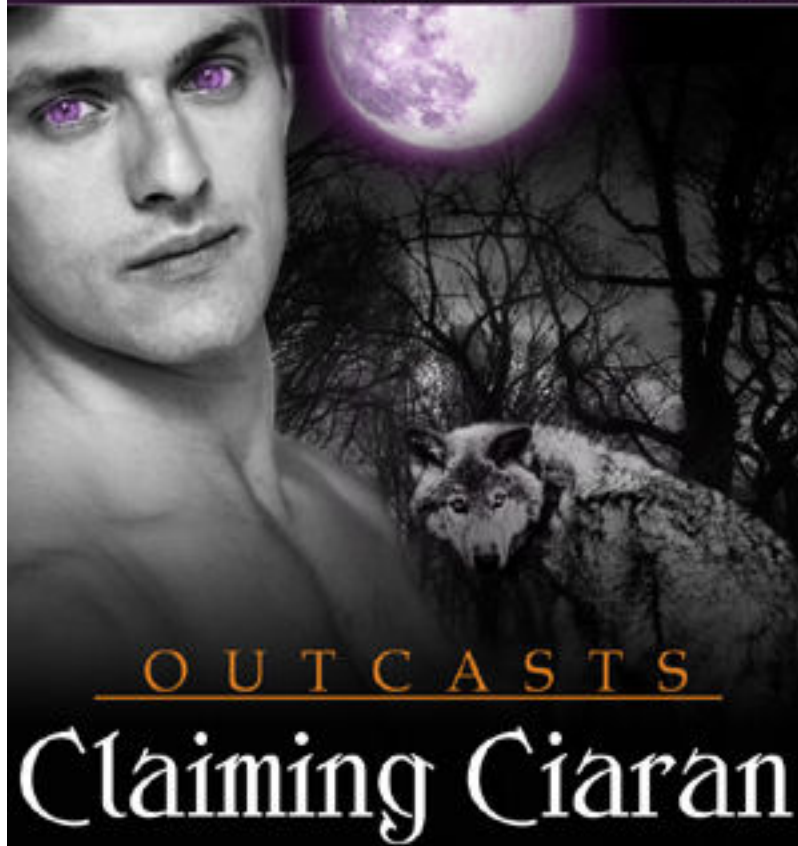


COBBLESTONE PRESS PRESENTS



SHIFTERS

Cassandra Gold



OUTCASTS

Claiming Ciaran

OUTCASTS:
Claiming Ciaran

By

Cassandra Gold

Claiming Ciaran by Cassandra Gold

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Claiming Ciaran

Copyright© 2009 Cassandra Gold

ISBN: 978-1-60088-477-1

Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Editor: Lana Williams

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Chapter One

With a smile nearly large enough to crack her face, the cooking show host turned the temperature dial on the oven. "While you're preparing your ingredients, make sure you preheat the oven to 350 degrees."

Ciaran scribbled down the directions the overly cheerful woman gave, watching carefully as she demonstrated. Thanksgiving was two weeks away, and he wanted to ensure the meal he prepared was perfect. He had cooked many different meals since he came to the human realm, but this one would be special. It was his first real holiday, and Drew's first one without his family. Although Ciaran was accustomed to being alone and not observing holidays, Drew had no doubt celebrated many occasions with his family and friends.

Just because Drew's family had disowned him did not mean he could not have some sort of celebration. Ciaran knew how important the pack was to werewolves. Drew tried to act as if he did not care that he no longer had a pack, but Ciaran sensed he cared more than he let on. Sometimes, when Drew returned from running in wolf form, he seemed pensive and sad. Other times, he started to make a remark about his childhood and cut himself off, as if he did not want to think about his past at all. Ciaran, alone, could not make up for an entire lost pack, but he could do his best to make the holiday special.

He finished writing the woman's instructions for making the perfect turkey and stuffing and set his notebook aside. Curling up on one

end of the sofa, he considered how much his life had changed. Nearly two months had passed since Ciaran had been summoned to Earth from Faerie and been rescued from his summoners by a werewolf.

In a few short weeks, Ciaran had lost the only life he had known, created a new one, and fallen in love. As an outcast half-demon, he'd never believed anyone would care for him. Andrew Moore knew of his past and loved him anyway. For that reason alone, Ciaran would have adored Drew. Everything else Drew had done, and continued to do for him, showed him each day how much his lover cared for him.

Being loved was a wonderful thing, he had learned, but loving was even more wonderful. His love for Drew made him want to be stronger, and better. He wanted to take care of Drew the way Drew took care of him. He was not quite sure how to do that yet, but he was learning.

A knock at the door interrupted his musings. Ciaran jumped. Then he did exactly as Drew had taught him. Instead of opening it, he peered out the window next to the door. A man dressed in a brown uniform stood on the front step, holding a clipboard and a large envelope. The man appeared bored and impatient. Ciaran recognized the uniform from television commercials for a delivery company.

He touched his hair to ensure it covered the points of his ears. Reassured that he looked normal, he opened the door. "May I help you?"

The deliveryman looked at his clipboard. "I hope so. I have a package here for an Andrew Moore. You him?"

Ciaran paused for a moment to determine the last, fractured question's meaning before he replied. "No, Drew is working. Would you permit me to accept the package for him?"

For some reason, the man laughed at his words. "I don't need a signature, so I guess I can let you do that." He handed Ciaran the parcel. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

"My home is a world away from here." Before the man could say anything else, Ciaran tucked the package under his arm and offered a false smile. "Thank you. Have a nice day." He shut the door.

Alone in the living room once more, Ciaran frowned. The deliveryman had appeared amused. Ciaran often encountered such

reactions from humans. At first it had confused him, but now he thought he understood the reason—his speech. His efforts to blend in would not succeed unless he learned to speak the way humans did.

He would never have a normal human appearance, with his pointed ears and strange eyes, but those things could be explained away. If he spoke like a human they would see what they expected to see, and be more likely to believe explanations for the odd things about him. The thought of blending in, of being normal and accepted, was wonderful after his years of being hidden away and barely tolerated by his grandfather.

Determined, he took the envelope and strode back to Drew's office. Although he would not normally interrupt during the day, he decided the package and his new plan gave him a good enough reason. He paused in the doorway a moment to gather his thoughts. Drew continued to tap at his keyboard, despite knowing Ciaran was there. With his werewolf senses, Drew had undoubtedly heard him approach. He cleared his throat. "I have decided to change my manner of speaking."

Drew shut down the computer program he had been working on and turned his office chair to face Ciaran. Disheveled brown hair, streaked with blond, stood up a bit, as if he'd scrubbed his hands over it, and his face wore the unfocused look he got when he was working and was interrupted. He frowned and tilted his head in a very canine expression of puzzlement. His green eyes sought Ciaran's gaze. "What?"

Ciaran struggled to explain. "I have noticed that humans do not speak the way I do. You speak differently as well. It is important that I blend in, and if I wish to blend in, I must speak the way you do."

Drew stood and joined Ciaran in the doorway, his broad shouldered frame filling much of the narrow space. Ciaran canted his head back to peer up at Drew, whose expression was more concerned than confused now. He stroked a fingertip along Ciaran's cheek. "I like the way you talk. It's cute."

Ciaran raked a hand through his hair, unsure whether to be flattered or annoyed. "I fail to see what is 'cute' about my speech."

Drew bent to press a soft kiss to Ciaran's lips. As always, even the

briefest touch of Drew's mouth to his made his heart beat faster. When Drew straightened, they were both smiling. "It's cute because it's you, and I love everything about you. But if you really want to change the way you talk, you know I'll help you."

What little was left of Ciaran's annoyance melted away. It was hard to be upset when Drew smiled at him. "Thank you. And perhaps I will continue to speak this way sometimes, for you."

"I think I'd like that." Drew glanced toward his computer and back to Ciaran. "I'm at a good stopping point. What do you say we go practice your speech right now?"

"I do not wish to interrupt your work," Ciaran began.

Drew hastened to reassure him. "You're not interrupting. I need a break anyway." He stepped closer to Ciaran. "Are you *up* for taking a little break with me?"

Puzzled, Ciaran considered Drew's question. The words meant something more than their surface meanings. He could discern that from Drew's tone. Drew's hot stare and teasing smile gave him further clues. Perhaps his lover was making some sort of innuendo? He nodded.

With a quiet laugh, Drew nuzzled his neck. "Bedroom?"

The implications of the question were clear, even to Ciaran. They would not just be practicing his speech. A rush of heat swept over him, and he nodded again.

Drew took Ciaran's hand, lacing their fingers together. Even after weeks of touches and lovemaking, Ciaran felt a thrill every time Drew touched him. Cradling Drew's larger hand in his own, he followed him to the bedroom, anticipation rising.

The moment they stepped over the threshold of the bedroom, Drew pulled him in for a hard kiss. He melted against Drew's strong body, teasing Drew's tongue with his own. The deep, rumbling growl that greeted his action made him shiver with arousal.

Drew pushed him backward, walking him toward the bed. Ciaran dropped the envelope he still carried on the nightstand and allowed Drew to maneuver him until the backs of his knees hit the edge of the mattress. He fell backward onto the bed.

Still standing, Drew gazed down at him. "Lesson number one: Use contractions."

They were truly going to practice his speech? Why had Drew kissed him, then? Confused and a little irritated, Ciaran tried to sit up.

Drew stopped him with one hand. "Nope. You're not going anywhere. This lesson isn't over yet."

"But—"

Forestalling any further complaints, Drew dropped onto the bed next to Ciaran and kissed him again. At the same time, he pushed a hand up under Ciaran's T-shirt. His fingertips found a nipple and brushed over it. The tiny bud beaded, the sensation radiating through Ciaran's body. Ciaran arched, seeking more contact, but Drew pulled his hand away.

Ciaran whimpered against Drew's lips in disappointment. "Do not stop."

The other man must have understood his mumbled plea, because he said, "*Don't* stop. Use the contraction."

"Don't stop. Please."

"Good." As a reward, Drew brushed over Ciaran's nipple again, and then pinched it lightly. "Take off your shirt."

Ciaran whipped the garment over his head and tossed it across the room. Drew laughed. "Wow. I can see you're in a hurry, so on to lesson two: use informal words." He leaned back on the bed. "What do you want?"

Were his desires not obvious from the way he had removed his shirt? Ciaran cocked his head. "I wish for you to touch me." He leaned toward Drew.

A raised eyebrow told him he had not said the correct words. "Have you ever heard anyone say 'wish' like that, unless they're wishing on a star or something?"

He considered. "No."

That earned him a grin. "Okay, then. What do you think a human would say?"

He bit his lip and tried to remember the last time he had heard a human express desire for something. "*I want* you to touch me?"

Despite his tentative tone, Drew looked pleased. "Very good. I think that deserves a reward."

Ciaran fell back onto the bed again as Drew kissed his mouth, and then his neck and shoulder. Each brief contact left heat in its wake. "That is—"

"That's."

Contractions. Lesson one. "That's good. Don't stop."

Drew paused to yank off his own shirt before returning to what he had been doing. His lips mapped out a meandering path over Ciaran's body. He lingered over the nipples, biting at the tiny brown buds and then soothing the sting away with his rough, wet tongue.

Ciaran writhed under Drew's ministrations. He had never known how pleasurable a small amount of pain could be until Drew had shown him. The experience was made even better by the knowledge that Drew would never really hurt him. Everything Drew did was designed to make Ciaran feel good.

The mouth on his chest was suddenly gone. He heard a low chuckle.

"Now what?"

He frowned at the loss. He had endured enough teasing for one day. His cock throbbed, demanding satisfaction. "Remove...no, take off your pants."

"I think I'm creating a monster." His expression amused, Drew unfastened his jeans and shoved them off.

Ciaran did the same with his own pants. "I'm not a monster, and neither are you." He pushed Drew to his back on the mattress and straddled him. Their erections brushed, and they both hissed at the sensation.

The need in Drew's eyes filled him with too many emotions to name. No one else had ever looked at him that way. Ciaran leaned down and claimed Drew's mouth in a hard, aggressive kiss. He could feel the surprise in Drew's response, but his Alpha-in-bed werewolf did not try to wrest control from him. Drew merely opened to him, allowing his tongue inside.

They were both panting when Ciaran finally broke the kiss. Remembering lesson one, he whispered, "Where's the lubricant? I want you."

Drew stretched one of his long arms out and managed to get the nightstand drawer open. He reached in and snagged the end of the tube of lubricant. "Got it."

The triumphant look Drew threw him made Ciaran laugh. "I'll take that." Ciaran snatched the tube away before Drew could protest. He popped the cap and poured a generous amount into his hand, which he used to slick Drew's straining erection.

Drew's eyes fell closed. "Oh, fuck. That feels incredible."

Impatient, Ciaran did not take much time to prepare himself. He pushed two well-lubricated fingers into his passage and twisted them. It was too much but not enough at the same time. Pulling them out, he guided Drew's cock to his entrance and lowered himself.

The large head stretched his opening. He welcomed the slow burn as Drew thrust up to meet him. They both groaned as he slid down to the base, and for a moment they remained unmoving, fully joined.

Then Drew gripped his hips and lifted, and he lost himself in the feeling of Drew's cock scraping against the sensitive inner walls of his passage. He moved up and down on Drew's erection, slowly at first and then faster. Drew's fingers dug into his hips hard, and that small pain kept him focused.

He trailed the pads of his fingers over Drew's muscular chest, through the thin sheen of sweat he found there. Unable to resist the temptation, he leaned forward and ran his tongue up Drew's throat, tasting salt and musk. The skin vibrated under his tongue, seconds before a growl emerged and Drew flipped him onto his back.

Drew's green eyes nearly glowed, a sign he was on the edge. "God, what you do to me." Another low, not-quite-human sound escaped him, and he started to thrust again, harder.

The new angle sent the head of Drew's cock sliding over that spot deep inside Ciaran that sent pleasure throughout his body. Ciaran arched and cried out. "More, please, I'm so close."

A large, warm hand wrapped around his erection and pulled. "Come for me. I want to see it."

Ciaran had never been able to deny his werewolf anything. The orgasm that had been lying in wait just under his skin boiled up and exploded out of him. His body clamped down on Drew. Ecstasy washed over him as semen gushed over Drew's hand and both their stomachs. The sharp, bittersweet scent filled the air.

The sound Drew made could only be described as a soft howl. His face contorted and wet warmth filled Ciaran's passage. They remained locked together for several minutes, panting.

Drew collapsed next to him. They lay there, silent except for their breathing.

That had certainly been an interesting way to learn how to speak like a human.

* * * * *

Drew snagged a couple of tissues from the box on the nightstand and cleaned himself and Ciaran as best he could. When he was satisfied they wouldn't be too sticky, he pulled his lover into his arms. As always, the smaller man relaxed against him with a happy sigh. He smiled and pressed a kiss to Ciaran's soft black curls, savoring the scents of sex and Ciaran. His fingers stroked absently along the black markings on Ciaran's back where his wings were hidden.

Ciaran leaned into the touch, almost like a cat. "Thank you."

"For what?"

One of Ciaran's slim shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I am..." He paused, and then, as if remembering Drew's speech lessons, started again. "*I'm* not sure. For everything."

The soft, protective warmth Drew often felt around Ciaran filled him, and he smiled. "I think I should be thanking you."

Ciaran lifted his head and stared at Drew, his violet eyes wide. "Thanking me? But I have done nothing for you."

Even after the weeks they'd spent together, and all the times Drew

had tried to show Ciaran he was valued, he still didn't believe it. Drew frowned, wishing not for the first time that he could have a little chat with the Fae grandfather who had made Ciaran feel worthless just because he was different. Half-demon or not, Ciaran was the gentlest, most caring man he'd ever met. He didn't want to imagine how empty and lonely his life would be without Ciaran in it.

Cuddling his lover closer, he nuzzled his neck and shoulder. "You've done more than you realize."

Ciaran's expression didn't lighten. If anything, he looked like he thought Drew was humoring him. "What have I done for you that anyone else could not? A maid could cook and clean for you, and do it much better than I have."

This was too important to let drop. Drew met Ciaran's gaze. "Sure, I could pay somebody to cook and clean for me, or I could do it myself, but nobody can do what you do for me." Ciaran opened his mouth, probably to protest, but Drew continued before he could say a word. "You love me, and that's everything to me."

Ciaran stared at Drew for a long moment, silent. Then he smiled. "I do love you."

"I am pretty lovable," Drew joked.

Rather than laugh, Ciaran nodded, his face serious. "You are."

Aw. Unable to speak over the lump in his throat, Drew pressed a soft kiss to Ciaran's lips. After a moment, he managed, "So are you."

Ciaran didn't speak again, but his face glowed with happiness, even when he fell asleep snuggled against Drew's side.

Chapter Two

It wasn't until they were preparing dinner in the evening that Ciaran remembered the package Drew had received earlier. He stopped chopping vegetables for the salad. "I almost forgot."

Drew gave him a quizzical look. "What?"

"A deliveryman brought a package for you earlier. I will—I'll—go get it." He left the room and went back to the bedroom. The large envelope still sat on the nightstand where he had dropped it. He picked up the package and took it back to the kitchen. He held it out. "Here."

Drew took the envelope and sat in a kitchen chair to open it. He turned a bright grin on Ciaran when he saw what was inside. "Your stuff's here. Come and look."

Nearly jumping with excitement, Ciaran pulled another one of the chairs up next to Drew's. "Let me see."

With a grin, Drew dumped the envelope's contents onto the table. Papers and a couple of small cards fell out. Drew pointed to one of the papers. "This is your birth certificate."

Ciaran traced his finger along the sheet of paper. On the top line, it displayed the name he had chosen, Ciaran Black. His grandfather had named him Ciaran, meaning black or dark, as a reminder of his demon taint. Ciaran had always accepted that, but no longer. He would not hate himself because he was not what his grandfather wanted. His new last name was a way to take back his heritage. In another jab at his grandfather, who he would probably never see again anyway, he had put

his mother's name, Meara, in the blank for mother.

Shaking off his thoughts, he smiled at Drew. "Thank you for getting these for me." He knew the papers had been a considerable expense for Drew, but if he wanted to live as a human, he must have them. A thought occurred to him. "Can I get a real job now?"

"Yep, you're legal. Well, sort of anyway. The guy who did these is really good. We can even get you a driver's license one of these days, if you want."

Ciaran wasn't certain about the idea of operating a vehicle. The task appeared tedious and complicated. Knowing he could, if he wanted to, was amazing. He could get a job. He had a home where he was welcome. Someone who loved him. Ciaran had never believed he would have any of those things. He had never believed he deserved any of them. Thanks to Drew, he was beginning to believe now. His heart full, he threw himself into Drew's arms.

Drew pulled him up onto his lap and held him close. "Hey. You okay?"

"I am fine. Happy." They still needed to finish dinner, but that could wait a few more minutes.

Snuggling in closer, Ciaran savored the warmth and safety of Drew's embrace. When he had first come to stay with Drew, he had feared being sent away, or not being able to adapt to the human world. Those fears seemed unfounded now, and he was grateful for that.

* * * * *

The next day, Ciaran began his job search. His best option was someone he already knew, but he had few acquaintances in town. He called Janie, the owner of Stomping Grounds, the coffee shop in town. She paid him to play his guitar and sing at her shop on most Fridays, and he had come to like her very much. She had spoken about needing to hire someone to replace an employee who had left to attend college, so he was hopeful that she would consider hiring him.

She answered on the second ring. "Stomping Grounds, Janie

speaking."

Her familiar voice eased his nerves somewhat. "Janie, hello. This is Ciaran."

Janie's voice brightened. "Oh, hi, sweetie! How are you? You're still playing for me tonight, right?"

"I am fine. And yes, I will play tonight. I am..." He paused, remembering Drew's lessons, and started again. "*I'm* calling because I'm looking for a job."

"Really? Well, you know I could use someone around here. It'd be part time, at least for now, but you'd have flexible hours."

Stomping Grounds was one of his favorite places. The shop was warm and smelled of good things, and Janie had always been kind to him. "That sounds wonderful."

She laughed. "I take it you want the job?"

Ciaran was nearly bouncing in his seat, but he kept his voice calm. "Yes, please. When would you like me to start?"

After a brief pause, Janie spoke again. "Come in tomorrow at ten. We'll get your paperwork done and you can stick around for a couple of hours to start learning the ropes."

He had no idea what ropes had to do with working in a coffee shop, but did not want to reveal his ignorance by asking. "Thank you, Janie. I will see you tonight."

"Bye, hon."

The moment he hung up the phone, Ciaran hopped up from the couch and rushed back to Drew's office, eager to tell him the news. Drew sat in front of his computer, working on a web site. His hair was tousled, as if he had run his fingers through it many times, and his shoulders looked tense. After a moment, he actually growled at the computer, the low, rumbling sound much deeper than a human throat could make.

Drew was amusing when he was annoyed. Ciaran could not help laughing. "What is wrong?"

Drew spun around in his computer chair, his face a mask of irritation. "This idiot tried to work on his own website, but he has the technical ability of a gnat, so he screwed up everything."

Ciaran understood very little about Drew's work, but he did know how demanding certain clients could be. "And he expects you to fix his mistakes."

"Exactly!" Sighing, Drew leaned back in the chair. "Unfortunately, his mistakes are turning out to be bigger than I thought. And my magic wand seems to be out of order today."

He hated to see Drew unhappy. Maybe his news would help. "I got a job."

Eyes wide, Drew leaned forward. He appeared surprised. "Really? Where?"

Hoping his lover was pleased rather than upset, Ciaran answered. "Stomping Grounds. Janie says I can start tomorrow."

"That's great. I needed some good news today."

Relieved, Ciaran came into the room and plopped down on Drew's lap, threading his arms around Drew's neck. "I am glad I came in here, then. Maybe you need a little encouragement."

Drew wound his arms around Ciaran's slim waist, pulling him close. "Hmm...I think you're right. A kiss would be just the thing."

Ciaran assumed a long-suffering air. "I *suppose* I could manage that." Sliding his fingers into Drew's hair, Ciaran pulled him down for a kiss. It started as a gentle brush of lips. Drew let Ciaran control the kiss, only opening his mouth when the Ciaran's tongue skimmed along the seam of his lips. Ciaran teased a bit, caressing Drew's tongue with his own.

Then he broke the kiss and leaned back. "Feeling better?"

"Yes and no, you tease. If I didn't have so much work to do..." Drew leered, mock-threatening.

Laughing, Ciaran hopped up and moved out of reach. "Well, you do have work to do, so you'd better get to it. I'll see you for dinner."

"Get out of here. And nice job with the contractions, by the way."

Ciaran grinned all the way to the kitchen.

* * * * *

At last, hours after he'd started, Drew finished the site repairs. He dashed off a quick email to the client, informing the man his site was back up and running, and shut down his computer. Irritated and tense, he decided to go for a run before dinner. He knew Ciaran would be expecting him to help with the dinner preparations, but he needed to get his frustration out first. A run in wolf form would accomplish that.

He stood and stalked down the hall. As he headed for the back door, Drew could hear the soft sounds of Ciaran playing the guitar and singing in their bedroom. He didn't stop to listen, though. Instead, he went into the kitchen and out the back door. He stumbled a bit as he came down the steep slope behind the cabin, and not for the first time he thought they should put a deck back there.

He continued walking until he reached his favorite clearing in the woods, where he began to strip off his clothing. He folded his shirt, pants, and boxers and set them on the ground. Clearing his mind, he reached for his *change*. Moments later, he padded away from the clearing.

Drew ran for about an hour, going after rabbits and squirrels and glorying in the wind in his face and the thrill of the chase. His wolf senses picked up everything around him, from the taste of the crisp air to the myriad woodland sounds around him. The November air was cool, and the breeze carried scents of dead leaves, wood smoke, and the upcoming winter. It was a perfect time to be a wolf.

Back home with the pack, they would all hunt together on days like this. Sometimes they'd make a kill, sometimes not, but after a big hunt, they'd gather at his father's house and spend the evening practicing their skills, playing games, and being together. He'd loved those nights. Before his father disowned him, that was. He pushed the thought away. He had a new home now, and he had Ciaran. He didn't need a pack.

Sunset was approaching as he headed back toward the clearing and caught another, richer scent—sweet, with a hint of wildness. *Ciaran*. The scent called to him. He broke into a light trot, suddenly ready to go home.

Sure enough, when he reached the clearing, the half-demon sat with his back against a tree. His eyes, which had been closed, opened when Drew neared. He smiled. "I knew you would come here."

Drew couldn't answer, so he went to the other man's side and leaned against him. Ciaran began to stroke Drew's fur, sifting his fingers through the thick hair. Drew leaned into the caress for a while, enjoying the gentle touches, but soon wanted those hands stroking skin rather than fur.

With that thought in mind, he changed. Ciaran let out a startled laugh as his armful of wolf turned into an armful of naked man. The laugh soon became a moan when Drew leaned over and kissed him. Drew teased his tongue along the seam of Ciaran's lips to gain entrance. Ciaran opened to him, tangling his tongue with Drew's enthusiastically.

He takes kissing as seriously as everything else he does. Drew smiled against the other man's lips at the thought.

He drew back for a moment. "I'm sorry I ran out without talking to you."

The half-demon reached up to trace Drew's lips with his fingertips. "I understand. I write songs or bike when I'm upset. You run."

He kissed the slim fingertips. Ciaran truly did understand him, yet unlike his own family, loved him just the same. He could be himself for the first time in his life, without fear. His heart so full he couldn't speak, he cupped the back of Ciaran's head and pulled him in for another kiss.

Ciaran nipped at Drew's lower lip. Maybe it was a wolf thing, but Drew loved being bitten. He let out a playful growl and nibbled Ciaran's lip in return. His lover must have felt playful as well, because Ciaran retaliated by rolling him over and pinning him on his back on the moss and dry leaves with surprising strength. Drew twisted a bit to test the hold, but didn't break free. Interesting. His little demon was becoming more assertive, and he had to admit he liked it.

Wrestling was as much fun as being bitten, and Drew couldn't resist the teasing challenge. After a brief struggle, he used his superior strength to flip them, leaving Ciaran on his back staring up at Drew and laughing.

The sight of his slim, beautiful lover pinned beneath him in the leaves had Drew's cock taking interest. He rubbed his thickening erection against Ciaran's denim-clad thigh, hissing at how good it felt. The

November air held a distinct chill the setting sun didn't warm, but the temperature didn't bother him. The heat of his arousal kept the cold at bay.

Ciaran gazed up at him, smiling. "You want me."

He laughed. "What was your first clue?"

"Well, this gave me a hint." Ciaran curled his fingers around Drew's cock.

The light touch pulled a moan from him. "God, that feels good. Stop teasing me."

Eyes hot, Ciaran stroked Drew's erection. "Who says I'm teasing?"

Ciaran couldn't possibly be saying what Drew's cock hoped he was saying. "Do you mean?"

Instead of answering, Ciaran pushed himself up enough to strip off his shirt. Drew jumped up and offered a hand, which Ciaran took. As soon as he gained his feet, he toed off his shoes. Then he unfastened his jeans and shoved them, along with his underwear, to the ground. The erection that sprang out told Drew that Ciaran was just as turned on as he was.

"You're so gorgeous." Drew trailed his fingers down Ciaran's chest to his stomach. He loved the silky-smooth feel of his lover's pale, hairless skin. He'd always thought it was like living marble.

Ciaran shivered under his exploration. "Not as gorgeous as you are."

He smiled. "Turn around. Put your hands on the tree."

Ciaran obeyed. The only thing sexier than his stomach was his back. Drew never tired of looking at the incredible black markings on his back where his wings were hidden. They looked like a huge, intricate tattoo. Drew traced his fingers over them, amazed as always.

His amazement turned to shock when the markings moved, twisting on the skin like a giant snake. Instinct told him to step back, which turned out to be a wise decision. Ciaran's wings emerged from his back, slowly reaching their full span.

Ciaran shifted and shook out the huge, black, bat-like wings. He looked over his shoulder to meet Drew's eyes. "I know you have wanted

this.”

Drew could only gape at the vision before him. He hadn’t seen Ciaran’s wings since the first time they’d met, when he found out Ciaran could hide them. The half-demon seemed to regard his wings as a source of shame, and a mark of his difference, but maybe he was getting past that if he was willing to show them to Drew.

Awed, he ran his fingers over one wing. The velvety-soft surface shivered under his touch. Ciaran moaned and let his head fall back. How had Ciaran known Drew had fantasized about this very thing?

Drew stroked the wing again. “Do you like that?”

“It feels incredible, almost like you’re touching my cock,” Ciaran admitted. “I never knew it could feel that way, until you touched them that night.”

Drew’s already hard cock throbbed at Ciaran’s words. If he wasn’t careful, this wouldn’t last long. He kissed Ciaran’s neck, his shoulder, his back, his wing. The last touch resulted in a full-body shudder from Ciaran, who whimpered.

Grinning, Drew moved on, kissing his way down Ciaran’s spine. When he’d gone as far as he could, he palmed the taut globes of Ciaran’s ass. “Lean forward.”

When Ciaran did as he asked, the angle was perfect. He spread the twin globes apart and ran his tongue along the crease between them. From above him, a sharp gasp sounded, followed by a choked, “Don’t stop.”

He had no intention of stopping. He lapped at the crease again before finding the tight, puckered opening and running his tongue around it. Drew could feel Ciaran’s body quivering, but his lover didn’t move. Not even when Drew pushed his tongue into Ciaran’s hole.

The cry his action wrung from Ciaran was music to his ears. He alternated light laps with penetration. He added a spit-moistened finger, then two, and Ciaran’s body opened for him.

Above him, Ciaran whimpered and scrabbled at the tree bark. “Drew. I need you inside me. Please.”

God, Drew loved it when Ciaran begged. He withdrew his fingers and stood. Lacking a better alternative, he spat into his hand and rubbed

that, along with the pre-cum he found, over his aching prick. He lined up with Ciaran's opening and pushed.

The tight, hot grasp of Ciaran's body was heaven. The few seconds it took to get past the resistance of the first ring of muscle were a pleasure so great it bordered on pain. Then he was in, and he paused a moment to savor the feeling of connection.

He'd planned to go slow, but Ciaran had other plans. His sweet little demon, usually so submissive, wouldn't let him take his time. When he pulled almost out in preparation to thrust, Ciaran pushed back into him quick and hard, wrenching a cry from him. The move felt so good he couldn't stick to his plan to go slow. His thrusts were fast and brutal. He could feel his orgasm hovering just out of sight. Needing Ciaran to come with him, he angled Ciaran's hips so he could hit his prostate.

Ciaran's yelp told him he'd succeeded. With one hand, he gripped Ciaran's hip to keep the angle perfect. With the other, he reached up to stroke Ciaran's wings.

"Drew!" His lover arched and clutched at the tree.

Drew watched as ropes of white spattered the trunk, decorating the bark haphazardly. The already tight passage clamped down on him, sending him over the edge. He howled out his completion as he pumped his seed into Ciaran's body.

Afterward, Drew carried his limp, exhausted lover inside. He gently cleaned the mess from his stomach and thighs. Then he lay down beside his now wingless Ciaran and pulled him into his arms. "I love you."

Half-asleep, Ciaran whispered, "Love you, too."

Drew watched him sleep for a few minutes before allowing himself to drift off. With or without his wings, Ciaran was something special. He only hoped Ciaran knew that.

Chapter Three

When Drew woke, the clock by the bed told him it was a lot later than he had realized. They wouldn't have time to make dinner. Ciaran had a gig at Stomping Grounds, and Drew didn't want to make him late.

He rolled over to face Ciaran, who lay sprawled on his back. Smiling, he brushed Ciaran's black curls away from his eyes. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. It's getting late."

Ciaran's eyes opened. After a couple of sleepy blinks, he asked, "What time is it?"

"After six. We need to take a quick shower. Then you can get ready, and we can eat something at the coffee shop before you play. What do you think?"

"Sounds good. But you forgot something."

Seeing the mischievous expression, Drew was skeptical. "Oh yeah? What?"

"Where is my kiss? Sleeping Beauty has to get a kiss from the prince to wake up."

"No more Disney movies for you." He rolled his eyes, but even so he leaned down and gave Ciaran a soft kiss. "There. Happy now?"

"Very much so. Thank you." With a smug smile, the now-awake "Sleeping Beauty" rolled out of bed and left the room.

* * * * *

By six forty-five, they were both ready. Grabbing his guitar, Ciaran preceded Drew to Drew's newly purchased truck. He preferred riding his motorcycle, but since he wasn't alone anymore he often found it easier to use the truck. He could grocery-shop now, and taking Ciaran to gigs was easier too. He grinned, thinking how domesticated this particular werewolf had become. At least he hadn't bought a minivan, or, heaven forbid, a station wagon.

Ciaran gave him an odd look as he snickered to himself. "What?"

He started the truck and headed toward town. "Nothing. I was just being silly. Are you ready to play tonight?"

His eyes lighting up, Ciaran launched into an animated monologue on the songs he planned to play and the new one he'd written today. Drew listened, making encouraging noises whenever they seemed necessary. Ciaran didn't talk much, except about his music. If anyone asked him about his guitar or one of his songs, he could go on all day. Since Drew liked seeing him happy, he made sure to bring up the subject often. Maybe some of the musical knowledge would rub off on him, although he doubted it. He'd exhausted his own meager skills teaching Ciaran basic chords and simple songs. Some people were better off appreciating others' music rather than trying to make their own, and he was pretty sure he was one of those people.

They reached the coffee shop a few minutes later. Drew parked the truck, and they went inside to get some food before Ciaran had to play at eight. As they ordered, Drew looked around. Stomping Grounds seemed extra-busy tonight. The place generally had quite a bit of business, since it was the only decent restaurant in town, but there were more people than usual. All the barstools at the counter were full and most of the booths as well. About half of the tables in the center of the room had been taken. By the time the music started, this place would be packed. Word had clearly been getting out about the live music Janie, the owner, had booked for Friday nights. The first musician she'd picked had been Ciaran, and he'd been very popular. Ever since then, she'd had him play often, sometimes on the same night as another musician, and other times by himself.

When they got their food, Drew snagged a table right by the stage.

He knew it was silly, but he liked to be close when Ciaran sang, so he could watch him. He knew that made him sound like a sappy teenage girl, or maybe the big bad wolf—*the better to see you with, my dear*—but he didn't care. Hmm. Maybe they could play big bad wolf later. He smiled a little at his silly thoughts.

"So, what do you think?"

He looked up and noticed Ciaran watched him expectantly. *I think I should have been paying attention.* "Um..." He was saved from having to reply by Janie's arrival at their table. The tiny brunette carried a plate of chocolate-chip cookies, which she set down in front of them.

"Ready to play tonight, Ciaran?"

"Definitely. I have some new songs I want to try out." He grabbed a cookie and took a bite, fidgeting in his seat.

"Great! We'll have quite a crowd tonight. I can't believe how much having live music has improved my business." She grinned, clearly pleased by the development.

Drew took a cookie as well. "Thanks for the cookies. I have to agree with you, the music was a great idea. Especially since there's nothing else to do around here. Now kids have a place to bring dates and hang out, and us older folks can hear some good music too."

Janie laughed. "Yeah, you're so old. What are you, twenty-five?"

"I'll have you know I'm almost twenty-nine."

"Look, buddy. I'm thirty, so you'd better not be saying I'm old." She crossed her arms, tapped her foot, and gave him a mock-threatening stare.

"You're thirty?" Ciaran put on an expression of innocent astonishment. "I thought you were twenty-four."

Janie beamed at Ciaran before turning a fake scowl on Drew. "See. That's why I like him more than you."

Drew pouted. "I'm hurt."

"I'm sure you are. If you're finished irritating me, I've got work to do." With that parting shot, she turned and swept away like an offended queen.

They both watched her walk away, and then turned to each other

and laughed. Janie was a lot of fun. He'd never seen her in a bad mood. She loved her job, and her customers, and her dedication showed. She also had quite a bit of business sense, as evidenced by her success with the Friday Music Night.

Of course, Drew thought later as he listened to Ciaran performing a quick sound check, the success of the music night had a lot to do with Ciaran's talent. The man could learn to play any song by ear, and the songs he wrote were wonderful. He had a great voice as well, rich, husky, and sweet, the kind of multi-layered voice that worked for almost any kind of music. Anytime he sang, listeners were enchanted.

His appearance didn't hurt either. Drew smiled slightly as he saw a table full of teenage girls giggling and gazing at Ciaran as if he were the hottest thing they'd ever seen. After the show, one of them would probably try to talk to him, getting all giggly and red-faced, and Ciaran wouldn't have a clue as to why. He never seemed to realize how his beauty affected other people. He didn't think he *was* beautiful, since he'd been raised to believe being half demon made him ugly and unworthy.

Ciaran started his set then, and Drew shook off his musings and focused on the stage. As always, tuning out the other people and sounds in the coffee shop came easily. Ciaran's voice soared above everything else, taking Drew with it. The forty-five minute set flew by. Although he still played mostly covers, Ciaran had begun to insert more of his own material into each show. Tonight, four of the thirteen songs were originals. Drew was pleased to note the crowd seemed to like them at least as much as the covers, if not more.

When Ciaran finished and thanked the crowd, several people came up to speak with him. True to Drew's prediction, one of the first people who approached was a teenage girl. The blonde blushed and giggled her way through a short conversation and, when she returned to her friends, Drew could hear them all squealing at her bravery. "Oh my god, he's *so* hot!" one of the girls announced in what was probably supposed to be a whisper.

"And so sweet! He actually talked to me!" the little blonde gushed.

Drew smiled. The girls were right. Ciaran *was* so hot, and so sweet.

And so mine. At times like this, he actually wanted everyone in town to know he and Ciaran were together. He knew that wouldn't be a good idea, though. The Midwest was a great place to live, but not always known for tolerance. Things might get awkward for them here if people knew, and he loved his home too much to take the risk.

A sudden prickling feeling of being watched made him turn. He scanned the room, searching for the reason for his strange feeling. His eyes stopped on a small group seated in the large booth farthest from the stage. Five people he'd never seen before sat there, four men and a woman. They were focused on the stage, and they were all dressed in dark, plain shirts and jeans. Something about them struck him as odd.

Before he could spend any more time wondering about the newcomers, Ciaran came back to the table. Flushed, eyes dancing, he sat across from Drew. "What did you think?"

Drew really wanted to kiss that smiling mouth. "You were wonderful. As always. Ready to go home, or do you want to stay a while?"

"Let's go home." Ciaran grabbed his guitar and called a goodbye to Janie.

They met the blonde teenager and her friends on the way out, and Drew held the door for them. He and Ciaran exchanged a grin as they heard one of the departing girls speak. "His friend's cute too! Did you see his green eyes? I could just *die!*"

"You do have beautiful eyes," Ciaran pointed out as they got into the truck and headed home. "And a beautiful body..." One slim hand crept across the space between them and stroked up Drew's thigh.

Drew clenched his teeth and tried very hard to focus on the road as his passenger's hand crept ever-higher. Concentrating became increasingly difficult, a fact of which he was sure Ciaran was aware. "If you want to get home in one piece, you'd better stop doing that."

Although Ciaran's hand stilled, he didn't take it away. "Until we get home, then."

Drew caught his hand and kissed the fingertips. "I think you're becoming a bad influence on me, Mr. Black."

Ciaran laughed.

* * * * *

Saturday morning dawned clear and cool. Drew slipped out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Ciaran, who still slept peacefully, his hand cupped beneath his cheek. His lips were curled into a slight smile, and his black curls were disarrayed, leaving a clearly non-human pointy ear exposed. For a moment, Drew stood watching him, tempted to crawl back into bed. After the night before, Ciaran deserved his rest. Drew contented himself with a last, long look before pulling on a T-shirt, sweatpants, socks, and his running shoes. He would do his morning run in human form today.

As he ran through the woods a few minutes later, he reflected on how much his life had changed in the past few months. He'd come out to his family with disastrous results, inherited his cabin, and found the best thing to ever happen to him on the way here. He often wondered who had been chasing Ciaran that night, and why they'd summoned him in the first place. He also wondered about Ciaran's grandfather, and whether the powerful Fae nobleman was looking for his grandson. Did the man even notice his grandson had gone missing, or care? Were the people who'd summoned Ciaran still searching for him? If they were, they'd find more than they bargained for. No way would Drew let Ciaran be taken from him. Werewolves didn't look too kindly on anyone messing with their mates.

Drew stumbled as he realized what he was thinking. *Mate?* He'd always been told he would know when he found his mate. Even though the idea came as a surprise, it felt right. He liked the idea of spending the rest of his life with Ciaran. But did Ciaran feel the same? *I know he loves me, but will he want to stay with me for life? And do I have the courage to ask him?*

Thoughtful now, Drew finished his run and returned home. Ciaran had breakfast ready when he walked in the back door. He stared in surprise at the plate sitting on the table, heaped with bacon, sausage, and eggs. Normally Ciaran tried to con him into eating healthy food for

breakfast. Raising an eyebrow, he looked at the other man. "What's the occasion?"

"There's no occasion, I just thought you might be extra-hungry this morning, after all the hard work you did last night."

Those laughing violet eyes met his, and he grinned. "I suppose I am. Thanks." He paused, remembering that Ciaran was supposed to start work at Stomping Grounds today. "Are you ready for your new job?"

"I believe so. I have all my papers."

"Do you remember what they're all for?" At Ciaran's nod, Drew scooted his chair back and patted his lap. "Come here a sec." Ciaran crossed the room and perched on his lap. He gave him an encouraging smile. "You're going to do great."

"Thank you." Ciaran gave him a quick kiss and stood. He went to the microwave and removed something.

Just before going back to his breakfast, Drew added, "Just don't forget your contractions, and the other stuff we talked about."

Ciaran nodded. "I will not. I mean, I won't." He came over to the table, carrying a bowl of oatmeal and a glass of orange juice for himself. He snickered at Drew's exaggerated expression of disgust. Drew's dislike for oatmeal was a running joke between them.

They ate in companionable silence for a while, each seemingly lost in his own thoughts. Drew considered his earlier realization, and debated whether to bring up the subject this morning. When Ciaran grabbed a napkin and a pen and started scribbling song lyrics, he decided to save the discussion for later. They had plenty of time.

* * * * *

Despite his best intentions, Drew didn't bring up the topic later. When they finished breakfast, Drew did the dishes while Ciaran went to his old bedroom to work on the new song he'd started writing on the napkin. Drew had work of his own to do, so he went to his office and pulled up a program he was designing.

Before he knew it, Ciaran was standing in the doorway, dressed in

black slacks and a white button-up shirt. "I have to leave for work now."

"You look nice." He stood and went to give his lover a quick goodbye kiss. "Have a good day."

"Thank you. You, too." Ciaran smiled and headed back down the hallway.

Drew watched him go, proud, nervous, and happy all at the same time.

Chapter Four

The bicycle ride to Stomping Grounds seemed longer than usual. The scenery went by unnoticed for once as Ciaran tried to think about his speech lessons, and Drew's faith in him. He could not help being nervous. He had never worked before. At his grandfather's house, he had been expected to stay inside and occupy himself by reading or some other quiet pursuit. He would have had no real concept of work, or money, or anything useful in the human realm without Drew's guidance. He frowned, hoping he did not make too many mistakes.

A few minutes later, he arrived in town. He locked his bicycle to the rack in front of the coffee shop and went inside, carrying the envelope with his papers. The chimes above the door rang, signaling his arrival.

Janie glanced up from the counter she was cleaning and smiled. "Good morning. Ready to get started?"

He nodded, a sudden surge of anxiety stealing his voice.

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Janie motioned him to the counter. She pulled a piece of paper out from beneath it. "First, you get to fill this out. It's a pretty simple application. Then we'll get to work."

Ciaran read the form she had given him, finding most of the information easy to complete. He wrote his name, Ciaran Black, on the top line. Address, telephone number, and other basics were easy to fill in as well. He had to look at the small card Drew had gotten him for the "Social Security number," a nine-digit sequence he still did not fully understand. The only thing he knew was that he needed it to gain employment, for

some reason. Drew had tried to explain what the purpose of the number was, but the idea was incomprehensible to him. In Faerie only names were needed. Anyone hearing a name would know all about the person's family and history just from their name.

The last segment of the application asked for references. The only person he knew, other than Janie, was Drew. He carefully printed *Andrew Moore*.

Finished, he held the application out to Janie. "I hope I have completed it correctly."

She skimmed the paper. "Looks fine. Why don't you come around the counter, and I'll show you some of the things you'll be doing."

* * * * *

Over the next four hours, Ciaran learned how to ring up customers' purchases on the cash register, as well as how to properly serve them all beverages that didn't require using the espresso or cappuccino machines. Janie had decided his training on the machines could wait until he felt comfortable with everything else, a decision for which he was grateful. His head already felt stuffed full of information.

Fortunately, he enjoyed the work. Talking to customers was interesting, and he liked the sense of accomplishment he got from helping them. He was almost disappointed when Janie told him to deal with one last customer and then he could go.

His last customer was a young woman whose long black hair was pulled back from her face in a severe style. She wore a black sweatshirt and jeans. Ciaran smiled at her. "Can I help you?"

The woman did not smile back. "I need a large black coffee and a blueberry muffin. To go."

He rang up the two items. "That will be four dollars and twenty-five cents."

After rummaging around in her purse, the woman came up with a five dollar bill. He took the money and gave her seventy-five cents in change. He poured her coffee into a takeaway cup and put a lid on it, and

then he got a muffin from the case. He presented her with both items. "Thank you. Have a nice day."

Still unsmiling, she studied him. "You have quite an accent. Where are you from?"

Ciaran made sure to consider his words carefully. The woman's suspicious expression made him uncomfortable. "I'm from Missouri."

Ciaran and Drew had discussed how he would reply to such questions. They had decided he would say he came from a small rural commune, which Drew thought might help explain some of his lack of knowledge about the world. His birth certificate claimed he had been born at home in a tiny Southern Missouri town, so the commune story would be appropriate. He did not tell the story to the woman, however. Something about her made him not want to tell her anything more.

She arched a pitch black eyebrow. "Really? I would have guessed somewhere a bit farther away."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." Despite his discomfort, he managed to keep his smile.

Without another word, the woman turned and left the coffee shop. He let out a sigh of relief.

Janie approached from where she had been fiddling with one of the machines. "Jeez, what was her problem?"

Ciaran shrugged. He understood very little about why humans behaved the way they did. Maybe working around them would help him grow to understand them better.

Patting his arm, Janie offered him a commiserating grin. "You'll get a few customers like that. There's this one old guy who comes in every day, and he'll bite your head off before he gets his coffee."

Bite your head off? That must be a figure of speech. He had never heard of humans doing such things. To hide his confusion, he smiled at Janie. "Thank you for hiring me. I enjoyed working."

She laughed. "Good, because I want you to come in at least four times a week. Let's start with Monday through Friday, ten to two. Will that work for you?"

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now get out of here, and I'll see you Monday." She waved him away. "Tell Drew I said hi."

"I will. Goodbye." He left the shop and crouched at the rack to unlock his bicycle. An odd, prickling sensation washed over him as he freed the chain and stood. Across the street, his last customer sat on the park bench, her cold stare directed at him. He frowned and climbed onto his bicycle, suddenly more than ready to go home.

* * * * *

The moment he entered the cabin, Ciaran caught the scent of garlic and tomatoes. Drew must have cooked something. Curious and hungry, he stepped into the kitchen, and stared.

The kitchen table had been set with the good china from Drew's great-aunt's glass-front cabinet. Ciaran had often admired its lovely blue and white pattern, but they had never used it before. Crystal goblets stood by the place settings, and a crisp white cloth covered the table's surface. The effect was very nice, like one of the restaurants Ciaran had seen on television.

Drew stood at the stove, stirring a pot of red sauce. He turned and smiled. "Hey. How was your first day at work?"

"It was good. I learned a lot." Ciaran drank in the sight of his werewolf cooking for him, marinara sauce rather than the meat sauce Drew preferred if the smell was any indication. The open cookbook on the counter beside the stove, and the way Drew's hair was tousled as if he had run his fingers through it many times, told Ciaran the rest of the story. Drew had obviously tried to make this meal special. Ciaran's chest felt tight with emotion.

"Good." Drew put the spoon down on the spoon rest beside the stove and turned off the burner. "I hope you're hungry. Lunch is ready."

"I am very hungry." Ciaran didn't just mean for food, but it would do for a start. Realizing what he had said, he grinned. Perhaps the double-speak humans always seemed to use was not so difficult after all.

Drew grinned back. "What else is new? Have a seat, and I'll bring

you some food.”

Ciaran didn’t bother to argue that he could do it himself. He could see Drew wanted to do something for him. He sat.

Moments later, Drew approached the table, bearing a plate of spaghetti with marinara sauce and a large bowl of salad. Ciaran stifled a smile at the vegetarian food. If he hadn’t known before that the meal was all for him, he did now. Drew liked to complain about his insistence on both of them eating vegetables. Each time Ciaran brought the werewolf a salad, he would say, “What’s this? Carnivores don’t eat salad.” Of course, he would always eat the salad anyway. He claimed he had to complain on principle, which made Ciaran laugh every time.

Drew bustled around for a few more minutes, getting his own food and a basket of garlic bread and pouring them each a glass of flavored sparkling water. At last he sat down. He lifted his glass and waited until Ciaran mimicked the action. Then he lightly tapped his glass to Ciaran’s. “To your new job. I probably don’t tell you enough, but I’m proud of you.”

Their eyes met, and Ciaran saw the pride in Drew’s green gaze. No one had ever been proud of him before. He swallowed to dislodge the large lump in his throat. “Thank you.” He reached out to touch Drew’s hand. “That makes me happy.” Everything about being here, with Drew, made him happy.

They smiled at each other for a long moment. Drew nodded toward the food. “We’d better eat before it gets cold.”

Suddenly ravenous, Ciaran dug in. He had a feeling he would need his strength for later.

Chapter Five

"I'm going to work." Ciaran's voice from the doorway pulled Drew away from his thoughts.

He swiveled his chair to face the doorway. "Come here." When Ciaran did as he'd asked, he pulled the smaller man down into his lap. He took a few seconds to admire Ciaran's stunning bone structure and pretty lips before he pressed a kiss to them. "I love you."

Ciaran's violet eyes lit as he smiled. "I love you, too." He wound his arms around Drew's neck and gave him a quick, tight hug, and stood. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Have a good day." Drew couldn't help watching Ciaran's tight little ass as he walked away. *I am a lucky, lucky man.*

Still grinning, Drew turned back to his computer. He had just finished the monthly website update for one of his oldest clients. There were a couple of other things on his to-do list for the day, but he wanted a break before he started them. Some physical activity would get him back in the mood to work. He stood and stretched.

What to do? He considered throwing on his tennis shoes for a run, but he'd already done that early in the morning. Instead, he stripped down and headed for the back door. A quick jaunt in wolf form would help him recharge.

The moment he stepped out the back door, he changed. He padded away from the house on four paws, relishing the chill wind that sifted through his fur and brought the scents of wood smoke, animals, and the

forest. He sent another mental thank you to his great-aunt Lizzie for leaving the cabin and land to him. Having a safe place to shift and run whenever he felt the urge was wonderful.

Drew took full advantage of the acres of forest. He ran to his heart's content, exploring and scenting out rabbits, deer, birds, and squirrels. He even lay down in his favorite clearing for a while and basked in the sun.

Everything was perfect until he wandered near the edge of the property closest to the road. He paused and sniffed the ground. Humans had been here. Several of them. He identified four separate scents, all male.

For the most part, he stayed well back from the road when he ran in wolf form. In this case, he made an exception. He followed the scent right up to the edge of the road. From his vantage point, he could see the cabin. The human scent was strong enough that they must have lingered here, but why? It was deer season, but any human wanting to hunt would have done so in the woods, not by the road. What purpose could they have had for staying here? He growled, not liking the idea of someone violating his territory.

A second later he shook his head at his own behavior. His wolf needed to chill out. Here he was going all Alpha, and the people had probably had a flat tire or something. Drew had no reason to suspect anything else. If he was going to act like this, he needed to go home and get back to work. There was no point in making something out of nothing.

* * * * *

He worked straight through until dinnertime. Ciaran had come home a few hours before and called out a hello before going into his old room to work on his music. Knowing the other man was occupied helped Drew focus. Before he stopped for the evening, he'd finished everything on his to-do list and started working on a new program.

At six, he shut down the computer and headed for the kitchen. In the doorway, he paused to watch Ciaran dancing around the kitchen, singing. He'd shoved his hair behind his ears to reveal their delicate

points. Drew could watch his slim, graceful lover for hours. There was something about the way Ciaran moved that turned him on like nothing ever had. He slipped up behind Ciaran at the sink and wrapped his arms around him.

Ciaran stopped dancing and leaned into him. "Hello. Did you miss me today?"

Growling playfully, Drew nuzzled a pointy ear. "Always. What's for dinner?"

The demon rolled his eyes. "Roast, if you will let me make it."

"You've been spending way too much time with Janie, Mr. Eye-roll." Drew nibbled Ciaran's neck until he laughed, and then released him. "What do you want me to do?"

The spark of mischief in Ciaran's eyes clued him in before a vegetable peeler was pressed into his hand. "You can peel the potatoes and carrots."

He pouted.

Before he could say a word, Ciaran said, "I know, carnivores don't eat vegetables. Well, your human side is an omnivore. Start peeling."

Drew laughed and followed orders.

* * * * *

By Tuesday, his third day on the job, Ciaran was beginning to feel comfortable working. He could handle the cash register with ease. He had learned the names of most of the pastries, cookies, and beverages. There were only a few sandwich and other food items on the menu, but he was learning to make them, too. Janie had even begun to teach him to make some of the easier baked goods during the store's slow times.

Spending time with Janie was one of the best parts of the job. He liked her very much, and now he thought they might be friends. His life in Faerie had been lonely and friendless, but now he had Drew, and maybe Janie. The other two employees of Stomping Grounds, a teenage boy named Mike and an older woman named April, were both nice, although he rarely saw them. Mike worked in the late afternoon, after the high

school let out, and April babysat for her granddaughter, so she worked weekends, sporadic hours when the girl was in school, and the occasional evening.

To Ciaran's surprise and pleasure, the customers genuinely seemed to like him as well. Most of them were friendly and interested in him. Many of them had heard him play at the Friday Music Nights and stopped to compliment his music. Even the old man whom Janie had promised would "bite his head off" before he got his coffee turned out to be very nice. He liked to come in each morning to have coffee and chat with a group of elderly men, and after snapping at Ciaran Monday when he ordered and getting no reaction, he had apparently decided Ciaran was all right. This morning he had ordered his coffee and said "Thank you, young fellow" when Ciaran handed it to him.

The only customer Ciaran did not like was the black-haired woman from Saturday. She had come in again Monday, and been just as strange and rude as the first time. Ciaran sighed when the bell over the door tinkled, and she walked in again. Despite his unease, he smiled at her. "Hello."

The woman nodded. "Hello. I'll have a black coffee and a chocolate chip cookie."

Ciaran keyed the prices into the cash register. "Three-fifty, please." He took the exact change the woman handed him. He got her coffee and cookie as quickly as possible, her unblinking stare making him nervous. He handed her purchases to her. "Thank you."

Her dark gaze seemed to bore into the side of his head. "No, thank you." She gave him a cold smile and left.

Something about the way the woman stared at him made him wonder if she had seen something in him that he tried to hide. Without really thinking about it, he reached up to pull at a lock of his hair. He froze. His hair had shifted, leaving the point of one ear exposed. He shivered, hoping the woman had not noticed.

"You okay?"

Ciaran jumped at the sound of Janie's voice. She had come from the back, where she had been making muffins for a special order. He forced a

smile. "I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"You're welcome, sweetie." Her grin told him he had said something she found amusing again.

He thought about what he had said, but could not imagine what was amusing about his words. Since she was not sneering at him like the strange customer, he decided not to worry about it. "Did you finish the muffins?"

Janie tossed her ponytail. "But of course. Speaking of the muffins, it's about time for you to leave for the day. Do you think you could drop the muffins off at the church on the way? They're doing some kind of ladies' meeting there this afternoon, and I told them we'd deliver the muffins before that."

Janie was asking him to make a delivery for her. She must think him trustworthy. He smiled. "I would be glad to deliver them for you."

"Great." She disappeared into the back for a few seconds before returning, a box in hand. "Here are the muffins. Take them to the church at the end of the street. The preacher's place is the little white house next door. His wife will take the muffins. She's already paid, so that's all you have to do. Got it?"

"Got it."

"All right, get out of here. I'll see you tomorrow."

Clutching the box, Ciaran left the coffee shop and walked down to the house next to the church. A sign on the door read, *At the church. Come on over.* He eyed the small church with trepidation. Many of the books in his grandfather's library had condemned demons. He did not believe he would burst into flames upon entering the building or anything of the sort, but he knew human religions thought demons were evil. The mere thought of being reviled was enough to make him hesitate.

After a few minutes of nervous indecision, he walked up the stairs to the church door and knocked. A woman's voice called, "Come in!"

He pushed the heavy door open and entered. He crossed a small foyer area and went through a set of propped-open doors to the worship area. An older woman with graying brown hair was kneeling on the ground, polishing one of the pews. She smiled at him. "Hello, young man."

Can I help you?"

Ciaran breathed a sigh of relief that the woman did not seem to be able to tell he was a demon. He gave her a tentative smile. "I have come from Stomping Grounds to deliver the muffins. Janie said to bring them to the preacher's wife."

"That would be me." The woman stood, wiping her hands on her dusty jeans. "I'm Angela Dover. What's your name?"

He shifted the muffin box to his left hand and offered his right to shake. "I'm Ciaran Black. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Dover."

She chuckled. "Call me Angela."

Angela had a firm grip. Ciaran nodded. "All right, Angela." He released her hand and offered her the box. "Here are your muffins. Janie just finished making them."

"Oh, good. They'll be nice and fresh, then. I love Janie's muffins. Unfortunately, I think my hips do, too." Angela winked at him. "Thanks for bringing them over."

"You are welcome." He smiled, despite his confusion. How could one's hips love food?

"You're new in town, aren't you?"

He was not sure why, but the look of speculation in Angela's eyes did not unnerve him. "Yes. I have lived here a few weeks."

"Well, welcome to Trenton. Feel free to come back anytime."

"Thank you."

With a last smile, Ciaran left the church. He had entered and spoken to someone, and nothing bad had happened. His steps were lighter on the way back to his bicycle.

Even the sight of the strange black-haired woman seated on the bench across from Stomping Grounds did not dampen his mood.

* * * * *

The humans had been at the road near his property again. Drew snarled and sniffed at a cigarette butt with the distinct scent of one of the humans who had been there a few days earlier. Not far away, he found

another bearing the same scent. What could have been a coincidence before now took on a more sinister air. Someone had been here at least twice, the second time long enough to smoke two cigarettes. If there had been only one, he could have written it off as someone tossing a cigarette butt out a car window while driving by. Two could not be explained so easily. The whole situation felt wrong. Another involuntary growl slipped out.

Determined to get to the bottom of the mysterious lurkers, he ran back to the house to shift. The second he had regained his human shape, he threw his clothing on and walked back to the same spot of road. Finding the cigarette butts again, he picked them up with a tissue, wrapped them, and put them in his pocket. He wasn't sure what good it would do, but he needed to do something. He looked around a little to see if there was any other evidence. He found nothing.

During the walk back to the cabin, he considered the possibilities. Either someone was coming out here to make out or do something illegal—sell drugs, maybe—or someone was spying on the house. Neither possibility was pleasant, but at this point he almost preferred the drug theory.

Back at the house, he got online to send an emergency email to one of his few remaining werewolf contacts. Nick was a lone wolf, and an enforcer of sorts. He hunted down rogues and took care of threats to the werewolf community. Drew asked him if there were any known werewolf hunters in the vicinity. If anyone would know about something like that, Nick would. He hit the send button, knowing Nick would respond quickly if there were any threats in the area, or find out if he didn't know.

After sending the email, Drew felt a little better. Until Nick replied, he would monitor the situation. He could patrol the property in wolf form every morning and night. If the humans showed up again, he would find out what they were up to. If not, then there would be nothing to worry about.

Chapter Six

"How much does a turkey cost?"

Janie raised an eyebrow at Ciaran's blurted question. "That depends on how big it is. I think they're usually about a dollar a pound. Are you planning to buy one?"

Ciaran ducked his head, embarrassed. Thanksgiving was only a week away, and he had not yet purchased the necessary supplies. He did not know how much money he would need, or how to go about buying things. He had been considering the logistics of it all, but had not meant to ask the question. He forged on anyway, needing the information. "Yes. I want to prepare Thanksgiving dinner for Drew. I have been watching the cooking channel."

"That's sweet of you." Janie leaned against the counter and grinned at him. "Were you going to tell him, or is it a surprise?"

"I would like it to be a surprise." Humans seemed to enjoy surprises, at least on television. Perhaps Drew would as well.

She rubbed her chin, thoughtful. "Hmm. It'll be kind of hard for you to take a whole Thanksgiving dinner's worth of stuff home on your bike."

Janie was correct. Getting everything he would need home on his bicycle would be impossible, and he still had not learned how to drive. Disappointed, Ciaran stared down at the floor.

"Hey, don't give up just yet. How about I take you shopping, and we can put everything in my car. We can go the day before and figure out

some way to sneak the stuff in."

His eyes flew back up to meet hers. Janie wanted to help him. Her sincerity was evident, even to Ciaran's untrained eye. Elated, he smiled at her. "Thank you, Janie. I would like that."

Janie patted his arm. "I would too, I think. Besides, I need to buy some stuff also. I'm having family over."

Family. How wonderful it must be for Janie to have a family that accepted and cared for her rather than hated and feared her, as his family had him.

Ciaran pushed his thoughts aside. He had Drew now. And Drew had him. Together, they would have a happy Thanksgiving.

* * * * *

The rest of his scheduled time flew by. Only Janie saying, "Two o'clock, hon," made him realize it was time to go home.

He glanced up at the clock in surprise. "Really? Already?"

Janie laughed. "I've never seen someone enjoy working here as much as you seem to. Make yourself those sandwiches you wanted and go home before Drew thinks I'm a slave driver."

When he had first arrived, he would have believed Janie's comment was serious. Now he understood that she was making a joke. He smiled and dared to make a joke of his own. "Drew would never think such a thing about you. He knows he's the slave driver around here."

His remark sent Janie into giggles. "I'm going to tell him you said that, just wait."

Throwing a smirk over his shoulder, Ciaran selected a roll and began to make a roast beef sandwich for Drew. "No you won't. You need me here."

"You're right, darn it." Janie stuck out her tongue at him and pretended to stalk off. "I'll get you later."

Ciaran laughed. Teasing Janie was fun. He was in such a good mood, he did not even add lettuce to Drew's sandwich. He wrapped up the roast beef quickly and made a turkey sandwich for himself. After

putting them both in a bag, he called, "Bye, Janie," and left the shop.

Outside, the air was cold. A sharp breeze made him grateful he had worn a jacket. He zipped the garment up to his neck and placed the sandwiches in his bike basket.

The first few minutes of the ride home were uneventful. He noticed a large, dark car following him down the street but thought nothing of it. Cars went down the street all the time, and the speed limit was very low.

The car still trailed behind him when he hit the blacktop road that led out of town. He sped up, the chill making him want to get home quickly. The car sped up as well, but not enough to pass him. A frisson of worry shivered up his spine, but he continued to ride as if he had not noticed the car. Whoever it was would turn off soon, and he could continue on his way.

He kept telling himself that, at least until he turned off on the long gravel road leading home and the car turned too. Then he got scared. Very few people lived on the road, other than himself and Drew. He had never seen the dark car before. Fear lent him speed, and he pedaled harder.

The car followed, pacing him. A low engine roar sounded, and suddenly the car was next to him. He could make out the forms of several humans inside, but the windows were too heavily tinted for him to see their faces.

Although the occupants of the car had not made any threatening moves as of yet, Ciaran knew deep down that something was very wrong. The car edged closer to him, as if the occupants wanted to make him stop. He looked ahead for a place to turn into the woods and escape. He saw nothing but a large ditch that deepened into a steep drop.

Before he could decide what to do, the car swerved toward him. He jerked the handlebars away out of surprise and fear of being hit. The front wheel of his bicycle caught a rough patch on the edge of the road, and he tumbled down the steep embankment in a tangle of arms, legs, and bicycle.

Moments later, he came to a stop at the bottom. He lay there, stunned. His body throbbed with pain and hummed with adrenaline. His breath came in labored gasps. Through the pounding of his own heartbeat

in his ears, he made out the sound of the car stopping and then coming nearer. They were coming back for him. Terror froze him for a long moment. What should he do?

Ignoring the pain caused by every movement, Ciaran untangled his limbs from the damaged bicycle and pushed it away. He crawled until the ground leveled out, then he clambered to his feet and ran into the forest. He did not know who the humans in the car were, or why they had followed him, but he knew he could not let them find him.

Desperate to get away, he ran through the thick underbrush, ignoring the slap of branches and briars against his face and arms, until he collapsed in exhaustion. A large, hollow fallen tree lay nearby, and he crawled into it. He would wait here. The humans could not search for him forever. Soon it would be safe to come out.

Huddled inside the hard, rotting tree, he prayed they would not find him. If he could stay hidden long enough, Drew would come.

But what if his pursuers came first? What would he do then? He grabbed a sturdy branch from the forest floor and clutched it tightly.

Drew would come.

Chapter Seven

Before Ciaran started working, Drew had worried his lover would get bored with nothing to do except watch television or do housework. Now, he could work in his office knowing Ciaran was happily occupied. Ciaran loved his job, which made Drew happy he'd shelled out for the paperwork that had enabled him to get it. On days like this one, he was especially grateful.

With his holiday vacation approaching, he had a great deal to do on a program he needed to finish by next week. Once he got started he lost himself in writing code. Being at a particularly tricky spot in the programming, Drew stopped paying attention to the time. It wasn't until after four o'clock that Drew realized Ciaran hadn't come home.

Frowning, he picked up the phone and called the coffee shop. "Hey, Janie. Is Ciaran still there?"

She sounded surprised, and a little concerned. "No, he left more than two hours ago. Is everything okay?"

Something's happened. The feeling took hold of him and wouldn't let go. Ciaran wouldn't have gone off somewhere without saying anything. To keep Janie from worrying, he seized on a plausible excuse. "He probably got a flat tire or went to the store. Thanks, Janie."

Not believing his own words, he hung up the phone. Then he got up and went into the bedroom to grab a pair of shoes. He was probably overreacting, but something about the situation wasn't sitting right with him. Those strange humans had been hanging around, and now Ciaran

was missing. There probably wasn't any connection between the two things, but he wouldn't take any chances. He'd learned to trust his intuition. As quickly as he could, he put on his shoes and went out to his truck. He almost took his motorcycle, but if he did run into Ciaran, they could put his bicycle in the truck bed.

He'd only gone a few miles down the road when he spotted something odd. The light of the setting sun glinted off something silver in the ditch. He pulled the truck to the side of the road and jumped out, his heart pounding in sudden fear.

His fear was realized when he neared the steep embankment and saw Ciaran's bicycle lying at the bottom, one wheel bent. Ciaran was nowhere to be found.

Heart in his throat, he scrambled down the uneven bank, half running and half falling. At the bottom, he scented the air as best he could in his human form. Ciaran had been here, and gone. He followed the scent and the trail through the weeds until he reached the edge of the forest. The visual trail became a lot less obvious there. He was forced to rely on his sense of smell.

A few feet into the woods, he cupped his hand around his mouth. "Ciaran!"

No reply.

More frightened than before, Drew began to run. "Ciaran!" He kept calling as he ran.

It was nearly dark when his lover's scent became much stronger. He paused by a big fallen tree, panting. Ciaran was close, but where?

"Drew?"

Drew looked around for the source of the small, scared voice. "Where are you?"

There was a scrabbling noise, then the other man stood up from where he'd been hiding inside the hollow tree, a thick branch clutched in his hand. His clothing was dirty and torn, and a leaf rested in his wild curls. He was shivering with cold, and hunched over as if afraid.

Drew approached him slowly. "Ciaran? You okay?"

Ciaran dropped the branch and threw himself against Drew,

burying his face in Drew's neck. "I knew you would come."

His arms came up to hold the smaller man tight. "It's okay. You're safe now."

Ciaran trembled against him for several minutes before he looked up. A smudge of dirt streaked one cheek. In the near-dark, his eyes were huge and black. "I want to go home."

"I left the truck by the road." Drew wanted to ask what had happened, but it was cold and dark, and Ciaran had clearly been through something terrifying. Questions could wait. He took Ciaran's icy hand in his and led him through the woods. The distance felt a lot longer now that he wasn't running. Why had Ciaran gone so far from the road?

When they finally reached the ditch, he paused. "Let me get your bike. I'll throw it in the truck."

"I would appreciate that very much. Thank you." Ciaran released Drew's hand and wrapped his arms around himself while Drew lifted the damaged bike.

Dragging the bike up the incline was a lot more difficult than running down it had been. Ciaran appeared to be having trouble getting up the embankment as well. His stiff, slow movements telegraphed pain.

Seeing Ciaran's obvious discomfort, Drew scowled. Whatever had happened to his lover, it hadn't been an ordinary bike wreck. A bike wreck wouldn't have made him run into the woods to hide.

Drew stowed the bike while Ciaran climbed into the truck, then got in himself. When they were rolling down the gravel road toward home, he looked at the other man out of the corner of his eye while trying to keep most of his attention on the road. "What happened?"

Ciaran shivered. "I left work and began riding home as always. I noticed a dark car that seemed to be following along behind me, but I decided it was just a coincidence. When I reached the turnoff to the gravel road, the car kept coming." He paused, swallowed. "I tried to get home, but the car came up beside me and swerved very close to me. I was forced to go off the road and into the ditch. Then it stopped. I suddenly felt I must not let the humans see me, so I hid in the woods. It was cold and scary, but I knew you would come."

The way Ciaran's voice cracked at the end of his speech broke Drew's heart. His wolf side wanted to shift and track down the humans responsible for frightening his love so he could tear them to shreds. His more sensible human side told him that wouldn't help right now. Leashing his anger and residual fear, he reached across the seat to take Ciaran's slim hand. "Of course I did. I was worried when you didn't show up." He had come, sure, two hours after Ciaran should have been home. He could have been too late. He hated the idea of his gentle lover being alone and scared in the woods. The humans had targeted Ciaran, but why? "Did you see the driver of the car?"

Ciaran shook his head. "The car had dark windows. There were several people inside, but I could not see how many." He winced as the truck hit a bump, and his elbow hit the door.

All Drew's protective instincts raged full-force. He frowned. "I don't like this, Ciaran. Nobody lives out here except for us. Why would they be driving around out here? You could have been really hurt. Maybe I should start driving you to work."

Voice weak and tired, Ciaran murmured, "I am sure it was an accident. You do not need to take me to work."

Drew considered telling the other man about the humans who'd been hanging around their property, but he didn't want to worry his already shaken lover too much. He had to protect him without being obvious about it. As soon as he could, he would email Nick again if the wolf hadn't answered. The situation had escalated too much to assume anything was a coincidence anymore. "Your bike looks pretty bad. I bet it needs some work." Thinking of Ciaran's stiff walk, he added, "You should probably call in sick for tomorrow. We can call Janie tonight." And thank goodness Janie had already lined up some local teenage band to play tomorrow night. Ciaran would be in no shape for that, either, with the way he was moving. "Then I'll take you to work on Monday, and we can take your bike to the shop. Okay?" He looked at the smaller man out of the corner of his eye again as he pulled into their driveway.

Ciaran sighed. "Okay. Thank you for coming to look for me." He paused for a moment. "I am sorry I do not have sandwiches like I

promised. I dropped them in the ditch.”

Drew parked the truck, shut off the engine, and turned to his sad-eyed passenger. “You don’t have to apologize about the sandwiches, Ciaran. I can make another sandwich. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Giving him a wobbly smile, Ciaran turned and got out of the truck. Drew followed, wincing as he watched the awkward, pained walk that had replaced Ciaran’s usual grace.

Once inside, Drew insisted Ciaran strip down so he could inspect his injuries. Fortunately, he discovered Ciaran hadn’t suffered any permanent damage, but there were plenty of scrapes and bruises to attest to his fall. His right elbow had a bad scrape, and his right hip was a mass of already-purpling bruises. Luckily, the half-demon healed very quickly, so at least he wouldn’t have to be in pain for too long.

Drew tried to appear unconcerned about the incident as he tended to the injuries and heated soup for dinner, but disquieting thoughts ran through his mind. He knew, deep down, that nothing about the attack was an accident. The only real question in his mind was whether the black car had to do with Ciaran or him, and if the people *were* after Ciaran, who had sent them? Not wanting to alarm the other man, he kept his thoughts to himself. He’d just make sure Ciaran was extra-careful until he figured out what was going on here.

* * * * *

After Ciaran fell asleep, Drew slipped out of bed and went to his computer. He powered it up and opened his email account. An email from Nick waited in his inbox. He clicked on it.

The short missive read: *No hunters up your way that I know of. In the middle of something deadly here, but I’m going to check the situation out. I’ll get back to you.*

As always, there was no greeting or closing. Typical Nick. Drew smiled a little, grateful that the humans were probably not werewolf hunters. Unfortunately, knowing what they *weren’t* was not much help. He needed to know what the humans wanted.

Feeling powerless, he did the one thing he could do. He walked out the back door, stripped, and changed. He would patrol the perimeter and look for clues. If anyone came to hurt Ciaran tonight, they'd have to go through an angry werewolf first.

Chapter Eight

Ciaran awoke early Friday morning, aching all over from his fall down the embankment. He shifted in bed, groaning as he put weight on the bruises covering his hip. He finally rolled over to find he was alone. The clock beside the bed read five a.m. Why was Drew up so early? Neither of them had to work today, thanks to a call to Janie and a few emails sent to Drew's clients.

Forcing himself to climb out of bed despite the way his body throbbed, he went looking for his missing lover. The office was empty, as was the living room. In the kitchen, he found a pile of Drew's clothing by the back door. He frowned and looked out one of the small panes of glass in the door. Rain streaked the surface, making it hard to see, but he soon spotted a wolf crouched in the trees not far from the cabin.

Why was Drew sitting outside in the rain, and in wolf form? Confused and concerned, he opened the door. The wolf's ears perked up, and he darted a glance toward Ciaran. Ciaran scowled and put a hand on his hip. The wolf's ears went down. Even from a distance, Ciaran could see Drew felt chastised. He padded toward the house, head down.

At the door, Drew moved as if he wanted to shake off the water. Ciaran put a hand out. "Wait! Let me shut the door first. You can come in after." He shut the door, leaving Drew outside, and watched in amusement as Drew gave himself a vigorous shake.

When Drew appeared to be finished, Ciaran opened the door. His penitent werewolf stared up at him and whined, eyes beseeching. He

sighed. "Now you can come in."

The wolf obeyed. He sat on the kitchen floor and peered up at Ciaran, head cocked, his tail thumping against the floor. Unable to resist Drew no matter what form he took, Ciaran patted his damp head. "All right, all right. Shift and dress, and we'll talk about why you were running around in the rain at five in the morning."

Instead of changing in the kitchen, Drew picked up his discarded clothing with his teeth and fled the room. Ciaran stared after him, something nagging at his memory. After a moment it hit him—the clothing on the floor. Drew had worn those garments yesterday. But they had gone to bed together...Ciaran frowned, not liking the conclusion his mind jumped to.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?" Drew entered the kitchen wearing only a pair of old, worn jeans, toweling his damp hair as he walked. As Ciaran watched, a droplet of water ran down Drew's tanned, muscular chest and down his cobbled stomach. The urge to lick that drop away was strong.

Ciaran shook his head and crossed his arms. He refused to be distracted by the sight of his lover bare-chested, no matter how alluring the sight. "Don't you 'good morning' me, Mr. Wolf. Those were last night's clothes beside the door. What is going on?"

The faint trace of red that appeared on Drew's cheekbones told Ciaran he had struck a nerve. Even to his untrained eye, Drew's guilt was apparent. Rather than trying to bluff it out, Drew sighed. "You're right. Last night after you went to sleep, I decided to go outside and make sure nobody was lurking around."

"Let me be certain I understand you." Ciaran leaned against the counter, keeping his gaze locked on Drew's face. "You came to bed with me, but after I fell asleep you decided to skulk around all night as a wolf. Without telling me."

For the first time, Drew's eyes flashed with an anger that was directed at him. "Damn it, Ciaran. I needed to protect you. Someone followed you yesterday, and ran you off the road. That scared the hell out of me."

Ciaran could understand the fear. He had been afraid as well, and even thinking of someone trying to hurt Drew made him both frightened and angry. His understanding did not mean he liked his lover sneaking around without informing him. What if something had happened? He closed the distance between them in a few quick strides and reached up to cup Drew's clenched jaw line. "What if I had awakened in the middle of the night and you were not there? Do you know how I would have felt, after yesterday?"

The hard line of Drew's jaw softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of that. All I could think of was keeping you safe."

The protectiveness and love he saw in Drew's eyes made his breath catch. "I know you want to keep me safe. I want you safe as well. We will be safest together, not apart." To emphasize his point, he kissed Drew, a gentle press of lips intended to reassure.

The kiss deepened as Drew's tongue teased the seam of his lips. He opened with a whimper, allowing Drew's tongue to stroke along the sensitive inner tissues of his mouth. Strong arms wrapped around him and pulled him close. Pain flared, and he couldn't suppress his flinch.

Drew released him immediately. "God, I'm sorry. I forgot. Are you okay?"

Ciaran nodded. "I'm fine."

"No you're not. Shit. I should have remembered."

Drew looked so miserable at the thought of hurting him. He peeked up through his lashes, teasing. "Perhaps you could make it up to me somehow."

The glint in Drew's eyes told him he had said exactly the right thing. "I know just how to make you feel better."

Ciaran smiled. "Oh?"

Before he could say another word, Drew lifted him into his arms and carried him out of the kitchen. Surprised, he laughed. "What are you doing?"

Hot green eyes smoldered down at him. "I'm going to kiss it better."

Ciaran sucked in a breath at the image the words put into his mind.

He could not seem to speak, so he just nodded.

Drew carried him down the hallway and into the bedroom as if he weighed nothing. He stopped next to the bed and lowered Ciaran to it carefully, treating him like something precious and breakable. Then he set to removing Ciaran's clothing.

Ciaran watched as Drew's big, gentle hands pulled his flannel sleep pants and boxers down over his hips and off, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. His shirt went next, and he was momentarily blinded by its slide over his head.

Then it was gone, and he could once again stare into Drew's eyes. His lover gazed at him with such emotion, such *love*. To have that emotion directed at him was almost overwhelming. He wanted to prove his worth, to proclaim his devotion, to do or say something to make Drew understand his emotions, but everything caught in his throat. He stared right back, trying to communicate with his eyes what his voice could not seem to express.

It must have worked. Drew smiled, a soft, happy expression, and kissed him. "Love you."

Ciaran ran his fingertips over Drew's lower lip. "And I love you."

Drew nibbled at his fingertips. "You just lay back and let Dr. Drew perform his miracle cure."

Eager to experience the "miracle cure," Ciaran lay back as ordered. First, Drew lifted Ciaran's right arm and kissed all the way down it, from the scratch on the back of his hand to his bruised shoulder. Ciaran smiled at the ticklish sensation.

Next, Drew kissed the small abrasion on his cheek where a branch had slapped him. Then those soft lips trailed down, past his neck and chest and right to the huge bruise on his hip. The delicate, feather-light touches brought nothing but pleasure. His cock twitched and began to fill. The rising desire made him shiver.

Teasing fingers trailed up his thighs, drawing circles and nonsense patterns on sensitive flesh but never touching what he wanted. He whimpered. "Drew, please. Touch me."

The devilish grin he got did not reassure. "I don't know, you might

be too injured."

Impatient, he blurted the first words that came to him. "Then you'd better start kissing it better, like you promised."

Drew laughed. "Fair enough. I guess we'd better make sure it still works, huh?"

Before Ciaran could answer, his lover licked his bobbing erection from base to tip. He yelped. "More."

Rather than continuing to tease, Drew took Ciaran's cock into his mouth and sucked. Ciaran ignored the various aches and pains in his battered body and focused on the pure pleasure of Drew's hot, wet mouth. With the way Drew's long, agile tongue curled around him, focusing on pleasure was not difficult to do.

He curled his fingers into Drew's silky hair and held on. His eyes wanted to close, but he forced them to stay open. The sight of his erection disappearing between Drew's lips was too good to miss.

Ciaran knew he would not last much longer when Drew brought a hand up to toy with the soft skin of his sac. He loved the way such big, strong hands could touch him with incredible gentleness. Then Drew's fingertips slipped back to stroke over his hole, and he lost it. He came with a cry, arching up into Drew's mouth.

Releasing him, Drew leaned up on his elbow. "Feel better?"

"Much."

"Told you it was a miracle cure."

The self-satisfied expression on Drew's face made him chuckle. "Yes, and you were right. But what about you?"

Drew made his way back up the mattress until they were side-by-side. He leered. "You could help me with that."

Laughing, Ciaran wrapped his hand around Drew's thick shaft and stroked. He could tell Drew had enjoyed pleasing him by how hard Drew was, and the amount of slick, clear liquid leaking from his cock. He only had to stroke a few times before Drew came, hot seed spilling over his hand and Drew's stomach.

Ciaran cleaned up as best he could with a tissue, and then let his head fall back to the bed. "It's too early. Let's go back to sleep."

Drew finished his own clean-up, grinning. "Sounds good."

Eyes closing, half asleep already, Ciaran muttered, "Stay."

"I'm not a dog!"

Despite the protest, Drew snuggled into Ciaran's less-bruised side. Ciaran smiled and let himself drift to sleep.

Chapter Nine

When the weekend passed, and nothing unusual happened, Drew began to hope the humans who'd been lurking had moved on. He hadn't let Ciaran out of his sight, but neither of them had seen any suspicious people or black cars. Who knew? Maybe the black car's occupant had just been a punk kid or a bad driver. He didn't really believe that, but it was possible. Maybe. He didn't plan to let down his guard, but maybe he wouldn't have to be so hyper-vigilant all the time.

By Monday, everything seemed to be back to normal. Just like most mornings, he went for a jog and came back for breakfast. Since Janie had called the night before and asked Ciaran to come in to work at eight instead of ten, they were having cereal and toast. He looked over to see Ciaran approaching the table with a glass of tomato juice.

Paired with frosted flakes, tomato juice sounded repulsive. Drew made a face. "Ugh. You're going to drink that with cereal? That's disgusting."

Ciaran laughed. "You're only saying that because you hate vegetables."

About halfway to the table, Ciaran suddenly stopped walking. His smile faded, replaced with an expression of surprise and confusion. The glass slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor, leaving a puddle that looked disturbingly like blood.

Drew stared at him. "What—"

Before he could finish, the other man began to...disappear. Ciaran's

body went from perfectly solid to transparent, like a ghost. Horrified, Drew reached out for him. "Ciaran!"

Ciaran thrust his hand out, straining to touch Drew's. His eyes were wide, scared. His mouth moved, but no sound came out. Their hands touched, and for a terrifying moment Drew's hand passed right through Ciaran's. Then Ciaran became solid again, and their hands met. Drew yanked the other man into his arms, heart pounding.

Several minutes passed as they sat there at the table, Drew holding Ciaran tight while the smaller man shivered in his arms. He whispered soothing nonsense phrases to his shaking lover, all the while trying to force down his own fear. What the hell had just happened?

Not knowing the reason for Ciaran's near-disappearance made the situation all the more horrible. He could, and would, protect Ciaran from humans, or other creatures. Something like this left him flailing, with no known enemy to fight against. If he didn't know what was going on, how could he stop it from happening again?

Finally, he realized Ciaran would be late for work if they didn't get up. Being late didn't seem very important in the overall scheme of things, but he knew Ciaran wouldn't want to cause any trouble for Janie. Besides, maybe it would be best for them not to be home. He'd go to the coffee shop too, and stay there.

He gently rubbed the other man's back. "Ciaran. Are you okay?"

Wide, worried violet eyes met his. "I believe so."

Half to himself, Drew whispered, "What was that?"

"I don't know. It was like being pulled in several different directions at once."

A thought occurred to him. "Was it like that when you first came here?"

Ciaran considered. "No, not really. When I was brought here, the transition was smooth. I was in Faerie, and then I appeared in the woods. There was no chance to feel, or to think." He paused, seemed to shake off some of his fear. "I don't want to sit here and be afraid. I need to go to work."

Working at the coffee shop should keep Ciaran too busy to dwell

on his experience, and being in public might be safer right now. Drew nodded. "Good. I don't know what the hell just happened, but I think it's probably best if we don't stay here right now. We'll act like everything's normal. I'll take you to work."

"You think it's a good idea?"

He hastened to reassure Ciaran, who still looked uncertain. "Yeah, I do. I'll come in with you, though. I don't want to leave you alone."

Ciaran didn't protest, another sign of how worried he must be. "Okay." He stood and walked about three steps before returning to take Drew's hand. "Come with me?"

Drew cradled the slim hand in his own, needing the reassurance just as much as the other man did. They stayed within arms' reach of each other while Ciaran got ready for work, and then while Drew cleaned up the tomato juice and broken glass. They kept their hands clasped together during the short drive, not letting go until they reached Stomping Grounds.

* * * * *

Once he started working, Ciaran seemed to feel better. Drew, however, was a wreck. He sat in a booth, pretending to drink a cup of coffee and trying to come up with a plan. Usually if he encountered a problem, he could use his werewolf abilities or his technical knowledge to fix it. No amount of strength, speed, or computer know-how could combat what had happened this morning, however. What could he do?

He was on the verge of banging his head on the table when Janie approached. "Drew? What's wrong? You look terrible!"

He looked up, and their eyes met. Janie's brown eyes were warm and sympathetic. She had been a friend to them since they came to Trenton. Could he trust her? She leaned forward, and a necklace fell out from behind the collar of her shirt. A silver pentacle pendant flashed in the morning light. Drew hesitated at the sight. Werewolves didn't have a history of good relations with witches. Or vampires. Or...any other kind of supernatural creatures, for that matter. Werewolves were a contentious

lot.

Then again, if Janie was a witch she might have some idea of what to do. Maybe if he could be careful, and keep his questions hypothetical, he could get some help without really telling her anything.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. "Janie, are you interested in the supernatural?"

She raised an eyebrow at his seeming non sequitur. "Yes. Why?"

He took a deep breath. "Let's say I'm designing a video game with lots of supernatural creatures: werewolves, vampires, demons, the whole nine yards. If someone wanted to capture a demon in the game, how would they do that?"

Janie frowned. Her puzzled expression told him she wanted to know why he would ask such a bizarre question, but she didn't ask. "Well, I suppose they would do a summoning."

"What would happen to the demon if they did a summoning?" Drew tried to keep his expression level and not reveal how much he wanted to hear her next words. He wasn't sure how successful he was, especially when her frown deepened.

"The demon would appear wherever the summoner cast the spell. What's this about, Drew?"

"I told you. I'm designing a game."

She rolled her eyes. "I can see something's wrong. You and Ciaran both looked like you'd seen a ghost when you walked in earlier, and you're still here. You've never brought him to work and then stayed before, even on his first day. Up until today, he rode his bike unless the weather was bad. Now you're watching over him like a mama bear. What's going on?"

He sighed, praying he could trust her. "I'm not sure, Janie. Something bad. Last week someone ran him off the road on the way home, and this morning something really weird happened. I can't explain right now."

"What? Someone ran him off the road?" Janie gaped. "He told me he had an accident. Why would anyone do that? He hasn't done anything to anyone."

"He might have some people after him from before we came here. It's kind of a long story." *A long story that most people would never believe.* Drew shrugged, not sure what else to say.

She sat across from him and stared at him until he met her eyes. "You know I'm your friend, right Drew? I care about both of you, and not just because Ciaran's my best employee." She looked pleased when Drew mustered up a weak grin at her feeble joke. "Will you come over to my place after Ciaran's shift is over and tell me what's going on?"

All he felt from her was sincerity and an honest desire to help. Since he wasn't psychic, he couldn't know if his hunch was right. Now that he had someone else to consider, he couldn't take the risk—yet, anyway. "I want to tell you, Janie, but not all of the story is mine to tell. I'll have to talk to Ciaran first."

Janie stood. "Okay. I'll go get you a glass of strawberry lemonade so you can quit pretending to drink the coffee. I know you don't like it."

He gave her a real smile then. "You caught me. Thanks, Janie. For everything."

She patted him on the shoulder. "I haven't done anything yet, hon. But I hope I'll be able to later."

After Janie left, Drew gazed down at the table, thinking. He looked up and nodded when she replaced his coffee with lemonade before returning to his deliberation. No other options came to him. Janie was the only person in town he knew well enough to trust, and she knew something about demons, and summoning. Nick had promised to check into the situation for him, but that was when he had believed the humans might be werewolf hunters. And Nick had been in the middle of something. Even if Drew contacted him again he might not be able to get away from whatever situation he'd landed himself in.

Drew had been sitting there thinking for quite a while when Ciaran sat in the seat across from him. "Are you all right? Janie sent me over to check on you."

He dredged up a real smile. Seeing his favorite person made it a lot easier to do. "I'm fine. I'm thinking, that's all. Janie wants me to tell her what's been going on."

Ciaran's eyes widened. "Why would we tell her?"

Drew leaned forward and waited until Ciaran did the same before he continued, keeping his voice low. "I think she's a witch, Ciaran. She might be able to help us."

Ciaran bit his lush lower lip for a moment, his expression both thoughtful and afraid. "If she's a witch, she probably doesn't like demons much..."

"She knows you. She likes you. I don't think she'll freak out and try to hex you or anything." He hoped she wouldn't. He would hate to have to cause another werewolf / witch war if Janie did react badly and tried to hurt Ciaran.

The half-demon stared at the table for a long moment, then sat back against the booth, nodding. "All right. If you think we should tell her, we'll tell her."

Looking into those trusting violet eyes, Drew felt a sudden resolve. *I will protect you. I swear I will. No matter what happens.*

Chapter Ten

A couple of hours later, Janie left April in charge and the three of them left the coffee shop. Ciaran followed Drew to the truck, and Janie led the way in her battered Jeep. Her house wasn't far, so the drive took less than ten minutes. Ciaran spent the short drive looking out the window, his whole body vibrating with tension. What if Janie hated him once she knew what he really was? He loved working for her, and being friends with her. The thought of her hating him made his heart ache.

When they pulled up in front of Janie's neat little house, Drew shut off the engine. He turned anxious eyes on Ciaran. "We don't have to tell her. This is your secret to keep. We can figure out something else."

Ciaran shifted toward him, not meeting his eyes. He knew Drew was right to want to get help, and about telling Janie everything. Knowing and doing were not the same thing, however. "I think we do have to tell her. We need help. I'm just afraid." His voice trailed off to a near-whisper. "What if she hates me once she knows what I am?"

Drew took his chin in a gentle grasp and held it until Ciaran looked at him. "No true friend could ever hate you. I think Janie is a true friend."

Staring into Drew's loving eyes, he wanted to believe. It was hard to do that when even his own grandfather hated him. He sighed. "But I'm a *demon*, Drew! That is not something most people would be willing to forgive."

"You're half demon. So what? You're a good person, Ciaran. I know you are, and so does Janie. No matter what happens in there, we'll

deal with it together." Drew pressed a quick kiss against Ciaran's trembling lips. "I love you."

"And I love you."

Drew gave him an encouraging smile. "Then let's go."

Together, they walked up the sidewalk to Janie's porch. Drew knocked. After a couple of minutes, the door opened. Janie stood there, looking a bit breathless.

"Sorry, I had to run to the basement to get a couple of things. Come on in."

They followed her into a small but comfortable living room. Janie motioned for them to sit. Drew went to the flower-print couch and sat on the end nearest the door. Ciaran trailed after him, envying his confidence. He perched on the cushion next to Drew's, ready to flee at any moment.

Janie watched them, looking concerned at their odd behavior. "Do you want anything to drink?"

When Ciaran said nothing, Drew answered for both of them. "No, thank you."

She still looked concerned, but she sat down in the chair beside the couch. "So, what's going on?"

Ciaran's voice had deserted him. A sick, nervous churning in his stomach left him light-headed. He turned helpless eyes to Drew, who nodded.

Drew took a deep breath. "Before we tell the story, I need to ask you a very personal question. Are you a witch?"

One of Janie's eyebrows shot up at the question. She fingered her silver pentacle pendant. "As a matter of fact, I am. Is that a problem?"

Drew shook his head. "No, not at all. It may turn out to be very good for us, actually. We need some unusual help."

She grinned. "Unusual is my middle name. If I can help you, I will. If not, I may know someone else who can."

So she was a witch. Drew had been correct. Ciaran wondered how powerful she was, and what she would do when he revealed his secret. The waiting became intolerable. His vocal chords finally loosened. His face settled into an expressionless mask. When he spoke, his voice was

flat. "I hope you'll still be so willing after you hear what I have to say."

Janie's grin faded, replaced by worry once again. Her mouth opened, but she said nothing. Instead, she closed her mouth with a snap and leaned forward, ready to listen.

Watching her, Ciaran spared one last thought for the friendship he had treasured. As if sensing his inner turmoil, Drew reached out and took his shaking hand. He squeezed, reassuring. Ciaran gripped Drew's hand like a lifeline. *No matter what happens, Drew loves me.* The knowledge gave him the strength to continue.

Janie eyed their joined hands but remained silent.

With his free hand, Ciaran brushed his black curls aside to reveal the slight but obvious points of his ears. "I'm not human."

Her face showed little reaction. "Okay." When Drew gaped at her, she shrugged. "Oh, come on. I *have* noticed the pointy ears a couple of times. And no one has eyes that color, not even with contacts." She focused her attention back on Ciaran. "Are you one of the Fae?"

Still reeling from her easy acceptance, Ciaran took a moment to answer. "Yes and no. I am half-fae. I lived in Faerie until recently, in fact. I am also half..." He hesitated again, reluctant to reveal the worst part of his secret. It had to be done. He choked the word out quickly. "Demon."

Janie leaned back, calm and composed. "Well, that explains a lot."

"It does?" Ciaran stared at her. Astonishment did not begin to describe how he felt at her lack of reaction.

She shrugged again. "Of course. Now I understand why you act like everything's new to you, and why you spoke so strangely when we first met. And I have a feeling I understand why Drew asked me about summoning a demon."

He watched her warily, waiting for her demeanor to change. "You don't...hate me?"

Now it was Janie's turn to be astonished. "Hate you? Why? You've never been anything but a friend to me."

Her words did not make sense to him. "But I'm a demon." He had never done anything to his grandfather either, but the man hated him. Hate did not always need a reason.

"So? Not all demons are evil. Duh!"

Not all demons are evil. Simple words, yet they reverberated within Ciaran's heart. For years, he had believed his grandfather's assertions that he was evil, wrong, just because of his parentage. After weeks with Drew, he had finally come to believe he was not evil. To have Janie believe in him was almost too much to hope for. He clutched Drew's hand, tears welling.

Janie's comment, or maybe the way she delivered the words, surprised a laugh out of Drew, who rejoined the conversation. "You would know that how?"

She grinned. "I wouldn't, really. But Ciaran isn't evil, therefore not all demons are evil." She sobered a bit then. "Tell me what you need help with."

All the emotion of the day had worn Ciaran down. He squeezed Drew's hand and nodded, giving his lover permission to tell the rest of the story.

Drew nodded back and began. "You know I moved here when my aunt died and willed me a cabin." At Janie's nod, he continued. "On the way, I stopped in a wooded area and found Ciaran. Some people had summoned him and were chasing him, so I helped him get away from them. I thought we'd heard the last of them, since they didn't follow us here, but this morning Ciaran nearly disappeared."

Her brow wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I could see through him for a few seconds, like a ghost or something. Scared the hell out of me." Drew ran his free hand through his hair. It trembled.

Janie toyed with the pentacle charm again, her gaze far away. "Hmm. Sounds like a botched summoning. Did you do anything to stop it when he almost disappeared?"

"No." Drew paused, thoughtful. "Well, I said his name and grabbed his hand, but that's all."

"Names are very powerful things. To summon a demon successfully and be able to truly bind him or her, the summoner needs to know the demon's name. You saying his name and touching him probably

disrupted their spell. Doesn't sound like these people are very good at what they do. Do you think they're the same people from before?"

Drew dropped his head onto his hand. "I have no idea. I never saw those people, and Ciaran didn't get a good look at the people who ran him off the road the other day. What should we do?"

Janie tapped her finger against her lips, thinking. "Well, I can do two things. I can cast a protection spell on Ciaran, which would help to protect him from negative magic. Also, I can try to do a binding, but it'll be tricky since we don't know who's doing this."

Having a plan, no matter how chancy, made Ciaran feel much better. He sat up straight and met Janie's eyes. "Whatever you can do would be appreciated. I want to stay here."

"We want you here too, hon. Let's get to work."

* * * * *

A few minutes later, the three of them sat cross-legged on the grass in Janie's backyard. She arranged various items around them, including a black and a white candle, a knife, and some herbs. She had already cast a circle around them and ordered them not to break it.

Ciaran watched and listened intently. What happened next might be the key to preserving the life he had created. Right after he had come here he would have been too weak and frightened to fight, but now he felt only determination.

Janie started with the protection spell, lighting both the black candle and the white one. Ciaran found himself tuning out as she began to speak, concentrating instead on the feeling of Drew's large, strong hand in his and how very much he wanted this to work. He brought Drew's hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it. He closed his eyes, letting Janie's words flow over him, and hoped. *Please let this work! I couldn't bear to lose him now.*

For a while, he went into an almost trance-like state. Everything around him seemed muted as he wished for Janie's spells to be successful. He did not notice Janie had finished until Drew tugged lightly on his

hand.

When he opened his eyes, Janie and Drew were both looking at him. He glanced around. "Have you finished?"

Janie nodded. "All done. I can't say for sure how well the spells will work, but I did my best."

Hope in his heart, Ciaran hugged her. "Thank you, Janie. You are a true friend."

Smiling, Janie squeezed back before drawing away. "I've got cookies inside. Will you guys stay and have a couple?"

Drew smiled too, his relief at having done something obvious. "Sure. We've got time."

"Drew, could you get the cookies and milk out? Ciaran will help me clean up out here."

Nodding, Drew headed for the house. Janie waited until he was out of sight before turning to Ciaran. "You love him."

Nothing but the truth would suffice. If she hadn't freaked over Ciaran being a demon, she probably wouldn't care about them being gay. "I do."

"I'm glad." She squeezed Ciaran's hand for a moment before beginning to pack up her supplies. "You're good for each other. You've gained a lot of confidence recently, and you've seemed downright—dare I say it?—happy."

Ciaran picked up the candles, carefully wrapping them as she showed him. Janie was right, he *was* happy. A few weeks ago he had not understood what the word meant. Now he not only understood it, but lived it.

Drew wanted to keep him safe, but Ciaran realized he wanted to protect Drew as well. If the last few days had taught him anything, it was that he would do anything to keep the life he and Drew had made.

Chapter Eleven

If Drew hadn't been consumed with anxiety, the chocolate chip cookies Janie served them might have been delicious. As it was, he barely tasted them. All he could think about were the spells Janie had done, and whether or not they would work. He was glad they'd done something to protect Ciaran, but he knew next to nothing about magic or summoning. How would they know if the spells were doing what they were supposed to do?

When the cookies were gone, Ciaran gathered the cookie plate and their glasses. He smiled at Janie. "Would you like me to wash these?"

Janie smiled back. "Sure, sweetie. I'd appreciate that."

Ciaran left the room, carrying the dishes. Drew and Janie both watched him go.

Feeling the weight of her gaze transfer to him, Drew glanced over at Janie. "Do you think the spells will protect him?"

"I don't know. It depends a lot on who's behind all this." She sighed. "I doubt they'll just give up. You need to be prepared for something else to happen."

He bared his teeth, angry at the thought of Ciaran being frightened again. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep him safe."

She touched his hand. "He loves you. And from the look on your face right now, I'm guessing you love him."

The side of his mouth quirked up in an involuntary grin. "That obvious, huh?"

She laughed. "Only to me. I have a feeling he's really going to need you, soon. Be ready."

The words didn't sound like speculation. Janie believed them, and so did he. He shivered. "I will."

"Good. Take him home and try to relax. I don't want him coming back to work until we've figured this thing out."

"All right." Knowing Janie was on their side filled Drew with an unexpected sense of relief. Until they were threatened, he hadn't truly understood how much more difficult life would be without the support of a pack. Janie wasn't pack, but she was a friend. He and Ciaran needed all the friends they could get.

Janie stood, and he followed suit. Together, they walked into the kitchen.

Ciaran put aside the dishcloth he'd been holding. "I'm finished cleaning up. Thank you for your help, Janie. And the cookies."

Janie smiled and pulled Ciaran into a tight hug. "You're welcome, hon. You're still my favorite employeee."

At first Ciaran shot a surprised look at Drew over Janie's shoulder, as if he hadn't expected the hug. Then he smiled and hugged her back. "And you are my favorite boss."

"Yeah, yeah. That might be nice if I wasn't your only boss." She released Ciaran and waved them both away. "Go home, and be careful. I'll do some research and call you if I find anything more."

"Thanks, Janie. We'll do the same." Drew laced his fingers through Ciaran's, and they went to the truck.

* * * * *

At home, Drew tried to take Janie's advice. Unfortunately, relaxing turned out to be a lot easier said than done. The cabin he loved felt like a cage. He prowled from one end of the house to the other, restless. His wolf side wanted to shift and find something or someone to rip to shreds. Or at the very least, patrol the area and keep intruders from his territory. His human side knew shifting wouldn't be wise in this case. What if he

was in wolf form and Ciaran was summoned again?

On his seventh or eighth circuit of the house, Ciaran caught his arm. "Stop, please. You're making me nervous."

A snappish retort lodged in his throat at the sight of his lover's pale, drawn face. He sighed and dropped onto the couch next to Ciaran, who'd been trying to watch TV. He laid his head in Ciaran's lap. "I'm sorry. I just need to be doing something."

Ciaran sifted his fingers through Drew's hair in a gentle, soothing motion. "I know. I love that you want to protect me, but it won't help if you drive us both crazy first."

Drew laughed. "Why don't you tell me what you really think?"

Cocking his head in puzzlement, Ciaran said, "I did."

Drew laughed harder.

Ciaran heaved a sigh. "Why don't you go research summoning on your computer? I will go work on a song. Then we will both have something to do."

The thought of having something to do cheered Drew immensely. "Great idea. I did tell Janie we would see what we could find out."

"Yes, you did. Get to it." Ciaran made a shooing motion similar to the one Drew had seen Janie use.

Drew had the amusing thought that Ciaran wanted to get rid of him because he was annoying, which was probably true. He had been a bit high-strung. He sat up and hopped off the couch. "I'll let you know if I find anything."

The smile Ciaran gave him could only be described as patronizing. "You do that."

Drew rolled his eyes and headed for his office.

* * * * *

Researching the summoning of demons was frustrating as hell. After calling up a search engine and typing in *summoning a demon*, Drew got an astonishing 550,000 results. He slogged through quite a few websites devoted to role-playing games and television shows. The

“nonfiction” results he found were contradictory at best. Most of the sites agreed that to summon a demon, it was best to know the demon’s name. They also agreed that the demon must be contained after summoning, using a pentagram or a circle of salt, chalk, or sand.

Drew had a hard time believing any of the people who’d made the sites had any real experience with demon summoning or any other magic. Just in case, he bookmarked a few of the more believable sites. Maybe Janie would be able to use some of the information he’d found, even if he couldn’t.

He was about to email Janie the links when he heard a sharp rap. He tilted his head to listen better. Someone had knocked on the door. Who could it be? He and Ciaran didn’t know many people in Trenton yet. Maybe it was Janie. He stood and stretched. The knock sounded again.

On the way to answer the door, he stopped in the doorway of Ciaran’s old room. His lover was bent over his guitar, playing, lost in the music. He probably hadn’t even heard the knocks. Drew grinned and kept going, not wanting to interrupt.

A third knock, a bit more impatient than the others, came just as he reached the living room. He strode across the room and opened the door. “Yes?”

The visitor wasn’t Janie. Instead, a woman with pulled-back black hair stood on the doorstep. She peered up at him, her dark eyes locking on his face. “My car broke down a little way down the road. Could I use your phone? It will only take a minute.”

Ingrained good manners made Drew want to say yes, but there was something odd about the woman. She didn’t look at all like someone whose car had broken down on a creepy gravel road at night. She looked almost smug. He sniffed discreetly, trying to figure out the source of his unease. She smelled acrid and bitter. A sudden certainty filled him—he didn’t want her in his house.

He opened his mouth to tell her she couldn’t use the phone. Before he could speak, movement caught his eye. The scent of one of the human males that had been lurking reached him, and he twisted to confront the threat.

Pain exploded in the back of his skull. Light flared, and then everything went gray.

Chapter Twelve

Ciaran put aside his guitar and scribbled down the last line of lyrics. Pleased to have finished the song, he picked up his notebook and stood. He could not wait to share it with Drew.

The moment he stepped into the hallway, he knew something was wrong. Voices carried from the living room, but not one of them was Drew's. He dropped the notebook and hurried into the room.

The cold-eyed woman from the coffee shop stood in the middle of the living room, her hands on her hips. Two men were struggling through the front door, their backs to him, dragging something. He could not hold back his cry of horror when he saw what they dragged.

"Drew! What have you done to him?" Heedless of the danger, Ciaran ran to the crumpled body of his lover, shoving the two men aside. He fell to his knees beside Drew, who did not move. Blood from the back of his head was already soaking into the carpet.

Ciaran cupped Drew's pale, slack face in his hands. "Wake up. Please, wake up." Drew did not respond. Helpless terror washed over Ciaran, leaving him sick and weak. He looked around wildly until his gaze found the woman. "We must call an ambulance."

The woman laughed, a hard, brittle sound. "I don't think so, demon."

Demon. She knew. The two men with her faced him then, and he understood at last. Two of the faces that haunted his nightmares of his summoning stared back at him, smirking.

"Did you miss us?" one of the men asked.

Ciaran stood slowly. He knew what he had to do. "If you leave him alone, I will come with you without a struggle." He clenched his fists and stared straight into the woman's cold eyes. "If you hurt him again, I will make you regret it." He might not know how to fight, or be terribly strong, but he would make them pay if they hurt Drew again.

The men laughed, their derision clear, but the woman nodded. "Fair enough." She jerked her head toward the men, then the door. "Leave him. Let's go."

The larger of the two men started to protest. "But—"

A quick, hard look from the woman shut him up. "I said leave him."

The man scowled but did not argue. He led the way out the door. The woman followed. The second man stepped closer to Ciaran and grabbed his arm in a bruising grip. "Move, demon."

Ciaran glanced down, allowing his gaze to linger on Drew's beloved face for a long moment. His werewolf was much too pale and still, but if they left now, Drew's natural healing abilities should be able to repair the damage. Ciaran hoped. The thought of Drew dying was more than he could bear. *No. He will be fine. He has to be.*

The man yanked his arm. "I said move!"

Ciaran allowed the man to lead him out the door and into the night. They walked a short way down the road, the gravel biting sharply into his bare feet. At a sheltered bend in the road, the other man and the woman waited beside a black van with no windows in the back. He wondered absently what had happened to the big car they had chased him with before.

The woman brandished a pair of handcuffs. Without a word, he held out his arms. She snapped the cold metal around his wrists. "Get in the van."

He took a deep breath and climbed into the back chamber of the van. The door slammed behind him, leaving him alone in the dark.

* * * * *

An indeterminate amount of time crawled by as the van bumped over gravel and then rode smoothly over blacktop. Ciaran had no idea how far they had taken him, or in what direction. With no windows, there was nothing to give him a frame of reference. The scent of strong industrial cleaner hung in the air, and beneath it the underlying scents of sweat, blood, and smoke. From the combination of smells, he doubted he was the first unwilling passenger the van had held. The thought chilled him.

He huddled in the corner of the chamber and rubbed at his wrists, which ached despite the relative looseness of the cuffs. His bones felt weak and brittle, as if the cold steel sucked the strength from them. His demon side was not susceptible to iron or steel, apparently, because a pure-blooded Fae would have been much more debilitated by the metal than he seemed to be so far.

The silence, and the dark, preyed on his mind. All he could see was Drew, crumpled on the blood-soaked carpet, quiet and still. He prayed he had done the right thing. If he had stayed and fought, the men would have hurt Drew further, perhaps even killed him. At least now Drew would have a chance. He would not allow himself to consider the alternative.

Had someone found Drew? Had he awakened to find Ciaran gone? If so, he would be worried...

Ciaran's heart ached at the thought of Drew being worried or upset he had not prevented this from happening, but that was better than the alternative. Drew could have been killed. Ciaran had protected him the best way he knew how. As long as Drew survived, whatever happened to Ciaran himself did not matter. Perhaps he could find a way to make it back to Drew. He hoped he could. If not, the knowledge that his lover still lived would have to be enough.

Finally, the van shuddered to a stop. A loud, metallic scraping sounded as the van door opened, and bright light stabbed his eyes. Cringing, he raised his shackled hands to shield them.

Rough hands grabbed his arms and dragged him out of the van. He

landed on his knees in the frost-covered dirt. After hours in the pitch-black van compartment, the morning sun blinded him, but the two men gave him no time to recover. They jerked him back onto his feet and pulled him forward. He had no choice but to stumble along with them.

The brief glimpses he got of his surroundings were not reassuring. He saw a rutted gravel road, trees, and a huge field of tall, dead grass where there might once have been farmland. There were no other houses or signs of civilization.

Stairs appeared out of nowhere. Unprepared, Ciaran tripped. His bound hands could not catch him, and he went sprawling, his chin hitting the top step. For a moment he lay there, stunned. The coppery taste of blood from his bitten tongue filled his mouth.

"*This* is a demon? What the hell good is he?" The larger man's voice dripped with scorn.

"You wanted a demon, and you have him," the woman retorted. "This is the one you summoned. If you had enlisted my aid earlier, you might have gotten a better result."

"Still better than nothing, Zed." The smaller of the two men hauled Ciaran up from the ground and shoved him toward the door of a house that had seen better days. The peeling paint, rotting wood, and boarded-up windows told Ciaran the place had been abandoned, perhaps for a long time.

The door flew open. A third man stood on the threshold. Ciaran recognized him as another of his summoners. "Took you long enough."

The large one, Zed, scowled. "Shut up, Dirk. We got here as fast as we could."

"Yeah, yeah." Dirk stood aside to let them pass. "Tory's been dying for you to get here."

The unpleasant sound Zed made bore little resemblance to a laugh. "He can keep on waiting for a while."

The small man, whose name Ciaran still did not know, nudged him. He moved in the direction the man had indicated until he stood in the center of the dim, dusty room. Each breath of the musty, stale air seemed to sit heavy in his lungs. The floorboards creaked under his feet as

he stood there, shivering and afraid of what would come next.

Dirk stalked around him in a slow circle. "What the fuck happened to his wings?"

The woman smirked. "I doubt he's lost them. He must be able to hide them somehow, to camouflage what he is."

Eyes narrowing, Zed stepped closer. "Let's find them, then." He gripped the bottom of Ciaran's white button-down shirt in both hands and ripped it open. Buttons flew. Ciaran tried to pull away, but Zed clamped onto his arms in a painful grip. He nodded to the smaller man. "Look at his back, Abe."

Ciaran could not help struggling again as the material of his shirt was peeled down his shoulders, exposing his upper back to the chill air. Behind him, the man called Abe sucked in a breath. "Holy shit."

Fingers brushed over his back. Just days ago, Drew had touched, even kissed, the very same spot and Ciaran had melted. This man's avaricious, unwelcome touch made him shudder in revulsion. He gritted his teeth to hold back a protest. Men like these would not be deterred by his objections.

Zed's icy eyes bored into Ciaran's. "Don't move." The big man squeezed his arms until he nodded, and then released him. He transferred his gaze to Abe. "What?"

"Come look at this."

Zed moved to stand behind Ciaran, out of his view. Both men were silent for a long moment, but he could feel their stares.

"Fuck." A larger hand landed on his back, yanked his shirt down until the material caught at his elbows. The hand trailed over his wings, prodding at them. After a hard jab at one wing, Zed snarled, "Bring them out."

Ciaran hunched his shoulders but did not do as the man had ordered. They would not touch his wings in their true form. No one would touch his wings in their true form again, unless he wanted them to.

Zed shoved him. "I said bring them out!"

He shook his head.

There was a tiny snick sound, and a long, slim knife blade

appeared in front of him. "Bring them out, or I'll do it."

Fear was a living thing, churning his stomach and crawling over his skin, but he could not back down. He swallowed. "No."

"Fine. We'll do it the hard way, then."

Ciaran closed his eyes and clenched his jaw against a scream as the sharp blade sliced into his back.

Chapter Thirteen

When Drew managed to force his eyes open, all he could see was a blurred swath of light and color. He shut them again. What the hell had happened? He could tell he was lying on the floor. The carpet beneath his head was sticky and damp, and pounding agony radiated from the back of his skull. The air was thick with the sweet, metallic tang of blood. Flashes of memory hit him—a strange woman at the door, scents that didn't belong, a blow. Someone had knocked him out.

Ciaran! He sat up abruptly. Dizziness, nausea, and pain rose, but he held them down. He had to find Ciaran.

Using the arm of the couch, he managed to drag himself into a standing position. Slow, halting steps carried him to the hallway, where Ciaran's songwriting notebook lay discarded on the floor. The sight sent a thread of panic through him.

"Ciaran." His voice came out raspy and weak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Ciaran!"

No answer. He struggled down the hall to look in the bedrooms, and even the closets, but in his heart he knew. Ciaran was gone.

Back in the kitchen, he snatched up the phone and dialed a number. Janie answered on the third ring. Her voice was groggy. "Hello?"

"Janie. Ciaran's gone." His voice broke on the last word.

"Drew? What do you mean, he's gone?" The groggy tone had turned into a panic that matched his own.

"Taken. I need you. Please." Without waiting for her answer, he

hung up. He dialed another number, his hand trembling so much he almost couldn't push the buttons. Voice mail picked up after the first ring. He waited through the short message, then choked out, "Nick. Things are bad here. If you can get away, please come."

He hung up, and the blackness took him again.

* * * * *

"Drew!"

A loud voice and a hand on his shoulder brought Drew back to himself. He must have passed out. He lifted his head. Janie stood beside him, her face pinched and white. "Janie."

Her eyes were wide and scared. "My God, Drew. You didn't tell me you were attacked! You're covered in blood. We have to get you to the hospital."

He shook his head, grateful to find that the throbbing pain from earlier had receded somewhat. He was healing already. "No hospital."

"Drew! What good will you be to Ciaran if you're dead?"

He would have to tell her everything. "You don't understand. I didn't tell you everything before. I'm not human."

Her already wide eyes popped open further. "You're not?"

Best to just say it. "I'm a werewolf, Janie."

Her mouth dropped open. Then she shut it with a snap. "I don't know why I'm surprised, after what you told me about Ciaran. What normal human would have taken that in stride the way you did?"

He gave her a little smile. "Probably none of them."

"True." She shook her head, as if bemused. "Okay, tell me what happened."

Drew told her everything. She already knew about the botched summoning, and the humans hanging around the house, so he concentrated on the events of the evening—at least, what he could remember of them. She listened carefully, a look of intense concentration on her face.

When he finished, she frowned. "So we don't know who took him,

or why. The woman you described sounds like this woman who's been coming to the coffee shop. She seemed really interested in Ciaran. He thought she was creepy."

"She must have been spying on him while the men spied on the house." Drew growled. "I should have known something would happen. Why didn't I shut the door in her face?"

Janie put her hand over his clenched fist. "None of this is your fault. We need to concentrate on getting him back. They have several hours' head start. The first thing we need to do is find out where they've taken him."

"If I shift, I might be able to track him." He would know Ciaran's scent anywhere. Unfortunately, if they had taken him very far the scent would be difficult to follow. He thought about his change, but his head gave a warning throb at the idea. "Fuck. I think I'll have to wait a few hours at least, until my head heals some more."

"Until then, we'll see what else we can find out. We *will* find him, Drew."

Meeting Janie's determined gaze, Drew prayed she was right.

* * * * *

As the morning sun cracked the horizon, they were exhausted and no closer to finding Ciaran than before. Drew searched for clues as best he could in human form. He discovered that the humans had taken Ciaran to a vehicle a short way down the road from the house, and that there had been several of them.

From a few phone calls, Janie had determined that the woman's name was Irina Novotny, and she had arrived in Trenton the previous week. Since then, she'd been staying at the bed and breakfast in town. She paid with cash, and drove a large, black car. No one seemed to know where she was from or why she had come to town.

Still unable to shift, Drew was at loose ends. He paced around the house until Janie couldn't take it anymore. She held out a hand in a *stop* motion. "Drew, for God's sake. I know you're scared and angry, but

you're not going to be any help at all if you don't go get some rest."

He started to argue, but she said the words that guaranteed he would obey: "Do it for Ciaran. He needs you to be strong."

He nodded. He hated admitting weakness, but she was right. He had to rest if he wanted to be worth anything later. "I called another werewolf in to help. I don't know if he'll be able to make it, but if he does, let him in. His name's Nick."

"Nick. Got it. And I'll do some research and call some of my own contacts. In a few hours, we'll have more information, and you'll be able to shift." She paused, gave him a reassuring look. "We'll find him."

He nodded again, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

* * * * *

The first thing Drew did was take a quick shower and change his clothes. The blood in his hair was caked and dry, and very difficult to get out, but with effort he managed. As he shampooed his hair for the third time, he carefully examined the lump on the back of his head with his fingertips. It was large and still oozing blood, and hurt like hell to touch. If he'd been human, he would be dead. They must not know he was a werewolf, or they would never have left him alive, injured or not.

Back in the bedroom, he dozed fitfully, clutching Ciaran's pillow. The familiar scent of his lover comforted him and tore at his heart at the same time. When he did manage to sleep, nightmares of Ciaran being taken, hurt, tormented him.

A loud bang jerked him out of a terrible nightmare in which Ciaran had been screaming Drew's name and Drew had been unable to find him. Adrenaline surging, he jumped out of bed and ran for the living room. Janie was peeking out the window next to the door. She saw him and motioned him over. "Does your friend Nick have pointy ears and long white hair?"

Pointy ears? Long white hair? "What? No."

"Then I'm guessing that's not him." Janie jerked her thumb toward the outside.

Drew looked out the window as well. Through the glare of the bright sunlight, he could make out a tall, slim man with long, silvery hair that was partially pulled back. His ears were more pointed than Ciaran's. He wore a cloak of some kind over an embroidered tunic. *Who the fuck is this Lord of the Rings reject?* And more to the point, why had he come here?

"Go into the kitchen. If you think things are going to go bad, run." Drew met Janie's eyes, trying to tell her how important it was for her to listen.

"But—"

"This guy might know something. Do as I say, please."

"Be careful." She opened her mouth as if she wanted to say more, but she didn't. She just turned and hurried into the kitchen.

The moment she was out of sight, Drew yanked open the door. The man outside had a fist raised, clearly intending to knock again. When he saw Drew, he scowled. "Where is my grandson?"

For a few seconds, Drew stared at the man, Ciaran's grandfather. All this time he'd wondered if Ciaran's grandfather cared that Ciaran was gone, and the man deigned to show up today of all days. Drew could feel his lip turning up into a sneer. "What do you care? He's been here for almost two months and you never came looking for him."

The stranger's patrician features twisted into an expression of haughty disdain. His cold, emotionless lavender eyes narrowed. "Time runs differently in the two realms, human. I tracked my grandson here. Give him to me."

Drew stifled the urge to punch the faerie for the hurt he'd caused Ciaran and for his belief that he could come in and take Ciaran away. The idea of his mate being taken from him—again, and forever—enraged his wolf. The change simmered under his skin, and he growled, deep and low. "Not human. And he's nothing but a burden to you, Fae."

At last Ciaran's grandfather showed an emotion other than impatience. One white eyebrow went up. "He's nothing to you, either, Wolf."

"I love him." *He's my mate.* He wasn't about to say the word for the

first time to anyone but Ciaran, but he needed Ciaran's grandfather to see that someone valued Ciaran for who he was.

Red splotches appeared on the faerie's pale cheeks. "Do you have any idea what he is?"

Drew's anger surged. He bared his suddenly sharper teeth at the older man. "Do *you*? I look at him and I see a man who is kind, and caring, and talented. You look at him and all you see is a demon, something to be hidden away and ignored. Excuse me if I don't jump to do your bidding."

Ciaran's grandfather snarled. "What do you know of it, Wolf? I had a position to maintain."

"Stop it!"

They both stilled at Janie's yell. She wasn't finished, though. She stalked over to them and pointed a finger at Ciaran's grandfather. "You. Either help us, or get out. You." She pointed at Drew. "Can you shift yet? I've got a couple of leads, and your friend Nick called. He'll be here in a few."

Nick was coming. Drew let his eyes fall closed for a moment as relief washed over him. The older werewolf would be a great help. "I think I'll be ready to shift by the time Nick gets here."

"Good."

Drew opened his eyes in time to see Janie sweeping out of the room. The faerie stared after her for a moment before shifting his attention to Drew. "What is going on here?"

Drew ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. "I couldn't have given Ciaran to you even if I wanted to. He's been taken. We're going to get him back."

Something flickered in the Fae's eyes. "Taken? By whom?"

Drew shook his head. "I don't know yet. They were willing to hurt me, or even kill me, to do it. I have to find him."

Ciaran's grandfather nodded. "I will help you."

Chapter Fourteen

Huddled in the corner of the cramped, dusty main room, Ciaran kept the filthy blanket he had found there wrapped around himself. The chill of the unheated and poorly insulated room sank into him, made worse by the loss of his shirt, which Zed had torn into pieces. Burning pain made him gasp as the blanket rasped over the cuts on his back. Zed had discovered quickly that Ciaran's wings were not hidden under his skin. He had made a few more cuts anyway, but Ciaran had not made a sound. He had not wanted to give the human the satisfaction.

The woman had ordered Zed to stop cutting. The one called Dirk had pushed Ciaran to the corner and given him an apple and a bottle of water. They still sat where the man had left them. Ciaran would not eat food given to him by his captors. The water had been opened already, so even that was not safe. They might not have done anything to the food, but he could not risk being drugged. Whatever they wanted with him would be best faced with a clear head.

He had already lost track of time. The boarded-up windows kept him from using the sun, and he had no watch or clock. His wrists still ached, and he cursed his faerie half's vulnerability to iron and steel. At least his demon half had no such weakness, that he knew of. He knew too little about his demon heritage to know what skills he might be able to use, or what vulnerabilities his captors could exploit.

Cold, hurting, and tired, he scanned the room once more. He saw nothing he could use to escape. The room had been stripped of anything

useful, probably years before. There was not even any furniture to hide behind.

He shifted backward slightly, and his foot bumped into something. A glance down revealed a loose nail in the floor. After a quick look to ensure his captors had not returned to the room, he shoved the edge of one of the handcuffs under the loose nail. Ignoring the pain in his wrist as the handcuff dug into it, he started working on the nail. If he could free the small bit of metal, he would have a weapon of sorts.

The door leading from the kitchen opened, and Ciaran quickly shifted to hide the nail. He had to school his features into an impassive mask when he saw who had entered the room. It was the fourth of his summoners, the one who had tried to hurt him when he had first been summoned. The man had featured in every nightmare he had endured since that night. This, then, must be Tory.

If he had not known what kind of person Tory was, Ciaran might have found him handsome. He was young, with blond hair, blue eyes, and nice features. Nothing about his face showed his inner cruelty.

Tory crossed the room and crouched on the floor in front of Ciaran. "You made us go through a lot of trouble to find you, you know."

Ciaran did not answer. What was there to say? He was not sorry for escaping them.

The other man continued, his expression almost friendly. "I have to give you credit. You were good at keeping a low profile. I don't know how you got the job, but that was a stroke of genius. I'm sure most people in that crappy little town didn't realize what they had among them."

What they had among them, not *who*. Ciaran hated the implication. When he had lived with his grandfather, he had not understood the distinction. He did now, but he refused to let this human bait him.

His continued silence seemed to amuse Tory, who smiled. The expression did not make his face look kind. He ran a fingertip along Ciaran's cheekbone. "I know exactly what you are, though. And I know you were meant to be mine."

The possessive look in the other man's eyes sickened Ciaran, as did the hand on his face. He pulled back. He knew he should not deny Tory's

words, or speak at all, but he could not hold back his whispered reply. "I was meant to be Drew's."

Tory smirked. "Drew. Was that the guy Zed killed?"

Ciaran's stomach clenched. His voice rose. "He is not dead. He was breathing." Drew could not be dead.

"Are you sure about that?" Tory sat back on his heels. "Zed smashed his head with a tree branch. He said the guy was bleeding like a stuck pig."

The image of Drew lying on the ground, pale and still, surrounded by blood, filled Ciaran's mind. Maybe leaving to protect Drew had been the wrong choice. What if he was dead? What if Ciaran had left him to die alone? A chill washed over him. Horrified, he raised a shackled hand to his mouth.

Tory smiled again, a smug, satisfied curve of his lips. "That's right. He's dead, and you're going to be mine. You might as well get used to it." He stood and stared down at Ciaran, his gaze bright with a cruel light. "You might even learn to like it."

Never. Ciaran glared up at his tormentor, not bothering to hide the hatred he felt. He would not submit to anything they wanted him to do. No matter what happened, he would find a way to make them all sorry for hurting Drew. And if Drew really was dead...He cut off the thought, refusing to consider it. He would deal with that later, if it turned out to be true. Now he needed to concentrate on escape.

Apparently satisfied he had unsettled his captive, Tory turned and left the room. As soon as he was certain he was alone, Ciaran started working on the nail again. The skin of his wrist chafed and split, and blood trickled down his hand, but he continued to use the handcuff edge to lift the nail, millimeter by painful millimeter. He concentrated on the task, trying not to think.

* * * * *

Time passed. Ciaran did not know how much, but he estimated it had been several hours. The stubborn nail had turned out to be much

longer than he had anticipated, but now the thin steel shaft was wobbling. One hard tug brought it out of the wood. He stared at his find. The nail was about four inches long and fairly thick. Despite being a little rusty, it was sharp enough to hurt someone if need be.

Ciaran slipped the nail into his pocket. At that moment, the door leading to the bedroom opened. All of his captors filed out into the main room. Dirk, Tory, and Abe stood by the door. Only Zed and the woman approached him.

Zed motioned for him to stand. He wanted to refuse, but he did not. He stood. A refusal would be a pointless defiance, and would likely lead to more injury.

Crossing his arms, Zed came to a stop near Ciaran. "You've had some time to think about it. I hope you've come to a more intelligent decision. Show us your true form."

This was the man who had hurt Drew, who might have killed him. The hate, rage, fear, and pain coalesced into a tight ball of icy resolve. He met Zed's eyes. "No."

Zed's arm flew in a vicious backhand that caught Ciaran across the mouth. He stumbled backward but did not fall. A trickle of blood dripped from the corner of his lip. Despite the pain, he smiled. Did they think they could hurt him now? Nothing they did could be worse than the knowledge that Drew might be dead.

Snarling, Zed brought his arm back for another blow. The woman grabbed his arm. "Stop. We need him alive and uninjured."

From behind her, Tory snapped, "Damn it, Zed. He's mine when you all are finished with him, and you promised not to mess him up."

Tory's remark brought out another of Zed's horrible laughs. "What do you care, Tory? He won't be pretty when you get done with him anyway."

Tory stepped up and took Ciaran's chin in his hand, tilting Ciaran's face to examine it. "True, but I want him to start out pretty. Look what you did, you asshole."

The woman rolled her eyes. "Enough. I need to prepare for the ritual, and all of you need to think about what you want from this. Each of

you will get only one spell, as agreed." She paused and directed a hard stare at Zed. "When the time comes, *I* will get him to take demon form. The less of his blood we spill before the ritual, the better."

"Fine. Let's go, then." Zed motioned to the other men, and they all went out the front door.

The woman remained. Her dark gaze locked on him. "When I ask you to show me your true form, you should do as I say. I can make it quite unpleasant if you don't."

Ciaran felt a sudden, hysterical urge to laugh. Unpleasant? What did she think everything up to this point had been?

She said nothing more, only spun on her heel and strode back into the bedroom.

After she left, Ciaran collapsed to the floor. He closed his eyes and clutched the blanket around himself, imagining Drew lay beside him. If he concentrated hard enough, he could almost feel Drew's warmth against his back.

The illusion comforted him, but it was not enough. Cold, hard reality would not be denied. Ciaran had already lived for years in captivity, albeit a much more pleasant prison than this one. He would not do so again, or allow them to use him in some terrible ritual. He would rather die than have his blood used to fuel dark magic.

One way or another, when this ended he would be with Drew.

Chapter Fifteen

True to his word, Nick arrived a few minutes later. He seemed surprised to see Drew and an unknown faerie standing in the open doorway. He cut Drew a quick, sharp look, his large body poised to fight if necessary.

Understanding the look, Drew shook his head. Ciaran's grandfather wasn't the threat. Nick relaxed his stance slightly and focused his light brown eyes on Drew. "You sounded upset on the phone, and you look like shit. What happened?"

Drew rubbed the back of his neck and was surprised to find blood there, and in his hair. Apparently his head was bleeding again. He'd nearly forgotten about it with all that had been going on. "It's a long story." He waved everyone inside and shut the door. Nick knew about Drew's falling-out with his family, and his move to the cabin, but other than that Drew hadn't done a good job of keeping his friend updated. The man wasn't exactly easy to keep in touch with.

With a quirk of one dark eyebrow, Nick said, "Give me the Cliff Notes version."

The older werewolf never went into any situation unprepared if he could help it, which probably explained why he was still alive despite his dangerous job. Except for a few scars, including a noticeable one on his cheek, Nick had come out pretty well because of his insistence on being prepared.

Drew had always admired that about Nick, but now he just wanted to get moving. He sighed. "When I was moving up here I ran into this guy who was being chased. He turned out to be half-demon, half-faerie." He jerked his thumb toward the older Fae. "This is his grandfather, by the way. He just showed up a few minutes ago."

Nick nodded at the older man, who tilted his head in acknowledgement.

Drew continued. "I brought him here with me. Everything seemed to be fine, but in the past few days we realized someone was after him. Last night they smashed me over the head and took him. I don't know where. We have to get him back."

"Is that it?"

All the helplessness Drew had been feeling churned in his stomach. He swallowed. "His name is Ciaran. And I love him."

The sympathy in Nick's light gaze almost undid him. The older werewolf clasped his shoulder. "We *will* find him."

He nodded.

* * * * *

While the men talked, Janie found more information. One of the employees at the bed and breakfast had written down Irina Novotny's license plate number. Using that tip, and some websites and search methods that weren't entirely legal, Drew was able to discover where the woman lived. He also learned a vital piece of information—her family owned a parcel of land several hours away. The land was in a very rural area, and there was a structure on it.

Drew looked at Nick. "This could be the place." Everything in him wanted to jump up and go, but he needed to make sure he wasn't running in circles. Going to the wrong place wouldn't help Ciaran.

Nick considered. "I agree. It's out of the way and most people wouldn't think to look there."

Ciaran's grandfather frowned. "You and I can track him as we travel, Wolf. One of us will undoubtedly know if we have chosen the

wrong location before we even arrive.”

They finally had a destination. Unwilling to wait another second, Drew jumped up from his chair. “Let’s go, then.” He strode down the hallway to the kitchen. Nick and Ciaran’s grandfather followed.

In the kitchen, Janie stood by the table holding two backpacks. She handed one to Drew. “I put some basic stuff in here—water, first aid kit, that sort of thing. There are also weapons inside, the best I could do on short notice anyway.” She indicated the one she still held. “This one’s mine. I’ve got supplies for spells and some weapons also. I’m assuming you guys have your own?”

“Never travel without ‘em,” Nick replied, patting the area where his shoulder holster rested. Drew knew he would have other items as well: knives in both steel and silver, ammunition, and who knew what else.

They all looked at Ciaran’s grandfather. The tall Fae actually smiled, an expression that came off as feral rather than amused. “I am prepared as well.”

Janie hefted her backpack. “Okay. Unless you guys have a better idea, we’ll take my van. There’s room enough for all of us.”

When no one protested, Janie led the way out of the cabin and to her van. The large vehicle bore the Stomping Grounds logo on the side. Without being told, Nick and Ciaran’s grandfather, whose name Drew realized he still didn’t know, got into the back. Drew climbed into the passenger seat and rolled the window down enough to be able to scent the outside air. Janie started the van and pulled out of the driveway. “Where to?”

From the back, Nick gave her the directions to Irina Novotny’s property. Drew didn’t pay much attention. He trusted Nick to get them to their destination, and he had other concerns.

He stripped off his shirt. “I’m going to shift now. Don’t freak out.” He went to work on his pants.

Janie’s laugh was strained. “If I haven’t freaked out about demons and faeries, I can handle this.”

Drew couldn’t answer. He had already begun to change. When he

had taken wolf form, he whined softly.

Eyes the size of dinner plates, Janie breathed, "Holy shit."

Ignoring her shock, Drew turned to the window and put his nose to the air coming in. Ciaran's scent lingered in the air, and he focused on it.

Nick leaned between the front seats. "Got the scent?"

Drew nodded.

"Good. If you lose it, or think we're going the wrong way, bark."

Drew whined to show he understood the instructions and went back to his task. The sound of the Fae chanting something in the back seat reached his consciousness, as did the quiet murmur of Janie and Nick's voices, but he blocked out the distractions. Only Ciaran mattered.

* * * * *

Whatever the mysterious "ritual" his captors were preparing for was, the time must be approaching. Ciaran remained huddled in the corner as the men and the woman came in and out the front door, carrying various objects—candles, a hammer, boxes. From his vantage point in the main room, he could see a tiny bathroom and what must have been a bedroom through the doors they went in and out of. None of the rooms had any furniture.

At one point, Zed and Dirk took him to the bathroom. The window was heavily boarded up, and there was nothing of use in the room. The water in the toilet was rust-brown, but he used it anyway. The water from the sink came out reddish-brown as well, until he let the faucet run for a while. He washed his hands as best he could and rinsed the blood from his wrists. He also took the opportunity to drink, preferring to risk the faucet over water given to him by his captors. A glance at his reflection in the mirror, an odd polished steel plate rather than glass, showed a pale, bruised, slightly distorted man he almost did not recognize.

Zed banged on the door. "Time's up, demon."

Ciaran opened the door without protest and allowed himself to be led out of the bathroom. He would bide his time, for now.

Back in the main room, Tory approached him, carrying a length of

rope. When Zed started to say something, Tory interrupted. "Irina wants him tied with this. She says no metal, except for her knife."

"Whatever." Zed rolled his eyes and stood back.

Tory muttered "prick" under his breath and unlocked Ciaran's handcuffs. He replaced the metal with loops of rope, which he tied tightly. He seemed to be trying to ensure that the ropes put pressure on the raw, torn parts of Ciaran's skin, but if he had expected Ciaran to show pain he was disappointed. When he finished, he waved Ciaran toward the corner. "Back to your spot. We'll be back to get you in a little while."

In his corner once more, Ciaran discovered a sandwich and a can of soda, once again already opened. Despite his hunger, he left them untouched. He reached into his pocket and clutched the nail. Whatever they planned for him, he would be ready.

Chapter Sixteen

The next four hours passed in an agony of uncertainty and fear. Drew remained vigilant, following the slightest hint of Ciaran's scent. He was convinced they were on the right track, but what would they find when they arrived? Would Ciaran be hurt? Dead? He shuddered at the thought. *No, they wanted him alive. At least for now.*

Ciaran's grandfather agreed they were going the right way. He said as much to Janie and Nick. Having his hunch confirmed made Drew feel a little better, but it wasn't enough. Nothing short of finding Ciaran would make him feel better.

And he hadn't even told Ciaran he wanted him as his mate.

The thought haunted him. He'd believed they would have plenty of time, but what if that wasn't true? Ciaran was the only real joy in his life—his friend, his lover, his pack. Like ordinary wolves, werewolves mated for life. He had seen one instance of a werewolf finding another mate after the first died, but it was rare. After losing a mate, some werewolves even grieved themselves to death. He'd never understood that before, but thinking about living without Ciaran by his side made the concept seem less impossible.

Janie turned off the main road onto a gravel road. Through the smells of dry, dead corn fields, wood smoke, and approaching snow, Ciaran's scent washed over him, strong but tainted with fear and blood. He yipped and scratched at the window. Janie stopped the van. "What is it, Drew?"

"He's caught the scent. We're close." Nick leaned between the seats again. "We should go in on foot. We need a plan."

Drew considered for a moment. He might need to be in wolf form when they went in. Shifting several times in one day while healing from a serious injury would be exhausting, but he needed to be in on the planning. He changed. Janie yelped, and he picked up the backpack to cover his lap. "Sorry, Janie. Nick's right, I caught the scent. He's scared, and hurt, but he's here somewhere." He paused, took a deep breath. "How should we do this?"

After a short pause, Nick spoke. "The first thing we need to do is recon. We don't know what kind of building they're holding him in, or how many entrances it has. We need to approach on foot and decide what to do when we have more information. It's getting dark, so that should help us stay hidden."

Drew wanted to just charge in and kill the humans who had dared to hurt his mate, but he knew that wouldn't be wise, or safe. Nick had gone into situations like this before. He knew what he was doing.

Drew found his jeans and shirt and tugged them on, wincing as the shirt scraped over the still-healing lump on his head. If that guy had hit him much harder, he wouldn't be in any shape to fight, not without a lot more time to rest and heal. How long would he have lain there before anyone noticed he was missing, or came looking for Ciaran? He didn't want to think about that.

Ciaran's grandfather leaned forward to join the conversation, his face impassive. "We must decide on our roles before we begin." For all the emotion he showed, they could have been discussing the weather. Drew restrained the urge to growl at the haughty Fae.

Nick nodded. "Good idea." He looked to Janie. "Do you have a gun?"

"Yeah, two of them actually."

Her reply made Nick smile. "A woman after my own heart. Witch or not, you're our token human, so you need to let us go in and check things out. Provide cover for us if necessary."

Her face settled into grim lines. "I can do that."

"Once we've got the lay of the land, the faerie and I will go in first. Drew, I don't think I need to tell you what your main objective is."

No matter what, he knew his priority. "To get to Ciaran."

"Exactly. You worry about keeping him safe, and let the rest of us take care of whatever else needs to be done." Nick glanced around at the others. "Any objections, questions, or comments before we get started?"

No one spoke.

With a shark-like grin, Nick opened the van door. "Let's go kick some ass."

* * * * *

Janie had pulled off in a good spot, in the middle of a curve on the rough, pitted gravel road and partially hidden by trees. The four of them slipped from the vehicle. In single file, they crept into the stand of trees and headed for Irina's property. Ciaran's scent was strong enough for Drew to follow easily, even in human form.

By the time they reached a small, dilapidated house, the sky had darkened. He knew immediately they had come to the right place. The five humans were here, as was Ciaran. The fear, sweat, and blood in the air sent Drew's hackles up. For the first time in years, he had trouble controlling his urge to shift.

With the exception of Janie, they all had excellent night vision. She stayed close to the men, taking her cues from them while they moved as close to the place as they could manage.

The trees ended about two hundred feet from the house, leaving a lot of open area to cross. Nick eyed the small house. "Wait here."

The werewolf made a half-circle, sticking to the trees, and then returned to the group. In a whisper, he reported, "There are two entrances, a front door and a back door. The back door is boarded up. From the size of the house and the shape, I'm guessing the front door opens into a living room type area, with a bathroom and bedroom off that. The kitchen is probably in the back, by the boarded-up door."

"How do you suggest we approach?" Ciaran's grandfather

watched the house with his eerie lavender eyes, his hand on a knife at his waist.

Nick frowned. "We'll have to go through the front door. Everything else is blocked. That's not ideal, but we have no other choice. I'll go in first with my guns. You all follow."

Free at last, Drew yanked off his shirt. "I go in as a wolf." He had his shoes and pants off in seconds, and he let the change take him.

* * * * *

"It's time. Bring him."

Drew's arms around Ciaran once again became the scratchy blanket as the harsh sound of the woman's voice jerked him out of the daydream he had constructed to console himself. He tightened his fingers around his makeshift weapon and waited.

The bedroom door opened, and Zed came out. He stalked across the room to where Ciaran sat. "Get up, demon."

This did not feel like the right time to reveal his weapon. Zed was strong and vicious. Of all Ciaran's captors, Zed was the most dangerous. Ciaran struggled to his feet, trying to appear beaten down and terrified. Appearing to be afraid was not difficult. He was terrified, but anger tempered his terror, kept it manageable.

"Into the bedroom."

Ciaran shuffled along slowly, feigning a limp. The delay gave him a chance to see where he was being taken. His captors had been busy. In the center of the small bedroom, an old, sturdy wooden table acted as an altar. The perimeter of the room was lined with black candles. The woman stood beside the altar, chanting and waving burning herbs that gave off a nauseating scent. At the other side of the altar, Tory stood, smirking. Ciaran could not see Abe and Dirk.

Growing impatient with Ciaran's slow gait, Zed shoved him. "Hurry the fuck up."

Ciaran bit back a defiant response and sped up. He reached the bedroom in four more steps.

When he came to a stop beside the altar, Zed left him to stand against the wall with Abe and Dirk. Now three of the men were across the room, out of easy reach. The odds were beginning to improve.

Tory shoved a milk crate over next to him. "Drop the blanket and get on the table."

For an instant, Ciaran considered disobeying, but in the end he decided to wait. He let the blanket fall to the floor and climbed onto the table. Tory moved to stand behind him at the head of the table. He gripped Ciaran's shoulders and pushed him into a laying position. Rather than releasing Ciaran, Tory continued to hold his shoulders with a painfully tight grasp.

The woman's chanting continued. The strange words grew in volume. Ciaran's skin crawled. With a certainty he did not understand, he knew her words were a prelude to blood magic. The men had summoned him to use his blood in this ritual, in order to get something they wanted. And Tory's reward, apparently, was Ciaran, when the others had taken the blood they needed.

Rage seethed just beneath his skin, like a separate entity clawing to get free. Bits of memory flickered through his mind: Drew lying in a pool of blood. *He's dead, and you're going to be mine.* Zed slicing into his back. *You might even learn to like it.*

Tory's thumbs stroked over the tops of his wing-markings in an obscene caress. *He's dead, and you're going to be mine. You might even learn to like it.*

Never! None of them would touch him, or benefit from his blood. They had hurt him, and they had hurt Drew. *Drew.* He wanted to curl in on himself, but the anger would not let him.

With an animal howl of rage and pain, Ciaran exploded. He twisted on the table. Unprepared for the sudden move, Tory's hands lost their grip. Ciaran scrambled to his knees and slashed at his tormentor with the nail. He caught Tory's cheek, and the skin ripped like tissue paper.

After a moment of shocked stillness, the other three men charged toward the table. A loud bang behind Ciaran startled him enough that he

lost his focus. Tory grabbed him by the hair, yanking him off the table. "Stupid fucking demon! You're going to regret that."

Ciaran landed on his knees on the floor, his head pulled back at an awkward angle by Tory's grip on his hair. He lost his hold on the nail as he hit the ground, leaving him without a weapon. Another bang sounded, and Dirk dropped, two large splotches of blood on his chest. Ciaran did not realize Dirk had been shot until Zed whipped out a gun and fired toward the doorway behind him.

Someone, or something, ran in through the door, but Ciaran could not turn his head to see what was happening. Unreasoning panic rose. Weaponless and held in place, he could only imagine what worse things could be in store. He struggled against Tory's grip, desperate to free himself.

Chapter Seventeen

From the moment they burst inside, everything was a blur for Drew. In another room a woman chanted something unintelligible, her voice low and guttural. The air was a haze of candle smoke, acrid, bitter herbs, and the overpowering stench of fear and hatred. They all rushed toward the sound. Nick was the first to reach the bedroom, his gun going off twice in rapid succession, and the faerie ran past Drew so fast he barely processed the movement. From the other room, Ciaran cried out, a sound of anger and pain. Drew snarled and raced forward.

Then he saw Ciaran on the floor, his head held at an awkward angle by a human. The sight of his lover alive paralyzed him, until the human pulled his hand back and struck Ciaran across the face.

Snarling, Drew leaped across the room. His teeth closed around the human's wrist with a snap. His weight propelled the man backward. They all fell, Drew onto the man and Ciaran in the opposite direction. Before Drew could try to see if Ciaran was all right, the man reached for one of the thick candles and swung it at Drew's head like a club. Drew dodged the clumsy blow easily and bit the man's hand. With a scream of pain, his adversary dropped the candle. The man lay on the floor, whimpering.

Drew turned to scan the room. His quick glance showed the faerie fighting the dark-haired woman in one corner. Nick was struggling with one of the men. Janie was nowhere to be seen. He hoped she had stayed in the living room.

His gaze flew back to his primary concern—Ciaran. His battered,

shirtless lover had moved to sit against one leg of the table, pressed against it as if he thought he could disappear into the wood. His hands were bound with rope. His face was swollen and bruised, but he'd never looked better to Drew.

Ciaran's eyes widened, and his lip trembled. He held his bound hands out toward Drew. His fingers shook.

Drew took a step toward him, but movement behind him made him whirl. The man who had tried to hit him with a candle now had a knife. Instead of going for Drew, he lunged for Ciaran. "Mine or no one's," he hissed.

Mate and *danger* flitted through his mind, and then he was on the man. Ignoring the knife that slashed at his side, he clamped down on the man's throat. The struggle ended in seconds. Drew stepped back from the dead man. In wolf form, he had the urge to howl over the body of his enemy, but his human side just wanted to be done with everything and get out of there.

He turned back to Ciaran. He had to protect his mate.

* * * * *

When Ciaran saw the wolf attack Tory, he had been too shocked to react. The chaos of the room around him left him in a state of confusion and disbelief. It was only after Tory was down, injured, that Ciaran's mind finally began to process what was going on. He knew this wolf.

It was Drew.

Huddled against the table, afraid and bewildered by what was happening around him, the realization worked its way into his consciousness. He would know that gray, brown, and white coat anywhere. The green eyes the wolf peered at him with confirmed his hope. Drew was alive, and he had come. Relief, gratitude, joy, and exhaustion overwhelmed Ciaran. Tears rushed to his eyes. He reached out, needing to touch and be sure this was real.

His hands never made contact.

Tory lunged, muttering, "Mine or no one's." Candlelight glinted off

the blade of the knife in his hand. Before Ciaran had time to be afraid, Drew pounced on Tory. There was a brief struggle. The knife scraped against Drew's side, leaving cuts, but Drew did not back down. He bit down on Tory's throat. The knife dropped.

Around them, the sounds of battle were quieting. Dirk and Tory were dead. A man Ciaran did not recognize appeared to be getting the better of Zed, who had lost his gun and was fighting with a knife. Ciaran could not see the woman. He started to turn to see what was taking place behind him.

The click of a gun being cocked sounded loud in the relative stillness. Ciaran sought out the source of the sound. Abe was rising from the floor, bleeding, but he had managed to get Zed's gun, which he now pointed straight at Drew.

Ciaran's exhaustion fled. The chaos, fear, and confusion slipped away, replaced by focus and purpose. Drew could not be hurt again, not while Ciaran lived and could prevent it. White-hot fury rose, and he embraced it.

Suddenly he was on his feet. His arms were free, somehow. Only a few feet separated himself and Abe. He closed the distance in seconds and slammed into the man, knocking the gun upward. The weapon went off, the loud bang making his ears ring.

Another shot sounded, and Abe crumpled to the ground. Unprepared, Ciaran fell alongside him. He lay on the floor dazed, adrenaline still surging.

Nearby, the man grappling with Zed got through his defenses, and Zed too collapsed, bleeding from a knife wound in his side. He did not move. A sudden silence enveloped the room.

Ciaran sat up slowly, pushing away from Abe's body. His heart pounded as his gaze sought Drew. Could it be finished?

Drew closed the distance between them in a quick lunge. Ciaran threw his arms around the wolf, burrowing into his thick fur. Now that they were together, and the danger was over, the rage ebbed and the need for comfort filled him.

As if reading Ciaran's mind, Drew shifted. He pulled Ciaran into

his lap and wrapped his arms around him. "It's okay. You're safe now." Drew rested his cheek on Ciaran's head and stroked his fingertips over the uninjured side of Ciaran's back.

The terror Ciaran had felt, the anger, the negative emotions mixed with relief and joy. Drew was alive and in his arms. It was more than he had dared to hope for. The conflicting emotions, more than he had been faced with since he arrived in the human realm, churned inside him, overwhelmed him. He trembled in Drew's embrace, trying to get closer.

"I thought you were dead. They said you were dead," he choked out. He needed to explain why he had left Drew alone and hurt. Why he had been prepared to die himself, if necessary. He struggled to continue. "I left with them so they would not hurt you anymore, but I was so afraid you had died anyway. Alone." Remembered pain clogged his throat.

Burying his face in Drew's chest, Ciaran burst into tears.

* * * * *

Mingled joy, relief, and worry flooded Drew as he held his mate. Ciaran clung to him, shoulders shaking with great, wracking sobs. More than anything else that had happened tonight, the tears broke Drew's heart. He rocked the smaller man gently and kissed his hair. "Shh, you did the right thing. If you'd fought them, they would have hurt you and probably killed me."

If anyone should be upset at himself, he should. He was the one who'd gotten smacked on the head and hadn't protected Ciaran. He couldn't imagine how terrifying it had been for Ciaran to leave with those people, alone, in a bid to keep him safe. His slim, seemingly delicate lover had a core of steel. He had never been prouder.

He needs to hear that. Drew rubbed the uninjured side of Ciaran's back. "I'm proud of you. You were strong. You protected me, just like I tried to protect you."

Ciaran raised a tear-streaked face to peer at him. "But I was afraid. The whole time."

Drew smiled. "Did you think I wasn't scared? I was terrified. The

thought of you being hurt or killed, well..." He shuddered. "The point is that you didn't let your fear keep you from fighting."

At last, the corners of Ciaran's lips turned up a tiny bit. Drew kissed him lightly. "That's better."

Having seen to his mate, Drew returned his attention to the room around them. After the cries, grunts, thuds, and gunshots, the quiet was unnerving. All of Ciaran's captors lay on the floor. None of them moved.

Nick was checking one of the men for a pulse. As if sensing Drew's stare, Nick glanced up. "They're all dead."

After what the humans had done to Ciaran, and what they'd intended to do, Drew felt nothing but a savage satisfaction. "Good." The tension in Ciaran's body eased slightly at the news, and Drew knew he was relieved.

Nick stood and pulled out his cell phone. "It is good, but kind of a pain in the ass at the same time. At least we're out in the middle of nowhere, so I'm willing to bet nobody heard. I'm still going to have to call in a cleanup crew for this." He waved his hand to indicate the bodies.

Once again, Drew was grateful that Nick had come along. The older werewolf had connections he didn't. A cleanup crew wasn't an easy thing to arrange, but it would keep his and Ciaran's secrets safe. The crew would come up with a plausible explanation for the deaths, like a bizarre cult or a drug-related incident, and no one would ever know the truth. He met Nick's eyes. "Thanks. I owe you one."

Nick's gaze went to Ciaran and his expression softened. "No, you don't. In your place I'd have done the same thing." He grinned and flipped his phone open. "Anyway, it was fun."

Drew barely stifled the urge to roll his eyes. "Only you would say something like that."

Whatever Nick might have said went unsaid, because Janie came into the room carrying her backpack and a bottle of water. "Let's get you two patched up a bit so you don't bleed all over my van."

Ciaran's eyes lit up. "Janie. You're here."

She smiled and sat on the floor next to them. "Of course I am, honey. You're my favorite employee."

Ciaran's laugh cut off abruptly, and his bruised face paled. He shrank against Drew again, his eyes going wary and defiant. Wondering what could possibly have caused such a change, Drew looked up. Ciaran's grandfather stood just behind Janie, his expression unreadable.

"What are you doing here, Grandfather?" Ciaran's normally musical voice was flat and hard.

The tall faerie did not move or smile. "You disappeared. I tracked you to the werewolf's home."

Ciaran glared up at his grandfather. "I'm not going back with you. I love Drew, and I'm staying here."

Ciaran's grandfather inclined his head. "If that is your desire, I shall not prevent you."

The reply seemed to surprise Ciaran. His eyes widened, and he was silent for a long moment. "Good. Because you couldn't anyway."

Drew bit his lip to hold back the laugh that wanted to escape. Ciaran sounded like a rebellious teenager. Drew hugged him close and hid a smile in his wild curls.

The older faerie came forward to crouch next to Janie. "Perhaps you will allow me to aid in healing the two of you before I return home."

Obviously at a loss, Ciaran stared at the older Fae. "All right."

"First, put these on," Janie ordered, handing Drew his jeans.

He grinned and shifted Ciaran off his lap so he could pull the pants on. It was hard not to laugh at the way Janie kept her gaze pointed straight at the ceiling. "Okay, I'm decent."

"Yeah, right," she muttered. "Let me see that cut on your side."

While she prodded at the cut and cleaned it, Drew watched Ciaran. The older faerie held Ciaran's chin in a gentle grasp and was dabbing at his split lip with a wet cloth. The half-demon's bafflement at his grandfather's behavior was obvious. He turned confused eyes to Drew, who shrugged. He didn't know what was up either.

Under the direction of Ciaran's grandfather, Janie put a paste of herbs on Drew's cut and bandaged it, murmuring words that must have been a healing spell under her breath. Ciaran's grandfather did the same for the cuts on Ciaran's back and wrists, promising that they would scar

very lightly if at all.

"You guys done in here? Cleanup crew's on the way, so we need to get the hell out of Dodge." Nick appeared in the doorway, still holding his cell phone.

"We're ready to roll." Janie slapped her hands together in a "my work here is done" motion. As an afterthought, she tossed Drew his shirt. "Put this on, or you'll freeze out there."

Ciaran's grandfather stood and extended a hand to help Janie up. She took it. "Thanks. And thanks for your help with the poultices."

The Fae nodded. "You have skill."

With a pleased smile, Janie left the room, motioning to Nick. "Come on."

Drew stood as well, and helped Ciaran to his feet. They both turned to Ciaran's grandfather. Not sure what to say, Drew went with a simple question. "Do you need a ride somewhere?"

The faerie frowned. "I do not wish to spend any more time in that horrid steel box. Iron and steel are not pleasant for us. I shall locate a gate and return home on foot."

"Okay. Well, thank you for helping us." Drew offered Ciaran's grandfather a smile. The man might not be pleasant, but he had helped them immensely.

To Drew's astonishment, Ciaran's grandfather gave them what could almost be called a smile in return. "You are welcome." His odd lavender eyes focused on his grandson. "I have always done what I thought best. Perhaps my choices were made more out of convention than care. A life in the human realm with a werewolf is not what I would have chosen for you. Nevertheless, I am pleased you have found happiness."

Several emotions flitted across Ciaran's face in quick succession before his face settled into an expressionless mask. "Thank you, Grandfather. I appreciate that."

Ciaran's grandfather extended his hand to Drew. "If ever you have need of me, Wolf, you may contact me. My name is Lorcan Oir."

Drew didn't have much experience with the Fae, or any, really, other than Ciaran, but in stories he'd read they always guarded their true

names. As Janie had told Drew days before, names had power. This was a gift he would not take lightly. He shook Lorcan's hand. "Thank you. I'm Andrew Moore."

"Take care of my grandson, Andrew Moore. Goodbye, Ciaran." Lorcan gave them both a final nod and strode from the room without looking back.

Ciaran stared after his grandfather, his brow creased. "I am confused."

Confused and ready to collapse, more like. Drew was willing to bet Ciaran hadn't slept since he'd been taken, and constant fear and adrenaline could wear a person out. He touched Ciaran's hand. "Me too. And tired. Let's go home."

Ignoring his exhaustion and the lingering pain in his side, Drew lifted his lover and carried him from the house.

Chapter Eighteen

Drew carried Ciaran all the way to Janie's van. Ciaran would have protested that he could walk on his own, but after the horror of believing Drew was dead, Ciaran found himself reluctant to be apart, even a short distance. He kept silent and buried his face in Drew's neck, grateful for the security of his arms. His lover seemed to need the contact as much as he did, so he burrowed closer. Under the smells of herbs, blood, and sweat, the familiar wild, woodsy smell of his werewolf comforted him. Questions lingered in his mind, primarily about his grandfather's strange behavior, but he did not wish to consider them. There would be plenty of time for wondering and worrying later.

Janie and the man Ciaran did not know were already in the van when they got there, the engine running. Drew managed to open the sliding door and set Ciaran on the bench seat, and then followed himself, shutting the door behind them. He leaned between the seats. "Let's get out of here."

"Gladly." Janie put the van into gear and did a U-turn, a tricky proposition on a narrow, bumpy gravel road in the dark. She managed the maneuver admirably.

The man Ciaran did not know turned around and peered back at him from the front seat. "Hey, Ciaran. I'm Nick. I'm a werewolf."

Nick was big, with dark hair and light brown eyes. A large, pale scar on his right cheekbone could have come from a knife, or a claw. Although Ciaran had seen him fighting with vicious skill and

single-minded intensity earlier, when he smiled he appeared kind and approachable. Ciaran liked him immediately. "Hello, Nick. I'm a demon." The words no longer pained him. He was faerie, he was demon, and neither of those things was bad. He held out his hand.

The big werewolf shook his hand. "You did well in there, Ciaran. You probably saved a couple of us when you jumped on that guy with the gun. Without you, Janie wouldn't have had time to take him out."

Pleased to have such a fighter consider him useful, Ciaran smiled. "Thank you. He was pointing the gun at Drew. I didn't plan, I only reacted."

Janie chimed in. "And thank God you did. How'd you get out of the ropes?"

The question startled Ciaran. How *had* he gotten out of the ropes? He remembered being tied, and then he had gotten angry and jerked his hands apart and stood... He frowned. What he was thinking hardly seemed possible. "I don't know. I think I might have torn them. Maybe they were loose."

Nick raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. After a long moment, an approaching vehicle with its headlights off pulled his attention away. "Cleanup crew."

"Good." Drew sounded relieved, and exhausted. A clump of hair on the back of his head was matted with dried blood. That and the shadows beneath his eyes told Ciaran more than any words could. His lover had forgone rest and proper care for his own wounds in order to find him. Now, with the crisis over, they could both give in to their weariness.

Janie must have heard the exhaustion as well. "We've got a long drive ahead of us. Why don't you two try to get some sleep? Nick will keep me company."

"Thanks, Janie." With a sigh, Drew twisted on the bench seat until he could stretch out a little. He held out his arms, and Ciaran slid into them. It took a bit of maneuvering, but they were able to arrange themselves somewhat comfortably.

The sound and feel of Drew's heartbeat, slow and steady against

his cheek, soothed Ciaran. At that moment, he wanted to be nowhere else but where he was. All the horror they had gone through receded, and he savored the safety, warmth, and love of Drew's embrace. They were alive, and together, and on their way home. Nothing else mattered. "I love you."

His cheek on Ciaran's head, Drew whispered, "I love you too. So much."

For the first time in he did not know how many hours, Ciaran relaxed and allowed himself to sleep.

* * * * *

"We're home."

Drew's voice penetrated the dreamless sleep Ciaran had fallen into. He opened his eyes to see Drew leaning over him. The haze of sleep lingered in his mind for a few seconds, until he remembered where they were and what had happened. He sat up, blinking against the brightness of the van's dome light. "We're home?"

Fingers ghosting over Ciaran's cheek in a barely-there caress, Drew smiled at him. "Yeah, baby, we're home. You want to come inside with me so Janie can go home?"

Ciaran managed a slight smile in return. "I guess I could do that." He shifted in preparation to get out. Then he impulsively leaned forward and put a hand on Janie's shoulder. "Thank you, Janie."

She patted his hand. "You're welcome. I'm just glad you're okay."

Drew pulled open the door and ushered Ciaran through it so he could get out himself. Outside, the sky was still pitch black and the air was very cold. Ciaran realized he had no idea what time it was, or even what day, but he could not bring himself to be upset over that.

Nick hopped out of the front seat with more energy than Ciaran or Drew had shown. He looked at Drew. "If that offer to stay's still open, I'll crash on your couch. I need some sleep before I head out."

"The offer's still open, but take the spare room. I haven't cleaned the carpet in the living room yet."

The three of them made their way to the front door. It took Drew a

couple of tries to get the key into the lock and get the door open. Even Ciaran's less-sensitive nose recoiled at the heavy odor of stale, dried blood in the living room. He grimaced. Nick and Drew both made disgusted faces.

Blood made Ciaran think about things he did not wish to recall. He grabbed Drew's hand. "Let's all go to bed, please. We can worry about this tomorrow."

Drew must have seen something in his expression, because he nodded. "Sure. Let's go to bed. Come on, Nick, I'll show you the spare room."

Ciaran sat on the bed he shared with Drew while Nick took his turn in the bathroom and then headed off to bed. Numb and worn out, he stared off into space until Drew came to get him.

"Do you want to get cleaned up before bed?"

He nodded and let Drew lead him to the bathroom. Drew undressed him with tender care before undressing himself. They stepped into the shower together. Drew washed them both quickly, admonishing Ciaran not to let his bandages get wet. Ciaran floated in an exhausted haze, too tired to be aroused by Drew's hands. He could feel emotions welling up, but the sheer weight of his exhaustion pushed them down.

By the time Drew dried him and carried him to bed, all he could think of was sleep.

* * * * *

Curled behind Ciaran in their bed, Drew fought against the waves of weariness that wanted to take him under. Part of his mind needed to stay vigilant, to protect his mate even though the threat was gone. Another part of him needed to savor the feeling of Ciaran's slim form in his arms. His mind raced, crammed full of conflicting thoughts and feelings—relief that Ciaran was alive and relatively unhurt, confusion about Lorcan's behavior toward Ciaran, guilt that he had allowed Ciaran to be taken in the first place, fear about what Ciaran hadn't yet shared with him. They hadn't talked much about what had happened. The cuts

on Ciaran's back, his raw wrists, and the bruises on his face attested to some rough treatment. Drew's stomach clenched, and he wondered if he would be able to handle hearing everything that had happened. He could console himself with the knowledge that the people who'd hurt his lover were all dead.

Ciaran shifted and sighed in his sleep. Drew moved a curl away from Ciaran's face, careful to avoid the bruises there. Even bruised and swollen, Ciaran's face was beautiful. Drew was reminded of the first night they'd met, and how he'd thought Ciaran looked like an angel. The love that welled up at the sight of Ciaran's sleeping face might have scared him if he wasn't so sure it was right.

For over an hour after the other man fell asleep, Drew remained awake, thinking. In the end, the exhaustion won out. Drew held Ciaran close, determined to protect him even in sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

A loud crash startled Ciaran from sleep. He sat up in bed, reaching out for Drew. The bed was empty. Dread, heavy and thick, filled his chest, making each heartbeat feel slow and painful.

He climbed out of bed and walked down the hallway. Each move he made felt like one step closer to doom. He broke out in a cold sweat.

Finally, he reached the living room. All four of his summoners were there, as was the horrible woman. She held a long dagger, its blade dark with something he did not want to identify.

The dread became terror. "Where's Drew? What have you done to him?"

Zed sneered. "Nothing much, yet. I just knocked him over the head so he wouldn't cause us any trouble."

Tory crossed the room and stood in front of Ciaran. "You made us go through a lot of trouble to find you, you know."

Ciaran did not answer. His gaze darted around the room, seeking Drew. He spotted his lover at last, crumpled on the floor at the woman's feet.

His silence seemed to amuse Tory, who smiled. He ran a fingertip along Ciaran's cheekbone. "Why do you keep looking at him? You were meant to be mine."

Revolted, Ciaran pushed his hand away. "Don't touch me." He pushed past Tory and the others to crouch beside Drew. His lover was pale and still, but his chest rose and fell with light breaths. He was alive. Ciaran found Drew's cold hand and clutched it desperately.

Above him, the woman spoke. "Enough of this. We need a sacrifice."

Zed nudged Drew's motionless body with a booted foot. "Take this one. He's hurt anyway."

"No!" Ciaran tried to cover Drew's prone body with his own. "Take me instead. I'll go with you. I'll do whatever you want."

Tory yanked Ciaran away from Drew, twisting his arms in a painful grip. "You'll do whatever I want anyway. You might as well get used to it. You might even learn to like it."

Struggling wildly, Ciaran fought to free himself from Tory's grasp. No matter how hard he fought, Tory's grip did not falter.

The woman nodded to Zed. Then she knelt beside Drew. She raised the knife, and plunged it down.

"No!"

* * * * *

Ciaran lashed out at the arms holding him, a scream lodged in his throat.

The strong grip didn't waver. "Ciaran! Stop. You're having a nightmare."

He opened his eyes and found himself sitting up in bed, Drew's arms wrapped tightly around him. Drew's face, pinched with worry in the dim predawn light, was such a welcome sight he let out a little whimper. Relief left him weak and trembling. "I dreamed they came to take me, but it was different. They killed you, and I could not reach you in time to stop them."

"It's over." Hold gentling, Drew rubbed Ciaran's arms. "They're dead, and they can't hurt either of us anymore."

It's over. Ciaran curled into Drew's body. He could not seem to stop shaking. The emotion he had suppressed the night before came rushing to the surface. He sucked in a shuddery breath, then another, determined not to cry.

Drew kissed his hair, the side of his face, the point of his ear. "You're safe."

The emotions did not subside. A churning mass of terror, relief,

fear, anger, and love threatened to spill over. Words clawed their way up his throat, choking him. They finally escaped in a dead, dry whisper, like leaves rustling on the forest floor. "They wanted to see my wings. I couldn't let them. Zed thought he could cut them out." He shuddered, the blade's cold steel slicing into his back in his memory.

"Fuck."

Drew sounded pained, and Ciaran knew his words stabbed into Drew as well, but he could not stop them. "Tory told me you were dead. He was the one who tried to make me do things when they first summoned me. He told me I would be his, and that I would learn to like it." The rest of the story tumbled out. Drew became increasingly tense beside him as Ciaran told of finding the nail, and deciding to fight and join Drew in death rather than be used for their ritual. Needing to be done with it, he finished, "And then you came."

A tense silence fell. Drew's arms felt rigid and cold, as if Drew had been repulsed by his words, or his weakness. Ciaran pulled away, rubbing his arms against the chill. "I am sorry."

Drew's hoarse voice broke the stillness. "No. You don't have anything to be sorry for, Ciaran. I'm the one who didn't protect you. I'm so sorry." His voice cracked, and he stared down at the bed. "They scared you, they hurt you, and I wasn't there."

Understanding hit Ciaran, sudden and brilliant in its clarity. Drew was not angry with Ciaran for his weakness, he was angry with *himself*. He felt guilty for the same reason Ciaran did: failing to protect the one he loved.

Ciaran put his fingertips over Drew's lips to stop him from speaking. "Neither of us is perfect. We did what we thought best at the time, and we made it out safe, together. That is all that matters."

Beneath his fingers, Drew's lips turned up into a smile.

Ciaran removed his hand. "No more apologies?"

Drew caught his hand and cradled it in both of his. "I do have one regret."

"What?"

Drew took a deep breath. "There's something I've been thinking

about. I meant to talk to you about it, but all this stuff happened." He waved his free hand around to indicate the chaos.

Giving his lover a cautious nod, Ciaran prepared himself. He hoped the news would not be bad. After everything that had happened, he was not sure if he could bear anything too awful, and Drew's hesitant expression and nervous voice did not bode well for whatever it was.

"You know I love you."

Ciaran nodded again. He did know that. *But?*

The hesitant expression on Drew's face did not ease. He clutched Ciaran's hand tighter. "What I feel for you isn't just love. You're everything to me, Ciaran. I want you to be my mate."

"Mate?" Ciaran barely recognized the raspy voice that slipped out. Despite his time with Drew, he did not know everything about werewolves, yet he knew mating was important to them. Like human marriage, mating signified far more than simply living in the same house. He had never considered the possibility of having more from Drew than he already had. Now that the offer had been made, he could think of nothing he wanted more.

Before he could say as much, Drew continued. "Mating isn't like what we have now. It's not even like marriage. It's forever. It means we don't want anyone else, ever. I know it's a lot to ask, and I'll understand if it's too much. Just...think about it, okay?"

Ciaran tried to catch Drew's eye, but the werewolf stared down at the bed. Wanting to understand, he asked, "And if I refused, would you choose another mate?"

Drew swallowed hard. His hand tensed around Ciaran's for an instant and then relaxed. "No. You're it for me. My mom always told me there was a mate for every wolf, and if we were very lucky, we would find him or her."

"You would be alone?" The horror of that thought made keeping his voice level difficult, but Ciaran managed.

Bright green eyes met his, emphatic. "This isn't about me. I want you to think about you right now. You spent most of your life alone. I might just be the first nice guy you met."

Ciaran might have spent most of his life alone, but he had no doubts. He knew exactly what love was, thanks to Drew. What he felt was no mere infatuation or gratitude. His feelings had been tested and had come out stronger. He brought Drew's hand up and nuzzled his un-bruised cheek against the back of it, holding his gaze. "I may be ignorant about many things, but this is not one of them. I love you. I would have died for you, and not regretted the choice for an instant. I would be proud and honored to be your mate."

Drew's smile lit up the whole room. He pulled Ciaran into his arms. "And I'll be proud and honored to be yours." He pressed a gentle kiss to Ciaran's lips, clearly trying to avoid the swollen corner.

His sweet wolf was always so careful. Ciaran leaned back to peer into Drew's joyful face. "What now? Is that all we must do to become mated?"

Drew's joy dimmed a little. "Normally we would have a ceremony in front the pack, and then I would claim you afterward, that night. It's more a traditional thing than strictly necessary, I think, since it wouldn't turn you into a werewolf or anything, but I'd mark you here." He brushed his fingers over Ciaran's shoulder. "Then everyone would know we were mated."

Ciaran shivered at the soft touch, imagining Drew's teeth there instead. The thought was more arousing than he would have expected. "We may not have a pack, but we can do the rest."

Although his gaze heated, Drew made no move toward Ciaran. "I don't want to hurt you. We should wait."

"I don't want to wait. I need this." Ciaran used surprise and his weight to push Drew down onto the bed. "Claim me."

Drew's eyes nearly glowed. He let out a defeated groan. "I don't want to wait either. Tell me if I hurt you."

"You won't."

With a soft growl, Drew flipped them so that Ciaran was trapped beneath his larger frame. He kissed Ciaran, quick and hard. "After this, you'll be mine forever."

"Yes." *Please. Now.* Cupping Drew's jaw in his hand, Ciaran tried to

say with his gaze and touch how very much he wanted this. He must have been at least partly successful, because Drew gave him the sweetest smile.

Their lips met again, Drew's tongue teasing along the seam of Ciaran's lips until they parted. Drew explored Ciaran's mouth with slow, languid strokes, caressing sensitive tissues and teasing Ciaran's tongue. A few times he pulled back to soothe the bruised, swollen corner with a tender touch.

Ciaran surrendered completely to Drew's kiss. He sifted a hand through Drew's hair and lay back, content to focus on the slick slide of their tongues meeting and the warm arousal spreading through him.

He let out a tiny whimper when Drew broke the kiss to trail his lips over Ciaran's jaw and neck. Drew smiled against his skin. "I love your skin. It's like silk. Delicious silk." He licked the spot where Ciaran's neck and shoulder met, making him giggle.

Ciaran ran his fingers over Drew's chest, tracing the warm skin and hard muscles. His lover was so beautiful it made his chest ache. "More, please."

Drew obliged, kissing Ciaran's chest while his hands slid lower. One curled around Ciaran's erection and pumped. Ciaran arched toward him, eyes squeezed shut, the pleasure allowing him to ignore the pain of scraping his back against the bed.

The slick, wet slide of a tongue against his nipple forced Ciaran's eyes open again. He watched Drew bathe one nipple, then the other, with his tongue. Needing more, he flailed his arm back, searching for the bedside table drawer. He found the knob by sheer luck, wrenched the drawer open, and scrabbled inside. His fingers closed around a familiar, battered tube, and he pulled it out.

"Please, Drew, I need you." He dropped the tube onto the sheet in Drew's line of sight.

His lover stopped what he was doing and grabbed the tube. In seconds, he had two fingers coated in slippery lubricant. He pushed them into Ciaran's body with no warning.

Ciaran cried out. The cold lubricant, the sudden stretch, the feeling of being full but not full enough, it all had him writhing, craving more.

Drew gave him a few quick pushes and then removed his fingers, leaving Ciaran empty and wanting.

Before Ciaran could get the breath to beg for more, Drew moved between Ciaran's thighs. Drew lifted Ciaran's legs to his shoulders and pushed in with one long, smooth thrust. He did not pause as he usually would, but pulled almost all the way out and shoved back in.

Their gazes met, Drew's green eyes glittering with love and desire and need. Ciaran stared back, hoping his eyes said the same. *I almost lost him.* He reached up and dragged Drew into a kiss of possession and love he did not know how to express. *Mine.*

A growl vibrated through Drew's chest, and he kissed Ciaran back with barely controlled wildness, nipping at his mouth. Drew's thrusts grew harder, less rhythmic. He jerked his mouth away. "Mine. My mate."

Heart racing, body on fire, Ciaran could give only one answer. "Yours."

Drew's next hard thrust scraped over that spot inside him. Drew held himself there for a suspended moment, and then he sank his teeth into the place where Ciaran's shoulder and neck met. Pleasure and pain exploded through Ciaran, crackling through his veins and over his skin. He came in a rush, thick, hot semen spurting between them and coating their stomachs.

Drew kept pumping into him, teeth still locked on his shoulder. He felt the slight stiffening of Drew's muscles, the hot gush of Drew's seed filling his body. He was soaring, burning, the pleasure so great he did not know how he would bear it.

At last the ecstasy crested and ebbed, leaving Ciaran spent and trembling. Drew released his shoulder and withdrew carefully, looking shaky himself. He cradled Ciaran as if he were something breakable and infinitely precious. He nuzzled Ciaran's hair and neck, and his tongue lapped at Ciaran's shoulder where his teeth had broken the skin. Against the skin, he whispered, "My mate. Love." His low, grumbling voice had not quite returned to its normal human register.

Every touch of Drew's tongue to the wound sent small aftershocks through Ciaran's body. Ciaran stroked Drew's hair, exhausted and

energized at the same time. He closed his eyes. "Yours. And you are mine." Certainty, warm and strengthening, washed over him. He had found his home, his family. "My pack."

Drew pulled Ciaran into his arms, back to front. "Sleep, my love."

My love. "I like that." Smiling, Ciaran allowed sleep to take him.

Chapter Twenty

The clock on the nightstand read ten a.m. when Drew woke and felt rested enough to stay that way. Ciaran was curled against him, and Drew took the opportunity to really look at the other man's injuries. The right side of Ciaran's face was swollen and bruised. The right side of his back had bandages taped to it, concealing the almost surgical cuts Drew knew to be there. Both wrists were swathed in bandages as well. Ciaran had gone through hell and come out with the wounds to prove it.

Drew pressed a soft, careful kiss to his mate's left shoulder, where his claiming mark marred the pale, perfect skin. His mate. His heart swelled at the two words, so tiny yet so important. Last night Ciaran had called Drew his pack. They were a pack now, in the truest sense. A part of Drew had felt empty and alone since his father disowned him. A wolf without a pack was a wolf diminished, or so he had learned as a child. Now he had a pack again.

A pack, a home, friends. His life had become much more than he'd ever dreamed when he left home almost two months ago. He smiled.

Oh, crap. Nick. There was one friend who had helped him more than he could repay. Drew slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Ciaran, and padded into the kitchen to make some breakfast.

Moments later, soft footsteps told him Nick followed. Without turning, he said, "Morning, Nick."

"It's about damned time."

Under Nick's grumbling, he could hear something else. Envy?

Congratulations? A mixture of the two? He sniffed the air, catching a whiff of sex that wasn't coming from him. More than a little surprised, he faced his friend, one eyebrow raised. "Somebody had a good morning."

Stoic Nick's face turned pink. "Your walls weren't made for shifters. I could hear you guys this morning." At Drew's grin, Nick went from pink to bright red. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Go right ahead."

Nick fled the room. Drew stared after him for a moment, deciding right then not to tell Ciaran they'd had an audience earlier. He'd make breakfast and keep his mouth shut. Hopefully Nick wouldn't blush like that when Ciaran woke up.

Snickering at the image of Nick blushing, Drew gathered his supplies to make breakfast.

* * * * *

Drew had a platter of bacon and sausage cooked and was starting on the eggs when Nick reappeared, hair damp and dressed in fresh clothing. The older werewolf still looked embarrassed. He stood in the doorway for a minute like he was stalling. "Do you need any help?"

"You could set the table." Drew pointed. "Plates are there, silverware in the top drawer, glasses in the cabinet next to the plates."

"Got it." Nick went to the cabinet and got out the dishes he needed, busying himself setting the table. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Finally, Nick spoke. "I'm sorry about listening in this morning. I didn't mean to, I swear, and I know I shouldn't have... You know."

Drew put the spatula down and faced the other man. He had no call to be angry, and he wasn't. The situation was actually kind of funny. "Nick, it's fine. We shouldn't have been so loud."

That made Nick smile. "If I'd just gotten the guy I loved back after being worried he was dead, I'd have been at least as loud. Maybe louder."

Smiling back, Drew picked up his spatula. "Well, there you go." He went back to work. "Over easy or scrambled?"

"Over easy sounds good. Anything else I can help with?"

Everything seemed to be back to normal. Drew smiled again and cracked an egg into the skillet. "How about making the toast?"

"You got it."

They worked in companionable silence. Nick buttered the toast after it popped up. Drew made eggs over easy for himself and Nick, and scrambled a couple for Ciaran.

Breakfast was finished when Ciaran walked into the room, rubbing his eyes. "Breakfast?"

The sight of his mate dressed in ratty old flannel sleep pants and one of his T-shirts, which was big enough to fit two of Ciaran, gave Drew a sense of contentment he couldn't remember feeling before. "Come here."

Ciaran obeyed, crossing the floor to stand in front of Drew. Drew dropped a kiss onto his upturned mouth. "Good morning."

Those big violet eyes gazed up at him, full of love. "Good morning."

Remembering their audience, Drew gave Ciaran another quick kiss and shooed him away. "Go get yourself some juice. Breakfast is done."

For once Ciaran said nothing about Drew's fatty, meat-heavy breakfast. He filled his plate with bacon, eggs, and toast, avoiding only the sausage. Nick and Drew piled their plates high as well. Silence reigned for a few minutes as they ate.

Then Nick suddenly tilted his head and stared at Ciaran, his expression thoughtful. "You're mated."

Ciaran's head popped up, eyes wide. "How can you tell?"

Nick shrugged. "Wolves know. I'm not really sure how."

Taking Ciaran's slim hand in his, Drew raised it to his lips. "This morning. We couldn't do the ceremony, but we're mated."

Expression serious, Nick reached out and held their joined hands in both of his. "I witness this mating, and bless it. May you live a long and joyful life together."

Unexpected tears sprang to Drew's eyes. He hadn't believed there would be any werewolf blessing on their mating. Having another wolf's stamp of approval touched him more than he would ever admit. "Thank you."

Ciaran smiled. "Thank you, Nick. You have done so much for us."

Releasing their hands, Nick shrugged again. "You're welcome. Drew would have done the same for me, and I think you would have as well, little demon."

"I'm not that little."

Both Drew and Nick laughed. Drew tapped Ciaran's pouting lower lip. "You're little, but you're tough."

Ciaran frowned for a moment, as if he wasn't sure whether to be mollified or not. Then he smiled. "Tough enough. So you'd better not mess with me."

Drew and Nick knew better than to laugh again. They traded glances and went back to their food.

The loud clatter of Ciaran's fork dropping onto his plate startled Drew. He jumped. "What's wrong?"

"What day is it?"

Confused, he thought for a moment. "Wednesday. Why? What's the matter?"

Ciaran relaxed. "I haven't missed Thanksgiving."

The comment made no sense to Drew. "Thanksgiving?" They hadn't made any plans for the holiday. He hadn't even discussed it with Ciaran, since he hadn't planned to celebrate.

"Yes. I wanted to make Thanksgiving dinner for you, to celebrate our first real holiday together. Now I still can." Ciaran sat back in his chair, a bright smile lighting his face.

Aw. Drew swallowed, absurdly touched for the second time in the past few minutes. "I'd love that."

Even Nick looked touched. His lips curved up in a soft smile, which he quickly wiped off his face when he saw Drew staring at him. He put on a disinterested expression instead.

Ciaran turned his attention to Nick. "Do you have plans? We would be honored to share our dinner with you."

Nick didn't have any family, and he hadn't been an official member of any pack for years now. Drew wondered if Nick would admit that, or pretend to have pressing plans. Or maybe Nick had another job to do.

To his surprise, the other werewolf smiled. "No, I don't have any plans. Thank you, Ciaran. I'd be happy to join you."

Ciaran beamed. "Good. I must call Janie. We had planned to shop. I hope she isn't too tired." He hopped up from his seat and practically bounded over to the phone.

Drew shared a smile with Nick. Apparently Ciaran was ready to get back to life and not dwell on what had happened. Once again, he was overwhelmed with pride. He doubted there was a luckier man on earth.

Chapter Twenty-One

On Thursday, Ciaran awoke later than he had intended. He slid out of bed, careful not to wake Drew, and dressed. He had a great many things to do.

The day before, he and Janie, along with Janie's mother, had purchased the ingredients necessary for a Thanksgiving feast. After speaking to Janie's mother at length about the menu he had planned, Ciaran was confident he could cook everything. It was only a matter of following the recipes and allowing enough time.

He made his way from the bedroom to the kitchen as quietly as possible. In the kitchen, he got to work preparing the turkey for roasting. While the turkey was in the oven, he planned to make the stuffing, mashed potatoes, green beans, and cranberry sauce. After the turkey finished, he would put the rolls in the oven and make gravy. Dessert had seemed too daunting a prospect on top of everything else. Fortunately, Janie had promised to bring a dessert over later. Her mother, Tabitha, had taken to Ciaran right away and volunteered to make a pumpkin pie. Ciaran had been happy to agree. If Tabitha's baking was anything like Janie's, the pie would be delicious. He hoped his meal could do the dessert justice.

* * * * *

The turkey was in the oven and Ciaran was working on the side

dishes when Nick entered the kitchen, yawning and trying to smooth down his wild hair. The big, battle-scarred werewolf reminded Ciaran of a sleepy child. The thought made him laugh. "Good morning."

"Smells good in here."

Nick went to the oven to peer inside, but Ciaran beat him to the door and slapped his hand away. "It's a turkey. You know that. Don't let the heat out."

On Nick's face, a pout looked ridiculous. Ciaran laughed again. "Go take a shower, you big baby, and then you can peel some potatoes for me."

"Gee, thanks," Nick grumbled, but he didn't sound angry, and he was grinning. He wandered off, presumably to follow Ciaran's instructions.

A few minutes later, Nick returned, showered, dressed, and ready to help. As Ciaran had promised, he put Nick to work peeling potatoes. From the occasional growls and curses he heard, Nick hadn't had much experience with the task. To keep from laughing, he focused on the recipe he had been reading.

Warm, strong arms wrapped around his waist and pulled him close. He chuckled as Drew nuzzled a ticklish spot on his neck. "Hello."

"Hello." Drew kissed his cheek, gave him a little squeeze, and released him. "Looks like you guys have been busy. Do you need any help?"

"Oh, man. You'll be sorry you said that," Nick crowed from the other side of the room.

Eyes wide and innocent, Ciaran faced them. "I have no idea what you mean." He picked up a knife and handed it to Drew. "You can start cutting the potatoes."

Despite his exaggerated sigh, Drew took the knife and picked up a potato. "Yes, sir."

They all laughed. Ciaran intended to reply, but a knock at the door stopped him. "That's probably Janie with the dessert. I'll get it."

Both werewolves brightened at the mention of dessert. They were easy to please. Ciaran shook his head and went to answer the door.

Welcoming smile in place, Ciaran opened the door. The visitor was not Janie. A stranger stood on the doorstep. Ciaran eyed the man warily. He was not much taller than Ciaran, with black curly hair and pale skin. The chill breeze shifted his curls, revealing a pointed ear.

Their gazes met, and staring into the stranger's black eyes, Ciaran felt a shock of recognition. He sucked in a breath. "You. You are..." He could not finish. He stood gaping, heart pounding, certain his sudden, wild hope could not be correct.

The man's thin lips turned up into a small smile. "Ciaran. At last. But you are injured..." One slender, pale hand reached out as if to touch.

A low, rumbling growl from behind them stopped the motion. The man dropped his hand. Drew stepped to stand beside Ciaran, his eyes cold and suspicious. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The man turned his black gaze to Drew. "My name is Faolan. Ciaran is my son."

His father. After all these years his father had come. Where had he been? Why would he choose to appear now? Ciaran had so many questions. He tried to speak but no words would come. Conflicting emotions choked him. He gave Drew an imploring look.

Drew seemed as conflicted as Ciaran. He glanced from Faolan to Ciaran and back again. Finally he sighed. "You're not here to start any trouble, or to try to take him away, are you?"

Brow creasing, Faolan tilted his head. "No, of course not. I came only to talk."

"Then come on in." Drew stepped back to allow their visitor inside.

Faolan entered and stood near the door until Drew shut it and motioned toward the kitchen. The three of them crossed the room without speaking. Nick stood in the kitchen doorway, his expression unreadable.

Ciaran cleared his throat and managed to speak. "Everything is ready to be cooked in a little while, once the two of you are finished with the potatoes." He darted a glance at his father. Nervous and awkward, he fell back on good manners. "Please have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

His father shook his head and sat in one of the kitchen chairs. "I did

not come to inconvenience or upset you. I wanted to meet you, and to make sure that you were all right."

Faolan's words appeared to be genuine, and at the door he had seemed emotional over seeing Ciaran. That made no sense, based on the years Ciaran had spent under his grandfather's oppressive care. If his father cared for him at all, why had he allowed him to be treated that way? The anguish and abandonment Ciaran had always secretly felt over his father's desertion spilled out. "Why now? Why did you wait so long?"

Sorrowful black eyes met his. "I wanted to come to you sooner. Your grandfather would not allow it."

Of course. Demons were not allowed in Faerie, and Lorcan Oir would have used that fact to his advantage in keeping his grandson's demon father out of his life. Ciaran knew he should not be hurt, or surprised, by his grandfather's actions anymore, but he was nonetheless. He took a seat across from the other man. "Will you tell me what happened? My grandfather told me very little."

"I will tell you whatever you wish to know."

After years of wondering, he had the chance at last to learn the truth about his birth, and to learn of his heritage. He leaned toward his father. "I know my mother was captured for an Unseelie experiment, and I was the result. How were you captured? How did you escape?"

Faolan sighed. "I was young when the Unseelie captured me, and foolish. I ventured out of my clan's land into land often warred over by demons and Unseelie. The raiding party found me, and I was no match for them.

"They brought me back to their compound and threw me into a cell. In nearby cells, I could see others—elves and other types of demons. I remained alone for a few days. Then they brought in a young Fae and put her in my cell."

"My mother," Ciaran whispered, unable to be silent.

His father nodded. "Your mother. By then all the cells had two occupants, a male and a female of different species. At first your mother was terrified of me. She remained in a corner of the cell and cried. I was afraid too, but I tried to keep it from her. I spoke to her often, of my home,

my family, myself. After a few days she began to trust me, and spoke to me of her own family and friends.

"A week had passed when one of the Unseelie came and told us we were to lie together and produce children for him to use as breeding stock to make the perfect race. If we refused, he said he would kill the males and give the females to his soldiers. It was a choice that was no choice at all.

"Your mother considered the ultimatum, and together we came to a decision to do as they said. Within weeks she was pregnant with you. I knew they would come for me, to kill me or use me further, and I could not bear to be parted from Meara, or my child. The Unseelie slept during the day, so I took the time to talk to the other captives as best I could. We began to plot our escape."

Ciaran frowned. What he had been told, little as it was, had been true, to a point. His grandfather had told him that he was born because his mother was kidnapped for an Unseelie experiment. The slant of the story had been distinctly different. His grandfather had made his conception sound cruel and terrible, but his father implied he had felt some sort of protective emotions toward his mother.

"I'm finished over here. I'm going to go watch the football game." Nick saluted them with the potato peeler and tossed it into the sink. After grabbing a drink from the refrigerator, he left the room.

Drew glanced down at the pile of potatoes he still had to cut, and then at Ciaran. "Do you want me to take these into the living room to cut up?"

The offer to leave him alone with his father was thoughtful, but Ciaran found he wanted Drew there. "No, stay."

"Okay." His lover smiled at him and went back to cutting.

Ciaran returned his attention to his father, who watched him and Drew with interest. "Then what happened?"

"We had heard some of the guards discussing an Unseelie holiday coming in two nights' time. Many of them would be drinking, leaving fewer to guard us. We created weapons from whatever we could and, that night, we waited for them to come and bring our food. The escape went

exactly the way we planned. The guards grew careless, lulled by our compliance and drink, and I knocked out the guard at my cell while an elf male did the same at his. We found the keys and freed everyone else." Faolan cleared his throat. "Perhaps I would like that drink now."

From the sink, Drew asked, "Water, or something else?"

"Water is fine."

Drew brought him a glass of water and went back to his task.

Faolan nodded. "Thank you." He took a long swallow. "We attacked the remaining guards and stole their weapons. The journey through Unseelie land was perilous and took us several days, but we made our way to neutral land. Two of the pairs did not wish to be parted, and left to go to whichever land would accept them. The others split up to return home. I begged your mother to come live with my clan, where she would have been accepted. My kind is not fond of the Fae, but my family would have welcomed her because she carried my child, and because I wished them to."

Ciaran could not help breaking in again. "You cared for her? Truly?"

His father's smile was sad. "I loved her. I understood when she insisted on going home to her father first, to tell him what had happened to her and formally call off her arranged marriage. I believed she would return to me."

"But she didn't." What had happened, to make his mother change her plans?

"She didn't." Faolan swirled the water around in his glass, his gaze far away. "I waited for her for days. When she never arrived, I sent word to your grandfather, desperate to see her. He came to the neutral lands to tell me she was disgusted by her time with me and never wished to see me again. Knowing the Fae's hatred for my kind, I begged him to let me take you, to raise you among my family, but he refused. He said if I cared for you, and Meara, I would never contact any of you again. I was afraid his words were a threat to you, so I never did."

Furious, Ciaran exploded. "How could he have done that? He had no right! He didn't want me, but he wouldn't let me be with you?"

Faolan's dark eyes held the same anguish he felt. "In his way, I think he believed he was protecting Meara, and maybe even you. I am sure he did not believe me capable of caring for you."

Thinking of his grandfather's strange words and behavior two nights before, he wondered if Faolan was right. Lorcan had seemed regretful. "It still isn't fair."

"You are correct, of course, but so little in life is."

Ciaran had certainly learned that lesson. He had also learned good things could come even from bad. A bad thing had brought him to Drew. But what had brought his father? "How did you know where I was?"

His father held his gaze. "Lorcan told me. He sent word of your disappearance and his trip here to the human realm to find you, as well as how to find you."

"He did?" Ciaran's mouth dropped open. His grandfather never changed his mind, never relented. For him to do so now was astonishing.

"I suppose he decided it was time."

"Past time," Drew muttered.

Ciaran almost grinned at the remark, but the situation was too serious. He had never expected to meet his father, and now not only had he met him, but he had also learned a great deal of his history. "I'm glad you came."

"I needed to know you, and to have you understand that demons are not the evil, uncaring creatures the Fae believe they are. Your demon half is nothing to be ashamed of."

He spared a moment's regret that he hadn't heard those words years ago, when he was alone and thought he would never be loved. Now, he did not need them. He had come to the same conclusion on his own. He smiled. "I know. I would like to learn more of my heritage, some day."

Faolan smiled. "And I would be glad to tell you about it. Perhaps one day you can meet some of your relatives. There are many who would be pleased to meet you."

Ciaran's eyes filled with tears. He blinked them away, annoyed at himself. This was a happy occasion. He had family out there who would

accept him for who he was. Even if he never met them, knowing they existed was enough. "I'm glad to hear that. I've always wanted to know where I came from."

Right in front of him was a link to his past that had been missing all his life. Looking at Faolan objectively, Ciaran could see the resemblance between them. He had inherited his father's black hair, small build, and pale skin. And his wings, although Faolan's were not in evidence at the moment. The Fae had gauzy, delicate wings. As a child, he had envied those beautiful wings. "Do I look like my mother at all?"

"You have her eyes. All of my clan have black eyes. Hers were amazing to me when we first met." Once again, Faolan's gaze was far away.

Drew cut the last potato and put it into a large pot with the others. He turned toward Ciaran and his father, his expression thoughtful. "Do you know where she is?"

Faolan shook his head. "She is not in Faerie, as far as I know. I searched for her for many years but never found her."

"Hmm." Drew moved the pot to the stove. "Do you want me to turn these burners on, Ciaran?"

"I'll do it." Ciaran got up and went to the stove, setting the various burners at the temperatures he needed.

"I have interrupted your meal. I will go. If you would not mind, I will return another day. I would like very much to get to know you." His father stood, obviously planning to leave.

Ciaran shared a quick glance with Drew. Somehow, Drew understood the unspoken question and nodded. His lover smiled at Faolan. "Ciaran's making Thanksgiving Dinner. Would you like to join us?"

His father's joyful smile lit one of the last dark corners of Ciaran's heart. "If it would be no imposition, I would love to."

Ciaran grinned and looked at the large quantity of food he was making. "It's no problem. We have more than enough."

They all stood there smiling for a minute, and then Faolan frowned. "What is Thanksgiving?"

Suddenly Ciaran understood how Drew must have felt when he had first arrived and been ignorant about everything. He caught Drew's gaze. "I've got this one. I've been watching the History Channel."

Drew laughed. "You can probably explain it better than I can, then. Go right ahead."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Is that everything?" Drew eyed the crowded kitchen table, praying it could hold the weight of the massive amounts of food Ciaran had cooked.

Ciaran glanced around. "Let me get the cranberry sauce and rolls, and we can eat." He shooed Drew away and picked up the bowl of cranberry sauce. "Go sit down."

Before Drew could sit, he heard a knock on the door. "I'll get it." He hurried to the door and opened it.

Janie stood on the doorstep, grinning, a pie in each hand. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Hey, Janie. Happy Thanksgiving." *Mmm, pie.* He craned his neck to see what kind they were, but she had covered them up. His nose told him at least one was pumpkin. "Do you want to come in for a while, or do you have to get back home?"

"I can come in for a bit. My mom's got everything under control at my place."

"Great." He motioned her inside, closed the door, and followed her in the direction of the kitchen. "We have some company."

She turned to look back at him, one of her eyebrows up. "Really? Who?"

"Nick, for one."

Nodding, she stepped into the kitchen. She spotted Ciaran, who still hovered near the table, right away. With a quick swoop, she

deposited the pies on the counter and pulled him into a hug. "Happy Thanksgiving, sweetie."

Ciaran beamed and hugged her back. "Thank you. And the same to you."

She released him and stood back to look at the table. Drew could see the instant she noticed Ciaran's father, because her eyes widened. "Oh, hello."

Stepping forward, Ciaran made the introductions. "Janie, this is my father, Faolan. Father, this is my friend and employer, Janie."

Faolan stood and bowed. "I am most pleased to meet you."

The courtly manners had a strange effect on Janie. She giggled and blushed like a teenager. "Nice to meet you, too, Faolan." She didn't seem to know what else to say.

Nick rolled his eyes. He mouthed "women" at Drew, who tried not to laugh.

Fortunately Ciaran distracted her. "Have you eaten? Are you needed back at your house?"

Janie stopped staring at Faolan and focused on his son instead. "We're eating in a little while. I can stay for a minute, but not too long." She peered at the dishes on the table. "Everything looks great. Good job."

"Thanks." Ciaran stood a little taller, obviously pleased.

Drew took a seat at the table, between Nick and Ciaran's empty chair. "Have a seat if you want, Janie."

She looked doubtful. "Maybe I should get out of your hair. You guys are ready to eat."

Ciaran shook his head. "Nonsense. Sit down."

"Okay." With a hesitant smile, she sat next to Faolan. Her gaze skittered over him, and she blushed again.

Drew and Nick shared another eloquent look. Biting his lip to keep from cracking up, Drew faced Ciaran. "Are we ready to eat?"

Ciaran nodded.

"Then come and sit down. I'm starving."

His mate smiled. "What else is new? I should make you wait." He didn't, though. He slid into his chair and looked around the table at each

of them. "I think, in honor of Thanksgiving, we should all say something we're thankful for."

The sentimental idea should have made Drew want to groan, but it didn't. Just like Ciaran, the idea was sweet. "I'll go first." He reached out to take Ciaran's hand in his. "I'm thankful I met you. I don't even want to know what my life would be like now if you weren't in it."

Ciaran raised Drew's hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back. "I feel the same."

Across the table, Janie sighed. Drew risked a glance at her, only to see the expected mushy expression. He was a little surprised to see Nick and Faolan looking almost as affected.

The moment lingered until Nick cleared his throat. "I guess it's my turn. I'm thankful for a lot of things. Right now I'm thankful for good friends."

"A worthy sentiment." Faolan raised his glass. "I am thankful for the opportunity to meet my son, and his mate."

"Wow. You guys took all the good ones." After a moment of thought, Janie grinned. "I'm thankful for all the learning and new experiences I've had lately, mostly thanks to you guys."

Ciaran laughed. "I'm glad you can see the positive side of all the trouble we have caused you."

"It's no trouble for my favorite employee."

Rolling his eyes, Ciaran reached for a serving spoon. "Let's eat. Who wants potatoes?"

Drew picked up the knife and started carving the turkey.

* * * * *

An hour later, they all sat back in their seats, staring at the massive amounts of turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and other foods still remaining. Drew groaned. "Did you think an army was coming to eat with us?"

Ciaran shrugged. "Two hungry werewolves might as well be an army."

Nick laughed. "Thanks a lot."

Janie, who'd only had tiny spoonfuls of everything to "check the cooking", pushed her chair back. "I think this is my cue to exit. Mom's going to kill me if I don't get home in time for dinner at my own house."

Ciaran's father smiled at her, his black eyes sparkling. "I am glad to have met a friend of my son's. Perhaps we will meet again one day."

Another blush spread across Janie's cheeks, and she lowered her eyes. "I hope so."

Behind his hand, Nick made a gagging motion only Drew could see. Drew covered his mouth to hold back a laugh. He thought Janie's star-struck behavior was silly too, but he wasn't about to point it out.

"Bye, everyone. Enjoy the pie, if you decide you ever want to eat again." With a wave, Janie left the kitchen.

"I must take my leave as well." Ciaran's father stood. "Time passes differently in the realms, so I must not be away too long."

Ciaran smiled up at Faolan. "Thank you for coming. It means a lot to me."

"To me as well." The older demon stroked the fingertips of one hand over Ciaran's unbruised cheek gently. "Be well, my son. I will see you again soon."

Ciaran said nothing, but he kept smiling. Faolan nodded to Nick and Drew. Then he muttered some words under his breath, moved his arm in a circular motion, and vanished.

Blinking, Nick stared at the spot where he'd been. "Well that was weird."

Drew closed his mouth, which had been gaping open. "I don't know why I'm surprised by anything anymore."

With a shrug, Ciaran stood. "That's one way to leave, I suppose. We do have a door."

Nick and Drew looked at each other and burst out laughing.

* * * * *

Nick stayed to put leftovers away and eat a slice of pumpkin pie

before he left. He even let Ciaran persuade him to take some of the leftovers home with him, which Drew appreciated. By early evening, he too said he had to go. There was always work for him, and as he put it, "Rogues don't take holidays."

After Nick drove off, Drew came up behind Ciaran and wrapped his arms around him. "Alone at last."

His mate tilted his head to look up at him. "It was a good day, wasn't it?"

Drew smiled at Ciaran's earnest expression. "Yeah, it was."

"You did not miss celebrating with your family?"

So that was what Ciaran was getting at. "I did celebrate with my family. You're my family, and so are Nick, Janie, and your dad. I've never had a better Thanksgiving."

Face glowing with happiness, Ciaran leaned up to kiss him. "I think we can make it even better."

Drew was more than ready to oblige.

* * * * *

Later, Ciaran lay curled against Drew, listening to his mate's soft, even breathing. Although he was tired and sated, he wasn't ready to sleep. His mind kept turning over all the things that had happened in the past few days. It all seemed so unreal.

Like when he had first been summoned, many good things had come from the bad. He had learned he was stronger than he knew. His grandfather had given him an apology of sorts. His father had come. And he and Drew were now mated, for the rest of their lives. He had much to be thankful for.

Drew moved slightly. In a sleep-roughened voice, he murmured, "You okay?"

Ciaran kissed his bicep. "I'm fine. Just thinking."

"Mmm. You can think in the morning. Go to sleep, baby." Drew tightened his arms, shifting Ciaran closer.

Ciaran laughed quietly. There would indeed be time to think in the

Claiming Ciaran by Cassandra Gold

morning. He rested his head on Drew's chest to listen to his mate's heartbeat, the sound strong and steady. "Okay."

"Love you."

The words warmed and soothed Ciaran as nothing else could have. "I love you too." Closing his eyes, he let himself drift off.

Tomorrow would be a new day, full of new joys and surprises. He wanted to be ready for it.

THE END

Author Bio

By day, Cassandra is a (relatively) mild-mannered middle school teacher. At night, she lets the characters in her head out to play as she writes erotic romance. Unfortunately for her husband, neither of Cassandra's personas enjoys doing housework.

Visit Cassandra at www.cassandragold.com, or at her Yahoo Group: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cassandra_gold