



SHY COWBOY

JAN IRVING



UNCOMMON
COWBOYS

A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

Shy Cowboy

ISBN # 978-0-85715-568-9

©Copyright Jan Irving 2011

Cover Art by April Martinez ©Copyright June 2011

Edited by S.F. Swift

Total-E-Bound Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Total-E-Bound Publishing.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Total-E-Bound Publishing. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2011 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

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

Uncommon Cowboys

SHY COWBOY

Jan Irving

Dedication

Chrysalis: a protective shell covering something in a state of growth or transition.
For Jambrea Jo Jones, who loved Cass.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Mack truck: Mack Trucks Inc.

Thermos: Thermos L.L.C.

Chapter One

Cass Drake looked through the sheaf of diet material as he used his hip to shut the driver's door of his truck. Shit, he really wanted some roasted potatoes with dinner tonight but he bet he couldn't despite how hard he'd worked all day. Caring for the horses and doing chores around the Yellow Trail Ranch sure burned off the cal's, though.

His diet advisor had told him again that he didn't have a weight problem. She'd said he seemed healthy to her, with a thickly muscled body that weighed more than most folks but Cass thought she was just being nice. He remembered the humiliation of his first and only date. That had been two years ago and he hadn't gone out with anyone since.

"Hey, Chubby," Marty Drayton drawled. "Where you been, on a hot date?" The other cowboy laughed, as if it was obvious that six-foot-five Cass with his massive frame wouldn't appeal to anyone.

Cass gritted his teeth but let it pass. Marty was an asshole but just one of many who had teased Cass over the years. High school had been hell because Cass was so shy, so aware of how he was different. Only being a valued and intimidating linebacker had kept the teasing from becoming more serious.

"I thought you were camping in the foothills this week," Cass said. A tough springtime chore was searching for the cattle that had wandered off the ranchland during the winter. They tended to seek the bordering national park beyond the town of White Deer, Montana.

Marty gave an exaggerated shiver. "April, man, too damn cold for me. I volunteered you and the new guy to go up and look for strays and the ramrod thought it was a great idea."

The new guy.

Tom Black. The reason behind Cass' latest attempt to diet. He flushed, dropping his head so Marty wouldn't see this sign of weakness and ride him about it. So far he'd been able to keep his painful crush on Tom to himself. Cass planned to keep it that way.

He stepped onto the porch where Marty was loitering. The bench outside the bunkhouse was the only place the hands were permitted to smoke. Summertime grassfires were a danger and the boss wouldn't tolerate carelessness. Marty had lit up. Relaxed, he'd set his boots resting on the opposite bench.

"Is Tom inside?" Cass asked.

"Your sweetie is in the horse barn with that baby mustang."

"Cut out that shit!" Cass wanted to smack the other man but he remembered his father telling him over and over again, *You're bigger than most folks, Cass, so go easy, be gentle. You don't know your own strength.*

Marty's brown eyes were sharp, and Cass told himself not to give himself away. Tom would probably laugh off Marty's words, but then Tom wasn't crushed on him.

"Not going over to Adrian and Cody's for dinner?" Marty referred to Cass' new friends, a veterinarian and his hired hand. Both were as passionate as Cass about helping preserve the small herd of wild horses that had returned to the foothills.

Cass shook his head.

"Oh. Guess it's not on your diet, huh?"

"My diet?" But even as he tried to shrug it off, Cass knew there were no secrets in a bunkhouse.

"Kind of obvious." Marty nodded to the bag with a diet slogan on it and Cass had to agree. Well, fuck it.

He decided to dump the diet info and take the travel book he'd found at the library before he went to the first horse barn. He'd just skip dinner altogether. He hadn't lost anything last week, but he'd been so damn hungry he'd dug in, had second helpings a couple of times. He'd have to try harder and never mind how tired and ravenous he got after a day working the ranch. He'd never lose weight if he didn't try.

"Tom?" Cass softened his deep voice as he entered the musky space, absorbing the peacefulness. A fresh spider web glittered by a bare yellow bulb and dust motes hung suspended in the chilly evening air. A hoof clomped, one of the horses moving restlessly as Cass walked past. Another stuck its head out and he gave the animal an absent pat.

"In here, Cass." Tom's voice came from the last stall, which was larger than the rest.

Cass' heartbeat picked up and he took a minute to wipe his free hand on his jeans. He hoped his straw-like hair wasn't sticking up from running his hands through it. "Big, stupid ox," he muttered to himself as he peeked inside and saw Tom on his knees beside a black mustang foal.

"What did you say?" Tom asked, his voice a slow, lazy drawl, like liquid caramel drizzling from a dessert bottle at Cass' favourite coffee house in White Deer.

Hearing it, Cass' body hardened with furtive excitement and his face reddened. He dropped his gaze. "Nothing."

"Oh, good. Because if a certain new friend of mine was callin' himself a 'big, stupid ox' then I'd take offence."

Cass looked at Tom, taking in the grey eyes and dark brown hair that fell over one eye. Tom Black, part Native American, had bronzed skin and prominent cheek bones. He was built on much slighter lines than Cass, only around five foot seven with a lean, fit body. Unlike a lot of cowboys who were happier in a truck or on a horse, Tom liked to run. On his days off he often went cross-country, wearing only a loincloth like a native runner from the past. Seeing him like that made Cass burn.

"Yeah, okay," Cass mumbled. "It all right to come in?" He could see that the stall was absolutely clean, with fresh straw for warmth atop wood chips. The foal Adrian Le Roy had dropped off was a fragile orphan, stressed from losing her mother to wolves. When Adrian had brought her to the ranch two nights ago, Cass had had his doubts she'd make it. She'd been dehydrated and in shock but Tom had a way with animals.

"Yeah." Tom leant against the wall.

Cass entered the stall, immediately as comfortable as the foal. Something inside him relaxed around only this man.

He eyed Tom. "You look tired."

"That would be the feedings every two hours. I've stopped going back to the bunkhouse to sleep."

"I noticed."

Tom held Cass' gaze.

Cass flushed. "You're a crazy-ass."

"Yep."

Cass handed Tom the book he'd picked up for him and took a bottle of Mare's Match milk replacer in exchange. He offered it to the foal, who didn't move far from Tom but nosed the offered food. "She's got an appetite."

"Adrian wants her as a present for Cody's birthday."

Cass' brows rose. "So that's how you got this cushy assignment."

Tom smiled, his eyes heavy from lack of sleep. "Yep, but I understand the boss wanted us to go up together into the foothills."

"I'll talk to him," Cass said. "He'll let you off the hook."

"Maybe you can see if I can still go up with you in a few days. I was looking forward to it even though it's lonesome sometimes. I can run some of the deer trails up there, really lose myself."

Cass shrugged. Lonesome. Yeah. But maybe the boss would let them put it off until Tom was free to come. If not, Cass would miss his conversations with Tom even though he'd never given any sign he found men attractive.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?" he asked.

"No," Tom sighed. "I figured I'd drop by and see if anything was left over in the fridge at the bunkhouse later."

"I can bring you something." Cass was a little annoyed with Tom, who needed to eat. He was too skinny.

"Nah, I'll go." Tom rubbed his eyebrow. "You didn't...see any strangers on the ranch today, did you?"

"No, and that's the third time you asked me this week. How come?"

He shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. "Just a weird feeling I've been having lately. Anyway, maybe it's better you stay here with the foal."

Cass lifted his brows.

But Tom didn't explain himself. "So you can take the watch while I raid the fridge?"

"Sure."

"Thanks for getting me a book to read." Tom put down the travel book on Italy. He'd told Cass he was hoping to save up enough to go backpacking through there in the fall. Cass couldn't imagine travelling to a place where they didn't speak English. Tom was much more adventuresome than he was. He'd even travelled to India once and shown Cass a beautiful album full of pictures.

"No problem." Cass settled down with the foal, content to wait. He watched Tom climb to his feet and rub his neck, probably stiff from all the hours of his vigil.

"Come here." Cass hauled Tom back into the straw.

"Huh?" Tom laughed.

Cass kept the bottle up in one hand for their foal while he worked the other deep into the tight muscles of Tom's neck.

"Ohhhhhh, Christ on a pineapple!" Tom closed his eyes and lifted his head.

His mouth was close enough to steal a kiss.

Don't think about that. But he found it almost impossible not to wonder what it would be like to brush his mouth against Tom's. How would Tom react? Would he shove Cass away or would he open his mouth, let Cass stroke him with his tongue?

Cass suppressed a groan at the thought. He was throbbing, his hard-on painful, needing Tom's hand.

Normal, act normal, you dork. You don't want him to ever know how you feel. Inhaling sharply, Cass made himself snicker at Tom as if he weren't aching to kiss him. "You were pretty tense, cowboy."

"Um, yeah. You're great boyfriend material."

Cass huffed and Tom's grey eyes popped open. His shirt was unbuttoned enough so that Cass could see drifts of curly brown hair on his upper chest. He couldn't help but imagine pressing his lips against that warm, silken flesh, cupping Tom's tight round ass in his big hands as he pulled him onto his lap and ground his heavy erection against him.

"You know, it pisses me off the way you always knock yourself down."

"I don't."

"Yeah, you do," Tom said. "When I first came to work here you were the easiest guy to hang with, even if you do tease me about taking care of Daisy Girl here..."

"Daisy Girl?"

"Name I came up with for the foal. If she's got a name, she's more likely to live through her first month. Now don't try to sidetrack me, Cass! We were talking about you."

"No, *you* were talking about me." Cass' hand fell away. He was disappointed he didn't have an excuse to keep on touching his friend.

"As I was saying, you'd take care of this foal if I wasn't. You know why that is?"

"I'm as nutty as you are?"

"You have a kind heart."

Cass swallowed, unable to think of a snappy comeback. "Right."

"Yeah. Now you want something to eat as well?"

"No, I had dinner." Cass' stomach growled.

"Uh huh." Tom's face was serious. "What can you eat on your diet?"

"I, uh, just anything."

Tom's brows lowered. "Come on, it's obviously important to you and I respect that."

"If you can get me some steak and vegetables but hold the potatoes?"

"Done."

"Thanks, Tom."

Tom gusted out a sigh. "It's not such a big deal. And if you ask me, you look fine. You're a big guy with a lot of muscle."

"I've been trying to work out."

"Oh, shit, I hate doing that after a long day. I just about fall asleep."

"Yeah."

"I hope she or he is worth it."

Tom's not jumping to conclusions about who might appeal to him was just another example of the sensitivity Cass prized. "There's...no one, Tom."

Tom cocked his head. "Wow, I'd think you'd have to beat people off with a stick."

"I, uh—"

"I mean, tall, blond hair with those sun streaks and built like the proverbial Mack truck. Plus, you have green eyes. I love green eyes."

"Really." He felt as though Tom had stroked him. He liked it. He wanted more. Wanted to lift Tom so his legs could wrap around Cass' larger frame and he could return the appreciation.

Whoa. He had to cut that out. Tom was just being nice...wasn't he?

"You think I'm bullshitting you. Hang on a sec..." Tom snatched the Italian tour book and flipped through it, lips pursed.

Cass watched, heart thudding in his throat. There was a little brown curl under Tom's ear that he could imagine himself kissing. He sat abruptly and raised his knee, afraid of giving himself away. He was big, all right. All over.

"The Riace Bronzes. I hope to see them on my trip. They're a pair of Greek statues found off the coast of Italy in the Seventies by a scuba diver." Tom held out the book Cass had picked up for him. The statues were dark-coloured with heroic torsos and full beards.

"Definitely men," Cass said. "Not, uh, pretty."

Tom smiled into his eyes. "Exactly. And you don't see a resemblance?"

"I don't have a beard."

"You got me there," Tom said. "Okay, I'll get our dinner. Back in a few."

Cass sagged against the side of the stall. The foal settled into the straw with him, satisfied for the moment. He found himself relieved he had a few minutes alone, if only so his erection would subside. If he and Tom had lived back when those Greek warriors were cast, they'd have explored what a warrior missed the most after a long campaign. The thought of Tom as his boy didn't cool Cass' blood any.

He looked at the foal. "You don't think he was actually flirting with me, do you?"

Chapter Two

Tom scolded himself on the walk to the bunkhouse in search of food. Just what was he doing, flirting with Cass? The gentle giant had a tender heart, anyone could see that but Tom was in no position to be anyone's boyfriend.

Wolf shifters had to keep a low profile. He sure as hell couldn't settle down anywhere, which meant he had to keep things light and friendly with Cass.

So why was that such a tall order?

Maybe it was the innocence he smelt on the other man. Tom knew Cass'd never slept with anyone and the primal wolf inside him liked that. His wolf wanted to cover the larger man, lick his neck and then bite him.

Mark him.

Shit! Tom shook his head in disgust. He wasn't going to bite anyone, least of all a sweetheart of a man who couldn't take a one-nighter. Not that Tom had got any in a long time. His wolf was very picky about who he slept with, as if he were searching for a mate. It was annoying as hell since Tom just wanted to burn off heat sometimes, get fucked or fuck someone else.

He reached the bunkhouse and had to stand outside for a moment, gulping deep breaths. He was hot and horny from being around Cass and he didn't want to give that asshole Marty something to chew on. He had a feeling the cowboy already sensed there was something brewing between him and Cass, which was more than Cass had recognised.

Cass was so sure he was unattractive. Tom hurt for him. Worse, he couldn't touch him, leave him sweaty and satisfied. More than anything, Tom wished he could show Cass how beautiful he was. He wasn't fat! He was all hard muscle with a healthy working man's build. Yes, he was a big guy but Tom liked that, wanted to know how he'd feel inside him. He'd been curious for weeks now to see Cass' cock, wanting to know if it was as thick as he imagined but Cass was so bashful about his body that Tom had barely caught a glimpse even though they shared the same living quarters.

Damn, he had to stop thinking about Cass. He was caught in an endless loop—he wanted Cass, he couldn't have Cass. Who needed this shit? He should probably move on

before he weakened and actually touched the other man, screwed up their friendship. Right now he was ripe for a moment like that, so tired from caring for the foal.

He leant against the door for a second, wishing he could just curl up like a cub on the front porch and sleep.

The doorknob turned in his hand. He could smell the stew bubbling in the room beyond. He was thinking maybe he could coax poor Cass into eating something substantial tonight when his groggy senses sharpened and he caught a scent —

Too late.

He hit the gravel beyond the porch, the side of his face burning, shredding on sharp stones and he couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe, grabbing his chest where he'd taken the impact of a hard body colliding with his.

He couldn't move, lying like a fish out of a stream, grabbing desperately for air, sucking it in along with a harsh, dirty scent like aging laundry. His nose wrinkled and his eyes watered.

In the sparse light from the swinging yellowed bulb he saw a tall figure standing over him. Red eyes.

Instinctively, he curled up. A boot struck his lower back, his kidney. Agony. He cried out. *Oh, God.*

Another wolf shifter, but not friendly. Something...wrong. Something was wrong with this one.

Rabid?

Claws scored hot stripes of pain into his back, tearing away cloth and flesh down to the bone. Saliva and teeth were on his neck as the thing mounted him. Tom screamed. Not the mark. He couldn't take a mark from this sick creature. His jeans shredded under harsh paws and he felt something prod his thigh.

A distended penis. The creature meant to have him.

He dug out clods of earth, weakly trying to pull himself away. Needles piercing his neck, tearing the flesh away like wet paper —

"What the fuck?"

Cass' voice. His sweet, innocent Cass. Boot heels clomping, hurried breath. Tom knew his friend well, knew he would place himself between Tom and danger.

"No!" Tom wasn't sure the word came from him since it hardly sounded human. But he had started to shift from the hot pouring of pain, his body seeking safety. He caught a glimpse of Cass, saw him seize a rake that had been resting against the cabin wall. It wasn't enough to fight the creature. He'd be ripped apart, eaten alive.

No. Not Cass. This thing couldn't touch his Cass.

Half man, half wolf, Tom managed to struggle to his feet, wobbling, blood dripping from the wounds on his back. Red eyes glared, silently ordering him to submit to the stronger wolf but Tom ignored his primal need to obey. Cass. He had to keep Cass safe.

He struck the larger wolf, bristling even as the flesh on his torn back pulled apart at the movement. Hurt. He hurt so much.

"Get away from him!" Cass smacked the rabid wolf with the rake so metal tines pierced the coat, embedding into the wolf's torso. It yelped but didn't give ground. Neither did Cass, putting his big body between Tom and the creature, yanking the rake free as the wolf leapt, biting at the wood in a fury to get to Cass.

"What the hell is going on?" Marty's voice. The bunkhouse door was open and cowboys spilled out, blinking in the half light.

The creature snarled at Tom, and the dark connection they shared through the new mark flared.

"Cass," he croaked. He collapsed when the thing disappeared into the underbrush. His hand scrabbled for the other man's boot. "Are you all right?"

"Am I all ri—" Cass crouched beside him and Tom glimpsed confused faces beyond, others demanding to know what was wrong, trying to find out what was going on.

Cass ignored them, pulling Tom to him. Tom couldn't suppress a sobbing sound when Cass touched his back. Cass yanked up his hand, filmed with blood. "Oh, God, Tom."

"Let him go, you big ox!" Marty snarled. "Can't you see he's all torn up? I called nine-one-one."

"No!" Tom managed. "No hospital."

Cass shook his head. "Tom, you need to—"

He stared into Cass' eyes, trusting him. "Please...promise, Cass. If you don't promise, I'll disappear." He knew he probably wasn't making sense but he was on the edge of being coherent. He could only trust that Cass knew Tom was a man of his word.

Cass' green eyes were brimming with tears as he lifted Tom. "Okay, I promise."

Tom licked dry lips, wanting to scold his friend for treating him like something fragile. He wasn't. He was a rough, tough cowboy.

But he didn't feel like one as Cass carried him towards his vehicle.

"Shush," Cass ordered before he could ask where Cass was taking him. "No hospital, fine, but I'm damned well taking you to someone who can stitch you up."

Cass eased Tom into the passenger seat and slammed the truck door. When Cass got in the driver's side he was still closing the door as he started the engine, gravel spitting from the wheels, the vehicle fishtailing onto the road.

"You al-always drive slow, Cass," Tom whispered. He fell over, slumping into Cass' lap, his head resting there.

Safe.

He shuddered when he remembered that thing on top of him. He'd nearly been raped but Cass had saved him. He closed his eyes, inhaling Cass' familiar scent of hay and the musk of hard work. And his banana-scented shampoo that always made Tom smile at the incongruity of the aroma on such a big man. Cass had told him once, very earnestly, that it was supposed to take care of split ends. Tom had wanted to tell him he didn't need to worry. His hair was beautiful, as beautiful as his green eyes...

When the truck came to a halt the absence of movement jolted Tom awake.

Cass' thigh was gone so Tom's head rested against the upholstery. He needed Cass and wished he were back.

A second later he got his wish because Cass was there, pulling him gently from the passenger side of the car, lifting him into his arms while he shouted for someone to help them, help them now, damn it. Tom blinked, seeing he was at Adrian Le Roy's Victorian.

Cass had brought him to a veterinarian, not a doctor. Tom snickered.

"Why are you laughing?" Cass asked.

"I..." He couldn't say why, but a veterinarian was more adept than a doctor in caring for him.

"Jesus!" Another voice. Cody, Adrian's hand. Tom met his concerned gaze. He hadn't spent much time around the man because he'd sensed he was possessive of his new human mate. His eyes sharpened on Tom's neck. Did he recognise a mark? "You're a mess, Tom."

"He wouldn't go to the hospital so I brought him to Adrian," Cass said. "He's bleeding."

Cody squeezed Cass' shoulder. "I'll take him."

"No!" Cass' hands tightened around Tom.

Cody's eyes widened and even he looked intimidated by Cass' size. "Okay, big fella."

Tom wanted to smile at Cass' bristling protectiveness but he felt too damn awful. His strength was draining away along with his blood.

Cass was looking at him, clearly worried and Tom wanted to reassure him. Before he could speak, he was in a warmly lit examination room where Cass lowered Tom onto a table.

"Cass, he should be in the E.R.," Adrian said.

"No," Cody said, staring into Tom's eyes. "He can't go there."

Adrian's brows rose and he nodded curtly. "Cass, go with Cody to the waiting room. Cody, I'll need you as soon as you get Cass settled."

Cody nodded but Cass didn't leave right away. He stared down at Tom.

Tom swallowed hard at the emotion he saw in Cass' eyes. "I'll be okay."

"I kept my promise, now you promise me," Cass demanded.

Tom's bloody hand squeezed Cass' hard, so he'd know he meant it. "Promise."

Chapter Three

Cass knelt in the straw, holding the bottle for the baby as she nursed, her head dipping up and down as she gulped. From the other side of the small shed, the mare snorted softly. Finally, the foal abandoned the bottle and went over to the mustang.

At first when he'd brought the trailer to transport the foal higher into the foothills, she'd balked so he'd hit on introducing her to the mare. The adult horse wasn't too interested in the baby but was nonetheless calm enough so the foal was attracted to her. Watching the little animal nudging the mare, Cass' throat tightened. The foal still missed her mother.

He remembered his dad and how much he still missed the old man, who'd died of cancer when Cass was just seventeen. He'd felt a void in his life where he'd once had his dad's kindness and acceptance. Dad would have understood Cass' painful feelings for Tom.

Cass closed his eyes and tried to imagine what his dad's advice would be.

You got to give it time, Cass. Just like you did with this foal. You didn't rush her into the trailer even when that Marty fellow told you it was taking all day. You sat for an hour or more until she was ready.

He felt as though his father were sitting next to him. He smiled.

As for Tom Black...what do you really know about him?

Cass frowned, wondering at the question his subconscious had asked. Unease tightened his gut. He huffed out a breath. He was too tired to think. His neck and upper back ached. He massaged the area with one hand, which wasn't as satisfying as someone else doing it for him, but since no one was around, he worked the muscle, bringing fresh blood to release the toxins.

"Okay, ladies," he said, climbing to his feet. "I managed to follow my diet today even though there was a special on pancakes at the diner. Not bad, huh? I'll be back in a couple of hours. Sleep well."

The shed door creaked as it closed and the cooler air outside roused him. He rubbed his unshaven jaw, looking at the surrounding forest and pasture land. The moon was a thin sickle high above with another planet glowing close by, jewels in the dark.

He ran his gaze over the little clump of buildings, then headed for the line cabin. When he was almost at the door he swung around, again scrutinizing the woods. Nothing moved except tree branches shifting in the slight wind.

He caught a soft cry from above, as if summoning him from the outdoors. He entered the cabin and climbed to the loft over the great room.

Tom had managed to kick off his bedding again, his chest slick with fresh sweat. Cass went to him, placing a cool hand against his brow. Hot, still so damn hot.

The chains clinked softly and Cass frowned at them. It seemed an odd way to treat a sick man, chaining him until his fever passed, but Adrian and Cody had insisted on it, pointing out that Cass would be in the barn or out on the range. What if Tom tried the loft stairs in his condition? Cass was careful to stay close but had insisted that Tom have his cell phone handy so he could call if he needed anything.

"Cass," Tom croaked, his eyes tightly shut.

Cass swallowed. "How'd you know it was me?"

"S-smell you."

"Okay."

Tom was clearly still out of his head. Cass mixed some aspirin with water for the fever. Adrian had assured Cass that Tom wouldn't need anything else. He lifted Tom gently, but the chains again clanked. Tom was going to tease him about getting his kink on when he was feeling better.

"Take a sip." He held the glass against Tom's lips. "It'll help."

"So hot..." Tom moaned. "Cass, I'm so hot."

"Yeah, you really are." He couldn't help grinning. "Come on, take a sip."

Tom drank thirstily, draining all the water. Cass carefully helped him ease onto his side, where he'd been resting because his back was too sore to take his weight.

Unable to stop himself, Cass pushed Tom's brown hair out of his eyes. "You're getting stronger."

"How do you know?" Tom grouched.

"Because you're grumpy for longer stretches of time than before."

"Very funny."

"I'm trying to see the bright side of the situation."

"I didn't know there was one." Tom shifted and Cass placed a hand on his chest, seeing how big it seemed in contrast to Tom's slighter frame. Why did he always have to crush on someone so much smaller than himself?

He remembered that fateful date he'd had. In the dark movie theatre, he'd accidentally sat on the girl, a waitress. She'd called him King Kong and repeated the name at the diner the next morning. He guessed he'd deserved to be a joke because if he'd been honest with himself, the waitress wasn't who he'd wanted to date.

Tom grabbed his wrist, summoning him from his thoughts.

"Ouch!"

"S-sorry."

"You're stronger than you look."

"Yeah." But Tom jerked him closer so that his breath was warm against Cass' lips.

Cass' heart jumped. "Tom!"

"Suck."

He blinked, a little lost in studying the darker flecks of charcoal in Tom's eyes. Did they have a pattern or was he just totally gone on the guy? "What?"

"S-suck me."

"Tom, I—"

"Please." Tom turned his neck and ripped off the neat white bandage that Adrian had applied to the bite wound on his neck. His grip on Cass was strong, his pupils blown and dark, swallowing Cass' reflection. "Please."

"I can't. You're out of your head."

But Tom's hand pushed him closer, so his mouth mashed against the dark oozing skin. It tasted unpleasant, like metal and something rotten. "Blah! Tom, for fuck's sake."

"Need it out. Need *him* out."

Again Tom compelled him, suddenly scary strong. Was it the fever? For the first time in his life, Cass felt weaker than someone else. He couldn't break Tom's grip. His chin hit the wound and fresh blood ran down Tom's neck.

"Ow!"

"If you'd stop trying to make me —"

"If you'd stop fighting me —"

Crazy, it was crazy, but he opened his mouth against the mark and sucked. More bad taste flooded his mouth as though he were drawing poison from his friend. His protective instinct kicked in and he sucked more strongly, Tom gasping, his nails needle-sharp in Cass' scalp.

"Yes! Harder, Cass. Baby, I need it harder."

He was conscious of Tom's long hair sweeping the side of his face, cool and silky despite the fever, aware of his scent, like a wet forest after a rain. He gripped Tom's slender shoulders in his big hands, God, wanting to cover him, fuck him.

He would have pulled away in embarrassment but Tom wouldn't let him. He kept making sounds of approval that went straight to Cass' cock.

"Your back." He tried again to pull away.

"Christ, I can't even feel it right now. It's fine."

Cass couldn't help but move his lips to fresh skin and Tom didn't seem to mind. He lifted his body, thrusting his hips so that Cass straddled him, holding him down. His hands covered Tom's wrists, cuffed in tarnished metal. He kissed Tom's throat, his collar bones, lingering there, open-mouthed, appreciating the sturdy frame.

Tom's pointed nipple peeked from under the sheet and Cass rooted for it. Hungry for Tom, so damn hungry to touch him.

He closed his eyes in satisfaction when he finally made contact, sucking as Tom writhed under him. As he sat back on his heels, a hard cock rubbed against his own enormous erection despite his inexperienced touch. "Uhhhh." He'd never been this turned on his life, never been this close to what he needed. He didn't know what to do so his hands opened and closed around Tom's wrists.

Tom pushed his chest up, twisting under Cass. "Bite me."

This time he didn't argue with the request. He didn't know why but he felt a primal need to mark the other man. He wanted Tom's flesh to bear the mark of his teeth. It was weird, but he couldn't fight it. When Tom was back in his right mind, would he be okay with having let another man mark him?

"Use your teeth. Break the skin. Do it!"

"*Mine.*" Cass bit down, hard enough that Tom screamed and hot wetness spurted against Cass' lower body, wetting the fabric between them. All through Tom's climax, Cass

held the smaller man down, held him down and loved for the first time in his life that he was larger, that he had subdued Tom.

After a moment, he panted, "What the fuck was that about?"

But Tom didn't answer, not precisely. "He scared me."

What? "I know," he said, clueless. "But I've got you now."

"You certainly do." Tom's voice was a purr. "Who knew I'd like to be held down like that? It was hot."

Cass flushed. "Shut up. I'm going to get some whisky."

"Finally drove you to drink?" Tom's voice was softer and his face bore a slight smile.

"No, I'm going to use it to make sure your wound is clean from the..." Cass cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Sucking and biting."

He thought he heard Tom snicker as he headed down the stairs.

* * * *

Tom woke when Cass touched his shoulder. His face felt hot and swollen, his eyes sore and gritty, as if there were gravel under his eyelids. "Hey..." His voice sounded raspy to his own ears but he had to make an effort to speak since Cass looked so concerned.

And a little freaked out. Oh, shit, had something happened between them?

The big man shifted in a wooden chair next to Tom's bed.

Where were they? This rustic log loft wasn't the bunkhouse or Adrian and Cody's fanciful Victorian.

"Line cabin," Cass told him, as if reading his confusion. "It's something that Cody refurbished on Adrian's land."

"But..." His mind was groggy... Ah. Of course, Cody and Adrian knew that Tom couldn't recuperate just anywhere. He might change while in the grip of fever dreams. This was the safest place for him, but that didn't explain what the hell Cass was doing here.

"Don't you have a foal to take care of?" he demanded, grouchy.

The worry in Cass' gaze lightened. "Yes."

"So why aren't you doing it?"

"It's not time for her feeding."

Warm, Tom shoved one of his blankets back. Probably the line cabin didn't have any other heating than a woodstove or fireplace but the chill felt good to his dry, burning skin. "You're not making sense."

"Sorry. I brought the foal out here with one of the mustang mares in a trailer. They're both in the small shed attached to this cabin."

"But why?"

"So I could take care of both you and the baby, of course," Cass said, giving Tom a look as if he was very dim. "Adrian and Cody wanted to do it, but they're both up to their asses in work."

"Uh huh." Tom rubbed his brow. "Did they give you any reason for why we're, uh, up here?"

Cass shrugged. "It's quiet and this is on the border between our ranch and Adrian's, so it's convenient for hunting strays. I already found some fencing down on the north pasture. Probably going to take me a week to repair that."

Tom shook his head, looking around the room again. "How long have we been here?"

"Two days," Cass said. "You've been feverish. Last night you wanted..."

"What?"

"Me to bite you." Cass frowned and turned bright red. "You're stronger than you look. And bossy."

"I...bite me?" Oh, shit. His wolf was demanding a mark from a suitor he found more suitable than the creature who had attacked him. Tom's wolf didn't care that he would put Cass in danger. Even Big Cass couldn't fight a rabid wolf shifter.

Tom sat up abruptly, grabbing his hand. "Cass! You didn't do it, did you?" Tom's hand went to the flesh above his heart. He rubbed it and his eyes widened. "Fuck, you did bite me!"

Cass' bashful green gaze dropped. "Not much of a bite and you...begged me, Tom."

Tom's hand moved up to the mark that had been forced on him by the creature. It ached sullenly but wasn't causing him the soul-sick feeling he'd dreaded.

"You asked me to suck on that bite on your neck first. I didn't want to do it!" Cass grumbled. "But you really seemed to like it when I did."

He flushed an even deeper colour and suddenly Tom could see how it must have unfolded, this terrible mistake. He'd been out of his head with fever and his wolf had taken

over. He'd wanted the taint sucked out and the poison of the creature's bond broken by the man he really wanted to cover him.

Tom closed his eyes and reached under his remaining blankets to touch himself, stroking his cock as it hardened. He could imagine the pleasure and pain of Cass' innocent mouth opening over his wound, sucking gently until Tom's fingers had threaded through his hair in silent demand, ordering him to suck harder.

Oh, God, yes, he must have begged.

He licked his lips and opened his eyes to see Cass was looking at the floor, obviously embarrassed. He had no idea of the passion of a wolf shifter and Tom hadn't had the ability in his state to temper his demands.

"You wouldn't settle down until I agreed to do it." Cass shrugged. "I was sure to use some whisky on it afterwards. You didn't like that as much as the bite."

Tom bet he hadn't liked a chemical after Cass had tasted him, only Cass would have no idea why. He rubbed his chest, feeling the slight impressions of Cass' teeth in his skin. He'd only just broken it, no doubt urged on by Tom, but that had been enough. He had never wanted to be marked, never wanted to be bonded to someone, especially a vulnerable human, but if he had to wear someone's brand, Cass was the man.

Cass swallowed audibly. Tom reached out and cupped his cheek, knowing he had come hard from that bite...Cass wouldn't have had any idea why. "Are you all right, Cass?"

"I'm fine."

But he wasn't fine. Tom's enhanced senses picked up how Cass was confused...and aroused.

Still he held Tom's gaze. "The important thing is that *you're* fine."

"Have you been staying close to the cabin when you weren't working on the fencing?"

Cass nodded. "You were insistent, especially at night. You wouldn't sleep unless I was inside with the door locked and the shutters on the windows."

Tom sagged back against his pillows. At least he'd done that much, tried despite his weakened body to protect his human. If the rabid wolf had been prowling, he would have made short work of Cass, who wouldn't have had a clue how to protect himself.

Tom realised abruptly he would have to change that. He sat up, determined to get out of bed. Something fell onto the floor with a clanking thud.

If it were possible, Cass turned an even deeper shade of crimson.

Tom reached down, head swimming at the movement.

Silver chains.

He laughed, grabbing his healing ribs. *Oh, shit, it hurt to laugh.*

Chapter Four

"Cody insisted on the chains," Cass said. "I took them off when you passed the worst of the fever."

"Of course he insisted," Tom said. He shoved hair out of his eyes and watched Cass track the motion.

"I'm glad you think it's funny. You gave me a hell of a scare." Cass crossed his arms. "And now I want you to tell me why. Because I've had time to think while I've been workin' and shit is just not adding up. First you seemed spooked on the ranch before you were attacked that night, asking if any strangers had been around..."

Tom nodded. Cass had indeed been doing some thinking.

"Then you don't want to go to the hospital. And after we got you fixed up, Cody and Adrian insisted on this out of the way cabin and the chains. Chains! Hell, they didn't even want me looking out for you. They said you'd do fine on your own but I couldn't leave you because you're..." Cass stopped and chewed his full bottom lip, making Tom want to nip it.

"Because..." Tom couldn't help the purr in his voice. Things were bad, he knew that, but this was his mate, even if innocent Cass had no idea.

"Because you're...mine." Cass dropped his gaze. "My friend, I mean."

Cass ran a big hand over Tom's blanket, smoothing it out, over and over again. Tom watched him and imagined that hand on him, on his cock, stroking.

"Anyway, you're going to tell me what the hell is going on." Cass sounded firm.

Tom quirked a brow. A slight smile touched his lips. He liked Cass' bossiness.

"I already have a theory." Cass reached for the sheet and flicked it aside. He encouraged Tom onto his stomach and lifted a corner of the bandage, exposing the stitches on his back. Tom could imagine that all that remained now were pink lines on the flesh. Shifters healed fast. "Your wounds have nearly closed up."

Tom's body broke out in goose pimples at Cass' touch. "Yeah, they have." He sighed. Shit, no way was that normal.

"And you were attacked by some kind of massive wolf."

Tom looked over his shoulder at Cass, waiting.

"But it was the chains that clinched it. If I were to shave some of the metal off and take it to the jeweller's in town I bet it would be silver. I figured since it's so tarnished. Silver is supposed to have some kind of control over werewolves."

"Very clever."

"I'm not slow, despite my size."

"I never thought you were."

Cass cleared his throat.

Tension hung between them. It made something curl low in Tom's backbone. It made him hard.

"You're some kind of...wolf man, like a werewolf."

"Yes and no."

"Tom, goddamn it! Be straight with me."

Tom laughed. "That's the last thing I want to be with you."

Cass' cheeks reddened again. "So you have been flirtin' with me."

"Took you long enough to see that."

"But I'm...a big man."

"Oh, yeah," Tom said with appreciation. "The only reason I haven't tried to get into your bed is because you're so obviously a virgin."

"And you figured you couldn't stick around because of what you are."

"That's right." Tom huffed out a breath, turning on his side so he could reach up to cup Cass' cheek.

Cass wanted to close his eyes and push his face into the touch but he wouldn't let Tom's beauty distract him. He was already in way over his head. If Tom's wounds hadn't healed super fast, Cass probably would have put aside his uneasiness, never guessed his friend was different.

"You were never meant to know. I like you, I like you so damn much." Tom pulled away, rubbed his eyes. "Can I have some water?"

Cass poured some from a carafe and handed the glass to Tom, watching to make sure he could hold it steady on his own.

"I'm a wolf shifter. You know I come from Montana, but the village where I grew up is a shifter village, full of others of my kind."

Cass nodded. "I follow you."

"It's like all those science fiction and fantasy books you read. Guess you never thought they'd come in handy in real life."

Cass had to agree with that.

"Well, what now?" A strange look passed through normally confident Tom's gaze. "Are we still friends now you know about me?"

That at least Cass knew how to answer. He was surprised by the lump in his throat. "Still friends. Now try to get some sleep."

"Okay." Tom's eyelids were heavy over his grey eyes. "But don't go outside tonight. Promise me."

"I promise." He shifted, moving from the bed.

"Where do you think you're going?" Tom asked, a hand snapping to cover Cass' wrist.

"Leaving you to sleep. You've been restless sometimes."

"Ever think it's because I can smell you but you aren't close enough?" Tom asked.

"Um...No."

"You can take your boots off and get under the covers. I need to feel your skin against mine. Do it now."

Though shocked, Cass couldn't help smiling despite his shyness. "You like givin' orders."

"Yes."

Cass took off his boots and slid under the sheets...only then did Tom close his eyes.

* * * *

Cass blinked, trying to figure out why his back seemed so damn warm. Usually he shifted around so much in bed that there was a cold spot somewhere come morning. Something else was strange, he mused as he floated absently between sleep and awareness. Hot breath against his neck and the weight of an arm tight around his waist.

He jerked upright, panting, and looked over his shoulder at Tom, who pushed brown hair out of his eyes with a quizzical look.

"You look like I seduced you instead of just slept with you," Tom said.

Cass felt himself colouring. Damn, he hated that he did that so easily. It could make life back at the bunkhouse fucking miserable sometimes.

"Don't look so embarrassed. I like it that you're..." Tom cleared his throat. "Untouched."

"Untouched?" Cass rubbed his eyebrow, wishing he was anywhere but here in bed with his best friend, having this conversation. Except he didn't want to be anywhere but in bed with his best friend. "That's a stupid thing to call it."

Tom grinned. "Yeah, it is. Sorry." His eyes grew more serious. "I'm also sorry I conked out last night before we could talk more. Even though you sounded very reasonable with your theories, you have to be freaking out."

"I am, off and on. But it helps that I still have to check on the foal every two hours. Besides, you're recovering." Cass pushed Tom onto his stomach so he could take a look under his loose bandages. The scratches looked even fainter this morning. "Looks like you'll be well enough to help out soon if you feel up to it."

"Good, it's fucking boring lying around here and besides..." Tom's face tightened.

"Besides?"

"I want to see if that wolf has been around while I've recovering. I should be able to catch his scent if he's been anywhere near the cabin."

"He's still, uh, after you?"

Tom nodded.

"But why?"

Tom turned on his side to face Cass, leaning his chin against his hand. It struck Cass as a very intimate position, like lovers talking in bed. "The wolf who attacked me didn't smell right. As aggressive as he was, he also smelt *afraid*, which doesn't make sense. But he's dangerous, Cass. I need to know if he's been around."

"All right," Cass said, "But you're not to go running after him, looking for another fight. You didn't do so well in the last one."

Tom's eyes widened with a trace of amusement. "Thanks!"

"You're welcome." Cass swallowed and leant close to Tom before he realised he'd really fucking lost it. He was still having moments where he thought he was losing his mind over the wolf shifter stuff and now here he was about to plant a kiss on his best friend's lips.

Before he could pull away, Tom slipped his hand around Cass' neck. His grey eyes bore into Cass'. "Where are you going?"

"I—"

Tom kissed him.

Bam.

"Oh." Cass pulled away, blinking.

"What?"

"Lightning."

"Really?" Tom looked pleased. His gaze went to Cass' mouth as if he couldn't wait to do it again.

Cass wasn't sure he would survive if he did. When Tom had kissed him, at first he'd felt merely the dry brush of two lips and then...zap! He'd experienced a shot of electricity to his nipples and his balls, almost like Tom had kissed his aching shaft. He shifted on the bed, hoping his ginormous erection wasn't too obvious.

"What is it about you?" Cass mused. "I've been alone since my dad died but it's been okay. But I went on a crash diet for you."

"You know I think that diet is bogus," Tom said in disgust. "You're a big guy and I like it. I've wondered what it would be like to be crushed under all that muscle."

Cass opened his mouth in shock but Tom cut him off before he could speak. "Cass, uh, there's something I haven't told you yet."

Uneasiness slunk under Cass' breast bone. "Would this have anything to do with what's brewin' between me and you?"

Tom swallowed. "Yeah. I should have left here weeks ago. I've...dreamed about you, dreamed about your mark on me."

"Mark..." Cass frowned. "Like when I bit you."

Tom's eyes half-closed as he sucked in a breath. He shuddered and colour touched his cheekbones. "Yesss... Your teeth in my skin, making me yours. When that shifter attacked me and marked me, my wolf used it to get what he wanted. You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." Tom looked annoyed, the way he always did when Cass put himself down.

Cass shoved aside his confusion. "What is it you want to tell me?"

Tom shifted on the bed, running his hand over the quilt before he met Cass' eyes. "We're kind of halfway mated."

Stunned, Cass stared. Then he sat up and reached for his boots.

"Cass?" Tom reached out and placed a hand on his arm but Cass shrugged it off. "Where the fuck are you going?"

"Out to take care of the foal," Cass growled. "Get some rest."

"Cass!"

He was already on the steps, heading down from the loft. When he reached the front door, he shoved it open with his shoulder, pausing to take a deep breath. His eyes were stinging. So what? He just hadn't had enough sleep. After a moment, he headed for the shed where the foal waited.

Chapter Five

"You're so good with her," Tom said.

Cass was feeding some milk replacer to the foal, his big hand cupping the back of the little animal's head as she gorged.

"Not as good as you are," Cass said. "And why are you up? I told you to stay in bed."

"I don't listen too good when my friend is upset." Tom moved carefully towards Cass and Cass stiffened, torn between helping Tom and feeding the hungry foal.

"Stay there, I'm fine." Tom settled down on the straw next to Cass with a sigh. He looked small and delicate next to Cass, who knew he was an oversized ox while Tom was a well-proportioned man with a runner's frame. Cass' self-consciousness grew.

"I know I fucked up..." Tom began.

Duh. Cass grunted.

"But I'm not a mind reader. I need to know what exactly about...being my mate made you run."

Cass frowned, staring at some of the dust from the straw sparkling in the warm morning glow. Tom said nothing and Cass liked that, liked that Tom was his friend enough to know to give him time to think.

"When I bit you, it was...intense." Cass shrugged. "I thought I felt that way because I'm not, ah, very experienced."

"What do you mean?" Tom cocked his head. His hair shifted on his shoulders and his grey eyes were sober, his face still pale despite his bronzed skin. Cass was glad he was healing though it was unsettling to realise that this man was actually stronger and more resilient physically than Cass was. Cass was used to being the muscle, the man who made others step back.

"I was just under your wolf spell," Cass said mournfully.

"My...what?" Tom looked blank. Then he laughed, falling back on the straw. "My wolf spell! Oh, Jesus."

"Don't laugh at me!" His chest hurt. He lowered the bottle and the baby nudged him, demanding before she sidestepped, dancing away as if picking up on Cass' mood.

"Oh." Tom's eyes softened. "Oh, Cass, I'm not laughing at you."

"Don't bullshit me."

"Well, maybe a little." Tom tried to sit up and groaned, so Cass reached down and lifted him easily with one hand. "Thanks."

Tom looked at Cass' hand still on him and Cass reluctantly removed it. His heart was thumping from just that touch. He was a fool.

"I'm sorry to say it, but I don't have any spells. When you bit me, it was basic attraction." Tom stared into his eyes. "Just like I've always felt for you."

"You..." Cass swallowed, then asked, very softly, "Really?"

Tom closed his eyes, inhaling sharply. "Oh, yeah. And I have tried to be good around you. Tried to be your friend."

"You're a good friend." Cass shrugged, not sure where the hell they were now. Recovering himself, he offered the bottle to the foal. "I was going to miss you when you went off to Italy in the fall."

Tom's eyes snapped open. "I was trying to talk you into going with me."

Cass paused and the foal butted his hand. "Huh?"

Tom shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Yeah. It was like chipping granite, getting through to you. Do you think I had you take out all those travel books for fun? I wanted you to look at them with me. I've been pretty fucked up since I met you. I kept trying to leave, I kept trying to get closer."

Cass had no idea what to say. Tom had been fucked up...over him?

"Will you do something for me?" Tom's voice took on a wistful quality that made heat spiral slowly in Cass' lower back. His balls drew up and his cock thickened.

"Yes." It came out raspy. Cass cleared his throat.

"Take off your shirt."

Cass blinked. "But it's morning."

Tom grinned. "Yeah, so?"

Cass studied the other man but could see nothing but sincerity in his face. He put down the bottle and tugged off the plaid shirt he wore over his white T-shirt. At the last moment he held the T-shirt bunched at his middle, aware of his size.

"Let it go, Cass," Tom said, covering his hand. "I want to see you."

"I'm nothing special," Cass mumbled. Heat started on his chest and rose up his neck to his face. He took off the T-shirt and knelt in his jeans, holding his breath.

Tom made no secret of studying him. "Shit, I wish I could draw."

"Not me," Cass said.

"Yes, you." Tom shifted closer and ran a hand down the centre of Cass' chest. Cass watched that slender finger, darker against his pale skin. It paused and circled one of Cass' large nipples which beaded at the touch, as if asking for more. "God, look at how you react, so innocent." Tom had shifted closer, coming to kneel between Cass' parted legs. He put his mouth on Cass' nipple.

Cass shouted.

The mustang mare snorted and the baby took refuge close to her.

Cass stared at Tom in shock, panting. Tom's lips were moist, flushed a deeper colour than normal. "Um. Probably you shouldn't shout when we're in the shed," he said. When Cass dipped his head, shamed, Tom gripped the back of his head, twisting his fingers in Cass' hair. "But I liked it. Fuck, it was hot."

"I liked your mouth on my nipple." He couldn't help but admit that. It had felt like a shot of electricity with warm, wet suction, and Jesus, Tom's *mouth* on him. It had gone straight to his confined and aching cock.

"Want more?"

Cass hesitated, not sure if he could take it. "But I might..."

"Come?"

Cass nodded.

"You should probably take off your jeans. Just so you don't come inside them." Tom's eyes had an incandescent light.

Cass held Tom's gaze, breath stuck somewhere in his chest.

"Not yet."

Tom swallowed. "We don't have to...I know there's a lot of shit to work out."

"I'm going to finish feeding the foal," Cass said.

"Oh, right!" Tom was blushing. "I can muck out the shed while you do that."

Cass wanted to tell him no, but he guessed it was ridiculous to be protective of a shape shifter who could probably bench-press Cass. "Okay. There's fresh straw in the back of the truck."

* * * *

An hour later, Cass settled on the straw outside the horse stalls. Tom joined him, pouring some coffee from a Thermos he must have brought out with him that morning. It was a typical thoughtful Tom thing, the kind of thing that had drawn Cass in the first place.

"What does it mean, that we're, umm, halfway mated?" Cass asked.

Tom choked on his coffee before managing a smile. "Sorry, just didn't expect you to ask that right off."

Cass waited, giving Tom time to think. That was only fair. His lower body pulsed and there was a curling around his backbone. He was still shirtless and he'd seen Tom stealing glances while he'd mucked out the shed and Cass had fed the foal. It had sure as hell warmed him up.

"Okay, I'm not an expert because I've never..." Tom cleared his throat. "I never thought I'd mate myself to anyone. But that's what I've done. I belong to you but you don't belong to me, Cass. Unless you accept my mark on you."

Cass frowned. "But you could have anyone!"

Tom looked at him and raised a brow.

"But...you want me."

"Yes," Tom said. "But with that wolf out there, you need to know you're in danger. You've challenged him by removing his mark on me."

"When I sucked your neck." Cass grimaced, remembering the taste of Tom's blood, the flavour of something wrong.

Tom nodded.

"Is he out there now?"

Tom shook his head, frowning. "I don't know. It rained recently so it was hard to get a trace. I'll have to roam the woods in my wolf form to be sure."

"But if he's out there, is that safe?" Cass reached out and cuffed Tom's wrist.

Tom smiled at the possessive gesture, his eyes on Cass' hand even as he made no movement to free himself. "No, but life isn't exactly safe if you're a shifter. It's complicated."

"Huh, I guess. But you're not going into the woods without me."

"Cass!"

"I'll bring a rifle." Cass thought about it. "Do I need silver bullets?"

"Regular bullets will put him down but they won't kill him," Tom said. "Cass, you're no match for him. He's feral. There's no telling what he'll do."

"What he won't do is hurt you again," Cass said.

Tom's eyes widened and then he cupped Cass' cheek. "Cass."

"What?"

"Nothing... Just you. Can I see you now?" Eagerness shone in Tom's eyes. "I've wanted to see all of you, all that muscle, for a long time."

Chapter Six

Tom could smell Cass' anxiety at shucking his jeans but his need to see his human outweighed his patience. He'd been good. He'd flirted. He'd even let his gaze fall on Cass' mouth from time to time but the other man had been oblivious to that signal.

Subtle was just not in the cards if he wanted Cass.

"You're beautiful."

Cass dropped his head. "If you want to see me, I'm nothing special. You don't have to make up stuff."

"Have I ever done that?" Tom covered Cass' hand, squeezing it with just a trace of his greater strength to get his point across.

Cass met his gaze. "No." He shrugged and then his hands went to his jeans.

Tom found himself holding his breath as the other man slowly unbuttoned them. As stripteases went, this was not a particularly sexy one. Cass' fingers shook. He didn't look remotely enthusiastic. But none of that could wither Tom's excitement as he saw the bare skin of his mate at last.

His legs were hairier than Tom's, his thighs as big as tree trunks. He shoved off his jeans, leaving simple white briefs. So Cass. No sexy underwear though the monster that bulged under those plain briefs captured Tom's gaze. He licked his lips. "Are you...going to take the rest off anytime soon?"

Cass kicked off his jeans but hesitated.

It was too much for Tom, who was practically twitching with the need to touch. He tackled Cass, laughing at the startled look in his eyes. "Mine," he whispered, brushing his lips against Cass'.

"What are you doing?"

"I'll stop if you ask me," Tom said. He ran a finger over the elastic of Cass' prim underwear. Then he reached down and gently squeezed the base of Cass' cock, and Cass' eyes rolled back in his sockets as he faded back into the straw.

Feeling every bit the predator he was, Tom cupped Cass' balls, feeling them heavy in his hands, Jesus, like boulders. Nothing small about Cass.

"I'm going to take your briefs off with my teeth," he told Cass.

"God almighty!" Cass breathed.

"Don't pass out."

"No promises."

Tom nuzzled against the lower swell of Cass' belly, just breathing against him, drawing out the anticipation. Cass shivered and a damp spot saturated the fabric concealing him.

"Oh, God." Tom had to take a deep breath. Just who was the virgin here? His fingers were trembling, for fuck's sake.

Taking the fabric in his mouth, he tugged, rolling the cloth down, revealing Cass a little at a time, teasing them both. He paused to explore Cass' thick bush of bronze-blond hair, thick enough so that Tom's fingers disappeared into the luxuriant thatch.

Cass vibrated under his touch, which felt a bit like an earthquake on a mountain. "Tom!" His hands dug into Tom's hair, clutching for a half-second before he apparently remembered his own strength.

"Cass."

"Uh?" Cass' eyes were dazed.

"We need to get something clear. Come with me."

Cass sat up, frowning. His hair was tousled and he looked like he was waking up very reluctantly from an erotic dream. "Tom?"

Tom's lips quirked at the irritation in Cass' voice. Oh, yeah. Turnabout was fair play. Time for Cass to experience some frustration. He'd been driving Tom crazy for months.

Tom ducked out of the shed and headed for the ranch truck. He felt giddy because he was about to show Cass something he'd concealed all his life.

He stopped at the front of the truck and looked over his shoulder at Cass, seeing Cass had his jeans clenched in one hand. To put them back on? Like hell. But Tom would deal with that little bit of mutiny in a moment.

He reached down, took hold of the underside of the truck and lifted.

"Holy shit!" Cass yelled.

Tom let the truck fall so it bounced on the front wheels. He turned to Cass, hands on his hips. "You can't hurt me."

Cass was staring at him, the jeans hanging limp in one hand.

"You hear me, Cass? I don't know who told you that you have to be careful with someone—and it's true with most people—but it's not true of me. I don't want you holding back when I'm with you. I won't break. In fact, I'm the one who has to be careful I don't hurt you."

He returned to the shed and Cass still didn't say anything.

Uncertainty spiked. "I'm not a freak." *Please don't think that. I'm your friend and, God, I want to be your lover. Don't run from me.*

"You're a miracle, Tom, like a comic book hero or something." Cass reached out and touched Tom's arm as if marvelling at the strength contained in leaner muscle than his own beefier frame.

Tom shuddered at that simple gesture, but Cass looked unsure of himself.

So Tom said, "Oh, yeah, touch me, baby. You know how hard I am right now? I liked showing off for you. In the wild, only the strongest wolves can mate." He lifted up on his toes and touched his lips to Cass'. "And I want to mate."

Cass hefted him off his feet, his grip strong. Tom felt small, not quite in control.

He liked it.

"Are you hard?" He nipped Cass' ear.

"What do you think?" Cass growled. "I could pound through cement."

Tom grinned. He could feel the swollen imprint of Cass against him, long and thick. "That silly girl you went on the date with was right about one thing."

Cass stiffened and Tom guessed he was embarrassed that Tom knew the story.

"She was right about you being King Kong." He reached down and cupped Cass, unable to get a handle on all of him. "Holy shit, you're hung like a stud."

"I can't..." A little fear now because Cass was obviously ready to come just from Tom's groping.

"No. In my mouth, Cass. I want to be on my knees with your cock in my throat."

Cass' nostrils flared and his eyes went blank. He dropped Tom back onto the ground, his large hands pushing Tom down so he was kneeling in front of Cass, who towered over him.

Cass clearly was in dire need, and Tom guessed that no one had ever done this for him. Tom yanked down the briefs and Cass stepped out of them and oh, Jesus, he was all man.

"Like Zeus. Like Hercules," Tom whispered, rubbing his face adoringly against the meaty prick. Smears of pre cum marked his skin and he loved it, loved having Cass' scent on him at last.

"Put it inside you." Cass' voice was raspy. He was pretty far gone, driven out of his usual shy sweetness.

"With pleasure." He licked the large head, then smiled.

"What?" Cass hissed. His enormous balls were drawn up tight as he trembled, ready to shoot.

"You just look like one of those exotic mushrooms they have in big city supermarkets. You know, the ones with massive heads?"

Cass' fingers tightened on Tom's head. "I want to come in your mouth. Do you, um, mind?"

For an answer, Tom swallowed more of Cass with enthusiasm. He moaned at the taste and feel of the solid, heavy weight. He wrapped a hand around the long inches at the base, unable to take all of Cass.

Cass' hands in his hair became rougher, the nails dragging against Tom's scalp. It was so hot, feeling those nails against him whenever he let Cass thrust into his mouth. Tom unzipped his jeans, shoved them down and took himself in his free hand, jerking himself in excitement.

"Tom, God, Tom, I never thought you'd want to do this for me," Cass choked out.

Tom let Cass fall from his lips long enough to see the wonder and emotion in Cass' eyes. He looked stunned that Tom was so hungry to suck his cock.

"When you look at me like that, I want to use those silver chains in the cabin upstairs to secure you to the bed. It would be hot, like having Atlas tied up."

"Atlas...the big dude with the world on his shoulders."

Tom rubbed Cass' thigh affectionately before kissing it. "That would be you, Cass. You worry too much, care about everyone."

"Tom..."

"Sorry." Tom guessed that Cass couldn't take a long, drawn out session. He needed Tom to take care of him. "Baby, it's okay, just enjoy it."

He took more of Cass this time, his mouth full of him. Cass thrust and his cock hit the back of Tom's throat. In a human, it might have been too rough but for Tom it was perfect,

but still he could feel Cass's hesitation so Tom pulled away for a moment, demanding, "Harder. Fuck my mouth."

Hands dug into his skull, holding him still and then Cass was thrusting, wild as an unbroken stallion. Cass cried out, his cock shoved deep. He went over the edge in a rush, hot come filling Tom's mouth, so much he wasn't sure he could swallow it all. He swallowed and swallowed and choked and then laughed, collapsing at Cass' feet.

Cass joined him a second later like a downed redwood. He curled up against Tom, still shaking, so Tom wrapped his arms around him. There were tears in Cass' eyes.

"It's okay. You're safe. You're with me." Something told him he had to be extra gentle now. Cass had obviously lived his life with this fucked-up belief no one could ever want him.

"I didn't hurt you?"

Tom raised a brow.

"Oh, right, you lifted the truck." Cass ducked his head. He was so gorgeous, and so unaware of it, the muscles on his body gleaming with sweat, his long cock slowly softening.

Tom licked his lips, still tasting Cass. "You'd never hurt me, even if I couldn't lift a truck."

Cass looked at Tom with wounded eyes, shy eyes. Emotion squeezed his chest. He was glad he hadn't been able to leave. Glad that things had somehow worked out that he'd mated himself to this one special man.

"What you'd do is die to protect me," Tom said and he experienced a sudden chill down his back even in the midst of finally being with his Cass.

Chapter Seven

The growl made Cass' blood freeze.

That it had come from his...lover? His best friend? Didn't make it any less scary.

He covered the phone and raised his brows at Tom, who wasn't relaxed anymore, but glaring, his smaller body braced as if he were going to tackle Cass.

"What does *he* want?"

"I figured with your super hearing you'd have caught it." Cass didn't back down though a cold feather brushed the base of his spine. Tom was definitely not human. "Our ramrod wants me to know that fencing is down between the west pasture and the foothills. The other hands are moving the herd temporarily but I need to get up there fast since we've already lost some animals. Map out the damage, fix it quick."

"I don't want you hiking up there on your own," Tom said, taking Cass' arm and squeezing just a little too hard for comfort. Tom could probably bend him like a pretzel, which was going to take some getting used to.

"I've hiked up there on my own plenty of times," Cass said. He uncovered the phone, told Tony he'd head out right away and ended the call.

"That was before you claimed me." Tom growled. "You think this is some kind of mild human dating thing? If that shifter is still around he'll rip out your throat!"

"Of course he will," Cass said with forced calm. He sensed he needed to keep extra centred when Tom was so uptight. "He's trying to force you to be his mate."

Tom sagged back against the shed wall, staring at Cass.

"This mark he forced on you sounds like taking away your choice."

Tom swallowed. Feeling the weight of Tom's gaze, Cass assembled some of the stuff he'd stored in the shed. He pulled the rifle free of its leather scabbard, checking the action of the gun.

"Yes, marking me by force was making me his. Under pack law, he could...make me his and start a new pack. That may be what he's driven to do since he smelt so afraid." Tom squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered. "Cass, I'm a submissive wolf. I'm not some alpha."

"It doesn't matter what you are." Cass leaned down and pressed his lips against Tom's. He wasn't used to kissing yet and he almost lost himself in covering Tom's mouth with his, but what they were discussing was too important to get sidetracked. "Whatever you think of me, I'm not a fool, Tom."

"But you're so gentle. You've been an advocate for wolves returning to this part of the country."

"I don't like to hurt anything that's wild and just doesn't understand the difference between the park and a rancher's grazing land. But I take care of what's mine." He gathered up the rest of what he'd need. "You stay here. Get some more rest. The foal needs to be fed in another three hours."

"Like hell I'll lie around while you put yourself at risk!"

Cass turned the shed's doorknob but Tom was there beside him, palm flat against the door.

"Tom, I'll keep safe, I promise you," Cass said.

"You don't know. He's stronger than I am. If you hadn't intervened before, he would have made me his and I couldn't have stopped him. My wolf was ready to submit."

"The only person you're going to submit to is me," Cass said firmly and then colour stung his cheeks at what he'd said. He dropped his gaze. "I mean...If you want to."

He didn't understand what he was feeling. Maybe the threat to Tom made him dominant and protective. He sensed that Tom liked him this way, bossy.

Tom pressed against him, and Cass leant his forehead against Tom's. Cass' lover smelt like leaves after the rain, like pine needles crushed underfoot. "I'll never let anything stop me from coming back to you, now that you seem to want me."

"No seem about it," Tom grumbled. "Or didn't you pick up on that a moment ago?"

"I did." Cass cleared his throat. "I'm sorry that call interrupted us and I didn't get to show you the same good time."

"Yeah, me too."

"I don't think I would have been as good as you were."

"Trust me, your mouth on my cock spells a good time."

Cass managed a little grin. "Well, okay. Rain check."

Tom stopped him again when he would have left then. "I'm trusting you to take care of yourself. If you see him, shoot first."

Another chill slid down Cass' back. "I'll do what I have to."

* * * *

Hiking a mile above the truck, Cass hit a trail that had been used by hunters before the land and wildlife had been protected. Birches spread coin-shaped leaves that shivered in the cool spring breeze. He'd warmed up and his breath came fast. Despite the beauty of the forest, he'd had an uncomfortable feeling since he'd arrived and left his vehicle behind him on the dirt road.

He wanted to put it down to Tom's fears.

The woods felt claustrophobic to him in a way he couldn't remember, the silence broken only by the sound of running water from the second creek he'd encountered. On the other side of the water was a path where the brush would meet his shoulders as he walked. He wasn't looking forward to tackling it but it should get him to the area where the fencing was down.

Taking a deep breath and raising the rifle, Cass delved into the old growth forest, listening hard while his heart pounded. He caught the distant sound of a bird calling and the rustle of bushes that could be anything from a squirrel to a bird to a cougar stalking him.

The last thought made his sweaty grip on his gun tighten.

He broke through the woods to find wrinkles in the grass and shards of fence line standing upright like broken teeth. What the hell? He'd been up here just a month before, and that fence had been fine, the cedar undamaged from the harsh winter storms.

As Cass loped closer, he saw fresh grooves in the young grass and mud. Someone had driven a vehicle here, ramming the fence, bringing it down in several large gaps. Again that chill touched him. He couldn't think of anyone who would do something so malicious way the fuck up here. Reaching this area took a lot of effort. Whoever had trashed the fence had obviously not valued their truck very much; Cass had left his behind rather than risk it getting damaged or stuck.

He knelt and examined some of the downed wood, splintered from impact. Blue paint. Had the vehicle been blue? He could ask around town and maybe see if anyone had seen a scratched-up blue truck.

He pulled out his cell phone but found no reception. He'd have to wait to tell the boss. Meanwhile he could maybe jury rig something with the scattered wood, just until he and some of the other hands could get up here and fix it for real.

Ignoring his unease, he started to work.

* * * *

"You smell like fear. Something happened up there." Tom shoved Cass against the truck and laid his hands on him, running them over Cass' shoulders and arms as if to check for injuries. "Christ, I smell blood!"

"Ouch!"

"You're hurt."

"Will you relax? It's just a scratch from snagging the back of my hand on some prairie wood. I had to improvise to patch up the fence."

"Christ, I can't let you out of my sight." Tom sucked in a breath, looking drained. "No sign of the shifter?"

Cass hesitated, then said, "Can we get out of the rain? I should make us some soup or something."

Tom frowned but stepped back. He still crowded Cass, which made Cass want to roll his eyes. His friend had been protective before but that was nothing to his attitude since Cass had marked him.

This mate business really complicated things.

He felt his skin flushing, felt his body tingling and awakening just because he was close to Tom.

On the way back to the cabin, they passed an ancient apple tree with a twisted rose climbing over it, remnants from an old homestead that had once stood on this part of Adrian's ranch. Cass always liked finding old wagon tracks or miner's troughs dried out in the hills. They reminded him of people who had lived here before. They'd lived here, died here and left something behind. Cass admired that.

"What's up?" Tom asked.

"Just...this is nice, living here. If you and I, you know, got closer, it wouldn't be so easy if we lived in the bunkhouse."

"More like impossible." Tom shook his head. "Not everyone is tolerant."

"Exactly. I wish..." He put his arm around Tom.

Tom stiffened for a moment. He looked surprised before he smiled. "I missed you too, sweetie pie."

Cass flipped him off but he was laughing as he cleaned his boots and entered the cabin.

"What kind of soup do you want?" Cass asked.

"I don't care, anything." Tom sat at the tiny kitchen table. "I finished feeding the foal but she'll need more in a couple of hours."

Cass nodded. "Did you go scouting for signs of the wolf?"

"Yes, but not too far from the cabin," Tom said. "And no, nothing conclusive. Just...a feeling."

Cass opened a can of soup and poured it into a pan. "I felt something up there in the foothills, like I was being watched. And it was obvious someone drove through the fence line. A set-up to get one of us up there alone, I reckon."

"Shit, probably me. He can take me if I'm alone."

"I had the rifle. If he was watching, he must have figured I'd use it."

"I'm glad you were careful," Tom said. "I hated letting you go."

"We can't hide in this cabin. If he's still around, we're going to have to deal with him."

Cass set the pan onto the stove.

"He smelt wrong. You didn't ask for this shit. Maybe if I leave, he'll just come after me. It's me he wants."

"No."

"No?"

"No, you're not running. Not from him and sure as hell not from me."

"I don't want to run from you," Tom said. "But if I submit he won't hurt you."

"Wait, I thought now I'd marked you, he was going to come for me anyway."

"Not exactly. The full bond is a mutual giving of the marks. I'd have to mark you and then...I'm free of him unless he can kill my mate." Tom swallowed. "But no way would I risk you."

Cass rubbed his jaw as he considered Tom. There were bruises under his eyes. He might have miraculous healing powers but they still took a toll.

"I wish we could go back." Tom sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "To you telling me stories about your dad and me showing you my album of India. You didn't know what I was. It was simpler."

"The way we spent so much time together it was bound to come out. Isn't that why you always moved around before?" Cass dumped some hot soup into a bowl and placed it in front of Tom. "I'll take care of the foal for the rest of the day."

"Okay, maybe I do need a break. I need to get strong fast."

"As long as you don't think this is your problem alone," Cass said, snagging his own late meal and sitting next to Tom. "Tonight you should mark me."

"*What?*" Tom stared at him. His eyes were beautiful, like the veins of dark grey granite in the peaks high above the grasslands. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard he has no hold over you if I'm your mate."

"No!"

"I want you, Tom, if you'll have me. I already went and fell for you."

"But if we do that, we'll be mated for life. There won't be anyone else once you let my wolf have you."

"I've watched you every weekend you went off into the hills, doing your running thing. You'd come back dusty and scratched, wearing that hot little loin cloth." Cass reached out and meshed his fingers through his lover's. "Even though I'm not much of an athlete and I'd slow you down, all I want is to run with you."

Chapter Eight

While Cass was tending to the foal, Tom found a few candles in the cupboard, no doubt kept in case power went out in the little cabin. He took them up to the loft and placed them around the bed. He straightened and smoothed the worn wedding ring quilt over and over. He stared at it, rubbing damp palms over his jeans.

Sex had never been easy for him since his wolf was so damn picky about whom he slept with, yet he'd had some experience. But being Cass' first lover was intimidating, especially because their first time would inevitably bring the wolf out. Tom had never unleashed his wolf while fucking someone. His cock hardened as he thought of doing that with Cass. But what if he hurt Cass, left him wanting and disappointed?

"Whoa, shut up, you're just making yourself nuts," he told himself.

He didn't have any close friends and his family had died a long time ago, leaving him self-contained, without the habit of confiding in someone. Could he open up to Cass, tell him what he really wanted? The big man had seemed a little daunting at first but early on Tom had seen Cass picking some wild flowers for an elderly neighbour who had lost her pet cat. After that, Tom had sought Cass out.

Maybe Cass was right and bed was where they'd been headed all along. Tom rubbed his jaw, finding his heart wasn't settling down. Sounds were extra loud to his sharp hearing as he listened for Cass' return.

He looked around the loft, trying to see if there was anything else he'd forgotten. Should he have picked some of the flowering apple branches or was that too sentimental? Oh, shit, he'd forgotten lube and condoms. He didn't need a condom. Wolf shifters couldn't catch or transmit anything but he couldn't expect Cass to take that on faith the first time. But they'd definitely need some lube.

He heard the truck pull up just then, breaking into his nervousness and it was a relief. He was making himself crazy, just fretting. He had to trust that somehow he and Cass could work things out. He looked out the window and saw Cass had something in the back of the truck.

"Tom?"

"Here!" He went to the top of the stairs. "I almost didn't hear you."

Cass raised his brows. "Why would you?"

"Never mind."

"You look weird, Tom."

"I'm... We don't have lube, Cass. Or condoms. And I don't have apple blossoms. And this is such a bad idea. If that shifter tries to hurt you..." Tom sank to the top stair.

Cass hesitated at the bottom. "Wow, you're a wreck. I expected to be nervous, not you."

"Surprise." Tom smiled weakly.

"I have condoms but not lube. But that's okay, we have something else that might work."

"What, olive oil? I looked in the pantry and no luck."

"I'm not sure I want to use salad dressing the first time we —"

"I know." Tom groaned. "We need to forget this."

"Will you calm down? There's an alternative."

"Um?" Tom reluctantly clomped down the stairs. Geez, he still had his boots on. Heat was rising in his chest, like the rise of his beast. Cass wanted to take his mark. Cass would let him bite into his flesh and taste his blood and Cass would be his and no other man would ever touch him.

Cass cupped his cheeks. "I'm crazy about you, Tom. That's all you got to remember."

"Okay." He'd try. This close to Cass he could smell him, musky male, straw, the faint trace of milk replacer he'd fed the foal. He smelt like a working cowboy which made Tom's dick rock hard.

"Give me a hand with something?" Cass strode out of the cabin and Tom followed, not knowing what else to do. Wasn't he supposed to be in charge? But he wasn't.

Outside, Tom recognised what Cass had brought to the cabin in the back of the truck: that old tin bathtub, dented but clean, and large enough for both of them. Tom remembered seeing it in a nearby meadow, resting on its side.

"Will it hold water?" he asked.

"Yep. I wasn't sure, but once I rinsed it off, I saw it was sound despite the dents. We need to put it in the cabin."

A bath. Cass wanted to bathe with him in that big old tub.

More heat rushed through him, then calmed into a slow, sexy beat as he and Cass lifted the tub and carried it indoors. He had the thought that it would be fun to bathe in the woods with Cass sometime, as long as they could bring hot water.

"We'll have to heat the water on the stove. Not enough in the tank to fill this monster," Cass said.

Heating and delivering the water settled Tom, but with every splash his wolf clawed harder for freedom. He had never been so aware of another man, of the sound of his breath, of the way his hair curled against the nape of his neck, of his broad shoulders. Tom wanted to lean his head against Cass' back while he rubbed himself all over Cass.

When Cass dumped in more water, Tom caught him close and tugged at the sweater he wore over his T-shirt. "Off," he growled.

"But—"

"I can't wait."

Cass dropped his head bashfully.

"And none of that shit about being ugly." Tom took Cass' hand and drew it down his torso to a not-too-subtle destination. Cass' eyes widened as Tom shoved his hand against his erection, solid and hot under his jeans. Tom moaned and pressed Cass' palm harder. He wanted Cass to hurt him a little, to own him, but he wasn't sure he could share that with his innocent.

"Okay," Cass huffed, yanking off his sweater and tossing it aside. "But the tub's not full yet."

"It will be. With us," Tom said, shucking out of his own sweater and T-shirt, then yanking down his jeans. He hobbled for a moment, having forgotten his damn boots.

Cass laughed and helped get them off, kneeling at Tom's feet so Tom could rest his hands on Cass' wide back. He dug his fingers into that gorgeous muscle, liking the hint of armpit hair, the silken skin under his callused fingers.

Now the jeans were gone, Tom's little surprise was revealed.

"A loin cloth!" Cass whispered, staring at the jury rigged scrap of cloth.

"I made it out of some hand towels," Tom said. "Just tied it at the waist. Kinda dumb, but you said you thought it was hot."

Cass shocked him by leaning forward to kiss Tom's cock. Tom hissed in a breath and his hands locked on Cass' head. "Right there. God. I need you right there."

"Is that right?" A sparkle in Cass' eyes reminded Tom that they teased each other regularly. Cass lifted the loose material and it fell aside in two halves. Tom's cock speared the air, wet-tipped, needy.

"I've thought about this." Cass placed his mouth directly on Tom, sucking the tip as if he wanted to drink Tom's taste.

Tom saw to his horror that his hands had started to morph, with long nails sprouting from his fingers. He jerked away.

"What is it?"

"Don't..." Tom twisted away, panting. How could he have done that? He could have hurt Cass with his claws. "Don't look at me."

"Tom." Cass' voice was exasperated. "You sound like me. You remember, when I was being really stupid about how I look?"

"It's not the same thing. I'm...I look like a freak, Cass."

"That's exactly how I felt," Cass said. "I'd be eating a donut after workin' all day and then you'd come into the bunkhouse. It would taste like ashes because how would a guy like you want me?"

Tom turned his head slightly and Cass moved behind him, embracing him. They stayed like that for a while but though Tom fought for control, his sharp claws didn't go away. Worse, he caught the reflection of his glowing eyes in the window.

"I'm going to take off the rest of my stuff and get in the tub," Cass finally said. "When you're ready, hope you'll join me."

Didn't Cass get it? Tom gave a disbelieving laugh. He was a monster, ugly. He'd never had this problem with anyone he bedded before but now when it mattered most he looked like this.

The splash of water drew his attention. Cass was in the tub. He didn't look relaxed but he was, oh, shit he was...

Desperate to look at Cass, to *see* Cass, Tom turned fully around. The big guy peeked at him, a hand cupping his sex. Bu he couldn't hide all of it.

Tom purred and stepped closer. "Need a hand with that?" It was a cheesy line but he didn't care.

Cass suddenly yanked him into the water which splashed everywhere. Snickering, plastered together, the look and scent of his mate, his skin under Tom's touch felt as natural

as running through the woods, even though he had to be careful of scratching Cass. But Tom had always been stronger and managed to conceal it.

"You look like Zeus," Tom said. "All you need is a curly beard and you'd be a ringer for the king of the gods."

Colour touched Cass' cheeks. Tom couldn't resist kissing him and suddenly they were crushed even closer, his legs open so he was sitting on Cass' lap. "Fuck me, Cass. Fuck me. Please."

"Tom..." Cass' eyes rounded. "I thought you'd want...You're the experienced one."

"What I've always wanted was your handprint on my ass or your cock in it." Tom wondered if he'd scare off his sweet Cass, but said, "I want to be dominated by you."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that."

"Cass, relax and breathe, man, breathe..."

After a while, Cass seemed to calm. There was no sound in the room except the ticking of an old clock, their mingled breathing and the tinkle of water from Tom's fingertips as he gently reached out and massaged Cass's stiff shoulders.

"I don't know how to dominate anyone. You mean chain you up and stuff?"

"I mean...we talk about it first." Tom felt colour heat his cheeks. Even for him, this wasn't easy. It helped that Cass was his best friend, the best friend he'd ever had and he'd spent hours and hours talking to him over the past few months. "It, uh, has to turn us both on."

Maybe he should let this go, hide this part of himself. He'd managed to hide the wolf for a long time.

As if he read Tom's thoughts, Cass frowned. "You said talk about it first, Tom. Be a man about it. Don't shut me out or I can't give you what you want."

Tom's eyes widened and he laughed softly. "That's it. You just gave me a zing, talking that way."

Cass looked doubtful. "I'm just bein' me."

"Exactly." Tom waited, letting Cass consider that.

Cass licked his lips, still shy. "You like it when I talk to you, direct like that?"

"Yeah. How about you?"

Cass considered some more. He wouldn't be rushed. "Someone needs to keep you safe. Who better than your best friend?"

"When you get bossy with me, when you hold me down, it's so fucking hot. I used to lie in my bed and imagine you climbing in, imagine you tying my wrists and gagging me so I wouldn't make too much sound and wake up the other hands. And then you'd fuck me," Tom said. "Even though you knew I'd spread myself for you whenever you wanted me, I loved fantasising that you made me helpless, made me take it."

"Maybe...maybe we had the same fantasy sometimes." Cass wouldn't meet his eyes. "I used to have this one where you were my slave, you know, back in Rome since you're always going on about Italy lately. I didn't have to worry about ruining our friendship or any of the stuff I worried about. I could just...have you."

"You can," Tom breathed, heart thudding, perspiration breaking out in sharp prickles on his upper lip and hairline at Cass's words.

Then Cass did lay hands on Tom then, tugging his head back by the hair. "You want me, all of me?"

Feeling that big cock against him, Tom shuddered. "Yes!"

Cass shoved Tom into place, facing away from Cass. The water lapped at his thighs as soap-slick fingers tentatively found his opening and rubbed against it.

"Oh, yeah." Tom hoped he sounded encouraging. "Whatever you want, Cass."

He was invaded and Cass was a little rough. Tom loved it, knowing that Cass was letting down his guard and trying to please. His fingers moved in and out of Tom's channel and he squeezed them in welcome. His balls tightened and he knew that he was close, explosively close.

"Please, Cass," he whimpered.

He heard a condom wrapper tearing. Cass grunted as his slick cock pressed against Tom, bent over in position and breathing hard. He was completely covered by the larger man. His submissive wolf loved it. His claws rattled, clutching the tub's side as Cass penetrated him.

"You'll never have any other cock up you but mine," Cass growled. He thrust again and lifted one leg, adjusting the angle. He nailed Tom's prostate and he shook under the onslaught of that big cock. God, he loved it. Words were locked up in his mind, his throat. He wanted to beg Cass to tie him to the bed, to paddle his ass, to make him crawl so he could suck Cass off...

Cass stiffened and cursed softly, "Fuck, oh, fuck."

Cass coming set Tom off, pleasure rolling him like thunderheads, one after another so he just breathed, trying to live through it. His vision blurring...spikes of pleasure...Tom turned his head, burying sharp teeth into the hard flesh of Cass' muscled upper arm. Blood ran, dripping into the tub.

Chapter Nine

"You're mine now," Tom whispered as Cass caressed his hair hours later. They were lying in the double bed in the loft, the small window open to let in the cool breath of the night with nothing between them and the stars, the heavy rising moon.

"I love you too," Cass said, as Tom had known he would. His Cass would not have given himself if he didn't love someone. It just wasn't his way.

"I've never told anyone that!" Tom gave a shaky laugh. "I feel..."

"Scared, yeah." Cass swallowed. "It's scary to let someone get so close 'cause he can rip you apart."

"I'd never do that, but I'm still afraid of what might happen. You feel too good. I'm not supposed to be this happy."

Cass swatted his arm. "That's fucked up."

"I know." Tom shrugged, but he couldn't help feeling a long shadow looming over this thing with Cass.

"I was thinking...Adrian is hiring. He can't afford to pay as much as the ranch, but maybe he'd throw in this cabin," Cass said, running a hand over the carved logs at the headboard. "We can't stay at the bunkhouse anymore. Some of the guys just wouldn't go for us sleeping together and I don't want to spend another night without you under me."

Tom raised his brows. "Is that right?"

"Yeah." Cass still looked shy but something else in his eyes gave Tom a pure and delicious feeling. His human liked to take control sometimes, liked to get bossy, and fuck, was it ever hot.

Tom was a wolf who had been meant to submit to another of his kind. He'd known it was his nature. With Cass, he could have the gentle dominance he craved.

"I think now we're mated, Cody would tolerate us in his territory."

"Cody is like you," Cass said blankly. "Of course he is. Here I thought it was Adrian who was the shifter."

Tom shook his head. "You just assumed since he works for Adrian but he's an alpha shifter."

Cass sat up in bed, pulling Tom with him. He pushed the hair off Tom's forehead so tenderly that Tom's throat tightened. Was this what it was like to matter to someone?

"Do you think he could help with our rabid wolf?" Cass asked.

"It's not his problem, Cass." Tom frowned, a little affronted. Okay, he wasn't an alpha, but he'd been taking care of himself for a long time. He didn't like turning over his shit over to someone else.

"Ummm."

He could see Cass wasn't going to just leave it but he was done talking. "What's wrong with this picture?"

Cass blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Look around you, cowboy, and wise up," Tom drawled. He waited, his blood heating up as Cass' still-damp-from-the-tub scent teased him. They'd lingered in the water a long time, until it really was cold. They'd been covered with goose pimples when they'd charged up the loft stairs to get under the quilt on their bed.

Then they'd napped, him lying over Cass' massive body like a pup who'd come home. When he'd woken up, his lips had been close to one large nipple, so he'd sucked on it tenderly until Cass' eyes had sprung open.

Christ, how he wanted his mate.

"Oh. We're in bed together. I guess that means we can do some stuff," Cass said, colour hitting his cheeks, delighting Tom. He hoped his cowboy never lost that shyness. It was hot. And Cass was all his now. The thought of another man touching his Cass made a growl rise.

"Are you going all wolfy on me again, Tom?" Cass asked.

Tom touched the mark on Cass' upper arm. He kissed it, sucking and Cass gasped, his head falling back, his body falling back so that Tom was in command. "It'll heal faster," he muttered.

"It's going straight to my cock, you touching me there! Will it always be like that?" Cass looked at the small wound.

Tom gave it another lick. Under him, Cass' body vibrated.

Despite Cass' excitement, Tom wanted to draw things out this time, now that the need to mark his mate wasn't riding him.

He climbed out of the bed into the chilly air, liking Cass' wide eyes on him. His lover's gaze zeroed in on Tom's cock. He wasn't as well endowed as Cass, but he had never had any complaints.

Cass reached out to graze a tentative finger down Tom's thigh. "Beautiful. But you don't look like one of the Riace Bronzes, Tom."

"No, I'm more like Critian Boy," Tom said. "You know, that statue in Athens."

"I remember that one." Cass knelt, green eyes earnest, as if he were taking some kind of test at school he had to ace.

Tenderness enveloped Tom. He wanted his mate to know how much he loved the way they touched. He didn't need a more experienced lover. He needed his Cass.

"You did say I looked like him, like a boy with a runner's build. I wondered how you knew since you never took my hint to share the showers." Tom ran his hands through the messy blond haystack of Cass' hair.

Cass shrugged. "You don't wear too much when you go running, remember?"

"I was hoping you'd notice."

"So you were trying to tempt me." Cass took Tom's hand and spread it out. He dipped his tongue in the space between fingers.

Tom jumped. "Shit, what's that?" His heart was racing. It felt like electricity when Cass licked him there.

"You have a lot of nerves in your hands. I've done some, ah, reading."

"You have, have you?" *For him.* Cass had read about how to pleasure a man just for him, Tom guessed. "Let's see what else you've learned."

"Okay." Cass swallowed, then he pulled Tom back onto the bed so he sat facing the wall with Cass behind him. Warm wetness on Tom's nape made him groan, while a finger tentatively stroked up and down the length of his cock.

"Bite down on me. Fuck, I'd love to have your bite marks all over my skin," Tom whispered.

Cass obediently bit Tom's neck, sucking hard enough so he bruised the flesh. Tom groaned. It felt like being claimed all over again.

"I thought we might try some of what you said you liked," Cass said softly.

A clink of metal and Tom looked over his shoulder to see a thick band in Cass' hand.

"Whoa," he said and looked closer. The silver collar had a snakelike chain dangling from it.

"Cody and Adrian left it in case you got real bad when you were sick, but I never had to use it." Cass shrugged. The sweet guy had probably thought it too extreme to use on a sick man. He hadn't known he was dealing with a feverish wolf shifter.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked, leaving this to Cass. He didn't want to push him.

"I'm...I'm going to put it on you, Tom," Cass said. "And you're going to wear it for me."

"Oh, yeah. Whatever you want." He grinned.

Cass grinned back. "Yes, whatever I want, little wolf." He pushed Tom onto his back and attached the chain to the headboard with a heavy click.

Restrained, Tom lifted the links while arousal pulsed through his body. "When I wear silver, I'm not super strong anymore," he told Cass. "I'm just like you."

Cass' hand was on the chain as if he was also getting used to the idea. "You look hot wearing that, like my own personal wolf."

Cass ghosted his mouth over the skin above Tom's stretched armpit, surprising him again with an oblique approach. Tom shuddered at the silvery sensation, moaning and helpless. God, he wanted to get fucked now. He lifted his legs wantonly, putting them snug to Cass' hips so he'd get the message.

Cass only laughed and continued to nuzzle Tom down the side of his torso. He tugged on Tom's nipple, and a spike of sensation made Tom tremble.

He was a plaything now, Cass' plaything.

"We need more chains," Cass said as he ran his hand down Tom's leg. "So I can chain your legs open."

"Yeah." Tom groaned, all for the idea. "Cass, please fuck me. Please. I thought about it so often, you just taking me, shovin' that monster in me when I was alone in my bunk at night."

"I seem to remember you mentioned a gag..." Cass cocked a brow. "Can you sit up a little?"

"Uh, yeah." He was panting. The fresh mark on his nape stung. He couldn't wait to get to their tiny bathroom so he could look at it.

Cass tied a clean undershirt loosely around Tom's head. Tom sensed that the big man still worried about hurting him.

Gagged and chained, Tom watched impatiently as Cass went to the old-fashioned wash basin to slick water and soap onto his cock and fingers.

He turned and faced Tom, towering over him, his slippery cock as thick as a smaller man's wrist. "Ready?" he asked Tom.

Tom could only moan. His pulse was throbbing visibly in his cock. Cass was giving him what he'd always craved from him. He'd been so afraid even if they did get close that Tom's needs would turn the other man off, but he should have known better. Hadn't they always fit together as best friends?

Cass placed a knee on the bed between Tom's open legs and pushed his wet, soapy finger at his opening. Cass watched intently, as if still feeling that pressure to please and took his time, fucking Tom's ass with thick fingers. Oh. Oh, God, too much, but he needed more.

Cass mounted Tom, pushing inside steadily, and Tom breathed through it...breathed through it, oh, Christ, it really was like being split open. Cass was never going to be an easy man to take.

He whimpered, the chain clinking as he shifted under Cass.

"Okay?" Sweat ran down the sides of Cass' face. His pupils were huge, like a bird of prey's in the semi-darkness.

Tom nodded and Cass thrust inside him with all the grace of a jack hammer.

Oh, God, Oh, man he couldn't... Tom's hands clenched in the bedding and he lifted up, wanton, needing to be taken in just this uncompromising way. His mate was powerful. He might not match Tom's super-strength but Cass would insist on taking care of his smaller mate, and a big part of Tom loved that.

"My prisoner," Cass whispered. "Maybe tomorrow I'll wake you up with my cock down your throat."

They stared into each other's eyes before Tom gave a thready sound and Cass pounded into him, used him, pushed his legs up high, lifted his ass in palms the size of small plates and hammered in, his balls smashing against Tom's, rock hard, quivering and tight with the need to spill his seed deep in Tom's receiving body.

Cass came in a hot wash and Tom felt again like a plaything as his aching cock was left untouched.

Cass yanked on the collar, snapping Tom's eyes to his. "Come for me, Tom."

The hand on his collar, the massive cock up his ass, the way he was chained and gagged and helpless...Tom came, snarling at the big, dominant mate who held him down and made him love it.

Chapter Ten

"What was that?" Cass asked. He reached out and lazily unsnapped the collar from Tom's neck, rubbing where it had left a slight pink ring. "Did we unleash a thunderstorm in here or somethin'?"

"Shit, I feel like I've been hit by a truck." Tom cocked a brow at his new lover, then heaved a sigh. Damn. "Every time I'm with you, I feel like that. What is that?"

"It's fucked up, is what it is," Cass said, leaning against the headboard. But he was smiling.

Tom smiled back at him. He pulled off the blanket, making no secret of the pleasure he took stroking Cass' mile-wide shoulders and chest. "Mmmmm."

"And to think I was too shy to ever ask you out." Cass closed his eyes, clearly enjoying the attention. "I didn't want you to see me like this, a big fucking oaf."

"I love you like this. You're so hot." To illustrate his point, Tom opened his mouth over one of Cass' nipples, sucking on it hard.

Cass gasped and his hands cupped Tom's head, delving deep into his hair. The strands slid against his skin. "Hot? Man, this is the hottest thing that ever happened to me."

Tom nipped his tender nub sharply and Cass yelped.

"That's for the 'big fucking oaf' comment. I don't like how you speak about the man I love. Cut it the fuck out."

Cass rubbed his abused nipple, which was sending out a strange cocktail of messages to his cock. *Like* being on top of the heap. Apparently he liked it when Tom bit him, liked a little bit of pain.

He rolled Tom under him and held his arms above his head. Despite his slight size Tom was much stronger than he looked—he'd already proved that. Still, it was a rush to conquer him.

"You'll pay for that, boy," he whispered in an exaggerated tone against Tom's neck.

Tom laughed, shivering as if Cass had tickled him. "You sound like a pirate king. 'Walk the plank, boy,' or 'scrub the deck, boy!'"

"My personal favourite is 'bend over, boy.'"

They were laughing so hard while his dick rubbed against Tom's. Sheesh, he was laughing in bed. With his lover. Weird.

"Wrestle you for who tops," Tom said. "Sexy."

Tom's last word threw him. "Sexy?"

"Sure, sexy cowboy. That's what I've always thought when I look at you. Or, you know..." He cleared his throat, eyes soft. "Beautiful cowboy."

Cass' breath stalled in his chest. There was no bullshit in Tom's steady gaze.

Tom thought Cass was sexy.

Tom thought Cass was hot.

His best friend, the guy he'd crushed on all these months but been sure he could never have, thought he was sexy.

"Maybe I am..." he whispered. "But only with you, Tom."

* * * *

In the shower, Cass couldn't help but notice a wolf shifter recovered fast although he could feel himself getting harder, spurred by wet, soapy Tom rubbing against him. Cass lifted Tom. Steadying him against the shower wall, Cass held his slippery prick ready.

"Why don't I take you out for another ride?" he asked.

"Cass..." Tom groaned as Cass impaled his lover, their joining slow this time, a shift of hips, bumping bodies, finding a way to mate. Tom squeezed Cass hard, a hot vice for his penis, gripping tight, milking him.

"Holy God!" he breathed.

"Uh." Tom's head lolled against the tile. He wrapped his legs around Cass, seeming content to let him do whatever he wanted with him – and what Tom seemed to want was to let loose.

His hips jerked and Tom skidded against the wall, his eyes shocked wide.

"He can't have you." Cass growled, thinking of the wolf still out there who wanted his mate. He was human, he didn't have Tom's instincts or special abilities, but by God, he would not let another man hurt what was his.

"I won't let him," Tom said. "Unless..."

Cass glared and Tom subsided. Cass could guess what Tom had almost said. *Unless he goes after you.*

"You better not." He had Tom at an angle now, big palms under his ass, lifting him into the pounding and it was wonderful to be this strong, this tall, this powerful because he could do this, he could give this to Tom, all of it, every inch while Tom whimpered and clawed at him, setting him off so he spilled in a hot rush. When Tom came, Cass felt pride even as his legs were shaking but damn, he felt good.

"Love to fuck you," he said, drowsy.

"Love to be fucked," Tom said.

* * * *

One evening a week later, Cass pulled his truck into a parking slot outside the town diner. His phone rang just as he opened the door and he grinned. Tom.

"My dad would have liked you," Cass told Tom.

"Yeah? What made you think of that?" Tom sounded a little breathless. He was probably mucking out the stable for the baby horse. They had to keep it pristine since she still wasn't past the danger period.

"Sometimes I still have conversations with the old man. We've talked a lot about you. I just...I knew him so well, almost as well as myself so I can hear him in my head."

"I like that. That's another thing I like about you." Tom's voice lowered slightly and an edge entered it. Something new. Something almost territorial. "So where are you?"

"I'm just going to the diner to grab some food I ordered for us." Cass carefully left it at that. "I'll be back soon. Do not go out in the woods while I'm gone."

"I gave my word," Tom grumbled.

"Just take care of my boyfriend until I get back," Cass said and he was smiling again when he cut the call. He loved calling Tom his boyfriend and he could tell Tom liked hearing it.

As his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light indoors, Cass spotted Cody. He looked up from a menu when Cass joined him in his booth. He frowned at Cass. "Where's Tom?"

Cass sighed. "He doesn't know I'm talking to you."

Cody got up to leave and Cass snagged his arm. "Hey, we need your help. Tom says you're a pretty big deal in the wolf pecking order, so I'm hoping it's wired in for you to help us."

Cody sat back down and glared at Cass for a long moment. When Cass didn't break his stare he laughed softly. "So Tom found himself a human alpha instead of a shifter to bond with."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I don't like you keeping something from him, Cass. He's your mate now."

Cass' eyes widened. "Wait, we just, uh, formalized that. How did you know?" He and Tom had had to spend a couple of miserable nights back in the bunkhouse, sleeping in separate rooms so they hadn't seen Cody or Adrian. Cass did intend to talk to Adrian about working for him as soon as possible. He wanted to live in that cabin, and not just part time like now.

"I can smell that you're his mate." Cody crossed his arms and slouched on the table. "I did like you asked, I called a couple of people I remember from the shifter village."

Heart thudding, Cass shifted on his seat. "This village... Tom wouldn't say much about it except he was raised there."

Cody grimaced. "In the old days there was more room for packs to roam. Now most of us live in villages but it's hardly ideal. All those wolves with very little room for territory. There are problems."

Thinking of wolves in the wild, Cass could see that. "But you and Tom chose a different life. Lone wolves, if you'll forgive the pun."

Cody nodded. "There is someone who might fit the description of Tom's attacker. Thing is..." Cody swallowed. "If it's the wolf I heard about, it was someone kept in a basement, half starved and beaten and raped by other pack members. He was the son of an alpha who was killed by a rival and the man wanted to make sure the kid never got strong enough to challenge him. Taking a mate would be the first step to making his own pack, so as crazed as he sounds, he's probably acting out of self-preservation, Cass."

"Oh, shit." As much as he wanted the rabid wolf stopped, Cass hated any kind of abuse. "Tom said he smelt wrong."

"When we're hurt, we tend to retreat into our animal. Someone who went through that kind of thing...I'm not sure he'd be anything but instinct, pain and anger."

Cass rubbed his jaw. "I can't let him hurt Tom, regardless of what's wrong with him."

"No, of course not."

"Does this rabid shifter have a name?"

"Luka. I don't remember his last name." Cody's face hardened. "I might not agree with you keeping our meeting from Tom, but I do agree something has to be done. This...thing is in my territory. It could hurt Adrian."

"You mean to hunt him, kill him."

Cody swallowed. "I don't want to, but this is part of being an alpha. Adrian is mine to protect and in a way, so are you and Tom. You're living in my territory part-time, so you belong to me."

Cass shook his head. "I'm not yours and Tom sure as hell isn't."

Cody smiled as if he hadn't expected any other answer from Cass.

"Is there no way to stop this man other than destroying him? I hate having to do that even when a wild animal preys on our cattle. It's just instinct, Cody."

Cody nodded. "I know, but what can be done? He's too dangerous like this for the human world. He'd need to be gentled, taught how to live with people again and I'm not sure it would work after what was done to him."

At that moment Maggie Norris brought over some paper bags to their table, smiling at Cass. She was the younger sister of the waitress he'd once dated and he usually avoided her because she brought back his embarrassment. Now he smiled at her and he saw her eyes widen in surprise at his friendliness.

"Hey, Maggie."

"Hey, Cass. It's all in there, including plastic cutlery and salt and pepper."

"Thank you." He paid her and she left, beaming at the size of his tip.

Cass again looked at Cody. "Thanks for filling me in. I'll take this back to Tom. You're right. We need to talk about it even if he is being stubborn."

Cody quirked a brow. "Adrian's taught me things go smoother when you share stuff."

"Oh, so you were stubborn once too?"

Cody shrugged before adding, "Cass, I'm going to hunt the rabid wolf this weekend but if you see him before then, shoot first. From what I heard, you'd be doing him a favour, putting him out of his pain."

Cass nodded, heart heavy. Suddenly he couldn't wait to get back to Tom.

Chapter Eleven

Tom crossed his arms, leaning against the shed as he heard a truck climbing the track that led to the little cabin. He tore off his work gloves with his teeth, anticipation rising at seeing his mate.

Tom shook his head at himself, at the way he found it hard to be separated from Cass. Channelling his wolf's possessiveness was new and difficult. Even though Cass was easygoing and blind to his own appeal, Tom saw it and saw how others responded to his Cass, who wouldn't appreciate too many fences. It was scary enough that Tom had taken a virgin for his mate. Now he had to work his whole life to make sure Cass never regretted it, never wanted into another man's bed.

His dick hardened. He'd thought he could control himself but he barely wanted to get out of bed when he was with Cass. Christ, the things he'd imagined when they'd slept separately at the bunkhouse. He always told himself to take it easy, try to remember that Cass was still innocent, but he was eager for the night, to be back in Cass' bed where he belonged.

A flash of dusty blue caught his eye and Tom frowned.

Cass' truck was red.

Blue...

Cass had said that blue paint had been left on the broken fence he'd repaired.

* * * *

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Cody demanded.

Cass calmly finished checking his rifle before glancing at Cody and Adrian, who had come as soon as he'd called.

"I'm going after Tom." Cass stepped over a shattered bucket in the shed, past long scratches on one wall marked by drying blood.

He couldn't look at that scored wall again. When he'd first seen it, his eyes had stung with tears.

Tom had run the horses out of the shed, probably because he didn't know if the rabid shifter would hurt them. His last act before he'd been taken had been to set them free.

Cass had spent the better part of an hour luring them back so he could pen them safely into their stall, plenty of time for Adrian and Cody to show up.

"You can't go after Tom. This isn't a human thing." Cody was shrugging out of his coat.

"You're going after them," Cass said.

"You and Adrian need to stay safe. It's what Tom wanted, it's why he let himself be taken. To keep you safe, Cass."

"I don't give a shit what Tom wanted," Cass growled.

"Me neither," Adrian said. He raised his hand when Cody's face darkened. "I'll follow you in the truck. It looks like Tom might be hurt, Cody, or possibly this Luka...maybe we can help him." His voice was soft, but firm, as if he knew he had to reach his wolf. "You'll need me there."

Cody glared at his lover but continued stripping.

Cass loaded more shells into his pockets. "I think I know where they might be. I had a sense of someone watching me in the woods when I went up into the foothills to do those repairs." He strode for his truck, getting in with the rifle close at hand. In the rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of a huge wolf disappearing into the trees.

* * * *

Tom shook his head. He lay on his side, the heat leaving his naked body in the cool spring air. His ears were still ringing from the blow he'd taken from the bigger wolf. When he stopped fighting, the creature had left him alone—only when he tried to get away was he stopped. Weird.

Steeling himself for another battle, he looked the creature. What he saw made him suck in a breath.

A kid.

He was just a kid, a boy, hunched over a growing fire, morosely feeding it with twigs. Long black hair, green eyes, bruises. One cheek was a mass of scars, as if burned.

"Hey," Tom croaked.

The boy tensed, looking at Tom out of jittery eyes. Shit. In wolf form, Luka was formidable, a red-eyed alpha, but he couldn't be long out of high school.

"Easy... Your name's Luka, right?" His voice softened to the one he used with the foal. He managed to sit up, his hand going to the drying blood on his forehead. His throat tightened. He hated to think what Cass would feel when he came home and found the mess in the shed.

"Listen, I think you're confused," Tom said, trying to keep his tone soothing. "I'm a mated wolf. I can't stay here with you."

Luka growled and shoved Tom.

He fell onto his back and lay still, head thumping, trees revolving in slow, sick circles. He licked his lips, knowing Cass would want him to try again, to find a way back to him. "Don't do this. I know you're strong—Jesus, stronger than any wolf I've ever met—but this isn't our way."

Luka looked at him and his eyes were slightly clearer. "Mine. I need... Mine."

Tom shook his head but even as he wanted to scream at the boy for separating him from his mate, he was riveted by the tears brimming in those green eyes, by the dirty, scratched hands, by the scars. "You've had a rough time. You just...need someone, don't you?"

Luka didn't answer but returned to tending the budding fire. He could have taken Tom by force but now he seemed focussed just on keeping him close, as if he didn't want to be alone.

Cold, Tom moved closer. The warmth was welcome and the other shifter didn't try to touch him. He seemed focussed inward, shivering and staring into the flames.

The sun was going down.

In the woods beyond, a wolf howled.

* * * *

Cass tramped up the same path he'd taken recently to the downed fence. When he got to the rise above the trees, he could see a small campfire and two naked figures close to it. One of them, mud-streaked and bloody, was Tom.

He shouted and both men looked at him. Green eyes, ragged hair. The boy snarled at him, leapt for him.

Cass hit him with his shoulder, and the thin boy cannoned through the air before crashing against the bottom of a pine. He lay there, dazed, staring at the other men and for a moment Cass thought he saw something like comprehension in the confused gaze. Tom's hands had morphed into claws. He tried to get in front of Cass but Cass butted him aside.

The boy was looking up at him through that long, matted hair. There was fear in those eyes now. Fear and pain. But a cornered animal was most dangerous when it was afraid.

Squashing the pity he felt, Cass raised the rifle.

Tom grabbed Cass' arm, shaking his head. "Cass... He's just a kid. Shit, someone's messed him up real bad!"

"Tom's mine," Cass said, very clearly, so there was no mistake. He took in what Tom must have seen, the deep scars, the black eye. He ached for the boy but he didn't lower the gun. "Do you understand?"

Panting, Luka lowered his head. He was on all fours, visibly trembling. Cass didn't need to be a wolf to recognise a submissive stance. The boy had given up.

He yanked off his long coat and offered it to a shivering Tom, putting an arm around him.

A familiar wolf emerged from the shadows. It gave him and Tom a steady considering look, then loped over to a puffing Adrian, who appeared in a break through the trees. The wolf snarled at his lover, keeping him safely away from the campsite.

"Fine. You take care of your man and I'll handle mine," Cass told Cody.

"Cass, he's gone." Tom whispered. "He just...faded away when Cody and Adrian got here."

Cass looked around the meadow and couldn't see any sign of the boy who had kidnapped Tom. He sighed, weariness weighing his shoulders. But then he felt Tom close to him, his warmth, his eyes reflecting Cass.

"Guess it's over," he said.

* * * *

A month later, Cass dropped his axe, his arms aching in a satisfying way. He'd chopped enough for the little cabin's woodpile. They lit a fire at nights so he and Tom could drink wine and then make love in front of it. He liked a little romance, and his lover fed that flame. Sometimes Tom wore nothing but his loin cloth, which fuelled Cass' fantasies something fierce.

The truck pulled up and Tom got out, smiling at Cass. "No problem with our travel plans! Adrian says we can take a month off if we want in the fall."

Italy. Cass wasn't sure how he felt about it. Scared and uncertain but also eager and excited. They'd spent several nights on the computer, planning their trip. Cass wanted to visit the cathedral in Ravenna with its beautiful mosaics along with Venice, while Tom wanted to take him to see the Riace Bronzes.

They headed towards the cabin, now their home because they both worked for Adrian and Cody. The foal whinnied, trotting along the fence. She was going strong and they had another of Adrian's orphans in the shed they were nursing now.

"Did you pick up that tofu?"

Tom nodded, amusement in his eyes. "Had to go two towns out to find any. But it's low fat for my calorie conscious cowboy."

"Thanks. I have to keep my boyish figure for my guy." Cass still liked to watch what he ate. He was coming to feel almost hot sometimes, especially when Tom looked at him, touched him, made him beautiful in his arms.

About the Author

Jan Irving has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense – but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together – in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

Email: <mailto:janmairving@gmail.com>

Jan Irving loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

Also by Jan Irving

Uncommon Cowboys: Shifter Cowboy
Saddle Up 'n' Ride: Straight Cowboy

Total-E-Bound Publishing



www.total-e-bound.com

Take a look at our exciting range of literagasmic™
erotic romance titles and discover pure quality
at Total-E-Bound.