



To protect herself, she must trust
the most dangerous man she's
ever met . . .

BODY GUARD

SHIFTERS UNBOUND

JENNIFER ASHLEY

NY TIMES Bestselling Author of *Primal Bonds*

Bodyguard
by Jennifer Ashley
Book 2.5 of
Shifters Unbound

Bodyguard

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Books in the Shifters Unbound Series

By Jennifer Ashley

Pride Mates

Primal Bonds

Bodyguard

Wild Cat

Fighting Cat (Spring 2012)

Mate Claimed (Oct 2012)

And more to come!

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BodyGuard

Chapter One

The store's owner had short and sassy black hair with a few red streaks, a compact but curvy body, and a fine-lined tattoo peeking over the collar of her shirt. Her blue eyes right now were wide as she contemplated the gun barrel aimed across the counter at her.

Ronan ducked his huge bulk back down behind the aisle partition, where he'd been crouching to examine merchandise on the bottom shelf. The robber hadn't noted Ronan, who'd come in to do some late-night shopping, almost hidden at the back of the SoCo novelty store. Ronan was willing to bet that the store's owner, Elizabeth, didn't remember at the moment that he was there either.

It was just the three of them on this Friday night: Elizabeth, the robber with the gun, and Ronan, who started making his way noiselessly toward the front counter. Ronan didn't dare charge while the gun was almost against Elizabeth's nose--one wrong move, one sound, and Elizabeth was dead.

Wait for it.

The robber wasn't much more than a kid; maybe twenty as humans figured age. Would be still a cub if he were Shifter. Humans couldn't control their young, Ronan thought in disgust. He'd have taken down any cub that even contemplated carrying a gun, let alone robbing a store.

Elizabeth had her hands flat on the counter. Ronan smelled her fear but also her rage. This was one of the few stores that allowed Shifters inside it, so Ronan knew a little bit about her from the Shifters who regularly shopped here. The human woman Elizabeth Chapman owned this store and worked it with her younger sister, Mabel. The store and the money in it were all they had.

Just stall him, sweetie. Don't do anything stupid.

The man put a shoulder bag on the counter. "Put the money in there. All of it."

"I only have about two hundred dollars." Elizabeth's voice was shaky, but Ronan heard the desperate edge to it. She was going to try to bluff him.

"I didn't ask you how much you *had*, bitch. I said put it in the bag. Then we'll check your safe."

Give him the cash, Ronan willed silently. Lead him back here.

"I already made the night's deposits," Elizabeth said.

"Don't lie to me, *chica*. I know when you make your deposits. I've been watching you. Now put the cash in the bag."

Ronan sensed Elizabeth's pounding heart, scented her fear sharpening over the oily smell of the arrogant young man. The kid wasn't wearing a mask or keeping out of sight of the store's cameras. That meant he didn't care if Elizabeth would be able to identify him later, which meant that either he was overconfident, or he meant to kill her and be long gone before any cops arrived.

Not gonna happen.

Ronan heard rustling as Elizabeth put the cash in the shoulder bag. "That's it," Elizabeth said. "See?"

"Open the damn safe."

"It isn't out here. It's in the back. In the office."

"So we go in the back."

Elizabeth made a little sound of pain, and Ronan knew the man had grabbed her. His blood boiled, the Shifter in him wanting the kill, and he almost came up roaring. *Not yet. Not yet.* But the bastard would pay for hurting her.

Elizabeth and her robber went by the end of the aisle, the guy carrying his shoulder bag, his gun shoved into Elizabeth's side. The look on Elizabeth's face was blank, resigned. She thought she was about to die. She didn't look around at the faint sound of Ronan shucking his jeans; never turned her head to spy him in the shadows, ready to shift. The robber kept his gaze straight ahead, focused on the office door and the potential money behind it.

Elizabeth fumbled with her keys, unlocked the door, and opened it. The lights were off. The robber shoved Elizabeth inside in front of him and let go of her long enough to reach for the light switch.

That's my cue.

Ronan shifted, and charged.

Elizabeth heard a small sound then felt a rush of air as something huge barreled at her in deadly silence. She saw a giant face, a massive ruff of fur, an open maw, a collar around a gigantic neck, and wide dark eyes with murder in them.

The robber, a young man with black hair and dark eyes, still had his hand on the light switch. In the next instant, the doorframe and wall around it splintered, and the robber found himself knocked to the floor with a Kodiak bear on top of him.

Elizabeth scrambled to her desk, grabbed the pepper spray she kept in her drawer, and snatched her cell phone out of her pocket at the same time. She turned around, but stopped, watching in shock as the young man struggled against all odds with the colossal bear on her Victorian pile rug.

The robber's gun went off with a *boom* of noise. Elizabeth screamed. The bear roared, the sound shaking the walls, and blood splattered to spray the floor.

The bear drew back a paw with six-inch claws and backhanded the robber across the face. The guy's head rocked. Still he fought, and the bear struck again. This time, the young man went limp, slumping to Elizabeth's rug in an ungainly heap.

The bear climbed to his feet, swung his great head around, and fixed red-raged eyes on Elizabeth.

He was the biggest living creature Elizabeth had ever seen. On all fours, the bear stood about six feet tall at the shoulder, which put his head well above Elizabeth's. His breath huffed between immense and sharp teeth, his growls rumbling from his throat like thunder. His gaze still locked on hers, he took a step toward her on one massive paw.

Elizabeth brought her hand up, aimed the can of pepper spray at his face, and gave him a full dose.

The bear blinked, drew back, blinked again, sat down on his hind legs, and rocked his head all the way back. Then he *sneezed*.

The noise exploded into the room like a sonic boom, vibrating papers on the desk and rattling the Victorian prints on the walls in their prim and proper frames.

The bear rose on his hind legs again and kept rising, ten feet--twelve--fifteen, his bulk hunching to fit under the low ceiling. At the same time, his immense body started to shrink. The bear's face contorted, muzzle shortening, as did, thank God, his teeth.

In about thirty seconds the bear was gone, and a man stood in its place. The man

was just as massive as the bear--at least seven feet tall, with chocolate brown hair buzzed short, eyes as dark as the bear's, an almost square face with a once-broken nose, and a chin and jaw dark with five o'clock shadow.

His arm bore a bloody gash where the bullet had whipped by it, but his body was muscle on top of muscle on top of muscle, not an ounce of fat that Elizabeth could see. And Elizabeth saw it all, because the man was stark naked. Except for the Collar, which had shrunk to fit his human neck, the bear-man wore not a stitch.

He wiped his streaming eyes. "Shit, woman," he said in a voice that brought down a trickle of ceiling tile dust to whiten his hair. "That *itches*."

* * * * *

Chapter Two

Elizabeth Chapman's red-streaked hair was mussed and her blue eyes were filled with fear as she faced Ronan, but she kept her hand firmly on the pepper spray.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Ronan. At your service." Ronan raised his hand in a mock salute, and blood from the bullet wound pattered to her pretty carpet. "Why'd you hit me with the pepper spray?"

Said pepper spray didn't move. "Why'd you keep coming at me, looking like you wanted to kill me?"

"I didn't. I was fighting my Collar, trying to keep it from going off. Hurts like a bitch when it does." He put out his hand and lowered the pepper spray without taking it away from her. "Now I know what stops it. Pepper spray." He shook his head again. "Shit."

"Sorry," Elizabeth said, not sounding very sorry.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I only go after bad guys." Ronan gazed with contempt at the human stretched out on the rose-patterned rug, which now contained extra red blotches from Ronan's wound. Unconscious, the robber looked very young.

Elizabeth snatched tissues from a box on her desk and handed them to Ronan. "He shot you. You need a hospital."

Ronan took the tissues and started wiping the blood from his arm. "Grazed me, and hospitals don't know what to do with Shifters. You gonna call the cops before he wakes up?"

Elizabeth stared at the cell phone in her hand as though surprised to find it there, then she turned around and punched in the three numbers.

Ronan lifted the pistol from the floor and held it between his thumb and forefinger. He hated guns. Any projectile weapon, in fact. He guided Elizabeth out of the office as she started babbling to the 9-1-1 operator, then he set the pistol on the nearest counter and started looking for his clothes.

He found the jeans he'd tossed into the corner and pulled these back on, but his shirt, which had shredded with his swift change, was a total loss. He rummaged the nearby racks and pulled out the biggest T-shirt he could find, a bright red one with *Red-Hot Lover: Handle with Care* printed on the front.

Elizabeth still had her cell phone to her ear. "You all right?" she asked Ronan, her gaze going to the wound.

Ronan shrugged. "Will be."

"Here. They don't want me to hang up."

Elizabeth handed him the open phone, snatched some paper towels and a first aid kit from behind the counter, and gently dabbed residual blood from his triceps. Ronan liked the brush of her slim fingers as she fixed a gauze bandage over the wound, the smell of her hair under his nose. Strawberries and honey. *Bears like honey.*

"Thanks," he rumbled.

"What were you doing in here, anyway?" Elizabeth asked as she closed the first-aid kit.

"Shopping. This is a store. I needed to buy a birthday present."

"This late?" It was going on midnight.

"Only time I had free." He growled into the cell phone. "Hey, will you guys be here any time soon? This lady needs to go home."

As though in answer, red and blue lights flashed outside, and the shop soon filled with police and paramedics. They made their way into the back office and found the inert robber, and the paramedics bundled him up and carried him out.

One of the police--a woman with black hair pulled into a hard bun and a take-no-shit stare--handed the kid's pistol and shoulder bag full of Elizabeth's money to her colleague and stayed behind to ask questions. Elizabeth described what had happened, and the female cop eyed Ronan in suspicion.

"Name," she said to him.

"Ronan."

"Ronan what?"

"Just Ronan. Bears don't have surnames."

The police officer had a smooth face and cold, black eyes. "You're a Shifter," she said.

"No kidding." Ronan glanced at Elizabeth, whose lips were too bloodless. "Can you let her go home? She's pretty shaken up."

"After she gives me her statement. You too, Shifter. In fact, I want you coming in with us."

She put away her little notebook and took out a pair of cuffs. They were big cuffs, and Ronan saw the markings that told him they had Fae magic in them, fashioned to contain Shifters.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth asked, wide-eyed. "Ronan didn't rob me. He helped me."

"He's a Shifter," the woman said. "He hit a human, and the human's going to the hospital. That's assault, and for Shifters a capital crime. I have to arrest him." *Rules are rules*, her flat eyes seemed to say.

"You mean he hit a human who was about to kill me," Elizabeth said heatedly. "If Ronan hadn't been here, I'd be dead."

The officer shrugged. "If you want to come down and plead his case to the judge, it's your choice. But I have to take him."

Ronan saw indecision flicker in Elizabeth Chapman's eyes. This wasn't her fight. She wanted to go home and forget about the robbery as best she could. Ronan wasn't sure what human females did to make themselves feel better, but the cub, Cherie, who lived in his house, liked to take baths that lasted forever whenever she was stressed. Which was often, considering what she'd gone through.

Ronan's fantasies went to Elizabeth in a bathtub, her curved body covered with suds, her black hair wet. He bet she looked cute with her hair all damp and spiky.

The cop clicked the cuffs onto Ronan's wrists behind his back, and the pleasant vision dissolved as he felt the sting of Fae magic. Even the small bite of it ground through his nerves and tried to set off a spark from his Collar. Elizabeth looked concerned as he winced, but Ronan shook his head at her.

"Don't worry about me, Lizzie-girl. But do me a favor. Find a lawyer called Kim Fraser--she's mated to Liam Morrissey in Shiftertown, and they live next door to Glory. I know you know Glory--she comes in here all the time. Tell Kim what happened for me?"

Kim, a human, had set up a law office that specialized in helping Shifters. Because human laws governing Shifters were restrictive and complex, Shifters needed all the help they could get.

"All right?" Ronan repeated, looking hard at Elizabeth. "Tell her?"

Elizabeth pressed her slim hands together and held them a little under her chin. Human body language for *I don't know what the right thing is to do here*.

"You can call her if you don't want to go to Shifertown," Ronan said. "Her card's in my front pocket."

Ronan's hands were locked behind his back and staying there. Elizabeth took a step forward. The female cop didn't say or do anything, just watched, ready to take down both of them if they tried anything stupid.

Elizabeth's hair smelled good. So did the rest of her. Ronan scented Elizabeth's residual fear from the robbery, overlaid with the warm goodness of her, and behind that, concern for someone else. Layers of scent that told him all about her.

He liked how she'd put the red streaks in her hair. Defiance--that's what it meant. Elizabeth seemed like a good businesswoman, following the rules, but those little streaks said she could be bad if she wanted to be. Or maybe they were a reminder of a time when she hadn't walked the straight and narrow. Ronan thought he wouldn't mind a glimpse of the bad-ass Elizabeth.

Elizabeth dipped her fingers into Ronan's front pocket. She did it quickly and competently, not touching Ronan at all as she plucked out Kim's business card. The move was practiced, as though she'd gotten good at taking things out of people's pockets. *Skill* was the word. Interesting.

"I'll call her," Elizabeth said, palming the card. "But I'm coming down to the station with you," she said to the cop. "He helped me, and it's not fair he's getting arrested when some gang kid tried to kill me."

The female cop shrugged. "Suit yourself. Come on, Shifter."

Ronan winked as the cop took his arm in a practiced grip and shoved him out the door. "I like you, human woman," he said to Elizabeth. "See you downtown."

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Elizabeth called Mabel, reassuring her sister that everything was all right, then reached Kim Fraser on the phone and told her what had happened. Elizabeth drove her small pickup downtown, following the cops to the jail and courthouse. She found it ironic that she had to leave her truck in a crappy lot with a sign saying *Park at your own risk*, while the arrests for the night were taken safely around to the front door.

Inside the station, Elizabeth gave her official statement to the female cop, then was told to stay in the waiting room until someone came to take her to Ronan's hearing. She hadn't thought the hearing would be tonight, not this late, but apparently Shifter Division processed Shifters as swiftly as possible.

So Elizabeth waited. Around her, arrests for the night were brought in, anything from indecent exposure to grand theft auto to assault with a deadly weapon. This was the heart of Texas, in a well-populated county, and the arrestees ranged from men with shaggy hair, baseball caps, and strong South Texas accents; to Spanish-speaking kids who glared in fearful defiance; to brightly dressed prostitutes with hair of every shade and shorts cut high up their butts.

Elizabeth had never been in this particular police station, but they all gave her the

creeps. The smell was the same--burned coffee, body odor, and floor cleaner overlaid with stale cigarette smoke. Smoking was no longer permitted inside, but the smoke clung to the clothes of people who went in and out.

Never again, she'd vowed. For Mabel's sake. Elizabeth had half-feared that the female cop would run a check on Elizabeth's name, but then, even if she had, the woman would have found nothing. Elizabeth Chapman had no criminal record, and no connection to anyone with a criminal record. Elizabeth had made sure of that.

After a long time, a tall black bailiff stopped in front of Elizabeth and said in a booming voice, "Ms. Chapman? Come with me."

Elizabeth sprang up and followed the man, half-running to keep up with his long-legged stride. "Where are we going?"

"The Shifter's hearing," was all he would say.

The bailiff led Elizabeth through a door and down a hall that was eerily deserted. At the end of this, he unbolted and unlocked a steel door that had to be a foot thick. He took Elizabeth into a short hall, maybe five feet in length, which had no other door but the one at its far end.

Why was Elizabeth reminded of zoo cages? The kind with two doors and a space in between, where an animal could be trapped if it tried to escape. The bailiff unlocked the second door, also of foot-thick steel, and ushered Elizabeth into a long, narrow courtroom.

It was a courtroom unlike any Elizabeth had seen, and unfortunately she'd seen quite a few during her colorful adolescence. The judge's bench, at the far end, was raised six feet off the floor and caged in front by floor-to-ceiling iron bars. A woman in judge's robes was just coming through a door right behind the bench. Bench, door, and judge were unreachable by anyone on the courtroom floor.

Ronan sat in a large metal chair below the bench, at a right angle to the rest of the room. His hands were now shackled in front of him; a chain between the shackles hooked them to a ring on the heavy chair, which in turn was bolted to the floor.

The courtroom was unadorned, no paneling on the walls, no heavy wooden tables or carved benches, just a generic linoleum floor, white walls, and two plain metal benches in the front of the room. A nervous man in a suit, probably the prosecutor, occupied the right bench. A man and woman sat together on the bench on the left.

The woman was human, with short dark hair, a business jacket and skirt, and a briefcase. Her buttoned-up look screamed lawyer, though she wore sandals on bare feet instead of hose and shoes.

The man next to her was a Shifter, no doubt about it. He had dark hair, eyes of incredible blue, and a Collar around his neck. He lounged on the bench, watching everyone in the room, including the judge, with an air of command.

Most people believed that Shifters posed a threat to humans, and looking at this man, Elizabeth finally understood why. Ronan was huge and full of muscle, but this Shifter, while nowhere near as big as Ronan, exuded a strength of presence that spoke of power. No matter that he wore a Collar, he could be deadly, and he wanted everyone around him to remember that.

Ronan saw Elizabeth and lifted his shackled hands in greeting. He looked the calmest of anyone in the room, no matter that they were treating him like a dangerous animal.

Granted, Elizabeth had seen Ronan as a big, scary bear, and even now, with his buzzed hair, glittering eyes, and muscles bulging out the *Red-Hot Lover* T-shirt, he still looked frightening. But he gave her a nod--in thanks, she guessed, for calling Kim and then showing up herself.

The tall bailiff locked the door, the clang of the keys loud. The judge hammered once with her gavel. "Counsels approach the bench."

That was it. No one else apparently would show up to this hearing, no court stenographer, no other witnesses. Maybe the session was being recorded, but what did Elizabeth know? Perhaps records weren't kept of Shifter hearings.

As Kim rose with the prosecutor and walked confidently toward the judge, the bailiff said to Elizabeth, "Sit over there."

He pointed to the seat next to Kim's Shifter. The Shifter sat up from his lounging position, smiled, and patted the bench next to him. The smile was charming, but it was also predatory, and his eyes were watching, watching. Ronan caught Elizabeth's worried look and sent her another nod.

Elizabeth went to the bench. The Shifter rose, though both judge and bailiff scowled at him, and stuck out his hand. "I'm Liam Morrissey," he said. "You're Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth Chapman. I called your wife."

"She's my mate." Liam closed his right hand around Elizabeth's and then laid his left hand on top of it, sandwiching her fingers in a cushion of warmth. Liam Morrissey was the leader of the Austin Shifertown, Elizabeth knew. He and his wife--no, *mate*--Kim, were the liaisons between Shifters and humans. "No worries, lass," Liam said. "You answer the judge's questions and tell the truth. Kim will take care of the rest."

The pressure of his hands on hers and the confident look in his eyes, together with the Irish lilt to his voice, were soothing and reassuring. Elizabeth found herself nodding, wanting to promise she'd do her best.

Ronan said from across the room, "You can let go of her now, Liam."

Liam's smile widened but he released Elizabeth. "I'm thinking you're growing a mite possessive, my friend," he said to Ronan.

"I'm thinking she's had a bad night," Ronan growled. "That and I can break your head with one hand."

"Shut it, Bear. I'm mate-bonded. You have no competition from me."

The judge pounded with her gavel. "The defendant will stay in order," she said sharply. Both Ronan and Liam went quiet but neither looked contrite.

The Shifters are in charge here, Elizabeth realized. *Not the judge, not the bailiff, not the prosecutor. Liam and Ronan might be inside the cage, but they've taken it over.*

"The defendant will approach," the judge said.

The bailiff unlocked Ronan's shackles from the chair, helped him stand, and led him forward. Kim came to Ronan's side, not looking worried, though the prosecutor kept his eyes on his notes as Ronan hulked next to him.

"The charge is assault with intent to kill a human," the judge said. She had dark hair going to gray, a face like a squashed prune, and a flat voice. "How does the defendant plead?"

"He pleads mitigating circumstances," Kim said. "And intent to kill is not on the arrest sheet. The human in question was armed with a loaded nine-millimeter pistol."

My client was defending the owner of the store the human man had come to rob and was shot by the human in the process."

The judge eyed Kim in dislike. "I asked for the plea, not the defense. You'll have the chance to speak in a moment. Prosecution?"

The prosecutor finally looked up from his file folder. "The victim, Julio Marquez, is at the hospital being treated for claw wounds. Mr. Marquez describes being attacked by a bear in Ms. Chapman's shop on South Congress. In fear for his life, Mr. Marquez shot but missed. The bear then struck Mr. Marquez again, rendering him unconscious. According to Mr. Marquez, he entered the store on a dare by his friends and waved around his gun. The bear attacked from the back of the store. Mr. Marquez did not see him before that."

Elizabeth jumped to her feet. "That's not what happened!" A dare by his friends? No way in hell. Elizabeth had looked into the cold, hard eyes of the kid, which had held an anger too old for his age. She'd recognized that anger. Julio Marquez was a dangerous young man.

The judge banged her gavel. "Ms. Chapman, sit down, or you will be fined for contempt."

The prosecutor leafed through his file. "Mr. Marquez's statement and Ms. Chapman's are not exactly the same, but both agree that the bear attacked Mr. Marquez."

"Because Marquez was forcing me into my office at gunpoint!" Elizabeth cried.

Another steely glare from the judge. "You will be called to give your version of events in due time, Ms. Chapman. Sit *down*."

"Best sit down, love," Liam whispered. "Kim will take care of it."

He sounded confident. Elizabeth sank to the bench, and Liam nodded at her. *Good girl*. Ronan sent her another reassuring look over his shoulder.

Even Kim seemed unperturbed. "The witness is understandably stressed, Your Honor," she said. "It's late, and she's had a bad experience."

The judge really didn't like Kim Fraser. For defending a Shifter? Elizabeth wondered. Or for marrying one?

The prosecutor broke in. "Maybe Ms. Chapman should be allowed to give her evidence so she can go home."

The judge's face softened as she listened to the prosecutor. The man was attractive in a slick sort of way . . . *what a witch*.

"Of course," the judge said. "Ms. Chapman?"

At that moment, Elizabeth's cell phone pealed. She was surprised she could get a signal behind all the steel doors, but the name that popped up on the screen was Mabel's.

"Cell phones are supposed to be off," the judge snapped.

"I have to take this. It's my little sister. She's home alone, and she's worried."

The judge looked as though nothing had ever harassed her more. "Outside."

The bailiff unlocked the door. Elizabeth charged out, and Liam quietly followed her.

"Mabel? I can't talk right now, honey. I'm in court."

Mabel's frantic voice cut over hers. "Lizzy, there are men outside, trying to get in. A bunch of them, and they have guns. I don't know what to do. I'm so scared!"

* * * * *

Chapter Three

"Call the police," Elizabeth yelled down the phone, watery fear pouring through her. "Call them now."

"I tried. They don't answer."

"Then you hide. I'm in a courthouse. I'll get--"

Elizabeth stifled a shriek as Liam Morrissey snatched the phone out of her hand. "Mabel? This is Liam Morrissey. Connor's uncle, that's right. You rest easy, now, lass. I'll take care of this. Stay down, behind a bed, don't go near the windows. My lads will be there before you can count to ten. All right?"

He clicked off the connection and dialed another with ease of long practice. While Elizabeth stood there with her mouth open, Liam said quietly into the phone, "Sean, get Dad and Spike and go up to Thirty-Fifth Street near MoPac. Mabel Chapman. She's got armed intruders. Go *now*."

Whoever was on the other end hung up, but Liam kept hold of the phone. "Now, don't you worry. My brother will take care of your sister. Let's go back and get Ronan sprung."

Elizabeth didn't move. "I can't. I have to go home."

Liam put a warm hand on her shoulder. "You going home would only put you in danger as well. My brother and my trackers can help Mabel better than the police. No one stops my trackers, lass. No one. Come on, now."

Liam had reassurance down to a science. In spite of her gut-wrenching fear, Elizabeth let him lead her back past the bailiff and once more into the courtroom.

"Oh, I see that you're still with us, Ms. Chapman," the judge said. "How nice. Please approached and read the words on the card."

Elizabeth promised to tell the truth and the whole truth, so help her God, then went over her story, prompted by questions from the prosecutor. It was like being in a play--she might not know her lines, but the prosecutor wanted her to say certain ones, judging from his cues. Ronan, back in the chair, leaned forward, resting his big arms on his knees, watching her closely.

Fear for Mabel gnawed at Elizabeth as she answered the questions. Liam still had her cell phone. He glanced at it from time to time, his face grim.

Elizabeth concluded shakily, "So I know that if Ronan hadn't been there, Marquez would have killed me."

"But you don't actually know that," the prosecutor said in his condescending way. "That's only what you guess."

That did it. The gloves came off. "Look, I grew up with kids like Marquez," Elizabeth said. "Any guilt or conscience in him went away a long time ago. He only deals in *if-then* questions. *If* I can identify him, *then* he shoots me. In his mind, I was dead as soon as he walked in the door. End of story."

The prosecutor shrugged apologetically at the judge. "It's still only what she thinks."

At that point, Liam got up and went to the door again. He held a murmured exchange with the bailiff, who did not look happy, but the bailiff let him out.

"Defense counsel, any questions for the witness?" the judge asked.

So far Kim had listened with a calm look on her face, not objecting to anything the

prosecutor had said. Elizabeth had stood in front of judges before--sometimes as the defendant--and a good defense counsel would have been all over the prosecutor's overly leading questions.

"I have only one, Your Honor," Kim said. She turned to Elizabeth, her face expressionless, professional. "Ms. Chapman, tell me, at any time--before, during, or even after the scuffle--did Ronan's Collar go off?"

Liam reentered the room. Behind the bailiff's back, he gave Elizabeth a thumb's up, and Elizabeth somehow knew that Mabel was all right. Her legs nearly buckled in relief. But what had Liam done?

"Ms. Chapman?" Kim asked, waiting.

"Uh--go off? What does that mean?"

Kim said, "When a Shifter tries to attack someone, the Collar around his neck shocks him. It's very obvious--you'd see a white-blue arc running all the way around the Collar, sparking like those plasma balls. The Collar causes a lot of pain and stops the Shifter. They're programmed to suppress a Shifter's instinct to kill."

Elizabeth replayed the awful scene in her mind, remembering the swift silence with which Ronan had burst through her office door. She closed her eyes and made herself remember every detail. Ronan's huge face, the Collar clasp on his big neck, the power in his gigantic body as he knocked Marquez to the ground.

She opened her eyes. "No. I didn't see anything like that. The gun went off and hit Ronan, but his Collar never sparked. I think Ronan was just trying to take the weapon away from Marquez."

Kim turned back to the judge, looking as professional as ever, but with a sparkle of triumph in her eyes. "There's a whole ream of scientific data on Shifters as to why they can't commit an act of violence while they wear Collars. If the Collar didn't go off in Ms. Chapman's store, that means my client had no malicious intent toward Marquez. My client saw the danger to Ms. Chapman and stepped in to make sure she wasn't hurt, and in the scuffle to keep the gun away from Marquez, Marquez was knocked unconscious. If my client had any intent to hurt or kill, the Collar would have had him in agony, even a big man like him." Kim walked to the judge's bench, rose on tiptoe, and laid a thick folder on it. "Here are a few of the many studies done on the Collars. I can produce more if Your Honor needs them."

The judge looked irritated. She flipped the file open, flipped it closed, gave Kim a dirty look, and sent a nastier one to Ronan.

"I'm going to let your client go," she said. "Not because you make a good point, Ms. Fraser. Partly it's because Marquez has previous arrests for armed robbery, and Ms. Chapman's story is plausible, but mostly because it's late and I want you all out of my courtroom. But I'm going to tell you, Mr. Ronan, to confine yourself to Shifertown and not leave it for one month. I don't want you anywhere near humans, understand? If you leave Shifertown, I will have your carcass hauled in front of me again, and then you won't walk out of here so easily."

"Begging Your Honor's pardon." Liam Morrissey shot her his charming grin. "Ronan's job lies outside Shifertown, just outside the gates, in fact. He works for me, and he supports three kiddies with his salary. It would be a great hardship on his family if he couldn't go to his job."

"Fine." The judge scowled, but even she wasn't immune to Liam's smile. "He goes

to work, then right back home. Consider him under house arrest. I'm holding you responsible for him." The judge pointed her gavel at Liam then banged it on the bench. She got up, robes swirling, and stalked out through the door behind the bench, which closed behind her with a bang.

Elizabeth was bursting to ask Liam what had happened at her house, but she had to wait for the bailiff to unlock Ronan from his shackles and then unlock the doors to let them out. Both Ronan and Kim had to sign things after that, and then they all had to walk out of the courthouse, back to the dark streets outside.

"What about my sister?" Elizabeth nearly shouted at Liam as soon as they cleared the front door.

Ronan put a large hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, but it was comforting, not heavy. Kim walked close to her other side.

"Mabel's fine, lass," Liam said. "My brother and dad got there in time. They and my trackers scared the bad guys away."

"What bad guys? Why were they trying to break into my house?"

They started down the street to the nearly deserted parking lot a half block away. Only two vehicles stood in the lot: Elizabeth's small pickup and a sweet-looking Harley.

"I don't know," Liam said. "Sean only told me that your sister was safe and that the trackers were sniffing around, seeing what they can find out."

"Trackers--you said that before. What trackers?"

"The trackers work for Liam," Ronan said. "They're guards, finders, warriors. Some of them can be complete assholes, but they're the best at what they do."

"Nothing will happen to Mabel with my trackers looking out for her," Liam said. "I promise you that."

Elizabeth closed her eyes a brief moment in relief. "Thank you, Mr. Morrissey."

"Yeah, thanks, Liam," Ronan said. "And you, Kim. Especially you."

Ronan shouldered Liam out of the way and snatched Kim into a big hug. *A bear hug*, Elizabeth thought, feeling a little hysterical. Kim hugged him in return, and Liam stood by, not seeming to mind the large man holding on to his wife.

Kim patted Ronan's back. "You're welcome, big guy. Can I breathe now?"

Ronan released her and stepped back, then damned if he didn't turn and enclose Liam in the same kind of hug. Elizabeth watched, eyes widening, as Liam wrapped his arms around the bigger man and held him close.

"You get used to it after a while," Kim said. Her nose wrinkled with her smile. "Sort of."

Liam and Ronan broke apart. Liam reached for his wife--no, his *mate*. Elizabeth was never going to get used to these terms. Liam hugged Kim and kissed her firmly on the mouth, and then he turned to Elizabeth and Ronan, one arm securely around Kim.

"Take her home, Ronan."

Elizabeth blinked. "What? He can't. He was put under house arrest ten minutes ago. That doesn't include driving across town to my house."

Ronan stood very close to Elizabeth. She could feel the heat from his body, remembered the feel of the powerful bear rushing past her in his intense and deadly charge. Ronan had saved her life, tonight. His Collar might not have gone off, but no matter what Elizabeth had told the judge, the bear in him had been ready to kill.

Elizabeth had seen the need for murder in men's eyes before, and Ronan had definitely had it.

"No room for me on Liam's Harley," Ronan said. "I'll have to go with you."

Liam and Kim had already mounted the motorcycle, Liam leaving the rest of the arrangements up to Ronan and Elizabeth.

"All right, you have a point," Elizabeth said. "But I'll take *you* back to Shiftertown and then drive myself home."

"Whatever." Ronan held out his hand. "Keys."

"What? No. It's not like I'm drunk." *Yet.*

"After the night you've had? Nope. I'm driving you. "

Elizabeth felt sick and stretched, her head ached, and her eyes felt hollow. She needed about a gallon of water and then one of coffee, a long bath, a hot toddy, and a really good night's sleep. *After* she made sure Mabel was safe.

"Fine." She dropped the keys into Ronan's hand.

"Cool." He snapped his fingers around them. "I've always wanted to drive one of these little pickups. Don't tell anyone."

The Harley roared to life. Liam lifted his hand and so did Kim, then Liam pulled out into the night. Kim, helmeted, leaned into Liam's back, as though she loved him body and soul. A human and a Shifter. What a crazy night.

Ronan opened the passenger door and got Elizabeth inside. "I'm supposed to like muscle cars. Strongman, macho cars." He shut her door and went around to the driver's side. He barely fit behind the wheel and had to slide the seat all the way back. "Monster trucks. Bad-ass motorcycles. Anything big and chunky that makes a lot of noise. Nothing cute and girly. So keep this quiet. Deal?"

Now he was making her laugh. "Your secret is safe with me."

Not that Ronan could ever be mistaken for cute and girly. He was huge but solid, like a pro wrestler, tall but perfectly proportional. His face wasn't exactly handsome--too hard for that, and he'd had his nose and right cheekbone broken at some time in his past. But his face was striking. His eyes were dark brown, almost black, but not cold. They were warm, very warm.

Ronan started up the truck and peeled out of the parking. Elizabeth held on as he raced around a corner and pulled onto Seventh heading due east.

Elizabeth wanted to talk to Mabel, to reassure her sister that she was on her way home. She reached for her phone and found an empty place on her belt. "Oh, crap. Liam still has my cell phone."

"Not surprised. Liam likes gadgets. He'll give it back to you when he's done with it."

"Doesn't he have his own?"

"Sure, but Shifters don't get to have fancy smart phones. Our phones call and hang up, that's it. I bet he's texting every human he knows, or playing games, or taking pictures. He's like a cub when he gets a new gadget in his hand. But I'll make him give it back."

Ronan drove through the sparse traffic as he spoke, flashed under the I-35, and sped on in entirely the opposite direction from Elizabeth's house.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "I live northwest of downtown."

"You're not going home," Ronan said, gripping the wheel as he spun the truck

around another corner.

"I'm not?" Her trepidation returned. "Why not?"

Ronan looked over at her and grinned. It was a warm grin, making his eyes twinkle. "Because I'm taking you to my home, Elizabeth Chapman. *Shiftertown*."

* * * * *

Chapter Four

Ronan felt Elizabeth's fear pouring off her as they neared the streets of Shifertown. But there was nothing frightening about Shifertown--at least, not these days.

When Ronan had first arrived from Alaska, though, he'd been scared as hell. Bears liked solitude, and Ronan had never lived near more than one or two people at a time in his life. In Shifertown, scores of Shifters surrounded him, always. And then the human government had told him he had to let other bears live in the same *house* with him.

Ronan's shyness had nearly killed him. Learning to survive the discomfort of being in a crowd, training himself to not react--either by running away or driving the others off--had been the hardest thing Ronan had done. People who derided shyness, or called it self-centeredness, didn't understand it. Shyness was instinct. In the wild, the need for personal space--a lot of personal space--could spell the difference between survival and death.

But Ronan had conquered his fear long ago, thank the Goddess. Now Ronan knew everyone, and everyone knew Ronan, and he'd carved out his own place in this strange, new world.

Ronan drove around a dark corner that contained a derelict convenience store and headed into Shifertown. Beyond an empty lot, which was purposely left derelict, Shifertown unrolled in streets of neat lawns and well-kept bungalows.

These houses had been pretty much trashed and abandoned by the humans who'd lived there twenty years before, and the government department formed to deal with the Shifter situation had snapped up the cheap real estate and used it to house the Shifters. Shifters had moved in and repainted, reshingled, and repaired the houses themselves. Now anyone could walk fearlessly down the quiet streets of Shifertown, doors could remain unlocked, and cubs could play safely in the front yards to all hours of the night.

Shifters, three species of them, now lived together without killing each other. Who would have thought?

Shifertown was dark this late, though windows glowed in houses here and there. Felines and Lupines would be outside without lights, both species still nocturnal despite human effort to change that. Bears, much smarter, would be sound asleep, taking advantage of every moment of shut-eye they could get. Ursines used a lot of energy when awake, and they slept with dedication.

Elizabeth, beside him, took it all in while gripping the dashboard. "Are you going to bother to tell me why I'm in Shifertown?"

"Sean brought your sister here, to my house."

She whipped around to stare at him. "To *your* house? Why?"

"Well, he couldn't take her to Liam's house because Connor lives there, and that could get messy. Mabel likes Connor, but Connor's still a cub."

Elizabeth kept staring at him, clearly having no idea what he was talking about. "If you mean Connor who comes into my shop sometimes to flirt with Mabel, he's not a cub; he's in college."

"He's only twenty-one, and in Shifter terms, that's still a cub. Won't make his

Transition for another, oh, seven or eight years yet. It's best not to let him and Mabel be more than friends--too confusing and even dangerous for everyone. So, right now, my house is best. You've heard the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears?"

"Sure, but what has that got to do with--"

"That story is total bullshit." Ronan laughed, the rumble of it filling the car. "At my house, nothing's too hard or too soft. Everything is *just right*."

He was rewarded with Elizabeth's smile. He liked her smile, like a sudden flash of sunshine. He hated to see her so afraid. She shouldn't be afraid, this sassy sweetheart.

Ronan slowed the truck, which he'd found fun to drive but a tight fit. He turned into the driveway, which was nothing but two strips of broken pavement that led behind the house. Ronan had turned the garage in the back into a work-and-play room he and his housemates called the Den, so he parked outside, behind the other car and a large motorcycle already there.

The motorcycle was Ronan's--Sean or a tracker must have retrieved it from the street near Elizabeth's store and driven it home for him. He hoped it hadn't been Nate who'd fetched it. Stupid Feline drove like an idiot.

Ronan got out before Elizabeth could and went around to open her door. "Here we are," he said, taking her hand to help her stand up. He liked her hand, small and warm in his. "Get ready for the horde."

"The what?"

"No worries; I won't let them hurt you."

The "horde" tumbled out of the back door and off the porch Ronan had built around two sides of the house. They were Rebecca, a full-grown she-bear from Ronan's clan; Scott, a black bear Shifter who was about twenty-seven and going through the pains of his Transition; Cherie, a grizzly, twenty in human years, who'd spent the first half of her life locked in a pen. Last came Olaf, the only polar bear in Shiftertown, nine in human years and still a true cub. Olaf had a sunny disposition, except when flashes of the past he couldn't quite remember came to him in his dreams. They called him Olaf, but no one, not even Olaf, knew his real name. All wore Collars that gleamed under the porch lights.

Behind the bears was Mabel, Elizabeth's twenty-one-year-old sister, whose hair today was pink streaked with green. She looked keyed up, frightened, and excited, all at the same time. She pushed past the bears and ran at Elizabeth, arms open.

"Lizzy, damn it, they said you almost got shot, and then you were at that police station for, like, ever. And then those guys came to our house--looking for you. They called through the front door asking where you were. And then Shifters, all over the place. Liam said it wasn't safe for me to stay home, said I would meet up with you here. Have you seen that Spike guy? He is *hot*. I swear he has tattoos *everywhere*."

Sounded like Mabel was all right then.

Rebecca looked at Ronan in concern. "Ronan? Liam said you took a bullet. You all right?"

Ronan held up his arm to show her the gauze bandage. "I'm fine. It just grazed me." A tiny bullet cutting across Ronan's triceps was nothing. He'd been shot with a Fae arrow last year--now that had *hurt*. The effing Fae spelled their arrows.

"You were jumping in front of bullets again, weren't you, Ronan?" Cherie said, folding her arms. She had black-and-brown streaked hair, entirely natural, matching

her grizzly's coat. "You've gotta stop that. We need you without holes."

"Leave him alone," Scott said. "He did what he had to do."

Scott was a black bear, the smallest of the horde when he shifted, but he was still tall and lanky, with black hair and a surly expression. The Transition was hard on him.

Olaf was still mastering English, having been located by Liam and brought to Shifertown only a year ago. He had white-blond hair and black eyes, and his bear was too adorable to be real. "Mabel paints my hair too. Okay, Ronan?"

"I said he'd look cute with blue streaks in his hair," Mabel said.

Rebecca shot Ronan an evil look. "I told him it was up to you."

"Sure, thanks, Becks. Not now, Olaf. This is Elizabeth, Mabel's sister. She and Mabel are staying. So keep it down so they can sleep. I'll give them my room and sleep out in the Den."

"No, no, no, don't do that to them," Rebecca said quickly. "They're taking *my* room, which is habitable, and I'll sleep in the Den. Putting them in your room would be cruel and unusual punishment."

"I'm sleeping with Rebecca," Cherie said quickly. She always felt nervous when Rebecca was out of the house.

"Whatever. Female bears," Ronan said to Elizabeth. "They like to take over. Everything."

"Hey, Papa-Bear was out being arrested," Rebecca said. "For being a knight errant. I didn't realize that was a crime in the human world."

"I did smack the guy," Ronan said. "But he deserved it. His mother must be too soft on him."

"His mother is probably terrified of him," Elizabeth said. "Or maybe she's as bad as he is, or--most likely--not there at all."

Ronan realized he still had hold of Elizabeth's hand. He also realized he wasn't in that big a hurry to let it go. Rebecca noticed, but--thank the Goddess--kept her thoughts to herself.

"How do you know so much about humans like Marquez?" Ronan asked Elizabeth. "You said in the courtroom you knew exactly what he was going to do."

Mabel rolled her eyes before Elizabeth could answer. "You do *not* want to know. Elizabeth was a juvenile delinquent. In a big way."

"I thought they didn't want to know." Elizabeth shook off Ronan's hand. "It's nice of you, Ronan, but we can't stay here. I don't have a change of clothes, for one thing."

"I brought your stuff," Mabel said brightly. "And Sean says we have to stay. He's cute, Lizzy--you should hear his Irish accent. Too bad he's mated, but I like his mate. Andrea, you've met her before. Anyway, Sean says we're staying in Shifertown until Liam and the trackers make sure it's safe for us to go home."

Elizabeth held up her hands. "Mabel, stop talking for just a second--"

"Shifertown's the safest place for you," Ronan broke in. "No one will find you here. The trackers will sniff around, find out what these people wanted with your house, and deal with them."

Ronan saw Rebecca's eyes flicker when he said, *Deal with them*, and the two bears shared a look. The phrase could have many shades of meaning, especially with the Morrisseys involved.

Juvenile delinquent. In a big way. Ronan remembered how Elizabeth had lifted the