



CARI Z

SURVIVING
the CHANGE

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *total-e-burning*.

SURVIVING THE CHANGE

Cari Z

Dedication

To Togo, for helping me to appreciate Colorado in the wintertime. One more year, baby.

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Chapter One

Blythe wiped down the nearly deserted bar and asked himself, yet again, why he'd taken this job. Did he really need the money that badly? Couldn't he get by on a work-study position, ten bucks an hour with the perk of being an office gopher? Then he remembered the state of his car—damaged and immobile—his apartment, which was behind on rent, and the cost of textbooks—your soul or your first-born child—and reassessed his priorities. Yeah, he needed this job. It had been good of his landlord to point him towards it, but now, three months into the fall semester and his brand new life, he wished he'd looked around more. Bartending was tedious. The live acts were terrible and dealing with drunks sucked. Dealing with supernatural, superhuman drunks sucked even harder.

It figured, it really did, that he'd get a job working in one of the shape-shifting population's favourite watering holes. There were more shifters on any given night than there were humans, and the vast majority of the humans who walked through the doors were groupies—normals that had a fascination with the paranormal and with shifters in particular. Vampires had the money and the supermodels. Shifters had the groupies and the raw sex appeal. They were the rock stars of the paranormal world, and they, more than any other supernatural type, made Blythe angry.

It wasn't even that they were all that common. In a city as big as Denver, there were still probably less than three hundred. There were fewer than ten thousand in the entire country. But their lack of numbers was more than compensated for by their huge personalities. Assholes. And he was catering to them.

There was no way around it. The money was good and when a shifter's band was playing, no matter how lousy it was, the beer flowed like water and the tips flowed with it. But tonight's shift was over, he was tired, and it was time to lock the doors.

"Time's up," he called out to the last remaining patron, a tall, lean man who'd been sitting at the end of the bar for much of the evening. They hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other, but Blythe had the uncomfortable sensation that the stranger was watching him the whole time. He'd never caught him at it, but shifters moved so fast that

you never did, and this man was definitely a shifter. There was a certain aura about him, an air of insufferable arrogance, that couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

The guy took a slow sip from his bottle before saying, "I'm not done yet."

Oh, perfect. A wiseass. Just what he needed at three a.m. on the only day he'd been stupid enough to sign up for an eight o'clock class. He needed what dregs of sleep he could get. "Well finish fast, we closed five minutes ago."

To emphasise his point, Blythe started turning off the lights behind the bar. He took his apron off and hung it up, then grabbed his jacket, gloves and scarf from the back room. All of this took about two minutes. When he came back out front, the guy was still sitting there, sipping his damn beer. Sipping it. It looked ridiculously dainty done by such a big guy.

"Hurry up!" Blythe snapped at him, his frayed temper strained to the breaking point.

The man looked up from his beer and met Blythe's eyes for the first time that evening. Even though the light was dim, the impact of his sudden attention was shocking. It made Blythe want to freeze, play dead, act like...prey. Oh, to hell with that, he was no one's prey. He met the gaze squarely, even though his back was pressed so hard against the bar that he was sure he'd have bruises. They stared at each other for a long moment, neither one moving.

"I'm almost finished," the man said at last.

"Good," Blythe replied. "Then you won't mind meeting me at the door while I get the rest of the lights."

Trying to move as if his legs weren't trembling, he walked over to the wall and began to methodically flip switches. Soon the place was pitch black, and still the guy wasn't done. Blythe couldn't even see him in the darkness. He sighed heavily and prepared to turn back on a light, but it suddenly wasn't necessary. The shifter was right beside him, at the door. Blythe jumped slightly. He couldn't help it.

The man smiled. "Coming?" he asked in a polite, infuriating voice.

"Just waiting on you," Blythe replied, annoyed that he'd jumped.

He went outside and shut the door behind them, locking it up. The man hadn't moved away. He was still standing there, staring. Well, he could stare at Blythe's back, because he was leaving. He turned around and walked down the sidewalk, conscious of the man's eyes still on him. Just before he rounded the corner, he heard a low, throaty chuckle that made his face flush. Fucking weirdo. The sooner he got home, the better.

It's a shame that the buses stop service at midnight, Blythe thought tiredly. It was a mile-long walk to his place—a mile of slick, snowy pavement coated with unidentifiable bits of refuse that he'd become intimately acquainted with over the last few weeks since his car had broken down. He walked as fast as he could, ignoring the few other people that still dotted the streets as he headed towards his apartment. Just a little further, and he could relax...

Finally he reached his building. With a relieved sigh, he let himself in, only really relaxing once the door shut firmly behind him.

It had been a long night. The work was almost more than he could handle, but Blythe wouldn't have dreamed about complaining about his hours to his boss. Cristof was in a bad mood anyway, since he'd been set aside by his sire for a younger fledgeling, and a grumpy vampire was a dangerous vampire. A *more* dangerous vampire, that was. Blythe worked the bar from seven p.m. to close, six nights a week, and he understood that these hours were non-negotiable. Still, by the time he trudged into his apartment, he felt dead on his feet and always smelled like beer.

Blythe stripped and stumbled to his tiny bathroom, slipping into the shower and turning on the hot water. Except...there was no hot water. The temperature barely flirted with lukewarm. Damn it. He shared a water heater with the three other apartments on his floor, and it wasn't unusual for them to have used most of it up by the time he got home. Blythe scrubbed himself fast, trying not to use up too much of his last sliver of soap. He turned off the cool water, towelled off quickly and fell onto his bed, making sure the alarm clock was set for the ungodly hour of seven.

The message light on his answering machine was glowing. Blythe wanted to ignore it, but it was possible the message was from the care facility. If something was going on there, he needed to know about it. Who else had any reason to call him? With a low groan, he rolled across the mattress and reached out to press the 'play' button.

"Hello, Mr. Kenner."

He recognised the head nurse's voice. Damn, it *was* the home.

"You specified that leaving progress reports on the phone was all right, so here's a quick update on your mom. Leanne is responding pretty well to the changes with her medication and isn't nearly so combative anymore. She remembered that it's you and your sister's birthday next month, and I bet she'd love to see you for it. Thank you for sending her

those flowers earlier this week. I'm sure deep down she appreciates it. Take care of yourself, and if you have any questions for me, don't hesitate to call my office." *Beep.*

Blythe draped an arm across his face, closing his eyes wearily. Mom. He didn't like going to see her around his birthday. Given his luck, the visit would go like it had last year, with her demanding to know what he'd done with his twin sister, Bliss.

"I know it's your fault," she'd shrieked at him. "She always follows your lead!" It was true, she had. She had followed him then taken it a step further, and ended up dying for her boldness.

He didn't want to think about that right now. Blythe punched his pillow a few times and settled down against it, trying not to think about his mother or his sister. Bliss' face swam before his vision, so like his own—dark hair, brown eyes, pale skin and a wide, beautiful smile.

"Stop it!" Blythe wished he could afford sleeping pills. He rolled onto his other side and resolutely closed his eyes, determined not to think about her. His tricky mind pulled another face before his eyes as soon as they were shut—the handsome, grungy, intolerable shifter that had stayed late at the bar that night.

Hell, he'd never get to sleep now. Classes got out at two today. He'd sleep between then and his shift. Sighing heavily, Blythe sat up and turned on his bedside lamp, then grabbed the closest textbook. Constitutional law, oh boy. Maybe he'd get lucky and put his mind to sleep through sheer boredom.

* * * *

Dan watched the young man disappear into his building and grinned to himself. It wasn't exactly a grin, not as a wolf, but the intent was the same. Damn cute kid, it was only polite to make sure he made it home in one piece. Now that the eye candy was gone, though, there was really no more putting off the inevitable. Dan loped back to where he'd stashed his clothes and shifted, then pulled the damp garments on. It was strange, the sudden feeling of nakedness he got as a human. His other form knew nothing of modesty, and he was covered in fur anyway. Too bad this form wasn't covered in fur. It was damn chilly out.

Dan looked down at himself and grimaced slightly. The ratty jeans and faded black T-shirt didn't do much for his respectability, but Zeph had never cared much about

appearances anyway. He pulled his cowboy boots on, the one article of clothing he had that was still nice, and walked to the pack's headquarters. Or, to be more precise, *this* pack's headquarters. There were two packs in the city of Denver, highly unusual even for a big metropolis, and they kept to themselves. Dan only associated with Zeph's pack, though.

The pack's headquarters were located in an industrial district, surrounded by warehouses and stockpiles of heavy equipment. It was a good place for shifters. Far enough away from the humans to change as often as they liked without generating fear, and close enough to the heart of the city that all the amenities were still available to them. The outside of the giant storage facility didn't look like much, but inside, it was a comfortable place, modern in every respect and divided up to give the pack's members their own space.

The watchers let him in willingly enough. All the pack's sentinels knew who to let through and who to turn away. Some of them didn't like letting a loner into their compound, but the alpha's orders were explicit on that particular subject. Dan was treated with respect, if not acceptance. At the rate things were going, he'd probably never have acceptance. Dan sighed and pulled his long blond hair back into a ponytail. It was all he could do to straighten himself up before seeing Zeph.

The shifters inside the compound who were still up and about let him through without comment, although the smell of their interest was evident as he passed by. He walked up to Zeph's office and knocked.

"Come in, my friend."

Dan smiled to himself. No surprises for Zeph. The man had probably scented him coming a mile away. Dan didn't know if lions had a better sense of smell than wolves, but with Zeph, anything was possible. Dan opened the door and walked into the large, surprisingly airy office. Zeph was sitting behind a desk, but jumped up and came around as Dan entered.

"Sheridan, it's been a long time."

Dan inclined his head as a mark of respect before he and Zeph grabbed each other in a bear hug. "You keep calling me Sheridan and I'll start calling you Zephaniah. It's just Dan. And do you ever sleep, man?"

"Just Dan, then. And rarely." Zeph drew back and sat on the edge of his desk, scrutinising his friend.

Dan tried to take it casually, but scrutiny by an alpha, even one who was his best friend, made his skin crawl. He knew what Zeph was thinking.

Dan was at least two inches taller than the alpha. He had broad shoulders, blue eyes, sun-coloured hair that hung down past his shoulders and a face that was handsome in its sculpted severity. Years ago, when he and Zeph had been in school together, Dan had covered all of his natural bodily gifts in hip, expensive clothing. His hair had been trimmed, his nails clean, his face shaved. Now he was wearing second-hand clothes that had seen better decades and his jaw was covered with stubble. Quite a comedown. Zeph seemed to agree.

"So, when are you going to stop fucking about and find a mate so you can join my pack?" he asked bluntly.

"Between dodging the fundamentalists and keeping myself from offending the resident packs, my time's been a little busy," Dan replied defensively.

"Bullshit. You have a different boy in every city waiting to jump at your beck and call." Zeph knew him a little too well. "Pick one to fall in love with and get your libido under control."

"It's not that easy." Being gay was never easy. Being gay and a werewolf meant that other shifters could smell attraction coming from you, and since the vast majority of shifters were biologically biased when it came to their preferences, being gay could get you into a lot of fights. Finding a mate changed that dynamic. It made you more trustworthy to the rest of the pack, made the fundamentalists a little more comfortable, made life easier. Dan had been looking for a long time. "It's not like choices abound for me, man. Gay shifters hook up early or become loners if they want to live. As for the normals...they're just so dull. Most of the time," he amended, remembering that Zeph's own mate and wife was a normal.

Zeph shook his head. "I worry for you, Dan. You're too thin, too wild. Times are hard and it's going to get more and more difficult for you to make your way alone. Human laws are changing. Things aren't as permissive as they were during our parents' era. The packs are growing tighter, more controlling."

"I'll manage," Dan replied casually, hoping that Zeph couldn't read him well enough to see how deep his loneliness really went. "I have for a long time now. I just came by to let you know that I'm going to be in the city for the next few weeks, maybe as long as a month. Darcy usually has some work to throw my way, and he always lets me sleep in the shop."

"You were trained to be an electrical engineer and now you work on cars for a living."

"It was a hobby before, now it's a livelihood." It was a pretty decent one, too. Every big city needed mechanics, and if nothing else, he could change oil and rotate tires.

"You can see Darcy tomorrow. I'm going to feed you up tonight. You look like a starved chicken."

"Thanks, Mom." Dan rolled his eyes.

"Are you going to speak to Carlos as well?"

Carlos Santiago was the alpha of Denver's other pack.

Dan snorted. "You know how much I hate that fucking snake."

Zeph shrugged. "Then I suggest you stay on my half of town. Don't give him any reason to hunt you down."

Dan suddenly thought of his interaction earlier that evening. "Where does that bar on Colfax fall in the turf wars?"

"Do you mean the Midnight Rose?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Neutral territory. The bar is owned by a vampire who's fallen on hard times. He doesn't allow for divisiveness in his business affairs. He books my daughter's band to play there once a week."

"Good. There's a really hot bartender working there."

Zeph just shook his head. "You have to grow up sooner or later, Sheridan. I hope for your sake it's sooner." He pushed off from against the desk. "Now, we're going to the kitchen. Early breakfast for you, late dinner for me. You can tell me some of your adventures over the past few years while we eat."

"Sounds good." They started walking down the hall together, comfortably silent until Dan brought up the one part of their conversation that had surprised him.

"You let Rebecca play in a band? In a bar, with beer and groupies and grabby drunks? Isn't she just sixteen?"

"Eighteen now, and far more frightening than anyone else in my life," her father replied dryly. "Maybe its better you wait to settle down, Dan. Having someone else in my pack as high-spirited and irresponsible as Rebecca is might drive me insane."

For the first time since the beginning of the semester, Blythe fell asleep in class. One minute he was sitting in his constitutional law class, the only person there taking notes by hand, not on a laptop. The next, he was slumped over his desk, groggily coming back to life as a large presence with a loud voice made itself known by his side.

"If Mr. Kenner can give us his attention again, perhaps he can explain to the rest of the class the outline of the Supreme Court's latest decision concerning the rights and restrictions of our First Amendment."

"Dr. Arabaz." Blythe glanced up at the bearded, scowling face before shaking the last of his sleepiness away. "The First Amendment, yes..." He managed to get out the bare bones of the ruling, thankful that he'd studied the article just that morning.

His professor nodded, barely, then turned his attention back to the rest of the class. Blythe pinched himself, fighting to keep his mind alert.

It was difficult, but he managed to stay awake for the next hour. As the rest of the students began to file out and Blythe was gathering his notes, his professor called out from the front of the room.

"Mr. Kenner, wait a moment before you go." Thankfully, Dr. Arabaz waited until the class was empty before tearing into Blythe. "Mr. Kenner, I don't know what your experience was like at your last university, but in my class, falling asleep is the surest way of failing, whether you've read the subject matter or not. Constitutional law is the basis for justice in our society, and I won't pass a student who can't be bothered to listen to my lectures."

"I'm sorry, sir," Blythe apologised, fuming at himself internally. "It won't happen again."

"I hope not." Dr. Arabaz peered closer at Blythe. "You look like something the cat dragged in. Late night, Mr. Kenner?"

"I work nights, sir. Last night ended up being later than I had anticipated."

"I see." He scrutinised Blythe a moment longer. "You're a smart man, Mr. Kenner. You show a lot of promise in this field, if you can only apply yourself to it and get in with the right people at the right places. Have you considered applying for any internships?"

"Yes," Blythe replied, trying to control the blush he was feeling at those faint words of praise. "But most internships are unpaid, and with my work hours, there's no way I could fit in an internship right now."

“What if it was a paid internship?” Dr. Arabaz didn’t wait for Blythe to respond. “Myers and Davidson’s firm downtown is looking for a new intern. They’ll be interviewing in December. They don’t advertise the positions, and they generally only respond to referrals from our faculty. You are my referral.”

Blythe was dumbfounded. “Really?” The professor of his least favourite class was recommending him for a highly competitive internship with one of the top corporate law firms in the state? He could hardly wrap his sleep-deprived mind around it.

“Yes, really. And I don’t want you to give me any reason to regret my decision, so I suggest you find a way to get enough sleep to cope. If you get the internship, I’m sure you’ll find the hours reasonable and the wages enough to live on without having to work two jobs.”

“That’s fantastic. Thank you.” He held out his hand and after a moment, Dr. Arabaz took it with a slight smile on his face. Blythe shook his hand vigorously. “Thank you very much. It sounds...I’ll do well, I promise. You won’t regret it.”

“Good to hear it. Now go get some sleep.”

Blythe left the school with a smile on his face. A paid internship, if it was enough to cover his bills, would be an absolute godsend. Internships were the best way to get in with law firms, and Myers and Davidson’s was a very prestigious firm. Regular hours, full nights of sleep...it was an incredible proposition. He felt newly energised just thinking about it, and was determined to get it no matter how hard he had to work for it.

Blythe caught the bus back to his apartment. He got out a block from his front door and shouldered his backpack, then made his way home. His eyes were blurred with exhaustion and he could hardly focus on the lock long enough to fumble the key into it. He tried once, twice, but on the third try, the key ring fell out of his hand and clattered to the pavement.

“Allow me.”

A long-fingered hand reached down and snatched up the keys before Blythe could even bend over. He whirled around on the stoop and found himself face-to-face with the same guy that had bugged him in the bar last night. He was grinning, the keys dangling from his index finger. And he was tall...Blythe was six inches up on the first step and this guy was still looking down at him, just barely. The potential for intimidation was there, but he didn’t seem to be trying and Blythe was in no mood to be fucked with.

“Give me the goddamn keys,” he ground out between clenched teeth. “What are you anyway, a stalker? Did you follow me home?”

“Not today.”

“Yesterday?”

“It was late. I just wanted to make sure you made it back to your place safely.”

“Well, don’t do me any more fucking favours, okay?” He grabbed for the keys, but the shifter held them just out of reach. “What the hell do you want?”

“Nothing!” the blond replied, batting his eyelashes innocently.

They were really long, Blythe noticed suddenly—really, really long and curled. His sister would have killed for eyelashes like that.

“I just want your name,” the man continued.

“I’m pissed off. Now give me the keys.”

“Hi, Pissed Off, I’m Dan. Dan Bailey.” He held out his free hand.

“You’re not cute. Give me the keys.”

“No, I’m not Cute, I’m Dan.” This jackass was enjoying himself way too much.

“I don’t care what you’re called, shifter or not, I will knee you in the balls if you don’t give me my keys in the next three seconds.”

The man eyed him sidelong for a moment, as if weighing the truth of Blythe’s last statement then reached past him, put the key in the lock and opened the door in one smooth motion. “There you go.”

The urge to say “thank you” welled in Blythe, but he choked it down and retrieved his keys, then stepped inside the small lobby.

“Quick question,” the shifter—Dan—said as Blythe began to shut the door. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his gaze was speculative. “Would you really have tried to knee me in the balls if I hadn’t given you the keys?”

“Yes.” Blythe shut the door in the shifter’s face, ignoring his sudden bright burst of laughter.

“See you tonight!” the cheerful voice called through the door.

“Great,” Blythe muttered to himself as he trooped up the three stories to his apartment. “I’ve got a stalker who thinks he’s a comedian. Brilliant.”

He didn’t waste any of his precious sleep time. As soon as he got into his place, Blythe closed the blinds, set the alarm and dove beneath his blankets. This time, he was too tired to

conjure up pictures, but a particularly warm laugh seemed to echo in his ears as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Dan stood outside the apartment building for a few minutes, just smiling. This kid had guts. Being both a shifter and a pretty handsome guy, Dan was used to getting what he wanted from men. He knew the guy was gay. He could smell the edge of desire when he was close enough, but it was ruthlessly squashed by the conscious mind as soon as it was felt. It was the first time in years that Dan had had to work to charm someone he was interested in, and that made this young man very interesting. The first step tonight would be getting the kid's actual name. The first step now was to get his ass to Darcy's garage.

It was fairly close, only a few minutes' run in his wolf form. Dan carried his clothes and boots in his mouth, awkwardly. He changed about a block from Darcy's place and pulled his things on fast, wishing, not for the first time, that he had a decent jacket, then walked into Darcy's.

Darcy ran a small business, just himself working on the cars most of the time. He specialised in American manufacturers and tinkered on a custom Hummer of his own in his spare time, which wasn't much. He never advertised for help, but Dan had been lucky enough to fall in with him through a friend of Zeph's, and Darcy had been good to him ever since, giving him money under the table for his help and a corner of the garage to curl up in at night. He knew Dan was a shifter and didn't care much one way or the other, as long as the work got done.

He was on a trolley beneath a Mustang when Dan entered the shop. A small bell rang and Darcy rolled out to see who it was.

"Back in town, are you?" was all he said when he saw Dan.

"Yep. Need some help?"

"Always need help around the holidays, what with people driving like maniacs and sliding into each other on the roads." Darcy stood up and brushed off his hands. He was a foot shorter than Dan and a little paunchy through the middle, but there was an air of authority about him that Dan respected. "Still good with Fords?"

"From the Fiesta to the Fusion."

“Good. Don’t care for that hybrid crap myself, but I’m getting a lot of it these days. What hours do you want?” That was one of the great things about Darcy. He cut right to the point.

“As many as you can give me. Say ten a day?”

“Got that much work right now. No whining if it’s less.”

“No whining,” Dan promised.

“How long are you planning on staying this time?” Darcy always liked to know in advance so he could adjust his workload accordingly.

“I’m not sure yet.” Until he could seduce that stud of a bartender. “Around a month.”

“Long time for you.”

“Yeah, it’s a tough time for travel.”

“True.” Darcy walked over to his desk and grabbed a key. “Garage key. Don’t lose it. Got a shower installed in back last spring, so feel free to clean up there.” He pointed to the pile of folded blankets in the far corner. “Bed.”

“Thanks, Darcy.”

The older man snorted. “I’m getting the better end, boy. Always do with you. You need to settle down so I can hire you regular.”

Damn, that was the mantra with his friends these days. “Maybe so, Darcy.”

“You start tomorrow.” He lay down on the trolley again and rolled back beneath the Mustang.

Dan headed into the back towards the shower. It would be good to feel clean again.

* * * *

He was not only clean but also presentable by the time he was ready to head to the Midnight Rose. There was no getting around the jeans, not many pants were long enough for his legs, but at least he could get a clean shirt. True, it was a garage shirt that had “Darcy” written on it and it dated back to the eighties, but hell, that decade was back in now. Still no jacket, but as long as the wind didn’t pick up, he could manage. Shifters, especially those with his sort of pedigree, were naturally tolerant to the cold.

He walked into the bar around ten. It was pretty busy tonight, probably because there was a band playing. Dan took a closer look at the lead singer and grinned. Little Rebecca

Lavi had definitely grown up. She looked a lot like her father, built slender but strong, with light brown hair that she'd cut short and styled into spikes. She was belting out a rock song that Dan could barely make out the lyrics to, but most of the people seemed to like it. Zeph wasn't there but his second, Jackson Dupree, was. Jackson saw Dan enter and motioned him over.

"It's been a long time, Dan." Jackson had a thick accent that gave away his New Orleans roots in an instant. He was just a little shorter than Dan and twice as wide, built like an absolute bull. His skin was chocolate brown and his hair was braided tightly back against his scalp. He was Zeph's enforcer, and looked every inch of the part. It was no surprise he was here tonight monitoring the alpha's only daughter. The only wonder was that Rebecca put up with it.

"About two years, Jackson." Dan nodded his head agreeably. He and Jackson had a similar level of innate dominance, but Dan knew his place. Loners always gave way to pack members.

"Closer to three," Jackson corrected as he drank from a glass of cranberry juice. The man was ridiculously strict with himself when it came to alcohol. Not much fun to party with, but a good guy nonetheless.

"Three years. Damn, where does the time go?"

"Away, brother, away. How've you been?"

Dan shrugged. "The same as usual. I keep on the move."

"Been down to my town lately?"

"Last year. It's looking better, Jackson."

The shifter grimaced. "Not better enough. Go get yourself a drink, then come back here and catch me up on the happenings. You're always good for a laugh."

"I'm so glad I can amuse you," Dan replied sarcastically. He walked over to the bar and grinned widely when his eyes met the bartender's. "Hey, Pissed Off! A Stella, please."

"Go to hell," the kid replied, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

A few people sitting at the bar snickered to themselves.

"You know it'll feel better when you give me your real name," Dan cajoled.

He watched with pleasure the array of emotions that flickered across the bartender's face. He was so expressive. It was easy to read his big brown eyes and follow the tilt of his mouth, and he smelled absolutely intoxicating.

The bartender opened the bottle and set it in front of him briskly. "Blythe."

"Excuse me?"

"That's my name."

"Blithe?" Dan grinned widely, not able to keep himself from teasing. "Like the adjective? Joyous and merry?"

"With a 'y.'"

Oh, the annoyance was surging back full force.

Dan had to continue. "That's an interesting name for a guy."

"Mom must have wanted another girl," Blythe replied sourly.

"It doesn't do you justice at all. You'd do better as a 'Brood,' or a 'Sullen,' or a—"

"Pay for the beer and get the fuck off my bar if you're just going to be an ass."

Holy shit, this kid was running hot tonight. Dan usually liked teasing, but now he felt slightly guilty. "Sorry." He laid down a five. "Keep the change."

That mollified Blythe's irritation some, and Dan decided to retreat before he screwed things up again.

He took the beer and went to rejoin Jackson. "Where were we?"

Jackson smiled. "You were going to tell me about New Orleans, but you got into a fight with the bartender instead. Be careful of him, Dan, he gets edgy around shifters."

"Any idea why?"

Jackson shrugged. "Not really. I just feel his general dislike. He's never outright rude, or at least he wasn't before tonight. What'd you do to provoke him?"

"Nothing!" Dan protested. "Why am I always the jerk in these stories?"

"Dan, come on." Jackson raised his eyebrows. "Be honest with yourself."

"Well...okay, usually it is my fault."

* * * *

Blythe's head was pounding in time with the music. Why did they have to have so much percussion? The four hours of sleep he'd caught that afternoon were keeping him on his feet, barely, but he'd already swallowed some painkillers for the headache that didn't seem to be doing any good. For a while that evening, he'd thought he had escaped Dan Bailey's promise of company, and the thought had been briefly comforting. Then at ten, the

man had walked in, pale hair glowing under the smoky lights, and Blythe had felt his stomach do a little flip.

It was just hormones, he reassured himself. He didn't actually want anything to do with this strange man. He was a shifter, which automatically put him outside Blythe's narrow comfort zone. He'd also appeared out of nowhere and seemed to delight in being a moron. Blythe had needed to keep those things firmly in mind when he'd looked at the man striding across the floor to greet a friend. God, he was hot. Dan had at least six inches on Blythe and was positively ripped. He made tattered, thrift-store jeans look designer against his incredible ass, and his face was like a sculpture, all sharp, perfectly proportioned lines. Way too good looking to be safe. Way too good looking for Blythe to want him. Good-looking men were invariably self-absorbed jerks, and this guy was no different so far. Plus there was the shifter thing, couldn't forget that...no, better not to think about it.

It'd been awfully hard not to think about it when the blond Adonis had walked over to the bar and hailed him using that same stupid joke from earlier in the day. Blythe had been short with him, but his epithets had just rolled off the man's back. Eventually, he'd told him his name, and Dan's reaction had been just as mocking as he'd expected. Strangely enough, the guy had actually seemed to feel some remorse for teasing him and had apologised before going to rejoin his friend.

Blythe collected the cash he'd left on the counter and watched him walk away, unable to tear his eyes free. Damn, it had been a long time since he'd been so captivated by someone that just seeing his back turned him on.

* * * *

The band played until midnight. Once the last set was finished, the lead singer jumped down from the stage and ran into Dan's arms, laughing and hugging him tightly. Blythe watched as he swung her around in a tight circle, grinning hugely before setting her down. She was talking a mile a minute and kept her hand on his arm. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he suddenly found himself wondering what Dan Bailey's arms would feel like wrapped around his body, swinging him around, setting him down and smoothing those palms down his body...oh, hell.

The crowd thinned out after that, and by three a.m., once again, he and Dan were the only ones left in the bar. Dan brought the empty bottle back up to the counter as Blythe started to shut things down.

“At least you finished it this time.”

“I learn slowly, but I do learn,” Dan replied.

His eyes never left Blythe and he felt himself blushing as he went into the back to grab his things. When he came back out, Dan was standing by the door.

“You’re not going to walk me home, are you?” Blythe asked as he locked the door behind them.

“I thought I might,” Dan admitted without a hint of sheepishness.

“I don’t need an escort to my own apartment.”

“Don’t think of me as an escort, think of me as a friend who wants to walk you home. Or don’t think of me at all. Pretend I’m not here.”

“Like that’s even possible,” Blythe muttered under his breath.

Dan heard him and smiled his brilliant smile again.

They didn’t say anything the entire way back. Blythe was determined to remain aloof and Dan seemed to be content just to walk beside him, his long legs allowing for him to move in a kind of relaxed saunter that made Blythe feel as if he was jogging just to keep up.

Finally they reached his apartment building. Blythe took out his keys and opened the door. Dan just stood there, unconcerned.

Before he stepped inside, Blythe felt moved to ask, reluctantly, “Do you have any place to go?”

“Are you offering?” Dan shot back quickly.

“No.”

“Ah.” There it was again, that calm, confident smile. “Then yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good.” Blythe almost started to say “see you tomorrow,” but he caught himself and just walked inside instead.

Feeling guilty about it was ridiculous, he told himself firmly as he walked upstairs and into his place. He didn’t even know this guy. You didn’t invite a total stranger into your house just because they put themselves out there. Besides, if he let him inside, who could say what might happen? He was a lot bigger than Blythe, he might...no, Blythe knew that whatever else this guy might be, he wasn’t a rapist. The real worry, the honest part of

Blythe's mind supplied while he got into the shower, was that once Dan was inside, Blythe might not be able to keep his hands off him. It had been almost a year since he'd been laid, and even longer since he'd had an actual relationship. He was too horny for his own good.

The water was a little better than lukewarm this time around, and he made use of it fast, washing his hair and body then using the last few suds to slick up his hand. Leaning back against the wall, Blythe closed his eyes and began to stroke his cock, which had been erect since he'd started thinking about Dan being inside his apartment. He called up mental images of his strange companion, his self-appointed guardian. His hair probably felt like silk against the skin. His body was hard but his hands, oh his hands, they would be soft in all the right places. Blythe could practically feel those hands on his skin as he imagined it, and not just his hands but his mouth, his perfect, smiling mouth. The phantom Dan closed his lips around Blythe's cock and he came suddenly, unexpectedly, in his squeezing hand.

Blythe stayed bent against the wall until the water was cold, then finally pulled himself out of the shower, amazed. He didn't usually come so fast with so little build-up. Dan definitely struck a nerve.

He probably did with everyone. What gay guy wouldn't be attracted to such a man? Not even a human, a shifter. Blythe felt his brief elation begin to slip through his fingers as memories intruded on his orgasmic glow. Suddenly feeling depressed, he brushed his teeth and got into bed. No class until ten this morning, thank God. He was still very tired and he slipped away easily, in part because he didn't try to fight it this time when Dan's face appeared beneath his eyelids, smiling at him. Always smiling.

* * * *

Dan treasured being in one place long enough to form a routine. He slept in the garage, started work around eight and finished at six. Darcy fed him the same stuff he ate, which meant lots of corned-beef sandwiches but that was okay, food was food. He was paid in cash at the end of the workday. He'd shower, get into the same clothes he wore every day—at least Darcy let him use his washer and dryer, since he didn't have a second set and couldn't see himself standing naked in a Laundromat waiting for his to be finished—eat dinner then head for the Midnight Rose. There was a different live act practically every night, and on the

nights he didn't recognise anyone in the crowd he sat alone, giving Blythe his space. It wasn't until the bar was empty and it was time to close that he came over.

He thought they were making progress. At least Bly—Dan had asked if he could call him Bly, and had gotten an indifferent shrug in return—wasn't actively shunning him now. He wasn't jumping into his arms either, which after a week was still kind of boggling Dan's mind. He'd never had to work this hard for a man, and judging from the way things were going, he was nowhere near the finish line. Bly was turning what he'd intended to be a conquest into an actual quest, and Dan was surprised to find that he was enjoying it.

Dan didn't know what was going on inside of Bly that was making this so challenging, but he was determined to find out. He thought about him constantly, picturing his slim frame standing behind the bar, standing beside Dan, wrapping his legs around Dan's waist...oy vey, as Zeph would say. Maybe it was just the result of not getting immediate gratification when it came to something he wanted, but Dan was more turned on than ever at the prospect of being with Bly. Not just fucking him, being with him. The few times Bly opened up a little, he'd been clever and dryly amusing. And hot. Completely hot.

Today was Thanksgiving, and despite knowing so little about Bly, he figured the day wouldn't be treated with any more distinction than a non-holiday. Bly didn't seem to have any family, and he didn't let anything interfere with his school or his work. The Midnight Rose wasn't a sports bar, so it wasn't likely to be packed with people catching a football game. That meant there would be time to spare for Thanksgiving dinner, which Dan was going to provide.

Darcy had offered to let him eat with him, but Darcy's daughter was visiting from out of town and Dan didn't want to interfere. He cleaned himself up and walked to the nearest grocery store, picked out a medley of different Thanksgiving-esque foods from the deli and took a bus to the bar. He felt oddly nervous. He wanted this to come off as a sweet gesture, not creepy. He hoped he wouldn't screw things up.

The Midnight Rose was practically deserted. A few older men were drinking together at a table in the back, but apart from them, it was just Blythe. He looked as if he was going to fall asleep on his feet. Time to distract him with goodies.

"Hi, Bly."

Blythe rolled his eyes. "You're not a poet, Dan."

"You just haven't heard my good attempts yet. I'm positively Shakespearean when I get a little encouragement."

"I never cared much for Shakespeare."

"Good thing you're not encouraging me, then." Dan put the sack of food on the counter and started unloading it.

"What's all this?" Blythe asked, eyeing the various containers apprehensively.

"This is Thanksgiving dinner. I thought you might like some."

There it was. There was the surprise he was hoping to generate. So much surprise that it momentarily pushed back a wall and let Dan sense something deeper. Bly was filled with a feeling of profound loneliness, and it resonated inside Dan.

He quickly turned his gaze back to the food and began to open the cartons. "Mashed potatoes with gravy, steamed pearl onions and carrots, turkey meat loaf and two slices of pumpkin pie."

"Turkey meat loaf?" Blythe said inquiringly.

"They were out of regular turkey." Dan pulled a can out of the bag. "Do you have an opener?"

Blythe looked at the can and actually chuckled. "We're having cranberry sauce out of the can?"

"That's the best way. It needs to retain its traditional shape to be fully enjoyed."

"Give it to me. There's an opener back here."

Dan handed the can over, taking care to let the back of his hand brush Blythe's fingers. His efforts didn't seem to have any effect on the object of his desire.

Blythe opened the can and set it back on the counter. "Okay, what do you want to drink?"

"Drink? Oh, just water," Dan replied airily.

"Don't be an ass. You brought the meal. I work behind the bar. I can at least give you a beer to go with the food."

Why did it feel so good to be called an ass by this man? Maybe because it meant, on some level, he was paying attention, and that was infinitely better than being ignored. "A Stella, thanks."

Blythe handed him the beer. Dan handed Blythe a plastic fork. They ate in total silence, but it didn't feel awkward to Dan. He watched Blythe raise every forkful to his lips, chew it

slowly and swallow it down. As he relaxed, the terse line of his mouth softened back into inviting fullness. Dan watched him lick a drop of gravy off his bottom lip and almost had to slap himself to keep from making a move. Blythe would respond with anger or fear, or likely both, if Dan pushed him too hard. He had to be the one to decide it was time to move along, and Dan was forced to respect that or be denied his goal.

Not that he couldn't help things along some. "Are you working until close tonight?" he asked after swallowing his last bite of pie.

"Yeah, but close is at midnight tonight. Cristof is bowing to the spirit of the holiday and letting me off three hours early." Blythe shrugged. "It'll be nice to sleep in tomorrow."

"Why waste time sleeping when you could indulge in some fantastic sex with me instead?" Now Dan did want to smack himself, but when Blythe didn't even blink, he realised it had been his internal voice. Thank God. This was going to drive him fucking insane.

"Why spend it here at all?" Dan said after he managed to get some control over himself. "Why not go spend it with friends or family?" He was pretty sure he knew why, but he wanted to hear it.

Blythe paused then said, "I don't have any friends in the area, and my mother has other plans."

Whoa, serious baggage there. Sometimes it wasn't a good thing to be able to sense so much. The bitterness inside of Blythe should have been tearing him up. His self-control was probably the work of years.

"Too bad," was all Dan said.

"Yeah."

To Dan's surprise, Blythe continued.

"What about you? Why aren't you celebrating with someone else?"

"Sort of the same reason," Dan replied, scraping the bottom of the can of cranberry sauce for the dregs. "I'm not affiliated with a pack, and my family lives back on the west coast. I called them earlier."

Actually, he had called them a month ago. Thanksgiving was a time when the large extended family converged on his parent's house, and he didn't want to put his folks on the spot with a call from the prodigal son. Dan didn't like to think too long on it.

"Want the last bite?" He held his fork out towards Blythe.

The result was a mixed bag. Blythe didn't eat out of his hand, but he did take the fork himself and eat the cranberry sauce. Then, he promptly gathered everything together and threw the empty containers, the bag and, alas, the forks into the trash. Dan didn't know whether to be annoyed or amused at losing the advantage. He settled on amused.

"You don't waste any time."

"I could say the same for you," Blythe replied.

Was that flirting? Flirting was good. "Why procrastinate when you know what you want?"

Blythe parried immediately. "Why rush if you don't have to? I just don't like clutter."

Damn it, if that was an innuendo then it wasn't very optimistic. Were relationships nothing but clutter to this guy, or was he being straightforward and just talking about cluttering the counter? Dan didn't have a chance to ask.

"Excuse me," Blythe said then went into the back room.

Dan leaned his elbows on the bar, cradling his chin in his hands. Again, he was struck by the strangeness of not being in the driver's seat when it came to seducing someone. No matter how he tried, he was outmanoeuvred at every turn. Patience had never been on his list of virtues, but the direct approach hadn't worked, and the indirect approach was having only moderate success.

It would be worth it, though. He knew in his soul it would be worth it. If only he could stay long enough to get through Blythe's walls, he knew he'd find something incredible. Whether Dan would be able to stay that long was the real question.

Chapter Three

Blythe took refuge in the back, shutting the door behind him and taking a few deep breaths. Damn it, couldn't he learn from the past? Why did he expect things to be different this time around? The whole process of dating and relationships was an explosion waiting to happen, and when a shifter got involved, that explosion became deadly. He should just tell Dan to leave him the hell alone. Blythe hadn't been clear. He hadn't been blunt enough. He should tell him to fuck off and...

He couldn't. It was a sad and simple fact. Blythe had developed his bitchy side late in life, when fate seemed determined to guide him into depression and self-hatred. Being an asshole kept people back, and that was usually a good thing, but he just couldn't rely on it. He wasn't a single-minded jerk who was so self-absorbed that he couldn't see when he hurt someone, and he wasn't evil enough to enjoy causing other people pain. Especially people that were trying as hard as Dan was trying. Dan was funny and thoughtful and him bringing Thanksgiving dinner over, even if they ate it out of plastic boxes, was better than Blythe doing nothing by himself.

Despite himself, Blythe was beginning to want more. He was curious about Dan. What kind of shifter wasn't part of a pack? It seemed like an unofficial rule that all shifters had to hold their allegiance somewhere. Human law enforcement counted on it. Maybe he'd get it out of him eventually.

Blythe took a last deep breath and headed back into the bar. The other two patrons had left, so it was just him and Dan. Alone. Again. It was a nightly ritual at this point, although tonight was the first night that they had hours of togetherness stretching before them. What time was it, eight? Nine? What the hell would he do with Dan until midnight that allowed him to keep his dignity intact and his lust under control?

Dan smiled at him when their eyes met. "How shall we pass the time?"

From the look on his face, Blythe knew exactly how Dan wanted to pass the time, and he couldn't say the thought didn't appeal. Still, he had to stick to his guns.

“Pool.” He pointed back at the tables. “I can’t cut out early, even if no one else is here. You can go and spend the rest of your evening doing whatever it is you do, or you can stay and get whipped at pool.”

Dan’s eyes were bright with barely controlled laughter. “Bold words, Bly. I accept your challenge.” He slid off the stool and sauntered – sauntered, damn him – over to the nearest table. “Mind if I break?”

“No.” Watching him bend over the table with his ass pointed straight back at Blythe, barely covered by the tattered denim, did nothing good for Blythe’s concentration. He needed to focus. He usually won at pool. He’d spent most of his undergraduate years studying in the campus rec centre, which was always busy with people willing to play.

It was harder than he’d anticipated, but Blythe managed to keep his mind on the game. He got the lead and held onto it until the eight ball was sunk. It helped that he gave Dan a taste of his own medicine, and Dan seemed to have no problems openly ogling Blythe. It felt good to be wanted, even if it was by a shifter.

“You cheated,” Dan accused him as they retrieved the balls. “You used mental warfare on me.”

“It’s not my fault you’re susceptible,” Blythe replied.

“It’s not my fault you aren’t,” Dan muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Blythe to hear.

“You just have to focus.”

“Oh, I have been focusing.”

“On the game, Dan.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been focusing on, Bly. Games.” He grinned. “Want to play again? Maybe I can focus harder this time.” He’d moved closer to Blythe, almost within a foot of him.

“Maybe.” Cool, noncommittal. It was a good response. Blythe congratulated himself. Now only if he could make himself believe it.

They played until close. Blythe won every game except the very last one. Dan’s competitive streak finally came out when he realised he wasn’t going to be getting anything extra out of Blythe, and he really did focus. Blythe grabbed his things while Dan got the lights, and they left together.

It was really cold, the wind whipping down the streets and throwing sprays of ice crystals into their faces. Blythe was okay under all his layers, but Dan was still just wearing his holy jeans and a shirt. It was long-sleeved this time, but that wasn't nearly enough to protect against this kind of chill, even if he was a shifter. They walked to Blythe's apartment in silence, but he could tell that Dan was suffering.

They reached the front door. Blythe took out his key and opened it up, then turned back to Dan. He had his arms crossed and was shivering a little, but looked surprisingly nonchalant.

"How far do you have to walk?" Blythe asked slowly.

"Not too far. Does make me wish I had a car, though."

"I know the feeling. Mine has been out of commission for weeks." Blythe sighed internally. He was going to do it, damn it. "Stay here for the night. You can have my couch."

The look of astonished glee that suddenly came over Dan's face made him feel hot inside, but he didn't let on.

"It's just for one night, though," he cautioned as he moved aside to let Dan in.

"How could I refuse?" Dan said as he stepped inside and shook some of the snow out of his hair.

They walked up to the apartment and Blythe let him in first, pointing the way to the shower.

"The bathroom is in there. There should still be some hot water for the shower if you want it."

"Do I smell?" Dan asked, glancing down at himself.

"No, I just thought you might want to use it to warm up."

"I wouldn't mind warming up."

The look on his face gave Blythe no doubts as to how he wanted to get warm. Blythe suppressed a smile.

"There's the couch. You want sheets for it?"

"No, just a blanket will be fine." Dan looked around, his gaze absorbing the details of the room.

Small, very neat living room containing a couch, a small table stacked with books, and a TV and its accessories sitting on another table against the wall. There was a half-wall separating the room from the closet-like kitchen, and a short hallway, which led to the

bedroom, bathroom and washer and dryer alcove. The walls were light blue, the carpet was a shaggy grey and the place was scrupulously clean.

Blythe felt self-conscious and a little apprehensive, suddenly wondering if it had been a good idea to invite Dan in. He kept the place up as well as he could, but it wasn't perfect. Then again, for all he knew, Dan was used to sleeping in the alley out back. Besides, he wasn't trying to impress him, right? Right?

Dan interrupted his musings. "Thanks a lot for having me in. I really appreciate it." He took off his boots next to the door and smoothed his wet hair back from his face. "I think I'll take you up on the shower offer."

"I'll get you a towel." Blythe turned on his heel and went to his room, opened a dresser drawer and took out his spare towel. He moved quickly and mechanically, grabbing one of the blankets off his bed and grabbing his extra pillow as well. Then he walked back into the living room. "I just have one—"

His voice stuck in his throat as he walked in to see Dan stripping of his shirt. His skin was golden tan, and it covered a body any male model would kill for. His muscles stood out in that peculiar way that shifters had, always taut despite their relaxed movements, as though he could spring into action at any moment. The shirt came all the way off then Dan was looking at Blythe, and Blythe felt like an idiot caught staring the way he was.

"Here." He tossed the pillow and blanket down on the couch then handed over the towel, making sure their fingers didn't touch. "You can put your stuff in the dryer if you want. Goodnight." Blythe turned and retreated back to his room in a flash.

"Happy Thanksgiving," Dan called out.

Blythe shut the door. "Yeah."

Yeah? What the hell kind of response was that? But he couldn't make himself say anything else. He didn't want to see anymore. Getting hard at the mere sight of Dan's naked flesh was bad enough. He didn't need to compound his anxiety by making himself seem like a tongue-tied moron.

He didn't want to want him. He didn't want to do this, but as soon as the bathroom door closed and the water came on, Blythe was stripping, rolling onto his stomach and pressing himself against his pillow. It wasn't even close to the hard, inviting body of Dan Bailey but provided a little needed pressure. His eyes squeezed shut and his mind spun with fantasies of Dan lying beneath him, Dan reaching down and stroking his cock, Dan's smiling

lips pressed against his own as they embraced and slowly locked their bodies together, pressing his cock into a tight, warm channel and feeling Dan arch against him...Blythe was fisting himself fast and couldn't stop to roll onto his back and grab some tissues. He came against the bed, clutching the pillow against his chest with his free hand even as his hips ground him into his hand, pulling a long, wordless exclamation out of his throat that he didn't remember to muffle.

Blythe lay there trembling for a few minutes, his head spinning with the intensity of his orgasm. "Fuck," he whispered finally, in a tone of half awe and half remorse. He was giving in. After all the promises he'd made to himself, he was giving in. Even worse, he really wanted to, and that made him feel like a traitor. To hell with it, he'd clean the sheets tomorrow. Blythe wiped himself off quickly and turned out the light, curling up against the wall and huddling under his remaining blanket. Despite his exertions, it took a long time to fall asleep.

* * * *

He woke up the next morning to the hot, buttery smell of pure deliciousness. Blythe blinked his eyes open and sniffed. Blueberry pancakes...but he didn't have any of the stuff to make blueberry pancakes. Where had those come from? Blythe pushed himself off his bed with the intent of finding out then remembered that he was naked and hadn't bothered to brush his teeth last night. His mouth tasted fuzzy and gross. Blythe put on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, bundled up his sheets and tossed them into his dirty-clothes' basket. He darted into the bathroom to brush his teeth then walked into the living room. It was empty.

What was up with that? Blythe checked inside the oven—yep, pancakes sitting on a warm plate. There was a plastic sack of groceries on the counter with butter, eggs, syrup and other breakfast essentials that he hadn't stocked in a while, as well as more soap and shampoo. The couch was neat, with the blanket folded over the arm and the pillow sitting on top of it, but there was no Dan. Everything of his was gone. Blythe leant back against the fridge, feeling disappointed and not being sure why. He didn't even know where Dan had gone. He didn't even know —

The door opened with a bang. "Hi!" Dan stepped inside, removed his boots and closed the door behind him. "Here are your keys." He tossed them to Blythe. "Your car is the Focus, right?"

Things were going a little fast for having just woken up. "My car?"

"Yeah. It's the Focus, right? The one with radiator damage?"

"Yes." Blythe looked down at his keys. "Did you use these to get into my car?"

"So territorial." Dan waved Blythe's concern aside. "No, I just wanted to be able to get back in after I went out for groceries. Do you live on dry toast?" He walked into the kitchen, edging past Blythe with a grin, and opened up the oven. "You haven't had any yet. You don't like pancakes?"

"I love pancakes. I just wasn't sure what had happened to you and I wanted to figure it out before I had breakfast."

"Did you miss me?" Dan asked mischievously.

Blythe snorted. "No." Maybe that wasn't entirely true, but Dan didn't have to know that.

"Oh. Well, I checked out the lot out back to see if I could find your car once I finished making breakfast. I'm a mechanic."

"Yeah?" Blythe was interested now. "The last mechanic I spoke with said it would take a grand to get the thing running again."

"He exaggerated. It would take a grand to get it looking pretty again, but maybe half that to fix it up so it could run." Dan looked at Blythe speculatively. "It really should go into a shop, though. The longer you wait, the worse things will get. I could fix it for you."

Blythe shook his head. "I can't afford it right now."

"Hear me out. I'll fix your car for you in exchange for a place to crash. Couch only," he added quickly. "It won't take me long, and I can't stay for long anyway. I'll help pay for groceries and utilities and all that jazz. Deal?"

Blythe was glad he was leaning against something. It helped him stay upright as Dan made his surprising offer. A roommate? He'd hated that in college, but it would be nice to have a car again. Besides, he'd already acknowledged to himself that he was interested in Dan. Trying to deny it now would be lying to himself.

Dan was watching his face carefully, looking for any sign of assent. Blythe knew he could be more expressionless than a champion poker player when he wanted, and it wasn't fair to torment Dan for too long.

"Deal. Couch only."

"Great! You won't regret it."

The look on his face assured Blythe of his sincerity.

"Now lets eat breakfast, I'm starving."

* * * *

Progress was being made, slowly but steadily. Dan kept his job with Darcy, who waved away his explanation for why he wasn't sleeping there anymore with a beefy hand and a gruff, "No details." With two of them there, Blythe's place was definitely a little cramped, but he made sure he was as neat as possible and respected Blythe's privacy. It had been a huge step for Blythe to assent to letting him live there, and Dan didn't want to strain his good luck.

Unfortunately, his time was running out. He'd lived with Blythe for close to two weeks and gotten no closer than a brief shoulder massage to getting him into bed, and the other shifters were starting to get a little restless. No one brought it up to his face, but Jackson had hinted several times on the nights Rebecca played at the bar that it might be getting time for him to move on. Zeph's pack was actually taking his presence pretty well, but they were starting to get some static from Carlos' people. If Carlos accused Zeph of harbouring an unlawful loner, then there would be a fight.

Zeph was as tough as nails and could take care of himself with ease, but a lot of his pack was made up of younger shifters, less experienced in the brutality that came with confrontation. Most of Carlos' pack, on the other hand, were unmated males who lived for fighting. Carlos encouraged it, as a way of weeding out challengers. He and his brother Raoul ruled their pack by engendering respect through fear and enforcing it through pain.

Things came to a head a week before Christmas, and into the fourth week of Dan's stay. He was just finishing up a cosmetic repair on Blythe's car when Jackson came into the garage.

"Hey, Dan."

“Hey.” Dan straightened up. “What’s up?”

“Zeph wants to talk with you.”

Dan felt as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head. Shit, shit, shit.

“Now?”

“Yeah.” Jackson jerked his head towards the door. “He’s out in the car.”

A private talk then, without even the rest of his pack knowing about it. Zeph was obviously serious, and feeling cautious, too.

“I’ll be right there. Just let me clean off my hands.”

“Sure, Dan.”

Dan felt like a nervous teenager climbing into the backseat of the spacious SUV. Zeph was there, and Jackson took the driver’s seat. He started up the car and pulled away from the kerb.

Dan cleared his throat. “Hey.”

“It’s close to a month, Dan.” Zeph didn’t waste any time with pleasantries. “Carlos is breathing down my neck about breaking the rules with you. You’re going to have to leave soon, or they’ll either come after me and mine, or corner you. Head out for a while, go find some sunny beaches. You can come back in a year, maybe less.”

Dan shook his head in frustration. “I can’t go yet, Zeph. He’ll be out of my reach forever if I leave now. I just need a little more time, just a couple more weeks, maybe into the new year.”

“He?” Zeph jumped on the word. “He who? He the bartender you’re living with now? I thought he was just another pretty boy you were seducing for a warm place to sleep at night.”

The truth behind those words stung all the more so because they didn’t apply to the way he felt about Blythe. Dan just shook his head again, unable to think of the right words to say. “I just can’t...if I leave, I won’t...I mean—”

“Hang on.” Zeph stared at him narrowly. “Are you falling in love?” His irritation vanished in a sudden burst of laughter. “Ha! You are in love! Holy shit, I thought I’d never see the day. That’s good, Dan, that’s really good! Are you close to bonding?”

“No!” Dan exclaimed miserably. “I’ve never had such a hell of a time with someone in my entire life. He doesn’t like shifters, he doesn’t trust humans and he never talks about anything private. I’m going out of my fucking mind trying to figure out how to reach him,

but getting through Bly's walls is like reaching for an illusion. You think you have something in your hands but then it's gone, and you don't even know if it was ever there to begin with."

"You have it hard, Sheridan."

"I know." He put one hand to his head and rubbed down his temples and across his eyes. "I can't remember ever feeling this way about anyone. I guess it's love, if love makes you crazy."

"Sounds like it." Zeph put a hand on Dan's shoulder. "Do you think you can do it by New Year's? Do you honestly think you can convince him of your sincerity and bond with him?"

"I have to try. Please don't make me leave now, Zeph. I couldn't stand to go without knowing if it could have happened."

"I can't make you do anything, I'm not your alpha." Zeph gave his shoulder a little squeeze then released it. "Right now all I can be is your friend, your very concerned friend. If you really think you've got a chance you should go for it, because knowing you this isn't likely to happen again. Just be careful, okay? You need to be very careful. Don't start anything with the others."

"I won't." Dan knew his life hung in the balance, and that balance became more precarious every day he stayed in Denver, but there was no way he could go. Not even if Zeph had insisted, so it was good for both of them that he hadn't.

* * * *

Dan drove Blythe's car to the Midnight Rose that evening. It was finally finished and he was looking forward to surprising him with it. Blythe had visited the garage a couple of times, met Darcy and dutifully admired his pet Hummer, but it was clear he didn't really care much about cars. He just wanted to have one that was working.

Blythe was talking to him more, which was a good thing. He actually treated Dan like a friend now instead of a temporary interloper. Still, Dan was a little nervous about handing the car over again. He'd said he'd fix the car in exchange for the couch. Now that the car was done, would Blythe be kicking him out?

Focus on the positive, Dan reminded himself. They'd been living together for two weeks and neither one of them had gone insane. Maybe Blythe valued his company for more than his mechanical skills.

The Midnight Rose was packed. Rebecca's band was playing again, and the place was filled with shifters, band groupies and humans who didn't care about the band but did care about the shifters filling it. Dan slipped inside and made his way up to the bar, trying to stay out of the way. There were a number of Carlos' people here and it would be bad for him to attract too much attention.

Blythe saw him coming and smiled. Dan wanted to capture that smile, pocket it and bask in its glow later. It made him feel so good. He reached the bar just in time to take the Stella that Blythe was offering.

"Nice crowd," he offered over the din.

"It's always busy when she's here." Blythe motioned Rebecca's way. "Aren't you going to go hang out with your friends?" He was referring to Jackson and the other shifters of Zeph's pack, forming their own group on the far wall.

"Nah, I think I'll stay over here tonight," Dan replied.

The truth was, Zeph had told him to keep his distance from his pack, to minimise the appearance of favouritism. Blythe looked curious, but he didn't have the time to say anything else. The bar was going full-tilt tonight.

The evening wore on and Dan and Blythe hardly spoke more than a few words at a time to each other. Dan felt a squirming tingle of doubt creep into his consciousness. He had no time to waste, and yet, there was no way he could push things with Blythe without making it uncomfortable. It seemed as if it would take a disaster or a miracle to open the door to intimacy with him.

Raoul was in the bar that night. He was a short, stocky guy with a shaved head and a hard, angular face. He was his brother's enforcer, but he wasn't much for keeping order. If anything, he enjoyed disrupting it. After Rebecca's band finished a set, he began to make his presence known, whistling and calling at her.

"Don't stop there honey, keep going! You make more money if you strip for the crowd."

Some of his pack mates laughed.

This was the wrong thing to say to the daughter of the rival pack's alpha, especially when so many of her pack mates were there to object, but it was just as obvious that Raoul didn't care.

"Come on, baby, show us your tits! Hey, I give you fifty bucks if you flash me your cunt!"

"You'd better shut your fucking mouth," Jackson snarled as he stepped forward, motioning at the same time for Rebecca to get off the stage and into the protection of the pack.

"Or what, baby, you jealous?" Raoul grinned ferally. His teeth seemed to lengthen in the dim light. "Sorry, I don't pay money to see little pricks like you packin'. You wanna pimp out the girl, though, and I let you watch while I fuck that ass—"

The fight started in a flurry, too fast to see who had thrown the first punch and too furious for either side to care. Dan wanted to leap up and jump into the fray, but the restrictions on him were binding, even in a situation like this. He could see that Rebecca was scared though, and knew that even if he couldn't fight, he could at least do something for her.

He ran into the crowd, dodging punches and pieces of broken chair as he raced towards Rebecca. She looked a lot younger than eighteen now, crouched against the wall behind two other shifters.

"I'll take her to the back," he yelled to them. "She needs to be out of this."

He'd never spoken truer words. Before they could respond, a shifter from Carlos' pack barrelled into them, snarling, half-changed and lashing out with teeth and claws. Dan grabbed Rebecca's hand and pulled her into his arms, then sheltered her as they ran towards the bar.

Blythe saw them coming and unlocked the counter door that would let them behind the bar. The way to the back room was already open. "Get her in!" he yelled.

Dan helped the trembling Rebecca into the back then turned to Blythe. "You too."

Blythe shook his head. "I don't need—"

Dan shouldered him roughly aside as he saw a shifter holding a broken bottle in his hand leap for the bar. His momentum carried him straight over it and he charged directly into Dan. The broken glass plunged into his chest, breaking into shards against his ribcage

and Dan felt his control break, felt the need to change come upon him as he snarled and began to shift, furious and out of control.

Bam! The thunderous sound of a shotgun blast filled the air and Dan realised with a start that his attacker was suddenly gone, knocked back by the intense power of the shot. Two more shots rang out, blasting shifters in various states of the change against the far wall. A bloody mist saturated the air and despite themselves, the shifters fell silent. Cristof, vampire owner of the Midnight Rose, walked the rest of the way into the bar from his office. And he was pissed.

Vampires were easier to identify than shifters. Their skin was papery and sallow when they needed blood, their eyes were like polished steel balls when they were annoyed, and their fangs lengthened when they got aroused or violent. Cristof was displaying all three characteristics right now. He didn't need the shotgun he held to take out a shifter, Dan realised. He was only using it to ensure he had everyone's attention.

"You dumb fucks," he hissed angrily as he cocked the shotgun again. The noise was surprisingly loud. "You hairy, scaly, feathered, filthy, ignorant fucks! Jesus, I hate shifters. I hate this entire fucking aspect of my life. You think I like being here?" He flung his arms wide, almost inviting attack, but no one dared to move. Cristof had been pale before he was turned. Now his skin glowed with a white luminescence, shining bright against the black of his clothes. "You think I like wasting my deathless existence in this fucking backwater bar listening to you dumb bastards chew yourselves apart? I hate it! If it were up to me, I'd let you fucks fight it out, but when you started destroying my property, you crossed the line. If any of my employees have been injured, I'll have your balls in a jar on my desk. My sire might find it amusing." He glanced towards Blythe. "You and the girl are all right?"

"Yes."

Dan could feel Blythe's eyes move to him, and he scented his sudden anxiety. Anxiety for him? That was good. Except for the whole bleeding part.

"Good. You and you." He pointed at Jackson and Raoul. "Your packs owe me reparations. Fifty percent of the damages apiece, and I don't want to hear a fucking song and dance about who started this shit. You should have taken it out of my establishment before you wrecked the miserable place. I'll be sending your alphas the bill tomorrow, and I expect payment by the day after. Now pick up your damaged goods and get the fuck out of my sight before I start loading silver shot."

Cristof turned around and stalked back to his office, slamming the door shut. Dan let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding then hissed as the shards buried in his chest began to burn. Too bad the adrenaline was starting to ebb.

Jackson raced over to the bar. "Is Rebecca all right?" His front was covered with blood and he had a vicious cut running across his forehead, but he didn't even seem to notice it.

"I'm fine, Dan got me," Rebecca said as she emerged from the back. She took one look at Jackson and ran into his arms. "Oh, God, you're hurt!"

Dan watched, speechless, as she reached up, pulled Jackson's head down to hers and pressed her lips against his. Jackson and Rebecca? Holy shit. He wondered if Zeph knew.

The shifters were slinking away, or limping in some cases. Amazingly, no one had died. The shotgun had done the most damage. Raoul cast a baleful glance towards them as he left, cradling his broken right arm against his chest.

"You'd better go," Blythe said nervously as he cast a glance towards the office door. "Cristof wasn't kidding."

"Will you be okay?" Jackson asked Dan, looking at his bloody wound.

"Just a little glass. It'll heal before morning. Get going."

They left, the rest of Zeph's pack forming a protective guard around them as they exited the door.

Dan watched them go then said, "I guess I should leave, too."

"No!" Blythe was emphatic. "No, don't go yet. Let me talk to Cristof for a moment. Sit down." Taking Dan's shoulders gently in his hands, he pressed him onto the stool behind the bar. "I'll be right back."

Turning around, he hurried to the office door and knocked. An annoyed yell answered him, but Blythe went in anyway.

Dan eased off his tattered shirt, irritated at the difficulty he had doing it. He plucked a bit at his chest, seeking out the shards that were stuck there. The big one was easy enough to yank. It felt like half the damn bottle, but that was as far as his success went. It was no good. His hands were shaky and he couldn't focus well enough to get his fingers around the smaller pieces. Dan cursed under his breath and grabbed a Stella from under the bar, popped it open against the counter and drank deep.

Blythe came out of the office a second later, shut it fast and rushed over to him. "Holy shit, Dan, your chest!"

"I know. Don't worry about it."

"Fuck that. Should we go to a hospital?"

"No." The closest hospital was on Carlos' side, anyway. "Just give me a little time to recover and then I can take care of it."

"No, I'll do it."

Before Dan could say another word, Blythe was standing between his knees, his expression intent as he picked delicately at the wound. He grabbed a nearby jug of water and poured a little over Dan's skin, washing away some of the blood.

"A little higher and he would have gotten you in the throat."

"Lucky it wasn't any higher, then."

Blythe glanced up at his face, then down again. "If it had been me, it would have been my throat. You pushed me out of the way."

He laid a few shards of broken glass on the countertop. Dan couldn't even feel the pain of the removal, he was too entranced at having Blythe's hands on him. He was standing so close...

"It wasn't safe for you," he said finally.

"It wasn't safe for anyone, it just wasn't fatal for you," Blythe replied. "Or for her. Is the girl a human, too?"

"Yeah. Her father is the alpha of one of the local packs."

"And you're his friend." Blythe disregarded Dan's questioning look. "You hang out with his crowd and she wasn't the least bit scared of you. You'd have to be his friend. Are you a member of his pack?" He pulled another sliver of brown glass out of Dan's flesh.

"No. I don't have a pack, remember?"

"I thought all shifters had packs."

"Not me, not yet. I'm a loner."

"Is that why you didn't mix it up more?"

"Yeah. If I make too many waves and don't have the protection of a pack, I can be killed with near-impunity. I have to stay out of things or I can be accused of provocation, and if Zeph—that's Rebecca's dad, he's the alpha—tried to defend me, then a big fight starts."

"Why not join his pack?" Blythe leaned in close, examining the wound minutely.

Dan inhaled his essence and sighed. "It's not so easy for a gay shifter, Bly. Fundamentalists believe that the only pure shifter is one who obeys the standard biology,

and most of the males are touchy enough about pack rank without having the distraction of another male's attraction put into the mix. Without a mate, gay shifters are considered a destabilising influence."

"That doesn't seem very fair."

"Shifters aren't any more reasonable than regular people. They're a lot less reasonable about some things, and this tends to be one of them. Most of them are pretty macho."

Blythe glanced around the wrecked room and snorted softly. "I think that's obvious." He paused then asked, "And you're not mated?"

"Nope." Dan could have breathed Blythe in for hours, but he straightened up just then.

"I think I've got them all. Let me get the first-aid kit in the back and we can patch you up."

He walked into the back to find it, leaving Dan frustrated, horny and in pain, waiting on the bar stool. He cursed under his breath and took another deep drink from the bottle.

Once Blythe had him trussed up to his satisfaction, Dan asked, "What did you talk to your boss about?"

"About letting you stay here with me long enough to clean you up, and about what he wanted me to do. He gave me the next week off at full pay, since it's going to be impossible to work the way this place is right now." Blythe shrugged. "It'll be nice to have Christmas off. And now, we need to get to the apartment." He glanced at his watch. "It's only eleven-thirty, we should still be able to catch the bus."

"No need." Dan pulled the car keys out of his pocket and handed them to Blythe with a half-smile. It was the most he could manage after this evening. "It's all done."

Blythe took the keys and grinned, clearly relieved. "Perfect timing. Now I can take you home in style."

Home. Was it a good sign that Blythe was using that word? Was it their home, or just his home? Dan was too tired to figure it out. He could feel his senses dulling as his body began to channel its resources towards healing. He barely noticed when Blythe placed his own jacket around Dan's shoulders and gently urged him to stand.

"Where's the car?"

"In the lot around back."

Dan let Blythe lead him to the car and drive them back to the apartment building. He was simultaneously drowsy and anxious to remain awake. This was the most tender Blythe

had ever been towards him and he didn't want to end it by falling asleep. It was wonderful to have the recuperative powers of a shifter, but wounds like his would definitely make him useless for a while.

They made their way up the stairs to Blythe's apartment slowly, and as soon as they were in, Blythe led him over to the couch. Dan sat back and closed his eyes, one hand lightly touching the bandages on his chest.

Blythe sat down next to him. "Can I get you anything?"

"I'll be fine."

"You don't look so fine."

Dan opened his eyes and stared into Blythe's concerned face. "Look closer," he murmured.

He didn't expect Blythe to take him seriously. None of his other attempts at flirting had been successful. Therefore he was a little slow on the uptake when Blythe suddenly straddled his lap, facing his chest but not touching it. Dan's eyes widened as Blythe framed his face with his hands.

"You're right," Blythe whispered. "You are fine."

He brushed Dan's hair back, leaned in carefully and very slowly kissed his lips. Dan's numbed mind didn't allow for anything except gentle acceptance. The moment he'd dreamed about for weeks was finally happening and he couldn't do anything but let it happen, because his traitorous body was exhausted. No finesse, no control, nothing but raising his hands just enough to hold onto Blythe's waist while trying to remember to breathe. Blythe's lips were so soft, so amazingly welcoming. His voice was warm and the pressure of his body against Dan's made Dan quickly and painfully aware that his jeans were very restricting.

"Bly," he stammered, unwilling to stop but definitely distracted. "Bly...wait, let me..."

Blythe glanced down then laughed faintly. "No, let me."

He let go of Dan's face and reached down to his jeans, undoing the zipper and drawing Dan's eager cock free of the confining cloth. He stroked it a few times with his hand then pressed forward, thrusting his pelvis against the hard, hot flesh. Blythe was still completely clothed but Dan could feel his hard-on through the fabric of his pants, rubbing against Dan's own erection. Blythe cupped his face again and kissed him, consuming his moans of growing ecstasy and mirroring his desire, holding him, touching him everywhere but his chest.

Dan gripped Blythe's hips harder and drew him in, grinding their erections together as the storm inside of him grew. In moments, the results of interminable fantasies and lowered inhibitions emerged and Dan began coming, crying a muffled moan into Blythe's mouth as he strained against him. He dug his fingers into Blythe and pulled him in as close as he could, feeling complete physical and mental bliss as his orgasm stole the rest of his energy. His world slowly dissolved into soft, soothing darkness. Without meaning to, but unable to stop it, Dan passed out.

Chapter Four

Blythe woke up on the couch the next morning, wondering for a moment what he was doing there. Then he felt the warm, heavy weight of the person next to him and grinned. Oh yeah. Good thing it was a Saturday. There was no way he would have gotten up in time for class with such a temptation lying next to him. Dan was still soundly out, breathing deeply and holding onto Blythe's shoulders with his right arm. Blythe would have lain there longer, but nature called. He eased out from under Dan's arm, watching with interest as a frown flashed across the sleeping man's face, then headed back to the bathroom.

Blythe cleaned himself up and walked as quietly as possible into the kitchen, glancing at the clock on the wall. Almost ten, and Dan was still out like a light. He knew that the reason Dan had conked out so fast last night was his body's reaction to being injured, and it could be hours more before he was healed enough to wake up. He'd probably be starving. As quietly as he could, Blythe started getting food out of the fridge. He'd make omelettes.

Blythe cracked some eggs into a bowl and smiled when he remembered that part of the reason Dan had gone out so fast had to do with him. Blythe hadn't been able to resist Dan's gentle come-on, despite his injuries. His lips tasted incredible, his body was perfection and the feeling of warmth and relief that Blythe got from being wanted so badly was addictive. His cock was just as beautiful as the rest of him and when Dan came, Blythe was on the cusp as well, mesmerised by the fountain of creamy whiteness erupting between his thighs. And then...Dan had fallen asleep.

Well, late-night frustration was what his hand was for. Blythe had cleaned up himself and Dan then eased the shifter down onto his back. He'd tried to get up to go back to his room but Dan had held him tight, unconscious but still strong. Blythe had given in and spent the night with him on the couch, which thankfully was wide enough for them both to lay on it without him feeling as if he was about to fall off. Then morning came and he was here, and Blythe didn't really know where *here* was.

He'd never set out to get a shifter as a lover. If anything, he had been decidedly opposed to the entire idea, from his sister's death right up to the moment he met Dan. His willpower took a severe beating beneath Dan's persistence, though. He was patient, good-

natured and had never been pissed off when Blythe turned him away at the door. It had been a while since Blythe had had anything really resembling a friendship, much less a lover, and after a while, he'd decided fatalistically that if it was meant to be it would happen. He'd been determined not to be any more inviting than he could get away with, though. Trusting someone else hurt, and when it was a shifter in question, it made the peril even sharper. Then Dan had gone and saved his life, and suddenly the rest of Blythe's well-thought-out objections flew out the window.

Dan had saved his life. Blythe's life was a sad and lonely nest of bitterness and angst, and this beautiful, sweet, forbearing man had put himself in peril to save it. Seeing him hurt caused Blythe reciprocal pain, an aching burn in his chest that flared with every heartbeat while he watched blood pour down Dan's chest. If he'd had time to pass out, he would have when he saw the broken bottle penetrate Dan's flesh. As it was, he was lucky he had someone even less prepared than himself to worry about. Blythe pushed away thinking about it and went back to cooking.

The omelettes were just coming out of the pan when Dan began to stir. He mumbled and tossed about a little, then sat up, slowly shaking his head. He blinked and looked at Blythe. He was completely mussed and cute, and Blythe's fingers itched to winnow through his hair.

"How's your chest?" Blythe asked as he put the omelettes onto plates.

"Fine." Dan reached up and removed the bandage. The skin beneath it was lighter than the rest and still hairless, but completely healed. He looked down at his lap, probably noting that his fly was undone, then looked back up at Blythe. "Did you sleep with me last night?"

"On the couch," Blythe replied, getting out a couple of forks.

"Did we do something else?"

"You can't remember?" Blythe asked in mock-sadness. He poured two glasses of orange juice and, balancing the meal carefully, made his way over to the couch. He sat down on the far end and put the food down between them. "Honestly, that hurts, Dan."

A look of such horrified chagrin came to Dan's face that Blythe instantly felt guilty for joking with him.

"You were wounded, Dan, your body was screaming for rest. We both fell asleep on the couch. You do remember the fight, right?"

"Yeah, mostly."

He took a glass of juice and sipped slowly, staring at Blythe, who tried to look as innocent as possible.

"I remember coming back here. I remember sitting down on the couch. I remember..."

His voice trailed off as he really did remember. Blythe was pleased to see a blush suffuse his cheeks.

"Oh, God, I fell asleep after you...oh, fuck!"

"I didn't expect anything in return, you were exhausted." Blythe actually felt a little bad about taking advantage of the situation. "I should have just let you go to sleep without molesting you first."

"Are you kidding me?" Dan exclaimed. "You didn't even get off! That's more than I can say, I definitely remember coming."

"I got off, just later." Blythe shrugged. "It's no big deal."

"It is a big deal," Dan growled. Putting his glass down and moving the food to the floor, he slid across the couch and crawled between Blythe's legs. His hands ran over Blythe's hips lightly, hungry caresses that were tempered with caution. His eyes were bright with desire and something else. "Please," he murmured. "Please let me taste you."

"The food will get cold," Blythe pointed out breathlessly, any apprehension he might have had fading under the sensual assault of Dan's hands.

"I'm not hungry for it," Dan replied, leaning in and gently licking the side of Blythe's neck, tracing the line of his jaw up to the point of his chin and capturing his mouth with tender, teasing lips.

Blythe finally got to do what he wanted and sifted his fingers into Dan's hair, tugging him closer and deepening the kiss. He was hard in moments and trapped Dan with his knees, at last able to meld their bodies together without having to worry about hurting his lover. His *lover*. He'd only started thinking of him that way, but Blythe loved the sound of it in his mind.

Dan was hard as well, and when they began to writhe against each other again, Blythe closed his eyes and prepared to let go. Dan seemed to have other ideas, though.

"No, let me taste you." He pulled back slightly and gazed at Blythe with an expression of need. "Please, Bly."

Dan didn't have to ask permission. He could have backed out of the tight cradle of Blythe's legs at any moment and simply gone down on him and Blythe wouldn't have

complained, but the fact that he was asking made the act seem more special, and put Blythe comfortably in control.

“Yes,” he groaned, pulling Dan in close and kissing him hard. “Yes.”

Dan didn't need to be told twice. He slid back down Blythe's body and stripped his shorts off, then settled down between his pale, smooth thighs, his hands slinking under Blythe's shirt and stroking his abdomen as his mouth descended, ever so slowly, onto Blythe's cock.

The sudden warmth and pressure surrounding the head of his cock wrenched a gasp from Blythe's throat, and he threw his head back against the arm of the couch and slipped his fingers back into Dan's silky mass of hair, but softly this time. It'd been so long since anyone had touched him like this, and after flirting with the idea for weeks with Dan, the reality was consuming. He knew he was going to come fast. “Fast” became “almost instantly” when Dan swallowed him to the very base of his cock.

Blythe wasn't a monster, but he did have over seven inches of thick and very hard flesh jutting into Dan's mouth, and his mind could barely wrap itself around the reality of being deep throated. “Dan, oh, I'm...mm, I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm...”

Then he was coming, and Dan was drinking everything he had to give and not missing a beat. He kept his tongue wrapped around Blythe's cock until the sensation became too much and he had to lift Dan off him. Blythe pulled him back up by his hair and they shared another kiss, a little more languorous this time. He could taste his essence in Dan's mouth and sucked gently on his lower lip, then his tongue, lapping up the vestiges of his own unique flavour.

“That was worth the wait,” he breathed.

“And we're not even naked, yet,” Dan replied suggestively, his smile lighting up the entire room.

Blythe laughed. “We should fix that, and then let me see what I can do for you.”

“I can think of several things.”

“Oh, can you?” Blythe challenged as he shrugged out of his shirt.

He watched with interest as Dan shucked his own off rapidly.

“Yeah. Unfortunately they all take too long, and I'm fucking ready to explode.” He was, too.

Blythe looked avidly at Dan's cock, a little longer than his own, slender and slightly curving and so hard and red it had to be painful.

"Fast and dirty, then?"

"Fast, at least," Dan agreed, coming back onto the couch and pressing his body against the length of Blythe's, stretching them out so he was lying against him.

His cock felt like a brand against the sensitive skin of Blythe's abdomen, and when he shifted down a little and pressed their groins together, Blythe echoed his lover's hiss of pleasure and need.

"Oh, fuck," Dan moaned, rubbing back and forth a little. They fit together so well, sliding easily against sweat-slick skin and the trails of pre-cum flowing from the tip of Dan's cock.

Blythe wrapped his arms around Dan's shoulders and pulled him in closer, trapping their aching cocks tightly between their bodies before undulating his hips a little. It'd been ages since he'd held someone against him like this, and the feel of Dan's perfect, hot body and obvious desire was driving him towards a second climax. He wiggled again, and Dan made a noise somewhere between a groan and a curse and buried his face against Blythe's neck, inhaling deeply.

"You smell so good," he whispered.

"Like what, breakfast?" Blythe asked shakily, sliding his hands down to Dan's hips and pulling him even closer, bending his knees to get better leverage as he thrust up into the hollow of his lover's hip.

"God, fuck...better than food," Dan said, his lips playing over the skin of Blythe's neck and collarbone, teeth nipping and tongue teasing him.

Blythe arched his neck into his lover's attentions, pressing their centres even closer together, and the pressure and friction were fast combining to drive him out of his mind. He had no idea how Dan hadn't come yet.

"Is this...good enough?" he managed around a kiss. "For you?"

Dan didn't bother to respond, he just pulled Blythe's lips back to his and kissed him savagely as he thrust once, twice, again, then he was coming and moaning his pleasure into the soft, panting cavern of Blythe's mouth. The feel of the tremors pulsing through Dan's body and the incredible closeness they were sharing were enough to set Blythe off again, and he writhed and clutched and came against his lover with a strangled gasp.

By the time they got around to remembering the omelettes, they were stone cold, and neither of them cared.

* * * *

Things kept going well right up until Christmas Eve. Blythe was on a break from school but he still went to campus every day to read up on cases pertinent to Myers and Davidson's firm in preparation for his interview. Dan kept working with Darcy eight to six every day, but now instead of going out to the bar he went home—home, he loved the sound of that word—and met up with Blythe. They usually stayed in, watching movies or cooking or making love, or often all three. Dan could barely keep his hands off of Blythe, and it seemed as if his lover reciprocated his frenzied affections. Physically, at least.

Dan didn't know exactly how long it had been since Blythe had been with someone, but he was pretty sure it was a matter of years, not months. He'd been ecstatic to get a physical relationship going, but he hadn't been under any delusions that it was going to be easy. Dan had expected to do a lot of seducing, a lot of coaxing, a lot of giving and explaining...not that any of that would have bugged him, but it was what he was expecting. Instead, after their first few times together, it was all he could do to keep up with Blythe. It wasn't that his lover was really experienced, but he wasn't afraid of anything, either. When he wanted something, he asked for it, and when he wanted to do something, he just settled in to do it and let Dan worry about telling him if it wasn't something he wanted. Which would have been impossible as far as Dan was concerned.

Just the scent of Blythe was a constant aphrodisiac, toying with his hormones and fucking up his concentration. Every nuance of him was delicious, and his moods changed his taste in the air. They fucked no matter what his mood was, because underlying it all was a latent horniness that wouldn't be denied, but his mood changed what they did and how they did it.

When Blythe was annoyed or irritated, like he often was after studying law for ten hours a day, he'd jump on Dan the minute he walked through the door. Frantic kisses, belt undone, pants pushed down over his hips and then Blythe was on his knees, nuzzling his face into Dan's rapidly-growing erection before opening his mouth and taking it in. The mere sight of the slender young man kneeling before Dan was enough to make him hard, and as

soon as Blythe started blowing him, he had to close his eyes to keep his composure. He couldn't look for long at those soft, full lips sliding up and down the length of his cock, or see him pause at the head as his tongue swirled around him in luscious circles. He couldn't watch those hands crawl up his thighs and pin his hips to the door, or watch his fingers slip between his legs to pull and tug at his balls. The few times he did he came in under a minute, and Dan was selfish enough to want the experience to last longer than that.

When Blythe was tired or sleepy, or more rarely, contented, he liked Dan to take the lead. Being pinned and orally assaulted was nice, but Dan loved it when he got to have his way with Blythe. After dinner when they watched TV, or sometimes in the mornings as they woke up together, Blythe would relax into Dan's side, smelling sweet and inviting, and Dan would turn a casual arm around his shoulders into an embrace.

Those were great times. Dan could turn Blythe so that he was lying down and strip him, slowly uncovering each new inch of skin as if it was a present. Blythe blushed but let him do it, sometimes pushing him to take his own clothes off, but more often just letting Dan work him over. The rush of knowing that, in those moments, his lover was giving himself to him, however he wanted, thrilled Dan more than they probably should have. He wanted to taste every inch of Blythe's skin, and he would, with lips and tongue, sometimes long, slow strokes and sometimes fast flicks designed to torment. He made his lover writhe with pleasure, and occasionally did things to him that made him cry out in surprise.

The first time Dan turned Blythe onto his stomach he'd felt him tense. Dan knew Blythe wasn't ready for that and he ran a soothing hand down his back. "It's okay," he murmured. "Trust me."

Blythe arched a sarcastic eyebrow over his shoulder at Dan, but he eventually did relax beneath his gentle touches. Tongue followed hands, trailing down the dips and curves of his spine, lingering for a moment on the dimples just above his ass then slipping down into his crease.

"Oh," Blythe groaned, jumping a little when Dan first pressed his tongue to his tight, puckered hole. "Oh, fuck, really?"

The unspoken, "*Are you sure?*" hung there afterwards, but Dan was more than sure. He'd been wanting inside of Blythe practically since he'd first met him, and he'd take it any way he could get it. He used his hands to gently expose his lover's ass, furling his tongue and pressed back in. Blythe was tight, so tight, but after the shock wore off, he began to loosen

up. Dan drove his tongue into Blythe like a piston, thrusting in as deep as he could with it before pulling back and licking soothingly over his clenching muscle. Once Blythe started lifting his hips and pushing back into him, he reached one of his hands between Blythe's legs and made a tight channel with his fist for his lover to fuck. Blythe barely knew which way to move, and by the end, he was reaching back and holding Dan close by the collar of his shirt as he rutted into his fist. Blythe screamed when he came, and Dan felt so smug that his own orgasm was almost an afterthought. Rim jobs fast became something Blythe had no problem asking for, and Dan was always more than happy to give them to him. Blythe could speak freely about sex. It was pretty much the only thing he spoke to Dan freely about.

Blythe wasn't a talker. He didn't talk about his feeling, he didn't talk about the future, he barely talked during the act itself except to express his lust. He never slipped up and said anything about love, and that bothered Dan more than he wanted to admit.

The only time Dan allowed himself to feel a little hope was when Blythe was asleep. After adjusting to sleeping together instead of alone, Blythe had begun to hold him in the night. One minute he would be facing away, the next, he was wrapping his arms and legs around Dan's body, holding him in a grip that was as gentle as it was unbreakable. Dan didn't want to lose this unconscious, addictive closeness, and he wouldn't stir until Blythe pulled away first.

It was a sad fact that Dan had never kept a boyfriend for two weeks together in the past, let alone over a month. He got tired of the boys that had caught his roving eye and traded in and up at the drop of a hat. Zeph was right. His libido had been out of control. No one could keep his interest. No one had anything he wanted badly enough to settle down for. No one until Blythe.

Instead of being the user, Dan found himself wondering if he was measuring up, hoping he was good enough for Blythe to keep him around. His position was precarious, and he didn't want to do anything that would jeopardise it. Blythe kept his bedroom, and his bed, to himself. He tried to explain why at one point, but it became uncomfortable and Dan let it go. He knew Blythe needed space and he didn't push, as much as he wanted to. God, he wanted to. He had to bite his tongue to keep from telling Blythe he loved him and wanted him for his mate. That might have made him freak, and like it or not, Dan was bound to him now. The mated bond wasn't there yet, not reciprocally, but it was too late for Dan to even

consider moving on. His hands were tied, and he hoped he could free them and bring Blythe around to the idea before it was too late.

* * * *

Christmas Eve day dawned chilly but clear. Dan and Blythe had spent the night together on the couch, sleeping a little and touching a lot, and they were both getting ready to head their separate ways until evening—Dan to work and Blythe to school. Blythe was in the shower when the phone rang. Dan let it ring, knowing that no one would be calling him on Blythe's phone. It went to the machine and after the beep, a woman's voice came on the speaker.

"Hello Mr. Kenner, it's Marcia again, here at Balfour Memory Care."

The woman's voice was professional but Dan thought he detected just a hint of reproach in her tone.

"Your mother is doing pretty well, although she's taking fewer solid foods than she used to. She talks of nothing but seeing you when she's awake, and I know a visit would mean the world to her at Christmas, especially with everything that's happened to your family over the last few years. Also, I just wanted you to know I had your mother's holiday wreath sent to your sister's grave. I think your mom appreciated that. We hope to see you here soon." *Beep.*

Whoa. Major whoa. Dan sat down on the couch and tried to marshal his thoughts. A dead sister? His mother in a nursing home? Dan wasn't an idiot. He knew that "memory care" referred to an Alzheimer's ward, one that probably catered to a lot of types of dementia. Blythe's world had suddenly gotten a lot more complicated, and complications were the last thing Dan needed right now.

There was nothing he could do about it, though. He couldn't delete the message. That would lead to a world of problems. Maybe he could pre-empt it. Blythe came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, wearing his briefs and nothing else.

Dan drank in the sight of him for a long moment before saying, "You got a call."

"I thought I heard the phone. Did they leave a message?"

"Yeah, it was someone named Marcia, from Boulder."

Blythe froze stiff for a moment. "Shit," he said finally, tiredly. "I completely forgot about that."

It sounded as if he'd wanted to forget. "Is your mom all right?"

"No. Damn it, I have to go up there."

He walked into his room and shut the door, shutting out Dan and any other questions he might have asked very effectively. Dan's heart constricted a little as he felt the walls he'd been chipping away at for the past month slam back into place. He stayed on the couch for a painful fifteen minutes, locked in limbo, until Blythe came back out of his room. He was fully dressed now, and his expression was distant as he glanced over at Dan.

"Shouldn't you be gone by now?"

Dan's heart squeezed even tighter. "Yeah, I should." He stood up and grabbed his boots, pulling them on. "Will you be home tonight?"

"No. Maybe. I'm not sure." Blythe rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand.

He looked far older than his twenty-three years at that moment, and Dan wished he could take him into his arms and ease his pain. He wished Blythe would tell him what was wrong, but that wish clearly wasn't going to be granted. Blythe grabbed his shoes and coat and they left together.

"Can you walk today?" Blythe asked.

Okaaay, he really wants to be alone. "Sure, no problem," Dan replied, although actually the wind was bitingly cold today. At least he finally had a jacket of his own. "I'll see you later."

"Right."

Blythe walked to his car and was gone in moments, taking his cloud of pain and confusion with him. Unfortunately, distance didn't make Dan feel any better. He trudged through the dirty snow to the garage, and Darcy took one look at his face and decided not to mention that he was a half an hour late.

Work dragged by, every second begrudging its passing. The clock seemed to hate Dan, refusing to move when he stared at it. By early afternoon, he was beginning to break things, and Darcy had had enough.

"Get gone, go clear your head. Don't come in tomorrow, it's a holiday even for me. Spend some quality time with your friend."

Quality time with Blythe. Like last night. Fuck...he hoped he'd get some of that, but Dan didn't feel like holding his breath. On the other hand, tomorrow was Christmas

Day...the time for gift giving. It had been forever since he'd gone shopping for anyone else, much less a man he was in love with, and Dan decided to make the most of it.

He spent his free hours roaming around malls looking for the perfect thing. It needed to be a message, suggestive and supportive, but not too pushy. Eventually, he found what he was looking for and persuaded the vendor to make a few modifications to it even though it was nearly closing time. By six, he was heading home, a small package tucked in his jacket pocket and an unconscious smile on his face as he contemplated Blythe opening his present on Christmas morning.

Dan was waiting at a bus stop at the Sixteenth Street Mall when he smelled the enemy. He spun around, his eyes seeking out what his nose had already verified. When he did see him, the animal inside growled long and low and prepared to leap. Dan kept his composure by a thin measure as Raoul walked over to him.

"What?" Dan demanded.

"Shut your mouth, loner," Raoul spit back.

Dan realised that Raoul was close to the change as well. Dan could feel the excitement in Raoul, and the bloodlust.

"Lost little loner, spending too much time in places he don't belong." Raoul grinned, and the skin pulled back tight from his angular jaws, giving his head an almost pyramidal shape. "Time to get your ass out of here, wolf cub. Too long in this place will stunt your growth."

"This cub has teeth and claws," Dan growled. "You'd do better not to try them."

"Don't deny me the little pleasures in life, cub." Raoul's face was a rictus of stretching skin and badly contained fangs. He was so close to changing he didn't even smell human any more. "De-clawing wolves makes me happy. I like to hear their screams." He cocked his head to the side. "I like to hear other people scream, too. Normals, like that boy from the bar. Hot boy, got a fine ass, even better than the little punk girl who runs with her daddy's muscle. You tapped that ass, cub? You taste him, yet? Or maybe you saving him for me."

Hot and consuming fury blazed through Dan as if his body was tinder, igniting every muscle with vengeful fire. "Don't touch him." He didn't recognise his own voice. "Don't even think about it. I will make the rest of your life short and painful if you come near him." It was a challenge he shouldn't have been making, but he couldn't let Raoul threaten Blythe without repercussions.

Raoul laughed. "Some balls still, eh? Good for your friend, but bad for you. Not long now, cub. Not long before leaving won't save you."

He turned slowly and walked away, insulting Dan by not backing away cautiously. He wasn't afraid of attack, not when Dan wasn't part of a pack. This was going to get messy if he didn't work things out with Blythe fast.

Dan got back to the apartment and wasn't surprised to see that Blythe wasn't home yet, but expecting that didn't make him any less anxious about his absence. He set the present down on the counter, microwaved something and sat in front of the TV to distract himself, but it just wasn't working. Dan couldn't get Raoul out of his mind, his leering face and the words that burned, rolling over and over until Dan had to actively work not to change shape.

It was no good. He shut off the television and picked up one of Blythe's law books, opening it just to have something to do. The book smelled old and comfortably well used. It was something that had passed through many hands and carried vestiges of their oils in the paper still. The most recent hands were Blythe's. Suddenly sick for his smell, Dan picked up his lover's pillow and tucked it against his face, holding it there and inhaling his mate's scent. It calmed him some, enough so that he could try to change his focus from anger to cautious hope.

Blythe was his mate. What they'd done last night had sealed it. There was no other way it could be now, not for him. He was lost. If he wanted to be found, then he needed to help Blythe understand what was happening. Hopefully, he wouldn't feel roped into a relationship...a long term, monogamous relationship. A month ago, the thought of such a thing would have had Dan on the next bus out of town, but his whole world had changed with Blythe. He had been shoved from the role of the desired to the desirer, and for a man who was accustomed to being the centre of attention without having to do much work, it was quite a shift.

The hours passed even slower now than they had earlier in the day. Dan had Blythe's cell number and tried calling once, but he'd shut his phone off. So there was nothing to do but wait. Wait. Patience was coming to Dan comparatively late in life, and it was a hard skill to develop.

Finally, he heard Blythe's car come back into the parking lot. The front door opened and footsteps marched slowly up the stairs. Blythe walked inside, his head bowed with some inner turmoil. He looked over at Dan and blinked.

“You’re up late. It’s two in the morning.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Dan replied.

“Yeah.” He shucked off his heavy outer clothes and came over to the couch.

Dan wanted to pull him down into his arms but Blythe kept a good distance from him, projecting an aura of very fragile control—too far one way or the other and he would start screaming. His eyes were red and his arms were folded tight across his chest.

Blythe smiled crookedly. “Today’s my birthday.” He didn’t sound happy about that.

“Why isn’t that a good thing?”

“Because this time of the year fucking sucks, period.” He shook his head. “I can’t talk about it right now. Later. I need to get some sleep.”

As fast as he’d sat down he was up and out of the room, shutting the door to his bedroom behind him. Dan watched him go and felt his heart squeeze again. This wasn’t going to be easy.

The rest of Christmas Day wasn’t any better. If anything, it got worse. Blythe was as tense as a jackrabbit, and he wouldn’t let Dan within touching distance of him. His whole demeanour had changed, from the cautiously built trust and attraction, to fearful resentment. What had happened to make him afraid? Dan knew Blythe didn’t care for shifters, but he still had no idea why. When he asked what was wrong, Blythe snapped.

“It’s none of your damn business, so just leave me alone.” Then his face blanched a little with guilt and he followed fast with, “I’m no good to anyone right now, I need to get out of here for awhile. I’m going to the law library to study. My interview is tomorrow.”

Dan’s mind was suddenly filled with images of Raoul and Blythe and blood, and he panicked. “Don’t go out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t go,” Dan insisted anxiously, “It’s not safe.”

“It’s no different than any other day, Dan. Less dangerous, probably, since there are fewer people on the streets.” Blythe got up and headed towards the door.

“Don’t, seriously.”

“Why not?”

“It’s just...” How could Dan explain the strictures on him, or his confrontation with Raoul? If there had ever been a bad time to explain things, trying while Blythe was fearful

and angry with him was it. "I just have a bad feeling. A really bad feeling. Stay in today, please." *Stay in, let me comfort you, let me love you, let me through to you...*

Blythe clearly wasn't in the mood to listen. "Keep your feelings to yourself, Dan. I'm going."

"Damn it, I am just trying to keep you safe," Dan said, his temper slipping at the thought of Blythe going out on his own with Raoul prowling around. "At least let me go with you."

"I don't need a babysitter, I'm not a fucking child," Blythe said angrily. "I don't need you hovering around me all the time. I can't get half the things done that I should when you're here, and right now I need you to back off."

He pulled on his jacket and kicked into his boots, then stalked out. The door slammed shut and Dan was left staring at the wall, dread warring with his own fear. This was a bad idea, a really bad idea. Raoul was probably watching the apartment building. Screw giving Blythe space. He should have stopped him. He needed to stop him.

Chapter Five

Dan raced downstairs but Blythe had already pulled away. The sky was spitting tiny grey flakes into the equally grey sky, and the streets were practically deserted, even though it was barely noon. Dan lifted his nose to the air, testing it, checking for any sign of his enemies. Yes, there he was, Raoul, mixed with the smell of diesel fuel. He was following Blythe.

Dan dropped his clothes in the middle of the sidewalk and changed, shifting into his other form. A large, winter-white wolf stood for a moment on the pavement, almost invisible against the snowy backdrop. He began to run, pushing the ground-eating lope of the wolf to a sprint and racing to catch up with his mate before Raoul cornered him. Blythe was brave but he'd be no match for a shifter physically, least of all one like Raoul.

Dan raced to keep the smells in his nose, and distractions out of it, ignoring the few people who had surfaced on the sidewalks and the cars he had to dash around. Faster, faster...he couldn't be that far behind them, the scents were stronger now. The university was getting close and Dan cut across the street towards it then put on a burst of speed as he saw Blythe parking in front of the law building. Raoul's car was right behind him. It was stopping. He was getting out and coming over...Blythe turned towards the shifter with surprise on his face and Dan could smell Raoul's sick satisfaction as he reached out towards Blythe, his face already twisting into its other form.

Dan was within twenty feet of them before either noticed him coming, and at ten feet, he leapt towards Raoul. His jaws closed around the snake-man's neck and the force of his leap barrelled them over onto the ground. They rolled until they hit a wall, and by the time they did, Raoul was bleeding copiously onto the concrete. The wound didn't stop him from struggling with Dan, but he wasn't able to struggle for long. Vertebrae cracked, cartilage snapped. The thick muscles of Raoul's neck couldn't protect him from the ferocity of Dan's attack, and in less than thirty seconds, he was irrevocably broken, past what even a shifter could heal. It was the fastest kill Dan had ever made.

He released the corpse from his jaws, licking away the strange, reptilian blood decorating his muzzle. Fierce satisfaction flowed through him as he looked down at the body

of his enemy, then faded almost immediately as he realised that Blythe was standing there, mouth open, his eyes round and horrified. Dan stepped away from the body and shifted, melding into his human form and standing up. Clearly Blythe had suspected it was him, but he'd never seen Dan in his wolf body before. He shuddered and took an unsteady step backwards.

"What have you done?" Blythe whispered, his voice quivering like a dry leaf in the wind.

"I had to do it," Dan said beseechingly, holding a hand out towards him. "I had to do it, Bly. He was going to kill you."

Blythe shook his head. "You don't know that. He didn't say anything. He didn't have a chance to before you...you...fuck, *why?*" He looked like he was going to fall over.

"Raoul came to me yesterday. He threatened me and he threatened you." Dan slowly shortened the distance between them. "He told me he'd be watching you. I knew he'd try to kill you."

"Why me? What did I ever do to him?"

"It's because of me. Because he knows how I feel about you." Dan's lips felt thick as he said the words, as if they were resistant to making him vulnerable. "Because I love you."

There, they were out, they were said and Dan's soul was as raw as the wind whipping around them as he searched Blythe's face for any sign of understanding or reciprocity. There was nothing. Blythe was lost in the awfulness of the moment, and nothing could draw him out of it. Whatever it was that had happened to him before, and caused him so much fear and anxiety, was killing Dan's chances with him now. Ripping Raoul's throat out in front of him hadn't helped matters.

"You people don't kill out of love," Blythe said finally.

The hatred in his voice stabbed Dan's heart like a knife and left him as broken as he'd left Raoul.

"You kill whenever it suits you and you never feel remorse, you never regret, you never pay. You just go on. You're no different. I don't know why I thought you would be different." He choked back a sob, then turned and stumbled back towards the car.

"Bly—"

Dan reached out one last time, his fingers closing on the back of Blythe's jacket, but it was no good. Blythe let it slip from his shoulders and kept going, wrenching open the door

and turning on the sedan, then pulling away with the squeal of straining tires. Dan watched him go, holding the leather jacket limply with one hand. The entire thing had taken less than two minutes, but in that small space of time, Dan's world had collapsed. There was no future for him now. There was only pack justice against a loner who had killed one of their own.

Dazedly, he lifted Blythe's jacket to his face, treasuring the brief warmth that remained in it and the smell he had followed here at breakneck speed. Blythe, his lover, his mate. Gone now and forever. Dan laughed slightly, fighting hysteria. He had finally made the hardest change ever in his life, but it had come too late. At least he wouldn't have to mourn his loss for long.

Blythe's cell phone was in the pocket. Dan took it out and slowly dialed Zeph's private number. He felt vaguely sorry to be interrupting his friend's Christmas Day, but it was the only chance he'd get now to speak with him before they found him.

"Hello?" Zeph's voice was cautious. He obviously didn't know the number.

"Zeph." Dan barely recognised the sound of his own voice.

"Dan? What's going on, what's wrong?"

"I killed Raoul."

"You killed Carlos' brother, Raoul? Raoul Santiago?" Zeph exhaled harshly. "Good God, Dan, why?"

"He was coming after Bly."

"Oh, hell. But you stopped him." Zeph tried to pull some sort of reassurance out of Dan. "Blythe is all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine." The ragged edge in Dan's voice threatened to turn hysterical but he beat it back. "He hates me, but he's fine."

There was a long silence. "You aren't bonded? Sheridan, how could you kill before you and he had bonded? Why didn't you explain things to him?"

"I couldn't." Dan shrugged at no one. "I couldn't force it, not with Bly. Now it's too late. I murdered Raoul right in front of him and now he can't even look at me."

"Then it's time to run, Sheridan. Leave the city immediately."

"I can't, they'll just come after Bly again. If they don't know him yet, they will. You can't force pack protection on him, and you can't risk your people with a fight over me. I'll stay."

“No. They’ll find you. Carlos will kill you. Dan, run. You’ve got to run.” Zeph’s voice was hard, his alpha nature coming through full force. “It’s not too late. We can salvage this but you have to leave, at least for now.”

“No.” It was too late to run now in any case. He could smell the shifters in the air, sense their approach. Five of Raoul’s pack mates. “Do me a favour, though? Make sure Bly survives this mess.” He turned off the phone before Zeph could reply. He’d do it. Zeph would take care of Blythe, ensuring that he lived through the effects of their strange, disastrous relationship. He had come so close, though. So close to true love...the thought of it ran in his head like the clapper in a bell. So close, so close. If he’d only had more time.

Dan closed his eyes and took one last deep breath of his mate’s scent, letting it suffuse his lungs and fortify his body, before gently placing the jacket and the cell phone against the wall of the law building. Maybe Blythe would get them back later. Dark shapes coalesced out of the snowflakes, shifters burning with purpose and the desire for revenge as they saw their slain leader. Dan stood completely still and let them come, hoping they would kill him fast. Unfortunately, with Carlos as their leader, that probably wasn’t going to be his fate.

* * * *

Blythe drove aimlessly around the city for a few hours before he finally felt calm enough to return to his apartment. He prayed that Dan wouldn’t be there, or better yet, that he’d come and gone and taken all the reminders of his presence with him. Arcing sprays of red blood swam before Blythe’s eyes as he tried to park, blurring with images of white fur dappled with crimson. A wolf. It figured, most North American shifters were wolves, but Blythe had never seen a white one before. Dan had been beautiful, right up until...

No! He wouldn’t think about it, he wouldn’t think about Dan. Blythe slowly got out of the car, trying to control his shivering, and walked around to the front door. A lumpy snow-dusted pile attracted his attention, and he nudged it with his shoe. Clothes. Dan’s clothes. So he hadn’t been back. Blythe was tempted to leave them there, but in the end, decided to bring them into the apartment. He could at least hand Dan dry clothes when he told him to leave.

That thought didn’t comfort Blythe in the least, and he frowned as he entered his apartment. Of course he wanted Dan to go. He was a killer, just like the rest of them. He had

no respect for human laws or human boundaries. He had murdered a man right in front of Blythe then looked for understanding. What was there to understand?

That nagged at Blythe as well. He'd recognised the man coming towards him as the shifter from the bar who'd started the fight over Rebecca. The fight that Dan hadn't taken part in...what had changed to make it so he could fight and kill now? Loners weren't supposed to attack pack members, Dan had told him. He could be killed for it.

Blythe paced the living room, which was small enough that he had to turn every six steps. What had happened, then? What had made Dan kill Raoul? Was it like he'd said, was Raoul really coming after him? Blythe found that hard to believe. He was nobody. He had nothing to do with either pack and liked it that way. As for Dan, he didn't understand how he could really be used as leverage. Shifters were fiercely independent-minded except when it came to pack authority, and since Dan didn't even have a pack, he was doubly so. Nothing they did to Blythe would affect Dan.

Liar, his heart scolded. Dan loved him. Blythe would be the perfect bargaining chip to get Dan to fall in line, or a sacrifice to torment him with. Dan loved him...Blythe sat down in a rush on the couch, the strength leaving his legs. Dan had said it this morning in front of the university, but Blythe hadn't been able to listen to words of love, when death was staring him in the face. Now that he had some distance, he recalled Dan's words, his beseeching expression, his hand reaching out towards him. Pangs of guilt radiated out of Blythe's chest as he remembered watching that face fall, cold despair replacing that brief flicker of hope.

The problem was, Blythe wanted Dan's love. He'd wanted to be able to take without having to give anything back, to feel loved and secure without having to put himself on the line. Ever since Bliss had died, his heart had been tied up in knots. Dan had untied some of them, just enough to slip inside. Now he didn't have Dan either.

No, he'd be back. He had to come back. His things were here. Blythe had been wrong. He saw that. Not totally wrong though, he shuddered as he thought of the bloody mess that remained of Raoul's throat. He didn't believe Raoul had had to die. But Dan had done it to protect him, whether the threat had been real or not, because he loved him. The hard part now would be getting Dan to stay long enough for Blythe to apologise and make it up to him, and to tell him...well, to tell him not to leave, for starters. Love, though? Did he love Dan?

* * * *

Christmas Day and its subsequent night passed slowly. Blythe showered, studied and prepared for his interview tomorrow. He sat in the living room and tried to occupy himself, but he couldn't help stopping to stare at the door every five minutes, wondering if Dan would be coming in. Christ, was this what Dan had gone through yesterday? Blythe had seen that he'd called, but he hadn't been in the mood to answer. Not while he'd been at his sister's grave.

Blythe hated going to see his mother. They had never been close. He was the son she never wanted, and if he hadn't been born with Bliss to mitigate her displeasure at his arrival, who knew how much worse it would have been? Blythe and Bliss, her twin dolls, always dressed to the nines, never allowed to get themselves dirty or have a hair out of place. His mother's formidable presence sufficed to keep them under control until high school, when natural rebellion was enough to drive any parent crazy, let alone a control freak like their mother. Bliss cut her long hair short and pierced her lip, and Blythe started hanging out with the shifters at his school. Small acts of defiance but they drove his mother wild, and she blamed him for leading his sister astray.

They had laughed about it back then. Together, they could withstand all her shouting and punishments, they could laugh at the world. Bliss started hanging out with his group of friends and got to know Stephen, one of the late bloomers among the shifter crowd. His parents had the ability, but it was unclear whether he'd inherited it or not. Stephen had been a good guy. Blythe liked him and he treated Bliss like a princess. They dated all of their senior year, and he took Bliss to the prom. That night, when they tried to have sex for the first time, Stephen changed. He lost all control over his animal form, a bear, and mauled Bliss before running off. Police found her the following morning, dead in the back of Stephen's car.

Bliss' death hit the community hard but there was nothing to be done. The alpha of the local pack apologised for the "accident" but also reminded law enforcement that it was an internal affair, and since shifters were protected as both a separate nation and an endangered species, there were no consequences. No jail time, no penalties. Blythe never even saw Stephen again after that night. For all he knew, the alpha had packed him away to a different

part of the country, someplace where not even the stigma of murder could follow him and he could lead a normal life.

Blythe, furious and half-mad at losing Bliss, actually went onto the pack reservation and demanded to see Stephen, but it was no use. The alpha subdued him and had him arrested for trespassing.

His mother, already fragile from alcoholism and depression, lost what was left of her composure and all of her mind when she found out Bliss was dead, and she was committed to an institution that same week. The first time Blythe went to see her, she attacked him with an oxygen monitor, screaming at the top of her lungs. After that, he limited his visits to once or twice a year, usually during the summer, as far from his and Bliss' birthday as possible. It wasn't a merry time of the year for him.

With Dan, though, it had been. He'd been happy. Then he had to go and ruin it by being a complete asshole. Blythe hoped he'd get the chance to make it up to Dan. He needed to come home. He had to come home.

* * * *

Blythe dressed in his only suit the following morning and prepared to head off to his interview with Myers and Davidson's. He hoped he didn't look as tired as he felt. Dan still hadn't returned, and the waiting was wearing on him. Why the hell didn't the man own a cell phone? Speaking of that, Blythe would have to get a new one, himself. It was unlikely that Dan had kept his jacket and the phone had been in it. He'd called it once, just to test, and got no reply.

Blythe was putting bread into the toaster when he noticed the package at the end of the counter. It was smaller than his palm, wrapped in shiny blue paper and had his name written on it in black marker. How had he missed it before? He reached over and picked it up, turning it over and examining it. A present from Dan. Trying to distract himself from the fresh flow of anxiety and guilt, he pulled the tape away and opened it. Inside the paper was a box, obviously a jewellery box, and inside the box was —

Blythe's breath caught in his throat as he lifted out the fine, white-gold chain and flat, circular pendant dangling from the bottom of it. The pendant was matte-finished, very simple and elegant. On one side it read "Bly," and on the other side, "Dan."

Blythe bent over the counter, shutting his eyes and clasping the necklace with both hands. It had been years since he'd received a Christmas gift, and to get something like this, from someone he loved...and fuck, he did love him. Wasn't there some awful song about hurting the ones you loved? Perfectly appropriate. It had slowly dawned on Blythe throughout the long night that Dan might not come back. He might have left Denver, given the whole affair up as a bad deal. Blythe couldn't let it end that way. He had to see Dan again.

He would stop by the Midnight Rose after his interview and talk with Cristof about it. Blythe didn't know how to get in touch with Dan's alpha friend, but his boss did. As long as he survived that encounter, he'd have something to go on.

Going to an interview was the last thing that Blythe wanted to do now, but after all the time he had put into it and with his professor sticking his neck out for him, he had to at least show up. Hands trembling slightly, he fastened the necklace around his throat, tucking the pendant down his dress shirt so it rested against the skin. The metal was warm from being in his hand, and he touched it again through the fabric.

Apparently, being one step above a zombie in his interview went unnoticed by Ted Hamilton, one of the minor partners who managed the interns. Studying up on the firm's cases turned out to be beneficial and by the end of their half hour, Blythe was having his hand shook firmly by the doughy lawyer.

"You've clearly put a lot of effort and energy into this, Mr. Kenner," the man said enthusiastically. "We have a few more interviews to conduct before New Year's, but I have to tell you, I'm very impressed with the recommendation Dr. Arabaz gave you, as well as your own knowledge of our firm's focus. Here." He handed over a business card with the company logo, his name and a phone number on it. "This is my office line, in case you have any questions. We'll try to get back to you within the next week or so."

"Thank you," Blythe mumbled, putting the card in his wallet.

Mr. Hamilton's secretary smiled at him on the way out.

Blythe started walking towards his car but stopped at the sight of the shifter he had seen in the bar before, the one who had taken care of Rebecca. What was his name again? He started walking towards the man, who seemed to expect it as the guy eased off of the expensive-looking car he was leaning against.

"Are you Jackson?" Blythe asked as he got close. "Dan's friend?"

"That's me." He tilted his head towards the car. "Zeph wants to talk to you."

Blythe swallowed. At least this saved him a talk with Cristof. "Fine."

He got into the back seat and found himself sitting next to a very ordinary-looking man, not much bigger than Blythe himself. He was clean-shaven and muscular, but there was nothing intimidating in his looks. At least, until Blythe met his eyes. They were as cold as winter, and the minute lines radiating around them spoke volumes about the tension he was carrying inside. Those eyes made Blythe want to jump right back out of the car, but he couldn't. Not until he knew what had happened to Dan.

"Did Sheridan come back to you yesterday?" the alpha asked.

"Sheridan?"

"Dan Bailey," Zeph clarified. "Did he?"

"No. I was going to try to find you today. I thought he might have come to you instead," Blythe replied, feeling chastened. How had he never learned Dan's full name?

"Damn it." Zeph looked out the window and sighed. "Then we'd better start looking for a body."

"A body?" Blythe couldn't wrap his mind around what he was hearing. "What do you mean? He's not dead, is he?" He felt a sudden pounding rush of blood flow into his head, making him a little dizzy. "Dan isn't dead."

"We'd both better hope he is," Zeph replied coldly. "Carlos has had him for twenty-four hours. That's a lifetime of pain and suffering for Sheridan, even as strong as he is."

"Carlos?" The other pack's alpha, he remembered. "What do you mean? If Dan didn't come to you, then after he killed Raoul, he must have run."

"That wasn't his intention when he called me yesterday. He knew if he escaped pack justice, Carlos would exact it on you. Apparently, you two got into a fight and Dan didn't feel like he'd be able to convince you to hear him out, so he gave himself to Carlos to keep you safe." He reached down to the floorboards and picked something up. "Your jacket. The phone is in the right pocket."

Blythe took the jacket with fumbling hands. He didn't know how to take what was happening. Dan had really killed to save him? And now he was being tortured to death? Blythe felt as if he was going to vomit. "We have to get him back."

"Impossible."

“Why is it impossible?” Blythe cried. “You’re the alpha of your pack. Surely one alpha can bargain with the other!”

“Dan isn’t part of my pack. He’s just my friend. If you two had bonded, then he would have entered my pack and I could have protected you both through this, but you didn’t.”

Even if he wasn’t stating it specifically, the accusation was still there in Zeph’s voice. Blythe clutched his jacket to his chest, his mind working at a million miles a second as the alpha continued.

“Trust me. It’s better if he’s dead at this point.”

“No,” Blythe whispered. It wasn’t better if he was dead, dead meant too late. “No, I can do it. I can get him.” The tendrils of a plan were misting through his mind, but there was no time to work out every angle now. He needed to be fast.

Zeph laughed derisively. “How the hell do you think you can get him out of their compound, kid? You think Carlos’ people are going to hand Dan over just because you ask for him?”

“Not me. Someone else will ask.” He cast his eyes up to the front of the car. “Can we go by Darcy’s garage? I need to borrow something of his to make this work.”

“We aren’t moving until you start explaining things to me,” Zeph growled.

“I’ll explain on the way. Please, we don’t have any time to waste,” he begged, seeing the recalcitrance in the alpha’s face. “It’s for Dan and it’ll work, I swear it.”

Zeph was silent for a long moment before saying, “Jackson, head to the garage.” Then to Blythe, “You’d better have something good.”

“I do.” At least, he hoped he did.

Chapter Six

An hour later, a lot more things were in place, but Blythe's confidence hadn't exactly gone up. He was behind the wheel of Darcy's souped-up Hummer, driving towards the downtown hotel that was Carlos' centre of operations. If it had been any warmer, he would have been covered in sweat, but as things were, it was all Blythe could do to keep from shivering. He knew what he needed to do, but feeling it was another thing. Zeph had emphasised this over and over—the feelings had to be genuine. Shifters could always tell, they could smell the emotions in you.

Blythe was drawing near the hotel and he needed to get into character. He focused hard on Bliss, remembering how he felt when he'd found out how she'd died and Stephen's casual fate. Angry, vengeful, resentful and entitled to answers. Good.

There it was.

The Columbine was three stories high, made of stained, white marble and clearly reinforced. Zeph kept his pack's headquarters away from humans to reduce fear and anxiety in the community, but Carlos' people were all about generating fear. Blythe took a deep breath, then pulled the Hummer into the loading zone and hopped out. A tattooed shifter started striding towards him, but he waved him away.

"Don't bother moving it, I won't be staying long. I need to talk to Carlos."

"You don't just come here and—"

"Carlos Santiago." Blythe's voice was clipped and dismissive. "I'm here to speak to him, not a flunky. Get me your alpha or get out of my way and I'll find him myself."

The shifter was clearly enraged, and began to change.

Blythe *tsked* and pulled a small canister out of his pocket. "I had hoped this wouldn't be necessary."

Turning the little spray bottle towards the shifter, he squirted a fine mist out of the nozzle. The shifter sneered and moved closer, then immediately began to cough. Violent hacking made him double over, and his skin began to develop bright red pustules.

"Aconite," Blythe said conversationally as he put the bottle back in his pocket.

Other shifters were approaching now, but warily.

He met their eyes calmly. "Wolfsbane to the layman, mixed with fresh ginger, condensed and loaded into this bottle. Gentlemen, I'm not here to cause trouble. Fluffy here started it." He gestured at the convulsing shifter. "I recommend a doctor, because his lungs are looking like his face now, and that wasn't pretty to start with."

"What do you want?" a skinny white kid asked, staying well away from his heaving pack mate.

"I want to see Carlos, and I want to do it without having to go through every one of his gang to get there." Blythe wiped his hands on a clean handkerchief and folded it back into his pocket. "I won't bring the spray out again unless I have to. Now, please. Lead on."

Five minutes later, Blythe was standing across from Carlos in his inner sanctum, such as it was. It looked like something out of a porn flick harem scene. Pillows, thick velvet curtains and incense, but everything was in shades of red and black, and nothing smelled very fresh. The entire room was dank and moist, and Blythe had no idea how far back it actually stretched. Probably, it'd been a ballroom at one point. Now it was a sty.

Carlos was reclining on a black leather sofa. The light was dim but Blythe could make out the resemblance to his brother Raoul. Carlos was bigger though, longer through the body. He smiled, and Blythe could see dark stains in and around his mouth. He hoped those were from wine.

"You have business with me?" Carlos asked in a sibilant murmur, waving one hand limply.

"Yes. I'm here for Sheridan Bailey."

"Are you?" The alpha's laugh came out like a hiss, soft but deadly. "You have a lot of balls coming into my home and demanding my property, human. No introduction, either. Very rude."

"The offence was unintentional. I'm Ted Hamilton, an attorney with Myers and Davidson's law firm downtown, and I'm representing the family of Blythe Kenner in suit against Mr. Bailey."

"Indeed?" One slender black eyebrow arched. "And what crime has he committed?"

"Two nights ago, Mr. Bailey murdered Blythe Kenner in the apartment they were sharing. This is a heinous crime perpetrated against a human, and is to be tried in human courts." This was where things really got tricky. If any of Carlos' pack recognised him this wouldn't work, but he didn't think anyone other than Raoul had ever really noticed him.

“Shifter crimes are dealt with internally.”

“Shifter crimes *were* dealt with internally. The state supreme court passed a law last month allowing the human justice system to prosecute serious crimes committed against humanity by shifters and vice versa. I want to see Sheridan Bailey brought to justice.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Hamilton, he is paying far more for the crime he committed against me than anything you could ever do to him.” There was that hideous smile again. “And your story stinks of untruths. Where are the officers of the law? Why do they send one man, armed with only a bottle of wolfsbane and no badge, into my home? Why just you?”

“Because they’re afraid of you,” Blythe replied evenly. “As you well know. Laws can be ignored as long as no one has the will to enforce them, and you’ve made it clear in the past that interference in your affairs would lead to personal damage. I’m not entirely alone, however. There are five police cruisers within a one-mile radius, and a team of SWAT members are standing by. I’m trying to do this the civil way, a way that opens doors of communication between the law and your pack.”

Blythe checked his watch. “If I don’t call in another five minutes, those officers will enter this building. They’re armed with silver shot and aconite bombs and are prepared to use deadly force. Speak to your watchers if you don’t believe me. I’m sure they can verify my story.”

This much at least looked good. Thanks to Zeph’s pack making a number of concerned phone calls to the police about shady happenings and drug deals in the neighbourhood, the local cops were out in force. The SWAT van actually belonged to Zeph and was a decent replica for the time they’d had to paint it, but not perfect. It was the most help Zeph could give apart from the carefully prepared aconite spray, and Blythe hoped it would be enough.

Carlos considered him for a moment. “Your men wouldn’t dare kill any of my pack. We’re a protected people.”

“Self-defence is best delivered pre-emptively,” Blythe replied blandly. “Please, let’s be respectful towards each other. Here’s my card.” He handed over the card the real Ted Hamilton had given him earlier that day. “I encourage you to get in touch with me on this line if you have any further questions.” Oh, he was so not getting that internship.

Carlos took the card, glanced at it. He uncrossed his legs and stood up, seeming to come to a decision. “Very well. You can have what’s left of Dan Bailey, but you’ll have to prosecute fast if you want to get any satisfaction out of it. Mr. Bailey isn’t long for this world.” He

grinned again, then called someone up on his phone and spoke briefly as he motioned Blythe into the hall. "They're delivering him to the front. I trust your vehicle is large enough to transport him?"

"It should be sufficient," Blythe replied.

"Good. Then farewell, Mr. Hamilton. Be assured we will speak again."

He shut the door in Blythe's face. It was too early to relax, but Blythe couldn't help letting a slight sigh escape before turning back down the hall and towards the exit. Carlos' pack members stayed well away from him.

The air outside was bitter and cold compared to the cloying thickness inside of the hotel, but to Blythe it smelled beautifully sweet and clean. He strode over to the back of the Hummer and opened it up, waiting for Dan to be delivered to him. It didn't take long.

He was wheeled out on a stripped-down steel gurney by a large and forbidding-looking shifter. As he got closer, even Blythe could smell the blood. Dan was covered with it from head to foot. It seemed as if there wasn't a single inch of flesh that was left untouched, and in three separate places his skin, in addition to being mauled and abraded, had turned black and crusty. The man wheeling him out picked him up and threw him into the back of the Hummer. Blythe watched and trembled inside, his control finally beginning to break as he actually got to see his lover. Was Dan even breathing?

Blythe slammed the back door shut and got into the driver's seat, started the monster car and pulled out into the road. As soon as the hotel was out of sight, he exhaled so hard it almost became a sob, and he realised just how close he was to breaking down. He drove as fast as he could straight to Zeph's compound, screeching to a halt outside the warehouse. Pack members were already standing by, ready to help, and Zeph was there with his wife, who was a surgeon at the local hospital.

"He's in the back!" Blythe shouted as he jumped out of the cab. "He looks bad but they said he was still alive, but I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not and I didn't want to stop and check—"

"Calm down," Zeph said soothingly as his wife went to work, opening up the back and crawling inside. "Mara can help him now. You've done your part well."

The reassurances helped until Blythe saw Dan again as Mara supervised his removal into the compound.

"Oh, God," he groaned as his eyes took in Dan's battered, broken form. "No, no, no..."

“Take him to the safe room,” Mara directed as she climbed out of the back. She stopped briefly by her husband. “He’s still breathing, but just barely. There’s no way I can tell how much damage has been done until we clean things up and stabilise him.”

“Do what you have to do,” Zeph replied before turning back to Blythe, who watched Dan go by with tears running down his face. “All you can do now is wait, so relax. He lives. He still lives.” He put his arm around Blythe’s shoulders. “You need food, some rest. I’ll show you the way.”

Blythe ate and drank a little, but there was no way in the world he could rest. Mara was very specific about not letting anyone into the safe room while she was working, so Blythe and Zeph waited in the small antechamber. The safe room was equipped with state-of-the-art medical equipment, as well as heavy steel walls and a reinforced door to keep wounded shifters where they couldn’t hurt anyone else.

After several hours, Mara came out. Both men looked anxiously at her.

“He’s sleeping now, not unconscious,” she said wearily. “I stitched together everything I could, and thankfully he’s not missing any pieces, but that bastard Carlos bit him three times. The venom is still inside of him and it’s going to be a challenge to purge it before it kills him. His immune system is in overdrive. I’ve got him on fluids and his heartbeat is strong, though, so I’d say there’s a fair chance he’ll come through it.”

“Can I stay with him?” Blythe asked quickly.

“No.” Zeph answered for his wife. “Not until his mind is right. He’ll probably wake up very violent, and I don’t want you within striking distance. Dan doesn’t need any more regrets.” He got up to speak to his wife privately, sliding the bolt across the safe room door as he did so.

Blythe buried his face in his hands and tried to hold back the tears. He’d taken his formal jacket and tie off hours ago and pulled the necklace out so it was visible. He watched it swing between his fingers, spinning their names in a tight circle. His face was hot and dry, as if he had a fever, and he felt light-headed.

“Drink this.”

A glass of cold water was right in front of his face. Blythe took it and sipped a little.

“Good.” Zeph sat down beside him again and asked without preamble, “What is my friend in there to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is he?” Zeph spread his hands questioningly. “Why did you go to all this trouble to get him back, risking your own life for him? What is he to you?”

“He’s...a friend.”

Zeph’s gaze didn’t waver. “Just a friend?”

“Why does it matter?”

“It matters a great deal. If he’s your mate, then when Carlos sees through your clever plan and comes to claim foul play, I can bring you both into my pack and protect you. If he’s just your friend, then I can’t keep him. Sheridan can’t belong to anyone’s pack until he’s safely mated, and you’re the only one for him. Even if he recovers, it will be weeks before he can fend for himself, and we don’t have weeks. That’s why.” He folded his hands expectantly.

Blythe was at a loss for words. “I don’t know if he’s my mate or not. I’m not a shifter. Normals don’t have mates.”

“Bullshit,” Zeph snorted. “My wife is a normal and she sure as hell considers me her mate, and lets the females of our pack know it. Is Dan someone you can see yourself waking up next to for the rest of your life? Can you reject all others to keep him first in your heart? Do you love him more than you love yourself?” He paused then added, “You should know that he’s already bonded to you this way. It has to be mutual for the bond to be secure, though.”

“He told me he loved me.” Blythe fingered the pendant, staring down at the floor.

“I know he does. He would have died for you. You were obviously prepared to risk everything to save him, including your life. Think about it for a while, then let me know.” Zeph patted him lightly on the shoulder, then got up and left the room.

Blythe had the couch and his thoughts all to himself.

For two days Dan did nothing but sleep and slowly, slowly heal. Mara checked on him every hour and let Blythe stick his head in while she worked. He didn’t think things looked any better, but she assured him that Dan’s vitals were improving.

“He’s always been a strong one,” she mused. “He’s a pretty dominant male. They tend to bull their way through most problems.”

“Then why did he tiptoe around everything with me?” Blythe asked as she exited the safe room and locked it again. “Why didn’t he just sit me down and lay things out for me

when he knew he wanted me for his mate? I'm slow to come around sometimes, but anything would have been better than this."

"Almost anything," Mara corrected. "As for why he didn't get blunt? I'd say it's because you're dominant over him."

Blythe blinked in surprise. "I'm just a human. How could I possibly be dominant over a werewolf?"

"Honey, let me let you in on a little secret," Mara said with a smile. "People are people, no matter what their DNA says. Shifters like to think they have everything perfectly structured and laid out, but the truth is, their hierarchy is skewed. A shifter can be the most dominant male in the pack—the alpha, for example—and still be submissive to his loving wife." She winked. "Although I'd never spread that around, of course. Have you slept at all?"

"Um, a little."

"Eaten anything?"

"Not for a while."

"I'll have Rebecca bring you some soup."

She turned and walked away down the hall. Blythe watched her go, a faint smile on his face then turned back to the door. There was a small glass window in it, the only viewing port in the entire setup, and he'd been glued to it for most of the afternoon. Most of the blood was gone, but Dan's skin still looked raw, and his entire body was criss-crossed with cuts and gashes, the deeper ones decorated with Mara's thin black thread.

"I'm here," he whispered, hoping that Dan could hear him on some level. "I'm with you."

Blythe slept in the antechamber, which had a pull-out bed, a small table with a drawer he could keep some clothes in, and a bookshelf with everything from *Programming in C for Dummies* to the paperback romances he'd sneaked off his mother's shelf when he was younger. He didn't really feel moved to read any of them just now, not when he was waiting anxiously for his own lover to wake up, but he did look over the covers. There was the requisite heroine in various states of undress, generally situated lower on the cover and looking up adoringly at the hero. The hero had even fewer clothes and really only one pose, that of the chest-baring, manfully protective semi-embrace. Their faces were nothing like

Dan's, way too bland, but the bodies...there was more than a little resemblance there. At least, there had been before.

Blythe didn't want to get distracted right now, but the memory of the last time he'd seen Dan like that, not completely naked and covered in blood in the snow, but holding him, wanting him...it was too good a memory to push away.

The night before Christmas Eve, Blythe had decided he wanted something. He'd never done it before and hadn't really been convinced he'd ever want it. But a week of being with Dan, having his insistent tongue and patient, curling fingers inside of him, had changed his mind. Dan hadn't asked but Blythe knew he wanted to fuck him, and on reflection, he found he wanted it to. But not on Christmas. Christmas wasn't a good time for him. He'd be terrible company by the twenty-fourth, so that night was the only chance he'd have until after the holiday, and Blythe didn't want to wait that long.

When Dan got home from work that evening, Blythe met him at the door, leaned into him aggressively and claimed his mouth in a deep, hard kiss. When he pulled back, Dan grinned at him, thinking he knew what to expect, but Blythe surprised him by pulling him by the hand over to the couch, methodically stripping his clothes off and sitting him down. Dan cocked his head a little but didn't say anything until Blythe reached beneath one of the pillows and pulled out a condom and a bottle of lubricant. He put them into Dan's hand purposefully, then leaned in and kissed him again before slipping out of his loose drawstring pants. He wasn't wearing anything else. He sat down on Dan's lap, straddling his thighs and pressing their erections together then wrapped his arms around Dan's neck. His lover looked dumbfounded.

"We don't have to do this," Dan said gently. "Not now, not until you're ready."

"I am ready." Blythe wasn't completely sure that wasn't at least a partial lie, but he did want it. He wanted to be fucked. He wanted to feel Dan's hard, hot cock inside of him, touching him in places no one had ever wanted to touch him before. Dan wanted him, for some reason he wanted him and his desire, red and straining up until it almost touched his washboard abdomen, made Blythe want him back. It felt so good to be wanted, *needed* even, like having Dan feel it first gave Blythe leave to without fear.

"I want you," he said, licking at his lover's slightly gaping mouth before plunging his tongue inside. He tasted good, slightly sweet, and his breaths were coming faster and heavier now. "I do."

"Bly..." Dan groaned his name, his hands trembling as they came together at his back, pulling him closer. "You've never...we need to prep you."

"I did already." And, God, hadn't that felt awkward?

It was one thing when Dan did it for him. It was totally another when he was reaching back and pressing his own hesitant fingers in. He'd done it, made sure he was good and stretched, but it hadn't been the most erotic thing he'd ever done. That was sitting beneath him on the couch, staring at him with dark, desperate eyes and trying so hard to maintain his control.

Dan poured a little lube onto one shaking index finger then pressed against Blythe's entrance. His small, excited gasp when he slipped easily inside shot straight to Blythe's groin, and he ground down against his lover's hand.

"*I want you,*" Blythe repeated breathlessly. "Please."

"Sit up for a sec," Dan muttered, tearing the condom open.

Blythe obligingly made enough space for him to slide it over his cock, and he couldn't take his eyes off it as Dan slicked it with lube. That was going to go in him. That was going to fit inside of him. Dan was really going to fuck him.

His lover sensed his sudden bout of nerves. "Anything you want," he whispered sensually, kissing the side of Blythe's neck, his words hot and moist on his sensitive skin. "However you want."

It was the perfect reminder. This was what he wanted. It was his idea, after all, and he could stop it whenever he needed to. Blythe knew that much about Dan. The man would rather go without than get off at Blythe's expense.

"Just like this," he told him then he lowered his body back against Dan's.

The large, snub head of his cock pressed first lightly, then insistently at Blythe's portal, but Dan didn't move. Blythe inhaled deeply and bore down, forcing the largest part of his lover's member into his body. His ass spasmed and he clenched his teeth against the pain, but Dan was there, holding him, murmuring softly to him and smoothing his large, soothing hands across Blythe's back and thighs.

“Relax,” he told him, shaking with his obvious need to move but focused entirely on Blythe’s needs. “Relax, baby. It’s okay, that’s the hardest part. Christ, you feel so fucking good...let me in, Bly, just push out.”

Blythe did and it helped almost immediately, and in another few deep breaths, he was sitting fully on Dan’s lap, marvelling at the fullness and the way Dan was looking at him. The stinging subsided to an ache, which transformed into a different type of ache as his lover’s clever hands stroked over his diminished erection.

“Oh, God...fuck...shit, you feel good,” Dan panted. “Fucking amazing.”

“You feel good, too,” Blythe said honestly. He really did. Blythe wanted to find that spot, the button that Dan could push inside of him to make him scream. He clenched his muscles, assessing.

“Fucking hell!” Dan gritted. “Not made of willpower, baby, you might wanna stop that.”

Except Blythe didn’t, not when it got him that kind of reaction. He slid up a little ways then back down, clenching again as his ass touched his lover’s tight, hard testicles.

“Bly!”

“You feel amazing,” he whispered, then leaned in and kissed Dan again. He moved again, slightly higher this time, and when he came down, Dan’s cock stroked over his prostate and Blythe cried out into the kiss, tearing his lips away and shuddering.

“I know,” Dan said, thrusting tentatively with his hips. “I know.”

He moved a little and Blythe moved a little, and between them, they moved enough to rub against that spot every single time. Blythe moaned and squeezed and panted, and when Dan reached down and stroked his cock firmly, he came in a long, glorious burst, throwing his head back and arching hard against his lover’s chest. Dan rode his contortions out, burying himself deep and biting Blythe’s chest as he came. They held each other, quivering, for what felt like forever before Blythe finally moved. Dan apologised for marking him, but Blythe brushed it off. He rather liked it.

That had been one of the best nights of his entire life. The day that followed had been awful and the day after that even worse. The only thing that could top the horribleness of knowing his lover had sacrificed himself to keep him safe was if he didn’t come out of it

now. The thought of it burned Blythe's soul, hurt him even worse than losing Bliss had. Dan had to come back. He had to wake up. He had to move again.

Naturally it wasn't until Blythe had stepped out on the third morning of their stay that Dan finally did move. Blythe was washing his hands in the bathroom down the hall when he heard the snarling, frenzied bellow erupt from the safe room. He barrelled into the hallway and almost ran into Zeph, who was a few steps ahead of him. They reached the safe room in time to see one of Dan's clawed, slightly furred hands crash through the little window.

"He's in half-form." A tremendous crash sounded against the inside of the door, and Zeph winced. "And he's fucking pissed. I need to get in there before he hurts himself worse."

"Wait," Blythe said, remembering his earlier talk with Mara. "Let me try. Dan!" He put his face up to the window, ignoring Zeph's sharp intake of breath. "Baby, calm down. Calm down. You're safe now. You're safe with friends. I'm here."

He kept speaking and after a few more moments the noise ebbed, then faded away. A fuzzy white hand, stained pink with blood, hesitantly crept through the window.

Blythe took it gently between his own and kissed Dan's knuckles. "I'm here, baby."

There was a mournful sigh, almost a whimper, then the hand disappeared. A moment later Blythe heard a loud thump. Before Zeph could stop him he threw back the bolt and opened the door. Dan lay slumped against the wall, barely recognisable in half-form. Kneeling down, Blythe rolled Dan onto his back and cradled his head in his lap.

"I'll get Mara," Zeph said as he left the room.

Blythe hardly heard him, all his focus on the creature lying in his arms. Neither Dan's sexy human form nor the beautiful white wolf, this was a misshapen combination of both of them, with fur jutting like a heavy fringe around every joint and a face that was a grotesque blend of sharp teeth and lengthened jaw beneath human lips. Blythe didn't care. Part of him marvelled quietly at it, but he didn't care anymore. Human, wolf or somewhere in between, Blythe was totally, crazily in love with Dan. He smiled softly, stroking the remnants of his mate's long hair.

Mara and Zeph helped him get Dan back into bed and reattached all the necessary tubes. This time when Blythe stayed, Zeph didn't say anything. He just nodded. Once the others were gone, Blythe edged onto the slender bed, lying on his side and gently resting his head against Dan's shoulder. He felt relaxed for the first time in days.

"I love you," Blythe whispered, then swiftly fell asleep.

Chapter Seven

Dan woke up to the sweet drip of morphine in his veins and the even sweeter feeling of Blythe pressed against his body. No, that was wrong. He had to be confused. He forced his eyes open and looked up at the blank white ceiling above him. A hospital? A dream? Heaven?

No. Heaven wouldn't hurt so much, morphine or not. Even opening and closing his eyelids hurt. Dan groaned softly.

Immediately the person beside him woke up. "Dan?" A warm, smooth hand touched his cheek. "Baby?"

It sounded like Blythe, but that was impossible.

"Where..." Dan managed to get out.

"Zeph's place. I brought you here after...the time you spent with Carlos."

The hand against his cheek quivered slightly. It definitely smelled like Blythe, but hell, he could hallucinate smells, couldn't he? Maybe he could, and yet he wanted so badly for it to be real.

"Bly?"

"Yes, love. Me."

He must have propped himself up on an elbow because suddenly Dan could see him, just to his left. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes were filled with tender emotion.

"Stupid, dumbass me. Not that I want there to be a next time, but if there ever is, don't be afraid to tell me what an idiot I am."

Wait, this wasn't right. Didn't Blythe hate him? The morphine was fucking with his brain. Dan sighed and closed his eyes.

"No." Blythe wouldn't let him slip away again. "This isn't a dream, and Mara told me you metabolise morphine as fast as she gets it into you, so you can't use that as an excuse either. I'm really here. I really was an idiot, and I really apologise for causing you so much pain."

His eyes were glistening with tears now. Dan hated to see him cry. He reached an awkward hand towards his lover's face and stroked a finger down his cheek. Blythe closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"I love you," he said after a moment. "I love you so much. I'm sorry I hurt you. It's hard for me to be real with people, to let them into my life, but you got past everything I threw at you. You're inside me now. You're more than I deserve and I never want to be with anyone else, so there. Consider us mated. We're joining Zeph's pack."

Then he smiled brightly, and seeing it was such a relief that Dan smiled back reflexively, despite the pain.

"And why the hell didn't you tell me your name was Sheridan?" He snuggled back down next to Dan, kissing the point of his shoulder. "Can I call you Sheri?"

"No," Dan said firmly before drifting back to sleep.

* * * *

He spent the next week in bed, and as such, missed all the excitement. At least that was how Rebecca put it.

"Ohmigod, you would not believe how freaky it was," she told them as she sat in one of the chairs Mara had provided. "Carlos came here with, like, all of his people, and I thought for sure we were going to get into a huge fight, and Jackson had his hands full keeping people from shifting prematurely and ruining everything. Mom and Dad talked and then Dad went out to talk to Carlos. Carlos was all, "You fuckin' liar, give me Dan and Blythe!" and Dad was all, "No, they're pack now, so challenge me or fuck off," and Carlos was like, "I can kick your ass!" and Dad said, "Try it," so they fought. It was over in less than a minute," she finished, a little anticlimactically for Dan's tastes.

"How did the fight go?" he asked. "Carlos is a viper. Did he manage to bite Zeph?"

"He tried," Rebecca said with a smirk. "But Dad's way faster as a lion, and he was all over him and ripping his head off before Carlos could shift back and ask for mercy. Like Dad would have given it to him. Now some of his shifters are petitioning to join our pack and the rest are dispersing. No more sharing territories. My dad is the sole alpha of Denver."

"That's great," Blythe said from Dan's side, clearly relieved. "But what would have happened if he'd lost?"

Rebecca looked at Blythe as if he'd lost his mind. "Like *that* would ever happen." She stood up and rearranged her fishnet stockings. "I've gotta go. I'm playing at the Midnight Rose tonight. The new bartender isn't nearly as cute as you, Blythe." She gave them a last smile, then left.

"How did the break with Cristof go?" Dan asked, rolling one shoulder in an effort to loosen it up.

"Fine. He talked about being used to the goddamn transience of mortals and told me if I ever needed work, he'd hire me back in a heartbeat. He's even helping me smooth things over with Myers and Davidson. Apparently Cristof's sire is one of their biggest clients and since they're starting to get along again, well, his leverage is increasing." Blythe sighed and flopped back on the bed. "I get to go back to school tomorrow and explain to Dr. Arabaz why I'm banned from the law firm's premises. At least they aren't suing me."

"Talk about a silver lining," Dan said with a grimace then lay back on the bed next to Blythe. His shoulder was still too tender for a massage, but the muscles knotted up terribly. "That's like Mara saying me having half my hair left was a silver lining."

"Oh, God, I love her," Blythe chuckled. "I've never seen you scowl at someone like that, and she just laughed at you."

They'd ended up cutting the remainder of Dan's hair short, to keep him from looking like a barber's worst nightmare. Blythe had taken a strand of it, braided it and now wore it around his wrist.

"I look like a carnival's freak sideshow attraction," Dan grouched.

Blythe looked over at him and smiled. "You'd rather be the main event?" Before Dan could reply, he rolled up against him and began to stroke his chest gently. "Who knew someone who wore the same pair of jeans every day had such vanity in him?"

"It's not vanity," Dan protested. "Look at this!" He held out his left forearm, one of the places where Carlos had bitten him. The muscles were shrivelled and shallow against the bone, making the arm look anaemic. "Seriously, it's gross."

"Mara says it will heal in a few more weeks," Blythe replied, leaning his head down and nuzzling the side of Dan's neck. "You've made incredible progress for being at death's door not too long ago."

"Maybe."

Despite himself, Dan felt Blythe pulling him away from his sulk. Dan was used to being whole and healthy and handsome, and the damage that Carlos had wrought threatened to plunge him into a state of depression and self-doubt. Blythe was there to ease him past every step, though. He understood depression, and after he told Dan about his family, Dan had been surprised his mate had turned out as well as he had. He turned into Blythe's nuzzling and captured his lips in a kiss. There was tenderness there, and love, and the edges of hunger as well.

"Care to make love to a freak show?" Dan asked with a grin as they broke the kiss, both of them wanting more.

"I'll show you what I care for," Blythe growled. "Take off your pants."

He stood up and shut the door firmly as Dan pushed the borrowed sweatpants down his legs and over his feet. He was lucky that his tormentors had left his genitalia alone. It had fared much better than the rest of him overall. Blythe had sucked him off for the first time since his capture two nights ago, without letting him reciprocate. Dan was weak, true, but he wanted to give his mate the pleasure he deserved, the pleasure he himself got.

"It's like we're starting over from the beginning, with me getting off and you getting nothing."

"Oh, I'm getting quite a lot," Blythe had answered with a grin.

Last night he'd gone down on Dan, then let Dan use his hand to stroke Blythe to a climax. He'd lifted Dan's cream-coated hand to his mouth and told him to lick, and Dan obeyed. He licked it clean then shared a kiss with Blythe, and they tasted each other and themselves in that sweet embrace.

Tonight, judging from the look on Blythe's face, would be different. He stripped slowly by the door, pulling his shirt away from his slender frame inch by supple inch, finally dropping it on the floor. His pants went the same way, creeping down past his ass and thighs. Dan tensed with anticipation, waiting for him to remove his briefs, but Blythe shook his head.

"No." He picked something out of his pants' pocket and slid over to the bed, gliding between Dan's thighs and up his body. He supported his weight on his elbows and bent over to kiss him, their bodies barely touching.

Dan was hard and aching already.

"I want you to stop calling yourself a freak," Blythe murmured between kisses. "You're so beautiful you make my heart hurt. You're mine, and nothing anyone else says matters now."

"I've never wanted anyone like I want you," Dan whispered, his heart pounding in his chest.

"And you can have me," Blythe replied with a wicked grin. "But not before I have you. The first touch you get of my cock tonight will be when it's pressing against you, right here." He held up a small, familiar container of lube with one hand as his other crept down Dan's body, eventually rubbing the pad of his thumb gently against his hole. "Are you up for it?"

Holy fuck, was he up for it? Dan felt as if he was going to come just thinking about it. It had been years since Dan had been on the receiving end, and the thought made his cock swell even more. "It's been a long time," he managed.

"Don't worry, baby." Blythe nipped at his chin. "I'll be gentle."

And he was gentle, maddeningly gentle and distracting. His mouth caressed each of Dan's hot spots on the way down his body, moving slowly and tenderly. Dan wanted to fuck, to come, to get off now, but Blythe wasn't letting him. The frantic pace had gone out of their lovemaking, leaving behind a slow, intense build-up that was even more exciting. It was so hard to be patient. It was one thing when he could be the one giving, focusing all of his efforts on Blythe, but it was totally another when he was the one who had to take and be gracious about it. He wanted Blythe to enjoy this. Judging from the dreamy look on his mate's face as he kissed the point of his hip, he was.

Finally, Blythe was crouched between his legs. He dipped his warm, wet mouth over Dan's cock even as the first slick finger found his hole, stroking in time. Dan accepted the intrusion easily, desperate for more. Two fingers, and Blythe was sucking harder at him now, swirling his tongue against the head of Dan's cock with every upward motion. Once he got three fingers inside, he touched the place within Dan that made his core suddenly shatter, fizzling away into a thousand different ecstatic pieces, and Dan couldn't stop himself. He came so hard he saw stars prick the edges of his vision, and he only just kept from screaming. Once his orgasm was ebbing, he forced his eyes open, worried about drifting off into a satisfied stupor and leaving his mate wanting.

"Bly?" he moaned softly.

"Already here, baby."

And he was. In one long, smooth motion Blythe pressed his lubed cock into his mate's waiting body. Dan was amazed he went in so easily – there was no hint of pain, just a sense of fullness and incredible satisfaction. Blythe began to move in him, just slightly to start, then harder and faster as his own orgasm built. Dan let it happen, savouring the feel of Blythe's thick cock inside of him, accepting that he really couldn't do anything more than be there for Blythe, with Blythe, welcoming him inside and tightening around him in time with his thrusts. The gold pendant swung between them, sliding across Dan's chest with every movement. Blythe was just close enough that his stomach brushed over Dan's resurgent cock, teasing it mercilessly, almost enough pressure for him to get off again but not quite. It was building, slower than the last time but still sure.

Dan squeezed tighter around his lover as Blythe stroked over that same sweet spot in him again and again, until Dan couldn't take it anymore. He crested a second time, less forcefully but just as pleurably as before and Blythe came with him, gasping and stroking in deep, then letting go with one long-drawn-out exhalation of pleasure. He came hard in his lover, his whole body trembling with the force of it, but he remembered, even then, to keep his weight off of Dan. When they were both spent and panting, he gently dislodged himself and rolled off to the side, wrapping an arm around Dan's chest and holding him close.

"Holy fuck," Dan said once he caught his breath. "I'm now addicted to you fucking me, and I don't need another addiction."

"There's always room for one more," Blythe said as he laid his head against Dan's shoulder, his fingertips playing with tufts of his mate's golden chest hair. "I've made room for all of mine. Hell, I'm taking my favourite addiction's last name. That's got to count for something." He stopped moving suddenly. "If you don't mind, that is."

"You want to be a Bailey?"

"I want to get over all the pain that was part of being a Kenner. As soon as you're well enough, we're formally announcing our relationship to the pack. Zeph said it's the rules."

"It's traditional, but..."

"Yeah, you guys are big on tradition." Blythe smiled against Dan's chest. "Well, now we can really fit in. We'll be Mr. and Mr. Bailey, and anyone who doesn't like it can go and fuck themselves."

"You'd do that for me?" Dan was still getting used to the idea that Blythe actually loved him as much as he loved Blythe.

“I’ll do a lot more for you, baby.” He moved up and kissed Dan’s mouth again, softly and full of promise. “But that’s a damn good place to start.”

About the Author

Cari Z is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. Currently she's living in West Africa, where she gets a lot of one of those things and none of the other. If she had a fridge she'd be sitting in front of it, sighing wistfully.

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