



SHIFTER COWBOY

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A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

Shifter Cowboy

ISBN # 978-0-85715-499-6

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Edited by S. F. Swift

Total-E-Bound Publishing

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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 Cowboy

SHIFTER COWBOY

Jan Irving

Dedication

To two friends who make me think of magic: Conny Wyborny and Johanna Snodgrass

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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

Dodge Ram: Chrysler Corporation

“Magic is believing in yourself, if you can do that, you can make anything happen”

~Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Chapter One

Gravel and dirt sprayed Cody Marshall where he was lying curled up in the middle of an unpaved road. He put a hand instinctively over his eyes, shielding them from the stab of headlights.

"What the..." The creak of a truck door, boots crunching on gravel...A slight figure blocked out the headlights and Cody looked up at a man with brown hair in his eyes. He knelt next to Cody, reaching out to gently grip his arm. "Are you hurt? Can I help you?"

Oh, shit. Cody's cheeks heated as he realised two things: one, he was lying in plain sight recovering and second, he was completely naked.

"'M fine," he mumbled. Blood. He could smell it on himself.

"No, you're not." Soft eyes held his, their colour reminding Cody of a string of tiger's eye, clear brown with strands of amber. "Look, I'm going to help you to your feet. Are you okay to try that? If you're hurting anywhere, let me know —"

"I'm not." Crap, just his luck he'd get some do-gooder on a little used road in the middle of fucking nowhere on a Friday night. The man looked young and attractive enough, so why wasn't he doing the traditional thing and partying like most of the cowboys who lived in the area?

"Okay then." Strength. Warmth. The stranger exuded it as he helped Cody to his feet. The front of the truck loomed suddenly closer as Cody wavered but before he could fall, he was snatched close to a hard, protective body. He felt the crispness of denim against his bare thighs and the cotton of a T-shirt brushing his sensitive nipples. He caught his breath, his hands fisting as powerful sexual hunger beat in his blood.

No. He shook his head, desperately holding onto his control. It was tough when he could see the waning moon through a clump of trees, when he could smell lime aftershave and feel the caring in the stranger's touch.

Nothing got to Cody like someone touching him with tenderness.

"Fucking let me go!" He shoved the man away from him, unable to handle it.

Shocked velvety eyes widened. "Hey, mister, I'm trying to help you!"

Cody dropped his gaze away from the other man's. What Cody needed was to feel in control again. He took a deep breath, pushing back his long black hair with a shaking hand. "What's your name?" he demanded, pretending his nerves weren't shooting sparks like a downed power line.

The stranger tilted his head, as if considering Cody. Cody hunched his shoulders, wanting to attack, wanting to ghost back into the trees while a third impulse licked up his thigh. *Want*. Not the pale human thing, but want like the satisfying crunch of bone under his teeth. He wanted to wrap himself around that slender body, him nude, the other man dressed, it didn't matter. He wanted to spread the stranger out on top of the truck, bury himself inside him while looking into those yellow-brown eyes.

Panting, Cody fought the need, curling his arms around himself.

"I'm Adrian Le Roy," the man finally answered gently, as if he had some sense of the wildness crashing through Cody. "I'm new here."

Cody thrust his hand out. "Howdy."

Adrian blinked and then his lips curved into a rueful smile. He took Cody's scratched and dirt-encrusted hand. "Howdy," he said in that deep voice that tightened the muscles in Cody's lower body like strings on a guitar. He had a slight southern accent that Cody couldn't help but find sexy, the slow drawl adding an old-fashioned courtliness to his words. "May I ask your name?"

"Cody. What are you doing out on this road?" In all the time he'd roamed the desolate old ranch lands, no one had seen him. It was one of the benefits of taking on the lonely position of working it.

"I didn't mean to be driving here this late...my connecting flight was delayed."

"Uh huh. Didn't really answer the bigger question."

Adrian's eyes widened at Cody's prodding and Cody realised he was probably being too blunt. Well, fuck it. He wanted to know.

"Bigger question. I guess this country asks for that, doesn't it?" Adrian shrugged. "I've been a bit of a rolling stone all my life but I want..." He chewed his lip. "Roots. A friend of mine told me this would be a good place to evaluate the return of wild horses and wolves into these foothills. I'm a veterinarian and a researcher. I also intend to hang out a shingle."

Listening to Adrian, Cody found himself staring at the other man as if he were prey. He tore his gaze away, licking his lips.

"Look, Cody, obviously you're in some kind of trouble," Adrian went on.

Cody looked down at him, taking in the fact he had a good five inches on Adrian, who'd have to stretch up to brush his lips against Cody's. "Trouble, always." Cody made himself step away from the attractive vet. When his hormones stopped jumping around, he wouldn't want the kind of things he craved now from what seemed to be a very nice man. But nice men weren't for a dirty creature like him. He knew that, so he walked towards the sheltering trees.

"Wait!" Adrian took a step after him.

"The farm house you're looking for is down this road a spell. The door's open, but don't use the oven. It ain't working right now so there's just the woodstove. You know how to work a woodstove, Adrian?" He slipped into a stand of birch trees, then turned around. He couldn't seem to help that his tone ground out low, silky like the touch he wanted to give the other man.

Adrian swallowed. "No."

"Guess you better learn then." A rock jabbed his foot and Cody cursed. It was just peachy walking around bare-assed without even his boots a couple of times a month. He hated being who and what he was.

"How can you know my stove won't be working?" Adrian looked confused. He was peering into the trees, but Cody knew he couldn't see him. Adrian didn't possess Cody's night vision.

"Because I live there, of course," Cody replied. "Guess you're my new boss."

* * * *

Because I live there.

Adrian heard the words again as he opened the back of his Dodge Ram truck and reached in for the first of his suitcases. The ranch house was an old Victorian painted lady, complete with a turret. He could see it needed a refresher on the paint; the colours had faded to pastels where once they might have been vibrant, and he immediately imagined himself taking on the job. Could he actually do that, paint an entire house? His experience to date had always been sleek and easy condos where everything was done for him.

Beside the structure were some planted willow trees and what looked like a patch of newly worked earth, perhaps for a vegetable garden. Vegetables! He could actually grow his own here, stop moving around and just...stay in one place.

His belly gave a little twist of apprehension at the idea. It was so much easier to slide through life, but he was increasingly dissatisfied and restless. Even his relationships were easy. He liked to play, to stay in control even though his fantasies had always centred on giving that up, surrendering completely to one man.

The tired music of the steps creaking under his feet brought him back to the moment, and he took in more details. A porch swing! Damn. He dropped the suitcases for a moment and sat down on it. As it swung gently from his weight, he found himself grinning.

Just as the mysterious Cody had promised, the door was unlocked. Adrian shouldered it open, his luggage weighing heavy in his hands. He paused in the front entrance, taking in some early spring buttercups and other assorted wildflowers in a simple jam jar on a table in the front entrance. He had an immediate picture of Cody picking them and placing them there, though it did not at all jibe with seeing the man – dirty, scratched, with tumbled black hair down to his waist and completely naked – waking up from an apparent bender on the road that led to this house.

The hall table looked like a hand-me-down, but it had been stripped to bare wood so it gleamed softly in the dim space. When Adrian bent to take a closer look, he could catch a scent coming from it, like the frankincense incense he used to like to burn, warm, woodsy.

Adrian reached for the switch and a glass hurricane lamp glowed ambient light. He could see beyond to what looked like a formal parlour while on the other side an open arch led into a mud room and a kitchen. It was a lot more space than he was used to, emphasising again the big leap he'd taken in coming out here on impulse.

"Hello?" Somehow he wasn't surprised when no one answered him. The house had an empty air, as it was waiting for someone to return. Someone who crackled with an unsettling energy, his green eyes meeting Adrian's only briefly, as if he were shy or ashamed.

"Welcome to your new home," Adrian muttered. He hesitated, then left his bags to tour the rest of the house.

The parlour had been outfitted like a comfortable den with a rag rug and a big screen TV but again, despite the modest furnishings, it was neat – Adrian's own preference. He noted the hearth was blocked off, some of the river rock missing and a big crack in the

façade. Okay, no fires until that got fixed. Maybe he could find someone handy to repair it before winter came.

At least if he was sharing the house with Cody, his new employee seemed to be tidy. After their first meeting, he'd have expected empty beer bottles left sitting on tables although he hadn't smelt alcohol on Cody's breath, come to think of it.

So why had he been out there like that, no clothes, apparently sleeping in the middle of the dirt road?

Adrian shook his head. Weird.

He remembered Miles worrying about him coming to this remote part of Montana and wondered what his friend would make of his first experiences out here.

He walked past the woodstove, which gave off a breath of warmth as if it had been lit earlier in the evening. Adrian hesitated as he came to a staircase heading upstairs. This would be where the bedrooms were located.

"Mine's to the left," a soft voice informed him.

Adrian jumped, swinging around to see that Cody had come in through a glass door off the parlour. He was still nude, still scratched up, a streak of dirt over one lean brown cheek. His features were hawkish, his eyes that strange, burning green. Now they were somewhere with better light, Adrian could see the other man possessed some Native American heritage. His gaze met Adrian's, then fell away.

"You must be C. Marshall," Adrian said. His friend Jared had said one hand already worked the land, a good man, very reliable. Uh huh, well, that remained to be seen. Cody hadn't made the best first impression on his new boss.

Adrian crossed his arms. When Cody didn't say anything, just stood there, head down, he began to feel uncomfortable. Just what the hell was going on with the guy?

"I'll be out by tomorrow morning," Cody mumbled, suddenly striding close on his way to the stairs.

"Whoa." Adrian instinctively stepped in Cody's path and gently grasped the other man's cool, damp shoulders. "You're leaving?"

Jungle green eyes shot to his and then dropped again in a manner that was really beginning to irritate Adrian. He didn't think it was representational of the real man, as if he were hiding something.

"You're firing me," Cody said.

"I am?"

Now the gaze was glued to his and Adrian saw confusion that mirrored his own, as well as shame—yes, it was shame—and a kind of sullen heat.

Cody's skin felt oddly vulnerable under his hands so Adrian immediately dropped them. His heart was thudding in his throat. Staring into Cody's wary eyes he felt lost, like he'd fallen into another world, primal.

"I'll be damned if you do that," he found himself saying.

"What?"

"I'll be damned if you'll just up and quit without telling me what the hell you were doing on that road," Adrian stated. "But meantime, you do have some, uh, clothing, right?" Damn, Cody was entirely too distracting without anything on, never mind the dirt. Despite his greater height and muscle, he was someone Adrian wanted to take care of, shelter, even as he pictured those mud-streaked hands on his own nude body, pushing him up against a wall and...

As if he picked up on Adrian's strange thoughts, Cody blushed and Adrian couldn't help but see the colour blooming on his chest, rising to his neck.

"Come on, you're hurt," he said. "All marked up, bruised." He couldn't help it; the healer in him demanded he touch again. He gripped the side of Cody's arm, stroking him to try to calm him. "I just want to help."

Cody jerked away, as if any kindness freaked him out. "I'll take a shower." Then his gaze snapped up to Adrian's and he muttered, "Fuck...why not?" He was suddenly closer, one dusty hand on Adrian's shoulder just as he'd pictured it a moment before.

"You want it? I can smell you do. You want my dirty hands all over you, Doc?" Cody whispered.

He crushed Adrian's mouth under his.

Adrian stiffened, shocked. "No!" This was not like the polite kisses he'd exchanged in the past, the comfortable warmth. He had no idea what to expect from this wild man.

"I want my tongue inside your mouth and you want it too. Take it." Cody took advantage of Adrian's bewilderment to caress him with his tongue. At first it felt almost innocent, a shy lick so that Adrian was seduced into letting his eyelids fall as his hands ghosted over Cody's bare shoulders.

Beautiful. Cody was beautiful and strong and taller than him and now his diffidence evaporated as he demanded that Adrian accept him, his tongue, his control. When he nipped Adrian's neck, Adrian's head fell back and Cody growled with satisfaction.

"I want you on the couch for me," Cody said, tugging at Adrian's jeans as if he wanted them off. Now. "I want you holding your legs open for me so I can fuck you."

Adrian moaned, wanting that too, wanting to be spread and vulnerable, taking this man's thick cock. *Yes!*

Oh, God, what was he doing? He'd come out here to shake the pall from his life but was he really going to surrender to this stranger moments after entering his new house? "Wait!"

"Damn it, don't stop me," Cody groaned, sounding frustrated. "You were made to be fucked. It's the first thing I thought about you when you touched me on the road."

"I..." Colour heated Adrian's cheeks. That was not the type of elegant compliment he was used to. Adrian firmly lifted Cody's hands away from his neck and stepped back. After a moment of staring at the other man, huffing, he asked, "So if I'm going to fire you anyway, you might as well kiss me, fuck me?"

Cody ducked his head.

"How'd you know I'd even want you to?" Adrian cleared his throat, suddenly feeling as bashful as Cody. "That I like men?"

"Your scent."

Adrian blinked. "Of course."

Suddenly a small grin tugged Cody's lips. "Yeah."

Adrian felt disorientated. Cody was truly strange, unsettling...and beautiful. He swallowed, deciding to get back to business. He needed some time to cool off. "Jared said you'd have a room set aside for me to use as a clinic?"

Cody looked surprised at the change of topic though his hands had moved to the front of his body, covering his hard sex. He hadn't done that when he'd been kissing Adrian. Adrian remembered all too well, his body living the tactile memory of warm silky lips teasing his, of the needy sounds Cody had made. "Yeah, it's next to the kitchen and has its own entrance, like you asked."

Adrian nodded. "I'll go there now, check it out."

Cody shrugged. "Just so you know...I wasn't drunk."

Adrian studied him, but the young cowboy didn't say more. He looked so miserably uncomfortable now that Adrian took pity on him. "We'll talk when you come find me."

Cody gave him an uncertain glance. Well, that was okay, since Adrian didn't know how he was feeling either. He might fantasise about letting another man take over but he'd never imagined it would happen for real his first day in his new home.

"Yes sir, I'll come find you," Cody said. When he turned his back to go upstairs Adrian couldn't help but catch his breath.

Scars. Under the grime and scratches he could see deep grooves cut into Cody's buttocks.

Chapter Two

Under the warm spray Cody soaped himself, closing his eyes as he ran a hand over his half-hard cock. It wasn't possible, but somehow he thought he could still smell Adrian, as if he was here in the tight space.

Cody shuddered with a flash of heat, stepping to grip the chrome towel rail. He had to get it together. He pushed his long hair out of his face, looking up to meet his sober gaze in the mirror. He'd lived out on the remote ranch for almost two years, managing what was substandard grazing land since most of it was broken up by the rocky foothills. Only some of it was fenced, so cattle got lost in the forks.

Now his new boss Adrian was here. Could Cody share this house with him? He'd assumed the other man would simply fire him after the way he'd found him naked on the road, but Adrian had surprised him.

Shit, he continued to surprise Cody. They'd nearly fucked moments after they'd met.

Cody ached with unsatisfied need. He took a deep breath. He had to put that aside. It must be the wolf, taking over. The wolf wanting to mount Adrian, to make him lie on his back and surrender.

Cody shaved off his morning whiskers, then pulled his hair back into a long pony tail away from his face. He had trouble meeting his own green eyes as he remembered what unsettled him the most about Adrian. It wasn't his silky brown hair or earnest gaze or even his scent.

It was the caring way he'd touched Cody. A few minutes later, he smoothed a hand over clean blue jeans, his cowboy hat in hand as he hesitated outside the half door that led from the kitchen area into Adrian's empty clinic. He could see Adrian's shadow moving around the room in the awakening light as he investigated the space. He'd be happy with it. Cody had followed the specifications Jared had outlined to him perfectly, working with a carpenter from White Deer to build something efficient out of what had been part of the old mud room.

"Cody?" Adrian's deep voice called, that Southern accent making Cody curious about Adrian's past. His voice sounded like a mix of honey and charcoal, going straight to Cody's cock.

"Yes, sir." Flushing, Cody unlatched the door and walked into Adrian's freshly painted office. Adrian was looking over a tray of silvery instruments Cody'd unpacked a couple of weeks ago, shipped from back east.

"For surgery," Adrian told him absently.

"I figured," Cody said.

"When I heard the vet who services this area was retiring, it seemed a great opportunity to come out west. Just one more domino that fell and told me this was the right decision."

"Ranchers are definitely going to need someone around here, yeah." Cody felt big and awkward, the way he had in school before he'd been shunned, driven out. Adrian was trying to be nice, make conversation like regular folks but Cody pretty much avoided people beyond ordering pie and coffee at the town diner, so his conversation skills had all but rusted up.

"You like to read?" Adrian hefted a couple of books from the stainless steel sideboard.

"Oh, that's where I left them." When the change was coming on, he got all muzzy-headed and often misplaced shit.

"Gay romances. And books on wolves."

"Yeah." Cody snatched the books back, embarrassed that Adrian had seen them. It was like he was looking inside Cody.

Adrian leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. "You do realise you're fuelling my own romantic ideas about a real cowboy?"

"I am?" Cody wanted to know what Adrian meant, wanted to breathe in more of his scent which was tired guy after a long journey and also warm, spicy man. He could imagine all too well waking up in the crisp linen sheets in the room reserved for Adrian, rubbing his face against the other man's neck, hearing the gentle pound of his pulse beat.

"Sure. You're obviously interested in the wilderness." He nodded towards the horizon outside the clinic windows. "And you find it lonely living here alone."

"I..." Cody flushed a deep red.

Adrian rubbed his jaw, his face reddening. "I'm sorry," he said, speaking in a muffled tone. "Sometimes I just say whatever I think. Bad habit I thought I broke a long time ago. Maybe it's coming out west."

"Folks say what they mean out here. I don't think it's a bad thing." Cody had to fight off an insane impulse to move closer to him, to feel Adrian's arms around him, stroking the

tension from his back as if Adrian were the mate who was destined to care for him.

"I haven't slept in a while. I didn't mean to imply you're, um, lonely." Adrian sounded embarrassed.

"I am," Cody blurted, seeing no reason to deny it. He hadn't kissed someone since that time he'd paid for it more than two years ago.

For a long moment he held Adrian's gaze until they both looked away.

Adrian cleared his throat. "So I've heard you've camped high in the foothills. That you've seen the wolves and wild horses that are returning to this area."

Cody nodded. "Along with some of the guides who work for Western Trail Rides, I've seen them a few times."

"I want to go up there sometime this summer."

Cody weighed whether it would be any easier lying in a bedroll close to the other man than it was sharing a roof with him. He scratched his eyebrow, wishing he understood the strong drives that Adrian seemed to set off inside him. He was more in control of himself now, but what about when the change neared next month? God, he'd have to make sure he was far away from Adrian. He couldn't live with himself if he somehow hurt him.

"It's still pretty cold up there now since not all the spring snows have melted, but I agree sometime this summer would be good. Jared mentioned one time he was out here that you specialise in horses, even giving free veterinary care to an outfit that retrains race horses into pleasure mounts."

Adrian smiled. "Yeah, I spent most of my youth in Kentucky and my last practice was in Louisville. I've offered medical support to trainers who do that kind of work. And a spread like this ranch, I thought would give me the opportunity at last to adopt one or two. That is...if you think you could do the training with me?"

This was surer ground. One thing Cody felt comfortable with was horses. He supposed he was a cliché, preferring them to people. "I could try, Doc," he said. "I did some reading on the internet after Jared shared your interest."

"I'm Adrian."

"Not to me," Cody said. "You don't know me. It's best that..." His voice drifted off. "You don't know where I come from, who I am."

"The same is true of me." Adrian shrugged. "I heard that in the west a man's actions are what speak for him, not where he comes from."

Cody ducked his head. No way was his boss anything but a good man. He'd seen that right off, when he'd tried to help Cody the first time they'd met on a lonely road.

But the same wasn't true of Cody.

* * * *

The encounter with Cody didn't clear anything up, Adrian realised as he unpacked his clothing a little later in his room.

The master bedroom overlooked the empty barn and the mountains beyond. The wooden furniture again had that hand-me-down feel, not in character with the Victorian ranch house but despite being mismatched—cherry, oak, pine pieces—the four-poster bed, chest of drawers and side table had been stripped down and polished to a subtle sheen.

Someone had done some nice woodwork.

As he went to the window to absorb the view, catching the sound of a wren calling for a mate in the low brush. Funny how he'd bought this place on a whim...he hadn't even looked at a picture of the house itself, just dry square footage faxed to his former city practice. But once he'd got a line on the property, something deep inside him had whispered this was where he needed to go. This was the place where he might find what was missing from his life.

It had been strange since Adrian had never really belonged anywhere nor felt the lack until he'd turned thirty. He'd thought he was a comfortably adjusted gay man. He had several friends-with-benefits he enjoyed. He'd grown up with a single dad who'd travelled the country in an eighteen-wheeler and maybe like his old man, Adrian hadn't felt any need to put down roots until Jared, a friend from university, had told him about this ranch.

Now he ran a hand over his neck, massaging tired muscles. He really needed to get some serious shut-eye but as he stared out the window, he saw Cody walk by, slapping work gloves against his thigh. Adrian watched him, captivated, until he disappeared into the barn.

* * * *

"Wow. I thought so."

Cody looked up from where he was sanding a bench. His long hair was in a braid and his hands weren't shaking anymore, as they had off and on during the day, partly because of the residue from the change and partly because of Adrian.

Adrian slouched against one of the barn's doorposts, brown silken hair in his sleepy eyes, rumpled blue work shirt that was partly unbuttoned to reveal smooth rounded muscle as if he'd meant to strip it off but come outside on a sudden impulse. Cody looked away because he couldn't help picturing lifting the slighter man, crushing him against the white-washed wall. Crushing his lips, breathing him in.

"That has to be very soothing work for a man who chooses to live in the back end of nowhere," Adrian said.

"Are you a shaman, the way you see into people?" Cody asked. He just hoped that Adrian didn't see all of him. Cody wanted a little time to be near Adrian before the other man would inevitably ask him to leave.

"Nope. It's just what I'd imagine finding soothing if I spent a lot of time alone." Adrian brushed a hand over the rocking chair Cody had most recently restored.

"I do a lot of the work in the winter time. After I check the cattle, fences, there's time."

"Your work is certainly something I'm going to appreciate in the house," Adrian said. "It's my first and like I said, I want to try to have some roots here. So far, so good."

"Yeah?" Cody tried not to imagine what it would be like if Adrian stroked his bare chest the way he was that cherry sideboard. He'd refinished it over the winter, but wasn't sure where to place it in the house so it stayed for the moment. Cody liked working with furniture, not particularly placing it.

"Yeah. Are you ready to tell me why you were lying naked in the middle of that road if it wasn't a bender?" He squatted next to Cody.

They were close. Too close.

Cody felt his heart pounding. He dropped his gaze, his hand falling away from the bench he'd been working on. "No."

Now Adrian would fire him. Maybe he hadn't before so he could give Cody the opportunity to open up, but he couldn't do that. Not ever.

Adrian studied him. "Will it happen again?"

"I don't know," Cody answered honestly. "Probably."

Adrian moved towards the door, still holding Cody's gaze. "I don't want you to get hurt," he said. Then he cleared his throat. "I mean, how many good cowhands am I going to find who will work a place solo and do such beautiful woodwork? Try to be careful."

Chapter Three

"Help me, please help me!"

Cody abandoned the saddle he'd been scrubbing and ran towards the woman who barrelled out of the driver's side door of her SUV. She opened the back and he brushed her aside, lifting out a dog wrapped in a blanket. Coppery blood-scent stung his nose. The animal gave a thin whine, making the hair on the back of his neck stiffen. *Pain. Pain sound.*

The woman gripped his arm, face tear-washed.

"Come on, Doc's around back," Cody headed towards the clinic door in strides. "Adrian!" he yelled. The name came easy to his lips although for the last five days he'd tried so hard to think of him as his boss, to keep his distance. He didn't want Adrian to see him for what he was. He didn't want to be sent away.

His hand was bloody as he twisted the knob, shouldering it open so it slammed against the wall.

"Put him on the table, Cody," Adrian ordered. Once Cody had done so, he peeled off the blanket. The dog tried to get up. More blood pooled around him in a red ring.

"God, no!" the woman sobbed.

"Step back and I'll do what I can," Adrian said, his voice calm, certain.

Having helped Adrian a few times with people's pets, Cody looked into the dog's dull eyes, holding its stare until it fell back, quivering, giving Adrian better access.

"You have a real touch with animals, Cody," Adrian said, shaking his head.

"How did this happen, ma'am?" Cody asked the older woman, who seemed to have taken comfort in the competent way Adrian was handling her pet.

Pushing back her grey hair, she watched Adrian working. "He was hit by a car. He's old now, can't hear anything. I don't let him out to wander but I was putting out the wash to dry on the line outside and next thing I knew..." She swallowed. "He screamed when he got hit."

"He's in a lot of pain but I'll do what I can for him, Mrs...."

She gave Adrian a tight smile. "Mrs. Appleton. We'll pay for it if you think you can...save him." Her voice was husky on the last two words.

"There's a place for you to sit and wait through that door," Adrian said gently. "Cody and I need to help him now."

"What's his name?" Cody asked, reaching out to squeeze Mrs. Appleton's hand.

"Ben," the woman said. "I guess it's not a very special name but we like it."

"I think it's a good name," Cody said. "I'll be out after I help the doc, but there's fixings to make coffee in the waiting room."

"Yes, all right," Mrs. Appleton said. "If you can't help him, will I get a little time with him?" Her grey eyes misted.

"Yes." Adrian gave the elderly dog a shot and it slumped on the table. Cody could feel the pain and fear receding under the veterinarian's care, the same gentleness he'd once shown Cody.

Cody took Mrs. Appleton's arm, noting that she was covered in blood. He guided her to the waiting room, and nodded towards the powder room. "You can clean up in there, Mrs. Appleton," he said.

"Cody?" Adrian called. "I need you."

* * * *

Hours later, Adrian found Cody and Mrs. Appleton in the barn.

"I've seen your work in town," Mrs. Appleton was telling Cody. "That second-hand furniture shop carries some of your pieces. I like the bowls, myself."

Cody had one in his lap as he and the older woman talked. It was made out of something that reminded Adrian of a knot in a tree, and Cody had left parts of what had been branches shooting out from the sides. It was a work of art, like something Adrian would expect to see in a high-end gallery in one of the cities where he'd lived.

"That's incredible," he said. "May I see it?"

There was faint colour in Cody's cheeks as his green eyes dropped bashfully. God, he was adorable. Then Adrian wanted to shake his head. He didn't just think that, did he? Clearly he was still feeling the stress from a very tense operation. Silently Cody handed him the piece.

"It feels like silk to the touch." Adrian gave his attention to Mrs. Appleton. "Ben is resting. I won't say he's out of the woods yet but he's tough."

Mrs. Appleton bent her head. "I have to get back to my husband. He'll need dinner. His heart isn't too good, poor man, or I'd have brought him with me."

Rubbing his tense neck, Adrian nodded. "Don't worry, we'll watch over Ben tonight."

"If he's still hanging in there in the morning, it would be a good sign?" she asked.

Adrian smiled. "Yes, it would."

She patted his hand. "Thank you, Doc."

"Here." Cody thrust the bowl she'd been admiring into her hands.

"Oh, but I..."

Cody turned his back, picking up a hand sander and bending over a bench he was working on.

Mrs. Appleton looked at Adrian and he shrugged.

"Thank you, Cody," she said softly before she headed out of the barn.

"That was a nice thing for you to do," Adrian said. His heart picked up now he and Cody were alone again. The taciturn young hand had avoided him over the last few days except when he was needed to help with one of the animals. Adrian marvelled at Cody's ability to calm them. He had a gift.

Cody continued sanding and suddenly Adrian had had enough. He knew the other man thought he'd go away. Certainly Cody's strategy to drive him off had so far been successful but Adrian wanted to make this place his home and Cody intrigued him. He wanted to know him, damn it.

Adrian reached out, tentatively made contact with Cody's shoulder. The muscles tensed under his touch, almost as if Cody wanted to shove him away.

"You're trembling," Adrian said, clearing his throat because suddenly his voice sounded huskier. "Cody? Please tell me what's going on, why you're avoiding me."

"You don't want to know, Doc, trust me," Cody whispered. His shoulder was rock hard under Adrian's touch and yet Cody seemed oddly vulnerable.

"Cody..." He wasn't going to back down this time. Cody was even sleeping in the barn now. "This is your home. You fixed it up, worked on most of the furniture inside the house. I feel like I've driven you out and I want you to confide in me."

Cody swung around, his green eyes capturing Adrian's.

"God!" Adrian murmured, feeling the impact of Cody's gaze like a shove to the chest. Frustration, fear, doubt...

Need.

Cody needed him.

Cody's lips came down on his and Adrian made an approving sound. *Oh, yes.*

"You got no idea what you do to me," Cody growled. "I walk by the house at night and I see your shadow on the curtains of your bedroom and I want to come up there."

Adrian's head fell back as Cody pressed hot lips to his neck, then the sensitive juncture where it met his shoulder. He cried out when Cody nipped him, sucking on the skin as he crushed Adrian to him. "God, oh, God," Adrian moaned. He was stiff, stiff and aching so that he rubbed himself helplessly against Cody's lower body, feeling an answering hunger hot and hard against his own.

"I want you. I've wanted you since you kissed me, hell, since I saw you lying in the road," Adrian murmured.

"No." Cody's fingers dug into Adrian's flesh with enough force almost to leave bruises but then he stumbled away. Adrian caught the flash of his eyes, green, glowing. It had to be a trick of the light in the barn. "You don't know what you're asking for."

Adrian put his hands on his hips, pissed. "I want you in my bed. You seem to want it too."

Cody had moved to the far side of the barn. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't see how being with you would do that."

Cody disappeared into the shadows.

"Cody!" Adrian strode after him, aroused, baffled and...suddenly alone. The door into the yard stood open, letting in a cool wind and the shine of the stars. There was no sign of Cody.

* * * *

From where Cody was standing in the meadow, he could see Adrian lingering outside the barn through a thin lace of newly uncurled leaves. He watched Adrian pace, could almost feel again the heat of skin under his touch, the way Adrian had been so willing, so wanting, his lips following Cody's, asking for more kisses, for him to take what he wanted.

But, God, the doc had no idea what kind of stray he had attracted.

Adrian suddenly cursed and strode towards the house. Despite Adrian's obvious distress, Cody knew he wouldn't leave, even if he wanted to take a drive, not with Ben sleeping in the clinic. He'd put the old dog before his own needs.

Cody gripped a sapling, his fingers tightening, his nails lengthening to claws, leaving a mark as he fought not to go after the other man. Adrian was so good with animals. After he'd finished operating on Ben how weary he'd seemed. Cody had been moved to say, "You did a good job, Doc," and Adrian's eyes had warmed at his words.

He'd wanted to take him in his arms. What the hell? As if he could ever be good enough to offer Adrian comfort. Besides, the want was getting worse. He'd been forced to hide out in the barn because sleeping in the house he'd woken up, sure he could hear the pounding of Adrian's heart one bedroom over.

Thinking of him, probably lying in bed now, staring up at the ceiling, maybe wondering what the hell Cody's problem was... The sapling suddenly cracked under his grip.

He jumped and backed away, staring at the scored trunk. "No."

But he couldn't get away from what he was. His fingers weren't his own anymore. The mating heat had transformed them into claws. Changing. He was changing weeks before the full moon gave him no choice.

"No!" He ran, leaping over a shadowed brook, branches hitting his face, swatting him as he ran faster and faster, his clothes falling away as he tugged them off, his shadow under the finger of moon transforming, lower to the ground now, pain sound bursting up from his chest —

And then he ran faster than his human self ever could, ran in a circle until he retraced his steps to the barn and the house and the man sleeping on the second floor.

He sat on the gravel drive and stared up at the darkened rectangle of Adrian's bedroom window.

* * * *

Adrian jerked awake, hearing a thump against the front door. He was lying tangled and sweaty in the sheets on his bed. He squinted, seeing it was still dark, the moon sinking into the horizon.

The sound could be the newspaper or maybe a milk delivery. He didn't always go into White Deer so some was delivered here every two days. He blinked, trying to work out what day it was.

His body ached and he looked down to see he'd spilled again all over his belly.

Dreaming about Cody. He shoved back the hair from his eyes. What was he doing? He barely knew the other man since Cody did his best to stay away from him. But ever since he'd first seen him, he'd felt caught in something he didn't understand. Something primal.

His gaze returned to the window, to the curtain rising from a gentle gust of early morning air. He got up and the bed creaked. Nude, he walked to his window, remembering Cody admitting he sometimes looked up at it, wishing he was in the bedroom with Adrian.

He looked out at the barn, saw the light was still on from the night before. Had Cody not yet returned? A movement caught his gaze and Adrian froze, heart pounding.

It was big, larger than any grey wolf he'd ever seen. It seemed to look back at him as Adrian's breath stalled in his chest.

Chapter Four

"Miles Danvers," Adrian said. "This is the cowboy who takes care of my stock, Cody Marshall."

Cody looked at the stranger, his nose already burning from the scent of his citrus aftershave. Who was he? Why was he here? He still felt groggy from the night before as if he were recovering from a bad cold. His muscles ached. If he'd made a kill or lain with someone after the change it would be better but the wolf hadn't left the yard the night before, staring up at Adrian's window like the moon.

In contrast to the overly strong scent worn by the stranger, Adrian only used soap and shampoo so he was soothing to be around. His scent was so alluring to Cody that he didn't think Adrian needed anything more.

"Nice to meet you," Miles said, reaching out with a well-manicured hand bearing a heavy gold watch around the wrist. He was dressed in a suit, as if he were visiting a board room and not a second-rate ranch.

Hesitantly, Cody shook the other man's hand. Something coiled inside him, wanting to drive him away as if he were a rival. He tightened his control over the wolf.

"Cody restored all this furniture," Adrian said, gesturing around Cody's small workspace in the barn.

"Oh, this bowl is to die for." Miles picked up one that Cody had finished just that morning, after he'd ridden out, checked fences and moved the small herd to fresh grazing.

"Maybe Cody will sell it to you. He sells them in town," Adrian said. His gaze was on Cody, so Cody swallowed.

"How is Ben today?" he asked. He didn't want to disappoint Adrian, never wanted that, but he didn't want to sell Miles anything.

Adrian's face relaxed into a smile.

Cody felt an answering smile touch his own lips in a moment of perfect understanding.

"Who's Ben?" Miles asked.

"A dog," Cody answered baldly, as if Miles should have guessed.

"And he's better," Adrian said.

Miles rolled his eyes. "Of course, darling."

Cody couldn't keep from grimacing. He saw Adrian flush. So he and this stranger were what? Former lovers? Miles was standing too close to Cody's Adrian. He stroked his forearm as if he had the right.

"I can't believe you left the city for this godforsaken wilderness. I know you wanted to break out of your rut but..."

"It's hardly a wilderness, Miles," Adrian said. "I'm surrounded by ranches and farms and White Deer is twenty miles down the road. It's a small town, but —"

Miles grimaced. "My cab had trouble with that road. It badly needs new paving."

"It's a good thing you didn't get here any earlier," Adrian said, his eyes going to Cody who was struggling to school his expression to something bland, struggling to keep his hands loose at his sides and from forming into fists.

"Why is that?" Miles asked.

Adrian had still not looked away from Cody. "There was a wolf on my property last night. A great beast larger than I've ever seen. It was magnificent."

Cody took a step closer to Adrian, called by his blood. "You weren't afraid?"

"No."

Miles eyes widened as he shook Adrian's arm, breaking the spell. "That's not a good thing. Don't you have chickens and stuff around here? It was probably after them."

"No, he...uh, the wolf didn't seem interested in checking out the chicken coop."

"How do you know? Adrian, you've always been a bit too sentimental about wild animals." Miles looked at Cody. "He volunteered to help out on reserves and sometimes even zoos."

"I wouldn't say the wolf wasn't interested in the chicken coop." Cody licked his lips. "But there was something he wanted more than food."

"He? How do you know it was a he?" Miles asked, looking from Cody to Adrian with growing impatience.

"He's been around here before. This is his territory," Cody said. He looked at Miles, holding his gaze until the other man dropped his eyes. "You shouldn't be here. He doesn't like strangers."

"What the hell —" Miles began, looking pissed.

Whatever else would have been exchanged on the subject was dropped at the sound of a large vehicle pulling into Adrian's drive.

"That'll be Mrs. Appleton," Cody said. Somehow he was standing in the gap between Adrian and his guest. He wasn't sure how it had happened but the wolf inside him laughed, settling down now his mate was close to him and not another man.

He is not my mate. He can never be ours, Cody told his wolf, then felt the sorrow and bafflement of his beast.

"I'm glad I have good news for her," Adrian said before he headed out to meet the other woman. Miles made to follow on his heels but somehow despite knowing he had no right, Cody again put himself between him and Adrian.

* * * *

"Cody." Mrs. Appleton took his hand, squeezing it. Cody flushed, a little embarrassed under the attention. "I love my bowl, thank you."

"You gave her one?" Miles asked, looking slightly disgruntled. He'd probably picked up on how Cody had no intention of selling him one.

Cody shrugged.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to freshen up," Miles said. "I'll leave you to play doctor, Adrian."

Adrian nodded to his friend, who headed for the main door of the house.

"Come see Ben." Adrian gestured towards the clinic to Mrs. Appleton. "I had him caged for the night though I almost didn't need to bother. With Cody around he seems very calm."

"I just told him he was safe and he should let us make the decisions," Cody said.

"Uh huh," Adrian said, his tone teasing as he gave Cody a small grin. "Whatever it is, it's magic."

"That's one word for it," Cody muttered.

* * * *

Ben groaned with pain as he tried to get up and lick Mrs. Appleton's hand. Cody gently pushed him back and the dog relaxed, letting his mistress fuss over him. There were tears in her eyes as she reached out and gripped Adrian's hand.

Adrian cleared his throat. "We'll leave you with your dog for a while. You should be able to take him home after he's eating solid food again without any trouble and he's off the I.V. Perhaps a couple of days, although I warn you, he'll have to wear a cone to prevent him worrying at those stitches."

"He'll get through it. Thank you," she said, settling on a stool next to Ben.

"I'll give you a little time with him then," Adrian said.

Cody followed Adrian from the examination room into the study, closing the door firmly behind him. "Doc, is Miles staying the night?"

Adrian washed his hands, pausing to give Cody a confused look. "Of course. It's a long trip out here to visit a friend."

"Yes, it is. If he's just a friend."

"Cody, are you...jealous?"

Cody made a growling sound and Adrian shook his head. "You practically ran away from me last night. I thought...maybe I'd imagined you wanted me."

Cody managed a derisive laugh though he didn't say anything. What could he say? Adrian had no idea how much Cody hadn't wanted to tear himself away, how much he'd wanted to give Adrian all the pleasure he demanded.

He waited and when the doc was at the entrance of his office he blocked it, hand on the door frame. He wasn't ready to let him go.

"Cody?" Adrian's tone was cool. Cody felt heat shimmer on his skin at the challenge. It made him want to tussle with the other man, to wrestle him to the floor and gently bite the back of his neck.

"Are you going to let him into your bed?" He couldn't help that his voice came out sounding angry. The thought had been driving him crazy ever since Adrian had introduced Miles.

"I can't believe you're asking me that."

"Just answer the question," Cody said. When Adrian looked stubborn he added in a whisper, "Please. Please, I know I have no right to ask but I need to know."

Adrian slapped the wall but Cody didn't even jump, all his attention riveted on his face, his expression. "Oh, all right," Adrian grumbled. "We had a thing once, maybe you picked up on it?"

Cody swallowed a flash of possessive rage. He didn't like to think of Adrian with

anyone else which was nuts. But the wolf didn't understand anything but *mine*.

He licked his lips and Adrian's gaze went to his mouth. "And tonight?"

"Tonight I'll probably look out my window, see if I can spot that wolf again," Adrian said ruefully. "I want to see if I can get a photo of him. He was larger than any I've seen before."

Cody shook his head. "Somehow I think he's camera shy."

"Hmmm." Adrian pushed his hair off his face. "I'll be honest with you, Cody. If you weren't here, I'd maybe be taking a little comfort with Miles. I'm probably crazy not to just do that."

Cody inhaled sharply at the thought.

"Hey, your eyes..."

Guessing what Adrian might have glimpsed, Cody dropped his gaze, fighting for control. "Please don't let him touch you." It took everything to ask, not to demand, not to just grab Adrian by the shirt and drag him into the barn and tie him there, guarding him from any other man. But Cody had fought all his life not to be the wolf his father was.

"I don't want to settle for reading romance novels, Cody," Adrian said, leaning away from Cody and crossing his arms. When Cody thought it was safe, he looked at the other man, taking in a patch on his chin where he'd missed a spot shaving, to the lean, elegant bones, the silky brown hair. His mate was a beautiful man. Cody wanted to give him everything, wanted to make him scream with pleasure.

"If you want me, come to the barn tonight." Cody couldn't believe he was asking but his bones, his blood, demanded Adrian. He needed to meld with his mate, to hear his cries as he rutted inside him. He only hoped he'd find a way to give him what he wanted without giving away his secret. "I promise, I'd never hurt you."

Adrian's eyes widened. "Of course you wouldn't."

Cody swallowed thickly when the other man threaded a hand tenderly through his hair before bringing their lips together. Oh. Oh, Adrian's kisses, the way his arms tightened around Cody, signalling how he wanted to get closer...

Cody pushed the other man against the wall, lifting his arms away from him, pinning them by the wrists above his head as he took control of the kiss, staring at Adrian as he teased them both by giving him just a taste of his lips grazing Adrian's, just a hint of his

tongue, licking his lips as Adrian panted, thrusting his lower body and swollen cock against Cody's.

"Do you like that?" Cody asked, his blood beating with the need to take, to secure, while he fought to be gentle. He would never hurt this man.

"It's frustrating!" Adrian glared at him. "I'm not used to being, um, a passive lover."

Cody laughed. "You won't be passive with me, beautiful Adrian, but you will be under me." Adrian had to understand that sex between them would mean surrendering to Cody's dominance. It could be no other way for the wolf.

Adrian's eyes flared and his scent whispered his arousal at Cody's blunt words. It seemed the civilised doctor liked the idea. He cleared his throat. "Beautiful? You really think of me that way?"

Cody flushed. "Um."

"You're the beautiful one," Adrian said, his hands exerting pressure as if to try to free himself, though Cody saw a strange kind of satisfaction in his eyes that he couldn't. Adrian liked that his mate was in control of their play, whether he was fully conscious of it or not.

"Will you give me what I need tonight?" Adrian asked. "I want you inside me, fucking me."

His hands were shaking. He had to step away, let Adrian go, or he'd take him right there, right then, and never mind Adrian's annoying friend was somewhere in the house and Mrs. Appleton was close by with Ben.

"I'll fuck you. I'll fuck you long and hard. You may not be able to walk easily the next day after taking me so be sure you want it. All of it."

Chapter Five

Be sure you want it.

God, did he. Adrian blushed, hoping Miles wouldn't pick up on his distraction as they ate together at the diner in White Deer. He'd sensed when he'd been leaving for supper with his friend that Cody wasn't happy but he'd held Cody's gaze from across the yard, willing him to trust him.

It was Cody he would go to in the middle of the night, Cody he wanted to give himself to.

As if he read Adrian's intent, Cody disappeared back into his workshop, but not after one last pointed glare at Miles. *Hands off, he's mine*, his brilliant green eyes seemed to say from the shadows.

Adrian felt an unaccustomed thrill go through him at the idea that someone would ever want him that much, as if Cody wanted to mark Adrian his. But as he drove into town he scolded himself for giving into such primitive feelings. He was older than Cody, an experienced man. He shouldn't want to be taken the way he sensed Cody would take him.

His cock throbbed, denying his intellect. It liked the idea very much.

"Why are you so damn twitchy?" Miles demanded.

"Uh." Adrian shrugged, not wanting to lie to his friend and former lover.

"It's that rude woodworking cowboy," Miles said. "He's hot, I grant you. Long hair, green eyes. But are you sure you want such a barbarian to have you?"

Adrian widened his eyes. "Why do you think he'd have me? I'm not some boy."

"Oh, come on!" Miles threw a French fry at him and Adrian grinned. "He's a savage. You can see it in his eyes. He didn't like my hands on you at all."

"I'm, um, sorry about that."

Miles gave an exaggerated shiver. "Are you kidding? God, I wish he wanted me the way he wants you. I'd definitely give myself to the beast."

"Beast..." Adrian frowned.

"What do you know of him? If I'm going to pretend to be asleep in my blameless bed tonight while the two of you no doubt get it on, I want to know more about him, darling, so dish." Miles put his chin in his hand and Adrian felt a wave of affection for the rich man who

gave generously to various animal causes. He wished Miles could find someone special who would see past the superficial to the kind person.

Adrian grimaced. "I don't actually know that much about him."

Miles blinked. "Are you kidding? You usually have a full dossier on someone before you agree to a first date and you never just trick."

"I know but...he's mysterious."

"Well, he does his cowboy thing, which seems pretty straightforward and what's mysterious about spending a lot of time in that barn, sanding wood? Come on, there's something you haven't shared with me."

Adrian sighed, pushing aside his salad and nursing his coffee. He needed to confide in someone. "I first saw him in the middle of a road, passed out and naked."

Miles eyes widened. "What?"

Adrian nodded. "Yup."

"So he drinks?"

"I don't think so. He told me he wasn't on a bender and I didn't smell any alcohol on him but he was scratched up, bruised, bloody, as if he'd been running in the woods."

"Uh huh." Miles stroked one eyebrow. "A beast indeed."

"Thing is, a day later there was no sign of the scratches or bruises." Adrian shook his head, still confused on that issue. "I suppose they could have been superficial."

"That's a weird place you've chosen to live with a wolf haunting your property and an enigmatic, surly cowboy." Miles reached forward to squeeze Adrian's hand. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'm not sure I have any choice," Adrian muttered, shoving his hair off his forehead. He could feel his skin, sensitised, licked by the heat of knowing that soon he'd give himself to Cody. And he didn't particularly care how the other man took him. He could bend him over his work bench and grunt over him, fucking him hard and Adrian would want it, would spread himself, taking it.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that. You always took a light hand with your lovers and you know I wanted more for you but this..."

"Cody isn't light. He's...locked up inside himself, ashamed of something. I need to know him."

Miles sighed. "Well, then I should feel sorry for the poor bastard since you always get your man."

* * * *

When Adrian entered the barn an hour later, he saw Cody working on one of his bowls, the recuperating dog at his feet. "I had a feeling I'd find Ben here with you."

"He was whimpering in his sleep," Cody said, his green eyes intent on Adrian's face.

Adrian's chest tightened under that appraising look. He knelt by the dog, threading a hand through his coat. "I'll take him back to the clinic, give him something for the discomfort."

"I'll carry him." Cody gently shouldered Adrian aside so he could lift the old dog.

"I am not fragile," Adrian muttered as he followed the larger man across the yard. "You don't need to do things for me." He unlocked the clinic door.

Cody watched gravely. "I want to."

Swallowing hard under that look, Adrian switched on the lights. Cody put Ben on the table and stroked the dog's back while Adrian gave him a shot.

"He'll rest now. I'll...check on him later." Adrian felt Cody's eyes on him as he took the animal and tucked him back in his cage.

"Did you come to the barn only looking for Ben?" Cody asked bluntly.

Adrian's breath caught in his chest. Cody wasn't going to hide behind friendship or small talk.

"You know why I came," he answered quietly.

"You were out a long time with Miles." Cody looked away until Adrian went to him, stroked a palm up the side of his cheek. Cody's green eyes snapped to his. "The truth is, you're safer with him than you are with me."

"Why do you always act like you're not a good man?" Adrian asked. Before they did what he knew would happen in the shadows of the barn, he wanted to understand the root of Cody's self-doubt.

"Because I'm not." It sounded like something Cody had memorised by rote.

Adrian frowned. Who the hell had made Cody feel he wasn't worthy of tenderness?

"Oh, so that's why you gave Mrs. Appleton a bowl that would cost a fortune in any city? Or why you carried an old dog over to your workshop simply to give comfort?"

"I...that doesn't mean anything." Cody shrugged.

"It means you're a caring person."

"You don't know me."

"I know your actions. They speak for you." Adrian raised a brow.

"Look, I don't want to tell you —"

"Tough."

"You'll want me to leave. You won't let me touch you."

Adrian laughed. "Are you kidding?"

"My father forced my mother to marry him," Cody choked out. He turned away from Adrian, wrapping his arms around himself.

Adrian took a deep breath. Knowing this had to be raw ground he asked softly, "How do you know that?"

"She died a long time ago and my father abandoned me but my uncle told me. Told me every damn day of my life," Cody said bitterly. "He and my cousins and the rest of the village hated me for it."

"Village?" Adrian blinked, thinking it was an odd name for where Cody had come from.

"My mother's people are a little...different. They call their town a village." Cody shrugged.

"Where is this place so I can avoid it?"

"It's not far from here, but I stay out of their territory," Cody said. "I'm my father's son so I'll never be welcome."

"But whatever happened between your parents wasn't your fault!"

Cody looked over his shoulder at him.

"Cody, you were just an innocent child."

"But I'm not." Torment was in the green eyes now and also a forlorn bit of hope, as if Cody wished what Adrian was saying was the truth.

"I'm sorry you had a difficult time growing up." Adrian carefully put his arms around Cody, rubbing his back.

"Please don't make me leave. Not yet," Cody whispered.

"Those marks...those scars on your backside. Does that have something to do with your uncle?" Adrian asked.

Cody tensed again, and Adrian hated that he'd caused that reaction. But primitive rage was bubbling inside Cody like lava, inescapable.

"Every time I was naughty as a kid, he wanted to remind me of my tainted blood. He wanted to make sure I never hurt anyone."

"What a bastard!" Adrian pulled away, his heart beating fast.

"Doc, it's okay." Cody lifted a tentative hand, as if unsure it would be welcome against Adrian's skin.

Adrian pushed his face into the caress, making it clear how welcome Cody's touch was. "It's not okay. How old were you the first time he..."

Cody shook his head. "I don't remember. I used to hide out sometimes in the woods when I was older and then finally I ran away. I like...working ranches like this one, where there aren't any, you know —"

"People, yeah." Adrian gave a humourless laugh. "No wonder if that's how you were treated." He took another deep breath, the air feeling like it was fanning the flame in his gut. Cody was his. No one was allowed to hurt him, shame him. "I just hate anyone helpless getting hurt."

"Which is why you're such a great vet."

"Since I came to live here you've seen to my comfort far beyond what any employee would bother with. You've furnished this house, which I understand was almost empty when you started working here, you've helped a carpenter to design and build my clinic and you've taken good care of the cattle and the chickens." Adrian kissed the palm of Cody's hand. "Please don't leave. I want you here."

Please don't leave.

Cody never thought anyone would ask that of him, but Adrian still didn't know all his secrets. Could Cody somehow keep control of his wolf, shield his mate completely from the wild part of himself?

It was the only way they could be together. He swallowed, not wanting to take the steps he had to take, but what else could he do? He had to keep his secret and keep Adrian safe. Adrian might have said that what had happened between Cody's parents didn't mark Cody, but one thing did and that was the wolf.

"If you come back with me to the barn, I'll ask you to do something strange, but you have to agree or we can't be together," he said.

Adrian's eyes widened. He crossed his arms, confronting Cody. "Am I allowed to know what it is?"

Cody chewed his lip. "I need to blindfold you. And...for the first time at least, it would be safer if I tied your hands to one of the barn posts or something."

"Blindfold? But Cody, I want to see you."

Cody shook his head. He ached for that too, but he didn't know how he'd react, being inside Adrian for the first time.

"This isn't some kind of kinky deal with you." Adrian studied him. "You really need this to feel safe."

"Yes. Please, Adrian."

Adrian let out a breath. "I've never let any man blindfold me."

"You'd have to trust me," Cody said, sure now that Adrian would tell him to return to the barn alone. Why would he take such a risk for someone he barely knew?

"Yes, I guess I would."

And Adrian took Cody's hand, as if asking him to lead the way.

Chapter Six

Cody licked his lips. "It would be easier if you got ready here."

Adrian felt his heart give a big *thump*. He reminded himself of telling Miles how he was an older, experienced man. This was not a big deal...so why was his heart suddenly thundering?

"Strip," Cody said.

Adrian stared at him, hesitating...then remembering how Cody had unveiled himself to him, how he'd shared something painful, something private. If he stopped now, Cody could take it as the expected rejection.

Still, his hands were shaking as he pulled his T-shirt over his head. When he revealed his bare chest to Cody for the first time, he saw the way the green eyes flared, glowing in that uncanny fashion that had to be some kind of trick of light.

"Doc..." Cody said softly before reaching out and touching a puckered nipple with his index finger.

Adrian inhaled sharply, the circling finger making his nipple stab the air, as if pleading to be taken into Cody's mouth.

Cody leant forward and put his lips gently against Adrian's chest, sucking the nipple while Adrian gasped. He clenched a hand around Cody's skull, asking him to stay, to tease, to touch, to claim what was his.

Claim what was his?

Whoa. Adrian blinked.

But before he could mull over his own strange thoughts, Cody blew on his wet nipple, the simple feeling resounding through him as if he were an innocent, as if he'd never experienced another man's touch. "Cody!"

"You like that, Doc? You're so beautiful." Cody's finger grazed Adrian's leather belt.

Adrian knew he was wishing Adrian was nude, wishing he could see all of him. He huffed out a laugh. "You make me feel like a centrefold."

"If you were in a photo spread, my copy would be very, very wrinkled." A dimple appearing in one cheek as Cody's face lightened. He looked happier than Adrian had ever seen him.

"And stained?"

"Doc!" Cody gave him a fake outraged look as they both laughed.

Somehow that made it easier to open his belt, the sound very loud in the charged hush of his darkened clinic. When the leather fell loose, Cody ran a finger over it before meeting Adrian's eyes. "I want to tie your hands with it," he said.

"Tie my hands..." He really would be helpless. And this man was going to fuck him, fuck him hard. Adrian felt a mix of feeling ball up in his chest so he couldn't continue for a moment, could only stare into Cody's eyes. "Why does that turn me on so much?"

"Because you need to be on your back for me, legs spread, throat exposed. You needed it that first time we were alone in this house together, just like I did, but you couldn't let yourself accept it."

Adrian frowned, thinking that was an oddly primal way of putting his desire. But when he stopped analysing for a moment, he pictured himself as Cody said, nude, his legs spread, Cody between them, gently nuzzling Adrian's needy cock. Above his head, Adrian's hands were bound by the leather belt.

And holding Cody's eyes, Adrian knew this was the way it was supposed to be between them, as natural as the spring flowers outdoors, as the brook nearby in the meadow, as the wolf that visited the ranch night after night on its lonely rambles. Cody was right. The first night they'd met he'd almost surrendered to this man completely. He'd needed it then and he needed it now, only now he'd had some time to get to know Cody...and he trusted him.

"God, yes, I need it!" Adrian whispered. "All right."

Next, he unzipped his jeans and his erection fell out, held only by the silk of his boxers. The material seemed to caress him, moving ever so slightly from the pound of his pulse, from the stir of his breath.

Cody reached out and cupped him, confident, and Adrian whimpered. He couldn't help himself, as embarrassing as the sound was.

"Beautiful, how you want this."

Adrian covered Cody's hand, not to stop him, a fear he saw flicker at first through Cody's eyes, but to let him know he approved of the touch, that he was a full participant. "I do want it."

Cody's lips crashed against his in a desperate kiss and now it was Cody who whimpered, Cody who needed.

"It's all right," Adrian murmured. "I'll give you what you want."

"What I want is a whole lot complicated."

Adrian dropped his jeans and his boxers to the floor and kicked them away, toeing off his sandals so he stood fully nude, proud, erect in the moonlight. He took Cody's hand and placed it on the centre of his chest, feeling fingers tremble and then clench against his skin. "No, it's not," he said.

* * * *

Adrian felt a trace of gratitude that Miles' bedroom window faced away from the yard between the house and the barn. This moment was intensely, painfully private, something he wanted to share only with Cody as the other man led him to the barn, nude, blindfolded with Cody's bandana, utterly helpless.

Cody's hand gripped his, his other arm wrapped carefully around Adrian's shoulder as he guided him. The cool breeze caused Adrian's nipples to pucker and a sensual feeling of freedom ran through his body, as if he were as primitive as the large wolf he'd glimpsed the night before.

"Cody," he said, wanting to share with his younger lover how all his senses were alive while he was totally dependent on the other man in a way he had never imagined before.

"I just want to drop to my knees and suck your cock when you're like this."

"Whoa, don't let me stop you!" The feel of the air changed and he smelt fresh hay. Nevertheless he started at the sound of the barn door creaking open.

"Shhhh." Cody sounded reassuring. "I got you."

"I know." Adrian felt the rasp of wood shavings under his feet and that frankincense scent he now associated with the barn and Cody's work. Cody steadied him as he helped Adrian to kneel. His belly brushed against a form and he realised it was the bench Cody was working on. It felt oddly warm and silken against his skin, comforting and familiar.

Cody kissed the back of his neck and Adrian shivered. His cock was so hard he gasped when Cody reached down to stroke him.

"Like this? Like me touching you when you can't see what I'll do next?" Cody whispered in his ear.

"Yes."

"You never really surrendered before."

Adrian's eyes stung behind the blindfold. Damned if he knew why. "Just you."

Cody leaned against him for a moment and Adrian could feel how he was trembling.

"Adrian, let me give you pleasure. It's all I want."

"Yes."

Cody pushed Adrian's legs wider apart. He felt the rasp of the other man's clothing against his bare back, making him feel smaller, more submissive, like a sexy pet.

"Are your knees all right?"

"Yes, you've left something soft here for me."

"One of my old horse blankets. I figured it would be easier for you to kneel."

"Thank you." Adrian felt cherished and he wanted to enjoy it. When was the last time someone took care of him? It felt so alien to his experience he couldn't remember.

"I'd do anything for you. That first time I saw you, when you touched me...you were so damn caring I was a goner."

Cody's callused hands ran down his back, making Adrian arch with pleasure. His ass raised and he heard Cody catch his breath, as if in reaction to the sight. He could imagine how he looked, pale, naked, round buttocks high in offering, kneeling blindfolded, eager to be fucked.

When Cody's fingers teased the lower curve of one ass cheek Adrian pushed himself deeper into the questing hand. "Take me," he whispered.

"If I do this...I'm not sure I can ever go away again. I might haunt your door if you get tired of me as a lover." Cody's voice cracked as he laughed.

It was the same feeling of kismet Adrian had experienced when he'd decided to buy the ranch, to come out west. "No going back," he said firmly. He had no idea where he and Cody were going or what was the core of the bond between them, but right then he didn't care.

Strong hands spread him and warm lips kissed his pucker so Adrian moaned. This was something he loved but also something he very rarely got. Most of his lovers seemed too sophisticated to want to get primal with him. Polite encounters in beds with high thread counts were his usual thing, not him on his knees, trembling, blindfolded while another man spread his ass cheeks, put his mouth to him, taking him.

Cody sucked at him, murmuring his enjoyment, his hands digging into Adrian's skin. He didn't just give Adrian service to ensure his compliance, he devoured him like an animal, his tongue a hot, wet invasion.

"Uh!" Adrian cried out, shaking, wanting more and Cody laughed before that tongue thrust into him again, spearing him so that Adrian pushed back, straining. "Oh, God. Oh, God, Cody..."

Finally a finger joined the play, penetrating him, thick, satisfying. He whimpered and sucked in a breath, easing it out with the burn he welcomed now.

Cody was penetrating him. It was so perfect, so exactly what he needed, the way Adrian had finally recognised he needed to be splayed out and under this man. Sweat broke out on his hairline and all he could think was, *Cody has a part of himself inside me at last.*

He groaned, greedy for even more than a finger but Cody took his time, rubbing, coaxing, until Adrian's body undulated back and forth over the bench. His moans seemed extra loud. He felt hot and flushed. He kept picturing how he must look, eager, submissive, so very ready to be fucked.

When Cody opened him further, adding another finger, Adrian murmured to himself, not really words, just feeling and sound. He sensed Cody's awareness completely wrapped in him while Adrian was grounded in what he was feeling. Cody was probably a lot less experienced than Adrian but he was taking time. He wanted to please.

Adrian gave him more sounds, letting him know when his body sparked at Cody's brushing him where he was most sensitive. Ruthless. Like a predator, Cody found where Adrian was weak and exploited it until one word rose in his chest, exploding out—

"Please!"

Adrian needed the other man's body inside him, his teeth marking him. He frowned at the last thought even as he widened his legs, even as he lifted himself up in clear invitation.

Now. I need it now.

Cody strained to keep the wolf from taking over the mating. His hands trembled where he caressed Adrian and he knew the other man had to be aware of his nervousness. He put on a condom, even though from what little he'd heard about his kind, he didn't need one. But Adrian would question, would probably stop him without it and he couldn't exactly

explain himself. He slathered himself generously with lube. His vision blurred, sharpening so he could see every mole and freckle on Adrian's back.

He took a moment to appreciate the sight with his enhanced senses even as his balls ached with the need to spill his seed inside Adrian. His silky skin over a body that was rangy and nicely-shaped, a man who was strong from living, from serving others. His rumpled hair, wild from Cody's hands, his trembling legs, his eagerly raised ass.

He belonged to Cody.

His hands tightened on the smaller man's slim hips as he rubbed himself against him, shaking with the need to just thrust inside. A drop of sweat hit Adrian's back, fallen from Cody's slick skin.

"Take me," Adrian moaned, as if he was as caught up in the mating heat as Cody, but how was that possible? Adrian was human. "Fuck me."

"I'll fuck you." He gripped Adrian, holding him still so he could penetrate him with as much care as he'd used with his fingers only moments before. Control. He would not lose control. He would master the wolf and his human lover. He slid inside slowly, squeezed tight by Adrian who milked his cock with each restless, wanton movement.

"Oh, God, Cody, feel so good..." Adrian pushed back, showing every sign that he loved having Cody inside him. It made it harder, knowing that Adrian welcomed him, that he was burned by the same fires. "You're so...warm."

Cody could only guess Adrian was feeling the difference between mating with wolf and man. His cock was still growing inside Adrian, something that Cody had never experienced as he filled other men. It had to be because Adrian was his mate.

The bite.

As much as he wanted to give it, he couldn't mark Adrian without his consent.

Cody growled with frustration even as Adrian bucked, his body still accommodating to Cody's change in size. "What...? Something feels different. God, Cody, I've never felt—"

Cody shifted and his cock nudged Adrian's prostate gland, distracting him. It was easy to please him because his body was designed to give the maximum in pleasure to deflect the pain of the bite.

"You like it, you like me inside you, Doc?"

"Don't stop, please."

"You should see yourself. You're so hot for it. I love you bound. I love you helpless." Cody stroked Adrian's flank before his fingers dug into Adrian's skin. "Next time I want to spank you when you're sitting there like that, fucking yourself on my finger."

Adrian made a soft sound.

"You like that idea? You like the idea of bending over your examination table in the clinic and getting your ass red from my hand?"

Cody stroked Adrian's tight, hard balls, also full of seed and ready to spill. His mate was fully aroused; his mate loved to be ridden. He twisted one hand into Adrian's hair, laughing. He was desperate for it.

"You'll let me do this whenever I want?" he asked. "There will be times I just look at you and need it."

"Whenever you want," Adrian moaned. "However you want it." His body swayed with Cody's thrusts, his silken brown hair soft in Cody's grip. He was *his*, he belonged to Cody.

"Spill. I want to see you spill all over my work place," Cody ordered.

Adrian stiffened, head arching back, coming, coming in long protracted pulls so that Cody could smell him, his sweat, his hot come, feel him squeeze his cock. He yanked his hand away from Adrian's hair when he felt the tips of claws protrude from his fingertips. He was changing, even as he came, even as he lost himself in the hot heaven of Adrian's body.

He spurted into the condom, head thrown back as he roared, primal. He shoved into Adrian again and again, until his lover collapsed against the little wooden bench. Staring at him, wanting to wrap himself around him and lick him and give him tenderness but knowing he had to go *now*, he couldn't stay, couldn't let Adrian see the beast he had given himself to.

Adrian felt hot, moist breath against his neck and then Cody's tongue licked him there. The graze of teeth, as if Cody wanted to mark him. Sated like never before though he was a little sore from Cody's size—he'd been larger than any man Adrian ever remembered accommodating—Adrian didn't think he'd mind a memento of their first encounter but before he could purr encouragement he felt Cody pull out, felt cool air against his own damp skin where their bodies had met.

"Cody?" he asked, drowsy. To hell with the chill, he felt like he could sleep right here, right now if only Cody would untie him.

As if in answer to his demand, something tugged at his belt.

Adrian's hands fell free and he shook his arms, feeling the pain of having had them confined. Ouch. Something to remember if Cody insisted on bondage, Adrian thought as he rubbed life into his stiff limbs.

He blinked. He was totally alone. He sat up, removing the blindfold. The room was lit by one small lantern at the far end but there was no sign of Cody.

Even more puzzling, the belt they'd used to tie his hands lay in two pieces on either side of Adrian's body. He lifted it, taking in the leather, cut in half by something sharp.

Cody was gone.

He'd pleased Adrian, given him everything he promised in their hot first coupling in return for Adrian's complete submission, but then he'd disappeared again, left Adrian alone when he wanted... He wanted Cody's arms around him right now, reassuring him. Adrian rubbed his chin, disgusted with himself even as his eyes prickled. For God's sake, he was an experienced man, no stranger to a morning after in a lover's bed, to making light of the moment, to moving on.

He was stupid, to feel so devastated.

Chapter Seven

"A new hearth?" Adrian watched Cody brush a trace of the cement he was mixing from his cheek.

They were both inside the house, surrounded by material Cody had brought together over the past few weeks. Large river rocks, bits of prairie driftwood, hunks of quartz and even two old arrow heads that Adrian had marvelled over. Cody had amassed everything on his solitary night walks, the ones that Adrian wished he could take with Cody, but despite what they'd shared, Cody remained solitary. And stubborn.

Somehow Adrian had been so busy seeing to the animals brought to his clinic as well as visiting ranchers that he'd almost missed this new project of Cody's. Of course, he'd also been distracted since the two of them had come together a few times, always when Adrian was either blindfolded or in the total darkness of his bedroom.

It was the hottest sex he'd ever had but also increasingly frustrating for Adrian, who wanted to see and touch his lover. He felt like Persephone, locked in a Greek myth. Cody would make him wild for it, make him surrender utterly, but then he'd leave and Adrian often wouldn't see him until late the next day, as if he were in hiding.

Hell, maybe Adrian was also hiding. If he were honest with himself, he was burying himself in his work when he wasn't with Cody. The truth was, he needed to be fucked, needed Cody inside him but afterward, he needed to be held, as embarrassing as that was.

Maybe it was better Cody wasn't around for that part since the need to be held was as new an experience as the need to submit. Adrian didn't know what to do with those feelings. He was a stranger to himself, a stranger he wasn't even sure he liked.

"The old fireplace wasn't in useable condition when I moved in, Doc," Cody said, interrupting Adrian's increasingly brooding thoughts. Cody's long hair was loose around his shoulders the way Adrian liked. He loved to tangle a lock of it in his fingers while holding Cody's eyes and listening to him. It always seemed like a silent promise between them, *I am your lover and I get to touch you*. Was he a fool for wanting more from Cody than an occasional hot, desperate fuck? Because as long as Cody left, that was all it was.

He cleared his throat. "That's why we've been stuck using only the hated woodstove, hmmm?"

"Yeah, and you still don't know how to use it very well." But Cody took care of that, putting a knot of wood in when it was needed. The oven that hadn't been working when he first moved in had since been replaced with a gas stainless steel appliance that Cody had teased him was 'citified.' But both men found it easy to cook with, which was the main thing.

"So how long will this project take?" he asked now. He wanted to go upstairs and get his camera, send some stills to Miles who was still taking an interest in what he referred to as 'Adrian's quaint country courtship.'

"Once I start, I can't stop," Cody told him gravely. "It's going to be a hell of a mess until it's finished and I can clean it up. But...I want to do this for you."

I want to please you.

Maybe Cody had some sense of Adrian's carefully buried hurt.

Adrian swallowed. "Can I help?"

"Any patients today, Doc?"

"Nope, unless I get an emergency."

"You'll be a mess."

"It can't be any worse than helping a cow give birth." He'd had Cody help him the last time, tugging and tugging to pull a calf free of its mother, both covered in wet, gory placenta, grinning at each other when it was done. He remembered how in that moment he'd felt closer to Cody than any other lover before him.

I'm falling in love with him and I don't even know him. He won't let me.

Oblivious to Adrian's morose thoughts, Cody slathered cement on his project, using the trowel as if he were icing the sides of the rock at the base of his construct. Then he picked up another waiting rock and shifted it into position.

Undaunted by getting dirty, Adrian peeled off his own T-shirt and felt a little hum of familiar satisfaction when Cody's eyes devoured him. Cody might be gun-shy, but there was no doubt he thought Adrian was beautiful.

Under his gaze, Adrian felt beautiful. It helped with the hurt.

"Can you hand me the round quartz, the one that looks like it's a map of the world?" Cody asked in an absent tone.

"Right." Adrian hefted it. "It feels like a worry bead that was created between glaciers," he said, taking a moment to appreciate nature's design.

"Probably right on the money," Cody said, taking it and fixing it so it bulged out of the design. "You can use it as a small shelf, maybe for a really tiny clock."

"Cody?" Adrian fiddled with some of the smaller pieces.

"Yeah?"

"Why are you doing this? You still won't sleep in the house." That fact grated on Adrian. He was more than ready to share a bedroom for the first time in his life. But he was always alone in the early morning hours, awake to stare out the window, sometimes glimpsing the large grey timber wolf. He hadn't had any more luck with that shy creature than Cody; whenever he went outside to take a closer look the animal dashed into the trees.

Cody scratched his eyebrow, looking a little self-conscious. "For you. To give you something nice. It was cracked when you moved in. I want to fix it so you can have fires in here over the winter."

"Oh." *He likes me.* Adrian flushed, suddenly as self-conscious as Cody about how much he needed reassurance.

They worked quietly. Adrian was surprised at how dirty he got and how much he sweated from the effort, but the mosaic they were building together was exciting to create. He found himself caught up, barely taking time to down deep swallows of lemonade when he got thirsty.

He and Cody together placed the plank that Cody had hewn by hand for a mantle. Then Cody climbed the ladder to place the last smaller stones and the two arrow heads into the wet cement.

They both admired the finished façade, but Cody stiffened when Adrian put his arms around him. "What, I'm not allowed to hold you?"

Cody closed his eyes. "It makes me want things."

"It makes you want *me*."

"Yes."

"How is that wrong?" Adrian gently pushed a lock of Cody's hair out of his eyes. When Cody didn't answer Adrian shook him. "Cody, enough. I need to know what you're hiding from me."

"It's getting harder for me. I should leave you alone but all I want to ask is..." Cody shook his head, his eyes sad and serious. "Can I come to you tonight?"

Adrian swallowed thickly, imagining how it would be. He'd maybe be half asleep when the floor board in his room creaked and he saw a shadow approaching him. Soon after he'd be gripping the headboard, body swaying, legs spread, Cody behind him, grunting, using sex words, using love words as he fucked Adrian.

His cock throbbed as Cody ran a hand down Adrian's jeans, directly over his crotch. His body said, *oh, yes!*

"No, Cody," he croaked.

Cody's green eyes widened and then fell away.

"It's not what you're thinking! It's not that I don't like you anymore." Adrian gestured to the hearth Cody had built. "You're amazing and I am so grateful you did this for me." He didn't add he wished it was something Cody had done for them both, because this was his home as much as Adrian's. He didn't want to come off as totally pathetic.

Cody licked his lips and then he looked at Adrian, showing a new courage in the face of rejection which Adrian knew he couldn't have mustered when they'd first met. "Then why won't you let me?"

"I need to see you," Adrian said, stroking Cody's long hair. "I want to see your eyes when you're inside me. I want to kiss you."

"You don't think I want that?" Cody's jaw flexed. "But it can't happen. I'm going out. I'll clean up the mess in the morning."

"Cody, wait!" Adrian's heart sped up as he strode behind the other man, reaching out to touch his shoulder as Cody opened the screen door. "Don't go, please."

Cody's shoulder was hard like the rocks they'd been hefting into the new hearth. "I have to go." He jerked away from Adrian's touch. "Do you think I want to leave you? I *have* to, Doc."

"Cody!"

While Adrian watched, Cody strode away, not towards the barn but towards the woods.

* * * *

Hours later, Cody reflected that he should have known never to touch his mate. The ache was only getting worse so that even when he tried to distract himself with a large

project like a new hearth for Adrian's house, it couldn't stop him from wanting to crush the other man under his body, from needing the bite that would mark Adrian *his*.

It had been especially hard when Miles was sharing a house with them, the need to claim Adrian.

Cody sat next to the stream he often visited in his rambles either as man or wolf, still sweaty and cement-streaked, listening to the water moving, watching leaves fall into the brook and trying to calm his thudding heart. Even the scent he breathed in seemed to remind him of Adrian, teasing him, making him hard.

The truth was, he ached to cover Adrian while looking into his eyes, into that beautiful shade of tiger's eye brown. He wanted Adrian to see how his own eyes changed, see the sharp claws that came out of his fingers and not be repulsed when he became part beast while inside Adrian.

Yet how could that work out? Adrian was a pragmatist. He had a caring heart but how could he accept that the cowboy he had given himself to was a shape shifter?

Cody tossed some wood into the water, watching the ripples. Being a shifter sucked. It made things really complicated for an ordinary guy.

"Cody."

Shit. He hadn't imagined Adrian's scent. He'd followed Cody into the woods.

Cody tensed, feeling fight or flight zip through his body but most of all the need to wrestle his mate to the ground, hold him there and mount him.

Adrian knelt beside him, face also still streaked from their work with the hearth, as if he walked for hours on his property in search of Cody. "What are you?"

Chapter Eight

What are you?

Cody swallowed. "Excuse me?"

Adrian cupped his cheek and Cody was lost. He couldn't push away his mate, the man who called to his body and his heart.

"I mean, what are you that you have this power over me?" Adrian asked. "I never imagined I'd submit myself the way I do with you."

Cody let out a relieved breath. Adrian didn't think Cody was unnatural. Just weird, probably. "I need you too." Cody nuzzled Adrian's neck, heard his heart pound, tasted warm skin. The urge to bite snarled in the back of his mind but he wouldn't give into the wolf. Adrian would have to give his consent, and since Cody had no idea how to even tell him what he was...

"God, I want you." Adrian took Cody's hand and placed it against his crotch.

Cody could feel him hard and needy. He felt a flash of heat and he knew that even without a blindfold or the safety of darkness, he had to take his mate.

He tugged at Adrian's jeans, his hands colliding with Adrian's so they both laughed. Adrian gave him a quick kiss and Cody felt himself crumble a little more for his veterinarian.

"I want you inside me so much. You have no idea how much will power it took to say no." Adrian was breathless.

"Didn't seem to take, thank God."

Adrian fished lube and a condom out of the back pocket of the jeans they discarded, handing them to Cody, who was struck how this older, sophisticated man was putting himself into Cody's hands. It made him feel protective. He rubbed his face against Adrian again, his silken hair, the line of his jaw where Cody couldn't help but leave a tiny love bite.

Adrian gasped, as if he liked being marked. His T-shirt was off now and he stripped Cody's away as Cody shucked off his own jeans and boxers. His erection fell out, heavy and thick.

Adrian's eyes widened as he took it in his hand, caressing it so Cody had to grit his teeth to keep from shooting right then. "You're on the large size. I mean...inside me you feel—"

Cody could imagine. His body was engineered to bring his mate maximum enjoyment so Adrian would crave it again and again, and lie down for Cody whenever he wanted. He was Adrian's perfect fuck.

"Get ready for me," he ordered hoarsely, watching Adrian lube his fingers and then put them inside himself. It was the sexiest thing Cody had ever seen, Adrian performing just for him, his eyelids fluttering closed as he groaned out his pleasure. Fucking himself on his fingers, making sounds like he wanted to be thrown down and taken. "You want it in you?"

"God, yes!" Adrian pulled his legs up, lying exposed on his back. It was the first time they'd ever done it face to face but even knowing this would probably mark their last time together, Cody couldn't stop himself from climbing onto Adrian.

He wanted to fuck him this way. He wanted Adrian to look into his eyes and see it was Cody he had let into his body, Cody who covered him.

"Ready?" he asked, even though he wasn't sure he could hold back. Adrian. He needed inside him so much, squeezed by his hot body, milked by tight muscle until he came.

Adrian nodded and Cody thrust inside, closing his eyes tightly as he groaned. He figured he had maybe five minutes tops before he started to go a little wolfy, with his eyes changing. Maybe if he kept them closed, Adrian wouldn't notice.

"Oh, it's so much better being able to see you," Adrian said and he reached up, tugged on Cody's long hair. "I want to look at you."

Cody's eyes snapped open, his vision so sharp he could count the freckles on Adrian's face. His balls tightened and he knew he wouldn't last long. Looking at Adrian while he made love to him was more stimulating than anything he could have imagined.

"Your eyes..." Adrian whispered.

Cody flinched. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I thought there was something strange about them before. Cody, they're glowing!" Adrian's body was suddenly tense under his. Cody groaned as he tried to pull away. He couldn't do this, not when Adrian was obviously repulsed.

"Don't!" Adrian's hands dug into his hips, forcing him to stay lodged inside him. Cody could feel his senses expanding, his cock growing harder.

"Adrian, you have to let me go. I can't hold back. Not with you."

"Give it to me, don't hold back."

Cody had tried, but if Adrian was asking for it...

He pounded into Adrian harder than ever before. Adrian took it, gasping, hands clenching into Cody's skin. A little wild, he lifted Adrian's legs so they were over his shoulders, freeing him to go in as deep as he needed. All the time he fucked, he stared into Adrian's eyes, seeing them widen, knowing that Adrian was too sharp not to see the changes.

As he got closer to coming, claws erupted from his finger tips as he became half man, half beast.

"What...are you?" Adrian's eyes were wide.

"The monster who loves you," Cody whispered. "Let me finish. Don't turn me away."

Instead of seeming to be put off, Adrian was moaning as Cody rutted inside him. He reached down and worked himself. "You could hurt me?" he asked. At any other time, Cody might have laughed at the mixture of hot sexual need and scientific curiosity in Adrian's eyes.

"Yes. Sometimes I want you so much it's like I want to tear you apart, eat you all up." But he'd never do it. He'd die before he hurt this man.

Adrian shivered under him. Fear? Lust? Cody didn't know and then Adrian was arching up as he came, spurting hot spend over his skin and Cody's.

Cody threw back his head, growling out his pleasure, aware of the cool air against his skin, of the scent of his mate, musky with sweat and come, of Adrian's eyes dazed with pleasure as they lay tangled together in the woods under the sickle of moonlight.

* * * *

Cody pulled out of Adrian's warm body, sensitised from his climax, wanting nothing more than to slump against him and savour the moment but he couldn't do that.

"Cody, don't run from me!" Adrian panted, grabbing Cody's shoulders when he would have scrambled away. His grip was strong. He was not a weakling and it pleased Cody even as he strained away.

Cody bent over the stream. He saw his own uncanny green eyes glowing, saw Adrian looking at their reflections before he turned and looked directly into Cody's eyes.

"Don't!" Cody tried to tug away but Adrian wouldn't let him go. He was afraid of shoving the other man too hard and hurting him. He was very strong directly before the change.

"Don't what?" Adrian asked in an absent tone as he studied Cody's face. "Don't touch you?" He cupped Cody's cheek. "Don't kiss you?" His lips covered Cody's and Cody whimpered, needing him. He kissed him back, hot, wild. His mate, smelling of his seed, his mate, freshly fucked, freshly conquered. His cock stiffened again at Adrian's gentle touch.

Adrian pulled back with a laugh. "You can't...again?"

"I always want it," Cody growled. His innocent veterinarian had no idea. Cody could go again...and again. Adrian's smooth skin, his beautiful eyes, his body that made Cody want to cover him, his throat where his pulse beat...all these things fed Cody's hunger, making it roar so Cody had forbidden thoughts of tying his mate down and taking him again...and again.

Adrian lifted Cody's hand, looking at the betraying claws and then into Cody's eyes.

"Interesting."

Cody jerked his hand away, stung. Was he just a freak to Adrian?

"What are you, Cody?" he asked, and this time his tone said he would know the answer.

"I told you. I'm a monster like my father."

"I don't see a monster. I see...something I don't understand, that I never dreamt existed," Adrian said. "But I want to understand. Help me to understand, Cody."

"Move back." Cody's heart was heavy. He knew Adrian wouldn't stop pushing until he knew all of it but maybe if he wouldn't let Cody inside his body again, maybe he'd still let him live in the barn if he swore he'd never touch him.

Cody could live with the pain of that ache, just to be near his mate.

"What are you going to..." Adrian shifted back onto his heels. His body was illuminated by moonlight. All Cody wanted to do was push his face between Adrian's legs and rest against his thigh, lick the spend from his skin, tongue his cock until he hardened again, until he was ready to take Cody again.

"Watch me. See what I am," Cody said. He'd never changed in front of anyone, not since he was a boy and his uncle had beat him so bad that he'd shifted into a yelping wolf

pup and run off into the hills. Remembering the disgust and hatred in his uncle's eyes, Cody's heart pounded.

The shift started off slow, like getting into a warm bath. His body shuddered and he gritted his teeth as the heat inside him increased. A growling sound emerged and he heard Adrian's faint murmur of "Oh, my God!"

Pain seared him, riding harder than the change. All along he'd waited for Adrian to reject him and he never had but this...how could any man accept this in a lover?

His mouth extended, teeth growing, eyes even sharper, scents so strong...then he was low to the ground, fur ruffled by the breeze. He sat down, the wolf facing Adrian.

Adrian had a hand cupped over his mouth. He was staring at Cody. Cody couldn't read his expression but he could smell the hot wash of their lovemaking and also a trace of fear.

Fear? He was afraid Cody would hurt him?

Cody whined, getting up to pace.

"It's you. You're the wolf I've seen," Adrian said. "But how is this possible? It can't be...I have to be losing my mind."

Adrian climbed to his feet and it was too much for Cody. He knew he was being a coward but he couldn't stay and face Adrian's judgement. He ran towards the trees, feeling the brush move faster and faster under his paws.

* * * *

"Cody?"

The gentle voice prodded Cody from a deep sleep. He blinked his eyes, a little groggy. The sun was slanting in through the open door of the barn. Cody was lying on a pile of hay, totally naked and...he wiped his lips. Blood. Not his.

His gaze shot to Adrian's. God. He'd run away last night rather than face the inevitable pain of his mate turning away from him. He sat up and put his head on his knees, tensing when a hand stroked his long tangled hair.

"Cody, I'm..." Adrian cleared his throat. "Please look at me."

Swallowing, Cody did as Adrian asked. He couldn't help that his eyes were stinging. He loved him. These last weeks with him had been the best in Cody's life. "I'll keep working

on the house. I'll take real good care of the stock animals and help you out with your work whenever you need it."

Adrian's eyes widened. "I know you will."

"Just let me stay in the barn," Cody begged, dropping his gaze. "Don't send me away."

Adrian sat down heavily on Cody's bench. He stared at Cody, whose gaze fell. Was Cody ashamed? He couldn't help reaching out, stroking Cody's hair. "There's blood on your face."

"Not mine," Cody mumbled.

"Oh." Adrian blinked. "You totally revert to being a wolf when you..."

Cody nodded, his cheeks heating. "Sometimes I just want to lose myself."

"Yet you never made a pest of yourself when you haunted the yard here." Adrian scrubbed his chin, hearing the rasp of stubble. He really needed a shower, a shave and a long nap. "I can't believe what I saw you do. As a veterinarian, I use measurement, science, experience, to work with animals, to cure them and take care of them."

Cody shrugged.

"But I did see it."

"There's no going back, Doc," Cody said in a morose tone. "I sure wish there was."

"So your father was a shape shifter like you are and he somehow forced your mother to marry him?"

"Mate with him, yeah," Cody said, green eyes flashing briefly up to Adrian's face. "We can be...very attractive to humans. Sexually. We can trap them, make them crave lying with us."

Adrian felt a flush of warmth when he remembered what it was like to lie under Cody. God, yes, he craved it! Cody felt so perfect, making him hot and wanton. He cleared his throat. "I can certainly attest to that," he said.

"You...liked me?" Cody asked.

"Yes," Adrian said. "And you know, after I get accustomed to what you are...I'm going to want to run some tests. I can't help who I am either. I'm curious about you, man and wolf. You're...marvellous."

Cody bent his head, his cheeks a little red.

Adrian stood. He held out his hand. "But none of that matters as much as this. Come to bed."

Cody drew in an audible breath, gaze snapping to Adrian's face.

Adrian waited and after a long pause Cody tentatively reached out and took Adrian's hand. "You need a shower first, love," Adrian said. "You look like you had a rough night."

"Yeah." Cody shyly followed Adrian's lead across to the house, stepping gingerly in his bare feet over the gravel. Watching him, Adrian had a feeling of full circle. Adrian had walked this space once for Cody, naked and helpless and now their roles were very much reversed.

After he'd pushed open the front door into the house Adrian looked at Cody. "I need a shower too, so I'll have one with you." His voice sounded deeper, huskier to his own ears. He knew what would happen if they shared the little cubicle together.

Cody blinked as if he couldn't believe what was happening. A sunbeam came in through the window by the door and lit his green eyes.

Chapter Nine

Adrian could see Cody's shyness clearly now they were together in Adrian's bathroom, no barriers anymore, no secrets. It was as if the other man had no idea how to be with someone who saw all of him, who wanted all of him. Adrian couldn't resist pulling him into his arms, feeling protective even though he sensed Cody was more powerful than he could imagine.

Dangerous.

And yet Cody had shown only gentleness, except in the heat of their lovemaking when Adrian had begged him to be rougher, to fuck him harder. Thinking of that, Adrian broke out into a sweat.

Cody's eyes darkened, the pupils in his eyes enlarging so he looked predatory as he watched Adrian pull out two clean jumbo-sized towels from the cupboard.

"You can tell when I'm, uh, hot for you?" Adrian asked.

"I can smell it, feel it when I touch your skin," Cody said, his callused fingertips rasping over Adrian's shoulders and down his arms. "That first time we met, I could smell how you wanted me to cover you."

Adrian shivered. His cock rose, nudging against Cody's matching erection. "God, how I want you," Adrian whispered. "I still feel like I'm caught in some kind of strange dream but you're real."

"Real and hungry for you." Cody lifted Adrian easily and placed him so one leg was higher than the other, one foot on the tile floor while the other rested on the rim of the bathtub. Adrian caught his breath as Cody moved closer, so his cock prodded between Adrian's open legs. "You want me to fuck you? Want my cock in you?" He punctuated the words by thrusting gently back and forth, his hands on Adrian's hips.

Adrian's head fell back as Cody feasted on his skin, leaving stinging little bites on his shoulder, his neck. "Yes." Adrian sighed. "But I want to do something for you first."

He pulled away and took Cody's hand, leading him into the shower. He switched on the spray and they both laughed when it first shot out on the cool side before warming up.

"I see I'm going to have to renovate your bathroom next."

"Does that mean you're staying?" Adrian asked pointedly. "A renovation will take some time, after all."

Cody stared. "You want that?"

"I want you in my bed. I want you here with me...every night."

"I can't promise I won't need to run as a wolf sometimes," Cody said, slicking his hair back off his face as Adrian began to soap his skin.

"Just stay on my land. Other ranchers might shoot a wolf they see near their cattle." Adrian shook his head. "Weird."

"What?" Cody was watching him closely.

"One, that I have a boyfriend," Adrian said. "And two, that he's a shape shifter."

"I've never been anyone's boyfriend."

"Me either."

"Uh, maybe you won't believe me, but we don't need to use a condom. I'm not quite human."

"I noticed."

"I promise I'll stay on your land," Cody said, voice caressing as Adrian knelt in front of him, the spray hitting them both, steaming up their private world.

Adrian nuzzled his cock and then took it in his mouth for the first time. Cody gasped, hand spearing through Adrian's wet hair. "Doc!"

"You're so beautiful, I've been desperate to suck you." Adrian looked up to quirk a brow at Cody. "And so big."

Cody laughed, red from more than the heat of the water. "Yeah. But you like that...right?"

Adrian answered with his lips, his tongue, worshipping Cody, taking him deep and sucking him hard while the other man begged him to *take it all, to suck it all* —

"Adrian, I want...please, I need..." Cody tugged him back so when he came, his spend hit Adrian's lips, his face, running with the hot water down his skin, marking him. Cody stared down at him, panting, hands snarled deep in Adrian's hair. "My mate," he breathed.

Adrian licked his lips, still tasting Cody. "Is that what I am to you?"

"That's what I've always wanted you to be," Cody said. "There's a ritual —"

"A ritual?" Adrian felt scientific curiosity mingle with a primal sense of rightness as he got to his feet, their bodies colliding again and again to touch and kiss, to revel in being together openly.

"I mark you with my come and, uh, I bite you."

Adrian pushed back the wet hair in Cody's eyes. "Bite?"

"It...leaves a small scar." Cody shuddered under Adrian's hands and his cock rose again to nudge against Adrian's body as if just the thought of the bite excited him intensely.

Adrian took a deep breath. "This is a kind of forever thing, isn't it?"

Cody pulled away, as if he thought he was asking too much.

"Do I get to bite you too?"

"Doc?" Cody stiffened.

"Sorry, a bit of humour, though I do kind of like the idea." Adrian demonstrated by kissing and then gently biting the side of Cody's neck. The larger man cried out, hands digging into Adrian's shoulders. "Oh, you like that."

"Yes."

Adrian caught a glimpse of glowing green eyes just before Cody's lips were hovering over the juncture between Adrian's shoulder and neck. Adrian felt hot breath against him, felt a stiff cock pressing against his own insistently, hands sliding down to cup his ass so they were rubbing together, suddenly frantic to come.

"Please!" Adrian cupped the back of Cody's neck, pulling him closer, suddenly wanting to be marked, to be fucked, to belong to his cowboy.

Like the wolf he was, Cody struck, sharp teeth, pain, a growling sound and then even as blood ran down Adrian's chest from the wound Cody had inflicted, Cody shoved him against the tiled wall and pushed soapy fingers into him. Heat built from the mark on his neck to his nipples and cock.

"Yes!" Adrian needed Cody ramming inside him, using him, pleasuring him.

Cody removed his fingers and spun Adrian around before ploughing into him, so they both gasped. Their hands knit together against the wall as they rutted, Adrian pushing out to take every inch, hot for it, hearing the sound of his own voice begging Cody and then he was coming, clawing at tile while Cody sucked on his neck. He erupted so strongly that his vision greyed, aware of Cody deep inside, of him spilling hotly into Adrian's body.

Before he completely passed out, Cody swung his shaking body into his arms, looking down at him with concern.

Adrian whispered, "Don't worry, just sleepy." And a little fucked out. But he was smiling as Cody carried him to his bedroom and then after a small hesitation, climbed into the bed to lie beside him.

* * * *

A week later, Adrian touched the slight scar on his neck as he walked through the moonlit woods near his house. The bite had been miraculously healed by the time he woke up from his first nap after their mating, but Cody had been very protective since then as if Adrian almost fainting had freaked him out.

It had taken Adrian a while to convince him to make love to him again and when he did, Cody had been very gentle but the pleasure had been...oh, man, it had been...

Adrian smiled, remembering it.

He hadn't told his friend Miles in his latest email that Cody was a shape shifter, of course, but he had mentioned that they were boyfriends now. Miles had called him a lucky bastard.

As he stepped over some fallen branches he caught the sound of something racing behind him in the undergrowth. His heartbeat picked up and excitement shivered hot over his skin.

He had just about removed all his clothing when a large grey wolf ghosted from the trees, eyes fixed on him.

Adrian's breath stuttered in his chest at the beauty of his beast.

He had come out here to this ranch to set down some roots but he had found what he hadn't even known he was looking for. Magic.

Cody transformed and soon an equally beautiful naked cowboy knelt at Adrian's feet. Adrian tugged off his boots and socks and then lay down on the tall grass, waiting.

He didn't have to wait for long. Cody covered him, long hair falling around them, muscled and furiously aroused, the way he always was after being a wolf, as if the feral part of him was free, not trapped inside, and wild to fuck. His lips nuzzled the bite mark that

made Adrian his. He still had a little trouble accepting that Adrian wanted him, would never send him away, but when he touched the mark his worries seemed to dissipate.

Adrian shuddered when Cody licked his skin, tasting him before his hands ran over Adrian's arms. He pinned them above his head.

Adrian spread his legs. Cody's cock nudged where Adrian had lubed himself then pushed inside, going easy though Adrian knew he wanted to take him roughly. Adrian sighed out his pleasure.

His wolf rode him, fucked him, and when he reached his moment, Adrian heard his own hoarse voice telling Cody he loved him even as Cody found the mark with his teeth, making Adrian his in the way of the wolf.

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!

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