

Loose Id



THE  
HARD  
TRUTH  
AMANDA YOUNG

# THE HARD TRUTH

Amanda Young

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# **The Hard Truth**

**Amanda Young**

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## Dedication

*Many thanks to my editor, Jana, who has the patience of a saint. This series would not be what it is without your guidance.*

## Chapter One

Cadge Johnson fidgeted in the passenger seat of Red Taylor's SUV as they sped down a winding country road toward the Council Of Immortal Beings' compound, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The drive from Pittsburgh had taken a little over six hours so far, and he was sick of being cooped up. With the time verging on one a.m., Cadge wanted nothing more than to get away from Red. The bastard had gone out of his way to give Cadge the silent treatment after he'd shoved the other man's hand off his thigh for the fifth time, then proceeded to crank up the god-awful screeching he called music. Cadge had never been in love with road trips, but the cause for this impromptu ride had his nerves stretched tight.

He stared out into the inky darkness and wondered how much longer it would be before they arrived. Mammoth trees jutted from the rocky landscape on both sides of the road. Their spiky limbs protruded like death's beckoners, ready and waiting to scratch the roof of the vehicle in warning. He was tempted to ask Red how much longer it would be, but the man would probably kill him if he asked some version of "Are we there yet?" again.

"Almost there," Red said, as if he'd read Cadge's mind.

Cadge looked around. Nothing but fucking trees, rocks, and asphalt surrounded them. "Almost where? I don't see anything."

“Hold that thought for just a second...” Red navigated a sharp left-hand turn onto a narrow dirt road that Cadge failed to notice until they were right on top of it. He braked and slowed to a crawl as the vehicle approached an immense wrought iron gate covered in spindly vines. He stopped next to a freestanding touch pad, rolled down the window, and leaned out to punch in the entrance code. “Well, what do you think?”

The gate swung inward with a loud groan, revealing a huge, square building that looked more like a warehouse than the haunted, gothic manor Cadge had expected. He picked at a hangnail on the forefinger of his right hand, nausea churning in his gut. This was a mistake. “I think I’m going to puke.”

“Quit being so dramatic.” Red nodded toward the looming building ahead. “You ready?”

“If I say no, will you turn this gas guzzler around and take me home?”

“I don’t think so, buddy. A deal is a deal.” Red dropped the gearshift into drive and pushed down on the gas, rocketing them forward.

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say,” Cadge muttered. He really should have thought twice before agreeing to come here and claim his birthright in exchange for Red’s calling in a favor from Shawn Kingston and the other Lycan regulators to save his baby brother, Teague. He should have kept his fucking mouth shut. Surely Red wouldn’t have let Teague and his lover die, regardless of what Cadge’s answer had been.

*I shouldn’t have been so damn impatient. If I’d just waited a little longer, I could be back in Pittsburgh rebuilding the club, instead of here facing a damn inquisition.*

The vehicle jerked to an abrupt stop in front of the building, propelling Cadge forward against the seat belt strap. “Fuck,” he exclaimed, rubbing his chest. He glared at Red. “You’d think your ass would know how to drive better as long as you’ve been behind the wheel.”

“Suck my ass, Cadge.” Red grinned, revealing twin dimples. The dim red light from the dashboard made his green eyes flash with emerald fire. “Not everyone drives like a little old lady.”

“Oh, you wish.” Cadge laughed, then quickly sobered as his gaze trailed over the imposing slate gray blocks of the fortress they were preparing to enter. “This is a shitty idea, Red, and you know it.”

“No, it isn’t.” Red patted Cadge’s hand where it rested on the cool leather console between them. “Your father would want you to be here where you belong, not hiding and pretending to be something you aren’t.”

Cadge inwardly winced. He pulled his hand out from underneath Red’s and busied himself with untangling the strap tangled around his midsection. “Save the guilt trip. My father would want to see me alive. Everything else is negotiable.”

Red said nothing as he turned off the SUV and unbuckled his seat belt. He pushed open the door and glanced back at Cadge over his shoulder. “You parents would want you to be happy.”

“What would you know about it?” Cadge shoved open his door, climbed out, and slammed it closed with a loud rattle of glass and steel. It was damn tempting to storm off, but one glance at the imposing building and the surrounding woodlands made it clear there was nowhere to go. They were in the middle of nowhere; his transportation out would be his own two feet.

He whirled around toward Red, who was only then skirting around the back end of the SUV. “Who in the hell do you think you are? You breeze into my life once every few years, come on to me when the urge hits you, and then you’re gone again. You don’t know shit about me or my life.”



Red's nostrils flared. "*What* life?" He opened his mouth to continue, only to snap it right back shut. A second passed, then two, before a placid mask of calm descended over his sharp features. "Now isn't the time or place to have this discussion."

"Yeah, whatever." He should have known Red would find an excuse not to talk. He always did. "Who's the pussy now, jackass?"

Red's jaw clenched. He stared at Cadge for an instant, then turned and stalked toward the entrance. Cadge reluctantly trailed after him. He didn't have much choice.

They entered a narrow foyer with high ceilings and pale gray marble flooring. Renaissance paintings of plump, naked women and fat babies hung in thick gold frames on the crisp white walls. Although he didn't know anything about art, something told him they weren't reproductions.

A bored guard who was dressed in camouflage from head to toe lingered at the back of the foyer. He stood between them and what looked to be a truly cavernous room beyond. A metal detector similar to the one at the airport filled the doorway. The guard snapped to attention, his shoulders jerking back and his chin jutting forward the minute he recognized Red. "Good evening, sir. Welcome back, sir."

"Appreciate it," Red said, walking through the metal detector. The alarm blared, no doubt set off by the weapons Red carried, but the guard quickly scrambled to deactivate it. "Have Kingston and his men reported in yet?"

"Yes, sir. At 1200 hours. The prisoner has been secured below."

"Only one prisoner? Are you positive? Kingston took three men into custody during the raid on Victor Manning's estate."

"Um..." The guard fidgeted, chewing on the inside of his jaw. "Kingston's men reported some problems during transport, sir, although I'm not sure of the exact details. You'll need to speak with them about that."

"All right. Where can I find Kingston?"

“He’s below, sir, still interrogating the prisoner.”

“Good.” Red glanced at Cadge. “Are you coming or what?”

The guard turned his attention to Cadge and seemed to pull himself taller, as if he’d forgotten anyone else was witnessing his discussion with Red. The man tilted his head to the side and studied Cadge like a scientist interacting with an unknown species of bug.

If Cadge had expected Red to make introductions, he was sorely disappointed. On the other side of the machine, Red remained silent, a stony expression on his face.

*Asshole.*

Cadge knew better than to anticipate the same leeway from the guard as Red had received. Red was a regulator for the council; they expected him to be armed. Cadge, on the other hand, was an unknown entity to them. He didn’t want to test boundaries and risk being shot for his effort. He laid his sidearm -- a .9 mm Beretta that Red had lent him -- into the basket next to the metal detector and emptied the change out of his pockets. The machine was remarkably silent as he stepped through.

He bent to retrieve his pistol and pocket change. The guard cleared his throat loudly. “I’m sorry, sir, but you’ll have to leave your weapon here. There are no firearms allowed in the building.”

“But Red...”

The guard looked toward Red.

Red moved beside Cadge. “He’s right, Cadge. I’m sorry. Rules are rules.”

Cadge ground his teeth together. “Fine.”

It wasn’t like he couldn’t protect himself without the damn gun, but that was beside the point. He didn’t like being in an odd place and surrounded by strangers with only Red’s word that he wouldn’t be met by hostility once he’d said his piece. It was anyone’s guess how these people would react when he admitted to his lineage. For all he knew, the council

members could have been behind the attempted genocide of his race. It was only his and Teague's dumb luck that had prevented them from being killed as well.

"Get a move on, Cadge," Red said. "There's still a lot to be done before dawn."

"I'm coming." He might as well finish what he'd started. Maybe, if he got lucky, the elders who sat on the council would think he was full of shit and send him packing. Stranger things had happened.

Cadge followed Red through the door and into what appeared to be a large, empty ballroom. A lit chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, prisms of light twinkling down from the teardrop-shaped crystal. As in the foyer, pale gray marble graced the floor. He didn't have time to notice more in his effort to keep up with Red. The other man disappeared through two white columns that framed an open doorway toward the back of the room.

Cadge quickened his pace to catch up and found himself in a dim hallway. Nondescript white doors lined both sides, all of them closed. At the end of the hall stood another sentry, this one more alert and armed with a high-powered rifle. Cadge wondered just what the guard thought might happen for him to need a weapon like that. None of the species had been at each other's throats for a very long time. Not that he really cared one way or the other.

He also couldn't care less about the council, or anything they stood for. Their purpose was to aid all creatures, but Cadge had yet to see any evidence of their "good" work. All he wanted was to bring his parents' murderers to justice, and then be left the hell alone. Politics hadn't interested him when his father was around to lecture on the need for a stable governing body, much less after his parents were slaughtered. It wasn't as if his people were still in need of a voice among the council. They were dead. He didn't need to sit among a bunch of stuffy suits in order to help himself and his brother. If anything, they were better off staying under the council's radar.

“There’s a meeting in progress, sir,” yet another guard said, blocking their entrance.

“Stand down, son,” Red said. “They’re going to want to hear what we have to say.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I was given an order not to let anyone through once the meeting began. You can’t go in now.” The guard held his ground.

“Listen, kid. They’re expecting me. I called ahead to make sure of it.”

“I’m sorry,” the guard repeated. “All I know is what I’ve been told. No one informed me of a late arrival.”

“Do you know who I am?” Red growled, crowding the younger man.

The guard swallowed. “Yes, sir, but...”

“Do you enjoy your job?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get the hell out of my way.” Red shoved by the guard and strode into the room as if he owned it.

Cadge’s cock twitched in response to the power play. Although he was nauseated at the thought of what he was about to do, seeing Red in his element was a definite turn-on. The man was an asshole, but he was sexy as hell when he was giving orders and bossing other people around. Not that Cadge would ever say that aloud.

His palms damp from nervous sweat, Cadge walked by the guard and his very large rifle. Red may not have given a second thought to pissing the man off. Cadge wasn’t so trusting. It was only common sense not to aggravate a man with a loaded weapon and then turn your back.

He followed Red into a vast room filled with people. Illumination spilled down from a crystal chandelier overhead. The bright prisms reflected on the highlights in Red’s hair and made it gleam like a brand-new penny. Legions of noisy people filled foldable gray chairs that faced the head of the room and the panel of elders, who sat behind a long, dark wooden

table. A hush fell over the crowd as Cadge and Red hustled down the middle aisle toward the council.

Cadge didn't think of himself as a weak man, but it took every ounce of courage he had to keep from heading in the opposite direction. Instinct screamed that this was the wrong thing to do. Although he'd lived long enough to heed the warning, he'd also given his word to Red. There was no backing out now.

Red stopped a few paces away from the table, and Cadge stood beside him. He fumbled with his hands, uncertain of what to do with them, before he decided to just fold his arms behind his back.

An older, frail-looking man with a downy cap of thin snow-colored hair stretched across his freckled scalp banged his fist on the table. "What is the meaning of this interruption, Redmond?" The golden-toned plaque in front of him read: DARIO ZAHN, IMMORTAL.

Unable to help himself, Cadge snickered. It had been decades since he'd last heard someone call Red by his given name.

Red shot Cadge a dirty look before speaking. "I'm sorry for the interruption, sir, but I believe you'll forgive the disturbance after you've heard us out."

A bushy white eyebrow rose in a pointed arc. "Would you care to explain who *us* encompasses?" Zahn glanced toward Cadge.

Although Zahn was sitting, Cadge had the distinct impression the older man was looking down at him from atop the bridge of his hooked nose. Cadge stepped forward and directed his gaze over the other eleven men and women sitting behind the table -- including Victor Manning, councilman for the Nightfeeders, who sat at the very end, glaring daggers at Cadge and Red -- and then directly at the man who'd welcomed them so brusquely. Out of respect for the myriad lessons his father had drilled into his mind in preparation for one day standing before these pompous elders, Cadge inclined his head forward in a show of respect.

“I beg your forgiveness for the interruption. Allow me to introduce myself.” Cadge raised his head, chin tilted high, and looked Zahn in the eye. “My name is Cadge Johnson, eldest son of former councilman James Johnson.”

A hush fell over the crowd, more deafening than the noise had been seconds earlier.

Zahn frowned. “You have the audacity to come here and stand before us, claiming to be a descendant of the Johnson family?”

A wave of gasps and whispers swept through the audience at Cadge’s back. He paid them no mind, having expected as much. A peek from the corner of his eye provided Cadge with a glimpse of Red’s strong jaw set tight, his support unwavering. That simple truth encouraged him to continue as nothing else could. Red could be a dick, but he never failed to be there when someone asked him for help. It was Cadge’s own fault he was usually too prideful to open his mouth and make the request.

“I do,” Cadge said with assurance.

Victor Manning jumped to his feet, his features twisted into a mask more heinous than the snake tattoo coiled around his shiny bald head. “This man is an imposter. He’s nothing more than a common flesh-peddler. I have it on firsthand authority that he and his swine of a brother are the proprietors of a demolished club in one of my precincts.”

A spike of adrenaline rushed through Cadge. He balled his fingers into fists at the small of his back. “Is that so?” Cadge spat. “And you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Manning?”

Although Teague’s suspicions about Manning’s involvement in the recent murders in Pittsburgh and the fire that had claimed their club, Oasis, had proven false, Cadge still didn’t care for Manning. The bastard was arrogant and intentionally cruel to the people who offered their blood to him. He was the kind of monster humans feared when the word “vampire” was whispered.

Manning's dark eyes narrowed into squints and an angry flush crept up his neck. He glared at Cadge before turning his attention toward his fellow council members. "Do you hear the way this common gutter trash addressed me? As a member of this council, I demand punishment for such disrespect, Dario."

"Silence," Zahn ordered. "Take your seat, Manning."

Victor glared but sat down. He leaned in and whispered something to the junior councilman beside him.

Spoken in Manning's lyrical Irish accent, Dario Zahn's name brought forth a long-forgotten memory. Zahn had been one of the council elders Cadge's father had spoken highly of, and often. They hadn't exactly been friends, as Cadge recalled, but they'd sponsored several of the same causes. He filed that tidbit of information away for future reference. He didn't know how many of the council members from his father's time were still around, but it wouldn't hurt to have a few friendly members in his corner.

Zahn scowled. "Mr. Johnson, I caution you to change your tone. I won't abide disrespect to myself or any of the other members of this council while you're here. If you seek our favor, it would be best for you to choose your words wisely."

"Yes, sir," Cadge replied, more intimidated by the older man's quiet disparagement than he had been by Victor's loud mouth. "I apologize to the council members for my tone. I meant no disrespect." The apology flowed from his tongue like water but left a vile aftertaste in his mouth.

"Very well." Dario nodded. "Would you care to explain the comments made by my fellow councilman?"

*Not really.*

He didn't know where to begin. Cadge exhaled and willed his fingers to uncurl. "It's true that my brother, Teague, and I have been living in Pittsburgh. Until recently, we ran a

nightclub there. A fire destroyed our business, but that is not the reason I'm here today." He glanced at Red, who nodded permission for him to elaborate.

"Redmond Taylor," Cadge said, with a barely suppressed grin, "is an old friend, who convinced me to come forward."

Dario glanced at Red, before bidding Cadge to continue with a roll of his hand.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not sure what else to say." Cadge weighed his words. He didn't know what to mention or what needed to be left out. The last thing he wanted to do was get Red in trouble for all the help he'd provided over the years. That was sure to happen if Cadge explained Red's involvement in forging their identities, or the way he'd hacked into the council's mainframe to cover their tracks.

The council kept a roster on all known creatures, and they had needed to be listed on it when they'd set up the club in Victor Manning's territory. Although they'd thought about trying to pass for human, the chances of getting away with it were slim. They'd decided the safest bet was to pretend to be Nightfeeders. They'd done it before and knew the drill. They could act reclusive -- not a stretch for Cadge -- and fly under the radar. It wasn't unusual for any creature to be fiercely protective of their privacy considering what would happen if humans ever clued in to their existence.

"You could start by explaining why you waited so long to come forward, and why your brother isn't here with you. It seems as if he should be here to have his say, if you are, in fact, both Daywalkers as you claim."

Cadge frowned, unused to having his word questioned. "We are, sir. My brother stayed behind because of personal issues. The man Red brought into custody tonight is responsible for the attempted murder of my brother and his partner, as well as the arson that led to the death of Joe Henderson, a human in my employ. As I'm sure you can understand, my brother chose to remain close to his partner." Cadge left out that Darren Bernard was Teague's lover's ex-boyfriend and a known associate of Victor Manning's. Darren had even held Teague's



lover, Kyle, captive on Victor's estate the night he'd been taken into custody. He'd leave the explanation of that mouthful up to Red, if he saw fit to share. It was the man's job, after all. Cadge had enough to deal with without accusing one of the council members of being an accomplice to arson, kidnapping, and murder. "As far as why it's taken this long for me to come forward..." What could he say without pissing off everyone in the room? "You have to take into consideration that the person, or people, responsible for the near genocide of my race have never been caught. Even now, revealing myself could have deadly consequences. For all I know, the perpetrator is in this very room."

A rash of loud whispering echoed through the room as Dario leaned in and quietly spoke to the woman sitting to his left. The plaque before her read: LUCINDA RHODES, FAE. With upswept silver hair and diamond studs sparkling from each pointed earlobe, she appeared slightly younger than Dario. Although her features were dainty, Cadge imagined there was a core of steel behind her doll-like countenance. You didn't get to be a long-standing member of the council by being weak.

Red moved closer, bumping shoulders with Cadge. The woodsy scent of Red's favorite cologne tickled Cadge's sense of smell and reminded him of home. Red had been wearing that same scent, or a damn good facsimile of it, since Cadge had bought him the first bottle over seventy years earlier. He would've liked to reach over and grab Red's hand, but he didn't want to give the impression they were an item.

"You all right?" Red asked.

Cadge shrugged. "I'm fine."

"You know," Red whispered, "they can kill you, but they can't eat you."

Cadge snorted. "That's not exactly true." He'd always thought that was a dumb expression. There were plenty of well-known human cannibals listed throughout history.

Red grinned and opened his mouth, more than likely with some pithy comeback, but someone cleared their throat and halted whatever he'd been about to say. Cadge stiffened his

shoulders and faced the council, ready for whatever they would decree. They would either take him into their fold, or boot him out. He needed the night to be over. Between the fire and then the rush to save his brother, Cadge was fucking exhausted. He wanted nothing more than a quiet spot to lie down and sleep away all the stress and drama from the previous week.

“Mr. Johnson,” Dario said, resting his elbows on the table and interlocking the tips of his fingers into the shape of a temple beneath his chin. “It is this council’s decree that we offer you shelter as our guest, until such a time when your bloodlines can be validated by more than your word. In return for our hospitality, you will submit to a routine DNA test, as well as supply us with blood for genetic testing. Any further ruling will be put on hold until after your identity is confirmed.”

Victor laughed, the hollow reverberations anything but joyous. “Putting any faith in this man’s claim is a ludicrous waste of the council’s time and resources.”

“Mayhap,” Lucinda Rhodes said. “But turning this man away if there is the slightest chance that he speaks the truth would be a grave error on our part. I, for one, am unwilling to take that chance. However,” she cautioned, meeting Cadge’s stunned gaze, “deceit with the intent to play on this council’s sympathies will result in stiff penalties, Mr. Johnson.”

“I understand” -- Cadge floundered for what to call her -- “ma’am.”

“Lady Rhodes,” she said with a smile. “And for the record, if you are who you claim, young man, I was quite fond of your father. His wisdom has been sorely missed.”

Cadge searched his memory for any mention of the woman’s name and found none. He wondered if her words were meant as a trick to lure him into saying some false nicety in order to gain her favor. Anything was possible, but he was too tired to come up with anything appropriately ambiguous to say. “Thank you for the sentiment, Lady Rhodes. It’s appreciated.”

"This man is a fraud," Victor said, his voice rising. "I'm not going to sit here while he makes a mockery of this council and you all fawn over him like a long-lost son." Victor, along with a younger, frail-looking brunet Cadge assumed was his junior councilman, rose to their feet.

Dario twisted in his seat. "You will take your seat, Manning. We aren't through here."

Victor sat down with a huff. He leaned in and whispered to the younger man at his side once again. Cadge didn't care for the viperous glances being shot his way.

"Well," Red drawled, "that was unpleasant."

"You think?" Cadge whispered.

"Redmond," Zahn said, "I expect you to stay behind and fill us in on your findings, while your friend is escorted to his room. Jenson..." Zahn snapped his fingers.

A heavily muscled man dressed in camouflage fatigues stepped forward. "Yes, sir."

"You'll see Mr. Johnson to the blue suite."

The grunt nodded. "Yes, sir."

Dario looked toward the men and women sitting to either side of him and then nodded. "Tonight's meeting is adjourned."

Red shot Cadge an apologetic look. "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"Whatever," Cadge said, aggravated with being dumped into the hands of a stranger. He knew Red had little choice in the matter, but that didn't make him feel any better about the situation.

The guard approached Cadge. "Mr. Johnson, my name is Griff Jenson, and I'll be escorting you to your room."

"Sure," Cadge said, studying the crooked hump in the middle of the other man's nose and then the thin bow of his upper lip. The guy wasn't bad looking, if you didn't mind more brawn than brains. "Lead on, Jeeves."

“This way, then.” Jenson smiled and turned away. “Just follow me.”

Cadge tagged along behind the guard, silently cursing Red for talking him into this shit and then abandoning him to play soldier. He hoped Red was damn proud of himself.

For the last several decades, Red had been badgering him to come here and claim his place among the council. Now that he was finally here, it figured Red would be anxious to wash his hands of the whole messy affair. It wasn't as if they got along well these days anyhow -- so unlike when they were teenagers.

He should be thankful Red wasn't dogging his every step and professing his undying love anymore. They were better friends than lovers.

Cadge's need to share his uncertainties with someone was his own problem. Maybe, after his sitter had left, he would call Teague and talk to him. He needed to call and find out how his brother and his lover were doing anyhow. Red had been in such a hurry to leave Pittsburgh that they hadn't gotten a chance to meet Kyle. Cadge was curious about the man who'd captured his baby brother's heart. He wasn't sure he believed in love anymore, but he sincerely hoped things worked out for Teague. No one deserved happiness more.

## Chapter Two

Red watched Cadge, his dark head held high, trail out of the room, and hoped like hell Griff would keep his mouth shut and his dirty fucking hands to himself. With his dark, moody eyes and creamy complexion, Cadge was just Griff's type. The proud way Cadge carried his lean swimmer's build would call to Griff's sexual appetite more loudly than a freshly killed deer would haunt the Lycan's taste buds.

Griff was a sexual menace -- which was probably why Red had found himself in the other man's bed so often. It was damn hard to resist someone who looked like an Italian bodybuilder and was willing to use every ounce of his two hundred plus pounds to fuck you into oblivion. Red hoped Cadge could resist Griff's rugged allure. He hadn't talked Cadge into traveling four hundred miles just to watch him fall for someone else.

Chairs scraped against the floor behind Red as the audience rose and quietly filed out of the room. Only his many years of training held him in position and kept him from fidgeting. With his head high and his shoulders squared, he waited for the room to empty so he could give his report to the council.

Dread built in his gut with every passing second. He didn't want to be the one to point suspicion toward any council member, especially one as vindictive as Manning. However, it

couldn't be helped. Regardless of whether Manning had an alibi for the Pittsburgh murders, he'd harbored the suspect in his home. Although Teague was the man responsible for turning Darren Bernard into the creature he now was, it was Manning who'd taken the alleged Gorgonopsian shifter into his home. He'd kept him there while the shifter had perpetrated vile crimes against creatures and humanity alike. There was sure to be a stiff penalty for that alone.

Victor was going to shit a brick after Red finished speaking. Under other circumstances, Red would have enjoyed the other Nightfeeder's torment -- the man was an asshole -- but he didn't relish being the one who had to do it.

Finally, the room was emptied and the surrounding doors secured. He faced the council members with his arms folded behind his back and exhaled his anxiety.

Zahn nodded, giving Red permission to speak at will.

"Lords and ladies of the council, it is my pleasure to assure you that the culprit responsible for the vicious murder of junior councilman Lark Tucker has been captured and is being held on the premises. As I'm sure you already know, the Lycan's head regulator, Shawn Kingston, and his men were called in to assist in the capture of Darren Bernard because of time constraints and my intolerance for sunlight. Kingston apprehended Bernard and two other assailants on Victor Manning's estate and, in doing so, rescued Teague Johnson and his recently turned lover, Kyle Drake.

"The two men who were apprehended with Bernard are well-known associates of Victor Manning's." Red dared a glance at Victor and found the other man's dark gaze locked on him. A scowl twisted the other man's features into a mask of barely concealed rage. While staring Victor in the eye, Red continued. "Because of these findings, and the fact that Victor Manning knowingly harbored a wanted fugitive on his property, it is my recommendation that the council authorize the immediate investigation of Councilman Manning's actions and the resulting outcome."

Victor slapped his hand down on the table and laughed, although the throaty reverberations held no humor. “Is this a joke? I’ve already explained my whereabouts during each of the crimes, and the reason for the suspect’s presence in my home.”

“With all due respect, Councilman Manning, just because you weren’t physically at the crimes scenes doesn’t mean you weren’t somehow involved.”

Victor leaped up from his chair, which fell onto its back with a loud smack. “How dare you malign my character in front of my peers. You know what I think? I think you’re too lazy to do the job you’ve been assigned, so you’re reaching for the easiest explanation that will suit your purposes. It seems somewhat convenient that you show up here with your *friend*, who just so happens to be making a claim on the very seat I now control, and yet you have the nerve to implicate me in crimes I didn’t commit. I think perhaps you’re so concerned with gaining favor with your little friend that you’ll say whatever it takes to get in his pants. I suggest you rethink your stance, before you bite off more than you can chew.”

Red’s teeth were clenched so tightly he had to make a conscious effort to loosen his jaw. “And if I don’t? What then?”

“I’ll have your job *and* your ass, boy.”

Anger seethed beneath the calm facade Red presented to the council, but he kept his mouth shut. He knew better than to stoop to Manning’s level and provoke the bastard any further. If the council felt hunted, they would close ranks, and Red wouldn’t be able to achieve anything.

Lucinda Rhodes snapped her fingers, commanding attention. “Do you have any proof to back up your claims, Redmond?”

“No, ma’am. The only evidence I possess is circumstantial.”

“Very well, then I must demand this issue be dropped until such a time when you do have hard proof to present.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Seething inside, Red lowered his eyes in a show of respect. He didn’t know how the hell he was supposed to find evidence against Manning if they wouldn’t authorize an investigation. This was exactly why he’d warned Teague away when he’d been convinced of Manning’s involvement with the murder of a young woman inside Club Oasis. Accusing a council member of wrongdoing was almost pointless unless you had a firsthand witness. Even then, it was iffy. Council members were above reproach.

“If that’s settled,” Zahn said, “I would like to hear your take on the young man you’ve brought to our attention.”

“Yes.” Athos Stephanopoulos, spokesman for the Chimeras faction, agreed with a nod. His shaggy mane of chestnut curls bounced up and down with every movement of his round head. “I find it odd that he would claim you’re old friends, and yet this is the first we’ve heard about him. After all, you’re well aware of the lengths this council has gone to in order to locate any traces of the Daywalker legacy, no matter how slim. I concur with Manning about the oddity of your timing. It strikes me as suspicious that you’d try to point accusations at the very member of our panel who would be usurped by your friend, if his assertions prove true.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, sir, but I can assure you that’s not the case. It took a good deal of cajoling to talk Cadge into coming forward. My only concerns were for his welfare and that of the council. While it is true we’ve been friends for a very long time, it would have been detrimental to force Cadge and his brother to come forward before they were ready. As Cadge said, they had just reason to fear for their safety had they revealed themselves at an earlier date.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucinda interjected, “but how is it supposed to be safer now than it was previously? Have there been advances in the case that we haven’t been made aware of?”

“No, ma’am.” Red’s mind raced and blanked at the same time. He couldn’t think of a conceivable reason for why Cadge would be better off turning himself in now than he would have been fifty years earlier. “A change of circumstances forced Cadge’s hand. He aided in



the rescue of his brother and, in doing such, revealed his nature to the men involved. Only then was I able to talk him into coming here and seeking safe haven--"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Stephanopoulos interrupted, "but didn't someone say this Johnson fellow ran a business in Manning's precinct?"

Red nodded. "Yes, sir. That's correct."

"Would you care to explain how he and his brother came to be proprietors of such an establishment, when all council sanctioned businesses need to be approved and registered?"

"I..." *Shit*. He was so fucked. If he told the truth -- that he'd altered records for Cadge and Teague -- he would probably be fired. If he lied, and the truth eventually came out, he would lose his job and be charged with obstruction of justice and only God knew what else. Either way, he was screwed -- and not in the fun, toothy way he liked. "I'm afraid I may have had something to do with that."

### Chapter Three

The council's admonitions rang in Red's ears as he stepped into the mirrored elevator and hit the button for the third floor. His shoulders slumped, and he blew out a frustrated breath of air.

He was suspended, pending the outcome of an inquiry of his service record and the Johnson brothers. One or the other would have been bad enough, but both would nail his balls to the wall. It was only a matter of time before his suspension was upgraded to full relief of duty. He'd given his word to Cadge and Teague that Darren Bernard would face justice. Now he'd be lucky if he wasn't thrown into the clink alongside him.

He found it ironic that he'd requested an open investigation into Manning's deceptions and ended up having accusations slung his way. He probably could have lied to the council about his involvement in hacking records for Cadge and bought himself a little time to cover his ass, but there was always someone smarter, someone more knowledgeable about tracing footsteps in cyberspace. He may as well own up to some, if not all, of his misdeeds. He didn't want to have to look over his shoulder for the foreseeable future, always afraid of the exact moment when the past would come back to bite him in the ass. He should have known he'd be caught. If it weren't for bad luck, he wouldn't have any.

All this time he'd been trying to convince Cadge and Teague to come forward and claim the life that was rightfully theirs, yet he'd never once considered how he would explain his connection to the brothers.

It was common knowledge that his family had served the Johnsons for generations. When the attack had fallen on the Johnson's manor, he'd already begun the process of training to take over for his father. Afterward, with the life he'd expected to assume reduced to nothing more than brittle bones and ash in the wake of the slaughter, it had been a troop of regulators that found him broken and bleeding at the estate, still in the throes of transformation.

After explaining what had happened -- sticking as close to the truth as he dared without giving away the knowledge that Cadge and Teague were still alive -- Red had been taken into the fold and trained to be a regulator. The council's graciousness in the wake of so much brutality had molded him into the man he was today. He owed them his life, more so even than Cadge -- who'd stepped in and saved his sorry hide after he'd been mortally wounded while trying to hide Teague from the band of masked men who'd invaded the property. He should feel guilty for betraying the council's trust, even if it had been to help the brothers, but he didn't. All he could do was what he felt was right, and he'd done that. His father and grandfather had made it their missions in life to take care of the Johnson family. Red was just continuing that tradition in his own way.

It had nothing to do with the fact that he'd worshipped Cadge since they were both knee high to a grasshopper.

He wiggled his shoulders, his muscles surprisingly light without the weight of his holster stretched across his back. While habit made him feel naked and vulnerable without a weapon, part of him was relieved not to have it glued to his person.

He loved his job and the power and prestige that came with being a top regulator. Unfortunately, the bravado that came along with it wore him out more often than not. Somewhere along the line in the past year or two, his idea of heaven had shifted from

kicking ass to kicking back with a cold one in front of the television. Although he'd been seriously considered retiring for some time, that option was long gone now. The best he could hope for was a shameful dismissal and no criminal charges.

*Oh how the mighty have fallen.* He didn't know whether his father would be proud of the way he'd stuck by the Johnson brothers or deeply ashamed of the disgrace Red's actions were bringing on the family name. It was a toss-up.

The elevator *dinged* as it reached the third floor, and the doors slid open like they were greased with butter. Red stepped out into the hallway and turned right, heading toward the guest wing where Cadge was lodged. He didn't have any cause to worry over not being able to find the right room, since Cadge was the only guest and currently under a guard's protection.

Griff Jenson stood about halfway down the hall with his ass and one booted foot pressed against the wall. His semiautomatic rifle sat propped beside him, the barrel facing the ceiling. Although Red knew damn well Griff was aware of him, the other man didn't look his way until he was within touching distance.

When his chin finally lifted, an insolent smile slowly spread across the sharp planes and angles of a face Red had once found charming. "I wondered when you would show up."

"Why's that?" The tension building behind Red's eyes reached a crescendo. He longed to reach up and rub his temples, but forced his hands to remain loose at his sides. Showing any weakness around Griff was like dangling raw meat in front of a pit bull. He had enough shit to deal with right now without adding Griff to the mix.

"Well," Griff drawled in the slow southern accent he exaggerated when he wanted something or somebody. "I figured since the pretty boy claimed to be an old friend of yours that you would be around sooner or later to check up on him. What I'd like to know is just how long you've been fucking him? After watching you together, seeing the way you looked at him, I have a sneaking suspicion I know the real reason you ended things between us."

Red rolled his eyes. "I seem to recall your issues taking care of that just fine without any outside help."

Griff pushed away from the wall and sidled up beside Red, invading his personal space. "Ah, come on now, Red. Things were good between us once. It could be that way again, you know."

"I don't think so." Red took a deep breath to calm his nerves and got a nose full of Griff's woodsy cologne and the earthy aroma of his skin lingering beneath. The enticing scent resurrected a mental image of the two of them fucking: Griff on all fours, taking it from both ends after they'd cruised bars in Amsterdam together and found a blond-haired, blue-eyed hustler to share. His mind created a picture so vivid he could almost feel the tight walls of Griff's ass. The memory went straight to his cock, making the stubborn appendage lengthen and fill regardless of his lack of desire to use it on the asshole in front of him. "The only thing we shared was sex, and no matter how good a fuck you are, it isn't worth putting up with your mouth."

Griff smiled. The wry twist of his thin lips looked downright evil. "You used to like my mouth. In fact, I remember you begging for it."

Red's ass clenched at the reminder of just how talented Griff was with his tongue. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been rimmed by someone who knew what they were doing and wasn't afraid to really get in there and lick.

Christ, it had been too long since he'd been laid if this SOB was getting to him.

There was no way an easy blowjob was worth the kind of grief it would bring him later. Griff was a hothead, and a jealous one at that. There was enough drama in his life without adding a possessive boyfriend. "Not enough to deal with the man attached to it."

"Your loss." Griff shrugged and reclaimed his position by the door. "It's just as well really. I think your little *friend* in there" -- he thumbed toward the door -- "wants to swing from my balls. Since you aren't interested anymore, I may just give him what he wants."

Griff smirked and adjusted his package, and Red's temper snapped like a swatted fly.

He crowded Griff until there wasn't enough room to slide a piece of paper between their chests. "You keep your filthy fucking hands off him."

Griff made a *tsking* noise in the back of his throat. "Why so touchy, Red? Cadge is a big boy. He doesn't need your say so on who he can fuck."

"He isn't interested in you."

"How do you know? What are you, his fairy godfather?"

Red backed up and schooled his features, trying to calm down. He wouldn't give Griff the satisfaction of riling him up any more than he already had. "I suggest you mind your own damn business. You're relieved of duty for the rest of the night. Get the hell out of my sight."

"But --"

Red held up his hand. "Need I remind you of who's in charge around here?"

Griff's angry glare said it all. "I thought not," Red stated. It might be the last time he got to use any authority with his men, and he'd damn well enjoy it. Technically, he'd already been relieved of command, but Griff didn't know that. "Report in to Henley in the morning, and he'll have you restationed."

Griff stared at him for a minute more, then spun around and stormed off toward the elevator. Red waited until the doors sealed before approaching Cadge's room and scanning his clearance card. He was thankful the council hadn't stripped him of access to the more secured areas of the compound. Otherwise, he'd be shit out of luck when it came to visiting Cadge.

The light flashed green, bidding him entrance. He knocked, though he was already pushing the door open. "Hey, Cadge. You awake?"

Red stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The plush blue carpet and beige silk decor melted away as his gaze zeroed in on the naked splendor of the only man he'd ever loved.

Cadge stood facing the window. The way he held himself -- the inward turn of his broad shoulders and the downward-tilted angle of his proud chin -- screamed of discontent. Silver moonlight illuminated his bare chest and shoulders in dim light. Shadows clung to his muscular back and long, athletic legs. The rounded curve of his buttocks and the shaded dip between groin and thigh teased Red with what he couldn't make out -- what he desperately wanted to see and touch. *And taste.*

Without any prompting, his feet carried him across the room and into the open doorway between the sitting room and bedroom. His body clamored for him to move closer, his balls tight from no more than a glimpse of Cadge's nudity. "I'm not complaining," Red said, "but why are you naked?" It wasn't every day he got to see the object of his fantasies come to life. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Cadge in nothing but skin.

*No, that isn't exactly true.* He could recall the last time, although he hadn't been able to take the time to fully appreciate the view.

Close to a decade earlier, not long before Cadge had hooked up with Adrian, they'd had quick and dirty sex in an alley outside a pub in London to celebrate Red's promotion to head regulator. They wouldn't have been together then if they hadn't both been drunk off their asses on blood laced with opium. The entire encounter had lasted less than twenty minutes, and they hadn't even gotten completely naked. Thanks to a lack of lube, Red's ass had burned and ached for hours, but he hadn't regretted a single second of the encounter. Cadge never said a word about it afterward. Red wasn't entirely sure he even remembered it.

Cadge shrugged. "I took a shower and didn't have anything clean to put on."

"I'm sorry, Cadge. I forgot all of your things are still in the SUV. I'll have to get them out for you."

"What difference does it make?" Cadge questioned, without turning away from the window. "Isn't this what you want? Me, vulnerable and at your mercy?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Nothing.”

Red wasn't sure how to take Cadge's offhand comment, so he let it go. Cadge had always been a little flippant, even in the best of times, and he had to be stressed out after everything that had happened in the last week. Not to mention the little show downstairs.

Red's arms itched to enfold Cadge and smooth away the other man's worry. He wanted to hold Cadge close and promise him everything would be okay. Maybe if he meant it from the bottom of his heart and tried his hardest to convince Cadge, he'd be able to believe it himself.

“Do you want to talk about whatever's eating you?” He stepped behind Cadge and wrapped his arms around him, placing his own forearms underneath the hard ridge of Cadge's arms, where they crossed under his heart. “If you're worried about the meeting, you shouldn't be. The council is always a bit stuffy.”

“It isn't that.”

“What is it, then?” Red inhaled the musky scent of Cadge's skin, the slightly fruity scent of soap and shampoo, and fought like hell to resist the urge to bury his face in the shining waves of Cadge's dark hair. An embrace was one thing; sniffing Cadge like a rutting dog was another. He couldn't help the hard-on pressing against Cadge's ass. It was a product easily explained away by lust. Red didn't mind letting Cadge think he was hot for his body; he couldn't stomach revealing the depths of his feelings. He could take having his sexual advances rebuffed. Having his heart stomped was another matter.

Cadge's pulse picked up. Red could hear it beating hard and fast, the blood pumping through veins and arteries in a fast rush of sweet, succulent life. His gums tingled from the mere thought of being able to taste the other man's essence bursting over his tongue.

Before he realized he was moving, Red's mouth was pressed tight against the velvety skin of Cadge's throat. Cadge's pulse thundered against Red's lips, egging him to take what he craved, to sink his teeth into Cadge's flesh and drink. His glanced down over Cadge's



shoulder and watched the rise and fall of firm pectorals. The proof of Cadge's desire jutted from his groin, stiff and heavily veined. The thick shaft bowed under its own exceptional girth, the swollen head ripe with juice that caught the dim light and glistened like manna from heaven. Red's mouth watered against Cadge's neck.

Cadge cleared his throat. "What do you think you're doing?"

Red pinched his eyes closed. He brushed his lips over Cadge's jugular in a gentle kiss, trying to make it seem as if that had been his intention all along, and lifted his head.

Cadge's chest rose and fell, although he remained perfectly still otherwise. "Let go."

"Why?" Red loosened his grip on Cadge and ran his hand down the cobbled surface of the other man's abs toward the hard staff between his legs. "You obviously like it."

"Just because my cock gets hard for you doesn't mean I want your hands on me."

"I would say that's exactly what it means." Feeling brave, Red clasped the base of Cadge's dick and gave it a squeeze. He'd come this far. He may as well do what he wanted. "Why don't you quit playing hard to get and give us what we both want? It's just sex." He dropped his other hand and cupped the heavy weight of Cadge's balls. "It doesn't have to mean anything more than two friends helping each other out, and it's not like we haven't done it before."

Cadge jerked his shoulders, breaking Red's hold on him, and walked out of the room without a word. Red followed, his gaze drawn to the firm mounds of Cadge's ass as they flexed with each step. What he wouldn't give to bury himself balls deep between those succulent cheeks, to hear his name spill from Cadge's lips in pleasure. Making love to Cadge, their panting, writhing bodies locked as one, was the closest thing to a homecoming he could imagine.

It was a damn shame Cadge didn't feel the same way.

They'd be good together, if only he could convince Cadge to give them a chance, to open himself to the possibilities of what they could share. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

Red caught up to Cadge by the door. He rested a hand on Cadge's shoulder only to have it shrugged off. "You want to tell me what your problem is?"

"*This* is my problem." Cadge slapped the flat panel on the door where the handle was supposed to be. In its place was a card slot. The only way into or out of the room was through the use of a key card. "I'm locked in this room with no phone or contact with the outside world, except through you and the damn guard stationed outside my room. I'm trapped here like a fucking prisoner, with no way out."

"That isn't true. I'm here. You have to know I'd never let anyone hurt you."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. You'd hate to have someone damage the merchandise, right?" Cadge shook his head, his eyes wild. "What were you *thinking*? That you could spirit me away and keep me locked up here, grateful for every scrap of attention you throw my way?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." His mind spinning, Red stared at Cadge. Was it possible Cadge trusted him so very little? He wanted to lash out in anger, or fuck the man blind, but neither of those things would give him what he wanted. Acting impulsively wouldn't win Cadge's trust. Whatever they'd shared as youths was obviously gone, ripped to shreds by Red's inability to protect Cadge's family, and his own, from the men who had besieged the estate.

Maybe he'd been fooling himself to think Cadge would ever forgive him for not doing more to save their loved ones. It didn't matter that he'd been mortally injured while trying to deflect attention away from the armoire where he'd hidden Teague. The regret that haunted him didn't change the outcome of that fatal day.

Cadge couldn't blame Red any more than he already blamed himself.

Red met Cadge's feral gaze and tried to communicate his remorse. "It was never my intention to imprison you here. The door locks for your safety, to keep people out as well as to keep you from wandering the grounds without protection. Just because you've been granted asylum by the council doesn't mean there aren't other risks. There are always rogues who'd like nothing more than to strike out at the council by whatever means they can."

"And the phone?" Cadge asked, his dark gaze trained on Red's face.

Red squirmed under the intensity of Cadge's gaze. He had the uneasy impression that Cadge could see straight into the depths of his soul, and found him lacking. "There isn't a telephone because the compound doesn't have service. We don't even have traditional electricity. The compound's powered by generators." He sighed, exhausted by more than a lack of sleep and a buildup of stress from the last week. He was tired of dancing around Cadge, straddling the tightrope between being a friend and a former lover. "I'm telling you the truth, Cadge. Whether or not you believe me is up to you, but if I wanted a sex slave, I could have my pick of partners. Believe it or not, I don't have to force people to fuck me."

"Shit. I'm sorry." Cadge scrubbed his hands over his face and wiped a stray hank of ebony hair out of his face. "I don't know what's wrong with me. This place, the people, and their suspicious attitudes are just rubbing off on me and making me paranoid." He stepped around Red, strode across the room to the beige chaise located under the window, and flopped down on it. "Being assigned a babysitter and then having two idiots in lab coats poke and prod me didn't help improve my mood."

"What do you mean?" Red asked, moving closer. "They were only supposed to swab your mouth for DNA and draw a single vial of blood."

"Yeah, well, I guess they changed their mind. Something about needing the blood for further testing. I don't really know. Frankly, they were so busy gawking and drooling all over me that I'm surprised they didn't try to talk me into a prostate exam while they were at it. Don't you ever let them out of the lab?"

“I wouldn’t know. I’m not a scientist, just a lowly hired grunt.”

“Mm hmm, more like head of the grunts.” Cadge smiled. The expression transformed his features from attractive to stunning.

“You should smile more often.” Red leaned against the tall end of the chaise and soaked in the muscular planes of Cadge’s body.

Cadge fidgeted and then settled back against the chaise with one foot on the floor and the other resting on the seat. The way he sat pulled his legs open and put his balls on display, the tender orbs hanging loose in his plump, pink sac. “There hasn’t been much to smile about lately.”

“I know,” Red said absently, his mind more intent on soaking in the view. He didn’t know whether Cadge was intentionally teasing him with the wanton sprawl, but it didn’t really matter. Either way, he was getting a free show.

Cadge mumbled something and Red reluctantly tore his attention away from the man’s crotch. Salivating over someone he couldn’t have was an exercise in futility anyway. All he’d wind up with were sore balls and a sleepless day filled with dreams he could never realize during his waking hours.

His desire for Cadge knew no bounds, but he was damn tired of being in love with a man who would never return his affections. As his father had always been fond of saying, he needed to shit or get off the pot. The problem was, he wasn’t sure how to turn off the emotions he’d had for so very long. His feelings for Cadge were so deeply ingrained that he imagined the man’s name was etched into the very marrow of his bones. If he’d been capable of hardening his heart, he would have done it a long time ago.

## Chapter Four

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Red must have tuned Cadge out, because he’d missed the last part of whatever the other man said. “I was thinking about something, and I didn’t hear you.”

Cadge reached down between his legs and scratched his balls. His fingers lingered over the swollen length of his cock as he pulled his hand away. “I can’t imagine what you were thinking about so *hard*.”

Red’s gaze followed Cadge’s hand, then rose to meet his friend’s dark eyes. He swallowed the moisture building in his mouth so he could speak. “Ah, isn’t that sweet? You’ve finally discovered sarcasm.” *Beautiful bastard.*

Cadge laughed. “Yeah, well...I asked whether you’ve heard anything about Darren and what’s going to be done with him? I want that bastard to pay for what he did to Teague and Kyle, not just get a slap on the wrist because the council thinks he’s some throwback to an extinct species. That’s probably bullshit anyway.”

“About that...” Fuck. He was hoping to spare Cadge the additional worry about his suspension until after he’d settled in a little more. “I, um, don’t really know what’s going on with them right now. The council suspended me. They wanted to know how you and Teague

were able to register the club without outing yourselves, and I didn't have much choice but to tell them I helped you. It was either admit what I had done or cast further suspicion on you and your motives for being here. Once the subject was brought to their attention, they would have looked into it further anyway. Better to fess up than be found out."

"Well, that's just fucking great, Red." Cadge frowned and sat up, folding his legs underneath him. "You blackmailed me into coming here, and now you're more on the outs with them than I am. That's fucking fabulous. *Really*. Not only are they going to think you're a criminal hacker, but that I'm a con artist, too. They're never going to let me near any of their records, and I'll never be able to figure out who killed Mom and Dad."

Red winced and turned his back to Cadge. He walked over to the window and stared out over the moonlit grounds. "They aren't going to give a shit what kind of person you are as long as the blood running through your veins is pure."

His conscience pinged at the reminder of what Cadge wanted. The leverage he'd used to get Cadge there, other than calling in Kingston's help to save Teague and Kyle, was the prospect of access to the council's files. Cadge believed they would point him to whoever had been responsible for his parents' murders, but Red knew better. He'd done his own research -- after all, Cadge wasn't the only one who'd lost family that day -- and there was nothing in the council's records that shed even an inkling of light on the responsible parties. It was a fruitless search, but Red didn't have the heart to smother Cadge's desire to seek out the truth.

"You don't know that," Cadge said from somewhere behind him. "They may not want to kill me because of the link my blood represents. They may want to chain me up like some exotic pet and keep me in the dungeon you've told me so much about."

Red turned and crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you have to be so dramatic? You know damn well I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

“How exactly do you plan on stopping them? I’ll bet they even took away your weapons.” Cadge swung his legs over the side of the chaise and stood, facing Red. “And, just for the record, I don’t need you to fucking protect me. The last time I checked, I still have both my balls.”

Red’s gaze trailed down the wide breadth of Cadge’s shoulders to the bulging muscles in his biceps and forearms. A light dusting of black hair did nothing to disguise the strength hidden in those arms or the heavy map of blue veins supplying limitless power to his stout limbs. Cadge’s arms hung limply by his sides, although his hands were balled into fists. “What are you trying to do, Cadge? Pick a fight with me?”

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m sick of the way you treat me like I’m some damn obligation you have to protect at all cost. I’ll be one hundred years old in three months; when are you going to see that I don’t need you?”

Cadge’s words stung. Red schooled his features, unwilling to let his emotions bleed over onto his face. He didn’t know why Cadge was spoiling for a fight or what good it would accomplish. However, he was game if Cadge only wanted to take out some aggression on someone. He could think of a few delicious ways for them to blow off steam.

“Fine,” Red said. He stepped closer and shoved out with his right arm, slapping Cadge’s shoulder with enough force to knock the other man back a step. “You want to fight? Let’s see what you’ve got, boy.”

“Boy? Fuck you.” Cadge shoved back, slamming his open palm into the center of Red’s chest.

Red held his ground, barely. He’d forgotten what a strong bastard Cadge was when he put his mind to it. “That can be arranged, too, if you’d rather.”

“You wish.” Cadge shoved him again, the heel of his palm slamming into Red’s right shoulder.

Cadge raised his hand to come at Red again, but Red blocked him with his right forearm. “Maybe you’re the one who wants a piece of me. You’re the one who keeps bringing it up.” He used his left to punch Cadge in his solar plexus, although he held back. He would give Cadge the distraction he wanted to take his mind off their problems, but he wasn’t willing to actually hurt the man unless he pushed the issue.

Cadge grunted, his right arm dropping to guard his stomach, while his left swung up and clipped Red under the chin. Red’s jaw snapped closed under the force. His teeth sliced into his tongue, the organ throbbing as his mouth filled with the taste of copper. He almost spit before he remembered where he was and swallowed. There was no reason to mess up the pristine carpet if he could help it.

“How’d you like that, asshole?” Cadge grinned evilly, with the pointed tips of his eyeteeth peeking from behind his flushed red lips. “Still think this is about sex?”

“Could be,” Red said, feinting a punch. Cadge danced backward, inadvertently lining himself up in just the way Red had expected. Red lunged, his shoulder hitting Cadge in his midsection, and tackled the other man to the ground. They landed on the floor by the foot of the chaise, with Cadge’s back on the thick carpet. “Some people get off on rough foreplay.”

“I’m not one of them.” Cadge squirmed and fought, bucking up against Red. “Get off me.”

Red wrestled with Cadge until he had the other man’s arms forced wide and pinned to the floor. “Make me.”

Cadge glared up at Red, his chest rising and falling as if they’d just ran a marathon. “You better be careful what you wish for, Red. You might bite off more than you can chew.”

Red would have been more concerned if he didn’t feel the hard length of Cadge’s rod branding his stomach. “You could be right, but tonight isn’t the night that’s going to happen. I can take whatever you plan to dish out, plus some, pretty boy.”



Cadge roared and bucked up against Red, the muscles in his neck and forearms bulging under the strain. Red leaned forward and put all his weight into keeping Cadge right where he was. Joy bubbled up to the surface and exploded from Red's mouth in a series of chuckles he couldn't hold in. He knew his laughter would piss Cadge off, but he couldn't help it. If he'd known how much fun tussling with Cadge would be, he would have tackled the man years ago.

Cadge stopped fighting, growing deathly still beneath Red. He glowered and panted, his nostrils flaring. "You think this is funny, jackass? Just wait until I get loose. We'll see who's laughing then."

Red leaned down and kissed the tip of Cadge's nose just to torment him. "Come on, now. Don't be so pissy. I'm just fucking with you. Besides" -- Red grinned -- "it feels like you've gotten a rise out of the situation."

"Oh, I'm not mad." Cadge's eyes narrowed. "In fact, you're right. All this fumbling around has my dick hard as nails. Since it's your fault, do you think you could do a favor for me?"

Red leaned forward. "What?"

"Go find the hot guard who escorted me up here. He looks like a man who could give me a nice, hard fuck I won't soon forget."

Red growled, unable to hold in the rumbling noise, even though he knew Cadge was baiting him. The bastard knew just which buttons to push and how. He dropped Cadge's arms and pushed up off the floor, rising to his feet. "Fuck you, Cadge. If you want a cheap piece of ass, you can damn well get it yourself. I'm not your goddamn pimp."

Cadge sat up, the corner of his lips twisted into a wry smile. "Yeah, I thought that might make you get off me."

"Go to hell."

Cadge jetted forward, wrapped his arms around Red's legs, and pulled. "You first."

Red's ass hit the floor and then his head banged against the carpet. "Goddamn it, Cadge. What'd you do that for?"

Cadge grabbed at the waistband of Red's jeans, his fingers nimbly undoing the button and pulling open the zipper. "I just wanted to make sure you knew who was going to be on top."

Red lay perfectly still, half afraid Cadge was just fucking with him again. "Wouldn't it have just been easier to say so?"

Cadge looked up from his task, his hands still tugging at Red's jeans. "Probably, but where's the fun in that?"

Red lifted his hips, giving Cadge room to work. His jeans were yanked down his thighs, cool air bathing his cock and balls. He tried to toe off his boots before Cadge had his pants around his ankles, but they wouldn't budge.

"Quit squirming. I'll get them." Cadge let go of his pants and moved down between his legs. He unlaced the thick-soled boots, one after the other, and then tugged them off his feet. His white socks quickly followed. Red tugged his shirt over his head and flung it behind him as Cadge yanked his pants down over his feet.

Naked, and harder than he could remember being in recent years, Red got his elbows under him and propped himself up. He gazed down at Cadge, who was crouched on all fours between his legs, and felt an answering tug in his balls. He didn't know why Cadge was doing an abrupt one-eighty, but if the end result was sex, he couldn't care less about the reasoning.

The first touch of Cadge's tongue caused every single muscle in Red's body to tighten down and sing hallelujah. Warm, wet heat bathed his balls. The flat of Cadge's tongue wiggled back and forth over Red's sac, and eroded his ability to keep his eyes open. His cock throbbed and drooled precum, thin filaments of silky moisture forming a thread from the swollen head of his cock to his abs.

“God, Cadge. I --”

“Shh,” Cadge said against the base of Red’s cock, his breath wafting over Red’s damp skin. He lifted his head, his lips gleaming with moisture. “Don’t talk. Words only screw things up between us.”

Red nodded, because Cadge was right. Whenever either one of them opened his mouth, all they ever seemed to do was argue. He wanted to share this moment with Cadge too much to risk ruining it. Too much time was spent with his foot in his mouth. It was like Cadge brought out the immature teenager in him. He cycled through so many emotions when he was in the other man’s presence that he was bound to do or say the wrong thing.

Cadge resumed his attention on Red’s balls, licking the taut, wrinkled sac and then sucking one ball at a time into his mouth. Pleasure sluiced through Red’s bloodstream, twice as potent as narcotics. With heavy-lidded eyes, he watched the muscles in Cadge’s shoulders bunch and flex, his lover’s dark head hovering over Red’s groin.

Hair tickled the inside of Red’s thighs like tiny, pleasurable fingers. Needing to touch Cadge, to feel the tenuous connection between them in some form or another, Red reached down and ran his fingers through the ebony strands of Cadge’s hair; they sifted through his fingers like warm silk. He cradled Cadge’s skull in the palm of his hand, not attempting to guide the other man’s movements. He was happy to lay there on the floor and take what he could get -- at least, for the moment. Eventually, he was going to want his own turn worshipping Cadge’s body.

Cadge backed off and ran his hands up the insides of Red’s thighs. His lips covered the trail left by his fingers with warm, moist kisses that lingered over Red’s skin. He tongued the crease between leg and groin and then pressed a chaste kiss within the sensitive dip above.

Red shivered, his body on edge and eager for more. “Christ, Cadge. Please.”

“Please, what?” Cadge nuzzled the curls around Red’s cock. “What do you want, Red?”

“You.”

“Mm hmm,” Cadge murmured, with his mouth pressed against the thick base of Red’s cock. “You smell so damn good.” He licked a path up the ruddy stalk and down the other side, avoiding the head. “Tell me what you want, or I’m going to stop.”

“No. Please...don’t stop. Suck me.”

Cadge made a humming noise and swallowed Red down. The blunt end of his cock butted the soft tissue at the back of Cadge’s throat, and Red swore. He didn’t even care if Cadge could only take half of him; it felt so fucking good. Heat enveloped him, while a prehensile tongue moved around his shaft and laved him in slick moisture. Just knowing it was Cadge’s mouth around him, holding him tight and sucking him, was more than enough to make Red’s balls hug his groin. He gritted his teeth and held on, determined to draw out this moment for as long as he could make it last.

Cadge bobbed up and down, his lips and tongue working Red’s cock to perfection. The pressure around Red’s shaft ebbed and flowed, loose on the way down, then tight as a fist on the ascent. The way Cadge’s tongue swirled over the responsive head jump-started one nerve ending after another. Slick heat and pressure against the tiny slit made Red’s eyes roll back in his head.

Red bent his knees, his feet flat on the floor, and pushed up into Cadge’s mouth. “Oh, God...yes.” He swiveled his hips, trying to bury more of his cock inside the hot inferno of Cadge’s mouth. “That feels so good.”

Cadge stared up at Red, his eyes full of need, while he laved the tender spot under the head of Red’s cock with the flat of his tongue. He lapped and teased, using the very tip of the slick appendage to fuck Red’s slit. His hands ran up and down the sensitive skin on the inside of Red’s thighs as his mouth worked the crown, sucking, licking, driving Red out of his mind. Just when he thought he’d have to beg for more, Cadge wrapped one hand around the base of Red’s cock and used his other to cup Red’s sac.

While massaging Red's nuts, he swallowed Red down until his lips met his fist and then reversed direction, pulling up with suction firm enough to suck the chrome off a bumper. The sharp edges of his teeth scraped Red's length and added to the sensations rioting through his body. Red's eyelids grew heavy and drifted down. He fought to reopen them, determined to watch Cadge worshipping his dick. He never thought he'd see the day when Cadge would be the one blowing him, and he'd be damned before he missed a single second of the action. Cadge's hot mouth felt like heaven around him, but seeing his dick disappear between firm pink lips was even better. He didn't even want to blink.

The only thing he could think of that would be better than the blowjob he was getting would be having Cadge's dick in his own mouth at the same time. Or...*oh God...*being fucked.

Once the thought of Cadge's fat cock plumbing his ass entered Red's mind, there was no way to get rid of it. Although it had been years, he could remember the way the thick appendage opened him up and hurt so good. The thought of coming on Cadge's cock was so much more appealing than filling his mouth.

"Stop." Red spoke up before it was too late. Much more of Cadge's sweet mouth and he wouldn't have a choice about where he finished. Cadge didn't quit. If anything, he sucked harder. Cum churned in Red balls, making him ache to let loose. He gritted his teeth and swatted Cadge's head. "Goddamn it, Cadge. I said stop."

Cadge pulled off Red's dick and glared up at him. "What's the problem? I know damn well you were enjoying that."

"I was. A little too much. I don't want to come in your mouth."

"What?" Cadge's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I --" The request froze in his throat, refusing to come out. *Christ, I need to grow a pair.* The worst that could happen was Cadge's rejection. It would kill the moment, and his hard-on, but he would live. He took a deep breath and let it out. "I want you to fuck me."

## Chapter Five

Darren shivered against the cold, hard cement and huddled closer to the wall, as far away from the screaming soldier outside his cell as he could get. Although he could understand the words being shouted at him through the thick steel bars, the questions didn't make any sense. It was like the words were twisted and out of order.

He didn't understand a lot of things. Disturbing images flashed through his mind on a constant loop he wasn't able to stop. Large gaping holes filled his memory like Swiss cheese. All he knew for sure was that he was cold, naked, and scared, with a deep hunger gnawing at his insides like battery acid. He couldn't recall the last time he'd eaten, but it couldn't have been recently. His stomach burned, as if it were trying to chew on his backbone.

Tiny, invisible bugs crawled over Darren's skin and made him itch. He swatted at his arms and legs, trying to get rid of an infestation he couldn't see. He clawed and dug, leaving bloody welts and gashes in his flesh, and still the bugs persisted.

Through all the questioning, shouting, and captivity that ate at his soul, only one thought circled through his mind like a ravenous vulture: *Kyle will come for me. Kyle will come for me.*

Two men appeared, both of them dressed in fatigues. The shouts quieted, but snatches of their conversation drifted to Darren.

“Yo, Kingston. What’s...”

“...amphetamines...hopped up on enough drugs to keel over a horse.”

“...you hear...suspended?”

“No shit...”

“...keep an eye...”

“Sure...”

“...back soon, Griff.”

Silence descended long enough for him to drift off and dream of Kyle’s sweet blue eyes staring up at him drowsily. It was an image of the evening after their trip to Beachwood Farms, and they’d just made love. Darren was lying in the circle of Kyle’s arms, basking in the warmth of his embrace and the bright summer sun shining down on their shoulders through the bedroom windows.

A loud noise jerked him awake and made his head pound all the more. He whimpered, covering his ears to stop the pain ricocheting through his head, and glared at the man beating a long black baton against the cell bars.

“What’s the matter, freak?” The man cackled and hit the bars harder, the noise growing to a fever pitch. “The noise hurting your precious little ears?”

Darren squeezed his eyes closed, trying to block out the soldier, to no avail.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, you freak of nature.”

Darren peeked through slitted eyes, his head pounding. He dropped one of the hands from his skull and scraped his nails over his thigh, blood dripping from a long furrow already dug deep into his skin. Pain radiated from his leg, but it was less distressing than the persistent itch that refused to go away. The more he scratched, the stronger it seemed to grow. Crimson blood dripped -- ignored -- to the cement and puddled around his right foot.

“I know all about the things you’ve done, convict. About the people you killed. I couldn’t care less about most of them, but junior councilman Jarvis was my friend. He was a good man who deserved better than to be ripped apart and fed on like cattle.”

Darren blinked. “No.”

“No, what? You may have everyone else fooled with this little crazy act, but I’m not buying it.”

Darren shook his head. “Not crazy.”

“I know you’re not crazy, you sick fuck. Feeding on humans is one thing, but you killed *creatures*, man. Fuck, you *kidnapped* your own boyfriend and tortured him. What kind of sick fuck does that?”

Darren’s mind scrambled to keep up, but he comprehended enough to understand what was important. “No,” he whispered, shaking his head back and forth. “Not Kyle.” He wouldn’t have hurt Kyle, couldn’t have. He loved Kyle. Kyle couldn’t be dead. He *couldn’t* be gone.

Denial came first, and then rage. The emotions burst through his system like balloons over a lit match. Darren jumped to his feet, his muscles stretched and burning. He rushed the bars and slammed into the cold steel. Ignoring the way the metal bit into the open wounds on his chest and abdomen, he rammed his arms through the cage and shouted. The soldier backed away, but that didn’t stop Darren. He kept reaching for the other man. The dirty bastard was lying.

Kyle was fine.

*Fine.*

“Ah, you don’t like being reminded of that, do you? I wonder how you would feel about being reminded of kidnapping your man, locking him in a tiny cage, and then let your boys feed off him for days.” The soldier laughed, a cruel sound that heated Darren’s blood and tinged his vision red.



“You’re lying,” Darren shouted. “*Lying!*” He backed away from the bars, screaming. There was nothing in the cell he could use as a weapon, nothing he could throw at the bastard to teach him a lesson. But there was one thing he could do.

Darren grabbed his cock and aimed at the bar. He grunted and sighed, a golden spray hitting the bars and beyond.

The soldier cursed and jumped back. “You’re going to pay for that, asshole. Nobody pisses on me and gets away with it. That’s a promise.” He left as fast as he appeared, disappearing from view.

Shaking from anger and fear, Darren stumbled backward until his ass hit the damp cement wall. He scrubbed his hands over his face, smearing blood and urine over his skin.

*The soldier was lying. He had to be. Kyle was okay.*

*Oh, God. What if Kyle isn’t okay? What if I killed him?*

Darren banged his head against the wall, trying to knock out the visions of blood and carnage that were never far from his consciousness. What if the visions he saw were real? Was it possible he’d done such awful, inhumane things? Could he have killed Kyle?

Darren tore at his hair, pulling greasy hanks out by the handful. He raged and screamed, hitting the wall until the cement blocks were stained crimson and his hands were numb.

His arms grew and shifted, his muscles burning. Bones snapped and popped, realigning. With fingers dripping in blood, Darren scrawled a hasty message in red.

His last conscious thought was of Kyle’s handsome face.

## Chapter Six

*I want you to fuck me.*

Red's words rang in Cadge's ears. Hormones flooded his body, sending his mind into a tailspin. His body was strung tight, as if every red blood cell in his body had flooded south and was trying to jam itself into his aching cock. He shouldn't be here, salivating to give Red exactly what he wanted, when there were other, more important things that needed his attention.

Yet somehow, being with Red felt like coming home after a long absence. He'd refused to give in to their shared chemistry for so long that finally doing so was like emerging from the sea's icy grip to inhale a deep, cleansing breath of air.

Sex would only muddy the waters between them, but he wasn't strong enough to turn Red away. It had been too damn long since he'd been touched or allowed himself to feel something other than anger and regret.

The guilt he should have felt never came. It had only been five short years since Adrian had died, and here he was, about to make love to someone else. He'd promised to love Adrian forever, but he'd cared about Red long before Adrian was even born. God forgive him, no matter how he'd cared for Adrian, Cadge had always loved Red best. Although life had

prevented them from being together, nothing had ever killed his feelings for the stubborn, sexy Nightfeeder.

He must have waited too long to respond, because Red took it upon himself to flip over onto his stomach and pull his knees beneath him. He reached back and separated his pert ass cheeks, revealing the vulnerable, puckered entrance to his body, and stared back over his shoulder at Cadge with eyes the color of the forest. "Take me, Cadge. Ram your cock up my ass and fuck me."

Cadge swallowed, the tart flavor of Red's precum lingering on his taste buds. He tore his gaze away from Red's and turned his attention to the long torso stretched out before him like a banquet of smooth, porcelain skin just waiting to be sampled.

He leaned over and ran his tongue up the bony ridges of Red's spine from tailbone to shoulder blades and covered the muscular planes of Red's back with his own bulk. The cool feel of Red's skin beneath his own served to remind him of the fact that Red was a Nightfeeder because of his failure to protect those he cared about. He shoved the thought away before it could take root. He refused to think about the past at a time like this. Red deserved his full attention, and he was going to get it. Cadge would make love to him this one time, with no thought of the past or future to taint their coupling.

He swiveled his hips, pushing his cock through the snug tunnel of Red's ass cheeks. Red pushed back against him, dragging a groan from the depths of his soul. Cadge couldn't wait to bury himself inside Red's heat. He just knew Red's hole would be hot, and tight. Phantom sensations of Red's channel pulling him home and undulating around him made Cadge's balls pull taut and threaten to unman him. Coming all over Red's sweet ass was tempting, but something better suited to another time and place. It wasn't what either of them wanted right now.

Cadge kissed the shell of one ear and nipped at the fleshy lobe. A tiny drop of blood welled to the surface, and he licked it away. The taste of copper danced on his tongue,

tempting him to take more. "I don't have any lube." Condoms were a nonissue. He hadn't had sex since Adrian, and it wasn't as if they could transmit viruses anyway.

Red shoved back toward Cadge and clenched his cheeks around Cadge's shaft. "Don't need it."

Cadge hesitated. He rested his forehead against the back of Red's neck. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. Just spit on me and fuck me. Now."

Cadge grinned, despite his reservations. "You always were bossy."

"Some things never change."

"Guess not." *But some things did change.* Regardless of how strong their friendship was now, there was a time when they'd been inseparable. Once upon a time, Red had thought the sun rose and set on Cadge's shoulders. Cadge had warred with his own father over what the family expected him to do with his life, and the path his heart wanted him to follow. *Some things would never be the same.*

Cadge knelt behind Red. He grabbed his cock around the base and brushed the dripping head through the crease between Red's firm cheeks. The sparse whirl of auburn hair around Red's pale, puckering hole tickled Cadge's helmet. He lingered there, right over the entrance to Red's body, rubbing back and forth, spreading the abundance of precum that spilled from beneath his foreskin. Even turned on, with his balls ready to pop, he couldn't resist teasing Red just a little. "Are you sure you want me? Tell me you want every single inch of my dick buried deep in your ass, and I'll give it to you."

Red rotated his shoulders, the muscles in his back rippling. "Yes. I want it. I want *you*." He glared back over his shoulder. "Now fuck me, dammit."

"I'm all yours." Cadge swallowed his smile and pushed forward. Red's hole gave a moment of resistance and then flowered open, sucking the flared head of Cadge's cock

inside. They both groaned at the initial penetration, and Cadge held still, relishing the feel of Red's heat around him. "God, Red...you're tight."

Red grunted in reply. His back stiffened and then slowly relaxed. "Move. Give it to me."

With only nature's lube to ease the way, Cadge eased forward. He kept one hand around the base of his shaft until it met Red's ass, and then he let go and buried the final inches.

Red bowed his head, panting. "Jesus...I forgot...how big you are."

Cadge leaned over Red's back. He wrapped one arm around Red's chest and straightened, pulling Red up with him until they were both on their knees, front to back. He nuzzled the curve of Red's throat, kissing the straining cords of muscle. "I forgot how good you feel in my arms."

Red leaned his head back against Cadge's shoulder. "Oh, Cadge. I've missed this. Missed you."

"I've missed you too." Cadge swallowed the ball of emotion Red's words caused and concentrated on the way Red felt against him, and all around him. He reached down and grasped Red's shaft, pumping it as he withdrew and then slowly drove back inside, one inch at a time. He kept his rhythm even and sure, thrusting into Red with long, deep strokes. He angled his hips upward, searching for Red's sweet spot, and knew the exact second he found it.

Red's ass shuddered and rippled around Cadge's cock, and he released a long, ragged moan. "Ah...right there, Cadge...more."

Cadge closed his eyes and gritted his teeth through the waves of ecstasy massaging his cock. He picked up the pace, careful to keep his hips aligned the way they were, and thrust into Red fast and hard, giving him everything he had. He didn't know how long he was

going to be able to hold out with Red squeezing him like a fist, but he wanted Red to come first. Once he'd seen to Red's pleasure, he would take his own.

He clutched Red's cock like a lifeline, working his fist up and down the solid shaft and over the spongy, swollen head. Precum leaked from the tip and smeared over his palm, easing the friction between his fingers and Red's turgid flesh. He mouthed Red's neck and shoulder, savoring the salty taste of his flesh. The intoxicating smell of Red's blood simmered just beneath the surface, igniting Cadge's hunger to fever pitch. His gums tickled and ached around his eyeteeth, superseding the need in his balls. Driving his cock deep, he licked the curve of Red's throat and settled his mouth over the jugular.

Red shook and jerked, his cock firing one round of cum after another. "Oh, fuck yes...feed from me, Cadge. Take what you need, love."

The last word -- *love* -- broke through Cadge's defenses like nothing else could have. His lover was strong and proud, and Cadge knew precisely what it had cost Red to whisper that particular term of endearment. At that moment, with their bodies joined and his mind in turmoil, there was nothing Cadge needed to hear more.

He bit down and shoved home, spilled himself inside Red's depths as his lover's life-giving essence spilled down his throat and replenished him. His orgasm went on and on, until he felt wrung dry and was forced to tear his mouth away from Red's throat before he took more than his lover could spare.

With one last kiss to Red's shoulder, Cadge carefully disengaged and pulled away. A chill danced down his spine the minute he dropped his arms to his sides. Shaking off a rush of longing to continue holding Red, he rose to his feet and walked into the bathroom.

Red was lounging on the chaise, his lean frame stretched out along its length, when he walked back into the room with a damp washcloth.

Red sat up and smiled as Cadge neared. "Hey."

"Hey." He handed Red the washcloth.

Red ignored the scrap of cloth and grabbed Cadge's hand instead, holding on tight. "Christ, Cadge. That was...there aren't words for how good that was." He tugged on Cadge's arm, pulling him closer, and then cupped Cadge's face in his palms. He stretched up, until scant inches separated their faces.

Cadge knew what Red was after and jerked away before their mouths could touch.

"What the fuck?" Red let go of him as if his skin had turned to toxic waste. "Why'd you do that?"

Cadge straightened. He reached out to push back the damp locks of hair clinging to Red's forehead, but his fingers only hit air as Red moved out of reach. Cadge sighed, tired beyond his years. "I just don't think we should get so...familiar."

"Familiar?" Red's brow creased, his expression one of disbelief and another emotion Cadge was scared to name. "You just had your dick up my ass and your teeth buried in my throat. How much more *familiar* can we get?"

"I'm sorry. Maybe it was a poor choice of words, but you know what I'm talking about. Nothing good will come from us trying to be together." He didn't want to have this conversation again. They'd already hashed this out too many times in the past. There was no hope of anything more than friendship between them. He didn't want to hurt Red, but he was turning the other man away for his own good. A relationship wasn't in the cards for them -- it never had been.

"You know, I should have known you would pull some kind of shit like this. I don't understand why you have to be so damn pigheaded that you can't admit you love me. I know you want me. You just proved as much."

"You're overreacting. It was just sex."

"You just keep telling yourself whatever helps you sleep at night, asshole." Red rose to his feet and began to get dressed. Cadge stood aside and watched as Red attacked his clothes like they were the enemy.

“Red, I --”

Red stopped in the process of stomping into his boots and looked up. “What? You what?”

He couldn’t do this. He wanted Red, the man was right about that, but every single person he’d ever cared about seemed to be marked for violence. Whatever bad juju he possessed had already struck out at Red once, damn near taken his life. Cadge couldn’t put him at risk again. He didn’t dare. “I’m sorry. You deserve better than me. I don’t have anything to offer.”

Red’s jaw clenched and relaxed. “Save your bullshit excuses for someone who hasn’t already heard all of them.” He stalked toward the door, only to whirl around and stride back toward Cadge in long, angry paces. His fingers balled up and then released at his sides. “No. You know, I was going to walk away and cool off, try to think of some way to reach you that I haven’t already tried a hundred times, but I’m not going to do it. I can’t stomach the thought of walking away and letting you get the better of me again.”

“Red, I didn’t mean to --”

“Shut up.” Red held his hand up. “Just stand there and listen to me for a change.”

Cadge nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. “All right. Talk. I’m listening.” He could probably guess what Red had to say, but he was more than willing to hear him out. He owed Red that much and more.

*So much more.*

Red looked Cadge in the eye and stared, his gaze full of anger and resignation. “I have been in love with you since before I even understood what the word meant, much less the heartache it could cause, but I’m damn tired of caring about someone who’d rather hide behind imagined responsibilities and guilt than grab life by the balls and take a chance on loving someone back, on loving *me*.”



“My reluctance to be with you doesn’t mean I don’t have feelings for you. We’ve been friends forever...of course I care about you.”

Red rolled his eyes. “That’s a fucking cop-out -- one in a long line of them. Do you think your parents would be proud of what you’ve become? How about Adrian?”

Cadge counted to ten and tried to remember everything Red meant to him. Even so, he had a hard time curbing the urge to lash out. He didn’t like being called a coward, but he was man enough to let it go, because Red was upset. “Don’t go there, Red. Leave Adrian out of this. You don’t know anything about him. You went out of your way to avoid getting to know him for the short time we had together.”

Red snorted. “Adrian was a pussy who didn’t love you enough to cope with the choices he made. You only wanted him because he was a malleable little puppy that worshipped your ass.”

Cadge’s temper snapped. His arm flew out, his knuckles smashing into Red’s mouth before he even realized his intentions. He drew his hand back and stared down at it as if it had a mind of its own. “I’m sorry for punching you, but you have no right to speak ill of Adrian. He was a kind, loving man who deserved a hell of a lot better than he got from me. I won’t listen to you criticize him.”

Red fingered his bleeding lip. “You need to open your eyes and take a good long look around you. Just because I’ve been in love with you for over half my life doesn’t mean I’m always going to be here, waiting on you to come to your senses. I know you love me, goddamn it.” Red bowed his head and sucked in a ragged breath of air. When he looked back up, his eyes were filled with pain. “All I need is to hear you say the words one time -- just one fucking time -- and I’ll never ask you to say them again. I’ve never asked you for anything for myself, Cadge, but I’m asking you now. I want you to look me straight in the eyes and tell me you don’t love me.”

Cadge's heart broke. He couldn't give in to his weakness and tell Red how he felt. Now more than ever, he had to stay strong. Regardless of how he felt, now was not the time to make them susceptible to the vulnerabilities that came with any relationship. In a world gone mad, loving Red would doom them both.

With his jaw clenched tight to keep the words from spilling out of his mouth against his will, he shook his head and turned his back on Red. He couldn't look Red in the face and lie to him.

"Fine. Be a coward. I hope your pride keeps you warm at night."

Cadge locked his knees and remained standing through the grace of God as Red's heavy footfalls grew farther away. He heard the door open and slam into the wall. He whipped around, unsure of what he could say to keep Red from walking out on him.

It was too late.

Guilt settled low in the pit of his gut and began to gnaw at him like a starving rat. He was torn between going after Red and trying to make amends before their friendship deteriorated beyond saving, or staying where he was and saving his pride. The muscles in his legs froze under the weight of his indecision.

The door inched toward the frame, threatening to take the decision out of his hands. At the last moment, Cadge raced forward and shoved his hand in the narrowing gap before it closed and sealed him inside. He yanked the door open, stepped out into the hall, and felt his blood pressure skyrocket.

## Chapter Seven

Remorse slammed into Red the minute he walked out the door, but coming face-to-face with Griff in the hallway outside of Cadge's suite prevented any chance to ruminate on what he'd done.

"Hey," Griff said. "Just the man I wanted to see. I was about to knock when I heard the arguing. You might want to keep the volume of your little lovers' spat to a minimum, unless you want everyone in the compound to know your business."

"Save your shit, Griff. What do you want?"

Griff crowded Red up against the wall just outside Cadge's door. "You know, if you're in a pissy mood because your boy won't put out, I can cheer you up real quick."

Red started to tell Griff to get out of his face, but he didn't speak quickly enough. Griff's firm lips slammed over his own, stealing the words right out of his mouth. A sleek tongue forced its way in and danced over his teeth, coaxing him to kiss back. The scent of male musk and woody cologne infiltrated Red's nostrils, reminding him of all the times he and Griff had been together, of how good the sex was. Cadge's face flashed through his mind. He shoved the image away. There was no reason for him to give a shit what Cadge thought. Cadge didn't want him and never would. Griff might have only been interested in an orgasm,

but at least he was up front about it. Griff didn't pretend to be anything but what he was -- a sexy asshole. Red's heart wasn't in any danger when it came to Griff.

Griff tilted his head to the side, finding a better fit for their mouths, and thrust his tongue deeper, fucking Red's mouth. Red closed his eyes and sucked on Griff's tongue, settling into the kiss. He wasn't going to let it go any further, had no intention of fucking Griff, but... *Damn, the man knew how to kiss.*

He was just starting to enjoy the kiss when a voice broke the silence.

"Well, isn't this fucking cozy?"

Red jerked his mouth away from Griff. His head slammed into the wall behind him. A bright slash of pain shot through the back of his skull. He shoved Griff away and turned to face Cadge, who stood just outside the door to his suite. "This isn't what it looks like." The cliché sounded ridiculous even as it slipped from his mouth.

A full-bodied laugh exploded from Griff's chest. "Your tongue felt pretty real to me."

"Fuck you, Griff." He inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm his temper. The way he felt -- like a guilty teen caught necking -- pissed him off. Cadge had no right to pass judgment on him, not after the way he'd just rejected him. "Was there something you wanted, Cadge, or did you just come out to visit the hallway before bedtime?"

Cadge's solemn gaze met Red's as he slowly shook his head. "It doesn't really matter why I came out here now. I do, however, think it's strange that you were professing your love for me one minute and then sticking your tongue down his fucking throat the next."

"What do you care?" Red asked, his composure cracking. "It isn't like you want me for anything more than a quick fuck. You wouldn't even lower yourself enough to kiss me."

Griff cleared his throat. "As much as I would enjoy a good floor show, do you think you two could finish your little spat later? There actually is a reason I came up here. Not that you're sweet ass isn't temptation enough, Red."

Red scowled. "Griff --"

“Yeah, yeah. So, anyway...I came to find you to let you know Darren Bernard committed suicide.”

“What?” That just wasn’t feasible. Prisoners weren’t allowed to keep anything they could use as weapons. “How is that possible?”

“The crazy bastard ate himself.”

“Excuse me?” Cadge’s forehead wrinkled. He and Red shared a look. “You want to say that again?”

Griff nodded. “You heard me right. He used his claws to tear into his arms and legs and when that didn’t work fast enough, he bit chunks of flesh until he finally bled to death.”

Red groaned at the mental image Griff’s words painted. “That’s fucking nasty.”

“Hey, you should feel blessed you weren’t the one who had to see it.”

Cadge humphed. “Shouldn’t someone have been watching him?”

Griff looked from Cadge to Red and then back again. “There can’t be someone in the cells to watch the prisoners at all times. The cells are inescapable, so it’s not usually a concern.”

“Fuck.” Cadge’s nostrils flared. “So that’s it then? No one is going to pay for what happened to Kyle and Joe or for the club burning to the ground?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Three men are dead, and I told the council everything we know about Manning’s involvement. There’s still a chance he’ll see justice.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” Cadge said, glaring at Griff.

Seemingly oblivious to the murderous glare being shot his way, Griff turned his back on Cadge and looked at Red. “Speaking of the council, I heard about your suspension. That sucks, man.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Dread crept up Red’s spine. Something was off. It didn’t make sense that Griff would come to tell him about Darren if he knew Red was suspended. Not to mention Griff’s lack of bitching about how Red had thrown his weight around earlier and

ordered him to leave his post at Cadge's door when he wasn't technically a superior officer any longer. Fortunately for Griff, Red was too exhausted to give a shit about his motives.

It had been a damn long night, and all he wanted to do was return to his rooms and veg out for a little while. He needed time alone to eat and to think. Too many uncertainties already hung over his head. He wasn't going to stay and risk fucking things up more.

Red yawned, daylight pulling at his consciousness. "I think I've heard enough bullshit. I'm calling it a night." Ignoring Griff, he chanced a glance at Cadge and walked off.

A door closed behind him, presumably Cadge's, and then he heard the heavy fall of footsteps behind him.

"Hey, Red...wait up, man. I'll keep you company."

Red stepped into the elevator and hit the Close button twice. He sighed with relief as the door closed in Griff's face. The kiss they'd shared had probably given him the wrong idea, and Red wasn't interested in spending the short ride upstairs fighting off Griff's roaming hands.

Kissing the other man had been a mistake, one almost as large as the hasty words he'd said to Cadge. It was too late to retract either. Griff would get over being led on and swapping a little spit. Cadge was another story. Their argument hung over Red's head like a noose just waiting to be tightened.

He knew full well that Cadge didn't like to be bullied into doing anything, but he hadn't been able to help himself. There was always a ready excuse for why they couldn't be together. First, it had been familial duties. No one admitted to being attracted to someone of the same sex in the early 1900s. After the massacre, Cadge had been riddled by guilt and on the run. Too weak to be moved after the transformation, Red was left behind to be picked up by the council's soldiers. Upon healing, he'd been placed in training to become a regulator. Seeing the people he cared about killed, and knowing there was virtually nothing he could do to stop it, had sent him on his own quest for blood.

Unlike Cadge, who'd stuck his head in the sand for too many years to count, Red had wanted to do something to make up for the way he'd failed his family and Cadge's. Being a regulator allowed him to help people. Just when Red was promoted to head regulator and had been in a position to offer Cadge something more than hot sex, Adrian Pascal had come on the scene. Red had kept his distance, hurt that Cadge had finally opened his heart to another man. He hung back, watching from afar as Adrian had clung to Cadge like a leech, his youthful naïveté romanticizing their culture to the point of nausea. Cadge's reluctant agreement to sire Adrian had broken Red's heart and led to a dark patch he'd thought he'd never recover from. Adrian's inability to cope after the transformation and eventual suicide had given Red hope that all was not lost, though he'd felt terrible for the optimism Adrian's death had lent him.

Five years after the death of his lover, Cadge was more reclusive than ever. Instead of coming to Red for comfort, as had been his habit through their long friendship, Cadge had retreated further into his shell and begun to distance himself from everyone who cared about him, including his brother and Red. Teague had been at a loss for what to do to break through to his brother, and Red had had no clue where to begin. Any attempt to reach out was met with hostility and suspicion. Cadge's reclusive behavior worsened as his obsession with solving the Daywalker massacre grew. He grew suspicious of anyone who tried to pull him away from his search, like everyone was out to get him.

Red had tried and tried to reach his friend, but the hard truth was, he simply didn't know how. He'd thought bringing him here, to the council, giving him a purpose, would drag Cadge out of his shell. That didn't appear to be the case. If anything, he seemed more suspicious. Red wished he could continue holding out hope for Cadge to admit his feelings, but it looked like a lost cause. Shit, maybe it always had been, and he'd just been too damn pigheaded to realize it. There was only so much he could do without driving an even greater wedge between them. All the help in the world wouldn't help Cadge unless he wanted to help himself.

Red didn't want to give Cadge any more time to second-guess why they couldn't be together. He was so fucking sick of all the games and the dancing around each other. Although the prospect of losing Cadge's friendship cut like a knife, he couldn't regret saying what he had.

Making love to Cadge, being as close as two men could get, had made him feel alive again, if only for a moment. When he'd offered his neck and felt the other man feeding from him, he'd been sure things had changed between them. He'd listened to his gut reaction and dared to utter the one word he should have known better than to say. He should have kept his fucking mouth shut. He'd opened himself up to rejection, and now he had to live with it. Cadge's refusal to kiss him had ripped away the hope budding in his chest and smashed it to hell, but he was the one who'd given Cadge the sledgehammer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cadge tossed and turned on the overly soft mattress. Finally, he gave up and got out of bed to stare blankly out the window as the sun rose over the horizon. It had been an age since he'd been able to risk seeing the sun for more than a brief peek, but he hadn't missed it. The morning Adrian had walked out into the sun and ended his life was scorched into Cadge's memory, tainting his enjoyment of the brilliant yellow orb.

It seemed strange to stand right in front of the window, letting the warm rays bathe his skin, and not be worried about someone seeing him. He'd pretended to be a Nightfeeder for so long, fear of the sun was ingrained somewhere in his psyche. Now that his secret was out, there was no reason to limit himself to nocturnal activities.

Thinking about nighttime deeds brought Red to mind. He remembered the way Red had loved to hunt and fish, spending all his free time outdoors. He wondered how much Red had longed for the sun after he was no longer able to tolerate it.

Not for the first time, he regretted leaving Red behind when he and Teague had fled the manor after the attack. He wished he would've stayed or taken Red with them...or



something. In his own defense, he'd been out of his mind with grief and clueless about how best to help Red. Guilt over his decision to leave Red behind until help arrived still gnawed at him.

As a Nightfeeder, Red was deathly allergic to the sun, while Cadge could stand it with no problem. Whatever misalignment of DNA Nightfeeders inherited from their creators was ramped to the nth degree, allowing them all of the Daywalkers' strengths and weaknesses. Cadge's body more closely resembled that of a fair-skinned human, easily burned but quick to heal. With the right sunblock to protect his skin, he could go out during the day all he wanted.

*Of course, I have to actually be allowed outside of this gilded prison before I can go anywhere.*

He glared at the door, fuming at his inability to come and go as he pleased. Being locked in grated on his nerves, regardless of whether he had anywhere to go. Red had left with Griff hours earlier and was who knows where, doing God knows what...

*With Griff.*

An image of Red pinned to the wall, Griff's buff body all but covering Red's slimmer frame as he pressed against him, invaded Cadge's mind. He growled and banished the mental picture before it could piss him off any more.

What the hell had Red been thinking, making out with that brute right outside his door? Had he been trying to make Cadge jealous?

No, that didn't make any sense. The door automatically locked when it closed, so Red probably thought Cadge would be trapped inside. That meant Red had been kissing the Neanderthal simply because he wanted to.

*Or because you wouldn't kiss him,* his conscience pinged in reply.

*Oh, no, Cadge argued with himself. I am not going to take the blame for Red's duplicity. I wasn't the one who was spouting words of love and shit, and then practically fucking someone else ten seconds later. This is not my fault.*

For once, his conscience didn't have a pithy comeback. Cadge didn't know if that made him feel better or worse. Talking to himself was ridiculous. What did it say about him when his own mind wouldn't respond?

He'd never been so lonely. Technically, he was used to being by himself, although someone had always been within a shout's reach. Now he felt well and truly alone. Oh, he didn't doubt that someone would notice if he started screaming his fool head off. A guard or some paid schmo would come running, though they wouldn't truly give a shit if he was okay.

Although the room was warm, a shiver tickled his spine and sent a parade of chill bumps popping up all over his skin. He hugged himself, rubbing his hands up and down his arms in an attempt to warm up.

Red's declaration echoed in his ears, haunting him almost as much as the warmth in the other man's eyes. Even before he'd walked out in the hallway and found Griff plastered against Red, he doubted the sincerity of Red's words. No one could whore around as much as Red had over the years and be in love with one man. Red's little speech had to be bullshit.

But what if it wasn't?

Cadge's chest clenched, making it hard to suck in air.

He shouldn't care. But he did.

## Chapter Eight

Cadge spent the morning pacing around his suite, bored out of his mind, starving for more than companionship. He was exhausted from little to no sleep, his stomach was empty, and it'd been way too long since he'd last fed on anything substantial. Red's essence had tasted divine spilling onto his tongue, but a Nightfeeder's blood wasn't very nutritious.

He'd been pissing brown all morning: a sure sign of red blood cell destruction. If he didn't consume replacement fluids soon, a migraine would settle in, and then he would lose the ability to focus on anything other than his spinning head. God help him if his condition deteriorated beyond that. He knew he could use the intercom to let someone know he needed to feed, but his pride wouldn't let him. He'd rather go hungry.

By the time the sun set, he'd worked himself into a rage. A light knock on the door had him on his feet and halfway across the sitting room before the door began to open. He was ready to give Red a piece of his mind for letting him stew all day, worried about everything from Red's suspension to how his brother was doing back home. He would have laid into Red too, except it wasn't his friend and erstwhile lover who stepped through the door.

Griff stepped into the room, alone.

He spotted Cadge and grinned. "Hey, ol' buddy, ol' pal." His gaze slowly traveled down Cadge's body and then back up to his face. The corners of his lips spread wider across his angular face. "I've been sent to fetch you."

"Fetch me for whom? Did Red send you?" The arrogant smile annoyed Cadge. He wished he had on something besides the same wrinkled, dirty clothes he'd worn the day before. He didn't like Griff, but he didn't want to look like a ragamuffin in front of the other man either. If anything, he wanted to appear more attractive. Griff was his competition, if he was interested in being with Red -- which he wasn't.

"Nope. I haven't seen Red since last night."

"Who, then?" Something ugly bloomed inside Cadge's chest at the thought of Red belonging to someone else, but he blotted it out. If he didn't know better, he would have suspected he was jealous. Thankfully, that was out of the question. He just cared about Red and wanted the best for him. His friend could do better than a grunt like Griff.

"Zahn. Seems a few of the council members want to have a little chat with you over dinner. You gonna wear that?"

Cadge almost told the bastard the clothes on his back were all he had since no one had brought in his things from the SUV, but he thought better of it. The fact that Red was pissed off at him and had neglected to get his clothes was none of Griff's damn business. "What? You think I should wear a pretty pink tutu and matching slippers? If they don't like the way I'm dressed, they don't have to look at me."

"All right, but I'd watch the attitude if I were you. The walls around here tend to have ears."

"Whatever," Cadge replied, curious why the man was warning him. Call him paranoid, but he expected Griff had more than the obvious reasons for telling him to keep his mouth shut. Was he worried Cadge would accidentally blab and get Red in trouble?

*And doesn't that thought inspire sunshine and daisies?*

“Well, come on then. I don’t have all night to play tour guide.” Griff turned quickly and headed back toward the door. He pulled it open and held it in position, waiting for Cadge to step out into the hall before closing the door and joining him.

Cadge begrudgingly got into the elevator with Griff and rode down to the first floor, where he followed Griff down a dimly lit hallway. Griff stopped at a nondescript door on the right, knocked once, and then opened it. He motioned for Cadge to go in ahead of him.

Cadge stepped into the room and discreetly looked around. Dark paneling lined the walls above carpet the color of forest moss. A fire crackled in the redbrick hearth, perfuming the air with the scent of wood smoke. A dining room table large enough to seat twenty-five dominated the room, though only two places were set, silver domes covering the plates. Dario Zahn sat at the very end of the table.

Dario Zahn stood. “Thank you, Griff. That’ll be all for now.”

Griff nodded and left. Cadge watched him go with a building sense of foreboding. He felt like a lamb being fattened before the slaughter.

“Thank you for agreeing to join me for dinner.” Zahn waved at the table. “Have a seat. We have much to discuss.”

“All right.” Cadge didn’t like the thought of being grilled, but it wasn’t as if he could really say no, and he was curious to find out what they wanted. Were they planning to question him about Red, or was it possible they’d already gotten his test results back? Either way, he was going to tread lightly.

Zahn sat and scooted his chair in toward the table. Cadge took the seat to Zahn’s right. The light floral scent of the centerpiece -- tiger lilies and ferns -- made his nose itch and his eyes water. Not even Daywalkers were immune to pollen. He pinched the bridge of his nose to suppress a sneeze and saw Zahn lift a tiny silver bell sitting near his plate.

Two waiters, dressed in identical white blazers and black slacks, bustled into the room through a door Cadge had failed to notice at the back of the room. One whisked the domes

away, while the other pulled a tiny scalpel from his jacket pocket and drew it across the bony surface of his wrist, filling one of the two crystal goblets in front of Cadge with crimson. The wound slowly closed, blood slowing to a trickle, and the waiter pulled his hand away and dabbed at his wrist with a napkin. By the time he was finished, the first waiter returned carrying a pitcher. Water was poured for both men, and then the waiters slipped away as quietly as they'd arrived.

"I hope O positive is to your tastes."

"Yes, thank you."

Water pooled in Cadge's mouth as he stared down at a rare T-bone steak surrounded by a bed of baby potatoes dripping in the steak's juices. He wasn't sure what he wanted first: the food or the blood. He needed regular fuel just like a human, but his body also required blood to replace the heme he failed to produce on his own. A vital component of red blood cells, heme was responsible for binding iron and transporting oxygen. Without it, his organs would shut down and he would die a slow and painful death.

While his brother had never developed much of a taste for the blood they needed to supplement their diet, Cadge enjoyed the fresh, salty flavor whenever he actually permitted himself the luxury of indulging. The bagged stuff tasted like sludge, but it was a hell of a lot safer than finding a human donor. He didn't need any "accidents" on his conscience, competing with the events already in residence.

He lifted his fork, ready to dig in, when Zahn cleared his throat. Laying the utensil down beside his plate, Cadge glanced over at the older man. *So much for eating...*

"I hope you don't mind me taking the liberty of ordering your meal ahead of time. I realize it was a little presumptuous of me, but I figured steak was a safe bet."

"It's fine," Cadge said with a tight smile, impatient to fill his stomach before it chewed through his backbone. "Everything smells fabulous. And thank you for taking my other needs into consideration as well. I can't help but notice you're only having water." He'd met

almost all manner of creatures before but never a true immortal. He wasn't sure what, if any, dietary requirements they had. He was also stalling for time. Although he wanted to know why he was summoned, he was nervous as hell. Regardless of whether it was disrespectful, he refused to discuss anything about Red.

"Yes. Fortunately, I don't have a need for more exotic drinks."

"Lucky you," Cadge said as he picked up his glass. He sniffed the liquid, just in case, and took a sip before the potent liquid could cool. Congealed blood was just nasty. A little like guzzling down a mouthful of milk straight from the carton, only to find out it had expired a week earlier. "Special diets can be a bit of a burden at times."

"I imagine so." Zahn turned his scrutiny toward the food and began to eat.

Cadge breathed a sigh of relief that Zahn's intense perusal was no longer being directed his way. He jumped on the opportunity to tear into his own steak while he had the chance, savoring the juicy meat as he chewed and swallowed. It was good, so tender it practically melted on his tongue.

"So," Zahn said, "I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to speak with you this evening."

"Yes, sir. I admit you have my curiosity piqued." *Morbid curiosity that'll probably do me in just like a damn cat.*

"Your blood work came back this afternoon."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'd like to extend an apology from the council and myself for doubting your word. Although you have to take into consideration the number of kooks we see on a monthly basis. It would be impossible to believe everyone."

"Sure," Cadge said with a nod. "I can see that, but I hope I'm correct in assuming the test results have assuaged any doubts you and the rest of the council may have had about me."

“Certainly.” Zahn took a drink of his water. “Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself, son.”

Cadge couldn’t remember the last time he’d been around someone old enough to call him son, but it made him feel surprisingly nostalgic. “There isn’t much to tell, sir.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Cadge fiddled with his fork, pushing potatoes around on his plate. “What would you like to know?”

“Nothing more than whatever you’re comfortable sharing. I would be interested in learning more about your reason for staying underground so long. It couldn’t have been easy to stay off our radar all these years. You can’t imagine the lengths we in the council have gone to in order to find someone of your heritage. We gave up hope long ago of ever finding anyone from such pure Daywalker lineage. Knowing your father was Councilman Johnson is just icing on the cake.”

“You knew my father?”

“Yes. Lucinda Rhodes and I were both on the council with your father. I’m afraid the rest of the current members are too young to remember your parents in more than name. I was quite fond of your father. He was a good man. What happened was a damn shame.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment.” Cadage took a sip of the blood, buying a little time while he considered what Zahn had said. “May I ask why you were looking for others of my kind? Don’t you think if you’d found someone it would have been a little like shining a spotlight on a deer during hunting season?”

“No. After the attacks, we searched for survivors because we wanted to find witnesses and offer them protection. Later, after we’d exhausted all avenues, we simply didn’t want to believe the entire race was extinct. We were laboring under the shared belief that if we located a single living Daywalker, even someone of mixed breed, we could put our scientists to work rebuilding your race.”



“I can understand that, but I don’t understand why you care. Why bother?” *What ulterior motive did they have?*

“Why not? Do the humans not take part in animal preservation? I’d like to think we’re just as humane, if not more so, as they are.”

“Touché. I suppose I’ve never really thought of my brother or myself as just another animal on the endangered species list.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. I was only trying to make a point. The purpose of the council is to guide and protect all creatures. Letting an esteemed species die out wouldn’t be in anyone’s best interests.”

“No offense taken,” Cadge said, picturing Teague’s head on a polar bear’s body. The image made him smile. Teague was almost as ornery as a bear.

Zahn drained the contents of his water glass and rang the little bell again. A waiter came in seconds later and cleared away their plates. Zahn waited until the waiter had left before speaking. “I hope you’ll call on me if there’s anything you need during your stay. You can reach me through the com unit in your room.”

The invitation didn’t come with the man’s extension number. *Convenient*. However, he wasn’t above taking the man up on his offer of assistance while he had the chance. He was dying to get his hands on those records. “What I’d really like, sir, is access to the council’s files regarding my parent’s deaths.”

“Hmm...” Zahn scratched his chin in such a clichéd move that Cadge would’ve laughed had he not been holding his breath waiting for Zahn’s response. “We’ll have to see about that. That investigation is closed, the records long sealed. I’m sure you’ll eventually be granted access to privileged information, but in the meantime, why don’t you take advantage of the library? I’m sure you can find something much more interesting to study besides those old case files.”

Cadge fought to control his temper. He couldn't stand to have anyone talk down to him. "Sir, with all due respect, I'm not interested in new reading material. I want to find out what happened to my family, and the others of my kind."

A low-level buzz filled the air. "There's no sense in embroiling yourself in matters of the past, young man." Zahn pulled a small flip phone from the black holder hanging off his leather belt and glanced at it. "If you'll excuse me for cutting our conversation short, I need to take this." He pushed away from the table and rose to his feet.

*Fuck.* Cadage bit down on his tongue to stifle the four-letter word trying to vibrate his vocal cords, and watched Zahn exit. He glanced around the empty room. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He could find his own way back, but he couldn't get in. He picked up his glass and swallowed the last of his blood.

A moment later, Griff showed up to escort him back to his suite.

\* \* \* \* \*

A series of knocks -- one long rap and then three short ones -- sounded on Red's door and pulled his attention away from the computer screen. Only one person used that knock, although Red had no idea why Griff would be coming by his apartment. With one last quick glance at the balances in his offshore bank accounts, he signed off, shut his laptop, and rose to his feet.

As suspected, Griff stood on the other side of the door. Red curbed his irritation on the off chance Griff was there to do more than bust his balls about Cadage. He pulled the door open and stepped back. "What are you doing here?"

Griff brushed passed him. "Polite as always, I see."

Red closed the door. "Yeah, well, I had a shitty day's sleep. Sue me."

Griff propped his ass on the end of the king-size bed that dominated the room. "Well, I thought you might be interested to know what I overheard about you this morning."

“Okay.” Red propped his hip against the wall, curious. “I’m all ears. Tell me what you heard.”

“You need to leave. Now. Tonight.”

“Excuse me.”

“I overheard Victor Manning telling someone he planned to see you executed. We both know that’s probably bullshit, but better safe than sorry.”

“I don’t understand. Manning doesn’t have the power to make that decision on his own. Who was he talking to?”

“Beats me. He was on the phone, so I could only hear his side of the conversation. He said the thing about having you executed, then something like ‘If you want to keep your cushy lifestyle, you better make sure I have my way’ and that was about it. He walked away, and I couldn’t follow without giving away that I’d been eavesdropping.”

“That doesn’t sound very fucking good for me. You don’t think he has any of the other council members in his pocket, do you? ’Cause, man, I have to tell you, that’s what it sounds like to me.”

“Me too. That’s why I think you should leave. I don’t see how they can execute anyone for something as simple as hacking, but you’re not going to get a fair shake, bud. If I were you, I’d split -- sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah.” Red shook his head. “Man, this is seriously fucked up. I have a lot of thinking to do.”

“What is there to think about?”

“There’s more than just me to take into consideration. Cadge would never forgive me if I just took off and didn’t say anything to him.”

“Him again.” Griff rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t worry too much about the eye candy. He’ll get over it. Your main concern should be keeping that fine ass of yours in one piece.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Griff, but you’re wrong about Cadge. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Wouldn’t I? You think I don’t know who he is? I know all about you and Mr. High-and-Mighty. You might want to watch the talking in your sleep if you don’t want your future lovers to know how little they rank in the grand scheme of things.”

“I’m sorry, Griff. I didn’t realize...” Christ, he couldn’t imagine what he’d said. No one had ever told him he talked in his sleep. He and Griff hadn’t shared a bed often -- not to rest anyway -- so whatever he’d muttered must have left one hell of an impression. He wanted to ask, but he didn’t want to put Griff in an awkward position. Whatever had been said had obviously taken its toll. No wonder he’d been so jealous.

Griff shrugged. “Don’t sweat it. It’s not like we had some crazy love connection like you have with the pretty boy. What we shared was more about fucking and sucking. That’s cool. It’s all I was interested in anyway.”

“Yeah.” Red let it drop, aware of how agitated Griff was getting from the tension riding the other man’s broad shoulders. “Listen, I appreciate you sticking your neck out for me. I don’t know how I’ll ever pay you back, but I will.”

“Hey, no sweat. Just be careful. There’s some gnarly shit going down around here lately. People have been acting freaky.”

“I will. Thanks, man.”

“Don’t mention it. Well, shit. I have to run.” Griff walked to the door and stopped. “You, uh, take care of yourself, you hear?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just walked out the door and closed it behind him with a quiet click.

Silence surrounded Red like a smothering pillow. He collapsed into his desk chair and wondered what the hell he was going to do. He and Cadge weren’t on the best footing at the moment, so it wasn’t as if he could just waltz into the other man’s room and ask Cadge to go with him.

*Fucking hell.* He didn't think his night could get much worse. Then again, he could always be wrong.

## Chapter Nine

*1932*

The tension at home was palpable. It seemed to hang in the air, as thick as the abysmal pea soup he despised. After a long and silent lunch, Cadge pleaded a headache and slipped away from the table before his father could resume the lecture he'd begun the night before.

Sunshine beat down on his head and shoulders as he crossed the yard and entered the barn, competing with the warmth that grew inside him at the thought of what he was about to do. If his father ever found out how Cadge had spent his afternoons for the last six months, he wouldn't expect Cadge to follow through with the betrothal he'd suggested. At the very least, Cadge would be disowned and cast out. At most, Father would have he and Red killed. The shame of knowing his eldest son was a sodomite would demand no less.

Dust motes danced on the air inside the dim structure. The smell of hay, sunshine, and horseflesh pervaded the air. It shouldn't have turned him on; it wasn't exactly a hot smell, but the pungent aroma brought to mind Red and all the X-rated encounters they'd shared in the hayloft. Cadge's dick firmed and pushed against the smooth cotton of his underpants. He

cast a quick glance around to make sure no one was around to see him, grabbed hold of the ladder rungs, and quickly scurried up.

He swung up into the loft and glanced around at the hay bales and the dust. A yellow and white barn cat chased a mouse across the room. "Psst...Red."

There was no answer, but a rustling noise echoed from behind the bales of hay.

With a grin, Cadge hunkered over since there wasn't room to stand up straight without banging his head on the exposed beams above, and worked his way around the hay stacks. He slipped between two stacks and fell to his knees on an old, threadbare blue and white checked quilt.

Red was spread across the blanket, naked as a babe. He grinned up at Cadge with lips the color of ripe strawberries. "It's about time you arrived. I would've started without you if you'd taken much longer."

"Sorry," Cadge said, reaching out to trace a shaky fingertip down the center of Red's chest. The other man's skin was so smooth and soft, the color of peaches and cream and twice as sweet. "I would have been here on time, but Father insisted the whole family eat together."

Red lifted up on his elbows, the muscles in his abdomen flexing under Cadge's fingers. "That's all right. I forgive you for keeping me waiting. You'll just have to think of some way to make it up to me."

"Whatever shall I do?" Cadge smiled, surprised as always by how joyful Red made him feel. He never smiled as much as he did around the younger man. "I suppose I could always do this." He leaned forward and swiped his tongue over one fat pink nipple. It beaded against his tongue, the blood rising to the surface just under Red's skin.

"Oh...that's a good start."

“Mm hmm,” Cadge muttered. He leaned over Red’s chest to switch sides and pulled the neglected nipple into his mouth. He sucked and nipped at the tiny bud, laving it with his tongue when Red’s cries got too loud.

Red tugged at Cadge’s right ear. “Don’t be a tease. I may not have much time today. Papa’s been hounding me to take over your father’s account ledgers. I think he wants to walk me through them one last time before he completely hands them over.”

Cadge groaned and released Red’s nipple with a *pop*. “Could we not talk about our fathers right now? Please?”

Red brushed a wisp of hair from Cadge’s brow and pressed a chaste kiss to the tip of his nose. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to kill the mood. I just wanted you to know.” He ducked his head and ghosted a kiss over Cadge’s closed mouth. “I don’t want to waste a single second of our time together.”

“Nor do I,” Cadge murmured.

Red wrapped his arms around Cadge’s neck and pulled him down, closing the distance between them. Cadge was more than willing to go along with whatever his lover wanted. He’d never get enough of Red. The realization that they could never have more than these clandestine meetings only made Cadge’s longing for the other man stronger. He tilted his head for a better fit and poured everything he couldn’t say into his kiss. Red responded in kind, kissing him back with a passion that tried to steal his breath and turn him inside out. They moved their lips in time together, hands roaming each other’s bodies.

Without breaking their connection, Red lay flat on his back beneath Cadge. One by one, Red worked open the buttons on Cadge’s shirt. Red slipped his hands beneath the fabric and caressed Cadge’s chest and abdomen, then moved his touch higher and shoved the offending material off Cadge’s shoulders.

Cadge blindly pulled the shirt over his hands and flung it aside, heedless of where it fell. He’d probably regret the action if his clothing fell into a pile of rat droppings, but at the



moment he couldn't care less. He lowered his weight down atop Red, relishing the feel of their naked torsos pressed skin to skin, and concentrated on the feel of Red's slick lips moving under his own. Red's flesh was hot where they touched -- his chest damp with perspiration from the humidity, and his lips bruised from kissing -- searing Cadge's skin as surely as the other man had branded his name across Cadge's heart.

*If only things could be different...*

Panting, Red twisted his mouth away from Cadge. "Enough. One of us still has on too many clothes. What are you waiting for? Shuck those britches and take me."

Cadge sneaked in one more kiss before he rolled off Red and onto his back. He tore open the placket on his britches and shoved them and his short pants down over his hips. Red moved to help him, pulling off his shoes and then tugging at the hem of Cadge's trousers. The second Cadge was naked, Red wasted no time in scooting up between Cadge's thighs. He bent over Cadge and licked a long line up the flesh standing eager and ready at Cadge's groin. Wrapping his thumb and forefinger around the base of Cadge's cock to hold it steady, Red covered the blunt tip with his mouth. He prodded Cadge's foreskin with his tongue, flicking over, under, and all around the tiny slit in the middle.

Cadge bucked and moaned, biting down into his bottom lip to stifle the noise. The wicked things Red was doing with his tongue drove him out of his mind. The overwhelming pleasure fried his brain and made him want to make promises he couldn't keep. "Red... *Oh, God...flip around.*"

"Wha?" Red murmured around Cadge's cock, his mouth steadily creeping lower.

"Turn around. I want to...*ah...*suck you too."

His mouth never once letting go of his prize, Red carefully maneuvered his body around until he lay on his side next to Cadge, head to groin. Cadge grasped Red's pale thighs, leanly corded with muscle from all the hours he spent on horseback, and pulled his lover's body closer. The tip of Red's dick was flushed crimson. Gleaming like dew in the low light,

clear tears clung to his foreskin. Cadge's mouth watered for a taste even as he leaned forward and swiped his tongue through the slick moisture. A taste similar to brine exploded in his mouth, tempting him to take more.

The soft, rust-colored curls tickled his nose, but that wasn't about to deter him from giving Red as much pleasure as he could. He needed to know it was as good for his lover as it was for him. It was damn hard to concentrate on the dick in his mouth while his own was being swallowed and stroked by Red's nimble fingers, but he was nothing if not determined.

He bobbed his head, taking Red in as far as he could without setting off his gag reflex. He laved all the sensitive spots he could find, paying special attention to the pulsing blue vein running along the bottom of Red's prick. Cadge explored the cowl of skin clinging to the rim of Red's cockhead. He probed under and all around the fat head, tongue fucking the tiny slit.

Red moaned, his mouth vibrating around Cadge's shaft. His hips rocked toward Cadge's face. Cadge relaxed his jaw, allowing Red to thrust into his mouth. He loved the feel of Red's heavy prick sliding over his tongue, the musky smell of his body that only grew stronger with every passing minute.

Cadge cupped Red's sac in the palm of one hand and massaged his balls. Moisture slipped from his mouth, coating Red's shaft and the heavy sac in his hand. He rubbed and sucked, losing himself in how good Red's mouth felt around his own dick. There was this thing Red kept doing with his tongue that made Cadge's balls throb with the need to spew. He didn't know how much longer he could hold back, but he was trying. It felt so good being with Red, no matter what they were doing, that he didn't want it to end too soon. Or ever. He'd be perfectly content to lie on the hard floor forever if it meant he could remain this close to Red, the pleasure extending on and on in a constant loop of give and take. Nothing sounded sweeter.

Unfortunately, reality had a way of intruding.

Red moaned and stiffened, his back bowing. The prick in Cadge's mouth swelled; the heavy vein underneath Cadge's tongue throbbed in time with Red's heartbeat. Red popped his mouth off Cadge's cock. He rested his forehead on Cadge's inner thigh. "Ah...Cadge...don't stop."

*Never.* Cadge sucked harder, bobbing his head faster. Red's cock bucked, spraying Cadge's mouth with his seed. Cadge fought to swallow it all, his own balls pulling up in sympathy.

Red panted against Cadge's thigh, the humid little puffs of air tickling his damp skin. "Oh, man. You're getting really good at that."

Cadge gave Red's softening member one last lick and pulled away. "Not half as good as you are."

Red lifted his head and smiled. "Keep at it a little longer, and I'll bet you'll be better."

Cadge snorted. That wouldn't happen. Red could suck the rust off a fence post. He patted Red's hip, then caressed the silken, hair-roughened skin. "Come up here." Although his balls were screaming for relief, he wanted Red's lips more than he wanted an orgasm.

"What about you? Don't you want to finish?"

"Come up here and kiss me."

"Okay." Red wiggled until he lay facing Cadge, his cheeks still flushed from passion. He reached between them and grasped Cadge's cock, fondling it. "Want to put this to good use and take me?"

"No." Cadge groaned as Red's hand wringing his prick and moved up and down in a slow, leisurely motion. "Not this time."

"When then?"

"Next time." *If they had a next time.* "I'm almost there. Just touch me. Kiss me. Please."

"Yes, sir," Red said in the tone he reserved for business.

Cadge smiled as Red leaned toward him. His eyes drifted shut as their mouths connected, lips moving in concert. Red smelled delicious, like male musk and sex. Cadge could hear the echo of his heart beating, almost taste the coppery essence racing through his veins. He knew better than to bite, but it was *oh so tempting*.

Red's fingers tightened around Cadge, his strokes picking up speed. Cadge moaned into Red's mouth. "Mmm...close. Just a little more."

"Come," Red whispered, nipping at Cadge's lower lip. "I want to feel you come all over me."

Cadge grunted, shaking as he spilled. Red brought his fingers up to his mouth and licked them clean.

Cadge's cock jerked, trying to harden back up. "You're trying to kill me."

"Nope. It'd be a shame to lose a fine man like you. I could spend all afternoon just staring at you, tracing each and every muscle with my tongue." Red grew quiet, his eyes downcast. When he finally looked up at Cadge, his pretty green eyes gleamed with moisture. "Cadge, I know you're risking a lot to be with me, and I just wanted to let you know that whatever happens -- whether we stay together or not -- I really do lo --"

Cadge swooped down and covered Red's mouth with his own before the other man could say anything that would damn them both. It was a cowardly move, but saying the words would make what he needed to do later so much more cruel for both of them. He could hardly bear the way things were without hearing the vow spill from Red's lips.

Heavy footfalls echoed off the barn floor, growing closer. "Redmond! You in here, boy?"

Cadge froze, his arms locked around Red. He didn't know what to do. If he moved more than hairbreadth in any one direction, he could make a noise, or stir up dust and give away their hiding spot.

“Shh,” Red whispered, his lips barely moving against Cadge’s ear. “Papa doesn’t know we’re here. He’ll go away.”

Cadge shook his head, too worried about being caught to say anything aloud. *No, Red’s father wouldn’t leave. He was going to find them. Cadge just knew it. They were both dead.*

“You worry too much.” Red grasped Cadge’s chin and tilted it until Cadge had no choice but to look him in the eyes. “Kiss me.”

Red didn’t give Cadge a chance to act on the request; he just took what he wanted and expected Cadge to do the same. In a way, Red’s attitude was liberating for Cadge because he didn’t have to take full responsibility for their trysts. Red was as much to blame for their explosive chemistry as he was -- maybe more, since he was the one who’d instigated their first time together.

Cadge envied Red’s freedom. At eighteen, Red was cocky and sure of himself. Five years his senior, Cadge knew who he was supposed to be, had a vague image of the man his family expected him to turn into, but that was all. Family and duty he could understand. Following your heart was another matter all together. If he were a braver man, he would take Red and leave, start over somewhere else where no one knew who or what he was. Unfortunately, that wasn’t in the cards.

Fully aware this could be their last time together, Cadge put all the words he’d never been able to say behind his kiss. He held Red tight and prayed some small part of Red would recognize his actions for what they were. Love had never been a problem, but it wasn’t an easy solution either.

Cadge tightened his grip on Red, unwilling to release his lover just yet. Just a minute more, and he would let go.

*Only a second more...*

## Chapter Ten

“Cadge... Earth to Cadge... Wake up.”

“Huh?” Cadge struggled to lift eyelids that felt as if they’d been glued shut.

“Having a nice dream? I could hear you moaning before I even opened the door.”

“Fuck you, Red.” Cadge blinked up at the shadowy outline of the other man as the last vestiges of sleep faded away. Lingering elements of his dream clawed at his groin, making his blood race in sluggish starts and stops. The soft sheet felt like sandpaper against the aching length of his shaft. For just a moment, he’d actually thought he’d gone back in time to the last lazy afternoon he’d spent with Red before everything went to hell. Things were so much simpler then, even if it hadn’t seemed that way at the time. *What I wouldn’t give to go back and change the way that afternoon ended.*

It had been while lying in the hay, both of them still panting with the exertions of their lovemaking, that he’d broken the news to Red about his impending engagement to Erin Anderson, a girl whose family’s property bordered theirs. Her family lineage could be traced back almost as far as Cadge’s, and his father thought it would be a good, fruitful match. Red had been devastated, but no more so than Cadge. He’d promised to find a way out of it, but they’d both known that wasn’t going to happen.

A week later, the world came to a screeching halt and everything changed. Making his old man proud was no longer an issue, but he'd already lost Red. First he'd pushed him away, and then he'd taken his life in order to save it. Although he'd love to believe Red still cared about him, there was no way that could be the truth. He'd done nothing to deserve Red's love -- not then, and certainly not now.

Red grasped Cadge's thigh through the sheet and gave it a gentle shake. "Come on, man. Wake up. I need to talk to you about something."

"About what?" Cadge scrubbed the sleep from his eyes and smothered a yawn. "Where the hell have you been anyway?"

"Nowhere. I've just been busy. Why? No one's been bothering you, right?"

"No. I'm fine." *I missed you.* "I just expected to see you. Your little butt buddy, Griff, escorted me down to dinner with Zahn. I asked where you were, and no one seemed to know anything."

"Yeah, well...like I said, I've been busy."

"Oh-kay." Cadge drawled out the word, wondering what was eating at Red. Warning bells clanged in the back of his groggy mind. It was probably just leftover feelings from his dream or residual emotions from their argument the night before, but something seemed off. Red's body practically vibrated with tension.

Although Cadge knew he didn't deserve it, all he wanted at that very moment was to see Red smile at him, to know he hadn't irrevocably damaged their relationship. He was so tired of fighting his feelings for Red, even if it was for Red's own good. "Listen, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings last night. That wasn't my intention. You just don't understand. I couldn't bear it if anything else happened to you because of me."

"Cadge...love..." Red paused and blew out a long breath. "I know you believe you're cursed or something, but you're wrong. Nothing that happened to me was your fault. There isn't anything terrible that's going to happen to me now. Even if I thought you were right --

and I don't -- the God's honest truth is I would rather have an hour of bliss with you than a lifetime of mediocrity with someone else. I --"

Without thought, Cadge grabbed Red by the back of the neck. He pulled Red down to him and smashed his mouth over Red's. Red's lips parted on a sigh, and Cadge thrust his tongue inside, rubbing it over and against Red's. He relished the feel of Red's soft lips moving over his own, savored the sultry taste of Red's mouth and the underlying hint of copper. The spicy scent of Red's favorite cologne tickled his nose and wrapped around him like a warm blanket. Although he didn't know what he'd done to deserve someone like Red, who was willing to forgive him for a lifetime's worth of wrongs, he wasn't altruistic enough to second-guess it. It was time to stop fighting, to stop running away from the one man he'd loved more than any other. He said a silent apology to Adrian's memory and decided to take life by the balls.

Red loved him and was brave enough to admit it, even though Cadge acted like an ass. It was about damn time he told Red that his feelings weren't one-sided. He didn't know how things would work out, if they even would, but he owed it to Red to at least tell the man he was loved in return.

Cadge tore himself away from Red's lips. "Red... For what it's worth, I love you too. I always have."

Red stilled, not so much as a breath passing his lips, and stared at Cadge with a look of wonder. After a long pregnant pause, where Cadge cursed himself for his shitty timing, a smile slowly spread across Red's face. He threw his arms around Cadge and squeezed. "You have no fucking idea how long I've waited to hear you say that. Do you mean it? Really? Because if you're fucking with me --"

Red's insecurity broke Cadge's heart. "I'm not lying. I mean it. I love you. How could I not?"



Red pulled away. “Well, you sure as shit did a good impression of it for the last seventy years.”

“I know. I-I don’t have any excuse for my behavior. To be honest, I’m sick of trying to fight the way I feel about you. There’s no use. If my feelings for you haven’t gone away by now, they’re never going to.”

“I’m glad you’ve finally figured that out.” Red cupped Cadge’s face with both hands and kissed him softly. His lips lingered over Cadge’s. “God, I want you. You have no idea how much. I’d love to climb into bed and spend the rest of the night proving how I feel about you, but I really need to talk to you about something.”

“All right.” Cadge stretched over to the nightstand and turned on the lamp, casting a dim illumination around the bed. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s about my suspension. A few more details have come to light... To make a long story short, I need to leave.”

“Okay. I don’t like the thought of staying here without you, but I’ll manage. When are you coming back?”

Red squeezed Cadge’s hand. “I’m not.”

“What?” Cadge frowned. “Why the hell not?”

“I knew there was a good chance I would lose my job after I admitted to helping you and Teague falsify records for the club. What I didn’t know was how far the council would go in order to prove a point to my men. They want to make an example of me, Cadge. They’re going to hold a mock trial and execute me.”

“*What?*” Cadge sat up, shaking his head. “That’s ridiculous. They can’t do that.” There had to have been some kind of mistake. All Red had done was hack into their records. Surely that wasn’t a killing offense.

“Don’t be so naive. They’re the council, Cadge. They can do whatever they want. Who’s going to stop them?”

"I will, dammit. I don't care who they are. They can't just kill someone and call it justice. That's ludicrous." There was no way he was going to sit by with his thumb up his ass while Red's life was in danger.

"You and what army? Listen, I appreciate the sentiment, but there's nothing you can do. I have to go. There are places I can go where they'll never find me. It's not like I don't have experience forging identities."

"This is *my* fault. If I hadn't insisted on moving, on setting up the club after Adrian died... I got you into this, and I'll find a way to get you out of it. You can't just run away. There has to be a better solution."

"Well, if you know an easy answer, then I'm all ears. Otherwise, I need to get the hell out of here. I shouldn't even know what's going on and wouldn't if Griff hadn't overheard Victor Manning threatening someone to help him fuck me over."

"But I had dinner with Zahn earlier this evening. He's the elder council member, right? It seems like he would know something about charges being brought up against you, and he didn't say anything of the sort."

"There's no reason you should have been told. It doesn't concern you."

"The hell it doesn't." How could Red even think that?

"Everything I did was of my own free will. You didn't force me to help you. It isn't your fault, or your responsibility."

Cadge threw back the sheet covering the lower half of his body and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He stood and crossed the room to where his clothes were lying over the back of a plush, cream-colored wing chair under the window. "We can argue about who did what later. Right now, we need to get you out of here."

Red stood, staring at Cadge as he yanked his jeans up over his hips and zipped them up. "What are you doing?"

“Getting dressed.” Cadge pulled a formfitting black T-shirt over his head and sat to put on his boots. “What does it look like?”

“I know that. I meant why are you getting dressed?”

“That should be obvious. I’m going with you.” He’d have to forgo access to the files he so desperately wanted to get his hands on, but for once he was going to put the living above the dead. Justice for his loved ones and all the other families murdered for nothing more than the blood flowing through their veins would have to wait a little longer. He’d waited this long. Now that he’d opened the floodgates and admitted how he felt about Red, there was no going back. He wasn’t about to let the man he cared about go it alone. There was no way in hell he was going to be left behind while Red struck out on his own.

“No.” Red crossed his arms over his chest. “You need to stay here. This is where you belong.”

“Stop being an ass.”

“It’s different. I’m not you. I may have lied and resorted to some underhanded method to get you here, but this is where your father would want you to be. He raised you to take his place on the council one day.”

*Bastard. That was a low blow, and he knew it.*

“My father is dead. I let what he wanted stand in the way of being with you once, and I won’t do it again. Don’t ask me to.” Cadge bent and laced up his boots, tying the strings in a double knot to keep them from coming loose.

“Aren’t you even going to ask me what I’m talking about?”

“No.” Cadge looked up. “I don’t care. I’m going with you and that’s final.”

“I lied to you about the files. There’s nothing in them. At least nothing you haven’t already seen.”

Halfway between standing and sitting, Cadge slumped back into the chair. He didn’t know whether to believe Red. He could just be trying to piss him off so Cadge would agree to

stay behind. Cadge regarded Red for a minute, studying the inward curve of his lover's shoulders and the way his left cheek kept sinking inward as if the other man was chewing on it. He wouldn't meet Cadge's eyes. "You're lying."

"I'm not. Don't you think if there was anything in the council's records I would have found it by now? I was proficient in computer technology before you even knew what one was. I knew the techs who transferred all hard copies over into computer files. There's nothing there."

"I..." Cadge tried to speak, to say something that made sense, but the words shriveled on his tongue along with whatever hope he had left. Any chance that some small bit of history remained to help him solve his parents' murder faded in the face of Red's confession. If the council had nothing he hadn't already seen then there truly was no hope. He'd waited too long to seek justice. Time had eradicated any chance of the truth ever being found out.

Cadge scrubbed his hands over his face. "Are you sure?"

Red fidgeted, his hands moving restlessly until he finally shoved them in his pockets. "Yes. I swear, if I'd ever thought there was a single clue in those files that would tell us who was responsible, you would have been the first person to hear about it. I would have never kept that kind of information to myself."

"Why are you telling me this now? Dammit, Red, I don't understand. Why blackmail me into coming here if you knew there wasn't anything to find? And don't give me any bullshit about how I belong here."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I wanted you here for me? I know I got you here under false pretenses, and I got your hopes up about something I knew wasn't going to pan out, but what other choice did I have? You haven't given me the time of day in years." Red paced over to the window and looked outside. "Do you remember the night we fucked, the last time right before you hooked up with Adrian?"

"Yeah." As if he could forget.

He'd been a lot more sober than he'd pretended that night. It had just been easier to let Red believe he was fucked up and horny, rather than explain that he simply wasn't able to spend another night in Red's presence without touching him. Red had been so excited and happy about his new promotion that it was contagious. Cadge hadn't been able to resist. "What about it?"

"I was such a fool that night. You know, I actually talked myself into believing you really wanted me. For more than a quick fuck, I mean. You were all over me, and it was just like old times. Afterward, when you went out of your way to avoid me, I convinced myself that you were just busy. Then the next time I came to town, you introduced me to Adrian, and I realized you were never going to stop running from me. It wasn't your parents keeping us apart or the gay issue. It was me. You just didn't want to be with me."

"That's not true, Red. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"Just let me finish, okay?"

"All right. Go ahead."

"I'm sorry I lied to you, but I thought that if I could just get you here you'd open your eyes and see me for the man I am now, instead of the lovelorn kid I used to be. You'd see me -- the *real* me -- and realize what you were missing out on."

Cadge was up out of his seat and behind Red before he finished speaking. He spun Red around and pulled him into his arms, holding on tight. "I do see you, both the boy you were and the man you are now. I loved you then, and I love you now, even if I never said the words. We've both done things and said things we aren't proud of, but..." Cadge paused and chose his words wisely. He didn't want to screw this up. "There is so much water under the bridge between us that it's hard to see things clearly sometimes. I'm not thrilled with the idea of being lied to, but I'd like to forget about the past and concentrate on right now. We can work on the rest later, okay?"

Red nuzzled his face into the curve of Cadge's neck, kissing his shoulder. "Yeah. That sounds good to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Red dragged himself away from the comfort of Cadge's arms and grabbed his lover's hand. He twined his fingers through Cadge's and gave them a tug. "Come on. If you're sure about this, let's get the hell out of here before I change my mind about taking you with me."

*As if that was ever going to happen...*

Now that Cadge had admitted loving him, Red wasn't going to let the other man out of his sight. He felt like he'd blink and wake up at any moment. Decades after he'd shelved any real expectation of ever being with Cadge, it seemed impossible that Cadge was finally willing to give him a chance. He wasn't sure if the fight was the cause for Cadge's abrupt one-eighty, or if it had just taken Red's simple declaration of love, but whatever he'd done, he wished he'd done it sooner. So much time had already been wasted.

Red led Cadge out of the suite and into the quiet hallway beyond. He stopped just outside the door and turned to Cadge. "Just stay calm and act like we're going for a late-night stroll outside. If there are any shifters on guard, they'll be able to smell your anxiety."

"I know that."

"All right." Red leaned in and kissed the tip of Cadge's nose. "You don't have to get testy." He stepped away and took the lead, walking at a casual but quicker than normal pace.

Since neither of them was under supervision, Red didn't see a problem with getting them out of the building and into one of the company vehicles parked around back of the compound. His conscience pinged at stealing one of the company SUVs, but it couldn't be helped. They could always park it somewhere it would be found after they'd secured another, less identifiable vehicle. That was the best he could do, and probably more than they deserved.

Cadge's hand landed on Red's shoulder halfway to the elevator. "Wait," Cadge whispered, crowding in close to Red. "Aren't I the only person on this floor?"

"Yeah. As far as I know. Why?" Red followed Cadge's finger toward the door that stood open a few feet ahead of them. He'd been paying so much attention to getting them to the elevator that he walked right passed the door without noticing it. "That's weird."

"Look at the carpet."

Red lowered his gaze to the carpet just inside the door and noticed the dark stain rapidly spreading toward the hall. He didn't need to scent the air to know it was blood, and quite a lot of it. The hair on the back of his neck vibrated with his unease. "Stay here."

"Like hell."

"Fine. Just stay behind me." He was going to take a quick peek and then they were gone. The only reason he didn't argue with Cadge about staying in the hall and keeping a lookout was because they couldn't afford to get in an argument and call attention to themselves. It was bad enough that something had obviously happened within throwing distance of Cadge's suite. Something was going on. He didn't like the stench of it, but he couldn't keep walking when there was a good chance someone he knew lay dying. His conscience would eat him alive.

Red eased the door open a little farther, wary of what he would find. The scent of death grew overwhelming, a mixture of urine, feces, and blood. Red wasn't sure how he hadn't noticed it before then, but he blamed the oversight on his mind being occupied elsewhere.

He entered the suite, being careful of where he stepped to preserve the scene, and crouched down beside the prone body. Bone fragments glittered atop the deep crimson leakage. Clumps of gray matter clung to the thick beige carpet, which indicated the corpse hadn't been moved. The man had died from a single gunshot to the back of his head -- *execution-style*.

He didn't need to turn the corpse over to identify it. The snake tattoo coiled around what was left of the hairless scalp did that for him.

*Victor Manning.*

More distressing than the body was what lay in a pool of gore by Victor Manning's head -- the very sidearm Red had turned in upon his suspension. He knew it was his because of the modified silencer and the custom-made grips he'd had designed to ergonomically fit his hands.

Cadge made a small sound, some kind of cross between a sharp inhale and a gasp. "That's --"

Red cut Cadge off. "I know." He rose to his feet, a sense of foreboding building in the pit of his gut. "We need to get out of here."

Cadge's head tilted, his gaze never leaving Red's. "Someone's coming."

Red closed his eyes and listened. The almost nonexistent *whoosh* of the elevator doors reached his ears, followed by nothing. Anyone else might have thought no one had gotten off on their floor, but Red knew better. He'd trained his men to move with virtually no sound.

Red opened his eyes and looked at Cadge. "You should go out the window. Now." It didn't matter that they hadn't done anything wrong. Red knew how this would look to his men. They were fucked if they were caught in the same room with the body. Both of them had motive for wanting Manning dead.

Neither of them had time to do more than suck in air before Red's men swarmed into the room like locusts, their high-powered assault rifles engaged and ready to be used if either one of them so much as twitched his nose.



## Chapter Eleven

Red found it ironic that Cadge hadn't wanted to get involved with him on the off chance that he'd somehow ruin Red's life, and now it was Red's incompetence that was going to be the end of both of them.

In the last two days he'd been poked and interrogated to within an inch of his life. His clothing had been stripped away, a provision he himself had introduced as a safety precaution some years back. Thanks to being denied even the most basic necessity of blood, he was getting weaker by the hour and having trouble concentrating on even the most rudimentary thoughts for very long.

Red could only imagine Cadge had undergone the same treatment, since he hadn't spoken with his lover for the last forty-eight hours. He'd only caught a brief glimpse of him earlier that morning as he was being led out of the dungeon for what Red could only guess was another interrogation. Red's turn had been the day before, but his session hadn't continued for nearly as long as Cadge's. He could only guess at the amount of time that had gone by since Shawn Kingston had taken Cadge, but it seemed like forever.

Although they shared a wall between cells, there had been no conversation between the two of them. When they'd finally been returned to their cells, after hours of

interrogation the night they were found with Manning's body, Red had tried to apologize to Cadge for getting him involved. Cadge hadn't answered. Red hadn't felt like spilling his guts out onto the table only to have the men he'd worked with laugh their asses off. All the cells were wired for sound, and Red refused to have his love life, or lack thereof, recorded for posterity. If they were going to be tried and executed, he'd just as soon die thinking Cadge loved him rather than hearing about what a bastard he was for getting them both arrested and accused of a murder they didn't commit. Red slid down the cold, damp cement wall until his ass touched the equally clammy floor, and dropped his head into his hands.

*There has to be something I can do to get us out of this. If worse comes to worse, I could always confess to everything and hopefully get the charges against Cadge dropped. Maybe Cadge will survive to forgive me for what I've done.*

"You should have come to me if you needed help."

Red lifted his head and stared at Griff, who stood on the other side of the bars. "I didn't think I needed your help."

Griff fingered one of the bars, a thick leather glove protecting his hand from the silver. "This is my fault, isn't it? I shouldn't have told you what I overheard."

"It isn't your fault. I was planning to run, but I didn't kill Manning."

"How am I supposed to believe that? It was your gun at the scene. You and your boy toy were found crouching over the body. What the hell am I *supposed* to think? I know the tooth fairy didn't do it."

"Smart-ass till the bitter end, aren't you, buddy?"

Griff shrugged. "Guess so."

"Nice to see that some things never change." Red stretched his hand out across his face and rubbed his aching temples with the tips of his thumb and middle finger.

"You know there's nothing I can do for you now, right? I would if I could, but anything I might try to do to help is only going to land me in the cell beside you."

Red didn't bother lifting his head. "I know. I don't expect you to stick your neck out for me."

"I might be able to sneak you in some blood."

"No. As much as I'd like to take you up on the offer, you don't need to do that. There's no point in feeding someone who's going to be dead before he sees his next full moon anyway."

"Yeah, well... If they weren't going to execute you before, they sure as shit will now."

The tiny ember of hope that he would be exonerated fizzled inside Red's chest. "I know. Listen, do you think it would help if..." Red paused, thinking.

"What?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it." He couldn't finish what he was going to say. As much as he wanted to talk to someone about the prospect of confessing to save Cadge, Griff wasn't the right person. Besides, if he admitted he was going to confess just to get the charges against his lover dropped, they would have him lying on tape. That wasn't going to help either of their causes.

"For God's sake, man." Griff rattled the bars. "If you know something that might help your cause, speak up. Are you protecting Cadge? Is that it?"

"No. Christ, no." Red sighed, so fucking tired he didn't see the point in keeping his eyes open. "I'm not lying about anything, Griff. I didn't kill Manning and neither did Cadge. I don't know how my gun ended up there. Neither Cadge nor I pulled the trigger. Manning was a despicable fuck. I can't say I'm sorry he's gone, but I'm not the one who killed him. I don't know who did."

Griff was quiet for a long time, so long that Red could almost pretend his ex-lover wasn't standing at the entrance to his cage and staring at him, until he finally spoke. "Plenty of people disliked Manning. No one else had immediate motive like you and your boy."

“Don’t you think I know that? I haven’t thought of anything else since I’ve been in here. All I can figure is it’s someone with access to the secure storage, someone who knew which gun was mine, and exactly which bullets to use to get the job done. Most people can’t tell the difference between regular bullets and the silver nitrate cartridges.”

“You should know that a lot of the regulators are rooting for you. People are saying they think your little boyfriend is setting you up.”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. I’m positive. Cadge wouldn’t betray me. I’d bet my life on it.”

“You are.”

“What?”

“You’re betting your life on his honesty.”

Red lifted his head and met Griff’s worried gaze. “I don’t have any other choice. I love him.”

Griff’s dark eyes shined. “I know you do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaun Kingston slammed a fist the size of a dinner plate down on the table in front of Cadge. “You better start talkin’, boy. My patience is only going to stretch so far.”

Cadge jumped at the noise, knocked out of the trance he was trying to lose himself in. He shook the cobwebs from his mind and looked Kingston in the eye. “Come on, Kingston. Do you really think Red and I killed Manning, then were stupid enough to get caught with the body?”

“How should I know? While I doubt Red would do something so amateurish, I don’t know you well enough to guess. Victor Manning had a lot of enemies, but you two were caught red-handed.”

Cadge fought back the urge to scream. They kept going around in circles, asking the same questions and getting the same answers. He'd been in the same plain white room for hours. He'd been denied anything to drink or eat. Although that was probably a good thing, since he wasn't allowed out of the room to piss either. "I didn't kill Manning or anyone else. Neither did Red. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

"So you say, but I believe you saw Manning as a threat. He evidently had something to do with the attack on your brother and your livelihood. Added to that animosity is the fact that you wanted his seat on the council -- a very prestigious position a lot of people would kill for. The only way you could usurp Manning was to discredit him, or have him killed. I think you managed to get your hands on Red's gun. You killed Manning and planned to frame Red for the murder, thinking he would get leniency because he's a respected member of the regulators."

Cadge shook his head. "That's ludicrous. Red turned that firearm in to the council when they suspended him. There's no way I could have had access to it."

Kinston paced back and forth in front of the table. "You could if you have a contact on the inside, someone who would benefit from Manning's death as much as you would."

"You're reaching for an explanation that isn't there." Cadge scrubbed his hands over his tired and gritty eyes. Talking to this SOB was useless. He just kept turning around everything that was said. "Other than Red and Manning, you're the only person I've ever met from here. Who the hell would I be in cahoots with?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

"Oh, for God's sake..."

The door to the room flew open and slammed into the wall behind it. Another soldier, this one blond and dressed in fatigues, came into the room. He held up a plain silver disc in one hand. "I think you need to see this, Kingston."

"No need. We've all seen it, the council included, and it concerns Mr. Johnson here."

Kingston gave the new soldier the stink eye. “Fine. I’ll be right there. But this had better be damn important.”

Kingston followed the soldier to the door and then turned his attention back to Cadge as the other man exited. “Don’t think you can try anything while I’m gone. There’ll be a guard stationed right outside the door.”

The minute the latch on the door clicked, Cadge laid his head down on the table and tried not to think about the perils of his situation. He wondered where Red was and if he was being subjected to the same treatment.

Cadge had seen them lead Red out of their side-by-side cells the prior evening, while he’d been left to stew and fret. Considering that, he assumed they were taking turns being interrogated. He hoped Red was resting and not worrying himself to death, as Cadge had done when he was on the other side of things the evening before.

“You’re free to go.” Kingston’s voice startled Cadge out of his thoughts. He must have dozed off, because hadn’t even heard the other man come in.

“What?” Cadge blurted. “Why?” He snapped his mouth closed, aware of how stupid he sounded. If they wanted to let him go, he was all for it, whatever the reason. However, he was curious about the abrupt one-eighty. One minute they were trying to intimidate him into confessing, and the next they were letting him go. It made no sense.

Kingston stepped behind Cadge and unlocked the titanium cuffs binding his wrists. “We’ve found the culprit. The charges against you and Red are being dropped.”

Cadge stretched his arms, working muscles stiff from disuse, and then rubbed the chafed skin above his hands. “What? Who killed Manning?”

“That’s none of your business. Just be relieved Manning’s junior councilman came forward with the evidence we needed.”

“I think you can do better than that, considering Red and I were framed to take the fall for whoever’s really responsible.”

Kingston sighed and fingered the end of one long ebony dreadlock. “Manning’s underling brought a surveillance tape of Manning blackmailing Lucinda Rhodes. She’d hired him to kill her junior councilman because the boy was threatening to reveal their ongoing affair. In exchange, she agreed to help pass the Nightfeeder agenda Victor was planning to propose. The tape showed Manning requesting access into the dungeon to kill Darren Bernard before he could reveal Manning’s involvement in the junior councilman’s murder. She conceded, but threatened to make him disappear if he didn’t clean up the mess he’d made. Apparently, Manning killed Bernard and made it look like a suicide. Then Rhodes killed Manning, planning to cover her tracks by framing you and Red. A man of Manning’s position can’t simply vanish without a trace. People would ask questions and dig for answers she couldn’t afford to be found. If Manning hadn’t been so paranoid and installed security cameras everywhere, she probably would have gotten away with it.”

*Lucinda Rhodes?* “You’re fucking with me, right?” She’d seemed so nice.

Kingston glared at him with eyes the color of midnight. “No. She’s being held until we can tie up a few loose ends. There will eventually be a trial, if her people don’t intervene on her behalf.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Fae are very powerful.”

Cadge couldn’t believe this shit. “Are you saying she’s going to walk?”

“Not exactly.” Kingston hedged.

“Well, what then?”

“The Fae simply like to punish their own.”

“Oh...” There wasn’t really anything else to say. He didn’t give a shit what happened to the woman as long as him and Red were off the hook. “I’d like to see Red now.”

“Forget it.”

Cadge backed his chair away from the table. “Why the hell not? You said the charges were being dropped.”

“You’re both cleared of the murder. Red, however, still faces other charges. After this fiasco, the council believes we should keep him in seclusion until they’re ready to deliver sentencing.”

“And when is that going to be?”

“Tomorrow.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. Red was” -- Cadage thought fast, trying to spin Red’s crime into something that would make him seem sympathetic instead of shady -- “preserving an entire race from extinction. Red put his ass on the line more than once to make sure my brother and I weren’t wiped out with the rest of the Daywalkers. He should be commended for what he did. He may have broken a few ridiculous rules, but he’ll pay for that through the loss of his job -- a job he’s dedicated his life to and done damn well. He’s losing his home and his livelihood. Don’t you think that’s going to be punishment enough?”

Kingston shrugged. “It’s not my call to make.”

“Great. Just fucking fabulous.” Goddamn it. Red had claimed the council was going to execute him for his prior deceptions. Cadage didn’t know what he was going to do, but he couldn’t let that happen.

He’d had a lot of time to think over the last two days and only one thing was cemented in his mind. He was in love with Red, and although he didn’t deserve it, Red loved him back. Even if they had to go on the run to escape persecution, at least they would finally be together.

Although he’d never been fabulous with words, he had no problem showing Red he was loved over and over again if that was what it took for his lover to believe it. The rest of the bullshit would work itself out in time.



Unfortunately, before he could prove anything to Red, Cadge needed to make sure his lover wasn't unduly punished. There wasn't anything he could do to change the council's ruling, but he could put provisions in place on the off chance things didn't go his way.

*Wonder how Teague would feel about helping me bust Red out of the clink?*

## Chapter Twelve

“Is there anything you’d like to say before we hand down your sentence, Redmond?”

“No, sir.” Red stood before the council, his back straight and his head held high. No one needed to know he was biting into the fleshy inside of his cheek so hard the taste of copper was overwhelming his taste buds and leaking down the back of his throat.

Everything that could be said had been, and he refused to snivel or beg for lenience. He wasn’t even going to apologize. He may have broken the rules, but he’d done the right thing. If push came to shove, he would protect Cadge and Teague all over again. They were the only family he had left.

“Very well,” Zahn replied, shuffling papers on the table in front of him. “After reviewing your transgressions, the overall deceit, and cyber-crimes alike, it is the decision of this council to show leniency in deference of your exemplary service record up to this point.”

Red’s chest deflated like a popped balloon. They weren’t going to make an example of him. *Thank God.*

“However,” Zahn continued, “it is this council’s belief that you intentionally broke the very rules you swore to uphold. Because of this, we have no choice but to discontinue your service. You will relinquish any property belonging to the council, up to and including your

private apartment within the compound and all arms you may have in your possession. By daybreak we expect you to have your things cleared out and vacate the premises. In the future, you will not be allowed in the compound without an escort or other sponsor. Do you understand, son?"

"I..." Red bowed his head, stunned. "I do, sir. Thank you."

"You only have until morning to get your things together and make arrangements. I trust you'll respect our wishes without having to be forced out."

It wasn't a question, but Red answered nonetheless. "Yes, sir. I'll be gone by morning."

"Perhaps you can call on Mr. Johnson to provide transportation. I believe he left the guest suite earlier today."

Red's chest constricted. "Maybe so." A pain much like acid reflex built in the back of his throat. "If I may be excused..."

"Of course." Dario Zahn waved his hand and then turned to say something to the man sitting next to him.

Dismissed, Red turned and walked out of the room with his pride intact, even if his emotions were wrecked. Cadge was gone. He shouldn't be surprised, but he was. Even as an optimistic boy he'd known any relationship between them was doomed. That hadn't stopped him from hoping then, and it hadn't stopped him now.

*When am I ever going to learn?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Red swiped his key card through the locking mechanism on the door to his room, his mind racing, and watched the light flash green for what was probably the last time. The plastic card felt solid and real in his hand. In a few short hours it would disappear like the rest of his life. He'd leave the compound with all the clothes he could stuff into his one oversize duffel bag and the money he'd stashed over the years. Although he was thankful

that he got to keep his life, he couldn't help but wish things had ended differently. Once he could access his finances, money wouldn't be an issue. Until then, he had a problem. The offshore accounts that held his funds didn't exactly come with bank cards. For the time being, all he had were a few hundred dollar bills tucked away in his wallet for emergencies. If this didn't qualify, nothing did.

The how and where part of the equation was a little more difficult to figure out. He had until sunrise to leave, and then he needed to find somewhere safe from the sun before it fried his pasty ass. There was always the option of holing up in a motel and sleeping in the tub during the day, although the cold ceramic was hell on his back. Getting there was going to be a problem. With the compound located so far out in the boonies, it wasn't as if he could pick up a telephone and call a cab. He supposed he could ask a favor from Griff if worse came to worst, but he wasn't looking forward to the amount of shit he would hear about Cadge. The worst thing was remembering the oh-so-casual way Griff tried to pretend it hadn't bothered him to learn Red was carrying a torch for someone else when he talked in his sleep. Griff could be a jackass, but he didn't deserve to know Red had been fucking him and dreaming about someone else.

Although part of him wasn't surprised, he had a hard time believing Cadge had left without saying good-bye. He couldn't really blame Cadge, not after the way he'd fucked everything up. However, that didn't make him feel any better. If there was one thing he knew with all certainty, it was that you didn't run out on someone you loved. He'd never known Cadge to lie -- the other man was almost *too* honest -- but actions spoke louder than words.

Red felt like a fucking idiot for believing otherwise -- not an uncommon feeling when it involved Cadge Johnson. Christ, it had only been two days since he'd seen the other man and here he was jonesing like a fat kid on a bad sugar crash. If he didn't know better he would've sworn he could almost smell the musky scent of pheromones only Cadge's skin

seemed to exude. The imagined aroma made him hard and caused the hollow ache in his chest to yawn open.

*I really have to quit torturing myself with something that will never be real.*

Yanking the door open, he stepped over the threshold and into his room. He blinked and did a double take.

*Oh my fucking God.*

Cadge lay spread out across the bed with his biceps bulging from the way his arms were crossed behind his head. Wet, curling locks of his dark hair lingered over the snowy white pillowcase. “About time you got here.”

“What are you doing here?” Red held his ground, although his thigh muscles quivered with the urge to carry him closer.

Cadge grinned, twin dimples denting the chiseled contours of his clean-shaven cheeks. “Waiting on you, obviously.”

“I get that, but why? As far as you knew, I could be swinging on the end of a rope right now, waiting for sunrise.”

“Nah.” Cadge shook his head. “I knew better.”

“You care to enlighten me as to how? I didn’t even know what was going to happen until a few minutes ago.”

“I have my ways.”

“Cadge...”

“All right, all right. Maybe I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I had a contingency plan in place for either possibility. If things had gone the other way, I’d be waiting on Teague to arrive so we could break you out of the dungeon, instead of lying here trying to entice you into a little naked fun.”

“You talked to Teague about this? About me?”

“Yep.” Cadge ran his left hand down his chest and used two fingertips to circle the dark point of one nipple. “You don’t really think I’d let something happen to you, do you?”

“You...you...” Red stammered, mesmerized by the way Cadge’s skin tightened and drew up, the caramel brown flesh puckered and silently calling out for attention. Red could recall the way that taut bud felt under his tongue, the flesh hot and turgid. The way the flesh wrinkled just like Cadge’s balls did when he was turned on. Red dragged his gaze away from Cadge’s nipple manipulation and studied the wall behind the bed. “I guess not. That still doesn’t explain how you knew what was going on.”

“Hmm?” Cadge looked up with drowsy eyes that color of rich, dark chocolate. “Well, it just so happens Griff was listening in on the hearing and was nice enough to come and get me the minute the verdict was heard. He’s the one who let me into your room.”

*Griff helped Cadge? How odd.*

Red wrinkled his forehead in confusion. “Why would Griff do that? No offense, but he doesn’t even like you.”

“None taken. Griff’s an ass. He does, however, care about you in his own way. For whatever it’s worth, I think he’s jealous of what we share.”

*What was there to be jealous of -- a fucked-up history of hot sex and one-sided love?*  
Red scoffed. “I doubt that. Griff isn’t into me that way.”

“I think you’re wrong. The man may be gruff, but he obviously feels something for you.”

*No more than you do,* Red thought with a trace of bitterness. “It hardly matters either way, Cadge.”

People wanted to fuck him, but no one stuck around for long afterward. Sure, Cadge had said the three little words Red had been waiting a lifetime to hear, but did they really mean anything? He’d fucked things up so badly he couldn’t imagine Cadge would ever return his feelings. Cadge probably wanted friendship and sex, not a real relationship and

commitment. Getting them both accused of murder was the final event in a long line of things he'd screwed up. Cadge deserved better than a man who fucked up everything he touched. Red forced his gaze to stay locked on the wall directly above Cadge's head. As much as his weakness for Cadge shamed him, Red was honest enough with himself to admit it wouldn't take much for him to be reduced to begging for the other man. He couldn't explain why the magnetic pull he felt toward Cadge had continued after all the years and distance between them. Regardless of why, love persisted and was stronger than ever.

Red yearned for Cadge. There was no denying it. But what did Cadge want from him? They'd made up before the shit hit the fan but had it changed anything? Here he was, cast out of his home and job, unsure of where he would go or what the hell he was going to do, and Cadge seemed to think he could throw his worries aside and hop into bed. That didn't bode well for the other man's intentions.

*We've never had a problem with fucking; it was the rest we screwed up.*

His hands hung limp at his sides with nowhere to go and nothing to do. He needed to find something to do before he gave in to Cadge's oh-so-blatant offer and pounced on the man. He didn't think he could handle a sympathy fuck at the moment -- one more screw for old time's sake before he hit the road.

"I tried to be there for your hearing, you know. They wouldn't let anyone outside of their precious circle into the room."

"While I appreciate the thought, it would have been nice to know you were there. I was under the impression you'd left the compound."

"I don't know why you'd think I'd run off somewhere without you. There's no way I'd leave you hanging."

Griff had planted that little kernel of thought, but there was no good to come from saying so. Red shrugged. "Sorry. I guess I should have known better."

He was going to lose what little was left of his sanity if he didn't do something other than stand there and stare at Cadge. He turned his back on the other man's nudity and strode to the closet to the right of the bed to gather up his things. Time was short, so he figured he might as well get to packing.

After pulling an old black duffel bag off the upper shelf, he started stuffing the meager contents of his closet into it. Regulators traveled light, and he was on the road a lot. The council footed the bills for room, board, and his other expenses when he was on assignment. The top-of-the-line weapons he'd carried belonged to the council just as much as his room and the vehicle he drove. The black Kevlar-lined fatigues he wore more often than not weren't his either. What little he did own probably wouldn't even fill the oversize bag. Clothes hangers *clanged* to the floor unheeded as he pulled jeans and fatigues off the rack and crammed them inside.

"It's all right," Cadge said from the bed behind Red. "I don't blame you for having doubts. It's not like I have a fabulous track record where you're concerned."

"We've both made mistakes."

"Do you think you could turn around and look at me while I'm talking to you? As good as your ass looks in those jeans, I'd rather be able to see your face."

"Not right this minute. I'm busy."

Although he had no problem facing down a shifter or battling a horde of rogue Nightfeeders, he couldn't bring himself to look at Cadge. The last couple weeks had been a whirlwind of ups and downs -- starting with the attack on Teague and ending with his recent dismissal -- making him feel turned inside out. The urge to fall into Cadge's arms and lay his worries on the other man's shoulders was disconcerting. He was an independent man, used to being on his own; he didn't need to lay his burdens down on someone else.

*Much less someone who habitually disappoints me time and again.*



The bedsprings squeaked as Cadge undoubtedly moved around. "I could help you pack."

"That's all right. I can do it."

"I know you can," Cadge offered tentatively. "But I'd like to help."

"Why? No one enjoys packing. You should be thankful you don't have to bother with it." Red knew he was being an asshole, but he couldn't seem to help it. His words kept coming out wrong, the tone short and clipped. Cadge hadn't done anything wrong, not really. Red wasn't sure why he was so pissed off. It was like something was clawing at his insides, trying to punch out at the only person there to take it. Cadge was just the lucky recipient of his ire.

"I do."

"Huh?" Red must have misheard something, because he had no idea what Cadge was talking about. "You do what?"

"Well, I packed, if you'd call sticking a couple of changes of clothes into a bag packing. It isn't like I have all that much here."

"Why would you do that? I thought for sure the council would offer you Victor's spot now that he's out of the way."

"I've never cared about politics, Red, and you know it. Why would I start now?"

"It's a good opportunity."

"I can think of a better one."

"Oh, yeah? Like what? You gonna rebuild the club?"

"Maybe. I don't really know what I'm going to do yet, but I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"If you don't get your lily white ass over here and look at me when I'm talking to you, I'm going to get up and haul you over here myself."

Red snorted. “You and what army?” He zipped up the duffel and turned away from the closet, tossing the bag aside. It hit the wall beside the door with a quiet *thud* and slid to the floor as he faced Cadge in all his naked glory. “You may be a little bigger than me, but that doesn’t mean I can’t take your ass in a fight.”

“Come on over here and try it,” Cadge said, bending the leg closest to the wall and placing his foot on the mattress. The corded muscles in his calf and thigh flexed under hair-roughened skin the color of hot summer sand. His stomach rippled, showing off every ridge of definition in his abs. “We’ll see who ends up on top.”

Red would fork over his last month’s pay if Cadge was still talking about fighting. The way Cadge’s cock twitched, the long, thick length almost long enough to drool into his navel, belied the innocent expression on his face.

*The man should’ve come with a warning label, horns, and a pitchfork.*

Warring emotions churned within Red, making him feel like he was going to fly apart at any moment. Looking at Cadge lying naked and spread out was doing a whammy on his libido, while his brain was screaming for him to ignore the insistent throb in his dick and get his shit together. He didn’t know which to pay attention to. Listening to his dick always seemed to get him into trouble. *Christ, Cadge looks delicious.*

The little line of sparse black hair beneath Cadge’s navel tempted Red to follow it with his tongue. The patch of ebony curls surrounding the man’s fat cock begged to be nuzzled and tugged with Red’s teeth. Then there was the plump sac dangling between Cadge’s athletic thighs and the meaty rod above. A dozen different ways to worship his body instantly sprang to mind.

“Are you planning to look all night, or are you going to come over here and do something with the dick that’s trying to pop through your fly?”

Red bit into his lower lip.

*Fuck it.*

He could start denying himself the things that were bad for him again tomorrow, when he was alone and miserable. Tonight he was going to take what he could get. Making love to Cadge wouldn't give him the answers he needed, but it would go a long damn way toward making him feel better.

Before he could change his mind, Red strode over to the bed. He bent at the waist and rested his hands on the foot of the bed between the two skis Cadge called feet. Excitement raced through his veins as he met Cadge's hungry gaze. "How do you want me?"

"I'll take anything you have to give."

The musky scent of Cadge's rising desire boosted Red's confidence. "Are you sure you want to give me carte blanche?"

"Oh, yeah. Come and get me, big boy. I'm all yours."

"Well..." Red hedged, a grin spreading across his face. "If you insist."

"I do." Cadge lifted up on his elbows. "Strip off those clothes and get over here."

Red tore off his clothes so fast he was surprised he didn't pull a muscle in the process. He climbed onto the foot of the mattress between Cadge's splayed legs, anxious to begin.

## Chapter Thirteen

Red nudged Cadge's balls with his nose, his lover's scent strong and musky. He licked the rounded curve of Cadge's ball sac and watched the delicate skin tighten and wrinkle. Cadge wiggled and spread his legs a little wider, rocking his groin up toward Red's face in search of more. Red ran the flat of his tongue up the middle of Cadge's sac, pushing his balls to the side. He chased after the right one, pulled it into his mouth, and tongued the plump orb. After a quick suck, he released it and moved on.

Intentionally skirting around Cadge's thick cock without touching it, Red moved on to the crease between Cadge's upper thigh and his groin. There he found the slick patch of denuded skin -- the hot spot he remembered from years gone by -- and gave it a kiss. He licked and sucked the fragile skin, bringing the blood up to the surface, while Cadge squirmed and moaned.

"Fuck, Red, quit teasing."

Red lifted his head and gazed up at Cadge, whose chest rose and fell in a fast rhythm that belied his request to stop. "Why? You don't like my mouth on you?" Red licked his lips, putting on a good show of moistening his mouth.

Cadge's gaze followed Red's tongue across his mouth. "I didn't say that."

“What’s the problem then?”

“I want you, dammit. Quit fucking around and get up here.”

The note of desperation in Cadge’s voice persuaded Red to listen, although he was mighty tempted to keep exploring the planes and angles of Cadge’s body. There was so much he wanted to taste and kiss... There simply wasn’t enough time to relearn all Cadge’s hot spots. They’d both have to settle for what they could get.

Red straddled Cadge’s hips, fully intending to take him inside, and was distracted by Cadge’s chest. He leaned forward and ran his tongue up and around each pectoral, the muscles firm and unyielding under his lips. Cadge tasted of salt and skin, a heady mixture. Red licked one nipple while he used his thumb and forefinger to roll the other into optimal stiffness. Cadge had fabulous nipples: tiny and tight, the way a man’s should be. Red would have been happy to suck on them all day, until they turned bright crimson and burned from all the suction.

Then he shifted his hips forward, inadvertently dragging his balls over the rigid length of Cadge’s prick, and was quickly reminded of his goal. There would be time for dragging out the sexual torment later. Right now, he yearned to feel every inch of Cadge’s dick up his ass. He wanted to ride Cadge until the other man was reduced to a limp, quivering pile of bones.

*And then do it over and over again until neither of them could move.*

Cadge grabbed Red’s ass and pulled him downward while pushing up and grinding their cocks together, then made a come-hither motion with one of his hands. “Crawl up here. I want a taste.”

Red’s cock jerked hard in response to the thought of letting Cadge suck him off. He was damn tempted to give in, but that wasn’t how he wanted to come. “People in hell want ice water.”

Cadge rocked up against Red, their shafts slipping and sliding together, and leered at Red. “Mmm...there’s one slight difference.”

“What’s that?” Red groaned, distracted by the feel of Cadge’s hands squeezing his ass.

“I intend to get what I want.”

In a move that left Red little choice but to go with the flow, Cadge used the hold he had on Red’s ass to drag Red forward. He didn’t stop until Red’s groin was over his face, Red’s dick hovering above his mouth.

Red braced his hands on the wall behind the bed to keep himself from tumbling forward. He stared down at his lover, ripe with anticipation. Cadge lifted his chin, his dark eyes smoldering with heat, and licked a path up Red’s shaft from root to crown. Red watched the progress of his lover’s tongue, noticed the wet trail of saliva left behind, and shivered.

An evil grin twisted Cadge’s full lips, revealing two elongated fangs. He winked at Red and lunged, covering the tip of Red’s erection with his mouth. The farther those red, red lips descended on his cock, the harder it was for Red to keep his eyes open. He wanted to watch Cadge swallow his meat, but the pleasure was all consuming, urging him to block out everything but the way slick heat undulated around him, massaging inch after inch of his flesh.

“Oh, fuck yes.” Something was seriously wrong with him, if he was getting off on being manhandled. He would have to think about that later, when Cadge wasn’t trying to suck his brains out through the end of his cock.

Red tried his best to hold still and let Cadge do his thing. He had no control over the way his hips jerked when the blunt end of his cock butted the back of Cadge’s throat or his muscles quivered every single time Cadge’s mouth tightened around the head of his dick.

The hands on his ass tugged and squeezed, propelling him forward and back with the rhythm of Cadge’s mouth. The tips of Cadge’s fingers brushed over his hole. Red clenched his ass, trying to get more stimulation where he wanted it, to no avail. Cadge just kept going, his hand and mouth pushing and pulling until every nerve ending in Red’s lower body was

firing on all cylinders. His skin felt stretched tight around his erection, his balls drawn taut and ready to blow.

Cadge's teeth scraped Red's dick. The small bite of pain, added with the friction of Cadge's suckling mouth, sent an arrow of heat straight to his balls. The muscles in his thighs quaked as he fought to hold off his orgasm. "Cadge...Christ...I'm gonna come."

The heat around Red's cock disappeared. "Oh, no you're not," Cadge growled, his deep voice even more guttural than usual. "I'm not through with you yet." He gripped Red's thighs tight and slid down on the bed.

Something soft and wet tickled Red's balls and moved beyond. He stiffened, waiting for what he hoped was coming next. Even prepared, he was still surprised by the sensation of Cadge's slick tongue sliding behind his balls and through his crease.

Red's toes curled, and a noise that sounded suspiciously like a whine spilled from his slack mouth. He would have been embarrassed if he'd been able to form a coherent thought beyond, "*Oh God, yes. More.*" Cadge's mouth felt so damn good. Better than it had around his dick, if that was even possible.

"Oh...Christ... Cadge, you make me ache so fuckin' bad."

"Mmmsgoo..."

Whatever Cadge said was indecipherable, but the vibrations his words caused were damn near rapturous. Cadge's tongue pushed at Red's hole, slicking him up and prodding him open by slow, wicked degrees until his ass ached to be filled by something more substantial.

All too soon, Cadge wriggled out from under Red, his tongue dragging over the underside of Red's balls as he regained his position on the pillow.

Red scooted his ass backward and rubbed his stiff and leaking cock against Cadge's abs. "You're damn good at that."

“I am really, really out of practice, but I’m glad you liked it. It’s easy to eat a fine ass like yours.”

“Well, you can use my ass to practice on whenever the urge strikes.”

“I’ll have to take you up on that, but right now I have other plans for your sweet, tight ass.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Mm hmm.” Cadge rocked his hips, sliding his cock through the damp crease of Red’s ass.

Red reached around Cadge and slid his hand underneath the pillow by the wall. He had to feel around for a second, but his hand finally landed on the dented bottle of lube he kept for desperate times. He pulled out his prize, flipped open the lid, and poured the cool liquid over his fingers. Red met Cadge’s gaze as he reached behind himself and slid two fluted fingers in past the first knuckle. He inched them in deeper, reveling in the slight burn as much as the tightly leashed heat in Cadge’s expression, until the awkward angle made it hard for him to bury his fingers any deeper. With a moan that was more air than sound, Red pulled his fingers free and grasped Cadge’s stiff cock in his slick fist. He pulled from root to tip, coating the shaft in moisture, and aimed the leaking head toward his entrance.

“Ready?” Red asked, teasing them both by rubbing the spongy head over and around his hole, spreading the lube and Cadge’s precum all around.

“Yeah.” Cadge bobbed his head up and down, doing a spot-on impression of a bobblehead doll. “Sit on my cock. Ride me.”

Red groaned and pushed back. The blunt end felt impossibly large and round against his opening, but he accepted the pressure for what it was and bore down, determined to feel Cadge inside him sooner rather than later. Cadge grunted and pushed up to meet him. The wide crown popped inside, bringing a rush of discomfort that Red ignored in search of his goal. He moved down a little at a time, taking more and more of Cadge’s shaft into his body



until there was nothing left to take. His ass rested against Cadge's groin, their balls snuggled behind and in front of the spot they were joined as one.

Thick and solid, Cadge's meat was fat enough to spread Red wide open and make him burn in the best way possible. Even without the friction, Cadge's cock hit all the right spots and made Red long for more. His patience shot, Red lifted up and lowered himself down in steady increments until he was riding Cadge at a slow and leisurely pace that teased them both unmercifully. Although he couldn't wait to feel the stubborn length pounding into his ass, Red planned to do things his way this time around.

With that thought in mind, he grabbed Cadge's hands and forced them down to either side of his head. Cadge stared up at him, one dark-winged eyebrow raised higher than the other. He twined his fingers through Red's and squeezed. Red wasn't sure if that meant Cadge liked what he was doing or not, but he wasn't going to let go until Cadge asked him to.

The bedsprings squeaked as Red bent and covered Cadge's mouth with his own. He bucked his hips back and forth faster, kissing Cadge when he could, licking at his lips when he couldn't quite reach him any other way.

Cadge panted and groaned, saying Red's name in a breathy quality that drove Red's excitement higher. The pungent scent of sex and need teased Red's senses. Beneath it all, the alluring aroma of Cadge's blood ran hot. His pulse thundered faster as they raced toward climax, tempting Red to sink his teeth through the silken flesh at Cadge's throat and drink. Saliva built in his mouth in anticipation of the ripe, copper taste of blood.

Red's gums itched, his fangs descending in expectation of feeding. His lips parted, allowing extra room for his teeth. Hunger expanded into a boiling pit of lava in his gut.

*Would Cadge let him...? Did he dare?*

Cadge blinked up at him with slumberous eyes, his lids gone heavy with longing. He tilted his head back and to the side, revealing the long length of his neck. "Bite me. *Please*. Take what you need."

Red swooped down and licked the salt from Cadge's skin. He took a deep breath and tried to temper his excitement, lest he hurt the man he loved. Resolved to go easy, Red slowly slid his teeth into Cadge's throat. There was no resistance, only the potent ambrosia that spilled over his tongue and the barely audible sound of Cadge's gasp. Cadge's hips rocked, never slowing in their pursuit to drive his thick cock home, over and again, as Red sipped with care. One mouthful went down like heady wine, quickly followed by two more.

Light-headed from the rush of feeding, he dragged his mouth away and nuzzled Cadge's throat, eagerly licking away the few remaining smudges of crimson. "You taste *so* good."

Cadge broke his hands away from Red's grip and caught his face in both hands. He covered Red's lips with his own and thrust his tongue inside, gliding it over and around Red's in a dance as old as time. He groaned and pulled away, his mouth tinged with the remnants of the blood staining Red's lips. "Fuck, you're going to kill me."

Red resisted the urge to smile and say something catty. Instead, he began to raise and lower himself over Cadge, picking up speed. Cadge's blood flowed through Red's body, invigorating him and driving him on. The exhaustion he'd felt upon arriving disappeared, leaving behind only the desire to rut, to fuck Cadge until he screamed.

Red impaled himself, over and again, taking Cadge deep. Cadge met him halfway, lunging up into him and putting his own strength behind every thrust. Their bodies slammed together, Red's cock jutting out in front of him. Unable to resist, he reached down and grabbed his cock, only to have Cadge's hand cover his own with a tighter grip. They stroked together, up and over the sensitive head, yanking him toward the pinnacle faster than he wanted to get there. His ass burned, the friction almost too much and yet not enough -- *never enough*.

His world narrowed until all he was aware of was the electric sensation of his balls contracting and the thick cock battering his prostate. Air seized in his chest, making him

thankful he didn't need the oxygen to survive as his dick swelled in his fist and began to shoot creamy streams of seed over Cadge's chest and torso.

"Oh, fuck...I'm coming." Cadge's face twisted into a grimace as he threw his head back against the pillow. His lips parted on a silent scream. His grip on Red's hips bordered on painful as he thrust deep and froze. Red's name slipped from Cadge's lips like a prayer as heat filled Red's passage and dripped from his ass.

Red eased forward and accidentally dislodged Cadge's softening cock. He winced at the small twinge of pain and continued on, pressing a gentle kiss to Cadge's supple mouth. Cadge's lips parted and his tongue nudged Red's lower lip. One sloppy kiss melded into another and another, the languorous pace making Red drowsy. He yearned to curl up against Cadge and sleep, but there wasn't enough time.

With regret, Red pulled away from Cadge's tempting lips and rolled to sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped, warning him that Cadge was on the move, before warm hands landed on Red's shoulders and started kneading. Not even a killer orgasm had gotten rid of the stress tightening his muscles.

"So," Cadge said, his warm breath wafting over Red's throat as he pressed his lips against the curve of Red's throat. "Do you have to leave soon?"

"Afraid so. I should already be gone by now, but *somebody* distracted me. Not that I'm complaining. Although I'll have to hustle if I want to make it into town before sunrise."

Cadge's hands stilled on Red's shoulders. "What happens then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I hate to remind you, but it isn't like you're going to have a job or even a home after you leave. I'm just wondering where you'll go, what you're going to do" -- Cadge sighed -- "whether you might need some company."

Warmth flourished inside Red's chest. "I don't know. I guess that depends on you."

"Me?"

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Red twisted around so that he could look at Cadge. “Home is where you are.”

Cadge tackled Red, pulling him onto his back, and slammed his mouth down over Red’s. After kissing him breathless, he pulled away and stared down into Red’s eyes. “I love you, Redmond Taylor. I’ll follow you wherever you want to go.”

Red growled and rolled Cadge over onto his back. “Don’t call me Redmond.” He’d always hated his name. Hearing it always reminded him of all the lectures and punishments he’d suffered through as a kid, and Cadge knew it. *The sexy bastard.*

Cadge smiled, the look in his eyes unusually tender. “How about I just call you mine?”

Red liked the sound of that. He plopped a kiss on the tip of Cadge’s nose. “That’ll work.” Maybe he’d been forced to wait a lifetime, but Cadge was finally his. That was all that mattered.

 THE END 

## Amanda Young

Amanda Young spends her days basking in the sun by the seashore and her nights surrounded by dozens of serenading male strippers whose only desire is to make her happy.

Yeah, right.

In real life, my husband chases away all the hot men, right before asking me what's for dinner and reminding me to do the dishes for the umpteenth time.

Always an avid reader of romance, I was thrilled when I discovered erotic romance and e-books. For a long while, I toyed with the idea of writing my own but couldn't ever seem to find the time to do it.

When I found myself unemployed in 2006, I decided that it was high time I gave it a shot. I sat down at my trusty computer and, according to my very patient husband, haven't moved since.

I love to hear from readers. You can visit my website [www.AmandaYoung.org](http://www.AmandaYoung.org) or email me at [Amandasromance@aol.com](mailto:Amandasromance@aol.com).