

She needed a man.

Jade Thorne stared out the window at the party going on in the crisp Montana darkness. A huge bonfire roared, flames reaching high into the night sky. Around it her wolf pack celebrated with their visitors.

Teenagers flirted, enforcers talked business and the elders sat together smiling as they watched the young pups—some in wolf form—tumble and play. Near the fire, a group strummed guitars. Jade watched a couple close to her age dance to the beat. Their bodies sliding against each other, hands moving over tanned skin.

Jade's gaze ran over the woman's upturned face, saw the way her eyes drifted closed, a smile tugging at her lips. Jade's stomach tightened and switched to look at the man.

Like most shifter men, he was big, broad and radiated animal power. Well-worn denim hugged a firm ass and long legs. His big hands slid down the woman's sides, molding her to him as he settled a strong thigh between her legs.

Heat rushed over Jade's skin. Air caught hard in her lungs, her gaze glued to the mating dance. One of the man's hands tangled in the woman's hair, pushing it aside. Then he leaned down and pressed his lips to her neck. To that sensitive spot every wolf possessed. The woman's head dropped back, her eyes turned to the starry sky, her lips open.

What did it feel like? Jade swallowed, the sound of her rapid heartbeat loud in her ears. How hot was the man's hand? Was his touch rough and needy or heated and sensual?

The man pulled the woman farther into the protective circle of his arms, turned his head and pressed his cheek to the woman's hair.

Jade touched a hand to the glass. By Luna, she wanted. A knot tangled in her belly, tight and hot. She wanted what all those people out there had—laughter, desire and love. She wanted a young, firm body sliding against her, into hers.

She wanted a man who loved her.

A cool shiver swept over her skin. Her hand dropped to her side. She would never have what her people shared. She wrapped her arms around her middle. In order for them to have it all, she denied what she most desired.

She straightened her shoulders. She was the alpha of this pack now. It was up to her to preserve their way of life. Her duty to keep them safe.

Her husband was dead and now the neighboring packs—stronger and wilder than her own—were sniffing the edges of her territory, lured by her pack’s mineral-rich lands and lucrative mine. They were searching for any sign of weakness.

Her fingers curled and she stared hard at the flames. She’d do what needed to be done, what any alpha would do—put pack first.

She wasn’t strong enough to fight their battles alone. Female alphas did exist, but they were surrounded by a strong team of enforcers. Jade didn’t have that asset. All she had to protect her pack was herself.

Tomorrow she’d pledge herself in marriage to yet another aging alpha.

All the surrounding packs were congregating on Thorne land for the Courting gathering. She would marry the dominant alpha in attendance and ensure her pack’s survival.

Jade bit down on her lip, her eyes closing. Again she would go to a wolf too old to show his bride the pleasure of the marriage bed. Shifters aged well, lived forty to fifty years longer than humans, but they still grew old and tired.

Just once—just for one night—she wanted to feel firm skin against hers. Her eyes opened and she once again stared at the party beyond her windows. She wanted to know the pleasure of a man’s hands on her body, wanted a strong, muscled male between her legs and she wanted the raging passion of a wolf in his prime.

Her gaze alighted on a familiar face in the crowd. Her husband’s second-in-command—now her second—Christian Tallant. In the months since she’d been widowed, he’d helped her assure the pack she’d look after them.

He stood a head taller than the shifters surrounding him, his legs longer, shoulders wider. Most shifter males wore their hair long, but Christian’s dark hair was shaved short. While the others laughed and gestured, he was still, his face impassive.

In the year since he’d joined the Thorne Pack, he’d served her husband and now her with dedication. They knew nothing about him or where he’d come from. She wasn’t sure of the dark,

hard look she sometimes saw in his golden eyes. He'd arrived on their land bloody and wounded...exiled from his pack.

Jade had no idea what he'd done to deserve the cruelest punishment a pack could mete out, but he was an excellent enforcer, brilliant strategist and had been a skilled second the last six months.

And he was a muscled, hot-blooded man.

A vicious wave of desire twisted her insides. Her skin felt too tight, hot, itching with need. As though he felt her stare, Christian turned his head and looked up at the house. Jade stumbled back from the window.

Christian Tallant wasn't for her. He left her edgy, uncomfortable. And the wolf in her knew he was too much for her to handle.

He was a wolf who'd demand her submission in every way. Jade couldn't afford for her pack—or their enemies—to see her as anything but dominant.

No, tonight she needed an easily controlled man who'd show her pleasure and leave her heart untouched. Because tomorrow she needed to marry a stranger.

Tossing her caramel curls over her shoulder, Jade headed outside. Moving down the flagstone path leading to the bonfire, she vowed that just for one night she'd take something for herself.

Her gaze moved upward to the brilliant full moon hanging above the trees. Thankfully her species had evolved past being ruled by its pull. But it still affected them—quickened tempers, heightened desires.

Nearing the group, she smoothed her hands down her hipster jeans. She knew the dark denim hugged her hips and her azure-colored shirt complimented her golden skin and matched the shade of her eyes. She breathed deep and forced a smile onto her face. She nodded at those who greeted her, accepted their nods of deference.

“Good evening, Jade.”

“Hi, Jade.”

Members of her pack surrounded her. She kissed cheeks, stroked hair and offered them the

reassuring touch and scent of their alpha. It was a need buried deep in their wolf blood. The need to belong and be protected.

A big, male body stepped in front of her.

“Jade? Everything okay?”

Christian’s deep voice rumbled through her. She looked up into his golden eyes. Somehow he always knew when she was upset or troubled. He could read her easier than a used paperback.

“I need to talk to you,” she said.

One of his hands circled her upper arm. He leaned close and she caught his scent. Her stomach clenched tight. Luna, he smelled good. A potent combination of man and wolf, forest and heat.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

His power swirled around her. Dominance oozed from his pores. If he’d been born to the right family, if he wasn’t an exile, she had no doubt he’d be alpha.

She glanced around them, saw strange wolves studying her. On the other side of the fire she noted one of the alphas who’d arrived early for the Courting. He watched her with flat, dead eyes that made her skin crawl. She looked away and noted a small group of women watching Christian with speculation in their eyes.

Jade’s wolf scraped her insides, eager to bare claws. “Not here.”

His head tilted, his golden eyes searching her face. Without a word, he pulled her toward the trees.

They didn’t go far, just enough to block the prying eyes. The music still echoed around them.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

She turned away from him, her mouth going dry.

“Jade?” His tone softened.

She swallowed. The way he said her name made her want to believe he cared about her. More than just as his alpha.

*Foolishness.* She couldn't afford to dream. Life had taught her harsh practicalities. For just this night, she wanted something real. Something that could never be taken from her.

"I need a man."

Christian moved up beside her, a dark frown creasing his forehead. "I know. That's why we called the Courting." His tone was biting.

She shook her head. "I'm not talking about that."

Silence.

Christian's face showed no emotion, but she sensed the tensing of his muscles. The silence grew until Jade's nerves itched like a bad rash.

"What *are* you talking about?" The words were a low growl.

She lifted her chin, met his gaze. "I want a lover. Just for one night."