

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



TRANSCENDING
DARKNESS
KATE STEELE

Transcending Darkness

Kate Steele

Is it possible to start a new life with a bang...or rather, a spanking?

For Owen Connors that's just what it takes. He's about to embark on a journey filled with change, including a new job, a new home and something he never thought he'd have...a man who offers him everything, including the opportunity to become a creature steeped in legend...a werewolf. All Owen has to do is accept Sam's love. Too bad that's an emotion he abandoned a long time ago.

For werewolf Sam Sterling, change begins within himself. Vowing never to become like his father, who took pleasure in cruelty and brutality, Sam has learned to be calm, kind and passive. That works just fine for him until he meets the man he would take as his mate. When Owen ignores him in favor of a strong and charismatic alpha werewolf, Sam realizes it's time for a change. For Owen, he'll take charge and become the dominant, decisive lover Owen needs.

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Transcending Darkness

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TRANSCENDING DARKNESS

Kate Steele

Dedication

This book is dedicated to each and every one of my readers who, with varying degrees of patience in the past three and half years, emailed me to ask, Hey Kate, Are you ever going to write that sequel to *Male of the Species* you promised us??? I always said yes, and finally, as solemnly vowed, here it is. Thank you for all the nudging, pleading, hinting and just plain insisting this book be written. I've grown to love Sam and Owen and without your encouragement I might never have gotten so well acquainted with them. Now about the next sequel...you all still have my email address, right?

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Coke: The Coca-Cola Company

Popsicle: Lipton Investments Inc.

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Styrofoam: The Dow Chemical Company

YMCA: The National Council of Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States of America

Chapter One

Death came cloaked not in black but in fiery yellow orange. It was the color of fury...fury blazing from the eyes of a werewolf betrayed. Staring into a demise of his own making, Owen Connors fought for his next breath. Terror fueled the wild beating of his heart but it was not that alone which kept him from drawing in a precious draught of oxygen—it was the iron-hard fingers wrapped around his throat.

Darkness began to cloud his vision, paired with the increasing buzz that muddled his hearing. He managed by a mere thread to understand the words of the man who had become his unexpected savior. “Maybe you should ease up a bit, Dev. He can’t tell you anything if you break his neck.” Nick Boyce’s suggestion, casually offered but nonetheless welcome, planted a small seed of hope in Owen’s receding consciousness.

“He’ll tell me or I’ll separate his fucking head from the rest of his body.” With those words, Devin Grant released his grip.

Gasping for air, Owen sank to the leaf-littered ground. One hand flew to his bruised throat and he rocked forward, coughing then convulsively swallowing while his other hand fisted the grass on which he knelt. He was given only scant moments to recover before his tormentor squatted down in front of him. The penetrating disdain Devin radiated was so potent, Owen flinched. To meet the man’s eyes again was a daunting task. Perhaps it would have been easier had they retained their normal golden brown hue, but voluntarily connecting with the blazing citrine of Devin’s intense regard at a time when his wolf was clearly ascendant and enraged was frightening. When he finally dared do so—there was no hint of mercy to be found within that preternatural gaze.

And who could blame him? I put the person he loves into the hands of a madman.

Shame assailed Owen at the thought of what he’d done and even he could find no fault in the actions of this man who stared at him with such tightly leashed rage. How had it come to this? Had he wanted money and status so badly that to possess it, he was willing to stoop so low?

No! Safety, security, a small inner voice insistently whispered and Owen reluctantly admitted to himself it was the truth. The person before him was a powerful, dynamic man, a man who protected those he considered his. Owen, whose hustler lifestyle was so precarious, so fraught with uncertainty, had seen in him a way to escape, to be truly safe for the first time in what seemed like forever. Hating such weakness in himself, he was still driven to pursue that elusive goal.

A movement, seen from the corner of his eye, drew Owen’s attention and he tore his gaze from Devin’s only to meet that of Sam Sterling. Swamped by an unwelcome flood of emotion, Owen’s heart cringed.

Why couldn’t I take what Sam offered?

Even as the question beat at him, Owen knew the answer. Sam was too passive. For such a big man, so tall and broad and physically strong, Sam was surprisingly unassertive. He'd offered Owen affection for the taking and Owen was honest enough to admit he cared for Sam, but somehow...it hadn't been enough. Sam had obviously wanted him, yet he did nothing to press the issue. He left the decision to act up to Owen and Owen, for his part, was unsure how to deal with a desire including more than physical need. Sam's restraint and the involvement of emotions Owen was afraid to deal with confused him. It made him feel vulnerable, a thing he abhorred and so he ran toward a goal he had no hope of achieving – being with Devin Grant.

Trying to snare him was nothing but a useless exercise and self-destructive to boot but Owen couldn't stop. Conditioned to expect the worst by the harsh realities life had thrown his way, some perverse part of his personality believed he deserved no chance at happiness, no chance at a true and loving relationship and so he threw away what Sam offered and, with a shaking hand, reached out and touched Devin's thigh. Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were wrong and conflict raged within him.

"You don't need him. I can give you everything you need," Owen offered then winced as Devin grabbed and flung his hand aside.

"I'm with *Ryan*," Dev growled. "He's mine—my mate—and I love him. You insinuated yourself among us under false pretenses and now you know what we are. Werewolves are very unforgiving creatures when betrayed – don't make me give you to the pack."

Owen blanched at Devin's threat. Werewolves. It was true. Silas Prudome, the man who had taken Ryan, had in their last conversation confirmed what Owen had begun to suspect and now there was no doubt. Werewolves existed and he'd just surrendered one of their number to an enemy. In this clearing lit by the rising moon and a few scattered camp lanterns, he was surrounded by them. Devin, Nick, Quinn Alexander and a few others he didn't know. He was sure any one of the men gathered here, if so ordered, had the capacity and will to hurt him for what he'd done. Even Sam. Perhaps now especially Sam whose feelings he'd trampled. As men they could do any number of things to him. In whatever form they took as werewolves, God only knew what would happen, but even had that threat not been imminent, Owen knew it was time to pay for his mistakes. With his heart in his throat and fear making the balmy summer air feel cold, he confessed.

"Silas Prudome has him. He's been paying me for information and a future favor that he finally collected in the form of Ryan. I'm sorry, I was a coward for taking the easy way out of my poverty. I didn't know you then, any of you," he admitted, directing his last comment directly to Sam. "By the time I did, I was in too deep."

Looking into Sam's dark eyes, Owen could see a change come over him. Sam's jaw hardened and a look of resolve transformed his heretofore impassive features. Before Owen could begin to think about what that might mean, his attention was drawn back to more immediate concerns.

"So you turned Ryan over to that butcher and his sorry excuse for a coven. Those fools are pretenders and wouldn't know what to do with real magic if it zapped them in the ass. Why didn't you come to me or Sam? We could have fixed this before it went so far," Devin growled.

Tearing his gaze from Sam's, Owen centered it on Devin's chest. Having seen enough of his anger and contempt, he avoided eye contact. "I didn't think there was any way out," he whispered and fell silent, waiting for Devin to pass judgment.

The excuses he'd offered were true but there was one more that remained unspoken. Trust. Owen had been unable to put his trust in these men. Scarred by childhood trauma, as an adult he found it beyond his capacity to believe in anyone. How could he have known they'd accept his remorse and keep Silas Prudome from exacting some form of retribution against him should he fail to deliver on the deal they'd struck? It was this stellar flaw in him, this inability to rely on another human being that kept Owen silent and allowed Ryan to be captured and his life to be put in danger.

Tension gripped Owen and ratcheted higher as Dev rose from his crouched position in front of him only to pace back and forth. Eyes focused just beyond his knees, Owen traced the lines of each blade of grass and fallen leaf on the patch of ground beneath his gaze until the first words Devin spoke snapped his attention back to him.

"I need a volunteer to stay with Owen."

Though his request seemed directed toward everyone present, his unwavering regard was aimed squarely at Sam.

Sam took his blatant hint and stepped forward. "This is my fault. I should have done as you urged and claimed Owen. Stopped this long before it began."

Claimed?

Owen frowned at Sam's use of the word. What did he mean by that?

"You blame yourself, I blame myself but in reality, we're all to blame for different reasons," Devin replied, heaping fault not only on Owen and Sam but himself as well. "But that doesn't matter now. He's yours. I expect you to teach your mate proper pack etiquette if he's to join us."

Mate? What? Owen's frown deepened with his rising consternation.

Released from Devin's harsh regard, Owen experienced a small bit of relief only to have it flee at Sam's approach. Determination was written large on his features and suddenly Devin's mention of punishment took on a different but no less alarming connotation. Though he was no longer in danger of losing his life, if indeed that had ever been the case, it seemed there was still a price to be paid for what he'd done. A rush of panic had Owen springing to his feet but he took no more than a step or two before a large hand cuffed his wrist, bringing him to an abrupt halt.

"No!" he shouted, a zing of fear prompting him to struggle against Sam's hold. A solid smack landed on his ass and for a split second the shock of it stiffened his entire body before he went limp.

"Take it easy, cub. I won't hurt you...much," Sam promised. His voice, heavy with resolution, was also laced with slight amusement. Hearing it eased Owen's apprehension...until his next words brought it back in spades. "First, a good spanking, then only pleasure for you, little one, hours and hours of pleasure. And if you're very good and beg me nicely, I'll even let you come."

Brief hoots of laughter followed Sam's declaration and in reaction to Sam's threat, the muscles in Owen's buttocks tightened. As though he had been shoved beneath the spray of a hot shower, embarrassment and dismay cascaded over him in a heated rush. He opened his mouth to utter a protest, another excuse or something designed to stay his fate but the words were halted before he'd drawn a breath to speak.

"Problem one solved," Nick quipped. "Now what, Boss?"

From his awkward position across Sam's shoulder, Owen directed his gaze toward the others. What he saw was totally unexpected. They were, to a man, stripping out of their clothing. Once naked, they closed ranks, bodies brushing, hands skimming lightly over naked flesh. What could have, in other circumstances, been taken for a lascivious display, was in this case something quite different. Their touches enhanced the aura of unity surrounding them and seemed designed to cement their bond as a group. As sometimes happens to men facing a dangerous situation, some of them were erect, but those blatant symbols of masculinity merely added to the sheer beauty of their unself-conscious contact.

The group's obvious connection to each other and their forthright acknowledgement of it were almost painful for Owen to witness. It was as though they were silently reassuring themselves and each other they were not alone. That each of them was a necessary part of the whole that together made them a pack. Owen couldn't help but be affected by it. It was a blatant reminder of his own isolation, his own lack of family and friends. He wanted to drop his gaze...to reject that which made him feel so alone, but something further occurred to keep his attention riveted to the group. The atmosphere around them began to shimmer like that of pavement-heated summer air. Within the glistening veil surrounding them, a strange shift was taking place. It was as though matter itself dissolved, wildly spun then slowed and reformed. When the gossamer cloak dispersed, the group of men within it had been reborn—as wolves.

Stunned, Owen stared in astonishment. These animals, beyond a superficial resemblance, had little in common with their domesticated canine descendants. They were huge, intimidating and despite their beauty, being this close to them invoked a feeling of utter defenselessness. Sensing their wild, unrestrained natures and knowing they were among the most elite of predators, a primitive part of his psyche quivered in fear.

The pack parted and made way for one individual. A black wolf, his muzzle and ears shaded with silver, emerged from their number. He regarded the group, his gaze seeming to gather that of every member until satisfied, he threw back his head and loosed a haunting howl. The others returned the eerie, warbling call, a sound that raised the hair on the back of Owen's neck and sent an electric shiver down his spine.

As their cries died away, their leader turned and ran. En masse the pack followed, disappearing into the night. Wonder swept through Owen. What he'd just witnessed was unbelievable. They'd changed into wolves. Men he knew, men he'd spoken with, shared meals with, men who lived normal everyday lives had changed into those fierce, untamed creatures. A combination of nervous reaction and exhilaration had his lips forming a tremulous smile. Amazing. It was totally, completely amazing, even more so because the fear he'd felt at what they could do to a weaker being such as himself, was lost in the awe he experienced at their being able to effect such an impossible transformation.

Distracted by his thoughts, Owen was forcibly reminded of his position when his body took a dip. Sam had leaned down to retrieve one of the nearby camp lanterns. Convulsively grabbing at his captor's shirt, Owen held on for the short walk that brought them to a second smaller and densely curtained clearing. Sam set him on his feet and snapped a terse order.

"Strip."

Startled by the hard, uncompromising tone of the man's usually gentle voice, Owen instantly focused on him. Sam positioned the lantern he had brought so its glow illuminated the almost cozy space they now occupied, making it easy for Owen to see every move he made. Kicking off his shoes, he opened the button of his jeans and lowered the zipper before pulling the hem of his tee shirt free. Skimming it up and off, he let it drop to the ground to rest atop his shoes. Finished with his own preparations, he stood barefoot and bare chested, waiting for Owen to comply with his terse demand.

Having never seen Sam less than fully dressed, even under these bizarre circumstances, Owen experienced a swirl of arousal in the depths of his gut. There was no denying the man was built. His broad shoulders, hard, delineated muscles, cut abs and flat belly were impressive and lower, hidden by worn denim fabric, was a more than imposing bulge. Sam could grace the cover of a bodybuilders magazine and the sight of him was mesmerizing...until Owen's gaze returned to his face where he encountered an expression so blank and empty of any hint of emotion, it was forbidding.

Breathing hard, Owen glanced around, judging the likelihood of making a run for it.

"You won't get far," Sam told him. "You may as well save yourself the extra punishment for trying to get away."

Owen's temper rose. Now that he was certain his life no longer hung in the balance, his usual haughty demeanor was reestablishing itself. Tempted to defy the order in spite of his earlier resolve to accept the consequences for what he'd done, he thought better of it and bowed to the inevitable. Using sharp, angry movements, he immersed himself in a show of false bravado and undressed. Though he fought to keep his composure, trepidation curled in the pit of his stomach and humiliation brought a rosy flush to his skin.

"I don't see why I have to do what you say," he hissed. "You have no rights over me."

"No rights over you? You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you? You've certainly made that abundantly clear. But here's the thing, sweetheart," Sam snapped. "The flavor of your true interest gives you away and validates my rights where you're concerned."

"What are you talking about? Flavor of my interest. What does that mean?"

"Did you know your body gives off scent signals?"

"Signals?"

"Pheromones. Most people think they only deal with attraction but they broadcast so much more than that. They give away your emotions. When you're afraid, happy or nervous. They can even expose when you lie and when they're particularly intense, they carry their own distinctive flavor, just like exotic spices. Of course it takes an individual with highly tuned senses to be able to detect those special scents and seasonings and werewolves just happen to be among those able to do so. It may sound arrogant of me to say, but I know it's me you want and not Dev. Your scent clearly gives it away...even when right in front of me you're offering yourself to him."

The bitterness in Sam's tone made Owen look away. If there was any doubt he was hurt, here was clear proof. "Whenever we're together I can taste your interest in me," Sam revealed. "Dev never inspires such a release of arousal pheromones from you. What I want to know is why you keep chasing him. Why, Owen? What is it about me you dislike so much that even though you're willing to be fucked by me you don't want to be with me in any other way? Tell me. I want to know."

Sam's demand, his obvious pain and anger, made it difficult for Owen to think straight. Unbreakable strands of anxiety wrapped around him and squeezed until he was rendered powerless by them. In the depths of his mind, reasons tumbled over themselves but saying any one of them out loud seemed impossible. There wasn't one that wouldn't cause more pain between them, and the tension created by that silent acknowledgment gripped him.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"You're lying. Try again. Tell me, Owen."

"I said I don't know!"

"You do! Tell me. Just tell me the reason!" Sam bellowed.

Battered by Sam's relentless interrogation, Owen's consciousness flinched as a single truth blazed forth. He shouted it out in an effort to appease his tormentor. "*Because I like you and I don't want to!* Are you fucking happy now? Stop badgering me!" Appalled at his admission and wanting nothing more than to disappear, Owen turned away, effectively blocking Sam from his sight.

No, no, no!

Longing, denial and fear hit with blinding force and he fell victim to their unmerciful pummeling. How was it possible to want something so much and yet live in terror of it? Drawing in a harsh breath, he whispered, "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Because I like you too," Sam answered. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult?" Insistent hands forced him to turn back and warm arms wrapped around him. Owen's first reaction was to pull away but Sam held him tight, preventing his escape. "Why is admitting you like me so traumatic? Why does it make you want to put distance between us instead of bringing us closer? Why don't you want to care about me?" Sam murmured against his hair.

Cheek against Sam's chest, Owen shook his head as best he could manage. "No more. No more questions. I won't answer you."

There was a moment's silence then Sam's deep sigh. "All right. But someday. Someday I hope you'll tell me. You may not believe it, but you can trust me. Although what I have to do next isn't going to do much to back up that statement."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your punishment. I still have to carry it out."

Owen pushed free of Sam's loosened embrace. Punishment. With this kind of thing he was well acquainted. "I know...much as I don't like it." Memories of blows received from unmerciful fists stiffened his spine and began a process he'd developed to protect himself. He forced himself to be calm, to allow his emotions to submerge and his body to brace for the coming ordeal. "I just have one request."

"What's that?"

"Hit me. In the stomach, in the face even, I don't care. Punches I can take. Just don't treat me like some helpless kid. I can't deal with that." His breath caught and his words stalled to a halt at the thought of being made to feel small and defenseless again. A spanking seemed designed for just that purpose and he viewed it with a repugnance that being punched couldn't begin to approach. "I won't even try to defend myself," he concluded in a rush. "So don't...do that other thing."

"Stop it." The pure steel in Sam's order brought Owen's words to an abrupt halt. He met Sam's gaze and was surprised at the utter dismay he saw reflected there. "Why? Why the hell would you ask me to do that? Do you seriously think I could beat you with my fists?"

"What difference does it make?" Owen asked, struggling to keep his equanimity and not respond to Sam's distress. "You have to hurt me. Does it matter how?"

"Jesus Christ, Owen! I don't want to do it at all so, yes, it matters how! The object here is memorable impact with minimal physical damage. Dev wants the consequences for your offenses to leave a lasting impression on you; that's all. No one wants you hospitalized."

"I don't see why not," Owen ground out. Now that he was willing to accept the consequences of his actions, having his willingness to suffer dismissed was making him

unreasonably angry. "After what I've done I deserve it. God only knows what's happening to Ryan. Have you forgotten about that?" Owen's composure began to crack. "I know I don't deserve any consideration but I'm the one who's going to be hurt here and now. At least let me choose the method."

"No."

The tone of that one word carried the weight of finality behind it and Owen desisted with his argument. *Maybe it's karma*, he silently speculated. Even though he'd offered to accept more physical pain in exchange for not being made to feel vulnerable, perhaps the exact nature of his transgressions required the cosmos to exact a punishment that would touch him on more than just a physical level. It seemed particularly ironic that the lesser physical punishment would be the one extracting a greater price from him. Utterly defeated, he gave up. "Fine. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore. Just do whatever you're going to do and let me go."

"Come here," Sam said, releasing all but Owen's hand and using that connection to guide him to a fallen log. Seating himself, Sam pulled Owen down on his lap. "Don't say that. Please," he entreated.

Owen found it difficult to meet Sam's eyes. "Why not? It's true."

"It is not. You made a mistake. People do all the time. It doesn't mean your life is over. All you need do is correct the mistake or atone for it then move on in a better direction. There is a better direction, you know, and I want you to go that way...with me."

"With you? Why would you even want that? I thought...I thought you wouldn't want to be with me after what I've done. I hurt you and you're angry with me, aren't you?"

"Pain fades given time or good reason and anger, well, once I express it, it's not something I can hold on to. Besides, being angry at someone doesn't mean you cut ties with them. You work it out and move on, which is what I want to do because I can't stay angry with my mate."

"Mate? He said that too."

"Devin?"

"Yes. He said teach your mate. Me?"

"You. I know it sounds strange, but my wolf tells me it's you. We could have something good together...if you'll give us a chance."

Confused by the emotional overload and dazed by Sam's offer, Owen felt his reasoning in danger of shutting down. It was all too much to comprehend. "I don't think that would work. Your friends...the others, Devin and the rest, they're important to you. They're not going to want me around. I'm not one of you. I'm the person who betrayed you all and put Ryan in danger. That's never going to change."

"Were you listening to me before? Were you listening to Dev? Would he tell me to teach you if he didn't believe you'd be accepted by us? Whether you become one of us

or not is yet to be decided. It's a choice available to you just as soon as you pay the penalty for what you've done and I say the penalty is this."

In a lightning-fast maneuver so unexpected it made him dizzy, Owen was shifted and pulled facedown across Sam's lap. The abrupt change in positioning tore a gasp from between his parting lips. Being forced into such an ignominious position, he began to struggle. His earlier panic surged and desperately he tried to release himself from Sam's grip. "Then I don't want a choice!" he yelled.

"They say the best punishment is one the offender most dreads. It seems I've stumbled across your weakness. I'm sorry, Owen."

The heavy remorse in Sam's voice stilled Owen's struggles but it didn't stop him from tensing when a large hand glided over his exposed backside. "Shit. Goddamn it, don't," Owen pleaded, the words torn from him.

Sam disregarded his plea and Owen jumped when the first stinging blow landed. "I think it's best if we cover just exactly why this spanking is necessary. Reason one. You used my feelings for you to get close to my family so you could carry out reason two." A flurry of smacks landed on Owen's quivering flanks. "Reason two. You accepted money from Silas Prudome to spy on us. Three. You tried to come between Dev and Ryan. Four. You assisted Prudome in taking Ryan. And last but not least, you lied to us and to yourself, an action that not only endangered Ryan but you too and brought us to this situation with me having to do this to you and hating every fucking minute of it!"

Each one of the transgressions Sam counted off was punctuated with a number of smacks designed to show Owen where he had erred and as his sins were recounted, his self-loathing grew. Heat flared in his backside and prickly tingles raced in stinging streams beneath his skin. Every blow hurt not in a crippling, disabling way, but rather one designed to physically reinforce and intensify his guilt. It also emphasized the mortifying and helpless position he was in. Shame and frustration brought tears to his eyes, tears that leaked and flowed no matter how he strove to stop them and if that wasn't bad enough, his body's other response merely added to his humiliation. Those prickly, stinging tingles generated by the impact of Sam's hand against his flesh were gathering in his groin. His cock, already half hard, was rapidly filling.

When Sam finally finished and set him back on his feet, any dignity Owen could have mustered was totally destroyed. Here he was, awash with remorse and self-reproach, naked and with his ass burning and yet his cock was hard as a rock.

Chagrin had him quickly turning his back on Sam while swiping the moisture from his face. His thoughts careened wildly from point to point like a wild bird trapped in a cage. Silently he berated Sam for his refusal to change his mode of punishment then himself for the duplicity that made the punishment necessary. All the while thoughts of Ryan and what might be happening to him tumbled together with the sudden realization that he himself might be a masochist.

Why the hell else do I have a hard-on?

With muttered curses he collapsed to the ground, hissing when his tender flesh met the cool grass. He felt Sam settle beside him and a quick glance caused him to do a double take. Sam had shed his jeans, and he too was now naked. The sight of his cock, long, thick and fully erect, left Owen speechless and his already scrambled thoughts took a tumble that threw them into complete incoherence.

When Sam settled an arm around his shoulders and urged him to lie back, Owen followed without resistance. He gasped when Sam straddled his body and rested lightly on his thighs. Embarrassment flared anew at the sight of his own spanking-induced hard-on making an obvious show of itself between them. Closing his eyes against Sam's reaction, he failed to see the man's forward lean. He drew in a sharp breath of surprise when Sam kissed him. Surprised he might have been but not displeased. He welcomed Sam's lips with his own and moaned in appreciation when they sealed together, parted and their tongues found each other. The wild surge of sexual energy shooting through him caused his hips to buck and when his cock bumped against Sam's, he uttered a half hysterical laugh. It was a feat none too easy with his mouth engaged in a kiss.

Sam pulled away, giving him a puzzled look. "What's so funny?"

"You. Me. We're hard," Owen said, pointing out the obvious.

"Uh yeah. I think that's a perfectly natural reaction when two people engage in sexual activity."

"But I was hard before you kissed me and I was thinking it might mean I'm a masochist. If you were hard too, you must be a sadist," Saying such a thing out loud gave Owen a chill and his amusement fled. "And I don't have the least idea why that would be funny. I think I'm going crazy."

"You're not going crazy. You're just overdosing on emotion and adrenaline," Sam assured him. "For the record, I'm no sadist. I got hard the minute you took your clothes off. Considering the circumstances I don't know if that's good or bad. I guess it's just being male."

"That explains your aberration. What about mine?"

"You really think you're a masochist? You like to be restrained and spanked?"

"Hell no! Did it seem that way?"

"Not really. I'm sure being spanked isn't something you usually do to get off. You're too embarrassed to even say the word which would make asking someone to do it to you a little difficult. Don't think I didn't notice." Sam lifted himself off Owen and sat cross-legged on the grass beside him.

With a slight grimace at the flare of pain in his backside, Owen sat up. "So what are we doing now?"

"Waiting," Sam answered.

"To see if they come back safe," Owen flatly stated. Renewed apprehension made him feel queasy.

"Yes. As soon as I know for certain everything's okay," Sam reached out and brushed gentle fingers over Owen's deflating erection, "I'll finish what I started."

The touch of Sam's fingers was a fleeting, carnal thrill he felt to the marrow of his bones and Owen wondered if they'd really get a chance to finish. Sam exuded confidence rather than worry as though certain everything would be fine but Owen was not so sanguine. "Are you as sure as you seem that everything's going to be all right?"

"Mmm, pretty much."

Still somewhat doubtful but willing to accept Sam's word, Owen wondered at the emotional peace stealing over him. It seemed Sam's confidence was infectious. Maybe it was the change in his attitude that made Owen believe him. Sam's sudden take-charge manner and his matter-of-fact declaration that they would have sex as though there was no longer any question of whether or not they would be together was arousing. His bold behavior actually stirred Owen's lust and he could feel renewed excitement centering itself in his loins.

Sam, who'd been idly watching the movement of his own hand as he brushed the tips of his fingers over a small section of grass in front of him, stopped what he was doing and turned his gaze in Owen's direction. A flare of carnal heat smoldered in the depths of his eyes. Having said nothing and moved not a muscle, Owen wondered why he was suddenly the object of such intense focus.

As though having read his mind, Sam answered his silent question. "Pheromones." The same fingertips that had just played themselves over the grass were now lightly caressing his ankle. Owen shivered. "Be patient. I'll be taking care of you sooner than you think."

"You mean when the others get back," Owen replied, desire overcoming any embarrassment he felt at being so easily read.

"Before that."

"Before that? How are you going to know before that?"

"I feel them," Sam answered and his eyes took on a faraway, unfocused cast.

"Feel them how?"

"We're a werewolf pack. It's part of our heritage. In a limited way, pack members are connected by a mental link whenever they choose to engage it. Right this minute they're running. They're excited, determined. Dev's worried but focused. He's ready for anything and I can tell he's not going to hesitate to shed blood if it's called for."

The eerie yet intriguing sensation Owen experienced at learning of this ability and hearing Sam's description stirred his curiosity. "What's it like? Being a werewolf?"

Sam remained silent for a moment then responded. "Empowering, alienating. In my human form I'm strong, far stronger than any born human. My senses are enhanced. I can see in the dark. If we were separated by as much as three or four miles, I could still catch your scent. I can change into a wolf and in that form I can indulge the primitive side of my psyche. I can hunt. With teeth and claws I can bring down a full-

grown deer on my own. I can run so fast it feels as though I'm part of the wind itself. Did you know the average full-out running speed of a gray wolf is forty-five miles per hour? Given a good open stretch of ground, a werewolf could easily top that by another thirty. Which is something that's always puzzled me though. You'd think blending the abilities of a man and a wolf would have a different effect. Like maybe the natural capabilities of the wolf would be diminished by the physical inadequacies of the human or perhaps that maybe the wolf could talk. Instead many of our separate abilities are enhanced. The human and the wolf that lives within him, each in their own way, become advanced...enhanced. I guess that's where the magic comes in."

"Magic?"

"Umm hmm. That inexplicable something that makes us what we are. We have it. It's embedded in our bones. Not literally perhaps, but it's there, a part of us. We're linked to the earth's mysteries, the unexplained phenomena, the fleeting something you see from the corner of your eye that disappears if you look too closely." Sam took a deep breath and seemed to pull himself from an almost distant reverie. "Anyway, those things I mentioned before, those are the good things. The bad is feeling different, apart from humanity. It's knowing that if the wrong person or people found out about me, my life would be in ruins. At best I'd be a freak, at worst a lab experiment. Add being gay on top of that and it's a double whammy," he added with an ironic twist of his lips.

"Are there other things out there? Vampires, trolls, pixies, whatever?" Owen asked, though he felt a bit sheepish doing so. Those things seemed impossible but then in just the last few days he'd learned werewolves, warlocks and magic were real entities in this seemingly staid and mundane world.

"So I hear, though I've met few. You know a lot of stories, legends, fairytales, what have you, are more or less based in fact. One of the earliest accounts of werewolves comes from Homer. *The Odyssey* details a story in which Odysseus and a band of his men have an encounter with the goddess Circe who was fond of turning men into wolves and lions."

"The Greek gods are real?"

"That I'm not too sure of but I wouldn't discount it as impossible."

"Jeez," Owen replied with a disbelieving shake of his head. "So, have there always been werewolves? Were you born this way? Are your parents werewolves? Why don't you guys just take over if you're so superior to humans?"

"Whoa, slow down," Sam lightly admonished but answered all the same. "If you're asking when or how werewolves came into being, I don't know. There are legends of course about how werewolves evolved. A human bitten by a wolf. A human cursed by a wielder of magic. There are legends of Native American skinwalkers who can change by donning the pelt of the beast they wish to become. Or of someone being able to shift by wearing a belt made from a beast's hide next to their skin. I've even heard things like being able to transform by drinking rainwater out of the footprint of the animal you

desire to become or by sleeping naked outdoors under a full moon with your face fully exposed.

"Some of those things could be true. Some seem like nonsense but then maybe it depends on the belief and power of the would-be shifter. As for your other questions, yes, I was born this way, yes, my parents are werewolves too and why don't we take over the world? Well, that one's a little more complicated.

"First and foremost I think the make-up of the general population is the main factor. There are infinitely more humans than supernatural beings. If the supernaturals were to band together it might be possible but that's never going to happen because I have a feeling there'd be too much distrust to overcome. The more power an individual or a species has, the more they have a tendency to jealously guard it. For instance the Fey, a very proud and insular race, I hear, would never take orders from a vampire or vice versa. If there's no leader there's no structure, no force that keeps a group together and working toward a single goal, especially one as big as world domination. There's also the fact that otherworldly creatures have traditionally kept themselves hidden and they've had centuries of practice doing so. I personally believe if we were to rise up and announce ourselves to the humans of the world, it would be suicidal."

"What about—" Owen began but was interrupted when Sam raised his hand to signal him to be silent. Sam closed his eyes and Owen unconsciously slowed his breathing as though afraid that even the act of drawing in oxygen would interfere with his companion's concentration.

A frown formed between Sam's brows and a few moments later he whispered an almost reverent "Fuck".

Owen chafed against the need to be quiet. On the verge of demanding to know what was going on, he was taken aback when a smile curved Sam's lips and he opened his eyes to reveal irises that had taken on a subtle amber glow. "You...your eyes. Why are they doing that?" Owen cautiously questioned.

"My wolf's elated. It's all right. Ryan's fine," was Sam's response. Owen noted his shortening breaths and wondered at it but his next words made the reason for them perfectly clear. "Ryan's shifting. For the first time. He's scared but Dev's with him. They're merging, mind to mind. I can feel it. Just the edge of it. The alpha meld. God, it's amazing. So bright, so pure, so...so...*freaking hot. Damn.*" The moment Sam said that, Owen felt a rush of heat beneath his skin. Sam's husky-voiced description was becoming erotic. "Ryan's fully shifted, he's running, they're chasing him. They're herding him this way." Sam turned a gaze on him that nearly stopped Owen's heart. "Dev's gonna fuck him when they get here. His anticipation is so intense it's affecting the entire pack." He reached out, wound his fingers around Owen's cock and began an easy, measured stroke. "I'm going to do the same. I'm going to fuck my mate, Owen. What do you think? Will that be a more acceptable punishment?"

Owen groaned. "How could that be a punishment?"

"You'll think so by the time I let you come."

Not liking the sound of Sam's threat but helpless against the rousing movement of his hand, Owen gave in to the pleasure. Expertly driven to the brink of orgasm over and over again, he writhed with frustration each time Sam stopped to give him time to recover.

"Faster," he begged, when after calming yet again, Sam began another round of maddeningly slow strokes.

"Not yet, cub. We've a long way to go, but don't worry. We'll get there in time."

Exasperated, Owen rocked his body in an effort to throw Sam off but Sam, who was so much heavier and stronger, easily controlled him. When he leaned down and swiped the flat of his tongue over the purple head of Owen's cock, Owen stiffened and cried out. Had it been another time, having Sam's mouth doing anything to his cock would have been a dream come true but at this moment it was nothing but a more intense torture.

That tormenting mouth slid down the hard length of his cock, Sam's tongue lashing the pulsing, swollen vein along the underside and Owen strained to thrust against the intense carnal stimulation. "Oh fuck," he cursed before a stream of uncharacteristic babbling began. "So good. Yes, just like that. Oh fuck, yes." Wet friction and coaxing suction were pushing him over the edge but just as the first pulse of ecstasy throbbed gut-deep, a firm squeeze at the base of his cock killed the glorious rush. "Nooooo!"

"Sorry, sweetheart. Not yet."

The husky taunt whispered in his ear, along with the soft brush of lips over the sensitive whorls of flesh, made Owen shiver and, panting, he shook his head in denial. "No more. Isn't that enough? Just let me come."

"Soon. Turn over. I want you up on your knees."

Owen started to obey then hesitated. "Are you gonna fuck me?"

"You want me to?"

The thought of having Sam inside him caused the muscles of Owen's belly to contract. Aching with desire, he rolled and assumed a ready position on his knees. "God, yes. The sooner the better." The heat from Sam's chuckle whispered over his buttocks and he softly moaned.

"Your eagerness is gratifying."

Large, warm hands skated over Owen's back, waist, buttocks and thighs and while it felt good, he was at the point of arousal where his body was interested in stimulation of a more specific variety.

"Sam, please," Owen begged, rocking slightly and spreading his thighs wider as dictated by his need.

"What, baby?"

"Fuck me."

"I plan to, but this first."

Palms settled on his ass and a sinuous tongue found his tender pucker. The sharp thrill of sensation shooting through him fried his last coherent thought and turned it to ash. Owen dived into the sensations. His hands fisted the grass, pulling chunks up by the roots, and eyes tightly closed he keened and moaned, writhing with the nonstop sensual assault of Sam's probing tongue.

A wet finger teased his tingling flesh and slid inside. "Umm, sweet. So beautiful," Sam growled. "You should see this. All puffy and pink, opening for me, yet gripping my finger so tight. I'm gonna give you a second one now, stretch this sweet hole and get it ready for my cock 'cause guess what. You're not the only one reaching the limit here."

Relief as much as desire had Owen eagerly welcoming the bulk of Sam's second finger. Panting, he rode those two scissoring digits. When they hit his hot spot, his mind and the corresponding sensations in his body swirled like the spiraling build of a soft-serve ice-cream cone, his cry a precursor to reaching the summit. Sam's fingers withdrew and for a split second his climb was interrupted but the thick cock that eased inside and wedged itself against his swollen pleasure center hurled him forward and with a single thrust Owen plunged over the edge into orgasm.

Screaming his lover's name, his body and senses careening out of control, Owen came. Shudders and jerks punctuated the spurts of creamy seed spraying the grass beneath him, each one adding to the euphoric bliss of release. Sam's continued thrusts chased the last dregs of Owen's pleasure forth and when Sam's cock pulsed and shot within the tight confines of his passage, the warm wash of semen marked Owen's completion. Locked muscles released, his entire body went lax and Owen melted into grass-cushioned ground.

Breathing heavily and taken by a sudden yawn, Owen accepted the smile pulling at his lips. However badly his evening had begun, he'd never anticipated it ending like this. With the warmth of Sam's body partially blanketing his, he let his world and all its problems drift away.

Hours later, Owen stirred and yawned, his eyelids doing a few slow blinks. A half-formed frown appeared between his brows. His unfocused gaze centered on the pale cream of an unfamiliar wall before shifting to survey the contents of a haphazardly arranged closet. The patchwork array of unfamiliar clothes hanging there, and the tangled pile of shoes on the floor beneath them took his frown from half to full.

Huh?

Trying to order his sluggish, newly awakening thoughts, he lay relaxed and quiescent until a sudden torrential flood of memories from the previous night's events assailed him.

Oh shit.

Instantly tense, eyes widening with apprehension, he froze like a rabbit in deep cover waiting for a predator to pounce. When no sound or movement betrayed the presence of another, Owen carefully turned his head. No one shared the king-sized bed

he currently occupied though he distinctly remembered the big man who'd stripped his unresisting body, laid him down and gathered him close beneath the warm, soft covers.

Sam.

Heat consisting of equal parts humiliation and arousal flooded Owen's cheeks and sent a warm flush cascading down his chest, belly and straight into his cock. That particular part of his anatomy twitched with interest. The things Sam had done to him the night before had been hellish, heavenly and so intense, Owen burned at the memory of them...until the events leading up to Sam's mastery of him muscled their way in. Levering himself into a sitting position, he pulled his knees up, dropped his forehead down to rest upon them and clutched at his already disheveled blond hair.

"God. How stupid was I to think I could get away with that?" he whispered.

When that called-upon deity declined to answer, Owen was forced to look within himself for truths that not only had him doubting his own intelligence but made him feel sick, lower than the lowliest of worms. He'd given in to jealousy and greed. He'd betrayed Ryan and practically handed him over to be used in some kind of cultish ritual by a sadistic warlock and for what? To win the regard of a man who felt nothing for him.

Picturing the rage and utter contempt twisting Devin's expression when Owen's duplicity had been revealed inspired a mental cringe and his hand went to his throat in memory. A touch proved painful and he was sure there must be bruises, not that he blamed Devin for inflicting them.

How could he have possibly imagined his act of betrayal against Devin's lover would garner anything more than disdain and fury from such a man? Devin wasn't the type who rewarded deceit. He admired honesty, kindness and all the other upstanding traits Owen seemed to have forgotten actually existed in the world...until he met Sam.

Sam was different from any person he'd ever met. His personality tended toward patience and calm; his behavior was straightforward and confident. Owen's emotional and mental stability was thrown off kilter by the way Sam treated him. It was so hard to accept the affection he offered, so impossibly difficult to believe it really existed and yet his inner child, deprived and injured, with arms outstretched, desperately reached for Sam's embrace and all it entailed.

Sam hadn't looked at him with the disgust Owen knew his behavior warranted. Yes, he'd gotten angry, but he'd also forgiven with firm and gentle stoicism. Sam claimed to care for him, to want him...even though afterward he meted out what he felt was a suitable punishment. Owen's expression scrunched as he remembered how mortifying it was to be spanked. Even now the cheeks of his ass felt tender but Sam had more than made it up to him with skilled, caring and commanding passion.

Three times they'd made love and each time Sam treated him to the most exquisite, sensual torture he'd ever experienced. His body became Sam's to caress, kiss, lick and suck until he'd been reduced to a writhing, begging mass of quivering nerves calmed only by the shattering orgasms Sam finessed, coaxed and demanded from him.

Moaning softly from the memory, Owen felt his cock stir. The men he sold himself to seldom cared about *his* needs. There was no kindness, no connection beyond the physical and sometimes even that was abusive, brutal. What Sam offered was more than sex. There was an emotional element to it, an involvement and concern that went beyond two bodies coming together for carnal release. It was incredible, amazing and so different it made not only his body ache but his heart as well.

Even in the wee hours of the morning, after the others had returned, Sam had looked out for him. So exhausted he could barely dress himself, Owen had gratefully accepted the help Sam offered. Sam had taken him home and tucked him into his own bed. Who else would do that for him after the sex was over and the pleasure ended?

Though thinking about Sam was pleasant and brought warmth to Owen's lonely soul, it took only a few seconds of visualizing Devin's angry expression to make it again grow cold.

"I've got to get out of here," he breathed when something akin to panic ensnared him. Looking around for his clothes, he found them draped over a chair, his shoes and socks placed beneath it.

With a slight grimace at the thought of going out without having showered, Owen shrugged. It wasn't as though he was headed anywhere but straight home. His main objective was to go with as much stealth as he could muster and hopefully remain unnoticed. He was unprepared to face the disapproval and dislike of any of Sam's friends.

Pulling on his briefs, maroon henley shirt and finally his faded jeans, he breathed a sigh of relief at finding his wallet, cell phone and keys on the chair seat tucked beneath his pants. He grabbed them and sat to slip his socks and shoes on, making quick work of tying the laces. Checking to make sure he had enough money, he then slipped his wallet into his back pocket and used his phone to call a cab.

A quick look in the mirror sitting atop a nearby dresser showed him a pale face haloed by tousled blond locks as well as big blue eyes with more than a hint of anxiety in them. His normally patrician features and aloof expression were somewhat marred by the sensual bee-stung look of lips that had obviously been engaged in carnal activity. The ring of bruises around his throat was far less pronounced than he would have thought and he remembered how after his second orgasm, Sam had spent some time licking those sore and tender marks. He'd claimed doing so would help heal them. Owen had been dubious but apparently Sam had been right and for that he was grateful.

Scowling at his reflection, Owen combed his fingers through his hair in an effort to tame it into some semblance of order but had little success. Finally giving up, he shrugged and crossed the room to the bedroom door. Carefully turning the knob, he took a cautious peek out into the hallway and seeing no one, he stepped out, shutting the door behind him.

Following the hall to the stairs, he began his descent. The house was quiet, no movement and no sound of voices from anywhere. Crossing the wide foyer, he was almost to the front door when a feminine voice stopped him cold.

"You're leaving, Owen?"

Turning slowly, Owen found himself face-to-face with Rose Alexander. Rose was the unofficial mother to Devin Grant's pack and aunt to Quinn Alexander, the man who had generously opened his home to Devin, Sam and the others. She was tall and slender with long golden brown hair. Rose was only ten years older than Quinn and at forty-five she was a lovely, vibrant woman, one of those lucky people who aged gracefully.

The first time he'd met her, even had he not known she and Quinn were related, he would have suspected as much. The resemblance between aunt and nephew was unmistakable. Normally her face was serene and often marked by a gentle smile. Today the smile was absent and her expression was watchful and slightly troubled.

Assailed by regret and guilt, Owen knew whatever distress she was feeling was his fault. "Yes, I should get home," he said, answering her question.

"I'll drive you if you like. Sam asked me to look after you when you woke up."

"That's okay. I called a cab, but thank you for offering."

"I see. I guess you won't have time for breakfast then either."

"No. I'm sorry." Owen paused, looked away for a moment then determinedly met Rose's gaze with his own. "I'm really sorry," he repeated, hoping she would know he meant for more than just breakfast. Each time he'd visited, this woman had always welcomed him into her home. Whatever else he had set out to do, hurting her wasn't part of it.

Rose said nothing for a moment then slowly nodded. "I believe you are and I just want to say one thing. It's easy to be sorry but usually hard to apologize so I appreciate your sincerity. Even so, harder still will be atoning for what you've done. If you truly want to set things right then you'll do whatever's necessary to make it happen."

Owen nodded and swallowed against the lump forming in his throat. "I will."

At his husky-voiced promise, Rose smiled. "Good. Now get moving before your taxi gets here. I'll open the gate for you."

"Thank you," he managed and forced himself not to run for the door.

Once outside he breathed a sigh of relief then headed at a brisk pace down the long drive that led to the gate. It was a beautiful day. A few puffy white clouds floated in the clear blue sky and as Owen breathed in the fresh air, the tension that had clung to him since waking began to disperse. Facing Rose made him feel somewhat like a truant student being released from the principal's office. It was more difficult than he'd imagined for someone as normally selfish and egotistical as himself to suddenly be burdened by all this guilt and remorse. It shook him and left him feeling disoriented, as though he was no longer himself, like he no longer knew his place in the world.

"I've got to sort this out," he muttered then, seeing his taxi coming down the street, he strode through the gate, determinedly pushing the thought aside. "Just not right now."

Hitting the buzzer on the nearby intercom box to signal Rose he was out, Owen jumped into the cab and watched the gate swing closed. Wondering when or if he'd ever go through that gate again, he gave the cab driver his address, leaned back and closed his eyes for the ride home.

Notebook open before him, pen frozen in mid-word, Sam Sterling was lost in thought. The ongoing drone of his professor's voice couldn't compete with Sam's memories of the previous night. He'd finally made Owen his...at least he hoped so. Their first time together had been explosive and physically, everything he'd wanted. Only the circumstances which brought about that memorable event had been lacking, and for that, Sam blamed himself.

I should have been more assertive.

Even as the thought formed, he knew himself well enough to know only the extreme push he'd gotten had been responsible for making him finally step up and take what he wanted. When Dev had called for someone to deal with Owen after learning of the role he'd played in Ryan's capture by Silas Prudome, Sam knew his days of waiting for Owen to freely choose him were over. He'd taken Owen in hand and, as expected, had seen to his punishment. The spanking he'd administered had been spur of the moment, but all in all Sam felt it had been effective. It was heavy on the humiliation yet light on the physical damage. God knows he had no desire to hurt Owen and considering how aroused his mate was afterward, his choice had been a good one. The lovemaking that followed had seemed inevitable.

Had he not known Owen truly cared for him, he wouldn't have forced the issue, but there'd been no mistaking the scent of Owen's interest and heightened sexual excitement. It was always that way, not only during the previous evening, but whenever they were together. For weeks, Owen sought to deny the attraction between them in favor of trying to win Devin's regard and that hurt, but Sam had been prepared to wait. Given Dev's lack of interest and Owen's genuine inclinations, Sam had been sure Owen would eventually turn to him. What he hadn't counted on were needs his mate kept hidden. If he'd known Owen's desire for a strong, dominant lover would push him to attempt to eliminate Ryan as the only rival between himself and Dev, Sam would have acted far sooner. If he had, Owen's introduction into the pack would not now be colored with awkwardness and mistrust.

More often than not, Sam was grateful his personality ran toward the passive. He'd seen men of his size intimidating others with their brute strength, his own father being the perfect example. To call him a bully would be an accurate description. Trenton Sterling could be a total prick when he wanted to be. He wasn't the alpha of their home pack, but he *was* the alpha's enforcer and had tried to turn his son into a carbon copy of himself. He might have succeeded had it not been for his wife, Sam's mother.

Isobel Sterling was the only one able to keep her husband in check. She was a strong woman and one firm in her beliefs. Her influence had helped build Sam's foundation, one that was based on respecting others and their rights. When he'd been disowned by his father for being gay, his mother had refused to cut ties with him. She'd listened when Sam explained he was biologically wired to like other men and it wasn't something he did to rebel against or shame his family. She'd not only listened, she'd believed him and to this day, they stayed in touch via the occasional phone calls Sam made home.

He wished, in a way, he could speak with her about Owen, but even though they'd managed to maintain a relationship, Sam couldn't begin to imagine mentioning such a subject to her. The idea of receiving advice from his mother concerning his male lover boggled Sam's mind.

Fortunately he had friends he could and did talk to. Those same friends, the members of his pack, through their generosity and forgiveness, were making his relationship with Owen a lot easier than it might have been. Knowing how much Sam cared for Owen, that Owen was his mate, they were willing to give him a second chance and for that Sam would be eternally grateful. It didn't assuage the guilt he felt for letting Owen go astray, but it went a long way toward soothing it.

Sam knew he'd have to be more aggressive in his dealings with Owen. He was somewhat ambivalent about it, as such wasn't his usual style, but his mate obviously desired a lover with a firm hand, and Sam was determined to do everything in his power to give Owen what he needed. Certainly the results were well worth the effort.

Remembering the way Owen had clung to him, the satiny feel of his sleek, translucent skin, the way his tight anal passage had accepted his cock caused Sam's heart to beat faster and his groin muscles to tighten. He still couldn't believe how lucky he was. His mate was gorgeous, the kind of man who turned heads and thinking about that caused the growl forming in Sam's chest to come rumbling forth. Startled, he disguised the noise by pretending to cough. The female student sitting nearest him glanced in his direction, but otherwise his lapse into wolfly expressed disgruntlement went unnoticed.

Ruthlessly tamping down his runaway emotions, Sam considered the reason Owen's good looks had him concerned. Had his lover been a werewolf and completely tied to him via their mate bond, Sam would feel no worry whatsoever. Owen's beauty would simply be something to enjoy, but his mate deliberately used it to attract men. He was a hustler. Sam had guessed it the first evening he'd set eyes on him when he'd seen him being picked up at a bar. It hadn't bothered him...until later when he'd realized Owen was his mate. Now it had to stop. Sam couldn't stand the idea of sharing Owen with someone else and his wolf, at just the thought of it, practically frothed at the mouth with fury.

Logically, at this point, he knew he had no right to interfere with the way Owen chose to make a living. He was an adult after all and their relationship was still on shifting ground, but he was determined to change all that. Sam had a plan. He'd

already discussed things with Dev, Ryan and his other pack mates. The only obstacle left was to get Owen's agreement and for that, Sam was prepared to do whatever it took. His mate didn't know it, but come evening, Sam was going to make him an offer he hoped Owen wouldn't be able to refuse.

Chapter Two

The first thing Owen did upon letting himself into his apartment was strip and shower. Indulging in routine acts in the safety and security of his own place gave him a sense of peace and helped to rout the disorientation that haunted him. Dealing with a skewed reality that included werewolves and warlocks prompted him to partake of things that made him feel a part of the everyday world again. While drying off, he debated what to do next and weighed his options. The temptation was great to veg out in front of the television. All the stress and sex from the night before had worn him out and apparently, no matter how much actual sleep he'd finally gotten, it hadn't been enough. However, feeling restless and unwilling to think too deeply about the situation he'd gotten himself into, Owen opted for going out.

He dressed in a simple white button-down shirt and a pair of black jeans with casual athletic shoes. With no concrete destination in mind, he donned his sunglasses and hit the sidewalk, eventually ending up at a nearby park that was home to an open air market. Even though it was a weekday the place was busy, populated by locals and tourists alike. There was stand after stand to investigate. Antiques rubbed elbows with books, crafts, prepared foods, produce, and just about every other commodity a shopper could want. With mindless determination, Owen explored and examined anything and everything that caught his attention.

He ended up with an eclectic assortment of purchases, an art book produced by a Japanese manga artist that was filled with illustrations of beautiful men clothed and nude, a bar of goat's milk soap intensely aromatic with a blend of rosemary and other herbs, a vintage deep brownish-amber glass insulator that would serve no purpose at all other than the fact that it reminded him of the color of Sam's eyes, a purchase he thought twice about for the pure sentimentality it represented. He also ended up with a bag of produce consisting of a couple of apples, pears and a small bunch of fresh carrots.

When the smell of various cooking foods caused his stomach to rumble, Owen purchased freshly prepared tuna salad tucked between the halves of a slim, whole wheat roll. After paying for the sandwich and a bottle of water, he looked around for a place to sit. A man and woman with two children were just vacating a comfy-looking bench with wrought iron arms and back in the shade of a nearby oak tree, and he hurried over to grab a seat. Just as he arrived, another man appeared. The two of them looked at each other for a moment.

"We can share," the other man suggested.

"Sure," Owen agreed.

He sat near the end and placed his bags on the seat between himself and the stranger. Opening his bottle of water, he took a swig then started on his sandwich. The other man took sips from a Styrofoam cup interspersing them with bites from a bagel. Owen caught the slight scent of cinnamon and, remembering the location of the booth that produced them, he made a mental note to purchase one for the next day's breakfast.

"Nice day, isn't it?" the man commented.

"It is," Owen agreed.

"You come here often or are you doing the tourist thing?"

"No, I live nearby. As for coming here often I'd say more like occasionally. I like to wander through every now and then. Buy a few things you might not find in the local stores."

"Mmm. It's my first time here. Thought I'd take a break from business concerns and do a little exploring. I'm very glad I did. There definitely are things here you wouldn't find in any store. I've certainly found more than enough to draw my interest." He turned to Owen and held out his hand. "My name is Charles, by the way."

The slight innuendo in the man's voice and his purposeful gaze told Owen all he needed to know. Shaking his hand, he gave Charles his name while frankly assessing him. The man looked to be in his mid-to-late forties, nicely dressed and well groomed. The gentlemanly type. He was exactly the kind of guy Owen preferred when he was on the prowl for a "date". Men Charles' age were young enough to easily arouse, old enough to be appreciative of Owen's particular skills and prosperous enough to not balk at paying for the pleasure he could give them.

"Perhaps we could combine forces and wander around together for a bit?" Charles suggested, releasing Owen's hand and leaning back. "Or preferably go somewhere and get to know each other better. I'd be *very* appreciative of your company."

"I think that could be arranged...depending on just how appreciative you'd be."

Charles named a price that made it difficult for Owen to suppress a grin. That amount of money would pay half of next month's rent. Even with his conscience prodding him to refuse, no way he was turning it down.

Owen accepted and with the deal made, he saw no reason to delay. Rising, he discarded the remains of his sandwich in a nearby refuse container. "You have a place?" he asked.

"My hotel's five blocks from here. The Ambassador."

"Nice," Owen commented. It confirmed what he already knew. This guy had money to burn. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Perfect," Charles answered and rising, dumped his own trash before picking his shopping bags up from the bench. Owen snagged his own and fell in step with him.

On the way, they indulged in idle chitchat. Charles asked if he liked the area, how long he'd lived there and other benign questions. He elaborated a bit on his reasons for

being in town and revealed that he lived in Philadelphia. The five-block walk was pleasant and easily covered. They arrived at the hotel and Charles took him straight to the elevator, up to the seventh floor and from there to his room. Once inside, Owen dropped his bags by the door as Charles left his own things on the table by a wide bank of windows and settled into a comfortable wing chair.

With a lazy smile curving his lips he let his gaze wander the length of Owen's body. "Take your clothes off. I want to see if you look as good out of them as you do in them."

"I don't think you'll be disappointed," Owen assured him, beginning to strip. He went slowly, making a show of revealing his body. He watched Charles as the man casually rubbed the growing erection behind the zipper of his tailored trousers.

Owen felt his own body tightening in anticipation, his cock starting to swell. This kind of situation he understood very well. There was nothing strange about it, nothing confusing. It was one man with a basic carnal need and he was the one who would fulfill it.

When the last of his clothing hit the floor, Owen slowly sauntered across the room, giving Charles plenty of time to look. "Does this meet with your approval?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Charles breathed, the heat in his eyes growing with each step Owen took. "You're quite the beauty and one hell of an unexpected bonus for this little trip."

Owen smiled. Inordinately pleased with the assessment, he sank to his knees. He opened the fastener on Charles' pants and lowered the zipper. Spreading the fabric wide, he reached in, freed Charles erection and holding it steady with his hand, he slid his tongue over the swollen head. He was rewarded with a gasping groan and fingers that wound into his hair. At the tug against his scalp, he looked up.

"Do you kiss?" Charles asked.

"If you like," Owen answered. It wasn't always something he allowed but then Charles seemed like a decent guy and God knew he was paying enough for the privilege.

Owen met Charles' forward lean. As soon as their lips touched, he knew he'd made a mistake. An image of Sam presented itself to him, causing him to freeze. He could almost hear Sam's throaty purrs and the certainty in his deep, resonant voice when he told Owen how much he wanted him. Shocked by that vivid recollection, Owen's conscience broke free of the barrier he'd erected against it and plunged him into a maelstrom of guilt and uncertainty. Struggling to push the image of Sam from his head and having no success, he was finally forced to admit defeat. Deep inside, his anger spilled free.

Shit! Why can't you leave me alone?!

The fingers of his free hand clenching in frustration, Owen silently cursed. He eased away from that ill-fated kiss, wondering how or even if he'd be allowed to gracefully back out of their deal.

Charles was the first one to break the silence between them. "Want to tell me about it?"

Owen's gaze flew to his. The man seemed totally undisturbed by the interruption, in fact, he appeared calm, even interested, so much so, Owen opened his mouth and blurted out the truth. "There's this guy."

"Ah. You like him."

"Yes. No! I mean...maybe," Owen confessed. "The one thing I do know for sure is that he wouldn't want me doing this. I know it would hurt him if he found out. But this is what I do, you know? Money for food and rent doesn't just appear out of thin air."

"Have you thought perhaps it's time to find a new profession?"

Shocked by the unexpected suggestion, Owen silently stared at the man who made it. It wasn't that he'd never considered the idea before; it was just having it voiced by such a surprising source. Most men intent on having a sexual romp wouldn't be giving their partner the kind of advice that would surely put an end to their fun.

"From your expression I guess you haven't...at least not seriously. You know this is the oddest conversation I've ever had with a gorgeous, naked man who has his fingers wrapped around my dick."

As though burned, Owen jerked his hand away. "Jeez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I told myself I needed to think about things...but I was going to do it later."

"Sounds rather Scarlett O'Hara-ish to me and as I recall, that idea didn't work out all too well for her either," Charles replied with a wry grin. "Get dressed, Owen. It seems you need to do your thinking sooner than you thought."

"Guess you're right." Owen stood, crossed to where he'd left his clothes and donned the discarded garments.

By the time he put himself to rights, Charles had himself tucked away, his pants done up and was rummaging in the minibar. He brought out a bottle of water, opened it and took a long drink. Watching him, Owen couldn't help but regret what he was giving up. Men like Charles were few and far between. He hated to do it, steering potential customers to the competition went against his principles, but Charles had been so nice he was going to try to make it up to the man. He deserved it.

"Um, look, I know this guy. His name's Mark. I think the two of you would like each other."

Charles considered him a moment before asking, "Does he look anything like you?"

"Well, we're not exactly twins but we have the same body type. He's got brown hair and blue eyes. Most people would tell you he's good looking."

"And would you be one of them?"

Owen shrugged then offered a reluctant grin. "Yeah, I'd do him."

Charles laughed. "Thank you, Owen. I appreciate it."

"Shall I call him?"

"No. If you'll give me his number, I'd prefer to do it myself."

"Sure."

Owen took the hotel-provided pad and pen that Charles offered him, scribbled down Mark's name and number then handed it back. "Listen, I appreciate you not getting angry about all this."

Charles smiled and shook his head in a mock show of regret. "It's definitely not how I expected things to go but I can't say I didn't find it a bit entertaining. Good luck with your thinking. I hope things work out well for you and your friend."

With a parting thanks, Owen left. Back out on the street, he debated the merits of getting something to eat to make up for his half-eaten lunch but with his thoughts in turmoil and his stomach warning him against it, he decided it would be better just to call it a day and go home.

As he walked, he thought about what Charles said. Find a new profession. The idea was daunting. It's not like he could just walk in anywhere and apply for a job. He'd barely finished high school and what the hell would he put down on a job application when they asked about previous employment? He didn't think hustler would win him points with any prospective employer. He could just picture the kind of job he'd end up with. Flipping burgers at some fast-food joint. Just the thought of it made him grimace in disgust.

By the time he arrived back at his apartment, the sun was setting. He kicked off his shoes, put away his purchases and before stretching out on the sofa, he washed up the few stray dirty dishes he'd left on the counter by the sink. Grabbing the remote from the coffee table, he turned on the television and found the station with his favorite newscaster.

He knew he should be trying to make some decisions about the future, but it was just too difficult. His thoughts kept running 'round and 'round in unproductive circles. He felt unsure if he wanted or even needed to change things. A lot depended on Sam and that thought alternately had him worried then seething with resentment that someone else's desires could have such a profound effect on how he lived his life. Heaving a gusty sigh, Owen gave up the idea of resolving anything on his own and instead, settled in to watch the news. Relaxing back against the cushions, he promptly fell asleep.

When the sound of knocks on his front door woke him, Owen opened his eyes to a dark apartment lit only by the glow of the television. Scrambling up from the sofa, he reached over to turn on a lamp and went to answer the door. A glance through the peephole revealed his visitor was Sam and at the sight of him, Owen's heart did a strange little flip that left him oddly breathless. Opening the door, he couldn't help but stare at the man who filled his doorway.

Sam was the most physically impressive man he'd ever met. Standing six-feet-six-inches tall, he towered over Owen by a good six inches. Owen himself, while not exactly short at an even six feet, was unused to being around someone who made him feel almost delicate in comparison. It wasn't just the difference in height that made him

feel so. He worked out to keep himself in shape but his body was just naturally slim whereas Sam had the physique of a bodybuilder. His shoulders were wide, his body solid and as Owen had good reason to know, having seen him naked, said body was an all-over mass of well-delineated, sculpted muscle that only hinted at the man's true strength.

While all that was more than enough to grab anyone's attention, Sam had other, equally impressive qualities that drew the eye. His mixed African American and Spanish heritage had given him a wealth of other beautiful traits. His mocha-colored skin looked warm and inviting. Owen remembered how smooth it had felt under his hands and he stifled the impulse to reach out and touch. Sam's hair was a true shade of black that seemed to simultaneously absorb and reflect light. He wore it in a style that was short and neat but long enough to hint at the natural wave it would have if he allowed it to grow out.

His face was well defined, jawline angular, cheekbones sharp. Under sleek black brows, his eyes were dark and to Owen's mind somewhat mysterious. Their color fascinated him. The background tint was dark brown but fanned around the pupil and mixed among that warm melty chocolate was a deep golden amber color. With the outer iris surrounded by a rim of solid black, the total effect was, in a word, compelling. Add to that the straight, slim nose that resided over a sculpted upper lip and a full lower lip that practically begged to be nibbled upon and Owen's enchantment was complete.

It was Sam's growing grin that finally made him realize he'd been standing there staring like a horny gay boy at his first glimpse of a naked man. Feeling the heat bloom in his face and hoping his cheeks weren't as red as they felt, Owen stepped aside.

"Hi. Come in," he invited.

"Hi yourself," Sam responded. He walked in, closed the door behind him and immediately invaded Owen's space. A large hand cupped his chin and forced his gaze to meet Sam's. "Are you all right?"

Surprised by Sam's concern, Owen immediately answered, "Sure. I'm okay."

Sam bent to him, intent plainly written on his face but before his lips met Owen's he stopped and actually sniffed. The pleasure in his eyes dimmed and his expression reverted to the impassive visage Owen knew so well. It gave nothing away. "You've been with someone," Sam said, the statement sounding flat and with no more inflection than if he'd simply commented on the weather.

"I tried to be," Owen corrected, "but before you accuse me of anything I want to make it perfectly clear nothing happened. And while we're on the subject, is it really any of your business? Why do I have to explain myself to you anyway?"

"Do you remember last night?"

"How could I forget? You beat me."

Sam raised one skeptical brow. "I see you have a talent for exaggeration. I spanked you. There's a big difference but that's not the point. You were afraid I'd hate you for

what you'd done to Ryan and Dev. My opinion obviously matters to you which means I'm just as important to you as you are to me. *That* is what makes you my business. So, first question answered which brings us to the second and the answer to that one is, yes, you have to explain yourself to me. You say you tried to be with someone but nothing happened. I want to know who, why and what stopped you."

Tempted to defy Sam's stern demand, Owen fumed but couldn't deny the logic Sam brought to bear. He *had* been afraid Sam would hate him and yes, damn it, Sam was important. He might not fully believe in what was happening between them but Owen wouldn't lie to himself that whatever it was meant nothing...which was exactly the problem. Sam wanted the truth and he was afraid that particular truth would be the very thing that made Sam leave and never come back. They'd never really talked about how Owen lived, how he made his way in the world but here it was and Owen was going to have to confess, out loud, that he made a living by trading the use of his body for money.

Apparently taking Owen's silence for a refusal to comply, Sam growled in a firm, no-nonsense tone of voice. "Owen, talk or I walk. I know it's not easy for you, but trust will come and talking honestly about things is one of the best ways to get there."

"Trust?" Owen bitterly spat the word. "Don't hold your breath for that one, but sure, since you insist, I'll tell you what happened. I went to the open air market in Garret Park. I met a guy there, Charles. Forties, loaded. Just my type, you know? He took me to his hotel. I stripped, had my mouth on his cock when he decided he wanted a kiss. I don't usually kiss johns but he was paying a lot of money for the privilege so I thought what the hell. I kissed him and then you showed up."

"I showed up?"

"In my head. I couldn't stop thinking about you. I knew you wouldn't like what I was doing and so I didn't. There. Happy? Now you know just what kind of trash you've hooked up with. You should take this golden opportunity to leave."

Stomach tied in knots, Owen turned away, expecting to hear the door open and close behind Sam. He was startled when a pair of muscular arms wrapped around him. Sam pulled him close and murmured in his ear. "I know what you do and I'm not going anywhere. I have no right to judge you for any reason, but I do wonder why you feel the need to punish yourself."

Owen was stunned. Sam's acceptance, his compassion and his intuitive understanding of what drove Owen was more than he expected to receive from anyone. "I'm," his voice caught and he cleared his throat, pushing away the emotion threatening to undo him before trying again. "I'm not punishing myself."

"Are you so sure about that?" Sam's arms tightened. "You called yourself trash. Those aren't the words of a person who's happy with himself or his life. You're not trash, you hear me? Don't ever say that again. That's an offense punishable by spanking."

"Oh God, not again," Owen managed to croak past the tightness in his throat. Sam's gentle teasing was causing his fear and tension to drain away. "Is this some kind of fetish for you?"

"My hand on your ass? Oh yeah, that's something I'll admit to being totally obsessed with."

Said hands landed on Owen's shoulders, urging him to turn around. Owen obeyed, coming face-to-face with a look in Sam's eyes that made him feel uncharacteristically bashful. He dropped his gaze. Sam lifted his hand to Owen's cheek and drew long fingers gently across his skin before slipping them beneath his chin. He tilted Owen's face up.

"Feeling shy? That's...what's the word I'm looking for? Oh yeah. You're going to hate this and believe me I never thought I'd say this to a guy but, it's adorable, totally cute."

"Shut up. What kind of pussy remark is that? Adorable's a five-year-old girl in a ruffled dress," Owen grumbled, embarrassed not only by Sam's comment, but because what he said about his sudden bout of self-consciousness was perfectly true.

It made no sense. Countless times he'd stripped for and performed sexual acts with men who were nothing more than strangers and never batted an eyelash. Was it adding emotions to the mix that suddenly had him feeling so nervous?

Unfazed, Sam laughed and bent to him, his mouth taking Owen's with a gentle yet passion-filled heat that soon had him forgetting all about timidity. He opened his mouth to the insistent tongue sliding against his lips and complied when it sensually explored his mouth and encouraged his own tongue to twine and dance with it. When strong arms wrapped around him, Owen had no qualms about stepping into them but he drew in a startled breath when a large pair of hands cupped the cheeks of his ass and lifted him.

Hands clutching at Sam's shoulders, Owen's world took a slight spin ending with a gentle thump when he was lowered to sit on the long counter that divided his living room from the kitchen. Sam wedged himself between Owen's thighs and pulled him close until their groins met. The contact forced a sighing moan from Owen and he bucked against the growing hardness behind Sam's zipper.

Sam eased back from their kiss, his hand moving to the buttons of Owen's shirt. "I've been thinking about you all day," he growled. "I'm going to have to borrow class notes from someone. I couldn't concentrate worth a damn."

Owen's shirt parted and his chest and abs were treated to warm, sensual caresses that ended with one nipple being teased between a thumb and forefinger while the other was laved with Sam's tongue then sucked until it tingled. Owen's cock had long since gone rock hard and he squirmed in Sam's embrace.

"Sam, please," he begged and groaned with relief when his jeans were opened and his aching cock released.

"Is this what you want, sweetheart, want me to play with your cock? Make you come?"

"Yesss," Owen hissed, not at all shy about wanting the pleasure and release Sam could give him.

Leaning to the side, he reached toward a grouping of assorted bottles on the counter. Scrabbling through vitamins and a plastic bear that contained honey, he found the bottle of lotion he sought and gave it to Sam.

"Here. This should make it easier."

Sam accepted the bottle with raised brow and a chuckle. "I like the way you think."

Pouring a measure of lotion into his hand, Sam reached for him. Owen arched into the long, skilled fingers encircling him, hips undulating as he struggled to match the slow pump of Sam's hand up and down his length. It felt exquisite. Hot and slippery-wet. Wanting more, wanting to touch Sam in turn, Owen fumbled with the heather-gray polo shirt he wore untucked over his jeans. Pushing it up, he uttered a garbled, frustrated protest.

"Take it off. Off," he insisted and felt a soul-deep satisfaction when Sam hastily obeyed.

"That better?" Sam asked with a grin.

"Much, but it's still not enough." With sure hands Owen opened the button at the top of Sam's jeans and lowered his zipper. Reaching in, he wrapped his fingers around Sam's thick erection, freeing it from the fabric hiding it from view. A thrill of pure desire twisted his gut and he spread his thighs wider, his legs winding around Sam's hips, his heels pressing against his firm ass to urge him closer.

"You're a wild little thing," Sam groaned, giving in to Owen's direction.

"I'm not little and I know what I want," Owen managed to say, his voice a husky rasp that became a heartfelt groan when Sam took both his own and Owen's cock in hand, expertly jacking them together.

From that point Owen let Sam have his way. He rubbed against Sam's big body, and lost himself to the feel of fingers and the satin-skinned hardness matching his own that slid next to his cock. The heat built between them, and the scent of musky, aroused male mingled with the tang of sex. Owen's hands clung to Sam's torso, the fingers of one hand skating over a bulging pec to the tiny nipple that topped it. Mouth seeking, he found the perky nub and closed his lips over it. The skin surrounding it was soft and smooth, the bud hard, the taste imbued with just a hint of salt. It made Owen's mouth water for more.

Sam's guttural growl rumbled through his chest, and Owen could feel the vibration against his lips. That primitive sound went straight to his cock, and he desperately pushed himself harder into Sam's hand. His orgasm was coming, the feeling riding his spine and sliding down into his balls.

Sam tightened his grip. His thumb swept over the crown of Owen's cock, spreading the precum now freely flowing forth. His strokes became faster, rougher and the intensity had Owen's stomach going tight. His gaze found Sam's. Pure, feral need lit his eyes making them glow with amber-tinged fire. Sam's free hand burrowed down the back of Owen's jeans. He gave one full mound a firm squeeze, and pushed the tip of one long finger into Owen's taut hole.

That small penetration pushed Owen over the edge. A harsh cry tore from his throat, his semen spilling over Sam's hand, his pleasure surging forth with a strength that threatened to tear him apart. It was exhilarating, frightening and so addictive he instinctively knew he'd never want to give it up. He felt Sam shudder in his arms and heard his deep groan seconds before the hot splash of cum against his cock and belly. Sam too had found his release, and the two of them leaned against each other until their racing hearts calmed.

Owen arched his back a bit and felt his vertebrae crack. He sighed and sat back, intensely aware of the calm satisfaction Sam projected. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to this change in you."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, cocking his head while a small frown formed between his brows.

"You're almost domineering now. You didn't used to be this way. I remember when we first met you were quiet and undemanding. You didn't push me for anything. Now you just walk in and take without the least bit of hesitation. It's a little disconcerting."

"Did I force you? Were you unwilling?"

Owen shook his head. "No, I wanted you the minute I opened the door."

"So in other words it's just a matter of making a few adjustments."

"I guess."

"But isn't that normal? When two people get past the initial attraction and start to really know each other, it's only natural they'd have to fine-tune their acceptance of each other, don't you think?"

"I suppose that's true."

"Let me ask you something else. How do you feel about me? Change inclusive."

Owen shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't used to talking about such intimate things. The men who paid him for his time never wanted more from him than physical satisfaction. Most didn't care if he liked them or not, but here was Sam, asking him to reveal his true feelings. Did he think blurting out something so embarrassing was easy?

Screwing up his courage, Owen looked away before mumbling, "I like you."

"Well, that's a start."

Noting the relief in Sam's voice, Owen again met his gaze. "But just because I like you doesn't mean you can push me around. Last night...what you did." Heat infused his cheeks, and he suddenly became fascinated with the hollow at the base of Sam's

throat. "No one's ever done *that* to me before," he concluded, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

"If you ever deserve it, I'll do it again."

Incredulous, Owen looked up and was captured by the decisive gleam in Sam's eyes. The sight of it made him angry. "I'm not a kid. Don't ever treat me like one again."

"Then how should I have treated you? Dev wanted you punished. What was I supposed to do, Owen? Beat you bloody with my fists? Break a bone or two? Turn into my wolf and savage you? Do you even have a clue what a fine line you were treading? If you'd pulled that shit with any other werewolf pack, all that and more could have happened. You'd quite possibly be dead now. Believe me, giving you a child's punishment was leniency at its finest."

Stunned, Owen sat frozen by Sam's revelation and the intensity with which he delivered it. No matter how he wanted to protest, Sam was right. Had it been anyone else, werewolf or not, he might have suffered some serious damage. It was a sobering thought.

He'd tried to convince himself Sam was a sadistic brute, but in reality, he wasn't. If anything, Sam seemed to be suffering some remorse at having gone as far as he did. Considering what *he'd* done, Owen realized the punishment he'd received was mild indeed, and having Sam as the one to administer it was actually a blessing in disguise. The unexpected reward that followed had been worth the fleeting humiliation he'd suffered. Nothing could compare with the earthshaking, sense-shattering exercise in sexual excess he'd experienced with Sam...and continued to experience with him. Compared to that, he could accept his rightfully deserved, albeit, embarrassing punishment.

"Sorry. I—"

Sam bent down and kissed him. "It's all right. That's behind us now. Just remember, depending on what we do, sometimes there are consequences to be paid." Backing away, he strode to the bathroom and disappeared inside. Owen heard the water running and Sam returned with a towel and a damp washcloth, which he used to wipe the cooling semen from Owen's skin. "I'd like nothing better than to take you to bed, but we have a date with destiny."

"Huh?" Owen replied. He hopped down from the counter and straightened his clothes.

"Dev wants to see us."

Panic swirled in the pit of Owen's stomach, and he shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I thought you were willing to apologize to Dev, Ryan and the rest of the guys."

"I am. I just didn't think it would be so soon."

"The longer you put it off the harder it's going to be. It's best just to get it over with. Besides, we need to do this first before you and I can move forward."

"But, Sam, I don't—"

"Owen."

That one stern word triggered Owen's anger. "Shit! I hate this. I hate confrontations. I can't deal with all this emotional crap."

"You're just upset because you have to admit you were in the wrong. Having to eat crow doesn't sit well on anyone's stomach." Sam laid an arm over his shoulder and hugged Owen to him. "I'll be right there beside you. All right?"

Shrugging, Owen petulantly gave in. "I suppose."

Sam kissed the top of his head. "Good. Get your shoes on."

On the way, Sam filled him in on things he told Owen he thought might help him with the coming situation, especially the workings of their pack, the hierarchy and even the pack name. Apparently packs adopted names based on their locations. Dev had dubbed theirs Stone River Pack after the name of a river that flowed through the nearby national park. He also now knew werewolves followed a modified version of their wild cousins when it came to rank among their members. Devin and Ryan were the alpha pair. Nick Boyce was their beta and second-in-command.

"As for the rest of us Quinn, Eric and I, we don't really have a defined rank. Unlike wild wolves, we don't try to dominate each other and jockey for position in the hierarchy. It's kind of complicated because we're both human and wolf. In some packs the ranks are more formal, but Dev chose not to take things to that extent. We're more like family than anything else. We care for and take care of each other."

"I had that. A long time ago." Squelching the urge to slap a hand over his wayward mouth, Owen silently cursed his own inner weakness for allowing those unbidden words to slip out.

"What happened?"

Shaking his head, he backed away from memories he'd prefer stayed buried. "Things change. That's just the way it goes."

"If you say so," Sam allowed, "but sometimes venting helps."

"Mmm, so I hear." From the corner of his eye, Owen saw Sam shake his head. "What? You want me to spill my guts like a teary little girl? Shit happens and I learned a long time ago whining about it won't change things."

"Don't get so defensive. I'm just saying if you want to talk about it I'll listen. I'm not asking you to sell me your soul. Although I wouldn't feel bad if you offered me a piece of it."

This time it was Owen who shook his head. "You... Sometimes I don't know how to deal with you. Didn't anyone ever tell you, guys don't talk about their feelings? We cuss and drink and scratch and spit and that's about the extent of a man's emotional expression."

Sam laughed. The sound brought a smile to Owen's face.

"So that's how it's supposed to be. All right. I'll back off but just so you know, I don't believe what you just said, so don't forget my offer."

Saying nothing, Owen nodded and reluctantly acknowledged that even though he still refused to believe sharing too much personal information with Sam was a good idea, his willingness to listen to Owen's troubles made a pool of warmth form deep inside. It eased the tension that gripped him and his injured soul curled around it, soaking it in.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the Alexander estate. Everyone was gathered in the library and Owen's tension was back with an added serving of trepidation on the side. He faced Devin, Ryan and the rest of their pack, an experience as uncomfortable as it was surreal. To say the least.

He still had trouble dealing with the reality of werewolves. If he hadn't actually seen some of these men change as Sam carried him away for his punishment the night before, he'd still believe they were all crazy. What bothered him even more about this whole thing was his thoughts having centered more on where he stood with Sam rather than in wondering about a phenomenon that should have remained the stuff of Hollywood movies, paranormal romances and make-believe. What did that say about his priorities? He was most definitely sure he didn't want to know.

Heart speeding faster than normal and stomach tied in knots, he waited silently with Sam by his side. He knew he was expected to offer a formal apology but the look in Devin's eyes kept him frozen in place. Whatever was supposed to happen he instinctively knew it wasn't up to him to make the first move. When Sam did, Owen was truly startled.

Sam walked forward a few paces then knelt before Devin and Ryan with his head bowed. "What happened yesterday was my fault and I freely accept the blame. I introduced Owen into our circle because I wanted him, but instead of claiming and guiding him as I should have, I let his desire for a strong mate lead him in the wrong direction. My weakness prompted Owen's misguided attempt to eliminate Ryan who he perceived as a rival. I'll accept whatever punishment you decree, even if it's banishment from the pack."

There were murmurs of protest from Quinn Alexander, Rose, Nick Boyce and Ryan himself. Eric Hawke, the youngest and newest member of the pack, said nothing but his wide blue eyes clearly broadcast their apprehension.

Devin said nothing and his lack of response broke the bonds that kept Owen silent. "No. That's bullsh...that's not right. It wasn't Sam's fault. He shouldn't have to apologize. He shouldn't have to grovel on the floor because of what I did. It was me. It was my decision, my desire, my greed and jealousy that put Ryan in danger. If anyone should beg for forgiveness it should be me. If there's more punishment to be doled out then I'm the one who should take it."

Devin's amber eyes glowed but his expression gave nothing away. "If that's so, will you take his place? Will you throw away your pride, kneel before everyone gathered here and apologize?"

Without a word and following Sam's example Owen knelt next to him with his eyes trained on the floor. Gathering his thoughts, he put them into words. "I'm sorry. I'm truly, truly sorry," he said, feeling the full weight of his guilt. It was heavy, painfully humiliating and humbling. "I betrayed all of you and the friendship you extended to me. Most of all I betrayed Sam. I knew he cared for me and I used it to get close to you. I was a fool. I couldn't comprehend the bond you share with Ryan. I thought I could take his place and so I put his life in danger. I didn't understand what it means to really care for someone. Sam made me see that I," Owen's voice became rough with emotion, "what it means to matter...*shit*."

Sam reached out and offered his hand. Owen swallowed the lump in his throat and twined his fingers with Sam's, holding on tight. Sam's touch calmed him enough to finish. "I just...I really just want to make it right. Whatever I have to do. I want to make it right." Owen drew in a shuddery breath and waited.

"Very nice," Devin commented. "It sounds as though you've put some thought into what you did wrong. Of course I'm sure Sam was somewhat helpful with that."

The chuckles that followed Devin's statement brought a rush of heat to Owen's face. It seemed they all knew what Sam had done to him the night before.

After a short pause, Dev continued. "I'm sure I don't even have to ask if Sam's forgiven you, but as Ryan was the one who suffered most because of your actions, I'll leave it up to him."

Hardly daring to breathe, Owen waited for Ryan's verdict.

"For Sam's sake I'm willing to give Owen a chance."

"So be it," Dev said, accepting Ryan's decision. "Owen, consider yourself on probation. Prove to us you'll stand by your word and in time, you'll earn a place among us. Now get up off the floor, both of you."

Sam was grinning as he got to his feet. "Thank you, Dev, Ryan," he turned to Owen, "and thank you for defending me, pup, but just so you know, there's no shame in kneeling before your alpha. In the wild a strong and cagey alpha is what holds the pack together. He's literally responsible for their lives. While the pressure on Devin's not usually quite so severe, he's the one who brought us together, the one who made us family. It's an honor to show him my respect."

"I'll remember," Owen softly replied. "I thought you were being deliberately humiliated because of me."

"I know and it means a lot to me that you were concerned." Sam draped an arm around Owen's shoulders, pulled him close and kissed his temple.

Knowing they had an audience made Owen self-conscious but he let Sam have his way. Being surrounded by people who had every reason to dislike him, he was

unaccountably appreciative of the sense of security Sam's presence gave him. When Dev approached he reluctantly relinquished it and stepped away from Sam.

"Nathan will be here anytime now. I believe the two of you have something to discuss. That is if you haven't already," he said, addressing Sam.

"We haven't," Sam confirmed.

"We'll leave you to it then. Let me know when you're ready for us."

Devin directed a nod toward Owen then, signaling his lover and friends, cleared the room, leaving Owen and Sam alone.

Unease settled in the pit of Owen's stomach. He turned an apprehensive gaze to Sam and waited for the ax to fall.

Chapter Three

"Don't look so spooked. Nothing bad's going to happen," Sam assured him. "We just need to have a talk about certain things. Let's have a seat over here."

Sam led him to a rectangular oak library table surrounded by sturdy, padded chairs. Drawing two of them out, he angled them so they faced each other and offered one to Owen. Sam took the second chair, their knees bumping together as he settled in.

Reaching for Owen's hand, he took it between both of his. Owen waited patiently, his eyes lowered to their joined hands. He watched silently as Sam rubbed gentle fingers over his knuckles, exploring their contours. It was a strange interlude, one that stirred emotions Owen had no desire to examine. When Sam started to speak, Owen looked up, met his gaze and felt pierced to the heart. Sam's earnest regard was intent and searching.

"Last night I told you I wanted you as my mate. Do you remember?"

Feeling his throat constrict and his breathing go shallow, Owen nodded.

"I need you to understand what that means. It's more than me just asking you to be my lover. It means I need you to give yourself to me totally, just as I'll give myself to you. You'll have to give up being a hustler, sweetheart. You're right when you said I wouldn't like you being with another man. I don't like it and it's something my wolf won't tolerate. Even though you didn't have sex with the man you met today, what did happen between you was enough that my wolf wants to badly damage him. I won't be able to change for a while. I'm afraid the beast inside would try to take the opportunity to hunt him down."

Being faced with such an alien concept put Owen at a total loss. The best he could muster was a disbelieving stare.

"Are you shocked?"

"A little."

"More like a lot from the look of you. Does it make you want to back away from me?"

Slowly, Owen shook his head. "No. I...I want to be with you."

"I'm glad to hear that. You have no idea how much."

"But if I don't do what I usually do, how am I going to live? How am I going to pay my rent?"

"I was going to suggest you move in here."

"Here?"

"Would that be a problem?"

"In case it's escaped your notice, no one here likes me. They're not going to want me living here."

"Now that's where you're wrong. Admittedly you did something that could have ended badly for all of us, but everyone's willing to give you a second chance. They're going to be a little cautious about trusting you for a while, but we've already discussed it. We all agreed if things went well tonight you'd be welcome to move in."

"I don't know," Owen said doubtfully. He'd been on his own for so long, he couldn't imagine what it would be like sharing a house with others, especially people who had no personal reason to accept him.

"I realize you'll be a little uncomfortable to begin with, but you can earn their trust, baby. What better way for all of you to get to know each other than to live together?"

"I suppose," he reluctantly agreed.

"Good. Of course you'll be sharing my room. I hope that's not a problem?"

The twinkle in Sam's eyes brought a tentative smile to Owen's lips. "No, it won't be a problem."

"Excellent. Now we come to the reason for Nathan's visit."

"Who's Nathan?"

"Nathan Cross. While not strictly a member of the pack, he's a werewolf and definitely a friend. He was with Devin and the others last night when they rescued Ryan."

Owen blanched at the thought. Here was someone else he'd have to face. More censure to endure.

"Now don't look like that. Nathan's not going to give you a hard time. In fact, he's going to offer you a job."

"A job?"

"I assumed you'd want one."

"Of course I do. Even if I'm living here I'd want a source of income."

Owen felt his world tip. Everything was happening so fast. A new place to live, a job, a person charging into his life who was essentially going to be a fulltime lover and more. The thought of it all was daunting. He found himself agreeing to everything from sheer shock. God knows he wasn't actually taking time to think things over, and he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one. In the meantime, while he'd taken a moment to panic, Sam had continued to talk about Nathan and his reason for coming to see them. Owen forced himself to pay attention.

"Nathan owns several businesses here in town. When I talked things over with Devin earlier he gave Nathan a call, and Nathan said he'd be happy to set you up with something. In fact, he said if you'd go to work in his bookstore in Millwood Plaza, you'd be doing him a favor. One of his employees recently moved, and the commute was too long for him to keep his job here in town. Nathan said he's not had time to replace the guy yet."

"A bookstore? Me, work in a bookstore?"

"You don't like the idea?"

"No, it's not that. It's just this is all so...out of the blue. What would I be doing?"

"I don't know. That's something you and Nathan will have to discuss and speaking of which, if I'm not mistaken, I think he got here a few minutes ago."

"How can you tell?"

Sam tapped the side of his head. "Werewolves have sharp senses. Hearing, eyesight, smell. As long as things go well and if you decide you want it, you'll find out for yourself."

"I will?"

"If you want," Sam reminded him. He tugged at Owen's hand then slipped his free hand around Owen's waist and pulled him forward to straddle his lap. Sam nuzzled Owen's throat above the top button of his shirt. "As my mate I can make you one of us. It's something you'll want to think about." Gently he nipped Owen's skin, making him gasp. "You'd be able to become a wolf. To run with the pack. To hunt and play with us. It's glorious, sweetheart, out in the wild, free and unfettered with nothing to do but enjoy all the sights and sounds and smells. I could give that to you. All it takes is one bite."

Owen closed his eyes, mesmerized by the sound of Sam's voice, by the feel of his hands sliding down to cup his ass, by the wet slide of Sam's tongue against his skin and the blunt threat of his teeth when they gently pinched a fold of his flesh between them. His cock filled and he rocked against his new lover, moaning at the sheer pleasure he was being given.

"That's it, baby," Sam crooned. "Just let go. Give yourself to me. So beautiful. So hot and sweet. You make me burn. Make me want you so bad."

"Sam," Owen breathed and brought their lips together.

Eagerly he slid his tongue into Sam's mouth and was met with equal enthusiasm. Their tongues entwined and caressed, their lips meshed. Breaths mingled while hands explored and bodies undulated together. Owen swallowed Sam's growl and presented him with a long guttural groan when Sam pulled him closer, increasing the pressure on his full and aching cock. He forgot everything but the man in his arms, the heat, the need and the pleasure building between them...until the sound of a familiar voice brought him out of his trance.

"See, I told you they were making out," Eric announced.

"Oh fuck," Owen hissed. Scrambling out of Sam's lap, he quickly resumed his seat and maneuvered his chair around so he could use the table to hide his obvious erection.

Sam's laugh was calm and easy. "Don't worry about it. With a house full of guys who like other guys we're used to this kind of thing around here. Come on in," he called out.

When the door opened, Eric's elfin and mischievous face was the first to appear. "Sorry about that, but Dev asked me to see if you guys were ready." Dropping his voice a bit, Eric stage-whispered, "He just didn't tell me ready for what."

"Eric, that'll do. Run along, little wolf," came Dev's voice from behind him.

With a wink and an unrepentant grin, Eric disappeared. The sound of a muffled swat, a surprised yip and a joyous giggle accompanied his disappearance. The door swung wider and Devin walked in, mournfully shaking his head.

The smile on his lips took the sting out of his comment. "Impudent pup."

"But it's good to see him so playful now," Sam said.

"It is," Devin agreed. "He was far too solemn for one so young." Devin made way for the man behind him and they joined Owen and Sam at the table. Introductions were made and Dev and Nathan took seats on the opposite side of the table. "So, considering the activity we interrupted, I take it your talk went well?"

"It did. Owen agreed to everything. He can be very accommodating," Sam practically purred, which for a werewolf was no easy feat.

"Cut it out," Owen muttered, fighting his embarrassment and the urge to whack Sam upside the head.

"Well, it looks like I have a new employee. Welcome, Owen, and nice to meet you too, by the way," Nathan said, greeting him.

Force of habit had Owen sizing up his new boss. While the two of them were about the same height, Nathan was thicker bodied. Not that he was fat; on the contrary, from the way his clothes fit, he looked honed and hard. His features weren't in anyway outstanding other than being put together in a visually pleasing manner and he had an affable smile. His short, reddish-brown hair nicely offset compelling green eyes and the obvious sincerity in them helped Owen to relax.

"Nice to meet you too and thanks. I've never worked in a store before, but I'll do the best I can."

"You'll be fine. It's not difficult and I'll be there to help you until you feel at ease. Of course you'll never be there alone. I always have at least two employees on duty during each shift and more when the occasion calls for it, like during the holidays. Even if someone calls in sick I can usually find a temporary replacement, even if it has to be me, which I honestly don't mind. The bookstore is one of my favorite places."

"Sam said you own several businesses?"

"That's right. The bookstore in Millwood Plaza, a catering service and a bar called La Bete Sauvage off Highland Boulevard –"

"Oh, I know that place. I've been there quite a few times. It's nice."

"Thank you. Now that I think of it, I really didn't give you much choice as far as employment goes. Of course I have a limited number of positions I can offer you. The catering service always seems to be in need of wait staff or maybe you'd like to learn bartending?"

Thinking about it for a moment, Owen shook his head. "Thanks for offering, but I think I'd prefer something quiet like the bookstore. The more I think about it the more I like the idea. I actually like books." While he didn't say it out loud, Owen was thinking the bookstore would also offer fewer chances for running into any former clients. If he was going to allow all these radical changes in his life, he decided he might as well go all the way. Too, after what Sam had told him earlier about the possessiveness of a werewolf's animal side, Owen felt this would be the safest choice.

"So do I," Nathan admitted. "What types of books do you like? Do you have any favorite authors?"

Devin groaned. "As long as everything's settled if you two are going to get into a discussion about books I'm leaving. Just one more thing. Owen, you're free to move in whenever you're ready. If you need help with your stuff, I've got five volunteers with strong backs who'll lend a hand."

"Thank you. I'm not sure when..." Owen looked at Sam.

"How about this weekend? We can get you settled in then come Monday Nathan can make his claim on your time. Does that sound all right with everyone?"

There was general agreement from all present.

"We have a plan," Dev declared. "Now I'm going to claim my mate and go home."

Surprised, Owen blurted out, "You don't live here anymore?"

"Nope. I moved in with Ryan. He didn't want to sell his house and we like the privacy. But don't worry, you'll see us plenty. We have to come by at least a couple of times a week to check up on our pups."

Sam gave a derisive snort. "Pups. Don't let Nick hear you say that. He'll have you out on the lawn facing a challenge."

Dev grinned. "Hothead. Been there done that, but don't you think Nick has calmed down recently?"

Sam nodded. "Eric."

"Yeah."

Puzzled, Owen looked from his lover to the pack alpha.

"Eric is Nick's mate," Sam explained.

Upon hearing that, an odd sensation engulfed Owen. His surroundings and the people near him became strangely distant and blurred as a picture of Eric materialized in his mind. Standing, at a stretch, maybe five feet seven or eight, the boy was almost too slim for his height. His blond hair, streaked with platinum, was the perfect foil for his elfin features and wide, sapphire eyes. Not sure of his age, Owen guessed perhaps thirteen or fourteen. At their first meeting, he'd been struck by how much Eric reminded him of himself at that age. Hearing the boy was mated brought to mind the circumstances he'd been living under at that time in his own life, and unbidden, visions of the past invaded his memories. Sweat broke out on his skin as his heart started to pound and nausea began to churn in the pit of his stomach.

Barely aware of what he was saying, Owen whispered, "That kid? How can you do that? I can't believe you...you'd just stand by and let him be hurt...that you'd just..." A black mist settled over his eyes and he felt himself sway as the memory of horrors experienced years ago reached out to claim him. Darkness, harsh whispers, cruel hands, terror and pain, always pain.

No, not now.

Struck dumb, Owen couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't exist. Time stopped as he slid into nothingness.

From what seemed very far away, he heard a voice calling his name. Owen struggled to find his way out of the darkness and came to lying on a sofa with his upper body cradled in Sam's arms. Frowning, he managed a few uncomprehending blinks before the realization of what happened hit him. He began to fight Sam's hold. Teeth clenched, he cursed. "*God damn it.* Let go. You mother-fucking son of a bitch. Let me the fuck go!" Unable to free himself, Owen's voice rose with his escalating rage.

"Calm down. I'm not letting go. It's all right," Sam's voice was firm and sure, but Owen wasn't about to let himself be fooled.

"All right? No, it's not the *fuck* all right. How can you stand by and let that kid be abused?"

"Owen, listen to me. Eric is Nick's mate but Nick hasn't claimed him. He wouldn't. Believe it or not Eric's actually sixteen even though he looks younger but even so, Nick won't touch him until he's eighteen and then only if Eric wants him to. It's not what you think." Breathing hard, Owen stopped fighting Sam's hold and listened. "It's not what you think, baby," Sam promised. He tightened his hold a bit. "Is that what happened to you?"

Owen stiffened with the jolt of pure shock that shot through him. In that moment he knew what the phrase "time stopped" meant. Shaking it off and deliberately slowing his breathing, he reached for the veneer of calm unconcern he used to bury his painful past beneath. Achieving a modicum of success, he shrugged against Sam's hold. "I'm all right now. Let me up, would you?"

"If you're sure."

"I am."

Sam released his hold and Owen sat up. He reached up to rub at the crease between his brows. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I misunderstood." Slanting a glance toward Sam and then away, he resolved to bury Sam's question once and for all. "You may as well know something right now. There are certain things I don't talk about...I won't talk about and that's one of them. It rises up to bite me on the ass now and then, but that's the way it is and that's the way I intend to keep it."

From the corner of his eye, Owen saw Sam's reluctant nod, "All right. I respect your right to keep private whatever you want, but what you said about it rising up to bite you on the ass. Is that something you really want to endure for the rest of your life?"

"I deal with it. Sometimes badly, but yeah, I deal with it as it comes."

Feeling the exhaustion that usually occurred whenever his past bitch-slapped him, Owen sighed and closed his eyes. He didn't notice the exact moment when the shaking started but he felt Sam's arm slide around his shoulders and rather than pull away, he leaned in and let his lover's warmth drive the chill from his flesh. A few moments later, he heard someone approach.

"Is he all right?" Ryan softly inquired.

"I think so," Sam said.

"I'm okay," Owen managed to answer. "Just tired."

"Would you like a drink? I brought water," Ryan offered.

Owen pried his eyes open and eased away from Sam. For the first time since ending up there, he realized he was on the sofa that Dev and Ryan had occupied earlier in the evening. Gaze meeting Ryan's, he was stunned by the concern he saw there. This was the man he'd nearly gotten killed and rather than offering disdain in the face of Owen's weakness he radiated sympathy. Before he had time to think about it, his own concerns slipped away and Owen whispered, "I'm sorry. I really am."

"I believe you," Ryan answered. "Don't think about that now. Here, drink."

With shaking hands, Owen accepted not only the glass Ryan handed to him but Sam's help in bringing it to his lips. The water was fresh and cool and helped drive the fog from his brain. With a deep sigh he sat up straighter and handed the empty glass back to Ryan.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I think you should stay here tonight. Or Sam should stay with you at your place. You shouldn't be alone."

"I'm all right now. Really."

"Physically maybe, but you still should have someone with you. I'll leave it up to you guys where you crash but, Sam, you stay with him. Consider that an order."

"No order necessary. I think you know that."

"I do," Ryan said with a grin, his hand landing on Sam's shoulder. "But this way Owen can't turn you out 'cause he'd be making you disobey an order from your alpha. I know he wouldn't want to get you in trouble. Good night, you two."

Ryan left, and Owen heard a murmur of voices outside the door that soon died away.

"You see? Everyone was concerned about you. Do you believe you're welcome here now?" Sam asked.

Too tired to protest, Owen shrugged.

Sam's sigh was tinged with gentle exasperation. "Stubborn. So what'll it be? You gonna stay here with me or do I take you home and join you in your bed? Frankly it's getting late and I think we should save ourselves the runaround. You look like you

could keel over any minute now, and I need to be up early for classes. Are you going to take pity on me and stay here?"

Inspired by the wheedling tone in Sam's voice, a smile tugged at Owen's lips. "I guess."

"Not so stubborn after all. Thank you. For that you get express service to the bedroom. Up you go." Sam stood, bent and lifted Owen up and over his shoulder.

"Fuck! What do you think you're doing! I can walk," Owen wheezed when he managed to draw in a breath.

Without slowing, Sam strode out of the library and headed for the stairs. "Nope. It's either this or I carry you like a cute little princess."

"Shit," he muttered, subdued by the threat.

Sam chuckled and easily climbed the stairs. They were almost to his door when Nick came out of one of the rooms on the opposite side of the hallway. A huge grin immediately wreathed his face, and Owen groaned with embarrassment.

"That's quite an armful you got there, big man," he teased.

"Nah. He's light as a feather."

"Feather, huh? Well, don't squish him when you get him in your bed. Maybe he'll tickle your fancy."

"I already know he's good at that. My fancy's never been happier. And not to worry, I'll take very good care of him."

"Good man," Nick praised. "Night, guys."

"Night."

Sam opened the door, closed it behind them and deposited Owen on the bed.

"Jeez. You guys. Are you always like this?" Owen scowled, but in reality he had to admit it felt good. It was nice to be included in lighthearted banter. It gave him a glimpse of what it was like to have friends, real friends who actually cared and not just acquaintances who were surface camouflage to disguise the fact he was really alone.

"Pretty much." Sam swooped down, stole a quick kiss and sat next to him. "You'll get used to it. Look at Eric. He was a tongue-tied, timid little cub when we found him. Now he slings bullshit with the best of us."

"How did he get here? I mean, how did he end up living here with all of you?"

"Eric was part of a pack that reviled homosexuality. When his uncle found out about him, he organized a hunt...with Eric as the prey."

"That poor kid."

"Yeah, fortunately he's clever. And fast. He got away from them and after a lot of walking and hitchhiking he ended up here. He was living on the streets, sleeping wherever he could find shelter and barely keeping himself fed with what little money he'd managed to save before the incident with his pack. Nathan noticed him one day

when he came into his bookstore and realizing he was a werewolf, he alerted Dev. Just in time too. Silas Prudome's people had targeted him for Prudome's use."

Owen frowned, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth for a moment before speaking. "Silas Prudome. He's the head of some kind of cult."

"Was," Sam corrected. "Prudome's no longer a threat to anyone."

Shocked by such a bald statement, Owen felt compelled to ask, "You mean he's dead?"

"Yes."

"Was that necessary?"

"It was," Sam said with a conviction strong enough to leave little room for doubt. "Prudome wasn't just the leader of a cult; he was the head of a black arts coven. When Devin and the others arrived, Ryan was chained to an altar and about to be sacrificed. Prudome had the knife at his throat. If Dev had hesitated Ryan would be dead."

"Why? Why was he going to...to hurt Ryan?"

"Prudome was going to sacrifice him in some kind of potency ritual. Even though that nut job set his sights on him, Ryan was fortunate. He had people who care about him, people who came to his rescue. Apparently there were others before him who weren't so lucky. With promises of food, shelter and a place to belong, Prudome was luring runaways, young men with no ties or family, into joining his supposedly benevolent group. There are people connected with the supernatural community who actually pay attention to such things and some began to suspect those young men were being victimized in some way because not too long after being taken in, they disappeared. It turns out they were right. Before they were released with a warning never to return, Nick questioned a couple of Prudome's followers. He managed to find out Prudome's ceremony was designed to counteract his escalating impotency and this wasn't the first time he'd performed it."

A haunting sadness engulfed Owen, brought on by thoughts of the fate suffered by Prudome's victims. "But why take Ryan, knowing he had friends and a lover who would come for him? Wasn't he just asking for trouble?"

"Prudome found out we were werewolves. Probably the night we rescued Eric as that was the only time we had any face-to-face contact with him but that aside, he apparently decided using a werewolf in his ceremony would up the potency factor, maybe even cure him. I'm assuming he also felt he was powerful enough to handle Dev and the rest of us. Who knows, maybe he thought he could corral the entire pack and sacrifice us one by one whenever he felt the need. I honestly think he was demented. It's common knowledge he killed his mentor in order to take control of the coven."

"And no one reported him to the police?"

"That would have been a problem. Remember what I said earlier about supernaturals keeping themselves hidden and apart from humanity? Can you imagine someone going to the police and telling them all about Prudome? Who knows what

would happen—if the police would even take such a report seriously. Besides, I have a feeling no one was mourning Master Deacon's demise."

"But if they'd reported him maybe Prudome wouldn't have been around to hurt others. Maybe those guys he sacrificed would still be alive," Owen insisted. It bothered him that no one had done anything about Prudome when he'd first shown his true colors.

Sam rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "You're right but it's a complicated issue. First of all you've got to realize that human law enforcement is not an effective deterrent to supernatural beings or those who wield powerful magic. The only thing that is, is other supernaturals. Among packs, we police ourselves. Any werewolf whose behavior could lead to the exposure of our species is reprimanded, incarcerated or even disposed of, depending on what they've done and how amendable they are to resuming their anonymity. I can't say for sure, but I believe that's the policy among most if not all otherworldly groups. That's why you don't see stories in the news about marauding vampires and such.

"In Prudome's case no one did anything because his first victim, Master Deacon, was every bit as despicable as Prudome himself. By human standards it wasn't the right thing to do but honestly, who'd want seek justice for a being such as that? It was only when Prudome began to sacrifice humans that the eyes of his contemporaries turned in his direction and I believe they would have done something about him as soon as they had proof of his activities. If you'll remember, up until Ryan was taken, there was only rumor and conjecture about what he may or may not have been doing."

"That's true. Do you really think another witch or warlock or whatever would have done something about him?"

"I do. There are white witches who abhor the taking of life. I believe one of them or possibly a group of them would have banded together and taken steps to put a stop to Prudome's crimes."

Owen nodded, the thought of the role he'd played in putting Ryan in Prudome's clutches striking him anew. "I thought he was an eccentric weirdo who had some kind of grudge against Devin. Not that that makes what I did any less heinous, but I swear I didn't know he meant to kill Ryan." Owen met the other man's gaze, his voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't know, Sam."

"I know you didn't. I don't believe you're capable of being that coldhearted. You had no way of knowing Prudome's intent. I'm sure you would have had a hard time believing it if someone told you he was the head of a black arts coven. In these supposedly modern times, it's hard to take such things seriously. Probably just as hard to believe in werewolves. We've never really discussed it, but how are you dealing with it? I know it's all had to be something of a shock. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Help? I can't think of anything right now. I'm dealing with it okay. I guess. Sort of in the sense that reality just got suspended, and I stepped into an alternate universe." At Sam's look of concern, Owen relented. "I'm kidding. It's not that bad, but it does sort of

make you look at people with a new perspective. When I was out today I kept wondering if maybe this person or that one was a werewolf, or maybe something else I didn't even know existed. It's like the confines of my world expanded, and I just need to find the boundaries again.

"Two days ago if you'd tried to convince me werewolves exist without giving me some kind of visual proof, I still wouldn't believe it. It helped that I saw it for myself last night. Before you carried me out of sight of the others, I saw them change. I saw an entire group of men just sort of melt and re-form as a pack of wolves. It was amazing," Owen admitted, the wonder of it still fresh. Then he directed a scowl at Sam. "Of course I didn't have much time to think about it before you demanded all my attention."

Sam's grin was instantaneous and not one whit contrite. "Devin's orders, sweetheart. But I'd have done it anyway. Earlier you admitted you knew I wanted you, but I don't believe even you knew how much."

Sam's hand landed on Owen's thigh and he gently squeezed before spreading his fingers and stroking them lightly over the fabric that covered Owen's skin. Owen felt an involuntary thrill of desire at the touch and looked up at Sam. "I do now. You made sure of that."

"I definitely did," Sam softly agreed. "Speaking of, before I'm tempted to show you again, I think we should get some sleep. I kept you up late last night, this evening's been stressful and you're obviously tired. Let's go to bed."

Owen nodded his agreement. Sam showed him to the attached bathroom, pointed out the amenities and found Owen a toothbrush which he put to use before taking a quick shower. Debating on leaving the towel around his waist after drying off, he finally wrinkled his nose in mild disgust at himself and draped it on the towel rod near the bathtub. There was no use in acting coy. It wasn't as though Sam hadn't already seen, touched and tasted pretty much everything he had.

He returned to the bedroom and got an impressive eyeful of prime, naked male. Sam had stripped his clothes off and was rummaging around in the closet. As Owen watched, Sam chose a shirt and a pair of jeans and hung them together in a bare space at the end of the rod.

"I like to pick out what I'm going to wear the night before so if I get up late I can just grab them without having to debate choices," Sam turned around, his gaze taking in Owen's nudity. "Mmm. Nice. I may have to take a cold shower so you can actually get some sleep."

Resisting that pleasurable stroke to his ego, Owen crossed to the bed. He climbed in, settled on his side and after situating the pillow under his cheek until it felt just right, he pulled the covers over himself and yawned. "If I hear you yell I'll know why. Goodnight."

"No sympathy whatsoever. I see how you are," Sam mournfully teased. He leaned over and planted a kiss on Owen's cheek. "You'll probably be asleep before I'm done in the bathroom. Night, sweetheart."

Owen mumbled a reply, his eyelids already too heavy to lift. There was a soft click and the room went dark. Owen fell asleep but later started awake when the bed dipped, and a warm body spooned him from behind.

"Easy. It's just me," Sam whispered.

"Sorry. Always sleep alone," he muttered, the tension draining from his muscles.

"You'll get used to it. Wolves like to cuddle."

"Mmm."

Silence reigned, and Owen drifted in a half doze. He wanted to go back to sleep, but part of his mind decided to busily review the events of the day. Behind him, Sam's breathing had gone soft and deep, and the arm he'd slung over Owen was relaxed and heavy. As his thoughts drifted, he came to the realization that while it felt nice to be held, on some level it bothered him, and he wasn't sure why. The more he thought about it, the more perturbed he became until it reached the point where he needed to get up.

Carefully, he disengaged himself from Sam's hold and as quietly as possible went to the bathroom. Closing the door behind him, he flipped on the wall switch and stood blinking under the glare of the lights over the sink. With a deep sigh, Owen turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face before cupping his hands and drinking. When his thirst was slaked, he turned off the water and reached for a towel. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he paused for a moment, meeting his own gaze in the reflective surface.

"You know why," he whispered, understanding the cause for his unease at having Sam hold him while they slept.

In actuality there were several reasons, the simplest being he wasn't used to it. The other reasons were more complicated. Sleeping with someone indicated a certain level of trust, even affection, by the parties sharing the bed. While he trusted Sam on a physical level, intellectually he was having a great deal of difficulty. Sam wanted him for more than just sex. Sam wanted them to live together, to share their lives, and no matter how much Owen wanted it, he was afraid. It was too good to be true. Especially for someone like him.

Taunting words echoed in the silence of Owen's mind. "Might as well stop begging for your mommy, boy. You think she doesn't know about this? It was her idea. She said you were a good-for-nothing pain in the butt. Said I could do whatever I wanted with you, and see what I figured out? You're not useless. What you are is a collection of convenient holes for my cock. That's right, boy. Take it. Suck it."

Breathing hard, Owen snapped to and met his own shock-tinged gaze in the mirror. Deliberately closing his eyes, he scrubbed his face dry with the towel, whispering against the soft terrycloth. "Stop it. *Go away.*"

He hated remembering the past and did his best to keep it at bay, but every once in a while a snippet of those hated memories would slip by his defenses. In a way he understood why it was happening now. The life he'd made for himself, no matter how

precarious it was, had just been uprooted. There were so many changes coming at him, he was finding it extremely difficult to cope with them all. He was off balance, and at the heart of it all was Sam.

Owen felt an unreasonable stir of resentment for the man who slept in the other room. Whether it was fair or not, he wanted to blame Sam. Sam made him want things he shouldn't, feel things he couldn't deal with. Sam was the stuff of dreams. He unearthed Owen's long-buried need to be loved, but at the same time stirred all of his most deeply seated doubts. Owen wanted desperately to reach out, but he was too wary, too scared.

Shaking his head, he hung up the towel and ran a hand through his tangled hair. Surprised by a huge yawn, he realized just how tired he was and, disturbed or not by Sam's presence, he desperately needed sleep. With a resigned sigh, he turned off the bathroom light and opened the door, letting his eyes adjust for a few seconds before padding softly across the carpet and back to bed.

Sam was right where he'd been when Owen got up. Instead of trying to resume his place, Owen slipped around to the other side of the bed where there was more room and he could put distance between himself and the big man. Gingerly he slid under the covers and settled in. Sam didn't move a muscle and satisfied, Owen yawned again and closed his eyes. He was almost asleep when Sam rolled and tucked his arm around Owen's waist. Mumbling something unintelligible, he curled around Owen then stilled.

Too worn out to do anything about it, Owen accepted defeat and Sam's cuddle quirk. Besides, he admitted to himself, it felt good. Sam's warmth chased away the chill he'd acquired with his sojourn to the bathroom, and the melding of their bodies against each other grounded him. Muscles going lax, his thoughts giving way to blessed silence, Owen slept.

Instantly awake, Sam opened his eyes with barely a blink. Holding perfectly still, he listened, wondering what had made the noise that disturbed him. It didn't take long to figure it out. His mate whimpered a second time, his body trying to curl into a ball. Owen was dreaming and from what Sam could tell, it wasn't a pleasant experience.

Touching him gently, Sam softly reassured him, "Shh, baby. It's all right. Everything's all right."

Owen jumped as though startled then melted against him. Sighing, Sam gathered him closer, relieved when Owen's erratic breaths evened out. Eyes open, gazing into the darkness that enfolded them, he considered the things he'd learned about his lover in the past few hours.

From the way he'd behaved when he thought Eric was being hurt, it was obvious Owen himself had been abused as a child. Even more apparent was he seemed to be suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Owen could claim he was handling it until he was blue in the face, but Sam knew better. A person who had that

kind of problem under control didn't pass out when something triggered their traumatic memories.

Deeply troubled, Sam was glad he'd practically railroaded Owen into moving in with him. Any guilt he'd been feeling on that account was swept away in the face of this new knowledge. Though he might not be ready to admit it, Owen needed him and Sam now felt better prepared to meet those needs. His mate was hiding a wealth of pain beneath a veneer of cool control, and no matter how hard he tried to keep that pain suppressed it was leaking out. No one should have to shoulder such a burden alone, and Sam was determined to be there for Owen no matter what the future held.

Despite his worry, Sam was also overjoyed. The doubts he'd had about Owen accepting him were gone. That his lover was willing to move in with him, and to take a legitimate job was all the proof Sam needed to know their relationship was truly beginning. It amazed him how much peace and satisfaction he took from that realization.

To love someone so much and to be loved in return. Though he was only in his mid-twenties, Sam felt it had been a long time in coming, perhaps because being gay made finding true love so difficult. So many of the gay men he'd met didn't believe in monogamy. For them it was all about having a good time with a variety of partners. Not that there was anything particularly wrong with that if it's what the two involved wanted, but Sam had always desired more. Whether that was the influence of the wolf within at work, his own personal preference or a combination of the two, he wasn't sure, but he wanted a partner, someone who would accept not only his strengths but his weaknesses as well, someone for whom he could do the same.

Having such a strong relationship could clear the way toward another goal Sam had tentatively set for himself. He'd thought perhaps someday of becoming a parent. While he knew he'd never father his own children, adoption was a possibility. He liked kids and enjoyed helping Nick who was a volunteer basketball coach at the local YMCA. Gently nuzzling the nape of his mate's neck and breathing in his scent, Sam wondered what Owen would think about the idea of someday adopting a child. He had no idea if Owen even liked kids and that made Sam smile. There was still so much they had to learn about each other. Owen was a proverbial diamond in the rough and Sam was looking forward to discovering all his hidden facets.

Chapter Four

Falling back on the bed, Owen heaved a satisfied sigh. Moving was hell. Fortunately, he'd had plenty of help. Sam, Nick, Eric and Quinn had all pitched in. Owen had managed to organize his possessions into a kind of loose order and ended up back at the Alexander estate with neatly packed boxes. One held his toiletries and bathroom stuff, several others held books and there was even one with odds and ends, including the insulator he'd purchased at the open air market the other day. That little item now held a place of honor on the windowsill. It was quite pretty when the afternoon sun shone through its amber depths, and reminded Owen more than ever of Sam's eyes...though he'd die before revealing such a sappy tidbit to his lover.

Everything he'd brought had been relatively easy to handle, the biggest loads being his clothes. They'd managed to transport them still on the hangers except for the things he had folded away in his dresser, like socks and briefs and those all went into another box.

He'd taken a certain amount of teasing flack about the sheer size of his wardrobe, and truly he hadn't realized it himself until it was pointed out to him that he apparently was a clotheshorse. Fortunately the room he shared with Sam was large, and had two closets, one of which was practically empty. At least it used to be. It was now nicely filled with Owen's things.

The move had gone a lot easier than he expected, though he'd faced one big problem when he accepted the offer to move in with Sam. His lease. He'd been prepared to pay the penalty for breaking it when Nick came to his rescue. A friend of his was looking for a place and two days before Owen's move he'd come to look the apartment over. Liking it, he agreed to sublet. This also presented a solution to a smaller problem. As Owen no longer needed and had no particular attachment to them, he left his dishes, tableware and other kitchen items behind for the use of the new renter who also purchased his bed.

With those stumbling blocks out of the way, everything else went smoothly. In a matter of hours his worldly possessions were packed, loaded into the backs of two SUVs and carted across town. Once everything was hauled up to the room he now shared with Sam, Owen had shooed everyone out so he could unpack. He'd been grateful for the help, but this part of the operation he wanted to take care of himself. Handling his things, putting them away and organizing them to his satisfaction, gave him a sense of belonging and helped him cultivate the feeling that this was now his home. Leaving his apartment for the last time had left him feeling strangely adrift, and he wanted to belong here, fiercely needed it and the security of being anchored that it offered him.

Staring up at the ceiling, Owen relaxed and let himself drift and drink in the peaceful silence for a few minutes before rolling to his feet. Next on his agenda was breaking down the boxes and getting rid of them, after which he intended to take a well-deserved shower. He was just heading toward the door with an armload of cardboard when it opened and Sam appeared.

"Hey. I came up to see how you're doing and to ask what you like on your pizza."

"I'm done and we're having pizza?"

"Yeah. We're all starving, Rose is out and no one wants to cook."

"Pizza sounds good to me. I like pepperoni, mushrooms, black olives, onions and extra cheese but I'll eat most anything except green peppers and anchovies. You've had a shower," Owen observed, noting the dampness of Sam's hair. Had his hands not been full of flattened cardboard boxes he might have given in to the sudden compulsion to run his fingers through the short, damp strands.

"Yeah, I used the bathroom down the hall so I wouldn't be in your way while you unpacked."

Sam's kindness was unexpected and Owen dropped his gaze a bit. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Here, give me this stuff and I'll get rid of it."

"You don't have to do that."

"Not doing it because I have to," Sam rumbled and reached out to brush at Owen's cheek. "You have a smudge. Cute."

Owen's lips twitched in a half grimace. "I need a shower."

"So go take one. I'll get rid of the trash, order pizza and it'll be here, or at least on its way, by the time you finish."

"Okay."

Owen handed over the cardboard and when Sam turned to leave, impulsively he reached out, halting him with a hand on his arm.

"Hmm?" Sam responded.

"Just...just this," Owen answered. He slid a hand behind Sam's neck, urged him to bend forward then brought their mouths together. Owen sensed Sam's surprise then felt his rumble of pleasure. A tickle of happiness settled in Owen's stomach as he teased his tongue against Sam's lips. His lover opened for him and Owen briefly explored the warmth within before gently withdrawing. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I have a feeling that's for more than me just carting off the trash."

"Yeah."

"You don't have to thank me for that. You being here is more than enough. Welcome home, sweetheart."

Not trusting his voice, Owen gave Sam a smile and, doing his best not to indulge in a panicked retreat, he fled to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Leaning back against it, he considered what he'd just done. He kissed Sam. Not that he hadn't kissed

him before, but this was the first time he'd initiated it. It was the first time in a very, very long time he'd offered another human being true, honest affection. He was stunned. The urge had just suddenly hit him, and he didn't resist, didn't even think about it. What did that mean?

The answer tried to present itself to him, but Owen stifled it before it could fully form. He refused to think about things that made him feel vulnerable and quickly began stripping off his clothes. When it came time to throw them in the hamper, he hesitated. Sam's things were already in there. He'd never thought about something as mundane as mixing his clothing with someone else's. It seemed somehow momentous, a feeling that was interrupted by the question of who did the laundry. The thought of Rose washing his clothes made him uncomfortable. Resolving to find out what the laundry situation was, he tossed his things in on top of Sam's, an action that brought a half-smile to his lips.

Having set out his toiletries earlier, Owen grabbed his shampoo and conditioner and headed for the shower. He was about to step in when he remembered the bar of soap he'd purchased at the open air market. It was wrapped in a square of quaint blue calico under which was a sturdy layer of cellophane that kept most of the scent in. When he opened it, the rich aroma of rosemary and other herbs drifted to his nostrils on an aromatic cloud.

"Mmm, nice," Owen breathed and, taking the soap, retreated to the shower.

Half an hour later he was clean and dressed, with his hair mostly dry from a vigorous toweling. Refreshed and very hungry, he headed downstairs and arrived just in time to witness the delivery of the pizza.

"Hey, Owen. Come help me in the kitchen," Eric said by way of greeting. He latched on to Owen's arm. "You can throw ice into glasses for everyone while I break out the soda."

"Sure," Owen agreed, his smile faltering when he noticed Eric had closed his eyes and was deeply inhaling. "Something wrong?"

The young man blinked a couple of times as though distracted then shook his head. "No, nothing," he answered, though it seemed as if he wasn't quite sure. "Come on."

Owen followed with a slight frown. Eric's sudden odd behavior worried him but hesitant to push, he let it go and followed him into the kitchen. Eric pulled glasses from the cupboard and set them on the kitchen table while Owen grabbed a container of ice cubes from the freezer. As he dumped ice into the glasses, Eric went to the pantry and came back with a couple of two-liter bottles, one of Coke and one of Sprite.

"Which would you like?" he asked Owen with a shy smile.

"Cola for me, please."

Eric began to pour just as Sam, Nick and Quinn arrived. Chaos reigned for a few moments while pizza boxes were opened, glasses distributed and for the debate over the merits of using plates or paper towels on which to place their individual slices. The

anti-dishwashing faction won and everyone finally settled in to eat. Sam took the chair to Owen's right with Eric on his left. Nick and Quinn sat across from them.

"So, did you get all your stuff put away?" Quinn asked Owen, having swallowed his latest bite.

"Yeah. I'm all set."

"Good. I was going to tell you if you need extra room or someplace to just store anything you don't want out, we can easily arrange that."

"Thanks, I appreciate the offer, but everything fit."

"Including all those clothes?" Nick teased. His deep blue eyes sparkled with good humor. "I thought I was bad, but you got me beat by a mile."

Owen managed a shamefaced grin and shrugged. "Well, you know how it is, you see something you like and next thing you know..."

"You've got enough clothes for three guys," Nick laughed. "Yeah, I know. I've endured my share of teasing about clothes."

Sam snorted. "Nicky is Mr. Fastidious when it comes to his clothes."

"Better that than a slob. Rose has threatened more than once to bring a bulldozer in to help clean up after him," Nick confided. "Recently though, for some reason, he's gotten a little neater." Owen smiled at Nick's wink.

Sam and Nick traded a few more good-natured barbs before the conversation took a turn when Quinn asked Nick how his classes were going. "Have you considered career choices?"

"Yep. I'm aiming at being a CSI."

"Really? Like on television?" Owen asked, seeing Nick in a different light. He didn't seem the type to take up such a serious profession.

"Well, your nose should certainly come in handy. You'll be able to sniff out the culprits in no time," Quinn teased.

"Not sure if that'll be a good thing or not," Nick answered in all seriousness. "If I can't find concrete evidence to back up what my nose tells me, it'll be frustrating as hell."

"I think it'll be an asset," Sam told him. "If nothing else, it'll make you dig for proof where on the other hand, if you had no other clues, you might give up."

"True."

"And speaking of noses," Quinn suddenly interrupted. "Is it my imagination or is there something on one of these pizzas that smells really good? Which one is it?"

"It's not the pizza," Eric piped up. "It's Owen."

"What?" Owen gaped.

"It's true. I smelled you in the foyer." Eric took a deep breath. "Smells really, really good."

Sam leaned in to take a sniff and sure enough his eyes drifted shut. When he opened them, they were a little unfocused and definitely warming up fast. "Damn, babe. What the hell is that? You smell good enough to eat."

Nick snickered, but he and Quinn both bent forward a bit and inhaled. Nick's smile slowly died and he and Quinn both emitted rumbling growls that seemed to startle them. "Shit," Quinn breathed. "Whatever that is it's, uh...stimulating."

Now the focus of four sets of eyes, Owen twitched in his seat. "Is it really that good? It's just handmade soap. I mean, I like the smell, that's why I bought it, but you guys must really like it. You're all starting to look like you're stoned."

"You know what I think?" Sam growled. "I think you may have found the werewolf equivalent to catnip."

"Are you kidding?"

"Take a look around. What do you think?"

Owen's gaze took in the intent expressions of the four men surrounding him.

"Makes me want to rub on him," Eric innocently blurted out, edging closer to Owen.

"There'll be no rubbing, cub," Sam snapped.

Eric instantly dropped his gaze, retreated and curled up in his chair. "Sorry," he whispered.

To Owen's dismay, Nick immediately bristled.

"Sam," he cautioned, his voice dropping several octaves.

Sam turned his glare on Nick. "The pup needed to be put in his place."

"Don't presume to reprimand my mate."

"He's not your mate yet."

"Need I remind you I'm your beta? Are you questioning my authority?"

"I'm questioning nothing. I'm exercising my right to defend my mate."

"Eric wasn't going to hurt Owen, Sam," Quinn interjected. "He's just a cub. A little overexcited, a little too young to know better."

"I know that!" Sam exclaimed, then stilled, taking a deep breath. "Shit. Eric, I apologize. I'd never hurt you. You know that, don't you, cub?"

Eric nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, Sam. Don't get mad at each other because of me. Please?" he directed this last to Nick.

Under the young man's earnest gaze, Nick's rigid expression softened and he nodded. He and Sam exchanged a look and Owen relaxed when Nick raised one rueful brow and mustered a half-smile.

"Damn," Sam softly cursed. "Sorry, man."

"Same here."

Feeling more than a little guilty for almost causing a fight, however unintentionally, Owen pushed away from the table. "I'm going to go wash this shit off before I cause any more trouble."

"I think that might be wise," Quinn said with a grin.

Sam followed Owen as he started out of the kitchen. "I'm going with you." He ruffled Eric's hair as he passed him. "I'm going to follow the pup's suggestion and rub on you."

Raucous hoots and laughter spilled out of the kitchen, following Owen and Sam upstairs.

"You fucking idiot," Owen hissed though he had a hard time keeping his own grin in check.

"Is that any way to talk to the man who's about to blow your mind?"

"I don't remember asking you to blow my mind."

"Then how about I just blow you?"

Not knowing how to react to this playfulness, Owen frowned and his amusement fled. Without offering a reply he kept going, striding into their room and straight on into the bathroom. For him, sex had begun as an exercise in pain and terror that morphed into a never-ending series of unfeeling business deals, a way to keep himself fed and clothed. This lighthearted approach was something new, and he lacked the necessary knowledge of how to handle it. It made him feel awkward and inexperienced.

In front of the hamper, he began unbuttoning his shirt. He knew he'd been followed when he caught a glimpse of Sam in the mirror, and a pair of arms encircled his chest. Sam brushed his hands away from the buttons. "I didn't get an answer to my question," he said, kissing the side of Owen's neck.

"I don't know what to say," Owen replied, surprised by the shiver that slid down his spine.

"The truth will do," Sam whispered close to his ear.

He turned them until they were facing the mirror, and their eyes met in its reflective surface. His hands continued to work the buttons open on Owen's untucked shirt then spread the fabric wide. Warm fingertips skated over Owen's torso, Sam's mocha-colored skin showing dark against the almost pearly sheen of Owen's flesh. Mesmerized, Owen lowered his eyes to follow the movement of Sam's hands. His breath began to race.

"Would you like me to blow you?" Sam softly repeated.

Cock starting to fill, Owen nodded then nearly moaned when the button on his jeans was opened and the zipper lowered. Sam pushed both jeans and briefs down and away, leaving Owen clothed in just his opened shirt. Cradled in Sam's arms, he saw himself on display, nearly naked and looking utterly shameless. His slim, nicely toned body was the perfect backdrop for his thickening cock, which rose from the nest of dark golden curls at its base.

"Beautiful," Sam breathed. "So sexy." His fingers closed around Owen's shaft.

"Oh fuck," Owen groaned, his knees momentarily going weak.

He'd never seen himself like this before. Never experienced anything so intimate, so sensual. He couldn't turn away from the vision of those dark fingers stroking his cock, the sight of them exponentially increasing the tactile sensations until he felt on the verge of exploding. He could see moisture gathering on the crown of his cock, and he cried out when Sam's thumb swept over it. Sam spread the warm precum, leaving a cooling sensation in its wake when the air hit the damp against Owen's skin.

Hips following the stroke of Sam's hand, he panted and moaned, "Oh fuck, oh shit. Oh God, Sam. Gonna come."

"Not yet, baby. Wanna taste you." Sam released his hold on Owen and, moving around to face him, went to his knees. "Feed me that bad boy. Come on, babe, fuck my face."

Spurred on by that raw suggestion, Owen guided himself to Sam's mouth and nearly lost it when wet heat wrapped around him. Forcing himself to look away lest the sight alone make him shoot, he gripped the brawny shoulders so easily within reach and experimentally pumped his hips, losing himself in the friction of Sam's tongue and the heady suction. Afraid of going too deep, of choking Sam, he had that fear swept away when Sam's hands cupped the cheeks of his ass, pulling him in. His cock slid down Sam's throat once, twice and on the third time, when Sam swallowed around him, Owen threw his head back and wailed as he came.

Shuddering with every spurt of seed he fed Sam, he softly moaned when his lover let him slip free with a few parting licks. Pulling in a deep, shuddery breath, Owen managed to hold himself up but was inordinately grateful when Sam stood and pulled him against his chest. Sam nuzzled Owen's hair then tipped his face up for a kiss. His tongue slid into Owen's mouth and Owen tasted himself mingled with Sam's distinct flavor.

"Time for that shower," Sam rumbled when he broke their kiss.

He slipped the shirt from Owen's shoulders and sent him in the direction of the shower stall. Glancing back, Owen stopped to watch Sam undress before he walked in and turned on the water. By the time the temperature was just right and he stepped under the spray, Sam joined him.

"You really do smell good. That soap is like an aphrodisiac."

"I'm getting rid of it," Owen claimed.

"Don't do *that*," Sam quickly demanded. He pressed his body to Owen's, letting Owen feel the thick length of his cock. "Keep it just for us. In fact, I think we should go buy another dozen bars at least."

Owen chuckled. "You really do like it."

"If there was ever any doubt," he rubbed his cock along the crease of Owen's ass, "this ought to dispel it. Then again I get hard just being near you."

"You..." Owen paused a moment to order his words. "How can you just say things like that?"

"Because it's the truth," Sam sighed, his hands sliding up and down Owen's arms. "You have so much to learn. Don't think I can't see that, or understand the reason for it."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know how to play. You don't know how to accept compliments. You find it hard to believe I care about you, or that the guys are actually willing to accept you, to befriend you, and you definitely have trust issues."

Offended, Owen stiffened. "Well, excuse *me*. Apparently, unlike certain other people, I'm less than perfect."

"Are you saying I'm perfect?" Sam drawled.

"No. You're an asshole."

"Hmm, well, I'll have to see if I can change your mind about that, but be that as it may, I realize all the things you're having difficulty with will resolve themselves in time. You know why I'm so sure of that?"

"I don't have a clue."

"Because I'm going to make it happen," Sam licked the outer edge of Owen's ear, the caress of his warm breath causing Owen to shiver. "I'm going to shower you with so much affection and so many compliments, you'll have no choice but to realize it's the truth when I tell you how beautiful and sweet you are," A kiss landed in the hollow beneath Owen's ear. "You'll finally believe me when I say there's no one on earth I'd rather be with. I'll show you how much fun it is to tease each other and tell stupid jokes. I'm going to find all your ticklish spots," Sam wiggled his fingers against Owen's ribs making him jump, "and drive you crazy until you loosen up and play with me. I promise you, sweetheart, I'm going to do everything I can to win your trust and show you that I'll do my very best to never let you down."

Inordinately touched and yet deeply troubled, Owen hung his head and stared at the water swirling down the drain. "This isn't fair. Why do you say things like that? Why do you have to mix me up and confuse everything? I don't like it. I don't know what to do. I just...feel lost."

Sam's arms came around him and Owen allowed himself to be hugged. "Shhh. You're not lost. I'm right here with you. I'll help you find your way."

With that softly whispered promise, Owen's defenses crumbled. Tears blurred his vision and rolled down his cheeks. Ashamed to let Sam see, he quickly tilted his face into the spray from the shower then wiped the water away. "Don't do this to me," he begged.

"Do what, sweetheart?"

"Don't make me feel things I shouldn't. It hurts."

"Oh, baby. It's not my intention to hurt you, but sometimes we can't embrace change without it. Would you rather everything go back the way it was? Would you rather we'd never met?"

"No! I don't want *that*."

"Then just believe in me for a while. It will get easier and even now it's not all pain, is it?"

Owen shook his head.

"Come on, let me show you how good it can be."

Sam shut off the water and Owen followed his lead out of the shower. He stood quietly as Sam quickly toweled them both dry then let Sam guide him into the bedroom and pull him down on the mattress. Tense, Owen let himself be held. He closed his eyes, drinking in the soothing rhythm of Sam's hands running slowly down his back, over the curve of his ass, up his hip and waist then back again until he finally relaxed.

Sam petted him over and over, following the same pattern until Owen practically melted against him. Until his caresses became less comforting and more sensual. Until need created a warm quivering pool in Owen's belly and his cock began to thicken against Sam's thigh. Until Sam leaned up, looming over him, blocking out light, fear and doubt, leaving Owen with nothing more to cope with than the pleasurable sensations that once more built inside his body.

He writhed against Sam, his skin tingling with each brush of hands or mouth or tongue or teeth. Sam touched him everywhere and lingered on every sensitive spot he found. Owen panted, quivering when a wet tongue played inside his ear and laved the hollow beneath it. He moaned when that same tongue circled the indentation of his bellybutton, sliding toward his groin in a deliberate tease before switching directions. He cried out when his nipples were licked and nibbled and nearly came up off the bed when the promise made earlier was fulfilled and his cock was licked and sucked.

Sam never stayed in one place too long, just long enough to make the sensations grow to the point where Owen's body was shuddering and his moans were nonstop. He went with Sam's gentle urging and rolled over on his belly, heaving a blissed-out sigh when Sam began worshipping his back, shoulders and spine with kisses, licks and firm strokes of fingers that traced bone and flesh with a delicate precision designed to entice and enflame.

Sam's inevitable progression southward brought him to Owen's ass, a circumstance that soon shattered Owen's newly established calm. It started with kisses and soft licks over the firm mounds of his cheeks and escalated into a full-on sensual assault of his anus that included the insertion of exploratory fingers and a determined, stabbing tongue. Brought back to the state of wildly aroused and needy, Owen got his knees beneath him and tilted his ass up, begging Sam to take him.

"Please, oh God, please. I can't take it anymore. Fuck me. Fuck me, Sam."

"Whatever you need, baby. Gonna make you feel so good," Sam growled.

Owen groaned in relief when two lube-slick fingers pushed deep into his ready entrance. He pushed back on them, riding them, wiggling to pull them deeper and cried out when they curled just right to nail his sweet spot. Dazed from that sharp jolt of sensation, he missed the fingers pulling out, only realizing they were gone when something much thicker began to invade his stretching anal ring. He stilled and struggled to relax, reveling in the burning ache then the steady friction against flesh that broadcast just how damn good it felt to every nerve ending in his body.

Sam's cock sank deep, and Owen took every inch until a set of full and heavy balls rested against him. Sam curled over him, blanketing Owen's back. Heat poured off him, carrying with it the musky, testosterone-laden tang of a fully aroused male. His fingers twined with Owen's and held his hands in place against the bed.

"Ready?" Sam breathed in his ear. "Gonna fuck you, sweetheart. Long and slow, fast and hard. Gonna make you spurt cum all over the sheets and rub your belly in it."

"Unnn, yesss," Owen groaned then gasped when Sam ground his hips in a circular motion that pushed his cock a few centimeters deeper.

From that point on there was no talking, Owen had neither breath nor functioning brain cells for it. Sam was as good as his word. He started off slow, drawing the silky-skinned rod of his cock out with maddening deliberation before sliding back in, in the same manner. Just when Owen would get to the point of begging for him to go faster, Sam would up the pace just enough to temporarily satisfy, but not enough to push Owen over the edge. With his rhythm and pattern established, Sam became a fucking machine, a piston thrusting within the flesh-and-blood cylinder of Owen's passage. Their bodies rocked, the bed creaked and their grunts and moans filled the room.

By the time they got to the point where Sam was slamming into Owen with short, sharp jabs, Owen's cock was swollen to bursting and had leaked a small puddle beneath him. Wanting to, needing to, dying to touch himself, he pulled at his hand, wordlessly struggling for release. Sam let him go but before Owen could act, Sam's freed hand was there before him, and with several pulling strokes Owen's climax ripped through him.

Pleasure, so intense it nearly made him scream, raced down his spine and slammed into Owen's gut. His cum fountained onto the tangled sheets beneath him and he shuddered with every jet that added to the warm, slippery puddle. Buried deep within him, Sam's cock throbbed seconds before the hot wash of his release bathed the tight, gripping sleeve of Owen's sensitized sheath.

"So good, so good, so good," Owen softly chanted, right before his knees gave out.

Sam caught his hips, lowered him to the bed and as predicted, his belly squished into the cooling pool of his own cum. Completely sated, Owen, who would normally have been fastidiously rolling away from the wet spot, instead nearly purred and wiggled when a small stream of Sam's cum slid down between the cheeks of his ass and over his depleted balls.

"You're a study in decadence," Sam observed with a raspy chuckle.

"Don't care. Feel so good. Wanna sleep."

"Anything you want, sweetheart."

Owen heard Sam's voice from far, far away and felt a warm cover settle over his body before his last conscious thought winked out.

Chapter Five

Sam walked quietly out of the bathroom and dressed while keeping an eye on his exhausted lover. Owen was still on his belly, his breathing slow and even as he slept. Tempted to brush a stray, wavy lock of blond hair from his forehead, Sam resisted the impulse, instead leaving the bedroom with a final backward glance. The sight of Owen in his bed made him happy, but that good feeling faded as he made his way downstairs.

In the smaller family room off the formal living room, he found his friends and fellow pack mates. The television was on and a DVD played. The movie was one he'd seen before with mummies, curses, ancient warriors and a handy though disreputable-looking dirigible airship that made traversing the expanses of the Egyptian skies a breeze.

Nick was sprawled on the sofa with Eric asleep and curled against his side. Quinn had opted for the floor, and was stretched out on his side with a bowl of popcorn near at hand. Sam carefully folded himself into the opposite corner from Nick, mindful of waking Eric.

They watched the movie in silence for a time until Nick directed a knowing look Sam's way. "How'd the rubbing go?"

Sam returned his look with an easy smile. "Smooth, with just the right amount of friction."

On the floor, Quinn snorted in amusement.

"Must have been tiring. You wear the poor guy out?"

"Yeah, he's sleeping. Afraid he's going to wake up glued to the sheets. He crashed right after and I didn't have the heart to wake him."

Something in Sam's expression must have alerted Nick to his friend's melancholy. "What's wrong?"

"He's so wounded."

Quinn immediately sat up and directed an intent, green-eyed gaze at Sam. "What do you mean?"

"I suspect—no, I know—he was sexually abused as a child. He won't talk about it, but it's hurt him. Deeply. It's warped his whole take on life. He's afraid to have fun, afraid to trust anyone. Afraid to believe anyone could find a single redeeming quality in him."

"I knew something was wrong," Nick said. "You know, when you first brought him around, I wanted to dislike him. He acted so cool and superior which really put me off, but the more he was around, the more I saw something unexpected. Now and then there'd be an unguarded expression on his face, a look in his eyes. It was like there was

a strange kind of innocence about him, a certain vulnerability. Even after the incident with Ryan I was telling myself I should hate him, but I just couldn't bring myself to. It wasn't only the fact that you love him; it was Owen himself. There's something about him that makes you want to dig deeper. It makes me want to bully him but protect him as well. Did you notice how he reacts to certain things? When we laugh and kid around he seems to want to join in, but it's like he's just not sure how to do it. He's like a lesser-ranked wolf in a wild pack wanting desperately to belong and please those of higher rank, but afraid to make a move for fear of being chastised."

"Nicky, you continue to surprise me," Sam softly declared. "You have depths I never suspected. What you say about Owen is absolutely true, and I'm going to do everything I can to help him find his way out of the emotional box he's built around himself. I want to tell you guys too how much I appreciate you giving him a chance. I know it's not easy."

"You'd do the same and more for any one of us," Quinn answered him.

"Owen's a good boy," Eric mumbled. "You'll help him feel better, Sam."

"Thank you, little wolf, though I can just see Owen's expression if he heard you call him a boy."

Low, appreciative chuckles followed Sam's observation. Eyes still closed, Eric grinned and wiggled closer to Nick. Nick responded by ruffling Eric's blond hair and kissing him on the temple.

"Go back to sleep, cub." His growl was low and filled with affection.

With a sigh, Eric went boneless, his breaths evening out.

Sam snickered. "He's a pistol. You're going to have your hands full in the future."

"In the future, hell. Try now. The little shit snuck into my bed the other night. Luckily for him I know how to restrain myself or he'd no longer be a virgin. I had to threaten him with the wrath of Dev to get him back to his own room."

"You better watch your ass, Nicky. When he hits eighteen he might try to nail you."

Nick snorted. "As if. Speaking of being nailed. How's Nathan these days, Quinn?"

Sam grinned when a handful of popcorn hit Nick in the face.

"He's just fine, thank you."

Nick winked at Sam. "Any rubbing going on there?"

Sam couldn't contain his laughter but tried to keep it down in deference to the sleeping Eric.

"None of your business, damn you," Quinn choked out, his shoulders shaking.

"Shucks. Now there would be a hot combo. Don't you think, Sam?"

"Surely, I do believe you're right."

"Don't call me Shirley," Nick deadpanned.

With that, Sam totally lost it. He roared with laughter and the others joined him. Eric woke up again, looking adorably ruffled and shell shocked which made them laugh all the harder.

When he was finally able to calm down, Sam took a deep breath. "Damn, I needed that. You guys are great for stress relief."

"I thought you got that upstairs a little while ago," Nick said, giving him a wicked wink.

"I did, and you don't know when to quit, do you?"

"Sure I do, see, here's me being serious. Everything will work out fine, big man. I know you. You're going to show Owen a different way of life. You'll change his outlook for the better, and we're all going to be here to help in any way you need us."

"Thanks. I mean it."

"You're welcome. Now why don't you go upstairs and peel your boy off those sheets before he's permanently stuck to them. I'm going to take my little wolf upstairs and tuck him in."

Nick levered himself off the sofa and swept Eric up in his arms.

"I don't want to go to bed! I wanna see the movie," Eric wailed.

"You've been asleep for most of it. It's almost over now."

"We can restart it from the beginning. Come on. I'm wide awake now."

"Let him stay," Quinn cajoled. "Tomorrow's Sunday. It's not like he has to get up early for classes or anything."

"All right," Nick relented. "But the minute you pass out again it's bed for you, Shorty."

"I'm not short, ass wipe."

"A little respect for your elders, please."

"I'm not short, ass wipe, sir."

Sam snorted and shook his head. "I'm going to bed. Night everyone."

A chorus of goodnights followed him out of the room and he retreated to the sound of Nick and Eric's good-natured bickering. Quinn's order for them to shush made him grin and good spirits restored, Sam eagerly returned to his lover.

When he woke, what met Sam's first sleepy blinks was the smooth nape of a particularly enticing neck. He smiled in instant recognition. The owner of that alluring body part was his mate, the day was just beginning and he was fully prepared to indulge in what was quickly becoming a ritual for them. Slow and lazy Sunday morning wake-up sex. Already erect, his cock nestled in the warm groove between the cheeks of his lover's ass and Sam indulged himself with a couple experimental pumps of his hips. Silky, warm skin slid against his sensitive length and he breathed a husky sigh.

Since beginning his life with Owen, it amazed him how such small and simple touches could feel so extraordinarily good but it hadn't taken long to come to a very pleasant conclusion. Contact in any form with the man in his arms seemed amplified beyond that of anything he'd experienced with any other person. Whether it was a side effect of the mate bond between them or something created by the strength of his love for Owen was unclear but whatever the case, Sam embraced it wholeheartedly.

Kisses laid against that tempting nape and the slow glide of his hand over his lover's hip and thigh resulted in a slight, indrawn breath, a barely audible throaty moan and a push against his groin that succeeded in settling his cock even closer to the small, tight entrance he hoped soon to fill. A further exploratory foray with his hand brought him to a cock that was waking faster than its owner. Taking it in hand, Sam let his fingers tease the thickening shaft with unhurried strokes.

His reward was a breathy groan and Owen's thighs parting as he brought one leg up and back, draping it over Sam's legs. Owen's eager opening of himself for their joining never failed to enrich Sam's already growing excitement. Reaching for the lube he'd stashed under their pillows the night before, he coated his cock and wedged that impatient organ against its intended berth—the tiny rosebud of Owen's anus. That perfect circle, still pink and puffy from last evening's lovemaking, slowly bloomed beneath the careful pressure Sam applied. In tiny increments, cautious forward incursions and patient lesser retreats, he eventually worked himself fully into the tight, gripping depths of his lover's passage.

Owen's panting breaths and his small, raspy moans were arousing but upon receiving the full length of his mate's cock, the "Sam" he uttered, hoarse and low, that single syllable drawn out and imbued with such carnal desire, nearly laid waste to Sam's restraint. Taking more than a few deep breaths, he recovered his original intent, slid a few inches free of the clinging sleeve of his mate's moist, heated channel then gently returned. In seconds he established a rhythm of slow, steady thrusts and settled in for what he intended to be a lengthy orgy of pleasure.

For Sam, this was heaven. Nothing could be better than holding in his arms the man who meant everything to him. He relished the feel of Owen's sweat-damp yet satin-smooth skin, his hard cock and the diminutive nipples that pebbled under his exploring fingertips. The way his belly muscles rippled as his passage squeezed and massaged Sam's cock was pure sinful perfection. The sensual sounds he uttered passed between his parted lips on breaths fast and shallow with exertion. They mingled with the slight rhythmic creak of the bed beneath them.

The build toward orgasm mimicked the speed of thick honey lazily drizzled into a cup of hot tea and like the honey, Sam felt he would welcome melting into the blistering heat. As they moved together, any and all barriers seemed to disappear. His pleasure was Owen's and Owen's his. There was no mine, no his, only ours. Sam curled his free arm up and over Owen's chest, his hand clasping his shoulder to hold him steady. With the fingers of his other hand wrapped around his mate's cock, he increased the speed of his thrusts and the tempo of strokes to that now rock-hard organ. The urgency of

impending climax, long kept at bay, broke over them in a scalding rush marked by pulsing spews of semen, muscle spasms, Sam's guttural groan and Owen's keening cry.

For blissful seconds Sam drowned in the pleasure they'd worked so diligently to achieve then followed the lessening waves of rapture back to sanity. With a deep, shuddery breath his body went boneless, all tension gone. Knowing Owen was in the exact same condition brought a lazy smile to his lips, one that stayed as he slid into a light doze. A quarter hour slid by before he stirred and gave his lover an affectionate squeeze.

"You're so limp I could mold you like dough," Sam teased, nibbling Owen's earlobe.

"Well, your yeast must have expired," Owen softly retorted. With a little muscle pressure and a wiggle, he expelled Sam's deflated erection. "Your baguette isn't even half baked."

Sam sputtered and laughed. "Maybe it needs to stay in the oven longer."

"This oven is out of service for cleaning," Owen crisply declared and rolled away. He sat up, stretched and yawned.

Sam admired the long, lean line of his body for a moment then followed his example. He levered himself out of bed and started for the bathroom, throwing a challenge over his shoulder. "Last one in the shower sucks dick."

"First one in the shower takes it up the ass," Owen countered.

Stopped dead in his tracks, Sam waved Owen in ahead of him. "After you."

Owen passed him with a satisfied smirk. "Chicken."

With a few very unwerewolf-like clucks, Sam followed his mate. Their libidos having been so well seen to such a short time earlier, the shower they shared served only its main purpose, that of getting clean. Afterward they dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast. While they were eating, Nick drifted in. He mumbled a greeting and plopped down at the table with the newspaper and a cup of coffee.

"Morning," Sam replied. "Eric still in bed?"

"Mmm," Nick answered.

"You two have anything planned for today?"

"Unh unh."

"So you're just gonna hang out and veg?"

"Umm, hmm."

With a smile curving his lips, Sam turned his attention to his lover. "As you can tell, Nicky's real talkative in the morning."

"I don't blame him," Owen sympathized, following his comment with a yawn. "Why'd we get up so early?"

"You think nine's early?"

"Yeah."

"Jeez. You're as bad as Nick. Have some more coffee. I thought we could just go out and mess around for a while. I want to visit the open air market in Garret Park and stop in at Davidson Sport."

"What are you getting there?" Owen asked.

"A football. The one we had met with an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"We were all playing touch football out in the backyard and the ball got fumbled. Dev and I managed to get a hold of it at the same time and in the struggle, the ball got squeezed a little too hard."

"You crushed it?"

"Not me," Sam said defensively. "It was Dev. He popped it like a balloon."

"I didn't think something like that was even possible."

"It is for us," Nick commented. "Better watch it when Sam's handling your delicate bits. If he gets too excited who knows what could happen."

At the sight of Owen's eyes widening with alarm, Sam turned his wrath on Nick. "Don't tell him stupid shit like that. You trying to ruin my sex life? Baby, don't listen him. You know I'd never hurt you. Have I ever?"

Owen dubiously shook his head.

"And I never will," Sam promised. "Tell him you were joking," he ordered Nick.

"I will if you bring me back a dinner from Smokin' Joes. Full rack of ribs with baked potato and Caesar salad on the side."

"You want sour cream and butter with that potato?" Sam asked, ladling on the sarcasm.

"Definitely, oh, and dinner rolls. A dozen."

"Mmm, I want some too." Eric shuffled into the kitchen. He collapsed into the chair next to Nick and laid his head on the table. "I want toast," he whined.

"Make that two dinners," Nick told Sam, "and if you want toast, make it yourself."

"You do it for me."

"What am I, your maid?"

"Umm hmm."

Nick rolled his eyes and Sam chuckled. "Two dinners and I haven't heard you tell Owen you were joking."

"I know a joke. What kind of music do rabbits like?" Eric waited a beat then finished. "Hip hop."

There was a chorus of groans before Nick asked, "Where'd you get that lame joke?"

"Off a Popsicle stick."

"Figures."

"Toast."

"In a minute."

"With butter."

"Sure, sure."

"And jelly."

"Uh huh."

"Grape."

"Right away."

"Hot chocolate."

"Milk," Nick countered.

"Yuck."

"Growing boys need calcium."

"I'm not a boy."

"You're still growing."

"I'll drink the milk but you gotta fix me bacon too."

"Anything else you want, Your Majesty?"

"Scrambled eggs."

"Criminy, now I'm a short-order cook."

"You asked."

"You didn't have to tell me."

"I want it."

"Yeah, yeah."

Snickers drew Sam's attention and he turned his gaze on his mate. Owen was laughing, his blue eyes sparkling with humor. That beautiful sight made Sam grin. "It's like living with a comedy duo," he said with a shake of his head. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah."

"Since I'm being so generous and buying you guys dinner, you can do our dishes instead of telling Owen you were joking about earlier."

"I'd rather tell him I was joking," Nick complained.

"Too late, we're outta here. See you later."

"Have fun," Eric said, giving them a sweet and sleepy smile.

Walking out of the kitchen and into the laundry room, Sam again heard Eric's repeated demand for toast and Nick's answering growl. "I've got an idea," he told Owen as they passed through the laundry room and out the side door into the five-bay garage. "Why don't we stop at the bookstore? Wanna take a look at where you'll be working?"

"Yeah...I guess that'd be okay."

"You don't want to?" Sam asked, addressing the slight reluctance in Owen's voice.

"Won't it seem weird?"

"Why? We're just gonna look around a little. Besides, nobody knows who you are."

"Yeah, but they'll see me tomorrow."

"So? It's no big deal. You worry too much."

Owen shrugged. "Maybe."

Sam grabbed a set of keys from one of several hooks near the door and ushered his lover into one of the black SUVs Quinn kept for everyone's use. Once they got into town, the errands he wanted to run were accomplished in short order, including buying a dozen bottles of a mixture of aromatic essential oils that echoed the scent of the rosemary-herb soap Owen had purchased. Sam had gotten into a conversation with the lady who made the soap and when Sam asked if there was a way to have the smell without wearing it, she recommended the oils.

"Why did you buy so many?" Owen asked, buckling his seat belt for the ride to his new place of employment. "Do you like it that much?"

"Yeah, I like it and these aren't all for us. I'm gonna give everyone a bottle for Christmas. If it works on them like it does me, there're gonna be a lot of happy, horny werewolf couples in the pack." Owen actually snorted and Sam gave him a grin. "Happy looks good on you, sweetheart."

"You talk too much," Owen replied, a weak frown forming between his brows. "You should buy diffusers for everyone too, like the lady said."

Owen's halfhearted attempt to hide his enjoyment didn't fool Sam. His mate might not want to admit it, but he was having fun and Sam was glad to see it. "I will, but I'll order them online so they're all the same design."

Ten minutes later they were at Millwood Plaza and parking in the lot near Cross Books.

"Wow, it's bigger than I thought. It looks nice from the outside, huh?" Sam observed as they got out of their vehicle.

"I guess."

"Don't you get too excited now," Sam teased.

Owen turned a grimace in his direction. "Will you shut up? I'm nervous, okay?"

"I know you are." Sam lightly bumped his shoulder against his mate's. "I'm just trying to lighten the mood. It'll be fine. You'll see."

The two of them went in and explored for a bit. For its size, the store had a relaxed, but well-ordered feel, probably because of the reading nooks scattered around that were supplied with free coffee as well as comfortable seats. Sam liked the thought of his lover working in this welcoming atmosphere. He surreptitiously watched Owen as he wandered here and there, picking up several books to read the back covers. There was an aura of peace about him and Sam could tell his nerves were settling.

Deciding to let Owen go at his own pace, Sam settled on a sofa in a reading nook laid out in the middle of the store to wait. Opening the sports magazine he'd

appropriated, he idly flipped through the pages. Customers wandered here and there, but no one disturbed him until Owen found him.

"Are you ready to go? Sorry I took so long."

His mate was holding a book and looking quite happy with himself. "No problem. Whatcha got there?"

"The latest Connelly crime thriller. It's supposed to be really good. What were you looking at?"

"Just this." Sam showed him the magazine. "Why don't you go pay for that while I put this back?"

"Okay."

Sam returned the sports magazine to the display at the front of the store and was reading an article in a news magazine when Owen rejoined him. He was just about to return it to the shelf when a perky, female employee came up to them.

"Are you finding everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks. My lover found a book he wanted, but we mostly came in to scope the place out."

Owen hissed a dismayed, "*Sam.*"

"Oh?" the girl responded, her brown eyes widening with curiosity.

"Yeah, this guy starts work here tomorrow," Sam said, indicating Owen.

"Are you Owen?" she asked, her smile growing.

"Uh, yeah, I am," Owen cautiously responded.

"Hi, I'm Ginny. I am sooo glad to meet you. We could really use the help. I hope you like it here. Mr. Cross told me you were coming. I get to help train you," Ginny bubbled.

"Hi, nice to meet you too. I hope I won't be too big a bother."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do fine." Ginny glanced in the direction of the front register, taking a half step in that direction. "I'm sorry, I wish I could talk longer but I gotta go," she said then lowered her voice confidentially. "Shawn gets grumpy if you make him late for lunch with his girlfriend." Resuming her normal tone, Ginny said her farewells on the run. "I'll see you tomorrow, Owen. Nice meeting you too, Sam."

"Same here," Sam responded and turned an indulgent look toward Owen. "See, what did I tell you? I bet you'll enjoy working here and she seems really nice."

The shy half-smile on his lover's face made Sam want to reach out and hug him. It struck him anew just how attractive Owen was and it made his protective, possessive instincts rise. Suddenly the thought of his being anywhere but home lost its appeal, and Sam found himself struggling with an unexpected surge of jealousy.

"Yeah, she does seem nice. So what are we doing next?" Owen asked as they walked out to their vehicle.

Squelching his unwarranted misgivings, Sam looked at his watch. "Well, it's closing on one. What say we hit Smokin' Joes for the food and head home?"

"Okay."

"Oh, and I want to make a quick stop at Joy's Bakery first. They have the best double fudge cake. I feel like cake."

"You're not hungry, are you?"

"Umm, yeah, actually, I am."

"Werewolves eat a lot, don't they?"

"You noticed."

Their casual conversation helped relieve Sam's worry and he was able to let go of his apprehension. He called in their order for ribs before picking up the cake, so by the time they arrived, everything was ready. Owen went in with him to help carry everything. They'd ended up buying six full dinners and two dozen dinner rolls. After calling to check, they'd found out Quinn and Rose were home, so Sam got enough to feed everyone.

Exiting the restaurant, they were loading everything in the backseat of the SUV when someone hailed Owen. Sam, who was on the other side of the vehicle, looked over to see a man in his mid-twenties sling an arm around Owen's shoulders. The possessive jealousy he'd felt earlier returned with a vengeance and, closing the passenger door on his side, he rounded the vehicle in time to hear the stranger asking Owen where he'd been.

"No one's seen you around for a while. When I told them you sent me a customer, we all figured you'd found yourself a rich sugar daddy and retired."

"No. I'm...just making a change is all," Owen's gaze fell on Sam and he gave him a tight smile. "Mark, this is my, uh...friend, Sam. I've been staying with him."

Appraising blue eyes centered their regard on Sam and he was given the once-over. "Wow, you're a big guy. No wonder Owen's been lyin' low. Bet you're about more than he can handle. You know," Mark said, his voice rife with suggestion, "I'd be willing to give Owen a hand anytime."

"Thanks for the offer, but that won't be necessary," Sam mildly replied. While Owen's friend was attractive, he didn't feel the least bit tempted to sample what he was offering.

"Too bad. Bet we'd have fun. Anyway, I gotta get going. I'm meeting someone inside, but hey, there's gonna be a party Friday night at Helberg's place," he told Owen. "The usual. Lots of guys with cash looking to get lucky. You should come. I remember you sayin' you made enough for two months' worth of rent at the last one."

Just the thought of what went on at that party had Sam seeing red. His wolf stirred, and he barely held on to the growl that tried to claw its way out of his chest. Slipping an arm around Owen's waist, he hugged him close. "Owen's got a real job now; he won't

be going to any more parties like that. We're not just friends, we're lovers and I don't appreciate your suggestion."

"Whoa, chill out, man. I get it. You guys are together, no fucking around."

"That's right."

"It's cool. Well," Mark said, his boldness somewhat subdued. "Normally I'd say see ya around, Owen, but I guess I won't."

As he walked away, Owen hissed at Sam, "Let go."

Releasing him, Sam watched his mate catch up to Mark and grab his arm. The two of them spoke for a moment then Owen rejoined him. "What was that all about?" Sam asked.

"None of your business," Owen angrily replied, opening the front passenger door and settling himself inside the vehicle.

Sighing, Sam followed his lead and took his own place behind the steering wheel. On the drive home there was complete silence which Sam finally broke. "Look, I'm sorry I was rude to your friend."

"You should be sorry, even though he's not my friend...more like a friendly rival."

"Then what are you so mad about?"

"You don't know what it's like to live that way."

Sam flinched at the anguish in his mate's voice.

"You have no idea what it takes to survive or how many of us secretly wish we'd meet someone or something would happen to get us out of that life. Mark was mouthy, but it's all self-defense. You expect to be treated bad so you put on an I-don't-give-a-shit attitude, but that's not the point here."

"Then what's the point?"

"When someone makes it out, you don't rub the other guy's nose in it."

"Then what *do* you say if you meet up with one of your former associates and they ask where you've been like he did?"

"You play it vague, like I did. I told him I was making a change. He already had it figured out."

"Then why did he keep saying all that stuff if he knew you were out?"

"To save face! What should he have done? Wish me luck when all he can think about is why me and not him? Why couldn't you have just kept your mouth shut?"

"Because I was hurt and jealous!"

"What? Why?"

"You called me your friend, like you were ashamed to admit we were together and the thought of you at a party like that just...just..." Sam watched all the animation flee from Owen's expression.

"I knew this was going to happen. I knew you wouldn't be able to accept what I used to do."

"That's not true. You think I haven't thought about it? I told you I knew from the very beginning. I'm not going to lie and tell you I don't wish you'd been in some other profession, but it doesn't mean I feel any less for you. Why do you think I got jealous? Because I care about you so much. I'm sorry. You're with me now and that's all that matters. I'll do better. I'll try to cut the crap, all right? But it's not that easy. I'm not perfect, you know."

Sam waited for Owen's reply. What he said was unexpected. "I'm not ashamed to admit we're together. You get why I didn't, right?"

"Yeah, I get it."

"So, can we call it even and let it drop? You know I hate emotional drama."

"I know and yeah, I think that's a good idea."

A few minutes later they were home and Sam was backing into the garage. He was out of the SUV before Owen got his seat belt undone and when the passenger door opened, Sam was waiting. He pulled Owen into his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." Owen's arms wrapped around his waist and Sam breathed a sigh of relief.

They stood quietly for a few moments until Owen leaned back. Sam met his frank and solemn gaze. He was struck by how truly open his mate was at that moment. He was hiding nothing, holding nothing back. "I know you're sorry and it's okay. In a way, it's my fault. I know I don't make it easy on you. I don't express myself the way you do. I can't just blurt stuff out about feelings and things. The way things have been, it was always better to keep everything shoved away as far as possible. If you don't care, you don't hurt. Just...just give me time. I need time, okay?"

Sam could almost visualize the cracks that formed across his heart at the thought of his mate's pain and he bent forward, taking a gentle kiss. "As much time as you need. Forever if you want," he whispered against Owen's lips.

In response, Owen's lips curved against his. "I don't think I'll need that long, but thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Let's take the food in and eat."

"Okay. Why are we still whispering?"

"'Cause you're a big goof," Owen answered and gave him a playful shove. "Now get away from me."

"Aw, baby, and after we were connecting so nicely."

"I'm gonna connect my foot to your ass."

"I've got something much better to connect to yours."

Owen actually started laughing and Sam succumbed to that compelling sound, laughing with him. It seemed his plan was working. Owen was learning to play. In perfect accord, the two of them grabbed the food and joined the hungry crew waiting for them in the kitchen.

Chapter Six

It was Monday, almost one in the afternoon and Owen had finally gotten the butterflies in his stomach to settle. Of course it might have been the soothing and somewhat mundane chore of shelving books that helped. Whatever it was, he was grateful for it and as boring as some might find his current task, Owen was actually enjoying it. The smooth feel of the book covers against his fingertips, the varied artwork, the heft of each volume and the rustle of paper pages, these were all things he took great pleasure in.

"Owen?" At the sound of his name, he looked up from where he was stocking a bottom shelf in the mystery section. Fellow employee, Ginny DeLuca, whom he'd met the day before, was waiting for his attention. "It's time for your lunch break."

"Is it?" Owen glanced at his watch. "I guess I got sucked into what I was doing."

"Well, it's good you're enjoying your work. You might not after lunch. I get to teach you how to run the register."

"Oh crap."

Ginny grinned. "Thought you'd like that. Don't worry about it. Early afternoons are usually slow and hopefully it won't be as bad as you think."

"I hope you're right."

"Sure. It'll be fine. Don't forget to clock out."

"Thanks."

Pushing the utility cart that held books to be stocked to the back, Owen stopped in front of the time clock and swiped his badge. Removing the navy blue canvas apron he was wearing—the store uniform—he draped it over the cart then walked back out on the floor and exited through the front door. With an hour to kill and no vehicle to drive anywhere, he was glad the bookstore was located in Millwood Plaza. There were several eateries nearby, and he chose Michael's Diner, which was just two doors down.

Michael's was a small place with a line of tables at its center, and the rest against two of the walls and in front of the plate glass windows that faced the sidewalk. In front of the fourth wall was a dining bar with a cash register at one end, and an open doorway at the other through which the kitchen was visible. Behind the counter, the wait staff danced around each other, dropping off food orders to the kitchen, filling their own drink orders, rushing out to deliver meals or rushing back with dirty dishes after having bused the tables.

The décor of the restaurant was nothing out of the ordinary, sort of down-home shabby even, but the aromas coming from the kitchen were divine. The fact that nearly every chair was full attested to Michael's popularity. Since he was alone, Owen opted to

sit at the dining bar rather than take up unnecessary space at one of only two open tables that would seat four.

He picked up the small menu to peruse his options, and decided on a grilled chicken salad. The meals at his new home were delicious and plentiful—Rose was an excellent cook—and Owen was certain he was going to start putting on weight. Sam had told him it was a wasted worry as he'd see to it Owen got all the exercise he needed.

He was certainly true to his word. Sex with Sam was vigorous and frequent and more often than not left Owen boneless and pleasantly exhausted. Thinking about Sam's fuck-for-luck send-off in the bathroom that morning to celebrate the beginning of Owen's new job made his lips twitch as he fought a smile. That little celebratory interlude had nearly made them both late.

"Are you ready to order, hon?" A server by the name of Sandy, according to the name tag she wore, interrupted Owen's lascivious thoughts. She stood with a friendly smile on her face and her pad at the ready. Owen placed his order then watched the television set perched on a high shelf behind the counter to pass the time but images of Sam and this morning's events kept overlaying themselves atop those on the screen.

Apprehensive about the first day at his new job, Owen had slept fitfully and as a result woke before the alarm. Deciding it was useless to try going back to sleep, he untangled himself from Sam and padded into the bathroom. After brushing his teeth, he took a shower. On emerging from the shower stall, he saw Sam just putting his toothbrush away. His lover was naked and the sight of those broad shoulders, his sleek back and the firm globes of his ass stirred a quirky tickle in Owen's belly. Quickly toweling off, he closed the distance between them. Compelled by some undeniable urge, he brushed his nose against Sam's shoulder and took a deep breath. His scent was pleasant, warm and slightly musky, one Owen now associated with being held through the night while sleeping under cozy covers.

"Morning. Did I wake you?" he asked.

"Not at all, the alarm went off a couple of minutes ago. I was surprised to see you already up. You didn't sleep well, did you?"

Owen shook his head. "Too nervous about today."

Sam turned into his touch and inclined his head. Owen lifted his chin to give the kiss Sam wanted and nearly moaned at the instant flood of pleasure he received. Pulling back, he returned Sam's chocolate-amber gaze and stood steady when Sam lifted his hand and traced the delicate skin beneath his eyes.

"No dark circles yet," he commented. "Will you do something for me?"

Owen noted the husky timbre of Sam's voice and his libido went on immediate alert. "What?"

"Sit up on the counter."

"Here?" he asked, indicating the relatively barren counter by the sink.

"Umm hmm."

Giving his lover a doubtful look, he complied. "Is this something I'm going to regret?"

"Not if I can help it," Sam growled.

"Oh fuck." The quirky tickle in Owen's belly became a full-fledged roil, the kind he'd now and then experienced from a too sharp drop while riding an elevator.

He did as Sam asked then squirmed a bit. The counter was cold but he didn't notice it for long. Sam was there, urging him to spread his thighs after which he knelt between them.

"Just right," Sam said, his breath fanning over Owen's plumping cock.

"Only because you're so tall," Owen replied, realizing his breaths were already becoming short and choppy.

"Being so does have its advantages," Sam acknowledged. "Just look at this. Don't you think it's amazing how this beauty grows? A little excitement, a little rerouting of your body's blood flow and it goes from soft and slumbering to hard and energetic." With his tongue, Sam wet the tip of his finger then swirled it softly over the crown of Owen's rapidly expanding erection. Owen jerked in reaction and Sam smiled. "Oh so sensitive too. It looks good, don't you think? The tip all shiny and wet. Want me to make it wetter?"

Meeting the expectant look in Sam's eyes, Owen nodded.

"Tell me," Sam softly ordered. "Tell me what you want."

Hot tingles swept over Owen's skin. At this point, his panting breaths were clearly audible and he clamped his lips together for just a moment as he wrestled with a sudden surge of bashfulness. As many times as he'd had sex in his life, something about the way Sam touched him or the way he said something sometimes brought out Owen's long-suppressed inner virgin, making him feel shy and inexperienced. Sliding his tongue between his lips, he parted them and breathlessly answered. "Suck me."

Sam's half-smile was gentle, his eyes full of understanding. "I'd love to," he answered then closed his mouth over Owen's cock to fulfill his request.

"Oh God." Legs draped over Sam's muscular shoulders, Owen groaned and leaned back, bracing himself against the mirror. The cool glass against his flesh was a sharp contrast to the heat wrapped around his dick and goose pimples chased themselves over his skin.

In a darkness of his own making, created by the simple act of closing his eyes, Owen lingered for endless, pleasure-filled moments. Sam's mouth, tongue and teeth did exquisite things to his now fully engorged cock. Suction and heat accompanied, long sweeping rubs against his length. Every now and then the merest scrape of teeth against the plump crown or the barest pinch of them closing around the tip of his cock made him jump and shudder. The muscles in his abdomen grew taut. The sensations were growing, rising and rolling as his body prepared for climax.

When Sam pushed his leg up and back, Owen let that lax appendage go where it was directed then tensed and drew in a sharp breath when a moistened fingertip brushed lightly over his anus. The slight pressure applied automatically caused him to push in reaction and with a warm, wet slither, his entrance was gently breached. "Sam," he breathed and rocked his hips. Sam's finger slid deeper, the tip finding Owen's prostate and gliding over it. "Ummm, God!" Owen cried out, taken by surprise by the burst of orgasmic euphoria that sent him sailing over the edge.

The mouth wrapped around his spurting cock took every shot of his essence and gulped it down. Gasping and quivering, Owen opened his eyes to see the swallowing motions of Sam's throat. To see that part of himself ingested, so obviously relished, touched him on an emotional level so deep it went beyond his comprehension. Sam released his diminishing erection and without hesitation, Owen leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Sam's neck. Shaken, he held on even as Sam rose to his feet and lifted him off the counter.

"Shower," Sam gruffly instructed and together they walked the few steps to the glass-enclosed stall and stepped in. Sam turned on the water and Owen, still caught in the spell of his release was about to go to his knees to return the favor but Sam stayed his drop to the floor. "It's getting late," Sam gently reminded him. Owen accepted the dollops of shower gel Sam squirted into his hands from the dispenser. "Like this, I'm not gonna last long." More than willing, Owen wrapped his hands around Sam's cock and pumped. "Oh yeah. That's it, sweetheart. Grip it a little tighter. Unhh yeah. Faster, faster, babe. Oh fuck, yeah," Sam groaned. His cock erupted between them, inundating Owen's hands and sending a few warm ribbons to lace across his belly. Sam heaved a deep, shuddery sigh and draped his arms over Owen's shoulders. "Oh yeah."

Owen grinned and chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Raising one brow, Sam fixed his gaze on Owen's face.

"Nothing," Owen answered then added, "I'm...happy." The truth of that statement struck him as portentous. Happy after sex? Relief was all he used to feel. Experiencing another unexpected bout of shyness, Owen turned away and grabbed the washcloth he'd left from his earlier shower. Soaping it up, he glanced over his shoulder and said, "We'd better hurry."

"You're right," Sam agreed. Laying his hands on Owen's shoulders, he halted his movements for just a moment. "I'm happy you're happy," he whispered in Owen's ear.

"Dope," Owen murmured then spun around and threw the soapy cloth he held at Sam. It landed against his lover's chest with a wet plop. "Wash," he ordered and, quickly rinsing himself off, he left Sam to finish up while he retreated to the bedroom to dress.

Sitting at the restaurant counter, remembering all that happened before he left for work brought a smile to Owen's face and a distinct tingle to his cock. Appalled at the idea of becoming erect in this of all places, he forced his pleasant memories away and

instead concentrated on the news program now on television. Several minutes of seeing the results of terrorist bombings and car accidents were enough to wilt his arousal.

When his food arrived he dug in, extremely pleased with his choice. The greens were fresh and crisp, the chicken nicely seasoned and the dressing, though low fat, was still creamy and delicious. He ate with a dedicated relish that was interrupted only when someone took the seat next to him. Glancing over, Owen realized his boss had joined him.

"Enjoying your lunch?" Nathan asked.

Swallowing the bite he'd been working on, Owen dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Hi. Yeah, it's really good."

"You've discovered one of my favorite places to eat, although it couldn't have been hard considering the proximity to the store."

"Not hard at all," Owen answered, noting Nathan's easy smile.

After first meeting with him, Owen had learned a bit more about Nathan. Besides owning three businesses and being a werewolf no longer officially part of a pack, he'd once been married. He was now divorced and apparently when they were younger, in spite of his marital status, Nathan and Quinn had been lovers. Quinn, it turned out, was Nathan's true mate.

Surreptitiously studying Nathan's reflection in the stainless steel napkin holder, Owen could see why Quinn was attracted to him. Like all the other werewolves he'd met, Nathan's body was obviously well toned. For a man of nearly forty he was still in his prime and it showed, not only in the way he looked, but the way he moved. His reddish-brown hair was thick and casually styled, the deep green color of his eyes was notably attractive and when he looked at a person, he gave his full attention, his gaze steady and clear.

What Owen liked most about him was his air of competence and command. He wasn't bossy, but he was definitely in charge. Owen had clearly experienced it his first morning on the job, when Nathan showed him around the store while talking to him about what his duties would include. Owen found he liked Nathan's attitude—it made him feel more secure about finding himself in what for him was an alien environment. Having a nine-to-five job seemed easier when he had someone at his back guiding him through the process.

"How are you getting along? Sorry I had to leave this morning, but hopefully Ginny's been taking good care of you."

"That's okay, don't worry about me. Ginny's been great, although she's threatened me with cash register duty after lunch."

Nathan grinned. "Ah, yes. Ginny's not fond of the register. The days you're scheduled to work together you'll have to watch out for her. She has a tendency to pawn most of the cashier work off on her partner."

"Thanks for the warning."

"No problem."

Owen's server, Sandy, stopped to take Nathan's order, calling him by name while topping off Owen's glass of water. "You two know each other, Nathan?" she asked him.

"We do. Owen is my newest employee at the bookstore. He took Rich's place."

"Oh yeah, Rich mentioned he had to leave. He seemed real sorry to have to go, but it's good you got a replacement for him so soon...and a cutie at that."

Nathan snorted a laugh. "Owen Connors, meet Sandy Weiss. Sandy owns Michael's."

"Pleased to meet you," Owen responded with a smile, though he was a little thrown by Sandy's "cutie" comment. "So why isn't this place called Sandy's?"

"It's named after our son. My husband and I were so darned proud when he was born we couldn't contain ourselves. That was twelve years ago."

"So you've been in business that long? That probably explains why the food's so great."

"Why thank you, hon. I'll tell Ron you said so. He's the cook. Also my husband."

"Ah," Owen acknowledged with a nod. "That's cool. It's great you guys can work together."

"Most of the time," Sandy admitted. "We do have our bad days like any other couple. Well, I'd best get busy. Nice to meet you, Owen. Hope to see you again. Nathan, your order will be up in a jiff."

Sandy bustled off.

"She seems nice," Owen observed.

"She is. Ron's as quiet as she is gregarious. They're a good fit and good friends."

Owen nodded and looked at his watch. "Time for me to head back."

"I'll see you when I get done here."

"Okay."

Owen left a generous tip, paid his check and headed back to work.

Several weeks went by, and Owen's life took on a semblance of normalcy and routine the likes of which he hadn't experienced since he was a little kid. He worked varied hours and found he liked it that way, even with the dreaded cashier work, although that too he was taking in stride. When he was scheduled on days, Rose or Quinn drove him to work and either one of them but most often Sam picked him up. When he worked evenings, Sam, by then free of his classes at the university, always came during his supper break and took him out to eat.

He found he eagerly looked forward to those times when they went to a restaurant and shared tales about their day as they ate together. It was nice, companionable and fulfilled a need Owen didn't even know he had. While sex with Sam was amazing, just

sitting and talking with him was such a conventional, conformist thing to do, it went a long way toward making Owen believe his life was really changing.

He'd wondered at first if some weird twist of his psyche would make him miss his old life or have trouble adjusting, but to his profound relief that just wasn't the case. It was a joy leaving it all behind. Old insecurities and the constant tension that went with them were disappearing. He didn't have to worry about turning tricks, wondering if the john would be halfway decent or a total sleaze, or if he'd make enough to keep his rent paid and food on the table. All those worries were gone, leaving him feeling light and free.

Things at the Alexander estate too were going better than he could ever have hoped. Rose, Quinn, Nick, Eric and even Dev and Ryan, when they dropped by, all of them seemed to regard him as one of their own. Like he belonged. He was talked to and teased and treated like a friend, like family and it had become more precious to him than he could possibly have imagined. He did his best to return their gift by helping where needed and doing chores around the house.

He'd learned everyone was responsible for doing their own personal laundry, but things like towels and washcloths were all thrown together and Rose took care of them. Owen helped her with those loads, folding sheets and towels fresh out of the dryer. He found he enjoyed lending a hand, and though he'd never admit it, he took a certain smug satisfaction in washing his clothes with Sam's. Seeing their things mingled together made him feel good. It was a strange thing to get a kick out of, but there it was and Owen never examined the reason for it too closely.

He even took turns in the kitchen making meals. Having been on his own for so long, he'd learned a thing or two about food preparation and even had a couple of favorite recipes that went over well with everyone. The night he'd made a simple dessert out of pie dough slathered with butter and generously sprinkled with a mixture of sugar and cinnamon before being cut in strips then rolled up and baked made him a God in Eric's eyes. The kid had nearly made himself sick, he'd eaten so many.

There was still only one thing troubling him. His reservations about Sam. No matter how well Sam treated him, Owen couldn't stop wondering when it would all go wrong. He kept worrying if his past and all the men he'd been with would finally start to weigh on Sam. Aside from that one incident with Mark, his lover never referred to his old life, never questioned him about it, but Owen couldn't help but worry that someday the thought of it would turn Sam against him.

On the contrary though, just as he'd said he would, Sam continued to lavish Owen with compliments and no one could possibly deny he was affectionate. When they weren't actively engaged in sex, Sam was still very tactile, touching him in small ways, a rub to his back, a hand resting on his thigh or an arm around his shoulders when they sat together watching television. There were quick kisses to his lips, a temple or the top of his head even when the others were around, and Owen was slowly losing the self-consciousness that came with them.

Being together so much with Sam began to stir his curiosity. He realized that while Sam knew some very private things about him, Owen knew practically nothing about Sam's past. One Saturday when everyone else had gone about their business after accepting Owen's offer to clean up, Sam lingered with him over lunch. Owen decided it was a good time to send out some feelers.

"So, I know you're studying architecture but are you more focused on designing business structures or homes?" he asked.

"I hope to do both," Sam replied, "though the thought of doing homes holds extra appeal to me."

"How come?"

"I like the thought of creating places where people can live together and hopefully be happy together."

"Like what you've found here?"

"Yeah. A short while ago I would never have believed I could be a part of a family like this...and have a lover like you."

Determinedly ignoring the part about being Sam's lover, despite the bubbling spring of warmth it caused to well up within his heart, Owen pressed on. "A short while ago. What was that like? What were you doing before you came here?"

"Why the sudden interest?"

Owen shrugged. "Considering our circumstances, isn't it natural I should be curious?"

"Mmm. I suppose so," Sam conceded and took an audible breath. "So. Before I came here. Well, for one I was working as a bouncer at the Glee Club on Highland."

"Really? I never went in there more than a time or two. Too straight."

Sam nodded. "Not my thing either but it was a job. I would rather have been working at La Bete Sauvage with Nick but there weren't any openings."

"So you knew Nick before you came here?"

"Oh yeah. We lived together and...listen, sweetheart, it's not that I've tried to hide it or anything, I just didn't mention it because frankly it's no big deal."

"What?"

"Nick and I were lovers for a while."

A frisson of shock jolted Owen. He felt the warmth in his chest dissipate and his heart felt funny, tight, until he took a deep breath and struggled for nonchalance. "Oh. Well, that's really none of my business, is it?"

"Actually, I'd like to think it is. When you care for someone, everything about them is your business."

Not knowing what to say, Owen lowered his gaze to his plate.

"And while we're on the subject, I may as well drop the rest of it on you. It's allowable and sort of instinctive for unmated werewolves to sleep with each other. I've had sex with Quinn and Dev too."

"Quinn and *Dev*?" Stunned, Owen met Sam's eyes.

Sam nodded. "Quinn talked Dev into starting this pack for werewolves who'd been thrown out of their original packs for being gay. Dev had suffered the same fate but he was definitely an alpha and two things an alpha werewolf usually needs are to lead a pack and to claim his subordinates. Sometimes the claim takes the simple form of a show of dominance, sometimes bloodletting, and sometimes it's sexual. With Dev it was sexual. He's been with all of us, except Eric, and it's the same with us. We've all had sex with each other, again except for Eric."

Struggling with the unfamiliar emotion of jealousy, Owen tersely bit out. "I'll bet Ryan loved that."

"Don't know. We've never discussed it, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by it. Of course now that he's a werewolf too, I'm sure he understands it on a purely instinctive level. Once he and Dev met it became a non-issue anyway."

"How so?"

"When we meet our mate that's it, we become totally monogamous."

"Oh." Once again, Owen was at a loss for words.

He'd never realized the depth of Sam's commitment to him, and he was torn by it. On one hand it made him happy, which considering his doubts about Sam was extremely confusing, but on the other hand it made him feel guilty. Not that he was about to run out and fuck guys willy-nilly. Been there, done way more than enough of that, but he wasn't *not* doing it for the same reason Sam was.

At least he didn't think he was.

It was in that moment Owen realized he'd never really thought about why he really *was* here. Why *had* he given up his former life? Because he wanted out so bad? Because Sam had offered something different? Or was it Sam himself? Just what exactly did he feel for Sam? Though plenty of clues had presented themselves to him, Owen had chosen to ignore everything...until now. It seemed some part of himself was ready to start analyzing his true feelings and the very idea of it was scary.

Disturbed by this realization, Owen rose from the table and began gathering the dirty dishes. Standing at the sink, he rinsed them, but before he could move to put them in the dishwasher, Sam's arms circled him and pulled him back against the large, firm body that had become so familiar.

"Are you mad at me?" Sam softly inquired.

Owen shook his head. "No, I just...what you said about being monogamous. That's big. That's serious."

"That's the way it is with us when we find the one we love."

Stunned, Owen drew in a sharp breath and whispered, "Love?"

"Love," Sam confirmed. "You didn't realize, did you? I love you."

The jolting shocks he'd received earlier were nothing compared to this. For a moment Owen couldn't think. He even forgot to breathe until the dizziness that assailed him and the dark spots dancing before his eyes forced him to take a deep, sharp breath.

"I...I..." he began but his overtaxed brain presented him with nothing further to say. Sam came to his rescue.

"Shh. You don't have to say anything. I don't expect you to say the words back to me. Maybe someday. I hope. But not now. It's enough that you're here. Okay?"

Owen took another deep breath. "Okay."

"Good. Let's finish this cleanup then what do you say to a nap?"

"I'm not really sleepy."

"You will be," Sam nuzzled the nape of Owen's neck, causing Owen to shiver, "when I finish having my wicked way with you."

Relieved to put the talk of love behind them, Owen managed an uncharacteristic and teasing reply. "That sounds like fun. I can do wicked."

"Oh, I know you can. That's one of the many things I love about you."

Owen was saved from having to reply when Sam let him go and retreated back to the table to gather the rest of the dirty dishes. They worked easily together with Sam rinsing the dishes and Owen loading them into the dishwasher, after which he started the cycle while Sam wiped the table and counters.

From the kitchen doorway, Owen waited for Sam to finish, his gaze following the big man. Something was different. He almost felt as though he was seeing Sam for the first time, and the sight of him was provoking a plethora of emotions in Owen, most of which he was reluctant to examine. The ones he chose to deal with were those most familiar, excitement and arousal. When Sam laid the dishcloth out on the counter and turned to walk toward him, Owen felt his cock stiffen. He took the hand Sam offered him and eagerly followed him upstairs.

Once in the bedroom, Owen realized Sam too must have felt the subtle shift in their dynamic. Instead of charging ahead and getting right to the main event, Sam took things slow. With both of them still fully dressed, he gathered Owen in and kissed him. It was a kiss that was soft, sensual, so deep and so long it stole not only Owen's breath but his senses as well. In a daze, he barely noticed when his clothes disappeared and began to recover himself only when his nude body made contact with the cool, clean sheets on their bed.

The heat of Sam's naked skin against his own finished the job of rousing him from his stupor, but what Sam did next took him under again. With a deliberation that was exact and almost to the point of excruciating in its intricacy, Sam began exploring Owen's body. He did things he'd never done before. His fingers ruffled through Owen's hair, combing and petting then holding him in place for the soft kisses that

feathered lightly over his forehead, eyebrows, temples, eyelids, nose, cheeks and jawline. At Owen's chin he stopped to nibble, gently biting and licking before moving back to his lips for another soul-stealing kiss.

With mouth and tongue and teeth and hands, Sam worshipped Owen. He found new erogenous zones along the way, like the insides of Owen's wrists, which when licked just right, raised goose bumps on his arms. When he sucked Owen's fingers and tongued the spaces between them, Owen shivered. Gentle tickles to the backs of his knees sent arrows of arousal straight to his groin and who could have guessed that soft bites and licks to the tendons and tender flesh around his ankles could be so erotic. Owen writhed and panted in a frenzy of growing need.

Eventually all the new places were explored to Sam's satisfaction, and he returned to the old favorites. The moans Owen had kept at bay were set free when his nipples were licked, pinched and held between Sam's teeth before being sucked, and when Sam took Owen's cock into his mouth, Owen arched into the contact, uttering a harsh cry. Sam patiently acknowledged Owen's pleas to hurry, but he never let himself be rushed. Instead he continued to devour Owen while now and then uttering small sounds as though he was enjoying the best meal he'd ever eaten.

Owen was treated to a blowjob he was sure would be the death of him. Sam licked every millimeter of his cock, balls and beyond going even so far as to lift his hips and tease his twitching pucker before returning to Owen's cock and sucking him down. He was brought to the brink again and again, only to have Sam tightly fist the base of his cock to stop him from coming. When he was finally allowed to blow, his vision went gray and fuzzy around the edges.

Reality, after a suitably sweaty, heart-pounding and boneless interval, reasserted itself. At that time Owen discovered two things, his throat was sore, something that convinced him he'd been extremely loud when he came, and Sam's lubed fingers were sliding inside him, opening him for the thick cock pressed against his thigh.

Stimulated nerve endings and the brush of Sam's fingers against his prostate gave Owen's depleted cock a new lease on life. He was hard and more than ready when the head of Sam's cock nuzzled his anus, pushed and pierced and slid within in a slow glide comparable to molasses in January. Slow was the way it stayed for a very long time. Sam fucked like forever was an option and for the better part of it, Owen's eyes were locked with his.

There were things in his lover's eyes so deep, so intimate, so revealing they filled Owen's heart until that beleaguered organ felt heavy and constricted. Wanting to stop the flow of such raw intensity, he tried to look away, but Sam gently seized his chin and kissed him until his emotions calmed and his body surrendered to the endless stroke of the cock within his hot, tight passage. Thus soothed, Sam relinquished their kiss, captured his gaze and again wordlessly presented Owen with what seemed like his very soul. Humbled by the naked truth in Sam's eyes, and his courage in divulging them, Owen relented, bravely returning Sam's regard if not completely the sentiments behind it.

Physical needs soon outweighed the emotional, and Owen finally reached the place where he needed to come so desperately he begged to the point of shedding tears of frustration. Only then did Sam give him what he wanted, thrusting hard and fast and deep until Owen's orgasm exploded forth in a rush of spurting semen and blinding bliss.

Right before he went over the edge, Sam whispered, "You. Only you." That sentiment lodged in Owen's heart, making his climax that much more poignant and intoxicating.

Afterward, when Sam eased free of their physical connection, he roused just enough to reach for his lover, pulling him close again. Sighing with contentment when their bodies melded together, Owen took the nap Sam promised he'd need.

Chapter Seven

Sam held tightly to Owen's hand. Four wolves ebbed and flowed around them as they walked, and Sam could feel and smell his mate's nervous tension. Deciding it was time for Owen to get better acquainted with the wild side of werewolves, Sam had asked for volunteers. Nick, Eric, Quinn and even Nathan had stepped up to participate and here they were, in the same woods where Sam had first made love to Owen. The others had all shifted, giving Owen the chance not only to see the actual shift up close, but to get used to being in close contact with their wolf forms.

It was a beautiful night. A warm, soft breeze rustled the leaves of the trees and brush that surrounded them. Its soft sighing through the pines sang to something primitive deep inside Sam's soul, making him want to give his wolf free rein. Only for the sake of his mate did he keep his human shape. Light from the moon, just days shy of being full, made it easy to see as they traversed land dense with trees and thickets, and he easily guided Owen past any obstacles that would trip him up.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"Fine, but this is strange. I feel like we've stepped into a fantasy novel and we're on some kind of mystical quest." Eric chose that moment to brush against Owen, making him jump. He manfully reached out to lightly glide his fingers through the ivory and gold strands of his coat as Eric passed by. "This is Eric, right?"

"Yes, it is. He's a beautiful color, don't you think?"

"Like moonlight and sunshine combined."

Sam squeezed Owen's hand. "That's rather poetic."

"You think? I must have read it somewhere."

"I don't think so. I think it's just you expressing how you really feel. It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Who said anything about being embarrassed?"

"You didn't have to. Your temperature jumped right after you said it. Embarrassment generates heat."

"You know it's not fair you can sense these things so easily. I'm at a disadvantage here."

"For now, yeah that's true, but maybe soon you'll have the same ability."

"You mean if I become a werewolf?"

"Yeah. Have you thought about it at all?" Sam skirted a fallen log, easily finding a more passable route.

"Some, but it's kind of hard to imagine."

"I guess it would be for a human. I've always been this way, so for me it's just normal."

"Have you ever wished you were fully human?"

"Never. There are some things at one time I wished were different, but this has never been one of them," Sam confided. Here in this semi-darkness, it was easy to confess things he'd never admitted before.

"What did you wish to be different?"

"That I hadn't been born gay."

"You too?"

"Oh yeah. Seriously, do you think there's a gay man who hasn't?"

"I doubt it, which is why I don't get why some people think it's a choice. Who'd choose to get kicked around for something like this? People face enough crap in life without deliberately adding to it."

"Simple logic has a way of eluding some people."

"That's no joke," Owen agreed. "So do we have an actual destination in mind, or are we just taking a random stroll with a wolf escort?"

"Actually, we do have a destination. You probably don't recognize the landscape, do you?"

"Not really. I don't hang out in woods a lot. The only time I was in a place like this was when...is this...that place?"

"If you mean where we first fucked then yeah, it's near here."

"Say that a little louder, why don't you? I don't think every squirrel in the county managed to hear you."

Sam chuckled at Owen's disgruntlement. "Oh, take it easy. It's not like the guys don't know we have sex." Quinn chose that moment to nudge Owen who'd stopped to berate Sam. His gentle shove was enough to push Owen toward Sam and not above taking advantage of the situation, Sam draped an arm over Owen's shoulders. "Come on, let's not squabble over trivialities. Don't you want to know where we're going?"

After a moment's silence, Owen answered, "Fine. Where are we going?"

"To check out the place where Silas Prudome's coven used to gather."

"Why?"

"There've been some rumors going around hinting the coven hasn't totally disbanded."

"But I thought you said Prudome was dead."

Sam could hear the trepidation in Owen's voice and he hugged him a bit tighter. "He is, but that doesn't mean one of his subordinates isn't bold enough to pick up where he left off."

"Wouldn't they be afraid your pack would come after them? It doesn't seem to me, after what they tried to do to Ryan, that Dev would just sit still and let them start operating again right under his nose."

"You got that right. Who do you think sent us out here?"

"Devin?"

"Umm hmm."

At that moment Sam's attention was drawn away from the conversation. They'd arrived. Muscling his way through the dense brush blocking their path, Sam won his way through and pulled Owen with him into a clearing. Unlike the others, he'd never been here before. It didn't take long to realize he'd prefer not being here now. There was an aura of eerie, brooding silence over the place. Even the insects seemed to be giving it a wide berth. The cricket sounds that had been so constant during the walk were oddly muted, as though they themselves or some unknown force kept them from straying too near.

At the center of the clearing, a stone altar rested. Waist high, it was long enough for a tall man to stretch out on, but Sam knew he wouldn't be putting it to the test. Perhaps it was his imagination, but for a moment he was sure the scent of blood emanated from that ominous bed. The wolves, having entered the clearing with Owen and himself, were sniffing around. Feeling a slight surge of power, Sam turned his gaze toward Nick as he transformed.

Beside him, Owen momentarily tensed. Sam could tell he was a little uncomfortable with Nick's state of undress. Born weres had little use for modesty and like the rest of them, Nick was totally unconcerned with his nudity. Shifting while dressed resulted in clothing torn away by a disgruntled wolf. Sam knew this was something Owen would learn and get used to.

"Sam, I'd like you and Owen to check out the house. It's at the end of that path, about two hundred yards from here," Nick said, indicating the break in the brush that surrounded the clearing. "The rest of us are going to fan out and investigate the woods. I'm not sure, but I get the feeling something's here or has been here not too long ago."

"I get the same feeling. Maybe you should keep Eric close to you."

"My thought exactly. You two stay alert." Returning Sam's nod, Nick transformed and, urging Eric to follow him, he, Quinn and Nathan all silently melted into the surrounding woods.

"Is it just me, or is this place giving off some really creepy vibes?" Owen asked.

"It's not just you. We're all feeling it. Considering what went on here, it's hardly surprising. Prudome sacrificed his victims on that altar."

"Oh crap. I don't like this."

"It'll be all right. Come on, let's get this over with."

Grimly determined, Sam kept hold of Owen's hand. Following the path, they soon found themselves standing in front of a small house with a weathered stone façade.

Had it not been for the knowledge of who once lived there, he might have found it rather charming. As a student of architecture, Sam could appreciate the design, but knowing this was where Ryan and perhaps others had been held prisoner cast a sinister pall over it. It was rather like the fairytale gingerbread house that drew unsuspecting children to their doom.

Though his senses were somewhat limited because of his human state, Sam still tested the air. Scenting nothing more recent than rabbits and raccoons in the area, he tried the front door. Unlocked, it swung open with a theatrical squeal.

"Shit," Owen hissed. "This is like some fucking horror movie. Do we really have to go in there? Is the electricity? Without the moonlight we aren't going to be able to see anything."

Despite his mate's unease, Sam couldn't help but smile. Owen's anxiety was perfectly understandable. Here they were in the middle of the night, standing on the threshold of a house with a dark reputation. Even a werewolf could admit it was spooky. "Take it easy." Digging in his pocket, he pulled out the small but powerful flashlight he'd brought and switched it on. "Behold," he pretentiously announced, "let there be light."

The flashlight's blue-white glare pierced the darkness. What was revealed was patently mundane. The entryway's hardwood floors gleamed dull and dark against the light cream of the walls and opened into an unremarkable living room. A thin layer of dust covered every flat surface from furniture to floors and nothing appeared to be disturbed. There were no strange scuff marks or footprints to be seen.

Trying the closest light switch answered Owen's question about the electricity. It was most definitely off. Flashlight in hand, and knowing it would be best to be thorough, Sam took them from room to room. There were two things of note in what appeared to be a study. Noticeable gaps in several bookcases indicated a number of volumes had been taken away and a large hanging mirror had been smashed. On closer inspection, he noted the heavy paperweight that rested on the floor beneath it amongst the litter of sparkling glass shards.

"Looks like someone had himself a hissy fit," Sam commented before moving on.

Owen followed him docilely enough as they explored, even offering a comment here and there until they came to the basement door. In front of a set of stairs leading down, he definitely balked. "Don't you know the basement is always where the really bad shit happens?"

"According to who?"

"Fiends, serial killers and other assorted whack-jobs."

Sam's chuckle lightened the stifling atmosphere. "I have to check it out. You can stay here if you want."

"In the dark? By myself? *Are you nuts?*"

"I was kidding. There's no way I'm leaving you here alone. Don't be a scaredy-cat; remember you've got the big bad wolf with you."

"Big bad wolf, huh? All right, I'll go. I just wish I didn't feel so much like Little Red Riding Hood going to her doom."

With a grin that quickly faded, Sam started down the concrete steps. Unconsciously broadcasting it, Owen's heightened apprehension was making Sam's wolf jumpy. The inner beast was stirring...preparing to meet any threat to its mate.

The air wafting up from the basement was chilly and stale and from somewhere there was a muffled sound as though drops of water were hitting a hollow surface. At the bottom of the steps, Sam played the flashlight beam over the room. He was relieved to find it blessedly empty but for a furnace, a water softener unit and a utility sink with a dripping faucet.

It all seemed fairly innocuous...until the flashlight's beam hit a closed door, the outside of which was fitted with two sturdy bolt locks. Glancing at his mate, Sam cautiously approached the door. The bolts weren't engaged. He really didn't expect to see anything when he opened the door, so it was something of a shock when the light fell upon a man-shaped bundle on the floor. Owen's gasp made him jump, but it took only a split second for Sam to realize it was nothing more than a blanket.

"Don't do that," he admonished his mate. "It's just a blanket for cryin' out loud."

"Sorry, but it looked like a body at first glance. Do you think this is where he kept them before he...you know."

"Yeah, I think so. Ryan said something about lying on a concrete floor."

"Oh shit. Damn it. Can we go now? I wanna go."

Hearing the genuine distress in Owen's tone, Sam more than willingly escorted him up the stairs and out of the house. Once outside, both of them breathed sighs of relief, though Owen still seemed quite subdued. Sam knew he was thinking about Ryan's ordeal and how he was partially responsible for what had happened to him.

"Don't dwell on it," Sam told him as they followed the path back to the altar clearing. "It's not going to help or change anything. It's done and over. Ryan's all right and you've been forgiven. If you have to think about it at all, remember that part. It's the most important." Owen gave him a halfhearted nod and Sam silently cursed. "I should never have brought you here. You sure the hell don't need to be dwelling on this crap. You need to be putting it behind you."

"Whether you believe it or not, I am, and it's thanks to you that I can. It's just seeing this place, knowing Ryan was here and what might have happened to him. What did happen to those others." Owen paused as they stepped into the clearing. "I think someone should do something about this."

"About what?"

"What I said before. This bad vibe. Maybe get a priest to sprinkle holy water and say some prayers."

"I didn't know you were Catholic."

"I'm not. It just feels like something's here. Maybe it's a remnant of whatever evil Silas Prudome conjured up or maybe it's the souls of those poor guys he sacrificed, although I don't think they'd feel like this, but whatever it is, someone should try to disperse it."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll talk to Rose about it. She knows people."

"People?"

"She made a lot of contacts in the supernatural world when Quinn came to live with her. Being human, she wanted to give her werewolf nephew the benefit of a guardian who wasn't naïve in matters concerning the paranormal."

"She's dedicated to Quinn, isn't she?"

"Oh yeah, to all of us really. I wish there were more people like her around."

A pair of nearly identical wolves entered the clearing, Quinn and Nathan. For Sam it was easy to tell them apart. The strongest indicator was their scent but their eyes too played a part. Quinn's were an icy green like peridots whereas Nathan's were a dark, mossy emerald. Simultaneously, they took their human forms.

"How'd it go?" Sam asked. "You guys find anything?"

"It wasn't much, but yeah, something, I'm just not sure what it was," Quinn replied.

Nick and Eric stepped into the clearing before Quinn could elaborate and they waited for their beta and his mate to join them. When Nick and Eric changed, Quinn explained what he and Nathan had found.

"There were two blackened burn spots about a foot in diameter with nothing left in them but ash. It was hard to decipher the scents, but it smelled like some kind of herbs and flesh...rabbit, we think. The thing is whatever consumed it, burned so hot that not even bones were left. No normal campfire would do that."

"Eric and I found something similar only we found three places. Someone's up to something. I just don't know what and whether we should be concerned about it. I guess the only thing we can do for now is tell Dev what we found and keep an eye on things out here. Did you turn up anything at the house?"

"Nothing," Sam replied. "No one's been in there for a while. Probably since Prudome's demise. There did seem to be a lot of books missing from the bookcases in the study and a broken mirror, but whoever made off with the books did it some time ago. The undisturbed dust on the shelves and the glass fragments on the floor made it fairly obvious the breaking of the mirror and the taking of the books happened around the same time."

"You'd make a good CSI, Sammy. All right, let's call it a night," Nick ordered. "I don't know about you guys, but this place gives me the willies."

"This coming from our fearless leader?" Sam teased.

"Give me something tangible to sink my teeth in and I'll show you fearless. Whatever vibe this place is giving off is just wrong. I think a purification is called for."

"That's just what Owen said."

"Great minds think alike," Nick replied with a wink at Owen. "We're outta here."

Nick, Eric, Quinn and Nathan again took their wolf forms. Nick led with Eric following. Sam and Owen fell in behind them with Quinn and Nathan taking the rear. The more distance they put between themselves and the clearing the more Sam could feel not only Owen, but his brother wolves relaxing. That place had definitely spooked all of them to one degree or another and he resolved to definitely speak to Rose about it. Such disturbing malevolence shouldn't be left to flourish in the heart of these beautiful surroundings.

When they made it back to the remote side road where they'd parked their vehicles, Nick and Eric resumed their human shape and began donning their clothes. Behind him, Sam sensed the power surge that indicated Nathan's and Quinn's intent to transform and he spun around to stop them.

"Wait! Wait just a minute." Wanting to give Owen something else to think about besides the place they'd just quitted, he issued a challenge to his mate. "If you can tell me which one is Quinn and which one is Nathan, I'll grant any request you have. If you can't then I get to have you as many times as I want tonight."

"You'd probably do that anyway," Owen muttered. "How about I just decline to participate?"

"Oh, come on. Where's the fun in that?"

"This really isn't fair. I can't see them very well and I've only seen them change twice. How am I supposed to know who's who?"

"You've got a fifty-fifty chance of being right."

"I've also got a fifty-fifty chance of being wrong."

"Think positive."

"Idiot. Fine. Quinn's on the left, Nathan on the right."

"Wrong. I win."

"Wait a minute, don't move," Owen demanded of the two wolves in question. "Would you guys change right now? I want to make sure Sam's not cheating me."

"Would I lie to you?"

"For sex? Yeah, I think you would."

"Owen," Sam halfheartedly protested while preparing for his lover's outrage.

When Quinn and Nathan changed they were just who Owen guessed they were.

Rounding on him, Owen exclaimed, "You bastard, I knew you were lying!"

"Who would have guessed you knew me so well?" Sam asked and laughing, he closed in on his mate, wrapping his arms around him before he had a chance to get away. "So what's your request, sweetheart?"

"Give me some time to think about it. I have to make sure it's sufficiently heinous."

"Uh oh, you're in trouble, big man," Nick observed. "Better start sucking up now or who knows what you'll be stuck doing."

"I'm not worried. Should I be worried?" he asked Owen, beginning to wonder if maybe he'd made a big mistake. The expression on his mate's face was none too reassuring.

Taking the passenger seat behind Nick, who was driving, Owen nonchalantly shrugged. "I really couldn't say at this point."

"Oh shit," Sam gloomily intoned, much to the delight of Nick and Eric.

By the time they returned home, Sam was sure he was in the doghouse. Owen wasn't broadcasting his intentions at all and had retreated behind a mask of cool civility. When they walked into the house, Dev and Ryan were there as well as Rose, so putting his personal considerations aside, Sam joined in the discussion of what they'd found.

"So what do you think, Rose? Do you know someone who could perform a purification ceremony?" Devin asked after receiving their report and recommendations.

"I believe so. Miriam Barclay is a white witch and very well respected. If you like, I'll speak to her about it. If she can't do it herself, I'm sure she'll know of someone who can."

"That would be very helpful, thank you. As for the rest of it, we'll continue to keep the feelers out for any new rumors and keep an eye on that area as well. I'd like to go out and see those burned places for myself. You say you found them in five locations?"

"We did. Eric and I found three, Nathan and Quinn found two others," Nick confirmed.

"Five. I wonder if there's some arcane significance to that."

"Pentacles have five points," Owen hesitantly ventured. "I know some people consider it a symbol of evil but it depends on how it's used. Wiccans believe the five points on an upright pentacle represent earth, air, fire, water and spirit. Satanists use an inverted pentacle in their rituals but that's a bastardization of its original incarnation just like the upside-down cross. Maybe that person who burned whatever it was out there was trying to fix the five points of a pentacle."

"How do you know all that?" Sam asked, surprised at his mate's knowledge.

"I read. You should try it sometime."

"In case you've forgotten, I do attend college," Sam reminded his lover amidst the snickers from his pack mates. "Reading is sort of a requirement."

"That did slip my mind. I guess your imitation of a lunkhead was just too effective."

"You're still pissed, aren't you?"

"I'm not pissed. Do I look like I am?"

Sam studied his mate's unruffled countenance. "No, but you could just be hiding it very, very well."

Owen shrugged and Dev interrupted. "Back to the subject at hand...pentagram is a compelling suggestion. Good job, Owen. When we go back out we'll take an accurate

measure of just how much distance there is between each burned area. Knowing their placement should give us a better idea of their intended purpose. Anyone have anything more to add? Ideas, questions, suggestions? No? That's it then. Thank you, everyone," Devin concluded.

Their little group began to disperse. Eric and Rose went off to watch television. Quinn and Nathan sequestered themselves in the library while Nick stayed to have a further word with Dev and Ryan. Sam noted Owen's disappearance into the kitchen and soon followed him. He discovered his mate sitting at the table eating a small piece of double fudge cake. Knowing how much Sam liked it, Rose had brought one home from Joy's Bakery that day.

Pulling out the chair beside him, Sam sat down sideways facing Owen. "Interesting night, huh?"

Mouth full, Owen merely nodded. Though he was still wondering how far he stood outside his mate's good graces, Sam realized he didn't really need conversation or reassurance; he was content just to be near Owen. After taking a sip from the glass of milk he'd poured himself, Owen glanced at Sam then down at his plate. To Sam it looked as though some inner debate was going on but before he could ask, Owen abruptly stood, straddled his lap and sat down. Picking up his plate, he lifted a forkful of cake to Sam's lips.

"Want a bite?"

Speechless, Sam nodded and opened his mouth. His lover eased the fork in and Sam closed his mouth around it. The taste of chocolate burst on his palate. He chewed and swallowed, but before he could say anything, Owen offered him another bite. For several minutes there was nothing said, the only sound being the scrape of the fork against the plate. By the time the cake was finished, the atmosphere between them was so sexually charged, Sam was fully erect and his breathing had gone from normal to fast and shallow.

Owen put the plate down, wrapped his arms around Sam's neck and took a chocolate-flavored kiss. When their open mouths parted, Owen asked, "Are you ready to grant my request?"

"Oh yeah," Sam breathed.

"I want you to fuck me. Fast, slow, hard, soft, rough, gentle, whatever, however. Just make me come."

For one stunning moment, Sam was sure his heart had ceased to beat. Owen could have asked for anything. A frivolous trinket, an onerous task performed. Instead, he'd requested sex. He'd honestly and frankly demanded Sam join their bodies and give him pleasure. Sam was elated. He knew Owen enjoyed their physical encounters, that much was certainly obvious, but to have Owen initiate sex was a first whose import rocked Sam to his very core. His mate was truly settling into the reality of their relationship. He was taking this bond between them seriously. Demanding his place and making it his.

Sam couldn't have been happier if he'd been commissioned to design a structure more glorious than the Taj Mahal. Or more turned-on. "Hold on tight," he warned then easily rose from his chair. Owen's arms and legs tightened and Sam walked them across the kitchen, straight into the pantry, closing the door behind them.

"What are you doing?" Owen demanded in an urgent undertone.

The breathless quality of his lover's voice increased Sam's excitement and without answering he fused his lips to Owen's. His tongue slid into the moist heat of Owen's mouth and he laved their tongues together all the while drawing in his mate's unique taste and the rising tang of need generated every time Owen became aroused.

Withdrawing his tongue, Sam kissed the damp lips against his and softly replied, "What you wanted. I'm gonna fuck you."

"Here?"

"Damn right."

"But somebody might come, somebody might hear us!"

"Somebody's definitely going to come...and, sweetheart, try to keep your voice down when you do."

The incredulous look on Owen's face made Sam grin and he took advantage of his lover's shock to lower him to the floor and strip his jeans and briefs down to mid-thigh. Squatting down, he pulled Owen's shoes and socks off then neatly divested him of his pants. Owen's fully erect cock bobbed in his face. Sam wrapped his fingers around the hard pole and swallowed it down to the root. Opening his own jeans, Sam pushed them down just far enough to release his uncomfortably compressed erection and gave it a few conciliatory strokes.

Rewarded by Owen's choked and muffled cry, Sam used his mouth and tongue to stroke up and down his lover's engorged length a few times before stopping to reach for the bottle he'd spotted upon dragging Owen into the pantry. It might be weird but he figured vegetable oil would make an acceptable lube and opening the flip cap, he poured a bit into the palm of his hand. Slicking his fingers, he reached around, found the puckered bud of Owen's opening and giving it a few warning rims with the tip of a greased finger, he sank the first digit inside. Tight heat welcomed him.

Receiving only a gasp and no protests, using a bit more finesse, Sam worked a second finger into the snug grip of Owen's anus and pumped them in a slow, careful rhythm designed to ease, open and lubricate. After a few moments, impatient for more, he withdrew his fingers and rose to his feet. Using the rest of the oil to coat his cock and disregarding the damage it might do to his shirt, he wiped his hands, curled them around Owen's ass and lifted.

"Up you go," Sam growled. "Wrap your legs around me and guide my cock inside."

"You're unbelievable," Owen whispered then did exactly as he was told.

Sam's cock sank inside his mate's accepting body and he groaned at the feel of that exquisite slide into Owen's hot, constricting passage. Bracing his mate against the pantry door, Sam pumped his hips. At first more than satisfying, the strokes were long and deep but with each successive one he wanted more...and apparently so did Owen.

Lifting his arm and bracing the heel of his hand against the doorjamb above him, Owen gasped, "Harder. Fuck me harder."

Giving voice to a guttural growl, Sam did just that. Owen pushed back against Sam's every thrust, giving them both the hard, jolting ride they sought. With each breath harshly soughing forth and his heart pounding so hard he could feel the thumps in his throat, Sam pushed them to the limit and beyond, straight into the euphoric maelstrom of orgasm.

Owen released his hold on the doorframe and, grabbing Sam's shoulders, buried his face in crook of Sam's neck. The sudden sharp pinch of Owen's teeth and the vibration pushed into his skin from Owen's cry of completion electrified Sam but the final straw was the warm splash of Owen's semen against his belly. Holding tight to the firm cheeks of his lover's ass, Sam ground his cock in deep and jerked with each spurt of seed his balls released. Wet warmth inundated the tight passage that held him and he undulated his hips, mesmerized by the slick squish of displaced fluids.

"Mmm, Sam," Owen breathed against his shoulder.

Sam smiled at the lazy, satisfied tenor of his voice. "Feel good?"

"Oh yeah."

"Want me to walk you upstairs just like this?"

"Not for love or money," Owen replied.

An emerging bubble of amusement pushed a throaty chuckle from Sam. Reluctantly he disengaged their bodies and set Owen on his feet. "How about a shower then bed?"

"That I can go for," Owen agreed.

Using Sam's already ruined tee shirt, Owen wiped the milky remains of spent semen from various body parts. Discarded clothing was replaced and weary but extremely satisfied, the two of them retreated to the waiting haven of their bedroom.

Chapter Eight

Owen woke from a light doze to the feel of Sam's lips on the back of his neck and Sam's hand slowly jacking his reawakening cock. He groaned and automatically pushed back into the stiff rod nestled between the cheeks of his ass.

"Want more?" Sam growled.

Though they'd already made love once, Sam's voice was so deep and sexy, his actions so skilled and compelling, Owen had no choice but to reply with a vehement, "Yes!"

The gravelly chuckle that answered him sent a quiver down his spine and caused his belly to tighten in anticipation. Sam didn't disappoint. Sitting up and resting his back against the headboard, Sam in turn prompted Owen to rest between his thick thighs and encouraged him to lean back against him. No sooner was Owen settled than Sam began teasing him into a lustful frenzy. There in the warm nest of their bed, surrounded by darkness, Owen surrendered himself to Sam's control.

There were the soft, erotic licks at the nape of his neck and along the planes of his shoulders then beneath his ears that made him quiver. Sam had already discovered how sensitive his ears were and he wasted no time nibbling the convoluted whorls before sliding his tongue within, emulating a slow, gentle fuck.

His wicked chuckle was the only answer he gave when Owen's begging moans of "Nooo, not the ears" crawled from him in a tortured whisper.

Licks soon turned to nibbles and nips until Sam's mouth settled at the base of Owen's neck where it curved into his right shoulder. He firmly fastened his teeth in that vulnerable spot and sucked up a mark. By this time Owen was aware of just how much that particular place fascinated Sam. He never failed to give it attention and Owen was sure it was something prompted by his wolf, his primitive way of claiming ownership.

Sam's hands were as busy as his mouth. They slid over Owen's torso and took an unerring path to his nipples. Those tiny buds were tweaked and rolled until they were rosy and stiff. The sensations coursing through him made it impossible to suppress the nonstop moans that formed in his throat and trickled forth. Seeking relief from Sam's teasing fingers, he drew his legs up until his knees were bent and the soles of his feet were flat against the mattress then tried to curl his upper body forward like a threatened armadillo rolling itself into a ball. Sam kept him firmly in place, instead arranging Owen's legs so his ankles were pressed against the outside of Sam's thighs. Doing so caused Owen's thighs to be spread wide and so exposed, Sam took complete advantage. He released Owen's nipples and instead went to work on his cock and balls.

"Oh fuck, Sam please!" Owen finally yelled when Sam had stroked him to the point of bursting while at the same time gently cradling and squeezing his balls.

"That's right, my only, cry out for me," Sam's growl answered him. "God, you make me so hungry when you're like this. I still can't believe you asked for me. For the first time. You have no idea what that means to me. I have to show you."

Owen's reward for the request he made of his lover continued. With an effortless motion, he lifted then slowly lowered Owen down on his cock. Still wet from their previous encounter, Owen's passage had no difficulty accepting that long, hot-skinned prick. It easily stretched the taut ring guarding his anus and slid within, the friction delicious as the satiny sleeve of his channel closed around it. There was no stopping the heady penetration until the cheeks of his ass rested in Sam's lap and when it was done, he was full, full, full.

From that point on conscious thought fled and carnal lust ruled. Feet planted on the mattress, thighs straining, Owen helped fuck himself on the thick pole of Sam's erection, but later, when he had time to think about it, he truly believed he could have just as easily done nothing and let Sam do all the work. The man's strength was incredible. His large hands cradled the cheeks of Owen's ass, rhythmically lifting then lowering him into each of his deep, upward thrusts. His thick cock provided a constant rub on the small spongy gland inside Owen's passage, sending a steady stream of shock waves into his balls that in turn raced up the length of his cock as though showing his cum which way to exit. In less time than he would have liked, exit it did.

Sex with Sam was all too new, all too wild and exhilarating to allow him any measure of control. Before he'd even had the chance to think about holding back, much less take himself in hand to stroke his demanding cock, orgasm imploded sharp and deep within his gut. Pearl-white seed pumped out in hard spurts to land in warm, dripping ribbons against his taut abs, stomach and thighs.

Unable to even think about being quiet, Owen keened with the power of his release, jerking with each burst of seed expelled, his body riding the sharp torrents of bliss that tore through him. Fully sated, Owen shuddered within the circle of Sam's arms and his taut muscles eventually relaxed. When Sam's mouth again found that now tender place on his shoulder, Owen gasped. Teeth, sharper than human, bore down on his flesh, stopping just short of piercing it. Sam's growl was harsh and guttural; his hands pulling Owen down hard as he ground up and in, burying his shaft as deep as possible before finding his own release.

Owen could actually feel the hard throb of Sam's cock as it shot and the heat of Sam's cum filling him. He moaned with the burst of renewed pleasure it brought him. "Feels sooo good. It's always so warm."

Panting to regain his breath, Sam gently licked the indentations left by his teeth, causing Owen to shiver. "I wondered if you'd noticed. A werewolf's average temperature is higher than that of a human. That's why you feel the heat when I come inside you."

Sam shifted beneath him and lay down, easily taking Owen with him. Turning to face him, Owen rested his hand on Sam's chest. Though he said nothing to Sam about it, the reason he'd requested sex as his prize in their little bet was because Sam's

thoughtfulness had touched him so deeply. His lover's vigilance in guiding him while they walked with the others in their wolf forms and while they'd investigated Silas Prudome's house hadn't escaped his notice.

As a man, Owen supposed he should be pissed at being so coddled, but he was honest enough to admit he was glad for Sam's behavior. Knowing the wolves had actually been Nick, Eric, Quinn and Nathan and that they wouldn't hurt him still made it difficult to quell the instinctive urge to flee when in the presence of such fierce predators. And that place they'd gone to. He could still feel the eerie presence hovering over it. Owen had never considered himself to be a coward, but having seen his share of horror movies, nothing on earth, besides having Sam there beside him, could have persuaded him to explore that deserted house in the dead of night. Just the thought of it made him shiver.

"Are you cold?" Sam rumbled.

"Not really," Owen replied and, looking for distraction, he levered himself up to straddle Sam.

"Something you want?" Sam asked, his voice a sensual, husky rasp.

"Yeah. Again."

His lover reached up, pulled Owen down to him and rolled him onto his back. Owen locked his legs around Sam's waist and for a time, consigned the real world to oblivion.

Several days passed during which Devin and the others carried out further investigations at the altar site. Owen gladly left it to them, content to go to and fro from work and home, his only involvement being secondhand as Sam and the others described what they'd found. His idea of the burned places marking the points of a pentagram bore fruit. After measurements were taken, it was discovered that each blackened spot was an equal distance not only from each other but from the altar which served as their center. Devin decided to go forward with the purification and Rose contacted her friend, the white witch.

When Miriam Barclay came to the house, Owen was surprised. He'd been expecting a somewhat mysterious and somber, dark-robed figure, possibly carrying a grimoire. Miriam turned out to be a woman in her mid-to-late forties, just shy of being plump. On the tall side of medium in height, she was wearing jeans, riding-style boots and a long, gray-and-navy-striped jacket cut in a rather flamboyant military style, complete with numerous pewter buttons over a white shirt with ruffles down the front. Her straight, multi-layered hair was silver, short, shiny and tousled. She had a ready smile and hazel eyes that sparkled with good humor. Somehow the outlandish clothes fit her to a T and Owen found himself immediately taking a liking to the woman.

"It sounds to me as though we're dealing with some kind of distorted spiritual manifestation. This place, you say, was the site of human sacrifice?" Miriam asked. All the werewolf pack members plus Nathan, Rose and Owen were gathered in the formal

living room. At Dev's affirmative response to her question, her expression became thoughtful. "I knew Silas Prudome and his master before him practiced dark rites, but I didn't believe they'd take it that far." Gravely shaking her head, Miriam pondered a moment then said, "It may take some doing, but I believe something can be done about this. The ceremony used will have to be twofold. First I'll have to break the connection to whatever evil influence was called forth and lingers there, then cleanse and release any souls that may be trapped. I'll want all of you to attend. Werewolves are natural lodestones for earth magic. Your presence alone will amplify anything I do and I have a feeling, just from the way you describe the place, whatever spells Silas Prudome invoked are powerful. Whatever was manifested won't easily relinquish its hold, especially if someone has continued to feed into it."

"What about Rose and Owen? They're not werewolves. Should they attend or not?"

Owen waited, half hoping she'd feel it was best to exclude them.

"By all means. I want them there too. As humans they'll provide a sympathetic and resonating energy that will attract the displaced souls. They'll be reminded of what they truly are and where they should be, now their corporeal bodies are gone."

"Won't it be dangerous for them?" Sam asked.

The crease between Owen's brows smoothed somewhat at Sam's concern. While not exactly thrilled at the idea of being there, Owen felt a bit better about it knowing his lover was looking out for him. Still, he anxiously awaited Miriam's response.

"Only if one of the spirits tries possession, rather than taking the path to release. Even if that happens," Miriam assured them, "your presence should prevent it. I'll want each of them assigned a guardian, one of you werewolves to stick close to them at all times and I'll give each of you," Miriam turned her gaze in turn on Rose and Owen, "a charm to wear which will also serve as a barrier to an invading spirit."

"Are you two all right with that?" Devin asked.

Rose immediately agreed and Owen, albeit reluctantly, followed her example.

"Then that's settled. We'll all be there," Dev assured Miriam.

"Good. All I need do is gather a few supplies and I'll be ready. Does tonight suit you? I'd like to take advantage of the full moon. The increased gravitational pull will help, not to mention the extra light, and it won't hurt to have you wolf boys at full strength either."

There were smiles at Miriam's calling them boys. Owen noted all eyes turning to Dev as though to gauge his reaction. At nearly thirty, the alpha of their so-named Stone River Pack was not only a prime and powerful werewolf, but a man as well. Sometimes he had a tendency to take his position a little too seriously—not that Owen had heard anyone fault him for it. Dev had a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. Regardless of that, apparently this day was not one of those in which his sense of humor suffered as a result of his position.

He gave Miriam a toothy grin. "Would you like to meet back here, or shall we pick you up on the way?"

"You all right back there?" Sam asked.

"Fine," Owen answered, glancing at Sam before returning his attention to his next step.

Nine hours had passed since their initial meeting with Miriam and it was closing on eleven in the evening. Dappled shadows littered the ground, courtesy of the moonlight streaming through the leafy canopy overhead. Unlit torch in hand, Owen concentrated on following Sam as closely as possible without running into him. His night vision wasn't anywhere near as good as that of the weres grouped around him, but the light from the full moon was enough to make the trail they followed passable. Sam too was helpfully steering him around any obstacles that might trip him.

Having to concentrate on where he was walking and listening to the murmured conversations taking place around him kept him from thinking too hard about where they were headed and what they were going to do. Once again they were dipping into a realm Owen had experienced only in movie theaters while watching a horror movie. To his way of thinking, this cleansing bore far too great a resemblance to an exorcism, and he was praying there'd be no spinning heads or spitting of pea soup.

In spite of all the assurances Miriam had given concerning their safety, Owen was still jittery, though he felt he was doing a good job of keeping his nervous tension hidden. A contrary part of his psyche was even enjoying this. He was reminded of that odd human foible in which people found a certain amount of amusement and fun in being scared. He couldn't help but wonder how long the enjoyment would last should the danger become all too real rather than imagined. Having his curiosity satisfied on that score was something he was sure he could live without. With a resigned sigh, he realized, wanting it or not, he'd be finding out all too soon. Their destination was before them and as had happened the last time they were here, Sam parted the dense brush in front of him and together, they entered the altar clearing.

A thrill of unease gathered in Owen's middle and he reached up to pat the lump beneath his shirt—a cloth bag that hung from his neck by a leather thong. The scent of herbs rose to his nostrils and the muffled rattle of the stones contained inside was reassuring. Miriam had given both him and Rose the charms before they set out, telling them to tuck them beneath their clothes so they were as close as possible to their skin.

"Baby?"

Owen jumped at the touch of Sam's hand on his arm.

"Easy there," Sam soothed. "Hand over your torch. Miriam wants them set up."

Doing so, Owen watched as Sam and the others followed her instructions. Beginning at the clearing's due north aspect, Miriam drew her own pentacle and circle around the altar with crushed herbs and salt. The torches were placed at the five points and lit. Within the circle, under the flickering torchlight, all was clearly illuminated and Owen let his gaze wander from person to person. Each familiar face bore an expression both somber and serious. Ryan seemed especially tense and considering what he'd been

through in this place, it was no surprise. Devin, Owen noted, was staying very close to him. At one point he slid an arm around Ryan's waist and bent to murmur something in his ear. His remark caused Ryan to smile.

That tender exchange brought a smile to Owen's lips and for a few seconds his tension level dropped...until he began to watch Miriam's preparations. Again wearing her military jacket and boots, she looked like a quasi colonial warrior making ready for battle. With the pentagram and circle drawn, she'd turned her attention to the altar. From the backpack she'd brought with her, she drew out the supplies she'd deemed necessary. First, five candles, red, blue, purple, black and white, were lit and set in place in pools of their own melted wax. Within their circle, stones of different shapes and colors were arranged in what Owen was sure was a deliberate pattern. Next, seven earthenware bowls were filled—a different dried herb in each—after which a few sprinkles of something that looked like oil was added. These were each touched by the flame of a slim red taper, causing the herbs to smolder and fragrant white smoke to rise from each bowl.

Wishing it was merely his imagination at work, Owen again felt the malevolent vibe that haunted this place. It was the kind of thing that could make even the soul shiver and he crossed his arms, defensively hugging himself. What had it been like to be so helpless, to know yourself ensnared by the power of someone with evil intent? He could only imagine the fear and pain of those who'd had their lives ripped from their grasps there on that cold stone bed.

Was it any wonder that such a deep sadness permeated the place? Owen frowned, realizing for the first time he did indeed feel an underlying grief in the stew of emotion manifesting itself. Any doubts he'd had about lost souls being trapped here were gone. They seemed suddenly all too real and Owen was glad for their sake that the decision had been made to purify this place of dread and misery.

Preliminaries complete, Miriam turned her attention to the group. "Are you all ready?" There were affirmative nods or quietly spoken assents from everyone present. "Sam, take your place with Owen, Quinn and Nathan next to Rose. I want everyone to stay in close contact with your partner. I don't anticipate trouble, but stay vigilant on their behalf."

Owen saw Quinn take Rose's hand and it eased his worry for her. Nathan took Rose's other hand completing the joining of their little group. Nick placed Eric in front of him and slid his arms around his waist, locking his mate to him. Dev took Ryan's hand. Sam moved into position beside and slightly behind Owen, so close that Owen could feel the brush of his body and the heat radiating from him. One large hand rested firmly on his waist and taking comfort from that strong and steady pressure, he relaxed a bit even as Miriam began the ritual.

"We come now to seek release and healing. Here within the sacred pentacle and circle we ask that evil be banished and the lost souls be lured and reconciled to us."

From that point on, Owen understood nothing of what Miriam said. He was certain the language she spoke was Latin, and her authoritative chant evoked an almost

instantaneous reaction. The base of the altar began to glow. In a matter of seconds it was cherry red and a dark, oily fog began to waft forth from within that scarlet glimmer. Writhing in seeming agitation, it shaped itself into something resembling misty tentacles. One daring arm reached out to Miriam who was closest to the altar, only to recoil with a snapping sizzle when a luminous aura manifested itself around her. Daunted but determined, it sought other prey. Those translucent black appendages stretched, striving to make contact with each person present.

As one such arm approached their position, the breath froze in Owen's lungs. The stones within the charm bag he wore grew hot, scorching his skin while primitive instinct screamed at him to run. Terror gripped him. His vision blurred as the tentacle twisted and obscenely squirmed toward them before expanding and re-forming itself to become a dark shroud. The foul miasma it exuded surrounded them and Owen closed his eyes against it. Sick and dizzy, he swayed under the weight of its vile and malicious influence.

Within the darkness of his mind, frightening scenes from his childhood were wrenched forth from where they were buried. A multitude of harsh and guttural voices began whispering—a cacophony of madness that grew louder and louder with each passing second. The shock and horror he'd experienced as that innocent child, was suddenly magnified tenfold and just as a scream formed in the depths of his chest, Sam's arms wound around him. Together, they were swallowed by light. The colorful nimbus surrounding them penetrated Owen's closed eyelids and he blinked as the horror gripping him drained away.

Breath racing, he desperately grasped Sam's arms and looked on as one by one, his friends...his family were enveloped in a gentle illumination that repelled the darkness attempting to swallow them. Prevented from making contact, the black fog swirled and roiled around them faster and faster until the wind it created caused the torchlight to frantically sputter and the brush and smaller trees surrounding the clearing to thrash.

Debris sailed out of the darkness to hit them, leaves, grass, small stones and tree branches. Owen felt a stinging pain at his cheek and slapped a hand to his face, his fingers coming away stained with crimson. Sam bellowed with outrage and sought to protect him from the spiraling winds but it was impossible. They attacked from every direction. A hollow moaning began. The sound was low and deep but rising higher and higher until it ended with a nerve-shattering shriek. The ground around the altar burst into flame, the fire consuming the candles, herbs and colored stones Miriam had set out. Moments later there was an explosive crack and the flame-engulfed stone was rent by fissures. Split in a multitude of places, the pieces separated, shifted then tumbled to rest, no longer a single slab but a pile of large rocks.

Absolute silence suddenly reigned. As abruptly as it had begun, the wind was gone, the fire winking out. The torchlight steadied and the colorful lights that had protected them withdrew, retaking their place inside each person who'd generated them. About to take a deep breath, Owen halted in mid-inhale. From the pile of stone, all that was left of the altar, something stirred. A male-shaped figure, misty and

indistinct, separated itself from the place of its demise. At first Owen was sure there was only one, but when it moved, several afterimages moved with it. Together, they approached Miriam. No guardian light appeared to repel them, indeed, Miriam lifted her hand and welcomed them, lightly caressing their indistinct, collective cheek while speaking in a voice so gentle and soft, Owen couldn't make out the words. A whispered sigh was their response before, as one by one, they quietly peeled away and disappeared.

Seeing the tears Miriam unselfconsciously wiped from her cheeks, Owen felt his own eyes sting. It was over and what they'd witnessed at the end was truly miraculous.

Sam tugged him around to examine his face. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I feel...better than all right."

"That was pretty amazing, wasn't it?" Owen tried to nod but Sam held him still. "This cut isn't very deep. It should be okay. We'll clean and disinfect it when we get home. Any other injuries?"

Owen opened a couple of buttons on his shirt and pulled out the charm bag. "It felt like it was burning me. See anything?"

Sam's fingers skated lightly over his skin. "It's not even red." Bending, he kissed Owen's unmarked flesh. "Let's see if everyone else is okay."

Their group gathered and Rose fiercely hugged Miriam. "That was beautiful, so wonderful. I was scared to death but what happened at the end was worth every moment of fear."

There were numerous nods and murmurs of agreement to the sentiments Rose so aptly described.

"It was pretty lively there for a while, wasn't it?" Miriam responded. "Thank you all for lending me your strength. I couldn't have done it without you," her praise was vehement and heartfelt. "Those boys...they were grateful."

The emotion-charged silence that followed was broken by Eric, "Hey, listen."

Hearing nothing unusual and feeling puzzled, Owen frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Crickets. They're baaaack."

The laughter that followed this all too familiar announcement set everyone at ease and, making sure the torches were completely extinguished, they made the trek back through the woods. Miriam was invited back to the house, but she declined saying her apprentice was waiting at home with tea and scones. As there were so many in their group, they'd taken two vehicles. Dev and Ryan with Rose, Quinn and Nathan in tow volunteered to see Miriam home, leaving Sam, Owen, Nick and Eric on their own.

On the road for less than two minutes, Eric made a sudden announcement. "I'm hungry."

"Again?" was Nick's immediate response.

"What do you mean again?"

"That's right, excuse me. I should have said still."

"You're the one who said I was a growing boy."

"And you're the one who denied it."

"Just the boy part, not the growing."

"All right. Before we get into the usual song and dance, what do you want, squirt?"

"I'm no squirt. Under the right conditions a certain part of me squirts..."

Eric didn't get the chance to finish his sentence. Owen and Sam's laughter drowned him out.

"You little brat. Do not finish that sentence. Don't even go there," Nick ordered. "You've got ten seconds to tell me what you want to eat. If I don't hear a destination in that time we're going straight home and you can rummage around in the kitchen for something. Your time starts now."

"Tacos. The taco place is still open. Can we go there?"

"Fine. You guys want anything?"

"Tacos at midnight? God no," Owen replied. "I'd have heartburn all night."

"I'll have a few," Sam said, accepting the offer.

Owen glanced at his lover. Lips twitching with the smile he was trying to suppress, he told Nick, "Just don't let him have any bean burritos. I've smelled enough noxious gas for one evening."

Owen's deadpan remark sparked laughter from Nick, Eric and even his victim, Sam.

"Are you implying I fart after eating beans?"

"Exactly," Owen answered.

Chapter Nine

Owen smiled to himself and gave his head a slight disbelieving shake. Tonight, he and Sam were celebrating their anniversary. He still found it hard to believe six months had passed and this relationship he'd been so unsure of had not only failed to falter, it seemed to gain strength with every passing day. The new life he'd been given still had an air of unreality about it. Things had changed so radically. He'd gone from living a life of superficiality and darkness to having this, aside from the incident in the altar clearing, normal, everyday, blessedly routine existence.

Some people might think it boring but then they'd never lived on the edge the way Owen had. They'd never spent six years being sexually abused and another six years using sex as a means to make a living. Compared to that, the life he had now was pure paradise and it was all because of Sam. His lover had insisted they celebrate and Owen, unable to dissuade him, let him have his way. Sam had turned out to be an unabashed romantic.

Sitting at a table for two in front of the windows at Michael's, Owen ate his lunch while contemplating how quickly their days together had accumulated. Though still not convinced it might not all go up in smoke someday, Owen tentatively began to rely on his sometimes wildly exciting, sometimes comforting but always steady relationship with Sam.

With his gaze idly focused on the comings and goings of people outside the restaurant, Owen wondered what sort of plans Sam had made for the evening. He had a few things of his own to take care of and was looking forward to getting off work. Owen had bought Sam a present.

It was a signed and numbered limited edition canvas print with hand-painted accents done by a famous wildlife artist and it had cost him nearly a month's worth of paychecks. The scene depicted was that of two wolves cautiously prowling a snowy expanse of woods. Behind them in the shadows one could just make out the silhouettes of their pack amongst the dark trees. Of the two wolves prominently portrayed in the foreground, one was black and the other pale gray with cream tips on his fur. Owen had fallen in love with the picture at first sight and though he sometimes felt silly doing it, he liked to imagine that the wolves were Sam and, perhaps sometime in the future, himself.

The gallery/frame shop where he'd discovered the print was part of the array of stores in Millwood Plaza. Owen had arranged to leave work a half hour early figuring thirty minutes would be plenty of time to pick up the framed canvas before Sam arrived. The gallery owner had assured him his purchase was already wrapped and ready to go and Owen squelched the apprehension that tried to take hold. This was the

first time he'd ever given anyone a gift and he was anxious as to whether Sam would like it or not. In truth he realized it was sort of a gift for both of them as he truly anticipated seeing it hung in their bedroom.

Silently scolding himself to calm down and finish his lunch, Owen was surprised when the chair opposite him was drawn out and a man sat down. He stared at the unexpected interloper for a moment until comprehension slowly trickled in. Here was something he'd hoped never to see but somehow knew would be inevitable. A former client.

"Hello, Owen. Long time no see," Harv Witlow drawled, his lips stretched in a too familiar and suggestive smile.

"Could have been longer if I'd had any say in the matter," Owen replied, thankful his cool under fire hadn't deserted him. "I don't remember inviting you to join me."

"Is that any way to talk to an old friend? I just happened to see you sitting here alone looking all gorgeous and fuckable so I thought I'd treat us to a reunion. You know I'd make it worth your while."

"I don't do that anymore," Owen flatly replied. "Get lost."

"Don't do that anymore? Who are you trying to kid?" Harv leaned forward and whispered. "You were born to take it up the ass."

Stunned to hear words that echoed his nightmares, Owen kept a tight rein on his emotions and leaned forward. "Go fuck yourself, asshole. Since the only other way you can get any is to pay for it, I'm sure you've had plenty of opportunities to put that collection of dildos you've got stashed away at home to personal use," he calmly answered. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go back to work." Unwilling to give Harv a chance to reply, Owen pushed away from the table and went to the register with his check.

Sandy was waiting for him and took the money Owen handed her. The expression on her face was pure concern. "Is everything all right, hon? Was that man bothering you?"

"He was, but I took care of it." With great relief, Owen noted Harv's exit from the restaurant.

"Are you sure? Maybe I should call Nathan."

"No, please, don't bother. It's all right. I'm not exactly helpless, you know."

Still frowning even after his assurances, Sandy made change and handed it over. "Oh, I know that but sometimes even big strong men can come up against more than they can handle. You go straight back to the bookstore, you hear?"

"I hear you. You're a worrywart," Owen said, smiling to take the sting out of his words.

"And you're my little cutie. I don't want to see anything happen to you."

"I'll be fine. Thanks, Sandy."

"You're welcome."

Owen pocketed his change and, keeping an eye out for Harv, walked the short distance to the bookstore, relieved when he saw no sign of him. His relief was short lived when he returned from the back after donning his apron to find Harv perusing magazines. Knowing he couldn't just throw the man out, Owen did his best to ignore him and went to work stocking the books he'd brought out from the back room.

It didn't take long for Harv to zero in on him again.

"Guess you weren't kidding when you said you didn't do that anymore."

"No, I wasn't," Owen said, moving away when Harv practically shoved his crotch in Owen's face where he knelt to reach a lower shelf.

"That's a real shame. A real waste too. You were the best cocksucker I ever hired."

Harv's voice rose with each word until several customers were looking their way.

"Shut the fuck up and get out of here," Owen hissed. Heart pounding, he felt sick, his mind in such turmoil he couldn't think of anything else to say or do to get rid of the man.

"Why should I? What are you gonna give me to leave?" he asked with a leer.

"He's not going to give you anything but I've got a size eleven boot I'd be happy to shove up your ass if you're not out of here in the next sixty seconds," a quiet voice interceded.

Startled, Owen wheeled around to find Nathan at his back. One look at the man's expression made him extremely glad that harsh glare wasn't directed at him. He could almost see the predator surface in Nathan's eyes and some primitive part buried deep inside shivered.

Harv, it seemed, was similarly affected. Without a word he turned and left.

"How did you —" Owen started to ask.

"Sandy called me. She saw the guy get out of his car and follow you. Come on. Let's go sit a minute."

Nathan led the way to his office in back. Owen followed with trepidation dogging his heels and the specter of unemployment dancing in his head.

"Have a seat. Relax," Nathan told him. He went to the mini-fridge in one corner of the office and pulled out a bottle of water which he handed to Owen.

Taking it, Owen was shocked to see his hands were shaking.

"Calm down, cub. Everything's okay now."

Nodding, Owen opened the bottle and took a long drink.

"That ever happen before?" Nathan asked.

Owen shook his head. "First time since I stopped...you know."

"I know. Guess there was always the possibility it would happen."

"I've actually been waiting for it. I just didn't think it would be this bad. Someone else might not have been as difficult to handle, but that guy's a total bastard."

"I could see that. You gonna tell Sam?"

"Hell no."

Nathan raised one disapproving brow. "Is that wise?"

"Maybe not but I can't tell him, at least not tonight. He's planned something to celebrate our first six months together," Owen explained, his cheeks heating at having to admit something that sounded so girly. "I don't want to ruin it for him."

A gruff chuckle followed his admission. "I see. Well, it's up to you. I know Sam would appreciate being informed. If not tonight then soon."

"You won't tell him, will you?"

Nathan shook his head. "It's not my place to interfere in your relationship but take my advice. Come clean about it and soon. Sam wouldn't want you carrying this burden on your own and frankly, if he finds out in some other way he'll probably be pissed you held out on him."

"I know he would," Owen admitted. "I'll tell him. In a couple of days. I want to give him at least that long to enjoy the anniversary thing before I spoil it."

"Youngster, I think you misjudge the situation. The only thing you could ever do to spoil anything for Sam is to walk away from him. That man is yours whether you want him or not. The only question I see is whether or not you've made up *your* mind. Even had he not been a werewolf with the sure sense of who his mate is, it's easy to see Sam has no doubts about wanting you."

Owen met Nathan's steady regard then dropped his gaze. "It's...it's not that simple."

"No? Maybe not. I'm not standing in your shoes so I really couldn't say, though God knows I've had my share of not so simple," Nathan sighed. "Well, it's something to think about anyway. You feeling steadier now?"

Owen nodded.

"Back to work with you then."

"Thanks...boss," Owen added with a smile, enjoying the slow spread of Nathan's answering smile as it curved his lips.

His boss snorted and waved him out.

A few hours later Owen was staring in stupefied amazement at the variety of colorful streamers and balloons that festooned the kitchen. Their friends had gone all out for their little celebration including a hand-lettered banner with the words Happy Six Months emblazoned upon it.

"I made the banner!" Eric crowed and everyone laughed at his enthusiasm.

Rose had pulled out all the stops and made them a meal fit for a king, crowned by an entrée of beef stroganoff. Everyone was there to wish them well; even Dev and Ryan had come to help them celebrate.

After a meal anchored by the eating of cake and ice cream came the all-important gift exchange and Owen's heart was in his throat when Sam began tearing the plain brown paper that kept his gift hidden from view. When the framed canvas was revealed there were many oohs and aahs of appreciation.

"That's really beautiful, Owen," Dev praised. "You know that black wolf looks very much like Sam when he changes."

"It sure does," Nick affirmed. "It's almost as though the artist actually painted Sam."

While happy with everyone else's praise, Owen waited for the one opinion that really mattered. Sam hadn't said anything and finally unable to wait, Owen prodded him. "What do you think? Do you like it?" Sam merely nodded and for a moment Owen felt disappointed until he saw the hard bob of Sam's Adam's apple. Sam finally met Owen's eyes and Owen could see how bright they were. The sight of Sam near tears made him bite his lip.

"Thank you. It's beautiful. I love it."

Owen nodded and impulsively leaned over to gently place a kiss on his lover's lips. "You're welcome."

"Aw, you guys are too cute. So, Sammy, what did you get Owen?"

"Fuck you, Nicky," Sam growled.

"Language, gentlemen," Dev sternly reminded them.

Sam was instantly contrite and turned an apologetic look in Rose's direction. "Sorry, Rose."

"That's perfectly all right. Nick can sometimes drive even me to cuss."

Grinning proudly as though he'd earned high praise indeed, Nick again prodded Sam. "So...get on with it."

"You're worse than a little kid," Sam said, shaking his head, then rose and pulled a wrapped box down from on top of the refrigerator. He handed it to Owen. "Happy Anniversary, sweetheart."

Feeling like a goof at the wave of delight sweeping over him, Owen took the box while trying to control his wayward grin. He tore the wrapping from it and discovered a jeweler's box. Carefully he lifted the lid and inside, resting against black velvet, was a pendant and chain. The front of the pendant resembled a miniature sculpture. Portrayed was a forest scene with a full moon framed by a canopy of interwoven tree limbs. Beneath the moon were two wolves, their necks outstretched toward each other, their noses touching in what was obviously a show of affection. Everything depicted was so intricately detailed one could clearly see the shape of each leaf on the trees and feel the texture of the wolves' fur. Utterly entranced, Owen lifted it out of the box to more closely examine it.

"Look at the back," Sam softly urged.

Turning it over, Owen silently read the engraving then realized it was his turn to try keeping his emotions in check.

Forever Enthralled. All my love, Sam.

Sam gave him a minute before saying, "Guess it's my turn to ask. Do you like it?"

Owen nodded and swallowed, managing a rough chuckle knowing he was mirroring Sam's earlier discomfort. "I've never seen a more beautiful piece of silver work."

"Silver? Bite your tongue. Werewolves and silver do not mix."

"Sorry," Owen smiled. "I didn't realize that particular myth was true. Stainless steel then."

"Try again," Sam urged.

Shocked, Owen looked at Sam for the first time since unwrapping his gift. "White gold? Sam, you didn't."

"Don't look so stricken. A friend of a friend does custom-made jewelry. He gave me a very good deal. Besides, what is it they say? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth? Although in this instance it would be a gift wolf."

"You're right. It's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Where's my kiss?"

Owen laughed and complied then slipped his new pendant on. His gift was duly admired and praised with everyone diplomatically refraining from asking what was engraved on the back.

After a very successful gift exchange, the party wound down. Owen and Sam were shooed off to enjoy their own personal celebration while everyone else helped in the cleanup.

Upstairs, Sam propped his present atop the dresser and stood silently perusing it. For a few moments Owen watched him then drawn by the need to touch, he crossed the floor to Sam's side. Due to Sam's complete acceptance of him, the reserve Owen had once felt about freely reaching out was slowly melting away. Confident of the welcome he'd receive, he slid his arm around Sam's waist and sighed with pleasure when the big man reciprocated and pulled him close.

Joining him in his regard of the canvas print, Owen asked, "You really like it?" Though his lover had already admitted as much, Owen still felt the need to be reassured. His inexperience at giving gifts made him unsure of the choice he'd made.

"I do. Very much. Just looking at it makes me feel good. It reminds me of how it feels to shift and taste the kind of freedom only a wild creature living unfettered can enjoy." The soft brush of a fleeting kiss stirred the hair at Owen's temple. "Thank you again. You know, I've never even thought about owning a piece of art. If I'd known how enjoyable it was I'd have done it long ago. Of course knowing it's a gift from you makes this one special."

Owen smiled, pleased by Sam's admission. "This is the first present I've ever given anyone."

"That makes it even better."

Ignoring that gratifying yet embarrassing remark, he replied, "I wasn't sure what you'd like. You're kind of Spartan when it comes to having things."

"Would have made it easier on you if I'd collected figurines, huh?" Sam joked.

Unaccountably tickled Owen snickered. "Or dolls."

"Dolls your ass," Sam growled. "Speaking of which..." His hand slid from Owen's waist downward to cup and squeeze one rounded cheek. "This one is so fine, if you'd asked me what I wanted I'd have said this."

"I had a feeling you would. That's why I didn't ask," Owen revealed, stepping out of Sam's grip to face him. "Will you do something for me?"

Sam cocked his head and gave Owen the kind of scorching look that made his dick jump. "Anything legal and maybe a few things on the iffy side."

"You're hiding some kink under that stoic façade, aren't you?"

"I'll leave that for you to find out."

"Don't think I won't but in the meantime I want to undress you."

"Is this another present?"

"Maybe. A little. I just want to. All right?"

"Of course," Sam agreed. "Don't get flustered."

"I'm not," Owen denied though he could feel a flush of anticipation and warmth heat his skin.

He wasn't about to tell Sam that he'd been contemplating doing this for the entire day. He kept remembering what they'd done in the pantry and how doing such a simple thing as making the first move had affected Sam. The man had been so happy. Owen still felt a warm glow in his middle when he thought about it. No one had ever expressed such joy at being with him, such appreciation at having him. Sam made him feel special, like he mattered and Owen wanted to make him feel the same. He might not be capable of feeling the things normal people felt or of saying the words Sam wanted to hear but he wanted to give this man something that only Sam had ever made him feel was worth the having. Owen himself.

"I've never before wanted to read anyone's thoughts but right this moment I wish I knew what you were thinking," Sam said.

Meeting his lover's gaze, Owen could almost feel the weight of Sam's concern. "Why?"

"So I could fix whatever's making you so sad."

Prompted by remorse, Owen's smile was immediate. The last thing he wanted to do was infect Sam with the melancholy that had crept up on him. "Who's sad? What's

there to be sad about? We just had a nice celebration. I got a beautiful gift and now I'm going to unwrap you and treat myself to another one. It's all good. Stop worrying."

"Make me," Sam gruffly replied.

Owen did just that. He brought his body flush with Sam's, slid his arms around Sam's torso and burrowed his hands under the hem of the deep, cherry-red henley shirt his lover wore. Palms gliding over firm flesh and back muscles that flexed as Sam returned his embrace, Owen lifted his chin, inviting a kiss. Invitation accepted, he parted his lips and made way for the tongue invading his mouth. Giving as good as he got, Owen played his own tongue over and around Sam's, reveling in the slick, flavorful dance.

He loved Sam's taste, his scent, his touch. Nothing made him feel more alive than being immersed in the total essence of this unexpected bounty...this lover who'd so determinedly become the center of his world.

Bringing his hands around Sam's ribs, Owen skimmed Sam's shirt upward, baring his flat belly, chiseled abs and firm pecs. Those twin mounds of muscle bore nickel-sized, flat chocolate disks topped by lighter, cocoa-colored kernels of flesh and, easing free of the kiss with his lover, Owen lowered his gaze and focused on one tiny nipple. Irresistibly drawn to it, his parted lips descended and touched down to frame that small morsel, his tongue teasing it with a gentle swipe. It instantly peaked and Sam's audibly indrawn breath—so immensely pleasing—encouraged Owen to continue.

He sucked first one nipple then the other before urging his lover to lift his arms. Pushing Sam's shirt up and off, he softly ordered, "Lace your fingers together and put them behind your head."

Clearly intrigued and more than willing, Sam obeyed. His stance bared his armpits and Owen lightly nuzzled one exposed hollow. Sam had used deodorant but that was hours ago and the lingering scent was faint. The slight herbal aroma, mixed with his own natural musk, was pleasant and Owen inhaled the captivating odor. Letting the soft wisps of hair that grew there tickle his nose, he shifted just the slightest bit and touched his tongue to the smooth flesh that marked the border of that hirsute patch. As he suspected, the taste was pure Sam, untainted by any chemical and he delicately washed his tongue over smooth skin to just the roots of outer hairs that covered Sam's armpit.

"I don't know whether to groan or laugh," Sam growled and his words brought a smile to Owen's lips.

Tipping his head back, Owen met Sam's ambivalent regard. "Does it tickle?"

"A little, but it's mostly sending wicked electrical vibes straight to my balls."

"Sounds interesting."

"Want me to try it on you?"

"Maybe later," Owen temporized then transferred his attention to Sam's other exposed armpit.

Happy with the “oh fuck” Sam muttered under his breath, Owen played there for a bit then relented and moved on to other parts of his lover’s tempting body. Mouth and tongue trailed over sculpted abdominals, tracing the thin trail of black hair that cut an alluring swath down their center. Reaching Sam’s navel, Owen swirled the tip of his tongue around the rim, fascinated by the convulsive roll of Sam’s belly. Without pause, he unfastened the button of Sam’s jeans and lowered the zipper.

The deep, cherry-red boxer briefs revealed by the parting of worn denim compelled his instantaneous grin. He straightened and captured Sam’s gaze. “You can lower your arms now.” Six months ago Owen would never have guessed this man had an unexpected and flamboyant streak when it came to his briefs. Hooking a finger in the elastic waistband, he gave them a light tug. “These are new.”

“I saw them online so I ordered a set,” Sam admitted, flexing his arms and shaking them as though to restore his circulation.

“Are they all this color?”

“One red, one navy and red stripe, one dark blue camo.”

“Hmm, nice.”

“You think it’s weird.”

“I think it’s...what was it you told me once? Something you never thought you’d say to another guy? Oh yeah...adorable,” Owen finished with a triumphant chuckle.

“Bastard, you’ve just been waiting to get me back for that.”

Loving the look of embarrassment on Sam’s face, Owen laughed. “Would I be that petty?”

“Umm, yeah. I think so.”

“You’re right.” Keeping his eyes locked with Sam’s, Owen lightly squeezed the long, thick rod barely contained by Sam’s briefs. “You’re so...what’s the word I’m looking for? Straitlaced? Bland? Hmm, no, that’s not it either but do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Ordinary,” Sam pronounced with a slightly disgruntled expression—one that turned into a grimace of pleasure when Owen squeezed his cock again and started a slow, easy stroke against his fabric-covered dick.

“No, no. You’re too gorgeous to be ordinary,” Owen honestly admitted while closely gauging Sam’s reaction to his touch, “but ordinary’s a good way to describe the way you act and dress. Not that you don’t dress nice or anything. I mean, anyone looking at you would never guess you’d wear red boxer briefs. They’d see a neat, button-down guy like you and probably think you’re the tightie whtie type. I think your underwear quirk’s like a social rebellion. I like it. I like the way you’ve chosen to be less than conventional. Conventional, yeah, that’s the word I was looking for.” Slipping his free hand between Sam’s thighs, Owen found the bulge of his balls and rubbed. “If you can call a werewolf conventional.” Sam’s hands landed on his shoulders and his lips slammed down on Owen’s. For long, breathless moments they held the

kiss, lips devouring, tongues tangling until Owen fought free. Panting, he released his hold on Sam's cock and balls and pressed his palms to the big man's chest. "Wait. Wait a minute. I gotta tell you something."

With a visible effort, Sam let him go and Owen took a half step back, staying just close enough to feel the heat of their bodies radiating between them. He'd wanted to turn his lover on but hadn't realized just how much he himself would be affected. Cock fully erect, he fought the urge to free himself from the almost painful pressure of his own jeans and instead handed Sam a little surprise. "A couple of weeks ago I sent for a catalog. It arrived in the mail today. Men's specialty clothing. They have every style and color of underwear you can imagine like these skimpy black mesh boxer briefs. Dozens of little openings barely concealing your skin. You'd look so hot in those...or in a thong. They've got all kinds of them but there's one I'd really like to see you in. This sexy little number in fuchsia and turquoise. A pouch attached to some thin strips of fabric. Bet it would overflow if you got hard. Even so, I'd do my best to get you that way if you'd wear it for me. I'd lick and suck you through that slippery silk fabric until it was wet with spit and precum and I'd keep going until you lost it and came in them. Then I'd jack myself off and cover the outside with my jizz until they were drenched in cum. Yours and mine. All mixed together. Hot, wet, slick and nasty."

"Jesus," Sam's voice was hoarse. There was fire in his eyes and his diamond-hard cock visibly twitched. "Who did you say was hiding kink?"

"Guess that would be both of us," Owen breathlessly admitted and impatient to continue, he again closed the small distance between them. With quick, efficient movements, he worked Sam's briefs and jeans past his lean hips, thighs and calves to end kneeling on the floor with them bunched around Sam's ankles. Lifting first one then the other of his lover's long slender feet, he urged him to step free of them. "Prop a couple of pillows together and lie back against them. Make sure you're comfortable. I feel like going for a nice long ride."

While Sam did as he asked, Owen stripped, all the while watching the graceful flow of Sam's body with each move he made and the mesmerizing flex of supple muscle under sleek, mocha-colored skin. Sam settled himself on the bed, his eyes gazing hungrily in Owen's direction and Owen imagined draping himself over the man. He could almost feel the pale parchment tint of his own skin melting against the dark, warm glow of Sam's like cream into coffee. Just the thought of it made his belly quiver.

Movements fueled by the sexual energy pulsing beneath every inch of his skin, Owen closed the distance between them, joined Sam on the bed and straddled his legs. Palms against those long limbs, he let them glide upward, mapping the pleasing shapes of bone, muscle and skin. Reaching the apex of Sam's slightly parted inner thighs, Owen cupped the full pouch that waited there and massaged the tender orbs within it.

Sam's gasp and groan were immediate, Owen's gratification immense. Leaning down and starting from the root, he drew the flat of his tongue the length of Sam's cock and swirled it over the crown. With delicate precision he probed the flushed and leaking slit, encouraging the flow and lapping each drop of precum that emerged.

Mouth watering, he coated Sam's cock in saliva and repeatedly rubbed the swollen head over his lips, butting his cheek against it and sliding the slick, wet warmth over his skin. It felt so good. Incomparable softness layered over a core of steel and wrapped with convoluted, blood-engorged ribbons that pulsed with life.

Parting his lips, Owen accepted the first few inches inside his mouth and moaned when Sam's fingers wove themselves into his hair, palms pressing against his scalp. Light pressure accompanied his action and Owen gave in to it, taking inch after thick, dusky inch until his tonsils protested and wiry hair tickled the tip of his nose. Fighting Sam's control and applying the first sucking pressure, he reversed direction. Sam's finger's tightened but he gave in to Owen's desires and simply held on as Owen began a slow, deliberate rhythm. Up and down. Suck and tease. Lick and nibble again and again until Sam's breaths became erratic and his balls drew up.

Letting his prize go with an audible pop, Owen licked his lips, straightened up and reached for the bottle of lube on the nightstand. "Still with me?" he asked Sam.

"Was there any doubt?"

Seeing Sam actually flushed and more than a little wild-eyed had Owen's lips twitching. "Not really but did I go too far? You're not gonna shoot as soon as you're in me, are you?"

"I believe my control is better than that but you know something, you're enjoying this way too much. I think I need to even the odds. Why don't you come here?"

Before he could process the request, Owen was positioned right where Sam wanted him—upright on his knees, legs straddling Sam's hips and pulled so close his cock brushed Sam's torso. Only the slight burn on his knees from skidding across the covers and the receding pressure on his back and buttocks hinted at how he'd covered the three feet from his previous position to this one so quickly. The man's strength and speed were incredible and it never failed to impress Owen how truly careful and gentle Sam was with him. He could so easily inflict damage but he never did.

Sam took the lube from him. Squirting some in his hand, he wrapped his fingers around himself, coated his own cock and directed it between Owen's thighs. The heavy rod aligned itself beneath Owen's balls. He then reached for Owen's cock and thoroughly lubricated it but instead of immediately releasing him, Sam retained his grip and stroked the firm column of flesh in his hand.

"Oh God," Owen groaned. Surges of sensation leapt the length of his dick, lodged in his groin and radiated outward until his entire body was immersed in pleasure.

Sam jacked him for a few endless moments before releasing him to anoint his fingers with the rest of the lube. Reaching around to cup Owen's ass, he pulled him close. "Rub off on me while I ream that tight little hole of yours."

"Oh fuck." Holding still for a moment, Owen waited for the fingers that would penetrate him and groaned when the first one made contact. It circled his vulnerable entrance, 'round and 'round, and 'round and 'round again until he was crazy with need. He pushed back into the slight pressure and was rewarded with penetration.

Sam's hand flexed against his ass and Owen went with the tug, snuggling tight against Sam's body and moaning with the sleek glide of the long digit impaling him. Wrapping his arms around Sam, he pressed in tight, thrusting his hips against Sam's torso.

Trapped between their bodies, Owen's lube-slick cock took on a rhythmic sawing motion. It was a teasing, pleasurable addition to the finger pumping within grip of his anus and the rub of Sam's cock against his balls. So much pleasure coming from so many directions had Owen feeling like an overstimulated cat. He wasn't sure whether to arch and purr or dig his claws in and bite.

A second finger joined the first within Owen's tight passage, slowly stretching tender, pliant flesh, increasing the sensations and upping the urgency until, swamped with the need for more, Owen acted. "Enough. Enough prep. I can't take it anymore. I want your cock."

"You've already got it, sweetheart," Sam teased. "Can't you feel it rubbing your balls?"

"You know what I mean. In me. I want it in me."

"You sure you won't shoot as soon as I slide in?"

Having his own taunting words thrown back at him made Owen grit his teeth but he was too aroused to get pissed. "You're not the only one with control. I think I can handle it."

"Let's see," Sam challenged.

"Lie back," Owen responded.

Following Sam's partial recline, Owen positioned himself, lined Sam's cock up with his hole and eased down. The pressure was immediate and welcome. It felt so good, this teasing, this pre-penetration in which his tight anal ring stretched to accommodate and immediately shrank at the withdrawal of Sam's plump cock head. Indulging himself, Owen took his time, making a half dozen false starts until Sam's groan signaled the big man's impatience.

The tension in Sam's body was a clear indication of his desire to push, to impale, to take but he waited and for that Owen rewarded him. With a precise drop of his body, he allowed Sam's cock within his tight passage and buried the first few inches in the grip of slick flesh. From there the rest was easy, smooth and fluid. His body took control, devouring the length of Sam's cock then released it with an upward slide only to devour it again.

"Feels so good. Oh God, you feel so good," Owen groaned. Posting up and down on Sam's thick, hard pole, Owen lost himself in the private intimacy of the act. No other existence mattered but theirs. There was nothing but them and this room, this bed, the scent of sex, the tang of perspiration, the creak of the mattress, their panting breaths and guttural moans, the slick heat of flesh that touched and slid and meshed.

Sam's hips rose with Owen's every downward plunge. The jar of their bodies colliding slapped Owen's cock against Sam's belly and he reached for it but Sam growled, "Mine," and took possession of it. The strokes that followed were firm and

constant matching each thrust of Sam's cock into the tight sleeve of Owen's passage. With each slide of flesh into flesh, the ache in Owen's body increased. The culmination was coming. Rising higher and higher until it burst forth in a blaze of rapture that sucked the oxygen from Owen's lungs along with his keening cry.

He drenched the space between them with cum, his anal passage gripping and fluttering around Sam's cock with each jet of cream released. Sam's hands clutched his hips and held him steady for several jerking grinds, then Owen felt the hot wash of his lover's semen fill him. He moaned with the advent of that tangibly warm infusion, loving the anomaly of being able to feel the heat thanks to his werewolf lover's higher internal temperature. There was something soothing about it. The perfect sensation to end an act that brought them both such pleasure.

Silence reigned for long, peaceful moments until Sam nuzzled his ear. "I love you," he whispered. "Happy anniversary."

All at once sad and happy, Owen turned his head to meet Sam's lips with his own and whispered against them, "Happy anniversary." It was the best he could offer and he did so with all the sincerity he could muster.

"We need a shower," Sam softly replied before gently kissing him. "Hold on to me." Easily maneuvering them off the bed, Sam carried Owen into the bathroom.

By the time they finished showering, it was late and they slept but Owen woke up from a nightmare a few hours later with the words he'd heard earlier from Harv Witlow echoing in his head. *You were born to take it up the ass.* Mindful of Sam sleeping beside him, Owen deliberately slowed his racing breaths. Lightly caressing Sam's gift to him, he concentrated on the love the pendant represented and tried to go back to sleep but the phantom sound of that hateful voice kept him from closing his eyes. With a soft, resigned curse, he eased out of bed. Sam mumbled something unintelligible and reached for him.

"Shh. I'm just going to the bathroom," Owen soothed and petted him.

Reassured, Sam resumed his deep slumber. Owen, after using the bathroom, dressed and quietly left their room. It was past one in the morning and dark, but riding the sky high overhead, a three-quarter moon cast her glow through the windows. Owen made his way downstairs and outside to the raised concrete patio that overlooked the wide expanse of open lawn at the back of the house. It was still and quiet and he took the steps down, settling himself on the last one and resting his bare feet in the cool grass. Leaning against the balustrade, he let the peace and silence wash over him.

A short while later it came as no surprise when Sam joined him. "Are you all right?" his lover questioned, his voice rough from sleep as he curled an arm around Owen's shoulders and planted a soft kiss on his temple.

"I'm fine. Just had a bad dream."

"Want to talk about it?"

The urge to say yes welled up fierce and hot but Owen pushed it down. "Not right now. You know what I really want?"

"Tell me."

"I want to see your wolf. I've never seen it. Is it...is it all right to ask?"

"Of course it is," Sam assured him. "I'd have shown you sooner but there was never an occasion that called for it." Already bare-chested, Sam rose and stripped out of his jeans, laying them on the step beside Owen. "Ready?"

Owen nodded then stared wide eyed as the cool air around Sam took on the appearance of heat shimmer. Even having seen this wondrous transformation several times with the others, he was still amazed. Before his eyes Sam just seemed to melt and reform and in his place there stood a huge black wolf with dark eyes infused with glowing amber.

Owen gasped and tears filled his eyes. "You're so beautiful."

The wolf took the few necessary steps to reach Owen and nuzzled his hand. Owen reached out to pet him and the wolf suddenly draped itself across his lap, looking up at him with an expression that screamed "pet me". With a soft laugh, Owen did just that, wondering at the texture and rich color of the coat under his hands.

Unbidden, memories invaded his thoughts and compelled by the spell of the moon and that of the wolf in his arms, he shared them. "Seeing you like this, touching you this way. It reminds me of something I wanted when I was eight years old. My dad promised me a dog for my birthday. I was so excited. I remember thinking how I'd be able to tell my dog all my secrets and that he'd be my best friend. I wanted that so badly but I never got the dog. My dad had a heart attack and died two weeks before my birthday. He was thirty-three. Thirty-three. Can you believe it? He had some kind of undetected congenital defect that just suddenly decided to kick in."

For a moment Owen buried his face in the wolf's coat, breathing in the musky, canine scent then lifted his head. "For the next couple of years it was just me and mom. I missed my dad so much. By the time I was eleven, Mom found herself a boyfriend. I tried to, but I didn't like him. It felt like my mom wanted me to accept him in my dad's place but I just couldn't. Terry moved in with us and for a while everything was okay...until the day he proved to me just how much he was nothing like my dad. He raped me while Mom was at work. He was fond of beer and apparently had enough to lower what few inhibitions he had about violating a kid. It was brutal, agonizing. I was terrified."

The wolf in his arms began to growl and Owen shushed him. "Shh, just listen. I need you to listen." The wolf subsided and Owen continued. "I told him I was gonna tell my mom but he said it was her idea. Said she'd told him I was a good for nothing pain in the ass and that he could do what he wanted with me. I didn't want to believe it but I was eleven, you know? Just a snot-nosed kid without a clue and Mom was always busy and distracted. It seemed, after Dad died, like she never had much time for me, like maybe she didn't care anymore. After that Terry used me on a regular basis. I was thirteen the first time he sold my ass to one of his poker buddies."

Whimpers and growls met his words but Owen forged on, raising his voice to be heard above them. "I should have done something. Said something to someone but by that time I was too ashamed. Too convinced I was worthless just like he told me. I held on 'til I graduated at seventeen then packed a duffel bag with some clothes, food and all the cash I could steal from the bill money Mom kept stashed in one of her dresser drawers. Before I walked out the door, I asked my mom if she knew. She just looked at me and said she didn't understand what I was talking about, or why I was leaving. So I told her. I told her how good old Terry'd been fucking me all those years. How he was selling me to his poker buddies to pay off his losses.

"At first I didn't think she believed me but then this wave of horror just rolled into her eyes and then I knew. Knew it had all been a lie. Knew if I'd just told her when it first happened that maybe, just maybe she'd have saved me. But by then it was too late. By then I was so angry, so filled with hate and self-loathing there was no way we could turn back the clock. When I shut the door behind me she and Terry were screaming at each other. I remember walking away and being happy for the first time in forever. I was hoping they'd kill each other." Owen hugged the wolf then let him go. "I want to love you. I really do. I just...I just don't know how."

The wolf in his arms sprang to his feet and a series of mournful, ear-piercing howls rent the night. Owen curled into himself, sobbing for all he'd lost and all he'd endured. There was nothing and no one, only his shattered psyche and shredded emotions until a pair of strong arms wrapped around him, cradled him and a soft voice brought him back from the abyss of pure darkness that threatened to engulf him.

"I'm here. Baby, I'm here. Stay with me, Owen. I've got you. I love you. It's gonna be all right, sweetheart, I promise," Sam softly crooned until his voice took a harsh, guttural dip. "I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch."

Panic hit Owen and he desperately clutched at Sam, forcing the words past the lump in his throat. "No. Don't. Don't...leave. Don't...let go. Please. Don't let go."

"Not going to. Never. As long as you need me I'm here. Hold on tight to me, baby. I'm taking you inside."

Owen wound his arms around Sam's neck and felt a dizzying shift as he was lifted in his lover's embrace and carried inside. At the bottom of the stairs they met Nick and Quinn.

"What's wrong?" Nick growled, his voice filled with urgent concern. "We heard you howl."

"Sorry," Sam apologized. "I overreacted. Sorry, Quinn. Please go back to bed."

Owen turned his face into Sam's chest, not wanting to be seen but he saw Nick's hand appear on Sam's arm.

"Sammy. Is he all right?"

"He will be. We're just a little off balance right now but everything will be fine."

"If there's anything you need. Anything I can do for either of you, just ask, you hear?"

"Thanks. I think what we need right now is quiet and a nice hot bath."

At the mention of the bath, Owen suddenly realized he was shaking. "Cold, Sam," he whispered.

"I know, baby. I'm gonna get you warm right now. Night, Nick, Quinn. Sorry."

"Don't worry about us. Go take care of your mate," Quinn said.

With that Sam was off, barreling through the open doorway of their bedroom and stopping only long enough to shove the door closed with his foot. He headed straight for the bathroom.

"Here. Sit here for a minute, babe," Sam said.

Owen released the stranglehold he had around Sam's neck, allowing Sam to set him down on the counter. Sam relinquished his hold long enough to start the water in the tub and as it filled, he returned and chafed Owen's hands and rubbed his back, doing his best to soothe and warm all at once. When the level of water rose to his satisfaction, Sam stepped into the tub and took Owen with him.

Despite being in shock and shaking like a leaf, Owen was so surprised at Sam's action he loosed a short bark of laughter. "Cl-clothes and all?" he stuttered, going willingly when Sam pulled him back against his chest.

"No reason to strip you down and make you colder before we warm you up."

"Makes a skewed kind of sense, I guess." Owen did his best to relax and soon felt the pervasive warmth drive the chill from his bones. He rubbed the forearms that banded his chest. "I'm sorry. Sorry I fell apart on you. I've never told anybody about my past. Never said all that out loud. Even knowing it all deep inside, it was still a shock."

"I wondered," Sam told him, hugging him close. "And you have nothing to be sorry for. I'm honored you trusted me with it. You know you can share the hurtful things with me as well as the good things, don't you?"

Owen nodded, fresh tears sliding down his cheeks. It seemed now that past deeds were out in the open, all the tears he'd kept at bay decided to go with them.

Sam rocked him from side to side. "It's okay, baby. Just let it all go. You'll feel so much better."

They stayed in the tub until Owen assured Sam he was good and warm. Finally convinced, Sam peeled him out of his wet things, vigorously towed him down and took him to bed, curling around him and holding him tight. Owen slept fitfully for a while, his bruised emotions keeping him from a peaceful rest. At one point tears found him again and he cried quietly while Sam whispered endless words of comfort and reassurance until finally, exhaustion won out and he slept.

In the morning, over Owen's protests that he was fine, Sam called Nathan asking that Owen be excused from work for the day.

"I can go to work, Sam. It's not like I'm sick," Owen protested.

"No, but, sweetheart, you look a little rough around the edges. Go take a look."

Dubious about doing so, Owen made the short trip to the bathroom and got a shock when he looked at himself in the mirror. Even for him, he was pale. His eyelids and lips were swollen and the dark circles under his eyes reminded him of raccoons. With a horrified groan, he splashed cold water on his face. While it helped somewhat, it was more than apparent the man in the mirror looking back at him had had a bad night.

Somewhat chastened, he returned to the bedroom, crawled back in bed with Sam and pulled the covers over his head. Sam chuckled. "It's not that bad."

"I look like hell."

Sam's laughter shook the bed. "Just remember you're the one who said that, not me."

"What about you? Aren't you going to class?"

"Nope. I'm taking the day off. I think we could both use a bit more sleep, then we're going to go out somewhere and do something fun. Maybe get some fresh air and sunshine to perk us up. Lord knows you could use some sun. Normally I'm rather fond of your complexion but this Casper thing you've got going on this morning is a little extreme. You need some roses in your cheeks, sweetheart."

"Shut up," Owen muttered, though his words belied the smile that pulled at his lips.

Chapter Ten

After catching a few more hours sleep, he and Sam cleaned up, fixed themselves a huge lunch and left the house with an unusual destination in mind. Sam first took Owen to a shoe store where he purchased his lover a pair of comfortable hiking boots, then it was on to the national park where Devin and Ryan worked.

In Dev's office they chatted for a bit while Owen changed into his new boots. His lover meant what he said about fresh air and sunshine. Sam was taking him for a hike. Owen went outside to walk around a bit, testing the fit of his shoes and the tightness of the laces. Ryan followed him out.

"Do you guys know which trail you're going to take?"

Owen shook his head. "I don't have a clue. Sam didn't say."

"How 'bout we go to the visitor center and I'll point out the merits of a few of them."

"Sounds good to me." Owen looked back to see Sam and Dev in the doorway to the building that housed Dev's office. The two of them were talking, but Sam's eyes were on him. Owen signaled he was going with Ryan. Sam smiled, waved him on and continued his conversation with Dev. Owen frowned. He thought Sam would join him but apparently he was content to remain where he was. Shrugging the expectation aside, he lengthened his stride to catch up to Ryan, following him through the glass doors of the visitor center.

Sam watched his mate follow Ryan, mourning the loss of the view. There was nothing he admired more than the sight of Owen's ass in denim tight enough to showcase the two firm mounds he so loved to fondle. He wanted to join him but the feeling niggled at him that Dev had something to say. He was right.

"Quinn called me this morning," Devin remarked.

"Ah."

"He was worried about you guys. Everything all right?"

Sam started to nod then stopped himself. "Not completely but it's definitely something that can be helped."

"Can I ask what the problem is or will you be offended if I try to pry?"

"Why would I be offended by your concern? I appreciate it. In fact I need it. The things Owen told me last night have me tied up in knots."

"You hide it well. I wouldn't have known if your scent wasn't broadcasting your upset."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want to worry Owen. He's got enough to deal with without me adding to it."

"So what is it he told you that's got you so troubled?"

Sam took a steadying breath. "A while back, the day Owen moved in, I told the guys I suspected he'd been sexually abused as a child. Did Quinn tell you?"

"Nick, actually."

"Mmm. Thought one of them would. Anyway, last night he confirmed it. He gave me details." Sam felt his throat tighten and his gut churn. Agitated, he ran a hand over his hair and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Easy, big man," Dev soothed. "Keep it together. It'll be hard for me to explain the sudden appearance of a wolf in my office."

Nodding, Sam took strength from the commanding timbre of his alpha's voice. "When he talked about it, his voice was so calm, like he was reading a page from a book. Only this was a horror story. When he was eleven, his mother's boyfriend raped him and later sold him to his friends for poker money. Jesus, Dev, I want to kill him. I want to kill that son of a bitch."

Inside, Sam could sense his wolf fighting to break free. He could feel the sharp slash of phantom claws and hear the hollow echo of fury-ridden growls. He clenched his fists against the pain and fought to hold on. At any other time when he and his wolf became one it was never like this. It was a joining, a pleasurable rush of sensation. This was something entirely different. It was a battle and Sam was losing.

The next thing he knew he was sitting in a chair. Dev's hands were gripping his shoulders and they were practically nose to nose. Dev's face had elongated to form the beginnings of a muzzle, his eyes glowed like backlit citrines and he was snarling, wordless growls pouring from his muzzle. Startled, Sam nearly succumbed to his first impulse, which was to hit the floor but his wolf did it for him. Reprimanded by his alpha, the chastened creature groveled before his show of dominance and withdrew.

Sam took in a deep shuddering breath and Dev released him.

His face restored to normal, Dev asked, "All right now?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem." Dev dropped into a second visitor's chair. "You know killing that guy sounds like a good idea but it won't help Owen."

"Shit, Dev, I know that but you know how hard it is to stay objective when it comes to your mate."

"I know. If you'll remember, I killed the man who tried to hurt Ryan."

"I do remember and Silas Prudome was no great loss. How many lives did he sacrifice in the rites he performed? What goes around comes around and he got what he deserved. It was justice at its finest," Sam told him, putting all the conviction he could muster into his statement. It didn't take much effort. He truly believed Silas Prudome was one of those people whose death made the world a better place.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Like you said earlier, no problem," Sam managed a smile then dropped his gaze to his hands. "I'm afraid I'm hurting him."

"Owen? What makes you think that?"

"Sex. It's at the core of his pain."

"Jeez, Sam. I don't think that's a problem. At least not with you. If anything, what the two of you do together goes a long way toward proving that sex doesn't have to be painful or something you do to get by in the world. I think for Owen it's part of what's helping him heal."

"You think he's healing?"

"I do. I've seen the changes in him. He's happier. He smiles more often and that constant underlying tension I always sensed in him is gone. You can't tell me that having sex with the guy who loves him isn't part of what made that happen."

"I guess you could be right," Sam conceded, feeling a great weight lift from his shoulders.

"Of course I am, but I'm thinking therapy might help. I'm sure Owen's got a shit load of issues to work through and maybe it wouldn't hurt for you to go with him a time or two."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. One of my subordinates is a woman whose husband is an alcoholic. She attends meetings to help her cope. She told me the friends and relatives close to people with problems sometimes need help every bit as much as they do. In case it's failed to come to your attention, we're talking now because you're troubled by Owen's past and how it's affected him. Hell, man, you were afraid you were hurting him."

"Fuck. Therapy, huh?" Sam blew out a breath. "I guess I can suggest it but I'm not looking forward to that conversation. 'Owen, sweetheart, you need your head shrunk.'"

Dev laughed. "I think you'll find a more diplomatic way to phrase it."

"I'd damn well better or he'll be kicking my ass."

Armed with Ryan's expertise about what sights they might find interesting, Owen returned to Dev's office with Ryan in tow. From the doorway he could see Dev and his lover laughing at something and Owen paused to openly admire them. They were attractive, virile men and knowing one of them was his brought a smile to his face.

As though divining his thoughts, Ryan softly observed, "They are beautiful, aren't they?"

"They are," Owen agreed and walked in to claim Sam.

The trails they took were clearly marked and Owen had to admit he enjoyed Sam's commentary about the different types of trees, birds and wildlife that inhabited the area.

Eventually they came to a deep ravine with a rustic and weathered wooden stairway set in place along one inner wall. They descended the stairs, and were immediately swallowed by the canopy of towering trees growing up from below. When they reached the bottom and looked up, a small waterfall became visible where it emerged from an opening high in the ravine's side. The water splashed down over a jumble of rocks then formed a stream that disappeared farther into the brush.

Deciding to follow it, they walked along the stream for a bit. Sam pointed out a rabbit trail that anyone else would have missed and curious, Owen questioned if he'd found it by sight or smell. Sam tapped the side of his nose.

Owen responded with, "My, Grandma, what a big nose you have."

"The better to smell you with, my dear," came the predictable reply. What followed was hardly predictable. Sam continued, his voice lowering to the husky growl that Owen had learned to associate with Sam at his horniest, "And, damn, you smell good."

In a matter of seconds Owen was backed into a tree and Sam's tongue was reaching for his tonsils. They shared several passionate kisses during which time Sam's right hand palmed one cheek of Owen's ass while the other encouraged his burgeoning erection to grow. When Sam broke their kiss, Owen barely had time to draw a deep breath before it was taken away again. Sam had opened Owen's jeans while they kissed and going to his knees, he took jeans and briefs down with him enough to free Owen's cock and balls then swallowed his shaft in one go.

Owen barely managed to refrain from yelling, but it was a near thing at finding himself buried balls-deep in the velvet, wet heat of his lover's mouth and throat. Afterward Owen thought perhaps it was being out in the wild that made Sam so thoroughly ditch his restraint, because the man went crazy. He wasn't slow; he didn't finesse or delicately coax Owen's orgasm forth. He demanded it, with everything he could muster.

Owen felt the tightening of Sam's lips around his cock and the strong suction that went with it. Sam stroked up and down and each time he reached the top, his tongue flattened and did a swirling twist over Owen's swollen crown, pulling a gasp from him and making his toes curl in his boots. As if that wasn't enough, Sam's hand cradled Owen's balls, massaging and rolling the delicate sac while gliding a finger over and over the satiny flesh of his perineum, something he knew drove his mate's lust to the breaking point. Spreading his thighs wider, Owen welcomed every touch and his growing desire for penetration.

Sam's near frenzy communicated itself to Owen and his arousal escalated at a dizzying rate. He began working with Sam, thrusting his hips and drowning in the sensations until his orgasm struck hard and fast. His cock erupted, spewing jet after jet of creamy seed down his lover's throat. Owen keened his pleasure, curling over Sam's shoulders and shuddering until the delicious contractions in his loins faded.

Sam disengaged and stood with a smug grin on his face, watching as Owen struggled with weak knees and fuck-drunk reflexes while trying to tuck himself in and put his clothes to rights.

"Son of a bitch. Another second of that and my brain would have exploded," Owen admitted softly, panting to catch his breath. "Give me a minute and I'll return the favor."

"That's okay, you don't have to," Sam magnanimously offered.

Owen looked him over, his gaze landing squarely on the prominent bulge behind Sam's zipper. "If you think I'm letting you walk around with *that* on display, you're sadly mistaken. Someone might get ideas."

"Why, Mr. Connors," Sam crowed, "even though there's no one around, you sound downright possessive."

Realizing that was exactly how he felt, Owen tried blustering his way out of it. "That's ridiculous. I'm just being nice. I know how uncomfortable it is trying to walk around with a hard-on."

"Mmm hmm." Sam backed him against their handy tree again and kissed him. "Thank you," he whispered against Owen's lips, "I'm truly flattered."

Owen frowned and with a twist of his lips muttered, "Oh, shut up and give me that thing."

He blew Sam with all the skill he possessed and proudly concluded he made the big man come every bit as fast and every bit as hard as he had.

Owen was back to work the next morning, his spirits and looks fully restored.

"Whatever you're thinking about must be naughty. That's quite the devilish smile you have going on there."

At the sound of Ginny's voice, Owen started. Remembering the previous day's activities had stopped his hand in mid-reach for the stack of free bookmarks he'd been about to lay out by the register. Schooling his features to innocence, he met her curious brown eyes. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"You heard me, you big faker. Whatever you did yesterday it wasn't lying around in bed playing invalid."

"I did start the day off feeling bad," Owen said, primly defending himself before a mischievous urge caused him to add, "but after I started feeling better I admit there was some playing around and truthfully? There was nothing invalid about it."

"I knew it," Ginny triumphantly declared. "But that's okay. As long as you started out sick, what happened later is allowable."

"Good to know," Owen answered with a serious nod then grinned.

"If I had a guy as good looking as Sam at home I'd probably be calling in all the time. Seriously, he's smokin' hot."

"I'll tell him you said so."

"God, no! Don't do that. I'd be embarrassed to death."

Owen laughed. "But he'd love it."

"I'm sure he gets enough praise from you."

"Among other things."

"Cut it out. I'm already jealous. I'll be turning green here in a minute."

"We can't have that. You'll scare the customers. Speaking of which..."

Ginny glanced over her shoulder and, seeing two women approach the counter, hurried back to whatever it was she was doing before she'd interrupted Owen's pleasant reverie. Owen ramped up his smile and charmed the ladies through the checkout process then continued with his own work.

It was a good day with the rest of the week going as smoothly. The usual "it's Friday" excitement passed Owen by as he was scheduled to work the next day. He missed hanging out with Sam and the guys but Sam met him for lunch and promised to pick him up after work as well. When the end of his shift finally rolled around he was in a good mood, a mood that was spoiled when Harv Witlow showed up.

Owen was waiting outside for Sam when Harv approached him and slapped an envelope against his chest. When Owen reached up to grab it, Harv smirked. "If you don't want to see those plastered all over the internet tomorrow, you'll be at my house tonight at nine sharp." He didn't wait for a reply, merely strode away.

Owen opened the envelope and was hit by a wave of shocked disbelief. Inside were several photos of him engaged in activities he'd been paid to perform with Harv. The photos had been cropped in such away that Owen's was the only face visible, but he recognized the bedroom that served as the background. His stomach lurched.

"Oh fuck," he whispered. "What the hell?"

Glancing up he saw a black SUV approach with Sam at the wheel. With shaking hands he folded the envelope and stuffed it in his back pocket. Taking a deep breath, he pulled together every bit of calm he could muster and let it engulf him like a shroud.

At three minutes to nine, Owen exited the taxi that pulled up to the curb in front of Harv Witlow's house. He sent a nervous glance over his shoulder at its retreat then took a deep breath. "Get a grip, Connors," he breathed. "You have to do this. There's no other choice." Walking up to the front door, he rang the bell and waited.

In less than a minute, Harv appeared. His greasy smile was insolent. "Owen! So glad you could make it. Come on in. There're some people here I'd like you to meet."

Heartbeat ratcheting higher at this unexpected development, Owen walked in the door and was confronted with the sight of three other men waiting in Harv's living room. His stomach twisted and sweat dampened the hair at the nape of his neck.

"I told the guys all about you. They're all very anxious to make your acquaintance."

Considering the circumstances, Owen congratulated himself on how steady he managed to keep his voice. "What a coincidence. I brought some people who can't wait to be introduced to you." Raising his hand to his mouth, Owen touched the tip of his index finger and thumb together and, placing them against his tongue, produced a piercing whistle.

"Why the hell did you—" Harv began then stopped when his front door was wrenched open.

Sam, Nick and Quinn strolled in. Quinn shut the door and placed himself before it, his stance an obvious challenge to anyone who might try to leave.

Harv's friends, reacting to the obvious threat, rose and made tracks for the kitchen. Intent on leaving by the back door, they never made it out of the living room. Devin, Ryan and Nathan strode into the room by way of the kitchen and Nathan echoed Quinn's stance, taking up position to block the only other exit. Unless they intended to jump through the glass at the curtained windows, Harv and his friends were effectively trapped.

"What's going on here? Who are you people?" Harv blustered. "This is a private residence. You have no right busting in here uninvited."

Sam's incoherent growl rumbled from the depths of his chest, the sound bringing every man's eye to him. Owen quickly stepped in front of him and shook his head. "No. Let Dev handle it. You promised, remember?" When Sam didn't respond, didn't even look at him, Owen wrapped his hands around Sam's rock-hard biceps and shook him. Or at least tried to. When Sam finally relented and looked at him, Owen repeated, "You promised." He relaxed a bit when resignation filled his lover's eyes.

"Fuck. Fine." He turned his glare back on Harv. "But if you make one wrong move your ass is mine."

Confronted with the formidable, muscular mountain of angry man that was Sam, Harv blanched, his false bravado instantly squashed. When Dev joined them, Harv glanced back and forth from him to Sam and seemed almost relieved. His relief didn't last long.

"I take it you're Harv Witlow," Dev said, his voice calm and controlled.

"That's right and you people need to leave before I call the cops."

"Well, now, Harv, here's the thing. We can't allow you to do that. It seems you have some pictures of our friend that he doesn't remember giving you permission to take. That's something we just can't turn a blind eye to, especially when you use them to blackmail him."

"Who said anything about blackmail? Is that what he told you? I deny it and it's his word against mine."

"Considering the fact that Owen has copies of said pictures in his possession which you threatened him with to get him to come here tonight," Dev paused and gave Harv's friends a piercing look, "and taking into account the little party you had set up and

waiting for him, I'd say it's a pretty good bet to say he's the one telling the truth. That being the case, I'm going to have to relieve you of those pictures."

"And if I refuse?"

"I thought you might. Walk with me, Harv. I have an argument I'm sure will convince you to give up those photos. Ryan." With a sharp jerk of his head and a hand on Harv's shoulder, Dev signaled for Ryan to follow as he steered Harv down the hall off the living room, and into what appeared to be a bedroom. For a few minutes there was silence which was suddenly broken by some muffled screams.

Owen noted the beatific grin on Sam's face and the startled jerk and wide-eyed dismay displayed by Harv's friends. Another minute passed and when the door down the hall opened, they craned their necks to get a look. Harv appeared, white-faced and shaken but otherwise undamaged, followed by Ryan and Dev. Upon reaching the living room, Harv collapsed on the sofa.

With a satisfied grin, Dev walked up to Nick. "Get Eric. Harv's seen the error of his ways. He's going to help us delete all those unwanted files from his computer. Isn't that nice?"

"Delightful," Nick replied and with a wink he passed a smiling Quinn and returned with Eric in tow.

Nose twitching as though scenting the myriad smells permeating the room, Eric was practically vibrating with excitement. "Calmly, pup," Dev gently admonished. "You know what to do?"

"Of course."

"Make sure the hard drive's wiped."

"Duh."

Nick lightly cuffed the back of Eric's head. "Manners, pup."

"Sorry, Dev."

"Get on with it, junior."

Nick and company chuckled.

"Dev," Eric whined. "Don't saddle me with weird nicknames. I'll never live them down."

"Go. Nick. With him."

With a nod and great restraint, Nick hauled Harv to his feet. "Computer," he growled then looked back at his mate. "Let's go...junior."

Grumbling under his breath, Eric followed them down the hall.

Watching them go, Owen sighed and touched Sam's arm. "Can we wait outside? I need some air." He watched as Sam caught Dev's eye and got his nod. Sending Dev a grateful smile, Owen led the way, knowing Sam was at his back.

Once outside he took a deep breath and tried to relax. "What a night," he softly murmured.

Sam's arm slipped around his waist. He was given a brief squeeze and let go. "The worst is over. Just a little mopping up left to do."

"I know. I'll just be glad when it's done. This," Owen waved his hand in the direction of the house, "is disturbing."

"But effective."

"Oh, I don't mean what we're doing. I mean that bastard and his blackmail attempt. Did you see what he had waiting for me? Four of them including him. If I hadn't told you, right about now I'd be the featured victim of a gang rape." Owen started to pace, fighting back the shakes as anger and horror in equal parts assailed him. When Sam tried to pull him into his arms, Owen stepped out of reach. "Don't. Someone might see," he hissed, mindful of the neighboring houses and the occasional vehicle that passed by on the street.

"Who gives a fuck," Sam growled. "I'll tear the throat out of the first person who dares say one goddamned word."

Shocked, Owen looked at Sam and realized his eyes were glowing. Dismayed by his lover's distress, Owen forgot his own and went to Sam. "Hey, calm down. Nothing happened. Everything's cool, right? Dev's got it all under control."

"I know that, Owen. I do. But what you said. Rape. Just like before. They'd have raped you. They'd have hurt you. No one touches my mate. No one hurts what's mine. No one." With each word Sam's tone dropped lower and lower, the final word trailing off into a garbled growl. When he started back toward the house, Owen knew a moment of pure panic then ran after him and grabbed his arm.

"No. Sam, no. Please. Please don't. I need you. I need you to stay here with me."

When Sam turned his head in Owen's direction, Owen gasped. Sam's face had elongated into the beginnings of a muzzle with sharp, canine teeth that were clearly visible. His hair had grown shaggier and his eyes burned with amber fire. Looking at the arm under his clutching hands, Owen could see the hair on Sam's forearm had gotten thicker and his nails had turned black and pointed.

Breathing hard, Owen kept his fear under control. No matter what he looked like, this was Sam and Sam would never hurt him. "Please. I don't want you to do this. Those people, they're not worth the dirt under your shoes but if you hurt them, I know you'll be sorry. I don't want you to have to live with that. I don't want to live with that. Knowing it was my fault." Owen closed his eyes, struggling to keep his emotions under control.

"Not your fault," Sam's raspy voice answered. "Never your fault," he whispered and when Owen looked again, his lover had returned to normal.

"Thank you," Owen answered, his own voice hoarse with relief.

Dev appeared in the doorway of the house. "Is everything all right out here?"

"Fine," Owen answered. "We're fine."

"Good. We're almost done here. Why don't you take Sam and wait in the car?"

"Sure."

From the significant look Dev gave him, Owen was sure he'd sensed Sam's fury and his partial change.

"Sam? Let's go, okay? I really need to sit down." Owen knew it was underhanded but he was sure by appealing to Sam's protective instincts he could get the big man moving in the direction he wanted him to go.

With a final glance at the house, Sam sighed and turned his back on it. "Sure. Whatever you need."

Walking side by side they crossed the street to one of the two black SUVs that waited at the curb. Owen opened the passenger door of the first one he came to. He levered himself inside and slid over to allow Sam to follow him in.

Once they were settled, he actually yawned. "Damn. This is exhausting."

Sam's arm slid around his shoulders and Owen leaned into him. "Emotional stuff usually is. I imagine when we get home we'll both crash."

"I'm just glad I don't have to go to work tomorrow."

"Mmm, me too." Sam nuzzled his hair. "I'll be able to thank you properly."

"Thank me for what?"

"For telling me about Witlow. For not trying to handle it on your own."

Owen carefully formed his reply...words he'd wanted to say for some time. "I had to. I knew you'd want to know and I...I knew I could trust you to stand by me. I trust you because I know you love me." Owen paused, searching for a way to express what he really wanted to say. "Do you remember when I told you that I wanted to love you but I didn't know how?"

"Sweetheart, that's a night I'll never forget. You 'bout broke my heart."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I don't mean because of what you just said. I mean because of all that happened to you. I hurt so much for you especially because I knew there was nothing I could do to change it, nothing I could do to ease your pain."

"Oh, but that's not true. You've done more than you know. That's what I wanted to tell you. When I said I didn't know how to love you, there was something I hadn't figured out yet."

"What's that?"

"Loving someone isn't something you learn, it's just something that happens...and it did. I love you. I really do. I love you, Sam."

Sam's joyous chuckle filled the vehicle. "Sweetheart. You should hear yourself. You sound so astounded."

"I am, damn it. This is a big step for me."

"I know, and I can't even begin to tell you how happy you've made me."

"Then show me instead."

Owen pushed eagerly into his arms as Sam did just that. The kisses they shared were soft and slow and for a short time their physical passion was banked in favor of the emotions they expressed. Owen teased Sam's lips with his tongue until Sam opened for him and then he changed tactics and tenderly nibbled and sucked Sam's bottom lip before slipping his tongue inside the wet heat of his lover's mouth. Their tongues brushed lightly against each other in a teasing dance that had Owen moaning.

Sitting next to each other while trying to find a good angle taxed Owen's patience as well as strained his neck and he finally shifted and scooted until he was able to straddle Sam's lap. Mutual appreciation was expressed by twin groans and when Sam's hands landed on his ass, Owen's hips did a sexy little shimmy that tore a gasp from Sam.

"Fuck. Do that again," he breathed against Owen's lips before once more chasing Owen's tongue with his own.

The heat between them ratcheted several notches higher and Owen was actually reaching for the button on Sam's jeans when Eric's voice sliced through his arousal.

"Whoa, that's hot."

"Get a grip, you guys, although from here it looks like you've already got one," Nick snickered.

Reaching for his waning restraint, Owen sighed and looked over to where Eric and Nick stood grinning. He trained his gaze on Nick. "You have all the charm of a bucket of cold water."

Eric laughed and Nick poked him in the ribs. "What are you giggling about, junior? Get in the car."

"Stop calling me junior, bucket head."

Owen laughed at their byplay, pushed himself off Sam's lap and reached for his seat belt.

"Everything under control?" Sam asked, following his example.

"The files have gone to that great cyber graveyard in the sky," Eric answered. "They're wiped and he doesn't have anything stashed anywhere else. He tried to lie about it but Nick called him on it, stupid idiot thought he could lie to a werewolf. He had some DVDs stashed away. We destroyed those. Broke 'em up and Dev even took the pieces with him just in case. Oh, yeah, and get this. Owen, you weren't the only guy he had pictures of. I found at least a dozen other files like yours."

Concerned at the thought of Harv pulling the same crap on someone else, if he hadn't already, Owen asked, "What did you do with them?"

"Wiped those clean too. I figured you'd want me to."

"Thanks, Eric."

"Sure. I had fun. This is exciting stuff. Like espionage."

"No martinis for you, shaken, stirred or otherwise," Nick quipped, "now buckle up, double-o-three-and-a-half, we're going home."

Chapter Eleven

Once back at the house, they gathered in the living room and Owen made a phone call to Mark, the former associate he'd recommended to Charles, his last aborted trick. He asked Mark to put the word out about Harv's picture-taking hobby and passed along the information that anyone who'd already been a victim of said hobby was now in the clear. Ending the call, he then thanked everyone present, especially Dev and Ryan who had organized their little raid.

"I enjoyed it," Dev said with a grin then dodged the cuff Ryan aimed at him.

"You're almost as bad as Eric," his mate declared.

"Hey, it was fun. I don't often get to play the big bad wolf."

"I don't care if he had fun. I'm just glad he agreed to do it," Owen told Ryan.

"We take care of our own," Dev answered. "That's what families do."

"Family?"

"Family," Dev confirmed. "You turned to us for protection, which proves you acknowledge the bond of trust between us. Everyone present voted you in. Consider your probation at an end."

Glancing at Sam, who was grinning like a fool, Owen tamped down his own elation and gave Dev his full attention. "Thank you. For everything."

"You're welcome. While Ryan and I are here we have a little matter to discuss with you and Sam."

"Should we clear out?" Nick asked.

"No, that's not necessary. You'll all know about it soon enough if Owen accepts."

Owen couldn't stop himself from asking, "Accepts?"

"Becoming a werewolf. Sam asked for permission to turn you."

"Oh." Excitement and doubt warred in the pit of Owen's stomach but he had a feeling the excitement would win. He'd thought about it often and was almost certain, if offered the change, he would accept it.

"I'll admit I had some reservations," Dev told him. "Considering your circumstances I thought it might prove too big a temptation not to use the gift to collect some payback. After what I saw tonight, I know that's not the case. You kept Sam from charging in and inflicting some serious damage on those men who meant to harm you. I'd say there were few who'd be so magnanimous but you showed commendable restraint. I believe I can trust you to exercise such good judgment in future. Right?"

"I'll do my best," Owen responded with the most honest promise he felt capable of making.

"I can't ask for more than that. As to whether you accept or not, I think that's something you and Sam need to discuss." Dev rose from the sofa and offered Ryan his hand. "Let's go home."

Accepting it, Ryan was effortlessly pulled to his feet. "We're going home," he deadpanned for the company at large.

Slinging an arm around his neck, Dev kissed Ryan's cheek. "Smartass," he lightly accused then tickled Ryan until he managed to break away.

With mock despair, Quinn sighed over the less than dignified playful behavior of his alpha pair then followed them to the front door. Nathan was at his heels. "I'm going with Nathan," he called out over his shoulder. "I'll be back, um..."

"Later," Nathan supplied, sending a significant look toward Nick.

"Tomorrow morning. Maybe," Nick responded, conspiratorially, yet loudly enough to be heard by the others as he whispered his conclusion to Eric before ruffling his hair. "Come on, junior. Let's go watch a movie."

Eric sprang up from where he was seated next to Nick. "Cut it out with the hair already and if you call me junior one more time I swear I'm going to light your tail on fire the next time you shift."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come on..." Nick paused then sent Owen and Sam a wink, "Shorty." He took off at a run for the family room.

"Gahhhh!" Eric yelled, giving chase.

Sam chuckled at their antics. "Want to come upstairs with me, gorgeous?"

Owen tore his attention from Nick and Eric to give Sam a once-over that managed to be teasing and lascivious all at once. "Sure, why not."

The two of them climbed the stairs and upon entering their room, Owen kicked off his shoes and threw himself down on the bed.

"Tired?" Sam asked.

Rolling to his belly, Owen patted the space next to him. "I was but fate's conspired to hit me with some cosmic caffeine."

"It has been an interesting night." Sam lay down beside him, emulating Owen's position. "So, have you thought about it?"

Owen cocked his head, trying to decipher the emotions that innocuous question held. There seemed to be a bit of trepidation and some definite hope and he thought perhaps the first emotion was there simply because the second had no desire to be dashed. Sam rolled to his back, linked his hands and slid them behind his head while nonchalantly training his gaze on the ceiling.

Unwilling to torment his lover with a delay, by way of an answer Owen fixed his regard on the framed canvas print he'd given Sam for their anniversary. "Do you suppose I'll look like that when I change? Like the gray wolf with the light-colored tips on his fur? I've daydreamed about that, about you and me out running in the snow

under the full moon. Does your fur keep you warm enough? And what about your paws? Do they get cold?"

"You'll stay warm. Your coat will be thick enough to protect you and paws are tough. Just keep the spaces between your toes clear of ice and you'll be just fine."

Owen met Sam's eyes with his own. "In that case, yes. I want to do that. To be a wolf with you."

Sam's smile was a thing of beauty and Owen moved closer to appreciate it. Lifting up, he straddled his lover's body and leaned down to taste that tempting smile. It was as delicious as he knew it would be. He sighed with satisfaction and lay down full length against Sam. Sam's arms closed around him. They stayed there for a time while Owen listened to the strong and steady beat of his lover's heart.

"Wolves mate for life, did you know that?" Sam asked.

"So I've heard."

"Werewolves follow the same pattern."

"I figured. You did tell me, once a werewolf finds his mate that's it. When you think about it, it's only fair I do this. If I'm it for you then you should be it for me."

With the tips of two fingers, Sam dug Owen in the ribs. "Is that the only reason you're saying yes?"

Owen squirmed and poked Sam back. "You know it isn't. I love you. I want you to be my one and only."

"I can do that," Sam softly affirmed.

As comfortable and content as he was, impatience began to nibble at Owen and he finally lifted up. Looking down at Sam, he tilted his chin a bit and said, "Bite me." Sam's laughter was immediate and his body shook with it. Owen felt like he was afloat on a gently bobbing sea. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"You. Bite me," Sam gently mocked then snorted and laughed again. "I'm not a vampire, sweetheart. I will bite you, but not here," Sam's fingertips stroked over Owen's throat, giving him chills, "but here." Those same fingers caressed the tender skin at the curve of neck and shoulder.

"All right," Owen said a bit breathlessly. "So when are you going to do it?"

"Anxious, are we?"

"Don't tell me you're not, Sam Sterling. I could hear it in your voice. You were half afraid I'd say no."

Sam growled. "You weren't supposed to know that. I thought I hid it pretty well."

"You did but I've gotten used to your ways. You worry about me more than you let on. It hurts a bit knowing I cause you anxiety but at the same time I can't help but be glad you care so much. I'm sorry and thank you."

"Don't be sorry and you're welcome. I love you. It's only natural I'd worry about you." Sam moved a bit and one hand began a soothing, rhythmic rub slowly up and

down Owen's back. "What you said reminds me of a conversation I had with Dev the day we went on our hike."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Dev suggested that maybe therapy would be a good idea."

Owen's eyes narrowed. "Therapy for whom?"

"Both of us but, um, mostly for you."

Not happy with the suggestion, Owen levered himself up and away, settling cross-legged on the mattress with his back to Sam. "I'm not sick, Sam."

"No one's suggesting you are, but you can't deny you have issues, things that maybe you might someday feel better about if you talked to someone."

"I talk to you."

"And I appreciate it. I'm happy to listen, you know that, but I'm not a professional. I can't help you with what's bothering you the way someone trained for such things could do." Sam raised his arm and rested his hand against Owen's back. "You don't have to go. Just think about it."

Owen stiffened for a moment then relaxed into Sam's touch. Truth be told, he had thought about it, but the idea of exposing himself, his past, his thoughts, to some stranger made him very uncomfortable. Still... "I sometimes think about my mother. Wonder what she's doing, how she is. I think about going to see her but then that anger I can't control kicks in and all I can think about is how it's all her fault. How she brought that man into my life, how she didn't pay enough attention to see what was going on. I want to blame it all on her but then I start to realize that maybe there's a different truth here besides the one I've made my own. Do you think if I went into therapy I might get help with that?"

"I'm sure you would. If nothing else, talking it all out will make you feel better. I'm thinking too that having someone not emotionally invested looking at the situation from a different perspective would probably be helpful."

Owen took a deep breath and blew it out in a gusty sigh. "I suppose you're right." He threw a look at Sam over his shoulder. "But you have to come with me. At least at first."

"I will, I promise." Sam looped an arm around Owen's chest and pulled him down until his head was pillowed on Sam's chest. "I'm hungry. I could use a bite."

"Well, there's plenty downstairs to choose from. Why don't we—"

Sam interrupted. "I've got what I need right here."

Owen smiled and pushed Sam's arm away. He twisted around until he was on his belly again then opened the button on Sam's jeans. Sliding his hand under the waistband, he found the hem of Sam's tee shirt and tugged it free. "I could use a little snack myself." Pushing the fabric up, Owen exposed his lover's firm, defined torso and zeroed in on one small cocoa-colored nipple. "Oh, look, a chocolate chip."

Sam's chuckle became a groan when Owen's tongue swirled over the taut little bud. "Mmm, yummy," Owen softly uttered before closing his lips over it to suck. Mouth busy, he wasted no time putting his hands to use.

Sliding the left one back to the opening of Sam's jeans, Owen lowered the zipper then reached in to find Sam's cock. A thrill of anticipation went through him as only half hard, it grew in his hand until its full thickness was achieved. Owen stroked the velvet-soft skin and squeezed the solid shaft. His thumb slid lightly over the plump head, stopping now and then at the tiny slit at the top to press and wiggle. It was a delicious little trick that drew sexy grunts from Sam while causing him to arch up into Owen's fist.

Owen licked a path to Sam's other nipple and used his right hand to keep the first one teased to a hard peak. He lifted up briefly and blew a stream of warm air against Sam's wet skin, making him gasp. "You like the way I multi-task?" he teased.

"Fuck yeah, but now it's my turn." Sam wrestled Owen to his back. "For starters, there's far too much clothing between us." Maneuvering himself half off the bed until his feet hit the floor, Sam pulled Owen's shirt off then rid himself of his own jeans and briefs. Leaning over Owen, he worked the button of Owen's jeans open then slid the zipper down.

Owen, finding a thick cock waving in his face, took full advantage of it. He circled the shaft with his fingers and directed it toward his mouth, licking up and down as much of the length as he could.

Above him, Sam softly cursed. "You want it?" he asked.

Owen nodded and scooted toward the foot of the bed, giving himself just enough room to hang his head over a bit and tilt his head back. He opened his mouth and eagerly accepted the broad head of Sam's cock against his tongue then moaned when several inches of thick male cock filled his mouth. Sam carefully sawed in and out, going a bit deeper each time until Owen was taking almost the full length of his cock.

Sam's scent filled his nostrils and his flavor drenched Owen's palate, making him groan in appreciation at the heady mix. Sam leaned over him again and Owen felt a tug at his jeans.

"Lift up," Sam breathlessly ordered and Owen did, feeling the cool bedroom air hit his exposed and overheated skin.

One particular part wasn't exposed for long. His cock was engulfed in Sam's mouth and he barely managed to restrain his hips from lifting off the mattress. Together they licked and sucked, movements in concert, desire steadily growing. Owen had reached the point where he was ready to pop, when Sam released him and withdrew himself from Owen's mouth.

With a wordless protest, Owen made a grab for him but Sam stepped back out of reach. "Not like this," he said, denying Owen his way.

He skimmed his shirt up and off then, moving to the side of the bed, stripped Owen of his jeans, leaving them both nude. Owen adjusted his position, regaining support for his head then grunted in surprise when Sam unceremoniously rolled him to his belly.

"Ow, hey, a little patience please, and give a guy some warning, would you? Not only would it be painful but my cock wouldn't look right folded in the middle."

"Sorry. Just want you. Now."

Sam's voice had taken on that deep husky rasp that caused Owen's breath to speed and his belly to tighten. Good things were coming and when Sam urged him up on his knees he had no further protests to voice.

Sam stretched out over Owen's body, the heat between them bringing a sheen of sweat to their skin which intensified the musky scent of aroused male. His cock lay along the crease of Owen's ass and he pushed and rubbed the thick length over Owen's pucker. Owen was soon panting, moaning and shoving himself back against Sam in an effort to increase the pressure. The nerve endings in the silky folds of skin around his anus were freely broadcasting their joy at the contact, causing his muscles to expand and contract.

"You really are a sensual creature. Well suited to be a werewolf's mate," Sam praised. "I can't get enough of you. So hot and wild, so aware of just what you want and unafraid to take it. It drives me crazy when you show me how much you want me."

Accompanying Sam's passionate litany were wet licks, warm kisses and the light sting of teasing nips to Owen's ears, neck and shoulders. He shivered and groaned. "Mmm, Sam, more. Give me more."

"I will, pup. Gonna make you mine all the way this time. Gonna fuck this sweet puckered hole. Fill your tight little ass with my cock and my seed while the wolf claims his mate. You're gonna bleed for me, sweetheart, but it won't hurt for long. I'll lick it all better for you, make you come so hard you'll scream."

"Then do it. Now, now, now."

"I thought you said I was the impatient one."

"I am too," Owen gasped. "Want that big cock inside me just like you said. Love it. Love you. Don't care about the pain. You never hurt me. Always feels so good with you."

"Aren't pain and hurt the same?"

"Not with you, not with you," Owen insisted. "Can't explain it better. Can't think with you doing that."

"I don't want you to think now anyway. Just feel, baby. That's all you need to do."

Owen couldn't find words or breath for a reply. The glide of Sam's body down the length of his made him shiver and Owen spread his thighs wider, making room for the big man. Hot breath fanned the sensitive flesh of his ass and large hands cupped the

cheeks, parting them. Exposed, his taut, needy bud twitched then convulsively tightened against the first firm, wet swipe of Sam's tongue.

"Oh fuck, yesss!" Owen hissed. His elbows collapsed when the rimming started in earnest.

One irrefutable fact he'd learned about werewolves — they were all about the licking and intimate body parts seemed to be their favorite snacks. As the pseudo prey in this scenario, Owen had no objection to being eaten. He wiggled and squirmed, pushing into the firm point of a tongue that, while considerably smaller, was doing a fair imitation of Sam's cock. As good as it felt to have such delicate, sensitive tissues laved and tickled by that sinuous organ, Owen craved more, craved the thickness of fingers easing the way for a long, hard cock.

"Sam, please. In me, got to have you in me."

"Already? You want something big and thick and hard stretching you open, pushing in deep?"

"Mmm, yesss."

"I got what you want, sweetheart. Right here."

Lubed fingers slowly pushed in to plunder his hole and Owen rocked into them, taking their length, working himself on them, building his need to fever pitch. Sam let him do as he pleased until the fingers withdrew and a hand landed on his hips, forcing him to be still.

"Take a deep breath, here comes what you really want."

With the touch of soft, wet flesh against his anus, Owen moaned, anticipating the slow penetration, the way his flesh would ease open beneath the pressure of that blunt head. There'd be a fleeting, sharp ache, a slippery inward rush and the crown of Sam's cock would lodge inside, trapped for a moment by the hard squeeze of the circular band of muscle that guarded his entrance. He wanted it desperately and wasn't disappointed when Sam delivered.

Bracing himself, Owen held steady for the long, slow glide of Sam's well-lubed cock as it filled him. Eyes closed to shut out the light, forehead pressed against his hands, Owen's breathing was harsh and quick. His position made the sound distinct and intimate, with each puff of air brushing against his lips and chin as it was deflected back at him from the sheets. Softly he began to whisper a steady stream of words, not knowing if they made sense and not giving a damn either way. Simply an unconscious expression of what he was feeling, he couldn't hold them back.

"Oh, God, oh damn. Son of a bitch. So good. Oh fuck, so good."

Finally breached to the hilt, Owen shuddered at the feel of Sam's thighs pressed against the back of his own. When Sam jerked against him, giving his cock a firm shove, Owen grunted then drew a sharp breath at Sam's slow withdrawal. From there began the rhythm, long, unhurried glides of flesh within flesh, Sam's cock pushing deep and easing free again and again.

At first patience won out and Owen ceased his every motion, accepting what Sam gave, wanting nothing more than to let his lover have complete control. That desire gave way to the pursuit of fulfillment. Each panting breath he took fueled the soft moans that passed his parted lips, audible evidence of the pleasure he took from the joining of their bodies. Stillness gave way to a small movement at first, a slight backward push to meet Sam's inward thrust. Steadily it became more, harder, faster, forceful, a surge of his body slamming back against Sam's, eager to drive the thick cock that filled him deeper within the slick confines of his gripping passage.

His climax rising toward the peak, Owen joyously labored with all he had, chasing the explosive bliss that would, for a few endless seconds, free him from the bonds of reality, taking its due in sweat and fleshly shudders. It was a worthy goal but one he lost sight of when his concentration was, without warning, ripped away. He was forcefully yanked upright and Sam's arms banded his torso, sealing every possible inch of their damp bodies together.

With one encompassing hand, he gripped Owen's chin, carefully canted his head to the side and uttered two words, rough and guttural. "My mate."

Owen had time for a single harsh indrawn breath before Sam bit down. Teeth, sharper than human, pierced his flesh. A blazing wave of heat engulfed him and his climax burst free, going from dead stop to explosion in a split second. Owen screamed as an exquisite flash of agony tore through him and then it was pleasure, endless crashing waves of pleasure that took him under and rolled him again and again.

Sam slammed their joined bodies down on the mattress, his hips pumping wildly, his cock forging in and drawing back in hard, frantic strokes. Owen recovered his senses enough to hear Sam's harsh growl, to feel the throb of his cock and the warm wash of semen that saturated whatever space was left in his passage not taken up by the thick column of flesh that filled him.

With that final act, whatever strength Owen had left deserted him and he collapsed completely. He grunted at the impact of Sam's body against his then took a replenishing breath when Sam rolled them to their sides and spooned him from behind. Sam's mouth found the bite at Owen's shoulder and his tongue softly soothed the raw flesh, each lick easing the pain until Owen drifted in a place of calm and ease reserved for pampered lovers.

Sleep exerted its influence but Owen resisted. He twisted in Sam's arms, turning to face him. "Show me how to do it."

Sam yawned and shook his head. "Can't."

"Why not?"

"First-time shifters need the full moon to change."

"But the moon was full last week. That means I'll have to wait for another three weeks!"

Sam shrugged. "You know I really am hungry now. Wanna go downstairs and get something to eat?"

"Sam. If I can't change for three more weeks why did you bother to bite me now?"

"Wasn't giving you a chance to change your mind. Besides, what a rush, huh?"

"You horny bastard."

"Who was begging for it, sweetheart?"

"That would be me. But three weeks from now after you've experienced twenty-one days of celibacy I'm willing to bet it'll be you who's begging." Owen rose from the bed and pulled on his jeans. "Now that I think about it, food sounds good. Coming?"

"Apparently not for another three weeks," Sam morosely muttered.

Owen laughed, leaned down and planted a kiss on Sam's lips. "You are so easy." With that he sashayed out of the bedroom.

Wide-eyed, Sam bolted out of bed, grabbed his jeans and followed his tease of a mate downstairs.

Epilogue

Under a half moon, flitting between dark trees and shrouded in shadow, eight wolves ran with joyous abandon. Though now in a playful mood, each and every one of them, given the right circumstances could become dangerous even deadly.

Their leader was a black wolf with white accents on his muzzle and ears. His alert, all-seeing gaze glowed with the fire of saffron citrines. At his shoulder ran his mate, his coat dominated by a rich golden brown, the green of his eyes like flawless emeralds.

Scattered behind them in a staggered line ran first the beta wolf. Blue-eyed, he had golden fur that shone with reddish-brown details. His smaller mate, sapphire eyes shining with excitement, kept pace at the beta's flank. His coat of ivory and gold was luminous compared to those of his brother wolves.

Two wolves with coats of dusky salt and pepper mixed with dark caramel and creamy tan followed. They were so evenly matched in height, weight and color – down to the green of their eyes – they could almost be twins.

In their wake and bringing up the rear was the final pair. The pack's newest member was a pale silver-gray wolf whose coat was so infused with cream he looked ghostly under the moonbeams that slanted between the trees. Last in line, the largest wolf, a coal-black beauty with amber eyes, kept careful watch over his inexperienced mate.

Upon reaching a secluded house, they slowed. While still in motion, the alpha pair transformed and turned back to watch their family gather. Dev and Ryan waited with welcoming smiles for the rest of the pack. One by one, each made the change, Nick, Eric, Quinn and Nathan.

Sam appeared next and gave his mate an expectant look. "Come on. I know you can do it." The last wolf whined and danced a bit in seeming agitation. Smiling, Sam squatted down so they were eye to eye. "If you change in the next ten seconds I'll give you something special. You know that thing I do in bed when I take your –"

In a blur of heat shimmer, the final wolf transformed. "Don't say it," Owen ordered, scowling at the teasing twinkle in his lover's eyes.

Everyone laughed and Dev led the way inside.

The house had originally been one Quinn kept for when civilization became too much for him. It was eight miles from the city limits and located in an area with dense woods and few neighbors. When Dev had formed the Stone River Pack, it became the perfect place for the activities that kept their wolves happy and the pack bonds solid.

Once inside, everyone donned their discarded clothing to combat the chill. Fall had arrived and with it cooler weather. With Eric's sometimes overzealous help, Nick

managed to start a fire in the fireplace. Quinn and Nathan rummaged around in the kitchen and returned with bottles of water for everyone. Sofas and chairs were duly utilized and everyone lounged together. Their contentment was palpable.

Where they relaxed together on a comfy overstuffed couch, Owen tilted his face up to Sam, parted his lips and pulled them back in a weird grimace. "I don't have hair stuck in my teeth, do I?" he managed in a garbled imitation of speech.

"You're deliberately trying to gross me out, aren't you?" Sam fondly accused.

"Maybe. You deserve it for that little performance outside."

"Sweetheart, I was just trying to help."

"Un huh, I hear you."

"Owen, how are things going with Dr. Kelly?" Dev softly inquired from his place on the floor. He was leaning back against Ryan's knees and idly caressing his thigh. "You don't mind if I ask, do you?"

"No, not at all. It's no secret that I'm seeing a therapist and actually, I wanted to thank you for having Sam suggest it. It's helping. Dr. Kelly says if I continue in the current vein I should eventually reach a point where I can visit my mom without turning it into a blame fest."

"That's good news."

"It is. I really kind of want to see her again, although I don't know what her current situation is."

"I'm glad you brought that up," Sam said.

Frowning a bit, Owen turned his attention to his mate. "Why?"

"With Nick's newly minted investigative techniques, we located her and I spoke to her on the phone."

"You what?"

"Don't get mad."

"I'm not. It's just..." Trepidation nipping him and in spite of the sudden tightness in his chest, Owen managed to ask, "What...what did she say?"

"Mostly that she was sorry."

"Sorry that you called?"

"Sorry for all that happened, sorry you left. She cried. She said she knows you'll never forgive her but she'd give anything to see you again. She asked me to tell you that even though you might not believe it, she loves you."

Pleased and touched more than he could have imagined, Owen let a shy smile curve his lips. He curled his fingers around Sam's hand where it lay against his thigh. "Thank you."

Sam dropped a kiss on the side of his head. "You're welcome. By the way, you now have siblings."

"Huh?"

"Yep. Two years after you left, your mom met a nice man—her words, not mine—got married and a year later had twins. Your half brother and sister are three years old."

"That's impossible."

"Why do you say that?"

"She was too old to have more kids."

"How old was she when you left?"

Owen did some quick calculations. "Thirty-five."

"So add three years to that and she would have been thirty-eight when she had them. That's not too old."

"Jeez, I don't believe this. A brother and a sister."

"That's good news, isn't it?"

"I guess."

"So do I get a thank you for that too?"

Twisting a bit to face Sam, Owen saw the mischief sparkling in his eyes. "I guess," he cautiously repeated.

"You know what I'd really like?"

"What?"

"That thing I was talking about before. What I do in bed? Only this time I'd like you to suc—"

Owen slapped a hand over his mouth. "Shut up." He drew his hand away when a teasing tongue tickled his palm.

Uncovered, Sam's grin appeared. "Make me."

Amidst masculine chuckles and snickers, and heedless of their audience, Owen sealed his mate's mouth shut with his own. When he ended the kiss, he stared into brown eyes glowing with flares of amber. This man, his lover, his mate, made his life complete. Somehow he'd made Owen's life come together. He'd pulled him out of the darkness and into a light the likes of which he'd never have found for himself.

Standing, Owen tugged at Sam's hand. "Come on. That thing you were talking about? I've got something even better."

With a joyous grin, Owen led the way upstairs and, reaching the nearest bedroom, he pulled Sam across the threshold and closed the door behind them.

About the Author

Having been an avid reader of romance for years, and being possessed of an overactive imagination, Kate decided to try her hand at writing. She discovered that, like reading, writing romance has become addictive. Whether writing about werewolves and otherworldly creatures or contemporary gay/erotic romance, she has found the perfect outlet and is thrilled to be part of the Ellora's Cave family.

Kate lives in a turn-of-the-century house located on three acres in the midst of Indiana farm country. Keeping her company is her family, dogs and other assorted pets.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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