

NATURAL FAMILY DISASTERS

FIVE SHAPE-SHIFTER SHORT STORIES



JAE

Natural Family Disasters: Five Shape-Shifter Short Stories

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Author's Note

The two main characters of this anthology, Jorie Price and Griffin Westmore, first met in my novel *Second Nature*. The events in *Second Nature* took them on a wild chase from a tiny town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula to an off-the-books poker game in Detroit and then into the council chamber of the most powerful shape-shifters in Boise, Idaho.

Running for their lives didn't leave Jorie and Griffin much time to enjoy their families' company or to share romantic moments. This anthology will give them a chance to do all of that. I hope you enjoy sharing some peaceful times with Jorie and Griffin too.

Jae

P.S. In this anthology, the term "pasties" doesn't refer to the adhesive patches covering a woman's nipples, worn usually by erotic dancers. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where these stories take place, "pasties" are meat-and-vegetable-filled pastries.

Bonding Time

Griffin slid her fingers over warm curves and closed her eyes in pleasure. “Mmm.” She purred at the return pressure against her thigh.

The unwelcome ringing of the phone interrupted the tender moment.

“I’m sorry.” Griffin took one of her hands away and received a disappointed glance. She leaned back against the bed and lifted the receiver to her ear, planning on quickly getting rid of the caller. “Westmore.”

“Hey, sis. It’s Leigh,” her half sister said.

“Hi, Leigh.” Griffin’s attention was already returning to the body that was snuggled against hers. “What can I do for you?” Over the course of the last year, she had learned to be more polite when it came to family interactions, so a “What do you want?” or a “Not now!” was out of the question.

Leigh started to converse about news on their fathers, cousins, and the rest of the pride in true Kasari style. If no one stopped her, she would go on and on for hours until she felt she had thoroughly caught Griffin up on pride business.

“Leigh,” Griffin said. “I’m a little busy right now.” Her fingertips trailed up a warm belly and received a groan of approval.

“Oh,” Leigh said. “I didn’t want to interrupt. It’s just that Ronnie went with the dads to meet with the leaders of the Hiawatha National Forest pride.” Gus had been mentoring Rhonda, preparing her for her role as Leigh’s partner and future natak of the pride, just as Brian had been mentoring Leigh. “The dads didn’t want to overwhelm them by bringing a fourth person, so I’m a little bored all alone at home.”

A year ago, Leigh never would have admitted a weakness like that to her half sister. If she had, Griffin would have snarled in disgust. Back then, it was beyond her understanding how a grown woman could feel bored or lonely just because she was on her own for a day.

Now things were different.

Last month, Jorie had been gone on a book tour to promote her new novel and had then been stuck in Boise for council meetings for two more weeks. By now, most Wrasa had accepted Jorie as a dream seer and would never think of harming her, so Jorie could travel with just one or two bodyguards. Griffin had stayed behind in Osgrove to get some of her own work done and enjoy some time alone.

The problem was she didn’t enjoy it anymore. After a week on her own, she found herself driving over for short visits with her family just to stay busy until Jorie returned.

Now it was her turn to entertain her sister. “Why don’t you come over for dinner?” She suppressed a sigh. “I can fill you in on my new job as a park ranger

in the Ottawa National Forest and the work I'm doing for the council as a maharsi searcher."

"Dinner? I thought I could come over right now," Leigh said. "Ronnie has a box of books she wants Jorie to sign."

Griffin let her hand trail higher, spreading her fingers out over the curve of delicate ribs. Signing books was not what she had planned for Jorie tonight. "No, Leigh. Right now is not a good time. Jorie and I are both busy." Her gentle touch evoked an enthusiastic response. Griffin stifled a groan. "Ow, sweetie, not quite so hard, please," she murmured with one hand covering the receiver.

"Not a good time?" Leigh asked. "Why not?"

Griffin leaned forward and pressed a kiss to a soft forehead. "Well, right now, we're having a little bonding time."

"Oh," Leigh said. She was silent for a moment and then repeated, "Oh. I'm sorry for interrupting. Please say hi to Jorie for me. Talk to you later. Much later. Bye." Abruptly, Leigh ended the call.

Griffin stared at the phone and shrugged. She looked down at the warm body snuggled against hers. "Just you and me again," she said, knowing that the object of her attention didn't like sharing her affection.

The bedroom door opened.

Jorie leaned in the doorway and stretched as she always did after hours of being bent over the laptop. The sight of her still made Griffin's heart beat faster. "Hey." Jorie padded over on bare feet.

"Hey." Griffin watched Jorie's every move, drinking her in. "Finished with the scene that has been giving you trouble?"

The dark head tilted in a nod. "I finished it earlier and already sent it off to Ally. You can read it later if you want."

Griffin answered with a smile. Jorie's trust, her willingness to share her writing, was a prize she held dear. "I'd love to. So if you already finished the scene, what were you working on? Got started on a new scene already?"

"No. I was writing down a few things for the dream-seeing manual your mother and I are working on. I think it's a really great idea to have something like that. I sure could have used a little more instruction while I was trying to figure out how it works." Jorie rolled her eyes.

"The council really lucked out with you," Griffin said. A wave of tenderness and pride swept over her, and she studied Jorie fondly. "Not only did they get a dream seer who is giving them advice, they also got a writer to write it all down for them, all in one beautiful package."

A seductive smile teased the edges of Jorie's mouth. "So only the council lucked out with me?" The timbre of her voice made Griffin's body vibrate.

Griffin laughed. "No. I'm one lucky cat too," she said, meaning it. "I never thought I'd find a woman who can give me the space I need as half Puwar and the closeness my Kasari side craves."

"That's easy since you give me the same things." Jorie's gaze rested on Griffin, warm like a touch.

Who would have thought? My perfect mate is a human. The Great Hunter really has a weird sense of humor. “And you can even handle my mother and the rest of my family.” Griffin purred with satisfaction.

“Apropos mother.” Jorie nodded in the direction of the phone. “Was that my mom? Did she call to ask why her allergies always flare up when the in-laws get together?”

Laughter rumbled through Griffin’s chest. “No. She’s been so accepting of us that I think it’s only fair to give her some time before we tell her why one turkey won’t be enough when she invites my folks over for Thanksgiving. Leigh called and says hi.”

“Ah. So that’s who you were talking to.”

“That and her.” Griffin pointed at the cat on her lap. “I’ve been trying to teach her to keep her claws to herself when she kneads my leg, but so far, she’s not a quick learner. I think we need more bonding time.”

Her words stopped Jorie’s approach one step from the bed. “Okay. Then I’ll go back to my writing. I wouldn’t want to interrupt your feline bonding time.” She winked at Griffin.

“Oh, no.” Griffin reached out one of her long arms, grabbed Jorie’s belt loop, and pulled.

Jorie landed on the bed next to her.

The bouncing of the bed annoyed the tri-colored cat on Griffin’s lap. Emmy stood, hopped down, and stalked out of the room.

“Ow.” Griffin pretended to sulk. “My cuddle buddy left me. Whatever will I do now? I’m a cat. I need affection.”

Jorie’s T-shirt slid up when she stretched out on the bed and leaned up on her elbow to grin at Griffin. Bare skin peeked out between faded jeans and the edge of the T-shirt.

Instantly, Griffin moved closer, wanting to touch the warm skin.

“Oh, poor cat,” Jorie cooed, “all starved for affection. Want me to scratch your belly?” She slid her hand under Griffin’s T-shirt and trailed her fingers teasingly up Griffin’s belly.

In the past, Griffin would have had a dozen suave comebacks for that question. No one would have been able to talk to her that way without triggering the urge to reassert her feline superiority. Her role had always been that of the seducer, not the seduced. She had directed lovemaking, not trusting her partner enough to let her have complete control over her body and her heart.

Now and with Jorie, everything was different. Griffin stripped off her T-shirt, lay back on the bed, and whispered, “Yes, please.”

Jorie moved down and planted a soft kiss over Griffin’s navel, making her chuckle, then purr. “Then let’s see how quick a learner you are.” She stopped Griffin’s hands from sliding under her own T-shirt. “Keep your claws to yourself.”

With a sound that was half groan, half purr, Griffin laid her hands onto the bed and let Jorie have full control over their bonding time.

Coming to Dinner

"A Christmas dinner?" Brian set down his glass on the coffee table and licked a drop of milk from his lips. "You know we don't celebrate Christmas, so why would we start now?"

Griffin stared down at him and at Gus, who was leaning back on the couch and hadn't yet offered an opinion. "Because I'm inviting you to celebrate Christmas with Jorie and me."

"Ah." Her father waved a negligent hand. "Christmas is a stupid human tradition. Invite us over some other time."

A flare of anger made Griffin's skin itch. She scratched her forearms. "Jorie is human and she's my mate, so if you want me to be part of the family, you better get used to celebrating this stupid human tradition!"

"Calm down, you two." With a lazy stretch, Gus looked up at Griffin and then glanced at his brother. "What's so bad about Christmas? Spending time with the pride, eating a turkey or two, and solving the mystery of surprise presents—sounds like the perfect feline entertainment to me."

"What's so bad about Christmas?" Brian grumbled. "Christmas carols blaring everywhere." He covered his sensitive ears to make his point. "Human cubs on a constant sugar rush from eating too many cookies, and humans strolling through the forest in search of the perfect Christmas tree. The pride hasn't had a quiet, uninterrupted run in weeks."

Griffin had to admit that some Christmas traditions were pretty annoying. The lack of privacy in the forest bothered her too. Last night, a family searching for a few fir branches to decorate their home had nearly surprised her as she had been about to shift shape. Still, she was quickly warming up to other Christmas traditions. So far, the mistletoe that Jorie had hung over the doorway was her favorite. *Not that I'd need an excuse to kiss Jorie whenever I want.* Thinking about Jorie made her anger fade away. She directed a calm gaze at her father. "The dinner is important to Jorie and to me, not just because of Christmas. We want to tell Helen, and I want both of you there to support us."

"Tell her what?" Brian sipped his milk again. "That you and Jorie are sharing the same pillow at night?" He smirked.

A frown replaced Griffin's pleading expression, but she knew her father was just having fun teasing her a little. She took her commitment to Jorie too seriously to laugh about his offhand remark, though. "No." She scowled at Brian. "Helen already knows that Jorie and I are a couple. We want to tell Helen who and what I really am."

Milk splattered all over the coffee table. "What?"

“Jorie has lied to her mother about her sexual orientation—or at least not told her the truth—for so long. She doesn’t want there to be any more lies between them.” Griffin was secretive by nature and her skin prickled with unease at the thought of revealing the Wrasa’s secret existence, but she supported Jorie’s decision.

Brian brushed drops of milk from his beard. “Don’t tell me the council has given you permission to reveal our existence to a human.”

They hadn’t, of course. The decision to come out to the human public might take the council years, and Jorie didn’t want to wait that long. “Since when did you ever wait for the council’s permission?” Griffin asked. “It’s a family affair, and the council doesn’t need to know we told Helen. I trust Helen. She won’t betray us.”

“How can you know that?” While Brian had come to accept and even like Jorie, his first reaction was still to distrust humans.

“Helen loves Jorie,” Griffin said. “She would never do anything to hurt her—and hurting me is hurting Jorie.” It was as simple as that.

The “and vice versa” hung unspoken between them. Hurting Jorie by refusing to come to her Christmas dinner would be hurting Griffin too.

“Fine,” Brian finally said. “We’ll come. Don’t let it be said that a human has more sense of family than a Kasari.”

The tension fled from Griffin’s body. “It’s great that you see it that way, because Mother is gonna be there too.”

Brian groaned.

“So, Christmas Day, two o’clock—be on time or dinner will get cold.” Griffin shot both of them a glance. “And bring your bag with some of the cat allergy stuff, please. Otherwise, poor Helen might not survive having dinner with eight big cats.”

Brian folded his muscular arms across his chest in a feline pout. “I told you I don’t make house calls for humans.”

“She’s not just any human,” Gus said. “Since Griffin and Jorie are living together, Helen is Griffin’s mother-in-law.”

The blood rushed from Griffin’s face. She blinked. She had never thought about it that way, but Gus was right. Wrasa law considered a couple married as soon as they were living together. *Huh. What do you know—I’m a married woman. I wonder if Jorie knows—or what she’ll say when she finds out.*

Twin grins spread over Gus’s and Brian’s faces. Brian threw his brother an amused glance. “Seems our daughter never thought about that. Maybe you are right, brother. Christmas could be fun. We never had that conversation about marrying into the pride with Jorie. Might be a nice opportunity to talk to her and ask her about her willingness to bear a litter of cubs for the pride.”

A deep growl rose up Griffin’s chest. “Maybe I’ll just tell Jorie that you refused her invitation after all.”

“Oh, no, I’ll be there,” Brian said. “Now you made me curious—and you know you can’t keep away a curious cat. Make sure you have enough food. And don’t

let Jorie anywhere near the kitchen.”

“She’s not that bad,” Griffin said, automatically defending Jorie.

Silence filled the living room, giving Griffin enough time to remember the last meal Jorie had tried to cook for her. “Okay,” she said. “Jorie stays out of the kitchen.”



“Christmas dinner?” Helen repeated. “Oh, how wonderful. Of course, I’ll be there. It’ll be wonderful to see you again. You and Griffin, of course.”

Her mother’s constant acceptance of her relationship filled Jorie with warmth. She pressed the phone to her ear with a grateful smile. “It won’t be just me and Griffin, though.” She wanted to give her mother fair warning. Both of them were used to quiet Christmas celebrations. Even before her father had died, it had been just the three of them, not a big family. “We invited Griffin’s whole family—her fathers, her mother, her sisters, and their partners. I hope they won’t overwhelm you.” For her, it had taken some getting used to.

“Oh, the more the merrier.” Helen laughed. “It will be wonderful to meet Griffin’s family.”

Jorie’s stomach twitched nervously. *Let’s hope you’ll still think that when you learn who they really are.*

“Any idea what I could give them for Christmas?” Helen asked. “I don’t know Griffin’s family, but I don’t want to show up empty-handed.”

As far as Jorie knew, Wrasa didn’t even celebrate Christmas. “Don’t worry about it, Mom. Griffin’s family isn’t big on presents. If we feed them, they’ll be happy.”

“With so many guests, I could book an earlier flight and help Griffin with the cooking,” her mother said.

Jorie hesitated. At times, Griffin could be pretty territorial about the kitchen. *Or maybe it’s just me she doesn’t want in there.*

“I don’t want to intrude,” Helen said when Jorie’s hesitation continued.

“You’re not intruding. I’m sure Griffin would love to have some help. She’s planning a big dinner.” In fact, their shopping list read like a supply order for an entire army regiment.

“Wonderful.” Joy vibrated in Helen’s voice. “I’m really looking forward to spending Christmas with you.”

Jorie gulped. “Me too, Mom.” Her hands shook when she hung up. *God, I hope I made the right decision.*



“Emmy, no! Get down!” In one tigerlike pounce, Griffin crossed the living room—but she was too late.

The Christmas tree, complete with its tri-colored cat ornament, came crashing down.

“Shit.” Only Griffin’s quick reflexes saved the Christmas balls and glass figures

from smashing on the table with its dinnerware. She grabbed the slender tree trunk. Fir needles bit into her hands, making her growl.

Emmy jumped down from the tree and disappeared under the couch.

Hurried steps approached, and Jorie peeked into the room. Her eyes widened when she saw Griffin with her hands wrapped around the Christmas tree, holding it at an angle. “What are you doing with the Christmas tree?”

“Me?” The glowing star on top of the tree started to pitch to the side, and Griffin quickly reached up and straightened it. “I didn’t do anything. Emmy—”

END OF EXCERPT

TO READ ON PURCHASE

Natural Family Disasters
by Jae

About Jae

Jae grew up amidst the vineyards of southern Germany. She spent her childhood with her nose buried in a book, earning her the nickname “professor.” The writing bug bit her at the age of eleven. For the last six years, she has been writing mostly in English.

She works as a psychologist and likes to spend her time reading, playing board games with friends, spending time with her nieces and nephew, and watching way too many crime shows.

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Excerpt from Second Nature

by Jae

Quinn prowled through the dark forest. She stayed in the shadows and slid from tree to tree, from shrub to shrub, avoiding patches of moonlight until she was far away from human campsites. She slipped her shirt over her head while she walked, impatient to get out of her clothes. Under a sprawling oak tree, she tossed the shirt to the ground. Her shoes and pants followed until cool air brushed against her bare skin.

Dropping to her hands and knees, she connected with the damp earth. Heat rushed through her. She clenched her fists in an effort not to scratch her burning skin and felt lengthening fingernails bite into her palms. Her muscles rippled, and she gasped as pain shot through her.

Jorie Price's fingers flitted over the keyboard, keeping pace with her character's movement through the forest. When Quinn stopped and shape-shifted, Jorie paused with her fingers lingering over the laptop and reread what she had written—or rather rewritten. This was the third time she had changed the scene. She stared at the blinking cursor, then sighed and rubbed her burning eyes. Was the scene finally working?

Her heart said yes, but her head wasn't so sure. Why would evolution produce a skill that was painful and made the creature helpless for a few seconds?

She reached for the delete button.

No. Deleting the scene felt wrong. She pressed her fingertips against her temples. *But how on earth does a 140-pound woman turn into a 280-pound cat?* Jorie slid down on the couch until she lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, the laptop balanced on her stomach. Her eyelids felt as if they were lined with sandpaper, but she couldn't allow herself to rest. Not before she had figured this out.

"I could really use some help from a cat expert," she said to Agatha, who had curled up at the end of the worn, comfortable couch.

Agatha eyed the laptop as if that would make the hated machine disappear from the favored spot on Jorie's lap. When Jorie looked at her, the cat turned and licked her bushy tail.

"And you, Emmy?" Jorie's gaze wandered to the calico ambling toward the kitchen. "No words of advice for your favorite can opener?"

"Meow," the cat said but didn't elaborate. She walked on, looking over her shoulder as if to make sure that Jorie would follow her into the kitchen to feed her.

"Very helpful, thanks. And I just fed you half an hour ago, so that 'I'm starving' act is wasted on me." She forced her tired eyes to focus on the screen, but instead of the scene, images from her nightmares flashed through her mind. Shivering, she shook her head to get rid of the images. "I need a break." She saved what she had written so far and opened her e-mail program. Despite the gnawing feeling in her belly that told her she should be writing, she clicked on a new e-mail from her beta reader. Maybe Ally could help.

Hi, J.W.,

Still having problems with the story? Have you thought about putting it away for a while? I know it works for some authors. Maybe write a short story or get started on a new project. You could even start the research on a sequel to A Vampire's Heart. I know your readers would love that.

Let me know what you decide.

Ally

Jorie shook her pounding head. Maybe putting the story away for a while worked for other writers. But not for her. Not with this book. For reasons she couldn't fully explain to herself—and certainly not to Ally, she needed to get this novel written. Now.

She dashed off a quick answer to Ally and then reopened her manuscript file. "No admitting defeat."

Her cell phone rang before she had written a single word, shattering the silence in the living room.

Jorie groaned. She set the laptop on the coffee table and got up from the couch before Agatha could settle down on her lap. Barefoot, she padded into the bedroom, where her cell phone was charging.

"Hi, Mom," she said. Looking at the display wasn't necessary. Only her mother and her agent had her cell phone number, and since Peter had dropped her when she had refused to give up on her new novel, that left one option.

"Jorie, how are you, darling?" Her mother's warm voice came through the receiver.

I have a headache as if I'm about to give birth to Athena; my nightmares haven't let me sleep through the night in weeks, and I have a serious case of writer's block. Aloud she said, "I'm fine, Mom."

"Are you getting enough sleep?" her mother asked.

"Yes, Mom," Jorie said. "Must be all that fresh air out here."

"Good. And have you met someone?"

Jorie sighed and looked out her bedroom window. Her neighbor was stacking wood in the back of his pickup truck, and the fall wind rustled through the white pines at the edge of her yard, but otherwise, nothing moved. Osgrove wasn't exactly a popular destination for most people her age, but coming here had felt right. "Please, stop trying to set me up, Mom. I'm not here to meet someone. I'm here to write."

"I know, but..."

"Stop worrying. I'm fine on my own," Jorie said. "Listen, I have to get back to my writing. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" She wasn't in the mood to answer more of her mother's worried questions about the way she lived her life. Guilt scratched at the edge of her consciousness, but she pushed it away and ended the call.

Back in the living room, the screen saver had come on. A small, red cartoon cat was chasing a ball of wool all over the laptop's screen. "That's how I feel," Jorie lifted the notebook onto her lap. "Chasing the elusive ball of wool, but never quite catching it." She stroked her fingers over the touch pad and watched as the red kitten was replaced with the text of her story. "Don't think. Just write."

Her fingers found their places on the well-worn keyboard, and she started to write. If she could get this book out of her head and onto the page, maybe the nightmares would finally leave her alone.



Ally stared at the e-mail that might as well be J.W.'s death warrant. She reread it, halfway hoping the text had changed. Of course, it hadn't.

Thanks, Ally. I know you mean well, but I can't give up on this book. I hope you'll hang in there with me.

J.W.

Ally whirled her desk chair around and jumped up. *Dammit. You're not leaving me any choice.*

The walls of her apartment seemed to close in on her. Her skin itched with the urge to shift, to leave the apartment and everything in it behind, and to lose herself in the simpler existence of being a wolf. Things were so much easier when she was running with the pack. If she shifted, she wouldn't just strip off her human skin but also the guilt and sorrow weighing her down. In animal form, things were clear and simple: her loyalty was to her pack, and she was doing what was necessary to ensure the survival of their species.

In human form, things were not so black-and-white.

With a sigh, she sank onto the desk chair. *Wishful thinking.* Running away wouldn't solve the problem. At some point, she would have to shift back, and the guilt would still be there, waiting.

She opened the prologue of J.W.'s work-in-progress. *This book is dangerous.* She had to warn the council before J.W. could publish it.

Ally picked up the phone and punched in her alpha's phone number. Her finger hovered over the last button before she pressed it. *I'm sorry, J.W.*

