



MADISON
MURPHY
WISCONSIN
Weirdo

JESSICA GLEASON

Champagne Books Presents

Madison Murphy, Wisconsin
Weirdo

By

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Dedication

This book is for those who have guided me, persuaded me and supported me: Mom, Becky and Jeanine. Thank you for being there to hold my hand and cheer me on!

One

Well, it was official.

Madison Murphy was no longer privy to the lackadaisical lifestyle of a Wisconsin native. Not with her current...*affliction*, anyway.

It affected her appetite, temper, appearance and general outlook on life.

Madison Murphy was now a goddamn overweight weirdo with the ability to change into a stupid Siberian tiger at a moment's notice—as if that was a useful skill. Maybe a fire-breathing dragon or a cute little pixie fairy...

But a Siberian tiger?

Not so much, especially in Wisconsin.

Like she didn't feel out of place before her stupid blind date...this was all she needed, the ability to turn into a gigantic kitty cat every time she got upset. How was leaving the house even an option? Maybe for a milder mannered individual, but for Madison, it was a no go. She didn't exactly need people turning their heads and staring because she was hacking up a hairball every fifteen minutes. She got enough stares for being slightly overweight and was already self-conscious before the whole hairball debacle.

Perhaps she could just pack things up and go to Vegas in search of Siegfried and Roy. They could probably put a fat Siberian tiger to work. It wasn't as if she was a particularly attractive kitty...

She shook her head and fought for a moment of sanity. There obviously wasn't one coming; the only things

she owned were newly shredded curtains and an empty fish tank. Obviously, kitty had a very playful side; the fish probably hadn't appreciated that.

Everything was fucked up since last Friday night. It was amazing that the nice men in white coats hadn't hauled her off to the comforts of a round rubber room. Nothing made sense anymore. If she wasn't a crackpot, then something was very wrong with the world.

Her symptoms had grown more intense since the arrival of her estranged one night stand.

She stopped and glared at the man sitting across the room in her favorite chair. This was all his fault; she'd suspected it all along, but his appearance confirmed it. His light, quizzical look only made her want to slap him harder. That is, until she gagged on another hairball...a new side effect of her anger. Stomach ulcers were much better than hairballs, but she didn't really have a choice in that matter anymore.

He had been a pity fuck. Whether he was the one that had taken pity on her or she was the one that had taken pity on him was inconsequential. She should have listened to her mother. "Don't be a whore," and "You better be able to deal with the consequences of your actions!" Those words swirled around in her head. Damn her mother for actually giving her some good advice.

"Madison, are you even listening to me?" He shouldn't even be here. The stout balding man was quite possibly the most annoying person—thing—she had ever met.

She stopped pacing for a minute and looked at him, wondering if he had said something. "You know, I don't really feel like seeing you right now. I'm quite busy, so if you could possibly show yourself out and jump off a cliff that would be great." She gestured toward the front door. "See? Door. Over there. One foot in front of the other—"

"Madison, I think I need to talk to you about some things," he said, clearly unsure of himself and looking at her with wide 'puppy-dog' eyes. "Do you think you could just listen to me for a couple minutes? I promise I'll leave you alone and never come back as long as you let me explain a few things to you. Really, it's crucial."

She stifled a cough that would probably produce

another hairball. Well, she supposed she could listen; perhaps he had some sort of solution or cure for her current predicament. Still, she didn't want to talk to him about that night.

Everything in her life had changed since then and not in a good way. She didn't even know how to piece it all together.

Sarah had set her up on a blind date, much to Madison's chagrin. But Sarah was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong. Non-cooperation was not an option lest she be made to submit to something much more mortifying than a blind date.

Sarah strolled along with Madison to the café where she was to meet up with Harold.

She didn't trust Madison to actually go on her own—good instincts on Sarah's part.

Harold, really...this one is going to be a bigger winner than the last one. Harold is a stupid name—why do I let her drag me into these stupid situations? Harold. Gross!

Madison had done her best to feign interest in Harold-The-Tax-Attorney. She probably wasn't very convincing, but who would be convincing if they were forced into a date with Harold the tax attorney?

The injustice of it all!

By the time they arrived at the café, Madison was so agitated her jaw clenched. Sarah shoved her inside and pointed to the unattractive bald man sitting in the corner. *Great, just great! He's worse than I anticipated. Way to go Sarah...*

"Madison, you go in there right now, or else!" she ordered.

"Really, isn't it bad enough having to look at what type of man you think I should be going on a date with? Do I really have to eat with him?"

"Yes, you moron! You're going and there's nothing you can do about it." Sarah snorted with a sense of finality before shoving Madison further into the café and then barricading the door.

Madison's eye twitched while she glared at Sarah through the glass before finally turning around and heading for Mr. Not-Even-Good-Enough-For-Right-Now. Madison

knew she wasn't all that great too look at. She'd eaten a few too many cupcakes and it showed right around her twenty-five year old mid-section, but the fact that she was a chub didn't mean she should be set up with people like Harold. Maybe someone in the funny-looking but charismatic category, like Zach Braff or even Kevin James.

Madison made her way over to Harold's table and sat herself down with a self-righteous thump. "Hey, Harry. Madison. Nice to meet you. How about heading to the bar for some drinks, my treat?" Harold, taken a bit aback by Madison's abrupt arrival, nodded and the two made a beeline for the door. He followed in Madison's wake all the way down the street to the nearest bar. "I do actually prefer Harold," he uttered in a voice barely above a whisper. Harold was lacking in the confidence department and looking at him, Madison understood why.

Still, he wasn't without his charms. After a few drinks, he even started looking good. Madison made nice with Harold until she was good and hammered, after which she decided it would be a fabulous idea for good ole' Harry to come home with her. "So, Harry, how about going back to my place?"

Without waiting for his response, she grabbed him by the hand, paid the tab, then ushered him out the door. They caught a cab to Madison's place and had all but ripped one another's clothes off in the car. Alcohol was apparently a dangerous thing for Miss Madison Murphy.

Two

Madison awoke naked and with a horrible headache. She felt as if she had been hit by a train, when in reality, she'd only been hit by Harold, who looked like a larger and less green version of a turtle. *Him...and a heavy dose of alcohol.* It took a while before shame set in, but she was glad Harold wasn't in her bed when she woke up. *Thank God for small favors.*

He did, however, leave a fair amount of "love marks" all over Madison's torso. It seemed that the turtle was more of a hyena in the sack. Madison had fragmented memories of her drunken debauchery, which she was thankful for. Remembering a romp with Harold wouldn't be pleasant.

Knock! Knock! She thought, *Sarah, of course, it's Sarah.*

Madison wanted to just ignore Sarah, down a few painkillers and head back to bed, but that wasn't an option. Sarah was NOT going away. "Madison, you let me in right now! I saw you stumble up here with Harold. I am so not leaving until you tell me about last night." She just kept talking as if the door was wide open. With a sigh, Madison relented and let her in.

"You know, Madison, I knew you and Harold would get along. I didn't expect you to drag him home with you, but good for you. You needed it. So, what was he like? Did you have a good night? And don't even think about telling me that you did not bring him home with you because I saw you from my living room window. The two of you were going at it before you even got in the building..." *Blah, Blah, Blah...she is not going to shut up until I tell her all about my night with Romeo.*

"Uh, Sarah, I barely even remember. We went to the

bar and apparently had too much to drink. I have a horrible headache and he was gone by morning. So, if you could leave me alone so I can go die in the bathroom, that would be great, ok?"

"Well, then, you don't have to tell *me* when I'm not wanted. I'll just come back after you're done being a cranky-pants!"

That was pretty much it. Madison didn't notice the 'side-effects' of her interlude until well after the hangover wore off...probably due to her sleeping for about a day and a half, but she had really gotten wasted on her 'date' with Harold. She needed the recuperative sleep. That and about eight double cheeseburgers from McDonalds. No joke.

By the time her painkiller-induced coma ebbed, most of Madison's 'love bites' had healed. Which was a plus. Going out in public looking like a patchwork quilt didn't appeal to her at all. Venturing out in public looking the way she usually did was hard enough. Standing an unimpressive 5'7" and weighing in at about two hundred pounds, Madison's generous size was enough of an attention grabber. Madison did, however, have some lumps in the right places. Her boobs were okay. But, the love handles were a no go.

Madison had all but missed the feline whiskers she had grown while she was busy inspecting her body for left over evidence of her one night stand. She was slightly desensitized to random hairs sprouting on her face; 25 years of being half-Italian had taken care of her concern for an excess of body hair. However, upon noticing said whiskers, Madison freaked out, which, in turn, caused her to cough up her first hairball.

"What the hell!" she sputtered after heaving the gooey mass of knotted hair into the toilet. "That is definitely not okay!" She trimmed off the whiskers, washed her face and took down her hair, noticing it had gone from a dark chestnut brown to bright white overnight. At this point, she was beyond freaked out and a panic attack bombarded her with chest pains, a cold sweat, and acute, intense nausea. The panic attack must have triggered her inner kitty, as she was suddenly in crippling pain and crumpled into a ball on the floor. In horror, she watched herself sprout fur, and not half-Italian fur...*real* fur.

At some point, she must have blacked out. What appeared to have been a hallucination knocked the wind right out of her. At first, she was okay with dismissing her panic attack as just that, but the remarkable changes in her body were hard to ignore. If the white hair hadn't been enough, the constant hairballs would have driven the point home. *Game. Set. Match.*

So here she was standing across the room from prime suspect and enemy number one. "So, could you run that by me one more time?" Madison eyed the man suspiciously.

"I...er, may have gotten a little bit frisky with you the other night."

Madison wanted to smack him. As if his ferocity hadn't been obvious! It sure as hell didn't do much to explain her current condition.

"Madison, you need to pay very close attention to what I have to say." He spoke slowly, as if she was a small child who could only understand the simplest of things.

"Okay...", was what she managed to get out. She was, for the moment, all ears.

"I bit you the other night and I shouldn't have done that."

Yeah, she knew that. She shouldn't have gotten wasted and forced herself on him, either, but there was nothing they could do about that now. She was just hoping this guy wasn't gearing up to tell her about his nasty case of syphilis.

"Do you understand what that means, Madison?"

"No, you idiot. If I knew what you were trying to say, I would have already tossed you out of my apartment, but there you sit. Unharm'd and on my sofa." He was really starting to get on her last nerve and she could feel a slight tickle building up in her throat.

"Okay, well, when I bite someone they don't just scar. My biting you had different repercussions."

Madison hesitated before responding. Yep, here comes the syphilis. "So, you gave me some sort of disease? Great! Please tell me there's some way to get rid of it? I don't need your weird freaky STD."

"That's not what I meant, Madison. Were you listening at all to what I was just telling you?"

She had tried to listen before her mind had decided to re-visit the night she'd met this short and unattractive man. "Yes...no...I was somewhere else. Would you mind explaining again?"

"Okay, Madison, it's very important that you listen this time. I'm not going to be around to explain things again. I'm a shifter—shape shifter, that is. Rather, I turn into a dog." She was trying very hard to pay attention, but the man was jumping from regular to freaky-deaky in three seconds flat.

"You *what*?"

"I change into a dog, and now—because of my carelessness the other night—you're probably going to turn into one, too."

"Cat," she replied nonchalantly.

"What?"

"*Cat*, Harold. I turn into a cat. Stupid white fur. Stupid white hairballs. Stupid round green eyes. What the fuck, man? You couldn't keep your animal diseases to yourself?"

A shifter.

Madison Murphy—a shape shifter.

If I have to change shapes at random, why can't I shape shift into a supermodel instead of a stupid cat?

Three

"Madison? Are you okay? I just came over to help you understand a little bit about what this all means to you."

Well, that was nice of him...talking as if he wasn't the culprit in the first place! He'd taken the time out of his busy tax attorney schedule to inform her she'd been turned into some supernatural being. Why couldn't she have been turned into some super sexy vampire with flawless skin and a great bod? No, she had to turn into an oversized fat cat who was apparently prone to hairballs.

She should have been on the defensive when he had showed up on her doorstep, but she'd let him in anyway. What's more, she'd believed what the crazy little man told her. Though, the physical proof had given her a push in the right direction. She was beginning to drift off into lala-land again.

"So, you got any pointers for a young feline on the go?"

"Aside from keeping your temper under control, I can't really help you out...and I'm being punished for my lack of discretion. We're not exactly allowed to create new shifters without proper consent. So, I'm not going to be of much use to you." *As if I wanted to use him again! Gross! The first time left me with enough shame and regret to last me an eternity.* "They're sending me away for punishment, but I can leave you with a friend's number. Maybe he can help you adjust to your new lifestyle. His name is Max and he works over at Caldwin Brothers Law Firm." *Great...another attorney.*

"Well, thanks for manning up. I don't have much else to thank you for and I don't really want to see you ever again, but it's nice to know that I'm not crazy. Or at least that I'm not the only crazy person in Wisconsin. I'll make sure to give your attorney friend a jingle if I feel the need to start spraying things. Or wait, is that only male cats? Either way, you'd best be on your way now to the punishment chamber or wherever."

With that, she shooed him out the door.

Shape shifter. So, I'm really a shape shifter. Lame.

Madison desperately tried to cling to reality, but she wasn't much of a fan of reality at the moment. Reality, as it turned out, was pretty flipping ridiculous. She wanted nothing to do with it. That happy little rubber room sounded pretty relaxing right about now.

So...some random man comes into my living room and tells me that I'm a shape shifter. That's it. No take-backs? No do-over?

It wasn't as if Madison was ever going to call this mysterious Max character. Still, she was quite curious as to how many freaks lived in southeastern Wisconsin or the whole of the USA. It daunted her.

What else did that insufferable man say about my condition? I can't get angry lest I turn into the white furry cat-beast and...something about the full-moon fever. Great, this is just what I need. I couldn't have won some sort of game show or lottery prize instead. No, it's just my luck that some unwanted and unattractive blind date turns me into a Siberian tiger and, to top it all off, my hair is white, I'm prone to growing whiskers and I now have a hairball problem. I probably should have listened a little better, but my patience for that man was virtually non-existent. So, now I'm stuck. What the hell do people...err...shifters, do in this situation? Shouldn't this new lifestyle of mine come with a handbook?

"Madison, are you in there?"

Sarah, of course.

"Yeah, Sarah, hang on a minute." Madison went to the door and let Sarah in. Despite her pushy demeanor, she was regular and Madison could use a dose of regularity at the moment. Sarah's extra bouncy golden curls, thin frame and

big doe eyes were usually annoying, but right now Madison craved anything that didn't sound like it had come from a Dungeons and Dragons nerd-fest. "So...before you say anything about Harold. I want to let you know that we talked it over and decided that we're not right for one another. It was a one-night fling and we're over. Though, he did suggest a friend that I may be more compatible with." That was sure to keep Sarah's matchmaking attempts at bay.

"So, are you going to call the new guy? What's his name? What's he like? Do tell."

"Well, Harold didn't give me many details, just a phone number. He also mentioned something about Max, I think his name was, being a lawyer."

"Ooohhhh, another lawyer! Aren't you the lucky girl?"

"Unbelievably."

"Well, you should call him, and when you do, you need to tell me all about him. Sneak some pictures if you can or maybe conveniently invite me over when you know he's on his way...just so I can scope him out for you."

"Sure, Sarah. We can even purchase a spy outfit for the occasion."

"Ohhhhh...très chic. Can we really go shopping for some spy clothes?"

"Why not, but not today. I'm sort of tired right now. So, if you don't mind, I think I'm going to take a nap."

"Oh, sure, Madison, I'll leave you to it. I'm excited about the new guy, though; make sure not to shut me out of the loop."

"I won't. I promise."

Madison was a little suspicious when Sarah so readily agreed to leave. It wasn't like Sarah to miss out on all of the juicy details. It wasn't like Sarah to...just go without a fight. However, Madison's brain was too frazzled to function at all. So, she went back to bed and slept until morning...until her phone rang.

"Is this Madison?"

"Uh...yeah, that's me," she replied, half awake, one almond-shaped eye still crusted shut.

"Madison Murphy?"

"Last time I checked. Who is this and why are you calling me at such an ungodly hour? I don't enjoy being

woken up before ten."

"Sorry about that. Someone by the name of Sarah phoned me; said Harold left you my number."

"Goddamn it all, that woman cannot keep her nose out of anyone's business. Your name doesn't happen to be Max, does it?"

"Well, it's Maxwell, but Max is also acceptable. So, Harold left you my number, eh? That strikes me as a bit strange as Harold and I weren't the best of...friends...inquiring minds and all that..."

"Uh, well, this may seem like a strange question. I'm not crazy, at least I don't think I am, but you're not a cat or something are you?"

"Well, no, most of the time I'm just a regular person. Unless we've been communicating in meows unbeknownst to me."

"Wow, funny guy. Have you ever been a cat? Or maybe...do you sometime change shapes?"

"Oh," Madison could tell by his tone of voice that he was frowning. "What sort of trouble has Harold gotten himself into this time? That man is such a nuisance."

They spent another fifteen minutes on the phone, most of which consisted of Madison explaining her current situation. Turned out, Max moonlighted as a Lion—king of the jungle style. He also agreed to show Madison the ropes, figuratively speaking. All in all, he seemed like a decent guy, witty and maybe a little stuffy.

Four

"So, you're basically telling me that humans have evolved from many different animals up to and including, but not limited to, wolves, lions, tigers, bears, gorillas, monkeys, large birds and in some rare cases, rodents?" Madison mused.

"Yes, but mostly we come from some type of monkey. Contrary to popular belief, our ethnicity has nothing to do with where we come from and everything to do with the type of animal we've evolved from." Max seemed to be trying to explain as simply as possible, but it was a complicated and unbelievable explanation. "For example, have you ever seen someone that looked like a rodent or someone with a hooked nose that resembled a beak? It's not just the misfortune of two hideous people mating, but more a dominant trait of their former animal that never quite disappeared over time. Of course, we're not all purebred's these days, so some shifters wind up as strange hybrid creatures...a griffin, for example."

"I see..."

"This is probably a lot to digest, but since Harold didn't bother to fill you in on everything, you're going to have to listen to me a little longer."

Not that Madison was complaining. Max was gorgeous. He was tall with broad shoulders that looked amazing in his expensive looking black suit. However, it wasn't the fact that he was 6'3" or the fact that he looked like he'd be perfectly comfortable sitting at a table full of delicious Vikings that had Madison's head spinning. It was the way that his masculine

features made him look positively roguish. Everything from the mischievous smile that showed his adorable dimples to his glittering blue eyes had Madison entranced. Max was beyond gorgeous. She had to constantly check to make sure she wasn't physically drooling over the man, though once or twice she actually had been. If Max noticed, he kept it to himself. Her brain wandered, but this time with thoughts of her and Max in bed.

"...and so, you see, when a human is bitten or scratched by someone infected with the shifter disease, their latent tendencies aren't so latent anymore," he finished.

"So, wait, can you run that one by me one more time? Is it like catching malaria from a mosquito?"

"That's almost exactly what it is, except instead of malaria, you get shape shifting abilities. But it doesn't make you a freak, just...more in touch with your roots."

"I guess I'm stuck this way forever then, huh?"

"Well, if you look at it this way, you were always a feline on the inside. It's just on the outside now, too. That's it, in a nutshell."

A week ago, Madison would have looked deep into his sexy blue eyes that crinkled in the corners ever so slightly and thought, *Gee...it's a shame he's such a loony, because, man, is he a hunk.* But today...today she believed every word out of the stunningly attractive man's round sensual lips. *Oh, happy day!*

"I'm sorry if I seem distracted, but this is farfetched for me. I mean, I believe you because I really have no choice, but it's still unsettling. Last week, I was more than content to plop down on my couch, drink a sixer of Miller Light and watch the Packer's game...but today I'm a page in a fantasy novel. It's too much."

"I understand and I'm sorry you've found yourself in this situation. I guess when you engaged in sexual relations with Harold, he was a bit surprised and had some trouble controlling himself. I don't think the man has been with a woman in the last eighty years. You've done him quite a courtesy!"

Madison was mortified. Not only was this man unbelievably good looking, but he knew all about her little tryst with Harold. "Wait. Eighty years? You don't mean that

literally, do you?"

"Oh yeah, guess I forgot to mention that detail. You must forgive me. The whole, as you say, 'shifter thing' slows down the aging process. How old do you think *I* am?" He grinned.

"Well, now I'm not so sure; I'd have put you at about thirty-four." The slight wrinkling about his eyes and the pronounced laugh lines in his face and her deductive reasoning had led her to this conclusion.

"Now, that's a compliment. I think I'll be 120 or so this year. I've lost track over time, but that's a pretty good ballpark figure."

"Well, hell! I guess I could get into this being a shifter thing. Though, the hairballs have got to go. Any other perks come along with this whole weird situation?" This was the first good news Madison had heard. Being twenty-five was great, but not looking thirty for quite some time was even greater.

"Aside from the odd senses you'll start developing and the stunted aging process, not really. Though, since you're a pretty kitty like me, you'll start developing cat like abilities even while you're in human form...better eyesight, agility. Not so bad...and lucky for you, you're not a wolf. They can only shift during the full moon. You have the ability to shift whenever you want, though you *must* shift during the full moon. It just sort of happens and there's no fighting it."

"Good to know. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to explain all of this to me, Max. I really appreciate it; we'll have to do coffee again sometime soon." She reached out her hand to move in for a handshake. The prospect of touching Max made her giddy.

"I'd prefer a steak dinner and you're welcome." He winked at her, taking her hand and squeezing it gently.

Did he just wink at me? There is no way that man just winked at me.

"I was very serious about that dinner; would you like to dine with me tomorrow evening?"

Of course, Madison was free tomorrow night. Anyone that would stoop so low as to have a fling with Harold couldn't have a busy social calendar. "Well, I'm not sure. I'll have to check when I get home, but I'll give you a call

later?" She was sure he could tell she was lying, but she didn't want to sound overeager about the encounter.

"I'll be in a meeting, but leave a message. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume we're meeting at Anthony's Steak House at seven tomorrow night."

"Sound great." *Drool...drool...drool.*

With that, they parted ways. Madison was both excited and better informed than she had been before meeting the delectable Max. Max the Lion. That stirred all sorts of images in her naughty little head, but she had other things to focus on. Max did tell her that she needed to learn to control her emotions and that when she did, the hairballs would lessen, which was great because she didn't want to drink anymore of that hairball remedy for cats. It tasted disgusting, though it did seem to calm the hairballs a bit.

Five

"I hear you went on a date with the mysterious Max."

"Oh, and how did you catch wind of that one, Sarah?" Madison was still a little perturbed with her nosy neighbor, but Max was so good-looking it seemed to dull the annoyance a bit. That and the fact that she had accidentally spilled some juice on Sarah's new coat.

"You know, a little birdie told me...", She batted her eyes innocently at Madison.

"Of course, a birdie, and it had nothing to do with the fact that you called Max and made him call me?" Madison yelled with as much drama as she could muster, but a smile still slipped onto her lips.

"Oh yeah. That. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course I mind, Sarah. You're just lucky the man was gorgeous and not another toad like Harold." *Well, actually, Harold was a dog.* Madison wondered what kind of animal Sarah would turn out to be. She was betting Chihuahua, but wasn't willing to sink her teeth into her to find out. "And we're going to dinner tomorrow night, if you must know."

"Oh, that's so wonderful, Madison. It's about time you found someone to appreciate you." Whether or not that was a backhanded compliment, Madison couldn't tell. Sarah seemed genuinely happy that Madison was interested in someone of the male persuasion, not that Sarah would have minded if men weren't Madison's thing. She just wanted Madison to get laid and maybe live happily ever after. For all her poking around, Sarah had a good heart and could be a very tenacious friend.

~ * ~

Sarah insisted on taking Madison out to shop for a sexy new date outfit, which Madison begrudgingly accepted. Though, she had to hand it to Sarah, the woman knew what she was doing when it came to wardrobes, hair and makeup. The red sequined dress Sarah chose for her did a wonderful job of hiding her unsightly bulges while also highlighting her ample bosom.

The outfit was sure to "wow" Max, or at least make him not want to throw up in his mouth when he looked at her. Though, he *had* distinctly winked at Madison right before they had parted and he *had* invited her to dinner. Not that it meant he was interested in her; he could just be taking pity on a pathetic girl in an unfortunate situation. Or, maybe he just had an eye tic.

It's too bad the sassy new outfit didn't quite make it to the fancy steak dinner.

Cough. Hairball. Cough, cough. Hairball.

~*~

Madison woke up on a cold, hard concrete floor, her dress slightly shredded. She wasn't excited about the entire passing out thing happening over the past few days. Though, the large bump on her head suggested that she didn't just black out this time. Rather, someone else had caused her to black out. When her head cleared some of the fog, she could make out grimy silver bars in the near distance. She was in a cage or maybe a jail cell; it was tough to tell with blurred vision and a jarring headache.

There was, without a doubt, a huge golden lion staring at her from beyond the bars. Max...it must be Max. "Um, Max? Is that you? Good kitty! Did you come here to help me? Where is "here" kitty; how the fuck do I get out?"

The large cat turned its head sideways and looked at her quizzically before romping away. Either it wasn't Max or much more devious forces were at work. Who else would have known where to find her? There was Sarah, but Sarah was a normal person...at least, Madison thought she was. Plus, the probability of Sarah turning into a beautiful golden lion was very slim.

No, it couldn't be Sarah. She would never do anything to hurt me...aside from forcing me to do things I don't

actually want to do and occasionally insulting me. It's not Sarah; that's just not a possibility. Which leaves Max—but why would he want to hurt me after helping me all day yesterday?

At an impasse, the throbbing pain in her head wasn't helping her sort anything out. She spent some time inspecting her cell. No way could she escape. She was much too wide to fit through the bars, even in her cat form, and she wasn't strong enough to bend or break them. The concrete wall at the back of the cell seemed a bit too sturdy for Madison to break through or tunnel under. So, the only choice she had was to sit and wait for someone to let her know what the hell was going on.

She must have drifted off to sleep or at least stopped paying attention to her surroundings because she snapped to attention when she heard the jingling of keys from down the hall. When the perpetrator of the noise got closer, Madison was instantly relieved. It was Max, eyes sparkling and a slight smirk on this face, keys in hand.

Six

"Excuse me, but what the hell am I doing locked up in a jail cell and why aren't you helping me?" Some dinner companion he turned out to be. She should've been suspicious when he'd winked at her, but she'd wanted so desperately to believe that someone so gorgeous could be interested in her.

"Yes, well, sorry about the bump on the noggin and the whole locked up thing, but it's for the best," he responded, amazingly put-together for a man who was just trotting around in lion form.

"What the hell are you talking about, tough guy? Since when do tax attorneys set up innocent women, knock them out, and lock them in cold dark dungeons?"

"I guess since about the beginning of time. Didn't you ever study European history? I guess the tax attorney thing is a little out of place, but I'm not really a tax attorney, anyhow."

"Well, nice of you to tell me now. I think that information would've been helpful before I decided to go on a date with you. Something like, 'Hey! I'm a psycho killer that plans on locking you up tonight before I slowly murder you.' That would have at least been common courtesy."

"Hey there, missy, I didn't say anything about a date. Though, you do look tasty in your little torn frock. Showing a bit more skin than I find appropriate for a first date, but hey, who am I to complain?" He grinned at her.

Stupid king of the jungle with his arrogant attitude.

"Well, it would have covered a sufficient amount of skin if someone hadn't accosted me on my way to the restaurant, man handled me and tossed me in a cell."

"Who says you were manhandled? Rocco tells me he treated you with the utmost respect."

"Yeah, sure, whatever, Max. I should've known better than to take a phone number from Harold and actually meet with someone I didn't know. Stranger danger and all that jazz."

"I assure you, Madison, that you are in much less danger here than you would be out there."

This had me thinking all sorts of awful things. "What are you talking about, psycho? No one out there would lock me up like a criminal!"

"No, but they would've killed you. That's for certain and they surely wouldn't have treated you with the courtesy I'm showing you right now."

"You call this courtesy? I'm dirty, in rags and locked in a cage, you idiot! What kind of courtesy is this?"

"The kind that keeps you alive."

Madison didn't even bother trying to make sense out of Max's ramblings. He was obviously a loon. Granted, he was a very fair loon with wonderfully wild golden hair all tousled and sexy. *Yeech, Madison, the man is keeping you in a cage. Get a hold of your hormones, you slut!*

"So, keeping me in a cage is necessary...why?"

"It was for your own protection and if you promise not to run away, I may be persuaded to let you go."

She coughed up a hairball. *Great, just great! I thought the hairball phase was a thing of the past. It's just what I need now, on top of all of this crappy crap. Crap!*

"Fine, let me out. Now."

"With that attitude, I don't think so. I'll come back and check on you when you've calmed down and then maybe we can calmly discuss letting you out."

With that, he turned and walked away, keys jingling the whole time.

"Asshole," Madison muttered, far from under her breath, but Max didn't bother to look back at her. "I'll show him calm! Locks me up and thinks I'm just going to sit here like a good little girl just because he's pretty. Ugh!"

Madison relented; at least the full moon wasn't for a few days. She didn't think her kitty would appreciate being caged. She'd be like one of those poor zoo animals. From what she could tell by peering through the small barred window, the moon wouldn't be full for another three or four days. She didn't want to spend that long in Max's five star suite. His bed, maybe, but it could take some groveling on his part to get her there at this point.

Tink.

Tink...Tink...

TINK...TINK...TINK...TINK

"What the fuck is with all the tinking, already? Can't a girl get a moment's rest?" Madison screeched at no one, or at least she didn't think anyone was there, until one of those *tinking* pebbles hit her square in the forehead. "Ouch! Does the torture never end? Isn't it bad enough that I'm locked in a cell, but you have to throw rocks at me, too? Who the hell is out there?"

"Madison?" a timid voice uttered, clearly from outside the cement building.

Sarah... "Sarah! Sarah, is that you? What the hell are you doing here?" *God bless the damn nosy neighbor.*

"Madison, what's going on?"

"Honey, if I knew that, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be sitting here on my fanny taking in the beautiful sites of cell block A."

"Well, I was sort of following you to your date because I wanted to catch a glimpse of Mr. Wonderful and when you got clobbered with that bat, I figured I should probably keep following," Sarah explained. She was nosy as all hell, but also quite the clever minx.

"Well, did you bring the cavalry?"

"No..."

"The police?"

"No..."

"The Incredible Hulk?"

"Madison, that's ridiculous."

"Keys? Did you bring anything that might be helpful?"

"Well, no...I didn't exactly stop to pack supplies. I just wanted to find out where they were taking you and make sure you were okay."

"Locked in a cell here, Sarah...*not okay!* Not okay!" While yelling at Sarah, Madison gagged and coughed up yet another hairball.

"What was that? Are you okay?"

"Just a hairball."

"Hairball, like a cat?" Sarah asked, obviously confused.

"Yeah, long story. So, how do you plan on getting me out of here?"

"Well, I could go around the house and ask Max to let you out."

"Sarah, that's the most retarded idea I've ever heard." Madison rolled her eyes. "Seriously, he locked me up; he isn't just going to let me waltz out of here. What else ya got?"

"Well, I could just take my car back into town to get the police—"

"Car? You brought your *car*? Drive the flippin' thing into the side of the building and get me the hell out of here before they try some weird freaky experiments on me!"

"Oh, but Madison, I don't want to chip the paint. It's an almost new car," Sarah whined.

"Sarah, my life is at stake here. Some weirdo locked me into a dungeon that he's keeping conveniently in his house. I think a chip in your car is the least of our worries. Just smash into the building and get me the hell out of here!"

Luckily for Madison, Sarah was a bit of a "proactive" driver and it only took her one nice good smash to break away enough of the one wall of my cell that faced the outside of the building for Madison to skitter through; the car was even still running afterward. "Hurry, get in before someone notices," Sarah said while glancing around to see if anyone had witnessed the accident.

"Sarah, you just drove a car through the side of someone's house. I'm pretty sure they noticed. Let's get out of here."

"Fine, but you have some explaining to do. This stuff doesn't happen to normal people."

Seven

Sarah, my new partner in crime, was driving merrily down the road and away from my former prison. It was slightly awkward with her sunny disposition leaking all over my shitty mood, but I really was thankful that she had just driven her almost-new car through the wall of a house just to set me free. She really did have her moments.

"Okay, wait. You're telling me that Harold was a cat in the sack?" Sarah was beyond astonished by that little tidbit. "Hey, if I had known, maybe I would have hopped into bed with the guy, too! Me-ow!"

"Sarah, that's not the point. You aren't at all fazed by the whole shape-shifting thing? Nothing...nada...not even a moment's hesitation in believing me?"

"Madison, weird things like that happen all of the time. Even I have a cousin that's a vampire, don't you?"

"So, you're telling me that you've known about this whole supernatural underground for years?"

"Yeah, seriously, you didn't think Stuart Townsend was actually pretending to be a vampire in *Queen of the Damned*, did you? Or Marilyn Manson...like he's not a demon?"

"For real? You're not just fucking with me because you think I'm a loon, are you?"

"No, I'm completely serious," she stated matter-of-factly. "The only thing I don't get is why the hunk went and clobbered you and locked you in his dungeon? Maybe he's into bondage?"

"I don't think bondage is the answer. I mean, he may be into bondage, we never got that far in our relationship, not that I would be comfortable with getting shackled for fun. It's just not my cup of tea....but that's entirely beside the point." The bondage issue flustered her. Max was a whacked out psycho and probably wanted to kill her, but he was still a hottie. "Anyway, Max said that I was in some sort of danger, but he wouldn't explain anything to me because apparently my angry disposition displeased him. As if I'd be happy to wake up all battered and in a cage!" She stifled another hairball.

"I wonder what kind of trouble he thought you were in."

"Sarah, he is crazy, a sexy psycho, a loon! I probably wasn't in any sort of danger aside from the danger he put me in. Ugh...life is much too difficult. I just want to drink a case of beer and drown my sorrows in a bowl of cheese soup. Is that too much to ask for, beer and cheese soup?"

"Stop being dramatic. You don't know that he's a nut ball. Maybe you really are in some sort of danger? We probably shouldn't be at home right now. Maybe we should get out of town, rent a hotel room, lay low for a couple of days?"

"Who says we are doing anything?"

"Yeah, like I'm not coming with you. For one, you're pretty much clueless when it comes to the paranormal and you totally owe it to me. I am so not sitting at home wondering what sort of adventures you're off on!"

"Adventures. This is my life, not a fairy story."

"Uh, so? I'm coming with and if you don't like it then you can go back to Max for help."

"Fine, let's go. Where exactly are we going, again?"

"I think there's a hotel off of Highway 14, we'll probably be safe there for a while. Though, I don't think we should take my car...or yours, for that matter. Too obvious."

"Great, now you're a detective, too. Fine, Sarah, you go pack and I'll call us a cab."

"Oooohhhh, goodie!"

~ * ~

"You all set, Madison?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." She sighed as she heaved

her overstuffed suitcase down the stairs and out to the cab. The cab driver was your normal impatient asshole. Though instead of the skinny bustling New York taxi drivers, he was a fat, sweaty Wisconsin driver that smelled of pepperoni pizza and barbeque sauce. *Gross!*

After shooing the women into the car, the driver proceeded to sweat profusely with all of the windows up, creating a less than pleasant atmosphere...though the stench didn't seem to bother him in the least. "So, where you two lovely ladies headed this evening?" He waggled his eyebrows at them via his rearview mirror.

"Can you drop us off at the Motel 6 out on Highway 14?" Sarah asked.

"Meeting up with some men folk for a romantic weekend, are we?" the cab driver asked with a certain hint of perverse suggestion behind his hoarse voice.

"No, no men folk. Just us gals," she replied.

"Lesbos, nice."

Resisting the urge to start hacking up yet another hairball, Madison chimed in. "No, not lesbos. It's none of your business, anyway. Just take us to the damn hotel, you stupid gorilla."

"Dykes, then?"

"No! Just drive!"

They spent the rest of their short ride in silence, the driver occasionally glancing back at them in the rearview and licking his lips. Madison thanked all that was good that Sarah hadn't set her up on a date with the disgusting, round and greasy cabbie because he was uber gross.

"Here we are, ladies. That'll be eight-fifty...or we could forget about the fare and you could just invite me up to observe the night's festivities?"

"Gross!" Madison handed him a ten and slammed the door in his face before following Sarah into the hotel's lobby.

"I got us a double and they have a hot tub!" Sarah said, her voice exuberant.

"A hot tub, yeah...like that's exactly what we should be spending our weekend doing. Sarah, sometimes I don't think your brain actually works."

"Hey, what's wrong with having a little fun, even if we are on the run?"

"We are not on the run Sarah. I'm on the run; you're just a tagalong."

"Have it your way, party pooper. I'm going to check out the pool and I'll meet you up in the room, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, see you there."

Madison made her way to the stairwell and headed up to the second floor to find her room. Luckily, she didn't have to lug her suitcase up more than one flight of stairs. She paused to look down either side of the hallway before stepping into her temporary abode. Then, everything went black. Again.

Eight

The whole being clobbered thing was getting old fast. She had been knocked out twice in less than twenty-four hours. Her new life was just not cutting it anymore—not that it had been cutting it at all in the past.

“Ow...,” she slowly mumbled while making her way back to the world of the conscious. It was a journey she was less than pleased to take. “Goddamn! Do they really need to keep conking me over the head?” Madison was still groggy while opening her heavy eyelids and attempting to bring the world back into focus again. “Wasn’t the first time bad enough, Max? Did you really have to clobber me again? My damn brain has been damaged enough today. You could have just held a gun to my head while escorting me to your car, but *nooo* that would have been *way* too much work for you. God, you’re an asshole.”

“Well, Ms. Murphy, you’re quite entertaining. Much more than I anticipated.”

She didn’t recognize the voice and things were still cloudy, but even though her vision had not quite returned, she knew without a doubt that the man behind the voice was not Max. “Max, eh? How is the old chap? Keeping you on your toes?”

“More like keeping me in his dungeon? Who are you, what do you want, and why am I chained to this bed?”

She hadn’t been locked away this time. Merely shackled to the bed in what she assumed was her hotel room. Sarah was bound and gagged on a shabby hotel desk chair. *Yup, this must be our room.*

"Well, Ms. Murphy, if you must know, I am an entrepreneur here to offer you a new and exciting career."

"And you had to knock me unconscious and cuff me to my bed because...?"

"I figured you'd be much more willing to listen to my proposal without the distractions of movement and freedom."

"Well, aren't you a considerate fellow?"

"I do try, Ms. Murphy."

They weren't alone in the room. Well, of course, a passed out Sarah sprawled in the corner, but now she noticed the two large scruffy men standing post at both exits—hallway and balcony. *Great, now I have two psychos and hired muscle on my tail. Not to mention the added stress of having to save my nosy neighbor. This week just keeps getting better.* "Are Guido and Nunzio really necessary...what did you say your name was again?"

"Frank and Bobby, yes, and I didn't happen to mention my name...yet. I do hope you'll find our hospitality comforting, Madison."

She hacked up another hairball. This one was much more of an orange color than before. "Hospitality? You call handcuffing me to the bed of a hotel room that I paid for, hospitable? I'd hate to see what you consider to be rude!"

"I'm sure hate would be the least of your worries if you found yourself in a situation that displeased me."

"So, get on with it. What the hell do you want, guy?"

"As I said before, I have a unique business opportunity for you."

"Yeah, well, sorry, but I've got a job. So, no thanks and go away."

"Oh, dear Madison, it's really not all that easy. You see, you are quite the find and I am not the only man gunning for you. In fact, my proposition is probably one of the most pleasant you will run across." He grinned at her like a man in charge.

"Oh yeah, I think I'll take my chances," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Well, that is a mistake that I am not willing to let you make. You see, tigers, such as yourself, are a very rare find. As most shifters turn out to be of the monkey persuasion, felines are a hot commodity. You're a very threatening

prospect to many shifters out there and lots of people don't want the balance upset by the introduction of a new power player."

"Power player." Madison rolled her eyes and wondered if all the shifter folk were lunatics. "Listen, whatever your name is, a few days ago I was just a regular person. A happy Wisconsin Packer's fan with a tedious day job and a drunken night-life. I have no idea what you're talking about; I am no "power player" and I just want to be left alone."

Sarah grumbled in the corner, apparently fighting her way back to the world of the consciousness. The meatheads stood a silent guard. Mr. Question Mark sidled a bit closer to Madison.

"Oh, dear girl, there is much you do not understand about our ways. Feline shifters not only have the ability to change into their animal, but they take on the strengths of their animal while in human form."

"Yes, I've already been informed." The man's eyebrow perked at her statement, but he said nothing to clue her in as to why he found this information so interesting.

"Well, Ms. Murphy, have you also been told that feline shifters are the only ones to inherit this ability? The dogs, monkeys and rodents of the shifter world only have the ability to shift at will and the wolves only shift during the full moon. So, you see, you are quite special and your talents are both coveted and feared in the shifter world."

"Well, no, I didn't know that part, but I don't see how that makes me a threat to anyone. I have no idea what I'm doing half of the time and I didn't know anything about this whole paranormal subculture until you crazies started explaining things to me. I would've been content to remain ignorant to everything and go on my merry way, even if it meant coughing up the occasional hairball." She was at wits end with all of these crazy shifters.

"Ah, but like I said before, even if you are not interested in us, we are very interested in you. There are people that would rip you to shreds on sight. Fortunately, I am not one of those people. I would like to handle this situation in a different manner." The man had a very sharp look about him, not unattractive per say, just sharp, hardened and quizzical. He looked dangerous and Madison

had no choice but to listen to what he had to say. "I would like to...recruit you. You see, I am a purveyor of fine shifters. My guards, for example, are both cougars. I, myself, am pleased to be a mighty lion. We, my merry little band and I, are all feline shifters and I would like to invite you to join our crew."

Madison took this information and chewed on it. It may be handy to have like-minded "professionals" surrounding her, but something in her gut made her dislike the man who had yet to introduce himself.

"Arthur Mainfield," he announced, as if reading her mind.

"Well, Mr. Mainfield—"

"Arthur, I insist."

"Well, Arthur, you present a very interesting case. I would be lying if I said this hasn't been an informative little visit, but what exactly is it that you want me to do?"

"Oh, just a little reconnaissance work and for you to use of some of your unique persuasive skills."

"So, you want me to be a spy slash enforcer? I don't think that's my cup of tea. So, I'll pass and you can take your muscle and get out of my room." Madison was doing her best to keep her anger under control as the constant hairballs were taking a toll on her throat. The stinging pain served as an excellent reminder to keep her temper subdued.

"Oh, Ms. Murphy, you misunderstand. This really is an offer you can't refuse. Aside from the fact that you're shackled to the bed, we've also take the liberty of inflicting your little friend with the shifter disease. So, unless you want her to have a rude awakening, you best sign on with us."

Madison reacted with false horror. She hadn't anticipated Mr. Mainfield's strategy, but he also did not know Sarah. While she would probably not be amused with her new affliction, she would be intrigued and morbidly curious. While what these strange men-beasts had done to her friend horrified her, she was also excited to see what kind of animal Sarah would turn out to be. Hopefully, it wasn't a Chihuahua as she had guessed earlier because a Chihuahua wouldn't be a very helpful player in an escape plan.

"I am disinclined to acquiesce to your request."

Madison grinned, taking a quote from the *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

“I am sorry to hear that.” Mainfield’s goons closed in. The world, once again, went black.

Nine

As Madison fought her way back to consciousness, her eyes flicked open for a moment. It wasn't long enough for her to gain a handle on where she was or who she was with, though she did notice that someone was carrying her, perhaps to a vehicle.

When she finally did break out of her head-trauma-induced semi-coma, she was riding in the backseat of a vehicle somewhere in the middle of a big city...Milwaukee or Chicago, perhaps? How had she gotten here? A few days ago she was mostly satisfied with her mundane existence and now she was beaten, forced to hide, and making all sorts of new "friends" she didn't want.

Madison hoped she hadn't been unconscious long enough to get much further than the surrounding cities. Chicago was even a bit of a stretch as it was about two hours by car and she didn't like the thought of losing so much time to an intruder-induced sleep. The full moon was only two days away and she couldn't afford to be caught in the middle of a big city when the shift overtook her. She didn't want to be poached on her first night out. Madison's head pounded, as was to be expected, what with her frequent head trauma and stress.

"Where are we?" she mumbled, though not to anyone in particular as she had not taken the time to even notice who escorted her around the city.

"Chicago, Western Ave," she heard a familiar voice utter from the front seat. It was not the condescending voice of Mr. Mainfield, and she had never heard his lackey's talk,

so they were also out. The voice was distinctly male, so that ruled out Sarah, as well. Leaving her with the cab driver, Harold and Max to choose from. Max, it was Max. *Oh, great!*

"Max?"

"That's my name."

"Where the hell is Sarah? Where the hell are we...and where the hell did you come from?"

"Sarah, your friend who called me the other night? We're in Chicago—I already told you that—and I'm pretty sure I came out of my mother's no-no parts." The sly smile was evident in his glib voice. *Douche bag!*

"Yeah, you're a whole lot of help. God, why couldn't you just leave me tied to that bed?"

"I can tie you to another bed if you wish." He turned and winked at her.

"Of course, that's exactly what I want you to do. I'm not thinking about anything but you tying me to a bed and having your way with me. Get over yourself!"

"Oh Madison, don't kid yourself. I know you hesitated a moment there when I suggested the bondage. It's okay, I'm pretty irresistible...and I never mentioned anything about having my way with you."

"God, you're a pig."

"No, I'm a lion. I thought we had already established that."

"How did I even wind up with you? I mean...one moment Mainfield's henchmen were knocking me upside the head and the next moment I wake up in the backseat of your car?"

"Would it have made you feel better if you had woken up naked in the backseat of my car? Because I can arrange that if you want."

"Are you ever serious? I want to know what happened to my friend and how I got here."

"Oh, you're really hurting my feelings, Madison. I thought I meant more to you than that. You're just using me to get information. I thought you would at least use me for my body."

"Yeah, well, that could have worked out if you hadn't locked me up in a jail cell, you creep!"

"As I said before, it was for your own protection and if

you still don't believe me, then maybe all of those knocks about the head have affected your brain capacity."

"I can think just fine, thank you. Can you please tell me what happened back there and why you've taken me to Chicago?"

"Well, there was no other girl when I showed up to save the day. There were a few dumb brutes and another lion and I bested them with my brute strength, sheer masculinity and good looks...that and Rocco's help, but he wasn't fortunate enough to make it out."

"Okay..."

"And we're in Chicago because I have a condo here and we're going to bunk down until I decide what to do with you."

"But you have to get Sarah! We have to save her!"

"She didn't happen to drive into my house earlier, did she? Either way, she wasn't there when I came to save the day. So, we really don't know where to find her or even if she is worth finding."

"Of course she's worth finding; she's my stupid nosy neighbor whose always trying to fix me up with unsuitable men. She's also my best friend and she's just been infected with the whole shifter thing. She's probably scared and alone and we need to go get her!"

"While that's interesting, we can't just run out saddles blazing. Let's get to my place, cozy up, have a little sex and decide what to do from there."

"In your dreams, pal."

"It *is* in my dreams, nice of you to pick up on that. How about we turn fiction into fact?" He turned off his headlights and pulled into the drive of a ritzy high rise. We stopped in front of the daunting building and an eager valet jumped out to greet us. After Max helped me out of the car, another eager building employee opened up the door to let us into the fancy building.

"Well, Mr. Moneybags, nice digs." Madison was a bit astonished by the rich décor. She could hang around with Max a bit longer. At least long enough to shower and maybe get a nap.

"I try. Should we get naked now, or after we get up to my apartment?" he asked before giving her a little shove into

the elevator.

Ten

Madison was angry with herself for many reasons. She should abhor the man she shared an elevator with, but she was still salivating over him. He had a confidence that wasn't at all arrogant. Sly, but not arrogant. Not being able to hate the man who had locked her up should infuriate her, but she couldn't muster the rage. His thick, tousled golden hair formed a magnificent mane to frame his perfect face. His dimpled cheeks, twinkling eyes and full sexy lips would make any woman drool. No, it wasn't just Madison Murphy. Any woman who didn't go weak in the knees while gazing upon Max's sexy visage was definitely homosexual or blind.

She didn't want him to turn her on. She didn't want him to rescue her. She didn't want him, period. Well, maybe that last one was a bit of a stretch. She wanted him very much, but was in denial. It wasn't like she was in love with the man, but she did swoon quite frequently over him.

"Um...Madison, you can get out of the elevator now. I mean, if you want to keep staring at the dark spot in the carpet, that's fine, but I assure you, my house is much more comfortable...and there's a bed." He winked again. The man must be a compulsive winker.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that, I was just thinking about how much I hate you." Her voice betrayed her lie, but she also didn't need to give Max any more encouragement.

"Yes. I'm sure." He glanced back at her while finagling the lock to his apartment. The door opened to reveal the most extravagant room she had ever seen. It was both homey and elegant which, in itself, was quite a feat. The only

thing his living room lacked was a bearskin rug, but considering the duality of his nature, she didn't blame him for not wanting to walk all over one of his fallen brethren. Perhaps the most overwhelming aspect of Max's house was how well it highlighted his sexy, confident personality. Madison would have doubted that Max was the type of person to decorate his own house, but upon seeing it, she wasn't so confident about her musings.

"Madison? You can come in, you know. You don't have to stand in the doorway all befuddled-looking." He chuckled at her baffled expression. "Maybe I shouldn't have knocked you about earlier; you're more spacey than you were when we met."

She stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind her. "What do you expect from me, Max? A person can only take so much in a day."

"Technically, it's been a few days, Mad, but who's counting?"

"Besides you, no one. Seriously, I am so stressed out right now. I know I'm not coughing up hairballs every five minutes, which may confuse you, but I assure you, I'm at my wits end."

"I didn't know your wits had an end. I'll try to take it easy on you...unless you ask me to take it hard on you." He snickered again. The man obviously thought himself very funny. Madison wasn't so sure she shared his sentiment, but she hadn't quite made up her mind about the man. He was yummy, that was a cold hard fact, but he was also mysterious and until she was able to unravel those mysteries, she couldn't let herself get lost in his beautiful eyes.

"I've got no fight in me right now, Max. Can you just explain things to me?"

"Okay, this might take a while. Let me go make us some coffee and we can have a little chat." He went about his coffee making, which amused Madison. She hadn't pegged him for someone who would know his way around a kitchen, but Max was, thus far, full of surprises. Some of them weren't so great, but nobody's perfect.

"Madison, you were 'born' in a time of territorial power struggles between the shifters. As a whole, the shifters aren't

very organized or reformed and right now, they're letting their base instincts drive."

"And you're not?"

"If I was letting my primal instincts drive, we'd be in bed by now, but we're not, are we?"

"Well, I'm glad I have a say in the matter. Anyway, that's not what I meant."

"I know, but I do so love watching you get all flustered."

Heat infused her cheeks. "Asshole."

"Sometimes. But to answer your question, I'm sort of like the Robin Hood of the shifter world. I don't exactly rob from the rich and give to the poor, but I have noble intentions and my band of merry men share my sentiments."

"Okay, and what about the other guys?"

"Well, you were in the company of Arthur Mainfield. He is more of an Al Capone. Juice loans, assassins, spies...all of that jargon, and he probably wanted to use you so that he could make a power play and reign over all of us shifters. There are other dangerous men out there who are probably looking to eliminate you, because, as you've probably guessed, you're a rare and precious find."

"So, you really were trying to keep me safe before?" Madison trusted him and not just because he was a total babe. He seemed honest, even sincere.

"That's what I said, wasn't it?"

"And the cage was necessary because...you thought I could overpower you with my brute strength or maybe because I'm so sexy that you didn't want all of the other kitties catching my scent and coming to rape me?" She probably shouldn't provoke him, but she was irritated with the whole ordeal.

"You were in the cage because I expected you to react with anger and I didn't want an angry Siberian tiger tearing through my home."

"Oh."

"But the rape thing is also a valid point, you are quite a fetching woman."

"Would you stop complimenting me already? I know I'm not beautiful, I'm not even pretty. I'm lumpy and frumpy and I don't need you to patronize me. Seriously."

"But I'm not—"

Madison cut him off with a wave of her hand before he could finish. She didn't want him to take pity on her as she had on Harold. She just wanted him to leave the situation alone.

He moved in closer and. "Madison Murphy, you exceed the standards of today's society and if you can't see that, you're blind." He took her hand and absentmindedly stroked it. "You have amazing golden eyes. In fact, I've never seen eyes that color before. They're wonderful, perfect. Your long white hair compliments your round cherub face and your other assets are quite admirable. The only thing missing is the wings."

"Yeah, I'm a cat, not a bird. So sorry to disappoint." Sarcasm was Madison's natural defense mechanism. She had no idea how to react to such wonderful compliments, as she had never been complimented before. Not ever.

"I meant that you're an angel, not a bird. You don't take compliments well, do you?" He raised his eyebrow at her once more, an inviting gesture.

"No, I don't enjoy compliments based on the fact that they're not true. So, either save them for someone who deserves them or compliment me on something realistic. Like my winning personality."

"Ha. You're a very peculiar woman. I can't say that your personality is winning, per say. But, you do delight me with your quips and blatant sarcasm."

"Thanks."

"I'm not sure that qualifies as a compliment. I just want you to know that I've meant everything I've said to you. I'm not just trying to butter you up so that you'll join my merry little band; I honestly think you're beautiful."

Max didn't give Madison the chance to debate. He briskly pulled her toward him, the determination in his face bringing a heated, embarrassed fluster of arousal to Madison. He pressed his palm to the nape of her neck, brought her face to his and kissed her hard.

Her arms flailed as she pulled away from his warm embrace. "Stop it!"

"Madison, shut the hell up before you ruin this moment." He kissed her again, and this time her lips parted

under the pressure of his crushing kiss, allowing him entry, and as their tongues entangled, Madison let out a soft, satisfied murmur of pleasure.

The next thing she knew Max was carrying her into the bedroom. "Well, hell Max, one little kiss and you think I'm going to sleep with you."

He gently laid her on the bed and stared at her satin draped frame. "Madison, if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all." He held one of her hands and raised it above her head, pinning it to the bed while his other hand went lower to find the exposed flesh of her hips. He lightly ran his finger in circles around her waist before inching his palm up across her ribcage and toward her enormous soft breasts. He stopped just short of the delightful mounds to touch his lips to her ears.

He whispered gentle kisses on her earlobe before tracing his tongue down the rim of her ear, her neck and down to her sensual collarbone, sucking hard at the skin in the hollow.

His palm snuck up to her breasts and tentatively grazed the flesh that he was not shy about wanting to devour. Her nipple responded, hardening to his probing as she let out another wanting sigh. He ripped her already shredded dress and kneaded her exposed breast. Flesh-to-flesh. Her back arched, bringing her breasts closer to his moist lips. She sensed his deep primal hunger wanting to take over and maul her, but he remained in control and proceeded with his slow assault.

Madison, however, wasn't so in control of her feline hormones. Her hand rushed to his waist to hastily unfasten his pants, which she shoved down using her feet. The shirt was next, up and over his head, leaving them naked atop his bed, bodies intimately pressing against one another. She probably shouldn't be doing this, but it felt too good for her to actually care.

His glazed eyes met hers and she could swear that the pupils went vertical for a moment, but she knew he was just making sure that she was still a willing participant.

She didn't want him to stop now. "Finish what you started, or else!"

"So delicately put, but you don't have to tell me

twice." All hesitation evaporated. With renewed confidence, his mouth explored her breast while his hands moved lower to knead the flesh of her soft hips and buttocks. He nipped at her nipple then returned to her mouth while moving his hand lower toward her awaiting treasure.

His strong fingers teased her delicate folds. Madison let out a feral moan and parted her thighs to allow him better access. A smirk in his grin made Madison think that he was up to something nefarious. He feathered his fingers over her so lightly he barely made contact. Still, it set Madison's desire on fire. She could sense his concentration; he teased her on purpose.

"God, you're an asshole, Max."

"I know, but you like it and don't even try to tell me that you don't."

She growled at him, infuriated and seeking release. He pressed his lips to hers while continuing his light assault on her intimate parts. His fingers finally found her clitoris and rubbed vigorously while she bucked at his sudden assault. He brought her within an inch of release then stopped.

"What, that's it?"

"I haven't even started," he replied, his deep voice husky with desire.

Madison's lips curved into a mischievous smile. "Neither have I."

Eleven

This time, his technique was different. Hands roamed all over her naked form, followed by little nips in a trail all the way across her flesh.

Madison's fingertips delicately walked across the wide expanse of Max's chest before following his treasure trail all the way down to the prize. His cock was at full mast while she tentatively played with the hair around his groin and gently cupped his full balls. When her hand finally grazed his hard shaft, he let out a long moan and grabbed her to shift positions.

On top of her again, with one hand on the mattress supporting his weight, he bent down to kiss her full on the mouth. His swollen cock teased her entrance, the head brushing her moist clit a few times before finally entering her with one swift thrust.

Madison raised her hips hard against him, wanting the invasion to proceed. His tongue hungrily thrust inside her mouth as his hips moved in tune to Madison's urgings. He pulled her harder against him with each powerful thrust.

The pleasure slowly built inside Madison and it would only be a short time before she came. He stopped abruptly and smirked at her.

"That best not be it, Max."

"Not even close...well, maybe close."

"Um...I'm...wait—" He thrust hard into her before she could finish her sentence, which drove her crazy. A loud wanting moan escaped before she settled back into the rhythm of his strokes. Max smiled down at her and with one

final thrust, Madison bucked wildly against his hips, throwing her head back in pleasure. A moment later, Max climaxed and the two collapsed together in a big sweaty pile on the bed. They lazily draped their limbs over one another and drifted into a light doze.

Madison awoke first. She covertly jabbed a finger into Max's ribs before closing her eyes and pretending to sleep. "What the...?" Max uttered.

"Huh? Oh, you're awake."

"Yeah, it seems that way, eh?"

Madison caught a glimpse of his back. She had left a few scratches while they were in the throes of passionate love-making. The wounds had grown into puffy red welts. "Uh, Max...I think I may have gotten a little to feisty with you."

"So it seems."

"Since I'm a shifter and I scratched you, does that mean you're going to turn into some sort of Liger?"

"What the hell is a liger?"

Madison rolled her eyes, obviously disappointed with his ignorance.

"You know, like Napoleon's favorite animal?" she said matter-of-factly and perhaps with a bit too much of a cocky undertone.

"Bonaparte?"

"No, Dynamite. You've never seen *Napoleon Dynamite*? His favorite animal is a liger...half lion, half tiger, bred for its skills in magic!"

"Oh, I see. Well, that's not how it works, anyway. I'm a lion, you're a tiger. Though if we ever had cubs they'd probably be, how you say...ligers?"

"Cubs?"

"Um...long story. I'd rather not explain the particulars right now. Can't we just bask in the afterglow a bit longer?"

Madison smiled and drifted off once more.

Twelve

Madison shot up in bed. "I am such an asshole! We've been here having a grand old time and indulging in the pleasures of the flesh and Sarah is still out there by herself! I am so inconsiderate; we have to save her."

"How much do you know about this Sarah, anyway?" he asked.

"Well, she's been my nosy matchmaking neighbor for about three years now. She's always in my house pestering the shit out of me. I'd say I know her pretty well."

"And how do you know she's not working with Mainfield?"

"Well, she came and saved me from your dungeon, for one!"

"Which led you to get captured by Mainfield. So, that's not really a valid point for me. Plus, she drove her car into my house. What kind of person does that?"

"The kind that's willing to save her friend from an egomaniacal lunatic."

"Madison, I thought we were past that point."

Madison frowned, no longer certain of Max's intentions. Why would he make Sarah out to be a bad guy? "Yeah, well, I guess not." He looked wounded. Perhaps she had misjudged the situation.

"I'm just trying to make sense of the situation. We don't want to walk right into a trap, do we?"

"Well...I guess not. I'm sor..." She trailed off, not actually wanting to apologize for her distrust.

"Madison, what would Mainfield want with Sarah?"

"To hurt her, to hold her hostage...I don't know. All of this is still new to me and I'm not sure how to make sense out of anything." Madison broke down into sobs, tears trailing down her face.

"Sweetheart, don't worry. We'll get everything taken care of and if saving Sarah means that much to you, then that's what we'll do."

Max sprang into action and made a few phone calls, presumably to his brothers (or sisters) in arms. "I have a few friends that are going to case Mainfield's haunts to see if we can figure this thing out."

"So, we're just going to sit here and do nothing."

"No, Madison, we're going to act as soon as we know what to do and where to go, but for now we just have to sit tight, okay?"

"Okay."

"Unless you want to have another go?" He smiled, that same devilish look on his face.

"In your dreams, big guy."

"Big, yup, that's me."

"Ugh...gross!"

"That's not what you were saying a few hours ago."

Madison blushed. He was right. He knew he was right; she knew he was right. So, she just sat there, defeated. "Hey Max, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, as long as it's not too personal."

"What the hell is your last name?" She felt like a tramp. First, she got down and dirty with Harold, the tax attorney, then hopped in the sack with Max, whose last name she didn't even know.

"Ha. I guess our relationship is far enough for me to divulge that intimate detail."

"I think your intimate detail was just inside of me, so could you just answer the question?"

"King. Max King."

Madison laughed. "Seriously, your name is Max King? Max King the Lion. That's awesome. How come you lions get such cool names? Max King, Arthur Mainfield...that's just unreal."

"I told you we were fated to be lions; I guess that's just another reason to support my explanation."

"So, how come I don't have a cool tiger name? Madison Murphy, Siberian Tiger, doesn't exactly sound like a proper tiger name."

"I'm not sure, perhaps your ancestors changed the name to fit in. I think Madison Murphy is a perfect name for a tiger, though I've never met a tiger before."

"Wait, what? You've never met another tiger?"

"Lions, bears, monkeys, apes, cougars, wolves, hawks and the occasional sewer rat, but no tigers. When I told you that you were a find, I really meant it. Tigers are very rare."

"So, everyone is gunning for me because I'm the only tiger around?"

"That's part of the reason. Your feline abilities make you a great asset because you've got better sight than most people. You're also very agile—as you've managed to prove in bed." He winked.

The man was a winking fiend. Madison didn't blush; she'd grown use to the flattery. That or she was finally cracking up.

"So, I'm like super shifter; that's pretty cool."

Madison let it all sink in for a minute before bursting out again. "Wait!"

"Wait, what?" Max seemed surprised at the random outburst, but if he was going to stick around, he was going to have to come to appreciate the quirks of Madison Murphy.

"I haven't hacked up a hairball in hours!"

"Good for you, Madison." He looked at her like her head was a balloon, but she didn't care. No hairballs meant good things for Madison.

A few hours drifted by without any reports from Max's friends. Max's worry was evident in his dark eyes, reflecting her own anxiety. Someone should have reported with information, even if there was no information to relay. "Excuse me for a minute; I'm going to go make a few more calls to see if we can find out anything new."

Max excused himself and Madison attempted to sit patiently, but wound up twiddling her thumbs and gnawing on her fingernails. When Max returned, he looked confused.

"I wasn't able to get in touch with anyone. It's probably not a good sign and as much as I'd hate to go out there blind, I don't think we have any other option."

"So, when your friends are in trouble we go running, but when mine has obviously been taken we do nothing?"

"It's not like that, and you know it. We just don't have a choice. I didn't want to rush out so close to the full moon, but it's the only way."

Madison had forgotten about the full moon and was suddenly uncomfortable about heading out to save Sarah and the merry men. She had only shifted once before and she'd passed out before anything definite had happened. So, she was nervous of what would happen to her out in the open, unprotected and away from the warm embrace of Max King. "Shit, I forgot all about the full moon. Do you think I'll be okay if we get stuck out there when the moon rises?"

"I don't know. I will try to stay by your side at all times, but I just don't know what's lurking out there. All of my people are missing and I don't know what kind of manpower we'll be up against."

"Do you think we can risk going out there?" Madison had done a complete one-eighty in the past few minutes. She still wanted to save Sarah, but she didn't want to wind up dead in the process...which seemed like a very real possibility. She wished more than ever that this whole debacle had never happened, even if she had just had the most amazing sex of her life with an Adonis.

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

Panic set in. She looked back at her old life and wondered why she had been so distraught over the boring existence she led. Yes, she had to work forty hours at a job she hated and no, she didn't have a lover with whom to share her life, but things hadn't been so bad. She was young-ish and apparently not hideous, though she had only come to that realization with the aid of sexy Max King. Regardless, she got to watch her beloved Pack win the Super Bowl more than a few times and she could always drink her fill of Wisconsin brewed beers.

The weather in Wisconsin wasn't always ideal, but she had always been able to find beauty in her surroundings. While others complained about the bone-chilling winter weather, Madison enjoyed the taste of snowflakes and the thrill of assaulting neighborhood children with snowballs. Summers weren't exactly her forte as she wouldn't be caught

in a bikini, but it was nice to sit outside on Sunday mornings sipping a Bloody Mary among friends.

Now she had to make the choice between saving her only friend who may actually be one of the bad people and saving her own hide, figuratively speaking. While her new condition wasn't without its perks, she found it harder and harder to maintain her sarcastic demeanor and classic wit. Her very personality was slipping away in the stress of being a newborn shifter caught in some sort of turf war. Part of her wished it had never happened and part of her was amazed at how ignorant she was to the rest of the world.

"Madison, are you okay?"

Max stared at her as if she were a fragile china doll or perhaps, a newborn babe. "No, Max, I'm not okay, but there isn't much we can do about it, is there?"

"You've got me. I don't know how much that helps, but at least you're not alone in this."

"Thanks, but that doesn't do much to ease my tension. While I may not be alone, I'm an inexperienced Wisconsin weirdo."

"Not weird, Madison, unique...beautiful...strong...a real find."

She smiled at him. He was trying to boost morale, but it wasn't helping.

"What's our plan of attack?" she asked, attempting to shift the focus from herself to the matter at hand.

Thirteen

"We can't exactly charge back over the state line with no direction, can we?" Madison was a bit frustrated with their lack of an itinerary. "I mean, we don't even know if they're still in the state. Even if they are, they could be anywhere between Lake Geneva and Green Bay by now. So, how are we even going to find them...whoever they are?"

"I imagine 'they' are Mainfield and his lackeys. The where is a bit trickier. You're right about that, we need to do a little more reconnaissance before we charge into the battlefield. The two of us aren't much of a cavalry as it is, so a location and plan may help."

Madison felt triumphant in her victory. She knew better than Max and she had only been part of this fucked up world for a few days. Though, maybe Max stretched himself too thin. "It was the best sex of my life," she blurted out.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

She smiled at him coyly. "You heard me."

"Thanks for the compliment, but that has nothing to do with.....WAIT!"

"Wait?" Her attempt to lighten the mood had sparked an idea in Max. Go, Madison!

"Cell phones." Max shouted.

"Yes, cell phones are pretty handy devices. I don't see how they're going to help us here, but I'm glad you've finally recognized how wonderful they are."

"No, Madison, that's not it! My friends all had their cell phones on them."

"So..."

"So...cell phones have GPS locaters in them!"

"I don't see how that helps us, unless you're some sort of rockin' techno path."

"I'm not, but I have a friend at the department who could run a trace on the cell phones for me."

"Well, then why are you standing around arguing with me? Do it! Time is of the essence here. Our biological clocks are sort of ticking and I'd rather not get caught out in the open when it's time to play with kitty."

Max ran off again to call his officer friend while Madison was left to her own devices. She didn't have any more nails to nibble. In fact, she didn't have much of anything to nibble and her stomach was growling something fierce. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten and that coffee was burning a hole through her stomach lining.

"Max, you got any grub in this place? A large lady like myself needs to eat...now."

"Yeah, hold on a minute, Mad. I'll fix you something to eat when I'm off the phone."

Madison couldn't wait that long, so she poked around in Max's kitchen. The man had all sorts of strange cooking implements, half of which Madison didn't recognize. Some cook she was—her culinary skills were limited to tailgating cuisine and the occasional mac and cheese. The fridge was packed, but she didn't see much that she recognized. So, she moved to the cabinets. "Ah ha, Lucky Charms!"

Madison pulled out a huge mixing bowl and filled it with the entire box of cereal. She decided to brave the refrigerator once again to find some milk. After moving a few things around, she found the milk stuffed at the back of the fridge. She emptied its contents into her bowl.

"So, I see you couldn't wait. I would have fixed you an actual meal—"

"This is meal enough for me," she said while shoveling delicious cereal into her mouth.

Max smiled, but there was something new in that smile...something Madison couldn't quite identify.

"You've got some milk spilling out of your mouth."

Looking a bit mortified before quickly wiping away the milk, Madison said, "So, what's the verdict?"

Max grinned and held up a piece of paper. "They're all

somewhere in Janesville, Wisconsin. I've got the address right here. I don't know whether or not your friend is with them, but it's the best lead we've got. Whaddaya say?"

"I say we go...once I'm finished, of course."

~ * ~

The woman was much braver than she wanted to let on. She'd put her life on the line to save someone who may not even need any saving. Max hoped that Sarah was the friend Madison thought her to be. If Sarah was the enemy, he didn't know how Madison would react, but he imagined it would turn into a big soggy mess, sort of like the one she was currently spooning into her mouth.

~ * ~

Madison finished her enormous bowl of cereal and slipped on her shoes, ready to head out into the harsh streets of Janesville, Wisconsin. Since Max had torn the rest of her dress to shreds, she donned some of his clothes.

She felt like a poor imitation of a cross-dresser, but there really weren't many other options at this point. Her house wasn't safe to stop at and the luggage she had packed for the hotel got lost somewhere in translation.

"At least we don't match," Max chided. "And we do have a long road ahead of us. I'm betting there'll be a Wal-Mart to stop at before we reach our destination." Madison relaxed a bit at the thought of a Wal-Mart, it was so normal. She hadn't even considered stopping at a store to purchase new clothes; life was overwhelming her common sense a bit.

With that, they piled back into Max's car and began their journey back into the great state of Wisconsin.

Fourteen

"You realize we've only got about sixteen hours left?" Madison mused with a mouth full of fried fast food goodness. They had just made their Wal-Mart visit and Madison had selected some more appropriate attire, which Max paid for as Madison's wallet was M.I.A.

"Yes, Madison, I know. Hopefully, we can get in, get everyone and get out without being detected."

"Yeah, like that's going to happen."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." They drove on in an uncomfortable silence. The highway was unbelievably calm and they made it from Chicago to the Wisconsin border in record time. It would only be about an hour before they reached their destination as long as no more freaky stuff happened. Madison was pretty fed up with all of the freaky stuff. The great sex and the super hot man were acceptable, but she had definitely had enough of the rest of this bullshit.

"What's the plan when we get there, hot shot?" she asked her sexy cohort.

"Well, we'll probably drive past to case the joint—"

"Ha, you said 'case the joint'—"

"Madison, can we focus here?"

"Yes, captain. Go on."

"And once we have a look at what we're up against, we can decide from there. I would imagine they've got us pretty outnumbered, but maybe we can use that to our advantage. It's much easier to sneak two shifters into a building than it is to sneak in a whole troop."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the sneaky type. It'll be like trying to sneak an elephant into the opera."

"Madison, I think you severely underestimate yourself."

"No, I think my assessment is pretty accurate."

"Whatever. You're an impossible woman," It seemed to Madison that Max was getting frustrated with all of her down putting. "Anyway, let's just get there and drive past before we make any real decisions."

The unusual pair reached Janesville in the early afternoon. They had made a few more pit stops for food and supplies as they weren't sure what kind of lion's den they'd be romping into. Ten hours remained until the rise of the full moon. Max hoped they'd have enough time to get everyone out before the shift overtook them, but the situation was very grim as they were still clueless.

"Ok, that's the building, Mad. What do you think?" The GPS tracker had led them to a shoddy looking warehouse downtown. The building had probably been condemned; it was rusted and in disrepair.

"I think that place is a shit hole!" she replied.

"Yes, that's obvious, but do you have any helpful observations?"

"No, remember I'm new with all of this. I wouldn't even know what to look for."

She was right, Max shouldn't have expected her to form the plan—he was the experienced one. "Well, I think we should wait until it gets darker before taking any action. We can park down the street and try to sneak in one of those windows, provided we can find one that isn't boarded up."

"Sure, let's do that." Madison's shaking hands betrayed her fear. And the visible lump in her throat was most definitely a hairball.

The two went to a café down the street and ordered coffee as they would need all of their energy to withstand the coming evening. "Max, what happens if we get caught? Or, what if this is a trap? I'm scared."

"I know, I'm a bit frightened, too, but this is all we've got. We can't go to the police—they'd most likely just laugh at us—and we can't wait around too long because I don't

want you to get caught in a bad situation when the moon rises."

"I think we're going to be caught in a bad situation no matter what."

"You don't know that sweetheart, calm down. Let's just take things as they come, okay?"

"I guess so, but I'd rather take you as you cum." She winked at him.

"Oh, well, that could be fun." They finished their coffee and headed back to Max's car for a little afternoon delight. Of course, they had to move the car to a more discreet location before going at it, but Max was okay with that situation.

~ * ~

By the time they were finished with another round of mind-blowing, earth-moving sex, the sky began to go black. They dressed and hurried back toward the warehouse. "You ready, Madison?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. At least I can die happy, what with all of the sex."

"Thanks, I'm a stud."

"Pshh! And I'm not?"

"No, no, you're quite adept." He smiled at her; the woman was an excellent companion in the face of adversity. She brightened the looming devastation ahead. "Madison, it's more than sex, you know that, right?"

"Isn't there something taboo about our kinds intermingling? Like isn't it frowned upon to consort with other cat species?"

"That's not how it works. Obviously, I don't want to be with a rat or anything, but there is nothing forbidding the two of us from being together, indefinitely."

"Oh." She didn't know where the man was going with this. She'd enjoyed the sex and he was great to look at, but she didn't really expect much more. In fact, she was capitalizing on the situation because she figured that when this whole mess was over, they would go our separate ways. Clearly, if they didn't survive it wouldn't be an issue, but she didn't think he would stick around once this whole mess was sorted out.

"Oh? That's all you have to say?" he responded, looking hurt once again.

"Well, why don't we discuss this when all is said and done?"

She was sure, from the look on Max's face, that he didn't know how to read her reaction. It really had been a nice day or so, and there was definitely a connection, but there was still a question about whether or not to act on these feelings.

"Okay, we can do that."

She kissed him on the cheek, not wanting to hurt his feelings. "Rain check for sure." She accidentally winked again; it was contagious. This must have been why Max was always doing it. Max's mood seemed to lighten a bit. "Sure, but I'm holding you to it!"

"I hope that's not the only thing you'll be holding to me."

Max laughed; perhaps there was hope for a relationship. "We've only got about five hours until the shifting overtakes us, so we should get going." Max was afraid of what was ahead of them, but he was more afraid that he wouldn't be able to defend Madison against a slew of bloodthirsty shifters.

They parked the car a few blocks away and reluctantly made their way toward the decrepit building. Madison could smell something off. She didn't recognize the scent, but with her feline senses, it was hard to decipher what was what.

"Max, do you smell something weird?"

"A bit."

"Do you know what it is?" It smelled rotten to Madison, like a dead fish that had been rotting in the sunlight for a few days. "I think it smells like dead fish."

"It's just filth, Madison. Sweat, body odor and maybe some waste. I think it's the shifters. They must be huddled together and captive somewhere nearby."

"That's a pretty big building; how are we going to locate them?"

"Follow your nose, like Toucan Sam."

"Jokes, at a time like this, Max, really?"

"No, I'm serious. The closer we get, the stronger that smell will get."

"Oh, okay." She was embarrassed for not realizing that, but she was still a newbie.

The two were in stealth mode, rather as stealthy as two shifters could be, especially considering at least one of them had hit the 200 pound mark. As they sidled along the building, the odor grew stronger, fouler, and she had a hard time not losing her lunch all over the lawn. "How can you bear that smell?" she whispered.

"You'll get used to it after a while."

"Gross. I hope I never have to smell something like this again."

"You're in for a rude awakening. The world is a stinky place, Madison, but we shouldn't be talking right now. I don't want to give them any more of an advantage than they already have."

She shut up for a minute, but couldn't help thinking about the stench. If she could smell them, they could probably smell her as well. "Max?"

"What Madison?" He gave her an irritated scowl.

"Can they smell us, too?"

The thought had to have occurred to him, but maybe he didn't want to add any more stress to the situation than was necessary. "Technically, yes, but hopefully their stench overpowers our scents."

"Oh, okay." She hadn't thought of that and it calmed her nerves. They were almost at the windows and Madison prayed they could find one with loose boards or one that wasn't boarded at all. Most of the building was sealed up, but some of the boards were rotted. Max signaled for Madison to stay put before he went ahead to look for an entrance. A few moments later, Madison's world went black. Again.

Fifteen

The mortifying stench reeled Madison back toward consciousness this time. She must have been in the belly of the beast. The stench was unbearable. She retched before her eyes even had the chance to focus and Lucky Charms didn't taste so good the second time around.

After composing herself, Madison looked around. She was in a large room with high ceilings. The walls were green with an splotches of orange, rust, no doubt. Filth coated a concrete floor. When her eyes focused in the dark room, she noticed she was not alone.

The room was full of random people—Max's merry men (and women) she assumed. Though, she couldn't make out Sarah from her vantage point. She also saw no sign of Max, so perhaps not all was lost.

"Where am I?"

The man next to her, a feline shifter named George, was the first to respond. Madison wasn't quite sure how or why she knew this man. There were obviously some pieces missing here, but she was rather positive that George was his name and that his face was a familiar one. "Mainfield and his goons have us all locked away in this room." Well, that cleared up the who part, but why were they being held?

"And why is he keeping us locked up?" Madison asked.

Again, George responded. "He's making a power play for the shifter world and with us out of the way, things will be a bit easier for him. He's also waiting for some tiger to join him in battle. I personally think he's full of it because

there's no such thing as a tiger shifter. Tiger shifters are a thing of myth!"

"They are?"

He looked at her like she had three eyes or four arms.

"You must be new?"

"Brand-spanking."

"Oh, well the tiger shifter is supposed to come of age and determine the fate of the shifter world. If the tiger were to team up with Mainfield we'd be toast, but since there's no such thing as a tiger shifter, I'd say we have a fighting chance."

"But, we're all locked up." Madison rubbed her throbbing temple, battling the confusion.

"Yeah, but in a few hours the change will happen and we'll be able to get out of this room. It's just getting past Mainfield's kitties that worries me. At least we'll have a fighting chance."

"Great. I've never shifted before, this is gonna be awful."

"Oh, well, you're probably not going to be of any use to us. We're hoping that some of our friends catch wind of our captivity and come to join the fray, but you should probably go over there in the corner with the other newbie and stay out of the way."

Other newbie? Madison felt a little bit less alone knowing she wasn't the only new shifter in the pack. She was about to make her way in the direction George had gestured, but she hesitated to ask him one last question.

"So, you guys can't just shift now and get out of here?"

"A few of us can, but most of the shifters in here are wolves. So, it's best to wait for the moon and all shift together."

"Oh, okay." So she was stuck in a room full of werewolves. For Madison Murphy, the excitement was non-stop. She couldn't make out the so-called newbie as she made her way past the other shifters, but when she got close, she caught a glimpse of the small figure huddled in the corner. Sarah!

"Sarah! Sarah, Sarah, Sarah!" The small figure looked up at her, a glimpse of hope in her swollen eyes.

"Madison, is that you?" she squeaked.

"Oh, Sarah, I've never been happier to see you in my life, no offense, it was nice to see you most of the time, but I am so relieved that you're okay!" Madison was also relieved that Sarah wasn't one of the bad guys, but she didn't want to let Sarah in on that one. She felt bad enough for distrusting her friend in the first place. "So, what's going on here?"

"I don't know. I woke up in the trunk of a car and I was all tied up. When we got here, they just tossed me in with all of the others. They've sort of ostracized me because I had no idea what was happening."

"It's okay. I'm here now. We can be ostracized together. So, I guess you know that you get to be a shifter, too, huh?"

"Yeah, I sort of figured that one out when they tossed me in here. I should have listened to you and stayed home...I just wanted a little bit of excitement in my life. This is much more than I bargained for."

"It's okay, Sarah, we'll just have to sit tight. Max is out there somewhere, so there's still hope that we'll make it out of here before shifting."

"Madison, the moon is going to be up in less than an hour. I don't think Max can dispatch all of the bad guys and break us out in time."

"Well, at least we won't have to shift for the first time alone. We can do it together and then follow these guys out into battle."

"But, I don't know how to fight. I cry when I chip my nail polish; this isn't going to work out for me."

"Hopefully, your animal can fight, then. If not, stay behind me. Okay?"

"Okay." Sarah was scared, but Madison couldn't blame her. She would have been petrified if she were in Sarah's position. Not that she wasn't also scared.

"So, do you know what sort of animal you are?"

"No."

"Well, has your hearing or sight or smell improved since you got turned?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, then you're not feline. I guess we'll just find out when the moon rises."

"Yippee," Sarah chimed with false excitement.

Sixteen

The minutes were winding down and there was still no sign of Max. Mainfield's men had gathered in front of the door. It was intended as a barricade to ensure the prisoners wouldn't escape when the change came, but Madison knew better. There was going to be a big, gross bloody battle, no matter what.

She imagined the other shifters were all on the same page, but Mainfield still obviously felt like he had the upper hand. She wasn't sure why, since she was locked up with everyone else, but something didn't sit right with her.

One of the goons opened the door; she thought it was Frank, but couldn't be sure at this distance. He made his way through the crowd and grabbed her by the collar, dragging her out with him before finally tossing her at the feet of someone wearing expensive Italian loafers. She was willing to bet it was Arthur.

"Oh, Ms. Murphy, it's so good to see you again. I hope you've been enjoying my hospitality."

She spat on his shoes before looking up at him to respond. "Yes, I've found the accommodations quite suitable and if you don't mind, I'll be going back now." She was worried about Sarah and wanted to be with the other shifters when things started happening. Madison's palms began to sweat and her heart seemed to beat just a tad bit faster than usual. Her eyes began to burn and despite her rubbing them, she couldn't quell the pain. Everything seemed brighter, clearer. A strange tingling under her skin told her the full

moon was close, fifteen minutes maybe.

"Oh, I don't think that's going to happen. I have another proposal for you and I think you won't be able to resist this one. You were lucky last time, but even if your little lion friend is around here somewhere, I don't think he'll get past all of my men in time to save you."

"Yeah. So? I don't see why that's going to stop me from saying no to you and your stupid proposal."

"Oh, but I'm offering you a once in a lifetime opportunity. I really mean that...no one will ever present you with anything close to it."

"How do you know?" she responded, trying to maintain a cocky and self-assured attitude.

"Because, Ms. Murphy, if you refuse, I am going to kill you and there's not much you can do about that."

"Oh, well that does pose a problem, doesn't it?"

"Only for you, Madison, only for you. I'm okay with the outcome either way." He was lying. Now that Madison knew the truth about the tiger shifter, Mainfield couldn't afford to lose her.

"And if you kill me, who'll tip the balance of the scales in your favor? How will you get control of the shifters?"

He clearly hadn't expected her response, but was still calm. "If you do not join us, I cannot afford to let you live, lest you tip the scales the other way. So, you see, it would be in my best interest to kill you."

She hadn't thought of that; sweat beaded and rolled down her back. She couldn't deceive the man, he would catch her lie, but she also wasn't willing to join him.

"So, Madison, what do you say?"

She attempted to look like she was actually considering his proposal, hoping that she could stall for time.

"Answer me now or die. It's as simple as that."

Madison looked down briefly. She raised her head, and with a confidence she didn't know she had, said, "Go to hell, you asshole. I'd rather die."

Mainfield looked disappointed as he pulled a gun from his waistband. He had it aimed at her head, cocked and ready.

"That was a poor decision, Madison. It's such a shame to have to kill you."

Madison squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to watch the last few seconds of her life. However, before he could pull the trigger, the gun clattered to the ground. They both doubled over in pain. The change was upon them.

Seventeen

Madison heard the captives screeching out in pain before crying out herself. Shifting was apparently a painful process. After dropping to the ground, Madison curled into the fetal position while clutching her roiling stomach. Her insides throbbed as the beast within attempted to find release. Madison's entire body ached, each nerve seared by a red-hot poker, each panicked breath a stab to her irate abdomen. She could feel all of the blood rushing through her veins to fuel the tedious shifting process.

Madison watched as her skin actually began to shred. "What the fuck?" she screamed as large flaps of skin fell to the ground beneath her, making room for patches of wiry fur. She tried not to freak out, but while watching her skin tear off in sheets and tumble to the ground, she lost control and was suddenly coughing up hairballs during the transformation process. *Great, that's just what I need. Hairballs while shifting. Why me?*

While attempting to slow down her racing heart by taking deep slow breaths, the convulsions started. She imagined they were similar to the contractions a woman felt during childbirth, except these ran through her entire body. Searing pain ripped through her as she writhed on the ground in a mock epileptic fit. Bright white fur sprouted in waves as her flesh ripped away from her now bulging muscles. The black stripes would fill in the blanks later, but she wasn't able to focus long enough to witness that particular spectacle.

"Oww!" she screamed as her spine rearranged itself—vertebrae crunching and stretching all at once. It felt as if

her bones had been torn out through her skin to make room for something new. The bones in her arms and legs twisted and contorted before snapping and reforming into strong legs and paws. With each snap, a horrid new convulsion raged through her misshapen form. She tried to scream out again, but heard only the howls of an animal in terrible pain.

Her vocal cords must have been lost somewhere during the transformation. By the time her face began to elongate and reshape itself, Madison was numb from the pain. She didn't even notice until whiskers came into her line of sight. The next memory she had was that of her tail—*I actually have a tail!*—flailing wildly. Her tiger had surfaced.

While she had survived the actual shifting process, the prospect of facing an army of rabid enemies still daunted her. Madison took a moment to admire her new shape. She stood an impressive two feet taller than your run-of-the-mill tiger. She was also a bit wider, which was to be expected considering her chubby human form. Though, the girth she carried around every day seemed to work in her favor. *Thanks, beer and cheese, I knew there was a reason we got along so well!*

Reality slowly melted away as Madison shrank to the ground. She remembered the pain of her transformation, but wasn't quite sure how she had become surrounded by the furred and the frenzied. In her confusion, she had also lost track of Arthur. It was probably not a great twist to her day, but this was her first real shifter experience and it was rather overwhelming.

Madison couldn't find a way to communicate with her shifter brethren, try as she may. She could only produce howls, growls and roars. They were lost amidst the cries of the other shifters. Though, she was able to spot the good guys in the crowd; there was something faintly human about their eyes. The other shifters had cold, hard eyes, all of which were pointed in her direction.

Most of the shifters had finished their transformation and the few stragglers were close to completion. The other animals had not yet started quarreling, as they were all too busy staring at her in complete awe. The prodigal tiger shifter had finally appeared. *I am such a lucky girl! Not!* She took a quick look around to assess her surroundings, as the

fight wouldn't stay paused forever.

There were wolves, hyenas, monkeys, cougars, jaguars, hawks and bears littering the floor of the abandoned warehouse. There was also an estranged ostrich huddled up in a far corner of the building. *Could that be Sarah?* And, of course, there was still no sign of Max. *That asshole better not stand me up this time, and if he's dead I'm going to kill him...again!* Arthur was the only lion in sight and he was gunning for her—teeth barred and claws ready. He let out a massive roar and charged in her direction. Madison didn't have more time to observe her surroundings because the bloody battle had begun.

The good guys had broken out of captivity and they had begun leaping on Mainfield's henchmen. There were claws, tearing flesh and fur flying in all directions. Madison had no idea who had the upper hand, but she did know she was in deep trouble. The foul heart beating within Arthur Mainfield's chest had one agenda, to kill her. The only things keeping Arthur at bay were Max's shifter pals, a fair number of them charged the man. They probably figured that dispatching the head honcho would give them a swift win.

Mainfield, however, was not to be underestimated. He roared, his huge golden body shaking as he raised his claws in the air. He tore out their throats mercilessly. Madison was petrified. She tried to stay out of the way as much as possible, but fallen shifters were everywhere. Even the strange ostrich was having trouble cowering in the corner. There was no hope for escape. Madison reluctantly joined the fray.

She lashed out and dispatched a few of Mainfield's men, though she didn't kill them. She couldn't bring herself to take a life. Most of the smaller shifters cowered in her presence. She was, after all, the famed Siberian tiger.

Blood splattered all over the dilapidated walls and it pooled on the floor. Shifters were dying all over the place and Madison's brain was about to overload. She had no quick escape, no slow escape for that matter, either. Even the scared ostrich had finally joined in the battle as it was also out of options. It ran head bowed down and head-butted anything in its path. Ostriches turned out to be very useful in battle; it dispatched at least five shifters in the short time

Madison was able to pay attention.

She had gotten herself backed into a corner and Mainfield swiftly closed in on her. He was out for blood. The man had promised to kill her and it was obvious that it was number one on his to do list. His eyes were full of hatred and he wanted blood...*her* blood. Madison, the magnificent tiger, cowered in a corner and closed her eyes, praying everything would just disappear. She wanted to count to ten and wake up in her own bed, hung over from a night of intoxication, but no matter how hard she tried, the carnage was still there when she opened her eyes.

Max had never shown up, so she was on her own. *The asshole had to go and die on me now. The one time I wouldn't mind getting knocked out and dragged someplace else...geez!* With a steely resolve Madison determined to keep her wits about her until the very end.

As a new shifter up against a daunting foe, she didn't have much hope. The howls of her compatriots were the only things keeping her going. She had to stay and fight with them; they wouldn't have been in this predicament if it hadn't been for her. While they were Max's friends, she was the reason they'd been called, also the reason they'd been captured and, as Max was probably dead, it was Madison's responsibility to aid them in their time of need. Not that she had much of a clue as to how.

Mainfield had disposed of the shifters in his path and stood in front of her, paw raised, claws out, ready to strike. Madison wanted to flee, her animal wanted to flee, but something inside of her couldn't let that happen. So, she stood her ground, braced and ready for the killing blow. The magnificent Siberian tiger, struck down in its first battle. She hoped that wasn't her fate, but she had a terrible feeling she was about to become a martyr. Mainfield somehow stopped his eyes from glowing red as he prepared to strike. Blood ran down his bulging muscles and matted his illustrious mane.

Tears stung her eyes and her raw throat burned as she let out one final roar. Just as Mainfield was about to strike, something large and fast leaped in their direction and the two forms tumbled away in a big yellow blur. *Whew! That was a close call.*

Another lion. Max! Max had come to her rescue, again.

The man has a knack for timing. He may just be worth keeping. Madison didn't let her head drift too far because a large, bloody battle was still being waged. The smaller lion had pinned Mainfield. The other animals had stopped fighting to turn their attention to the two lions. The smaller lion struck and in one fell swoop tore out Mainfield's throat. The larger lion went limp as blood pooled around it.

The other animals just stared wide-eyed in amazement. The moon had begun to wane and the remaining shifters lay in heaps on the ground. Madison could feel the remaining energy quickly draining from her body as she collapsed. The smaller lion slowly made its way toward her crumpled form. It looked at her with large, round sympathetic eyes and nudged her with his proud nose before collapsing next to her. Sleep had taken all of the surviving shifters.

Eighteen

When Madison awoke, she was naked and covered in scrapes and dried blood. She had a hard time keeping her eyes open, but she did notice a naked form cradled next to her. Max...he had come to save her. She could get used to waking up next to him; of course, she would prefer it if they didn't have to be covered in blood and guts every time, but she was also willing to compromise. She'd pay almost any price to keep waking up next to the man who had saved her life, more than once.

Max stirred, rubbing his eyes. "Did we win?" he asked, his voice slurred with sleep.

"How should I know? I don't even know which ones are the good guys anymore."

"Well, Mainfield is dead, right?" he asked.

"You did tear his throat out, Max; people don't recover from those sorts of injuries."

Max smiled, at least Madison's humor was intact. "You never know."

The other naked bodies began to move and slowly, they all sat up. However, a good deal of the bodies never moved. At least half of the shifters hadn't survived the evening. Mainfield's men littered the ground, but a fair share of Max's friends were also deceased. With Mainfield dead, his men had no leader and were no longer a threat. They awoke, collected their belongings and left the building.

Max's men collected the bodies of their fallen brethren; they would be given a proper burial. Max rose to

address his band of merry men before returning to help Madison up. "Sarah, where's Sarah?"

There was no sign of the small blonde woman. "I don't know, Madison; she may not have made it."

"She has to have made it. I don't know what I would do if she didn't."

The remaining shifters searched long and hard for Madison's blonde cohort, but to no avail. As they were about to give up their search, they heard muffled cries. Max and Madison went in search of the noises source, but they didn't see much of anything. Still, something was alive somewhere in the cesspool. After scanning the ground, Madison noticed a few fingers slowly wagging. Someone was trapped beneath the fallen bodies of a few dead shifters. *How gross.*

Max went to work uncovering the mysterious person. When he finally freed the unfortunate captive, he helped her sit up. It was a very dirty, very disgruntled Sarah.

Madison rushed over to hug her friend. "Sarah! Thank God, you made it."

"I should have stayed home. That was horrible."

"I told you to stay home, didn't I? It's not my fault you wound up at the bottom of a dead shifter pile-up."

"You should have made me mind my own business!" Sarah screeched.

"As if my telling you to stay at home would have made a difference! You're way too nosy to not go poking around in dangerous affairs."

"I am not."

"Of course not...so, which animal were you?"

"Guess."

"Well, I didn't see any Chihuahuas, so I'm putting my money on the ostrich."

At that, Max chimed in, "There was an ostrich? That's weird, I've never seen one of those before!"

"Yeah, that's me. The were-ostrich," Sarah responded.

"I knew it was you! As soon as I saw an ostrich over in the corner, I knew it was you, it had to be." Madison was amused that Sarah was a shape shifting ostrich, but she was just happy to see that they had survived the night.

"This is Max, by the way." Madison gestured toward Max's fantastic naked form.

"Yeah, that's great, Madison. Nice to meet you and everything, but can we just go home?"

This was the first time Madison had ever known Sarah to be antisocial, especially in the presence of an attractive male. She thought Sarah would be the first one to appreciate Max's assets, which were prominently displayed at the moment. "Sure, Sarah, let's do that."

The three naked shifters all made their way toward Max's car. Luck was with them; it was too early for people to be milling about. Madison didn't think she'd be able to traipse around naked in front of other people. Sarah was like family and Max had already seen her in her birthday suit, so she was okay with the situation, but other people seeing her naked would have mortified her...it probably would have mortified them, as well.

Max dropped the ladies off in front of their apartment building. "So, I guess I'll be seeing you ladies."

"I guess so," Sarah said before making a break for the building. Madison stayed behind to give Max an appropriate send off. "Thanks for the ride...and all the other stuff...saving my life and all..."

"You're welcome. You'd better get inside before people start waking up." She was a little disappointed with his response, but she decided to hustle and get inside before anyone else had to see her naked.

"Okay."

"I'll see ya around, toots."

"Did you just call me toots? That's ridiculous."

"As if the rest of the night wasn't ridiculous." Her shoulders slumped a little in defeat at his comment, but she remained silent. "Fine, Madison, go home."

"Fine."

"Goodbye."

"Yeah, goodbye, Max." With that, she turned and walked into her apartment building, headed up to her apartment, cleaned up and collapsed in an exhausted lump on her own bed.

Nineteen

Max sat on the couch in Madison's living room, the very same couch Harold had been sitting on when he delivered his life-altering news. At least Max wasn't an ugly balding weirdo, but the acceptable type of weirdo. Suave and sexy. *Yum!*

"So, what are you doing here?"

Madison watched him for a moment, looking for some sort of reaction in his face.

"You have every right to be angry, Madison, I should have at least called."

"Yeah, should have, could have, didn't. It's been a month and you didn't even bother sending me a 'Dear John' letter—nothing. What did you expect to find when you came over, welcoming arms and a warm embrace? It's far too late for that."

"I came here to apologize and if you don't want to hear it, that's fine." Max looked sincere, but Madison still wasn't willing to let his actions go unpunished.

"Apologize for what...lying to me? Abandoning me? Using me for sex? There are so many things to choose from that I just don't know what you're here to apologize for."

Madison wasn't going to let him get off easy, she knew this, but she just hoped they would move past it and perhaps enjoy a nice afternoon romp.

"No Madison, everything I said was the truth and while I did enjoy the sex, it wasn't the only reason I wanted to be with you. You're an amazing, witty and beautiful woman."

"Spare me. I don't need to listen to more of your crap."

"I mean it, Madison. You're pretty swell."

"Of course I'm swell, but that doesn't mean someone like you would appreciate my ample good qualities."

"Seriously, I'm trying to apologize! Can you just hear me out? I'll say my peace and then go if that's what needs to happen, though I hope you'll re-consider me." He winked at her. "I should have come in with you the morning after the big bad battle, but I needed some time to process everything that had happened."

"Like the rest of us didn't have anything to process?" Madison was boiling. She had become a shifter, gotten kidnapped more than once and almost died a handful of times in a few short days and *he* had to process; that was pure golden crap.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, of course, the results of the battle weighed heavily on me. I lost some good friends in that battle and we spent some time making sure they were shown the respect they deserved. But the deaths weren't my main concern, you were."

"What do you mean, I was your main concern? If I was your main concern, then why haven't I heard from you in a month?"

"I've been keeping tabs on you, making sure you were safe."

"Gross. Peeping Tom, find someone else to spy on."

"Madison, you're just being unreasonable now. Listen to me, please."

"Fine." She did sort of want to hear what he had to say, but she didn't want to make it easy. He had some groveling to do before returning into her good graces.

"You, Madison Murphy, took me by surprise. I've never felt this way about anyone before—"

"What, repulsed...?"

"Madison, shut up. No, I mean I've never met such an abrasive yet compassionate woman. You're my match—both in conversation and in the bedroom. I had to take some time to sort out my feelings for you and make sure that what I felt was real. It's taken me a month to figure out that the feelings weren't going to go away. So, whether you like it or

not, I love you, and if you don't return the sentiment, that's fine. I just had to come here and tell you because I couldn't go on not knowing how you felt."

"You *what* me?" Madison was astonished. She didn't know what she had expected from him, but a declaration of love wasn't it. He was bold, beautiful and a marvelous lover—but those were all things she'd given up on a long time ago.

"I love you, Madison and we've got a long time to figure out what that means. I'm already 120 years old and that's young, so take your time, if that's what you need."

Madison was still pissed about Max's disappearance, but she didn't want to risk losing the man of her dreams. Swallowing her pride was difficult, but it was worth it this time. She didn't want to end up an old spinster, hardened by time and stuck with the bad habit of hacking up hairballs. "I, uh...you, too."

"What was that Madison?" Max grinned...Madison was impossible, but she was his impossible woman and there was no fighting it.

"I love you, too, okay?"

He shrugged and looked away. *What the fuck?* Madison wasn't about to let him get away with that. She grabbed him by the back of the neck and forced him to look at her. "Max, did you hear me?"

"I might have." He grinned at her like the big stupid jerk he was. He didn't exactly meet her eyes, at first. She waited.

"You're an infuriating woman," he whispered to her just before grabbing her around the back and pulling her in for a mind-numbing kiss. It was several minutes before she was able to pull her mouth away from his. "I'm sorry for staying away for so long; I was just afraid."

"I know, Max. I knew when you walked in the door. I just wanted you to work for it." She was pushing his buttons. He looked at her a moment longer before pulling her in for one more rough, passionate kiss.

She pulled away. "So?"

"So, what?"

"What about Sarah?"

"Ugh...why does it always have to be about Sarah?"

"Well, she spent most of her free time trying to hook me up and I think I should return the favor." He stood up and grabbed her hand, pulling her up so their eyes could meet. He looked her up and down before the corners of his mouth twitched up into a devious half-smile.

"I don't know, Madison, this might be a dangerous adventure. I haven't met many shape shifting ostriches."

"I'm game if you are."

He kissed her on the hand. "Let's just take this project one step at a time, okay?" Madison giggled as she led Max toward her bedroom. *Thank God for small favors.*

~ * ~

Madison Murphy leaned out the window of Max's fancy new car. She was a Wisconsin girl at heart, but cheese, beer, bowling and the Packers were no longer her life. They'd had a good run, but Madison was now an official member of the Wisconsin Weirdos. There was no going back, but then again, she wouldn't want to, even if she had the chance.

"Let's go slay us some bad guys." She looked adoringly at Max as the two drove on into the night to face down the bad guys and serve up a little justice.

About Jessica

Jessica Gleason is merely a woman walking through life with words. She loves writing more than breathing and is on a mission to spread the joy of writing and reading to future generations by teaching writing on the college level. Gleason has been published in *The Muse*, *The Idiom*, *Writer's Eye Magazine*, *Nefarious Ballerina* and *Fickle Muses*... to name a few. In her spare time she enjoys karaoke and collecting cats.

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