



ALPINE WOODS SHIFTER SERIES BOOK FOUR

Worth Fighting For

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR

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Cover Copy

All's fair in love and war.

As leader of a fox skulk, Cody is used to feeling protective.

But when his best friend, Misty, gets attacked, his panic has nothing to do with duty. Suddenly, he's noticing Misty as a woman instead of the girl he grew up with. But pursuing those feelings would risk their friendship, something he's unwilling to do.

Misty's tried everything, without success, to convince Cody she's not "one of the guys". Yet now that he's looking at her like she always dreamed, he pulls away every time she gets close.

Danger lurks in the background, waiting to pounce. Someone plots against the foxes, leaving them all in jeopardy...especially Misty. Will Cody overcome his fears in time to save the woman he loves?

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Teaser

From one moment to the next, the kiss changed. No longer was Misty the aggressor. Instead, she was hit by the full force of Cody's dominance. Without thought, she gave up control, closing her eyes and melting into his embrace. Releasing the material in her fists, Misty ran her hands up his chest, feeling the muscles ripple through his clothes wherever she caressed. God, she couldn't wait to get him naked. From what she'd already seen and felt, the man was gorgeous, ripped in all the right places.

A moan of denial escaped as he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers but holding her hips still as she tried to thrust against him.

"Not here." He kissed her nose before pulling away. Tease. The fact he was right only made it worse.

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Dedication

To Jamie, Sarah, Becca, Kaitlyn, and the rest of my Syracuse pack.

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Prologue

Misty took one last look at herself in the mirror, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear before flipping up the car's visor. With a deep breath to steady her nerves, she opened the car door and stepped out.

Nothing about the small house seemed intimidating, but the closer Misty got to the front door, the tighter her chest felt. She only made it four feet before doubt got the best of her, and she turned around, striding back to the car. She gripped the door handle, preparing to flee as if the hounds of hell were on her tail, but she paused, closing her eyes to try and calm her mind.

After the past weekend, this was the last place she wanted to be.

No, that wasn't true. She'd always liked coming to Cody's house. The confession she was about to make terrified her, though. But like it or not, it needed to happen. She needed to know once and for all if there was a possibility, however small, that Cody might return her feelings someday, or if all this time she'd been chasing a pipe dream.

If once she told Cody everything, he couldn't return her feelings—or looked at her with the same horror she'd seen in her nightmare last night—well, she'd just have to accept reality. At least then she could spend her energy getting over him instead of trying to seduce the man.

Well...maybe she wouldn't tell him everything. If he didn't remember last weekend, she wasn't going to remind him. That memory would go with her to the grave.

What had she been thinking? Even if she had managed to seduce him, there was no guarantee anything would come of it. She'd come close to losing one of her longest friendships because of some stupid plan. But she'd been frustrated and desperate. Desperate because nothing she'd tried budged her from the *friend* category she'd fallen under since the first day of middle school. So when Cody had invited her to come over for pizza and a movie, bringing a bottle of tequila with hopes that he would take advantage of her—or that she could take advantage of him—had seemed like a brilliant idea.

Not one of her finer moments. Even if it had almost worked. Would have worked. Except he'd imbibed a bit too much alcohol and passed out when they were half naked and rolling around on the bed.

Of course, he'd forgotten everything the next morning. Although, that might have been a blessing.

She blamed her fox for the whole fiasco. If it hadn't been for the sneaky fox inside, she never would have resorted to tricks. That was her story and she was sticking to it. Clearly, it was all the fox's fault.

Wiping her sweaty hands on her jeans, Misty squared her shoulders. Without taking any more time to second-guess her decision, she strode to the front door of Cody's house. Best to get this over with. Either she'd spend the rest of the day in Cody's arms, or she'd spend it in a carton of ice cream. But the sooner she did this, the sooner she could get on with whichever option awaited. Stalling would just make her more nervous and agitated.

She raised her fist to knock on his door, but froze with her hand inches from the wood. A strange scent lingered on his porch, leading straight inside.

She leaned forward and took a deep breath. The faint, but unmistakable, scent of a vixen fox wafted from behind the closed door. The knowledge hit like a blow to the heart, causing her to stumble backward.

Needing to be certain, Misty pressed her nose against the pane and took another breath, picking up traces of both Cody and a woman inside. She glanced at her left wrist for the time. Damn. No watch. How was she supposed to remember something so mundane when she'd prepared to do something so important?

The scent of the strange fox didn't necessarily mean Cody was sleeping with whoever was inside...but it couldn't be later than nine in the morning. What else would a woman be doing in Cody's house at that time of day?

Don't jump to conclusions, she chanted to herself as her breath hitched. Even if he were sleeping with someone, it wasn't as if he owed Misty anything. After all, they weren't a couple yet. She knew there'd been other women in his past, just as there had been other men in hers. But she'd come here ready to lay everything on the line. She'd been ready to confess her love for Cody. Whether he knew her intentions or not, finding him in the arms of another woman hurt worse than she could have imagined.

There she went jumping to conclusions again. Misty backed away from the door and down the porch steps. A strange fox could be in his apartment at nine in the morning for a lot of different reasons. It could be a cousin she had never met, or a long lost sister.

Or he could have found his mate.

The last thought halted Misty in her tracks. Her breath shuttered out. This guesswork solved nothing. All it did was make her feel worse. She needed to find out who that woman was and why she was with Cody.

Determined to learn the truth, Misty snuck around the side of the house to peer in the window. From her vantage point, she saw the living room and the hallway leading to the kitchen. Nothing moved.

As she was about to turn away, ready to seek a different view, the bedroom door off the hallway opened. A woman emerged dressed in Cody's shirt—the one he'd gotten on his trip to California last year—and a pair of his boxers.

Misty wasn't sure how long she stopped and stared, her mouth hanging open. The woman wasn't simply beautiful. With her long white-blond hair and petite figure, she was stunning. There was something...exotic about the woman's looks, yet at the same time, she looked like the girl next door. Never before had Misty seen a fox with such pale coloring.

Misty didn't have self-esteem issues. She knew she was attractive, and she stayed fit. But she didn't hold a candle to this woman. And that knowledge felt like a dagger piercing her chest. Not because the woman was prettier, but because the woman was prettier and wearing Cody's clothes.

As the woman turned toward the kitchen, Misty quickly rounded the house, hiding in the bushes for cover to stare through the sliding glass doors.

Cody stood at the stove wearing a pair of jeans, unbuttoned at the top. Even from a distance, she saw the line of hair running down his stomach, disappearing behind the waist of his jeans. Her core clenched in desire at the sight. She couldn't help but stare, mesmerized at the trail, as the smell of cheesy eggs and toast wafted toward her.

The scene looked like something out of her dreams. Except in her dream world, she was the woman walking out of his room wearing his shirt.

Gathering her courage, Misty looked up at Cody's face. Attraction shone from his eyes.

Despair settled heavily upon her shoulders. The look told her everything she needed to know.

Unable to watch any more of their intimate interaction, Misty picked up the tattered pieces of her heart and crept back to her car. Later, she'd worry about what all this meant. If she dwelled on it now, she'd never be able to stop the tears.

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Chapter 1

The cellphone trill cut over the music pouring from the juke box in the corner of The Watering Hole. Misty set down her beer. Being the only pub in Vulpes Creek and the cool place to hang out in town on a Friday night, the place was packed. But she didn't need to look through the crowd to know whose cell rang. That jazzy piano riff belonged to only one man in town.

Sure enough, out of the corner of her eye she watched Cody, Premier of the Vulpes fox skulk, push his way out of the crowded bar. Misty sighed into her beer and tilted her head to the side as he swept past her booth. No denying the man had a great ass.

"Still crushing on Cody, huh?" her friend Jen asked, following her gaze to their skulk's Premier.

"He's not a man easily forgotten." Something Misty knew well. God knew she'd tried hard enough to get over him the past couple months.

Jen reached for her hand resting on the table and squeezed in sympathy. They'd been friends their whole lives, so Jen knew the ridiculous amount of time Misty spent pining for a man who thought of her as one of the guys.

"It's fine," Misty lied. "You can't make someone love you, right?"

She'd tried that, too. But ever since Cody and Misty had met, the first day of middle school, they had become fast friends. Once puberty hit, Misty had developed feelings. Cody hadn't. And because they were the best of friends, she hadn't stood a chance. Not even wearing skimpy outfits or dating other guys had budged her position as "friend." She'd done some stupid things trying to get his attention, but nothing had worked. All she'd ended with were nights full of regrets. She included her get-Cody-drunk-and-take-advantage-of-him night in the regret column. After everything that happened afterward, Misty was grateful he didn't remember anything.

Or maybe he did and was trying to spare her feelings. He'd been remote since that night, almost as if avoiding her. Her gaze drifted to the exit.

"Have you tried talking to him since then?"

Misty's gaze shot to her friend's concerned one. Jen couldn't be reading her mind...right? As close as they were, she hadn't told Jen about that night. She hadn't told anyone, too ashamed to even talk about it.

"Since when?" Her words were measured. Misty hated uncertainty. Her father had always told her when she needed to make a decision, make one and deal with the consequences later. Don't pussy foot around an issue. Okay, so he told her that while teaching her to drive, but the lesson worked on so many different levels. Then again, maybe it wasn't the best advice considering recent events.

"Since the morning you saw that slut in his apartment wearing his clothes." The sneering tone of Jen's voice told Misty how the "other woman" ranked in her friend's eyes.

A snort escaped Misty and the first real smile of the evening curved her lips. Fierce loyalty was one thing she loved about Jen. Ever since Misty had confessed the morning she'd gone to Cody's house and seen a woman coming out of his bedroom, Jen had insisted on calling her a slut. Even after learning the woman was an arctic fox who had gotten lost while hunting, and was now mated to the Premier of the neighboring wolf pack. It didn't matter nothing had happened between the woman and Cody, or that she'd been dating the wolf when she'd stumbled into Vulpes Creek. All that mattered to Jen was the hurt her appearance had caused Misty.

"She's not a slut. And don't let any of the wolves hear you talk about her like that. Or Cody, for that matter. They adore her." Cody had been moping around town ever since she'd left with the wolves months ago. According to the rampant town gossip mill, he'd thought he'd found his mate and was heartsick after learning she'd already been attached to Jason, the wolves' leader.

To Misty, Cody thinking he found his mate wasn't all that much different than him actually finding his mate. Both put him out of reach.

"Whatever. Now that she's mated and marrying Jason, maybe things will change. Not that Jason isn't attractive, but why anyone would choose a wolf over a fox is beyond me." Jen strove for a light tone but Misty read the doubt in her friend's eyes, belying the words. Jen had been quite vocal about trying to get Misty to move on, until she'd realized it was hurting their friendship. Clearly Jen didn't believe anything would change, but being the good friend she was, she kept those thoughts to herself.

“What about you and Nick? Things seem to be pretty hot and heavy from what I can see.” Misty had to change the subject. She didn’t want to talk about Cody. She didn’t want to see the doubt and disbelief that she and Cody could ever be more than friends.

Before Jen could answer, Cody strode back through the door of the pub and stood inside the entrance, capturing everybody’s attention. Misty stared at him, a sense of foreboding filling her as she studied his frown. In their fifteen years of friendship, Misty had never seen Cody look this angry before. Whatever that phone call had been about, something seriously bad had happened.

“I just got off the phone with Samantha.” Great. Misty couldn’t escape that damn arctic fox. She rolled her eyes and took a swig to hide her sneer. “Someone has taken Julie, the youngest Callahan.”

The beer stuck in her throat and Misty coughed to clear her airway. Cody’s words replayed in her mind. Even though the foxes preferred to keep to themselves, the Callahan wolf pack was right next door. The two communities often worked together. Their middle schools and high schools were separate, but school lines bunched the two communities together for elementary school.

Julie had been four years behind her in school, but Misty remembered her well. How could she forget? The girl had gotten picked on for being a full human born to wolves. The bullies had been careful not to tease Julie around her siblings, but Misty had seen it happen and informed Julie’s sister, Laurie, who was in her grade. Misty didn’t know what Laurie had done. Truthfully, she didn’t want to know. But whatever she’d done had stopped the bullying.

Misty had been a bit of an outsider herself, being a runt, and as a result she’d always sympathized with the youngest Callahan. The thought of someone taking her left a sour taste in Misty’s mouth. Okay, that might be the beer. But this situation didn’t sit well.

The wolves were family. Maybe the red-headed stepchild of the family, but still family. Some of her red hair fell into her face, catching her eye—maybe the wolves were the non-red-headed stepchildren. Looking around the bar, Misty knew she wasn’t alone in the feeling.

“What do you mean, *taken*?” A male called from the bar.

“Kidnapped.”

At Cody's reply, someone unplugged the juke box, cutting off Billy Joel mid-sentence. The silence in the room deafened. An attack against the Callahans hit too close to home to ignore.

"They don't know who, but the wolves are tracking her scent. Samantha says they're heading our way. I'm going to run out and see if I can help. I'm looking for volunteers to come with me," Cody announced.

Chairs scraped against the floor as all around the bar, people stood. It was a busy night, but almost every male and quite a few females made their way toward the door, ready to help.

Misty took one look around the bar and the flood of people leaving, and made up her mind. Doing nothing didn't sit well with her. If she could help, even in some small way, she owed it to herself and to the wolves to do it. She turned to Jen and raised her eyebrows, even as her friend frowned.

"You're kidding, right? I'm not real great at the fighting thing, and unless you've been taking lessons I don't know about, neither are you."

Misty pushed out her lip and gave Jen her best puppy dog eyes.

They stared at each other until Jen rolled her eyes and sighed. "Fine, let's go. But if you get killed, I'm taking your movie collection and if I get killed, I'm coming back to haunt you."

"Deal." With a big smile, Misty grabbed her purse and held out a hand for Jen's. She ran to the bar in the back and hailed Jarrod. Being the bartender, he would have to stay behind and since he was a friend, could watch their purses for them.

He studied her a moment before tilting his head to the side and opening his mouth.

Misty frowned at him before he could speak. "Don't lecture," she warned.

He held up his hands in compliance before reaching for their purses. "I'll watch your purses, but if you get hurt, I'm selling them to the highest bidder."

"What would I do without friends who would steal my movie collection and sell my purse when I'm hurt?" Misty joked before she jumped up, leaning over the counter to kiss his cheek.

He stood back as she struggled to reach him.

"You could make this easier, you know."

He simply smiled and crossed his arms over his chest. The jerk. Somehow, the two purses hanging from his hand didn't subtract from his manly demeanor at all.

"Fine. No cheek kisses for you. Your loss, I give a mean cheek kiss." She smiled as she backed away from the bar. Already, the cracks and pops drifted in from outside, signaling people had begun shifting. As she turned, she saw Cody guarding the door, brooding in her direction. She stood staring at him for a moment before squaring her shoulders and making her way to join the others.

* * * *

Where did she think she was going? Cody had seen Misty stand up with the rest of the crowd and pass her purse over to the bartender. He stood and watched in amusement as she flailed around trying to kiss Jarrod's cheek. His lip hurt where he'd bitten it in an attempt not to laugh. God, she was entertaining.

Looking down, he wiped a hand over his face, hiding the small smile that escaped. Was it any wonder they were friends? Back in middle school when he had been way too serious about grades and football, Misty had whirled into his life and made him laugh. She'd shown him that sports were not the most important thing in the world and that being silly wasn't a bad thing. In fact, he'd wager Misty had been the biggest influence on who he was today. She'd taught him to laugh at himself.

But being friends for as long as they had been, Cody also knew a lot about Misty. Like her struggle with asthma. And the fact that Misty was not a fighter. At all. Even when she hunted, she more chased the squirrels than captured them. She had no business going with the pack when she would be a liability.

Their eyes met as she turned away from the counter. Cody stared at her until she squared her shoulders and started to walk past him. He knew that look. Misty might be goofy, but when she got an idea in her head, there was no changing her mind. Logic wouldn't dent her determination.

Still, he had to try. He had no clue how dangerous the night would be. Surely, this one time she'd listen to reason.

"Misty." Cody reached out and clasped her arm.

She didn't try to fight him, stopping at his touch. But when she turned to him, he sucked in a breath. A strange plea shone out from her eyes,

tearing into him. Maybe she was just putting on a brave face. Did she want him to stop her?

“I don’t know how this is going to go down. It could be dangerous. I don’t think you should go.”

She huffed out a breath, but ruined the effect by smiling. “Someone’s gotta watch your back, chief.”

Ever since he’d taken over as Premier of the skulk, she’d called him chief. He still remembered the day it first happened. The way she’d uttered it during one of her rambling rants and how she’d blinked afterward, looked straight at him, and told him she was always going to call him that from then on. True to her word, she did. Some people might get annoyed, but he loved it. It was silly and exactly the kind of thing he liked about her. Through that one word, she made sure he didn’t take himself too seriously.

And it was the reason she had to stay. Misty was goofy, and silly, and sometimes drove him insane with her lack of logic, but she kept him grounded. His mind hitched on the thought. How could the same thing drive him insane and keep him grounded? Yet somehow, that’s exactly what she did.

Shaking his head, he gripped her arm tighter. Risking her wasn’t an option. Determined to try again, or order her to stay if need be, Cody opened his mouth to protest but was cut off when Misty grabbed his arm and pulled him outside.

“No time for arguments. They’re waiting for us.” She pulled him out the door and he saw the rest of his skulk, already shifted, sitting in a group, staring at him. As much as he hated to admit it, Misty was right. There wasn’t time to argue. Still...

“Promise me you’ll stay toward the back. And if things get out of hand, you and Jen take off and go for reinforcements.”

“Yeah, sure,” she muttered, pulling off her shirt.

Focusing on her eyes instead of the appealing flesh she’d revealed, Cody pulled her around until she met his gaze. “Not, ‘Yeah, sure.’ Promise me.”

She huffed again, stirring her bangs, and rolled her eyes. “I promise I’ll stay to the back and go for reinforcements if things get out of hand,” Misty replied in monotone.

Having her along still didn't sit well with him, but they needed to get moving. If Jason needed help, he couldn't afford to waste any more time worrying about this. Everything should be okay if she stuck to the back of the group. Enough members of the skulk were coming, she would be protected. Right now, he had bigger concerns.

Samantha had been frantic on the phone. The panic in her voice had pulled at every protective instinct in him. It was silly to still want the woman now that she was mated to Jason, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't get her out of his head. So when she asked him to try and help her mate, he hadn't even thought about saying no. Months ago when they'd first met, he'd told her he would be there whenever she needed his help. Now the time had come to step up to the plate.

Quickly stripping off his clothes, Cody dropped the reins of control and allowed his fox to take over. He gasped as the stress he'd been holding in his shoulders surrendered. The tension increased before fading to a dull ache as his muscles stretched and shrunk to his animal form. Skin rippled as fur surged down his body. The shift forced him to his hands and knees as his bones reformed.

When the shift completed, he stood and shook. It took a moment for his brain to assimilate with his new body, reconnecting nerve ending and pathways. But soon, it had cleared and he focused on the task at hand.

Facing his skulk, Cody let loose a battle cry and heard the sound echoed from the foxes around him. Without another word, he turned and took off.

Certain in the knowledge that the others would follow, he didn't bother glancing behind him. Instead, he allowed his mind to wander as he ran toward the edge of town, passing homes along the way, and every now and then, picking up another fox. Whether word had spread or they joined the group out of curiosity, he couldn't be sure. His own ranch-style house was the last, standing guard between the town and the surrounding woods. Cody sprinted past it into the fields where he'd first met Jason's mate.

It occurred to him that if something were to happen to the wolf Premier, nothing would stand between him pursuing Samantha. But as soon as the thought came to him, he pushed it out of his head. That wasn't him. And he didn't want to be the type of person who could stand back and let something bad happen to a friend for any reason.

Sure, when he'd first met Samantha, his fox had stood up and taken notice. He'd felt something, a pull for her. Had even considered mating with her. His inner animal had been attracted to the little arctic fox who'd stumbled into their town. Samantha had been—and still was—a woman he imagined falling in love with.

Always curious, Cody had spent years learning everything he could about mating. The mating pull was nothing more than animal attraction. An instinct the creatures inside them developed. True mating happened when animal attraction met human love, an emotion that developed in their human half after time. The attraction was instant and couldn't be faked. Cody had been attracted to women before, but never *the* attraction. The pull indicating he'd found his mate. His fox hadn't taken notice of anyone. Until her... But that didn't immediately mean they were meant for each other. Love and destiny were never that easy.

Did he regret not meeting Samantha before Jason? Sure he did. Who knew what might have happened? But not enough to refuse help when it was needed. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that Jason and his pack would be there if the skulk needed them. He could offer no less.

Besides, Jason wasn't the only one in danger. Although he'd never been friends with Julie, he had seen her around, and knew many in the skulk were friends with her. She'd been a bit of an outcast in elementary school, but from what he'd seen, she had never let the experience make her bitter. She was as much a member of the Callahan pack as any wolf in the town. Especially recently, since mating Brendan, one of the wolves.

Moreover, someone kidnapping a member of a neighboring pack, no matter who, was a threat against him and his. And that was something he wouldn't ignore.

He paused, lifting his head in the air and sniffing. No foreign scents. Although his sense of smell was stronger in animal form, it would never rival the wolves' or dogs'. A grunt of frustration escaped, until a whine caught his attention. He turned to face his skulk and saw Misty standing sideways, staring off to the left. Her ears perked forward and one paw hovered above the ground. She whined again, turning and barking when she caught him looking at her.

What was she hearing? The rest of the skulk mimicked her strange behavior until Cody heard it—growling. Putting his ear to the ground, he

heard the unmistakable sounds of a fight. The wolves were closer than he'd anticipated, barely outside the town barriers. Without a second thought, he took off toward the noise, the crunch of twigs behind him indication of his skulk following.

A lion roar blasted through the forest, freezing him in place. Lions? What were lions doing here? And what would they want with Julie? A lion pride could easily overpower a fox skulk, whose sheer size alone put them at a huge disadvantage.

He looked over his shoulder at the foxes following him. True to her word, Misty trailed at the back of the skulk with Jen. The sight of the two women in fox form made him hesitate. If they were going up against lions, there was a good chance someone would get hurt. Sure Misty was his friend, but something else made him pause. Some deeper concern. The thought that she could be hurt swamped him with anxiety.

As the sounds of fighting grew more intense, a sense of urgency filled him. The noises were just over the next rise, at the abandoned cottage between their two towns. He didn't have time for this indecision, but for once, he didn't know what to do. All of a sudden, the noises tapered off, and Cody knew he needed to move. Whatever apprehension held him back would have to wait until later for analysis.

Sparing one last glance at Misty, Cody dashed forward and saw five wolves holding down a cat—although it appeared the fight had left the animal. Not a lion, but a hybrid. Lion-cheetah, if he had to guess, based on the spots in his fur. Lucky for them, there was only one. Especially lucky considering how many wolves surrounded the large cat, holding it down. If it took that many wolves to restrain one of these hybrids, he didn't want to imagine having to fight an entire pride.

A wolf moved from the cat's hind quarters to the head of the beast and Cody recognized Jason's markings. He didn't need to be told what was about to happen—the rage simmering off the wolf said it all.

Cody glanced at the surrounding wolf pack. Julie was nowhere to be seen. The cottage stood dark and his animal senses told him no one was inside. This feline might be their one chance of locating her. Gathering all his energy, he rushed through the shift, taking to his human form in seconds. A grunt escaped him, the only evidence of the pain caused by rushing a normally fluid process.

“Jason, no!” he shouted, stumbling to his feet. His head throbbed and he shook it, trying to clear the cobwebs before focusing on the scene in front of him. The wolf remained still, the cat’s neck firmly in his mouth, but he did raise his eyes.

Cody almost staggered back in shock. The savage look in Jason’s eyes was contrary to the reasonable man he knew. He was so taken aback, he didn’t even notice the other wolf shifting until Jason’s brother, Ethan, stepped forward as human.

“Stay out of this, Cody. It doesn’t concern you.”

What was wrong with these people? He’d known these brothers practically his whole life. Considered them good acquaintances. This ruthlessness wasn’t like them. Yes, their sister had been kidnapped—Cody understood their anger and frustration—but they weren’t even thinking about the larger picture. Jason always thought big picture.

“We need him to find Julie,” Cody reasoned, trying to break through the rage surrounding the pack.

“How do you know about Julie?” Danny, the third and youngest Callahan brother, stepped forward to stand beside Ethan. At least he seemed more coherent than the other two.

“Samantha called.”

The statement caused a growl to burst from Jason’s throat. Cody couldn’t prevent a smirk from curling his lips. Antagonizing the feral wolf in front of him probably wasn’t the smartest idea, but he couldn’t help it.

From the few times he’d spoken to Samantha in the past few months, he knew the wolf resented the time Cody had spent with her. He couldn’t get over his mate needing to borrow Cody’s clothes when she’d gotten lost and stumbled into Vulpes Creek as fox. Even though they both knew nothing inappropriate had occurred, seeing his mate in another man’s clothing had brought Jason’s alpha wolf instincts a bit too close to the surface.

“We’ve got Julie. This is tying up loose ends.” Ethan’s voice was more animal than man. The tone as much as the words surprised Cody. They’d already rescued Julie? It only took him a moment to connect the dots. What was in front of him wasn’t wolves protecting their pack, their territory, or their loved ones. This whole scene screamed of revenge.

As a Premier, Cody stayed informed of the going-ons in other packs, prides, and skulks. He knew what happened to those who acted out of vengeance. While the council accepted a killing done to protect, a killing done for any other reason—even revenge—wasn't tolerated. Any shifter who acted on those impulses became rogue in the eyes of the council and was sentenced to death. Jason knew that. Looking into his eyes, Cody realized the wolf in Jason had too much control over the man.

He saw Jason's mouth tighten on the cat's neck and knew he had to do everything possible to turn this around.

"Stop. If Julie's safe, killing the cat is vengeance." Cody came forward and stooped down. "You know the repercussions this kind of thing can bring."

They'd both heard the stories. The most recent had happened last year. A zebra Premier and his zeal killed a gorilla shifter who had raped the zebra's mate. Word reached the council and they sent their assassins after the man. The poor woman lost her mate on top of everything else, but it had served as a warning to other shifters. Kill for anything other than defense, and suffer the consequences. The council was created to maintain order, and they would do whatever they deemed necessary.

"We can't just let him go," Ethan raged. But Cody saw the understanding in Jason's eyes. His brother might not understand, but the Premier did. Cody breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he had broken through.

The cat wouldn't live. He'd not only endangered Jason's pack, but involved a human. The council wouldn't forgive that. But there was a right way and a wrong way to handle the situation. Right now, it fell upon Cody to ensure the proper procedure was followed. He'd need some of the wolves to help get the cat to the city jail, but from there, he would contact the council personally. There would be a trial, but without a doubt, the cat would be dead within days.

Despite the understanding in Jason's eyes, his mouth remained wrapped around the other man's throat.

"Your rage makes sense after what he did to your family. But don't let it rule you. Go. Take care of your sister. If your pack will help bring him to our jail, I'll make sure he's delivered to the council for judgment. You and I both know what will happen to him."

Cody saw the internal struggle as Jason eased off the cat. Every muscle bunched with the wolf's movement. He couldn't help but feel for his friend. Not only had his pack been attacked, his sister had been kidnapped. Sympathy filled him, but before comforting the man, he had a job to do.

As an only child, the closest thing he had to siblings were his best friends. He thought about Misty being kidnapped, and rage bubbled up, almost blinding him. Claws bit into his palm as his hands fisted, telling him how close he was to losing it. He needed to get it together.

Gesturing to the wolves holding the cat down, Cody turned to head back to town but stopped in his tracks. It was mean to tease the wolf when he was down, but the devil inside him couldn't resist. Besides, a little teasing would help keep his own beast at bay.

With a smile, he swung back around. "Oh, and call Samantha as soon as you can to let her know you're okay. She's freaking out. Made me promise to come out here and save your ass." He swallowed a laugh as Jason's growl filled the night.

* * * *

Misty strained her neck, trying to see over the heads of the foxes in front of her. She huffed in annoyance as she realized the pointlessness. If she hadn't promised Cody she'd stay in back, she would have already crept forward. Admitting she wouldn't see anything, she swung both ears forward, trying to at least hear what was happening.

Even the words were muffled. Her curiosity almost forced her forward, but she bit her inner lip, remembering her promise. At least the tone of the conversation didn't seem confrontational.

Giving up trying to hear anything either, Misty dropped her butt to the ground and sat. She might as well have stayed at the bar. At this point, it didn't seem like she would see anything interesting.

Misty coughed to cover the chuffing laughter bubbling up as Jen looked over and rolled her eyes. At least she wasn't the only bored one. A couple foxes glared at her over their shoulders at the noise, before turning back to the action. Apparently they had a decent view.

With a tilt of her head, she gestured Jen forward. Cody had made her promise to stay back, but he hadn't said anything about Jen. If Jen saw what was going on, she could fill Misty in later over beers. Not ideal, but at least

she'd know what happened. How sad would it be to come all this way and still be out of the loop?

Luck was with her and Jen understood the unspoken request. Misty watched her snake through the crowd to get a better view. After she was gone, Misty raised her head and stared at the pattern the leaves on the trees made against the sky.

She should be grateful the situation was settled before they'd gotten here. It wasn't like she knew how to fight. But the pull of adventure had been too strong to resist. Like those people who strapped a bungee cord to their ankles and jumped off bridges, the element of danger excited her. Personally, Misty thought those people were crazy, but then again, many people would think running toward a potentially lethal shifter fight was crazy, too. To each their own.

Besides, the thought of Cody fighting, potentially hurt, while she sat in a deserted bar, sipping her warm beer, would never sit well with her. She'd be half out of her mind with worry if she'd stayed behind. It would never have worked.

Bored from lack of action was a better alternative to crawling out of her skin with worry. Plus, Jen could give her all the gruesome, or not-so-gruesome, details later. Even if the skulk had arrived late, surely something exciting was happening or else they wouldn't still be here. They'd have turned around and gone back to town.

A stick snapped behind her, the noise jerking her to her feet. She twisted to find the cause, but it was too late. A giant black cat, unlike anything she'd ever seen, leapt straight toward her. Misty had no time to move before being tackled to the ground.

The impact forced the air from her lungs as the ground scraped against her cheek and shoulder. The weight of the animal crushed her as they slid to a stop.

Misty lay stunned, struggling to breathe. Her mind screamed to fight, to get out from under the cat, but her body refused to listen. She heard foxes barking, growls from nearby wolves, and even some human shouts, but pushed up against the belly of the beast, couldn't do anything to help or reassure.

Her lungs fought to drag in air but could only take in shallow breaths, even as her mind compelled her to move, to struggle, or wriggle, or

something. She heard the foxes and wolves surrounding her, knew they fought the black cat, but none managed to remove him.

Without warning, the cat moved, his heavy weight crushing her chest. Her lungs, still struggling to draw breath, became even more constricted.

Finally, her body registered her mind's pleas to fight. Her arms flailed uselessly against the beast. The longer he sat on her, the harder it was to focus. If she didn't get him off soon, it would be too late.

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Chapter 2

Idiot. I'm surrounded by idiots. It had been glaringly obvious from Stella's viewpoint, hiding in the bushes upwind of the locals, any type of rescue for her brother would be suicide.

Even before the foxes had arrived, there were too many wolves for their small party of hybrids to overtake. And then the foxes had shown up and the numbers became even more overwhelming.

Yet, for whatever reason, her idiot brother's idiot right hand man had run out and attacked one of the foxes. Did he really think he could take on two entire packs?

On second thought, she didn't want the answer to that question. Although he resembled his mother—a panther shifter—apparently, there was enough coyote in him from his father to make him dumb as a dog.

As soon as the human bitch, Julie, had escaped, they should have abandoned the plan and left, getting as far away as possible. But nooo, her brother hadn't even told her. Had instead chased down the car the woman had used to escape. Anybody with half a brain should have known the wolves would be out in droves searching for the woman. Once she'd gotten to the truck, leaving was the only intelligent option.

Then again, intelligence had never been her brother's strong suit. Stella was the thinker. She had as much brains as her brother Jay had brawn, which made the two of them a formidable pair.

She should have known he would screw this up for her. For months, she'd been working her ass off to line everything up.

A shiver snaked down her spine as she remembered the cheetah council member she had slept with in order to get her bill proposed. His rough hands yanking on her hair as he shoved into her... There'd been bruises on her hips and breasts for days after each of their get-togethers. Bile rose in her throat, but she pushed it back down.

Everything had fallen into place. All she'd needed was a little canine support, and who better than a Premier with a radical new take on pack leadership? Word about Jason of the Callahan Pack had even reached the

hybrids. Rumor was he accepted all types of shifters into his pack. Even the humans in the town.

Stella spit on the ground.

Accepting humans when she and her brother had been rejected at every turn, banned from their mother's pride and scorned from their father's. What an insult. So Stella and Jay had hatched a plan to not only give hybrids the respect they deserved, but power. More power than any other breed. And no one would see it coming until it was too late.

The bill she'd labored over would demand all breeds be given an equal number of chairs in the council. Stella had spent months going over the wording, mixing in enough deception to fool the pure bloods while maintaining the hybrid's legal rights. The felines would support the bill, thinking they would get an advantage, and with Jason's support, the canines would back it as well. No one would realize the true winners would be the hybrids with all their different variations. Pure bloods never thought much about hybrids, except to insult them.

It would only have been a matter of time before hybrids took over completely. A new rule would form. With her, the mastermind who orchestrated the change, as Queen.

Stella sneered as she watched events play out in the clearing. Everything had been falling into place exactly as needed. Even after Jay had failed to seduce the wolf's sister, they'd hatched this kidnapping plan. Things had been set up perfectly, but even the best laid plans could be ruined by someone else's incompetence. If only her brother's idiot friend hadn't allowed the woman to escape.

Now, everything was ruined. Without the support of an influential wolf Premier, the bill would never pass. All that work down the drain.

She'd need to come up with a new plan. But this time she wouldn't be able to use her brother. A pang of agony shot through her as she gazed at Jay. She'd heard them say they were sending him to the council for judgment, and Stella knew what that meant. There was nothing she could do to save him. She only hoped his death would be quick and painless.

Throughout her entire life, Jay had been the one constant. The one person she could always count on. After everyone else had abandoned them, they'd still had each other. But from here on out, she was on her own.

Rage burned hot in her belly. When she became Queen of the shifters, she would avenge this injustice. He should have been at her side as she ruled, reaping the benefits of their hard work.

Turning away, Stella cast one last look at her brother over her shoulder as chaos reigned below. Wolves still surrounded him on every side, leaving no opening for a rescue, even in the confusion following the attack on the vixen fox. The knowledge of his encroaching death enveloped him.

An idea took shape as she stared at the scene, imprinting every detail on her memory. Two neighboring packs against a couple of lone hybrids... She could twist this to her advantage. Before she was done, everyone would remember her brother as a martyr. More, he'd be a hero.

The wolves and foxes would regret the day they took Jay from her. If nothing else, she'd make sure of that.

* * * *

Cody turned in time to see the beast tackle Misty to the ground. His heart froze as he watched the pair slide across the forest floor. Every muscle tensed as he stared at Misty's still figure under the large animal. Fear thudded through his veins.

The thump of impact as the cat tackled her had echoed throughout the clearing. It could have broken her neck.

No. Cody wouldn't accept that. Still in human form, he rushed to her side, but kept getting tripped up by the foxes around him. Everyone stood frozen, staring at the pair.

"Help her!" Cody shouted at the group. As if his shout broke a spell, the foxes and wolves sprung to action. Foxes leapt at the cat, forcing him backward. Still, he kept Misty trapped underneath him.

Cody tried once again to reach them, desperate to get Misty out of there. She still wasn't moving. As more time passed without movement, a band tightened across his chest until he struggled to breathe.

His skulk continued to fight, surrounding the pair, making it difficult to reach them. As if in slow motion, Cody watched the beast remove one of the foxes from his back and throw him straight at Cody. They both went down as the fox plowed into his chest.

The Premier instinct demanded he make sure the fox wasn't injured, even while the band around his chest tightened. Panic threatened—if he didn't get to Misty soon, he would go crazy. The fox who'd been thrown

grimaced, but nodded Cody onward, obviously sensing how close he stood to losing it.

Cody rose and looked at the pair, hoping his skulk had managed to free Misty. Although they hadn't more than budged the beast, Misty's back legs flailed in a futile effort to push him off. She was alive. The relief almost brought him to his knees.

Spurred to action, Cody grabbed a fallen tree branch off the ground and rushed the animal. There was no time to shift. Besides, it would be easier to grab Misty and remove her from the fray with opposable thumbs.

He shoved a couple of foxes out of his way in his rush, but finally reached his destination. Lifting the stick over his shoulder, Cody swung it like a club, hitting the cat on the side of the head. The blow did no more than turn the head of the beast. He stared in shock, bracing himself for a retaliatory attack. At least if the cat jumped him, he'd get off Misty. What was a little mauling if it put her out of harm's way?

The beast leapt forward but was tackled mid-air by both Jason and Danny in wolf form. The two wolves working together knocked the animal off his feet, the trio tumbling to the side. Cody barely spared them a glance as his gaze shot to Misty. Her fox eyes were wide and panicked as she took large wheezing breaths.

"Damn it, Misty." He bent down and scooped her into his arms. The fight continued on next to him, but was winding down. This shifter wasn't as strong as the other one had been. Not that it was easy, but with Jason and Danny's help, the beast was quickly overwhelmed.

Misty continued to wheeze, each pained breath like a stab to his own chest. Sparing a quick glance around, he caught the eye of Brad, his second in command. The fox nodded, telling him without words that he would take care of things there.

Without a word, Cody turned and hurried toward town, clutching Misty to his chest.

"I bet your inhaler is back at the bar, too. You have to carry it with you at all times, damn it."

Her fox eyes met his human ones in frank disbelief. He could almost hear her snarky voice asking about pockets in her fur.

"I knew it was a bad idea to bring you. Look what almost happened."

She wiggled in his arms and Cody loosened his hold, adjusting her to run a hand up and down her side. “It’s okay, baby girl. We’ll get you back to town and fix you up. You’re going to be fine.”

He kept talking, going back and forth between recrimination and comfort as he ran toward town.

If he could get to his house, he was pretty sure he still had a spare inhaler she’d left there once in a kitchen drawer. In his arms, Misty’s wheezing started to lessen, and Cody picked up his pace. Years ago, when she’d first been diagnosed, Cody had done some research, and he knew things were more serious when the wheezing stopped. It signaled she was entering a real danger zone.

Static filled his brain. All he could think about was getting home. He could fix her if he just managed to bring her home.

“It’s okay, honey. We’ll get you home and fixed up. Everything’s going to be okay.” Maybe if he kept repeating it, he’d begin to believe it.

He stumbled as Misty twitched in his arms. The thoughts flew from his head as her bones popped with her shift. Her legs stretched out, almost unseating her from his arms, but Cody kept a firm grip on her, breaking into a run as he finally cleared the trees. The fur under his hands retreated, silky skin replacing it. He forced himself to not look down, staring at his house as they neared. He didn’t know why Misty chose now to shift, but it didn’t change anything. Inside he’d find her inhaler. He had to save her.

* * * *

Misty forced all the air from her lungs, trying one of the breathing techniques her doctor had shown her, and was amazed when her wheezing abated. But for some reason, Cody seemed more distressed by the improvement. His words became frantic, assuring her she’d be okay.

It was kind of charming how worried he was about her. A man wouldn’t be this panicked over a friend, right? Maybe Cody did feel something for her. She tried to reassure him that she was okay now, but her fox form restricted her.

She’d never seen him panic before, but no doubt he was now, she realized as she stared at his darkened features. Those frown lines would cause wrinkles if he kept it up much longer. Although she still felt bruised from where the cat had hit her, and the whole side of her face was burning,

the breathing techniques had quieted the asthma. There was no need for his anxiety.

No matter how much she was enjoying being in his arms, she had to let him know she was all right. Focusing inward, Misty drew in her fox, pulling it, aspect by aspect, back inside until her human half took over. Her legs and arms stretched, her fur receded as her skin swelled. She expected Cody to put her down, but instead he continued forth, leaving the front door open in his hasty rush inside.

His hands on her new, overly-sensitive skin sent a shiver through her. What she wouldn't give to be naked in his arms under different circumstances.

"Cody," she croaked, her voice hoarse from both the change and the asthma attack. The breathing exercises had helped, but she'd need a puff or two on her inhaler when she got back to the bar.

"No, don't speak. Just hang on. I've got a spare inhaler around here somewhere." He swore under his breath as he stubbed his toe on the edge of the counter in the dark.

"But Cody—"

"Damn it, Misty. Give me one second to find it. Hang on, okay?" Cody cut her off. She could tell he was past listening as he set her on the counter and shuffled through drawers. With a sigh, Misty leaned back on her hands.

As long as she was here, she might as well enjoy the view. This wasn't the first time she'd seen Cody naked. Years ago, it had been a regular occurrence whenever they'd gone hunting. But starting in high school, he'd shifted before meeting her. At the time, she'd barely noticed, but as her attraction toward him grew, she longed for the glimpses of Cody's body. Now, she studied what she'd been missing out on over the years.

Was it any wonder the man captivated her? Although he had the red hair so prevalent among fox shifters, his seemed darker, exotic, and the shaggy cut he favored seemed effortless—even though she'd seen first-hand the hair product in his bathroom.

Unlike many fox shifters, who tended to be short but lanky, his build was stocky, with muscles begging to be licked. And on the subject of things begging to be licked...

Misty bit her lip as her gaze moved lower. Cody wasn't the largest man she'd ever seen, but he certainly wasn't lacking in that department either.

And if the stories were to be believed, he knew how to use what he had. She'd bet they'd be amazing in bed together. If only she'd managed to convince him to give it a try.

"Got it," he shouted, holding up one of her spare inhalers she must have left over here at some point.

Misty quickly raised her gaze to his, but the look in his eyes as they met hers told her he knew exactly what she'd been ogling.

Coughing into her hand, she tried to hide the smile refusing to go away. Without warning, he stood before her, pushing her hand aside and trying to shove the inhaler in her mouth.

"It's okay, Misty. Stop fighting, this is going to help you."

She grabbed the inhaler from him before he knocked out her teeth, putting her hand in front of her to hold him back, then stared at him in silence until he calmed down.

The breathing exercises had helped with her asthma attack, but her chest still felt sore from struggling to breathe. So Misty took a deep breath with the inhaler, letting the medicine coat her airways. After two puffs, she began to feel normal again, even though her face still stung and she'd likely have two huge bruises on her chest and back—one from the cat and one from the ground.

"You're okay?" Cody asked, the panic starting to fade from his eyes.

"Yeah. I still hurt in places, but I'll live." She thought about mentioning his unnecessary panic, but was glad she hadn't brought it up after seeing the relief flooding his eyes. No need to bring it up when it would only put him on the defensive. It had been a tough night.

"Wait here. I'll get the first aid kit for your cut."

Misty frowned as she watched him walk out of the kitchen. The stinging on the right side of her face became sharper as she focused on it. But was it bad enough to need a first aid kit?

All of a sudden, Misty didn't feel quite so confident sitting on Cody's kitchen counter stark naked. With a tentative hand, Misty reached up to assess the damage. Her breath hissed as she encountered raw flesh. Blood covered the tips of her fingers when she pulled them away.

That was one way to kill a girl's self-confidence. She might be naked, but she'd also bled all over the man's kitchen while ogling him. As if Cody

didn't have enough embarrassing stories about her, she had to add one more.

"Okay, tell it to me straight. How bad is it?" Misty asked after Cody reappeared carrying some bandages and Neosporin. The question seemed to startle him, and he stared at her cheek for a moment before replying.

"Uh..."

The hesitation made Misty groan. "That bad?"

"No." The waver in his voice belied the words. "No," He stated with a firmer tone. "The guy got you pretty good, but it's already starting to heal. Tomorrow you'll be good as new, but I want to put something on it to be sure."

"I actually think it was the ground."

"What?"

"The gash. I think it's from sliding on the ground. He tackled my other side. See?" Misty pointed to the darkening spot on her side. "This is where he tackled me. The bruise on my shoulder and gash on my face is from the ground."

* * * *

Cody fought the urge to growl as he examined the wounds on Misty's pale skin. Everything inside him wanted to find the bastard in the town jail and beat the living crap out of him. The cat might outweigh his fox, but the rage he felt assured him of victory.

Even though her shift earlier had likely healed some of the damage, the wounds Cody saw would take a couple days to heal completely. Which proved how bad the damage had been.

Without thought, Cody moved to Misty's side, his hand bushing the mark on her shoulder where she claimed she'd hit the ground. Blood pooled under the skin, giving the area a bluish tint. By tonight, the area would turn black, and by tomorrow, it would already be yellow. He leaned down and placed a gentle peck above the offended flesh.

Emotions rioted inside him. He'd almost lost her tonight. If they hadn't gotten the beast off when they did, or if her asthma attack had been worse... He shuddered. He now understood what it had cost Jason to release the man who'd captured his sister. He'd thought he knew before, but these emotions were much worse than he'd imagined.

It wasn't until he leaned away from her shoulder that he realized his hand had been absently stroking her thigh. Her inner thigh. Snatching it back, he cleared his throat and reached for the Neosporin.

Since the first time they'd met, Cody had always felt a special connection to Misty. Being an only child, he used to fantasize about Misty being his sister. But the feelings crashing through his chest right now didn't feel very brotherly.

"I should have insisted you stay at the bar," he muttered under his breath as he cleaned the gash on her cheek.

"You aren't my father, Cody. Besides, who would have guessed a second man lay in wait, or that he'd attack from behind?"

"We didn't know what to expect. If you're going to keep putting yourself in these dangerous situations, I have to insist you learn how to defend yourself."

"And how am I supposed to do that? Besides the yoga classes I teach in town, there's a youth ballet class, and a step aerobics class. What kind of self-defense am I going to learn, how to sashay the bad guys to death?"

Cody frowned at her words. She was right. There was nowhere nearby to learn self-defense classes. Most shifters developed a natural instinct to fight, but somehow Misty had missed that day in Shifter Instinct 101. Although, now that he thought about it, developing a class in self-defense for the town wouldn't be a bad idea. It would be a great way to protect his skulk when he wasn't around.

Cody glanced back at Misty. She needed to learn now. It would take time to develop a full class and find an instructor. They couldn't wait that long. He wouldn't wait.

"I'll teach you." Cody twitched. Had he just said those words? He'd been thinking of asking one of the senior members of the skulk to teach her, but the thought of another man putting his hands on Misty, even to teach her self-defense, made him want to throw a blanket over her and shield her nakedness.

What was wrong with him? This was Misty. His friend-who-was-like-a-sister Misty.

He looked down at the thigh he'd been absently rubbing earlier. Maybe not quite like a sister. No, he couldn't teach her. Right now, the emotions

rolling through him were too confusing. But he couldn't let any of the other male foxes teach her, either. They'd have to figure something else out.

His gaze moved up, stopping at the growing bruise on her side, the skin there already darkening. Once again, instinct warned him not to wait. And he always trusted his instinct.

Glancing up, he gazed into Misty's eyes. She looked downright giddy at the idea of learning how to fight. Knowing he was caught, Cody sighed. It appeared he would be teaching her. He'd just have to stifle these new, strange feelings for the time being. At least until he figured out what had caused them and put an end to it.

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Chapter 3

Misty released the chipmunk she'd captured. She wasn't hungry. Just restless. Cody was coming over tonight to begin her fighting lessons, and nervous energy filled her. If she hadn't done something to burn off the excess energy, she would have started cleaning. And once she got started, she'd never be able to stop.

So she'd decided to shift and go for a run, especially since she still had an hour and a half before Cody was supposed to arrive. But now that she was here, surrounded by the forests she loved, boredom set in. Well, maybe bored was the wrong word, but she was still filled with the restless energy she'd hoped to dismiss.

After Cody had announced he would teach her, she'd been elated. After all, how could more time with the man she loved be a bad thing? Not to mention, there'd been something in his eyes and touch the night she'd been attacked. Some emotion she'd never seen before.

But a couple days away from him had allowed the doubts to set in. Yes, she hoped Samantha's marriage to Jason would pave a path for her and Cody, and yes, she needed to spend time with the man in order to convince him she was perfect for him. But she knew what a miserable fighter she was. Her father had tried to teach her once, before declaring her hopeless and giving up. Having Cody watch her flail around like a landlocked fish probably wasn't going to make her appear irresistible.

Too late now. Cody had already rearranged his schedule in order to meet with her tonight, even moving his weekly meeting with the elder members of the skulk. It would not only be rude to cancel, but outright inconsiderate. She'd just have to suck it up and look like an idiot. But she supposed if she'd managed to overcome Cody seeing her pathetic attempts to climb the rope in gym class, she'd get over him witnessing her embarrassing fighting skills as well.

A faint cry made her ear twitch as she meandered through the forest. Her ears swiveled, searching for the sound. It came again somewhere to the left. She froze, sniffing the air trying to determine if she was in any danger.

The small mewling continued. The pain in the cry broke Misty's heart. It sounded like a young fox.

Sometimes kids from the local middle school passed this area while playing. What if one of them had fallen and gotten hurt? Her imagination ran wild, picturing the young shifter's friend running back to town for help, leaving the fallen child frightened and alone.

Her fox couldn't sense any danger—not that her fox instincts were all that strong. For whatever reason, most of her senses and instincts had never developed as well as most other shifters' had. The weeping continued, a constant cry of pain and fear. Misty could no more ignore that sound than she could ignore a lost child, which it might very well be.

Following the sound, Misty dodged through the trees until she came upon the source. The scene before her made her freeze. Horror and sympathy rose up inside her, tightening her throat. She swallowed past the lump, assessing the situation. It wasn't some kids from her skulk, and no one would be coming to help.

Misty tramped down the urge to cry as she watched the baby fox, not a shifter but a full fox, curl up with its fallen mother. She didn't know what had killed the mother, maybe another animal, or starvation. Perhaps the mother had never recovered from birthing the youth, who looked to be no more than three weeks old. Whatever had happened, one thing was clear, the mother had done whatever possible to protect her child.

The baby fox nudged the mother's head with its nose, causing Misty's heart to thud heavily in her chest. No way could she leave the kit here. If he didn't starve to death, he would be a sitting duck for every predator in the forest. The mother could no longer protect her child, but Misty could. Reason enough to take action.

With stilted steps, she approached the pair. The kit looked up at her, a pleading cry escaping as if asking her for help. Misty tramped down the tears that threatened to fall. She needed to be strong and get this baby to safety. She eased closer, giving the kit time to adjust to her smell so she didn't frighten it. A boy, she realized, his scent becoming clearer the closer she got.

It wouldn't be easy to tear him away from his mother's body. Using her nose, Misty pushed the baby away. Even recognizing the futility, Misty took

a moment to nudge the adult fox with her nose. Cold and stiff, as she'd suspected.

Poor baby. She'd lost her mother at a young age, too, but at least she hadn't been in the car with her at the time. Hadn't seen the destruction, or been left alone with a cooling body. And she'd had her father to love her.

With a deep breath, Misty turned away from the body, forcing the kit to walk in front of her. Without looking back, she started home. Every now and then, the young fox would cry, breaking Misty's heart again.

When they got back to her house, she would make sure he had plenty of food and toys. If Cody arrived while she was at the pet store, he'd have to wait.

It was actually kind of perfect. She'd been lonely lately, and thinking of getting a pet. Although she'd never wish this pain on anything, what could be better than another fox to keep her company?

* * * *

The first thing Cody heard when he approached Misty's front door was laughter. The kind of laughter that came straight from the gut, borne of pure joy. A sound he'd come to associate with Misty. He smiled as he opened the door and strode into her living room.

The text he'd received earlier had said to come right in, but his confident steps faltered as he saw the cause of her giggles. Misty in human form, sat on the floor with a beaver puppet, playing with a fox. The kit's eyes were open, but he still possessed his black baby fluff. It couldn't be older than a couple weeks.

"What is that?"

Apparently unaware of his presence until he spoke, she jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Oh, hi Cody." She looked at her wrist as if expecting a watch to be there. Why she did that when he could count the times she'd worn a watch in the past two years on one hand, he'd never understand. "Is it time for training already? I'm not dressed, yet."

Cody looked down at her clothes. Skin tight jeans that looked way too appealing and a black t-shirt with the words *Foxy Lady* spelled in big pink letters across her breasts. Perky breasts that would fill his hands perfectly.

Way too tempting. Those clothes had to go. Wait. He mentally back-pedaled, rephrasing his last thought. She had to change into different

clothes, more clothes. Some nice baggy sweats would be perfect. Something to hide her figure. And tennis shoes, he thought as he watched her bare toes curl into the carpet, the bubble gum pink polish peeking out from under her jeans.

Cody shook his head and refocused on the problem at hand. “You can change in a minute. What is that?” he asked again, pointing to the animal at her feet.

“What’s what?” She looked down, as if unaware anything abnormal was going on. Apparently in Misty’s world, playing with a fox on the living room floor was business as usual. “That’s a fox. You know, one would think the Premier of fox shifters would know that.”

The teasing tone almost brought a smile to his face, but his curiosity wouldn’t let the subject go. “I know it’s a fox. What is it doing in your living room?”

“I adopted it,” she said.

“Adopted it?” Cody looked down at the animal again. There was no humanity in its scent, but the boy was still a baby. He hadn’t been around enough newborns to know the difference between a shifter baby and a fox baby. “It’s a shifter, then?” He hadn’t realized Misty was considering adoption. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized Misty would be a great mom.

“No. It’s a fox.” She spoke slowly as if to a simpleton. “I feel like we’ve been here already.”

Closing his eyes, Cody didn’t know whether to be frustrated or entertained. Part of him wanted to laugh while the other part wanted to shake a straight answer from her. Worse, he couldn’t tell whether or not Misty was serious. Sometimes she didn’t realize when she was being evasive.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?” he suggested.

“Okay. I was hunting and found him with his mother. She had already passed away, and he was sitting beside her, crying. I couldn’t leave him there.”

No, Cody wouldn’t have been able to leave him there, either. And he wasn’t surprised Misty had gone out and bought the little scamp toys to play with, but...judging by the amount of toys scattered throughout the

room, this wasn't a stop over until Misty found a better home for the kit. She intended to keep him.

He rubbed his forehead, considering his response. During their friendship, he'd occasionally have to infuse logic into one of Misty's hair-brained plans. It always made him feel like the bad guy. The killjoy. How to explain this to her without upsetting her?

"Misty, I understand why you brought him home with you. You did a good thing. But you can't keep him here."

She tilted her head to the side, looking at him quizzically. "Why not?" Her tone wasn't belligerent, merely curious. She honestly didn't see a problem.

"It's a wild animal. You can't keep a wild animal as a house pet."

Silence stretched out. He stared into her eyes, searching for the tears he expected his words to cause. When they didn't appear, he breathed a sigh of relief. Since he'd never been comfortable with her tears, being the cause of them would have broken his heart.

"So you're telling me, I can have a wild fox living inside me, sharing my body, but I can't have one inside my home. Doesn't that strike you as a bit...odd?"

Cody considered her words. Only Misty would make an argument like that. But it did make him pause. When he tried to think of a rebuttal, he realized she had a good point.

It really wasn't his business. As long as her neighbors didn't complain, he had no reason to force the issue. Besides, he didn't want to see the joyful light in her eyes dim.

"Do you even know how to take care of him?"

"Sure I do. Well, okay maybe not. But I'll learn."

He took a deep breath, wanting to question her further, but it wasn't his place. Tonight he was supposed to teach her self-defense. The whole afternoon, he'd researched teaching techniques and had come up with a lesson plan. But first, they needed to do something with the fox and she needed to change into clothes that didn't cling to every curve.

"Fine, but what are you going to do with it while we practice?" he asked, looking around. The shiny new dog crate in the corner snagged his gaze. She wouldn't...

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Chapter 4

Misty didn't see what the big deal was. The crate wasn't too small for the baby fox. And she'd bought a soft pad for the bottom and a fox stuffed animal to put in there with him, so he could curl up and everything. But when she'd tried to usher the animal inside, Cody had acted like she committed a sacrilege.

Walking outside after changing into yoga pants and a tank top, Misty saw Cody putting the finishing touches on his makeshift fence. After seeing the crate, he had shooed her off to change, telling her he'd figure something out for her new pet. She glanced at the area he'd blocked off in the back yard by tipping her porch furniture on its side. The space in the middle wasn't much larger than the area in the crate.

"How is that any better?"

Sweat dripped down his forehead as he glared at her where she stood by the back door.

"Because 'crate' is just a fancy way of saying 'metal cage'. This way, he'll be outside with grass beneath his feet and sky above his head. A fox needs to be free, to be one with nature."

One with nature? She pursed her lips to hold back the giggles. He was so cute when he got all worked up. Whenever he was adamant about something, he'd emphasize his point by gesturing while he spoke. The dramatic hand movements were such a contrast from his normal personality, she always had to stifle the urge to laugh.

Years ago, she'd burst into a fit of giggles whenever he broke out in gestures. Then, one day, the laughter had pushed him over the edge. It had been one of the few times she'd seen him truly angry. The memory still made her uncomfortable. But it had taught her not to laugh at people when they were serious. Since then, she'd learned how to giggle on the inside. Now, she could tease him all she wanted just to see him get all intense. Which she did. At least once every other week. After all, someone had to keep the Premier sharp. Wouldn't do the skulk any good to have a weak leader.

Walking over, Misty looked down at the enclosed area. The empty area.

“Where’s Oscar?” she asked, glancing around the yard before turning back to Cody.

“Oscar?” he asked.

“Small, black and red fur, baby fox.”

“He’s right...” Cody broke off as he stared at the ground behind him with a “huh.”

Panic set in. “You lost my fox?” Her voice rose to a shout, her eyes searching the small backyard. Oscar was nowhere in sight. “He’s still a baby, Cody. He can’t survive on his own, yet.” Not to mention the attachment she already felt, even though it had only been a couple hours.

A sense of failure assailed her. Oscar was hers to take care of. She hadn’t even lasted one day.

“Oscar,” she called, knowing how futile it was. She hadn’t owned him long enough for him to learn his name. But her brain refused to come up with a better option. How would she find him? All she could think to do was stand by the woods and call his name. But what if he’d gone in the other direction? He would run into the road and get hit by a car. Oh God.

“Calm down, we’ll find him,” Cody said beside her.

“But what if we don’t? What if we never know what happens to him? I brought him here to try and protect him and now—”

“Wait, there he is.” Cody cut into her rant, pointing under a bush in her garden where Oscar slept. With his black fur, he blended into the dark soil underneath.

Misty ran over, picked up the fluff ball and cuddled him against her cheek, the soft fur reassuring her he was safe. Oscar let out a small squeak, and tried to wiggle out of her arms. Reluctantly, she set him down in the makeshift playpen. She watched as he circled first one way, then the other, before finally curling up and going back to sleep.

* * * *

Staring at Misty as she gazed at Oscar with such love, Cody felt... jealous. Which was ridiculous. Misty was his friend but nothing more. He’d never wanted anything more. But lately, for some reason, he’d started questioning their relationship. Whenever he looked at her, he felt a strange heat, almost like desire.

It was crazy. He didn’t desire Misty. He didn’t. But deep down, he knew it was a lie. His eyes lowered to her butt as she leaned down to place a

stuffed animal in the pen with her fox. The yoga pants clung to her curves worse than the jeans had, leaving everything and nothing to the imagination at the same time.

A flash of Misty, her eyes sparkling down at him as she leaned in for a kiss, ran through his mind. If he didn't know better, he'd swear it was a memory. But he'd never kissed her. Not even during a childhood game of Spin the Bottle.

He needed to get a grip. Even if she would be open to something more than friendship with him, he would never do it. There weren't many girls he considered friends. Acquaintances maybe, but not friends. What they had was too special to ruin just to scratch an itch, which was all they would ever have.

If she was a potential mate, things would be different, but she wasn't. With all the time they'd spent together over the years, he would have sensed the connection a long time ago. Best for everyone to ignore these sudden urges and keep things light. Which would be a lot easier if she'd put on sweats instead of the clingy...

Cody jerked his gaze away from her butt. Clearing his throat, he tried to concentrate on the task at hand. Self-defense lessons.

"Come on, let's go over here to get some room." He put his hand on her elbow and led her away from the makeshift pen. The longing sigh she made as she cast one last look at Oscar sounded almost like a sigh of pleasure. He gritted his teeth and ruthlessly pushed down the images threatening to rise.

"What's first, chief? Karate, Jujitsu, maybe a little Tai Kwon Do?" Misty jumped away from him and started hopping back and forth like a boxer, reminding him of a little bunny. The image made him smile.

"Easy tiger. Why don't you show me what you've got, first, so I know where to start."

The hopping stopped. She stared at him with a blank look on her face.

"Come on, you can fight me." He raised his hands and assumed a fighting stance, having no doubt he could block whatever she threw at him.

"Um...what I've got. Okay." She pulled up her pants and shrugged her shoulders a couple times. Then she did something—he didn't think he could describe it if he tried—a drawn out "Wwaaa" escaped as her hands circled wildly around her head. Every now and then, one of her legs would lift up in what he had to assume was supposed to be a kick.

Without a word, he gaped at her display for a minute, dropping his hands from their defensive position around his face. It had to be a joke. But even as the thought came to him, he knew without a doubt, she wasn't kidding. This was Misty's interpretation of a badass fighter.

His lips twitched as she spun, her hands still chopping through the air in wide, erratic circles. Before she'd gotten her balance back, one foot rose into the air in an imitation kick. She stumbled, catching herself before she fell. *Barely.*

He tried to contain the laughter. He really did. But a snort slipped past his guard, and that was all it took. Laughter rolled through him, bursting out in a long bellow. Clutching his stomach, he doubled over, unable to stop.

"Hey!" Misty complained, shoving him to the ground. The impact did nothing to stop the roars of laughter. Before long, his stomach and sides ached. He pulled air into his lungs, struggling for control. He blew out a breath, as his chuckles tapered off.

Glancing up, he took one look at Misty, arms crossed and toe tapping as she glared down at him with a furious expression, and burst into renewed cackles. It was as if she'd learned her moves from old Bruce Lee movies. Which, considering who he was thinking about, she probably did.

Once he'd regained control, he sat up, wiping the tears from his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed that hard. Actually, he could. No surprise, it had been with Misty.

Almost scared to discover her reaction, he stood and turned to her. She certainly looked angry, but the laughter shining out of her eyes told a different story. One of the things he loved about Misty was her ability to laugh at herself. He grinned and gave her a helpless shrug. No one would have resisted laughing at her display, not even a saint, and the twitch of her lips told him she understood.

"I know, I know. Hopeless, right?" she asked.

"Not hopeless." He weighed his words carefully. "But I don't think we'll be able to cover everything in one or two or twenty lessons. Let's just start at the beginning."

"Okay." She dropped her hands to her side. "Teach me, sensei."

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "The first thing you need to learn is to stay—" He broke off and stared at her, remembering her 'moves' from before. "Actually, in your case, the first thing you have to learn is to

never do what you just did. Unless you intend to crack them up and run away while they're on the ground laughing.”

The glare she threw him told him she didn't appreciate his humor. “Ha ha ha. Can you quit joking around and get serious?”

“You think I'm kidding, but I'm not. Seriously, the first thing you need to learn is nothing fancy. I'm not going to teach you how to be Jet Li. I'm going to teach you how to defend yourself. No judo chops or breaking cement blocks. Your objective is not to win, it's to get away.”

Disappointment shone from her eyes as her lip poked out in a pout. A pout that made her lips look far too enticing. He found himself unconsciously leaning forward for a kiss, and tightened his resolve. What was wrong with him?

“But I want to be like Laurie.” One of the wolves in Jason's pack. Not only was Laurie an alpha wolf, she was a superb fighter both with fur and without.

“Honey, no matter how much training we do, you're never gonna be like Laurie.”

Her sigh was so exaggerated, he had to wonder whether she tried to egg him on. Although he never understood why, he knew she occasionally tried to get under his skin.

“I know,” she said, reminding him of a petulant child.

“All right then, moving on. For the next lesson, I want you to follow my lead, okay?” He waited for her nod before continuing, “Breathe in.” With his hands toward him, he raised them to chest level as he took a deep breath, then lowered them as he breathed out. “Breathe out.”

* * * *

Wait, what? Misty stared as Cody lowered his hands to his side and then repeated the breathing exercise. When he'd had her breathe in and raise her hands, she'd expected him to show her some super move to knock down her opponent. But breathing? She knew how to breathe. She was a yoga instructor, for crying out loud.

“Is this like the ‘wax on, wax off’ approach to self-defense?” she joked.

“You watch too many movies.”

“Well, I thought you were going to teach me some fancy moves.”

His eyes narrowed and he glared at her through lowered brows. “Didn't I just get through telling you not to do anything fancy? Not five seconds

ago. Are you even listening to me?"

"Fine, nothing fancy." Misty held up her hands in defeat. "You don't have to get so cranky about it," she muttered under her breath.

"I heard that."

"I knew you would," she shot back. And because she knew it would aggravate him even more, she smiled, enjoying the way his forehead crinkled in a frown.

This was probably the reason they'd never dated. In fact, it kind of amazed her they were still friends. Whenever she was near him, she felt compelled to tease. Almost as if the devil possessed her. She simply couldn't help herself. If she wanted their relationship to grow into more, she needed to find a way to curb the impulse. He would never fall for her if she kept acting like such a brat.

New plan. She would throw herself into her lessons. She'd impress him by paying attention, listening closely, and picking everything up super-fast.

"Did you hear what I said?" Cody asked.

It wasn't until he asked the question that she realized he'd been speaking the whole time her mind had been wandering. So much for the *listen closely* plan. With reluctance, Misty murmured an apology.

"I said, the reason you need to concentrate on your breathing is because it will help you remain calm during any intense encounter. Remembering to keep your cool is more important than any move I might show you. I know how panicked you get when something goes wrong."

Misty reared back. She wasn't a panicker. When things went wrong, she went with the flow. "I don't know what you're talking about. I always keep a cool head."

No response.

Probably trying to wrack his brain to come up with an example of her panicking and couldn't, she thought with just a touch of smugness. Blatantly she stared back at him until his gaze darted past her shoulder in surprise.

"Oh no, Oscar broke loose!" he exclaimed.

Misty's heart sped up, the breath freezing in her throat, as she spun around and ran to the pen. Oscar lay curled in a ball with his stuffed animal.

Knowing what was coming, she straightened slowly. The slight curl at the corners of his lips and raised eyebrow said it all.

“Touche,” she conceded.

“We’ll work on it. For now, let’s learn some of the most common ways a bad guy could grab you, and what you can do to get away. We’ll do human skills first and then learn to fight while shifted. Whenever you’re attacked from behind, I want you to squat down. It might seem strange, especially if he has a hold of your hair, but it’s the best way to break an attacker’s grip. Okay, turn around and let’s give it a try.”

Give it a try? Did that mean Cody would grip her from behind? Just the thought had her muscles tightening in anticipation. With a deep breath, Misty turned around. She held her breath, her eyes closing as she waited for the moment he’d touch her.

His touch had never failed to fire her blood. And her imagination. Often, she’d dream of Cody’s arms encircling her from behind. Granted, those fantasies had been romantic, not because he wanted her to fight him. Splitting hairs.

Any moment, Cody would take her into his arms. Maybe even sweep her off her feet. Her hands clenched as she pictured it. The smile on his face as he held her, those happy lips coming closer and closer until finally he closed the distance and kissed her... The breath she’d been holding came out on a sigh.

All of a sudden, Cody’s arms circled her, tightening just short of painful. Misty’s brain emptied. All she could think about was how incredible the man smelled. The spicy scent of his cologne was faint but still present, probably left over from that morning. But underneath, pure man bled through—a scent purely Cody. As the aroma surrounded her, she took a deep breath, pulling it into her lungs.

“You’re remembering to breathe. Good,” he said quietly. The heat of his breath caressed her ear, causing a shiver to snake down her spine.

She was supposed to be doing something, but her entire world began and ended with the fact that Cody Mattherson had his arms around her. Even though it wasn’t romantic, it made her stomach clench with need.

Sadness swamped her. If only he felt the same way...

* * * *

This was a mistake. The moment he put his arms around her, he realized it. Now here he was, Misty’s backside flush against him, trying desperately to control his wayward thoughts.

Over the past couple months, ever since he'd started having vivid dreams of taking Misty to bed, he'd been careful not to get too close. But now, he was trapped, his face pressed so close to her hair he smelled her shampoo with every breath he took.

Maintaining his distance emotionally proved impossible when he had her in his arms. Every time she breathed, her breasts rose perilously close to his hands. Over her shoulder, he stared at the peaks. Two perfect handfuls. Her nipples peaked under his stare, mesmerizing him. What would they feel like in his palms? And would they taste as good as they did in his dreams?

No. Thinking about that was dangerous. He needed to focus on the task at hand. She was taking deep breaths, which meant she'd not only listened to him but followed directions.

"You're remembering to breathe. Good," he murmured, closing his eyes to breathe in her scent. Any moment now, she would squat down, like he'd instructed, breaking his grip. For now, he savored the feel of her in his arms.

When she shivered, he almost lost it. Undoubtedly, she was cold in only a tank top as the day cooled into night, but in his mind, he pictured her in bed, shivering under him in pure desire. The image punched him in the gut.

Misty was a friend. A good friend, but nothing more. There was no way he would ruin what they had because his libido all of a sudden realized she was also a woman. As if oblivious to his inner struggle, Misty turned in his arms to face him.

In a haze, his gaze dropped to her lips. They parted and the urge to close the distance between them almost overwhelmed him. He needed to find out if Misty tasted as good as she smelled. If she would sink into his embrace or push him away. He needed to know if the emotions rioting inside him were one sided, or if perhaps she was feeling the same undeniable pull.

A few inches would close the distance. Although he tried to resist, Cody found himself moving closer. He looked up into Misty's hazel eyes, saw the naked desire inside before she closed her lids, shielding her emotions from him. He'd always been able to read her by gazing into her eyes.

The thought made him freeze. *Always* could mean a lot of things, but for Misty and him it meant over a decade. Fifteen years of friendship. Way back when he still believed in Santa Claus and The Easter Bunny, they'd baked gingerbread cookies and colored eggs at his parents' house.

This was wrong. It didn't matter if she felt the same way—which she appeared to. Throwing all that history away wasn't the right move.

Clearing his throat, Cody released her and took a step back. A retreat, plain and simple. He was man enough to admit it. Even as every instinct urged him to plow forward, or maybe because they did, he took another step away.

One minute longer and he would have pulled her tight and ravished her, here on the grass with little Oscar sleeping not ten feet away. He looked into sparkling hazel eyes as they opened.

"Attackers usually don't let someone go and back away on their own," she joked.

Under normal circumstances, her humor attracted him, making him a part of the joke. One of the things he loved most about her. But tonight, he didn't want to be pulled in. He needed to get away from her and the temptation she'd become. Once he'd regrouped and regained his equilibrium, they could continue training. But not until then.

"It's getting late. Why don't we try again in a couple days?" Cody continued to back up. He saw the question in her eyes, but didn't bother trying to explain. Nothing he said would justify his squirrely behavior. "I'll call you."

Without another word, he turned and ran.

* * * *

Finding other hybrid shifters had been easier than she'd anticipated. And once she'd found them, it hadn't taken Stella long to earn their sympathy. A few fake tears, the story of her brave brother persecuted by the evil pure breeds and their pure breed council, and they'd been eating out of her hands.

"Those wolves would have killed him right there, but the fox Premier showed up. I thought it would be okay." Stella sniveled for effect, soaking in the furious expressions around her. Perfect. "But he said they should send my brother to the council. That the council would surely kill him. They said he didn't have a chance because he wasn't a 'pure breed.'"

A fist slammed down on the table. A large beefy hand. Stella's gaze traveled up the arm, pausing at the wide shoulders. This one would do nicely as her new muscle man.

"We have as many rights as pure breeds. They're supposed to be for all of us," the man said, looking at the crowd of hybrids around them. Easily manipulated, and he roused the crowd for her. Yes, he would do nicely.

"But they don't work for us. My brother was guilty of nothing more than living too close to the wolves' territory. It wasn't even across their boundaries. He died protecting me." She practically felt the outrage building. These people weren't even questioning her story.

"But didn't the wolf Premier just marry an arctic fox? I hear she's pregnant, too. You'd think a potential father of hybrids would be more understanding toward us."

Stella glared at the woman who'd spoken out, before composing herself. She'd planned for this moment, but she'd hoped it wouldn't come until later. After she'd already gathered enough support to squash such questions with no more than a look.

"I don't understand it, either. You should have seen the look on his face." She closed her eyes and shuddered. "I think the foxes are to blame. Why else would they have shown up?"

The rumble of the crowd began again, louder than before. She heard the anger in the whispers. Having spent time listening to the local gossip, Stella knew the foxes were known for keeping to themselves. They were the perfect scapegoat to rouse the indignation of the oppressed hybrids.

As the anger around her grew, Stella implemented phase two of her plan. "What we should do, is start our own group, a union of sorts. For the rights of hybrids everywhere. But first, we have to show them we mean business and aren't going to back down."

The avid gazes of the crowd told her she had everyone's attention. Before long, she'd be their leader, and then she'd take over the council. After she did, her brother's killers would pay. Along with everyone who'd turned their backs on her and Jay. They would all pay.

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Chapter 5

Misty narrowed her eyes as she saw Cody sitting alone in a booth at the diner one town over from Vulpes Creek. He'd avoided her for almost a week, dodging her calls, ignoring the door when she went to his place—as if she didn't know he hid inside. But by the look of his plate, he'd just gotten started. Perfect. She might not be much of a hunter, but she'd cornered her prey.

Squaring her shoulders, Misty strutted to his table and swung into the opposite side of the booth. It took him a moment to look up, but as soon as he saw her, something close to panic entered his eyes.

“Sit down,” Misty ordered as he started to rise.

Last time she'd seen him, she'd been sure he'd been about to kiss her. But he hadn't. Instead, he ran away. And now he avoided her as if she were a leper. How was she supposed to convince him they were perfect for each other if he ran away every time she got close?

“Eat your lunch,” she said.

He stared at her for a full minute before a smile curved his lips. The sight caused her stomach to clench in desire. “Feeling bossy today, are we?” That was all it took. With one little tease, the tension in the air cleared, and they were back on friendly ground.

Misty bit her inside cheek to hold back the smile, even as her lips twitched. “I'm mad at you,” she stated.

“What did I do?” He put his hand against his heart in a wounded pose.

Her pulse leapt. They were actually flirting. “You've been avoiding me. How am I supposed to learn how to fight when my teacher runs away from me? Aren't you supposed to be throwing me to the ground or something?” *And kissing me senseless...* A girl could dream.

“You're right. I haven't been a good teacher. What can I do to make it up to you?” It was impossible to stay mad at him when he smiled at her.

“Bring over dinner for tonight's movie night.” Misty paused as Cody closed his eyes and grunted. “You are still coming for our monthly movie fest, aren't you?” It was a long-standing tradition. Every third Friday of the month, they'd take the night off and hang out, just the two of them.

Emerald green eyes pierced her. “We could always train tonight instead,” he offered. If she agreed, they’d train, but would never reschedule to see the movie. But if she said no, she’d get two nights with him instead of one. Easy decision.

“No way. It’s *Rocky IV* tonight, and you know what that means. Ivandrigo. Hot, half-naked, blond Russian, or getting my ass kicked?” Misty put her hands out as if they were a scale and moved them up and down before raising the side symbolizing the hot blonde. “Besides, maybe I’ll pick up a few moves.”

The possessive gleam in Cody’s eyes shocked Misty as he glared at her raised hand symbolizing the hot Russian. Maybe she was making more headway than she’d thought. To give him a moment, she signaled the waiter and placed an order to go. As much as she wanted to spend the rest of the day sitting across from him in this booth, she’d only come in to grab a quick bite. Already she was running behind.

When she looked back at Cody, the strange emotion had vanished. An easy smile curled his lips, lighting up his face.

“You really think Rocky is going to teach you about self-defense, huh?”

“Yeah, because Bruce Lee worked so well for me, right?” she joked, swiping her hands through the air in mini karate chops, similar to the ones she’d used when he’d asked her to show him her skills.

Rich laughter spilled out as he reached forward and grabbed her hands, lowering them to the table. The sound made her stomach clench, even as her heart jumped at his touch.

He didn’t even realize how sexy he was. All he had to do was smile at her, or laugh, and she was a goner. Who was she kidding? All he had to do was look at her.

“Okay, we’ll stick to the movie tonight. I’ll come over tomorrow night and undo whatever ‘lessons’ you take away from Rocky.” He laughed again.

This time she joined in. “So what are you doing here in the middle of the day?” she asked. Her hand tingled where he still held it against the table. Holding her breath, she turned her hand around and twined their fingers together. Hopefully he wouldn’t pull away. Would assume the gesture was meant in friendship. Which it was. No matter how much she wanted Cody,

she would never trade what they had. But the potential for them to be so much more compelled her. She wished he saw things the same way she did. Saw what a perfect couple they would be together. It was as clear as a cloudless day to her.

“Old man Jacobs smelled some strange scents when he was out hunting this morning. Asked me to check it out.” The Jacobs farm was technically located outside of the skulk boundaries, but Cody had never let that stop him from helping the old man out. When the man had sprained his ankle last year, Misty had brought over a couple casseroles for him, only to find Cody already there, mowing the lawn.

Misty worried her bottom lip. She’d called to check on Julie the other day and gotten the rundown of events leading up to the abduction. Brendan had mentioned a strange scent in the woods around Julie’s studio before she was taken. But he’d also mentioned how her kidnapper had sought her out and tried to seduce her before resorting to kidnapping. The two strange scents could be unrelated.

“Do you think it’s linked to the events in Alpine Woods?” Misty asked.

He squeezed her hand. “I doubt it. But if it is, we’ll take care of it before anything happens.” He paused and stared at her. Adoration shone from his eyes, causing the butterflies in her belly to flutter with renewed vigor. “Don’t you know I will always keep you safe?”

The breath she’d been holding came out in a whoosh. No wonder she loved the man. Everything inside her wanted to join him on his side of the bench and curl against his side, taking shelter in his strength. She might have given in to the impulse if the waitress hadn’t chosen that moment to come over and give her the bagel she’d ordered.

“Wait. What are you doing here?” he asked as if suddenly realizing they weren’t in town.

“I teach a couple classes at the dance studio here two days a week. There’s not enough business in Vulpes Creek to keep me gainfully employed. Speaking of—” She glanced down at her unadorned wrist and sighed. “I really need to get a watch.” His laughter caused her stomach to do another slow roll. “I’m running late. I should get going.”

“Okay. I’ll come over around eight tonight. Pizza or Chinese?”

She wrinkled her nose. Neither sounded appealing. What she really wanted was a big juicy burger. “How about I call The Watering Hole and

have Jarrod grill us up a couple burgers. You can pick them up on your way. He cooks a mean burger.” She thought she saw a flash of the same possessive heat from earlier, but it disappeared so quickly she couldn’t be sure.

“Sounds good to me,” he said with a wide smile.

With a small wave, Misty turned around and left the diner. A giggle escaped as she walked the two blocks to the dance studio. They hadn’t been able to have a movie night in a few months. In fact, the last one she remembered had been the night she’d tried to seduce him with alcohol. Or rather, the night she did seduce him but had run up against an alcohol overload wall. The night Cody didn’t remember, thank God.

She wasn’t stupid enough to try that again, had realized the mistake the next morning. But spending the night alone with Cody, good food, and a movie—however terrible that movie might be—sounded like a perfect Friday night. Especially if he kept looking at her like he had a few minutes ago.

The memory of the proprietary gleam in his eyes, and the way he gazed at her as he told her he would keep her safe, brought a smile to her face. She burned it permanently into her brain, never wanting to forget. He was wearing down. Soon, all her dreams would come true.

* * * *

Cody looked down at Misty as she rested her head against his shoulder. At some point during the movie, she had fallen asleep, and now unconsciously snuggled closer. It was his heat, he was sure, that made her cuddle against him. Nothing more. But the knowledge didn’t stop desire from burning through him.

Raising his hand, Cody hovered it over her shoulder, debating whether or not to wake her. The way her scent enveloped him brought his protective instincts screaming to the surface. Her essence filled him with every breath he took.

What he really wanted to do was wrap an arm around her and cuddle her closer. Panic bubbled to the surface at the thought, and his hand moved closer to her shoulder, intending to shake her awake, but something stopped him before he made contact.

She’d looked so tired when she opened the door tonight. She’d mentioned her day had gone downhill since seeing him this afternoon, but hadn’t gone into any details. Some rest would do her good. And if she was

more comfortable using his shoulder for a pillow, who was he to push her away? They were friends, after all, and friends were meant to be leaned on when the other needed support. How did that Bill Withers song go? *Lean on me, when you're not strong, and I'll be your friend.* Reaching for the remote, Cody turned down the volume so it wouldn't disturb her.

She shifted against him. Her forehead nuzzled his throat, fitting perfectly between his shoulder and chin. Her skin was so soft, he couldn't resist running a finger down her cheek.

A sigh slipped past her lips, and he gritted his teeth. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to not lean in and take those lips with his.

He turned back to the movie, but it no longer held his interest. It wasn't as good as he remembered. Years ago, when he'd first seen it, the fight between Rocky and Ivandrago had seemed...epic. He supposed he'd seen too much in the last few years to find the boxing match as exciting as it had once been. But Misty had been sweet enough to rent it, even though he knew she'd rather have seen something else. Whenever she chose a movie for them to watch, she always took his preferences into account. Usually she chose a zombie movie or a comedy, since they both enjoyed those. But every now and then, she'd slip in an action flick for him. Yet, never did she make him sit through a chick flick for her.

He frowned at the realization. She was always doing things for him and all she asked for in return was time. Even her self-defense lessons had been his idea. If he hadn't suggested—no, demanded—them, she would never have asked.

Looking down at the woman in his arms, he tried to analyze his rioting emotions. While she slept, he could study her without ruining their friendship. Indulge in the overwhelming desire to touch her. Whenever she was around, he thrust his hands in his pockets to keep from grabbing her.

He didn't understand why his feelings had changed, but somewhere along the road, they had. Misty was no longer one of the guys. All of a sudden, he saw her as a woman. A tempting one.

Guided by instinct, he leaned down and brushed his lips against her forehead. The skin was silky smooth against his lips. He closed his eyes and, for a moment, let his imagination run wild. Brushing his lips against her skin once again, Cody fantasized about kissing her everywhere. The images running rampant through his head had him half-hard in arousal. He

couldn't resist repeating the caress, but as he did, he heard her breath catch on a moan.

Unsure whether the throaty sound was reality or part of his fantasy, Cody opened his eyes and raised his head to look down at her. With dread, he stared into wide-open hazel eyes. She sat up, turned toward him, and reached for him. He stood in a rush even as she leaned into him. The abrupt movement didn't give her a chance to brace herself and she fell face down on the couch cushions. It should have been comical, but the laughter he pushed down was borne of panic, not humor. He needed to get out of there. Now.

"I have to go." He rushed toward the door, ignoring her as she called out behind him. It wasn't until he got into his car and drove off that he realized she must have seen his erection. And wasn't that just peachy?

After he got home, he would have to rub one out in the shower. And, even though he knew deep down it was a lie, he told himself he would not be envisioning Misty as he did it. Lately, she had starred in all his fantasies. No matter how hard he tried to think about someone else, anyone else, the image always transformed into her.

He needed to pull it together and get a grip. Tonight, he would take Misty in his imagination, and tomorrow, he would lock her back into the friendship box. Then he would throw out the key. Next time he saw Misty, he would have his emotions under control.

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Chapter 6

Misty grunted as she fell to the ground, Cody falling hard on top of her. That had hurt. Still, she took a moment to savor the feel of his front pressed up against her back before he jumped off as if she'd burned him.

Sweat ran between her breasts as she rose onto her hands. She needed a puff of her inhaler. Being thrown repeatedly to the ground was hell on the lungs. Air whooshing in and out against their will over and over again... yeah, that was good for the asthma.

"Damn it, Misty. You're not doing what I'm telling you." The curt tone, more than the words, had her back going up. Cody had been in a foul mood since they'd started the lessons, being impatient with her and downright rude most of the time. She'd about reached her limit.

"It's not like I'm not trying," Misty said as she rose and dusted off her hands.

"Not hard enough. It's not rocket science."

Shocked, her gaze flew to his. Never in the fifteen years she'd known him had he spoken to her in such a condescending tone. What had gotten into him today? Last night he'd been so tender, kissing her forehead as she'd rested against him. It seemed almost impossible the man with the dark frown standing in front of her and the man from last night were one and the same.

"What the hell crawled up your craw?"

"Crawled up your craw? Do you even know how stupid that sounds?"

Misty recoiled as if he'd slapped her. Her throat felt tight and she swallowed threatening tears. This wasn't the man she'd known most of her life. The man she loved. It couldn't be. Because that man would never be this cruel.

"That's twice now you've called me stupid. This is new to me. I just need some time to learn it."

"You know, I don't have forever. You aren't the only thing I have to do today."

The words *have to* jumped out at her. After all they'd been through, he saw her as a responsibility. A chore he had to finish before he popped open

a cold one and enjoyed his weekend. While she'd gloried in every minute, he'd been watching the clock until he could go home.

All her hopes about the future withered. Her instincts had been wrong to pursue him. They'd been wrong about a lot of things, apparently.

She bit her lip and ruthlessly thrust back the tears. No way in hell would she let him see her cry. With as much dignity as she could muster, she raised her chin and straightened her clothes, using the excuse of brushing dirt off to break eye contact.

"I didn't realize you saw me as an obligation. These lessons were your idea in the first place." She heard the tears in her voice, but was helpless against them. "But since your day is so busy, you'd better get on with it. I no longer require your services as an instructor."

Her eyes itched with unshed tears as she crossed to her back door and let herself inside. Behind her, Cody said something, but Misty blocked it out. She'd heard enough from him to last a lifetime.

The door handle jiggled before she'd gotten half way across the room. Thank heaven she'd locked the door out of habit. Next came the knocking as he shouted her name through the pane. She ignored both.

Not bothering to turn on the lights in her bedroom, Misty sat on her bed and stared at nothing. Her thoughts whirled inside her head. One by one, her fantasies of their future together played through her mind, a final hurrah before dying a swift death.

She'd never been certain they would marry. But whenever she pictured the future, he was always in it. Sure, she wanted him as her life mate, but if he'd never returned her romantic feelings, she figured they'd still be friends. Had thought he cared for her at least that much.

But the things he'd said today...

Anger and hurt swirled within her as she replayed the words in her head. Damn him for taking that little bit of hope away from her. Damn him for making her feel unwanted and useless for the first time in her life.

The worst part was she still wanted him. Despite everything. She wanted to run after him and apologize—although for what, she hadn't the faintest idea.

The fox inside her still longed for him, tried to push her toward Cody. She bit her lip as the tears threatened to fall again. Her fox was downright desperate, and she knew her other half would always long for him. The

realization that she would never get over him punched her in the gut. Loving a man who viewed her as an obligation. All the times he'd avoided her in the past few months took on a whole new meaning.

Misty shook her head and thrust all thoughts from her head. A deep breath helped steady her nerves. When she felt she had a measure of control, she picked up the phone.

Right now, she needed to talk to someone she knew loved her unconditionally. But she would not cry on the phone with her dad. Last year, he'd gone to visit his sister who'd mated into a New York fox skulk. The trip was supposed to last for two weeks, but he'd met someone—not another mate, but a companion—and decided to stay. For the first time since her mother's death, he seemed happy. But if he thought she needed him, he would come running back to town. Would put her above his happiness without question.

She wouldn't let that happen. She wasn't anyone's obligation.

She thought she had control of her emotions. Was positive she could hold it together. But when her dad picked up the phone, his deep baritone saying, "Hi princess," with such happiness, she lost it.

The tears rushed forth, flowing in an endless trail down her cheeks as the sobs poured from her soul. Somehow, she managed to confess everything between sobs. Her father remained silent the entire time, and didn't speak for a long moment after the story had finished.

Finally, after what seemed like ages but was probably only seconds, her father said, "Pack up whatever you want to keep. I'm coming to get you."

* * * *

Every time Cody closed his eyes, he saw Misty's face, filled with pain. Pain he'd caused with his careless words. And the tears she'd valiantly tried to hold back.

An hour had passed as he stood on her back porch knocking on her door. After he'd given up, he'd called a dozen times and got her voicemail every time. Two hours later, he'd decided she'd had enough time to calm down, and had gone back, pounding on her door with no more luck than before.

Over and over, he replayed the cruel things he'd said. Even as he'd railed at her, he'd known how cruel he was being. But as if a demon had possessed him, he couldn't halt the words. He'd been so determined to push

her away, to keep their friendship intact, he'd been ruthless, hurting the one person who meant the world to him. And probably damaging their relationship anyway. He'd never been more ashamed. Misty had never been an obligation to him.

Snarling at the reflection in the bathroom mirror, Cody headed toward the kitchen to make coffee and plan his next course of action. No matter what, he would repair their friendship.

The phone rang as he poured over a list of things he could do to earn her forgiveness. Distracted, Cody grabbed the receiver and said hello, still staring at the piece of paper.

"Cody. It's Bobby Alexander. How's it going?" The name dragged Cody out of his musings as he focused on the conversation. He'd met Bobby a few times at various shifter functions over the years. If he remembered correctly, Bobby was Premier of a skulk operating out of New York.

"All right. What's going on with you?" he asked, going into Premier mode.

"I'm looking for some information on a member of your skulk, a Misty Turner."

Dread settled heavy on his shoulders as every muscle in his body tensed. Why was Bobby looking for information about Misty? "Why?"

"It's procedure to ask the former Premier about a person before accepting them into the skulk. Normally I wouldn't bother since her father is already here, but he's pretty new, too. Figured I'd get some insight."

"I gotta go," Cody managed to bite out before hanging up. A strange buzz surrounded him as the world changed, taking on an altered hue that let him know his eyes had shifted to his fox's. He was close to losing control. Deep breaths helped calm the beast within. Helped him gain a measure of equilibrium.

So, she was going to pick up and go, was she? Move away without a word? Without giving him a chance to fix this?

Like hell.

* * * *

It was pathetic how easily manipulated these people were. How much they yearned for a leader. But it had paved the way for Stella to slip into the role. In a couple of weeks, she had cemented her place among the hybrids.

Phillip, her enforcer, slapped down a map of Vulpes Creek. Post-it notes with scribbles displayed the information from various scouting trips they'd made over the past couple weeks.

"Here's the safest place to strike." Phillip pointed to a section on the map. "We can easily get in, do what we need to, and get out, before anybody knows we're there."

Studying the map, Stella reached the same conclusion. She'd chosen her second well. Brains and brawn. Although she'd still take on the greater strategizing. After all, her second was a pawn in this, just like everyone else. She was the one pulling the strings.

"Good. I want it done tonight."

He nodded and left to round up the troops. Time for her first loyalty test. If the hybrids followed her in this, they'd follow her in anything.

* * * *

Misty stared around her bedroom. The boxes she'd bought sat open on the floor, the bottoms all taped together, empty inside. Her gaze snagged on things around the room she wanted to take with her, but she had no idea where to start.

This room had been her home, her haven, her entire life. She hadn't even moved into the master bedroom after her father had left, deciding to stay in the room she'd grown up in. It was hers right down to the light purple paint on the wall. But it wouldn't be hers much longer. Not if she went along with her father's plan to move her to New York.

Misty looked back down at the box patiently waiting on the floor. She tilted her head as she studied it, trying to decide what she should do next. Looking inward, she attempted to analyze her emotions. What did she feel about moving? She should be angry, or sad, or maybe even happy. But she didn't feel any of those things. Inside, her mind was like the surface of a lake on a windless day. Calm and quiet.

The lack of emotion should scare her, but summoning the energy for even that emotion seemed daunting. All she felt was numb. To her core.

How long she stood there in the doorway, her hands limp at her sides, she didn't know. Furious knocking on her door roused her out of her stupor. What the hell?

Walking to the front room, she stared at the portal while the pounding continued. It could be Cody coming back. But this knocking sounded angry.

Before when Cody had come by and knocked, it had been constant but subdued. With a small shrug, Misty crossed the room and opened the door.

Cody's enraged green eyes met hers.

And there it was. The calm surface of the lake inside her came alive, the water bursting out in an explosion of anger.

"What?" She put one hand on her hip and the other on the door, ready to slam it in his self-important face.

"That's all you have to say to me? Really?" He took a step back and closed his eyes, his chest lifting and falling as he took deep breaths. His lips moved but no sound emerged.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

Would he answer? His jaw tightened as if he were clenching his teeth. "Counting," he gritted out. "It's supposed to calm people down."

"Good luck with that." She started to shut the door, but his hand slammed against it, preventing it from closing.

"We need to talk," he said.

Anger built inside her. Now that it was convenient for him, he wanted to talk. This morning, he'd been too busy to deal with the nuisance of training her, but now he had some time and just expected her to let him in and make coffee.

"I'm busy at the moment. Thanks for stopping by." This time when she tried to close the door, he stormed past her, pacing the hallway.

Rolling her eyes, she shut the door and stood in front of it with her arms crossed. If he wanted to talk, he could damn well start. She had nothing to say to him.

When he looked back at her, she almost retreated from the emotion in his eyes. It took all her willpower to stand firm. This was her house, damn it, at least for the next few days. She would not be pushed around by the big dumb alpha.

He shook his head, turned away, and continued pacing. Using his words from earlier, Misty said, "I don't have all day."

Anger flashed in his eyes, almost making her smile. *Misty, one, Cody, zero.* Maybe it was petty, but not even the tiniest amount of shame bubbled up.

"Damn it, Misty, I was frustrated and in a pissy mood this morning. I didn't mean what I said. But this—" He broke off again, pacing away before

returning. “Were you even going to tell me?”

She froze. Tell him what? He couldn't have found out about her moving, could he? Determined to keep a cool facade, Misty raised one eyebrow. “What am I supposed to have told you, exactly?”

All of a sudden, he stood in front of her, gripping her arms above the elbow. He gave her one shake, staring down into her eyes before cursing and pushing away to stand with two feet of space between them.

“What, you were just going move half-way across the country without a word? Fuckin’ A. Pick up and leave when I’m not looking. You weren’t going to even give me a chance to apologize! You really think that’s a solution to our problem?”

“Based on our conversation this morning, I can’t understand why you would care.” Her lip only trembled a little as she said it. Shock reflected on his face, and Misty braced herself for whatever was coming next.

“Why I would—” He broke off with a curse.

Before Misty knew what to think, he swooped, his hands grabbed her as his lips captured hers in a heated kiss. One moment he’d been standing two feet away, railing at her. The next, he was suddenly flush against her, his arms surrounding her. Her brain struggled to grapple with the change.

When her lips parted in surprise, his tongue swept inside, taking control. This wasn’t a gentle kiss, but one borne of frustration. He didn’t ask for control, but seized it.

His flavor filled her senses. Everything fell away as she lost herself in his kiss. The entire world disappeared until it all that existed was the two of them.

Wiggling to free her arms, Misty reached up and circled his neck, rubbing the hot skin at the back before threading her fingers in his hair. The new position allowed his hands to slide down to her hips, pulling her forward until her front was plastered against his. Every inch of her pressed against him. He hardened as he pushed against her.

She moaned into his mouth, her hands fisting in his hair. The reality of the situation hit her, causing a shiver of pure pleasure to snake down her spine. Cody stood in her front entranceway, kissing her with such passion. This couldn’t be happening. It had to be a dream. But her dreams had never compared to this.

He broke the kiss to gently bite her lower lip.

Her breath hitched as he trailed his lips down her throat, stopping to nibble at her collarbone. Without thought, her body jerked forward into him, thrusting her breasts up in invitation. An invitation he seemed to understand as he reached his hands around her back, keeping her arched forward. His lips continued their descent, placing gentle pecks at the edge of her shirt. Blood pounded in her ears, drowning out everything but the sensations thrumming through her, his lips on her breast, his hands firm against her back, encasing her. Supporting her.

“The bedroom,” she managed to gasp as he slipped his hands under her shirt. Everywhere he touched fired nerve endings, leaving a trail of sensation in their wake. His hands stopped and he lifted his lips away from the top of her breasts, making her groan in frustration. When he straightened, she opened her eyes to stare warily into his as he studied her.

She tried to put every bit of certainty into her eyes, willing him to continue what he’d started. She knew she’d won when the roguish smile curled his lips before he leaned down and ravished her mouth once again. Her head spun from the intensity as he turned them around and backed her toward the bedroom. She closed her eyes, trusting him to keep her from tripping. Trusting him to not let her fall.

As they turned into the bedroom, Cody broke the kiss. Hearing his growl, Misty opened her eyes and followed his gaze to the boxes sitting on her floor. Guess she’d have to cancel the move now. But there was plenty of time to worry about that later. Right now, she had her man right where she wanted him.

Taking control, Misty grabbed his hands and backed up until her legs hit the bed. She fell backward, pulling him down with her. The feel of his chest pressed against her distracted her. It must have done the same for him, since his lips captured hers with renewed ferocity.

Her body quaked as she opened her legs and bent her knees, allowing him to slide in between and press against her through their jeans. She bucked into him, thrilled with the purely male groan the movement pulled from him.

Something tickled her thigh a second before a piano riff ripped through the air. She groaned against his mouth, recognizing the ring.

“I’ll ignore it.” He shook his head and deepened the kiss.

“What if it’s something important?” she asked.

“Nothing is more important than this.”

Happiness bubbled inside her and she tightened her legs around him. He always knew the perfect thing to say. Well, except this morning, but she wasn't going to think about that anymore. It didn't deserve another moment of consideration. This was the Cody she knew. Right now, she had everything she'd ever desired.

Seconds after the cell stopped ringing, it started again. Misty groaned, knowing he couldn't ignore it again. Breaking the kiss, he growled in frustration and reached down.

“Give me a minute to get rid of whoever it is,” he said before flipping open the phone and putting it to his ear with a curt, “hello.”

Trying to give him some privacy—hard considering he still lay between her thighs—Misty turned her head to the side. He must have had his phone volume really low, because all she caught were snippets.

“Was anybody hurt?”

Her head snapped back to Cody's face.

Anger lined every angle of his body as he stood, pulling her up with him. Gone was her gentle lover. “Okay, I'll be right over.” He threw her an apologetic look as he closed the phone. “There was a fire at the edge of town. No one hurt, but I need to go check it out.” He leaned down and placed a brief kiss against her lips. “I'm sorry. The job of a Premier...”

“I understand,” she broke in. He didn't need to explain his job to her. It was part of him. Part of what she loved about him was his sense of responsibility. “Why don't you come back over when you're done, and we can pick this up then?”

His smile flashed, but she knew his brain was already on his duties. Even so, he leaned down to nibble on her ear and whispered, “Something to look forward to,” before backing away and leaving.

Misty stood without moving until she heard the front door close behind him. Then she turned around, fell on the bed, and screamed in glee into her pillow. She lay there for a full minute, savoring the sensations rioting through her system.

The box on the floor caught her eye and propelled her into action. While Cody was gone, she might as well get to work canceling her move. If she hurried, maybe she'd have time to set up something romantic before he got back. With that resolve in mind, she jumped up and got to work.

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Chapter 7

What a mess. Cody sat in his car and stared at the burnt shell of a building in front of him. He'd come back to stare at the wreckage after his emergency meeting with the town elders. They'd all agreed on the need for a town meeting about the building that had caught fire. No, not caught fire. *Set on fire*. Deliberately, according to the evidence left at the scene.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Cody let his frustration out in a scream, grateful no one was around to see how close he was to losing control. This was his town. His skulk.

No matter how he studied the facts, for the life of him he couldn't find any logic here. Vulpes Creek was fairly cut off from the rest of the world, but he doubted anyone from town would do this. Too much risk, not only of the fire spreading but also of getting caught. Everyone knew Cody would be forced to punish the criminal. Besides, the location of the building on the edge of town made it a prime target for outsiders. But who?

According to the fire chief, the front door had been barricaded. If they hadn't gotten here so quickly, it might have been too late for Widow Carlson. Even so, she'd been rushed to the emergency room for smoke inhalation. He'd gone to visit her before coming back here and was grateful to find her relatively unharmed. Sure, she was a bit of a meddler and overly chatty at times, but he couldn't imagine her driving someone to this.

It had to be a strike against the skulk. Which still left the question of why. A warning, maybe. But of what? There'd been no note, no clue, just the remnants of the building.

No point in dwelling on it any more tonight, although he doubted he'd get much sleep. The neon clock on his dashboard read one AM. Hard to believe he'd been at this for hours and was no closer to understanding it than when he'd first arrived.

Still, his presence had been necessary. In times of crisis, his skulk looked to him for guidance and reassurance. As much as he wished he could have stayed with Misty, his work here had been important.

Misty...

Cody glanced at the clock again. Hopefully, she hadn't waited up for him too long. Too late to head over now. No matter how much he might want to. A bout of hot sex would suit his restless spirit, but wouldn't be fair to her. Tomorrow would be soon enough to pick up where they'd left off. And he could do better than a hasty screw in the bedroom. Misty deserved roses and candlelight. She would never ask for it. But she needed it, whether she knew it or not. Despite their rocky start, he was just the man to give it to her.

* * * *

Sunlight pierced her closed eyelids, waking her from a sound sleep. Why hadn't she closed the curtains before going to bed?

Using her hand to shield the worst of the light, Misty opened her eyes and peered around. That explained the curtain question. And the crick in her neck. Ouch.

Misty sat up on the couch and tried to stretch out her muscles. Of course, this afternoon would be the day of her advanced yoga class. Stumbling to the kitchen, Misty grabbed a cup and staggered to the coffee pot. Sending up a silent thanks for automatic timers, she poured her first cup and sniffed the rich aroma before adding in her sugar and cream.

It wasn't until the cup was half empty that she realized she still wore the lacy black babydoll lingerie. Not surprising that it had taken her so long. She was completely useless before her first cup of coffee. God's nectar.

She bit her lip in indecision. There were a lot of reasons why Cody might have flaked on coming by. She didn't know how bad the fire had been. When he'd been on the phone, he'd asked if anybody had gotten hurt. Whatever had happened must have been pretty bad. He might have simply forgotten in all the hoopla.

Or he could have changed his mind....

Misty pushed the thought out of her head. Doubts didn't deserve her time or energy. Whatever was supposed to come would come whether she worried about it or not, so her motto was *let it be*. Okay, she'd stolen it from the Beatles, but it worked.

Besides, he wouldn't have changed his mind. She closed her eyes and touched her fingertips against her lips. There had been too much intensity in his kiss. Such passion. Emotion like that didn't just disappear. Right?

There she went. Questioning herself again. She shook her head, exasperated with herself. No matter how much she lectured, it was impossible to completely dispel the doubts.

Misty looked at the wrist, then rolled her eyes and glanced at the wall clock, groaning at the early time. Despite the fact that most yoga classes were taught in the morning, no one had ever accused her of being a morning person. As a rule, she didn't teach her first class until seven AM, and then only twice a week. Because of the size of the town, she was able to set her own schedule. Anyone who decided to start their day before six in the morning needed their head examined. It wasn't normal. On Sundays, she didn't have to be in until one. Thank God today was Sunday.

Still, now that she was up, she might as well get her day started. She had no hope of going back to sleep. Looking out the window into the backyard, she saw Oscar chasing his tail in his pen. Foxes were not supposed to chase their tails. Clearly, she was not letting him out enough. According to all the online articles she'd read about raising foxes, they needed plenty of exercise. And to be kept in a large pen outside, not inside like a dog. Cody had been right, damn him. Not that she had any intention of telling him as much.

Deciding it was past time both she and Oscar got a good run through the woods, Misty stripped out of her lingerie, carefully placed it on the counter, and shifted. And realized belatedly as she stared up at the knob she needed thumbs to open the door...and the fox pen. Honestly, she'd lose her head if it wasn't attached.

* * * *

This was Misty's favorite part of any class. Everyone lay curled forward on the floor with eyes closed, concentrating on breathing, and Misty got to examine them unobtrusively. She studied the evenness of their breathing, how long it took them to release tension, and how much sweat had gathered on their clothing. All the factors told her whether or not she'd pushed hard enough, or too hard. Today the class had gotten their money's worth and she had earned her paycheck.

"When you're ready, slowly curl into child's pose, remembering to breathe."

The door in the back of the studio cracked open, the cool air a welcome relief from the stuffy room. Cody stuck his head in, his eyes zeroing in on

her. She held up a finger, asking him to wait a moment. With a nod, he eased the door shut.

“Okay, now push yourself into a seated position with your hands at heart center, then to your third eye. Namaste.” She waited until everyone opened their eyes as they eased out of their meditation. “Thank you for coming today, everyone. I’ll see you all next week.”

The class began to file out, many of them stopping Cody to ask questions as he tried to slip past. Foolish man. He wasn’t nearly as invisible as he liked to think. Whenever Cody entered a room, everyone stopped to stare. The women out of attraction, and the men because his mere presence commanded it.

Misty shook her head and rolled up her mat, stuffing her extra clothes and water bottles into her bag. On Sundays she only had the one class, which allowed her to go home, shower, and be lazy the rest of the day. Maybe she’d take Oscar out for another hunt, even though they’d gone out that morning. He’d been driving her crazy with his surplus energy lately.

“Hey,” Cody said, reaching down to help her off the floor. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. The casual way he did it might have been in friendship or between lovers, but he lingered a second more than necessary.

A smile bloomed on her face. Lovers it was. Her doubts this morning had been unfounded. Too much passion raged between them to ignore.

“Hi. Busy day?” she asked. Because she couldn’t resist touching him, she ran her hand down his arm, feeling the bulge of muscles underneath his clothing.

“You have no idea,” he groaned. “I brought you something.” He reached into the backpack he carried with him.

“What’s this for?” she asked as he held out a small gift-wrapped present.

“An apology. For the way I acted yesterday. And for not showing up last night. I got a bit held up. I’m hoping you’ll let me make it up to you tonight and come over for dinner. Maybe even stay the night?”

She let the yes shine from her eyes, but didn’t let that stop her from teasing him a bit. “I don’t think I should make any decisions until I see what’s in the package.”

“Well, that’s forward. But I guess if you need to see my package first...” Cody reached for his fly, but Misty grabbed his hand to stop him.

“Not that package.” She giggled, happiness filling her.

“Oh. That one. Well, okay, I guess you should open it then.”

With gusto, she tore into the wrapping and flipped open the box within. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared down at the gift. It was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

“You keep looking at your wrist. Now you’ll actually have something to look at.” He reached over and removed the watch from the box. Taking her left hand, he fastened the watch around her wrist. She stared at the top of his head as he worked. Tingles of pleasure radiated up her arm from where he held her hand, but a greater pleasure came from inside as she realized what he’d revealed. He’d seen her constantly looking at her wrists. All this time, she’d watched him, convinced he didn’t return her feelings, but he must have watched her, too.

Misty tried to think of the right words to say as she stared at the watch, but was speechless. Each number on the clock face had been replaced by a *Star Wars* symbol. The tie fighter sat where the three should be and the imperial starship sat opposite it. At the top, a little R2D2 sat ready to hail in the hour.

“How...” She couldn’t finish. This watch not only looked expensive, but custom made.

“I was saving it for your birthday next month, but there’s enough time to plan something else. The last time I remember you wearing a watch, it was that plastic Darth Vader one with the flip up helmet. I figured another *Star Wars* watch might motivate you to put it on in the morning.”

She remembered that watch, but was amazed he still did. Back in middle school, she’d worn it every day until it stopped working, and a few months afterward as well. Awed at his memory, her gaze rose to his.

“Judging by your reaction, I’m guessing the gift was good enough for dinner tonight. Shall we say eight?”

“This is too much. Let me cook tonight to thank you.”

“That wasn’t the deal. Besides, I’ve got something planned. Just say thank you and be at my place at eight.”

Blowing out an exasperated breath, Misty smiled and nodded.

“Good.”

He leaned down, angling for her cheek again, but she was too fast for him. Turning her head, she caught his lips with hers. The box fell to the

floor as she reached up and fisted her hands in his shirt. She pulled him in tight until his arms surrounded her.

When he groaned, she slipped her tongue inside his mouth. His taste flooded her senses as she teased his tongue with hers. His arms surrounded her, urging her closer as his lips plundered hers.

From one moment to the next, the kiss changed. No longer was Misty the aggressor. Instead, she was hit by the full force of Cody's dominance. Without thought, she gave up control, closing her eyes and melting into his embrace. Releasing the material in her fists, Misty ran her hands up his chest, feeling the muscles ripple through his clothes wherever she caressed. God, she couldn't wait to get him naked. From what she'd already seen and felt, the man was gorgeous, ripped in all the right places.

A moan of denial escaped as he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers but holding her hips still as she tried to thrust against him.

"Not here." He kissed her nose before pulling away. Tease. The fact he was right only made it worse. Her work studio wasn't the place for a wild bout of sex, especially considering a dance class was due in a half hour.

"Okay. But you better make good on those promises tonight," Misty said, gazing at his lips. She was sure hers were similarly red and swollen, and it made her smile. She was so rubbing this in Jen's face for not believing it would happen.

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Chapter 8

Classical music didn't suit her. But Lady Gaga, Misty's favorite artist, wasn't what he considered romantic. Something about playing *Bad Romance* in the background while trying to sweep a girl off her feet seemed wrong. Cody threw up his hands in frustration. None of these CDs worked for tonight.

A hand written case, stuck behind the stereo, caught his eye. He pulled it out and realized it was something his mother had made for him last Christmas. He looked over the playlist. Frank Sinatra, Etta James, Stevie Wonder... This might work.

He popped it in the player, lowering the volume until it played faintly in the background. Then he moved back to the kitchen to check on the chicken in the oven. He wasn't the best cook in the world, but could handle the basics. And hopefully follow a recipe without screwing up too badly. According to the directions his mother had given him, it still needed a couple minutes, but the smell filled the house, rousing his appetite. Hopefully it would be perfect for Misty.

The doorbell sounded as he uncorked the wine. A rush of excitement bubbled inside him, and he crossed to answer the door. Why had he resisted this for so long? Now that the moment was here, he couldn't think of anything more right than making love to Misty.

"Hi," Misty said as soon as he opened the door. His ready smile faltered as he took in what she wore. The dress looked like a large men's dress shirt cinched with a belt, but the material was wrong. Instead of starched linen, the dress was made of a sapphire colored silk. It clung to her curves, slithering enticingly with each movement. Watching it made his hands clench with the desire to trace those curves.

Working up the willpower to drag his gaze away from her hips proved harder than he anticipated. Then his gaze snagged on breasts. Perfectly shaped, they appeared to be unhindered by a bra. Cody shifted his weight as he hardened, his pants growing uncomfortably tight. In his mind, he imagined sliding that silk off, baring her body to his gaze.

"Aren't you going to invite me inside?" she asked, causing him to start.

His gaze flew to her smiling one. He'd been standing in the door, blocking the entrance as he gawked at her.

"Of course, come on in." He held the door open for her. As she eased past him, he saw the slit up the side of her dress, stopping a mere inch below her underwear line, and bit back a groan.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"That dress is killer."

"This old thing?"

He found himself returning her smile. It was so easy to let go and have fun around Misty.

She started to walk past him toward the kitchen, but he grabbed her hand, yanking her into his arms. She grunted a little at the impact before laughing, the rich sound filling him with a sense of peace. God, he loved her laugh.

"Hi," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Studying her features, he let his fingertips linger over the curve of her ear until her expression grew serious. When her gaze shifted to his mouth, a haze of anticipation clouding her eyes, he leaned forward, savoring each inch along the way as he grew closer and closer.

The first brush of lips was gentle. But that was all it took for hunger to claw at his belly. He pressed his lips firmly against hers, rubbing his hands sinuously along her back and down over her butt. She moaned as he squeezed the flesh in his hands.

Trailing his lips down, he placed a bite against her jaw, not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough for her to feel the force of his passion. Moving lower, he sucked on the flesh on her neck. Her scent was stronger here and he breathed deeply, pulling it in. Against his lips, her pulse raged. He ran his tongue over the beat, pulling her closer as a shiver raced through her.

"I've got some wine waiting in the kitchen," he said, moving them in that direction but unwilling to let her go. Her curves slid against him as they danced backward, his leg slipping between hers as they walked.

"Wine, huh? You don't have to get me drunk, you know. I'm pretty much a guarantee. Especially if you keep rubbing against me like that," she joked, a glint of laughter in her eyes.

“Like this?” He thrust his hips forward. His thigh between her legs rubbed against her core, dragging her skirt up. Her head fell backward at the friction, baring her throat to his gaze. Feasting on the creamy expanse with his eyes, he couldn’t resist leaning in and sucking on the hollow of her throat.

Her nails pierced into his shoulders. No, not nails, claws. Drawing forth such primal need in her surprised him. But as he felt one long leg circle his hips, he knew she was beyond control. He ran his hands down to her ass again, lifting upward until her other leg joined the first around his waist. All thoughts of dinner drifted away as he slammed her against the wall behind them.

Control was overrated anyway.

* * * *

Misty’s back hit the wall, the impact propelling her into Cody. Grabbing his hair, she pulled until his mouth pressed against hers, his lips demanding hers open to allow his tongue to thrust inside. She moaned as it captured hers. He took no prisoners.

Using her legs around his waist, she pulled him tighter against her core. She wanted him so badly. Every thought in her head centered on rolling around naked with him.

On a gasp, she pulled her lips away. Undeterred, he trailed his lips across her cheek and took her earlobe between his teeth.

“The bedroom,” she managed.

Her back left the wall as he carried her the few remaining feet to his open bedroom door. Without wasting any time, he dropped her onto the bed before plunging back in. Heat flooded her as his lips caressed hers, opening them so his tongue could sweep inside. Her dress chaffed against her hardened nipples. She wanted his hands on her, right there.

As if reading her thoughts, his hands reached up to stroke her nipples through the dress. She arched into his touch, rubbing her crotch against his jeans as the sensations rioted inside her. He thrust against her, making her imagine him inside her, moving at the same frantic pace. Leaning back, she tried to unbutton his shirt, needing to run her hands over his skin, but her fingers fumbled until she groaned in frustration against his mouth.

After a minute, he leaned up and pushed her hands away, freeing himself from the shirt. Taking advantage of the moment, Misty unwound

her legs and kneeled on the bed. Staring him straight in the eye, she drew the dress over her head, wanting to see his eyes when she revealed herself. Under the dress, she had on a lacy black thong with a little white bow in the back. A bow he wouldn't see unless she showed it to him—and it was super cute underwear, it'd be a shame not to show it to him.

The passion in his eyes burned as she slowly turned around and got on her hands and knees. Arching one eyebrow, she looked over her shoulder at him. He still stood at the edge of the bed, but now he stared at her ass. It took him a moment to look up, but when his eyes met hers, the glow of his fox's eyes sent a rush of liquid down below.

His eyes bore into hers as he unbuttoned his pants and slid them off, pulling a condom out of the pocket and placing it next to her on the bed. Misty licked her lips in anticipation. She'd waited for this moment forever. And now it was here. She reached for the condom, but his, "no," stopped her, the gruffness of his voice sending shivers through her system.

His hand brushed over the top of her thong, the contact drawing a throaty moan from her. Everywhere he touched, her skin tingled from the contact. She jolted as his palm came down hard on her ass, but his hand rubbed the area, soothing it.

His other hand reached down between her thighs, his thumb slipping beneath the thin material to slide inside her.

"You're already so wet for me." He groaned, seesawing his thumb in and out. Misty's head dipped as her hips followed his movement. Her nipples ached for his touch but his other hand remained firm on her ass. As she shifted her weight to one hand, reaching up with the other to rub her breast, his hand cracked hard against her butt cheek. "Not yet," was all he said. She groaned in frustration until he brushed against the hood of her clit with his middle finger. Just once. Heat flooded to the area, even as she froze, waiting for more.

His thumb continued to tease her, driving her further, but not far enough to propel her over the edge. Then, his middle finger circled her, pressing firmly to the right of her clit. She exploded, arching her back as she rode his hand.

Cries of pleasure echoed around the room. But it wasn't enough. She wanted more than Cody's thumb. She wanted to come with his cock seated fully inside her, filling her as he pounded furiously into her from behind.

As her pleasure ebbed, she heard a crinkle behind her. Cody had opened the condom wrapper. She glanced back, staring at his impressive erection. He wasn't huge, but he was thick. A vein along the side pulsed. Misty licked her lips, wanting to taste him, to run her tongue along that vein. But before she moved, he rolled the condom into place. Later, she promised herself.

When he came back, he placed a gentle kiss just above the bow on her thong, before slipping the panties down her legs. He steadied her as she raised one knee and then the other to take them off completely. Then he was there, his legs on either side of hers as he gripped her hips in his hands. She felt his cock bobbing against her opening and her muscles tightened in anticipation.

Lining himself up, he slid slowly forward. She leaned into the pressure until his head slid past her entrance. Once inside, he eased out only to thrust back hard again and again until he was fully seated.

Misty's hands clenched the bed covers, a strangled moan breaking free at each jerk. He leaned forward, his body covering hers, and his hand reached around her to play with her nipples. She screamed his name and heard him growl in response. The primitive sound sent a wave of please spiraling downward, and she clenched around him.

“Jesus, do that again.”

The naked need in his voice caused the woman inside her to cheer in triumph, but she was too distracted by her own desire to savor the feeling. She tightened her inner muscles again, relishing the power she had, even bent over as she was.

He bit down on her shoulder, not hard enough to break the skin—although she wouldn't have complained if he had, an act that would mate them together forever. She didn't have time to be disappointed though, as his hand pinched her nipple, adding a new sensation to her pleasure. The slight pain drove her pleasure higher as he altered the rhythm of his hips between slow and furious.

She was close, her body tensing in anticipation of a powerful orgasm, when he pulled them both up until they were kneeling on the bed. Still inside her, the new position tightened her sheath, causing him to feel larger than before. She cried out in surprised pleasure as he continued thrusting, the friction driving her wild.

Any minute now, she would shatter. It built inside her. Reaching up and behind, she stroked Cody's neck, weaving her hands through his hair. His breath fell hot against her neck as he sucked on the sensitive skin. Misty exploded, her cries filling the room as she rhythmically clenched around him. He stroked her clit, prolonging her pleasure as he drove into her, shouting his own release to the rafters.

Afterward, he collapsed on top of her, but didn't stay there long. He sat up, leaving a trail of kisses down her spine until he reached the small of her back. With a little nibble, he started back up, rolling her to the side once he'd reached the top of her neck, and cuddling her against him.

"That was incredible," he murmured, nuzzling her ear with his nose.

Misty couldn't agree more. His arm surrounded her, clasping her tight against him. One of his legs lay between hers and she didn't resist rubbing against it. A growl rumbled against the back of her neck where he'd been kissing and she giggled.

A smell tickled her nose, wafting over the scent of delicious sweaty male behind her.

"Is something burning?" she asked, raising onto her elbow to sniff the air.

"Son of a bitch." Cody scrambled out of bed and ran butt naked out of the room. The man really did have a fantastic ass. And it was all hers.

* * * *

Cody waved a dish towel, trying to dispel the black smoke pouring from the oven. So much for following a simple recipe. Then again, he had been a bit distracted. At least their chicken dinner had burned for a good cause.

Grabbing pot holders, he pulled the dish out of the oven, dropping it onto the stove. Black smoke still drifted up, but it wasn't the massive outpouring it had been. The meal was toast. Literally, if he couldn't find anything else to serve.

"Oops," Misty said, her arms going around him from behind and her head resting on his shoulder as she looked at the burnt offering. "And you went through so much trouble. I'm sorry. I guess I was kind of single minded."

Cody turned around, his arms pulling her against him. "I'm not sorry. Although I wish I had taken the dish out before answering the door." He

grinned down at her. She'd put her dress back on and his hands itched to sneak under the fabric. To learn whether or not the thong still lay on his floor where he'd thrown it. "Or at least prepared a second option."

"There's always pizza," she suggested.

"There is that." Unable to resist the temptation, he stroked up her thigh, raising the hem until he reached her hips. No thong. He didn't know what was more erotic, the fact Misty wore no underwear or that her underwear currently sat on his bedroom floor.

She let her head fall back and clutched his shoulders.

He leaned in, sucking a trail down her throat. "Why don't you go find a movie and I'll order pizza. We can continue this after it gets here," he whispered against her skin.

"I've got a better idea. Why don't we continue this now, and order the pizza after?"

Cheeky thing. "No deal. I invited you over for dinner, which means I have to feed you." He turned her around and gave her a playful slap on the butt.

She turned and glared, but the fire in her eyes had little to do with anger.

Walking to the wall phone, Cody quickly found and dialed the number for the pizza place. In the past, Misty and he had always argued over pizza toppings. Sure, they could have gotten half and half, but then they wouldn't have had anything to argue about. This time, he didn't need to argue. Misty would have what she wanted.

He placed the order and started to move away, but turned back and pressed *Redial*. They were going to need lots of energy for the night ahead. He'd make sure of it. Might as well order a second pizza for him. That way his green peppers couldn't sneak onto her half—the other reason they didn't split the toppings down the middle.

As he walked out of the kitchen toward the living room, he heard moans. Pleasure moans. The sound caused him to freeze. Was Misty pleasuring herself in there? Pride warred with desire inside him. He knew he'd satisfied her, so why... But the image of Misty with her hand between her legs appealed to him.

"Yeah, baby." A man grunted in pleasure.

What the hell?

Cody strode forward and saw Misty sitting on the couch, her gaze riveted on the television. She looked up with wide eyes as he entered the room.

“You were watching porn before I came over?” she asked.

“What? Of course not.” He came into the room, turning toward the TV as a blonde woman took some guy’s penis into her mouth. He’d never seen this before in his life. Grabbing the remote, he tried to figure out how it had gotten on his screen.

“I had no idea you were into this stuff. Well, okay, you’re a guy, so of course you like porn, but I didn’t know you actually watched it. Like just for fun. Movie night is going to be so much more interesting next month.”

* * * *

“I am not into this stuff. I was watching a movie on Cinemax. This must have come on after...” His words stumbled to a halt as his gaze flew to hers. “Wait. What was that about movie night?”

Misty hid her smile behind her hand. When she’d first pressed *Power*, she’d been shocked, but she’d quickly realized what had happened after she saw the channel the movie played on. Still, she couldn’t resist a little teasing.

The more she thought about it, the more appealing her movie night suggestion became. Who knew what kind of fun they’d have now that their relationship had changed.

“Well, it was an idea. But if you aren’t really into watching these movies...” She let the end of the sentence trail off, waiting to see if he would take the bait. Even from this distance, she saw his jaw clench.

“Fine. I watched it.”

Misty straightened. “You know it isn’t healthy to watch porn by yourself in the middle of the day,” she chastened.

It took him a moment before he knew what to say. Finally, he threw his hands in the air and sighed.

“I can’t win here, can I?”

Misty slid off the couch onto the floor. On her knees, she took two steps until she kneeled in front of Cody. Before her eyes, his cock rose.

“Believe me. You’re about to win big,” she said right before she took him into her mouth. From experience, she knew pizza would take twenty minutes to get there. She planned to use every second.

* * * *

Raising his head from between Misty's legs, Cody swore as the doorbell peeped again. The pizza. He'd completely forgotten. Beneath him, Misty moaned in frustration. He looked across her creamy skin to her face, taking in her still-closed eyes. Lost in passion, she hadn't even heard the bell.

On the television, a woman screamed in ecstasy. Knocking came from the other side of the door. Shit.

Untangling Misty's hands from his hair, Cody grabbed a throw blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it around his waist. Unfortunately, it did little to hide his raging erection.

Poor Timmy, the delivery boy. Cody didn't want to imagine what went through the teenager's head as he thrust a couple bills at the boy and grabbed the pizza. The moans and grunts coming from behind him increased in intensity.

"Keep the change," he managed before shutting the door.

"But you gave me double—"

Right now, he didn't care if he gave the boy a hundred dollar tip. He had more important things to think about.

When he walked back to the living room, Misty stood in front of the couch, her head tilted to the right as she studied the figures on the screen. Although she didn't turn, the creaking floorboards must have alerted her to his presence.

"Are we really doing everything they're doing? Because I gotta tell you, I'm not sure I bend that way."

Cody glanced up at the television as he placed the pizza on the coffee table. His already stiff cock hardened to the point of pain. Oh yeah, they were definitely attempting that.

"As a yoga teacher, you're claiming a porn star is more flexible?"

"Good point." She grunted. "Still, that can't be comfortable."

Grabbing her around the waist, Cody helped her leg stretch onto his shoulder. "Let's find out," he murmured, seating himself inside her in one solid thrust. He closed his eyes, grunting at the wet embrace. The position allowed him a deeper penetration.

Once he'd filled her completely, he gripped her hips to support her, leaving the decision up to her. Either she'd be adventurous or she wouldn't.

Either way promised to be an unforgettable experience.

With a wicked smile, she bent backward. Giving him not only her trust, but control. He leaned down to suck on her jutting nipples. Her throaty moan filled the room as he began to move.

He'd chosen his bed partner well, he thought as sensations swamped him. If he'd really chosen at all. He was man enough to admit, she'd pretty much dragged him. And he'd never been more grateful.

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Chapter 9

For the second day in a row, sunlight pierced her closed eyelids, waking her from a sound sleep. Burying her head in the pillow, Misty groaned, attempting to shut out reality and recapture her dream. It had been a wonderful dream.

A warm chuckle tickled her ear from behind as an arm wrapped around her stomach. Misty's eyes flew open as memories of last night assaulted her.

"Cody?" She turned onto her back.

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"Of course not." She smiled at him, feeling downright giddy. Between her legs, her sex was deliciously sore from their adventures the previous night.

They'd watched the entire movie, trying everything the couple on the screen had. Well, almost everything. When a second man had joined the play, Cody had turned to her with complete sincerity, and a touch of possessiveness, and told her to not even think about it. She'd loved it. And in traditional style, teased him a little in return. But it hadn't gone as she'd anticipated. After she'd told him he shouldn't expect any other woman if she couldn't have any other men, he had looked at her and said, "Why would I want another woman when I have you?" The memory still caused pleasure to bubble up inside her.

"Are you hungry, or do you want to cuddle some more?" he asked, sweeping her hair behind her ear.

Normally, she wouldn't be up for another few hours. Cuddling sounded like heaven, but their sexual gymnastics last night had burned off a lot of calories. As much as she wanted to sink into his embrace, food proved too strong a temptation.

"I require nourishment!"

Her stomach clenched as his rich laugh filled the room. God, she loved the man. Just looking at him made her lightheaded with happiness. And now it seemed like all her dreams were coming true.

"Eggs or pancakes?" he asked as he pulled on a pair of jeans from the floor.

“Eggs, please.”

“Okay.” He leaned over her and placed a firm kiss against her lips. Then he left. After a moment, the sounds of pots banging together drifted from the kitchen.

Misty lay in bed, listening to the sounds for a moment before burying her face in the pillow again and letting out a giddy squeal.

After plumping the pillow, she got out of bed and reached for her dress. As she leaned down, Cody’s shirt lying on the floor caught her eye. Without stopping to think, Misty dropped the dress and threw on the shirt. His scent surrounded her and she breathed it in deeply, filling her lungs.

She glanced at her underwear, started to reach for it, and changed her mind. Maybe she’d have to surprise Cody by dropping a few things and bending over to retrieve them.

Using her finger, she brushed her teeth. It would have to do until she got home. No way would she use his tooth brush. Even though she’d kissed every inch of him, that seemed a bit too familiar. With a last look in the mirror, she left the room to join her man in the kitchen. Her man.

She paused in the entrance to the room. The table was still set from the night before, the uncorked bottle of wine left on a counter with unlit candles and red rose petals scattered over the surface. Last night, she’d been so absorbed by him, she’d barely noticed any of it. But now, the effort at romance made her throat tighten.

He still hadn’t noticed her, his back turned to the stove. In a way, the scene reminded her of the one she’d seen so many months ago between him and Samantha. But this time, he wasn’t with some lost girl he’d found on his property. She was his lover, whom he’d spent the previous night screwing every which way but down. Actually, a couple positions could be considered screwing down.

Creeping behind him, Misty wound her arms around his waist and put her head against his back. Her fingers traced the ridges in his stomach, enjoying the way they clenched under her exploration.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For breakfast?” he asked, turning to face her.

“No.” She gestured around them. “For all of this. Guess I spoiled the romance. You had flower petals and candles in mind, and I turned on the porn.”

He laughed and pulled her into his arms, tucking her head underneath his shoulder. “So not only did I get credit for the romance, but I also got to act out a porn movie with you. You were right last night, I did win big.”

Nuzzling his throat, she smiled against his skin, then peeked her tongue out to taste. Hot, male, and musky. As his strangled moan rent the air, she felt powerful.

“Food first, then more of that.” But he swore, seeming unhappy with his decision.

With a final nip, she backed out of his arms.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing. It’s ready. All you need to do is sit down and enjoy.”

“My favorite kind of breakfast. One where I don’t have to work.”

He laughed as he set the plates on the table and held her chair out for her. “Not hunting?” he asked.

She didn’t even dignify that with an answer. Just stared at him until he laughed again and grabbed her hand.

“Forget I asked.”

“Already have,” she chirped, shoveling eggs into her mouth. She was famished. Incredible, considering she’d eaten an entire pizza by herself last night.

“So what’s on your agenda today?” he asked.

“I’ve got classes from noon ’til five today. You?”

“Prep for tonight’s town meeting.”

“Oh, shit. That’s right, I completely forgot.”

“What would you do without me?” He smirked at her from across the table, but whereas normally that look would piss her off, today it flooded her with warmth.

“Without you? Wear out my vibrator trying to get half the pleasure you gave me last night.”

The fork missed his mouth, but he didn’t seem to notice as he stared at her. Then in a rush, he jumped forward and pulled her up with him.

“Breakfast is over. Time for a shower.”

She laughed as he led her out of the room and down the hallway to his bedroom. The man had amazing stamina. And she didn’t even care that she hadn’t finished her eggs. Breakfast could wait.

* * * *

Despite arriving fifteen minutes early, Misty found a crowd waiting outside town hall. She waved to a few people as she scanned the group for Cody, but gave up after the second sweep. He was probably busy with the skulk's elders or the fire chief. Rumors were running wild after word had gotten out about the fire. No doubt tonight would put those to rest.

She caught sight of Jen and Jarrod standing with a group of people. But as she moved toward them, a feminine hand curled around her arm.

"Misty, dear. We haven't seen you in ages."

Warning bells clanged loudly in her head, but it was too late. There was nothing she could do now but face the woman. With a deep breath, she turned to face Cody's mother.

"Hi, Mrs. Matherson. How are you tonight?"

"*Mom*, dear. I told you to call me Mom." Their conversations always started this way. For years, she'd been asking Misty to call her Mom. But now, it was especially awkward considering all that had happened between Cody and her.

"Yes, of course," she mumbled. "If you'll excuse me, I see someone I need to talk to."

But Mrs. Matherson tightened her hold, leaned in, and sniffed her neck. After her yoga classes, she'd gone home and taken another shower. Surely she didn't still smell like the man? After showering at his place before her classes, she'd caught some speculative looks from some of her students, but no one had dared to comment.

"Well, I wish I had caught you before you washed my boy's scent off, but I can't tell you how happy I am you two have finally gotten together. Took you long enough."

Someone must have called her. This was not good. All she needed was for Cody to blame her for his mother learning his bedroom habits.

"It's not what you think—"

"Stop that now. As if I didn't see the way you two always stare at each other. I expect both of you for dinner sometime soon."

"We'll be there on Friday," Cody said from behind Misty, his arm circling her shoulders. The voice rolled through her, sending a bolt of pure lust spiraling down her gut.

She shivered and felt his arm tighten around her.

"Friday it is. Bring dessert." Then she left them alone.

“I wasn’t the one who told her,” she said, turning to him.

“I know.” He leaned down and placed a firm kiss against her lips. “I missed you.” And wasn’t that just perfect?

“I missed you, too,” she managed before his lips swooped down again, this time ravishing hers. His tongue swept inside, burying her under a tidal wave of need. All she could do was grip his shoulders and trust him to see her through.

A couple people around them clapped after they broke apart. A part of her wanted to hit him for the boorish display of possession—he might as well have told the skulk, “hands off, she’s mine.” But another part of her leapt for joy. It wasn’t as strong as marking her, but they had just had sex for the first time last night. To think two nights ago, she’d been ready to leave. All things considered, she’d made remarkable progress.

“Come on. Let’s get this show on the road.” Leading the way, he pulled her into the building and sat her in the first row. The rest of the skulk filed in behind them. Cody took the stage and quieted the crowd.

At first, Cody’s words flew past her as she studied him, devouring him with her eyes. Everything about him showed control. Power simmering just beneath the surface. As a fox, he didn’t have the strength of the wolves or the speed of the cats, but in a fight, she trusted him to hold his own. By whatever means necessary. And he was all hers.

Without warning, the hall exploded in whispered conversations. Misty looked around as tension blanketed the room. Maybe she should have been paying attention instead of ogling Cody.

“Did he say the fire was deliberately set?” Jen asked from her right. When had she gotten there?

“Everyone calm down. We are still investigating the matter. But until we figure this out, we need the whole town to be on alert. If you see anything suspicious, call me, or Brad. For now, it would be best if everyone stick close to home for a few days. Don’t go out of town unless absolutely necessary. If you do leave skulk land, be extra vigilant. That’s all we can do until we have more to work with. As long as we stick together, there’s nothing to fear.”

A sense of peace filled her. Such confidence infused his voice, she had no choice but to believe he would make everything okay. As she looked at the other members of the skulk, she noticed a few worried faces, but most

held a trust similar to what filled her. Cody was their Premier, not because he was among the strongest—although he was—but because he inspired confidence. They would all follow him wherever he led.

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Chapter 10

“Would you stop fussing? You look fine. It’s just my parents.” Cody grabbed Misty’s hands to still them as she fiddled with her hair.

“Exactly! I’m meeting the parents. I need to look perfect so they’ll like me.” Her eyes were earnest.

“You aren’t meeting the parents. You’ve already met my parents. Last week I saw you and my mother having lunch.”

“But that was last week. Now I’m the girlfriend. If they don’t like me, they could order you to stop seeing me. I need to make a good impression.”

His heart jumped a bit at the word girlfriend.

He shuffled his feet a bit, trying to ignore his discomfort. They’d yet to discuss the terms of their relationship. Considering they’d spent every night together the past week, it wasn’t a leap to call Misty his girlfriend. But something held him back from fully committing. There were questions he needed answered.

“You’re being silly. They already love you. Come on.” He tugged a bit to get her up the porch stairs. As he rang the doorbell, she made a strangled sound, almost as if she were in pain. Amazed, he studied her profile. She really was nervous. Raising her joined hands to his lips, he offered her comfort. Maybe she knew something he didn’t. Should he be nervous?

“There you two are,” his mom said as she opened the door. “Well, come on out of the heat.”

“Hi Mrs.—” Misty began.

But his mother cut her off. “How many times do I have to remind you to call me Mom?”

He rolled his eyes at the shock on Misty’s face. It seemed silly that he’d ever doubted their reception. His mother had treated Misty like a member of the family for years. Things wouldn’t change now that they were an item.

“Your father is waiting in the living room. I’ll just stick this in the kitchen.” And grabbing the pie they’d brought, she disappeared down the hallway.

“She still wants me to call her Mom.” Misty spoke slowly, no doubt considering the implications.

With a smirk, he leaned against the wall and remained silent, letting her come to her own conclusions.

She glanced up, caught the look on his face, and frowned. “Don’t you dare say ‘I told you so.’”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Although of course, he had considered it.

* * * *

Laughter drifted from the direction of the dining room as Cody plunged another plate into the soapy water. It always amazed him that Misty was able to get that kind of laughter out of his father. Although not an uncaring man, his father had always been a bit aloof. Few things made him smile and even fewer made him laugh. But whenever Misty came around, the intimidating facade cracked.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?” His mother placed more dishes on the counter for him to wash.

“How do you know something’s bothering me?” He thought he’d hidden it pretty well.

“You’re my son,” she said as if that explained it all. And perhaps it did. As his mother, she knew him as well as he knew himself. Maybe better.

“How did you know Dad was your mate?” he asked after a pause.

“The moment I met him, I knew. Of course, we took some time before we tied the knot. It took longer for the human side to fall in love. But my fox knew immediately.”

And there was the root of the problem. Everyone he’d ever spoken to said that their inner animals knew their mates instantaneously. But his fox had recognized Samantha. Not Misty. No matter how drawn to her he felt now, he’d felt nothing until recently. Years had passed before he’d even noticed she wasn’t one of the guys. How could he trust what he felt now? Especially on the heels of meeting and losing Samantha.

“Why?” she asked, pulling his head up until their eyes met.

“I didn’t recognize Misty until recently. How do I know what I feel is real?”

Emotion flooded his mom’s eyes. Sorrow mixed with a touch of pity. He hadn’t meant to be so blunt. But he needed advice. Every night, it got harder to resist bonding with Misty. When he was with her, he felt right. Whole. But mating lasted forever. The bond would never be broken. How could he tie them together without being one hundred percent sure?

“Sometimes, familiarity blinds us and our inner beasts. When you met Misty, you didn’t even know about those needs. It’s possible your fox didn’t connect what it knew before, to what it needed after. But only you can know whether or not she’s the mate for you. Be sure before you act on it, because once you do, there’s no going back.”

Before he could process her words, he saw a figure standing in the doorway. He hadn’t noticed the lack of laughter until then.

“We should get going. I have an early class tomorrow.” The hurt in her voice had him rushing forward.

“Misty...” He grabbed her shoulders.

“Thank you so much for dinner, Mrs. Mattherson. Everything was lovely.”

It frightened him that she wouldn’t meet his eyes, staring over his shoulder. How much had she overheard? He squeezed his eyes shut as he scrolled back through the conversation. Shit.

On the ride home, he tried to talk to her but she sat next to him in silence. Even once they’d arrived at her place, she didn’t speak.

Not knowing what to expect, he followed her inside. The only time he’d ever seen her this quiet and composed, she’d shut him out and planned to move away from him.

He had to explain. Needed to do something to take that dazed look off her face. “I was trying—”

“Stop.”

Reluctantly, he complied. At least she wasn’t crying. Although he’d prefer tears to this silence. Why wasn’t she at least raging at him? He’d prefer *anything* to this eerie silence.

“So you’re still not sure of me, huh?” There was something odd in her voice. Something that had his pulse hammering in his veins and his throat tightening. She didn’t sound sad. She sounded...resigned.

“Misty.” His throat tightened to the point of pain.

“When you came to me last week, I thought you’d realized you loved me as much as I love you.”

His heart skipped a beat before leaping in joy. She loved him. Everything else was forgotten. All that mattered was the woman he was coming to realize meant the world to him, just told him she loved him. The overpowering urge to tell her he felt the same way assailed him.

“I lo—”

“No. I don’t want to hear it. I can’t hear it right now.”

A fresh wave of fear swept over him. This was worse than he thought.

“I keep betting on you, and I keep getting hurt. Just when I’m about to give up, you do something or say something that gives me hope. And if you say those words to me right now, I’ll throw my hat back in the ring—even if you don’t feel the emotion behind the words.”

He tried once again to speak, but she was beyond listening.

“It would be comical if it weren’t so pathetic. To think I even tried to get you drunk so you’d sleep with me. Which is just so fucking stupid.”

Wait. What? “When did you get me drunk?” he demanded, not letting her cut him off this time.

“Movie night a few months ago. I brought over tequila.” She waved her hand absently, her mind already moving onto something else.

He remembered that night. Well, kind of. Vaguely. About an hour in, everything went a bit hazy. Now he knew why.

“We slept together months ago?” His voice rose. How had he forgotten something so monumental?

“No. It didn’t work. I should have known then it never would. A few days later, I went to talk to you and saw *her* walk out of your bedroom wearing your clothes.”

He didn’t have to ask who she referred to. There’d been no woman in his life for months, except one. With a jolt, he realized there was no longer the aching tug at his heart when he thought about Samantha. She no longer held his heart. Misty did. Everything inside him ached for Misty.

He shook his head, focusing back on the woman he loved and the confession she’d just made. Flashes of them tangled together flitted through his mind. The same images had played through his mind in spurts for months. Not a dream, but a memory.

“I can’t believe you’d try to trick me like that.” It was so unlike the woman he’d known all his life. He wasn’t mad. Not really. But he couldn’t keep the sense of betrayal out of his voice.

“Because you don’t believe I have the guts, or because you find it detestable?”

He wished she’d turn around, look at him. The longer she stood facing away, the more fuel got thrown on the fire. Here he was, trying to work on

their problems, and she shut him out. And on top of that, to find out she'd tried to trick him into sleeping with her.

“No, because it was deceitful. I thought we were friends, but friends don't manipulate each other that way.”

“Friends,” she echoed in a whisper. She turned to him then, staring at him with haunted eyes. “I can't believe you don't feel how right we are together. Can't feel what I feel inside.” She paused, and he watched her chest rise with a deep breath. “Seems we both have a lot to think about. It might be best if you didn't stay the night.” With that, she turned and walked into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

He could have told her he did realize how perfect they were for each other, but Misty's emotions were as closed to him as the door between them. Nothing further would be gained tonight. With one last reluctant look at the closed portal, Cody left.

Chapter 11

Misty rubbed her hand over her face as she listened to the woman prattle away. Excuse after excuse. None of this made sense.

“You’re a vet, he’s sick. How can you turn him away?” Hysteria bled into her voice. What was she supposed to do? This was her baby.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but we only take domesticated pets. Dogs, cats, birds. We don’t treat foxes.”

Her mind went completely blank. Something was wrong with Oscar, but she didn’t have the first idea what it could be. Without the vet’s help, she was clueless. Why wouldn’t they help her?

“You might try the vet over in Oakville. One of the doctors at that practice used to work at a zoo. He may be able to help.”

Throwing a quick “thank you” over her shoulder, Misty ran outside. Oakville was a bit farther away from town than she wanted to go, especially with all the hoopla about staying close to home, but her options were limited.

When she’d woken up this morning, Oscar had still been asleep. Hours later, he woke, but had still not been his energetic self. She’d known something was wrong. Just known. And she needed help to figure out how to fix it.

Briefly, she’d considered calling Cody, but her wounds from the night before were too fresh. In all honesty, she wasn’t ready to talk to him yet.

No, she’d handle this on her own. Oakville wasn’t that far. She’d get Oscar the help he needed and be back before anyone even missed her. After settling him in the back seat, Misty got back behind the wheel and took off. Everything would be fine.

* * * *

They wanted to keep him overnight. But he would be okay. Misty kept repeating it to herself as she walked out of the vet’s office. He was going to be okay. Her heart could finally return to its normal rhythm.

When she’d gotten home from her early morning class to find Oscar still asleep... She wouldn’t think about that. The vet assured her he would

make a full recovery. That was the only thing that mattered. In a few short days, they'd be back in the woods hunting up breakfast. Well, his breakfast. Misty had never understood the appeal. Give her eggs and a muffin over raw rodent any day of the week. She'd just have to watch him more carefully. Make sure he didn't eat anything he wasn't supposed to. Who knew acorns were toxic? But the vet suspected eating them had caused the pancreatitis in Oscar. Thank God she'd managed to find him treatment. He was going to be okay.

Now that the drama of the morning had settled, Misty's spirits soared. Her relief filled every part of her, making her almost lightheaded. There wasn't even any room left for the resentment she'd felt last night. Maybe she'd call Cody and they could hash things out over lunch.

This morning had given her a bit of perspective. As long as they had their health, everything else would fall into place. She wasn't willing to be used for sex, but she couldn't believe that's what Cody was doing. He cared about her. She knew he did. So if he needed time to figure out his emotions, she'd give him time.

Certainty gave her a sense of euphoria. She felt as if she floated ten feet above the ground. Which might explain how she'd been blind to the swarm of people until they were upon her.

"You think you're better than us?" one shouted in her ear.

Who were these people, and what were they talking about? She shook her head frantically and tried to deny the accusation, but it was too late.

As if a dam broke, everyone ran forward, shouting in her ear. Misty slammed back to reality hard. The breath whooshed out of her as she looked around. Frowns marred everyone's faces. No, *frown* was too mild a word for the rage reflected in the faces around her.

Trying to get away from the advancing crowd, Misty turned to run back to the vet's office. To any building. But found more people coming from that direction. Her heartbeat pounded furiously inside her chest as every muscle in her body tightened in fright.

Desperate to escape, she spun in a circle, searching for a path out. All she saw was a sea of angry faces, shouting at her from all directions. They called her *bitch*, *slut*, *pure bred whore*. There was no way out of the mass of furious people.

The anger around her snowballed until she barely understood one word from the next. Frantic to shut out the angry voices, she covered her ears with her hands. But the effort was futile.

Fear threatened to overwhelm her as she found herself surrounded. Ruthlessly, she pushed it down.

A man stood in front of her and when she met his eyes, he spit in her face. She flinched as it hit her cheek. The shock of their hatred had her freezing in shock as tears filled her eyes.

“You stupid bitch!” Someone screamed in her ear right before a hand reached out and yanked on her hair. Pain burst across her skull as another hand wrenched her hair from the other side.

Another flash of pain.

Then she was pulled from all sides. Hands tore at her clothes, at her hair, scratching her without thought.

Misty called for help, but the crowd drowned out her words. With a sob, she begged those around her. They either didn't hear her or didn't care.

She turned to try another direction when a hand flew out of the crowd and pushed her. Hard. She stumbled, falling into a body in front of her. The woman she'd fallen into slapped her face with enough force to turn her head. Breath whooshed out of her lungs and her hand flew up to cup the offended flesh. Her cheek tingled with a mix of pain and numbness.

With a fresh sense of desperation, Misty frantically sought an exit. Some way to extricate herself from the situation. She had to get out of there. Now. But the bodies closed in around her until she barely had room to breathe.

Hands pushed her from all directions now. Claws scraped down her arm, causing her to yelp in pain. In a flash of panic, she wondered how far they would go. All it would take would be one person. One person with a knife. She'd bleed out on the street surrounded by people who hated her. Never again would Cody hold her in his arms. She'd never hear him tell her he loved her. If only she'd let him say it last night. At least she'd have that to hold on to.

Thoughts of Cody steadied her, even as the crowd seemed to grow wilder. It seemed the less she fought, the angrier they became. No. It couldn't end like this. She had to find a way out. What had Cody taught her? When something goes wrong, she should breathe and keep a cool head.

Her lungs were tight with panic as she drew in the first breath. The air pushed painfully against the tight muscles. She forced herself to draw in another, deeper this time, and felt a sense of calm fill her, even as her head smarted from continued hair pulling.

Your job is not to win, it's to get away. Use whatever means necessary to get your attacker on the ground and remember the pressure points... Cody's lessons came back to her. Get away. That was her purpose. By whatever means necessary.

A hand punched her back hard enough to bring a fresh wave of tears. No doubt she'd have bruises tomorrow. But it did make up her mind. If she would be hurt either way, there was no reason not to fight her way out.

With that resolve in mind, Misty punched the man in front of her in the throat. His eyes bugged out as he clutched it. She squeezed past him as new rage boiled in the crowd around her.

The next man, she thrust her hand up against his nose. Blood flew out, some landing on her shirt, but she didn't stop to think about it.

Arms circled her from behind, forcing the air from her lungs as they tightened. On instinct, Misty squatted, breaking the hold. Without stopping to think, she turned and punched the man in the balls.

More hands reached for her. Clawed her. Nails dug into her skin, but Misty blocked out the pain. Using every ounce of training, she made her way to the edge of the crowd. The people behind her moved, blocking her from her car.

No time to worry about that. Now that she'd fought back, the crowd was becoming more violent. The only option left was to run, and hope they didn't follow.

Stripping as she went, Misty threw herself into her change. As the shift swept over her, she pushed her body past endurance, rushing her fox to the surface. The pain blinded her, but she stumbled to her feet and took off for the woods. The need to get far away overrode everything else.

The crowd pursued her as far as the woods before breaking apart. But Misty never slowed down. Adrenaline flowed thick in her veins, allowed her to push her body harder. Faster.

She must have run for over an hour in blind panic before her lungs forced her to stop. Once she did, she collapsed on the forest floor. Her lungs wheezed as she struggled to pull air in. A quick inventory of her body

showed pain originating from her abused scalp, her cheek, her arm, and her left front paw.

Raising her head, Misty looked around and sniffed the air. She didn't recognize any landmarks, but detected the scent of Alpine Woods, Jason's wolf pack. At least she was among friends.

Her legs wobbled as she stood. She wouldn't make it much farther, but if she could make it to town, she'd be safe. Was probably safe now that she'd crossed their pack boundaries. But she couldn't rely on the crowd staying off pack territory. The attackers had smelled like shifters, but not any she recognized. And she'd been outright panicked—she couldn't trust her nose at the time.

As her sense of relief, of safety, grew, her steadiness shrunk. Her paws carried her in an uneven line as she continued to struggle for breath. Her chest felt like it would explode, or implode. But determination pushed her onward. Once she got to town, she'd get an inhaler and go home.

A sob of relief escaped as she caught sight of the bookstore, Books and Crannies. Help would be there. Putting on a burst of speed, Misty ran around the building until she reached the front door.

Of course it would have to be a push door and not automatic. But before she shifted, Laurie, Jason's sister and owner of the store, opened the door for her.

"You lost?" she asked, staring at Misty with humor lighting her eyes. The humor vanished as Misty limped past her before collapsing with a drawn-out whine. The change swept over her until she lay wheezing on the floor in human form, no doubt bleeding on the entrance rug.

"Julie, Samantha, I need some help over here!" Laurie shouted.

The two women rushed over. With their help, and a throw blanket they thankfully had on hand, Misty was seated in a comfortable leather chair. Julie sat beside her, a first aid kit in hand, patching up the scratches on her arm.

They were talking to her, but Misty was past hearing. Everything passed by in a daze until the sharp sting of antiseptic touched her exposed wound. Her breath hissed in, resulting in a coughing spat as her lungs protested.

Laughter came next, tinged with hysteria. What a fucking mess. Her cheek felt hot and swollen, her muscles protested every move she made, and

she'd no doubt be covered in bruises tomorrow. To top it off, she was having an asthma attack. Because why not.

"Here drink this. It will help with the wheezing and the nerves."
Samantha pushed a cup of something into her hand. Steam floated up and the scent of chamomile drifted out.

"Thanks," she croaked, grateful for the tea and the kindness. She hadn't been the nicest to Samantha in her thoughts. Now she regretted every bad thought.

Across the room, Laurie stood at the counter with the phone to her ear.

Although she didn't hear the conversation, she had no doubt Laurie would call Cody. The relief at that nearly drowned her. Cody would come for her, and when he arrived, everything would be okay.

* * * *

He barely remembered to put the car in park and turn off the engine before throwing himself out of the car. From the moment he'd gotten the call from Laurie, his brain had stopped functioning. The need to see Misty, hold her, overrode everything. He now understood exactly how Jason had felt months ago when he'd come to pick up Samantha from his house.

Slamming the front door of the bookstore, he swept his gaze around the room until he spotted her. In an instant, he crossed the room, crouching down to stare up at her.

He noted her ragged breathing as he dug in his pocket for her inhaler. When Laurie had called him, she'd mentioned the excitement had pushed Misty into an attack. It had taken him an extra ten minutes to run home and grab her inhaler. Ten minutes of him grinding his teeth. But now that he was here and able to offer her relief, he was glad he'd taken the time.

Holding it up to her mouth, he waited until she'd taken a couple puffs before releasing it into her hands.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Truthfully...not really sure." She still breathed heavy, but the wheeze had disappeared.

"Why don't you tell us what you remember," Jason said.

Cody glared at him for pushing her. He hadn't even seen the other Premier, but it was obvious from his body language he'd been there the whole time.

“I’d gone...Oakville. As I was...making my way back to my car, they just...attacked. From all sides. I couldn’t get away. They were so enraged.” She shivered, no doubt lost in memories.

Cody ran a comforting hand down her arm until it hit the white bandage. He frowned at it.

“I’ve never seen such hatred before. They kept calling me bitch and pulling my hair. Finally, I fought back and got away. I shifted and ran. Just ran.”

The fear in her eyes forced the air from his lungs. The need to bring her home and cuddle her close overwhelmed him.

“I’m taking her home. Now. I’ll call you in the morning to discuss this,” he told Jason. Because their territories were so close, this problem concerned both of them. But he couldn’t do his duty as Premier right now. He had bigger concerns.

Ignoring her protests, Cody lifted Misty into his arms and carried her to the car. Neither of them talked on the ride back to his place. Nor as he carried her inside.

It wasn’t until he lifted her onto his kitchen counter and examined her injuries that she spoke.

“I’m okay. Really.”

Cody gazed into her eyes and saw the truth. Shaken up, not seriously hurt. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t have been. Thinking about what might have happened caused an ache in his chest and sent his fox clamoring for control. The colors in the world altered as his eyes shifted.

Protect mate.

It hit him like a ton of bricks. Like that, everything clicked. *Misty* and *mate* became synonymous with each other. No other woman would do.

It had always been Misty.

“Mate,” he whispered, the fox more in control than the man.

He saw her eyes widen before he moved, claiming her lips in a desperate kiss. After a moment, those eyes floated shut, a moan rumbling from her throat. Instinctively, he deepened the kiss, his tongue tangling with hers.

Pure hot lust slammed into him and he growled against her lips. He felt the reins of control slipping through his fingers, but he fought to hold on.

That morning, she'd been attacked and traumatized. His lust would have to wait until she was ready. He wasn't a brute to take her when she was so unsteady. No matter how much his inner beast wanted to.

His control slipped another notch as her arms encircled his neck. Using every bit of willpower he possessed, Cody pulled away, leaning down to rest his forehead against her shoulder. He pulled in a ragged breath, still struggling with his wolf. Now that his human side had accepted Misty as his mate, his fox demanded he complete the connection.

One bite was all it would take, but the primal beast inside him demanded he claim her in all ways. He'd heard rumors. Everyone claimed a bond was tied tighter when formed during sex. It was also said, when the enzyme in the saliva that initiated the bond released into the bloodstream, both people experienced out-of-this-world pleasure. His best friend had mated last year and told him to think of the best orgasm he'd ever had and multiply it.

Imagining it had him shaking with barely checked lust. He had to stop. Tomorrow would be soon enough to mate with her.

"Why did you stop?"

He looked up and met her stare. After a moment, when he still hadn't spoken, she went on.

"Was it because you don't know how I feel, or because you're still not sure? Are you changing your mind?"

"Of course not." He grabbed her arms, forcing her to stare into his eyes, to read the emotion teaming there. "You are mine."

"Then what's holding you back?" She spoke with care.

"You're hurt."

Breaking eye contact, he stared at her reddened cheek. A growl rumbled in his throat at the hand print there. The sight gave his human side a greater foothold toward control over his fox. He reached up and covered the abused flesh gently with his hand. She was so fragile.

"You were in danger, and I wasn't there. Do you have any idea how much that kills me?" The mark on her cheek and the gauze on her arm were the only visible injury, but no doubt she had others. The wounded look in her eyes when she'd described the attack earlier, the relief when he'd first entered the bookstore, told him how bad it must have been.

“You were there with me. Without your training, I never would have been able to escape. Don’t you see? You did protect me.”

The songs were all wrong. Love wasn’t a free-fall, it was a takeoff. He flew with it into the clouds as big flashing neon signs pointed out what he already knew. He was over the moon for this woman.

Her eyes darkened with emotion akin to his. “Take me to bed.” She crooned, pulling him toward her.

He allowed himself to be drawn in. Allowed himself to be convinced. He would maintain control. Could keep it together and love her gently. To show her exactly how much she meant to him. How much he cherished her.

His mouth brushed hers, pulling away before coming back for another brush. She moaned at the teasing caress, opening her legs and shifting closer to him. Savoring her flavor, he leaned in and nipped her lower lip, sweeping his tongue over the ache his bite left behind. Her hands reached for him, but he resisted their pull.

This was the time to go slow. To take care and explore every inch of her body. Using the tips of his fingers, Cody swept his hand up her spine. Silky smooth skin arched into his touch, trying to deepen the contact. But they had the rest of their lives ahead of them. All the time in the world. He was in no hurry.

“Cody,” she groaned. Her back arched, her extended nipples poked against the t-shirt he’d brought for her.

As if tasting a delicacy, he leaned in and nibbled on her lips until her passion-clouded eyes drifted closed.

She leaned in to deepen the kiss, but he turned his head, trailing butterfly kisses across her cheek until he reached her ear. Taking the lobe in his mouth, he sucked deep. With his teeth, he gave the side a sharp tug, before soothing the ache with his tongue.

The more she moaned and writhed against him, the firmer his control became. Driving Misty mad with lust filled him with intense pleasure. Filled him with a sense of rightness. The way her claws scraped his shoulder, he knew she stood on the brink of release. And he’d brought her to the edge with a simple kiss. Yeah, he felt like the king of the world.

Unable to stand the shirt between them, Cody swept it over her head.

In wonder, he stared at the sight he’d bared. Misty really was gorgeous. Her skin lay out before him, a creamy expanse dotted with freckles. He

wanted to kiss every one of them. Her breasts weren't large, but weren't small either. They were just hers. And hers were perfect.

He swept a finger down the crease between them, causing her to arch upward, her head thrown back. Offering herself to him. It proved too much temptation to resist, as he leaned closer. But he paused with his lips an inch from one distended nipple, breathing through his mouth, across her flesh.

In the air between them, he felt the anticipation building. Her legs tightened against his hips, her hands pulling his hair until they forced him to close the distance. Her taste exploded on his tongue, proving too much for his tenuous control.

He threw open a drawer to his right for a condom. A few days ago he'd come home to find Misty scattering a large box of condoms throughout the house. He'd found it funny at the time, but right now he was extremely grateful. Unwilling to part with her breast, he continued to feast as he blindly searched in the drawer. He'd seen some in here just this morning, he knew he had, so where the hell were they?

His hand closed over something plastic that crinkled. He broke contact and held it up triumphantly.

Both of them stared at it a full minute without speaking. Cody didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It wasn't a condom.

"You planning on rubbing that ketchup over your...hot dog, chief? Cause I gotta tell you, ketchup and sex doesn't have the same impact as, say, chocolate sauce and sex."

The laugh bubbled up as he stared at her until he was unable to resist. Their passion cooled in the face of such ridiculousness. Cody rested his head against her shoulder until tears slipped out of his eyes.

"You looked so proud to have found it." Misty giggled as their laughter tapered off.

Taking advantage of the break in action, Cody leaned over and dug in the drawer, pulling out a real condom this time. He started to open the package, but Misty stopped him with a hand on his arm. Then she took the package from him and tore off the wrapper.

With a seductive look, she swept her free hand down his front, until she found the object of her search. Her fingers curled around him and squeezed until his eyes rolled back in his head. His hips bucked as she moved down his length to the head, her hand still wrapped tightly around him. After a

couple pumps, she released him to roll the condom on and gripped him again, pulling him forward using his cock.

They both groaned as the tip touched her entrance. Pushing her hands aside, he gripped her hips and plunged. The feel of her wet heat encasing him almost undid him. He eased out only to thrust back in. Her lips caressed his neck, but his focus centered on the pleasure building below.

Inside, his fox tried to break his control, but he held firm. As much as he wanted to plunge hard and fast, the day had been traumatizing enough for Misty. She needed gentle and slow. So he gritted his teeth and slid out. The friction set every nerve ending on edge, firing his blood.

She writhed against him. Her hips bucked, even as his fingers dug in to stop their movement. Rubbing against him, her moan caught in her throat as she tried to pick up the pace. The wiggles were doing nothing for his tightly strung control, but he held firm.

“Faster, damn it.” Her voice was guttural.

He didn’t answer, just continued his easy pace.

All of a sudden, a sharp sting pierced his neck. Even as he noticed the pain, a tidal wave of pleasure raged inside him, devastating his control. Half aware, he pumped his hips over and over, releasing inside her. White light flooded his vision as his brain simply shut off. The pleasure too intense.

Once the buzzing in his ears stopped and his vision returned, Cody wiped a hand over the still smarting flesh on his neck and brought his fingers to his eyes. Blood. The wound began to heal. He felt the skin reforming. But his brain was slow to process what had happened. He searched his mind, and discovered something that hadn’t been there before. Misty.

Always before, she’d been a part of his heart. But now she was a part of his soul. He felt it entwined with his own, connected in a way few would understand. The connection felt as solid as if they were tied together. As he followed the path in his mind, he felt everything she felt. Utterly sated and so deeply in love with him it made his heart stumble.

She groaned then, falling backward onto the counter. When she looked at him, he saw brown fox eyes staring back at him.

“Wow,” was all she said. All he needed.

“And just think. I still have to mark you.” He smirked, causing her to groan.

“I’m not sure I’ll survive it!” And she looked utterly serious.

“Wuss,” he teased, picking her up and carrying her to bed.

Later, as he lay on his back with Misty draped on top of him, breathing deeply as their bodies cooled from another round, Cody played with her fingers and thought about everything that had happened. Both were content to remain in silence until their heartbeats slowed to a normal rhythm, beating in time with each other. In some regards, things had progressed quickly—their first kiss had been less than two weeks ago. But in his soul, he felt as if he’d waited eternity for Misty. *Finally*, his fox whispered to him.

After a moment, she raised her head and studied him.

“Are you still upset about that night I tried to get you drunk?” Her face was utterly serious; her eyes pleaded for understanding.

He had to be honest. He let out a garbled sigh. “I thought about it all last night. You know, I think my mom was right. Familiarity did blind my fox where you were concerned. And the reason things have changed recently, is because something woke my fox up and pointed out what stood right in front of him. Maybe you did it. That night. So no, I’m not upset. I’m actually grateful.” He reached up and cupped her cheek. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

A smile bloomed, lighting up her entire face. Her happiness flowed through the link they now shared. It would take a while to get used to another person’s emotions inside him, but it had proven to be quite a thrill during certain sexual encounters. Through the bond, he’d felt a flare of pleasure as his tongue tickled certain spots, or as his finger pressed into the small of her back.

In a tender caress, he swept a lock of hair behind her ear. Without a word, she leaned down and nipped his shoulder. Life couldn’t get any better, he thought as he cuddled her closer. Everything had fallen into place.

* * * *

A broken nose, bruised esophagus, and even a few cracked ribs. Stella listened to her followers as they described what had happened with the fox at the impromptu protest. Better than she had imagined.

The council would be hard pressed to ignore this. Time to put the final phase of her plan into action. Stella picked up a knife from the table, testing the blade against her finger. Time to tighten the noose around the necks of the foxes...and the council. Soon, she’d control them all.

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Chapter 12

“What?” The shout jerked her out of a sound sleep. Sweeping the hair out of her face, Misty looked blearily around until she spotted Cody across the room, his cellphone to his ear. She’d been so out of it, she hadn’t even heard it ring.

With a groan, she collapsed back on the pillow. Being the Premier’s mate wasn’t easy. She smiled into her pillow. *Mate*.

No doubt someone had some ridiculous dispute at eight in the morning and needed help. She groaned. Eight in the morning. Making a phone call at this time of day should be outlawed.

“This is a joke.” The mix of anger and fear in Cody’s voice had her looking up, her smile vanishing.

Although his back faced her, she saw the tension lining his body. He clutched his forehead and his hair stood straight up as if he’d been nervously running his fingers through it.

Worry built inside her. Cody wouldn’t lose his cool over some silly dispute. She rubbed her eyes, willing her brain to engage even as the lingering dregs of sleep clouded her mind. Maybe something else caught fire. Or someone had gotten hurt.

“They attacked her, for Christ’s sake. She defended herself.” Hysteria tinged his voice, but the words had her jerking. Was he talking about her?

“This is bullshit and you know it.” He paused, no doubt listening to the person on the other end. “I understand that, but this is different.” Another pause. “Ridiculous. She shouldn’t have to defend her actions.”

Her throat closed with worry the longer she watched him. Whatever the person on the other end had said, sent Cody into a rage. And it became more and more apparent it concerned her. She doubted the news would suit her any better than it did him.

Then he turned and met her eyes across the room. He visibly softened as his gaze settled on her, and he blew out a frustrated breath.

“Fine. But this had better go down as you claim.” He disconnected.

Misty bit her lip, considering him as he crossed the room and sat on the bed beside her. He opened his mouth, but seemed at a loss for words.

“Cody, what’s going on?”

He grabbed her hand and squeezed. It was meant to comfort, but knowing he thought she needed it only increased her nervousness.

“That was the council.” He stopped to consider. “Apparently yesterday was not the first protest staged by a group of hybrids. They’ve been putting a lot of pressure on the council for equal rights.”

“Equal rights for hybrids. Okay, I’m all for that,” she muttered, still trying to figure out how this involved her.

A touch of pity entered his eyes. “I know you are, honey.” The endearment scared her. He’d never called her honey before. “The thing is... a couple people were hurt when you fought your way free yesterday. The hybrids are demanding you stand trial for your actions. Tomorrow.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. Stand trial? People who stood trial with the council rarely got away scot-free. It wasn’t like the human judicial system. There would be no jury of peers, no *innocent until proven guilty*. The council ruled with an iron fist. Most who stood trial never saw the light of day again.

“But...I had to fight back. I didn’t do anything wrong. There was no other way to get away, and I had to get away. They were pulling my hair and pushing me. They slapped me before I even tried—” She felt the panic bubbling up, choking off her rambling as it rose.

He shushed her, pulling her into his arms, and running his hand down her back in a soothing caress.

A sob of fear broke free, and she found herself crying into his shoulder as he whispered reassurances in her ear.

Why was this happening to her? And why now, after everything else had fallen into position? The man she loved, loved her back. Had mated with her the previous night. Everything had clicked into place perfectly, only to fall to pieces. It wasn’t fair.

“They assured me it’s just a formality. They have to appease the hybrids, but have no intention of harming you. After it’s revealed that you acted in self-defense, they’ll let you go. Don’t worry, my love.”

His words sank in, penetrating the wall of grief and fear. Just a formality. With Cody beside her, she could face this with grace.

Cuddling into her mate’s embrace, Misty let his warmth surround her, give her the strength to pull back the tears.

“It’s going to be okay. This will work itself out, you’ll see,” he whispered into her hair.

She thought about the way he’d yelled into the phone, defended her actions. About the fear even now flowing through the connection they shared.

He wasn’t as cool and collected as he appeared, and that knowledge gave her what she needed to put on her own facade. She’d be strong for him, because that’s what he tried to do for her.

“Okay. We’ll get through this. Together.” She sat up to look at him.

“Together,” he whispered back before leaning in and claiming her lips in a bruising kiss. A wave of passion crashed through her, and she allowed it to sweep her cares away.

Tomorrow was uncertain. She wasn’t about to let today slip away. For now, the man she loved sat beside her, and she was going to enjoy every moment she had left.

* * * *

“Are you okay?” Cody asked from the kitchen doorway. For the past few minutes, Misty hadn’t moved from her position on the couch. Had scarcely blinked. Her eyes stared blankly across the room, though he doubted she saw anything at all.

At the sound of his voice, those blank eyes swung his way. It took a moment before they focused on him. She tried to muster a smile, but the effort was wasted. He knew the turmoil raging within her. Felt it through the bond they shared, even as he fought to hide his own from her.

“I’m fine.” Her voice cracked a bit. The lie was so obvious, he could have picked up on it even if he didn’t have a link with her.

On hurried feet, he moved in front of her and knelt down. Although her smile still curled her lips, tears pooled in her eyes as she watched him.

“Don’t lie to me, Misty. I know you’re not fine.” A single tear spilled over, the sight breaking his heart. He reached out and wiped the tear away with his thumb, smoothing it over her cheek.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t protect her from this. And it killed him. He was supposed to keep her safe from everything. To protect her with his life. But he hadn’t anticipated something like this coming.

“I’m scared,” she whispered. The quiet admission tore into him. Even feeling her emotions hadn’t prepared him to hear the anguish in her voice.

Breaking his gaze, she stared down at her hands. "Some brave mate I am."

The anger was swift. "Don't." He shook his head. "Don't do that. You are everything I have ever wanted in a mate. More." He waited until her gaze rose to his before continuing. "I'm scared, too." It was easier to admit than he'd thought it would be. Especially as gratitude lit her eyes. If sharing his fear with her took some of the weight off her shoulders, there really was no choice.

"You are?" she asked.

Cody shook his head, gazing at her in confusion. Didn't she know how worried he was? Couldn't she sense it? Her emotions must be incredibly intense to overpower their newly formed bond. Or maybe he was better than he'd thought at blocking his turmoil from her.

"How can you ask me that? Of course I am. Misty, you mean everything to me. Absolutely everything. Don't you know that?" Another tear spilled over, and he reached up to wipe it off her cheek. "Everything is going to be okay. It has to be. But..." He paused, taking a deep breath while gathering his thoughts. "If things don't go our way tomorrow, I'll find a way to get you out of there."

Panic leapt into her eyes. Her hands shot out, wrapping around his biceps like twin vines.

"No, you can't. It would be suicide. If something goes wrong, you have to promise me you won't do anything stupid. Just leave and don't look back."

Anger burned in his veins, pulsing hot behind his eyes. "Do you really think I could just walk away from you? Nobody will touch you as long as I have breath left in my body. I told you once I would protect you from anything, and I meant it. You're mine."

With her hands, she forced his to unclench and pulled him beside her on the couch. "It's a moot point. Everything is going to be fine. Tomorrow is just a formality." As she spoke, she crawled into his lap, resting her head on his shoulder.

He shuddered at the feel of her in his arms. Turning his head, he sniffed her hair. Without a doubt in his body, he knew life would be meaningless without her. He tightened his arms, giving her comfort and taking it in turn.

"I'm sorry. I meant to ease your fears, not dump mine on your lap," he said, cuddling her closer.

She reached up and ran her hand over his jaw. “I love you,” she said.
The emotion shining from her eyes floored him.

“God, Misty, I love you so much. I can’t stand the thought of anything happening to you.”

“Do you think... Could you just hold me for a little while?” Her tentative whisper swept through him. Nothing would tear her from his arms.

“All night if you want.”

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Chapter 13

Misty worried her hands as she paced back and forth in the lobby of the intimidating building.

“If you keep that up, you’ll rub the skin right off,” Cody said, grabbing her hands to still them. Then he lifted them to his lips and placed a kiss in each palm.

“He’s coming, right? You’re sure he’s coming?”

Misty wasn’t exactly sure what would happen today. Although the trials were open to the shifter public, she’d never been to one before. Doubt most shifters had. And even though they told her she didn’t need a lawyer, she and Cody both felt better with one there. Just in case. So yesterday, Cody had made a few calls, and pulled some strings. Vulpes Creek didn’t have any lawyers, but Jason’s pack did, and he’d agreed to represent her. At least she’d be in trustworthy hands.

Resting her head on Cody’s shoulder, Misty struggled to hold back the tears. She didn’t want him to know how frightened she felt, but inside, she was a wreck. Her head kept running through possible outcomes, and only a few she found favorable.

No humans had been involved, thank God, and no one had been killed, so death was an unlikely punishment. Unlikely, but still a possibility. The council worked around its own set of rules. If they felt her actions had risked their society in any way, they wouldn’t hesitate to end her life. And she had shifted on human land.

A shiver snaked down her spine and she felt Cody squeeze her hands in response. Whatever she had to do to get out of this, she would do, not only for herself, but for him.

“Sorry I’m late,” someone muttered as a breeze from outside rushed in.

She turned to greet the lawyer, Justin. Older than her by several years, he hadn’t been in school with her, although she’d seen him around.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “This is going to be an open and shut case.” Which didn’t necessarily mean a good outcome for her, but even as she opened her mouth to lean on the humor that came so naturally, the door to the main chamber opened and an elder stepped out.

The man had to be in his seventies. His hair was stark white, and his round face and soft body showed signs of age. He should have looked jolly, but his eyes were cold as his gaze zeroed in on her.

“We’re ready for you.” He didn’t bother to see if they followed him into the room, but turned around and with a determined stride crossed the room to take his position on the bench.

With a last squeeze, Misty let go of Cody’s hand and strode forward. Before she stepped onto the podium in front of the council, she spared a quick look around. Her gaze found a few friendly faces in the crowd. Jason and his family had all shown up. As had Jen, Jarrod, and most of the foxes from town. The sight of Cody, taking a seat beside his skulk, snared her gaze for a moment before she pushed on.

But as friendly as the group to her right appeared, the group to her left appeared equally strong in their hatred. She didn’t recognize any faces, but the looks were all the same. Cruel and filled with rage.

Someone on the bench cleared their throat, impatience bleeding through. Squaring her shoulders, Misty tried to put on a brave face as she stepped up to the podium. Her attackers wouldn’t get the pleasure of seeing her cower.

“Misty Turner, you are brought before the council because of your attack on a group of hybrids within the town of Oakville. Do you understand the charges?” A man in the center of the group spoke out.

She looked over to the hybrids to her left. The phrasing made it sound like she had attacked them. It hadn’t gone down like that at all.

“She does, your honor,” Justin said beside her.

“No, I don’t. I didn’t attack them. I defended myself.”

Justin tried to shush her, but it was too late.

The man’s face filled with rage at being contradicted. Apparently, she’d mis-stepped without realizing it.

“We are aware of your claims. But you stand before us in seemingly fine health.” He gestured to the hybrids. Some of them moaned and clutched their sides. One man with a bandage on his face looked especially grieved. Drama queens. “While your supposed attackers have numerous injuries. How are we supposed to justify such a juxtaposition from what you say and what the evidence point to?”

She shot a frantic look at Cody. This was not what she had anticipated. Just a formality, they had assured her. But the further this trial went, the more it was looking like a set-up.

“They did other things. Pulled my hair and pushed me.” Now that she was saying it out loud, it did seem ridiculous. At the time, she’d feared they would kill her, but now that concern seemed so extreme. She closed her eyes and threw a frantic prayer to the heavens. Please let her come out of this intact.

“And that gave her permission to break his nose and his ribs?” A woman stood up in the group of hybrids, gesturing to two of the moaning people as she referred to them.

“Please, sit down. We will get to the bottom of this,” the council member placated. Then he turned a frosty stare toward her. “Ms. Turner, did you at any point, ask the hybrids to stop?”

Shocked by the question, Misty shook her head. Asked them to stop? Even if she had, they wouldn’t have heard her over all the screaming and yelling.

“Did you ever try to reason with them?”

Another shake of her head. These weren’t the questions she’d anticipated. Worry built, threatening to choke her. Why were they acting like she’d committed some horrid crime?

“What other options did you try before resorting to violence?”

Misty didn’t know how to answer. She merely shook her head as Justin spoke to the council, trying to redirect the line of questioning, only to be cut off.

“So you tried nothing to get away before attacking the people around you.”

Tears clogged her sight as she stared up at the man.

“Rupert, there’s no need to interrogate the girl. She’s just gone through a terrible ordeal.”

Grabbing onto the kindness like a lifeline, Misty turned to the older woman on the bench. Her eyes smiled down at Misty and allowed her to draw in a ragged breath. If she concentrated on the woman’s eyes, she could believe everything would be okay.

“We demand justice!” The same hybrid woman who’d called out earlier spoke. The crowd around her rose up in agreement.

For a moment, all Misty heard was the deafening volume of the hybrids demanding her head. Then a banging as her original questioner pounded his gavel.

“Quiet. Ms. Turner, Inform the council of the steps you took before lashing out,” he said.

Although the phrasing was better than before, she still caught the accusation in his gaze. She looked at the friendly woman instead and took a deep breath.

“I tried to get back to the vet’s office, or any building, but they blocked my way. I was surrounded. I tried to extricate myself from the crowd but they pulled my hair and pushed me into each other. They were shouting too loud to hear anything I had to say.”

Justin gave her an approving look.

The man nodded, then seemed to consult some papers on his desk. “At what point did you pull out the knife?”

A palpable hush fell over the room. Misty stared at the man in shock before finding her voice.

“Never. There was never a knife,” she croaked with an unsteady breath.

“There are numerous eye witnesses who said you brandished a knife and shouted, ‘Get away from me, you filthy hybrids.’”

All of a sudden, the room exploded in a rush of yells and shouts. The protesters in anger, and her supporters in indignation. Anyone who knew her, knew those words would have never crossed her lips. The gavel banged a few times before everyone fell silent.

“Are you claiming you’ve never seen this piece before and did not stab it into the shoulder of a man during the struggle?” A man brought over a bag with a knife in it. Blood stained the tip.

“I’ve never seen this before in my life,” she said with honesty.

“Your honor, we would be pleased to submit fingerprints for verification that she did not use this knife.” Justin spoke from beside her.

“There are ways around that,” the woman from the hybrid crowd shouted. Misty was at her wits’ end with the woman. Three times now she’d interjected against her. What had Misty ever done to her?

“Are you really claiming I had time, while I frantically tried to get away, to wipe down a knife? Seriously? I left my clothes in shreds on the

ground so I could run as fox, but I had time to grab a napkin and make sure I left no prints?”

There was silence after that. The friendly council elder cleared her throat and spoke out. “Point made. I vote that we test the weapon. If, as she claims, her fingerprints are not on it, we have to conclude she did not use the knife and dismiss the case. Would anyone like to second the motion?” A few murmurs assented. “All right then. Misty, you are required to provide fingerprints. If we do receive a positive match, the case will continue at a date to be determined at that time. For the moment, you’re free to go.” Then with a wink, the woman slammed her gavel down.

“No!” The hybrid woman cried out. “It is clear the council does not have the best interest of the hybrid shifters at heart. This trial has been a joke. We demand more.”

“Who are you, exactly?” A man on the bench who hadn’t spoken before asked.

“I am the Premier of the hybrid shifters of eastern Colorado.” She raised her chin in pride at the words. Whispers exploded throughout the room.

“Excuse me? You can’t form a new pack and become a Premier just because you say it’s so. There is paperwork and permissions needed.” A frail woman on the board spoke.

“It is clear that the council is only concerned with the rights of pure breeds. We will form our own council under my leadership unless you listen to our demands and change your ways.”

The council exchanged looks before one woman swept a hand, gesturing to the podium where Misty stood. As the woman stepped forward, Justin ushered Misty over to Cody. His arms circled her from behind, and she leaned into his embrace. This trial was getting wildly out of control. Who was this woman?

“We demand the council incorporate hybrids into their ranks to ensure fair trials for our kind.”

The elders looked at each other, many nodding their agreement.

“It seems fair. Is that your only demand?” one asked.

“Seats for all the variations of hybrids in the world.” Her voice rang out clear.

This time the council hesitated.

Misty understood why as the implications slammed into her. There were far more hybrid breeds than pure breeds around nowadays. Giving that many council seats away would swing control into the hybrids' hands. She shivered as she realized what would have happened to her today if such a thing were the case.

"That, we cannot agree to. As we do not assign council seats based on percentages, it would not be fair to the other species. We agree to give the hybrids the same number of seats every other breed has, which would be three."

For a minute, Misty feared the woman would launch herself at the man. She looked angry enough to spit bullets.

"Fine. I will take one, and the other two will go to senior members of my pride."

Again, the members of the council shook their heads. "That's not how it works. The seats are determined by a vote among all the hybrids in the state. Your...pride...is only a small piece of the pie."

The woman's eyes were bright with anger. "No! Those are our demands. I need a seat! I deserve a seat!"

Cody tightened his arms around Misty as the woman exploded.

Her gaze swung in their direction. A few of the wolves and foxes stepped beside them.

"This is your fault. All of you. If you had just walked away and left my brother alone, none of this would be happening. I'd already have a foothold."

Seemingly beyond rational, the woman rushed them.

Cody pushed Misty behind him and prepared to face the fuming bitch. The woman screamed as she launched herself at him, but Cody was too fast. He grabbed her hands and twisted, bringing her to the ground and covering her body. Across the room, the hybrids looked on with wide eyes as their leader screamed and raged from the floor.

"She's bat shit crazy," one of them muttered. A couple loyal followers tried to reach their fallen leader, but others held them back.

The council members all pounded their gavels, trying to restore order.

Jason and his brothers reached down and held the woman so Cody could rise. At the urging of the council, they carried her back to the podium and held her before the bench.

“Who was your brother?” one asked, obviously catching her slip from earlier.

She shook her head mutely.

“What is your name?”

Again, she refused to speak, raising her head in challenge.

The man sighed. “Do you have anything to say in defense of your actions?”

She didn’t speak.

“In that case, you will be taken into our custody until we can get to the bottom of this. It is becoming increasingly clear you stand at the center of the rioting and protesting lately. We will decide what to do with you after the facts have been assembled.” He banged his gavel and the wolves carried the woman to the side of the room.

“As far as the council seats for hybrids,” the man continued. “I believe it is a good idea regardless of the reason it was brought before this council.” A couple people around the room, both hybrid and non-hybrid, nodded in agreement. “In the next few weeks, we will set up a vote and provide hybrid shifters three seats on the council. If no one else is going to have a breakdown,” he paused a moment and gazed around the room, “I call this meeting adjourned.”

Misty breathed a sigh of relief as the gavel cracked down. She clutched Cody’s shoulders from behind until he spun around and swept her into his arms. Without a word to the supporters around them, he carted her with determined strides toward the exit in the back.

Misty threw a cheery wave at the crowd over his shoulder before he turned the corner. Relief swamped her. It was over. Had she been standing, her knees would have wobbled. With a giggle, she buried her nose in Cody’s throat and let his scent flood her senses as he carried her out of the building and down the street toward their car.

As the shock and worry from the trial faded, Misty’s senses went into overdrive. Cody’s scent surrounded her and she rubbed her nose against his throat. His steps slowed at the caress, his pulse picked up speed, hammering against her cheek. Turning her head, she rubbed her lips against the furious beat before opening her mouth and sucking. His taste, deliciously male, exploded on her tongue. It short-circuited all thoughts, leaving only an aching need to be taken by him. Filled by him.

“Jesus,” he breathed out. Then he ran, his feet eating up the distance to the car. He practically threw her into the passenger seat before taking position behind the wheel. Without looking, he pulled out of their space. A honk from the car he’d cut off blasted behind them.

Lust raged inside her, driven on by the emotion she felt thrumming through the bond between them. With a naughty smile, Misty sent a wicked thought through the connection. Her smile widened at the sight of his hands tightening on the steering wheel. The sound of his dark groan filled the car.

She wiggled in her seat, felt the heat and moisture below. Unable to sit still, she rubbed her legs together, but the friction wasn’t enough. She needed his fingers, his tongue. She needed Cody.

As their vehicle ate up the road, traveling much faster than the posted limit, Misty’s passion built to a ravaging fire inside her. The tension became too much, demanded release.

With a growl, she unbuckled her seatbelt and crawled over the middle console. She took Cody’s ear between her teeth and ran her hand down his torso, releasing buttons along the way until she reached between his legs and clutched the growing bulge there.

His hands jerked on the wheel, causing them to swerve. Lucky for them, there was no oncoming traffic.

“I’m not gonna make it. Pull over,” Misty whispered in his ear, squeezing his cock through his jeans.

“Hold on. Just hold on.” The car picked up speed, ricocheting down the road. They turned down the first side street they came to. A dirt road leading God-only-knew-where. On these long rural highways, it was anyone’s guess. Rocks pounded on the windows as they shot forward.

After what felt like eternity, Cody stopped the car and threw it into park, the main road barely visible from the back. His hands reached for her, ripping the collar of her shirt as he pulled down to free one breast. The cold from the air conditioning rushed over the bared flesh.

She arched forward with a hiss as his fingers swept over her nipple. But she needed more. Her fingers searched the folds of his pants until she found what she’d been looking for. Forcing herself to be careful, she pulled the zipper down and reached between the parted fabric and through the slit in his boxers. The back of his head thumped against the rest as she pulled him out.

“Move your seat back,” she commanded, grateful he didn’t question her in the haze of passion.

All she thought about was getting him inside her. Of riding to release. After there was enough room, Misty crawled into his lap, her skirt flaring out around his hips. She rubbed against him, and moaned at the friction against her clit. Not even the seat belt latch digging into her knee would stop her from seeking her pleasure.

Finally, she grabbed him and guided him inside her. Their groans tangled between them. She leaned in and bit his shoulder, as she thrust her hips, sliding up and down his length.

Not bothering to start slowly, Misty threw herself into a frantic rhythm, biting harder on Cody’s shoulder as the pressure built below. His dark musky favor heightened her awareness of him. As did his hands digging into her flesh. She felt the sharp sting of his claws as they scratched her. The small pain mixed with her pleasure, ramping it up until it spilled over, throwing her into a powerful release.

She cried out as it swept her away, her inner muscles clenching until with a grunted shout, he exploded inside her. Her writhing slowed to a gentle caress until finally, she collapsed against him. Opening her eyes, she saw the indent of her teeth on his shoulder and leaned in to place a butterfly kiss against it.

“Well, haven’t done that since I was a teenager,” Cody muttered after a moment.

Misty growled a warning and nipped the juncture of his neck.

He laughed. “Now now, don’t get jealous. You know you’re the only one for me.”

With a sigh, she snuggled against him, content to remain exactly as they were. After all, now that the trial was over and Misty was a free woman, remaining here, in Cody’s arms, sounded perfect. But even as the thought crossed her mind, the desire for something more than a hasty fuck in the front seat of the car assailed her. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, the hair on his chest tickling her nipples as she rubbed against him. Wanted to taste the erotic flavor of his manhood, and feel his tongue everywhere.

She leaned up and looked into his eyes. “Take me home, my mate.”

He raised his head and captured her lips in a heated kiss. “Not *chief*?” he joked after they finally broke apart.

Misty had to think a minute to pick up the trail of their conversation. “You don’t like *my mate*?”

“I do. I love being your mate. But I prefer being your commander in chief.” He wiggled his eyebrows as he said it.

“*Chief* I can do. Commander?” She snorted, climbing back over the console into her seat. “Good luck with that.”

He laughed as he righted his clothing, turned on the car, and pulled around. “Are you saying I don’t command your heart?” The smile on his face melted her.

“You do,” she admitted breathlessly.

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. “Good. Because you command mine as well.”

Epilogue

With a pop, the cork came out of the champagne bottle. Misty looked around blearily, still trying to dispel the passion Cody had stirred up moments before the group had shown up on their porch steps. No doubt the rumpled clothing when they'd gotten around to answering the door told everyone exactly what they'd interrupted. But at the moment, Misty couldn't summon the energy to be embarrassed.

"To a successful day," Jason said, raising his glass in the air as his mate thrust one into Misty's hands.

She smiled at Samantha before drawing the bubbles into her mouth, savoring them, and swallowing. The taste lifted some of the haze from her mind.

"Guys, this is too much," she said, gazing at the champagne and cake they'd brought over.

"Nonsense. Besides, I feel a bit guilty for getting you into this in the first place," Julie said as she sat on the stool beside her on the kitchen island. Her mate, Brendan, growled in frustration across the room, but held his tongue. Judging by the glare he threw Julie's way, Misty guessed they'd argued over her guilt.

After the trial, Jason had stayed behind to help question the hybrid woman. They'd been forced to use drugs to discover the whole truth, but they'd gotten the story out of her, beginning with her brother and the reason she resented the foxes and wolves so much. Charged with conspiracy, attempting to overthrow the council, and the kidnapping plan she'd been a part of, she'd been sentenced to the same fate as her brother. She was probably sitting in a cell somewhere.

But Misty didn't have one thought to spare for Stella. She'd been given a second chance at life, and she wasn't about to waste one moment on the woman or her brother. Time was too precious.

"Don't be silly. No one is to blame but her and her brother, and in the end, she paid for it. Now that our problems are finished, it's time to get on living!" Misty declared. Raising her glass in the air, she toasted, "To solving problems."

“Not to rain on anyone’s parade, but we’re not problem-free quite yet. Apparently, the protests and riots in the area have drawn the attention of some government officials. The council believes an undercover agent has moved into the cabin off route 70. Since our two communities are the closest around, we’ve been asked to make sure they don’t discover something they shouldn’t.” Jason looked around the gathered group. “We need to figure out how to approach this and find out what is known. And keep the wrong information from getting out.”

“Well, that’s easy enough,” Misty said, drawing everyone’s attention. “There’s only one unmated woman here. Laurie will just have to seduce the agent.”

“Oh, no...” Laurie began, but Jason cut her off.

“The agent is a woman. Although she is young enough something like that might work.”

No one spoke for a minute. The logical conclusion hit them all at the same time. As one, their eyes swung to Danny, Jason’s unmated brother and the only single man in the room. He swung his head around, taking in everyone’s stares directed at him.

“Shit,” he said.

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About Sondrae Bennett

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I love romance. I love reading romance, living romance, but I especially love writing romance. There's no greater feeling than watching my characters come alive in each other's arms. Most of all, I love giving my characters the happily ever afters they deserve, with a little necessary drama first.

Cody caught my attention from the very beginning—a fox Premier with a healthy dose of dominance, humor, and courtesy. I knew I had to find him a mate, and where better than hidden within his own skulk. Misty was more than willing to take him on. The two of them together were a blast to write, and I hope their story has touched your hearts as much as it has touched mine.

When not writing, I can usually be found curled up on the couch with a good book, taking my dogs for walks or spending time with my family. I love to hear from readers. Please feel free to email me or drop by my website or blog to learn about upcoming releases. I can also be found on Facebook and Twitter.

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Chapter 1

Sex got better with time, and being with Katrina these past two years had proved it. Tyler twisted in the cramped bathroom stall as Katrina squeezed in against him and closed the door. An electric shock of pain shot along his nerve—he'd jarred his funny bone against a metal bolt that held the faded fiberglass walls together. "It's too narrow in here. I can't maneuver."

"That is half the fun." Katrina whispered with her Asian accent, then undid his zipper.

His pain vanished.

She knelt in front of him and pulled his waistband below his hips. His cock had thickened when she'd asked him to follow her to the restaurant's bathroom

after lunch, so he was already erect. She caressed him, her delicate hands confident in their movement.

Never, in a thousand years, would he have guessed they'd be in this position one day. He took a shaky breath and leaned his weight against the cool wall behind him. They'd grown so close, he couldn't imagine a future without her.

Leaning forward, she licked her ruby red lips before wrapping them around his shaft. At a slow, easy pace she swallowed him.

Time stopped. Mesmerized, he couldn't pull away his gaze. Her thick lashes formed crescent moons when she closed her eyes and stroked her tongue against him. So soft and smooth...

He moaned and it echoed in the closed-in space. Cutting the sound off in a gasp, he leaned his head back against the stall. "Everyone in the restaurant will hear me, Kat."

Ignoring his protests, she withdrew from him, then slid his cock farther down her throat, sucking him into a moist, warm haven.

Bracing the stall as if it were caving in, he remained on his feet, even though his knees threatened to give out while her rhythm became more demanding. Oh God. Short of breath, he struggled

with his inner wolf-like beast. Its presence rose, threatening a shift. “Kat...” He tried to warn and whisper, but it came out more like encouragement.

The beast part of him loved Katrina as much as the human did and it wanted to participate. However, public shifting was forbidden by his alpha.

The scent of Katrina’s beast filled his nose. Shit. She was close to shifting as well. Things became more aggressive when her wolf-shifter nature joined them in sex, which would be great at home, not in a fucking public bathroom. His afternoon was going to get very, very complicated if he didn’t tone things down.

She grasped his ass and dug her long nails-turned-claws into his skin.

All his reasoning ability crumbled with the pain—oh—the pain. It turned into searing pleasure. His internal wires must be crossed somewhere for him to love the claws.

The door to the bathroom creaked open and Tyler swallowed a groan. He almost had an aneurysm.

Footsteps followed, with the sound of unzipping.

Katrina didn’t stop, or even slow down. Having someone else in the room didn’t appear to bother her. She’d changed so much from the time he’d met her,

from a shy, frightened girl to a confident, strong woman. Well, she'd smack him for calling her a woman. They were both werewolves in the Vasi pack, far from being human.

He listened to the male use the urinal.

All the while, she sucked hard and fast.

Unable to breathe or move, Tyler remained silent until the stranger washed his hands and left. "Oh my God, Katrina, I'm so close." He pulled himself from her mouth and lifted her onto her feet. In a frenzy of hands, he slid her red silk dress over her hips and she pulled his pants lower. Eager to be inside his mate, he didn't waste time with her panties and tore them off in an act of what he called He-Manism.

Nothing about him would make anyone think He-Man. All one hundred and fifty pounds of curly, red-headed male made them think Ronald McDonald. Never mind that he could bench press a car in his beast form. Werewolves might be legal citizens now, but not many tolerated them, so he kept a tight lid on his secret identity to keep his job.

Why a beauty like Katrina even paid him any attention still amazed him.

She trapped his face between her hands and gazed at him with her dark, tilted eyes. "Take me, Tyler.

Make me yours.” Hot damn, she could read his mind sometimes.

In his suit’s jacket pocket was the engagement ring he wanted her to wear. That would truly make her his. Lifting her by the hips, he pressed his cock against her clit and rubbed. He could make her climax this way—he’d done it before.

She gripped his shoulders and the jacket seam popped. “Fuck me.” Her voice was husky with desire. She never swore in public, but those rules didn’t exist in their bedroom, and apparently, public bathrooms.

With a thrust of his hips, Tyler entered her in one hard shot. Wet and tight, her pussy enveloped him.

She cried out and it echoed in the small room.

Buried inside his mate, he didn’t care if the whole building heard. He pumped, allowing Katrina’s velvet to stroke him. The stall creaked and rattled. He caught her delicate mouth in a kiss, her taste a mixture of need, love, and sake.

Sweat trickled along his face, making his curls stick to his skin. A passion this strong, a love this fierce should tear him apart. In and out, in and out, he thrust until her secret muscles clenched even tighter around him.

“Oh Tyler.” She moaned against his lips.

He brought her this pleasure, his touch that she craved, and his name she used. Nothing could have made him feel more—more male.

Harder and faster, he plunged inside. Panting as if running a marathon, clothes pasted to his sweaty skin, he helped her find her release and milk him of his.

He arched his back when he came.

Katrina rode his climax, her strong limbs wrapped around his body until she slowed, then sagged against his shoulder.

Catching his breath, he leaned his sweat-soaked forehead against the cool wall by Katrina’s head, sandwiching her. “If I win another Rube Goldberg contest, can we do this again?”

She laughed, drawing him in for a chaste kiss. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” It was all he could think to say. Every year Chicago held a small Rube Goldberg contest. He’d competed since high school. Developing over-engineered machines that performed simple tasks, usually involving a chain reaction, summed up his life. Finally winning left him empty. His true contest

lay in convincing Katrina to marry him. She was the ultimate prize.

She'd blown his mind when she'd suggested a tryst in the men's room. A huge step for her to be so open about her sexuality. She'd been so abused by her old pack. He thought he'd never get through those barriers. Then one night, two years ago, she'd knocked on his bedroom door and told him she wouldn't live in the past anymore.

That he, Tyler McCoy, was her future. Unbelievable, even now.

Setting her down on her feet, he tugged at her hem and fixed her dress. He picked up her torn panties. "I don't suppose you want these?"

She laughed. "Keep them as a souvenir. Just do not pin them on the bedroom wall like last time."

Exactly where he wanted to display them. They truly were a perfect match.

"I am going to wash in the ladies' room."

"Okay, I'll take care of the bill."

She rose on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I'll meet you outside under the archway."

It didn't take long for him to clean and dress—no amount of work could make his red hair look tame—but paying for their dim sum lunch took forever. He

stood at the register as Katrina walked by and pinched his ass for good measure before stepping out of the restaurant.

Stuffing his credit card and receipt into his wallet, Tyler stepped onto the main street of Chinatown.

An antique red archway covered the entrance to the tourist trap to keep evil spirits away and good luck in. Sticking his hand in his jacket pocket, he rubbed the small, velvet jewelry box he'd placed there earlier today. He could use all the luck he could get—just because Katrina was his mate, didn't mean she'd agree to get married.

Raised in an all-wolf-shifter community in rural Mongolia, she didn't think like American shifters. Like him. He took a deep, shaky breath. Marriage was a foreign ritual to her.

He'd chosen this location not just for his superstitions, but for its significance. Katrina worked in the area, a place where the old Asian world met the new, as an interpreter for some of the local companies.

She waited under the arch, facing him, her delicate eyebrows furrowed. An Asian man he didn't recognize spoke with her.

Facing the stranger's back, Tyler could only see his short black hair and long fall trench coat.

A sharp stab of jealousy drove him to quicken his pace. He couldn't help it. As a shifter, possession was nine-tenths of the law, and Katrina belonged to him.

Passing half a dozen souvenir shops offering cheap trinkets, Tyler trotted along Wentworth Avenue. Katrina's raised voice reached his ears, but he couldn't understand Mandarin. He growled low in his chest. His mate didn't yell often.

Three other men broke from the crowd and surrounded the arguing couple.

Tyler's heart rate took off like a locomotive on a downhill slide. He smelled shifters. Non-Vasi shifters on their territory. Surrounding his mate.

The Asian stranger grabbed her arm and yanked her into his embrace.

"Hey!" It took every ounce of Tyler's control to keep his beast from busting out on the tourist filled streets of Chicago's biggest attraction. He shoved the stranger from behind, knocking Katrina from his arms.

She stumbled and landed hard on the ground. Tears stained her cheeks. The cold wind blew strands of long, black hair across her face.

“Get your hands off her.” He bent to help her, but the stranger blocked him. Straightening, Tyler glared at Katrina’s assailant and met a cold, dark stare.

His beast rose closer to the surface and clouded his thoughts. She belonged to him and this male thought to block his way. The only solution was to tear this asshole limb from limb. “Get out of my way.” He spoke each word separately and clearly to get his point across.

“This is none of your concern.” The stranger spoke with a thick accent like Katrina’s.

“You’re on Vasi territory. Anything that happens here is my concern. And she belongs to me.” Tyler pointed to Katrina, then back to himself.

“Chinatown is not Vasi territory. Never has been and never will be. And this female mated me before she ran away.” Crossing his arms, the stranger planted himself in front of Tyler. “She still belongs to me and has never been yours to take.”

Tyler’s jaw hung as if on broken hinges. He shot her a questioning look, but she stared at the ground, not meeting his gaze. Katrina hated to speak about her past. Now, he knew why.

She wiped her face, huddled on the ground, and didn’t deny a thing.

Every bit of joy in his life lay with Katrina, but truth's claws dug into his heart. He didn't know which hurt more, the lies or the way she hunched on the ground, submitting to this stranger like an omega all over again.

One of the surrounding males took her by the arms and assisted her to her feet.

She took a step toward Tyler, reached out her hand, and spoke his name in a tone laced with regret. Tear-filled eyes pleaded with him.

Fuck shifter laws. Fuck this stranger. And fuck any territory he stepped on. No one would make him give her up. "I'll ask politely one last time, buddy." Tyler's glare challenged the stranger. "Let her go."

The Asian trailed a look down his thin body and back. "Or what? You will sell me insurance?"

Tyler relaxed his hold on his beast.

It burst from his body in a spray of clothes and blood. Bipedal, he towered over the unknown shifters.

Cries from the humans crowding the street filled the air. Not everyday a lanky redhead exploded into three hundred pounds of teeth and claws.

Werewolves scaring the locals only caused the pack

trouble, but this was an emergency. His alpha would just have to take it out of his hide.

With a full back-handed swing, Tyler knocked the stranger out of his path to Katrina.

The man who had helped her to stand snatched her away into the panicked crowd.

As if waking from a nightmare, she shook her head, then kicked and screamed until they were swallowed from his view.

Leaping after her, Tyler was intercepted midair. He hit the pavement with a bone-crunching impact. Air rushed out of his lungs while stars whirled around his head, yet he still managed to roll from the attack. He might not train like Eric, his alpha, or Robert, his beta, but Katrina had forced him to learn the basics of keeping his hide intact.

He jumped to his feet and faced his opponent. The dark, cold eyes of the unknown Asian male stared back from the face of the beast who'd attacked him. His companions had shifted, too.

Impending death confronted Tyler. Three shifters against one were terrible odds, especially for a shifter who worked as a real estate agent.

The streets had emptied quickly and the faint sound of sirens reached them.

Stalking away, the stranger didn't even give Tyler a backward glance, although the other two prowled closer.

In the distance, he heard Katrina scream his name. Tears sprung to his eyes at the cry. He was supposed to protect her. A vise squeezed his chest. Breathing became difficult around his breaking heart. Red became the only color he could see.

His opponents coordinated their attacks and jumped him together.

* * * *

Katrina attempted to transform into her wolf-beast form as Chen's guard dragged her through the panicked human crowd. Her beast didn't respond. Sharp claws of fear tore into her heart. What was wrong?

Her beast used to cower like this in the past when faced with Chen, but they'd grown so much since escaping to America. It only took one moment in her old alpha's presence and they'd lost all they had gained. No, please no, she needed to connect with her beast and fight.

She looked at her true mate a last time as he stood in his red tinged magnificent form against Chen and

his pack mates. Their gazes met and she reached for him, hoping one day he might forgive her secrets.

If only the past would have remained buried. No one knew of her life in China—she wanted the depravity forgotten. Her best friend, Sugar, had once told her to build a wall around the haunting memories, and she had. Now, Chen, her worst nightmare, showed up here, halfway around the world.

What did an alpha of a large shifter clan want with the lowest of daughters of her birth pack? She'd been nothing but garbage to him. There must be other females with the same pure shifter blood as her. Chen could mate and torture one of them. What made her so special?

She struggled in the guard's arms, twisting and turning until she sank her flat, human teeth into his neck.

With a cry, he pulled her off by yanking on her long hair, then slapped her across the face hard enough to rattle her thoughts. Such hits had been common in her youth but it had been years since anyone had laid an unkind hand on her. Limp, she wasn't difficult for him to carry and take away from Chinatown. The place where she'd met a misfit pack

of omega shifters. The place she'd felt most at home. The place where Tyler had kissed her for the first time.

She cried out his name one last time as loud as she could. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance he'd come for her.

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