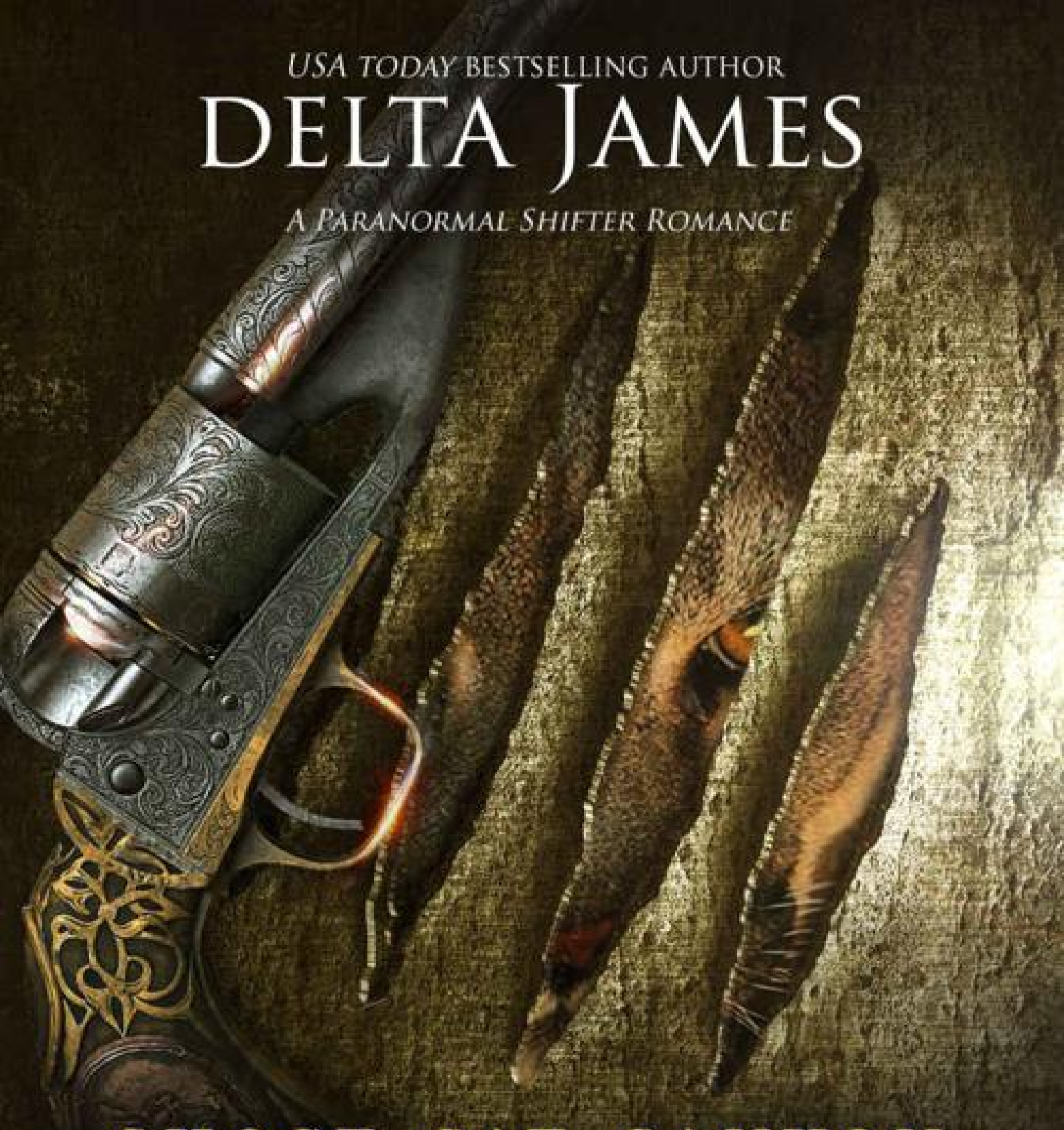


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

*A PARANORMAL SHIFTER ROMANCE*



GHOST CAT CANYON:  
UNTAMED

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UNTAMED  
GHOST CAT CANYON

DELTA JAMES

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## PROLOGUE

*A*mong one of the tribes of ancient, indigenous people who once roamed the Idaho Panhandle, there is a legend about the daughter of a mighty shaman who fell in love with a mountain lion. His strength, honor, and courage allowed him to leave the coils of the beast behind and become human. Her father cast a powerful curse on all those who followed them. The children would never be truly one with either lion or human but would have the ability to shift between the two worlds. This story, passed down between the generations, became known as the *Legend of Koyama*'.

## CHAPTER 1

*R*attling, he coiled and waited. The vibrations in the ground had alerted him there were intruders invading his territory. He hated intruders, especially once he'd found a nice spot to sun himself. Why did they have to bother him? The human dismounted and tied the horse to a scrub bush nearby. He shook his tail like a maraca, but only the gray seemed to notice him.

The horse's nostrils flared as he pawed the ground in fright. God damn thing should be afraid of him. He could strike from as far as two-thirds of his body length, enough distance to bite that obnoxious four-legger right on the nose.

What was the human looking at, standing close to the edge? There was nothing to see, at least nothing that hadn't been there for a millennium or more. Humans were foolish creatures. He considered that perhaps their brains had begun to drain out as they left the comfort of the ground to stand erect.

*Now what?* He thought as he shook his tail louder and turned away from the two-legger on the edge toward a new disturbance. He didn't have ears, but humans did. Couldn't the new intruder hear him rattle, a clear warning to get away?

The horse tied to the bush heard him. It wanted to leave, but the humans ignored the beast.

Flash from a gun caught his attention. A neat red hole appeared on the back of the light blue shirt the human on the ledge was wearing. The smell of gunpowder wafted over from the revolver in the hand of another two-legger. The first one



spun around—now there was a trait he would like to have had: the ability to spin around quickly. How handy would that be?

The human by the ledge quickly gained another hole on his front where the blood poured out of. Blood exiting the body was never a good thing for the creature it was leaving. The human at the ledge stumbled backward, the loose ground giving way beneath him as he tumbled over the cliff, arms flailing above him as if that would help anything.

The horse finally broke free and galloped down the trail. The remaining human surveyed the bottom of the canyon then turned, heading back the way they'd come with a strange and satisfied look on their face and a primitive, feral gleam in their eye.

Peace and quiet ruled the mesa once more. Good. He hated having his nap interrupted.



### *Twelve Hours Earlier...*

Cade pulled the saddle from his horse and set it in the tack room. Picking up a grooming towel, he rubbed the big gelding down and ruffled up the coat where sweat from the saddle had dampened it. He smiled as a thought hit him. He didn't much like things to be wet... unless it was in connection with Trey. Wet and Trey together was a very good thing.

His cock responded by swelling and pushing against the fly of his jeans. Clearly, his dick was very fond of wet and Trey. She smelled so sweet when she was aroused, and she went from tough, kick-ass law enforcement officer, to soft, sensual mate in nothing flat. Cade knew once she was turned, her purr would call to him and wrap around his heart.

Right now, what he wanted was to be home with his dick buried in her, but first he needed to get his horse put away. The horse preened under his hand, whinnying in pleasure. He glanced down at his watch. If he hurried, he could get home before Trey did and set them up for a long night of carnal delight.

“When you rub that girl you’re fucking, does she moan like that gelding?” said Cyrus as he walked into the barn.

She did, but he wasn’t about to share that information with anyone, least of all Cyrus.

“Fuck off, Cyrus.”

“You claim her yet? I’m not sure I could control myself if I was plowing her good from behind. You take your woman properly yet, boy?”

Cade stopped, slowly bringing his hands down to his sides, his fists clenching tightly.

“Let me be clear. Shut up and fuck off, old man.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Cade turned around. “I think I’m talking to a piece of shit who doesn’t know the first thing about caring for one’s mate.”

“I’ve had two; you’ve had none.”

“You abused my mother, but you’re too afraid of Lorna’s claw to hit her. And it’s not a secret that you haven’t shared her bed in a couple of years. So, I’m pretty sure you’re the last person I’d take relationship advice from.”

“Relationship? That’s such bullshit. We’re lions, boy. We fuck what we want when we want and if your mate doesn’t like it, she gets pushed aside to make room for one who’ll take care of your needs. I put Lorna in the other room when she got too demanding...”

“What’s the matter, old man? Couldn’t keep up... or is it that you couldn’t get it up?”

As he’d hoped he would, Cyrus growled and threw a punch in Cade’s direction. Cade dodged, then landed a right cross, staggering the man who’d sired him.

“You’re a piece of shit. My mother and Lorna both deserve better than you.”

“You’d best be careful, boy. That girl of yours is often alone. Bad things can happen to a woman, especially a human, when her mate isn’t there to protect her.”

“You so much as breathe in Trey’s direction and it’ll be the last thing you ever do.” Deep down, Cade almost hoped his father would take him up on it. “You old bastard, if I didn’t think I’d end up in jail, I’d put you down like the mangey cur you are.”

Snarling, Cyrus stormed out of the barn. Cade took a deep breath and tried to center himself. A quick glance at his watch reminded him he had a couple of hours before Trey got home, but he had time for a quick run to clear his head. He walked back into the tack room, removed his clothes, and called forth his mountain lion. A familiar shimmer and feeling of peace washed over him as the great cat took over.

He bounded out of the stable, galloped across the barnyard, leapt over the back pasture fence, and ran. The feel of the wind on his coat would help rid his mind of Cyrus altogether. He let the spirit and wisdom of the wildcat rule his thoughts as his great paws delighted in the touch of the soft grass. On strong legs, he easily cleared the back fence into Koyama’s open range.

An eagle overhead called to him, daring him to race the sky. Cade roared his acceptance and the two ran along the ridge and up into the tree line. Once amongst the pines, he lost sight of the eagle and its shadow but delighted in dodging among the branches, rocks, and fallen logs until he hit one of the creeks, the lifeblood of Koyama’. He charged into the cold water, chasing down a large trout before hauling it out of the water.

Cade ran back into the open field, dropped the fish, and called up to the sky. The eagle circled overhead, spying Cade’s offering, and cawing its acceptance. Cade ran back toward the barn, trying to drive away the last remnants of anger that almost always accompanied any interaction with Cyrus. Someday, he was going to kill that sonofabitch.



God, she was beautiful. Trey lay on her back in their bed. He'd come home still cranked up on adrenaline. His anger at Cyrus in might be in check, but the interaction left him feeling primitive and possessive. Perhaps it was time to truly take her as his mate. Maybe it wasn't the perfect occasion, but he needed to bind her to him, to ensure she listened, and kept herself safe. Cyrus hadn't been all wrong; both Lorna and Cyrus were a threat to Trey, and her job often meant she was alone. Plus, she was still human.

He'd all but attacked her when she walked through the door, tossing her on the table, stripping her naked from the waist down, stepping between her legs, and shoving his cock deep inside her. Thrusting hard and fast, she'd climaxed twice, and he'd spent himself in her. He'd lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bath before he finished undressing them both. After stepping into the shower, he'd used the wall for leverage and lifted her onto his cock and fucked her a second time. When he was done, she was a sated dead weight in his arms.

He loved that he could do that to her—leave her so far gone that she could do nothing more than cling to his strength and let him care for her. She was still impaled on his cock when he stepped out of the shower before he sat her on the vanity's countertop and allowed himself to slip from her body. And now, he stood over her, contemplating how lucky he was to have such a beautiful woman in his bed and in his life.

“You've got that caveman look on your face,” she said in a soft, sultry tone that told him she rather liked the untamed part of him that dwelt in his soul.

“You're the only one who brings that out in me.”

“I know,” she purred, so confident of her place in his life and in his heart. “Why don't you come back to bed and let the caveman out to play?”

He chuckled. So, she wanted to play? His cock throbbed. They'd only finished the last round a few minutes ago, but he was already raring to go. He wanted her on her knees, but with the way he was feeling and with Cyrus's threat fresh in his

mind, he didn't trust himself not to sink his teeth into her neck and start the change that would overwrite her DNA and make them truly one.

Cade leaned down, parted her labia, and circled her clit with his finger. Trey's entire body quivered with renewed desire. He purred quietly to her, watching as goosebumps rose along her skin, the heat and need visible across her body. He stroked down from her swollen nub to the opening of her core, tickling just inside and delighting in her moaned response.

"No, Trey. You don't come unless I tell you. Disobey me, and I'll discipline you."

She growled, as much as a human could, in frustration, and he grinned. She was so responsive. He loved her so much.

Cade understood she'd never be truly submissive, but she chose to submit to him. If he couldn't trust himself to mount her from behind without claiming her, he desperately needed to have her experience a deeper level of submission at the very least. So, he crawled onto the bed, stretching out on his belly and shoving his face between her legs. His tongue darted out, licking her entire length, clit to slit to just before her puckered entrance. Trey shivered. He brought his tongue back and then nibbled at her swollen labia, drawing out the honey that dripped from her and making a meal out of the experience.

He nuzzled her pussy as it pulsed in rhythm with his aching cock. As he set his tongue against her clit once more, he slid two of his fingers into her wet cunt. He finger-fucked her while he sucked and nibbled.

"Cade, please," she cried.

"Come," he commanded as he nipped her clit and sent her flying.

She cried out as a powerful orgasm seized her, causing her entire body to shake.

"Up on your hands and knees, Trey," he growled, fighting the urge to mount and claim her thoroughly.

Not yet. The timing wasn't right, and he wanted her to make the choice to join with him. But he didn't kid himself; he

was fairly sure that if she didn't make the right choice, he'd make it for her.

He was rock hard, and his balls had drawn up painfully at the thought of what he was going to do to her. They'd talked about anal and had played at it several times. Just recently, he'd started training her ass to take him with a series of gradually larger plugs. His finger traced the cleft of her ass, stopping to rim and press against her puckered rosette.

Cade withdrew some of the moisture from her sheath, slathering it all over his cock. Trey groaned; she knew what was coming.

"Cade," she pleaded.

He slapped her ass. She moaned and her whole body twitched in anticipation and need. Cade grasped her hips in his hands, lining up the head of his cock with her dark hole. Cade groaned as he began to push in, fighting against the tight ring of muscle to gain entrance. She clenched around him, drawing him in further.

"Push back against me, Trey. Give over to me," he commanded.

He continued to press further, tunneling into her, but pausing frequently to allow her body to relax and accept. Relax was a relative term as her back passage was damn near strangling his massive cock, and yet he knew neither of them would stop what was happening. Trey would likely much prefer to be on her back with him hammering her pussy, and he'd prefer to have mounted her from behind so that he could sink his teeth into the nape of her neck, but for tonight, this would have to do.

Finally, his balls were flush against her ass. He purred, allowing the sound to surround and embrace her. Stilling, he closed his eyes and exhaled at the thought of having claimed her ass for the first time. Slowly he dragged himself back, then pushed in again. There was almost no hesitation when Trey shouted as she came again.

"I don't recall telling you that you could come, Trey."

He slapped her ass twice on both cheeks. She cried out from the sting, but quickly refocused on who was dominant and who was not. Her responses were making it hard for Cade to keep control and take her gently.

“Please, Cade,” she repeated as if reading his thoughts, almost as if the tether had already been established. “I need you. I want this.”

He wrapped his hands more firmly about her hips and began to shove himself all the way in before pulling back then surging forward. Finesse and control gave way to primitive need and he began pounding into her in earnest, enjoying the way her tight passage challenged his right to be there, yet sucked him back in. Forward and back, he moved in a powerful rhythm that threatened to sweep them both away. He leaned over her back and released her hip with one hand so he could rub her clit.

Trey’s scream was primal, entirely feminine, and very close to that of a wildcat in heat. He grinned. Trey was his whether he ever claimed her or not. The familiar tingle ran down his spine as his balls drew up. When she thrust back, he pulled her hard against him as his cum shot out of his cock and he emptied himself in her ass.

Cade fell forward onto her, pressing her body into her bed. Spent. Replete. He allowed his dick to slowly slide out before wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. She was exhausted, nearly lost to the land of dreams already. Before she could fully doze off, he slipped from their bed into the bath to wash himself before and brought a warm washcloth to ensure she was clean and taken care of.



### ***The Following Morning...***

*What the fuck?* The sound of pounding hoofbeats could be heard outside the stable. This wasn’t the Old West. People didn’t just gallop up to someone’s barn.

“Cade! Cade! It’s Dandy,” called one of the ranch hands.

Cade swore under his breath. It had been that kind of morning. First, Trey had been called out on an emergency and left their bed before he'd had a chance to draw her underneath him for a hard, satisfying fuck. Then, his antique truck hadn't wanted to start, so he'd taken Trey's dually, only it needed gas. They'd lost a heifer in calving, which meant they'd either need to find a surrogate or bottle feed the damn thing. Cash was meeting with the rodeo people in Boise, so he'd be buying them breakfast at Trillium, one of the most expensive spots in town. Clay had disappeared early again without a word to anyone, and he had no idea where Cole had gone. And now, last but not least, whatever the hell this was. Shaking his head, he finished tightening the cinch and went to see what fresh hell had arrived.

The difference in light between the interior of the barn and the blinding sun of late morning was enough to make him blink. Walking outside, he saw that his father's enormous gray gelding was wild-eyed and covered in a lathered sweat with no rider in sight. On a good day, Dandy was a pain in the ass. Spooked and worked up? Not good at all.

"Easy, boy." Cade kept his voice low and even. "Easy."

Dandy snorted, striking the ground with his foreleg. Where was Cyrus? Had Dandy dumped him, or had he simply broken away when Cyrus dismounted? One of the hands tried to reach for the testy gelding, but Dandy cow-kicked at him, barely missing the man's head.

"Let me get him," said Cade. "Easy, Dandy. Easy."

He walked toward the horse with his hand extended, moving slowly and steadily. Dandy pinned his ears and shook his head but stood his ground, neither retreating nor charging. Cade was able to take hold of one of his reins and ran his other hand down the horse's sweat-covered neck.

"Anybody see Cyrus leave this morning?" asked Cade.

"Yeah, one of the crew said he rode out early. Said he wouldn't be gone long."



Cade reached back, loosening the horse's cinch. "Any indication which way he was headed?"

Silence greeted him. Of course not. Cyrus Waverly believed he answered to no man, so why tell anyone what he was up to. That sonofabitch. Cade didn't like Cyrus and neither did his three younger brothers, which was fine because Cyrus didn't care for any of them either.

Cade turned back to the barn, leading Dandy alongside. "How about Clay? Anybody seem him today?"

Nothing but silence. *Shit!* He wondered again why he worked so damn hard. After a few more steps, he handed Dandy, who had now calmed down considerably, to one of the barn workers.

"Get him untacked and hose him off. Walk him until he's dried, give him a good grooming, and put him back in his stall."

"There was a time Cyrus wanted me all hot and bothered instead of his damn horse," Lorna said with an exaggerated drawl and a sly smile as she joined them in the barnyard. "Of course, you could scratch that itch if you had a mind to."

Lorna. Now there was a mistake that kept coming back to bite him in the ass. Her father had sent her from their claw in Louisiana with an eye to finding her a mate. She'd been nothing but trouble since the moment she'd arrived. Cade would have tossed her out on her ass a long time ago, but Cyrus had married her. Unfortunately, he hadn't married her before Cade's fateful birthday a number of years prior just after her arrival.

The fact that he was drunk, and she'd egged him on did little to alleviate his guilt over what had happened. Just another secret he kept from Trey. They hadn't been together at the time, but there were days when he felt like that was immaterial.

*"Come on, Cade. It's your birthday. You're always so buttoned up. Why not let your inner beast come out for a spin?"* Lorna had said in a breathless voice as she'd tugged

*the top of her skin-tight sheath dress off her shoulders and peeled it down past her chest, revealing her perfectly pert breasts, no bra and stiffened nipples.*

*She'd been right. He'd been too caught up in trying to work his way through the mire of getting his family's ranch, Koyama', back on its feet to take care of any of his baser needs. Lorna was a pretty girl, and also a master manipulator just like her sire. But at that moment, her striking good looks, the scent of her arousal, and his not being sober combined to form a trifecta that he'd found hard to ignore.*

*Cade had growled and Lorna had dropped to her knees, purring in a submissive pose, calling to that part of him that needed release. He wanted Trey, just like every other day, but she was too young and too human. Cade had fisted Lorna's hair, drawing her up to her feet before tossing her over one of the bales of alfalfa, grabbing the hem of her dress and rucking it up around her waist. With no preliminaries, he'd unbuckled his belt and opened his fly. His cock had sprung free, hard and ready.*

*Lorna had made no move to evade him or given any indication she didn't want what he had to offer. He'd stepped between her legs and shoved his cock all the way to its hilt in one hard thrust, his barbs smoothing to just a nubby texture as he did so. It was when he'd drawn back, and they'd protruded to scrape her interior walls that she'd yowled.*

*"Cade," she'd cried, not caring if anyone heard.*

*He should have stopped. Hell, he never should have started, but it had been a while. He'd been in need and she'd offered.*

*Cade had grasped her hips, surging forward again, only to drag himself back and forth, in and out. He'd fucked her ruthlessly, enjoying the way she'd wailed and arched her back, fighting him to be able to move with him, but he'd held her in place. He'd known what she wanted: for him to lean forward and take the nape of her neck in a claiming bite, but he had no intention of claiming her.*

*He'd slammed into her over and over, allowing his barbs to score her cunt. Had she been in heat, they would have prepared it for his seed to take hold. Instead, they'd just rasped her inner walls, driving her to the razor's edge between pleasure and pain.*

*Cade had felt her orgasm take her like a flash fire, consuming her as she'd yowled in triumph. One last brutal thrust and he'd pulled himself out, spending himself on her exposed ass and the small of her back.*

*Just as quickly as they'd started, he'd stepped back, hitched up his jeans, and buckled his belt as he patted her backside.*

*"That's the first and last time that will happen on this ranch. If I catch you with one of my brothers or the hands, I'll send you back to Louisiana."*

*She'd turned on him, snarling. "You're a bastard, Cade Waverly."*

*"That has been a persistent rumor, but my mother swears it isn't true."*

The memory was unpleasant, and Cade turned back to his own horse to finish tightening the girth. After slipping on the bridle, he led him out to the barnyard. "We need to start moving the herd in the south pasture up to the catch corral so we can get everyone vaccinated and cut the steers from the herd. Zack, if I'm not back, take the best of the bunch up to the finishing barn. The others can be put on the truck for transport to the auction."

"Did old man Jeppesen get ahold of you?"

Cade turned back. "No. Do you know what he wanted?"

"Yeah, he talked about wanting to see if he couldn't buy the feeder steers before you took them to auction. He said he'd give you a fair price..."

Cade laughed. "But his idea of fair usually isn't. Tell you what. Call Jeppesen. Last time I checked, feeder steers were a hundred and a half per hundred-pound weight. If he'll pick 'em up from the catch pen, he can have 'em for a hundred and

a quarter, but he's got to buy the lot in cash within forty-eight hours."

Zack whistled. "That's a good price."

Cade nodded. "If he'll do it, it'll be worth not having to hassle with them."

"You got it, boss. You going to look for Cyrus?"

"Somebody has to. I'll call in if we need a medivac," said Cade.

"You think he's hurt?"

"Has to be. Otherwise, Dandy never would have come in alone. I'll try and pick up his trail and see if I can't backtrack to wherever he dumped the old man."

Swinging up onto his own mount, a blanket bay appaloosa, he rode to where Dandy had come through the gate and began the meticulous process of following Dandy's tracks. After riding for more than two hours, he understood why Dandy had been in a lather. At the heart of Ghost Cat Canyon, he watched as turkey vultures flew overhead, indicating something had died. Cyrus's trail eventually led him up to Himeen Mesa.

*Now why the hell would Cyrus have gone there? As far as he knew, everyone thought the top of the mesa was haunted by his mother, but he'd never felt her there.*

Cyrus was an old-time rancher who'd refused to embrace modern ranching and had put Koyama' in danger of being sold off in pieces to developers before his mother's death. More recently, he'd wanted to lease his parcel to a developer who wanted to build a casino, forcing Cade to come home to sort out.

Of his four sons, only Cole had not found his way into one of the special ops units of the United States Armed Forces. Instead, Cade was certain he'd been recruited into one of the intelligence agencies, but he had never asked, and Cole had kept his own counsel. Growing up, the four of them been close, more so than most alpha males in the same family or claw might have been, and united in their hatred of their sire.

Noting Dandy's tracks and that of another horse without shoes, Cade rode up the only side of the mesa that was traversable by horse. With this rocky terrain, that second horse had to have feet like iron. When he got to the top, there was nothing. He had to be up here, there was no place left to go. Dandy had come down without him and the shoeless horse had gone up and back with the same weight, but neither animal's tracks went beyond a certain point.

"Cyrus!" he called.

Cade proceeded around the leading edge of the mesa. He and his brothers had long ago given up calling their father by anything other than his given name or various epithets that fit. There were still no tracks, but as he examined the area, he thought it bore evidence of having been swept over.

He looked back at where his own horse was tied and where the other tracks abruptly stopped. It was as though someone had tried to ensure no evidence would remain of what had happened. *Evidence? When had he started thinking like that? Probably right about the time he and Trey got back together.* The signs around him did not bode well.

As he continued walking, he heard the distinctive sound of a maraca, only there weren't any mariachi bands nearby. Looking around, his eyes landed on an enormous rattler coiled and ready to strike. Cade turned toward the snake and sniffed; the scent seemed a bit off, but he wasn't as familiar with the smell of reptilian shifters as he was with mammalian ones. Most likely, it was just a large, common-variety rattlesnake. No help there, but still a nuisance.

Cade hissed and then snarled, allowing his altered self to vocalize for him. Even though the snake couldn't hear him, its primitive brain recognized it was in the presence of an apex predator. The rattling ceased and the snake uncoiled and slithered off in the other direction. With nowhere else to look, he glanced over the edge of the mesa and saw Cyrus's broken, lifeless body at the bottom. Even from this distance he could see the blood and open wounds and knew there was no reason to call for a Medivac at this point.

He returned to where the rattler had been sunning himself. The broken bits of the scrub brush close by made it appear that something had been tethered, likely Dandy, but there were no hoofprints from either of the horses. If the snake had been sunning itself, it probably saw at least Dandy and Cyrus, and it would have warned them away.

Cade hunkered down and ran his fingers lightly over the rock and examined the ground where Dandy had to have been tied. Most horses didn't like snakes on the best day, but Dandy had stumbled into a nest of rattlers the year before and now over-reacted to anything that even sounded vaguely like the snake's warning system.

Looking carefully at the dirt close to the edge, he could see no evidence of either man or horse having been here, but Cyrus had to have been. He'd been shot and fallen off the mesa. Or maybe he'd been shot down below. It made more sense, however, if the act had been committed up here. Again, there appeared to be faint brush marks erasing any tracks that might have been a clue. *Who was he? Columbo?*

The dirt was loose. Something caught his eye: a tiny pebble, wet and sparkling in the sun. Cade picked it up and found that it was covered in sticky blood. So, Cyrus had been shot up here before falling to the valley's floor.

The killer, whoever it was, had taken great pains to try and hide what had really happened.

After one final examination of the surroundings that provided no additional information, he walked back to his horse, mounted up, and headed down the steep trail. He made his way around the base of the mesa until he reached Cyrus's body, or what was left of it. The creatures of the canyon had already begun feasting on him. Cade hoped the flesh and organs that had once belonged to Cyrus did not give any of them indigestion.

The vultures he'd seen circling overhead had clearly gotten here first. He sniffed at the body—wolverines, bobcats, even badgers, but no mountain lions, which made sense. Purebloods rarely fed on their half-blood brothers.

He unsheathed the hunting knife he kept at the back of his belt. Grimly, he examined the wound. He noted gunshot residue on the back of Cyrus shirt, so the killer had been close. The residue and exit wound on the front of the body indicated Cyrus had been shot from the rear, which was fairly ironic considering how many times Cyrus's dirty dealings had stabbed others in the back.

It seemed that whoever had done the deed had not come down to ensure Cyrus was dead. Given the placement of the shot and the subsequent fall, his death had pretty much been a foregone conclusion. Like the killer, Cade backed away, sweeping away the evidence of his ever having been there.

He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and initiated a conference call with all three of his brothers. Only two picked up.

"Where the hell is Clay?" he growled when he had Cash and Cole on the line.

Cade was in a foul mood.

"Always good to hear from you too, big brother. As to Clay, who the hell knows? I haven't seen him since Cyrus got into it with him the other day," said Cole.

"I ran into Zack. Jeppesen said he wanted the steers, and that Dandy came in without the old man," said Cash.

*God damn it, where the hell was Clay?*

Cade wasn't one to pussy-foot around a problem. "Cyrus is dead."

"I hope you're not expecting either of us, or Clay for that matter, to burst into tears. What happened?" asked Cash.

"Someone shot him from behind out on Himeen Mesa."

"I don't envy Trey. There's bound to be a long line of suspects," said Cole.

"Okay, so the old bastard isn't missing. Somebody shot him. Call Trey and let her handle it," Cash said abruptly.

“If it was that easy, we wouldn’t be having this little chat,” stated Cole.

“You’re right, we wouldn’t,” said Cade. “There’s no way we don’t look like suspects. Depending upon when it happened, we’ll need alibies.”

“Last time I checked, you’re fucking the county’s lead investigator,” said Cash.

“I’m well aware of that, which presents its own set of unique problems. But at least most of my time is accounted for.”

“You don’t think one of us did it, do you?” asked Cole.

“I don’t know. And if one of you did, I don’t care. I just wanted to ensure that we’ve got our asses covered. Trey is good at her job. Whoever it was brushed away whatever happened on the top of the mesa except for a blood-stained pebble, and I have it. I tried to make sure that any trace of my having been up there doesn’t lead back to one of us. We just need to ensure there is nothing that leads back to one of us that isn’t common knowledge or easily discovered.”

“You mean like the fact we all hated the sonofabitch?” asked Cash.

“Or that he was trying to destroy Koyama’?” added Cole.

“Yes. Trey knows both of those things and I doubt she will give them much weight...”

“But what if somebody sees the two you being together as a conflict of interest?” asked Cash.

“Then she and I will deal with it. But if either of you hear from Clay, I need to talk to him.”

“I do think one of us needs to call the authorities to say that he’s missing,” said Cash.

“It needs to be me and to let her know I found him. Too many people know I went out to track down where Dandy came in from. I did leave some footprints a very short distance from the body.”



“What aren’t you saying?” asked Cole.

“Up on the back side of the rock outcropping at the top of the mesa there were two sets of prints. Dandy’s and a heavy, unshod horse. Sound like any horses you know?” said Cade.

“You can’t think Clay had anything to do with this.” Cash said.

“Can’t I? They had a knockdown, drag out fight.”

“We’ve all had at least one of those with him since you returned,” said Cole.

Cade continued, “Yeah, but Clay’s the only one who punched him. Thank God I couldn’t see any evidence of that. Still, his last words to Cyrus were that he wanted the old man dead. Plenty of people heard him. We need to find Clay and make sure he’s got an alibi.”

“Don’t you think we ought to ask him if he did it?” asked Cole.

“It doesn’t matter. God knows if anyone had a right to kill him, it was Clay...” started Cade.

“He wouldn’t, Cade. He couldn’t.” Cash’s voice held some authority.

“I’m going to call it in. And for Christ’s sake, find Clay.”

“One of us should tell Lorna...”

“If you want to, go ahead, but I’m not getting in that particular viper’s strike range again,” said Cade.

Without hesitation, Cole responded, “Chicken.”

“Cluck. Cluck,” replied Cade with a smile, no love lost for his father or Lorna.

## CHAPTER 2

Trey was just parking her Jeep in front of the Appaloosa County's Sheriff's Office when her cell rang. Glancing down, she smiled when she saw it was Cade.

"About those pictures I sent you earlier..." she answered.

"What pictures? I've been out of range."

"Uhm, the ones I probably shouldn't have sent, but at least they were from my personal cell not my official one and—wait, why are you calling me on my work phone?"

"Because it's official business and may well get a bit dicey so I wanted to keep the two separated. And what did you..." he stopped himself. "I'll take care of that and remind you later why sending me dirty pictures of you when I can't do anything about it and leaving me hurting this morning are both bad ideas."

"You could have taken a cold shower."

"I did. It didn't help."

"Hey, Trey," called Dorothy, the dispatcher, as she walked in.

"Hang on a sec, Cade. What's up Dorothy?"

"We got a call from out at Koyama'. It seems Cyrus's horse came in without him."

"How long ago?" she asked.

"Several hours. Cade went out to try and find him."

“Cade? Dorothy just said Cyrus was missing and you went looking for him.”

“Unfortunately, I found him. He’s dead, Trey. Somebody shot him. I called my brothers first and that’s why I’m calling you now. I probably should have called the Sheriff’s Office first, but much as I hated him, it was still a bit of a shock.”

“Where are you now?” she asked.

“Foot of Himeen Mesa and close enough to the body to keep the vultures and other predators at bay, but hopefully not so close that I messed up your crime scene. I did get closer and then realized I shouldn’t, so I backed off.”

“The chopper will be faster. I’ll head out there now. I’m sorry, Cade. I’ll be there as fast as I can.” She hung up. “That was Cade. He found Cyrus’s body. He’s been shot. I’ve got the coordinates and I’m going to grab the crime scene gear and head out. I’ll text you the location. Find out who’s closer and send him, then let the Sheriff know. Call Doc Walker and tell him we have an apparent murder and give him the location as well. I’ll call in when I have more info.”

Trey grabbed her crime scene gear bag and headed out to the airfield.

“Deputy Mitchell,” called Hal Johnston as she drove up. Hal was Dorothy’s husband and owned both the airfield and an aerial application, or crop dusting, service.

Whenever she saw Hal, she couldn’t help but remember the famous scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* when the bad guys tried to kill Cary Grant with a crop duster. Trey loved the classics.

“Hey, Hal,” she said as she got out of her Jeep and headed toward the hanger where Hal kept his two planes and the county’s helicopter. “Cyrus Waverly’s dead. Cade called me with the coordinates. I’m going to meet him there.”

“Yep. Dorothy called me. I checked to make sure the chopper was ready to go. I should have known it would be since you flew it last.”

“Thanks, Hal.”

“Sure thing. Tell Cade I’m sorry for his loss. I know that him and his brothers weren’t close to that old bastard, but still... You know, there was a lot of talk back in the day about his first wife’s death.”

Trey nodded. “I remember, but I’m sure they investigated.”

Hal spat. “I’m sure they said that, but Russ wasn’t sheriff then and Cyrus was good buddies with the last one. I doubt much was done. Hard for me to believe that Hannah Waverly fell off a horse and got dragged. She was a helluva trick rider and barrel racer before she married Cyrus.”

Not knowing how to respond, Trey just nodded then started on her pre-flight and had the chopper wheeled out before climbing into the pilot’s seat and starting the motor. She waved at Hal and lifted off.

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard someone question the circumstances surrounding Hannah Waverly’s death. Thinking back, she remembered when Cade had come home for his mother’s funeral.

*Cade had surprised everyone by joining the Army immediately after graduating. He’d taken a bus from his graduation ceremony to the airport in Coeur d’Alene and flown to the army camp for basic training the next day. He’d come home on leave because of his mother’s funeral. At the time, Trey worked for The Trail Diner, the only local eatery in town besides the tavern.*

*“Hey, Cade!” called Wes, the owner, as he came out from the kitchen and extended his hand. “It’s good to see you, boy. Whew! I’m dating myself. Boy? You ain’t been a boy for a number of years. Damn proud of what you’ve done. They say you and your unit have been involved in some pretty scary operations.”*

*Cade had returned the handshake. “Don’t believe everything you hear from the media. What they don’t get wrong, they just make up.”*

*“I was sure sorry to hear about your mama. Sit down and let me get you a cup of coffee. Hungry?”*

*“Does anyone know what happened?” Cade had asked.*

*Trey had seen him try to mask the grief visible in his eyes, his beautiful green eyes. At the time, Trey hadn't known what she'd found so fascinating about those eyes. She'd never thought of a man having green eyes. Blue or brown, sure. Maybe even hazel, but not green. But then Cade Waverly was unlike any man she'd ever met. Like every other girl in the county, she'd watched him in the high school rodeo events. And just like all of them, and reputedly a number of buckle bunnies, she'd probably fallen in love with him.*

*As far as anyone had known, after Cade had joined the Army and become a member of Delta Force, the Army's elite special forces unit, his mother had been in a terrible riding accident where she was thrown from her horse and dragged. Her body had been unrecognizable.*

*Wes had shaken his head. “You know she always liked to ride the half-wild ones. They figure her horse spooked and she fell, got her foot hooked in the stirrup and he dragged her. They say your daddy was so grief stricken, he shot that horse dead.”*

*Cade had snorted. “Cyrus has never cared for anyone enough to be stricken by grief or anything else.”*

*Wes had nodded but changed the subject. “You going to be around long?”*

*“No. I got special leave for her funeral and then I have to head back to my unit.”*

*“I'm closing the diner down for the afternoon. I think most of the other businesses are doing the same. Your mama was really loved in this town.” Wes's voice had been gruff with emotion as he'd spoken. “She deserved better than your daddy.”*

*“Didn't we all,” Cade had said grimly.*

*The funeral had been a graveside service. Afterwards, it seemed as though the whole town had made the trek out to the heritage ranch at the mouth of Ghost Cat Canyon. Koyama', which was Nez Perce for Mountain Lion, had been established*

*in the mid-1850's and continuously owned by Cade's family since.*

*Like everyone else in town, Trey had attended the funeral, which had lasted until long after sundown. Wes hadn't been wrong; Cade's mother had been loved and respected by all.*

*Unlike the rest of town, she'd known that Cyrus's plans to bury his wife in a casket in a mausoleum had not gone over well with his sons. While she'd loved Cade from afar, she and Clay had been good friends. She'd agreed with all four brothers that Hannah Waverly would never rest in the family crypt.*

*That morning she'd stowed jeans, boots, and a t-shirt along with a crowbar and two shovels behind the seat of her pickup. As all the other mourners left, she'd stayed behind at the graveside with Clay. Once they were sure they were alone, they'd pried the top of the coffin open and respectfully lifted Hannah's body onto a handmade quilt before covering her.*

*She'd driven Hannah and Clay in the bed of her truck to the old, original homestead of Koyama' where they'd prepared a deep grave. Along with the tail hair from Cricket, her favorite horse, they laid her body at the bottom and added a thick layer of wild sage over the blanket. They'd filled in the grave and topped it with rocks to form a mound. In between the rocks and all around the gravesite, they'd planted ivy, representing love ever after, and lavender, representing serenity and grace.*

*"I'm so sorry, Clay," she'd said.*

*"He killed her. Don't you ever let anyone tell you differently. Cyrus killed my mother," he'd said before getting into the passenger side of her truck.*

*Trey drove them back to Koyama' where they'd returned the shovels and the crowbar. With Clay keeping watch so that she wasn't seen, Trey had changed back into the dress she'd worn to the funeral and they'd walked up the steps side-by-side.*

*“Where have you two been?” Cade had asked in an oddly neutral tone.*

*Clay had only grinned at him, the first genuine smile she’d seen from him since their mother had died.*

*“Doing what needed to be done,” Clay had answered.*

*“What needed doing with shovels?” Cade had asked.*

*“She may be in the ground, but she’s not in a coffin sealed in cement. She’s buried out by the old homestead in sight of Himeen Mesa. That was her favorite spot on the ranch,” Clay had answered.*

*“You snatched the body?” Cole had asked as he joined them. “And didn’t invite me? Damn, Clay, that was just downright rude. Come on baby brother, I’ll buy you a drink.”*

*Cole had pushed Clay into the house, leaving she and Cade alone on the porch. Something about she and Cade had always seemed inevitable. She’d never wanted anything or anyone as desperately as she wanted him.*

*“I’m sorry about your mom. She was always so nice to me. Are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help?” she’d asked.*

*“All right? Hell no, nothing is all right. My mother is dead. I don’t believe that cock and bull story my father is telling. Clay knows something but he isn’t saying, and Cash and Cole are sticking up for him. As usual with my family, I’ve been cast as the bad guy.”*

*“I’d say I was sorry, but it doesn’t sound very supportive. Want to get out of here?” she’d asked.*

*“I’m not very good company, Trey.”*

*“Why don’t we head to my place? My grandmother died last year and left me her cabin down by the river,” she’d suggested.*

*The cabin and its surrounding two acres were nothing more than a little bump on Koyama’s border.*

*He'd been hurting and seemed to be at an emotional breaking point. Besides, she'd been in love with him from the time she knew how to recognize that emotion. She hadn't said another word, just took his hand and led him out the kitchen door and down to her truck, passing him the keys.*

*At the end of the drive, he'd stopped. For the first time in all the years she'd known him, he seemed uncertain. Taking a deep breath, he slowly exhaled and turned the truck towards Trey's home.*

*When they'd arrived, she'd reached for the keys and then gone around the front of the truck, waiting for him by the driver's door with her hand outstretched to him.*

*"You don't have to do this, Trey," he'd said softly.*

*"No, I don't," she'd said as she led him into cabin and into her bedroom.*

*She'd slipped out of the little black dress she'd worn to his mother's funeral before reaching for his belt and unbuckling it.*

What had followed had been the most life-altering experience of her life. She and Cade, the man she'd dreamed of most of her life, had made love repeatedly throughout the night. In the morning, she'd woke to the sun peeking into her bedroom window and silence throughout the cabin. She'd slipped on her paisley and chenille robe and discovered the belt was missing. No matter; there was nothing he hadn't seen or touched the night before. Except that when she walked into the living area, there only proof that Cade had ever been there was a note that read:

*We were never meant to be. I'm sorry.*

*Cade*

Trey had felt like a fool. She'd never felt as close to anyone as she had to Cade the night before. It had been like their souls had bonded, like they'd found each other at last, a kind of homecoming. She'd snorted, shaking her head to dismiss the memory and her foolish, romantic notions. He'd been hurting over his mother's death and pissed at his brothers, and she'd been the easy lay he'd needed to get



through the night before going back to his job as a special ops superhero.

She'd made the decision that morning to get her act together. No more would she just drift through life, hoping to catch Cade Waverly's eye so he could sweep her off her feet and ride off into the sunset to build a life together.

Trey got accepted to Dartmouth, double majoring in art history and political science. Shortly before graduation, the FBI had come calling. She'd left her commencement ceremony and boarded a plane for Quantico. She'd spent more than five years in Europe as the FBI's liaison with NATO on a number of significant cases. After an almost disastrous mission in Bosnia, she'd requested a transfer home where she'd been given a plum assignment as an instructor at Quantico.

Trey had gone to visit one of her favorite haunts in D.C., The Three Sisters, where she'd reconnected with Cade. She grinned; it had been one helluva reunion, including naked sex on a hotel balcony in the middle of a raging storm. After a successful mission in Ottawa, she and Cade had returned to Idaho together and moved into her old home, a small homestead cabin. With the exception of the difficulties the four brothers were having with Cyrus, things had been almost idyllic.

She entered the coordinates Cade had given her into the navigation unit and flew to the location of Cyrus's body. Near the mesa, Trey spotted Cade and waved before patching through to Dorothy to let her know she'd found both the body and Cade.

"Maybe you'd better wait for the boys to get out there."

Trey laughed. "Dorothy, I don't need the boys to help me. I have Cade, my side arm, and my rifle, but I'll be careful. Someone should go out to the ranch to make the official notification. Did Doc give you an ETA?"

"He said he was close by and will be with you shortly." Dorothy still sounded hesitant.

Trey continued, “Get a message to Russ. Let him know I have confirmed the body’s location and will call him with an update.”

“Do you want me to call Koyama’?”

“No. Notification of a death in the family should be made in person. Send one of the guys out there first.”

“Sure thing.”

Trey maneuvered the chopper away from Cyrus’s body, Cade, and his horse. He looked so stoic and ruggedly handsome sitting in the saddle. She wondered if there would ever come a time when the very sight of him didn’t make her pulse race. Who was she kidding? Seeing Cade, clothed or unclothed, tended to cloud her judgment and send her libido into overdrive.

She landed and shut down the chopper’s motors. Grabbing her crime scene gear, she headed to Cade first before attending to the body.

“I’m not sure what to say,” she said, touching his knee as he sat on his big appaloosa.

Sidestepping the horse away, he swung down and dragged her into his arms.

“There’s not much to say except I’m glad you’re here. You do your job. I suspect you’ve called for Doc and some back-up?”

“That’s standard procedure.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll wait until your back-up gets here. Since it’s clear that someone killed Cyrus, I want to make sure you and Doc are safe.”

“Want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

“Sure, I woke up to find you gone, which we’ll discuss when I get home tonight...”

“Cade, I didn’t want to wake you and I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to talk to me like that when I’m here in an official capacity.”

Cade snorted. “The last time you slipped out of our bed without telling me, I warned you I’d blister your backside if you did it again. Now, we can do that at home tonight, or I can be really inappropriate and do it right now. Which would you prefer?”

She shook her head. She’d known when she left that morning that he was going to be pissed. Cade needed control, especially in the bedroom, but she’d needed to get to work early and had forgotten to tell him.

“I suppose this is another instance of you thinking you’re compromising?”

“You bet your ass it is,” he snarled.

Cade hugged her tighter against his body, his mouth coming down on hers in a kiss of quiet desperation. He drank her like she was the last drop of water for a man dying of thirst. His tongue plunged into her mouth, tasting, exploring, possessing. She softened against him, allowing his tongue to slide along hers. His cock stiffened in his jeans and pressed into her belly.

In another place and time, she would have slid down his body, unbuckling his belt and opening the fly of his jeans to free his cock before taking him in her mouth so she could pleasure him into oblivion and ecstasy. But this was a crime scene, neither the time nor the place.

When he lifted his head, she kissed his full lips gently, saying, “I think I’d prefer to wait until we’re at home.”

Trey disengaged from him and turned back toward the body. She walked in a circle around it, cordoning off the crime scene. Once the tape was out, she paused to examine the body without touching or moving it. She glanced toward the top of Himeen Mesa. This viewpoint gave her no clues.

“Cade, I’m going up to the top of the mesa. I need you to stay where you are. I have my sidearm and my rifle.”

“Wait until backup gets here and then either he or I will go with you.”

She shook her head. “We’ve talked about this before. This is my job and I’m good at it...”

“The best,” he corrected.

“The body has been here for several hours, so unless you think the secret treasure of El Dorado is up there, the killer is long-gone. I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like it.”

“And I wasn’t crazy about you going to Ottawa...”

“That was seventy-five grand...”

“That was your *job*,” she added, stressing the last word before walking back to the helicopter.

Without another word, she flew to the top of the mesa. Luckily, it was big enough for her to set down on the other side of the rock outcropping from where Cyrus’s body had been found. Once again, she shut down the chopper, grabbed her rifle and headed toward the edge directly above where the body had landed. Sure enough, someone had tried to cover up what had happened. It was windy up on top of the mesa so that might explain it, but then again, she wouldn’t think it had been long enough or stormy enough for the elements to have erased the remnants of Cyrus’s visit.

Trey walked back to the helicopter and got out both her official crime scene camera as well as her cell phone, taking pictures of the area with both, including a shot looking over the edge to Cyrus’s body. The most likely scenario was someone had shot Cyrus from the back, causing him to tumble off the ledge.

After hopping back into the chopper, she returned to her previous landing spot down by the body. Once out of the cockpit, she began taking pictures, retracing her steps and capturing a photo gallery of the area, the body, and anything else she thought might be helpful or relevant.

By the time she was finished, one of the deputies in her department, Don Shepherd, or Shep as he was called, had arrived. Shep’s arrival was followed closely by the town’s doctor, who also worked as the county’s medical examiner.

“Holy shit,” said Shep, as he got out of his car before walking over to Cade and extending his hand. “I’m sorry, Cade. I know you two weren’t close...”

“I hated the sonofabitch.”

“So did a lot of people,” said Shep.

“I think it happened on top of Himeen Mesa, but someone tried to get rid of any evidence of what happened,” Trey said to Shep. “The most likely scenario... Cade if you want to leave, you can.”

“Yeah, Cade, it’s not like she won’t know where to find you,” said Shep, who blanched when Cade growled. “Damn it. I didn’t mean it the way it came out.” He turned and tipped his hat to Trey. “No offense intended. I meant we all know—shit! You two know what I mean.”

Trey grinned at him. “Yeah, I do. The big guy’s just having a bad day aren’t you, big guy?”

“I’ve had better, most of which start with waking up with you in my arms.”

She shook her head as Doc Walker came from the back of his SUV with a body bag and stretcher.

“Good lord. I’m sorry about Cyrus,” he said to Cade.

“It’s okay, Doc. Trey, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to ride back to Koyama’. I’ll be there or at home. Call me when you’re done here.”

She didn’t care if it was appropriate or not when she walked over to him and dragged his mouth down to hers.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll find out who did this,” she said quietly.

“I know you will.”

Cade stepped onto his horse and turned away, picking up a lope to head back for Koyama’.

“I don’t care if you hate him or not, seeing your father dead really affects a man,” said Shep.

Trey nodded. “Shep, can you see if you can get some people out here to do a search in the immediate area and up on top of Himeen.”

“Sure. What are we looking for?”

“Anything and everything—footprints, the bullet casing, the slug itself—I know it’s the proverbial needle in a haystack, but we have to start somewhere.”

“Sure, Trey. Do you think they’ll find anything?”

“Doubtful, don’t you think?”

Both Shep and Doc Walker nodded in agreement. Shep walked back into his Jeep to call one of the volunteer groups who helped the department in situations like this one, and Doc Walker took his place beside her.

Doc nodded in the direction Cade had ridden. “He’ll be okay. You know all four Waverly brothers hated the old man and believed he killed their mother.”

“I know,” she said. “You don’t think one of them did this, do you?”

“I don’t know, but I know I’d want to,” said Doc. “I’m pretty sure I know the answer, but for the record, did you touch the body?”

“No. It was pretty obvious he was dead.”

“The exit wound in his chest give you a clue?” teased Doc who was often irreverent in the face of death.

“Yep. I’m a trained investigator.”

“Care to speculate?” Doc asked.

“Obviously GSW to the back. I couldn’t find a gun anywhere around the body or up on top of the mesa. I suspect he was shot up there and fell off the ledge. Looks to be a .44 caliber from the size of the exit wound. No gun close at hand pretty much rules out suicide.”

“They train you special agents in charge pretty good. I can’t confirm anything officially until I get him on my table, but I’d concur with your field analysis.”

“I have photos both from down here and up there. It looks like somebody tried to get rid of any traces of what went on up there. I’ll shoot the pictures over to your office.”

“I wish the other departments I work with had someone of your training and caliber,” said Doc, shaking his head.

“She’s damn smart,” said Shep. “Trey, Jimmy’s on his way to tell the family.”

“Tell him to watch how everyone reacts. Cade’s already called his brothers, but I doubt any of them told Lorna,” said Trey.

“They don’t like her very much, do they?” asked Shep.

“They’d have to like her at all to be even in the neighborhood of very much,” answered the doctor.

Trey grinned again. Doc was an old-fashioned MD; he called ‘em like he saw ‘em and didn’t take crap from anybody about anything. Trey had liked him from the moment she’d met him.

“Shep, since Jimmy is going to Koyama’ and the boss is in Boise today, why don’t you go back out on patrol and let Dorothy know. Doc and I will keep each other company.”

“You need a hand with the body, Doc?” asked Shep.

“No. I think Trey and I can handle it.”

Shep tipped his hat, got back in his Jeep, and headed back out.

Doc nodded. “It’s probably better if Jimmy’s the one to give the notice. Shep was a deputy here before Russ got elected sheriff. You know, neither Cade nor his brothers ever believed his mother’s death was an accident,” said the doctor.

“Did you?”

“My report indicated there was nothing that supported anything other than a fatal accident,” he said neutrally.

Trey picked up on it and looked at him. “That’s not what I asked.”

Doc nodded. "I know."

Trey helped the doctor put the corpse in the body bag, sealed it, and place it on the stretcher. Together, they lifted the flat board that held Cyrus's body and carried it back to the doctor's SUV.

"I'll get him back to town and start my official exam."

"Thanks, Doc."

Doc Walker nodded and got into the driver's side of his SUV.

She was just getting ready to jump into the helicopter when Dorothy called. "I talked to Russ. He won't be back tonight, but I caught him up-to-speed. The Elks are coming out to help. Russ thought maybe you should follow up with the Waverly's."

"All right. I'll call Shep and send him back out here to wait until the volunteers show up. If I'm going out there, I can get started on my investigation. I'll have Jimmy head back into town, so we have someone readily available in case something comes up. I'll let you know when I get to Koyama'. Could you call out there and ask them where they want me to set down and let me know?"

"Sure thing, Trey. Why don't you call me on the way in.? I was going to take some food out to Hal since he's working late on one of the planes. I'll drop off extra so you'll have something to eat when you get back."

"Thanks, Dorothy. I really appreciate everything you do for me and everyone else in the department."

Trey spoke briefly to Shep and was glad she had thought to bring one of the satellite phones She outlined what needed to be done. After she'd finished, she took off in the chopper, headed for the main house at the heart of the ranch. Koyama' was huge, one of the largest ranches not only in the state, but in the Pacific Northwest. On her way, Dorothy called back and said the pasture in back of the house would be cleared for her to land.



After setting down and shutting off the helicopter's engines, Trey drew in a deep breath. It was no secret that Cyrus's sons had hated him, but she needed to know the whereabouts, at the very least, of all four of them, as well as Lorna, the trophy wife Cyrus had married shortly after Hannah's death.

She also needed to maintain her professional distance, which meant making Cade understand that under no circumstances could she or would she talk to him about the case. He also needed to know there was a strong possibility that Sheriff Langley would issue an order for the two of them to remain apart for the duration of the case, or at least until Cade was cleared.

Trey took another deep breath. That request might take some doing. Cade was pissed that she'd left this morning without waking him, but last night they'd been exhausted. Even so, he'd made love to her repeatedly with an almost feral passion that she'd responded to wildly. Cade seemed to be able to call out the beast in her. Or if not a beast, an alley cat in heat at the very least.

She tried to squash those thoughts and remind herself that she was a professional. She'd been taught by the best. It was going to take all her skill and training to do this, but she was determined to do so and to do it well.

Trey had almost convinced herself she could pull it off when she looked up and saw those green eyes. Those damn green eyes and the tall, brawny cowboy they belonged to. A brief, sensory memory from last night flashed through her—*running her hands down those muscles, feeling his body slip between her thighs as he drove his cock up into her pulsing wet heat. No man made her feel that way. It was only with Cade that she reveled in passion beneath a man's weight wanting nothing more than to remain where she was and feel him thrust into her again and again.*

Thankfully, his voice shook her from her reverie. "Hello, Trey. It's been a long time."

Even though it hadn't been, she walked over and drew him close. "Far too long." Sometimes, even tough, ex-Delta Force cowboys needed a hug.

"I missed you."

His voice sounded as if it had been soaked in hundred-year-old whiskey. It was deep and mellow and flowed over her body like a summer storm. Damn the man. She always responded to even the simplest greeting like it was some kind of major declaration of love. Thank God she had on her uniform. There would be no way for him or anyone else to tell that her nipples had beaded up and desire swirled like a maelstrom in her nether region.

## CHAPTER 3

So much for wondering if Trey would pull back from him in light of her job. He had no doubt she would follow the evidence. What bothered him was his concern that he would have to ensure that the evidence led away from his brothers. It wasn't that the idea that one of them had finally killed the old man that bothered him; it was lying to Trey.

He was so sick of the secrets he felt he had to keep from her: his one interlude with Lorna, the fact that some evidence could point directly at he and his brothers, and then the huge fact that he was a mountain lion shifter. At some point, he needed to come clean. About all of it. He didn't want anything but truth between them.

Cade tried to tell himself not to inhale her scent, but it was too late; he would recognize her sweet perfume anywhere, especially if she was aroused, and she was. She may be here for her job, but the woman wrapped around him was here because she loved him.

"Thanks for coming," he whispered.

"Always. I am sorry about Cyrus," she said.

"I won't lie to you, Trey. I'm not. His being dead makes things much easier for my brothers and I, and none of us had any use for him. You knew him well enough to know his death isn't much of a loss for anyone, his trophy wife included. Frankly, the world is a better place without him in it."

“Sometimes I forget what a cold-hearted sonofabitch you can be.”

Cade shrugged. “It’s true and you know it. Cyrus was a bastard of the first order, and I can’t think of one person who will miss him, especially not me. And for what it’s worth, I was at the ranch all morning until Dandy came in without him. You can talk to most any of the ranch hands.”

“I intend to. I’ll need to talk to your brothers and Lorna as well.” Her tone was neutral.

“I’ll let them know and have them call you,” he said, turning away.

“No, Cade. Now. Are they in the house?”

“Lorna and Cash are. Cole is down in the barn. If you want to walk on up to the house, I’ll go down and get Cole, unless you’re worried we’ll conspire to get our stories straight.”

“Do I need to be worried about that?”

“Jesus, Trey. You know me better than that.”

She nodded. “Why do you say his death makes things easier for you and your brothers? I mean I know you all hated him and wished he and Lorna would leave, but...”

“Remember the terms of my mother’s will? She left this center parcel—the one with farmhouse and buildings—to Cyrus, but not entirely. He was to be allowed to live here for as long as he wanted and there wasn’t anything any of us could do about it without risking losing our own inheritance.”

“Do you think she knew how you felt about him?”

“I’m sure of it. By the time she wrote up her will, we’d discovered that he’d abused her. The only thing that kept him safe was her. Otherwise, we would have disposed of him a long time ago.”

“Cade, you shouldn’t say things like that to me or to anyone with law enforcement. You do know that Russ may well pull me from the case?”

“Good.”

“Good? Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re the only qualified one in that department. The rest of them couldn’t find their ass with both hands and a map.”

“Don’t you want to know who killed him? He was your father, after all.”

“Honestly, sweetheart, I don’t give a shit other than I’d like to buy whoever did it a drink.”

She shook her head. “Again, not something you want to tell the person investigating your father’s murder.”

“Duly noted, but it’s the truth and it’s also not a secret.”

“Okay. By the way, don’t think I didn’t notice you accounted for Lorna, Cash and Cole. Where’s Clay?”

“Should we be getting our lawyer involved?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Cade. That’s a double-edged sword. On one hand, if you haven’t done anything you think warrants the attention of a lawyer, probably not. But, on the other, having a lawyer to watch over your family’s interests wouldn’t be the worst thing.” she responded honestly.

“Here to get everyone’s alibies? Are we going to have an Agatha Christie reveal at the end of your investigation?” said Cole as he walked up from the lower barn.

Cole leaned down and kissed Trey’s cheek, and Cade had to suppress a growl. He knew Cole was baiting him, but it didn’t matter. His brother knew Trey was his bonded spirit and knew better than to make a genuine pass at her.

“It’s good to see you, Trey, but in the interest of saving you time, the butler did it,” Cole said.

“Only you don’t have a butler, which leaves me back at trying to figure out who killed Cyrus. Where were you earlier today?” she asked.

“I get to be a suspect?” he asked brightly. “Oh, how fun! I haven’t been a suspect since someone broke the stained-glass window over the altar at the church in town, but big brother

there took the rap for that.” He pointed at Clay with a grin. “But to answer your questions, I’ve been down in the lower barn all day. We got two new broodmares in this morning. Several of the barn rats were down with me. Feel free to walk down there or I can have them come up.”

“Cade didn’t answer me, so let me try you. Where’s Clay?” she asked.

*God, the girl was like a dog with a bone.*

“I have no idea. Last time I checked, he was all grown up. I don’t have any need to keep up with his whereabouts and he certainly doesn’t feel any need to check in and out with me,” said Cole. “I’m going up to the house for a beer. Care to join me?”

“I’m on duty.”

“Fine. Make it a coffee or a soda or a bottle of water or anything else in the fridge. Lighten up, Trey. Cyrus was a sonofabitch, but if somebody did him in, it wasn’t one of us.”

Trey looked between he and his brother.

“I need to speak to Cash and Lorna, so if they’re up at the house, I think I’ll take you up on that offer. Plus, I could go for a Diet Coke.”

She fell in beside Cole, who looked over his shoulder at Cade. “You coming?”

Cade said nothing but started up to the house behind them. They climbed the stairs to the front porch and Cole opened the door, ushering Trey inside.

“Hide the drugs and whatever we killed Cyrus with,” he yelled. “The cops are here.”

Trey looked at Cole and then at him. “Does your brother have any idea how unfunny he is?” she asked.

“None, whatsoever,” Cade answered.

Lorna came into the foyer with crocodile tears making perfect trails down her perfect face.

“That’s not amusing, Cole. My husband is dead and you’re making jokes. I’m going upstairs with a headache,” she announced dramatically.

“Maybe if you’d had fewer of those, the old man wouldn’t have been tomcatting around,” said Cash as he joined them.

Lorna made a melodramatic wail and fled up the stairs.

“I take it there’s no love lost between you three and Lorna?” asked Trey.

“Let’s see. Lorna arranges to be caught in a compromising position with Cyrus, who feels honor bound to marry her. Then Lorna is pretty much awful every single day while living here. Nope, I’d say no love lost pretty much covers it,” said Cole.

Trey had heard the rumors and it seemed Cole had just confirmed them.

She turned back to Cade. “Did it bother you that your father married Lorna so shortly after your mother died?”

“I found out about that months after it happened. I was deployed and out of communication. Did it surprise me? Not really. I think Lorna had figured out none of us were going to be available, so she settled for Cyrus.”

“Then she found out that being fucked by an old man wasn’t all it was cracked up to be,” added Cole.

She turned back to Cash. “Neither of your brothers seems to know, so let me ask you. Where’s Clay and do you have any idea where he was earlier today?”

“None, whatsoever,” answered Cash. “And before you ask, I was in a meeting with one of the big rodeo event people in Boise. I just got home.” He grabbed a piece of paper, scribbled something on it and gave it to her. “You can talk to them.”

“How’d the meeting go?” asked Cade.

“Really good. I think we have a good shot at providing rough stock for their four premium events next year. And with Cyrus out of the picture, we should be able to put together a deal,” said Cash.

“Oooh, another red herring,” quipped Cole. “This is shaping up to be ever so much fun.”

“About that lawyer?” She looked at Cade. “I’d save the money and buy a muzzle for your brother.” She shook her head, but continued, “So, Cyrus was an impediment to your business?”

“Impediment? Well, la-de-da. Will you listen to the fancy FBI agent? If you’re asking if Cyrus being dead is going to make doing business easier, the answer is yes. And FYI, if you want anything coherent out of Lorna, you’d best go talk with her right away. She and old man kept the best booze up in their rooms. I figure by now, she’s knocked back one, if not two,” said Cash.

“Are you giving me permission to go upstairs and question your stepmother?”

They all laughed bitterly.

“Yes, Trey,” said Cade. “Help yourself.”

“Yes, Trey, go upstairs and talk to the old man’s trophy wife. Is it just me or do neither of you find it interesting that the Sheriff’s Department is showing far more interest in Cyrus’s death than it did in our mother’s?”

Cade growled at him but stopped when Trey placed her hand on his chest.

“Your mother’s death was ruled an accident. Your father’s will be officially declared a murder. And, as you well know, neither Sheriff Langley nor I were with the department when your mother died,” said Trey as she turned to go up the stairs.

“Top of the stairs to the right. Lorna’s room is at the end of the hall,” called Cade.

“Thank you, and again, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Why? None of us are,” said Cash.

“If you could find Clay, I do need to talk to him,” she said.





It was curious. Cade's brothers seemed far more concerned with their mother's death all those years ago than they were with their father's. Neither Cole nor Cash had asked for any details surrounding it.

She strode down the hall and found the door to the room at the end of the hall slightly ajar. Before she could knock, she heard Lorna on the phone with someone.

"They've found Cyrus. He was murdered... How should I know? I just know that girl who went off to the FBI and came back is out here asking questions... I don't know what she knows or what any of them know for that matter..."

Trey's cell buzzed quietly, but it was enough to attract Lorna's attention, so Trey knocked.

"I'm sorry, Lorna. I just need to ask where you were earlier today."

Lorna put down her phone. "I don't think I'm inclined to answer without my attorney being present."

"Do you have something to hide?"

"I've invoked my right to counsel..."

"That only applies after you've been arrested," said Trey evenly.

"Well, then you're trespassing. Get out of my house."

"I'm not sure who the legal owner is, but your stepsons said I could come up and talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you. Get out," Lorna said, giving Trey a light shove.

Trey, quickly deflected and turned her around, pinning her arms behind her.

"Knock it off, Lorna. Right now, I can arrest you for assault on an officer, but I don't want to do that. All I need for

my report is to know where you were earlier today and if you know where Clay was.”

“I don’t know about Clay, but I was in town getting a mani-pedi and there were plenty of witnesses.”

“Thank you. That’s all I need. When we know more concerning Cyrus’s death, we’ll be in touch. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Trey left her room, stopping long enough to look at the phone Lorna had tossed on the bed and making note of the number. She trotted downstairs. Cade and Cash had retreated, leaving only Cole in the foyer.

“Your family is really fucked up,” she said as she moved toward the front door.

Surprisingly, he laughed. “You have no idea.”

Trey walked to the barn area and confirmed both Cole and Cade’s alibies. She breathed a sigh of relief when the farmhands’ stories matched, and when Cash’s checked out after she called the rodeo event group that he’d met with earlier in the day.

When she came from the side of the house to get to the pasture where she’d left her chopper, she was a bit surprised to find Clay Waverly leaning up against the tail section. Unlike his brothers, Clay was a bit leaner, although still more muscular than most men. He wore his hair long and didn’t seem to sport the perpetual five o’clock shadow like his brothers.

“I hear you were looking for me,” he said.

Trey nodded. “I am. Want to tell me where you were earlier today?”

“Who wants to know the Chief Investigator for the Sheriff’s Department or my old friend, Trey Mitchell?”

She observed his body language. To the casual observer, he was relaxed and bored, but she knew Clay better than that. He was a bit like a large cat, lying in wait for its prey. His body was poised like a taught spring, ready to strike.

“Both,” she said closing the distance between them. “Have you been in contact with anyone in your family today?”

“Oh, Clay... Clay,” wailed Lorna as she came running out the back door, then flung herself into his body. Trey noticed that it wasn't into his arms, but into him. Clay's arms only came up to steady her, but everything about him said this was completely unexpected behavior and that he wanted to push her away.

“What the hell, Lorna?” he snapped.

“Clay... Cyrus is dead! He's been murdered. Somebody shot him in the back!” Lorna wailed.

Clay looked around her. “What's she talking about, Trey?”

“It's the reason I asked if you'd talked to anyone in your family. I'm sorry to inform you that your father was found dead earlier today. The apparent cause is a gunshot wound, but it won't be official until we get the death certificate from the medical examiner. Jimmy came by earlier to notify your family and express the Department's condolences. As per protocol, I came out to determine where everyone...”

Clay laughed and tried to set Lorna away from him, but she clung to him like a leach.

“Everyone, meaning any of us who hated the bastard? That would certainly include me and pretty much everyone who ever knew him. I was out checking on one of my feral herds as well as a small band of broodmares I set up in one of the far pastures with one of my older studs. I've got no alibi whatsoever and God knows I have a motive, but then so do most people who've crossed paths with him. You're sure it's him and sure he's dead?”

“Yes, to both. His face was easily recognizable, and he was most definitely dead. No one in your family seemed to know where you were or where you've been.”

He nodded. “You see Cade?”

“Yes,” she said, inhaling deeply. “As I did with the rest of your family, I asked about his whereabouts.”

Clay shook his head. “That couldn’t have been easy, but Cade would never do anything to jeopardize his relationship with you. The two of you belong together and my eldest brother knows how close he came to not having you in his life.”

“Clay, this is a not a conversation we should be having right now.”

“Why not? It’s the truth. When Lorna here,”—he physically peeled her off of his torso and held her at arm’s length—“tells him what I said, and she will, he’ll be even more upset than you are. The difference is while you go all cold and civil, Cade’s just as likely to break my face.”

Trey couldn’t help but smile. With the exception of Cade, the remaining three Waverly brothers had oodles of charm and were, for the most part, straight shooters. Cade might be a straight shooter, sometimes too straight, but he was also a regular hard ass to deal with.

“And it’s such a pretty face,” Trey teased. Once upon a time, she and Clay had been close friends.

“I know,” he quipped with an easy grin. “Did you get what you need from us?”

“For the moment. As I told them, Doc Walker has the body and will make an official determination about his death. We’ll keep you apprised. Please step away from the chopper so I can get back to town.”

“Sure thing, Trey. Come on, Lorna. I’m sure Trey doesn’t need the paperwork involved in you getting killed by her helicopter and we don’t need the resulting mess.”

Trey shook her head as she got into the helicopter and started her pre-flight checkup. Before she could finish, Cade appeared.

“I’m sorry if we weren’t much help earlier. You’ve always known there was no love lost with any of us where Cyrus was concerned. Any ideas about what happened? I know he was shot...”

“I really can’t comment on an ongoing investigation,” she said politely, but without her usual warmth.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to get any information, just wondering.”

“I know. I feel kind of bad that I can’t really say anything. I will say that you, Cash, and Cole all seem to have solid alibies. I need to check on Lorna’s, but off the record, Clay’s isn’t any good and he was pretty blunt about his feelings toward Cyrus.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. Ever since he got out of the service, Clay tends to spend a lot of time alone.”

“Was Cyrus proud that three of the four of you served?” she asked.

“Not at all. He thought it was a waste of time and took us away from doing what he wanted done. And all four of us served.”

“I didn’t think Cole did.”

“I’m pretty sure he did. It was one of those don’t ask, don’t tell thing brothers do. I’m pretty sure he was with US intelligence.”

“You mean like the CIA?”

Cade laughed. “I don’t know more than any of the rest of us know; we didn’t have high enough security clearance.”

“Cash was a SEAL, right? I know Clay was in the Marines.”

“He was a Marine Raider.”

“Can we talk off the record?” she asked.

“Off the record, on the record, I’m not sure it makes a difference to me.”

“You made a comment about your mother’s death earlier.”

He nodded. “You were right. Neither you nor Sheriff Langley were with the department at the time.”

“But do you think it was an accident?”

“No, I don’t. I never did and neither does anyone who knew my mother. There wasn’t a horse born that my mother couldn’t ride. And the horse that was supposed to have killed her was her trick horse. That gelding was the best trained, most even-tempered, bravest horse I’ve ever known. No way he got spooked and dragged my mom. She used to get frustrated with him because if he felt my mom was in danger of falling or something, he’d stop and refuse to go.”

“So, his dragging her doesn’t make sense.” He nodded, and she took his hand in hers. “I’m sorry, Cade. That probably felt like I was setting you up. I wasn’t. We don’t need to talk about this. In fact, we probably shouldn’t.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Trey.”

“This is so far off the record, I can’t even tell you... but I don’t think you or your brothers had anything to do with Cyrus’s death. Lorna, I’m not so sure about.”

“I don’t know that she cared enough to take out the old man. They didn’t like each other and today is the first time, as far as I know, that she’s been in Cyrus’s room in years. By the time we moved back, her bedroom was at the other end of the hall. But keep your guard up with Lorna; she’s not as helpless as she likes to make out.”

“Women like Lorna rarely are. Is there something going on between she and Clay? She was all over him this afternoon.”

Cade snorted. “Of the four of us, Clay probably likes her the least. He loathes her. I can almost guarantee that there will be a discussion about how quickly we can boot Lorna off the ranch without looking like heartless bastards. I, for one, will vote for the sooner the better, despite appearances.”

Trey kissed him lightly and he backed out from beneath the rotor blades. With Cyrus’s death looming over them, the timing was all fucked up, but he didn’t care. He needed to make things right with Trey. He didn’t want any more secrets between them.

## CHAPTER 4

*B*ack at the airfield in her Jeep, Trey called Doc Walker to see if he would be available for her to drop by. Once he confirmed, she drove straight to his office. It was after hours, but everybody in town knew that if the office was closed but Doc's SUV was in the driveway, just go around to the back. Before Doc's wife passed away, she'd always invite you in for something to drink and whatever tasty snack she'd been working on all day.

She knocked on the back door and called into the house.

"Down here, Trey," he hollered up from what passed as the county's morgue.

When the two funeral homes in town had combined and had extra equipment left over, Doc had a small autopsy and cold storage installed in the basement of his house, which also served as his office.

"Quiet afternoon, so I had a chance to get started on Cyrus," he said as moved the remains into one of the cold storage drawers.

"Other than he was shot, care to share your preliminary findings?" she asked.

"Only if you declare yourself off duty and come up to the back porch for a beer."

"Are we talking store bought or your home brew?"

"Hey, I don't serve store bought to my friends, especially those I brought into this world."

She grinned at him. Trey had literally known Doc all her life. After they'd made their way upstairs, she sat down in one of the rocking chairs and sighed.

“So, what do you know?”

“Not much to tell other than what you observed. Officially, Cyrus died from a gunshot wound from a forty-four-caliber gun. Preliminary screenings don't show drugs or alcohol in his system. There were a number of broken bones that happened either simultaneously or immediately after death. Although interestingly, I think it may have been an antique pistol.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The level of damage done to the body internally. There wasn't as much expansion as I would have expected from a modern forty-four.”

“You don't think he was shot on the canyon floor, do you?”

Doc shook his head. “I don't see how there could have been that much trauma just from him collapsing after he was shot.”

“So, you think he was shot on top of the mesa?”

“I only saw the photographs you took. You were up on the mesa; what did you see?”

“Nothing conclusive,” she hedged.

Doc gave her a knowing smile. “What's your gut tell you?”

“Doctor patient confidentiality?” He nodded. “Something happened up on that mesa. Something that whoever was up there with Cyrus doesn't want us to know about.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It looks as if someone tried to brush away any evidence of what happened. When I observed the body, there appeared to be major trauma, like he had to have fallen over the edge of Himeen.”

“I would agree with that,” said Doc.



“The argument could be made that the tracks of whatever happened or whoever was up there got partially erased by the elements, except we haven’t had any wind or storms that would do that.”

“As we’re speculating, any suspects?”

“Cade, Cash and Cole all have solid alibis. Lorna said she was in town at the nail salon which is pretty easy to check.”

“What about Clay?” asked Doc.

“He freely admits he was by himself checking on a mustang herd and one of his semi-feral bands of Appaloosas, so no one to verify his whereabouts. But I can’t believe Clay would kill his father.”

“Why? He certainly had motive and likely had opportunity from what you say. Clay has always been good with firearms, and Cyrus was a mean s-o-b. Sounds to me like Clay hit the trifecta.”

“I know that. Everything points to him, but I just don’t believe it.”

“Neither do I. If Cyrus had been beat to death, maybe. But shot in the back? I don’t believe Clay is capable of that.”

She shook her head. “Me either. Funny that I think he could commit premeditated murder, but it would have been head-on. I can’t see any of Cyrus’s sons shooting him in the back.”

“I would agree with your assessment of both the murder itself and the most likely suspects. And for as much as I don’t like Lorna, I don’t think she’s capable either.”

“I don’t know. I could see her lying in wait to shoot him in the back, but my assessment of her character is probably colored by Cade’s dislike of her.”

“I didn’t rule her out because I didn’t think she’d shoot someone in the back. I totally think she could do that. What I don’t believe is that she could handle a forty-four caliber. That’s a gun that’s got a kick. If it had been a twenty-two, she’d be top of my list.”

“What am I going to do, Doc?”

“Search for the truth, Trey. That’s all you can do.”

“Speaking of which, what do you remember about Hannah Waverly’s death?”

“That’s an old case,” said Doc.

“It’s come up a couple of times. Cade is convinced Cyrus killed her.”

“None of the boys ever believed it was an accident,” said Doc. “Official cause of death was blunt force trauma caused by an accidental fall from and being dragged by a horse.”

She grinned at him. “What’s your gut tell you?”

He shook his head. “I think the boys are right. I don’t believe it happened the way it appeared. Hannah was too good a horsewoman and that horse was far too well trained. I shared my thoughts that the death was suspicious with the sheriff at that time, but as I had nothing to back it up, my official report was pretty sparse.”

“And? Is there an unofficial report?”

Doc chuckled. “Trey, I don’t know any medical examiner who doesn’t have a file with notes about cases he couldn’t make official, but the sheriff told me I was only the county medical examiner, not a trained investigator.”

“So, you think both parents were killed.”

“I do, but I don’t necessarily think they were killed by the same person or for the same reason.”

Trey nodded. “Neither do I but let me ask you another question in this conversation that we never had. What do you think of Lorna Waverly?”

“I think she’s a manipulative little schemer whose daddy got her hired on at Koyama’ after she burned one too many bridges back in Louisiana. She set her sights on Cade and got rejected. She got the old man into her bed and managed to get found so he’d marry her. I think she was a little afraid of

Cyrus, and frankly, I don't blame her. He could be a real sonofabitch."

Trey stopped rocking and sat forward. "Do you think he killed Hannah?"

"Whoa. We are way out in the sticks now," said Doc.

"It goes no further than me," Trey assured him.

Doc's next words weren't a surprise, but hit home, nonetheless. "I think the boys"—Trey suppressed a laugh. It was hard to think of the tall, brawny, alpha males of Koyama' as boys—"think he did."

"What about you?" she pressed. Suddenly, it was vital to her that she know what he thought.

"I don't know. I think Cyrus was unhappy, but in his own way, he loved her."

"Why do you think Cade and his brothers think he did it?" she asked, genuinely curious about Doc's rationale.

"The timing was convenient. Lorna comes aboard, Hannah dies, then Cyrus marries Lorna. I think they think Cyrus killed Hannah so he could get Lorna, but I don't think that's the case. Hannah being alive meant no one could pressure Cyrus to marry Lorna. He could have a fling with her and then choose to use his marriage as a shield."

"Thanks, Doc. As I said, we never had this conversation."

Trey stood and said a quick goodbye on her way to her Jeep before calling in to let Dorothy know she was heading home. By the time she turned off the main highway onto the gravel road that led to her cabin, the sun was rapidly disappearing over the horizon. She loved sunsets in this part of the world. They were a riotous cascade of colors: purples, violets, oranges, and pinks that seemed to all work together in a wondrous harmony.

In about two hours, it would be dark. Dark in this part of the Idaho panhandle was a relative term. With no ambient or neon lighting, a full moon and a sky full of stars often made for enough illumination to ride, something Trey loved to do.

As she parked, her palomino mustang, Loki, loped up to the barn, hollering in horse language about the fact that dinner was being served late. Behind him followed her sabino mustang and two donkeys. Each member of her herd had been adopted from land management roundups and now acted like she'd raised them from babies. She went into the barn first to pitch their alfalfa and serve up their grain. The welcome sound of happy munching calmed her before heading into the house.

Trey took a shower, then grabbed her chenille and paisley robe, the same one she'd had on all those years ago when she and Cade had first reveled in each other's arms. That morning, she'd been unable to find the sash that belted it closed. Now, she had it back after learning that Cade had taken it with him as a kind of talisman.

Sitting down at her kitchen table, she began making sense out of her notes and filling out her reports. Trey was glad she'd gone to see Doc. Knowing he thought she was on the right track was reassuring. The fact that he agreed with her that none of Cyrus's sons had been responsible was even better. She would call in the morning to verify Lorna's alibi before signing off on the report. She turned out the light and headed into bed, not bothering with a nightgown. She figured Cade would be along when he could.



Cade stood on the side porch. To most, it would look as though he was staring into space, but he wasn't. After a few seconds, his brothers wandered onto the porch beside him.

“What's on your mind, big brother?”

“I need to know if any of you did it. I'm not passing judgment and you don't have to tell anyone else, but if I'm going to help protect you, I need to know. When Dandy came in this morning, I tracked him back to Himeen Mesa. I found prints from Dandy and from an unshod horse,” said Cade.

“I didn't do it,” Clay replied without hesitation.

Cole laid his hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "We know that Clay. You'll notice none of us asked you."

Cash nodded. "Of the four of us, you're the least likely to have shot the old bastard. I'd say Cole is next and it's a toss-up between Cade and I as to who is more likely to have done him in."

Cade shook his head. "No contest. I'd win. I've hated him longer and I'd have pulled rank."

Cole chuckled. "We're pretty pathetic, standing here debating who hated him the most. And no way any of us would have shot him in the back. My guess is that Trey will know that."

"I'm sorry you're stuck in the middle with Trey," said Clay.

"It's okay. But if none of us did it, then who did?" asked Cade.

"More to the point, did anyone tell Lorna he'd been shot or more specifically shot in the back?" Silence was his only answer. "Then how did she know? When she launched herself at me by Trey's chopper, she specifically mentioned he'd been shot in the back."

"Do you think Trey noticed?" asked Cole.

"She didn't mention it, but I think she's walking a tightrope between her job and her relationship with me."

"I just want to state for the record that when this is over, if not before, you need to claim Trey and take her to mate. And when you do, I get to be best man," stated Cash.

"How do you figure that?" asked Clay. "I'm the one who always kept him up to date on her career."

Cole drawled, "Ah, yes, but I'm the one with the contacts that let him connect with her again."

"And I think the three of you jackasses need to put that kind of talk on hold until this gets sorted out," growled Cade.

“Leave it to Cyrus to fuck things up one final time with his death.”

Cade shook his head. “I’m going back up there tomorrow to make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“What if...”

“The crime scene is down below and if anyone sees me, I’ll just say I wanted to see for myself. Given how they fucked up mom’s death, I don’t think anyone will challenge me. It’s been a long day, so I’m craving my mate’s very warm bed.”

“Doesn’t anyone think we ought to say something about the old man?” Cole asked. “Cade, you’re the oldest. We all have a beer in our hands... Just something to send him on his way?”

“Sure,” said Cade lifting his beer toward the setting sun. “Here’s to you, Cyrus. May you roast in hell.”

All four brothers raised their long necks, clinked them together, took a sip, and then walked in different directions. Considering the past they’d shared with their sire, it was the best they could do.



On the drive back to the cabin, Cade came to the conclusion that this had to end. He loved Trey, he always had, but secrets had kept them apart, and if he wasn’t careful, all those same secrets would tear them away once more. The unspoken words coiled in his gut like a snake ready to strike. Trey trusted him. She loved him, yet he was keeping secrets. If Cyrus had been a righteous bastard, he had passed that trait down to his son.

The cabin was dark when he got there. He let himself in quietly and was surprised to see Trey standing naked in the doorway to the bedroom, her body illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the window. Without a word, she closed the distance between them, then stood on her tiptoes and lifted her arms around his neck, causing her stiffened nipples to rub against his chest.

She fused her mouth gently to his and let her tongue run along his lower lip. His lips parted and her tongue slid along his, enticing him to kiss her back. Trey worked her way down his body, undressing him as she went. She knelt before him, unbuckled his belt before opening his fly, then pushed his jeans down over the round globes of his ass. He took a seat in the kitchen chair while she wrestled with his boots, the last of his jeans, and his socks as well. She sat back on her knees, licking her lips like a cat waiting for its cream. His cock was fully erect, throbbing with anticipation and need.

“Open,” he commanded in a low, gravelly voice.

Trey’s skin was flush, and the faintest blush crept up her neck. She knew what had started out as a blow job, an offering of comfort, had changed to become his fucking her mouth as he pleased. She did as she’d been told and he thrust his dick past her wet lips, nudging the soft place at the back of her throat. Her tongue swirled around him as she sucked like a kid with a lollipop. He groaned and fisted her hair in his hands. Cade held her head captive as he began shoving his cock in and out.

He looked down at her as heat and arousal flashed through his system. The way his cock disappeared into her mouth was mesmerizing and he watched as she swallowed him down, sucking deeply and trying to keep him inside. He dragged her head back before forcing it down the entire length of his cock. Twice more and he was spilling himself down her throat and into her belly.

Trey rocked back on her heels and stood, taking his hand to lead him to their bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked.

“To bed. We’ve both had a long day, but if you need to talk...”

“Oh, we’re going to have a talk, but first you’re going to put yourself over my knee.”

“Cade...”

“Trey, I warned you about slipping out of our bed.”

“I had to get in early.”

“Then you needed to set the alarm earlier, or at least wake me up and tell me. I don’t like waking up without you next to me. You’re going to submit to my discipline because you know I’m right and because getting spanked gets you wildly aroused.” He waited a moment before continuing, “Now, Trey. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you and I won’t tell you again. Right now, I’m willing to take everything that’s happened today into consideration and give you ten, but for every moment you delay, more will be added.”

Trey sighed but yielded, settling herself across his lap, wiggling to find a secure, comfortable spot. He steadied her, closing his leg against the back of hers before bringing his hand down in a short, sharp arc, the sound of it echoing through the room.

She inhaled sharply. Apparently, she’d forgotten the painful part and had focused on how sexy and vulnerable his latest spankings had made her feel. His hand descended again, this time on the other globe. A third smack landed at the center of her backside, allowing his fingers to slip between her cheeks, and he chuckled when he found the evidence of her arousal.

His cock throbbed as his hand continued to strike her heated flesh. He felt, more than heard, her sigh as she seemed to find that deep peace that descended over her like a warm, cashmere blanket. When she sagged against his leg, Cade couldn’t decide which was sexier, the woman who could suck his cock like a pro, or the vulnerable female who lay limp over his lap, her arousal spreading like wildfire through her system. He mentally counted to ten and then let his hand rest on her bottom, holding the heat in before sliding it between her legs. He shoved two fingers into her sheath and stroked her in an altogether different way until she was just on the cusp of coming.

“Cade,” she said, clutching his calf before her body stiffened with anticipation as he continued to finger her.



Trey's breath sped up and the noises she made morphed from moans to whimpers as her climax bore down on her relentlessly. He could feel the inner walls of her pussy quivering as he pleased her, plunging into her again and again.

"Cade," she cried again as she tipped over the edge in ecstasy and her pussy clamped down hard around his fingers as she writhed on his lap.

"Do you have any idea how much I want to fuck you?" he asked, holding her in place.

She gave a shaky laugh. "About half as much as I want to be fucked."

"Good, then this will be an excellent object lesson."

He helped her up and hoisted her over his shoulder, carrying her into their bedroom and slipping her back under the sheets before sliding in behind her. He spooned her back to his front and he could feel that she was tense, waiting.

"Go to sleep, Trey. That's all you're getting tonight."

"Cade!"

"Go to sleep or take another ten over my knee before you get the privilege of rest."

"Wait..."

"Yes, you will do just that until morning. Keep fussing at me and I'll make that next set twenty."

"There are times, Cade Waverly, where I don't like you very much. For the record, this is one of those times."

He chuckled as he nuzzled the nape of her neck and felt his canines elongate. Sometimes spanking Trey had an even more profound effect on his need to claim her than when he made love to her. But then again, except for last night when he'd taken her ass, he'd yet to mount her from behind.

Maybe he should do that again in the morning. No, his conscience screamed to tell her the truth—all of it—and make her his mate.

## CHAPTER 5

Eade was up with the sun. He'd relented during the night and gathered Trey close, settling himself between her legs and pressing himself into her body in one long, hard move. He'd stroked her two times, allowing her climax to wake her.

As the sun filtered into the room, he whispered kisses across her face, smiling as she opened her eyes.

"See? This is me telling you I need to get back to Koyama' early this morning," he said as he rolled to a sitting position and stood, stretching his muscular arms into the air and displaying his delectable torso.

Trey gave him a one finger salute. "And this is me telling you what I think of you, and what I think of getting spanked then being made to wait for several hours to get laid."

He grinned, rubbed her backside, then hopped up for a shower before getting dressed. Soon enough, he parked at Koyama', saddled his horse, and headed for Himeen Mesa. He wanted to double check that nothing had been left behind that might lead back to his brothers. Even though he had a perfectly good explanation as to why he might be there, he felt discretion was the better part of valor. As he rode up the trail, he spotted signs of a large cat, too large not to be a shifter.

With his right hand, he pulled his rifle from his saddle scabbard and rested the barrel on his left forearm. As he rounded the top of the mesa, he heard the scream of a wildcat above and to the right but swung his rifle around and managed

to get one shot off to deflect the large cat's attack. Cade pitched the cat to the ground; it rolled before rebounding with a growl and a swing of its massive paw at him and his horse.

Swinging down, he tore off his shirt in one quick motion. The minute his two feet hit the ground, the big cat struck again, or at least tried to, but Cade's instincts and abilities to shift into fight mode had been honed by his years in Delta Force. He called his own big cat forward, shucked off any last clothing, and met the other mountain lion mid leap. The two slashed at each other and rolled together toward the edge.

Gaining their feet, they circled, growling and swiping at one another with lethal claws. Their screams of rage and challenge echoed down the canyon. The challenger was unknown to him; Himeen Mesa was part of his claw's territory and the interloper had no right to be here. He charged and knocked the other cat to the ground, pouncing on top of him and grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. His opponent scrambled backward, reaching up with his hind paw to claw at Cade's upper leg. Snarling, Cade released him, and the other cat managed to break free completely before galloping past Cade's horse and down the trail.

Cade shifted back, caught up to his mount, who seemed fairly bored by the whole incident, and redressed, before cleaning and bandaging several scratches on his torso, thigh, and upper arm. He was just finishing putting his supplies away when he heard a truck and trailer. He looked over the edge of the mesa and saw Trey pulling into the area that was used for parking.

He quickly looked around, pleased to find that any evidence of large cats or his scuffle with whoever the other shifter had been was mostly disguised. Cade needed to figure out what had happened to Cyrus, who the cat was, and help Trey come to the right conclusions, but he needed to keep her safe first.

An unknown cougar shifter on the loose was no good for anyone. He would need to alert the other members of their claw. With Cyrus gone, it could be a rival claw trying to lay claim to Koyama'. Their women would need to be under lock

and key; if the intruder wasn't after territory, he was most likely after breeding females.

He knew that cat could have been the one who ambushed Cyrus, but he still had no clue what the old bastard had been doing out at the mesa in the first place. However, the most pressing questions still remained: who was he and what did he want? He hadn't recognized the scent of the shifter, but he knew it was male.

Keeping Trey safe, without her knowing what was going on, would be difficult. She was observant, but that wouldn't protect her or even improve her odds in a fight with a shifter in its altered state. He put his foot in the stirrup and groaned as he stepped up. The shifter had caught him across his ribs. With his improved healing, the wounds would mostly be mended by nightfall, but that didn't make them any less painful in the interim.

He reined his horse away from the edge and headed down the trail.



That morning, Trey had waited to get up until after Cade had left. Tossing on an old, white linen nightgown, she ran out to feed the livestock. She came back in, made a cup of coffee, and as she took a long draw off her mug, she thought once again that whoever it was who'd invented pod-style coffeemakers ought to be sainted. Today was her day off, but the nail salon opened at ten. Trey buzzed around the house doing her weekly cleaning. She knew that by the time she was finished, Loki would have been able to digest his breakfast.

She called into the office. "Hey Jimmy," she said, recognizing the voice of the youngest deputy when he answered.

"Hey, Trey. I can't believe Old Man Waverly is dead. You and Cade going to move over to Koyama'?"

"We haven't discussed it. I'm supposed to have the day off, but I want to verify Lorna's alibi."

“You think she did it?”

“Not really. Her alibi should be really easy to check. I’m planning to take a ride in the area on horseback.”

“Why?” he asked.

Sometimes Jimmy reminded her of a Labrador puppy with muddy feet: way too eager and kind of a pain in the ass, but sweet and useful if given a task within his skill range.

“Because I think better riding a horse and it’s a different perspective from on foot or in the chopper. If Russ asks, tell him I’ll have my preliminary report to him this afternoon. So much for scheduling an afternoon off to catch up on some work around the cabin. If anything, I’m only going to take a couple of hours as vacation leave as I’ll be working most of the day.”

“Ok, I’ll let him know.”

Trey dressed, then moved her truck and trailer from the garage shed. Loki nickered at her when she entered the barn. Grabbing her tack and the palomino, she loaded both onto her trailer. The drive to Himeen Mesa wasn’t long and soon enough she was parking nearby. She quickly saddled her horse, swung up onto his back and headed for the trail to take her up to the top.

As she picked her way along the trail, she noted fresh tracks. She hadn’t seen another rig, and the closest ranch was Koyama’. She made it to the top just as Cade was starting down.

“Good morning, Trey.”

“Morning Cade. Mind telling me what you’re doing up here?”

“Asking as a lover or a deputy?”

“Does it matter?” she asked.

“Probably not. As you pointed out yesterday, neither you nor the sheriff were part of the department when my mother died. This area wasn’t roped off as a crime scene, but the way his body was kind of bent and broken, I figured it had to have

happened up here. For some perverse reason I don't understand, I wanted to see where he died."

"That all sounds very reasonable. Did you find anything interesting?"

"There were signs of a big cat over by where Cyrus must have fallen."

Trey nodded. "Would you mind showing me?"

"Not at all," said Cade as he turned his horse around and rode back up to the flat part of the mesa around several large rocks. He pulled up, stepped off his horse, and handed the reins to Trey. "Would you hold him?" he asked, pulling his rifle out of the scabbard for the second time that day. "I want to go up on that rocky formation and see if there's anything up there."

"I can do it," she said.

"I'm sure you can, but I'm already down. It'll only take me a minute," he said as he turned back toward the rocks.

"Cade? Can you take my cell and if there's anything up there, can you get some pictures?"

"Sure, I can do that."

He crossed back over to her and took her phone. Their hands brushed against each other and she instantly felt arousal surge through her system like a jolt of electricity. She wondered briefly if he felt it too as she watched him make his way up the rocks. *God, that man had a great ass.* When she closed her eyes, she could easily remember what it felt like to have her hands on it, urging him to fuck her harder.

*In the dark hours before dawn, he'd settled himself between her legs, pushing his cock into her without any preliminaries, including waking her. He'd held himself still, allowing her to adjust to his invasion of her body as she'd orgasmed. Cade had kissed her as if he was a starving man and she was his last meal. Her hands had reached around to grasp his buttocks where she'd dug her nails into the hard muscles.*

*Cade had withdrawn then slammed back into her as her legs had intertwined with his and she'd continued to cup his ass as he'd picked up the pace. Over and over, he'd drawn back only to surge forward again.*

*"Cade," she'd called his name like a benediction as he took her higher and higher until she'd flown over the edge of bliss for a second time.*

*He'd ground himself against her, hitting her clit each time he'd thrust forward. Cade had stiffened and growled her name as he'd flooded her pussy with his cum before collapsing and allowing her to bear his full weight. She'd loved the feel of his coarse hair snuggled against her pebbled nipples before he'd rolled off, pushed her onto her side, and spooned against her.*

She hoped she wasn't blushing as she remembered how each time he became aroused from that position, his cock throbbed in the cleft of her ass, and she felt its hard length pulsing against her dark hole. She'd never been interested in having a man take her there, but the night before last had been a revelation. Cade had not only made her come, but he'd given her tremendous pleasure. She knew then that there would never be anything she would deny him.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he said, breaking her reverie.

"They're not even worth that. What did you find?"

"Cat signs. Big. I took pictures and I'll show you the tracks over by the ledge."

Trey handed him his Appaloosa's reins and then stepped off Loki before walking with him to the ledge where Cyrus had likely fallen from. Cade was right; there were mountain lion tracks, big ones.

"These weren't here yesterday," she said. "But then it looked like someone had tried to destroy any evidence of what happened up here."

She watched Cade carefully. His expression betrayed nothing.

"That or a dust devil. They can be small, brief, and powerful," he said. "Don't get too close to the edge. It isn't all

that stable. See that loose material? It would be hard to maintain any kind of traction.”

She nodded. “But what was he doing up here? Isn’t this where they think your mother was killed?”

“Killed? So, you don’t believe the theory of it being accidental.”

“No, I don’t, and neither does Doc Walker.”

Trey got out her phone and pulled up the pictures from the day before.

“See this?” she said showing him a close-up of an unshod hoof print.

“That’s kind of a protected area, no telling how long it’s been up here. Could be mustangs.”

“That doesn’t make sense. They wouldn’t come around on this side of the mesa. There’s nothing for them here. No food. No water.”

He nodded. “Probably right. So, you think someone rode an unshod horse up here. Pretty rocky for a horse to go barefoot.”

“Not your brother’s Appaloosas,” she said quietly. “They have tough feet. Aren’t some of his herds almost feral?”

“You think Clay had something to do with this?” he asked.

“I don’t want to think that Cade. That’s why I didn’t include this picture with my report. That print with lack of a verifiable alibi and his history with Cyrus? It doesn’t look good.”

Cade stilled. “You know Clay. He couldn’t do that.”

“Couldn’t he? I don’t want to believe it, but all of the evidence points his direction. Cade, I think you need to get him a lawyer. I can sit on this and follow other clues and lines of inquiry, but at the end of the day, Clay may well find himself facing charges.” She sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I appreciate you telling me. I also appreciate that you don’t think it’s Clay, but I agree that the evidence is



stacking up against him. I know you're going out on a limb for him." He paused. "I'm concerned that if you're collecting evidence, your life could be in danger. I think we should move out to Koyama', which I know could easily be seen as a conflict of interest for you. And if staying with me in general is viewed that way, maybe you should move into town until this gets resolved."

"I can take care of myself, Cade. If you want to be rid of me..."

"If you want to step back from that, I'll consider not blistering your butt. I mean it, Trey. I'm not going anywhere, and I will not let that old bastard's death split us up."

Trey turned away from the ledge and felt the ground give way. Had Cade not been there to catch her, she might have easily slipped over the edge.

After pulling her to safety away from the loose dirt by the ledge, he said, "Promise me you won't come up here by yourself and that you'll take precautions."

"I can't make you that promise. I have to investigate." She walked over to Loki and mounted him in one quick move. "But Cade, you need to get Clay a lawyer."

He nodded and swung up on his own horse. "Will do," he said.

They rode back down the trail together and Cade stayed with her as she rode by the crime scene. Cade pointed out more tracks of big cats. Trey took additional pictures noting areas of interest that hadn't been there the day before.

When they rode to the cordoned off area, Trey jumped down and ducked under the yellow tape. "Shit!"

"What is it?" Cade said riding up to the tape.

"Look at the blood—oh God, Cade. I'm sorry. You don't need to see this."

"You know I hated Cyrus just like the rest of my brothers, and if, as you say, Clay may be charged with something, I figure anything I know might be of help."

She nodded. “The blood. Yesterday it was a solid pool. Now, it’s kind of spread around, which doesn’t get done by wind.”

“No.” He nodded. “But it is natural.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something rolled in it... and enjoyed themselves.”

Trey had dealt with the body yesterday. She’d dealt with having to talk to the Waverly brothers, especially Cade and Clay. But knowing that something or someone had rolled in Cyrus’s blood was too much. She tossed Loki’s reins to Cade then ran and threw up behind some bushes away from the crime scene.

She was emptying the last contents of her stomach when Cade lifted her hair away from her face with one hand and rubbed her back with the other. When she’d finally finished, he handed her a bottle of water, which she used to rinse her mouth before spitting it out and drinking the remainder.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. I don’t want you out at the cabin by yourself, even for a few hours.”

“Cade, you don’t get to make unilateral rules.”

“I do when they are made to keep you safe. Trey, you and I both know an animal wouldn’t do that. Whoever murdered Cyrus came back at some point between when you guys left yesterday, and we got here today, and rolled in his blood. That’s pretty aberrant behavior. You need to stay safe. And don’t come back out here alone.”

“Look, Cade, I appreciate what you did for me just now and I appreciate your concern, but I can’t be held hostage at my own home.”

“Fine. Stay out at Koyama’.”

“No. Talk about being completely inappropriate. Russ would kick me off the case and rightly so.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t want to believe Clay did this, but if you’re going to disprove it, you’re going to need me to be involved.”

“Then we’ll stay out at your place, but you aren’t going to be out there by yourself.”

*Who the fuck did he think he was?* She shook her head. Arguing with him when he was like this was a waste of time.

“I’m going to take some pictures of the blood then head home.”

“And then what?” he asked, anger tinting his tone.

“I’m pretty sure my afternoon is shot. Once I get unloaded, I’ll head into town.”

“Fine, we can load my horse and I’ll go with you.”

She rolled her eyes behind his back. After taking pictures, they loaded both horses into her trailer and took off for the cabin. The drive seemed longer than before, but with the geldings out to pasture back at home, she grabbed a quick shower. Cade borrowed her dually, heading toward Koyama’ and admonishing her to call him before she left the Sheriff’s Department. She took the county Jeep into town to meet with the sheriff. On her way, she called the nail salon. Lorna’s alibi checked out.



*God damn, foolish female. There was some nutcase running around, and she wanted to play Nancy Drew or Cagney and Lacey or Rizzoli and Isles. He knew he was being irrational. She was, after all a highly trained and skilled law enforcement officer. If she wouldn’t take the proper precautions, he’d take them for her. She was right about one thing: they needed a lawyer.*

Cade drove back to the ranch. On his way, he called Cash and asked him to get Cole and Clay.

“What’s with the sudden onset of brotherly love?” Cash asked.

“After being attacked by a mystery shifter, I ran into Trey at the mesa. Somebody, likely the killer, rolled in Cyrus’s

blood and had a field day. Trey found a barefoot hoof print, and as she said, everything is starting to add up and point to Clay. We need to come up with a strategy, figure out who's trespassing on our land, and get a lawyer."

"Trespassing?"

"Yeah. I ran into a cat shifter up at the mesa."

"What about Trey? Do you think she's safe?" asked Cash, his voice revealing a simmering anger.

"No. And she refuses to take any kind of precautions," Cade snarled.

"Any kind or not enough to make you happy?"

"Both. I've told her she isn't to be out at the cabin alone, but I think it may take a few times for her to understand the severity of not doing as she's told."



"Trey?" called the Sheriff.

Trey stowed her gear in her office and headed into his. "Bossman?" she said before sitting down.

"I thought you were taking the whole day off, then it was just the afternoon, and now here you are."

"I wanted to take another look at the crime scene."

"Find anything new?" he asked.

Trey nodded. "Some signs of a very large cat."

"Talk to me."

"Doc and I agree. Cyrus had to have fallen from the top of Himeen Mesa. At the top, it looked as though someone had tried to destroy any evidence of what might have really happened. There's a lot of loose dirt and rock up there, but we haven't had the kind of weather to sweep it clean. I decided to go back up by horseback earlier just to see what I could from that viewpoint," she said.

Russ Langley nodded. Russ was ex-Military Police and his haircut showed it. A kind of updated brush cut in shades of salt and pepper. He was a clean shaven, bear of a man, not necessarily overweight, but he certainly didn't have Cade's cut, muscular body.

"The trail up wasn't as clean, but still it looked to me as though someone had tried to obliterate a clear picture of what went on. Then, on that side of the rock outcropping, I found a hoofprint of an unshod horse and a lot of big cat tracks that weren't there yesterday."

"Why would either be up there, especially on that side of the mesa?"

"That's what I thought as well. I got some pictures of both the hoofprint and the cat tracks. It also looked like there was maybe more than one cat and there was a fight."

"That's interesting as well."

Trey smiled. "But the most curious, and also most bizarre and unsettling, was that something or someone rolled or played in the pool of Cyrus's blood."

"What?" asked Russ.

"Yeah, it was splattered all around. Doesn't seem like something an animal would do, more like something some depraved lunatic might do."

"I think we ought to keep that detail just between us. Maybe you should go out and pull down the crime scene tape and bury the blood unless you think there's more to be learned by leaving it up."

"No, and I agree about keeping what I saw today between us. I have pictures of that as well."

"Any thoughts on a suspect or are we just looking at some random sicko?"

"Could be the latter. I hope so."

"Why?" asked Russ.

“First, because I don’t want to think I live in a town or county where there’s someone who is that far gone that they believe rolling in a victim’s blood is some kind of rite of passage.”

“And second?”

“How do you know there’s a second?”

The sheriff grinned. “Because if there’s a first, there’s always a second.”

“Second, because if it is someone close to home, the evidence is starting to stack up against Clay Waverly.”

“Do you like him as a suspect?”

“From a physical evidence standpoint, yes. His horses are all barefoot and Himeen Mesa is part of Koyama’. Plus, he has no alibi and there was no love lost between Clay and Cyrus.”

“So, motive and opportunity... What about means?”

“Clay’s been around guns all his life and I’m sure there’s more than one forty-four out at Koyama’.”

“So,” said Russ, “motive, means, opportunity, and the physical evidence is stacking up.”

“But the evidence is only circumstantial, and I’ve known Clay most of my life. He had no use for Cyrus, but I can’t see him killing him, especially not shooting him in the back.”

“I agree. Unless he or one of his brothers was finally able to prove their old man killed their mother, why now?”

Trey was a bit surprised that the sheriff brought up the old cold case.

“Even still, not in the back. That’s a coward’s way or the way of someone who doesn’t think they could win in a fair fight. I don’t think that description fits Clay or any of his brothers. Since you mentioned it, I’ve been thinking about Hannah’s death. I know it was ruled accidental, but I also know that a lot of people, including her sons, don’t believe that. What if the two are connected?” she asked.

“You think the same person killed both?”

“Not necessarily, but what if whoever killed Cyrus believed Cyrus killed Hannah and was taking revenge?”

“Which points you right back at Clay.”

Trey nodded. “I know. I don’t like it. Just so you know, I ran into Cade. He said he wanted to see Cyrus’s place of death at the top of the mesa for himself, which makes a certain kind of sense, given he doesn’t believe our department did enough to find out what really happened to his mother.”

“He could have been up there to try and hide any evidence pointing to his brother.”

“He could, but I couldn’t see any difference from yesterday except evidence of a cat fight. I did tell him Clay was beginning to become a person of interest and that they might want to retain legal counsel.”

The sheriff smiled. “Not exactly FBI protocol, but then the FBI doesn’t operate and live in a small town. I’d have done the same, and for the record, I don’t think Clay or any of the boys did it. Sure, they hated Cyrus, and the old bastard had given them plenty of reason to do so, but shooting him in the back, as you say, doesn’t fit what I know about them either. If one of them wanted Cyrus dead, I suspect he’d involve the others and we’d have never seen a body, much less found any evidence. But I appreciate you telling me.”

“Cade thought I ought to stay either in town or at Koyama’ instead of my cabin.”

“I’m inclined to agree with him.”

“And I’ll tell you what I told him. I can take care of myself.” The look on her face brooked no argument. “Anything else? I want to finish up my paperwork and head home. I’ve got chores to do that I should have done when I got back from Himeen Mesa, but I felt I needed to bring you up-to-date sooner rather than later.”

“I appreciate that, and I want you to think about coming into town until this has all blown over.” He held up his hand to stave off her argument. “I’m not willing to make it an order,

but that could change. I'm going to call out to Koyama' and let them know Clay isn't to leave the county."

"I can do that," she said.

"I'm sure you can, but I think it'll go over better coming from me."

"Ok. I should be about an hour before I head for home."



The sheriff closed his door and pulled a burner cell out of his pocket.

"We've got a problem. Both the doc and my chief investigator are pretty sure Cyrus was shot up on Himeen Mesa."

"So? They've got nothing. I know Cade tampered with most of the evidence when he discovered Cyrus's body."

"Trey Mitchell is like a dog with a bone and the Doc ain't much better. I can most likely bring Doc around to thinking it was Clay—two can play the tampering with evidence game. But I can also hint that I think it was justified. He's fond of those boys, hell, they're men really, so he might well be willing to sweep it under the rug."

"He did the last time."

"True enough, but this time I'm sheriff and the Doc's wife is dead. We don't have the leverage you had last time."

"Don't worry about it, Russ. I'll make sure they come to the conclusion we want. The Doc should be easy, and your deputy can either get on board or we'll deal with her."

"You leave Trey alone. Cyrus Waverly was a mean old bastard, but I won't have Trey harmed."

"That may not be your call."

The call ended abruptly, and Russell Langley wondered, not for the first time, just what the hell he'd gotten himself involved in.



## CHAPTER 6

Trey finished up her paperwork, sent it to both Dorothy and the sheriff, and signed out for the day. The drive back to her place on the long, lonely stretch of highway gave her time to think about both cases. A thought occurred to her and she called back to the office. “Dorothy?”

The dispatcher laughed. “Didn’t you just leave here?”

“I did, but you know me. I got to thinking.”

“Lord knows you have enough time to do that between your place and the office. What’s up?”

“Can you do me a favor and pull the file for Hannah Waverly’s death and put it on my desk?”

“Sure can. That’s no problem. Do you think it has something to do with Cyrus’s death?” asked Dorothy.

“I don’t know, but when I talked to the Waverly brothers, they mentioned it and so did Doc. I just thought I’d take a look at it since I wasn’t with the department when it happened.”

“I’ll pull it and leave it on your desk. See you in the morning.”

“Thanks, Dorothy.”

Trey loved this time of day. Dusk in Idaho’s panhandle was a gorgeous display of color. The afternoon light faded as the sun began its descent behind the horizon. She loved the way the riotous concoction of colors played against the descending inky blackness, working together to frame the

rising of the moon and the stars as they began to peek out from wherever they hid during the daytime.

She smiled. Small town Idaho. Her grandmother's cabin—it was funny how she still thought of it that way—sat back off the main road. She had to admit that both Cade and the sheriff were right about her place being isolated, but that was part of what she loved about it. Where they were wrong was in thinking she needed someone to watch over her. She'd been taking care of herself since her parents had been killed by a drunk driver.

Turning down her gravel drive, she was surprised when she rounded the last bend because not only was the livestock not waiting for her, complaining that their dinner was late, but parked in front of her home was her dually and Cade's red 1937 GMC pickup. *Oh crap! I forgot to call him.*

She parked next to Cade's truck and took a deep breath. As she opened the door, she noted that no lights were on, but there were candles lit everywhere and her fireplace glowed with flames. The cabin was still mostly dark, but in a welcoming way, as though dusk had invaded the space and made itself comfortable.

“Cade?” she whispered, afraid he would be angry.

She knew he loved her and knew he was protective by nature. She also knew he was aware that she was a trained and capable woman with lethal skills, but he'd been fairly adamant about her letting him know when she left the station.

His Stetson hung off the back of the chair, and when she looked toward her bedroom, Cade's muscular physique filled the doorway. He was gorgeous and moved with a mesmerizing and powerful grace, not typically attributed to men his size. She was quite certain he was the sexiest creature to ever roam the earth. The look he gave her was both incredibly predatory and sensual.

Sometime and somewhere, he'd lost his shirt. She reminded herself to breathe, but it was difficult because her thoughts were clouded by the sight of the most flawless male torso she'd ever laid eyes on. His perfection was marred only

slightly by some light scratches she hadn't noticed this morning.

*Where had those come from?*

Broad shoulders and a thick, strong neck led down to solid, chiseled pecs covered in a light dusting of hair that narrowed to a pleasure trail following the centerline of his perfectly sculpted abs and disappeared behind his sterling silver trophy buckle. She knew a lot of buckle bunnies preferred the way Wranglers fit a man, but there was something about the fuller cut of Levi's and a button fly that she rather enjoyed, and the way Cade filled them out was drool worthy.

"Hey, babe," she said, trying to keep her tone casual.

"I thought I told you to let me know when you were headed for home. I also thought I told you to be careful, but the door was unlocked. I just walked right in here. If I'd wanted to harm you, I could have planted a bomb, or done something to cause a fire, or a myriad of other things. Or I could have been waiting behind the door with a wire to wrap around your neck and strangle you."

"Cade, I know you think I'm in danger, but I don't agree, and I don't like having my movements monitored. For God's sake, you, or members of your immediate family, are murder suspects and I'm the lead on the investigation. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"We both know that I do."

"Maybe it would be better if you stayed at Koyama'."

"Better for who? The killer? No doubt, thus why I'm staying here. You? Hardly. There are times you really do need a keeper. Me? Absolutely not. The idea of something happening to you haunts me. Besides, I'm a real sonofabitch when I don't have you at least twice a day. Ask my brothers; they'll attest to that fact," he said. "I thought we'd gone through this, but apparently we still need to get a few things straight."

"Like what?"

"Like you do what I tell you and be careful."

“Fuck you.”

The grin that spread slowly across his face was feral and should have scared her, but it didn't. “That's precisely what I had in mind.”

The butterflies in her belly that always accompanied a disagreement with him took flight. She was wildly attracted to Cade in a way she'd never been to any other man. He could do more for her arousal with a look than other men could do with hours of foreplay and aphrodisiacs.

“Don't tell me it's inappropriate or a bad idea. I'm well aware. The lawyer we hired for Clay has already informed us that we shouldn't have any contact with anyone at the sheriff's department.”

“Then what are you doing here? And where did you get those scratches?”

Cade looked down as if he was noticing them for the first time. “I had a run in with a big cat earlier today. He shredded my vest and shirt but didn't do much damage to my skin. There must be a female in heat and the males are getting testy.”

As he spoke, he closed the distance between them inch by painful inch, making her feel as though she were being stalked. When he was within arm's reach, one of his hands snaked around her waist, drawing her in. His other hand held the nape of her neck to angle her face up for a kiss before his mouth came down, fusing their lips together.

This was a decidedly bad idea, but she didn't care. She could easily be ordered off the case or lose her job and she couldn't find it in her to care about either. She'd never wanted anything more than she wanted Cade Waverly in this moment. She didn't care about his mother's death, his father's murder, or his youngest brother's implication in the latter. Everything was lost to the feel of being in his arms.

His tongue pushed past her lips and teeth, tasting, exploring, and dancing with hers in a way she'd come to expect from him. He was never in a hurry and it never felt like

kissing her was a way to get her on her back. Cade didn't rush; he seemed content to just hold her close and devour her mouth. She moaned and molded herself against his strong frame. When the kiss became more demanding, he slanted his lips away from her mouth to nibble along her jaw and down her throat.

“Cade, I...”

“Too late, Trey,” he said as the arm that had been around her waist dipped down to behind her knees and he lifted her off her feet. “For some reason, you seem to have forgotten that when you don't do what I tell you, you put yourself in danger, or you act recklessly, that you will answer to me.”

“Answer to you? Do you hear yourself?” She shook her head, trying to dispel the sensual web he seemed able to weave around her in spite of his caveman notions.

“No.”

That was it. One word. Two letters. Nothing more.

“I'm not kidding, Cade. This is a bad idea. I think we should take a break until your father's murder is resolved. Get out.”

“He was a sonofabitch. Someone killed him. Matter resolved. If in the past several hours you have somehow actually convinced yourself that this thing between us is some kind of fling, you'd best think again.”

Cade set her on her feet before sitting down on the bed, stripping her clothes off, and tipping her over his knee. This was not what she wanted. *Liar!* She had to admit in some ways she did want this. She needed to know that he would keep her safe, he would hold her accountable, and when she fucked up, he would spank her. It hurt, but she'd found that on the other side lay peace, forgiveness, and incredible erotically charged sex. Trey had learned that while the spanking would hurt and she would feel sorry that she'd disappointed him, what came after more than made up for it. In a way, the experience was restorative; it always brought them back to a good place.

His cock throbbed beneath her as his denim-clad leg closed against the back of her thighs. Cade's hand came down, smacking her upturned rump. Heat and sensation flared; she knew the ache would become painful before he was done. Trey moaned and he struck her once, twice, three more times. The sting would soon morph into something far less pleasant.

"Damn it, Trey. You're going to learn to mind me." His hand landed another half dozen times.

"Cade," she cried out. "That's ten."

"Did I say that you would only get ten? I'm pretty sure I didn't because I'm pretty sure sets of ten aren't proving to be much of a deterrent."

His hand rained down another flurry of swats, never setting a pattern she could anticipate, but ramping up both pain and desire in equal measure. Somewhere in the second set, she lost count of how many times he'd spanked her. She knew in the end, Cade would be the one to decide when she'd had enough. After what seemed like an eternity and an infinite number of swats, his hand rested on her heated globes and rubbed soothingly.

"Are we clear that you're not going to be out here by yourself?" he started.

"What if I have to come home during the day?"

His hand lifted up and cracked down in a painful smack. "You call me first. You are not to be out here alone. Clear?" he growled.

"Yes, Sir," she said, trying to soothe his ire.

Grumbling, he released her legs and sat her up in his lap. "I mean it, Trey."

"I hear you, Cade."

"Do you?" he said, the emotion raw in the tone of his voice.

She took his face in her hands and drew him to her, sealing her lips against his as her tongue darted out, parting his lips and surging inside. Cade's arms wrapped around her and she

knew there was no safer place in existence than within the steel cage of his embrace.

Cade pushed her onto her back. “I need you, Trey. I love you.”

“You have me. I love you, too.”

The erotic ache from her blazing cheeks was welcome and inflamed when he ground his hard cock against her. He pressed her into the mattress, spreading her legs and chuckling as his knuckle rubbed her swollen clit when he unbuttoned his jeans. He let his hand drift further between her legs, testing her readiness to receive him.

Cade shoved his jeans down past his gorgeous ass, freeing his cock to tease the entrance of her core. He shoved in, one single, long, hard pass. She moaned in pleasure and wrapped her arms and legs around him. Without another word, Cade pulled out methodically before driving back into her several times, each time holding himself still inside her for a brief moment. She came on the third or fourth pass, calling out his name and taking hold of his buttocks to urge him deeper, harder, faster.

He began to fuck her with a powerful rhythm that sent her senses reeling. She came a second time, taking her hands away from his butt to cling to him. When she tried to move against and with him, he reached under to hold her steady so she couldn't.

The world retreated until all that she knew was him—the way he held her, the way he fucked her, the way he loved her.

His pace became faster, his body slamming into hers as he hit the magic spot deep inside, making her writhe and revel in his passion and desire. She cried out a third time as she let pleasure overtake her. Her orgasm washed over her like the wild storm that had raged around them when they'd been reunited on that balcony.

Cade stiffened and pleasure flared anew when her pussy was flooded with his cum. He held himself hard against her as he spilled himself before collapsing. He rolled from her body,

withdrawing as he did, but pulling her with him to keep her nestled close.



She lay next to him, sleeping peacefully. He hadn't lied to her, not exactly. Granted he hadn't told her everything, but then he didn't plan to tell her everything until he claimed her fully, establishing the tether between them. Trey would be safer with him in her bed and with their connection established. The tether would tell him if she was hurt or in danger. He didn't plan to ever make use of that because he intended to keep her far away from danger, but it was a nice failsafe.

Cade grinned. Keeping her safe might be easier said than done but getting after her for it could lead to far more pleasant and satisfying things. He meant to keep her in line with the judicious use of his cock inside her cunt and his hand applied to her backside. Speaking of which, Trey had a glorious ass and it felt good under his hand, either in a caress or as he disciplined her.

Their road to a happy ending wasn't going to be easy, but they would make it through together. Cade knew he should be more open with what was going to happen to her, but he'd decided it would be far easier to deal with any fallout once the tether was established. Plus, the tether would also make it more difficult for her to ignore his call. She would be compelled to answer. Fair? No, but he didn't particularly care. He'd tried to ignore his need for her, tried to ignore that she was his bonded spirit and that he would have no other, but it hadn't worked. He'd known all those years ago of their destiny, and the only thing his attempt at patience had accomplished was hurting her and making them both miserable.

With a self-satisfied smile and a profound sense of rightness, Cade closed his eyes and slept. He awoke to find Trey's lips wrapped around his cock as her tongue swirled around its head. She'd lifted her head when he'd shifted under her attention.



He cupped her head, gently forcing it back down. “Suck me,” he growled.

She leaned forward, enveloping the large bulbous head of his cock with her mouth. He had to focus to keep the barbs that were lying just below the surface of his cock suppressed. She drew her head back, replacing her mouth with her hand, squeezing gently. She licked the head, and his contented purr became a groan from deep in his throat.

She sucked his cock back inside and let her tongue swirl around, focusing on the soft, sensitive underside. Cade threw back his head and thrust his hips up, driving it to the back of her throat as he caught her hair in his hand and pressing her face further into his groin. She grazed his length with her teeth, not as a threat, but to enhance his pleasure.

“Yes,” he sighed.

He knew he wasn’t going to last long and at some point, he’d send his cum down into her belly, but she needed to be reminded who was in charge, and when he wanted to fuck her mouth he would do so. The same could be said of her ass.

Cade fisted her hair tighter, forcing her mouth away from his cock and dragging her up his body. Her sexy, confident smile was her undoing. It would be a cold day in hell before he allowed her to control anything in their sex life. Once he had her lying along his body, torso to torso, pelvis to pelvis, he smacked her ass twice, one on each cheek before flipping her to her back. Trey wriggled and tried to throw him off.

“You will submit to me in all things, but in this most especially.” His tone was clear.

He forced his knees between hers, spreading her legs before making a place for himself. He kissed her, dominating from beginning to end as his mouth pressed hard against hers. When resistance fled, he exerted even more control as their tongues danced.

His cock was poised, parting the petals of her sex as he pressed inside—not hard and fast like the last time, but slow, inch-by-inch, possessing her. Trey gasped as his cock filled

her, stretching her, making her cunt accommodate his size. He drew back and she mewled in need. He pushed in again, as deep as he could. Her arms wound around his neck as her legs intertwined with his.

Cade suppressed the barbs. He needed to claim her and do it soon. Each time he fucked her, it became more difficult. He wanted to let them out, wanted to scrape her inner walls, digging furrows and preparing her to take his seed. Cade had never had a driving desire to breed a female, to sire offspring, but with Trey, his need had become almost desperate.

Trey's hands grasped his ass, digging her nails into him as he cupped her buttocks, holding her steady to drive into her. He slammed hard against her pelvis, drawing back to give her the full length of his cock into her tight sheath. He ground down on her as he stroked deep, making her orgasm explode and the ripples wash over them both. Cade let her ride out her climax, then began to fuck with speed and power. When he felt her readying to go off like a rocket once more, he allowed himself his own sweet release, collapsing on her and pressing her into the mattress, before falling into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER 7

Trey opened her eyes slowly and her joy embraced her with the same strength as the man who lay at her side. The residual aches she felt reminded her that Cade did not take her safety or her pleasure lightly. To say that Cade was well-endowed was putting it mildly. Not only did he have size, but the man also knew how to use what he had.

She'd never had trouble reaching climax, but what he did to her and how easily she orgasmed with him had been a revelation. Before they found their way back to each other, she'd convinced herself that her memory of that night had been exaggerated in her mind. If anything, time had only diminished the reality of being fucked by Cade.

She heard the sound of his breathing next to her and smiled. Even in his sleep, he kept his arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close with his cock nestled in the cleft of her ass. She grinned as she ran her fingertips along his forearm down to his hand where it closed over her mound. He was a possessive bastard, and she didn't resent that half as much as she probably should.

Trey managed to extricate herself from the bed, throwing on his shirt with a pair of cowboy boots and slipped outside to the barn. She quickly fed the stock and checked the electric water buckets before returning to the house. When she opened the door, her nostrils were met with the smell of bacon, maple syrup, and vanilla.

The look he leveled in her direction made her bite back her quip.

“I don’t like reaching for you and not finding you next to me.” His growl was quickly overtaken by a grin as he said, “I like my shirt far better on you than I ever liked it on me. However, do I need to remind you that if you leave, I won’t stop hunting until I find you? And when I do, I’ll drag you back home by the roots of your silky hair and spank your gorgeous ass until you can’t sit down.”

She laughed in spite of herself, desire swirling low in her pelvis. “You think I have a gorgeous ass?”

“Don’t be coy, Trey. You have to have heard it often enough.”

“Not really. There weren’t a lot of men before or since that first time with you.” She paused. “Also, I should point out to you that spanking me could be considered assault on an officer of the law.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “The day you tell Russell Langley that a man taking his woman in hand and spanking her sassy ass is assault, I want to be there. He will laugh himself sick.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He drew her into his arms, bringing his mouth down to hers to kiss her thoroughly. “I mean that Mrs. Sheriff Langley has, I suspect, spent more than her fair share of time face down over her husband’s knee.

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

She did not want to think of her boss’ wife every time she went into his office, so she changed the subject. “What smells so good?”

“Bacon and French toast. I have some syrup warming.”

“I’ll go put on some clothes.”

She hadn't gotten very far when he caught her hand and brought her back against his body, the hard length behind his fly making its presence known.

"I like you just the way you are, or rather, I'll settle for this when we're alone if I have to."

"What would you prefer?" she asked.

"Naked and wet."

"Water dripping off my hair and body?" she asked provocatively.

He shook his head. "No, naked and dripping your arousal down the inside of your thigh." He purred as he slid his hand between her legs, putting his fingers inside her and stroking.

No asking permission, just letting her know he considered her his in the most deliciously decadent way possible. She could feel a blush staining her cheeks, but at the same time, her body softened and leaned toward his.

Cade grinned. "You like being handled by a man that knows how." It wasn't a question, just a statement of fact.

Without releasing her, he brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean before piling the cooked French toast on a single plate, layering butter between each piece and then pouring syrup over the stack. He added the bacon, then went to the kitchen table before sitting down and tugging her onto his lap. Trey had never felt small or dainty enough to sit in a man's lap.

"Give over, Trey, and just relax," he said, pulling her against his chest before handing her a bite of bacon followed by French toast.

"I can feed myself," she said, not sure of how she was feeling about this arrangement.

"Of course, you can. You're a decorated FBI agent who is now this county's chief investigator. You're also a crack shot, both with a handgun and a rifle, but it doesn't mean you can't sit in my lap and let me feed you nor does it mean I'm going to let you stay out here by yourself."

She rolled her eyes. “As you pointed out, I can take care of myself.”

“Yep, but you don’t have to. You can choose between being here or being at Koyama’.”

“Cade, if Clay gets arrested, this is a huge conflict of interest.”

“I don’t give a shit. It’s not exactly a secret that we’re together. I’ll keep my distance unless we’re out here, but that means you call me when you get to the sheriff’s department and when you’re leaving. I want to know where you are.”

“That’s not practical,” she argued.

“Fine, then turn in your resignation and work for Clay’s lawyer to prove him innocent, which he is, you know.”

“That’s what my gut tells me, but it’s not what the evidence says.”

“Trey, I’m trying to be reasonable and about as enlightened where your safety is concerned as I’m going to be. Either you agree to check in with me and understand that if and when you don’t, there will be consequences, or you call the sheriff and tell him you quit.”

“You can’t give me ultimatums,” she said.

“Don’t go there. There’s some maniac who struck at my family and that puts you at risk. I’m not okay with that. I won’t endanger you, not now, not ever. I can probably be a little less overly protective once you catch this animal, but until then, you check in with me. I need to know where you are, Trey.”

She’d been trying to pull away, but Cade held her fast.

“Let go,” she said.

“No. Settle down and let’s finish breakfast.”

“Let go, Cade.”

“No, Trey. And if you don’t knock it off, I’m going to think you need a better demonstration of what happens when

you don't mind because clearly the one you got last night wasn't sufficient."

She wanted to argue with him, wanted to jump up and tell him to go to hell, or at least wanted to tell herself that his words weren't every bit as arousing as the way he touched her.

"Give over, Trey. Let me take care of you."

"Why is it that when you talk that way, I feel all soft and squishy inside?"

"That's not all you feel. I can smell your arousal and your nipples have perked right up. The thought of me taking you in hand and spanking you gets you all kinds of turned on. I'm okay with that. Just remember that there's an enormous difference between the half-hearted swats I gave you last night and a true punishment spanking. As I recall, you didn't much care for the latter."

Before she could say anything else, he popped another piece of bacon in her mouth and proceeded to feed her again, interspersing bites of food with kisses. Little by little, she found herself relaxing into his body and enjoying this moment together. A moment that was halted when the mantle clock struck seven and the chime rang out in the small space.

"Shit! I need to get showered and dressed for work. I can clean the barn when I get home," she said.

"You go ahead, but you call me when you get to your office," he admonished as she headed into the bedroom. She rolled her eyes. "Knock it off, Trey. You roll your eyes all you want, but if I don't hear from you, you'll have even more trouble sitting tonight."

His threat made her inhale sharply as her arousal spiked again. She shook her head as she went into the bathroom.

After she'd finished, she pulled her hair up in a high ponytail and exited. He'd retrieved his shirt and was just finishing up in the kitchen.

"Thank you for breakfast and cleaning up. You didn't have to," she said.

“I live here too, remember? Last time I checked, this was our place. Besides, I like taking care of you.” He pulled her to him and kissed her again until she was breathless and relaxed. “And I really like your hair down.”

“Okay. When I’m not on duty, I’ll keep it down.”

He nodded. “That’ll work. See? I can compromise, and I will on everything but your safety. I’m going to assume we’ll be staying here?”

“Honestly, even this is so far outside the boundaries of what I should be doing, it’s not even funny.” Her tone implied resignation even if her words didn’t outright agree.

He shook his head. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m going to do my best to ensure you never regret choosing us.”

She rested her hand on his chest and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “I forgave you back in D.C. We can’t move forward together if you keep looking back and feeling guilty.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. Now, go. I’ll close up everything here.”



“Russ?” he said into his phone after she’d left.

“Cade, good to hear from you. I was sorry to hear about Cyrus. I know there was no love lost, but he was still your old man.”

“Thank you, and you’re right that his death is fairly meaningless. Does Trey have any time off scheduled? Does she have any available?”

“The two of you is not a good idea. She could be accused of a conflict of interest and depending on how this plays out, she could be in danger.”

“You and I both know it would take a lot for Trey to betray her professional responsibilities, and there’s no need to worry about her safety.”



“I take it you’re planning to keep her safe?” the sheriff asked.

“Yes. She is my mate, and her safety comes before everything.”

“I wondered about that. Let me guess, the time off is because you’re planning to claim her?”

“Yes,” said Cade.

“How does that work for your kind?”

“Like most shifters, it happens during sex. Unlike most, she won’t really feel anything other than the bite itself, but she’s most vulnerable for the first few days, so I’d like to have her off duty.”

“Okay. Just let me know when you claim her, and I’ll schedule her off. But after that, she’ll be fit for duty?”

“She’ll be better than ever: faster, stronger, more athletic. And it will establish a pair bond between us. Her DNA will be altered to become one of us, but she won’t be able to shift. It’s the reason we tend to stay away from humans.”

“Why? I don’t know that my wife has ever had cause to shift.”

“Because female mountain lion shifters can be nasty to turned females, and as the latter can’t shift, it puts them at a distinct disadvantage.”

“You worried about Lorna?” asked the sheriff.

“I know of few females nastier than Lorna, but she won’t be an issue much longer. She’ll be leaving Koyama’.”

“Does Lorna know that?”

“Not yet,” answered Cade.

“And you know Clay has become a person of interest.”

“I do. Shep called him last night to tell him he wasn’t to leave the area, and Trey shared that the evidence is stacking up against him. But I’m telling you, Russ, he didn’t do this.”

“We’ll have to let the investigation play out,” said the sheriff. “I wouldn’t count on Trey not doing her duty.”

“I’m not,” he said.

“I suppose you could influence her through your pair bond.”

“I could, but I won’t,” he said. “I won’t have to.”

“Trey can be hardheaded and has a real thing for truth and justice.” The sheriff’s words almost sounded like they were spoken to convince himself and not for Cade’s benefit at all.

“Which is exactly why I won’t need to apply any influence. Clay didn’t do it, and I have faith that Trey will find the real killer.”

He ended the call with a few more words before making his way to the barn. Both horses and the two donkeys were, understandably, skittish of large predators, specifically a mountain lion shifter. The horses on Koyama’ either grew up on the ranch or were desensitized to shifters early on.

Knowing Trey liked a clean and well-kept barn, he mucked out the stalls and cleaned the waterers. The sound of crunching gravel caught his attention. He looked out and didn’t recognize the luxury SUV. He checked her tack room again and spotted what he was looking for: a spare rifle. He picked it up, checked to ensure it was loaded, and walked out into the sunlight to find the vehicle’s driver standing beside the car.

“Can I help you?” he asked the stranger, who looked up in response.

“I’m looking for Deputy Mitchell. I have some information regarding Cyrus Waverly’s death.”

“I would suggest talking to Trey at her office and not her home,” said Cade.

“Who are you to be telling me when I can or should speak to her?”

Cade brought the rifle up higher. “I’m the guy holding the loaded rifle.”

The stranger's response was quick. "I'll try her later."

"I suggest you either try her via phone or at the office. Trey's home is off limits."

The man said nothing and got back in his vehicle. Cade scented the air and picked up an all too familiar scent. This guy was a shifter—a mountain lion shifter. That added a degree of danger and difficulty he'd need to keep Trey safe from. He'd tell Trey about her visitor, at least the human half, tonight. He'd wait to tell her about the shifted half until he'd claimed her, and she'd become one of them.

Cade returned to the barn and put the rifle back on the rack. With one quick look at the cabin, he was beginning to think of as a second home, he hopped in his truck. Soon enough, he found himself turning off the highway onto the asphalt drive that led to the main house.

Cade was a bit surprised to see two vehicles, both pretty fancy, that he didn't recognize near the barnyard. He suspected one was Clay's new lawyer, a highly recommended defense attorney out of Seattle who was licensed to practice in Idaho. But he didn't have a clue as to who might own the other. He got out of his truck and joined Cole who was just on his way into the house.

"Visitors at this hour?" asked Cade.

His brother nodded and asked, "Have you made plans to claim Trey?"

"Not yet. That's going to require some time and explanation, but I want it done sooner rather than later."

"Worried about Lorna?" asked Cole.

"She can be vindictive and probably isn't going to be happy about being booted out of here. Do you think her father will take her back?"

"Doubtful, and therein lies the problem."

"We can't simply toss her out..." said Cade.

"Sure, we can," said Cole. "She's done nothing but cause problems since she got here. Cyrus brought her in and then he

married her, but now he's dead."

"The visitors?" asked Cade.

"I'm assuming one is Clay's lawyer, and I wouldn't even venture a guess as to who the other one might be."

They entered the house via the kitchen door, both stopping to grab a cup of coffee. Cade chugged his down. He reminded himself to have Trey teach him to use her machine as he poured himself a second cup. When they stepped into the foyer, a man in a three-piece suit stood waiting.

"I'm Cade Waverly. This is my brother, Cole. May I help you?"

"I'm Cecil Morton. Mrs. Waverly's lawyer."

"Mrs.? Lorna hired a lawyer?"

"Mrs. Waverly felt it was in her best interest to retain legal counsel..."

"Yes, I did. Thank you for coming Cecil. Can I call you Cecil?" said Lorna as she flounced down the stairs in full hair and make-up.

Cade turned back to the attorney. "You might want to get your money up front. My father kept Lorna on a strict allowance and that won't be increasing. In fact, we were hoping Lorna would leave without much of a fuss. I'm willing to pay her a nice settlement and your fee for counseling her to accept if she'll leave quickly and quietly."

"You can't do that to me, Cade. Not after what we've meant to each other."

Cade snorted. "I fucked you once in the barn when I was drunk. All I felt afterwards was disgust, mostly for myself with a little left over for you. I've seen the will. Cyrus left you nothing but six months' allowance. Anything that wasn't already distributed by my mother at her death, goes to my brothers and myself." He again turned back to the attorney. "As I said, talk to your client, but the only way I pay her one dime more than Cyrus left her or your fee is if she's out of

here by week's end. If she chooses not to go, we'll pay her what the old man left her and drop kick her ass out."

The door to the study opened and Clay stepped to the entrance, motioning for the other's to join him.

"Clay?" she cried. "Cade's threatened to make me leave without any money."

Clay shrugged. "You know the old saying, Lorna. You reap what you sow," he said, stepping back to allow Cade and Cole to enter before closing the door firmly in Lorna and her lawyer's faces.

Cash was seated in one of the leather wingbacks, but Cole had gone absolutely still. Cade followed his gaze to the beautiful woman sitting in the other wingback.

"Hello, Cole."

"Quinn? But that's not your real name, is it?"

She shook her head and said, "No."

She was dressed in a kind of bohemian, artsy skirt and overblouse that Cade might have expected from a trendy fashionista from Seattle. Not very businesslike. Perhaps they'd hired the wrong law firm.

"For what we shelled out yesterday, I'd expected to see Mr. Greyson himself, not his paralegal," growled Cade.

The woman stood. "I agree, Mr. Waverly. For the retainer you paid, you're entitled to have your attorney at this meeting, but let me assure you of three things. First, the retainer is just that, and your fees, especially if Clay is charged and goes to trial, will exceed that exorbitant amount. Second, acceptance of the retainer yesterday guarantees you nothing more than an in-person meeting before the firm decides to take on your case. And last, the firm would never send one of our paralegals to represent us at an initial client meeting. Only a senior partner can determine whether or not the firm will undertake representation." Extending her hand, she closed the gap between them. "I'm Kennedy Greyson." She shook Cade's hand then turned to Cole. "If you'd prefer a different attorney

from our firm, I can have someone out here this afternoon, or I can refer you to a different firm altogether.”

“No need,” said Cole evenly. “No one knows better than I your ability to convince a reasonable man of whatever it is you want him to believe.”

This was an interesting development. Obviously, their attorney and Cole had history, an interesting history if Cole’s reaction to her was any indication. A smile played on Cade’s lips. He rather imagined Trey would have enjoyed the hell out of this. Thinking of Trey, he realized she’d yet to check in.

He cleared his throat and spoke to their visitor. “My apologies, Ms. Greyson. I hope you won’t hold my bad manners against Clay.”

“I love the fact that all it took for you to get mannerly was to be finally sleeping in Trey’s bed,” said Clay gleefully, without any concern for present company.

“You’ll have to excuse Clay. If we have to go to trial, we’ll beat some sense into him prior to that date,” said Cade, who was rewarded with her smile. “I need to make a quick personal phone call. I’ll just step out on the porch and be right back.”

He left as Cash made further introductions. Cole’s normally glib tongue seemed to be failing him. He’d have to check with him to see what the full story there was.

Cade phoned Trey. “Shit,” she said as she answered.

“I take it I don’t need to go into the fact that you fucked up.”

“I’m not used to having to check in and it’s really overkill.”

“Really? You know someone who drives a navy-blue SUV Beamer? I’ll text you his license plate. He came out to your place shortly after you left. I invited him to leave at the point of a rifle.”

“Jesus, Cade. You can’t go around threatening people.”

“I can and will where you are concerned.” He sighed. “I’ll see you tonight, and I’ll bring a couple of aged steaks from the

house. Can you wrangle up the rest of dinner?”

“Sure, and I still need to muck out the barn.”

“Already done. Feed is ready for tonight. Don’t forget to call me before you leave.”

“Okay. I’ll run that license once I get your text,” she said quietly.

“I have to go back inside, but I’ll talk to you later, right?”

“Yes, Cade.”

He ended the call and turned back to the French doors.

“I’m sorry I had to step out,” he said as he re-entered the study.

“That’s not a problem. I was just explaining how these things work. Two rules: No interviews with the press or anyone else. Not now, not ever. And all communications go through me. An old nickname for one’s attorney used to be a mouthpiece, which I consider an accurate moniker.”

“This is a small town,” said Cash.

“I don’t care if it’s a postage stamp,” said the attorney, who’s very presence seemed to be having a continued curious effect on Cole. “It’s imperative that I control the information flow incoming and outgoing. Cade, I’m not going to mince words. I understand there is something going on with the chief investigator. That needs to stop.”

“Not happening,” growled Cade.

“Not an option. It is completely inappropriate and could present her with a conflict of interest.”

Before Cade could speak, Clay spoke up. “If that’s a deal breaker for you, Ms. Greyson, have your firm refund whatever is left of the retainer after this meeting. Cade and Trey deserve to be happy. It’s taken them a number of years to get to where they are, and I’ll be damned if I see Cyrus fuck up one more good thing in this family.”

Kennedy Greyson looked surprised. Cade rather imagined that it took a lot to put that look on her face.

“Do you trust her?” she asked to no one in particular.

“Let me field this one,” said Clay. “Yes. In fact, I think we have a stronger position if Trey is the investigator.”

Cade nodded. “I agree. Trey doesn’t believe Clay is guilty, but she says that’s where the evidence is pointing. None of us, except for Lorna, lived in this house while Cyrus was alive. Trey and I live at her grandmother’s old homestead cabin currently. I’ll let her know that we won’t discuss the case unless I believe she may be in danger.”

“That’s a curious thing to say,” said the attorney.

“Clay didn’t do it. It’s obvious that someone is framing him. If it looks like they aren’t fooling Trey, they might want to harm her. Some guy in a fancy SUV came by her place this morning after she left. I sent him on his way, but I won’t have Trey out there by herself.”

The attorney smiled, not the polite smiles she’d been sharing up to this point, but a genuine one. “It would appear chivalry isn’t dead. Apparently, it’s alive and well in Idaho. I’ll need to find a place to set up an office to work.”

“You’re welcome to the study,” offered Cash. “Or you might want to consider the guest house. You could have a place to stay and an office. It’s nicer than any of the hotels in the area and you’d have immediate access to all of us.”

The attorney nodded. “If you’ll quit treating me like some idiot city girl, call me Kennedy, and agree to let me borrow a horse to ride, I think Cash’s idea makes a lot of sense.”

“You ride?” asked Clay.

“I do. I lost my horse last year and just haven’t had the heart or the time to find a new one. I miss riding. It’s my Zen place. I do some of my best thinking on the back of a horse. I grew up close to the Bear Paw Mountains. If possible, I’d like to get set up and call my firm. I’ll let them know we have a new client and that I’ll be here for the duration of the case.” She turned to Cole. “Unless that’s a problem for you.”

“No. I don’t live here, and it was a long time ago,” he replied.



“Come on, Ms. Gre... Kennedy,” said Cash. “I’ll take your bags out to the guest house and open it up for you.”

“That would be great. At some point soon, I’d like to talk to each of you individually. You all need to know that a trial like this isn’t a sprint, it’s a marathon. Clay, can I have some time with you later today?”

He nodded. “I need to ride up to check on one of the herds, but I’ll be back in the early afternoon.”

“Good. How about two o’clock?”

“Sure.”

“Clay, this is going to be hardest on you. If possible, I’d prefer you didn’t go off on your own. If you could take a ranch hand or one of your brothers, that would be helpful.”

“Okay, if you think it’s necessary,” hedged Clay.

“I do. Part of our issue right now is that you have no alibi. That’s an easy fix for the future.”

“Kennedy?” said Cash. “Why don’t we slip out the back? I haven’t heard Lorna and her lawyer leave.”

“Lorna is your father’s widow?” asked Kennedy. “Can I ask why she’s retained counsel?”

“Money,” the brothers said in unison.

Kennedy nodded. “Cash, why don’t you fill me in on that situation. I’ll see if we can’t deal with that as well. I need all of you focused on keeping Clay from being charged, and if he is, then we pivot to clearing his name.”

Cash led Kennedy out, and Cade turned toward the foyer.

“Cade? I can handle Lorna. I suspect you have things you’d rather be doing,” said Cole.

“You’re all right with her handling Clay’s case?”

“Yes. As I said, I know first-hand how good she is at making people believe what she wants them to.”

“Come on, Clay. I’ll ride out with you,” said Cade.

## CHAPTER 8

When the call ended, Trey stood looking at her phone with an odd expression. He hadn't sounded angry, but she had a sneaky suspicion that he was. The disconcerting part was the way her pussy clenched when thinking about his words earlier today. She feared that come tomorrow morning, her ass would hurt more than it did now. And what he said about the Sheriff and his wife, was that true as well?

Sitting down at her desk, she ran through her messages and made a note of those she needed to return, including one to Doc Walker. She ran through the reports and the few notes in the file Dorothy had left on her desk from Hannah's death. Most interesting was that Lorna's alibi in Hannah's case had never been verified, or if it had, no notes had been made. *Curious.*

Trey looked up to find the Sheriff standing in her doorway.

"You know what you're doing?" he asked.

"I do. I know what the evidence says, but I don't think Clay did it. I give you my word, I will work this case like any other."

"He has means, motive, and opportunity," said the Sheriff.

Trey nodded. "I know."

Noticing the file on her desk. "Just curious or do you think they're connected?"

“I find it interesting that two people in the same family were killed. I know one was ruled accidental, but it’s curious that an excellent horsewoman with a well-trained, steady horse died from a riding accident and her husband was later shot in the back. Just a bit too coincidental for me. The problem is that there’s nothing in the file to suggest foul play.”

“That’s a cold case, Trey. Focus on what happened to Cyrus and keep your professional distance from the Waverlys,” he said before he walked away.

Professional distance? That was a bit difficult to do when your prime suspect’s big brother spent every night in your bed fucking you silly and had a bad habit of spanking you when he felt you were out of line or putting yourself at risk.

Trey looked down at the text from Cade. She pulled up the database for license plates and ran the one from the SUV that he’d said had been at her place. It came back as belonging to a rental company that specialized in luxury rentals. Cade was right. Something was off. There was no one she knew who would need to rent something like that, so she placed a call to the company.

“Good morning. Executive Rentals. How can we help?”

“Good morning. I’m Deputy Mitchell from Appaloosa County. I understand you have a navy-blue BMW SUV currently leased.”

“Someone has given you incorrect information.”

“Really? I ran the plate, and it is registered to your company for that vehicle.”

“I’m so sorry, Deputy,” said the person on the other end of the phone. “We do have a navy-blue BMW SUV, but we just reported it stolen. We have a rather large fleet of cars that are kept in a secure storage facility. This morning when our security guard did his physical check of each vehicle, he reported it missing. We double checked and our records don’t show it as leased out, so we called the police.”

“How often does your security guard do his physical check?”

“Once a week.”

More to herself, Trey said, “So, it could have been missing for that entire length of time. Thank you for your help. I’ll follow up with the police.”

*What the hell? Somebody that Cade had felt was not on the up and up shows up at her house in a stolen Beamer? There was most definitely something going on.*

Shep stuck his head in the office. “Trey? We got a report of an SUV parked at Wes’s diner. He said he knocked on the window and got no response. He thinks the guy may be dead.”

“Shit. Let me guess, a navy-blue Beamer?”

“Wes didn’t mention the make, but he did say dark blue.”

“Can you call Doc Walker and have him meet me? Then call Wes and tell him to keep everyone away from it and that I’m on the way.”

“Will do,” said Shep. “I’ll let the Sheriff know as well. What the hell is going on? Two bodies in a week?”

“I have no idea, Shep, but I can tell you that I mean to find out.”

Trey grabbed her keys, her sidearm, and her jacket before driving a route that was all too familiar. The diner, while technically still within the city limits, was just off the highway at the edge of town. She pulled up, got out, and donned her latex gloves. A quick check told her that the driver’s side door was unlocked, so she opened it and felt for the driver’s pulse. The man appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties. His hair was short and silver grey. He was wearing what appeared to be an expensive pair of linen trousers and a cashmere sweater, not exactly what a local would wear in this part of Idaho. Not only was there no pulse, but the man felt cool to the touch. No immediate cause of death was visible, but she looked around for clues, nonetheless. She’d just finished an initial review when Doc Walker pulled into the parking lot.

“Hey, Doc. I need a couple of minutes to cordon off the area and take some pictures before I let you take a look at the body.”

Quickly and efficiently, Trey had the area taped off with yellow crime scene tape and began taking photographs, some official, some not. When she was on the passenger side of the car, she managed to take a couple of pictures of the body and SUV with her phone and send them to Cade.

Before opening the door to the Beamer or allowing Doc into her crime scene, she dusted all four doors and was able to lift a number of fingerprints. After opening the driver's side door, she dusted the seatbelt receptacle, the steering wheel, the rearview mirror, and several other buttons in the interior.

“Okay, Doc. We're good to go.”

Her phone vibrated and she looked down at a text from Cade.

*That is the SUV from this morning, but not  
the man. The guy this morning was at  
least twenty years younger.*

*What the hell was going on?*

Doc Walker stood and Trey joined him. “He's been dead a while. His body temp has dropped, but he's still in rigor. I'll be able to tell you more once I get him on the table. Can I get him out of the vehicle?”

“Sure, Doc. I'll give you a hand,” said Trey.

“Trey,” said Wes, the diner's owner. “Let me help the doc with that.”

They spread the body bag on the stretcher and maneuvered the corpse into it before carrying it to Doc's vehicle.

“I'll let you know what I find,” said the doctor.

“Wes, can I speak with you?”

“Sure thing, Trey. How can I help?”

“First, I'll get this car hauled off as soon as possible,” said Trey.

“Don't worry about it, Trey. You do what you need to do. Any idea who he is... or was?”

“Not a clue. I had a report of this SUV being out at my place, but this is not the guy who was driving.”

“Maybe he was a passenger?” said Wes with a shrug.

“Maybe. I want to see if I can find anything else, but I’ll give the tow service a call and have it taken to the station.”

“No need. Mikey should be here in about half an hour. He comes by every day about the same time.”

*Life in a small town.*

She went back to her Jeep and pulled out a portable vacuum, placed a new bag in the catch container and began running the machine over the floorboards, seats, and cargo space, then changing bags when the first one filled. Trey went over the windshield wipers, collecting anything that had been caught in the blades, as well as removing dirt and debris from each of the vehicle’s tires, carefully labelling each evidence bag.

Securing the evidence in the locking compartment of her Jeep, she walked into the diner, caught Wes’s eye and waved to let him know she would be leaving. Her personal cell vibrated in her pocket as she walked to her car. She glanced at the screen to find a message from Cade.

*Text me before you head for your place.*

She shook her head and smiled, wondering why she wasn’t feeling suffocated or outraged that Cade seemed intent on protecting her. She knew she should, but she didn’t. Instead, what she felt was as if a soft, warm blanket had been settled around her. The thought made her laugh. There was nothing soft about Cade, and he was far from warm... more like scorching hot.

After another quick trip, she was back at her office. The department was too small to have its own true forensics lab, but from the time she joined, she’d pushed to buy equipment and systems to run some testing on their own.

“Hey, Trey,” called Dorothy. “The doc said he had a light morning with live patients and thought he might have something for you by the end of the day.”

“Thanks, Dorothy,” she said as she continued into her office before locking up her sidearm and checking her messages.

Finding none, Trey headed into the makeshift lab. One of the first things she’d managed to allocate funds for was a scanner and connection with the national databases so they could examine and compare fingerprints. On quick analysis, it appeared they had seven separate and distinct prints for Trey to scan in. While that process completed, she next went to work on the material she’d taken from the tires.

Shep stuck his head into the lab. “Trey? It’s a quiet day. The Sheriff sent me to see if I could help. He’s not real happy about two deaths in less than a week.”

“He’s not the only one. If you could start going through what I collected from the car’s interior, that would save me a lot of work,” she said.

“Sure. What are you working on? This stuff just fascinates me, and I appreciate you teaching me.”

She smiled at Shep. He was a good deputy.

“The more I can teach you, the more help I have,” she said.

She began examining the debris from the tires. As the results came back, she recognized they were all too familiar. She compared them to some of the dirt in and around Cyrus’s corpse and from on the top of the mesa. The results were conclusive: they matched.

“Shep? I need to go check on something. Could you try and keep an eye on the fingerprint check? Call me if we get a hit.”

Trey went back to her office, grabbed her sidearm, and headed back out to the Jeep. She drove directly to the site of Cyrus’s death. Once she’d left her vehicle, she was able to see the new tire tracks as well as the footprints of two individuals, one with a larger shoe size than the other. She made quick work of taking measurements and pictures before getting back in her Jeep and driving to where she could climb to the top of

the mesa. Once again, she found evidence of new activity, footprints and what looked to be signs of a scuffle.

She was squatting down examining the lip of the edge when she heard a low growl directly behind her. She turned around slowly to see two mountain lions stalking her. They were enormous specimens, similar to the one she had encountered when she'd been attacked on the Appalachian Trail. What was even more frightening was they appeared to be working in tandem. Mountain lions in the wild were solitary creatures. In a captive environment, they could work together collaboratively. Trey cursed herself for having left her rifle back in her Jeep. Her sidearm was holstered and she worried that if she tried to remove it, the two predatory animals would leap and get to her before it could do her any good.

The smaller of the two large cats growled again, and she could not recall ever hearing a more menacing sound. Her back was to the edge and each time she crept to the left or right, the two predators changed their trajectory, crouching, tails swaying back and forth slowly, ears flattened against their skulls—all signs of agitation and aggression.

“Trey, freeze. Don't move,” called Cade from a rock outcropping at the top of the mesa.

What was he doing here and why was he naked? She estimated he was at least twenty-five feet up and forty feet away from her. Both mountain lions looked in his direction but focused back on her the moment she took a step.

“Damn it, Trey. Stand still,” Cade yelled as he took a step back and then ran three strides toward the edge of the rocky ledge above.

“Cade!” she screamed as he made a leap off the edge.

Trey stumbled back and fell to one knee as the man in whose arms she'd spent the rapturous night before shimmered in mid-air and became a beast. Where the hot male should have been, a mountain lion of exceptional size and the most extraordinary deep golden coat leaped in his place. He roared



as he landed and bounded toward the other two cougars. Both turned to confront Cade.

*But how could it be Cade? Was she dreaming? Had she hit her head?*

All three large cats snarled and growled at each other, two against one. It had become obvious that the first two mountain lions were united in their defense from and attack upon she and Cade. Teeth gnashed and inflicted gaping wounds and claws lashed out, opening lacerations. The largest of the three, the one she struggled to think of as Cade, had the advantage in that he was bigger, stronger, and faster, but was still outnumbered. Again and again, the pair tried to split and get on either side of Cade, but he was clearly the better fighter.

Trey managed to scramble to her feet and took off running toward her Jeep as soon as an opening presented itself.



Cade watched her run, glad she was getting to safety, then he focused on his two opponents. He was sure one was Lorna, which didn't surprise him. Even though Trey had verified her alibi, he hadn't been convinced that Lorna didn't have a hand in Cyrus's death. But who was the cat with her? It was a male and smelled vaguely of Lorna, meaning she'd either been intimate with it recently or it was part of her original claw.

The pitched battle of two against one continued with both sides inflicting wounds. Cade knew for the most part, that his wounds were only a bit more than superficial, but still painful. He tried to be careful of Lorna. After all, she'd been married to Cyrus and had been part of their claw. He wanted a chance to talk to her, to find out exactly what she knew before he booted her out of Koyama'.

They tried splitting again to get on either side of him, but Cade lashed out with his front paw, catching the male all along his ribs and opening up a wound that would need medical attention sooner rather than later. Lorna screeched and Cade whirled to confront her, batting her head and knocking her

senseless. When he turned back to the other cat, it appeared ready to slink away but Lorna attacked Cade by slashing at his hindquarters with her razor-sharp claws. He whirled and snarled but stopped when he heard footsteps approaching.

Trey reached the top of the mesa, rifle in hand. The male cougar gathered himself to leap at her and Cade shifted back before shouting her name. As the large cat pounced, Trey brought the rifle to bear and fired, dropping the enormous animal on top of her.

“Toby!” screamed Lorna once she’d shifted to her human form.

Cade watched his mate struggle to push Toby’s body off her own as Lorna, who’d shifted again to her beast, sprang toward Trey. Cade caught her mid-jump, catching her by the neck and snapping it, killing Lorna instantly. Exertion and blood loss had taken its toll as he dropped to one knee. Trey scrambled to her feet and ran toward him, pushing Lorna’s body away from his.

“Cade, my God, are you all right? What the hell is happening? Shit! Never mind! We need to get you to Doc Walker’s so he can stabilize you for transport to a hospital. These claw marks are deep,” she said in a rush.

Cade growled low and when he saw that she could feel the reverberations coming from deep inside him, he changed it to a low and seductive purr. He could smell her immediate reaction. Her nipples beaded, her skin flushed, and her arousal kicked in. He knew her scents and knew how she responded to his purring when they fucked.

Cade grabbed her upper arm and began to lead her further away from the bodies. Trey stopped, her foot kicking at the back of his knees before sweeping his legs from underneath him and landing him flat on his ass. She tried to jerk her arm out of his grasp, but Cade pulled her forward, tipping her so that she fell on top of his body.

“You’re going to explain to me what just happened and why it is that you never mentioned you were some kind of... I

don't even know what to call you. Let go of me, you arrogant prick!"

"My cock is a lot of things at the moment, hard, randy, and hurting, but not arrogant," he said before dragging her further into his arms and crushing her mouth to his.



She was laying on Cade in the middle of the mesa where Lorna and someone named Toby had just been killed. Her lover, it appeared, was some kind of... she didn't even have a name for it. And Cade thought they were just going to have a quick fuck before they buried the bodies? He'd better think again.

She could feel the heat of his body, and without thought, she inhaled his strong, masculine scent. He smelled clean but earthy at the same time. Cade had always seemed as though he belonged in the wild. Buildings didn't suit him at all. Suits didn't work for him either. Cade was all cowboy, all man with his blue jeans, white broadcloth western shirt, silver laced belt that closed with a sterling trophy buckle, and snakeskin cowboy boots. His Levi's only complimented his gorgeous ass and strong thighs and did little to hide when his hard cock bulged behind his fly, pressing against the buttons and threatening to pop them open.

Only he wasn't a man at all, or at least he wasn't a man all of the time. They needed to talk about that, but at the moment, Cade wasn't showing any interest in talking. He lifted his hands and pulled her dark hair free before he ran his fingers through it, untangling her curls and teasing it between his thumbs and forefingers. He locked her head in place while he continued his sensual assault on her mouth. She could feel and hear the rhythmic purring that resonated within him.

One hand left her hair to snake down her spine, slipping under the waistband of her uniform to caress the curve of her ass. She opened her mouth, whether to protest or moan, she

wasn't sure. Her nipples tightened and desire coursed through her system, churning in her belly and swirling lower.

As his tongue surged into her mouth, arousal flared and she clutched at him, desperately returning the kiss. She didn't know what seeing him turn into a mountain lion meant, but the man beneath her was the one she knew intimately. The one she'd given her heart to. This was no seductive teasing or coaxing; this was a commanding sensory onslaught. His tongue slid over and around hers as he sought to possess her in some feral, primal way.

"No," she sighed, trying to break his sensual reverie, but failing.

She couldn't allow this to happen. There was something in the way Cade touched her, kissed her, that made her feel drugged. She'd heard the expression "drunk on kisses," but this was far more than some casual, tipsy feeling. This was full on addiction. She feared if she didn't stop him, she might not be able to survive him.

He rolled with her so that she was beneath him as he made a place for himself between her thighs. This was madness. He continued to hold her in place with his hand fisting her hair, tugging at her scalp. He lifted his lips from hers. She should cry out, scream, anything other than moan with some kind of manic need.

Cade tugged the shirt of her uniform over her head, unfastened her bra, rendering her naked from the waist up. She needed to feel him skin on skin. She rubbed her beaded nipples against his softly furred chest, the coarse hair she found there stimulating her even more.

Her hands reached up to grasp Cade's ass, like chiseled marble, but far warmer to the touch.

"No, Cade..."

"Yes, Trey," he insisted as he tugged her pants down past her ass and she shimmied to help him in spite of herself.

The weight of his body felt right as he pressed her into the dirt. His massive cock throbbed with an even stronger, faster

beat. It pulsed against her lower belly, stretching almost to her navel.

Cade slipped his hand between them, pressing his thumb to her completely engorged clit as he brought his mouth down on hers once again, swallowing her pleased scream. His hand moved lower, stroking her wet, swollen sex as her legs stiffened in anticipation of the growing swell of desire simmering within her. His fingers moved into her pussy, curling up to stroke her deeply. With one skilled move, he removed his fingers and pinched her clit hard, snatching her away from the crest of her orgasm.

Trey wriggled and Cade eased up, tugging her pants down further. She winced a bit from the spanking the night before when his weight pressed her onto the hard-packed ground, but she was far more focused on Cade as his cock seemed to zero in on her wet heat.

He claimed his place between her legs, the one they both knew had always been his. He pushed into her, and the large, bulbous head of his cock breached the opening to her core as he sank inside. She'd been so close that all it took to send her flying was feeling his hard length as it settled into her completely. She floated in ecstasy and wondered if it would always be this way between them.

Cade remained still, allowing her spirit to return to her body. She had no doubt that there was more to this than just lust. Cade was staking a claim on her in light of the earlier revelation. She tried to wriggle away from him, but he reached under her to cup her ass in his hands as he dragged his cock back and surged forward all the way to his root.

“No, Trey. Let me have you. Give over to me. Please.”

He said the last in an anguished tone and she knew what that plea had cost him. Cade was proud and tough, and he was used to taking not asking. As he thrust forward again, she allowed herself to go soft and to accept the power of their need for one another. Cade began to fuck into her with a brutal intensity that sent her soaring into a tornado of hunger and desire.

Any coherent thoughts she might have had or intellectual arguments she might have made fled in the face of his relentless pounding. Over and over, he ravaged her, his rhythm not even failing for a moment when she climaxed repeatedly. It was as if lightning struck and flared throughout her body, the rolling thunder following close behind. The world collapsed until it contained only the two of them and the storm that raged between them.

Cade grunted and groaned as he hammered her pussy, all the while surrounding her with a pulsing, purring noise that seemed to block out all else. Slamming his pelvis against hers, grinding against her clit, he drove into her harder and harder.

“Come for me, Trey. Come fly with me,” he growled next to her ear.

Trey cried out as carnal pleasure swept over them both. As her orgasm crashed through her, Cade savagely spilled everything he had into her pussy. Her muscles contracted around him, greedily squeezing every last bit of cum there was to take.

Cade collapsed on top of her, nuzzling her neck as his hands skimmed over her skin to soothe and restore reason by comforting her raging emotions.

“We’re not done, Trey,” he crooned. “Not by a long shot. We’ll work it out. I can explain everything.”

“I don’t know that you can, but I’m willing to listen.”

He shook his head. “It’ll have to wait. We need to get dressed and get rid of these bodies.”

“No way. You’ll bleed out.”

“I won’t. I’ll be weaker than normal for a day or two and it wouldn’t hurt to get the wounds washed out and bandaged, but I’ll heal.”

He reached for her as the color drained from her face, catching her hand, grateful she didn’t pull away.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

The air around him shimmered and he shifted from man to mountain lion. Taking two strides, he leaped to the top of the outcropping, only to return a few minutes later with his clothing in his mouth. He landed with a grace she could only admire. Cade shifted back and re-dressed, pulling his boots on last.

“Why don’t we go sit on that rock for a minute,” he said gently.

“Did I really see what I think I saw?” she whispered. “Please tell me I’m dreaming or got into some nasty drugs or something other than...” She just shrugged, unsure of how to finish that sentence.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. You saw Lorna and I shift between mountain lion and human.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is.”

Cade thought it was best to let her lead the discussion. Trey ripped the bottom portion of her shirt off and began pressing it against the deepest of his wounds, trying to staunch the blood loss. He knew it wasn’t necessary, but figured it gave her something to do.

“She called him Toby.”

“She did. I think her brother’s name is Toby. I never met him.”

“So, he was part human too?”

“Yes. What were you doing up here?”

“My job. I found debris that matched this area in the tires of that SUV, so wanted to take another look. The better question is, what were you doing out here?”

“I had a hunch Lorna might be involved in Cyrus’s death as well as my mother’s. I went with Clay earlier in the day to check on one of his feral herds. We ran into two of our hands who mentioned Lorna had left the house earlier, so I sent Clay back to the ranch with them and came to see if maybe she’d come out here. I found her horse and another one I didn’t

recognize. I was on my way to find out what she was doing and let you know.”

“You shouldn’t be playing cop, Cade. It could look bad for Clay.”

“No doubt Kennedy would agree with you.”

“Kennedy Greyson?” she asked, and he nodded. “She’s a helluva lawyer.”

“You know her?”

Trey nodded. “Only by reputation. I also know she doesn’t tend to defend people she feels are guilty unless there is a larger, constitutional issue at stake. What did you see?”

“They were already stalking you when I arrived. I thought I told you I wanted to know your whereabouts.”

“You did, but I have a job to do. I’ve already got the sheriff warning me off you and questioning my ethics for sleeping with you. I could lose my job if he found out I was feeding you information.”

“I understand, but surely you can see that you’re playing out of your league with all of this. It isn’t safe for you. Tell Russ you’re taking a leave of absence.”

“I’ll do no such thing. Besides, you’re better off with me as the lead investigator, remember? At least *I* don’t think Clay is guilty.”

“Do you not understand,”—he said, letting his anger get the better of him—“that they would have killed you? They’d have made sure you went over the edge, then shifted back, and obscured the prints and evidence of what really happened. If I hadn’t been here, you’d be dead.”

“In case you missed it, I’m the one that killed Toby.”

“Only because I was here to confront them and give you a chance to get away, which is what you should have done.”

“And left you to face the two of them alone?” she said as she finished dabbing at his injuries.

“I was never in danger.”



“My bloody shirt says differently.”

“I was about to finish him off when you returned and made yourself a target.” He rumbled before continuing, “Plus, I wanted a chance to question Lorna...”

“Questioning suspects is my job.”

“Not questioning a mountain lion shifter. Lorna was a nasty piece of work as a human. Shifted, she could have killed you with a single swipe of her claws, here—” he ran his finger across her throat “—or here,” he stroked her mid-section. “But because I had to keep her from ripping your esophagus out, I had to snap her neck. Now, I’ll never know what she might have told us.”

Trey looked at the two bodies. “Will they stay like that? Like cougar skeletons?”

He nodded. “Once the body dies, it remains in the state it died in. In some ways, this is better.”

“How do you figure?”

“Two mountain lion carcasses are easier to explain.”

“But they’re huge...”

“Larger than normal cougars have been seen in our area before.” He motioned to himself.

“Were they—what did you call them or you—shifters?”

“Yes. Shifters have hidden in plain sight alongside humans for as far back as anyone can remember. Our beginnings as a species are told in the legends around this area, but shifters of all kinds are located throughout the globe. I suspect shifters evolved along parallel lines with humans.” He paused, realizing they did not have time to spare. “We need to get rid of the bodies.”

“I can’t be a part of tampering with evidence.”

“So, you’re going to try and convince the world that shifters exist?”

Trey was silent. He watched as a myriad of emotions played across her beautiful face. “What am I going to do?” she

asked quietly.

“You’re going to figure out what happened to Cyrus. Once you know that, you can figure out how best to proceed.”

“If non-shifters found out about you...”

He nodded. “But once you know the truth, maybe we can shape the evidence to lead to the correct conclusion even if we have to keep some of what happened hidden.”

She looked at him sharply. “What do you know?” she asked suspiciously.

He sensed this was one of those moments of truth. “Nothing, I swear.”

“It wasn’t Clay, was it?”

“No. I don’t think Clay was anywhere close to here when it happened. I found Cyrus’s body; I erased evidence of my having been on top of the mesa, but what happened up there had already been obscured. Then, I called the sheriff’s department.”

“If you didn’t think Clay was involved, why go to all that trouble?”

“Because I didn’t know what happened, didn’t know where my brothers had been. All four of us hated Cyrus, but even though I didn’t believe any of us would have shot him in the back, I needed to know for sure. We might have killed him, but we’d have done it face-to-face.”

“Did you think it happened up here? Is that why you went up here?”

He nodded. “It was pretty easy to see he’d fallen, so I searched around and found a pebble covered in blood.”

“Oh my God, Cade...”

“I know. I should have given it to you right away. For what it’s worth, I was going to tell you tonight and give it to you. It’s been wrapped in my handkerchief since I found it.”

“You’re damn right you should have given it to me. Shit. Okay, maybe we’ll tell them that I called you to meet me here

and we found it together.”

He nodded. “That could work. Does Doc know anything more?”

“Maybe, but this is so far out of bounds, that I don’t know who to turn to.”

“You can trust me, Trey. I know I’ve kept things from you, major things, but I swear that’s all of it.”

“For the record, I’m a bit freaked out by the whole shifter thing, but I don’t think any of your family did it either. The doc doesn’t think it was Lorna.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it was a forty-four caliber and unless you’re very good with firearms and have some strength, the recoil can be a bitch. He also doesn’t think it was a modern revolver. Something about the damage done to the interior of the body. Doc may be just a good ole country doctor, but he’s one hell of a medical examiner. Jesus, Cade, this is a mess.”

“I know. But we’re on the same page now. No secrets. If it comes down to a choice, I will choose you, over Clay, over my other brothers, over Koyama’, anything.”

Tears welled in her eyes and he kissed her softly. “I know what your family and Koyama’ mean to you.”

“They mean nothing compared to you. I love you. Cash, Cole, and Clay are my brothers, but you are my bonded spirit, my mate, my everything. Nothing comes before you.”

She reached out and took his hand in hers. “I love you, too. And I choose you over any job. Nothing comes before you.” She glanced around as if remembering where they were. “I’m going to want to know more about what a bonded spirit is, but we need to get moving.” After another pause, she continued, “Do you think Cyrus’s death is connected to your mother’s?”

“I don’t know. All four of us have always believed he had something to do with my mother’s death, but now I wonder if maybe Lorna was somehow responsible.”

“How so? I mean I know he married her fairly quickly afterwards.”

“Lorna’s claw, kind of like an extended family or clan, sent her to Koyama’ when they couldn’t find a mate for her and she was getting out of hand. I suspect they thought that with four sons, Cyrus could force a match, but I think when Lorna realized none of us were interested, she set her sights on the old man.”

“But to get him, she had to get rid of your mother.”

He nodded. “Exactly. By the time I left Delta Force, he’d moved her into another room, fucked her only occasionally, and paraded her around as arm candy. He had her on a restricted allowance.”

“You think she thought if he died, she’d inherit?”

“I’d bet money on it, but now I’ll never know for sure.”

“So, who do you think the dead guy in the SUV was?”

“Not a clue,” he said. “I wonder if we can get a picture from somewhere of Toby?”

“Do you think he might have been the guy you ran off from our place this morning?”

“Makes sense. And it also shores up my argument for you not being out there on your own.”

“Cade...”

“Enough, Trey. We need to bury these bodies. Afterward, we’ll go back to our place and figure out our next move.”

He extended his hand to her and was greatly relieved when she took it.

“Is this why you left me all those years ago?” she asked softly, increasing the strength of her grip when he tried to pull away.

“Yes, normally shifters and humans don’t work out. But when I found out you were in D.C., I’d hoped. And when I went out for a run, I saw you on the Appalachian Trail...”

“Oh my God, you were the mountain lion!”

He nodded. “I couldn’t stay away any longer. I never stopped thinking about you, Trey. Never.”

“So, we’ll be the exception?”

He stopped, turning her into his arms and bringing his lips down on hers in a kiss that was at once commanding and entreating. She melted into his embrace and softened her mouth, allowing him to lead.

“We’ll be so much more than that, Trey.”

## CHAPTER 9

They worked together to dig a deep hole a good distance from the foot of the mesa. Cade lifted and carried both bodies down, dumping them unceremoniously. As he started to cover them with dirt, he sent Trey looking for their clothes. When she found them, she returned and helped him fill in a layer of rocks before adding in the garments, dousing them with what smelt like gasoline, and lighting them afire.

“You watch the fire and I’ll go up top to make sure we didn’t leave anything behind,” he said.

She shook her head. “No, let me. My job is finding evidence, so I’ll be better at getting rid of it.”

“Trey, I’m sorry.”

She smiled. “I should be, but I’m not. I do, however, have so many questions.”

He kissed her. “I’m sure you do, but let’s save those for later. Take a rifle with you. I don’t want you getting out of your vehicle again without one.”

“Are all shifters as bossy as you?”

“No, only those in love with a chief investigator who seems bent on putting herself in danger, which by the way, we’ll be having a discussion about all of this when we get home.”

She hated the way her pussy clenched, and her nipples stiffened in response to his veiled threat. It was the damnedest

thing. Every once in a while, she would feel a kind of delicious shudder run through her when she thought about the spankings he'd given her. She didn't like the pain, but the feelings of peace and being cared for were just this side of addictive.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to take into consideration that I did save your life and I've had kind of a rough day?"

Cade leaned over and kissed her. "I would point out that neither would have been necessary if you'd done what you were told and kept yourself safe."

"How about if I pointed out that it can be a little disconcerting to realize the man you've been in love with your entire adult life is actually not completely human?"

He kissed her again. "Points for telling me you love me regardless of that fact, but again, you wouldn't have known that were it not for your own recklessness. And before you get pissy with me, I was planning to tell you the other night, only Cyrus went and got himself murdered, but I'm glad you know now. There's a whole lot more you need to know, but we'll get to that once we've dealt with your disobedience."

"Don't I have any say in... in any of this?"

"You can always speak your mind, Trey, but at the end of the day, I make the rules and your job is to follow them. When you don't, I'll decide how and when you get punished. And don't get all high handed and indignant with me. I'm a mountain lion shifter and I can smell your arousal. The fact is that you get all kinds of turned on by the idea of being held accountable by me."

Trey debated whether or not to admit he was right and realized she didn't need to. His comment had been a statement of fact, not a question.

"How are we going to explain Lorna and Toby's disappearance?"

"We're not. I've got their clothes," he said tossing them into the fire. "We're going to untie their horses and spook

them and let them run home. When they get back to the ranch or wherever, someone can file a report and search for them. Once I get done with burying them, they won't be found."

"I don't think I ought to try and pull Toby's driver's license."

"I agree, but when it's known Lorna is missing, we can reach out to her family and maybe get it then."

"Do you think he was the one that confronted you?" she asked.

"I do. Does anyone know the dead guy in the SUV wasn't the one that came out to your place?"

"No. I barely even mentioned that you saw the SUV at my place."

"My truck is parked on the other side of the mesa. You stay here and make sure no one finds the bodies. I'll go get it. I've got some lye in my truck. We'll add that and some water to the hole. I've also got some charcoal and we can add that and once they've burned down to embers, I'll finish filling it in."

Trey smiled. "Should I be worried you seem to know an awful lot about the disposal of bodies and body parts?"

"Usually only needed for the carcasses of dead cattle and the like."

"Good to know."

They spent the next several hours ensuring the bodies would not be discovered and that nothing could be traced back to either Trey or anyone at Koyama'. Once finished, they headed back to Trey's place with Cade following her Jeep in his truck.

She glanced up in the rearview mirror and shook her head. She wondered how it was that she was so calm and happy in the face of all that had happened. And she was happy. The idea of spending her life with Cade filled her with a combination of joy and lust. True, they had some things to work out, the whole shifter business first and foremost, but there was a kind



of peace in understanding what had driven him away the first time and that he was committed to spending his life with her.

Before pulling away from the parking area, Trey checked her messages and found one from Doc Walker. She'd returned the call and ended up leaving a message for him. After several minutes, her phone rang, and not for the first time, she was grateful for hands-free technology.

"Doc? You called me."

"I did. I have some preliminary results for you on the body from the SUV."

"Anything interesting?"

"Yes. He died from a large dose of neurotoxins, which caused paralysis of his heart and lungs."

"That sounds nasty. Any idea how he was poisoned?"

"That's where it gets interesting. I also found a load of hemotoxins in his system," said the doctor with a chuckle.

"My degree was in criminal justice not chemistry."

"A cocktail of this kind would be unusual for someone hoping to poison someone but is often found in rattlesnake venom."

"He died of a snake bite?"

"Yes. Most rattlesnake venom has more hemotoxins than neurotoxins, but in our corpse's case the neurotoxins were far more abundant."

"So, somebody dosed him with rattlesnake venom?" she asked.

"Not exactly. Given my preliminary findings, I went over this guy with a magnifying glass, literally, and could not find an injection site. What I did find was evidence of an actual snake bite. From the looks of it, a rattler... and a big one."

"Couldn't someone have made two injection sites close together to mimic a bite mark?"

“They could have, but they didn’t. There wouldn’t have been any evidence of necrosis of the surrounding tissue or swelling. This had both, so I think someone used a snake to deliver the venom,” he said.

“How do you use a snake as a weapon?”

“You’d press the rattler’s mouth against the victim, like when you milk any kind of viper. Rattlers will pretty much strike at anything in front of them if provoked.”

“What makes you think it wasn’t just a run of the mill snake bite, Doc?”

“The location. Normally, you find snake bites on a person’s extremities. This one was located in his left axilla.”

“Criminal justice, not anatomy.”

He laughed. “Armpit, not a common place for a snake bite.”

“You’re right; that is interesting. So, you think it’s murder?”

“Like with Hannah, not enough to call it that, but enough abnormalities to not rule it natural causes or just an accident.”

“Ok. Thanks, Doc.”

Trey ended the call and glanced back to see Cade was still behind her. She turned off the road onto her driveway. When she’d parked, she immediately hopped out and walked into the barn to feed and check on her stock. She heard Cade’s vehicle pull in and the door slam.

“Trey,” he snarled from the doorway.

She looked up. He was holding her rifle as he moved into the interior of the barn. She’d left it on the gunrack and her handgun in the safe in her Jeep.

“What part of ‘don’t get out of your vehicle unarmed’ did you have an issue with?”

“Cade, this is my home. Besides, I keep a gun in the tack room.”

“And I’m between you and the tack room. There was a guy out here earlier looking for you and now you’ve found a dead body in the vehicle he was driving. Whoever is behind what’s going on is not above killing.”

He shook his head and walked over to the stacked bales of alfalfa, pulling one off the top and dropping it in front to make a kind of bench. He sat relaxed, with his legs open, a pronounced bulge clearly evident.

“Come here, Trey.”

“Why?”

“Because I told you to and you’re going to learn to do what I tell you. You’re going to come over here, strip naked, and settle your beautiful self over my knee.”

“Cade...”

“Now, Trey.”

This was so annoying. Yes, he’d told her not to do it, but he was right behind her and there was a gun in the tack room. But more annoying than believing he was being unreasonable was the fact that she could feel her desire surging to the forefront. No doubt about it, she found his dominance and the accountability arousing as all get out.

She took a deep breath, expelled it with a long sigh, stripped her clothes off, and went to stand in front of him. His hand came up and slipped between her legs.

“Wider,” he growled.

Well, there was a God saving grace; he was as horny as she was. He traced the petals of her sex and her knees almost buckled from the sheer pleasure he gave her. Her pussy felt like it had lit up like Christmas. He continued to finger her but brought his free hand up to smack her ass, and not a light smack either. She realized that when she put herself in danger, it scared him, and Cade Waverly was not used to experiencing fear, nor did he like it.

His fingers parted her labia, stroking slowly, seductively. She moaned. There was no hiding how turned on she was. Her

nipples were hard and beaded and her pussy was wet and ready for him.

“Over my knee, Trey.”

Her body was on high alert, anticipating what was to come, both pain and pleasure. She settled herself over his hard thigh. His jeans did little to hide the fact that he was also majorly turned on. As soon as she found her place, he closed his leg against the backs of her thighs and his hand caressed the rounded globes of her buttocks.

Cade was taking his own sweet time. She rather imagined he wouldn't respond well to her telling him to get on with it and sitting in a stable where there was lots of leather and even some crops meant pushing him was probably not a smart plan.

Anticipation settled around them both. They each knew exactly what he was going to do, and both knew how much her ass was going to hurt when he was done. However, they both understood that for them, this was the right thing to do.

*Smack!* Trey hissed at the sting. Apparently, there would be no warm-up. *Smack! Smack! Smack!* The sound reverberated all around her as she swore, and he smacked her ass even harder.

“No cursing, Trey. Especially when you're getting spanked.”

Over and over, Cade rained his discipline down on her ass. He hadn't said she couldn't cry out, just that she couldn't curse. He landed another half-dozen harsh strikes to her heated globes. Pain and warmth radiated all over her behind. She held her breath, hoping the mitigating factors she'd laid out earlier meant she'd only receive a single set of ten.

“I ought to take my belt and blister your backside, but as you pointed out, you've had kind of a difficult and stressful day. So, we'll call it good, but disobey me again before this is over, and I don't care how bad your day is, when I get done with you, you won't sit for a week.”

She sighed and tried to get up on her own.

*Smack!*

“That’s not the way this works,” he said, releasing his leg and lowering her so that she was on her knees, her mouth in line with the bulge contained behind his fly.

Fisting her hair to hold her in place with one hand, he unbuttoned his jeans with the other to release his cock so that it was pointed directly at her mouth.

“Suck it,” he commanded.

Trey leaned forward and opened her mouth. Before she could actually take it in, he impaled her mouth and throat with his fully engorged cock. She moaned and he pressed himself in harder. Her nipples were stiff, and she felt as though she was probably dripping the evidence of her need onto the hard-packed ground.

As he thrust in, she swirled her tongue around the swollen head of his staff, feeling the small bumps she hadn’t noticed when he’d thrust himself deep inside her. Cade groaned and directed her head forward and back on his cock. She wasn’t sure why or what it said about her, but she loved the way he took control away from her and used her mouth to please himself. He kept her still while shoving his cock to the back of her throat, groaning again when she swallowed to take him deeper. She felt him swell in her mouth as if he were getting ready to come.

He withdrew without warning, fisting her mane and pulling her to her feet as he hoisted her over his shoulder. He hitched his jeans up around his lean hips as he left the barn and walked to the house. He closed and locked the door behind him before striding into the bedroom. Setting her down on her feet, he turned her around and swatted her aching backside.

“Up on the bed, all fours,” he growled as he stripped himself as naked as she was, with his cock fully erect and protruding from his body.

There was something in the sound that seemed to rumble deep within his chest that forced her to comply. She’d barely gotten into position when his hands grasped her hips, and the head of his cock breached her opening.

“Cade,” she cried as a powerful climax shook her to her core when he began to ruthlessly thrust into her.

His cock felt bigger, not only that, but the nubby texture she’d also noted as he fucked her mouth was more pronounced, as if they were small spikes covering the entire length of his shaft. There was a kind of rippling effect as he pushed in, but when he dragged himself back, the barbs became more rigid as they scraped her delicate flesh. Cade fucked her with short, spearing strokes, holding her in place so she couldn’t escape him or evade his ruthless stabbing.

“Trey,” he growled as he began to plunge in and out of her. Each time he slammed his hips, she arched her back and cried out, but wasn’t sure if it was pain or pleasure as the two had begun to morph into one.

One of his arms wrapped around her, while the other hand moved her hair to one side as he nipped her neck before nuzzling it. He made a deep, purring sound close to ear in rhythm to his surging cock. He nipped her neck again before grasping the nape in his teeth and biting down hard.

Trey should have collapsed beneath him when the bite became savage, but instead she writhed in his hold in a kind of furious ecstasy. She responded to his feral possession with a primitive response of her own as a second orgasm seized her, contracting all of her muscles, including those that enveloped his cock. As her pussy clamped down on him, she yowled as the barbs covering his length dug into her sensitive flesh. He trapped her against his body, forcing her to bear his weight as he pounded into her repeatedly and the spikes rippled to tear at her inner walls as his cock retreated.

Trey cried out in ravaged revelry as he hammered her sheath with his barbed staff. The harder and longer he fucked her, the more she embraced the painful pleasure he caused. As his pelvis slammed into her bruised backside, a vicious maelstrom of desire and need seized her and forced her to capitulate to his savage claiming.

Cade made a muffled growl as he thrust a pillow under her hips and pressed her down into the bed.

Trey's arms stretched out as her fingers clawed at the bedsheet. Continuing to pummel her wrecked pussy, he moved at a frenzied pace of power and speed, the spikes digging furrows into her inner walls, sending her over the edge into a rapturous chasm as she screamed in surrendered climax. Again and again, he plunged in and out, driving himself to the end of her channel.

The other times they had fucked, there had been an animalistic quality to his possession, but this time she had a different perspective. The man who was fucking her like no other ever had—rough, furious, possessive—was part animal and she knew he was claiming her in the more primal way of his altered self.

As he gave one final, brutal thrust, she felt the barbs take hold, locking her body to his as his fangs embedded even more deeply in the nape of her neck. He held himself hard against her as his cum began to spend itself deep inside her, bathing and coating her ravaged flesh with its creamy essence. Her body responded as her muscles contracted, causing her to shudder and her pussy to clamp down, milking his cock further.

Cade released her neck as the throbbing in his staff began to slow and the spikes receded. Running his hands over her body, he made a deeply soothing and possessive male sound of satisfaction that most closely resembled the purr of a large cat. Trey felt as though a taut string within her was plucked and something alive and invasive sprang to life. He rolled from her, bringing her body close. His touch was gentle and encouraged her body to quiet so that the wildfire he'd created became warm and settled like embers that could be reignited at his will.



He hadn't meant to claim her... Well, not tonight any way. But something raw and wild that had started at the top of the mesa had overtaken him when she'd sagged against his leg as he spanked her. The mountain lion had surged forward,

demanding that he claim the woman that he'd always known to be his and that he'd loved for so long.

Trey lay against him, clinging to him as he stroked her body and allowed her to come back to herself. He knew both his fangs and the barbs had done their job to begin her transition from human to shifter. He waited until her breathing had deepened and evened and then extracted himself from beneath her. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he was loath to leave her, so stayed but reached for his phone where it had fallen to the floor in his haste to claim her. Trey stirred and he rumbled a soothing sound to her, using and strengthening the tether between them.

“Russell Langley,” the sheriff answered.

“Russ, it's Cade. It's done.”

“I knew you were planning to, but I thought you'd wait until all this was over.”

“That had been the plan, but things changed. I decided I'd waited long enough and claimed her as mine.”

“Did you tell her you were going to claim her and that she would no longer be human?”

“Not in so many words,” confessed Cade.

“Sweet Jesus! Have you lost your mind? Your brother is most likely to be arrested and prosecuted for murder while you're fucking the lead investigator. Now you tell me you've claimed her, and she'll become your mate and part of your claw, but does she know that? What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?”

“You know Clay didn't kill Cyrus and you know Trey is going to follow the evidence.”

“What I know and what the evidence says are two entirely different things.”

“Maybe, but if you charge Clay, he'll be exonerated,” stated Cade.

“Perhaps, but that might not be enough to save her career.”



“Is there a particular reason you keep threatening my mate?” he growled and was surprised at the feeling of trust and love that flowed back through the tether to him.

Her hand stroked down his back and he smiled as he looked back over his shoulder. Trey had rolled to her other side so that she was facing his back. He leaned down and kissed her gently. Her lips softened against his as he traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue, allowing it to dance with hers briefly.

Before he knew what she was about to do, she’d snatched his phone away and rolled to the other side of the bed.

“Here’s the deal, Russ,” she said sweetly. “You can keep me on the job or suspend me. If you leave me alone, I’ll solve this case if for no other reason than to prove Clay didn’t do it. If you suspend me, I’ll quit.”

“Which might make things easier for the department,” said Russ, irritated.

“Not really. If I leave, I’ll offer my services to Clay’s attorney. You do know they’ve retained the services of Kennedy Greyson, don’t you?”

Cade grinned at her. His mate knew how to play hard ball. He would just as soon they suspend her, so he could keep her closer and not have to be concerned about what she was up to.

“You can’t do that...”

“Not only can I, but I will. Think about it, Russ. Anything I find we’d have to share with the defense any way, but if I’m working for the defense, we don’t have to share anything with you.”

Russ said nothing, then sighed. “Just try to keep it on the down low. Cade asked if you could have a couple of days off. I’m okay with that, but if you find out anything on the case, I’d like your word that you’ll let me know.”

“First, I didn’t ask for any leave...”

“Well, that little love bite on the back of your neck says you’re going to need some. I meant what I said, Trey. You may

be his mate, but you work for me.”

The call ended, and she looked up at Cade as she felt the nape of her neck and winced.

“Shit, Cade. What the hell did you do to me and why don’t I remember?”

“That’s a rather long discussion that we probably should have had before I did it.”

“It feels like you bit me,” she said, accusingly.

He nodded. “I did. Shifters like me, in fact most of the cat shifters, claim their mates by biting the back of their necks.”

“Why don’t I remember that?”

“Because part of what happens is a kind of memory loss. What do you recall after I spanked you?” he said, sitting beside her and taking her hand in his.

“It’s weird, but I have a vague recollection of being tossed over your shoulder and ending up in here. I know we had amazing sex, but don’t recall a lot of details. It’s almost like I was roofied, but I know that isn’t it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t phrase that in the form of a question. I hadn’t planned to claim you tonight, but out in the barn, when you gave over, my baser instincts took control.”

She looked at him quizzically. “What does that mean?”

“When a mountain lion shifter claims a true mate, what we call a bonded spirit...”

“You used that term up on Himeen this afternoon. What is it?”

“We believe our soul looks for its other half, the one that completes them from the time we are born until we find them or die. We search for each other in each of our nine lives.”

“Only nine?” she asked a bit nervously.

“Yep, the whole nine lives thing is real.”

“And after that?”

“We ascend to a higher plane where we spend eternity with our bonded spirit.”

“And I’m yours?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I’ve known since I came into manhood.”

“So, we’ve been together before?”

“Yes, but only once. We don’t always find our bonded spirit. This is my fourth life, and this will only be the second time I’ve found you.”

“Why don’t I remember any of this?”

“Because this time you were born human not shifter.”

“And the bite mark?”

“As I said, it’s our way of claiming our mate.”

She shrugged. “None of this sounds so bad.”

“That’s because there’s more you don’t know. The bite and the way I fucked you...”

“From behind. The only other time we’ve done it in that position was when you took my ass. I liked this a lot better, but again the details are a bit fuzzy.”

“Come morning, they won’t be, or at least not the aftereffects. Unless a mountain lion shifter suppresses it, our cocks, like our feline counterparts, have barbs. They irritate and enhance the experience for our mates. When I stroke into you, it’s in the direction of the barb, but when I pull back, it goes against the grain and the spikes drag furrows inside you. If we were trying for a baby, you’d need to be in heat and then the barbs would hook deep inside you to ready your cunt to receive my seed and hold me close, so it has time to settle in you.” A look of horror crossed her face, but she tried to hide it. He kissed her. “It’s like a normal human pregnancy.”

“So, you might have got me pregnant? Does the pill have any effect? If not, you’re damn straight we should have talked about it.”

He laughed and she threw a punch, which he caught in his hand and closed his fingers around her fist. “No, Trey, you’d

need to be fully transitioned and even then, you'd need to be in heat. When it happens, the barbs will dig in during the time I'm spending myself in you and will then settle deeper as I pull out."

"Charming. No wonder your kind avoids mating with humans. I can't imagine a lot of women enjoy that."

He laughed. "You'd be surprised. Being in heat is like a kind of super arousal. When you're in estrus, all you'll want to do is fuck." He pulled her close, purring in a deep, raspy tone. "I will be more than happy to accommodate your need."

She shook her head. "Why don't I remember the barbs?"

"Because they secrete a substance that has a similar effect to a roofie and causes memory loss in those not of our kind. But after you've fully transitioned, you'll remember."

"That's convenient," she said with a bit of snark.

"That's evolution at its finest. If only our kind remembers, we have a much better chance of keeping the secret." He purred again, enjoying her involuntary shiver as she leaned against him.

"I can hear you, but more than that I can feel you," she said with a kind of reverence.

"That is the pair bond link, known as the tether, that's established by the claiming bite. It will grow stronger with time and it makes it easier for me to keep tabs on you as I'll know when you're in danger and vice versa."

"Like a kind of psychic link?" she asked.

"Yes, on both ends, but I can force the tether and compel you. I'm under no illusion that you, my beautiful mate, will want to do as you're told because you are extraordinarily strong-willed. But it will be hard for you to ignore me, and if you try, you'll get a lot longer and harder spanking than the one out in the barn."

She shook her head. "There's a part of me that thinks all of this is just perfectly normal and another part that says I should be angry and assert my rights."

“I’d go with the perfectly normal, because angry and assertive will get you put over my knee again.”

“I keep thinking I should have a million questions, but I can only come up with a few. Will the transition be painful or dangerous? Can it be reversed?”

He shook his head. “No, the transition is a one-way street. It’s only dangerous if your body rejects the toxin that causes it. You’ll probably run a low-grade fever and maybe feel like you have a mild case of the flu, thus why I called Russ. By the way, I was hoping he’d suspend you.”

“Oh my God, does he know about you?”

“Us,” he corrected. “And yes, he knows I’m a shifter because he’s one too.”

“Russ is a mountain lion?”

“No, snake.”

“How many kinds of shifters are there?”

“Almost as many as there are different kinds of animals.”

“So, is Russ a rattler? Are all shifters larger than their... What do you call animals that aren’t shifters?”

“Purebloods.”

“So, the sheriff is a large, rattlesnake shifter...”

“Why are you so interested?”

“Because the dead guy we found in the SUV this morning was killed by a large dose of rattlesnake venom that was heavy on the neurotoxins. Doc Walker said the bite was from a huge rattler in an unusual place. Wait... is Doc Walker a shifter?”

Cade shook his head. “No, but his family members have been doctors in this area for hundreds of years and have kept our secret for that long.”

“Anybody else at the sheriff’s department?”

He shook his head again. “No, but Dorothy is like Doc. She and Hal know about our kind. Do you really think Russ killed the unidentified guy?”

“I don’t want to believe it and he hasn’t interfered with my investigation, but this really puts a wrinkle in things. Was there anything about Cyrus’s body or the hoofprints above that gave you any idea about who the other horse was?”

“I’m fairly sure it was one of Clay’s horses, but a lot of our hands and Lorna like to ride them. Besides, I can’t see her rolling in his blood, and before you ask, that’s not a snake kind of thing either,” he said.

“I have a friend at the DMV. I can ask her unofficially to do some research tomorrow.” She crawled into his lap and nuzzled him. “I may not be in heat, but I’d really like to fuck you again.”

He chuckled and stood with her in his arms. “I got news for you, Trey. I’m the one that does the fucking. You’re the one who gets fucked.”

Cade took her back to bed and proceeded to prove just that.

## CHAPTER 10

When she woke in the morning, Cade was not lying beside her. Deciding to test the tether, she tried to feel him and was surprised and delighted when she did. They got up and pulled his shirt over her head before she walked into the main room of the cabin.

“Kind of cool, isn’t it?” he said as he flipped an omelet. “How are you feeling? I was going to fix this and bring it to you to share.”

“The tether is really interesting. It’s like I can hear and feel you inside my head. It’s kind of a white noise unless I focus on it. And then when I wanted you, I just had to sort of ask and the answer came to me.”

“The tether will grow stronger with time and using it will become second nature.”

“Are you linked to your brothers?”

“No, the tether only exists with one’s bonded spirit. You seem to be handling this a whole lot better than I thought you would.”

“Well, for one thing, you told me there’s no going back.”

“And for the other?” he asked.

“I’ve been crazy about you since I discovered boys.”

He smiled. “I felt the same, but I just wasn’t sure how you’d handle knowing I wasn’t human. I should have known better.”

“Will I be able to shift?”

“No. Only born she-cats can shift, but our children will be able to.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” she said, a bit disappointed.

“It isn’t. It’s also the reason I wavered on bringing you into this life. Born she-cats can be notoriously territorial and feral where transitioned she-cats are concerned. In the end, the thought of spending another life without you was just more than I could bear.”

He plated the omelet and set it on the kitchen table before taking a seat in the chair and drawing her into his lap. Sitting on a man’s lap was not something she’d done in the past, but found she quite liked it where Cade was concerned. When he reached for the fork, she slapped at his hand and then picked it up, cutting off a bite and offering it to him. Grinning, he took it and then smiled when she gave the next bite to herself.

“I don’t want you to be worried about me where born shifters are concerned. I’ve taken extensive martial arts training and am quite able to protect myself, especially if I know what to expect. With Lorna gone, do I need to worry about anyone?”

“Not anyone out at Koyama’. The married ranch hands can handle their mates.”

“Do you employ only shifters?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s just easier. We do business with anyone but living and working on a ranch is a bit more intimate than most businesses, so it’s better for everyone. It also allows our people to have a large, open range that they can roam as both human and mountain lion.”

“I feel a bit like I got left out.”

“I won’t lie to you, the ability to shift is a tremendous gift and there are times when running in your altered state can give you a new perspective on whatever is troubling you. You should know that it was during one of those runs when I made the decision that I could keep you safe and that I wasn’t willing to give you up.”



She shook her head. “You decided? You might have clued me in. That’s not entirely fair, I suppose. I keep thinking I should be furious with you for that little love nip, but I’m actually leaning toward being grateful for taking the decision out of my hands.”

“I know I should have talked to you first, but again, instinct took over and I had to have you with me.”

She leaned back into his body, happier than she could remember ever being.

“What are you going to do about Russ?” he asked.

“I want to call my friend at the DMV to see if we can identify the body, but you think the one that was with Lorna was her brother?”

“That makes the most sense.” They paused to enjoy the morning with each other and finish off the rest of the meal.

After breakfast, Trey placed the call, and the photo of Lorna’s brother was sent to her phone, which she turned to show Cade.

“I know we were sure it was her brother up on the mesa, but now we have absolute proof he wasn’t the dead guy in the SUV,” he said.

“You think he was one of the mountain lions we had to kill yesterday?”

“His prints weren’t in the system?”

“Not at all, which is kind of unusual.”

“Why?”

“I would have thought at his age that he had some kind of military service. Is there anything Doc Walker can spot in an autopsy that might let us know if he’s a shifter, and if so, what kind?”

“Not really. The internal organs of cats and humans are basically the same and they shift when the rest of the body does.”

“Hang on a minute,” Trey said, picking up her phone and calling Doc Walker.

“Trey. I wondered if I might hear from you. How are you feeling?”

“Not bad at all. I’m sending you a photo of Lorna’s brother. Is there any way to tell if he and the guy we found in the SUV are related?”

“I can compare facial features and make an educated guess, but it would be completely subjective. But if he’s related to her brother, we could run his DNA against hers.”

“Of course,” said Trey. “I’ll bring you something in just a bit. And Doc? Can we keep this just between us?”

“You know about Russ?” the doctor asked.

“I do. Cade told me. Do you think it was him?”

“I don’t want to, but he’s the only snake shifter in the area,” said Doc with a resigned tone.

Trey ended the call. “You heard?”

Cade nodded. “What do you think?”

“I’m like Doc. I don’t want to think it’s Russ, but if he’s the only snake shifter...”

“He isn’t. Russ’s wife is also a shifter.” Cade let his statement just hang in the air.

“One thing at a time. Can we go to Koyama’?”

“I’d prefer if we moved back there. I can have one of the hands come and get your livestock, but I’d sleep easier if we weren’t here by ourselves.”

“That makes some sense, but I want to get Lorna’s hairbrush to see if we can get a hair with a follicle, so Doc can run DNA.”

“But we know the dead man wasn’t Toby...”

“But what if it’s someone else related to her? You said the corpse was about twenty years older than the guy who confronted you? What about their father?”

“Their father?”

“Is he alive?”

“Far as I know. Why would he be involved and why did someone want him dead?”

“If he wanted the inheritance...”

“But Lorna didn’t inherit.”

“Did she know that?” asked Trey.

“I don’t know, but why would she frame Clay?”

“Because he can’t profit or inherit if he was involved in Cyrus’s death. She had to know that if she framed one of you, that the rest of you would do whatever it took to keep him from being convicted. If she made you out as an accessory after the fact, you can’t inherit either. So as next of kin...”

“Lorna inherits everything. But why tell her father or brother for that matter? As far as I know there was no love lost between them. She despised her father for forcing her from their claw to ours. And none of that answers why Russ, or his wife, would kill the man in the SUV.”

“The first step in figuring that out is to figure out who he is. Let’s go,” she said and hopped off his lap.

“No. You get packed, and I’ll call over to the ranch and have a couple of guys come over with a trailer. Do the donkeys load?”

She laughed. “Yes. Literally lead everybody out and up to the trailer in the order you want them to load. All of them will just walk in.”

“Maybe we’ll put you in charge of teaching our herd to load. Some of ours are good, but we also have a couple of real knot heads.”

Trey walked into her bedroom and started putting clothes into a duffle. Cade walked up behind her and wrapped her in his arms.

“It’ll be okay, Trey. You’ll figure it out and I’ll keep you safe.”

She sagged back against him. “In other words, I’m the brain and you’re the brawn?”

“That’s going to work a whole lot better than the other way around,” he teased. “You might do okay as the muscle, but I’m not sure I have what it takes to be the brains.”

She laughed. Somehow, he knew just what to say. “We’ll be back though?”

“As soon as it’s safe.” He shifted his position, picked up the duffle in one hand, wrapped his other arm around her waist and led her out to her Jeep. “One of my guys will pick up my truck.”



As they rounded the corner near the barnyard at Koyama’, Trey spotted all three of his brothers sitting on the porch waiting. She reminded herself she’d known Cade’s brothers as long as she’d known him, and it wasn’t as if it was a secret that they were together.

“For what it’s worth? They all thought I was a complete ass for how I treated you and were always rooting for us to get together.”

“I’ve been alone for so long. Having a family is going to take a little getting used to.”

He chuckled. “Not to worry. They won’t give you much of a choice.”

He helped her out of the car, grabbed her duffle, and led her up to the front porch.

“It’s about damn time,” said Cash as he leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

“I never thought he’d pull his head out of his ass,” said Clay with a grin.

Cole was quiet at first, but then said, “I don’t think Kennedy is going to like this.”

“That’s Kennedy’s issue,” said Cade. “Trey is with me and I’m not comfortable with her being out at the cabin.”

With pleasantries exchanged, they walked into the house and up the stairs. As Cade turned to the right at the top of the stairs, Cash put his hand on his arm to stop him.

“We took the liberty of cleaning Cyrus’s stuff out of the master suite and moving your things into it. We worried that Lorna would throw a fit, but she rode out yesterday. The horse she was riding came back, but she didn’t. We’ve had people out since first light.”

Cade ushered everyone into the bedroom. “Call them back and then call Russ. Lorna’s not coming back. She and another mountain lion shifter tried to kill Trey yesterday. We’re pretty sure it was her brother.”

“Are you okay?” asked Cole. She nodded. “I take it as you mentioned shifters, Trey is up-to-speed?”

“Yes. In fact, I have a love bite on the nape of my neck that your brother says is going to overwrite my DNA.”

“That is good news. Welcome to the family,” said Cash.

“Do we need to worry about the bodies?” Cole asked.

“No, they were shifted, and we disposed of them and all of their clothing that way. Did another horse come in with Lorna’s?”

Clay nodded. “Yes, one of mine, a mare that I had just turned loose with a feral herd.”

“Let Russ know they both came in so that we most likely have two missing people,” said Trey.

“Why? If the second horse leads right back to Clay,” said Cash.

“Because I’m assuming more than just you three saw the second horse and can identify it as one of Clay’s. We have to appear as if we have nothing to hide.” She looked at all four faces, all of whom were smiling. “What?”

“You said ‘we’ without even thinking about it,” said Clay with a grin.

“I understand from your oldest brother that I have little choice in that matter,” she said, glancing at Cade.

“Truth to tell, Trey, you’ve never had a choice. Not since he recognized you as his bonded spirit. He tried telling himself you were better off without him, but you’ll both be better as a bonded pair. And God knows this family could use a woman with a good head on her shoulders,” said Cash.

“Cole, you go call Russ. Cash, let Kennedy know that Trey is here and that we’re turning over the search to the authorities. Clay, you stay where someone can alibi you,” said Cade.

“What are you going to be doing?” asked Cole.

“We’re going to take Lorna’s hairbrush to Doc to see if he can pull DNA from it to match against the dead guy we found in the SUV out at the diner,” said Trey.

“And they say romance isn’t dead,” teased Clay.

Cade’s brothers left the room. “Are you okay with us being in here?” he asked.

“I am, but I was going to ask you the same question. I kind of thought when this was all over, we’d move back to my grandmother’s cabin.”

“I’m open to that, but between now and then, I think we’ll be more comfortable in here. It has an attached bath as does the largest of the guest rooms that Lorna used. We should probably put Clay in there. He has the original homestead cabin, and Cole and Cash both built places for themselves on their parcels.”

Trey nodded. “I think Clay is better off up here where people can see him.” She wrapped her arms around him. “We’ll be all right, won’t we?”

“We’ll be a helluva lot better than just all right. Now, let’s go get that hairbrush.”

After collecting the brush, they drove to Doc Walker's. The old man was sitting on his back porch as they came around the corner and smiled when he saw them together.

"About time you two went public," he said.

Both Trey and Cade laughed. "We have Lorna's hairbrush. It's in a sealed and properly catalogued evidence bag."

"Well let's take it down to my lab and see what we find. I'm surprised you aren't doing this yourself, Trey."

"I think we're better off if I take a bit of a hands-off stance with the evidence, or at the very least don't do any testing without a second person being there."

They walked down to the doctor's lab where he easily found a piece of hair with the follicle still attached. "It'll probably be at least twenty-four hours, but more likely forty-eight."

"Doc would Russ's wife have any reason to kill our John Doe?" asked Cade.

"Not that I know of," said the doctor. "But then, neither does Russ. I take it Trey knows?"

"Yes and have joined the ranks of the family. Maybe when we know who this guy is, we'll have a better idea of why he might have been killed and by who," said Trey. "Officially, I'm off-duty. We'll be out at Koyama'."

They left and headed back to the ranch. As they entered the foyer, the sound of raised voices, one of them distinctly female, could be heard from the study.

"Ready to meet Kennedy?" he said, grinning down at her.

"No time like the present," she said, taking his hand in hers as they turned toward the double doors that led into the office right off the entrance.

They opened the door to find Cole and Kennedy facing off. They both whirled to inspect Cade and Trey.

"Kennedy, may I present my fiancé, Trey Mitchell, the chief investigator."

“Fiancé? I had been led to believe your relationship was relatively new,” said the attorney. “I wasn’t aware things had progressed to that point.”

“Don’t feel bad, counsellor. I wasn’t aware either,” said Trey. “Although, I think I’m probably happier about that idea than you are.”

“I told you Trey and Cade should have been together a long time ago, but big brother there went off to be honorable and stupid,” said Cole.

“A trait that seems to run in the family,” Kennedy quipped.

“Look, Kennedy, the sheriff isn’t happy about this either, but I’ll tell you what I told him. My relationship with Cade is not going to influence how I do my job. I’ll follow the evidence wherever it may lead. I also told him that I don’t think Clay did this and that anything I find I will share with you as his defense counsel of record.”

“Is an arrest imminent?” asked Kennedy.

“Not that I’m aware of, but I’m off today and for the next couple of days. When I get back, I’ll be focused first on identifying the body we found dead in a stolen SUV parked at the diner,” answered Trey.

Kennedy focused her full attention on Trey. “Do you think the two are connected?”

“Based on the evidence? I have no opinion. We don’t know enough. Based on my gut? Yes. We’re a small town. The last time we had an unexplained death in this town was a long, long time ago. So, two in less than a week? I’m not buying it,” said Trey.

Kennedy nodded and extended her hand. “I think I may have misjudged you based on my own past interactions with small-town cops. Clay has said repeatedly that we are far better off with you at the helm of the investigation than not.”

“Tell you what, you don’t hold my being a cop against me and I won’t hold the Parenti trial against you.”

Kennedy laughed. “Deal.”



“Parenti trial?” asked Cade.

“A case the FBI worked on for three years that Clay’s attorney dismantled in less than an hour.”

“Your over-eager buddies from the Chicago PD did that. They didn’t have probable cause and they didn’t have a warrant. Fruit of the poisonous tree.”

Cole and Cade both looked at Trey, mouths slightly agape.

“It means the evidence the cops found couldn’t be used as it was tainted from an illegal search and seizure. Like I said, she doesn’t represent guilty people unless there is a larger constitutional issue at stake. Parenti was guilty as hell, but freedom from illegal search and seizure would be one of those pesky constitutional issues.”

Kennedy smiled at her. “I think, Deputy, that you and I are going to get along just fine. I’m actually very fond of good cops. They have a lousy job and when someone gets sloppy and screws up a case that should have been a slam dunk, I’m quite sympathetic. I’d like to ask that we don’t hold discussions regarding Clay’s case except in the guest house and that Trey consider the guest house off limits as I’m using it as my office.”

“I have no problem with that.”

On the heels of her agreement, Cash and Clay entered the study through the French doors that led onto the porch and the six of them headed to dinner shortly thereafter. Despite repeated assurances that she was fine, Cade was solicitous of her throughout the meal.

All were acutely aware that discussions regarding the case slowly building against Clay were off limits, but they found plenty of other things to talk about, including horses and ranching in general.

“I understand the two donkeys that joined us this afternoon are yours,” said Kennedy.

Trey nodded. “They are. In case you haven’t figured it out, they’re very friendly. Their names are Martini and Rossi. The

palomino is Loki and the sabino is Ace. All four are from the Badlands.”

“They’re not her first mustangs,” said Clay. “Trey and I were buddies growing up and I learned a lot from her when she adopted her first one and trained it to be a great ranch horse. It’s the reason we have two bands of wild mustangs here at Koyama’ and why I’m experimenting with letting some of our appaloosas return to a semi-feral state.”

When the evening ended, Cade and Trey excused themselves and went upstairs to their room. There was a beautiful hand-thrown pot filled with flowers and a note from Cash, Cole, and Clay welcoming her to the family.

“The roses are gorgeous,” she said.

“Unless I miss my guess, they’re from what’s left of my mother’s garden. Lorna had it destroyed. Clay was able to save two rose bushes that he planted at my mother’s gravesite.”

“I remember taking her body and burying her with Clay. He was so adamant about it. I couldn’t convince him otherwise, but I’ve always wondered why she wasn’t buried in town.”

Cade grinned. “As you know, she was supposed to be, but my mother was as wild as the mustangs that run on our land. Clay wanted her buried up at her favorite place on the ranch, out by the old homestead in sight of Himeen Mesa. Really pissed off the old man, especially when Clay wouldn’t tell him where he buried her. I always appreciated that you went with Clay and never told a soul. We should ride over there one day. It’s a long ride, but worth it.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

“But tonight, I have a different kind of riding in mind.”

He turned her into his arms and deftly, but reverently, removed her clothes and allowed her to do the same. She kissed his body as she rendered him as naked as she was. When she knelt to tug his jeans down, she was surprised that his cock looked perfectly normal. Well, except for its size:

large, long, and with tremendous girth. It was hard and strained up toward his navel.

Cade led her to the bed, drew back the covers, and helped her in.

## CHAPTER 11

“*Y*ou’re gorgeous, and all mine,” he said in a deep rumble, opening the tether between them. Her eyes widened as she felt his love and lust roll through her with the sudden rush of a tsunami, quickly morphing to an immersive wave of warm, swirling water.

Cade whispered kisses from her jaw down her throat to the valley between her breasts. His mouth enveloped one areola and nipple while his fingers traced over her belly and between her legs to play with her clit. Trey shuddered and relaxed as he purred to her, letting her both feel and hear the seductive, soothing sound. His finger slid between her labia, allowing his thumb to rest and then press against her swollen nub.

As he rubbed her sensitive jewel, he could feel her cream beginning to leak out of her pussy. Cade glanced up to see her biting her lip.

“You may as well learn to give voice to what you’re feeling. I won’t ever come until you’ve cried out your need to me, and no spanking will be complete until I’ve taken you to tears. So, when you come for me, Trey, let me hear your need. Reach out through the tether and let me know what you’re feeling.”

He continued to press against her sensitive nub as he inserted first one, then a second finger deep into her pussy, stroking the ceiling of her sheath. He could feel her arousal and need flow back across the tether and he let it envelop him. Her body shuddered as she came quietly, but powerfully.

“Cade,” she moaned between thready breaths.

He lifted his head from her breasts and brought his fingers up so he could suck them clean. Her spicy, sweet taste was the perfect *aperitif*. He stretched out on his belly, spreading her thighs and wrapping his strong arms under and around them. He nuzzled her clit and then licked down just past the opening of her core.

Cade nibbled her labia, allowing his tongue to swirl up into her pussy, lapping up the desire that had pooled at its entrance. Her vulva was swollen and ripe for the taking and he meant to do that and more. He brought his mouth up to her clit and sucked it in, shoving his fingers inside her and pumping them in the same rhythm with which he sucked her nub. Trey cried out as she came again, her entire body shaking with sensation and need. He nipped her clit and her body shuddered with an aftershock of renewed arousal.

Licking, nipping, and sucking, he dragged himself up her body. His knees forced her thighs apart and he lowered himself between them. Lining up his cock, he swirled the head just inside her opening to lubricate it and began to slowly, relentlessly press himself into her wet heat.

Nothing had ever felt as good as Trey’s pussy accepting him, pulsing along his length. But tonight was different. This was the first time she’d feel what they were to each other through the tether. She sighed as he dragged himself back, releasing the barbs. He watched her eyes widen and then dilate from pleasure. He pushed forward again until his balls were snug against his body. Her core shuddered in pleased response, and he savored the connection that flowed between them.

He withdrew almost completely then surged forward hard. Her pussy contracted as if it was trying to suck him deep inside and never let go. Fucking Trey made all the pieces of his life come together. It was as if nothing existed in time or space but this connection to her. Cade wanted her with a savage and primal need that he knew would never be completely satisfied, only abated until he could take her again.

Trey's body seized with the power of her climax. He saw the beauty of it, saw how he completed her in the same way she did him. He allowed her to ride the crest, but then pulled back, only to thrust home fiercely. Her scent and the feel of her body beneath his, told him it was time to change his tempo. Cade allowed his feral need for her to come to the fore as he fucked her ruthlessly. Trey clawed at his back and came again.

Cade angled his body so that he hit her clit every time he drove forward. The muscles of her pussy constricted around his cock, pulling his orgasm from his body. With a shiver, his cum rushed down his cock and he spent himself inside her. He ground his groin against her pelvis as her cunt greedily milked his cock to take every last bit.

When he had nothing left to give her, his muscles relaxed and he collapsed, loving the way her body embraced his: skin rubbing, arms clinging as her fingers tangled in his hair. She made no move to change their positions. He lay on top of her with his face buried in the nape of her neck, allowing himself to close his eyes and sleep.



Trey's dreams were inundated with visions from her past that filled her with a quiet joy and an absolute certainty that she was exactly where she belonged. She'd been awake for a while, pondering all of the changes her life had seen over the past few months, when she'd heard Cade's breath change and knew he was awake. She waited until he nuzzled her neck and then drove her elbow into his solar plexus.

"Shit, Trey. What was that for?" he growled.

She rolled over within his embrace and kissed him deeply. "That was for staying away so long. I know I said I forgive you for leaving, but that was for being so stubborn."

"You could have done something to bring us back together, too, you know."

“Nope. You’re the one who knew we were bonded spirits, so it’s your fault. But I’m willing to forgive you if you’ll make me that French toast you made the other morning.”

He laughed and kissed her. “Done. You wait here.”

Cade rolled off the bed and pulled on a pair of jeans. He hadn’t been gone a minute when her cell rang. She glanced at the screen and saw Doc Walker’s name.

“Doc? Is there a problem?”

“Kind of. Someone broke in here last night and stole the hairbrush, evidence bag and all.”

“That’s more than kind of a problem.”

“Not really, because I’d already extracted the DNA from the follicle, and I have the results if you want them.”

“What are they?” she asked, not bothering to keep the excitement out of her voice.

This was Trey’s favorite part of an open investigation, the part where something broke. The part where she was able to get hold of a thread that would allow her to unravel everything.

“The man in the SUV was Lorna’s father.”

“Holy shit. You need to call the department and let them know.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because they didn’t break into the house, just my lab. And actually, they didn’t *break* in at all. Whoever it was used a key. There are only two keys to my lab. One on my keyring, and I think you know where the other is.”

“The one we keep at the department for emergencies.”

“Yeah, and that’s not all. The venom that killed him was from a female snake.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“There have been studies about the differences in venoms. In recent years, they’ve been able to distinguish between venom based on age and gender. The results probably aren’t conclusive enough to hold up in court...”

“But you’re pretty sure about your findings?”

“I am, but I don’t want to be. Russ’s wife and mine were friends for years. I find it hard to believe she would kill anyone, and I can’t figure out why.”

“I’m going to get Cade and we’ll come to your office. Get your rifle and sit in your living room with your back in a corner. We’ll be there as quick as we can.”

Trey ended the call, got dressed, and grabbed a sweater and boots for Cade before she ran down the stairs. She burst into the kitchen to find Cash, Cole, and Clay standing with him, looking grim.

“Problem?” she asked.

“Yeah, Russ just called. They’re issuing a warrant for Clay’s arrest,” answered Cole. “I need to go wake Kennedy.”

“No. That’s the last thing you need to do. Clay, you need to get a horse and get the hell out of here. You need to disappear far up into the hills. Remember that old mine shaft we found as kids? As far as I know, we five are the only ones who know it’s there. Check back there before the end of the day. We’ll get gear up to you.”

“If he runs, it’ll make him look guilty,” said Cash.

“And if they arrest him, I’m afraid he won’t live to stand trial. I just talked to Doc Walker. The dead man in the SUV was Lorna’s father. Someone has stolen the hairbrush we dropped off, but they weren’t aware he’d already taken what he needed.”

“Shit!” said Cade, grabbing his sweater and boots and pulling them on. “Cash? Can you run interference with Kennedy?”

“Sure, but why don’t we want her to know?”



“Because she would be ethically bound to tell the sheriff, and there’s a very good chance he’s involved in whatever is going on,” said Trey,

“Cole, you help Clay. Take some of the red flags up there. We’ll check the old mine every other day. If we need Clay, we’ll tie one to one of the support beams just inside the entrance. Clay, you do the same. If you see the signal, stay hidden but watch for us. Only come out if it’s one of the four of us. Leave your phone here. Trey and I will go to the Doc’s.”

“We’re going to need to get him out of there asap. He isn’t safe.”

Cade nodded. “Agreed. All right, let’s go. From this point on, it’s family only. We’ll figure out what we can tell Kennedy to keep her out of hot water.”

With their marching orders, they headed out. Cade and Trey jumped into his truck and high-tailed it for town.

“I told him to arm himself and wait in his front room backed into a corner,” she said.

“You think Russ would kill him?”

“I don’t want to, but I don’t know that he wouldn’t. Doc said the snake bite was from a female snake.”

“Russ’s wife?” She nodded. “What the hell is going on?” he asked.

“I don’t know. But I do know that we’ll figure it out.”

“I’m glad we have you on our side. I love you, Trey.”

She grinned. “What was it you told me? That’s good because you’re stuck with me.”

Trey slid over next to him, buckling herself in with the seatbelt in the middle of the bench seat. Cade wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they drove into town, not knowing exactly what lay ahead, but feeling certain that whatever it was, they would face it together.



*Do you think you know who done it? Maybe you do... or maybe you don't. See what happens next in **GHOST CAT CANYON: BOLD** available at all your favorite retailers July 8, 2021 and available for preorder now at: <https://books2read.com/ghostcatbold>*

*Eleven Hours Before Cyrus's Murder...*

"I don't know who you think you are, boy," snarled Cyrus.

"I think I'm the guy who's kept one of your other three sons from killing you. Although there are times I don't know why," responded Cash.

"Your mama cheated me out of what's mine. Now, I've got the chance to finally get what's coming to me."

"Koyama' has belonged in my mother's family for generations. You're just pissed that she knew you well enough to know you'd squander and sell off her heritage, and my brothers' and my legacy."

"Lorna and I are tired of you making us live like poor relations."

"You and Lorna? Is there a you and Lorna? Last time I checked, you two had separate rooms at opposite ends of the hallway. I can understand why Lorna's disappointed. After all, you were her second choice and then you couldn't even provide her with all the money and luxuries she wanted. But then you've always been every woman's second choice or no choice at all."

"Why you..." Cyrus started, raising his fist and advancing on Cash.



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