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MADISON LAYLE &  
ANNA LEIGH KEATON

# Falke's Peak



PUMA  
& NIGHTS



Falke's Peak

By Anna Leigh Keaton and Madison Layle

**She couldn't believe her eyes.**

Stressed out ad-exec Dakota wandered into Catamount Outfitters in search of a guide for a wilderness excursion. She didn't expect to be greeted by not one, but five of the most ruggedly delicious-looking men she'd ever seen. Not to mention a live cougar guarding the shop.

**The Falke brothers have more than just good looks in their genes.**

Eldest brother Axel agrees to guide Dakota on her mountain trek. In cougar form, Axel's twin, Gunnar, was there as a protection from predators—but he had his eye on the sexy client instead.

**Into the wild...**

While the rule with clients was "paws-off," both Axel and Gunnar couldn't resist Dakota's seductive Native American beauty and determination. As cold days led

to hot nights in the cabin, Axel and Gunnar wondered if they'd finally found a woman strong enough to tame them...

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~Angela James

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# Dedication

This is for our friends, Deanna and Sable. Thanks for believing in us from the beginning.

Thank you to Angela James for fighting to get this story acquired, and to Gina Bernal, our fantastic and very understanding editor.

# Chapter One

The moist smacking of eager kisses, the playful male growl and the giddy female giggle were strikes one, two and three. They made Dakota Tokala regret ever agreeing to this vacation and kept her from enjoying everything the ski resort and quaint, Bavarian-styled town of Leavenworth had to offer.

When Lana first pitched the idea for the ski trip to Washington, Dakota had been led to believe it would be a girls-only getaway for herself and her two best friends. Unfortunately, one week before the trio was scheduled to leave, Lana fell trying to run in her obscenely high stilettos to avoid a rain shower and broke her arm. Then Carrie decided to invite her fiancé to take Lana's place since he'd been *moping* over the prospect of entertaining himself for a week without her.

Dakota glanced at the couple in the seat opposite her just in time to see him feed her one of the strawberries they'd stocked up on from the lunch buffet.

*Once again, you're the odd duck.* She frowned and took a bite of her salad, unable to savor the taste of herbs and vegetables. Disgruntled, she forked the food around on her plate, then gave up and shoved it away.

As she started to scoot out of the booth, Carrie turned to ask, "Hey, you not hungry?"

"No," she replied, trying to keep the disappointment from her voice.

"But I thought you said you were famished."

Her friend looked confused, and Dakota sighed. Carrie was a great friend—had been since they met as freshmen during rush week at college—but things were different when men entered the picture. Not that she faulted Carrie. She was happy for her, but the queen-sized hideaway bed wasn't as appealing an option for the week when the only bedroom was occupied by a couple ready for a real honeymoon.

Dakota had only claimed hunger to get out of the suite because of the lovebirds. She hadn't expected Carrie's fiancé to agree and suggest they all try the restaurant they'd passed in the resort's lobby after checking in the night before.

"I know. I thought I was too, but you two go ahead and enjoy the meal. I'm just feeling a bit restless and thought I'd do a little souvenir shopping or something." Maybe the idea of shopping would keep Mr. Testosterone from wanting to follow this time.

It worked. Carrie's fiancé didn't say a word. Instead, he stuffed his mouth with a bite of an almost-mooing T-bone drowned in steak sauce.

Though Carrie frowned, she nodded. "Okay," she said, a hint of apology in her eyes. "We're still heading for the slopes later, right?"

Dakota smiled. Her friend was trying to keep her included, but that could prove impossible when Carrie's attentions were diverted by much more interesting playthings.

Grabbing her goose-down jacket, Dakota raised her cell phone and waved it. "Call me when you guys want to go."



They wouldn't call. As she walked away, she could imagine them heading back to the room, supposedly to change into snow gear for skiing, and getting sidetracked by warm linens and a soft mattress.

Dakota couldn't blame Carrie. If she had a man in her life, she might do the same thing. Then again, if she had a man in her life, she wouldn't feel like a third wheel on a trip that was supposed to have been an action-packed girls' retreat.

When they first planned the trip, she and Lana had looked forward to the prospects of a few flirty thrills with some hunks on the slopes. They'd even teased Carrie about finding themselves a couple of sexy ski instructors.

But that didn't mean Dakota needed a man in her life. She did well enough on her own, had a successful career, good friends and a nice apartment in Vegas. She wasn't interested in finding a husband or even seeking a long-term relationship.

Still, being the odd one out wasn't exactly her idea of a fun-filled vacation either. There should be plenty to do to keep her occupied while Carrie and Ted enjoyed their premarital lovers' haven.

Slipping on her coat, she stepped out into the blustery winter day and smiled as she boarded the empty resort shuttle to the main hub of Leavenworth.

Nestled among towering mountains, the village had a unique appeal, which surprised Dakota. Having grown up in Boulder, she'd always liked the wilderness and natural vistas that reached for the heavens. But a college scholarship and fate had led her to the concrete, glitz and neon jungle of Las Vegas.

She didn't mind city life, even when it went on around the clock, but she had to admit an attraction for simpler things and fewer deadlines, being free to stop and enjoy nature—something her parents had encouraged with their annual summer vacations to many of the country's national parks.

Leavenworth and the Wenatchee National Forest, though, had never been in her parents' travel plans. She'd lay odds that it was as picturesque in the summer as it was blanketed by new fallen snow.

The shuttle van pulled to the curb, and the driver turned to look over his shoulder. "How's this?"

Dakota glanced out the window. "Perfect. Thanks. I'll get it," she said, keeping the older gentleman from getting out to hold the door for her. She opened the van's sliding door and exited onto a surreal wintry landscape. If she ignored the cars lining the paved street, she could pretend she'd stepped back in time and into Bavaria. Murals and gingerbread trim decorated the buildings, and the scents of fresh-baked pastries, spicy sausages and melted chocolate spilled from shops lining the sidewalks.

As she meandered down the walkway, peering into windows at the brightly colored gifts for sale, she sidestepped a woman and three excitable children in snowsuits. The woman murmured an apology as she grabbed the smallest one's hand. Dakota grinned at the cherub in all pink from stocking cap to boots, and resumed her walk. A bright red flier taped to a lamppost made to look like an old-fashioned gas lamp caught her attention.

The advertisement was for overnight expeditions into the mountains.

When she stepped closer to read more, she collided with another pedestrian who dropped a bag of sealed plastic food containers and almost dropped her heavier burden—two twelve-packs of canned cola.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” they both said at once, which made the other woman laugh and Dakota hurry to help retrieve the containers that had fallen onto the shoveled and salted sidewalk.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” the woman asked.

“No, no.” Dakota rose to her feet, holding on to the bag’s handles. The petite blonde looked as if the cases of soda were more than enough of a load. “I’m afraid I was so busy looking around I wasn’t watching where I was going. Didn’t mean to cut off your path.” She flashed a smile as further apology.

“Tourist,” the woman said with a nod and answering smile, her breath a brief puff of white in the cold air.

Dakota laughed. “Guilty as charged.”

“Welcome to Leavenworth. I’m Heidi.”

“Dakota.”

“Nice to meet you. I would shake your hand, but...” She raised one of the cases.

“No problem.” Dakota glanced at the flier that had caught her eye earlier. She could ask the concierge back at the resort, but decided to take a chance and ask a local. “So, you’re from here.”

“Born and raised.”

“Do you know of a reputable place that offers guided trips into the mountains this time of year?” She pointed at the flier by way of explaining her question.

Heidi grinned. “Sure do. Catamount Outfitters. In fact, I’m headed in that direction. I could show you.”

“That’d be great. Thanks.” She lifted the bag. “I’ll just help carry this for you too.”

“Thanks.”

As they walked, Dakota estimated Heidi was a few years older than her own twenty-four. Blonde and petite, she was a polar opposite to Dakota’s darker skin tone and more average height of five foot six. But she wasn’t frail.

“So, what kind of trek do you have in mind? Horseback? Snowmobiling?”

“Hadn’t thought about it really. This is sort of spur of the moment. I’m booked at a ski resort with a friend and her fiancé.”

“Ah,” Heidi said with a hint of sympathy, obviously reading between the lines.

“Yeah, exactly. Anyway, I guess snowmobiling wouldn’t be bad, but I’d like to do some hiking. Maybe with snowshoes or cross-country skiing? And wouldn’t mind camping out for a few nights if there’s a cabin handy. Not really into canvas tents in the winter.”

Heidi laughed. “So, rustic, but not entirely without civilization.”

Dakota grinned. “Right.”

“I’m sure the guys at Catamount can handle that. Nobody knows the Wenatchee like the Falke family.”

“Great.” Maybe her vacation didn’t have to be a bust after all.

“Here we are.” Heidi stopped at a door and used her hip to shove it open, the movement setting off a jingle to announce their arrival.

Stepping inside, Dakota saw a well-organized store filled with anything and everything a nature lover could possibly need or want. Heavy winter gear, skis, camping equipment arranged on racks and shelves. Kayaks and canoes hung from the high ceiling.

Wordlessly, she browsed the aisles as she trailed Heidi deeper into the store. But when she looked up, she froze. Behind a counter stood two men—obviously identical twins—who belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine instead of in some remote outfitter discussing football. Someone else knelt behind the counter, his hand appearing every other second to place merchandise inside the glass display case, but her gaze quickly returned to the two men she could see. Not even the life-sized, stuffed mountain lion reclining at one end of the counter could turn her head, although she noticed it because it was the *only* animal in the store. Weren’t most outfitters decorated with trophy bucks and taxidermy’s prized works of art?

The third person stood up and popped off a challenge to something one of the others said. Dakota’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. He looked exactly like the other two!

Blond, tall, rugged-looking, with classic chiseled features, all three men rivaled any model she’d ever worked with at the advertising firm. Wearing the store’s uniform, they were practically indistinguishable

from one another. She'd heard of identical twins, but identical triplets were rarer still. She stared, trying to spot some differences between the men.

Heidi chuckled, drawing a reluctant glance from Dakota.

"It never fails," Heidi said, the humor evident in her tone.

"Fails?" She wanted to look back at the trio of hunks but managed to hold off long enough to get an answer.

"Your reaction." Heidi leaned closer. "The Falke brothers always surprise the tourists." She winked.

Well, who could blame them? The brothers were stunning.

Dakota dropped her voice to a whisper. "They'd stop traffic in Vegas."

Heidi laughed louder. "I bet they would." Her outburst caught the men's attention.

An excited tremble ricocheted through Dakota.

Working with fashion models on various ad campaigns was considered a perk at her job; although being somewhat new to the business and at the bottom of the food chain, she didn't always get to meet the hunks in person. Usually she had the pleasure of going through the proofs, and her coworkers fought over the chance to land men's underwear clothing contracts.

But these guys weren't models used to the limelight and fawning females. Not that she was one. Sure, she adored the male physique, and the sight of a sexy man could turn her head any day, but Dakota wasn't the type to ask for an autograph, something the more arrogant models came to expect.

While the Falke brothers made her mouth water, they were everyday citizens working in a sporting goods shop. And staring was rude. She had to get over the shock of their looks and get down to business. She took a steady breath and tried to think of what that business was.

*Oh, yeah. Wilderness excursion.* Would one of them be her guide?

“Hey, sis. What’s so funny?”

*Sis?*

These men were Heidi’s brothers?

“Oh, nothing,” Heidi chimed. “Brought refreshment.”

“Excuse me,” a fourth man said as he edged past Dakota to take Heidi’s heavy burden. “You’re the best.”

*Where’d he come from?*

“Thanks, Tor.”

The man, or Tor as Heidi had called him, was yet another copy of the other brothers. Not an exact match, but close enough to testify to a very close family connection.

“Got food too.” Heidi’s grin was bright.

“Awesome. I’m starving!” A fifth man slid past Dakota’s other side to give Heidi a chaste, smacking peck on the cheek. “You’re our favorite sister,” he said with a teasing grin.

Stunned, Dakota did a double take and turned to look back down the aisle to see if any more would appear. All she saw were shelves of propane canisters, lanterns and a canoe hanging from the rafters.

Spinning back to face the men and Heidi, Dakota watched with a hint of awe.

Heidi laughed and shoved the kissy one away. "I'm your *only* sister, Sin."

He chuckled and went to join the others who were opening the first case of cola.

"Nice and cold too," one of them said. He popped the tab and took a swig.

*God!* There were *five* of them; only this latest arrival—Sin?—looked more like Tor, the fourth man, than the trio behind the counter. The two latecomers were about an inch shorter with slighter builds, and their mussed hair and quick grins gave them a more youthful appearance. She'd guess twins and a set of triplets.

As if seeing double—more than double—she felt lightheaded. She must look the fool, standing there gaping, but *damn...*

"Did you just call him sin?" Dakota asked in an aside.

"Yep, short for Sindre. Come on," Heidi said, taking the bag from Dakota's hand. "Let me introduce them to you."

She set the bag of home-cooked food on the counter, and the men dug into the plastic containers.

Except for one who eyed Dakota and moved toward her.

She eased closer to the stuffed cat, unsure whether she wanted to come between a pack of hungry men and their food.

"Guys, this is Dakota..." Heidi glanced at her. "Sorry, I didn't get your last name."



"It's Tokala," she answered, grateful for the distraction.

"That's an unusual name," said the brother who drew near, although the counter still separated them.

"It's Lakota. It means fox." Why she felt compelled to share that bit of trivia was beyond her, but her answer made him grin. Her tummy flipped.

The man was gorgeous. Their parents must've sold their souls to the devil to have had such a number of tall, healthy and handsome sons.

Like his brothers, he wore khakis and a maroon, short-sleeved polo shirt with the company's name and logo—a stylized cougar head—on the breast. Around his neck, he wore a thin leather collar with a pewter medallion on it that bore another likeness to the wild animal.

*Odd.* They all had them on, except for Heidi. Strange thing to include as part of a uniform. Stranger still that all five men wore collars at all. Where she was from collars symbolized submissive tendencies in D/s playrooms, but Dakota couldn't envision any of these men bowing to a whip.

Wielding it, maybe. But submitting to it? Not a chance.

"This is Axel, my oldest brother."

"Only by a minute!" protested the two others who looked remarkably like him. His eyes were a rich hazel that reminded her of natural forests around Leavenworth—light green with sparks of gold and brown.

"Those two are Kelan and Reidar." The pair waved at her with matching smiles, friendly and cute enough

to make Dakota smile back. “And the pair too busy to stop stuffing their faces are Sindre and Torsten.” The brothers chuckled and winked at her without pause in their lunch. “I have another brother, Gunnar,” Heidi added, “but maybe you’ll get to meet him some other time.”

“Nice to meet...everyone.”

“Please excuse my brothers for eating in front of you,” Axel said. “They can be a bit...untamed...when it comes to meal time, but I’m sure Heidi brought enough to share. Are you hungry?”

“Umm...” She was, but didn’t want to intrude. She could pick up something on the way back to the resort. “Not really.”

“She’s here to hire a guide for an overnight expedition into the mountains,” Heidi volunteered.

“Really. How many in your group?” Axel asked.

“Just me.” His raised eyebrow pushed Dakota to explain. “A couple of friends are having too much fun back at the ski resort, together, and I would like to really just get away—up in the mountains—for a little while.”

“The cabin on Red Dog Ridge isn’t booked this week, is it?” Heidi asked.

Axel glanced at his sister and took a sip of his cola. “Nope.” That penetrating gaze swept back toward her, and Dakota wanted to melt.

Would it seem odd if she took off her heavy jacket? The store was becoming much too warm.

“How do you want to travel?” he asked. “If by snowmobile, I’ll have to check to see if the trails up that way are open after the snowfall on Thursday.”

“Is it more than a day’s hike?” Leaning against the counter, Dakota wiggled her fingers against the fur of the stuffed mountain lion. The softness had her lifting her hand to stroke its pelt.

“No. It can be reached on foot in six to eight hours.”

Even the cat wore a collar like the rest of the store’s staff. She grinned. “You know, I’ve always wondered what these cats felt like.” She looked up to see Axel and Heidi watching her. “Of course, I’d never dare touch a live one. Are cougars abundant in this area?”

That’s when the stuffed cat started to purr.

Dakota jerked her hand away and stared at it with narrowed eyes, her heart thudding a little irregularly.

It was so still. Was this some sort of joke? Some gag these men came up with to tease the tourists?

The cougar’s tail flicked. Its golden-green eyes looked straight into hers, and a long pink tongue came out as it gave a huge yawn, baring canines sharp enough to tear her apart.

“Holy shit.” Dakota shrieked, jumped backwards to get away from it and nearly tumbled onto her ass. But a set of big, strong hands caught her by the arms and steadied her.

“Whoa. Careful there,” one of the brothers said before he let her go. Which one he was she didn’t know and didn’t care. Her gaze remained on the wild animal that hadn’t moved from its perch on the counter.

She decided to stay closer to the other end, near the brothers.

Axel thumped the cat on its ear and the animal growled low, although it didn't seem angry.

"It's alive?" Dakota eased away another step.

"Don't be afraid," Heidi said. "I guess I should've warned you, but we're so used to him being around. It's just Falke."

"Falke..."

Heidi nodded. "That's what we call him."

"A mountain lion...in your store."

The woman smiled. "Actually, I'm a veterinarian. This store is Axel's brainchild. But, yeah, Falke's like family, which is why we named him that. He's sort of a fixture here. Don't worry. He won't harm you."

*Right.* That's what those magicians in Vegas thought about the tiger in their show.

Heidi ruffled the fur atop the cat's head and it playfully pawed at her. Big paws. Big cat!

Dakota kept her distance.

Axel walked around the counter. "Why don't we go up to the front and talk about that expedition?"

"Okay."

The door chime sounded.

"I'll get it," one of the others volunteered.

"Thanks, Kel," Axel said as he escorted her toward the front.

While she and Axel discussed cost and plans for her wilderness excursion, Kelan showed a mother and her daughter down an aisle of snowboards. Since it was too late to start the trek today, Dakota agreed to be ready to go tomorrow morning. Her guide would pick her up at the resort. One day hike to the cabin, four nights there, and one day back. She'd get back in time

to have one final day at the resort before driving back to Seattle for her flight to Vegas.

“Does 6:00 a.m. sound okay?” Axel asked, taking notes and giving her the forms she needed to sign. “It’ll take about forty-five minutes to drive to the trailhead, but there are some places along the way where the sunrise makes for a spectacular view.”

“Six is fine. I may be a city girl, but I’ve always been an early bird.” Now that they’d worked out much of the details, Dakota felt a little more comfortable with him, one on one. These men would make any single, heterosexual woman a little off balance.

“Okay,” he said, “I think that about covers it. Bring only the clothes you’ll need and what toiletries you can carry. Catamount will supply the rest of the gear as part of the rental. Have you ever gone backpacking in the mountains before?”

“Yeah, but it’s been a few years...” She stopped the moment Falke meandered into view with the young girl behind it, holding its tail.

“Go kitty!” She was laughing and unafraid, but Dakota was terrified, especially when the mountain lion stopped, turned.

“Oh n—” Before she could get the fearful words out, the cat plopped down on its back and pawed at the child.

Claws retracted. *Thank God.*

“What is that moth—” Again she cut off the thought and shook her head as the woman in question, the girl’s mother, appeared with a smile on her face, snowboard in hand.

“Courtney, Falke might not want to pull you around the store today. You’re growing too big for such games.”

“Aww, Mom!” The girl gave the cat’s tail another tug, then dropped to her knees and petted its belly. The cougar responded by draping a huge arm over the girl’s shoulder. Dakota held her breath, watching the unusual hug. “Bye, Falke,” the girl said before getting up and joining her mother at the checkout.

“Excuse me a moment.” Axel moved over to ring up the woman’s purchase.

Dakota nodded but kept her gaze on the cat, which now lay in the middle of the floor, looking at her. Its tail swished lazily as it stared into her eyes. And then she heard it purring again.

Dakota shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

“What is?” Axel asked, returning to her.

“That cougar.”

Axel looked at Falke. “Yeah, he’s a real *pussy* cat.”

As if the lion understood, a deeper rumble sounded, making Dakota laugh. “Well, I don’t know about that.”

## Chapter Two

Later that day, in the back of the store, Axel called the Falke brothers together. The last one to lumber in was Gunnar, still in catamount form.

“So, who’s taking the brunette beauty on her hike?” Sindre wanted to know. “I’ll gladly volunteer.”

“I’ll play you for it,” Torsten said, his hands raised and ready for a rock, paper, scissors challenge.

*We are*, Gunnar told the group telepathically.

“But you went on the last one,” Sin said.

“And he’s going again with me, because I took care of business while you all stuffed your faces,” Axel announced, putting an end to the debate.

If a cat could smirk, Gunnar was good at it.

“Hey, I helped Courtney’s mother,” Kelan said defensively.

Reidar punched Kelan playfully. “That’s because you have the hots for her mother.”

*I’ll go, but I’m going as a human.*

Axel looked at Gunnar.

*I’ve had my tail pulled more today than a cat can stand!*

“And your head scratched behind the ears,” Tor added unapologetically.

“And your back petted,” Reidar said with a nod and no sympathy.

“And your belly rubbed!” Sin smirked. “You perv!”

Axel shook his head and chuckled. “The client signed on with me as her guide.”

*I went last time as the cat,* Gunnar protested, *and it's fucking cold outside!*

“Forecast calls for warmer temps later in the week. You’ll be fine.”

*Then you go barefoot, and I'll keep the lady warm.*

“Uh oh...looks like another call for rock, paper, scissors,” Tor teased, albeit somewhat seriously.

Axel groaned. Why did it always have to come to this? “I’m not playing games with you.”

Gunnar hopped up on the table, a simple leap for a cougar, and started to turn. With a flash of white light, he’d transformed in seconds from animal to man, unbothered by his nudity. “I’ll play. Loser goes as the cat.”

“You guys look so much alike, she probably won’t even notice,” Tor volunteered.

Axel sighed. “Fine, but if you win, you best remember she’s a client, not a target for your sex drive.”

“As if I didn’t see you eyeing her the moment she walked in with Heidi,” Gunnar mumbled.

That was true, though Axel wouldn’t admit it aloud. The woman’s Native American heritage made for a sexy caramel complexion and deep ebony hair he found very attractive. Hell, he even liked the sound of her name on his tongue, and when she told him it meant fox, he found humor in the irony.

“Ready?” Gunnar asked. “One, two, three... Damn it!” Axel’s *paper* covered his *rock*. “Best two out of three?”



“Not a chance,” Axel said. “Now, let’s get down to business. While Gunnar and I are away, Kelan, you and Reidar are in charge of the store.”

Kelan gave him a cocky salute.

“Tor, you and Sin can decide who’ll man it in catamount form.”

Having Falke here was the best shoplifting deterrent, so the brothers traded up each week to take over that duty, even though another might do the same on guided tours. Their senses were stronger when in catamount form, so it was always a help to have a little added protection on the expeditions.

“The schedule is one day in, four nights at the homestead and one day back. Kelan, I’ll need you to go with us to the resort, so you can drive the Cherokee back to town.”

“Pick up?” Kelan asked.

“Same place as drop off. Be at the trailhead, say around 5:00 p.m. Thursday.”

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Before sunrise the next morning, Dakota dealt with an upset friend, and her guilty conscience.

“Is it because we didn’t call you to go to the slopes last night?” Carrie asked. “I said I was sorry.”

Her fiancé, apparently exhausted from their overnight romp, had barely moved when Dakota stuck her head into the room to tell them goodbye.

*I should’ve left a note instead.*

Dakota had packed the night before, putting everything she intended to carry in a paper sack she borrowed from Axel. He'd said they'd transfer it to her backpack once he arrived to pick her up. So, she wasn't carrying much as she headed for the elevator with a hastily dressed Carrie trailing behind.

"You don't have to apologize." *Again*, she didn't add. "I told you, this has nothing to do with you. I just discovered this outfitter in town yesterday that does guided tours into the mountains, and I decided it would be fun."

"You're not mad?"

"No," Dakota answered with a sigh. "I want to do this."

"But you paid for a third of the room here."

"And you two can enjoy it enough for all of us. Like I said, I came here for a little adventure, and I think this trip is just what the therapist ordered."

She stepped through the front door, held open by the doorman, and shivered at the cold, predawn blast of winter wind. "You should get back inside," she told Carrie, who'd only had time to slip bare feet into sneakers and don her ski jacket over rumpled jeans and a pajama top.

"How long will you be gone?" Carrie asked, ignoring the advice.

"Til Thursday. I'll still have all day Friday and Saturday morning to go skiing with you and Ted, if you want."

"I still feel guilty about this."

"Well, don't. I'm a big girl. I can find my own entertainment."

Just then, a Jeep Grand Cherokee pulled to a stop under the resort's covered circle drive. Carrie gasped at the sight of the two men in the front seats.

One hopped out of the passenger side, leaving the door ajar, and smiled at Dakota. "Ready to go?"

"Yep." She lifted the paper bag.

He approached, took the bag from her and gave her friend a pleasant, "Hello."

"Hi." Carrie seemed almost out of breath uttering that one word.

Dakota laughed, thinking of Heidi's response when she'd done the same at the store. *Happens all the time.*

"Carrie, this is Axel..." She turned to him. "Right?"

He grinned. "Right. My brother Kelan is driving."

"You're hard to tell apart," Dakota said. Although, now that she looked between the two there were a few slight differences. Kelan's hair was longer, and he had a bit of whisker growth on his face. He'd had that yesterday too, hadn't he?

"You still got it right, so you're off to a good start. I'll just be a minute," he said, lifting her bag to show what he meant, and then headed for the back of the vehicle. "Go ahead and take the front passenger seat. I'll sit in the back."

"Okay." She turned to hug her friend goodbye.

When she did, Carrie clung to her and hissed, "Sexy! Why didn't you tell me? I swear I don't feel guilty anymore. Damn, girl!"

Dakota laughed and pulled away. "You have a good time on the slopes."

“Uh-huh.” Carrie smiled and leaned closer. “Jump his bones the first chance you get.” Dakota rolled her eyes and headed for the Jeep. Carrie had a wicked sense of humor, but she had to admit the thought had crossed her mind. She had a crazy and delightful dream of him offering her kisses as motivation on the hike, with sex as her reward when they reached the summit.

When she hopped inside the vehicle, she smiled at Kelan who was in midyawn. “Hi. Still sleepy?”

He chuckled. “Sorry. Yeah, a little. Good morning.”

Dakota sat back and put her seatbelt on. “Yep, it is.” Her excitement energized her. She couldn’t wait to get started up the mountain and looked forward to seeing the cabin. The way Axel described it, she pictured a utopian setting like those in Thomas Kinkade’s winter paintings.

A raspy purr had her turning in her seat. The mountain lion sprawled across the whole back seat.

“Oh! Hi there... Nice kitty.” She tried not to be obvious as she leaned against the door, praying they’d fed it already. It was so big and still made her nervous, especially in the tight confines of the vehicle.

Kelan chuckled again. “Falke, why don’t you quit scaring the lady and say hi?”

*Meow.*

She blinked. “They can meow?”

Kelan grinned. “Pumas are closer to cheetahs than African lions or the tiger. They can’t roar. They purr and meow, hiss, yowl and growl, a lot like a house cat. Just depends on their mood and the circumstances.”

“Oh. So, as long as it’s purring, everything is all right?”

“Yeah, purring’s good.”

“Gotcha.”

The hatch closed and the back side door opened. “Move, you big galloot.” Axel shoved at the cat’s butt, which it lethargically moved out of the man’s way as it sat up. Once Axel was in and his door shut, Kelan put the Jeep in gear and pulled out. Dakota glanced out the window to wave at Carrie who stood there shivering with a huge grin on her face.

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Dakota zipped her down jacket up high and stood with hands in pockets as she watched the Jeep drive back down the slope until it disappeared behind the evergreens around a curve in the road.

The sky was just starting to lighten from black to navy, with a million stars dotting it. As deep into the forest as they were, though, all she could see was a strip of sky right above them. Still, it was a spectacular view, enhanced by a lack of citywide illumination.

Axel held a flashlight in one hand while he checked through the packs one last time. Before Kelan took away the vehicle, Axel had her sprawl out in the back seat of the warm truck and put on a lightweight pair of ski pants and a pair of insulated wool socks, all of which he supplied as part of the “package.” Now, with her hiking boots laced up, she was toasty warm.

Falke sat on his haunches next to her, staring. She tried not to let his penetrating feline gaze unnerve her, but it did. She didn't have much experience with animals, other than the dog her parents owned when she was little—which had been a sweet little rat terrier that had been old when Dakota was a baby. She'd heard stories though, read newspaper articles about mountain lions coming into cities and eating house pets, attacking small children. One fast move and Falke might mistake her for breakfast.

The cat purred.

All was well if they purred, Kelan had told her. But that purr could stop in an instant. She'd rather not take any chances. "Nice kitty," she whispered as she stepped sideways, slowly moving toward Axel and away from the monstrous cat.

"Okay," Axel said, standing up straight. "It's all here. Ready to head out?"

She nodded, excitement coming back full force.

Axel handed her a pair of thick gloves. "Put these on and stretch your legs good. Backs of your thighs and calves especially."

As she took the gloves, she gave him a quizzical look.

"Have you ever snowshoed?"

"Ah, no."

Axel grinned then turned and picked up one of two pairs of snowshoes off the ground. "This should be interesting."

Dakota ignored the remark and started her stretches. She was in pretty good physical condition, she figured. She tried to hit the gym a couple times a

week. How hard could this be? She hiked Mt. Charleston west of Vegas in the spring and fall when she got a chance.

She did the warm-up stretches she normally did before starting her weight training workouts. Back, arms, thighs, calves.

Then Axel was there, right in front of her, and she got a whiff of something wonderful. *Him*. The cold morning air blended with a masculine scent and made her suck in her breath. *Damn*. He didn't seem to notice her reaction as he set the snowshoes on the ground in front of her, lined up, and then said, "Step on. I'll strap you in."

Dakota placed her feet where he directed, and he tightened the straps to fit snugly over and around her boots. Then, as if as an afterthought, he raised the pant leg of her ski pants and checked her boot laces.

"Very good. You've hiked before I see."

She laughed. "I might be a city girl, but I do leave the house once in a while."

He stood up laughing. "And I've been put in my place. Let's see you walk now."

She went to take a step with the snowshoe. It wasn't heavy, but the strange...bigness...of the thing had her lifting her foot higher than normal, which put her off balance, and she started tipping. She tried to pull herself back the other way, but overcompensated. Waving her arms, she tried to save her balance and dignity. It was futile. She was going down.

She prepared for the impact of her ass on the ground, but it didn't come. Instead, she hit something soft that gave a little grunt.

*Meow.*

“Oh, God.” Dakota scrambled as best she could to get off the cat, but with the snowshoes it was nearly impossible. “Sorry! Sorry.” She couldn’t get on her knees, so she slid along on her butt, glad for the slippery material of the ski pants.

Then big, strong arms were lifting her. “Easy,” Axel said, but the word was laced with amusement, and she had the urge to slug his shoulder. Her face burned with embarrassment, and when she was once again on her feet, she refused to look in his eyes. Instead, she cautiously eyed the big cat, glad to see it didn’t appear ready to attack her. She shuddered to think of how many stories she’d heard of animals snapping because someone stepped on their tail or paw.

“Falke is not going to hurt you, Dakota,” Axel said, his warm breath brushing her cheek, which made her scalp tingle.

For a moment, she forgot about the cat and wanted to turn her lips toward his. His nearness warmed her. What would his mouth taste like?

He cleared his throat, shifted to put some space between them, and the intimate moment was gone. “Falke just kept you from bruising your backside. The ground here is frozen and packed pretty solid. He’s here for protection, yours as well as mine.”

She nodded, a bit less jittery and somewhat soothed by his statement.

“Okay, I think we need some snowshoe lessons before we head into the *snow* with them. Yes?”

She huffed out a frustrated breath and brushed the back of her glove over her face. “Yes.” The sky was



getting lighter, and it was easier to see both Axel and the cat. "Sorry." She looked at Falke, who once again sat on his haunches staring at her with those penetrating eyes. "Sorry."

He purred, and she would swear, if a cat could smirk, it just did. At her. *Probably thinks I'm a moron.* She hoped she didn't hurt the big guy.

"Ready? Lesson one was the stretching. This is a workout you've never had before, and you're going to feel it. Some of the sheltered parts of the trail you'll be able to take them off and walk, but this first stretch—about a mile or so—is in the open, and the snow this time of year is probably about seven feet deep. No snowshoes, you're not going anywhere."

She nodded and adjusted her knit cap, tucking in a few strands of hair that had fallen out in her tumble.

As he spoke, Axel stepped into the other pair of snowshoes and fastened the bindings. "Okay, lesson two. Keep your feet shoulder-width apart and try to think of the snowshoe as an extension of your body, just as you do your shoes or boots, but a lot wider and longer."

She adjusted her stance a little, putting a bit of distance between the two webbed snowshoes. They were made out of lightweight aluminum and, other than the fact they seemed cumbersome because of size, they weighed almost nothing.

"Good," Axel said. "Lesson three. You don't walk straight, as you do normally. Watch me." He took a few rather awkward steps. "You have to swing your foot out and forward, and make sure you clear your other ankle or you'll bruise yourself. You're not cross

country skiing or pushing straight forward, and you have to make sure you lift your foot up out of the snow. You'll know what I mean when we get onto the fresh stuff, not this packed down snow on the road."

Dakota tried a few careful, tentative steps, using her arms for balance. She made a full circle around the turnaround area and was pretty proud she stayed on her feet.

"That's great!" Axel said, with a little too much enthusiasm. Then she reminded herself she probably wasn't the first klutz he'd ever had to train. "Try to step with the pressure landing on the balls of your feet. It'll be easier on your muscles in the long run. Why don't you practice a little more here, and then we'll head up the mountain?"

"Kay." She did a couple of more circuits around the clearing, swinging her leg as he'd shown her, concentrating on keeping her feet apart and stepping on the balls of her feet. It felt weird, but by the third time around, she had her balance.

"Ready?"

"Yep." She grinned. As ready as she'd ever be.

The sky was even lighter now, and Axel's grin was so handsome it made her sigh. She wondered what his company's policy might be on getting involved with a client. Not that she wanted to be "involved." She'd be heading back to Vegas in less than a week. But Dakota wouldn't mind adding a nice vacation fling to her Adventure List.

He picked up the smaller of the two packs and stepped behind her. "Arms back," he instructed. Axel

put the pack on her and reached around her sides to fasten the straps below her breasts.

Oh, damn, did he smell good. She closed her eyes and inhaled. His arm brushed the side of her breast. Too bad layer upon layer of winter clothing kept her from really enjoying the light graze.

Falke's purr changed to a deeper growl, which made her blink and stiffen. As soon as her gaze met the cat's, the growl quit and it meowed, making her snicker.

"You don't fool me," she muttered. "Pussy cat, indeed."

Axel chuckled and tugged on the pack lightly, adjusting a strap here and another there, but no longer reaching around her to do so. "Okay, Dakota. Let's go."

Her name sounded really good in his deep voice.

"You did eat a hearty breakfast this morning?"

She nodded. "I had room service send up eggs and ham and orange juice."

"Good. We'll stop often to rest. I'm carrying the canteens. Anytime you're thirsty, let me know. And I want you to eat the power bars in this pocket—" he patted the side of her pack, "—at least one an hour. If you start to sweat, you need to peel off a layer of clothing. You need to stay dry but warm." He moved to her side and waited until she looked up into his eyes. "If something's wrong, tell me. You signed your life into my hands, and I really don't relish the thought of hauling a body down the mountain."

She sobered at that visual. "Right. Will do."

"And, the most important thing of all..."

She waited as he paused.

“I tell you to jump, your only question better be, ‘How high?’ Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” she said seriously. Her life really was in his hands, and she trusted him. However, Dakota knew dangers lurked in the wilderness, especially when the temperature hung around ten degrees Fahrenheit.

“That’s a good girl.” He winked. “Falke, take the tail.”

“What?” Dakota asked.

“Falke will watch our backsides for any danger. I’ll lead.”

“What kind of danger?” She’d been thinking hypothermia and frostbite.

Axel shrugged. “We’re in bear country, though they should be hibernating. Elk, moose, deer. They mostly take off when they hear humans, especially since it’s not mating season, but you can’t be too careful. Falke will make sure nothing sneaks up on us at any rate.” He hefted his pack and snapped the fastenings into place over his chest. “Call out if you have any problems. We’ll take it slow.”

She nodded at him. “Okay. Thanks.” And then they were off.

Dakota didn’t care for the cat being behind her. She kept envisioning him getting bored and using her as a chew toy, but if he’d ward off things with big antlers that could impale her, she’d put up with it. Every deer or elk she’d seen in the woods pretty much either ignored her or took off when they heard her, so she couldn’t imagine they’d be any different here.

“Damn,” she whispered.

Axel instantly stopped and turned to look at her. "What's wrong?" They hadn't even reached the trail yet.

"I don't have a camera."

Axel chuckled. "In your pack, next to the power bars. It's just a disposable, but we supply them too, just in case."

She grinned. "Thanks. Let's go!"

It might have been fifteen minutes according to her watch, but it felt like five hours before they reached a clearing and Axel stopped in front of her. Already she felt the strain, in her thighs especially and in her shoulders from carrying the pack.

"How you doin'?" he asked.

"Good." She wasn't about to start complaining less than an hour into the trip. She held in a little groan thinking she had six hours to go, and smiled.

"Turn around." He motioned behind her with his chin. "Take a look."

She looked down at her feet to carefully maneuver the snowshoes so she didn't topple on her butt, and did a one-eighty. When she looked up again, she gasped in awe.

The sun was just below the mountains opposite where they stood, a bright yellow glow over the tips of the snowcaps. The sky was a brilliant pink that bled into lavender and purple as she looked up above her. "Oh, wow." She sighed. A crunch on the dry snow and a tug on her pack had her turning her head to look at Axel. He'd pulled one glove off with his teeth, where he still held it clamped between them, and reached into

the side pocket of her pack. He came out with a yellow disposable camera.

He grinned around the finger of his glove then backed up and held the camera up to his face. "Cheese," he teased as she twisted around to see him.

Dakota grinned as he clicked the camera, the flash bright and quick. The sunrise would be behind her. She couldn't wait to see that shot. Axel held the camera out toward her. "Beautiful," he whispered. But he wasn't looking at the sky.

Dakota melted a little and sure didn't feel the cold air, even though little plumes of white escaped with every breath she exhaled. "Thanks," she murmured, tugging off one glove and reaching for the camera.

He clung to it, placing his other hand over hers. Her gaze collided with his. Her lungs froze as they stared at each other. Pinned between his hands, her fingers brushed over his warm skin.

After a pause, he released her hand and the camera, and said, "Might want to tuck this next to your body instead of in the pack so the batteries don't freeze."

"Kay." She took the camera and found the inside pocket of her down jacket. "Thanks." Searching for something to say next, she glanced around. "Where's the cat?"

"Just checking out the area. Probably marking territory." He shrugged and pulled his glove back on. "You doing okay, though? Your breathing's a bit heavy."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Could maybe use a sip of water, though. But I'll make it." She bared her teeth in a grin. "I'm tougher than I look."

Axel handed her an open canteen, and she sipped a couple of times. He made no comment about her claim of being tough, just took the canteen back when she was done, capped it and put it back on the hook at his hip. "Ready then?"

"Yep." She looked around for Falke.

"He'll find us. Don't worry."

Dakota did the concentration thing as she turned her snowshoes and her body back up the path.

"Another forty minutes or so, and we'll stop for a real break. By then we'll be in the trees where the snow's not as deep, and we can take off the snowshoes for a while."

Dakota nodded at Axel's back and followed as he led her up the sloping hillside.

## Chapter Three

*This woman is impressing the hell out of me.*

Gunnar's thoughts entered his mind telepathically, and Axel nodded. They'd just reached the deeper, denser part of the forest where he promised Dakota they'd stop for another rest. After this break, they'd have about two hours to go before reaching the cabin. They were making much better time than he'd expected.

Her breathing was only slightly labored from the trek. She'd stopped him several times for a drink of water, following directions well and taking care not to get dehydrated. Of course, if she hadn't stopped him, he'd have forced her to drink, but that hadn't been necessary. They'd had a longer break around noon to eat the sandwiches Heidi packed for them.

Axel unfastened his snowshoes and stepped out of them, going up on tiptoe a couple of times to stretch his calves. Then he went to Dakota, who stood still, watching Gunnar with a wary eye.

"He's harmless," Axel said for the tenth time that day as he reached for the buckles holding her pack around her chest. "Let's get you out of this for a few minutes."

"He's a wild animal," she said. "They go crazy all the time. I read the newspapers. Heck, dogs go feral too, and they're house pets."

*Humph. Maybe just a little bite...*



Axel narrowed his eyes at Gunnar. *Don't even think about it, buddy.*

*Because she might like it and you're claiming her as yours?*

*She's a client*, Axel reminded his brother, though he had a hard time remembering that very fact.

He bent to loosen the straps on Dakota's snowshoes. She *was* as impressive as hell. There were signs that she was wearing down. The last half hour had been slower than the rest of the day, and he'd seen her stumble a couple of times. He hadn't been able to keep from pushing her limits, though, just to see where they were, how much she could take. She took it all, even grinning at him when he could tell she was starting to tire. Not a single word of complaint the whole day. Not one. Her biggest worry seemed to be Gunnar.

*If she's a client, why are you staring at her as if she's a feast?*

*Shut up, pussy.*

The puma hissed at him. Dakota flinched.

*Knock it off*, Axel warned. *She's nervous enough around you already.*

"I have to...umm..." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the trees.

Axel shrugged out of his pack and then drew out a roll of earth-friendly toilet paper. She'd used the bushes twice already during their earlier breaks, so she knew the routine. Another good sign that she wasn't dehydrated.

She grinned at him. "Thanks. Be right back."

She walked a little stiffly, stopping a couple of times to stretch her lower back, before she disappeared behind a few trees.

“You need to behave yourself,” Axel whispered to Gunnar when he was sure she was out of earshot. “She’s a client. A damn sexy one, but a client nonetheless. Look all you want, but there will be no touching.”

*I’m just a big fucking pussy, remember?* Gunnar’s tone was full of pissed off attitude. *I’m not the one who needs to remember she’s paid for your company. We’ve known each other our whole lives. I know when you’re hot for a piece of tail.*

“Look, Gun, it’s—”

Gunnar let out a savage hiss and dashed into the woods in the direction Dakota had gone.

Axel took off after him. “What is it?” he called to his brother, but Gunnar was already out of sight, too distant to maintain a connection with Axel in human form. “Fuck!” He ran faster.

Dakota screamed.

Axel crashed through the close-together evergreens, taking a swipe to his cheek from one spiky limb.

Gunnar made the cry of a panther on attack, and then snarls erupted. Axel cleared the trees to see Dakota on her back, frantically trying to pull up her pants, with Gunnar a few feet from her, on the other side of the small clearing, in an all-out brawl with the biggest damn gray wolf he’d ever seen.

The two predators tumbled in the snow amid a cacophony of fierce hisses and growls. Bared fangs and sharp claws. Then they broke apart as the wolf

yelped like a beaten puppy and ran off into the woods. Gunnar went after it, but Axel knew it was over. If the wolf was on the run, Gunnar would just make sure it kept running, not hurt it unnecessarily.

Dakota scrambled to her feet, her jeans up but unbuttoned, the ski pants around her ankles. She stared at the trees in the direction Gunnar and the wolf had disappeared, shaking as hard as a leaf in a hurricane.

“Hey,” he said softly as he approached her. “You okay?”

She nodded but didn't turn toward him.

She raised her bare hand to her face.

He came around her and bent his knees to look her in the eye. Her hand was red where it covered her mouth. Her cheeks stark white except for the apples rosy from the cold. “Falke's taken care of it. That wolf won't be back.”

A hard shudder went through her, and she finally made eye contact with him. “I was...squatting...and heard a rustle. I turned my head and it was just...there.”

Axel gripped her arms. She looked like she needed the anchor.

No tears though.

*Amazing.* Most women would be blubbing messes by now. Maybe that would come after the shock wore off.

“It was probably just checking you out. Probably wouldn't have hurt you anyway. Odd smells in the woods is all.” He knew better. Wolves avoided human smells when in the woods, unless they were hungry.

But Dakota needed reassurance right now that she was safe.

“You think?” she asked with quite a bit of hope in those two words, which made him smile.

“It’s possible.”

“Or I was lunch with my pants down.” She pulled back then and turned away to fasten her jeans and yank up her ski pants. While she collected herself, Axel picked up her gloves and the roll of toilet paper, shaking the loose snow off of them.

Dakota took a couple of deep breaths before she turned back. A small, strained laugh slipped out of her, and she wouldn’t meet his gaze. “Probably a heck of a sight, huh? Me bare-assed in the snow?”

Axel laughed and draped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a little hug. He wanted to wrap both arms around her, hold her for a minute or two, but instead guided her in the direction they’d come. She really was one hell of a woman. He didn’t think there would be any tears forthcoming, and fuck, that was nice. “Damn it,” he joked, “the pants were up before I got a glimpse of anything. Then again, maybe it was good you were doing what you were doing, or you’d have to change your pants.”

Dakota laughed and leaned into his side. She fit there a little too well. “Thank God I was *done* with that part!”

They made their way back through the twenty feet or so of thick underbrush to the trail where their packs sat. Gunnar was there, lying down, panting. When he saw them, he said, *I got a small gash in my right*

*haunch. Nothing serious, but could you check it when you can tear yourself away from her?*

Axel dropped his arm. "I gotta check Falke." To Gunnar he said, *Any chance it was rabid?* as he went to his pack and pulled out the first aid kit.

"He's hurt?" Dakota asked, sounding more panicked over Gunnar than she had over the entire wolf incident.

*No rabies, Gunnar said. Just hungry, I think. She's got some babies in the area somewhere. She's still nursing; I smelled it on her. Dakota probably would have been dinner if I hadn't been here. Damn, that bitch was huge.*

Axel frowned. If Dakota had come *between* the she wolf and her young, not even a cougar would've been able to chase her off.

*She gonna be okay?* Gunnar wanted to know.

"I don't know," he answered, replying to both Dakota's question and his brother's. Axel knelt next to Gunnar and poked at a slowly seeping wound.

*Just a scratch,* he decided.

Gunnar whimpered and cringed.

"Oh, you poor baby," Dakota said, dropping to her knees next to the cat. "Poor kitty. You're so brave. I'm sorry I didn't like you." Slowly, she extended her hand toward Gunnar's face, letting him scent her. When Gunnar licked her fingertips, her laugh was low, gusty and sexy as hell. When Dakota sank her fingers into Gunnar's fur, Axel had the urge to scrape his fingers across the tiny scratch on the cat's thigh.

*Oh, yeah,* Gunnar said to Axel, purring loudly as he flopped over on his side, right onto Dakota's lap.

She let out a soft laugh and scratched Gunnar's chin, his chest. "He's okay, right?"

Axel forced himself to not roll his eyes. "He's fine. Just a big baby." To pay his dear brother back for having Dakota's hands all over him, he poured the alcohol straight over the little wound.

Gunnar shot to his feet with a strange combination of a yelp, growl and hiss.

Axel chuckled. "All better then?"

*Fuck you.*

"He's really okay?" Dakota asked, worry in her voice.

"Yep. He's had worse." He glared at his brother. "And probably will have much worse in the future if he's not careful."

*You're the one who wanted me here like this. Kind of nice if she wants to pet the kitty now and then.*

Axel growled as he got to his feet and helped her up. "You okay? Ready to head out or want to rest some more?"

She glanced around her and shook her head. "I think we should go. What if it comes back?"

Axel nodded. "Probably for the best. Falke, stay close."

*Aye, aye, Captain. The closer the better, especially if she wants to pet me some more,* he said with a chuckle in his thoughts.

*Don't make me hurt you, little brother.*

Bring it on.

Dakota was fairly sure she'd never been so tired in her life. As the sun started its descent and some cloud cover moved in, the temperatures dropped. She'd re-layered all the clothing she removed during the better part of the day, the temperature having risen temporarily to around the freezing mark. But now she was cold, and she wore everything she could put on and still move.

Thank God it hadn't started snowing. There was enough of the white stuff on the ground to plague her already.

She stumbled more often than not now and, although she hated to complain, she feared she would land on her face soon and not be able to get up.

Just as Dakota looked up from her feet to say something to Axel, she walked right into his back, and they both went tumbling into the frozen powder.

"Oh, crap, I'm sorry," she said, trying to disengage herself from him. She had the snowshoes on again and couldn't find the strength to lift them up out of the snow where they'd buried themselves. When she put her hand flat on the ground to lever off of Axel's back, it sank to her shoulder in the soft snow. "Shit."

Axel laughed. "Hold still, honey."

*Did he just call me honey?*

He rolled out from beneath her, sat up, and then dragged her out of the snow so she sat on her butt. "Better?"

Ignoring the warm fuzzy feeling his unintentional endearment and the touch of his big hands caused in her tummy, Dakota nodded and pushed a few strands

of hair out of her face. Then to her horror, her teeth chattered.

“How long have you been cold?”

“Just a little while.” A convulsion of tremors shook her body. “I thought if I picked up speed...it would help.” She clamped her teeth together.

“We’re here. Good thing.” Axel pointed. “You should have said something sooner. Out here—”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. I think falling down made it worse than it was. Honest.” She glanced at the cabin through the evergreen trees. It looked dark, cold and lonely. And really small. Not exactly a Thomas Kinkade painting, although the snow-covered trees surrounding it were pretty. And it had to be warmer than her current position. “So this is Red Dog Ridge...”

“Yes,” Axel answered.

Falke came up to her and pressed his nose against her cheek. “Hey! That’s cold.” She laughed, raised a gloved hand, and petted his head. “You really are a good kitty, aren’t you?”

Axel climbed to his feet, and though she watched him accomplish the feat without sinking into the snow, she wasn’t sure how he did it. She didn’t need to try it herself though. He leaned down in front of her, nudged Falke away with his elbow, and lifted her up with gloved hands under her arms. How he had the strength to do that after the trek they’d made, she wasn’t sure, but gave in and leaned against him for a minute.

Despite the layers of clothes between them, too many for her to feel his warmth, she tried to take in his



strength. And he still smelled so good, she wanted to close her eyes and stay there a little longer.

“Come on. Let’s get you inside and in front of a fire. I don’t think you’re hypothermic yet, but damn, Dakota, you should have—” He sighed. “You don’t have to try to be so tough you kill yourself.”

She leaned back and looked up at him. He was tall, and so handsome it almost hurt. “I *am* tough.”

He grinned and shook his head. “Yeah, you are. Come on.” He lifted her up in the air again, turned her and set her back down facing the right direction. “Fifty more feet to the front door. That’s all. Then you can relax.”

Falke slithered around her and led the way, his big paws powering him through the snow, his tail leaving a rut along the path.

That fifty feet seemed like a mile, but she reached the stone steps leading to the porch and stopped, wanting to just collapse. Instead, she leaned down to undo her snowshoes.

“I got it,” Axel said, brushing her hands away. Within seconds, he freed her of snowshoes and pack. “Up you go.” He lifted her up off her snowshoes, over a couple steps, and onto the porch.

Falke sat in front of the door, waiting patiently.

“Unhook the latch at the top. The door’s not locked. Go on in,” Axel said as he picked up the snowshoes and packs and hauled them up the steps.

She popped the fat hook out of the eye near the top, then turned the handle and let the door swing open. It was pitch black inside, and visions of animals using the place as a den came to mind, so she froze.

Falke nudged her thigh as he passed by her and went inside.

“It’s safe. I’ll open the shutters on the windows in just a bit.”

She took one tentative step through the door, then to the side to let Axel pass her. He dropped the packs and flipped on his big flashlight as he went straight to a fireplace against the far wall.

The thought of that wolf out there somewhere made Dakota shut the door and turn the lock.

Falke nudged her thigh with his nose, and she absentmindedly petted him. She wasn’t afraid of the dark, but the wolf sneaking up on her earlier had scared the crap out of her. She did her best not to let her fear show to Axel, but the encounter affected her. Badly.

Dakota thought of all the hiking she did on her own. She wasn’t sure if there were wolves around Vegas, but she knew for a fact there were coyotes. Were they as dangerous as wolves? Sure weren’t as big. That wolf had been as big as Falke.

She looked down at the big cat who purred like an outboard motor. “Thanks again,” she whispered. “I think you might’ve saved my ass out there.”

He leaned against her and rubbed his side against her thigh while she scratched behind his ears.

Across the room, Axel had a nice fire built in the rather impressive stone fireplace, which provided some much-needed light to the space, and was adding small logs to it. There was a long, comfortable looking sofa in the middle of the main area, a hand-woven rug in front of it, and a bookcase against the far wall to one

side of the fireplace. The bookcase shared the corner with a small desk located behind a wooden ladder that led to a loft. *For storage maybe?*

She glanced to her left and noticed a tiny kitchen and dining area with a square table and stools shoved underneath.

Other than the front door, she only saw one more door on the opposite wall to the left of the fireplace, and she assumed it led to a bedroom. She also hoped it offered access to a bathroom. Then she just about smacked herself in the forehead, realizing there wouldn't be running water out here.

This cozy, little one- or two-room cabin was about as far out into the boonies as one could get.

Oh, great, three days in close quarters without a shower. So much for a little hanky-panky. "Damn it," she muttered under her breath.

Falke gave a whiny sound that almost seemed like a question. She looked down at him and sighed. "Fantasy out the window," she whispered. "That's all." She gave him one last pat and headed across the room to Axel. "Anything I can do?"

"Yeah," he said, throwing one last thin log onto the fire before sitting back on his heels. "Sit down here, take off your jacket and boots and thaw out. I need to run outside and get some more wood. The last group up here didn't leave enough in the bin to make it through the night."

Dakota slipped off her gloves, unzipped her jacket, shrugged out of it and then pushed her ski pants down her legs. She dropped the coat and gloves onto the floor and sat down on the rug next to the river stone

hearth, and started working on undoing her wet, swollen laces.

“Why are the windows covered?” There were two on the front of the cabin, a smaller one in the kitchen area, and on the opposite side wall a large picture window. But all four were shuttered, so no light came in through any of them. “Are storms that bad up here?”

Axel turned to look at her, raised an eyebrow. “You want the truth?”

She frowned. “That would be nice.”

“Bears. They’ll bust a window to get into a cabin and tear it apart searching for food.”

“Great.” She jerked at her wet laces. “Wolves, bears, lions, oh my.”

Axel chuckled, pushed her hands out of the way, and took over on the laces. “Wolves, yes, as you know. Bears, not so much this time of the year. They’re hibernating. And as for lions...” He shrugged. “He’s on our side.”

“Yeah, but there are others out there, aren’t there? Wild ones?”

He nodded. “Yeah, there are, but trust me, Falke has marked this territory as his enough times that they’d be stupid to wander too close. Cats are very territorial. They take care of their own.”

“I thought they just impregnated the females and took off to find the next one.”

“And I thought you didn’t know animals.” Axel laughed and tugged her right boot off her foot, then set to work on the left. “Mountain lions in the wild do that, but domesticated ones like Falke... Well, they’re a different breed altogether.”

The subject of their conversation came over and stretched out next to her. She laid her hand on his back and dug her fingers into his already warm fur.

“Oh? They mate for life? Domesticated ones? I guess they don’t have much choice but to take what they’re given.”

For some reason that struck Axel as very funny, and he burst out with a hearty laugh. “Believe me, Dakota, there’s always a choice. But yes, Falke, when he’s ready, will mate for life.”

She frowned at Axel. “When he’s ready?”

Axel jerked off her other boot, peeled down the wool socks so she only wore her pair of white sweat socks, and pulled the ski pants off her feet. Then, to her amazement and complete delight, he picked up both her feet, put them in his lap and started rubbing.

“Oh, that’s good,” she murmured as she closed her eyes and let the growing fire’s warmth start to seep through her flannel shirt and jeans, while his fingers worked magic on her feet, sending little tingles up her legs. “What did you mean by when he’s ready? He’s a cat.”

“Yes, he is. Okay, you sit here and relax,” Axel said, seeming to want to change the subject. “The wood pile is just around the corner of the cabin, so don’t lock me out.” He winked as he stood up. “Be back in a minute.”

“Pick your mate, huh,” she said to the cat as he leaned against her and purred. He rolled onto his back and looked up at her. As she rubbed his chest and belly, she wondered how... “Oh, you’re going to go off into the wild and find some hot-to-trot kitty and

bring her home? Or are you a love 'em and leave 'em type?" Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Maybe Axel's just delusional?"

The purring stuttered, almost sounding like a chuckle, which made her laugh.

"I knew it! You are, aren't you? Axel's living in a dream world. Still, he's the best damn good looking, delusional guy I've ever met. But don't you dare tell him I told you so." She winked, enjoying their little one-sided chat, and scrubbed her nails over his deep chest. He seemed to love that if his swishing tail was any clue.

"Well, I'll share another secret with you." The cougar's ears perked up, and she grinned. "I've never been much of a cat person, but you're growing on me. I'm glad you were there today. Lucky for me, you're on my side."

The cat purred again. Dakota sighed and closed her eyes, tired to her bones.

The door banged open and in came Axel, carrying a stack of wood so high it covered his face. He walked unerringly across the room to a big wooden box in a corner and dumped the logs inside.

"That should get us through the night," he said as he went back to the open door. He stepped outside and brushed wood crumbs and snow off his jacket, then came back inside and shut the door.

A cold draft made its way to where she sat, and she shivered.

*Meow.*

She shook her head and tucked her fingers under her armpits. “Yeah, well, it’s going to take more than five minutes for me to thaw, okay?”

Her stomach rumbled, and the cat growled as he rolled to his feet and left her side.

“Sorry,” she grumbled.

“Hungry?” Axel asked, as if he’d heard her belly. But there was no way he could’ve since she was across the room from where he was peeling off his outer gear.

“Uh, yeah. Famished.” How the hell did he know? She’d had another of those nasty power bars no more than an hour ago. Probably hungry himself. “Need help fixing dinner?”

“Nope. We’re just going to have...” He pulled the door open, leaned out and picked something up. When he shut the door he held up what looked like a freezer bag full to bursting with something brown. “Venison stew. Guaranteed to fill you up and make you beg for more.”

Dakota laughed. “Where’d you get that?” She was sure he hadn’t brought it up the mountain in his rucksack.

“Out back there’s a secured cache. We fill it up after the first hard freeze.” He went into the kitchen and, using his flashlight, scrounged through a lower cupboard to retrieve a big pot. “It’ll take a while to warm, but it’s fully cooked.” He pulled a pocket knife from his jeans and used it to cut away the bag from the frozen lump of food, then dropped the whole thing into the cast iron pot before carrying it toward her.

“Wow. Definitely rustic,” she said, scooting to the side a bit when he reached around her for something.

He set the pot on the hearth and set up the something. It was a small tripod with a hook dangling from the center. He carefully hung the pot handle from the hook.

“But not without some civilization,” he said, making her suspicious that he’d talked to Heidi about her and her expectations for this trip. He pointed to a generator against the wall near the front door. “We’ll fire that up in the morning so we can use the stove. We try not to use it much, since hauling in extra fuel for it in the winter is a real pain.”

“Hot water, maybe?” she asked hopefully, willing to take sponge baths if she could get her hands on Axel. His ass, as he leaned over the fire, was definitely something to look at. She really wouldn’t mind seeing it without the denim.

“I can get you some of that tonight,” Axel said with a grin when he straightened up and headed back into the kitchen. This time the pot he brought out was at least ten-gallon sized. He went to the door, slipped on his boots and went outside. He returned almost immediately, carrying the pot overflowing with fresh snow, kicked off his boots, shut the door and brought the pot to the fire. “It should be ready about the same time as the stew. We have a stash of hot chocolate in the cupboard, if you’d like.”

She grinned at him. “Thanks, Axel.” Then she grew serious. “I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you I got cold. I thought I could work through it.”

He reached over and pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear, making her shiver but not from cold.



“You did work through it. Just don’t do it again, okay?”

She nodded.

He seemed to collect himself. His hand dropped as he stepped back and sat down a few feet away on the sofa.

Falke stepped up onto the sofa and sprawled out next to Axel. Both of them looked at her, and it struck her, suddenly, that their eyes—man’s and cat’s—were almost the same color.

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As it turned out, the door she’d spotted wasn’t the bedroom. That was up a narrow, rough-hewn wooden ladder to the loft. One bed. Huge, but only one. Although, the couch had a queen-sized hideaway under its cushions—something Axel quickly pointed out. She’d been amazed to watch Falke completely bypass the ladder and land at the top with one big leap.

The doorway was to a bathroom of sorts. No running water, so no sink; however, Dakota couldn’t quite express her thanks for the rather high-tech looking waterless composting toilet. She wouldn’t have to go outside and wade through high snow banks to reach an outhouse in the frigid weather and pitch black night.

But best of all was the far corner of the small room. Axel had warmed up a full ten gallons of water for her while they waited for the stew to start bubbling and, after supper, put on a second, smaller pot for the hot

chocolate. He then took the ten gallons into the bathroom and filled a tank hung from the ceiling above a drain in the floor. A nifty little shower stall.

“Oh, Axel, this is awesome,” she’d exclaimed, wanting to push him out of the room so she could strip down and take her shower.

“There’s towels, shampoo, etcetera in there.” He pointed to a white cabinet on the wall. He’d lit two fat candles in the bathroom for light, and Dakota did her best not to stare at him in the romantic setting. Okay, a rustic bathroom wasn’t *that* romantic, but she had a damn good imagination.

She rushed back to her pack, pulled out the flannel pajamas she purchased yesterday after booking the trip and practically skipped into the bathroom to shower.

Outside the bathroom, as soon as Axel heard the water trickling down the drain, he turned to speak to Gunnar.

*Don’t go there. His brother cut him off. You can’t keep your hands off her either. At least she’s the one petting me, not the other way around.*

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me she was freezing to death out there?” Axel had waited to jump Gunnar’s shit about this, even though it could have been dealt with telepathically. He was ready to strangle his brother. Between Dakota getting near hypothermic out there, and then Gunnar all but throwing himself in her lap, Axel couldn’t take much more.

*Same reason you were pushing her limits all damn day, going farther and faster than you would have with any other woman we ever brought out here. Like you, I wanted to see how far she’d go before failing.*

“Damn it, Gun, there’s a difference between sore muscles and freezing to death.”

*She wasn’t freezing to death. She was cold. Besides, by the time she started shivering, we were less than a quarter mile from the homestead.*

Axel growled and glared. Damn it, his brother was right. He’d been doing the same thing all day.

*She’s....special.*

“Shut up,” Axel hissed. Gunnar was his closest brother, in age—Axel had been first, and Gunnar was the second of four in their litter—and they’d always shared a special bond, slightly deeper than he had with the rest of his family. He knew one day they’d share a mate. It had to be if they wanted their line to continue. But neither of them was ready to look for one, yet. Until that day, there was an underlying competition between them—there had been since they were thirteen years old—where women were concerned.

Gunnar chuckled. *We’ll see who can get under her skin first. You or the pretty kitty that saved her life.*

“Goddamn it, Gun, I swear if you—”

“Who are you talking to?” Dakota asked, stepping out of the bathroom dressed in a pair of flannel pajamas that made her look as cute and innocent as a bug, her hair wrapped turban-style in a towel.

*Don’t think I didn’t hear you calling her honey earlier...or see that little, let me put that curl behind your ear for you, touch.*

“The damn cat’s being a pain in the ass. I should kick him outside for the night.”

“Outside? In the cold?” Dakota walked right up to Gunnar and knelt down in front of him, obviously not

afraid any longer. “That’s no place for a good kitty, now is it?” she said as if speaking to a baby while she scratched his ears and rubbed his head. “You’ll be good, won’t you?”

Gunnar purred. Loudly.

“Fuck,” Axel muttered as he turned away and went to the sofa, where he collapsed into the corner. Gunnar would probably win this round. His only consolation was that *neither* of them would be having sex with Dakota. Gunnar was a damn cat, after all, and he was there in a business capacity.

“Yes, you are, aren’t you?” she crooned.

*Oh, yes, I’m a good cat. And she obviously loves sweet little kitties.*

*You aren’t a little kitten, and you damn sure aren’t sweet.*

*She thinks I am.* Gunnar licked Dakota’s chin, and her laugh did something to Axel’s chest that made it damn hard to breathe.

Axel sighed and closed his eyes. “Let me know when you’re ready. I’ll make your hot chocolate.”

“Thanks.” Dakota chuckled as Gunnar nuzzled her hand, then her belly, before he rolled onto his back and continued to purr.

*You are so going to pay, Axel told Gunnar. Next group of he-men wannabes we get, you’re going to be up here as guide trying to keep them alive.*

Gunnar laughed and purred as Dakota rubbed his chest and belly, really getting into it. *It’s definitely worth it.*

Gunnar lay on the floor near the fire, watching his brother at the stove putting together a hot breakfast for Dakota. Earlier, Axel brought fuel up from the storm shelter, while he'd moved the gas-powered generator outdoors. The small engine was now rumbling just outside the door on the front porch. The sun was up, and the two of them had opened the shutters so sunbeams streamed in through the windows and brightened up the old place.

It had felt good to shift, if only for a brief time, and stretch his human muscles after being in his cat body for so long.

He'd tried to convince Axel to switch with him for the day, but that hadn't gotten him anywhere. Axel was sure Gunnar would try to get into Dakota's pants if he were human. Gunnar figured Axel was probably right. That belly rub she'd given him last night had left him in quite a state.

It was nearly 10:00 a.m., but they hadn't heard a peep from her all morning. Of course, he could hear her breathing, but he'd been awake since before dawn and she hadn't so much as moved a muscle. Axel thought starting breakfast, the scent of hot pancakes, would wake her up, but no such luck. Breakfast was nearly ready to be served, and she was still deep asleep.

Maybe they'd pushed her too hard the day before. She'd been a real trooper, though, and Gunnar couldn't quite get over the fact she'd done so well right up until the last half hour or so of the hike. It wasn't like Axel to press a client to the breaking point like that, not

unless said client was some asshole—almost always a guy—who thought he could outdo the guide.

Impossible really. Their catamount physiques, even in human form, could out perform any human any day of the week. It was rare that they got physically tired, or even winded. He, himself, as guide once had to rescue one of those bastards from the bottom of a ravine by himself, dragging the guy up a nearly sheer cliff face to get him to an area where a rescue team could land the chopper and haul him off the mountain.

It was just part of who they were. Long life spans—provided they didn't run into a stray bullet. Contrary to popular belief about shape-shifting creatures, such as werewolves, they weren't immortal. A plain ol' bullet from any decent hunting rifle could take them down the same as any other mountain lion, or human for that matter. But they did tend to live to a ripe old age of around a hundred under the right circumstances. They were strong, fit, and—he stood up and headed for the ladder to the loft where Dakota slept—they had a tendency to enjoy the ladies.

Axel wanted Dakota. That was no secret, especially to Gunnar, who in his puma form could easily scent the pheromones both Axel and Dakota released whenever they so much as looked at each other. Hell, Gunnar wanted her too, but he didn't have a chance while he was here as a cat. The thing he didn't think Axel realized was that there was something more to Dakota than a quick fuck. There was a deeper attraction than Axel would admit. Gunnar knew, because he felt it too.

They weren't old, but their fathers had been urging them, and their litter mates, to start searching for *the one*. The odds of finding a female that carried the right gene, like their sister, was slim to impossible.

Yes, they needed to procure offspring, and without a match of their own kind, only a vital, healthy human woman could keep their line alive—but she'd have to be willing to mate with two of them. And if the shape-shifting didn't scare her off, the idea of polygamy surely would.

Though their fathers warned this might take time, as caution was a must, at only thirty, he and his brothers all felt they had a few more years before the search for a prospective mate needed to happen.

Gunnar leaped up to the loft and landed on silent paws. Dakota lay sprawled near the edge of the king-sized bed, one arm dangling off the side. Her breathing was deep and even. The poor woman was exhausted.

He silently padded to the bed and peered over the edge at her. No dark smudges beneath her eyes, which was a good sign. She smelled good too. Very good. Gunnar had the urge to bury his nose against her side and breathe her in, but he refrained. She'd probably freak out, since only twenty-four hours ago she was sure he was going to eat her.

Not that he wouldn't mind a taste or two...

He sat on his haunches and stared at her. *Come on, sweetheart. Time to wake up.* He could send his thoughts to a human, but he couldn't read humans' minds, which was a real bitch at times.

She didn't budge, and he sighed. The good thing, he supposed, was that if a woman slept that soundly,

she felt safe. He'd sensed her unease last night when they entered the cabin. That wolf had scared her half to death, and when it got dark last night, the fear she'd tried so valiantly to suppress came back.

He turned his head and nuzzled her palm, giving it a little lick. She tasted as good as honey, and he wouldn't mind a few more licks, but he stopped himself when she groaned.

Her lashes fluttered open, and blurry eyes stared at him. He pushed his head against her palm and purred.

"Hey, pretty kitty," Dakota murmured. But then she tried to roll onto her side, gasped, groaned, and flopped back on her belly with a curse muffled by the pillow.

*Damn, damn, damn.* They'd pushed her way too hard. She could barely move. He was about to tell Axel to get up here, when the front door opened and his brother went out, probably to gather more firewood.

She turned her head to face him again, and a frown marred her pretty brow. "I feel like I've been hit by a truck." She laid her hand on his head again, though not scratching or petting. "Oh, God," she mumbled when she tried again to turn over. "My legs...my back. Shit, where's a masseuse...or chiropractor when a girl needs one?"

He gave her hand a quick swipe with his tongue, then leaped onto the bed, over her, onto the empty side, and shoved the covers off of her with his nose. Then he planted his big front paws against her lower back. It was the best he could do right now, not having any hands. He proceeded to knead into her.



A soft, gusty laugh came out of her as she flopped once again to her belly. "My friend had a cat that did that, but you're much better at it." She sighed. "How the hell did you know? Ohhh...yeah...right there...that's the spot."

Her muscles were knotted like rocks, so he kept it up. She didn't seem to notice that his motions weren't quite those of a normal cat. Probably didn't matter to her since she was in so much pain.

The front door opened again, and Gunnar peered over the edge of the loft to see that he'd been correct. Axel carried a load of wood.

"Ahhhh..." Dakota moaned when he hit a particularly hard knot of muscles.

"Dakota?" Axel called.

*She can barely move,* Gunnar sent to him.

"I'm here," Dakota said, then moaned again as Gunnar moved down her back, just above her butt. And what a fine butt it was. Soft enough to jiggle a little when he moved her with his paws, firm enough to be perfectly shaped.

"What the hell...?" Axel's head popped into view over the edge of the loft as he climbed the ladder.

"Falke gives great back rubs," she muttered. "Can I buy him off you?"

"Move," Axel said to Gunnar, anger in his tone, and shoved him, hard, off the edge of the bed.

Gunnar hissed. *What the fuck, Ax?*

*You just had to wake her up, didn't you?*

*No. Shit, she was in pain, and you were outside. I did the best I could with what I've got.*

Axel was obviously ignoring him. He climbed onto the bed and took over where Gunnar had just been.

“Aww, honey, you’re all twisted up here.”

“Uh-huh. Oh, that’s nice too.” She sighed, and Gunnar sat on his haunches so he could watch her face. Her dark skin and straight, raven hair were magnificent. Her lips were plump, but not filled with collagen like so many of the ski bunnies that came to Leavenworth. He’d bet they were soft and tasted even better than her skin.

“Hey, pretty kitty,” she said as she reached out again and laid her hand on Gunnar’s head. “Thanks for tryin’, but Axel’s...ahhh...yeah...there...”

She sounded like a woman in the throes of sex, and Gunnar was damn tempted to shift and help his brother out. Four hands would be better than two.

But that was against the rules. Rules all of the brothers lived by. No one—absolutely no one outside of the family—knew the truth of their heritage. It was way too risky to their way of life, especially since they’d given up a more nomadic existence. None of them wanted to have to leave the idyllic surroundings of their childhood home.

Gunnar sniffed the air. Dakota was so turned on, if Axel made one move now, he’d have her without a single protest. Hell, as turned on as she was, she’d probably be begging soon. No way Gunnar would let that happen. He had a feeling about this woman, and Axel wasn’t going to get her all to himself. Not if he had any say in it. And he did. He was the one with sharp teeth and claws right now.

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Dakota groaned and sighed and moaned. She ached so badly, but on the other hand, she'd never had such an awesome massage. Never in her life had she experienced such talented hands loosening muscles and making her skin so warm. When Axel's callused hands slid under her pajama top to work her lower back, her thoughts turned to things other than soreness. The heat he transferred into her body seemed to slide lower and lower, until she wanted to spread her legs and beg him to come on in.

Then his hands moved down to the backs of her thighs, so close to where she was hot and needy. She gripped the pillow with one hand, Falke's head with the other, and forced herself not to move her hips.

"How you doing?" Axel asked.

His voice was so low and sexy. She'd die to hear that phrase whispered in her ear while he was buried deep inside of her.

"Dakota?"

"Mmm. Good." She couldn't say much else. "Don't stop. I almost feel human again." The aches she woke up with seemed to fly right out the window. But she didn't want him to stop. Not ever.

He chuckled. "I'm sorry, honey. Yesterday was too much for you."

There was that word again. *Honey*. She liked the way he said it and wondered what he meant by it.

"We'll take it easy today, sit around the cabin and relax."

*Or stay in bed,* she thought. *With you.* Dakota sighed. *Would he?*

He worked his magical fingers and palms down the backs of her thighs, her calves, even took some extra time on the soles of her feet.

“Roll over. Let me get your quads.”

She let go of Falke and rolled. Her back still ached a little, but the worst of the pain was gone.

“How are your arms?”

“Arms are fine.” She gasped when his hands touched her inner thigh.

Axel looked up at her face. “Hurt?”

Slowly she shook her head. *Do it again. Do it again. Please!*

He didn't though, seeming to be much more careful not to touch her in a too intimate way. Why? If he thought she was injured and couldn't fight off advances she didn't want, it was so not true. She wouldn't fight him, not one little bit.

Testing out her back, careful not to move too fast for fear she only felt good lying on it, she used her arms to lever herself into a sitting position, her face within inches of Axel's.

“How's it feel?” he asked.

She glanced down at his crotch, saw the hard outline of his erection pressed against the fly of his jeans, and would've liked to ask him the same question. She wasn't a virgin by any means, but she'd been so busy with school and then landing the job at the advertising firm, she hadn't had much time for fun. For men.

Axel looked up into her eyes again, one eyebrow raised in question, probably because she hadn't answered him. She was so horny she could barely think straight, yet he ignored his erection and worried only about her wellbeing. Damn, that was sweet.

Dakota leaned forward and pressed her mouth against his.

Fireworks and nuclear bombs. His mouth was warm, with just the right amount of moistness. And he was wild. As if he'd been waiting for her to make the first move. His hand left her thigh and buried in her hair. Axel tilted her head just a little and swept his tongue into her mouth. He tasted of a hint of coffee, sweet syrup and hot, hungry man.

*Reowwww.* The most terrifying sound rent the air, and she jerked away in horror.

Falke jumped up on the bed, over her lap, and growled at Axel. The big cat had his face right up to Axel's, and Dakota was terrified he'd kill the man. She didn't know what to do. If she moved, it might startle the cat. If she didn't do anything and Falke hurt Axel...

They glared at each other. Neither man nor beast moved, but they *both* seemed to be growling. She felt the vibrations through the bed. Heard the low sounds of anger.

"Please don't hurt him," she whispered. "It's okay." She didn't know what else to do or say. The cat seemed to understand so much. "Falke, I'm okay. He wasn't hurting me. It's okay."

The cat broke eye contact with Axel, turned his head to her and swiped his rough tongue up her cheek.

Then he purred and plopped down over her lap, as if he were guarding her like a living, breathing, *fanged* chastity belt.

She let out a nervous laugh and looked at Axel. Though he'd just come face-to-face with a furious wild animal, he didn't appear frightened. No, he looked mad enough to kill the cat.

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*Outside, now!* Axel heard and ignored Gunnar's demand as his brother paced back and forth near the front door in full pissed-off puma form. He set Dakota's plate of breakfast on the table in front of her.

"Thank you," she said with a smile for him and a worried glance at the cat. "I think he may need to be let out...to go...you know. Unless you have a supersized litter box around here somewhere."

Axel smiled, though he couldn't quite bring himself to laugh. "Yeah, I think you're right." Gunnar needed to be let out all right, but Axel didn't relish the thought of what would happen once he was. He'd been bombarded with dire epitaphs and curses since he'd helped Dakota climb down from the loft.

*Here lies Axel, the Asshole. Has a catchy ring to it, don't ya think? Brother, if you don't get the fuck over here, I'm not gonna wait for the headstone. I'm gonna carve that into your hide! You're only delaying the inevitable.*

Unaware, Dakota poured maple syrup on her pancakes, the yellow pat of margarine sliding off the

side in a melted puddle. Then she looked up at him with an expectant smile.

“Look, I’ve already eaten, so why don’t you take your time, enjoy the meal, and I’m going to go outside too...to, uh, gather some kindling...and maybe chop more firewood. If we want to keep the fire ablaze around the clock, we’re gonna need it.”

“Okay. Be careful and hurry back.” Her grin was adorably cheeky, and he wanted to sit down beside her but knew that would only make matters worse between him and his sibling. He turned to head for the door. “Take good care of Axel, Falke.”

*Don't worry. I will.*

Axel stopped, met Gunnar’s feline gaze and sighed before grabbing his coat, opening the door and accompanying the puma outside.

Gunnar leaped off the porch and plowed a path toward the tree line about thirty yards from the cabin. Axel knew the cat was headed for a rocky outcropping that was another twenty yards beyond there. He hurriedly fastened snowshoes onto his booted feet and grabbed the ax from the woodpile to go along with the story he gave Dakota. He wouldn’t really need it for protection from his own brother, despite the threats Gunnar leveled against him, but it was good to keep up appearances.

Gunnar’s tail swished angrily as he sprawled on a flat rock when Axel arrived.

“Okay. You wanted to talk,” Axel said, taking the offensive. “Let’s talk.”

*I want to beat some sense into you, but Heidi wouldn't appreciate having to stitch you up after I finished.*

Axel propped the ax against a tree and crossed his arms. "I fucked up," he admitted. "Are you happy now? I never should've kissed her, but she started it."

*You didn't have to finish it.*

"I didn't. A certain possessive puma spoiled it."

*Lucky for you!*

Feeling guilty enough as it was, he tried a counter-offensive jab of his own. "You haven't exactly been keeping your distance, rubbing up against her thigh, playing on her sympathies and pawing her this morning."

*I'm a cougar! What was I supposed to do? Sit around licking my balls while she groaned in pain? Maybe I should've let her keep thinking I'm gonna turn feral when she least expects it and have her for dinner as my main entrée.*

"All right. You've ma—"

*And for the record, my 'paws' remained on the outside of her clothing unlike someone's hands. Seriously, Axel. What was all that talk about, 'She's a client, not a target for your sex drive,' hmm? Was that all just a bunch of bull, or do the rules only apply to the rest of us and not you?*

Axel unbuckled his snowshoes, walked over to where his brother lay and sat down on an empty spot. The ridge that gave the area its name was always windblown, the snow only a few inches deep here.

Gunnar was right. Axel had struggled with his attraction to the caramel-skinned beauty since first



setting eyes on her in the shop. He thought he could handle it, despite the close quarters, better than any of his brothers. It was just five short days after all.

He hadn't made it beyond a day and a half.

But, damn it, she'd impressed the hell out of him yesterday, and she looked so damn pretty, and kissed so fucking—

*That does it. We're switching places right now.*

“What?”

*You heard me. It's the only way. You know I'm right. That kiss proved it. What if she tried again? Would you be able to turn her away?*

Honestly? No, but he couldn't admit his weakness to Gunnar. “Would you?”

Gunnar changed from cat to human and immediately began to shiver. “Fuck! It's cold.” He jumped to his feet on the rock and rubbed his hands together. “And, yes, I could. Now, hand over those clothes.”

Resigned to make the switch, Axel stripped and shivered. While Gunnar hopped off the rock and hurriedly donned his outfit, Axel climbed onto the rock, sucked in a cold breath of air, and let the change begin. Goose bumps skittered across his bare flesh, the familiar tingles erupting at the base of his spine. The shift rippled like an electric current from his core to his extremities. His vision spotted then blurred into a kaleidoscope of colorful starbursts. He exhaled as his height shrank toward the cold stone ground, closed his eyes, and in that instant the cold climate receded, his body warmed by a thick coat of golden fur. He blinked

away the last of glittery sparks from his vision and looked around with heightened senses.

Axel noticed the wound still evident on Gunnar's thigh before his brother all but hopped into his pants. Small and already on the mend, the pink scratch shouldn't be a problem so long as Gunnar kept his pants on.

*You'll have to answer to my name.*

"As if I didn't have enough practice doing that when we'd switch classes back in high school. I think I can handle it."

Gunnar combed his fingers through his hair and then put the pair of gloves on. When he turned to head back, Axel said, *Don't forget the ax and kindling.*

"Got it." He paused and glanced at Axel, who leaped off the rock and turned away from the trail back to the cabin. "Where are you going?"

*For a run. I...I need to burn off some energy.* And he needed time to think. Time to figure out how a city slicker from Vegas could get under his skin so fast, and what he would do once she was gone...in less than four short days.

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Gunnar took his time gathering the kindling and splitting logs, but once his arms were full of wood, he could put off his return to the cabin no longer.

Despite what he'd said to his brother and his righteous anger over Axel's apparent double standards, Gunnar wasn't as confident in his ability to mislead

Dakota about his identity. The truth was he didn't relish the idea of deceiving her. He wanted her to know him, Gunnar, not Falke the puma or the Axel stand-in.

But he had no excuse for Axel's departure and his arrival on Red Dog Ridge, at least not any kind of story that she'd find believable, so he must keep up appearances as his brother and find some way to get through the next few days without caving in to his more dominant male urges.

As a cat it had been both easier and more difficult—easier because he was feline and couldn't do more than vie for the occasional tummy rub, and harder because his keen animal senses made him aware of the sexual tension in the room and Dakota's physical desires without her ever voicing such need or acting upon it.

The trouble was she did act upon it. He smiled at the thought even as he cringed. She was no shy wallflower, which both pleased and terrified him. If he'd met her somewhere else, under different circumstance, things might've been different between them.

Although that kiss—or rather Axel's reaction to it—had infuriated him, it also gave him hope for something he was unsure his brother had considered.

This woman could be their perfect mate. As a human, Axel had certainly picked up on her magnetism, but while shifted, Gunnar had been much more observant to every change in nuance. She could be *the one*, but what remained uncertain was his and Axel's readiness to take the risk necessary to discover

for sure. A huge risk considering how brief their time with the woman had been thus far.

There was no question in his mind, however, that Dakota was physically—no *sexually*—attracted to Axel. The only concern he had was whether she'd react likewise to him, not that he could do a damn thing to find out. Not after he'd given Axel such shit about it.

Having literally stepped into his big brother's shoes, he was now responsible for keeping the family secret, providing for the woman as their client and succeeding where Axel had failed. The problem was that Gunnar wanted to seduce her, to learn whether or not she could be *the one*, not avoid her temptation as he so boldly declared he could.

Rules were rules, and regardless whether she might make them a good mate or not, Dakota wouldn't be in town long enough for them to determine that as fact or wishful thinking. Knowing her for forty-eight hours wasn't enough time to be certain they could trust her with their secret, or their hearts.

He returned the ax to the woodpile, removed the snowshoes and dropped the kindling into a pile on the porch where it would stay dry and ready for use. Taking a deep breath of cool fresh air, he opened the cabin's door.

When Gunnar reentered the cabin, he realized one thing was much easier now: his senses were subdued in human form, so he wasn't plagued by her scent of arousal. Though he still caught a whiff of her unique fragrance, it wasn't nearly as hard to deal with as it had been before.

Maybe he could do this after all.

He shed his outer gear and breathed in the warmed air of the cabin's interior, searching the space for Dakota. The fire blazed with a fresh supply of logs, but she was nowhere to be seen. He opened his mouth to call out, but then heard a noise in the bathroom.

He decided to let her be and headed for the kitchen. Although the cabin didn't feature indoor plumbing, it did have a manual pump outside for water when fresh snow wasn't readily available. But Axel had retrieved a wash bucket of snow earlier to clean the dishes once it melted, which it had. So Gunnar dropped in the small stack of dirty dishes, a squirt of soap, and began scrubbing a plate.

Three plates and two forks later, he was whistling while he worked on another utensil when two soft hands slid around his sides and warm breath tickled his neck.

"Where's my furry guardian?"

He froze, praying to hear the tread of puma paws on the porch. Fuck, his human hearing sucked. How had she snuck up on him?

Gunnar swallowed hard and dropped the spoon and sponge into the water, causing the cool sudsy water to spatter. "Umm, I expect him back any minute."

Her hands dove up under his shirt, across his chest. She lightly kissed the side of his neck and hugged him closer to her body. "Mmm, you smell good."

So did she. So damn good even to his limited human senses. His dick grew thick and pressed against his jeans, and he hadn't even turned around. Definitely safer if he stayed right where he was.

*Rules... Ah, hell, that felt good. No! Rules. Client.*

Her fingers dipped lower, unsnapping his jeans. He started to turn, stopped, took a deep breath. “Uh, Dakota, I... What...” He couldn’t fucking think straight with her body so close to his, her warm breath along his neck, her seductive touch against his sensitive skin.

Her hand brushed over the hot bulge in his pants, paused, squeezed.

She sighed.

He ached, throbbed.

“So, while we’re all alone,” she murmured, her tone husky and suggestive, “why don’t you and I start where we left off, hmm?”

His zipper started to descend. Gunnar whipped around and grabbed her wrists in tight fists.

Up on her toes, she leaned against him, pinning him between her sweet curves and the kitchen counter, making him groan—a sound cut off when her mouth covered his.

Oh, damn, she tasted good.

*Client!*

He pulled back at the thought, though he didn’t want to, and said, “God, Dakota, I can’t.”

She didn’t try to squirm free of his grip. Neither did she back away, her body still perfectly aligned with his hard-on. Instead, she smiled and sensuously ground herself against him until he swore he’d ignite from the titillating friction.

“Something tells me differently,” she said with brazen glee and a wicked glint in her dark eyes.

“I can’t,” he said again, the words harder to push out with lungs that no longer worked.

“Why not?”

“You’re my client. You hired me—”

“Oh, that’s easy. You’re fired. Now kiss me.”

He tried to think fast. *Keep her talking, keep her distracted.* Where the fuck was Axel when he needed him? “How will you find your way down the mountain if you fire me?”

The instant her lips touched his again, her bare foot slid up one of his calves. Her leg curled around his. He shoved her hands around to the small of her back and heard the catch in her breath, saw the excitement in her gorgeous eyes. “No,” he ground out. “We can’t.” Though the reasons didn’t seem so clear now.

Dakota nipped his bottom lip and whispered against his mouth, “I want you.” She tilted her pelvis just so, her heat aligning with his throbbing cock. “And I know you want me too.” Then she pressed her lips against his once more. When she emitted an erotic half-moan, half-purr, he was lost.

Gunnar kissed her hard, spun them around, and pinned her against the countertop. She was so fucking hot, so ready. Her sounds of need and excitement made the rest of his reasons for saying no fly right out the window into the snow. He wanted her and, damn it, she wanted him.

She clawed at his jeans, shoving them down off his ass to midthigh. He groaned into her mouth, his tongue dueling with hers, and she sighed.

“Love a guy who goes commando,” she muttered when he released her mouth to suckle her neck and

pull her tee from her jeans. When had she changed? She'd been cute in the pajamas, but was hot as hell in the tight denim and curve-hugging T-shirt. No bra, he learned when he yanked the tee up. The sight of her breasts damn near made him come in her hand.

Hiking her up onto the counter, he latched on to one plump nipple and tore at her clothes. With one hand, she clung to his head, her fingers woven into his hair, and tried to help remove her clothes. He just wanted them out of his way.

He heard material rip, but paused only long enough to say, "Sorry."

She pulled him back to her breast and huffed out, "Don't stop."

Seconds later, her nails scored his back as she lifted his shirt up. He released her luscious nipple with a hard pop and yanked the T-shirt over his head.

The disconnection between their bodies gave him a second to try to catch his breath, try to get control of his heart rate, his sanity. Oh, fuck, she was so beautiful. That long straight hair over her bare shoulders, just grazing the top of her sweetly rounded breasts. Those dusky nipples, puckered from his mouth. The tiniest scrap of nothing panties he'd ever seen.

She squirmed a little more, just enough to slide her pants all the way off and her panties to her knees. When she let them go, the lacy thong fell free of one foot and caught on the other. Dakota dangled the flimsy material like a lure of water to a man dying of thirst. Then she met his gaze and grinned. "Have I told you how incredibly turned on I am by a man in



nothing but leather?" As she spoke, she shoved his jeans farther down to pool around his ankles.

He blinked at her question. He wasn't wearing leather pants. "Leather?"

Her gaze dropped to his collar, black leather bearing his family's crest. With a sly grin, she nodded and hooked a finger in his collar, drawing him closer. "Mmm-hmm," she murmured against his lips. "Nothing but leather."

That did it. She was naughty and sweet, and sexy as hell. Even with human nostrils he could scent her arousal. Gunnar kissed her as if he'd perish without her, which he began to believe might be the case. He'd never needed a woman so much in his life. Finesse escaped him. He pushed all thoughts of responsibility to the farthest corner of his mind. His hands weren't gentle as he wrapped them around her waist and pulled her hot, damp core against his belly. He demanded with his mouth that she give her all...and she did. Tongue, teeth, nipping, biting, mewling like a kitten, panting like a tigress. *Ah, yes...*

"Please," she said on a harsh breath when he grabbed her ass cheeks and lifted her from the counter. Then she cried out when he shoved inside of her. She was so hot, so wet for him. Her inner muscles squeezed him, and he grunted as he slammed her back against the counter for leverage.

"More," she begged, and so he gave her more, everything.

She gripped his neck, her head thrown back, her legs anchored around him. He leaned over her and drew one fat nipple between his teeth.

Dakota squealed and bucked against him, then fell back and whacked the back of her head against the wall. “Shit!” she cried, but her nails dug into his back and shoulders.

He lifted her, nearly toppling both of them to the floor because his pants were around his ankles, and she landed hard on the table, him over her. One of the stools crashed to the floor.

Her husky laugh sent a piercing shard of heat into his heart, and when she looked at him with that come-and-fuck-me grin, his knees damn near buckled. Her nails scored his sides, making him hiss, causing goose bumps to erupt across his back. She squeezed her inner muscles around his cock, and he groaned.

Gunnar pulled away, out of her, and flipped her over, her belly against the sturdy table. She had the cutest ass he’d ever seen, and he grabbed it with both hands then gave it a sharp little slap that made her squeal and wiggle.

“Don’t tease,” she said, laughing. She tossed her hair and looked over her shoulder at him.

He met her gaze, aligned his cock and plowed in to the hilt with one hard thrust.

She cried out. He didn’t stop. He rode her hard, fucking her with wild abandon. And, damn him, she felt perfect.

He slapped her ass again and she yelped. Another smack and stroke, and she hissed, “Yes.”

Dakota clawed at the tabletop, flailed for a handhold, until he grabbed her wrists, pulled them behind her back and bound her with one firm fist. His other hand at her shoulder, Gunnar pulled her toward

him, held her steady, while he repeatedly bucked against her, rocking the table, ramming his cock as deep as humanly possible.

“Oh...oh, yeah. Yes. D-don't stop,” she begged, not that he had any intention of doing so. He'd prefer this moment last forever, but all too soon his climax neared.

He struggled to hold it off a little longer, wanting to stay united flesh with flesh, needing this union to last. Maintaining a tight grip on her wrists, Gunnar reached beneath her with his free hand and found her slick clit. He pressed against it with the heel of his palm as he fucked her harder and harder with every stroke.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Her body tensed, she went up on tiptoes.

He slid his hand back, found that little bundle of nerves and pinched.

She screamed, and her body clamped down on him so tightly he thought he'd pass out. His orgasm struck with the force of a grizzly's paw. Gunnar gritted his teeth, shoved into her body as deep as he could, and let himself go.

He had no time to revel in post-coital afterglow.

As soon as he came, his sanity returned, his senses restored, and he heard the telltale thud of catamount paws.

He glanced up and saw Axel peering into the window just feet from them. “Oh, fuck.”

Dakota giggled.

He tensed, knowing Axel would've roared if he could have.

Instead, his big brother deafened his mind with, *Gunnar!* And his ears with the most powerfully shrill cry of fury.

Gunnar pulled out of her sweet body and struggled to yank up his pants without falling on his ass.

“Where the hell is my shirt?” He couldn’t find it, and judging by the sounds coming from outside, he had little choice but to go without.

“What’s wrong?” Dakota straightened up, her tee still bunched up above her breasts and lacy panties caught around one ankle.

*Reowww!*

“Nothing. Stay here. I need to go...uh...check on Falke.”

Worry marred her face now as she pulled her shirt down, her panties up then ran to the window. She reached for her coat. He stopped her as he grabbed his own.

“No. I’ll be fine,” he said with a slight wince at the lie and a glance out the window to see Axel swipe, with claws bared, at a support post on the front porch.

*Get the fuck out here, now, goddamn it!*

He was a dead man.

“Stay here,” he repeated, trying not to cringe at the volume of Axel’s telepathic curses. “I’ll go see what has him so riled up and be back soon.” *I hope.*

Damn, he’d screwed up.

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*You fucking son of a bitch!* Axel cursed when Gunnar cleared the doorway and shut the door behind him. He hissed, spat, growled. *The ridge. Now!*

Axel took off for the woods, and Gunnar strapped on the snowshoes still sitting on the porch from less than a half hour earlier. How was he going to get out of this one? Especially after all his talk about Axel not being able to control himself.

Damn, though, she'd been sweet.

He glanced at the window as he stepped into the snow to see Dakota there, watching him. He forced a smile and waved, then headed for the ridge, and his fate with his pissed off brother.

As soon as he cleared the trees, Axel demanded, *Change. Now.*

“Wait a second, Axel. Let's be reasonable—”

Axel took a swipe at him with bared claws, ripping into the heavy winter coat. *Now, goddamn you. Shift!*

After a moment of stunned silence, unable to believe his brother had swiped at him while he was still in human form, anger rushed through him deep and fast. “Fine!” He threw off the jacket and dropped his pants. In a flash, he shifted. Just as he finished the change, Axel was on him.

Gunnar's cat legs tangled in the pants, boots and snowshoes, and he had to twist and contort to scramble out of them and avoid Axel's snapping jaws. *Stop, Axel. Hear me out!*

Axel pounced, snapping his teeth in his face, digging his claws into his hide, as they rolled in the snow.

Gunnar broke free and faced off against his brother.

*It took you all of five minutes, didn't it?* Axel demanded. *You planned it. You wanted to pretend to be me so you could fuck her.*

*No!* Gunnar protested. *I didn't tell you to run off. Soon as I returned, she wanted to continue what you started...with that kiss. What was I supposed to do?*

*Not fuck her!*

*She seduced me. She came on to me.*

They circled and feinted this way and that, each one seeking a weakness, a point of attack. Axel found one first. He swiped at Gunnar, his claws finding their mark, and Gunnar had had enough. He growled and countered Axel's attack with a leap, landing on top of him, his claws buried into his brother's sides. Axel yipped like a puppy and then turned his head and snapped, getting Gunnar in the shoulder.

Gunnar shrieked in pain but hung on.

*You outweigh her by sixty pounds, you asshole. I'm supposed to believe you couldn't stop her? From what I saw, she wasn't pinning you to the table!* Axel reared up on his hind legs and fell back, intentionally throwing his weight onto Gunnar.

Gunnar grunted and lost his hold on his brother. He turned, grabbed Gunnar's throat and pinned him in the snow, belly up. Gunnar tried to push him away with his paws, but he had no leverage in the soft snow. And he didn't want to hurt his brother...not any more than he already had. Gunnar's will to fight died as quickly as it had flared.

*Okay, okay,* Gunnar cried. *I get it, you're pissed. I'm sorry.*

Axel snarled and clamped his teeth tighter, inflicting more pain but not breaking skin. *Pissed doesn't even begin to describe what I'm feeling.*

*I know. I'm sorry. Ax, I'm your brother.*

Another menacing snarl.

*I didn't mean for it to happen. I swear. She's just...irresistible. You gotta know that! And when she grabbed my cock—*

The teeth tightened on his throat.

*Stop!*

With a loud yowl, Axel released Gunnar's throat and leaped away, his tail swishing, golden-green eyes full of distrust...and hurt.

Gunnar didn't need to hear his brother's thoughts to know that it would be a long time before he was forgiven. They'd never let a woman come between them in their entire lives. He refused to accept the idea that this woman might. Axel needed time to calm down before he spoke to him about Dakota. Gunnar would give him that.

Axel turned and bounded through the snow to the pile of clothes on the ground, shifted, and hurried to dress. Gunnar lay in the snow and watched, noting the scratches on his neck and both sides of his body. Scratches, but not much blood. They'd inflicted much worse on each other in their younger years. The flesh wounds would heal; he just hoped the emotional scars would too.

Once Axel disappeared into the woods, Gunnar rolled to his paws to assess the damage to his own body. A few scrapes here and there, but nothing major. It looked like the winter jacket Axel had retrieved had

gotten the worst of it. Even when mad enough to maim, Axel hadn't fought to kill, just get the upper hand. Gunnar wasn't sure, if the tables were turned, whether he would've been quite so careful.

He hopped onto the exposed rocks and lay down to lick at a couple of the deeper scratches. He'd give Axel a little while to calm down before he went back to the cabin. And to come up with some story for why he returned looking like he'd waged war with a big fucking cat.

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Axel's pain had hardly subsided by the time he reached the cabin. The cuts on his body were nothing compared to what he'd felt in his chest when he witnessed his bare-assed brother draped over Dakota. It hadn't been more than thirty, maybe forty-five minutes, since Gunnar had read him the riot act about responsibility and celibacy, and there he was, fucking the very woman Axel had desired from the moment she waltzed into his store.

*Fuck.* He collapsed onto the porch and bent to remove the snowshoes.

Jealousy had never entered his vocabulary, until now. Despite their sparring over the years, he and his brothers had always been a close-knit family, all looking out for their little sister regardless of how much of a fit she gave them for it. Heidi had been the only female to ever garner the kind of protective,



possessive instincts he seemed to be suffering all of a sudden.

But somehow this felt different. Dakota wasn't family. No relation at all. A stranger, and yet he was drawn to her.

The door opened and Dakota dropped to her knees beside him. "Oh, my God!" She touched his torn jacket. "What happened? Are you okay?"

He finished removing the snowshoes and avoided eye contact. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a few scratches. Nothing serious."

"What happened? Did Falke do this?"

"Not his fault." Elbows propped on his knees, he held his bowed head in the cradle of his palms. *Shit*. Gunnar wasn't the problem, although he'd taken his frustrations out on him. No, the problem was the woman, or rather his reaction to her. Why did she ignite such strong passions in him? So strong, he'd willingly attack his own brother.

What was he supposed to do now? Dakota would be gone by week's end. His brother would still be family. He'd have to make amends somehow, even though the gut-deep wound to his pride remained raw.

"I don't understand."

He hated to lie to her, but she wouldn't understand the truth even if he could tell her. "Falke had a run-in with a porcupine." He snorted. Prickly was an apt description for how he felt.

"A porcupine?"

"Yeah, the quills can hurt like a son of a bitch, but he'll be okay. He just doesn't make a very good

patient.” He laughed, though it lacked any real humor. “Maybe it’s my poor bedside manner.”

“Let’s get you inside.”

Because she shivered, he let her guide him to his feet and into the cabin where the warmth of an open flame surrounded him and thawed the last of his anger.

How could he fault Gunnar for doing what he himself wanted to do? It was no secret among the brothers that he and Gunnar shared similar tastes in women. That was why he knew, deep down, that when the time finally came for them to claim a mate, he’d do so with Gunnar at his side.

He shrugged off the ripped jacket and heard Dakota gasp.

“A *few* scratches? Where’s the first aid kit? Some of those are deep. You need to get antibiotic ointment on them.”

“Let me get cleaned up first.”

He told her where she could find the kit in a kitchen cupboard while he excused himself to refill the water tank in the bathroom and take a quick, cold shower. After he finished, he found her waiting for him on the couch. Dressed in a fresh pair of pants, he padded barefoot over the rug, joined her on the sofa and sat still while she played nursemaid.

“I thought you said Falke wasn’t dangerous.”

“He’s not.” He met her gaze. “Don’t let this change your opinion of him. Like I said, it wasn’t his fault.”

She nodded. “Did you get all of the quills out? Will he be all right? You don’t seem worried that he’s not come back.”

“Yeah, he’s probably off somewhere licking his wounds. He’ll come back when he’s ready.”

A part of him felt he should be disgruntled over her interest in Gunnar, but another part, maybe a larger part, was pleased to see she cared.

He winced when she dabbed at one of the deeper cuts in his side.

“Sorry. This might sting a little.”

*No worse than I deserve.* His chuckle was pure self-deprecation.

“Oh, by the way, I found your shirt.”

He hadn’t known he lost it. “Oh? Where?”

She grinned. “It sort of wound up soaking in the wash bucket with the rest of the dirty dishes I never let you finish.”

Axel glanced at the kitchen and forced a chuckle out in reply. So Gunnar had told the truth about her pouncing on him.

“I took care of them while you were gone, though. The least I could do since I interrupted you.” She eyed him with an expectant expression, so he leaned over and gave her a quick, chaste kiss.

“Thanks,” he said, “for the dishes...and the interruption.”

Her smile showed he’d pleased her with his answer.

The pair spent the rest of the day indoors, sharing lunch—hotdogs and marshmallows cooked over the flames in the fireplace—and exchanging stories about their pasts.

“I can’t imagine having so many siblings,” Dakota said with a smile and a glance at her row of Scrabble letters.

“And your parents?”

She placed two tiles on the board, changing his word, *love*, into *lovers*, and wrote down her score.

“Still in Boulder. They live in the same house I grew up in, although my old bedroom is my mother’s sewing room with a daybed for whenever I come to visit.”

“You see ’em oft—”

A scratch on the door had both of them turning their heads toward the sound. Axel pushed to his feet and went to let Gunnar inside, but he didn’t miss the soft sound Dakota made.

“Is he...?”

She knelt on the couch, looking over the back of it as the puma walked in with a slow and wary stride.

Axel shut the door, and without a word—verbal or telepathic—he returned to their board game.

“He looks so sad,” she whispered as she took up her original spot across from him on the rug. The cat moved around the couch and laid down close enough to warm up by the fire, but not close enough for anyone to touch him.

Axel stared at her, surprised by her intuition. “He’ll be fine.” He noticed she didn’t rush to the cat’s aid with ointment in hand and suspected she was being cautious, but she didn’t seem fearful as it lay a few feet behind her. His gaze collided with Gunnar’s, and he gave his brother a small smile of reassurance.

She glanced up. “Your turn.”

He eyed the board, took a *C* from his stand and changed *lovers* to *clovers*.

“What about your parents? Do they live in Leavenworth?”

“Lost my mother a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. She really kept us all together. Having a big family can be trying at times. Brothers will fight, have disagreements, but I wouldn’t trade a one of them.” He held his brother’s gaze as he spoke. “When things are really rough, I know Gunnar and the others always have my back and will be there for me if I need them. I’d do the same for them.”

Gunnar dipped his head and then laid it on his paws. *Truce.*

“That’s great, Axel, having a support network like that.” She smiled, and then her grin turned cheeky. “But don’t think it’ll earn you any bonus points with me in Scrabble. I still intend to beat you.”

He chuckled. “Bring it on.”

The rest of the evening passed quickly, peacefully.

After a dinner of venison steaks that they and the cat enjoyed, Dakota finally had the nerve to approach Gunnar, his minor injuries much less visible beneath all that fur.

“You okay, big fella?” She knelt beside him and reached out to stroke his head.

Gunnar shied away, glancing at Axel, obviously unsure whether any contact was permissible after what happened earlier.

*It’s okay.*

“It’s okay,” she said, echoing his thoughts. “I won’t hurt you.”

Axel sighed. He hoped what she just said was true, but he feared the worse.

Gunnar eased closer, dared to rub his moist nose against her palm and ducked his head to let her pet him.

“That’s a good kitty,” she said with obvious pleasure. “I bet you won’t mess with that mean ol’ porcupine again, will you?”

The sound Gunnar made, part snort, part chuckle, came out more like a cat’s sneeze.

*So, that was your story?* Gunnar asked.

With a grin, Axel shrugged. *It’s somewhat true. I’ve been as prickly as one lately.*

Gunnar eyed him, swished his tail and began to purr beneath Dakota’s attentive hands. *Yeah, I guess I see a resemblance now.*

Axel sobered. *I’m sorry, Gun. I shouldn’t have taken my frustrations out on you. She just... He shut his eyes for a second and shook his head. No, that’s no excuse. I haven’t claimed her. And she was just acting upon hints I’d given her all the way up the mountain. I shouldn’t expect you to react any differently toward her than I would’ve.*

*We could claim her,* Gunnar suggested as he plopped down on his side and playfully pawed at her to encourage more petting. She laughed and complied.

*I don’t know. That’s the biggest commitment we will ever make, and we don’t know that much about her, other than she’s from Colorado, is an only child and lives in Vegas. She works in advertising too, and there’s no telling what kind of media contacts she has.*

*What if we're wrong about her and she exposes our secret?*

Gunnar groaned, although it was hard to tell whether from the pleasure of Dakota's hands or the realization of Axel's point.

"I think Falke is spoiled," she observed.

"If he wasn't before, he is now," Axel said, playing along.

*But not foolish, Gunnar quipped. You're right. Until we know for sure, we practice caution. We have to know what's in her heart before we can make any claims.* He groaned again as Dakota put herself into the belly scratching. *Tell me, Ax, through all our years of friendly competition over girls in high school and women once we grew up, when was the last time you attacked me for sleeping with one?*

Axel sighed. *Never.*

*When was the last time you felt this way about a woman?*

*Never.* Axel scraped his hand through his hair and watched Dakota gentle her ministrations and tickle her fingers over Gunnar's chest and chin. *But we've only known her a couple of days. She's on vacation. She could be a very different person day-to-day. If we claimed her and then we found out that she's not this...wonderful...*

*Do you believe that?*

Axel stared at the fire for a long moment. Did he believe that? Dakota brought out a lust in him the likes of which he'd never known—almost uncontrollable—and she obviously did the same to Gunnar. She was tough, strong both physically and mentally. She'd

rebounded from her aches and pains within a couple of hours, and she'd faced down a she-wolf and didn't break, not one tear.

*No, he admitted. I don't believe she's much different in the real world than she is here. She's not faking it. But we barely know her and have no way to predict how she'll react to the truth about us.*

Dakota yawned. "Well, consider that payback for the kneading you gave me earlier, big guy, but I think I'm gonna call it a night and head to bed." She stood up, stretched and faced Axel who sat on the couch. "You coming?"

He glanced at his brother.

*Go ahead. I'll just stay down here...by the fire. Maybe I'll feel warm again by morning.*

"Yeah," Axel said. "Just let me put some more logs on the fire first. I'll be up in a minute."

She smiled. "Okay, but don't take too long, or the sandman might beat ya there."

While she climbed up the ladder to the loft, Axel busied himself with stoking the fire.

*Did you use a condom?* he asked Gunnar.

*No, but you know I can't impregnate her. She's human.*

*Not alone, you can't.* He turned to stare at the cat.

The only way a lone catamount male could reproduce was by having sex with a female of his own kind. Despite an almost one-hundred percent guarantee of multiple offspring whenever births did occur, females like their sister were extremely rare. And unlike the maternal prides of African lions, mountain lions didn't instinctively share a strong family bond,



which was why what the Falkes had accomplished in Leavenworth was unique and precious.

Most male catamount shifters lived solitary, nomadic lives and died without reproducing. But a few males, like their fathers, had discovered a compatibility with humans that helped save their species. And their human mother's love and guidance throughout their childhood had formed that family bond when other catamount units splintered.

Because Dakota was human, pregnancy wasn't a concern unless *two* catamount males climaxed inside her during peak ovulation. Judging by her scent, that time was close. They couldn't risk impregnating her, not an unclaimed female who might not wind up being their mate.

*Damn, I—*

*It's okay.* Axel headed for the hatch to the storm shelter. *Lucky for us, Reidar included a box of condoms when he restocked the cold storage last summer. I spotted it this morning when I retrieved fuel for the generator.*

Axel was back in a matter of seconds and closed the hatch.

*I'll never pick on him again for his compulsive way of planning ahead,* Gunnar said with a full-fanged yawn of his own. The puma hopped up and stretched out on the couch. *Have fun, bro.*

Axel took out a few of the condoms and put the box in a bottom drawer of the desk. *Good night, Gunnar.*

He'd reached the top of the ladder when he heard his brother's snicker. *It won't be as good as yours.*

With night fallen, Axel paused to let his eyes adjust to the darker loft area, a task that wasn't too difficult since she'd lit and left a couple of candles burning in glass hurricanes lamps on nightstands. Shadows danced about the space to the melody of the flickering candlelight, and the scent of vanilla hung in the cool night air.

Dakota lay under the covers, curled on her side, facing him. Her eyes, though, were closed. He smiled at the strange nervousness that coiled in his gut and forced his feet to move. He padded barefoot to the other side of the king-sized bed and put the condoms on the nightstand.

After stripping out of his pants, he lifted the soft flannel sheets and slipped into bed to spoon with the drowsy woman who'd provoked every lustful fantasy his mind could imagine.

Her ebony hair tickled his nose and smelled like fresh-picked strawberries, the fragrance of the shampoo in the bathroom. Her skin was silky smooth and warm to the touch. Better still, she was as naked as he was—a fact that reassured him of her willingness and made him want to keep her snuggled against him forever.

“Mmm.” The sound was soft and feminine, a touch dreamy.

She wiggled a little, cool bare bottom against heated groin, and his cock hardened to attention. He splayed his fingers over her middle and hugged her closer, one finger just brushing the underside of a soft, full breast.

“Sleepy?” he murmured.

“Not anymore.” She turned, scooted around to face him and hiked a bare leg over his hip. Her foot, like her bottom, was a fraction colder than the rest of her body. Heavy-eyed, she gave him a drowsy smile that contradicted her answer.

“You sure?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

He drove one hand into her hair and rubbed her thigh, hip and butt with the other. “Good. I’d hate to have to beat up the sandman.”

A light giggle was her only reply.

Pulling her to him, Axel began a slow exploration of her mouth. He swirled his tongue around hers until she mimicked his moves with her own. Her body came awake as she responded to his kiss with renewed eagerness. By the time he pulled back, her eyes were brighter, more alive and still visible in the soft candlelight.

“With kisses like that, bring on the insomnia,” she teased, making him laugh.

He rolled her beneath him, pinning her body to the mattress with his weight. “Glad you approve, ’cause I’m just getting started.”

“Oh? And what do you have in mind?” There was humor in the question.

He smiled, took her hands and interlaced their fingers as he moved them above her head. “If you’re a good girl, you’ll soon find out.”

“And if I’ve been bad?”

He cocked an eyebrow, enjoying her spunk. “Have you?”

“Not yet.”

“Then we’ll deal with that when you are.”

She grinned.

“Be still. Hang on to the headboard if you want, but don’t move.”

He sat up, shoving the sheets off of them both and revealing her supine body to his gaze. Her skin was a honey color that looked sweet enough to feast on all night long.

She put on a pout, one that succeeded at adorability more than displeasure, and asked, “You won’t give me a hint?”

“Nope. It’s a surprise.” He ran his hands down her arms, over her body. “You like surprises, don’t you?”

“No...yes.” She closed her eyes and hummed her approval, arching her spine as he fondled her soft breasts. “Okay, definitely yes.”

He chuckled and toyed with her dark nipples, lightly pinching and plucking at the tips until they pebbled. Scooting backward, he positioned himself between her legs, placed his hands on her knees and pushed them apart. The dark triangle over her apex parted to reveal a pretty pinkness that made his mouth water. Then he leaned down, using his arms to keep his weight off her, and nipped one of her breasts.

She sucked in a quick breath and grabbed his head.

“Nuh-uh.” He pushed up and sat on his heels. “Hands over your head.” He didn’t tell her, but as on edge as he was, Axel needed her compliance so he wouldn’t climax too soon. This wasn’t a night for a quick fuck but rather leisurely lovemaking they could both enjoy and hopefully recall years from now as a fond memory.

He waited, watched her expression, saw her bite her bottom lip, but she complied.

When she did, he leaned over again to suckle one plump nipple into his mouth. He moved from one to the other, paying close attention to how her breathing became labored, how her heartbeat raced.

He licked a path downward over her tummy to playfully poke her navel with the tip of his tongue. He kissed her there before he moved lower. She raised her hips in a silent plea he understood but ignored. He had no intention of hurrying.

Instead, he scraped his teeth over her inner thigh, and she gasped at the sharp nip. His effective yet gentle bite didn't break the skin this time, but he recognized promise in her reaction—a thought, a hope, he filed away to be examined another day.

She couldn't take much more teasing without some fulfillment, and neither could he, so he dipped his head once more and nibbled his way from knees to pussy until she squirmed against his voracious mouth. He tasted her, licked her, suckled her clit, and he fucked her sweet pussy with his tongue and fingers, forcing her up to a peak that made her mewl, buck and rub her gorgeous cunt against his mouth.

Then, when her whimpers died down, he renewed his efforts to make her tremble and quiver all over again.

When he finally donned a condom and climbed over her, Axel noticed her white-knuckled grip on the bars of the rustic log headboard. Thankful she hadn't suffered any splinters as a result, he blanketed her very

compliant body with his, slid one arm beneath her head, and raised one of her legs with his other.

“Hold me,” he told her, and she responded with a quick tight hug around his neck. “Don’t let go.” He kissed her hard and pushed into her tight, damp pussy with agonizing slowness.

He drank in her moan and groaned in return as he gently entered her again and again, drawing out each thrust, stretching her inner muscles and pausing every time he buried himself inside her.

“Oh, my, that feels wonderful,” Dakota whispered against his ear. It hadn’t taken long for her fingers to weave into his hair, the sensation of her touch an aphrodisiac to his libido.

He hesitated, trying to catch his breath, hoping to hold off a little longer. *Make it last.*

He pulled almost out of her, felt her lift her hips toward him, and then shoved in harder than he had before.

“Yes,” she said against his neck.

He used his hand beneath her butt to hold her in place, pull her toward him, as he repeated the thrust.

She whimpered and clung to his shoulders.

“There’s more,” he warned, the words a mere whisper in her ear.

“Oh, God...”

“Hang on.” He nipped her earlobe, laved her jaw line, and kissed her thoroughly as he released the last cord of his restraint and fucked her with deep, solid strokes.

She felt too good...in his arms, beneath him, wrapped around his cock. Her inner muscles clamped down on him, and she cried out her pleasure.

He followed with a powerful orgasm of his own, the rapture leaving him lightheaded and spent.

Though his muscles trembled from the force of his release, the tender kiss she pressed to his cheek struck him like an arrow to the heart.

## Chapter Four

Dakota felt no pain this morning. In fact, she doubted she'd ever felt better. Her body had been well used, she'd had more orgasms in the last twenty-four hours than she'd had in forever, and she was surrounded by warmth.

Her nose itched. Something tickled it. She slowly pried her eyes open and looked at the back of a furry head. In fact, fur pressed along her whole front and she had her arm around Falke. Behind her was the long, warm, bare male body of Axel, his arm around her, holding her tight, her head cradled by his arm and his warm breath brushing against her hair.

A slow smile overtook her and she closed her eyes, pressing her face against Falke's fuzzy head. He smelled of the outdoors. Fresh and clean. She buried her hand in the fur of his chest. He started purring, which made her grin grow. "Morning, Falke," she whispered. "Get lonely downstairs?"

He made a soft sound that almost sounded like "uh-huh," and Dakota giggled.

"Wha—?" Axel lifted his head.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at Axel's bleary-eyed stare. "Mornin'," she said. "Look who came to join us."

Axel looked over her shoulder and sighed. "Just couldn't stay away, could you?" After a short pause, he chuckled. "I think the fire burned out and he got cold."



She leaned back a bit and kissed his stubbled chin. "I hadn't noticed." The air was cool, chilly really, though under the covers with big, warm cat on one side and long, hot male on the other, she was toasty warm.

Axel dipped his head and kissed her lips lightly. "Stay here until I get the cabin warmed up. I'll start the generator when I bring in wood, and we'll have a hot breakfast."

She smiled at him and nodded. "Sounds good."

He kissed her again, then threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. "Shit! Okay, it's colder than I thought." He laughed as he pulled on his jeans, hopping from one foot to the other, nearly toppling over, and making silly little sounds as he hurried for the ladder and disappeared out of sight.

Dakota sighed and relaxed back into the pillows and Falke, rubbing his side, digging her fingers into his soft fur. She hugged him and rested her head against his neck. "You're a good kitty, aren't you?"

His purr got louder, and she felt his tail flick against her shin under the covers.

"I wish I could take you home with me." She dropped her voice to a whisper so Axel couldn't hear her. "I wish I could take you both home with me."

Falke made that little question mark sound and dipped his head to lick the inside of her wrist.

"I know, I know, this is just a vacation fling. I'm sure I'm not the first woman Axel has brought up here and shared this bed with. I'm also sure I won't be the last. But..." She sighed. "He's just so...incredible."

The purring stopped, and Falke rolled over. He stared at her with eyes she could swear were filled with intelligence.

“You always seem to know what I’m saying.”

The cat nuzzled her neck with his cool, wet nose, and she giggled and pushed his face away from her. “God, can you see me walking down Freemont Street with you on one side of me and Axel on the other? Bet that would deter the muggers.”

A low grumble came out of the cat, not quite a growl, but close.

She frowned at him. “It only happened once.”

He bared his teeth, his lips pulling back, and this time there was no question he growled.

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “It wasn’t really a mugger, just a teenaged purse snatcher. Nothing major. A stupid Midwesterner saw it happen and took off after the guy. I got my purse back, then had to tell the small-town Good Samaritan that chasing a purse snatcher was a good way to get himself killed.” She shrugged. “Then I took him out to dinner, since his buddies had abandoned him to go off to some brothel. He had a fiancée back home.”

She loosened her hold on Falke and leaned back into the pillows. “How come I can’t find a guy like that? Or like Axel. Only one that isn’t temporary? I mean, I suppose I paid for this trip, and he’s supposed to wait on me, cook my meals, make sure I don’t freeze to death, but do you know what my last boyfriend did?”

Falke nudged her shoulder with his nose when she stopped talking, when she’d slipped into the memory

that to this day made her furious. She heard the generator fire up outside. "He was at a buddy's house one night, drinking, and they ran out of beer. He called me at one in the morning, when I had class at eight, and wanted me to make a beer run for them."

A low grumble came out of the cat again, and he bared his teeth a little bit.

"Yeah, well, I let him have it. Then I changed my phone number." She shrugged. "And since then I guess I've just been too busy to look." She scratched Falke's ears, ran her fingertips over the silky tips and laughed when he flicked them and shook his head. "Sorry." She went back to scratching. "I really like Axel, you know? But part of me doesn't know if it's just been so long since I got any, or if there's really something special about him. Not that it matters if there is," she hurried to add then frowned at the cat. "I'm having a heart-to-heart with a mountain lion. That's got to tell you something, doesn't it?" Dakota really wished one of her friends was there to smack her upside the head and tell her what she already knew deep down inside. She wasn't supposed to get attached to a vacation fling.

"He's like two totally different men, though," she muttered. "So hard and fast and exciting yesterday afternoon. Then so sweet and gentle and *thorough* last night." She rolled onto her side and hugged Falke again, his fur tickling her chest and belly. She let loose a light laugh. "And you have no idea what I'm talking about, which is probably for the best."

A big paw moved from the bed to her shoulder, and when she raised her head to look at him, he licked her cheek.

“Yeah, well...” She sighed, then smiled. “I’m gonna miss you when I’m home.”

“Is it warming up up there, yet?” Axel called.

Dakota pushed the covers down to her waist and sat up. “Yep. It sure is.”

Falke made a sound as if he were strangling and jumped down off the bed, dragging the blankets with him.

She lunged for the covers. “Pervy cat,” she teased when he turned to stare at her.

Falke leaped off the loft edge, and her heart stopped for a second. He landed softly and went to the door. Axel opened it for him and Falke took off into the bright sunlight.

“It’s warm today. Above freezing,” Axel said, turning to grin up at her. “Feel like a little outing?”

“Sounds great!” She hopped out of the bed and went for the dresser against the wall where she’d stashed her clothes. “Just let me wash up.”

“There’s some water by the fire I can put in the bathroom for you, but not enough to shower, and it’s a little cool.”

She went down the ladder naked, her clothes clutched against her chest with one hand. “That’s fine. It’ll get me going.”

Axel grabbed her when she turned for the bathroom, swung her around and pulled her into his arms before planting a deep, tongue-tangling kiss on her.

“Mmm...” she murmured when he lifted his head. “I think I could get used to that.”

He kissed her again, then swung her away and gave her bare bottom a little slap. "Go, or we'll never get out the door."

She laughed and dashed for the bathroom.

"Oatmeal and coffee good for you?" he called through the door.

"Sounds good," she called back. She determined to make the best of the few days she had left with him. Dakota needed to take everything he had to give so she could relive the memories when she was back home, buried in work, and...alone. Funny, but she'd never thought of herself as lonely before. Her work kept her so busy she barely thought about it. But now that she had some quiet time to reflect, she thought maybe she'd been missing something in her life.

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"Oh, wow!" Dakota hopped down off the porch and into knee-deep snow, then promptly burst into laughter. "It's so beautiful today."

*It sure is*, Gunnar told Axel as the two stood on the porch watching her flail about in the snow.

The temperature had risen to at least forty overnight and the sun was high, the sky as blue as he'd ever seen it. Axel couldn't take his eyes off the woman who'd thrown herself onto her back, arms outstretched as she stared up into the brightness.

*I heard her whispering to you. What'd she have to say? Just more 'what a pretty kitty' nonsense?*

Gunnar chuckled. *Actually we had quite a discussion over your prowess—our prowess. She said you're like two completely different men.*

Axel grinned and moved his snowshoes from against the cabin wall to the porch floor. *Really. Two different men, huh?*

*Yep. One exciting, one thorough, I believe was her word.*

“Come on up here, honey, and get your snowshoes on.”

He watched as Dakota struggled through the snow to get onto her feet, then clomped up the steps. She grinned like a loon, and he couldn't keep from leaning over and kissing her lips.

“Give me a minute. I think I want to lose a couple of layers of clothing or I'll suffocate. It's so warm out.”

“Okay, but don't bare too much. Weather can change in the blink of an eye.”

She gave him a saucy wink. “I thought you liked me bare.” She giggled and pushed past him when he made a halfhearted try at grabbing her.

Gunnar sighed, making Axel look down at him. “What?” Axel whispered.

*Any more doubts?*

Axel shook his head. *It's too soon to reveal ourselves. Let's just go with the flow the next couple of days and then decide. She mentioned spending her last day in Leavenworth with her friend. We've got some time.*

*You're right. Just sucks being the one who doesn't get to have his hands on her again anytime soon.*

*Well, Axel said reluctantly, not wanting to forfeit any time with her. We could switch again—*

*Gunnar shook his head. No. Enough deception. We do it again and she'll think it's still you. Next time I get my hands on her, I want her to know who's touching her. I need to know she's willing and wants me too. It will be hard enough to explain what we've already done. More will only make it worse. He groaned. I want to. I just can't.*

*You're right, Gun. We can't deceive her like that again. It's not right, especially if she is the one.*

The door behind him opened. Axel turned to see Dakota dressed in her ski pants and a sweater that looked as if it was pulled on over a T-shirt, her jacket open. She stuffed her knit stocking cap into her pocket and pulled her gloves from where she'd tucked them beneath her arm. "I'm ready." She grinned. "Where we goin'?"

Axel laid her snowshoes on the floor. "Put these on, or we won't make it out of the yard."

She laughed and laid her hand on his back as he strapped her into them.

"I thought we'd head up to the lake. It's not a far hike, and it should be pretty today." He stood up and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "You start getting chilled, tell me. Start sweating, take off the sweater. Got it?"

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Yes, boss."

"Watch it, little girl, or I'll have to turn you over my knee."

Her eyes blazed with heat, her pupils dilating as she sucked in a quick breath. “Promise?” she said with a breathy note to her voice.

“Oh, you are a bad girl.” He popped her on the butt before picking up his pack and strapping it on.

She laughed. “I’ll be really, really bad if you’ll—”

*Meowwww.*

Gunnar’s noise—meant to stop the conversation, Axel was sure—sent Dakota into a fit of giggles. She clomped over to Gunnar and scratched his ear. “Okay, kitty. No more naughty talk around the cat.” Then she pulled on her glove. “You know, I’d swear he got embarrassed this morning when he pulled the blanket off me.”

*That wasn’t embarrassment, Gunnar said. She’s got the best pair of tits I’ve ever seen, and she almost had a big ass kitty pounce her.*

Axel laughed. “Maybe he’s shy.”

*Bastard.*

*Pussy.*

*Reowwww.*

Dakota yelped and swung around to glare at Gunnar. “What’s wrong with you?” She put her hands on her hips. “Jeez, don’t make that sound unless there’s another wolf around. I don’t like it.”

Gunnar hung his head as if she’d just chewed him a new asshole, and gave a little whimper. Just as Axel knew she’d do, Dakota went to Gunnar and gave him a hug.

“Oh, you big baby. I’m not mad.” She kissed his head. “Just don’t scare me unless I’m supposed to be scared.”



Gunnar licked her cheek, and she laughed.

“Suck up,” Axel muttered, shaking his head in disgust at his brother.

Dakota stood up straight, keeping her hand on Gunnar’s head.

Gunnar chuckled. *Whatever works.*

Axel hopped off the porch then turned and lifted Dakota down into the snow. It took a few seconds for her to find her balance, but when she did, she grinned up at him. He would swear he’d never seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

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Dakota followed Axel through the snow, the shoes hardly sinking at all because the snow was wet, but the little bit that stuck to the shoe was heavy, making it even more difficult than normal to walk in the webbed footwear. She followed Axel’s tracks as he headed around the side of the cabin, and when she looked up at the new view, she gasped in awe.

Axel stopped and turned back. “What’s wrong?”

All she could do was point at the towering mountain covered in white. The snow sparkled in the sunshine as if diamonds were scattered over the surface.

“Falke’s Peak, or at least that’s what we call it.”

“It wasn’t there when we got here the other night,” she said, moving closer to him. “It’s amazing. Look at those jagged edges, and the snow is so pretty.”

Axel laughed. "It was there, but the clouds were too low to see it. Got your camera?"

"Oh! Yeah." She pulled her right glove off and reached into the inside pocket of her down jacket. She snapped a few pictures. "I grew up in Boulder, but..."

"It all has to do with elevation," Axel said. "In Boulder, you're already a mile high. Here, you're less than half that. The peaks look higher."

She turned her gaze to him and made a face at him. "Duh."

He laughed and chucked her on the chin with his gloved hand. "Come on. You'll like the lake. It's just over that little ridge over there." He turned away and started off.

Dakota glanced up at the mountain again as she tucked her camera away and pulled her glove back on. She followed his tracks, finding it easier if she stepped inside them, since his snowshoes were slightly bigger than hers. Falke leaped through the snow, bounding ahead and returning to walk by her side a while, then taking off again, constantly making her grin at his antics.

Dakota felt so...happy. She tried to remember the last time in her life she'd been able to cut loose and laugh like this. To breathe in the fresh air and stare at the butt of a man so gorgeous it made her ache to jump him and have her way with him right here in the snow.

Well, never. But she vowed to try to find things that could make her feel like this. Happy and filled to brimming with laughter and...pleasure. She just felt really *good*.

She took off her gloves and stuffed them in her jacket pockets. It was really warm, the sun managing to fight winter and give off heat.

“Almost there,” Axel called over his shoulder. “Just this hill to go.”

She glanced at the hill in front of him, then stopped and turned back to look for the cabin. They’d gone maybe two hundred and fifty yards from the back of the little house, and the hill that looked kind of difficult to climb up in snowshoes was more or less the base of the mountain Axel had called Falke’s Peak.

Axel was up the fifty-foot hill without a problem. She stopped at the base and looked up at him. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Come on, honey. It’s not as bad as it looks. Keep the snowshoes perpendicular to the hill and kind of crab-walk up sideways.”

She turned and started moving. Fell over on her side, but at least her body went up the hill when she fell and not down. Her bare hand met icy snow, and she jerked it out of the white stuff and dug out her gloves. After wiping her hands off on her jacket, she put the gloves on.

Falke stood at the bottom of the hill, looking up at her as if he expected her to roll down on top of him.

She stuck her tongue out at him and pushed herself back up onto her feet.

“That’s it, hon. You can do it.”

“If I wanted to hear a cheerleader, I’d join the Dallas Cowboys.” She took a few more awkward steps.

Axel laughed. “We like the Seahawks in this part of the country. I thought you’d be a Broncos fan.”

“They’re all the same to me,” she muttered. “Bunch of big men plowing into each other over a toy ball.”

“Damn, you’ve got spunk.”

“My dad—” She caught herself from another tumble and steadied herself. “He told me that I have a snarky side.”

“I’ve yet to hear snark from you,” he said. “Just a little farther.”

She fought her way up the last few feet, and then she was being lifted the rest of the way. Dakota wrapped her arms around Axel’s neck when she was high enough and planted a hard kiss on his lips. “Thanks.”

He grinned, his breath warm against her cheeks. “You’re very welcome.” When he let her slowly slide down his body, there was no mistaking the hard bulge in his pants, even through the layer of denim and skiwear.

“Mmm.” She leaned into him and breathed in his scent. Fresh and clean like the outdoors with a sweet male musk beneath.

“Be good,” he whispered and pulled back. “Turn around and take a look.”

Reluctantly, she pulled away and let him lift and rotate her so she faced away from him.

“Oh...wow...” A smooth expanse of white stretched out before them, outlined by the dark pine trees. If she thought the snow on the mountain sparkled like diamonds, it was nothing compared to this.

Axel wrapped his arms around her and pressed into her back. "Pretty, huh?"

"Amazing. Absolutely gorgeous."

"You'll like this too. Come on." He moved around her, took her hand and led her down the gentle incline to the lake, and then out onto it.

"You sure it's safe?" she asked, wondering how deep the water was below them.

"Yep. Frozen solid." He stopped and leaned down, unbuckled his snowshoes and then hers. "Step out."

It looked deep, and she frowned at him when he stood up.

"Go on," he said with a grin. "Trust me."

She did trust him, and she stepped out of the snowshoe onto the snow, sank down about three inches then stopped.

"Careful, it's slick."

She squatted down and brushed the snow away, and saw the ice. Saw through it to some weeds and gravel. "Oh, cool!" She went down on her knees and brushed away more snow. "Look. You can see the bottom. It's so clear!"

Axel dropped down beside her and helped her push the wet snow away to clear a circle of the pretty ice.

"Wow. Oh, man, just...wow!" She stuck her face down next to the ice, almost touching it with her nose, and looked through it at the colorful stones and weeds that had literally frozen into place. "It's like a giant snow globe. Why is the snow so shallow here?"

"This is a really windy spot when the snow's falling, so it doesn't get deep."

Dakota sat up on her heels and grinned. “Thank you.”

Falke came running up, then skidded on the ice and slid into her, knocking her onto Axel’s lap. They both burst out laughing as Falke used his claws and scrambled to his feet with a noise that sounded an awful lot like a laugh. Then he pounced, pushing her into the snow and coming down over her.

She laughed so hard her sides hurt as she tussled with the big cat, picking up handfuls of snow and shoving them in his face. He purred and batted at her with his big paws, splashing snow into her face.

“Help me, Axel!” she cried around her laughter.

Then Axel was there too, with a big handful of snow coming down right at her.

“No,” she cried and rolled away, grabbed a scoop of the wet, white stuff and flung it at him as she tried to gain some footing only to slip and slide on the ice beneath the thin layer of snow.

Axel grabbed her behind the knee and pulled her back down, rolling beneath her and taking her weight so she didn’t smack the hard ice. Then he pinned her down with his body, tugged her shirt up, and rubbed a handful of snow on her bare stomach.

She gasped and laughed and struggled to get away. “Jerk!” she screamed as she reached above her, grabbed some snow, then in a guise of putting her arms around him, dumped it down the back of his neck into his jacket.

Axel shouted in surprise, and rolled with her until she straddled his hips as she used her hands against his chest to lever herself up. Falke pounced on her again

and knocked her back to the ground. With his big paws, he shoved snow toward her head, but she got him first, smack in the nose, with a lightly packed snowball. He jerked back and sneezed, then made that laughing sound again and grabbed her wrist between his teeth.

“Hey!” she said, losing her humor, realizing a full-grown male mountain lion had her in his teeth.

“Falke,” Axel said softly, but she heard the warning behind it.

The cat released her and lay down next to her, hanging his head, glancing up at her like a little kid who just got scolded.

Dakota looked between the cat and Axel.

“He wouldn’t have hurt you. He was playing.”

Falke hadn’t hurt her. She hadn’t even felt his teeth through her thick jacket and sweater. But still... She sat up and reached out to pet the cat’s head.

“It’s okay, big guy,” she said softly. “Just scared me is all.”

Falke licked her gloved hand, then stood up and rubbed his cheek against hers. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. “For such a big kitty, you’re just an old softy aren’t you?”

He purred and nuzzled her neck.

“Cold nose!” She shoved his face away from hers with a laugh.

Axel was beside her, and she smiled at him. He returned the grin, and she saw something in his eyes.

*Don’t go there. Just don’t.* The more time she spent with him, the more she never wanted it to end. But she knew it was all an illusion. She’d hired him. She was

sure he would bring anyone out to this spot to show off the scenery. It wasn't just for her.

But, damn, she could really imagine it was.

"Falke will never harm you, Dakota. I swear it on my life—the life of every one of my family members."

"That's a pretty big statement. He is a wild animal." She scooted around until she could get onto her knees on the slippery ice, made even more slippery by her ski pants. "I want a picture of you two." She pulled off her gloves and reached into her jacket for the camera.

Axel didn't say anything more, but he made a little face that let her know he wanted to argue the fact his cat was tame.

"Falke, go stand by Axel," she said, making a shooing motion to the cat.

Falke got up, this time without sliding one bit on the ice, and she realized he'd probably...teased her? No, a cat couldn't tease. But he could walk on the ice just fine, his claws clicking softly, so what explained him sliding into her before?

"Put your arm around Falke," she said to Axel, who sat in the snow.

He draped his arm over the cat's neck.

"You don't seem real affectionate toward him," she noted, realizing that he never touched Falke.

"He prefers the ladies," Axel said in a dry tone, making Dakota laugh.

She raised the camera to her eye, but stopped and lowered it as she stared at man and beast sitting next to each other. "Dang, you two must have been brothers in another life."



“What?” Axel’s tone was filled with shock. The cat turned its head to look at him.

“You two... You sort of look alike.”

Axel sputtered. Falke made that silly chuckling sound.

“Same eye color, same hair color. Haven’t you ever noticed?”

“Uh...yeah...a bit, I guess. Take the picture, Dakota.”

She almost laughed again at Axel’s strange reaction to her comments. She snapped a picture, then another, then a third for good measure because she wanted to have one to hang up in her condo. They sat in the almost blindingly white snow, with the dark trees behind.

“Come here.” Axel held out his hand, and she walked on her knees to get over to him. When she was close, he took the camera from her hand and pulled her onto his lap. “It’s not ideal, but I think we can get the three of us in a shot.”

She grinned and snuggled up close to Axel, her head on his shoulder. Then Falke straddled her legs and scooted up to her, his head next to hers, which made her laugh.

Axel held the camera out, pointed at them, and snapped a picture just as Falke licked her face.

She burst out laughing and shoved Falke’s cold nose to the side.

“Be good,” Axel said to the cat.

Falke made that cute little laughing sound and laid his head against her chest. Axel snapped a few more pictures, then shoved Falke off of them and wrapped

his arms around her. “Look,” he whispered, and gestured across the white expanse of the lake.

Dakota squinted through the brightness and saw what he pointed at. A huge bull elk was slowly picking its way across the lake, slipping here and sliding there.

“He’s big.”

“Yep. And those antlers can kill if they’re pissed off.”

She took the camera from Axel’s hand and held it up. Even though the elk was probably too far away for the cheap little camera, she snapped a couple of pictures.

“Want to hike across the lake? There’s this really pretty little glade over there—” he pointed in a direction away from the elk, “—where we could have lunch.”

“Lunch?” she turned and looked at him. “Elk stew?”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “No, I made some sandwiches. They’re in my pack.”

“A man after my own heart.”

He stared into her eyes, and she again saw that *something* she couldn’t quite define, or didn’t want to look at too closely. It made her skin feel tight and her heart race.

She pushed off his lap and carefully gained her footing. Axel followed.

“We can leave the snowshoes here,” he said, picking up two and sticking them in the snow so they were standing up, then he did the same for the other pair.

Falke took off over the white flatness.

“Dakota?” Axel said as he moved next to her.

She looked from Falke up into Axel’s eyes.  
“Yeah?”

He leaned down and kissed her, softly, tenderly.  
“All kidding aside, you might be the woman after my heart.”

Before she could get her brain functioning again, he was fifty feet away, heading after Falke.

“You coming?” he called over his shoulder.

“Uh. Yeah...” Her insides fluttered, and her heart pounded against her chest. She still couldn’t let herself fantasize such a thing, but she couldn’t deny that what he’d just said was probably the sweetest thing she’d ever heard.

## Chapter Five

The next day was spent much the same way. Exploring the forest, watching wildlife and having fun just being together. But time sped by, and now it was time to gather their things and head back down the mountain. Their days together were over.

Gunnar leaped onto the loft and sat watching Dakota stuff her clothes into her backpack. She was already dressed in a pair of jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt and socks. Her boots awaited her by the front door, but they still had some time before she'd have to put them on.

Axel hollered from below. "I'll be right back. Gotta head out to the food cache. How about some pancakes and sausages for breakfast?"

"Okay. Sounds good," she replied.

"I'll bring back some wood to restock the bin before we go too," he added. *You need to go outside, Gun?*

*No, thanks. I'm good.* Having to piss outside in the winter sucked, but no one would believe a mountain lion could be trained to use the toilet, so it was a price he had to pay as a shifter when non-family members were around.

*'Kay. Back in a bit.* The front door closed as Dakota slung her backpack over one shoulder and headed for the ladder. Gunnar leaped down, easily making the eight-foot plunge without mishap. He

turned to watch her navigate the ladder and drop off her pack by her boots.

*This sucks.* He brushed his body along her thigh and drew her attention enough for her to run her hand along his spine. Her touch made him purr. He wanted more time with her, to meet her in human form, have the chance to talk to her.

“I like you too, big ’un.” She patted his head and headed for the bathroom.

Gunnar walked over to the fireplace, laid down on the woven rug and watched the dying flames lick at the last hot embers of what had been a log.

His ears perked up. Something wasn’t right.

He sat up, sniffed the air and listened.

*Fuck!*

He looked at the closed front door. Axel wasn’t back, and he couldn’t warn him telepathically at a distance, not when Axel was in human form. He had to be within eyesight.

*Dakota.* He couldn’t warn her either, not as—

*Fuck!*

With no time to lose, he transformed into a man and headed for the bathroom door. “Dakota! Hurry.”

“Just a second,” she shouted back.

“No. Now!” He threw open the hatch in the floor and then yanked the bathroom door open. “Come on!”

Dakota startled, but he didn’t have time to explain.

“Axel! What the—” He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward the hatch.

“Go. Hurry.”

“What... Where are your clothes?”

“Avalanche!”

That was enough to make her move. She scrambled down the ladder into the in-ground storage room that had been built as an avalanche shelter. “Stay in there,” he shouted, running naked for the front door.

“But—”

He had to warn Axel, and there wasn’t much time. Just as he threw open the door, though, he saw Axel step up onto the porch, a frozen package of sausage in one hand and several logs of wood in his arms. His brother’s eyes widened.

“Avalanche.” But he didn’t need to explain. The rumble was getting loud enough now for human hearing to pick up and the ground began to shake.

Axel dropped the burden of sausage and logs and dashed after him back inside the cabin. They didn’t even bother to shut the front door.

Gunnar dropped into the hole, barely missing a frightened Dakota with whom he fell to the floor, covering her body with his own. A second later, Axel followed, pausing just long enough to yank the rope on the hatch to slam it closed.

“No, Falke!” Dakota screamed, her fear apparent.

The rumble was now a roar. The shelter was black as pitch.

“He’s okay.” Axel joined them on the river stone floor as he, too, used his body to protectively blanket Dakota.

Like a runaway freight train, the crashes sounded closer until it shook everything around and above them. Something fell off a shelf, causing Dakota to yelp and him to hug her closer.

Then...silence. Gunnar breathed a sigh of relief. They might not be safe, but at least they were still alive.

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Dakota opened her eyes and saw *nothing*, but she felt a lot. Rough floor. Cold chill in the air. Warm breaths—hers, Axel's, and...

“Uh. Oh, my God. Who—?” She began to squirm, which was not easy with two—*two*—men on top of her. One was clothed. One wasn't.

A man grunted.

“Careful,” Axel said, as they moved off of her.

She shot to a seated position, tried to butt-scoot backwards, but her hand collided with something hard behind her. Feeling around, she recognized it as a shelving unit.

“Who the... What...” She couldn't draw breath enough to form the questions that raged in her mind.

“Let me find some candles,” Axel said, his voice way calmer than she would've expected. She could hear him move, start to feel his way about the confines of their underground shelter.

“I would wait on that, brother.”

Dakota squeaked and wedged her body against the shelves, as far away from that voice as possible. When did one of Axel's brothers show up here? And which one of them was naked?

“When did you get here? Where’s Falke? Axel! My God, he’s still out there,” she said, realizing the cougar might be trapped in the snow, hurt or dead.

“Meow,” the brother said.

She turned her face toward the voice even though she couldn’t see anything but blackness. “That’s not funny. He might be hurt.”

“I’m not.”

Anger simmered. “I’m not talking about you! I’m talking about a poor defenseless cat that might be—”

The man chuckled and so did Axel.

She stopped, baffled at why they could be so heartless over their pet. Didn’t they care?

“Falke is far from defenseless,” Axel explained, “and he’s fine. He’s here.”

“Oh?” She hadn’t noticed the cat jump inside, but everything had happened so fast. Had the cat been down here before her and she’d somehow missed him? That must be it. She breathed a sigh of relief that he was safe. “Here pretty kitty.” She raised her hand out, expecting the puma to find her, nuzzle her hand.

Instead, a man’s hand cupped hers and raised it to his face. Her fingers trembled as they slid over a slight growth of whiskers. Axel had shaved earlier that morning. This man wasn’t Axel. He couldn’t be.

He pressed a kiss into her palm. Her breath hitched.

“I like you too, lil’un.”

She gaped. Not that he could see her or she him, but this man, this brother knew, quoted almost verbatim, the last thing she’d said to the cat. “I-I don’t understand.”



“Don’t be afraid,” he murmured, his hand still holding hers against his face.

Then a soft glow appeared, illuminating the man, and her first thought was *beautiful*. “Wow,” she whispered.

Then his face, his body began to blur, dissolve. His eyes...his whiskers became that of a mountain lion, a very *familiar* mountain lion.

She jerked her hand away, slamming her elbow against the shelving unit behind her. “Ouch!” Blackness returned all around her, as did her fears. Her body shook. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she could barely catch her breath, much less her scattered thoughts. Fight, flight, scream or cry. She didn’t know what to do or how to react to what she’d just witnessed. There was nowhere she could go, although that didn’t stop her from trying to lean as far away from— “What the hell *are* you?”

“We’re shifters.” The answer came from Axel. The strike of a match vanquished the darkness as he lit an oil lamp.

“Shifters?”

*Yes, shapeshifters. I’m Gunnar, Axel’s brother.*

She blinked when the voice sounded in her mind. Shaking her head in disbelief, rubbing her temples, Dakota eyed the cat who sat tranquilly a foot or two from her. “D-did you just...?”

“We can communicate telepathically,” Axel explained.

*Telepathically?* She glanced at Axel and pressed her lips together to keep from echoing his words like a

parrot. Then she realized something. “We? You mean you *both* can be...can turn into cats?”

Axel stared at her, gave her a cautious smile and nodded. Setting the lamp on the stone floor at his feet, he took one step to his left, bent down and shifted before her very eyes. The same luminosity. The same incredible, unbelievable change, as if the image of a man dissolved into that of an animal. It was miraculous. Magical. Insanely mind-boggling. And yet...

In the next heartbeat, she faced two mountain lions, but one was dressed in Axel’s clothes—a sight that made her snicker then burst out in an uncontrolled, hysterical giggle. Then she heard male laughs in her mind, and her humor fled as quickly as it materialized.

She wasn’t afraid, not now, not of what appeared to be wild predators, but she was freaked out. She’d fucked a man who was now a cat staring at her. *Those eyes... Brothers.* No wonder the cougar’s eyes looked so much like the man’s.

Then she remembered all of the little things she shared with Falke, things she’d no intention of telling Axel. Thankful for the dim light and hoping it helped cover the sight of her embarrassing blush, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand. “Oh, my God.” Horrified, she stared at the cats even as they eyed her. At least they didn’t smirk at her, as if this had all been some kind of cruel joke. Could cats smirk? No, they appeared to be more worried than smug. “I-I don’t know what to say.” Maybe she was still sleeping. Maybe this was all some kind of twisted nightmare.

Shifters weren't real. They belonged in novels, in Hollywood movies, not in real life.

The cold air in the room made her shiver, and she knew she wasn't dreaming. She wished she'd had time to grab her coat. Maybe the shelter had a blanket.

*We won't harm you.* The voice was Axel's, easy to recognize, even if she hadn't exactly *heard* the words spoken aloud.

She shook her head. Dakota knew that. Deep down inside, she didn't fear for her life, at least not from them. Whether they would ever get out of this hole in the ground was another matter altogether.

She watched Axel change back to a man and noticed the look of worry remained even after he was human again. Concern marred his brow while he straightened his clothes into some semblance of order once more. She was unsure of its cause until...

*We've never shared our secret before,* Gunnar said inside her mind, something she was sure she'd never get used to. But his words struck something inside her.

"Never?" Though she asked, Axel's slight nod was all the confirmation she needed. Their message was clear. They'd not only shown great trust in her, but they'd also protected her during the avalanche. Gunnar had made sure she was safe first before going after his brother, his own flesh and blood. What if he hadn't made it in time?

She shuddered at that unwelcome thought, looked at Gunnar and held out her hand. He slowly eased forward to nuzzle her palm. "You changed to save me."

The cat purred.

She dared a smile. "That's so weird."

"We're not out of the woods just yet," Axel said, drawing her attention away from Falke...uh...Gunnar.

"I won't betray your trust," she declared, wanting them to know that much, regardless of what happened next, even if they died in this hole without ever again seeing the light of day.

He held her gaze for a long moment. "We believe you, Dakota. It's not that. I just mean that we're still in danger." Axel headed for the ladder to the overhead hatch, the only way in or out of their shelter-turned-underground-prison. "We need to get topside, see what kind of damage we're dealing with."

"But..."

He paused and looked back at her, waiting.

"Um, nothing." She didn't want to jinx him with her fears that the avalanche wiped out the cabin and buried them beneath a mountain of snow. The roar had been so loud, and combined with the other sounds... She shuddered, envisioning the snapping of evergreens and the destruction of the cabin.

Axel shoved the hatch. It flew open with surprising ease, which caused a relieved laugh to burst from her lungs.

"Oh, thank God!" Smiling, she climbed to her feet and quickly made her way toward the ladder.

Axel cleared the last rung, turned and asked, "Can you hand me the lantern?"

"Oh, sure." She grabbed the lamp and passed it up to him, and then climbed out of the shelter into a darkened—but surprisingly intact—cabin. A broad grin creased her face.

Gunnar leaped out of the shelter with ease and immediately made his way over to Axel's backpack. Axel set the lamp down and dug out a shirt and some pants, which he handed to the cougar. With the clothes in his mouth, the mountain lion headed for the bathroom.

*Be right back.*

Dakota shook her head. "This all seems so surreal."

Gunnar pawed the door closed, and she turned to see Axel frowning.

"What?"

Staring not at her but the windows, he lifted the lamp once more, walked over to the front door, which was ajar. He nudged it open farther, and she followed. He stepped out onto the porch and held the lamp aloft. She froze just inside the doorway. They were surrounded by a wall of snow and debris. The extended roof of the porch had sheltered the door enough for Axel to open it, but a lot of snow covered the wooden planks of the porch itself.

He bent down to pick up a package of frozen sausages from a scattered pile of logs and snow.

Dakota's heart lodged firmly in her throat. She glanced back inside the cabin. Without the lamp, it was dark as night, yet she knew it was around ten in the morning. That was when it occurred to her, when reality sank in and her earlier relief vanished. The cabin had been dark because all the windows were covered. They were buried. Under how much snow? She looked up at the cathedral ceiling, at the loft. Could this old cabin hold up under a mountain of snow?

*Trapped.* Not underground, but still trapped nonetheless. How long would it take them to shovel their way out?

“Fuck.”

She looked back at Axel, but he was staring past the open door. Dakota stepped out onto the porch behind him and looked around. The overhang had caved in on one end. Her heart began to beat again, this time too hard.

*Buried alive. A snow tomb. Won't be found until spring thaw.* Her breaths grew shallow and her vision blurred a bit.

Axel spun around and grabbed her shoulder with one hand, bending his knees to look her in the face. “Hey. Deep breaths, honey. We’re okay.”

She pulled away from him and went back inside. Pacing to the kitchen and back, she tried to calm herself. She looked up at the ceiling again, though she could barely see it through the dark.

“Dakota.” Axel didn’t quite shout, but it was close. He stepped inside the cabin again.

She stopped pacing and met his eyes in the light of the kerosene lamp. “What?”

“This house was built to withstand avalanches. We’re okay. Our great-grandfather knew what he was doing. The building’s stood strong for almost a century.”

The bathroom door opened, and Gunnar came out. God, that was even creepier. Two brothers. Two cat-men. Buried alive with two freaking cats!

*Hold it together, Dakota,* she told herself.

“What now?” she asked, needing a plan. Always best to have a plan, right? She wasn’t a spur of the moment type woman. The one time she was adventurous—coming up to this cabin—and look at what happened. She licked her lips.

“We still have a fire,” Gunnar said. “And a broken window.”

She made a face as she looked across the room to a blackened picture window near the ladder to the loft and noticed a pile of snow on the floor below the broken pane. “Which means what, exactly?”

Axel set the lamp on the desk and went to Gunnar, who knelt next to the fireplace. “You’re right. The smoke is escaping, so the snow didn’t cover the chimney.” He looked up. “Less than twenty feet, then.”

“Too bad Great-granddad didn’t put an escape hatch in the loft.” Gunnar sighed. “I think there’s a roll of plastic sheeting in the storage. Let’s get the window covered before we lose too much heat.”

“How long?” she asked, getting the strong feeling they were ignoring her.

“Three days, tops,” Axel said as he picked up the lamp and headed for the door, still open, in the floor. “Most likely a lot sooner.”

Gunnar stood up and came toward her. The only light now that Axel was in the storage room came from the very low fire. She stepped back and bumped into the countertop. He stopped walking and put his hands in his jeans pockets. Damn, those jeans fit him well, even though they were Axel’s. They looked so damn much alike it was eerie. Sure, she’d seen identical

twins before, but ones that looked so much alike as adults weren't that common.

"They're expecting us at the rendezvous point at five tonight," he said, his voice low and calm. "We've got a personal locator beacon." Gunnar turned away and went to the packs near the door and began digging. "We'll put it out. It'll go for twenty-four hours." He pulled a cell phone-sized, electronic thingy out of the pack and held it up. "See, no problem. Here it is. Chances are they'll come after us as soon as they get the call from search and rescue that the beacon has been set off." He punched a button several times...and nothing happened. "Oh fucking son of a bitch." He turned it over, flipped open the back, and stared for a long moment in silence. Then he dove back into the pack and started a frantic search.

Axel came up the ladder, lantern in one hand and a big roll of plastic in the other. He took one look at Gunnar dumping out the contents of the pack and asked, "What the hell is going on?"

Gunnar climbed to his feet. "There's no fucking battery in the damn PLB."

"Okay, chill out. Calm down." Axel set the roll of plastic against the wall and took the little yellow device from Gunnar's hand. "I'm going to kill Reidar. He was supposed to replace all the batteries last week. Damn it!"

Dakota bit her bottom lip and tried to calm her racing heart. "So...we're trapped here? Stuck? No one's going to know we're buried under a pile of snow? We don't have enough wood to last three days."



“We have plenty,” Axel said, his voice low and steady. “Snow is actually a great insulator, and the cabin will stay warmer with less fire.”

“The food’s outside in the cache.” She glanced at the frozen sausage Axel had set on the table a few moments earlier. Pointing to it, she added, “That’s not enough to feed us for very long.”

“We have two weeks’ worth of dry food in storage, and lots of snow to make water with,” Gunnar said. “We’ll be fine. Just might get tired of oatmeal and mac and cheese.” He smiled a little, and it did help calm her nerves.

“We’re okay then. Really?”

Gunnar nodded, stepped forward and reached out his hand to touch her cheek, but she stepped to the side and away from him. With a sigh, he said, “Yes, sweetheart. Really.” He turned to Axel and said, “Let’s get that hole covered before we lose any more heat.”

For the next while, the men put up the plastic, using a staple gun Gunnar retrieved from storage. She started to wonder just how much stuff they kept down there.

“So, who’s up for some breakfast?” Gunnar asked, heading for the storage room again.

The knot had loosened in Dakota’s gut, and she was hungry. “I am,” she said softly, heading over to the fireplace where there was a bit more light.

“Yeah. Me too,” Axel said. “I’ll put the water on.” He got the old metal coffee pot from the kitchen counter and a big pot from a cabinet, and went out the door to fill them with snow. Waiting for snow to boil into hot water would take forever. She wouldn’t be eating anytime soon.

Gunnar came up the steps and closed the hatch to the storage, went to the counter and set down his armload of stuff, then came toward her. “Catch.” She grabbed the granola bar that zinged her way.

She found her first smile since the avalanche. “Thanks,” she said as she ripped into the chewy chocolate chip bar.

## Chapter Six

Gunnar put the last bowl into the dish drainer and lowered the wick on the kerosene lamp until it flickered and went out, casting the kitchen area into darkness. His heart heavy, he went to the couch and sat down on the opposite end from Axel, slouching into the corner and crossing his arms over his chest.

He stared at Dakota's back. She had fetched a blanket and pillow from the loft, and one of his mother's favored Agatha Christie novels from the bookshelf. She lay facing the fire, her back to them, and hadn't said a word for the last two hours. She also hadn't turned a page in a good five minutes, which told him she was deep in thought, not deep into the mystery.

*We lost her,* he said telepathically to his brother.

*Maybe. Maybe not. She needs some time and space to adjust.* Axel glanced around the darkened cabin. *Maybe it's a good thing we're trapped in here so she can't run away.*

*I'm hoping that's part of her problem. The avalanche spooked her. Then we revealed ourselves. That's a lot to take in at once. But the way she flinched when I tried to touch her...*

Axel sighed. *It definitely wasn't the most idealistic way to go about letting her know what we are, that's for sure. A discussion over a nice dinner.* His laugh was only in Gunnar's head, and it held no humor.

*There wasn't any other way. I had to turn.*

*I know, brother. And it was the right thing for saving lives. Just not the right thing for saving our sex life.*

*Love life, Gunnar corrected. I can admit it. Can you?*

*Yeah, Axel said with a sigh. I love her. Who wouldn't? Her first concern during the avalanche was Falke. Not the fact we were getting buried under tons of snow. She was worried about a cat.*

Dakota sat up fast and spun around on her butt, crossing her legs and folding her arms over her middle. Her eyes narrowed on the brothers.

“What’s wrong?” Axel asked.

“You’re talking to each other, aren’t you?” She sounded angry.

Both Gunnar and Axel nodded.

“Stop that shit right now. If you’re going to talk, talk. And why can’t I hear you? I heard you down there.” She flung her arm out, pointing to the hatch in the floor.

“Our telepathic ability is different when we are in our human form,” Axel said. “As humans, we can only communicate with family members. When we’re in catamount form, then we can urge humans to hear us so long as we’re in sight of them.”

She frowned at them. “So all of you are cats?”

“Except Heidi,” Gunnar answered. “She lacks the proper chromosome. But she can communicate telepathically with us, just not other humans.”

“Why is that?”

He shrugged. “It just is.”

“How’d you get that way? What caused it?”

“It’s passed down through the men in our family. The history of the catamount shifters goes back further than anyone knows.”

“And your mother?”

“Human,” Axel said.

Dakota shook her head and swiped her hand over her face. Then she groaned as she looked at Axel. “That first time we had sex, we didn’t use protection. I’m not going to have a litter of kittens or something, am I?”

Gunnar cleared his throat. Axel didn’t say anything.

“I *am*? Oh, God! What the hell did you think— No, what was *I* thinking? I wasn’t. I was horny. Damn it, I know better. This is why I don’t have affairs. I’m not good at it.”

That wasn’t true. She was damn good at it, Gunnar thought, but wisely chose to keep the compliment to himself. Instead, he tried to calm her by saying, “You can’t get pregnant from one time with one—”

A loud, sarcastic bark of laughter came out of her before he could finish. “I haven’t heard that line since I was in the backseat of my boyfriend’s father’s station wagon when we were in eleventh grade. I didn’t believe it then, and I don’t buy it now.”

“With *one* shifter,” he finished.

She hesitated. “What?”

“What he’s trying to say,” Axel said, “is you aren’t pregnant.”

“And he’s so sure, how?”

“You’re human. You would need the sperm of two catamount shifters to conceive,” Axel said, his voice harder now. “I always wore a condom.”

“No, remember, you—” Her face went blank as the meaning behind Axel’s admission sank in. She slowly lowered the hand she’d raised to point toward the kitchen.

Gunnar’s stomach tightened into a knot. *That was real smooth, brother!*

*Sorry.*

*Fuck!* He didn’t look at Axel, but Dakota did, and she didn’t look happy.

“You... *You* always wore a condom?”

Axel gave one solemn nod.

When she turned her gaze on Gunnar, he could practically see the flames of furious realization licking up her cheeks. Her voice was deadly calm when she said, “Which means *you* didn’t.”

Gunnar shook his head.

She surged to her feet and stalked into the darkness of the kitchen, her stocking feet thudding against the hardwood flooring with her furious steps. Her breathing was loud, deep, as if she was trying to catch her breath. Gunnar glanced at Axel.

Axel stared at the fire and said, *Let her work it out, Gun. Don’t say anything.*

It didn’t take long. She practically shouted. “What the hell is wrong with you two? Was it all some sort of damn game? Switch places and see if the city-slicker notices?”

Gunnar winced. “No. I...” He glanced at his brother before continuing. One of them had to say something. She was “working it out” all wrong. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. I was supposed to remain catamount the entire time, but—”

She didn't let him explain. "Oh, man, I don't believe this! After we did it on the table, the damn cat was making a racket. What the hell was all that crap about Falke having a run-in with a porcupine? That had to be a bunch of BS, so what? If the cat wasn't..." She paused and pointed at them. At Axel more so, it seemed—her movement and features less visible in the shadowy area across the room. "That was you, Axel? Outside? While Gunnar and I—"

"Yes." Axel got up off the couch and went toward her.

"You saw us."

"I did, and I was pissed off at him for fucking you, because *I* wanted you."

"There never was a porcupine, was there?" she asked, her voice softer. "You attacked him."

"Yeah, I did."

She looked at Gunnar and then back at Axel. "You scratched the hell out of your own brother?"

"Uh...we sort of scratched the hell out of each other," Axel said. "That was me who came back inside. Gunnar was only human for...well...for long enough to have sex with you."

"Why the hell was he in his human body at all if he was supposed to be a cat the whole time?" she cried.

Gunnar stood, unable to stand the hurt and anger in her voice and not being able to see her. "Because I was jealous of that first kiss between the two of you. I wanted you too, but you're our client. We were trying to abstain, but I thought he was weakening."

"I was," Axel admitted, drawing Dakota's gaze.

Gunnar continued, “I thought I’d have better control over myself than he would. We switched places so Axel didn’t have to fight temptation so hard.”

Her gaze snapped to Gunnar’s. “Oh yeah, you really fought me off, didn’t you?”

He flinched, unable to deny her claim.

She closed her eyes and dropped her head forward. “Sorry, that wasn’t fair of me. I know I started the whole thing, but I thought you were him.” She sighed heavily. Her words hurt, but he said nothing. “This...I...I’m a one-man woman. I’ve never been involved, much less slept with, two men at once. And definitely not brothers.” She looked at Gunnar. “And if you went back to being a cat, you just let Axel go upstairs and sleep with me after you and I...” She shook her head, her brow wrinkling in confusion. “How could you *do that*?”

Before he could answer, Dakota growled and crossed her arms again. “God! I don’t believe this. I told Falke things...*you* things. I suppose you told him everything I said to you when you were a cat?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but what could he say?

She glared at him, turned her attention to Axel, and then him again. “I bet you both got a good laugh out of that, didn’t you?”

“No. It wasn’t like that!” Gunnar couldn’t take it anymore. He didn’t know what to say, how to apologize for tricking her. So he stepped forward, pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Something he’d wanted—needed—to do since they’d had sex. He knew she’d thought he was his brother before, but she



knew who he was now. He had to kiss her, taste her and let her know he too desired her.

She put up a token protest, a small sound and a slight shove, but then pulled her arms out from between them, tipped her head a bit and settled her hands on his sides as he ate at her mouth. Her tongue dueled with his, her breath sweet from the oatmeal and maple sausages they'd had for breakfast. Gunnar held her tighter, and she melted against him, her soft curves fitting against his hard planes perfectly.

When he couldn't breathe, was afraid he'd press her up against the counter as he'd done before, Gunnar slowly pulled back and rested his cheek against hers. Dakota panted heavily, her fingers digging into his sides. His cock was hard, throbbing with a need to be buried inside of her again.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done, sweetheart, letting Axel go up to the loft with you while I stayed down here, alone. I will never regret having been with you, and I want to be with you again." He sucked in one deep breath and went for it. "And so does Axel."

She jerked, but he held her firm against him.

"Shh. Please, listen."

She stood tense in his arms but didn't try to pull away again.

"We didn't plan this. Never in our lives have we shared a woman, but we knew that someday we would. When we find the woman we'll spend our lives with, she will be the one woman we can both love."

Dakota did pull back then, but not out of his arms. “You can’t talk love to me. You lied to me. Just because we have great sexual chemistry—”

“I know, sweetheart, I know. What I’m trying to say is that this isn’t the norm for us. We don’t want you to think this was a game we’ve played before. We didn’t plan to feel the way we do, and we both hate the deception behind what happened. But we can’t change that now. All we can do is ask your forgiveness and plead for you to give us another chance.”

She turned her head and looked to the side, where Axel stood close but just out of arm’s reach.

“He’s right,” Axel said softly. “Our feelings for you are...deeper than we’ve ever experienced.”

She was scared. Gunnar could sense it in the way she held her body rigid against him now. The only thing that softened her was his kiss. But he knew sex didn’t make a relationship; trust did. And they had a hell of a hill to climb on that front after what they’d just admitted.

Axel stepped closer, until Gunnar felt his body heat. His brother then laid his hand on Dakota’s back, leaned in and kissed her cheek. Gunnar released her with his other arm and edged sideways, letting Axel get closer to her.

“We want you, honey,” Axel said. “I’ve wanted you since you walked through the door of my shop. Truth be known, we’re both relieved that you know now. Despite the risk in revealing our secret, we’re glad you know that we are both attracted to you and care about what happens to you.” He moved closer, had one arm around her and his body pressed against her side.

Gunnar held her the same way on her other side. She eased her arms around them, holding them close to her. A good sign, Gunnar thought.

“I just needed a getaway...and a vacation fling. I haven't had much to do with men since...well, for a few years.”

Axel slowly leaned forward, brushing his lips over hers. “Your getaway isn't over. We're not going anywhere for a while. And now that you know you've already been with both of us...” Axel kissed her deep, and she moaned. Gunnar's lust came back full force. She wasn't denying what Axel said. Would she...could she?

When Axel lifted his head, Gunnar didn't let her stop to think. He swooped in and kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue into her soft, moist mouth, stroking her tongue with his.

While he still kissed her, Axel whispered, “Let us give you something to remember, Dakota. If all you want is some hot memories of your vacation, take a chance and see what it's like to be with two men at once. Two men who want to worship your body.”

They were making it hard for her to think straight. Dakota's body tried answering for her. The two men kissed so differently from each other, it excited her. If Gunnar was as *enthusiastic* as he'd been the first time, and if Axel was as thorough as he'd been every time, the thought of both of them worshiping her body made her tingle all over.

But this was so...

“Don't think about it,” Axel said, as if he'd read her thoughts. Thank God she knew he couldn't. She'd

revealed enough to Gunnar when he was a cat. “Just accept us. Right now. Don’t think about yesterday or tomorrow. Let’s just stay in this moment.”

A moan slipped out of her, and she gripped the backs of both men when Gunnar grazed his tongue along the roof of her mouth. She never knew that part of her body could be an erogenous zone.

Gunnar broke the kiss and met her gaze through the darkened area of the kitchen where they stood. Her body trembled, her pulse hot and hard in her pussy.

She turned her head slightly and looked into Axel’s eyes. Yes, these men looked similar, and she could see how she’d mistaken Gunnar for Axel that first time when all she could think about was the lust searing her body and making her brain into mush, but with them standing practically shoulder-to-shoulder, she saw the subtle differences. Axel’s eyes were just a shade darker, his hair a tiny bit longer.

“Don’t worry, honey. We’ll take every precaution.” Axel touched her cheek with his palm, and she leaned into him, closing her eyes.

What did she have to lose if she said no? Except fulfilling every heterosexual woman’s fantasy of being devoured by two gorgeous, attentive men?

A slow smile curved her lips as she made her decision. Dakota trusted these two with her life, and they’d saved her. Twice. Opening her eyes and looking back and forth between them, she said, “Okay.”

After a brief moment of dead silence, Axel laughed and pressed his mouth to hers, while Gunnar seemed to breathe a sigh of relief and leaned in to nibble that oh-so-sensitive spot behind her ear.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, accepting Axel's tongue when he teased her lips apart, and giving better access to Gunnar who nibbled her neck, sending tingles racing down her arms and straight to her pussy.

Hands seemed to be everywhere. Holding her against their bodies, touching, rubbing, petting her back, her sides, her hips. It was good. So damn good. And they were all fully clothed. She couldn't wait to see what it would be like once they were naked.

One hand—Axel's she thought—slipped under her sweatshirt and skimmed up over her belly to cup her breast. Even through her bra, her nipple puckered at the light friction of his palm.

Another hand—Gunnar's maybe—slipped down, and his fingers plucked at the button on her jeans.

Her pussy clenched, and she clung to the men. One hand in Axel's hair as he kissed her so deep, with so much passion. The other on Gunnar's shoulder, her nails digging into his sweater so she could keep her balance.

But maybe she didn't want to keep her balance. She wanted to fall—if only this once—into the bliss these two promised.

Her zipper opened, the sound barely audible beyond her heavy breathing. She moaned into Axel's mouth when Gunnar's warm, callused palm slipped into her jeans. His talented fingers skimmed over her mound then pressed against her, teasing her clit in a frustratingly erotic way.

Gunnar dipped his tongue in her ear then whispered, "Already hot. And so wet." His breath sent

another rush of lust and warmth sparking through her. “I’m going to taste you.”

She whimpered and jerked her mouth from Axel’s, turned her head, and pressed her lips against Gunnar’s. He stabbed his tongue into her mouth at the same moment his fingers slid between her pussy lips and teased her clit. A strangled cry ripped from her mouth, but he swallowed most of the sound. Her hips bucked against his hand. When Axel pinched her nipple, she almost came.

“So fucking responsive,” Axel murmured against her ear.

She couldn’t ever remember being *this* reactive in her life. These two did something to her. Sexual chemistry at its finest. Maybe they had some special shifter prowess, or maybe some spectacular pheromones normal human men didn’t possess. Whatever it was, she didn’t want it to end.

In one swift motion, Gunnar released her mouth and Axel swept her sweatshirt over her head, barely giving her time to raise her arms. Gunnar went down on his knees in front of her, and Axel tongued her nipple through her bra.

She gripped the back of Axel’s head, pressing his face to her chest. Thank God for the counter behind her, because she feared that was the only thing still holding her upright. Her jeans slid down her legs. Her bra cups were pulled down. Then mouths. On her breasts, her pussy. “Oh, God!” she cried as her knees turned to jelly.

Axel wrapped his arms around her waist and held her upright, while Gunnar shoved her thighs farther

apart—as far as they'd go with her ankles trapped in her jeans—and speared his tongue deep into her cunt. Axel suckled, nipped, laved, made love to her breasts with his mouth.

Dakota couldn't breathe. All she seemed able to do was feel. They held her up, held her open. And when one of Axel's hands slid down over her butt cheek and squeezed, she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. Then he pressed against her anus with a fingertip and suckled hard on her right nipple. She tumbled over the edge, gasping and crying out as the orgasm hit with the force of an avalanche.

Her legs gave out then, but they held her upright still. Axel's strong arm held firm around her waist. Gunnar's hands supported her hips.

She bucked against Gunnar's mouth, and he kept up the exquisite torture, his tongue flicking her clit with rapid strokes, prolonging the amazing orgasm longer than she thought possible.

When Dakota thought she couldn't possibly take any more, Axel moved from her breast and kissed her chin, her cheek, then her lips, before he whispered, "You can come again." He pressed his finger into her anus at the same time Gunnar suckled her clit hard.

The next bolt of lightning struck so hard she saw stars behind her tightly squeezed eyelids. Heat flooded her, made her tingle from scalp to toes. Her mind went blank to everything but the pleasure coursing through her, pulsing with each hard beat of her heart.

## Chapter Seven

One second Dakota was in the kitchen, up against the counter. The next she was on the blanket in front of the fire with two naked men. She wasn't sure how she got there. One of them had carried her, she was sure, but she couldn't say who had been the one.

Axel lay on her right side, closest to the fire, while Gunnar lay on her left. Their mouths and hands skimmed over her body, never letting the slow burn of arousal wane. Her breasts were never left unattended, nor was her pussy. Someone's fingers teased her clit and slowly pumped into her pussy, but she didn't have the energy to look up and see who.

Gunnar suckled her breasts as if he'd die without them. Axel nibbled on her shoulder, her belly, moving, always moving, keeping her unbalanced. Which was okay, because she was flat on her back. She didn't need her balance.

And she damn sure didn't want him—want *them*—to stop.

Dakota closed her eyes again and spread her legs wide, letting them know she was ready for more—more of whatever they wanted to give, to take. She was theirs for this moment, and having already experienced the most outstanding orgasms of her life with these two, she desperately wanted—no, needed—more. So much more. She wanted it *all*.

Gunnar moved, cool air brushing against her side when his body separated from hers. She opened her



eyes and watched him. He went on his knees near her head, his cock long, thick and gorgeously hard. He wrapped his hand around the base of his shaft and came toward her with it.

She grinned as a deliciously wicked sensation zinged through her, and she opened her mouth for him. Tangy. Sweet. She took him as deep as she could, gently suckling, and was rewarded with a soft male purr of satisfaction.

After donning a condom, Axel moved too, on his knees between her thighs, which he lifted and laid over his own, raising her ass off the floor just a bit. The tip of his cock teased her pussy, and she quivered all over in anticipation of him entering her.

Just as Gunnar withdrew and slid back into her mouth with a shallow thrust, Axel speared her with his thick cock. Her eyes widened, and she grunted around Gunnar's dick.

"Take it all," Gunnar said, his voice low and rough. "You can, sugar. We want everything you have to give."

"Oh, fuck," Axel whispered. "She's so slick." He withdrew and thrust again.

Dakota moaned as Axel's cock slid so smoothly into her, so deep. She barely had enough concentration to focus on Gunnar, but she managed to tease his cock with her tongue, stroking under the head, and then very lightly skimmed her teeth over him as he started to withdraw.

He hissed and jerked, then pushed deeper into her mouth on the next small thrust.

She swallowed and sucked hard on his length.

“That’s it.” He buried his fingers in her hair and held her head still. “Yeah.”

Axel lifted her hips higher, holding her ass suspended in the air as if she weighed nothing, and slammed into her so hard, she slid back an inch on the blanket. She raised her legs and rested her ankles on his shoulders.

“Perfect,” Axel said, but his voice was strained, tight, and when she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, his face was flushed, his teeth gritted in a grimace of erotic agony.

The sight of him that way, so restrained, notched up her lust, and she gripped Gunnar’s cock in one hand, urging him closer until he fell forward, his hands on the floor on the other side of her head, his rippled abs right in her face.

She sucked him hard, pumping him with her hand in the same rhythm that Axel stroked into her. On each deep thrust from Axel, he bumped her G-spot at just that right angle, and she knew this wouldn’t last long.

Gunnar grunted, groaned and seemed to be fighting a need to fuck her face by restraining almost all movement—his and hers. “Oh, fuck...Dakota...” His plea came out husky, almost breathless.

She worked harder to make him lose control by cupping his balls in her hand and lightly tugging them as she sucked, licked, and swallowed his cock.

The sounds they made, low and guttural, purely primal, pushed her closer and closer to the edge of ecstasy. She thrust her hips in time to Axel’s. And when he lifted her ass just a bit higher, when the pressure on her G-spot became more pronounced, she

moaned, she bucked. She sucked Gunnar's cock harder.

"Axel," Gunnar gritted out in an urgent growl. Axel reached under her and pressed a finger into her anus. She tensed, her eyes wide, every muscle in her body tightening. She groaned, the sound vibrating around Gunnar's cock.

And then it was like magic.

Gunnar and Axel shouted in unison. Hot, tangy semen spurted into her mouth. She struggled to swallow every drop.

Axel quit moving except for the orgasmic pulse of his cock inside her pussy. In the next heartbeat, he pressed that finger deeper into her ass and pinched her clit at the same time. She fisted Gunnar and screamed as everything she ever thought she knew about sex flew out into the snow and she came so hard she was sure she'd die before it ended.

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With no daylight filtering through the mountain of snow under which the cabin lay, it was impossible to determine the time. Axel's left arm, the one with his watch around it, was firmly trapped under a sleeping Dakota.

*You awake?* Gunnar asked through their telepathic connection.

*Maybe. Time?*

Gunnar silently chuckled. *Sorry, I might wear the collar as a cat, but I haven't gotten the whole wristwatch thing down yet.*

*Smartass.* Axel grinned. He was physically drained, willing to stay right here with Dakota and Gunnar, curled up with her warm, lithe body pressed between them. He yawned and let his eyes drift shut. What did time matter anyway? Everything was good right here.

*I wasn't sure what it would be like,* Gunnar said.

Axel frowned. *What what would be like?* He wanted to drift back to sleep, but his brother was obviously feeling talkative.

*Sharing. Being together with one woman. Over the years I've often wondered if we could really do it.*

*You mean, if you could actually do it,* Axel said, then yawned again. *I knew when the right woman came along, everything would work out. Just didn't think it would be quite this soon, is all.*

*All the jealousy went away. It felt right.*

*It was right, brother. Shut up and go back to sleep.*

*The fire's dying down. I think I'll stoke it and put on some water to heat for Dakota when she wakes up.*

*Okay. You do that.*

When Gunnar moved away from the other side of Dakota, she made a soft sound of displeasure then snuggled up closer to Axel. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head beneath his chin.

"Where'd he go?" she muttered against his chest.

"I'm right here, sweetheart. Just checking the fire."

She pulled back a little and looked up. "Mmm. Nice view," she said with a soft smile curving her lips.

Axel turned his head to see what she meant and was greeted by his brother's bare ass not far from his face.

Dakota giggled when Axel made a face and turned back toward her.

"Well, I like it." She flopped over onto her back and pulled the blanket up to her neck. The move wasn't one of modesty, Axel realized, when she tugged the blanket enough that it exposed his backside to the cool air of the cabin.

Underneath the cover, he skimmed his hand up her belly and cupped her breast. She gave a soft moan and closed her eyes. Her pretty lips parted slightly. He was just leaning down to kiss her when she said, "There's seven of you, right? Six brothers and Heidi?"

Axel sighed and propped his head on his other hand. *Time to talk, not kiss.* "Mmm-hmm." But he couldn't take his hand from her softly firm breast, especially when her nipple tightened ever so slightly at his touch.

"And you, uh...how many of you were born at the same time? You all looked so alike. Are you...did your mother have all of you at once?"

Gunnar moved to the couch, where they'd dropped their clothes earlier, and pulled on a pair of jeans. "No. There were quadruplets first. Then triplets. Heidi is the youngest, born with Sindre and Torsten."

"And that's normal for you? So many children born at once?"

"Yes. Between two and four babies per litter," Axel said.

"You're born babies...not kittens?"

He chuckled. Her gaze told him she worried she might offend them, but he wasn't surprised by her curiosity. It was a valid question for those unfamiliar with shifters, which of course accounted for most of the human race. "We don't reach our catamount maturity until puberty, so we can't shift until then. We're normal little kids, human in all regards save one. Our only gift as youngsters is our telepathic ability, and that doesn't really manifest until language is learned."

"Telepathy, which your mother didn't have because she was human, right? Poor woman."

Gunnar turned and grinned. "We were forbidden from using it when she was around. House rules."

"What about your sister? Will she have a whole bunch of shifter babies at once?"

Gunnar grabbed the big water pot off the hearth and headed for the door.

Axel answered, "Only if she hooks up with a catamount shifter, but we're rather few and far between. Our family unit is uncommon."

Dakota looked from Axel to Gunnar's back as he opened the front door, then back at Axel. "There's more like you out there?"

"Yes, but most males of our race are loners. They don't mate for life, and if they are alone, they cannot impregnate a woman unless she carries the catamount gene. Females aren't born to catamounts very often."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "It's just the way it is. We don't question certain things, because who would answer? We can't be genetically tested for fear of being found

out. We live our lives in secret because it's the only way to survive without becoming some lab experiment."

"But you exposed yourselves to me."

"We did," he admitted softly.

"Because my life was in danger." She dropped her gaze to his chest.

"True, but also because deep down we wanted you to know. We trust you."

"I won't tell a soul. I swear. Gunnar saved my life."

He didn't bother to tell her that the house hadn't collapsed; therefore his brother hadn't saved her life, at least not from the avalanche. Gunnar hadn't *needed* to expose himself to her. But he understood his brother's way of thinking. There had been danger, and secrets be damned. Gunnar wasn't about to let the one woman they could both love be killed.

"And if your life hadn't been in danger and we'd showed you what we were?" Gunnar said, shutting the door behind him and carrying the pot full of snow across the room to the fire. "What then? Is your vow of secrecy only out of gratitude because your life was in danger?"

Dakota turned her head and looked at Gunnar. "Would you really have shown me otherwise?"

"Yes," both Gunnar and Axel said in unison without a second's hesitation.

Her mouth dropped open in obvious surprise. "Seriously?"

Gunnar set the cooking pot on the hearth to warm. Then he sat down on the other side of her from Axel and touched his fingers to her cheek in a tender caress.

“I was only waiting until we were off the mountain. I wanted you to know *me*. Not me pretending to be my brother.”

She looked back and forth between them, and then a frown furrowed her brow. “You need to share a woman,” she said hesitantly, “because you need both your sperm to impregnate her.”

He and Gunnar both nodded.

“I can’t be that woman. I don’t want to get pregnant.”

“Ever?” Axel asked, his heart nearly seizing up on him. He desperately wanted children. He’d been brought up in a big, loving family, and he wanted to expand that family, give their fathers grandchildren.

She frowned. “No, I don’t mean that. I’m just not ready. I’m only twenty-four. I...” She swallowed hard. “No. Not ready for that. Four babies?”

A little relief ebbed through him. She wasn’t saying no *forever*, just for now. There was still hope. He glanced at Gunnar, then back to Dakota. “I wore a condom this last time, and if—when—we have you again, we’ll both wear protection. We’d never trap you or harm you in any way, honey. We hope you believe that.”

She nodded quickly. “I do. I know. You made that clear earlier.” Then a slow grin parted her lips. “When, not if?”

Gunnar chuckled. “When, sugar. *When*.”

Axel finally checked his watch. It was just after six. If plans went as they should, their brothers would be heading out to find them very soon, being that they were now an hour behind schedule for their



rendezvous at the trailhead. He'd give it about three more hours, and with luck, they'd be dug out and on their way back to Leavenworth. He prayed everyone followed the protocol they'd set up years before for this kind of emergency but had never needed to use.

*Three hours.* That should give them plenty of time for food and more. He pressed a fast, hard kiss to Dakota's lips. "The *when* will be soon. After dinner." He winked, realizing he was famished and all they'd have to eat tonight was mac and cheese, some freeze-dried meat and maybe, for desert, a granola bar.

"Oh?"

Axel got up and reached for his clothes.

"Oh, yeah," Gunnar said, then kissed her and stood up. "There's a whole lot of that gorgeous body we still need to explore."

She grinned up at him even as her cheeks turned a little pink.

In that instant, he knew that nothing had ever felt more right. The three of them. Not just in the sack, but being together, sharing a space, laughing, teasing. Loving.

He pulled on his sweater and turned to look down at Dakota. "You're okay, right? We didn't do anything...too outrageous?"

Her grin grew, as did the sparkle in her eyes. "I'm great, Axel. Thank you for asking." She flicked her pink tongue over her bottom lip. "I'm thinking there's not much you could do that I'd say no to."

Axel growled and had a hell of a time pulling himself away from simply gazing at her, even if it was just to gather up supplies to start dinner. "We're taking

you up on that in about—” he glanced at his watch, quickly calculating how long it would take to boil water and make macaroni, “—an hour.”

Dakota laughed. “I’ll be waiting.”

They’d need to hurry if they wanted one more round with her before the family arrived. He was sure the entire clan would show up for the rescue effort. That was the kind of family they were.

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Dakota rolled left, searching for one of the two warm bodies that had pressed against her for the last few hours. When she found nothing but cold floor, she rolled right, reaching out for the other one. Nothing. She frowned and buried her face in her pillow. She was cold, and Axel and Gunnar had abandoned her.

But then her frown eased into a smile as she recalled all they’d done to her body before she’d fallen into an exhausted, satisfied heap.

Because she was cold and had to pee, she finally opened her eyes. Yep, the fire was out in the fireplace. *How odd.* They hadn’t let the fire burn down since the moment they’d arrived at the cabin. *Wait.* She could see. There was a lot of light in the cabin. Bright, white light.

She jerked up to a seated position and yelped when she saw the group of men sitting and standing around the small table in the kitchen, lit by several halogen lanterns. Jerking the blanket to her neck, she wanted to

bury herself under the rug. The entire family was there!

“Hey, sweetheart,” Gunnar said with a smile as he moved across the room toward her and away from the bundle of guys, some of whom she’d never seen before. “We’re rescued.”

Her stomach knotted. “I can see that,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

“And our dads brought some hot, freshly brewed coffee.” He knelt next to her, blocking her view of the rest of the group, and offered her a steaming cup.

She glanced down at herself, then pointedly frowned at him.

His gaze met hers. He gave her a silent, “Ah,” and turned toward the table of men. “Okay, guys. Clear out. We’ll be ready in about twenty minutes.”

As the men headed for the door, one of the two older men she hadn’t met before—albeit the family resemblance was remarkable—grumbled about “ungrateful whelps.”

“Next time you could try digging through the six feet of snow,” one of Gunnar’s brothers said. She heard humor behind the words, but still....

“Six feet? You could have dug us out?”

Gunnar rolled his eyes.

“Hey, honey,” Axel said, stepping out of the bathroom. “I got your stuff together, and a tub of warm water in there for you to wash up.” He flung his arm out toward the bathroom.

“*Six feet?* We weren’t really trapped?”

Gunnar looked a bit sheepish when he gave her a little shrug and a half grin. “Well, maybe more than

six, but apparently the house was pretty much the end of the avalanche zone.”

She knew her irritation wasn't from the fact they hadn't dug themselves out. It was because all those...cat men...had seen her half-naked, and she was sure it was obvious to every one of them what she'd been doing with their brothers or sons.

Gunnar's and Axel's Cheshire cat grins didn't help matters either.

Gripping the blanket tight around her, she scrambled to her feet, gave both men a good glare then stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door.

She heard Axel mutter, “And I thought she'd be in a *better* mood if we let her sleep a little longer.”

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Dakota's thoughts were troubled as she buried her nose in Axel's back, hugged him closer and kept her gloved hands tucked inside his jacket pockets.

“Not much farther,” he hollered over his shoulder and the sounds of revved motors. Unwilling to lift her face into the wind, she answered with a nod that rubbed her cold nose against his jacket.

For a moment, she smiled at the memory of two grown men playing rock, paper, scissors to see who would get to drive with her as a passenger. Gunnar lost, so he now sat in catamount form—because there wasn't a spare set of winter clothes for him—on the back of another snowmobile, his big paws on the shoulders of one of his other brothers.

The ride back made the return trip a lot faster than their hike to the cabin. The trouble was Dakota was unsure she wanted her adventure to end.

A part of her wanted to say to hell with the rest of the world. Stay in the moment as Axel had suggested. But that moment was over. It was time for her to face reality.

She had a life, a career, back in Vegas. Nothing had brought that home to her more than seeing the curious glances of the other Falke men. Her awkward embarrassment over having their tryst uncovered by the whole family didn't help either. And, though Axel had introduced her to his fathers and they'd been nice to her, she could sense a nervous uncertainty in the air.

As incredible as the Falke brothers were, they were shifters. They needed a woman willing to mate with them, carry their children and live in some strange fantasy world where men could turn into big, predatory cats.

The sex had been amazing, but it wasn't enough to build a relationship on, and her future wasn't in Washington. She was an outsider.

The wind died down though the night's chill remained. The motor slowed, and the snowmobile came to a stop at the rendezvous area, which was illuminated by lights from several four-wheel drive vehicles.

Axel's hand covered her arm. A gentle squeeze. "We're here, honey."

She hugged him close, savoring her final moment with him. Then, taking a deep breath, she let go,

climbed off the snowmobile and turned to face the real world.

“Oh, my God!” Carrie screamed, skidding to a stop and wrapping Dakota in a breath-stealing bear hug. “You’re alive. Thank God. When I heard about the avalanche, I was so scared.”

“Yeah,” Dakota mumbled, pulling away but letting Carrie dominate the conversation.

“I bet you were terrified.” Her friend tugged her toward an SUV where Heidi stood talking with the family patriarchs. “Are you hurt? You look fine.”

“What? Uh, yeah. I’m okay.”

“Hey, Dakota.”

She stopped at the greeting to see Ted, Carrie’s fiancé, holding the door of the SUV open for her. “Hi.”

“I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Thanks.” Was she all right? She felt...numb.

“Wow,” Carrie continued. “I can’t believe this happened. When Heidi showed up to tell me, I freaked out. We’ve been glued to the two-way radio ever since we heard the cabin was buried. They were gonna have to dig you out, and no one knew if anyone was alive in there.”

“Here. I’ll take care of that.” Ted took the backpack off her shoulders and went to toss it in the SUV’s cargo area. He’d just returned when—

“Whoa! What the fuck?” Ted yanked Carrie away from Dakota.

A soft purr sounded by Dakota’s hip. A tender nudge. She looked down at Gunnar...Falke.

“It’s okay,” she said, reaching out to scratch behind the cat’s ears.

*Are you all right?* Gunnar asked, his voice in her head.

“That’s a-a cougar,” Ted said, keeping Carrie behind him.

“I’m all right,” Dakota said, staring into the cat’s upturned eyes. She smiled and looked at Ted. “He’s just a pretty little pussy cat.”

Carrie stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “That’s no pussy cat.”

*Meow.* Gunnar nuzzled her hand. *At least you think I’m pretty.*

Dakota chuckled, but her amusement was short-lived. She did think he was pretty, inside and out, a very handsome man, and that’s why she had to go.

Someone behind her called, “Falke,” and the cat grudgingly trotted away.

“Well, uh,” Ted began. “We best get in the vehicle now. It’s late, and you must be exhausted.”

Dakota hesitated, glancing back to where Axel stood next to the snowmobiles. He was watching her, but answering questions from a man in a yellow search and rescue jacket. There was also an ambulance standing by, its engine running but no lights flashing. Apparently the cavalry had been called in just in case there’d been injuries or worse. She trembled at the thought. Despite the teasing from the other brothers earlier about digging out, the danger had been real.

“Oh, damn. You probably just want to forget this whole nightmare, don’t you?” Carrie said.

“No. I...” She could never forget the Falkes, but neither could she stay in their world. “Um...Yeah, we should go.”

Dakota turned away from Axel and Gunnar and let her friend guide her into the backseat of the SUV. Ted climbed into the front passenger seat to wait for the driver.

“Let’s get you back to the resort,” Carrie said, wrapping her arm around Dakota and acting like an overprotective mother hen. “We can change to an earlier flight. Let’s leave tomorrow. I’m sure you’re not up to skiing or anything. And we should call your parents back.”

That woke her up. “You called my *parents*?”

Carrie frowned. “Well, yes. They had a right to know their only daughter might be buried alive on a mountain. I mean, I would want to know.”

Dakota groaned and held out her hand. “Give me your phone.” Knowing her parents, they’d be on the first plane out of Boulder headed for Washington. She flipped open the phone Carrie handed her and punched in the number to her mother’s cell.

Heidi got in the driver’s seat and turned to look back. “All set?”

The phone rang once. “Hello! Carrie? Is that you? How’s Dakota? Do you know anything yet?” Her mother sounded distraught, which made Dakota want to flog her friend.

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Oh, thank God. Dakota, Carrie said—”

“I know, Mom. I’m fine. No, not a scratch. What? You’re where? The airport!” Just as she’d thought. She glared at Carrie, who cringed and mouthed *I’m sorry*.

“Guess so,” Heidi muttered good-naturedly and turned to crank the engine.



“No, tell Dad you don’t have to fly here. I’m fine. I promise.” She glanced out the window as they started to move and saw Axel and Falke staring at the vehicle in which she sat. She swallowed hard and let out a slow breath. It was time to go back to the real world. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

## Chapter Eight

Gunnar pulled the Grand Cherokee up in front of the resort, threw it into Park and jumped out. Axel, riding shotgun, was practically on his heels. The doorman opened the glass and chrome door as they approached.

Heidi told them this morning that she'd overheard Dakota on the phone with her parents, telling them she'd be leaving first thing in the morning. It was almost ten. Dakota might be gone. His heart thundered in his chest as he approached the front counter to inquire about her.

Axel grabbed his arm, pulling him up short. "She's there," he said, his voice a low growl of relief as he tipped his chin toward the coffee shop just off the lobby.

The breath whooshed out of Gunnar, and the churning in his gut eased a bit. She hadn't left yet. The brothers headed through the arched opening into the bustling cafe. As they approached her table, Dakota had her head down searching for something in a massive purse. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, her clothes stylish and reserved, less like the free-spirited hiking beauty he knew and more like the businesswoman she was. She sat with her friend Carrie and Carrie's boyfriend. Gunnar couldn't remember the guy's name. It didn't matter. Only Dakota mattered.

Dakota looked up from her bag when they stopped next to the table, but Carrie spoke first. "Hey, how you doin'?"

Dakota's eyes widened a bit. Eyes outlined in dusky makeup. Her lips were painted with a soft rose color. She almost didn't look like the same woman.

"Wh-what're you doing here?" she asked, her voice soft and sweet, her chocolate eyes deep, soulful. Yes, definitely the same woman. The one he loved.

Axel pulled a slip of paper from his inside jacket pocket. "You didn't get your receipt. I thought you might need it for your records...or something."

*God, that sounded lame,* Gunnar thought.

Dakota took the receipt from Axel's fingers and unfolded it. This time when she looked back at them, temper sparked in those gorgeous eyes. "That's...quite a discount."

Axel shrugged. "With the avalanche and all—"

"And all?" she asked, her voice rising. "And all, huh?" Her eyes narrowed on Axel, and she stood up, picking up that big, leather purse and slinging the straps over her shoulder. The pale pink sweater she wore looked soft and hugged every curve. "If you think that you owe me for—" She stopped, glancing at Carrie and the boyfriend. "Excuse us," she said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah," the guy said. "We'll get the breakfast bill and meet you in the car. But don't take too long. We've got to get on the road."

Dakota stalked off.

"Nice meeting you," Carrie called after Gunnar and Axel as they followed Dakota out of the coffee shop. They went through the lobby and around a corner leading to the first-floor rooms. She stopped and whirled on them. "You two are not paying me for sex,"

she hissed and waved the receipt in their faces. “What the hell do you take me for?”

“What? No, that’s not—” Axel stuttered a few more uhs and ahs, but Gunnar had a better idea. He stepped forward, pulled her hard against his body and dropped his mouth to hers. She shoved at his shoulder for the briefest moment, the paper receipt crinkling, but then her entire body melded with his, and she opened her mouth on a soft moan, giving him access. He sank his tongue inside to taste her. His cock hardened against her belly, and it took all of his willpower not to grind against her and push her up against the wall.

“No,” she moaned as she pulled back and dropped her forehead to his shoulder. “No, Gunnar.”

“We’re not paying for sex, sweetheart,” he murmured in her ear. “I swear. The markdown was because of the avalanche, the wolf and the fear you suffered when you paid for and expected fun, safety, and relaxation. We’d *never* think of y—”

“Gun,” Axel said softly.

Gunnar was loath to let go of her, but he passed her over to Axel, who wrapped his arms around her and gently kissed her lips.

“Dakota,” Axel whispered. “Don’t go.”

She jerked back and stared at him, a look of disbelief on her face. “What?”

“We don’t want you to go,” Gunnar answered.

She turned her head and looked at him, her eyebrows pulling together. “I have to.”

Gunnar shook his head. “Stay here. With us. Don’t leave. We’ll take care of you.”

“You’ll—” She shoved away from Axel, crammed the wrinkled receipt into her purse, and crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t need anyone to ‘take care of me.’ I’m a big girl. And I’m not going to stand here and...God!”

“Maybe he said that wrong,” Axel said, reaching out to her.

She stepped back, out of reach. “I have my career, my condo, my... Everything is in Vegas. I can’t stay here. And I’m sure not going to rely on some man—men—to take care of me. I don’t belong here. This isn’t my home.”

“It could be,” Gunnar said.

She shook her head. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. My parents are on their way to Vegas right now. They’re meeting me at the airport.”

*If?* Gunnar tried another way. “Then promise to come back.”

Her expression softened for an instant then turned to...sadness? Regret? Slowly she shook her head.

“We want you,” Axel said, and Gunnar knew the kind of courage it took for his brother to admit that. “Only you.”

“You don’t even know me!” She threw up her hands in a sign of frustration.

Gunnar’s gut tightened, and his heart seemed to shrivel up in his chest.

“Look, guys,” she said, her voice softer as she stepped closer to them, reached out and took Gunnar’s hand in hers, then reached for one of Axel’s. “You two showed me a wonderful time. I’ll never forget it or

you. Everything about this week was...magical. But it's time for me to go back to the real world."

"We're real," Axel said, and Gunnar heard the strain in his voice.

She gave them a sad little smile, squeezed their hands and kissed each of them on the cheek. Her lips by his ear, she promised, "I'll keep your secret." When she pulled away, she looked at Axel. "I have to go."

Was there a slight quaver in her voice?

She let go of their hands and walked around them, walked away from them, and vanished around the corner to the lobby.

Axel's back thumped against the wall as he shoved his hands in his pockets and dropped his head forward.

Gunnar had never felt so much pain. Not his broken leg when he was twelve and fell off the roof. Not his concussion when he was sixteen and took a nosedive off his motorcycle.

"She isn't *the one*," Axel said, his voice tight. "If she could walk away, she's not *the one*. Right?"

Gunnar's heart shattered. If Dakota wasn't *the one*, then he didn't think *the one* existed. He couldn't imagine ever wanting—*needing*—another woman the way he needed her.

"*Right?*" Axel demanded, looking up with desolate eyes.

"Right," Gunnar said, the word strangled, not wanting to leave his lips.

"Right," Axel said. He shoved away from the wall. "I need a drink."

Gunnar followed him into the hotel lounge, which he was surprised was open at that time of the morning. Axel sidled up to the bar and plopped down on a stool.

“Ax, maybe drinking—”

“Coffee,” Axel told the bartender. “Very hot and very black.”

Gunnar almost smiled, but it was short lived. “Same,” he said, sitting down next to his brother.

Long silence stretched as they sipped their drinks. Then Axel nudged Gunnar with his shoulder. “It’s not the end of the world. It was good while it lasted, but she’s not the only fish in the sea.”

Gunnar scowled at his brother’s profile. *You keep telling yourself that, and maybe you’ll even believe it one day.*

Axel turned his head. *What else can we do?*

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Axel picked the last plate Gunnar had just rinsed off the counter, dried it and stuck it in the cupboard overhead. A Sunday night ritual at the Falke house, Heidi had cooked, as usual, and the guys took turns with kitchen cleanup.

Though he, Gunnar and a couple of his other brothers lived in the apartments above the outfitters store, the family always met for dinner at their fathers’ home on weekends. Gunnar rung out the dish cloth and wiped down first the island in the middle of the massive kitchen, then the countertop around the sink, while Axel made sure the pots and pans were stored

properly, stacked just so in the cabinet, or Heidi would pitch a fit.

The rest of the family was already in the living room, shouting at the television as they watched whatever sports happened to be on.

“Boys.”

Axel turned from the stove to see their dads standing in the doorway.

“The den.” Their dads turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Even at the age of thirty, being called into the den could make his stomach quiver. That room had always been off limits to the kids, unless it was punishment time for some major infraction.

Axel turned a glance on Gunnar, who looked as worried as he felt. In unison, they headed out of the kitchen, knowing that keeping their dads waiting would be worse.

“We’re too old to get the belt,” Gunnar muttered under his breath as Axel turned the knob on the door to the dads’ inner sanctum.

The room was large, holding two heavy oak desks, two recliners—their dads’ thrones as they’d always referred to them—and a leather sofa that faced the recliners across a scarred oak coffee table. One end table stood between the thrones.

“Sit,” Fridrik said. He was the older of the two, by about a minute and a half. His voice was hard, and Axel racked his brain for whatever he and Gunnar had done to get a lecture.

Gunnar sat down and Axel followed, sitting on opposite ends of the leather sofa.



Burke, their other father, raised a highball glass to his lips and sipped his after-dinner scotch. He slowly lowered the glass to rest on the arm of his chair, looked from Axel to Gunnar, then said, "We're sick to death of watching the two of you mope around the way you have been for the last month. It stops now."

Axel glanced at Gunnar, who stared at the coffee table.

Fridrik sighed. "Why the hell are you two still here when she's in Vegas?"

Axel stared at his dads, fixing his features so his surprise didn't show. "What are you talking about?"

"I told you he'd play stupid," Burke said in a low, angry tone to Fridrik.

Fridrik explained, "Your mate is in Vegas and you're here. You don't see a problem with this?"

"She's not our mate," Axel denied, a declaration that lacked any conviction.

Fridrik snorted. Burke shook his head and said, "Really?" in a tone filled with sarcasm.

"We haven't marked her," Gunnar said. Neither father seemed convinced.

"If she were our mate, she wouldn't have left us," Axel added stubbornly.

Burke laughed at that then took another sip of his drink. "Boys, do you really think your mother just fell at our feet and gave herself over to a couple of catamount shifters?"

Gunnar looked up at that. "She told us she grew up here, that she'd always been in love with the two of you."

Fridrik burst out in hearty laughter that seemed to erase years from his features.

Burke smirked. “Oh, she was in love with us, all right. Loved playing little games, teasing us to get us sniffing around, seeing which one of us would turn on the other first over her. That woman, bless her heart, did whatever she could to make us jealous. We dealt with that all through school. Until the graduation party.” His face went serious, and Fridrik took over the story.

“That’s the night she found out what we were. She decided to go to the party with Dick Haven, even though both of us had asked her. She was back to playing her little game, seeing which one of us would come after her. We knew it was time to reveal ourselves to her. We loved her, knew she was *the one*, and we were getting too old to play her games.

“Dick had her in the back of his father’s pickup truck, trying to get under her skirts, when we found her. She screamed, trying to get away from him, and we went a little crazy.”

“I shifted,” Fridrik said with a small shake of his head.

“She was more terrified of us in that moment than she was of Dick.”

“So, what happened? How’d you get together?” Gunnar asked, obviously engrossed in a story they’d never heard.

“Took us over two years of courting her to convince her we were the guys she’d always loved,” Burke said with a small smile, full of tender love for the wife who’d died just a few years earlier. “And after

she agreed to be our mate, she admitted she was happy she didn't have to choose between us. Because she couldn't."

Axel swiped his hand over his face. "This is different. Dakota isn't Mom. She didn't have a lifetime to get to know us. She made her choice. Her career was more important than us."

Burke's eyes narrowed, and he pressed his lips together, which meant he had a good anger brewing.

Fridrik said, "You both revealed yourselves to her, right?"

He and Gunnar nodded.

"And she didn't run screaming from the cabin?" Burke asked.

"We were buried in snow. She couldn't," Axel said dryly.

"Don't you dare mouth off to us, boy!"

"Sorry, Dad," he said contritely and slouched into the sofa.

"She won't reveal our secret," Gunnar said, "if that's what you're concerned about."

"Have you ever revealed yourself to another woman?" Burke asked.

"No, sir," Gunnar answered. "It wouldn't have happened then except I had to warn Axel about the avalanche."

"So, you two never planned on revealing yourselves?"

Not wanting to lie, and choosing to treat the statement as a rhetorical one, Axel kept quiet, as did Gunnar. When neither son responded, Burke gave an

omnipotent nod and asked another question. “How did she react?”

Axel sighed and shrugged. “Not as badly as she could have.”

“Not so badly at all if what we saw was any indication,” Fridrik said.

“What do you—”

Fridrik raised an eyebrow. “She was naked on the living room floor, son. It doesn’t take a genius.”

Axel’s cheeks heated a bit, but he reminded himself that they were men first, his dads second. “So we had some fun. She still chose Vegas over us.”

Burke growled and got up from his chair. “Is that what has your tail in a twist? That she couldn’t make a commitment to you after less than a week in your bed?”

“We asked her to stay!” Axel shouted, then closed his eyes and mumbled an apology. “We asked her to stay. She said she didn’t belong here. She had to go home. She left. End. Of. Story.”

Burke went to his desk and poured another scotch, proving his exasperation, because he almost never had more than his one drink a day.

“So you go after her,” Fridrik said in a calm tone. “You go, and you make the change if she can’t.”

Axel scowled. “And leave the shop? Leave the family? I...no.”

Burke settled back into his throne. “Your store is more important than Dakota?”

Axel opened his mouth, but he couldn’t say yes.

“Your family is always your family,” Fridrik said. “It doesn’t matter where you roam.”

"She left us, though," Gunnar said, sounding exasperated.

"I didn't realize we raised such pussies," Burke said to Fridrik.

"Dad!" Axel sighed. "You want us to just get up and leave? Go to Vegas and stay there...forever, if that's what she wants?"

Fridrik challenged, "You didn't have any trouble asking her to uproot her life to stay here with you. Yet, you're unwilling to consider the opposite for her?"

"I... We..." Axel's answer faded, and Gunnar sat very still. Their father had a point.

"Would you rather grow old alone?" Burke asked, his voice mellow now. He looked at his brother, then back at his sons. "If you asked her to stay, and you planned to reveal yourselves at some point—don't bother denying that—then she's *the one*. We don't make mistakes when it comes to finding our mates, because there is only one for us. If you don't go after her..."

He saw the sadness in his dad's eyes just then, and it twisted his heart. It hurt so much to have Dakota walk out of their lives after just days. What had it been like for his dads to lose their mother after more than thirty years of marriage?

"I'm sure Kelan will run the shop for you," Fridrik said.

"And we'll keep an eye on things, too," Burke added.

"Who knows?" Fridrik smiled now. "Maybe someday, you might persuade her to return."

Axel turned to Gunnar, who smiled for the first time in a month. “Drive or fly?”

“Drive,” Gunnar said. “We need to pack enough for an extended stay, and it’ll give us time to figure out what to say.”

Axel stood up. “Thanks, Dads.”

Burke held up his scotch. “Go get her, boys.”

Gunnar stood up, a grin now splitting his face. “We will.”

## Chapter Nine

“Earth to Dakota! Come on, girl, are you deaf?”

Dakota blinked, glanced up, and said, “Oh, sorry. I didn’t catch that. What did you say?”

Sonya rolled her eyes and reached out to pull her from her chair. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you but snap out of it, or you’re gonna miss the sexiest eye candy this side of the Mississippi!” Her coworker dragged her into a conference room where proofs from a recent photo shoot lay spread out.

Dakota glanced at the photos and frowned. What was so amazing about pictures of gamblers with smiles on their faces seated around a roulette wheel? This was Vegas. The agency did hundreds of these kinds of ad campaigns to promote tourism, the casinos and hotels, all the time.

Skeptical, she muttered, “I don’t see what you mean.”

“Not *those*. This!” Sonya headed to the window and, hiding behind the curtain, gestured her to look outside for herself. “He’s here!”

Dakota approached the window and stood in plain view.

“Remember him?”

She did. The story was that the model had been a waiter in Paris before he became famous on the fashion runways of Europe, and now he’d been chosen to be the face, abs and more for a new line of boxer briefs. In person, or as close to in person as she’d get,

he looked *human*. Just another nice looking man in a dress shirt and trousers, his hair too dark, his frame too lean...and she couldn't see his eyes, but she'd bet her last paycheck that they weren't as blue as they would appear in the final prints. Airbrushing was a miracle of modern marketing technology.

"Yeah, he looks different...in clothes."

"Is that all you can say?" Sonya peeked out the window again. "That man is every woman's wet dream."

*Not every woman.* "I've seen better," she quipped with an uninterested shrug. Actually, she'd *been* with better fantasies, stretched out on the floor of a mountain homestead in the orange glow of soft firelight.

That thought damn near brought tears to her eyes, so she fisted her hands and turned to walk out.

"Dakota!"

She kept going, but Sonya followed her back to her cubicle.

"Okay, out with it. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said as she took her seat and began going through her email for the second time that day and trying desperately not to envision matching pairs of hazel eyes. Why couldn't she get them out of her mind?

Sonya crossed her arms. "Not buying it."

Dakota stopped, looked up, and tried to smile. "Look, I know the guy is handsome, and I'm sure he's probably very nice in person. He'll make a great model for the new line, but he doesn't make me all tingly."



“Okay, who are you? And what did you do with Dakota?”

“I’ve never been the type to drool over eye candy.”

Her coworker straightened up. “No, but you used to at least appreciate a sexy body when the opportunity presented itself. Nowadays you’re always, I don’t know, off in your own little world or something.”

Dakota sighed. “I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind.” Not that she was all that enthused about spending another night alone to think and dream of what could’ve been. She frowned, staring at the unfinished design specs for the Carlson’s interactive ad campaign on her computer screen. The layout was still off, and she needed to edit the copy and wrap up the proposal before the client presentation next week. “And a lot of work to get done.”

“Uh-huh.” Sonya straightened up and dropped her arms. “Okay, fine. I get it. Won’t bug you again. But Dakota, I’ve gotta say, you need another vacation, girlfriend, because you haven’t been the same since you came back from the last one.”

When Sonya walked away, Dakota ran her fingers through her hair and dropped her head onto her desk with a groan. Sonya was right. She hadn’t been the same, because nothing seemed right anymore.

*Don’t go.*

It had been a month since she’d heard Axel say that to her, five weeks to be exact since she’d kissed his cheek and walked away. Her lips quivered. A lifetime since she’d scratched Gunnar behind the ear and left a quaint little nothing of a town in rural Washington.

She glanced at the clock on her computer monitor and decided an early departure wouldn't hurt. She wasn't getting a damn thing done today anyway, so she shut her computer system down and grabbed her things.

Had she done the right thing? She'd thought so at the time, but now in hindsight, she wasn't so sure. The career she'd strove for had lost its luster, become a job—one that for brief moments occupied her mind enough to dispel the loneliness but never cured the problem. Work gave her a reason to get up each morning. After all, she had bills to pay. Her rent. Utilities. Her car note.

She unlocked her VW Beetle and slipped in on the driver's side. Gripping the wheel, she closed her eyes a second and exhaled.

Her job wasn't all she'd hoped it could be, and it wasn't enough to fulfill the aching void. What had she come back for? Her family? They weren't here. After assuring themselves she was alive and had all her limbs, her parents had returned to Colorado.

Her friends? Carrie was off on her honeymoon, and Lana was dating a physical therapist she'd met after the accident that kept her from going on the ski trip in the first place.

Her neighbors—at least those to whose faces she could put a name—were nice enough. But they were busy with their own lives, so aside from the occasional wave and “How are you?” they offered little incentive to plant roots here.

A horn honked, startling her from her thoughts and making her realize the light was green. She'd driven

several blocks on autopilot. Stepping on the gas, Dakota tried to focus more on the traffic and less on why she kept dwelling on the possibility that a month ago she'd made the worst mistake of her life.

*Traffic. Stop lights. Neon signs.* Before her vacation, she hadn't thought much about the hustle and bustle of Vegas. It had just been life as usual, but now she'd experienced another side to life, another world that made the previously exciting city feel too busy, congested and garishly bright.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter. "I made the right choice," she said aloud, trying to convince herself that she believed the words.

She didn't belong with two men. Things like that just didn't happen, and she mentally went through the plethora of reasons why for the umpteenth time since returning from Washington.

How would she tell her parents? What kind of future could she have with two men—no, two brothers? Even considering it, she knew polygamy would be impossible. It went against societal conventions, against the *law*.

Yet, their parents had found a way.

*They didn't ask you to marry them,* she reminded herself.

No, no one had said anything about marriage or a lifelong commitment, but she'd still run. From commitment, from them, from the strong emotions they so easily ignited inside of her.

She didn't belong with Axel and Gunnar Falke. They were not human.

No, that wasn't true. They were *more* than human, shifters. Exotic, exciting, unbelievable men who'd asked her to stay, to give any potential future with them a chance, and she'd stupidly walked away.

But it was for the best, wasn't it?

*Then why do I feel...hollow?* Why couldn't she resume her life as usual? Why did something every single day remind her of what she'd given up?

Her friend's wedding had been the worst. A beautiful ceremony in a traditional church, as opposed to one of the abundantly available wedding chapels. The bride glowed with joy. Surrounded by family and friends, her groom had eyes only for her. While wedding guests laughed and ate and had a good time, Dakota didn't miss the couple casting desirous glances toward each other—that shared understanding and need to get away and be alone. Shared looks similar to those exchanged in an isolated cabin, at a snow-covered trailhead and outside the lobby of a ski resort.

Her mind occupied with what might've been, she arrived home with little memory of the actual trip that brought her there. After parking her car, she got out and checked her mailbox. As she thumbed through the junk mail, her frustration level grew.

*Scared.* That's what she'd been. She'd been too afraid to commit to them after just a few days together. They didn't know her, not really. How could they? And she might've been privy to their greatest secret, but what more did she know about them?

Not much, she decided.

In her ground-floor apartment, Dakota tossed her keys and purse on the table, grabbed a bottled water

from the fridge and dropped into her recliner to stare at the black TV screen.

She hadn't given herself a chance to learn more about them either. Whether it was because they could do things no normal humans could or the idea of having not one but two men interested in her—and willing to share—she didn't know. Maybe it was both. Regardless, she'd run away from the opportunity to find out more about them. Denied herself the chance to see if a relationship could work.

Of course, it was too soon to talk about love. She'd told them that, and now told herself every time they entered her thoughts. But she did care about them and wondered what they were doing now.

Had they found someone else? They were big boys, grown men. They were fine. They'd probably forgotten all about her by now.

She drank half the bottle of water and closed her eyes with a disgruntled sigh.

“Get over it!” she snapped at herself. *Move on.*

Her gaze landed on the new picture frame that sat atop her TV next to an older college graduation picture of her with her parents. The new frame held a montage of four pictures. One of her before a beautiful sunrise, another of a big elk and two more of her with Axel and Falke. She smiled at the shot of Falke licking her cheek, but the smile softened, faded, when she stared at the last shot. Two pairs of hazel eyes looked back at her—one in the face of a handsome man, the other in the face of a cougar. The camera had captured three happy faces, hers and theirs, in front of an idyllic backdrop of snow and nature. She wished she'd

thought of taking a picture with the three of them while both men were in human form.

She got up and went to the bedroom, took a long shower and prepared for bed. It was early, but she didn't care. She wasn't hungry, and she wasn't in the mood for news or sitcoms or some stupid awards show.

Flipping back the bed linens, she'd just begun to climb in when the doorbell rang.

For a half second Dakota thought about ignoring it, but curiosity won out, so she threw on a silk wrap and headed to the door.

The doorbell sounded again.

"I'm coming. Just a minute."

Peeping through the eye-hole, she looked and saw no one.

Ticked that it might be children playing pranks, she hollered, "Who is it?"

Something scratched at the door.

*Oh, damn it.* Someone better not have left a stray puppy or kitten on her doorstep. Her apartment didn't allow pets, aside from the occasional goldfish.

With a huff, she unlocked, opened the door, and gaped.

A full-grown puma in a black leather collar sat outside her door, his long tail swishing lazily.

*Meow.*

She stared, afraid to blink, expecting her hallucination to vanish.

"Can we come in?" Axel stepped into view.

"Oh, my God!" She grabbed the cat by the collar, Axel by his shirt, and pulled them into the apartment.

He laughed.

“Are you crazy?” she asked Falke...Gunnar. It had to be Gunnar. “You could get yourself killed or wind up in some magician’s stage act. This is Vegas for crying out loud!”

“We weren’t sure of the reception we’d get,” Axel said, “dropping in on you unexpectedly like this.”

Telepathically, Gunnar added, *We figured if at least one was a ‘pretty little pussy cat,’ you wouldn’t shut the door on us.*

She narrowed her gaze on him for using her own words against her, but damn it! He was a sight for sore eyes. They both were. How often had she dreamed of seeing them again? And here they were. She dropped to her knees and hugged the cat.

“I would never shut the door in your faces.”

He purred.

“That’s a relief,” Axel said. “We apologize for disturbing your sleep.”

She followed his glance down to her silk wrap, and then she fiddled with the lapels. “Oh, no, you didn’t...” She cast a look at the clock. “I mean, it’s not late. I wasn’t asleep, just...getting comfortable.” *Alone on a Friday night.* She fought a grimace at that thought and forced a smile. “I’m glad you stopped by.” *Ugh.* She was rambling.

Axel pulled off the small backpack he held over one shoulder and tossed it on the floor next to Gunnar. “Got a bathroom where he can change?”

She glanced up at him, took his hand and climbed to her feet. “Sure. Down the hall...door on the right.” Her gaze held Axel’s.

She wanted to hug him too, but hesitated. The cat bumped her hip as he passed, nudging her closer to his brother. Why did hugging a cougar seem safer than the man before her?

Axel decided for her by pulling her into his arms. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth of his embrace, the renewed longings. He didn't move, merely held her close, her head on his chest. "It's good to see you again, Dakota."

"You too." Her loneliness vanished, and she wanted to cry. He felt so...right. What had they done to her to make her want them so much?

Reluctantly, she eased herself out of his arms. An awkward silence filled the space between them. "Can I get you something to drink?" She turned for her kitchen.

"Sure."

She opened the refrigerator and grimaced at the realization that the options available were few. "I don't have any alcohol. Would you like some milk, juice or bottled water?"

"Water's fine." His answer came from the living room.

She grabbed three just in case Gunnar wanted one and hurried back into the other room. Axel's back was to her as he stood before the television.

"Here you go." Setting one on the coffee table, she held the other out until he turned and took it.

"Thanks." His expression had changed, become more open, even warmer, and...cocky?

"So," she began, "what are you guys doin' here?"



His lips curved into that devastating smile she loved. "Would you believe we were in the neighborhood?" His grin now was pure mischief, and she chuckled.

"Oh, really?" She didn't buy it for a minute. "I didn't know Vegas was 'in the neighborhood' of the Wenatchee National Forest."

His shrug was nonchalant. "We took a detour." He glanced back at her television, reached up to brush his fingertips along the edge of her new picture frame. "The photos turned out nice."

His remark caused a flash of heat to warm her cheeks. Self-conscious, she busied herself by opening her bottle of water. "Yeah, they did. It was a great vacation." She took a sip and looked up again. "Are, uh, are you here on vacation?" Vegas was a favored destination for a lot of people, so it made sense.

He set his bottled water down unopened. "Not exactly."

A door opened from down the hall and footsteps sounded on the Berber carpet.

"So, what do you think?" Gunnar said with a grin as he returned to the room.

She eyed him, dressed in form-hugging denims and snug muscle shirt. *As sexy as ever.* "You look..." *Delectable.* "Great, as always."

"Thanks." He gave her a wink and added, "But I meant about being neighbors."

Axel coughed.

Gunnar froze.

"We hadn't exactly gotten around to that bit of news, yet," Axel muttered.

“Oh. Umm...” Gunnar stuffed his fingers into his pockets. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag, so to speak?”

Confused, she tried to fathom what they’d just said. *Neighbors?* “What’s wrong? Did something bad happen? I thought business was booming?”

“It is.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Then why?”

“We came here for you,” Gunnar said.

Her eyes widened, her mind blank with shock.

“Not that we’re stalking you or anything like that,” Axel rushed on to say. “I mean, we’re not just gonna show up on your doorstep expecting you to take us in or anything.”

Gunnar took her hand. “What he means is we missed you, and we decided that if your life is here, then so is ours. We’re going to look for an apartment first thing in the morning, get some jobs and hopefully—if you’re agreeable—visit once in a while, maybe see if we can get to know each other better?”

Her eyes watered, and she shook her head. *No.* They couldn’t do that. Why would they want to do that when they had an idyllic home back in Washington?

Axel stepped up and clasped her other hand. “We’re not here to push you into anything.” He was so cautious with his words, his touch. So adorably careful that when he risked a small smile, she succumbed to the urge of returning it. “Maybe you could show us newcomers around the big city?”

“No,” Dakota whispered, and they frowned. Both dropped her hands as she shook her head harder. A blink sent tears slithering down her cheeks. “No, you can’t—” Axel took a step back, and she grabbed for

him, desperate to keep him close. "No, we can't live here."

She knew what she had to do, what she wanted to do. *They came for me.*

"What do you mean?" Gunnar asked, his tone one of disappointment and hurt. "We come all this way, and you won't even give us a chance to see if we can—"

She fisted his shirt, yanked him toward her and planted a kiss on his mouth. Her other hand never released Axel's wrist. Not that he tried to pull away.

Neither did Gunnar try to hug her or touch her in any way but for his lips against hers, his tongue responding to her foray. When she pulled back, she glanced at Axel who stood silent and reserved.

She let go of his wrist to run her palm over his chest. Slowly, she fisted his shirt too. He didn't budge except for a slight tick in his jaw.

"I've missed you both too," she said with more tears slipping free of her lashes. "You've no idea how much. I tried so hard to get on with my life here, but it's not the same. It'll never be the same, not since—" She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "You can't move here, because I can't live in Leavenworth without you."

Axel blinked. He raised his hand, hesitant and soft, to cup her face. His thumb brushed across her damp cheek. "You mean it? You're moving?"

"Well, not right this minute, but seeing you two again made me realize why I've been so lost and alone since my return. I don't know how you two did it, or what I will tell my parents!" She gave an abrupt laugh

and shook her head. “But I’ve been miserable here lately. I used to think the big city was exciting and offered the best chance at happiness, but I was so wrong.” Dakota released their shirts and slid her hands down their arms to hold hands with each of them. “Walking away from you guys was the stupidest thing I ever did in my life, and I have no excuse other than that I was scared.” Her breath hitched. She closed her eyes and whispered, “I’m still scared.”

Axel pulled her into his arms. “God, honey, don’t fear us.”

She clung to him, welcoming his warm embrace, and heard the soft thud of his heartbeat—a quiet reassurance that he was real. They’d come for her. After she turned them down and walked away, they’d come for her. The emotions boiling inside her threatened to overwhelm her, and she trembled.

Another hand—Gunnar’s—stroked her back in a soothing manner.

“I’m not afraid *of you*.” She pulled back to look Axel in the eye then turned to see Gunnar beside them. “Never like that. I mean, I’m just...I don’t know. It all happened so fast, and what I felt—what I feel now—it’s so strong that I’m not sure what to do. There’s two of you and only one of me. How can this happen? I’ve never fallen for anyone before, and now there’s two of you, and you both mean so much, and I was stupid for walking aw—”

“Shh.” Axel cupped her face, his thumb over her lips.

“I’m rambling,” she muttered.

They smiled at her.

“You’re adorable when you ramble, but I’ve waited weeks to do this.” Axel kissed her, soft at first, then firmer, and she responded with all of the emotion she’d kept bottled up the past month.

Nothing else mattered anymore but his broad shoulders, strong arms and hot breath that bathed her neck as he trailed light, passionate kisses over her skin.

“We’ll go slow,” he murmured between kisses. “Get to know each other.” Another kiss. “Likes, dislikes. We have plenty of—”

“Axel?” Her voice was a breathless whisper.

“Hmm?” A soft brush of his lips just under her ear.

“Shut up and take me to bed.”

He chuckled and swept her into his arms. “Yes, ma’am.”

Before he headed down the hall, she reached out and snagged Gunnar’s hand, matched his grin with one of her own, and pulled him down the hall with them.

“Last door on the right,” she said as Axel carried her to her bedroom.

Her place was far from lavish. A simple queen-sized bed, two nightstands and a dresser. A hamper sat in the corner. When she saw the bed, she frowned.

“It’s kind of small for us to sleep in.”

“Who needs sleep?” Gunnar asked from beneath the shirt he was in the process of pulling off. Once free, he tossed it toward the hamper and began removing his jeans while he toed off his shoes.

Axel set Dakota on her bare feet and tilted her face toward him with a fingertip under her chin.

“He has a point,” she allowed with a cheeky smile.

“I love you,” Axel said. “You didn’t want to hear that a month ago, and I understand that, but it’s true.”

*Damn these tears.* Her heart hammered as she stared up at his sincere features, so open and vulnerable. And she knew she would never survive without them. Though she’d fought, tried to deny it, run from it, they’d opened her heart and crawled inside.

Slowly, she cradled his face in her hands and admitted, “I love you too.” Up on tiptoes, she pressed her lips to Axel’s and began to pull his shirt from his pants.

Axel deepened the kiss. His hands rested on her hips just inside her robe. Gunnar stepped up behind her and lightly slid that robe off her shoulders, pressing soft kisses at her nape.

“Guess who else loves ya, sugar,” he whispered.

She moaned into Axel’s mouth, but the kiss continued until he raised his arms to let her pull off his shirt, which joined her robe on the floor. She reached for his pants, but his hands were already there. The spaghetti strap on her right shoulder fell off, thanks to Gunnar’s efforts. She turned toward him, found him gloriously nude. Though she expected an impudent grin on his face, she saw only sincerity and passion.

She smiled. “Guess who loves you too.”

Gunnar grinned and tugged the other strap of her nightgown. A smooth caress sent it over her hips and to the floor while Gunnar leaned closer to brush her lips with his. Then he slid his arm around her waist and hoisted her up against his hard body.

Draping her arms around his shoulders, she gave herself over to the kiss. Gunnar whirled with her in his arms and fell onto the bed. Seconds later Axel crawled onto the bed to join them. Gunnar's hands mapped her body, leaving behind pleasurable tingles everywhere he touched.

They positioned her between them on her back while they propped themselves up on elbows and gazed at her, each man slowly skimming her body with hot palms, tantalizing fingers.

She closed her eyes for a second and reveled in the gentleness they showed toward her.

"Dakota," Axel said, gaining her attention.

"Hmm?"

"After tonight, there'll never be another woman for us but you."

She smiled.

"We want to claim you as our mate, the woman who will someday bear our children...when you're ready."

Her smile grew as Gunnar teased one of her nipples and Axel continued to speak.

"But we didn't exactly expect to end up in your bed tonight, and I know you aren't ready for children, yet. Neither of us brought protection."

"Oh. Well, that's okay," she said in an attempt to sound convincing. It was nice that he thought of that when she hadn't, but she didn't want to stop now either. She wasn't ready for kids just yet, but that didn't mean she wasn't ready to be theirs, now and forever.

“No, it’s not okay. Your desires and needs are most important to us. We’ll know someday when the time is right, and it’ll be a choice we three make together. Okay?”

Her smile back in place, she nodded.

“Good. Until then, do you trust us to ensure that you won’t get pregnant?”

She raised her eyebrows. “How do you plan to do that?”

He smiled. “Do you trust us?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

He bent over her to press a kiss on her lips. Gunnar slid his palm down her body, between her thighs.

“We want you right now,” Gunnar said, “want to mark you as ours, if you’ll let us.”

“Will you agree to be our mate?” Axel asked, his lips a hair’s breadth from her mouth.

“Yes.”

Gunnar slipped a finger into her pussy as Axel thrust his tongue into her mouth. “Now,” Gunnar added in a soft whisper she barely heard, “we can make love to our mate.”

Yes, they could make love, and did with sublime effectiveness. The pair indulged themselves by driving Dakota to peak after peak with their hands and mouths before either of them ever entered her. She’d never felt so adored or sated in all her life, so much so she was as relaxed and happy as a loon by the time Axel pulled her body over his.

Her heart full of joy, she nipped his chin playfully and captured his mouth with hers. He hugged her close, but Gunnar was the one who first penetrated her



pussy. His hard cock slipped in from behind to gain her attention. Axel drank in her sounds of pleasure while Gunnar slowly, almost methodically, fucked her. So deep. So deliciously good.

Axel's cock rubbed her, too, with the sweetest sensations as she slid forward and back in response to Gunnar's thrusts, but before she could reach the peak, when she was just on the verge, he pulled out, and Axel replaced him.

"Mmm, yes," she murmured as he slid deep inside her moist pussy. Her eyes closed, and she pushed up to sit more securely on his hard cock buried into her to the hilt.

Axel gripped her hips, held her still while he throbbed inside her, hot and hard. Gunnar embraced her from behind, his hands like warm cups for her breasts. And then he nudged her puckered anus, the tight hole giving way to his determination.

Her eyes flew open at the unfamiliar entrance, but Gunnar held still, barely an inch inside, letting her get used to the stretch and uncanny sensation.

"Relax, sugar," he murmured against her ear with soft kisses of reassurance. "I won't hurt you. We'll go nice and slow."

She looked at Axel, his hazel eyes darkened with passion, calm with patience. Propping her hands on his chest, she closed her eyes and relaxed into their care.

True to their word, they took it slow, eased her into the new experience of double penetration, one she soon accepted and enjoyed. By the time Gunnar fully entered her ass, she panted with pent-up arousal.

“That’s it, sugar. God, you feel so good.” His voice was breathless, his body tense with unleashed vigor. Still he took care to ensure she found pleasure.

But she could wait no longer. She needed them to move, to take her, fill her. A slight wiggle of her hips made both men groan. She collapsed over Axel and kissed him, a voracious signal of what she longed for. He bucked his hips in response, and Gunnar began to move.

“Oh! Oh, oh, yes,” she hissed when they set up a quicker rhythm that set off sparks of pleasure inside her core. Axel held her to him, ground his cock into her pussy, and kissed her like never before. Gunnar covered her, filled her. Thrust after thrust, he rode her, drove her higher and higher until she fell over into orgasmic bliss with a cry of release so profound she wasn’t sure she’d survive.

And then the sharp sting of teeth on her shoulders, one man on each side, sent a wave of incredible energy zinging through her system. Like lightning, it shocked her, electrified her, and kept her climax going. Both brothers shoved into her with simultaneous strokes, froze, and succumbed to their own climaxes, setting off a ripple of post-coital tremors that left her sated, smiling and exhausted.

“I love you, mate,” both men said in unison.

Too tired to lift her head, she replied, “Forever, my loves.”

# Chapter Ten

*Four months later...*

“Would you please, *move*,” Dakota said through gritted teeth as she shoved Gunnar’s shoulder with her own, and Axel’s hip with hers. “You two are way too big to cram in here with me.”

She dropped her eyeliner into the sink and her compact of powder fell off the puny vanity, the lid breaking off as it hit the tile floor.

She growled and spun on her heel, stalking into the living room of their miniscule apartment.

“Hey, honey,” Axel said, coming out of the bathroom, wiping shaving cream from his cheek with a damp facecloth. “It’s going to be okay, you know.”

“You guys always decide it’s time to shave when I go to put on my makeup. We don’t have to be in the same room with each other 24/7 you know. It’s not like we don’t—”

Gunnar grabbed her from behind, spun her and clamped his mouth over hers to shut her up. As usual, it worked. She shoved at his shoulder with her fist, but his talented tongue had her melting in seconds, making everything else disappear for the moments she spent in his tight embrace.

“Jerk,” she murmured when he lifted his head and smiled down at her with mischief twinkling in those gorgeous eyes.

“We know how to release your tension,” Gunnar said without remorse.

“We’ve still got a half hour before we have to meet them. Plenty of time for some stress-relieving down and dirty sex,” Axel added oh so helpfully.

Dakota laughed and rested her head against Gunnar’s shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist and using him as an anchor.

She would accept their offer, but if she did, thirty minutes would turn into an hour, and she might never make it to their fathers’ home that day. No, they had to go. They couldn’t put off the inevitable any longer.

Axel rubbed a big, gentle hand over her back and kissed her cheek. “The offer is still the same as before, honey. You don’t have to tell them anything. Pick one of us to introduce as your boyfriend, and that’s that. Nothing to worry about.”

*As if she could choose one!*

In a half hour they would meet up with her parents at the Falke home. In thirty minutes, her parents would meet her lovers. They had already met her new in-laws, although they didn’t know about that relationship...yet. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe evenly.

For three months, ever since she moved to Leavenworth, she’d kept her parents away with excuses of getting settled into her new job, not having time to entertain because of her workload. It hadn’t kept them away very long. They’d always been hands-on parents. Just because she was an adult didn’t mean that would change.

So, they'd surprised her, showed up in town with no warning, and caught her off-guard outside Catamount Outfitters when she was returning from a lunch run with Heidi. And now her time was up. It would all come to a head in a half hour.

Lifting her head, she looked back and forth between her men. How could she choose one to announce to her parents as her boyfriend? They weren't dating. They were mated. For life. She had the marks on her flesh and all the love in her heart to prove it.

"You don't have to make a decision now, sweetheart," Gunnar said softly. "Let's just go and have dinner, and see how it turns out. They're your parents, and you have to decide what to tell them, but remember, they're our family too, now."

"Yeah, no pressure there," she said, letting the sarcasm out loud and clear as she pushed away from Gunnar's safe embrace. "I don't know what I'm going to do. They already think—assume—a man is involved in this move. I've been grilled repeatedly, in very gentle and roundabout ways, of course, about the real reason I moved to the middle of nowhere when I'd spent every minute since my junior year in high school aiming for a big job in a big industry in a big city."

"And you told them?"

She rolled her eyes. "I evaded. And rather well, I think." She gave a shaky little laugh and wrapped her arms around herself. "I want to tell them everything. They're good parents, the best, and we've always been close. I want them to share in my happiness." She made a face at the two gorgeous men in front of her. "I

just don't know how to share...this." She dropped her arms and shrugged. "I have no idea how they'll take it."

Axel stepped up to her, cupped her cheek and kissed her softly. "Whatever you decide, hon, we're right there with you, okay?"

She nodded. "I know."

"Come on," Gunnar said, taking her hand and tugging her toward the door. "It's time to go."

"And," Axel said as he followed, locking the door behind them after they stepped into the hallway, "it's not as if we're staying in this apartment forever. The house will be done before first snowfall, and then you can have your very own bathroom to do all your girl stuff in."

Dakota laughed and bumped her shoulder against Axel's. "I love you guys."

"Love you too," they said in unison as they went down the steps that led into the alley behind the shop.

"But if I don't tell them the truth, how will I explain a big ol' log house in the woods the next time they come to visit? The tourism bureau and Catamount Outfitters don't pay me that much to design their advertising."

"Land is fairly cheap around here," Gunnar said with a cheeky grin as he tugged her down the alley toward one of the company Jeeps.

She snorted. "Yeah. And my dad was born yesterday."

The sun was high, the temperature warm. Dakota had been right; summer in Leavenworth was just as gorgeous as the winter. The tourists were abundant,

and the store had been bustling since the beginning of June. The Falke brothers had even turned down a couple of jobs so that all of them could attend this dinner. The ride to the dads' house didn't take nearly enough time. Her father's old F150 with the new Bigfoot camper he'd bought this spring sat in the driveway. Dakota's stomach cramped.

Axel reached over from the driver's seat and clasped her hand. "It'll be fine."

Gunnar reached from the back seat and tenderly rubbed the back of his knuckles along her jaw line. "Whatever you decide, sweetheart. We'll follow your lead. And the rest of the family will too. You're one of us now, and we all look out for our own."

"Okay. Let's get this over with." She shoved open her door and got out, heading up the walkway instead of waiting for her men as she usually did.

Everyone was gathered on the back deck. Two massive stainless steel barbeque grills smoked, and the scent of venison steak and Heidi's special marinated chicken wafted into the early evening air.

"Hey," she said, swiping her sweaty palms on her jeans.

"There's the lady of the hour," Fridrik said with a grin, getting up from his Adirondack chair. He enveloped her in a bear hug and whispered in her ear, "It'll be okay. We've been through this before."

She hugged him back and said, "Thanks."

"Quit hoggin' the girl," Burke said, pulling her away from Fridrik and hugging her.

She burst out laughing, probably from nerves, but she did like the attention the dads gave her. They

seemed to enjoy having another female around. She returned Burke's hearty hug. "Thanks, Dad," she murmured quietly before he let her go and grinned at her. It was easy to love this whole family.

Her own mother and father came up to her and gave her hugs, and then she heard Axel and Gunnar come out onto the deck. They'd been sweet to give her some distance before they came along.

"So, I guess you've already met everyone?" Dakota asked her parents.

"Except these two," her mother said, eyeing Axel and Gunnar. "What a group of good looking men."

Dakota grinned. There was no arguing that point. She turned and pointed. "Axel and Gunnar. The oldest of the boys. Axel owns the shop. Guys, these are my parents, Mary and John Tokala." They shook hands, said the typical "nice to meet you" pleasantries.

"She speaks very highly of you," her mother said to Axel. "Saved her life in the mountains, then gave her a job."

"At least she's out of that damn city," her father grumbled. He'd hated her living in Vegas all alone.

"She's safe here," Axel said, and the deep meaning behind the words helped calm Dakota a bit. She was safe with him, Gunnar and the whole Falke family.

Her mother narrowed her eyes a tiny bit and looked Axel up and down with an assessing gaze that made Dakota want to squirm. The same look her mother had always given any boyfriend she dared bring home.

"So," Dakota said, turning back to the group of men, "where's Heidi?"



“Right here,” Heidi said, stepping out onto the porch carrying a humongous serving bowl of tossed salad. “Great timing. Food’s just about ready.” She set the salad on one of the two picnic tables near the barbeques. “Boys, go get all the stuff off the counter and bring it out. I’m not your dang slave.”

The six brothers nearly tripped over their own feet, playfully shoving at each other to get through the sliding glass door as they went to fetch the rest of the food and condiments.

Dakota’s mother laughed and picked up a bottle of beer she’d obviously been drinking earlier, while her father joined Fridrik and Burke at one end of one of the picnic tables, their conversation centered around U.S. national parks conservation and hunting regulations.

Heidi opened the grills and started piling meat onto platters. Her parents thought this dinner was a celebration get-together, an anniversary for the company, but that was just an excuse. For three months she’d been living with Axel and Gunnar, attending weekly dinners at the dads’, and helping Heidi cook meals now and then for all the boys who seemed unable to feed themselves—or at least feed themselves properly, as Heidi put it. She still couldn’t get used to the amount of food these men could consume in one sitting.

Within moments, the tables were laden with salads, chips, condiments, meat and Heidi’s homemade bread. Axel sat on one side of her, Gunnar on the other, and her mother right across from them.

“When are you going to have the new proofs for the winter ad campaign done?” Reidar asked. He sat next to her mother.

“I only started last week,” Dakota said with a frown. “I just got the photos back yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Kelan said. “How’d I look?”

“Not as good as I did,” Torsten piped in around a bite of chicken.

“You wouldn’t even take your shirt off for the photographer,” Sindre said as he reached behind him and pulled another beer from the cooler.

Dakota bit her tongue and glanced at Axel. There would be a few shots of the brothers in the ad campaign, but it was Axel’s company, and so he was the face of it.

He winked at her. She, Axel and Gunnar had gone through the proofs the night before and chose the photos that would be used. Of course, all the brothers had looked great, but she was a bit biased. And the only one she was using with no shirt was Gunnar. By far he had the best set of abs.

“That’s your answer to everything, isn’t it?” Torsten said as he reached across her mother’s plate to grab a bowl of chips. “Just get naked.”

“Manners please,” Heidi said, slapping Torsten’s shoulder as she walked behind them. “Sorry,” she said to Dakota’s mother, “they really weren’t raised in a barn.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Torsten added.

Her mother laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you had your hands full with this bunch.”

“At least they know how to sit at a table, right?” Heidi said with a laugh then sat down on the other side of Sindre.

Her mother’s assessing gaze traveled back to her then Axel, then Gunnar. Mary smiled and lifted a fork of macaroni salad, her eyes twinkling a little.

Dakota wanted to tell Axel and Gunnar to act more like their brothers. They ate with forks, had napkins over their laps. What the hell? They didn’t do this on a normal basis. They usually were as unruly as the rest of them. As loud as the rest of them too, and tonight they barely said a word.

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“Thanks for the help,” Heidi said as she dried the platter Dakota had just washed.

“No problem. The guys seem to think this is a holiday or something.” She shook her head and grinned. “Besides, the way my mother keeps staring at me is starting to make my skin itch.”

Heidi laughed. “She’s pretty sharp. She knows something’s up and Axel isn’t just your employer.”

“I know.” She sighed.

“Hey, I want you to know something.” Heidi set the platter on the island and turned back to Dakota to place her hands on her shoulders.

“What? Jeez, Heidi, I’m terrified enough as it is.”

Heidi laughed and wrapped her arms around her, hugging her hard and quick. When she pulled back she said, “I want you to know that I’m really happy you’re

part of the family. I always wanted a sister, and you're about the best one I could ever imagine."

Tears sprang hot and fast to Dakota's eyes even as she smiled. "Thank you. I feel the same about you. The brothers make me kind of nuts sometimes, but I love it when you and I have girl time together."

"Need any help?"

Dakota turned toward the door to see her mother standing there, smiling.

*Crap.* How much had she heard?

"Nope," Heidi said, wiping the last platter. "We're done. But thanks." She set it on the island and turned to the fridge, pulling out three of the good, imported beers she kept hidden in the back so her brothers didn't get them. She handed one to Dakota and the other to Mary as she walked out of the kitchen, leaving mother and daughter alone.

"Still mad we didn't call first before showing up?" her mother asked.

"I wasn't mad, Mom, just surprised." Dakota used the edge of the wood slab island to pop the top on the beer, as Gunnar had shown her, and traded bottles with her mother.

"You're about as nervous as a cat in a room of rocking chairs tonight," Mary said then took a sip from the dark green bottle.

Dakota opened the second bottle the same way and took a long drink. "Dad seems to have hit it off with Fridrik and Burke pretty well," she said, trying to change the subject.

Her mother nodded and leaned her hip against the island, resting her hand against the old, scarred wood.

“Deer hunting and land management. I’ll be lucky if we’re not up all night the way those three are jabbering.”

Dakota snickered then took another drink. Her mother’s gaze landed on her hand holding the bottle. Her left hand.

“You were never one much for jewelry,” Mary said in a tone so nonchalant it couldn’t have been more fake.

Dakota set her bottle of beer on the island and gazed at the ring on her finger. A braided band of two gold strands and one bronze. The symbol of her light-colored mates wrapped securely around her darker coloring.

“I’m just having a difficult time figuring out which one of them gave it to you.”

Dakota stared at the ring so hard her eyes blurred.

“And another thing. Turn around and raise your shirt a little.”

Dakota’s heart thudded. She looked up at her mom, turned and slowly lifted the bottom hem of the tank top to reveal the tattoo she’d gotten a month before when she’d accompanied Axel on a trip to Seattle. While he attended a trade show, she’d done the one thing she never thought she would. She’d surprised her guys and gotten a tattoo. One with the Falke family crest on it. Axel and Gunnar told her it was the most incredible thing anyone had ever done for them, as much a symbol of her love for them as the two faint bite marks she carried on her flesh.

Her mother nodded. “I thought I caught a glimpse of something there when you hugged Burke earlier,

and again a moment ago when I came into the kitchen. It's the same design they all wear on those collars, right?" She frowned. "Which is something else I find a bit odd."

Dakota smoothed her shirt down. "It's just..." She shrugged.

"Pretty permanent," Mary said, motioning toward her.

"Yes, it is. Very."

"I have it narrowed down to two of the six. It's either your new boss or the one with the wicked twinkle in his eye every time he looks at you."

Dakota bit her bottom lip but couldn't stop the grin. "Oh, Mom..." She met her mother's gentle brown gaze. "I've wanted to tell you. I just didn't know how."

"It's the playful one, isn't it? Gunnar? He seems your type."

Dakota shook her head, and her throat was so tight, her answer came out as little more than a hoarse croak. "It's both."

Her mother stared at her, her brow slightly furrowed. She raised her beer and took a longer drink this time, watching Dakota over the top of it. When she finally set the bottle down, she nodded slowly, spread her hands over the wooden countertop and let out a long, slow breath. It was the kind of reaction she used to have when Dakota was a teenager and dropped some bombshell, like when she'd come home at seventeen and asked her mom what she thought about her going on birth control.

The question was, would Mom stay calm or explode like she had when Dakota told her she wanted

to be an ad executive instead of going to college to become a doctor or nurse or lawyer.

“What, exactly, do you mean by *both*?”

Her mom’s voice was way too calm. “I love them both.”

“Do they know this?”

Dakota nodded.

“And the ring?” she pointed to Dakota’s finger.

Dakota leaned over the island and fingered the strands. “Them. Me.”

“What— Wait a second.” She turned away, then back, a look of total confusion on her face. “Which one of those older gentlemen is their father?”

She’d wondered how long until one of her parents picked up on the fact they were both called “Dad” by the seven adult children. Dakota shrugged. “Both.”

Her mother’s lips twitched slightly then broke into a grin, and she laughed. She laughed so hard tears came to her eyes, and she swiped at them with the back of her hand. “Oh, wow,” she said when she calmed, but her smile stayed in place. “So it’s a family thing, huh?”

*More than you could possibly know.* Dakota nodded. “Kind of.”

Mary shook her head, showing her disbelief. “Polygamy is illegal, you know.”

“That’s why there won’t be any official marriage. Nothing filed with the state.” She placed her hand over her heart. “But it’s in here, and it’s forever.”

Her mother’s expression softened. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I love them, Mom, and they love me.”

“I can’t say I expected *this*, or that it’s something I actually *wanted* for my only child, but...” Her mother stepped around the island to embrace Dakota. “You finally have that big family you always wanted.”

Dakota laughed and hugged her mom. “I’m *so* happy I didn’t have to grow up with all these brothers. Heidi has told me horror stories.”

Her mom laughed and pulled back, still holding Dakota by the shoulders. “Okay, sweetie. If you’re this sure, then you have my blessing. I’m not saying I won’t worry a little. I will, so you’ll just have to accept that. And I think I’ll wait until we’re back in Boulder before I tell your father, okay?”

A giddy giggle slipped out of Dakota as relief flowed through her. “Please!”

“Everything okay in here?” Axel asked as he and Gunnar came through the door.

Dakota grinned. Mary let go of her and walked up to the men. They stood a good foot taller than her petite mother, but it was obvious who held the power right then. Her big, strapping lovers looked as scared as she’d felt all day.

“My daughter tells me I have two sons-in-law instead of one.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they answered in unison.

Dakota tried not to giggle at their worried expressions. She couldn’t see her mother’s face, but she had no doubt it was the same look she’d given Dakota just minutes before.

“You two going to take care of her? Treat her right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said again.



“And you both love her?”

Axel said, “With all our hearts, ma’am.” Gunnar nodded and placed his hand over his heart.

“Then I suppose you should call me Mom instead of ma’am. And knowing my daughter, it’ll probably take both of you to keep her in line.”

“Mom!” Dakota said in mock outrage, but she doubted her mother noticed, since her big, brawny lovers were taking turns hugging Mary and laughing. Her mom would convince her dad everything was good, and maybe she could get them to come visit for Christmas to see her new home.

Warmth filled her to brimming as she watched her men tease her mom about how unruly her daughter was, regaling half made-up stories about her, talking over one another.

She walked up to the trio and was immediately brought into the group when Axel put his arm around her and tucked her against his side. She’d never been happier in her life.

Thank God they hadn’t accepted no for an answer when she’d first walked away.

## About the Authors

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle, and romance can be erotic—even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (aka “my darling hubby”), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh write erotic romance both as a team and individually. They’ve consistently been on bestseller’s lists with their coauthored books and have won numerous awards together, including the 2009 EPPIE Award for Erotic Romance and the 2007, 2008 and 2010 Lories Best Published in Erotic Romance Awards.

The pair first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar...

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