

The book cover features a close-up photograph of a person's bare, muscular torso. The person's hands are placed on their own chest and abdomen. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows. The text 'Changeling Press' is at the top, and the title 'wild thing' and author 'Lena Austin' are in a stylized, glowing orange font at the bottom.

Changeling Press

wild thing

Lena Austin

Wild Thing

Lena Austin

All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2009 Lena Austin

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this or any copyrighted work is illegal. File sharing is an International crime, prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Border Patrol, Division of Cyber Crimes, in partnership with Interpol. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is punishable by seizure of computers, up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000 per reported instance.

ISBN: 978-1-60521-273-9
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Katriena Knights
Cover Artist: Bryan Keller

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Wild Thing

Lena Austin

When Dr. Lee Porter returns to his old family homestead for some much-needed R&R from the fugue states that have plagued him and ruined his career as a professor of geology, he finds a sick feral man in the barn one cold night, and nurses him back to health. The attraction once Will recovers is mutual, but Will is more feral than Lee thinks.

Will loves his new packmate, even if the poor human can't grasp what being a pack member means. Then, when Will witnesses what really happens during one of Lee's fugues, he knows it's much worse than Lee thinks. He's shifter sick, and must embrace his heritage as a shifter of an unknown type, and learn to live as a Wild Thing. Or he will die... possibly in the jaws of his lover.

Chapter One

The battered Jeep Laredo hit air, and its driver whooped even as he fought for control. His geologist's eye automatically noted and logged the striations in the rocks, most typical of the volcanic nature of the Yellowstone area since the time when T-Rex called this its stomping ground. And now it was all his. Okay, nine acres of it, anyway. Dr. Lee Porter, geologist and paleontologist double-doctorate and stressed professor was going "over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house." His jeep splashed over the narrow ford in the small stream he remembered from his childhood.

Only the tanned and lean lady who'd managed a goat farm for close to fifty years wasn't there anymore. Patricia Porter had died the way she lived -- quietly and with dignity -- last winter. Her beloved goats had been sold either for their meat or to other breeders. Now her farmhouse, barn, pastures and property belonged to her grandson and last living descendent.

The Jeep rounded a large rock, and Lee got his first view of the tidy little farmhouse, neatly fenced pastures full of plants to browse upon, and weathered gray barn. He slammed on the brakes, a bit disconcerted by the isolation and emptiness of the entire farm. After the suburban crowding of Boulder, Lee needed a few minutes to adjust. Sure, now that he was a freelance researcher for the United States Geological Survey, he'd have more time in the field. That didn't mean he took isolation easily, no matter how much he needed it, or how integral it was to his work.

"Banging on rocks and messing with methyl-ethyl-bad-stuff again!" his last lover Brian had accused before he loaded his last box out to his new apartment. Brian was much better at finding lonely gay men to tease into becoming his Sugar Daddy than he was actually holding onto a job. He depended on the shallow nature of the gay culture, which preferred beauty and youth. As long as his handsome face, sleek body, and full

head of hair held out, Brian would not have to work for a living. Lee wished him lots of luck, since Brian's thirtieth birthday was in three months.

"Let him leech off some other sucker, now." Lee grimly let the brake go and stepped on the gas. He needed the peace and isolation. His hands still shook at odd times, even when he was awake instead only after the nightmares of running, running to nowhere.

He'd rented the property out to people who'd wanted a taste of Yellowstone until now. The key opened the door and Lee lugged in his suitcases and boxes of groceries. By the time he lounged on the back porch with a sandwich and icy cola, the sun was setting in a fiery display with the deliciously cool spring breeze to sweep away the daylight. One star twinkled in the darkening sky.

He ran joyously over the sand, swift and silent, but the vegetation seemed so parched and large. The sand grains were pebbles compared to his usual view, and every leaf seemed nearly as big as his head. His heart raced out of control along with his fear. Where was the house? Where was he? What happened to the world that it had grown enormous? All he could do was run in terror, with the stars twinkling alight one by one overhead...

His soda can clattered to the porch boards and he jerked awake. His plate joined the can on the floor and cracked in two. Just as in his dream, his heart pounded, and the stars were just visible in the dark blue sky.

Lee scrubbed his face with once again shaking hands and dug into his pocket for the tranquilizers his doctor had prescribed for his stress and elevated heartbeat. They didn't help much unless he took enough to turn into a zombie. Three pills would be enough to make him fall into a deep, hopefully dreamless sleep. He begged the pills to give him peace and dry-swallowed them down.

His cell phone beeped softly, announcing Low Battery, while he dumped the remains of his dinner in the kitchen trash. He ignored the Blackberry, even sticking his tongue out childishly when he passed the kitchen table. For once, he was free. He had a signal, but no one who would call. His new bosses at the U.S.G.S. had generously given him two weeks to settle in and clear up the last details of his grandmother's legacy.

After that, he would use his satellite service and laptop computer more than a phone. The phone was just for emergencies, and right now he just didn't give a damn.

He was home, and that was all he cared about. His first happy memories had been in this farmhouse, helping with the goats, chasing chickens, and even standing on the stool to help his grandmother do the dishes after dinner. They had all shared the three bedrooms and two baths as a family. The piano in the corner had tinkled along to country music and laughter, with his father playing the fiddle while his mother tickled the ivories.

Lee wandered over to the piano bench, curious to see if his grandmother's sheet music was still hidden inside. Beneath the worn calico cushion, the lid squeaked when he lifted it. Inside, to his delight, he found all the folders and books he remembered. They were faded and yellow in places, and one corner of the book cover flaked off when he lifted them out. An old photograph slipped out from between the pages and fell to the old rag rug. It showed three people and a small boy, all standing stiffly for the photograph. The small boy was clearly Lee himself, with the snaggle-toothed grin of a six-year-old and tousled dark curls.

His father had the same cocky grin, he noted. He'd never known his father that well. Oliver Porter had lived life hard, and died young. Probably not long after the picture had been taken, which explained why it had been hidden among music no one would ever play again.

Bernadette Byrd-Porter, aka "Birdie" to friends and family, had died beside her beloved husband in a car wreck just after Lee's seventh birthday. Lee reached up to touch his curls, now painfully aware where he had gotten them. He hadn't been able to remember much about how his parents looked. He'd remembered his mother's blue eyes, but not anything else. Even faded in a photograph, those bright eyes shone out.

Vaguely, he noted that his grandmother had also been beautiful in a wild and slightly rugged way. The way she looked at the camera with suspicion fit with his memories of a woman always in motion. Like any gay man, he appreciated beauty and acknowledged it, whether it was a statue, a painting, music, or human. But he'd also

learned that beauty was all too often skin-deep and hiding ugliness. All in all, he'd take ugly. It was more honest. Honesty had been difficult enough to find in the foster care system, with everyone determined to keep you down.

Lee shook off his gloomy mood. Enough wallowing in self-pity. He'd broken free by sheer determination, and he'd do it again with his new job in an old home. He snatched up a book he'd bought in Boulder, *The Outdoor Family Guide to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons*. Since his place was smack dab between the two parks, he'd better know the flora and fauna when he went "banging on rocks" looking for iridium deposits. All manner of animals loved the rocks as much as he did, so it behooved him to know what he might disturb. He tucked the book under his arm and went to bed, using the picture for a bookmark. He'd scan it into his computer later.

* * *

The coyote thrashed in the dirt, the infection raging through his body. He no longer knew or cared about anything but the heat of the fever alternately boiling him alive or freezing the marrow of his bones. His vision narrowed to a single focus -- crawl away to die, somewhere far from his beloved pack. It was the last bit of love he could give his pack-mates while they were out hunting, following the new Pack Leader who'd already given them so much.

Will. His name was Will. It meant resolve and determination. Yes, that was what he had. Throughout the nightmares cause by his fever, Will crawled away, one paw in front of the other. He was surprised when the sun rose, and for a time he slept in the shade, wishing he remembered why he needed to leave. All he knew was the burning in his body, and the pain of the wound that had swollen on his thigh.

Somewhere in the middle of his dreams, the sun set again, and the cool night brought him no relief. Left with no choice but to keep breathing, he only remembered the imperative to go as far from the pack as he could crawl before he died. Since he hadn't died yet, he kept putting one paw in front of the other before dragging his body or actually managing a few minutes of a staggering run. Time had no meaning, only the bright light of the sun followed by the blind darkness of night.

Finally, his nose hit something that smelled both different and familiar. It was a pillar of wood that was not a tree, but something called "fence." Vaguely, he remembered fences. His fevered brain recalled the taste of flesh from animals that had never run free, but the thought of meat only brought him to the awareness of thirst and a wish to find some of the special grass that made a coyote throw up in hopes of feeling better. He could smell water, and it wasn't far.

By the time he shivered in the darkness of night once more, he'd found another wooden thing that held water, dripping from an odd protrusion rising from the ground. "Monkey things," someone he'd known had once said with a growl of contempt. He couldn't recall anything more. No matter. He fought to lift the front part of his body over the edge of the thing that held the water, and found it sweet to drink. Replete, Will lay for a moment beside the monkey thing that held water.

He could have sworn he felt every drop of the water spreading out, replenishing some deep need in the meat of his body. More would be needed, but not now. In fact, he was sure he would live, despite a sincere wish not to do so anymore. The darkness of death was more welcoming than the gloom of loneliness. Will was tired of loneliness.

"Hide in the shadows of the monkey place!" That insistent voice ordered him from the past he couldn't see clearly, and he followed the order blindly. He saw a hole, leading into darkness, that smelled like the delicious meat animals he'd eaten once. He didn't want any right now, and the smell was old. No matter. It was a dark place to hide. He took the offer of shelter.

A loud bang of wood on wood awakened Will from his half-nightmare sleep. Bright light flooded the man-place, but the little stall with straw where Will hid remained dark. He was surprised to find himself in human form. After all, he vaguely remembered crawling in the man-place as a coyote. Finding the straw and dark corner at all had been more luck than skill.

Will wished he had the energy and concentration to change back to coyote. Something -- probably a human -- moved around the structure. The steps were slow

and cautious, with frequent pauses. However, the human's breathing was casual and calm. He was not hunting with bang sticks that made noise and caused death.

Will fought the urge to sleep and the deep lethargy that made thinking so difficult. He was no young pup. He remembered walking among humans. He'd even helped men for coins and papers to use to buy food. Some humans had been kindly when he had been in need. Perhaps...

The footsteps drew gradually closer until a handsome human male with night-dark curls and pale, sand-colored skin approached. His gaze swung around to follow a bright light on the end of a thick, shiny stick. The human's teeth were bared.

Will shivered before he remembered humans bared teeth instead of making happy tails, since they didn't have tails to express their feelings. The light found him and Will winced against the bright glare. He made no attempt to move, since he doubted he could manage more than a feeble thrash from where he lay on his side. He would live, but he was still too weak to move.

The human's eyes widened, but with the light blinding him, Will couldn't discern what color they were. Human eyes had many colors, like the plants in the Meadows, the sky, and the many colors of earth and rocks. Sometimes, they were even earth-colored, like coyotes and other proper animals, proving the existence of a connection to all creatures. Will had always liked to think it was true.

They stared at one another, each thinking their own thoughts. Finally, Will put his head back in the straw, too sick to care. Maybe a bang stick would be better than the pain of his wound and the sickness. He just hoped it was as quick as they said.

"Holy shit!" The human's gaze fell on Will's swollen thigh. "That's a bad infection! Hang on!" He turned and ran out.

Hang on? What was he to hang on to? Or with? Will shut his eyes. Vaguely, he heard more sounds. One he identified easily -- a car door. He liked cars. Riding in cars, faster than he could run, with his head out the window, made him have happy tails.

Running feet thumped on the floor of the man place. The human came back. Maybe with the stick.

Will opened one eye in time to see the human drop a red and white box beside the straw where Will lay. No bang stick? Perversely, Will was disappointed.

The man touched a shiny thing, and the box opened into two parts. A pungent smell emanated from the box. The human rummaged in the box and found a round thing that rattled like a snake.

Will recoiled, in case the snake came out of the tiny round thing. He did not want to die like that, with a bite that made one sicker. That was a bad death. He had had enough of being sick.

"Easy there, pal. Geez, your skin is burning up!" The human put a hand on Will's arm, but he took the hand away and shook it, as if he were in pain. He opened the round container and took out two tiny white things, like little stars or perhaps candy. He presented them to Will in his palm.

Will had liked candy, so he eagerly accepted the gift. Bitterness exploded on Will's tongue. He swallowed crumbs and shut his eyes tightly. His jaw dropped, and his face screwed up.

The human chuckled and patted Will's arm. "Sorry, pal. I don't have any water except in the trough outside the barn. The antibiotics you took will help, I promise. This field kit contains just about anything I need out there when working."

Pal. Twice the human had called him this. Pal was another word for friend. The human was willing to sniff noses with Will? How wonderful! Will returned the kindness with his best attempt at a human smile.

"My name is Lee." The human stuck out his hand. "What's yours?"

Will frowned and tried to remember what the gesture meant. He lifted his hand in front of his own body. "Will. Name is Will."

The human grabbed his hand and moved it up and down before releasing it. "Nice to meet you, Will. Can you tell me how you've gotten in my barn naked and sick?"

How to answer? Will didn't have words for all of the question. He could say some, but he was out of practice. He'd forgotten so many words. "No clothes. Burned. Sick. Wanted to die alone."

Again, Lee patted Will's arm. "You're not going to die. I'm sorry you're homeless because your place burned. They say a lot of folks choose to live as a wild thing after that."

All Will could manage was a nod. He couldn't fight the tired feeling much longer. For the first time in many years, he had a friend to sniff noses -- or the human equivalent -- with him. Maybe living wouldn't be so bad, after all.

Chapter Two

Lee waited until his guest fell asleep. Then he threw the blanket he'd left on the bench outside the breeding stall over Will's naked body. Guiltily, he left Will in the old straw pile and resumed his inspection of the barn. He was torn between taking the naked, dirty and clearly sick man into his home and leaving the poor guy out in the barn. He might be one of the feral people rumored to occasionally come out of the wilderness to steal and kill, as yellow journalists gleefully detailed to sell their stories. Lee took everything they said with a large grain of salt.

So Lee chose the middle of the road. He'd treat the infection with antibiotics, feed Will a meal or two, then let things take their course. The legendary feral people his grandmother had told him about tended to fade back into the wilderness when the whim struck, sometimes never to return. Now that he thought about it, it was likely that Will was one of the feral people, and apparently one of those who rarely made an appearance among their fellow humans.

The fact that Will had long, light brown hair and soft, puppy-brown eyes had nothing to do with Lee's hospitality. Neither did the sleek, long muscles of Will's perfectly toned body. They were just side benefits for Lee.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that, old boy. You might actually begin to convince yourself of it.

His inspection done, Lee went back to the kitchen. He was a fair cook, so he threw together a chicken soup in the slow cooker. That made a better use of the chicken thighs than his original plan. If Will did disappear in the night, Lee could freeze the unneeded portion for another day when he didn't feel like cooking. In the meantime, Lee needed to finish the sad but necessary job of cleaning out some of his

grandmother's things stored in the attic. He could bring a box or two down at a time, breaking the overwhelming chore into manageable tasks.

When he had two boxes down, he placed one on the coffee table and fought with the packing tape seals. Inside, he found a pile of old papers and an accordion file with his name on it. The elastic string broke as soon as he touched it, and inside he found his birth certificate. His foster family had arranged for him to get a duplicate when he went out on his own, but this was clearly the missing family copy. He also found his parents' marriage and death certificates, and all the necessary paperwork that identified a person born in the latter twentieth century. The missing pieces of his early life, spelled out in cold detail. He had few memories of his early years, mostly short vignettes of living there at his grandmother's goat farm.

Lee frowned, and tried to do as his foster mother had recommended a thousand times. "Lee, honey, you may never know what happened before you came here. Most kids have such horrible pasts that their brains just refuse to remember. Why not dwell on the good things, instead of a past that may be best left buried?"

He'd received regular communications from his reclusive grandmother, but understood that she'd been in no position to support and raise a small, active little boy. Even when he'd visited her briefly once after he'd graduated high school, things had been so uncomfortable, he'd breathed a sigh of relief when the time came to go to Boulder and college. The quiet out here had bugged the hell out of an adolescent on the verge of discovering his sexuality, and he'd been anxious to explore. Also, he'd still been resentful he'd been left alone. Now, he understood quite a bit more.

Lee glanced up at the ancient analog clock on the mantle and swore. He'd lost a good six hours going through the paperwork. The soup smelled great, and he bet Will would be awake and in need of sustenance. Lee ran upstairs, grabbed a pair of sweatpants for Will to wear if it got cold at night as it often did, and scooped up a thermos of soup. He was out the door and into the barn before he remembered to slow down so he didn't scare Will.

He shouldn't have concerned himself. Will wasn't there. He'd folded the blanket neatly and laid it aside.

Feeling somewhat disappointed, Lee turned to go and bumped into a solid wall of tanned, masculine chest. Wet, dripping chest that smelled of clean air and meadows. Lee staggered backwards, off balance, until the hands that went with the chest clamped down on his arms and steadied him.

Will, his dark eyes a little amused, waited until Lee had his balance, then released him. He pushed his wet hair out of his face and flipped it over his shoulder impatiently. "Sorry. Needed bath. Stinky Will." He wrinkled his nose. "Candy worked on leg. Feels better."

Lee looked down at the wound and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the rather impressive cock dangling carelessly only a few inches from the healing wound. "Yeah." He forced himself to examine the wound clinically. Clearing his throat, Lee prayed Will wouldn't notice how Lee's own cock hardened at the tanned, lean body and nine-inch-and-maybe-more meat decorating it. "Looks like the antibiotics are doing their job." The wound was much better, and even the swelling was down.

Will let him look with a casual air. "Nice small pond. Was good water." He sniffed the air. "Smell food. You have food for Will? You share?" His dark brown eyes held the same look as a starving puppy, and stronger men than Lee would have broken down.

Smiling to himself, Lee lifted the Thermos. "Of course I'm sharing. I made this myself. Chicken soup."

"Mmm. Love chicken. Is good to eat. Miss chicken." Will's half-closed eyes and sniffing nose clearly indicated the truth of that statement. "What other thing?" He pointed to Lee's left hand.

"Sweatpants. I thought you might get cold if you decide to sleep in the barn tonight." He held up the worn, gray sweatpants, and hoped Will wouldn't be insulted by the offer of something little better than a rag.

Will's jaw dropped. "Clothes? Real clothes? Will's clothes burned long time. Miss warm clothes." He held out a hand. "Hunger okay. Used to hunger. Used to leg pain. Please, clothes?"

Surprised, Lee handed over the pants and swallowed disappointment that Will covered up his nakedness. "Sure, pal. If you would prefer this over the soup, that's okay. We can share the soup in a minute." Lee hung the Thermos on a convenient hook nearby.

"Pal? We? Share? Truth?" Will seemed joyous, and awkwardly pulled on the ragged clothes. "You want to be..." He bit his lip and frowned, as if searching for a word. "Friends? Friends with Will?"

Touched by the lonely eagerness in Will's voice, Lee smiled at his guest. "Sure, I'll be your friend, Will."

"Good. I touch noses with you." Will, at several inches taller than Lee's 5'11", bent down until the end of his long nose rubbed against Lee's shorter one. "I remember some things. Kiss?" His lips brushed against Lee's.

Oh, God. Lee's brain fogged like a San Francisco morning. The sweet innocence of the question made Lee a puddle at the feral man's feet. But such innocence could also get Will killed if he offered a kiss to the wrong person. The logical and moral part of his brain begged him to do the right thing and warn Will, but his body was on auto-pilot and melted like butter in the sun when Will pulled him closer. Still, he managed to choke out what was right. "Some men like kissing other men, some don't."

Will's nose rubbed his again, and moved to sniff his neck. His warm breath tickled Lee's neck and sent sexual shivers down Lee's spine. "You like. I smell Lee."

Pinned up against Will, Lee also noted Will's rock-hard erection was a match for his own. The two cocks seemed to strain toward each other, one through the thin barrier of sweats, the other through Lee's well-worn jeans. "Yes, I do like men. Do you?"

Will's large dark eyes blinked as if he'd never considered the question before. He paused, and Lee could have sworn he saw the synapses flashing. Clearly, the feral man

was no dummy, just sorely lacking the language to express himself. "Like everybody. Love few." He bent to nuzzle Lee's nose again. "Like you lots. Lee pretty man."

Who could think with his pulse hammering in his ear? For a certified genius professor, Lee could barely put two words together at that moment. Not when his body buzzed with need and his brain was occupied with all the wild man-Tarzan fantasies of his book-obsessed youth. He didn't consider himself a "pretty man" *per se*, but a compliment deserved acknowledgment. Lee cleared his throat. "Thank you, Will. You're gorgeous."

"Is go-jaws good thing?" Will nipped at Lee's shoulder, just enough to make Lee shiver in both delight and a tiny thread of fear. Then, the feral man licked where he'd bitten, soothing the tiny sting. "Maybe means tasty, like you?"

If that wasn't an invitation, Lee was dumber than many freshmen away from mama's skirts and rules for the first time. He leaned forward to lick and suck at a firm, lightly furry pectoral muscle and felt it tighten against his lips in response. Still, the teacher in him mustered the strength to give a vocabulary lesson. "Gorgeous means better than pretty. You are better than pretty, and tasty, too."

It was true. Will was a fantasy most gay men would kill to be near, much less touch. His hair had to hang past his shoulder blades when it was combed, and his brown tan would make any of the maple furniture in the farmhouse envious. Not to mention that killer body, honed to fitness by necessity. The ass Lee made bold to stroke was as hard as the rocks a geologist studied. Combine that with the sweet innocence of nature, and...

Lee mentally slapped himself. Nature was not innocent. Nature was a ruthless killer. Humans were natural omnivores, but the feral people were rumored to be pure carnivore. Will had all but confirmed his status as at least an omnivore when he said he remembered and enjoyed chicken.

For all of a few seconds while he relished the taste of pure masculine flesh, Lee wished he had finished that degree in anthropology. Then good sense returned. He was glad he wasn't an anthropologist who'd feel compelled to study Will and his friends

like bugs under a microscope. No, in fact, he felt protective of Will and his people. Despite what they likely did to survive, living like cavemen in the National Park, they were to be admired for taking on a challenge that would kill most humans. Lee reined in his curiosity and vowed to himself that he'd let Will tell him. Later. Much later.

Will lifted his head from Lee's neck. His face was as hopeful as a puppy wanting a red ball. Lee could almost see a tail wag accompanying the look only brown-eyed people could master and use with devastating effect. "Lee says yes with body. Yes?"

Any reservations Lee had melted away under that pleading stare. Hell, if he'd been straight he'd have had a hard time refusing. As it was, Lee's cock was ready to bore a hole through the jeans and maybe through solid rock, like a tunneling machine creating a new mine shaft. "Yes."

Speaking of shafts, Will's shaft now peeked from the top of the sweatpants' waistband. The thick head was incredibly large and purple. "Good. Will mount first? Okay?"

For a moment, Lee's ass puckered and tried to crawl up to his navel in fear of getting that huge head inside itself. That instinctive fear brought Lee to his senses. "One problem, Will." He pointed down to Will's impressive erection. "We need lube to ease your way. I have some in my bedroom."

Will lifted his hands from Lee's body. "I not... um..." It wasn't regret on his face, but fear. Even his tan was a little paler, and he shuddered. He glanced at the wide-open barn doors, and his shoulders hunched down slightly, as if warding off some unseen blow.

In an instant, Lee understood the problem. He reached up to stroke Will's cheek, and incidentally brushed some of the long, silky strands of hair away from the handsome face. "Are you scared to be indoors, Will?"

Looking anywhere but at Lee, Will nodded. "Doors. Locked in. Like traps."

Well, that made sense. Of course he'd be a little claustrophobic. Lee stroked again, marveling at how that action seemed to calm his wild lover. "That's okay, Will. I'll go get it and come back. Will you wait that long?"

The puppy eyes fired up with hope. "Wait? I can wait." He stepped back and dropped his jaw in a semblance of a smile. "Not long?"

"I'll be as fast as I can." Lee turned and ran toward the house, hampered by his own erection and much tighter jeans. Later, he might swear he teleported through the kitchen, into the den and into his bedroom on the first floor. He skidded to a halt in front of the antique dresser, and tossed underwear haphazardly around the room until he found the bottle of lube whimsically called Ass-tro-Glide. Damn manufacturers and their sense of humor. Then he caught a glimpse of the warning on the label: Do not use with animals.

What the hell was he doing? Lee looked in the mirror. "Oh, just risking my life. That's all." He dashed out of the room, humming the old song by the Troggs, "Wild Thing." Will was certainly making Lee's heart sing.

Chapter Three

Will stood virtually where Lee had left him, but his attention was riveted on the Thermos in his hands. His expression alternated between frustration and puzzlement. "How you get this to give chicken? Where is chicken?"

Lee swallowed a chuckle. Of course the smooth and seemingly seamless appearance of the thermos would confound Will. He'd have such fun showing Will civilization. Lee put down the lube on the shelf just inside the stall and took the container from Will. "Like this."

Will studied Lee's hands intently, watching how the bowl portion twisted off to reveal another top that had to be unscrewed and removed. He sniffed with relish at the scent that wafted from the opened container. His stomach rumbled loudly in the quiet barn.

Lee poured some of the chicken soup into the bowl and handed it to Will. Guilt washed over him for letting Will get so hungry. The poor guy probably hadn't eaten in days. "Here. Eat. I'm sorry, pal. I didn't think about how you've probably been without food for a day or two at least."

Will shrugged with complete indifference, but raised the bowl to his face. "Pack brought Will some food when enough."

Lee took that to mean his friends had brought food when there was enough to share. The implication was that Will had been hungry so much of his life that he was more used to deprivation than satiation. Perhaps that explained why Will was so very lean. There wasn't an ounce of spare flesh on the body because there had never been an opportunity to be fat.

Of all the things they had in common, it would have to be hunger. Even now, Lee remembered the painful cramps of a belly that had been empty too long when he lived

in a foster home that had abused the system. Most of his foster parents had been genuinely loving people, but that one case still haunted him. He also remembered the first time he'd been allowed to fill his belly after social services had removed him. Because that memory of throwing up a perfectly good meal had horrified him, Lee reached over and gently touched Will's arm. "Be careful. If you eat too much, you'll get sick again."

Will eyed him over the bowl rim and obediently took the Thermos from his lips. Regretfully, he put the top back on. "Lee is right. Don't wanna be sick again." When he deposited the Thermos back on the shelf, he spotted the bottle of lube. "Lee hurried. Is good."

Lee could not pretend to be surprised when Will's strong hands clamped down on Lee's biceps. In fact, it heightened Lee's arousal like a space shuttle liftoff. He could've split rocks with his cock. Was it the danger of sex with a feral? Or was it Will himself? No matter. He opened his mouth willingly, accepting the kiss Will offered.

Surprisingly, the kiss was gentle and inexperienced. Will seemed to enjoy using his tongue to taste Lee's mouth and lips more than simply rubbing mouths together. Dangerous wasn't the word for Will's technique. It was more along the line of "eager virgin" to Lee's perception. Whatever Will sensed satisfied him greatly, because he made a low, almost-growl in his throat. "Happy Will is to know Lee is still wanting sex."

That hopeful tone was incredibly erotic and sweet simultaneously, especially when spoken against Lee's lips. Lee wanted to reach up and pull Will down for more kisses, but his eagerness for more than a mere lip rub was killing him. He'd always thought the idea of "throbbing cocks" in porn was bullcrap, but now he understood the term did have a basis in reality. "How many times do I have to say yes, Will?"

Abruptly, Will let him go, his face split with a happy grin. Okay, something resembling a happy grin. The message came through clearly enough. "Naked now, right?" He eagerly removed the sweatpants and hung them carefully over the stall wall, as if they were a treasured possession. Maybe to Will they were.

Not to be outdone, Lee stripped off his jeans and shirt as fast as he could, but forgot to get out of his boots and socks first. Therefore, he ended up a bit tangled and fell on his ass right in the straw. The straw was old and somewhat scratchy, and the dust he raised made a small cloud of haze around him. Oh, if his colleagues -- former colleagues, he reminded himself -- at the university could see him now! They'd either laugh themselves to the floor or be horrified, but he could imagine their faces at dignified and quiet Dr. Leander Porter being so graceless and eager to fuck with a wild man.

The wild man in question didn't even twitch his lips. He knelt next to Lee and laid one soothing hand on Lee's shoulder. His big brown eyes were sympathetic. "No ouchies, Lee. All day, all night. We wait."

Immediately, Lee felt better. Will was right, of course. Time was their friend, not an enemy. He reached down and pulled off his boots, then his socks, and finally his jeans. The "underwear" was a bit problematic. They were the new fad in men's underwear, a thin mesh similar to women's nylons, but cooler and able to breathe. The skin-colored briefs left nothing to the imagination, but had to be peeled off like the second skin they were. He stood to remove them.

Will's eyes lit up with appreciation for the display, and he licked his lips. Under any other circumstances, a wild thing looking at him with that much hunger would have disturbed Lee, but in this case, he was grateful Will felt the same as he. Will reached out to caress Lee's butt and nuzzle his cock. "Niiice."

By the time Lee wriggled out of the briefs and tossed them aside with the rest of his clothes, his ego had been stroked enough. He wasn't used to men finding him all that attractive. After all, he knew he looked a bit like a geek. He knelt in front of Will, and stroked Will's hair. "You're the beautiful one, Will."

The not-very-dangerous-now man tucked his head to the side and smiled, as shy as a teenager. He mumbled something unintelligible, and then coughed. "Will not booty-full."

"To me you are." Now it was Lee's turn to initiate the action, and he leaned in to kiss Will's neck. There was a fresh green scent about Will, and Lee couldn't resist inhaling deeply. "You smell like meadows and open sky, Will. That's beautiful."

"World is booty-full. Smells booty-full. Lee smells like trees and earth." Will leaned his head further away. "Nice things to smell."

Lee wasn't about to tell Will the scent on his body was his deodorant. If Will equated the smell of his deodorant to natural things, then Lee promised himself to buy stock in that company on the net that night. He licked Will's neck. "You taste good, too."

The gasping intake of breath from Will was praise enough, but when Will tilted his head and bit down on Lee's shoulder just enough to sting, Lee matched it with a gasp of his own. Will licked the spot just as tenderly. "Lee tastes better than chicken."

Okay, so it was a backhanded compliment, but Lee took it in the spirit it was meant. He pushed Will back on the straw and tasted his perfectly firm pectorals. They too had a sweet, fresh taste of man and nature in harmony. "So do these." He reached up to lightly tweak a nipple.

Will lay back in the straw, his chin jutting to the barn ceiling. His cock was so rigid, it lay flat against his belly, distended and purple. "Lee makes sex better than eating buffalo, better than chicken, better than..." He cast about for the right phrasing. "Better than cold water when hot days come!"

The ringing triumph in Will's voice said that was the best analogy he could make, to compare what Lee was doing to him to the most wonderful thing he could think of, and Lee took it in the spirit it was meant. "Thank you, Will. May I show you more of what I can do?"

"More! Yes! More."

Lee trembled, and something wound tight snapped inside himself, as if his tension had been a physical band around his heart. He had no more resistance left. It had been a long time since any man had begged for his touch with such sincerity and need in their voice. Will didn't want anything from him but this moment in time, and

the independence of a wild thing to roam. In doing so, he'd freed Lee as well. Lee reached up and patted his hand along the shelf until he found the lube bottle. "Will, may I use this on you as well as on me?"

Cautiously, Will sniffed the proffered bottle without taking possession of it. Lee knew he'd smell cinnamon and a sweet smell resembling apples. He shrugged. "Is okay."

Understanding his new friend's reluctance, Lee dribbled a bit on his fingertips and applied some to Will's cock. He knew Will would immediately feel the cool slickness that was the main feature of the product, followed by a gentle spreading warmth. Intent on pleasuring Will, Lee took his time to cover every inch in subtle strokes under the guise of applying the clear, scented liquid.

Will's shuddering intake of breath was all the reward he needed. The thick, deeply veined length in his hand twitched, almost begging Lee to grasp it firmly and enjoy its taste, like the fine banquet of flesh every gay man dreamed of on a cold lonely night. Will grunted softly, but didn't speak.

Lee's mouth watered with the need to taste, but he restrained himself and bent to blow gently on the slick, hot cock he intended to savor when the time was right. The soft croon above him was all the encouragement Lee needed. Will liked what he was doing, and Lee was thrilled. He bent further and tasted the base, right where cock and balls met on the underside, where a man could be sensitive.

Up to now, Will had lain with patient ease in the straw, but now he panted, and one hand clenched the straw convulsively. More dust motes played in a sunbeam from the dying rays of the sun that filtered in the open barn door. Inarticulate sounds rumbled from deep in his throat.

Since that was just the reaction Lee wanted, the professor decided he could still teach a thing or two when he set his mind to it, despite being the youngest member of the geology faculty. Of course, this was something he'd never taught a student. He dragged his tongue slowly up Will's shaft and tasted man, apple cinnamon, and, in

some weird sort of way, freedom, on his lover's willing body. Unable to wait a second longer, he swallowed the whole damn thing until his nose nestled in brown curls.

The feral man yipped -- there was no other way to describe that sound -- and bucked upward, filling Lee's throat and making him glad he'd long ago learned to control his gag reflex. On the back of Lee's tongue, hot sweet-salt taste overrode the apple and cinnamon.

Recognizing the taste of pre-cum as he had many times since he'd figured out his sexual orientation, Lee withdrew to nurse lightly on the head of Will's cock. He damn sure didn't want the party to end so very soon.

One growl. A real growl, by God, from Will's throat, was all the warning he got before Will's strong hands were on his shoulders. For one heart-stopping moment, Lee wondered if he'd gone too far, too fast, and would pay with his life. Then, he was flipped expertly on his back in a move the college wrestling team would kill to know. "Will and Lee equal, yes?"

Lee blinked at Will's intense expression. "Uh, yeah." Geez, he stammered like a freshman, too. *Real suave and debonair, professor.*

Will jerked his chin in a definitive nod. "Yes. We equals. No spray without you spray, too." He glanced up at the shelf, then did his weird jaw-drop grin. "You like lube. I like chicken. You lick lube. I lick chicken." He reached up on the shelf, grabbed the thermos, opened it, and poured some in his hand, where he sniffed and studied the soup like he hadn't gulped mouthfuls earlier. "Cooler now, but still warm. No ouchies."

Analyzing what Will was trying to convey took Lee a moment. "Okay, you can use the chicken on my cock if you like, but the lube is for when we fuck, okay?"

Tilting his head, Will considered carefully. "Oh-kay. Remember okay means yes, now." With the bargain sealed, he dribbled the soup on Lee's aching cock and imitated what Lee had done to him with reasonable success.

As far as Lee was concerned, his actions were successful. Now Lee was the one gasping and wanting to fuck face like an animal.

Will seemed to sense that, and changed position to the classic sixty-nine so he could fuck Lee's face while returning the favor with athletic pushups designed to provide both thrust and pull for both men.

It wasn't a competition, but Lee couldn't help wonder who'd win the race by -- for once! -- being the slowest at losing control. Both of them seemed determined the other should come first.

Just when he thought he was going to lose, Will stopped and raised his head. "Stop! Stop! No spray now!"

Gently, Lee released Will's cock with a soft "Pop!" He'd won, sort of. By a hair. Barely. The light breeze on his cock cooled him just enough to keep him from spr -- er, coming, and he thanked it for the respite.

Will fell over on his side and rolled warily to his knees. He frowned and looked puzzled. "Who is alpha?"

Lee understood. He'd taken enough anthropology to know the problem. In feral societies, even apes, the strongest male was dominant, and often called the alpha male. The pecking order of the group meant a great deal, including sexual positions, in chimpanzees. It was important to Will to know his place. More important to Lee suddenly, was knowing he wanted Will's place to be with him. Where the hell had that notion come from?

Chapter Four

Lee swallowed a gulp of both fear and longing, his gaze locked on the straw of the stall. He damn sure knew he'd lose any sort of physical contest with Will, who outweighed him by at least thirty pounds and definitely was more muscular. Dammit, he was much more interested in fucking than brawling.

"Good."

Lee looked up at the satisfaction in Will's voice. Once again, Will had that slightly off, dropped-jaw grin on his face. Puzzled, Lee put his head to one side, knowing his face was full of confusion. "What?"

"Lee submits. I am leader. Good." Will unfolded his hands from his chest and grabbed Lee's left bicep. Then he stepped behind Lee. "Where funny-smelling lube you want? Ah!"

Bewildered, Lee tried to follow along with the turn of events. All at once, the whole meaning struck him. He'd put his head down, smelling of fear. That had been a signal to the feral man that Lee submitted to a more dominant male. Well, okay. He could accept he wasn't the stronger of the two of them. Hell, he wasn't even sure he was the smarter, only the more educated. One thing he did understand -- he'd better help Will with the lube, and quickly.

Will fumbled with the flip top, but permitted Lee to gently take it from him. He followed every movement of Lee's fingers until he saw how to open the top, and nodded in satisfaction. "How we use? Better than lickings?"

Lee could sympathize with the dubiousness in Will's voice. After all, it looked like thick water. Ah, the marvels of modern civilization! Part of him gloried in showing Will the conveniences of civilization, but part of him cringed at corrupting the other

man's innocence. *One step at a time.* He turned and kissed Will's left pec. "Let me put this on you, Will? I know how much to use."

Will considered for a moment, then grunted. "Okay. You show, I learn."

That was the idea, as far as Lee was concerned. He wanted the man so badly, his hand trembled a bit dribbling the thick drops on his hand to lube up Will's cock. Lee could hardly wait to have that glorious beast fucking him until they were both comatose.

Will half-closed his eyes as soon as Lee wrapped his warm hand around his hot, hard shaft. "Good. Good Lee. You teach Will lube."

Deliberately, Lee took his time to stroke that delicious length to its fully engorged potential. Not only was he smearing the viscous goo along every inch for his own sexual comfort, Lee loved how he tamed the beast in Will with every stroke. Oh, yeah, this was going to be one fantastic fuck.

His feral lover opened his dark eyes when Lee lubed his own ass for his pleasure. Will reached around and took over, rubbing the lube into Lee's puckering ass, burying his fingertip up to the first knuckle at the same time he turned Lee's head and rammed his tongue down his throat. When Will came up for air, he spoke two words. "Knees, Lee."

Obediently, Lee dropped to his hands and knees, facing away from him. He knew this was likely to be quicker than rabbits, the way they'd worked themselves into a frenzy just with the foreplay. Most guys didn't give a damn about foreplay. It was all about the fucking and getting off. Personally, Lee liked a little anticipation. He put his elbows in the straw and lifted his eager ass to the barn roof, ready and willing to get thoroughly jack-hammered.

Instead of kneeling behind him and fucking away, Will reached down and picked up Lee's ankles, lifting his whole body up so his weight rested on his elbows. Lee's knees remained bent, but slightly apart, and rested on Will's strong thighs.

Lee was so impressed by the feat of strength, he almost missed how easily Will slid in past his first sphincter, filling him with the wild and mild burn of a gloriously huge cock. Lee sucked in a shuddering breath of air. "Oh, yeah."

Will echoed his intake of a lungful, and, incredibly, waited patiently until Lee's body relaxed and allowed him past the second sphincter, until he was buried to the hilt in him.

Deep impact were the only words Lee could use to describe what it felt like. He wanted to scream with pleasure but the second Will started the first upstroke, Lee cried out incoherently with the sensual bliss of what Will's thick meat did to him. Every millimeter Will pulled out was pure deprivation and rapture, simultaneously.

Whatever Lee was feeling, Will was getting some thrills along the way, as well. They were both riding the joy wagon to glory with every stroke up and down. Will's barking moans -- there was no other way to describe the sound, and Lee was too busy enjoying himself to give a damn about finding better words -- just upped the ante on Lee's own impending gratification.

Lee would have sworn Will's cock got larger with every hammer blow downward, and whatever worries Lee had about taking much more were overridden by the rockslide of blowing his wad explosively. Just like an avalanche, you just kissed control goodbye and were along for the ride. Lee was even beyond praying he'd recover. Hell, Lee didn't care if he lived beyond the next few minutes. What a way to go. The morticians would need dynamite to get the smile off his face.

Above and behind him, Will was howling like Tarzan needed every creature in the jungle to come to his aid. Lee was surprised the bats and birds roosting in the barn roof didn't all take flight at once, positive the ceiling was coming down. For a finale, Will slammed so deeply into him, Lee expected to taste Will's orgasm at the back of his throat.

They both just hung there, suspended in that moment of time. Lee personally wondered if his heart was going to burst right out of his chest and go on a walkabout all on its own rather than put up with one more moment of his abuse. To say Lee loved his

sex on the wild side of life was an understatement. He would never be the same, and never satisfied with ordinary, anonymous sex in a bathhouse ever again, and he knew it in the marrow of his bones.

The barn door swung closed with an eardrum-shattering bang. In an instant, Will moved away from Lee and crouched by the stall opening. Then the wind whistled down the valley and thunder grumbled in the distance.

"Wind must have blown the open barn door closed." Lee struggled to his feet and smiled reassuringly at Will. Lee wasn't about to admit how he'd almost jumped out of his skin at the sound, himself. The goal was to relax Will.

Instead, Will's shoulders hunched, and he looked around desperately until he spotted the huge, open windows of the barn. Only then did he relax even marginally.

Yeah, the feral man was clearly claustrophobic in the worst way. Lee quietly put on his clothes and rehearsed in his mind how to phrase his request. He didn't have a whole lot of hope for a good outcome, but he had to make the offer. It was only polite. "Will?"

Slowly, Will came out of his crouch and turned his wide-eyed brown peepers on Lee. He sniffed the moist breeze coming in the big windows. "Rain soon." He picked up the sweatpants from the stall wall, and pulled them on with a sensuous sigh. "Warm clothes feel good. Niiice."

Lee's lips twitched with humor. Apparently, "niiice" was the way to express how good something felt. He sat down to pull on his boots. "Yes, it's going to rain, Will. I know you're scared of enclosed places, but I feel I should offer. Would you like to sleep inside, in my bed? With me, I mean?" Oh, boy. Could he sound more like an awkward adolescent?

"You my friend, Lee. You sleep in man house." Will shivered and winced. "Will sleep in barn. Feel safe. Warm. Dry. Is okay." He walked over, bent down, and rubbed noses with Lee. "No sad ears, Lee. We play when sun shines, okay?"

Lee stood, and rubbed noses as equals with Will. "Okay, Will. I'll play with you tomorrow. You rest and have the rest of the chicken soup. I'll tie those barn doors open for you."

Will fell down in the straw pile and pulled a blanket close. "Okay. Love new pack member Lee."

Lee tied open the barn doors and mulled over the full implications of Will's sleepy statement. New pack member? Love? Lee swallowed hard, got himself a cup of coffee, and called up his browser. What could the net tell him about the feral people and pack behavior? Something wasn't jiving, but he couldn't place what it was.

Hours later, with his stomach burning from too much decaf coffee, Lee studied his notes. To say the least, studies of the feral people were sketchy at best. They'd appeared only a few years ago, mostly out of the wilderness areas. Some had a pack structure similar to wolves and coyotes, some were solitary individuals with territorial ranges, and some lived in nomadic groups. Will appeared to be one of those following a pack structure, so Lee had followed that tiny lead. From what little he had gathered, it seemed most accurate. The information left him bewildered and shaken.

If he understood the snippets of information Will had dropped, Will was not a transient *per se*, but rather an associate member of a "pack" who'd been so sick he'd crawled off to die. His pack would not know he was still alive. However, according to the work of one Dr. Selena Montoya, feral people numbers were on the rise. In some cases, civilized humans who lived in remote areas had disappeared. Whether they'd been killed or joined the wild packs was unclear, but the fact remained that they were all gone. Without a trace.

Lee swallowed the dregs of his mug and staggered off to his bed. Part of him was terrified, and part of him was... curious. And, if he was truthful with himself, half in love with a feral man himself. Was love or curiosity what had caused the others to die? Had curiosity really killed the cat?

Chapter Five

Lee finished his stretching and made sure his running shoes were tightly laced before setting off on his usual morning jog. He still hoped to compete in the Bolder Boulder Marathon in the spring of next year. There was something about running that just cleared his mind, and he had many things to think about. He wasn't even sure where to begin, except chronologically.

He hadn't even gotten to the gate marking what he considered to be the "house grounds" before he had the strangest running companion he'd ever had. A fully-grown male coyote loped beside him, as content as a domesticated dog.

At first, Lee was startled and a bit worried, but the coyote lolled his tongue out and paced along cheerfully until Lee relaxed. There was something about the happy nature of the coyote that made him seem more like a friend than a predator. "Well then, my fine fellow, since you choose to be my running companion today perhaps you'll also listen to my troubles."

The coyote perked his ears forward, and his wise brown eyes lingered on Lee's face as if he really did understand the situation, and agreed to listen.

Encouraged by his companion's seeming intelligence, Lee decided that an animal that couldn't speak probably made the best shrink in the business. What could it hurt? "Okay, then. Let's start with what brought me out here in the first place." Lee ran a couple of yards before he figured out the wording. "I've been having what the head shrinkers call fugue states."

The coyote turned his head to one side as if he didn't understand and yipped once. Since it sounded remarkably like, "What?" Lee took it that way.

"A fugue is a period of time in which you don't remember what happened. Sometimes you even wake up in a totally different place than when you last had a

memory." Lee paced his breath for a couple of yards. "Like last time. I had finished my work for the day, and started to feel very odd on the way home. I guess I made it inside the house, because my briefcase was at the foot of the stairs. I don't know. I woke up naked in my backyard the next morning with my clothes strewn all over the yard. If I hadn't had six-foot privacy fencing, I probably would have been arrested and charged with indecent exposure. Sad part is, the doctors have no clue why, or even why I have an elevated heart rate all the time. It's like my metabolism runs in high gear at all times. You should see the way I have to eat! Most people have to diet. I have to make a pig of myself to keep from being skin and bones."

Now the coyote made a whining bark, and then looked ahead. It was if he said, "That is a puzzle. Okay, let's hear the rest." The coyote angled his run so he now literally ran beside Lee, as if to be a comforting force.

Lee laughed -- more like a wheeze -- he needed his breath for running. "Okay. Next problem. I don't know what to do with my feelings about Will. I could so easily fall in love with that man. I know! I know! He's feral. I should run away back to Boulder as fast as my Jeep can go, but I can't."

They rounded a large pile of old mine tailings left over from when there had been a very successful small silver mine not far away. By the time his grandmother acquired the property, of course, the mine had been completely worked out. That was how she had bought it for little more than a song.

The path they ran on wound through the valley, past the mine entrance, then in and around a few hills before finally making its way past the back pasture and looping around to the house again. At least, that's the way Lee remembered it.

He checked his pedometer. According to the readout, he had already managed a quarter-mile. Not bad. It was a start, considering he hadn't had much time to run in the past few weeks. Getting locked up in a loony bin for observation screwed with your fitness schedule, big time. Hell, it screwed with everything. "I guess I should add that things got so bad, my roommate had me locked up in the psych ward. I can't say I blame him. After some of the crazy things he says I did when I blanked out, I would

have put me in the 'I love me' jacket, as well. I just woke up in the hospital one day, with Brian telling me how I had thrown off all my clothes and run around the house vocalizing like a bird of some kind."

Again, the coyote gave that same growling bark, as if to express both concern and puzzlement.

Lee huffed out a few labored breaths. He was not close to the Wall yet, but any runner recognized when his body had begun to strain a little. The Wall was a marathon runner's term for the way your body fought you for rest. For Lee, the sensation was just like hitting a wall. Man, he was out of shape. "I can't blame Brian for beginning to cheat on me. After all, we were fuck buddies, not soul mates or anything. Neither of us gave a damn about love, that was for sure. At least he confessed and made plans to get his own place when I took a leave of absence from CU. After all, you can't have the youngest professor in the geology department going bonkers." Lee gave a short bitter laugh. "Not even in the Liberal Republic of Boulder will parents allow their precious offspring to be taught by a nut case who may or may not show up to teach at all."

Now the coyote gave that happy, yipping bark and frisked around Lee as he ran past the dilapidated remains of the mine office and rounded past the hulk of the rusting machinery in front of the mine opening. A small pond, used by the miners for all sorts of tasks and now free of their polluting ways, glistened bright blue in the morning sunlight. The coyote ran to take a drink.

Lee didn't blame him one bit. He bet it tasted better than some of the so-called sports drinks. He couldn't resist, and stopped to scoop up a few handfuls of cold, fresh water. He wished he'd remembered the reusable water bottle he normally clipped to his waist, but considered himself lucky he'd found the pedometer.

The coyote -- Lee resisted the temptation to call him Wiley -- hiked his leg against an aspen and then sprawled in the shade of an evergreen bush.

Lee took one last handful of water. The icy chill of a snow-fed stream would be a pleasure come August, but it was only just now mid-June. He'd timed his arrival to ensure no late spring snowfall would interrupt his work. If he were lucky, he'd get

some great samples and take measurements long before the snows came again. Then he could spend the winter back in Boulder with the trappings of civilization.

Now, why didn't that appeal to him? Why did he suddenly long for a quiet Christmas with Will in front of a crackling fire? *Oh, man, Lee. You have got it bad.*

Without warning, he felt as if someone had clubbed him in the chest. His heart raced, but he couldn't catch his breath. Or rather, he couldn't breathe fast enough to keep up. Lee fell over to one side beside the pond and writhed. The last thing he saw before the world winked out was the coyote, watching him with its ears perked forward with interest. Or was it hunger?

* * *

Will was caught completely off-guard when Lee fell over and collapsed beside the water. At first, Will thought perhaps Lee had been a clumsy monkey and had lost his balance. Only when Lee wriggled like a snake stepped on by a buffalo did Will realize Lee was sick.

At first, Will used his nose to sniff him. Lee smelled funny. Still Lee, but also a chicken-y sort of smell, yet not chicken. Not the big predator birds that steal small prey from a hungry coyote's mouth, either. Something different, but still Lee. Perhaps that was why Lee had always delighted Will's nose.

Sweat poured off his newest packmate, and Lee's eyes were wildly frightened. Will didn't think Lee saw him despite Will's nose in his face. His mind hunted in another place. The sounds that came from his throat were like the coos of a dove in the trees, and yet not. A different animal, but birdlike.

Will was so confused, he sat on his rump, but out of reach of Lee's flailing arms and legs. If Lee had been a coyote, Will would have said Lee was shifter-sick. Those who did not shift regularly, or who were in the throes of adolescence, often would act that way until someone reminded them to shift and free the other half of their spirit. Will did not know what to do. Will was not Pack Lead -- yes, he was. Will was Lee's Pack Leader. Lee had agreed. They had mated!

Lee bark-cooed again, and his normally lake-colored eyes turned dark as night. His fur changed, growing longer and -- Will could not accept what he saw easily -- feathered? Yes, little earth- and sand-colored feathers! His body became small, and his feet fell out of his shoes and foot coverings, displaying tasty-looking little bird legs.

Will could no longer deny the evidence before him. His mate was shifter sick! If Lee had been sick like this for weeks, Lee was very ill indeed! There was no time to waste. Before Lee finished his shift and flew away, Will had to howl for assistance and pray one of the People heard him. Will dared not let Lee escape. Lee would awaken alone in the wild places as a monkey and be in danger! Birds went where even monkeys could not go!

Will threw back his head and howled with all his heart. This was not the time of howling, with no darkness that put the unthinking creatures to sleep. Will filled his chest with air and howled out his distress and fear, begging for the Pack Leader to come. All he could do was hope the People would hear, and howl for him, until the howls came to the Pack Leader's mate.

If not, then he would have to hunt Lee, following and stalking, no matter how long it took, until his little bird body returned to monkey. Who knew how long that would be? How would Will protect his mate if Lee flew into a tree? The predator birds would have his mate for a meal, since Lee had been a monkey all his life. Instinct was not enough. Instinct gave you fur -- or, in this case, feathers -- but it did not teach you to do much. Will had no choice!

His heart wept, but Will had to risk hunting his mate. Will pounced, and got a long, sharp, black beak in his left foreleg for his troubles. He yipped and leaped backward, but Will was determined to catch and hold his mate under his paws until Lee calmed and returned to monkey. Will dared not turn to monkey himself until Lee was subdued but not hurt, else his poor mate would escape him.

Lee raised his crest and clacked his beak together, twisting away from Will's paws with great speed. Will had to admire his quickness and coloration. His dark earth-colored tail was broad and long, with snow-colored tips on the ends. But prettiest of all

were his eyes. The patch behind his eye changed from sky blue to blood red. Very distinctive. Oh, Lee was so furious and defiant, Will had to admire that he would fight a larger adversary. Lee's feet, with two toes in front and two behind, were tipped with small, black talons, suitable for holding prey. Had they been larger, Will might have hesitated.

As it was, Will had no choice. He had to hold him before Lee spread his wings! Again, Will pounced, telling himself, "No bite! No bite!" It was the hardest thing to hold, but not use teeth. Will did not trust his own jaws not to crunch down, and he was truly terrified that his hunger would override his heart.

Again and again, Will leaped forward, attempting to bring down his mate, and each time Lee escaped. Sometimes Will held him for a brief instant, but his sharp beak and fast reflexes made the capture fleeting. With each escape and painful paw, his heart loved his mate more for his courage. Lee fought, as little and weak as he was, never giving up. Will was so proud of him.

This explained much. No wonder his mate was so smart. The birds were very quick to learn and react. They saw things from the sky no creature on the ground could see. The vultures and crows were always the first to carrion for a reason.

Soon Will would tire and his mate would escape! Perhaps when Will saw his little mate spread his wings, fear gave him extra speed. Will did not think, he just knew he had to save his beloved from his own folly. Somehow, Will managed the highest leap he had ever managed, and caught his little feathered mate in his jaws!

The only problem was, when he hit the ground, Will heard the sickening sound he so feared. Will's jaws, so strong and proud, came together with a snap.

Lee, the one who had given him reason to live, shrieked and lay still.

Will tasted Lee's blood in his mouth, and his heart died with his little mate.

Chapter Six

He knew he was dreaming, but it didn't help the nightmare. The rational part of Dr. Lee Porter kept repeating the mantra, "This is all in your head. You'll awaken and all will be fine." The not-so-rational part of him screamed, "Wake up, you moron! Wake the fuck up!"

Tiny vignettes, like video trailers of a horror film, took over the screen in his head. He saw flashing jaws ready to swallow him whole, or paws of some giant werewolf attempting to pound him into the dirt like a tent peg. He made desperate attempts to defend himself or run away, until the beast caught him and crushed his arm between those massive jaws. Finally, he fainted, and the world was silent for a time.

But it was not without pain. That was how he knew he lived. His left arm keened with agony until he felt the sting of a needle and the ice in his veins of some medication. He didn't care, as long as the analgesic brought relief and kept him from screaming like a little girl.

Someone else was screaming, too. Or was it howling? Yeah, howling. Howling so sad, it nearly broke his heart. For lack of anything better to think about, he listened intently. At first, he'd thought there were many howls, but now only one voice alone sang of Lee's pain for him.

At first, Lee tried to reconcile that sorrowful sound to his nightmare images of the coyote attacking him. The two just didn't mesh. Since he knew for certain the coyote had been friendly before his collapse, and a nightmare might be just a nightmare, Lee resolved to give the critter the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, Lee heard whispers. He didn't know whether to be grateful or not. He could be in a regular hospital with a badly broken arm, fresh from orthopedic repairs, or he could be back in a padded cell and restrained to the bed. That also caused painful

cramps when your muscles, used to movement, rebelled at being stuck in the same position for a long time. He'd been lashed to his bed for what seemed a lifetime but was likely only a couple of hours before they'd determined he was sane again and let him loose. Cautiously, he twitched his right arm. It moved freely.

That is, until a strong, warm hand covered his wrist and halted all movement. "Easy there, Dr. Porter. You're safe." The unfamiliar masculine voice was warm with good humor, and commanded perfect English. It was not, therefore, Will.

Will! Lee's eyes popped open, and he beheld a sight that a month ago would have made his heartbeat go unsteady for an entirely different reason -- lust. But that was before he met Will. Now, his mind acknowledged the incredible beauty of the Native American man who still held his wrist captive with nothing more than a momentary stray wistfulness. Lee knew most men weren't gay, and of those few who were, he was too old to attract many of them. Still, Lee stored that handsome face away for a hot shower sometime in the future. This guy belonged between the covers of *International Male* or *The Advocate* as fantasy fuel.

The Native man, clad conventionally in a blue chambray shirt, his hair pulled back into an ordinary-looking ponytail, smiled without showing his teeth, but his eyes were warm and full of humor. "Stop looking at me like that, or you'll make my... husband... jealous."

Husband? Oh, my God. He was gay. And married. Perhaps that was a good thing for the entire gay population of the West. Such men ought not to run around loose. "Who are you?"

The warrior-god smiled in relief. "Well, thank goodness! A coherent question. My name's Jeff. Dr. Jeff Gleason, if you will." He kept his hand firmly on Lee's wrist. "No handshake needed, please."

Lee's brow creased in a frown. His memory jingled like a ringing cell. The name was familiar. He knew from the man's clothes he wasn't a medical type, and he didn't have the look of a head-shrinker. But where had he heard that name before? "I know you. Or rather, I know of you. I'd definitely remember your face." He cleared his throat

and flushed. At that moment, his busy brain also recognized he was lying on the couch in his grandmother's living room. Patricia Porter would have had a litter of kittens to see his dirty feet on her sofa.

Jeff laughed. He let go of Lee's hand at last and scooted Lee's grandmother's favorite wing chair into a more comfortable angle to talk to Lee. "You didn't see me, Dr. Porter, but I've seen you at CU Boulder. Your graduate studies into the geological time clock using the iridium deposits around the end of the Cretaceous Era were brilliantly meticulous. Pissed off quite a few of my colleagues that a young upstart like you had seen past their stagnated thinking, I'll have you know."

Huh? How did this man know how much trouble his doctoral thesis had caused in the earth sciences department at CU? Then, like lightning, he knew. "The volcanologist I wanted to connect with. That's you?" He waited for Jeff's nod. "How'd you know where I was? No one but my new boss at USGS knew where I was, and even he only had an address to my grandmother's farm."

Jerking his head in the direction of the howling, Jeff grinned. "Will. Speaking of Will, you might want to reassure him. He was totally freaked. As you can hear."

Lee snorted. "That's a coyote, not Will. No human throat could produce that howling."

Jeff cleared his throat. "Uh, true. Um... Listen, there's something we need to talk about. But first, um..." He opened the door.

Two coyotes whirled around. The larger coyote doing the howling had been Lee's running buddy. The smaller, younger coyote calmly got up and strolled into the house as if he owned it and sat next to Jeff's leg like a heeling hound.

The howler yipped joyfully and scrambled inside, as ecstatic to see Lee as a puppy. Lee's former running buddy made a prodigious leap from the floor, over the end table, and onto Lee's lap as if he had wings. Before Lee could blink, his face was bathed in coyote kisses. Well, that certainly solved the question of Lee's nightmares.

Lee ruffled the fur and scratched the coyote's ears, apparently finding the classic "stupid spot" that made many canines lift one leg and beat the air with their foot in joy.

That gave Lee time to see his left arm had been put in a cast using the emergency medicine field kit plaster and plastic wraparound that served as a perfectly good support when medical help wasn't readily available. His own casting set was bright red. This was blue, probably out of Jeff's kit. "Thanks for coming to the rescue, Jeff." He cleared his throat. "Not exactly the dignified meeting over coffee I'd planned, though."

"Dignity is something I see all too rarely these days, anyway." Jeff lifted a mug from the side table. "I did avail myself of your coffee, though. I ran out a couple of months ago, and haven't had time to get to civilization."

Lee couldn't resist teasing, just a little. "What, the magma chamber running so hot you couldn't take time to take a drive to town for a day?" He let Jeff wince and chuckle. "By the way, you indicated Will got you when I crapped out. Where's Will?"

Jeff chewed on his lower lip and petted the coyote at his knee. He and the coyote on Lee's lap seemed to have a silent conference for about ten seconds. Without taking his eyes off the coyote, Jeff nodded. "Right there."

At first, Lee didn't understand. Then he laughed and rubbed the coyote's ears again. "Okay, the joke's on me. This is *Will E. Coyote*. Very funny. This coyote, unless he's very tame and domesticated..."

The coyote growled as if that was an insult, but head-butted Lee's hand as if asking for more rubs and scratches.

"Sorry, pal. No insult intended. This guy is a wild thing. Are you saying he found you out there doing a field study nearby and brought you to me like Lassie saving Timmy from the well? I ain't buying that crock." Lee shook his head. "Not saying this little guy isn't smart as a whip, but come on."

Jeff's eyes watered with his attempts to control whatever amused him. "Uh, no. Not like Lassie. He howled. Um..." Jeff huffed out a sigh. "Will, you'd better show him."

The coyote on Lee's lap whined and flattened his ears, but jumped down reluctantly and paced to the center of the braided rag rug on the floor. Amazingly, he gathered a breath and stood on his hind legs. Then, he began to grow and shift form.

His limbs straightened and elongated. His nose shortened, and his ears became small, pink and shell-like. The fur covering his body either virtually disappeared, or became long and silky... and distinctly Will's.

The breath caught in Lee's throat, and his jaw sagged slowly to his chest. He fell back against the pillows and choked out, "Okay, where's the local loony bin? I just started massive hallucinations about werewolves in coyote suits." He shut his eyes and decided he'd play with the blue crayons first when they allowed him therapy.

A rough hand stroked his cheek. "Poor broke-winged bird-man Lee. No scared. No sad ears," Will's voice pleaded with Lee. "Lee said loved Will."

He had said that. To the coyote. Lee cracked one eye. Yes, those were indeed Will's big, dark brown eyes, and there was no mistaking the meadow scent of Will's body. Will and the coyote were one and the same. "I fell in love with a werewolf?"

Jeff sniggered. There was no other word for it. However, he kept petting the coyote beside him and didn't say a word.

"Hmph! Not wolf. Coyote." Will folded his arms across his naked chest and lifted his chin. "Not same." Then his face sagged into sorrow. "Sorry I bit my bird-man Lee and broke wing. Didn't mean to hurt you. Had to save you." His hand fiercely clutched Lee's uninjured right hand.

Lee gulped. The implication was clear. His nightmare was nothing of the sort. He had fought Will. His mouth was drier than dust. Lee swallowed and hoped what little saliva he possessed might do the trick. "You seemed a lot bigger in my dreams. And it's my arm, not a wing."

"Was wing." They stared each other down, like a pair of adversaries. Will's chin jutted out stubbornly.

Jeff cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Will, would you like for me to explain?"

What the heck? It suddenly dawned on Lee that the young coyote at Jeff's feet was no more *just* a wild animal than Will was. Lee had to accept the evidence of his own eyes, but this didn't prevent him from wanting -- needing -- more proof that he wasn't the only one riding a slow train to the asylum. "Um... is this your -- um, I can't

believe I'm saying this -- husband, Jeff?" Lee winced and closed one eye, almost afraid of either possible answer.

Jeff smiled, his hawk face softening with love and humor. "Yeah. Rody, would you like a human introduction?"

The young coyote flowed upward to a handsome young man with dark blond hair and a wiry build. He was as naked as Will. Lee should have guessed Hollyweird covered up the actors with either clothes or fur to get around the censors. Reality was much, much more graphic. And well-hung. A little young for his personal tastes, but Lee was the maverick among his gay friends, preferring something with a few miles on the odometer, so to speak.

Lee's gaze slid automatically back to Will. In Will's eyes, Lee would have sworn he saw jealousy and -- Oh, boy. He'd slid off the deep end if he was making this analogy -- if Will'd been in furry form, his hackles would have been up. No matter. Lee was all about Will, and Jeff was welcome to his pretty blond. Lee tugged on Will's hand until Will knelt next to the sofa and him. "I'll keep my own wild thing. If this is my own madness, I don't want to return to reality."

Will's brown eyes softened to the best of melted chocolate. Whoever said "puppy browns" had no clue what the real thing could do to you. Lee was a goner as soon as he saw the love in those eyes. Will sniffed noses with him, and Lee stole a kiss when Will's long hair swung over them like a privacy curtain.

Jeff cleared his throat again. "They say love is a form of insanity, but your illness has nothing to do with your mind, Lee. You're shifter sick."

Distracted by Will's big brown peepers and firm lips, Lee took a few minutes to process what Jeff was trying with remarkable delicacy to tell him. It still didn't make sense, but Lee understood the vulcanologist was trying desperately to "break it to him gently." Whatever it was. So, Lee came out with something vastly intelligent. "Huh?"

Rody, apparently deciding they were all much too delicate for his tastes, managed to throw a rock in Lee's calm waters. "Lee is a shifter too! Lee must learn to shift to other form before he dies!" At least the young man was honestly sincere.

Will whirled, snarling and changing to coyote even as he spoke, his words morphing with his body from “No! Lee not die!” to the full growls of an enraged coyote.

Rody changed back to coyote as well and snarled back, with lip curled and teeth bared.

There would be a fight, and Lee wasn’t sure why.

Chapter Seven

"Knock it off, you two."

One quiet command from Jeff, and the two coyotes not only subsided, they hung their heads and submitted. Both sat on their haunches next to their chosen human and didn't even growl anymore.

Lee was no biologist, but even he could recognize this as unusual cross-species behavior. He swiveled his head back and forth, studying both Will and Rody. Will's head was up a little more than Rody's, but clearly both accepted Jeff's authority as absolute. "Okay, you're a coyote too, right?"

"Actually, no." Jeff sighed and knocked back his coffee. "I'm fully human. I just killed the former Pack Leader when he attacked me. Long story, and the details are unimportant." He got up and saluted with his mug, offering silently to get Lee a mug as well. The irony of the guest offering to get the owner coffee was not lost on either.

Lee lay back on the pillows, trying to wrap his head around the fact that he was petting a werewolf -- er, werecoyote? -- one he'd fucked already. No wonder Will had been a little weird. Did that mean Lee was into bestiality? He didn't think so, if they stayed human. Where was the line he wasn't supposed to cross now?

When Jeff returned with a full, steaming mug, he continued. "What is important is what Rody said, however undiplomatic."

"What's one more weirdness in this insanity? Okay, shoot from the hip, Jeff. I'm what?" Lee just sighed. "I'd better give up trying to find logic and order. Apparently, I'm in a whole new world, and I'd better adjust."

"Exactly. Okay, blunt and straightforward. You ask questions afterward, but you'll have to take some of what I say on blind faith. You have no reason to, but I'm

asking for your trust." Jeff leaned forward, his entire body language screaming how earnest he was. Whatever he was about to say, he sincerely believed it to be true.

For what it was worth, Lee understood there was a difference between absolute truth and belief. What was true by one person's understanding didn't have to be based in reality. However, since Lee's reality was totally in question right now, it harmed nothing for Lee to accept what Jeff said as the best truth around for the moment. "Fine. I'll try. This is just really weird."

"Tell me about it. I keep looking at my reflection and asking, 'What's an educated modern man doing in a situation like this?' For what it's worth, you have my sympathy." Jeff slugged down a healthy gulp of brew. "Okay. We think that the reason you've been sick is that you're what the coyotes call 'shifter sick.' The state occurs when a shifter doesn't shift form at least once a month. The body and spirit inside rebel. The shifter then begins to shift without conscious control."

Lee pondered that rather extraordinary concept and tried to accept the possibility of an illness even existing. "But I'm not a shifter. I've never been... hell, I have no clue what species. It damn sure isn't coyote, if I manage to accept that any animal can be a shifter."

"It's true most shifters know what they are by adolescence. I have to admit, I can't figure out why you haven't up until now, unless you're a half-breed." Jeff gave Lee a wry grin. "You're doing well even letting me talk. I'd have thrown the nut cases out on their ear and checked myself in a psych ward by now. Oh, and you're a bird shifter, according to Will, and not a species known to this area."

Will changed to human, so he could join in. "Brown bird." He nuzzled Lee's uninjured right arm. "Pretty bird."

Pretty bird. That had been what his father had called his mother. Everyone else called Bernadette Porter, "Birdie." Lee sat up, startling Jeff and Will. "My mother's nickname was Birdie! She was from Arizona!" He flung off the quilt covering him, wincing at the pain in his left arm, and pulled an Audubon book off the shelf. Quickly, he thumbed through until he found the picture of Arizona's most famous bird and

showed it to Will. That bird had been in the decor of his parent's home, if he remembered correctly. Now such an odd choice made perfect sense. "Is this the bird you saw?"

Will studied the picture with a frown, and then nodded. "Lee prettier, but same bird. Not good." He pointed to the tiny picture. "Lee-bird bigger. Eyes like blood and sky."

"Now I know he's telling the truth. The red and blue patch behind a roadrunner's eye doesn't photograph well." Lee stared down at the picture, trying to resolve his personal self-image with the concept, but his recent "nightmares and fugue states" suddenly made much too much sense.

Jeff shrugged. "It's not uncommon for shifters to be bigger in their wild form. Sometimes up to half again as large. I think it has something to do with mass to energy ratios, but that science is definitely out of my specialty." He grinned at Lee with shared understanding between the volcanologist and geologist. "Rocks and melted rocks are simpler."

"Tell me that next time we need a spectroanalysis." Lee grumbled and focused on the subject at hand. He left the open book on the table, with the picture of a roadrunner staring back at him. Not the cartoon purple creature, but reality. Lee sat back on the sofa with stunned resignation. "Okay, let's accept I'm a roadrunner shifter." He swallowed and shook his head. "I can't believe I just said that."

Will, who had returned to coyote form, laid his head comfortably on Lee's knee.

Again, Jeff leaned forward. "Look, I'm no psychologist. Best I am is a secret specialist in shifters, according to the legends of my people and my experience since meeting up with Rody." His hand automatically reached out to stroke his friend -- er, husband.

Lee scrubbed his forehead with his good hand. His world kept tilting, his arm hurt like a bitch, and now he was trying to accept the impossible as a new reality. He'd have had better luck adjusting if he'd been thrown through a portal to a new planet in space. "Excuse me while I keep having to reboot my brain. Keep going."

"I have a theory. The Medicine People of the Comanche tell stories of medicine people able to become a brother to the shifters, even learning to shift with them." Jeff sighed and looked uncomfortable. "I'm not a shaman, but my grandfather was. He tried to teach me, but I wanted to be a modern man, not some throwback learning hocus-pocus. Needless to say, I'm fumbling along, sorry I didn't listen then."

Lee caught himself looking up at the wall at a sepia-toned portrait of his grandmother, and wondered if she knew. Maybe she had, from the way she'd begged him to try a year living with her, but Lee had hated the isolation and lack of companions his own age. Summers were all he could stand, back then. Now guilt washed over him. "Funny how we don't recognize their wisdom until it's too late." He shook his head. "We'll have to muddle along. So, what do you remember?"

"Grandpa spoke of long hours of meditation. Learning to visualize the body changing seemed to be a large part of it." Jeff grinned and shrugged. "I'm going to assume that with you being a half-breed who's already shifted at least once -- probably more -- the process comes down to relaxing and visualizing yourself as a roadrunner." Lee thought back to all the times where he'd hit a fugue. He'd been doing something he loved that relaxed him, like running or coming home after a hard day. And one lost day stood out. His eyes flew open wide.

"Self-hypnosis! After my first fugue, the docs recommended a self-hypnosis file for my iPod!" He knew just where it was upstairs and dashed as quickly as he could, considering every step up the stairs jarred his arm. It only took a minute of digging around in his half-unpacked suitcase for Lee to find the iPod with its distinctive white ear buds. He ran back into the room with the player tucked in his arm sling and the buds in his ears. "Let's see if this works. Just visualize being a bird, huh? Okay. I have some half-memories to work from. Takes about half an hour, if I remember the instructions. I only used this once, and blacked out for several hours. Woke up naked in the backyard about one a.m."

Jeff and the coyotes nodded, mostly in unison. "We'll wait a full hour. Then I might try some of my grandfather's chants, though how they'll translate to English so you'll understand them remains to be seen. I'll work on it."

Lee nodded acceptance, thumbed the iPod on, and lay back on the sofa. This time, he'd really listen and not half-assed play with the techniques. Breath control, and getting the body to relax was first. In the background of the recording, the wind sighed softly, and the birds chirped. Lee found that ironic. *Concentrate, moron.*

"Hello, and welcome to Mind Song. Please lie back, and make sure your body is covered with at least a sheet. Participants often find their body temperatures lower during this session." The man's voice was low and soothing.

Right. He'd forgotten the sheet. Lee pulled the quilt over himself and winked at the others watching him. "Uh, predators can stop watching the birdie, please?" He closed his eyes and ignored Jeff's snickers.

The Mind Song voice continued. *"Comfy? Good. It's not uncommon to wiggle around while your body relaxes in this next segment. Muscles elongate while relaxing, so feel free to make adjustments if necessary."*

Yeah, yeah. I remember. Get on with it. Lee remembered he'd made quite a few adjustments of his long frame the first time. He wriggled, loosening knots in his back and legs he'd never known he had until he'd loosened them.

By the time the recording had taken him through the first body-relaxing exercises, Lee had again found hidden tensions, but he was still human. But this time, he knew what was about to happen and welcomed it. He wouldn't be a frightened bird. He'd be a bird with a man's consciousness. He'd... Somewhere in the middle of his ruminations, while he obediently controlled his breathing and listened to the wind sighing, he relaxed his mental grip on something he'd never known he squeezed until he let go.

Now his "unnaturally fast" heartbeat was perfectly normal, and he lived it. He felt warm and at home in a soft coat, and his mind quickened with a reaction time that

amazed him. Even though his eyes were shut, he knew he could see things his human body couldn't.

Prey. He was hungry. What would he find if he went hunting? A tasty lizard, perhaps? Lee opened his eyes and stood, fully aware he'd shifted and why. He'd done it! Exhilarated, he cooed a short song of triumph, but spreading his wings was impossible. One wing lay limp and nonfunctioning. Painful. He turned to look at it, and even that hurt. He squawked in pain. His talons dug eight holes in the fabric. He had tense toes, it seemed.

A wet black nose obscured his vision of the world. Will. It was Will. Lee swallowed the instinct to peck and run. Will sniffed delicately, wagging his bushy, sand-colored tail, with his ears erect. Lee gathered Will was pleased, at least.

There was just one problem. How did he get back to human? Come to think of it, he'd better stay human until his arm healed. His wing was close to agonizing. In fact, he folded his legs and dropped down onto the sofa where his butt had recently made a divot in the cushion. It was close enough to a nest. His head lowered until his beak rested on the edge of his impromptu nest edge, and he shut his eyes. All he wanted to do was go back to being human, where he could wear a cast, use his legs to walk, and maybe grill up a burger. That was more familiar. Being a bird wasn't normal!

Visualizing himself as human seemed to be the key. He felt that odd twist in his body, and his heart rate slowed to something approximating human, if a bit faster than what medical science considered "normal." Well, it made sense he'd have less trouble getting back to human. After all, that was what he was comfortable as.

Lee opened his left eye, and was relieved to see the world as he always had -- from the perspective of a person taller than the sofa, at least. He double-checked. "Yep, skin, not feathers. Cool." Fatigue washed over him. "Why am I so tired? And starving?"

Jeff shrugged, and the coyotes didn't move. "I'm clueless on that one. The coyotes are unaffected by shifting. They do it as effortlessly as breathing. Maybe it's because you shift to something non-mammalian? I could ask the other shifters when I return to the Park."

“Damn. Forgot there were other kinds. You implied there were.” Lee had to lie down. “Hope this goes away before dinner. I was going to invite you guys to grill out.” He could feel the need for sleep slurring his tongue. “But no one had better dare ask for wings. Got it?”

He fell asleep to laughter, at least.

Epilogue

Six Months Later...

Finally, they were alone. Will didn't know how to express his relief. Once Lee and the Pack Leader Jeff had teamed up to discover why the ground rumbled, and what they could learn, there had been few days free. Lee and Jeff worked long days, with Rody and Will to keep them company on long hiking and camping trips, and then back to the laboratory that had once been Lee's barn.

But for the next few days, Jeff was gone to Civilization. Will did not understand Civilization, but when Jeff came back, he was always tired and smelled funny. Rody liked being separated from Jeff even less, but he stayed with the Pack as the Pack Leader's Mate. All was well, so the day had been quiet and joyous. Until now.

Will's coyote form didn't allow for many facial expressions, but he could pin his ears back and tuck his tail between his legs. He also kept his eyes tightly shut, rather than allow the stinking flea shampoo in them. That had been a painful lesson right after Lee's cast had come off.

Lee lathered his fur well and set the timer for the recommended five minutes to allow the shampoo to kill the myriad fleas and ticks now infesting Will's fur. Then he pulled the rubberized cork on the tub and allowed the filthy water to flow down the drain to the drain field, where the sand and land cleansed the water and returned it to the earth. "There, lover. Hang tight, and I'll spray the shampoo out of your eyes."

Even the drops they regularly put between his shoulder blades couldn't kill some of the more stubborn pests, so Will submitted to the indignity of a bath in coyote form monthly. Well, that and he did enjoy having Lee's talented hands ministering to his fur until it was silky smooth. Even getting his face sprayed with water, as Lee did now, was well worth such momentary discomfort.

In the background, the television played Will's favorite entertainment -- old cartoons from the previous century, featuring a genius coyote and his elaborate attempts to capture his favorite prey. Will sympathized with the coyote. Roadrunners were indeed tasty, and much better than chicken.

Lee finished rinsing the suds out of Will's eyes, so Will was happy to behold his love and mate, properly naked and kneeling next to the tub. There was no sense in clothes, Lee often said, since Will rarely waited until he was outside to give a good shake and remove the water from his fur.

Will grinned to himself. Of course he did it deliberately. After all, getting Lee naked was in itself a reason to bathe. The timer chimed, and Will waited patiently until his fur was free of that disgusting smell.

When the water in the tub ran clean and clear of suds, dirt, and insects, Lee reached up to turn off the hand-held shower. "There we go, pal! All clean!" In those brief seconds, Lee was vulnerable.

Wickedly, Will transformed to human and pinned his mate to the tile floor. "Will Coyote catches Roadrunner Lee!" Then he rubbed noses with his mate. So much better than eating chicken was capturing a roadrunner.

The TV had the last comment. "Meep! Meep!"

Lena Austin

Lena Austin is a “fallen” Southern Belle with a checkered past. She has been a licensed minister, hairdresser, and Realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in archaeology, but did learn to scuba. After a life like that, writing about it is pretty restful. Of herself, Lena writes, “I’m tall, and I look like an unholy mating between an Amazon and a librarian. Everything else is subject to change on a whim.” She presently has over thirty books written, and has no plans to stop “until they pry my cold dead fingers from the keyboard.”

Email: voiceomt2002@yahoo.com

Web site: <http://www.LenaAustin.com>

Blog <http://depravedduchess.blogspot.com>

Facebook, Lena Austin’s there, but darned if she knows the address

Twitter, http://www.twitter.com/Lena_Austin

Yahoo! group (news only) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/LenaAustin> or

Yahoo! group (social) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Catitude>

Changeling Author Link <http://www.changelingpress.com/author.php?uid=11>