

Fated to a Cougar

[Marisa Chenery](#)

Book four in the Cougar Surrender series.

Out on the hunt for the fairer sex, cougar shifter Grady doesn't expect to run across his other prey. As he follows Caleb on a mad dash through Anchorage's dark streets, Grady ends up on the receiving end of a metal pipe to the head. When a police cruiser arrives on the scene, Caleb takes off, leaving Grady in the dirt.

As a cop, Sage's job is to protect and serve. But she doesn't expect to be kissed senseless by the sexy man she's trying to help. She can't resist his charm—or his touch on her body—and agrees to see him again.

A relationship started on passion changes quickly when tragedy slams into Sage's life. But with Grady by her side, Sage finds the one thing she's been missing.

*A Romantica® **paranormal erotic romance** from Ellora's Cave*

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Chapter One

Grady took a swig from his beer, then nodded in the direction of a group of women who'd just taken a table close to where he and his friend sat. "What do you think about any of them?"

Draven turned his head for a look before focusing back on Grady. "Not bad, but I think I'll pass. They aren't exactly what I'm looking for."

"I have to say the same thing." Grady watched one of the women put a plastic tiara on the head of another that had "Bride" on it. "It looks as if it's a stagette, which means they wouldn't be interested in a guy trying to pick them up, anyway."

Draven chuckled. "True. They're here for a good time that involves lots of alcohol. Don't be surprised if their table gets noisy after they have a couple drinks."

There was a loud outburst of laughter from that direction. "It's already started," Grady said with a smile.

Both he and Draven were single cougar shifters who had no interest in dating the females of their kind. Human women held more appeal, especially now that both his cousins Taylor and Blaise, along with his brother Jase, had ended up mated to humans and were extremely happy. Grady wanted that.

"I think this night is going to be another bust," Draven said after he finished his bottle of beer, then signaled their waitress that he wanted another.

Grady first met Draven three months ago, after Jase introduced them. Draven was Blaise's go-to guy for anything to do with computers and the internet. And when Jase had needed a way to track Caleb, Blaise's cousin who'd tried to poison Blaise's father, Draven had been the logical choice. He'd given Jase a computer program to track Caleb's location every time the other shifter used his cell phone. It'd worked for a little while, but Caleb now appeared to have gone deep into hiding. And it was Draven's project to see if he could find any clues as to where Caleb had gone.

"Maybe the bar scene is getting old," Grady said. "We should try the mall or something like that instead. After all, that's where Blaise met his mate Harley."

Draven nodded. "I guess we could give that a shot. There definitely would be a lot of women there, but a grocery store can be just as good."

"You're welcome to try that, but you'll be on your own. That's not exactly my ideal spot to pick up a woman. I can just picture getting slapped if I went up to one and asked if I could compare her melons to the ones the store has for sale."

His friend barked with laughter. "That's what I like about you, Grady. You probably would do something that stupid just because you can."

"Damn right."

Another loud burst of laughter came from the women who were having the stagette. There was a tray of shots in the center of their table and they were pounding them back pretty fast. One looked at Grady and winked while she pursed

her lips in a kiss. He smiled but made no move to go over there.

The waitress brought Draven a fresh beer. She asked Grady if he wanted another, but he shook his head. She then left to wait on another table. "So, any progress on finding where Caleb has slunk off to?" Grady asked.

"Nothing yet. The asshole has done a better job of keeping his tracks hidden than he did a few months ago. I think Caleb smartened up after his last encounter with Jase, which isn't working in our favor."

Jase had managed to track Caleb to an older apartment in the low-income section of Anchorage, a place none of them would have expected him to go. His brother had come close to capturing their prey, but Caleb had used Katarina, Jase's mate, to make good his escape. She'd been the superintendent of the building at the time. And that had been the last time they'd seen Caleb.

Now it was Grady's job to bring him in. As a cat shifter, Caleb wouldn't be facing human law enforcement. No, his fate would be decided by Taylor and Blaise's father Nate, the leader of their family group. Even though Caleb wasn't Grady's cousin, he was cousin to Taylor and Blaise. Their father was the older brother of Caleb's father.

"Well, let's hope he didn't smarten up too much," Grady said. "I need to find him."

"Don't worry. I'm not giving up yet. He's bound to make a mistake. It's only a matter of time."

Grady hoped so. He was afraid that as time went by, the chances were Caleb was no longer in Anchorage. If that happened to be the case, it was more than likely that Caleb would never be found.

After Grady downed the rest of his beer, he said, "Since nothing is happening here, I'm going to head home."

"All right. I'm going to finish my drink, then I'll go home as well. I have a new game that's calling my name. I'll probably stay up all night playing it."

Grady shook his head with a grin. Draven was a huge computer geek, but he didn't look like one. He was the largest cougar shifter Grady had ever seen. At six-foot-seven, with a body thickly padded with muscles, Draven had the build of a werewolf.

"You're going to fry your brain if you do that too often."

Draven chuckled. "Not a chance."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it. I'll give you a call in a couple days to get together again."

"Sounds good."

Grady stood, pulled on his jacket, then headed for the bar's entrance. As he passed the stagette's table, the same woman who'd blown him a kiss let out an appreciative whistle. He smiled and shook his head as he kept walking. There was no way he was going to get involved with that. A group of women who'd been drinking large amounts of alcohol usually spelled trouble.

He zipped up his winter jacket once he stepped outside. A fresh layer of snow had fallen while he'd been in the bar. Now that it was mid-winter, the white stuff was piled high on the sides of the streets from the plows. Grady shivered as a gust of cold wind blew his way. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and hunched his shoulders. He wished he could shift to his cougar form. His thick fur did a better job of keeping him warm than the jacket he wore.

Another gust of wind hit him, bringing the scent of another. Grady let out a low growl as he jerked his head in the

direction the scent had come from. He took a quick look around to make sure no one was around, then put on a burst of speed no human would be capable of.

Grady followed the scent to the end of the street, which was a parking lot. He saw two men standing in the deepest shadows. He recognized one immediately. It was Caleb. And the man with him was human.

Not caring who saw him, Grady put on another burst of preternatural speed and ran toward his quarry. He'd be damned if he let Caleb slip through his fingers after having no leads on his whereabouts for months.

The wind suddenly changed direction and blew from Grady's back and toward Caleb, who jerked around. Grady caught a flash of teeth as Caleb snarled and made a run for it. Grady didn't give it a second thought as he gave chase.

His prey led him through backs of buildings and down alleyways. After turning onto one of the latter and coming out on a street that was lined with industrial buildings, Grady swore under his breath as he slowed to a fast walk. Caleb was nowhere to be seen. His prey had gotten a little ahead of him, but he hadn't thought he'd manage to get away.

Grady came to a stop and looked around. Caleb hadn't gotten that much distance between them. He had to be around there somewhere. A cougar shifter didn't have the ability to just disappear into thin air. They had magic inside them, but not to that extent.

Something slammed into the back of Grady's head, knocking him to the ground. A second hit came before he had a chance to gather his wits about him enough to roll out of the way. The blow made him see stars, and darkness hovered around the edges of his consciousness. It felt as if his head had almost cracked in two.

The sound of a police siren coming saved Grady from another blow. Dazed, he vaguely heard a metal pipe being dropped to the ground near him, then footsteps running away. A car came to a screeching stop a few feet from where he lay at the side of the road. The door opened and another set of feet hurried toward him.

Grady reached up and felt the back of his head. Wetness came away with his fingers, and the smell of blood filled his nose. He groaned. Caleb had done a number on him. And he knew it was his prey who'd gotten the jump on him from his scent.

"Don't move," said the person who crouched beside him. The voice was female. "Let me check you to see where you're hurt."

"I already know where I am. It's my head."

"Let me have a look."

Grady turned his face in the woman's direction and had a split second to see she wore a cop's uniform, and how beautiful she was, before she clicked on a flashlight and aimed it at him. He closed his eyes as the light hit them and sent a surge of pain through his skull.

Fingers gently touched the spot where Caleb had beamed him. Grady sucked in a sharp breath when she hit a particularly sore area. At least his head had to still be in one piece. The woman cop surely would have said something by now if it wasn't.

"Sorry," she said. "I just want to see how bad this is. I think I should call an ambulance. You'll more than likely need stitches."

That had Grady surging to his feet. He moaned and clutched his head. The quick movement made it feel as if it would

fall off. "No hospital. I'll be fine," he said with his eyes closed as he concentrated on stopping the world from spinning.

She grabbed his arm to steady him as he swayed a trifle in place. "I'm pretty sure you have a concussion. The doctor will want to keep you in the hospital for observation. I'm going to make the call."

Grady snapped his eyes open and took hold of the cop's hand that held her radio. "Please don't do that. It might look bad, but it really isn't that serious."

It probably was as bad as she thought, but as a cat shifter Grady healed a lot faster than a human. By tomorrow the wound would be almost a hundred percent gone. And because of what he was, there was no way he could go to a hospital. One little blood test and the doctor would know there was something different about him.

"I have to disagree with that," she said.

He focused fully on her face. Able to see in the dark as well as if it were daylight, Grady had no problem seeing her. She wasn't just beautiful, she was very, very beautiful. Her eyes were an unusual light blue. What he could see of her hair that wasn't tucked under her uniform's hat was auburn. And she was tall. He guessed her to be around five-foot-nine. Being six-foot-three, he liked his women not to be too short.

He looked at the nametag pinned to the front of her jacket. "Well, Officer Sage Moran, we're going to have to agree to disagree. There's no need for an ambulance."

"What's your name?"

"Grady."

"Grady, I have first-aid training." She lifted her flashlight and shone it into his eyes, which caused him to groan. "And from the looks of you, my assumption of you having a concussion has to be correct. You really need to see a doctor." She jerked her hand with the radio out of Grady's grip. "I'm calling an amb—"

Grady took hold of Sage's hand again and tugged her to his chest before he brought his lips down to hers. He couldn't think of anything else to distract her, and the thought of kissing her had come to mind more than once since he'd seen her face. He kissed her deeply, pushing his tongue between her lips to get a good taste of her. Not sure if he could get arrested for coming on to a cop, he decided to get as much as he could.

He licked and sucked and couldn't hold back from purring like the big cat he was as Sage's fingers gripped his arm harder and kissed him back. Grady's cock grew hard. The scent and taste of her filled his head, pushing some of the pain away. She sighed into his mouth and it took everything in him not to take her to the ground and see how far she'd let him go.

The scent of Sage's arousal wafted around them. From the way she continued to kiss him as if she were going to crawl inside him, Grady had the feeling she wasn't going to put an end to this anytime soon. He wanted nothing more than to let their kiss go on, but the pounding in his head reminded him all too well where they were.

He lifted his head and looked at Sage. Her eyes were closed and she breathed at a fast rate. Her lips were also puffy from his kisses. Damn, even wearing her cop's uniform she looked delicious enough to eat. He definitely had to see her again.

"See? I'm okay," he said. "Will you go out with me?"

Sage blinked open her eyes, suddenly aware of where she was and what she'd been doing. Talk about totally unprofessional. She'd been so completely involved in sucking face with Grady that anyone could have snuck up on them—like the guy who'd hit Grady with the metal pipe—and she wouldn't have cared. This was the first time since becoming a cop she'd let her guard down while on duty.

She looked at Grady and had to admit his gorgeous looks were mostly to blame for her bad behavior, as well as the toe-curling kiss he'd laid on her. Even when he'd been down on the ground, Sage had to have been blind not to see he was a hunk. He had features a male model would kill for. His tawny-blond hair was on the long side, perfect for a woman to bury her fingers into and hold on as she kissed him for all she was worth. And his eyes. They were such a light brown they were damn close to gold. She'd never seen anything like them, and right now they appeared to be eating her up. Plus he was tall. She had nothing against shorter men, but at her height, she wanted to be able to wear heels and not feel as if she towered over the guy she was with.

It then dawned on her what Grady had asked. "You mean like a date?"

He gave her a sexy crooked grin that made her pussy clench with unfulfilled desire. "Yeah. A date. Then we can continue where that kiss ended."

At first, Sage didn't know how to answer Grady. Since she'd started her career as a police officer, she really hadn't taken the time to date. She worked long hours, and her being a cop wasn't something a lot of men could handle. Sometimes she had a hard time shutting off that side of her when she wasn't on the job. She had to have a tough personality to do it.

"I...ah..." Now she sounded like an unsure teenager being asked out on her first date. It'd been a long time since she'd had sex, but she hadn't thought a mind-blowing kiss would strip her of the confidence she usually had in spades.

Grady put his arm around her waist and tugged her even closer. There was no missing how hard his cock was as it pressed against her stomach. Sage quickly swallowed back a moan before it pushed past her lips.

"Just say yes," he said.

Sage heard herself agree to the date before her brain could catch up with her mouth. Grady took her lips in a hard, fast kiss, then let her go. She vaguely heard him ask for her address, which she gave him. He also asked her when would be a good time for them to go out. She mumbled that tomorrow night she was off work. He said he'd see her around seven, then turned and ran toward the alley closest to them.

She shook her head, coming out of the haze of arousal that'd taken her over after Grady had kissed her again. What was the matter with her? She didn't normally act so ditzy around a guy. She then realized Grady had left before she could call an ambulance for him.

Sage took off at run in the direction he'd gone, but once she reached the alley there was no sign of him. For someone with a head wound, he sure could move fast. Deciding there was no point in trying to chase after him, she returned to her cruiser and got inside. She turned off the flashing lights before she put it in drive and drove away.

She really couldn't believe she'd so quickly agreed to go out with Grady or that she'd allowed him to distract her enough to slip away without making sure he went to the hospital. Tomorrow night she'd get to see if he'd had someone look at his wound or not.

For the rest of her shift, Sage went from looking forward to seeing Grady again to dreading it. And with no way of contacting him, it wasn't as if she could call and cancel. Then there was the fact she'd given him her home address without knowing anything about him. At least being a cop she would know how to handle him if things got out of hand. But the big question was, who would handle her if she got out of hand with him and jumped his bones?

Chapter Two

“Ow. Would you take it easy?” Grady asked.

He sat at the kitchen table at his home that he shared with his parents, his brother and his brother’s mate. Katarina, who’d become mated to his brother Jase three months before, tended to Grady’s wound.

“Stop being such a baby,” Katarina said. “I thought all you cougar shifters were tough guys.”

“We are, but that freaking burns.”

“It needs to be disinfected with rubbing alcohol. I know it’ll be healed by tomorrow, but it’ll help to have it cleaned out.”

“Yeah, Grady, stop being a crybaby,” Jase said with a chuckle. He sat across from Grady as he watched his mate work.

“Bite me,” he said with a growl. “I still can’t believe Caleb managed to get the drop on me. But I guess he did me a favor.”

Jase gave him a confused look. “How can getting your skull almost cracked in two by a metal pipe do you a favor?”

Grady smiled. “I ended up with a date for tomorrow night.”

His brother snorted. “With who? An imaginary woman? Caleb must have hit you harder than I thought. You’re seeing things.”

“No, Sage was very much real. She’s the reason why Caleb stopped hitting me and took off.”

“He was afraid of a human woman? I’m assuming this Sage is human.”

“She is, and she’s a little more than just a human woman. She’s a cop. She saw Caleb with the metal pipe and turned on her flashing lights and siren.”

Katarina stopped poking at Grady’s head and leaned around to look at him. “You have a date with a police officer?”

“Yeah. I asked her out after I kissed her and she said yes.”

His brother’s mate whistled. “You kissed an on-duty cop? You’re lucky she didn’t try to arrest you.”

“I thought she might, but it was the best thing I could think of to distract her from calling an ambulance for me. She insisted I go to the hospital. I don’t think she would have taken no for an answer if I hadn’t laid one on her.”

“So you only kissed her and asked her out for that reason?”

“No. Sage is gorgeous. I would want to date her even if I hadn’t been trying to stop her from getting me to go to the hospital.”

Katarina went back to cleaning Grady’s head wound, and he sucked in a sharp breath. He had to be thankful his mother wasn’t at home. She would have been fussing over him too much. His parents had gone away for the week. They’d flown to the Gulf Islands, which was off the eastern coastline of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. They owned a cottage on their own tiny private island. It was big enough—and had enough trees for coverage—for them to shift to their cougar forms and go for runs. Grady figured his parents mostly went there to have some alone time without him and

Jase hanging around.

“At least we now know Caleb is still in Anchorage,” Jase said, changing the subject.

“Yeah, but he got away,” he added. “And the male human he’d been talking to when I first spotted him was gone when I went back to see if I could pick up his trail. He must have had a car in that parking lot because I lost it there.”

Jase shook his head. “That’s too bad. It makes me wonder what Caleb was up to. It couldn’t be anything legal if he had that meeting in a dark parking lot in the middle of the night.”

Katarina gave Grady a tap on the shoulder. “All done. I have to agree with that, Jase. Who knows what he was up to, but it couldn’t have been anything good.”

“I was thinking he has to be running out of money,” Grady said. “The amount he had stashed in that apartment that he took before he went into deeper hiding won’t last him forever. And as far as Draven has been able to find out, Caleb still owns his house. There’s a lot of capital tied up in it. If it suddenly burns to the ground we’ll know what that meeting was about.”

“Actually,” Jase said with a nod, “that makes a lot of sense. That way Caleb won’t have to go through the hassle of having to sell it. He’d only have to collect the insurance money from it. That’s a quick way to turn it into cash.”

The more Grady thought about it, the more likely a scenario it could be. They’d have to watch Caleb’s house for anything suspicious taking place around it. And if Caleb did decide to do away with it like that, there was always a chance he’d risk returning there to take what he wanted from it beforehand.

Grady stood and walked over to the fridge, where he took out a bottle of beer. “I think I should tell Uncle Nate. As the leader of our family group, he could get others to watch Caleb’s house when we can’t.”

“Good idea.” Jase stood, then walked over to his mate and put his arm around her shoulders. “Now that your head is taken care of, Katarina and I are heading upstairs.”

He watched them walk out of the kitchen. He wouldn’t be seeing those two for the rest of the night. And with his room directly across from theirs, at times his damn sensitive cougar hearing allowed him to hear more than he wanted to. That was the only part that sucked about living with his family.

Grady went upstairs to his room. As he neared Katarina and Jase’s, the sound of feminine giggles came through the door. He continued into his bedroom and closed himself inside. He put the bottle on his bedside table and yanked his long-sleeved t-shirt over his head. The collar of it was stained with blood. Katarina had already put his winter jacket in the washer since it’d gotten the worst of it. Head wounds always bled like a bugger.

After putting his shirt in the dirty laundry hamper, Grady settled on the king-sized bed and turned on the large flat-screen LED television that hung on the wall across from it. He sipped his beer and a small smile played on his lips as he thought about Sage. He wondered if he asked nicely if she’d cuff him, then have her way with him.

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Since Sage had worked the night shift, she slept until early afternoon the following day. Usually she would have slept longer, but having two days off and then going back into work on day shift, she had to get her sleeping times adjusted.

After she showered, she returned to her bedroom to get dressed. Seeing the almost overflowing dirty laundry basket,

she could no longer put off doing the washing. Luckily enough, she had something to wear. She tugged on her last pair of clean jeans and a sweatshirt.

She lugged her laundry downstairs and put the first load in the washer in the main-floor laundry room. That'd been one of the big selling points for her when she'd put in an offer for the two-story semi almost a year ago.

That task done, Sage went to the kitchen and put the kettle on to make a pot of tea. She grabbed a muffin from the package she'd bought the day before and sat at the table to eat it while she waited for the water to boil.

Before going to bed she'd come to the conclusion it wouldn't be a great idea to go out with Grady. She hadn't been thinking when she'd agreed to see him in the first place, and she wasn't looking for a steady boyfriend. Her work kept her too busy, especially now that she was striving to become a detective. As for having a short fling, she couldn't separate her feelings enough to have one.

A knock on her front door brought Sage out of her musings. She went to answer it, having an idea who it could be. She pulled open the door and smiled at the woman who stood on the other side.

"I had a feeling it was you," Sage said as she stepped back to let her older sister Macy walk through the entrance. She carried an infant car seat with her six-month-old son Josh inside, almost buried under all the blankets on top of him.

"Well, you did tell me you weren't working today and that you'd be switching to day shift," Macy said as she set the car seat on the floor, then took off her winter boots and jacket.

"Very true. I'll take Josh."

Sage picked up the car seat by its handle and carried her nephew into the living room. She pulled the blankets off him, then unbuckled the straps. She laid him on the couch while she took off his snowsuit. The poor thing looked as if he couldn't move in it.

Macy sat on the couch once Sage picked up Josh. "So how goes the police business?"

"Not bad. I'm still working my way to becoming a detective. The hard part is finding the time to study to take the test."

"You work too much. You don't even have time to date. I know you feel your career has to come first and that you're still young, but you won't be twenty-four forever." Macy nodded toward her son. "Wouldn't you like to have a rugrat of your own someday?"

"Of course." Sage gave Josh a kiss on his little pouty lips. She loved him as if he were hers. "It'll just be something I do when I'm in my thirties. Unlike you, I won't be ready at twenty-six to be married and already starting a family."

"You know why I wanted both those things sooner rather than later."

Sage did. They'd lost both their parents when Sage had been eighteen and Macy twenty. Their father had never been a great father or husband. Even though their mom had tried to hide it, there had been times when Sage and Macy had seen marks on their mother after their father had lost his temper with her. Once Sage turned sixteen, their mom finally kicked him out and told them the truth about her marriage. Then two years later, while Macy and Sage were away for a week with their grandparents, their dad had forced his way into the apartment their mom had rented and killed her. He took his own life afterward.

So Sage understood why Macy had wanted to have a family of her own. As for herself, Sage had made the decision

she'd become a cop. She wanted to be able to help protect women who were in the same situation her mother had been in. Something she hadn't been able to do for her mom.

"I know," Sage said.

"This is a change in subject, but since you're off tonight, do you think you could do me a favor?"

"What would that be?"

"Hank and I haven't gone out alone since Josh was born. I was wondering if you'd agree to babysit so we can go out for dinner. I'd have Josh all bathed and ready for bed. We'll bring the playpen for him to sleep in. He's usually asleep for the night around seven thirty or eight at the latest."

Sage thought it over, but quickly decided it would be the perfect way to get out of her date with Grady. She'd just tell him she'd forgotten she had to babysit. And with Josh already at her place when Grady arrived, it wasn't as if he could do anything about it.

She nodded. "Sure. I don't mind babysitting. In fact, why don't you go out for dinner, then go see a movie. And if you want, you can even leave Josh here overnight."

"Really? I only thought to ask you to watch him for a few hours."

"Seriously, I'm okay with him staying over. I don't get to see him as often as I'd like, and he's growing so fast. It'll give you a break."

"If you're really sure you want to have him all night, I'm not going to turn you down. You might have to put up with me calling more than a few times to see how Josh is doing, though."

Sage smiled. "You can call as much as you want."

"All right. Then he'll be all yours tonight. And that being the case, I shouldn't visit for too long. I'll have to get everything you'll need for Josh ready. Nowadays, I swear I can't leave the house with him without taking half of it with me."

"Do you have time to stay for some tea? I put the kettle on. I just have to make it."

"That would be great."

Sage passed Josh over to his mother, then stood and headed for the kitchen. She took two mugs from the cupboard and smiled. Sage was actually looking forward to having Josh to herself all night, even if he'd be sleeping most of the time. For now, he was the closest thing to her having kids of her own.

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Grady pulled onto Sage's street and kept track of the house numbers until he arrived at her place. He turned into the two-car driveway and parked next to the vehicle already there. He got out of the car and headed over to the front door. Before he rang the doorbell, he ran his fingers through his hair to straighten it. The wind had blown it into his face. He touched the spot where his head wound had been. It was completely healed, he didn't even have a headache anymore.

It didn't take long for Sage to answer the door. He ran his gaze over her, thinking she was more beautiful than he'd remembered. Even in jeans and a sweatshirt she looked sexy. Her auburn hair was down and fell around her shoulders, which made his fingers itch to run through it.

“Hi,” he said with a smile. “I hope you remembered we have a date.”

“I do.”

He frowned a bit when she made no move to invite him in or get her jacket. “Are you ready to go?”

“Actually, no. I have to cancel. I forgot I’d promised my sister I’d babysit her son. I’m looking after him overnight.”

“That’s okay. Have you eaten supper yet?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t I come in and we can order something for delivery.”

Sage hesitated before she answered. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

“You have my word I’m not some nutcase. Besides, you’re a cop. I’d be stupid to try something. I can help you babysit. I like kids.”

Grady did, but he hadn’t been around too many of them. Since cougar shifters lived to be around two hundred years old, they tended not to have too many kids. Family groups were mostly made up of extended family and others from outside of it who’d become mated to a member of the group.

She took a little longer answering that time. “Look, I’m going to be straight with you. I don’t think I have time to have a steady boyfriend. I hate to say it, but my career as a cop comes first. I don’t think it’ll work out. And I don’t date casually.”

Grady wasn’t about to let Sage push him away that easily. The kiss they’d shared the night before told him she wasn’t unaffected by him. He had to say it’d ranked up there as his all-time best. She was also the first human woman he’d ever kissed. He definitely wanted to see where their attraction for each other led.

He took a step closer. “I can understand that it would, but I’m willing to put up with that. At least take the time to get to know me better before you shoot me down.”

The sound of a baby crying reached his ears. Sage turned her head to look into the house, then back at him. She seemed to search for something while she gazed at him before she nodded as the baby’s cries grew louder.

“Fine,” she said. “You can come in and we’ll get something delivered to eat. I have to get my nephew.”

Grady stepped inside as Sage turned and walked farther into the house. He took off his boots and winter jacket before he followed her into the living room. A thick blanket was spread out on the middle of the floor, where he presumed the baby she held had been lying.

Once Sage noticed him, she walked toward him, then passed the baby. “I have to warm up a bottle for Josh,” she said. “You said you wanted to help, so you can hold him while I do that. After he’s done I’ll put him to bed, then we can order some food.”

Grady looked at the little person he held, not sure what to do. This was his first time holding a baby. Josh smiled, then proceeded to try to stick his drooly hand inside Grady’s mouth.

“Enough of that, you,” he said as he pulled Grady’s hand away. “You might like to suck on your hand, but I don’t.” Josh tried again, and Grady let out a quiet cat growl, which the baby thought was funny and giggled. “You like that, huh?”

He really was a cute little thing. Grady purred as he nuzzled the side of Josh’s neck, causing Josh to giggle again. The

baby managed to grab hold of Grady's cougar head pendant as he lifted his head. He held it in a tight fist and refused to let go.

"Don't even think about putting that in your mouth," Grady said with a chuckle. "You might like it because it's shiny and has rubies for eyes, but I don't need baby slobber all over it."

"Here, let me help before he pulls too hard and breaks the chain on you," Sage said as she came to stand beside Grady.

"I doubt he'd be able to do that. It's pretty strong."

Sage gently pried the pendant out of Josh's hand. "Nice cougar. I'll take Josh now and give him his bottle."

"Thanks. All right."

Grady couldn't resist giving the baby a quick kiss on his soft cheek before he passed him over to his aunt. She settled on the couch with Josh, propped him into the crook of her arm, then put the nipple of the bottle into his mouth. Josh greedily took it.

"I guess he was hungry," he said as he sat next to Sage.

"My sister has started him on solid food, but Josh still loves his bottle. She said he'll fall asleep while he takes it, then that'll be it for the night. He usually sleeps through."

Already, Grady saw Josh's eyes were fluttering closed. "In that case, we should decide what we'll want to eat. I can order it while you finish feeding him."

"Okay. I don't think it'll take very long."

"Then what would you like to have?"

"It'll probably be easier to order pizza. I like almost anything on it, except for onions and anchovies."

"That makes it easy. Do you have a usual place you get it from?"

Sage told him of a pizza place not too far from her house. So as not to disturb the baby, who'd fallen asleep, Grady stood and went to stand near the entrance of the living room. He used his cell phone to find the restaurant's phone number, then made the call.

Chapter Three

Sage set her gaze on Grady as he turned his back to make the call to order pizza. She had a great view of his ass, which was encased in black denim. His jeans were tight enough to show it off. His wide back tapered to a narrow waist. She had to admit he had a great body.

She sighed to herself as she fixed her attention back on Josh, who was asleep and still sucking on his bottle. It was already half gone. Sage had thought the baby would be a great excuse to cancel her date with Grady. What she hadn't counted on was him asking to help babysit and then wanting to order in food. And for some damn reason, she couldn't bring herself to tell him no, be it going out on a date or inviting him inside her house.

Seeing him again brought how attractive she found him to the forefront of her mind. She wanted him, there were no ifs, ands or buts about it. What she wanted to do with that knowledge was something entirely different.

Usually able to pick up a vibe off people who she thought she'd have to watch out for, Sage didn't get any of that from Grady. He seemed like a genuinely nice guy, and seeing him hold Josh and hearing him make her nephew giggle had almost melted her insides.

Grady came and sat once again on the couch next to her. He spoke in a quiet tone. "I ordered a large pizza with just about everything they had, except for the two toppings you didn't want. It should be here in twenty minutes."

Sage looked down at Josh and saw he'd finished the bottle and pushed the nipple out of his mouth. "And it looks as if Josh is all done. I'll put him upstairs."

After leaving the living room, she took the stairs to the upper level and headed for her bedroom. Even though she had two guestrooms, Sage wanted Josh in her room in case he did happen to wake up in the middle of the night. She tended to be a deep sleeper, especially when she was trying to make the changeover to another shift.

Inside her room, she carefully placed Josh in the playpen and covered him with blankets. Before she headed downstairs, she turned on the baby monitor that sat on her dresser, then picked up the receiver to take with her.

Sage returned to find Grady sitting on the couch exactly where she'd left him. He smiled as she closed the distance and took a seat next to him. She placed the receiver for the baby monitor on the end table.

"Did Josh stay asleep?" Grady asked.

"Yeah. He was out like a light."

"Good." Silence stretched between them for a few seconds before Grady said, "I'm glad you didn't cancel our date." He turned on the cushion toward her. "I was looking forward to seeing you again."

"I guess you could say I was as well." That was mostly true. Even though Sage had wanted to come up with a way to cancel their date, she really had thought about seeing Grady again. And now that they were together once more, she didn't mind having him around.

"So what do cops do on their days off?" Grady asked with a grin.

"Well, this one, besides babysitting for her older sister, usually hangs around at home and relaxes. I also get caught

up on laundry, house cleaning and grocery shopping that I tend to neglect during a workweek.”

“Sounds exciting.”

Sage chuckled. “No, it’s not, and you know it.”

“Okay, that’s true. How long have you been a police officer?”

“A couple years now. It can be a stressful job, but I wouldn’t want to do anything else. How about yourself? What do you do for a living?”

Grady smiled. “Live. Seriously though, I don’t work. I don’t have to. I own stocks in my uncle’s multinational software company, which is the biggest here in Anchorage.” He said the corporation’s name.

Sage instantly recognized it. “Yeah, you must do well for yourself.”

The doorbell rang and Grady pushed to his feet. “That has to be the pizza. I’ll get it since I’m paying for it.”

She watched him leave the room, then heard him talking to the delivery guy. It didn’t take long for Grady to return, holding a pizza box. The smell of it made her stomach growl once it hit her nose. Sage hadn’t realized how hungry she actually was until then.

“I’ll get some paper towels,” she said as she quickly headed for the kitchen.

She handed Grady a sheet once she returned. He opened the pizza box and they dug in. A quiet moan pushed out of Sage after she took the first bite, chewed and swallowed. It was exactly what she needed. She looked over at Grady to see him watching her eat. He stared at her as if he wanted to taste her along with the food. A surge of arousal shot through her. To hide it from him in case she showed any outward sign of it, she took another big bite of pizza.

“Enjoying it?” Grady asked.

Sage nodded, then swallowed. “This place always has the best pizza. I’d hate to tell you how often I order it. Cooking is another thing I find hard to do while working.”

“You must work long hours.”

“I do, and a lot of them can be during the night shift.”

They didn’t talk too much after that and concentrated on finishing their meal. Once they were done, Sage got rid of the pizza box in the kitchen and returned with a beer for each of them.

Now that they were no longer eating, Sage decided to bring up the subject of how she’d met Grady. So far, she hadn’t seen any sign of the nasty head wound he’d received. He seemed to have recovered rather quickly.

“How’s your head?” she asked.

“Fine.”

“Did you end up going to the ER?”

“Actually, no. It wasn’t as bad as you thought it was. Even though it bled like a bugger, it was only a scratch.”

Sage frowned. Having taken a metal pipe to his head, Grady would have been pretty lucky to only end up with a mere scratch. The light from her flashlight hadn’t been the best, but what she’d seen when she’d checked his head the night before was a lot more than that. Yes, head wounds bled a lot, but the amount of bleeding he’d done, it hadn’t been something as minor as that.

“Really?” she asked. “Then you won’t mind if I look at it. And I never did get a chance to ask if you knew who your assailant was before you took off.”

“I thought you were off duty today,” Grady said with a short laugh.

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I stop being a cop. I take my job very seriously. Some of the guys I’ve dated in the past have said I’m too uptight about it. But that’s the way I am. So are you going to let me look?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, and I’m fine. As for the guy who hit me, it was dark and I didn’t see his face very well.”

“Do you normally walk around that area alone late at night? The buildings there are mostly industrial. I thought it was kind of strange.”

Grady looked at her, not showing anything on his face. He then said, “You ask too many questions.”

Sage didn’t get a chance to say anything else before Grady closed the gap between them and took her mouth in a heated kiss. A small voice inside her said he was using it to distract her from what they’d been discussing, but the rest of her didn’t give a shit. She quickly lost herself to the sensations coursing through her as his lips moved over hers. It became more so once he pushed his tongue inside and stroked hers, tasting her.

Things quickly heated up after that. Sage basically said the hell with it, wrapped her arms around Grady’s neck and tugged him even closer. She wanted him. She didn’t know if what they started here would last, but right now her body craved his touch—bad. She’d just feel and enjoy what he could give her.

Grady reached between them and palmed one of her breasts. His thumb stroked back and forth across Sage’s taut nipple. It immediately tightened even more. She kept hold around his neck, shifted and fell back flat onto the couch cushions, taking him with her. His heavier weight stretched full on top of her with his hips wedged between her spread thighs, which had her moaning. His erection landed right on her pussy, rubbing against it, driving her arousal higher.

Soon Grady stepped things up a notch. He lifted his upper body off her, breaking contact with her mouth, and pushed her sweatshirt to her chin. He stared down at her bra-covered breasts, his gaze filled with hunger. With one finger he traced an invisible line from the hollow of her throat to her cleavage. It then hooked into one of her bra cups and tugged it to the side, exposing her nipple.

“Beautiful,” Grady said on a sigh.

A noise that sounded like a true cat’s purr pushed out of Grady as he bent his head and kissed the tight bud. Sage arched her back, pushing herself closer. Her heart beat faster and an ache built inside her pussy. She panted in anticipation, silently begging him to touch more of her. Once again in a man’s arms, she now realized how much she’d missed it, how much she craved it.

Grady rubbed her nipple along his cheek, then opened his mouth and took it inside. He rested his weight on a bent arm as he used his free hand to caress Sage’s side. He thrust his hard cock against her pussy, making her wish there weren’t layers of clothing separating them. Wetness pooled between her legs and she lifted her hips to meet his.

Their breathing became harsh as they strained against each other. Grady tugged the cup aside that covered her other breast and took the nipple between his lips, sucking, making her even wetter.

Sage reached down and pushed her hands under the back of Grady’s shirt. She ran them up the muscles along his

spine, scraping her nails against his skin. He groaned and released her breast.

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "I need to see and feel more of this gorgeous body of yours."

"I won't stop you," Sage said in a low voice. "I intend to do the same to you."

Grady gave her a sexy grin. "I get to go first."

He shifted to his side, wedging himself between her and the back of the couch. Sage turned to lie on her side as well, facing Grady. There was just barely enough room for both of them. She was about to suggest they move to the floor, or any flat surface that was a lot bigger than the piece of furniture they were on now, but the words died in her throat as he undid her jeans and shoved a hand down the front of them and her panties.

Sage moaned as a finger stroked her pussy, playing in her wetness. It then pushed inside her, pumping in and out. It wasn't until a second joined it that she could no longer lie still and rocked against him. She squeezed her inner muscles around the plunging digits while pleasurable sensations shot through her. Sadly, it wouldn't take much more of that to make her come. She was already strung tight.

She panted and ran her hand down Grady's chest, encountering his cougar head pendant. It felt warm to the touch, and Sage couldn't resist wrapping her fingers around it. She used it to anchor herself to him as he skillfully worked her body.

Grady took her lips in a carnal kiss, his tongue thrusting inside her mouth, mimicking the movement of his fingers. Sage clutched his pendant tighter as her orgasm slammed into her, almost taking her breath away. She moaned against his lips, riding his fingers while wave after wave of pleasure swamped her. He continued to thrust into her pussy, pushing every last bit of her release out of her until there was nothing left.

He removed his fingers and nibbled her lips. "God, I love the way you look when you come," he said, his voice husky with arousal. "I want to see you do it again, but with my cock buried deep inside you."

"Yes." Sage reached for the button on Grady's jeans and undid it. With a quick tug, she had his zipper down as well.

She'd been about to get her hand around his erection when the doorbell rang. Sage stiffened, then turned her head in its direction.

"Don't answer it." Grady grabbed her leg, draped it over his hip and nuzzled the side of her neck.

"I have to," she said reluctantly. "It could be my sister. This is the first time she's let me keep Josh overnight. She might be regretting that decision."

Grady sighed, then slowly let Sage go. "You're right. You have to get it in case it's her."

Sage rolled off the couch and stood. She quickly did up her jeans and fixed her shirt before she headed for the front door. She smiled as she pulled it open, all prepared to see Macy standing on the other side, looking anxious. Her smile died when her gaze landed on the police officer who stood on her porch. She knew him well since she worked with him almost on a daily basis.

"Hey, David. What brings you over to my house? I'm off-duty today."

He nodded and took a deep breath as if he really didn't want to be there. "I'm not here about you being off. It's a personal matter."

Sage frowned. "I don't understand. What could that possibly be? As far as I know, I haven't unconsciously broken any laws, because that's about the only way I'd do something like that."

David looked down at his feet, then back up at her. "Damn, this is a lot harder to do when you know the person."

"Now you have me feeling a little nervous."

"Sage, I'm sorry." He paused, then continued in a businesslike voice. "There was an accident almost an hour ago. A drunk driver slammed into a car and pushed it into the oncoming traffic where it was hit head-on. The driver of the car the drunk hit was killed instantly. The passenger was rushed to the ER barely alive and not expected to make it." He paused again, a look of pity on his face. "It was Macy and her husband. You need to go to the hospital to be with her. I know she had a baby. He wasn't in the car. Do you know where he is?"

"He's asleep upstairs in my room," Sage said softly, not wanting to accept what David had told her. "Are you sure it was Macy and Hank?"

"I'm positive. I was first to arrive on the scene. I recognized them from the family picnics the department has in the summer. Plus, we found ID on them, which confirmed who they are. I'm so sorry. Would you like me to drive you to the hospital? As I said, your sister isn't going to make it. When I left the ER, they were doing their best to keep her alive."

Sage swallowed back the tears that threatened to rise to the surface. "Is she conscious?"

"No, and the doctor doesn't think she'll wake up. You need to see her before..." David's words trailed away.

She knew what he'd been about to say. Before Macy died. "I'll drive myself. I don't want to take Josh with me, though."

"Then don't take him," Grady said as he came up behind her. "I'll stay with Josh. You go to the hospital."

Sage turned and looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. He's asleep, and you said he'd more than likely stay sleeping for the rest of the night. I can handle that."

"Is there anyone you need me to contact?" David asked, drawing Sage's attention.

She shook her head. "No. I can call Hank's parents. They live in Fairbanks. As for my family, it's just Macy and I. We don't have anyone else. And I'm legally Josh's guardian. Macy made sure of that right after he was born." Sage's voice cracked a little.

Grady put his arm around her shoulders and tucked her under his arm. "Are you going to be okay to drive?"

"Yes," she said after she cleared her throat. "I'll get ready and will leave in a minute."

"I'll follow behind you," David said.

Sage stepped away from Grady, feeling about ready to break down, but she wouldn't. At least not yet. She had to be strong, be there for Macy. She wouldn't let her sister be alone.

* * * * *

Grady stood in the open door and watched Sage pull away in her SUV. The police cruiser parked at the front of the house fell in behind her. Once they disappeared from sight, he shut the door and let out a deep breath.

The night had gone from being perfect to a disaster. After Sage answered the door, Grady had easily been able to

hear the conversation that took place there. He'd wanted to go to her, but he couldn't since he wasn't supposed to know what was going on. Once she'd said she didn't want to take Josh to the hospital with her, there was no way he could remain in the living room. He'd had to tell her he would look after the baby. It would be one fewer thing she had to worry about. She already had enough on her plate with her sister not expected to live.

He returned to the living room and sat on the couch. Grady was prepared to stay with Sage for however long she needed him. Hearing she had no other family besides her sister, he wouldn't let her go through this alone. Yes, they'd just met, but he liked her a lot. He would be strong for her, help her through this difficult time in her life. He'd be a huge asshole if he left now. Plus, it went against everything he'd been taught. Cougar shifter family groups were tightknit. Each member could be counted on to be there for another when they were in need. Since she didn't have anyone to fall back on, Grady would step in and fill that role for her.

Right then the baby sighed over the monitor. Grady turned and looked at it. If Sage's sister didn't pull through as expected, Sage would become an instant mother. Even though Josh wouldn't remember his parents, he at least wouldn't have to suffer through watching them being buried or know what was going on.

Chapter Four

Sage sat in one of the hard plastic chairs in a hospital waiting room. She'd been there for hours. She figured it had to be pushing close to dawn, though she really hadn't been paying close attention to the time. At least not until after Macy had passed away.

Sage had made it to the hospital to be with her sister before she'd succumbed to her injuries. Macy had had massive internal injuries and head trauma, and there had been nothing the doctors could do to save her. The damage had been too severe. Sage had been able to hold Macy's hand, kiss her one last time and tell her that she didn't have to worry about Josh. That she would look after him and would always be there for him. As if her sister had only been waiting to hear those reassurances, her heart had stopped beating and didn't start again, no matter how hard the doctor and nurses had tried to bring her back.

Now here Sage sat, numb to the world around her, waiting to sign the paperwork to arrange to have her sister's body moved to the funeral home of her choosing. She also waited to talk to Hank's parents. They'd only arrived a short while ago, having taken the forty-minute flight from Fairbanks to Anchorage. There was no question of Hank and Macy not being buried side by side.

The older couple stepped into the room. They both seemed to have aged ten years. Hank had been their only child. At least a piece of him would live on in Josh. The baby was the spitting image of his father, but with his mother's eyes and hair color.

"Sage," Hank's mother Kate said as she held open her arms.

Sage hugged Kate and then Hank's father Max. "How are you both holding up?" she asked.

"About as well as you, I'd imagine," Kate said as she wiped tears out of her eyes. "I just thank god Josh wasn't in the car."

That would have been even more devastating. "So do I. He's still at my place. My boyfriend Grady is there watching Josh." Sage figured it would sound better to have Grady as her boyfriend than tell them she'd just met him.

"A boyfriend?" Kate asked with a small smile. "Last time I talked to Macy she said you didn't have one, and that you were too busy with your police work to date."

"We haven't been together that long."

"I'm glad you have someone you can lean on for support. And just to reassure you, we'll give you any help you need with Josh. We know he'll be better off with you. It would just be too much for us."

Sage had known she wouldn't have to worry about Hank's parents trying to take Josh away from her. Max's health wasn't great, and he had been in and out of the hospital because of his heart a few times in the past year. Looking after a six-month-old baby would take its toll on both Max and Kate.

"I know," Sage said. "And thanks for the offer. I'll be sure to call if I need anything. Once we get finished here, you're both more than welcome to stay at my place for however long you're in Anchorage."

“That won’t be necessary,” Max said. “We already booked a room at a hotel. It’ll be less stressful for you.”

Sage nodded. “Okay, but you’re welcome to change your mind.”

After that, the rest of the time Sage spent at the hospital passed in a blur. She filled out the necessary paperwork, barely paying attention to what she signed. Once she’d done all she could for now, she said goodbye to Hank’s parents with a promise to talk to them in the afternoon to arrange a time to go to the funeral home.

Sage drove home. She was tired but didn’t know if she’d be able to sleep. For one thing, Josh would be awake soon. On the way, she stopped off at a store to buy diapers and all the other things such as food and bottles she’d need for her nephew. She had a key to Macy’s house but she couldn’t bring herself to go there to pick up what she’d need just yet. Though she’d have to do it very soon. Josh would need his crib and clothes. Plus, she also had the decision as to what to do with the home.

She pulled into her two-car driveway and parked beside Grady’s expensive sedan. After getting out of her SUV, Sage headed for the front door. She unlocked it and stepped inside, placing the items she’d bought in the entranceway. The house was completely quiet. It was early enough for Josh to still be asleep. She figured Grady must be sleeping as well since he didn’t come to see her.

After taking off her coat and boots, she went to the living room. The scene that greeted her had her smiling despite what the night had turned into. Grady lay on the couch, his feet dangling over the end. Josh was on his chest, his little head tucked under Grady’s chin. The quilt from the playpen was covering the baby and the sides were tucked under Grady, holding Josh in place. Grady had his arms wrapped around her nephew. The sight of them together pulled at her heartstrings.

Sage leaned against the wall next to the entrance to the room and slowly slid down it until she sat on the floor. She couldn’t tear her gaze from them. Being sleep deprived and an emotional wreck on the inside, she crazily thought Grady would be the perfect replacement father for Josh. It was stupid to be thinking like that when she’d had one date with him that had lasted a few hours at the most, but at the moment, he was the only person in her world who she thought she could lean on.

She then noticed Josh had his little hand wrapped around Grady’s cougar head pendant just as she’d done when she and Grady had been fooling around. It was the second time her nephew had taken hold of it. He obviously liked it, and Grady mustn’t have minded.

Sage lifted her knees to her chest and rested her forehead against them. She closed her eyes. The image of her sister lying in a hospital bed, broken and bleeding, rose inside her mind. It would probably be something she’d never forget. She swallowed past the lump in her throat as she fought back her tears. She wanted to wail and scream about the injustice of it. Macy and Hank had been too young, and Josh should have been able to grow up with his parents. But she wouldn’t do any of that. There was too much to do to settle her sister’s affairs.

“Sage.”

At the sound of her whispered name, she looked up to find Grady awake and staring at her. Sage pushed to her feet and quietly walked over to where he lay. Josh was still sleeping. She knelt on the floor in front of the couch and softly caressed her nephew’s cheek.

“Have you been home long?” Grady asked in a whisper.

“No,” she replied just as quietly.

“Did your sister...”

“She didn’t make it. Macy died about a half hour after I arrived.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Did Josh wake up for you?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t too sure about me at first. The only way I could get him to sleep was on me like this. I tried to put him back in the playpen, but he started to cry again.”

“At least you got some rest.”

Grady ran his gaze over her face. “You need to sleep as well.”

Sage shook her head. “I can’t. Josh will be awake soon. And you’ll want to go home.”

He stared into her eyes. “You have to sleep. I’m not going to leave you alone.”

“You’ve been here all night. You’ll want to change your clothes and shower. Plus, there isn’t much to eat here. I need to go grocery shopping.”

Grady reached over and cupped the side of her face. “Then you and Josh can come to my place. We have a personal chef who makes all our meals. And you’re more than welcome to sleep in my bed. I’ll take care of the baby. My brother and his wife will be there as well to help. We all live together, along with my parents.”

Normally, Sage would have been able to manage everything on her own, but not now. Having someone take care of her, make it so she didn’t have to worry about anything, was something she couldn’t turn down.

“Okay, I’ll go to your place once Josh wakes up. I’ll have to feed him and get him dressed, then we can go.”

As if he’d heard his name, the baby squirmed against Grady and opened his eyes. Grady sat up and shifted Josh until he had him cradled in his arms and disentangled the baby’s fingers from his pendant.

“Hey there, buddy,” Grady said. “Did you have a good sleep?” The baby smiled at him.

Sage stood, then took Josh from Grady. “I’ll get him ready to go.”

She grabbed some of the things she’d bought on the way up the stairs. Once again, she was glad Grady was there. For someone who’d asked her for a simple date, he sure as hell got a lot more than he bargained for.

* * * * *

Grady took a quick look at Sage, who sat beside him in his car. The baby was in his infant car seat in the back. It’d taken about a half hour to get Josh fed, changed and set to go.

Sage looked about ready to drop. There were dark circles under her eyes and she seemed to be staring at nothing. Grady focused his attention back on the road. No matter what she said, he was going to get her tucked into his bed as soon as they got to his house. She needed to get some rest before she faced what she had to do that day. It wasn’t going to be easy on her, but he planned to stay with her every step of the way.

Once they arrived at his place, Grady hit the remote to open one of the doors of the four-car garage. He pulled in

next to his brother Jase's car and parked. After he shut the engine off, he closed them inside.

He carried Josh in his car seat and one of the bags Sage had brought while she grabbed the other one, then walked to the entrance to the house. Grady stepped aside for her to go in ahead of him. He motioned for her to keep walking up the short hallway.

They stepped out into the foyer. Grady was surprised to see a pile of luggage sitting near the front door. He then saw his dad coming down the stairs from the upper level. His father smiled as he came to join them.

"I thought you and Mom were going to be away for a week," Grady said.

His dad shrugged. "Your mom decided she couldn't afford to take an entire week away. We just arrived home about ten minutes ago." His father looked at Sage, then the infant car seat Grady carried. "Who do we have here?"

Grady put down the bag he held and wrapped his arm around Sage's waist. "This is Sage." He turned the car seat around so his dad could look inside. "And this is her nephew Josh. They're going to be spending some time here with me. Something happened last night while I was over at Sage's place on a date and she was babysitting. Her older sister and husband, the parents to Josh, were hit by a drunk driver while they were out for dinner. They both died. Sage has been at the hospital all night while I stayed at her place to watch the baby. She's Josh's godmother. She also doesn't have any family to help her."

"I'm sorry for your loss," his dad said solemnly. "I'm Charles, Grady's dad."

"Thanks," Sage said quietly.

"And I'm sorry as well," his mother said as she joined them from upstairs. "I heard what Grady said about your sister. And you're more than welcome to stay here for as long as you need. You look about ready to drop."

"This is my mom Olivia," Grady said. "I was going to put her to bed," he told his mother.

"Well, in that case, I'll look after the baby while you take care of Sage."

Before Grady could say anything, his mom took the car seat from him, then placed it on the floor so she could unbuckle Josh. She squatted and took the baby out and managed to take off his snowsuit.

She stood and smiled. "He's gorgeous. How old is he?"

"Six months," Sage answered. "You don't mind looking after him?"

"Of course not. I love babies." His mom lifted Josh and gave him a kiss.

The baby's little hand came up and took hold of his mom's cougar head pendant, which was identical to Grady's. It'd once belonged to his father. All male cougar shifters were given one once they reached puberty. The pendant was made with a bit of magic inside. When a male met his mate, the cougar's ruby eyes glowed. It didn't necessarily happen right after the couple met. It could take days, weeks, even months. It was triggered once the male could accept the female as the one he loved and wanted as his, be it consciously or subconsciously.

Once that happened, he would only be able to think about her, being unable to eat and sleep. He wouldn't be able to stop thinking of making love to her, using sex to help convince her to claim him. And it was the female who decided to claim the male as hers by taking his cougar head pendant from him and putting it around her neck, thus having the mating bond form as their souls joined.

“You have the same pendant as Grady,” Sage said. “Josh liked his, so I guess he likes yours as well. I’ll take it from him.”

His mom laughed. “It’s okay. He can hold on to it if he wants. He can’t damage it.” She looked at Grady. “Sage looks about ready to fall over. Go take her upstairs. I have everything under control here. I’m sure Jase and Katrina will be down soon as well. They’ll want to meet Josh.”

“All right,” he said as he took the bag Sage carried from her and placed it with the other one. “We’re going up now.”

Grady guided Sage up the stairs and down the hallway to his bedroom. Once they were inside, he closed the door behind them. He walked her over to his bed and tugged down the covers, then stepped aside.

“In you go,” he said. “I’ll wake you up in a few hours.”

“Stay.”

He looked at her. “What?”

“I want you to stay with me.” Sage closed the distance between them and put her hands on his waist.

“You need to sleep. If I stay I might get worked up, if you know what I mean?”

She met his gaze. “I want you to make love to me. I need it. Right now I feel as if my whole world has been knocked off its axis. I want the connection sex will give me. I’m about ready to break down, and I can’t. Please. Stay with me. I promise I’ll go to sleep after.”

“Are you sure? You’ve been through so much.”

In way of answer, Sage went on tiptoes and kissed him. She pushed her tongue past his lips and thoroughly tasted him. Her grip on his waist tightened as she tugged him closer so their bodies met. Some guys would have done their best to stop what was about to happen based on principle, but Grady wasn’t even going to try. If it was something she needed from him, then he’d give it to her.

He wrapped his arms around Sage and took over their kiss. He licked and sucked, pushing inside her mouth. It didn’t take much to have his cock fully engorged. What they’d shared at her house before she’d been informed about her sister... He remembered all too well what she’d looked like as she’d come apart in his embrace. He wanted to make her come again, but this time while his cock was buried deep inside her.

Grady slowly stripped away her clothes one at a time, learning her body with each inch of skin he exposed. Once he had Sage completely naked, she helped him undress. Now as naked as she, he pulled her close again. The feel of her skin-to-skin caused his cock to jerk between them. He sucked in a sharp breath as she reached down and put her hand around it. She pumped up and down, squeezing tight.

He let her stroke him a few more times before he gently pulled out of her grasp and lifted her onto the bed. He came down beside her, running his hand down her body until he reached her pussy.

Purrs rumbled out of him. “You’re so wet.”

“I don’t want to wait anymore. I want you inside me. Show me I’m not alone.”

Grady gently kissed her as he shifted to lie between her thighs. “I’m right here for you.”

He nudged the head of his erection into her pussy. He pulled back, then sank a little deeper until he’d worked his full

length inside her. Sage moaned as he set a pace that was sure to bring them both to release. She lifted her bent legs to either side of his hips and matched his strokes. Her inner walls tightly hugged his shaft as he surged in and out of her.

Grady purred again, unable to hold it back. Making love to Sage didn't compare to other women he'd been with. He was more in tune with her, wanting to make this good for her, to show her this was all for her.

He thrust into her faster, loving the feel of her taking him. She panted and moaned, clutching his biceps after he lifted his upper body off her. He sank deeper, his cock growing even harder.

As her pussy tightened around his plunging shaft, then clutched and released it as Sage climaxed, Grady's point of no return rushed to the surface. He growled like the cat he was and surged into her one final time before his orgasm overtook him.

Once he'd given her all he had and she'd settled beneath him, Grady lowered himself on top of her, bracing on his elbows so she didn't have to take his full weight. He kissed her gently. He pulled out of her and rolled onto his back, bringing Sage up against his side with her head resting on his chest. He ran a caressing hand up and down her back. She slowly, by degrees, relaxed. She reached for his pendant and closed her fingers around it.

Grady kissed Sage's forehead and saw her eyes were shut and her breathing had evened out. He'd lie there with her for a while to make sure she stayed asleep, then he'd get up and see how Josh was doing.

Chapter Five

Grady gave Sage one last look before he headed out his bedroom door. She was sound asleep. He'd gently eased out from under her and gotten out of bed without waking her up. Now dressed, he went downstairs to see how his other guest was doing.

He found Josh being showered with attention from his mom and Katarina in the living room. They had a thick blanket on the floor, which the baby lay on as the women sat on either side of him, smiling and laughing at what he did. Jase and his father were on the couch watching them.

"You two are going to spoil him if you're not careful," Grady said as he went to join Katrina and his mom.

His mother looked at him and smiled. "You can't pay too much attention to a baby. Is Sage asleep?"

"Yes, but I have to wake her up in a few hours. She has to go to the funeral home with her brother-in-law's parents to make arrangements for Macy and Hank."

"Will you go with her?" his dad asked.

"If she'll let me. I already know none of you will have a problem looking after Josh for us."

"Of course we won't," his mom said. "Jase and Katarina were telling your father and me how you met Sage, and that she's a police officer."

"Yes, she's a cop. And I suppose you also know Caleb got the jump on me."

His dad nodded. "And Jase told me about your assumption of what he could have been doing meeting a human in the middle of the night in a parking lot. I have a feeling if we don't capture him soon he's going to leave the country and we'll be lucky if we find him again."

"I know. Draven is working on something that will hopefully help us find him. I don't know how he plans to do it, and quite frankly, I'm not going to ask since I'm sure it'll be illegal."

Josh whimpered, and Grady went and picked him up. The baby smiled and rubbed a hand wet with drool over Grady's face. He didn't care. During the night when he couldn't get Josh back to sleep right away, he'd had lots of time with him. He'd grown attached to him, as he had Josh's aunt.

His mother sighed. "What?" Grady asked.

"Seeing you holding a baby, it makes me want grandchildren." She then grew serious. "You feel something for Sage, don't you? For only knowing her a short time, you've taken on a role of a mate for her by standing with her during a bad time in her life. And for someone who has never looked after a baby before, that didn't stop you from taking care of Josh all night. Plus, you brought them both into our home so you can continue to look after them."

Grady kissed Josh's cheek. "I'll admit I'm falling for Sage. And I have no trouble with Josh being a part of her life. I'm just not sure how she feels about me yet."

Jase chuckled. "Well, from your scent, which smells like sex and Sage, she has to have some feelings for you if she slept with you, especially considering the state of mind she's in."

“Jase,” Katarina said as a rebuke.

“It’s okay,” Grady reassured her. “She at first wanted to cancel our date, but she reluctantly invited me into her place. Now, losing her sister who was her only relative, I think she feels as if she’s alone. I’ll do everything I can to show her she isn’t, that I’ll be here for her.”

“Don’t be surprised if she sets off your pendant,” his dad said. “It already sounds as if you’re falling in love with her.”

Grady didn’t dislike the idea of that. The few short hours he’d been with her and then helping her through her loss, he had to agree with his dad that he truly was falling for Sage.

His brother chuckled. “If that happens, Grady will be an instant father and Mom will be a grandmother like she wants.”

“True,” he said. Then softly laughed as he pried his cougar head pendant out of Josh’s grasp before the baby put it in his mouth. “He’s always trying to put drool all over my pendant or tugging on it. Sage is the same, minus the drool. She fell asleep on me before I came downstairs. I had to get it out of her hand. She has a tendency to want to hold it too.”

Katarina smiled. “I have a feeling she’s your mate. Aspen, Harley and me have been talking about what it’s like being human and mated to a cougar shifter. All of us agreed about one thing—we were all drawn to our mate’s pendant, wanting to touch it, claim it, even before we set off the magic inside. We also found it warm, warmer than it should be just from normal body temperature.”

“Interesting,” said his mother. “Cougar shifter females don’t experience anything like that when we first meet our mates. I guess a human mate must affect the magic differently.” She then turned to Grady. “If what Katarina says is what’s happening to Sage, how do you feel about that?”

“I would want her as my mate, and I would accept Josh as mine as well.”

“Then you’ll have to let her know what you are either before she sets off the pendant or after.”

“I know. The only problem is when to do it. Right now she already has too many emotional things to handle. Me telling her I’m a cougar shifter might just push her over the edge. She’s barely hanging on as it is. She’s fighting to stay strong and won’t let herself mourn her sister yet.”

“That will come,” his mother said. “I think you’re right about now not being the time to tell her. I’d wait until after the funeral, which I’m sure will be sometime this week.”

“I would imagine so.”

Grady kept hold of Josh and sat in the armchair kitty-corner to the couch. He could handle being a father. And if what Katarina said was true about Sage possibly being his mate, he was all prepared to settle down with her and the baby. All that remained to see was if she did set off the magic in his pendant.

* * * * *

Sage awoke from a bad dream, calling her sister’s name. She snapped open her eyes and looked around. It took her a few seconds to remember where she was. She sat up and glanced at the clock on the bedside table next to her. According to it, she’d only been sleeping for an hour, and she seriously doubted she’d be able to go back to sleep.

She rubbed her eyes, remembering what she’d dreamed about. She’d been calling for Macy, searching for her,

knowing she had to find her. When she did, her sister lay bloody and broken, her eyes staring sightlessly at Sage. Tears threatened to rise to the surface, but she pushed them back. There was too much to do. She had to call Hank's parents in an hour to arrange a time with them to go to the funeral home. She dreaded it.

Sage lay back on her side and clutched the other pillow to her chest. It smelled like Grady. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Without him, she didn't know how she would have been able to keep it together. And making love to him had her not wanting to lose him. For the first time in her life, she wanted to depend on a man.

Even though her emotions were in turmoil, Sage was falling for Grady. After having the kind of father she'd had, she'd never believed she would be able to fall in love with someone so quickly, or even at all. Macy had found it with Hank, but Sage hadn't thought she'd ever have it for herself. That was part of the reason she'd focused so much on a career that a relationship came last.

Now she didn't know how she was going to handle being a cop and raising Josh. There was no way she could continue working the night shift. He'd lost his parents, he didn't need her being absent most of the time. At least she'd be given time off because she'd lost a family member, and more after that since Josh was now hers. She could get maternity leave, she hoped. It wasn't something she paid too close attention to.

Giving up on sleep, Sage threw back the covers and got out of bed. She'd changed her clothes before leaving with Grady, but she hadn't had a chance to take a shower. She didn't think he would mind if she took one. It would help wake her up.

Sage took her first good look around Grady's room. It was huge. There was a small sitting area complete with a couch, side table and brass floor lamp. She figured there would be an en suite bathroom since this was more like an apartment than a regular bedroom. The first closed door she tried opened up to a large walk-in closet. Grady's clothes took half the space. The second door ended up being the bathroom.

Like the rest of the room, its proportions were huge. There was a two-person whirlpool tub at one end, two sinks set in a granite countertop and a glassed-in shower stall that had been done in black-veined white marble.

Sage found some fluffy bath towels on a shelf near the shower along with shampoo, conditioner and a bar of soap. Already naked, she stepped into the stall and closed the door behind her. Once she had the water at just the right temperature, she ducked her head under the spray. She didn't take very long to wash her hair and body. The water did help wake her up. She turned off the faucet, then stepped out and dried herself.

As she walked out into the bedroom Grady came in from the hall. She gave him a small smile. "I hope you don't mind. I took a shower."

He closed the distance between them and gave her a kiss. "Of course I don't. What's mine is yours while you're here. I was only coming to check on you. I figured I'd let you sleep for another hour."

"I couldn't sleep anymore. Do you have a comb I can borrow?"

He took her hand and led her over to the dresser, then handed her the one that sat on it. "Here."

"How's Josh?"

Grady smiled. "Fine, and getting spoiled rotten by my mom and sister-in-law. They've pretty much claimed him as their own and won't let anyone else have him."

Sage nodded. "Would you mind watching him again while I go to the funeral home? I don't want to take him there."

"How about I have my mom and Katarina look after Josh and I go with you? You shouldn't deal with that alone."

"Hank's parents will be there."

"I know, but they have each other to lean on. I want you to feel you can do that with me."

She finished with her hair and put the comb on the dresser before she turned to face Grady. "I'd like that. I've always been strong, but going through this shows I'm not all the time. I thought it was hard when my parents died. I was just a teenager then."

"What happened to them?"

"My dad killed my mother, then killed himself. He was abusive and didn't like the fact she'd left him."

"That would have been rough."

"It was, but it also made me want to be a cop so I could protect other women from suffering the same fate as my mother. I just wish I could have done that for Macy."

Grady tugged Sage into his arms with the side of her face pressed against his chest. She reached up and held on to his cougar head pendant. Holding it made her feel more connected to him for some reason. A part of her wanted to take it from him and put it around her neck so she'd have something of his on her all the time. The old her before her sister's death would have told her to smarten her ass up and not be so needy, but this new her didn't care if it made her appear weak.

"How about you get dressed, then I'll take you downstairs for something to eat. The last thing you ate was the pizza we had last night."

Sage lifted her head and kissed Grady's chin. "All right, though I'm not very hungry. I'll force myself to eat. I can't be passing out from lack of food. Not when I have Josh to think about." She kissed him again when he angled his mouth in her direction.

"No, that wouldn't be good."

"Thanks for looking after us."

"You're welcome. I'm glad I can help."

With her free hand, Sage reached up and traced Grady's lips with her fingertip. "I probably shouldn't be saying anything right now, but having lost Macy, I've come to realize how quickly I can lose someone. I don't want it to happen before I get a chance to tell a person in my life how I really felt about them." She paused for a few seconds. "Don't take this the wrong way, thinking I'm usually this quick when it comes to relationships, because I'm not. Grady, I want you to be a part of my life. For the first time, I have strong feelings for a man."

He cupped her face and smiled. "I feel the same way about you. When it's right, it's right."

"Really? I didn't think you would since I tried to get rid of you last night."

Grady chuckled. "I didn't let you, though. I think I started falling for you when you stopped me from getting my head bashed in and tried to take care of me."

Sage let go of his pendant and with both hands angled Grady's head down. She ran her fingers through his hair along

the spot where he'd been hit. Much to her surprise, there was nothing there, not even a scabbed-over cut. It'd only been two days. There was no way it would have healed that quickly, even if it had been minor as he'd told her last night.

She pulled her hands away and met his gaze when he lifted his head. "There's nothing there. I can't feel where your wound was. That shouldn't be possible."

Grady ran the backs of his fingers along her cheek. "For me it is. It's something we can talk about, but not right now. Let's wait until after you've gone through what you have to do for your sister."

"Tonight. We'll talk about it tonight."

"I don't think you'll be in the right frame of mind for it."

"I'm going to be up front with you. I can't stand being lied to or have people keep secrets from me when it'll affect me. You do either of those things, we won't work out, and I don't want to regret accepting you into my life."

"Then tonight we'll talk. And if you don't mind, I want my family there when we do."

"Okay."

"Now get dressed." Grady stepped away. "I'll wait for you in the hall because if I stay in here I can't promise I won't take you to bed again, and that wouldn't be good."

Sage smiled. "You'd make me late. I won't be long."

After Grady walked out of the room and closed the door behind him, Sage took off the towel she wore and dressed. She was now intrigued as to what he'd tell her if he wanted his family present when he did so. And she wasn't sure what he'd say to explain why his head had healed quicker than should have been possible.

Once she was ready, Sage stepped out into the hall, where Grady waited for her. He took her hand in his as he guided her to the stairs. They walked down the curved stairway to the foyer, then into a large living room. His parents were there along with another couple Sage assumed were his brother Jase and his wife Katarina.

Grady's mom held Josh. She stood when she saw them. "There's Auntie Sage." She passed the baby to Sage and asked, "Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head. "No. Thanks for helping to watch Josh."

"It was no hardship. And I've already told Grady I'll look after the baby when you two go to the funeral home. I also want you to invite Josh's grandparents over here for dinner when you're finished. They obviously haven't seen him since they arrived."

"Thanks. I'm sure they'd like that."

"Good. And you and Josh are more than welcome to stay the night with Grady. You shouldn't be alone at a time like this. It's not as if we don't have the room."

Sage couldn't help noticing how young Grady's mom looked. Olivia didn't look old enough to have two adult children. If Sage had passed her on the street, she would have guessed her to be around thirty-five years old. Even his dad Charles looked the same age.

"I guess we can stay over," Sage said. She actually didn't like the idea of being alone. She'd have too much time on her hands and would think about Macy and how she was gone, which wouldn't be good.

“Great. You must be hungry. I’ll have our chef whip you up something to eat.”

Olivia hurried out of the living room. Sage looked at Josh, who smiled. She still thought it was a blessing he had no idea what was going on. But she wouldn’t let him grow up not knowing about his parents. She would make sure he’d know them, and he wouldn’t be calling her “Mom” either. She’d only be Auntie Sage.

Chapter Six

Making the funeral arrangements for her sister was the toughest thing Sage had ever done. She was more than grateful Grady had decided to go with her. Him just being with her helped her get through some of the rougher moments.

Hank's parents had accepted Olivia's offer for dinner. Once they were done at the funeral home, they decided to return to the hotel before they went to Grady's house since there were more than a few hours to kill in between. Sage had Grady drive to her place to pick up Josh's playpen. On the way, she also had him stop at a store to buy Josh some new clothes since there was no way she was going to her sister's house to get more.

At her place Sage led Grady upstairs to her bedroom. She packed a bag with a change of clothes before she set to work closing up the playpen to take with them. After she had it collapsed and bundled, ready to go, she sat on the bed beside him and folded the blankets. She set them aside, then turned to him.

"Will your mom mind if we take a little longer getting back to the house?" Sage asked.

"I doubt it."

"Good."

Sage threw herself into Grady's arms, pushing him onto his back. She landed on top of him and kissed him hungrily. She needed to get as close to him as she could, have him make her feel alive.

Grady put his arms around her and kissed her back with the same fervor. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and thoroughly tasted her. Sage spread her legs and brought her pussy on top of his hard cock. She rocked against him, making them both moan.

As arousal beat at her, Sage left Grady's mouth and kissed a trail down to the side of his jaw. She reached between them and dragged the bottom of his shirt up. He quickly pulled it the rest of the way off and threw it over the side of the bed. His arm then snaked around her waist and held her to him as he positioned them both in the center of the bed, giving them more room.

After they settled in place, Sage shifted lower on Grady's body, licking and kissing as she went. A cat-sounding purr rumbled out of him, something he seemed to do a lot during sex. She didn't mind, it turned her on just as much as his moans and groans. She figured he had a different way of showing how much he enjoyed what she did to him.

Sage paused at his cougar head pendant and brushed it with her finger. It was warm to the touch, warmer than it should be from Grady's body heat. She couldn't explain her fascination with it. The thought of taking it from him once again flashed through her mind but she pushed it aside. There was something else she wanted more.

Lower she went, taking the time to drag her tongue along his washboard abs. At the top of his jeans, she undid them and parted the material. Sage ran a finger down the length of Grady's cock through his underwear. It jerked in response.

She met Grady's gaze as she took hold of the top of his pants and underwear and tugged them both down past his hips. "Earlier I didn't get to explore as much as I wanted. I don't intend to miss out this time."

"By all means. Explore to your heart's content. It might kill me but I'm giving you the control."

“If that’s the case, then I want you completely naked.”

Grady helped Sage as she pulled his jeans and underwear the rest of the way off and tossed them aside. She feasted her eyes on him. He had a great body, muscular and cut but not overly bulky. But what really made her mouth water was his cock. Fully engorged, it was thick and long. From their previous lovemaking, she already knew it filled her pussy all the way up. And he definitely could use it to make her want to scream his name in pleasure.

She straddled his thighs and wrapped her fingers around his shaft. She pumped it a few times until a drop of pre-cum appeared on the tip. Grady groaned, his hips lifting off the mattress, thrusting his erection tighter into her hand.

Sage firmly grasped him at the base and circled the head of his cock with her tongue. Grady groaned louder, a purr mixing with the sound. She gave him one last lick before opening her mouth and taking the head inside. She sucked back more of his length, then slowly lifted her head until only the tip remained. His hands fisted the covers under him as she took him in and out, taking as much as she could handle.

His cock grew even harder. “Sage,” he said with a moan. “I’m getting too close. I want to be inside you.”

Sage sucked him almost to the back of her throat, then released his shaft. She sat up. “And I want you there.”

She watched Grady as she took off her shirt and bra. His gaze followed her every movement. Next came her pants. Her panties, she took her time removing. She was already wet for him, more than ready to take his cock into her pussy.

Once she was as naked as he, she straddled his hips, then lowered herself onto his erection. It stretched her as she worked it in and out until she completely impaled herself. Sage lifted to her knees, sliding him almost free of her body only to push back down until he was all the way inside.

Sage continued to ride Grady, clenching her inner muscles around his plunging cock. She set a slow and steady pace that had her climax inching toward the surface. He reached up and palmed her breasts, tugging on her taut nipples. She placed her hands over his to keep them there. It was just enough extra stimulation she needed to have her panting, straining for her release.

As Grady let out a strangled moan and his cock pulsed inside her, Sage fell into her own orgasm. Her pussy clutched and released his shaft, milking him as wave after wave of pleasure tore through her. Once it was over, she collapsed onto his chest, gasping for breath. She found his cougar head pendant with her hand and held on to it.

“That was pretty intense,” Grady said.

Lost in the moment, Sage blurted, “I love you.”

Grady cupped her face and brought her lips to his. He kissed her slowly. “And I love you.”

His pendant warmed even more. Sage opened her hand and looked at it. “Why are the cougar’s ruby eyes glowing?”

“They are?” Grady asked with something akin to hope in his voice.

“Yeah. Look.” She sat up and lifted the pendant for him to see. “And why do I have this almost overwhelming urge to put it around my own neck?”

She couldn’t see what made the rubies glow. The light was dim at best in the room since the curtains were closed and it was getting dark out. It being the middle of January, the sun set around four thirty in the afternoon.

“Take it.”

“What?”

“Take the pendant. You’re meant to have it. I want to see you wearing it.”

The way Grady spoke, it was as if the idea of her doing what he’d said was something that would mean a lot to him. Sage couldn’t deny the fact she really, really wanted his necklace. And she wasn’t even one for wearing jewelry.

“Take it,” Grady whispered.

Sage gripped the pendant again and slowly pulled it over Grady’s head. She turned it over and looked at the glowing eyes before she focused back on him. He lay there intently, watching her with a look of anticipation on his face. She took hold of it by its chain, turned it so the cougar head would face out, then slipped it over her head.

Grady held his breath as Sage lowered his pendant around her neck. Once it settled on her chest just above her cleavage, he sucked in a breath. The mating bond formed in an instant, joining their souls. From the look of surprise on her face, he guessed she felt it too.

Katarina had been right. Sage was the one. She was now his mate since she’d claimed him when she took his pendant as her own. Not that she knew that, but Grady did. Seeing her wear it, the love he had for her solidified. She was his. The moment the bond formed between them, he’d gained not only a mate but a nephew as well.

“What was that?” Sage asked as she searched his face. “I felt something—”

He cut her off by sitting up and taking her lips in a heated kiss. His cock went instantly rock hard inside her. He wanted her again. He needed to show her with his body how much he loved her and was glad she was his.

Grady held Sage close, then took her down to the mattress on her back. He pumped between her legs, glorying in the feel of her pussy taking his cock. She clutched his ass and pulled him in tighter as she lifted her hips to meet each thrust.

He already knew he wasn’t going to last long. Grady hooked one of Sage’s legs over his arm and spread her wider. He sank deeper. He angled his cock in just the right way so it hit her G-spot. She moaned, her fingers digging into the tops of his shoulders as she held on to him.

Then she panted his name as her inner muscles squeezed and released his shaft. As she came, his balls rose closer to his body and his point of no return tried to rush to the surface. He pushed it back. He wasn’t ready to come just yet.

Grady waited until Sage settled under him after her climax ended. He pulled out of her, then shifted to her side. With gentle hands, he urged her over onto her stomach, then up onto her hands and knees. Once he had her in that position, he came up behind her and stroked his hands down her back to her hips.

He held her still as he probed her slick entrance with the head of his cock. Grady purred at the feel of her wetness bathing the tip of him. He stroked her pussy without entering her, rubbing her clit with each pass. Sage pushed back and moaned.

Grady kept hold of Sage as he pushed forward and seated himself to the hilt inside her with one stroke. He stilled as her pussy spasmed around his length. After it ceased, he stroked in and out of her. She took more of him in this position, and his balls slapped against her with each thrust.

He reached around her and found her clit. He rubbed it as he surged into her. It ended up being enough to send her

into another orgasm. She moaned with her release and that pushed him over the edge. Grady pumped his hips faster, then with a groan that bordered on a growl, he climaxed, filling her with his cum.

With no more left to give, Grady wrapped an arm around Sage and took them down onto the bed on their sides. Both of them were breathing as if they'd run a marathon. He was satiated and didn't know if he could move again. All he wanted to do was hold his mate in his arms.

After what had just happened, there would be no getting around telling Sage about him being a cougar shifter later that night. He should have had that conversation with her once the ruby eyes in his pendant had glowed, but he'd wanted to see if she would take it from him. Hopefully she would accept him for what he was and not get too angry with him for not telling her before the mating bond formed between them.

* * * * *

Sage and Grady arrived at his house twenty minutes after they'd made love at her place. She helped him haul all the things they'd brought inside. Olivia had greeted them and informed Sage that Josh had gone down for a nap and that she'd put him upstairs on the bed in the master bedroom with pillows around him so he wouldn't roll off. Olivia had then asked how everything had gone at the funeral home.

"Good," Sage answered as she set down the bag she carried.

"And will Josh's grandparents be coming for dinner?"

"Yes. They asked me to thank you for the invitation." Sage shrugged out of her winter jacket.

"Oh my goodness," Olivia said as she looked at Sage, then at Grady and back to Sage again.

"What?" Sage asked, not sure why Grady's mother looked awfully happy all of a sudden.

"You're wearing Grady's pendant." Olivia's smile grew even bigger. She then gave her a hug.

Sage tentatively hugged the other woman back. "Ah, yeah, I am. I didn't realize it was that big a deal."

Olivia let go of Sage and looked at her son. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

Grady gave his mother a pained smile. "It happened really suddenly. I sort of didn't want to spoil the mood. I'd already decided we were going to have a talk with the rest of you. I figured it would be easier that way."

"Be sure you do, but I have to say I couldn't be happier. Now I get my wish." Olivia gave Grady a kiss. "I have to go tell your father, Jase and Katarina." She then headed up the stairs to the upper level.

Sage turned to face Grady. "What was all that about? The way your mom talked, you'd think we'd just gotten engaged or something."

"I'm going to leave it at you taking my pendant is a bigger deal to my family than you know. The rest I'll tell you later tonight once Josh's grandparents leave."

"Okay, I think."

She wasn't sure what to make of what had passed between Grady and his mom. It was obvious they were keeping something from her for some reason. They didn't appear to think it was bad, since Olivia had been happy about Sage wearing Grady's pendant. That could stem from the fact the other women of the house wore the same necklaces as well. Maybe in their eyes Grady giving her his pendant was tantamount to him asking her to marry him, and she, not knowing

the significance, had accepted while in the dark about the whole thing. She guessed she'd find out one way or the other later.

* * * * *

Sage spent the rest of the afternoon taking care of Josh. Since they were eating dinner in the early evening shortly after the baby went to bed for the night, she made sure she had him bathed and in his pajamas before Hank's parents arrived.

Bathing a six-month-old was a new experience for Sage. She probably would have done a quicker job of it if Grady hadn't offered to help by getting into the whirlpool tub with Josh to hold him while she did the washing part. Her nephew had a ball splashing them both, and he moved around so much Grady said it was like holding on to a slippery fish.

After Hank's parents arrived, they took turns passing Josh between them. It'd been a month since they'd last seen their grandson. Hank's mom Kate got a little teary over the fact Josh looked more and more like his father the older he got.

Once Sage got the baby upstairs to bed in Grady's room, the adults sat down to dinner. They talked about the services for Macy and Hank that would take place in two days. Much to Sage's surprise, all of Grady's family said they would be attending. Even Jase and his dad stated they would be around to help with the heavy lifting when the time came for Sage, Kate and Max to empty out Macy and Hank's house.

That was something Sage still dreaded, but it had to be done and put on the market. There was no way she could keep both her house and the other one. And she couldn't afford to pay the mortgage for Macy's with only her income. And Max and Kate had their own place in Fairbanks.

Hank's parents said their goodbyes once it grew late and promised Sage they'd talk to her the next day. After they left, everyone else headed back into the living room. She couldn't help noticing how nervous Grady looked all of a sudden.

They all sat, spreading out on the couch, loveseat and armchairs. Sage and Grady ended up on the loveseat, which was across from the couch. At first, Sage wasn't sure anyone was going to start the conversation since the others all seemed to be waiting for something.

Grady cleared his throat. "I guess I'd better be the one to get the ball rolling." He cleared his throat again and took hold of Sage's hand and looked her right in the eyes. "What I'm about to tell you, I've never told anyone like you before."

She gave him a confused look over the "anyone like you" comment. Was he referring to her being a cop or was it something else entirely? "Okay."

"I've been told it's best if I just come right out and say it without easing into it too much. So here it goes." His face grew serious, not showing any emotion. "Sage, I'm a cougar shifter. You set off the magic in my pendant and made the cougar's ruby eyes glow, which means you're my mate. When you took it from me and put it around your neck, you claimed me as yours and the mating bond formed, joining our souls."

Chapter Seven

Grady watched Sage's face carefully to see what her reaction would be to his confession of being a cougar shifter and what she was to him. At first, her expression remained blank, as if she really hadn't heard what he'd said. Then it switched to one that was guarded, almost as if she thought he wasn't all there in his head.

"You're a cougar shifter?" Sage asked. She looked around the room before focusing back on him. "And your family already knows you think of yourself as being one?"

"We're all shifters."

"Except for me," Katarina said. "I'm just a regular human like you, Sage."

Sage shook her head. "I'm sorry, but do all of you think you're doing Grady any favors by playing along with his delusions? And that's what it has to be."

Grady blew out a breath. "I really don't want to shift to my cougar form in front of you just yet. I need you to accept it a bit more or it'll freak you out. You can't deny you felt something pass between us when you put my pendant on. That feeling of an invisible bond forming, tying us together was the mating bond. I felt it, and from the look on your face then, I know you had to have as well."

"I can admit I did feel something. But how can you be sure it was our souls joining? For all you know it could have been us only caught up in the moment, if you know what I mean?"

"It wasn't that. It was the magic inside the pendant. Every male cougar shifter is given one once he reaches adolescence, and when we meet our mates, she sets off this bit of magic, which makes the rubies glow. To have the mating bond forming, the female has to be the one to take the male's pendant and put it around her neck."

Sage skipped her gaze over Olivia and Katarina. "So your mom and Katarina wearing cougar head pendants means they claimed their males too."

"Yes."

"Look, Grady, I'm a cop. Do you have any idea of some of the weird stuff I see sometimes on a daily basis? I have to say this ranks right up there."

"You're going to have to shift," Jase said. He put his arm around his wife. "It's too bad Sage didn't grow up with an uncle who is a werewolf like Katarina. It would make this so much easier."

"Werewolf?" Sage asked, really thinking things couldn't get any stranger than they already were.

"The hell with it. I'm shifting," Grady said as he stood and stepped in front of her.

Sage watched, transfixed, as Grady's body blurred and shimmered. Then in a matter of a few seconds, a large cougar took his place. She opened and closed her mouth a few times and looked around at the other people in the room. They didn't at all seem surprised. Actually, Olivia appeared happy with it.

The cougar Grady had become took a step closer, which snapped Sage's attention back to him. He purred loudly, then rubbed his furred cheek against her knee. She didn't know what to do. She felt frozen in place, her mind desperately

trying to make sense of it all.

“It’s okay, Sage,” Katarina said as she crossed over to her and took the spot where Grady had been sitting. “Touch him. It’s still Grady inside there. He’s able to think and react as he would in his other form. He just can’t communicate with you.”

Katarina took Sage’s hand and led it to the top of the cougar’s head and got her to stroke him. Maybe it was because the other people in the room weren’t freaking out or acting afraid, or because Sage was already an emotional wreck from her sister dying, but whatever it was, she wasn’t having an “Oh my god, run for your life” moment.

She pulled her hand out of Katarina’s grasp and petted Grady one more time before she said as she looked into the cougar’s eyes, “Okay, I believe you now.” She then looked at the others. “Do you mind if Grady and I talk alone?”

Olivia stood first and came over to Sage. She bent and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. “Welcome to the family.”

“Family?” Sage asked as the notion took her by surprise.

“Yes, family. You’re no longer alone, my daughter. Being Grady’s mate, you’re now a part of our family group and are one of us, as is Josh. We’ll take care of the both of you.”

Sage lost it. Tears welled in her eyes and there was nothing she could do to stop them. Through a sheen of them she watched the others leave the room. Everything she’d kept bottled up inside since losing her sister came out. Sobs racked her body as a strong pair of arms gathered her close. Grady had shifted back to his human form, but she hadn’t noticed until he sat her on his lap with her head on his shoulder.

She had no idea how long it took for her to cry herself out, but he sat with her through it all, gently rubbing her back, telling her how much he loved her and that everything would be all right. Once her sobs subsided into hiccups, Sage felt as if she’d been through the wringer.

“Are you okay?” Grady asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Are you okay with what I am and what you are to me?”

Sage wiped her eyes with her sleeve as she sat up and looked at him. “Surprisingly, yes. It was what your mom said about me now being part of your family. It’d only been Macy and I since I was eighteen and she was twenty. Losing her, it was as if I’d lost everything. I know I have Josh, but he’s so little and dependent upon me. Now I have you. I can lean on you and you’re always going to be there.”

“And I will be. You’re my mate, a part of my soul. I love you, and I’ll love Josh as if he were my own child.”

She cupped the back of Grady’s head and kissed him, long and deep. After she lifted her head, she said, “I love you too.” She gave him a small smile. “I guess you being a cougar shifter is the reason your head healed so fast, huh?”

“Yeah. We heal a lot faster than humans.”

“I guess I have a lot to learn about what you are.”

“Don’t worry. No one is going to test you on it,” Grady said with a crooked grin.

“Good.”

“Now let’s go tell everyone that you’re okay with us and that you’re feeling better.”

Grady stood and put Sage down on her feet. She put her arm around his waist as he wrapped his along her shoulders, tucking her up against his side. She was sure she’d have a ton of questions but right at that moment, all she cared about was the fact he was hers and would never leave her. Facing a life with no family scared her more than him being able to shift into a cougar.

* * * * *

It was three weeks after her sister had died and Grady had revealed what he was to Sage. She was back on the job, but only temporarily. She’d given her two-week notice and would no longer be a cop after that. Raising Josh was more important and she wanted to be the kind of aunt slash mother Macy would have wanted for her son. Her sister had planned to be a stay-at-home mom, so Sage would be as well. And it wasn’t as if she needed to work. Her mate had more than enough money to support the three of them.

After going through her sister’s belongs and getting the house on the market, Sage had then focused on selling her own as well. She and Josh had moved into Grady’s family home. The baby even had his own room right next to hers and Grady’s. It’d been a guestroom, which Olivia had turned into a nursery. She’d even slipped in a few stuffed cougars instead of teddy bears.

This was the last day Sage would be on duty. It was an afternoon shift, but she didn’t worry about Josh. The rest of her family was always there whenever she needed them to watch him. That was one thing she really liked about cougar shifter family groups. They always looked after one of their own.

Sage had also learned about Caleb, the guy who’d jumped Grady the night she’d met him. Once back at work she’d been using her police resources to see if she could get any leads on Caleb’s whereabouts. Her methods were legal, unlike Draven’s. She’d turned a blind eye to whatever he did.

It was getting close to the end of her shift. Sage decided she’d do a drive-by of Caleb’s house. Grady, Jase and his cousins Taylor and Blaise took turns watching the place in case their suspicions about Caleb wanting to torch it turned out to be correct. So far nothing had happened there.

She pulled the cruiser over to the curb and scanned the front of the large house. There were no lights on anywhere inside or outside. With another pass, Sage caught something that looked like a person-shaped shadow darker than the rest heading around a corner toward the backyard. Not wanting to take any chances, she shut off the car’s engine, then got out with her flashlight in hand. She headed in the direction she’d seen the shape go.

There was a full moon that night, and its light reflected off the snow. Sage turned on her flashlight once she neared the corner of the house. Since no one had shoveled in a while, the snow was deep. And she saw footprints in it that looked fresh. She followed them, keeping an eye out for the person who’d made them.

It didn’t take her long to find him. He had his back to her, bent over, working on something. She heard the distinctive rasping sound of a lighter being used, but the wind must have blown it out. It didn’t work in his favor either since it blew in their direction right into their faces.

“What are you doing?” she asked loudly.

The man shot around and Sage aimed the light she held in his eyes. The first thing she noticed was it was Caleb who

stood a short distance in front of her. She'd seen pictures of him. And the second, he held in one hand a glass bottle that had a rag hanging out of the top, which couldn't be anything but a Molotov cocktail, and in the other a lighter. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was going to do with them.

"Everything is fine, Officer," Caleb said. "This is my house. I locked my keys inside and was going to look for the spare one I have hidden in the yard."

"Really," she said. "And you were going to use that homemade bomb to light the way for you?"

"It isn't what you think it is."

"Drop what you're holding and walk toward me, keeping your hands in sight."

"You're overreacting. As I said before, this is my house. I'm not breaking any laws."

"You will do as I say or I'll force you to comply."

Caleb walked toward her, but made no move to drop what he held. "What's your name, Officer? I'm going to go to your superior and tell him how you harassed me for no reason."

Once he was close enough, Sage said, "You can try, Caleb, but since this is my last night on the job, I don't think it matters."

He stopped and stiffened. "How do you know my name?"

Sage put one hand behind her back as she pulled out the cougar head pendant she wore under her uniform shirt with the other after she pocketed her flashlight. Caleb's eyes widened, then he sniffed the air and a look of fury passed over his face.

"You're Grady's," he said with a snarl. "Did he send a woman after me?"

"No. I decided to come here by myself since I have more experience taking in scumbags like you."

"Do you think that you, a mere human, can best me enough to subdue me? I'm a cougar shifter. I'm faster and stronger than you."

As if to prove his words, Caleb let loose with a cat's growl and launched himself at her. Too bad for him, Sage had been all prepared for that. She pulled the hand she had at her back to her front and aimed her Taser gun right at him. She fired and the two small electrodes hit him in the thigh. He went down like a ton of bricks, no longer able to move as his muscles involuntarily contracted.

Sage closed the distance between them and looked down at him. She kept the electricity flowing from the gun to Caleb. "Yeah, you might be faster and stronger, but you're no match for a Taser gun just like every other criminal out there. Now be a good boy and shift to your cougar form."

She turned off the juice and waited to see if Caleb would do as she'd ordered. Of course he didn't. Once he'd recovered enough to be able to move again, he growled threateningly and tried to have another go at her. Sage jolted him a second time, rendering him immobile.

"Go to hell, bitch," he said through clenched teeth.

"Wrong answer." She squatted in front of him. "If a human gets zapped too many times, it can kill them. As for a cougar shifter, who can heal a lot quicker, I'm not sure how many jolts you can take, but I'm willing to find out. Either you

shift so I can put zip ties on you or you get the juice for however long it takes Grady and whoever else in his family wants to come collect you to bring you to face our family group leader. It's your choice."

To show she meant business, Sage turned off the electricity before she zapped Caleb again. It didn't take him long before he complied. It was then she found out a cougar shifter could take on his cat form while being tased. Obviously, the magic inside them wasn't affected.

After the change was complete, she quickly zip-tied his front legs together and then his back, and for good measure, she tied the front and back together as well. Satisfied he wouldn't be going anywhere, Sage turned off the juice and pulled the electrodes out of Caleb's leg. He snarled, showing off his sharp teeth. She chuckled.

Sage straightened and pulled her cell phone from the inside pocket of her uniform jacket and called Grady. After she explained the situation, he assured her that he, Jase, Taylor and Blaise would be over to collect Caleb as quickly as possible.

Since Caleb's place wasn't in the same general area of her new home and Taylor and Blaise's, it took the men about twenty minutes to arrive. They came running toward her. Once Grady reached her, he tugged her close and kissed her almost senseless.

"I can't believe you caught Caleb after all the months we've been trying," Grady said once he released her.

"It was just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Plus, I had some help from something none of you have." Sage held up her Taser gun. "It would seem cougar shifters aren't immune to being tased."

Taylor laughed. "Did you get him after he shifted?"

"No, I hit him before that."

"Then how did you get him to shift and lie still long enough for you to tie him up so well?"

"I told him he either shifted, allowing me to zip-tie him, or I'd keep the juice going to him until you guys showed up. He chose the first option."

"Remind me never to piss your mate off, Grady," Blaise said with a laugh. "I think she's too friendly with that Taser gun of hers."

Sage chuckled. "You have nothing to worry about from me. Well, if you guys can take care of Caleb, I should get back on the road. My shift is almost finished and I have to get back to the station."

Grady pulled her to him again. "Are you still okay with giving up police work? You're giving up your chance to be a detective."

She smiled. "Raising Josh will be more rewarding, and he deserves to have me home. As do you."

"Well, if you're firm on it, I'm not going to complain." He grabbed her ass. "Though I'm going to miss seeing you wear your police officer uniform. It turns me on."

"I get to keep it," she said with a wink. "I can wear it anytime you want."

Jase cleared his throat. "You two do realize you aren't alone? I so didn't need to hear that."

Taylor and Blaise hefted Caleb out of the snow between them. "Time to go," Taylor said. "Dad will be happy to see what you caught him. I'm sure he'll want to see you tomorrow, Sage."

“Grady, Josh and I will be by sometime.”

After Taylor and Blaise left, carting Caleb with them, Jase said he’d meet his brother at home. Once Sage and Grady were alone, they slowly walked toward the front of the house. She was more than ready to turn in her badge and gun at her shift’s end. In less than a month, her life had changed, some for the bad and a lot for the good. As she looked at the man she loved, she knew she’d never have to worry about being alone again. She owned her cougar shifter’s soul as much as he owned hers.

The End

About Marisa Chenery

Marisa Chenery was always a lover of books, but after reading her first historical romance novel she found herself hooked. Having inherited a love for the written word, she soon started writing her own novels.

After trying her hand at writing historicals, she now writes paranormals.

Marisa lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband and four children.

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