



A
NOVEL

LONE

ROWAN McBRIDE

LONE

...Rafe paced the open area in front of Seth, looking like a wolf on the prowl. “You do a lot of weird damned things. Half the time you’re like some puppy left out in the rain, and the other half you’re like a hungry, wild wolf. The first I guess I’ve always seen, but I didn’t even *know* about the second until yesterday. So yes, I’ve been comparing you to both animals quite a bit, and it’s been freaking me out.”

Anger and bitterness nearly choked him. “You lied to me. You promised you would tell me when you wanted me to leave.”

He whirled around. “*Shut up!*”

Seth jumped and shut his mouth, stunned by his fury.

“I have never lied to you, but you’ve been lying to me since I fucking *met* you, so you don’t *get* to be self-righteous. *Do you hear me?*”

He shrank back, nodded.

Rafe swept his hand through the air between them. “And what is this? Why do you act so timid and scared when we both know you can kick my ass any time you want? One second you’re shy, the next savage, the next you’re on a stage in front of hundreds of people talking about math. Who the fuck *are* you, Seth?”

Rafe was mad. *The Alpha was mad.* Instinct hunched his shoulders, bowed his head. He tugged on his hair as he fought back a whimper. “S-Sorry.”

“Stop that.” Rafe grasped his wrist and untangled his fingers from his hair. “And spell it out for me.”

The gentle touch. The soft, gruff tone. Rafe was kind, and some of the panic eased out of him as he remembered that. “I...can’t.”

“Try.”

He stared down at his lap. Nightkin nature was so complex, so intimate. How could he explain it to a human?...

ALSO BY ROWAN MCBRIDE

Warm Rush, Book I: Chasing Winter

LONE

BY

ROWAN MCBRIDE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

LONE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.
All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of
the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales,
or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

All rights reserved.
No portion of this book may be transmitted or
reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission
in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief
excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2009 by Rowan McBride
ISBN 978-1-60272-512-6
Cover Art © 2009 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To my friends—thank you for sticking around
even after getting to know the real me.*

CHAPTER 1

“Hey.” Rafe paused and winked down at him. “We’ve got time for a game, right?”

Seth stopped short and stared at the red brick building in front of them. No windows, so he couldn’t see inside, but an unassuming sign named the place *Trick Shot*. Two cues crossed underneath those words declared it a pool hall.

Pool was his favorite game—he’d even put himself through college with it—and Rafe knew he wouldn’t be able to resist.

Still, he tried, because he just wanted to give his five 8:00 A.M. lectures at Georgetown and return to Iowa. The lure of greater recognition in the field of mathematics had drawn him

LONE

to D.C., but aside from that he had no interest in the city and could easily have spent the week in their hotel room.

Rafe leaned down, that playful smile tugging on his lips. “Come on. What’s better after dinner than a game of nine ball?”

Nothing. In Iowa they played together several nights a week, and he’d already begun to miss the routine in the two days they’d spent here.

Seth glanced up at Raphael Dirisio, his lover of three months. In that short time, the big man had somehow managed to learn more about him than anyone in his entire life, and the intimacy hadn’t scared Seth away. In fact, the opposite had happened. Rafe, with his six foot six, well-muscled frame, made him feel comfortable and safe and passionate.

That strange combination was probably what convinced him he could give a lecture here. Rafe made him believe he could have a normal life, and even pursue paths that had always seemed closed to him before.

“So how about it?” asked Rafe.

This man deserved more than a game of pool, but Seth tried to give him what he could. “Sounds like fun.”

Grinning broadly, Rafe strode in the direction of a small arrow with “Entrance” printed across its face.

The entrance turned out to be a nondescript door in an alleyway, and unease pricked at his skin as he caught the scent of smoke and beer. He hesitated. “On second thought, I don’t know—”

“Don’t worry, Seth.” Rafe slid a hand to his back, urged

him deeper into the alley. "I'll look out for you."

No doubt. Even if someone did bother them, Rafe wouldn't hesitate to jump to their defense. He'd probably have fun doing it, since he didn't mind a little trouble now and then, but where did that leave *him*?

At five foot five, Seth Anderson avoided trouble whenever he could. His body was fit, but looked fragile beneath the khaki slacks and button down dress shirt he wore. In a place like this, the probability that he'd become a target of violence was very high.

"Seriously," Rafe drew him close, and Seth couldn't stop himself from nuzzling his hard, broad chest, "I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

No, Rafe had stepped into the role of protector quite easily. He wondered again why someone like this had any interest at all in him, then pulled away. As it was in any city, there were places such displays between men were accepted.

This was not one of them.

"All right, lead the way."

He grinned, showing off those perfect teeth. "Think I'll beat you this time?"

"What will make this time different from any other?"

Rafe chuckled and opened the door to the pool hall.

As soon as Seth stepped inside, however, he wanted to run right out again.

Nightkin. Every single one of them.

Warlocks, vampires and—most of all—werewolves. They all looked human right now, but one Nightkin could always

recognize another, and they had definitely caught him.

“Rafe, I think we should go to another hall.”

Rafe, human and completely unaware of what he’d gotten himself into, waved him off. “It’s a little crowded, but we’ll score a table soon.” He grinned down at Seth. “I have experience with this kind of thing, you know.”

“I really think—”

“Hey! Are you two wanting to play pool?” Rafe glanced up and strode to the bar. “We sure are.”

Reluctantly, Seth followed, knowing he couldn’t get them out of here without causing a scene. And without revealing his own Nightkin nature. Rafe knew many things about him, but he didn’t know this. *Besides*, he thought as he tried to comfort himself, *this is a major metropolitan city*. Humans were rarely attacked, not in places like this.

The bartender was a low-level warlock; the warm smile on his face and the chilling aura around his body made Seth a little sick inside. Vampires and werewolves could be good, bad, or any combination of the two. But warlocks were almost always sociopathic.

Rafe, of course, was totally oblivious. “So what about it? Can you get us a table?”

The warlock glanced at Seth, his grin pulling wider. “There should be one free in twenty minutes or so.”

“You sell cigarettes?” asked Rafe, eagerly leaning against the bar.

Seth saw the flash of magic, followed its path just in time to see an “out of order” sign appear on the machine in the

corner.

“Sorry, man. Machine’s busted. You can get some next door, though.”

He tried not to look away, tried not to show his fear, though surely everyone in the room had scented it already.

“Okay.” Rafe glanced down at him. “How about we get the cigs and take in some of the city while we wait for a table to clear?”

“That won’t work,” said the warlock, his tone still easy, still amicable. “I can’t hold tables for patrons not in the hall.” He looked at Seth. “One of you will have to stay.”

And there it was. Seth could feel the subtle tension in the air, the unspoken threat. If he tried to leave, they’d both be torn to shreds. “I-I’ll stay.”

“Really?” asked Rafe, clearly surprised. “You sure?”

He nodded. “Take your time.”

The warlock smiled his approval.

Seth watched his lover leave, maybe for the last time, and pulled himself onto a stool at the bar. “Can I get something to drink?”

The warlock leaned forward on his elbows. “I don’t know, little puppy. You sure you’re legal?”

It was something he had to endure in the human world every day. At thirty-two, he was often mistaken for someone much younger. But here, in this place, there was no way the being before him had made such a mistake. “I’m not a pup.”

The grin didn’t waver. Why did they smile all the time? “Prove it.”

LONE

"I don't have to prove it," he told the warlock, trying to sound brave and knowing he'd failed. "Y-You know I'm over twenty-one."

That cold smile twitched with amusement. "Oh, I think you're going to be a lot of fun."

Nightkin games were rarely played without bloodshed.

"Mordecai!"

The warlock glanced up. "Yeah, Dorian?"

"I'm through with this table, if you want to send him over here."

Mordecai smiled down at Seth. "Looks like your fun's about to start, little puppy."

Seth eased himself from the stool and, keeping his head bowed, walked toward the voice. To his surprise, the table was actually empty, and he racked it up. He kept his movements smooth and quiet, trying not to draw attention to himself.

"Nine ball. That's quite a game for a pup."

His eyes closed briefly, but when he opened them again he didn't look at the source of the voice. Eye contact of any kind would spark whatever they had planned for him. "It's my favorite."

"You any good?"

False modesty was not a trait of the Nightkin. "Yes."

The man rubbed his stubbled cheek against Seth's. "Want to play with me?"

They were no longer speaking of pool, but Seth continued the charade. "I'm w-waiting for someone."

Big hands gripped his shoulders and turned him around.

LONE

God, he was huge. Not quite as big as Rafe, but he'd seen enough werewolves to know that this one would be massive when he shifted. Blond hair, square cut jaw, battle hardened muscles. He could very well be an Alpha.

"What pack do you hail from, little one?"

Seth tried to drop his gaze, but the big wolf grabbed his jaw and forced his head upward. "I don't claim a pack." It may have been a mistake to admit it, but if he were caught in a lie, the consequences would be even more dire.

Another wolf appeared beside the big one. "Awful tiny to be a rogue, aren't ya?"

Being without family went against the very fiber of a werewolf, but he'd had no choice. "I-I'm not a rogue. I'm just lone."

A third wolf appeared, this one female. "Dangerous, a pup like you being lone in the big, bad city."

"I'm not a pup," he said respectfully, scenting bloodlust in the air.

"No, he's not a puppy," said the big wolf. "But I'll bet he's barely bigger than one when he shifts."

Seth's mind blanked, and he tried to bolt.

Chuckling, the Alpha easily held him in place. "He has almost no wolf strength in his human form."

Everyone in the hall joined in his mocking laughter.

The female spoke again, baring her teeth. "I don't know, Bardolf. He hardly seems worth the trouble."

Yet another voice joined the nightmare. "Oh, he'll probably be more fun when he shifts."

LONE

Bardolf's powerful fingers tightened, bruising his upper arms before tossing him to the center of the hall.

He crashed into a barstool, crushing the wooden legs and sending white-hot shards of pain through his entire body as he crumpled to the floor. Struggling to lift his head, he counted no fewer than eight wolves approaching him. The vampires came close, too, but they merely looked curious and most likely wouldn't get involved. A blessing, such as it was.

Bardolf crouched before him. "Heard of me? Bardolf of the Shining Moon Pack?"

He nodded. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't know I was trespassing into your territory."

"You know of me, but didn't know enough to respect the boundaries of my territory? Do you take me for a fool? You should have come to me right away, paid your respects."

Seth tried to scramble away, but the female caught him up and lifted him into the air. "Shit, he really is weak! I've never played with a wolf like this before." She held him over her head and threw him into a pool table.

His face collided with the hard wood. His teeth cut the inside of his cheek and blood spilled into his mouth. The coppery taste nearly summoned the wildness out of him, but he fought it back. *Don't shift. Don't shift.*

"I'm sorry," he pleaded again. "I'm not from the coast, and I've been lone so long that I'm not familiar with the borders."

All playfulness vanished from the Alpha wolf as he grabbed a handful of his shirt and hauled him to his feet. "Doesn't really matter. You're not strong enough. You don't

LONE

deserve to survive, and I'm surprised you managed this long." He whispered husky words into his ear. "Shift. Die a wolf, with honor."

Seth wanted to, but he kept an iron grip on his human form. *Don't do it.*

His heightened hearing picked up stray words from two of the vampires.

"Why won't he change his shape?"

"Perhaps he wishes to die a man, instead."

That wasn't it. There was a reason Seth was lone. He couldn't... He couldn't...

Just don't shift.

"Fine," said Bardolf. "Die like an ape. Either way, you're a nice little snack." A cool smile stretched his lips over growing fangs. "And that pretty human of yours will be a fine dessert when he returns."

Rafe. He had to protect Rafe, at any cost.

Familiar darkness, wild and sweet, rose up in him, washing away all fear, all morality. His eyes narrowed and a soft growl escaped him as he lifted his head. "You want me to shift so badly? It's your funeral."

* * *

Rafe walked down the dimly lit alleyway, returning to the pool hall. The place next door didn't carry his brand, and he'd had to walk three blocks just to find himself a pack. *Maybe Seth is right*, he thought, *maybe I should quit.* He'd never really had a reason before, and the fact that Seth cared enough

to suggest it brought a smile to his lips as he strode into the hall, looking around to see if the little guy had scored a table.

Shock froze him in place.

Bodies littered the hall, most of them bloodied. They were on the floor, on top of the tables, curled in fetal positions against the wall. Even the bartender was slumped over the bar.

And there was Seth, standing in the center, his fists clenched, his body trembling as he stared down at a man lying at his feet.

Suddenly the others didn't matter, and he broke into a run. "Seth!" Grabbing his shoulders, Rafe leaned down as he tried to catch his gaze. "Jesus, are you okay?"

Seth lifted his head, and his trembling intensified. "Rafe?"

"Oh, God." Rafe smoothed his hair back, trying not to look horrified when his palm turned red with blood. "Yeah, it's me. What the hell happened?"

His gaze drifted around the room and back to him, his brown eyes vacant. "There was a fight."

He looked so small. Even more fragile than usual. Rafe drew back, his eyes widening when he saw the torn and bloodied shirt, the red slash across his chest. "You're hurt!"

Seth glanced down at his chest and up again.

It had to be some kind of hysterical shock. "Seth, listen to me." He cupped his face in his hands. "I'm going to take you out of here and to a hospital. Do you understand?"

He shook his head. "No hospital...police...questions I c-can't answer. I'll miss my lecture tomorrow."

His *lecture*? "Seth, you are covered in blood and you need

medical attention.”

“It’s not my blood. At least, most of it’s not my blood.”

The stilted, shaky words chilled him. “You need to have someone look at your chest.”

“J-Just a scratch.”

God, what if Seth had lost his mind for good? “The police are going to get involved anyway.” He struggled to keep his voice calm. “We’re standing in a room full of dead bodies.”

“Ashes to ashes...” He glanced around the room again. “They’re not dead,” he said, sounding surprised. “I can see them breathing. Can you see them breathing?”

Rafe took a good, hard look. He could see the slight rise and fall of their chests. “Doesn’t matter. Whatever went down here needs to be reported.”

“Rafe.” He stumbled forward, twisting his hands into Rafe’s shirt as his eyes finally seemed to focus. “Please.”

The soft entreaty broke him. And they could always go to the police when he’d come back to his senses. “All right.”

Seth leaned against him, nuzzling his chest before his legs gave out.

Rafe caught him up and cradled him close. His eyes were shut, but he was breathing normally. The strain of whatever had happened must have taken its toll, and Rafe couldn’t blame him. He looked as if he’d walked through the bowels of hell.

Awkwardly, he shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around Seth’s small body, as much to hide the bloodstains as to keep him warm. Leaving the pool hall, Rafe ignored the

LONE

stares of passers-by as he hailed a cab and took his lover back to their hotel room. This would all work out.

All that mattered was keeping Seth safe.

CHAPTER 2

Seth made a few minor changes to the next day's lecture and put the papers away.

“Shit! Ever hear of *defense*?”

He turned just in time to see Rafe shake his fist at the television set. Those explosions of passion used to frighten him. Not because he thought Rafe might lash out at him... No, because he was afraid the wolf leashed inside might be aroused by such energy. But in the three months they'd known each other, the wolf had never been summoned forth. Not once.

Until last night.

He'd laid waste to an entire room of Nightkin last night. If

Rafe hadn't returned, if Seth hadn't heard his voice and come to his senses, he would have killed them.

He had started to hope he'd finally mastered the thing inside him, his pure nature. But as soon as he'd known Rafe was in danger, he'd summoned it, embraced it, *reveled* in it. Which meant Rafe probably had more to worry about from *him* than any Nightkin.

Not wanting to dwell on those thoughts, Seth left the desk and went to sit on the couch. He turned to face Rafe, sitting cross-legged on the cushion as he simply watched the man before him.

Jet-black hair fell carelessly over his forehead as he focused on the football game. His handsome, roughhewn features intimidated most people, but Seth had experienced the gentle caress of that full mouth, and had ceased to be scared. Even Rafe's body, dressed in a pair of snug jeans and nothing else, elicited no fear. Tan skin stretched taut over his large frame; every muscle was rigidly defined. It didn't matter that the human was only relaxing on the couch—the power within him was obvious. And a light mat of dark hair on his chest made a trail down his abs and into his jeans. The wolf in Seth adored that.

If he were a werewolf, he'd be Alpha.

Of course, if he were a werewolf, he would have tried to rip out Seth's throat the moment they'd met.

And Seth would have had to kill him.

He shut away those dark thoughts and replaced them with memories of how they'd met. Warm memories, nice

memories.

He'd just moved to Brier, Iowa to teach at the small college there. It was the first town in his life that didn't seem to have any Nightkin whatsoever, and that had been the determining factor in accepting the job. The area also had a nice looking pool hall, and he wasted no time in checking it out. It had been so long since he'd played.

When he laid eyes on Rafe, leaning back against the bar in a black T-shirt and dark jeans, he'd assumed the big man was the bouncer. It wasn't until the next morning that he'd learned Rafe actually owned the place.

As usual, Seth was having trouble getting someone's attention long enough to procure a table. Rafe walked up to him, offered to share his table, and warned that he'd never been beaten. Seth normally played alone, but those bright blue eyes startled him into agreeing.

Ten minutes later, Rafe had lost his first game of pool.

Four hours after that, they were sweaty and tangled together in Rafe's big bed.

The morning after *that*, Rafe offered his home until he could find a place of his own, not knowing Etheridge College had provided Seth with more than adequate housing arrangements. The scent of this stranger's bed, his home, had called to Seth like the moon calls a wolf, and he'd felt no need to enlighten him.

Seth smiled. Most mornings he still awoke intending to leave. Then he would sit, take in Rafe's strong profile, and just stay. Like now.

“Why do you do that?” asked Rafe, his eyes still on the TV screen.

The question jarred him out of his thoughts. “What?”

“Why do you watch me like that? Sometimes you sit up and do it while I sleep, too.”

Seth instinctively let his shoulders fall forward as he dipped his head to stare down at the cushion—the position of an omega wolf ceding to his superior. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t know it bothered you.”

Rafe cupped his jaw, the hold much gentler than the one he’d experienced with the Alpha of last night. “It drives me crazy, because those eyes make me so damned hot, and you just let the fire build until I break down and get you. I think I want you more than you want me.”

His lips parted. How could he think that, even for a moment? “I watch you because you’re beautiful.”

A callused thumb caressed his cheek. “Beautiful? How?”

Years of hiding his true nature hindered him from verbalizing the passion he felt for this man, the passion he always kept leashed. But he tried. “The planes of your face, the elegant lines and curves of your body.”

The corner of his mouth lifted as he pulled away, returning his attention to the television. “Beautiful like one of your equations then.”

It always came out wrong. He’d yet to discern what it was, exactly, Rafe wanted to hear. “B-Beautiful like every man on the planet wishes he could be.”

His head turned, a flicker of surprise in his face. Then he

reached out and dragged Seth onto his lap.

Seth shifted his weight, trying not to block Rafe's view of the television. "I don't want to interrupt your game."

He picked up the remote and pressed the mute button. "Redskins suck anyway."

His thick, hard thighs were such a pleasure. Seth laid a tentative hand on one of his forearms, enjoying the feel of corded muscle there.

"Want to order room service tonight?" asked Rafe. "I checked the menu, and they seem to have a good vegetarian spread."

Rafe was an old fashioned meat and potatoes man, but Seth had been a vegetarian for the last ten years. A vegetarian werewolf. It was absurd. But the diet helped him to control the beast within. "I'd like that," he said, forcing a smile.

Instead of smiling back, Rafe sobered and fingered a lock of his hair. "You remember any more of what happened to you last night?"

Yes. He remembered every detail: the scent of blood, of fear, the screaming as the Alpha begged for mercy. "No."

"I'm really sorry, Seth."

His head shot up. "Why?"

"I left you alone in a strange place to buy a pack of cigarettes. *Cigarettes*."

His eyebrows drew together. "You couldn't have known."

The planes of the face he'd been admiring hardened. "I should have been there to protect you."

Seth hesitantly touched that strong face, trying to ease the

tension there. “It wasn’t your fault.” It was his—it was always his. For living, for breathing, for surviving.

“The whole mess made me realize something. Something important.”

Dropping his hand, he stared downward as he prepared himself to hear it. *You’re too much trouble. You’re not worth it.*

“I love you, Seth.”

Shocked, he propelled himself backward. He would have landed on the floor if Rafe hadn’t caught him and drawn him back to his lap. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

The words played over and over in his head, flooding his mind. He couldn’t comprehend them, he couldn’t accept them, and his body shook as he tried.

“Isn’t it okay that I love you?”

The worried tone made him look up, but those intent blue eyes didn’t give him the clues he needed to form a proper response. “I... No one... No one has ever said that to me before.”

Rafe caressed his cheek, smiling. “You’ve never been in love before?” The smile faded when he didn’t answer. “Wait, are you saying that no one, *in your entire life*, has said those words to you?”

Monster. Freak. These were the words familiar to him. “No one.”

“Shit.” His big hands tightened on Seth’s hips, drawing him closer. “There’s a whole lot I don’t know about you, isn’t there?”

The secrets of his soul had broken him long ago, but he had to keep them to survive. Even if that meant losing this mystifying, wonderful man. “Yes.”

Rafe enclosed him in a powerful embrace. “All right, this is how it works. I said that I love you, and I’ll be saying it every day from now on, but you don’t have to say it back to me. Not until you’re ready. Understand?”

“No.” Wanting more of Rafe’s masculine scent, he nestled his face into the crook of his shoulder. “But thank you for explaining it to me.”

The arms wrapped around him squeezed tighter. “What’re you not getting?”

Being held this way made it hard to focus. He couldn’t stop himself from rocking his hips against Rafe’s hard body, trailing kisses up his neck. “Why, I guess.”

“Want a list?” he asked, untucking Seth’s shirt. “You’re smart, funny, so damned cute.”

Seth pulled back, but only so he could run his palms over Rafe’s broad chest.

“I love how you’ll listen to me talk for hours about the stupidest shit.”

Scenting arousal, feeling his own spiraling upward, he dropped a kiss on a hard, rounded shoulder.

“How you move with an almost hypnotic grace.”

Rafe unbuttoned Seth’s shirt, easing it off his shoulders and down his arms. As soon as he was free, Seth went back to exploring his chest, his nipples.

“Fuck,” said Rafe, groaning. “Your touch, definitely.”

LONE

Seth tilted his head to the side. Did he really have a list? He wasn't sure he believed it. Any of it. But it felt good to hear. As if a thirst that had parched him all his life might finally be quenched.

Rafe grinned as he slid a hand behind Seth's neck. "I love how when you're confused, your whole body shows it."

The human drew him close to kiss his mouth. Seth could taste the beer he'd had hours ago, and underneath that, his unique flavor. The same taste that had seduced his tongue that first night. "Rafe," he whispered.

Warm hands urged him up to his knees, removed his belt and undid his slacks. "My name on your lips."

Not wanting to leave his lap, Seth awkwardly pulled them and his boxers off his legs, drawing a chuckle from Rafe.

With much more skill, Rafe flicked open the catch of his jeans, lifting his hips off the couch. He pushed Seth upward and slid the denim down, kicking them off. He wasn't wearing any underwear, but Seth supposed if he looked like that, he'd go with the bare minimum of clothing, too.

Rafe closed long fingers around Seth's erection, making him gasp as the callused hand slid up and down. "I love how you shoot stick." He leaned forward, an almost wolfish grin on his mouth. "And I'm not just talking about pool."

His body trembled with pleasure as he stared at his lover in awe.

Taking Seth's hand, Rafe guided it to his own cock, which was as big and powerful as the rest of him. Life lessons had taught Seth never to touch someone intimately without

receiving permission first, and although Rafe didn't understand that, he was always patient.

Seth stroked the long, hard shaft. A drop of pre-cum appeared at its tip, and he swept it up with his finger to savor its taste on his tongue.

Rafe groaned again, tilting him backward. Seth hooked his knees over wide shoulders as he trusted Rafe's strength to keep him from the floor. When he felt a warm, wet mouth close around his cock, he wanted to howl with ecstasy. But, as always, he held back, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to contain the wildness.

Just when he was about to gain release, Rafe pulled back and straightened them both. Seth bit his lip to stifle a whimper as his legs dropped to the couch cushions. "What..." Swallowing hard, he opened his eyes, entranced as the flickering light of the television danced over the human's tan skin, painted a halo onto his dark hair. "Why..."

Rafe caressed the beads of sweat from his forehead. "Eyes." His thumb brushed over his lips. "Mouth." His hand skimmed his torso. "Body."

Still explaining things to him. *So kind*. Focusing on the words, Seth glanced down at his hairless chest, which still held a long diagonal scar. "You don't think I look like a child?"

"Anybody who thinks you're a kid is fucking blind."

A shy smile touched his lips as he angled his head to welcome a kiss.

Rafe didn't deny him, his hot mouth gliding against Seth's

before tongue swept over teeth and delved inside. It was lusty and tender and...

Loving?

He didn't know, but he wanted more. Linking his hands behind Rafe's neck, he opened his mouth wider in a silent gesture of acceptance. Rafe took full advantage, coaxing his tongue into that familiar rhythm, drawing soft sounds out of his throat. Slow, playful. When he began to pull away, Seth tried to follow, tried to make the kiss last.

Soft lips smiled against his. "Your passion."

Passion? He thought *this* was his passion?

Rafe spat on his hand and slicked it over his hard pole. Seth forgot everything as his body lit with anticipation, trained by now to know what was coming. Strong arms lifted him up, and he used his knees to guide. His muscles tightened when he felt that thick column of flesh pressing against his hole, and he forced himself to relax, to accept.

The large, mushroomed head of his cock was slow to penetrate, and it balanced him on a delicious crux of pleasure and pain. Then it was inside, and there was only pleasure. With Rafe, it was always pleasure.

Seth gripped his shoulders as Rafe eased himself deeper. He fought the urge to just *take* the human, leaving it to Rafe to set the pace.

He bit back a growl when he'd finally settled against Rafe's lap, knowing such a savage display would scare any human being. Instead, he touched their foreheads together, forcing himself to wait.

LONE

Rafe breathed warm words over his mouth. "I love that you're a perfect fit."

Those bright blue eyes robbed him of motion. He felt smoky and confused and he wasn't sure what to do next.

Grinning, Rafe showed him by thrusting his hips upward.

Seth grabbed a thick shoulder with one hand and the back of the couch with the other. Guided in some small part by animalistic instinct, but mostly by Rafe, he rode the man underneath him. His breath quickened as he felt the pressure build inside him, felt something even purer than his Nightkin nature flutter down his spine and engulf the whole of his body. He threw his head back, clenching his teeth because he was afraid of the sound that wanted to tear free. Then there was one perfect, shining moment when everything slipped away. No wolves, no blood, no death.

Only Rafe.

The moment was all too short, but Rafe was there when it ended and Seth clung to his strength. In the power of his own release, he'd hardly been aware of Rafe's orgasm, but now his own body was filled with it as the big man held him tight, shuddering against him. Seth felt...

Happy. Perhaps for the first time in his life.

Rafe picked up the discarded shirt and pulled out of him. Seth's grip tightened. He wanted to stay, he wanted the connection to stretch into forever, but he didn't protest as Rafe wiped them both clean.

"Isn't that my shirt?" he asked softly as Rafe swept the cotton over his abdomen.

Rafe's hand firmed on his back, urging him to fall forward and rest his head on his shoulder. "It'll come out in the wash. Besides, you brought at least twenty outfits for a week-long trip. I swear, you're worse than my sisters when they travel."

His sisters didn't have to worry about being found out for monsters and having to run some place far away at a moment's notice.

Not wanting to think about that, not now, Seth snuggled closer, trailing kisses over his warm skin.

Rafe chuckled and stretched out on the couch, settling him on top of his big body. Gentle hands stroked his back, soothed him, calmed him.

"You hungry?"

Sex and food: a wolf's idea of paradise. His stomach growled in response and he nodded against Rafe's chest, relishing the feel of coarse hair beneath his cheek.

Rafe reached behind the arm of the couch and retrieved a phone from the end table. "What do you want?"

More of this. "Do they have eggplant parmesan? Or grilled Portobello mushrooms?"

"Man, I don't care what you say, there is no way a fungus can taste like a steak."

No argument there, but it was the closest he could allow himself to have. "I like them."

Stroking his back with his free hand, Rafe dialed the number and ordered both the eggplant and the mushrooms, as well as a real steak for himself.

After he hung up, he wrapped thick arms around Seth.

LONE

“You feelin’ good?”

“Yes.” Seth closed his eyes and listened to the strong, steady beat of Rafe’s heart. Love. He’d said love. And the echo of those words felt like moonlight on his skin.

It was a lie, but Rafe didn’t know that. He didn’t know that Seth’s true self was impossible to love. That he didn’t deserve any measure of kindness or tenderness or mercy.

But for now, for as long as he could, he would pretend the words were real.

CHAPTER 3

Rafe rapped his knuckles against the door of *Trick Shot*, the pool hall where Seth had been attacked on Monday. There'd been no mention of the bloodbath on the news, or in the paper, or even on the internet. It was Wednesday morning! There should have been *some* news about it by now, right? He knew D.C. could be a rough town, but damn.

No one was answering from inside. No one had picked up the phone when he'd tried to call this morning, either.

Frustrated, he kicked the door and spun, dropping back against the roughhewn wood and crossing his arms over his chest.

Dammit. He needed to know what happened.

Seth seemed fine. In fact, he seemed happier than he ever had...and that was what worried him. A major trauma like that didn't just leave someone unscathed, and the fact that he still couldn't remember any details meant the fallout could do a lot of long-term damage.

"That pool hall doesn't open until six. There's one a few blocks down if you want to play that badly."

Rafe turned his head. A man, probably in his mid-twenties, stood on the main sidewalk, leaning his shoulder on the wall just inside the alley. "I'm not looking to play. I just want to get inside."

The man, dressed head to toe in black, grinned at him. "Then you are piss-poor at breaking and entering."

For the first time all morning, Rafe smiled. "It's not like that. I was hoping to talk to someone about what went down here Monday night."

"Ah." Trailing his hand along the wall, he walked down the alley to join him at the entrance. "You a cop? A reporter?"

The height of the other man startled him. He wasn't used to anyone being able to level his gaze. Although this guy was a lot leaner, his confidence and ease of movement made Rafe think he could probably hold his own in a fight. "No. A friend of mine got hurt here, and I'm trying to put together the pieces."

"And what are you going to do once you've completed the puzzle?"

Rafe shrugged, glancing away as he thought of Seth, trembling and covered in blood. "Be there for him."

LONE

A long silence passed, and Rafe looked at him again.

The man smiled, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners as he held out his hand. "I'm Dorian."

"Rafe," he said, shaking it.

Dorian released him and flipped open a plain metal box hanging beside the door. He leaned forward and pressed a button under a speaker. "Hey, Mordecai! Wake up!"

Rafe looked at the intercom in surprise. "I didn't even see that thing there."

"Don't worry, most people miss it." Dorian cast a sidelong grin at him. "It's designed to blend in."

A groggy voice came through the speaker. "We're closed. Come back at six."

He pressed the button again. "You can open up for me, can't you? It's Dorian, and I've brought a friend."

"Aw, shit, Dorian. Can't it wait till later?"

"Are you really going to shut me out, Mordecai?" he asked, his voice friendly but firm as he smiled at the intercom.

The man on the other side of that box groaned. "Hold on, I'll be right there."

Rafe watched him shut the box. Now that he knew it was there, it was easy to see. "You own a percentage of this place or something?"

Dorian chuckled. "No, but I'm his oldest customer, which gives me certain privileges."

He heard a deadbolt slide just before the door opened, and the bartender from the other night appeared, rubbing at his face. For someone who'd apparently been sleeping, his

pressed slacks, maroon dress shirt, and carefully styled red hair were immaculate.

“What’s so important, Dorian?” He froze when his gaze hit Rafe. “You.”

“Great, you remember me,” he said, taking a step forward. “That’ll make this a lot easier.”

The redhead lifted an eyebrow. “Make what easier?”

Seeing that the door was about to be slammed in his face, he lifted his palms and forced himself to appear less threatening. “Look, I don’t want any trouble. I just want to know what happened Monday night.”

“Like what? It was business as usual.”

Rafe frowned. “Business as usual? I saw over a dozen people laid out in there, you included! Most of you were covered in blood!”

Mordecai shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m fine and, as far as I know, all my patrons are fine.”

He did look fine. Like Seth looked fine. What the hell was going on here? “I know what I saw. And a close friend of mine has a big-ass scar on his chest from whoever attacked him.”

“A scar?” The bartender appeared genuinely confused, then turned to Dorian. “Are you crazy?” he whispered. “He’s—”

“He’s all right.” He covered Rafe’s shoulder with his hand, as if that gesture proved his statement. “Let us in so we can rack up.”

Mordecai hesitated, ran a hand through his hair. “Okay,” he said reluctantly, stepping aside to let them in.

Dorian slid his hands into his pockets and strolled inside.

Tense, but determined to get some answers, Rafe followed him.

“I have to check the inventory,” said Mordecai, rushing past them to disappear into a back room. “You two have fun.”

Rafe started to go after him, but Dorian caught his arm. “He’s not going to tell you anything. And, trust me, you don’t want to try and make him.”

He glanced down at himself, realizing with a start that his fists were clenched tight. “I wouldn’t have beat on the guy or anything.”

“I didn’t think you would.” Dorian went to a table and racked it for eight ball. “You seem like a good man.”

Taking a deep breath, he uncurled his fingers and looked around. Everything was so clean. Even the tabletops. He knew from experience how hard it was to remove bloodstains from felt. Easier to replace it, but the material on these tables still looked well worked, used.

“Funny, isn’t it? How something so macabre can be erased so easily.”

Rafe spun to face him. “Do *you* know what happened here?”

“Bits and pieces.” Dorian tossed him a cue. “I was lucky enough to leave before it started. I’d given my table to this little guy who looked scared out of his mind.”

Scared. Fuck, how could he have left him? Seth didn’t do

well with new people, and he'd abandoned him in a whole new *city*.

"Is that your friend who was hurt? The one I just mentioned?"

Rafe approached the table. "I think it might be. Could you tell me what you know?"

Dorian took the break, his shot sounding like a cannon in the empty hall. He sank two balls with it; the guy was pretty good. "Turf war. Ravaged the entire place."

He frowned, holding the cue close to his body with both hands. "Turf war? This doesn't seem like the type of area to have a gang problem."

"Oh, you'd be surprised at the sort of things that go on—even in the quietest of neighborhoods—after dark." He took another shot, sank another ball. "As far as I can understand, it was the standard dispute. The home side fighting for their territory, the other side protecting what was his."

Rafe glanced up from the table. "His?"

"Theirs." Dorian straightened. "Forgive me, my English is lacking at times. I was born in Romania. Cliché, I know."

He didn't understand why that would be cliché. "Your English is great. I can't even pick up an accent."

"You're too kind," he said, grinning. "I believe it's your turn."

Rafe scanned the table and sank three balls in rapid succession. He missed the fourth, but just barely.

"You're very good," commented Dorian, studying his next shot.

“The guy I usually play with is a genius at this game. I’ve learned a lot from him.”

“Is this the same man who was here the other night?”

He’d been so selfish, tempting Seth to play the way he had. And without even checking the place out first. “Yeah.”

“Was he hurt badly?”

“Nasty scratch on his chest. I thought for sure he’d need stitches, but I guess it looked a lot worse than it actually was.”

“Frightening, when we don’t know the facts. Sometimes even more frightening when we do.”

The cryptic statement made his hands tighten on the cue. “Do you know anything about what happened to him, specifically?”

“Hasn’t he confided anything at all?”

That sick feeling rose in his stomach again. “He doesn’t remember.”

Dorian turned, the muscles in his long, lithe body rippling as he leaned back against the pool table. “That’s what he told you?”

Something about that tone, although still friendly, had him on the defensive. “Yes.”

“And you believe him?”

“Of course I believe him. He doesn’t lie. He doesn’t even have it in him.”

A smile ghosted on Dorian’s lips. “You’re a noble one, Rafe, and it’s an admirable trait. But its drawback is that you tend to see a similar nobility in others.”

He thought about Seth’s sweet, shy smiles, his gentle

caresses, how his expressive eyes broadcasted every emotion inside of him. “You don’t know him. He’s special.”

The other man’s attention sharpened. “It’s more than friendship, isn’t it? He belongs to you.”

Goosebumps prickled his skin. “He doesn’t *belong* to me.”

“But he does.” Dorian’s considering gaze slid up and down his body. “You have the look of one who has claimed another for his own.”

Those dark eyes—the mischief and the certainty—compelled him to respond. “It’s not like that. We’re...close. Very close. But there’s no *ownership*.”

The mischief faded, and because of that his face seemed almost sympathetic. “Many things can be overcome with love. But if two souls exist in different places, one will always destroy the other. Perhaps you should consider finding someone more akin to yourself.”

“You don’t know anything about us.” Uncomfortable with this conversation, especially so close to his declaration of love for Seth, he put his cue on the table. “Is there anything else you can tell me about Monday night?”

Dorian paused, shook his head. “There is nothing more I can tell you.”

Rafe removed his wallet from his back pocket. “How much do I owe the redhead for the game?”

He raised a hand. “I’ll take care of it.”

Forcing himself to remember his manners, Rafe nodded. “Thanks.” He shoved his wallet back into his pocket. “And take care.”

“Have a safe journey, Rafe.”

Nice, polite words. Why did they set his teeth on edge?

Uneasy, Rafe glanced over his shoulder one more time before leaving the pool hall.

An hour later, he was on the main campus of Georgetown University. As he had Monday and Tuesday, he took a second to try and comprehend the sheer scope of the place. Huge. Much bigger than Etheridge College back in Brier. Where Etheridge consisted of a few key buildings and two dorms, Georgetown was a self-sustaining community. The old fashioned architecture and the red brick buildings couldn't hide the fact that it was about as modern as a place could get. It had a bank, a grocery store, a hospital and God-only-knew what else.

When Seth received the invitation to speak here, Rafe had been worried about his ability to cope. That was the real reason he'd come along—not to see the sights as he'd claimed. Then he sat in on his class on Monday, and watched him do his thing.

Seth was a totally different person when teaching. Dynamic, with no trace of the shyness that plagued him everywhere else. And confident. He answered questions smoothly and thoroughly, and somehow managed to keep the attention of a classroom packed with three hundred students.

It made Rafe proud to see him excel, but it also made him wonder why he was wasting his time in a two-bit town like Brier. Before coming to D.C., he hadn't known that Seth was some kind of math superstar, with articles published all over

the world. He hadn't understood anything in that lecture, but the people around him had been hanging on Seth's every word.

And yet no one had ever said they loved him.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and climbed the stairs to the student center. How was that even possible? Seth was...*Seth*. Sure, he could be a little distant, and could be skittish as hell at the weirdest times. He didn't like to talk about himself, got tongue-tied when he tried to explain how he felt about something. But he tried, with the whole of his being, to get past all that.

Sometimes he even managed it, and Rafe could see the real Seth, the one who would give his soul to you if you asked.

Two souls existing in different places...

What the hell did that mean, anyway?

He entered the student center, ignoring the hot, flirty stares of men and women looking him up and down. Right now he only wanted one hot stare. He lengthened his stride, heading to the rec room. They'd met here both Monday and Tuesday, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why. Seth leaned over one of the pool tables and lined up his shot, his gaze focused, his body relaxed.

"You're never going to make that," said Rafe, leaning against the doorjamb.

He straightened, smiling broadly. "Hi."

Now, how could a face like that keep any secrets? "Hi, yourself. How was your lecture?"

"It was good." He glanced at the table. "Why don't you

think I can make this shot?”

Rafe walked to the other end of the table, where the final ball, the nine, was flush against the foot cushion at the center diamond. The cue ball was close to the head of the table, also in the center. “There’s no way you’re gonna pocket this ball. You have to knock it loose to a better position first.”

Seth’s mouth crooked as he leaned over the table. The cue stick glided smoothly through his fingers, sending the cue ball sailing across the table. It glanced off the nine on the right side, rolling it straight into the left corner pocket.

“Holy shit,” whispered Rafe. He’d made it look simple, but this was an impossible shot.

Seth straightened, holding the cue stick close to his body. “We should have put money on it.”

“Yeah, and I’d be broke. Again.” Rafe circled around to stand next to him. “That was amazing.”

“Want me to teach you?”

A lot of experts didn’t like to share their tricks and secrets, but no one ever called Seth Anderson a pool shark. “You bet.”

He leaned on his cue, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Now?”

It always caught him, how cute Seth could be. He had no defense against it. “Okay.”

Seth began to retrieve the cue ball when a feminine voice called his name.

“Professor Anderson?”

He turned. “Yes?”

Two pretty, female students jogged up to him. Seth took an

unconscious step closer to Rafe, and Rafe gripped his shoulder briefly to show he had nothing to fear. His presence must have reassured him, because the tension left his body.

One of the young women—a tall, slender brunette—hugged a magazine to her breasts. “Professor Anderson,” she said breathlessly. “My name is Lydia Garret, and this is my friend Christine Ballard.”

Seth looked from one woman to the other. “Nice to meet you.”

Christine, whose blond hair was cropped short around her ears, radiated nervous excitement. “We’ve been attending your lectures all week, and we’ve read everything you’ve ever written.”

His head tilted to the side. “Really?”

Lydia nodded, handing him the magazine she’d been hugging. “We were wondering if we could get your autograph?”

Seth didn’t even look at the magazine. “Autograph? You want my autograph?”

“We know it’s inappropriate, and that you’re probably bothered all the time.” Christine pouted, making the most of her full, shiny lips. “But we were hoping you’d make an exception for us?” He reached out and gingerly took the magazine from Lydia. “Journal of Algebra,” he said, reading the title. Finally, a measure of the students’ excitement seemed to spread to him, and he glanced up. “Rafe, this is the first major article I ever had published.” He flipped it open to show him. “See?”

*An Exploration of Generalized Free Products
of Conjugacy Separable Groups*

Author: Seth Anderson.

Pretty much the only thing he'd understood of that was Seth's name, but it didn't stop him from being damned impressed. "That's great."

Lydia rocked back and forth on her heels. "Could you sign it? Please?"

He glanced at her, nodding. "Do you have a pen?"

She handed him a black marker.

Seth signed his name in the corner above his article and gave the journal back to her. "Thank you."

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "I should be thanking *you*."

Christine held out another one. "Could I get one, too?"

Seth took the magazine. *American Journal of Mathematics*. Without looking at the table of contents, he opened it right to his article and signed the page.

When Christine took the journal from him, she stepped forward, which made Seth take a half step back. "You know, when we heard you were coming, we were expecting someone a lot older. Like sixty, at least. We couldn't find any photos of you."

"I-I don't enjoy being photographed."

Lydia toyed with her necklace, openly flirting with him

now. "But you're so cute. And it was such a great surprise to see someone our age giving the lecture."

Rafe bit back a grin. Sometimes it really must suck to be cursed with such young features.

But as always Seth was polite with his correction. "I'm sorry, people often mistake my age. I'm thirty-two."

The girls' eyes widened a fraction, but they weren't about to give up.

"Thirty isn't old," Lydia said playfully.

Christine joined in. "We're going to have lunch in Alexandria. Would you like to come?"

Seth glanced up at him; his eyes confused, panicked, pleading.

Rafe laughed and dragged him back against his body. "That sounds fun," he said, wrapping him in an obviously intimate embrace. "But we already have plans."

Both girls were stunned into silence.

Lydia was the first to get her voice back. "Oh, so you two are...?"

"I belong to him," said Seth.

Rafe glanced down. How weird was it that he'd used words almost identical to Dorian's?

The girls giggled. "That's cool," said Christine. "I guess we should be going then. Thanks for the autographs, Professor Anderson. We're really looking forward to your last two lectures."

"Thank you."

When they were out of earshot, Rafe lowered his head and

squeezed Seth close. “Math groupies. I never would’ve figured.”

“Me, either.”

“That’s never happened to you before?”

“I moved around a lot, received my Master’s and PhD through correspondence. I submitted articles because no one would take me seriously when I tried to get a job. When my name began to gain notoriety, I started to get offers to teach.”

It was probably the most Seth had ever told him about his life, but he wanted to hear more. “Did Georgetown offer you a spot?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you take it?”

Seth turned in his arms, tipping his head back to look at him. “I liked Brier much better than any other community I visited.”

And he thanked God for that every day. “I love you.”

Something strange flickered in his face. “I’m not sure if I can get used to hearing that.”

“Don’t worry,” said Rafe, smoothing his hair back, “you will.”

Seth stared into his eyes a moment, before leaning forward and nuzzling his chest.

Warm, a little ticklish. It made him chuckle. He’d never met a man who showed affection like this before. “You remind me of a puppy when you do that.”

Seth’s small body stiffened, and he pushed himself away. “I am not a puppy.”

LONE

The dark frown caught him off guard. It was the closest thing to anger Rafe had ever seen in him. "I didn't say you were. I just said that thing you do reminds me of one."

Gaze fixed on the floor, he crossed his arms over his chest. "So you don't like it?"

Why would this be a hot spot for him? For anyone? "It's one of my favorite things about you. It's on my list."

He glanced up, his expression cautious. "List?"

"The one I started last night?"

His face softened, and he absently scratched himself behind the ear. "I'm sorry. I guess I've been on edge lately."

In some ways, the outburst was comforting. "After what you've been through, you're more than entitled to a few mood swings."

Seth's eyebrows drew together, but then his face cleared as he hopped up and sat on the pool table. "I've been thinking."

"Yeah?" asked Rafe, wondering if they were finally going to talk about Monday.

"I thought maybe tomorrow we didn't have to meet here after my lecture. We could meet at that big bookstore in Georgetown, the one with the café inside. We could have a light lunch, take a walk to explore the city. Maybe even take one of those trolley tours."

It wasn't what he'd wanted, but he couldn't help grinning. "You really want to go sightseeing?"

He nodded, timid again. "It was so nice of you to come with me all this way, and we've only gone out for dinner once. It's not fair that you've been cooped up in a hotel room since

we got here.”

If he’d stayed cooped up on Monday, Seth never would have gotten hurt. “You’re sure?”

“I’d like to go out with you, Rafe.”

Now that was something he couldn’t possibly resist. Seth almost never expressed his wishes. “Maybe we can have dinner in Dupont Circle. I’ve heard of a restaurant there that’s supposed to be really great. La Tomate, I think.”

He smiled. “Is Dupont the neighborhood where we can hold hands?”

Closing the distance between them, Rafe braced his fists on the wooden railing of the pool table. “We can hold hands anywhere you want, Seth.” He dropped a slow, tender kiss on his mouth. “Less people will eyeball us in Dupont, I guess.”

Seth’s breath felt soft and warm on his lips. “I’m already looking forward to tomorrow.”

Too cute. “What’ll we do till then?”

“I’d still like to teach you that trick shot.” Hesitant fingers came up to touch his face. “Is that all right?”

Rafe kissed his cheek. “After that?”

“I...” He took a hard swallow as a blush stained his skin. “Do you think we could...”

“Spend the rest of the day in bed?” he said, taking mercy on him and finishing the sentence.

His breath hitched, and he nodded.

Rafe grinned and lifted him to the floor. “Sounds like a vacation to me.”

LONE

* * *

Seth stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at his shirtless body.

“Hey!” called Rafe from the bedroom. “You coming or what?”

“In a second,” he called back. He focused on his chest, where he’d gotten scratched. Clawed, actually.

Where a scar was supposed to be.

He ran his hand over the smooth skin, knowing he was going to be repeating this ritual for some time. It had to be done, because Rafe was human, and he’d never understand.

Pressing his thumb to his skin, he used the nail to slice a diagonal line across the expanse of his chest. A low hiss whispered through his teeth as he cut himself open. The pain wouldn’t bother him if he shifted, but shifting would only accelerate the healing and make the self-injury pointless.

The wolf inside stirred at the scent of fresh blood, and he struggled to control the wildness. A simple deception, but he didn’t like lying to Rafe. Although Nightkin law and his own survival demanded it, something about it seemed very wrong. It felt as if he were violating a hallowed covenant by doing so. He’d made no promises, no blood vows, so why did he feel this way?

Grabbing some toilet paper, he wiped the blood from his skin. The wound had already closed, and it looked like a normal, human scar.

“Seth! You powdering your nose in there?”

“Something like that.” The mutilation and vague sense of

LONE

transgression weren't so bad, if committing such acts meant he could keep Rafe a little longer. He tossed the paper into the toilet and flushed it before leaving the bathroom to play human.

He would do anything to keep Rafe a little longer.

CHAPTER 4

Seth took a sip of his tall mocha latte. There was a hint of mint in it, *fresh* mint, and it teased his senses enough to bring a soft smile to his face. His smile faded when he caught sight of the clock on the far wall.

He was only ten minutes late. It was nothing to worry about.

Some dark, menacing voice inside his head whispered that Rafe had left him like some people left a box of puppies on the side of the road. It told him that he was lone once again.

He shook the thought away. No, not Rafe. Rafe really loved him. The human side of him. And that was enough. More than any beast could hope for anyway.

Rafe would be here. There was nothing to worry about.

Seth glanced around the café portion of the bookstore. At the table next to him sat a witch. A witch who'd just discovered her powers, if the *Magical Craft Primer* she held in her hands was any indication. She didn't even have enough skill yet to hide her nature from him.

Witches, though magical, were not Nightkin. Higher level ones could mask themselves from detection. A necessary skill, since some warlocks liked to eat them for dinner.

The woman, with soft brown hair curling around her face and the scent of lavender clinging to her body, glanced up and offered him a warm smile. Seth smiled back, knowing she sensed his Nightkin nature, but that she didn't know enough to realize what it meant.

He politely returned his attention to his drink. Witches, whether high level or not, tended to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, to start every relationship with warmth and light. Their auras were kind, gentle.

Once, many years ago, he'd lost himself in that light for a few days. A male witch. Seth had been lone so long, had been fighting *so long*, and the young man had shared his hotel bed, had given him a warm body to cling to.

The witch had left him three days later. He'd had no choice, really. Seth was dangerous.

Was he a danger to Rafe?

He didn't think so. Things were different with this human. Aside from that isolated incident in the pool hall, Seth's nature had been, well, domesticated. And he'd never prayed so

fervently *not* to be a danger, because he was beginning to think of Rafe as a...as a...

Mate.

The very idea was insane. Not just because Seth was a werewolf. But because he was also a—

Something pricked his senses. He turned in his chair just in time to see the witch leave the store...and a vampire stride in.

Tall, lanky, graceful; the stranger flashed a cool smile at him as he walked through the café.

That smile worried him. It wasn't uncommon to see Nightkin in places like this, but Seth was a hunted being, and this sort of familiarity usually brought danger with it.

The vampire took a seat at a table in the corner. Still smiling at him, he stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles.

What did he know? What did he want?

Vampires had no innate animosity toward wolves. They were kin, after all. And while some of them could be skilled fighters, most preferred to stay out of wolf affairs.

However, if they thought they might catch a good show, they were known to take a front row seat.

A flash of magic made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, and he watched every human in the store walk casually out of it. It probably felt natural to them, leaving this place. They'd never even question it later.

Only a warlock with a high degree of skill and power could accomplish such an act.

Seth stood and headed for the exit.

LONE

A werewolf, even bigger than the Alpha from the pool hall, entered the bookstore and blocked his escape. "Hey there, pup. What pack do you hail from?"

He backed away as a line of wolves streamed into the store. A pack, obviously. They moved as one, and many of them wore tough leather jackets. Jackets they'd probably made themselves, after a hunt. "I don't have a pack. I'm lone."

The new Alpha smiled, showing his lengthening teeth. "Really? We heard a story about someone taking out a good chunk of Shining Moon a few days ago. Fella sorta matches your description. Wouldn't be you, would it?"

The scent of bloodlust rose in the air, and he struggled not to react to it. "Please, I don't want any trouble."

From behind, a wolf bumped into him with his big body. "Didn't sound like a denial to me."

Seth tried to stay calm and assess the situation. He opened his senses, scented the air. Fourteen wolves. One vampire. One warlock.

Another wolf looked skeptical as she studied him. "He's drenched in fear. If he really caused that thing at Trick Shot, why does he smell so scared?"

The Alpha punched Seth in the chest, forcing him deeper into the circle of wolves. "They said the guy at Trick Shot acted scared at first, too. Maybe he just needs some motivation."

Motivation. *Rafe*. Rafe would be here any minute!

He broke from the pack, using surprise and his smaller size to wriggle free and lunge for the door. He almost had a hand

on the handle when someone grabbed his shoulders and dragged him back to the café.

“Quick little guy, isn’t he?” said the woman with the iron hold on him.

“He’d rather run than shift. How fucked up is that?” A young, lean wolf looked over his body. “What kind of wolf are you?”

“Please,” whispered Seth. “Just let me go.”

The wolf grinned, slamming a hard fist into Seth’s face. “How’s that for motivation?”

Rafe. “Please.”

A tall female nudged the other wolf aside. “Let me try.” She crouched before him. “Hi, little one. What makes you shift?”

Tears pricked his eyelids. “I don’t want to fight.”

She shook her head, clicking her tongue in mock sympathy. “Looks like we’ll have to find out with trial and error.” She ripped open his shirt, tearing it off his body. Then she raised her hand—letting him watch as the fingers grew into claws—and took a swipe at his chest.

Seth gritted his teeth, felt the warm trickle of blood down his torso. *Don’t shift. Escape and warn Rafe away.*

The woman licked his blood off her claws. “Well that didn’t do it. Got any ideas, Zev?”

The Alpha shrugged as he approached him. “More of the same, I guess.” He grabbed Seth’s head and kicked him under the jaw with his knee.

His head snapped backward and his vision went black. The

wolf inside tried to claw out through the darkness, but Seth reined it back. He had to get out. He had to warn—

“What the hell are you doing!”

Too late.

The female turned in surprise. “How’d he get past the spell?”

“Must be holes in it,” said another wolf.

Seth dropped to his knees and stared at Rafe, who stood shocked and enraged just inside the doorway. “Run,” he said softly. “Please run.”

Zev glanced down at him, a slow smile curving his lips as his teeth receded. “Looks like we may have just found the pup’s motivation.”

Rafe ran straight into the pack’s center. One of the younger wolves tried to block his path, and got nailed with a powerful right cross that actually made him stumble backward. Seth had never seen a human with enough strength to do that before.

Rafe grabbed Seth around the waist, hoisting him into his arms as he backed away. “You leave him the fuck alone, do you hear me?”

The wolves watched him, amused. “He’s already lone,” said one, and the others chuckled.

Rafe slid him to his feet, keeping one eye on the pack. “Seth? Can you stand?”

The concern in Rafe’s face threatened to break him as he trailed his fingers down the human’s cheek. “Rafe.”

“Aw, shit.” He kissed Seth’s forehead. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

LONE

The pack began to close in and Rafe straightened, sliding Seth behind him. "Listen, Seth. You and I are going to back out of here and run like hell, okay? If you don't think you can make it, tell me now and I'll carry you."

Seth felt his one hope at happiness slip away. "They're not going to let us leave."

As if in answer to that, a heavy, scraping sound drew their attention. Two of the wolves shoved a massive bookcase, still laden with books, in front of the entrance. Rafe wasn't strong enough to slide it free, and neither was he...unless he shifted.

But if he shifted, Rafe would know what he was.

And he wouldn't love him anymore.

"Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way." Rafe left him, walking toward the core of the pack. "Let us go. You don't want this kind of trouble."

The woman who had scratched him looked Rafe up and down. "The puppy has a human bodyguard?"

Zev smirked. "I guess human is better than nothing."

Seth saw Rafe's back stiffen, could smell his confusion.

One of the beta wolves tilted his head to wink at Seth, holding up his hand as he walked in front of Rafe. His fingers lengthened, curled slightly, and his nails grew, darkening as they hardened into razor sharp claws.

Rafe fell back a step. "What the fuck?"

Silently, the wolf and the man inside of Seth howled, summoning his Nightkin nature.

Protect Rafe. Protect Rafe. *Protect Rafe!*

LONE

* * *

Rafe heard the low, dark growl, but before he could turn around to see the source, a pair of hands gripped his shoulders from behind. He looked up and saw Seth, *Seth*, suspended in a handstand above his body.

The moment lasted one, surreal second, and then Seth was falling, bringing the heel of his shoe down onto the forehead of the man in front of him. His other leg kicked into his neck with a sickening crunch. The man flipped sideways, hitting the floor in a crumpled heap as Seth somehow managed to land on his feet, facing the crowd of men and women.

Rafe stared at his lover of three months in shock. His body was still fundamentally the same—small, fit. But his shoulders had a new roundness to them, the muscles of his bare back flexed and bunched with power, and his hands... Dear God, his hands had morphed into claws. Just like that other man's had.

The man who was now lying dead at their feet.

Seth's voice cut through the stunned silence of the room. "Anyone who lays a hand on my human dies," he growled, low and rough. "Got that?"

His human? His human?

"Holy shit," said one of the women in the crowd. "He really *is* a Ravager!"

Ravager?

The biggest man in the group smiled. "Looks like we're finally going to have some fun."

His mind spinning, Rafe glanced down at the dead body,

then back at Seth as he struggled to find his voice. “S-Seth?”

He turned his head, and his eyes—pupils, irises, whites—were completely black. His face was wild, vicious. Nothing like the man Rafe knew.

“Stay,” he gritted out through razor sharp teeth.

Another man grabbed his shoulder. Seth snatched his wrist and spun sharply, cracking the bones in the arm. He kicked him behind the legs, making him kneel, and with no hesitation he drove his knee into the center of his back, breaking it. The man slumped to the floor, twitching.

“What pack is this?” he asked, his voice hard and unafraid.

The big one narrowed his eyes. “Harvest Moon Pack.”

Seth bared his teeth in a chilling smile. “How poetic. Just so happens I’m feeling like a harvest right now.”

The man threw back his head and howled.

Rafe watched in stunned horror as every member of his gang did the same.

The horror turned into a nightmare when their faces started to change. Their mouths and noses elongated into muzzles; their teeth extended, sharpened. Hair sprouted on their skin as their hands turned into claws that looked even more deadly than the ones Seth sported.

The big one grew even bigger. His head shifted shape, putting pointed ears higher on his head as his mouth dripped saliva. His body thickened, forcing his fur-covered chest and shoulders to burst out of his clothing, the material hanging off of him in tatters. His knees bent back at a grotesque angle, tearing the bottoms of his jeans away, and his feet looked

LONE

more like paws than feet. Half the people in the room were undergoing the same transformation, and Rafe struggled to comprehend it.

No, it couldn't be. They didn't exist.

The other half of the gang transformed, too. But they shrank down, their clothes falling away, revealing...

Wolves.

Oh, merciful God in heaven.

Seth growled, his back rigid as he waited for them.

Two of those...those *things* charged, as well as one of the wolves. Seth waited until the first one was almost on top of him and whirled into another spinning move, this time using his claws to slice open its abdomen. It dropped to its "hands" and knees, and Seth jumped onto its back to launch himself into the air, executing a flying round house kick that connected with the second one's jaw, knocking the beast to the ground. As Seth hit the floor, he swept his leg underneath the wolf, flipping it over. While the animal was still in midair, he caught its head in his hands and slammed its skull into the ground.

It was like watching the goddamned *Matrix*.

Rafe was so focused on the fight that he almost didn't see the creature coming for him. The flash of brown caught his attention just in time, and he jumped back as one of its claws slashed a line down his chest. He cried out in pain and surprise, crashing against one of the tables in the café.

The beast loomed over him, at least eight feet tall, ready to finish what it had started.

LONE

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Seth whip around and sprint toward them.

Leaping at the last second, Seth grabbed its head and bent it backward until his feet were on the ground again. He opened his mouth wide and drove his fangs into its neck, ripping out a chunk of flesh and spitting it to the floor as his powerful hands tore the head right off its body.

Rafe watched in shock and revulsion as both the head and the body disintegrated into dust. Then he slowly turned to stare at the one who'd done it.

Seth's black eyes were steady as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

No fear, no regret, no humanity.

Another of the two-legged things crept up behind Seth. Before Rafe could even warn him, Seth flipped into a handstand, wrapping his legs around its body and throwing it forward with him. He landed on its waist and snapped its neck, his chest heaving as he stared down at it.

A green ball of fire collided into his body, but it dissipated on contact. Seth glanced up, growling at a man in the corner. "Forgetful warlock." A grin twisted his mouth as he stood. "Nightkin magic is useless on Ravagers."

Rafe pushed himself to his feet as Seth stalked toward the man.

More green balls flew at him, and finally a steady stream of green fire, but Seth didn't seem to feel it at all. When he laid hands on the man he was after, Rafe had to turn his head and shut his eyes. Only when the screaming stopped could he

look again.

The rest of the creatures rushed him, to back him into that corner. Seth leapt onto a table and used the wall to propel himself over them, landing back in the open. The next few minutes were a blur of blood and howls and bodies hitting the floor.

And when it was over, Seth was the only one left standing. Rafe finally understood what happened Monday night.

“Frightening, when we don’t know the facts. Sometimes even more frightening when we do.”

Seth turned, carrying himself like some kind of wild animal as he approached. Rafe held his ground for all of half a second before panic snapped him and he broke into a run.

The world pitched and spun, and suddenly his back hit the floor. Seth raised his arm into the air, his claws spasming with power.

“Seth!” Oh, Jesus, was he really going to die like this? “It’s me! It’s Rafe!”

Seth tilted his head to the side, a gesture just familiar enough to make him even more terrifying. “It’s Rafe,” he said softly, trying not to let his voice shake. “You remember me, don’t you?”

Slowly, he lowered his arm and straddled his waist. “Rafe.”

He nodded. “Yes, Rafe.”

Seth brought his face close, a low growl flowing out of his mouth.

Rafe squeezed his eyes shut, praying it would be quick.

His eyes flew open when a hot, wet tongue glided up his cheek. Rafe's breathing shallowed as Seth nuzzled the curve of his neck, kissed the underside of his jaw. Cautiously, he tried to sit up, and Seth's hands curved over his shoulders, easily pinning him to the floor.

The mouth sucking kisses over his neck grew insistent as it caressed the hollow of his throat, worked its way into the collar of his shirt. Another growl filled the air as Seth tore open his shirt, lapping at the exposed skin.

Then everything stopped, and Seth straightened, a scowl on his already fierce face.

Rafe tried to stay still, having no idea what might set him off.

"Rafe is hurt," he said in the voice that was Seth, but not Seth. He lifted his nose into the air, inhaled deeply.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"Tracking the vampire." Apparently finding what he was looking for, he rose to his feet and pointed a long claw at him. "Stay."

Rafe could only nod as Seth disappeared into the book stacks.

He couldn't have said *vampire*, could he?

A few minutes later, Seth reappeared, dragging a man who had to be a half foot taller than him by the shirt. He dropped to his knees beside Rafe, yanking the man down to the floor. "Lick his wound."

The man bared a pair of long, slender fangs and hissed at him. "I'm not touching a human for anything but lunch."

“Are you crazy, Seth!” He tried to sit up and make another run for it. “I’m not letting that thing anywhere near me!”

Seth growled and shoved his free hand into Rafe’s chest, slamming him back to the floor. “Vampire saliva heals and won’t change you on a genetic level. It’s the blood that’s dangerous.”

He turned his head to the vampire. “And you *will* lick his wound, or I will rip off your head and tear your heart out through your throat. Trust me, I’m fast enough to do all of that before you turn to dust.”

The vampire’s eyes rounded. “Okay, okay.”

Seth pushed the other man’s head to Rafe’s chest.

A cold, moist tongue slid over his cut, and he tried not to worry about the tingling sensation that came with it.

The vampire tried to lift his head, was held immobile by Seth’s iron grip. “I’m done. He’s healed.”

Seth’s hand tightened in his hair and hurled him against a nearby bookcase. The vampire slumped to the floor, knocked unconscious.

Focused totally on Rafe, Seth straddled his waist and ran a palm over his chest. “It looks fine. Does Rafe feel fine?”

No, he felt like his mind was about to shatter. “That was a vampire?”

He nodded, lowering his head to kiss his chest.

Arousal was starting to creep in with the fear, which couldn’t possibly be good. “I-I thought vampires couldn’t come out in the daylight.”

Those unnaturally long fingers tangled in his hair, yanking

his head back as he rose higher. "You watch too much damned TV, Rafe," he said, before crushing their mouths together.

He'd never been kissed like this, not by anyone.

It was hard and primal and full of wild passion. Seth thrust his tongue forward, dominating his mouth, forcing him to learn a rhythm totally different from the one they usually shared. For the first time since they'd met, Seth *took* what he wanted.

When he broke the kiss, he growled over his wet lips, nipped at his chin. That hard, demanding mouth found his neck again, nuzzling and licking the artery there.

Rafe gathered the last of his courage to try and bring sense back into his life. "Seth."

He made a soft sound of pleasure, but otherwise ignored him as he moved on to nipping his shoulder.

"Seth, we have to get out of here. The police will be here soon, and you've killed everyone in the store."

"Only killed one. Tried to take what was mine." His kisses were relaxed, unhurried. "Ashes to ashes..."

"Dust to dust," he finished, his voice shaking.

The caress of Seth's mouth changed, curved. Rafe didn't want to think that he might be smiling.

"Wolves will wake up," murmured Seth.

Thinking they were dead was one thing. Knowing those...those animals were going to *get up* might have been worse. "Seth."

He lifted his head. "They scared Rafe." He brought his face closer. "Seth will kill them and make it better."

“N-No.” Whatever he wanted, it wasn’t more violence. He was already soaked in it; any more and it might never wash off. “Don’t kill them.”

He grinned and returned his attention to Rafe’s body. The sensation of his smooth lips, his wet tongue, the scrape of those sharp teeth...it was insane. Again, he tried to sit up and, again, Seth easily pressed him flat.

How strong *was* he?

“Seth.”

“Mmm. Rafe.”

One of Seth’s hands traveled down his body, teasing the inside of his waistband before sliding down to cup his crotch. “Big, strong, Rafe.”

Rafe tried not to panic when Seth trailed one of his claws up his zipper, tried not to lose control at the sound of the nail clicking over each metal link. “Seth, not here. Please...”

Seth straightened, jet-black eyes focusing on his face. “Rafe doesn’t want me,” he whispered.

Rafe didn’t say anything, *couldn’t* say anything.

As Seth stared down at him, the black in his eyes receded, slowly revealing familiar brown. His teeth shortened, his face softened. His shoulders grew less round, less savage, making him look delicate in comparison. The claws faded; his fingers gradually returned to their normal size.

His eyes drooped half shut. “I’m sorry, Rafe. I should have told you that I was a monster.” He swayed, slumped over him. “God, I could go for a burger right about now.”

Rafe lay there with Seth on top of him. His breathing was

slow, steady—he'd fallen asleep.

Praying he wouldn't wake up, Rafe eased out from underneath him. He gingerly got to his feet, backed away.

Holy fuck. He'd just been attacked by a room full of...of violent, shape-changing, fang-baring, magic-throwing *creatures!* And Seth was one of them.

Rafe took another step backward. He had to get the hell out of here, had to run far away. Who knew what Seth would do when he woke up? He jumped when Seth stirred, but he was only curling himself into a fetal position in his sleep.

He always curled himself into that position when Rafe wasn't in bed with him.

His mind reeled as it replayed the fight, ached as he recalled the last three months.

Which Seth was the real Seth?

He wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

Rafe turned away to search for an escape route. The main exit had been blocked off, but there had to be a fire door somewhere. He started to walk through the carnage around him and paused, looking over his shoulder.

If these things got up while Seth was still asleep...

Clenching his fists, Rafe told himself it didn't matter. He should just leave him there. This was some B-horror-movie world and he'd walked in at the middle—not knowing the plot, the rules, or even who the good guys were.

For all he knew, these things had attacked Seth with good reason.

But, just yesterday, they'd spent hours laughing together

underneath the covers. And the day before that, Rafe had recited a list filled with the reasons he loved him. Some part of him tried to make him forget, but he instinctively fought against the urge.

Seth, who had shared his bed for three months.

Seth, who called him beautiful.

Seth, who just saved his life.

"Fuck!" Rafe crossed back to his small, sleeping body. He bent over and scooped him up, cradling him in his arms. Seth was covered in blood again—half naked this time—and Rafe wasn't looking much better. He grabbed two of the leather jackets discarded by creatures who'd turned into actual wolves, wrapping one around Seth's body and putting the other on his own. Then he found the fire exit, relieved when it opened into an alleyway without setting off any alarms.

They'd been spending a lot of time in alleys, lately.

His jaw tightened, and he traveled the dark passages for a few blocks before emerging onto a main sidewalk. People gave him a wide berth as he walked past them. Knowing someone would probably call the cops if they attracted any more attention, he lifted his hand and flagged down a taxi. He opened the door and slid inside, settling Seth in the seat beside him before rattling off the hotel address to the cab driver.

The cabbie glanced back at Seth. "Little early in the day for a bender, isn't it?"

"He fell off the wagon."

"Ah," said the driver, facing front and easing the car into the street. "That's a familiar story."

LONE

Rafe's head fell back against the headrest, and he took a few deep breaths. Unable to relax, he settled for staring out the window. The buildings began to blur together as he wondered again about the man beside him.

They'd called him a Ravager. That couldn't be good, whatever it was. And he'd definitely ravaged everyone in that bookstore.

Everyone except Rafe. Seth had been wild and scary as hell, but when Rafe asked him to stop, he had.

He straightened. "Hey, can we swing through a drive-thru on our way to the hotel?"

"Must be your first time in the city. There aren't any of those here."

"Well, then could you stop someplace where I can get a burger? You can leave the meter running."

The cabbie shot him a dark look before tapping the zone map on the back of the seat and returning his attention to the road. "The D.C. taxi system doesn't use meters. We charge flat fees through zone travel. Staying within one zone is a specific charge, and the charges only go up depending on how many zones we travel through."

Rafe growled, although it was nowhere near as intimidating as the sounds Seth had made earlier. He dug his wallet out of his pocket and held up a crisp bill. "One hundred dollars if you take a little detour to a good burger joint."

The cabbie snapped up the bill and pocketed it. "I am here to please."

Rafe stared down at Seth, who still slept peacefully. He

LONE

reached out to touch him, his hand hovering above his shoulder. Tremors of unease made his fingers curl into a fist as he pulled himself back. Whatever was going to happen, nothing could ever be the same.

So much for dinner in Dupont Circle.

CHAPTER 5

Rafe sat on the bed, staring at the tendrils of steam escaping from underneath the bathroom door. His lover, washing the blood from his body.

Seth's eyes had snapped open as soon as they stepped foot into the hotel room. He made a guttural dog-like sound, wrenched himself from his arms and bolted for the bathroom. Rafe had tried to follow, but he'd locked the door behind him.

That was forty-five minutes ago, and Rafe still hadn't decided whether he wanted him to come out.

The water shut off, and he knew that his decision wouldn't matter, regardless.

A few seconds later, Seth emerged, his naked skin scalded

red and scrubbed raw.

Rafe shot to his feet. "Jesus, Seth!"

His eyes rounded and his back thumped against the wall. As Rafe watched, the red faded and his skin healed, revealing the smooth perfection he had admired so much when they'd first met.

"Jesus, Seth," he said again, this time in a whisper.

Trembling, keeping his back against the wall, Seth inched his way to the farthest corner from Rafe. He dropped to the floor, hugging his knees to his chest, his gaze darting everywhere but at him.

Rafe frowned. Seth had just laid out a pack of monsters. Why did he look so afraid?

Remembering the paper sack on the bed, Rafe picked it up and slowly approached him. Seth's head lifted in jerky, uneven movements; his eyes were wary and untrusting as he stared up at him.

Careful not to get too close, Rafe bent over and held out the bag. "Seth? You want this?"

His head tilted as he focused on the bag. Bit by bit, he uncurled his body. "You got me food?" he asked, crawling on all fours toward it. He sniffed the bag and glanced up. "Meat?"

It unsettled him, seeing Seth this way. He was more like an animal than a human being. "You said you wanted a burger." Did he not remember anything he did in that other state? And was that better, or worse? "If you want, I can call room service and get some of those mushrooms you like."

"N-No," he said on a soft breath. "Thank you." He sat

back on his haunches and reached for the bag. He stopped a few times, his fingers twitching with hesitation, before gingerly taking it from Rafe's hand. Casting a quick glance upward, he opened the bag and pulled out a hamburger wrapped in paper. He peeled it back, sniffed the sandwich and glanced up again. "There's blood in this."

Rafe felt his anxiety spike, but he kept it from reaching the surface. "I wasn't sure how you liked it, so I got one medium-rare, and one well-done."

He stared at the hamburger a long moment, before opening his mouth wide and taking a huge bite.

Memories of the decapitation he'd witnessed earlier flooded him, and he fought the urge to turn away. "Do you like it?"

Keeping his gaze on the food, he nodded as he took another, smaller bite.

"No pickles. I know you don't like those."

Seth looked up at him, a sad mix of pain and confusion in his expression. But some of the distrust did leave him, putting Rafe more at ease. He looked so fragile, sitting there. Like a kid, or a...puppy.

The things in the bookstore had called him that too. No wonder he didn't like the word.

Rafe reached out to smooth the hair out of his face.

"Don't!" Seth scrambled away, his back slamming into the corners of the wall.

Rafe snatched back his hand, jumping damn near a foot in the air. "What the fuck, Seth?"

He held his sandwich close to his chest, like he was protecting some kind of treasure. “You don’t have to touch me.” His voice cracked, and he swallowed, shaking his head at the floor. “I know you’re scared.”

“I’m not—”

“Rafe,” he interrupted, an edge creeping into his tone. “I can *smell* it all over you. The fear.”

Shit. He really had no idea what was going on anymore. Knowing he couldn’t deny it, he took a seat on the carpet a few feet away, resting his forearms on upraised knees. “Is this okay?”

Seth stared at him until he settled, and quietly returned his attention to his hamburger.

Rafe watched him eat in small, careful bites. Seth could smell fear, could rip a monster’s head off with his bare hands, could execute the kind of kung-fu moves he’d only seen in movies. Yet here, he just seemed scared and hurt and confused. And there was nothing Rafe could do.

He leaned forward, not missing it as Seth’s head shot up, and reached into the paper bag. He pulled out a bottle of juice and rolled it to him. “Cranberry-apple. That’s your favorite, right?”

Seth stared at him, his eyes crinkling at the corners as if he were about to cry. Without breaking their gaze, he picked up the bottle, opened it, and sniffed the liquid before taking a cautious sip.

“Why’d you smell it? You think I’d somehow managed to poison a sealed bottle?”

He glanced away, the pain in his face deepening. "It's happened before."

Mary and Joseph. What the hell kind of life did Seth lead? "Seth—"

"I'm sorry," he said, his words tumbling out of him. "I-I didn't mean to stay with you. You just... You just smelled so good and you were so gentle and I'd never had that before. You were kind to bring me back here after...*that*, and I'll leave." He looked up, his brown eyes glistening. "After I finish the food, I'll get dressed, and I'll leave. I'll never bother you again, and you can burn my things. It was so... It was so stupid of me to think I could ever have any sort of life, and I know that now."

Rafe held up his hands. "Hold on, Seth." He started to get up, then thought better of it. "Before you make any decisions that are going to change both our lives, don't you think you owe it to me to explain what the hell is going on?"

Silence passed between them before Seth gave him a reluctant nod. His mouth worked a little, but no words came out.

"Okay," Rafe said gently. "Why don't we start with a few questions and answers?" He waited for Seth to nod before palming his own chest. "That thing that licked me? That was a vampire?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"The man who shot green fire from his hands? You said he was a...a warlock, right?"

"R-Right."

“The rest of them? What were they?”

He hesitated, answered softly. “Werewolves.”

Christ. *Give me strength.* “And what are you, Seth?”

All expression slipped away as his head dropped onto the wall. He pushed his cheek into it, looking like he were trying to make himself disappear. “An abomination.”

Rafe sucked in a breath. He’d said it so smoothly, as if it was a fact drilled into him long ago. “That doesn’t tell me anything.”

The sandwich fell from his hand, but he curled the juice closer to his body. “I’m a werewolf, but I’m...defective. A werewolf has three forms. Human, wolf, and hybrid. I can’t shift into wolf form. I can’t shift into hybrid form. My magic gets stuck somewhere, preventing the transformation.”

He thought about the huge beast that had nearly killed him. Though Seth had looked plenty vicious, he hadn’t looked anything like that. “But you do change, a little. I saw you.”

His eyes drifted closed. “A normal werewolf accesses the Nightkin magic just long enough to complete the shift. In me, the process starts, the magic cycles in my body, and it doesn’t stop until I return to my human form. The magic amplifies my strength, speed, and reflexes beyond any wolf. But it also...”

Seth swallowed hard, pain etched into every muscle of his body. It was only going to get worse and Rafe didn’t want to hurt him, but they needed it out in the open. “What does it also do, Seth?”

Eyes still closed, he pawed at the wall. “It wipes away all fear, all regret, all concept of the future. It heightens my lust—

bloodlust,” he glanced at Rafe, shrank deeper into the corner, “lust for the flesh.”

Rafe stared at him for a while, at his small, trembling body. It was wrenching to watch, to realize that Seth hated himself. “Monday night... Did they attack you, or did you attack them?”

“They came after me. Because I’d trespassed into their territory without asking the Alpha’s permission, and in my human form I appear small, weak. So they attacked.”

Shit. He’d fucked up more than he thought. “Is that why those people in the bookstore were after you?”

“No. They came because I should have killed everyone in that pool hall, but I didn’t.”

He couldn’t comprehend the rules Seth lived by. “They came after you because you spared their lives?”

“They knew I was in D.C. because I spared the lives of Shining Moon. They *came after* me because I’m a Ravager, and Ravagers must be exterminated.”

This was much more than hate. It was easy to tell from his tone that Seth felt he *deserved* to be attacked. “Why?”

“We’re too strong. We can’t be controlled. We endanger the pack—all packs—and Nightkin, and humans.”

Rafe tried to keep his thoughts organized, to keep his questions simple, but it felt like he was hearing a different language. “Nightkin?”

Seth looked away, his voice low and flat. “Werewolves, vampires, warlocks, seers. It’s a family, and family members must protect each other, so they must come after me. I’m a

freak. I shouldn't even exist. But I don't know how to do anything but survive."

Rafe frowned. He sounded so tired, and he'd managed to hide that weariness from him for three months. "How long have you been fighting, Seth?"

"Forever," he said softly, his legs curling closer to his body. "I've turned entire packs to dust. I've done the same to vampire clans. To anyone who came after me."

Even after what he'd seen today, he couldn't grasp the idea of Seth as a killer. Other images kept crowding in—late nights under the stars, low laughter as they played pool. "Have you ever killed a human being?"

"No." Before Rafe could even decide whether to be comforted by that, he said, "But I came close, once."

Did he want to know this? He couldn't seem to stop himself. "Tell me?"

His shoulders shrugged. "My foster" —the word got caught in his throat— "father was beating the shit out of me. I really liked the lady in the house—she was nice to me—and I tried to hold back. But he just kept hitting and hitting and *hitting*. I couldn't... I couldn't stop myself from shifting, and then..."

"Then?" whispered Rafe.

Seth traced a pattern on the juice bottle. "I broke his fingers, shattered his hands, snapped every bone in his arms and legs and feet. I'd just moved on to his ribs when I realized that he wasn't the only one screaming anymore. The lady was standing there, begging me to stop. I saw myself in her eyes

and I finally understood what I was, even though I didn't yet have a word for it." Tears slipped down his face, and his eyes were pleading as he turned his head to look at Rafe. "I didn't mean to cripple him. I just wanted him to stop hitting me."

God, he sounded so young. "How old were you?"

One of his hands left the bottle he held so protectively to tug viciously at his own hair. "Nine."

Rafe stopped breathing. *Nine*. And he nearly beat a full grown man to death.

Still tangled in his hair, Seth's fingers turned white. "Freak. Monster. *Abomination!*"

And suddenly Rafe forgot everything. The wolves, the blood, the death. All he could see was Seth, and he was hurting.

In a flash he was there, gathering him close. He placed his hand over Seth's, untangling it from his hair as gently as he could. "I've got you."

"I'm sorry!" he cried, twisting away. The drink sloshed out of his bottle, staining Rafe's clothes red. Seth's gaze dropped to the mess, and his struggling intensified. "*I'm sorry.*"

Tightening the embrace, Rafe crooned softly into his ear. "Shh."

He froze, then wrapped shaking arms around him. "I'll leave. I can do it. I'm lone, and it's how it should be."

Rafe closed his eyes, realizing—in his own way—that Seth was trying to comfort *him*. To reassure him that he'd never see the monster from the bookstore again. "There's a little problem with that, Seth." He stroked the bare skin of his back.

"I don't think I want you to leave me."

"You do, I know you do." Seth's hands twisted into his shirt. "I smell your fear, even now."

"Yeah, well, look at it from my point of view. A few hours ago, I didn't even believe werewolves *existed*. I need time. Can't you give me that?"

"I'm not just a werewolf," he whispered. "I'm a Ravager. I bring suffering and death."

Rafe knew he should take that at face value, but he never had any common sense when it came to Seth. No one who did would have asked a stranger to move in after the first night. "You didn't bring any suffering or death in the last three months. Before this week, you only brought light into my life."

His breath hitched. "Light?"

"Yes, light. The side of you I saw today...was that even you? Or is it like another person inside of you?"

Seth stiffened, but didn't try to pull away. "It's me, Rafe. It's like I'm purified, empowered. I take what I want and I don't care about the repercussions. That's part of what makes me so dangerous."

That couldn't be right. How could the man he held now be any less "pure" than the one who'd caused the carnage at the bookstore? "Did you ever," he paused, trying to remember the word, "shift in Brier?"

He shook his head in the crook of Rafe's neck.

"All right. Then maybe we can go back to Iowa and get that light back. You want to try that?"

LONE

Seth was silent. The seconds stretched until minutes passed. Rafe tried to be patient, stroking the tremors from his body. *Please*, he prayed. *Please give me my life back.*

“Yes,” murmured Seth, nuzzling closer to him.

“Okay,” said Rafe, even as he wondered how he could possibly pretend that Seth was at all normal. “Okay.”

* * *

Rafe frowned at the television screen, the only light in the room. The ten o’clock news wasn’t making a damn bit of sense.

“Rafe?”

He twisted around on the couch to see Seth—wearing a pair of boxer shorts and hugging a pillow to his chest—sitting up in bed. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

His gaze flicked to the TV and back to him. “What are you watching?”

“The news.” He turned back to look at the screen. “There’s a story about the bookstore on, but they only say that it was ransacked by unknown persons. And look—” He pointed at the security footage. “All the cameras in the store are screwed up. It’s just snow.”

“Nightkin magic wreaks havoc with technology.” Seth glanced down at his pillow, seemed surprised to be holding it, and set it aside. “As soon as the warlock magicked the people in the store, the equipment became useless. All the shifting did the same, and the effect lasts for hours afterward.”

A totally different world. Rafe hit the mute button and

turned on the couch again. "Why don't you come over here?"

Hesitating, he sat back on his heels with his hands flat on the mattress, his shoulders hunched forward.

Rafe didn't want to think how much he looked like a dog about to get a scolding. "Please, Seth."

A tremor went through his body, but he crawled to the foot of the bed and slid to the floor. He padded to the couch, paused, and sat on a cushion an arm's length from him.

Rafe leaned over and pulled him onto his lap. "Isn't that better?"

His brow furrowed. "You're still afraid of me."

It wasn't easy, having his fear laid bare like this, but he slid his palms to Seth's thighs. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"But," his head tilted to the side, "you still want me close?"

That familiar shyness drew him in the way it always drew him in, and he didn't have to try so hard to keep his hands on his lover. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Seth caressed his bare chest, his shoulders. "Rafe," he whispered, leaning forward.

Instinctively, Rafe snapped his head back.

Seth stopped short, glanced away.

"Shit, Seth. I didn't mean—"

"It's all right. I understand."

"It's not all right." He slipped a hand to the nape of Seth's neck and pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I'm sorry." Seth's face softened as he straightened, but it couldn't hide his pain.

Rafe smoothed back his hair, realizing that Seth had probably been in pain all his life. “You never told me you were in a foster home.”

He shook his head. “Not a foster home. Many, many foster homes. Too many fights, too many things I couldn’t explain, too much trouble. When I was thirteen, they put me in an institution for psychotic children. Anderson’s School for Troubled Youth. That’s where I got my last name.”

“Ah, fuck,” whispered Rafe. “That must have been terrible for you.”

“Not as bad as the rest of it, I guess. Sometimes they drugged me, sometimes they didn’t, depending on which doctor was breezing through the place at the time. But being there taught me how to hide the truth of what I was, which helped me to survive once the real fighting began.”

“Real fighting?”

“When I turned eighteen, they sealed my records and sent me on my way. I still wasn’t sure what I was, so to the Nightkin world I looked like a lost puppy. I was easy prey. They thought I was easy prey.”

From what he’d seen at the bookstore, Seth could easily hold his own, but a kid that age should’ve been worrying about fast cars and Friday night dates. Not life and death. “No offense, Seth, but your Nightkin world is fucked up.”

Seth smiled, and the expression broke his heart. “It’s not like that. Most werewolf packs are very loving. They take care of their own. They teach, they protect. The welfare of the pack is the most important thing to every wolf within it. That’s why

Ravagers have to be killed.”

People had been trying to kill Seth all his life, and he didn’t hate them. Not at all. How could that be? “I don’t see it. I don’t understand why you *have* to be killed.”

Seth tentatively reached out, touching his mouth, tracing his lips. “You aren’t Nightkin.”

Catching his wrist, Rafe uncurled his fingers and dropped a kiss into his palm. The surprise he saw in Seth’s eyes when he lifted his head cut right into him. He couldn’t imagine being an outcast from every world in existence. Couldn’t imagine never knowing kindness or understanding or love. “We can stop talking about it if you want. Can’t be easy for you.”

He smiled again, a little warmer. “I’ve never talked so much about it to one person before. It feels nice.”

Rafe’s gaze drifted to his chest, to his smooth, flawless skin. “You heal pretty quickly, don’t you?”

“Ravagers heal much faster than normal Nightkin. Especially if I’m in my shifted form. The Nightkin magic accelerates the process.”

“Why did it take so long for your scar from Monday to heal?”

Seth’s body started, and he edged backward. “I...” He raised his hand, pressing his thumb to his own chest. “Whenever I thought you might see me without my shirt, I cut myself with my nail, so that you would think I was human.”

“Ah, Seth!” His head back fell against the couch and he stared up at the ceiling, unable to look at him.

Seth leaned forward, resting his hands on Rafe's pecs. "You're upset?"

"I'm fucking *pissed!*"

He eased upward and looked down at his face. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Rafe bolted upright, knocking him back. "Sorry you hurt me? Hurt *me*? What about *you*, Seth?"

He dropped his gaze, shrank into himself. "I-I just wanted to be with you."

Again, he wondered why he seemed scared. But he knew enough to take advantage of it. "It's time for you to make me a promise."

Cautious, he glanced up.

Rafe took his head in his hands. "Never again. You are never, ever to hurt yourself again. Understand?"

"No," he said softly. "Could you explain it to me?"

Ah, fuck. This day had drained him. He was pissed that Seth had kept so many secrets, and he was pissed that he thought it was okay to mutilate himself. "Do you think you can make the promise just because I'm asking you to?"

Those brown eyes looked so confused, and Rafe wondered just how much damage hid behind them. "I promise, Rafe."

Rafe dropped his hands. "Thank you."

"There's something I should tell you."

Already he knew he didn't want to hear it. "What is it?"

"The three ways to kill a Nightkin."

That one sentence was worse than anything he could have imagined. "Wh-What?"

LONE

Seth glided his fingers down his own throat. "Take off the head." He slid his palm over his chest. "Tear out the heart."

"Stop it, Seth."

His voice was soft, inescapable. "And silver, Rafe. Silver to the head or heart will kill us instantly, but silver in any part of our body will poison us."

Nausea snaked through his stomach, and he balled his hands into fists as he tried to control it. "Why are you telling me this?"

Seth reached up and trailed his fingers over Rafe's face in a gentle, tender caress. "Because I want a promise from you, too."

Calm. Chilling. Yet another side to the man he'd thought he knew. "And what is that?"

"If you ever think, even for a moment, that I'm about to ravage you, I want you to kill me."

Kill him? Kill *Seth*?

"I can't promise you that."

"You made me promise."

"It's not the same."

"Rafe." He threaded his fingers through Rafe's hair. "Please."

"No."

Seth brushed a kiss against his cheek. "I just promised you that I would never hurt myself. If I ever hurt you, who would put me out of my misery?"

Oh, God. He'd never heard such fucked up logic, and his voice broke. "I can't."

The calm expression cracked. "All right, all right." He straightened, his hands sliding down to Rafe's chest. "I'm sorry."

But Seth didn't understand *why* he was upset. He could see that much just looking at him. Shaking, Rafe tried to hold back the ball of raw emotion in his chest. *How the hell was this going to work?* Seth was so fundamentally different from anything he'd ever known. How could he have not seen that from the beginning?

"Do you want me to leave, Rafe?"

He willed himself to get a grip. This was Seth, and he owed it to both of them to try and figure it out. "No."

"Will you at least promise to tell me when you do?"

When. Not *if*. Didn't Seth have any faith in him? He shook his head, but buckled under that steady gaze. "Okay, I promise."

Seth slid off his lap and stood, taking his hands and coaxing him to his feet. "Come to bed?"

He sighed, picked up the remote to turn off the TV, and looped an arm around his shoulders as they walked around the couch. Rafe got in first; Seth crawled in after him and curled up against his body.

"Will you meet me after my lecture tomorrow?"

His lecture. "Still going to that?"

Seth nodded. "Math...it makes sense. And it's consistent. Two plus two always equals four, and that's comforting."

Good to know that even Nightkin needed things to make sense. "Sure, I'll meet you in the student center."

LONE

“Will you play pool with me?”

Was he really content with the craziness of their situation?
Or was he putting up a front for his sake? “Yeah, I’ll play.”

Seth nestled closer, dropped a soft kiss over his heart.

Maybe it was as simple as taking it day by day. Meet Seth
at school. Play a game of nine ball. Let the sunlight warm
away the cold.

Maybe.

CHAPTER 6

Rafe rubbed his eyes as he clicked on another link to yet another website. He'd been surfing the internet since Seth left this morning for his lecture, and now it was all starting to run together. The information he'd combed through wasn't even turning out to be that useful.

A keyword search for *Ravager*, for example, brought up one sci-fi flick made in 1997, and hundreds of references to role playing games. He shuddered when he thought about some of the things that had come up when he'd typed *werewolf*.

The door opened behind him and he spun in his chair. "Oh, shit."

Seth stood there, staring at him with big brown eyes. “You didn’t come.”

Rafe would have done anything to erase that pained expression. “Yeah, I know. I totally lost track of time.”

His briefcase slid from his fingers, thudding to the carpet. The sound was deafening in the quiet of the hotel room. “I waited for over an hour and you didn’t come.”

An *hour*? He was such a bastard! “I’m sorry, Seth.”

He glanced around the room, as if seeking the reason for his abandonment, then back at him. “What are you doing? Is it important?”

“Just some research.” Rafe winced. Shit, that sounded callous.

“Research?” He didn’t look angry as he crossed the room, just hurt and confused. “Wolf packs?” he asked, looking over Rafe’s shoulder.

“Ah, yeah,” he said, feeling like he’d been caught snooping in something personal. “I wanted to learn more about you, and the werewolf sites didn’t have any kind of ‘facts’ consistent with each other. So I thought I’d focus on wolves.”

“Really?” he asked softly, meeting his gaze. “You wanted to learn about me?”

Rafe skimmed his knuckles down his cheek. “Been thinking about you all day, Seth. Didn’t want to bombard you with questions when I went to meet you.” He tried to think of something more to say, something better than *I lost track of time*. In the end, all he had were more apologies. “I’m really

sorry.”

That melancholy finally started to fade. “You can ask me anything, Rafe.” Seth leaned on the desk as he stared at the computer. “Ask me something now.”

He actually sounded excited, and although his brain had turned to mush, Rafe turned to look at the laptop screen. “Right now I’m learning about the ranking system in a pack.”

And, just like that, his excitement evaporated. “Oh.”

Rafe glanced up. “Not a good place to start?”

“Go ahead and ask.”

Were they going to be this awkward together from now on? He hesitated, but plunged in anyway. “I understand that Alphas lead and betas follow, but I can’t figure out which describes you best. I mean, you were obviously the strongest when you fought that group yesterday, but with me you’ve always been so shy. Submissive, even.”

Seth straightened, wrapping his arms around his slender body. “Technically, I have no rank. I’m lone.”

Fuck. He’d known that. Those things in the bookstore had said it, and they’d *laughed* when they’d pointed it out.

Seth stared at the pictures on the screen, his expression...yearning. “But, if I were in a pack, I’d be an omega wolf.” He pointed to the last image on the screen. “There.”

It was a picture of one wolf being roughed up by two others. It didn’t look like play. It didn’t even look like the pictures of challenges he’d seen on other sites. “Why are they doing that to it?”

“Because he’s deformed. We can’t see it in the photograph, but the others *know*. So he’s forced to eat the scraps of others, and he can only exist on the outskirts of the pack.”

Looking at him, Rafe could see Seth knew exactly how that wolf felt. “Why doesn’t he just leave?”

Seth lifted his hand and trailed his fingers over the other images. Wolves at play, wolves showing affection to each other. “Because they’re his family. He doesn’t know how to exist without them.”

This new world was pissing him off more and more. “But any wolf can challenge the Alpha, right? That one there doesn’t look weak. Why doesn’t he do that?”

“It wouldn’t matter. Even if he somehow found the strength and courage to win a challenge, the others would never follow him. They would attack, and he would either have to wipe out the pack, or die.”

Rafe took his hand, drawing his attention away from the screen. “Have you ever been part of a pack?”

He straightened, staring down at the floor between them. “I was born in one, but they left me shortly after I was birthed. That’s how I ended up in human foster care. I never found out which pack I hailed from. For all I know I’ve dusted them already.”

The more he heard about Seth’s life, the more he wondered if he’d *ever* had a moment of happiness. Rafe began to pull him closer, and Seth stepped away, giving his head a rough shake. As if he were trying to shake off his own feelings.

“I suppose I was lucky. Most Ravagers are killed as soon as their natures are discovered. Maybe they thought they *had* killed me when they threw me away. Although...we turn to ash when it's done properly.” He glanced up. “Maybe they didn't have time? Threw me in a Dumpster because they were ashamed to let the others know what they had birthed?”

Stunned, Rafe couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

Walking to the wall, Seth ran a hand across its smooth surface. His words came faster, with less emotion. “When I was nineteen, a pack in Vancouver let me stay close to them. They knew I was omega, of course. Especially since I wouldn't shift my shape. They were hard on me, but I wanted a family so much. I let them do whatever they wanted to me for months, before one day I got the bright idea to challenge the Alpha. I thought that if I won, they'd have to respect me, Ravager or not.”

Rafe tried to picture it—a small nineteen year old boy, trying to fight for some shred of dignity. “What happened?”

“What do you think happened, Rafe? I'm here, aren't I? I must have won.”

They were worlds apart right now, and every time he tried to bridge the gap, Seth just got farther and farther away. Blowing out a soft breath, Rafe watched him turn to lean back against the wall.

“There's a reason you forgot me, you know,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

He frowned. “I know. I got caught up in—”

“That's not it.”

Figuring they were gearing up for something heavy, he closed the laptop screen. “Why do *you* think I didn’t show up, Seth?”

“You don’t want me anymore.”

Seth must have done a good deal of thinking himself, waiting all alone in that student center. He sounded as if he’d come to terms with this outcome already. “That’s not true.”

“You haven’t kissed me on the mouth since it happened.” He turned his head, his eyes lifeless. “You haven’t even put on a shirt yet today. It may not have been a conscious decision, but you were never going to come and get me.”

Rafe kept a hold on his temper, knowing Seth had learned to expect the worst from people. “You think you know me that well? So well I don’t have to remind you that, when I get out of bed, I pull on a pair of pants and I don’t bother with anything else until I’m about to leave the house?” He left his chair and stood in front of him, towering over the smaller man. “I thought you liked that about me. You certainly stare at my body long enough whenever you get a chance.”

Unease crept into Seth’s face, and he tried to move away.

Rafe grabbed his hands, intertwining their fingers as he pinned them against the wall above Seth’s head. “I fuck up once, and you think it’s over, that I don’t want you anymore?” The answer was in those big eyes and he swore. *He had to fix this.*

Keeping the hands he held pinned to wall, he lowered his head. “How’s this for wanting you?”

Despite his anger, his urgency, Rafe forced himself to be

gentle with his kiss. A soft brush against Seth's mouth, a subtle firming of his lips afterward. Like their first night together, when he thought everything might vanish in a puff of smoke if he played too rough. He didn't let it happen then, and damned if he would now. Just had to be careful, slow.

Using the tip of his tongue, he coaxed Seth's lips to part, and was rewarded with a sigh of pleasure. Relief washed away the anger, the desperation. He sank into the kiss, losing himself, forgetting everything but this.

At first, he didn't notice that Seth was trying to lower his arms. Then the pressure increased, and Rafe reluctantly lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

His breathless answer made Rafe want to kiss him all over again. "I want to put my arms around you."

He looked at their hands, still intertwined. "This doesn't make sense. I shouldn't be able to hold you here."

Seth tried to lower his arms again, and Rafe kept them pinned against the wall without much effort. "Rafe? Why won't you let me go?"

"Why are *you* letting me hold you like this?" He stared down into worried brown eyes and couldn't understand them. "You're a lot stronger than me. I found that out yesterday."

This time Seth put his weight into trying to leave the grip, falling still and dropping his head when he couldn't escape. Submissive. "I don't have any wolf strength in my human form."

It was starting to fade, the idea that the Seth he knew—the Seth he held here now—was the same one who'd effortlessly

pinned him to the floor yesterday. He didn't want it to fade. He needed to be sure of the truth. It was the only way he'd ever get to know the real Seth. "Show me."

His head shot up. "What?"

"Show me the other you. The stronger one."

Shock paled his face. "I c-can't. You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm asking you to shift into a Ravager."

"No!" cried Seth. "I'll hurt you! I won't be able to stop because I'm a *monster*."

He squeezed Seth's hands—to reassure, not to intimidate. "That's the thing, Seth. I'm not so sure that's right."

Seth began to struggle for real, kicking and bucking against him. "You're not Nightkin! I'm a *Ravager*, and you can't comprehend that!"

"You're right." Rafe used his bigger body to hold him still. "I'm only human. But maybe you need an outsider to see you for what you really are, because I don't think you're capable of seeing yourself clearly."

"I *know* what I am!"

Rafe shook his head. "You only know what people *say* you are. They tell you that you're some kind of rabid dog, incapable of decency when you shift into your other form, and that you need to be put down. They've been telling you so long that you believe them."

"Because it's true," he gritted out.

"Is it?" Rafe gentled his body, giving Seth room to breathe. "You said you could define what you were when you

saw yourself in that woman's eyes. But you were *nine years old*, and her sonovabitch husband was beating you. If someone had done that to me, I for *damned* sure would have used whatever power I could to protect myself, and I might not have been able to stop at broken bones. But you did, Seth. Do you even understand that?"

Seth glared up at him. Angry. Defiant. Definitely not listening to him.

So he tried again. "I'm not going to deny that you scared the shit out of me yesterday, and that you still scare me now, but you told me that a Ravager takes what it wants and doesn't care about the consequences. That can't be true, because you stopped when I asked you to." He touched his lips to Seth's ear, whispered his next words. "You stopped."

"You don't know anything."

Frustration egged him to start shouting, but he forced himself to control his tone. "No, I don't. All this is just theory on my part." He lifted his head. "That's where you come in. I need you to prove me right...or to prove me wrong. I have to find out, so I can move forward."

Seth's face hardened with bitterness as he kept his gaze locked on Rafe. Seconds stretched into the silence, feeling like hours.

Then Rafe saw the shift.

The darkness in his pupils bled outward, engulfed the brown of his irises, blotted out the whites of his eyes. He bared his teeth as they grew longer, sharper. His shoulders swelled—filling his suit jacket—and although the changes in

his muscles were subtle, they radiated power. He felt Seth's fingers lengthening, getting rougher, and he glanced up to see his fingernails darken and reshape themselves into deadly talons.

Those hands began to spread apart. Rafe tried to stop the movement, his arms straining with the effort, but Seth continued on as if he weren't even there. When Seth had his arms spread wide, he broke Rafe's hold and grabbed his forearms in one lightning quick movement.

Pushing forward, claws wrapped tight in an iron grip, Seth turned to press Rafe's back into the wall as he pinned his arms close to his body. He growled, staring up at him with obsidian eyes.

"Like what you see, Rafe? Do I still seem sweet and misunderstood, *Rafe?*"

The muscles in Rafe's arms burned as he tried to move them, but the struggle was useless. He was trapped, and now he was about to be proven right or wrong.

Seth's head darted to the left, his gaze focused on Rafe's biceps. He leaned close, a feral smile on his mouth. "Big muscles. I like it when they bulge like that, but I was too timid to ask you to flex for me." As if to prove he was fearless now, that he didn't *need* to ask, he dragged his tongue along the vein that traveled up the crest of the muscle.

Rafe's breathing shallowed, and he tried to control his fear. *Have faith in Seth.*

Seth straightened and looked at his chest, his torso, his thighs. "You're beautiful, Rafe."

When he didn't respond, Seth stood on his toes, his eyes dark, his lips curved in a wolf-like grin. "Aren't you going to ask me how?"

"H-How?" he asked cautiously.

"You're so fucking big, Rafe," he said, settling on his feet and licking one of Rafe's pecs. "And you're so tight, firm. Every muscle perfectly formed, every hair perfectly in place." He glided his tongue across an old scar over Rafe's ribcage—one he'd gotten playing college football. "Even your scars are sexy as hell. What man or wolf wouldn't salivate over you? I could feast on you forever."

Seth had never said things like this to him before, and the words warmed every nerve in his body. The references to *eating* him, however, had him on edge. He tried to move his arms again, and Seth didn't even notice. "Let me go, Seth."

He slowly lifted his head and, still smiling, snapped his jaws at him.

Rafe's body jumped. Controlling his fear was no longer an option. "Seth, stop."

His chuckle was low, gruff. "Do you really believe that's going to work?"

"Please."

Seth nuzzled the valley in the center of his chest. "No."

"Y-You stopped before."

His face darkened as he looked up again. "That was before. When our positions were reversed just now, you wouldn't let me go, not until you got what you wanted. Well, the Ravager is here, Rafe, and now I'm not letting you go until

I get what *I* want.”

He’d made a huge mistake. In the bookstore, Seth had only been trying to protect them both. But this time, *he* was the one who’d made him angry. “What do you want?”

The wolfish grin returned. “You.”

For sex or lunch?

Seth closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “So scared, Rafe.” Opening them, he flicked his tongue over a nipple. “Humans are always saying that fear has an unpleasant smell. ‘The stink of fear.’ But they’re wrong. The scent of fear is sweet.” He swirled his tongue over the nipple, grazed it with razor sharp teeth. “I think that’s why vampires like to scare their food before feeding. The fear sends adrenaline to the blood, which is like a shot of espresso to Nightkin. It’s wonderful.”

Seth moved on to his other nipple, his claws still holding Rafe’s arms to the wall. “Since the bookstore, your fear has been calling to me. The wolf in me wanted so badly to chase you, but I was determined to spare you that. And then you go and summon my pure Nightkin nature. I should thank you.”

Sharp teeth punctured the skin of his pectoral muscle and Rafe cried out. “Seth!”

Seth licked the blood from the small bite.

Panic flooded Rafe’s system. What did he do? *What did he just do?*

Seth glanced up, curious. “This is much more fear than should have been drawn from a little nip. You’re terrified. Why?”

Rafe stared down at his chest, at the thin trickles of blood.

“God, Seth. Did you... Am I going to turn into a...”

The grin on Seth’s bloodstained mouth mocked his terror. “Werewolf?”

He couldn’t do anything but nod.

“Would that be so bad, Rafe?”

For all his talk about Seth not being a monster, the thought of becoming something at all similar to what he was repulsed him. “Tell me.”

His voice hardened. “You really do watch too much fucking TV. Werewolves can’t be *made*, only born.”

Rafe’s body was shaking now, and he fought for some semblance of calm.

Black gaze locked on his face, Seth lowered his head and licked the rest of the blood from his chest. “What do you think of your Ravager? Now that we’ve had a little time to get...acquainted.”

He swallowed the hard lump in his throat. “I-I don’t know what the hell to think.”

It shouldn’t have been possible, but the black in Seth’s eyes went even darker. “Rafe is...” He turned his head. “Rafe is honest. Honest. Now. And before. So...”

Rafe stared down at his brown hair. “Seth?” The claws on his forearms loosened, and he tried to slip free.

Seth snapped to attention, releasing a short bark as his claws locked tight.

He instantly went still. “Okay,” he whispered. “It’s okay.”

His claws gradually gentled, gliding upward, slipping up his forearms, cupping the curves of his biceps. His fingers

curled, and he skimmed his talons over the bare skin of his shoulders, finally gripping his traps.

Rafe's eyes widened as Seth pulled himself up until they were eye-level with each other.

"Big Rafe," he growled softly. Seth took his lower lip between his teeth and tugged—teasing, terrifying—before letting go of it to speak. "I released your arms. You should wrap them around me."

A crazy mix of fear and arousal made it hard to breathe, but he obeyed.

Seth slicked his tongue over Rafe's lips, nipped lightly at his jaw. "Tighter."

He tightened his arms.

Those sharp teeth grazed over his earlobe. "*Tighter.*"

Rafe hesitated, then closed his arms in an embrace that would have crushed a human being.

Seth's head fell back. "Mmm. Strong Rafe." Long fingers fisted into Rafe's hair, and his mouth descended, showing him what real power was all about. Predatory, dominant. Growls rumbled through Rafe's body as the Ravager forced his lips apart, sucking on his tongue with such ferocity that it bordered on pain.

But it wasn't pain, and Rafe moaned as a new kind of passion roared through him, mingling with the fear, almost overwhelming it.

Reaching behind himself, Seth gripped Rafe's wrists. Slowly, those claws spread his arms apart, and Seth slid down the front of his body until he was on the floor again. He

pressed a long, lingering kiss to his chest and stepped back. Scowling down at himself, he reached into the collar of his dress shirt with one of his claws and used it to rip it open all the way down the middle. He tore at the jacket, reduced his tie to shreds. Frustration twisted his expression and he growled his displeasure, his hands moving faster.

Those razor sharp talons, so close to his skin... "S-Seth. Remember your promise."

His head jerked up, tilted to the side. He growled again, but his claws stopped moving. "Clothes... uncomfortable... wolf..."

Rafe nodded. "A-All right." With trembling hands he reached out and took the tattered clothing off his body. He knelt on the floor, removing Seth's shoes, unbuckling his belt, undoing the catch in his slacks. Gingerly, he worked the pants down his legs, sliding them off his feet. "Better?"

Some of the hardness left his face, and he lowered his head, bumping Rafe's cheek with his nose. "Sweet Rafe."

Rafe stared into those midnight eyes a long moment, unsure what to make of this whole, insane situation. "You're welcome, Seth," he said finally, rising to his feet.

A pair of rough hands clamped onto his shoulders and slammed him back to his knees. "Rafe can't leave," he snapped, his small chest heaving with agitation.

Stunned by the change in mood, Rafe tried to push upward and found himself locked to the floor.

Sharp claws bit into his skin. "Stay!"

Rafe stared up at him in shock. A few seconds ago Seth

had been almost affectionate, and now he looked ready to kill. Something had to have set him off, but what?

Swallowing hard, he forced himself to concentrate. Right now, Seth's determination seemed ruthless, but there was also desperation there. The same yearning that had been clinging to him all day. Maybe... Maybe it was as basic as not wanting to be alone. "I'm not leaving. I'm just trying to stand."

Seth brought his face close, as savage as ever. "I want you, and I take what I want."

"Who are you trying to convince, Seth?" His heart thudded hard against his ribcage, but he fought through the fear. "Me? Or yourself?"

His black eyes narrowed as he bared his teeth. None too gently, he grabbed Rafe's head and thrust him downward.

Gritting his teeth, Rafe instinctively fought to stay upright, but Seth wasn't having it. Inside half a second he was on his hands and knees, his body shaking with exertion as he stared right at Seth's erection. Like the rest of him, it hadn't changed all that much. Just enough to make it seem powerful and unfamiliar.

"Now."

Flashes of the bookstore—the blood, the screaming—threatened to break him. *No*, he told himself. *Seth wouldn't*—

Hard to think, to even finish that sentence. His pulse was pounding in his ears. His heart was beating fast enough to do some real damage. His vision was starting to blur, darken. Then...

Clarity. Burning bright in his mind like a beacon.

It all came down to a choice—fight or submit—and when Seth came out of this, Rafe didn't want him to hate himself even more than he already did. If this really was about loneliness, then it was easy enough to patch that hole for a few minutes.

Making his choice, he leaned forward to take Seth's hard, hot cock into his mouth.

Even this taste had changed. Lush. Wild.

Rafe slid his hands to the backs of Seth's ankles, up his tight calves, his thighs, before cupping the rounded curve of his ass. He stroked his dick with his mouth, using his tongue to give special attention to the uncut head.

Seth buried his talons in Rafe's hair, yanking him down to the base of his cock. "More. Harder." Using his greater strength, he showed him just how Ravager Seth liked it.

Rafe obeyed. The force of Seth's pelvis hurt as it rocked into his face, but not enough to break or bruise. Not enough to stop his own pleasure from rising.

Seth had never been one to make much noise in the heat of passion. Now a string of loud, primal sounds rumbled out of him, and Rafe began to lose himself in them. He'd always been big, strong. Because of that, he'd always had to be careful with his lovers, especially Seth. But here, now, Seth was a lot stronger. In a way the knowledge was liberating.

The cock in his mouth swelled, and he knew what was coming. Picking up the pace, he worshiped the flesh with lips and mouth and tongue.

A pair of claws slipped under his arms, and suddenly he

was rising into the air. Rafe had just enough time to utter an inarticulate sound of protest before Seth crushed their mouths together. He felt like he was being devoured, only now he couldn't remember why that might be a bad thing.

Rafe clumsily set his feet on the floor and stood, rising to an angle that allowed him to better enjoy this kiss. Then Seth surprised him again—half shoving, half tossing him back against the wall.

The Ravager took a few deep breaths and threw himself into Rafe. Kissing his chest, nipping, licking. His tongue swept over the tender part of skin he'd bitten earlier, soothing the ache Rafe had forgotten was even there.

Closing his eyes, he caressed Seth's overdeveloped shoulders. Strange, powerful, surprisingly erotic.

If this was what being ravaged felt like, he could use a little more of it.

Seth's claws skimmed down his ribs, his waist. He gripped Rafe's hips and lifted him into the air to nuzzle his abs.

No one, but *no one*, ever picked him up. Not since he was a kid. He pressed his palms flat against the wall to keep his balance, staring down at Seth in awe.

The feat of strength didn't seem to impress Seth. He only lapped at Rafe's abdominal muscles, rubbed his cheek against the hair there. Hoisting him higher, he flicked his tongue into the recess of his navel. Then higher once again, this time to nuzzle his crotch.

The growing bulge in his jeans was starting to get painful. Seth didn't make things any easier, sniffing him there and

soaking the denim with his tongue.

“Fuck,” whispered Rafe, knowing he was about to come in his pants—something he hadn’t done since junior high.

Seth loosened his hold, letting him to slide to the floor. Tucking the claws of one hand into the waistband of his jeans, he pulled Rafe away from the wall.

“Wh-What are we doing, Seth?” He dug his heels into the carpet, couldn’t even slow him down.

“Bed. Humans like to fuck on beds.”

The fierce, husky statement jarred him into remembering that they weren’t even from the same species. He tried to ignore the disquieting idea, to hang on to his arousal.

Seth dragged him to the bed and used his talons to rip open the front of his jeans.

“*Shit, Seth!*” he yelled, jumping back. “You could’ve warned me!”

He pointed to Rafe’s pants. “Off.”

“Fucking-A,” he muttered, pushing his jeans from his hips, down his thick thighs, and kicking them off. His cock sprang free with enough force to slap his stomach.

Didn’t look like hanging on to his arousal was going to be a problem. Rafe wondered how the hell he could be this scared and turned on at the same time.

Seth’s gaze locked onto his pole, a soft growl escaping from his parted lips. He walked forward, reaching out with those deadly claws.

Rafe stumbled backward, his faith in Seth disintegrating.

Moving almost too fast for his eyes to catch, Seth closed

the distance between them and hooked an arm under his back, keeping his ass from hitting the floor.

“So much fun to chase you, Rafe.”

Rafe was still leaning backward, which meant most of his weight was resting on Seth’s arm. “Th-Thanks for catching me.”

He grinned, trailing the tips of his claws down Rafe’s chest, the center line of his abs. The scrape of talons dipped down into his pubic hair, all the way to—

“Seth...”

Gently, he closed long fingers around his cock, sliding along its length. “You think I’ve never fucked a human before, Rafe? You think I don’t know how delicate you are?”

His cock throbbed, and his mind began to go fuzzy. “You’ve had sex with a human, in this form, before?”

Seth’s hand paused. “Three. Once with each.” He glanced away. “Always just once.”

He didn’t want to ask. He *shouldn’t* ask. But he did. “Did you hurt any of them?”

“I hurt *everyone!*” His head snapped up, his eyes beyond black. “*Seth is Ravager.*”

How could anyone, human or not, carry that much pain? Slowly, cautiously, he straightened. Then, because he couldn’t think of anything else to do, he dropped a short, soft kiss onto Seth’s mouth.

Staring up at him, Seth touched his own lips. “Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

Those jet-black eyes watched him a long moment before

he growled darkly and shoved him toward the bed.

Rafe went flying forward, the wind knocking out of his lungs when the top half of his body collided with the mattress and the rest of him hit the floor. He started to get up, only to be driven back down, his chest flat against the bed.

“I want you here.”

Rafe braced his hands on the mattress and tried to push himself up. “Seth, what’re you—”

Those powerful claws slid to his upper arms, easily pinning them flat. The smooth skin of Seth’s chest pressed against his back as warm breath caressed his ear. “You have had your way with me for three months. This time, I will have you *exactly* how I want, and there will be no argument. Understand?”

The cotton comforter rubbed against his cheek as he nodded.

Seth licked his ear. “Good Rafe.” He shifted his weight, resting on top of Rafe’s back. “So big. So broad.” He kissed his way across the expanse, grazed his teeth over his shoulder blades. Seth rose off of him and there was...nothing.

Rafe started to turn his head, and Seth twisted it away again. “No looking, Rafe.”

Not being able to see what Seth was doing scared the hell out of him, but he didn’t dare disobey. He gasped as sharp talons pricked the nape of his neck, held his breath as they skimmed down his spine. Between his shoulder blades, down to the small of his back, up the curve of his ass.

The claws lifted away and again there was nothing.

Rafe wanted to turn, *needed* to turn, but somehow kept himself still.

A stream of cool air whispered across the small of his back, making him shiver. It skated behind his knees, over his calves.

Something warm and wet traced the muscles in the backs of his thighs. Seth's tongue, and damned if it didn't feel good.

His body jumped when he felt claws grazing over his right buttock; his eyes drifted shut when he felt a hot tongue on the left. The difference in sensations, it was driving him crazy. Seth's palm flattened against him, massaged him. His mouth left the sensitized skin, and both hands were on him now, spreading his cheeks apart. A tongue darted inside, teased his hole all too briefly before disappearing again.

Rafe twisted his hands into the comforter, trying to keep control of himself.

All hope of control deserted him when Seth spread his thighs and licked his balls. He groaned—loud, long—and the sound only intensified when Seth drew them into his mouth.

Without thinking, Rafe began to arch his body and, still sucking on him, Seth slapped a hand against the small of his back, reminding him not to move.

Rafe eased himself back onto the mattress and let Seth torture him. That demanding mouth had him balling his hands into fists. Sucking. Licking. He felt the pressure building, the flare of desire, the promise of release.

With a slurp and a pop, the mouth pulled away.

"Ah, Seth," he said, his voice muffled by the comforter.

“You’re killin’ me.”

Seth’s hands glided up his thighs, grasped his hips, and hiked him into the air.

“What the fuck!” Rafe braced his forearms and elbows on the mattress to keep it from smothering him. “What the fuck!”

“Rafe can look,” he murmured, sliding his arm under Rafe’s lower abdomen and easily supporting him there. “To relax.”

He whipped his head around, the sight of himself being held this way surreal.

With his free hand, Seth caressed the muscles in his ass before sliding underneath to take his cock. Long, rough fingers pumped it, milking a few drops of pre-cum into his palm. Eyes locked on Rafe, he smeared it over his own stiff dick, which was also leaking its pleasure. “Turn your head away now,” he told him, his voice deceptively gentle.

At first he couldn’t get his neck to move, but after a few, taut seconds he was staring down at the comforter.

Seth gripped his hips with both hands and lowered them to a height he liked, which still left Rafe with his knees dangling above the floor. He felt the slick head of Seth’s cock pressing against him and couldn’t stop himself from tensing.

“Accept me, Rafe.”

Harsh. Demanding. But underneath all of that was something a lot more simple.

A plea.

Rafe closed his eyes and forced the tension from his body.

Seth rubbed against his opening, relaxing him more. Just

when it started to feel playful, the teasing cock slid into him with one hard, smooth stroke.

Pain and surprise made him cry out, made his body jolt. His fingers dug deep into the mattress, his jaw clenching as he tried to get past the hard burn, tried to brace himself for another wrenching thrust.

But the man inside him held still, letting him adjust to the sensation of being filled so suddenly. Slowly, slowly, it started to feel good.

“Rafe is...so tight.”

And Seth was thick, so engorged that Rafe could feel his cock pulsing with every heartbeat. His own pole soon throbbed with the same rhythm, as if his body recognized Seth’s superiority and bowed to it.

Seth pulled back, taking his time, until only the head of his cock remained inside. It left Rafe feeling empty, needy, and totally at his mercy. The claws holding his hips in the air clamped tight, and Seth slammed into him with enough force to rattle every bone in his body. This time there was no time to adjust, no time to breathe. Just one hard thrust after another. The pace was frenzied, animalistic, ravenous.

Seth growled. Rafe groaned.

Fuck, this was too much.

Unable to move in the awkward position, Rafe couldn’t do anything but let it wrack his body. Nothing but a tangled mass of nerves now, writhing and needing relief. No choice but to let himself go and trust in Seth because he had all the control.

He came when Seth came. Ecstasy ripped through him,

twisting everything inside as his muscles tensed so hard he was sure he would snap in two. He felt himself shoot his load, but was more aware of Seth, of the warmth radiating from Seth's body. His chest dropped to the mattress, his knees hit the floor. As he gasped for air, he thought...

He thought he heard wolves howling in the distance.

One by one, his senses came back to him. The smell of cooling sweat, the sound of his own heavy breathing, the too bright sunlight as it streamed through the balcony window. The air was so thick with sex that he could taste it on his tongue.

And Seth, still inside of him, lying forward on top of him as he licked the sweat off his back, kissed his hot skin, nipped at his shaking muscles.

"Seth," he whispered.

In one quick movement, he pulled out of Rafe's body and flipped him over. Before he'd even had time to sink to the carpet, Seth had straddled his thighs. "Rafe," he murmured, dropping kisses on his chest and his shoulders.

There was something different about his face. He still looked every bit the Ravager, but there seemed to be less rage there. Less pain. "Feelin' good?"

His head shot up. "I want more."

Rafe's eyes widened. "More?"

Seth ran his claws over the length of his shoulders. "You're spent. I'm not. I want more, again, and again, and again." His head darted downward, to the left, the right. Agitated, confused. "But Rafe is... Rafe is..."

His arm felt heavy as he lifted it, touching Seth's face with his fingers to draw his attention. "What is Rafe?"

Dark, intent eyes stared at him. The agitation faded, and Seth kissed the underside of his jaw, his adam's apple. "Rafe is tired." Sliding from his lap, he slipped his arms underneath his body and scooped him up, cradling him close as he stood.

In a week full of bizarre occurrences, this one might very well top them all. It just wasn't right, a two hundred fifty pound man being carried this way. Especially by someone half his size.

Seth placed him on the bed, pulled the covers over his body, and crawled in after him.

Rafe stared up at the ceiling, using this moment of peace to gather his bearings. Complete domination was something he never thought he'd experience. His strength and size had always been a shield against it on the street, in his pool hall, in bed. Today he'd found out that it had all been an illusion. He'd been fucked like an animal, by someone who may *be* more animal than human. It was unnerving to know Seth could control him so effortlessly, and he'd never felt so vulnerable in his life.

It was also the best damned orgasm he'd ever had.

He fingered the comforter and realized Seth had tucked him in. He was no expert, but that didn't seem like something a monster would do.

Turning his head, he frowned when he saw Seth naked and curled away from him at the edge of the bed, with no blanket to keep him warm. He'd reverted back to his human form,

delicate shivers coursing through his small body.

Once. Always just once.

Those other people, did they run screaming after being fucked by his Ravager side? Rafe didn't know what the hell he wanted to do, but it wasn't that. So he reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Seth curled himself tighter.

He sat up, turned him over. Those brown eyes were anxious, cautious, longing. Rafe took hold of the comforter and tugged it over his body.

Seth glanced down at the blanket, then back at him, his face lighting up. He jumped to his knees, falling against him as he lapped at his cheek.

Startled, Rafe jerked his head away.

All the joy...just fell out of him. Rafe's chest tightened, wishing he could control his reflexes better.

Seth started to pull away, and he couldn't let it go at that. Without saying a word, Rafe wrapped him in an embrace and drew him close. He was tired of apologizing, and he was sure Seth was tired of hearing it. Holding him was all Rafe had left.

When the body in his arms began to lose its tension, he eased them onto the mattress. Seth pillowed his head just under his chest, and Rafe pulled the covers up again, to make sure that Seth felt safe and warm. It must have worked, because in seconds he was fast asleep.

Stroking his brown hair, he wondered for the thousandth time how they were going to get through this. They were so different. Two different beings. Two different worlds.

LONE

Two different souls.

He looked down at Seth and snatched his hand away, realizing he'd been petting him like some kind of dog.

Seth whimpered. Still half asleep, he slid up Rafe's body, searching out the hand. "Don't stop. I like that."

He hesitated, returned his hand to his hair. Seth settled down immediately, at peace in sleep once again. Rafe wasn't feeling the same tranquility.

Accept me, Rafe.

He wanted to. He wanted to be open minded enough and strong enough to make this work. And he was determined to try. But sometimes trying wasn't enough.

What if they were just too different?

CHAPTER 7

Seth shoved his clothes into the suitcase he'd set on the table, his body shaking as he tried to keep quiet. Flashes of Rafe asking him to stop, of Rafe crying out, of Rafe being subjugated to his every desire played through his mind and body over and over. The dark side of him begged him to shift, to wake up the human and relive this afternoon.

Bad Seth. Bad Seth. Bad Seth!

How could he have unleashed his pure Nightkin nature?
On *Rafe*?

Rafe, who'd always done his best to protect him.

Rafe, who'd been kind.

Seth had dominated and humiliated the only man who'd

ever been good to him.

And he wanted to do it again.

He snatched his suits from the closet and threw them into the case. Going back to Iowa was out of the question. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from Rafe. Arizona maybe. Or Maine.

"Little early to be packing, isn't it? Being that we're not leaving till Sunday."

His hands stilled and he glanced at the bed as Rafe sat up. The muscles in the human's tan, naked body worked with the movement, every line and curve highlighted by the setting sun. His black hair fell over his forehead, accenting his sapphire eyes. The wolf inside wanted to tear free.

More.

Seth went to the dresser and pulled out the rest of his clothes. "You're leaving on Sunday. I'm going now. Someplace far away from you."

His face sober, Rafe stood and crossed to the table. "Just like that, huh?"

"Yes!" yelled Seth, the sound caught between a shout and a growl. Rafe jumped back, and it killed him to see it. To see Rafe, so big and strong, cower from him that way. "It's what you want."

"Is it what you want?"

Seth dumped his clothes into the suitcase. He hadn't known how much he'd wanted Rafe to deny it until just now. "Yes."

"Liar. A few hours ago you were practically begging me

to... What was the word? Oh, yeah. *Stay.*”

He stiffened, accosted by more memories. “I hurt you. I *bit* you.”

Rafe ran a hand over the fresh mark on his chest. “I’ve seen you in action, Seth. You could have taken the whole damned muscle out of me if you’d wanted. Now that I’m calmer, it feels more like a love bite.”

A love bite? Disquieted by the words, Seth scratched himself behind his ear, trying to sort it out. He caught the cautious consideration in Rafe’s expression and slammed the suitcase shut. “It’s already started, hasn’t it? Everything I do, every move I make...you’re comparing it to a wolf, or a dog, aren’t you? Do you feel like you’ve been sleeping with a dirty little animal all this time?”

Rafe grabbed his shoulders and shoved him into a chair. “Sit down, Seth.”

Black rage rose up in him and he shot to his feet, even as he held the wolf at bay. “Did you just tell me to *sit*?”

He thrust Seth back into the chair. “Yes I did.”

Fear saturated the air, but Rafe’s face was grim, determined. What was going on? Unsure, and needing to know, Seth did as he was told.

Rafe paced the open area in front of him, looking like a wolf on the prowl. “You do a lot of weird damned things, Seth. Half the time you’re like some puppy left out in the rain, and the other half you’re like a hungry, wild wolf. The first I guess I’ve always seen, but I didn’t even *know* about the second until yesterday. So yes, I’ve been comparing you to

both animals quite a bit, and it's been freaking me out."

Anger and bitterness nearly choked him. "You lied to me. You promised you would tell me when you wanted me to leave."

He whirled around. "*Shut up!*"

Seth jumped and shut his mouth, stunned by his fury.

"I have never lied to you, but you've been lying to me since I fucking *met* you, so you don't *get* to be self-righteous. *Do you hear me?*"

He shrank back, nodded.

Rafe swept his hand through the air between them. "And what is this? Why do you act so timid and scared when we both know you can kick my ass any time you want? One second you're shy, the next savage, the next you're on a stage in front of hundreds of people talking about math. Who the fuck *are* you, Seth?"

Rafe was mad. *The Alpha was mad.* Instinct hunched his shoulders, bowed his head. He tugged on his hair as he fought back a whimper. "S-Sorry."

"Stop that." Rafe grasped his wrist and untangled his fingers from his hair. "And spell it out for me."

The gentle touch. The soft, gruff tone. Rafe was kind, and some of the panic eased out of him as he remembered that. "I...can't."

"Try."

He stared down at his lap. Nightkin nature was so complex, so intimate. How could he explain it to a human?

"Fuck, Seth." Rafe straightened and walked away from

him. "Is it even worth it?"

Something cracked inside of him. "I'm... I'm not worth it?"

Rafe paused, ran a hand through his hair as he blew out a slow, measured breath. "Is that what I said?" He turned, his blue eyes sparked with fire and...pain. "Is it?"

Seth wanted to run from this. Or attack. Something. He didn't know what was happening, but he felt cornered. "No."

He began to pace again. "I'm wondering if *this*, whatever you and I have between us, is worth it. I don't even know you, Seth. And I'm not just talking about you being a werewolf. That's a pretty big fucking thing to keep secret, but I guess I understand why you did it."

Silence fell. Seconds, minutes. When Seth couldn't take it anymore, he ventured the question. "Then what?"

Rafe sat heavily on the bed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he stared down at the floor. "You never talked about your past. Nothing. I don't blame you, because yours is horrific. But you never talk about what you want, what you need, what you love. I know you like pool, I know you like math. I didn't know you were famous, and I didn't know you were published all over the world. This past week has made me realize that you never had any intention of sharing your life with me. That you never trusted me enough to let me in."

Some unnamable emotion rose up inside of him. Didn't Rafe know that whatever life Seth had, *he* was the center of it? "Rafe—"

"I said I loved you, and I meant that."

He stifled another whimper when he realized Rafe was speaking in *past tense*, and it made him forget that he'd intended to sneak away.

"Our entire relationship has been nothing more than one deep, dark secret. I was prepared to stick, to try and see if any of what we had was real. Except now, after a day and a half, you're ready to cut and run. And I'm betting you weren't going to leave a note." Rafe glanced up, the fire gone from his eyes. "So I'm asking you, is it even worth it? Or should I just let you go?"

The storm of emotions howled through him so violently that he couldn't make sense of them. He needed help. "I-I don't understand. Could you explain it to me?"

Rafe shook his head. "No, Seth. Not this time."

He'd been alone thirty-two years, but he'd never felt it so much as he did now. "Please, I need you to explain. Like you always do."

Rafe closed his eyes, took a breath, and rose to his feet. "I need you to give me something."

Something? Why couldn't he just *say* it? He was usually so straightforward when explaining things. "What? Whatever it is, I'll give it to you."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Rafe..." *What did he need?* He fought the urge to pull at his hair as he desperately tried to figure it out. "Help me."

For a while he just stood there, looking down at him. Then, finally, he closed the distance between them and knelt on the

floor, placing warm hands over his thighs. “Do I hurt you, Seth?”

“No,” he answered immediately, palming his own chest. “You’ve never once hurt me.”

A soft sigh escaped him. “I’m not talking about physical pain. Have I ever hurt you?”

He frowned and shook his head.

“So yesterday when you told me you were a Ravager, and later that night I pulled away from your kiss...that didn’t hurt at all?”

“I deserved—”

Rafe gripped his jaw. “We’re not talking about what you think you deserve. All I want to know is whether it hurt you.”

“Y-Yes.”

He released him. “I hurt you a lot? Especially since the bookstore?”

“Yes,” whispered Seth.

“Do I give you pleasure?”

A smile touched his lips. “Yes.”

“Even after I found out what you were?”

Heated memories from a few hours ago simmered through him. And afterward, Rafe had held him, stroked his hair. “Yes.”

The hands on his thighs tightened. “Now, close your eyes.” Seth closed his eyes.

“Think about the pleasure and the pain. All of it. And tell me which feeling is stronger.”

He sat quiet, trying to puzzle it all out. The knot inside him

was difficult to unravel, but when he did, he opened his eyes. “More pleasure, Rafe.”

Rafe’s chest hitched. “Then...” In a burst of motion, he stood and flipped the suitcase over, scattering a flurry of clothes onto the floor. “Then don’t leave. Try to make this work. I know I’ve fucked up a lot, and I know I’ll fuck up more before things are settled. But stay with me and try.”

When he only stared up at him, Rafe shook his head and walked away. Wings of sunlight danced over his back, and Seth watched the pattern, entranced, realizing with a start that he wanted him to stay close. “How?”

He turned, bathed in orange sunshine; still naked, still beautiful. “I’m willing to meet you halfway. Hell, I’ll meet you *most* of the way. All I’m asking is for you to take one step toward me. Just one.”

Seth leapt from the chair and threw himself forward, wrapping his arms tight around Rafe’s body.

Chuckling, Rafe stroked his back. “That’s not what I meant. But it’s a start.”

A start. Yes, he wanted a start. He would learn, and whatever it was that Rafe needed, Seth would give it to him.

* * *

Seth pulled on a pair of khaki slacks and a sage green sweater. The natural fibers of both felt good against his skin. Not many werewolves enjoyed synthetic materials. It was comforting to know that, in this small way, he wasn’t so different. While his Ravager form could barely tolerate any

clothing at all, his human form needed the coverings.

Not like Rafe, who was completely comfortable with his body.

He glanced up, taking in the sight of him as he leaned against the frame of the open balcony window. Even now, Rafe only wore a pair of dark blue jeans. Hunger arose as Seth's gaze traveled upward from his bare feet, to the denim hugging his calves, his thighs, his hips. One of his thumbs hooked into a belt loop as he stared out at the cityscape, and his naked torso called Seth forward, step by step.

The word left him on a soft, husky breath. "Rafe."

He didn't turn his head. "It really is a nice-looking city, isn't it?"

Reluctantly, he looked out at the skyline, at the Capitol Building in the distance. "It is."

"Up here, it just seems like a quiet Saturday morning. Hard to believe that werewolves, vampires, and warlocks are walking around down there."

Seth's gaze darted up, but Rafe was still staring at the city, his face expressionless. "Nightkin can be found almost anywhere."

"In Brier?"

He'd never seen Rafe so subdued. "I think I'm the only Nightkin in Brier."

"You can tell? Just by looking at a person?"

"Yes." He placed a hand on Rafe's wrist, but the big man didn't move, didn't acknowledge the touch in any way. "I can sense them." He ran his hand up the hard cords of his forearm,

to the large muscles of his triceps. "And I can smell them." The skin of his palm tingled as he glided it up to Rafe's shoulder. Caught in a moment of quiet exploration, he lingered a while, before sliding his fingers behind. Seth paused when he felt some sort of bandage there, and he started to peel it off. Was this because of yesterday? Had he hurt Rafe so badly?

"I wouldn't do that. Not unless you want me in a foul mood for the rest of the day."

Seth stopped, smoothing the edge back into place as he stood on his toes. He took a sniff at it and glanced up in surprise. "A nicotine patch?"

"Yep."

He frowned, trying to remember the last time he'd seen Rafe with a cigarette. "When did you quit smoking?"

"Monday night."

The night Shining Moon attacked him. "You quit because of me?"

"Turns out nearly losing you was just the kick in the ass I needed."

Rafe still hadn't met his gaze. It was beginning to worry him. "If you hadn't gone out to get the cigarettes, you might have gotten hurt. Everything that came down on us was my fault."

His mouth crooked. "One of us is always trying to take the blame from the other, but maybe nobody was at fault. Did you ever think about that? Maybe we just had a shitty week."

No one had ever absolved him of anything before. It felt strange, knowing Rafe didn't blame him for all the fear, all the

stress. Seth pressed a kiss to his arm. "We could make sure the week ends on a better note. We don't leave for Iowa until tomorrow, so why don't we go out today? Third time's a charm?"

Rafe finally turned his head and looked at him; a faint, wry smile on his mouth. "Is there any place in this city where a pack of angry strangers won't try to kill us?"

He grinned. "We can go to a college or university campus. Those are considered neutral territory, and Nightkin aren't allowed to fight on them."

His eyebrows drew together. "Why's that?"

"A covenant, created long ago. So Nightkin who might be from warring factions can get an education without worrying about attack and exposure. Applies to the other magical beings, as well."

"Other magical beings?" Rafe held up a hand when Seth started to answer. "Never mind. I'm not ready to hear that yet."

So much had happened this week. It would overwhelm anyone. "All right."

"Are churches sacred, too?"

"It's hard to consider something sacred when it's been trying to wipe you out since the dawn of time."

Rafe chuckled, looking out at the city again. "Don't let my grandmother hear you say that. It would break her heart."

Seth moved in front of him, slipping his arms around his waist. "So? Would you like to try?"

A slow, indecipherable smile curved his lips. But before he

could say anything, the telephone rang.

Rafe didn't seem at all pressed to answer it, and Seth was tempted to let it ring. Then his curiosity got the better of him, and he left to pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Seth?"

"Yes, it is. How may I help you?"

"My my, what a polite Ravager you are."

Seth stiffened, lowered his voice. "Who is this?"

"First introductions should never be made over the phone. Come to the hotel courtyard and we'll meet properly."

"No."

"Is that an invitation to come up to your room, then?"

He looked at Rafe, leaning forward on the balcony railing. "Wh-When?"

"Now, if you please."

"I'm on my way."

The voice on the other end held a note of amusement. "Good boy."

The line went dead and Seth returned the receiver to its cradle. Someone had found him. How? Unlikely they'd tracked him from the pool hall or the bookstore. It was nearly impossible to accomplish that in a city, even for werewolves. Cabs, subways—it was easy to lose a scent. And only his first name had been mentioned in either skirmish. Who waited for him downstairs?

"Who was that?"

Seth stared at Rafe's broad back. He was strong, certainly stronger than the average human, but now an unknown entity

had tracked them down. If he didn't go and face it, Rafe could get hurt. Or killed.

He searched out a pair of loafers and tugged them onto his feet. "Evan Marshalls, from Georgetown University. Apparently I forgot to sign some papers regarding teaching credit and payment, and they need to be taken care of before we leave." He stood and walked toward the door. Unsure. Anxious. "It shouldn't take long."

"Seth."

He opened the door and turned. Rafe was still leaning on the balcony railing, but the muscles in his back had gone rigid. "Yes?"

"You coming back?"

His hand tightened on the doorknob, and he knew that whatever was waiting downstairs—whether it was vampires, werewolves, or the entire Nightkin Nation—he would reduce each and every one of them to ash in order to get back to Rafe. "Yes, Rafe. I promise."

Rafe didn't say anything, and Seth left to make a proper introduction.

The courtyard was simple, quiet. A stretch of manicured grass, a few cherry blossom trees, two benches to enjoy the view. A human couple sat on a bench at the opposite end from him, but otherwise it appeared empty.

His Nightkin senses told him it was not empty.

"Come out, vampire," he said in a low voice only it would hear.

A power unlike any he'd felt before washed through the

courtyard, and the owner of the amused voice he'd heard on the phone walked out from behind a tree. "That's no way to greet kin."

He was tall—as tall as Rafe—with black hair and eyes like coal. The crimson dress shirt and black corduroy slacks he wore accented the sleek, powerful body beneath. A human might think he was between twenty-five and twenty-seven, but Seth knew the being approaching him was much, much older.

Seth watched him with the wary eyes of a wolf. "Your scent is familiar, but you don't smell like someone whose blood I've spilled."

The vampire grinned. "I've always admired the sense of smell your kind possesses. Envied, even."

Right now, every sense he had was focused on this person. If he needed to shift, this time there would be no hesitation, no fighting it. He *would* get back to Rafe. "Who are you?"

"Forgive me." He held out his hand. "My name is Dorian. You know my scent from the pool hall."

Seth hesitated, reached out to shake it. "That was you?"

"Yes." Dorian dragged him close and lowered his head to speak into his ear. "Although if I had known you were a Ravager, I'd never have given you my table. I would have helped those wolves and, believe me, with my assistance they would have succeeded in tearing you apart."

Seth snatched his hand away. "Why are you here?"

Dorian slid his hands into his pockets, seemingly easygoing again. "Existential questions should never be asked on Saturdays." A faint, chilling smile curved the corners of his

mouth. "Has your human asked you such questions yet? Or has his brain imploded from the strain? If you don't want to answer, I suppose I could just go up and ask him myself."

Growling, Seth grabbed him by the shirt. "You stay away from him!"

"Temper, temper, little puppy." Still smiling, Dorian patted his head. "The fact is, Rafe and I are already fast friends."

Rafe? Friends with a vampire? What was their relation...

Seth shook off the hand resting on his head. "No," he said, stepping back. "He would have told me."

"Like you told him you were a werewolf? A *Ravager* werewolf, no less?"

The old vampires were fond of mind games. Seth struggled to keep his head clear, to stay prepared for the physical attack. "How?"

"He came by Trick Shot, Wednesday morning. Wanted answers about what happened to you." Dorian smoothed the wrinkles from his shirt. "I must say I was surprised to see him. Most humans would have let the incident slip from memory. I couldn't decide whether to be disgusted by his ignorance or amused by his arrogance."

Without thinking, Seth shoved the vampire backward. "You don't know anything about him!" He clenched his fists, thinking about the man waiting in their hotel room. "Rafe is brave, and noble, and good, and kind."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Yes, I got a similar impression the moment he spoke. Interesting, that one." Dorian glanced toward the hotel. "He asked about the intercom at Trick Shot,

and was startled by the lack of blood within. It's rare for a human to question Nightkin illusions. Their minds aren't usually attuned to magic."

Dorian seemed to remember himself, smiling at Seth. "And he cared for you so much that I couldn't understand how the man he spoke of could possibly have been a Ravager. Of course, I had no choice but to follow him to you. To take a look at you for myself."

Seth fell still, carefully following the vampire's every move. "You were the one who sent Harvest Moon to the bookstore."

"A smart puppy, aren't you?"

"Why?"

"I had to be sure, didn't I? I knew you were a werewolf on sight, but the only way to spot a *Ravager* is when he's in shifted form."

Clever. Dangerous. "The vampire there? He was yours?"

He grinned. "Yes and no. Not from my clan, obviously. Couldn't put one of my own in that sort of danger. But he was willing enough to do my bidding." The smile faded as suddenly as it appeared. "He was very upset that you made him lick your human."

"I don't care."

His gaze went distant. "No, I don't suppose you would." Focusing on Seth again, Dorian circled around him. "Seth Anderson, respected mathematician. Transferred three times in college, then gave up and earned your degrees through correspondence. Were you getting attacked every time you

walked off campus?” He didn’t wait for Seth to answer. “Published in every math journal worth being in, but no photos are ever available. A very good teacher, too. I hear people from all over the world tried to procure one of the limited spaces available for your lectures at Georgetown this week.”

Seth’s breathing shallowed, and he began to wonder if he would be able to keep his promise to Rafe. “You know my full name?”

He nodded. “I also know that you’ve been living in Brier, Iowa for three months. I found that hilarious, by the way. A wolf hiding in a brier patch.” He chuckled. Seth didn’t join in. “I know that your students adore you, and so does your human. Still no driver’s license, though. Why is that? Didn’t want to take a picture?”

Seth couldn’t answer.

Dorian shrugged. “I also pulled your Council file. Wasn’t hard to match you, even without the pictures. You have a distinctive description, RW3228. Small and helpless in your human form, so no one ever thinks you’re a threat. But you’ve cut a swath of death and destruction all over the continent, haven’t you? And you’ve killed seventy-two Hunters. That’s twenty-seven more than any Ravager in history.”

RW3228. It was what the Hunters called him. If this man had access to his file, he was even more powerful than Seth had feared. No choice but to kill him, no choice but to—

Dorian clucked his tongue. “Come now, Seth.” He held up his hand. “Do you really think you can take me? Even as a

Ravager?”

Seth stared at the ring on Dorian’s little finger. A pewter band with a diamond cut, blood red garnet in its center. “You’re of the Searing Blood Clan,” he whispered.

“Yes, and do you know what that means?”

The bleakness of this situation began to creep in. “You’re an Ancient. Your blood is so powerful that you can no longer convert humans because it would kill them, and your age has given you substantial physical strength. You’ve survived this long, so your fighting skills must be formidable, as well.”

“Very good. Now, I want no more thoughts about shifting.”

A low growl rumbled out of him. “I’ve killed Ancients before.”

“Trust me, Seth. You have never encountered a being like me.”

Rafe. He had to get back to Rafe. “What do you want?”

Dorian leaned back against a tree, unconcerned as he faced a Ravager alone. “At the moment I want to tell you a story.”

His eyebrows drew together. “A story?”

“Will you listen?”

It was a trap, it had to be. But Seth had no choice but to listen. “What is it about?”

Dorian smiled and, for the first time, the gesture seemed warm. “It’s about a girl. She was beautiful, brilliant, and so very shy. Her name was Nadia, and she was a Ravager vampire.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you know there were such things, Seth? Did you know that every

Nightkin race has its own form of Ravager?”

Cautious, he took a seat on a nearby bench. “Yes, but I’m not familiar with the differences between them.”

The smile on the other man’s face turned indulgent, as if Seth were a child in need of a lesson. “You know what happens to werewolves. Ravager warlocks die at birth, every time, because they’re *pure* Nightkin magic. When they hit the open air, they explode and take every living thing within a city block with them. It’s why warlock mothers always give birth alone.” Dorian watched him calmly, his voice steady and detached. “Ravager seers... Well, there hasn’t been one of those in a thousand years, and no one really knows what they’re like. Can’t be pretty, though, having the Sight *and* the wild, defective Nightkin magic inside them. I hope I never live to see one.”

Dorian straightened, and the tone of his voice suddenly changed. Intent, excited. “Now, a Ravager *vampire* is quite a creature. I daresay they rival the wolves.”

Four Nightkin races, and only two kinds of Ravagers walked this earth. Seth was lone because he was a danger to the pack. Were Ravager vampires threats to their clans? Their own blood? “T-Tell me more. Please.”

Dorian’s eyes were so dark. Bottomless. “Like with you, the shift triggers the madness in Ravager vampires. Their nature isn’t unleashed until their fangs extend, which they can control for the most part...until they need to feed. Vampires operate with a certain elegance when we drink blood. There’s a game to play, a seduction, a decision to bring forth lust or

fear or both. All so we can get just the flavor we crave. We take what we need, we lick the wound, and we walk away. The prey never remembers what happened.”

That charming, deadly smile returned to his mouth. “But Ravager vampires are wild, untamable creatures, and they don’t care for any of that. They tear out the throats of whoever they can get their hands on, gorge themselves, and grab the next warm body. Doesn’t matter if they’re human, Nightkin, anything. If it has a heartbeat, they want it, and the only way they know to *get* it is to kill it. The carnage doesn’t stop until the moon sets.” His long fingers played with his garnet ring. “Nadia was a...terror when the Ravager madness was upon her.”

Seth had never heard specific stories of other Ravagers. Just that they were monsters that had to be exterminated. “But you also said that she was smart.”

“She was very smart, and quite sweet in her human form.” He returned his hands to his pockets. “In fact, you remind me of her. The shyness, mostly. Strange, but her Ravager nature gave her a charming sort of innocence. That inability to connect—despite having so much to offer—isolates a being, and although she was drenched in blood and death, it made her rather naive. Everyone was afraid of her, but she could make me laugh, and I swore I would never let harm come to her.”

He’d... He’d wanted to keep her safe? “What happened?”

A muscle ticked in Dorian’s jaw. “Someone close to her summoned the Hunters. I tried to protect her, to keep my vow, but I failed. They killed her, and many, many good people

died in the clash. I barely survived.”

Seth had learned *this* lesson many times, but still he couldn’t stop himself from asking. “She was betrayed?”

“Yes,” he answered softly. “By her mother, and both were killed. It’s a common story, and the same will happen to you and your human.”

Seth gripped the edge of the bench until his knuckles turned white. “He would never betray me. Rafe is brave and noble and—”

“Good and kind,” finished Dorian. “I heard you the first time, and I believe you. He’s only human, though. If Nightkin loyalty is useless in the face of a Ravager, what hope does a human have?”

“He loved me,” his gaze dipped to the grass, “once.”

“Ah, but no longer?”

His voice caught in his throat. Rafe hadn’t said the words since he’d discovered the truth.

“What does it matter if he no longer loves you?” asked the vampire, frowning. “It’s not as if you’ll ever love him in return.”

All at once, Seth understood. What Rafe wanted, what he needed. “I never told him.”

“You haven’t told him that Ravagers are incapable of love?”

His voice dropped, almost to a whisper. “No.”

“A cruel thing to do to a human, but I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything more from you.”

Something in those words sparked memories of yesterday,

and his head shot up. “What if... What if it’s not true? The things they say about me?”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Rafe says I’m not a monster.”

“And you believe him?” he asked, smirking. “A human who could never hope to understand our world?”

Awareness, strange and freeing, unfurled inside of him. “Rafe is honest.”

“He may well be, but honesty is not the same as knowledge.”

Even that couldn’t deter him from exploring this new idea. “But Rafe *has* knowledge, more than he believes. He knows my favorite juice is cranberry-apple, and he knows I don’t like pickles on my sandwich, and he knows—”

“Seth.” Dorian gentled as he crouched before him. “What is Rafe’s favorite juice?”

He stopped short. “I... I don’t—”

“What does he like on *his* sandwiches?”

The excitement bled out of him. “I don’t know.”

“Do you understand why you don’t know these things?” He rested a hand on the bench. “It’s because you didn’t care enough to find out.”

That wasn’t true, was it? Seth shuddered when he remembered the patch he’d found on Rafe’s shoulder this morning. He’d been wearing it for almost a week, and he didn’t notice. He didn’t even notice that Rafe hadn’t picked up a single cigarette in all that time. “Maybe I can learn. Maybe I can—”

“You can’t learn to love, Seth. Ravagers are instruments of death and, in the end, that’s all you truly understand. If you don’t leave him, he’ll die. It’s that simple.”

It isn’t that simple. It can’t be! “Why do you care what happens to him?” he asked bitterly. “If I want him to be mine, what business is that of yours?”

“‘Rafe is brave and noble and good and kind.’ Isn’t that what you said? How could I not develop a certain fondness for him?”

Seth stopped short, then shook his head. “I can’t leave him. He smells good and he feels warm, like...like...”

“Like moonlight?”

His lips parted. “Exactly. I think that every time I’m near him.”

“I can understand that,” said Dorian, nodding. “No Nightkin can resist such a thing, not even a Ravager. But, little puppy, what you haven’t realized is that every moon must wane.”

Every moon must...

No, he was done listening to this. Seth stood, walked away from the truth. “He doesn’t want me to leave. He said he wants to try.”

Dorian looked up at him. “And the trying will drain him of light. Humans are delicate creatures. Their hearts are like chalices, and they must be kept filled.”

Growling, Seth spun and slammed his fist into a cherry blossom tree. The bones in his fingers cracked, then knitted themselves together. As he pulled away, a spot of blood

dripped down the bark. "I promised him that I would go back. I've never made promises before. Only for Rafe."

"Then go back and tell him goodbye. The Hunters will find you soon, and he's going to lose you no matter what happens."

He glanced at Dorian, still crouched by the bench. "The Hunters are after me?"

"Aren't they always after you?"

Yes, since he'd left the asylum, and he could hardly imagine life without them anymore.

"This time they'll send their best and most cunning, I'm sure." Dorian rose to his feet and grinned. "Even you won't be able to stop them."

The playful viciousness Dorian wielded so easily spun his senses. "You relish the thought of my death?"

"Yes."

"Why? You protected that other Ravager. Why do you hate me when we've never met prior to my arrival to D.C.?"

In an instant Dorian stood before him, his long fangs bared. "Because, Seth," he growled, lowering his head. "Why should you survive when *my daughter* had to die?"

Shock robbed him of the ability to shift, to even run away. "Your daughter? Nadia was your daughter?"

"She was. I lost my offspring and my mate on the same blood soaked night."

He glanced away, then back at Dorian. "How old was she? Nadia?"

His face was hardened by God-only-knew how many years of anger and pain, but he answered. "She was twelve years old

when they killed her.”

“Did you love her?”

His brow furrowed; the anger began to crack. “Yes.”

Ravagers couldn’t love, but they ached for it every moment they walked. At least, that’s how Seth felt. “I’d rather live twelve years with a parent’s love than thirty-two years without it.”

Dorian drew back, and more cracks appeared in the anger.

Seth tilted his head, exposed his throat. “If my death will ease the loss of your daughter, it’s yours. Take it.”

A dark hiss whispered across his neck just before the scrape of fangs. Seth shut his eyes, ready.

But the teeth didn’t break the skin.

Dorian straightened, his fangs receding. “I’d rather catch the show, I think. Hunters are skilled at making a death last, at stretching the pain until it drives a Ravager insane.” He smiled. “Well, *more* insane.”

He didn’t feel relieved that he’d live a while longer. He was so tired—tired of fighting, tired of surviving. “You’ll be telling them where to find me?”

“No,” said Dorian, looking him over. “They’ll find you soon enough on their own, and I’ll be there to see it. In the meantime, I shall grant you the luxury of putting your affairs in order.”

No point in saying thank you. Or goodbye. Seth began to leave the courtyard.

“Seth.”

He paused, but didn’t turn around.

LONE

“You want proof that Ravagers cannot love? Think about how willingly you gave your life to me just now, how easy it was to break your promise to your human.”

Seth froze. It *had* been easy. His knuckles throbbed, and he glanced down at the hand he’d used to hit the tree. That promise, too, had been heedlessly broken. He’d betrayed Rafe’s trust twice without a second thought.

Dorian was right. It was proof.

But he didn’t want it to be right.

Anguish twisted his stomach, threatened to cripple him. Desperate to get away from it, he ran for the hotel, needing to bury himself in the only man who could take the pain away.

A man who would get nothing but pain in return.

CHAPTER 8

The seatbelt light dimmed, followed by the ding of a synthetic bell.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the captain has turned off the seatbelt sign, and it is now safe to move about the cabin. However, we recommend that you keep your seatbelt fastened while seated.”

Safe to move about the cabin, but not safe to have the belt unfastened while sitting. His hand locked to his buckle, Seth closed his eyes and opened his senses to search for Nightkin once again. Just a seer. That was all. There was a witch somewhere behind him, but a witch’s magic harmonized with the environment—whether natural or technological—and was

relatively safe. A Nightkin's magic, however, could make the plane fall out of the sky.

But there was only a seer. Nothing to worry about. A seer's magic was contained entirely within the body, and wasn't a danger to sensitive equipment. He took a deep breath, and turned his head to look at Rafe.

Sleeping, with his head propped against the window.

The peaceful sight couldn't fool him. His face looked tight, strained, as if his troubles wouldn't grant him repose, even in dreams.

Seth's fault. Again.

After Dorian had said those things to him yesterday, he'd sprinted back to their hotel room. Rafe had tried to get him to talk, to tell him what was wrong, but Seth had only wanted Rafe's warmth. Rafe's light.

When Rafe pressed him for information, Seth shifted and took what he wanted.

It wasn't forced sex, exactly. At first, Rafe tried to get him to return to his human form, but he never actually asked him to *stop*. Seth lost himself—biting, scratching, trying to crawl inside of the big man. He'd pushed Rafe further than any human deserved, and Rafe had taken it all, despite his fear. All he asked afterward was for Seth to tell him what happened. Such a simple, tender price.

Seth couldn't pay it.

So now Rafe slept. Exhausted. Wan.

Drained, just as Dorian had warned. Dorian had warned of other things, as well.

Hunters were coming. Elite assassins, trained specifically to kill Ravagers. They always came in threes—one vampire, one warlock, one werewolf. They never gave up, not until they were reduced to dust, then another set would come. Since the Hunters didn't know his real name or exactly what he looked like, it was usually easy to evade them for a while. *Indefinitely* if he could just manage to stay out of trouble, keep himself from shifting. He doubted they could track him to Iowa, not without Dorian's instruction.

At least, that's what he told himself. Perhaps he lied in order to stay with Rafe.

"Hello."

Seth glanced at a little girl standing in the aisle. She was African-American, wearing a pale pink dress that matched the barrettes in her hair. She couldn't have been more than six years old.

And she was a seer.

"Hello," he said cautiously.

She curled her hands over the armrest. "You're my brother."

Seth couldn't help smiling. "No," he told her gently. "You and I are kin."

She leaned forward, as if sharing a secret with him. "I felt you."

He bowed his head. "I felt you, too."

"You're broken."

His smile faltered. "Yes, I am." Wanting to change the subject, he touched the charm bracelet on her wrist. "That's a

pretty bracelet.”

She fingered the little steel charms. “They’re angels. Mom says that there are all different kinds. Some protect and some sing and some kiss your forehead when you feel scared. She says that the angel you need most is always the one closest to you.”

This girl had no idea what it meant to be lone. He wondered what that felt like. “Your mother sounds very smart.”

“That’s what Dad says.” The girl stood on her toes to get a better look at Rafe. “Does he belong to you?”

Seth shook his head.

“But you *want* him to belong to you?”

He glanced over his shoulder and back at the girl. “Yes.”

“Why don’t you just take him?”

All Nightkin, even relatively gentle seers, had a very direct approach to mating. Seth was no different, but Rafe was not Nightkin. “It doesn’t work that way with humans.”

Her mouth quirked. “Humans aren’t that different. My parents are human.”

“Your parents are human?” It shouldn’t have surprised him. He’d only sensed one Nightkin onboard. Still...

She nodded. “I’m adopted.”

Ah. Although it wasn’t unheard of for a seer to be born to human parents, adoption was far and away the more logical conclusion. “They are good to you?”

“Yeah, they’re great. Except...”

Seth tilted his head to the side. “Except?”

The irises of her eyes flickered into black. "Seth. Your name is Seth."

He straightened, unnerved that a seer had Seen into him, however briefly. "Yes, and what is your name?"

"Xuan." She reached over and unbuckled his seatbelt. "You can help me, Seth."

For reasons he didn't understand, he let her take his hand and pull him to his feet. "Help you with what?"

She led him up the aisle. "My parents don't understand what I am. They're taking me to a special doctor, and he's going to...to..."

Remembering his own history with psychiatrists was enough to fill in the rest of her sentence. "I don't understand how I can help."

"I don't either." She tugged him past a curtain and into first class seating. "I just know you can."

First class was nice. Large seats, plenty of leg room. Rafe had offered to use his own money to upgrade them, but Seth had felt guilty about the expense. It wasn't until their return plane ride, when Rafe asked to be seated by the emergency exit, that he'd realized how cramped such a tall man would be in coach.

Why hadn't he figured that out the first time? Was Dorian right in saying he just didn't care enough?

"This is my seat!" Xuan announced proudly, pointing to an empty seat next to a conservatively dressed woman sitting by the window.

"It's...very nice," he said awkwardly, meeting the

woman's gaze as she glanced up.

Xuan looked from one side of the aisle to the other. "Mom, Dad. This is Seth."

A tall, wary man rose from the other side of the aisle to sit next to the woman.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. ..." His voice trailed and he looked to the little girl for help.

"Coleman," Xuan filled in.

Seth held out his hand. "Mr. and Mrs. Coleman."

Mr. Coleman shook it, understandably wary. "How may we help you, Seth?"

"Actually, Xuan is under the impression that I'm supposed to help *you*."

Mrs. Coleman leaned close to her daughter, her voice low. "Xuan, you were supposed to go to the bathroom and come straight back. You know you're not supposed to bother strangers."

Xuan smiled. "But he's not a stranger. He's kin."

"Kin?" She glanced up. "How is that possible?"

Seth knelt by the seat, his voice soft. "It's not a true familial relationship. Your daughter sensed my presence because our magic links us."

Mr. Coleman looped his arm around Xuan and dragged her into a protective embrace. "You have no link to our daughter."

"I-I'm sorry, Mr. Coleman. I didn't mean to upset you." Seth paused, trying to think this through. "Xuan has the Sight. You know that, don't you?"

Mrs. Coleman took her husband's hand. "Sometimes she—

”

“Sometimes she says that things are true,” Mr. Coleman cut in. “But there’s never any way to prove it.”

Seth glanced down the aisle, spotted an approaching flight attendant. “Have you ever asked her something simple? Something you could verify?”

“The doctors told us not to encourage her.”

He turned to the little girl, who watched him expectantly. “Xuan, close your eyes.” When she did, he asked, “Do you know the name of the next person to walk through those curtains?” The question shouldn’t tax her abilities. Quick looks into the immediate future were usually easy for seers.

She smiled and opened her eyes. “Chris.”

A female flight attendant walked through the curtains.

“There, you see?” said her father. “She just *thinks* she knows things.”

Seth glanced up at the woman. “Excuse me, miss?”

She paused. “Yes, sir?”

“What is your name?”

“Christine.” Xuan giggled, and she bent over to touch the girl’s nose. “But my friends call me Chris.”

“Thank you, Christine,” Seth said politely. When she walked away, he turned back to Xuan’s parents. “Your daughter is Nightkin. A seer. They’re very rare.”

Mrs. Coleman looked to her husband. “Martin, do you think he—”

“No,” he said flatly. “He’s some kind of con artist, Elaina. He planned this ahead of time.”

Xuan shook her head. "No he didn't, Daddy."

He only held her closer.

The protectiveness, it was something Seth had never experienced as a child. He truly wanted to help Xuan, to make sure that her parents understood her as well as protected her. "She has a deadly allergy to silver, doesn't she?"

Martin frowned. "How could you know that?"

"All Nightkin suffer from it. We enjoy the silver light of the moon, but the metal is dangerous to us."

Elaina's lips parted. "She does love moonlight. Whenever there's a full moon she sneaks into the backyard to dance in it."

Seth smiled. "I used to do the same thing."

Martin opened up, just slightly. "And you're one of these...these Nightkin as well?"

He nodded.

"Show us."

His eyes rounded. "That's not a good idea. My nature is different from your daughter's, and it tends to be hard on technology."

"The plane would crash," said Xuan matter-of-factly.

Her parents gasped, and Seth glanced around to make sure no one else had heard.

Martin lifted Xuan onto his lap. "I don't know how to handle this. I just want her to live a normal, productive life."

"Oh, she can," he said quickly, wanting to reassure them despite the events of his own life. Seth reached into his pocket and removed his wallet. Taking out one of his business cards,

he handed it to Xuan's father. "She doesn't need a psychiatrist, Mr. Coleman. She just needs your love and understanding."

Martin read it and looked up. "You're a math professor?"

"Keep the card," he said, knowing the humans needed a physical reminder of this conversation. Otherwise, their minds would let the idea of magic fade from memory. "You can check my credentials once the plane lands, if you wish."

Tucking it into his breast pocket, Martin gave his daughter a gentle squeeze. "Do you want to be a professor, sweetie?"

Xuan shook her head. "I want to be an astronaut."

Both of her parents laughed.

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," said her mother.

Seth stared at the happy family, unable to keep himself from envying them. "Did I help you, Xuan?"

"Yep," she quipped, smiling broadly. "And now I want to tell you about—"

Seth held up his hand. "Until you're older, you should always ask your parents if it's all right to tell someone what you see, and you should ask that someone if they *want* to hear it. It will save you a lot of trouble."

Her parents sent him grateful smiles.

Xuan glanced up at her father. "Can I?"

He stared down at her, stroking her cheek. "If Mr. Anderson says it's okay."

"Is it?" she asked, looking at Seth.

He hesitated. His past, his future...none of it was good. "Could you give me a clue first?"

“It’s about your parents.”

The air died in his lungs. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear this, but no seer had ever been willing to See him before. This might be his only chance to find out what had happened. “All right.”

Her irises went dark again, longer this time. “They didn’t throw you away, Seth. The others wanted to hurt you because you were broken, so your parents hid you. They were going to come back for you, but the others were mad and killed them.”

His parents... They’d wanted him? They’d known what he was, and they’d wanted him anyway? “That’s hard to believe.”

“It’s the truth. They loved you, Seth. Just like mine love me.”

In short, jerky movements, Seth rose to his feet. “Thank you.”

“Would you like to know the name of your pack?”

Her parents looked nervous, and truthfully he didn’t want to press this anymore. “No, they didn’t want me then, so I’m sure they’re not interested in me now.” Besides, he’d reap vengeance if he had their name. His Ravager nature would allow nothing less.

Xuan slid from her father’s lap. “Is there anything else you want me to See?”

He stared down at her, a hundred questions inside of him, but only one he could voice. “Do you know my real name?”

She smiled. “Your real name is Seth. Your mother stitched it into your blanket.”

Tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them back. “Thank

you,” he said again.

Xuan took a step forward. “You’re not alone, you know.” Her gaze drifted upward, to a spot behind him. “He’s always close, isn’t he?”

Seth turned, saw Rafe standing just inside the first class archway. How long had he been there? What did he hear?

Xuan giggled. “Raphael Dirisio. You always cry at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”

His blue eyes rounded.

The shock of finding him there wore off. “Rafe.”

He glanced at Seth. “It’s not like that. Okay, it *is* like that, but I only watch it at Christmas. When you’re topped off with spiked eggnog, how can you *not* cry when that little bell on the tree rings?”

Rafe’s warmth called to him, pulled him forward. The palms of his hands pressed against those hard, defined abs. “Rafe, I want...” He paused, glanced behind him at the young seer. “No Looking,” he warned gently.

Pouting, she crawled back onto her father’s lap. “Okay.”

Seth returned his attention to Rafe, pushing him backward, past the curtain separating the two sections of the plane. “I want...”

Rafe embraced him, heedless of the other passengers. “What do you want, Seth?”

“You.” His hands traveled downward, began to untuck his shirt. “The answer to that question is always *you*.”

Rafe caught his wrists and pulled them away from his body. “Here? Now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

His grip tightened. “No.”

The seer’s words had left him cold. He didn’t want to think about them; he just wanted to lose himself. “If I have to, I’ll take you. Shifting may drop this hunk of metal right out of the sky, but rest assured I’ll have you several times over before we hit the ground.”

His brow furrowed as he lowered his head. “You’d do that?” he whispered. “Kill all these people, that little girl who seemed to like you so much? All so you can get fucked?”

Seth’s hands fell away. Rafe had called his bluff, and now he had no way to chase off the cold. “No.”

Rafe stared down at him, his face hard, before reaching out and jerking open the lavatory door. “Come on,” he said, shoving him inside. He walked in, lifted Seth up to stand with his feet on each side of the toilet, and locked the door behind them. “Over a dozen people just saw me squeeze inside here with you, so if you want to join the mile-high club, we’ve got about ten minutes to do it.”

Confused, Seth trailed his fingers over the human’s face. “Why...?”

He yanked Seth’s shirt free of his slacks, snapped open his belt buckle. “We don’t exactly have time to talk about that right now.”

Sweet Rafe. Dipping his head, he took Rafe’s mouth in a soft, grateful kiss. The hands on his body gentled, one of them sliding down to stroke his cock. Seth moaned, hard already and needing more.

Rafe broke the kiss and dropped low.

“Rafe.” Seth gripped his arms, trying to tug him up.

“I told you, no time to talk.”

He tried again. “I want you inside of me. I want you to fill me.”

Rafe paused. “It’s not just a quickie for you, is it?” He straightened and braced his hands against the wall. “You *need* this.”

Seth glided his hands over those big arms, up to his shoulders. “Yes.”

“Like you needed me yesterday?”

He stilled. What was the right answer? How would he get more of Rafe?

Rafe didn’t move, but the shadows darkened under his eyes. “It’s not a test, Seth. If you say ‘yes,’ then we’ll fuck. If you say ‘no,’ then we’ll fuck. I just want the truth.”

The truth? Could he risk that? He brought his head closer, sniffed Rafe’s cheek. He didn’t care, for this he’d risk everything. “Y-Yes. Like yesterday.” Seth pulled back to catch his gaze, but couldn’t tell if what he’d said had given Rafe any sort of pleasure.

His face unreadable, Rafe slipped a hand into Seth’s hair and granted him the velvet warmth of his mouth. The kiss was slow, gentle, thorough. It gave him everything he needed, without demanding anything in return. Seth tried to give what he had, leaning deeper into the kiss, rubbing their bodies together.

Despite the time constraint, Rafe somehow seemed

unhurried. His hands glided over Seth's shoulders, his chest, his thighs, his cock. Every caress seamlessly blended into the next, never hesitating, never clumsy. *Seth* was the awkward one, bumping his elbows and knees as he fought to get closer.

Rafe soothed and guided him with firm touches, soft kisses.

Those strong hands kneaded his ass, and Seth's breath came in quick, uneven gasps. Unaffected by the cramped space of the lavatory, Rafe dropped his own pants without breaking contact with him. Seth grasped his cock, surprised to find him hard.

"You... You still want me?"

Rafe's hands slid to the backs of his thighs and hiked him up. "Wrap your legs around me."

Seth obeyed, closing his eyes and enjoying the hard calluses on those hands.

Hot breath grazed his skin as Rafe tasted the curve of his neck, holding him tight in muscular arms. Seth could feel the human's heart pounding in his chest, relished the scent of arousal as it overpowered that of the recycled air around them. "Rafe," he whispered.

Rafe spat on his hand, and Seth trembled in anticipation.

This too seemed slow...almost languid. Rafe eased into him with the same care and patience he always used, stroked him with the same controlled power.

Seth tried to hang on. He wanted this to last forever, he wanted to forget anything else existed. But every thrust pushed him closer to the edge, every brush of Rafe's mouth

threatened to send him over. "Rafe," he panted, clinging as tight as he could. "I can't..."

"It's okay," murmured Rafe. "I'm about to lose it too."

His balls tightened and his muscles contracted, giving him pleasure to the point of pain. To keep himself from howling, he clamped his teeth onto Rafe's shoulder, came in a quiet rush of intensity. Rafe's body convulsed, rocking the small space as he had his own orgasm. All that existed was the sound of their breathing, the beat of their hearts.

I wish I could love, Rafe. If I could love anyone, it would be you.

Why couldn't Dorian have killed him?

No, he wouldn't have wanted that. He wanted to be here, in Rafe's arms, for as long as he could.

Rafe indulged him, holding him until his breathing evened. Eventually, though, this had to end, and Seth reluctantly allowed the separation when the time came. The harsh drone of the plane was a poor substitute for Rafe's heartbeat as he cleaned himself up, straightened his clothing.

Glancing at him, Rafe grabbed the door handle. "Ready?"

He nodded and started to climb down from his perch on the toilet.

Rafe pressed him back. "I leave first, then you follow about five minutes later."

He frowned. "Why?"

"It's just the way it's done. We have to at least *try* and be discreet."

He watched Rafe slide the lock open, and a panic like he'd

never felt before exploded out of him. “*I don’t want to be lone!*”

Rafe spun. “What?”

The panic kept racking his body, begging him to shift, to *make* Rafe stay. Only the knowledge that they were thirty-seven thousand feet in the air prevented him from doing it. “I don’t want to be lone. I want to be with you.” His chest constricted as he forced himself to stay up where Rafe had instructed. Obeying *hurt*, because every nerve in his body screamed at him to fling himself into the human’s arms. “Don’t make me be lone. Please.”

An eternity passed between them, before those sapphire eyes deepened in color. Rafe held out his hand.

Weak with relief, Seth took it and stepped down to the floor.

Rafe shook his head and opened the door. “You picked a hell of a time, Seth.”

What did that mean? He was about to ask him to explain when he noticed that every person in coach seemed to be watching them as Rafe led them back to their seats. His heightened hearing could pick up snatches of conversations. Some were disgusted, some were amused, one or two actually thought it was romantic.

“You want the window seat?”

Seth cringed. “No, I don’t like to be reminded that we’re in a two hundred thousand pound steel tube that’s being propelled through the air by eleven thousand gallons of highly combustible fuel.”

Rafe's hand tightened on his. "Why didn't you tell me you're afraid of flying?"

When he couldn't answer, Rafe blew out a hard breath and took his seat by the window. "God, I'm tired."

Seth sat beside him and buckled his safety belt. "I'm sorry."

Unbuckling him, Rafe lifted the armrest out of the way so that it no longer separated them. He looped an arm around Seth's body and pulled him close. "I have got to get some sleep, or I'm not going to be able to drive us home when the plane lands. But you can stay right here until the seatbelt light comes back on, okay? Would that make you feel better?"

Seth pillowed his head on Rafe's chest and slid an arm around his waist. The sound of that strong, familiar heartbeat became the focal point of his world, just as it had in the lavatory a few moments before, and it settled his fears. "It makes me feel much better." If their positions had been reversed, if Rafe had been the one afraid, would he have thought to do this for him?

He didn't want to know the answer, so he closed his eyes. Rafe's breathing steadied, indicating sleep. The heat of his body seeped into him. His enthralling scent surrounded him.

Three days ago he'd been determined to run away, to never look back. But now he knew he no longer had the strength to do that. He also knew that this man's nobility, his sense of honor, wouldn't allow him to cast Seth aside, even in the face of the pain it brought him.

Eventually it would kill Rafe's light, frost his warmth...

LONE

ravage his soul.

Because that was all Seth knew how to do. It was all any Ravager could offer, no matter how much he wished otherwise. He wanted Rafe with a ferocity he could scarcely control, with a passion he'd never known existed, but that would never be enough.

Wanting was not the same as loving.

CHAPTER 9

Seth looked up at the night sky. The stars were bright, but the moon was gone. It happened every month, but its absence always made him sad.

They'd been on the road for almost an hour. Rafe had hardly said a word since the plane, and the car ride had taken place in complete silence. He didn't appear angry, just tired. Seth wasn't sure whether speaking would make things worse, so he remained quiet. It should have been easy—he was used to silence—but for some reason this was different. This time it bothered him, and he wasn't sure why.

He turned to stare out the window. His Nightkin eyes could pick out the trees as they whipped by, even in the

darkness. Rural highways often lacked any sort of lighting, but Rafe seemed at ease driving these sort of roads at night, despite his human nature.

The Iowa landscape rolled past, lulled him away from his unease. In another hour they'd be in Rafe's house. In Rafe's bed. Perhaps then things would be good for a while.

"We ever going to talk about it?"

His body started, and he glanced at Rafe. "Talk about what?"

"About what that girl said to you on the plane," he said, his gaze locked on the road.

"How much of that did you hear?"

Those powerful hands tightened on the wheel. "You just found out, after thirty-two years, that your parents didn't abandon you. You don't feel the slightest need to have a conversation about that?"

No. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to *think* about it. "How is that any of your business, Rafe?"

Rafe chuckled, but the sound was low, hollow. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not. I can be fucking slow, Seth, but believe me. I'm learning."

His eyes widened. Despite what Seth had thought on the plane, Rafe was pulling away. He was about to be lone again. "I don't understand why it's so important to you. It doesn't change anything. It's nothing."

"*Nothing?*" He jerked the wheel to the right, and the brakes squealed as the car skidded to a stop on the shoulder of the road. "Get out."

Seth looked into those dark woods. He was being thrown away, like a dog whose owner couldn't be bothered to sell or take to the pound.

"Now, Seth."

The panic he'd felt on the plane resurfaced, and he began to shake. "You're going to leave me? Just drive off?"

Rafe slammed his fist into the steering wheel. "For Christ's sake!" He snatched the key from the ignition and stormed out of the car. "*Does this make you feel better?*" he yelled through the open window. "Do you trust me a little more now!"

Stunned, Seth shrank deeper into his seat.

His fist tightening around his keys, Rafe stalked to the passenger side and wrenched open the door. "Unbuckle your seatbelt and get out here."

With trembling fingers, Seth did as he was told and ventured out of the car. "Wh-Why are you so angry, Rafe?"

He took a deep, steadying breath. "I'm worried about you."

The unexpected answer made him frown. "Worried?"

"Yes, worried. Why won't you talk about your parents?"

It was so important to him. Why? "I don't want to talk about them."

Rafe lowered his head, his bright eyes visible even now, and rife with pain. "It's me, Seth. You can talk to me."

Usually the weather didn't affect him, but right now the chill fall air cut through him like a knife. "I..." He started to walk away. He didn't know where he was going, but he

couldn't be here. "It's not like that."

Rafe grasped his shoulders and pinned him against the car. "Tell me what it's like."

Backed into a corner now, Seth had no choice but to fight. "We're on the ground, Rafe. I can shift."

The threat had the opposite effect he'd intended. Rafe's grip firmed. "Maybe you should."

Astonished by the suggestion, he tried to break away, and again Rafe held him in place. "I still smell fear on you. Why would you want me to change form?"

"Because when you're a Ravager, you let yourself go. If you can't allow yourself to feel when you're in this form, then maybe you should move on to the next."

Anger burned away any surprise, any confusion. "You still don't comprehend what I am, do you? I only have two emotions when I'm a Ravager. Lust, and rage."

One of Rafe's hands left his shoulder, caressed his face. "That's not true. You get confused. You have moments of tenderness. You feel sorrow, and it hurts you."

Seth knocked his hand away. "I don't feel any of that."

The gentleness didn't waver as Rafe went back to stroking his face. Somehow the soft touch was worse than any anger, or weariness, or even pain. "I can't tell if you're lying, or if you honestly believe that. All I know is what I saw when you told me about those humans you'd had sex with in your Ravager form. When you said, 'just once.' Remember that?"

He tried to look away, but Rafe wouldn't let him.

"But I don't get any credit at all for sticking around, do I?"

he asked softly. "I've been with you twice and I'm still here, but it doesn't touch you. You don't care."

This was killing him. He wanted to run, but he couldn't. He wanted to lash out, but he couldn't do that either. Because Rafe deserved so much better. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Seth..." He shook his head. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I just want you to let me in."

"You keep saying that. Let you in...where? And what does this have to do with my parents?"

Rafe closed his eyes a long moment, then focused on him again. "I have no idea what's going on inside of you, and I want you to share that with me. Your parents loved you, Seth. Doesn't that bring you joy?"

He tried to bolt and Rafe grabbed him. "I don't want to talk about this!"

"*Why not?*" he shouted right back. "Why won't you let me in?"

Suddenly Seth was kicking at him, hitting him. "Because I *killed* them! I killed my parents!"

Rafe straightened, but didn't loosen his hold as he let Seth beat on him. "What?"

Tears slipped past his control, but he kept hitting Rafe, pounding on his chest. "My mother and father loved me and they *died* for it! How is that supposed to bring me *joy*, Rafe? It's my fault they died!"

"Ah, Seth." Rafe wrapped him tight in his arms. "Is that what you really think? And you've been carrying it around

with you since you were told?"

He hated Rafe right now. He couldn't understand why this was happening, why Rafe would make him live this. He just wanted the pain to go away; he wanted to use the violence and the anger inside of him to punish, to attack.

And yet, against his will, he found himself clinging to Rafe's strength, his warmth. "It's the truth. If they'd just let the pack kill me, they'd still be alive."

"Love doesn't work like that. They wanted to keep you safe, and they sacrificed themselves to make sure you were. The best way to honor them is to live. It's all right to *live*, Seth."

The grief was so intense that it engulfed him, forced him to shift. It traveled from his core upward; to his chest, his throat. A searing ball of pain intent on tearing him apart. Throwing back his head, he released it in the purest way possible.

He howled.

The piercing sound filled the air, and he couldn't stop. Three decades of anguish poured out of him, and the knowledge that he'd believed such horrible things about his parents all this time only sharpened the pain. He might have howled for hours, trying to purge himself. He thought it would stretch into infinity.

But, gradually, he became aware of the strong arms still wrapped around him.

Rafe. Rafe had seen him howling at the nonexistent moon like an animal.

Seth shoved at him, breaking the hold. He growled,

backing away blindly, crashing into the car and knocking its front end into the road.

And Rafe's hands were on him again, only the lust he'd taken for his nature wouldn't rise. Only grief existed now, and the wolf in him could not show such weakness. "Get away!" he snapped.

Warm lips pressed against his forehead, and Seth was so distracted by the sensation that he didn't notice he'd been enclosed in another embrace.

"You don't have to fight me, Seth." Rafe held him close, stroked his back.

Seth raised his claws, ready to tear him to shreds.

"I can keep you safe while you let yourself hurt."

He froze. "Rafe is... Rafe is..."

"What is Rafe?"

That voice. So resonant. So gentle. Too many emotions...like a storm dashing him against the rocks. Except in Rafe's arms he felt...he felt...

In a flash the answer came to him. "Rafe is shelter."

"Yes," he murmured, his hand slipping into Seth's hair. "Rafe is shelter."

With barely a breath, Seth surrendered, falling quietly into his human form. He collapsed against the man holding him, and burst into tears.

They sank to the ground, huddled together against the car. Rafe held him on his lap like a child, and he wept like one. His parents had loved him. His parents were dead. He'd found them and lost them in one surreal breath, and his sobs kept

LONE

rising and rising in volume and misery.

Rafe just held him. He didn't tell him to shush. He didn't offer platitudes to get him to quiet down. He just stroked his hair and let him feel his grief.

This storm had been brewing all his life. It was turbulent, brutal. And somehow Rafe was here, keeping him safe from something that might well have destroyed him.

Shelter.

* * *

Rafe paused when Seth walked to the trunk of the car. "What are you doing?"

He glanced up. "Bags?"

The little guy was so cute. In the past week, he'd forgotten that. Smiling, he held up his arm. "Come here." Seth left the car, letting Rafe loop an arm around his slender body. "All of that can wait till tomorrow."

Seth nuzzled his chest. "All right."

They walked up the porch steps to the rustic house Rafe owned. It had been a mess when he'd purchased it years ago. After a lot of hard work and more money than he cared to think about, it was finally something he could call home. Simple, clean lines. A host of plants in warm colors his sisters had picked out for him. He hadn't appreciated how welcoming it looked until he'd brought Seth here. The subtle, wary tension had flowed out of his body, and it was as if he was at ease for the first time in his life.

Looking back, that was probably the moment Rafe had

fallen for him.

Seth pulled away to study a large box sitting in front of the door. He glanced up, hesitating, before lowering his head and sniffing at it. "Smells like old paper."

Rafe took a more direct approach and checked the label. "Oh, it's from Steve Baker," he said, bending his knees and picking up the heavy box. "Get the door, will you?"

"The town librarian?" He reached into Rafe's pocket and pulled out the keys. "What is it?" he asked, opening the door and stepping aside to let him in.

Setting the box on top of a coffee table, he gave himself a good stretch. "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

Like a kid on Christmas, Seth tore open the top of the box. He lifted out the first of a stack of journals. "Mathematics journals?"

"Take a closer look."

"Dynamics of Partial Differential Equations," he read aloud. His lips parted as he ran his fingers over the cover. "I was published in this issue."

Rafe grinned, waiting for him to put it together.

One by one, Seth pulled the rest of the journals from the box. "I've been published in all of these."

"I asked Steve to track down every article you'd ever written. I didn't expect him to be done so soon." He slid his hands into his pockets. "I guess a year's worth of free games at my pool hall is a pretty good motivator."

Seth hugged a small stack to his chest. "All of them? They're all here?"

“You didn’t move in here with much. Just some clothes and a toothbrush.” He’d always wondered about that, but he supposed he had the answer now. “I thought it might be nice to have something personal around, to make you feel more at home.”

“Home,” he whispered. Seth looked up at him. “O-Our home?”

The exhaustion that had been dragging him down for days started to creep back. “All this time, and you haven’t been thinking of this as your home, have you?”

Seth looked around, as if seeing the place for the first time. “I’ve never had one before. Here it’s warm, and safe. I’d like to call it home.”

His mouth crooked. Finally, it seemed like he might be taking a step. “Go ahead. You already get your mail here.”

The first genuinely happy smile he’d seen in Seth since this insanity began shaped his lips.

“Rafe—”

The phone rang, interrupting whatever he’d been about to say.

Frowning, Rafe glanced at the clock. It was almost midnight, which meant it could only be family. “The woman must be psychic,” he murmured, picking up the cordless receiver. “Hello?”

A feminine voice with a Midwestern accent lit into him. “You were due home two hours ago! We were worried about you.”

He tilted the caller ID. *Dirisio*, seven times. “I see that.

We're fine, Mom. Just had a little detour, is all."

"How was your trip?"

He glanced at Seth, who was thumbing through his journals. "Interesting. D.C. is quite a city."

"Well, I'm glad you got home okay, sweetie. Guess who else will be home soon?"

Rafe sank into a worn leather armchair. "Who?"

"Sera! Isn't that great news?"

The thought of his baby sister brought a soft smile to his face. "So she's finally coming home from Paris, huh?" Sera had skipped the country to pursue her photography career. It always surprised anyone who saw her—she was more than pretty enough to be in *front* of the camera. But taking pictures was her passion, and she was making quite a name for herself. "When will she be back in Iowa?"

"In a few days. The entire family will be having dinner together next Saturday. I trust you'll be there?"

He knew better than to argue with his mother. "Sure thing."

"And you'll bring your beau?"

Seth had never met his family. It was only a five hour drive, but usually he found one excuse or another not to go. Grading papers, preparing for a test, usually some school thing that Rafe couldn't argue. "I don't know, Mom." A Ravager at their farmhouse? How would that go over? "I'll ask him, though."

His mother clucked her tongue. "Rafe, you have been living with this man for three months. Don't you think it's

about time to introduce him to us? Especially now that Sera is coming home?"

Rafe exhaled a slow breath as he stared up at the ceiling fan. It was past time. But Seth had just found out that his own parents were dead, and he didn't know how best to protect him now. "We'll see."

Mom, as always, took that as a yes. "We look forward to seeing the both of you. Now get some sleep. It's midnight!"

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

"Goodnight, Rafe."

"Goodnight." He dropped the phone back into its cradle. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and watched Seth organize his journals. Quiet, shy Seth would have a hard time with his rambunctious family. Hell, they'd even give Ravager Seth a run for his money.

"You don't have to take me. You can tell them that I'm behind on my class work, and that I have to stay on top of things if I hope to make tenure."

Rafe linked his hands together. "You heard the whole conversation?"

He shrugged, staring down at the journals spread around him. "My hearing is almost as good as my sense of smell."

So many things he didn't know. So many things he needed to learn. "You don't want to go?"

"They're your family. It's your duty to keep them safe."

He was starting to feel tired again. "That's true. But I don't think you'd be a danger to them."

Seth finally lifted his head, his brown eyes unsure. "You

don't think I'll hurt them?"

"No, I don't think you'll hurt them."

"I've hurt you. I've bitten you, given you scars during sex."

Rafe burst into laughter and those big brown eyes rounded. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, he forced it down to a wide grin. "Seth, if you had sex with any member of my family, then I'd have to do some ravaging, myself."

He tilted his head to the side, then a slow, careful smile touched his mouth. Standing, he gingerly stepped out of the circle of journals he'd built and crossed the room to take his hands. "I miss your bed, Rafe."

Rafe tugged him closer. "My bed?"

It took him a while to figure it out, but Rafe let him sort it through for himself.

Seth's hands tightened on his. "Our bed?"

A ray of hope shined into him, and suddenly things seemed easier. "Now you're catching on," he said, getting to his feet.

Seth lifted Rafe's arm and draped it over his shoulders. "I'm glad to be home."

Rafe dropped a soft kiss onto his mouth. "I'm glad, too."

CHAPTER 10

Seth studied Rafe from the passenger seat. His long, powerful fingers were relaxed on the steering wheel, his face focused on the road. He didn't look nervous, but Seth could sense it inside of him. The tension. The fear.

"It's not too late. You can take me home and visit your family alone."

The corner of Rafe's mouth crooked. What had he said to cause that lopsided smile?

"Trust me, it's too late. I said I was bringing you, so if I show up empty handed the entire Dirisio family will drive down to Brier just to get a look at you."

Now Seth was the one who was nervous. Rafe spoke often

of his family, and they seemed affectionate, energetic, and very close. What if they discovered he was a monster? Would he lose Rafe? “Maria, Teresa, John,” he murmured. “Mike, Gabe, Angie, Sera.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to...” He took a breath. “I’m trying to remember everyone’s names. Angie and Gabe have two children each, right?”

Rafe cast a brief glance at him, chuckled softly. “Yeah. Angie’s children are Sophia and Micah. Gabe’s are Anthony and Joan.”

Something about these names tugged at the analytical side of his mind, but he couldn’t quite uncover the pattern.

“Seth, don’t worry about memorizing all their names. They’re not going to quiz you when we get there.”

Rafe always tried to put him at ease. Over the past week, they hadn’t talked at all about werewolves or Nightkin. It gave Seth room to breathe, time to settle, and he liked to believe that the gifts were intentional. He liked to believe that Rafe still loved him, even though he hadn’t said the words since he’d discovered his true nature. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Introducing me to your family.”

His smile faded. “It’s time. That’s what humans do. They meet, they date, and then they go to meet the parents.”

Gentle and straightforward with his explanation. Like always. “I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“You won’t.”

Seth couldn't tell whether the confidence was real. "Are you going to tell them what I am?"

His hands tightened on the wheel. "You're my lover. That's all they need to know."

It *was* all they needed to know, and it was best to leave it at that. But insecurity kept nagging at him. *Are you ashamed of me, Rafe?* "What if they see it? My Nightkin nature?"

"I lived with you for three months and didn't see it." A thoughtful frown creased his brow. "You might want to be careful around Sera and my grandmother, though. Their eyes have a way of seeing straight into a person."

Alarmed, Seth straightened in his seat. "They have the Sight?"

His fingers relaxed and his smile returned. "No. They're just sharp."

He'd never gone to meet someone's family before. Would they behave the same way a pack would? Or were human families different? He tried to quell his growing anxiety, but he was so afraid of slipping, of revealing himself and seeing their reactions. "How much farther?"

"About four hours."

An eternity. Here, in the car, he felt safe. But they were driving toward an environment totally alien to him—filled with so many variables that he couldn't hope to predict the outcome.

Just don't shift. Be good.

* * *

Seth followed Rafe up the dirt path, looking around in awe. “It really is a farm.”

“Did you think all this time I’d been talking about a penthouse suite?”

His tone was teasing, but Seth couldn’t get over the sheer tranquility of it all. “There are chickens and pigs and cows and,” he inhaled deeply, “corn. So much corn.”

Rafe slipped his car keys into his pocket. This evening he wore a navy sweater and a pair of black slacks—formal attire compared to his usual jeans and T-shirt. “It’ll be time for the harvest soon.”

He tried not to think of the pack that had attacked them at the bookstore in D.C. That was another life, and it couldn’t touch them now. “Will you be returning here then? To help your family?”

“Yeah.” He climbed the porch steps, his weight causing the wood to creak faintly, and rapped his knuckles on the door. “Just like every year.”

So close, his family. They were blood; they were kin. And they would do everything in their power to protect him.

Seth’s nervousness spiked as he walked up the steps, bordered on panic as he caught sight of the porch swing underneath the window. It was used often, and the smells of many humans permeated it. He could even pick out Rafe’s unique scent, although it was weeks old.

He wasn’t ready for this.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump.

“Hey,” said Rafe. “Are you okay?”

Seth looked up, saw the worry in his face as the warm, yellow light of the porch spilled over their bodies. “I-I’m all right.”

His dark eyebrows drew together. “Seth, just—”

“I won’t shift,” he said softly, knowing his own anxiety couldn’t compare to Rafe’s. “I won’t... I’ll try not to act like a wolf.” *No growling, no scratching, no sniffing the humans.*

Remember, please remember.

Rafe’s other hand came up, and warm knuckles caressed his cheek. “Don’t worry about any of that. Just relax.”

Strangely, those words, the light touch, eased some of the tension out of him, and he leaned forward to nuzzle his chest.

The front door flew open and Seth jumped back, staring wide-eyed at the tall, beaming woman standing in front of them. “There you are! We were wondering when you two would get here!”

Rafe grinned, kissing her cheek. “Hi, Mom.” He gestured to Seth. “This is Seth Anderson.”

He offered his hand. “Thank you for having me in your home, Mrs. Dirisio.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Dirisio pressed her hand to her chest. “Aren’t you precious? You can call me Maria.”

Precious? As in valuable?

Maria ushered them inside. Once in the brighter light of the living room, she placed her hands on his shoulders. “Now, let me get a good look at you.”

Seth looked, too. Rafe’s mother had dark hair and blue eyes. She was beautiful, statuesque, strong. Just like Rafe.

And she must have been at least five foot ten. Were all the Dirisios tall?

Smiling, Maria took his chin in her thumb and forefinger. She tilted his face upward, from side to side.

He wasn't sure what to make of it. Perhaps it was some sort of human greeting ritual.

Rafe left his side and he started to panic, but he only went to kiss the cheek of an old, white-haired woman sitting on a faded brown sofa. "Hello, Nonna."

She lifted a pair of thin, wrinkled hands and kissed his face. "Bentornata a casa, tesoro."

Welcome home, darling. Said with such ease, such warmth. Family. He wanted that. He wanted it with Rafe. But a Ravager, by nature, could never have a family.

Maria wrapped Seth into a tight embrace, smothering his head against her full breasts.

Poisoned heat seared into his cheek and he cried out, shoving himself back.

Everyone in the room looked at him in shock.

Only one thing could have caused that kind of pain, and Seth covered his cheek with his palm to hide it.

"What's wrong, dear?" asked Maria.

Seth couldn't answer. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the crucifix hanging around her neck, resting against the thick fabric covering her chest. The cross still had bits of his skin stuck to it.

"Jesus." Rafe leapt up and ran to him. His hand closed around Seth's wrist. "Come on, let me see."

Left with no choice, Seth let him pull his hand away. Rafe's eyes widened, and the two kind women in the room went silent.

He knew what they saw. A blistered and bloody wound in the shape of Maria's crucifix.

Maria crossed herself. Rafe's grandmother began to murmur in rapid fire Italian.

Seth fell back a step. It was over. Rafe's family would leap to protect him, and Seth didn't have the will to fight them. So he'd have to run, and he would never know such light again.

Rafe straightened away from him, and Seth shut his eyes.

"Don't be so superstitious, Nonna."

Seth glanced up. He was defending him?

"Seth has a severe allergy to silver, Mom. It can kill him."

"Oh my." She removed her necklace, careful not to touch the stained silver, and placed it on the mantle above a fireplace. "I'm sorry, dear. I had no idea."

He edged closer to Rafe. "I-It's all right."

His grandmother tottered to her feet. "L'aloe raffredderà il dolore."

Rafe looked down at him. "She says—"

"The aloe will cool my pain." Seth awkwardly nodded his head to Rafe's grandmother. "Grazie, siete molto gentili."

The old woman raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "You will call me Teresa, yes?" she asked, her thick Italian accent coloring her words.

Seth remembered what Rafe had said about her eyes being sharp, so he dropped his gaze. "Thank you, Teresa."

Maria laughed. "I can see why my son has taken to you." She looped her arm around her mother's shoulders and led her toward another room. "Let's get some aloe for our guest." She winked at Rafe. "I'll tell everyone you're here."

"Thanks, Mom."

When they disappeared from sight, Rafe leaned down and gently grasped Seth's face with both hands. "Damn. That's one hell of a burn, there."

His chest hitched. "You protected me."

"Protected you? If you ask me, I dropped the ball just now. Does it hurt?"

Silver was the worst pain imaginable to Nightkin. "Yes."

"Why isn't it healing?"

"Wounds inflicted by silver take much longer to heal. Weeks, if at all."

Rafe hissed, tilting Seth's head to the side. He blew a soft, cool stream of air across the raw skin. "Does that feel better?"

Never in his life had he been treated this way. Seth turned, touched a light kiss to his mouth. "Tender Rafe," he whispered.

Surprise flickered across his features before he smiled. "Thanks."

"Wash your mother's necklace, but don't touch it until it's clean. Nightkin blood on silver is very dangerous."

"Shh. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Rafe always took care of him. So noble. So kind. "I'm too much trouble."

"You're not. It could have happened to anyone." He

paused, chuckled. "All right, probably only to you. But it's okay."

"I should have—"

"I didn't know you spoke Italian."

The silver burn still biting into him had been worth it. To have Rafe trying so hard to ease his pain... He wanted this soft, gentle moment to last forever. "I started teaching myself the first time you told me about your family."

"Why?"

His brow furrowed. "I'm not sure. I wanted... I wanted..."

Rafe caressed his uninjured cheek. "To be closer to me?"

Seth stared up into those sapphire eyes, nodded.

"Well, look at that." His mouth crooked. "There might be hope for us after all."

Hope. Rafe was honest, so if he said such a thing existed, it must. Seth gripped his shoulders, leaning forward to nuzzle his chest.

"Big brother!"

Seth hopped back just as a tall girl with short black hair hurled herself into Rafe's arms.

He laughed and spun her in a circle before setting her down. "Sera! How was Paris?"

Locked in his embrace, she smiled up at him. "Amazing, but I still say Italian is more romantic than French, any day of the week."

A man, almost as tall as Rafe, walked in from an adjoining room. Seth caught the scent of simmering garlic and tomatoes, so he thought it must be the kitchen. "You got it wrong, sis.

French is plenty romantic, and that's okay. Italian has all the *passion*."

Rafe finally released his sister to clasp the other man's hand. "Gabe! Where are those wild kids of yours?"

"Upstairs." Frowning, he glanced up. "And suspiciously quiet."

As if on cue, something large crashed on the floor above, rattling the light fixtures.

Gabe sighed. "Ah, that's more like it."

Yet another man ran in from yet another room and jumped onto his back.

Instinct hunched Seth's shoulders. *Shift. Protect Rafe.*

But Rafe didn't need protection.

Reaching behind him, he grabbed hold of the other man and tossed him forward. "You must be losing your touch, Mike. Heard you coming a mile away."

"Please," smirked the man. "If I'd meant to take you down, you would have gone down."

Seth straightened, his gaze darting from one member of the Dirisio family to the other. So many in one room, and they were all so...so *energetic*.

Maria, Teresa, and a woman holding a toddler in her arms entered the room. Maria went straight to Seth, a small stalk of aloe vera in her hand.

"I'm sorry I took so long, sweetie." She broke the stalk in half and squeezed the clear gel onto her finger. "The marinara sauce needed stirring."

"No it didn't," said the woman with the child. "Honestly,

Mom, you should have more faith in me.”

Rafe broke from his brothers to kiss her forehead. “Hey, Angie.” He tweaked the child’s nose. “Hi, Sophie.”

The little girl giggled.

Seth watched the exchange with a stunned sort of fascination. Every single member of Rafe’s family had jet-black hair, varying shades of blue eyes. He’d known that—he’d seen the pictures—but it was quite another thing to witness it firsthand, to see how they interacted with each other.

Maria slicked the cooling aloe over his burn. “Is this helping, dear?”

He nodded.

Mike elbowed Rafe in the stomach. “So this is the guy, huh?”

Rafe rolled his eyes. “This is Seth, if that’s what you mean. Seth, this is my big brother, Mike.”

His “big” brother was about four inches shorter than Rafe, and not nearly as broad. “How do you do?”

Gabe, the other brother, raised his eyebrows. “Gee, he’s polite. I wonder what he sees in you?”

Instead of getting angry, Rafe laughed. “The one with the mouth is Gabe. He’s the oldest of the three of us.”

Gabe was bigger and taller than Mike. All three of them stood together, and Rafe dwarfed them all. What was that like? Being the youngest, and yet the strongest?

Rafe leaned forward, pointing to the women. “Angie’s my older sister, and Sera’s the baby.”

Sera hopped toward Seth and took his hands. The “baby” was at least five inches taller than him. “Oh! You’re adorable!”

Seth blushed crimson.

Angie laughed. “He really is. I’m with Gabe—What the heck does he see in you, Rafe?”

“Rafe is brave,” Seth said softly, “and noble, and good, and kind.”

Rafe glanced down at him, his lips parting.

The women in the room cooed in delight.

“Great,” said Gabe. “Now they’re all going to want one.”

Mike snorted. “Good thing your wife got called to the hospital, or she’d be in love with him, too.”

“Rose isn’t here?” asked Rafe.

“Some guy blew a vessel in his brain. She probably won’t be back until after midnight.”

“Ouch.”

“Tell me about it,” said Gabe. “For him *and* me, because I’m left alone with—”

Another resounding crash shook the light fixtures.

The authority that burst from his voice made Seth jump. “Tony! Joan! Get down here!”

Angie called up as well. “Mikey! I know you’re a part of whatever just happened, so you’d better get down here too!”

Seth stared at the ceiling as the children broke into a run. How could three pairs of feet make so much noise? If he hadn’t known better, he might have thought it was a pack of wolves racing across the floor.

Three small children, all with dark hair and blue eyes, burst into the living room.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

Both parents sighed.

“Seth,” said Angie. “This is Micah. We call him Mikey.”

“And these rugrats are Tony and Joan.”

Seth tilted his head to the side. “Anthony... Joan... Micah...” He glanced up, looking around at the rest of the family as he finally understood the pattern. “Angels and saints. That’s where all your names come from, isn’t it?”

“Hey, big brother,” said Sera. “You weren’t kidding when you said he was smart.”

“Which,” said Gabe, “once again begs the question—”

“What the heck does he see in you?” finished Mike.

Rafe rapped both men on the backs of their heads. “Yes, Seth. We’re all named after saints and angels.”

Gabe raised his hand. “Gabriel, Messenger of Truth.”

“Michael, The Warrior,” said Mike, his chest puffed out.

Angie sighed. “Angela, generic form of angel.”

Sera laughed. “Well, I didn’t get much better. A cut off form of Seraphim.”

“Girls,” said Maria, fisting her hand against her breasts. “It’s not as if there are a lot of female angels to choose from in the Bible.”

“You could have gone to other sources.” Angie kissed the little girl she still held in her arms. “I got ‘Sophia’ from

gnostic lore.”

“Gnostic lore is not canon.”

Sera jerked her thumb at Rafe. “You got *his* name from the Apocrypha.”

“No,” said Teresa, patting him on the arm. “This one is different. I was sent a dream while your mother was pregnant with him. That is how we knew what his name would be.”

Seth’s gaze drifted to Rafe. “Which angel is Raphael?”

His eyes were steady as a smile curved his lips. “The Healer.”

Unbidden, Seth’s hand went to his injured cheek.

“...the angel you need most is always the one closest to you.”

Before he had a chance to ponder that, Maria clucked her tongue and spread more aloe onto his skin.

“Don’t worry, dear. We’ll take good care of you.”

Rafe chuckled before looking around. “So where’s Pop?”

“Out back,” said Mike.

“Chopping wood,” said Gabe.

He frowned. “And why aren’t you guys helping him?”

“He wanted to do it himself,” they said in unison.

Rafe shook his head. “Useless, both of ya.” He glanced at Seth and nodded toward the back of the house. “Want to come and meet my father?”

The idea of being left alone under the scrutiny of this family terrified him, so he quickly went to Rafe’s side.

Rafe winked down at him before leading him to the back porch.

Again, the scent of corn and chickens and cows and pigs filled his nose. It was so rich, so natural. It made him want to shift and hunt and howl.

Rafe's hand between his shoulder blades soothed the beast inside of him. "Liking the fresh air?"

The urge to shift subsided. "The air is different here, even from Brier."

"You doing okay? I know my family can be a lot to handle, and you got a full dose of them back there."

Careful of his injury, Seth slipped his arms around Rafe and finally nuzzled his chest.

He chuckled, and Seth inhaled deeply.

"Cut it out," he said, gently pushing him back. "That tickles."

Seth smiled, trying not to wince with the pain it brought to his cheek.

Rafe grabbed the railing that lined the porch and hopped over it. "You can take the stairs, over—"

Seth landed on the ground beside him.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Rafe looked him over. "I thought you didn't have any wolf strength in your human form."

"Human strength is no small thing, Rafe."

He grinned and walked around to the side of the house, where an older man was chopping wood. He had the same Dirisio jet-black hair, with shocks of white at his temples.

"Hey, Pop. Why don't you let me take care of that for you?"

The man straightened and wiped the sweat from his brow, his burly frame illuminated by the light spilling from the house. "Rafe! When did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago." He looped his arm around Seth. "Seth, this is my father, John Dirisio."

"After John the Baptist?"

"Yep," he said, as if people asked him that question every day. He rubbed the palm of his weathered hand against his jeans and held it out. "Rafe thinks the world of you, which means you must be a good guy."

Shaking his hand, Seth glanced up at Rafe. Did he still think the world of him? Or had all that changed the moment he showed his Nightkin nature?

His troubled thoughts vanished when Rafe whipped off his sweater and handed it to him. "I'll finish up," he said to his father. "You go in and play with the grandkids."

John grunted, but gave him the axe. "I should take a shower, too. Your mother will forgive *you* for bringing woodchips to the dinner table, but she'll show me no such mercy." He chucked Rafe on the chin with his fist and patted Seth on the shoulder. "Nice to finally meet you, Seth," he said, walking away. Seth nodded, but his gaze never left Rafe as he clutched the sweater close.

They'd seen each other naked too many times to count, yet the sight of Rafe's body always shocked him. The low light couldn't hide the ripple of muscle that undulated beneath the human's skin, even as he did something as simple as test the weight of the axe in his hands. The dark, rough hair on his

torso only accentuated the deep lines and arcs that formed him in flawless symmetry. His broad shoulders tapered down to a relatively narrow waist, turning his upper body into a perfect triangle. It made Seth salivate.

He wanted to have sex. *Now*. And his fists twisted deeper into the sweater as he tried to hold back the wolf inside him.

It was so hard lately to keep the beast at bay. The sight of Rafe, his scent, his very *voice* made him want to shift and take. He'd managed to stay in control this past week, but Rafe still feared him, and it was like a siren's song to the Ravager within.

Rafe picked up a log, setting it upright on the level tree stump. "You don't have to watch me do this, Seth. It's pretty boring."

He held the axe horizontal, measuring distance, and abruptly brought it over his head. With no delay he swung it down and the blade sliced cleanly through the wood, splitting it into two equal pieces. His movements were relaxed as he placed the firewood on a stack and readied another log.

"Seth?" He effortlessly split that one as well. "Did you hear me?"

The muscles in Rafe's shoulders, his back, and his arms all flexed and bunched with each powerful stroke. Seth took a step forward. "Tell me to stay."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Say that word. Stay."

His brow furrowed, and Seth could sense his uneasiness. "Why?"

Because Rafe was Alpha, and he wanted desperately to be part of his pack. To belong to him. “Please.”

Rafe’s hands tightened on the axe until his fingers turned white. At first, he seemed about to deny him, then he turned to set another log on the stump. “Stay.”

Seth gasped softly, walked around to stare at his profile.

He split much more wood than seemed necessary for one night. But maybe he was trying to help his father, to give him enough to last the week. Families—packs—they did things like that for each other, right?

Beads of sweat formed on Rafe’s tan skin, streaming down his body in shining rivulets. One of those beads pooled on the rounded muscle capping his shoulder and rolled down to the hill of his biceps. Without thinking, Seth closed the distance between them and licked up the salty essence with the tip of his tongue.

Rafe jumped and yanked the axe back. “Fuck, Seth! You shouldn’t surprise me when I’m swinging a blade around!”

His shoulders fell forward, and he dropped his gaze. “I-I’m sorry.”

For several seconds, the only sound in the air was Rafe’s harsh breathing. When he finally spoke, it was with resignation. “It’s fine. No one got hurt.”

Seth lifted his head. “Bad Seth?”

He frowned like he had when asked to say “stay,” but he shook his head. “No. Just don’t go lapping at my skin in front of my family, okay?”

Rafe didn’t want him to act the wolf. It was a necessity

with a human family, and Seth would obey because Rafe was Alpha. He'd do anything for this man, even hide half his soul. "All right."

"I guess we have enough wood here." He set the axe aside. "We should be getting in so I can clean up for dinner."

Something pricked at his ears. Not Nightkin, nor another magical creature, but...

Then Rafe heard it too. A soft growl. He turned, a smile in his voice. "Alto? Come here, boy."

A large sable haired dog loped up to him.

Rafe crouched down, ruffling its hair and ears and body. He dipped his head and let it lick at his face. "Right back at ya, fella."

Still holding Rafe's sweater, Seth's fists clenched tight. *He* was not allowed to lick him, and yet the *dog* was welcomed. Hot, irrational envy boiled inside of him as he bared his teeth.

The hackles on the dog arched as it growled at him in earnest.

Rafe hooked an arm around it as he glanced up at Seth. "What's going on?"

"He's part wolf," he gritted out.

He smiled. "Yeah, about a quarter, I think."

Wolf in the dog was a source of pride, but wolf in the *man* brought only shame. Darkness flooded his body, the kind only a Ravager could embrace.

Alto tried to leap for him, but Rafe locked his hold just in time. "What the hell!"

Seth's voice crept closer and closer to a growl. "He knows I'm omega. He's trying to protect his pack and his territory."

The muscles in Rafe's arms swelled with the effort of holding back his dog. "Seth, *stop it.*"

His words hit him like a physical blow, and the darkness dissipated to give way to pain. "You choose him over me?"

"No." It tried to leap at Seth again, and he tightened his arms around it. "But I can't exactly *reason* with Alto, can I?"

Seth stared at the angry dog. "You love him?"

"Yes."

He tilted his head to the side. "He's... He's a member of your family?"

"*Yes.*"

Wanting to be good, wanting Rafe to be happy, Seth did the only thing he could do. He dropped to his knees before the dog. "I am Seth Anderson, and I humbly ask permission to tread upon your territory." Holding Rafe's sweater in one arm, he braced his other hand on the cold ground and lowered his head.

"Seth, what are you—"

"It's all right, Rafe." Seth shut his eyes, leaned forward, and bared his throat. "Your scent is all over me, so he'll know I mean you no harm."

He felt the dog's hot breath on his skin just before its teeth closed over his neck. Rafe's fear perfumed the air, and he wondered why as the contact ended almost as soon as it had begun.

LONE

Seth straightened, keeping his gaze on the animal. "Thank you for granting me this honor, Alto."

It settled back onto its haunches, wagging its tail.

Slowly, Rafe let him go. "Can he understand you?"

"Yes, but on a different level than words can convey."

Rafe patted Alto's head before rising to his feet.

Seth followed suit, staring up at him.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and looked away.

"Thanks for not hurting him."

The awkward silence carved a canyon between them, and Seth searched for a way to bridge it. No matter how hard he tried, he kept stumbling into mistakes brought on by his Nightkin nature. But he didn't want the hope he'd tasted so briefly to vanish. "Is... Is Alto named after a saint or an angel?"

Rafe turned his head, met his gaze. "Saint."

"I've never heard of him."

A slow breath flowed out of him and he reached down, grabbing an armful of firewood. "Not much to tell. Hermit, missionary." He led him back to the house. "Took forever to find a name for him. Can't really name a dog 'Thomas' or 'Christopher,' you know?"

"Are there any saints named 'Seth'?"

He took the porch steps two at a time. "Not that I can remember, but we can ask Angie. She has a degree in Christian Theology."

Seth wasn't sure he wanted to ask. Everyone in Rafe's

LONE

family had a holy name, even the ones who were members by marriage. Similar patterns occurred in wolf packs. If his name possessed no divine significance...

Could Rafe ever truly accept him?

CHAPTER 11

“It’s gotta be a trick.”

“Yeah, it’s impossible.”

“It’s not a trick. You only need to move three to invert the triangle.”

Rafe relaxed on the living room couch as Mikey, Joan, and Tony studied the ten pennies Seth had arranged on the coffee table. They’d been fascinated with him since dinner, and he seemed just as fascinated sitting there on the carpet with them.

Beside him, Gabe rested his elbows on his knees. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen them sit so still for so long.”

“He really is very good with children,” said Angie. She sat on his other side, and the three of them took up most of the

couch. Sera was perched on the padded arm, quietly watching Seth.

“Yeah,” said Rafe. “There was a little girl on the plane who adored him on sight.”

Joan put her finger on one of the pennies and looked up at Seth, who shook his head. She bit her lower lip and stared down at the makeshift puzzle again.

Angie gently shifted a sleeping Sophie in her arms. “Nonna likes him. That’s always a good sign.”

His grandmother had pulled Seth aside just before dinner, and they were alone together for several minutes. Rafe still wondered what they’d talked about, but Nonna had refused to share, and she’d gone to bed a while ago. “He’s a good guy.”

Seth’s fair skin tinted red, and he knew those keen ears had been paying close attention to the conversation.

Mike walked in and handed Rafe a beer. “Well, Mom’s finished inspecting our job in the kitchen. She and Pop are in bed now.”

His siblings raised their hands.

“Didn’t you forget a few people?” asked Gabe.

“Where’s our beer?” asked Angie.

Mike smirked and settled himself into an armchair. “Get it yourselves. I’m only being nice to Rafe because we haven’t seen him in six weeks.”

Sera straightened. “Um, hello? Rafe lives five hours away. I’ve been in *Paris* for the last eight months! They don’t really go for beer over there. They’re all about the wine.”

Mike took a taunting drink from his bottle. “You’re too

young to imbibe anywhere but at communion.”

“I’m twenty-six!”

“Rafe cut firewood.”

“I scrubbed pots.”

“Okay, I just don’t like you. Happy?”

Rafe chuckled softly before letting his gaze drift to Seth. He was watching them, his head tilted to the side. Like a puppy trying to figure out what had the humans all riled up.

He shoved the thought away. Seth wasn’t a puppy. He was...well he wasn’t a *dog*.

Alto barked outside. Probably a squirrel or something, but it made him think about the look on Seth’s face a few hours ago. He’d never seen him so angry when he wasn’t in Ravager form. What had caused it?

Jealousy?

Of a dog?

And that thing where he’d bared his throat. Rafe had been scared to death that Alto was going to take his head off, and the only thing that kept him from taking action was the risk of startling the two of them into a fight.

Tony jumped up. “I did it! I turned the triangle upside down!” He threw his arms around Seth, knocking him to the floor.

Rafe started to get up, but then Seth laughed.

When was the last time Seth laughed?

The other kids pounced, and he tumbled around with them. Gentle, at ease. Rafe settled back as he took a swig of beer. It was good to see him having fun.

"There we go," said Angie.

Gabe smiled. "That's the pack of wolves we know and love."

Rafe choked on his beer and had a coughing fit.

"You all right, little brother?" asked Mike as Gabe pounded on his back.

He cleared his throat. "J-Just went down the wrong pipe."

Seth was still playing on the carpet with the kids. He made a sound too much like a yip, and Rafe took a long, long drink.

"Hey, Rafe?" said Angie. "Can I ask you something?"

As long as it's not about werewolves. "Sure."

Her voice dropped. "Seth...he seems a little...young."

"Yeah," said Mike. "You've never been one to rob the cradle."

Rafe wiped some of the beaded moisture from his bottle. "Seth's three years older than I am."

Angie's eyes rounded. "Are you serious?"

"No way," whispered Mike.

He glanced up, caught the startled expression on Seth's face. Apparently he hadn't known that either. Over three months together and what did they have? Not even the basics.

Mikey tackled him, and they were all a tangle of arms and legs again.

"Rafe."

He turned his head to look at Gabe.

"He's fragile, isn't he?"

Depended on which Seth was in control. "In some ways. In others he's probably the strongest" —*Nightkin/ werewolf/*

Ravage — “person I know.”

“You’ve never brought a guy home to meet *all* of us before, unless you count that disaster of a boyfriend you had in college when you came out. This one seems complicated, and you seem committed. Are you sure you’re ready?”

His mouth crooked. Gabe had a way of making him see the hard issues. “I’m sure I’m not.”

“Hey,” said Mike, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “If he smashes your heart, I’ll kick his ass for ya, okay?”

He chuckled, took another sip of beer as he envisioned Seth’s eyes going black. “I doubt that.”

Sera hopped to her feet, walking right to the tangle of children and Seth. “Okay kids, it’s my turn with him now.”

They whined and she clapped her hands before shooing them away.

Seth stared up at her, looking downright scared, before glancing at Rafe.

He smiled to put him at ease.

The tension left his body and he rose to his feet.

“I have to take your picture,” she announced, her voice taking on a tone Rafe knew all too well.

Almost frantic, he shook his head. “No.” His gaze darted to Rafe, back to her. “I mean, no thank you.”

Sera draped her arm around his shoulders. “Camera shy? I promise you it’ll be painless.”

“I prefer not to have my picture taken.”

“I’m almost famous, you know.” She grinned and leaned into him. “You’ll be able to tell people you own a Sera Di.”

“Di?” asked Seth.

“My professional name.”

Mike whistled.

“Do Mom and Pop know?” asked Angie.

Gabe chuckled. “They can’t, or we all would’ve heard an earful tonight.”

“They’re gonna think you’ve shirked your heritage,” said Mike. “It’ll be an explosion of cataclysmic proportions.”

“I think it sounds sophisticated,” Sera said defensively.

Seth’s soft voice drew all of their attention.

“Dirisio is beautiful, and it connects you to such a beautiful family. Why would you want to sever that tie?”

Gabe raised an eyebrow. “Point one for the little guy.”

Angie and Mike murmured their agreement.

Sera stared down at him, considering, and broke into a smile. “And that’s why I have to take your picture.”

“Does that count as a point for Sera?” asked Mike.

“Hard to say,” said Gabe. “It wasn’t particularly clever or profound.”

She stuck her tongue out at them before pouting at Rafe. “You know how good I am. Don’t you want a picture of him?”

He blew out a heavy breath. “I do, actually.” But Seth had been running all his life, and something like that would push any man’s feeling about photography way beyond camera shyness. Rafe wanted him to stay relaxed, like he’d been since dinner. “It’s his choice, though. You shouldn’t try and force him to get his picture taken.”

“And he was in our house for all of two seconds when

Mom scarred his face,” said Mike. “Can’t blame him for not feeling photogenic.”

Seth touched his cheek, his gaze on Rafe alone. “You’d like a picture of me, Rafe?”

He was always so eager to please. “Not if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Seth hesitated, glanced up at Sera.

Rafe leaned back against the couch, making sure to keep his voice casual. “We get the negatives. Right, sis?”

Her excitement bubbled out of her, making her bounce. “Sure! I just want to take the picture.”

“How do you feel about that, Seth?”

His hand fell away from his cheek. “A-All right.”

“Cool! Stay right there while I grab my stuff.” Sera bolted from the room, her feet pounding the stairs. It always amazed him how such a slender girl could sound like a baby elephant when she ran.

The kids surrounded him again. “Do you have any more puzzles like the one with the pennies?” asked Mikey.

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

Seth glanced down at them. “Well, there’s one with toothpicks—”

“Not so fast, ankle biters,” said Gabe, rising to his feet. “It’s time for bath, teeth, and bed.”

Tony and Joan whined. Mikey snickered.

“I don’t know what you’re laughing about, young man.” Angie stood, cradling Sophie close. “You’re going right

upstairs with them.”

“Aw, *Mom*. ”

“Don’t ‘aw, Mom’ me. Scat!”

Mikey ran up the stairs; Tony and Joan followed close behind.

Gabe glanced at Angie. “Five bucks says your kid drops a toothbrush in the toilet before one of mine do.”

She laughed. “You’re on.”

Gabe took Sophie from Angie’s arms, letting her stretch. “We’ll see you guys in a bit.”

Mike raised his bottle. “To the joys of parenthood.”

Rafe clinked his bottle against Mike’s. “Amen.”

Sera came down as Gabe and Angie went up, carrying a light meter and a camera mounted on a tripod.

Mike shot a sidelong glance at Rafe. “She spends a few months in Paris and suddenly every picture is a production.”

“Damned straight.” Sera set her tripod on the floor. “Anything worth doing is worth doing right.”

“Good to know they have clichés in Europe too,” said Mike, coughing into his hand.

Sera ignored him, holding up the light meter and taking Seth’s hand. “How about one by the fireplace?”

He nodded, standing awkwardly by the mantle.

“Relax.” She bent over and kissed his cheek.

The look on his face was priceless, and Rafe had to grin.

When Sera started snapping pictures, Mike moved to sit on the couch beside him. “This could last for hours, you realize that.”

“Gotta love her passion,” said Rafe, as he watched Seth try and force a smile. The expression was just a baring of teeth.

Okay, so it wouldn’t be a pretty picture, but at least he’d have one.

“Passion. That’s a nice word for it. I would have gone with *obsession*, or *compulsion*.”

Sera clucked her tongue. “You’re so nervous!” She jerked her thumb at Rafe and Mike. “Is it because these lugs are staring at us?” Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed his hand and picked up her tripod, dragging him into another room.

Rafe frowned. “Do you think I should rescue him?”

“Nah. He’s gotta learn how to deal with us sooner or later, right?”

He chuckled. “I guess so.”

“You’re really into him, aren’t you?”

A long drink from his bottle of beer was his answer.

“I meant what I said before. If he breaks you, I’m kickin’ his ass.”

“Trust me. That’s not possible.”

“What? You think just because he’s half my size I won’t do it? You’re the nicest one of us, but you’ve always been careful with your heart. If he abuses that, I won’t give a shit how small he is. You’re still my baby brother, even if you are nine feet tall.”

“Six foot six,” he corrected calmly. “And thanks. I appreciate that.” There was no convincing him that he couldn’t hold his own with Seth in a fight. Mike had been a

LONE

Marine, and was a black belt in three different schools of martial arts.

The warrior, just like his name. And Gabe had all the insight.

So did that mean Rafe really was a healer? His hand tightened on his bottle.

No, because he'd done jack shit with healing Seth's wounds. He had no clue where to start. He was beginning to doubt it was possible.

Sera reappeared, still holding Seth's hand, and disappeared into another room.

"I'm telling you," said Mike. "Hours. Want another beer?"

Rafe grinned. "Nah." It felt good, being with his family. Especially after that craziness in D.C. He appreciated them so much more now. All his life, Seth had been...what was the word he always used?

Lone. Somehow, that word was more heartbreaking than "alone" or "lonely."

He remembered his brother and moved on to different subjects. They talked about this year's crop, about football, about Mike's love life. Normal things. Safe things. After a while, Angie and Gabe returned, joined in the conversation.

It was a good hour before they saw Seth and Sera again.

"Finally," said Rafe. "I was beginning to think you'd decided to *paint* those pictures."

"So funny," she said wryly. "Just so happens I'm not done yet."

Gabe shook his head. "For the love of all that is holy, Sera.

Give the poor guy a break.”

“Hey, I was all ready to tie things up. Seth had a request. He wants to take a picture with Rafe.”

Rafe’s gaze went to Seth. “That true?”

Seth smiled back at him. Still shy, but there was no mistaking his excitement. “Yes. Please.”

He set his bottle on the coffee table and stood, holding out his hand. Seth smiled as he came forward to take it. “Where do you want it?”

“Fireplace?”

His mouth crooked. “Sounds good to me.”

Rafe led him to the other end of the room and sat down on the brick hearth. Seth sat on the floor, nestling himself back against him, between his thighs. As if they’d been this way a thousand times, as if he belonged there.

“Okay,” said Sera, setting up the tripod in front of them. “Get comfortable.”

Rafe leaned forward, pressing his cheek against Seth’s as he slid his arms around his tight little body. Seth reached up, curved his palms over Rafe’s forearms.

“Too cute,” said Gabe.

“No argument there,” said Mike.

Angie just cooed.

Sera snapped three pictures and straightened. “*Now* I’m done.”

Gabe and Mike applauded, only to be hushed by Angie, who reminded them that the kids were light sleepers.

Gabe let loose a huge yawn. “I think I’m about ready to

join them.”

“Me too,” said Angie.

Sera stretched. “Definitely time to hit the hay.”

Mike crouched in front of Seth. “You want to help me milk the cows in the morning?”

“I don’t know how to milk cows,” he said, nestling himself deeper into Rafe’s hold. “Will you teach me?”

His mouth curved in approval. “Sure thing. See ya at dawn.”

His brothers and sisters left the two of them alone by the fireplace. Seth twisted around. “Are we going to bed as well?”

Rafe stared at the cross shaped scar on his cheek, still blistered and raw. “I need to take a shower, and so do you. You smell like dog.”

Seth winced, and Rafe realized he’d fucked up. Again.

“Alto. You smell like Alto because you let him close his teeth around your neck.”

Thankfully, his face cleared. “All right. I’ll shower.”

It was disconcerting how Seth agreed to whatever he wanted. And, if anything, he’d gotten *more* submissive over the past week. He didn’t understand it.

Of course, he didn’t really understand anything about Seth, did he?

* * *

Rafe crept down the stairs and through the kitchen door. The unexpected light made him blink, and when his vision cleared he saw Sera standing in front of the fridge. “I thought

you were going to bed.”

Her gaze stayed focused on the contents of the refrigerator. “I wanted to get those pictures developed, since you’re leaving after breakfast tomorrow.”

“You could have mailed them, or driven down to drop them off.”

She straightened, holding up a bottle filled halfway with milk. Rafe nodded and she poured two glasses. “I wanted you to see them as soon as possible.”

Glass in hand, Rafe leaned back against the counter. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing like that.” She picked up a manila envelope and handed it to him. “See for yourself.”

He took a gulp of milk and set the glass on the counter. Opening the envelope, he pulled out a small stack of black and white pictures. The first one had Seth baring his teeth, and he grinned. “He really doesn’t like cameras.”

“Check out the next one.”

Rafe moved the photo to the bottom of the stack, and his heart just about stopped when he saw the next image. Seth looked right into the camera, and he wasn’t smiling. “Jesus.”

“There’s nothing special about the angle I used, or the lens, or the pose itself; but you can see it, can’t you? That flawless isolation.”

Yes, he could see it. Something about the eyes—a yearning, quiet sort of despair—that Sera had captured perfectly. He went on to the next picture. This one portrayed Seth’s whole body as he leaned against a tree out front. It was

here, too. The solitude. Made more poignant by the quarter moon hanging in the background.

“Seth,” he whispered, trailing his fingers over the picture.

“Now, look at the fourth one.”

He did, and it was another headshot. Seth wasn’t smiling in this one, either, but something was different. Something profound. “He doesn’t seem lonely in this one. At all.”

Sera took a step closer. “I told him to think of you.”

Rafe lifted his head. “Me?”

“It was like... I don’t know. Like every bit of sadness he’d ever felt in his life just evaporated.”

He glanced down at the pictures in his hands and moved on to the next. Seth’s smile, genuine and brilliant, lit up the photo. “What the hell is he thinking about in this one?”

She leaned forward, her short dark locks falling over her forehead. “Oh, I was telling him about the time I fell into the pig pen. How Mike jumped in and got me, how Gabe chewed me out, how you cleaned up my cuts and scrapes. Seth loved hearing stories about the family, especially if they involved you.”

Rafe looked over the rest of the pictures. There was a profile shot, highlighting the new scar on his face. A photo of him sitting cross-legged on the floor with his head tilted to the side as he stared up at the camera. And, of course, the three pictures of them together in front of the fireplace. In the first, Seth had been caught off-guard, and his expression was blank. But in the other two that same joy, that same brilliance, shined through.

So well that it jarred him when he found himself staring at the first picture again. "These are fantastic, Sera."

"Well, it's not all cheese and wine in France, you know. I *did* go there to learn something."

He laughed, covering his mouth with one hand to keep his voice down.

"So is Seth in bed or what? I'm sure we wore the little guy out."

"Finishing up his shower about now. He and Alto got pretty close."

Sera swept up her glass of milk and drained it. "Alto try and lick him to death?"

The memory brought back a slew of doubts. "Actually, they got off to a rocky start."

"You're kidding. Alto loves everyone."

Apparently not if they had some kind of mystical wolf blood running through their veins. "Not Seth."

She yawned and patted him on the arm as she left the kitchen. "The rest of us like him, so no worries."

"Yeah," he said, looking through the pictures one more time before sliding them back into the envelope. "No worries."

He turned off the lights and went upstairs to his old room. The posters on the wall, mostly depicting football players from a decade ago, made him feel like a teenager again. Seth sat on his heels in the center of the bed, wearing a pair of black pajama bottoms and an old white T-shirt. His head darted up when Rafe walked in, and he smiled.

Rafe grinned and set the envelope on a nearby dresser,

careful not to knock over his athletics trophies. As a teenager, he would never have had a guy in his bedroom. "Did you have fun today?"

"Your family... They're so..."

"I know," he said, pulling his shirt off over his head.

"They love you so much."

"They do, at that."

Seth fell forward, bracing his hands on the mattress. "Do you think they like me?"

"They adore you."

"Really?"

Rafe stripped off his pants. He had on a pair of boxer shorts tonight, a rarity for him. "Really."

Seth's gaze slid over his body. "Rafe?"

"Yeah?"

He lifted his head. "Good Seth?"

His brow furrowed before he sighed and leaned back against the dresser. "Yes."

If Seth had a tail, it would've been wagging.

Bad Seth. Good Seth. Strong Rafe. Tender Rafe. Simple words that were associated with a name. Like you would say to a dog. Or, he supposed, a wolf in human form. Was this part of his culture?

He crossed his arms over his chest. "This may not be the best time, but I want to have a talk with you."

Seth settled back onto his haunches, head tilted to the side. "About what?"

"About you. About werewolves."

He blanched, but nodded his agreement.

Now that he'd forced the issue, where was the best place to start? He remembered how surprised his brothers and sisters were when they'd found out Seth's age. "How long do werewolves live?"

"The average werewolf has the same life expectancy as a healthy human being."

Good thing he'd quit smoking then.

"Why did you ask me that?"

Rafe stared down at the floor. "Because you look so young. I thought maybe... I don't know. You would live forever."

"Vampires are the only Nightkin with a chance at immortality."

An involuntary shudder went through him when he remembered the one and only vampire he'd ever seen. And that one had licked him.

"Rafe."

He looked up, the breath skittering in his chest when he saw the troubled expression on Seth's face. "What?"

Seth hesitated. "I've already exceeded the life expectancy of a Ravager."

Something cold and sick cracked him open. "Are you telling me you're going to die soon?"

"I—"

"What is it? Heart problem? Kidney failure?" He struggled to keep the panic out of his voice. "Is it something we can fix?"

Confusion flitted over his features. “Ravagers are usually killed at birth. If not, then most are put down by age twenty.”

The tightness in his chest eased. “You’re thirty-two.”

“The odds of a Ravager reaching my age are one in ten thousand.” He glanced away. “That’s just my estimate. It’s hard to be accurate because the Chronicles are closed to me.”

“Chronicles?”

“There’s a place—only the Council knows where it’s located—that contains the sum of Nightkin history. There’s even a file for me. RW3228.”

Reduced to a file number. This “Council” didn’t consider him human, or werewolf. Just something to be exterminated.

Deciding they’d talked enough about this stuff tonight, Rafe climbed into bed.

“You’re not naked,” Seth said softly.

“Neither are you.”

Disappointment radiated from him. “But you’re always naked when you come to bed.”

He chuckled. “There are four kids in this house who don’t know the meaning of the word ‘knock.’ My brothers and sisters aren’t much better.”

Seth exhaled a heavy breath.

Smiling, Rafe lifted the covers to let him crawl underneath.

Seth’s tongue darted out as he tentatively licked his chest.

His muscles tensed. “Why do you do that?”

Pained, Seth gripped his shoulders and pulled himself on top of him. “You let your dog do it.”

“You’re not a dog.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "You liked it before...before you knew what I was."

Rafe paused. He'd never thought of it that way. "I guess I did."

"Then why don't you like it now?"

He reached up and threaded his fingers through Seth's hair. "I don't have a good answer to that."

Shivering, Seth pressed his head deeper into Rafe's palm. "You don't do this anymore. I miss it."

His hand stilled a second, before he continued stroking his damp brown hair. "It feels good?"

"Yes," he whispered, lowering his head. The tip of his nose skimmed his cheek, the curve of his neck, his shoulder.

"Why are you always smelling me?"

Seth lifted his head. "I can't explain it."

"Try."

He frowned, but it was with concentration. "Your scent. It's so..." His frown deepened, and a low growl escaped him. "I can never find the words."

Rafe cocked an eyebrow, but he kept himself from moving away. "Try," he said again, gently this time.

Seth stared down at him, his body tense as he made a second attempt. "The night we met, in your pool hall, I had your scent before I'd even seen you. When you introduced yourself, it was your scent that drew me to you, and it was the reason I went home with you."

Great. Their entire relationship was based on his scent. No wonder it had almost shattered so many times. "So, basically,

you would have hopped into bed with anyone who smelled like me.”

The black of his pupils bled into his irises. “*No one smells like you.*”

Rafe’s body started. What the—

“Rafe smells like fire and earth and water and sky.” Erratic, agitated, Seth dug sharpening fingers into his skin. “Rafe is brave and noble and good and kind.”

He’d never heard that kind of ferocity before, from anyone. Maybe scents were different for Seth, maybe they told a werewolf more than they would a human. “Okay,” he said softly, stroking his hair again. “Okay.”

Almost instantly, he grew calmer. “I-I scared you,” he said wretchedly.

He couldn’t deny it. Looked like they were going to spend quite a bit of time talking about werewolves, after all. “You’re so many people, Seth. Submissive one minute, wild the next. I never know what to expect.”

When he tried to cringe away, Rafe locked his arms around him.

“My Nightkin nature.”

“Explain it to me.”

Seth stretched out over him, laid his head on his chest. “So hard.”

“I know.”

Seconds ticked by, but Rafe let him take his time as he stroked his hair.

“I’m not a lot of people; I’m only one. In different

situations, certain strengths and weaknesses get amplified.”

That didn’t sound so different from humans, really. “Weaknesses? Like when you cringe if I raise my voice? Or when you bend over backwards to do what I say?”

Tension tightened his body. “That is not a weakness. You are Alpha.”

Rafe frowned. “Alpha?”

Seth slid off his body, running a palm along Rafe’s chest. “So big. Strong.” He grazed his teeth over a nipple. “You’re very much like an Alpha wolf.”

The passion just beginning to rise died away. “I’m sure the hair on my body doesn’t hurt.”

Seth rose up and looked into his eyes, a soft smile on his lips.

But Rafe couldn’t return it. “If you can’t get yourself a wolf, then you’re willing to settle for a human who’s close. Is that it? Is that why you stayed with me so long, Seth?”

“No!” He sat up, his face pale with shock. “I...” He tugged at his hair. “I got the words wrong again.”

Instinct made him reach out, untangle Seth’s fingers from his hair. “Let me make it easy for you. A simple yes or no question. If you could change me into a werewolf, would you?”

Seth glanced away, and Rafe started to leave the bed.

“Rafe!” He threw his arms around him, clutching him tight. “Stay.” His voice dropped. “Stay.”

Slowly, he sat on the mattress.

“You’re the only person in my memory, Nightkin or

human, who's been good to me." Still clinging to him, Seth kissed his cheek. "If I had a choice, I wouldn't change you into a werewolf. I'd change *myself* into a human being. To be what you are."

Rafe jerked backward to look down at him. His expression was so desperate, earnest. It drew him in, and he caressed his cheek. "I don't want to be Alpha, Seth."

The words made him gasp. "You don't want me?"

"Where the hell did that come from?"

He dropped his gaze, trailing his fingers over Rafe's shoulders, his arms. "If you aren't Alpha, how can I belong to you?"

"Ah, Seth." Rafe cupped his chin, lifted his face. "Is that why you shrink when my temper gets up? Because you think I own you, and that I could toss you away if you piss me off?"

"Yes...no." He squeezed his eyes shut. "You protect me. You teach me. You are *Alpha*, Rafe."

"You've protected me, and you've taught me about a world I never even knew existed."

Bewilderment shook his small body. "Seth is omega. *Rafe* is Alpha."

Seeing the damage he was doing made him soften his voice. "Do you know your sentences deteriorate when things get intense for you? It happens when you're a Ravager, too. You go from eloquent to guttural and back again."

Seth pressed the heel of his hand into his forehead. "Rafe pays attention?"

Gently, he grasped Seth's wrist to pull his hand from his

LONE

face. “Yes, Rafe pays attention.” He slipped his arms around him, drew them down to the mattress. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push you.”

Bit by bit, his rigid body relaxed and curled against him. “Good Seth?”

Rafe closed his eyes. “Very good.”

The question remained, however, of how good *Rafe* could be.

CHAPTER 12

“Rafe, it’s your turn.”

His hands curled tighter around his pool cue as he glanced at Seth. “Say what?”

Seth’s lips parted. Rafe had been staring right at the table, but hadn’t been paying attention to the game. “It’s your turn.”

“Oh.” He leaned over, lining up his shot. The five ball dropped into the corner pocket, but he scratched the next one. “Shit,” he murmured, retrieving the cue ball and tossing it to Seth.

Rafe...didn’t make simple mistakes like that. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said, rolling his neck and rubbing his shoulder.

“Tired, is all. I go away for a week and come back to a month’s worth of work. Taking forever to catch up.”

Seth glanced around the empty pool hall. They often snuck in a game before the doors opened, but Rafe had been working long hours since they’d returned to Brier. He shouldn’t have asked for this today, he should have been more considerate. “Bad Seth,” he whispered.

“What was that?”

Preparing to lie, Seth met his gaze. But those blue eyes made it hard. “B-Bad—” He snapped his mouth shut, knowing Rafe didn’t like to hear him say those kinds of things.

Rafe’s face softened. “I’m having fun. It’s nice, you know? The quiet.”

This didn’t feel right. Rafe was kind, attentive. His voice was gentle. He said he was having fun, but...

Seth realized with a start that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Rafe smile. It couldn’t have been when they’d gone to visit his family, could it? That was five days ago.

Desperate, Seth put the cue ball on the table, angled his stick, and made it hop over the seven to knock the six into a side pocket.

Rafe straightened. “Nice shot.”

But still no smile. “Want me to teach you how to do it?”

“Sure.”

Seth rushed to fetch the six and the cue ball, setting them in their original places. He lifted his head, his hands trembling. “W-Wouldn’t you be able to see it better if you were on this

side of the table?"

"Right," he said, walking around. He propped his cue stick against the table and braced his hands against the railing. "Show me."

He looked interested, but not particularly excited. Not like he would have been a few weeks ago. "Rafe, I want..." The sentence trailed, and he stared up at the big man helplessly.

Rafe lifted a hand, hovering over Seth's hair for the barest of moments before dipping to caress his face. "What do you want?"

I want you to pet my head. I want you to smile. I want—

"You." Seth let his cue stick clatter to the floor and grabbed Rafe's shirt. "I told you that already."

Every muscle in his body tensed, but he lowered his head. "We've got a few hours before the staff gets here. Want to have a little private time in my office?"

A trace of the human's fear tickled his senses, but Seth forced himself to ignore it as he nodded.

Without another word, Rafe took his hand and led him toward the back of the pool hall.

Seth gave him all control, lost in strong arms, in gentle kisses. He leashed the wolf inside, determined to give Rafe a chance to lose himself as well. And after this...

After this perhaps they could rest.

* * *

"You wish Raphael to fight for you, to speak for you, to heal your wounds. You want his body, his heart, his soul. I can

see in my grandson that he is willing to give you all these things. But what do you offer in return?"

Trying not to let Teresa's words haunt him yet again, Seth walked down the pathway leading to Rafe's home.

Their home. Rafe had said it, and Rafe was honest.

Of course, Teresa had been honest as well the night he'd spent with the Dirisio family. When she'd pulled him aside and asked him what he had to offer, he had no answer. A week later, he hadn't been able to think of one.

Rafe still hadn't smiled.

Was he really draining the life from his lover? Could Rafe *die* from his very presence?

Seth scrubbed at his face, smothering a whimper with his palm. He tried. He wanted Rafe to be happy. But Rafe needed love, and Ravagers were incapable. He'd tried to give *himself*, but Rafe didn't want to be Alpha.

Although he'd lived among humans all his life, many of their ways were a mystery. There were Alphas in human society, so why did this one balk at the idea?

It wasn't right to think of a human as a mate. He'd known that from the start. But it was too late, he'd fallen in too deep. Problems were arising because Seth couldn't help treating him the way a wolf would. In the beginning, it had been simple to keep his emotional distance. But now he felt raw and needful and uncertain.

Why couldn't Rafe just *take* him?

Pulling his hand away from his face, he stared at the path beneath his feet. The distance between them just kept growing

and growing. Rafe didn't even come to get him from school today, and it had taken Seth well over an hour to walk here from campus.

While he didn't mind the fresh air and the peaceful, quiet scenery, he wondered what happened. Rafe usually picked him up, and if he couldn't make it, he called.

He hadn't called today. And he hadn't answered the phone when Seth tried to call *him*. It had to be something important. A problem with the pool hall, maybe.

The front door slammed and Seth looked up, surprised and hurt to see Rafe standing on the porch. "Y-You're home? Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"Get out of here, Seth."

He fell back a step, staring at Rafe's stiff body and clenched fists. "What?"

His jaw ticked. "I want you gone. Now."

Seth glanced away, stared at the ferns lining the walk as he tried to understand what was happening. It wouldn't come clear, and he met Rafe's hard gaze again.

Rafe had never looked at him this way before.

"When..." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "When do you want me to come back?"

"I don't."

His entire body hitched as he tried to comprehend. "Not today?"

"Don't you get it, Seth?" Rafe's voice, so often a source of comfort for him, went even colder. "I promised I'd tell you when I wanted you to leave. Well, *I want you to leave.*"

LONE

Without any command from him, Seth's feet shuffled forward. "But—"

"Didn't you hear me? I'm tired of having a whiny, smelly, dog underfoot every goddamned day!"

Anger sliced away confusion as he prowled closer, a growl curling his lips.

Rafe stooped down, snatched up a rolled up newspaper and threw at him. "Git!"

He yelped, jumping back as he stared up at him in shock.

"Go!" he shouted. "I don't want you! *You're too much trouble!*"

Everything inside him froze, then fractured. Seth dropped his briefcase and spun, running for the woods.

Dog.

Trouble.

He stumbled and fell, skidding over the ground, ripping open his slacks at the knees.

Monster.

Abomination.

Shoving himself to his feet, he pushed himself to run deeper through the trees. Branches tore at his clothing; shrubs clawed at his legs. It didn't matter. He would survive.

He always survived.

A sob burst from him and he sank to the cold ground. Curling himself into a ball, he whimpered into the dirt. He'd been sent away before. He'd been deserted before. He'd been betrayed before.

But he had never been hurt like this before.

Why—

His Nightkin senses snapped to attention, forcing him to shift as he leapt into the air. He barely evaded the silver stake as it slammed into the earth where his head had been moments before.

Seth spun, scenting the air, searching for the attackers. Two. A vampire and a werewolf.

Hunters.

He tore his tie from his neck, used his claws to shred his shirt away. His talons sliced into his skin, but the wounds were shallow and healed instantly. He growled into the silent woods as he stepped out of his shoes.

“Ashes to ashes.” The knuckles in his claws cracked as he curled them, licked his own blood from his fingers. “Dust to dust.”

A wolf burst forward in its hybrid form, startling birds from the trees. Its claws shot out, swiping at his chest, going for his heart.

Seth arched backward, felt the whistle of the other wolf’s arm above him. He twisted, grabbed its forearm, and wrenched the bone apart from the elbow as he straightened.

The wolf howled, one arm hanging useless at its side, and spun into a reaping kick that would have broken his legs if he hadn’t flipped backward. Seth landed in a crouch and used his own leg to sweep its feet from underneath it.

He pounced before the wolf could recover, clawing for its neck. Before he could draw blood, it slammed its knees into his back, knocking him forward and grinding his face into the

ground.

Seth rolled over and up, breaking into a run. The wolf chased him, and he used his momentum to leap against a tree, propelling himself through the air. He landed behind the wolf, reached up, and yanked its head back with enough force to shatter bones in its neck and back.

It dropped to its knees, twitching and snarling.

He lowered his head, growled his words into its ear.

“Seth is having a very, very bad day.”

His grip cracked the wolf’s skull as he tore the head off its shoulders.

The dust had barely scattered at his feet when another silver stake cut through the air, and another, and another.

Seth dodged the gleaming streaks as he sniffed out the vampire. He found it hiding behind a tree just as it ran out of ammunition, and he chased it down when it tried to bolt.

Grabbing it from behind, he spun it around and knocked the crossbow out of its hold. Blond. Male. He stank of stale blood and rotted flesh. Like all Hunters, he was dressed in black fatigues. Seth threw him against a tree; the vampire bared his fangs and grabbed a silver tipped knife from his vest.

He was quick, but Seth snatched up his wrist and bent it to the side, splintering it. The poisoned knife fell to the ground, and he snarled as he pushed himself up to his toes.

The vampire sneered down at him. “Abomination. Your blood isn’t even worth spilling. The only thing you’re good for is fertilizer.”

Seth crushed the wrist he held, drawing a high pitched hiss

from the Hunter. He trailed his other hand down the black vest he wore. “Kevlar? Do you really think that can protect you from me?”

Before he had a chance to answer, Seth locked his talons and drove his claws through the protective material. Forcing his way through the ribcage was easy once the outer shell was breached. The bones snapped and popped, giving him access to the beating heart. Hot blood stung his skin. This vampire was old.

But he’d killed older.

With a growl, Seth ripped the heart from the man, and both disintegrated.

He stood alone, shaking with rage. Then the rage disintegrated as well, and he sank to his knees, dropping his forehead against the rough bark of the tree.

Now that the heat of battle had passed, he wondered why he’d even bothered to fight.

“Rafe,” he whispered, shifting into his human form. Rafe didn’t want him. No one wanted him.

He was lone.

Whimpering against the trunk, he tried to ignore the scent of ash, tried to remember the scent of one who was brave and noble and good and kind. The one who’d finally learned that *he* was worth none of these things.

Rafe hated him, as everyone did. As they should.

Seth hiccupped, drew away from the tree.

Something... Something wasn’t right.

His parents hadn’t despised him. Neither had the little seer,

Xuan. Rafe...

He sniffled.

Something wasn't right.

Rafe would never be so cruel. He was too kind. Even when he was angry.

Something...

Seth tilted his head back, scented the air as he opened his Nightkin senses.

Hunters always came in threes. A vampire, a werewolf, and a warlock.

Where was the warlock?

Ice lanced through him.

With Rafe.

He leapt to his feet and shifted as he sprinted through the woods, back to Rafe's home.

Their home.

If he hadn't been so shocked by Rafe's behavior, he would have noticed the heightened fear. Would have wondered why the newspaper had still been on the porch so late in the day. He'd have recognized the strain drawing the big man's body taut.

Seth growled and pushed his legs harder. This time, he didn't feel the scrape of tree branches or shrubs. He didn't feel the hard ground beneath his bare feet.

Rafe always tried to protect him, but he wasn't a warrior.

Rafe always tried to be honest, but he wasn't all knowing.

Rafe was human, yet he was *everything*.

He burst free from the woods and ran up the cobblestone

path. He bolted up the porch steps, wrenching the door from its hinges and throwing it aside as he stalked in. His hackles rose.

Nightkin magic drenched this place.

When he entered the living room, he saw Rafe tied to a chair. The warlock had his arms wrapped around him as he held a knife to his throat.

Seth growled low as he approached.

"Stop right there," said the warlock. "Unless you want me to cut off his head. All that sparkling blood splashed on this white carpet... I would like to see that."

He stilled. "Get the *fuck* away from my human."

"Not a chance. You're here, which means the other two in my team are dead. That makes this one my leverage."

"Seth," whispered Rafe. "Run."

His gaze darted to him, back to the warlock. "Why is he bound with rope? And why do you use a knife instead of your magic?"

The hand holding the knife pressed the blade against Rafe's skin, drawing a trickle of blood. "This human is unpredictable. He was supposed to coax you indoors earlier, but he broke my puppetry spell."

"Rafe is strong."

"I'm a *seventh-level* warlock. No one has ever broken one of my spells before. Who knows what else he can do?"

Seth tried to think, but the Ravager lust within him made it hard. "Rafe is *mine*."

"Not anymore, freak. If my puppetry spell failed against

him, a memory wipe is useless. He knows of us, so he's gonna die no matter what you do. The only control you have is over how much time he has left."

Without warning, Rafe knocked himself backward, tipping himself and the chair into the warlock. Trying to keep his balance, the other man pulled the knife away from Rafe's throat as he spread his arms wide.

Seth launched himself into the warlock. The knife dropped to the carpet, and Seth grabbed him as he scrambled for it, dragging the man beneath his body. Green fire licked at his skin, but couldn't hurt him. Grabbing the warlock's hair, Seth jerked his head back.

"My human!"

The warlock screamed as Seth sank his teeth into his neck. The scream turned to gurgling as blood filled his throat, and the gurgling turned to nothing when the head separated from the body.

He brushed the dust from his mouth and crawled to Rafe. "Mine," he murmured, using his talons to slice the ropes apart.

Rafe reached up, pushing on his bare shoulders. "Get out of here."

"No." Seth hit his hands away. "I want to stay with Rafe."

"You don't understand. You have to—"

He made a soft, whimpering sound when he saw the small cut on his human's neck. "Rafe is hurt." Seth lowered his head, lapped at the wound.

Rafe shoved at him again, but he wouldn't be moved. Not this time.

“Seth, there’s—”

The window shattered, and Seth bolted upright. A split second of confused silence hung in the air, then his entire body was flung back, slamming into the wall. Agony, sharp and searing, radiated from his shoulder. He slid to the floor, staring in shock at the silver stake piercing him. At the superheated blood bubbling from the wound to coat it.

“But...I killed all three.”

Suddenly Rafe was there, reaching for the stake.

“No!” Seth gripped his hand, using his superior strength to pull it away from his body. “This much Nightkin blood on silver is like acid.”

His bright gaze fixed on Seth’s shoulder. “Oh, God.”

The poison ate into him, and he looked to Rafe for explanation. “Three. Dead.”

Rafe shook his head. “There were more than three.” He whipped off his T-shirt, wrapping it around his hand. “I’m going to yank that thing out as quickly as I can. Ready?”

More than three? No. It was always just three. Not four. Not a hundred. *Three.*

“Brace yourself, Seth.”

“Ah ah, human,” came a voice from beyond the window. A brown haired vampire leaned against the sill, heedless of the broken shards of glass scattered over it. “We can’t very well allow you to free our quarry, can we?”

Rafe twisted, his back stiffening. “Fuck you.” He turned and reached for the stake.

In an instant the vampire was there, his bronzed hand a

stark contrast on Rafe's paler shoulder. "Maybe later." He tightened his grip, dragging him away with one arm and driving him to his knees. "I don't want to miss a second of this Ravager's death. We've been hunting him for over thirty years, you know."

He struggled against the hold. The vampire barely seemed to notice.

Protect Rafe. Seth braced his feet flat on the floor and tried to push himself upward. His legs weren't strong enough. The silver had already sapped his strength. "Three. Not four. Always three."

"Yes, and this time the Council sent two groups of us for you, RW3228."

Dorian... He'd said that this time Seth wouldn't be able to stop them. He'd wondered at the time what would make the new ones different from the others. Now he had his answer.

His gaze drifted to Rafe, who was grimacing under the force of the vampire's grip. "You're hurting him."

He glanced down in disinterest. "And?"

"Stop. Please."

The vampire's gaze shot to Seth. "What did you just say?"

"I... I beg. Let Rafe go."

His eyes widened.

"Did he just say what I think he said?" asked a feminine voice. A werewolf with long, black hair tied in a braid climbed through the window and walked up to them. "He couldn't have said what I think he said."

Seth stared up at them. "Please."

The werewolf crouched before him. “Adish, I’ve never heard of a Ravager asking for *someone else’s* life before.”

“Neither have I.”

“What does it mean?”

“Nothing, Sachiko. He’s a Ravager, and Ravagers must be exterminated.”

“*Bastards!*” Rafe tried to wrench himself free of Adish’s grasp. “He’s a person! You can’t talk about him like he’s some rabid dog!”

Sachiko turned her head, lifting an eyebrow. “The human’s got quite a fire in him, doesn’t he?”

Adish grinned, lifting him to eye level. “He certainly does. I haven’t been laid in weeks, and he’s going to be fun after the Ravager dies. He’s so...solid.” He brought Rafe closer. “What do you say, human? Think you can handle a vampire’s passion? I’m four centuries old. You most likely won’t survive.”

“Go to hell.”

She glanced up. “What if he does survive?”

“Flynn will wipe his memory.”

“Don’t think that’ll work,” said a man from behind, completing the triad of Hunters. “Did you see how Cain’s puppetry spell fell apart?”

Adish frowned. “You’re ranked three levels higher than Cain.”

“True.” He ran his fingers through his pale hair and leaned closer to Rafe. “And I could probably wipe his memory without a problem. But there’s no telling whether it’ll stick.

No choice. Gotta kill him.”

“No!” cried Seth. “Don’t!”

All three Hunters looked at him.

“What do you care?” asked Flynn, casual and unsympathetic. “You’ll be long dead by the time we do it.”

Seth tried to reach for him, but even lifting his arm had grown difficult. “Rafe *must* live. Rafe is *everything*.”

Sachiko trailed her finger along his cheek, held her hand up to the other two men. “Tears.”

Flynn tilted his head to the side. “Never seen that before.”

Adish frowned, giving the man in his hand a rough shake. “What makes him so important, RW3228?”

Rafe’s fist swung out and connected with the vampire’s face. “His name is *Seth*, you sonovabitch!”

“Damn,” said Sachiko. “I’d never thought I’d see the day when a *human* clocked you.”

Adish rolled his head, and the bones in his neck cracked as they realigned themselves. “I asked you a question, RW3228.”

His body shuddered with pain. “Because...” The wound in his shoulder blistered, and he gritted his teeth. “Because Rafe is brave...and noble...”

“And good, and kind. Honestly, Seth. You’ve elevated that sentence to a mantra.”

The Hunters spun, drawing their weapons.

“Who’s there!” shouted Adish.

A tall, dark-haired vampire with raven eyes walked out of a shadowed corner.

Seth gasped as a familiar, ancient energy charged the

room. "Dorian," he whispered.

"Where did you come from?" asked Sachiko, clearly shocked.

"Romania," he replied calmly.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Most of the day."

Adish's voice hardened. "We would have sensed you."

His mouth crooked. "I am long past old enough to control when I let my presence known."

"That's..." Flynn swallowed and tried again. "That's impossible. You can't hide your Nightkin nature."

Dorian focused his dark gaze on the warlock. "Who are you to tell me what is possible? I am Searing Blood." He turned, surveyed Adish. "And you will release that human. Now."

Adish dragged Rafe closer to him. "Of what importance is he to you?"

"We happen to be friends, if you must know. And if you squeeze his shoulder any harder, he will not be able to play pool with me. If he is not able to play pool with me, you will spend the rest of eternity in a rather small jar atop my mantle."

Adish stood stiff, sizing Dorian up, and let Rafe go.

Dorian caught hold of him before he could fall, drew him up against his body. "Are you injured, Rafe?"

"No, just a little bruised. You're a..."

Amusement crinkled his eyes at the corners. "Vampire."

"Shit." He pulled away and dropped down next to Seth. Snatching up his shirt, he wrapped it around his hand again.

“Don’t worry, I’m gonna take care of you.”

The silver poisoning heightened his senses, sharpening his pain, making him more aware of his surroundings. It almost hurt to look into Rafe’s bright, sapphire eyes, but he couldn’t look away. “You want to take care of me?”

“Yes.”

His breath hitched, sending shards of white-hot fire through his body. “Kind Rafe.”

Adish drew his crossbow, pointed it at Rafe. “Kind he may be, but he will not interfere with our kill.”

Dorian sighed and touched his fingers to the other vampire’s wrist, guiding the bow away from Rafe. “Did you not catch that part about the human being my friend?”

Sachiko linked her hands in front of her. “Master Dorian, Flynn believes a memory wipe won’t work on this human. We must kill him.”

He casually stepped between Rafe and the Hunters. “Rafe, make him more comfortable, but do not remove that stake. At this point, the cloth wrapped around your hand will do nothing to protect you against the poison.”

Rafe hesitated, then gently drew Seth to his body, laying him back on his lap.

The change in position tore a cry out of him, and Rafe flinched. “I’m sorry.”

His chest heaved as he dragged in air.

Rafe lowered his head. “You’ll get through this. Maybe, with Dorian’s help—”

“No.” Seth looked up at him, let this man become his

world. "Dorian has come to watch me die."

His face hardened as he looked up. "Is that true?"

Dorian took a seat on the carpet beside them. "I told you I'd be here when the Hunters came, Seth."

Seth lifted his stronger hand to touch Rafe's arm. "You have to get Rafe away."

"Fuck that," said Rafe, smoothing his sweat drenched hair back from his forehead. "I'm not leaving you."

So loyal. More loyal than any wolf he'd known. Seth fought the stiffening cords in his neck to look at Dorian. "Keep Rafe safe. Promise."

"Why does he keep begging for the human's life?" asked Flynn.

Dorian's gaze remained on Seth. "Why, indeed."

"Ravagers can't think outside their lust," said Sachiko. "So how is this possible?"

"Seth is special."

"How would you know?" snapped Adish.

"Because Rafe told me, and he's an honest man." Dorian leaned forward, just slightly. "Isn't that right, little puppy?"

Seth stared up at Rafe, who was stroking his hair. "R-Rafe said that?"

He nodded.

"After... After Rafe met Ravager?"

"No," he said, his voice soft. "Before."

He whimpered, tried to move away.

With firm, gentle hands, Rafe held him in place. "But I still believe it."

Falling still, Seth let himself feel the strength of the man holding him. “You don’t think I’m a dog?”

“Ah, Seth.” He pressed his lips to his forehead. “I didn’t mean any of that. I was just trying to keep you safe.”

“You should die for that alone,” said Adish. “Harboring him when you know damned well he’s an abomination.”

Dorian rested his wrist on an upraised knee. “Actually, from his point of view, he could call *all* of us ‘abominations.’”

“Whose side are you on, Dorian of the Searing Blood? How many of us has that *thing* dusted?”

A faint smile touched his lips. “I spend a great deal of time in the Chronicles. It’s no secret that I’m obsessed with Ravagers, in particular. RW3228—Seth—isn’t so bad.”

“He’s killed seventy-five Hunters!”

“That really shouldn’t be held against him. I’ve known you for all of five minutes and I’ve already conceived a hundred different ways to dust you.”

His fist clenched. “He wasted two werewolf packs in D.C.”

“Exaggerating a bit, aren’t you? Shining Moon and Harvest Moon are still out there, howling at the night.”

Flynn stepped closer. “I would think you, of all people, would be pissed as hell over the trouble he caused in your favorite hangout.”

“It was magicked and pristine by the time I returned, so I didn’t much care. But maybe we should talk about that.” He leaned forward and snapped his fingers over Seth’s face.

Seth winced as he tried to focus on Dorian. Those onyx

eyes weren't nearly as appealing as Rafe's sapphire.

"At Trick Shot, who attacked first?"

He tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry. "Shining Moon."

"You were trying to defend yourself?"

A scratchy, wheezing sound escaped him, and Rafe rubbed a warm palm over his chest. "No. Had to... Had to protect Rafe."

"And the bookstore?"

"Protect Rafe. Dorian will protect him now."

Sachiko peered down at them. "It always comes back to the human."

"Don't get soft," hissed Adish. "He dusted a wolf at that bookstore."

Dorian chuckled. "My pet informed me that Seth told the wolves one thing—hands off what was his. The one who died was the one who disobeyed, which is actually in accordance with Nightkin law."

"Why are you trying to defend him?"

"I'm not. I'm trying to find the truth, and none of you will interfere." He straightened, sitting cross-legged as he rested his elbows on his knees. "Seth, you still with us?"

He blinked.

"Why is it so important to protect Rafe?"

"Rafe is brave—"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" shouted Adish. "He's a broken record with that."

Dorian smiled. "He has a point, Seth. You'll have to do

better.”

Another wave of pain tore through him, and he groaned.

Rafe held him close, his voice hard. “Stop grilling him and get the fucking stake out of his shoulder!”

Dorian ignored him. “Be a good boy, Seth. Tell me what I want to know.”

Seth tried. He wanted to be good. “Rafe has no magic, but he’s still brave. Rafe is noble, even when it’s hard. Rafe has been told lies, but he’s still good. Seth has hurt Rafe, but he’s still kind.”

Rafe threaded his fingers through Seth’s hair, soothing him. “Easy.”

“Why is it so important to protect him?” asked Dorian.

His brow furrowed. “Rafe brings light.”

“You could have saved yourself today if you’d just run away.”

The thought horrified him. “Can’t leave Rafe!”

“Is he more important than your own life?”

“Yes.”

Sachiko gasped.

Dorian kept his dark eyes on Seth. “Why is he more important? What possible reason could there be to die for him?”

Tears rose, clinging to his lashes, distorting his vision. He broke the vampire’s gaze to look up at Rafe. In the last months, he’d done many things he’d never done before. He had changed, tried to be better, all for this human. And even through the pain, Seth felt joy being close to him, willing to

sacrifice all for his sake.

Just as... Just as his parents had sacrificed themselves for him all those years ago.

His breath hitched as he finally understood. "I...love him."

Rafe's hand stilled in his hair. "What?"

Despite the pain caused by the slightest movement, he nestled closer to his human, forgot about everyone else. "Seth loves Rafe."

Rafe shuddered, and Seth wondered if he'd hurt him yet again.

But Flynn was the one who broke the silence. "Holy fucking shit."

Sachiko glanced at Adish, back at Seth. "Adish, I think we might have made a mistake with this one. I mean, if he can love—"

The vampire's voice cracked the air like a whip. "Get a hold of yourself. You two aren't new; you know these things will say anything to save their own hides."

Was that the reason behind the shudder? "Does Rafe believe me?"

His eyes shone with unshed tears as he nodded.

"Don't cry," he whispered.

"Enough of this insanity," said Adish, aiming his crossbow at Seth's head. "Time to put this dog down."

Rafe hunched over, shielding him with his body. "You'll have to kill me to get to him."

"Not a problem."

With preternatural grace, Dorian rose to his feet, standing

almost six inches taller than Adish. “Holster your weapon, Hunter. That is a direct command.”

“I answer to the Council, not to you.”

He broke into a grin. “But I’m *on* the Council. See how that works?”

“You,” sneered Adish. “You haven’t been present in Chambers for over a century.”

Dorian chuckled. “Is that how you plan to explain your insolence to the others? That you disobeyed me because I haven’t attended the club meetings?”

“The others want this Ravager dead. They will overrule you.”

A thread of steel edged his voice. “I shall tell you a secret, child. The Council is merely a convenience: a means to organize the administrative needs of the Nightkin. *Searing Blood* rules all. Anger me, anger my clan. And we are quite...inventive with our wrath.”

Adish pressed forward, but a trace of fear scented the air. “As powerful as you may be, *Searing Blood* only numbers thirteen.”

He laughed. “Thirteen members are always visible. But we all possess the ability to cloak our Nightkin nature. We are more than you believe.”

Flynn dropped the knife in his hand, hastily retrieved it and sheathed it in his vest. “More than thirteen?”

Dorian didn’t elaborate. “RW3228 has proven that Ravagers may not be the monsters we’ve perceived them to be. From now on, their extermination orders will be

determined on a case by case basis.”

“You can’t do that,” said Adish.

“I just did.”

“They’re *Ravagers*. Even your clan will not abide such an edict.”

“Oh, they will stand behind me on this for two simple reasons. I am the leader of our clan, and—when I became thus—they swore reparations to me for the loss of my offspring.”

“Nadia,” whispered Seth.

Rafe fingered his hair, stroked his cheek. “Who’s Nadia?”

“His daughter. He couldn’t protect her, like I couldn’t protect you.”

Dorian glanced down at him. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, little puppy. Protecting a loved one is very different from protecting yourself. Because they’re at the center of your world, you’re often blind to the dangers around you.”

“You’ll protect him. Promise.”

His face sobered. “I will, Seth. I swear it on my ring.” He returned his attention to the Hunters. “Go to the Council and tell them what has transpired here. Inform them that this human is now under the protection of Searing Blood. The puppy too, if he manages to survive.”

“No way. I came here to bag a Ravager.”

“Adish,” warned Sachiko. “Perhaps we should take it up with the Council.”

He clenched his fists as his fangs extended.

Dorian seemed unconcerned. “Listen to the wise wolf,

Adish. I'm not one to inflict a quick death."

Adish stopped short, then leaned forward. "This isn't over."

He smiled. "We're immortal. It's never over."

Holstering his weapon, Adish stormed out of the house, signaling the others to follow.

"Get this thing out of his shoulder," said Rafe.

Dorian slipped his hands into his pockets. "Sorry, can't."

"What do you mean, can't!"

"As old as I am, I still have no resistance to silver. I like your puppy, but not that much."

Rafe snarled, a sound worthy of any wolf. "So what was the point of all that then! If you're just going to let him die?"

He dropped into a crouch. "I have my own agenda, Rafe. Saving you was an unexpected bonus. Saving him is beyond me."

"No..." Rafe lowered his head, kissed Seth's cheek. "Don't listen to him, you got that? I'm going to figure this out."

The poison had spread into his limbs; he couldn't even lift his hand. "Rafe is..."

"What is Rafe?"

Everything was dimming, and yet those eyes... "Rafe is upset."

His world flickered into darkness when Rafe squeezed his eyes shut. "Yes," he said, opening them again. "I'm very upset."

Relief washed through him when the sapphires returned.

“Does he love me again?”

A sob tore out of him. “Oh, Jesus.” He clutched him tighter. “I never stopped loving you, Seth. Not for a second.”

Seth gritted his teeth, tried to force himself to shift. It wouldn’t come—the silver held him in place—and regret at his failure summoned more darkness. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Can’t shift into human form. Rafe doesn’t like Ravager.”

Panic cleared his face, rounded his eyes. “Th-That’s not true, Seth.”

The words confused him. “But—”

“*It’s not.* I swear. I’ve been an idiot and a bigot and a royal fuck up, but I love *all* of you. Ravager included.” Rafe stroked his hair, wept over him. “Seth, you gotta hang on. So you can hear my whole list. I never got to finish telling you.”

List? He still had a list? Seth wanted to hear it, but his fingers and toes had gone numb. There was no hanging on. “Bad Seth.”

“*No.* You’re good. Good Seth. *Best* Seth. Just...”

Hot tears fell onto his face, and Seth smiled as an old story floated through his thoughts. “Beauty’s tears healed the Beast.”

His lips parted. “Beauty?”

“Rafe is beautiful.”

“God.” The human who held him so firmly trembled. “Don’t slip away from me, Seth. Be strong.”

He couldn’t. So dark...

“*Stay!*”

His eyes snapped open.

Rafe's chest heaved as he stared down at him. "That's it. Just like that."

Seth watched as he focused his gaze on the silver stake. He couldn't be thinking—

"Brace yourself, Seth."

"No! Acid!"

He repositioned his legs, locking them around Seth to hold him in place. He lowered his head and reached for the stake. "You can howl as loud and long as you want, okay?"

His eyes seemed so bright. Brighter than the moon. Brighter than anything he'd ever seen.

Rafe closed his hand around the silver, his face contorting in pain. For countless seconds nothing happened as he struggled with it, the muscles in his arm and chest writhing beneath his skin. His teeth clenched and he released a growl of his own, wrenching the stake from Seth's shoulder and flinging it across the room. Poisoned blood sizzled as it thudded to the carpet.

Seth arched his back off the floor and howled.

The earsplitting sound reverberated off the walls, shaking the remaining windows in their frames. His wound purged itself, gushing silver, then blood.

Rafe's hand clamped over his shoulder, and Seth's body fell limp as he slipped into his human form.

"I've got you," he said, breathing hard as he kissed his cheek.

The hand on his shoulder soothed the agony ripping

through his body, cooled the blistering heat. Seth looked up in surprise, and was stunned by the sight of Rafe above him.

His eyes...were they glowing? It could have been his heightened senses, but they seemed little more than two sapphire orbs of light staring down at him.

"You're going to be all right," said Rafe.

And his voice. There was something different. An echoing, almost transcendent quality that made him feel safe and loved.

But, just when he would have asked, the glow faded and Rafe slumped over him.

Alarmed, Seth turned his head, lapped his cheek. "Rafe?"

"Yeah."

"Y-Your hand?"

"Hurts like hell."

He called out. "Dorian!"

Dorian's voice was hushed. "Yes, little puppy?"

"Lick. Heal Rafe."

"He'll have to wash his hand first. I can't risk taking any silver residue into my body."

"I'm not leaving him," murmured Rafe.

Seth lifted his hand and caressed his cheek. His strength was returning quickly. Too quickly. "Please."

Rafe lifted his head, his face wan. He grabbed Dorian's wrist, pulling him down to the floor and pressing his palm to Seth's wound. "I don't care who you are, what clan you lead. If he bleeds to death, I'll kill you."

He nodded, and Rafe eased himself from underneath Seth before lurching to his feet. Using the wall for support, he

stumbled out of the room.

Seth tried to sit up, but Dorian pressed him flat.

"I do believe the human was serious about killing me."

"Dorian, I thought I saw his eyes—"

"I know. Notwithstanding he pulled a silver stake out of you and survived, he seems to have purged the poison from your body. How interesting."

He frowned. "Rafe is not human?"

"Oh, he is most certainly human." His gaze followed the direction Rafe had gone. "But he is also something more."

"What is the 'more'?"

"Damned if I know." Dorian glanced down at him. "But I intend to find out. No telling him anything until I do, understand?"

He balked at the idea. "Rafe doesn't like secrets."

"It's not a secret. You don't know anything."

It didn't seem right, and he was about to say it when Rafe returned, a first-aid kit tucked under his arm.

"Is he going to pull through?"

"I believe so," answered Dorian. "Ready to let me fix your hand?"

Rafe thrust his arm toward him. Seth gasped when he saw that he'd lost most of the skin from his palm.

Dorian took his wrist and glided his tongue over the injury. The skin regenerated; the wound closed.

He looked at his hand, flexing it a few times. "Nice trick. Can you do the same for him?"

"Only his own Nightkin nature can close a wound inflicted

by silver.”

Rafe knelt beside Seth and opened up the kit. “Thank you, for everything you’ve done.”

“Thank you, for everything you’ve taught me.”

Carefully, Rafe cleaned his shoulder and wrapped it in gauze. “How does that feel?”

He touched the bandages, then Rafe’s chest. The heartbeat felt good beneath his fingertips. “I want to go to bed.”

The tension in his body vanished as he burst into laughter. “Amen. I am wrung out.” He glanced at Dorian. “We’re safe?”

“You are.”

He slipped his hands underneath Seth and stood, cradling him in his arms. Seth huddled close, enjoying his strength and light. “Both of us are probably going to sleep for the next few days,” said Rafe.

The vampire nodded. “A well deserved rest.”

“If you want, you can come by after that. We can have that game of pool you were talking about earlier.”

Dorian tilted his head to the side, a surprised smile on his lips. “I’d like that, my friend.”

Seth remembered his manners. “Thank you, Dorian of the Searing Blood.”

His grin widened. “I’m listed in the phonebook as Dorian Burns, if you decide to visit D.C. again in the next decade or so.”

Rafe snorted and turned away without another word, carrying Seth to his bed.

Their bed.

LONE

Their home.
Their life.

EPILOGUE

Seth tilted his head back, letting the light of the full moon caress his face. His skin tingled, his blood sang. He was alive, and he was loved.

The glass door behind him slid open, and Rafe's scent filled the air as he walked onto the deck. "What are you doing out here?"

He tugged at his shirt as he fought the urge to shift. "I was drawn."

"Oh yeah," said Rafe, moving up behind him. "Forgot the full moon was tonight."

That anyone could forget such a thing...it made him smile.

Rafe slipped long arms around him. "What are you

thinking?”

The truth flowed out of him with such ease now. “I want to run. I want to dance. I want to howl.”

He brushed a kiss against Seth’s cheek. “So go. Do the wolf thing.”

“I’m a wolf with no wolf form. I doubt the people of Brier would be comfortable with me running naked through the streets.”

“The woods?”

A shiver went through him. “Not ready, yet. It still smells like Nightkin dust there.”

Those strong arms tightened around his body. “The moon, it’s like a call?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” He straightened and took his hand. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

Rafe gave him a tug, and Seth followed. “You’ll see.”

Moments later, Seth was sitting in Rafe’s car, watching the night-kissed scenery roll by. “Rafe?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you teach me to drive?”

“Sure.”

“Tonight?”

He took a turn on a road leading out of town. “Not tonight.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Trusting him, he relaxed as Rafe took them...wherever. It didn't matter. He liked being close, and the air streaming through the open window ruffled his hair. Gripping the door, he leaned out and closed his eyes as the wind buffeted his face. It felt wild and free, and he opened his mouth, letting his tongue taste the natural flavor of this place.

All at once, he realized what he must look like, and he fell back into his seat. Nervously, he glanced at Rafe, but the human was smiling as he kept his gaze on the road.

Seth smiled as well, twisting slightly so he could sit and stare. Rafe didn't object, didn't even comment.

The road changed. Unpaved, uneven. Seth straightened; he didn't recognize the area. "Where are we?"

"Old man Riley's cornfield." He pulled to a stop and turned off the engine. "Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

Rafe removed the keys from the ignition and left the car.

Seth opened the door and got out, staring at the tall stalks of ripe corn in front of them.

"I thought we could have a little hide and seek." He walked around to stand before him. "What do you say?"

"Hide and seek?" Excitement lit his body, and he dropped into a partial crouch. "The game? You want to play with me?"

His smile faded as he threaded his fingers through Seth's hair. "You didn't get to play much growing up, did you?"

He straightened, shook his head.

"Adult wolves play, too, don't they?"

Seth linked his hands behind his back. "Yes, how did

you—”

“Been watching a lot of Discovery Channel.” He lowered his head. “Let’s play.”

His eyes rounded as the excitement returned. “Really?”

“Give me a twenty minute head start, then shift and come after me.”

Surprised, Seth took a step back. “Shift?”

“That’s why we came out here. To let you run and dance and howl.”

He hadn’t changed his form since the day the Hunters had come. “But—”

Rafe captured his mouth, delving into a long, deep kiss. It warmed his body more than moonlight ever could, and dazed his senses.

“You’re the one who has to come after me, Seth, because my tracking skills are shit.” He pulled away, taking off his watch and setting it on the hood of the car. “And if you don’t find me, I might be lost for a long time. Understand?”

“Find Rafe,” he sighed, still enthralled by the kiss.

He grinned and disappeared into the corn.

Seth paced the dirt by the car. He wanted to go *now*, to start the game, but Rafe had said to wait. He glanced at the watch.

Three minutes.

He paced again, counting stalks of corn. Was it time now?

Ten minutes.

Growling, he kicked off his shoes, took off his shirt, stripped off his pants and underwear. What about now?

Fourteen minutes.

Was that close enough? No. Wait. Twenty minutes. That was the rule. He counted again, ears of corn this time. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he looked at the watch.

Twenty-one minutes.

Seth bared his teeth and summoned the shift.

His fingers elongated, his fangs sharpened, his shoulders swelled with power. He sniffed the air and scented his prey.

Rafe.

He sprinted into the corn and caught the trail immediately. He took his time, savoring the chase as he loped between the stalks, knocked loose ears of corn. Stiff, sharp leaves cut into his skin, but in his Ravager form he barely noticed, healing almost instantly. The trail zigzagged, circled in playful patterns. But it was easy to follow. The human might as well have left a lighted path.

The scent grew stronger—he was close. Unable to hold himself back any longer, he quickened his pace...and burst into a small clearing.

Surprised by the abrupt change in terrain, he stopped short and glanced up. What he saw made him salivate.

There stood Rafe, tall and big and strong, naked in the clearing's center. The moonlight bathed him, blessed him, adorned him.

"Rafe," he said, the word thick with lust.

He turned his head and smiled. "Took you long enough. It's freezing out here."

Seth loped forward, taking in the sight of his body before

meeting his gaze. "I win?"

He nodded.

Something was different, and he circled his human as he tried to decipher it. "What happens now?"

Rafe didn't move, waiting until Seth was in front of him to answer. "Whatever you want."

He stretched upward on his toes and growled. "I want to lick every inch of your bare skin. I want to fuck you on this cold ground. I want *Rafe*."

Rafe slipped a hand into his hair; stroking him, petting him. Seth gasped when those long fingers curled and scratched him behind the ear. "Okay."

Seth's gaze darted to his face. He was still smiling. "I don't scent fear on you. Why?"

"Because I'm not afraid."

He jumped back, confused and apprehensive. "Why?"

His face was gentle as he stood still in the center of the clearing. "I love you, and I understand you a little better. Remember my list? It's got new things on it now. I love your black eyes, your sharp teeth." His gaze dipped to Seth's claws. "Even those killer hands of yours. I love your submissiveness and your wildness, I love your strength and your innocence."

Seth tilted his head to the side. Never in his life had he not scented fear as a Ravager. He didn't know what to do, and his claws spasmed. "But Seth is—"

"My mate."

Seth took a cautious step back. "Explain it to me."

"I will, if you come here."

He hesitated.

Rafe's mouth crooked. "Heel."

Automatically, Seth walked to him.

"Good Seth."

His confusion intensified. "*Explain.*"

"I'm taking you as my mate. You belong to me now."

The words began to slip away from him. "The human doesn't understand...wolves...wolves mate for—"

"Life."

His head shot up. "Life," he whispered.

Rafe stroked his hair, soothing the agitation from him. "I understand."

"You are Alpha?"

Warm knuckles skimmed down his cheek. "Why don't we try taking turns?"

"Taking turns?" Seth's brow furrowed. "Wolves do not take turns."

"I'm human, and you're not the average wolf. Can't we make our own world? Bring our souls to the same place?"

He stared into Rafe's eyes, struck by the contrast of sapphire against the pearlescent moon behind him. "H-How?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure we can figure it out. Do you know why?"

He shook his head.

"We've been through hell and back, and we survived. We're still together. That means we've always had a connection, and we'll always be connected. You and I, we're a—"

“Pack?”

Rafe grinned. “I was going to say family, but that works.”

Trembling, Seth lifted his claws, lightly raked his talons over his broad chest. “Rafe is...”

He slid his fingers under Seth’s chin and lifted his head. “What is Rafe?”

Dorian was still trying to find that out. But Seth knew, and the only one he wanted to tell was his mate. “Rafe is an angel.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know about that.”

“He is!”

His shoulders shook as he made no effort to suppress his laughter.

Frustrated, Seth snarled and hooked his leg behind Rafe’s, sweeping them from underneath him and slamming him into the ground.

Rafe landed with grunt and a thud. “Good thing a full moon only comes once a month. I don’t think I could take this much fun every night.”

Seth straddled his waist and licked his cheek. “The moon stays full for *three* nights, Rafe.”

Laughter filled the air again. “Remind me to bring the first-aid kit along tomorrow.”

He sank sharp teeth into one of Rafe’s pecs, killing the laughter. The muscle jumped, but there was no fear, just arousal. Seth lapped at the small wound, discovering a taste even sweeter than fear. “Rafe is an angel,” he murmured, licking and nipping at his skin. “My angel.” He straightened,

LONE

staring down at his mate. Rafe didn't believe him, and he didn't know how to make it clear.

Rafe's big hand skimmed down his hairless chest, over his stomach. Long fingers closed around his cock, stroked him into forgetting all else.

"Seth, you've got me naked, in a cornfield, under a full moon. Ravage me."

Wild, untamable love burst free of him, and it was too much to express in mere words. Without fear of reprisal, without fear of judgment, Seth threw back his head.

And howled.

ROWAN MCBRIDE

Born an Air Force dependent, Rowan McBride traveled the world and totally missed the 80s as most Americans know it. In exchange, he's gotten to walk in clogs, break an arm at Mt. Fuji, and say prayers at a Korean Buddhist temple. So far it seems like a fair trade. Although he graduated from high school in Hawaii, he didn't learn to hula and make leis until going to college in Iowa. After leaving the Midwest, he moved to Washington, DC, and very nearly got himself a Juris Doctor degree. Now he's chilling out in Texas, diabolically planning road trips that could span years.

People tell him his life is random, and that's probably true. Rowan comforts himself with the working theory that a random life makes for good stories. When that doesn't work, there's Pocky. Lots and lots of Pocky.

For more information about Rowan and his writing, please visit his website:

<http://rowanmcbride.com>

* * *

**Don't miss *Warm Rush, Book I: Chasing Winter*,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

When Jesse Winter left Connecticut to attend his business overseas, he had no idea that he would be gone three long years. His homecoming is a bitter one. An accident has left his body shattered and his heart cloaked in ice, and he knows he'll never be warm again.

But Keith Taylor, just fifteen when Jesse skipped the country, has other ideas. He's all grown up now, and he's been waiting for Jesse to come home.

Keith's determined to bring the fire back into Jesse's life, and he knows he's strong enough to do it...

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

DARK FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

ROMANCE

HORROR

EROTICA

FANTASY

GLBT

WESTERN

MYSTERY

PARANORMAL

HISTORICAL

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE

www.AmberQuill.com

www.AmberHeat.com

www.AmberAllure.com