

Chapter One

Snow fell in thick-flaked flurries, the windows iced in the corners in splintered patterns. Christmas carols played in random order from the CD disks Lyndon had inserted in the stereo. He loved the traditional carols, Bing Crosby being among his all time favorites.

No one could croon like Bing, Lyndon thought.

The evening grew dark with early night, and he sat in his favorite rocker reading in front of the fireplace. He'd learned to dismiss the derision at appearing like an old man because of his holiday habit. No one else had to know, and honestly, no one else did. Since his father died, he had no family to see, and doing more for Christmas than the small tree in the corner and enjoying the calm quiet when he was snowed in, just didn't appeal to him.

But then again, most cougar shifters were solitary people to begin with. They didn't congregate at huge family reunions. They were family oriented, but more of a nucleus family, not the in-laws' cousins' fourth removed and the subsequent divided tree limbs of family.

Tilting his head, he closed his eyes, catching the woeful howl of the wolf pack. Their songs bounced over the snow, keen and clear. He listened until it faded, then like a loop, started again. Except, their howls had changed, became hard, aggressive growls.

He sat up. That wasn't like them, and they sounded very close.

Standing, he set the book in his hand on the mantle and walked to peer out his window. Limping out of the trees, he saw the blurred form of a wolf, hobbling.

The howls started again, and this time it was a hunting cry.

He knew the poor creature on the snow was the harried game. Grabbing his heavy jacket by the fire, he leaped into his snow boots, strapping them down, listening to the wolves' cry.

He darted through the house, leaving by the side door of the mudroom, circling back around, searching the tree line where he'd seen it. Gray dusk made the snow seem even thicker as it fell, but he could just make out movement yards ahead of him.

The animal had stopped, though streams of steam proved it still lived. He didn't recognize this one from his studies, and he'd catalogued over forty-five different wolves in the local packs. His home, an old look-out cabin, sat nearly on the border of their two territories, so every now and then, he actually could watch both, but for the most part, they avoided each other's land.

Cutting through the snow, he listened, the howls coming closer. His hands were beginning to chill, and he stuffed them in his pockets, his fingers digging, but coming up empty. No gloves. He remembered. They were on the shelf drying out from his last foray outdoors. Couldn't be helped, he was halfway to the panting animal.

Gray eyes focused on him as he neared. It didn't attempt to escape, it didn't snarl, and it didn't become defensive. It laid there. Studying it as he drew closer, he knew this

one wasn't one of the wolves from either pack. He could also see what the problem was. A bloody paw was packed with snow and debris.

"Poor baby," he murmured. "Found an old trap, didn't you?" Cautiously, he eased his way forward, its gray eyes staying focused, yet its demeanor never changed. His brow furrowed. "You can't be a wild wolf. You'd have tried to take my head off by now. I hope you're not a release wolf that hasn't found his footing." He'd have to radio the conservation center when the storm blew over to see if this one resembled one of their release wolves.

A snarl whipped his attention over his shoulder. Three sets of eyes. Pissed off eyes glared at him. He growled low in his chest, hissing. The wolves were completely confused, tails in the air, full battle gear locked and loaded.

Not turning his back on the three, he crouched and gently lifted the animal from the cold snow. It hung limp as a rag in his arms. "Definitely not wild," he breathed, the words forming as clouds in the bitter cold. "All right, let's see what we can do about your foot."

He had to take the chance to turn away from the watching trio to get back to the cabin. Golden lights soothingly glowed through the frosted glass window in the front. The wolves that had been chasing his cargo stayed behind in the trees, sharp snaps and punctuated growls voicing their displeasure as he took away their game.

"Too bad."

But they didn't follow him. The wolf's forefoot was a mess. With a glance, he hoped it was really only packed and not badly injured. It would be a shame that a release wolf would have to be reclaimed because of an injury like this. Nudging his way into the mudroom, he used a shoulder to secure the door then laid the wolf on a pile of summer rugs.

It whimpered once as its body settled. Gray eyes closed. Taking a quick inventory, he realized there wasn't a tag on this wolf anywhere. *Hm. Not a release wolf?* He stood slowly, still being cautious with the animal, but it seemed absolutely unconcerned with its eyes closed, resting, to anything Lyndon might do.

He slipped from his jacket and hung it on the peg near the door, doing the same with his boots, ready for him on the floor.

Now, he was definitely curious and concerned about the wolf before him. Not a release wolf, but way too docile to be a wild pack wolf. Lyndon couldn't remember any like this one, ever.

Kneeling, he lightly touched it, waiting for a reaction, but all it did was open its eyes. "You aren't wild, are you?" he asked quietly. "Is that why they were chasing you? Because you're not wolf?"

It raised its head with a jerk, startled eyes sharpening and focusing on him.

"Thought so. You don't have to shift if you don't want to. I know it's uncomfortable when you don't know where you are, and the injury won't shift well with you. If it helps, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm a researcher. A cougar shifter with an

affinity and divine love of wolves.” He smiled warmly. “Okay, before I talk you to tears—casualty of living alone during the winter—let me see if we can get your paw cleaned up.”

Lyndon stood and turned the corner to gather supplies.

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Jason would have gaped if he'd been in human form. What had it taken him? Like twenty seconds of inspection to figure it out? This was the most insane thing to ever happen to him. And wasn't it just his luck to be rescued by another shifter. A cougar shifter. He knew he should've acted tougher when he'd come closer, but he was tired from being chased over half the mountain. He wasn't even sure what he'd done to piss off the pack he'd ran with, but suddenly he was lower than the omega and told in no uncertain terms to get the hell out of their territory.

He would have been fine if he hadn't hit that log in the drift. It tripped him and he'd wrenched his paw. Since then, he'd been hobbling and jogging along, trying to find a safe place to hole up.

Then if bad luck couldn't get worse, the other pack had taken offense to his invasion into their territory.

Christ! Can't a man find an acre to just play in the snow anymore? He'd taken a week for Christmas to run, and now he was stranded. Granted, it looked like the man who'd rescued him seemed to be mostly safe, even if he rivaled the Space Needle for height. He'd outed himself without a single hesitation. Most shifters wouldn't share their I.Q., much less their hidden ability, or their shifter species.

He heard footfalls of socked feet as his rescuer reappeared, a bowl and towels in his hands.

“Okay, let's see what we have to work with. I'll try not to hurt you, but I'm not a doctor.” He waited as though he anticipated actual acceptance. Jason huffed and stretched out his front legs. He'd been completely discovered. His mother would have a cow over this. “By the way, I'm Lyndon, like the president.” He dropped a cloth into the water and squeezed it out.

Jason was surprised at the complete care he took with holding his leg. First, he used the water to drip wash the packed snow and debris free. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the twinges and stabs of pain. Slowly, he felt the crusted feeling on his fur thin and vanish. *Blood*. He hoped it wasn't as bad as he feared. A few days at the most to heal and he'd be good as new.

“This doesn't look too bad,” Lyndon stated, studying the paw, giving it a long once over. “I was worried it would be more gnarled than this. It probably wouldn't hurt to have stitches, but if you stay like this, I can wrap it snug and that should help. If you shift, I have butterfly strips, closest thing to stitches out here.” He dried the paw with tender care, rubbing it with light strokes until it was clean and the fresh blood had stopped welling.

Empathy shined back at him from Lyndon's ice blue eyes. *A cougar with quartz blue eyes?*

"I'll do what I can, but I am limited. You're welcome to stay as long as you want, until you heal, whatever. I have supplies to get through March or April, depending on the snowfall."

Jason watched him. Lyndon wasn't kidding; he liked to talk. Lifting his head, he sniffed then licked at his paw. He'd be okay. Then he swiped a lick on the back of Lyndon's hand in thanks for his care, and for not pushing the shift. He seemed like a nice guy, but Jason had yet to find a guy who treated his two-legged body with this same kind of respect and kindness being shown to an injured wolf. He waited patiently as Lyndon wrapped his paw.

"Okay, you're welcome to sleep here or closer to the fire. I'll put water down for you. I don't have a lot of raw meat, but I'll do what I can."

Jason stretched out on the rugs again, his body worn and exhausted, making it hard for him to do much of anything. He'd move later. He'd think about food later. He'd think about getting home later.

Right now, he just wanted to rest.

Quietly, Lyndon stood, picking up the bowl and dirty cloths and towel. He went to turn, then pausing, said over his shoulder, "By the way, I do have an emergency radio. If you have someone you need to contact, let me know."

Jason allowed himself to answer this one, shaking his head on the rugs. *No. There's no one.* His parents would care if he vanished completely, but they knew he did this every year. Aside from them, there was no one in his life. And he rather they didn't know where he was.

Jason caught through the slits of his eyes as Lyndon walked across the front room, poked at the fire and added another log. Grasping a book off the mantle, he scooted into a well-worn, thickly padded rocking chair and propped his feet up on a boxed ottoman to read.

In the ensuing silence, broken only by the sound of Christmas music, Jason drifted into sleep.

Chapter Two

Lyndon woke the next morning, stretching stiffly in the bed. Springs creaked in protest. The hardest part about winter was getting out of bed in the morning. He needed to rebuild the fire. He'd turned off the generator when he went to bed, and there was a definite nip in the air inside. *Blue ball freezing outside, no doubt*, he mused. Gritting his teeth, he slid from bed, hopped into his slippers and tugged on his robe over his thermals. With his hair sticking up all over the place, he was sure he was a scary sight.

Taking care of his bathroom business, he walked into the living room, and found the wolf curled into a ball in front of the now-dead fireplace. Not wanting to startle him, he said, "Morning."

Gray ears flickered. "I have to get firewood for today. You can use the bathroom, or come outside. I won't look," he said, smiling with a cajoling laugh. He tugged on his robe, watching the animal's head. He knew he was listening, but he also recognized pure reticence to changing. "I meant what I said yesterday, I'm not going to hurt you. I know I look scary and all Paul Bunyon-y, but I'm not. Just a very soft spoken giant."

When he got no response from the wolf, he turned to dress, leaving it up to him what he wanted to do. Thinking, he dug through his clothes and found something to leave on the bed. Without knowing what his guest looked like, he couldn't really offer something size appropriate. He hoped it would encourage him to change, if he wasn't walking around naked.

Tucking in his shirt, he went to the kitchen to set the coffeepot on the stove then sauntered into the mudroom to get his heavy jacket and gloves. Returning from outside with a stack of wood, he bent by the fireplace to start the fire, and then did the same in the stove. With the coffeepot set to make its magic, he grabbed the snow bucket and went back outside to get snow to melt for water. With that on the stove, he fed both fires a little at a time until they were going well.

Lyndon decided to break out one of his jarred stashes of stew. It might help entice the wolf to change. He hadn't let his disappointment show when he'd walked into the room and found him still curled up, only to the side, out of his path to the fireplace.

With fresh water left in a large bowl for his guest, he went to the bathroom to finish cleaning up, and combed his hair. The scent of coffee began to reach him and he sniffed, murmuring in appreciation.

Done in the bathroom, he returned to the kitchen to start breakfast. It wasn't exciting to be on the mountain in the winter. Just usually really cold, but it worked for him. He didn't like crowds. He was fine with people, but large crowds made him jumpy. Long tailed cat analogies came to mind.

With a cup of coffee in hand, he strolled out of the kitchen area to where his chair sat facing the now-crackling fireplace. "Can I look at your foot?" He sat down nearby, not too close to make him feel trapped, but close enough that he would have to make a small effort to reach Lyndon.

Gray eyes lifted and blinked.

He waited.

Cautiously, the animal rose and limped over, the white bandage on the front paw looking terribly out of place. He sat down in front of Lyndon and offered his paw, like he wanted to shake.

Lyndon removed the bandage, holding the leg steady with his other hand. Balling the gauze in his fist, he dropped it on the floor by his leg. "This looks so much better already. Another day or two and you'll be able to leave without a problem." He let him test the foot to put weight on it. He could with less of a limp.

It took Lyndon by surprise when the wolf leaned forward and set its jaw on his shoulder. He recognized the motion. *Friends.*

"Hungry?" he managed to ask. Something about the wolf tugged at him. There was fear, too, in the animal's behavior. It wasn't normal for shifters to prefer their wild states. Stories in those gray eyes kept him hidden.

The wolf stepped back and sat down again, tilting its head, then he nodded.

"I have clothes you can borrow. Will you change to eat with me?"

Gray eyes closed like blinds had been drawn and his head dropped. It tore at Lyndon when he cupped the long jaw, and he flinched at the slight touch. "Who hurt you?"

The wolf backed up and curled in on itself in front of the fireplace again, its tail fluffed over its face, hiding.

"All right. You're still welcome to eat something, but I'd like to at least see your face."

Nothing, not a single twitch that he'd heard.

Swallowing the sigh, Lyndon palmed the gauze and tossed it in the fireplace, standing to return to the stove with his lukewarm coffee.

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For two days the routine was essentially the same. Lyndon offered, and the wolf retreated. Healed enough to leave on the next morning, they both woke to a sheet of falling white.

"Well, damn. That's going to make it fun," Lyndon muttered. He didn't let it show when he heard the wolf grump. He didn't want to stay. Staying meant needing to shift was becoming a necessity.

"Well, let me get the morning going. Biscuits and gravy with bacon sound okay to you?"

He didn't wait for an answer, aware that expecting one would likely put more pressure on his guest. Instead, he laid out clothes again then went outside, tackling the snow to bring it in to melt.

Moving around the kitchen, he noticed the gray fur rug that had taken up residence in front of the fireplace was gone. The initial thought was he'd tried to leave during the blizzard, but he sincerely prayed he wouldn't risk it.

He kept his surprise from being too obvious when he heard movement—physical human movement—from his bedroom.

Seemed patience had outlasted stubborn.

At six-eight, Lyndon knew he was intimidating. Because of that, he'd grown accustomed to moving slowly, talking gently, even if he was prone to talk a lot when he got going. He wasn't the type to fly off the handle without provocation, and he didn't stay mad for long. He'd hoped his guest had realized that over the last few days. Heck, even as a full size wolf, he'd looked more like a pup next to him. Not that he'd ever say that. Shifters did have pride.

“Hi.”

Lyndon stopped stirring the gravy on the stove and turned to look for the first time at his guest. Shaggy auburn hair crowned a pale face, taken up almost completely by wide gray eyes.

“Morning,” Lyndon replied.

In an instant, Lyndon could discern without question why he hadn't wanted to change. For a guy, he was too pretty. Big, stone gray eyes circled by cinnamon lashes, with a slim nose and perfect cheekbones, and full, sunset pink lips. With the red tint to his hair and fair skin, Lyndon guessed there was some natural redhead in his family tree, but the overall mix he got was pure feminine beauty.

On a guy it was a ticket to a life of hell.

The shirt and thermals he'd left on the bed swallowed the man's frame. He was five-seven or -eight, if he stretched. A light frame made it worse. He wasn't thin, or gamine, but he wasn't thick like an athlete would be either.

Lyndon turned to not stare, aware that would make him more uncomfortable, continuing with breakfast. “There's spare toothbrushes in the catchall in the bathroom, and socks in the dresser. The gray thermals will keep you warm.” And everything he owned would be like dressing a five year-old in dad's clothes.

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” he replied, a little soft, a lot nervous.

“No problem. This will be ready soon.”

He caught it out of the corner of his eye when his small pink tongue snuck out and licked his bottom lip. “Jason Stanville.”

“Lyndon Granger. Nice to meet you.”

When he didn't make any demands and Jason didn't seem inclined to ask, he spun and vanished quickly into the bedroom. Lyndon let out a slow breath.

Way too pretty. How has he survived? Considering all the hiding he did the last three days, he wondered if he really was only surviving.

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Jason pushed the gravy around on his plate. It was good; he just wasn't comfortable. He wasn't used to being around people, and gentle or not, Lyndon was as tall as a mountain.

"Your hand okay now?"

Jason flexed it spontaneously. "Yes. Thank you. You didn't have to do what you did."

Lyndon sipped his coffee. "I know most of the wolves on this range by sight. If a release wolf was hurt, the conservatory would want to know."

Jason nodded. "You live up here year round?"

"I leave three times between spring and the first hard fall to bring back supplies. I have a four-by-four and a snowmobile in the barn behind us. That's where the generator is kept." Picking up his plate, he carried it to the sink where heated water for the dishes waited.

"You don't mind it being so rustic?"

"Not really. I've gotten used to it. I've lived up here almost eight years. I'm not good around crowds. The folks in town are nice enough, and the Rangers check on me every now and then. They'll probably come by after this blizzard blows over, make sure I didn't turn into a Popsicle."

Jason's lips twitched. "One heck of a Popsicle," he mumbled.

"I know." Lyndon poured more coffee. "That's why I keep as much wood and fuel as I can. It takes me forever to melt to this size."

Jason snort-giggled, feeling his cheeks flush red. Lyndon scraped his plate and washed it. Drying it with another towel, he set it on the shelf.

"Eat what you want. With this fresh fall, I'm going to bring in extra wood and make sure the generator is clear in case it's needed. I won't be long. There're books by the fireplace. I know it's not the Ritz, but it's warm, and until the storm breaks, you're safe."

Mentioning the fact that he was alone with Lyndon made his heart skip into his ribs. It was only a matter of time before... "Thank you." Jason set his fork down, keeping his eyes lowered. Men always say it was his eyes that draw them first. "I won't get in your way."

He knew without looking that Lyndon was staring. They *always* stare. He squirmed once then made himself stop.

"The water on the stove can also be used to wash up," he offered. "You do what you need to do, use what you want. I won't be long."

Jason felt him walk by, his long ambled gait relaxed, not slowing as he passed Jason's shoulder. Swishes and stomps told him he was dressing to go out. When the door thudded shut, he released the held breath that filled his lungs to aching.

Taking his plate to the sink, he scraped it clean into the waste barrel then washed it, doing the same Lyndon had with his, setting it on the shelf. Utensils were in a drawer

by the stove. The cabin did have running water, but it was probably a well system and froze solid during the winter.

Walking back to the front room, he stared through the pane of glass to the falling snow. Thick, fat flakes didn't just fall, they poured from the sky.

It took a few minutes for Jason to make the connection. *He went out in this?* Just to check the generator? Trembling, he immediately realized Lyndon wanted to give him a little space, and he'd used the generator as an excuse.

Sinking to the floor in front of the fireplace, he wrapped the over-large flannel around his frame. Warm, and as good as a blanket. With his socked feet tucked up under him, he rested his chin on his knees and watched the fire. *Soap opera of the rustic*, he thought.

The flames gradually soothed him into a meditative state, allowing him to relax.