



To tame a wild thing, first you must gain her trust...

Mia's retreat on Cougar Mountain was supposed to be a quiet time of communing with nature. Instead, she can't shake the sense she's being watched. The reason why appears before her, chilling her to the bone. His name is Stark. And he says he's been waiting for her.

She takes to her heels, but it does no good. Captured and bound, she is surprised to feel no fear. Instead, she is mesmerized as her soul drinks deeply of his dark, commanding sexuality.

Stark once fought the Cougar Spirits, but now he embraces their mission to protect the forest and its creatures. Mia is his destined mate, perfectly made to fight by his side. But first he must tame her, starting with a slow and relentless seduction of her body—while he reveals each painful bit of his past.

Mia finds herself sinking into his touches, seeing the world as he sees it. But as shots ring out in the forest, she sees something else. A vision that Stark may never understand...and could not only destroy the bare beginnings of their destined love, but their mission to save the wilderness.

This book has been previously published and has been revised from its original release.

Warning: Sharp teeth and powerful male muscles, a watching, waiting cougar, enough heat to catch the woods on fire.

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Predator
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Predator

Vonna Harper

Dedication

To the wonderful Forest Rangers who love the forest around Diamond Lake as much as my family and I do. Without their dedication, the wildlife making their homes there would be in jeopardy. As would our cabin.

Chapter One

Someone was watching her.

Thoroughly scanning her surroundings, Mia debated amending her gut reaction. She was alone in the middle of the forest. If she was being watched, it had to be by an animal or bird.

Just the same, she'd heard distant rifle shots this morning. At the time, she'd been more pissed than alarmed because it wasn't hunting season. If some idiot was poaching—damn it, that joker better not be scoping her out. *Go back to where you belong. This mountain's mine as long as I'm on it.*

Experience had taught her how to be as silent as an animal, and she'd done so during her hike up Cougar Mountain. Quiet, so she could get in touch with the living creatures that shared this remote wild land with her and not run them off. She'd been rewarded when a yearling buck stepped from behind a pine tree and stared at her. She'd stared back, smiling. The two of them, human and nature's creature, had studied each other for several minutes before the buck melted back into his surroundings.

Unfortunately, this time she felt no sense of peace and warmth. Instead, reality reared its ugly head. Whatever studied her now wasn't a buck. Neither was it any of the other creatures that lived and died in the wilderness; she was now sure of that.

Unease crawled up her spine. Her body felt alive, not alarmed, but far from relaxed. Someone new to the forest might panic, but she felt more at home here than she ever felt in so-called civilization. Controlling her breathing and thoughts, she sent energy and strength to her legs. She had nothing to fear from an unseen hiker, camper, forest ranger, naturalist, or mushroom hunter.

And, yet... No, damn it, Jack the Ripper wasn't hanging around!

She'd been away from the country that nourished and renewed her for too long; that's why she was nervous and unsettled today. Two brief weeks of living out of suitcases in an upscale Washington, D.C., hotel had turned her urban, and what had always been familiar had become less so.

That's why she'd decided to explore Cougar Mountain in northwestern California before returning to work as a Forest Service biologist, so she could get back in touch with her roots. She needed to trust her instincts again. Only, this afternoon her instinct was more than nagging—it was shouting.

She wasn't alone.

"I know you're out there." The tops of the trees swallowed her voice. "If you're playing a game, I don't find it funny. I have a gun and a knife and know how to use both."

Silence. Even the wind stopped teasing the pine branches.

A finger of alarm pressed against the top of her spine. “Look, I have as much right to be here as you do. I’ll go west, or east if you want west. Hell, I don’t have a problem with north or south. What I have a problem with is playing games.”

She couldn’t think of anything else to say after that. Much as she loved the evergreens, the thick vegetation provided too many places for someone to hide.

Okay, so her fellow traveler wasn’t interested in talking, she told herself in an attempt to calm herself. She had no problem with playing that game. Tossing back her long, single braid, she set her sights on the top of the rise she’d been climbing. The slope was steep enough that she had to lean forward to keep her balance, which caused her butt to stick out. Fine. Let the stranger have a gander at a firm, rounded mound. It wasn’t as if he’d ever get to touch it.

A soft and low sound, maybe deep breathing, silenced her own breath. A chilled wave coursed through her, stopping her forward progress, and a blip of something she hadn’t allowed herself to think about broke through. She’d been attracted to Cougar Mountain because of the legend surrounding it, a legend she’d fully expected to debunk.

But if there was something to the reason for the mountain’s name—

A man stood with his arms folded across a too-big chest, legs spread wide, muscled thighs and calves challenging his jeans to contain them, his dark eyes glinting with something she couldn’t or wouldn’t put a name to.

He was beautiful. Wild. Thick black hair so long it swept his shoulders. Days overdue for a shave. Broad shoulders and back; proud and, yes, arrogant. He held his mouth in an unyielding line, lips thinned in concentration, or anger, or something else beyond her comprehension. His facial bones were well displayed despite the stubble, jaw strong and cheekbones high. Those incredible and unnerving eyes were set deep in their sockets as if protecting them from deep scrutiny.

Although she wasn’t done studying the man’s unfathomable expression, Mia knew better than to let it distract her from his strength and size. Tall, maybe six feet two. Like his face, the rest of him carried no padding. He was all lean energy and health, his chest sheltered beneath a flannel shirt no bullet could stop.

A bullet?

No, she couldn’t—wouldn’t—shoot him.

Unless her life depended on it.

Shaking off the horrid image of aiming her pistol at that athletic form, she accepted that the only thing disturbing the lean line of his belly was a certain undeniable mound. A large, proud bulge that loosened her clenched jaw and softened her in ways she prayed he couldn’t guess.

Man. All man. Silent and watchful.

“One—one of us needs to say something,” she came up with, angry because her voice shook a little. “I’ve already shot off my mouth, so what say we make it your turn?”

Going by his lack of a reaction, she nearly believed he hadn't heard her. But unless he was deaf, that wasn't possible. Her career brought her in contact with men who made their living on their feet and working with their hands, so she was accustomed to well-toned males. To say she'd become immune to vibrant bodies would be a lie. She was a healthy young woman who loved nothing more than wrapping her body around and over a member of the opposite sex and feeling them become one.

But this man, this woodland stud, was putting the competition to shame. Yes, mystery and the possibility of danger added undeniable elements, but it was more than that. The appeal went deeper than a near-perfect physique.

"Okay, so you aren't interested in talking. I understand. I do. I came here because I needed some downtime." About to wipe her suddenly damp hands on her hips, she clenched them instead. "I want to put some more miles behind me while it's light, so I'll just be moving on."

Maybe thirty feet separated them. A former high school and college track star, she was still fast on her feet. If he so much as made a menacing move in her direction, she'd leave him in her dust.

Not that she wanted to.

Shit, what was this? Some fantasy that she and Mr. Mysterious-and-Sexy's eyes had once met across a crowded room? Not only wasn't she a woman for romantic fantasies, this wasn't a room, and it wasn't crowded. Most telling, he was more intimidating than intriguing.

Not that it mattered, because she'd never see him again.

Swallowing disappointment, she made a quarter turn and took her first step toward what appeared to be a decent deer trail. She thought about asking what had brought him to the area and if he'd heard the rumors about cougar spirits and spells, but he probably wouldn't respond to that, either. One step became two and then three. She told herself to relax, that the awkward encounter was nearly behind her.

"I've been waiting for you."

His voice was a rumble, a deep and low growl. Unsettling as the tone was, his words made her shiver. And stop. "What?"

"You came."

Run. Get the hell out of here. But, damn it, she'd never backed down from anything. After taking a halfway calming breath, she faced him. Moments ago he'd been standing in the sun as if inviting her scrutiny, but now he stepped into the shadows. Either that or the shadows had reached out to envelop him.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She paced every word, keeping them strong. But underneath, something was happening to her, a little more softening in her sex and a hell of a lot of awareness of herself as a woman. Not just a one hundred-twenty-pound woman being confronted by a man who might outweigh her by a hundred pounds, but female in its most basic form.

"You might not understand now, but you will," he said.

His tone was just as deep and rumbling as the first time, and yet it had become what, silky? Seductive? She'd come in contact with a few unbalanced people in her life. Here was the most masculine male she'd ever encountered—and it looked like he had a few loose screws. Not fair!

“I don't know what to say.” Her words came out a whisper.

“You don't have to say anything. I'm leading your journey.”

“I, ah, appreciate the offer.” She took a backward step. “But I have my own journey, and I'm going to get back to taking it. Now.”

“No.”

Chapter Two

He approached, and yet he didn't. There was no other way of explaining what she was seeing. Yes, his legs moved, but not with a simple and practiced bending of the knees and flexing of muscles. Instead, he glided, slid, floated toward her. Maybe her reaction was connected to the mountain's name, but it seemed that his progress mirrored that of a big cat—effortless, powerful and supremely confident.

Something shifted inside her, a sloughing off of restraint and caution. Instead of being ruled by the instinct for survival, an equally primal response pushed its way to the surface. For the first time in her life, she wanted, simply wanted, a man. Wanted to grab and hold on, to crush her mouth against his, to pull his scent into her and run her lips over his belly. To scream as he mounted her.

Her cheeks and throat heated. Her senses sharpened and narrowed at the same time until little existed except the human life-form closing the distance between them. He became more than three-dimensional, an exquisite Greek god. She mentally stripped off his clothing. He smelled of the earth and sun and more: skin and clean hair. Lips buzzing and thighs trembling, she fought the instinct to wrap her arms and legs around him and invite his body into hers.

Not an animal! Damn it, not some bitch in heat!

Closer, his heat beginning to seep into her and now within easy reach. Bombarded by opposing emotions, she swung between surrendering to his male strength and running as she'd never run. "Stop. Not another step."

"Too late." Despite his words, he ceased his graceful-as-hell gliding and settled his arms at his sides. "It became too late the moment you decided to come here."

Oh, shit. "Who are you?"

Instead of answering, his remarkable eyes began a slow journey down her body. Unnerved by the intense scrutiny, she nevertheless took note of his eye color. From a distance, the black had predominated, but now she saw yellow flecks dancing in the darkness. She'd never seen eyes like that, certainly not on a human. For an instant, she thought she'd come up with the creature they reminded her of, but that slid away when his gaze settled on her crotch.

Her crotch, the center of her sexuality, was short-circuiting. She couldn't simply say she was turned on, because the sensations were more intense and nearly uncontrollable. Fighting not to squeeze her legs together, she wondered if he could sense her arousal.

Of course he did! That's why he was staring at that part of her anatomy. "Look, I don't appreciate this damn game you're playing. The rest of my group's close by. All I have to do is pick up my cell phone, and they'll be here."

"You're alone. Like me."

Oh, shit. "Fine. Whatever. But just because we are doesn't mean I'm yours for the—whatever you're thinking. I know how to defend myself."

She knew this land; at least, she comprehended the pulse of the wilderness. But she wasn't fool enough to trust everyone who shared it with her. If not for the primitive heat between them, she'd have already put distance between her and the stranger. Wouldn't she?

A nod of his head distracted her. He was so damn sexy, all male energy and promise, dangerous as hell. "Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Of course you aren't. I won't let you."

"You're brave. That's good."

Throat dry, she wrenched her awareness off her pussy and glanced behind her to make sure she had a path to freedom. "You're not making any kind of sense, and I've had enough of whatever the hell this is."

"It's destiny, what the spirits have ordained."

Cougar Spirits? Enough! God damn enough! Not so much as blinking, she slid her right hand into her rear pocket and extracted her knife. It opened with a soft click, the blade aimed at his throat. "I don't know or care what damn spirits you're talking about. This conversation has gone on more than long enough. You go your way, and I'll go mine."

"I can't let that happen."

The words hit her like drumbeats. There was more than a little wildness to him, as if he was driven by instinct instead of his mind. What if he had no control over his actions, was dangerous?

She took a backward step, and then another. Her gaze remained fixed on him. He didn't move, didn't breathe. And he didn't seem surprised by her actions. A few more steps brought her close to a thicket. To the right of it grew a number of widely spaced evergreens. As long as she watched her footing, she could easily navigate her way around the trees.

Could run.

Sucking in the oxygen she'd need for the task, she spun on her heels and leaped into the shadows. Her backpack dragged on her shoulders and back, and she unhooked the straps that fastened it to her chest and waist. If need be, she'd discard the pack and run full-out.

A sound, a growl, something coming from deep inside a man or animal's chest, sounded behind her. Her nerve endings told her he was coming after her. Not taking time for the scream that ached to erupt, she shrugged out of her pack and flung it aside. Her pistol was in it, but at least she had her knife.

Could she use it on Mountain Man?

Before she could reach top speed, he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground. She dangled for precious seconds before digging her nails into his forearms. “Stop it!” she screamed. “Damn you, don’t!”

Not letting go, he lowered her to the ground and forced her onto her knees. When he hit the ground beside her, she renewed her efforts to tear out of his hold. Although she drew blood, his grip remained strong, making it hard to breathe.

He was trying to force her onto her belly! Terrified and furious, she wrenched to the side. Too late she realized she’d released her hold on his forearms.

“God damn you!”

He seemed to be everywhere, blanketing her, pushing her down. Her breath whistled, and her muscles screamed as she struggled, but she was no match for him. The ground pressed against her breasts.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded, although she already knew. He didn’t answer.

Bending her knees, she tried to kick him, but he straddled her, his weight imprisoning her thighs. At the same time, he pushed down on her shoulder blades, making it impossible for her to do more than lift her head. Her left arm was caught under her, the right at her side. She managed to slide her right arm upward, but found nothing to grip.

“Let me go!”

“I can’t.”

Lying under him like some trapped wild animal was unacceptable, so she twisted and squirmed. Panic clawed, and sweat coated her skin. So heavy, so damn solid! It would take little for him to crush the life out of her. She was still struggling, albeit with lessened strength, when he stopped pressing on her back. She managed to turn her head a little more, then wished she hadn’t, because he was removing his own backpack and reaching into it.

“This is insane. I’ll charge you with—you know I will.”

When he held up a length of rope, she screamed. And screamed again, her voice spiraling into the trees.

No! Not rope being tied around her *free* wrist! But although she fought the restraint with everything in her, he easily tied it in place. Then, using the loose end to hold her arm up behind her, he pulled her trapped arm out from under her. She fought the inevitable, fought and swore and screamed again, but he easily lashed her wrists together.

Not content with rendering her arms useless, he slid off her and grabbed the ankle next to him. Despite her resistance, he bent her knee up so her heel rested on her buttocks and hog-tied her ankle to her wrists. It mattered little that he’d left enough slack that she wasn’t in danger of losing circulation. What could she do with only one free leg?

Still on his knees, he scooted away. Rolling onto her side as best she could, she locked her gaze on him. Much as she needed to scream, she feared that would enrage him. He stared back at her, his expression unreadable. Her heart beat like thunder, and yet an emotion she refused to acknowledge calmed and quieted what could have become panic. Every inch of her was alert and alive and focused on her beautiful captor.

“What do you want?” she asked when his silence became more than she could stand. “Damn it, what is this about?”

“It’s about following our destiny.” He swiped his hand across his eyes, then shook his head as if trying to wake up.

“There’s no destiny involved. Nothing except you doing something...” She’d nearly said “something stupid”, but that might set him off. Being tied like this did strange things to her. It wasn’t all that uncomfortable, although her arms and leg would eventually start to ache. Still, having the use of one leg was...not comforting, exactly, but as if she’d been left with a small yet useless piece of freedom.

Helplessness meant she could no longer function on her own. She’d been stripped of self-determination and direction. Instead of making all her own decisions, a stranger had taken over that role and responsibility. In many ways, her body now belonged to him.

The thought rooted deep inside, but instead of panicking, she turned reality around and around in her mind. Of course she didn’t trust him, couldn’t imagine ever trusting a stranger who’d do something like this to her, but he’d narrowed her world down until nothing except her physical body mattered.

And that body was displayed for him.

He stood with a gracefulness that should have unnerved her. Instead, her awe of him grew. And when he retrieved her backpack and started going through it, she accepted what all the arguments in the world wouldn’t change.

He could do whatever he wanted to her.

To have that kind of power over a human life, to know that other human would die if he abandoned—No, he wouldn’t leave her like this. If she knew nothing else, she had no doubt of that.

What have you done to me? Why this acceptance? If you’ve placed a spell over me, hypnotized me...

Movement, maybe, on the hill behind him distracted her. From her position on the ground, she didn’t have a decent view of what had snagged her attention. All she knew was that whatever she’d spotted hadn’t been there earlier. If he had an accomplice—no, she had the feeling this man operated alone.

Then what?

Indicating her bedroll, he grunted approvingly, causing her to dismiss whatever was up there. His reaction to her spartan cooking equipment and prepackaged meals was the same, and when he pulled out her lightweight, all-weather jacket, he nodded. His continued silence was no longer getting on her nerves as much as it made her wonder what he was thinking. It went without saying that he was concentrating on her, maybe making his plans, maybe asking himself how things had gotten to this point.

This point being she was lying on the ground and feeling supremely alive, waiting. *You're messing with my mind somehow; that has to be it.*

What do you want of me? she ached to demand, but he'd already taught her a lesson—patience. He'd speak when he was ready, and nothing she said or begged would change that. Besides, she was far from a position of power.

Bottom line, she was trapped on her side, her free leg under her, spine arched so her breasts were on display, her crotch easy for him to reach. He could rip off her shirt, unfasten her sports bra, manhandle her breasts, grab—

No, damn it! She wasn't getting wet. She wasn't! Only an idiot would react to being captured by becoming turned on. Those crazy, adolescent fantasies about being spirited away by pirates or Tarzan types had been nothing more than the result of her newborn sexuality.

Mind control. Trapping my thoughts as thoroughly as he trapped my body.

When he dropped to his knees beside her again, she expected him to start pawing her. When he only stared, she remained tense, waiting, wanting and anticipating something she couldn't name.

"It doesn't have to be like this," she told him. "You're a handsome, healthy young man. Women—women have to be falling over themselves wanting attention from you."

From his lack of expression, she wondered if he'd understood her words. There was something about him—a loneliness, a distancing, almost as if he'd lost touch with himself. "Do you want to talk? Maybe if I understood, I could help."

"It's too late."

Fresh movement on the hill distracted her from his somber tone. It was as if—impossible, of course, but it was as if whoever or whatever was up there was judging him.

"No, it isn't," she insisted. She didn't dare concentrate on anything except her captor. "Let me go, and we can both forget what took place. I don't hold grudges. I'll chalk it up to one of life's unexpected adventures, this crazy thing that... I won't go to the police if you release me now."

"You'll leave. I need you here."

She could lie and say whatever he wanted to hear, but surely he'd see through words meant to gain her freedom and nothing else. Besides, for some strange reason, she wanted to be honest with him. "I came here to explore the mountain, gave myself four days to do so. Then I have to get back to work."

"That's what I thought when I arrived," he muttered and again shook his head. "But then the mountain reached me."

The mountain? "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know. It's my job to teach you."

"Teach me what? Never mind. I'm not—" Her words trailed off. If she'd angered him—

"You're beautiful. Healthy."

Her throat seized, making it nearly impossible to swallow. Tears stung her eyes. When he reached for her, she briefly believed he felt sorry for her. But then his fingers trailed over her neck.

This wasn't the first time he'd touched her, but earlier, he'd manhandled her. This was something entirely different. Lowering her head to the ground, she tried to focus on him, but all she could see were his knees. He continued running his fingers along her veins. She felt smaller than she had a few moments before, softer, more womanly. *A spell? Was it that simple?*

"Wh-who are you?" she stuttered. "Please, at least tell me that."

"Stark."

Stark. Strong. Masterful. She hoped he'd ask her name and with the sharing they'd become more than strangers, but he didn't seem to care. Maybe nothing mattered to him except that she was female to his male.

The pressure against her neck increased. "I can feel your pulse," he told her. "Your heart's racing."

"Of course it is. You can't possibly expect me to—"

"I fought at first," he interrupted, his forefinger now running behind her ear. "When Cougar Spirit came to me, I denied his wisdom, but in the end, I embraced what he wanted of me. Now, it's your turn."

"Cougar Spirit?"

"He taught me how and why to listen. It's my turn to do the same to you."

Madman, he was a madman! *But was he?* She pondered this as his fingers slipped into her hair, and he lightly massaged her temple. At first, she remained tense, but bit by bit, her muscles relaxed. Her eyes didn't want to remain open. The strain in her arms seemed to decrease, and why would she want to straighten her imprisoned leg when lying here, breathing in the forest's scents while her captor taught her to accept his touch, was so incredibly hypnotic.

More than hypnotic. She was becoming even more aroused.

"Your skin's so soft," he muttered. "And under that, you're strong. Cougar Spirit approves."

"Cougar Spirit? Approves? What—"

"No more. Your time for questions will come, but first you need to turn yourself over to me. For that to happen, you must go deep inside yourself and listen to your own silence."

He had to know he wasn't making sense, didn't he? Opening her eyes, she lifted her head. With his hand still in her hair, he reached for her backpack and withdrew the sleeveless T-shirt she slept in. Even before he started twisting it, she understood what he had in mind, so when he rolled her onto her back and pressed it against her lips, she clenched her teeth, fighting in the only way she could.

"There," he said when the makeshift gag filled her mouth. Lifting her head even higher, he tied off the shirt in back. "Now you'll listen to your body."

Then he knelt beside her again with his hands resting on his potent thighs and his gaze working slowly over her helpless body. Something hot and heavy licked from between her breasts to her crotch.

When the heat settled in her pussy, for the first time in her life, she saw herself as nothing except a sexual entity. *This isn't happening*, she tried to tell herself. But it was.

"I've been waiting for this." His fingers clenched, making her wonder if he was forcing himself not to touch her. "Ever since I accepted my destiny."

What destiny, she tried to ask with her eyes. But even if he replied, would it make any sense?

Revealing no emotion, he leaned over until his face was so close to hers that he began to blur. "You're destined to be my mate, my partner, my equal in the battle that's been thrust on us, but first I must claim you."

Even as he spoke, Stark struggled to accept that he was actually saying the words he'd waited so long to speak. All those lonely days and nights and he'd finally found *her*, captured her.

She was afraid, of course, but he read more than that single emotion in her. Hopefully, the time would come when he could explain why and show her how to put her conflict behind her. But just as his new reality had slowly revealed itself, she had to go through the same process. Otherwise, the change wouldn't be complete. Otherwise she'd continue to fight instead of accept.

Accept. Embrace. That's what the rest of today and however long it took was about, wasn't it? Because if he failed to bring her into his world, he'd continue to live in it alone. The aching solitude—

No! He wouldn't go there!

Instead, he'd touch and teach until she turned her back on everything she'd been and believed in before coming to Cougar Mountain.

Unless he failed.

A low growl rolled out of him. He had to succeed, he had to!

Fighting the animal in him, he again dug into her backpack looking for signs of the life he'd taken her from. Pulling out her cell phone, he flipped it open. *Mia's messages*, the opening screen read. So, her name was Mia.

Chapter Three

“Your body is ripe,” he said. “I look forward to turning it into what I need.”

Desperate to discover what he meant by *need*, she tried to speak, but even though the gag muffled her efforts, he pressed his fingers over her mouth. “Don’t,” he warned. “Certain things simply must be. That’s what we both need to comprehend. We are part of something larger than us. Something powerful and good.”

Good? She knew her eyes were widening and her muscles had tensed, but he ignored those things. After several seconds, he took his hand off the gag and rolled her onto her stomach. Being unable to see him brought her dangerously close to panic, but before the battle could consume her, he untied her leg and stretched it out beside the free one. That done, he turned her onto her back again. Not having her leg trapped under her felt wonderful! Next to that, her weight resting on her hands was nothing. Thank goodness for loose soil and layers of decayed pine needles.

“I’ve been alone a long time,” he told her in a tone that mirrored the wind. “The days and nights have bled together, until I can’t remember how many there have been.”

His expression became vulnerable, making her think of a lost child. Whatever had taken hold of him was overwhelming him, not that she could or should want to do anything about it. But it was just the two of them in the middle of nowhere, and he’d become her world. Against all reason, she found herself fighting tears.

“Don’t,” he said and swiped at a tear. “You’re fulfilling your destiny.”

If he said that one more time, she’d scream—at least she would if she was capable of screaming. Blinking back her tears, she concentrated on preparing herself for his every touch and movement, his every mood. Something was changing about his expression, a look in his eyes she’d never seen on a human being. He continued to study her with an awful intensity, and yet it was more than that. Animal-like? Was that what she was seeing, a sloughing off of human qualities while primal instinct came to the surface?

Knowing the change went deeper than his expression, she tried to sink into the ground. At the same time, the primitive promise emanating from him intrigued her. How many times while hiking had she imagined walking into the wilderness and never turning around? Leaving civilization in all its complexity behind. Had she been taken to that point of no return?

His eyes now bright with an inner light, he ran a finger across her forehead and over her jawbone. She shuddered, then relaxed. Again and again, he traced the contours of her face until she half believed it now

belonged to him. Her body hummed and waited, both living in the moment and eager for the touch to become more intimate, more of an invasion.

She'd worn a front-button flannel shirt so she could roll up the sleeves and undo the top buttons as the day grew warmer. She'd already exposed her elbows and freed two buttons and had been debating letting more air reach her chest when she'd met *him*. Now she didn't know whether to be glad or disappointed that she was modestly dressed—not that she had any control over whatever he decided to do.

At the moment, he was staring at the nearby hill, making her wonder if he'd seen whatever it was she thought she had. But after briefly studying whatever had caught his attention, he nodded and turned back to her. Once again, she was struck by the totality of his interest in her; it was as if nothing else existed.

Reaching out, he took hold of her shirt, freeing one, two and finally all the buttons. Releasing the bottom ones meant he'd had to pull her shirttail out of her jeans. Instead of exposing her bra, though, he shifted position slightly and lightly rested his hands on her shoulders. The heels of his hands pressed against her collarbone.

Say something. Tell me what you're thinking. Anything!

Instead of responding to her silent plea, he leaned over, his mouth closing in on her neck. Pulse quickening, she lifted her head in a futile attempt to stop him—maybe. He waited her out until she could no longer hold her head up and then ran his lips over the side of her neck.

Alarmed, she struggled to slide out from under him, but he had no trouble holding her in place. “Don’t fight!”

“Hmm. Hmm!” she muffled behind her gag.

“This isn’t about pain. And it isn’t about rape.”

No rape? You promise?

The second time he touched her it was with his teeth, a light raking over her flesh that had her whimpering. And when he nibbled and licked, her whimper became a primitive cry. Something knotted in her belly to distract her from the sensual touch. She wasn't terrified of him. She should be, but she wasn't. He'd taken both of them far from convention and everything she'd taken for granted all her life, and she couldn't do anything about it—except experience.

Closing his hand around her jaw, he turned her head one direction and then the other, making her wonder what he was looking for and what he was thinking. She could kick, or at least try to kick him, but not only wasn't she sure her boots would incapacitate him, she didn't want to fight.

She needed to experience.

“You smell of the forest,” he said with his face inches from hers. “That’s how I know you’re the one I’ve been waiting and looking for, because our scents are the same.”

He was right! Even with everything she had to deal with, she plainly caught the aroma of warm pine needles and rich earth clinging to him.

“I want you.” His gaze darkened. “You deserve to know how much I do, but I’m not going to take you against your will.”

What do you call what you’ve already done?

“That’s not how it needs to be between us. We must mate as equals.”

Not be forced or have sex, or make love, or even fuck, but *mate*? She had no doubt that his word choice had been deliberate. Desperate for further clarification, she stared unblinking at him, but if he read the silent plea for an explanation, he gave no indication. Releasing her jaw, he ran his fingers down her throat and from there to her collarbone. Next, he slid his hand under her shirt and began exploring what he couldn’t see.

Her breath kept catching, and she had to remind herself that this was truly happening and not part of some erotic dream. If she was in control of things, she’d program her fantasy man to treat her body like something rare and precious, something to be cherished and explored—mostly explored.

Not controlled or manipulated, as was happening.

A shiver running from the base of her throat and over both breasts brought her back to the moment. Watching her, he pushed her shirt off her shoulders. Having her hands behind her had arched her upper body so her breasts were thrust toward him. When he dipped his head toward her again and ran his tongue over the swell of her breasts not covered by her bra, she moaned and hissed into her gag. Sweat bloomed on her throat and under her arms. Her breathing quickened, becoming a near pant.

He continued licking, occasionally running his teeth over her flesh, sometimes pressing his mouth against her until, despite her attempt to remain still, she started rocking from side to side. If he asked, she couldn’t say what she was trying to accomplish, maybe nothing more than seeking an outlet for the energy building inside.

That’s what it was, she decided when, finally, he granted her a break from his sensual assault. He was filling her with anticipation, turning her on, but promising nothing in the way of relief.

“Like silk.” His mouth was so close to her breasts that his breath puffed over her flesh. “Your skin is like silk.”

Her breathing snagged, then stopped. She waited, existing nowhere else, for his next move, his next words.

“I knew I’d have to capture you. Otherwise, you’d run. I could imprint you with Cougar’s wisdom. I thought—during those days and nights when I waited for you to arrive—I kept thinking about what I’d have to do to accomplish my goal. I dreamed of having you under my control and being able to touch you however I wanted. Those dreams drove me crazy.”

Leaning back, he settled his hands on his knees again. He was watching her, and yet he wasn’t, his attention maybe someplace deep inside himself. She shouldn’t care what this man who’d taken control of her was trying to tap into, shouldn’t want anything from him except her freedom. And yet...

With a quick shake of his head, he brought himself back to the here and now. Alerted by his now clear gaze, she readied herself for whatever he intended to do next, but he was in no hurry to touch her or break down any more of her barriers and defenses. Instead, he took in her entire body, not with a lustful leer that would make her skin crawl, or the possessive look she'd seen on cats just before they pounced on whatever hapless creature they'd been stalking. He was simply taking his measure of her, maybe recording her form so he'd never forget it, maybe doing what he needed to assure himself that she indeed was under his control.

Under his control. What a frightening, heady, and exciting thought!

Damn it! What was she, some cow being led to slaughter?

The thought spluttered and died when he pushed her shirt away from her ribs and waist. Once more everything tunneled down until there was only the two of them and what he intended to do to her. His eyes danced with what might simply be sexual excitement and yet seemed to be more, as if he was nearing the finish line after a long race.

She knew he was going to touch her before he did, sank into something deep and dark and warm, an existence she'd never experienced or known was possible. She was no longer a separate person with rights and responsibilities, because he'd taken those things from her.

He was in charge, taking over. His hot, magical fingers danced over her flesh, both touching where he'd touched before and exploring new territory. Instead of watching what he was doing, he kept his gaze locked on hers.

Caught in his web, she couldn't think how she might break free of his intensity. For long seconds, the dark message in those incredible eyes distanced her from her body's response to a thumb running over her ribs, nails tracking light lines along her belly.

Then, maybe because he knew how much power his eyes carried, he closed them. When he did, a wave of fear caused her to tense. Why was he denying her a connection she needed as much as she did air? Desperate to bring him back to her, she rocked from side to side and then tried to sit up. Opening his eyes, he easily pushed her down again, holding her in place by resting his forearms on her chest until she stopped struggling. Panting a bit, she waited and watched.

"You're starting to want me," he said. "You don't want to feel like that, I know. It's just the beginning. No end in sight, no release or relief. Just anticipation. And me."

What are you saying? Oh God, what are you going to do to me?

At length, he let up on the pressure. His fingers became like light kisses on her collarbone and the base of her throat. When he moved from there to her midsection, she sucked in a deep breath and held it, no longer just waiting, but half crazed with wanting him to go further. How prophetic his words were becoming! Her breasts more than filled her bra, and her jeans were tight against her belly and crotch.

So gentle. And yet possessive. Painting her with energy. Promising more.

Her hands were useless behind her, the circulation compromised because of her body's weight, but even when her fingers tingled, she couldn't think how she might change that. Everything had been reduced down to one thing—sexual energy. She needed more, needed everything he had to offer!

Damn you for doing this to me!

Perhaps he knew how much her breasts ached because he cradled them in his strong hands and pushed them up and in. Her nipples throbbed, the hardened tips rasping against soft cotton. "Please," she sobbed into the gag. "Please."

He blinked several times, a slow unveiling of his emotions. He was turned on, she had no doubt of that, but where she was all raw, unwanted anticipation, he seemed to be in control of what he was feeling and doing. And he wanted everything to be about her, aimed at her.

Damn you.

Kneading, massaging, sometimes stroking the naked swell of her breasts, but mostly heating and igniting them despite the bra's barrier. And then, when she was certain she couldn't take it anymore, he unclasped the front closure on the sports bra. Her breasts spilled out, exposed and vulnerable. When he didn't claim them, she blinked away the fog that had settled around her so she could focus on him.

"You want this," he said, his hands inches above her. "Tell me the truth. You want this, don't you?"

Incapable of lying, she nodded. And as she did, something primal lifted her buttocks off the ground, and she spread her legs.

"Not yet, not until I've taken you down."

Fury again claimed her, and she tried to bite him, would have sunk her teeth into his forearm if not for the gag. Was that why he'd placed it on her, not to keep her silent, but because he'd understood how savage she'd become?

"These"—nails as light as butterfly wings stroked her newly freed breasts—"belong to me now. What you feel is because I've decided you deserve it, but if you do something to displease me, I'll take away your pleasure. For now."

How could she do anything? Confused, she willed herself to remain still and compliant.

"At times you'll hate me for what I'm doing, but I have no choice. Neither of us does." That said, he unfastened her jeans and tugged down the zipper.

All but on fire with anticipation, she nevertheless acknowledged that he was again talking about something, or maybe someone, with power over both of them. A prickle of awareness at the back of her neck caused her to once more take in what she could see of her surroundings.

The trees continued to dominate, the sky all but hidden by the lighter green growing tops. Deep shade made it difficult to make out details near the ground. This time her attention was drawn, not to the hill, but to a large bush with several evergreens standing guardian just behind it. In front of the bush stood—

No, couldn't be!

But it was. A cougar. Golden coat contrasting with the darker surroundings, heavy head held high as if the predator was sniffing the air. Small ears twitched and large potent paws splayed out on the ground. The thick, long tail slowly lashed. And the eyes—yellow and alive and intense, staring at her.

The magnificent creature was larger than any of the half dozen or so cougars she'd seen in her life, leading her to conclude it was a male in its prime. Its mouth was parted, revealing deadly white teeth. If they'd been closer to civilization, she'd be concerned that he felt pressured by humans, which could turn him into a killer of those humans. But remote as this area was, she'd be surprised if he'd ever seen anything on two legs before.

Then was he simply trying to size up the newcomers to his land?

"He's here, isn't he?" Stark's attention was fixed on her.

She nodded, her eyes asking questions she wouldn't have the words for even if she'd been able to talk.

"He's real, and yet he isn't; a spirit, my spirit, and soon to be yours."

What are you talking about? Damn it, I don't understand—

"I know you don't," he said, responding to her unspoken question. "Neither did I at first." As he'd done once before, he swiped his hand over his eyes. "And I sometimes still fight his control over me. I can't win. I know that. But I still want back the life I once had. The loneliness..."

This beautiful and powerful man felt helpless because of what? Some damn cougar?

Chapter Four

He's here, Stark acknowledged. *Watching. Judging.*

Part of him wanted to walk away from the woman so he could stand before the animal that had turned his life into something he'd never believed could happen and ask for guidance. To be assured that his captive would soon join him in his journey. The rest of him, particularly his hard and lonesome cock, ached to make a lie of his promise not to take her against her will and immediately spill himself in her.

So damnably hard! To be a man without the kind of relationships he'd once had was the hardest part of his new reality. In the past—he could barely remember who and what he used to be—he'd never forced himself on a woman. Many had telegraphed their willingness to share their bodies with him in exchange for him doing the same, and it had been enough.

No longer.

It was all or nothing with Mia. Either she surrendered or—

Scant moments later, Mia could no longer dismiss the cougar as a simple animal. Thankfully, he hadn't come any closer, but his stare became more intense, making her wonder if the creature was trying to capture her mind. Even worse, she swore she could read his thoughts. Thoughts? From a cougar?

But what else could it be? The last thing she'd been thinking about just moments ago was how precious and endangered the forest had become. Her concentration had been on something far different—her spinning sexual awareness. Then that intense animal stare had changed things.

"He's reaching you," Stark said, his hands resting on her newly exposed waist and his mouth so close she felt his heat.

Eyes brimming, she nodded.

"I don't know how it happens." He inched lower, fingers exploring her belly. "I now accept his messages and feel blessed because of them, but at first I wanted to kill him."

Shocked, she struggled to concentrate on what he was saying and not the possessive hands heading for her sex. As long as her jeans and panties remained around her hips, they'd prevent him from reaching what she had no doubt was his goal—but did she want that?

How had everything become so complicated?

"I had a job, a life." He leaned closer, his body blanketing hers and blocking her view of the predator. "I wanted to hold on to those things, but he had a different use for me."

What is that use, and what does it have to do with— No, don't! Don't touch me like that! I can't think.

Now he was at her hips instead of her waist, hands splayed over her hipbones and easily holding her in place. Next, he dipped his dark head, the movement slow and graceful and excruciating. She knew he was going to touch his mouth to her navel, knew it in every vein and nerve ending. Waiting became delicious agony, a swirl of emotions ranging from anger because she had no say in what was happening to heady anticipation. She wanted, needed, craved the press of his flesh on hers. At the same time, she feared the consequences. The loss of will.

Moaning, maybe growling a little, she tried to slide out from under him because as soon as he kissed her there she'd be lost. Lost! Growling back, he held her in place. His palms dug into her hips, pain and pleasure meshing together.

And when she least expected it, he reared back, grabbed her jeans, and yanked them down over her hips. He didn't stop until the denim was around her thighs, making it impossible for her to spread her legs. She didn't need to look at herself to know what he was seeing: creases in her flesh left by the sturdy fabric, her pale belly and reddish pubic hair visible through the whisper of yellow nylon clinging to her pelvis.

He growled again, and she thought she heard another growl, this one issuing from where she'd seen the cougar. She started trembling before Stark lowered his head again. Sucking in her belly made her lightheaded.

Heat. So much heat racing through her.

His mouth over her belly nearly lifted her off the ground, and when his tongue glided in and out of her navel, her hands curled into useless fists. Back arching, she offered herself to him. He rewarded her by raking his teeth over her stomach and starting a fire there. Desperate to touch him, she writhed under him. Undoubtedly he'd left her jeans where he had because he wanted her frustrated. Straining against the confining denim, she admitted she was that, and more. A twitching mess dependent on him for satisfaction. If she were free—damn, if she were free, she'd wrestle him to the ground and plant her legs on either side of his hips so that when she came down, his cock would slide into her starving core. She'd ride him like a cowgirl atop a bronco, spurring him on until he exploded inside her.

But she couldn't do that insane thing. Instead, she was reduced to impotent hip grindings while he licked and kissed, nipped and tongued. He confined his *explorations* to the area just above what her panties covered, the repeated teeth-scraping turning her flesh there so sensitive she half believed she'd shatter.

She hated what he was doing to her, this relentless, intimate teasing, possessing what he had no right to, holding her against the ground and filling her pussy with liquid heat.

And she loved his rough touches, his wet tongue, gentle mouth, and harsh teeth. She loved being all woman and white hunger.

I can't—can't take—you're killing—oh God, killing—

Rearing upright, he rotated his neck as if working a kink out of it before focusing on her again. She couldn't comprehend his expression, which frightened her, and although not having her nerves assaulted allowed her some small amount of control over her emotions, she needed back the heady danger.

"Your body's humming. Dancing. I love the way it feels."

You're responsible.

"You hate me right now. Having sexual heat forced on you isn't what you wanted to happen today. But you need to be tamed. Remade."

Damn him for throwing his nonsensical words at her! But even as she raged against him and everything he stood for, she also admitted she'd never wanted anything more than what he'd just promised. Tamed? The word conjured up images of a wild horse about to be branded, but it would be worth it, if he also fucked her.

Fuck?

Yes, she acknowledged. That was exactly where she wanted this to go.

Watching her with his predator eyes, he eased her jeans down until they encircled her knees. Lifting her head, she tried to look at herself, but he forced her back onto the ground.

"No, don't. Experience, just experience."

She wanted to do as he'd ordered, wanted to become an oozing mess ruled by sensation, but when he placed his hand over her eyes, panic grabbed hold, and she thrashed her head. For several endless seconds, he fought her, then let her see again.

"Lesson learned." He seemed to be speaking to himself. "You can handle being silenced and not being able to use your hands, but sight's vital. I won't forget that."

Her heart was still pounding, but at least she no longer felt as if she couldn't breathe. If asked, she wouldn't be able to say why his blinding her had unnerved her so.

"I was going to take things one step at a time, letting instinct rule me, not telling you what I had in mind, but maybe I was wrong. Anticipation. Not being certain what's going to happen, but having some idea, keeps things from being more than you can deal with."

His tone, as calm as if he were discussing a weather forecast, might be designed to settle her even more, but he was wrong. Damn wrong. Not only was she locked into the sound of his voice, his hands were splayed over her panties with his thumbs so near her core she'd soaked the fabric between her legs. Hell, he could probably smell her arousal.

"We're going to have sex. But first, I want—I need you so hungry that you have to fuck as much as I do. All inhibitions cast aside, down to basics. Animal to animal."

She'd known he was going to pull down her panties before he did. The sudden wash of summer heat over her just-exposed flesh unnerved her more than having her breasts exposed had. This was more intimate, a point of no return, her cunt now available to him. Beyond vulnerable.

“Something else I’m changing.” Lifting her head with one hand, he untied her gag. “It’s time for you to talk again.”

Instead of taking advantage of her small freedom, she waited him out, certain he’d silence her again if she said anything that displeased him. But when he imposed no conditions, she relaxed a little.

“Why me?” Her voice was rough-edged, something she couldn’t help. “I know. I’m here alone. But why me?”

“I thought you understood.”

“Understood what?”

“You’re in tune with the wilderness, and it trusts you.”

The wilderness was made up of living, but unthinking, organisms, but maybe she comprehended his meaning after all. Certainly she felt more comfortable in settings like this than anywhere else. “I don’t trust you.”

“I know.”

She’d wanted to say a thousand things when she couldn’t speak, but now her mind emptied out. Or maybe the truth was the energy between them outstripped the need for any other kind of communication. She’d never understood women who liked being manhandled, and twice had ended relationships because the boyfriend at that time had started acting as if he had the right to call all the shots. As for the whole man always on top thing, that belonged to her grandmother’s generation.

And yet—

Ah, shit, and here she was slipping away, becoming whatever it was he believed she needed to be.

Maybe he’d once again tapped into her thoughts because he cupped his hand over her mons, his fingers trailing over her slit. Electricity slammed into her and lifted her buttocks off the ground. If she could have moved her legs, she’d—what? Watching him through half-open eyes, she accepted the heat and strength seeping from him to her. He’d turned her into something weak and pliable. At the same time, she was absorbing his strength and making it hers—giving her the courage to see this through to the end, if there was one.

“We aren’t so complex after all.” His voice hummed through her, sliding her down into a space she’d never known existed. “We humans think we’ve evolved so far and that our so-called superior intellect has lifted us above animals.” His middle finger glided over her pussy lips, the journey made easy by the fluids weeping from her. “But beneath that veneer we show the world, we’re as primitive as they are.”

Stark bent low again, his mouth first touching and then engulfing her right breast. His forefinger entered her at the same time, a sleek and simple invasion she acknowledged by clenching her pussy muscles around him.

He sucked, sucked some more, pulled back until only her nipple remained in his mouth and held it between his teeth. Held on. Another finger—she couldn’t tell which—joined the one already in her, and her

pussy softened and expanded and wept. Her feet beat a rapid tattoo on the ground, and she couldn't stop whipping her head from side to side. Animal sounds escaped.

And although she could no longer see the creature, she sensed the cougar's eyes on them.

A burning throughout the breast Stark had claimed penetrated the hot fog drifting around her, forcing her to still her movements. He wasn't biting her nipple so much as trapping it between his teeth, but circulation was being compromised. Knowing what he was doing took her into a place of fantasy where she existed as nothing except this man's plaything. Not only had he claimed her as his possession, he knew exactly how to keep her emotionally off balance and sexually on fire. The invading fingers provided more than stimulation. They claimed, owned, controlled. Gave birth.

Modern, liberated women—and she considered herself a card-carrying member—would never allow a man to treat them like a possession, and yet she was.

Could she make him stop?

Did she want to?

A quick bite of pain followed by release and relief swung her thoughts from her cunt to her breast. Although now free, her breast still throbbed and probably would for several minutes. Lifting her head, she saw that he'd left indentations where his teeth had gripped.

Watching her with a mix of concentration and amusement, he cupped a hand around her breast and lightly squeezed it. "My marks. Proof of my claim on you."

"You—you have no right."

"It's not a matter of right, Mia. This is about responsibility and commitment."

I don't understand. But telling him that wouldn't change anything. He'd continue going about whatever it was he was doing at his pace and in his way, and she had no choice but to accept and absorb.

The hell you do, a rebellious spark insisted. *You can fight. Tell him you'll have him arrested.*

Only his fingers remained deep inside her, and he'd all but stripped her naked, and she wanted nothing more out of life—well, almost nothing. Letting her head fall back, she tried to concentrate on her aching nipple instead of the intimate invasion elsewhere, but the ache, the delicious burning, was on the move, traveling along her veins and arteries and flooding her with sensation. She was alive, keenly alive! Exposed and expanded.

How she loved the feel of a cock in her! Even when her mind argued that the man fucking her wasn't the one she could consider spending her life with, the instinctive animal who lived beneath her civilized surface was content. All that creature needed was to fuck and be fucked, to climax and scream and scratch and bite and have those things done to her.

Yet another shift alerted her to a change in his *attack*. He splayed his hand over her belly, holding her in place. Again and again, he withdrew the fingers in her hole until she was afraid she'd lose him, only to

have him plunge deep again. There was no rhythm to what he was doing, no cadence she could climb onboard. Her inner tissues clamped and released, clamped and released. A climax was close, so close!

“Not yet.” Although he barely whispered, his voice had a strangled sound. She might have taken closer note of what that said about his emotional condition if his fingers hadn’t quieted.

“Don’t, please.” She tightened her inner muscles around the wonderful invasion. “Please don’t stop. I—”

“This isn’t just about sex, Mia. It’s about you giving up chunks of yourself so you’ll become what they need.”

“They?” If only he’d finish her off, then she could and would concentrate.

“The Cougar Spirits.”

There was more than the one creature watching them? For a moment, she couldn’t think of anything except the possible ramifications, but then he pulled out of her and nothing except that mattered. “What—Stark, what—”

“Quiet!”

Despite feeling as if she were about to break apart, she caught her lower lip between her teeth and stared up at him. One hand continued to press against her belly, but the other, the one that had taken command of her sex, where had it gone? She was pulsing inside, a mindless, wonderful, excruciating throbbing.

Once more he attacked her jeans, this time pulling on them and her panties so everything was now knotted around her ankles. Until he removed her short hiking boots, he wouldn’t be able to dispense with her clothes, but apparently, he intended to leave her hobbled. What did he think she might do, outrun him with her hands tied behind her?

No, the last thing he intended today was to free her.

That inescapable fact hit her like a blow to the gut. It should have before, but she’d been so intent on each moment in their developing *relationship* that she’d given scant thought to how it would all play itself out. She still had no idea—or maybe the truth was, she didn’t want to face the so-called finish line—but she could no longer delude herself into thinking their *relationship* would soon end.

What did he intend, to turn her into his sex slave?

Even as the thought brought bile to her mouth, she cast it aside. Whatever Stark’s intentions were, she couldn’t believe they involved sexual slavery. True, sex was at the core of whatever was happening between them at the moment, as witnessed by her about-to-short-circuit body, but his reasons went far beyond determination.

As for her reasons for not fighting him with every ounce of strength in her—

Chapter Five

While she watched, fascinated and yet disbelieving, Stark removed her boots and tossed them aside. After disposing with her jeans and panties, he lifted her legs so one rested on each of his shoulders. He'd crouched low while getting her into position, but now he straightened a little, lifting her buttocks off the ground. Blood began pooling in her head.

"What are—"

"What you need."

She didn't know anything about herself, so how could he be so sure? Having her hands lashed behind her with him over her made her feel helpless, but that was nothing compared to what she was experiencing now. Not only had she lost control over her body, she wasn't sure she wanted it back.

She trusted him. By all that was holy, she trusted him!

Almost as soon as she acknowledged the thought, she reminded herself that the blood rush could well be responsible. But although a small part of her brain devoted to self-preservation wanted back freedom and self-determination, she'd sunk too far into need and wanting to heed its cry. She'd been claimed by a stranger, taken over by him, freedom stolen, and that was good.

Heady.

Incredible!

He began running his hands over her inner thighs. A willing participant, she sank deep into sensation, and when he brought his mouth within inches of her cunt and breathed his hot breath on tender tissues, she sobbed out her need.

"Hush," he warned, his words sliding like warm water over her labia. "Feel. Only feel."

As if she could do anything else! He continued drawing in mountain air, heating it, and expelling it on her until she feared her head would burst and her heart explode. "Oh God, oh God, oh God."

"Quiet. Let it happen. Become part of me."

What was that he'd said, something about losing herself and turning into him? But she couldn't think how to focus on what might be a warning, not with his mouth so close to her core and need pounding through her.

"Do me, oh God, do me."

"You want this then?"

This? The question, like the alarm accompanying it, drifted off like mist touched by a summer sun.

Driven by a force she couldn't name, she struggled to scoot closer. And when he rewarded her efforts by running his tongue over her need-soaked labia, she sobbed and writhed. His deep laughter floated around her, the sound both superior and understanding. Her body twitched and quivered, the sensation of countless pinpricks making it impossible for her to remain still.

"Come with me. Come to that place where we both belong," he said.

Although she didn't understand his message, she nodded and gasped and offered her sex to him. "Again!" she begged. "Please, again."

His tongue claimed her once more, not quick and furtive this time, but a slow, possessive stroke that had her mewling. Before she could begin to reclaim ownership of her nerves, he licked again, his tongue no longer soft, but hard and insistent. She was melting, falling apart, flying off into a million pieces.

"Hold still!"

She tried. Oh, how she tried, but her nerves spiraled out of control. She felt as if she were trying to catch fireflies one-handed. Everything was happening so fast, and she couldn't get a handle on the pace, but maybe she didn't want to.

Maybe she only wanted to shatter.

To climax.

Driven by the overwhelming need, she pushed her legs against his neck. Using her forearms for leverage, she offered him more of her pussy. Bits and pieces of what might be sanity kept breaking away to stand watch from the sidelines. She was acting like a slut, or a bitch in heat, but even when her cheeks flamed, she was too far gone to stop.

How could she put on the brakes when he licked her sex lips and ran the tip of his tongue into her hole, when his teeth scraped her clit and set her to squealing? Being unable to stop his attack and wanting it more than the breath of life had taken her where she'd never been before. Only feeling mattered, only this relentless drive to release and relief.

"Killing me! You're killing me." Startled by the high-pitched voice, she was slow to acknowledge she'd spoken, and that she'd been so honest. So undone.

"Not killing." His lips pressed against her hot and heavy core. "Bringing you to life, the one I now live."

Again he was handing her pieces of some planned future and maybe warning, but she was too deep in the flames to make sense of it. "I want—I need..."

"I know what you need, Mia. The same things I do."

That couldn't be, could it? Surely he didn't want to be tied up and sexually manipulated, to have her tease him until insanity ruled.

But if he did, he'd have to wait until she'd scraped herself back together, and that wouldn't happen until she'd found release. Although she'd managed to remain still while they were talking, she now offered

herself to him again. A small part of her was appalled by the wanton way she presented herself, but she couldn't begin to think how to stop. She smelled her heat, her need, felt her racing blood.

And then he closed his mouth around her clit and sucked, and she shook like a leaf in a storm.

"Ah, ah! Help, oh, help!"

No relief. Hard heat centered on her cunt and the poor trapped nub wanting to explode. Needing to shriek and shatter and then laugh with joy.

Sensing a lifting up, a spreading outward, fresh heat plunging throughout her, she dove into the impending climax. If she could think how it was done, she'd scream. Instead, she buried herself in her body.

And then she heard it—a sharp sound like lightning striking and splintering a tree. The harsh crack was almost immediately followed by another. A third, loud enough to hurt her ears, came.

Pulled out of herself by the nerve-shattering explosions, she sobbed as her nearly there climax faded. Blinking the world back into focus, she saw him staring at her. His mouth was open, the moist heat he'd gifted her with still on her pussy. "What—was that?"

Although he cocked his as if trying to determine where the sound was coming from, his attention remained locked on her. "You heard it?"

"Of course. My God, it sounded only a few feet away."

"Your hearing..."

"What about my hearing?" she prompted when his words trailed off.

"It's so keen."

If she hadn't been torn between sexual frustration and alarm, she would have pointed out that only the profoundly deaf wouldn't have heard what had to have been a rifle firing repeatedly. When she'd heard the shots earlier—how many lifetimes ago had that been?—they'd been at a considerable distance. Now she was surprised she couldn't see the shooter.

What if the hunter was just over the hill or beyond the sheltering bushes and trees? If he came across her and Stark... "Let me go!" she ordered, struggling to lift her legs off his shoulders. "Now, let me go!"

Instead of granting her plea, he gripped her calves, holding her in place. Although carnal need continued to overload her system, it now warred with another basic emotion: survival. An armed stranger was out there firing when it wasn't hunting season. If he'd just killed an animal, maybe he was capable of silencing anyone he perceived as a threat to his getting away with a crime.

The massive cougar! Had he shot it?

"I mean it, Stark." Although it was too late to matter, she dropped her voice to a whisper. "This is dangerous."

"Danger?" He didn't bother to keep his voice down. "How?"

Was the man crazy? "I don't want to get shot."

“You won’t. Not unless he gets a lot closer.”

Furious, she renewed her struggles. Although her strength didn’t come close to matching his, he ducked his head and slid out from under her legs. Having them on the ground again sent pins and needles shooting through her. As soon as she could, she sat up, hands digging into the dirt to help her balance. “Untie me, please.”

Something both softened and darkened in his eyes. “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“You aren’t?”

“Not anymore.”

Confused, she stared at him. He’d taken her so deep into herself while stimulating her that she’d been incapable of contemplating what was happening to him. Now she clearly saw that he was far from immune from arousal. Granted, she couldn’t fully comprehend his expression, but his body was wire-tight, his cheeks flushed, sweat glistening. Although the scent of her arousal was strong, she smelled his heat and excitement.

What was it about this afternoon that had made her sight crystal clear? Beneath his jeans, his engorged cock was all but fully exposed. She swore she could see its swollen veins and reddened flesh. When she stopped breathing, she heard both their hearts beating, the sounds like frantic drums.

“What’s happening?” she asked, then had to clamp down on a confused and frightened whimper. “Everything—”

“Your senses?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve never been this acute.”

He hadn’t asked a question. Instead, he’d spoken as if he understood everything she was experiencing. “What’s happening?” she repeated, on the verge of tears. Her voice hammered in her ears, but even worse was how out of control she sounded.

“The same thing that happened to me,” he muttered. Then he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her against his chest. Off balance, she didn’t try to pull away, but sank into his strength. He smelled male, masculine. When his body heat seeped through his shirt and spread over her, she no longer saw herself as his prisoner, but something precious. And when he pressed his lips to her temple, she turned into him and kissed his throat.

“Listen to me,” he said with his mouth so close that every sound he made vibrated. “I don’t understand everything that’s happened to me since I came here. I’m not sure I ever will. There’s something, a force I call Cougar Spirit because I keep seeing a cougar.”

No, he wasn’t crazy. Or if he was, she’d joined him in insanity.

"It began the day I entered the forest. Before I started hiking, I stopped to see a forest ranger friend who warned me to look out for poachers. There's been a lot of killing in the area—deer and elk out of season, idiots looking for a thrill."

That's what was out there then, poachers. "Can't the rangers stop them? If they know they're there—"

"They don't have enough manpower. Along with all the cutbacks in federal funds, rangers' responsibilities across the board have increased. Unfortunately, as a result, poaching's been relegated to the back burner."

"And in the meantime innocent animals are being murdered for sport! That's sick." With her ear so close to his heart, she could hear his beating clearer than she could her own. The sound was music.

"Yes, it is sick."

His simple words made her feel as if they shared a core belief system. Not only did they both embrace the wilderness, but anything that jeopardized that wilderness appalled them.

She wanted to tell him that, to open herself and let him know how much she needed mountains and trees to feel complete, but that would have to wait until later, if it happened at all. Once again her awareness of herself as a woman was pushing to the forefront. If she was capable of doing so, she'd wrap her arms and then her body around him and take his cock into her and turn them into one.

But she couldn't, because she was still his prisoner.

"Let me go," she repeated.

"No."

"Why?"

"Until and unless I know you can handle certain things, I have to do it this way."

"Then tell me."

Looking at a spot beyond her, he ran his thumb down the valley between her breasts. "There's more to what's happening than simple telling. Why do you think I captured you?"

Captured. The word swirled between them. "I don't know."

"Don't you?"

"No." Up this close, she couldn't make out his expression so she tried to wiggle out of his grasp. Instead of giving her that small bit of freedom, he clasped her upper arms and pushed her back a few inches but kept her immobile.

Everything washed over her in a tidal wave of emotion and sensation. The world she'd always known no longer existed. Even more essential, she'd lost control of her body and couldn't possibly regain it until her kidnapper handed it back to her. As if that wasn't enough, other things were happening, not just to her body, but to her mind as well, things she might never understand.

"Listen to me," he said. "I'm going to tell you something. Maybe it'll help you comprehend."

What choice do I have? she wanted to throw at him. Instead, she ordered herself to relax. As she did, her mind cleared, and she again became acutely aware of her surroundings. Now that she'd had time to accept her heightened senses, she came to the realization that whoever had shot the rifle wasn't close after all. True, she still sensed the hunter's unwanted presence and heard his boots thumping on the ground as he half walked, half ran to wherever he was headed, but other sounds and life-forms stood between her and him.

A glance at a nearby tree revealed a line of ants heading up the south side. A study of the ground there revealed the opening to the underground home the ants had come from. There among some summer-dry ferns was an elaborate spider web and the nearly transparent yellow spider responsible for the work of art. Farther away, a half-grown bird in his nest clawed, impatient for its parents to stuff yet more food in its gaping mouth.

She *saw* an owl sleeping at the top of a pine, *heard* a snake slither over low grass. She'd always known she shared the wilderness with untold numbers of living creatures; she just had never been able to observe them with such clarity.

Whatever was happening between her and Stark was changing that.

No, she amended. Stark was a vital part of the transformation, but he wasn't entirely responsible. Although what she'd been experiencing had disoriented her, it didn't take long to spot where she'd earlier seen the cougar. He was no longer there.

"What happened? The rifle shots—did the poacher scare him off?"

"Nothing frightens Cougar."

"Then what—" she started, but stopped as an image filled her mind. It was as if she was running beside the predator as it silently loped to where the hunter had fired his deadly weapon. When the cougar stopped, she did the same, her keen gaze following the direction the cougar was staring.

There. Crumpled and lifeless at the bottom of a steep slope, a doe. The man responsible for the murder stood a few feet away, shaking his head and muttering profanities.

"Damn, fucking damn. So fucking sure it was a buck this time!" Cocking his leg, the man hammered his heavy boot into the doe's side. "Worthless piece of shit!"

Rage stronger than anything she'd ever experienced swept through Mia. If she'd been able, she would have ripped the man's throat out and left him to bleed to death. Beside her, the cougar's tail lashed, and a hard guttural scream erupted. At the sound, the man gasped and swung his rifle around. He fired twice in rapid succession, then either he ran out of bullets or his rifle jammed. Grasping the weapon as if it were a club, he began backing away.

"You see, don't you?" Stark asked.

"Of course," she exclaimed, then shuddered as the reality of what had just happened sank in. Something, probably Stark's voice and presence, had pulled her back to where her real body was. She

could no longer see the hunter or cougar, and thankfully not the murdered doe. “I don’t understand,” she whimpered, straining against Stark’s hold.

Chapter Six

Stark released her arms and massaged away the imprints his fingers had made. She watched, fascinated by his sure, long and strong fingers.

Hers was a woman's body, nothing spectacular, but honed by a physical life. If he wanted a centerfold, he hadn't gotten one. But if he needed someone capable of matching him—

"You aren't going to run away," he said. It wasn't a question.

A perverse part of her longed to point out that taking off *dressed* as she was might be grounds for getting herself locked up, but his tone was too serious for that. As she shook her head, she acknowledged that what remained of her blouse and bra hid nothing. It didn't matter; modesty had nothing to do with this moment.

"The connection—I didn't know it would be this easy, that you would begin to join us so soon."

"Us?"

"You'll understand soon enough."

If she sat cross-legged, her pussy would be exposed in naked invitation, so although that would be more comfortable, she left her legs stretched out in front of her, leaning forward a little to keep her balance. Despite the rough ground, her body continued to hum with the aftereffects of his manipulations. "That's—that's how you intended to, what? Convince me, entice me, force me—damn, I don't know what I'm talking about!"

"Let me do the talking, then."

"All right."

"Good." He trailed a thumb between her breasts. "I need to tell you what happened to me, because I believe it'll help you understand what's going on."

"All right."

"It started for me the way it did for you. I was hiking, simply hiking, hoping I was miles from poachers, glad to be away from job pressure and touching base with why I'd gotten a master's in forest biology. I worked for the Bureau of Land Management and had been incorporating new federal regulations into my job description and was frustrated because I had to spend so much time indoors." His eyes glazed. "I was doing a lot of soul-searching."

"About what?" she encouraged when he fell silent.

A warm, strong hand settled over her knee. “Whether I’d made a mistake in my career choice, and what the hell could I do about it.” His head came up. He looked fierce, defiant. “I’d made so damn many sacrifices getting where I was professionally and...”

I understand. How I understand. “What kind of sacrifices?”

“Personal. Letting a woman I loved walk out of my life because I put work first, moving thousands of miles from family, limiting friendships.”

A chill cooled a little of the fire his closeness continued to feed in her. She too had moved halfway across the country so she could work in a national forest and had ended an engagement because her fiancé hadn’t understood the hold the wilderness had on her. She had few friendships, and only two, both with fellow rangers, that she could call close.

“You were trying to decide whether to stay with your career?” she asked.

“Yeah. Complicating my decision was a simple fact: if I turned my back on the only thing I was qualified to do, how was I going to support myself?”

“It was more than that. You knew you had to work in the forest in order to feel alive.”

A moment ago his eyes had taken on that far-away look, but they immediately intensified, and he stared at her as if determined to reach all the way to her soul.

“I’m saying that because I feel the same way.” The words might be the most honest she’d ever spoken. Her back had started to ache, prompting her to bend her legs so she could sit Indian-style. Too late, she realized she’d exposed everything.

With his hand on her knee, his gaze traveled down her body, registered what she’d revealed, then returned to her face. “I was in conflict,” he said, “second-guessing, talking to myself, trying to map out the rest of my life and getting nowhere.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. It was something I had to do. One night, not long after I got here, I don’t think I’d slept more than a few minutes and woke up just as the sun was rising.” He gnawed on his lower lip. “The largest cougar I’d ever seen was standing no more than ten feet away, watching me, just watching.”

Sleeping alone in the wilderness had never frightened her, but if she’d woken to find a cougar that close— “Just watching?”

“There was nothing aggressive or menacing about his stance.” When he released her knee and raked his hand through his wind-tangled hair, she understood how deeply the connection between man and beast had affected him. “I sensed he was trying to communicate with me.”

“What did you do?”

“I listened. And I learned. Truth was, he didn’t really give me a choice, because when I tried to leave what I figured was his territory, he matched me step-for-step. I tried to scare him off, but that didn’t work. I...hell, I aimed my pistol at him, and I swear, he laughed.”

A laughing cougar? “I’m trying—I’m trying to decide whether I would have been afraid,” she admitted.

“Are you now?” He again settled his hand on her knee, the touch sealing them in inescapable ways.

“No.”

“Neither was I. Until then I’d never believed in anything I couldn’t see or analyze, and yet there’s always been something about the woods, a sense of timelessness, of endurance, innocence and wisdom at the same time. As if a force beyond my comprehension is responsible.”

Oh God, were they really that much alike? “As if there’s something bigger than man at work,” she offered.

“Yeah.” He gently squeezed. “As if man is small and insignificant in comparison with a forest’s complexity and richness.”

She could love him. No questions asked, she could fall in love with the stranger who’d robbed her of her freedom. Shaken by the realization, she tried to remind herself of what he’d done to her, but that did little to undermine what she’d discovered about him. “You—what does this have to do with a cougar?”

“A lot. I think—hell, I know Cougar Spirit found certain things he was looking for in me. He didn’t stalk or intimidate me so much as make sure we shared the same space. I wanted to walk in one direction, but he turned me where he wanted me to go. That’s how I came across two elk carcasses.”

“Two? That’s sick!”

“It is, but that’s not all.” Sliding his hand down her leg, he encircled her ankle. Further cemented the connection between them. “A couple of days ago, Cougar Spirit took me to where hundreds of marijuana plants are growing. There’s some elaborate irrigation in place and two stands for guards. The day before that, Cougar Spirit and I explored a hillside that had recently been clear-cut. When the rains come, the ruts caused by dragging the trees over the ground are going to erode.”

“Clear-cutting’s illegal,” she blurted despite the pulsing warmth climbing up her leg. “Regulations call for seed trees being left standing and replanting.” Although she’d already put one and one together, she shuddered. “This was timber theft, wasn’t it?”

“On a large scale. Mia, I’ve now seen three clear-cut sites in areas so remote I doubt if anyone except the so-called loggers have been there in years.”

This forest was under assault! And because of a creature or being Stark called Cougar Spirit, he’d been handed proof of the extent of that assault.

“Do you understand what I’m getting at?” he demanded. His hold on her ankle tightened.

So much was swirling around her: a hot sexual wind, at least one heartless poacher, marijuana growers and illegal logging. As for why she was being sucked into that underbelly—

“What does Cougar Spirit want from you?” Before he could answer, she shook her head. “Don’t bother. I know the answer. He—I can’t believe I’m saying this—he wants you to right those wrongs, to protect the forest that’s his home.”

“Yes.”

Staring, and yet not staring at him, she breathed deeply. While she’d always stood up for herself and what she believed in, she’d never thought of herself as confrontational or an activist. This time, however, she was too deep into whatever this was to be satisfied with anything less than the absolute truth. “What about me, Stark? How do I factor in?”

Nostrils flaring, he lifted his chin. “I can’t do it alone. I don’t want to.”

“Do what?” she asked and closed her eyes so she could concentrate fully on the words she sensed would change her life.

“Protect this forest by stopping those who are harming it.”

“Say it!” she snapped. “Damn you, say it! How do you propose to put an end to what Cougar Spirit exposed you to?”

“Look at me,” he ordered. He was beyond beautiful, beyond handsome. Like the cougar who’d been watching them, Stark symbolized everything that was wild and real about the part of the world she loved most.

“Why do you think I approached you the way I did?” He jerked his head to indicate her bound hands. “I couldn’t track and lead you the way Cougar Spirit did to me. No matter how hard I tried to get away, I couldn’t fight Cougar Spirit’s power over me, but if I attempted his techniques, you’d have shot me.”

“I’ve never so much as aimed my gun at anyone.”

“But you would if you believed your life was in danger.”

Would she? Probably. “What’s your point?”

“I watched you for a long time before I approached you.”

Unnerved, she started to lean away only to start to lose her balance. Grabbing her around the waist, he pulled her close. Maybe she should have resisted, but she didn’t when he positioned her between the V of his legs so her back and arms were against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, holding her to his heat.

“Mia, Cougar Spirit found a way to make me believe in him, but I couldn’t do the same to you, so I chose another way.”

“By turning me on.” Why hadn’t she mentioned being grabbed, disarmed, tied up and stripped?

“Yeah.”

“You thought if I was so, what—horny?—that I’d fall to my knees and worship you the moment you...you know.”

“Fault my technique if you have to. You have every right. But the bottom line is I want someone beside me who has the same values I do, who shares the same commitment.”

Although she knew he was talking about doing whatever it took to stop the attack on the forest, she lacked the courage to ask for details. “You could have asked.”

“Would you still be here if I had?”

He was right, damn it. The moment he’d shaken her hand and started in about how some four-legged beast had shown him what a handful of evil people were or had been doing, she would have thrown her “good-bye” over her shoulder as she hotfooted it away from a madman. The way he’d worked things out, leaving had become the last thing she could—or wanted—to do.

What was she doing nestling against him? Being turned on had gotten her in over her head. If she had the sense she’d been born with, she’d be demanding back her clothes and freedom. Once she had those essential trappings in place, she’d ask for proof of what he and Cougar Spirit had explored. Then she and Stark would formulate a plan, call in the authorities, watch the wheels of justice turn.

Only those wheels didn’t always turn.

Sometimes the bad guys won.

Chapter Seven

Stark's arms provided a sensual cocoon for her to bury herself in. His strength reminded her of the differences between man and woman, and his cock pressing against her buttocks... How could she even think of moving from that firm and undeniable contact? He might have freed her legs, but she was still his prisoner, and she wasn't sure she wanted it any other way.

How could being surrounded by a virtual stranger feel so good, so right? All right, so *good* didn't scratch the surface. It was his fault—and hers for sleeping alone for so long. It was also a matter of having met a man unlike any she ever known before, one who believed in something he called Cougar Spirit. He'd made the decision to put mountains, valleys, creeks and lakes ahead of his own needs and desires.

He's asking you to embrace his beliefs and values. To embrace a predator's idea of justice.

To turn your back on your life.

Can you?

"A question." She had to force the words and fight the press of his skin against hers. "If you saw that poacher right now, what would you do?"

Maybe she should have anticipated his silence. Perhaps she should have anticipated he would try to draw her even further into his world, values, and beliefs, but none of those things would have prepared her for a thumb on her right nipple or a callused palm covering her left.

"I'm not looking for a poacher," he muttered, his breath sliding through the hair on the top of her head. "I'm holding you."

Melting me's more like it. "I know you are."

"And you're letting me."

"You think I could push you away? My hands are still tied."

"Do you want me to free you?"

Free, she'd have back her life and body and thoughts. Free, she'd have to make the decision whether to stay or leave. "No, not yet."

He muttered and against all reason, she rested the back of her head on his chest. His erection pressed against her buttocks. "When I first saw you—Cougar had guided me to you—I nearly went crazy trying to decide how to approach you, or if I should. Then—I'm not sure I should be telling you this."

Even with the heated current caused by his hands making her breasts and more throb, she nodded. "Stark, we've already shared more than most people do in a lifetime."

His mouth touched the top of her head. “In essence, I asked Cougar what he’d do if he was me. His response was to—it was as if I was floating above him as he approached a female cougar.”

“Was she in heat?”

“What?”

She took a deep breath, not because she needed to, but expanding her lungs increased the contact between them. How bold he was with her body, as if he had every right to it. And how easy allowing him to do so was. “I’ve seen cougars mating, if that’s what you’re about to tell me.”

“It is.” That said, he flattened his palms over her nipples, claiming her.

Something about his possessive touch took her both into and beyond herself. Awash in sensation, she mentally *traveled* to where Stark and Cougar had been. She *heard* the savage, unearthly scream of a male cougar closing in on a receptive female. Instead of trying to flee a predator weighing as much as twice what she did, the female stopped and turned toward her pursuer. Her primal scream matched his as he slipped closer. At the last moment, she sprang and whirled away with him in hot and noisy pursuit. Seconds later, he overtook and pounced on top of her, stopping her. Squawking in what sounded like fury and fear mixed together, she bit and clawed, but the male easily drove her to the ground. Captured her.

Once she was trapped beneath him, she stopped fighting and twisted her heavy tail to the side, allowing the male to power his cock into her. Her expression became one of acceptance and pleasure. Even when he bit into the back of her neck, she only dug her claws into the earth. Her cries became a loud purr.

That’s what Stark had intended to do to her. He’d run her down—or in this case tied her up—and then was going to use his body and sexuality to tame her.

“It’s a savage act,” she finally thought to say. If she wanted, she could duck her head and sink her teeth into the backs of Stark’s hands. Even as she rejected the notion, she wondered what it would feel like to scream and bite and claw while his cock claimed her. “One designed for animals, not humans.”

“But what’s happening to the forest is the work of animals, albeit two-legged, but animals just the same. Beasts.”

She couldn’t deny that any more than she could deny feeling as if she were expanding and opening up. Stark was everywhere, over and around and on her. Dangerous as it was, she loved feeling as if she belonged to him. Granted, a small voice warned that sex between them was only the beginning of something that would fundamentally change her, but how could she be expected to think beyond that point?

She needed to suck Stark into her core. He could throw her to the ground and mount her as Cougar had to his mate, and she’d let him. Hell, given the way she was feeling, she’d beg him to *force* himself on her!

Was that what she wanted, she pondered when he closed an arm over her breasts and clasped her against him. His now-free hand trailed over her midsection, inching lower, softening and loosening her.

Why not? Damn it, why not? The human rules she'd always lived by didn't exist here. Cougar Spirit was in charge, and she desperately needed to open herself up to the creature's messages.

His gifts.

She'd face the consequences later.

A sound reminiscent of a contented hum slipped from her lips as she spread her legs and lifted her buttocks off the ground. A deep answering rumble began in Stark's chest. Then silence descended.

Unable to maintain her position, she sat again, but kept her legs open. As she knew he would, he answered her call. Down, down, down his fingers slid, slipping over and then past her mons, *kissing* her labial lips, barely touching her entrance, stopping and resting there.

She couldn't rest, couldn't think, couldn't remain still! Fighting down a hungry cry, she tilted her pelvis toward him. At the same time, she raked her teeth over the arm imprisoning her breasts.

Muttering something that wasn't words, he released her breasts only to grasp her chin and force her head back. "Don't move," he warned. "I'm doing everything."

When was it going to be her turn?

Even more important, did she want any kind of responsibility?

Something, tension probably, slipped out of her to leave her even looser and receptive beyond words. Her existence began and ended on this small piece of land, its boundaries defined by her captor, her mate.

He'd run her down, overpowered her, and was now playing with her. She loved the game, loved being the center of his world and having his attention fully on her. To be a naked and receptive animal.

To live in the moment.

Even as she began rubbing her ass against his erection, she acknowledged the otherworldly quality of her thoughts. His fingers might be dipping into her so he could collect the gift of her fluids and then bathe her cunt with them, but some part of his mind must be on Cougar Spirit, while yet more brain cells were engaged in processing what needed to be done in order to stop the assault on the wilderness. And even if his brain wasn't heeding the grinding pressure on his cock, other parts of his anatomy had to be.

The hand that had been on her chin slid lower to cover her collarbone. Hoping he was about to claim her breasts again, she leaned back. As she did, he pressed down until her back and trapped arms rested on his left thigh. He kept after her until her head hung nearly to the ground. Not content with his total mastery, he looped his boots under her feet and spread her legs wide by pushing against the insides of her ankles. Splayed like this, she couldn't lift her legs enough to free her feet.

Curling his body over hers made it easy for him to work her pussy with both hands. Acknowledging his strength and control left her unnerved; it would be insanely easy for him to do any and everything he wanted. But the tiny voice of caution barely registered. How could it when she needed this. Needed this!

How gentle and yet masterfully he spread her sex lips. Even as her cunt beat and pulsed, a part of her floated. Her mind's eye watched as he opened her to the mountain breeze. Her wet, red pussy gaped, its

mysteries exposed. A masculine finger slid into the cave he'd uncovered. She trembled, shivered, whimpered. Even with blood rushing anew to her head, there seemed to be no end to the inner fire heating her pussy.

She'd been invaded and claimed, taking and receiving pleasure. He'd turned her clit into a hotbed of need and restlessness, and even as it screamed its silent savage scream, she embraced its hunger. She needed to climax! Needed. To. Climax! At the same time, she half believed she could dance at the edge of release until the moon watched from the heavens. Relishing the growling, impatient hunger, she wrapped herself around it until little else mattered.

There he was, taking up her space and turning her into his pet, his plaything, his soon-to-be mate. He'd taken her down, down to that dark and fevered place. Everything was physical now with hard-as-hell nipples and breasts that felt as if they might explode. She didn't think. She existed. Felt everything.

Him again, or was it still? That potent finger sliding in and out, work-rough fingers slick with her juices, reaching deeper and deeper, triggering nerve endings that lived for the weight and heat and length of an engorged cock. And, yet, his finger wasn't enough! Wouldn't take her far enough!

"Please, please, please." Swallowing was nearly impossible.

"What do you want, Mia? Tell me, what is it you're begging for?"

"You!" Pussy muscles clamped down, then further yet, trying to trap him inside her. "I need you!"

"This?" He curved his finger, gliding his short nail over the swollen and sensitive sides of her pussy. "Is that what you need?"

"Not enough, damn you! Not enough!" Alarmed by the desperation in her voice, she struggled to sit up.

"No!" He punctuated his command by pressing his elbow against her midsection. "Not until you understand."

"What? That you're stronger than me?" She tried to bite, but missed his arm. "I get it, all right! Does that make you feel superior? Does it?"

"That's not what I'm about." His voice turned low and seductive. And now two fingers rested inside her, taking her closer to that wonderful and overwhelming edge. "This is about us becoming one."

"Not this way!" *Stop sounding so desperate!* "It's not enough, damn it! Not enough."

"Show me, then," he muttered as his fingers began moving, claiming. "How do you propose we turn us into one?"

One? Promise or threat?

Despite the incredible distraction, she reached deep inside herself for what remained of her sanity. Sweat slicked her neck and chest, the small of her back and behind her knees. "Let me up. Please."

Instead of heeding her plea, he worked her, fingers gliding faster and faster, pushing her up the mountain again.

“Please! Please please please,” she chanted. The voice belonged to someone she’d never been, a famished and burning bitch in heat. Someone frightened. “It’s your turn! I want—need to bring you to—to where I am.”

He wanted to keep things the way they were. She sensed the male predator in him, the primitive possessor of females. Saying nothing, no longer breathing, he bent the leg she was resting on until she was able to sit up. Doing so sucked his fingers out of her. Her pussy cried at the loss. Leaning forward, she waited until her head stopped pounding.

Waiting for a measure of clarity and strength to return seemed to take forever, but bit by bit she decided what she would do. What she had to. Keeping her features impassive and her pussy muscles clenched, she pushed away from Stark and got to her knees.

“You’re afraid,” she told him, her voice a whisper. She looked around for the cougar. Nothing. He’d left them to work this out without him. For her to face herself. “As long as you physically control me, you believe that’s all you need to do, but what happens once I’m free?”

His slow blink robbed her of his incredible eyes. “Maybe I’ll keep you with me forever.”

“No, you won’t. But look at what exists between us.” Despite the hunger gnawing at her inner thighs, she refused to be distracted. “I’m naked.” A shrug served to dismiss the bra and shirt bunched around her restrained arms. “Unable to touch you while you can do whatever you want to me.”

“If I was doing what I truly want, you’d be under me.”

Under me. Spread for me. Oh God! “Then do it. Turn into a cougar and drive me to the ground. Spread my legs and fuck me.” An image of a hard and raw sex act dried her throat and soaked her pussy. “I sure as hell can’t stop you.” Glaring at him, she turned so he could see her roped hands. “You’ve told me some nonsense about needing me to help confront those who are endangering this mountain, but that’s not it.”

“It isn’t?”

“No! That’s your excuse for doing what you have. You’ve been out here so long that you’ve more than become antisocial. You’ve turned into an animal. And now you’re trying to do the same to me.”

Something washed over his features, dark layers of emotion she couldn’t penetrate. She wasn’t afraid of him so much as overwhelmed. When he stood, the size difference slammed into her along with the inescapable proof of his greater bulk and strength. Just the same, her body had only one reaction: she wanted him. Needed him. As for her mind—

His every step was slow and steady as if telegraphing his intentions as he destroyed the distance between them. With each one, she became heat and energy. When no space remained between them, he took hold of her arms and turned her from him. Standing with her back to him and his fingers possessive on her flesh, she knew nothing on earth, except she couldn’t walk away from this man.

Sure fingers made quick work of the knots. The resultant renewed blood flow caused her hands to heat and burn. Not that it mattered. Turning back around, she let her useless top and bra slide to the ground. He was staring at her, intensity again darkening his eyes and infusing her body with another wave of desire. Despite her still-numb fingertips, she reached for his shirt buttons. He wasn't wearing an undershirt, and in seconds she flattened her palms against his mountain-man chest. He was so damnably tall, so strong, so warm and alive!

And without her, so alone.

Don't think that, don't!

Not taking her gaze off his, she finished the unbuttoning, tugged his shirt out of the waistband, and pulled it off him so she could deposit it on top of her clothing. Her nails took care of his jeans' snap; the zipper came next. By then, he'd fisted his hands in her hair.

"It's my turn," she told him. "You've had more than enough time to do whatever it was you believed you had to do to me. You succeeded. I want you to know that." *How, I don't know.*

Dropping to her knees before him, she clutched his waistband and pulled his jeans and briefs off his hips and down. There! In all its dark, hard glory, his cock!

Mouth dry again, she sank onto her haunches and stared at what she'd wanted to see and touch and feel inside her since the moment she'd known he existed. "Incredible," she muttered, her mouth close to his belly so her breath could warm and dampen him there. "Beautiful."

"You—I've never—"

"Never heard a woman say that about your cock?" Taking courage—or was it need—in hand, she brushed the sleek head with her lips. "It's the truth."

She'd kept her fingers on his clothing which made it easy for her to drag them all the way to his ankles where his hiking boots stopped them. The act rendered his legs as useless as hers had been, but that wasn't why she'd stripped him. Bottom line, she *needed* his body.

I've become an animal.

Balancing herself by gripping his hips, she leaned to the side and forward, careful not to touch his cock. Given its size and position and most of all her quivering need, it wasn't easy, but this was her journey, her exploration. Her insanity.

Damn, but was the skin around his scrotum soft! Much as she loved brushing her lips against that warm silk, doing so tested her self-control and made it all but impossible to keep her attention off the insistent messages her pussy was giving off. She used her damp tongue to paint his belly. When he sucked in a breath and increased his hold on her hair, she stuck her tongue into his navel, her face so close that his scent entered her through her pores. His cock pressed against her chin.

"Damn you, damn you," he hissed. "Shouldn't have freed you."

"Don't say that." Her mouth now hovered over his cock, and she expelled her breath in harsh puffs.

His lack of a response bothered her, but she couldn't concentrate on what he might be thinking when her inner fire resisted all her efforts to tamp it down. Giving up, she released a hip so she could slide her hands between her legs. Her thumb unerringly found the wet and ready hole. Not trusting herself to breach the opening, she contented herself with rubbing the side of her thumb between her cunt lips.

Her mouth, opening, reaching, encompassing his cock, closing down around as much of it as she could. Breathing through her nostrils, she rocked between awareness of her filled mouth and empty pussy.

"Damn you, damn you," he chanted. His grip on her hair loosened, and she guessed he was trying to study her attempt at masturbation.

Power hadn't shifted to her after all. Instead, it had shattered and melted, leaving her adrift and drowning. His cock filled her, warmed her, brought her so damn close to him that fear nibbled at the edges. Fighting that should have distracted her. Instead, she was sinking closer to him, opening herself up to him. Losing herself.

This man had done more than rob her of her clothing and freedom; he'd taken her to a place she'd never been before. And now that he had, she wanted nothing but to explore that place, that world. Him.

Careful! Don't lose yourself.

The taste and texture of him coated her tongue and the inside of her cheeks to kill the warning. His head touched the back of her throat, and although she'd never been comfortable with her oral sex skills, she easily freed her mind from past performances. Her mouth and tongue and throat were her gifts to his cock. She gave them freely, proudly, her tongue swirling around his width and length. The act was both foreign and familiar, a tantalizing experience that distracted her from self-pleasure. Bold in ways that made a lie of her earlier bondage, she sucked and licked until a groan rolled up from deep inside him.

Perhaps he wanted her to back off until he'd regained self-control, but how could she after what he'd put her through? She let him slowly slide out of her warm cave, but instead of waiting for him to make the next move, she took his cock in her hand.

"What are you—"

"Whatever pleases me," she shot back. "My turn, damn it."

"The hell it—"

"Be quiet. You want me to gag you?"

His laugh carried equal amounts of amusement and sexual tension, but at least he stopped protesting. The hot, hard weight in her palm was a gift, proof of his trust in her. Yes, she understood how fragile that trust was, but it was precious nevertheless.

Don't lose yourself, don't!

Rocked by a wave of emotion she refused to examine, she lowered herself even more, tilted her head to the side, and sucked in his balls. The contrast between them and his cock was both monumental and

nonexistent. His cock, designed for penetration, was hard, while what now filled her mouth put her in mind of wet, loose silk. His future lay within the hidden balls, his unborn children waiting for life.

Was that why she felt so shaken? Not because her actions were so intimate, but because she now cradled his immortality?

Too much! Too damn much!

Chapter Eight

He was growling, the sound one she'd never heard from a human throat. A cougar could create the deep rumble which led her to a simple conclusion. Stark was becoming, or was already, a predator.

Was Cougar Spirit responsible?

If she mated with Stark, would she join him in his mission?

Hands on her thighs and her mouth now empty, she looked up at the man who'd already changed her world and would alter it even more if she didn't flee. With his legs splayed wide and his fingers around his cock as if sheltering it, he returned her gaze. Because he was in shadow, she couldn't make out the nuances of what rode in his eyes, but her electrified body easily and freely absorbed the messages.

The next move was up to her.

Her pulse thundering in her temple, she leaned back. Maybe the mountain gods approved because when she repositioned herself so her legs were stretched out in front of her, soft grasses protected her rump and palms. She trusted the same mountain gods to supply her back and shoulders with the same support when the time came.

"You want this?" he asked.

"Not just want."

"I'm talking about more than us having sex."

"I know." Hopefully, he didn't need more right now because her lips had become numb. In contrast, her body vibrated.

"Do you understand?" Long, strong fingers caressed his swollen-as-hell cock. "Everything?"

"I can't comprehend it all. I don't know how I'm going to react to what you and Cougar Spirit want from me. Right now, the only thing I need in life is you inside me."

He was just standing there, waiting for what? Unnerved, she fought the impulse to caress her aching hole. Although digging her nails into the ground kept them off her, she'd become a mass of nerve endings, a fire desperate for the wind that would send her sexual flames reaching for the sky. She needed, damn it! Needed that incredible cock of his buried so deep in her that it might remain there forever.

Nothing else mattered.

A long, deep breath aimed at tamping down the flames turned into a howl. Knowing she was responsible for the sound shocked her; at the same time, she accepted it as proof of her descent into the world Stark and Cougar Spirit shared.

No longer contained by her human form, she'd match Cougar Spirit stride for stride. Maybe she'd grow claws and fangs. And what about Stark? Would he run and fight and maybe kill beside her and the cougar?

Looking up, up at that now harsh and hard naked body gave her the answer. Yes, because he and Cougar Spirit had already become one.

Get out! Run!

I can't. Not now.

Not taking his eyes off her, Stark leaned down and untied his boots. Then he kicked them off and stepped out of his jeans and briefs. *This is what I am*, his stance said. *What I have to offer.*

Supporting her upper body on her left elbow and forearm, she curled in so she could easily reach what she had to offer him. Unashamed, she parted her folds and exposed her pussy to him. He nodded, then sank to his knees. Still displaying herself, she offered no resistance when he spread her legs and slid into the space he'd created.

They were speaking without words, asking and answering unspoken questions.

And Cougar Spirit had returned.

She didn't have to look at the beast to know his attention was locked on the two humans. Maybe she should send him a message letting him know she was no mindless female in heat he could mold however he wanted. Just because there was a connection of sorts between them didn't mean she'd surrendered her will and future. She had a life, damn it, a world she'd spent years creating. Why would she turn her back on that to protect this damnable mountain?

A touch, Stark's fingers running up her inner thighs, wrenched her thoughts from the predator. When Stark's fingers continued their march, she leaned back again, but she'd watch as long as he explored her cunt. And when he was done...

There was no searching, no teasing or toying, just a simple and complex contact between fingertip and clit. Hissing, she rocked her pelvis toward him. He withdrew, then touched again. Once more her breath whistled; this time she tilted her pelvis upward, a bold and unashamed bitch offering herself.

For endless seconds, he stroked her hard and quaking nub. Then his finger was gone, and it took every bit of self-control not to sink her teeth into him. She was trying to straighten when he flattened his hands over her breasts and pushed. At the last moment, he looped an arm behind her back and guided her to the ground. When her spine rested on the grasses and the smell of growth and dirt was strong in her nostrils, he slid his hand out from under her.

She studied the powerful form over her. He consumed her. That's what it came down to, being consumed. And yet, there was no fear in her, no sense of being overpowered. Surrendering to a message and force without words, she raked his shoulders. He responded by growling, the sound rumbling over and

in her. Leaning low, he nipped at her shoulders, the bite hard enough to abrade her skin. Sighing, she hooked an arm around his neck and guided his head so his face was between her breasts.

He licked and nibbled the hollow before doing the same to each breast. Inhuman sounds escaped her gaping mouth; she thought she heard Cougar Spirit growl.

Somehow Stark was between her wide-spread legs, his cock pressing against her opening. Her feral sounds became hungry whimpers as she lifted her pelvis to welcome him.

There. In. Hard and strong. United.

Knowing she was trapped as she'd never been, she scooted down and further sealed the union. He did more than fill her, more than consume her. She'd become part of him, not separate human beings united by sex, but fused body and mind.

The time of resisting, of running, of demanding freedom, was over. For now. There was only his cock pressing against her inner tissues and a fullness that resonated throughout her. Blinking him into clarity, she bent her knees so her heels rested on the base of his ass. Her hands gripped his buttocks.

"Finally. Oh God, finally." She wasn't sure which of them had spoken.

He'd lifted his upper body and was supporting it by locking his right elbow, his hand inches from her neck. His gaze was intense, his body hard and trembling. He put her in mind of an impending storm, a whip and whirl of wind and energy. Electricity hummed around her, reminding her of the seconds before a lightning strike when the air gathers itself for the explosion. Giving herself up to the storm, she became a reckless mortal by embracing the strength and relentless power. How many times had she huddled under a sheltering tree with rain pounding all around, or stared out at a purple-black sky splintered by lightning strikes, humbled by nature's might?

Nature. Animal. She'd become both those things.

"We're one," she said with her heart beating like a frenzied drum.

"It has begun." With that, he drove into her, powering himself deep and wide.

It has begun. Did he mean there'd never be an end and that today's fucking would unite them for life? Sudden fear that she'd never again be a separate person blunted her body's response to the spearing cock. She didn't realize she'd scratched his buttocks until he brought his face within an inch of hers.

"Don't." That's all he said, don't. And with the command, the fear slipped away to be replaced by that sense of oneness. She was his. And he'd become hers. For now.

There. His body pulling away and then powering forward, harsh and wild. There was nothing restrained or civilized about his thrusts. He came at her again and again until she was dizzy with his strength, her pussy a million fragments of sensation.

She was nothing under him, a frail female being fucked by an alpha male, a vessel, a receptacle.

No, she amended as he forced an arm under her shoulders and lifted her off the ground. She was no damsel or helpless and hapless bitch. He'd freed her, shaken off the shackles of civilization.

She stared up at the sky and treetops, her world a kaleidoscope of blue and green and dancing branches with a solitary hawk and beyond the drifting predator a jet trail.

So far away. Part of a foreign world.

Just as she reached the edge, his body-jarring thrusts slowed to long, sleek glides. His cock caressing her cunt walls put her in mind of a sightless man exploring his world with his fingertips. The gentle strokes kept her just below the brink and made it possible for her to concentrate on each touch, every embrace. Gripping his upper arms, she closed her eyes, her mind holding on to the colors and dancing branches, the watching hawk.

Cougar Spirit too was watching. She felt the predator's steady gaze on every inch of her, his impact blending with Stark's and becoming one.

No fear now, not even question. She accepted that Cougar Spirit had somehow blended and united with Stark.

Stark again nibbled at her breasts, again laid a wet trail between them. She realized he was marking her, giving himself in the pure and uninhibited way of an animal. And because she was his mate today, she clung to him and tightened her pussy muscles until his cock stilled.

"What—are you doing?" he demanded.

"We're equals." The words closed around her. "For right now, we are," she tried to amend. "This—all I want is to fuck. Just fuck."

"Then let me do my job."

Forcing herself to relax, she concentrated on the press of skin against skin. He loomed over her, his weight holding her to the ground. Her teeth and nails might stop him, but if he was as primitive as she sensed, aggression on her part would only trigger the same from him.

There, his cock once more challenging her, moving free and full. Although she loved the sweat and smell and hunger of sex, her most violent climaxes had come from clit stimulation. She hadn't had that many partners and only two had truly gotten it. As for why she hadn't said anything to Stark—

Because you're afraid you'll never be able to put yourself back together.

Casting off dangerous thoughts of what it would feel like to have his tongue and teeth and fingers controlling her over-the-top sensitive nub, she turned her head to the side and stared up at the sky. She was trying to make it come into focus when he nibbled the side of her neck.

Explosion! Not a climax, but an unraveling of her senses.

"Stop! Oh God, I can't—stop."

Instead of ceasing his attack, he closed his mouth around tendon and vein. Heat from his expelled breath bloomed from ear to shoulder.

"Oh God, God!"

Holding on much as a lion or tiger might control its prey, he continued. In her mind, she saw his toes pressing against the ground as he drove himself into her. No matter that she was in over her head, she clasped his arms with all her strength. Her heels pressed against his ass, and sweat sealed them together.

She'd become animal, as wild as he was, knowing nothing beyond need. She writhed under him. Everything in her became movement and action, energy firing throughout her. By turn she clung to his arms, pulled his head down against her breasts, or dug her fingertips into his buttocks. By arching to the side, she managed to bury a thumb in his crack. Once there she prodded and teased and laughed when he tried to pull away.

"Get back here," she commanded, slapping his buttocks with her free hand. "Take your punishment."

"Doesn't—damnation—doesn't feel like punishment."

He'd released her throat so he could speak, and instead of reclaiming his predator hold, he closed in on her left breast. Sucking her nipple into his wet mouth, he lifted his head a little, bringing her breast up with him.

The drawing sensation, ah, hell, it sent her off into a new direction. Everything was happening at once, his cock claiming and pounding, his body imprisoning hers, mouth taking ownership of her breast, one arm again bracing his upper body while the other slid under her back and once more lifted her off the ground. Her thumb slipped out of the home she'd found for it; she let her head dangle.

Too far gone. Incapable of meeting him strength for strength after all. Floating and flailing in his grip. Sensation sparking from her captured breast and throughout her invaded pussy, the flame-shards meeting in her belly and womb.

I'm coming.

Raw female cries exploded as the first wave slammed into her. "Help me!" she sobbed. "Oh, shit, help—damn! Oh, damn!"

Other sounds, rough and wild and uncontrolled, accompanied by his wet heat deep inside said his own climax had hit him. He'd become all male animal and as such utterly vulnerable, but she was too far gone to do more than scratch his shoulder.

Heat. Again and again. Waves of fire tearing at her sanity and making her cry out. She was as lost and vulnerable as he was, afraid of her body's relentless power and yet diving deep and free into wild pleasure. Familiarity with the ways of her climaxes did her no good. They'd never before gone on and on until she believed she'd break apart.

Her clit, throbbing, fired and firing. Short-circuiting over and over again. Shaking her as a cat shakes a mouse. *Help me!* she wanted to beg. At the same time, nothing had ever felt this good.

"Ah, ah, ah-ah." She whispered because her strength was spent. At the same time she clung to the powerful beast who'd ripped her apart and was the only creature who could put her back together again.

His cock jerked inside her, the movements slowly quieting as if it were dying, and she sensed he felt as overwhelmed as she did. Wave after wave rocked her. They rolled together so she couldn't tell when one ended and another began or if there was a distinction between them, but the intensity was lessening. She filled her lungs to ease her lightheadedness.

His weight pushed down and around her, pinning her beneath him. Even when his climax had spent itself and there was nothing left of him except sweat and exhaustion, his strength still rolled over her.

He had her in every way a man could possibly have a woman. In the ways of a savage beast ruled by primitive urges.

And that was why her own climax—or was it a multitude of climaxes—continued to live.

Too much! More than he'd expected.

Eyes shut against the world, Stark struggled to silence his thoughts. The fault was his, his and his damnable obsession. Cougar Spirit had brought him so deep into the creature's world that he'd all but forgotten anything else existed.

He'd committed himself to safeguarding the mountain even if it meant risking his life. What he hadn't comprehended, what maybe he'd refused to acknowledge, was that others might not embrace the same goals.

The moment he'd seen *her*, he'd wanted her body and mind, her voice and smile. The clawing need had blinded him to everything else, and he'd let himself believe she'd embrace his quest. Be his mate.

Now the darkness was lifting, forcing him to acknowledge that she was more than a soft body and feminine voice. She was much more than the being Cougar Spirit had led him to. No matter what he did, he couldn't touch Mia's mind or heart or soul, and without those things, she'd never be the companion he'd sought.

Let her go. Take her back to her world.

No! I won't be alone, I won't!

Chapter Nine

Cougar Spirit stood where Mia had spotted him when she and Stark were having sex. As far as she knew, the magnificent creature hadn't moved the whole time.

Stark had rolled off her, but his arm was thrown over her breasts, and his leg lay over hers, continuing to hold her down. Every inch of his flesh was sweat-caked; his long hair clung to his forehead and cheeks. Although something that might be panic kept clawing at her senses, she refused to let it overwhelm her. He was watching her intently, undoubtedly recording her every move and expression.

But what was he thinking?

One spring morning, she'd happened upon a coyote as it silently circled a crippled rabbit. Instead of pouncing on the hapless creature and killing it, the coyote had studied its prey much as Stark was studying her. Man and predator had the same look in their eyes, a simple statement of power and strength. The coyote had wanted the rabbit to know its life would end when and how the coyote determined. Stark needed her to acknowledge that her future was under his control and command.

"You aren't going to let me go, are you?" She didn't move.

"Cougar Mountain needs you."

So it wasn't just because Stark wanted her as his mate. A force larger than both of them held the ultimate trump card.

"You aren't enough?" she asked. "You can't protect and defend this mountain without my help?"

"I don't want to do it alone. Cougar Spirit doesn't want that for me, either."

There it was, a simple statement that marked the direction her life would take if she turned everything over to something she barely comprehended. She could tell Stark that just because he'd accepted the mountain's challenge didn't mean she was willing to throw away her future for something she'd known nothing about until a few hours ago.

But Stark's seed was still in her, his teeth had reddened her breasts, her fingernails had marked his shoulder, and she was alive! Thinking.

"Let me up."

"Don't run."

"Because you'll stop me?"

After a long and powerful gaze, he rolled onto his side, but the better part of a minute passed before she forced her legs under her. Once on her feet, she stared down at the naked man who'd tied her up and

made her beg him to fuck her. His muscles crouched just beneath the surface, and although his cock was at rest, it would soon want her again.

His cock had assumed ownership of her. It promised nothing but so much pleasure she wasn't sure she'd survive her next climax.

Did Stark want more from her than to spend the rest of her life on Cougar Mountain?

Did he know?

Shutting down the question, she focused on the unblinking four-legged beast above them.

There's no compromise to you, is there? she silently asked Cougar Spirit. *All or nothing. Either I bend my will to what you want, or what, you'll kill me?*

Not want, need.

She nearly challenged Cougar Spirit to explain further, but her spent and trembling body had started to sing. Mountain air and heat flowed over her flesh to remind her of the hundreds, maybe thousands, of days she'd spent in the wilderness. The finest silk couldn't match this sensation.

And yet this moment was about more than air and heat because Cougar Mountain was home to deer and elk, trees and creeks, all of them vulnerable to man's senseless and sometimes cruel attack.

Walking barefoot over forest debris had already become as easy as standing on plush carpet. With each step she felt stronger, renewed, her sex-wounded body humming and alive. She loved her nudity, tangled hair and aching breasts. Her body remembered the feel of Stark's flesh against it. Most of all, her core comprehended.

"You believe you've done it, don't you?" she asked when she and Cougar Spirit stood inches apart. "Taken control of me."

I need you. And him.

Not trusting herself to look back at Stark, she focused on the animal. "I know what you're capable of. You're the most powerful animal in the forest, top of the food chain."

Not me, man is.

Much as she hated hearing that, he was right. A well-placed bullet would end any predator's life. Cougar Spirit might be immune to man's weapons, but not deer and elk, bear and eagle. Only man—and woman—could hope to defend them.

"I have a career just as Stark once did."

I know.

"But you got him to turn his back on that and everything else that was once his life."

Yes.

This time she lacked the strength to battle her need to look at Stark. He'd stood up but had made no move toward her, the distance between them letting her know he understood her need for time alone with Cougar Spirit. Just the same, she took note of how the wilderness surrounded and embraced Stark. He'd

told her a little about his existence before coming to Cougar Mountain, the job he'd been questioning, the lack of a meaningful personal life. Still, leaving the familiar must have been hard.

But he'd done so because he'd heard Cougar Spirit's plea through every fiber of his being. The mountain and the creatures who called it home had become more important to him than his own life.

"I can't just stay here," she told Cougar Spirit. "If I do, people will come looking for me."

I know.

What had Stark done, she wondered. Had he turned in his resignation, told his landlord he wasn't coming back, sold his possessions? Could she do the same?

Stark.

Beyond tears, she retraced her steps but stopped when she was still out of Stark's reach. "You made incredible sacrifices," she told him.

"I didn't see it that way; I still don't."

In other words, his commitment would remain steadfast whether or not she willingly joined him.

"I *saw* one poacher today, but there are more, aren't there?"

"And timber thieves. And those who leave campfires burning. And others who tear up the ground with their machinery and vehicles."

"Cougar Mountain isn't the only place that happens."

"I have to start somewhere."

"Violence isn't the only option."

Not a sound, not a movement, simply the sense that his entire being was focused on her. She hadn't simply given fantasy free rein when she likened Stark to Cougar Spirit. Whether the otherworldly being was responsible or Stark had already carried the essence of what he'd become in him didn't matter. The end result was that he was part of this forest.

"You said—you told me that there isn't the necessary manpower to go after poachers."

"Yes."

"Because poaching is an attack on one animal at a time. But what if what's under attack is an entire stand of trees?" Forcing herself, she glanced at Cougar Spirit. "I have some idea what those operations are like. It takes a number of men, heavy equipment, time, and noise."

Positioning herself so she could easily look from Stark to Cougar Spirit, she continued. "How did the two of you propose to put an end to that?"

Head back, Stark focused on the predator.

Kill! Cougar Spirit insisted. Tear out their throats. Spill their blood over the earth.

"And then what?" she asked despite her repulsion. "Even you can't get to every timber thief out there. And if Stark does the attacking, he's risking his own life. How will you continue if he's killed?"

Fighting a wave of terror at the thought, she locked her gaze on Cougar Spirit. “What?” she demanded. “Haven’t you thought about that?”

If he dies, I’ll find others.

For an instant, she hated Cougar Spirit for what he’d just said, but how could she blame him for thinking like an animal; that’s what he was.

“You don’t have to. Not if—if we—Stark and I handle things the way they should be.”

“Tell me.”

Grateful to have Stark to talk to, she dismissed Cougar Spirit. “There are laws against what those so-called loggers are doing. And against those who use the forest to grow illegal crops. If we use those laws—”

“How?”

“I’m not sure, yet. But if we had pictures, or even better, video of the operations we find or Cougar Spirit leads us to—do you understand what I’m saying?” Excitement quickened her words.

“Not killing?”

“No,” she whispered. Then she took hold of Stark’s hand and pressed it against her breasts. “Ours are human hearts full of humanity, not just animal instinct. Cougar Spirit selected us to do what he can’t, but that doesn’t mean we become like him.”

An intellect she hadn’t noted before bloomed in Stark’s gaze. The change reminded her of the look in her nephew’s eyes when he realized he didn’t need training wheels. At that moment, a dependent child had embraced independence. Stark had long embraced his independence, but Cougar Spirit had taken some of that from him.

It was time for him to make his own decisions again.

To join her in a task that excited her as she’d never been excited.

“You have a friend who is a local ranger, right?” she asked. “If you went to him with proof—”

“Not just him, law enforcement too.”

“And the media.” She laughed. “Think of the possibilities, the press, the pressure on government to adequately fund—”

He silenced her by pulling her close. And when she lifted her head, he covered her mouth with his, his lips strong and yet gentle on hers. Warm. Alive. His mouth opened; so did hers. Tongues touched, heated, danced together.

A long time later they broke free, but by then his cock had been fed, and her cunt sang.

“You’re staying, then?” he asked.

“Yes. Yes.”

“Willing to put Cougar Mountain’s needs ahead of yours?”

“It won’t be like that,” she told the man she knew she’d spend the rest of her life with. “Just as you’ve become part of this mountain, so have I.”

“Because of Cougar Spirit?”

“No, not just him,” she said and laughed again. Laughed and brushed her breasts over his chest. “Because of you.”

About the Author

A fast-fingered writer of erotica, Vonna Harper loves penning stories set in remote locations where her characters can give into primitive impulse. Throw in a little capture and/or bondage and she's a happy camper. Her website is www.VonnaHarper.com. She's also on Twitter and Facebook and loves connecting with readers.

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Loves lies behind the eyes of a predator.

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The longer Dana Mallon studies the magnificent jaguar confined to a nature preserve, the greater her sense that forces beyond her comprehension are at work. Looking into the eyes of the big cat stirs something in her heart and heats the jaguar tattoo on her hip, stimulating visions of a fierce, naked man.

Instead of fleeing the vision's blatant sexuality, she follows the primal urge of her body into his arms. With his touch, her very existence shifts, and a lifetime of loneliness fades beneath the power of their sexual union.

Nacon is determined to learn how this woman freed him from centuries in limbo. There's only one way to learn the truth—take her back with him to the past. And force her to embrace the incomprehensible.

Warning: Fangs, claws and great sex!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bloodhunter:

Heat seeped up from the earth to caress Dana's bare toes. All around unseen insects whispered their secrets, and the lush vegetation kept hidden the location of countless animals, snakes and frogs. Although she acknowledged the hidden creatures' presence, they mattered little. Her journey, this instinctive placing of one foot ahead of the other, claimed her full attention. And yet she didn't know where she was going, where she'd been when she started walking, even who she was. She was naked, her arms empty. Her eyes adjusted to the scant illumination offered by stars and moon. Weariness, thirst, even questions didn't touch her mind. She walked because that was her task, her passion.

Counting distracted her from what she was doing, but a skimming sensation along her shoulders brought her head up.

She slowed then stopped, somehow knowing she'd reached where she was supposed to be. Her arms settled along her sides and started working her hips, fingers caressing exercise-heated skin. Although she wanted to work her way to her core, the sudden need for answers kept them on safer territory.

The trail ahead of her snaked into a great thicket, making her wonder if it ended there. This was her destination?

"Am I alone?" she asked the night.

"No."

A voice like a distant and lonely guitar played by a master. A male voice.

"Are you waiting for me?"

"I believe— Yes."

The dangerous words burned her nerve endings and sent her to trembling. Her cunt's demands became harder to deny. Unable to speak for the dry knot in her throat, she widened her stance. She became as wild as the land she was in.

Now the male voice spoke to her without words, the weight and warmth of him straightening her spine and hardening her nipples. Her breasts throbbed and memories of countless fuckings pooled around her labia. *"I'm sex,"* he was telling her in that secret language they shared. *"I may be other things to other people, but to you, nothing except what my cock offers your cunt matters."*

"How arrogant you are! To think that's the only thing I care about."

"It is, Dana, it is. Put your hands on your breasts," he said in his silent way. *"Massage them and accept that those fingers belong to me, not you, and that you need this to live."*

"How do you know so much about me?"

"Because I now know I've been looking for you for thousands of years."

He didn't mean that; he couldn't! But how could she tell him when her breasts were so hungry and she might climax if she so much as pressed her legs together? He wanted her to massage her breasts, so she did, sometimes courting pain, sometimes barely touching herself with butterfly fingers. These weren't her fingers, she told herself. They belonged to him. Her back arched, and her mouth parted. She heard herself breathing, quick and loud and heavy with need.

Need! Clawing and crying need for whatever the stranger granted her.

"So many years of searching, but I found you. Even when I didn't know what I was searching for."

Ah, back to using his seductive voice again. "How did you find me?"

"A million ways, whispers and light, the smell of you."

She smelled of her hot juices, primal scents that aroused and demanded. "What do you want from me?"

"To believe in me. And once you have, to travel with me."

"Travel? Where?" Closing her thumbs and fingers around her nubs, she squeezed. No pain, just more of the melting heat in her core. "Where do you want to take me?"

"To where the answers lie."

A spark of something she couldn't name struck the base of her throat only to quickly spread down and out. His voice, his damnable voice was responsible! As the ever-growing ember crawled over her belly and sent lightning fingers along her inner tissues, she lost all interest in their conversation and the finger of fear that had briefly touched her. One thing and one thing only mattered. Seeing him. Touching him. Claiming and being claimed.

Infused with this single all-encompassing reason for living, she stepped toward the thicket. With her second step, she knew without a doubt that he was in there, waiting for her, challenging.

Promising?

No fear now. No hesitation. Nothing except sex-scent in the air and hot explosions threatening to turn her into an animal in heat. Cupping her breasts, she held them up as gifts. They were so heavy, heavy like the weight and warmth between her legs. Animals fucked and mated. When nature's primal need controlled them, they knew nothing of restraint or embarrassment. They needed to mate, only mate. They sought and demanded sex.

She'd do that. Pull the man behind the voice out of the brush and throw him down and mount him. With her teeth on his throat and her hands hard on his sex, she'd demand her rights. Ride him. Ride him until he had nothing left to give her and she'd screamed out her release.

Naked, he'd be naked. Erect and aroused with a staying power to match hers, and animal lust coursing through his veins.

Nearly insane with a power she couldn't comprehend or control, she reached the great vegetation. But before she could plunge into it, everything went still. Waiting. The world was waiting.

Not the naked male animal she craved after all. Instead, the tall, strong creature emerging from his hiding place wore a cape that caressed and cradled him from shoulders to mid thighs. The instant she saw the cape, she knew what it was made from, but revulsion and disbelief came before unwanted but necessary acceptance.

A jaguar pelt. Beautiful and awful. Stripped of the big cat's living heat.

Screaming out her rage, she tore the pelt off its owner and pummeled his chest. Then, sobbing, she clutched the pungent smelling skin with its whisper-soft fur to her breasts.

"You killed it! You bastard, you damned bastard, you killed it!"

No denial. No words at all. Instead he stood with his arms at his sides as she'd done earlier, with his head high and his hard, hot, uncircumcised cock thrusting toward her.

"Accept me. Believe in me."

"No, I can't! I won't."

"Yes, you will."

Screaming again, she turned and ran.

Dana was on her feet beside the bed. With the dream still gripping her, she couldn't put her mind to the question of what she intended to accomplish so she stood while circulation returned to her legs and clarity to her mind.

That's all it had been, a dream, albeit a vivid and disturbing one, especially the part about the jaguar skin and the detail about him not having been circumcised. But there was no reason why life as she'd always known it should cease to exist. All she needed to do was become clear-headed again. Maybe a trip to the bathroom followed by a drink of water followed by...what?

The more she thought about it, the more the bathroom seemed like the logical starting point. Fortunately, the cabin was so small that that task called for taking only took a few steps. After tending to nature's needs, she ran the water and cupped her hands under the cold flow. Once she'd satisfied her thirst, she ran her dripping hands over her face and shivered.

Animal attraction is the essence of their power.

Shifters' Captive

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Magical Ménages, Book 1

Waitress Sherrie Stolz never thought she'd need her chatting-up skills to play along with a hot, sexy kidnapper who rants about were-animals and psychic possession. Then he proves his story by changing into a wolf before her eyes.

Human contact never interested John Walker, but his mission is desperate. The pack seer insists Sherrie is the only one who can save his pack from a rash of mysterious comas. His connection with Sherrie is instant, powerful and beyond rational explanation...until a third piece of the puzzle enters the picture.

Grant Perron follows his instincts only to find his prize in the hands of his rival. He's poised for battle—until he learns his panther shifter clan suffers the same fate as John's pack. And there's more. When the three of them touch, the primal, erotic power surge swells like the waves of an earthquake.

Sherrie's hands—and bed—are suddenly full, figuring out how to manage two snarling alpha males without giving in to the urge to knock their heads together. And channel her new-found power before a villain uses it to destroy them all...

Warning: Contains abduction, m/f/m ménage, oral & anal sex, rough sex, wilderness sex, astral projection sex and plain old sex in the bedroom—times three.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Shifters' Captive:

"We're trapped." Sherrie stated the obvious as she craned her neck to look up the wall of rock. Somewhere at the top was the cave where their nemesis lived. Was this avalanche a coincidence or had he meant to kill or capture them?

John moved around the perimeter, pacing the limits of their enclosure. Perron got to his feet, tossing the bloodied T-shirt aside and scaled a pile of stony rubble. He attempted to climb over the boulder that had nearly crushed him.

"Damn it!" he roared in frustration as he fell back and landed on his feet.

"I told you rushing into this was a bad idea," John said. "Now we're trapped. I'm sure it's no accident."

Grant scowled and started to take off his shirt. "You can stand here and complain about being stuck. I'm shifting and finding a way out."

Without another word, Walker followed his example, quickly stripping. Once again their bodies rippled. Charged static electricity lifted Sherrie's hair and made her arms prickle. Suddenly, she longed

fiercely to be able to shift too. Into what form she had no clue, but the idea of releasing the primitive animal inside her to howl and run was deeply seductive.

She pressed back against the stone as the two wild beasts ranged around the pen in a similar way to their human counterparts. The wolf nosed the ground and whined as he searched for a break in the rock pile big enough to squeeze through. The big cat gathered its weight and sprang with a powerful thrust of his hind legs, but the leap carried him only halfway up the boulders. His nails scrabbled on stone before he fell back into the debris with a howl of rage, tail lashing.

There's no way out, but feed me their energies and I'll release you. The voice sounded in Sherrie's head as clearly as if she wore headphones. She clapped her hands to her ears. It was one thing to receive silent communications in a dream, but shocking in her waking life.

Join me, and together we can have limitless power.

Get out of my mind! She shook her head, clearing it of the seductive haze that had settled over her like morning mist. She was beginning to understand how this guy worked—a chance meeting, mesmerizing eye contact and next thing he was inside your mind, manipulating it. Well, she was too strong to give in to that.

Besides, her animal companions were starting to squabble. Perron brushed past Walker in his furious pacing to and fro, and the wolf bared his teeth and growled. In response, the giant cat roared. The pair faced off, hackles raised, their bodies tensed to attack.

“Hey!” Sherrie shouted. “Stop it!”

They ignored her and continued to stalk in a circle around each other, gazes locked together. John's menacing growl rumbled louder. Grant's ears were laid flat. He hissed and sprang at John, his huge body bowling him over. They wrapped around each other, teeth flashing, claws ripping, tumbling over and over. The wolf managed to grip the cat's throat and pin him for a moment, but a heartbeat later, the much bigger panther was on top.

“Shit!” Sherrie could see John was going to get the worst of it since Grant outweighed him and had razor sharp cat-claws. She scooped up a rock and threw it at the fighting animals. It didn't slow them down. They continued to bite and claw at each other with a ferocious noise that made gooseflesh rise on her skin.

Sherrie picked up a larger rock and heaved it at the panther's head. It crashed into his shoulder and knocked him sideways. The panther released his opponent and turned toward her, showing sharp fangs. Her heart pounded. At that moment, she was terrified for her life. These were two dangerous animals who might not remember their human side in the heat of battle.

“Stop fighting,” she yelled. “This isn't helping.”

The wolf crawled from beneath Perron's body and staggered to his feet, whining and shaking his head. One ear was bent and bleeding. The panther backed off, still hissing, before turning to lick his wounded flank.

“We have to work together to get out of here. Stop acting like idiots.” She felt like the idiot, talking to a pair of animals as if they’d understand her. She wondered how much of their intellect was functioning. Moving closer, she held out a hand toward each beast, palms open. She touched John’s muzzle, the top of Grant’s head, and stroked both soothingly. Soft fur caressed her palms and, once again, an electric charge entered her from contact with the two shifters. Lust, power, strength and awareness flowed through her.

Almost simultaneously, the two beasts began to change to human form. She felt the vibration, the twisting beneath her hands, and pulled away to watch while skin replaced fur and animal features became human once more.

Given their situation, she shouldn’t have had a lustful thought to spare at the sight of their nude bodies, yet her body seemed to have a will of its own. One glimpse of John’s dark-haired chest and groin and his semi-rigid cock made her stomach flutter. He bent his head to examine the clawed flesh on his side, and she longed to kiss his wound better. Grant looked just as sexy with his rumpled blond hair, one hand rubbing a band of tooth marks around his throat. An image of the pair of them locked together, not in combat, but in a sweaty sexual clinch, flashed in her mind. Liquid heat bloomed between her legs.

“Are you two quite finished?” she demanded, using anger to distract her from the mounting urgency of her desire. She threw a pair of jeans at Grant, and he caught them, but didn’t put them on. They dangled from his hand as he stood like a glorious statue and examined their rocky prison.

“Maybe we could boost you up,” John said. “You could find your way back to the Blazer and drive to town for help.”

Sherrie stared at the imposing height. “I think we’re pretty well trapped.”

She had a growing sense this was playing out exactly as it must and they’d find it impossible to escape their cage even if she was able to reach the top of the rock. They were trapped here together for a reason. Deep inside, she felt something was about to happen between her and these two men—a union that couldn’t be stopped. It both frightened and excited her, but it was undeniable. Only together could they free themselves and overcome their enemy.

Grant was near panic, although he’d never let the others know it. He hated being caged with a fiery passion. His palms were slick with sweat, and his breathing was shallow, but damned if he’d have a panic attack in front of Walker. He’d turned his fear into rage and directed it at the wolf. Rolling around on the ground biting and scratching had been better than falling apart. Now he scanned the top of the cliff wall and the morning sky overhead. Somewhere up there was the asshole who was playing with them like marionettes.

“Hey.” Sherrie was suddenly beside him, offering a bottle of water from the knapsack. “You look really pale. Sit down and rest.” She pressed her hand on his shoulder, and the warm contact distracted him from his apprehension. In two seconds flat, he went from near panic at the idea of being trapped to wanting

her with a bone-shaking desire. His libido always ran hot, but his instant reaction to this woman was abnormal. More magic like the dream travel.

Grant stared down into her light green eyes then at her plump lower lip that beckoned him to kiss it. Obeying his instinct, he dipped his head to cover her soft mouth with his. Potent energy passed between them. He closed his eyes and drank it in—until a hard hand thumped his shoulder, pushing him away.

“Hey!” Walker stood between them, fists clenched.

Sherrie grabbed his arm. “It’s all right.” She put her hand on his cheek, drawing his attention to her face, and repeated softly, “It’s all right.”

Rising on her toes, she kissed the wolf, a light peck at first that soon became a deep, searching kiss. Grant’s already hard cock stiffened even more. He palmed his erection, squeezing lightly as he watched the hungry mashing of lips and tongue. Then he put a hand on Sherrie’s hip, completing the joining, and once again a powerful jolt crackled through all three of them, their energies entwining as well as their bodies.

Grant accepted the sensation with a satisfied grunt, but the wolf broke away, his eyes wide and worried. “Damn!”

“This is supposed to happen, the three of us together.” Sherrie sounded confident, almost serene. “Can’t you feel it, John? Don’t fear it or fight it.”



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