



Dedication:

For Rebecca, who is fond of Mitch and Todd and wields the transatlantic pointy stick so well.
Thank you for the unflagging support and encouragement -- I blame you for everything!

Journey to Compromise

Mara Ismine

"More coffee, hon?"

"I should be getting on my way." Mitch smiled at the tired waitress. "You must be ready to close."

"I'm stuck here for another half hour, hon, and I appreciate the company. So if you want some more..."

"I'm not that good company, but I'll have some more coffee." Mitch kept smiling. The coffee would give him a bit longer before he had to decide what he was going to do next.

"Believe me, hon, you *are* real good company after the day I've had." The waitress topped off his coffee while she told him all about her shit day.

Mitch smiled and nodded, making the occasional comment, but not really listening. His day hadn't been any better, and he didn't have anything to look forward to tomorrow.

"So, what brings you to this dead-end town, hon?" the waitress called across the diner as she stacked chairs on the empty tables, having finally run out of complaints.

"Just passing through," Mitch replied. He could answer automatically now; that question came up at least once a day. "Been a bad year for me. Ended a long-time relationship. Lost my job when the company went under. So I decided to move on. Been doing a bit of this and a bit of that to make ends meet. Any jobs going around here?"

"Not here, hon, this place is so dead they forgot to bury it!" His new friend patted him on the shoulder as she passed. "Can't even think of anyone looking for a bit of help in return for a meal or two."

"That was the next question." Mitch admitted with a tired grin. "Thanks anyway."

"I didn't do nothing, hon."

"You thought about it, which is more than some will do," Mitch replied, giving her another smile.

"Here, you finish this slice of pie." She came back to his table with a generous slice of apple pie. "I'd only have to sling it otherwise, not worth the arguments to take it home, it won't split five ways. And you know them kids'd never agree who was gonna get pie and who was gonna get cake."

"Wouldn't be kids if they could!" Mitch didn't really want the pie, but he took it anyway. She topped off his coffee again before going back to her clearing up.

"Doncha know it! You got any?"

"No. Been glad about that since the split." Mitch shrugged and took his empty plate over to the counter, wondering when these lies had become his life.

"I hear that, hon! You got a place to stay?"

"Yeah. I'm good." Mitch forced himself not to shudder at the thought of being dragged home to the screaming kids by his new friend. He brought his cup over to the counter and stacked the chairs on his table.

"No need for that, hon," the waitress said as she lugged a bucket of water and a mop around the counter.

"No big deal, let me give you a hand so you can get back to those kids of yours a bit quicker." He took the bucket and mop away from her and winked. "I do know how to work one of these!"

"There's not many men that say that!" She laughed and watched him for a moment before turning back to the things that needed doing behind the counter, apparently satisfied that he did know how to mop a floor.

Mitch found it soothing to do the simple task. Aidan would never believe it if he could see him now. But then, Aidan had never thought that Mitch could do anything right. And Aidan had probably never mopped a floor in his life.

"If I were ten years younger, I'd be taking you home and keeping you," the waitress said with a sigh as she took the bucket back.

"I don't think I'd do too well as a kept man," Mitch joked.

"No, hon, I don't reckon you would. That woman of yours musta had rocks for brains to let you get away!"

"We all have rocks for brains at times." Mitch tried to push her concern away. It hadn't been all Aidan's fault. It hadn't been all his fault, either. They had just gotten bad for each other and couldn't seem to turn things around. "I'd best be going and let you get closed up."

"There's another five minutes if you want it, hon."

"It's not going to get any warmer or any lighter out there." Mitch grinned at her from the door. "You have a good Christmas."

"You take care, hon. There's a lot of wolves around here, and they like to come into town when the moon's bright." She stared at him across the width of the diner, her eyes level.

"I'll be careful." Mitch nodded his head in thanks for the unnecessary warning and slipped out the door. Her "Merry Christmas" mingled with the chimes on the door, and both were cut off as the door closed behind him. Mitch breathed in a lungful of the crisp air outside thankfully. He headed along the empty street toward the motel, watching the side streets without seeming to. He had known that this was a wolf town the moment he got off the bus. This close to full moon, they would be antsy, just like he was. He could deal with one or two, but he didn't want the whole pack after him.

He didn't know what would be best to do. The vague, traveling itch that had pulled him across the country the last few months wasn't giving him any clues about which direction to take tomorrow. He had been planning on staying here for a few days, getting the holiday out of the way, maybe even working for a week or two before moving on. That was until he got off the bus and found wolves.

Maybe the traveling itch would be back by morning, and he could hike up to the interstate and hitch a ride in the right direction. It might be close to Christmas, but the truckers were still busy. The itch had left him before from time to time. The first time it happened, he had hoped he was wherever he was supposed to be, but a day later the itch was back and he moved on. Other times, he had stayed around until it had come back to drag him onto the road again.

Voices from an alley up ahead attracted his attention and drew his thoughts away from tomorrow to focus on the here and now. He was going to cross the street to avoid trouble, but something kept him where he was, walking toward it. Some days he didn't have the sense to come in out of the rain, he thought grimly. The last thing he needed was to get into anything in a wolf town. But he kept heading toward the mouth of the alley, listening intently. He couldn't make out the words, but the taunting tone was all too clear.

There was no one around on the main street. Even the diner was dark now, the waitress probably halfway back to her kids. Mitch slipped into the shadows near the alley and started to stalk. He paused at the mouth of the alley to listen and let his eyes adapt to the dark. There were no street lights down there. He didn't need them, but neither did the current occupants.

"Snivelin' cocksucker!" The insult was followed by the sound of a boot hitting flesh.

"Not so full of yourself now, are you, fag?" A second voice snickered.

"On your knees, you fucking pervert, I've got a treat for you!" More laughter greeted the third speaker.

Maybe four of them plus their victim, Mitch calculated as he slipped soundlessly around the corner and started to drift among the shadows and trash of the alley. He could make out the shapes of four men standing over a huddled form on the ground.

"On your knees! Or do you still think you're too good to suck wolves?"

The figure on the ground didn't move. A couple more kicks didn't provoke any response, not even a whimper. Mitch bared his teeth and took another moment to check that there was no one behind him before he acted. He knew that this was going to be brutal. It was too close to full moon for it to be any other way.

The fight was short and dirty, but Mitch was the only one left standing. He wiped the blood from his face. One of them had landed a good blow and split his lip, maybe loosened a couple of teeth. He kicked the wolves out of the way, checking to see that they were still breathing and weren't just faking unconsciousness. He didn't think any of them were strong enough to keep still while their balls were crushed. It was just a shame that they would recover with a shift or two. Killing any of the pack would only make matters worse, even such worthless members as these.

The figure on the ground still hadn't moved or made any sound. Mitch circled the victim warily, pulling his battle rage back under control. The poor kid had suffered enough already without him adding to it. He bit back an angry growl as his eyes picked out more details, and he had to force himself to stay calm. The kid's eyes were still open despite the bruises and torn clothes. For a moment Mitch worried that he was too late. But the eyes flinched when he reached out a hand.

"We got to get out of here, kid," he said softly, his voice barely a breath of air. The kid heard and stiffened in rejection, readying himself for more punishment, the eyes wary but defiant.

"Hey, I'm one of the good guys!" Mitch tried to grin, but it made his lip hurt more. "But I reckon this bunch has friends hereabouts. So we'd best not be here when they show up."

There was the faintest hiss of disagreement from the huddled form on the ground.

"You want to stay here? You were enjoying that?" Mitch drew back slightly as the thought occurred to him.

A breath of a growl answered that.

"Okay. So it's me you don't want to leave with." Mitch sighed and raked his hand through his hair. "I don't have time to talk this through. We've got to go, and I don't think you can get yourself out of here."

A slight movement and a stifled whimper.

"That's what I thought." Mitch nodded. "I'm not going to do any more damage to you, but I can't say I'm not going to hurt you. I don't reckon I can move you without hurting you. But look on the bright side, there's only one of me, so I've got to be a better bet than waiting for the four of them to wake up." Mitch took the slight flinch of the eyelids as agreement and gathered the kid into his arms as gently as he could. He stood up and wiped his feet thoroughly on the wolves. He could feel the question in the rigid body in his arms.

"Might slow them down a bit when they come to follow us," he explained, walking as smoothly as he could toward the mouth of the alley. "I've got a room at the motel," he went on as he

slipped into the shadows of the main street. "Unless there's somewhere else you'd rather I took you?"

Silence was his only answer.

"Yeah, that's what I figured." Mitch sighed and just concentrated on getting the kid back to his room as quickly and quietly as he could. He didn't want anyone who just happened to glance at the street to remember seeing him carrying a battered and beaten kid back to his room. He really didn't want to try and explain that to the authorities, any more than why he was taking the kid to his room rather than trying to get medical attention for him.

Once they were in the room, there was a short battle to separate the kid from his clothes and get him into the tub. Mitch won, but it didn't gain him any points with his guest. The kid hunched up at one end of the tub, the one farthest from Mitch, and glared at him.

"You need to get cleaned up," Mitch pointed out, filling the basin to wash his own face. "You know we can't stay here for long. The less blood on you, the less likely they are to be able to track us into the forest."

Insolent eyes ran over Mitch's blood-spattered clothes.

"Yeah. I've got to get cleaned up, too." Mitch rolled his eyes and stripped off his shirt, ignoring the sudden increase in tension behind him. "I haven't got the time or the inclination to take advantage of you right now," he muttered. "You aren't at your most attractive with blood, snot, and wolf stink all over you."

That gained him a flash of anger. Mitch chuckled and put the soap and a clean washcloth on the edge of the tub. He had revised his estimate of the kid's age upward during the struggle to get him in the tub. His unwilling guest might be small and slender, but the kid wasn't a child. He might even be legally adult, as well as physically. But that still made him way too young for Mitch to be thinking about as anything but an abused kid.

"Get yourself cleaned up, kid, or I'll have to do it for you!" Mitch glared at the defiant form in the tub. "I'm going to get us some clean clothes. I know mine won't fit you, but we aren't going to be wearing them for long once we get into the forest, are we?"

There was a sort of wary agreement in the posture, and, maybe, just a hint of hope.

"Don't know about you, kid," Mitch said over his shoulder as he was leaving the bathroom, "but I'd like to live to see if next year will be any better than this one."

He pulled a couple of clean sweat shirts out of his pack with some jogging pants and a pair of cut-off jeans. He stripped the rest of his clothes off and pulled on the jogging pants before returning to the bathroom with a sweat shirt and the cut-offs. The kid had made some attempt to get clean, but was having to put more effort into staying conscious than scrubbing. Mitch took over and ignored the non-verbal protests. The kid was soon clean, dry, and dressed, as well as

angry, frightened, and embarrassed. Mitch resisted the urge to tousle his hair and grin at him. He dumped the kid's filthy clothes in the bath water and swilled the worst of the dirt and blood out of them.

The wet clothes and his own dirty ones got double-wrapped in plastic trash bags and stuffed into his backpack, along with the few belongings he had unpacked. Mitch picked up the kid and the backpack and slipped out of the room, locking it after him and putting the key in the pack. It wouldn't stop the wolves for long, but every extra minute might count. He was sure that the wolves would be after them. The insult to the pack would be more important than what those four bastards had been doing.

He used all the concealment he could find to get them into the forest out back of the motel. Once they were in the trees, he settled the kid more securely in his arms and started to run. He found a stream and ran in the water for a while, following the meandering course downstream. The stream cut through a rocky area, and he left the water to climb the rocks.

He set the kid down on the first almost-flat area he found and quickly stripped off his own clothes, and then stripped the kid, despite a rather vicious elbow in the face. He bundled the clothes into another trash bag and left the kid shivering while he climbed a near-vertical rock face to hide the backpack in a crevice. It was damn cold and he wasn't used to naked rock climbing, but he got safely back to the kid without leaving any telltale blood trail.

"What's with you, kid?" Mitch sighed and glared at the naked bundle of bruises still sitting on the rock where he'd left him. "You waiting for me to go first or something?"

That earned him a short head shake, and the kid wouldn't meet his eyes. Mitch squatted down and grabbed the kid's chin as gently as he could, lifting it until the kid had to look at his face or at his half-frozen cock and virtually invisible balls. Mitch figured that the kid would prefer his face to even the obviously unthreatening cock. And he was right, sort of. The kid was freezing, but his eyes were filled with shame and anger.

"Can't." The word was a sulky hiss of breath.

"You do talk English, after all! I was beginning to think you didn't. By 'can't,' do you mean 'right now' or 'ever'?" Mitch had a sudden, sinking feeling that he had gotten something terribly wrong.

"Now!" was the scornful mutter that went with the eye roll.

"Phew. I was getting worried. Thought I might have to climb back up there for the clothes! It's not a problem kid, but you do have to trust me. Yeah. Yeah, I know you don't want to do that, but it is our only option." Mitch stared into cynical eyes. "Unless you want to sit here freezing your ass off until the wolves find us?"

A look close to hatred and a tilt of the jaw to expose the throat were his only answers.

"C'mon kid," Mitch said with a weary sigh. "You know it's only symbolic." He leaned down and bit the offered throat gently, despite the rush that made him want to mark and draw blood. "Too fucking close to the moon for doing this," he muttered grimly and pulled away from the temptation, but he couldn't stop himself from licking one of the raw scrapes on the kid's shoulder for a taste.

The kid flinched away from him with an accusing look, but still started to turn his stiff and injured body. Mitch throttled a growl and lifted the kid into position, feeling the resistance thrumming through the scrawny frame. He arranged their bodies quickly; the sooner this was done, the better. The kid's ass felt like a chunk of ice and had about as much give.

"Bite!" Mitch half sighed, half growled, holding his forearm in front of the kid's mouth. Sharp teeth sank deep into his flesh and he snarled a curse. Damn kid would go overboard on this part. "Slacken up, kid, or this won't be symbolic after all!" Mitch managed to form the warning words even as he rubbed his rapidly hardening cock against the kid's deep-frozen ass and growled deep in his throat. The teeth withdrew to just rest against his skin, and a nervous tongue soothed the bite. Another warning snarl delivered to the back of the kid's neck stopped the movement.

Mitch bit down, more savagely than he intended, and broke the thin skin. The swirl of blood in his mouth shut down thought for a few moments. He fought back into control and growled warningly again at the resistant body beneath him. He felt the kid's muscles writhe in rejection, and then the kid exhaled and let his body go limp in Mitch's hold.

Mitch growled in approval, his teeth still fixed on the kid's nape. He rocked his hips, rubbing his now fully erect cock against the kid's ass. He concentrated all his willpower on not doing any more than rubbing, and let the rest of his instincts take over. Fur flowed over his skin, muscles writhed and altered, pulling the bones into new configurations. The change swept over his body and on through the kid's.

Mitch held the position for a few seconds, grinding against silky fur as the rush and release of the shift triggered another, more embarrassing release. Mitch forced his fangs to unlock and let go. He backed away slowly, enjoying the ass-high sight for a split second before the kid reacted and spun around to face him with a snarl, tail whipping in fury. Mitch uttered a warning growl and turned to lead the way back to the stream. His ears flickered, listening hard. The kid hissed and then followed him. Mitch relaxed and trotted faster. They needed to get clear of the town and hunt. He was hungry, and the kid needed fresh meat, plenty of it, to complete the cure begun by the shifting.

A sharp pain in the tip of his tail had him spinning around with a snarl, to find the stream empty behind him. A soft hiss drew his eyes upward. Green eyes glowed at him from the top of a rocky cliff that rose from the water. The eyes blinked and vanished.

Grumbling to himself, Mitch followed. The cliff face offered plenty of purchase for paw and claw, but maybe not for wolf paws and claws. It was a good place for them to leave the stream, Mitch admitted to himself, but the tip of his tail still stung from the bite. Damn kid. It wasn't as

though he had deliberately come during the shift. It had just happened. These things did. Sometimes.

Mitch followed the flickering tip of the kid's tail through the trees and brush. The wolf stink was lessening, but they weren't clear of the pack's territory yet. They couldn't afford to take the time to hunt until they were beyond the pack's control. Damn wolves were touchy about that. Mitch sighed. It wasn't likely that the wolves would be willing to forgive a little poaching, even if he had left the morons abusing the kid still breathing.

Another hour of slipping through the dark forest didn't improve Mitch's mood. It had been a shit day, and he had been almost looking forward to sleeping in that motel bed. It had been dry and moderately clean. And paid for.

Instead, he was running around in the dark, following some kid whose name he didn't even know. With wolves probably howling for his blood. He was tired. And hungry. And having increasing difficulty in controlling his lust for the sleek ass he was following.

It didn't matter that the kid was way too young for him. Or that he had been badly abused only a couple of hours ago. That was in human form. The longer Mitch was in cougar form, the less important all the human reasons became. He was bathed in the scent of the cougar in front of him. A scent mixed with his own and the musk of sex. He caught glimpses of the dried traces of his own come on that silky fur. It was driving him mad.

Mitch hadn't been controlled by the animal impulses of his beast for many years. But normally he didn't shift until he was ready to hunt. The beast was always hungry after the shift. That hunger was readily satisfied by fresh meat. Or fighting. Or sex.

The ritual dominance to force the kid's shift and the delayed hunt were making it very difficult for Mitch to remember why he couldn't just take what was in front of him. It would be so easy to just pounce and bury himself in that ass. The ass that his beast insisted was his by right. Mitch clung to his human side, which knew that giving in to the cougar would be a very bad idea. He had enough guilt in his life already without adding *that* to it.

He almost sighed with relief when the kid slowed from a steady trot and began to move in the unmistakable way that said "hunt" to all of Mitch's senses. The deer didn't stand a chance against the two of them. Cougars were normally solitary hunters, but humans were used to working together. They fed with only a minimum of snarling and growling at each other. Mitch knew that the kid needed the vitamin- and mineral-rich soft tissues more than he did, even if his beast didn't fully share that opinion. He gorged himself on muscle and marrow and let the kid eat his fill of the tender belly and soft organs within.

There wasn't enough of the carcass left to be worth dragging anywhere for later by the time they both finished with it. They moved away to let the smaller denizens of the forest fight over the remains.

The kid took the lead again. Mitch sighed and rolled his eyes, but followed. His beast wanted to force the issue and remind the kid just who had submitted in the ritual, but Mitch was tired and this was the kid's home. It wasn't worth fighting over as long as the kid took them somewhere safe enough to sleep.

The shallow cave *was* a good place to sleep. The approach was difficult enough to keep the wolves away if they came this far. It was almost difficult enough to keep Mitch away, with his stomach as full as it was. The kid didn't seem to have much trouble with the climb.

Mitch sighed and flopped onto the sandy floor. He was more than ready to sleep. He licked lazily at one paw and let his eyes drift toward shut. Now that one hunger was satisfied, the other was easier to control. The kid was cleaning himself more energetically. Mitch watched him from beneath heavy eyelids.

The image of that long, agile tongue paying as much attention to Mitch's body as it was to its own dispelled some of Mitch's drowsy contentment. Damn kid was flexible, too. Even for a cougar, some of the positions he was getting into weren't easy. Mitch watched that tongue cover every inch of fur as it slowly worked its way from shoulder toward tail.

The kid hissed and jerked his head away from his back as the scent of Mitch's come intensified. Green eyes shot an accusing glare across the cave before he licked cautiously at the matted fur again, his whole body expressing his distaste.

Mitch growled and rolled to his feet. He padded heavily across the cave. The kid snarled at him and crouched, ready to attack. Mitch growled and cuffed him across the ear to remind him just who was dominant here. The kid had no chance against him in a fight, and they both knew it. The kid hissed and spat, but reluctantly dropped eye contact.

Mitch rumbled a soft, warning growl and placed one heavy paw between the kid's shoulder blades. His teeth closed on the loose skin at the back of the kid's neck, and shook it slightly. The kid snarled one last protest with flattened ears before turning his head away and letting the tension drain from his body, accepting Mitch's dominance.

Mitch released the kid's neck but left his paw in place between the kid's shoulder blades. He settled down beside the kid's reluctant body and started to lick along the kid's flank. Mitch slowly and methodically cleaned every last trace of his come from the matted fur, smoothing it back into silky perfection. The kid's scent filled his nose. The kid's flavor filled his mouth. This had been a very bad idea.

Mitch continued letting his tongue stroke the sleek body even after the last of the salty come was cleaned away. It felt good. It felt right. And that was what brought him to his senses and made him turn back to his own side of the cave. It wasn't good or right for him to force any sort of attention on the kid. They were out of danger for now. The kid was healed, fed, and cleaned. He did not belong to Mitch, despite what his beast felt about it.

Mitch sighed and curled up on the sandy floor to sleep, his back firmly toward the furred temptation sharing the cave. In the morning, they would go their separate ways. No ties. No regrets. No complications. Or, at least, no more than he already had.

He dreamed of sleek fur and warmth. He woke, purring, at dawn to find himself entwined with the kid. He wasn't sure which of them had moved in the night. He licked sleepily at the rounded ears resting on his shoulder. The kid's purr blended with his own. Mitch hadn't realized just how much he had missed waking up with another living, breathing body beside him. This felt good. Very good.

The kid didn't seem to share Mitch's opinion. He was treated to a whole range of glares, growls and hisses of displeasure until they left the cave and headed back toward town to retrieve the backpack. Maybe the kid had expected to wake up in human form, Mitch thought, and wasn't happy to spend so long as a cougar. But he didn't think the kid would have been happy to go through the shifting ritual again back there, either. The kid had recognized and, reluctantly, accepted the ritual to shift and heal, so he must know that the only way to shift back was using the ritual again.

Wolf-stink surrounded their trail once they passed the edge of the pack's territory. They moved more cautiously, but didn't see any wolves waiting for them to return. The wolves had hung around below the crevice he had hidden the backpack in, but hadn't climbed up to get it. He retrieved it with less difficulty than it had taken to plant it there. He should have shifted first and avoided that cold, naked climb the previous night. He had short-rigged the straps for a mouth carry automatically before stashing the pack.

The kid led Mitch around the edge of the town to an old cabin where he had been staying, judging from the scent of him all around it. Mitch followed him inside and dropped the backpack by the door. The kid was twitchy and shooting him more accusing glares.

Mitch sighed and stalked over to him. They needed to shift back to human using the ritual. It wasn't as though Mitch had invented it, or even used it deliberately. It hadn't been his fault the kid didn't have enough strength to shift himself. He felt put upon, angry, and something else he wasn't going to look at too closely. He had saved the kid, fixed him up, and gotten him out of town to heal. And all it had gotten Mitch was distrust and evil looks.

Mitch met the kid's glare with one of his own. They both knew what had to be done. The kid snarled and spat some more before reluctantly turning away from Mitch and crouching, ass presented for Mitch to mount.

Mitch moved forward, covering the slighter form. They fit together well, and the kid's sweet scent filled his nostrils. He squashed a fleeting regret that this wasn't for real. He sternly reminded himself of the abuse the kid had suffered only the evening before. There was no way that the kid would be remotely interested in a quick fuck. Or even a leisurely one.

Mitch bit down on the rich fur and rubbed himself against the sleek ass, willing his change to happen quickly. He released the kid and rolled away before the shift was complete.

"You only interested in the helpless?" the kid demanded belligerently. "Does the power rush turn you on?"

"What the fuck is your problem, kid?" Mitch snarled back, reaching for the backpack and pulling out some clothes.

"My problem? Huh!" The kid sneered at him. "You've been drooling over my ass for hours."

"Maybe. But I haven't done anything about it, have I?" Mitch snapped back before he could think about it. "I'm not some damn moronic wolf."

"You're attracted to helplessness, though, same as they are," the kid retorted, glaring. "Now that I'm not so helpless, you aren't interested."

"What?" Mitch felt like he had seriously lost the plot somewhere in this conversation.

"You've been blowing hot and cold all night," the kid snarled. "You think I couldn't smell it? But you never followed through. Or don't you like the idea of used goods?"

"You are one fucked-up individual, kid." Mitch shook his head. Was the kid really complaining because he hadn't made a move on him?

"My name is Todd," the kid snapped with one of his glares.

"Okay. You are one fucked-up individual, *Todd*," Mitch repeated. "I am not some pedophile who'd force himself on an injured kid."

"I'm not a kid." Todd bristled. "I'm twenty-three."

"Okay." Mitch sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. "You aren't a kid, even if you look like jailbait. But I'm still not a rapist."

"If you didn't want me, why did you take me away from the wolves?" Todd scowled at him with a hint of uncertainty.

"You'd rather I left you to them?" Mitch demanded incredulously. "Were you actually enjoying that?"

"No! Of course I wasn't enjoying it," Todd snarled, rounding his shoulders and wrapping his arms around his chest defensively. "But why did you get involved?"

"I had an attack of rocks for brains and waded in when I should have just walked on by." Mitch sighed and scrubbed his face again. "I don't know what your problem is. I would have done the same for anyone."

"Oh."

Todd sounded almost disappointed by that. Mitch dragged his clothes on, trying to ignore the naked body so close to him. He really needed to get out of this town. Nothing had gone right since he'd gotten here.

"But you wanted me last night," Todd muttered. "You just didn't do anything about it."

"Yes, I wanted you." Mitch rolled his eyes and pulled his sweatshirt down. "But I didn't think you were interested after the damned wolves. You seemed pissed off about the shift."

"You made my fur sticky."

"I cleaned it up for you." Mitch sighed, forcing the memories away with an effort.

"And then ignored me."

"What do you want from me, kid? Sorry -- Todd?" Mitch turned to glare at the slight figure. "You want me to say that it was damned difficult following your ass without fucking your brains out? It was. You want me to say that I think you are sex on legs? I do. What the hell do you want?"

"I don't know what I want." Todd's shoulders slumped. "I just don't understand why..."

"Why I'd rescue you without fucking you?" Mitch asked softly, stepping forward to tilt that sharp chin up and make Todd meet his eyes.

Todd nodded, flinching slightly, his hazel eyes wary.

"I don't expect payment in kind for the rescue," Mitch said carefully. "Although a thank you might be nice," he added wistfully.

"Th-thank you," Todd stammered.

"You're welcome." Mitch grinned and stepped back, releasing Todd's chin. "Now. You're home safe, and I'll be on my way."

"Do you want breakfast first? I've got some eggs," Todd offered hesitantly.

"You get dressed. I'll make breakfast," Mitch found himself saying when he had meant to turn down the offer and get away from the confusing, attractive kid.

"Where are you going? Back to the motel?" Todd asked as they sat at the rickety table and ate breakfast.

"No. I'm going to head up to the interstate and see if I can hitch a ride," Mitch told him around a mouthful of food. "I don't think it would be a good idea for me to hang around here. You might want to think about relocating, too."

"Yeah. I have been thinking of it." Todd shrugged. "Are you headed anywhere in particular?"

"No. I'm just drifting." Mitch cleaned his plate without meeting Todd's eyes across the table.

"I've got a car," Todd said, "If you want, we could move on together..."

"A car?" Mitch wasn't sure why he was surprised. Most people had cars. He'd had one until it broke down one too many times and he abandoned it for the bus.

"It's not much." Todd grinned and ducked his head, looking even more like a little kid. "It's old, but it runs good."

Somehow, Mitch found himself leaving town with Todd an hour later. He wasn't sure when he had agreed to it. It didn't seem like one of his better ideas. He was trapped in the car with the infuriating, sexy kid -- no, not kid, *man* -- for hours with nothing to do but think about him.

"You live there long?" Mitch asked Todd, hoping that conversation would help keep his blood supply mainly above the belt line.

"No. I didn't really live there at all, just stayed there a few days," Todd finally replied after a couple minutes of silence. "I was hoping to find somewhere to spend the worst of the winter. I didn't think the wolves would bother me if I didn't bother them."

"Wolves are pack animals; they're always bothered by anyone in their territory. I've had a few run-ins with them over the years." Mitch grinned sourly at the memories. "Wolves are always bad news to other shifters."

"There weren't many where I grew up." Todd shrugged, keeping his eyes fixed on the road. "I'll know better next time."

"Yeah, you will." Mitch wished that the lesson had come easier. "What are you doing up this way, Todd?"

"I needed to get away from home." Todd squirmed in his seat and gripped the steering wheel tighter. "I thought I'd look around and find someplace to stay that looked good. What brought you here?"

"A bus." Mitch chuckled when he got the expected glare. "My long-term relationship ended badly. My firm went bust. I got an itch to travel, and I've been drifting ever since."

"Were you married?"

"No. We talked about it, but we liked where we lived and didn't want to move to another state just for a piece of paper. Good thing in the end."

"Why would you need to move to..." Todd started, but trailed off as he added things up and realized.

"Gay marriage wasn't an option in our state," Mitch said, just to be sure Todd had reached the right conclusion.

"You're gay?" Todd glanced away from the road for a second to stare at Mitch with a strange expression on his face.

"Yeah. I don't advertise the fact, but I don't hide it, either." Mitch wondered if he should have kept quiet this time, too. Why did he want Todd to know he was gay? The kid had been starting to relax around him; had Mitch just blown that?

"That's why I needed to leave home," Todd said quietly after another long silence. "My folks weren't too happy when I told them I was gay."

"Sorry it went that way for you. Some parents can deal, others can't." Mitch shrugged. It was an old argument. He had friends who never came out to their families and suffered for the lies they lived. Others didn't live the lies and didn't have families. The lucky ones were accepted.

"Could yours?" Todd asked.

"My folks were good people. They were disappointed over grandchildren, but they came around and accepted me, and Aidan, in the end." Mitch shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Those were bad memories. It had taken his folks a couple of years to get to that stage.

"Were?" Todd latched onto that.

"Yeah. They're dead now. Car accident took my dad, and my mom sort of pined away after that. They were life mates. My sister calls now and again, but we don't have much to say to each other."

"Your parents were shifters?"

"Yours weren't?"

"No. It had been dormant in their families for several generations. I was a big shock to them." Todd grinned mirthlessly at the road. "They couldn't take my being gay on top of the shifting."

"Their loss," Mitch said, waiting to meet Todd's questioning look. "You didn't choose to be, either. And the shifting was certainly their doing."

"I think they felt guilty about that," Todd mused. "Maybe that's why they reacted so badly. You don't hold with 'gayness' being inherited?"

"I don't know. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. It's more important to me how you live with it than where it came from." Mitch settled back for the debate he was sure he was going to get. The conversation moved away from painful personal issues into more general areas. Time passed quickly on the empty road.

They pulled off onto an old logging track as night fell. There was no point in paying for a motel room for full moon. Todd was able to shift without Mitch's help. Mitch told himself sternly that he wasn't disappointed about that. They roamed the forest and hunted together without the tension of the previous night. They curled up under a pine tree near the car to sleep. Todd settled next to Mitch as though they had been sleeping together regularly.

Mitch woke to purring, his and Todd's, and an agile tongue licking his ears. His sleep- and pleasure-fogged brain did not object to the attention. He rolled to his back and enjoyed the sensation of that tongue working its way down his belly to bathe his balls and his suddenly needy cock. He opened his eyes to find Todd straddling him as he worked. Mitch enjoyed the view for a few moments before letting his tongue do some exploring of its own.

Todd tasted even better than he looked. Mitch lapped at the tight, furred balls in front of his nose, watching the bright red, glistening cock emerge and harden. He wished he could feel it in his mouth, but that just didn't work too well in cougar form. Fangs were a serious impediment to oral sex.

Todd's tongue rasped along Mitch's cock, drawing a yowl from Mitch's throat at the pleasure-pain of it. A few more licks had him climaxing, spraying come over Todd's muzzle even as Todd came over his face. They curled up together, licking each other clean before shifting back to human form.

Mitch opened his mouth to ask what that had been about, but shut it without speaking. Did it really matter? It had been good. Todd had started it, so he didn't have to feel guilty about forcing himself on the younger man. He decided that he didn't need to know why. He would just enjoy the afterglow.

"We need gas," Todd said soon after they got back on the road. "We'll have to stop at the first place we find."

"Okay. Maybe we can find some breakfast there." Mitch let the silence settle around them again. They were climbing into the mountains. There were pockets of snow along the side of the road, and the sky was that leaden gray that promised more to follow.

They found a small town just before the fuel gauge needle fell off the bottom of the red. The gas station was open and there were lights on in the attached workshop. There was a diner and a laundromat side by side across the street. They pulled up to the pumps at Assend Gas & Service.

"Looks perfect," Mitch said. "We can fill up, get fed, and clean our clothes without hardly leaving the car."

"I want to leave the car," Todd grouched with a grin. "My butt is getting seat-shaped."

"Not from here, it isn't." Mitch leered quietly as Todd climbed out to pump gas. Todd gave him the finger and was still laughing when there was a loud crunch and a lot of swearing from the workshop.

Mitch and Todd arrived at the workshop door together. Mitch didn't remember getting out of the car. The lower half of a pair of legs was sticking out beneath the front of a car with its hood up. The swearing seemed to be coming out of the open hood.

"You need some help under there?" Mitch shouted to be heard over the vitriolic curses.

"Sure do. Just lift this bitch off me and I'll scoot right out! Idiots asking damnfool questions," a voice said.

Mitch ignored the sarcasm and turned to Todd. "If I lift it up, can you drag him out?"

Todd nodded and dropped to the grimy floor to peer under the car. "I think you'll have to lift it about six inches to get the gearbox off his chest, unless it's still loose."

"It ain't loose or I wouldn't be talking. I'd be dead," the voice snapped. "Just fixed the second bolt when she dropped on me."

"Anything else likely to give if I lift her?" Mitch asked.

"Get the damn fire department, Superman. You ain't gonna be able to lift this old hag by yourself. Lord give me patience."

"No harm in trying," Mitch said with a nod to Todd. He straddled the legs and hooked his hands under the bumper. His fingers found the jack points and he crouched, ready to take the strain.

Todd scooted over to grip the man's ankles. "Nice view," he said, too softly for the man under the car to hear.

Mitch fought back a laugh at the inappropriate comment. Now wasn't the time to tackle Todd, but there would be time for that later. Mitch steadied his breathing and pushed himself up, taking the car with him. It was heavy, but not too heavy for his moon-enhanced muscles.

"Got him!" Todd's voice called out.

Mitch breathed out and lowered the car back to the ground. He unclenched his fingers and stood up, stretching and twisting to work the kinks out. Muscles and joints popped and cracked, but nothing seemed to be damaged. Mitch was grateful for that.

He turned to find Todd helping a wizened old man sit up on the dolly. The mechanic could have been anywhere between fifty and ninety.

"I don't get the cape and the tights, Superman?"

"It's laundry day," Mitch replied. "Do we need to take you to the hospital, old man?"

"Name's Jed. Nearest hospital's forty miles off." Jed rubbed his chest and spat thoughtfully into the corner. "Don't reckon it'd be worth the journey when it'd already be dark when we got there. I only need a night or two to fix this." He eyed Mitch knowingly. "Reckon you know what I mean."

"Reckon I do." Mitch nodded, his nose finally picking up the scent under the oil and gas reek of the workshop. "Are there many lynx in these parts?"

"There's one or two." Jed nodded. "This is a nice, quiet town. Kinda peaceful, you know?"

"No wolves here, then," Todd muttered.

"Not the sort that cause bother. Are you two the bothersome sort?"

"We don't bother anyone who doesn't bother us." Mitch glared at Jed. The tone of Jed's question raised his hackles more than the words themselves. "What are you doing, Todd?" Mitch transferred the glare to Todd's legs, which were now sticking out from beneath the car.

"Just finishing up those gearbox bolts." Todd's voice floated out of the hood and was followed by metallic clicking.

"That's mighty neighborly of you, son. Do you know what you're doing under there?"

"Sure. Got the same gearbox on mine. Had to replace it a couple of times."

Mitch rolled his eyes. Todd sounded happy to be rolling around on the oily floor with a wrench or whatever.

"You looking to stay around here, boys?" The old mechanic was watching Mitch intently again.

"We were looking for gas and breakfast. And time to do some laundry," Mitch muttered, looking at the black grime on what was visible of Todd's jeans.

"I've got some spare coveralls someplace, but it's probably a bit late for them now." Jed laughed and rubbed his chest again.

"Probably." Mitch agreed. "Do you need to lie down or something?"

"My partner'll be along in a bit. I'll do until he gets here. You boys could find worse places to stay a spell, you know?"

"That I do know," Mitch replied with feeling. "Any work going around here? Can't afford to stay for the scenery."

"There might be a few odd jobs, for the right person. We've got plenty of scenery for free. I'm thinking you'd fit in here." The old man nodded abruptly, his eyes sharp on Mitch.

"You can tell that from a few minutes' talk?" Mitch raised his eyebrows.

"Met a lot of people in my time. Know how to size them up right quick." Jed tapped his nose and smirked at Mitch. "And when the Lord gives you a Christmas miracle, it don't do to count its teeth too close."

Mitch blinked and decided not to point out that he wasn't a miracle, or a horse, or anyone's idea of a gift. Todd asked something technical from under the car and the old man replied. Mitch didn't follow one word in ten of the resulting conversation. "I'll just go and pump our gas," he muttered, slipping out of the workshop.

He filled the tank and pulled the car away from the pump. Another car pulled across him, blocking him in. Mitch frowned and rolled his eyes. His luck was running true. Now he had to explain to the local sheriff why he hadn't yet paid for the gas.

Mitch got out of the car slowly, he knew better than to make any sudden moves. The sheriff was standing on the far side of the county car, watching him. Mitch nodded a greeting.

"You fixing to pay for that gas, son?" The sheriff's tone was neutral, but his eyes were suspicious.

"Just heading that way now, sheriff." Mitch tried to match the neutrality and add a bit of politeness.

"The cash desk is over that way." The sheriff indicated the small building next to the workshop.

"But Jed is in the workshop," Mitch countered. He walked away from the sheriff toward the workshop. He tried to stay relaxed despite the itching between his shoulder blades. He could hear the sheriff following at a discreet distance and could imagine the beefy hand resting on the gun riding at the sheriff's hip.

Mitch stepped into the workshop, interrupting an animated discussion between Todd and Jed involving compression ratios, whatever those were. It took him a moment to tear his gaze away from Todd's oil-streaked and happy face and remember what he was doing there. And who was behind him.

"Here's the money for the gas." Mitch pulled the crumpled bills from his pocket slowly and held them out to Jed. Mitch felt the itch between his shoulder blades intensify as he reached into his pocket.

"Reckon I owe you a tank of gas, Superman. What with Todd here finishing the job for me and all." Jed's bright eyes fixed on Mitch, and his head cocked in an unspoken question.

"That's not necessary, but I won't say I don't appreciate it." Mitch tried to smile, but waiting for a bullet to replace the itch made it difficult. "If you would just tell the sheriff as much..."

"Thought I heard his car." Jed frowned, trying to peer around Mitch. "That you out there, Robbie?"

"Yes, Jed. You got a problem here?"

The sheriff's voice was closer to him than Mitch expected. Todd stiffened at the strange voice, wariness replacing his happiness. Mitch walked forward and turned to watch the sheriff. It was just automatic to put his larger body between Todd and the threat of the gun.

"Looks like you're the only problem around here right now, Robbie," Jed grouched. "You been hassling Superman?"

"My name is Mitch," Mitch muttered, without much hope of Jed paying any attention. The old man's gaze was fixed on the door and the sheriff.

"I wasn't hassling," Sheriff Robbie protested. "I was just concerned, was all."

"Not concerned enough to get here when you said you would," Jed sniped with a glare.

"As if you notice the time when you're working on an engine." Robbie snorted.

"I notice the time real fine when I've got a gearbox sitting on my chest."

"You're hurt?"

Sheriff Robbie was suddenly replaced by a fussing mother hen who rushed to Jed's side and patted at him, checking for injury. Mitch relaxed slightly. Jed hadn't mentioned that his partner was the local sheriff, but only someone close would be that concerned.

"Quit your fussing, Robbie! Nothing wrong with me that a nice walk in the woods won't mend." Jed's voice was tetchy, but there was a fond look on his face. "You boys be able to mind the store while Robbie takes me for a walk?" Jed demanded rather than asked.

"I can work a cash register if I have to." Mitch shook his head at the manipulative old mechanic. "You go and check out the woods. Maybe the diner does take away..."

"Won't be much business this time of day anyway." Jed grinned at Mitch. "No reason you can't get your breakfast and do your laundry while you mind this place."

"I don't think they'd want me in the diner right now." Todd moved up beside Mitch, grimacing at the state of his clothes. Todd's arm brushed Mitch's as he stood at his side.

"Maybe not. Cissie can be a bit fussy sometimes," Jed said mournfully in what sounded like the voice of experience.

"Not everyone appreciates oil and grease on their clothes, Jed. I'll get you boys some breakfast," Sheriff Robbie said unexpectedly. "What do you want to eat?"

"This is a lot better food than the last time I got a free breakfast from the local law," Mitch muttered around a mouthful of bacon a short while later.

Sheriff Robbie had brought them back plates heaped to overflowing and large mugs of coffee before he disappeared with Jed behind the workshop. The bickering faded as they moved slowly away into the forest surrounding the town.

"You spent much time in jail?" Todd asked casually when he had washed his own mouthful down with a swig of coffee.

"Only a night or two here and there when I haven't had the right answers." Mitch took a swig of his own coffee and watched Todd carefully. "I've never done time, if that's what you're asking."

"I didn't think you were the type." Todd shrugged. "I've never had any serious problems with the law, either. I think this is the first time a sheriff has bought me breakfast."

"Best keep it that way." Mitch grinned. "They don't normally spring for this much or this good."

Todd went back to tinkering with the car once they had finished eating. Mitch took the plates back to the diner and took a rain check on more coffee and some pie. He made use of the laundromat. He kept an eye on the gas pumps and the workshop while their clothes sloshed together in the washer. No customers pulled in, and Todd didn't come out.

It was a very quiet town. He wondered if Todd would be willing to stay here for a while. Then he wondered when Todd had become the deciding factor for him staying. His beast was firm in the belief that Todd belonged to him. But they hadn't talked about anything beyond the moment in human form. Maybe it was time to do that.

He folded the clean, dry clothes and packed them into his backpack, smiling wistfully at how right it seemed to have Todd's clothes mixed with his. He must be getting old and sappy, he thought impatiently.

He collected the coffee and pie and headed back to the workshop. Todd hadn't been idle in his absence. Mitch blinked at the now clean and tidy workshop. Tools hung gleaming from the racks

along the walls, and the floor was pale gray with only a few patches of black grime. Todd was on his hands and knees scrubbing the last portion, working his way back to the door.

Mitch grinned as he admired the sway of Todd's ass and the position. The workshop might be cleaner, but it looked like most of the grime had transferred to Todd. Even his pale hair was dark and spiky.

"Looks like you could do with a coffee," Mitch said softly. "I wouldn't have recognized this place."

"Coffee would be good. Let me just finish this." Todd sat back on his heels and surveyed the freshly scrubbed floor, wiping his forearm across his face and rearranging the smears of dirt. He grinned over his shoulder at Mitch. "It does look better, though. This is a good place. I wouldn't mind..."

Todd didn't finish his thought, just turned away and went back to his scrubbing with more enthusiasm. Mitch could see the pale skin behind Todd's ears burning with a blush. What had Todd been going to say to produce that?

"There's pie to go with the coffee, but it'll wait 'til you're done. I thought you were going to work on the engine, not the floor?" Mitch kept his tone even and friendly. He wanted to demand what had made Todd blush, but he already knew well enough that wouldn't work. Todd would only clam up if pushed.

"I was." Todd laughed softly. "But I'm too dirty to be leaning on the paintwork, and I couldn't find anything clean enough to cover it. And my feet kept sticking to the floor."

"I've done the laundry, but you're going to need some scrubbing before you're fit to put on clean clothes."

"I know. I'll probably have to clean me, clean the rest room, and clean me again," Todd groaned.

"There's a rest room?" Mitch blinked. It was a gas station, so there probably was *something*. "I thought maybe an outhouse without running water."

"That's where I found the bucket and cleaning stuff. It's out back, but it *is* part of the building." Todd laughed more loudly. "It has hot and cold water and even a pay shower."

Mitch felt a strange sensation in his chest as Todd turned sparkling eyes to him, white teeth flashing against the grime on his face. He fought down the urge to walk over and kiss Todd senseless, and to hell with the dirt and grime.

"Not sure I've got enough change to run the shower long enough to get you clean," Mitch growled, and was rewarded with another carefree laugh from Todd. It was a sound he wouldn't mind getting used to.

Todd finished scrubbing the floor and stood up, stretching his body in a way that urged Mitch's blood to head south. They stood outside the workshop in the weak winter sun, sipping coffee and eating pie. Todd watched the street and Mitch watched Todd.

"It's nice here." Todd finally broke the silence.

"Yeah. I wouldn't mind staying a while," Mitch agreed. "I was thinking about it earlier. You got anywhere you got to be?"

"No. I'd like to stay." Todd's eyes flickered to Mitch's and away again.

"Together?" Mitch forced the word out of his suddenly dry mouth.

"That'd be good." Todd's eyes skittered across Mitch's face again. "If you want to, that is..."

"I want to." Mitch growled and forced his body to stay still. Right here, across the street from the diner, was not the place to show Todd just how much he wanted to.

"I can see." Todd grinned as he let his eyes rest on Mitch's straining zipper.

"You aren't helping any!" Mitch warned.

Todd was still grinning when he finished his snack and headed off to the rest room to clean up. Mitch made himself stay out front and keep an eye on the pumps and open workshop. That didn't stop his thoughts picturing Todd in the shower or help his jeans fit any better. He wasn't taking the empty plates back to the diner in this state.

He tried to think of something else, with limited success. It was easy to think of a naked Todd in places other than the shower. It wasn't so easy to think of anything that didn't involve a naked Todd.

Jed and Sheriff Robbie returned, looking slightly mussed and rather smug. Jed seemed to be completely recovered from his close encounter with the gearbox.

"You doing okay, Superman?" Jed smirked at him.

"My name is Mitch. There haven't been any customers, so no problems." Mitch wondered if Jed would ever use his proper name.

"That's good. I need a nap, sure you understand. You just carry on." Jed winked at Mitch and started walking toward the stairs beside the cash desk.

"Mitch?" Sheriff Robbie asked with a frown, as he followed Jed. "Wasn't that the chimp in *Tarzan*?"

"No! He was the monkey in *XL5*. Your memory is getting as bad as your eyesight," Jed snapped.

Mitch shut his eyes and tried to ignore the cackling coming from the stairs. Jed must live up there. Mitch didn't think he was up to imagining what the pair were going to do. Maybe they were just going to have a nap. Shifting was tiring, after all, when you did it both ways within a few hours. He took the dishes back to the diner while he had the chance.

Todd came around the corner from the rest room as Mitch crossed back across the street. Todd looked much cleaner, if still slightly damp. He smiled and waved self-consciously at Mitch before heading back into the workshop.

Mitch joined him there.

"I thought I'd do some more laundry," Todd explained as he stuffed some dirty coveralls into the trash bag he was carrying. "If I can get these things clean, I can work on the car some more before Jed gets back and still have some clean clothes."

"Jed is already back." Mitch stuffed his hands into his pockets to stop himself from grabbing Todd and checking just how clean he was and how quickly he could get messy again. "He and the sheriff have gone upstairs for a nap."

"Oh. Upstairs? I thought he lived in the cabin out back. Did he seem better?" Todd stopped in front of Mitch and tilted his head slightly as he asked.

"I think he lives upstairs above the cash desk, that's where he took the sheriff. He certainly looked a lot happier," Mitch said and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? Oh!" Todd's eyes went wide and round, and then he started snickering.

"You can laugh," Mitch muttered, trying not to join in. "You didn't have to see the horny old goat practically drag the sheriff upstairs."

"Aw. I bet it was sweet," Todd spluttered.

"No. It was *not* sweet."

"Poor baby." Todd laughed and bumped his head against Mitch's shoulder.

"I'll give you 'poor baby,'" Mitch growled and grabbed Todd, bending him back for a noisy kiss.

Todd dropped the bag of dirty laundry and wrapped both arms around Mitch's neck. The kiss instantly turned more serious as their mouths locked together and their tongues twined wetly.

Mitch could hear bells over the pounding of his pulse as he held Todd pressed tightly against him. This was better than his mental pictures of a naked Todd. Although getting Todd naked right now would make the kiss even better.

"Mitch! Customer!"

Todd was pulling away and talking. This wasn't the time for talking, there were much better uses for that agile tongue and those wet lips. Mitch growled and tightened his hold warningly. Todd's hand pressed across Mitch's mouth. And he was still talking. And grinning. But he wasn't trying to get away anymore.

"Customer, Mitch. Gas? Remember?"

Mitch groaned as the words finally made sense. "There hasn't been a customer all morning. Why now?"

"Just lucky, I guess." Todd pressed a quick peck of a kiss to Mitch's cheek and pulled back more insistently.

Grumbling under his breath, Mitch let Todd escape and stomped outside to see to the idiot who wanted to get gas right now. Todd slipped over to the laundromat while Mitch was counting change for the pesky woman.

Mitch ambled across the street to keep Todd company and got left in charge of the laundry when a young mother came in with a fussing baby. Todd vanished back into the workshop, and Mitch had to listen to a long and involved description of the baby's sleeping habits. As far as he could tell, the baby didn't sleep except while her mother was telling everyone that she didn't. He made sympathetic noises and mentally tried to make the machine wash quicker.

Todd was doing something to the car engine by the time Mitch escaped the laundromat. The lure of oily metal had obviously been stronger than Todd's desire to keep his clothes clean. Mitch took the time to enjoy the view. Todd's ass might look scrawny at first glance, but on closer consideration it was sleek and neat, especially when draped over a convenient fender.

Todd didn't share Mitch's appreciation of the position and threatened to adjust Mitch's ideas with the wrench in his, once again, oily hand. The evil car seemed to agree and hit Mitch on the head with its hood. Not even the clean coveralls that Mitch produced softened Todd's attitude. Mitch retired to the cash desk to scowl at the gas pumps. Alone. No more customers disturbed his solitude, either.

Mitch watched Todd pull the evil car out of the workshop and disappear back inside without even a glance in Mitch's direction. Mitch glared at the car and tried to take comfort in the fact that at least Todd had been wearing a set of the clean coveralls.

He was in a bad way when he could see that as a positive thing, Mitch decided glumly. Maybe the evil car's owner would turn up and remove his rival for Todd's attention. The late afternoon sunlight caught on the chrome and reflected into Mitch's eyes in what seemed like an automotive smirk.

Sheriff Robbie came back down the stairs and nodded to Mitch. Mitch returned the nod and tried to look polite. It wasn't the sheriff's fault that Todd found a heap of oily nuts and bolts more interesting than Mitch.

The sheriff strolled out toward his car and suddenly diverted to the workshop. Mitch almost went out to see what the problem was, but the sheriff raised a hand to the workshop, climbed in his car, and drove away.

Mitch settled back on the stool behind the cash register. He had exhausted the entertainment available from the selection of magazines. Hunting with guns had never appealed to him. He didn't think it could compare to his way of hunting. Fishing sounded much too complicated the way the magazines described it. He refused to even open the car magazines. Gossip about celebrities he had never heard of and didn't recognize wasn't much better, and he drew the line at reading more than one romance story in the women's section.

The main workshop door opened again,. Todd climbed into the evil car and reversed it back inside. The door shut and Mitch was left watching the shadows of the gas pumps lengthen as the sun dipped lower.

"Did I just hear Betsy?" Jed appeared at Mitch's elbow and stared out at the forecourt.

"Betsy?" Mitch tried to disguise his startled jump as a stretch.

"That evil bitch I was working on when you got here," Jed elaborated.

"The car is called Betsy?"

"She's Sarah Clark's pride and joy." Jed cackled. "Did young Todd get her running?"

"He drove Betsy out of the workshop and back in again, so I suppose so."

"Good boy. Knew you was good people." Jed nodded to himself. "There's a cabin out back, if you wanted somewhere to stow your gear. If you're fixing to stay awhile."

"How much?" Mitch still had some money in the bank, but it was shrinking rather than growing. He was trying not to dip into it too deeply while he was drifting. One day he would be ready to settle down and start up his business again.

"For you, Superman, it's free for the rest of the year." Jed snickered. "It's got electric and running water."

"Thanks. My name's Mitch." The end of the year was only just over a week away, but it'd be good to have somewhere until then. "Though I reckon Todd'll be staying in the workshop with Betsy." Mitch hoped that came out more as joking than whining.

"Go check it out." Jed waved vaguely toward the back wall. "I'll go turn the electric on and see what miracles young Todd has performed."

Mitch grunted an agreement, but followed Jed to the workshop. He wanted to see the old man's reaction to the transformation. And be there to protect Todd if Jed had been attached to all the grime.

"Holy cow! I never noticed winter this year!" Jed rocked back on his heels at the workshop door. "I didn't realize it was spring already!"

Todd stood up from where he had been crouched beside Betsy with a polishing cloth in his hands. He eyed Jed warily and bit his lip. Mitch slid into the workshop and tried to edge around Jed.

"You do all this?" Jed marched into the workshop and poked Todd in the chest accusingly.

Todd nodded and stepped back against Betsy's fender. Mitch growled softly and readied himself to intervene. Jed might look like a feeble old man, but that didn't give him the right to upset Todd. Not while Mitch could prevent it.

"Hush up!" Jed snapped at Mitch. "I won't hurt him. You shouldn't have let him do all this by himself. I haven't seen that floor in years." Jed turned in a slow circle, taking in the shining tools and tidy shelves before turning back to Todd. "You've been working too hard. Weren't no need for you to do all this. Not that I'm complaining; I haven't seen that oil filter wrench for nigh on six months."

"It had fallen down behind the oil barrel." Todd relaxed slightly. "I didn't work that hard, really. It was fun. You've got a neat set-up here. I just tidied up a bit..."

"Hah!" Jed shook a warning finger at him. "I'm not so old I don't know just how bad I'd let the place get, nor how much cleaning it needed."

"He didn't do it for you, Jed." Mitch decided to intervene before they got into an argument about how hard Todd had, or hadn't, worked. "He did it for Betsy."

"Betsy?" Todd frowned at Mitch. "Who's Betsy?"

"The new love of your life, there." Mitch pointed at the car.

Mitch left Todd grinning and talking engines with Jed; from the sound of things, Todd had a few more ideas of things to do to Betsy to make her run better, and Jed needed some convincing. They were talking that strange language again, so Mitch decided to go and check out the cabin.

He could just about make out the outline of the cabin under the trees behind the workshop. He picked his way through the junkyard and found a slightly overgrown track leading to the cabin and beyond. There would be room for Todd's car in the lean-to next to the cabin.

The last light of the setting sun painted the cabin walls with a golden glow and allowed Mitch to see the rotten step before he put his foot through it. A porch wrapped around three sides of the cabin, with the lean-to on the fourth. Mitch walked all the way around before trying the door. He noticed a couple of boards that needed replacing and a section of railing in need of attention, but the cabin seemed to be fairly sound from the outside.

The back door, which faced the workshop, opened reluctantly. The hinges needed adjusting, Mitch decided. It was a small cabin. The door opened into a kitchen area with all the basics, including a fridge and microwave. Mitch walked through the kitchen to a table and chairs on the far side and found the room widened out to the width of the cabin, with a large stone fireplace directly opposite the front door.

There was a sagging couch in front of the fireplace and a large bed at the far end. There was another door on the far side of the stonework that led to a bathroom.

It wasn't grand, but it felt comfortable somehow. Mitch poked around inside. Everything was sound. He tried a light switch without any response; either the light had blown, or Jed hadn't switched the power on yet. Water ran from the faucets after a few clanks and some spluttering. He ran all of them until the water came out clear. He could hear a tank filling when he was done, so the plumbing was in working order. He found an electric water heater in a closet near the bathroom.

Mitch tried not to get too excited. The cabin was big enough for two and livable even without power. He could see himself cuddled up on the old couch with Todd in front of a flickering log fire. The bed needed airing and clean sheets, but he could see them doing more energetic things than just snuggling there. Although the image of snuggling together under a pile of quilts on a cold morning made his chest ache again.

Maybe he was coming down with something. Mitch ignored the fact that shifters were generally immune to most bugs and he had never even had a cold in his life before.

The light suddenly came on, distracting him from his uncomfortable thoughts. Jed must have remembered to turn the power on at last. The electric light was much harsher than the setting sun and showed up the layer of dust over everything. Mitch sighed as he looked around. Todd had cleaned the workshop without any help; it wouldn't be fair to expect him to clean the cabin as well.

Mitch found an impressive array of cleaning equipment in the kitchen area, including an elderly vacuum cleaner. He switched the water heater on; he was going to need plenty of hot water before he was done.

He cleaned out the fireplace first and started a small fire to begin airing things out as he worked. The cabin was surprisingly well equipped. There was a washer-dryer next to the water heater, and he found some slightly damp detergent.

In a surprisingly short time, Mitch had the cabin cleaned, freshly laundered sheets on the bed, and a nice fire going in the hearth. He was nearly as grubby as Todd had been earlier, but there seemed to be plenty of hot water for a shower or even a bath, once he had collected his clean clothes from Todd's car. The windows could wait for another day, he decided wearily. So could sweeping the porch.

He found the switch for the light over the back door just as he heard a car coming up the track. He stepped out onto the back porch as Todd pulled up at the steps. His clean clothes had come to him.

"Mind the second step," Mitch warned as Jed climbed out of the passenger side and Todd came around the front of the car.

"Needs a bit of attention here and there," Jed admitted. "I'd say cleaning, too, but by the look of you, Superman, you've found that out."

"Name's Mitch," Mitch said, without much hope of being listened to. "It's a good place for what we're paying."

Jed cackled in appreciation of the joke. "Got a little something here for you boys. Thought you might need some provisions." He reached into the back of the car and hauled out a large cardboard box.

Mitch went down the steps and took the heavy box, and then trailed after Todd and Jed back into the cabin. He set the box down on the table and stood back to watch Todd explore their new lodgings.

"Damn, but you've worked hard in here," Jed muttered from beside him. "You boys run a cleaning service or something?"

"Just trying to compete with Betsy," Mitch answered absently, his attention on Todd.

"Think you might be winning there." Jed cackled again. "She might be beautiful, but she's not much for snuggling up to on a cold night."

"It's beautiful!" Todd spun in a circle in front of the fire, trying to take it all in. "We can really stay here?" he asked Jed with wide eyes.

"It's all yours, son." Jed smiled at him. "Stay as long as you like. There's three other cabins if'n any paying guests decide to drop by. Not that that happens much anymore."

Todd turned wide eyes to Mitch, all but begging for more reassurance. Mitch felt a smile tug at his mouth as he tried to nod solemnly. Maybe they could come to some arrangement with Jed to extend their stay past New Year. If his traveling itch didn't come back before then. If Todd wanted to stay longer.

"Here, eat your dinner afore it gets cold," Jed said gruffly, delving into the box and pulling out wrapped plates from the diner. Mitch grinned and sat down; it had been a long time since the slice of pie. Todd slid into the chair next to him and started shoveling food into his mouth.

Jed pattered around the kitchen area, putting other basics away and muttering to himself as they ate. He put a couple of slices of pie on the table in front of them.

"See you in the morning, boys." Jed grinned and winked at them. "Cissie can wait on getting them plates back."

The back door groaned and slammed behind him.

"Is this real?" Todd asked, blinking at the back door.

"Feels real to me," Mitch tapped the table. "I'll admit that my luck isn't usually this good, but maybe I'm due some of the good kind."

"I hope so." Todd grinned at him. "I don't want to wake up tomorrow and find this was just a dream."

"Me, either." Mitch ate another forkful of food. "But maybe we should make the most of it, just in case?"

"Mmm."

They finished the meal in a silence full of meaningful looks.

"You go get cleaned up," Todd said, gathering the plates. "I'll wash these up and get some coffee going."

"Then we can sit in front of the fire for a bit?" Mitch waggled his eyebrows hopefully.

"We can start with that." Todd sent Mitch a smoldering look over his shoulder. "Did you want to shift tonight?"

"Maybe later. I'd like to get a good look around, but I can wait for daylight and do it on two feet." Mitch shrugged.

"Four feet are better, though." Todd bit his lip in thought. "I think I'd like to have a look around, too."

"No rush. Nights are long this time of year."

"Mm."

When Mitch emerged from the bathroom with his towel wrapped around his waist, he found that Todd had turned off all the lights and was curled up at the end of the old couch waiting for him. The firelight made Todd's pale hair and skin glow.

"Now I know I'm dreaming," Mitch said softly. "I imagined you there, just like that, when I first saw the fireplace."

"Why was I sitting here alone?" Todd frowned.

"Just waiting for me to join you so we could cuddle in front of the fire."

"That sounds better." Todd nodded. "So, why are you still over there?"

"Damned if I know." Mitch padded over to the couch and scooped Todd up for a kiss before settling them both back on the couch.

"Were we just cuddling in your imagination?" Todd wriggled into a more comfortable position and looked up at Mitch through his eyelashes.

"We might have been doing a bit of kissing..." Mitch tilted his head down to meet Todd's waiting lips. "And maybe a bit of stroking..." Mitch added slightly breathlessly a little later, as his hands slid under Todd's shirt to explore.

"Anything else?" Todd panted as his shirt disappeared over the back of the couch, and Mitch's hands were fumbling at the button of Todd's jeans.

"Mm, yeah." Mitch pushed Todd's zipper down and rubbed the hot bulge covered in soft cotton that sprang free. "But we'd moved to the bed by then."

"Right." Todd thrust against Mitch's hand and moaned. "Bed. Now. Naked."

"Yes." Mitch stood up and carried Todd over to the bed. They fought to peel off Todd's jeans. Mitch's towel had been left near the couch with Todd's shirt. Todd's jeans and boxers fell to the floor, and they rolled across the bed, rubbing skin on skin for the first time in human form.

Mitch wasn't sure how he ended up on his back with Todd's mouth moving over his chest. Maybe it had something to do with Todd's hand pumping his cock firmly. Mitch reached under the pillows and scrabbled for the lube he had put there earlier. His hand closed around the tube just as Todd's mouth closed around his cock.

Todd's mouth felt even better than Mitch had imagined. Hot, wet, and enthusiastic. Mitch moaned and tried to pull Todd's body around to return the favor. Todd growled and refused to move. Mitch shuddered and gave up. Todd's tongue swirled around the head of Mitch's cock and teased the slit every time he lifted his head.

Mitch couldn't think straight for the pleasure zinging through his body from that heated caress. He'd make it up to Todd later, he decided fuzzily. He gripped the sheets and let Todd do whatever he wanted. It all felt good. Even the cold finger slipping into his ass felt good. The finger warmed quickly, and Mitch forgot that it had been cold when his prostate was massaged thoughtfully.

"Sooon," Mitch moaned.

"Mmmm." Todd agreed, head bobbing, eyes rolling up to watch Mitch as hands and mouth worked together to drive Mitch over the edge.

"Now!" Mitch shouted as the pleasure got too much to hold inside and surged up his cock and pulsed into Todd's waiting throat. The orgasm seemed endless as spasm after spasm emptied his balls. Todd swallowed continually, humming his approval, until Mitch collapsed on the bed, watching the pretty floating lights in front of his eyes.

Mitch grumbled slightly, and his spent cock lost that wonderful heat when Todd moved. Mitch's head snapped up off the pillow as another heat filled his ass. Todd smirked at him and settled deeper. Mitch was caught in bright hazel eyes. The word "Mine!" floated between them, but Mitch wasn't sure who had growled it.

Mitch frowned. There was something not quite right here, if only he could think well enough to figure it out. Todd moved, pulling out and pushing slowly back in. That felt good to Mitch. Todd did it again. Mitch tilted his hips slightly and it felt even better. Mitch decided that he could think, and figure out what wasn't right, later. Right now, he needed to watch Todd's face and enjoy Todd filling him. And thrust back. And stroke his suddenly needy cock. And hold Todd's flexing ass. And feel Todd come deep inside him. And come over Todd's chest and belly.

"Hey!" Mitch snapped a long, drowsy time later. He frowned at the shadowed ceiling above the bed. Todd was sprawled across Mitch's chest and hadn't moved for a while. Mitch had been almost-thinking about good things, like how right Todd felt in his arms, and how close this was to his imagined snuggling, only better. Something had been niggling at the edges of his almost-thoughts. Something that was not quite right.

"Ung?" Todd murmured.

"You topped!"

"Mmm."

"I wanted your ass." Mitch's beast was quite insistent that Todd's ass was his, and Mitch should've been buried in Todd's ass, not the other way around.

"Later."

"Later?" Mitch liked that answer.

"Mm."

"How much later?" Mitch's hand smoothed over Todd's ass, fingers teasing along the crack.

"M tired." Todd lifted his head enough to glare sleepily at Mitch.

"Okay. You just sleep for a bit." Mitch grinned. "Let me just get a bit more comfortable here."

"Hmf." Todd's head dropped back down onto Mitch's chest.

Mitch ran his hands down the length of Todd's back, feeling the ripples of the lightly padded bones beneath the supple skin. He eased his hands over the tight curve of Todd's ass and on down to Todd's slender thighs. He rearranged Todd's legs to lie outside of his own. Todd did not protest, resist, or assist the move. His body remained limp and *asleep*. Except for the obviously awake part that was poking Mitch in the belly.

Mitch let his eyes drift shut and settled in to learn Todd's body by touch. He took one hand off Todd's skin long enough to find the lube and slip the tube between his own thighs to warm. Mitch's hands mapped all those places he wanted to lick and bite and suck, rubbing slowly across the skin, sometimes firmly, sometimes lightly. He drew Todd's legs gradually higher and wider, opening Todd to more intimate touches. Todd remained determinedly *asleep*, even though his cock throbbed enthusiastically against Mitch's abs.

Being *asleep* didn't stop Todd's hips rocking when Mitch slid a finger inside him and stroked. Todd rocked back and forth, rubbing his cock on Mitch's abs and his channel on Mitch's finger. Mitch added another finger, stretching Todd carefully and doing his best to avoid the one spot Todd wanted him to touch. Todd's hips squirmed and rocked harder.

Mitch continued his slow stroking. His own cock was more than ready to finish this, but he wasn't going to until Todd was *awake*. Another time he would be happy to play this game with Todd and take him long and slow and half-asleep. Mitch felt the imagined pleasure of that skitter across his skin.

But this time, the first time he took Todd, he wanted Todd awake and aware. He wanted to watch those hazel eyes as he slipped into the flexing, slick channel his fingers were teasing. He wanted Todd to call his name, or at least acknowledge his presence with both heads. Mitch had already come twice; he hoped that he could last long enough this third time to get inside Todd and make it good for him, too. Todd had better stop being *asleep* soon!

"Tease! Get on with it!" Sharp teeth dug into Mitch's chest to emphasize the words.

"Are you awake now?" Mitch was proud that he managed to say the words without groaning.

"Yes!" Todd sat up suddenly, driving Mitch's fingers deeper. Todd growled and pushed down, wriggling to get the fingers even farther in. His body arched, his head falling back as he braced his hands on Mitch's chest. "Do it! Now!"

Mitch pulled his fingers away and grasped Todd's hips. Todd's hand wrapped around Mitch's cock, guiding him home as Mitch lowered Todd slowly over his straining erection. Todd fought to free his hips and slam down. Mitch kept the movement slow and controlled. If he let Todd have his way, it would all be over before he was fully in.

His cock slid slowly and easily into Todd's well prepared body. The slick heat encased him, flexing to draw him deeper and deeper. Mitch held Todd still when he could finally go no deeper. He wanted a moment to savor just how good it felt.

"Mine!"

The word vibrated between them as Mitch released Todd's hips and started thrusting. His hand wrapped around Todd's cock, pulling and squeezing.

"Mine!"

Mitch had waited too long to be able to coordinate any sort of rhythm. His hips thrust up. Todd slammed down. Todd's cock slid and jerked in Mitch's fist. The frantic activity didn't last long. Mitch felt his cock throb in Todd's ass and Todd's cock pulse in his hand, but he had no idea who came first or if they came together. All he knew was that he had marked Todd deep inside and Todd had marked Mitch, himself, and the bed with ragged pulses. And it was *right*. So right it made his head spin.

Mitch drifted back to awareness, feeling fidgety. He opened his eyes to find the bed bathed in bright moonlight. Todd sat up and stared at him with wild eyes. There was no need for words. They slipped off the bed and padded out onto the front porch hand in hand. Mitch shut the door firmly behind them.

The moonlight pooled brightly between the cabin and the trees. Todd shifted and flowed down the steps, disappearing into the rustling weeds. Mitch growled and followed. He shifted so effortlessly that he hardly noticed the transition from two feet to four. Todd's scent was strong. Mitch was in no doubt what he wanted. He wanted Todd. Now.

Todd waited at the edge of the trees, the bright moonlight glittering off the tips of his fur. Mitch snarled a wordless demand. Todd growled and lashed his tail, but stood his ground and watched Mitch stalk toward him. They stared at one another nose to nose, and then Todd rubbed his cheek along Mitch's.

The edge of aggression vanished. Todd turned away and crouched, his ass pointing at Mitch in invitation. Todd looked back over his shoulder and yowled softly.

Mine!

Mitch wasn't aware of moving, but his fangs sank into the back of Todd's neck as his cock sank into Todd's ass. Todd hissed and spat and shoved back as Mitch growled and snarled and shoved forward. Climax came hard and fast.

Mitch stepped back, blinking. Todd rose from his submissive crouch and shook his fur back into position. Mitch stepped closer with a questioning rumble. Todd made a small sound of acceptance and brushed his cheek against Mitch's again before trotting off into the deep shadows beneath the trees. For a few moments, it looked as though Todd's fur was still glowing even in the shade.

They hunted quickly, sharing the kill without argument. They came to a lake and backtracked to find the other cabins Jed had mentioned. Mitch could feel something pulling him back to their cabin. It was almost like his traveling itch, but stronger and more insistent. Todd trotted at his side without complaint. Maybe he felt it as well.

The moonlight was still particularly bright at their cabin. Mitch could almost feel the light stroking over his fur as he paced from the trees into the weed-strewn clearing. Todd growled softly from behind him. Mitch glanced over his shoulder to watch Todd step into the moonlight, pale fur flaring to sparkling life.

There was no thought involved, no question. Mitch brushed his cheek against Todd's and crouched, facing the cabin. Mitch hissed as Todd thrust roughly into him. It hurt, but in a good way. Teeth sank into the loose fur between Mitch's shoulder blades. This was necessary. This was right.

Climax came in a swirling of brilliant light and heaving ground. Mitch felt a strange sensation as though he was shifting, but inside. It felt like his brain was changing in a ruffle of movement.

Mitch opened his eyes to the too bright moonlight and was surprised to find he still had fur and claws. Todd was lying crumpled on the ground beside him. Mitch swung his heavy head to touch Todd's shoulder, the familiar scent of Todd and fur filling his nose.

Todd blinked wild, green eyes at him and staggered to his paws. Mitch hauled himself up and leaned into the slighter form. Together they stumbled to the cabin and crawled up the steps. They rested for a moment before shifting back to human and going inside.

They fell into bed in a tangle of limbs and were asleep before their heads hit the pillows.

"Wakey, wakey! Rise and shine, boys!"

"Urgh." Mitch pried his eyes open and glared at the far end of the cabin and the unwelcome voice coming from the kitchen area. Todd whimpered and burrowed deeper into Mitch's side, pulling the covers firmly over his head.

"I've got coffee!" Jed cackled gleefully from the kitchen. "You boys decent? Or are you fixing to make an old man's morning?"

"Perv!" Todd muttered from under the covers.

"I heard that, Todd," Jed shot back with another cackle. "Christmas is coming and I didn't want you to miss it. Come and get your coffee. It's Cissie's special brew..."

The aroma of strong, hot coffee spread through the cabin, supplemented by slurping sounds. Mitch hoped that Jed had brought his own coffee and wasn't sampling either of theirs.

Todd's head emerged and his nostrils flared as he scented the coffee. The movement brought a lot of warm and happy Todd into contact with a warm and happy Mitch. Before Mitch could fully appreciate the position, Todd slid out of bed, letting in a lot of cold air.

"I'm naked!" Todd slid back into bed faster than he had left it and glared at Mitch as though it was Mitch's fault.

Mitch opened his mouth to reply, but shut it again once he took in Todd's expression. Mitch knew better than to get between a caffeine addict and his morning fix. He groped on the floor on his side of the bed and retrieved Todd's jeans.

Todd snatched them out of his hand and dragged them under the covers. Some creative wriggling, with far too much application of cold, clammy denim to Mitch's anatomy, and Todd popped out of bed again, heading for the kitchen area and coffee.

Mitch admired the view wistfully. He would have preferred to have admired Todd's ass more closely and more comfortably here in bed, but not with Jed lurking in the kitchen. As far as Mitch could tell, only Jed's voice had intruded around the corner of the stone chimneybreast. A situation that probably wouldn't last much longer. Mitch made a break for the bathroom while he could.

Jed was still mercifully not visible when Mitch snatched a clean shirt from his pack and pulled it on. He padded barefoot to the kitchen area where Todd was slumped at the table, inhaling a super-size coffee. Jed was perched at the far side of the table with his own cup, and a third waited for Mitch, still sealed. After another glance at Todd, Mitch pulled a clean mug down from the cupboard and poured half the sealed coffee into it. He pushed the rest of the cup toward Todd and settled down with the smaller portion.

"Thanks." Mitch nodded warily to Jed as he sipped the coffee.

"You're welcome. Thought I'd come check on you now it's daylight." Jed cackled and winked. "Been quiet for a while, just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"We're fine." Mitch fought not to blush. He seemed to remember rather a lot of noise outside in the bright moonlight last night. The sort of noise that a horny old lynx wouldn't miss, or misinterpret.

"So I see. Mighty fine." Jed snickered and ogled Mitch's chest. "You boys get yourselves sorted and come up to Cissie's -- when you're ready! This is one of Compromise's big days."

"Compromise?" Todd emerged from the coffee long enough to ask.

"This here is Compromise." Jed waved vaguely toward main street.

"I thought it was Assend?" Todd muttered. "Assend Gas. Assend Diner."

"It used to be." Jed grinned. "But we agreed to change the name to Compromise a while back. Some folks didn't like living in Assend, for some reason."

"Why? It's not a bad name." Todd frowned.

Mitch kept quiet; he had caught something in the way that Jed pronounced Assend that made him think there was some local, Jed-type joke coming. One that didn't involve the town's name being misspelled.

"It was the full-length version they objected to." Jed nodded to himself and stood up. "You boys remember to come on up to Cissie's. Don't go getting distracted by the scenery."

"What was the full-length name?" Todd frowned at Jed, who was making for the back door.

"Assendofnowhere." Jed watched that sink in before scuttling out the door, cackling merrily.

Mitch groaned and rubbed his face. He'd just known it was going to be bad.

"Do you really think...?" Todd turned questioning hazel eyes on Mitch.

"Who knows?" Mitch shrugged and then grinned. "But if Jed's family had anything to do with it..."

"Yeah. It does sound like the sort of name Jed would come up with!" Todd chuckled. Then he shivered and buried his nose in the coffee cup again.

"Go have a shower and get dressed. I'll get the fire going again." Mitch stood up to do that. He had been quietly enjoying the sight of Todd's naked chest, but he'd prefer that Todd was comfortable. He would have liked to lure Todd back into the big bed and warm him up that way, but Jed was bound to come looking for them again if they didn't make it to Cissie's.

Todd drifted past and raked through their clean clothes in Mitch's backpack. He hesitated at the bathroom door.

"Do you think it's worth unpacking?"

"Might as well." Mitch sat back on his haunches by the fireplace and met Todd's questioning gaze. "I wouldn't mind staying here through the holidays. Jed said there might be some odd jobs I could do."

"He said he could use me in the workshop for a bit, if I wanted." Todd bit his lip, still staring at Mitch.

"Do you want that?"

"Yeah. I do." Todd nodded. "It's good here. The town, the workshop, and this cabin. It feels like somewhere I'd like to stay."

"Sort of homey?" Mitch asked carefully.

"Yeah. That's just how it feels." Todd nodded after thinking about it for a moment.

"I told you I don't have anywhere I'm heading for. I've just been following an itch."

"I'm just looking for somewhere to stay awhile." Todd said softly. "Nowhere in mind. Just looking..."

"For somewhere to settle and call home?"

"Yeah. Sounds stupid, but that's about it." Todd ducked his head.

"Go and have a shower. We can stay here and see if this is the place or not," Mitch said. "My traveling itch is quiet. This is a good place. Who knows?"

Todd nodded again and disappeared into the bathroom. Mitch went back to building the fire, feeling slightly more relaxed. It sounded like Todd wanted to stay with him. Mitch wanted that more than he wanted Compromise to be where his itch had been leading him. Todd had become very important to him in such a short time, and last night had only settled that feeling deeper.

Mitch shook off the deep thoughts and got the fire going. He wandered over to the front door with his cooling coffee and stepped out onto the porch. Shifting in the bright moonlight last night seemed more like a dream than reality, but flattened patches in the frosted weeds testified to the truth of his memories.

"We really did..." Todd spoke softly as he joined Mitch on the porch, close enough for their arms to brush.

"Fuck like bunnies in the moonlight?" Mitch chuckled, breathing in the scent of Todd and shampoo. He wrapped his arm across Todd's narrow shoulders and squeezed slightly.

"I wasn't going to put it quite like that." Todd laughed softly. "Nothing like that has ever happened to me before." His arm snaked around Mitch's waist, and he stole a sip of the cold coffee.

"Me, either." Mitch shrugged slightly, keeping his hold on Todd. "I don't know what it was, but it seemed pretty powerful to me."

"Yeah. Powerful. I felt that, too. Do you think it'll happen again?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to find out."

"Me, too. I'm not used to so many good things happening at once."

"Maybe it's our turn for good things. Sure been enough bad for me this last year." Mitch leaned into Todd slightly. "You're counting last night as one of the good things?"

"Oh, yeah. You?" Todd leaned more heavily into Mitch's side.

"Oh, yeah!" Mitch rumbled. "And if I didn't think Jed would interrupt, I'd take you back to bed right now for a lot more good things."

"I'll hold you to that later!" Todd tilted his head back against Mitch's shoulder and grinned. "But I supposed we better get up to Cissie's, or I'm sure you are right and Jed'll be back looking for us."

"Trying to catch us naked, you mean," Mitch grumbled as he felt Todd begin to pull away. "One thing before we go."

"What?" Todd tilted his head up to look at Mitch again.

"This." Mitch breathed against Todd's mouth and kissed him. *Mine!* whispered through his head as his mouth filled with the taste of Todd, and Todd kissed him back enthusiastically.

"You know something?" Todd asked a few minutes later as they walked side by side up the track toward main street.

"What?" Mitch let his shoulder bump Todd's.

"I think this is going to be a very good Christmas." Todd bumped him back and grinned.

"You know, I think you might be right!" Mitch grinned back. *Might be one of my best Christmases ever*, he thought to himself as he looked down at Todd's happy, relaxed face.

Journey to Compromise

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