

1. Oak.

December

Even at five twenty in the morning, the car radio had nothing to offer except obscenely cheerful Christmas songs. Emma Calthrop gritted her teeth but it was better than silence and it was doing a reasonable job of keeping her awake. Her tiredness was verging on euphoria; an emotional state that was only partly down to the successful outcome of a difficult foaling she'd been called to attend six hours previously. It had as much to do with twelve hours without food or sleep, as having saved a thirty-thousand-pound mare and its potentially race-winning colt.

She gripped the steering wheel and gingerly flexed the muscles of her neck and shoulders. A spasm deep at the base of her neck fired the early warning of a headache if she couldn't relax.

In less than a week it would be Christmas and she had bought no presents, sent no cards, nor made any of the other usual preparations that featured most peoples' lives at this time of year. Her plans were the same as they had been for the last three Christmases: two days off; alone apart from the routine of half an hour spent dutifully around at the neighbours. On Christmas Day there would be a six-minute phone conversation with her brother in South Africa, and a slightly less punctual four-and-a-half-minute phone conversation with her sister in Newcastle. The prospect was not a cheery one.

The kind, slightly rumpled face of her business partner came briefly to mind. Andy Fraser was perhaps the one person she would have enjoyed being in a position to buy for. He was going through enough turmoil as it was, facing his first post-divorce Christmas however and the last thing he needed was the incongruity of an un-called for gift from one of his staff. Cards and presents between colleagues were in any case generally eschewed in favour of an altruistic online donation to charity... Dutifully, Emma erased his image with a blink.

Instead, she focussed upon the road and tried to recall all the positive aspects of her life; a genuinely rewarding job, her friends and two dogs, her health and relative fitness and a youthful appearance that routinely shaved ten years off her true age. Yet even collectively, these plusses couldn't mitigate the dull, ever-present ache of loneliness - an emotional state that seemed cynically targeted at such a family orientated time of year. She wondered morosely how long it would take anyone to miss her if she *did* crash the car.

"Bah humbug." Emma muttered to herself darkly.

The roads were deserted. She was driving through an other-worldly, pre-dawn silence which was neither night nor day and an ethereal mist rose off immaculately kept, frost laden lawns either side of her. Three-quarter of a million-pound houses flanked the tree-lined road, for this was the affluent territory of professional footballers, bankers, and stockbrokers.

Emma was wondering what annual income would be required to maintain such properties when without warning, a figure shot across the road in front of her. She reflexively slammed on the brakes as a loud thud proclaimed an impact. The wheels locked as tyres scraped over haphazardly laid grit and the car slewed sideways to a standstill. With her heart thudding, she spun around in her seat, searching for whatever she'd hit. The figure had loomed large in her headlights, substantial and dark – covered in fur but with a stark white underbelly and long, long limbs. But there was no sign of it. Emma blinked in dismay, wondering if she was so tired that she was hallucinating.

Hearing the thud echo in her mind, she put the car in neutral, applied the handbrake and, after a brief, shaky struggle with her seatbelt, got out to check for damage. The car engine idling in the quiet street, sounded uncommonly loud and Emma was nervously aware of its position in the middle of the road. A glance either way confirmed her solitude and she quickly crouched to scan the front of the car. There was no blood, but a tell-tale dent now graced the off-side front wing, just shy of the headlamp.

Cursing, Emma straightened up and rubbed the back of her neck tiredly. She now had little choice but to try and find the large dog or whatever it was she had hit. She looked around carefully, then at the ground for any

signs of a blood trail. But there was nothing. Her head was beginning to pound as she gazed fretfully at the plume of exhaust thickening behind her car. It had probably only been a glancing blow, she told herself. Whatever she had hit, was probably half a mile away by now.

Emma got back in the car, but found her gaze drawn to the narrow entrance of an exclusive private estate, the gate to which yawned wide open. Muttering at the possibly ill-advised nature of her decision, Emma wrestled the car around and steered it determinedly through. She stabbed the radio off and drove slowly, winding the window down to peer concertedly down every driveway. As cold slithered over the doorframe onto her lap, her breath plumed under her nose and she could hear cones in the pine trees overhead crack in the tightening chill.

Spotting movement in the depths of a small wood adjacent to a large house on the right, Emma brought the car to a standstill. She loitered anxiously for a minute or two, concerned about the many CCTV cameras that protected these houses. Having gained the safety of the wood, the creature appeared static. Its movement was limited to odd, spasmodic twitching that did little to reveal its identity but was strongly suggestive that she had found her casualty. She applied the handbrake and cut both the engine and headlights. Silence descended like a blanket. Emma got out of the car and walked cautiously down the driveway into the wood.

The figure was hunched over – a bulky, amorphous shape with proportions that seemed decidedly unnatural. As she approached, everything about it jarred against her innate understanding of anatomy. She recognised elements individually as being either canine or primate in origin - but both should never be evident within the frame of the same animal. And it was bigger than she had first thought. She cast around for a stick or a branch – anything she could defend herself with if it turned on her.

As she stooped to collect a likely candidate, the creature became aware of her presence and whirled threateningly to face her. It was still dark – and darker still under the trees but Emma was now close enough for that to no longer matter. She pulled up sharply in shock. Horror and disbelief sent shivers chasing up and down her spine in a way that hadn't happened since the innocence of childhood populated her imagination with bogey men and forest monsters.

The figure struggled onto its hind feet before her - a man, but not a man. Its face was a muzzle stretched into a violent snarl. It glared at her malevolently. Emma was stunned. Fear routed her to the spot. All the hairs stood up on the back of her neck and her heart pounded but she squared her stance and raised her tree branch in a warning gesture.

To her surprise, her warning appeared to be heeded. The violence slowly evaporated from the creature's intent and with a last, half-hearted

snarl, its attention turned inward to its own pain. Emma automatically scanned the creature in a rapid triage assessment – a process somewhat hindered by the common-sense part of her mind refusing to believe what she was seeing.

The creature dropped to its knees again, opened its shoulders and howled – a heart-stopping, primeval sound that started all the dogs in the neighbourhood barking. It regarded Emma warily but then spasmed forward almost onto its face. Bones and joints cracked at different locations all over its body but the breadth and muscularity of its back remained unaltered from what was an essentially human configuration. Its neck twisted obscenely, as if it were trying desperately to rid itself of some invisible gag or restraint, then Emma saw its face flatten in horrifying detail. Canine teeth as long as her forefinger retreated back into its skull and she stepped forward in involuntary fascination.

“That’s not... *possible*...” she breathed aloud. Blood dripped from its receding teeth, its eyes were baleful with pain yet it seemed somehow aware of her disbelief.

“*Five minutes*...” it uttered and braced its body against another onslaught. Emma flinched at further horrific sounds of bones cracking, not sure by which she was more stunned – the fact that she was all too evidently standing less than ten feet from a lycanthrope or the fact that it had spoken to her in a gruff, deep, only just intelligible voice.

Still prone, it looked tiredly at her again and its voice became a grumble – a rhythmical shudder of insensible vowels. Emma realised suddenly that it was laughing – but then it was gripped by another violent spasm and the slabs of muscle on its back contracted, forcing it to rise up onto its knees in an exaggerated, involuntary stretch. It opened its mouth and roared again – this time a very human noise.

He – for it was most definitely a he - shook like a dog and subsequently deposited large quantities of hair onto the frost-nipped grass around him – including most of it from his head. Fingernails receded and forelimbs shortened into wrists. He shook his head again – like an animal with an irritating seed in its ear and the pricked, pointed cranium-top ears folded backwards and curled in on themselves, briefly resembling the roseate ears of a greyhound before flattening and shortening further until they were the right shape, and situated in the anatomically correct place for a human.

Panting and fully transformed at last, the man fell forward onto his chest in the grass, his skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat and loose fur. Emma crouched cautiously by his side.

“Where did the car hit you? Are you injured?” Her voice sounded hoarse and incongruously matter-of-fact. His answer was a low growl, the

words indistinct in the turf: “Just give me another minute...” he pleaded wearily.

Obediently, Emma stepped back and leant against a tree. She folded her arms patiently, consciously trying to reduce her heart rate. After a minute or two the man pushed himself onto his knees but remained leaning forward. In another moment, he was violently sick, the retching deep and protracted. When he finally raised his face, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked impassively into Emma’s eyes.

He appeared to be in his early fifties, slightly overweight but otherwise muscular and balding. His eyes were dark in the moonlight but placid. When he got to his feet, Emma assessed him to be around five foot eleven. The contrast to the animal she had followed into the woods was extraordinary but the entire transformation had indeed taken no more than five minutes.

Unable to think of anything else to say, Emma asked: “Do you need a lift?” At that, he raised an eyebrow. “Well you’re either a very well-off werewolf or you’re lost,” she pointed out, indicating the large property behind him.

“And you’re exceedingly calm, considering what you’ve just witnessed.” He countered in an incongruously well-spoken voice.

“Well I can hardly refute the evidence of my own eyes,” she shrugged.

He accepted this tiredly. “Come.” Entirely unselfconscious of his nudity, he turned and walked rapidly towards the house behind them. He entered through an unlocked back door, and strode through a large, well equipped kitchen into the hallway beyond. From there, he took the stairs two at a time and Emma had to hurry to keep up, obedient but decidedly on guard about whatever hospitality she was about to receive.

The reason for his haste became apparent when he entered a large bedroom and made immediately for the en-suite, where he bent over the toilet and vomited a second time. Emma loitered uncomfortably outside. After a minute or two, he re-entered the bedroom and casually pulled on a dressing gown. He sat on the edge of a very large bed and sagged tiredly. His lower legs were covered in cuts and scratches, as were his hands and forearms. Filth rimmed his otherwise well-tended nails and soil was pressed against his flesh, as if he had rolled in damp earth.

Emma’s need to break the silence made her sound uncertain. “My name is Emma,” she began, “I’m a vet. I’m sure I hit you. With the car, I mean...”

In response, the man simply shrugged his shoulders. His eyes closed briefly before snapping open once again. With a groan, he got to his feet and pushed past her to regain the en-suite. Irritated by his refusal to reciprocate the introduction, this time Emma ignored the sound of renewed retching. She stood with her arms folded in the doorway, watching him impatiently.

When he got his breath back, he shrugged again apologetically. "You may have caught my hand – and hip." He lifted his right hand and they both looked at it. The knuckles appeared slightly swollen but the skin wasn't broken. A glance at his right hip revealed a deeper purpling of the flesh which betrayed another bruise.

"Is it painful? Let me look." Emma stepped decisively into the bathroom but he ignored her and instead horrified her by dipping his hands into the toilet bowl. He stirred around the contents, lifting several solids to scrutinize before dropping them back into the toilet and flushing finally. "Mostly cat I think..." he commented wryly, "...could be worse..."

He stepped behind a floor-to-ceiling glass partition that enclosed an impressively proportioned shower area and turned it on. "My name is Leo Cartwright" he answered finally. "I'd shake your hand but..." he smiled as Emma stepped back hastily. "Look, it's clear we should talk," he admitted, "but I need to take a shower and then sleep..."

Emma sighed in frustration but nodded. His weariness was obvious and it was catching. She was fighting her own insidious fatigue and delayed shock made her shaky. The heat from the shower was soporific. She began to feel insouciant and disconnected with reality. Emma blinked hard in an attempt to clear the fog. Events had taken on a decidedly dream-like quality.

"Have you been up all night as well?" Leo Cartwright casually removed his robe and dropped it to the floor.

"Yes, practically."

"Then go home. Sleep." He stepped under the scalding hot water and turned under its jet. "I will find you again."

"How? And why?" Emma asked shrewdly. Her eyes were searching as soft pillows of steam slowly filled the bathroom.

"Well I assume your practice is local and in the phone book," he answered patiently, "but quite frankly if that fails, I could find you by smell." He grinned suddenly at her before bending to scrape at the dirt on his legs with a rough sponge.

Emma raised her eyebrows incredulously. "How?"

"In the same way that your scent has already told me all manner of intimate details about you..." he explained. When her expression remained uncomprehending, he sighed and took a deep breath: "You are in your early forties," he assessed, "although I must admit it's only my nose that told me that – you don't look it. You are physically fit, in good health, you've never smoked, you hardly drink, and you've never given birth. You are currently about midway through your menstrual cycle and it's been a *long* time since you last had sex... Your body is crying out for attention." he admonished.

Emma's jaw dropped.

"Am I right?"

Her mouth snapped shut in annoyance. Denial seemed pointless but her embarrassment and natural indignation were ameliorated by his matter-of-fact tone of voice. “Yes. About everything, pretty much” she admitted thickly. She didn’t know what else to say.

“What time is your last appointment later today?” He turned several times under the water, rinsing soap away.

Emma shook her head, stalling, and assessing the wisdom of lying to him. She suspected he would instantly know this too. “Today is a day off,” she finally admitted. He nodded then reached up to turn off the shower. The sudden silence felt like a pact between them. He broke it regretfully.

“I’m sorry but if I don’t get some sleep soon then it won’t be enough – uh - before tonight.”

Emma understood when she was being dismissed. She nodded and without another word gratefully made her way back down the stairs. On her route through the kitchen, she dropped a business card on the table. It seemed churlish not to and she would feel decidedly better about thinking he had found her by conventional means. She also hoped that providing him with her mobile number would limit him to this option.

In the wood outside his home she stooped to collect a handful of the fur he had shed. It was coarse and thick: definitely not human. She lifted it to her nose, inhaling a harsh, pungent smell – a little like fox but denser; earthier. Back in the car, she wrapped the small clutch of fur in a disposable glove but was unsure what she was going to do with it. For now however, it represented tangible evidence that she hadn’t just imagined the whole thing.

Emma yawned and squinted up at thin morning sunlight. The moroseness she had felt earlier deepened suddenly to depression. His short assessment of her had summarised her life so succinctly that she felt its deficiencies keenly. It was only then that she realised he had skilfully refrained from answering the “why” part of her question.

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Her dreams after she fell into bed that morning were fervent and tempestuous. Undeniably sexual in origin, they refuted any hope of a beneficial rest until she awoke about an hour before noon, cross and fretful. After showering, Emma fixed herself a substantial brunch and walked the dogs, feeling better for the fresh air, despite a biting wind that threatened snow.

Back home, she brooded until her reverie was disturbed at around one-thirty by a knock on her front door. A prescient sense of dread was confirmed when she peered into the hallway and observed her dogs sitting

side by side, staring at the door with the same keen interest that they observed next door's cat through the front room window. Understanding immediately who it must be, Emma felt her heart quail.

She briefly considered hiding from him but when he knocked again she steeled herself and with a calm she didn't feel, pushed her way between the two lurchers and opened the door. Leo Cartwright turned from his appraisal of the cul-de-sac where she lived and regarded her blandly. Only the most disciplined of ingrained training prevented her dogs from clamouring forward behind her. Soft little whines of eagerness betrayed their happiness however – a direct contrast to Emma's own feelings about their visitor. He smiled cheerfully. He was dressed casually in jeans and a khaki jacket, buttoned up tight against the chill.

"I have dogs," she warned, realising that he must have heard them by now.

"A middle-aged bitch and a young dog – I know," he confirmed. "Dogs love me," but then he hesitated, "any cats?"

Emma intuited that if his senses were as acute as he purported, then he would be aware of the territories of at least three which lived in the close. Responding to an impish desire to discomfort him, she smiled thinly and lied. "I lost my cat in mysterious circumstances about four weeks ago."

For a fraction of a second a look of alarm crossed Leo's face until he spotted her smile and she stepped aside to allow him in.

"Not funny," he remarked as he crossed the threshold, but the corners of his mouth lifted in amusement. He pulled off his gloves and unbuttoned his coat as Emma shut the door behind him.

He seemed smaller than she remembered – an almost deliberately ordinary man. The dogs however, were virtually turning themselves inside out in an effort to gain his attention.

Emma was proud of their training and with Leo ignoring them, they kept to her side until she showed him into the living room. There, he ceremoniously called them to him, whereupon both dogs ignored their owner and fell at his feet in cringing obeisance.

"Drift..." Emma dutifully introduced the young male, "and Tassel..." she indicated the smaller, older bitch. She tried not to feel jealous as he stooped, allowing them to sniff him over. Their tails rotated manically until he abruptly straightened up and they sprang away; happy but instantly accepting of the dismissal.

"Tea or coffee?" she asked as he removed his jacket and settled casually upon the sofa.

"Coffee please."

In the kitchen, Emma bit worriedly at her thumbnail as the kettle boiled. Overnight, she'd had plenty of time to consider why he'd want to

contact her again. Quite frankly, she didn't like any of the conclusions she had drawn. She gazed out of the kitchen window at her small, untidy garden and suddenly felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. Unmistakeably, she became aware of him immediately behind her.

There had been no sound to indicate that he had joined her in the kitchen but she felt his presence with every fibre of her being. Her eyes widened in fear yet she stubbornly refused to turn around and acknowledge his trespass. A shiver of dread swam down her spine. She wondered bleakly if she was about to be strangled or if he would simply snap her neck with his bare hands. Emma glanced down at her own hands, which were gripping the work surface in terror. The tiny, pale hairs on her forearms stood on end as she felt his hands settle upon her waist.

Managing to avoid leaping out of her skin only because of the purity of her terror, Emma felt every muscle tighten against him. His voice was gravelly in her ear and as he leaned forward to whisper, she felt his stubble against her neck and her fear instantly evaporated into something else entirely.

"You have nothing to fear from me," he murmured.

She felt like a baby bird caught in the grasp of a cat's paw. The sense that she was being toyed with was hard not to fight against but his voice was hypnotic and overriding every other thought and feeling was an almost overwhelming sexual desire. Helpless to do anything else as she felt his lips against her neck, she turned in his arms, but fought her need to return the embrace. His lips snagged the corner of her mouth and Emma had to consciously resist an impulse to accept the kiss and open her mouth.

She pushed against his chest. Feeling the reassurance of the work units behind her, she used them to brace against and shoved him backwards - hard. He blinked but accepted her rejection and remained an arm's length away. He smiled. His face was flushed and the pulse in his neck unexpectedly betrayed his own desire.

"I will not hurt you." he stressed. His eyes were searching, almost pleading. He lifted his hands in an open-palmed gesture of appeasement. Emma could see nothing but his desire to express the truth of this. "I can be whatever you want." he stated emphatically.

Emma closed her eyes briefly. She wanted him, she couldn't deny it - but she didn't trust these feelings as her own.

"You want me..." he whispered as if reading her mind.

"I want a lover!" she admitted, hissing the words between her teeth in frustration. "But that isn't necessarily *you!*" Emma glared at him, her eyes alive with fight.

Leo acceded her point and relaxed. They were engaged in a game he loved and was very good at. He was the hunter with her - his prey - backed

into a corner and they squared up to each other in a way that thrilled through both of them. It was elemental.

“...And that reminds me,” Emma grated, “how in god’s name could you *possibly* know that I’ve not had a...” she struggled briefly with an absurd embarrassment at the profanity which had immediately come to mind. “...had sex,” she amended quickly, “for a long time.” She forced herself to appear less confrontational by uncurling her fists and instead folded her arms defensively across her chest. She felt her breath ease as the fight or flight impulse retreated slightly. “Where I am in my monthly cycle is - I grant you - something which I can accept you would know...” she stated evenly, somehow relieved at this explicit reference to his impossible status as a beast from myth and legend. “But the frequency of any sexual activity cannot possibly be something you can sense - surely?” Emma was emphatic, but her question betrayed her curiosity – and her doubt.

Leo had the grace to look sheepish. Laconically, he leaned against the wall behind him and shrugged.

“To a certain extent, I can.” he refuted stubbornly. “But you are right about that...” he smiled wryly. “It was mostly an inspired guess, I’m afraid.”

Emma was incensed. He could only have made such an assumption based on her physical appearance and that stung. She knew she was dowdy – but it certainly didn’t help to be reminded. She glared at him from over her reading glasses. “How dare you!” she breathed, but had to gulp around a sudden, incongruous urge to laugh at his audacity. It undermined her indignation and although she was desperate to retain the moral high ground, it was almost impossible to balance upon the knife-edge of such outrage without falling one way or the other. Emma looked away from him, knowing that if she met his eyes, all he would have to do to ruin what remained of her composure would be to smile.

But Leo did not press his advantage; he did not move. He seemed to understand her emotional fragility as well as her physical vulnerability and refrained from exploiting the inappropriate humour between them. Emma shook her head. He was so utterly *ordinary* to look at that the magnetism she had felt emanating from him a moment ago, seemed ridiculous. But the second she recalled that power, the desire returned. Her insides melted and she saw Leo respond instantly. His eyes glittered and he lifted his head, inhaling unmistakably. Worst of all, he made no attempt to hide his response.

Damn she thought angrily. “Well, you’ve got some balls I’ll give you that, just how many women have you seduced this way?” Maybe this was his *raison d’etre*, she theorised: pick on vulnerable women and – well what exactly? Throw himself in front of their car, reveal himself as a werewolf and then offer himself as a sexual partner if they didn’t immediately run away

screaming? It sounded utterly preposterous even to her and she told herself crossly that she was being hysterical.

Leo was scratching his chin reflectively. "I... well I've *tried* once or twice I suppose..." he admitted, "but I imagine my success rate is no better than any other bloke my age..." He glanced owlishly at her, conscious that she was on the verge of laughing once again.

He shrugged suddenly. "Look, my *balls* as you eloquently put it, are based on a set of unequivocally superior senses – you've *seen* why..." He sighed heavily. "I know what *I* want," he tapped his chest gently. "I can also sense what you *need*, whether you *want* it or not..." He then paused. "I also appreciate that you have no reason to trust me but I can only repeat – for what it's worth – that I *will not* harm you. In any way." His expression was deadly serious. "And, at the risk of making you laugh - out loud - this time, I think I can give you that: what you need I mean, physically and emotionally..." he added softly.

Emma deliberately met his gaze – challenging his statement until he shrugged again, this time apologetically. "Such arrogance..." she marvelled under her breath – but her words contained a grudging admiration she couldn't hide. Leo smiled and took one step forward. Emma felt her heart quicken in response. Although he cautiously refrained from moving again, his expression became intent; once more returning to the hunt.

"If you can think of any reason I should not make love to you – other than the myriad of reasonable reservations about someone you've only just met..." he acceded, "...then please tell me." Through her silence, he regarded her patiently. "Sometimes..." he mused, gazing reflectively through the window behind her "...trust can be spontaneous as well as earned."

"You're a fucking *werewolf!*" she pointed out in exasperation, but in truth was more impressed by the odd profundity of his statement than she would have cared to admit.

He nodded carefully. "Yes I am." They regarded each other steadily. "Well?" he asked presently, "Anything else?"

This time Emma did laugh aloud - but she recognised that he had a point. She examined her feelings carefully, trying to think of an intelligent, *logical* reason to deny him. She was quickly forced to concede however, that logic had little role to play in this particular confrontation.

Years of caution; of taking the safe option and of suspecting that such options represented a host of missed opportunities, warred with a slightly hysterical vision of his hands around her neck. She groaned in frustration and her mind remained stubbornly blank. Leo stepped forward again. This time Emma did not protest. He moved closer until there was less than a hands breadth between them. After a moment that lasted an eon, Emma closed her eyes and dropped her forehead onto his chest in surrender.

Still, he did not move. His arms remained at his sides until Emma helplessly lifted her gaze. Her eyes were full of uncertainty but she understood implicitly that he was waiting for her to make the first move. That was the nature of his game – to allow his prey to step knowingly and willingly into the trap.

They were so close that Leo felt her breath upon his lips as she spoke, whispering finally: “Don’t disappoint me…” then she kissed him, assuaging months of frustration in an act of simple, tactile joy that she loved and was good at it. Her tongue melted against his, sending hot little jolts of electricity through her womb. Emma closed her eyes and felt her loins turn to liquid. Instinct took over and she avidly followed it, her mouth tracking across his jaw and neck, inhaling his clean, aftershave-laden scent, only dimly aware of the way in which her hands were pulling at his clothing.

Here was a man, suddenly and miraculously in her arms – and the joy of that was enough to make her cry out but then she became illogically fearful that he might yet reject her, that he might cruelly step away and leave her sexually and emotionally stranded: the ultimate act of control. Her heart laboured in her chest at this new possibility. Her fervour diminished but he did not move out of her embrace and he had undoubtedly been returning her kisses. Slowly, she regained some composure.

“Shall we go upstairs?” he suggested; a polite request that seemed oddly conventional under the circumstances – especially when moments before, she had been perfectly prepared to let him fuck her against the work units. A mental vision of that had its own effect and Leo inhaled again deeply. “God, Emma…”

Swallowing down her fear, Emma forced herself to take direct action and with her boldness, found her confidence restored. Decisively she took hold of his hand and pulled him up the stairs to her bedroom. In the sanctuary of that space, his eyes were full of her. They traced her movements slavishly. Emma felt suddenly exultant. Having taken this step, it seemed that he was as much in her power as she was in his and their need was evidently mutual. All trace of fear left her body. Sinuously, she became the active partner, pulling him to her and encouraging him to relax with soft sighs that described her own pleasure.

The two of them disrobed quickly, acceding to their urgency but not so rushed that Emma failed to indicate the need for contraception. The box of condoms in her bedside drawer was several months old – bought on a wave of optimism in the summer. After that brief verbal communication, Emma succumbed to her metier: body language told her everything she needed to know about most people, most of the time and she knew she was good at it. Leo, it seemed, was equally good at communicating in this way.

Emma thus found herself enjoying the consummation of an unusual meeting of minds and bodies that was as explosive and as enjoyable as it was unexpected. Leo was attentive to her needs and after he expressed his desire to see her come, she allowed him to provide the means, instructing him in what route to take across the contours of her body until she was writhing at his behest, coming almost at his command. Then he took his own pleasure and Emma enjoyed that as much, cradling his vulnerability like a gift freely given.

For a moment, Emma surrendered to a feeling of love for him. She allowed herself to revel in the fantasy that he was hers and that the love they had made – as well as the need they had found - was mutual: but only for a moment. As his breath eased and she felt him twitch inside her, she accepted the likely reality: that he would feel comparatively little for her.

As they separated, Emma felt her heart's thudding ease gradually and she took a deep breath. Then she grinned with sudden recklessness; a wild expression directed at the insensible ceiling. A fuck is a fuck she acknowledged, and this - bloody good one as it turned out - was, as he had rightly surmised, long overdue. She relaxed gratefully: feeling suddenly human once again.

Even through the ensuing cat-nap, his continued urges pursued her – first into her dreams and then with his hands, arousing her in semiconscious waves until she emerged from a brief sleep directly into an act of love that pulled her into the here and now. Astonished, she met him completely. There was no awareness of a start or a finish, just raw sensation that continued to entertain them both, pushing them to a physical exploration which condensed weeks into hours; until Emma got a sense that he was striving towards exhaustion and she intuitively understood why.

Entangled limbs pushed and grasped, reaching for yet more and more until the growl in his chest sounded suddenly deeper than it should and another, uncounted climax gasped inside her. He gazed around as if coming to, noted the encroaching twilight and reached to turn the clock which had been knocked sideways by a flailing arm. Leo sat up in alarm. Sweat plastered the hair to his chest but his face was pale. As their eyes met, he moaned in fear. Emma understood implicitly. It was just after four. In less than half an hour it would be dark.

He leapt off the bed, staggered on trembling muscles and with a groan, reached for his clothes. Emma did her utmost to help – mostly by keeping out of the way as he danced, shrugging on his jeans, stuffing his socks and underwear roughly into his pockets and pulling his shoes on without tying the laces. She followed, throwing on a robe as he grabbed his

sweater and ran down the stairs. Bare-chested, he reached for his coat and turned to her in apology. "I'm sorry – but if I don't get home..."

Emma pushed a finger against his lips. "Wait - one moment." She rushed into the kitchen, to a small fridge-freezer from where she retrieved a plastic bag. She pushed this into his hands already burdened by his sweater. A familiar smell assailed his nostrils but he was too distracted to place it. He clutched both bag and sweater to his chest and reached for his car keys in his coat pocket. "Now go." she encouraged. He kissed her once and fled. As she shut the door behind him, Emma wondered if she would ever see him again.

Leo only just made it. Flinging his sweater and the plastic bag onto the passenger seat beside him, he drove with desperate concentration, keeping to the speed limit but with a racing driver's keen awareness of his surroundings.

When he reached home, he was out of the car in an instant, already kicking off his shoes as he felt the change in his mood and his heart-rate that signalled his transformation was imminent. Feeling bile and the familiar dread rise in his throat, he hurried to the door of his cellar. There, he tugged off the rest of his clothes and once naked again, opened the plastic bag which Emma had given him.

He stared at its contents in amazement and laughed breathlessly. It was funny, irreverent – but also extraordinarily insightful. Leo pulled a large knuckle bone clear of the plastic. Shards of fatty meat hung from it and it was filled with marrow. Saliva filled his mouth and he grinned fiercely. He threw it down the steps of his cellar and glanced briefly out of the window at the pine trees that framed his view of the full moon.

Feeling his blood boil, he followed the bone down the steps, pausing only to lock the door behind him. As he gained the hard, cement floor of the underground room, Leo felt his heart begin to labour and he emitted an involuntary whimper of resolute dread. Seating himself upon a stained single mattress that was pushed against one wall, he swallowed and braced himself for the horror and the pain.

Dogs in the surrounding houses barked in unison as an ethereal howl rose presently above the rooftops and beckoned them to a place they only dreamed of. They clamoured to comply. Some even made it out into their gardens before being called back inside. The howl was not repeated.

In the darkness of the cellar, a huge grey wolf paced restlessly. He returned to the mattress and gathered the bone in powerful jaws. His tongue

rasped the inside, extracting as much of the marrow as he could reach before he closed his back teeth over its hard surface and concentrated briefly. Bone splintered. In satisfaction, the wolf nosed through the choicest morsels, selecting the soft parts near the knuckle that he could chew into smaller pieces and swallow.

Occasionally he looked up with passive yellow eyes, to a narrow quarterlight through which he could track the progress of the moon in the cloudless sky. When the bone's hard shank was stripped clean of all meat and marrow, he relaxed with a great sigh onto his side and slept. Chase dreams caused his paws to paddle reflexively. The night passed quietly.

When the sun cast a shard of yellow light at an oblique angle across the internal brickwork, a man woke shivering in the unheated room. Trembling, Leo got to his feet and on stiffened limbs, struggled up the steep narrow steps to a door that was scarred by a violent patina of deep scratches. Leo unlocked it with numb fingers and stooped to gather the clothes he had abandoned the night before. He slowly took the stairs to his bedroom and turned on the shower. He then waited, expecting to see his stomach contents again. He wasn't disappointed but the resulting regurgitation was less arduous than usual and for once, contained no dread mystery.

As he felt scalding hot water cascade over his shoulders and soak through to his bones, he flexed thigh muscles that twanged in protest and was this time sublimely grateful for knowing the source of their soreness. He grinned wolfishly and wondered about the corresponding aches and pains that Emma would be suffering.

Today was Sunday. Leo had never owned a pet so he wasn't certain but he didn't think vets' practices were open on Sundays. He grinned again, feeling hope and gratitude fill him with a cautious optimism he hadn't experienced in years. Leo knew that he was using her ruthlessly but today he was going to need her again just as much.

That same morning, as Emma awoke and pulled herself groggily out of bed, her eyes widened in astonishment when muscles cruelly protested the previous day's unaccustomed exercise. She sat back down upon the edge of her bed to take stock. Her inner thighs complained the loudest but her stomach muscles and quadriceps were almost as painful. Her pubic bone was bruised and tender but the internal ache was harder to assess. Twisting carefully, Emma ascertained with some confidence that the bruising was nothing more than what was to be expected considering the nature of

the exercise. Emma shook her head and smiled, cautiously getting to her feet to commence her normal routine; pulling on warm clothing prior to taking the dogs for their early morning walk.

Sunlight glistened on a hard frost. It was a beautiful day and the dogs revelled in the glory of life, the pursuit of rabbits and the sheer joy of running on the park. Stumbling along behind them on wobbly legs, Emma found it hard not to agree with their sentiment and she hailed familiar dog-walkers with a cheery wave. Even if she never saw Leo again, his legacy was something that could not be quantified and she re-acknowledged the feeling that somehow, with a simple, physical act, she had re-joined the human race.

When she pulled onto her drive an hour or so later, she found Leo waiting for her on the front step. His eyes were closed and his face was turned to the sunlight. He looked like he'd been there a while. He greeted the dogs' enthusiasm with a smile, shielding his eyes from the sun as Emma approached. They were both cagey and uncertain with each other but Emma could not hide her pleasure.

"Come on in." she invited. "I have to take a shower but come; have breakfast with me." Leo remained seated on her front step until Emma sank to her haunches by his side. He raised his hand to cup her cheek and tease a strand of hair away from her eyes.

"Rough night?" she intuited gently.

In answer, Leo allowed a smile to creep across his face. "Thanks to you, last night was a very good night, comparatively speaking..." Emma placed her head on one side and studied him carefully. She was familiar enough with her own moods to recognise when introspection deepened to depression.

"What then?" she encouraged softly.

He sighed and finally got to his feet with a low groan. "I'm fifty-three Emma. I don't know how long I can carry on, that's all..." he admitted.

In response, Emma gently lifted her hand to his face in an echo of his gesture a moment before. "In all honesty, I can't imagine how you've survived this long." she confessed in wonder. "But the man who had sex with me yesterday, clearly has enough vitality for five men half his age." She poked him in the ribs. "So, you need to stop feeling so sorry for yourself and eat something – I presume you have an empty stomach?" she surmised. He nodded gratefully and she opened the front door. "Well, do you like scrambled eggs?"

"I love scrambled eggs," he confessed agreeably.

As they were eating, Leo forced himself to relax in her company. He knew her body intimately, but had to remind himself that she was still a relative stranger and he was not accustomed to domestic intimacy. He found himself observing her carefully, an old habit that studiously took in the way that she watched him, the way her eyes were wryly aware of where the dogs were at all times, her relaxed, easy-going and generally open body posture but also the quizzical, sharp glances and the sense that she was listening to every word.

When they were interrupted by her landline, he continued to scrutinise her. In the hallway, silhouetted by sunlight that streamed in from windows either side of the front door, Emma reached for the phone and upon answering, glowed with a sudden liveliness he hadn't seen before. In animation, her features expressed quixotic intensity and ready amusement. The conversation was brief and she returned to the kitchen with an affectionate expression lingering.

"My boss..." she helpfully explained, "he was just asking if I would mind being on call today..."

"You're very attractive," Leo said suddenly.

Emma's eyebrows shot up and she gave him a very appraising stare. Then she looked away deliberately.

Ah, Leo thought to himself in amusement. "How long have you been a vet?" he asked instead.

"All my working life," she responded in some surprise. "I didn't just fall into it, if that's what you mean."

"Well I imagine not," he agreed affably. "Six years training?"

Emma nodded, licking tomato ketchup off her thumb and collected their plates which she stacked neatly next to the sink. "Coffee?"

He nodded.

"What do you do by the way? Whatever it is, it obviously pays well - judging by your house."

"It could be rented," he evaded, playfully feeling the need to challenge her assumptions.

"Which would probably cost you more per month than a mortgage on that estate," she pointed out.

Leo cleared his throat and answered carefully. "I'm a psychologist. A professional therapist."

Emma looked surprised – and could hardly contain her mirth. "Well you've got to admit, that's pretty funny, considering..." she remarked at his subsequent expression, "although I can understand why you'd be drawn to it. The *Id* must be a powerful familiar in your case..."

“Mmm – smart as well as attractive...” he smiled in agreement but was dismayed when she scowled. He decided not to let her get away with it this time. “Ok – you need to work on that,” he observed.

“What?”

“Your inability to accept compliments in a graceful and appropriate fashion”, he reasoned. “It’s a complete knee-jerk reaction... classically defensive,” he added evenly, “and one that can cause dismay and confusion - especially when the comment which caused it was genuinely meant.” He allowed himself to sound hurt. “In my case, it wasn’t so much a compliment as a simple observation made aloud in a companionable effort to share my thoughts...” He paused, aware that Emma was staring at him in amazement. She looked suddenly chagrined.

“You’re right. I apologise,” she agreed. “And thank you, the compliment was gratefully received, I assure you.”

“I can help you with that if you like.”

“Oh no,” Emma remarked. “If you think I’m going to lie down on a couch for you – in a metaphysical sense that is - you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Why, what are you afraid of?” As Emma poured coffee into two mugs, she shot him a suddenly haunted glance. “There’s nothing occultist or mysterious about psychology Emma,” Leo protested. “Mostly it is about applying logic objectively – and asking the right questions.”

Emma looked distinctly sceptical – and a little put out. “Do I so obviously need help?”

“Psychotherapy is there for anyone who asks for it and, I believe, we can all benefit from someone being objective – and asking the right questions.” He rose to follow her into the living room.

“Well you would,” she retorted, “and the size of your house testifies to your success.” Emma placed their mugs on a coffee table and sat casually upon the floor. Her youngest dog shifted from his position upon the rug to lie down next to her, placing his head on her lap. Emma fondled his ears absently.

Leo sat on the sofa and crossed his legs patiently. He was aware that since arriving that morning, he had not yet kissed her; a fact which he was anxious to rectify but Emma’s eyes shone in light of his perceived challenge.

“It’s not about what you need; it’s about what you want. Only occasionally do any of my clients actually *need* my intervention, more often they have simply come to the understanding there are things they want out of life I can assist them with.” He gazed at her thoughtfully. “How long have you been single?”

Emma’s response was immediately defensive once again. “What’s that got to do with -”

Leo interrupted by leaning forward to place an admonishing finger upon her lips. "Which is absolutely fine, if that is your choice – is it?"

She thought about that for a moment. "Yes - and no," she finally responded. Leo leaned back once again, his expression alive with interest.

"So, why do you think you have been?" he asked.

Emma glanced at him cagily. "You're bloody determined to do this aren't you?"

"Look, we can dress this up any way you like. We can simply call them meaningful conversations if you want – I don't have to sit here with a notebook and bang on about your childhood, but I *can* help you." He leaned forward again. "It's about getting the most out of your life, Emma. It's about having every chance to obtain what you strive for. To do that we must sometimes uncover unconscious desires and resolve conflicts... make the unconscious, conscious..." He paused at Emma's guarded expression. "We can come back to this if you like – but you *will* let me help you," he predicted with an infuriating smile.

"You're a lunatic!" she declared.

"A genuine, bona fide lunatic." he agreed happily.

Emma shifted to sit at his feet. She rose onto her knees and placed her hands either side of his legs to lean over his lap. She gazed into his eyes from less than six inches away then grinned as his smile broadened, deliberately sustaining their gaze until they began to feel the tug of it elsewhere.

"It surprises me that you appear to be self-conscious about your looks when you can do to me what you are doing right now, without even touching me..."

"What do you mean?" Emma asked in surprise. Leo took hold of her hand and placed it on the front of his jeans. His laugh was a low rumble.

"Why doctor – that's a highly unprofessional response," she remarked. They continued to grin at each other. "I am curious however," she admitted, "what made that happen for you?"

"Any number of things," he answered promptly, "Your proximity," "your smile. Your eyes laughing at me..." he added gently.

"Don't you think that's just natural considering what we were up to yesterday?"

Leo reflected upon this. "Quite possibly," he admitted, "although I think if you'd had a paper bag over your head I wouldn't have an erection." Emma laughed delightedly. "I am more than happy to make love to you," Leo continued, "even though you are being evasive... Is that what you want?"

Emma struggled with the suspicion that she was being expertly manipulated. She sat back upon the floor and crossed her legs. "Ok, ask." she shrugged defiantly.

"I already have." he reminded.

Emma thought for a moment: "Well you're right, I do think looks have a great deal to do with my being single," she regarded him with her head on one side. "Don't get me wrong, I know I'm not ugly but I'm not beautiful either."

"I never said you *were* beautiful," Leo responded gently. "I described you as attractive."

Emma gave him a side-long glance and a wry smile. "Such brutal honesty."

"All women want to hear that they are beautiful – but that's a compliment which becomes a double-edged sword when they implicitly know that they are not." he explained blandly.

"And are men not just as susceptible to such flattery?"

"Of course, doubly so; god Emma, you don't even have to dress it up with a guy. All you ever have to do is offer the opinion that he has a big cock and you'll have him in the palm of your hand – possibly literally..." Leo mused, "But we are straying from the point."

Emma smiled at him, recognising such blatant generalisation as simply a means to make his point. She owed him an honest response rather than the knee-jerk reaction he'd already accused her of. So, she took a deep breath and looked away from him, turning her thoughts inward. It wasn't as if she had not drawn her own conclusions about his question after all: she'd had long enough to consider it.

"The fact that I look a lot younger than I am doesn't help."

Predictably, Leo said nothing; mutely inviting her to elaborate.

Emma sighed resignedly. "A direct result of that meant that I didn't get my first boyfriend until I was twenty-four." Emma met Leo's eyes deliberately, her voice became significantly matter-of-fact. "When I was eighteen I looked twelve - I am not exaggerating Leo, you'll have to take my word for it. I just did," she stated flatly. Leo remained mute, his patience palpable. "When I was twenty-four I looked about seventeen," she continued evenly. In truth, Emma was amazed at how hard this had suddenly become. *Matter-of-fact* had all too quickly given way to a deep-seated emotion that was alarmingly powerful. She gritted her teeth in irritation at herself.

"People were – still are actually - forever telling me that I'll reap the benefit when I'm older," she laughed softly, "Well I *am* now older. Forty-four in fact... And all I see in the mirror is that same kid – but now with wrinkles and a few grey hairs." Emma laughed at herself painfully. "I know that isn't what others see," she smiled ruefully, "this is entirely *my* hang-up," she concluded. "But when everyone else my age was experimenting – testing the boundaries and creating the building blocks that formed their emotional maturity - my life was significantly devoid of any meaningful adult

interaction...” A lengthy silence ensued. Emma tested it; braced herself for it, battling feelings that felt entirely out of proportion to facts that she believed she had successfully consigned to her past.

Leo was a master of silence however and the longer it went on, the more significant it became until Emma realised that he wasn't going to let her off the hook. Now, here; so desperately soon into their relationship - she had unguardedly manoeuvred herself into a place where she would be forced to reveal her conclusion about an issue that until ten minutes ago, she didn't even know she was going to raise and had no real understanding of its continued power to undo her.

She looked up at him briefly, allowing him to see the sudden emotion in her eyes before her gaze slid restlessly away from him once again, taking in the door, the corners of the room, the vacant television screen – anywhere it could not be judged. Emma took a deep breath.

“Friends and colleagues often describe me as *a good kid*,” she smiled, “and I *do* appreciate the positive aspects of this – it infers that I am a likeable, approachable person... But its pretty condescending when you think about it...” Emma paused again, dismayed by another upwelling of emotion. Thoughtfully, she considered what she was trying to say and approached her explanation from a subtly different angle.

“Male equals man; female equals woman,” she stated abstractly. “Each word means similar things. The first is merely a gender assertion, but the second is a description which encompasses a *host* of other, deeply significant detail.” Emma breathed easier, feeling the emotion recede behind the analysis. “What each of us believes makes us a man or a woman is a very personal thing... For most kids growing up, it's simply a transition of time – a case of merely absorbing sometimes painful experiences until they emerge – physically and emotionally - into the adult phase of their lives...” She looked into Leo's eyes and almost lost it when she met the benign gaze of a professional listener. His expression was bland but she could not mistake the softness in his eyes as he regarded her. Emma swallowed and smiled bravely.

“Even the *word* ‘woman’ is feminine,” she suggested with a helpless shrug. “Printed on a page it looks rounded - but strong: ultimately grown-up I suppose,” she concluded. “And I can objectify my feelings Leo – I have plenty of evidence to suggest that I *am* treated as a grown-up but I guess, the crux of the matter is, I've never really felt that I embody such a lovely word. Somehow that evocative, deeply *associative* word has never really seemed to apply to me...”

“I see.” Leo paused, appearing to digest all this. His empathy was palpable but it was evident that he was steering his own course though this minefield. “And there are no other reasons that you can think of which may

have contributed to your stubbornly single status?" he asked, surprising her once more.

Emma frowned thoughtfully and casually wiped her eyes. "Well I dare say there are *certain* aspects of my personality that are grotesque and repellent..." she suggested ironically, trying vainly to make a joke of her feelings.

"How long have you been in love with your boss?"

Emma gaped at Leo. His expression was impassive. In the lengthening silence, Drift rose from his position slumped against Emma, stretched, and shook himself extravagantly.

"What the hell kind of a leap is that?" she exploded, feeling herself go red with embarrassment and anger.

"The signs were subtle, but fairly obvious when you were on the phone to him earlier. Your demeanour changed immediately you knew it was him." he elaborated. "I'm assuming he doesn't feel the same way or is in some way unavailable, otherwise your feelings would have been a lot less ambiguous."

Emma rose to her feet when Drift moved to the French window and whined to go out. Opening the sliding door into the garden admitted an icy breeze. "It was still a massive conclusion to jump to, Leo." she complained and shivered, shutting the door on the chill.

"Probably the only reason I noticed was because you were on the phone – and perhaps a little less guarded. I would be interested to observe you in his company but I imagine you have learned a way of concealing what I saw very well. Do you think he knows?"

Emma's eyes widened. "Christ I hope not," she muttered, simultaneously realising that she had just admitted to the crush. "God I'm going to have to be careful around you – I mean, you really pay attention." she fretted.

Leo laughed. "Emma, the last thing I want is for you to become careful around me." He got to his feet and moved to stand next to her, watching as Drift patrolled the edges of her lawn. "I mean, I know you are anyway – you won't be able to help that in light of what I am but you rightly surmised that people make assessments - and reassess them all the time. I just hope you remain trustful of my desire to help you, that's all..." He pulled her suddenly against him and grinned. "Your feelings for him are irrelevant anyway."

Emma's immediate reaction was to protest but then she read his facial expression, which was playful and teasing. "Why?" she asked crossly instead.

"He's missed his opportunity," he pointed out, "I have you now." He kissed her deeply. "You're all mine," he whispered, sliding his hand beneath

her t-shirt to cup her breast, squeezing the nipple until she groaned. Tentatively, he undid the belt of her jeans and slid his hand between her legs, laughing in undeniable triumph when he discovered how much she was ready for him.

Emma gasped. "Well, I'll admit you're one helluva distraction." she agreed with a grin and grasped his wrist. "And I'm not the only one who is aroused, asshole," she pointed out, biting his lower lip.

"And clearly, you enjoy sex." he murmured, hearing her breath become choppy as his fingers probed. This too was something she could not deny.

"No more than anyone else I think, considering the lengthy abstinence I have endured," she countered. Her right hand crept beneath his sweater and her chilly fingertips were playing amongst the hairs of his chest at the same time as her left hand skilfully undid the belt of his own jeans. He did not stop her.

"Oh, my fucking god..." he muttered as her hand reached warmth and hardness. They both laughed softly. "Perhaps not," he acceded, but it was still a wonderful surprise to discover that you do."

Emma stopped kissing him long enough to look shrewdly into his eyes. Her touch was experienced and she was beginning to get the upper hand.

"Why, because I'm mousy?"

Leo exhaled in a sudden breath of laughter. "You're not *mousy*," he insisted, pushing his jeans down over his hips to provide her more access – which she took immediate advantage of. "Aaaah – well, you are – but only at first glance. Anyone who bothers to look will see straight past that..."

Emma contemplated taking him to task about agreeing that she was mousy but decided against it. She was enjoying their honesty with each other and instead she reached further into the warmth, allowing her index finger to tease between his buttocks. Leo moaned and pushed her urgently against the glass.

"You're bloody good at this, I'll give you that," he admitted. His voice was low, his mouth hunting for hers.

"Yes," she agreed. "I am."

He pulled away to look at her for a second, then reached around her to open the patio door and let the dog back in.

"I've had sexual relationships with many women," he commented, "you are the first who seemed to understand instinctively what I was trying to do yesterday... other than ensure that you were thoroughly satisfied of course..." he smiled.

"To wear yourself out?" Emma confirmed. Leo nodded, sliding the door shut again. "Well, don't forget I have a unique perspective." she pointed

out. It was disconcertingly easy to forget that when she had met him only a little over twenty-four hours previously, he had looked *entirely* different from the non-descript but supremely confident individual beside her.

“Leo, how many people know about you?” Tension suddenly crackled between them and Emma struggled out of his grasp to reopen the patio door – this time for Tassel who had taken her turn at the glass. Desire continued to radiate between them and its fruition remained a breath away. Her question had been asked with deliberate casualness but they both understood it was a crucial one and Emma sensed Leo’s disquiet implicitly.

“Not many.” he stated flatly. Emma waited patiently as his expression became stony. “One...” he admitted and an unwholesome grin suddenly split the lower half of his face. “...who is still alive anyway.”

Adrenalin suddenly caused Emma’s heart to thump painfully. She carefully maintained a bland expression but she knew she had crossed a line. It was hard to define how his smile suddenly seemed to have become somehow less than human but she was not surprised when Tassel chose that moment to return. As Emma opened the door, the elderly lurcher deliberately inserted her body between them. She swung her head to gaze reproachfully at Leo, although wagged her tail apologetically.

“Leo, have you ever killed anyone?” Emma persisted softly. She was astonished at her own daring but determined to press him. Leo’s eyes became flinty but Emma defiantly held his gaze. Although outwardly relaxed, his body was as tense as that of a man facing the barrel of a gun – but it was his face that riveted her gaze. His grin had become horribly fixed. Briefly, his tongue flicked across his teeth - teeth which she suddenly noticed were very white for a man his age. Sensing danger, Drift also got to his feet again and whined anxiously. The dogs’ reaction broke the spell and Leo’s expression was full of regret as he suddenly wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m sorry. I have frightened you...” he observed, pressing his lips against her neck. “I’m so sorry...” Emma clearly heard the worry in his voice. Hesitantly, she returned his embrace. “I didn’t mean to scare you...” he continued, “...actually no - that’s a lie,” he admitted. “I did – but I regret the impulse that made me do it.” He sighed heavily and Emma felt him squeeze her gratefully. “I’ve had to be a survivor...” he explained fervently, “but in answer to your question I’ve never killed another human being. I have done some terrible things...” he whispered. “But never as a man. I told you yesterday, and I will tell you again – and as many times as I must,” he announced, pulling away to hold her at arms length in emphasis, “you have nothing to fear from *me*. But you have to understand Emma, that I *cannot* vouch for your safety when I am... in my other guise...”

He gazed at her searchingly until she nodded. He *had* scared her but she was prepared to trust him for now. Her mind thronged with questions

however and Leo saw this immediately. He sighed heavily again. With a wry smile, he pulled his jeans back up and returned to his seat upon the sofa. When Emma deposited herself next to him, he reached across the small gap between them to grasp her hand. Deliberately, she left her jeans undone, such disarray maintaining the inherent promise between them.

“Ask,” he said seriously. “I’ll tell you everything - I’ve no reason not to with you...” He gave her a sideways glance and shrugged expansively. His expression at that moment revealed an aching vulnerability - and he looked every day of his fifty-three years.

Emma took a minute or two to get her thoughts in order. “I hardly know where to begin...” she said at length.

“That’s alright, this is new to me too...” he admitted genially.

It briefly crossed Emma’s mind that as well as needing to be essentially selfish, Leo would have had to become an effective liar to hide his alter-ego for so long. If he was manufacturing the emotion that appeared etched upon his face at that moment, Emma decided to forgive him. Deliberately, she steeled herself to be as objective as possible.

She was hesitant, on the cusp of revealing *why* her perspective benefitted from more than just the visual proof she had received in the early hours of the previous day. She wondered at that point why Leo hadn’t yet questioned her apparent acceptance of his condition: his curse. There had been no hysterics from her, no burbling terror; no frank denial. The gaze that she turned upon him then was as it had been from the outset: calm, appraising; forthright.

You are not the only one hiding the burden of a secret... she thought to herself grimly. But for now – and in respect of his undoubted skill in divining her own vulnerabilities – she would interrogate him with the full force of her human curiosity, her pragmatic logic, and the powerfully diagnostic acuity of a skilled and experienced vet.