

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



TESS MACKALL
NATALIE DAE

BLACK COUGAR CURSE

Black Cougar Curse

Tess MacKall & Natalie Dae

Deep in the mountain wilderness, Lucia Chavez searches for closure to her father's death, and the mythical black cougar he sought. Drop-dead sexy Cherokee Indian guide Sam Starr knows more than he's telling. After he saves Lucia from being swept away in a mudslide, the bath they both need turns steamy indeed. Sam and Lucia are living proof that near-death experiences can bring two people closer together – they can't keep their hands off each other.

Amidst danger and mystery, Sam and Lucia explore the lust that burns between them. If their desire gets any stronger it could bring down the mountains. Ancient secrets hold the key to their unbridled sexual need. Was their passion written in the stars?

One man. One woman. A curse that binds them – and could tear them apart.

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BLACK COUGAR CURSE

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Prologue

1822

Lavani splashed through the autumn-chilled stream and onto the grassy bank where she lay in the sun dreaming about the blue-eye. For two moons the man Daniel had stayed with their tribe, trading beads and fine cloth. The sight of him riding atop a big black horse toward their village that first day had taken her breath and pushed an odd tremble through her body to settle low into her belly. Her father, an elder of their tribe, had come to call Daniel "friend" to the Cherokee and had invited him to stay and share meals, to learn their ways.

She smiled, the vision of Daniel offering her a wildflower last night making its way into her thoughts. The words he had whispered were so tender and loving. He wanted her and she wanted him. Nothing could keep them apart.

In his early days among them, when he spoke to her, Lavani lost her voice and skittered away like a frightened doe. But she had not been able to stop herself from stealing looks at him whenever he was near. With the passing of time, she had grown bolder in her study of him, sometimes catching him watching her too. One day he asked if she would walk with him. Had her father known, she would have been punished, but the blue-eyed man with flaxen hair coaxed feelings from her she did not understand so she risked her father's anger.

Remembering their nights of forbidden kisses, Lavani touched herself. She plucked at her nipples but imagined it was Daniel's mouth on her breasts instead of her fingers. Drops of water trailed down her body, tickling her skin. The sun beamed warm and bright as she lay there, her hand now between her legs. She closed her eyes and brought Daniel's face to mind.

He knelt before her and buried his face within the hidden passage to her womanhood. Lavani could not be still beneath the caress of his tongue and he held her by her hips to quiet her movement. Sounds came from her lips she had never made before and joined the familiar cries of the night animals.

As she envisioned Daniel pleasuring her, a gentle breeze carrying the scent of the meadow, flowed over her naked body. She breathed in the fragrance of sun-drenched wheat ready for harvest and the abundant wildflowers that grew among the stalks. Heat blossomed inside her and snatched her breath, lifting her high into the heavenly feeling taking over her body.

She squeezed her thighs together and Daniel's face vanished into wisps of clouds soaring above. With her fingers still deep within the wetness of her guarded place, she

rested until the beating in her chest slowed and her breathing calmed. Her eyelids fluttered open and she saw the sun beginning to drop just below the mountain peaks, the fiery river chasing over her flesh a rival to its warmth. The day was done and the men would return, anxious for rest and food.

While the men of her tribe had hunted, Daniel had stayed behind and every day they had walked together. As time passed, their need to be with each other had grown stronger and they met by the stream nightly. His kisses sang to her deep within her heart and her body had wanted more. Daniel promised that when the time was right he would ask for her hand.

Lavani had tried to explain that her father would never allow their union. That she was promised to Manohar, grandson to the *Didanawisgi*, their medicine man. But Daniel would not listen, saying they would run away together if necessary. To Lavani, it all seemed so hopeless, but in Daniel's arms she believed. Then something wonderful happened and she knew that no matter what she would leave her people and go with Daniel to live in the white man's world.

Their kisses had brought about a fever within her—within them both. Passion overwhelmed them. They had walked deep into the woods and Daniel had laid her down on a blanket of moss and touched her in places she knew he should not, but her body and heart would not allow her to say no. Naked beneath the moon with the wind blowing across their bodies, they had loved one another, joining with all they had to give.

As she rushed along the path, her heart leapt. She would see Daniel riding into the village with the other men—and she would see him by the stream later that night too.

Three mornings ago, her father had asked Daniel to join in the hunt and each day he had left her. It saddened her not to be with him, but also cheered her that her father had asked him to go. To hunt with the men of her tribe was an honor for Daniel, an acceptance. If only she could find a way to undo her father's promise to Manohar. Shuddering, she thought back to how Manohar had looked at her the day before when she had returned from the stream. It was as though he knew her every thought. Fire had leapt from his eyes and he had patted his loins and smiled at her. The thought of being touched by him brought shivers deeper than any winter cold to cover her skin. Sickened, she had turned from him and run to tell her friend, Indulala. Why was he not hunting with the others? Had he stayed behind to taunt her?

And he had not hunted again today.

Lavani tried to forget about Manohar, She was too happy with Daniel to dwell on her intended. Daniel would find a way to take her from here and Indulala had promised to help them. They would make plans to leave soon. She would miss her family and Indulala, but she and Daniel would have their own family to love. In the distance, she heard the pounding of horse hooves. Smiling, she skipped along the path back to the village, her heart filled with love and joy.

* * * * *

While the blue-eye hunted with the others, Manohar had made his way back to the village in search of Lavani. He had found her that first morning bathing in the stream. The sun touching her skin had started a fire in his loins he could not quench. She was his promised one and he should have the right to take her, but he would not chance angering her father.

For two days he had watched her. Today he had arrived ahead of her and crouched in the shadows of the tall trees. It was not long before he caught the sound of her softly humming. She came out of the thick brush and walked to the stream's edge where she shed her clothing, slowly entering the rushing water. Her hands curved and brought the wetness to her bosom. He held his breath as the clear drops trailed over her body.

A short time later she rose from the stream's rippling blue veil, her body shining. Of slender form, her breasts high and proud, her womanhood covered with a thick patch of black hair, her beauty struck him with the force of thunder. He gripped his manhood with his fingers and stroked its thickness as she lay down in the grass and brought her hands to her special place.

She should not touch herself that way. Pleasure should only be found in his arms. Who had taught her such forbidden things? It was as he thought. Why he had stayed behind and watched her. The blue-eye had touched her. Touched what was his. Anger rose in his chest and Manohar swore the white man would die for dishonoring him.

And Lavani would be his once more – but not as his mate. Their people would shun her and she would be used by him whenever he desired, belong to him. Not even her father could save her. Stirred by the thought of having her night after night, he jerked his length harder and faster as he watched her hips lift from the ground and sway. Moans drifted to him and tore through the haze of his bitterness as he spilled his seed on the forest floor. He rested against a tree as she dressed then hurried down the path to the village.

Tomorrow he would hunt with the blue-eye. And the man who had taken what was his would not return.

* * * * *

Smoke curled upward, flakes of fire drifting in the piney breeze as heavy mountain mist poured from the jagged shadows and hovered above the clearing. White Owl watched his grandson, Manohar, who stood at the forest's edge. It pained the old medicine man to see the face of someone he loved so filled with fear. Yet through pride and the need to avenge the wrong that Manohar believed had come to him, Manohar had bound himself to this place, this night, and to the curse he'd asked White Owl to place on Lavani.

White Owl sat cross-legged by the fire, his chant ripening in the wind, the sound an eerie echo swallowed by the white fog. He stared at the vision within the fire, his own

reflection glaring back at him, whispering words only he understood. His time at the feet of the place of blue smoke, what the white man called the Great Blue Ridge, had been marked well. Deep lines carved into his face told of his journey. He was at the time for his ending, but because of what he was about to do, he would not be given the reward of his rest, not called to the home of the spirits. Instead, he would dwell in this place for many moons to come.

From the murky veil, a shrill cry pierced the night. Flames streaked upward from the crackling logs and spit red cinders into the black sky. Manohar came closer and clutched a dagger at his side, his moccasined feet planted firmly apart.

Lavani's tortured face floated within the smoke. Manohar staggered, his eyes wide. White Owl shook the turtle-shell rattler and continued to chant. Lavani had cursed herself by shunning Manohar's love, driving Manohar's need for revenge. Alone, the maiden's body twisted as she struggled to give life to the blue-eye's son. A son who would bear the mark of Manohar's revenge until the end of time and beyond.

The wind shifted, wailed, and White Owl thrust the rattle northward, to the south, east then west. Ancient words he did not want to utter came from his lips, but the honor of his grandson must be avenged this night. Dying into a gentle breeze, the smoky air swirled and wrapped around them. Manohar moved even closer to the fire and White Owl nodded for him to sit.

"Your actions this night, son of my son, will change the lives of many. Are you prepared to carry the burden of this curse? For as you curse others so shall you be cursed."

"My soul will live many lives and I will be aware of this. What comes about this night is not a curse." Manohar gazed at the old man, a look of challenge on his face.

"A soul learns as it passes from one body to another, one time to another. Your soul will be aware of the past while the souls of those you curse will not. Your soul will never learn, never know love." White Owl's words ended in a pleading tone. *Why could he not make his grandson understand?* Souls passed through life searching for love, the only reason for being. What Manohar wanted would leave him without love. And he would be aware that love would never find him and be condemned to suffer through life without knowing the peace and contentment love brought.

"Love." Manohar spat at the ground. "Love has wronged me. *She* has wronged me. I took the blue-eye from her and I will take him once more. His child must not live. It is my will and you must do as I ask to avenge the dishonor that has come to me—your grandson."

White Owl pondered telling his grandson that by giving him what he wanted, White Owl himself would be cursed. If Manohar loved him as much as White Owl loved his grandson, would Manohar put a stop to this curse if he knew what fate awaited his grandfather? White Owl looked deeply into Manohar's eyes. What he saw frightened him. Dark spirits dwelled there and he could not bear to hear his grandson's

answer. He would rather suffer endless moons at the foot of the mountains than know the truth.

With a heavy sigh, White Owl tossed gray powder into the fire and the flames arrowed into the air, seeking out the dark spirits. Glowing ash floated around them and fell to the ground. The circle where they sat rumbled beneath them. White Owl's gaze strayed to Manohar who sat there, trembling, looking afraid, but it was clear that Manohar's pride would not end what should be forgiven.

"Love decides, Manohar. Always," White Owl shouted at his grandson. "You will do well to remember this during your journey through these long years ahead."

"Love decides nothing, old one. I decide!"

White Owl passed the turtle-shell rattle from one hand to the other, chanting and weaving his body, sending the dark spirits on their way.

* * * * *

A rustling noise brought Lavani's attention to the opening in the cold hut. No one had come to her *asi* to lay a fire for the birth of her child. Her only friend, Indulala, crawled inside, kneeled next to Lavani and took her hand. Tears slid from Lavani's eyes as she stared at Indulala's face. No more would they look upon each other with the promise of another sunrise. Lavani's mother had dreamt of this day, foretelling the birth of Lavani's son—a son who would walk between two worlds.

And of Lavani's passing when he entered this one.

In a weak, anguished voice, she whispered to Indulala, "When my son comes, you must take him to the place beyond the hidden waterfall and find my mother's brother." She heaved in a breath, preparing herself for what was to come. "Give him my son. Beg him to care for him as his own."

Lavani squeezed Indulala's hand in hopes of gaining her friend's promise. With Indulala's quiet oath, spoken only with the closing of her eyes, Lavani smiled. She flattened her head to the fur pallet and invited visions of Daniel to strengthen her. His blue eyes swam before her, the sound of his laughter soothing her fears.

Choking back tears, Lavani sat up and spread her legs. She curled forward and pushed. Pain seared her body as her son's head breached her womb and he reached for life. The domed house trembled. Flames leapt from the once-dark hearth at the center of the small hut.

It was time.

Lavani turned to Indulala and screamed at her friend to save her son. Indulala buried her hands between Lavani's legs and ripped the small, bloody form from her body. Taking a knife from her belt, she sliced the thread of life joining mother and son.

Smoke unfurled from the hearth and stretched through the hut. A low moan whispered from the gray cloud and the air heated. On her knees with the tiny life

swaddled in her buckskin skirt, Indulala backed out of the *asi*. One last time Lavani's gaze met hers as the fire spewed wings of flame.

The dark spirits had come and Lavani would give herself to them in sacrifice for her son.

With her last breath, Lavani shut her eyes and held her arms out to Daniel, there, waiting in the summer meadow's tall green grass.

* * * * *

A tear rolled down White Owl's cheek. He looked to Manohar. An aura of blackness surrounded his grandson. The dark spirits controlled his heart. Manohar would live until those he'd cursed found love. Each body his soul inhabited would bear the mark of that vengeance, that curse, and he would be denied love.

Lavani's child would grow into a strong man, but the curse he bore would leave him alone, a heart forever wandering until the spirits were pacified and allowed him to find his mate. She too would wander, love always out of reach until they found each other.

As he watched Manohar now, he came to understand what a mistake he had made. He had been blinded by his love for the little boy who once hunted with him. Blinded by his own love and loneliness. He would give anything to take that little boy's hand once more and walk into the night with him, never looking back. What had happened to that happy child? When had the dark spirits touched his soul and moved him to this night?

There was no love in Manohar's eyes. Had there ever been?

"The dark spirits live within you now, son of my son."

"I feel no different, old one. And Lavani is no more. I will not have to look at her and see the blue-eye's child in her arms. They are gone from this earth."

"The dark spirits will only go so far, Manohar. They must leave something to chance," White Owl said.

"Lavani and the blue-eye's child are dead! That is what I wanted. That is what they gave me."

White Owl shook his head, no longer caring that the man before him did not love him. He would banish him from his sight and instead remember the little boy who once loved him. "The child of the blue-eye lives, Manohar. And he will one day find his mate and break this curse. It is then the dark spirits will come for you and you will pay for what you asked them to do."

"You lie! The child is dead!"

"No. The child breathes and is now hidden from you." White Owl pushed up from the ground, his tired body more weary than ever. He accepted his fate and would wait out the curse alone. He walked away from the circle.

"Where are you going? Come back here!" Manohar screamed.

White Owl turned to face his grandson for the last time. "Go. I will not see you again. It is finished. You must live with what you have done and one day die with it as well. And I will watch, thankful for the day it comes." White Owl shuffled away into the darkness with Manohar's angry voice at his back only a distant sound to him now.

Love would find its way and then he could rest.

Chapter One

Present Day

The call of the night bird broke the dusk, announcing evening's slow rise. *Whip-poor-will...whip-poor-will*. A black sky loomed, its mask of darkness shattered only by the soft, intermittent glow of silver slashes in the distance. Cold buffeted the sun-warmed woodland, sending a querulous tremble through the trees and the animals to a safe haven. Only one dared prowl the forest floor.

The black cougar, its man-spirit ever-vigilant.

A creature of whimsy, legendary and widely considered to be a myth, the sleek black cougar charged into the dense night. Leaves rustled beneath the merciless pounding, powerful forequarters sprinting, climbing, claws clutching. Banshee winds screamed down the mountain and tipped the treetops. The heavens emptied in a thunderous chorus and unleashed a hard rain to pelt the hidden land.

And still the cougar ran.

Running, stalking, the smell of *her* heavy on the air.

The predator slowed and gracefully stretched from rock to rock, coursing the jagged ravine, its sharp, taloned paws digging at the saturated moss and earth as it halted and its nostrils flared, scenting the air. Paws pummeling the ground once more and fluid lunges took it closer until the big cat came to rest on a stony perch.

Ears erect, the ebon feline crouched, flicked its tail and watched her. She huddled near a hissing fire, the torrent threatening to douse its flames. Smoke encircled the small clearing. The tang of fear clung to her. Deep within the cat, its man-spirit stirred and hunger swelled – the hunger of a man in need of a mate.

A feral scream erupted from the animal as a keen awareness burst within its body, flooded its veins and suffused its heart and lungs. An insistent throb pierced bone and sinew, thrusting, crushing. The spirit essence rose, separating from its animal, and hovered. Whining as it always did with the separation, the mystical cougar pawed the air and leapt, its silhouette becoming silvery threads of light that showered the trees and ascended to collide with the wind and rain. Vaporous and shining, a milky spiral lit the darkness for a few fleeting seconds then fractured into scores of luminous points to rejoin with the man-spirit and fell to the earth in a heap.

Sam Starr arched his back and gasped for air. Rain stung his naked skin. He lurched forward then sat while he grew accustomed to his human form. Ages had passed since his first transformation and it never got any easier. Emotions, senses, *need*, all changed, but somehow lingered from each of them. But this time, something was different. The cougar essence had given reign to its man-spirit, allowing him to shift earlier than usual – because of the woman camped out at the base of the bluff.

Sam had gotten word from the boys at the sporting goods store when he'd stopped in for supplies a few days before that she was looking to hire him as a guide. He'd spotted her campsite two days ago from a distance but hadn't approached, figuring she'd give up and go back to the city where she belonged. Only she hadn't, and apparently had decided to move deeper into the forest. A bad move on her part. She'd chosen to make camp at the bottom of an unstable area. With the rains they'd had in the last couple of weeks and tonight's downpour, she wasn't safe. It wouldn't take much more to bring the entire slope down on her.

"Damn it. Why me?" he muttered as he pushed off the muddy ground.

The idea of dealing with a civilized woman didn't appeal to him at all, much less one who seemed intent on finding him when he didn't want to be found. Pushy. That's what she was. Just plain damn pushy. Well, she'd find out he could push right back. He lifted the branch in front of him to pass through and scraped his hip on the tree's trunk.

Remembering his nakedness, he chuckled. *Well, she wanted to see me.*

As he picked his way through the soaked terrain, he looked back at the hillside. Water ran like a river straight down its center. Sam had been made aware of the impending natural disaster through his cougar self, but the fact that the woman was in danger was something his cougar didn't know until Sam had transferred the information to the cougar. Miraculously, the cat had yielded to its man-spirit's dominance.

And that had never happened before.

Yes, they often shared information, but one had never allowed the other to interfere with their time in earthly form, only sensing each other in their minds and certainly never shifting sooner in preference to the other's needs. Sam thought about that. He had needed to shift. Needed it to get the woman out of harm's way. Had he asked his cougar to yield? All he remembered was the shift. And right now he didn't have time to dwell on it. Regardless of how much he despised some prissy woman invading his territory, he couldn't let her be swept away in a mudslide.

Blinking his eyes against the sheet of rain, he made his way to the campsite. The smell of smoke was strong, almost acrid. Lightning repeatedly clapped and strobed, invading the pitch black, showing him the way. As he drew near, the woman stood and let the blanket she was using for shelter against the rain fall at her feet. Her eyes wide, mouth shaped in a huge O, a soft wail of fright came from her throat.

Sam tamped down the urge to laugh. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. Stopping opposite her, next to the dying campfire, he planted his feet firmly apart, toes digging into the muddy mix of earth, leaves and twigs. He waited to speak, struck by the need to assess her more closely. Her spirit was strong and his cock twitched.

He concentrated, focusing just above her great big eyes. A deep crimson aura emanated from her body. Strong woman. Angry. But the depth of that red was mottled with shades of gray and even black. She was broken. Something dark dwelled within her and distrust burgeoned inside Sam.

"Heard you were looking for me," he said.

Her lashes batted as if she were surprised he'd spoken. She closed her mouth, swallowed hard and in a trembling voice asked, "Are-are you Sam Starr?"

"I am."

"But you're naked." Her gaze drifted up and down his body.

Sam shifted, her scrutiny doing something to him he hadn't anticipated. He gritted his teeth, willing his cock to behave. Hell, she looked like a drowned rat more than a woman, not at all pretty as far as he could tell, yet his body responded. That's what he got for letting his monthly visit to see the Monroe sisters slide this time. He'd been too restless, and that should have been reason enough to go, but he hadn't been willing to leave his mountains. Something—or someone—had stopped him. And maybe that someone was standing right in front of him.

But why?

"My mountains. I dress or not dress the way I like."

She looked away. Rain soaked her clothes and dripped from long hair that lay plastered to her head. Her thin cotton shirt clung to her, displaying full, rounded breasts. Just the way he liked them. A lot more than a handful. *Damn it. Why the hell did he have to be naked?* He felt his cock rising.

Shit.

"I've been looking for you for two days," she said.

"Well, looks like you found me. But we have more important things to deal with right now." Sam glanced up at the hillside. "You're camped at the bottom of what is about to be a nice little mudslide."

"Mudslide!"

A fireball streaked from the sky and landed in a treetop about twenty feet away, the resounding thunder so loud, she jumped from where she stood straight into his arms. A horrendous cracking noise followed. Sam's cock pressed into her stomach as his arms instinctively wrapped around her and he half dragged, half carried her from the path of the falling tree. In the rush to safety, he slipped and they both landed in the slushy muck. The tree crashed to the ground not a foot away.

Beneath him she squirmed, clawing at his chest. "Get off me!"

He rolled from her and scrambled to get up. "No problem, lady. Let's just get the hell out of here before that hill comes down on top of us."

He grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. She pulled away, stumbling toward her small tent, which had collapsed from the weight of the rain. Sam cursed to the high heavens. He was in the middle of one of the worst storms he'd ever seen on the mountain and stuck with some crazy city woman intent on getting herself killed.

Sam's chest tightened, warning him of danger. His bare feet splattered mud and water as he rushed to catch up to her. He'd carry her out if he had to, but they had to go

now! Damn it. Just as he reached her, she turned and shoved a large canvas duffel bag into his chest.

"Take this!" she screamed over the howling wind and horrendous thunder.

"Hell, no!" He threw the bag on the ground. "We've got at least two miles to walk in this storm."

"Those are my clothes, for God's sake. I can't leave them!" She bent over, grabbed the bag from the ground and slammed it into his chest again. "The bag goes or I stay."

Yeah, definitely a crazy woman. "Then stay. I'll drop by in the morning and say a few words over the burial ground." Sam started to walk away.

"Wait! You'd just leave me like that?"

"Well, if God didn't give you sense enough to come in out of the rain, there's not a lot I can do about it." He took a few steps more.

"All right. How about you at least carry it to higher ground so I can come back for it tomorrow. The rest I'll handle myself."

Unbelievable. She planned on him being her pack mule. "The rest?"

"My camera equipment. I need it. I can handle that, but not the big bag too. Please, it's not that heavy. The camera equipment weighs a heck of a lot more."

Right now he'd be willing to crawl all the way back to his cabin just to get the hell out of there. He quickly strode to the bag and hoisted it over his head, wincing as the strap scraped his skin. She nodded and gathered three more bags, hanging one around her neck and placing the other two medium-sized totes on each shoulder. They headed across the clearing and through the dense trees, skirting the hillside. From behind them a low rumbling sound erupted.

Sam glanced back to see uprooted trees sliding toward them. "Run!"

With no time to waste, he weaved in and out of the thick stand of trees, taking them deeper into the woods. Their only chance was to get far enough into the forest to use the stout tree trunks as protection. Hopefully the forest debris and wall of trees would slow down the mud and give them some lead time. He heard her cry out and stopped.

Glancing behind him, Sam saw that she had fallen. He ran to her as the roaring flood of mud and everything it had swept up in its path raced toward them. One of the bags had slipped from her shoulder and landed on the ground.

She looked up at him as he neared and said, "I twisted my ankle."

Lightning spat all around them, revealing a solid wall of mud only seconds away. He'd have to carry her out. With one hand at her waist, he tried levering her across his shoulder, but the other two bags got in the way. Without a word, he ripped away the one now dangling from her upper arm as she whipped the smaller one from around her neck and held onto it. He tossed her across his shoulder and took off at breakneck speed.

Time and space spread out before him as his cougar force seized control and guided his steps. Swift and surefooted, Sam maneuvered the darkest woodland where even the

illumination of lightning failed to penetrate the thickness of the treetops. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, fueling the wild dash. Hanging from his shoulder, the woman wrapped her arms around his lower chest and held steady. Rumbling, crashing, the slide continued to roll toward them. If he could get across the ravine, they would be safe.

A keen whine slurred from his throat as his leg muscles cramped then stretched. Closer to the ravine, his strides lengthened and in preparation for the jump, his toes dug into the ground. Seconds ticked along with his heartbeat. One...two...three...he leapt, the sound of air rushing past him tunneling through his ears. The break in the forest gave way to the lightning once more. Beneath them, the jaws of the thirty-foot deep chasm gaped wide. The woman screamed, her fingers scratching at his skin.

Less than a moment later, his feet landed firmly on the other side and he fell to the ground. She spilled from his grip and tumbled to his side. His lungs burned as if they were going to burst and his heart beat so fast he thought surely he would die. Struggling for air, he looked toward the ravine. The wall of mud poured into the opening.

The woman next to him cupped his upper arm and rested against him. Several minutes passed and they continued to sit in the rain and watch the mud fill in the ravine. Finally finding the strength to stand, Sam pushed up from the soaked ground.

She looked up at him, shaking her head. "What the hell just happened?"

Sam swiped a thick strand of long hair from his face and answered, "We lived to see another sunrise."

Lucia Chavez swallowed her fear and eyed the sky above. The storm had abated and the heavy clouds with their dark gray bellies had shifted away while they'd sat in silence, leaving a pitch sky littered with bright stars and a round silver moon. She turned her attention to the man standing over her. He was Cherokee, his features beautiful. She took in his hair-free chest, admiring the way his stomach muscles stood out, highlighted by the rain wetting his body and the moonlight glancing off his skin. His waist tapered to slim hips set on either side of a thatch of black hair surrounding a long, thick cock. Her eyes widened at the sight of it and a blush crept into her cheeks. Despite their situation and the tremors of fear still humming through her body, a spike of desire flared in her pussy. She struggled to suppress its spread, forcing herself to concentrate on why she'd needed to meet him.

Being at this middle-of-nowhere place wasn't her idea of fun, especially when the guide she sought had proved elusive, but he was here now in all his glory. He had information she wanted but as she looked at his frown, she wondered if he'd give it.

Her gaze strayed to his midsection again. *What the hell is wrong with me?* Anyone else in this situation would be intent on getting up off the ground to somewhere dry. She shifted her attention to his face and lost herself in the penetrative gaze he bestowed

on her from slightly slanted eyes so dark and deep they warmed her. Entranced, she licked her lips, imagining how he would feel against her.

"Finished your inspection?" he asked, eyebrow quirked, one corner of his mouth lifting.

Her blush heated further and she struggled to stand, plopping back down on her ass. Grinding her teeth in humiliation, she ignored his outstretched hand and tried again, this time getting to her feet with no trouble. She stared at him once more, unwilling to hide her appraisal. She wanted him to know she found him attractive. Hell, he surely knew what she'd been thinking just now anyway.

Long black hair, plastered to his head and arms, reached right down to his waist and absurdly, she wondered how long it had taken him to grow it. She didn't usually go for long-haired men, but this guy...

Lucia shook her head, her heart beating too fast for altogether different reasons now. The fear had sloughed away, curiosity and the urge to touch him taking its place. She stepped closer to him, wanting... *Wanting what?*

"You coming with me or not?" His tone held a hint of irritation and he stood before her as though clothed, not at all embarrassed.

Who the hell roams the mountainside naked anyway? Is he some kind of freak?

Freak or not, she wanted to get to know him, had to find out what he knew, but not out here, with rain splattering down on them.

"Where are we going?" She clutched her camera bag, the strap sodden and mud-caked.

"To my cabin." He swiveled and walked away, his leg muscles stretching and bunching with each step.

Lucia glanced behind her at the chasm. *How the hell had he jumped across it?* She frowned. No way was that possible. Yet it was. He'd leapt over and her heart had fluttered wildly as she'd looked down into the blackness, convinced they would fall and hit the bottom. She turned to follow and gasped as she saw him up ahead, striding with purpose as though he walked barefoot all the time. Maybe he did, but if she didn't hurry she'd lose him in the forest. Shoving thoughts of the leap from her mind, she took after him, the mossy, uneven ground aggravating her ankle.

The guys at the sporting goods store had assured her she could trust Sam, but did they know him well enough? Was it really safe for her to go to his cabin? With a sigh of determination, she trudged on, upping her speed so she walked a few paces behind him. He didn't look back or acknowledge her presence. Her duffel bumped against his back and the strap of her camera bag chafed her shoulders. She cursed this shithole of a place and herself for ever coming here.

But I had to. I've got to do what Father set out to do.

He weaved between tree trunks and she struggled to see. A scampering of animal feet as she walked gave her a start. She trailed him, focusing her thoughts on the

mudslide that had nearly ended her life. If he hadn't appeared, if he hadn't insisted she run... She shuddered at the thought of meeting the same fate as her father. Had she camped the same place he'd died? The locals had informed her of his death—he had left a contact address at the small post office should something happen to him. Based on her father's letters, Lucia had followed the trail that led to where she'd pitched her tent. The scenery he'd described seemed the same, but then again this area looked much like every other around here—forests, mountains and streams.

She shrugged. Up ahead the forest thinned and patches of dark sky split the monotony of tree trunks. Her guide picked up speed and she pushed herself to catch up, breaths coming out in short, sharp gasps. Unused to such rigorous exercise, she'd ached from head to foot since her arrival, feet encased in ugly brown hiking boots instead of her usual high heels or comfortable sports shoes. Though she'd always wanted to photograph parts of the earth that remained as nature had intended, she hadn't realized how filthy she'd get here. Still, she'd finish her father's mission if it killed her. She laughed at the irony and pressed on, thoughts briefly flitting to the studio where she sold her photographs. A longing for home swept through her but she shoved it away. Time for sentiment later, when she was alone.

The guide stepped out of the forest into a clearing. She limped on, her thigh and calf muscles burning, until she stood beside him. Though misting rain obscured her view, the fuzzy curtain didn't mar the beauty before her. A large, one-story log cabin nestled a short way up a mountain, picturesque in a shaft of moonlight. The clearing, ankle-high grass with a narrow track down the middle, served as a front yard. She imagined it would be pretty in summer and wished she'd come here then. The pictures she'd have snapped would have been wonderful.

Summer wasn't an option, though. Dad said the black cougar tends to roam more in the cooler months.

Her father had seen it, written of his awe at spying the large beast roving the area. He hadn't been able to get his camera ready quickly enough, but he'd vowed to stay here until he'd captured it on film. Lucia grimaced, following her guide down the sodden track.

If he managed it I'll never know. That camera must have been buried with him.

Straightening her shoulders, she cursed the thick mud, the last part of her journey a serious chore with the extra weight clinging to her boot soles. She wanted nothing more than to get out of her wet clothes and soak in the bath. Would he have a bath in that cabin? It didn't look like the kind of place that had electricity or running water. Lucia sighed and swiped at the rain dripping down her face. The cold seeped into her bones and she shivered, hoping she wouldn't catch a chill. That was all she needed, being stuck out here with some guy who enjoyed prancing about in the buff.

He veered right as the path curved and led them to steps carved out of the mountainside. Her sore ankle protested as she took each one, trying to keep up. The man strode with ease and he reached the front door, swinging her bag off his back and

dumping it on the ground. Lifting a rock, he slid out a key and opened the door. Key back in place, he hefted the bag over his shoulder and stepped inside, flicking on a light.

It has electricity, then.

Turning in the threshold, he looked her up and down, a faint smile tweaking his lips. "You'll need a bath."

That's the understatement of the year.

Lucia smiled tightly and followed him in, closing the door behind her. She was pleasantly surprised at the interior, and immediately conscious of rain dripping from her soaked clothes onto a polished wooden floor.

"I've dripped water..." she said.

"Don't worry about it. It can be cleaned up." He faced her, rain plopping from his hair to the floor, and dropped the bag next to an overstuffed red sofa to Lucia's right. It faced a large stone fireplace and two matching chairs sat on either side of the hearth.

A flat-screen TV hung above the mantel. The door to the rear stood half open, and Lucia peered past him into the other room. The kitchen looked modern.

"I'll show you to the bathroom." A fleeting smile curved his lips before disappearing. He turned, giving her another unobstructed view of his ass, the ends of his hair kissing the cleft.

Damn, he's fine.

She blew out through pursed lips to steady her fast-beating heart and placed her camera bag beside the sofa. He stepped through a doorway to the left and she followed him into a hallway lined with three doors. He pushed open the one nearest them and moved to the side so she could enter first. She gaped at the fixtures—all modern—and blushed at her earlier assumptions. Hadn't she done this kind of thing before? Assumed she knew what was what then been proved wrong? That trait had forced her to eat humble pie on more than one occasion.

"Your home is lovely." She smiled at him tentatively, and once again his eyes drew her in. Her stomach rolled over and she shivered. She crossed her arms over her breasts, hugging herself as shakes suddenly racked her body. The heat inside the cabin had started to thaw her out, but she couldn't control the abrupt jerks and spasms that overtook her. Frightened by the quick onset, she widened her eyes and gasped to take in air. A quick image of them leaping over that ravine swept through her mind, the enormity of what could have happened slamming into her. Swallowing, she stared at him, her mouth working but no sound coming out.

"Hey... You all right?" He laid a hand on her shoulder, eyes narrowed, eyebrows meeting above his nose.

Lucia nodded, teeth chattering, and took a couple of steps into the bathroom. "I-I'll be fine. It-it's just shock, I think. From what could have happened." Her teeth clamped painfully on her tongue. She closed her eyes, concentrating on tuning out the pain. Her

equilibrium shot, she swayed, snapping her eyes open and focusing on the opposite wall to stop herself slewing sideways.

The guide gripped her elbow and steered her to the toilet, pressing her onto the closed lid and hunkering down beside her. "You need to get out of those wet clothes."

He lifted a hand to remove her jacket. She raised her own to cover his and a tremor zipped through her at the contact. Their gazes met and she blinked in confusion at how she could still feel desire when in such a state.

"Please. Let me undress you."

Holding his stare, Lucia was satisfied he wouldn't do anything he shouldn't. A wry laugh huffed out of her at the thought of him wanting to do anything sexual with her — she must look awful. And even if she tried she doubted she could undress herself and climb into the bath without help.

"Look, it's important we get you into a warm bath, but you can't bathe alone. I won't touch you or even look if you don't want me to, but I must stay in here with you. I don't want you slipping under the water on my conscience."

He shrugged as though he did this all the time and Lucia nodded, taking her hand from his and allowing him to remove her jacket. It fell to the tiled floor with a wet slap. He pulled off her boots and socks then stood, easing her to her feet so he could relieve her of her other garments. She stood before him naked, comfortable because he'd averted his gaze the whole time. He moved to a small cupboard beside the door and pulled out a thick cream-colored towel, draping it around her and urging her to sit back down.

He patted her shoulder before moving to the tub and turning the water on. Within seconds, steam rose, billowing toward her, its damp warmth helping the shakes recede. She studied the way his muscles glided beneath his skin as he bent over to swirl his hand through the water. How odd that she didn't feel exposed and uncomfortable. An intimate scene like this with a stranger would normally inspire feelings of unease, yet she sat, watching his every move as though she'd been doing it for years.

He shut off the taps and turned to her, hand held out. Another bout of violent shivers racked her and a tendril of indecision as to whether she should trust him snaked into her mind. *But he looks as though he'd never hurt me, and I can't get in that bath by myself.* Going with her stronger instinct to trust, she took his hand and hobbled to his side, allowing the towel to fall to the floor. Lucia stepped into the tub, the warm water an immediate balm on her juddering body. The heat seeped into her skin, chasing away the shivers. She leaned back and closed her eyes. The ends of her brown hair danced in the water, tapping her shoulders. She submerged her head and opened her eyes to find him looking down at her, a soft, sad smile playing about his lips. Was he seeing her or someone else? Lucia blushed and slid her head back out of the water, resting it on the edge of the tub.

"Better?" he asked, kneeling beside the bath.

She nodded, butterflies in her belly, and wondered how he could look so haunted.

Chapter Two

Sam forced himself to focus on the fact she was obviously suffering from shock. She might be a tough, snooty city gal, but when all was said and done, she'd just been through one hell of a lot, and she needed him to be kind.

But damn it, now they were both naked.

He scooped up some of the bathwater and drizzled it over her shoulders to help keep her warm, repeating the gesture again and again. Her hair displayed bits of mud and a few twigs. As gently as possible, he untangled the small sticks and reached for the shampoo.

He squeezed some of the gel into his hands then tensed slightly. Normally, he needed to concentrate in order to see the spirit colors of someone unknown to him as he'd seen hers earlier. But her aura radiated. The secretive gray and black shadows were gone. Energy projected from her body in bursting rays of bright red. A passionate woman—a woman who understood her sexual needs.

It could mean only one thing. Right now she was vulnerable, her true self and open to him. And what an enticing package. *Shit! Get hold of yourself, Sam. She's a woman in trouble. Scared. You don't take advantage of a woman in a situation like this.*

And then he wove his fingers through the dark strands of her hair.

Flashes of light lit the inner recesses of his mind. Sweet familiarity filtered through his veins. Had he touched her before? No, he'd never met this woman. So why did he feel such an intimate connection? His cougar had sensed something too.

A current of lust whipped straight to his cock. Was it possible? After all these years? Almost two hundred years of waiting? The words of the uncle who'd raised him sounded loud and clear in his head as if it were yesterday. Sam had cried at Silver Hawk's feet, desperate to understand his first shift—to know *what* he was—what had happened to him.

Quiet, little one. Destiny has claimed you. Walk the mountains with pride. Protect them. There are many lessons to be learned, wrongs that must be made right. Be pure of heart. She will find you when it is time, and the burden heaped upon your soul by vengeance will be healed.

Sam worked the lather into her hair, kneading tenderly, trying to shut out thoughts of his promised salvation. Did he want to lose his cougar? His immortality? On the darkest of nights he'd pondered those questions long and hard, never finding the answers he needed.

Her head relaxed, her neck becoming limp. The bright glowing red softened to pink. Heightened sensuality. She wasn't scared anymore, but horny it seemed. Just

what he needed – an action junkie – a woman action junkie at that. Well, who was he to turn down a woman who had requested his services?

Or had fate finally decided it was time?

“What is your name?” he asked.

A low moan loosed from her lips before she spoke. “Lucia.”

Sam turned the tap to switch on the shower massage. “Lean your head back so I can rinse the shampoo.”

Once she’d reared her head, her more than ample breasts came into view. Glimpses of her nakedness as he’d undressed her had tempted him, but now? *Oh, hell.* Did her nipples have to stand out like that – large, brown and waiting for his lips? This time his cock refused to be subdued. Up it went.

The soapy water streamed from her hair and down over those tight tips. The brown color deepened to mahogany and his cock pulsed. She didn’t really need to have her body bathed, just warmed, but... Sam snatched a washcloth from the shelf next to the tub, soaked it in the water, then laid it on her shoulder. His hand hovered above the scrap of fabric. Should he? One way or another, it wouldn’t take long to find out if the lady was responsive – agreeable. Hell, it might be just what the doctor ordered.

For both of them.

He dropped his hand to the cloth and began rubbing in circular motions. Lucia sighed and rested her head against his bare chest. In response, he trailed the fingers of his other hand up and down the column of her throat. She brought her hand up and wrapped it around his fingers, bringing them to her cheek. She wanted him too. Maybe only for a night. And maybe... Silver Hawk’s words whispered through his mind. *She will find you when it is time, and the burden heaped upon your soul by vengeance will be healed.*

Did Sam dare think the day had arrived? *Easy, ol’ boy. Don’t let your cock get in the way of reality. It’s sex with a beautiful woman. Not the end of two centuries’ worth of waiting.* She dragged his hand lower and placed it on her breast. Shock or no shock, her gesture was a blatant invitation. Sam dropped the washcloth in the bathwater.

Leaning in close as his hands cupped both her breasts, he whispered, “I’ve heard tell that a near-death experience can bring two people closer.”

Lucia moved her head to the side and looked at him. Eyes glazed with desire, she put her hand to his cheek and urged his lips to hers. He thrust his tongue inside her mouth and she accepted it eagerly, their sexual hunger dueling, feeding off each other’s need. She moaned into his mouth as he squeezed her nipples.

Diving from the hidden waterfall. That’s the image his mind conjured, the feeling that raced through his body. A euphoric swell of excitement so thick he couldn’t breathe, could only taste and fall further and further, deep into the pool that was *her*.

Lucia.

She twisted in the bath and he lifted her. She twined her legs about his waist and locked her ankles behind his back. Water dripped from their bodies and puddled on the

floor. The kiss ripened in its urgency. He maneuvered them over to the bathroom sink and hurriedly slid open a drawer. Reaching inside, he prayed his memory served him right and he'd find the foil wrapper. *Pay dirt!* Jerking from the kiss, he ripped the package open with his teeth as she sank hers into his neck for a passionate love bite.

Oh fuck! No time for the bedroom, he slammed the bathroom door shut and thrust her torso against it. Her hands flew to his groin and she grasped the condom. Before covering him, she teased her clit with just the tip of his cock. He gritted his teeth and dipped his head to her heaving breasts to suck those magnificent nipples.

Little moans and whimpers filled the air as she sheathed his length. Licking, sucking, nibbling, he couldn't get enough of the plump brown peaks crowning her beautiful breasts. He slipped his hand between their bodies and palmed her folds. Her hand covered his and forced his fingers through her cleft.

Slick, wet, she begged for his cock. "Fuck me."

Hoisting her farther up the door, he claimed her mouth and drove his throbbing cock deep inside her. A whorl of color erupted in his head, followed by a feeling so intense he thought he would collapse. The rushing sensation was similar to what he experienced when he shifted to his cougar—he found it oddly comforting and disturbing at the same time to be having it now.

They banged against the door in a reckless crescendo of pounding flesh, groaning and grunting. Fingers digging into his skin, she let her hips buck with his and met his thrusts. Arching into him as if struck with an abrupt stab of pleasure-pain, she grew rigid and he knew she was coming apart, finding her orgasm. He wanted to stop, to watch, but his own need overwhelmed him. Hungry to follow her into the powerful spasm, he drove his cock into her pussy one last time as his climax gripped him.

With his eyes shut tight, barely able to stand, he shuddered, his cock convulsing, emptying. As if in the distance he heard her cry of release and tried to hold on to it, but lost it in his own lusty haze. Seconds—minutes—he didn't know how long they stayed that way as his struggle for air lessened and his heart rate calmed. His weight against hers kept them pinned to the door.

Damn. It had happened so fast. Where was his control? She reclined against the door, her head on his shoulder, breathing soft and slow in his ear. *Asleep?* He peeked at her. Yes, she'd fallen asleep. His gaze lingered on her face, her smooth light-brown skin and perky nose, the lips he'd kissed. Those long dark eyelashes quivered. She was dreaming. What did someone so beautiful dream about? Was he a part of those dreams? If he went to sleep would he find her there?

His legs trembled, tired. What a fucking sight—nailed to a damn door with a naked woman, the kind a man dreamed about, his cock still dripping inside her.

And worse than that?

She was asleep and he wanted more.

Movement jolted Lucia awake. She kept her eyes closed, aware of Sam carrying her, and smiled, content for the first time since she'd arrived in these mountains. He lowered her and she gripped him about his neck, trusting him yet at the same time fearful of falling. The softness of a bed met her back and she snuggled her head into a pillow as Sam eased his arm out from beneath her. Bedding rustled as a blanket covered her, its warmth a balm on her aching body. Would he climb in beside her? Could she hope for that, despite them having only just met and the fact they'd just had sex? Yes, she could hope, but somehow she didn't think he would take the liberty. Her instincts were right on target. A light brushing of his lips on her forehead sped up her heart, then his footsteps padded away. The door clicking shut prompted her eyes open and she stared into the darkness, unable to make out the shapes of furniture against the walls. Too fatigued to care, she closed her eyes again, bunching the cover under her chin and bringing her legs up so she lay in a ball on her side.

His scent remained on her skin and in the air. Thoughts of their frantic lovemaking roamed through her mind. She didn't usually give herself so freely, so quickly, yet it had seemed right—still did. But hadn't she recently told herself—after Jacob, goddamn him—she wouldn't rush into anything again? She sighed, the memory of her former lover tainting her previous contentment. Jacob was...a bastard. She laughed. *Aren't all ex-boyfriends?* But no, he was top of the pile when it came to cruel men. Oh, he hadn't hit her, nothing like that, but his mind control was second to none. He even had her father under his spell for a while, taking an aggressive interest in his photography and urging him to come out here and find the elusive cougar.

If he hadn't told Dad about the cougar, Dad wouldn't be dead.

When had she realized Jacob wasn't the man for her? Who was she kidding? She knew exactly when it was, when clarity came and enlightenment stung her heart.

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Learning of her father's death, she had gone straight to Jacob's, needing the comfort only a loved one could provide. Instead, he'd railed at her father's "stupidity" for camping in a dangerous area. She knew now that it was because the camera had been buried with him.

"But he didn't *know* it was dangerous," she'd said. Anger had roiled inside her and she'd bunched her hands, lifting her chin to look him square in the eye. "And is that all you can say? My father is dead, and you're only bothered about his *stupidity*?"

Jacob had stared at her. She saw him now as though he stood before her in Sam's room. Narrowed, spiteful eyes, light wrinkles around his puckered lips, black hair mussed after he'd raked a hand through it.

"Well, for God's sake. How the fuck am I going to explain this?" He'd paced his living room, hand to his mouth, frown creasing his brow. His quick steps indicated either anger or worry and his shoes squeaked—those shiny patent leathers he favored so much.

"Explain what?" Lucia had reached out as he passed, stopping him mid-stride, trying to gain his full attention.

Jacob shrugged her off and continued pacing, his slacks whispering, gaze trained on the hardwood floor. "Never you mind."

The sense that something wasn't right spread through her gut and sped her heart. "No. Tell me what you mean. Explain *what*?"

He'd stopped abruptly, hands and jaw clenched, and glared at her. "If you must know, your father was employed by my boss to go and get pictures of that cougar. *I* organized it. *I* got him the job—one he'd never have gotten by himself. *Me*. And I was on commission. If he'd have brought evidence back that the cougar existed... Shit. I'd have been made! And your father, your stupid, *stupid* father, fucked it up. How the hell my boss is going to take this is anyone's guess. No, scrub that. He'll go fucking crazy, and I'll be in the firing line. My boss isn't someone you want to piss off, I can tell you." He stopped beside the dining table and slammed his fist on it. "Jesus Christ! Of all the dumb things he could have done! Wouldn't surprise me if you were that stupid too. It's in the genes. Gotta be." He faced her, a sneer on his lips, eyes blazing.

Oh, God. Tell me I didn't just hear that. Tell me he's lying.

Lucia stared at him, aghast that his only concern was money. Not that a man had died in pursuit of a damn photograph. Not that she, the woman he supposedly loved, was hurting, her insides hollowed out by grief, the hole that had formed there growing too big for her to understand or handle. How would she cope, never seeing her father again? How the hell did you survive without the one person who had been a constant all your life? No more hugs in strong arms that took all the pain away. No more soft laughter that eased the bad things in life if only for the moment it took to revel in that laugh. To remember how it had sounded when she was a child, and how hers had merged with his as he lifted her up high and told her she was his best girl. The best girl that ever lived.

Tears had burned her eyes as she'd studied Jacob and she could stand there no more, his nasty grin and the bright pink spots on his cheeks too much to bear. She swung around and stumbled from his apartment, the journey to hers made without thought. Ignoring his calls had come easily, as had her decision to finish the job her father had started—without Jacob's involvement.

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God, how that time had hurt. She'd never forgive Jacob, never, but thinking of him brought pain and the knowledge that at some point she'd have to fully face up to what he had done and said and accept it. Could she do that? And could she let another man inside her heart?

No. I'm not sure I can.

So why had she allowed Sam to know her intimately? How had she allowed it if Jacob's ghost still lingered in her heart? Or did it mean Jacob's importance was fading,

that the love for him that had burned despite his attitude was now letting her move on with her life?

Maybe. Or maybe I just needed...someone tonight.

Eyes still closed, Lucia swiped the tears away, her pillow cold and damp from those that had fallen. The lump in her throat subsided and she told herself to forget about Jacob, forget every damn thing about him. He hadn't loved her, not really and, thinking about it now, she knew deep down he'd chosen her for a reason. She and her father were photographers. He'd orchestrated this all along, and the realization gave her the strength to douse the final vestiges of any love she felt for him.

No more. She'd press on with her life, seek the cougar and then go home, putting this episode in her life firmly behind her.

Weary, Lucia relaxed, tension bleeding out of her. Images of herself and her father came to mind, of the time he'd taken her on horseback through the meadow, the buttercups bright, petals shining in the sunlight. She could practically feel the horse canter beneath her, the muscles brushing against her thighs, and saw her father urging her to catch up, his smile wide, eyes twinkling.

"I'll do this for you," she whispered. "I'll find the cougar."

* * * * *

On the back porch, Sam breathed in the crisp night air. A mere human would have been chilled, but he rarely got cold. There were things he'd accepted about himself long ago. Mostly things that could not be explained other than attributing them to the part of him that belonged to the cougar. The symbiotic relationship had served him well all this time, but tonight he found himself wondering about his newfound control.

Sam would much prefer crawling into bed and sleeping next to a very sexy woman, but he sensed that danger lurked. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. His cougar urged him to run—to find that danger and kill it. He thought he could stop the change at will now if he wanted to, keep the cat hidden. He shook his head, pondering why it seemed dominion had been relinquished to him.

Until now, communication with his cougar had been rare and he'd never given it much thought. Until tonight. Little things had occurred before, such as his animal side warning him of a snake or some other creature in search of prey, but nothing as monumental as forgoing its prowling time. Sam had always wondered if the cougar realized what was happening when the shift took place—if it realized it shared a consciousness with a man. But this night there had been no doubt. The cat was very much aware of Sam, just as Sam had always been aware of its presence. Some sort of dialogue had taken place between them. After all these years, Sam could talk to it. And he was sure Lucia had been the catalyst.

If she *was* his mate, he might be able to read her thoughts just as he could the cougar's. He needed to open himself to her more fully. But it would be an invasion of her privacy, wouldn't it? He mulled this over for a moment. If he only read them when

he had to, if danger presented itself and he needed to know how she was dealing with it... Yes, he'd read them then.

He assumed Lucia was here for the truth surrounding the death of her father. The locals had been unable to recover his body and that had to hurt Lucia. Sam knew exactly where her father's body was, the cougar having sensed its location. Figuring she'd want to see the site of his death, Sam worried, knowing he didn't want to reveal to her the exact place where he rested. Unearthing the body at this point would only cause her more grief. And he couldn't chance the questions that would surely follow once he revealed where the body was.

"Damn it to hell," he swore softly into the darkness.

There was a lot more to worry about right now than the location of her father's body, however. On its brief ramble tonight, the cougar had sensed more than the danger the mudslide had posed to Lucia and that knowledge now belonged to Sam. The man who'd killed Lucia's father was back. The cat had wanted to go after the killer. Instead, it had shifted so Sam was able to save Lucia. He couldn't allow the cougar to attack the man. That would bring the authorities down on their heads and focus attention on them.

Anger rose inside him and he curled his hands into fists. He wanted to find the bastard and deal with him himself. There were a whole lot of places a body could get lost in the mountains. It was his responsibility as caretaker of the place of blue smoke to mete out punishment on this stranger, and the son of a bitch had it coming. But he couldn't invite public scrutiny.

Sam had been in his cougar form and witnessed the killer and Lucia's father fighting. The younger man had been too strong for Chavez and, sensing the evil that had emanated from the man, he'd attacked as the cougar, but the killer had stabbed him. The instinct to survive had forced his cougar to run, and it took days for him to heal. Had the wound been an inch farther over, it would have pierced his heart.

Rubbing the spot on his chest where the blade had sunk deeply into his flesh, Sam bared his teeth and snarled. He tensed, every muscle bunching. For a few seconds he gripped the porch railing to steady himself. A fine mist of rain blanketed his naked body, adding to the sensations that skipped over his skin. Stepping off the porch, he moved toward the edge of the woods, fearful Lucia might wake up and see the transformation. Crouched low to the ground, he bowed his head and prepared to become the cougar.

A burning sensation ripped through his arms and into his torso. The wind picked up and in the distance the turtle-shell rattle sounded. White mist poured through the trees and plumed upward. All around him images of his ancestors spoke to him, a chaotic jumble of words and thoughts assailing him at once. Understanding flowed within him and he lifted his head, his mouth open to let the spirits in.

The life force of his ancestors streaked through him, touching every place inside him. Bones crunched, fusing for the change. A rope of blinding light hurled toward him

and entered his body. Knotted with energy, he levitated, rising from the forest floor slowly. Growing in intensity, the clatter of the turtle-shell rattler resounded, its mystical rhythm orchestrating the shift.

Rendering to starlike particles, Sam's form shot into the heavens, twisting and turning as his consciousness deepened and became one with the cougar's. Bursting with knowledge, he tumbled back to earth and landed on all fours.

The scent of the killer was strong on the wind, and the black cougar took off running.

Sam smelled what the cougar smelled, aware that *he* was now in charge, that he and the cougar were no longer separate but one complete being. Understanding swelled within his soul. The will of the cougar had been released to him. Lucia had to be the reason. She had to be his mate.

Legs stretched, paws pounding the ground, he followed the scent over rocks and through crevices. An owl hooted and the whippoorwill gave warning. Sam stopped, nostrils flared, and sniffed the air. The owl and whippoorwill knew, just like all the creatures here in the *Shaconaque*. Someone had trespassed into their sanctuary.

An evil presence that needed to be banished forever.

Claws digging into the sodden earth, Sam growled and sprinted in the direction of that evil. Farther into the forest he prowled, his need to find the killer dominating his every thought.

He leaped over the edge of the ravine, then crisscrossed between trees and bushes. Closer he came, closer to the man who wanted to destroy him. Near enough now to smell smoke from a campfire, Sam dug deeper with his paws, kicking up mud and debris. There, in a small clearing not far from the mudslide area but on high enough ground to have kept him safe, sat the stranger.

Circling the camp, Sam spotted metal glinting at the man's side. A gun. He reined in the urge to attack, to bite and claw until justice had been served. The chorus of the whippoorwill and owl sounded in the distance, urging Sam to action. But he couldn't. He could not afford to be wounded—to waste days on healing. And the attack would only bring out the hunters to search for a killer cat. Who would protect the *Shaconaque* then?

Who would protect Lucia?

While it was true he was immortal, he was not completely immune to pain and suffering. And his last run-in with this son of a bitch had left him crippled for days. He'd awakened on a ledge, weak from loss of blood and half starved.

Sam's feral whine slurred from his throat. The bastard jumped from where he sat and pointed his gun in Sam's direction. Hidden by the trees and the shadowy night, Sam knew there wasn't a chance the man saw him, yet he fired at the ridge where Sam crouched, forcing him to retreat. It was then Sam realized he could only fight the killer as a man. He would need not only his knowledge of the mountains, but his gun as well. And it would be a showdown to the death.

For now he needed to get back to Lucia and make sure she stayed safe. The killer had come back for a reason and Sam didn't doubt for a second that reason was her. He must have followed her here. But what could Lucia have that the killer needed? And why hadn't he approached her the way he had her father? Maybe he thought she knew something and was waiting for her to reveal it.

But what?

* * * * *

That hushed part of night where everything stilled had finally arrived. Moonlight filtered through the window and illuminated Lucia's sleeping form. She slept on her side, breathing nice and steady, hair fanned out on the pillow. Sam pulled the quilt over her bare shoulders and watched her sleep.

She was in his care now, and with everything he held holy he would protect her. Stealthy steps took him over to the sideboard. Removing his .357 from a drawer, he tapped it against his palm, swinging the cylinder open to reveal the chambers loaded to the max. Satisfied he was prepared to deal with the threat that loomed over them, he left the gun out just in case, then silently made his way from the room.

Sam entered the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He showered quickly and dried off. While every part of him seemed to be on high alert, he was tired and wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest for a while.

He picked up a brush and dealt with the mass of wet hair. His gaze strayed to the door and he saw images of Lucia's beautiful breasts and plump nipples in his mouth as he sucked on them. Fuck it. A quickie up against a damn door sure as hell hadn't been enough. Not to mention the fact that he'd come like a virginal schoolboy. An aching nut sac and a hard cock would keep him up all night. But was that the only reason he wanted to crawl into bed next to her?

No, it was a hell of a lot more than sex. In all his years, Sam had never once felt possessive. It wasn't a part of his nature. The mountain had taught him many things, but one lesson that stood out among all the rest was that no one, animal or human, belonged to another. Yet he couldn't stop thinking about Lucia as being his—meant for him and him alone. Unable to stand it another second, he flung the brush to the vanity, snatched open the bathroom door and strode down the hall to the bedroom.

Her soft, even breaths came to him. His cock jerked. He had to have her, but he'd go slowly this time, taste every part of her. Inhaling deeply, he caught her scent. The rise and fall of his chest quickened with lust and a low growl rolled upward from his throat.

"Sam?" Her sleepy voice called to him.

He didn't answer, instead lifting the quilt to join her. He turned on his side, his bare skin touching hers, and placed a hand on her shoulder. She was so warm and he wanted her so much. In a raspy whisper he said, "Tell me no."

She trailed her fingers along his cheek. "Not possible."

Shuddering, he pulled back the quilt and covered her body with his. He looked into her moonlit eyes, seeing everything he'd ever dared dream. Lucia was the answer to his loneliness. But could she love him—half man, half beast?

Raising her head a fraction, she curled one hand around his neck and brought her other hand to rest on his chest, right over his pounding heart. "This feels..." She blinked, shaking her head.

"Like it was meant to be?" he finished, hoping her thoughts were the same as his.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded slightly. Just as unsure and surprised as he, he figured. For an instant he thought about leaving her. Because surely it wasn't this simple—the spirits delivering her to him and everything in his world becoming perfect. There would be trials to face. They would need to prove themselves worthy of this gift.

His fear mixed with his overwhelming desire for her. Not fear for himself, fear for her. She was strong, that he already knew. But he wanted to spare her any pain. And the truth—his truth—could tear her apart. Her breath had become shallow and she moved beneath him. An insistent throb in his cock pushed the doubt from his mind. All that mattered in this moment was his insatiable need for her.

With his tongue, he traced her full mouth, then sucked in her bottom lip. Her tongue darted out, seeking his, and they came together in an all-consuming kiss. Every muscle in Sam's body grew tight with anticipation. His rampant heartbeat matched the pulsing in his cock. Hard, getting harder, his cock ached for her and his sac burned with the need for release. But he would endure the torture and go slowly. Show her how it could be between them.

Sam dragged his mouth from hers and planted kisses beneath her chin and down the center of her chest, through the valley between her luscious breasts. He rubbed his cheek against her curving mounds, delaying the desire to taste her erect nipples. Sweet, they would be oh so sweet. An involuntary groan came from him as she relaxed, lying back on the pillow. Her eyes were closed and a little smile formed on her lips. She had given him her body to do with as he pleased.

Unable to wait another second, he swirled his tongue around one nipple, scooping it into his mouth to suckle. He scraped his teeth over the distended bud gently and she rewarded him by arching to offer him more. As he suckled one of the hard tips he rolled the other between his thumb and forefinger, gently squeezing. She arched again, moaning loudly. He trailed his tongue to the other breast and nibbled as he tweaked the first with his fingers. She was too beautiful for words.

Keeping his mouth on her nipple, he smoothed his hand over her torso and hips, finally palming her pussy. Lucia strained upward into his touch. Sam positioned the heel of his palm right on top of her clit. He applied pressure, moving his hand in a circular motion. Her moans grew louder and she writhed against the mattress.

Slipping one finger inside her, he trembled at how wet she'd become. All for him. The desire to taste her overwhelmed him. He moved lower so his face hovered above her sex. Nuzzling his nose into her cleft, he breathed deeply. She smelled crisp, spicy,

sweet, earthy. And it had been so damn long since he'd sampled a woman this way. Trapped in this existence, he never strayed far from his mountain. Now the spirits had sent a woman to him and he planned to lick her from head to toe. There was nothing in this world that compared to the taste of a woman, ripe and ready for a man.

She spread her legs, a clear invitation to love her with his tongue. Sam gripped her outer thighs and lightly ran his tongue the length of her cleft, moving downward then upward again. With each pass, his tongue delved deeper until her slickened folds parted and he tasted the heated cream of her desire.

Damn, she tasted good. His cock ached for her, but he wanted her to come in his mouth, to swallow every drop of her sweet juices. Lucia's hips lurched as he flicked her clit in rapid-fire succession. The scent of her arousal became stronger. Close, she was so close. Sam slowed the strokes or she would come too quickly. He wanted to keep her on the edge for a little while longer. Backing off, he blew a steady stream of air over her swollen nub, feeling her tremble.

"Sam...please...I need you." Soft and sexy, lazy with desire, her words came out almost like a purr.

Had a woman ever wanted him so much? Or did he just want to believe this was special? His tongue rounded her clit then he opened his mouth and nursed on the nub, driving her wild. She bucked and clutched at the sheets. Deep moans loosed from her lips as she pumped her pussy into his face. A loud cry echoed across the room. She grabbed at his head, tangling her fingers in his damp hair.

Sam slid his tongue lower and captured the juices streaming from her opening. He swallowed, tasting her sweet cum. Lucia fell backward, her body spent. Rising, he moved on top of her, propped himself on one arm and pushed the hair away from her face. She grabbed his finger and sucked on it, moaning. The warm wetness of her mouth zipped through him and rested in his balls. God he needed to feel that heaven. But first he would come inside her. Reaching for the bedside table, he grabbed a condom and ripped into the package. He skimmed it over his cock and settled over her again.

Guiding his cock to the source of her heat, he thrust forward, the squeezing sensation of her walls stretching then closing, gripping him like a vise. He stilled as she released his finger and glided her hands over his shoulders and down his back. She brought her legs to his hips and linked her ankles behind his back, ready for the ride.

She stared at him and he couldn't mistake the glazed look of desire in her big beautiful eyes. Drawing his cock back, he plunged it inside her once more. His long, steady strokes were met by her thrusting hips. The muscles of her face tensed and she raked her nails along his back. Her mouth wide, she cried out. His mind emptied of all thought save the turtle-shell rattler singing its song. Sam couldn't control his cock any longer and emptied inside her. Throwing his head back, he growled, his body rigid.

The turtle-shell rattler quieted and Sam collapsed to the bed, nestling his woman against him.

Chapter Three

Lucia stirred and cracked her eyes open, confused for a second as to why no tent covered her. Realization leached into her mind and she stared at a large wall where a velvet rug in hues of tans, ambers and blacks hung. At her right were two windows. Sunlight shone around the outside of the burgundy-colored drapes, the rays also bleeding through the center gap where one set didn't quite meet. Sam must have closed them to keep the sun from waking her. Last night the moonlight had clearly revealed every inch of his beautiful body. Beneath the windows sat a long wooden sideboard and she squinted to make out what lay on top. A set of knives with what appeared to be intricately carved ivory handles lay in a regimented row. She wondered if he hunted. Blades, each a different length and shape—some curved, some straight—caught the sun peeking around the curtains.

Her body ached and she recalled the trek through the forest and the leap over the ravine. In sync with her thoughts, her ankle throbbed. Despite the tiny bite of pain, a sense of well-being pervaded her. She smiled, happy to be in a bed and not a sleeping bag over a thin, foam-filled mat. This room calmed her, the lack of wealthy trappings uplifting compared to homes in the city where the more you had the better you were perceived. Lucia had believed that too—until now. The furnishings humbled her, making her realize she didn't need things to feel content. *Where did that come from?* Perhaps the fright from last night had given her a fresh perspective on life.

Where is Sam?

Memories of their quick fuck in the bathroom and their sensual joining in bed flooded back. Far from being embarrassed or ashamed, she took their coupling for what it was—two people in need of one another during a time when stress levels were high. Did it really matter that no love was involved?

She shook her head to clear it, her cheeks hot and her heart beating too fast. She needed to concentrate on other things. Indulging herself a while longer, she closed her eyes and listened. Birdsong filtered in and she imagined hundreds of birds in the forest joining together to create a beautiful melody. Banging sounded—pots and pans in the kitchen?—and she opened her eyes, flinging back the sheet and patchwork quilt, handmade if she guessed correctly. Rich reds and creams lent the covering a warm appearance, and she had the sudden urge to remain cocooned inside it, Sam by her side.

Instead, she stood and stretched, then walked naked to the window, her ankle giving only a slight twinge. She pulled open one set of drapes and stared outside, resting her hands on the sideboard next to the knives as she looked upward. A clear blue sky, white fluffy clouds and a brilliant sun gave the impression summer reigned, but she'd bet her last dollar a nip ruled the air and, judging by the sway of the branches

in the forest, the breeze was stiff enough to keep anyone who had no pressing business outside, indoors.

But she did. She'd have to go into town and buy a new tent, and later find a safer place to camp. Lucia turned from the window and looked around for her clothes. If there had been a wardrobe or a chest or drawers, she would have searched through them, but it seemed Sam had no need of clothing or anywhere to store it.

Surely he doesn't go into town naked?

She laughed at that and the thought of people's faces if he did. It wasn't something he could get away with where she came from, that was for sure. Lucia folded the quilt to the bottom of the bed and removed the top sheet. Wrapping it around her toga-style, she padded out of the room and into the hallway, her ankle protesting. She cursed and continued through to the living room. A fire flickered in the grate, the room warm and inviting. She moved toward the large window at the front of the property, drawn by the beautiful grassy clearing surrounded on all three sides by forest.

Lucia glanced back at the sofa, relieved that her bags were still beside it. Unable to resist, she pulled out her camera and opened the front door, stepping out in the chilly air. Goose bumps sprang up on her arms and she shivered, an eerie spiral of dread wending up her spine. Wide-awake now, she surveyed her surroundings, sure that something wasn't right. She snapped a couple of pictures. Had something shifted out there in the forest? A dark figure? She stared, focusing on where she'd seen the slight movement. Yes, there it was again. Someone stood between two tree trunks, clothed in black, a white moon face staring right at her. She zoomed in, the angry face of a large man filling her view. She caught a succession of photographs until he realized what she was doing and lumbered off, disappearing into the forest.

A shuffle sounded behind her and she gasped, whirling to face Sam, who stood in the threshold. "Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me!"

"What's wrong?" His brows drew together and he peered over her shoulder into the clearing.

"I saw someone in the forest. A man." She placed a hand over her fast-beating heart.

"A man? What was he doing?" Sam narrowed his eyes, still gazing behind her.

"Staring at this place. I took his picture." She indicated her camera.

Sam ushered her inside, locking the door behind her. "Show me."

Lucia selected the view screen and held the camera up for him to see.

"Bastard." Sam scrubbed his chin, his taut face showing nothing but anger.

"Who is he?"

"It doesn't matter."

Lucia looked at him, realizing he was clothed. Disappointment obliterated the fear the forest man had inspired. She gave an unsteady smile to hide a nervous laugh—had she *really* expected Sam to walk around buck naked *all* the time? Still, he looked good in

jeans and a tight-fitting black T-shirt, his hair tied back at the nape and his head covered with a white bandana.

"You hungry?" He stared into her eyes, his gaze intense. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Yes and yes, thank you." She moved toward him, lifted her camera and took his picture. If today was the last she'd see of him, she wanted a tangible memento of him. Something to look back on and ask herself *What if...*?

Emotion lodged in her throat—the thought of never seeing him again was almost too much to accept. She frowned, unused to such feelings coming on so quickly, and told herself she was being irrational.

"Are you all right?" Sam stepped to the side to allow her to move farther into the living room.

She nodded and put her camera away, a sudden chill coursing down her spine and an unexplainable sense of loss hollowing out her insides. "I...uh, do you have coffee?" He regarded her with a steady gaze that had her taking in a sharp breath. Her heart raced and she gripped the sofa back to steady her weak legs.

"Here. Let me help you." Sam took her elbow, guiding her to a wooden table in the kitchen and pressing her onto a chair.

Lucia sat, disoriented for a moment as if all she was and knew herself to be had been stolen away, leaving new feelings she hadn't experienced before. Her head lightened and she clutched the table edge, closing her eyes to steady her equilibrium.

What's happening to me?

"I think you might have caught a chill last night. You're flushed and don't look too well."

She savored the sensations his voice inspired—heat burning her folds, her nipples tightening into hard peaks that begged to be licked—then opened her eyes to find him standing in front of her again, pressing a glass of water into her hand and nodding for her to sip. The cool liquid felt good on her tongue and she finished the drink, better for having taken in some fluid.

"I'll make you a coffee and some toast." Sam moved to the worktop where he busied himself with the task.

The scent of coffee wafted to her, warm and pleasing, like she was back home. For a moment she wished she were, but she shoved that thought away. Sentiment wasn't on her agenda either—at least not until she'd found her father's resting place, and maybe even then she'd hold back until she'd caught the cougar on camera.

"Sugar and creamer?"

Sam's voice startled her, its timbre commanding yet mellow. Again her cunt clenched and her nipples rubbed against the sheet, the abrasion nothing like his wet tongue last night as he'd suckled them. Heat suffused her face at the memory of being so wanton. *"Fuck me..."*

Lucia blinked and closed her eyes briefly. "Um, please." She adjusted the sheet higher under her armpits, conscious that her cleavage was on show. Not that his gaze had strayed there. He'd been chivalrous, keeping eye contact only, a far cry from the city men she was used to. Her nipples brushing the sheet mocked her unfulfilled desire to have his mouth there instead. She squirmed, her pussy lips wet, the throb there insistent and bold.

He placed coffee and buttered toast in front of her and sat opposite her, studying her with those deep, dark eyes—eyes that seemed to see into her soul, to know what thoughts whispered through her mind. His lips tweaked upward, but he straightened them quickly, leaving her wondering if he had really smiled at all.

"What did you need to see me about?" he asked.

A part of her died inside at his apparent ease at forgetting what had happened between them the night before, but she scolded herself. Wasn't this why she was here? To interest him in helping her? Batting the unfamiliar needy emotions away, she forced a smile and picked up a slice of toast.

"I was told you'd be able to take me to where my father died."

His eyes widened briefly, as though he were searching his mind for an answer. He cocked his head and frowned. "No one has been murdered in these parts for quite a while. When did your father...pass?"

"He wasn't murdered. And it was a month ago, in the area where I was camped. At least, I think it was there. You saved me from what killed him."

"A mudslide?" His gaze penetrated hers. "So you're talking about Chavez, the guy who came to find the black cougar?"

Lucia nodded and blushed under his scrutiny, feeling as though Sam was irked by her father's reason for being here. And why had he said "murdered"? "He was a photographer, but more than anything he loved nature and animals. He'd retired and came here to capture the cougar's image." Her throat tightened and she swallowed, dropping the uneaten toast back onto the plate. Her hunger vanished and she stared out the window, studying the mountain so close on the other side of the glass. "I need closure, I need—" She turned to him and stopped herself from revealing her intention to find the cougar too. Something about the tightness of Sam's mouth and the blaze in his eyes warned her not to offer such information.

"The cougar needs to be left alone. It doesn't court company. Or need public exposure. It doesn't deserve being placed in a cage to be stared at and studied." He grimaced and his jaw muscles flexed. Slapping his palms on the table, he rose and strode to the washer and dryer situated on the far wall. "Your clothes should be dry by now. I washed them this morning." He opened the dryer and removed her clothes—everything she had brought with her. As he folded them, he said, "The rain had soaked through your bag." He placed a pair of panties on the pile.

His casual manner amazed her. There he stood, one of her bras in hand, looking at her without the slightest hint of embarrassment. He continued to fold and she stifled the urge to get up and finish the task.

"Thank you. That was very kind. I'll be out of your way after today. If you're not too busy and can take me to my father's resting place, once I've paid my respects I'll trek into town and buy some more camping equipment. I appreciate everything you've done for me so far, but I really don't think you want me hanging around getting in your way."

Sam stared at her, eyes and mouth wide, a pink sock clutched in one hand. He appeared startled, offended even, and she wondered what she'd said to elicit such a reaction.

"No." He cleared his throat. "I mean, you can stay here. It's not safe. And not just because of the mudslides." He placed the sock with its companion on the pile and retook his seat at the table. "That man you saw is hunting the cougar. He's not someone you'd want to run into—he's not a good person. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her stomach rolled over and she picked up her cup to occupy her shaking hands. After taking a sip of coffee she nodded. Were there dangerous people out there willing to take lives in order to get what they wanted? "So I take it camping alone wouldn't be too smart, right?"

"Damn right."

She pondered what Sam had said about the cougar. Should she stay just to take its picture and risk others coming to find it too? Or should she go back home to the life and comforts she'd missed since coming here? Concrete sidewalks instead of grass and sludge. Dainty shoes instead of clumpy boots. Loneliness instead of...what? She huffed out a laugh. A little time spent with Sam hardly justified her thinking it could lead to more, but that thought had flickered through her mind, hadn't it? The briefest of thoughts, but one that startled her with its strength all the same. She eyed the rigid set of his jaw and took it for anger, but was it directed at the man she had seen in the forest or her?

Abruptly, she decided to leave before she allowed herself to feel things she shouldn't. Things that clearly weren't reciprocated. Things she had no right to expect based on one night. Yes, she'd had the fuck of her life and wished for more of the same, but... "I'll go back to the city tomorrow." She sipped her coffee, the taste suddenly bitter. "I won't trouble you further." *But, damn! I wanted to finish what Dad started. Where's my determination gone?*

His hand shot out to grip her wrist and heat spread up her arm and through her body. Fear followed close behind, but not the kind that warned her away from him. No, she sensed the fear coming *from* him and didn't understand why.

"No." He stared at her—hard. "You must stay. Here. With me."

"I...I have no reason to be here other than why I came, and once today is over, my main objective will have been met. I have a job and a home to return to, a life waiting back in the city. It was silly of me to come. I don't belong here."

She stared at him, and the warmth pooled in her belly before seeping into her pussy. The hot desire she'd experienced last night threatened to erupt again and she squeezed her legs together. His gaze drew her in and a force surrounded her, alien in its intensity. The need to remain here grew, but she pushed it aside. She was being fanciful, imagining she'd felt something she hadn't and heard a pleading lilt in his voice that wasn't there. Lust had gripped them, and that's all that had a hold of her now.

"There is a reason," he said, thumb circling her inner wrist.

Chapter Four

Warmth flared in his groin as his cock stretched the front of his jeans and apprehension fisted in his gut. If she *was* the one he'd been waiting for, he had to find a way to make her stay. At least until he could figure it all out, decide if he really did want to be normal, whatever that was.

Would the spirits of his ancestors give him a choice?

Her eyes told him she wanted him as much as he wanted her, but would that be enough? Two people needed more than sex. They had nothing in common. Yet he was drawn to her and that terrified him. He hadn't experienced so much fear since he was a small boy and first learned of his cougar. If she wasn't the woman who could lift his curse, he couldn't afford to get too close.

She was afraid too. But what did she fear? Him? None of it mattered. It was out of their hands. They were on destiny's path now and nothing could stop whatever was about to happen. She looked at him with such longing. Such sadness. How could he tell her? Guilt plagued him. Maybe she'd be better off not knowing and telling her would be selfish. But she'd come to him looking for answers, hadn't she?

She started to stand and he touched her shoulder.

"Wait. Sit down," he said.

She sat. His hand still wrapped around her wrist, he leaned closer to her. What he had to say wouldn't be easy for her to hear and even harder for him to tell. What he'd seen that day out on the mountain was through his cougar's eyes. If he told her everything his cougar had seen, she'd expect him to go to the authorities with the information.

And that he couldn't do.

Sam would not place himself at risk. Several lifetimes of running, hiding, had left him jaded. Someone always came to prove the black cougar existed and someone always got hurt. A searing pain spread across his chest and he heaved in air. An image of Lucia, broken and battered, lying in the nearby stream assaulted him.

A premonition.

He couldn't bear the thought of her getting hurt, and it relieved him to know he was right in not telling her everything. At least for now.

The vision vanished. He settled his thumb on the pulse point at her wrist, feeling the strong rhythm of blood rushing through her veins. Fear weighed heavy on him—fear for her. The spirits had given him a glimpse into the future. Would they have done that if Lucia wasn't the one? Over the years he'd had similar visions about other people, so he couldn't be sure. But for her sake and his, he had to convince her to stay. She

really wasn't safe now that he knew the killer was back and had apparently taken an interest in him, and possibly her too.

What had led him to his cabin?

"Sam? What is it?" she asked, her voice soft and coaxing as she tugged on the sheet to keep it from slipping lower.

His throat constricted with the words he needed to say. "I don't think your father's death was an accident. I think someone may have killed him."

She paled, jerking her arm from him. Her hand covered her mouth and she squeezed her eyes shut. Sitting very still for a minute or so, she then jumped from the chair and ran. Sam followed, terrified she'd try to leave, but she hurried to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. He stood outside, propped against the door, and heard her retching.

Like a vise, her suffering clamped down on his chest. The overwhelming need to hold her, to take the pain from her, gripped him. His own ache over Silver Hawk's death rose inside him with the freshness of yesterday. Yes, someone always came for the cougar and someone always got hurt.

And this time Lucia might be the one claimed by the Raven Mocker.

The sound of water splashing as she brushed her teeth filtered through the door. Silence followed and moments later a low whine. She was crying. How much should he tell her? *What* should he tell her? The truth would be too much and she'd never believe him. He'd concoct a version of the truth, then, and answer her questions as best he could. Something told him she'd be relentless with those questions too.

Sam opened the door to find her sitting on the toilet, face buried in her palms, the sheet loosely pooled around her body. The horrendous sobs tearing from her throat shook her shoulders. He gathered her in his arms. With slow, easy steps, he carried her to the bedroom where he set her on the bed and gently pushed her back.

Tears coursed down her cheeks and she sniffled. The anguish in her eyes burned brighter than the sunlight bursting through the window. Soft red highlights streaked her dark brown hair. Sam was way out of his element. He'd never had to comfort a woman before. Instinct took over and he did the only thing he knew to do. He lay down beside her and took her in his arms, letting her weep into his chest. He stroked her hair and simply remained quiet. Eventually her tears subsided and she too quieted. For a moment he thought she was sleeping, but then she stirred, sitting up. She looked down at him and smiled. The sheet dropped to the bed as she threw her leg across his body and straddled him.

Goddamn, she's beautiful. Hair brushing her jutting nipples, eyes wet with desire and grief, she placed her hand on his waist and began tugging at the hem of his shirt. Sam breathed deeply, anxious, his cock already hard. With his bare chest revealed, she leaned forward and rubbed her lips back and forth over his nipples. He threaded his hands into her hair, dragging her to his mouth.

One...two...three brief pecks to his lips was all she allowed as she fought not to kiss him, teasing. He groaned, desperate to taste her, and lunged upward to take her mouth. The kiss began feverishly then slowed to an exploration that joined them in so much more than simple lust.

Sam rolled her onto her back and ran his hands up and down her body—over the curve of her hips and waist and up to her large rounded breasts. She made furious work of unfastening his belt buckle. Before he knew it, she had his pants unzipped and his cock in her hand, poking it into her wet slit.

He pulled away from her mouth. “Easy. Easy. Not so fast,” he warned.

“I need—”

“I don’t care. Slowly.” He trailed his tongue across her bare shoulder.

And he *didn’t* care. He would have all of her and take his time doing it too. The woman just didn’t know what she’d gotten herself into with him. Almost two hundred years of fucking tended to hone a man’s skills.

He dragged both her hands above her head, stretching out her arms, pinning them to the pillow. Continuing his erotic assault, he wound his tongue around one taut nipple. Her soft moan of pleasure clung to the air. Nudging her legs apart with his knee, he ground his cock against the downy tuft of hair covering her folds. She pushed upward with her hips, chasing what she wanted.

Sam looked at her and shook his head. “Not yet.”

His tongue blazed a trail down her torso and like an arrow moved straight to her navel where he teased the small hole with tickling strokes. She giggled and he raked his teeth over her flesh. Her hands strained against his. He grabbed a pillow and stuffed it beneath her ass, raising her hips to the perfect angle.

With his gaze trained on the neatly trimmed thatch of dark brown hair hiding her cunt, he grinned. One thing you could say about a city girl, they knew how to package the goods. He took her hands from above her head and pressed them to either side of her body. It wasn’t often that he got to eat a little pussy. Everybody in these parts knew to wear a condom with the Monroe sisters because they entertained gentlemen callers regularly. It wasn’t unheard of for one man coming to see another man going. Those two women gave new meaning to the term “sloppy seconds” and Sam wasn’t about to put his tongue in anything they had.

But Lucia’s taste and scent left him drunk with desire. And last night’s sampling hadn’t been nearly enough. He wanted to lick her pussy until she was senseless with need for him. Her sweet womanly aroma had been made just for him.

He blew his breath across the plump folds of her sex. She shuddered with just that tiny huff of air. His cock jerked, thumping hard against her thigh. Damn. The power of a woman—this woman in particular. If she truly did belong to him, the spirits had indeed rewarded him for all the years he’d protected the mountain from those who would harm its wildlife or mar its beauty. Wanting every single moment with her to last, he playfully wiggled his tongue over her cleft.

Her hips jiggled. "Oh, yes. Yes."

Those breathy words of approval spurred the need to bury his tongue inside her juicy depths. Letting go of her hands, he parted her outer lips, salivating for the taste of her. At first he smoothed his mouth over her satiny folds, kissing the glistening pink skin. She humped her pussy against his face, begging with soft whimpers. Again, he blew his breath over her wetness as her hands fisted into the sheet she'd worn.

Hips writhing, mouth uttering Ohs and Ahs of pleasure, her stomach muscles undulating. And all his. For now. What if she left him tomorrow? Or the next day? The thought pressed down on him with the intensity of the mudslide they'd escaped. At that moment he didn't care what the spirits had in store for him. He wanted Lucia. No other.

Just her.

And not only for a few days.

It wasn't the sex. And it was. It wasn't her body. And it was. He'd been alone for too long and her being here heightened his awareness of that loneliness. A loneliness he'd pushed aside for too many lifetimes. He slid his tongue upward, touching her clit and circling the taut nub. Her sounds of pleasure became shrieks of torturous need, amplifying his own craving to fill her with his seed, to keep her with him.

Now and forever.

Would the spirits be that generous? The longing in his heart expanded, shelving the emptiness that had been his life and giving way to hope. Her scent called to him as his tongue stroked her clit. Thrusting two fingers inside her, he matched the rhythm of his finger-fucking with that of his tongue. He burned to be inside her, to brand her as his.

He glanced up at her. She pushed her breasts together, massaging and pinching at her nipples, licking her lips. Flattening his tongue against her clit, he rose with her hips as she pressed for more and sought the orgasm he knew swelled inside her. As her agitation grew, she bucked and moaned beneath his tongue, pulled from him and brought herself back.

And Sam never let up.

Relentless, he continued the passionate onslaught, tongue flicking, fingers working furiously. And then her moment came. Gasping for air, she grew rigid before releasing her creamy juices. He slipped his fingers from her opening and dipped his mouth lower to catch the flow. Drinking her in, he tasted the musky scent and only wanted more.

He lifted his head, expecting to see spent desire in her eyes and instead saw the embers of lust burning brightly. She hadn't had her fill of him. And he sure as hell didn't think he'd ever get his fill of her.

She reached for him as he covered her body. Her lips brushed over his, her tongue licking her juices from his mouth. He fumbled for a condom, smiling with the thought that he'd need to buy another box. Impatient, he nudged her over and up on all fours. He brought his cock between her thighs and slid the tip through her wet pussy. Back and forth he rubbed, riding just high enough in her folds to touch her clit with a

promise for more. But he wanted to feel her warmth, the tightness of her walls, and with one hard thrust, entered her. The smooth glide of his cock inside her tight walls drove him to the point of breaking. Her muscles flexed around his thickness and the slick wet heat of her felt so damn good. So right.

He wound a hand around her hair, tugging. Her body arched and she shoved her ass back against him. From long, slow strokes in and out, taking his cock to the hilt and back to the tip of her opening, he shifted to short, jabbing lunges. Her fleshy cheeks slapped his thighs and the sound of their wet joining echoed in the room. She clawed at the sheets then jerked upward and locked her hands around his neck. He adjusted the angle of his strokes as she sat on his haunches to have more control over their rhythm. He circled her breasts with his hands and pinched her nipples. Sweat beaded his forehead. Her soft moans grew louder. Bucking up and down, she sheathed his cock over and over, pussy clenching and unclenching around him. Her nails raked the skin on his neck.

Insatiable. Wild. She rode him hard and fast. Sam had never failed to outlast a woman, but damn if she wasn't testing every ounce of his stamina. He tensed to hold back, his heartbeat accelerating. His balls tightened and a tingling sensation shot out into his cock. Breath held, lungs painfully expanded, he heard her scream. On a whoosh of air, he emptied his cock in short, jerky thrusts.

Sam felt himself falling, hurtling through a black veil of time and space. The scent of wood smoke filled his nostrils. Flashes of an old man sitting by a fire spun through his mind's eye. Lifting a turtle-shell shaker, its rattle ominous—deadly—the man's singsong chant rent the quiet night and flames billowed, beckoning. Alive within the red-orange blaze, the dark spirits lurked.

And the cougar leapt.

Sam threw his head back and growled from deep in his chest, holding Lucia tightly against him. She struggled, pulling away as if suddenly afraid. Rearing his head once more, he let loose another feral wail then laid her down and claimed her once more.

Love had finally found him.

* * * * *

The early afternoon sun fell across them in a blanket of yellow light. Next to him, the old quilt rustled with Lucia's movement as she glided her lips over his shoulder. Pulling her closer, he kissed the top of her head, breathed in her scent and nestled her into the crook of his arm.

Time for the questions, he supposed. Questions that would force him to walk a fine line. He was certain she was indeed the woman promised to him. The one who would forever change the only life he'd known—the life of two souls dwelling within one body, each sharing the other's existence yet walking the earth alone.

It had always been his nature to keep to himself because of what he was, but that part of him had already changed just by being with Lucia. Could he go back to that

solitary world? But then he'd never really been alone, had he? His cougar had always been there. If the curse could be lifted, which one of them would disappear?

The cougar or Sam?

Would the spirits be so cruel as to send Lucia to him just to have him taste her love and never live out his dream of truly being loved by banishing him instead of the cougar? And the cougar deserved to exist in this world just as much as he. Sam wasn't the only one who'd guarded the mountain all this time.

The cougar belonged to the Great Blue Ridge. It was a part of the "place of blue smoke" and understood things that Sam never could, sensing all the wondrous phenomena and upheaval that was nature. In truth, Sam's need to interact with other people—his need for a woman—had brought trouble down on them. Everyone was curious about the reclusive guide who seemed to know the mountains like the back of his hand.

He'd been forced time and again to vanish into the wilderness for a decade or more because someone was getting dangerously close to discovering his secret or because he couldn't age, and sooner or later someone would notice. Each time the need to return would overwhelm him and he'd reinvent himself so he could stand on the fringes of life and watch from afar. What was this...his tenth or twelfth incarnation?

Sam had lost count.

While as much a part of him as his cougar, the sounds of the hills and valleys had never fully given him what he needed, and he always found his way back to the edge of civilization, longing for what he could not have. That elusive promise.

Friendship. Family. Love.

"Sam?"

"Yes."

"I feel like there's more to all this. To you and me. I'm not ready to talk about it, but we need to at some point. You know that, don't you?"

"I do."

How the hell did his mate end up being a city gal? The woman was just too damn comfortable with herself, but they were all that way, weren't they? At least the ones he'd seen—wearing their designer jeans and boots to go hiking as if they were on a trip to the mall. Tossing their gum wrappers into the streams and taking pictures with their fancy digital cameras and never really understanding the beauty they saw.

Yet he sensed something different about Lucia.

If she wasn't, it would never work between them. But why did he even doubt she was his. He knew it with every part of him.

"And we need to talk about something else too."

Here it comes. He nodded.

"Who killed my father?"

Sam threw back the quilt and tried to get up. She wrapped her arms around his waist, her breasts pressing the bare skin of his back.

"Don't. I need to know."

"I don't know who killed your father." First lie.

"But you said —"

He ripped her arms from him, stood and turned to face her. "I said I thought someone killed your father. I never said I knew who."

"Then tell me who you think killed him. I have the right to know."

He couldn't argue with her on that score. Hell, he couldn't argue with her anyway. Not and look at that sexy mouth of hers or those gorgeous breasts. The thought of driving his cock deep inside her tightened his nut sac. He'd love to spread those pretty legs and have her again. But he doubted she'd be in the mood once their talk was finished.

"I was out walking near your father's campsite." It wasn't actually a lie—he'd been prowling the night as his cougar. "I'd talked with him the day before."

"You spoke to my father?" The quilt fell farther down her body as she pushed up onto her knees.

Sam nodded and silently reproached himself for thinking about sex while in the middle of telling her a bunch of half-truths about her father's death. "Seemed like a nice guy. I'm sorry for your loss."

She looked away for a few moments. At first he thought she might be crying, but she wasn't. When she faced him again, she appeared determined to keep going. Her eyes glowed with a mixture of sadness and anger.

Jaw set, she asked, "What did you talk about?"

"The fact that there was a line of storms moving in from the west the next day and that he should move his site."

"And he didn't," she stated in a dull tone.

"No. Not then, well... He said he was waiting for someone and couldn't leave until they showed."

"Who?"

"Didn't say."

Sam bent over and picked up his briefs and jeans. Although she watched him dress, she stayed quiet, obviously thinking on what he'd said so far.

Threading his arms into his shirtsleeves he asked, "You okay?"

"I've had a few months to get over the shock of him being gone, but to think someone may have killed him..."

"I understand. Maybe we should let all of this rest for a bit. Would you like to get dressed? Not that I don't like you just as you are." He grinned. "But I'll bring your clothes to you if you like."

She smiled, and he thought he saw the hint of a blush in her cheeks. A city gal blush? That was a first. But then Lucia wasn't your ordinary run-of-the-mill city gal, was she? No. Her appearance here was fated. Their paths had to cross.

"I'll get your clothes." He walked out into the small hallway.

"Sam?" Her soft voice stopped him.

"Yes?"

"You'll finish telling me when you get back, right?"

"Everything I know. The story belongs to you, after all."

Sam walked into the laundry area. *What the fuck am I doing? Stalling for time, that's what I'm doing. I can't tell her everything. She'd have the sheriff all over this mountain.* But he couldn't let her go anywhere either. And not just because he wanted her, because she was the one.

The killer had returned and Sam had no doubt that Lucia's arrival had something to do with that. What was the connection? Could it really all be about the cougar or was something else involved here?

Returning to the bedroom with her clothes, he watched her from the doorway. She stood in front of the window, the sunlight splashing her luscious body, her aura a bright, clean white. What did that mean? Purity of thought? He didn't recall Silver Hawk teaching him about a white aura.

He set the basket on the bed.

"So tell me the rest of it," she said without turning.

"That night I wasn't far from where your father was camped. I heard loud voices." His cougar had heard the voices, but that didn't matter. He'd give her as much truth as he could. "I went to investigate. When I got close, I realized your father was arguing with someone. I headed toward the site and shouted out. Before I got there, the man he'd been arguing with had left. I watched your father take down his tent and pack up."

"What did he say about the man?"

"Nothing. I didn't ask either."

"Can you identify him?"

God, yes he could identify him. He was the same guy Lucia had snapped a picture of, the one lurking in the forest. "No. It was dusk and from the trees too dark to really make out his face. It had already begun to rain."

"But the man left."

"Yes."

"So what makes you think someone killed my father?"

"Your father was leaving the area. He'd packed up and was moving to higher ground. He knew the hillside was unstable. It had been raining all afternoon and the worst of the storms were closing in. Besides, he'd said he couldn't leave until someone showed up to meet him, and I assumed it was the man he'd argued with."

She shook her head and left the window to come over and sit on the bed. "I don't understand. None of that explains why you'd think someone killed him."

Sam looked down at her, very much aware of the effect what he said next would have. "It was hours later before the storms caused enough damage to trigger that mudslide. Your father would have set up another campsite on higher ground long before then. So why were his belongings found in the mudslide debris?"

"He never left." Her hushed voice echoed in Sam's head.

"No."

Kneeling in front of her, Sam took her hands in his. "I think that man came back. I think my shouting before I got to the campsite scared him off and once I'd left..."

"He came back and killed my father."

"That's what I think."

"But why?"

"I don't know, Lucia. I don't even know why your father was here."

"To take pictures. He loved wildlife and was published in all kinds of magazines and books. He was sent here to take pictures of the cougar, that's all."

"Maybe."

"Maybe? What are you saying? Is there something you're not telling me, Sam?"

Sam hung his head. He'd gone as far as he could. His cougar had been there that night, not him.

And he couldn't tell her that through his cougar's eyes, he'd watched as her father had been bludgeoned to death.

* * * * *

Lucia stared at Sam, sensing that he knew more. The set of his jaw told her not to push him, though, and she clamped her mouth shut. He stood and tilted his head, silently asking whether she was okay, and she smiled. She was as okay as she could be under the circumstances, but a question nagged at her, one she didn't want to acknowledge or contemplate. And could she hide the truth that prodded her now—or the truth as she saw it?

She rose, picked up her clothes and moved toward the door.

Sam cleared his throat. "I'll go. You get dressed in here." He walked to her, trailed the backs of his fingers down her cheek, then left the room.

Lucia's stomach rolled over. God, how did he make her feel like this, a giddy schoolgirl in love with her first crush? Was this what people meant when they talked of love at first sight? She'd always said it didn't exist, but now? With a sigh, she dressed, sitting on the bed to pull on her socks. That question returned, and she allowed it to bloom and spread into more queries that swirled in her head until she covered her face with her hands and inhaled deeply, then blew out through pursed lips.

Did Jacob have anything to do with this? If he did, what role did he play? Just a middleman who found a photographer? *A middleman prepared to sleep with me to get what he wanted.* And what did his boss have in mind once he had proof the cougar existed? Sam had mentioned the cougar didn't deserve to be caught and caged. Had he heard word this was someone's intention? And Jacob's boss—who was he? Jacob had never really said what he did for a living, being vague to the point of telling her nothing except that he worked in an office. His words the last day she'd seen him had been the first time he'd offered information regarding his employment. Why hadn't she pushed him to tell her after the first time she'd asked and he'd been vague? Wasn't that what couples did, share their lives with one another, discuss their day at work and how it had gone?

Christ, he was an asshole.

She smiled wryly, smoothing her hands down her face then dropping them in her lap. He hadn't wanted her like she'd thought, and she was ready to accept that now, without feeling hurt and used. If she dwelled on his reasons for being with her, she'd end up bitter, and damn it, she was too young for that. Too young to allow her first relationship to taint the ones that followed. To taint the one with Sam.

Had her father been murdered by the man he'd met up with? *Why* had he met him? And what the hell had he been killed *for*?

The questions came thick and fast, too many for her to process, and she took a deep breath again to steady herself for sifting through them. As she mulled things over, she wondered if her father had told Jacob he'd taken a picture of the cougar. Did Jacob's boss send the man to retrieve the photos? And had he managed that task before he— She swallowed down bile, the image of the moon-faced figure she'd seen in the trees filling her mind.

Was that man now following her?

Oh God, no. No. If he didn't get the film... Shit, he might think I have it!

Lucia sprang from the bed, her knees weak and her heart thudding hard and fast. She lurched toward the door, wrenching it open and stumbling into the hallway. Praying she wasn't right, praying Sam would think her reasoning insane when she told him her fears, she ran to the kitchen. He turned from where he was making coffee, and his eyebrows drew together. Lucia clutched the doorframe, the need to tell him her thoughts prevented by her rasping breaths.

"Lucia? What's wrong?"

She gasped, flapping her hand to tell him to give her a minute.

"Have you seen him again? Outside?" He glanced out the window at the mountain then moved toward her, grasping her shoulders. "Tell me!"

"I...I think I've worked out...what's been going on." She closed her eyes, willing her heart to slow, her breaths to even out.

Sam stared at her, questions in his eyes. "Sit down. Talk to me."

He pressed her into a chair, kissed the top of her head and went back to making the coffee. Sam kept his back to her, shoulders rigid, and she wondered if anger prompted his arm muscles to bunch or whether it was apprehension. Lucia related her fears, the words coming out in a mad rush, and she finished, accepting the cup of coffee Sam placed before her.

He sat beside her, leaving his cup untouched, and squeezed her thigh. "What if you're right? How do you feel about someone hunting the cougar?"

"I..." How *did* she feel? Wasn't she hunting it in a way? "The thought of it being caught, sold, caged... It isn't right." She stared at her cup. "It would be cruel, wouldn't it? Taking it away from everything it's ever known." A sigh escaped her. "All I wanted was its picture. For me. Just so I'd got one. For my father. His memory. I didn't plan on telling anyone I'd seen the cougar—if I ever do—just..."

She looked at him and his features softened, his eyes kind and moist.

"If I'm right, isn't there anything we can do to stop them? Isn't the cougar protected in some way?"

"The law doesn't matter to the men who hunt the cougar. These men need to be told to back the hell off in a language they understand." His jaw muscles spasmed and he tapped his fingertips on the table. "And if this Jacob has anything to do with it, I don't want you blaming yourself. You couldn't have known the man he worked for had sent someone to trail your father. And it makes sense, that man being here. I've been wondering why he showed up here and now I know. He followed you."

Despite suspecting the same thing herself, Lucia gasped. Fear brought goose bumps to her arms, and she rubbed her skin. "He thinks I know something, doesn't he? Thinks I have my father's camera. His pictures."

Sam nodded. "Possibly, though I imagine they've dug around in your father's resting place in search of his camera. And if they think you have more pictures, they won't rest until they have them, I'm certain of that." He sighed. "You'll stay with me at all times, understand?" He curled his fingers around her hand, his thumb stroking her knuckles.

"I will."

"Good. I can't risk— You mustn't— You not hungry?"

"Sorry, no."

"Me neither." Scraping his chair back, he held out his hand. "Come on. It's time to go."

Chapter Five

Outside, the sun warmed Lucia's face, but within seconds the wind snatched that warmth away, tousling her hair and sending it in all directions. She shoved her hair inside her coat and zipped up, dipping her chin inside the turtleneck collar. Sam walked beside her, hands in coat pockets, head moving left and right as they walked away from his cabin toward the trees.

"How will we get over that ravine?" she asked. "I don't know how we managed it before but—"

"It tapers, solid land at either end. We only had to jump before because running around it would have taken too much time." He paused, smiling at her, then asked, "You sure you're up for this?"

Lucia nodded, though her stomach contracted at the thought of what she might find. Not only items belonging to her father, but maybe his body if she dug... No, she didn't have the tools, and would she really unearth him if given the chance?

"He'll be buried too deep for you to get him out, you know." Sam sighed. "I realize that's your ideal, giving him a proper burial, but if we got someone up here to dig him up, we risk another mudslide, and one day I have a feeling that whole damn mountain is going to come tumbling down. All it'd take is a small earthquake and shit, down it'll come. It's unstable. I'm not even happy about taking you there now."

Lucia frowned. Had he read her mind? She shook the thought out of her head, feeling foolish for even entertaining such a notion. "I'm really grateful. I just want...want to go there. To the last place he was. Is."

"I understand."

They entered the trees, their journey hampered by mulch and boggy ground. Dappled sunlight lit the tree trunks and forest floor and a dove gave a mournful cry, the sound sending a jagged shiver up Lucia's spine. Sam strode ahead, navigating their path with ease. Lucia stumbled frequently and cursed herself for being so clumsy. She'd never get used to living in a place like this. Or could she?

I imagine if I had to I would. I'd adapt. She scoffed at herself. *I doubt very much the opportunity will arise. Yes, we've got things to discuss about us, but... No, Sam's not going to want me hanging around for long. He's such a loner. Having someone in his life permanently doesn't seem to figure in his plans.* She shrugged and looked ahead, smiling as his hair swayed with his movements. The urge to touch it grabbed her and she walked faster to keep up, not wanting to be too far away from him for long. *Where did that feeling come from?*

She frowned. Was she latching on to Sam because her emotions were screwed? Did what she felt only exist because of her circumstances? She didn't know, but if there was a chance of having a full-on relationship with him, she wasn't about to say no. He was so...different. Lucia studied him. His head darted side to side, as though he constantly scanned their surroundings for danger. He looked as if he could spring at anything that came their way, his body taut and waiting, his mind alert. Despite her fear regarding the man she'd seen earlier, she didn't feel as afraid as she would have if Sam wasn't here. Hell, the only other person she'd have felt this safe with was her father and he –

Lucia swallowed, refusing to complete the thought. She had enough emotion inside her right now to fill the upcoming ravine. It wouldn't do to let any out before they'd arrived where her father had died. If she did, she feared she wouldn't be able to continue walking, and she *had* to see her father's resting place. Say a few words for him. *Do something to acknowledge the fact he had lived, give thanks for his presence in her life.* With the lack of a body and funeral, she'd missed out on the acceptance part of the grieving process. This journey, though hard, would give her some measure of peace and hopefully the strength to move on.

Sam broke through the tree line and stopped. Lucia shifted her thoughts from morbidity and quickened her pace until she stood by his side. *Is something wrong?* He stared ahead, hand raised to his brow to shield his eyes. The breadth of the ravine gaped, a startling sight. No way could they have leaped across it before, but they had. She opened her mouth to question how, but Sam held up his free hand. *Is he listening for something?* He lifted his chin and inhaled, head tilted.

"Someone is close by," he said, eyes narrowing. "Stay beside me. And we jumped over the narrow end, in case you're wondering." He smiled and took her hand. "Come. I'll show you."

Speechless with fear, Lucia took comfort from his firm grip. They walked in silence and Lucia marveled that it wasn't awkward. She didn't feel the need to speak, not like when she was with Jacob. His silences had been harsh, as though she'd done something wrong or he didn't want to be with her. She saw that now, and despite knowing he wasn't good for her, didn't love her, it still stung. He'd manipulated her, used her for his own ends. A tinge of anger pushed some of the fear away. She hadn't deserved to be treated like that, and if Jacob could sleep at night without feeling guilty, she was better off without him.

The ravine gap had tapered to a five-foot span as they'd walked and she looked at it with a critical eye. Yes, they could have jumped that. The speed Sam was running could have possibly given him enough momentum to leap across, though the thought of her weight over his shoulder had her questioning it yet again. The forest looked the same the whole way along, so she didn't have any landmarks to pinpoint exactly where they had crossed. She sighed, telling herself it didn't matter how or where they'd got across, only that they had. If they hadn't, well...

She shuddered and Sam squeezed her hand.

"See the solid ground over there?" Sam pointed ahead a short distance.

Lucia nodded, relieved when they walked over to the other side. There, she glanced backward, an itch tickling her to stare down into that deep, dark place. She ignored it, knowing she'd freak out if she looked, and continued walking without conversation, sensing Sam enjoyed the peace. He appeared to soak up everything around them, from the magnificent scenery to the smells and weather. Lucia breathed out, drawing from his serenity and infusing herself with it. City life was all well and good, but out here, in the beauty of this place, she had time to think, really think, or not to think at all.

"We are here," Sam said.

Lucia stared ahead. How could she have camped so close with no thought to the dangers involved? Everything had changed upon meeting Sam. New purpose burned inside her now, the need to seek out her father's killer growing brighter by the second.

Sam stopped abruptly, holding her hand tighter and glancing all around. Fear returned, keener now, its edges sharp and spiky.

"What is it?" Lucia looked around, her heart thumping. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"Someone has been here recently. Maybe too recently. As though our presence scared them off."

"How do you —"

"Living out here you get a sixth sense. And I smell them. Smell anger."

Lucia stared at his profile. His jaw muscles pulsed and his mouth was a straight slash. Brow creased, he moved on, tugging her with him.

"Remain alert. Do *not* move far from me."

A buzzing vibrated in her ears, the sound she always heard when frightened, as if her nerves hummed. Her stomach rolled over and an image of the moon-faced man sprang to mind. He'd looked menacing, annoyed, though startled when he'd realized he'd been spotted. It had to be him who had been here, didn't it? And back there, Sam had said someone was close by. Was the man following them? Watching them from the forest?

She gripped Sam's hand tighter. "Thank you. For arriving when you did. That man could have overpowered me in a second if he'd caught up with me and I'd still been alone. I can't stand to think what he'd have done."

Sam brought her close and she rested her cheek against his chest, the sound of his fast-beating heart giving comfort, yet at the same time frightening her. If *he* was fearful...

"I'll find him." He stroked her hair, taking in a deep breath, then released her and looked into her eyes. "Everything will work out."

Lucia nodded and they pressed on, apprehension ensnaring her the closer they got to their destination. After a few minutes, Sam steered them nearer to a ridge and pointed at a smaller mound that protruded, its shape triangular, covered in brown earth of the mudslide that had been smoothed by the recent rains. She looked up at Sam and

he nodded. Here she was then, at the place she'd been seeking. Emotion flooded through her, so intense she wanted to run, to escape the burden. But if she ran it wouldn't change a thing. She'd still have to face this place again. Peace would never be hers until she'd accepted that her father rested beneath that hump. Until she'd found the man who had killed him.

She stared into the distance, another jut of fallen mud reminding her how lucky she'd been—and how close she'd camped to her father's resting place. Tears burned her eyes and she took a deep breath and let go of Sam's hand. She approached the mound, expecting to see...what? Loose earth with a camera, rucksack, or maybe a tent pole poking out of it? *Yes, that's exactly what I'd expected to see. I wanted to find something, anything that had belonged to Dad.*

She sighed, her limbs heavy, her head achy.

Rest well, Dad. I miss you. Miss you so much.

Lucia blew out a breath, trying to get a hold on her feelings. If she allowed them to run out of control she'd be no good for anyone, a burden for Sam, who didn't need to aid a blubbering woman back to his cabin. Not when an unknown man seemed to be following them. No, she'd remain strong until this was all over, and the tears could come when she'd returned home, where no one would hear her or have to suffer her company.

She walked on, blurry gaze fixed to the mound, and wondered exactly where her father rested. It must have been around one hundred feet wide. Looking up at the bluff, she imagined the force of the mud as it spewed over the top and slammed onto the ground. Sam placed his hand on her shoulder and she turned to face him, wanting nothing more than to rest her face against his chest and have his arms around her. But her emotions were too fragile for such an action.

"Did... When did this mudslide happen? I mean, day or night?" She stared into his eyes, seeing his compassion.

"Night. I heard the rumble."

"And it would have been quick?"

He nodded.

"A blessing, then." Relief swept through her. He wouldn't have known a thing. Still, she winced at the image of his broken bones from the weight of the mud and the lump in her throat expanded. "I...I stupidly thought I'd find something here. Some..."

Sam looked behind her, his eyes narrowing, head tilting. "Come with me."

Pulse throbbing in her neck, Lucia spun to follow him and slipped her hand in his. They walked quickly to where a shovel lay against the mound and hunks of mud, recently dug, littered the ground. Someone *had* been here.

Someone hoping to find a camera?

A chill skittered up and down her spine and goose bumps peppered her skin. The sense of being watched assailed her and she looked out at the ravine, and then at the

forest. Something sparkled there, as if the sun had glanced across a shard of glass embedded in a tree trunk.

"Sam?"

He turned and stared at the trees. The glint sparkled again, the laser of light longer, wider this time, then winked out. Foreboding encompassed her and she *knew* someone stood there.

"It's him, isn't it?" she asked, her gaze on the spot where she'd seen the light.

"I would say so, yes."

The light flashed once more. Knowing that he watched them, had possibly killed her father, and now wanted her...

"We should go back." Sam pulled her along beside him, heading the way they had come. "It isn't safe out here. We're exposed."

Lucia nodded, walking double time to keep up. A loud crack rent the air a second before something hit the mudslide to their right, a spray of earth shooting up before slapping back down, the sound like rain on tin. She jumped, shrieking before she could stop herself.

"Fuck!" Sam shouted.

He pushed her down to the ground. Her knees and hands sank into the damp earth and she flattened herself, facedown, terror careening through her. Would she be safe down here? She turned her head to look at Sam. He remained standing, his hands bunched into fists, a tic flickering beneath his eye.

"Sam! Get down!" Lucia tugged the leg of his jeans, frantic to keep him safe.

"He's gone. I saw him running away. It was just a warning."

Lucia stood, rubbing her hands down her coat front then flicking off stubborn clumps of mud. "A warning? Shit, what the fuck will the real thing be like? One of us wounded? Dead?"

"No." He drew her close, arm about her back, fingers curled into her waist. "I won't allow that to happen. I'll find him before he comes back."

"I can't expect you to put your life in danger for me. Much as I want to find the bastard who killed my father, that little episode there has me changing my mind. I should go. With me gone, he'll come and find me in the city. I'll have police protection. And it means he won't be here looking for the cougar. If I go, this will get cleared up quickly. I can tell the police about Jacob. About everything."

He smiled, but he didn't seem to find anything amusing. "These people won't stop. Not until they have what they want. And I want to help. Need to help."

"But why? This is nothing to do with you!"

Sam cupped her face. "Lucia, this has *everything* to do with me."

"This isn't your fight. He was my father and I won't let you get killed trying to help me."

"This is my home."

She pulled away. "Home or not, it's not worth your life!"

Their bond was growing. Sam felt it and he knew she did too. And that's why the need to protect him was so strong within her. Only she didn't have the advantage of understanding exactly what was going on.

"It's more than that, Lucia."

"Then explain it to me," she said.

"We need to get back to the cabin. Keep moving." He brought her close against him once more.

"All right," she groaned. "But you can talk while we walk."

He trudged forward, continuing to scan the forest, sensing the man wasn't far. The shot had definitely been a warning. Whoever he was, he'd become so desperate he hadn't even tried to hide the fact he was there. A picture of the cougar might be valuable to some, but valuable enough to murder her father for, risk coming back to the scene, and now possibly kill them as well? But he hadn't shot them, had he? There was more to all this than just a picture of a legendary cat.

One thing was for certain, though. Whatever it was he wanted, the killer wasn't sure where it was—buried, or in Lucia's possession. Otherwise, he wouldn't be digging, and he wouldn't have missed when he aimed that gun. He thought Lucia had whatever it was he was after.

Sam was almost dragging Lucia along and slowed his pace to accommodate her much smaller steps. "I'm a part of this place. The spirits talk to me here."

"Spirits?"

The disbelief in her voice made him smile. "The spirits of my ancestors."

"Oh, but you don't really mean they talk to you, do you?"

"It's not as simple as that. They come to me in visions and put me on the right path. They are here with us now."

Lucia's head bobbed back and forth as if she were looking for the spirits.

Chuckling softly, Sam shook his head. "You won't see them."

A covey of quail flew into the air up ahead. Sam's gaze followed their short flight. The blue sky stretched, its endless palette dotted with wispy white clouds. A crisp autumn breeze blew and rustled the tree leaves.

"I'm not sure I understand. Is this your religion, Sam?"

Sam halted his steps. Turning his head to the east, he breathed deeply. The man was moving farther away. At least Lucia was safe for the time being.

"Sort of. But it's more of a way of life," he said. "It's in my blood. Who I am. The cougar is a part of me. Just like these mountains."

Moving in front of him, she asked, "And you would die for the cougar, for these mountains?"

"Yes. Yes, I would. And..."

Her beautiful brown eyes stared at him, searching. "And?"

And he would die for her—a realization that momentarily paralyzed him. He couldn't tell her. They'd only met last night. Yet it seemed as though his soul had known hers forever.

"I'm the caretaker of the *Shaconaque*."

"The what?"

"The 'place of blue smoke'. The Great Smoky Mountains. This place is sacred to my people. The Cherokee have lived here for over a thousand years. Our blood is in this soil. The spirits of our ancestors are here."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. Who made you 'caretaker'?"

Staying as close to the truth as possible, he said, "I was born with this responsibility. Marked by it."

"But how?"

Sam looked deeply into eyes that shone with questions, trying to convey his belief. "I feel it. Just know it."

Her voice tinged with sadness, she looked down at her feet and said softly, "I wish I believed in something like that."

He crooked his finger beneath her chin and tilted her head so her gaze met his. "It's there inside you. When the time comes, you'll do the right thing."

"You make it sound as though something is about to happen."

"Are you telling me you don't already know this?"

She had said to him earlier that she believed something was going on between them but she wasn't ready to talk about it. Her eyes said she still wasn't ready. Unable to look at him, to answer him, she turned away. Sam dropped his hand. He would take her to see White Owl. He could help Lucia discover who she really was.

Certain the man was gone and that Lucia was safe, he walked away from her, threading his way through the trees. Seconds later, he heard the crunch of her hiking boots behind him. He would spend the day with her, his woman—the woman promised to him by the spirits. Already his cock hardened for her.

Later, he'd take her to White Owl.

Chapter Six

Back at the cabin, a sense of despondency settled over Lucia. Visiting her father's death site was supposed to be therapeutic, healing the raw wounds inside her heart and mind. Instead, it had turned into a frightening experience with sinister overtones. She thought of her father as she lowered onto a sofa and stared out at the forest. Why was such a kind man targeted? Oh, she realized he was expendable to those who wanted the cougar pictures, but she railed against the unfairness of it all. Her father was deeply loved, respected, and so kind he didn't deserve such a drastic end to his life. All for a damn picture?

Tears stung her eyes and she clamped her teeth to stave off the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. No, she wasn't going to break down. She was stronger than that. She could get through this, see it through to its completion, and then cry. Sucking in a deep breath, Lucia stood and walked into the kitchen.

Sam turned from making sandwiches and smiled. "You okay?"

"Yeah. My mind's kind of full, but I'll be all right. It's just...so much information at once thrown me, that's all. And then seeing that mudslide and knowing my father is beneath it, and that shot...the thought someone intends to harm us... It's all too much, but shit, I'm damned if some money-hungry men are going to get the best of me." She gave a wobbly smile and moved beside him.

"Good. You're focusing on the positive, giving yourself something to anchor onto. We'll get through this—one way or another."

She smiled again and tilted her head. "What are you doing?"

"We're going out to lunch."

"We are? A picnic? Out *there*?" She glanced out the kitchen window at the mountain, her stomach bunching.

"Yes, out there." Sam walked to the fridge and took out some sodas and fruit. "But he's gone for now, so it'll be all right."

Lucia nodded. "I came here to finish my father's job. Do you think they'll come for me?"

Sam shrugged and placed the food in a backpack. "Who knows? But they'll have to get past me first."

Warmth spread through her and she regarded Sam, tenderness for him coiling around her heart. He turned and their eyes met, the connection so strong her heart rate sped up.

"I won't let anyone hurt you, Lucia." Sam stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "For the rest of the day we're going to relax—or try to. We need to kick back so

we can face whatever those bastards have in mind for us. Rested up, we'll be ready for them. Coiled up and anxious we won't. Come on." He jerked his head toward the door. "I want to take you somewhere."

Lucia trailed him through the living room to the front door. He stood on the threshold and inhaled a long deep breath, scanning the area with narrowed eyes. A quick nod and he moved aside for her to leave the cabin, closing the door behind them.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see."

Lucia followed Sam through the forest and they emerged from the tree line where a winding creek meandered, its scent pungent. The water tinkled over smooth, exposed stones, the surface illuminated by the sun hanging high in the cloudless, azure sky. The air remained as cool as it had been earlier that morning and she zipped her coat. Sam strode toward the creek and lowered his backpack to the long grass bordering the water. He turned full circle, face pointed to the heavens, head cocked. Lucia gazed around, anxious that they could be easily spotted.

"Is it safe here?" She looked at Sam.

"Yes. He didn't follow us to the cabin and he isn't here now." He hunkered down and opened the backpack, pulling out two blankets.

"How can you be so sure? He could be back there in the forest." Lucia glanced over her shoulder, seeing nothing but trees, but still, that man could be hiding.

Lucia shuddered. Despite her unease, she lowered herself to the blanket and looked out at the land on the other side of the creek. Ratty grass spread as far as she could see, waving in the slight breeze. She eyed the forest behind her. Nothing there.

"I promise you, he isn't around." Sam placed his hand on her thigh, his gaze serious. "If he was, do you think I'd have suggested lunch out in the open?"

She smiled and shook her head, telling herself to trust this man who she knew yet didn't, parts of him an enigma she wanted to understand. An air of mystery surrounded him, yet he was so open in other ways, honest and to the point. He knew this area better than she did, and if he said they were safe, she'd just have to go with that. Relaxing a little, she covered his hand with hers and a glimmer of desire burned in her pussy. Never had she experienced such intensity with a man. The need to be fucked hard and fast gripped her, but she shoved it away, unused to the force that made her want him when she'd been with him so recently. Was it the novelty, or was the connection she felt between them real?

Sam buried his fingers in her hair and lowered his lips to hers. She opened her mouth to him and his tongue delved inside, inciting myriad sensations in her body. Her arms weakened and her legs and chest seemed to hollow, her head lightening with each swirl of his tongue. A low moan cut short in her throat and she lifted her hand to cup his face, his skin hot on her cold palm. He ended their kiss and eased her onto her back, straddling her, settling his ass onto her throbbing cunt. Deftly he unzipped her coat and pushed it aside, fingers gliding beneath her top to trace circles above her bra. Cool air

soughed over the skin on her belly where goose bumps sprang up. Her nipples hardened and she longed for him to release her breasts, aching so fiercely she gasped. He pushed her top up, drew her bra down and swooped forward, the wet heat of his mouth on one nipple sending a jolt of lust to her core. She moaned, sliding her hands in his hair and arching her back for him to suckle harder. Nipple held lightly between his teeth, he flicked his tongue back and forth. All thoughts of where they were vanished and she gave in to the spikes of pleasure his mouth produced.

Cunt aching, Lucia gripped his shoulders, digging her nails into the soft down of his coat. Sam released her nipple, trailing his tongue across to the other. The abandoned nub grew harder as air settled over its wetness, exacerbating the sharp jabs his laving tongue incited. She smoothed her hands to his upper arms, drawing him away from her breasts, needing his mouth on hers. He lowered his chest and stretched out his legs, body covering hers. His nearness seized her breath and he pulled his head back a little, eyeing her with concern. She stared up at him, undoing his jacket. He raised his torso, hands on either side of her head, lifting them one at a time as Lucia wrenched off his upper garments, tossing them to the ground. Sam covered her again. The skin-on-skin contact thrilled her and she jerked her hips upward, closing her eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, then claimed her mouth, the kiss fast and erotic and so damn right.

She whimpered and clutched his lower back, pushing down. He rocked, her jeans abrading her clit, a swift rush of pleasure spreading through her folds. Sam ground against her, circular movements that brought her to orgasm, the suddenness of it snapping her eyes open. Her clit throbbed in time with her pulse and she took her mouth from his, sucking in a breath then crying out, the sound breaking on a gasp. He circled faster and her pleasure deepened with each gyration. She raked her nails up and down his back, lifting her head to the crook of his neck and grazing her teeth over his skin. He kissed the top of her head and slowed his movements as her orgasm receded, the aftershocks a beating sweep, her nerve endings recovering.

Grasping his upper arms, she reversed their positions and straddled his knees. Quickly, she freed his cock from his jeans, lowering her head, licking the tip. She wet the head with strong strokes then sank him into her mouth. Lucia pulled up, tongue flat to his shaft, lips tight. Sam groaned and clutched her hair, hips rising to meet her mouth's descent. She sucked him in deep, repeating the up-and-down motion until his cock vein throbbed against her tongue. Tasting pre-cum, she bobbed harder, faster, wanting him to explode in her mouth. Circling a finger and thumb around his base, she worked his shaft, shifting one knee between his legs. With her free hand, she tugged one side of his waistband and Sam helped by lifting his ass and pushing down the other, exposing him to his thighs. She trailed her fingers over his balls, the fine hairs above tickling her skin. Lucia stroked the smooth ridge between his sac and asshole, eliciting a strained moan from Sam. She sucked up, lips encircling his corona before she plunged her mouth back down. His cock tip touched the back of her throat and a shot of cum spurted, the warm fluid coating the back of her tongue. His taste set her clit to

throbbing and she swallowed, waiting for another ejaculation. It came, a third and fourth quickly following and she cupped his balls, thumb stroking his base as her other hand drew upward.

With a growl, Sam guided her away from his cock and positioned her beside him on the blanket. Propped on one elbow, a faint red tinge on his cheekbones, he studied her face, his gaze penetrating. Lucia's breath caught and she stared back at him, the telltale throb of a second orgasm brewing inside her. With one fingertip, he traced the dip and swell of her collarbone, then drew it down to the valley between her breasts. The featherlight touch sent shivers through her and she lay panting in anticipation of what was to come. He trailed his fingertip lightly to her navel, circling it before he snapped open her jeans and unzipped her. His gaze still on her, he reached to take off her boots, then lifted her ass to ease down her panties and jeans. She pulled one leg out of the fabric and splayed her legs, wrenching her gaze from his face to look at his semihard cock.

Her cunt clenched and he positioned himself between her legs, dipping his head, breath hot on her folds. Lucia gripped the blanket in her fists and stared at the sky, waiting for the first touch. It came, soft yet firm, hot and wet, and her hips bucked involuntarily. His lips encircled her clit and he drew the nub inside, sucking gently, with an agonizingly slow rhythm. Tingles from her clit spread through her outer lips and her sheath contracted. Sam released her bud and licked down. He tongue-fucked her and she bent her legs, letting her knees drop to the blanket.

"Fuck!" she breathed, clenching her teeth and fisting the blanket tighter.

Sam withdrew his tongue, gliding it up to her clit. She gasped, willing him to fill her with his cock, knowing her orgasm would be a swirl of pleasure she could hardly bear. An intense throb ebbed and flowed, sending her head thrashing from side to side. On the brink of coming, she ground her teeth to ward it off and Sam took his mouth away. Her fingers splayed, she slapped the blanket, then brought her hands up to cup either side of his head.

Sam eased up onto his knees and fumbled inside a pocket of the backpack. He took out a condom and sheathed his cock. Looking down at her, his eyes smoldered with desire.

She jerked her hips. "Inside me. Please, get inside me now."

Sam reached back and clasped one of her calves, bringing it up to rest on his shoulder. Her stomach clenched with excitement and she let out a small whimper. He placed her other leg on the opposite side and Lucia shuffled downward so she could settle the underside of her knees over his rounded shoulders. Sam slid his hands beneath her ass and speared her pussy with his cock. He held her there as he pumped, short sharp thrusts, maintaining eye contact as though breaking it would sever their special connection.

Unable to stop the spasms racking her body as a fresh wave of pleasure hit, she closed her eyes, head spinning. Her senses took everything in—the scent of her juices

mixing with that of the creek, the intoxicating burn of pleasure spearing her pussy, the cool air nipping at her sweat-slicked skin—and she keened, abdomen jolting in time with his jerks.

Her clit overly sensitive now from his abrading thatch, she reveled in the spikes of sensation. Her juices still glistened on his lips and chin. She longed for him to kiss her, to crush his lips to hers so she could taste herself and smell the heady scent his loving had created. How quickly she had been reduced to a smoldering, wanton woman. He had only to look at her, to touch her, and she was his.

He pushed into her—harder, shunting thrusts and she gripped his wrists. Desire for him grew, shocking her with its intensity.

Oh God, I love him, but I don't know how this happened so quickly.

"Faster," she gasped, nails digging into the soft skin of his wrist. "Fuck me faster."

Sam picked up speed, closing his eyes as his cock swelled a little more and his veins pulsated against her internal wall. He was close, she knew, but so was she. She stopped holding off and let the burn glide through her, taking her to heights she never knew existed until she'd met Sam. Pulse thundering in her ears, she watched his eyes bunch tight and his mouth open to release a strangled groan. The sight and sound aroused her further, her cunt contracting with uncontrollable spasms, her heels bumping against his back.

"Ah!" Sam breathed, grunting with each jerk of his hips.

Lucia joined him, stuttered noises coming out of her. She closed her eyes, loving the swirling waves of ecstasy undulating from her core to her clit to her lower belly. The sound of her ass slapping against him heightened the thrill. She hissed air out between clamped teeth, riding the tides of lust that flowed then ebbed into a pulsing throb. Sam slowed, his cock beating a post-ejaculation rhythm. When she opened her eyes, she found him gazing down at her. He smiled and eased her legs from his shoulders. Lowering her ass to the blanket, keeping himself inside her, he braced his hands on either side of her body and covered her with his. His cock still throbbed, matching the beat of her clit, and his breaths whispered across her cheek. Sam peppered kisses along her jawline to her lips. He claimed her mouth, tongue probing deep. Lucia tasted the traces of her juices, lifting her hands to bury them in his hair and keep him close. Their joining had been exquisite once again and she marveled at how two people could experience such wonderful sex when they hardly knew one another.

Sam broke their kiss, murmuring, "We must talk soon."

Lucia nodded.

"There are things at work here that you're not aware of. Things that will explain everything. Like how we've only just met yet I feel as I do." Sam kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips.

What did he mean? Did he have information she didn't or was he just speaking theoretically, musing that a higher force or something else had guided them together? Fate? Destiny?

"I don't understand this." She traced his lips with her fingertip. "And if I'm honest I don't want to try. Taking each moment as it comes...it works for me. I don't care whether we've just met. Something is there." She stared up at him, the smile on his face warming her.

"What others think isn't part of the equation, is it?"

"No. With you I feel safe. Like I'm meant to be here."

Chapter Seven

"We must go now," Sam said. "To see White Owl. *Didanawisgi*."

"Who's that? And why do we have to see this White Owl?" Lucia tightened her hold on Sam's hand as she stepped over the fallen tree limb in her path.

"*Didanawisgi*. It means 'medicine man'. And you will understand why we must see him when we get there."

"Well, I'm all up for soaking in a bit of local culture, but... Care to clue me in as to why I have to see him?"

Sam kept her hand in his as they walked. Everything about her, touching her, talking to her—it had all become so natural to him. The day with her had passed so easily. That small amount of doubt that she was his promised one had lessened to almost nothing. Lucia was his.

He halted and turned to her. "Each of us has lived before, Lucia. Your soul has been on this earth many times. He can help you remember this."

"Oh," she said in a dull tone. "More of that religion of yours that isn't a religion."

He smiled and took her other hand, clasping them both to his chest. "You will come to understand. You know there is more to us. You've said so. It's important that you remember your past lives."

Curiosity and something akin to fear stared back at him from her eyes. "I don't believe in that type of thing, Sam. It's for...for..."

"Crazy people?"

"You're not crazy. So no. It's just that—"

"If you can't see it or touch it then it's not real?"

"Something like that, yes."

"When you have lived in these mountains for a while, you get a sense of things that aren't so obvious. It's the way of my people to listen to the mountains. To listen to the spirits."

"I know you think this is all real, Sam, but... I'm not a believer and never will be. Things like that just aren't possible."

"You feel something more than the physical when we make love, Lucia. I know you do. All I ask is that you give this a chance."

She nodded, but Sam knew she agreed only to pacify him. Soon, she'd discover that the spirits couldn't be so easily appeased. Her destiny was linked with his and she couldn't hide from it. It might be hard for her to swallow at first, but she'd come around. Wouldn't she? A person couldn't walk away from their destiny, could they?

The trail opened into a clearing and Sam smelled wood smoke. In the center of the clearing sat White Owl facing a campfire, his face weathered and worn from the ravages of time. Sam had no idea how old he was, but he'd always been there. His face was wrinkled, his hands gnarled, his hair gray and his eyes—those dark, penetrating eyes, so clear and sharp—told of his wisdom.

And White Owl had always been alone.

Silver Hawk had taken Sam to see the ancient medicine man after his first shift to his cougar. After that, Sam visited White Owl often. According to Silver Hawk, *"Only White Owl can teach you what you need to know."* Sam had listened and learned. There had been times when it had been hard for him to believe the old man's words, but with every day that passed, Sam's awareness of who and what he was had grown. And his duty to follow the path the spirits had set for him had gone unquestioned. Even during those dark and lonely nights when he'd wished for more, he'd accepted his fate.

Lucia's presence here this night meant the end of one life and the beginning of another.

She tightened her grip on his hand and stood slightly behind him. Sam glanced at her, sensing her fear. Squeezing her hand, he smiled and continued to the circle.

Speaking in his native Tsalagi, Sam greeted the old man. *"O si yo, White Owl. It has been a while since I've visited with you."*

White Owl didn't return the greeting. Instead, he lifted his head to look directly at Lucia. *"She has come."*

Sam let go of Lucia's hand and dropped to his knees before the fire. *"Then I'm right. She is the one."*

White Owl turned his attention to Sam. *"You will learn much this night, Black Cougar. The truth will be yours."*

Sam tensed. What more could there possibly be for him to learn? The truth? What truth? And he'd forgotten White Owl called him Black Cougar. Had Lucia noticed? Yes, she was his promised mate, but how much did free will figure into all this? How would she react to finding out he was the black cougar? He heard her voice behind him.

"You're named for the black cougar, Sam?"

Sam studied White Owl's face. Did he plan to let Lucia see everything tonight? Looking back at her, Sam held out his hand. She took it and knelt next to him.

He started to answer her question but the sound of the turtle-shell rattle stopped him. White Owl chanted, his hoarse wail floating on the air. All around them the dark night seemed to come alive. Wind shook the tree leaves and the smoke from the fire billowed upward, veiling the stars. Chilled air vanquished the warmth of the flames, and Lucia shuddered.

Pulling her close, Sam draped his arm across her shoulder and whispered, *"Just listen."*

The old *Didanawisgi* continued his mystical serenade. Sam and Lucia sat in silence and waited. Gray smoke swirled, rendering to a white mist, twisting and circling the clearing. Next to him, Lucia gasped at the sight. Popping and crackling, the fire grew more intense, but the cold air also swelled. Lucia rubbed her arms and stared at Sam, her eyes questioning.

Sam placed a finger to his lips, gesturing toward the fire with a tilt of his head. The sound of voices erupted from the flames and Lucia tried to pull from Sam's grasp, but he held her tightly against him, preventing her escape. She needed to know, to see who she was – who Sam was. And Sam needed to learn whatever was left for him to know.

This night had been written. And so it would be.

* * * * *

Lucia stared at the fire, her eyes glazing, vision tunneling. A tiny image wavered in the flames but she couldn't make out what it was. It grew, revealing the face of an Indian woman until it filled her sightline. The woman appeared about to give birth and another female kneeled by her side. Their lips moved, their voices filling Lucia's head.

"When my son comes, you must take him to the place beyond the hidden waterfall and find my mother's brother." The woman with child heaved in a breath. "Give him my son. Beg him to care for him as his own."

Her friend promised to grant those wishes and placed her hands between the other woman's legs. She gripped the emerging head and a baby boy, a tangle of arms and legs, cried out. The scene touched Lucia's core and enlightenment breezed through her.

That baby is Sam, I know it...

The woman severed the umbilical cord and swaddled the baby in her skirt. She left the tent, streaking across the ground and disappearing through a stand of trees. As though she were there, Lucia followed, the smell of damp earth so real, the twigs crackling underfoot so vivid. The woman walked on, the child's cries muffled, until she broke through the tree line. Lucia caught up and stared. A jagged rock protruded a little way ahead and the melody of trickling water filled the air. The woman rounded the base. Trailing her, Lucia quickly made her way down an archway cut out of the stone, the noise of the water growing louder. Lucia stared in wonder at a waterfall cascading into a small pool on the other end. The woman moved at a fast pace, treading carefully along a ledge and disappearing behind the liquid curtain. Afraid she'd lose her, Lucia ran, finding herself in a large cave lit by torches. To the rear a fire raged and beside it a man sat cross-legged, an Indian, his long black hair tied in a plait at his nape. He looked up at the baby's whimpers and stood, fists bunched at his sides.

"Indulala, is this the child of my sister's daughter?"

The woman nodded and unfurled her skirt, cradling the baby in her arms. "Yes, Silver Hawk. Lavani asked that I bring him to you and beg you to care for him as your own, to keep him safe from Manohar."

Silver Hawk frowned and stepped forward. "Lavani has gone to the spirit world?"

Indulala bowed her head and whispered, "Yes."

"By Manohar's need for vengeance and White Owl's hand. Taking the life of the blue-eye was not enough. So be it. They must both live with the consequences." He scrubbed his chin and closed his eyes for a moment, opening them to focus on the child.

"What do you mean?" Indulala asked.

"Manohar will walk the mountains all the days of his life without love. White Owl used the Dark Spirits to curse Lavani's child, and in exchange, White Owl will remain at the foot of the *Shaconaque*, The Great Blue Ridge, until Lavani's son meets his mate." He released a ragged sigh. "This he could only do if another *a-gi-ya*, a woman with child, touched Lavani's son upon his first breath."

Indulala held the baby in one arm and rubbed her abdomen with her free hand, fear clouding her expression.

Silver Hawk nodded. "And so it is written. You will bear this child's mate. We may only ask that the spirits bring their souls together soon." Silver Hawk stepped closer and held out his arms, receiving the baby with tenderness. He stared down, eyes filling with tears. "You are special, little one. I promise to keep you safe."

* * * * *

The scene faded, replaced by White Owl, alone, chanting beside a fire. Though he spoke in a foreign tongue, Lucia understood him. He lamented cursing himself, having to curse the baby, only agreeing because Manohar was his grandson. His pain came through with his words and he stared at the flames.

"The spirits have come to speak," he whispered in shock.

Lucia couldn't see anything in the fire, but it appeared White Owl could. He gaped at the red-and-orange flames and placed his hands on his chest. A ragged sigh burst out of him and he shook his head, eyes wide.

"No. No! This cannot be!" White Owl said. "Do not give Indulala a daughter only to take her away in childhood. Please, let Lavani's son be with his mate. To wait for her rebirth is a punishment the child does not deserve. He will bear the sins of Manohar and walk the mountains without love." The flames jostled, undulating as though a being directed their movements. Sparks flew out at White Owl and he jerked back.

"Show me the soul of Indulala's girl-child," Lucia whispered. She trod quietly, taking up a position behind White Owl. A face stared back at her from the fire, a face charred by heat, the whites of its eyes stark in so much blackness. Ebony hair writhed, snakelike, and an evil smile showed bright white teeth. The image vanished, replaced by a woman's face.

My face!

Lucia's knees buckled and she gasped painfully. She fought to remain upright but staggered backward, landing hard on her butt beside White Owl.

"I will remember," White Owl said. "Tell me when the soul of Indulala's girl-child will return."

Lucia closed her eyes and White Owl's gasp rent the air.

"No! The boy-child will suffer too long. His black cat spirit will roam the mountains in darkness and he will walk alone in the light." The flames leapt and hissed. White Owl nodded, appearing to accept whatever had been decreed. "And what of her? Will she bear the same punishment, know what she is?"

No, this can't be happening. All this talk of souls and me being promised to Sam, all because of a curse made years ago. And a black cat spirit? What... Oh God. The cougar? Sam is the cougar? No, it isn't possible. I won't believe it. It's ridiculous to even contemplate such a thing.

Still, she asked White Owl, "What punishment? What am I?"

He turned to look at her. "You have the soul of Indulala's girl-child. You have traveled through the years in the bodies of various women, destined not to find true love until the curse saw fit to let you come to Sam." He sighed. "Now is that time. You have been brought together through the workings of another..." Placing his hand upon hers, he whispered, "Manohar has also returned. You will only be allowed peace in your joining once he has been killed."

Manohar, the guy who started all this, has come back?

Lucia struggled with the concept of people living multiple lives, the same soul being born over and over. "Who have I been?"

White Owl waved a hand in front of the fire and showed her the many lonely incarnations of herself through the years. Lucia wiped tears from her cheeks, understanding now why she had found it so difficult in this life to open up to men. Her relationship with Jacob was proof that he wasn't the man for her, that she had needed to meet Sam, the one destiny had chosen for her.

"So you see," White Owl said. "Now you know the truth of who you are."

Lucia nodded. It was over, all those years of searching. But if Manohar was reincarnated in this time... *What the hell have we got to face? Will he try to stop me and Sam being together?*

She shuddered and looked at White Owl, the wrinkles beside his eyes deepening with the closing of his eyes. "What am I?" she asked, not entirely certain she understood what she had been shown.

White Owl lifted his eyelids halfway, as if too weary to open them fully. "Face the fire once more and you will see."

Lucia stared at him for a beat then did as he'd asked. A black cougar prowled through the forest, its sleek figure absolutely beautiful.

That's me? Who I really am? It isn't possible, is it? A human also being a cat?

Her mouth widened and she inhaled a deep breath, ready to scream.

Abruptly, quiet surrounded them and a gentle autumn breeze replaced the howling wind. The flames receded, dwindling to nothing more than glowing embers, the smoke dissipating, yielding to the milky moonlight. Sam reached for Lucia. She flinched and kept her gaze focused on the dying fire.

It had all been too much for her, then. Free will did have a say after all. Knowledge had not sealed their destiny as Sam thought it would. But why had she been promised to him if she couldn't handle the truth of who they were?

"Her soul will always be tied to yours, Black Cougar. But it is her choice to stay or go. Or yours to follow."

White Owl's words struck a chord of fear inside Sam. "You mean leave the mountains? My home?" Sam was not prepared to abandon everything he'd ever known.

"Your heart will show you the way." White Owl stared up at the sky and blew out a long breath. "We will see each other no more, Black Cougar. I go to my rest now."

Sam helped the ancient one to his feet. White Owl looked frailer and older than he ever had, though relief shone in his eyes. His own curse had been lifted. And his lonely existence had come to an end.

Watching White Owl's tired form shuffle away into the shadows, Sam breathed deeply to hold back the tears that welled in his eyes. He would miss him. When Silver Hawk had died, White Owl was all he'd had left. And even though it was White Owl's curse that had burdened Sam all these years, he forgave him. Everything in this life existed for a reason, and if being able to love the woman standing next to him was the reason for Sam's life, then it had all been worth it.

"Rest well, my friend," Sam whispered into the night.

Lucia still sat next to the fire. Sam couldn't imagine the questions running through her mind. She knew the truth about him. The truth about the cougar. And herself. Could she ever accept him for what he was? Accept herself? The visions had not revealed an end to his dual existence, no hint of losing his immortality.

There was more to come, but what?

"Lucia. We should go. You need to get some rest."

"Do you expect me to sleep in your bed, Sam?"

"Only if that's what you want." He crouched next to her, hoping she'd look at him.

"What happens when you...when you change?"

"I know when the change is supposed to happen. And I prepare for it. When we met and I was naked it was because I had been the cougar."

Her hands trembled as she brought them up to rub her eyes. "Am I in danger?"

"From the cougar?"

She nodded.

"No. The cougar would never hurt you. The cougar saved you."

Her head whipped upward, meeting his gaze for the first time since the visions came. "What are you talking about?"

"That night, the cougar should have roamed until dawn. It was his feeding time. But he shifted because somehow I asked him to. I had seen you camped at the base of that ridge through his eyes and knew you were in danger. The cougar yielded to me, put aside its own needs for me—for you, Lucia."

She seemed puzzled by his answer. "And last night? Did you change? Did you leave me?"

"Yes. I left you. The cougar needed—"

She turned away from him, her shoulders rising and falling as she seemingly struggled for air. A soft whine left her mouth as she pushed from the ground and stood. Shaky, she staggered. Sam reached out and steadied her but she brushed his hands away.

"Don't touch me. I don't know what you are. I don't understand any of this."

He held his hands up. "I know. And I'm sorry. This happened so quickly. If we'd only had the time to get to know—"

"Get to know one another?" She shook her head, mumbling to herself.

"Lucia, I'm still Sam."

"And just who the hell is that?" she shouted, eyes blazing with anger.

"I understand your anger. But please, give us a chance."

Lucia circled the campfire, heading for the trail. Sam fell in step behind her. The darkness of the forest would stop her. She needed him to guide her. And Sam needed his cougar's eyes. So much of him relied on the cougar. For the first time, he wondered if the cougar had ever relied on him.

Once they were among the trees, pitch black descended. Through his cougar's eyes he saw her hands stretched out in front of her in search of obstacles. Sam stayed close but remained quiet.

He heard her crying and his heart lurched. Why was she so afraid of him? They'd made love and she should know he'd never hurt her. She fell to her knees, her sobs echoing in the night. Sam wanted to take her in his arms and hold her, tell her everything was going to be all right. But how could he tell her that when he didn't know himself?

Where were the spirits in his darkest hour? They had been a constant in his life. But now they had abandoned him. He could no longer feel their presence. It was just him and Lucia. A man and a woman who needed to find their way to each other.

"Lucia, let me hold you."

Her voice cracked. "Oh Sam. I'm so scared."

"I'd never hurt you."

She shook her head. "It's not just you and what you are. It's me. What am I? Am I really that baby in Indulala's womb? A soul that has moved from body to body? My God, Sam, there's no such thing as a soul, yet I felt it and know it's true."

Relief poured through Sam. Her acceptance would come eventually. He sat beside her on the soggy ground and dragged her into his arms. She didn't push him away this time, only cried louder, harder. Not knowing what to say, he kissed her forehead and gently rocked her back and forth.

"We'll find our way together, Lucia. I promise."

Chapter Eight

Lucia walked back to the cabin ahead of Sam, trusting him to keep her safe but wanting to be alone to digest what she had seen and how she felt about it. If she took a wrong turn, he called out and she went the other way. The forest seemed to close around her in protection, giving her the sense that even if Sam wasn't here she'd be okay. She looked about, pushing the images from the fire out of her mind, her gaze picking up things she shouldn't have in the gloom. Bark stood out on tree trunks as though the sun still shone and footprints from their earlier walk remained. A night bird flew below the lowest branches, swooping close to her head, and she made out its feathers and a darting, beady eye. *How is that possible?*

She brought back the memories of what she'd seen. It must have broken Lavani's heart knowing she would never see her baby grow into the beautiful man he had become. Lucia couldn't imagine the pain Sam's mother had gone through. Falling in love with Sam's father then having him ripped from her by death...

If it were Sam, I couldn't bear it.

Lucia thought of him now, how his life was in jeopardy, all because of a damn curse. As a child, had he ever questioned Silver Hawk as to the whereabouts of his mother and father, or had he just accepted they weren't there? How was Sam educated? And if the visions were true, Sam had been alive for many years—too many for a human. Did the fact he was a cougar change that, or had the curse kept him alive until he'd met his mate?

And am I really his mate in the true sense?

She ousted that thought from her mind. No way could she be a damn cougar. *No way!* It wasn't possible.

But Sam is one.

Yet she hadn't seen him change and probably wouldn't believe it until she witnessed it for herself. There was so much she didn't know about him, about curses and Cherokee customs. They needed to talk—Sam needed to explain everything so she could understand. It wasn't in her to believe anything that didn't have a rational explanation, but the way she felt about Sam meant she'd have to try.

Okay, I've admitted it. I want to be with him, can't imagine not being with him now, and if that means believing he's the black cougar and I'm that cougar's mate...

"Shit. It sounds nuts. I don't buy it."

"What was that?" Sam asked, coming up beside her and holding her elbow to steer her across the open expanse in front of the cabin. He jerked his head left and right then glanced over his shoulder to the forest behind.

Lucia did the same, narrowing her eyes to peer between the tree trunks, seeing nothing untoward. "Oh, just talking to myself." She stared at the brown of the trunks and the green of the leaves, highly apparent in the darkness, albeit a darker hue.

Why can I see like this? What the hell is going on?

"He isn't around." Sam urged her faster. "But I still want to get you inside where it's safe. Who knows when he'll return?"

Lucia followed him inside the cabin, taking off her boots beside the doorway. She blew out a breath through pursed lips, her body aching, her mind foggy from too much thinking. She took her coat into the bedroom and reemerged, pajamas in one hand. Sam kneeled in front of the fire, stacking kindling in the grate. He turned at her entrance.

Lucia smiled. "I need a shower. The smoke. It's in my hair."

"Go ahead. Leave it running, would you? I'll jump in when you're done."

She hesitated, wanting to ask him to join her, but refrained. Though she'd love to free her mind of the evening so far, sex would give only momentary respite. Best she shower and get her head around understanding everything Sam would tell her. The quicker she accepted it, the quicker she could move on. The quicker she could embrace her new life.

In the shower, she shuddered despite the warm water. That man was hunting Sam and therefore hunting her, maybe thinking she'd known all along what Sam was. Did that mean the man would want her out of the picture? Was Manohar's soul in that man? Frightened at the thought of Sam being captured, she stepped out of the shower, dried and dressed, the need to be close to him lending her speed. He was where she'd left him, though the fire blazed now, the room comfortably warm. Staring at the flames, he didn't appear to have heard her come in. Could he see things in them without White Owl present? Did that demonlike image belonging to the spirits show itself to Sam? She padded up behind him and eyed the fire, seeing nothing but jostling flames.

Hand on his shoulder, she said, "Shower's free."

Sam looked up at her then rose, studying her face, his head tilted, eyes misty.

"Did you see something? In the fire?" she asked.

"I did. The future."

He closed his eyes, leaned forward and kissed her, the touch of his lips so soft, so...sad Lucia wondered if the future was bleak.

Sam pulled away and cupped her face. "We will never be apart. You know that, don't you?"

Lucia nodded. "I feel it inside. Can't explain how I know, but I feel myself changing with every moment I spend with you. I've never been one for the outdoors, the open spaces and forests, yet...the thought of staying here is growing on me. The city doesn't seem so appealing since we visited White Owl. As though...as though seeing that my soul has traveled this earth through many people until I came here... God, I sound so stupid!"

"Not stupid. Just accepting of the truth. I knew it would come. Acceptance is sometimes difficult and we naturally resist what we don't understand. How do you feel?" He smoothed his hands down her neck, settling them on her shoulders.

Lucia shrugged. "I...God, this is going to sound dumb but..." She took in a deep breath. "I can see better in the damn dark!"

Sam threw his head back and laughed. "Good." He kissed her nose tip. "I'll shower and explain a few things afterward. It will make sense when you know what you are, what you will become. I can help you through this transition, tell you what to expect and when."

She frowned, heartbeat picking up and butterflies swirling in her belly. Was he implying she...? No, she wasn't ready to face this. He'd had time to accept what he was, yet she had too much to take in at one time—Sam being a cougar, curses, being spied on, and now he was saying *she* was a cat?

"Transition?" She bit her lip.

"Yes. Transition. You saw what was in that fire. You're my mate and I'm—"

"The black cougar." She stared into his eyes, the words she'd spoken ridiculous, unbelievable, yet they made perfect sense.

Perfect sense that the man I'm falling in love with is a cat. Perfect sense, my ass!

Sam nodded, lightly massaging her shoulders. "I know how it sounds. I know it must be frightening, but everything will work out."

He walked away and she watched him go, her mind swimming with what he had said. *It will make sense when you know what you are, what you will become.*

* * * * *

Over dinner he explained how he saw snippets of the future from time to time and how he sensed things more than the average human. Lucia watched him as she ate, awed by his words and entranced by the way his lips moved.

"It will be the same for you." He popped a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth and swallowed, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds before returning his gaze to her. "Like you've already said, you can see better in the dark. Your sense of smell will also get better. You'll hear much clearer. Sounds made from far away will come to you, alerting you of any danger to come. I don't know how that would work in the city, how it would feel. I imagine if it's anything like when I go into town, it's too much. Too many senses working at once to bring me an overload of information." He scooped up another forkful of potatoes.

"There's no way I can change this, is there? I've always been a cougar, right?" *Do I even want to? If I'm meant to be with Sam, isn't it better we're both cougars?*

"Yes, you have. And no, you can't change it." Sam laid his knife and fork down on his plate. "It will be difficult to grasp at first. The shift, I mean. It begins in your belly,

like a tightening, and your limbs loosen, almost like your bones are liquefying in readiness to transform into different shapes.”

“Does it hurt?” *Please, don’t tell me it hurts.*

“Only pinpricks of pain here and there to begin with. Maybe when your teeth change, when your nails turn into claws.” He covered her hand with his. “You know, an amazing thing happens. Your spirit rises, lifts out of your body, and if you’re lucky you’ll see a sparkling mist—if you change slowly enough. It’s almost as though by your spirit leaving when the transition takes place...it’s like it does this so you *don’t* feel pain. When your body has shifted from human to cougar and vice versa, your spirit descends. It might startle you, but at least you have some information now. You know what to expect. Shifting without this knowledge is hard, believe me.”

Lucia frowned. It all seemed so fantastical. How would it feel to be a cat, walking around on four paws not two feet? And what if she couldn’t change back?

“I’m frightened, Sam.” Her bottom lip quivered and she bit it to stop the tremble. “It’s all just so weird. Too much to take in.”

He squeezed her hand. “I know.”

“Could we... Would it be safe to go outside? Take a walk? I feel...confined, hemmed in.”

Sam smiled and stood, taking their plates to the sink. “That’s your cougar talking. She’s wild, doesn’t like captivity.” He leaned his hip against a cupboard. “Do you understand why I couldn’t live anywhere but here? I have lots of space, I’m surrounded by nature and I feel free.”

The appeal of the city, of people milling around or rushing from one place to the next soured. The thought of this mountainous area, though...it grew on her by the second. The urge to breathe fresh air and stretch her legs became more urgent. “So could we go out? Now?”

Sam nodded. “You can try out your senses. Check before we leave whether it’s safe.” He glanced at the wall clock. “I doubt very much anyone will be out there now. If anything they’ll come back when they think we’re asleep.” He held out a hand. “Come. I have somewhere I’d like to take you.” Leading her to the bedroom, he opened a drawer and took out a small square packet.

Lucia laughed as he slipped it into his pocket. “Dare I say you feel the same as me?”

Sam took her in his arms, his mouth close to hers. “I can’t get enough of you. Can’t stop thinking about you. Your touch. How we are together. I want to take you somewhere special, make love to you there. Think you can handle that?”

Lucia nodded, brushing his lips with hers. “God, yes. Take me there.”

Lust brewed inside her and she longed for him to take her now, hard and fast on the bed or against the wall. These feelings she had for him may have developed quickly, but she sensed that her new cougar emotions bound her more tightly to Sam, as though they were indeed destined to be together. She kissed him, conveying her growing love

for him with each shift of her tongue, each circular movement of her hands on his back. Sam groaned and a growl followed. Did his cougar sense hers?

He broke away and steered her to the front door where they stood at the threshold, chins lifted. Lucia sniffed, smelling nothing but the pure goodness of the outdoors.

"Do you think it's safe?" Sam asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Now, when we walk, keep alert. Any change in the air, any new aroma that doesn't smell right...let me know. I want to make sure you aren't overwhelmed by your new senses and understand what is happening."

He closed the door and walked ahead. Stepping onto the grass, he held out his hand and Lucia clasped it, his touch sending shivers through her. She scolded herself for allowing the distraction—she must learn to focus on what her heightened awareness told her. They veered across the grass toward the forest and entered the trees hand in hand. Forest aromas assaulted her, stronger, more pungent than anything she'd smelled before, and she marveled at the different nuances, how they blended together to create one scent. Traces of animals, birds, leaves, earth and bark filtered through the air. She heard night creatures foraging, wings flapping, paws tapping on the ground. How had she survived so far without such keen instincts?

"Do you feel it?" Sam asked. "Feel the life in the forest?"

"Yes!" Awed, Lucia looked around, spying with her stronger sight an owl high up in a tree. "Yes, I feel it. Breathe it."

Sam chuckled. "You'll never get weary of it. Though we carry what some might think of as the burden of a curse, I welcome it, embrace it."

"It's all so beautiful. Nature. Everything seems so...so sharp and defined. It's amazing."

They continued in silence, Lucia soaking up the experience, her heart swelling with happiness. Of being truly herself for the first time in her life.

A new essence wafted toward her. "The waterfall is near. Oh, and I can hear it. Only faintly, but I hear it."

"It's through here." Sam tugged her out of the forest.

Lucia recalled the scene from the vision in the fire, when she'd followed Indulala on this very route. They walked through the rock face with the archway, Lucia inhaling the musky scent of wet rock. The sound of the water grew louder here, as though she stood right beside the waterfall, yet it lay a few feet ahead as they emerged from the rock. The pool was more beautiful than in her vision, the moonlight illuminating the spume the waterfall created as it pummeled down, the ripples on the surface glistening.

"Oh my God! It's stunning!" She rushed forward to kneel on the pool's smooth stone edge, sweeping her fingers through the water. "But it's cold!"

Sam stood beside her. "You won't feel the cold the same way you used to. Maybe a little since you haven't been through the shift yet, but I think you'll find that it's not cold at all."

Lucia stood, staring at him wide-eyed. "We're going in *there*?" She pointed at the pool, her eyebrows shooting upward.

Rich laughter bellowed out of Sam and he nodded, pulling her toward him. "Yes. In there."

He unzipped her coat and tugged it off her arms, laying it on the ground beside them. She allowed him to undress her. Naked, she let his gaze rove her body and watched his features change as he took her in. His eyes darkened and his mouth curved into a sexy smile.

"Fuck, you make me horny," he said, cupping her shoulders and drawing her close.

She snaked her hands between them and removed his upper garments, tackling his jeans buttons with impatient fingers—fingers that she wanted to curl around his cock. He toed off his boots and socks and stepped out of his jeans. He wore no underwear and his cock jutted proudly, the heavy weight of it bobbing. Pressing her chest to Sam's, Lucia positioned her slit so his hardness glided between her wet folds, the tip of his cock butting her engorged clit. Her nipples grazed his chest and she gritted her teeth, hissing out her pleasure while looking into his eyes. A soft breeze lifted his hair. It fell back down to cover her breasts and she kneaded his ass, holding him steady as she gyrated against him. Sam brought up his hands, one splayed at the center of her back, the other in her hair, and they kissed, tongues entwined.

Sam broke away, panting softly. "Fuck, woman."

He let her go and stooped to his jeans, taking the small packet out of his pocket. He tore off the wrapper and handed the condom to her. She took it and curved her hand around the base of his cock, easing her fist up and down, loving the feel of his soft skin on her palm. Sam sucked in a breath as they stared at one another, lust and desire like a tangible thing between them, something they could pluck out of the air and feast on whenever they chose. He caressed her arms as he watched her rolling the condom down his length. Shivers wended up her spine and her clit throbbed. Lucia looked up, took Sam's hand and brought it to her mouth. She sucked on one finger, swirling her tongue around it. Sam's groan prompted her to suck deeper, emulating how she sucked his cock.

"Stop," he whispered. "Stop or —"

Lucia sucked harder.

"Fuck!" Sam closed his eyes and breathed deeply, opening them again to look at her with longing.

She stopped teasing him and drew his finger from her mouth, guiding him to the pool. They slipped into the water, the temperature only a momentary shock to Lucia. She gasped and lowered her body, arching her neck to dip her hair in the water. Her breasts broke the surface and she cried out in delight and surprise when Sam's mouth

claimed one nipple. His hands supported her back and she raised her torso, pushing her chest toward him so he suckled harder.

Sam pushed her gently through the water so her back rested against the smooth stony side. She braced herself on the rounded lip of the pool then pushed up, gripping him around the waist with her legs. Lucia stared at Sam, lowering herself onto his cock, the water aiding his entrance. He filled her, wide and long, pumping into her with languid, easy thrusts.

Lucia moved one of his hands down between them. "Touch me inside and out. Make me come."

He stroked her clit with one thumb while the other strummed her breast, all the while plunging into her sex. She drowned in the sensations spreading inside her cunt and lower belly. Tiny waves of pleasure radiated from her clit and she vowed not to touch him as he made her come, succumbing to his total control. The water sloshed around them, smacking against the edge of the pool and whooshing over the side to wet the stone. He swirled his fingertips around her nipple then gripped it between finger and thumb. Sam thrust into her harder, faster and water splashed up, wetting her face and breasts, its coolness heaven on her heated cheeks. He tweaked her nipple with more force and she cried out, chasing the blissful stirrings in her core.

Sam leaned forward and licked the column of her neck from base to chin, his tongue warm and erotic. She hung her head back and gave herself up to the crest of her orgasm, so many things being done to her at once she couldn't restrain herself.

"I'm close," he whispered against her skin, breath hot, lower lip dragging up her throat. "So fucking close..."

His cock thickened and her cunt clenched around him, milking the first spurt of cum. He yelled out, a hoarse emission that ratcheted up her desire and she gripped his waist tighter. With quick, hard jerks he rammed into her, pinching and pulling her nipple, kissing down to her collarbone and taking the other bud into his mouth. He held it between his teeth as he panted out his orgasm, the rumbling soft chant of "Ah-ah-ah" humming through her breast.

Sam quickly took his fingers from her clit and gripped her around the waist with both hands, fucking her, hard and relentless, prolonging her orgasm. She lifted her head and he claimed her lips with his, dipping his tongue inside and exploring her mouth. Lucia wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts to his chest. Sam's rhythm broke and his hips spasmed, cock pushing into her as far as it would go. She cried out again, reveling in the receding bliss, knowing she belonged here in this place with a man who seemed to know her needs more than she did.

Chapter Nine

Halfway home, Sam caught a whiff of danger in the air. He stilled, lifted his face toward the darkened sky and closed his eyes. *He's back. Near. Goddamn it!* His senses heightened, he tilted his head, judging the direction in which the man hid. East, he was east, probably lurking in the forest that bordered the ravine. Sam turned to face Lucia. She, too, had stopped walking a short way behind him, her eyes closed, fists poised in front of her as though gripping the air.

"You sense him too?" Sam asked, moving to stand by her side.

She nodded and opened her eyes. "Over there." Pointing in the same direction Sam had been looking, she pursed her lips. "He's waiting, isn't he?"

"I would think so. Hiding under the cover of darkness. Damn coward." A stronger aroma breezed past—anger or impatience?—and Sam frowned. "Come on. We need to get home." He took her elbow and propelled her forward, intent on reaching the cabin as soon as possible. Something wasn't right, and damned if he wanted Lucia out here when the shit went down.

She stumbled but righted herself and he slowed his pace a little, guilt that he'd acted roughly adding to the building pressure inside him. He flashed her a brief smile, the frown lines marring her forehead a result of more than just his actions, he was sure. Her cougar was manifesting inside her, uncoiling and spreading. She couldn't shift out here—not now, not when that man lurked so near. He'd have her good as caught in a second as she struggled with the change. Unused to such a vast transformation, Lucia would be disoriented, leaving her vulnerable. Sam shuddered and walked on, his grip still firm on her arm, senses on full alert.

Footsteps to their left filtered toward them and Sam stiffened at the same time Lucia drew in a sharp breath.

"Shit!" she whispered, drawing him closer.

A new scent lingered on the edges of the others and Sam narrowed his eyes, concentrating on what it was. Engine oil? He strained to hear better, waiting to pick up any indication a vehicle idled nearby. Hearing nothing but the night animals and his and Lucia's breathing, he urged her to walk faster.

"Quickly," he murmured, tugging her on, his cougar pushing to be free. He clamped his teeth together, fighting the inevitable change. His cougar knew something he did not, but he resisted the shift, not wanting to startle Lucia and be unable to help her should she change too. "If we should get separated out here, head to the hidden waterfall. Do you remember how to get there?"

"Yes, but —"

"Good."

They stumbled out of the forest and into the clearing outside the cabin. He stared all around, head cocked again. The scent was stronger here, heavy on the breeze, yet as he scanned the forest he saw no evidence the man was there. *Bastard knows how to hide for sure.*

"He's closer," Lucia said, eyes wide. "Christ, he's waiting for us. He's ready to jump out, to capture you and take you away. He's—"

Sam tightened his grip on her arm. "Now isn't the time to panic. You must remain calm. Come on. We need to get back inside." He stifled the urge to take her in his arms and reassure her more. It wasn't the time for that either.

Stepping farther into the clearing, Sam pulled Lucia with him, ears tuned to any movement other than theirs. Their feet shuffled through the grass, making it difficult. He cursed beneath his breath and judged how far they had to go before they reached the cabin. Maybe one hundred feet stretched before them—one hundred feet too many—and he made a swift decision. Stopping abruptly, he scooped Lucia into his arms, ignoring her startled protest. He ran forward. The sharp crack of twigs rent the night and Sam knew it was a race against time. An engine roared to life and two swaths of light from behind sliced the immediate darkness, sending the cabin into shadow. Lucia stared over his shoulder, her gasp loud in his ear.

Fuck! We've been set up.

"Shit, Sam! A truck's coming! Put me down. I can run!"

He ignored her and pressed on, upping his speed, his heart hammering so hard it hurt. Fifty feet, forty, thirty, then a blur of movement to his left told him someone had emerged from the forest. *Damn, the key!* He'd never get it out and the door opened in time. He'd have to put Lucia down and fight. His lungs burned and the muscles in his calves and thighs seared from exertion. Twenty feet, ten...

"Sam! Oh God, Sam! Watch out!"

Lucia's warning came too late. A dark shape barreled toward him from the left, knocking them sideways. He scrambled to keep hold of Lucia but she tumbled out of his arms as they hit the ground. She rolled a few feet away and he sprang to his feet, circling to gain sight of the man. There he was, standing with legs apart, fists ready for action.

"Run, Lucia!" Sam yelled, locking gazes with the man. He saw her from his peripheral vision, staggering toward the cabin, the headlights bringing her figure into focus. Hoping she'd make it safely, he turned his attention on the man, who took one step forward, eyes narrowed.

"Ah, and there you are," he snarled, lips curving into a vicious grin. "Fucked. You're fucked."

The vehicle shot past and Sam glanced sideward to check on Lucia. She fumbled at the door, struggling to get the key in the lock then looked back, her face white, her eyes shining in the glare of the headlights. Anger surged inside him and he lunged forward,

jabbing his head into the man's belly. The momentum propelled the man backward and they both fell to the ground, clutching at one another in an attempt to gain the advantage. Spurred on by his need to keep Lucia safe, Sam threw the man onto his back and straddled him, raising his fist to jam it into his moonlike face. Jerking his head to the side, the guy delivered an uppercut to Sam's nose. Pain bloomed inside his head and he snapped his eyes shut reflexively, springing them open again as his opponent hoisted him off his belly and threw Sam onto the grass. His head smacked against something hard and, disoriented, Sam stared up at the man who now towered over him.

"Reckon we wouldn't get hold of you?" the man asked, voice loud and gruff.

The sound of a door opening and closing filtered through the fog in Sam's mind. *Please let her have made it inside. Please...* He fought against losing consciousness, begged for enough energy to shift. His body disobeyed his commands and his cougar keened inside him, clawing for escape.

"Fuck you!" Sam spat and turned his head toward the cabin.

Lucia stood in front of a red pickup truck, arms pulled behind her, held in place by a guy in a suit. An aura of red mottled with black emanated from the man. And in the distance, Sam heard the turtle-shell rattler. A vision came to him. Manohar's feathered spear hurtled through the air. A loud swoosh and then a thud. A blue-eyed man gripped his stomach, falling to the ground. Sam cried out in agony as if *he* had been pierced by the spear – not his father. The cougar raged against the pain. Turning toward the headlights that illuminated the man and Lucia all too clearly, Sam resisted the beckoning oblivion. His arms and legs were too heavy to move, as though all the life had been sucked out of him. Head aching, his sight going fuzzy, his remaining energy drained away.

His opponent planted a heavy boot in the center of Sam's chest, pinning him to the ground. "See your little lady there? Reckon you won't mind us taking her on a ride. She's got information we need, know what I'm saying? And sure as shit she'll tell us knowing what we'll be doing to you." He paused for a beat. "My boss there, he'll lose no time in letting her know what I'll be doing to you."

Nausea weakened Sam further and he cursed his inability to get up or shift. He stared at Lucia, willing her to remain quiet when her captor asked questions. But if she did, would they hurt her? Even kill her?

Oh, fuck, no. Please no...

The boot on Sam's chest pressed harder. "Yeah, that's right, you might well look like you're about to shit your pants. You probably will by the time I'm done." The man laughed, cruel as fuck, and hawked spit on Sam's face.

Lucia stared at Sam, her stance that of a woman unafraid of what lay ahead. As Sam slowly gave in to the blackness creeping into the edges of his mind – *what the hell's wrong with me? Why am I so damn weak?* – he marveled at her tenacity, her strength. He

allowed a small smile to tweak his lips, knowing her cougar's strength would be growing by the second.

She jerked forward, hair falling across one side of her face, and called out, "Say nothing, Sam! I'll be all right. They won't—"

"Shut the hell up!" the man shouted, his long black hair splayed out over the shoulders of his gray suit.

Sam stared at him, hatred festering in his gut. He looked familiar, yet Sam hadn't had much contact with any of the locals except White Owl for years. A memory tugged at his fading consciousness, of a boy Sam knew as child—a boy he was warned to stay away from. The eyes were the same—recessed and too wide apart—and his nose, sloped and pointed, matched the image of the boy he once knew. What was his name? Sam growled low in his throat at his inability to remember.

It's not possible this is the same guy. Too much time has passed. Unless... No, no way he's a cougar too. Fuck! Where do I know this guy from? Could this man carry Manohar's blackened soul?

Before he could process his mangled thoughts, Sam sank into a dark void, fathoms deep and a million miles from Lucia.

* * * * *

Lucia tried to jerk out of the long-haired man's grip but he held her tightly.

"Stop it, bitch!" he snapped, squeezing her wrists tighter.

She winced in pain and stared at Sam, who lay motionless. Was he dead? *Oh God, no. No!*

"What the hell has that man done to him?" she shouted, pulling forward, trying to get to Sam. Anger boiled up alongside a fear so huge it threatened to overwhelm her and she sucked in a deep breath to steady her fast-beating heart.

"Knocked him out. He'll be fine—if he tells us what we want to know."

"He doesn't know anything," Lucia said through gritted teeth. "Doesn't know a damn thing about what you want."

"But you do. Get in the truck." He shoved her forward, guiding her to the passenger door, swinging it open.

Lucia dug in her heels. "No way am I getting in there with you."

Something clenched in her belly, a tightening of muscles she hadn't experienced before. Her spine snapped straight, her head jerking back to meet his face. The man released one of her wrists and spun her around to face him, slamming her back against the side of the truck bed. He covered his nose with his free hand, blood seeping between his splayed fingers.

"You'll regret that, lady. Now get. In. The damn. Truck!"

He let go of her arm and fisted her hair, pushing her head down and in through the side door. Lucia pushed back, but he shoved her inside. Sprawled across both seats, the shift stick jabbing into her hip, Lucia scrambled to her knees and lurched forward, sinking her fingers into his eye sockets. He screamed and careened backward but righted himself in time to prevent her getting out of the truck. Eyes bunched closed, he pressed himself to the truck, trapping her inside. Clenching her fist, Lucia drew her arm back and punched him in the balls. Again he staggered backward and bent double, a series of pained groans and curses grumbling out of him. Heart thumping, she clambered out of the truck and ran toward Sam.

Only to find him gone.

She spun in a circle, scenting the air for signs of him, smelling nothing but damp foliage and the man by the truck. She raced toward him. He'd brought himself upright, his face contorted in rage, hands out as she approached. She came within inches of him and surged forward, smacking her palms against his chest. This time he didn't move. He remained solid and resolute, and his hands came up to grip her wrists.

"That was the last and only time you will ever get over on me," he said, tears streaming down his face.

She bit back a gag at his breath, focusing instead on breaking free again. She lifted her knee, thrust it into his groin and pushed him backward. He fell, taking her with him, and she landed on top of him, a *whoomph* of air gusting from her. He bared his teeth and gripped her wrists tighter, pinching the delicate skin. She cried out and thrashed against him, wrenching one hand free. Clawing at his face, she raked her nails down his cheek, four lines of blood filling the nasty scratches she made there. He let her go and she scrabbled to her feet, chest heaving.

If he's hurt Sam, I'll kill this bastard.

She backed toward the trees, watching him sit up and cover his cheek with one hand. He stared at her as though deciding whether it was worth pursuing her again. He must have decided it was because he ran toward her, face contorted in a silent scream, hands stretched out in front of him, ready to strike. Lucia took a split second to consider her options. Either she ran or faced him head-on. With his speed, she'd have to face him. Bracing herself for impact, she fisted her hands and held her breath. He drew closer, closer still, a scream of rage ripping from him. His hair streamed out behind him and his suit jacket flapped open. As though it was all happening in slow motion, Lucia stepped to the side and eased out her foot, digging her heel into the ground, her toe pointing skyward. The Indian didn't have time to change course and tripped, hurtling past her and landing facedown on the ground.

Lucia whirled, her stomach muscles bunching tighter. She stared at his still form and her body hollowed, her bones seeming to liquefy, leaving her limp and weak.

No. No, I can't faint now...

As if her soul had separated from her body, she rose above herself and looked down at the scene. The man remained prone on the ground. She watched herself

undress, confused as to why she would do so in this situation. Her clothes in a heap, she stood naked and turned to the sky. Meeting her own gaze unnerved her—those eyes weren't the ones she stared at in a mirror. They changed shape, became rounder, larger. Her irises blazed yellow, the pupils elongating to slim black slits. Lucia gasped, confused. What the fuck was going on? Was she dead? Was this the first leg of her journey to Hell? Her body slumped to the ground amid a miasma of sparkling fog. She tried calling out to herself, to make her body stand upright and run. Resting on her side, her knees drawn up to her chest, she shook, yet her separated self floated without tremors, cloaked in a feeling of peace. With startling speed her arms and legs shot out, hands and toes splayed. Claws sprang from her fingertips and thick dense hair sprouted on her hands, growing up her arms and covering the rest of her body. She gasped, in awe of what she witnessed, and reveled in the sense of belonging that stole over her. She had finally found herself. After a glance at the still man, Lucia returned her attention to herself.

And stared down at a black cougar.

Sam?

The cougar looked up, blinked its mesmerizing eyes, and Lucia's spirit plummeted toward it. The warmth of a body enveloped her, fitting snugly around her soul, and she glanced down at her feet.

Paws...

Inhaling a deep breath, she tried to scream, but all that came out was a keening wail. Her gums ached and new teeth burst through them, the pain sharp and shocking.

Jesus Christ... God help me, but I'm a fucking cougar. Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. I can't deal with this, can't...

She searched for any sane thought to hold on to, but her sense of self began to recede, replaced by a stronger, more instinctual being. Though the woman she was lingered, this new part of her pushed to the forefront.

She walked forward, stumbling a little on all fours, her paws digging into the ground. Her muscles moved differently, like well-oiled machinery. Her skin furrowed—ripples on a lake—and her whiskers twitched. Sniffing the Indian, she nudged his foot with her muzzle, wishing she could shout at him to stand the fuck up. Again, all that emerged was a wail, quickly followed by a frightening growl. The man stirred and lifted his head. Lucia growled again and his body tensed. She smiled and imagined her bared teeth greeting him as he turned to her. He stood, eyes wide, arms out to ward her off.

"What the fuck?" he whispered, backing away.

What the fuck indeed.

Was this the man who had ordered her father's death? Was he Jacob's boss, the one who had orchestrated this whole damn mess and caused so much pain? Was he Manohar?

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...

Lucia sprang forward, front paws to his shoulders, and clamped her teeth down on his neck. He sailed backward, arms windmilling, and Lucia had never felt so free and alive in her whole life.

She smiled.

That was the last and only time you'll ever get over on me.

Chapter Ten

Lucia stared at the dead long-haired man through her cougar's eyes. She licked the blood from her muzzle, the taste foreign but natural, almost sweet. She'd killed a man yet felt no remorse. Would she feel guilty when she shifted again? Could she push thoughts of what she'd done to a part of her mind that belonged only to the animal? She didn't know and had no time to dwell on it now. Sam needed her help and she'd be damned if another person she loved would lose his life.

Scanning the area and sniffing the scents on the breeze, she took off in the direction of the stream. A loud crack echoed through the surrounding forest and a sharp pain lanced her left hind leg. She released a yowl of pain and crouched low in the long grass. Wetness soaked her leg and she dared not move to look. Panic wasn't an option right now.

A dark shape darted between tree trunks, growing bigger as it neared. The shadowed human form stepped out of the forest and stood panting, white breaths sailing into the air and dissipating before a new cloud replaced it.

A man. Moonface? Lucia scented the air. *Not Moonface. Someone...different.* A familiar tang struck her and she lifted her head. *Shit, no. What's Jacob doing here?* Shock at her discovery brought a flutter of uncertainty to her belly. She caught sight of her front paws as she flexed what she'd thought were fingers, relieved at still being the cougar. She'd forgotten, the shift so new and the presence of her human emotions confusing her. *I can deal with him this way – providing he doesn't shoot me again.*

Moonlight streaked across him as he walked closer, showcasing a black fog emanating around him. A dense, immediate extension of his body, it thinned a few inches from him, shimmying like cigarette smoke, curlicues coiling and spiraling.

What the hell is that?

She peered harder, thinking her eyes were playing tricks on her, but the fog remained, growing thicker as he approached. Moonbeams illuminated his face, showing her his cruel expression, the hard planes of his cheeks and jaw she hadn't noticed before. Lucia breathed slowly so as not to alert him with her own white breath clouds, despite burgeoning fear at the sight of his raised rifle. He intended to wound her further, but he wouldn't kill. She knew that now just as she knew she loved the burst of a new sunrise, the setting of a lazy summer sun and...Sam.

Jacob stopped a few feet from her, searching for the cougar. The black mist around him deepened, the tendrils edged with flaming red. Something told her the aura had meaning and she allowed her mind to process the new information while she kept her gaze steady on him. Was it anger? Danger? Hate?

He raised the gun, wedged the handle into his armpit and aimed it at the grass where she lay. She wanted to close her eyes, to shut out the sight of him, but her cougar forced her to keep them open. His finger curled around the trigger, pulling back in slow motion, and a breath born of fright huffed out of her mouth, giving away her position. Shots peppered the ground in front of her, mud spraying, dull thuds hitting the ground, the reverberation shuddering through her. Slow and steady she reversed, stifling a whine as pain seared her hind leg. The grass rustled with her movements and she stilled, eyeing him, expecting a fresh assault of bullets.

He crept forward, gun poised, his footsteps eclipsing the sound of the burbling stream. "Where are you, cat?" He paused, then, "Fucking think I won't find you, huh?"

Lucia's cougar pushed for dominance and she allowed its force to seep into her. A growl threatened to erupt and she tamped it down, breathing through her nose, jaw clamped shut. He drew closer, the stench of him much stronger than she ever remembered, raw and mean and nasty. And another scent spiked, headier than the others.

Fear.

She stretched her lips back in a semblance of a smile and watched him take exaggerated careful steps. His right foot appeared through a swath of grass and she darted her head forward, clamping her teeth around his ankle and standing on all fours to draw his foot up. He lurched backward, eyes wide, arms akimbo, his startled yell ripping through the air. Thumping onto his back, he let go of the rifle and it disappeared into the long grass. Lucia snarled, biting harder, and dragged him to the stream. He pummeled the ground with his fists. Once on the bank he lifted his upper body. The whole of his aura blazed red now, the tips bright yellow sparks. Anger undulated from him in waves, urging Lucia on. He darted his head from side to side as though searching for his rifle. She took the opportunity to release his ankle and whip around to his back. Using all of her strength she butted him with her head. He reeled into the water, the resultant splash almost obscene in the quiet of the night.

Lucia walked backward, staring at the ripples his entrance had made while deciding her next course of action. Should she continue her search for Sam now?

"If we should get separated out here, head to the hidden waterfall."

What if Sam waited for her there? Wouldn't it be better to check at the waterfall before trying elsewhere? She couldn't catch his scent back where she'd last seen him and she couldn't smell him now. Moonface had taken him somewhere, she was sure of it, but what if Sam had escaped?

"Do you remember how to get there?"

Did she? She glanced around, sniffing the air, panic at her indecision erasing her memory for a moment. Lucia searched her mind, willed it to give her some recollection of where she had to go. It came along with a whiff of remembrance on the wind—wet rock from the cave—and she veered her rear end to the right, edging her way backward, gaze fixed on the now-calm stream.

Suddenly, two hands breached the stream's surface, quickly followed by the man's head. His mouth opened to suck in air and his hands flailed, smacking the water. Droplets rose in perfect globes, moonlight glancing off their curved tops, then dashed down into the stream, bleeding back into their original form. He called out incoherent words full of panic. Lucia halted.

He shouted louder, clearer. "Help! I'm stuck! Help!"

She imagined weeds had clamped their soaking tendrils around his ankles, holding him in place. Memories of their last conversation as well as the results of his sending her father to find the cougar rushed through her human mind. He hadn't cared for her father—had cared for nothing but his objective, for no one but himself. Her cougar reasoned if she were only a cougar she should act as nature intended. Freedom was hers and she ought to flee the scene, grateful in the morning to see another sunrise.

Sam's face came to mind, and the day he had rescued her and said the same thing. Tears stung her eyes and she laughed. Cougars didn't cry. Cougars didn't feel this way. Humans did.

But I'm not exactly human. Sorry, Jacob, but you're on your own.

* * * * *

Sam woke to the sight of a plain white wall inches ahead of him and a closed wooden door to the right, the jamb warped with age. Moonlight shone brightly through the window to his left and he was able to make out the rocky terrain of a slope at the back of the cabin. He sat naked on a pine chair, ankles and wrists bound with coarse rope. Neck aching, he winced as a stabbing pain streaked through his head.

Where the fuck am I?

Judging by the moon's position in the sky, not much time had elapsed since he'd passed out. He had to be west of his cabin and they had to be in old man Martin's hunting cabin. Maybe a mile or two away from his own at the most. He turned his head. Moonface stood in the corner, arms crossed over his chest, a smug grin on his pasty face. Mouth dry, Sam moved his lips to speak but no sound emerged. He blinked to clear the remaining fog of sleep and made eye contact with the big man. "Where's Lucia?" Sam croaked.

Moonface smiled wider.

Sam cleared his throat. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Like you don't know." Moonface pushed himself off the wall and strode toward Sam. "Your bitch has something we need. Information on a certain animal roaming these parts."

"What animal?" You hurt her, you son of a bitch, and I'll...

Moonface stopped in front of Sam and bent at the waist. When their noses were almost touching, he said, "A black cougar." Straightening, he leaned against the

opposite wall, hands on hips, and regarded Sam with hooded brown eyes. "A black cougar that is really a human."

Sam laughed loudly, hiding his anger. "You're joking, right? Tell me you're joking." He laughed again, the sound belying the fear that pervaded his body. *Shit, they know...* "There's no such animal around here, let alone one that changes into a damn human. You're wasting your time. The cougar is a myth."

A quick uppercut from Moonface slugged Sam backward. The chair struck the hardwood floor and the pain in his head as it smacked into something with a hard edge obliterated that in his jaw. Sam gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, waiting for another blow. It didn't come. Instead, Moonface gripped Sam's biceps, hauled him to his feet and turned him to face the other half of the room, a coffee table the only other furniture.

"See that up there?" Moonface asked, pointing to the ceiling.

Sam looked up. A sturdy meat hook had been screwed into one of the black beams. What the hell was this guy going to do? Hang him up there and torture him? He lowered his head and aimed his gaze dead at the man. "Yes..."

"That'll be your anchor for the next few hours if you don't tell me what I want to know." Moonface's fingernails bit into Sam's flesh.

Sam's stomach clenched and he welcomed the sensation as it grew in intensity. "Get these damn ropes off me and I'll talk." He stared at the man, hoping sincerity shone from his eyes—eyes that would soon change to bright yellow orbs if he couldn't control the impending shift.

Moonface laughed, low and ominous, and glared from Sam to the hook then back again. "Reckon you'll make a break for it if I take the ropes off. Or attack me."

Sam shook his head as though defeated. "Big guy like you shouldn't worry about anything like that. You'd stop me running. Besides, I'm no match for you. Waste of time me trying to start shit." And I'll be honest now. I know things. Things you want to know. And I'm the only one who knows them. "Come on, man. If you string me up I'd likely pass out as weak as I am right now. So untie me. These ropes are cutting off my circulation and I'm getting numb. I'll tell you everything I know."

The bastard studied him for a few seconds, arms folded. "Like I'm going to believe that! Everyone talks with a little pressure applied. Everyone." He shrugged. "We'll just sit here until you get bored. I have time. Days, weeks, whatever. My boss said as long as I got the information, I had plenty of time."

"Yeah, but wouldn't it be good if you got the information now? How good that would make you look, huh? Think about it. Guy like you needs to rise up the ranks, you know? Untie me. Get the glory."

"I don't need to untie you. You can just tell me what I need to know. You'll talk. They all do in the end."

"Telling you won't work. I have to show you. I know where the cougar lives."

"Say what?" Moonface widened his eyes. "Well I'll be... Shit. Right now you'd say anything to get out of those ropes and try to take a swing at me."

"You're right. I probably would. But think. I've lived in these mountains all my life. If anyone has seen the cougar, it's me. Do you really think a city girl like Lucia knows a damn thing about it? I'm the one you're looking for. Not her."

Moonface paced, apparently mulling over Sam's words. He turned to face Sam again. "You don't need your damn hands untied to walk. Now get up!" Moonface glared hard, his cheeks reddening. "Don't get me any more pissed off with you than I already am."

"We have to climb up that rocky slope at the back of the cabin to get to the trail. I can't do that tied up, goddamn it! You want the information, you just have to trust me and undo these fucking ropes."

Moonface paused a moment, as though weighing what Sam had said.

Go on, take the damn bait...

Moonface sighed then flexed his arm muscles. "I'll take your fucking head off if you so much as move the wrong way, you got that?"

Nodding, Sam stretched his arms out. *Come on. All you gotta do is get these ropes off me, motherfucker.*

Moonface kneeled, maintaining eye contact the whole time he untied the ropes at Sam's ankles. Sam lowered his arms, letting the guy know he wasn't about to bring both his fists down on his head. The ropes loosened and Sam eased his legs apart, shifting the bonds out of his way with one foot.

Moonface stood and nodded at Sam's hands. "Lift them up. And no funny shit with your feet, either."

Sam obeyed, looking the man straight in the eye. Instant relief came as the ropes fell away to the floor. He flexed his fingers and rotated his hands.

"Thanks." Sam's stomach tautened further and his head lightened. *Couple more minutes...keep him talking a little while longer...*

"Start talkin'." Moonface strode away and pressed his back to the door, gun pointed at Sam's chest.

Sam turned to him but remained in place. His spirit rose, hovered above Moonface—the place he needed to be when the change completed. "I've heard tell of a big cat."

"Yeah?" Moonface's eyes brightened. "And?"

"But it isn't a human. It's just a damn cougar." At Moonface's scowl, Sam pressed on. "Never heard of it being a human anyway. I mean, how would that work? It isn't possible, right?"

"Might not seem possible to you, but my boss, he reckons some guy's been cursed. Years ago. Like, couple hundred years. Said his great-granddaddy told him way back when he was a kid. Anything's possible with you fuckers living up here in the

mountains, believing in all that spirit shit. Playing with magic. All that chanting and crap like that."

Sam kept a poker face despite laughter brewing inside him. If this man only knew the power the spirits could invoke, he'd shit his pants. Sam's legs weakened. The transition was escalating. "You mind if I sit down?"

Moonfaced gestured to the floor. "Go ahead. Just tell me about this cat. And be fucking quick about it so we can be on our way."

Sam dropped to the floor. He lay on his side to ready himself. The faint mist of change swished over his body and Moonface frowned, blinked.

"Where are we exactly?" Sam asked, hoping to distract him. "Maybe I can explain how far we are from where I think the cougar has its den." Eyes throbbing and burning, he closed them.

"Not too far from your cabin. Rented this place from some old guy in town."

"All right. Gives me a better fix." The familiar prickle of hairs beginning to sprout overtook Sam and he gave in to it. His soul plunged back into his body, the transformation swift and steady. He whipped to all fours and growled, staring at Moonface.

The man's eyes widened and his mouth dropped opened and closed. "Fuck *me!*"

He fumbled with the trigger, his hand shaking so violently he couldn't pull it back. He reached for the doorknob, missing several times before he clasped it, yanked it open and turned to run. Sam dove forward, all four paws landing on Moonface's back, pitching them into a hallway. The gun slid along the floor out of reach. Moonface's forehead struck the wall and he slumped down, arms flailing to get Sam off him. Anger rolled inside Sam. He swiped his paws at the man, almost sorry to hear the screams of fright. Would scaring him be enough? Or would he come back to hunt them again? The idea of Lucia being harmed pushed out every other thought and Sam bit down on Moonface's arm, dragging him onto his back. He stood over him, paws on either side of his body, and drew back his lips.

Moonface's steely gaze told Sam all he needed to know – this guy was frightened, but he'd never give up searching for the cougar. His and Lucia's lives were at stake if Sam let this man live. He would have to kill to keep them safe. A whoosh of cougar force swept through him. He lunged, clamped his teeth into Moonface's neck and ripped it open. A garbled scream died in the man's throat as blood poured from the wound, soaking Sam's muzzle. He bit again, ripping out the vocal cords, and backed away, leaving Moonface to bleed to death in agony. Sickened, Sam whirled and sprinted down the hallway in search of a way out. Lucia wasn't here. Her scent was absent. Stairs led downward at the end and Sam took them, sniffing a source of fresh air. He searched the lower rooms until he spied a large open window in the dining area and jumped outside. In the backyard he stood still, listening for sounds of anyone else in the vicinity. Hearing nothing but leaves rustling in the trees to his right, Sam ran around the side of

the cabin and out onto a flat expanse of grassland. After gaining his bearings, he sniffed again, hoping to catch Lucia's aroma on the wind.

A faint whiff of her reached him. He took off in the direction of his cabin, speeding across the grass and into the forest. Mulch and earth cold on his pads, his claws sinking into the mud, he darted in and out of tree trunks, sensing Lucia had been near here recently. Moonlight shone between the trunks ahead and Sam ran faster, every sinew stretching and bunching with his efforts. The trunks thinned as he traveled then opened out at the stream where he and Lucia had picnicked. Remnants of her scent were here, so he nosed the ground, pacing the bank in search of a stronger aroma. He thought of his vision—Lucia bruised and bloodied beside the stream. Panic jarred his heart and swelled in his chest. If she wasn't here, where the hell was she? Why had he seen the vision if it hadn't come true?

He splashed across the shallow part, came up on the opposite bank and caught the smell of blood. He sniffed, padding along the edge of the stream, picking up a more pungent stench of the copper tang he sought.

Please don't let me find her hurt. Dead.

He remembered the vision in the fire in his living room, the future he'd been shown with Lucia by his side. But what if that vision was wrong too? He stopped at a stretch of trampled grass the size of a human torso. Peering into the blades, he spotted a dark patch.

Blood.

He darted right and stumbled toward his cabin, lungs straining and muscles flexing with each thud of his paws on the ground. The clearing outside his cabin came into view and Sam slowed, senses keener now, alert to any movement or sound, however small. And then he remembered he mentioned they should meet at the waterfall should they become separated, but he was so close to the cabin, he'd check there first. His breaths clouded the air before him, the night colder since he had been here last. How long had he been out of action? He glanced up at the moon to see how high it had risen. Maybe an hour had passed.

Shit, Lucia could be anywhere by now.

A stiff breeze sailed over him, bringing with it the rank odor of blood and the stronger scent of Lucia.

Sam took off running. A hump on the ground came into view and his heartbeat picked up speed. Was that Lucia down there? He couldn't tell, couldn't make out anything except that it was a person. He retracted his lips and snarled. Cold air filled his mouth as he opened it to release a feral yowl. He narrowed his eyes—long dark hair spilled over the ground, obscuring the face. Slowing, Sam caught his breath and prepared himself.

If it's her, if the vision was wrong and she's...

Inhaling through his nose, he padded closer, spotting a man's gray suit. Relief spread through Sam, weakening his legs, and he forced himself to investigate further.

He still had to find Lucia. Sam nosed the hair away from the man's face. Deep gouges marred the Indian's cheek, congealed blood dried there. An exposed, bloody hole gaped at his throat, and blood soaked his white shirt.

He looked up. Lucia's clothes lay in a heap a few feet from the Indian.

Lucia had shifted – and he hadn't been there to help her through it.

Chapter Eleven

Lucia had turned and fled as fast as her painful leg allowed, her recollection of the route to the waterfall coming sharp and certain. Her instincts screamed that only Sam was important now—him and their survival—and she rushed on, teeth gritted against the pain. At the waterfall, she limped behind the watery curtain, entering the cool cave, relief loosening her limbs. Curled in the spot where the fire had burned so long ago when Indulala brought Sam to this very place, Lucia licked her leg wound. Luckily the bullet had only grazed her, but shit, it hurt like hell. Finished cleaning, she flopped onto her side and closed her eyes, planning to rest for a short while before going back out in search of Sam if he didn't arrive soon.

What if he didn't come? What if she couldn't find him?

I can't think about that now. I've got to remain positive.

With a whoosh, her soul lifted and she stared at herself below on the cave floor, her fur ruffling, skin undulating over muscles and bones. Her teeth slid upward and her lips pulled back. She noted their familiar human shape and felt every hair slip back into its follicle. Soft stinging pains rippled into her paws as they changed into hands and feet. As though she had never been a cougar, her female form appeared, her calf stained with a fresh streak of blood. Her spirit plummeted, diving back into her body, and she opened her eyes as the full extent of her human self settled back into place.

I killed two men, I killed two men, I killed two men...

A lump formed in her throat and she swallowed, bringing her knees up to her chest and clasping them tight. Stones on the cave floor dug into her skin but Lucia ignored the bite, her mind too full of what she had done. Traces of her cougar remained, whispering that she had done what she had to do. Live or die, those were her options, and whether she had been human or not at the time, the fight for survival would have ended with the same results.

She closed her eyes again, tears stinging, and gave in to the rising emotions. Sobbing, she released the tension and guilt, promising herself this small moment of self-indulgence before rising and leaving the cave to find Sam. She wavered between the two options. If she left here and Sam came to find her gone... But if he needed her... Another question came, one that shocked her upright and sent her giddy. *What if there are more men out there in search of the cougar? In search of us?*

She cursed and sobbed harder, the decision too hard to make right now. Weary, she remained still, telling herself this small respite was what she needed in order to give her strength should she need to go out and search.

* * * * *

Sam pounded toward the waterfall, the scent of the liquid curtain growing stronger by the second. He prayed Lucia would be there, that she wasn't hurt someplace he couldn't find her.

But I will find her. Even if it takes me days, I swear I'll find her.

He ran through the forest, twigs crackling under his huge paws, rapid-fire breaths shunting out of him. Breaking through the tree line, he stared at the rugged, jutting rock ahead, the whoosh of pouring water hitting the pool below it thundering in his ears. His senses were so keen the sound pained him and he shook his head to release the pressure building inside his skull. Rounding the base of the rock, he sped through the archway in the stone, the gush of water gaining volume. The short, narrow tunnel closed in on him and he ran faster, wanting to be out of the stone confines. He burst out of the rock and slowed, not wanting to slip on the pool's edge and tumble into the water. He didn't have any time to waste. Sam strode behind the waterfall and sniffed, barely picking up Lucia's scent, the water's aroma too strong and overpowering. He thought of her not being inside the cave and his heartbeat quickened with alarm.

What if someone else was in on the cougar deal? What if they had taken Lucia after she'd shifted and harmed the man I found dead at the cabin? A tranquilizer dart would have taken her down, no problem.

He stepped into the cave, seeing nothing but blackness. His stomach lurched and he cursed in his mind, hoping to keep the shift at bay. He couldn't switch back now. Not if Lucia wasn't here. He needed his cougar form to run faster, to use the cat's extra-perceptive senses. Without them his search for Lucia would take longer.

A snuffle sounded and he peered into the gloom, vigilant in case someone other than Lucia created the noise. He walked forward, making out a human form on the ground. The smell of blood reached him and he bared his teeth. Head rearing, he fought the urge to release a feral shriek and lowered it again, nose closer to the cave floor with every step forward.

And he saw Lucia, her back to him, a wide dark smudge staining her calf. He darted forward, rounding her body so he could look at her face and scent her breaths.

It whispered out of her partially opened mouth, steady and sure—she slept peacefully. Sam slumped to the floor beside her, closing his eyes to allow the shift to take place. It happened quickly and he reached out to push strands of her hair away from her face. She jerked awake, eyes widening fast, and scooted backward, pushing her torso upright then scrabbling to her feet. Bunching her fists, she stared at him as though she didn't know him or her surroundings.

Sam sat up and held out his hand. "It's all right, Lucia. It's me."

Emotion swelled inside Lucia, threatening to send her into a faint. She rushed forward, cradling Sam's head against her lower belly, her fingers twining in his hair.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. He's here. He's safe.

Sam stood and crushed her to his chest, arms going about her, hands splayed on her back. She pressed herself to him, wanting him closer than was possible, wishing she could merge her body with his so they became one being. Tears spilled and sobs racked her. Sam smoothed his hands up and down her spine, murmuring endearments into her ear. She soaked them all up, whispering sentiments of her own, cupping his shoulder blades and nuzzling the crook of his neck.

He feels so damn good. So right.

Lucia lifted her head and clasped his face. Brushing her lips across his, she slipped her tongue into his mouth. He tasted so fine, so Sam. They kissed for some time, long and sweet and sensual, his burgeoning cock rising to tap her inner thigh.

He took his mouth from hers and drew his head back a little, looking into her eyes. "You're hurt. I saw and smelled blood." He raised one hand and caressed her hair then trailed his thumb down her temple, tracing her jawline. "Let me look."

She shook her head and, as if the mention of her wound prompted more pain, she winced at the insistent throb. "It's fine. I'll be okay." She remembered them making love in the pool here and she wanted him like that again, the kind of slow lovemaking that curled her toes and set her soul free. She lowered her hands, searching out his cock.

"No, sweetheart. Not yet." Sam's eyes darkened and his face took on a look of concern. "I need to look at your wound. How did it happen?"

Lucia cleared her throat, remembering Jacob coming toward her with the rifle. "I was...I was shot."

"What?" He gripped her shoulders and a tremor went through him. "You were *what*?" Taking her chin between fingers and thumb, he stared at her, his eyes narrowing. "Who the fuck did that?" His jaw muscles twitched.

"Jacob," she said, sliding her arms around his waist.

"Jacob? Your ex?"

Lucia nodded and rushed on. "But he won't hurt me again. I...I killed him." *But did I really? I just didn't save him...* "He was in the deepest part of the stream. I pushed him in there. He couldn't get free—cried out for help and I just stood there. My cougar—I shifted, Sam, shifted into a damn cat—and...and I turned away from him. Came here. God, I killed that Cherokee guy too. Gouged out his throat for everything he'd done that led to my father's death." Tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away, angry that the guilt remained when if their roles were reversed, the Indian man wouldn't have given her death a second thought. "I keep wondering if he deserved what he got, whether anyone deserves that kind of death. But I just acted on impulse. Followed my cougar instincts."

Sam touched his forehead to hers and met her gaze. "You did the right thing. Whatever your cougar dictates is what you must do, and never, *never* feel guilty about it when you change back. If it wasn't him dead out there it would have been you, and I can't stand to even think about that. Fuck!"

He crushed her to him again, hands clamped to her ass, and kissed her with an urgency that matched hers. She whimpered, throat swelling, and ran her hands up and down his sides. He wove his fingers into her hair and cradled her head, holding her as though she was too precious for words. They broke apart, panting, staring at one another. Lucia fancied their emotions swirled out and joined in the space between them, combining into one indomitable force that could never be weakened.

Sam knelt at her feet and cocked his head to one side, grasping her leg. He studied the wound, the blood congealed now, and looked up at her, pain filling his eyes. "I should have been there. Should have protected you."

"It's all right," Lucia said, resting her hands on either side of his head. "It doesn't hurt much."

"It isn't all right. I should have been more alert when they came. Should have run faster, got you inside the cabin."

At the sight of his sorrow-filled face, love swamped her, and she hoped her face showed him she believed he had done all he could. He pressed his cheek to her thigh, his breaths hot on her skin, and the burn of desire took hold of her. He kissed her leg, his tongue blazing a trail to the juncture where her thigh met her inner thigh. His lips skated across, tongue dashing out to taste her folds, and she arched her hips. Heat burned her face at the same time it flared in her pussy.

Rising, Sam kissed her lower belly, moving higher until he reached her breasts. He took one nipple into his mouth, sucking hard and long, one hand fondling her other swell. She gazed down at his ebony hair in the darkness and her tummy flipped over, love spiking her need. Her clit ached and blood pumped through her veins, pulsing in her neck. Sam stood fully upright, cupping her breasts and circling her hard nipples with his thumbs.

He kissed her lips briefly then whispered, "Not here. Come out into the moonlight."

Taking her hand, he led her through the tunnel to the lagoon. Her loins quivered as he pressed down on her shoulders so she lay on the cool stone, the waterfall draping them in privacy. He looked down at her, cock bobbing, his long hair covering his chest. A spasm of longing ripped through her and Lucia beckoned for him to join her. Sam lowered, one knee either side of her hips, and took his cock in hand.

He gazed from her face to her mound then back again. "Touch yourself. Show me how you like it done."

Coils of lust unfurled and she smoothed her hand down her belly. Her thigh tickled her fingertips and she inched lower, dipping two fingers between her folds. Her clit hardened beneath her touch, the ache there growing. Sam fisted his cock with easy, languid glides, his thumb brushing the head with each upstroke. The sight of him pleasuring himself brought on a rush of excitement and she rubbed her clit faster, urging the beginning burn of orgasm to take hold. She watched how Sam handled his cock, how he pulled down slowly and drew his hand up with quicker movements. Circling her clit, Lucia slid her free hand over her breasts, tugging at one nipple until

pleasure-pain jabbed from there to her pussy. Sam groaned and widened his legs, gently pushing hers wider to gain access to her slit. He slipped two fingers inside her, curving them to rub her G-spot. Pressure built inside her at his touch, the sensations shocking and fierce. Her fingers bumped his palm as she rubbed her bud faster. Juices seeped from her and she scooped some upward, the slickness aiding her clit massage.

Sam released a stuttered breath and his eyes half closed. "That's it, sweetheart. Show me what you like. Fuck yourself."

He upped the pace on his cock, each stroke urgent now. Lucia lifted her head and looked down at herself, the sight of their combined efforts a massive turn-on. Both their hands worked her over and she switched her gaze to his cock. By the light of the moon she saw pre-cum glistening on his tip and a light breeze sifting over them brought the scent of her sex. She gasped, shocked by the sensations ripening inside her.

"Come for me, Sam," she whispered, her voice throaty.

"Fuck, Lucia. Fuck, I want you."

They didn't have a condom and she shook her head, quickening the movement of her fingers and arching her back. She pinched her nipple again, moving her hand from one to the other, wishing his mouth there, suckling, nipping, tongue swirling. Her orgasm came on swiftly, catching her unawares. Pleasure ripped through her core and spread to her folds, clit aching with an incessant, ferocious beat that left her breathless. Lowering her head to the stone, she watched Sam fist himself harder, flicking his fingers over her sensitive spot. She felt a gush of fluid within as she keened through the height of her orgasm. Her hips bucked, ass leaving the stone and slapping back down time and again.

Sam grunted, a succession of "Ah, fucks!" preceding a rope of cum spurting from his cock and landing on her belly. She smoothed in the warm wetness, a second shot joining it and coating her fingers. Waves of bliss continued to ripple through her and she hiked in a breath, hissing it out through clenched teeth. Sam let out a strangled yell and a third ejaculation jetted from him, splashing onto her breast. She rubbed it in, slowing her hand on her clit, aftershocks in her folds, her cunt.

Sam bent over, easing his fingers from inside her, and claimed her lips. The scent of his cum drying on her skin left her lightheaded and wanting more. She clasped the back of his neck and guided him down for a kiss, her tongue probing deep. A low growl rumbled in Sam's throat and he maneuvered to her side, draping his leg over hers and slipping his arm beneath her to roll her onto her side and hold her close. She kissed his cheek, his jawline, his neck and nestled her face against his collarbone. Breathing labored, they lay there for some time, hands caressing, fingertips and lips exploring.

Equilibrium returned, Lucia lifted her head and kissed Sam's nose. She eased away from him and stood, holding out her hand. His fitted in hers perfectly and she helped him to stand, leading him to the softer spray coming off the main body of the waterfall. He stood with eyes closed, limbs loose and body relaxed. She spread the glistening

drops over his chest, his arms, his belly, and finished by rinsing his cock. Opening his eyes, Sam gave her a lazy smile, one corner of his mouth rising higher than the other.

Putting one hand to her cheek, he turned her so she stood beneath the fine misty spray and slid his hands all over her body, his electric touch bringing the need to have his cock inside her. She tamped down her desire and took his hand, leading him out from behind the curtain, sitting on the poolside with her feet dangling in the water. The cold pool eased her sore calf and she glanced up at Sam.

"Sit with me?" she asked.

Sam sat, thigh and arm touching hers, resting his head on her shoulder. "We have much to discuss. About tonight. About everything. There may be others out there hunting us. Others who know we exist. We'll have to be careful in the future."

Lucia nodded and took his hand in hers. "Where did you go?"

He lifted his head and looked at her, rubbing her thigh with his free hand. "The guy you took a photo of...he took me to an empty cabin."

A spike of unease knotted Lucia's belly. "Do you think —"

"No. No, sweetheart. He won't bother us again. I killed him. And the man at my cabin. The Indian? His spirit was strong. Evil. I sensed Manohar's soul. It would only seem right that the spirits had set us on a course to end this conflict once and for all." He drew her into the circle of his arms. "And Jacob? He can rot in Hell for all I care."

Lucia laid her cheek to his shoulder and breathed in his scent. She believed him. Together they had completed a circle. What was once a curse had now become a blessing. The horrors of the night seeped in and she clutched him to her, so thankful he'd gotten away and sat with her now. Life without him wasn't an option any longer.

"You mean everything to me, Lucia," he whispered.

"I want to stay," she said, raising her head and gazing into his eyes. "Stay with you in the mountains."

Sam's eyes widened a little. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Lucia nodded and, keeping eye contact, kissed him with a passion that grew stronger every time their lips touched. She thought of how this trip had changed her, how meeting this mountain guide had shown her the past, where she had originated, where she was destined to be. Breaking away, she stood and grasped his hands, pulling him upright.

"I want you inside me. In bed. At home," she whispered against his lips.

Sam smiled, lowering his forehead to hers. "It's a long walk." He stepped back and looked her up and down. "You sure you can make the journey with your bad leg? And naked?"

"How else would I do it? My clothes..." Realization dawned and she rushed on. "I don't know how to instigate a shift. It happened by itself before. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do."

Sam laughed, his smile lighting her up inside. "Relax. Think of your cougar. Invite her in. Ask her to take you home." He released her hands and stepped backward. "Watch. Now we have mated, I can control my changes."

Lucia stared in awe as Sam shifted, the change so fast she would swear she'd imagined a man had stood before her seconds ago. A sleek black cougar had taken his place, the animal beautiful, magnificent. His fur caught the moonlight and he stared up at her, yellow eyes blinking. Her inner cougar sensed Sam's and Lucia felt the tug of the shift beginning to unfurl in her belly. She allowed her cougar free rein and succumbed to the change, her spirit hovering above them for only a few seconds this time before it zipped back down into her feline form.

She brushed her muzzle against Sam's then took a step back. Raising her front paw, she playfully swiped his head and took off, ignoring the gripping pain in her leg, pounding through the forest, his thudding paw strikes close behind. Energy winged through her, stunning and liberating, and she glanced back through the trees. Sam pursued, eyes glinting in the darkened forest, his teeth bared as though he smiled. Lucia pressed on and emerged from the tree line, streaking across the grassland, her muscles bunching with every leap forward. She reached his cabin first and shifted with ease into her human form, then stood watching his approach.

He's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

Sam slowed and padded toward her, changing from cat to man by her side.

"You let me win," she said, laughter burbling out of her.

"Ah, but next time you won't be so lucky." He smiled and winked, sliding the key out from under the rock. After inserting it in the door, he gestured for her to remain in place, disappearing inside then reappearing with two folding chairs and soft, fluffy blankets. "Here." He set up the chairs and wrapped a blanket around her, guiding her to sit facing the clearing before them.

He cloaked himself in a blanket and took a seat beside her, reaching a hand out from the fuzzy folds to take hers. Lucia looked at him staring at the horizon, his features softening as he spied something in the distance.

"Look," he said, pointing ahead.

She stared at the sky. Meager daylight had begun to chase away the darkness, tendrils of soft pastels bleaching the night. She smiled, tears of happiness stinging. "We did it again, Sam. We lived to see another sunrise."

About the Author

Tess MacKall is a sassy Southern belle who loves to flirt and tease. It was no big surprise to her friends when she began writing erotic romance and erotica. There's nothing she likes better than weaving a sexy plot that entangles her hero and heroine and forces them to look love square in the eye.

With a background in journalism, she began her career with a local newspaper, and then moved on to politics. Having a flair for marketing, she worked on various political campaigns across the South and honed her skills as a speech writer. After several years, she left the political arena and returned to her beloved hometown to raise her family and live her dream of writing.

Next on her list of dreams is to start life anew in a small coastal town. She hears the call of the ocean and can imagine sitting on the beach listening to the waves, and to all those sexy characters who keep talking in her head. Life is about change and the need to keep it fresh. There is nothing more exciting than a little reinvention from time to time – new locales to explore and motivation for the muse. Her three children have been her greatest joy, and when she passes from this life to the next, she wants a diamond created from her ashes for each of them because “love lives on”.

Natalie Dae writes erotic romance; sometimes paranormal, sometimes fantasy and sometimes everything else! She lives in a quiet village in England with her husband, children and three cats. In her spare time she reads, reads, reads. Oh, and cleans house – a terrible obsession.

Natalie is a multi-published author in several genres under other pen names.

Tess and Natalie welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

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