



Cat's Eyes

Crista McHugh

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Blurb

Andy Rodriguez has always desired his partner, Emily Hawkins, but the memory of his former lover's murder five years ago still haunts him. Em doesn't know he's a shape-shifter, and he has no plans to drag her into his world where a war between true shifters and werewolves constantly wages. All that changes the night a werewolf attacks Em.

Prologue

Two pairs of rough hands hurled Andy to the ground. His face skidded along the concrete, and the taste of dust mingled with the blood in his mouth. Then the door slammed shut behind him.

He was surprised those filthy dogs let him live. They sure beat him within an inch of his life. Normally, he would enjoy a good fight, but two against one skewed the odds in their favor. And with his hands tied behind his back, he couldn't even shift, much less fight back.

A moan came from a few feet away. He lifted his head. His swollen eyes distorted the images around him, but he saw he wasn't alone in the sweltering warehouse. He inched closer to the other body. When she turned her head, a beam of sunlight fell across her bruised face. "Em?"

"Andy?" she whispered back.

Dear God, they had worked her over, too. Dried blood clung to her face from a busted lip, and her right shoulder hung at an awkward angle. Anger well up inside him from the pain in her eyes. There was no reason for her to be involved in this rivalry, and he regretted he had dragged her into it.

"Don't worry, Em, I'll get you out this mess. I promise."

Chapter One

Eighteen hours earlier

Andy Rodriguez leaned back against the bar and sipped his beer. The smell of smoke, liquor, and cheap cologne assaulted his nose. Typical Friday night in a Dallas honky-tonk, though. Everyone was out to have a bit of fun and kick off the weekend.

"Hey, Andy, congrats on cracking that case this week," one of his co-workers said as he came over and stood next to him. "It seemed like it was going to be a wild goose chase until you put all the clues together and landed the perp. Good field work."

"Thanks, Ty, but I don't deserve all the credit. It was Em who noticed the blood stains in the trunk. Best piece of evidence we got."

"Ah, Em the Eyes." Ty's attention turned to the tall blonde playing pool with several of their colleagues. "Glad she decided to stay in Dallas, even if it's just to have something nice to look at."

Andy frowned. Ty seriously wasn't trying to demean her because she was an attractive female, was he? "I'm glad she stayed because she's the best damn partner I've ever had."

He backed away when he heard the annoyance in Andy's voice. "I wasn't trying to knock her down or anything, but I'm surprised you're even able to work around her. Admit it, she's hot."

He wasn't going to deny it. Emily Hawkins was easy on the eyes. The neon lights enhanced the reddish highlights in her wavy golden hair, and the cut of her jeans hugged her curves. But it was her eyes that caught everyone's attention. Bright emerald green and unwavering when she stared at a person. Almost unnatural, if he had any opinion. But then, his tawny colored eyes could also be considered unnatural, too.

He watched her lean over the pool table. The movement accentuated her tight, round ass, and desire heated his skin. He wanted her, but two things prevented him from acting on it. Not only was she his partner, but he knew better than to get involved with a normal female. The last time he tried that, the werewolves saw to it that she came back to him in a wooden box. Another pawn that fell in a centuries old war.

"I admit it, but I'll also add that I see her as more than just a piece of ass."

"Ouch, that was below the belt." Ty took a long swig of her beer. "Do you think she'd go out with me if I asked her?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you're her partner. You work with her day in, day out. Surely, you know a little bit about her. What kind of guys does she go for?"

Andy tightened the grip on his bottle to the point he almost shattered it in his hand. He knew more about her than he did his own mother. She liked men who could handle her dry sarcasm without their testicles retracting inside them. She liked spontaneity. And if her advances were to be interpreted correctly, she liked him. Too bad he wasn't going to cave. He refused to drag her into his own personal hell.

"I don't think you have a chance with her, Ty. Most guys don't make it to the third date. She's kinda picky." In truth, he was the picky one. He was more than happy to point

out the flaws in her previous boyfriends.

“We’ll see about that. Besides, all I need is one night with her.”

As if on cue, Em approached them. “Why are you two sulking by the bar?” Her faint English accent grew stronger when she drank, and now she sounded like a newswoman for the BBC.

“I was just telling Andy we should come over and shoot some pool,” Ty replied and flashed a charming grin.

Andy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Did he have to listen to this?

She juttied her hip out and rested her hand on it. “Why don’t you buy me a beer and join me in a game, then?”

“I might just do that. What do you want?”

“Another Newcastle. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Ty ordered her drink and carried it to a table. As he began racking up the balls, Andy grabbed her bare arm; the feel of her silky skin against his palm almost broke his resolve. “Be careful with him.”

“Jealous that another man shows some interest in me?” She pressed her body against him, and his cock stiffened. The floral scent of her perfume wafted towards him from the hollows of her neck. “If you had the bollocks to ask me out, you wouldn’t have to worry about him.”

A smile played on his lips. “You know that ain’t going to happen.”

Her hand grazed along his thigh, and he suppressed the moan that rose in his throat. She never made it easy for him to resist her. “It’s your loss.”

“So you keep telling me.”

“One day, I’ll have my way with you.”

“And ruin everything we’ve built together?”

She laughed. “It’s not like other officers in the precinct haven’t hooked up before. I think Ty’s shagged about half the women on the force. Do you find me hideous or something?”

Quite the contrary, he thought as he peered down the plunging v-neck of top to catch a glimpse of her cleavage. She was almost his ideal woman—smart, feisty, sexy. “I know better than to get involved with you. I’ve seen your path of destruction.”

“Suddenly having sympathy for all those men you said were never good enough for me? Come now, I’ve been good for over a year. A girl gets lonely.” Her finger stroked along his ear.

He reached for her hand; if she continued to touch him like that, he was going to break his own rules and cross the line. “You know, this could qualify as sexual harassment.” He arched a brow and waited to see how she would respond to that.

“It’s only sexual harassment if it’s unwanted.” She leaned closer to him, and her warm breath tickled his cheek. “Admit it—you lie awake in bed and think of me.” With a smirk, she pulled away and joined Ty at the pool table.

He drained the rest of his beer and turned around to face the bar and hide his bulging erection. She was right. He would probably dream of her again tonight, and his dreams were anything but innocent. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ty standing close behind her, helping her line up a shot, and his blood boiled. He wished he could be the one pressing his body against hers.

As soon as he thought it, he remembered the fate of his last lover. Five years had

passed since then, but time had not dulled his shock at the sight of the shredded flesh on Heather's body and the flatness of her lifeless eyes. He would never put someone he loved in danger like that again. It was better to burn alone in his bed than mar Em's porcelain skin.

The door of the bar opened, and the scent of wet dog and rotting meat turned his stomach. He glanced around, knowing he was the only one who could smell it, and spied the werewolf on the other side of the bar. Their eyes met, and he strode towards Andy with a cocky grin on his face.

"Good evening, kitty cat," he said as he sat next to him at the bar. "Where's the rest of the pride?"

"I could ask you the same, Wes. It's unusual to see you alone without some of your fellow dogs." He caught the bartender's attention and waved his empty bottle. He was going to need another drink if he was going to tolerate his new company.

"Let me buy this round. It's always good to run into you."

Andy frowned. Werewolves and true shifters barely tolerated one another, and the sudden pleasantries from Wes roused his suspicion. "What do you want?"

Wes chuckled. "Always so blunt. That's why I like you, Andy, even if you are an overgrown cat." He slid the new bottle of beer over to him and sipped his own. "I was curious about the rumors around town, that you've added three new shifters to your pride."

"What business of it is yours?"

"You know the agreement between Craig and Miguel. We need to try and keep the numbers balanced so one side doesn't gain an advantage over the other."

"Actually, I remember the agreement being that you don't bite any more humans and turn them into werewolves. And believe me, I've been hearing reports to the contrary."

"You know how easy it is to lose control in the heat of passion. We need mates as much as you do."

"If what I'm hearing you say is true, Miguel will not be pleased." And it would just confirm what they had been suspecting for months. Craig was trying to mount an army. Thankfully, werewolves could only shift during a full moon. At least the shifters would have a few weeks to respond.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You know my motto: why can't we all just get along?" The stench of his breath crossed the space between them, and Andy breathed through his mouth instead of his nose.

"That's what Miguel and the rest of us shifters want, but Craig seems determined to start something."

"I think you're reading him wrong. He's mellowing out in his old age." Wes spun around on the stool and watched the people in the bar. "Anything interesting going on tonight?"

Andy glanced over his shoulder. Ty had pinned Em against the pool table, and his hands stroked the curve of her hips. She caught Andy's gaze and winked. Damn, she knew how to tease him. One of these days, he may just give her what she wanted and worry about the consequences in the morning.

Unfortunately, Wes witnessed the exchange. "Who's the lovely bird, Andy?"

"Leave her alone," he growled. If that werewolf laid one finger on her, he wouldn't hesitate to hunt him down with a gun full of silver bullets.

“Oh, she’s yours, huh?”

“She’s my partner.”

“She looks like she’d be a real tiger in the sack.” His gaze remained fixed on her.

“But she’s a mortal, isn’t she? No yellow eyes like the rest of you overgrown pussy cats. And if you haven’t mated with her, she’s fair game.”

Andy’s eyes narrowed as Wes stood and approached her. He knew he should have chased after him, but he was so angry, he might shift in front of everyone. *No, I can’t do that, not in this crowd. Too many witnesses.* He stayed near the bar, every muscle poised to spring should the werewolf try anything.

Wes started chatting with them and looked like he was getting ready to challenge them to a game of cutthroat. Ty went to the change machine for more quarters, leaving Em alone with him. He leaned close to her, appearing to flirt with her. Her nose wrinkled, and she retreated to the opposite side of the table.

Andy began to relax as he watched them. Em made sure there was at least three feet between her and Wes, and Ty tightened his grip on his cue as he sized up his competition. A fight was brewing, but there was no need for him to interfere yet.

They continued this dance until Ty, having finished probably five or six beers by that point, took a swing at Wes. The werewolf easily dodged his fist and responded with a blow of his own. Ty landed on the floor in a heap.

Em whacked Wes on the back of his head with her cue and then jabbed it between his shoulder blades. She pinned him to the table and pressed her elbow against the back of his neck. “That was uncalled for,” she said.

“I think I’m beginning to like you.” Wes laughed, but his face twisted in pain as she applied more of her weight against his spine.

“Funny, I don’t feel the same about you.”

“You haven’t even given me a chance.” With inhuman speed, Wes whipped around and broke free of her hold on him. Now she was the one spread against the table, and he leaned his body against hers, his face inches from hers.

Andy jumped to his feet. It was time to show this dirty dog some manners.

“How’s this for a chance?” Her knee hit him squarely in the groin, and he released her with a grunt. Her emerald eyes flashed in anger. “Bugger off.”

Andy grabbed his shirt and tossed Wes towards the door. “You heard the lady; time for you to leave.”

When they reached the door, Wes lifted his head; his feral eyes glowed yellow instead of their normal brown. “You’d better watch her, Andy, because I know I will.”

There was no mistaking the malice in his voice. Andy’s blood ran cold. “You hurt her, and it will mean war.”

Wes laughed. “Hollow threats, pussy cat.” He straightened to his full height and disappeared into the dark parking lot.

Chapter Two

Em frowned and played with her silver locket as she watched the exchange between Andy and Wes. Something about that guy gave her the chills, and it wasn't just his stench. He wasn't human, whatever he was. She wondered how much Andy knew about him.

"You okay, Em?" he asked when he came back to her.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but Ty's in a sorry state." She knelt next to him and lightly slapped his face a few times. She couldn't tell if he was pissed, or if he was still suffering the after effects of Wes' punch.

Andy crouched beside her. "I'll get him to a cab. He just needs to sleep it off."

"If you say so." She stood and stretched, working out the kinks in her shoulder. Wes played rough, but she could handle it. She was a cop, after all.

She finished the rest of her beer while he took care of Ty. Despite the fact Andy left her sexually frustrated, she had to admit he was a nice guy. She couldn't ask for a better partner; she just wished they could be partners in another way. Her instincts told her he wanted the same thing.

Warmth pooled in her lower stomach as she stared at him. He was damn sexy, like a Mayan warrior. His biceps strained against the sleeves of his t-shirt, revealing the tattoo in his upper right arm, and his tanned skin contrasted with his white teeth when he smiled. But it was the smoldering heat in his golden eyes that intrigued her the most. She wondered what she needed to do to get him into her bed.

She reached into her pocket for her keys. She'd be sleeping alone once again, it seemed. Time to refresh the batteries in her vibrator. That would take care of some of her needs.

"You're leaving?" Andy asked when she passed him.

She shrugged. "Yeah, that wanker sort of ruined the evening for me."

"Do you want me to follow you home?"

Her panties grew wet. Maybe she wouldn't need her toys tonight. "Only if means you'll come inside and stay the night."

The intensity of his gaze felt like he was undressing her. How much longer would he ignore his obvious desire for her? They needed to shag, get it out of their systems, and relieve some of the tension between them. "I'd stop at the door."

"Then no thanks. I'm big girl; I can take care of myself."

"Don't let your guard down, then. Wes is a nasty character, and he has a reason to hold a grudge against you now." Worry strained the handsome features of his face.

She paused. "And how exactly do you know this Wes fellow?"

"Let's just say that although charges have never been brought against him, he's usually high on the suspect list." He never looked away from her. It was another thing she admired about him. Most people faltered under her direct stare, but not him.

"I'll keep that in mind." She kissed him on the cheek and inhaled his scent. Damn, he smelled so good, so male. "See you on Monday."

Frustration gnawed at her gut while she crossed the parking lot and got into her car. Andy knew more about Wes than he was telling her, but she got the message that she

should watch her back for a while. As if he could sneak up on her with a stench like that. She didn't know if it would be better to describe it as musty or just plain putrid.

She started her car and waved to Andy when she drove past the door. From her rearview mirror, she saw that he stood with his arms crossed, watching her as she pulled out into the highway. Always the good partner to keep an eye on her.

The streets were almost deserted at this time of night, and she got home quicker than usual. She pulled into the driveway of her house and lingered in the car for a few minutes.

Her fingers wrapped around the locket her mum had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Even though she had passed away three years ago and left her this house, Em never really considered it her home. Part of her missed London. If her mum hadn't gotten ill and needed her help, she never would have come to Dallas. Now she stayed here because she loved her job, even if her partner drove her nearly insane with lust. One of these days, she'd get it through her thick skull to stop chasing him.

She turned off the engine and listened to the radio. Another sappy love song. She surfed the radio dial and found some AC/DC playing on the next station. "Much better," she said and tapped her hands on the steering wheel in time with the pounding beat.

Something crashed into the top her car. The ceiling dented in above her, and she reflexively hit the automatic locks. "What the fuck?"

The car rocked, claws scratched along the metal, and two enormous paws appeared on her windscreen. They slid down, and she came face to face with the largest wolf she had ever seen. Her heart pounded as the wolf's yellow eyes stared at her and it licked its chops. It rammed its head against the glass. *Holy shite!*

She fumbled for her gun in the cubby box. She aimed it at the wolf and didn't think twice about squeezing the trigger. Shards of glass sparkled like falling diamonds under the streetlight as her windscreen shattered, and the wolf slid off the bonnet. Not wasting a moment, she opened her door and fired three more bullets into it.

The wolf twitched on the grass. She ran for the front door, but before she reached it, several stones of weight collided with her back and knocked her to ground. She swung her gun and hit the wolf on its snout. Its jaws snapped near her hand, and she fired another shot at it. Bloody Hell! Why hadn't it died?

The familiar stench of rotting flesh filled her nostrils. That thing smelled like Wes. She continued to squeeze the trigger, but it only flinched as each bullet pierced its body. Fear stifled her scream, and she tried to focus on shifting so she could get out of here.

A dark shadow sprang from the trees, and the wolf rolled away. The streetlight shone down on the large jaguar that now attacked the wolf. Jesus Christ, did the zoo have a break out? Their growls filled the night, and she gathered her wits about her. She needed to get out of here. *Shite! My keys are in the car.*

Seeing as how she couldn't get into the house, she saw only one option to find safety. Lights illuminated her neighbors' windows. She prayed no one would see her as she hid behind the shrubs and removed her clothes in a matter of a few seconds. She willed her body to shrink. Feathers sprouted from her skin, and she took to the air as soon as the transformation was complete.

From above, she watched the two animals wrestle with each other. Sharp teeth sank into soft flesh, and whimpers mixed with snarls. Who would come away the victor?

What the fuck? Werewolves shouldn't be able to shift unless it was a full moon. Andy looked up at the narrow sliver overhead and frowned. Miguel needed to hear about this. But first he had to help Em.

He had grown so adapted to shifting that he could seamlessly turn into a jaguar as he ran. His hands changed into massive paws before they hit the ground. Fur sprouted from his skin, and his teeth elongated into long fangs sharp enough to pierce through bone. Powerful hindquarters launched him into the air. He pounced on the werewolf and freed Em from its weight. Then the fight began.

Blind rage guided him as he sank his teeth into the wolf. A foul taste filled his mouth as he tore the fur from its haunches, but he found satisfaction in hearing it yelp. He raked his claws across its face. This dog would regret the day he ever tried to attack her.

As they wrestled in the front yard, the warm metal bullets worked their way to the surface of the werewolf's wounds. He hated that they could heal as quickly as real shifters; he needed to make sure the wounds he inflicted were enough to buy him enough time to escape.

The flutter of wings distracted him, and the sting of the werewolf's bite filled his arm. The shrill sound of a hawk echoed above, followed by a set of talons scratching at the wolf's eyes. Now was his chance. He clamped his powerful jaws around the wolf's neck and ripped its throat out. The wolf stiffened and then grew still.

Andy rolled away from it and checked around him to make sure no one was watching before he shifted back to a human. He needed to get the silver bullets from his car before the werewolf healed enough to launch another attack. Blood dripped down his face, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

By the time he returned with the bullets loaded in his gun, the wolf started twitching. He aimed at its heart and pulled the trigger. This bullet remained embedded in its flesh, and the body shifted to reveal Wes. The son of a bitch was now permanently dead.

Exhaustion seeped into his sore muscles, and his arm fell to his side from the weight of the gun. He searched the yard. "Em, where are you?"

"Behind you," she said. Her wide eyes filled with horror, and she tugged her shirt down. "What the hell was that?"

"A werewolf. Can you open my trunk for me?" He lifted the dead body in his arms. She didn't move. "You just killed someone."

"I wouldn't consider this asshole a person, especially after what he just did to you. Now get my trunk open so I can get rid of the body."

"You're a cop, Andy."

"This is different. I doubt anyone in his right mind would press charges against me for saving your life."

She hesitated, and the body began to slip from his arms. If she didn't help him, he'd collapse under the weight. But after a second, she took his keys. He dumped Wes into the trunk and slammed the lid shut. His head swam. He closed his eyes and leaned against his car.

"You're hurt," she said softly.

"I'll be fine." He opened his eyes and looked her over. "You okay?"

"Physically, I'll be as right as rain with the exception of some bruises. Mentally, I'm beginning to think I'm off my trolley. I thought werewolves were just legends. And then you—" His knees wobbled, and she reached forward to catch him. "You look like shite,

you know that? Come inside so I can put something on those gashes.”

He shook his head. “We need to get out of here before his friends come looking for him.”

For a second, he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. Her eyes appeared golden under the streetlight, and they were filled with worry for him. His heart skipped a beat. He half expected her to run away screaming after he revealed he was a shifter to her, but she stayed by his side and held onto him. Her hand caressed his cheek.

“Right, but I’m driving.”

“Just stay on the right side of the road,” he said as he sank into the passenger seat.

“I’ll try and remember that.” She started the engine and adjusted the seat. Before she put the car in drive, she glanced over at him. “And just so I don’t forget to thank you for saving my life, cheers.”

Chapter Three

Em's gaze flickered over to Andy every few seconds as she drove to his flat. What had just happened tonight? She tried to suss out what she witnessed. Werewolves were real; one had attacked her, and Andy had appeared like a jaguar in shining armor to rescue her.

He dozed in the passenger seat. Her mind reassured her that his wounds would mend—shifters always healed faster than normal humans—but that still didn't keep her from worrying about him. It was strange not having him criticize her driving like he normally did when they rode together for work. As the streetlights flashed through the windows, the shadows accented the sensual curve of his lips. She longed to find out if they would feel soft or demanding when she kissed him.

Get your mind out of the gutter, she scolded herself. He's beat up because he saved your life, and all you can think about is bonking him.

"What are you planning on doing with the body?" she asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Burn it, probably."

She shuddered. She always wondered what he held back from her. Maybe he was a serial killer in disguise. With the ease he talked about disposing of the dead werewolf, he sounded like he could be one.

Andy pulled out his mobile and dialed a number. After a few seconds, the person on the other end picked up, and he began speaking in rapid Spanish to his best mate, Miguel. She strained to decipher the conversation, but her mastery of the language was rudimentary at best. She recognized the word *morte* and figured they were discussing what to do with the corpse in the boot.

He snapped his phone shut. "Taken care of." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

The stench of the body infiltrated the car, and her stomach churned by the time she pulled into his building's complex and parked. If she stayed in the enclosed space much longer, she would be in danger of puking. She went around to the other side and helped Andy out of the car. "Do werewolves always smell that bad?"

His brow furrowed. "You can smell him?"

"He smells bloody awful—how could you not?"

"This doesn't make sense." He lurched forward, and she wrapped her arm around him. If he fell, she doubted she'd be able to pick him up off the pavement.

"Let's get you to bed and suss it out later."

A sharp laugh broke from his throat. "Always trying to get me in bed, aren't you?"

"I think I can restrain myself tonight." He wouldn't be a good shag if he was as zonked as he appeared. "Do you think you can handle the stairs?"

He nodded, and they climbed them one at a time. When they came to his flat, she unlocked the door. "I have some bandages in my bathroom."

"Should I be scared to go in there? Bachelor loos are notoriously filthy from my experience." But she was pleasantly surprised how neat his flat was. Almost sparse would be a better way to describe it. No pictures on the walls, no personal effects; just the

essential furniture like a small couch and coffee table in the lounge.

She led him to the bathroom, made sure the lid was down, and sat him on the toilet. “Where are they?”

“Under the sink.”

She found all the supplies she needed neatly organized in a plastic basket and pulled it out. She laughed when she saw each item had been dated and organized by its purpose. Andy was always OCD at work, but it seemed it carried over to his home life as well.

Em soaked a flannel in water and cleaned the dried blood off his arm. That wound looked the worst out of all of them. As she got closer to the edges of it, she winced. Puncture marks outlined the shape of a mouth, and the skin loosely clung to the sinews below it. “It bit you?”

He hissed when she poured some peroxide over it. “Yeah, but I’ve had worse.”

“If there’s some truth to the legends then, should I be worried about you when the full moon comes?”

“No, thank God. I’m immune to the werewolf’s bite.” He studied her with concern in his golden eyes. “He didn’t bite you, did he?”

She shook her head. “Guess I’m lucky you showed up when you did.”

“Em, you’re not worried about what you saw me do tonight?”

“Why should I be? I mean, learning that werewolves are real is a bit disconcerting, and I’m still trying to get comfortable with how easily you killed Wes. But I always suspected you were a shifter. I never had proof until tonight.” She found a roll of gauze and wrapped it around this forearm.

He grabbed her chin and lifted her face so her eyes met his. Then he gasped. “What happened to your eyes? Why are they yellow now instead of green?”

“When I shifted, my contact lenses fell out.”

“Holy shit, you’re a shifter?” His hand fell from her face.

She began cleaning the gash above his eyebrow. “Yeah. Although I must admit, I’m slightly jealous. I’d like to be a jaguar. And how did you manage to shift without tearing your clothes?”

He stared past her, the disbelief plain on his face. “You mean I’ve been working with you for four years and never once figured out that you were like me?”

She laughed. “It’s not something I want well known. My father always referred to it as curse and punished me every time I tried to shift when I was growing up. He taught me it was better to try and blend in with the humans. Hence the contacts. I got tired of people freaking out when they saw my eyes.” His lips pressed together, and she added, “They look almost natural on you with your coloring, though. I’ve always liked them.”

“What’s your form?”

“A hawk. Not the most threatening animal, I know, but it has its advantages.”

“So you’re the hawk that attacked Wes?”

She nodded. “I’ve always told you that we make a brilliant team.”

A smile played on his lips. “A hawk fits you, although you’re the first bird I’ve heard of.”

“We’re rare. The only other person I know who can change into a hawk is my father. But then, I haven’t met that many shifters.” She searched the basket and found some wound glue. “Hold still; I’m almost done.”

“Thanks for fixing me up, Em.”

"It's the least I could do." She pinched the edges of the gash together and waited for the glue to take. "Why did he attack me tonight?"

"I think it had something to do with you kicking him in the nuts."

She grinned. "He deserved it."

"But seriously, I wonder now if he knew you were a shifter. He called you a bird in the bar before he approached you."

"Bird is a common term for a woman."

"Not in Texas. This could mean even more trouble."

"So shifters and werewolves hate each other?" He looked up at her as if she was an idiot. "Sorry, but I've spent my life isolated from other shifters. I didn't even know what he was until you told me."

"Hate is a mild word. If I had my way, I'd wipe them off the face of the earth." His features twisted in a scowl, and she almost backed away from him in fear. "But I'm not the alpha of the pride; Miguel is, and he wants peace. Now that they're able to shift when it isn't a full moon, though, his mind could change."

"Can this wait until morning, Andy? You need to get some rest."

His shoulders slumped. "I suppose you're right."

Em released the skin above his eyebrow and checked to see that the wound glue held. Her fingers travelled down his face and lingered along his jaw. Would he fight her if she kissed him? She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat and took his hand in hers. "It's time for bed then."

Andy followed her and sat on the edge of the mattress while she removed his jeans and t-shirt, leaving him in his boxers. "Miguel suggested you stay here tonight in case Wes mentioned something to the other werewolves on his way to your place. I need to keep an eye on you."

"You mean I finally get you in bed, and all you can think about are werewolves?"

"You don't want to get involved with me, Em. It's too dangerous."

"I think I know what I'm getting myself into." She cupped his face in her hands and leaned forward. At first, he met her with resistance when her lips met his, but then he yielded to the demands of her kiss and allowed her tongue to explore his mouth.

He gripped her arms, and for a second, she feared he would push her away. Much to her surprise, he pulled her closer to him and began kissing her back with an intensity that left her wanting more. His tongue danced circles around hers, fanning the flames of desire that burned within her. *Bloody hell!* She knew she would enjoy kissing him, but not this much. If he continued to tease her this way, she might end up straddling him and satisfying the need that consumed her.

And then it was over. He ended the kiss sooner than she would have liked but not before it had the intended effect. The tip of his cock poked from the opening of his boxers. The fact her kiss aroused him pleased her. He would remember that the next time she offered to shag him.

"Em..." He brushed her cheek with his knuckles, and she saw more than just lust in his eyes. Her heart lurched. Could it be possible that he loved her, too?

"You're too tired to put on a good show now, I know." She pushed him back on the mattress and grabbed his feet to tuck them under the sheet. "Sleep, and maybe in the morning, we'll continue getting off." He looked puzzled. "Making out, I think is the American term. But if you want to get me off in other ways, you're more than welcome."

He smiled even though his eyelids sagged. "I love your little British phrases."

And I'm arse over elbows for you, too. She took a few steps back and waited until she heard his first snores before she retreated to the bathroom. She ran the shower and peeled off her dirty clothes. Some soap and hot water would remove the stench that clung to her skin from the attack, but it would do little to relieve the aching throb in her lower stomach. Only Andy could soothe that.

When she finished her shower and dried off, she tiptoed into the bedroom and found one of his t-shirts. She inhaled the scent of the detergent and realized it was part of the scent that was uniquely him. Then she crawled into the opposite side of the bed. It was crazy to physically be this close to him and not cuddle. She stretched her body along his and wriggled her way into his arms. With her head resting in the nook of his shoulder, she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter Four

In his dreams, Andy never held back when Em propositioned him. She asked if he wanted to join her in the bed, and he didn't hesitate to remove their clothes and begin making love to her. Her golden hair fanned out on his pillow. His hands cupped her soft breasts, and his tongue traced her nipples, bringing them to firm points. She moaned and begged him not to stop.

But the dream was different tonight. He was getting ready to plunge his cock deep inside her and ease the aching hunger building up inside him when the phone rang, killing the mood.

* * * *

The familiar ring of his cell phone pulled Andy from his dreams. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times, slightly disoriented. Although it was still dark outside, he recognized his room, but he didn't know what to make of the soft body that molded along his.

"Are you going to answer your mobile?" a softly accented voice asked him.

Holy shit! It was Em lying next to him, and his hands were fondling her breasts. He rolled away from her and managed to answer the phone before it went to his voice mail. "Rodriguez here."

"Took you a while to answer," Miguel said on the other end. "Was I distracting you from something?"

He stared at Em, who looked too sexy for her own good in his old Texas Longhorns t-shirt. She twirled her hair around her finger and lowered her eyes to his crotch. There was no hiding his arousal from her. She grinned at him.

He stood and retreated to the bathroom. "Just waking up." He closed the door behind him to drown out his conversation from her ears. "My little encounter with Wes left me exhausted."

Miguel laughed. "And I'm sure having Emily nearby hasn't left you exhausted in a different way."

"You know me better than that."

"I've heard you whine about her for the last four years. Why don't you just tell her how you feel and get it out of your system?"

Andy ran his fingers through his hair. "It's not that simple. And now I've learned she's a shifter, too, albeit a naïve one."

"Em? But her eyes are green."

"Contacts. She's a hawk."

"*Dios mio*, how could have I missed that one?"

"I asked myself the same thing when she told me. You'd think we'd learn to recognize our own."

"Well, technically, she's not like us. She's not feline." A pause filled the connection. "But she's still a shifter, and we'll treat her as a sister, just like any member of the pride."

Andy's thoughts for her were anything but brotherly, especially when he spied the

pile of her clothes near the shower. He reached down and picked up the flimsy thong on the top. How did this even qualify as underwear?

"Andy, are you still there?"

He tossed the thong back on the floor. "Um, yeah, just got sidetracked."

"I spoke to some of the guys, and if what you're telling me is correct, we're going to have some trouble with the werewolves."

"Well, considering I just killed one of their members, I wouldn't be surprised. I'm curious how they learned to control their ability to shift, though."

"You and me both. I'm hoping his body will offer us some evidence. In the meantime, I called my contacts in San Antonio and Austin to give us some reinforcements. Eric mentioned he heard something about the werewolves in LA shifting at times other than the full moon; he's looking into it."

"Good idea."

"In the meantime, keep an eye on her and watch your back. We'll come by around eight to help you dispose of the dog."

"Can't be soon enough. I don't think I'll ever get the stench out of my trunk."

Miguel laughed again. "Go back to sleep. See you in a few hours."

The other end clicked, and the call ended. Andy checked the clock on his phone. Four o'clock. Still plenty of time to get a few more hours of sleep.

His gaze strayed to Em's clothes, and he wondered what she was wearing under his t-shirt. Possibly nothing. His dick grew hard as he imagined what her naked body looked like.

He took a deep breath. *Stop it. Remember what happened to Heather.*

But Em was a shifter. Like it or not, she had become part of the war. She could fight the werewolves if they attacked her or even just fly away. He never wanted things to come to that, though. If she was injured because of him, he'd never forgive himself.

"Andy, are you alright?" Em asked from the other room.

He opened the door. She leaned against the frame; the hem of his t-shirt barely covered her hips and revealed her long legs. The lamplight created a halo around her tousled golden hair, making her appear like an angel. But he remembered the way she kissed him earlier tonight; she was more devil than angel, and she knew how to tempt him.

She touched the bandages on his arm. "How's that feeling?"

He jerked his arm back as if her touch burned him. "Almost healed."

"That's good to hear." She closed the space between them. "I'm sorry the phone woke you."

"It was an important call."

"Oh?" Her breasts rubbed against his bare chest. "Anything I should know?"

Sweat prickled along the nape of his neck. Should he follow Miguel's advice and tell her he wanted her more than he'd wanted any other woman? That he could barely contain his lust for her? That he was almost certain that he had fallen in love with her? "It can wait until morning."

Her nails lightly grazed his stomach and tugged on the waistband of his boxers. She tilted her head so her lips were inches from his. "Yes, it can wait until morning."

His mind warred with his dick as he gazed into her glowing golden eyes. If she wanted to seduce him, then maybe it was time to give into his own desires. But could he

risk losing his heart again? He brushed his knuckles along her cheekbone. "Are you sure, Em?" he asked and saw the almost imperceptible nod. She was willing to take the risk.

Her acceptance tore down his resistance. A dam crumbled inside him, and his desire for her flooded his mind. He wove his fingers into her hair and crushed her body against his. Then his mouth ravaged hers. He held nothing back in his kiss. She would know how he felt about her before dawn broke.

His cock strained against the button on his boxers and rubbed against her mound. She whimpered and rose up on her toes so it could slip further between her legs. Her juices soaked the material, and he felt a rush of excitement knowing she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He backed her to the bed and broke the kiss long enough to pull the t-shirt over her head.

Her warm hands brushed his cheeks. "You mean you're finally going to take me up on my offer."

He pushed her back on the mattress and kicked off his boxers. Her eyes blazed as she stared at his nakedness, but he doubted she felt the same thrill as him when he lay next to her. "You've been asking for it long enough. And I'm tired of holding back."

He cupped her breast in his hand and licked the pink nipple, sucking on it until it formed a tight bud in his mouth. She shivered and arched her back. The scent of her skin filled his nostrils. She had used his soap, and he liked the smell of it on her. He continued to tease her until she moaned and then moved on to the next breast. His tongue flickered faster over that nipple, and when his teeth grazed it, her hips bucked, and she whispered his name.

His heart skipped a beat. How many times had he imagined her saying his name in the heat of passion? And he was just getting started.

He pulled his attention away from her breasts to watch her reaction as he slipped a finger between her legs and into her wetness. Her mouth formed a perfect "O," and she tightened her muscles around him. He withdrew his hand and added another finger when he entered her again. She threw her head back and clung to his shoulders while her hips moved in perfect rhythm to his thrusts.

"Don't stop."

Amused by her reaction, he pressed his thumb against her clit and started massaging the firm nub. Her nails dug into his back, and she said, "Mmmm, I like that."

He grinned and pressed his lips along the hollows of her neck. He enjoyed teasing her. "Like what?"

"You touching me like that."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to make me come." As if to emphasize her point, her hips thrashed against his hand, moving with an urgency fueled by her need to climax. "Please, Andy."

He lifted his thumb. "And what if I don't want you to come just yet?" By now, he managed to insert a third finger inside her and stroked the silky walls of her sex as she moved under him.

"Please." She brought his face to hers, and her tongue dove into his mouth as she kissed him. He could almost taste her hunger, and the intensity of it shocked him. He withdrew his hand to steady himself and keep from coming right at that moment. Dear God, why had he denied himself this pleasure for so long?

She ended the kiss by gently sucking on his lower lip. Her golden eyes glowed like a cat in heat, and she reached down to caress his cock. Her fingers wrapped around the shaft, and she gasped. "What a stonker."

"Translate, please," he murmured as his lips trailed along her jaw, and he began to nibble on her earlobe.

"You're huge."

He chuckled. "And if you keep trying to get me off like that, your fun will be over before it starts." He pried her hand away from his erection and pressed his lips to her stomach. His tongue explored the crevices of her navel before he went lower.

He opened her seam with his thumbs to reveal her swollen clit and slick, pink pussy. So beautiful, and all his. She tasted sweet as he lapped up her juices and traced circles around her nub with his tongue. He reached his hands behind her to grab her firm ass and tilt her hips up, allowing him easier access to her intimate areas. He wanted to make her scream his name before he finished with her. He sucked gently on the sensitive bundle of nerves, and her breath caught. Her hands pressed against the back of his head, urging him to continue, and he was more than happy to oblige.

Her pelvis rolled in time with his tongue, and her fevered whispers encouraged him, even though none of them made sense to him. God, he loved this. Her muscles tightened under his hands, and he knew she was reaching her climax. He sucked her clit harder, pushing her over the edge, and felt a rush of satisfaction when her body stiffened and she cried out in pleasure.

*

As the aftershocks of her orgasm ebbed, Em tried to move. Her arms and legs felt like they were made of lead, and none of them wanted to obey her brain. The only thing she managed to do was continue running her fingertips through Andy's silky black hair. He sucked one of her breasts again, and she was almost certain he would make her come again before he entered her.

What made him change his mind? After years of flirting and teasing, he finally threw her to the bed and began making love to her like she had always imagined. Hell, it was even better than she imagined. The things that man could do with his tongue... It must be part of his special abilities as cat. But she wasn't going to waste this opportunity. This was her chance to show him exactly how she felt about him.

"How are you?" he asked in a low voice that bordered on a growl. His erection pressed into the softness of her lower stomach.

"A little wonky after that."

"I take that is a good thing." He rolled her nipple between his fingers, and his lips brushed against her forehead.

"Yes, a very good thing." She lifted her face so his lips would join hers. She tasted her own cream when he kissed her, reminding her of the bliss he had just given her moments before. What a lucky girl I am! But still, she wanted more. She wanted him inside her, and warmth pooled in her snatch as she thought of it. "Now I want to please you," she said when he broke away.

The corners of his mouth tugged downward as if he wasn't ready to relinquish control, but she gathered up enough strength to push him on his back and straddle his thighs. His cock stood rigid from his groin, and she lowered her mouth to lick the dew that pearled on the tip. He inhaled sharply through his nose, and she repeated the action.

This time, she elicited a moan from him, and she went further, taking his entire length in her mouth. He barely fit, but she sucked in her cheeks as she travelled up and down his shaft. He tasted delicious, and with each stroke, her anticipation heightened. This was just the appetizer, and she couldn't wait for the main course.

"Em, please stop, or I'm going to come in your hot little mouth."

She released her suction and ran her tongue along the back of his penis like she would lick a melting ice cream cone. Only now, the cream she licked away tasted more salty than sweet. She had almost made him come, and she needed to remind herself to be let him recover before she pushed him to the brink again. "Are you sure?"

"I want to feel your wet pussy around my dick."

Em crawled closer to him and hovered over his cock so it brushed against her slick labia. "Do you?"

"Please."

She lowered on him so just his head entered her vagina. "Like this?"

"More," he groaned and grabbed her arse.

She inched lower until half his cock was inside her, stretching her walls as she tried to accommodate his girth. "Better?"

"Dear God, more." He thrust his hips up, driving his entire length into her furthest recesses.

She gasped at the sensation of him filling her completely. Sweet Mother Mary, she could now die a happy woman. She tightened her thighs around his hips and rocked up and down along his shaft, smothering her moans each time his head rubbed against her pleasure spot.

His hands rested on her hips to guide her movements, but his eyes remained fixated on her. She wondered how she must look to him, writhing on top of him while she tried to fulfill both their needs. Sweat glistened between her breasts as they bobbed up and down with each thrust.

"You're gorgeous, Em," he said as if he'd read her thoughts. A huge grin formed on his lips, and she relished the idea she was giving him as much pleasure as he was giving her.

Pressure built up inside her womb, and each jab of his cock increased her agony. She was so close to coming. So very close.

And then something inside burst, and waves of pleasure pulsated from her pussy. A strangled cry broke free from her lips, and she collapsed against him.

*

Em's actions mesmerized him, from the moment she wrapped her lips around his cock to the second her eyes widened in ecstasy. He loved watching her reach her orgasm and wished he could have reached his climax at the same time she did. But he still hungered for more.

He caught her as she fell forward and rolled her onto her back. He rammed into her pussy over and over again, faster and deeper than she had allowed him when she was on top. She spasmed as she continued to come, and her walls clenched tightly around him. Yes, this was what he needed.

His vision blurred, and his body convulsed as he shot a stream of hot cum inside her. Euphoria like he had never experienced before throbbed through every inch of his body, and he screamed out her name with his last thrust. His pulse pounded in his ears.

Exhaustion seeped into his muscles as he continued to come, and he slumped forward on his elbows.

She reached up and wiped a dribble of sweat that snaked down his cheek. For a few seconds, neither one of them said anything. Their breathing slowed, and their damp bodies pressed together. His cock remained buried deep within her, not ready to leave the warm glove that fit around him so perfectly. Her lips yielded to his when he kissed her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Why did we wait so long for that?” she asked after the kiss ended.

His gut churned, and he rolled off her and stared at the ceiling. What had he just done? By making love to her, he had marked her as his mate. He closed his eyes and relived the last moments of their passion. Yes, it was worth it. He couldn’t imagine a more perfect woman for him than Em. “I was scared you’d become a target if the werewolves knew you and I were lovers,” he confessed.

“I’m not as helpless as you think I am.”

He turned to her and brushed her hair out of her face. “No, I don’t think I’ll ever think of you as helpless after tonight. But I do worry about the fact we didn’t use any protection.”

“Don’t worry; I’ve had all my shots.” She smiled and cuddled next to him. “No risk of that kind complication.”

He wrapped his arms around her and breathed a sigh of relief. As he stroked the smooth skin of her back, he realized he would be quite happy to share a bed with her for the rest of his life.

Chapter Five

The early morning light filtered through the curtains. Em buried her face deeper into Andy's arms. She inhaled deeply, savoring his scent like she would a fine wine, only he was more intoxicating than anything she had ever drank.

He stirred underneath her and kissed the top of her head. "Are you awake, Em?"

She nodded. "Although I'm still exhausted after our shag."

His warm laughter sent shivers of anticipation down her spine. "So you're saying I wore you out? You, the woman who once bragged about her sexual stamina to me?"

"I was only bragging to try and see if you could be baited." She ran the flat of her tongue over his nipple. His breath caught, and his cock stiffened as her fingers circled around it. "And I was right."

"You keep that up, and Miguel and the other shifters are going to catch us in the middle of something."

She smirked. "I'm sure they'd like to watch."

Color flooded his tanned cheeks, and his pupils dilated. "Maybe I don't want to share you."

"Do you dare presume you have some sort of claim on me now just because we shagged?" She raised one eyebrow and sat up. Secretly, deep inside, she yearned to belong to him. At least, when it came to his heart. But she'd be damned if she'd let him order her around like a slave.

"Depends." He slipped on finger between her legs and stroked her sensitive clit. She could barely stifle her moan. "How much did you enjoy it?"

More than I care to admit, her mind screamed, but all that came from her mouth was a whimper. She was torn between getting dressed before his friends arrived or seeing if they could manage a quickie.

A wicked grin carved his face while he watched her reaction to his touch. Yes, he knew exactly how much she wanted him, and it irked her. She had always prided herself on keeping men guessing about her thoughts, but she couldn't hide them from Andy.

But then his face grew serious, and he removed his finger. "If we keep this up, I'll never get that stinking dog out of my car." He leaned over and kissed her cheek before he rolled away from her. "You can have the bathroom first."

How can he go from seducing her one minute and then being a perfect gentleman the next? She grabbed his Longhorns t-shirt and sought refuge behind the closed door of the bathroom. A few minutes later, the warm water of the shower pounded on her skin, and the steam cleared her mind. If she wasn't careful, she was going to fall hard for Andy. She had always fancied him, but now that he had opened himself up to her a bit, she longed to get further under his skin. At least I don't have to worry about him running away from me because I'm a shifter.

A cold breeze blew through the shower, and her nipples tightened. The shower curtain pulled back. "Are you going to leave any hot water for me?"

"You can always join me."

His eyes swept down the length of her body, and she held her breath. She wanted to rub the soap all over him, to slide her fingers over his fit body, to stroke his hard shaft

until he came. But to her disappointment, he shook his head and handed her a towel. "I'll wait until you're done."

The water felt icy to her now, and she turned off the shower. No need to linger in there if she wasn't going to have any fun. She wrapped the towel around her body and stepped out the shower.

"I noticed you don't have a tattoo," he said behind her.

"Should I?"

He chuckled. "I guess you don't need one if you like ending up naked after you shift. I know I wouldn't mind seeing you naked more often."

The tattoo on his right bicep rippled when he moved his arm. She traced the outline of what looked like jaguar's head. "Is that what this means?"

His breath caught when she touched him. He nodded. "It's the Mayan logogram for the jaguar. I know a witch here in town that does them. The spell is in the ink. Once you have one, you never have to worry about losing your clothes when you shift."

She remembered how she had to remove her clothes before she shifted last night. "It sounds like I need a tattoo, then."

"Maybe when I get out of the shower, we can discuss what symbol you want and where to put it." His fingers brushed against her shoulder blade. "Perhaps a hawk here."

There were other things she would rather discuss, other places she'd like his fingers to touch. She gave the towel to him when she passed him. He licked his lips while he watched her leave, and the heat from his stare drove away any chill in the air. She gathered her clothes and pulled the door closed behind her.

Once in the bedroom, she pulled her jeans on, opting not to wear her thong again. Maybe she should leave it here to remind him of her. She laughed; that game had grown passé when she was at Uni. Instead, she tossed it into the rubbish bin and finished dressing.

Andy exited the bathroom with the fluffy towel wrapped around his lean hips; she fought the urge to yank it off of him. "Am I ever going to get my t-shirt back?"

"Of course." She sat in the bed and turned her head away while he dressed; if she watched him, he wouldn't make it past his pants.

"It looks good on you." His gaze focused on the bin. "Should I lend you a pair of underwear, too?"

"If I can wear your pants, I seriously need to consider a diet." She peeked out of the corner of her eye and saw he was fully clothed again. She sighed; she could stare at his naked body all day, but nothing would get done other than some more serious bonking. "When are your friends supposed to arrive?"

"Miguel said around eight." He checked his watch. "It's a little past seven now. How about some breakfast?"

"Sounds brilliant."

He caught her arm when she stood and stroked her cheek. "I hope this morning wasn't a one-time thing."

He consumed her mind and senses with his love making. Once wouldn't be enough to satiate her appetite for him. "Are you accusing me of being a tart?" she teased.

"I know your track record."

It would have been kinder if he had slapped her in face. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them away before he could see them. "They weren't you."

He pulled her into his arms, almost crushing her. “Shit, Em, I didn’t mean for it come out that way. I’m just worried that I’m reading you wrong, that’s all.”

The scent of his cologne mingled with the soap on his skin and his laundry detergent, and she breathed them all in. Their familiarity calmed her. “They were just substitutes for you, and as you have always been quick to point out, they were all smarmy gits.”

He chuckled and lifted her chin. “I think I understand what you’re saying.” He ran his thumb across her bottom lip. “I’ve desired no other woman since I met you, and I thought you should know that.”

And just like that, he released her with his seductive lips curled up in a smile and went into the kitchen.

* * * *

Andy rummaged through his fridge. After last night’s fight with Wes, he craved meat. Raw, red meat. Preferably still bleeding. He found a sirloin he had bought a few days ago and sniffed it. Not as fresh as he would’ve like, but it would satisfy him for now. “How does steak and eggs sound for breakfast?”

“Brilliant.” Em peeked around the corner and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I would have been happy with beans and toast. Need some help?”

“It’s kinda cramped in here. Feel free to make yourself at home in the living room.”

It was a partial lie. His kitchen was small, but her lithe body could have easily fit in here. He was afraid of having her that close to him. She was like his own personal heroin—one hit, and he was addicted to her. He could just imagine breakfast burning while he was busy making love to her on the kitchen floor. Besides, he needed to distance himself from her if he was going to have his shit together and not act like a hormone crazed teenager when Miguel showed up. And God help him, he hoped he could maintain a professional demeanor at work on Monday.

He heated up a frying pan and threw the meat in it. “How do you like your steak?”

“Rare,” she said from the doorway. She continued watching him with those large golden eyes. They still surprised him; after seeing her with green eyes for four years, he felt like there was a stranger in his apartment. Then she winked at him, and the rush of familiarity filled him. It was the same Em, but he was free to love her now he knew she was like him.

She cleared her throat. “So, going back to what we were discussing in the bedroom, where do we stand after this morning?”

The edges the steak turned grey, and he flipped it over. “I thought I made my intentions clear.”

Her fingers brushed along the nape of neck and ran down his spine like she would stroke a cat. Desire filled him, and he wondered if she knew what kind of effect she had on him, especially now that he knew how it felt to be inside her. Her breath tickled his skin. He gripped the handle of the frying pan to keep him from turning around, removing all her clothes, and satisfying his need for her.

“I’d enjoy having you as my lover for quite a while, Andy.”

His chest tightened. Did he hear her correctly? He turned around to ask her what she meant, but she had already disappeared into his living room.

The steak had cooked long enough to take the chill off of it—just the way he liked it—and he fried the eggs in the juices from the meat. When the meal was complete, he

carried out the plates to the coffee table in front of the couch. “Sorry I don’t have a real table.”

She shrugged and cut her steak. “You’re a bachelor.” She dipped the meat into the yolk of her egg and closed her eyes as she ate the first bite. “Perfect.”

He grinned. Why hadn’t he picked up the subtle signs of her shifter roots sooner, like the way she always ate her meat barely cooked? Or the inhuman grace with which she moved? Maybe he had been too busy ignoring his feelings for her to notice the evidence that now seemed so clear to him.

He stabbed his steak with his fork, but before he could cut it, something crashed into his front door.

Chapter Six

Em jumped at the noise, and the stench of the werewolves filled her nose. “Andy, I don’t think those are your mates.”

He swore under his breath as a second crash splintered the wood. He moved between her and the door. “Stay behind me.”

“Where’s your gun?”

“In the bedroom.”

“Still loaded with the special bullets?”

He nodded. “There should be a few left in there.”

She ran into the bedroom and saw his slim mobile next to his gun. She flipped it open, highlighted the last number called, and pressed send.

“What is it, Andy?” a male voice said on the other end.

“It’s not Andy, it’s Em; and if this is Miguel, you might want to get your arse over here now. We have company.” She turned the phone off and tucked it in her pocket. Then she checked the chamber of the gun and rushed back to the lounge.

*

Thank God she’s got a good head on her shoulders, Andy thought as Em ran back to his room. Based on what he knew from the gun range, she was a better shot than him. Hopefully, he had enough bullets to take care of their visitors. His eyes flickered to the clock above the TV. Seven thirty. *Dammit! Too early for Miguel.*

The door broke free from the hinges after the fourth blow, and Andy shifted to prepare for battle. He’d die before he left any of those dirty dogs touch Em. His tail twitched as he crouched on the floor, and he licked his long fangs. He wanted to taste blood.

He sprang at the first person who burst through the doorway, going straight for the throat. His powerful jaws snapped around it, and the werewolf fell to the ground. Several pairs of hands clasped around him, and he lashed his claws out at his attackers.

The crack of his gun broke his concentration. He looked up to see one of the men fall to the ground. Blood trickled from the left side of his chest. A direct hit to the heart. Another shot fired, and another werewolf fell from the same fatal injury. God bless Em and her sharp eyes.

He growled and jumped at the next invader, determined to keep them confined to the doorway and away from her. His gun exploded three more times, and three more bodies piled up in the hall outside. But they still kept coming. Craig must have sent an army after them.

The gun clicked on the empty chamber. “Shite!”

He couldn’t see what was happening to her from the crowd of bodies that surrounded him, and he tried to maul his way through them. Two or three opponents, he could easily handle, but he lost count of how many werewolves came into his house. But none of them had shifted, which made them easier to attack.

“Get the girl,” one of them said, and anger surged through him. There was no fucking way they were going to get within ten feet of her.

He increased the intensity of his attacks. He knocked two of them away from him

and caught a glimpse of one of them trying to corner Em. She danced around the coffee table, keeping it between them.

“Get back,” the same voice ordered, and his attackers retreated.

Miguel must be here, was the first thing that ran through his mind. He turned to the door in time to see a flash of metal. A shot fired, and an explosion of pain filled his body.

*

“Andy!” Em screamed as she watched him slump over from the gunshot. Bloody hell, he couldn’t be dead. Her heart felt like all the life was being squeezed from it, and she was too stunned to dodge the werewolf that lunged at her.

They fell to the ground, and his elbow dug into her stomach. Her lungs burned from the air being forced from them. He lifted his body off her and leered down at her. “You smell like him,” he said. “His mate?”

“None of your fucking business,” she replied and brought her knee up to his groin. He rolled away from her, and she scrambled to her feet.

“Careful, my dear.” An older man stood in front of her with his gun leveled at her head. Silver streaked his shoulder length hair, but he radiated the same stench of rotting meat as his companions. “I’d hate to blow away that pretty face of yours.”

Her gaze travelled to the jaguar in the middle of the floor. Relief flood through her when she saw his heaving sides. She visually swept the room. Besides Mr. Friendly and the gunman, seven other werewolves surrounded them. Two of them were women, but not the kind she would want to tangle with. The odds were not in her favor; however, if she distracted them long enough to allow Andy to heal or for Miguel to get here, maybe that could change. “What do you want with us?”

“You draw blood, we draw blood,” the gunman replied in a flat voice. “That’s the way it’s always been.”

“Then why are we still alive.”

He laughed. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Let’s just say ya’ll are the pawns in my plan.” His eyes narrowed. “You must be one of the new shifters Miguel has invited to town, although I surprised he gave you to Andy. I would have kept you for myself.”

“You’re not the only one with secrets.”

“Kill her now, Craig,” one of the women said. Her face twisted in jealousy when she had heard Craig’s comments about wanting to keep her, and Em could only assume she wasn’t willing to share. “She’s just some English tart. She’s not a member of Miguel’s pride.”

He turned his head to answer, and Em seized the opportunity. Her leg kicked out, knocking the gun from his hand, followed by a roundabout kick to his face with the other foot. She snatched the gun and fired blindly. One of the women cried out and collapsed against the couch, but the rest of the werewolves descended on her. Their fists flew at her, and their hands desperately tried to wrench the gun from her hands. She kept squeezing the trigger until the gun emptied and then swung it like a club at her attackers.

Through the haze, she saw the jaguar rise to his feet. Andy had almost healed enough to help her. For a second, she considered a shifting to fly away, but she wouldn’t leave him behind. Not with these creatures intent on killing them both.

A fist connected with her mouth, and she tasted blood. A pair of strong hands wrapped around the upper arm of her gun hand and yanked on her. Her shoulder popped, and her vision blurred from the pain. The gun fell from her hand. Something hard

smashed into the back of her head, and everything went black.

*

Andy listened through a fog as Craig threatened Em. He felt helpless to do anything about it; every twitch of his muscles radiated pain through his body. At least he wasn't in as much of a hurry to kill her as Lily was. If what he had heard about her was correct, she didn't care to share him and had killed three other female werewolves that had tried to replace her.

Chaos erupted in the small apartment once again, and more bullets showered the occupants. He pushed the pain out of his mind and focused on Em, terrified she had been shot.

He struggled to his feet. It would only be a matter of time before the police arrived to investigate all the gunshots. They would probably label it another gang-related incident. Not far from the truth.

Em's shrill cry froze his blood, and her body crumpled to the floor. What the hell did they do to her? He opened his mouth, and his fierce yowl drew the attention of every werewolf.

"You're not dead yet?" Craig asked with an amused grin on his face. Blood trickled out his crooked nose, and he wiped it away. "Maybe we should finish this somewhere else; what do you think, Andy?" He nodded his head, and Lily withdrew a syringe from her pocket.

Rough hands seized him. They dug their fingers into his wound, paralyzing him in agony as she knelt in front of him. He snapped at her, earning him another wave of pain.

"Nice kitty." She uncovered the needle and plunged it into his haunch. Warmth pounded through his vessels like he just drank a bottle of Jack Daniels. His muscles refused to obey him, and his vision blurred. What kind of drug had she given him? "Time to go to sleep," she said in a sing-song voice as his eyes closed.

Chapter Seven

A palm slapped his face, jerking Andy from the blackness. The heat threatened to suffocate him and enhanced the smell of wet dog from the sweating werewolves near him. He opened his eyes and received another slap in the face.

"I think he's finally coming around," a voice sneered.

He tried to move, but tight cords bound his wrists behind his back and tied his feet to the cold metal chair he sat in. At least the pain had dulled from his ribs where the bullet had pierced him earlier. His throat was parched as the west Texas hills, but he managed to croak, "What the fuck do you want?"

Cold laughter answered him. "Always difficult, aren't you, Andy? No wonder Miguel considers you his right hand man. Or should I say, cat."

Dim light flickered through the blades of the fans near the ceiling of the warehouse, but his eyes adjusted quickly. Craig sat in a chair across from him and sipped on a cup of coffee.

"You still didn't answer my question." His speech sounded slurred to his ears. Must be the after-effects of the drug.

"I think you should give careful thought to your circumstances, young man, and answer my questions."

"I don't care what you do to me, you wannabe shifter. You'll get nothing."

Craig blew on his coffee and swirled the cup in his hand. "Actually, I was thinking it might be better to torture your mate first, but I realized she's so new to the pride, she wouldn't know anything. You're the one privy to all of Miguel's plans."

"You can still torture her, Craig," Lily said behind him. She tilted Andy's head back so he had full view of the cruelty in her eyes while she ran her fingers through his hair. "I bet her screams would convince Andy to talk."

Fear clenched his stomach, but he struggled to keep his face blank. He refused to let them use her like that. "Go ahead. She's nothing to me. Just a girl I took home to fuck."

Craig clucked his tongue. "You know better than to lie to me like that."

Lily snickered and shoved his head forward.

"She's your partner, isn't she?" he continued. "The same one you've had for four years, if I'm not mistaken. And now it seems you've chosen to mate with her. I could smell you on her."

"I'm surprised you let me live, Craig. It's so unlike you," Andy said, trying to steer the conversation away from Em.

"Who says I'm not going to kill you? After all, it's a life for a life."

"I'm not sorry I killed Wes last night. He attacked first."

"Wes was a trouble maker. You actually have my thanks for taking care something I was planning on doing anyway."

"Why? Because now that he could shift without it being a full moon, he could challenge you for pack leader?"

A snarl curled along Craig's upper lip. "Wes was an annoying show off. I'm glad to be rid of him."

Andy grinned. He heard more of what the werewolf hadn't said than what he did say.

Maybe Wes was the only one who possessed that power. If that was the case, then his fellow shifters would have less to worry about.

“But your mate, she killed five of my pack. She will have to answer for her crimes.”

“Actually, you’ve been biting a lot of humans lately from what I’ve been told.

Maybe she was just doing her part to keep the numbers even, as dictated by the treaty.”

“And what of Miguel inviting new members to the pride?”

“Our family is the same size as always,” he lied. The drug was finally wearing off, and his mind felt sharp again. Years on the police force had taught him how to mislead a criminal to get a confession. Craig was no different than most of the scum on the streets these days.

“Even with the addition of her?”

“As you mentioned, she’s been my partner for four years.”

Craig set his cup on the cement floor and approached him. “I’m getting tired of these games, Andy. Be a good kitty and tell me what I want to know.”

“You haven’t even asked me a question.”

“What is Miguel planning? For weeks, my spies have reported the constant stream of visitors to his house. Most of them are shifters.” He lifted Andy’s chin. “I suspect he’s lining up re-enforcements and making treaties of his own.”

“Maybe he’s just having company over for the holidays. You know how we Mexicans are. You let one of us over the border, and we’re bringing every cousin we can find.”

His sarcasm earned him a solid smack in the face. Blood filled his mouth, and he spat it out at Craig.

“Maybe I need to call immigration and have you all deported.”

Andy laughed. Getting under the werewolf’s skin distracted him from his pain. “You have nothing on us. Miguel and I are both second generation Texans.”

“But you can’t say that about the rest of your pride. It would be a shame if your numbers were reduced in half.”

“According to the treaty, that means it’s open season for werewolves; we need to keep the numbers balanced.”

“He’s irritating me, Craig,” Lily interrupted. “Either kill him now or let the rest of us have some fun with him.” She licked her blood red lips and dug her nails into Andy’s shoulders.

“Give me a few more minutes with him, my pet.” He leveled his gaze with him. “I’ll give you one more chance. What is Miguel planning?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, other than maybe some fireworks and a cookout for the Fourth of July.”

Another blow to his face let him know this answer was not what the werewolf wanted to hear. “My patience is running thin. Tell me, or I’ll take my dear Lily’s suggestion and extract the information from your mate.”

His gut tightened. They were going to hurt Em to get to him. Shit. He could only hope he could hold out until Miguel put two and two together and launched an attack on Craig’s compound at the edge of the city. “She doesn’t know anything. Hell, up until last night, she didn’t even know what you were. She just knew you smelled like maggot-infested trash.”

“We’ll see about that.” He reached around him and grabbed an empty syringe from

the metal table beside Lily.

“More drugs? I won’t lie to you—there’s no such thing as a truth serum.”

The glint in Craig’s cold blue eyes chilled him. “No, I’m not giving you anything this time. I want you awake to hear her screams. As for this, I’m interested to see if what Wes wrote was true.”

Something cold swiped over the skin on his arm, followed by a sharp sting. He winced and tried to jerk his arm away. Fear closed his throat as he could only imagine what they were planning on doing with him.

“Stay still, kitty,” Lily chided as she raked her nails through his sweat damp hair.

Craig reappeared holding up a syringe full of blood. His blood. Andy thrashed his head from side to side to shake her hands off and lunged forward to head-butt the werewolf in the stomach. His face scraped along the cement when he landed on it, but it was worth it to hear Craig gasp for air. The syringe clattered and rolled away from him.

Two sets of hands pulled him and his chair off the ground, and Lily ran to Craig’s side. “Are you alright?”

“Fine, just give me the damn syringe.”

She nodded and retrieved it for him. Her face twisted into a scowl, revealing the true extent of her hatred as she glared at Andy.

“I think you’ll find this interesting.” Craig took the syringe and walked over to the table. “Let him watch.”

The two men rotated his chair so he had a direct view of the table. Why did he have the feeling he was trapped in some sort of mad scientist’s experiment?

Craig tightened the rubber tourniquet on his arm with his teeth like a heroin junkie and cleaned the skin over one of his bulging veins. Then he stuck the needle in it and transfused Andy’s blood into him.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Hands clamped down on his shoulders, preventing him from repeating his earlier attack. He sat there, bound to the metal folding chair, while he watched his blood flow into the werewolf’s arm. Craig closed his eyes while the first wave of his high started throbbing through his veins. But his blissful smile quickly changed into a grimace, and he doubled over with a groan.

Lily gasped and ran towards Craig, but he waved her away. “Maybe Wes wasn’t such a lying son of a bitch after all.” Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his eyes widened. His pulse visibly pounded at his temples.

Andy froze. He had seen this reaction a hundred times before, but usually it was under the influence of a full moon. He waited for the shift to take place, but Craig fell to the ground instead.

“Help him up,” Lily said to the other two werewolves. “Take him to his room so he can sleep this off. I’ll take care of the over-grown lap cat.”

They half-dragged the leader of the pack out of the warehouse. He was now alone with Lily, and that chilled his blood more than being alone with Craig. The warmth had fled her heart long before she was changed. She was all steel and ice, the cruel mistress of the pack who was eager to share the leader’s bed and carry out his every whim. Sometimes, Andy wondered who really dominated the other.

“I warned him not to try that,” she said as she circled Andy. “Wes wrote it was the secret to being able to shift at will—to merge our blood—but I always suspected it was a

trick. Wes wanted him to suffer; Wes wanted him to die and take his place.”

“So why are you here with me instead of at your lover’s side?”

“Because I want to have some fun with you. I want to make you scream.” She grabbed a knife off the table and straddled his lap. “Which way do you want me torment you? By the knife?” She dragged the blade across his chest, cutting through the material of his t-shirt and leaving a thin trail of blood on his skin. “Or with my body?” She rubbed her hips against his groin.

“Looking at your face is torment enough.”

The crimson lips pulled back in a snarl, and the knife swiped across his cheekbone. He inhaled sharply from the sting of her attack, but he kept his face blank.

“I wonder if your little mate will find you handsome by the time I’m done?”

“You forget, I’ll heal without any scars. One of the advantages of being a true shifter.”

“What is Miguel planning?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She lowered the knife to his crotch. “It doesn’t have to be this way, Andy. You and I can have a bit of fun; I’ll remind Craig how much he wants me, and he’ll kill you in a jealous rage. At least you’ll die knowing you had the best sex in your life just minutes before drawing your last breath.”

He laughed. “So it’s all just a game to gain his attention, huh? Has it ever occurred to you that you don’t arouse me?”

“You can’t tell me that you wouldn’t want to bury your face in my tits?” She leaned forward so he couldn’t help but see down her top. The curve of her breasts appeared from the shadows, but he remained unmoved. There was only one woman that occupied his mind that way, and she was God knows where in Craig’s complex.

“Not interested.”

All the air left his lungs as the cold steel dug into his lower abdomen and sliced through his skin to the edge of this breastbone. She hadn’t gone deeper than the first layer of muscle, handling the knife with the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel, but it still hurt like hell.

“What’s the matter, Andy?” she whispered in his ear as his blood flowed over the two of them. “Real shifters heal quickly, right? I can cut you up all day, and I’ll have a clean canvas to work with tomorrow.”

The overwhelming urge to shift filled him. Nothing would bring him more pleasure than to sink his long fangs into her. Between his pain and anger, he could easily snap her neck between his jaws. His wrists stained against the cords that bound him, and a growl rumbled from his chest.

She crawled off his lap and licked the blood off her fingers. “Shifters always taste so good.” The tip of the blade lightly brushed against the skin of his neck but didn’t break the skin. “The only reason I don’t kill you now is because Craig has other uses in mind for you. Does it upset you to realize you’re just a pawn in this?”

He ground his teeth together and glared at her.

She laughed. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking. Tough to shift with your hands tied behind your back like that, isn’t it? Too bad kitties don’t bend that way.”

The blood slowed from the wound on his stomach, but not before he began to feel light-headed. How much blood had he lost today?

“One last chance, Andy. Would you like to die a happy death or a long, slow painful one?” The sunlight flashed on the blade of the knife, and a malicious grin spread across her lips.

“Fuck off, Lily.”

Her eyes narrowed, and the knife swiped across his forehead, coming dangerously close to his eyes. “Wrong answer,” she hissed.

The door to the warehouse opened, and she turned to see the same two werewolves from earlier return. She lowered the knife. “How is he?”

One of them motioned for her to come closer. They spoke in hushed tones. Andy tried to decipher what they were saying, but the flowing blood from his latest wound hindered his vision. From the expression on their faces, Craig was having a bad reaction from his blood. Good; serves the bastard right.

Lily’s voice rose over the sound of the fans. “I’m finished playing with him. You two can have your fun, but remember to keep him alive until Craig says otherwise. Dump him in the holding cell when you’re done with him.”

“And what about the other one?”

She pursed her lips together. “I’m sure we’ll think of something to do with her next. She’s expendable, but let’s not kill her yet.”

His heart pounded as he imagined what they were planning to do to Em. Could he live with himself if they killed her?

The two werewolves shared a grin and approached him. After the fifth time one of their fists struck his face, he lost consciousness.

Chapter Eight

The sound of heavy footsteps followed by the crash of a limp body in front of her pulled Em from the semi-conscious state she'd lingered in most of the day. The slamming door made her head throb. Her right arm hung at an odd angle as if someone had pulled it out of its socket and only the skin kept it attached to her body. She flexed her fingers, trying to wake them up. At least she'd managed to slip out of the sorry excuse for a knot job around her wrists earlier this morning before the pain became unbearable.

She tried to roll over, but the slight movement sent waves of agony through her body. She moaned.

Another person shuffled towards her. "Em?"

Relief filled her when she heard the familiar voice, and she fought back her tears. He was still alive. "Andy?"

He inched closer to her until she saw his face looming in front of her. Bloody hell, he looked like shite. Bruises covered both eyes, and blood seeped from the cuts on his forehead and cheekbone. But underneath all the injuries, she still glimpsed the handsome man that made her heart skip a beat.

"Don't worry, Em, I'll get you out this mess. I promise."

She laughed, but it sounded bitter to her own ears. "And who's going to rescue you?"

He sighed. "Good question. Damn, I wish I had my cell phone. If I could call Miguel and tell him what happened..."

"Unless they took it from me, I should have your mobile in my pocket."

"Why do you have it?"

"Because I called Miguel when the werewolves attacked."

"You never cease to amaze me, Em."

She gritted her teeth and slowly raised herself to a sitting position. The pain made her vision swim, and her stomach churned. She waited for the nausea to ebb before she dug a hand into her pocket. The phone was still there. "Do you want to speak to him, or should I?"

"Can you hold it up to my ear? I'm a little tied up at the moment."

She looked behind him and saw the plastic cords that cut into his wrists. Why had they taken the time to tie him up thoroughly and do a complete bodge job on her? The throbbing in her shoulder caught her attention; maybe they thought her injury negated the need to restrain her. But she couldn't believe they hadn't stripped searched her. Right now, these werewolves appeared to be a pack of dimwits which she gladly used to her advantage. "Fine, but after you get off the mobile, I'll try to undo that knot." She highlighted the last number dialed and hit send. Then she held it near his ear.

A few seconds passed before he said, "Miguel, it's Andy."

She didn't understand what Miguel said in response, but it was loud enough to hear through the speaker and cause Andy to wince from the volume.

"*Pare el hablar y escuche mí por un momento.*" He rolled his eyes up to Em and continued the rest of the conversation in rapid Spanish.

She frowned. Obviously, he didn't want her to know everything going on. She was beginning to get brassed off with him. Part of her wanted to yank the mobile away and

snap it shut, but she knew it was more important to get help now. She could wait a few more minutes to find out what he was telling his fellow shifter.

He stopped speaking and nodded to her. She closed the phone and tucked it back into her pocket. "Thanks. He's on his way with the rest of the pride."

"Do you mind sharing with me what you told him?"

His muscles tensed, and he avoided her gaze. "I just told him what happened."

"Bollocks. If that was the case, you wouldn't have gone through the trouble to speak to him in a language you know I don't understand." She hooked her finger through the cords on his wrists and tugged on them. He sucked in a breath through his teeth. Fresh pain pulsed through her shoulder, but she felt a twinge of satisfaction knowing he was in pain, too. "If you want me to untie you, you need to stop shutting me out. I'm a shifter, too, you know."

"Please believe me, Em; I'm doing my best to protect you."

"But you want me to trust you when you don't trust me?"

"Shit. Why are you being so stubborn?"

"Because we're partners, dammit." She tugged on the cords again and found the knot. This was going to be a pain in the arse to untie with one hand. "We shouldn't keep secrets from each other."

He remained silent for several moments while she worked on the knot. Finally, he said, "They threatened to hurt you in order to get me to tell them what Miguel was planning."

She froze. "And what did you say to that?"

"I told them you meant nothing to me, but they saw through that lie. I'm just hoping Miguel will arrive before I have to make a choice between you and the rest of the pride because I wouldn't be able to show my face around them again if I had to make that decision now."

Warmth flooded her cheeks. "You'd betray your pride for me?"

He lifted his eyes and stared at her face. "Shit, Em, I'm already getting eaten alive by guilt for what they've done to you so far. If you died—"

She leaned forward and silenced him with a kiss. The joy she felt from his lips blacked out any pain from the movement, but tears still welled up in the corners of her eyes. Her heart pounded with her love for him. When the kiss ended, she said, "Remember, I'm not as helpless as you think I am."

He winced when his grin pulled on his busted lip. "Yeah, I noticed that when you killed five of those smelly dogs and bloodied Craig's nose."

She chuckled. "I enjoyed that. Now turn around so I can suss out this knot."

After another five minutes, the cords began to loosen. He wiggled his hands free and sat up. "I'm glad they were stupid enough to leave you united. Thank you."

Her stomach clenched when she noticed the gaping wound on his stomach. "What did they do to you, Andy?"

He followed her gaze and covered his stomach. "Lily had little fun with a knife. Don't worry, I'll be fine in an hour or two." He started untying the cords around his ankles. "As soon as I'm free of these, I'm planning on shifting and pouncing on the next person who come in here. When I do, you get the hell out here; understood?"

"And how do you suggest I do that with a dislocated shoulder?"

He paused and stared at the wall. "Good point." He licked his lips. "I suppose I can

always try to pop it back into place for you.”

“You’ve gone completely barmy if you think I’d allow that.”

“Come on, Em, it’s not the first time I’ve dealt with something like this.” He leaned towards her, but she retreated.

She cradled her injured arm closer to her body. “But you’re not a doctor. I want someone with a bit of experience yanking on my arm, if you don’t mind. Some pain meds would be brilliant, too.”

“Weren’t you the one telling me a few minutes ago that we need to trust each other? Funny how you change your tune when the tables are turned.”

She drew in a ragged breath. Why did he have to throw her words back in her face like that? “How many times have you done this?”

“The truth?”

She nodded.

“Never, but I’ve seen it done at least a dozen times. Miguel’s explained it to me as he did it. I’m feeling pretty confident I can pop it back into place on the first try.” He held out his hand to her.

He was asking a bloody lot from her. She searched his beat-up face and saw nothing that resembled malice there. Only concern for her. She gulped and took his hand. Apprehension chilled her blood like ice water flowing along a glacier. “What do I need to do?”

“Rest your head in my lap and try to relax.”

“Easy for you to say.” She held her arm to her chest as she lay down. Dear God, she hoped she was making the right decision.

He wrapped one hand around her wrist and the other pinned her upper arm to her side. “Relax.”

“I’m trying, but all I can think about how much it’s going to bloody hurt.”

“I promise you it’ll feel better the second I get it back into place.”

She closed her eyes and braced herself for the pain. “Then get on with it.”

He laughed. “I can’t until you relax.” He jiggled her arm, and she screamed when the simple movement ignited every nerve in her shoulder. “Shit, sorry, I was just trying to get you to loosen up.”

She bit her bottom lip and squeezed her eyes tighter. “This is why I wanted pain meds.”

Andy waited a few seconds for her pain to wane. “What can I do to get you to relax?”

“No fucking idea.”

His breath warmer her cheek as he leaned closer to her. “I could never hurt you, Em. I love you too much.”

She forgot to breathe, and her body went limp. If she had been standing, she would have sworn her knees would have buckled under her. Thank God she was lying down when Andy told her he loved her. Her head swirled as she replayed his words over and over again in her mind.

But a sudden motion along her injured arm jarred those pleasant thoughts from her head. With her elbow bent and her upper arm pinned to her side, Andy rotated her right arm out until her shoulder popped back into place. She cried out when she felt the clunk, but the pain quickly vanished when he returned her arm to her chest and stroked her

cheek.

“You’re crying.” His thumb brushed the wetness from her eyes.

She opened her eyes and saw him smiling down at her. Her left hand fumbled for his hand and clasped it like a lifeline when she found it. “You love me?”

His smile widened. “Do you doubt me?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s just I never thought I’d hear you say those words to me.” She lifted her head to sit up, and the room spun.

He leaned her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. “Careful.”

The fabric of his t-shirt bunched up under his fingers. He smelled of blood and sweat, so different than he normally did, but underneath it all, he was still her Andy. His heart still sounded the same under her ear, and his touch still filled her with warmth. She knew would he always stand by her side, and she couldn’t imagine growing old with anyone else. “I love you, too.”

His body stiffened, and she heard his heart skip a beat before tightened his embrace. “Now I’m the one in shock.”

“Why are you so surprised? I wouldn’t have chased you for so long if my feelings were only lukewarm for you.”

His mouth covered hers, and his kiss told her how much he hungered for her, how much he needed her. And she held nothing back when she kissed him in return. Their dancing tongues ignited a fire within her, and for a moment, she forgot her pain and where they were. Andy consumed her senses, and her sex throbbed with desire at the memory of his love-making. She wanted him to fill her—physically and emotionally.

Keys jangled outside the warehouse, pulling them from the temporary escape of their kiss. Andy broke away from her and frantically tugged at the cords around his ankle. The bolt slid out of the lock, and he cursed under his breath. “I need more time.”

“Then I’ll give it to you.” She only feared losing him, not the person on the other side of the door. Her legs wobbled when she stood. She stiffened them, regained her balance, and crept towards the door. Her right arm wouldn’t be good for much, but she still could use the rest of her body.

“Em, what the hell are you doing?” Andy whispered.

“Buying you a few more seconds.”

The door opened, and the toe of her shoe connected with the chin of the intruder.

Chapter Nine

What the hell is she thinking?, Andy's mind shouted. Em crouched by the door, and as soon as a body silhouetted the doorway, she kicked her leg and caught the person on the chin. That woman was completely *loca*, but he loved her for it. She was giving him the extra seconds he needed to untie his ankles.

Shouts shattered the silence, and the body fell back into the person behind him. Em slammed the heavy metal door shut and pressed with what little weight possessed against it to keep it shut. "A little help would be appreciated," she grunted.

"I'm trying." His fingers pulled at the knot, but it wouldn't budge.

Something rammed the door and knocked Em off her feet. She fell forward and slid on the cement. Andy's pulse quickened; with his ankles bound it would be useless for him to shift now. The door opened wide, and the sunlight blinded him.

"Grab her," a male voice said.

Em cried out, and the sounds of bone hitting flesh filtered to his ears, but he couldn't see what was going on.

"She's just a girl," the voice said.

Another voice yelped. "Fuckin' hell, she just bit me."

"Keep an eye on the cat."

Her scream chilled his blood. He crawled toward them as best he could with bound ankles, but when a bullet ricochet off the ground in front of him, he fell to the side. The clang of the door slamming shut echoed through the stillness. They had taken her and left him alone in the dim, empty warehouse.

*

The bastard knew exactly what he was doing when he plunged his thumb into the groove of her injured shoulder. A scream escaped from her lips, and nausea boiled in her stomach from the pain. Why hadn't Andy untied that knot yet?

The other werewolf squeezed the trigger of his gun, and Em froze when she heard the shot. *Oh, please don't let them have shot him again.*

They dragged her out the warehouse by her hair and closed the door behind them. One of them backhanded her; the blow sent her sprawling. "Why did you have to cause so much trouble, you stupid bitch?"

She spit the blood from her mouth and ran her tongue over the sensitive cracked tooth. If her arm wasn't total crap, she would have shifted and flown away by now.

"What? You expected this to be easy."

He leveled the gun at her head. "I swear to God—"

"Stop it, Cory." The other stuffed his body between her and the gun. "Not until Craig says we can." He turned to her and grinned. "Then I want a piece of her, too."

"How about a piece of this, you wankers?" She swept her leg behind them and managed to knock the one called Cory off his feet. His gun fired, but unfortunately, the bullet didn't find his mate. She had barely gotten to her feet when they grabbed her again and yanked on her injured arm. Her knees collapsed, and black spots floated in front of her.

The other one pulled her to feet and wrapped his fingers around her hair, pulling it

until he forced her to look up at his face. He pressed the barrel of his gun against her temple. The stench of rotting meat assaulted her nose. "I'm going to enjoy making you scream later on; that is, if there's anything left of you when Craig's finished." He pushed her forward. "Now move, or I'll have to regretfully inform our leader that an accidental misfire planted a bullet in your brain."

They led her up the front porch of the large white bungalow across the garden from the warehouse. Inside, the blast of the air conditioner cooled her sweaty skin, but that was the only comfort she found there. The gun pressed against her back between her shoulder blades, and her captors forced her up the stairs to a closed door at the end of the hallway.

Cory knocked on the door. When a voice answered on the other side, he opened it. "We brought her like you asked."

Craig sat on the edge of the bed with his head down and gripped the sides of the mattress. Sweat dripped down his face, despite the cool temperature of the room. He looked like he was having a heart attack. "I heard shots."

Cory shoved her forward. "She gave us a bit of trouble."

Craig laughed like an old man twice his age. "I'm not surprised."

"Sir, maybe we should stay here in case she tries anything."

He raised his eyes, and terror clutched her heart. Bright yellow orbs stared at her now instead of the icy blue color they were before. "I think I can handle her now."

"We'll be in the hallway if you need us."

The door clicked behind her, leaving her alone with the leader of the werewolves. She swallowed her fear and pasted a façade of boredom on her face. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to thank you for breaking my nose earlier today."

"Too bad I didn't break more than that."

He chuckled again, sending shivers down her spine. "I can see why Andy chose you for his mate. You're mighty spirited, ain't you?" He stood and stalked her; those glowing yellow eyes never left her face. "I always thought English women were shy and demure."

"Shows what a stupid git you are, then."

"You know, we aren't so very different." He ran one finger down her neck. "We're both part animal."

She wrinkled her nose from the odor that permeated from his skin. "Except you're a smelly dog subject to the whims of the moon, and I'm a bit more refined than that."

He tightened his fingers around her throat. "Perhaps I should teach you a lesson you won't forget. Then, after I'm done with you, maybe Andy will be more willing to talk."

His hand pressed against her windpipe, depriving her air. She clawed at his arm, but he pressed deeper into the soft flesh of her neck. Her lungs burned from the need to breathe. Just as her muscles began to twitch, he loosened his grip and hurled her towards the bed.

She coughed and sucked in the sweet, cool air. "You think that by hurting me, you'll get to Andy? Well, here's a clue for you—we're just shagging each other for fun. You'll gain nothing by threatening me."

"It funny how I hear the same lies from the two of you." He pinned her to the mattress. "I've always been a man of science, you know. For years, I've wondered how you shifters can be born with the ability to change into your animal forms at will, but we werewolves couldn't. We can't even become what we are until we're bitten by another,

and even then, we're weaklings until we get our first kill. So I started researching the differences between us.

"Wes was my assistant. A few months ago, he told me he had unlocked the secret to being able to change into our wolf forms at will, but he refused to tell me how. He laughed in my face when I demanded he share that information with me. But I found his notes last night. It seems if we mingle the blood of a true shifter with ours, we gain some of your powers."

Her heart pounded in her chest. Bloody hell, this couldn't be true. But she'd witnessed it last night when Wes attacked her as a wolf.

"But it seems Wes' plans were far more ambitious than I first thought. His next step was to see if he could breed with a shifter. Our women become sterile once they're bitten, but female shifters like you can bear children." He stroked her cheek, and his eyes lowered to her body. Revulsion seeped into her every pore from his touch. "You're very rare; do you know that? I've only seen one other female shifter, and she wasn't nearly as pretty as you are."

"You're completely nutters if you think I'd let you try that experiment." Her hand traced the outline of Andy's mobile in her pocket. Miguel needed to know about Craig's plans.

He snatched her hand. "What are you up to?" He pulled the mobile from her pocket and flipped it open. The last number called illuminated the screen. "Very clever, calling Miguel and giving him updates. I should have checked your pockets."

He hit the send button and paced the room. In a smooth voice, he said, "Good afternoon, Miguel. Craig here. Sorry, but Andy can't come to the phone right now; he's too busy spilling his guts about the inner workings of your pride. Don't even bother coming to rescue him or his little blond *chica*. We'll be waiting for you if you do."

Fuck! While he talked on the phone, she searched the bedroom for a weapon, preferably a silver one. Besides a wooden chair and lamp, the only thing she saw was an old cavalry sword mounted on the wall across from her. It would have to do, though. She had to get out of here before he decided to carry out his experiment. It was either attack him or jump out the window, shift, and take her chances on trying to fly with her injured shoulder. Anything but allowing him to rape her.

Craig snapped the phone closed and opened the door. "Be on the lookout for Miguel and the rest of the shifters," he told the men in the hall. "I have a sneaking suspicion they're hiding in the brush. Take care of them, and don't disturb me." He closed the door and turned the lock.

Em crossed the room while his back was turned to her and grabbed the hilt of the sword. The wood cracked on her first tug, and Craig whirled around. The second tug freed it from the mounting. "Back off," she warned and pointed the blade towards him.

"You want to play rough, huh? Very well, my dear." Grey fur sprouted from his skin, and the elongation of his nose to form a snout distorted his wolfish grin.

Her pulse pounded in her ears. He's able to shift at will, too. She lunged forward and swung the sword, but he fell on all fours. Her attack did nothing more than fan the air and throw her off balance. And Craig saw that.

The large wolf leaped at her and hit her squarely in the chest. The force of it knocked her to the floor. The sword clattered across the floor, out of her reach. Her attention focused on keeping the snapping jaws away from her face and neck. Drool dripped from

his mouth, and his snarls grew louder as he inched closer to her.

Noises from outside filtered in through the windows, and the first gunshot distracted him long enough for her move her leg under his belly and kick him off her. She crawled towards the sword. Her fingertips brushed the hilt. Then pain burned in her thigh as if someone had driven a dozen hot pokers into her skin.

The wolf sank his teeth into her flesh and dragged her further away from the only weapon she had. He crouched over her and drew back his blood-smeared lips. The late afternoon sunlight glinted off his yellow fangs. When she met his gaze, terror paralyzed her.

Craig's features morphed back into a human's. "You wanted to play rough, and I was happy to oblige. If you want to continue this game, let me know. It turns me on."

Her thigh throbbed from the bite, and blood soaked the denim, leaving stains on the hardwood floor. Tears stung her eyes. Her battered body couldn't do what she needed it to do, but that didn't mean she had to surrender. "Bugger off," she replied through gritted teeth.

"I'm going to enjoy fucking you." His tongue licked the hollows of her neck.

Her skin crawled. "I'm certainly not going to enjoy it." She slapped his face with as much strength as she could muster, aiming for his partially healed nose, and shimmied closer to the sword.

His expression darkened, and she cried out when he pressed her injured shoulder into the floor. "Play nice, or else I'll make Andy watch."

"In case you haven't been listening, it sounds like Miguel and the rest of the pride have arrived." Screams mingled with the gunshots below. She hoped someone had freed Andy from the warehouse and that some of those screams resulted from his attacks. "They'll be up here any minute now."

"That's what you hope. I can see the fear in your eyes. They've left you all alone with me."

Her fist slammed into his jaw. His head jerked to the side, and blood splattered the walls. Em shook the soreness from her knuckles. I probably broke my bloody hand.

"Do I need to tie you to the bed?" He reached for her wrist, but she swung it out of his reach.

Her fingers grazed the hilt, and she extended her left arm until she grabbed it. Without a moment's hesitation, she whipped it around and plunged the blade into Craig's chest.

His eyes bugged, and the air whooshed from his lungs. Every muscle in his body stiffened. "You think a steel blade will kill me?" he rasped. "Only silver can harm me."

Em slid out from under him. "But I bet this bloody hurts."

He fell back against the footboard of the bed. The hilt slipped out her blood-slicked hands, and he wrapped his own around it. "You're going to pay for this, bitch."

She cradled her injured arm and retreated towards the door. He would have the sword out before she knew it. Only silver could harm him. She clutched her locket in her palm, and the cool metal pressed into her skin. Her heart pounded as she wondered how she could use it as weapon. She yanked on the chain and broke it. *Forgive me, mum.*

The tip of the blade had barely cleared his wound when she pounced on him and knocked the sword away. "Silver hurts, eh?" She coiled the chain around her fingers and thrust them into his wound. "How about this?"

He screamed, and surge of satisfaction pulsed through her veins. She pushed the silver chain deeper into the wound, between his ribs, past the squishy flesh, until she felt the throb of his heart next to her fingertips.

Chapter Ten

Andy paced in front of the door in the warehouse. It was the only way in or out, and the minute they opened it, blood would be shed. Then he was going to find Em. His mind imagined the worst. What was Craig doing to her now?

A cougar yowled nearby, and the werewolves fired shots in the direction it came from. The pride had arrived.

He grinned as he shifted. He wanted to be ready to attack when they freed him.

Andy, where are you? Miguel's voice filled his mind, a sign they were close enough to exchange thoughts.

In the warehouse. Craig has Em.

Shit, Eric's voice interjected. *Who should we get first?*

Me. I want to be the one to rip Craig's throat out.

Miguel laughed. *You heard our brother. Be careful, but show them no mercy.*

The voices grew silent, but Andy could sense the pride's fear and exhilaration when they attacked the werewolves. Snarls and gunfire mingled to create chaos outside. His mouth watered at the thought of tasting blood. He crouched by the door and waited for his turn to join the hunt.

The lock rattled against the metal door. "Give me the gun," a familiar voice said on the other side. Patrick, one of the leopards. "Stand back, Andy." Three shots rang out in rapid succession, followed by the thump of the lock hitting the ground. The door opened, and he was free.

* * * *

Em trembled and removed her hand from the wound. Craig's heart had seized around her fingers when she pushed the chain into it, and the light faded from his eyes. Sweet Mother Mary, he was finally dead.

A stray bullet shattered the window, and she ducked to avoid the flying glass. She had to get out of here.

Her steps echoed down the deserted hallway. The guards posted outside Craig's room had joined the battle outside long ago. No one to stop her. She could barely lift her injured leg and left of trail of blood on the hardwood floor behind her. Once she was downstairs, she clutched her arm to her chest and peeked out the window.

Large cats of every variety attacked the werewolves. Leopards, cougars, panthers, jaguars—they all gathered around their prey and ravaged them with their claws and fangs. No wolves battled them, and she felt some relief knowing that only Wes and Craig had gained the ability to shift outside the full moon. The werewolves fired their guns at anything that moved. Blood soaked the ground, but very little of it seemed to be from the cats.

And then she spotted him. How she knew that particular jaguar was Andy, she didn't wasn't quite sure, but she recognized the grace and power of his movements. The pattern of the rosettes on his fur marked him like a unique tattoo. He sank his teeth into the calf of one of the werewolves and yanked him to the ground before going for the next one.

Her heart pounded from watching him, and the urge to kill consumed her senses.

Em opened the door and limped towards the lone gunman by the old Ute in the middle of the yard. His yellow eyes gave him away as a shifter, as did the silver bullets that gleamed in the loaded 9mm clips. "You care if take over?" she asked.

He stared at her in confusion for a few seconds after they both ducked behind the bonnet to avoid getting shot. Then he grinned. "You must be Em," he replied. "I'm Eric."

She nodded and took the gun from his hand. "Let me play with that."

"Just aim for their hearts, if you can."

"What do you mean, if I can?" She leaned over the bonnet and aimed at one of the werewolves. A shred of doubt filled her about using her left hand to pull the trigger, but the target collapsed when she squeezed it. "I could have been a sniper if I wanted."

"No arguments from me." He shifted into a cougar and ran out into the fray.

Using the bonnet to steady her arm, she aimed at the next one. The shifters slowed her from picking off the werewolves as quickly as she would have liked, but she didn't want to accidentally hit one of them. She waited patiently until she had a clean shot and then fired.

Her accuracy drew the attention of her enemies, and a hail of gunfire descended upon her. Bullets pinged against the Ute, creating dings in the metal. She crouched behind the front tire and waited for it to stop. "Might as well exchange the clip," she muttered.

A figure appeared out of the corner of her eye, and she pointed the gun at it. Golden eyes glowed from the darkness. The shadow morphed from a large cat to a human as it ran towards her. "Em," Andy said and wrapped his arms around her.

She closed her eyes and clung to his warm body. "Thank God you're alright."

"Come on; let's get you out of here." He grabbed her waist and pulled her towards the shadows.

The smell of petrol wafted up from the ground, and the hair stood up on the back of her neck. Something felt very wrong about this. They managed to get ten feet from the Ute before the fireball from the explosion knocked her on her face.

*

Heat seared his back a split second before something whacked the back of his head and sent him sprawling. He opened his eyes and fought off the black curtains on the edge of his vision that threatened to sink him into unconsciousness. Em lay several feet away from him; the slow way she came to her knees told him she was alive but just as stunned as him.

Flames engulfed the old pick-up behind them. One of the bullets must have hit the gas tank. He lifted his head. The ground spun in circles in front of him, and his stomach rolled in nausea.

"Look at what I have here," Lily's voice said from the darkness in front of them. She came into the light with a 9mm aimed at Em's head. Blood caked her clothing, and the scratches on her face made her snarl seem even more sinister. "A kitty and his girlfriend. Where have I seen this before? Oh, yes, five years ago. At least this time, you get to say your goodbyes before I kill your mate, Andy."

Time stood still. She had killed Heather, and now she was going to shoot Em. His heart forgot to beat as the muscles in her finger flexed around the trigger. Behind her, a shadow moved. The large paws of another jaguar collided with her shoulder, and sparks spewed from the barrel of the gun. Em's body lurched backwards.

“No!” He stumbled towards her. Blood splattered across the orange t-shirt, but her chest still moved up and down with each breath. Her wide eyes stared up at him in fear and pain.

He picked up Em’s gun from the ground and pointed it at Lily. “Move, Miguel.” The jaguar dug his claws in her stomach before it leaped off of her. He felt no remorse as he emptied the clip of silver bullets into her chest.

His body shook, and his arm collapsed under the weight of the gun. Silence surrounded him. The battle had ended. The leaders of the werewolf pack were dead. And Em was hurt.

Miguel had already shifted and was tending to Em by the time he returned to her side. “Give me your shirt, Andy.”

He removed the tattered rag that it resembled and gave to his friend.

Blood squirted out from the wound on the right side of her chest. Miguel covered it with the shirt and pressed Andy’s hand over it. “Apply as much pressure as you can; we need to slow the bleeding down. I’ll go grab my kit. I think I have some Quick Clot in there.” He flipped open his cell phone and hurried away from them.

“Andy?” Her voice trembled when she said his name. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Yes, Em?” His own eyes stung, but he refused to let her see him cry. He brushed the hair from her face.

“I’m scared.”

Her confession tore at his heart like a knife. He didn’t want to admit he was scared, too. This played out like his worst nightmare. It had taken him five years to stop mourning Heather, but Em’s death would destroy him.

Blood soaked through the material of his shirt, and he pressed it harder against her chest. He needed to be strong for her. “Don’t worry, Em. Miguel’s an ER doc. He’s gonna patch you up until we get you to the hospital. Just hold on. Please. For me.”

Her icy fingers squeezed his hand. “I’ll try.”

A heavy tool box kicked up the dust next to him. “Move aside, Andy. Eric and I will take over from here. I’ve already called an ambulance.”

Eric shrugged off a back-pack and pulled a bag of IV fluids from it. “I’ll get these going.”

“Good. I want at least an eighteen gauge needle, and then slam the fluids into her. We need to keep her pressure up. She’s going into shock.”

Panic threatened to strangle Andy as he stood back and watched his friend work over the woman he loved. “What’s going on, Miguel?”

“I think the bullet hit an artery.” He cut away her shirt and packed gauze into the gaping hole in her chest. “I’m hoping the Quick Clot will slow it down until we get her to Parkland. I’ve already contacted the cardiothoracic surgeon on call. He’ll be waiting for us when we arrive.” Then he added under his breath, “If she makes it.”

Numbness consumed him, and the words replayed over and over again in his mind. If she makes it. No, I can’t lose her, his mind screamed. She was his mate in every sense of the world; she filled the void inside of him, and he would be left a hollow shell without her.

“Let’s give them some room, Andy,” Patrick said. His grip tightened on Andy’s shoulders and pulled him away from the scene. “Miguel and Eric know what they’re

doing. Besides, she's a shifter like us; she'll heal quickly once they get her taken care of."

The clouds burned bright above the setting sun, and the other shifters piled the bodies of the dead werewolves into the warehouse. There would be no evidence of the massive slaughter that just occurred when the police arrived. They knew this game all too well. But it still didn't ease the pain in his heart. Why did he have to drag Em into this? If she died...

He sank onto the ground and buried his head in his knees. Hot tears streaked down his face. Please God, get her through this, he prayed. Don't take her away without giving me a chance to make this up to her.

The wail of sirens pierced the gloom, and red lights flashed from the road in front of them. The ambulance had arrived.

Chapter Eleven

Mumbled words floated through Em's dreams. She strained harder to hear them. The rich timber of Andy's voice flooded her body with warmth once she recognized it. He was somewhere near her.

The words slowly became clearer. "...just turned off the propofol, so she should be coming out of it any minute now."

A warm hand covered hers and squeezed it. "Thanks, Miguel. I can't wait to see her awake after the last three days."

Three days? Rubbish. I just closed my eyes for a few minutes.

"I think you're about to have your wish," Miguel replied.

A pair of lips brushed against her cheek. "Em? Can you hear me?"

Of course I can hear you.

"Open your eyes, Em, and look at me."

The glaring lights overhead made her wish she hadn't. She winced and tried to cover her eyes, but a tangled mess of tubes and cords surrounded her like a spider's web.

"Let me turn off the lights." A switch clicked. "Now you can open your eyes."

Andy's face swam above hers, and it took her eyes a few seconds to focus in the dim room. "Much better," she murmured. She wished she could wake up every morning looking into his face. But why was Miguel there?

"Good." Andy kissed her cheek again. "I've been worried sick about you."

"Worried sick would be an understatement." Miguel laughed. "I had to send him home for a nap and a shower earlier this morning. He hasn't left your side since you came out of the OR Saturday night."

She bunched her brows together. "OR?" Her voice sounded more hoarse than normal. None of this made sense. "Where am I?" She tried to sit, but the tubes tied her to bed.

"Take it easy, Em. You're in the ICU."

"Well, get me the bloody hell out of here, Andy." She tugged on the tubes like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum.

Miguel approached the other side of the bed and helped Andy restrain her arms and legs. "They just took you off the vent less than an hour ago, Em. You're going to be here at least overnight."

"I want to go home."

Andy laughed. "I told you she was stubborn."

"Yeah, she'll fit in well with the rest of us."

Their hands tightened around her limbs. "Play nice, Em, or they'll never let you out of here," Andy murmured in her ear. "You'll be home in a few days, and once you're healed up, I'm going to do all sorts of naughty things to you."

"And on that note, I think I'll leave you two alone. Take it easy, Em."

She waited until Miguel disappeared past the glass wall before she asked, "What happened?"

He pulled away and frowned. "What do you remember?"

Memories from that night trickled into her mind. "I was behind the Ute with you,

then it exploded.” Like a flash-flood, every detail of that night filled her consciousness. “She shot me.”

Machines beeped all around her as her pulse accelerated. She remembered the burning pain from the bullet piercing her chest. The fear in Andy’s face as she told her to hold on. Then a strange feeling of weightlessness.

He stroked her cheeks and made soothing noises to calm her. “That’s right. You lost a lot of blood. Thank God Miguel got it under control until the surgeon could fix the damage. Even then, you still were on the vent, and they pumped about three or four units of blood into you.”

She took a deep breath, and pain shot out in every direction underneath the thick bandages on her chest. “That bad?”

He nodded. Her heart pounded again, but not from panic this time. The love in his face shone as his thumb brushed against her lips. “I almost lost you the other night. I promise you, I’ll make it up to you, even if I have to spend the rest of my life showing you how much you mean to me.”

“No more refusing me?”

“I don’t think I could now I that I know what I’d be missing.” He placed one more kiss on her forehead and reached for a rucksack. “By the way, work thinks you were mugged Saturday night, presumably by someone who wanted revenge because you put them away. The dangers of a cop’s life,” he added with a roll of his eyes. “I volunteered to take a few days off to take care of you.” He held out an unopened packet of her green contacts.

“Cheers.” She waited until the slow motor of the bed raised her to a sitting position to put them in. “Do I look like my old self again?”

“To everyone else, maybe. But I’ll never forget the way your golden eyes glowed when I made love to you. It’s something I want to keep all to myself.” His lips caressed hers, and his kiss, although chaste, left no doubt in her mind about his feelings about her.

Heat flooded her skin, and a dull ache formed in her lower abdomen. What was wrong with her? She had been shot, had almost died, and all she could think about was how wonderful it would be to have a hump with him. The monitors started beeping again, and he pulled away.

“I suppose we should stop before they call a code on you.”

She smiled. “Now you have some idea of what you’ve been doing to me for the last four years.”

A nurse poked her head into the room. “I heard the alarms going off; is everything okay in here?”

“Everything is perfect,” she replied. Andy loved her, and she couldn’t ask for more.

“Alright.” The nurse started to leave but added, “What pretty green eyes you have.”

Em looked up into Andy’s deep golden eyes and grinned. It would be their secret.

The End

About the Author:

Growing up in small town Alabama, story-telling became a natural way for me to

pass the time and keep my two younger sisters entertained. Of course, that also means I'm inclined to suffer some of the same maladies of many southern writers which may include overuse of simile and metaphor, exaggeration, melodramatic writing style, and the ever-popular long-winded sentence.

I currently live in Western Washington with my husband and maintain my alter ego of mild-mannered physician by day while I continue to pursue writing on nights and weekends. I refer to it as "therapy".

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