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# LOVE, ALWAYS, PROMISE

# Wolf Creek Pack 5

## **Stormy Glenn**

#### **EROTIC ROMANCE**



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With deep gratitude, Stormy Glenn

### **DEDICATION**

To all my friends at my yahoo group... Thank you for all your help, input, and words of encouragement. A lot of this wouldn't be possible without you and I am grateful for each and every one of you.

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### **STORMY GLENN**

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### Chapter 1

"Would you come home with me?" Ethan asked the tall gorgeous man he held in his arms. Breathtaking didn't begin to describe the man. He seemed like everything Ethan ever dreamed of in a mate, and he was all Ethan's.

Standing with his body pressed against his, Ethan could feel every sculpted muscle in Jace's body. He could even feel the hard cock pressing against his abdomen, letting him know how much Jace wanted him.

Stunned amazement filled Ethan when he spotted Jace sitting in the small bar having a drink. The intoxicating scent of the man, deep woodsy and all masculine, instantly entranced him. In all of his wildest dreams, he never thought his mate would be so sexy.

Jace stood several inches taller than Ethan. The collar length chestnut hair framing his face made the sparkle in his grass green eyes stand out. Ethan didn't know if he ever saw eyes so beautiful before, so dreamy. He knew he would spend the rest of his life happily drowning in their deep green depths.

"So? Will you come home with me?" Ethan asked again when Jace just continued to stare down at him. His heart skipped a beat when Jace leaned down to kiss him. He heard about kisses like these,

ones that would make him forget everything but the person in his arms. He just never experienced one.

As Jace's lips explored his, Ethan felt an urge to crawl right up his tall, muscular body. He wanted to imprint Jace on his senses until he never left. As Jace finally lifted his head, Ethan gazed up at Jace's face. Ethan's chest moved rapidly with each hurried breath.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yeah, sweetness, I'll go home with you," Jace drawled in his deep, whiskey-rough voice.

If Jace didn't have his arms around him, Ethan would have jumped around, dancing for joy. Yes! Jace agreed to go home with him. He couldn't remember ever being this happy before. He grabbed Jace's hand and led him out of the bar, fantasizing about the night to come.

He spent the majority of his life knowing he was gay, but he never acted on it. He always wanted to save himself for his mate, and now here he stood. Ethan would finally get to do what everyone always talked about. He could barely wait.

Ethan's apartment was just a block away from the bar, a fact that thrilled him to no end. It took him less than ten minutes to get Jace home, the door locked, and the buttons undone on Jace's shirt.

As he led Jace into his bedroom, he couldn't help feeling a little giddy. His mate looked so handsome, he could have anyone that he wanted, but he belonged to Ethan now. In a few minutes, he would truly be his.

"Jace," Ethan whispered as he watched Jace strip his clothes off. Jace's eyes seemed intense, almost hazy, as he gazed back at him. Ethan wanted to believe he looked at him with such fierceness in his eyes because he wanted him.

"Are you going to stand there all day just looking, sweetness? Or do you plan on doing a little touching, too?" Jace asked with a deep chuckle. Ethan could feel his face heat up as he quickly reached for the buttons of his own clothing. He still couldn't take his eyes off of Jace. He watched him get undressed, then climb onto the bed and lie back.

Ethan thought he might swallow his tongue when Jace placed one hand under his head as he looked over at him. His other hand moved down to stroke his long, hard cock. Ethan could just see the drops of liquid leaking from him before Jace's thumb wiped them away.

He felt so aroused. His cock practically hammered against his zipper, demanding freedom. He quickly dropped his shirt on the floor, reached for his jeans, unzipped them, and pushed them down his legs before climbing onto the bed.

His eyes zeroed right in on the cock in Jace's hand. He needed to get some of that. It seemed more important than breathing right now. Kneeling between Jace's legs, Ethan leaned forward and opened his mouth, watching a sexy grin come over Jace's face as he guided his cock into Ethan's eager mouth.

Ethan stuck out his tongue, swiping it over the top and licking up the drops of liquid there, moaning at the sweet taste as he swallowed. Oh God, he could really get used to the taste of his mate.

As often as he fantasized about it, he never actually gave anyone a blow job before. He just hoped he could do the wonderful cock in his mouth justice. He didn't want to fail Jace in any way.

Wrapping his lips around the top, he ran his tongue over the top again before sucking Jace's entire length into his mouth, gagging just a bit when the head hit the back of his throat. Readjusting, he moved back a little, working Jace into his mouth a little at a time.

He continued this even as his hands moved down to gently squeeze Jace's silky sac, massaging the two round balls in his hand. He was overjoyed when he heard Jace groan. Ethan hoped he brought Jace as much pleasure as he got.

Just having Jace in his bed was better than any hand job he ever gave himself. If he enjoyed it this much, Ethan wondered how he could possibly survive Jace making love to him.

"Come here, sweetness," Jace whispered as he reached for him. Ethan eagerly complied. Letting Jace's cock plop from his mouth, he climbed up Jace's body until he settled over the top of him, a leg on either side of his hips.

"Wasn't I doing it right?" Ethan asked anxiously.

"Oh, sweetness, you did it exactly right. But if you kept on doing it, I wouldn't be able to get a piece of this sweet ass of yours. You have me too close to coming." Jace grinned as he slapped Ethan on the ass.

"Oh," Ethan said, feeling his face heat up once again at Jace's praise. With a smile, he reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a bottle of lube out of the drawer. "We may need this." He giggled nervously as he handed the bottle to Jace.

"I think we're definitely going to need this," Jace said as he pushed Ethan over onto his back. "Now lift your legs, sweetness, and don't let go until I tell you to."

Ethan quickly grabbed his legs and pulled them up to his chest, a little embarrassed to have his nether regions on display, but his embarrassment fled the moment Jace pushed a lubed finger deep into his ass.

Damn, that felt good.

"Fuck, sweetness, you're so tight," Jace groaned.

Ethan felt a second finger push into his ass and move around the edge, stretching him. He moaned. He wasn't sure he could last much longer. Soon, a third finger joined the first two making Ethan shiver.

"You're going to feel so good when I fill you with my cock."

Just the thought of Jace's words brought Ethan closer to coming. He could feel his balls drawing up tight against his body, his cock leaking pre-cum like a faucet. "Jace, I'm so close. I want to feel you in me when I come," he said as he pushed his hips back against Jace's fingers.

"Sweetness, I don't think you're ready yet. I need to stretch you out just a little more so that I don't hurt you."

"Please, Jace?" Ethan pleaded.

He could feel Jace's eyes on him for several moments before he pulled his fingers free. A moment later, he felt the hard press of Jace's cock against his entrance. He held his breath and tried to relax as Jace slowly sank into him. He felt a small pinch of pain, but the moment Jace's body pressed up against him, Ethan didn't feel anything except pleasure.

Enjoying the feeling of being claimed by his mate for the first time, Ethan was unprepared for the intense pleasure that shot through his body when Jace pulled back, the head of his cock brushing against his prostate.

He cried out, rocking back and forth on Jace's cock as fast as he could, trying to find that spot again. "Jace, fuck, do that again," he whimpered.

Jace chuckled, his hands grabbing onto Ethan's hips, holding him still. "Just let me do the work, sweetness. You keep those legs of yours up next to your chest. I'll take care of the rest."

Ethan nodded. His eyes drifted closed as Jace started moving, his large cock pegging his sweet spot with every deep thrust. Ethan knew he was close, oh, so close. He just needed a bit more to throw him over the top.

He let go of one leg and reached for his cock, wanting to stroke it, only to have Jace slap his hand away. He looked up at him in surprise.

"Uh uh, no touching," Jace commanded.

Ethan pressed his head back into the pillow as he groaned. "Jace, please, I'm so close."

Jace chuckled as he leaned down over Ethan, his body settling between his legs. His face was just inches from Ethan's as he gazed down at him. Ethan could feel every press of his body against his, every deep thrust of his cock into his ass.

"Oh God, Jace, harder," he begged as he dropped his legs and wrapped them around Jace's waist. His hands moved up to encircle

Jace's neck, pulling him down for a kiss. As he did, Jace's body pressed against his, trapping Ethan's hard cock between them.

Every time Jace thrust his hips forward, Ethan's cock rubbed through the soft hair on Jace's abdomen. Between that wonderful stimulation, the pressure of Jace's body pressing on his cock and the feeling of his full cock in his ass, Ethan was lost.

"Jace, Jace, oh, oh, ooohhh," he cried out as he felt his cock thicken then erupt. Just as Ethan climaxed, he felt Jace lean forward and sink his canines into the skin on Ethan's neck. Jace's hips moved wildly into Ethan, pounding into him over and over again.

The world around Ethan faded away to be replaced with the man in his arms. Nothing outside of the two of them existed. Ethan's body felt so sensitized, every movement of Jace's body against his, inside of him, threw him higher into his orgasm until the world went black around him.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan opened his eyes slowly. He could feel every little delicious ache in his body. He couldn't remember ever feeling so relaxed and achy at the same time. A small smile moved across his face as he remembered where each little ache came from.

He found his mate and been claimed by him. Ethan's life would never be the same again. It would always be entwined with Jace's. Trying to suppress the giggle forming in his throat, Ethan rolled over to face his mate.

"Jace?" he called out when he found the bed empty. Where was his mate? Ethan rolled from the bed and ran to every room in the small apartment. The place appeared empty. There was no sign of Jace, not even any sign he had ever been here.

Nothing said Jace had ever been here except the ache in his ass and the slight sting in his neck. For a moment, Ethan wondered if he dreamed it all. Did he want a mate so badly that he imagined him? The bite mark in his neck said no, but the empty apartment said maybe. As tears started to form in his eyes, Ethan quickly pulled on his clothes. He ran to the living room to leave a note for Jace, just in case he came back, then left the apartment and headed back toward the bar where he found him.

As he walked, a hundred different scenarios went through his head. Had Jace left the apartment and been hurt? What if he lay in some ditch somewhere with no one to help him? What if he got lost?

Maybe he left for another reason. Ethan knew how much he enjoyed Jace's love making, but maybe Jace didn't feel the same. Ethan felt horribly embarrassed that he passed out before Jace had come. He wondered if Jace even climaxed. Maybe that was the problem.

Maybe Jace left him because he was horrible in bed. Ethan wasn't sure he would ever have an answer, especially if he couldn't find him. As he neared the bar, his eyes darted left and right, down every alleyway and into every passing car. He needed to find his mate.

"Hey, Ethan. Didn't expect to see you back here tonight," Tommy Nash, the bartender, said as he saw Ethan walk in. "I thought you'd be occupied all night long with that handsome hunk you left with."

"Hey, Tommy, that man I left with, Jace? Have you seen him back in here?"

"Lose him already did you?" Tommy laughed.

"Please, Tommy, have you seen him?" Ethan asked as he gripped the wooden edge of the bar counter.

"No, man, sorry. I haven't seen him since you two left together," Tommy replied seriously, shaking his head.

Ethan nodded. "If he comes back in here, call me, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Ethan."

Ethan waved then walked out. Where else could he check? Okay, maybe he should start with the hospitals. Jace could have been hurt or something. Although Ethan truly hoped that wasn't the case. He would just die if anything happened to his new mate.

It took Ethan less than ten minutes to get to the local hospital. Wolf Creek was not a large town. Since he lived in town, he could pretty much walked everywhere in a matter of minutes, which helped Ethan a lot as he didn't own a car.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I need to know if a man has been brought into the emergency room," Ethan said to the older gray haired nurse behind the counter of the emergency room. "He's about six foot three, chestnut brown hair, green eyes. His name is Jace?"

The nurse shook her head as she looked at Ethan. "I'm sorry, young man, no one has been brought into the emergency room at all tonight."

Ethan let out a slow breath. Well, that was one worry off his mind. Unless Jace lay hurt somewhere and hadn't been found. "Can I leave my number with you in case he comes in? He's new in town, and I'm afraid he's been hurt or something."

The nurse gazed at Ethan for a moment. "Is he your mate?"

Ethan nodded, thankful the woman knew about shifters. He knew she was human because of the way she smelled, but she must have a werewolf close to her. Their secret wasn't shared with everyone.

"Yes, we just found each other tonight. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, he was gone. I'm worried that he got hurt or something, or maybe he got lost trying to find his way back to my apartment."

The nurse nodded, smiling over at Ethan as she handed him a piece of paper and a pen. "Congratulations. I remember what it was like when my sister found her mate. I don't think she let him get out of her sight for nearly a week."

Ethan quickly wrote his phone number down, then Jace's description, before handing the paper back to the nurse. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"You just bring your young man back here to meet me when you find him. That will be thanks enough."

"Promise," Ethan replied with a smile.

As he turned away, the nurse stopped him. "Oh, hey, have you tried contacting Sheriff Joe? He might be able to keep an eye out for your young man, especially if he's lost. He's one of you, too. He'd understand."

Ethan turned back, shaking his head. "No, I didn't think of that, but thanks. I'll stop by and talk to Joe as soon as I check my apartment again."

"Good luck, Ethan," the nurse said as he turned and hurried out of the emergency room. Ethan gave her a little wave and headed back to his apartment. Okay, so Jace wasn't at the hospital or the bar. Where else could he be?

Ethan tried to look everywhere as he hurried back to his apartment. He didn't want to miss seeing Jace. He could be anywhere. Reaching his apartment, Ethan hurried up the stairs and ran into his apartment.

He found the place still empty, no sign that anyone had been here since he left. Ethan's shoulders slumped and tears filled his eyes. Where was Jace? Why wasn't he here where he should be?

Ethan grabbed a small backpack and filled it with a couple of granola bars and some bottled water, a small blanket and an emergency kit. He grabbed his jacket and the backpack and made his way back out the door. He'd spend all night looking for Jace if he needed to.

\* \* \* \*

"My name is Ethan Brown. Can I speak with Sheriff Joe, please?"

"Sheriff Joe is out on a call right now. Is there anything I can do for you?" the deputy behind the counter asked.

Ethan shook his head. "No, I really need to talk to the sheriff. Do you know when he might be back?" he asked, looking around the sheriff's office.

"It could be any time. If you want to wait for him, you can sit right over there," the deputy said as he pointed to a line of metal chairs sitting against the far wall. Ethan nodded his head and went to sit down.

He twisted his hands nervously in his lap as he waited. He wasn't sure that the sheriff could file a missing person's report. Jace had only been missing since last night, but anything might help.

He spent the entire night covering every inch of town, going into any business that remained open to ask about Jace, asking every person he saw on the street about him. No one had seen his mate.

After a night of searching fruitlessly, he arrived at the sheriff's office as soon as it opened, hoping to catch the sheriff and talk to him about Jace. He could feel himself getting desperate, afraid he would never find his mate.

He didn't know what he would do if something happened to Jace or if he never found him. How was he supposed to spend the rest of his life mated with no mate? He never even heard of such a thing.

He heard of werewolves out there that lost their mates to death, but never one that just *lost their mate*. As long as Jace remained alive, he could never be with anyone else, not that he wanted to. He saved himself for Jace and would continue to do so for as long as it took to find him.

Ethan nearly jumped when the double doors on the front of the sheriff's office opened and a tall, black haired man dressed in a uniform walked in. He waved to the deputy behind the counter as he walked passed.

"Oh, hey, Sheriff, there's a young man here to see you. He's been waiting for over an hour," the deputy said as he pointed toward Ethan.

Ethan quickly jumped to his feet when the sheriff turned to look at him. "Are you Sheriff Joe?"

The sheriff took a few steps toward him. "Yes, you're Ethan Brown, aren't you? From Shasta Pack?"

Ethan quickly nodded his head. "Yes, can I speak with you for a few minutes? It's really important." How in the hell did the sheriff know who he was? Did he locate Jace? Was Jace looking for him even now?

"Is something wrong?"

Ethan looked around the office. There were just a few people in the room, but he would really prefer talking to the sheriff in private. "Can I talk to you in private?"

The sheriff looked at Ethan for a few moments before he nodded his head. "Come on into my office, Ethan."

Grabbing his backpack, Ethan followed the sheriff into his office, sitting down in the chair across the desk from the sheriff.

"So, what seems to be the problem, Ethan?"

"A nurse at the hospital suggested that I talk to you. She said you would understand about finding my—my mate?"

"Yes, of course I would. I'm the enforcer for the Wolf Creek Pack. Why?" the sheriff asked as he folded his hands together and sat forward in his chair.

"Oh, thank God. I found my mate last night down at Doogy's bar. Do you know the place?"

Joe nodded. "My brother Tommy is the bartender there."

"Anyway, we went back to my place, and he claimed me. I guess I kind of passed out, and when I woke up, he was gone. I can't find him anywhere. I've checked the hospital, the bar, every hotel I could find. It's like he just disappeared."

"Okay, slow down," Joe said, holding up his hand. "You found your mate, he claimed you, then disappeared?"

Ethan nodded. "I've been out all night looking for him, but—"

"Are you sure you found your mate, Ethan? Could he have been a human?"

Ethan shook his head. He pulled the collar of his shirt to one side so Sheriff Joe could see the bite mark in his neck. Just a few hours

passed since Jace claimed him. Ethan knew the mark would still be a little red but visible to every shifter around.

"Okay, guess that answers that question. What's his name, description? What do you know about him? Maybe I can track him down and find out what's going on," Joe said as he grabbed a piece of paper and pen to take notes.

He looked up when Ethan didn't immediately answer him. Ethan saw the man's eyebrows rise. He knew it was because of the flush filling his face.

"Ethan?" the sheriff asked.

Ethan felt like an idiot. He realized that he handled things with Jace all wrong. He knew nothing about his mate except the size of his dick. He should have found out more about him before he fucked him.

"I just know his first name. It's Jace. Other than that, I don't know anything about him. We never really got around to the talking part of things. I kind of figured we'd get to that the next morning, but—"

Ethan's face burned even more when Joe chuckled.

"Okay, I guess I can see that. I didn't know much about my own mate for several days after I met him. So, why don't you tell me what you do know?"

"His name is Jace. He's about six foot three, brown hair, green eyes, and totally hot."

"Is he from around here?" Joe asked. "Do you know if he belongs to our pack?"

"No, he said he came from out of town. He said he was just passing through."

"Is there any way he could have left with plans to come back for you?"

Ethan thought about it for a minute. "But wouldn't you think he would have left me a note or something?"

"Maybe he didn't have time," Joe suggested.

Ethan shrugged. "I guess," he said sadly. Could that have been it? Did Jace take off without leaving note because he didn't have time? Would Jace come back for him? Wouldn't he want to come back for him?

Rising to his feet, Ethan grabbed his backpack and looked back at the sheriff. "Thank you for listening to me. I guess I'll just go home and wait for him to come back. I'm sure you're right and he just needed to leave in a hurry."

Even as he said the words, Ethan knew he didn't believe them. Something dreadful happened to his mate and he knew it. He felt it in the deep ache in his chest.

"Ethan, I'm sure he had a very good reason for leaving the way he did. Just give him some time. In the meanwhile, I'll keep an eye out for him and see what I can do. Okay?"

"Thank you, Sheriff."

"If you don't hear from your mate, why don't you check in with me in a couple of days," the sheriff said as he walked Ethan to the door. "Don't worry. It will all work out in the end."

### Chapter 2

"Hey, Sheriff, they keeping you busy around here?"

Sheriff Joe Nash looked up to see his long time friend, Jason Dominick, standing in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, leaning up against the doorframe. "JD, how the hell are you? Come on in."

"I'm doing a lot better now, but it has been a long road," JD said as he walked in and sat down in a chair across from Joe's. He leaned back and propped his feet up on the edge of the desk. "How have you been?"

"I've been great, better than I have in years," Joe replied, a deep chuckle coming from him.

"Oh? Do tell," JD encouraged.

"I found my mate a few months back." Joe grinned. "He's the most gorgeous thing you ever laid eyes on."

"He?" JD whistled. "Wow, bet that set your parents back a bit."

Joe shook his head. "Not really. I mean, sure, they were a little surprised in the beginning, but now Nate and my mom are nearly inseparable. I swear he spends more time at my parents' house than he does at home."

"My father would disown me in a heartbeat if he even caught wind that you and I were friends, let alone if my mate was another man. He doesn't tolerate anything that remotely smells gay or lesbian."

"Really? That's too bad. We have several gay and lesbian couples in our pack. Sure, there are a few grumbles here and there, but for the most part, no one cares. A mate is a mate. We don't choose them, fate does."

JD shrugged his shoulders. "I guess. I just couldn't ever see myself in that type of relationship. My mate will be a woman that can provide my father with his grandcubs. My father set down that law a long time ago."

"And if your mate is a man?" Joe asked seriously.

JD shook his head. "Fate wouldn't be that cruel to me. There's no way I can take over after my father as alpha of our pack if I'm mated to a man."

"Is that what you've been doing?" Joe asked. "Getting ready to take over for your father?"

JD knew that Joe wanted to change the subject. He couldn't blame the man. It was a touchy subject. He always knew Joe was gay, but it never bothered him. He just knew he couldn't be gay. It wasn't allowed.

His father carefully explained that to him when he was seventeen years old and got caught kissing a boy. His father set down the law concerning *homo depravities*, as he called them. Then he proceeded to beat the lesson into him.

JD dated only women, making sure no one ever saw him with a man again. He hadn't ever really been in a relationship with a woman, much to his father's disappointment. But he never got in a relationship with a man, either.

"Not really. I've actually been recovering from silver poisoning."

"Whoa, silver poisoning?" Joe whistled. "How the hell did that happen?"

"It was stupid, really. About three months ago, my brother Robert decided that he wanted to be next in line. He and his goons jumped me, but instead of doing it in an honorable challenge, they tried to take me out with silver daggers."

"What happened?"

"I didn't kill them, but only because I bled too much. I sure as hell did some damage, though. By the time it was all over, I was in pretty bad shape. It took nearly three weeks for me to get over it."

"I'll bet. I'm just glad you did. I can't remember hearing of anyone that has gotten over silver poisoning like that," Joe said.

"I almost didn't." JD snorted. "The silver got into my blood stream. I felt pretty bad for a while. Everything got all screwed up. I couldn't smell right, I couldn't hear right, nothing."

"Really? Lost all of your senses? That sucks," Joe exclaimed.

"You're telling me. The worst of it is that the entire time is one big haze. There's still bits and pieces of time I don't even remember even now. I think I was pretty much in a fog," JD replied.

"But everything is okay now?" Joe asked, the concern clear in his voice.

"Well, except for the fog, yeah," JD chuckled. "I still don't remember much of anything that happened during those three weeks. Doubt I ever will. Everything else seems to be back to normal, though."

"That's good. I would hate to think—come in?" Joe said when someone knocked on the door.

JD turned his head to see another deputy open the door and stick his head in. "Hey, Sheriff, I hate to bother you, but we're a little of concerned. Ethan didn't come by today, and it's his regular check in. He never misses a week. We wondered if you could maybe go check on him."

"Yeah, sure, Charlie. I'd be happy to," Joe replied, reaching for his brown cowboy hat. He looked over at JD as he got to his feet. "Feel like going for a ride?"

"Yeah, I guess," JD replied as he got to his feet and followed Joe out of the sheriff's station.

As he climbed into Joe's bronco and put on his seatbelt, he looked over at Joe in curiosity. "So, what's up with this Ethan guy? Did he miss out on his weekly donut drop or something?"

"No, not exactly." Joe chuckled. "About three months ago, Ethan met his mate in a bar, took him home, and mated him. When he woke up the next morning, his mate was gone. At the time, we thought he just went home to take care of some business and he would come back."

"And?" JD asked when Joe stopped talking.

Joe shook his head. "Ethan never saw him again. He came to see me and wanted to file a missing person's report, but he barely knew anything about his mate. Too busy getting laid." Joe chuckled. "Since then, he comes in once a week to see if I've found anything out."

"Man, poor guy. Do you think he will ever find his mate?" JD couldn't imagine being without his mate once he found her. He felt sad for the man. He must be going through hell.

Joe shook his head. "I did in the beginning, but it's been nearly three months. I'm starting to wonder if the guy even knew he mated Ethan."

"Could Ethan be wrong about the mating?"

"No, I wondered that at first, too, but I saw the bite myself. He definitely claimed Ethan." Joe replied as he parked in front of a red brick building. "I feel bad for the guy. Even after all of this time, he's totally convinced his mate will come back for him. I don't have the heart to tell Ethan he'll probably never see him again."

JD nodded. "I can imagine. I wouldn't want to be the one to tell this guy his mate claimed him then flew the coop. Who knows how he might react?"

"I worry about that myself. Ethan's only been part of the pack for a few months. I don't know that much about him, but he seems like a nice guy." Joe said as he climbed for the vehicle. "You mind hanging out for a few while I go check on him?"

"No, I'll get us something to drink and meet you back here at the truck," JD said as he climbed out.

"Better yet, why don't you come on up with me? I'll be just a moment and then we can go back to my place for lunch. My baby is a super cook, and I'd really like you to meet him. Besides, I might need the help with Ethan. I suspect he's drunk."

"Can you blame the guy?" JD asked, following Joe upstairs to the second floor of the small apartment building. He leaned up against the door as Joe knocked. He lifted an eyebrow in curiosity when Joe needed to knock several more times before they heard a reply.

"Come in," said a quiet voice from inside the apartment.

Joe reached for the doorknob, glancing over at JD. "Just wait here. I shouldn't be too long."

JD nodded and watched Joe walk into the apartment. As he looked through the doorway, he could see Joe walk into the far room. He assumed it was the bedroom. He could hear Joe swearing.

"Fuck, Ethan, what the hell are you doing?"

"I wasn't doing anything," said another voice.

Ethan, JD presumed.

He was intrigued by the tone of the man's voice. It sounded soft and lyrical, much like butterfly wings flapping.

"How much have you drank?" Joe asked.

"Not that much," Ethan replied.

JD shook his head, chuckling quietly. He would bet that Ethan had been drinking for quite some time if the slurring of his words was anything to go by. The man was obviously plowed.

"Ethan, I thought you planned to come down to the office to see me today."

"Did you find him? Has he come back? I know he's going to come back. He just has to, Joe."

"No, I haven't found him yet. But you have everyone worried. You didn't come down to the office today. You know we look forward to your weekly visits," Joe said.

JD shook his head as he heard Joe crooning softly to Ethan. He wondered if Joe's mate knew about the way he talked to Ethan. He also seemed to really care about Ethan. JD wondered how much.

He couldn't see Joe being unfaithful to his mate, ever. He had looked for his mate for as long as JD knew him. But still, did he have to talk to the man like he was? For some reason, it bothered JD.

"Hey, JD, could you come give me a hand?" Joe called from the bedroom.

JD rolled his eyes as he walked into the small apartment. As he crossed the room, he could hear the other man talking again. As he reached the doorway to the bedroom, he was stunned at the sight of the man Joe sat next to. He looked breathtaking.

\* \* \* \*

"Did I tell you how gorgeous he is, Joe?" Ethan asked. "He has such beautiful green eyes. I could look at his eyes all day long."

"Yes, Ethan, you told me how beautiful he is," Joe replied. "Now come on, let's get you into the shower, and you can take a nap."

"He's coming back for me, Joe. He has to. I'm his mate," Ethan said as Joe helped him to his feet. As he stood up, a strong, masculine, woodsy scent reached him. Oh, how he missed that smell. "I miss him, Joe," Ethan mumbled as Joe tried to lead him toward the bathroom. "I want him back."

"I know, Ethan. Don't worry, he'll come back," Joe assured him.

Ethan started to turn to ask Joe what he would do if Jace never came back when he spotted the man standing in the doorway. "Jace," he whispered, briefly shocked that his mate stood before him. "Jace, you came back," he cried out as he pushed his way past Joe to get to the man, wrapping his arms around him. "I knew you would come back. Everyone thinks I'm crazy, but I knew you'd come back."

He turned quickly to look back at Joe, smiling wildly. "I told you he'd come back."

Joe just nodded his head absently. His eyes seemed to be on the big man in Ethan's arms. "JD?"

Ethan turned back to Jace, his hands rubbing over his chest, trying to touch as much of his mate as he could. It seemed like forever since he touched him. He needed to feel every inch of the man.

"Where have you been, Jace?" Ethan asked. "Why did you leave me? What took you so long to come back?"

He felt strong arms grab a hold of him and push him back. "Look, Ethan—"

"JD? I'm going to step outside while you two talk. If you need me, I'll be downstairs in the truck," Joe said as he pushed them into the living room, then walked past them and out of the apartment.

"Joe! Damn it, Joe, don't leave me in here with him," JD yelled out as Joe shut the door.

"Jace? What's wrong? Aren't you glad to see me? I missed you so much, Jace," Ethan said as he pushed his body up against Jace again. He reached up and brushed his hands over Jace's beautiful face. "I love you, Jace."

"Look, Ethan, I'm not your mate. I—" Jace began.

Ethan stared at him in horror. How could Jace be saying that? Of course they were mates. Jace claimed him. "That's not true, Jace," Ethan cried out. "You know I'm your mate. You claimed me."

"No!" Jace exclaimed. "I am not your mate. I am not gay."

"But, Jace, you—" Ethan cried out as he grabbed onto the front of Jace's shirt. He couldn't believe that this was happening. Jace was rejecting him. He dreamed about Jace coming back since the night he left. Ethan just never thought Jace would be come back to deny him.

"Please, Jace," he cried again, tears starting to form in his eyes. "I love you, Jace."

"No!" Jace yelled, grabbing Ethan by the arms. "Stop saying that. You don't love me. I don't love you. This needs to stop, Ethan. I am not your mate. I have never been your mate. I never will be your mate!"

Ethan cried out as Jace pushed him away with such force that he hit his desk with a sickening crack then fell to the floor. A shock of pain shot through his back. He looked over just in time to see Jace walk away, the door slamming closed behind him.

He started to sit up when the pain in his back made him cry out, and flashes of light sparkled in front of his eyes. He flopped back down on the floor, laying his head down and staring at the closed door.

It really was over. Jace didn't want him. Ethan spent the last three months wanting for something that never really existed. It had all been a hoax, a fantasy created in his mind. Jace wasn't his. He wouldn't ever be his.

Ethan closed his eyes, the pain in his heart almost too much to comprehend. He didn't know if he would survive this. He didn't know if he wanted to. His whole body radiated with his pain. As he tried to turn over again, the pain became too much. With a small whimper, Ethan gave in to the darkness trying to claim him.

\* \* \* \*

Jace's hand clenched and unclenched with anger as he made his way out to the truck, climbing in and shutting the door. He glared over at Joe before turning his head to stare out the window. He couldn't believe the situation Joe put him in.

"JD? You okay?" Joe asked.

"Hell, no, I'm not okay," Jace snapped. "You left me up there with him. He's out of his fucking mind, Joe."

"How do you know? You said that you experienced memory lapses. Maybe you forgot, and he is your mate," Joe replied as he started the truck and pulled into traffic to head home.

"He is not my mate," JD snapped. "I told you, my mate will be a woman, not a man."

"I really should have seen it," Joe said as if JD never spoke a word. "He described you perfectly. I think the name threw me. I've always called you JD. But that's not your name, is it? Jace must be short for Jason, right?"

JD shrugged his shoulders. "I use *Jace* once in a while. I just didn't remember using it with Ethan." JD gripped his hands together to keep them from shaking. "Hell, I don't even remember Ethan. I'd remember if I claimed someone as my mate, wouldn't I?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Joe replied.

"He really thinks I'm his mate, Joe. I don't even know the guy."

"Is there any way that you could be?"

"No, of course not," JD said, quickly dismissing the idea before he could think about it. If he thought about it, he might remember how cute Ethan looked. "I would know, wouldn't I?" he asked quietly.

Wouldn't he?

"Well, you did say that the silver poisoning messed with your senses. Maybe it messed a lot more up. And you did say it was about three months ago. The time period is about right. Do you remember if you were in town or not?"

JD shook his head. "No, I still don't remember anything. But, Joe, I just can't have a man for a mate. My father would disown me in a heartbeat. I'd never make alpha."

"Well, seems to me that you have some things to consider, then. What's more important to you? Being alpha of your father's pack or being with the mate that fate has chosen for you? You do realize that if Ethan is your mate, you've already claimed him. There will be no other mate for you, right?"

"Yeah. I just need to think about this," JD said after a few moments. He pushed his hand through hair, pulling at the ends a bit as frustration wormed its way through him. This situation was just plain nuts. He needed a drink.

Joe patted JD on the shoulder. "It's going to be okay, man. We'll figure this out."

JD just nodded. He wasn't so sure. If he claimed Ethan as his mate, he would never get the alpha position from his father. On the

other hand, if the man was his mate and Jace denied him, he would be without his mate forever. Both situations made his stomach roll.

"Come inside and meet Nate," Joe said as he pulled his Bronco to a stop in front of his house and opened the door of the truck. "I believe I promised you lunch."

JD chuckled. "Yeah, you did."

He watched Joe's stride quicken. The man sure was in a hurry. He chuckled when Joe opened the door and called out to his mate.

"Baby, I'm home."

Walking in behind Joe, JD started to shut the door when the sound of someone running caught his attention. JD turned his head just in time to see a small, sandy haired man fly around the corner and launch himself into Joe's open arms.

He watched with astonishment as they began to kiss, a kiss that looked like it would go one for several minutes, especially since Joe's hands firmly grasped the guy's ass and the guy's legs wrapped around Joe's waist.

Feeling a little embarrassed watching such an intimate display between mates, JD cleared his throat. He saw the man in Joe's arms lift his head and look at him in curiosity. "Hello," the man said.

Joe laughed as he turned around to look at Jace. "Baby, this is an old friend of mine, JD. JD, this is my baby, Nate."

"Hello, JD," Nate said, holding out his hand.

JD couldn't help laughing. Nate didn't even let go of Joe, just held out his hand to him. Reaching out, he shook the man's hand. "Hello, Nate, it's nice to meet you. Joe has talked about you all day. And please, call me Jace."

He saw Joe raise an eyebrow at him. He just shrugged his shoulders. Until he knew for sure whether Ethan was his mate or not, he might as well be called Jace. He preferred Jace. JD is what Joe knew him as, but it was also what his father called him. He hated his father.

"I told Jace that maybe we could talk you into making us lunch," Joe said as he gave Jace a strange look before turning back to his baby. "What do you say?"

"Oh, I see how it is. You just came home so I could cook for you," Nate said as he slid to his feet, his hands going to his hips as he glared at Joe. "It doesn't matter that I've been missing you all day."

"Now, baby," Joe said as he placed his hand on Nate's arm. "You know that's not true. If I just wanted food, I could have taken Jace to some place in town. I came home to see you. Your cooking skills are just a bonus."

Nate stared at Joe for a moment before nodding his head. "Good answer, Sheriff. You might still get lucky tonight."

Jace couldn't help laughing at the crestfallen look on Joe's face as Nate turned and headed for the fridge. Joe looked like someone just kicked his puppy. Jace sat down at the table across from Joe when he gestured to a chair, a soft chuckle still coming from him.

"Hey, baby, I wondered if you could help me with something," Joe said as he looked across the room at his mate. The cautious tone in Joe's voice made Jace curious.

"Sure, what's up?" Nate asked as he started slicing a tomato.

"You remember me telling you about Ethan?"

"The guy who can't find his wayward mate?" Nate asked curiously. "Yeah, sure, I remember him. Why?"

"Well, I went by to see him today, and he thinks JD, I mean Jace, is his mate. Do you think you could—?"

Jace watched with interest as Nate rolled his eyes, wiping his hands off on a towel before walking toward them. Once he stood in front of him, Nate reached out for Joe's hand, then his.

"Okay, go for it," he said after taking a deep breath.

Jace looked at Joe in confusion. What the hell was going on?

"Jace, do you remember Ethan?" Joe asked.

"No, I told you I don't," Jace replied.

Nate nodded, confusing Jace even more.

"Is he your mate?" Joe asked.

"No—yes, oh hell, I don't know," Jace said as he pulled his hand free of Nate's and set it on the table. "How in the hell am I supposed to know? I don't remember a thing from then."

Joe nodded. "I know. But I'm trying to help you here, Jace. Hold Nate's hand again and answer me yes or no. Is Ethan your mate?"

"I don't know, Joe. What more do you want from me?" Jace said angrily.

"What do you feel? Is there any way he could be your mate? Think about it, Jace," Joe continued. "Now, grab Nate's hand and answer my question."

Jace glared at Joe but finally took Nate's hand again. "I don't know if Ethan's my mate or not, but I can't have a man for a mate. I told you that. I know I didn't like you talking to him, but I don't know why."

"He's your mate," Nate said simply, dropping Jace's hand and walking back over to the kitchen counter to start slicing tomatoes again. Jace stared after the man, confusion filling him at Nate's statement.

"How do you know?" Jace asked. "You don't even know the man. You don't know me."

Nate turned and smiled at him. "I know."

Jace turned to look at Joe in confusion, perplexed over the smile on Joe's face. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Baby?"

"Jeez, Joseph Nash, why don't you take out a fucking ad in the local paper? You seem to want to tell everyone we meet," Nate growled, not even turning his head to look at his mate.

Joe chuckled. "It's just because I'm so damn proud of you, baby."

Jace watched Nate turn around and shake his knife at Joe, a small glare on his face. "I'd better get a blow job out of this."

"Promise, baby," Joe laughed as he turned back to look at Jace. "Nate has some—unusual abilities."

"Abilities?" Jace asked skeptically. What the hell did that mean?

"Let's say that he's not just another pretty face." Joe laughed.

"Uh uh, and this has to do with Ethan being my mate because?"

"Nate has the ability to tell if someone is lying or not. He can also read your emotions."

Jace stared at Joe for several moments before looking over at Nate, then back, before he started laughing. "Well, that's got to make your life a little more complicated."

"Actually, no, I think it makes things a lot simpler. I know from the get go that I can never lie to him, so why even try? If I have something I can't discuss with him because of work or pack business, I just tell him and he drops it. It also helps when I want him to know that I really mean what I'm saying," Joe explained.

Jace nodded. "Okay, I guess I can see where that might help, but I still don't know what this has to do with me."

"Because it's there, dummy," Nate said as he turned around to glare at Jace. "Haven't you been listening to a word Joe said? The memory of claiming Ethan is in your head. I can feel it. Your feelings of possessiveness that only a mate has? Those are there, too. Ethan is you mate, plain and simple."

"Fuck!" Jace growled as he ran his hand through his hair. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

"Go get your mate? Live happily ever after?" Nate smirked. "And, if you're real lucky, somewhere in between, you might even fall in love."

Jace shook his head. "You don't understand," he snapped, slapping his hand down on the table. "I can't be mated to a man, no matter how much I want him. It just can't happen."

"So, you do admit that you want him?" Joe asked quietly.

Jace gave a bitter laugh. "Are you blind? Even three sheets to the wind, he's still the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen. Of course I want him. I just can't have him."

"You're going to give up your mate?" Nate asked in astonishment, quickly crossing the floor to stand next to Joe, his hand reached over to touch his mate's shoulder. "How can you even consider something like that? He's your mate."

"It's not that simple, Nate. I—"

"It is that simple. He's your mate. End of story," Nate said, his voice starting to rise in anger.

"I can't have a man for a mate!" Jace shouted. "I won't make alpha."

"My God, you are one selfish bastard. Maybe you're right. Don't claim Ethan. He doesn't need an asshole like you in his life," Nate yelled back. "He's better off spending the rest of his life alone than with the likes of you."

"Nathan!" Joe shouted.

"Oh please, it's not like you weren't thinking the same damn thing. Your *friend* is so worried about how this will affect him and his life. He's never once thought about what this is doing to Ethan," Nate snapped before he turned and stormed out of the room in a huff.

Jace lifted an eyebrow, watching Nate stomp out of the room.

Joe sure had his hands full with that one.

His gaze returned to Joe.

"I'm sorry about that, Jace. Sometimes Nate gets a little riled when he feels strongly about something." Joe chuckled.

"You think? Is he always like that?"

Joe shrugged. "Yeah, I guess, but I like it. He's not afraid to tell me what he thinks, so I always know where I stand with him. That helps a lot. Plus, I think his biggest concern is the people around him are happy, including you."

"What does he care?" Jace replied. "He doesn't even know me."

"Doesn't matter. He knows you're one of my friends, and that's enough for him."

"Okay, besides the whole *let's be happy* thing, why is he so concerned with me being with my mate?" Jace asked. It felt a little

weird saying the word *mate*, but he guessed he might need to get used to it eventually.

"When I claimed Nate, we had a lot of shit to work through. We had the whole gay thing to going on with the rest of the pack. I'm the alpha's son and my mate was male. While things have settled down now, it wasn't received too easily in the beginning. On top of that, somebody was after Nate. We both almost died. We've learned to appreciate what we have together. I just think that Nate wants that for you and Ethan, too."

"Shit!" Jace replied, sitting back in his chair as he stared at Joe in amazement.

Joe nodded. "He grew up in a type of prison dormitory thing run by the guy that was after him. Until we met, no one ever loved him or took care of him. I don't think he understands how someone could consider giving that up for any reason. I'm not sure I can, either."

"What do you think would happen if I took Ethan home? It's dangerous enough just being next in line for the alpha position. If I brought a gay man home, mate or not, how long do you think it would be before someone tried to take one of us out? I can't be there to protect him every second of every day, Joe."

"I guess I can see what you mean, but is it so terribly important that you become the next alpha of your pack? You already told me you don't like living there. Is it worth giving up your mate for them?"

Jace thought about it for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. "Honestly, right now I don't know. I've just always known that I would be the next alpha. My father raised me around the idea. I don't know anything else."

"Okay," Joe said as he leaned back in his chair, "answer me this, then. If you could do anything you wanted, anything, no matter how bizarre, what would you do?"

Jace chuckled. "I've always wanted to own a horse ranch, raise and breed horses."

"You never told me that," Joe said in wonder. "Why a horse ranch?"

"I love horses. I always have. I even have a couple back home. My father indulges me as long as I remember that my first duty is to the pack. But, if I had a choice, and mind you I said if, I would raise and breed horses."

"That's just it, Jace, you do have a choice. You don't have to be pack alpha. From what you've told me, your brother wants it more than you do. Let him have it. Move here and be with your mate. I'm sure we can find you a nice ranch around here where the two of you can live."

"Would it really be that easy, Joe? Just pack up and move my ass here, give up ever becoming alpha of my pack, and live happily ever after with a man?" Jace asked skeptically.

"No, it's probably not that easy. But if you want it bad enough, it's worth the fight. I can promise you that. Even after everything that Nate and I went through, I still wouldn't trade a minute of it if it meant giving Nate up."

"Trying to get back into my good graces, Sheriff?"

Joe and Jace both turned to see Nate standing in the doorway, a small smile on his face. His smile grew wider as he walked toward Joe. Nate moved around to sit down on his lap and looped his arms around Joe's neck before cuddling in against him.

Jace watched Joe wrap his arms around Nate. Just before he buried his face in Nate's neck, the most tender look Jace ever saw crossed Joe's face. He seemed to be really happy with Nate.

Could it be that easy? Could he just give up being the next pack alpha to move back here with Ethan? He spent his entire life knowing that he would be the next alpha. He didn't know anything else.

But was giving up his mate the answer? Sure, Ethan was a man, but he was also the sexiest looking man Jace ever saw. As much as he tried to suppress his desires for other men in the past, he could easily

see himself with Ethan. Just the thought of sinking into his tight little body made his cock hard.

"Hey, Joe? Could you take me back into town to my car? I have some thinking to do," Jace said after a few moments.

Joe turned to look at him, nodding his head. "Yeah, sure, Jace."

Jace stood to his feet, reaching his hand out to Nate. "Thanks, Nate, and I'm sorry about lunch. Maybe we can do it again some other time?"

"Anytime, Jace," Nate said as he stood to his feet and shook Jace's hand.

Jace started to turn away then stopped, looking back at Nate. "Would you keep an eye on Ethan until I figure this all out?"

Nate smiled, nodding his head. "Just don't take forever, Jace. While you're out trying to figure things out, Ethan is living without his mate. You've already claimed him, and he needs you."

Jace nodded his head. "I just—I need to think about some things, get this stuff right in my head, or I won't be of any use to Ethan."

"I just have one bit of advice for you before you go, Jace. Think about who is going to be more accepting of you, your pack or your mate. Who is going to care more about your happiness and not what you can do for them? And who is going to love you no matter what?"

Jace stared at Nate for several tense moments before nodding his head. The man was a fountain of knowledge. He seemed to know all the right things to say to confuse Jace.

"I'll think about it, Nate."

"You do that."

## Chapter 3

Jace's mind reeled as he drove home. Something deep inside of him told him that Ethan was indeed his mate. Jace didn't know if that excited him or scared him.

The man looked gorgeous. There was no doubt about that. In any other circumstances, that fact would have thrilled Jace. Having a beautiful mate for the rest of his life was not a bad way to go. Ethan also seemed more than willing to be in their relationship, whatever that was.

Jace just wasn't sure being with Ethan would be his best choice. Being the alpha of a pack seemed to be what every werewolf wanted out of life. Jace wondered if something about him that made him different. He really didn't want to be alpha. He just wanted to settle down somewhere and live a peaceful life with, well, Ethan.

A small chuckle slipped from Jace's lips. He gripped the steering wheel tighter. More laughter slipped out until Jace had a full belly laugh going. He pulled over to the side of the road and laughed until tears streamed down his face.

As the laughter slowly dwindled, Jace wiped the tears from his face. He leaned forward and rested his head on the steering wheel. He just answered his own dilemma. He didn't want to be alpha. He wanted Ethan. His decision was that simple. He could do what everyone else wanted him to do, or he could do what he wanted and be happy.

Jace sat up and drove his truck back onto the road, heading for his home. His mind already planned what he needed to do when he got

there. He knew once he told his father of his decision and left, he'd never go back.

Exhilaration filled Jace as he drove down the road toward his house. He tapped his hands on the steering wheel to the beat of the music from the radio. Now that he made his choice, Jace felt like the weight of the world had lifted from his shoulders. He felt excited about what their future would be like.

Would Ethan like living on a ranch? Did he even like horses? Jace pictured the two of them riding horses together, sitting on a porch and cuddling as the sun set, even running through the woods in wolf form. So many new things opened up now that he wouldn't be under his father's thumb. Jace couldn't wait.

He pulled into his driveway and turned off the motor. Jace had a little bounce in his step as he made his way to the front door. He needed to pack as fast as possible and get back to his mate.

Jace opened the front door and walked in, his forehead crinkling in confusion when he heard voices coming from the living room. He often had people drop by, but he could have sworn he locked the front door. Come to think of it, he didn't need to unlock it when he came in.

Jace followed the voices until he stood in the archway of the living room. He didn't recognize the statuesque blond walking around the room, pointing here and there. Another young woman stood behind her writing on a notepad.

"Those will have to go," the blond woman said as she pointed to a matching set of horse head bookends. "They're just horrible. Who decorates with this stuff?"

Offended, Jace cleared his throat. "That would be me. And those bookends were a present from my grandfather."

The woman whirled around, surprise on her face for a brief moment before a serene smile covered her lips. "You must be JD," she crooned. "I'm so happy to finally meet you." "Who are you and what are you doing in my home?" Jace asked. He crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the hand the woman held out.

"Oh, I'm Susanna," she replied.

"And you're in my house without my permission because?"

"Not to worry, darling, your father brought me."

Darling? Jace racked his brain to figure out if his father ever mentioned Susanna before, but he came up blank. He had no idea who this woman was and why she was in his house.

"Why would my father let you into my house?"

Susanna looked confused for a moment, but then she smiled. Jace took a step back at the look on her face. It unnerved him. He felt like prey to a hunter, and Susanna was the hunter.

"Your father moved me in. Your father told me I could change anything I didn't like." Susanna waved her hand around the room. "Most of this will have to go, of course. There's no way I can live in a house with this stuff. I haven't had time to look over the rest of the house, but I'm sure most of it will have to go, too. It would be better if we just moved to a bigger house, but I suppose this will do for now."

"Lady, I don't know who the hell you are, but you're not changing one damn thing in my house!" Jace snapped. "Get the hell out."

The woman bristled. "Your father brought me here. I was under the understanding that I would be welcomed."

"To redecorate me house?"

"To be your mate."

Jace's mouth dropped open as he gapped at the woman. His father found a woman, a stranger, and moved her into his house to be his mate? Jace didn't know why he was surprised but he was.

"I already have a mate, thank you," Jace replied. "I don't need another one."

"You have a mate?" the woman shrieked. "I was told I would be your mate. That you would be alpha and I would be the alpha's mate."

Jace chuckled, not feeling the least bit sorry for the woman. She was a gold digger. Jace could see it in her fancy silk dress and the diamonds glittering on her throat. "You were told wrong."

"Well," the woman snipped as she pulled her cell phone out of her small clutch purse, "we'll just have to see about that, won't we?"

Jace pointed towards the front door. "You can see about it somewhere else. I want you to leave."

"Oh! Well, I never!" The woman stormed towards the front door, the other woman fast on her heels. Susanna paused at the front door to glare back at Jace. "Your father will hear about this, and how do you think he will feel about you ignoring a direct order from your alpha?"

Jace smirked. "I don't really give a shit!"

Jace took great satisfaction in shutting the door on Susanna. He made sure to lock it afterwards, too. He still shook his head as he made his way upstairs to his bedroom. He was almost to the top of the stairs when a loud pounding came from the front door.

Jace rolled his eyes and walked back down the stairs. He prepared himself to tell Susanna to leave again when he opened the door to find his brother, Robert, standing there.

Jace tensed. "Robert." The last time he saw his brother was at the sharp end of a silver knife.

"I see you found your way home," Robert said, his eyes roaming up and down Jace. "And no lasting effects."

"What do you want, Robert?" Jace asked, refusing to move from in front of the door. "Have you come to try and kill me again?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Robert snapped as he pushed his way past Jace and walked into the house. "I came to warn you."

"Warn me?"

Jace closed the door and followed his brother into the living room. He seriously doubted his brother wanted to warn him about anything. He would more likely to stab Jace in the back than anything.

He stopped at the entrance of the living room and watched Robert pace around. His brother seemed to move from one spot to another, lifting a vase here, a statue there. He seemed to be procrastinating.

"What do you want, Robert?"

"I came to warn you."

"You said that already," Jace replied. "Came to warn me about what?"

"Father has chosen a bride for you."

"Yes, I've met her."

Robert glanced up, surprise showing on his face. "She's here already?"

"She was. I asked her to leave."

Robert frowned. "Why? Father handpicked her for you. She has good breeding, comes from a large pack. She will be able to provide you with as many cubs as you choose."

"And she's not bad to look at either, is she?"

Robert's face flushed, and Jace suddenly knew why his brother came to warn him. It wasn't because his brother cared about what happened to him. Robert wanted Susanna for himself.

Jace chuckled. The situation seemed just too funny to him. His brother wanted exactly what Jace didn't want. As far as Jace was concerned, Robert could have it, all of it.

"I'm leaving, Robert," Jace said. "I just have to pack my stuff and then I'm gone."

"Leaving?" Robert echoed,

"Yes, I'm stepping down from my position in the pack and leaving for good. I won't be coming back."

"But...but, you're supposed to be the next alpha," Robert said. "You've always been next in line for alpha."

Jace shrugged. "I don't want it. I never did. That was always father's thing. You can have it as far as I'm concerned."

"And Susanna?"

"You can have her, too."

"You don't want Susanna?" Robert said it in such a way that Jace knew his brother couldn't fathom the idea.

"Robert, I don't want Susanna. I don't want any woman that father picks out for me. In fact, I don't want a woman at all. I prefer men."

"You're gay?"

The horror in Robert's voice made Jace roll his eyes. He really hoped that Joe's pack was as accepting as he said they were because Jace's pack would never accept Ethan and him being together.

"Yes, Robert, I'm gay," Jace said. "Not only am I gay, but I'm happily gay. I'd no more take Susanna as my mate than I would cut off my arm."

"That's disgusting," Robert shouted. Jace tensed once again as Robert took a step towards him. "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"I would have thought you'd be thrilled with the idea, Robert. You can have Susanna and the position as next in line for alpha. Isn't that what you always wanted?"

"You're going to shame us!" Robert shouted as he advanced on Jace.

Jace held his hands up in front of him, trying to ward Robert off. He didn't think it would work, though. Robert's face reddened with rage, and his eyes glittered with what Jace could only see as insanity. Robert had lost it.

"Robert," Jace said. He'd prefer to avoid a confrontation with his brother again. The last one cost Jace more than he wanted to think about right now. "I'm leaving for good. I'm not going to shame anyone. You can have it all."

Robert didn't seem to be listening to Jace's words. Jace braced himself as his brother jumped across the space between them. Jace narrowly missed being hit by the fists Robert aimed at his head. Jace jumped back, sweeping his leg out to trip Robert as he did. Robert fell forward, his chin connecting with Jace's leg. He grabbed out at Jace as he started to fall.

"What the hell is going on in here!" a voice shouted from behind Jace. He twirled around, fists ready to continue the fight with whoever stood behind him until he spotted his father.

"Robert!" his father shouted. "I demand an explanation."

Robert climbed to his feet and pointed toward Jace. "He's gay, father."

"Don't be ridiculous," Arthur Dominick replied. "He's next in line for alpha. He can't be gay."

"It's true," Robert said. "Ask him."

"Robert!" Arthur shouted. "I am not going to put shame on your brother like that. Everyone knows you can't be gay and be an alpha, and your brother is going to be the next alpha."

"Uh, no, I'm not," Jace said.

Jace could see the surprise on his father's face when the man turned to look at him. He held his ground, refusing to be intimidated by the alpha. Jace spent all of his life doing his father's bidding. He wasn't doing it a moment longer.

"I'm stepping down from my position as next in line for alpha and I'm leaving, father."

"That's out of the question," Arthur said. "You've been trained to be alpha your entire life. There is no one else that can take your place. I even arranged for Susanna to be here." Arthur wagged his finger at Jace. "And I don't appreciate how you treated her. I realize I should have said something to you before I moved her into your house, but I expect you to be nicer to her when she comes back."

"Father, she's not coming back," Jace said.

"Of course she is," Arthur said. "It might cost you some pretty little piece of jewelry to apologize to her for your behavior, but women like things like that. She'll forgive you soon enough once she moves in."

"Father!" Jace said a little louder. "You're not listening to me. Susanna is not coming back."

"She will be living in this house the moment her stuff arrives!"

Jace snorted. He just wasn't getting through to his father. He doubted anything he said ever would. His father was a stubborn man that only listened to what he felt was important.

"She's more than welcome to live here."

Arthur smiled. "That's more like it. I knew you'd understand."

"After I leave."

"Don't get that into your head again, JD," Arthur said, waving his hand at Jace. "You're not leaving."

"Yes, I am. I'm done, father. I don't want to be alpha. I never wanted to be alpha. That's what you've always wanted. I've found what I want, and it's time for me to go get it."

"I refuse to listen to this," Arthur said, not surprising Jace. "You will do as I say, and that's the end of it. I've conveyed your apologies to Susanna, and she should be returning in a few days. I expect you to behave when she does. She will be your mate."

Jace tightened his lips to keep from shouting at his father. No matter what he said, Arthur would just hear what he wanted to hear and nothing else. Nothing he said would make a difference. Jace knew the only way his father would understand would be when he was finally gone.

"Come along, Robert," Arthur said. "We need to discuss your behavior. I think maybe I have been too lenient with you. You must understand that your brother has been chosen to be the next alpha, not you."

Jace tuned his father out at that point. His father didn't say anything he hadn't said in the past. He watched as Robert followed their father out the door, shooting Jace a deep glare filled with hatred.

The moment the door closed behind them, Jace leaned back against it and took several deep breaths. His nerves were fried.

Thinking about it, Jace realized that his nerves were always fried after dealing with his father.

Jace chuckled and pushed himself away from the door. He headed back upstairs to start packing. He couldn't wait to be out of here and back with Ethan. Just the thought made him move a little faster until he nearly ran up the stairs.

His mate was waiting.

\* \* \* \*

Jace shut off the engine to his truck and stared at the house in front of him. He couldn't believe he was finally here. It seemed to take forever, but here he sat. Everything he owned sat in the back of his truck and the horse trailer behind that.

The decision to leave his pack and move to Wolf Creek had been the easy part. He knew he made the right decision even before he left. Ethan was his mate, and he needed to do everything within his power to hold on to him.

His decision had only been reinforced when he arrived back home to find his father had picked out a bride for him and moved her into his house without permission. Jace disliked the woman on sight. He hated her after her first word. She was a bitch.

He knew she could be considered gorgeous as far as women went, but to him, she held no appeal. She wasn't Ethan. Besides that, she seemed power hungry. She flirted with any man with clout, and Jace knew that if he married her, she would have been unfaithful within a week of their marriage.

He still wasn't sure if she slept with his father or not, but he wouldn't be surprised. Maybe she should have considered marrying his father instead of him. His father was a widower, so that shouldn't be a problem, and Jace certainly wasn't going to marry her.

He took one look at Susanna and knew that his life was no longer with his birth pack. His life was with Ethan.

It took him another six weeks to get all of his affairs in order, sell his house, and pack up everything he owned to move down here. He didn't call ahead because he wanted it to be a surprise, although he was pretty sure that Nate knew he would be back.

Now he needed find a new place to live, preferably some place that would take his two horses, then find his mate and move him in. Then, if Ethan didn't try to take his head off for being such an asshole, he needed to get to know his new mate.

Jace couldn't help but chuckle as he climbed from his truck and walked toward the house. He had so much to learn about Ethan, but he hoped the man was as feisty as Nate. Just the thought of Ethan standing up to him and giving him as much shit as Nate gave Joe made Jace harder than a rock.

Climbing up the steps, he reached down and readjusted himself, sighing deeply before knocking on the door. He couldn't wait to see the look on Joe's face when he found out that Jace was here, lock, stock, and horse trailer.

He could hear voices coming from inside of the house as he waited for someone to answer, feeling almost giddy as he waited. A huge grin covered Jace's face when the door opened. He winked when he saw the stunned look on Joe's face.

"Hey, Joe."

"JD, what are you doing here?"

"Jace, please, and," Jace said as he pointed over his shoulder to his truck parked in the driveway, "I made my decision."

"Oh, Jace, uh, hey," Joe stammered.

"Can I come in?" Jace asked. Confusion filled him at the shocked look on Joe's face. What the hell was going on? Why was Joe acting so strange? And why wouldn't he let Jace into the house?

"Now really isn't a good time, Jace. Maybe we can have lunch or something—"

"Hey, Joe, Nate said we had company," said a voice from behind Joe.

Jace watched as Joe dropped his head down for a moment then stood back. He took a step into the room, his eyes going to the small figure across the room. His breath caught in his throat, his heart thudding quickly in his chest at the sight before him.

It was his Ethan, but he looked different somehow, smaller, like he lost weight. He also supported himself with two titanium forearm crutches on either side of his body. But the look of shock in his baby blue eyes drew Jace the most.

"Jace," Ethan whispered reverently, the edges of his lips starting to turn up. Jace could smell the instant arousal fill the room the moment Ethan's eyes landed on him. Ethan suddenly dropped his eyes, the smell of fear overwhelming the scent of arousal as he turned away.

"Please, excuse me," he whispered almost silently as he walked away.

Jace took a step in his direction only to be stopped by a hand on his arm. He looked down to see Joe holding him back. "Joe, let go of me. I need to go see Ethan."

"No, you need to sit down and listen to me. Ethan has been through enough already. He doesn't need you adding to his problems," Joe said sternly.

Jace looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about? What happened to Ethan, Joe?"

"Come sit down, Jace."

"I don't want to sit down, damn it," Jace yelled as he tried to pull away from Joe. "I want to know what happened to my mate."

"I don't know what happened to him, Jace. He won't tell me," Joe said quietly.

"Fuck, Joe, what's going on?" Jace said, looking at him desperately. "Did my father get to him? Is that what happened?"

"Your father? Why would he want to hurt Ethan?"

Jace ran his hand through his hair as he sat down on the couch. "He got really angry when I left. When I got home, he'd found me a

bride and moved her into my house. I took one look at her and knew my life was here with Ethan. So, I packed up, sold my house, and here I am." He looked over at Joe. "Now, tell me what happened to Ethan."

Joe sat down in a chair across from the couch, shaking his head. "I'm not really sure. He won't talk about it. About two days after you left, I got a call from the hospital. Ethan had been brought in, and he was calling for me."

Jace watched Joe clasp his hands together. Joe rested his elbows on his knees as he looked back at Jace. He seemed nervous but concerned. It didn't reassure Jace at all. He braced himself for Jace's words as the man began to speak.

"It's his back, Jace. One of his vertebrae was compressed or broken or some such shit. I don't really understand it all, but the doctors said he'd never walk again." Joe chuckled. "Damned if he didn't walk right on out of there two weeks ago. Since then, he's been living here with Nate and me."

"He broke his back? But he's a werewolf," Jace replied in horror.

"I know, but some things can't be healed."

"Why doesn't he just shift? That would heal him."

"He can't. The doctor said he will probably never shift again. It might kill him if he tries. Because of that, he also can't heal properly. You need to be prepared for that, Jace. He's probably going to need those crutches for the rest of his life."

"I don't care about that. I just want to know what happened to him. Hell, Joe, I came back for him so that we could be together, and I don't care how we're together as long as we're together."

Joe nodded. "All right, but you need to be aware that something happened to Ethan. He's different now, more solemn. He doesn't laugh like he used to or smile very much. The smile on his face when he saw you was the first one I've seen in weeks."

Jace's heart ached with each word out of Joe's mouth. He couldn't stop thinking about what Ethan must have gone through, and all by himself. He had been all alone while Jace tried to get his shit together.

If Ethan didn't kick him to the curb at the first opportunity, Jace would consider himself lucky.

"Look, I need to go see him, talk to him," Jace said as he stood to his feet. The palms of his hands suddenly sweated. He couldn't believe how nervous he felt about seeing his mate. He needed to explain a lot, though, and he hoped Ethan would give him the time.

"Why don't you take him his lunch?"

Jace turned to see Nate standing in the archway, a tray of food in his hand. "Hey, Nate," Jace said as he walked over to take the tray. He smiled when he noticed enough food on the tray for two people.

"Jace, you want me to go take care of those horses of yours?"

Jace lifted an eyebrow, wondering for a brief moment how Nate knew about his horses, then laughed it away. Of course Nate knew. He was Nate. "Thanks, that would be great. And maybe you can talk to your mate about helping me find a place for Ethan and me to buy while you're at it."

Nate smiled. "Already done. I'll show it to you and Ethan tomorrow. Right now, though, you need to go get your little mate to agree to talk to you before you start planning his future. He's pretty upset. I can feel it from here. His room is right over there," Nate said, pointing to a room across the way

Jace nodded, a little confused at how Nate could feel Ethan's emotions from here when he couldn't but more concerned with what upset Ethan. Jace thought Ethan would be thrilled to see him. He certainly seemed that way the last time they met.

As Jace took the tray and started toward Ethan's room, he winced a little remembering the last time he saw Ethan. He had been pretty mean to him. Could that be what upset Ethan? Was he waiting for Jace to reject him again?

Jace paused outside of Ethan's room, talking a deep breath. Okay, he just needed to go in and explain to Ethan why this whole situation was so screwed up and how much they were meant to be together.

Simple, right?

## **Chapter 4**

Ethan threw himself down on his bed, grabbing a pillow and wrapping his arms around it. He couldn't believe Jace was here. He hadn't seen him since he walked out of his apartment several weeks ago. He felt like he lived in hell since then.

He missed Jace every second of every day. It created a huge, aching hole deep inside of his chest Ethan knew would never be filled. No matter what he said, Jace was his mate. And no matter what Ethan felt, Jace made it more than clear that he didn't want him. The proof lay in the pain that radiated through Ethan's back as he pulled his knees up.

Ethan couldn't stop the tears streaming down his face as he thought about all that he lost. He mated a man that despised him. The doctor told him that he could never shift again, and now he had to be in the very same house with the one man he couldn't have. He wondered how long Jace planned to stay and how hard it would be to avoid him.

Hearing someone at the door, Ethan turned his head, expecting Nate. Fear filled him when he saw Jace standing in the doorway. As Jace walked toward him, Ethan scooted back on the bed trying to get as far away from him as he could.

"Hey, Ethan, I brought you something to eat," Jace said as he set the tray on the nightstand and sat down on the side of the bed, looking over at Ethan.

As he reached out for him, Ethan shrank back in fear. Jace paused, his hand half way to Ethan's face then slowly lowered it back down to his lap. "Ethan? Is something wrong? Are you hurting?"

Ethan quickly shook his head, afraid to speak.

"You hungry?"

Ethan shook his head again. No, he wasn't hungry. He doubted he could even eat a bite right now. He'd probably throw it right back up. He just wanted Jace to leave, to go away. He wanted to not feel afraid anymore.

"Well, I am. Do you mind if I eat here with you?"

Ethan's eyes widened. Jace wanted to eat in here with him? He didn't think he could take it. As much as he was afraid of Jace, the mere scent of the man aroused him. He knew that if Jace stayed in the room, he'd smell it.

"Please, go away," he murmured softly.

"I can't go away, Ethan. This is where I belong," Jace replied almost as quietly.

Ethan quickly shook his head. "No, please," he cried out, almost sobbing when Jace leaned down and wrapped his arms around him. He put his hands on his chest, trying to push him away. Jace seemed to ignore his struggling. Ethan felt the warmth of Jace's body as the man picked him up and cuddled him closer.

"Oh, sweetness, please calm down. No one's going to hurt you, I promise. I won't let anyone hurt you," Jace crooned against Ethan's head. "Tell me who did this to you and I'll make sure that they never hurt you again."

Ethan stared up at Jace in shock. He didn't know. "You—you did this. You hurt me," he whispered.

Jace just stared at him. Ethan watched his mouth open as if he wanted to say something then closed it again. When he did finally say something, Ethan wasn't surprised at his denial. He expected it. Jace wouldn't want to admit he wasn't perfect.

"No, Ethan, you must be mistaken. I wouldn't do this to you. You're my mate. I would never hurt you," Jace said heavily, his voice filled with dismay.

"You did do this to me. Do you think I'm lying? You told me that you would never be my mate, that you could never love me, and then you threw me across the room." Ethan yelled by the time he finished.

"Ethan," Jace replied in a low, tormented voice.

Ethan started to hit Jace on the chest and shoulders, all of his grief and anger over the last couple of months suddenly came free as he cried. "I hate you. You did this to me. You've taken everything from me, and I hate you!"

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Jace cried as he wrapped his arms around Ethan, pinning his arms against his chest. Never could he have imagined that he could feel the level of pain he did when Ethan said he hated him. He felt ice spread through his stomach as he considered that he could have hurt Ethan.

He swallowed the despair in his throat as he whispered to Ethan, his hands gently rubbing Ethan's back as he tried to calm him. "Shh, sweetness, it's going to be okay. Shh."

A deep, unfamiliar pain filled his chest as Ethan's cries quieted down to the occasional hiccup. Jace just held him as he fell into a fitful sleep, his hands gripped in Jace's shirt. Every time he started to move, Ethan cried out, clenching his hands tighter.

Jace just stayed where he was, savoring the feel of Ethan in his arms. He knew this would be the last time that he would hold him. Jace could never ask Ethan to accept him after what he did, no matter how much he might want to.

For once in his miserable life, he needed to put someone else ahead of himself. He wasn't sure how he would accomplish that, but he would if it was the last thing he did. Ethan deserved at least that from him.

It was clear to Jace now that Ethan deserved much more. He deserved things Jace would never be able to give him. He could never

take Ethan's pain away, never go back and undo what he did. But he could ensure that Ethan's future was better.

That included Ethan not having to be afraid of his mate. If he left, Ethan wouldn't be afraid anymore. Jace never felt so ashamed of himself as he did when Ethan shrank back from him in fear. He never wanted to see that look in his mate's eyes again.

Jace turned his head when he heard the door open, watching Joe walk in. He gestured toward Ethan's sleeping form, holding his finger up to his lips to tell him to be quiet. Carefully extracting himself from Ethan's grasp, he rolled from the bed.

Jace grabbed the folded blanket off the end of the bed and covered Ethan up. He stared down at him for a moment, trying to memorize his beautiful features, then turned back toward Joe and pointed toward the door.

Jace gazed at Ethan one last time before quietly shutting the door behind him. Walking into the living room, he headed for the door. He stopped just before he reached it, taking a deep breath.

"I'll send you some money for Ethan's medical bills and whatever else he needs," he said softly, unable to keep the tremor out of his voice. "If you would look for a nice place for him to live, someplace that he can maneuver in easily, I'll arrange to send you some funds to buy it and a nurse to help him out. I'd also like for you to arrange for him to get some physical therapy. I'll pay for it, of course."

"Jace, where are you going?" Joe asked as Jace reached for the door handle.

"I'm leaving. It's what Ethan wants, what he needs," Jace replied, feeling tears form in his eyes at the very thought of leaving his mate. No matter where he went or where Ethan stayed, they were still mates and always would be.

"You can't just leave. He needs you. You're his mate," Joe argued.

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"I'm the last thing that he needs, Joe."
"Jace—"
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"He hates me, Joe."

"No, he doesn't. He's just mad at you right now. You did leave him with no explanation, remember?" Joe reminded him. Jace knew Joe just wanted to reassure him but nothing would at this point. Everything Ethan went through was his fault.

"No." Jace laughed bitterly as he turned to look back at Joe. "He hates me, and he has every right to hate me. I would."

"Jace, you're his mate. He—"

"I did it, Joe. I'm the one that hurt him," Jace said quietly.

As Joe just stared at him, his mouth hanging open in shock, Jace dropped to his knees, his grief overwhelming him. His hands clenched into fists. He pounded them against his thighs as tears fell down his face.

"I did this to him when I was here last time. I was so busy trying to deny him, I pushed him away, and he got hurt. Is there any wonder that he hates me? I'm his mate. I'm supposed to take care of him. Instead, I've caused him unimaginable pain."

Joe knelt on the floor next to Jace, rubbing his back. "Jace, it's going to be okay. We'll get past this."

"How can we get past this, Joe? He hates me," Jace cried. "First, I claimed him then left him. When I do come back, I don't remember him and I deny him, hurting him in the process. What's to get past? He's better off without me."

"Jace, did you explain to him about the silver poisoning? I know it's not an excuse, but it does explain why you didn't remember him. And I've known you for nearly twenty years. You would never intentionally hurt anyone. If it did happen like you say, it was an accident."

"And that makes it all better? That makes it all okay?"

"No, but—"

"Jace? I need to get ready for bed. Do you think you could come help me?"

Jace looked up to see Ethan standing in the doorway. An anxious frown covered his lips. Worry made the lines around Ethan's eyes seem darker.

"Of course, Ethan," Jace replied quickly as he wiped the tears from his eyes, jumping to his feet to cross the room to Ethan. He heard Joe's soft chuckle as he followed Ethan into the bedroom.

As Ethan sat down on the side of the bed, propping his crutches against the wall, Jace knelt at his feet, pulling his shoes off and setting them beside the nightstand. "What else can I do?"

"I need those bottles over there on my dresser," Ethan said as he pointed toward his dresser.

Jace got to his feet. He could feel Ethan's eyes on him as he grabbed the three bottles of pills and a bottle of lotion. He quickly turned to go back when he saw Ethan standing in front of him in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs.

Swallowing hard at the sudden lump in his throat, he walked over and handed Ethan the bottles. He closed his eyes briefly, praying that Ethan wouldn't notice the hard ridge in his pants or smell the scent of his arousal.

Opening his eyes, he saw Ethan gazing up at him still. He held up the bottle of lotion. "I need you to rub this into my back. The doctor says it will help with the swelling."

Yeah, he just bet it did.

He took the bottle from Ethan. Just the thought of rubbing anything on Ethan certainly increased his swelling. He just hoped he would be able to hide it from Ethan. From the little smirk on Ethan's face, he didn't think he did a very good job of it, though.

"How do you want to do this?" he asked, almost swallowing his tongue when Ethan just raised an eyebrow at him. "I mean, how do you—"

"It's easiest if I just lie down on the bed and you straddle my legs. Just remember not to push too hard or it will hurt," Ethan said as he

turned around and carefully climbed onto the bed, lying down on his stomach.

Jace stared down at him, gritting his teeth as he took in all the smooth skin beneath him. Even with Ethan looking thinner, due to his injury and time in the hospital Jace assumed, he was still the sexiest man Jace ever saw. And he was supposed to rub lotion on him?

Oh hell!

"Well?" Ethan asked as he turned his head to look up at him. "Are you going to help me, or do I need to call Nate in here?"

"No, I'll do it," Jace said as he climbed onto the bed and straddled Ethan's legs. Oh damn, Ethan's perfect little ass was right in front of him. Jace could feel his cock throbbing against his zipper, wanting out, wanting to get to that perfect little ass.

He took a deep breath and flipped the lotion open, squirting some onto his hands before closing the bottle and dropping it on the bed next to him. Rubbing his hands together to warm up the lotion, he began rubbing it into Ethan's back, careful to avoid going too low.

But apparently, Ethan was having none of that. He moved his hands down and pushed the edge of his boxers down to just above the soft curve of his ass cheeks. "You need to rub it in a little lower where the injury is."

"What exactly happened, Ethan?" Jace asked as he rubbed lower. Ethan was so quiet, Jace wondered if he would answer him. But then he felt him take a deep breath and heard him start talking.

"My injured is to the L3 vertebra on my spinal cord, or Lumbar vertebra, which is connected to the nerves in my leg, specifically the ones in my thighs. That's why I have to use the crutches to get around. My legs don't always do what I want them to do."

"Will you always have to use them?"

Ethan shrugged. "I don't know, maybe. The doctors at the hospital told me I would never walk again, and they were wrong about that, so..."

Jace dropped his head down into the middle of Ethan's back, overcome by his feelings of guilt. "I'm so sorry, sweetness. I never meant to hurt you. Please, believe me. I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world."

He sat up when Ethan pushed back against him, lifting himself up as Ethan rolled over onto his back. He just knew Ethan would berate him again, tell him what he already knew, that he was a horrible person.

"Tell me about the silver poisoning," Ethan said as he settled down onto his back, looking up at him curiously. Only at that moment did Jace realized that Ethan listened in on his conversation with Joe.

"Let's get you tucked in, and then I'll tell you," Jace said as he rolled off of Ethan to the side of the bed. "Do you need to visit the bathroom or anything?"

Ethan nodded. He rolled over to the side of the bed and reached for his crutches. Jace leaned down and lifted Ethan up into his arms, carrying him to the bathroom. He carefully set him on his feet before stepping out and closing the door.

He leaned his head against the cool wood while he waited for Ethan to take care of business, jumping when the door pulled open. Ethan gave him a little embarrassed smile, holding out his arms.

Jace grinned back. He swept Ethan into his arms again and carried him back to bed. He pulled the covers back and laid him down before covering him back up. He started to sit down on the side of the bed when Ethan flipped the covers back, looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, Ethan, this isn't a good idea."

"Please?"

Sighing deeply, Jace slowly unbuttoned his shirt in case Ethan wanted to protest. Jace watched Ethan carefully and searched for any sign of discomfort from the man. When none came, he draped the shirt over a nearby chair. Jace pushed his boots off his feet then his socks before kneeling on the side of the bed.

"Aren't you going to take your jeans off?" Ethan asked.

"Uh, Ethan, I'm not wearing anything under my jeans," Jace said, feeling his face heat up.

Ethan just smirked, closing his eyes. "I won't look, I promise."

Jace looked at Ethan for a moment before quickly unzipping his jeans and pushing them off his legs. He jumped into the bed so quickly Ethan giggled, rolling against him. He came to rest with his face in Jace's chest, his legs pressed against the side of Jace's.

Jace inhaled swiftly at the feel of Ethan's body pressed against his. Why couldn't he have discovered this before he fucked it all up? Ethan felt wonderful pressed against his body, the soft feel of his skin heating every spot he touched.

Ethan just scooted up until his head lay on Jace's arm. He placed a hand hesitantly against Jace's chest. "Okay, so I'm all tucked up in bed. Now, tell me."

Jace took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "A few days before we met, my brother and a few of his friends tried to kill me using silver knives. He wanted to be the next in line for the alpha position. I defended myself but came away from it with silver poisoning."

"Your brother tired to kill you?" Ethan whispered. Jace could hear the disgust in his voice at the thought.

"Things are different where I come from, Ethan. It's a constant fight for ranking, for position in the pack. In a sense, it's dog eat dog."

"My God!" Ethan exclaimed.

He brought his arm up, patting Ethan on the shoulder. "It's okay, Ethan. He has no reason to come after me now. I gave up my ranking in the pack to him. He can have it and all of the crap that goes with it."

"You gave up being the next alpha? Why on earth would you do that?" Ethan asked. The shock clearly showed on Ethan's face as he looked up at Jace.

Jace shrugged his shoulders. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time." He couldn't very well tell Ethan that he gave up being the next alpha to be with him, not when Ethan didn't want him anymore. He didn't want Ethan to feel bad.

"So, what does all of this have to do with me?"

"Oh, sweetness, I wish it didn't have anything to do with you, but it does. The night that I claimed you, I suffered from the silver poisoning."

"Are you saying that if you hadn't been poisoned you never would have claimed me?" Ethan whispered.

"God, no! I'm not saying that at all, Ethan. It's just the reason I don't remember it. There's actually about a week there I don't remember a thing. I remember arriving in town, then nothing until I woke up in my bed at home."

"So, you were serious when you said that you didn't know me that day?"

Jace nodded. "I'm sorry, Ethan. I wish I did."

"You really don't remember claiming me?"

Jace could hear such sadness in Ethan's voice that it made his eyes water. "I know I did. I know that you're my mate, but no, I don't remember it."

He lifted an eyebrow in query when Ethan began to laugh. He laughed so hard that he tears streamed down his face. Jace started to become concerned at the bitter sound in his laughter. When Ethan finally quieted down, he laid his head back down on Jace's chest. He could feel Ethan's tears continue to fall on his skin even after the laughter stopped.

"I saved myself for you, did you know that? I wanted my first time to be with my mate, I wanted it to be special. How stupid was that? You don't even remember it," Ethan cried. His hand tightened into a fist on Jace's chest.

It took everything in Jace to keep from crying right along with Ethan. He claimed him, took his virginity, and he didn't even

remember it. He would give almost anything to remember just a little of it.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. You don't know how much I wish that I did remember it. It should have been a special time for both of us. At least you have the memory, though. I know I claimed you, but I don't remember anything about it. I don't know if I ever will."

Jace reached down to pat Ethan's hand when he sniffled. Ethan turned his hand, holding onto his. "It was nice."

"Did I—was I good to you?" Jace asked hesitantly.

"Yes."

Oh, thank God!

Jace would be devastated if he hadn't made Ethan's first time enjoyable. He might not remember it, but Ethan did. Jace consoled himself with the knowledge that he gave Ethan something good to remember.

"Did I hurt you? Then I mean, not later."

"No, you didn't hurt me."

At least he had that. If he was only going to have that one time with Ethan, at least he made it good for him. "I'm glad, Ethan."

"Maybe I'll tell you about it some time," Ethan murmured.

Jace tilted his head up to look down at Ethan. Was he serious? First off, the idea of Ethan describing their first time together excited him beyond belief. Second, that Ethan even considered that they might see each other again, well that just made Jace want to kiss him all over.

"You must have really thought I was a complete nutcase that day in my apartment." Ethan chuckled.

"I didn't know what to think, Ethan. I know I didn't like the way Joe talked to you, but I didn't understand why. I also thought you looked like the sexiest damn thing I ever saw," Jace replied.

"Then I opened my mouth."

"You did surprise me, that's for sure. I was positive I never met you. It wasn't until Joe started talking to me and then Nate did his little thing that I realized there might be something to what you said."

"Why did you leave me, then?"

"I needed time to think. I was raised my entire life knowing exactly where my life was going. I was next in line for alpha. I never even considered another life. You kind of threw me for a loop."

"I wouldn't have kept you from being alpha, Jace. Surely you know that."

"You wouldn't have, but being mated to you would. My father doesn't tolerate anyone being in a same sex relationship. Neither do most of my pack. If I mated you, I couldn't be alpha."

Ethan was silent for a moment, but when he began to speak, his voice sounded so quiet, Jace needed to lean down to hear him. "I'm sorry, Jace. If you want to go, I'll understand."

"I'm not, Ethan," Jace assured him as he squeezed his hand. "I can think of no other place I'd rather be than right here with you."

"You don't want to be your pack alpha?" Ethan sounded skeptical. Jace couldn't blame the man. What wolf didn't want to be alpha of his own pack, well, besides him?

Jace shook his head. "No, I never wanted it. It was just expected since before I can remember. I've always wanted to own a horse ranch. What about you?"

Ethan shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I guess I've never really thought about it."

"What do you think about horses? Do you like them?" Jace asked, mentally crossing his fingers.

"I've never really been around them. Why?" Ethan asked curiously, looking up at Jace.

"I thought maybe we'd buy a ranch or something, if you wanted. I can teach you anything you don't know about horses," Jace assured him, wondering if he stepped over the line with Ethan. He didn't say he would let Jace stick around, but he didn't say he couldn't.

"Could we get a dog?"

Yes! Jace silently yelled to himself.

"What kind of dog do you want?" he asked instead.

"I don't know. I've just never had a dog, and I've always wanted one," Ethan said, shrugging his shoulders.

"How about we get one after we find a house? Nate said that he already has a place he wants to show us tomorrow."

"Okay."

Jace lay there with Ethan in his arms. He wondered how Ethan could possibly be so forgiving of him after everything he did. He probably would be yelling and screaming, but Ethan just wanted to know if he could get a dog. How in the hell did he ever get so lucky?

"Jace?"

"Yeah, Ethan?"

"Will I get to stay when you bring your wife home?" Ethan asked hesitantly.

"Ethan, I'm not married," Jace replied, confused.

"Not now, but you will be some day."

"Who do you think I'm going to marry?" Jace asked, tilting his head to look down at Ethan again.

He watched Ethan drop his eyes as he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but you won't be single forever."

"Ethan, I'm not single now." Surely Ethan understood that. They were mated. That meant he wasn't going to be with anyone else but Ethan.

"But you said you weren't married."

"I'm not, but I'm mated to you, Ethan. That means I'm not single," Jace reasoned.

"I know that, but you can't go your entire life without sex. You're going to find someone someday. You'll probably want to get married and have kids. I just need to know where I stand once you bring her home."

His whole life without sex? Did that mean Ethan didn't want to be with him again? Did he screw things up that badly between them? Jace almost laughed. Of course he did. Why would Ethan want to consider being intimate with him after what he did to him?

"You never have to leave, Ethan. Wherever I have a home, you do, too," Jace said as he tried to hold back his tears. "And I will never bring anyone else into our home."

"Then—then you'll set up two homes?"

Ethan's voice seemed to be filled with confusion. Jace really didn't want to discuss this with him. If he put it into words, it made it more real. He would much rather pretend that it would never happen.

"No, sweetness. Our home will always be my only home. I would never do that to you."

"I understand, just—please, if we're going to be living together, don't bring them home. I know I have to share you, but I would really prefer that you don't bring them home. Maybe you could get an apartment in town for that or something?"

Jace scooted up against the headboard, staring down at Ethan. "Who is *they*, Ethan? Who do you think I'll be bringing home?"

"Your lady friends," Ethan said, like it was a done deal.

"What lady friends?"

Ethan shrugged, his face turning a little red. "Whoever you go to for—well, you know."

"Ethan, if you don't want to have sex with me, fine. I won't make you, but that doesn't mean there will be a string of people in my life, either. I take being mated very seriously. I would never be unfaithful to you."

Ethan sat up, staring at Jace in total confusion. "But, I thought—you said—but, you're not gay. You said so at my apartment."

"Is that what this is all about?" Jace asked in shock before he started laughing. "Sweetness, I said I wasn't gay because I was still in that I'm going to be the alpha of my pack mode. Alphas in my pack

can't be gay. That's one of the reasons I left. Ethan, I'm just as gay as you are."

"You're gay?" Ethan whispered.

Jace stared at Ethan. The expression on his mate's face was almost comical. He looked astounded. Jace wanted to laugh. Instead, he grabbed Ethan by the shoulders and pulled him up, pressing his lips against his as he drew him in for a long, passionate kiss.

He heard Ethan whimper as his tongue moved out to caress his lips. He pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around his back even as he delved deeper into his mouth. He could feel Ethan's hands pressed against his chest, his cock hardening against his hip.

Lifting his head, Jace looked into Ethan's dazed eyes. "I'm very gay, Ethan. I'd really like the chance to prove it to you. But this time, there are no excuses, no silver poisoning, no forgotten memories. This time, we'll both know what we're doing."

Ethan nodded his head slowly. Jace leaned in and kissed him. He promised himself that he would make this the best experience of Ethan's life, even better than the first time, which could be hard considering Jace didn't remember the first time, but he was willing to try.

Jace rubbed his hands down Ethan's smooth chest. As his palms grazed over Ethan's nipples, he heard a small hitch in Ethan's breathing. His hands stayed, his fingers tugging on the small pale brown nubs. Ethan whimpered and Jace felt like a god.

He pulled his lips away from Ethan's and scooted down Ethan's body. Ethan's body looked beautiful, so perfectly formed. Jace couldn't understand how he could ever forget making love to him. He felt an urgent need to map out every square inch of flesh he could find just so he'd never forget again.

With that single thought in mind, Jace pushed Ethan's boxers down his legs and flung them across the room. He grinned up at Ethan feeling wild and free for the first time in a very long time, then lowered his lips to Ethan's body, ready to get the exploration started.

## Chapter 5

Ethan squirmed beneath Jace's larger body as the man began to lick him. He was stunned Jace was even here, that the lips gently sucking on his nipples belonged to the man he thought he would never see again, let alone be intimate with.

He just couldn't believe that an hour ago he figured he would be alone for the rest of his life. Now, Jace was here, loving on him, saying they would be together as mates. Ethan still wasn't sure he believed that. Too much happened.

But the alternative, being without Jace for the rest of his life, just didn't seem worth considering. Jace was everything Ethan always wanted in a mate. Ethan needed to believe this was real. If he didn't, he might actually lose his mind for good. He wasn't so sure he hadn't started to.

Ethan moaned as Jace tugged gently on one nipple before moving to the other, giving it the same treatment. He remembered how good it had been with Jace the first time. He also remembered Jace being gone when he woke up.

"Sweetness? What's wrong?" Jace asked as he lifted his head. "Are you not enjoying yourself?"

Ethan frowned. "What do you mean?"

Jace lifted his body up and pointed to Ethan's semi-hard cock which had been rock hard moments ago. "Am I hurting you?"

Ethan felt his face flush. He shook his head.

Jace crawled up the bed to stretch out next to him, leaning on his elbow. Ethan closed his eyes, filled with embarrassment. He just knew he was going to fuck this up. Jace would leave and he'd never

see him again. Ethan turned his face away to hide the sudden tears that prickled his eyes.

"Ethan?" Jace whispered close to his ear. "Do you want me to leave? I'll go if that's what you want. I don't want to do anything to hurt you, not again."

Ethan shook his head rapidly. No, he didn't want Jace to leave. That seemed to be his whole problem. He wanted Jace to stay forever. He just wanted Jace to want it, too, and he felt terribly afraid that he'd wake up in the morning and Jace would be gone again.

Ethan felt Jace's fingers caress the side of his face. "Please tell me what's wrong, Ethan. I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong."

Ethan wiped his eyes then turned to look at Jace. "Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Is that what this is all about?" Jace asked looking decidedly confused. "Ethan, I told you that I'm here for good. I've left my pack to be here with you. I'm not going anywhere."

Ethan shook his head. "No, you didn't."

"Yes, I di—"

Ethan held his breath as a perplexed look came over Jace's face. Would he leave now? Would he decide that Ethan was too needy and leave? Ethan's heart thudded in his chest as Jace suddenly jumped up from the bed and grabbed his jeans. This was it. Jace was leaving. Ethan didn't know if he could bear it.

He held his breath to keep from sobbing as he watched Jace pull his jeans on. He prayed that he could keep his sorrow locked safely behind his lips until Jace left. He wanted some dignity. He didn't want Jace's last memories to be of him begging.

"I'll be right back," Jace said, pointing a finger at Ethan. "Don't move from that spot."

"Wha—"

Ethan watched Jace race out of the room, his jeans barely buttoned. He pushed himself up farther on the bed and pulled the blankets up to cover his naked body. He didn't understand what Jace was up to.

Before he could continue with his thoughts, the bedroom door swung open and Jace came back in. Ethan rolled over to watch him strip out of his jeans and climb back onto the bed.

"Give me your hand," Jace ordered.

Ethan held out his hand feeling even more confused and maybe just a bit frightened, when Jace slapped a handcuff on his wrist. Then Jace clicked the other end to his own wrist. He looked up at Ethan, a wide grin on his face.

"Now you know I'm not going anywhere without you. Joe has the only key, and he won't come in to rescue us until morning."

Ethan held up their cuffed wrists, his eyebrow raised. He glanced over at Jace. "Into kink, are you?"

"No," Jace said, shaking his head. "Can't very well go anywhere without you like this, now can I?" Jace shook their bound wrists. "As for the kink angle? Never thought about it before, but I'd be willing to give it a shot. What do you say, sweetness? Should we buy a set for ourselves?"

Ethan nearly choked. He gaped at Jace in astonishment. "You want to get handcuffs?"

"It could be fun." Jace chuckled and then his face grew serious. "Can I stay, Ethan?"

"You're asking me?"

"You're the only one who matters."

Ethan gazed into Jace's face as he tried to consider his answer. Jace seemed to be leaving the decision in his hands, but what about in the light of day? What happened when the cuffs came off?

"Jace, you know I'm never going to be normal, don't you?" Ethan asked. "I'll never shift, never be able to run with you. I'll always need a little extra help. Hell, I'll probably have to use those damn crutches for the rest of my life."

Ethan watched Jace's green eyes darken with pain. "I know, and I can never tell you how sorry I am for that, Ethan. I swear I never meant to hurt you."

"I don't want to be with you if you're only here out of some misguided guilt trip," Ethan stated vehemently. "I'd rather be alone for the rest of my life than be a pity fuck."

Ethan didn't think it was possible, but Jace's eyes darkened even more only this time they darkened with anger. "You do remember that I came back here to be with you before I even knew you had been hurt, right?"

Ethan swallowed past the lump in his throat then nodded.

"I came back because I wanted to be with you. I gave up everything, my home, my status in my pack, even my pack, to be with you. Just because things are a little different now doesn't mean I'm going to leave, Ethan."

"But—" Jace's finger covered Ethan's lips.

"No buts, Ethan. You're my mate, for better or for worse. The only way you can get me to leave is to tell me you don't want me." Jace's brow furrowed. "Is that it, Ethan? Do you not want me?"

Ethan's mouth dropped open in shock. "You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious. If you don't want me, tell me now, and I'll go. I'll never bother you again."

"Jace, I looked for you. I looked for you every damn day." He waved his hand, only remembering that they wore cuffs when Jace grunted. "I searched everywhere, the hospital, the hotels, the bars. Hell, I even searched the damn ditches looking for you." He let their chained hands fall back to the bed. "You're my mate, the one person I waited my entire life for," he said quietly, almost a whisper. "The way you made me feel that night...I..."

"What, sweetness?" Jace murmured. "Just say it."

"You made me feel special, like I mattered to you."

"You do matter, Ethan," Jace said. "Why do you think we're handcuffed together?"

Ethan smirked. "Cause you're weird."

Jace chuckled back. "True as that may be, we're handcuffed together so that you know I'm not going anywhere without you. It's just you and me now, sweetness, as long as we live." Jace's eyes dropped. "Unless you don't want me and would rather I leave."

Ethan watched Jace, realizing his mate felt just as unsure about things as he did. He reached up with his free hand and cupped the side of Jace's face. "I want you. I've wanted you since the first night I saw you."

"And if I wasn't your mate?" Jace asked, his eyes rising to meet Ethan's.

"I'd still want you."

Jace seemed to let out a relieved breath then he grinned up at Ethan. "Then can we get on with this show? My nuts are about to fall off."

"Please, by all means, continue the show. I wouldn't want to be the cause of your nuts falling off," Ethan said. He scooted down the bed as fast as his injured back would let him. "I'm all yours."

"You bet your sweet ass you are," Jace growled fiercely as he moved to cover Ethan's body with his. The way Jace looked down at him made Ethan feel like the prey to a hunter. It was wild, aggressive, powerful. It made Ethan's toes curl.

"Jace," Ethan groaned. Jace grinned and then leaned down to swipe his tongue across Ethan's nipple, then the other one. Ethan squirmed, hot passion overwhelming him, but Jace's hands held him firm.

Ethan spread his legs as Jace licked and nibbled down his body. His skin ached everywhere Jace touched. He burned. He wanted to be consumed. He wanted Jace to fuck him until he couldn't walk. Well, at least until he couldn't walk without feeling it.

Ethan clenched his fingers in Jace's hair and pulled. Foreplay felt good, but he wanted to get down to the really good stuff. "Jace," Ethan pleaded, "need you."

"Gonna get me, sweetness."

Ethan understood exactly what Jace meant when his hard cock was enveloped in hot moist heat. Ethan bucked against Jace's mouth. His mind reeled with the sensations shooting through his body, sensations he never felt before.

His world spiraled out of control when he felt two lubed fingers push into his ass. Between the mouth around his cock and the fingers in his ass, Ethan felt so stimulated he knew he could fly to the moon.

"Jace!" Ethan cried out. "I can't—I can't—Aahhh!" Fingers pushed into his body once again and curved inward, touching the hidden button inside. Ethan saw sparks of light flash before his eyes as his seed erupted into Jace's mouth. Then the world went dark.

\* \* \* \*

Jace swallowed all of Ethan's release then cleaned him up with his tongue. Once done, he slowly licked his way back up Ethan's body, his fingers till moving inside Ethan's tight ass. Ethan had come. Now it was his turn.

He pulled his fingers from Ethan's ass and squirted some more lube on his cock. He wanted to make things as easy as possible for Ethan. No pain, only pleasure. He scooted up between Ethan's legs and pushed the head of his cock against Ethan's hole. Then he looked up.

Jace's mouth dropped open in surprise. Ethan was out cold. For a moment, Jace worried that he hurt Ethan in some way. His heart pounded as he leaned over Ethan and tried to shake him awake, his hard cock forgotten.

"Ethan? Baby?" He said softly. "Ethan? Come on, wake up." Ethan's eyes fluttered.

"That's it, come on, sweetness, open those beautiful blue eyes for me."

Ethan's eyes fluttered again, then opened, a dazed look in them. "What happened?" Ethan asked, looking around as if confused. As he looked down, his face suddenly flooded with color. "Oh lord, I passed out again," Ethan groaned. "I *have* got to stop doing that."

"You're okay?" Jace asked, still concerned. "I didn't hurt you?"

If possible, Ethan's face blushed even more as he shook his head. "No, you didn't hurt me. If anything you—well, you didn't hurt me."

Jace watched Ethan for just a moment then chuckled. "We're going to have to work on your stamina."

Assured that Ethan was okay Jace's body started to notice the sexy man it pinned to the bed. Jace's cock hardened right back up, wanting its turn. Jace grabbed his cock with his free hands and pushed against Ethan again.

"You ready for me?"

Ethan grinned. That was all the invitation Jace needed. He slowly pushed his way in, watching Ethan's face for any sign of discomfort. When one didn't come, Jace thrust the rest of the way in until he was seated to the root.

Oh, he was in heaven. Ethan's grip around Jace's aching cock felt better than anything he ever felt. Jace began to slowly move. Each gentle thrust took him higher. He knew they were meant to be together. Ethan's body fit his perfectly.

Jace grabbed Ethan's leg with his free hand and lifted it up to place it over his shoulder when Ethan suddenly cried out. It didn't sound like a cry of pleasure. Jace froze and looked down at his mate.

"What?" he asked quickly. "What is it?"

Ethan's tear stained eyes looked up to look at Jace. "I can't—I don't bend like that anymore."

"Do you want me to stop?" Jace asked.

Ethan shook his head. "No, but how—" Ethan stopped, his face burning red.

Jace grinned. "Not to worry, sweetness, I have an idea." He quickly slid out of Ethan's body and rolled the man onto his side. He

patted Ethan's hand as he cuddled up behind him. Grabbing a pillow, he placed it between Ethan's legs, then moved in again.

Jace clasped the hand cuffed to him and wrapped it around Ethan's body, Ethan's head lying on his arm. He used his free hand to grab Ethan's hip, then slowly pushed his cock back into Ethan's hot grasp.

"There are a lot of different ways that we can do this, sweetness," Jace whispered into Ethan's ear. "Half the fun will be figuring out which ones work for us."

Ethan turned his head to look back at Jace. "You're not mad?"

"Never. This position is just as good as any other, maybe even better," Jace replied. "This way I have something to hold onto while I fuck you." To back up his words, Jace reached around and grabbed Ethan's cock with his free hand. He began pumping it as he thrust into Ethan from behind.

Jace felt Ethan's hand tighten around his. "Is this okay, Ethan? You're not hurting?"

"No, I'm good." He sounded breathless. "I—oh, oh, right there, Jace."

Jace grinned. He stroked Ethan faster. He thrust faster. Ethan's little moans of delight sent Jace through the roof. He just knew his cock would explode any moment. The warning tingle began to tickle his spine.

"Ethan, I want to claim you again."

Jace held his breath as he waited for Ethan's response. He wouldn't blame him in the least if Ethan said no or that he wanted to wait. The air in his lungs came out in a huge sob as Ethan tilted his head to the side, baring his neck to Jace.

"Ethan," he whispered right before he leaned forward and sank his teeth into the soft skin between Ethan's neck and shoulder. A sweet, tangy blast of taste shot into his mouth as he claimed Ethan again. It went straight to his cock, sending Jace over the edge of ecstasy. He couldn't believe he would ever forget the taste of claiming his mate. There was nothing like it on earth. It was better than running free through the woods, better than sniffing the calm cool air. It was almost better than sex. He had been such a fool to ever think he could give this up.

Jace felt the knot in the end of his cock extend and take root inside of Ethan. He distantly heard Ethan cry out and felt hot seed pour over his hand. He didn't have the strength to do more than withdraw his teeth and lick the small bite mark closed before he curled around Ethan and fell into an exhausted sleep, still connected to his mate.

\* \* \* \*

Consciousness came to Ethan in an instant. One moment he slept. The next, he was awake. He opened his eyes, briefly wondering where he was as he did most mornings. He still wasn't used to sleeping at Joe and Nate's house. He doubted he ever would. Still, it took him a moment to remember.

Then the events of the previous night flooded Ethan's head as his body filled with a few aches and pains. He glanced back over his shoulder to find Jace staring back at him.

"Still here, sweetness."

Ethan remembered the handcuffs and wondered if that explained why Jace was still here. He looked back at his arm, surprised to find he was no longer handcuffed to Jace. Turning back to Jace, Ethan raised his eyebrow in query.

Jace chuckled. "Joe came in earlier and released us." He reached back and grabbed something off the nightstand. Turning back to Ethan, he let the silver handcuffs dangle from his fingertips.

"He did say we could keep these if we wanted."

Ethan felt his face flush. He dropped his eyes from Jace's intense stare and rolled over to face away from him. He was a little stunned that Jace remained here. He fully expected him to be gone, handcuffs

or not. The fact that Jace was still here confused Ethan as much as it thrilled him.

"So, what do you say we get some breakfast and then go see this place Nate told me about?" Jace asked.

"Jace, are you sure you want to do this?" Ethan asked hesitantly.

"Get some breakfast or see the ranch?"

"Jace."

Ethan felt Jace cup his face, turning his head back to look at him. His finger grazed down the side of Ethan's face, over the bridge of his nose, then across his lips. Jace leaned down and gave Ethan a small kiss.

"Yes, I'm sure that I want to do this, Ethan."

Ethan took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he regarded Jace for several moments. Finally, he nodded his head. "Okay, then. Get me my crutches. I need to visit the little boy's room."

Jace grinned. He swooped down for another kiss before rolling to the side of the bed. Ethan squeaked when Jace turned around, reached back, and picked him up before carrying him into the bathroom.

"Jace, you can't carry me everywhere," Ethan insisted as Jace set him on his feet.

"Who says?" Jace asked as he slipped out of the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Ethan rolled his eyes and turned to do what he needed in the bathroom. After flushing the toilet, Ethan grabbed the metal hand bars that Joe put in and moved to the sink. He washed his hands then brushed his teeth. Looking at himself in the mirror, Ethan wondered what he got himself into.

Was he really going to let Jace stay? Ethan wanted him to. He dreamed of nothing else for months, but could he trust that Jace would stick around? Ethan's life changed a lot in the last several weeks.

There were days Ethan felt so much pain he couldn't even get out of bed. And doing anything that took a lot of walking or physical work was out of the question. That was all part of Ethan's past.

Would Jace get fed up and leave when things got hard? Ethan wasn't even close to being a normal werewolf anymore. He'd never shift or run through the woods. He'd never be able to join the pack on a full moon hunt. He didn't even know if he would ever be able to participate in the full moon mating as other mates wolves did.

Basically, Ethan didn't have anything to offer Jace. Ethan shook his head, filled with despair. If he truly cared about Jace, the best thing he could do was to give Jace his freedom. Jace needed to find someone else to mate with, someone normal.

Ethan used the metal bars again and moved to the toilet, sitting down on the seat as the strength seemed to leave his body. Jace claimed Ethan again just last night. Once a mate had been claimed, that bond could only be severed by the death of one of the mates. That only meant one thing. Ethan was in trouble.

Ethan jumped when someone knocked on the bathroom door. "Are you about done in there, sweetness?"

Sweetness! Ethan swallowed past the lump in his throat. "Yeah, I'll be right out." He took a deep breath and heaved himself into a standing position and stepped toward he sink. He quickly wet a washcloth and wiped his face. He ran a brush through his hair and then took a deep breath.

Holding onto the grab bar, Ethan carefully moved to the door. He plastered a serene look on his face and opened it. Jace sat on the side of the bed waiting for him. Ethan pointed to his crutches. "I need those."

"You need me," Jace replied as he stood up and crossed the room. Ethan heaved a huge sigh as Jace picked him up and carried him over to the bed. When Jace set him down, Ethan glared up at him.

"Jace, you can't keep doing this," Ethan said. "I have to get used to using the crutches."

Jace squatted down in front of him and cupped his hands around Ethan's face. "Ethan, I hate the fact that you have to use those damn things, but I—"

Ethan pulled Jace's hands away from his face. "Jace, I told you what it would be like. This is my life now." He gestured to the crutches. "Those are my life now. That's not going to change just because you don't like it."

Jace opened his mouth to say something then snapped it closed. He reached for Ethan's hands and grasped them. "I know that, Ethan. Do you think I don't? But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Jace, you—"

"No," Jace said, shaking his head, "you listen to me this time. I get it that you will probably have to use those damn crutches for the rest of your life, but that doesn't mean I don't have the right to make things as easy as possible for you."

"I don't want you to feel like you—"

"I don't *have* to do anything, Ethan. I want to. You're my mate. If carrying you everywhere makes things easier for you and gives me an excuse to hold you in my arms, what does it hurt?"

Ethan just didn't have an argument for that. What could he say? *Don't hold me* when he wanted it more than anything? *Go away* when that scared him the most? Ethan knew he wanted to be with Jace. He just didn't know if *he* would be enough.

"Promise me you'll tell me if it gets to be too much for you? Don't keep it from me because you feel guilty and think you have to stay with me. I don't want you here out of pity, Jace."

Jace was silent for a moment, but then he nodded. "I don't pity you, Ethan. Yes, I feel responsible for what happened to you. Nothing in this world is ever going to change that. I did this to you. I have to live with that. But I'm here because I want to be here, nothing else."

"And?"

Jace chuckled. "And I will tell you if it gets to be too much for me." Jace held up his hand. "Promise."

Ethan laughed.

"Now," Jace said, "I want you to promise me something." Ethan nodded.

"Promise me that you'll give us a chance. Stop thinking I'm here out of some misguided sense of guilt. Accept the fact that I'm here because I want to be here." Jace patted Ethan's leg. "These? They're only a part of who you are, a small part. I want to get to know the rest of you, what you think, what you want, even what you don't want."

"Oh, Jace, I—" Ethan's voice trailed away under the powerful intensity in Jace's gaze. He felt like an idiot when tears prickled the corner of his eyes. He seemed to do a lot of crying around Jace.

"I want everything, Ethan. I want to be there with you when you go through your physical therapy. I want to learn how to care for you at home. I want to make your life easier, and it has very little to do with what happened to you. I want it because you're my mate. I would have wanted these things even if you didn't get injured."

"Okay," Ethan said. There wasn't really any other way for him to answer. Jace seemed to want him despite everything. Ethan knew he would be stupid to throw it all away because of his fears. He'd just have to deal with them one day at a time and hope Jace didn't leave in the meantime.

Jace leaned up and gave Ethan a kiss. He stood to his feet and grabbed Ethan's crutches and handed them to him. "So, what do you say we get dressed and then we'll go grab something to eat and see that ranch Nate told me about?"

Ethan's voice wobbled as he let out a little laugh. "Why don't you get me something out of the dresser to wear, then? I also need my pills off of the top of the dresser. If you want to learn this stuff, you might as well start now."

"I can do that," Jace said as he walked to the dresser. "I just have one question."

Ethan raised an eyebrow at the heated flush filling Jace's face. "What?" he asked cautiously.

"How do you feel about going commando?"

## Chapter 6

Jace grinned as he flipped an egg in the frying pan. He watched Ethan shuffle across the kitchen on his crutches and lean against the counter. This morning was going better than he could have ever imagined.

He knew Ethan had misgivings about letting him stay. He was scared. Jace knew Ethan had every reason to be frightened. Not only had he been responsible for Ethan's injuries, but he denied their mating and left Ethan.

Jace wouldn't be surprised if Ethan changed his mind at any moment and kicked him to the curb. He wouldn't blame him, either. Jace just hoped in the time Ethan gave him that he would be able to show his mate that they had something worth fighting for. Jace would do everything in his power to prove just that.

"Hard or runny?"

"Huh?" Ethan asked in confusion.

Jace chuckled at the small frown that came over Ethan's face. "Your eggs, sweetness, do you like the yolks hard or runny?"

"Oh," Ethan grinned. "Sunnyside up, I guess."

"Slightly runny, then."

Ethan propped his crutches against the counter and reached for a loaf of bread. He opened it up and pulled out a couple of slices before casting a curious glance at Jace. "Wheat or white?"

"Sourdough, if I have a choice, otherwise white," Jace replied.

"Sourdough isn't bad, but do you know how bad white bread is for you?" Ethan asked, his face scrunched up in disgust. "It's terrible for your body, nothing but filler."

Jace chuckled. Ethan practically shuddered with revulsion. "Guess I'm not much of a nutritional eater. You'll have to keep me in line."

Ethan pointed the butter knife in his hand at Jace. "No more junk food for you, mister. You just wait until I get you on a proper diet. You'll see how much better it is for you, how much better it makes you feel."

Jace couldn't help himself. He grabbed Ethan around the waist and lifted him up to sit on the butcher block counter. He stepped in close between Ethan's legs then leaned down to nuzzle Ethan's neck with his lips.

"What will you give me in return?" Jace murmured.

Ethan did shudder this time, but Jace doubted he did so with disgust. His head fell back, giving Jace unobstructed access to the silky skin of his neck. Ethan's cock perked right up, ready to come out and play.

"Anything you want as long as you promise never to stop doing that," Ethan gasped. Ethan's arms wrapped around Jace's neck. Jace raked his canines across the mating mark in Ethan's neck. Ethan's hands clenched in Jace's hair, pulling him closer.

Jace groaned. Fuck, Ethan was hot. He was so damn responsive to Jace's touch. Jace just needed to touch Ethan and the man seemed to go up in flames. If that didn't turn a man on, Jace didn't know what did.

"Do you know how hot you are, sweetness?" Jace whispered against Ethan's silky skin. "How much you turn me on?" Jace grabbed one of Ethan's hands and placed it against his hard cock. A deep growl broke from his throat when Ethan gave him a tight squeeze.

"Every damn time I look at you, I want to rip all of your clothes off and fuck you until you never forget who you belong to," Jace said.

He could see the effect his words on Ethan in the darkening of his blue eyes. It was also clearly evident in the hardness that pressed against Jace's abdomen.

"Jace," Ethan choked out.

"Yeah, sweetness?" Jace asked against Ethan's neck.

"Jace, I need—I need—I need something," Ethan stammered. His chest rose and fell with his rapid breathing. His hands clenched and unclenched in Jace's hair. His body trembled. Jace knew exactly what he needed.

He reached down and quickly unzipped Ethan's jeans, spreading the denim material open until Ethan's cock bounced free. He grinned at Ethan. "And this is why you go commando from now on," he said right before he leaned down and swallowed Ethan's cock to the root.

"Ahhh, fuck, Jace!" Ethan cried out.

Jace paused for just a moment to make sure he hadn't hurt his mate. He would never forgive himself if he hurt Ethan again.

"You stop now and you're a dead man!" Ethan warned harshly as he yanked on Jace's hair.

Jace grinned then started moving, his lips surrounding Ethan's cock even as his tongue licked the heavily veined sides. He licked up the sides until he reached the large mushroomed head. A drop of precum shot across his lips, making him groan.

He loved the taste of Ethan in his mouth. Not having given many blow jobs in his life, that surprised Jace. He thought he would be repulsed by the taste. He wasn't. Just the opposite, in fact. He wanted more, a lot more, and he knew there was only one way to get it.

Jace picked the pace of his movements, licking faster and harder. He paid special attention to the small slit in the top of Ethan's cock, which dripped more pre-cum with every passing swipe of Jace's tongue.

"Jace," Ethan cried, "I can't—I can't—" The rest of Ethan's words were cut off by his long groan. Jace felt the muscles in Ethan's legs tighten. He winced when Ethan's hands clenched in his hair.

When Ethan's body started to shake, Jace knew he was close. He increased his endeavors, licking more, sucking harder. Ethan cried out above him, then hot liquid filled Jace's mouth. He swallowed, taking in as much of Ethan's sweet essence as he could get.

Ethan whimpered. Jace let go of Ethan's dick to reach up and catch his mate before he collapsed. Ethan burrowed into his chest, his head on Jace's shoulder. Jace rubbed his mate's back gently.

"Jace," Ethan whispered.

Jace rubbed his cheek against the top of Ethan's head. He felt...peaceful. His cock throbbed behind the zipper of his jeans so much he thought his jeans might burst open at any moment, but he felt strangely peaceful, calm, like all was right in the world.

It reminded him of the tender look he saw on Joe's face when he cuddled his mate close. Jace imagined he had such a look on his face at that very moment. Something about holding his mate close gave him the most serene feeling in the world.

"It's called finding your mate and being complete, Jace."

Jace jumped and swung around, putting his body between Ethan and the voice coming from the far side of the kitchen. He let out a relieved breath when he spotted Nate leaning against the doorframe to the kitchen.

"Hey, Nate," Jace said. He felt his face burn a little when he remembered that Ethan sat behind him with his dick hanging out of his pants. He quickly turned back around and reached down to put Ethan back in his pants, zipping him back up.

Ethan's face blazed bright red. Jace caressed the side of his cheek, tilting his head back before leaning in to give him a small kiss. Lifting his head a moment later, he looked deep into Ethan's bright blue eyes.

"Thank you, sweetness."

Ethan's eyes widened. "You're thanking me?"

Jace grinned. "No one else, sweetness."

"But, I didn't—and you didn't—" Ethan licked his lips, then glanced own at Jace's crotch. "You never—"

"I don't need to, either," Jace replied. "Having you was plenty for me."

If anything, Ethan's face got even redder. Jace thought he looked absolutely adorable. Jace tilted Ethan's face back up to his. "You, sweetness, are wonderful, and I will be forever grateful that you allowed me back into your life."

"Well said, Jace."

Jace turned to grin over at Joe, noting that the man's mate once again pressed as close to him as he could possibly get. Whenever they were in the same room that was how they seemed to be. Jace decided he liked that idea.

He turned around and lifted Ethan to his feet, then scooted between him and the counter. Wrapping his arms around Ethan's waist, he pulled the man back against him. Ethan's body stiffed for a moment before leaning into his.

"So, tell me about this ranch you found for us, Nate," Jace said. "Does it have room for a puppy?"

"Two or three, even," Nate replied. "It's a couple of miles from here, down by the lake. You'll love it, fifty acres, a barn and stable. The house itself was built in 1856, but the previous owners modernized it as much as they could."

"Why is it for sale?"

Nate glanced over at Joe, looking a little green around the gills.

"The last owners were members of our pack. Their son, a man named Roger Drummond, betrayed Nate to that man I told you about. Nate almost died. Roger was killed by that very same man. His parents decided to move away to someplace warmer."

"They weren't forced out of the pack, were they?" Ethan asked.

His words told Jace silently that his mate possessed a very large heart. Most people wouldn't have cared. Jace would forever be grateful for that big heart. It made Ethan take him back and give him a second chance. He just hoped he had a chance of winning that heart for himself.

"No," Nate said. "They were more than welcome to stay. I just think it was too hard for them knowing what their son did. Of course they didn't do anything, and we tried to talk them into staying, but they just wanted to get away from the bad memories."

Ethan snorted. "I can understand that."

Jace stiffened. Was Ethan talking about them?

"No, Jace, he's not," Nate said softly.

Ethan tilted his head back to look up at him questioningly. Jace grimaced. Having Nate around would take some getting used to.

"I'm not what?" Ethan asked.

Jace shrugged, feeling completely stupid. "I just wondered if you were talking about us and what happened."

"God, no," Ethan exclaimed. "I was talking about my birth pack."

"Your birth pack?" Jace asked, his forehead crinkling in confusion. "Weren't you born here?"

"No, I've only been in Wolf Creek for a few months. My entire pack moved here." Ethan frowned. "Well, what was left of my pack, anyway. There weren't many of us left by the time we got here. Most of us were killed."

"Killed!" Jace exclaimed, his arms tightening around Ethan's waist. "What do you mean, killed? Are you still in danger? And who tried to kill you?"

"It's a long story, but the short version is that several members of our pack made a deal with a vampire princess to barter wolf blood in exchange for money and territory. Our alpha found out and killed the vampire. He then moved us here to join up with the Wolf Creek Pack."

"Fuck!" Jace exclaimed, horrified by how close he came to losing his mate before he even met him.

Ethan nodded. "It's not so bad. We lost a lot of members of our pack, but we moved here and this place is much nicer. Our old alpha, Reece, became an enforcer for Daniel. I think he's much happier here."

"He is," Nate said. "He wasn't happy being an alpha, but he did what he needed to do. He likes being able to come home to his mate every night instead of running a pack."

"And you should meet Prince Zacarius," Ethan said. "His sister was the vampire princess that tried to kill us, but he wasn't involved in that. He's a really nice guy."

"Prince Zacarius?" Jace asked.

"He's mated to Devlin, the enforcer of my old pack," Ethan replied. "I met him a few weeks ago when he came to get Devlin."

"And his sister tried to kill you?"

Ethan nodded. "He wasn't involved with that, though. I know Prince Zacarius would have stopped her if he'd known. He wants peace between the werewolves and vampires. He's not into all the killing that his sister and my pack members did."

"Sounds like some of the people in your pack and the ones in mine should get together and throw a party," Jace said. "They all seem to think hurting people is the way to get what they want. I'm sure they'd get along famously."

"Really?" Ethan asked. "You're pack is that bad?"

"Ethan, I told you what my brother did to me just to get further up in rank," Jace explained. "I wouldn't put it past him or my father to do absolutely anything to get what they want."

"They won't come after you, will they?" Ethan asked.

Jace could hear the concern in Ethan's voice, the worry. He wasn't quite sure how to answer him. He felt pretty sure that his father and brother washed their hands of him, but there was always that one chance.

"I don't think so, Ethan," Jace finally said. "I pretty much burned my bridges with them when I left, but I can't promise they won't try something. I can, however, promise that I won't be going back, ever. My place is here now, with you."

Ethan seemed to just melt in Jace's arms. He leaned back against Jace and buried his face in Jace's neck. That was enough for Jace.

\* \* \* \*

"It's just over here on the left," Nate said, pointing out the front window, "the driveway with the white fence. Mr. Drummond replaced the fencing about three years ago at the same time he fixed the roof on the barn."

Jace leaned forward to see where Nate pointed. He could see the driveway just ahead, and as Nate said, new white fencing lined the property. There were a lot of trees around the driveway, but beyond that fenced in fields just begged to be occupied.

"Look at that, Jace," Ethan whispered, his voice filled with awe as they turned into the driveway. "Have you ever seen anything so perfect?"

Jace glanced down at Ethan's animated face. Without even seeing more of the property, he knew just by the excited look on his mate's face that they would be purchasing the place. His little mate looked mesmerized.

Jace couldn't blame him. The place looked spectacular. Joe drove them down a long driveway, fenced in fields on either side. There were a few trees here and there in the fields, but other than that, they were bare except for rich green grass.

They came to a large open area at the end of the driveway. A white, two story house sat directly in front of them. It looked to be a typical old fashion farm house, but that was all that was typical about it.

Multipaned windows sat between matching green shutters. A large front door sat in the middle of a wooden porch that ran the length of the front of the house. A small flowerbed lined the ground in front of the porch except for the area where two steps led up to the porch. And a river rock chimney could be seen on the side of the house.

To the left of the house sat a huge barn and stable area. Jace could just imagine putting his two horses there and adding to them as the

years went by. Given a few years, he could build up a sizeable herd of horses.

"Look at this place, Jace," Ethan said, breaking into Jace's fascination with the stable area. "Can you imagine anyone wanting to leave here? Ever?"

Jace smiled, patting Ethan's leg. "No, sweetness, I can't."

Joe brought his truck to a stop and climbed out. He flipped the seat forward. "Coming?"

Jace climbed out then took Ethan's crutches from him. He leaned them up against the side of the truck and reached back to help Ethan from the vehicle. He went to set Ethan on his feet then paused.

"I could just carry you, you know?" he whispered into Ethan's ear.

"Maybe later?" Ethan replied, a small sparkle in his eyes.

Jace grinned and set Ethan on his feet. He handed the man the crutches and waited for him to get them situated before moving toward the house. He kept his hand on Ethan's back the entire time.

"The place is selling for a dream," Nate said from the top of the steps. "If you need financing, I'm sure we can work something out. Mr. and Mrs. Drummond just want to get out from under the place. I think they're trying to buy a condo in Florida."

Jace glanced up, waiting for Ethan to make his way up the steps. "How long have the Drummonds lived here?"

"The Drummonds have been here forever," Joe said. "I don't know exactly how long, but they've been here since I was born, I know that much. Mr. Drummond's grandfather was born here, so I imagine it's been in their family for several years."

"And they just left?" Ethan asked.

Jace frowned. He could hear Ethan breathing hard. He didn't like how much energy it took for the man to get up the stairs. As they moved into the house, Jace decided that if they needed to travel up and down anymore stairs, Ethan would be carried. "Oh my," Ethan whispered, coming to a halt as he looked around the large open area inside the house.

Jace felt a little stunned himself. The outside of the house had a very farmhouse type of look. The inside had been fully redesigned and redecorated. The colors seemed simple, white walls, oak hardwood floors.

Everything else changed. It seemed to Jace that what was once a few different rooms had been opened up into one large room. The living room sat on one side of the large room, the kitchen and dining area on the other.

Beyond the living room sat a few doors. A large river rock fireplace sat in the middle. The ceiling over the living room looked as if it had been raised and vaulted. Jace imagined whatever rooms used to be above it no longer existed.

A set of stairs sat against one wall by the dining room. Jace didn't like the idea of Ethan having to use the stairs to come and go. He'd be exhausted after just a few trips. As much as he liked the place, and he did, it might not turn out to be the place for them.

"Come on," Nate said, excitement lacing his voice, "there's something really special over here that I want to show you."

Jace and Ethan followed Nate across the living room to one of the doors on the far side. Nate practically bounced where he stood. "You're going to love this."

Nate opened the door and led them into a large bedroom. Jace saw as set of double glass doors on one wall, two multipaned windows on another. The third wall had a solid wooden door, the fourth wall solid except for the doorway they stood in.

"This is very nice, Nate," Jace said.

"That's not the best part. They called this the mother-in-law suite," Nate said as he hurried over to the one other solid door in the room. "Mrs. Drummond's mother stayed in this room. She wasn't a shifter. The Drummonds refitted the entire bathroom for her and her walker."

Jace's mouth fell open. The bathroom had been refitted with metal bars by the toilet, the very large bathtub and inside the separate glass shower. It looked a dream bathroom for anyone that might be disabled in any way. It was perfect.

"There's an office off of the kitchen," Nate continued. "It's not as large as this room, but I think you'll find it more than adequate for your needs, Jace. There are also two more bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, just in case you have company."

As they made their way back into the main room and explored the rest of the first floor, Jace couldn't help but wonder how they had been so greatly blessed. Nate said he knew of the perfect place for them, but Jace had no idea it would be this perfect.

The inside of the house was open and well equipped for Ethan. He would be able to get around without any trouble, even if Jace wasn't there to carry him everywhere. Between the specially equipped bedroom and bathroom for Ethan, the office for Jace, and the acres of land for the horses, it was more than Jace ever dreamed they'd have.

Jace wrapped his arms around Ethan as they walked out onto the front porch. From where they stood, most of the fenced in field could be seen on either side of the driveway. Granted, there were more trees around the house, some of them blocking their view, but Jace imagined they would shade the house well in the summertime.

"What do you think, sweetness?" Jace asked. "Do you think your dog could be happy here?"

"My dog?"

"You did say you wanted a dog, remember?" Jace reminded Ethan. "And I don't think you can actually own a farm without one." He glanced over at Joe, winking. "Isn't that right, Joe? Isn't there some law or something that says you have to have a dog if you own a farm?"

Without batting an eye, Joe replied. "Oh, yes, it's in the county by-laws. Every farm owner must have a dog. Helps keep down on the rat population and all." "Rats?"

"The two legged kind." Joe smirked. "You might even want to think about getting a second dog just in case."

Jace saw Ethan frown. "You don't have a dog," Ethan pointed out.

"No, but I don't need a dog," Joe replied, grinning. "I have Nate."

"Well, sweetness?" Jace asked again. "Should we take it and give your dog a place to run and play?"

"Can we afford it, Jace?" Ethan whispered. "I don't have a lot of money, and most of it has been used up for my medical bills."

"I don't want you to worry about the money, Ethan," Jace said, a sliver of anger shooting through him at the idea of Ethan using up his hard earned money to pay for his medical bills. "I have enough to take care of both of us."

Jace grabbed Ethan's chin and tilted his head up to his. "I just need to know if you could be happy here with me."

"And my dog."

Jace smirked. A sparkle twinkled in Ethan's eyes again. "And your dog."

## Chapter 7

"That's the last of them, Ethan," Jace said as he walked back into Ethan's bedroom. "Are you about ready to go?"

Ethan glanced around his furnished apartment one last time. As much as he looked forward to moving into their new home together, the thought of leaving this place saddened him just a bit.

This is where he lived when Jace claimed him for the very first time. Even if Jace couldn't remember it, Ethan knew he always would. It held a special place in his heart and always would.

The last month with Jace had been some of the best, and the hardest, times that Ethan ever experienced. His love for Jace grew with every moment they spent together. Jace was a kind and gentle man who seemed to care for Ethan greatly.

He was also a hard task master when it came to Ethan's health and physical therapy. He wouldn't let Ethan feel sorry for himself or stay home instead of going to see the physical therapist. While Ethan felt grateful for Jace's loving care, there were times he wanted to kick the man's ass.

"What's wrong, sweetness?"

Ethan shrugged. "I'm going to miss the place."

"You only lived here for a few months, Ethan," Jace said as he walked over to sit down beside Ethan on the bed. "How could you be that attached?"

Ethan felt his face flush. He quickly dipped his head. He loved Jace, he really did, but sometimes he felt like he rode an emotional rollercoaster with the man. His feelings seemed to be totally out of control around Jace.

"Uh uh, no hiding from me," Jace said as he lifted Ethan's chin. "What's wrong?"

"I know you don't remember it, but I do," Ethan tried to explain without looking like an overwrought, emotional fool. "This was the first place we came together, where you claimed me. It holds special memories for me. It's hard to leave it and move somewhere new."

Ethan cried out as Jace suddenly got to his feet and picked Ethan up, tossing him over his shoulder. Jace leaned down and grabbed Ethan's crutches, then walked right out of the bedroom and through the apartment to the front door.

"Jace!" Ethan laughed.

Jace simply locked the door and carried Ethan down the stairs without saying a word. Ethan could see people staring at them as Jace walked toward his truck. They looked surprised, then smiled. Ethan's face burned as he continued to laugh.

Jace put him in the truck then walked around to the other side, tossing his crutches in the back before climbing in and starting the truck. He had the truck on the road and aimed toward their new home by the time Ethan stopped laughing long enough to speak.

"Where are we going?"

"Home to make some new memories for you."

Oh!

Ethan couldn't keep the grin off his face. Jace always did stuff like this, things determined to put a smile on Ethan's face. He seemed to take this mating thing very seriously. Maybe it was time to give a little back.

Ethan turned his body until he could lean his body back against his door. He could see Jace trying to ignore his movements, but his eyes kept coming back to Ethan over and over again. Ethan was thrilled.

He slowly unzipped his jeans and pushed his hand inside. Jace was right, going commando made things so much easier, no underwear or boxers to get in the way of him playing with himself.

With thoughts of what Jace would do to him when they got home, it didn't take more than a few moments for Ethan's cock to fill. A few strokes of his hand and he ached, wanted.

When he heard a small whimper from Jace's side of the truck, Ethan decided to up the game. He pushed his shoes off his feet, then wiggled his hips until he could push his jeans off his legs.

Naked from the waist down, Ethan spread his legs and started stroking himself again. He dropped his other hand down to gently massage his balls. He tried to arouse Jace, but Ethan found that he got incredibly turned on himself.

His moved his hand down to stroke his finger over his hole.

Jace groaned.

The truck swerved.

Ethan giggled.

"Oh, fuck, sweetness," Jace moaned, "put it in. I want to see you fuck yourself."

Ethan shuddered. Jace's words had such an intense effect on him. He reached over to the glove box and pulled out their hidden bottle of lube, pouring some on his fingers. Dropping the bottle on the floor, he reached for his hole again.

Ethan couldn't contain his moan as his fingers glided over his eager flesh. It wasn't often that he played with himself anymore. He didn't need to. He had Jace. But in the past, wanting to save himself for his mate, he played often. It still felt really good.

Ethan pressed one finger into his ass and started fucking himself. His legs trembled. The pleasure shooting through his body overwhelmed him. His hand tightened on his cock, his thumb pressing against the slit in the top.

"Another finger, sweetness," Jace demanded, his voice sounding low and husky. "Put another finger in."

Ethan pressed another finger in as he glanced across the truck cab at his mate. Jace's eyes kept roaming from the road to Ethan's ass, then back again. His chest rose and fell in rapid succession. His nose flared, his eyes dark green.

"Fuck, sweetness," Jace groaned, "you'd better stretch yourself out real well. The minute this truck stops, I'm going to be so deep inside your ass I won't ever come out."

Ethan pressed a third finger in. He really started to get into it, stroking his cock and riding the fingers in his ass, when the truck came to a sudden stop. The only thing that kept Ethan from hitting the floor was the seatbelt around his waist, which was gone a moment later.

Ethan heard the truck door open. He felt Jace pull his fingers free from his ass, then grab his legs and drag him to the edge of the seat bench. Before he could do or say anything, his legs were lifted into the air and Jace's cock sank into him.

Ethan's eyes drifted closed as Jace started pounding into him with the very first thrust. He grabbed the steering wheel with his free hand to keep from being pushed up the seat by the force of Jace's movements.

Jace was always so careful with him. While Ethan delighted in Jace's gentle touch, it frustrated him at times. Sometimes he just needed to be taken, to be fucked, and not worry about his injuries.

This was the first time since they got back together that Jace seemed to forget that Ethan had an injured back. He wasn't gentle and caring. He wasn't even loving. He was fucking fantastic, or was that fantastically fucking? Ethan wasn't sure. Whatever it was, he enjoyed the hell out of it.

It also sent Ethan right over the edge. He cried out as pleasure so intense that it sent shockwaves throughout his body exploded. His body stiffened and ropes of white cream shot out of his cock, covering his hand and abdomen.

Ethan opened his eyes just in time to see the muscles in Jace's neck tighten. He looked like he gritted his teeth before he tossed back his head and roared out Ethan's name. Ethan felt the cock in his ass

thicken, then hot spurts of cum filled him only to be replaced a moment later by Jace's knot.

Jace's head fell down on Ethan's stomach. Ethan wrapped his arms around Jace's head, cradling his lover to him. He could feel Jace's rapid breathing. Small spasms racked the man's body as the knot at the end of his cock pulsed.

Jace suddenly lifted his head and stared down at Ethan with a look of horror on his face. Ethan instantly knew what his mate thought. He reached up and pressed his fingers against Jace's lips.

"I'm fine, Jace, never better in fact."

Jace didn't look convinced. "Are you sure? I was pretty rough with you."

"I know." Ethan grinned. "Great, wasn't it?"

Jace looked shocked then he slowly began to grin, too. He brushed back the hair from Ethan's forehead. "Yeah, it was great," Jace said. "Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

"I'd like that," Ethan replied. "Although, I think we can find another place than your truck, hmm? There's just not enough room in here to maneuver properly."

"Are you ready to head home, then?"

"Yes." Ethan chuckled. "We have a lot more flat surfaces at home to make new memories on."

\* \* \* \*

Ethan set his spoon down and reached across the counter when the phone rang, picking up the receiver. "Hello?"

"I'd like to speak with Jason Dominick."

Ethan frowned. The voice wasn't pleasant. In fact, it sounded very demanding. "He isn't here at the moment. Can I take a message?"

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

"Who are you?" Ethan countered.

"I want to speak to my son!"

Ah, the picture became clear to Ethan. The voice at the other end of the phone was Jace's father, Alpha Dominick. The one person Ethan really didn't want to talk to.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Jace is not available at the moment. I would be happy to take a message."

Ethan bit his lip when he heard the man grumbling to himself. He wanted to laugh, but he figured that would be bad manners, so he kept his mouth shut.

"You tell my son he's done enough fooling around," Alpha Dominick growled. "You tell him to get his ass home where he belongs before I have to come get him."

"I'll be sure to pass the message along to him."

Not!

Ethan wasn't surprised when the alpha hung up on him without saying goodbye. The man was just plain rude. Ethan chuckled as he set the phone down and went back to his tea. There was no way he'd pass that message on to Jace. He might tell his mate that his father called, but he wasn't about to tell him he had been ordered home. Jace was home.

"Hey, Ethan, there's something I need to talk to you about," Jace said as he walked into the kitchen a moment later.

"What's up?" Ethan glanced up from his cup of tea. The anxious look on Jace's face made Ethan forget all about his phone conversation. His concern was for Jace.

The moment his eyes met Jace's, the man glanced away. He looked hesitant and just a little worried. Ethan was shocked. Except for when they first got back together, Jace always seemed self-confident. He was never uncertain of things.

"Jace?" Ethan asked. He moved over to cup his hand around Jace's cheek. "What's wrong?"

"The full moon is tonight, Ethan." Jace still wouldn't meet his eyes.

Ethan frowned. "And?"

Ethan didn't understand what the problem was. The full moon would come out when the sun set. It happened every month. Those that could would shift and run free, hunt and celebrate being a shifter. Those that were mated would shift and search out their mates for a night of unbridled passion.

Oh!

Ethan's hand dropped and he stepped back from Jace. Now he understood. This would be their first full moon together. Ethan could no longer shift. He knew he would never be an equal mate in this area, always lacking. He wouldn't run with the rest of the pack or hunt down prey. He would always sit on the sidelines of that life.

The thought that he would never run free with Jace felt like a knife through Ethan's heart. He felt it like a physical pain. His chest ached. His eyes burned with unshed tears. Ethan turned back to his tea to hide his grief from Jace. There would be no point in letting his mate know how miserable he felt. Jace would just feel guilty.

"I think you should go run with the rest of the pack," Ethan said. He took a deep breath and plastered a smile on his face, turning back to Jace. "You'd enjoy it. I'll be here when you get home."

"I can't leave you here all alone, not on the full moon," Jace insisted. "We're mates and—"

"Well, I certainly won't be running through the woods with you." "Ethan!"

"What did you expect, Jace?" Ethan asked, realizing that he couldn't hide the bitterness in his voice. "I can't shift. I can't run." He waved his hands toward the side of the room. "I can barely make it up the stairs on my own."

Jace's nostrils flared. "You could come and... and..."

"And what, Jace? Watch? Sit on the sidelines while you run and hunt and play with the others?" Ethan snorted. "I don't think so."

"Ethan!" Jace snapped.

This wasn't what Ethan wanted. He tried to hide his sorrow from Jace, but it came out as anger. It wasn't what was supposed to happen.

Jace was getting angry. He probably felt resentful as well. Who wanted a mate that they couldn't run with? Ethan needed to end this conversation before either of them said something they didn't really mean.

"Just go, Jace," Ethan finally said. "I'll be fine. I'll probably make some popcorn and just curl up on the couch and watch a movie or something."

"I'm not going to leave you here all alone, Ethan," Jace said again. "It's the full moon and—"

"You already said that, and I told you I'll be fine. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself for a few hours. I'm not a child, Jace."

Jace glared. His nostrils flared again. His lips thinned into a tight little line. "Fine," he growled. "Stay here by yourself, then. If you don't want to spend the full moon with me, I'll spend it with people who do."

"Oh, no, that's not what—shit!" Ethan dropped the hand he reached out to Jace and frowned. That certainly went well. *Not!* Now Jace was pissed at him. He saw it in the stiff posture of the man's shoulders as he stormed out of the kitchen.

Ethan would like nothing more than to spend the full moon with Jace, but he knew the pull that glorious white globe had on a shifter. Jace wouldn't be able to resist the chance to run free in the moonlight. He would need to hunt, to play with the others in the pack. He wouldn't be able to stay home with his less than perfect mate.

No, it was better this way. Jace would join up with the others in their pack and run free under the moon's shining light. Ethan would be waiting for the man when he came home. They could make up then.

Ethan spent the next two hours watching some comedy on the television that he really wasn't interested in. It looked stupid. Besides, he couldn't stop thinking about Jace. He handled things all wrong between them. He knew that now.

He went over their conversation a hundred times in his head. Ethan knew Jace thought he blamed him for not being able to join the pack. That wasn't the case at all. Ethan just didn't want Jace to be deprived of all that being a shifter meant because of him.

Ethan gave up any resentment he felt toward Jace for his injuries long ago. After getting to know the man, Ethan realized he would never intentionally hurt anyone. It just wasn't in him. What happened with Ethan had been an accident.

The more Ethan thought about it, the more he knew he should have gone with Jace. His mate didn't like being separated from Ethan for long periods of time. Ethan didn't like it, either. He should have just gotten a blanket and gone along, even if he could have only watched from the sidelines.

Maybe it wasn't too late, Ethan thought as he got to his feet.

The moon still hung full in the night sky. He could go join Jace and spend the evening with his mate, even if he couldn't join in all the little wolfy games.

Ethan walked to the bedroom and went to his dresser to grab some outdoor wear. His pajama bottoms wouldn't keep the cool night air at bay. He needed something warm and preferably comfortable.

He tossed a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt on the chair in the corner then searched around for his shoes. Maybe he'd take a blanket and pillow with him just in case he got tired waiting for Jace.

Smiling at what he envisioned Jace's reaction to his arrival would be, Ethan pulled his pajama shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. He started to reach for his pajama bottoms when a loud crash from the front room froze him in his spot.

Ethan listened for a moment, but he didn't hear anything more. He sniffed the air. At least he hadn't lost that. He could smell him and Jace, a whole lot of Jace. It was one scent Ethan would never get tired of smelling.

With no other sound ringing out and just the smell of the two of them in the house, Ethan felt safe in continuing his plans for the evening. He'd have smelled an intruder. Still, he'd be a lot happier when they finally got a dog.

"Sweetness."

Ethan froze again, his pajama bottoms half way down his legs. He knew that voice, but he didn't. It sounded like Jace, but the tone went deeper, more intense, almost raspy in nature. And it sent chills up Ethan's spine.

"Jace?" Ethan asked. He quickly pulled his pajama bottoms up then looked toward the doorway.

He saw a shadow pass in front of the doorway but the form was bigger than Jace, taller and thicker. Jace was a big man, much bigger than Ethan. The shadow moving toward the bedroom door looked even bigger than Jace.

Fear gripped Ethan. He sniffed the air but smelled nothing except him and Jace and a slight *cold* scent as if the very air changed. As the shadow moved closer to the door, Ethan tried to move back but his crutches wouldn't cooperate. They kept slipping on the hardwood floor.

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"Sweetness." The voice that sounded like Jace but wasn't. "I can smell you, sweetness. I know you're in here."

"Ja—Jace?"

"I can't stay away from you, Ethan," the voice said, getting closer. "Not tonight. It's the full moon, sweetness, the time for us to be together and renew our mating, to claim each other again."

Ethan's heart pounded. He climbed onto the bed and scooted toward the headboard, trying to make himself as small as possible. He grabbed a pillow and held it in front of his body, maybe as a shield against the huge form that suddenly filled the doorway.

"It's the full moon mating, sweetness, and I've come to claim my mate."

"Jace?" Ethan squeaked, holding the pillow tighter against his body. There was no way that the creature standing in the doorway could be his mate. His Jace wasn't nearly that big. He also didn't have dark brown hair over most of his body, pointed ears, a lightly elongated nose, and long canine teeth.

Ethan's mouth dropped open as his eyes roamed over the...the...whatever stood in the doorway. He felt absolutely positive his Jace didn't have a dick that big, either. This creature looked like he sported a two-by-four between his legs.

"Hello, sweetness," it said, looking right at Ethan.

Ethan inhaled swiftly as shock filled him. The eyes, the deep, grass green eyes, those belonged to Jace. The creature standing before him, walking slowly toward him was none other than Ethan's mate.

"I tried to stay away, Ethan," Jace said as he climbed onto the end of the bed and crawled toward Ethan. "I swear I did. I tried to do as you asked. I joined with the pack. I ran and hunted. None of it felt the same without you. I have to be with you tonight."

Ethan's hand trembled as he dropped the pillow and reached out to touch Jace's furry face. The fine hairs on Jace tickled his skin. Ethan could suddenly smell a strong, musky scent in the air. It overwhelmed every other smell in the room, shooting straight toward his cock.

It made him want, made him ache. It made him need his mate more than he ever did before. "Jace?" Ethan asked again.

Jace turned his head and licked at Ethan's hand, his extremely long tongue wrapping nearly all the way around his palm. Jace groaned. "Oh, you taste so good, sweetness. I could lick you up."

Ethan yelped as Jace grabbed his legs and pulled him down on the bed. He grabbed Ethan's pajama bottoms and ripped them right down the middle, tossing the tattered material to the floor.

"I think I will," Jace said.

Ethan lifted a hand to stop Jace only to drop it down to the bed when Jace's long tongue licked him from abdomen to collar bone.

Oh, sweet hell.

Jace licked him again. Ethan never felt anything like it in his life. Ethan just became Jace's lollipop.

"Oh God, Jace," Ethan panted.

"Mmm, sweetness fits you, Ethan," Jace said as he licked down Ethan's body. "You taste sweet, like milk chocolate with just a hint of cinnamon."

Ethan buried his hands in Jace's hair as his world narrowed to the tongue moving toward his groin. His cock stood up and waved hello. Much to Ethan's dismay, Jace bypassed his cock and moved lower to lick at his puckered hole.

"There's that cinnamon taste," Jace said. "It's so strong here."

Ethan nearly lost his mind when Ethan nuzzled his balls. The small hairs on Jace's face rubbed again him.

"I want more, sweetness."

Okay.

Ethan dropped his legs open and offered himself up to his mate. If Jace wanted him, Jace could have him. Ethan didn't care if it came as part of the full moon mating ritual. He just didn't want the pleasure to end.

And it didn't. Jace bathed Ethan's body with his tongue. He circled Ethan's nipples, moved down over his chest and abdomen,

then around his cock and over his balls, pressing it against his eager entrance until he could push in. Jace didn't miss an inch.

Ethan's body quivered with each swipe of Jace's tongue. His body felt over sensitized, every nerve ending screaming for more of Jace's touch. Ethan knew he whimpered, babbled, pleaded for Jace. It just seemed to spur the man on.

Ethan cried out his objection when Jace suddenly pulled away. It turned to a small yelp when he suddenly got flipped over, several pillows shoved under his hips to elevate them. He glanced over his shoulder to question Jace, but any protest he would have made died on his lips when Jace gripped his ass cheeks and pulled them apart, licking along the crease.

The pleasure felt too intense. Ethan couldn't hold back anymore. The heat smoldering in his body was about to combust and take him with it. He started moving his hips, pressing back against the man tormenting him.

"Jace, Jace," he pleaded. "I need, Jace, please."

"Then you shall have, sweetness."

Ethan cried out when Jace pulled away from him. He knew they argued, that Jace had been upset with him when he left the house. But he didn't think he would survive it if Jace left him now.

The feeling of Jace's cock pressing against his hole should have warned Ethan what was about to happen. He saw the man when he walked into the room. As Jace's massive dick slowly impaled him, Ethan could do nothing but shake and whimper.

The further Jace pushed in, the more convinced Ethan became that his mate wanted to kill him. He just didn't think the man would fit. It didn't hurt exactly. There was just a whole hell of a lot of pressure and fullness.

Finally, Ethan felt Jace stop, giving him a few brief moments to breathe and adjust to the feel of Jace's massive cock in his ass. When Jace started moving, every thought of Jace torturing him flew right out of his head to be replaced by a red haze of desire so intense, Ethan saw sparks explode in front of his eyes.

Every movement Jace made, thrusting in or pulling out, stroked against his sweet spot. There wasn't a single second that direct contact between Jace's cock and Ethan's prostate didn't happen. Ethan never felt anything quite like it, and he wasn't sure he could handle it if he ever did again.

Everything seemed too intense, the feel of Jace's clawed hands digging into his hips, the soft brush of Jace's furry body against his, the way Jace filled him to the brim, even the strong scent of his mate. Ethan's senses overloaded, exploded. So did his body.

Ethan's fingers dug into the blankets below him as he cried out his release, ropes of pearly seed covering the bed. He heard the soft growls behind him become one loud, continuous roar before long canines sank into the soft flesh of his neck as Jace claimed him again.

Ethan's cries turned to screams of delight as Jace's seed filled him. The knot extending into his body was the last straw. Ethan's body melted right into the mattress. He saw lights sparkled before his eyes until his vision turned black. He smiled, feeling happy and satisfied, then slipped into unconsciousness.

## **Chapter 8**

"Ethan?"

Ethan groaned and rolled over. He didn't want any nagging voices invading the pleasant dreams he experienced. He felt melted, relaxed. He wanted to stay in the pleasant little dreamland he floated in.

"Ethan!"

Ethan blinked, his eyes opening up without his permission. He rolled over to see Nate sitting on the side of his bed. The cool air that prickled his skin suddenly reminded Ethan that he lay naked on the bed, and why. He felt his face flush even as he grabbed the blankets and pulled them up over his body.

"Nate?" he whispered hoarsely. "What are you doing here? Where's Jace?"

"Packing."

Panic hit Ethan. His heart thundered in his chest. "Packing? What the hell are you talking about?" he asked as he pushed himself into a sitting position.

"He's downstairs with Joe right now, packing."

"What? Why?"

"Last night was the full moon."

"And?" Ethan already knew that. It was kind of obvious to shape shifters. He just didn't understand what that had to do with Jace packing. He knew he pissed Jace off the night before, but he kind of figured they made up. Could he have been wrong?

"It's also the time of the full moon mating for those who are mated," Nate explained.

Ethan's could feel his face burn bright red again. "I know that."

Boy, did he know that. He felt the effects of the full moon mating in every ache in his body, but they were all exquisite aches, reminding Ethan of how well his mate claimed him the night before. It had been glorious.

Ethan quickly grew concerned when Nate grabbed his hand. Nate's eyes seemed to be filled with worry, which only increased Ethan's. Did something happen he didn't know about? Did Jace decide a mate that couldn't run and hunt during the full moon wouldn't do for him?

"Wh—what?" Ethan's voice wobbled.

"How are you feeling?" Nate asked. "Are you okay?"

As much as Ethan's face flushed in the last five minutes, he wasn't sure it would ever go back to a normal color. He wasn't used to discussing intimate stuff with anyone, especially someone that wasn't his mate.

"I'm fine," Ethan replied, still confused and just a little panicky. "What's going on, Nate? Why is Jace packing?"

"Jace shifted last night, Ethan," Nate explained. "It was the full moon and—"

"Would you stop beating around the damn bush and tell me what the hell is going on?" Ethan snapped.

Nate heaved a sigh. "Jace thinks he hurt you last night."

"Jace would never hurt me!"

Nate chuckled, which seemed strange to Ethan considering the circumstances. The situation didn't seem very humorous to him. In fact, it felt kind of like a disaster.

"I don't think he realizes that," Nate said. "He shifted last night into our third form and then I'm assuming he claimed you."

Ethan rolled his eyes as his face burned yet again. "Yeah."

And then some.

"You passed out, Ethan."

"Oh lord."

"Jace believes he hurt you, that you couldn't handle him claiming you."

"Well, it seemed a little intense, but he never hurt me," Ethan asserted. "Jace would never do anything to hurt me."

"Then you need to stop being embarrassed and get your ass into the other room before your mate packs all of his stuff and leaves. Right now, he believes that the best way to protect you is to leave."

"Oh, I swear," Ethan exclaimed as he dropped the blankets and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "One of these days I'm going to smack that man up side his head so hard his brains will rattle for a week."

He looked around for his pajama bottoms, only remembering that Jace shredded them when he spotted the wadded up material in the corner. He couldn't help but smile. He might have to have them framed.

"Can you get me a pair of pants out of the dresser?"

Nate eyed the tattered material on the floor and chuckled. "Yeah, sure."

Ethan took the jeans from Nate and pulled them up his legs. He was grateful when Nate turned away, giving him a little privacy while he stood up and pulled them the rest of the way up his body.

He grabbed his crutches and started for the door. Screw the shirt and shoes. He needed to get out to the main room and beat some sense into his mate. Ethan didn't know whether to be pissed that his mate felt he needed to leave or pleased that his mate cared so much about him that he would rather leave than subject Ethan to what he saw as harm from him.

Joe sat at the dining table drinking a cup of coffee. He didn't say a word, just pointed to the front porch. Ethan rolled his eyes and made his way to the front door, which stood wide open.

He could see Jace sitting on the front steps before he even reached the doorframe. His shoulders looked hunched, his head bent as he held it in his hands. He looked so totally dejected that Ethan's heart ached for him.

All thoughts of beating Jace over the head with his crutch left Ethan. His mate needed understanding and reassurance, not anger. Ethan rested his crutches against the door frame then carefully shuffled across the space between the door and Jace.

Jace jumped when Ethan leaned down to rest his hand on his shoulder. He looked up and blanched, his face turning pasty white. Ethan ignored Jace's small gasp and carefully moved around in front of Jace, stepping down to sit on the step below the man.

He settled his body back against Jace's, grabbing the man's arms and wrapping them around his body before leaning his head back against Jace's rigid body. He could feel the heavy thud of Jace's heartbeat. The man was terrified.

"I know we've only been in the new place for a couple of weeks," Ethan said. "Is it too soon to get a dog or should we wait until we're a little more settled?"

When Jace didn't say anything, Ethan tilted his head back to look up at his mate. Jace's face seemed frozen in shock, his mouth hanging open. Ethan reached up and lifted Jace's chin, closing his mouth.

"Should we get a small puppy or a full grown dog to start out with?" Ethan looked forward again, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm not sure we're up to puppy training just yet."

"Ethan."

"Puppies are nice, though," Ethan continued as if Jace didn't speak a word. "If you get a dog when they're young, you can train them the way you want. Of course, there are a lot of homeless dogs out there that need good homes, too." Ethan tilted his head back again. "What do you think?"

"Oh, Ethan, I—" Jace murmured softly, tears in his eyes.

Ethan leaned into the hand his mate cupped around his cheek. He wanted Jace to know that he wasn't afraid of him, that he wasn't even angry with him. He wanted his mate to know that he was loved.

Ethan grabbed the hand cupped around his cheek, pressing it tighter to his skin. He reached up with his other hand and wiped Jace's tears away with his thumb. He detected a slight hitch in Jace's breathing.

"Love you, Jace."

"Oh, Christ, Ethan," Jace whispered as he gathered Ethan into his arms.

Ethan wrapped his arm around Jace's neck. He could feel Jace pepper his head with little kisses. Jace's breathing came in rapid gulps, his body shaking. Ethan just held him tighter as he murmured sweet words to the man.

"I knew right after you left last night that I should have gone with you, Jace," Ethan said. "I'm sorry I didn't. I'm sorry I acted like such an ass about it, too. I could have handled that a whole lot better."

He pulled back enough to look up into Jace's face. "But I enjoyed it when you came to find me." Ethan's eyes dropped. He smoothed down the material of Jace's shirt, feeling a little embarrassed to be talking about the intimacies of the night before.

"I really enjoyed what happened after you found me," Ethan whispered.

"You passed out, Ethan."

Oh hell, there went his face again. "Yeah, but I've done that a time or two in the past, haven't I?" He looked up at Jace, wanting the man to see his eyes when he spoke. "You didn't hurt me, Jace."

"You swear?" Jace whispered, his eyes looking desperate.

"I wouldn't lie about something like this, Jace."

"I'd hope you wouldn't lie to me about anything, sweetness."

"I haven't yet," Ethan replied. "Don't really intend to start now."

Ethan turned around again and cuddled back against Jace's bigger body, tucking his head into the crook of the man's neck. He smiled, wiggling a bit when Jace lifted him up and settled him more comfortably on his lap.

"So, dog or puppy?" Ethan asked.

"Maybe we should start out with a dog," Jace replied. "Like you said, there are a lot of dogs out there that need good homes. Besides, if we got a full grown dog, maybe he could teach a puppy a thing or two."

"Two dogs?" Ethan asked, excited at the prospect. "Do you think we can do two dogs?"

"Ethan, I think we can do anything we want."

\* \* \* \*

Jace watched Ethan sleep. He fell asleep in Jace's arms while they sat peacefully on the front porch looking out over the farm they now owned. It gave Jace a sense of peace to hold his mate while he slept.

He was stunned beyond words that he had been granted such a wonderful gift. And that was exactly what Ethan was, a gift. He was everything a mate could ever hope for and then some.

To hear Ethan say he loved him was almost more than Jace could handle without breaking down like a little baby. While he knew he cared greatly for Ethan, adored him even, he never thought to hold his mate's heart, not after the things he did.

It was the greatest gift he ever received. While he never questioned his decision to give up his position in his old pack, knowing Ethan loved him made everything he gave up worth it.

Jace just wished he could express to Ethan how much the man meant to him. Saying *I love you* just didn't seem adequate for the feeling Jace experienced every time he saw his little mate.

He needed to think of a bigger way to do it, something Ethan would never forget. He needed to show his mate beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loved and adored him. Jace wanted Ethan to know that he was exactly where he wanted to be.

And he needed help to do it. Jace cradled Ethan to his chest and stood to his feet. He smiled as Ethan snuggled closer to him before

turning and walking back into the house. Joe and Nate sat at the dining table together, Nate curled on Joe's lap.

Jace nodded as he passed them and carried Ethan into the bedroom. He carefully laid Ethan down on the bed then reached for the buttons on his jeans, pulling them off his legs. Ethan squirmed a bit as Jace tucked him into bed.

"Jace, Jace," Ethan whined.

"Ssshhh, sweetness," Jace murmured back. He smoothed the sandy blond curls back from Ethan's face. "I'll be right out in the other room when you wake up, Ethan. I'm not going anywhere."

His words seemed to settle Ethan down. The man smiled then rolled onto his side, tucking his hands under his cheek. Jace's heart pounded in his chest. There wasn't a more beautiful sight in all the world.

Chuckling at his reaction to Ethan, Jace walked back into the other room. He grabbed a soda out of the refrigerator and went to sit down across from Nate and Joe. Both men seemed pretty satisfied with their day's work if the grins on their faces were anything to go by.

Jace knew they could rightly feel that way. They essentially saved Jace from making a colossal mistake with Ethan. He had been all ready to leave, his bags packed and sitting by the front door.

Not wanting Ethan to be on his own when he woke up, Jace called Nate and Joe and asked them to come over. It was probably one of the smartest moves he ever made, next to coming back for Ethan.

"So, I need your help with something," Jace said after a few minutes of silence.

"Sure," Nate said. "What's up?"

"I need to do something for Ethan," Jace answered. "Something to show him how much he means to me."

"Marry him," Nate said simply.

Jace gapped, his mouth dropping open.

He and Ethan were mated. They would celebrate with the rest of the pack in a mating ceremony, but he never considered actually marrying Ethan. It wasn't because he didn't want to. Simply that he never thought about it.

However, the more he did think about, the more he warmed to the idea. Marrying Ethan in an actual wedding ceremony would show not only his mate but the world he committed to the man.

Jace began to grin as he pictured Ethan's face when Jace proposed and asked the man to spend the rest of his life with him. He'd definitely need a ring, something special that was unique to Ethan's personality. Just any old ring wouldn't do, not for his mate.

He glanced up when Joe chuckled, curiosity filling him. The man just waved his hand at Jace.

"Be sure you know what you're getting yourself into, my friend," Joe remarked. "When Nate planned our wedding, I swear I didn't see him for days on end. He practically lived at my mother's house."

"Hey," Nate grumbled, swatting Joe's arm. "It was a damn good wedding, and you know it."

"True." Joe laughed. "And I wouldn't change anything about it, but you have to admit it, you and Mom lost your minds when you planned the ceremony."

Jace shook his head, chuckling as the couple continued to argue over what happened while they planned their wedding. While it was cute to watch, Jace sincerely hoped that Ethan wouldn't go crazy.

He envisioned a quiet, peaceful ceremony. Of course, if Ethan wanted all the hoopla involved in a big fancy wedding, that's exactly what he'd get. Jace wanted to give Ethan everything he ever desired.

"Okay, guys," Jace said, breaking into the two man conversation. "You think we could get back to talking about my wedding plans?"

Nate's face flushed. Joe laughed. "Sorry, Jace."

Jace waved his hand at Joe in a dismissive gestured. "Don't worry about it. It was kind of cute to watch, but I could really use some help

with Ethan. I want to plan something he'll never forget." Jace grinned. "Any ideas?"

\* \* \* \*

"Jace?" Ethan called out as he walked into the large main room of their house. Nate ran him into town on some errands, and he just dropped Ethan off. Ethan set his bags down on the dining table and went in search of his missing mate.

"Jace, where are you?" Ethan asked as he walked into the empty bedroom. He searched the bathroom, the office, and the rest of the first floor. Not finding his mate, he started toward the stairs, assuming his mate must be upstairs, when a sheet of red paper caught his eye.

It was taped to the refrigerator. Ethan frowned and pulled the paper off the fridge, scanning it quickly. He laughed softly when he read the words Jace wrote for him.

Roses are red, violets are blue.

Follow the trail, sweetness,

I have something for you.

Trail? What trail? Ethan glanced around the room. He couldn't see anything. Amused at the little game Jace wanted to play, Ethan again searched the rooms for signs of a trail. In the bedroom, he found what he didn't see before.

The double glass doors sat slightly ajar. When Ethan pushed them open, he noticed a trail of red rose petals leading away from the house. Ethan began slowly following the trail, glancing ahead of the path for signs of his mate. He just saw more rose petals.

The trail led around the side of the house then out toward the barn. Intrigued, Ethan followed. He heard the barking before he reached the large bay door to the barn. Pushing the heavy door open, Ethan stepped back in fright as a large yellow dog barked at him.

Ethan laughed as the dog jumped all around him, barking. The large red bow around his neck told Ethan that this cute yellow lab was

part of Jace's game. It helped to see a large red piece of paper attached to the bow.

Ethan reached down and petted the dog for several moments before tearing the note from the bow around his neck. Once again, he read the words Jace wrote for him, amused at the poem his mate created. It was cute, but Jace would never make it as a professional poet.

Come with me and you shall see

a man who wants you more than can be.

He needed to follow the dog? Confused, Ethan glanced around the barn. Follow the dog where? Suddenly, the dog turned and bounded off farther into the barn. Shrugging, Ethan followed.

The dog was soon out of sight, but his barking could be heard echoing throughout the barn. Ethan followed, shuffling his feet along until he came to one of the unused stalls. A large red heart had been painted on the door.

Ethan pushed the door open. Whatever air he had in his lungs filtered out as he caught sight of his mate lying back against a pile of straw, his very naked and aroused mate. He didn't know whether to laugh or melt.

A large red bow wrapped around Jace's very erect cock. "I see you found me, sweetness," he drawled.

Ethan melted.

Jace was a very attractive man. It wasn't just in the way he looked, although that was rather impressive. It was also in the self-confident air about him. The man knew he looked gorgeous.

"I like this game, Jace," Ethan said as he dropped his crutches and moved into the room, taking one slow step after another until he stood between Jace's spread legs. "I'm very good at following instructions."

"Prove it," Jace dared him.

Ethan raised an eyebrow, silently accepting the challenge.

"Take off all your clothes," Jace instructed.

Ethan knew Jace's eyes followed his every movement as he slowly pulled his clothing off and dropped them on the floor. He didn't even have to look. He could feel Jace's burning gaze roam over every inch of his body.

Once Ethan stood naked before Jace, he waited. He knew Jace wanted something more. He was right. Jace crooked his finger, indicating that Ethan should move closer. Ethan didn't know how much closer he could get. He practically stood in Jace's lap as it was.

Jace grabbed him around the waist and pulled Ethan down, settling him on the straw covered floor between his legs. Ethan would have preferred to sit on Jace's lap, but this was his mate's show.

"So, what now?" Ethan asked when Jace didn't do anything. After the way he found his mate, he would have expected Jace to do something. He hoped for some really good sex at least.

Jace gestured to the bow wrapped around his dick. "Unwrap your present, what else?"

Ethan chuckled and grabbed the end of ribbon, pulling little by little until the bow released and the ribbon came free in his hand. The other end of the ribbon didn't float down like Ethan expected but fell down heavily as if weighted.

He glanced at Jace, but the man simply raised an eyebrow at him. He grabbed the ribbon with both hands and began sliding it through his fingers until he reached the other end. Ethan froze, his eyes widening at the glint of gold he saw dangling from the edge of the ribbon.

He pulled it up, realizing that the object was tied on with a small piece of red thread. It was not one but two gold rings. Ethan's fingers shook as he pulled the rings free of the thread then cradled both rings in his other hand.

They looked like simple gold bands. There were no diamonds or other gems, no special designs to the rings. Just simple bands. They looked perfect. It wasn't until Ethan picked the smaller one up that he noticed small engraved letters on the inside of the band.

He frowned, peering closely at the letters until he could make sense of them. Then his heart thundered in his chest. Ethan felt tears gather in his eyes.

Love, Always, Promise.

Ethan looked over at Jace. He silently questioned him, afraid to put sound to his words. He loved Jace for so very long. He told the man twice of his love. Both times, he received no response.

Ethan began to wonder if Jace would ever love him. He knew Jace cared, but caring was different than loving. As good as Jace was to him, Ethan didn't want to upset the apple cart by speaking of their relationship a whole lot. He figured what he had was too good to jeopardize.

Jace nodded. He grabbed Ethan's hand and pulled him closer. He grasped Ethan's free hand and held it up. With his other hand, he grabbed the smaller ring from Ethan's fingers and slid it down his finger.

"Love always, sweetness. I promise," Jace whispered.

Jace grabbed the other ring. "I know we will participate in a mating ceremony in front of our pack," he said, "but I want more than that. I want the whole world to know that we belong to each other."

He handed the ring to Ethan then held up his ring finger. "If you want the same thing, you know where this goes," Jace said. "Will you marry me, Ethan Brown?"

Ethan's tears streamed down his face unchecked. He didn't care if someone, anyone, thought it was too girly for a man to cry. His emotions felt too intense to hold inside. Ethan's hands trembled as he slid the larger ring down Jace's finger.

Looking up into his mate's face, he was shocked to see mirrored tears on Jace's cheeks. But there wasn't sadness in Jace's eyes, only joy and love. Ethan realized he saw this emotion in Jace's eyes before. He just didn't recognize it for what it was.

"Love you, Jace," Ethan whispered as he leaned forward to kiss his mate. "Always, promise."

Jace chuckled. "Then do you think you could do something about this?" Jace asked as he grabbed his erect cock with one hand and waved it in Ethan's direction.

"I told you," Ethan replied, grinning as he placed his hand over Jace's. "I'm very good at following instructions."

#### **Chapter 9**

"He's really is cute, Ethan."

Ethan laughed, his fingers threading through the soft yellow fur of his new dog, Mickey, a present from Jace to celebrate their engagement. Ethan quickly learned that having a three-year-old dog wasn't much different than having a puppy.

Both took lots of energy, lots of attention, and lots of love. In return, Mickey gave Ethan all of his love and adoration. He became excited every time Ethan walked into the room, sat quietly with Ethan when he wasn't feeling well, and loved him unconditionally. He was like an extension of Jace.

"He's wonderful," Ethan replied. "Jace and I discussed whether to get a puppy or a full grown dog. I think getting Mickey was our best choice. I couldn't imagine having any other dog now that we have him."

Nate chuckled. "So, you have your mate. You have your home. Now, you have your dog," Nate said. "Anything else you need?"

Ethan shook his head. "I would have been happy with just Jace." He waved his hand around. "All the rest of this? It's just icing on the cake."

"Speaking of icing, have you decided what kind of wedding cake you're going to have?"

Ethan frowned. "We have to choose a wedding cake?"

"Oh, honey." Nate giggled. "There are so many things you have to plan for a wedding." Nate sat forward. "Not to worry, though. I know the perfect wedding planner for you."

"Oh?" Ethan replied, curious. "What exactly does a wedding planner do?"

Nate's grin looked mischievous. "Everything."

The sound of someone knocking on the front door interrupted Ethan's reply. Ethan grabbed his crutches and walked toward the door. He started to turn the door handle when Nate cried out behind him.

"No, Ethan!" Nate shouted.

Ethan turned to Nate in surprise. He never heard that tone in Nate's voice before. He sounded frightened. It sent a shiver of dread up his spine.

"Don't answer the door," Nate said, quickly crossing the floor between them. He grabbed Ethan by the arm and pulled him away from the door, his face worried. "Come on, we need to get out of here."

"Wha—" Ethan started to ask only to be stopped by a louder knock on the front door. He turned, confused by what was going on. Mickey began to bark and growl at the door. Nate yanked on his arm.

Ethan suddenly felt very scared. He grabbed Mickey's collar and tried to pull him along as he followed Nate toward the back of the house. His heart pounded in his chest. The knocking on the door turned to pounding. It was accompanied by a loud, thunderous voice yelling through the thick wood.

"JD!" the voice shouted. "I know you're in there. Open this damn door."

JD? Ethan knew of only two people that called his mate JD. One was Joe, and he called Ethan's mate Jace since they got back together. That left Jace's father. And it terrified Ethan to know that his mate's father stood just on the other side of the door.

Ethan wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to be disrespectful of Jace's father, but he didn't want to let the man inside, either. He was terrified of him, especially after the things Jace told him. The man was a monster.

\* \* \* \*

Jace frowned as he pulled up in front of his house. He didn't recognize one of the cars sitting in his driveway, but the other one belonged to Nate, which meant Ethan was home. Jace parked the car and slowly climbed out.

Loud pounding on the front door drew his attention. Jace felt his heart sink to his feet when he recognized his father. Nothing involving his father could be good. Jace braced himself then stepped around his car to face his father.

"Hello, Father."

Arthur Dominick swung around, his hand raised in the air to pound on the door again. He glared, his hand slowly dropping as he walked down the steps and toward Jace. "It's about damn time you got here!"

"I didn't know we had an appointment. I would have been here sooner."

"I'm not in the mood for any of your crap, JD," his father snarled. "I've given you enough time to get this shit out of your system. It's time for you to come home and take your place as next in line for alpha."

Jace shook his head. "Not going to happen. I'm not going anywhere."

Jace's heart thudded in his chest when he spotted Ethan and Nate coming out of the kitchen door behind his father. He watched Ethan unclick Mickey's leash and point towards him. The yellow dog raced across the yard, barking the entire way, until he stood between Jace and his father.

"Of course you'll come home," Jace's father shouted. "It's where you belong."

"No, I won't," Jace replied calmly. "This is my home now."

"Bullshit!" the man yelled. "This is your way of getting even with me for bringing that fool woman into your house. You know it, and I know it."

"Oh, so you admit that was a stupid thing to do?" Jace laughed. "Why, Father, I'm shocked."

The man growled. "I've had just about enough of this, JD. You have a duty to your pack. You're my heir, the next in line for alpha. It's time for you to come home where you belong. We'll find you another wife."

"Sorry," Jace said. "No can do, Father. I already have a mate."

"Fine, bring her with you."

Jace grinned, his eyes turning to Ethan. "Him, Father, my mate is male."

"Impossible."

"Oh, it's very possible, Father," said another voice.

Jace turned to see his brother, Robert standing off to one side. He wouldn't have been concerned except Robert held a gun in his hand, pointed directly at Jace and his father.

"What are you doing here, Robert?" Jace's father asked as he turned to look at the man. "I thought I told you to stay home? And what in the hell are you doing with a gun?"

"I think he intends to shoot us both," Jace said. "Don't you, Robert?"

"The thought occurred to me," Robert replied, a smirk on his lips. He waved the gun just a bit. "Tell your little whore to get over here."

Jace bristled at Robert's words but motioned Ethan over. He kept his eyes on Robert as Ethan walked the last few feet across the yard to stand beside him. Jace immediately wrapped his arm around Ethan's waist and pulled him back and slightly behind his larger body.

Jace didn't like the chuckle that came out of Robert's mouth. It made him shiver even more than the presence of his father. There was something seriously wrong with Robert, a madness in his eyes.

"I thought I'd killed you," Robert said, waving the gun towards Ethan.

Jace's eyes widened at his brother's words. Deep rage filled him. He started to lunge for his brother, ready to rip his throat out at the clear threat to his mate, but Ethan grabbed him, holding him back.

"Well, no one said getting to the top would be easy," Robert drawled easily.

"Knock it off right now, Robert," Jace's father said. "I don't have time for your shit."

"You never have time for me, father," Robert shouted. "It's always JD. JD this and JD that. JD, JD, JD. I'm tired of hearing about JD. What about me?"

"Robert! Leave your brother out of this. I told you to stay home."

"Oh, that's right," Robert said. "Let's not bring the golden boy into it. We wouldn't want to mar his good name."

Robert turned to point his gun at Jace, making his heart beat faster. He just knew they weren't going to get out of this unscathed. Robert was too crazy and he apparently had an agenda.

"You're always letting him get away with things, with going against your words. You never punish him for it," Robert shouted at his father. He waved his gun around then pointed it in Ethan's direction.

"He mated that stupid little runt, and you never did anything about it. You just set him up to marry Susanna instead, like a reward. Susanna should have been my wife, not his."

"How did you know Ethan was my mate, Robert?" Jace asked suddenly. He knew for a fact that he never mentioned it when he went home. He didn't want his brother or father to even know about Ethan. It was safer that way. "I never said anything to anyone."

"Oh, please!" Robert snorted. "You reeked of the man. You kept calling out his name when you came home. I thought you'd never shut the hell up."

"You knew I mated Ethan and you never said anything?" Jace asked. He felt Ethan reach down and grip his hand. He gave the man a little squeeze before dropping his hand and grabbing his arm. He tried to maneuver Ethan behind him again, but Ethan refused to move from his side. Jace was grateful for the support but worried about Ethan's safety.

"Oh, no, I said something all right," Robert replied. "I told father, but he said it was because of your silver poisoning. He said you were delusional."

"And you'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Robert?" Jace asked. "I wouldn't have had silver poisoning if you and your goons didn't jump me and stab me with a silver dagger."

"You stabbed your brother?" Jace's father roared. "I thought he was attacked by someone from another pack. That's what you told me."

"Oh, sure, blame it on me," Robert replied. "You get all so upset over a little argument, but you didn't say a damn thing about JD mating with a man. You just let him go on and on about how much he wanted his little mate, his sweet little mate."

Jace could feel Ethan's shock in the tensing of the muscles under his hand. He couldn't blame Ethan, especially considering what the man heard about the people in his family. He wouldn't blame Ethan if he washed his hands of the whole lot of them.

"You knew I mated Ethan and you didn't anything?" Jace asked, disbelief clear in his voice. "I was sick with silver poisoning. You knew and you never told me?"

Robert cackled like a madman. "Oh, he did something, all right. He already had Susanna picked out to be your mate. He sent me back to take care of your little whore."

Jace suddenly felt cold dread take hold of his body. This wasn't good. He gripped Ethan's arm tighter. The man seemed poised to attack Jace's brother. Jace couldn't let him be hurt.

Robert sneered as he looked Ethan up and down. "He should have died. Who knew the little runt would be strong enough to survive?"

"What did you do?" Jace growled.

"Oh, please, don't act so self righteous," Robert snapped. "I heard you deny mating him with my own ears. You even tossed him across the room. I did you a favor. Who knew you'd get all emotional and come back for him?"

Ethan growled. This time it was a low growl that told Jace Ethan was getting ready to attack. When Robert sneered at him again, this time a dark, lecherous look in his eyes, Jace didn't think he could hold Ethan back.

"Maybe I should have fucked him before I beat the shit out of him," Robert said. He chuckled. It sounded cold and bitter. It made Jace shiver. His brother really was nuts. "I would have, too, if he hadn't been unconscious, but I like my prey to fight back."

Jace knew even before all of the words left Robert's mouth that all hell was about to break loose. He wasn't sure how much of the crap coming out of Robert's mouth he could believe, but Jace wanted to believe all of it. It meant he was innocent of hurting his mate.

Before Jace could share his joy at the news with Ethan, his mate growled and leapt forward. Jace immediately had visions of blood everywhere, broken bones, and possibly bodies.

He reached out a hand to stop Ethan only to hear a loud bang. He felt a sudden pain in his chest. It was cold. His mind overloaded, and he crumbled to the ground, a splotch of red spreading across his chest. He looked up to see Robert standing there, smoke spiraling up from the gun in his hand.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan roared. Without thought of what it might do to him, Ethan shifted into his wolf form even as he leapt through the air at Robert. He heard screaming, felt warm, coppery liquid fill his mouth as he

tore into Robert. All he could only see in his mind was Jace falling to the ground.

"Ethan!" someone yelled.

When someone grabbed him, Ethan turned, snarling. It took a moment for the red haze clouding Ethan's mind to clear enough for him to recognize Joe as the person holding him.

"Let him go, Ethan," Joe said. "He's not going to do any more damage."

Ethan looked down at the bloody body beneath him. He could see that the man still breathed, but just barely. Ethan growled, biting down harder on the arm in his mouth. He didn't want the man to continue breathing. He caused too much pain to live.

"Ethan, sweetness, you need to let him go."

He knew that voice. Ethan turned to see Jace squatting down next to him. He held a piece of thick cloth to the wound in his shoulder. The other one he held out to Ethan. Ethan dropped the arm from his mouth and walked over to nuzzle his snout against the hand Jace held out to him.

Jace stroked his fur, checking him over for injuries before dropping the cloth he held and grabbing each side of Ethan's face in his hand. His face looked very serious.

"Listen to me, sweetness," Jace said. "Don't shift back. Stay in wolf form until we can get someone to look at you. Do you understand?"

Ethan nodded his head. Of course he understood. He wasn't stupid. He just—oh shit! He'd shifted. He wasn't supposed to shift. The doctor said it might kill him if he did. Ethan whined.

Would he have to stay in wolf form for the rest of his life? Would it kill him if he shifted back? How could Jace marry him if he remained a wolf? Would Jace even want to marry him after this? He attacked Jace's brother. Jace might be pissed at him.

Ethan whimpered, nudging his nose against Jace's face. Jace stroked his fur. "It's going to be okay, sweetness. We'll figure this out."

"JD?"

Ethan growled and turned to bare his teeth at Jace's father.

"Don't you growl at me, you little upstart," he shouted. "If it wasn't for you, my son would be back home where he belongs."

Ethan took a step closer. He felt Jace's arms wrap around him and tighten, holding him back from attacking, which was just what Ethan wanted to do. He wanted to tear into the man that caused his mate so much grief.

"Shut the hell up, Father," Jace shouted back. "Ethan had nothing to do with this. I left because I don't want to be alpha. I want my own life, not the one you dictate to me. And I want to spend it with the person I choose, not one handpicked by my father."

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't be alpha of the pack with a man as your mate," Jace's father said. "You will marry Susanna and provide cubs for the pack, just as you should have before you threw your little temper tantrum and moved out to this God forsaken hovel."

"This little hovel is my home, Father," Jace replied, "and Ethan is my mate, the only one I'm going to have."

Jace's father huffed. "Fine, keep the little runt, but you will come home and marry Susanna." He grimaced as he looked down at Robert. "Now that your brother is no longer useful to me, I have no other choice but to choose you as my heir."

"I'm not interested."

"That's not a choice that you have, JD. We have a pack that needs an alpha they can look up to, that they can trust. Our pack trusts you. They need you. You have an obligation to them."

Jace stood to his feet and glared at his father. "I have an obligation to my mate and no one else."

Jace's father waved a hand at him. "I already said you could keep him. What else do you want?"

"Do you really think I could ever forget your part in all of this?" Jace shouted. "You sent Robert to kill my mate. My mate, Father, mine! I will never forgive you for that."

Jace took a few steps closer to his father until the stood nose to nose. "I want you out of my life," he said. "You've done nothing but try to control me all of my life. Well, I'm through, Father. I want you to leave and I never want to see you again."

"You're throwing away a good chance at being the alpha of your own pack, JD."

"What part of this aren't you getting? I don't want to be the alpha. Not of your pack and not of anyone else's pack. I just want to live in the country with my mate and raise horses. That's all I've ever wanted."

Jace's father stared at him for several moments before turning and stalking away. He stopped at the doorway to his car to glance back at Jace. His face filled with so much rage and anger it appeared beet red.

"You will regret this one day, JD. Mark my words," he said, shaking his finger at Jace. "One of these days, this will come back to bite you in the ass, and when it does, don't come crawling to me."

"Never going to happen," Jace replied. He stepped over and kicked his brother. "Don't forget to take your heir with you."

Jace's father snarled but walked back to lift Robert over his shoulder and carry him to the car. He tossed him into the backseat as if he were a useless piece of luggage then climbed into the driver's seat. His tires screeched as he turned the car around and sped down the driveway.

Ethan leaned into his mate as Jace sank down onto the ground and wrapped his hands in Ethan's fur. He licked his cheek. Jace chuckled and stroked his fur. "We're going to be just fine, aren't we, sweetness?"

Ethan woofed.

"I think I need to lie down here a minute, sweetness," Jace groaned as he fell backward. Ethan whined. He forgot that Jace was

injured. He quickly scanned the area, spotting Joe and Nate standing off to one side.

He barked at them. Joe cautiously walked over and knelt down next to Jace. When he gave Ethan a worried look, Ethan scooted back and settled down on the ground, his head resting on Jace's abdomen.

"Okay, Ethan, I'm just going to apply some pressure to Jace's wound," Joe explained. "It's probably going to hurt, but we have to stop the bleeding. Do you understand?"

Ethan wished that he were in human form so that he could roll his eyes. Of course he understood. Why did everyone keep asking him that? Instead, he let out a small woof, then leaned forward to lick Joe's wrist.

"Good," Joe said. "Okay, Jace, here we go."

Ethan whimpered when Jace cried out. He inched forward. He couldn't help but feel that if he acted faster, Jace never would have been shot.

"He's going to be just fine, Ethan, don't you worry."

Well, Ethan was worried. He couldn't help it. Jace was shot. Ethan shifted into wolf form after the doctor told him not to. And now some manic father knew where they lived and carried a grudge against them. Things were just peachy.

"It'll be okay, sweetness," Jace whispered. "I'm not going to check out now, not when I just found you. Remember? Love, always, promise."

## **Chapter 9**

"Nervous?"

Jace chuckled. "Sweating bullets," he replied to Joe's question. He glanced at himself in the mirror again, smoothing the lapel of his tux down for the hundredth time. "You'd think that since we're mated I wouldn't be nervous. It's not like he's not going to show up for the wedding."

"Don't feel too bad, Jace," Joe said. "Nate got a flat tire on the way to our wedding. He arrived almost an hour late. Poor man never fixed a flat before. I was positive he changed his mind."

Jace glanced at Joe, worry filling him. "You don't think that—"

"No, lucky for you, I'm having my father drive him here."

Jace laughed nervously. "Good, good."

"It'll be fine, Jace," Joe assured him. "Don't worry. Nate and my mother planned this thing down to the last detail. Nothing is going to go wrong."

Jace frowned. "Yeah, thanks for that, by the way. When Nate said your mom might have a few ideas, I didn't know that this would turn into the wedding of the century."

"Dude, you have no idea." Joe laughed. "This is only half of what my mother did for Nate and me. I swear the entire valley attended my wedding. I haven't seen a turn out like that since Marla Robinson rode a horse naked through town doing her impersonation of Lady Godiva."

Jace blinked. "That must have been a sight."

"Yeah, probably wouldn't have been so bad if she didn't take an ad out in the local paper a week before hand. When she said she wanted to bring theater to the valley, I don't think the town council quite had that in mind."

"It's never boring 'round here, is it?"

"Oh, Wolf Creek has its moments, true," Joe replied, "but I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Everyone here is family, even if not by blood. They'll always be there to guard your back when there's danger and to help you celebrate the happenings in your life."

Jace nodded. "Everyone's certainly been there for Ethan and me since my father came and Robert shot me. We got home from the hospital and your mother rounded up every lady in the valley to fill our fridge with food. We didn't have to cook for a week."

Joe laughed. "Yeah, I've been there a time or two. Just stay away from Mrs. Thompson's green bean casserole. I don't know what that woman puts in it, but you'll have heartburn for a month."

"Green bean casserole?" Jace asked, wincing "I think Ethan dropped that one trying to get it out of the fridge. He's getting back to normal, but he still has his moments."

"How is he doing?" Joe asked. "Any lasting effects from his shift?"

Jace shook his head. "No, in fact, the doctor said it might have actually done some good. Ethan won't ever heal completely, but he has better movement now and he's in less pain, which is all I really care about. And he can shift now. He's just not supposed to tax himself too much."

"I'll bet it's a relief to know you didn't cause his injury, though."

Jace shrugged. "I don't know if it really makes a difference. I mean, ultimately, I'm still responsible even if I didn't actually cause the damage. If my father wasn't such an asshole, he never would have ordered my brother to come back here and kill Ethan."

"I don't think you had anything to do with it, Jace. Your father's just an asshole. He would have eventually gone after any mate you chose, and you know it. It wouldn't have mattered if it was Ethan, the

man on the moon, or even a woman. If your father didn't hand pick your mate, he would have been pissed."

"I suppose."

Jace wasn't convinced. It was a huge relief to him to know he didn't actually injured Ethan. The guilt ate away at him. Knowing his brother had been in the apartment the same time he rejected Ethan, waiting to kill him, didn't make Jace feel any better.

In fact, it made him feel worse. If he didn't have his head up his ass and just accepted Ethan, his mate might not have to use crutches for the rest of his life. That guilt, Jace would never get rid of.

"Come on, Jace, drop the frown," Joe said, slapping him playfully on the arm. "It's your wedding day. You should be happy."

"I am."

"The stop frowning or your fiancé is going to think you don't want to marry him," Nate said from the doorway.

Jace twirled around and grinned at him. His heart beat a little faster. "He's here?"

Nate nodded. "He's waiting for you right down the hallway."

Jace's hands started to tremble. He held them out at arm's length and shook them. He wondered if he would make it down the aisle without hyperventilating. He felt so nervous he thought butterflies might be doing loops in his stomach.

"You ready, Jace?"

Jace shook his head rapidly back and forth. "Yes?"

Joe chuckled. "You'll be fine."

Jace followed Joe down the stairs to the main floor and out the front door. The wedding ceremony would take place in the front yard. All the guests sat in chairs lining the walkway.

Jace walked down the makeshift aisle to where a flower arch sat. The plan was for Jace to wait there for Ethan to walk out of the house and down the aisle. Jace wanted to walk down the aisle so Ethan wouldn't have to. Ethan wasn't having any of it. He wanted to walk down the aisle to Jace.

If that's what Ethan wanted, that's what Ethan would get it. Jace was determined to give Ethan everything he wanted. The man deserved it. Jace was still stunned Ethan shifted and attacked someone to save him.

It showed how much Ethan loved him, which just might be a fraction of how much Jace loved Ethan. Jace glanced up when the music started. His heart thundered in his chest as he waited for the front door to open and show his mate. This was it.

Time seemed to slow to almost a crawl as the door opened. Then suddenly, there Ethan stood. Jace gasped. He was dressed in a tux that matched Jace's, black with a crisp white shirt and a black bow tie. Ethan's hair had been carefully combed and shined in the afternoon light.

But the smile on his beautiful face was the most spectacular thing about him. It lit up his entire face and made him glow. Jace wasn't sure he ever looked so good. He just couldn't believe he had been lucky enough to be blessed with a mate like Ethan.

Jace started down the aisle, determined to help Ethan walk down the stairs when Ethan held up his hand to stop him. Jace stopped, puzzled until Ethan stepped forward. Instead of a heavy metal crutch on each arm, Ethan gripped a simple black cane in his hand.

Jace's mouth dropped open in surprise as Ethan walked down the steps using only the cane for assistance. His steps weren't stilted or slow. They were confident as if Ethan walked with a cane for years.

"Ethan?"

Ethan grinned. "Surprise!" He said. He held up the cane in his hand. "I graduated."

"Graduated?"

Ethan nodded. "Doc says I don't have to use the crutches anymore unless I really need them, just the cane."

"Is he sure?" Jace asked, concerned that Ethan just wanted to please him and make him feel less worried.

Ethan pointed back down the aisle to where an older man sat. "Ask him," Ethan said. "He's sitting right there." The man waved and nodded.

Jace grabbed Ethan around the waist and swung him up in the air, twirling him around as pure happiness surged through him. Finally, he let Ethan's feet slide to the ground, his arms still around the man.

"Ready to get married, sweetness?" he whispered.

Ethan grinned. "Love, always, promise."

# THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

Stormy lives in the great Northwest region of the USA, with her gorgeous husband and soul mate, six very active teenagers, two boxer/collie puppies, two old biddy cats, and three fish.

You can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand and a puppy in her lap, or on her laptop, creating the next sexy man for one of her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com.

#### Also by Stormy Glenn

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