

Loose Id

MAN *and* WOLF

KATE ROMAN

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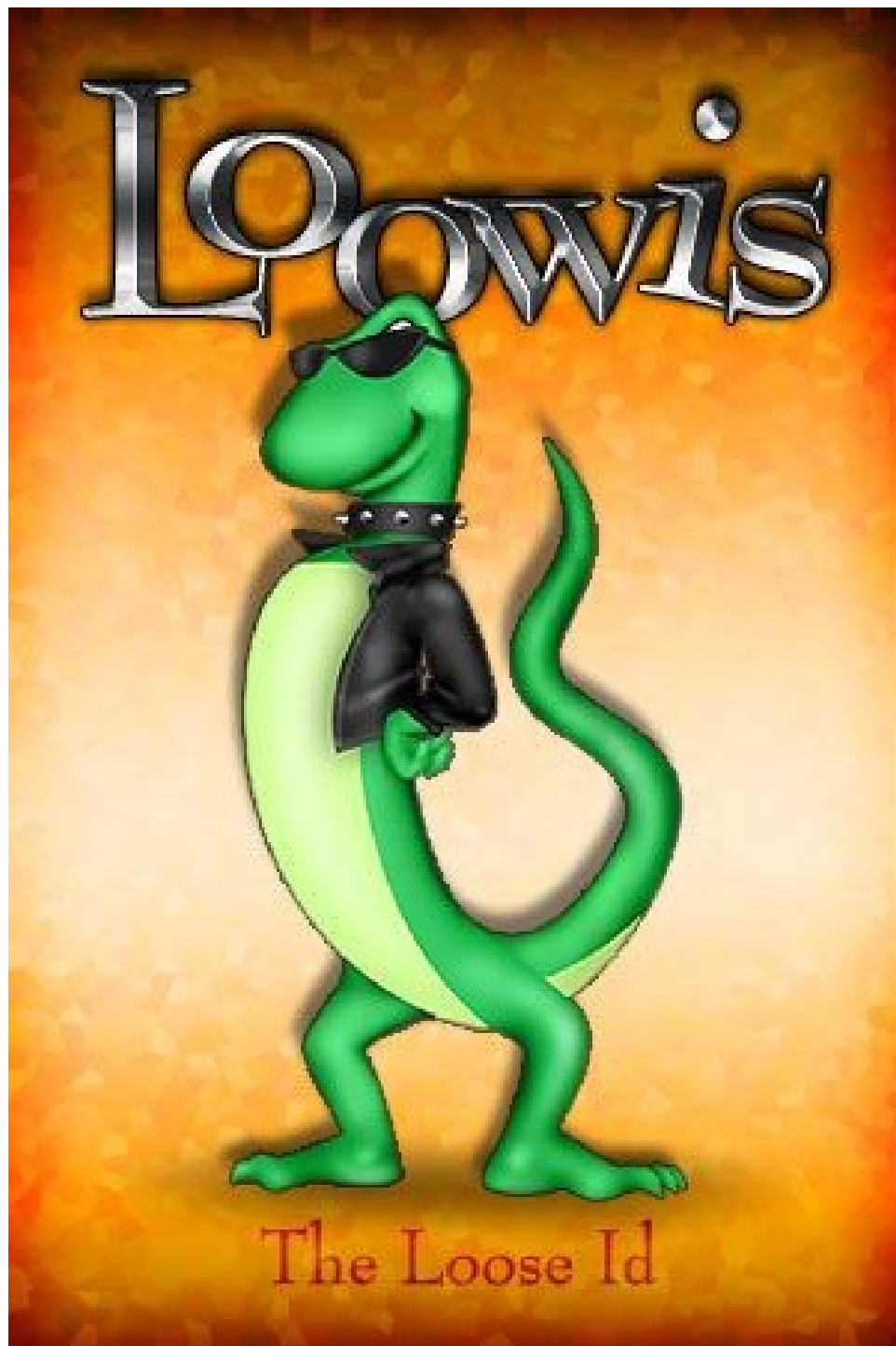
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Chapter One

Rob Nichols shouldered his way through the front door of the Lake Park Canine Veterinary Hospital, his malamute shivering in his arms. The bells above the door jangled violently, but in the busy waiting room, no one looked up.

At this hour, the two vet techs staffing the front desk were busy helping other customers: a thin, bright-eyed young woman with a bullmastiff sitting placidly at her feet; a harried-looking middle-aged man whose chocolate lab limped disconsolately around him; a heavily made-up professional woman holding a dachshund wrapped in a colorful afghan. From the next room, the practice resounded with a chorus of barks, whines, and growls.

The malamute whined, head dropping onto Rob's shoulder. He rubbed her fur anxiously. "Hey! Hey! I need some help here! My dog's been poisoned! What are you guys standing around for?"

All conversation ceased. A ginger-haired vet tech glanced up from where she was cashing out the dachshund. "If you'll just have a seat, sir, someone will be with you in a minute."

Rob crossed the linoleum floor in three powerful strides, elbowing his way to the counter. "No! She ate some rat poison! She's dying! Fucking get someone out here now! This can't wait a minute!"

"Sir, I assure you, we're very busy here. As soon as someone can—"

"Now! She'll die unless you get someone out here right now!" He locked eyes with the vet tech. In his arms, the dog raised her head, whining nervously.

"Sir, I'm afraid—"

"Now! She's dying!"

A tall, well-built blond man in a white lab coat appeared from one of the examining rooms, shutting the door behind him. "What's going on out here? Come on, you guys. Let's keep this profess—"

Rob interrupted. "Are you a vet? Help me! My dog's eaten rat poison! She's dying!"

The blond held up a hand. "I'm Dr. Jamie Bretton. What happened? What makes you think she ate rat poison?" He came out from behind the desk and crossed quickly to the pair, then pulled a penlight from his coat pocket and shined it in the dog's eyes as she whipped her head around.

"I was on a job. She got out of the van somehow and ate poisoned bait. She swallowed it before I could stop her. Please. I know it's late. Please." The malamute snarled, and the vet took an involuntary step back. The dog leaned over Rob's arm and threw up. "Baby, I'm sorry," Rob crooned. He looked at Dr. Bretton. "I know you're busy, man, but she's all I have. Please." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Please."

Jamie snapped his fingers at the ginger-haired girl. "Tessa, let's go. Clear exam room B. We're going to need to start lavage immediately. Full charcoal flush. Start an IV. Let's go." He reached out and took the malamute from Rob's arms. Their hands brushed as he did so, and a current of electricity ripped through Rob. The vet moved quickly for the exam room, and Rob stared after him, heart pounding in his chest. Pausing in the doorway, Jamie turned and called back, "Hey! What's her name?"

Scrubbing a hand over his unshaven jaw, Rob replied, "Bella. Her name's Bella."

Nodding briskly, Jamie disappeared through the doorway, Bella in his arms.

Bella. Rob had had her since she was little more than a pup, a gangly adolescent dog, no longer cute enough, probably, for whoever had left her by the side of the highway. It took him twenty minutes and one of Riverview Joe's finest hot dogs to get near her. He'd crouched by the side of I-64, halfway to the airport, cars

whizzing by, honking and yelling. Rob had ignored them all. Ignored Bella too, just sat down and watched the sun sink lower in the sky, while he took small bites from the sausage and shivered in the evening chill. Bella had shivered harder, nosing at his calves and knees before finally taking the food he offered. Scrawny, ribs clearly visible through her skin, she'd watched him the whole time, nostrils flared, tail at half-mast, until finally he'd stood up and headed back to the van. When he'd opened the door, she'd jumped in without hesitation.

Now she rode with him on his courier route every day. Sat in the passenger seat, waiting while he dropped off each package.

They spent every day together. She was his constant companion, his best friend. His only friend. Rob fought back a sob. He should be tougher than this. Smarter. He knew the rules. Knew he'd taken a chance getting attached to her. But he'd thought he was safe now. Despite the nightmares and the scars, he'd thought it would be okay. Bella kept his secrets. She understood.

And now this.

Rob had known as soon as he'd returned to the van and found her happily chomping away on something. He'd fought to get the remains of it from her mouth, smelling the poison in it right away.

As her nerves started to fray, the toxins taking over, Bella's innocent enthusiasm at her found treat turned to terror. She hadn't known that food could be a trap.

Around him, the practice was closing, the flow of clients all dried up for the night. Rob was alone in the waiting room, staring at torn and stained year-old dog-breeder magazines, trying to ignore the chorus of yelps and barks around him. Trying not to tune in to Bella's struggle to survive as he sat there, helpless. Rob wiped at the corners of his eyes. His dog. Just when he'd thought the universe was done kicking him around for a while.

He leaned back against the cracked tan Naugahyde chair. Closing his eyes, Rob shut out all the noises and smells around him in the practice, breathing deeply, trying to calm down.

A hand dropped heavily on his shoulder, and Rob jumped. He'd been so far under, he hadn't even sensed the vet's approach.

"Mister..."

"Nichols. Rob Nichols." He sprang to his feet, extending a hand. The vet shook it as if he barely remembered how, dark shadows and bags under his eyes speaking volumes about his day.

"We've done everything we can for Bella. I'm glad you brought her in when you did. It looks like we managed to pump her stomach clean before the poison got into her system." One corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. "She's a fighter, Mr. Nichols—"

"Call me Rob. I don't know any Mr. Nichols."

The tall blond looked taken aback, and Rob realized belatedly how he sounded. "I'm sorry, man. I'm sorry. It's just—"

The vet put his hand back on Rob's shoulder. "It's okay. Take it easy; this is always hard."

Rob looked at his new companion, smelling the antiseptic soap on his hands, the spicy aftershave, and underneath—

He came to his senses in a rush, eyes widening. "Is Bella gonna be all right, Doc?"

The vet smiled. "Tonight will make all the difference. We'll know in the morning. Warfarin's an awful thing, but it looks like you got her here before it had a chance to act. And like I said, she's obviously a fighter. And please, call me Jamie."

Rob looked into his deep blue eyes. "She is a fighter, yeah. You have no idea."

The vet seemed puzzled. "I guess not. Look, Rob, I'm gonna keep her overnight, and we're gonna know a lot more in the morning, okay?"

Rob's heart dropped, and on cue, a bloodcurdling howl arose from the back room. Jamie stared around wildly, and Rob winced. He tried to send Bella reassuring thoughts, tried to overcome her panic by calming himself, hoping she'd take the hint.

Jamie sank into the chair next to the one Rob had just vacated. Exhaustion was written all over his face. "We don't see a lot of these cases, and I have to tell you, I'm glad. They're always touch and go, to some extent." He looked down at his hands, then at Rob.

"Touch and go," Rob said slowly, his voice breaking. He sat down next to the vet. "Jamie, you don't understand. Bella...if she..." Tears shone in his eyes, and he held them back with an effort.

Jamie put his hand gently on Rob's shoulder. "Hey," he said softly. "Hey, you've done everything you can. You did the right thing. She's young and strong, and—" He broke off as Rob rubbed the tears from his eyes, giving up any attempt at pretense.

"She's all I've got," Rob whispered.

The unearthly howl from the back room was repeated, and Jamie jumped. "Look, Rob, I'm gonna be here for a while yet. You're welcome to stay with me...in case she needs you, okay?"

Rob nodded, wiping his hands on his jeans. "Thanks, Jamie. I'm gonna—"

Bella's howl came a third time, and Jamie shot a worried glance toward the back room. Rob froze.

That howl was different, and he knew what it meant.

"I'm gonna just go check on her, okay? You stay here. I'll be right back." Jamie gave Rob's shoulder a squeeze and headed toward the back, covering the distance with just a few long strides.

Rob was torn. Sick as she was, Bella was still looking out for him. He'd heard her message, loud and clear: the moon would be up in less than an hour. The full moon.

He'd been so caught up in saving her that he'd ignored the warning signs, and now he was caught unawares, out in the open. Putting a hand to the back of his neck, Rob felt the heat there and in his shoulders and elbows, hips and knees. The change was starting. He had to get out of there, had to get home behind a locked door, away from anyone he could hurt once the transformation was complete.

What was it Colonel Derrick used to say? Rob shivered, memories washing over him.

"Once it comes on you, boy, the only way you ain't gonna kill someone is if they're able to get away. Or you are."

Rob fought the bile rising in his throat. The Center had given him a lot over the years—torture, nightmares, surgery after painful surgery, and their ultimate gift, the killer instinct—but until now he'd never thought they'd given him something he could use. *Gotta get away.*

Away from Bella and the handsome blond vet trying to save her.

With a last, rueful look toward the back room, Rob pushed open the door and ran, headed for his van. The door to the vet hospital swung shut with a gentle *shush*, the bells hanging from the crossbar the only alarm that sounded the coming danger.

* * *

Rob had nearly made it to his apartment when his vision went, all color draining, leaving him stranded in a world of grays. He'd catch hell tomorrow for not returning the van to the delivery depot, but right now that was the least of his worries. All Rob could think was that Bella was safe, at least for now, and if he didn't get inside his apartment in the next few minutes, no one else would be.

Fumbling with his keys outside the building door, Rob suddenly bent double, the first of the cramps ripping through him like a knife. The keys dropped from his hands, then clattered on the cold concrete stoop. Rob gritted his teeth, shutting his eyes against the jagged shards of pain creeping down his spine, digging through his body with sharp, probing fingers. He focused on breathing.

The front door swung open in front of him, releasing a breath of stale lobby air. “Robert! Oh, Robert, what on earth is wrong?”

Rob's blood turned to ice. He could smell Mrs. Cray's wrinkled hands reaching for him. Easily twice his age and then some, coming to his rescue when it should be the other way around. “Robert, honey, come on inside. Let me take a look at you.”

Forcing his eyes open, Rob raged against his treacherous body, demanding one last measure of control. “I’ve...I’ve had some bad Chinese food,” he ground out, rescuing his keys and stumbling toward the elevators, shaking off the tiny, sweet-smelling hand she had laid on his arm. With her standing close, tugging at his sleeve as he waited for the elevator, Rob's heightened senses were overwhelmed by her scents—stale lavender bathwater, sweet, lacquered hairspray, and denture adhesive. The sounds only he could hear—the rustle of polyester over her wrinkled skin, the crack of tired vertebrae straining and settling, the slow, slushy pumping of her tired heart.

Rob caught the snarl as it fought its way from his throat. He shivered, fighting to keep his humanity despite the white-hot urges buzzing in his ears like flies. The elevator arrived, and Rob nearly crawled through the door, holding a hand up to forestall his neighbor as she tried to follow. “Be...fine...soon...”

The elevator door trundled shut ominously, and Rob dropped to the floor of the car, retching and clawing at his skin. His hair grew thicker by the moment, and his skin twitched and cracked as the new growth ripped through, making his clothes painfully tight.

Rob emerged from the elevator on the fourth floor and could only crawl down the hallway to his apartment, hoping none of his neighbors were peeking out. The

lock was a trial, and Rob fought to stay focused, sweat pouring off him in rivers, until he finally made it inside and lay prone on the floor, kicking the door shut behind him.

The other locks on the door, all keyed to the first, slid into place with the closing of the door. They were not designed to be easily opened from the inside.

He lay still, the rough fibers of the ancient carpet irritating his sensitive nose. Clawing at his clothes, Rob writhed in agony as his limbs broadened, as his fangs descended, as his tail grew.

Human bodies weren't meant to be abused in the way his had been. They weren't meant to switch between animal and man every time the moon shone in just the right way, awakening the genetic code that usually lay dormant and harmless in his cells.

With a cry of pain, Rob gave in to the change. His cries deepened, turning into growls and snarls. He pushed himself up onto paws and stalked around the darkened apartment, angry and pained. A member of his pack was gone. Snarling, Rob prowled the small space, frustration burning in his veins. He remembered taking her to safety, and that would have to be enough for now.

The apartment consisted of three rooms, and Rob knew every inch of it by heart. The tiny, worn-out kitchen opening to a living room that just fit a battered plaid couch, a TV on a stand, and a dog bed. The bedroom, its door barely five feet from the couch's edge, was home to a bed and nightstand, and the bathroom led off the bedroom. Rob moved around the scant pieces of furniture, checking the rooms. With a low growl, he shouldered his way between the legs of the rickety table sitting between kitchen and couch, seeking peace in feeling sheltered and hidden, sinking into wolf.

Outside, a full frost moon climbed high in the sky, continuing its journey, its power over Rob unstoppable and complete.

Finally calm, Rob rose, his claws clacking across the burned and stained linoleum in the kitchen as he prowled over to the refrigerator and nosed open the

door. The pound of raw ground chuck he'd left open and unwrapped that morning lay on the bottom shelf. He snatched it off the plate and pawed at it on the floor in front of the open door.

It was gone in three snaps of his powerful jaws.

Afterward he stretched his spine and hips and shoulders and stalked over to the edge of the linoleum, where the kitchen met the main room of the apartment. Against one wall was a dingy metal radiator, paint peeling and valve all the way open, and at its foot, a pile of hastily arranged blankets. Nosing an opening in them, the magnificent gray wolf with the blue eyes crawled in and, tail over nose, went to sleep.

Just at the edge of consciousness, a lingering vestige of the man clawed its way to the surface, and Rob thought of Bella. He offered up a prayer that she'd make it through the same night, but the prayer emerged as a mournful whine.

A snarl began low at the back of his throat but died halfway to completion as Rob remembered the kind, tired look of the vet he'd trusted with her care.

"Tonight will make all the difference." Rob remembered those words, and the feeling of Jamie's hand on his arm, before the wolf he'd become swallowed both the words and the memories, dragging him down into an uneasy, exhausted slumber.

Chapter Two

Jamie stared balefully at the Alaskan malamute.

She glared back, baring her teeth, making good on the promise in her eyes.

Bella was strong and just as much of a fighter as her owner had promised. Jamie had two bite marks on his hand to prove that. Bites came with the territory, though, and Jamie didn't blame the pup. She was far from home and in pain. If Jamie was surrounded by strangers, fighting for his life in a foreign place, he had no doubt that biting would be the first of his reactions to anyone approaching him.

He sat down on the green tiles and took a deep breath, tired beyond reason. Pulling a double shift wasn't for the faint of heart, but Jamie wouldn't have it any other way. He and his partner had built this practice from the ground up, putting the needs of the patients first, and he was used to the long hours and scant sleep that mind-set delivered him.

Jamie had started doing graveyard shifts in vet school and found he liked the solitude. He liked treating animals when things were quiet and he could focus better. Everything seemed simpler.

This dog, however, was neither quiet nor simple. She was pissed.

Jamie tried again, crooning her name, low and soft. "Bella, that's a good girl, Bella, good Bella, just need to take a look at you, Bella..."

He snatched his fingers away just before her jaws snapped shut. Getting to his feet with difficulty, Jamie threw his hands in the air. "Fine, have it your way." He grabbed the clipboard hanging at the front of her pen, checked the time, and made a brisk notation. "I'll come back in an hour. See if you're feeling any better then." Signing the entry with a flourish, Jamie continued talking. "You know, I get the

feeling Rob wouldn't be too happy with you right now if he was here. He was pretty worried about you."

Not worried enough to stick around, though, he silently amended. Looking up, he noticed that Bella had gone quiet at the mention of her owner's name, sitting on her haunches, alert but much less threatening than a minute ago.

Jamie crouched next to the small pen and tried again. "You miss Rob, huh, girl? You waiting for Rob to come get you?"

With a sigh, the big dog lay down and lowered her head to her paws. "That's a good girl, Bella; you wait for Rob."

Jamie unlatched the enclosure, swinging the gate wide, and then crawled in with stethoscope and thermometer. "I betcha Rob's coming back for you, girl," he said, gently stroking Bella's head. "He seemed pretty upset about what happened to you. Probably just went to go have a drink somewhere and calm down." Bella growled a warning, and Jamie looked up. "Not a big drinker, huh? Well, Rob must have had a good reason for not sticking around. Seems like he's pretty fond of you. He'll be back for you just as soon as he can."

Jamie maneuvered the thermometer into place and propped himself up on one hand, lying in the cramped enclosure with the malamute. In truth, he'd spent most of the night thinking of the stranger who'd stormed into the hospital earlier, demanding Jamie's help, teary-eyed at the thought of losing his dog. Jamie rubbed Bella's ears reassuringly. "Rob'll be back," he said softly.

People abandoned their animals at his practice all the time, if they even bothered to bring them in. This close to St. Louis's poverty-stricken East Side, Jamie had seen just about everything, and too often when the bill for treatment got even remotely near what it really cost, the owner either abandoned the animal outright or simply failed to return, never answering his repeated phone calls. And that was if the number they gave was even valid.

Jamie hoped this wasn't one of those cases. Rob had seemed genuinely heartbroken at the turn of events, and the look in his eyes when Jamie had told him

he could stay had smacked of genuine relief. Which had made it that much more puzzling when Jamie had returned from checking on the dog to find him gone.

And if he were being honest with himself, his disappointment was more than just concern for the dog. There was no denying Rob was attractive: well built, with olive skin, full, sensual lips, and eyes that had melted Jamie in his tracks. Listening to Bella's strong, steady heartbeat, Jamie admitted what he'd been fighting for most of the night. He'd thought, just for a moment out there in the lobby, that there'd been a connection between him and Rob, something more intense than instant physical attraction. Jamie had looked into Rob's eyes and felt like he'd known him forever, as if his whole life had been on hold until Rob walked through the door.

Finished with the exam, the vet patted the malamute's shoulder reassuringly. "He'll come back, Bella; I know he will." Jamie inched out of the cramped space, pushed himself to his feet, and stretched his back and shoulders. "And if he doesn't, I'll hunt him down and kick his ass myself."

"You know, sometimes I think they'd never get better if we didn't tell them to."

Jamie spun around, his alarm giving way to relief as he recognized Brianna, his partner in the practice and a damn good vet in her own right. Jamie laughed. "Tell me about it. It's all part of the treatment."

He hadn't heard the skinny black woman arrive but was glad of the company. Too much time on the graveyard shift thinking about tall strangers and their blue-eyed dogs would get anyone down. Brianna's smart mouth generally put a stop to that.

"You look like creamed death on toast, as my grandmother likes to say," she commented, shrugging out of her jacket. "Rough night?"

Jamie hung Bella's clipboard back on the front of her enclosure, the door still open. "Which of them aren't?" he asked. Brianna raised her eyebrows in response.

"A little excitement," Jamie continued, leaning on the door. "Two car accidents, one mystery stomachache that turned out to be nothing more than bad gas, an ulcerated eye, one tail slammed in a door—"

Brianna winced and walked along the enclosures to join Jamie, running her fingers along the wire fencing as she went.

“And one poisoning. Rat poison. Brianna, this is Bella. Bella, Brianna.”

Brianna's face lit up at the sight of the big dog, and Jamie held up a warning hand. “She should be considered a bite risk. As well as not being out of the woods yet. After all the excitement last night, I think she's gonna be just fine, but I'd like to see her get out back and stretch her legs. See how she's doing.”

“Morning! Anything new with our mystery big girl?” Tessa, the tech who'd helped Jamie treat Bella the previous evening, hung her jacket on one of the hooks and coaxed her thick ginger hair into a ponytail.

“Hanging in there,” Jamie said. Brianna moved to the next enclosure, reading Jamie's notes as she went.

Nodding, Tessa pulled a leash and a muzzle down off the wall. “Come on, girl. Let's see if you're feeling any better today than you were last night. Although, come to think of it, your night was only marginally worse than mine.”

Jamie chuckled, checking his watch before finishing a treatment note. “Not another blind date? When will you learn?” He scribbled his signature and moved on to the next pen.

“Ugh. Remind me never again to take someone's word for it that their cousin's a hoot.” She pulled a face, and Jamie shook his head. Tessa's love life was a well-known train wreck and much discussed around the practice. Constantly on the prowl, she dated too often and not well. Although, Jamie thought, she certainly had better luck than he did. He couldn't remember the last time he'd pursued someone. No one had interested him in a long, long time. Watching Tessa leash up the big, blue-eyed malamute, Jamie silently amended that thought, picturing Bella's owner and his smoldering blue eyes.

“At least you're out there, giving it a shot, looking at what's available.” Brianna paged through documentation for a sad-eyed, caramel-colored boxer. She looked at Jamie meaningfully. “Unlike some people we could mention.”

Jamie shook his head. "I'm too busy to look," he began. "Besides, I might as well—"

"Be married to the clinic," Tessa and Brianna finished in unison. They both dissolved in gales of laughter.

"Honey, you're too young to be so old," Brianna said, moving to the next enclosure. She picked up the clipboard hanging in front of the gate. "No one's saying Mr. Right's coming through those doors in the next few days, but Mr. Right Now could at least put a smile on your face. The place isn't gonna fall apart if you take a night off, Jamie. Now I'm not saying you should abandon us all to the never-ending tide of dogs coming through that door, but seriously. You need a life." Brianna opened the pen door and knelt down to retrieve a wriggling dachshund.

Jamie turned. "Thanks, Dr. Ruth. You know, you're here just as much as I am; you have been from the start. How's your love life going, hm?"

"A lady never kisses and tells." Brianna succeeded in taking the dachshund's temperature as it looked around for a means of escape.

Tessa giggled. "Okay, that definitely means some action's going down." Holding the muzzle, she bent to the big malamute at her side. "C'mon, girl. Some fresh air'll do you good." Bella flicked her head to one side, uninterested.

"Where's she gonna find fresh air, Tessa? We're in St. Louis." Jamie rolled his shoulders and stretched, then rubbed at a stubborn kink at the base of his neck. The long night was beginning to take its toll.

"Ha-ha." Tessa wrestled the big dog, trying to get the muzzle secured as Bella whipped her head this way and that, growling and snarling. "Uh, Dr. Bretton? A little help here?"

Jamie sighed and looked their way. "Bella, Rob'll be back as soon as he can. Give Tessa a break."

Bella let out a sharp bark, setting the other patients to yipping and howling their responses.

“Thanks for the help, Doc.” Standing next to her, out of harm's way, Tessa quickly slipped the muzzle over Bella's ears. Jamie watched her work, ready to lend a hand if needed, but the malamute gave her no further trouble.

“Rob?” Brianna asked. She and the dachshund both looked up with interest.

“Yeah, a guy named Rob Nichols. Brought her in last night and then disappeared without leaving any contact information.”

“Lemme guess,” Brianna answered. “No billing info either? No cash, no credit card? The original hard-luck case?” She tucked the squirming dachshund back in his enclosure as he tried to lick her into changing her mind.

Jamie heard again the desperation in Rob's voice from the night before, the tears he couldn't hide. “Long story,” he said finally.

“Oh,” Tessa said, “Rob Nichols is hot. Why'n't you say earlier? I'll call directory assistance.”

“Tessa...” Jamie shook his head. Bella had quieted again and watched the conversation with interest. Tessa scratched her behind the ears, and Bella leaned into the attention happily, rolling her head against the offered palm.

“You'll be happier once you get some air, won't you, girl?” Tessa said.

Jamie shook his head and kept writing as the perky vet tech led Bella along the row of enclosures and out the back door. He continued along the row, checking dogs, forcing his mind from the mystery of Rob's whereabouts, focusing on the job at hand. The sun had risen while Jamie's mind was elsewhere, and its wan rays sneaked in the clinic's windows, washing the mint green walls down with pale morning light, giving the big room a clean, near-magical feel.

A persistent banging started out front, and Jamie felt his stomach twist. Could it be Rob?

He headed for the lobby, heart sinking as he unlocked the door to admit a petite brunette swaddled against the spring in a thick fur coat. Jamie pasted on a

smile, inwardly chastising himself. He'd spent less than ten minutes with the guy. It was gonna be a long day if he had palpitations every time the door opened.

Then again, Jamie had hoped for a far better start to the morning than this.

Mrs. Corrigan was young and bored, and she often brought her purebred West Highland terrier in for Jamie's inspection. Mutty was generally fit as a fiddle, but after looking him over each time, Jamie treated the little guy as if he were getting a well-earned vacation. Last night she'd dropped him off, complaining he wouldn't eat his dinner. As soon as she'd left, the terrier had torn through a bowl of house kibble with no hesitation.

"About time you opened up, Jamie," Mrs. Corrigan said with a thickly lipsticked smile. "I've been waiting quite a while to get in." She tossed long, straight brown hair over her shoulder and fixed him with a calculating gaze. "How's my guy today?"

Jamie felt the blush starting at the back of his neck and spreading. The wealthy young woman had no compunction about showing interest in him, despite Jamie's repeated polite retreats. "Mrs. Corrigan—"

She uttered a *tsk* loudly, drumming perfectly manicured nails on the Formica countertop. "What am I gonna have to do to get you to call me Gale? With all Mutty's ailments, we're getting to be good friends, you and I, Jamie. Very good friends."

Jamie swallowed and looked down at the counter. "Mutty's feeling much better, Mrs. Corrigan. Maybe he was just dehydrated." Managing a cheerful smile, Jamie continued, "He's all ready to go. I'll just—Lemme go grab him for you."

He fled for the back room, ignoring Mrs. Corrigan's sigh of frustration. Just as he reached Mutty's enclosure, the door to the yard run opened, and Tessa returned with Bella in tow. "She's such a good girl! Aren't you? Such a good pup." Tessa shivered in her thin scrubs, but she and the malamute both looked pleased, and Jamie couldn't help smiling.

"She behave for you?" Jamie opened the pen for Mutty and stuffed him under one arm. The tiny terrier licked at his scrubs happily.

"Good as gold," came Tessa's reply. "Whoever your mysterious Rob is, he's done a great job training her. She's smart too. Like she understands when she's being talked to." Tessa ruffled the malamute's neck, then removed the muzzle and led her toward the pen. "There's definitely something—"

"Yoo-hoo!" An impatient ring of the bell on the counter reminded Jamie of his unwelcome chore for the morning. He and Brianna exchanged a look.

"Uh-huh," Brianna said. "You need me or Tessa, we'll be right back here, waiting for—"

With a snarl, Bella lunged past Brianna and made for the front room, baying angrily. Tessa tried to keep hold of her, but Bella fought her way loose and ran through the open door toward the lobby. Jamie ran too, Mutty slipping from his grasp. He was just in time to see Bella launch herself at Mrs. Corrigan, backing her into a corner of the lobby and snapping wildly, teeth gnashing just inches from the young woman's upraised forearm.

The young woman shrieked and pelted Bella with blows. Bella stood her ground, snarling and growling at Mrs. Corrigan's attempts to break free. As Tessa stood by, horrified, Jamie rushed round the side of the counter, Brianna hard on his heels. Between the two of them, they managed to get control of the malamute, pulling her away from the sobbing woman. "Take her in back. Now," Jamie directed.

Bella went quiet as soon as she was separated from her prey, and she followed Brianna meekly. Tessa disappeared after them, her face pale.

Making soothing noises, Jamie slipped an arm around the sobbing woman and guided her to a chair. Mutty bounced in a circle around his owner, yapping with concern. He popped up on his hind legs, front feet in her lap, sniffing and whining. To Jamie's horror, the young woman dealt the terrier a savage kick that spun him across the lobby. Jamie checked the urge to go to the little dog as Mrs. Corrigan dug

her nails into his hand. Her wails grew louder. "That beast! That savage, evil, monstrous beast! Why me? Jamie, why me?"

The bells above the door jangled, and Amy, the clinic's part-time receptionist, shouldered her way inside. She took in the scene at a glance, and her eyes went wide. "Dr. Bretton?"

Tessa reappeared from the back room, still pale, arms folded over her chest. She looked from Jamie to Mrs. Corrigan with concern. "Dr. Bretton?"

"Tessa, take Mutty back to his enclosure for a few minutes and check him over. See if he's okay. Amy, cancel my first surgery for the day. Bump it to the next available slot. It's not urgent care, so just tell them something came up."

Tessa nodded, kneeling to scoop up Mutty, who bounded into her arms with a joyful bark. "Of course. But what about—"

"And call animal control about that foul, evil—" Mrs. Corrigan renewed her wails.

"Oh, Mrs."—Jamie pulled himself together and marshaled his considerable charm with a deep breath—"Gale, I don't think that's necessary, do you? After all, it was only a small—" Jamie tugged gently at her sleeve, but she batted his hand away.

"That, that...thing...should be destroyed. You saw it! It attacked me!"

Tessa gasped, turning in the doorway, Mutty wriggling in her arms. "Wait a minute—"

Jamie held up his hands, trying to placate Mrs. Corrigan and his vet tech simultaneously. Shaking her head, Amy made her way behind the counter and logged on to the computer.

"Call animal control," she wailed. "There's a monster loose!"

With what was meant to be a reassuring smile, Jamie pushed the hysterical woman inside an empty exam room and shut the door. Once he was safely on the other side from the hysterics, he took a deep breath, eyes closed.

“She's right, you know.”

Jamie opened his eyes. Brianna leaned against the front desk, arms folded, dark eyes wide and cautious. “You know we should call animal control. Or she will.” She made no move to reach for the phone.

With a sinking heart, Jamie nodded. He knew she was right, just as he knew that the overworked, overcrowded animal control shelter's default policy was “public safety first.” Which generally translated into “animal safety last.” Jamie wondered what he'd tell Rob if he ever returned to pick up his dog. *When* he returned, his brain amended. When, not if. Something in Rob's eyes last night had made Jamie believe that whatever kept him from his dog right now would have to be earth-shattering. A matter of life or death at the very least. Hoping he was right, Jamie turned away as Brianna picked up the phone.

* * *

Jenkins and Woo, two of St. Louis's finest animal control officers, arrived in record time. They also arrived just as the vet hospital had started to get busy, and Amy, Tessa, and Brianna had their hands full triaging curious clients and their pets.

Leaning against the cupboards in exam room B, Officer Jackson Woo took notes on a tiny notepad he held in front of him. “Who's the dog's owner, Dr. Bretton? Where can we contact him?”

Jamie was sitting next to the still-weeping Mrs. Corrigan, her hand clutched in his. He hesitated.

Woo looked up over half-rimmed glasses, and Jamie held his breath. A portly, middle-aged Chinese man, Woo had been out to the clinic on a couple of different occasions, and Jamie knew he took a dim view of the bleeding-heart approach. “Dr. Bretton?”

Brianna burst through the door, knocking sharply as she came. The open door admitted a cacophony of noises, both canine and human. “We're getting pretty backed up out here, Dr. Bretton. You about through?”

Jenkins, tall and young with thick, curly red hair and hooded brown eyes, stepped forward, holding up a warning hand. "Please, Miss. We'll be done when we're done. Okay?"

Brianna gave him a dark look. "Jamie, I can't handle your patients and mine too. Not today."

"Ma'am, please." Jenkins looked over at his partner and shook his head in disgust. "We're conducting a criminal investigation in here, and I'm going to have to ask you to vacate this room. We need to get information on this dangerous animal."

Woo merely turned back to Jamie and spread his hands wide in supplication. "Dr. Bretton, I'll ask you again. How can we get in touch with the dog's owner?"

"Good question," Brianna replied evenly. "We're trying to answer that ourselves."

Woo looked from one vet to the other. "So the dog has no papers, no microchip, nearly attacked an innocent bystander without provocation, and now you're telling me you can't find its owner? I'm afraid this dog is coming with us. It's a dangerous animal. You know the drill." He scribbled on his notepad.

Jamie heard the pain in Rob's voice all over again, saw the intense blue eyes as if Rob were in the room.

He cleared his throat. "Actually Bella's mine."

Brianna choked on her gum and pounded her chest dramatically. Jenkins stepped forward to help but retreated at a look from his partner.

Jamie felt his face grow warm. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, but you see, Bella's my dog. I just don't happen to...have her papers here...today."

Brianna cocked her hip, arms akimbo. She'd recovered nicely from her coughing fit and was fixing Jamie with a look of amusement. "Uh-huh. This is how it starts."

He glared at her. “Yes, uh...Officer Woo. You see, I've had Bella since she was a pup, and she's never shown even the...slightest bit of...aggression. Really, Officer, there's not a mean bone in her body.” He tried a reassuring smile.

Officer Woo took a deep breath and dropped his hands to his sides. “I'm sure. Regardless, today apparently one of those bones turned, and she threatened someone, in front of a witness. So when you come up with those papers, we'll give her right back. Until then we'll just keep her safe from harm—”

Jamie rose, dropping Mrs. Corrigan's hand. “You can't. See, she was poisoned last night, and I can't release her.”

“Poisoned?” Jenkins asked.

“Uh yes, rat poison. You know, it's a very toxic substance, and she's lucky to be alive.”

“I know all about rat poison, Dr. Bretton,” Woo commented. “How'd she get hold of some?”

“Oh that's easy,” Jamie replied. “She got out of the van—”

“She got into a delivery van,” Brianna interrupted.

“That's right,” Jamie continued, shooting her a grateful look. “Aren't there laws in this city about the transportation of poisons? Why aren't you out enforcing them instead of hassling a dog who's lucky to even be alive?”

“Wait a minute,” Mrs. Corrigan demanded imperiously. “Isn't everyone forgetting about me? I'm the one who got attacked here!”

The two animal control officers exchanged glances, and Woo snapped his notepad shut with a sigh. “The animal is hereby confined, not to leave the premises on penalty of destruction. Dr. Bretton, you have a court appearance in your future. Ma'am”—he turned to Mrs. Corrigan—“I hope you feel better soon.”

Brianna snorted, and the red-eyed young woman shot her an icy glance. Brianna shook her head as she held the door open and gestured for everyone to be on their way. They filed out in silence, except for Mrs. Corrigan, who returned to

sniffing loudly. In the doorway, she turned and regarded Jamie levelly. “Dr. Bretton, you can expect to hear from my lawyers.” She turned on her heel and stalked out.

Jamie sighed and started to follow her. Brianna threw a skinny arm across the doorway, blocking his path. “You raised her from a pup. Uh-huh. Smart. I just usually ask them for their numbers.”

“Brianna...”

She threw her hands up in the air and headed out into the hallway.

“I panicked, okay?” Jamie said, following. “I just...I just really think he'll be back; that's all. And he trusted me—”

Brianna held a hand up. “Save it. You have work to do.” Jamie looked at the floor, then raised his eyes just in time to see Officer Jenkins staring at him oddly across the crowded lobby. A moment later Jenkins ducked his head and followed his partner out the front door. The bells jingled as it closed behind them.

“So what's your next move, Dr. Bretton?” Brianna grabbed two clipboards from the stack on the desk as Tessa turned and mouthed, *Help me*. There were three people and four dogs at the front counter. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. “Apart from taking some of this client backup stemming from this morning's excitement?”

Jamie opened his mouth to object, and Brianna said, “Stemming, Dr. Bretton, from an incident caused by your dog. So tell me. What is your plan?” She held out the clipboards with a challenging stare.

Jamie held up his hands in surrender, then took one of the proffered clipboards, resigning himself to a longer day than he'd planned. Backing into the exam room, he gave Brianna a wide smile. “Simple. Find Rob Nichols.”

Chapter Three

“So you met this guy who came into your practice clutching a dying husky—”

“Malamute,” Jamie interrupted around a mouthful of pizza.

“Dying malamute, right. Then said guy cries on your shoulder and runs away, and you fix his dog up just in time for it to try to bite someone. For which you take the blame.”

“Leonard”—Jamie wiped his hands on a flimsy paper napkin and reached for another beer—“that's not exactly—”

“Let me finish, Jamie, please. And now you want me to find him for you, not because you've gotten yourself into twelve different kinds of trouble, but because you want a date. Is that right?”

“Leonard”—Jamie set the beer back down on the glass coffee table; at a glance from Leonard, he moved it to a coaster—“I-I just want to find this guy so he can get his dog back, all right?”

Leonard finished the slice of pizza in his hand in two aggressive bites. He fixed Jamie with a beady glare, and Jamie looked away. He was well aware his face was an open book.

“Jamie, you described him to me as dark haired and well built, with olive skin and intense, ocean blue eyes.”

Jamie sighed and reached for another slice of pizza without comment.

Leonard quivered with indignation. “Are you aware that I am not a dating service?”

Jamie swallowed his mouthful of pizza. “Come on, Leonard. Just this once? I at least need to get the guy to come back for his dog. He obviously—”

“Obviously was very attached to his dog. Yes, you mentioned.” Shutting the pizza box, Leonard moved it to the floor and picked up his laptop. “But this is the last time, okay?”

Jamie kept quiet, taking another bite of the pizza and wiping his mouth with another flimsy napkin. He could argue the point. In the nine years they'd been friends, he'd only asked Leonard for help researching men he was interested in on two other occasions. Each time Leonard had protested, but deep down Jamie suspected he liked being of assistance, liked putting his skills to a less-noble use than his daytime job as a software engineer required.

Leonard peered intently at the small computer on his lap. “Nichols, Nichols, Nichols...hm...” Jamie finished the pizza and retrieved his beer.

“Nothing so far, Jamie. Let me adjust the search algorithm for alternate spellings.”

Jamie drank his beer and waited patiently. Leonard kept a dingy loft on South Ninety-seventh, just west of the river running through the heart of the city. He could easily have afforded to move out of the area, but Jamie suspected the thought rarely crossed his friend's mind. He was entrenched in the place; computer components covered every surface, and machines in various stages of distress littered the place.

“Aha!” Leonard sat back triumphantly, and Jamie looked up from his beer. But Leonard peered closer at the screen, and his face fell. “Oh, but that can't be right.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “There are seventeen possible candidates in the Greater St. Louis area,” Leonard announced. “Four are deceased, seven moved out of state, one was born, uh...six days ago, two are serving in Iraq—sort of a weird coincidence, there—two are over the age of sixty-five, so unless your tastes have drastically changed—”

“Leonard—”

“And one is, unbelievably, female. Jamie, are you sure you heard this guy's name right?”

Jamie let his chin drop onto his chest. Somehow he'd known Rob would turn out to be too good to be true.

In one corner of the living room, an iguana scratched at the lid of its glass tank. Leonard waved a hand at him, half greeting, half forbearance. “Just a second, just a second, Zorba. Keep your scales on. I'll be right there.” He peered down at the screen. “This doesn't look right.” He tapped a few more keys and waited, chewing at a thumbnail. “This doesn't look right at all.”

Beer halfway to his mouth, Jamie turned back to the screen with no clear idea of what right would be.

“It says here that one of the deceased Rob Nicholse renewed his driver's license. Four days ago.” Leonard tilted his head, lips pursed in concentration. “And the renewal was approved by the fine yet highly oblivious state of Missouri. So that's”—Leonard frowned—“creepy, Jamie; that's really creepy. Whatever your new, uh, friend, is up to, it's probably not legal. Are you sure you really want to find this guy?”

Jamie bit his lip, the thought of Rob's smoldering eyes foremost in his mind. “I have his dog, Leonard.”

His friend made no comment and started to close the laptop. Jamie held up a hand to stall him. “Wait. Can you do me one more favor?”

His friend raised an eyebrow.

“Could you... whip up a dog license for Bella?”

“Whip up?” With an aggrieved sigh, Leonard reopened his laptop, typing and shaking his head. Jamie smiled into his beer. Even if he didn't get a date, Rob had better at least thank him for this. At this rate he'd be buying Leonard pizza until the end of time.

* * *

Stopped at a light on Fourteenth Street, a block from the address Leonard had given him, Jamie wondered if he was making a terrible mistake.

He'd left Leonard's loft, after a stern lecture he'd only half listened to, with a very convincing imitation dog license and directions to Rob's place. It turned out Rob lived about a mile from the clinic, where Lake Park became one of the more colorful neighborhoods of the East Side. Jamie used the time driving back from Leonard's to rehearse what he was going to say to Rob when he found him. So far he had: *Hi, I have your dog.*

As he drove, Jamie tried to figure out why he'd let things get this far—dragging Leonard into it, getting Brianna to cover up his lies to animal control. He wanted to believe it was simply to keep Bella—and Rob—out of trouble. But the memory of Rob's eyes made a further liar of him; Jamie couldn't escape what he'd seen there, a loneliness so terribly familiar.

As he waited at the light, Jamie shook his head. He and Brianna had worked so hard to build the practice, to keep it going, and now he was jeopardizing it all for one animal, one guy. If nothing else, there was a pretty good chance Brianna was going to kick his ass into next year.

The pager at his hip vibrated, and Jamie groaned.

The light still hadn't changed, so Jamie dug out his cell phone and flipped it open with practiced ease. "Amy? What's wrong?"

A bulldog had been brought into the clinic with a bite wound that looked badly infected. Jamie could hear the dog's howls in the background as Amy strained to be heard. He made the left across Fourteenth with the phone balanced against his shoulder, telling Amy he'd be right there.

Instead, though, Jamie eased the car to a halt outside the address indicated by Leonard's searches, double-parking with his hazards on. He peered up at the ramshackle building dubiously. Whatever Rob Nichols was doing, if he was even there, would have to wait until Jamie had taken care of this bulldog. Hell, he probably owed the bulldog a favor for keeping him from making an ass of himself.

Two cars in succession honked at him, and Jamie reluctantly looked back over his shoulder, easing the car into traffic, looking for a place to turn around. The memory of those blue eyes haunted him—the tortured look in them. “*She’s all I have.*” Jamie could have sworn he saw something there besides the usual hard-luck pleading. Maybe he could swing by later, ask the guy to come have a drink, talk things over—

Jamie stopped that train of thought in its tracks. Right now he needed to be at the practice, doing what he was supposed to. He gave himself a mental shake. As he turned right, back toward Lake Park and the clinic, an unseasonal light snow began, melting away almost as soon as it hit the ground.

Chapter Four

Rob was strapped to a metal table, his neck, wrists, waist, knees, and ankles restrained by wide canvas straps. The metal was so cold, it stung his bare skin. The pungent odors of iodine and formaldehyde filled his nose, and he was terrified beyond rational thought, filled with the terror of anticipated pain, the terror of the treatment he'd endured.

A grizzled face swam into focus, and Rob shrank back against the metal. "He's still awake, so give him ten more cc of diazepam. If he moves around this time, we could lose the connection."

A needle stung Rob's arm. Then a hand dropped heavily on his thigh, fingers probing the muscle there. Rob fought to pull away, to yell for help. As the fingers pinched cruelly, Rob was unable to make a single sound.

"That oughta do it, Doc. Now go ahead, work your magic."

"Colonel Derrick, are you sure—"

"Doc, Uncle Sam ain't paying you to ask questions."

There was a resigned sigh close by. Then surgical steel bit into Rob's flesh, filling the air with the tang of blood. Rob's whimpers turned to screams.

Pain followed, spiraling and hot. Rob convulsed against his bonds; the pain rushed at him, snarling, jaws open wide, and Rob pushed himself down deep, toward the solace of unconsciousness.

Jerking awake, Rob slowly raised his head from the pile of blankets next to the heater, panting and shaking.

Running a hand over his face, he was pleased to find a jaw rather than a muzzle. He drew a deep breath, readjusting to seeing in full-spectrum color, trembling from the nightmare. He was so tired. So tired. Shivering, he pulled the blankets around him, covering his naked body, curling up tight against the heater as that ancient appliance kicked on with a noise like a toolbox falling down a flight of stairs.

The *clang* of the old heating pipes was reassuring in his transition state. The noise told him where he was, anchored him to his human state, keeping him company as his body recovered from its ordeal.

Rob pulled the blankets over his head, tucking into a tight ball, the edge of the radiator warm and hard against the back of his neck. He had the brief confusing feeling of missing his tail, wanting to curl it around him, over his eyes. Then his rational mind fought the wolf instinct back, batting it into a corner, admonishing the strange thought.

But there was something else missing, and Rob struggled to recover it.

Bella.

Rob's rational and wolf brains registered the loss simultaneously. Bella was all the family he had now, and he was terrified of losing her. With a whine, Rob remembered the look in her eyes as he'd torn the last of the poisoned meat from her jaws. After that, events were a blur. Running every red light between Bella and safety, yelling for help in the lobby, frustrated at the unseeing eyes of the techs at the desk. No one coming, no one listening.

And then the vet himself.

Rob settled in his blanket, the image of Jamie's face foremost in his mind. There was something about the set of his jaw, the concern in his blue eyes. He'd come back out to sit with Rob, put a hand on him, and Rob remembered the jolt he'd felt when the vet had touched him. He could hardly ever bear to be touched now, but this had felt different. Jamie had felt different. *Jamie felt...*

His fevered brain searched for the right word, the right image. The way Jamie'd looked at Rob, the honesty in his eyes. Rob had known, on some deep level, that Bella would be safe with him. Jamie hadn't judged Rob, hadn't tried to force his way into Rob's head. Just sat with him, reassuring and—

The wolf part of Rob's brain cut him off midsentence: Jamie felt right; that was all. Rob could trust him to come close.

With a satisfied growl, Rob stretched against the radiator, unable to fight the exhaustion any longer. In the morning he would be himself again. He would be rested and rational, and fully human.

And he would go back to the clinic to claim what was his.

* * *

The bells on the front door jangled with each blow. Someone outside the vet hospital was determined to come in.

Jamie sat up on the narrow cot and pushed off the blanket, swinging his feet onto the tile. The smells of antiseptic soap and dogs filled his nose. The bulldog's bite wound had been badly infected, and the only hope for containing the infection had been to remove the damaged tissue entirely. He'd completed the surgery around three, then finished the inpatient rounds. Afterward he'd been too tired to do anything but collapse on the cot in the back kept for just such situations.

The pounding resumed, louder now, and the bells jingled alarmingly, setting all the dogs howling. Jamie ran a hand over his hair and squinted at the wall clock: seven a.m. The sun's rays barely straggled through the high windows of the back room. He groaned. The alarm on his phone should have woken him, but apparently he'd been beyond the normal realm of tired.

After dragging himself to his feet, Jamie located his shoes and headed for the front door. "Coming," he called. "Hang on. I'll be right there."

He peered out into the dim morning light and groaned. After unlocking the door, he opened it to admit Officers Jenkins and Woo. The two animal control

officers were followed by Brianna, who handed Jamie a cup of coffee as she entered. “Amy left me a voice mail, honey.”

Jamie smiled his thanks and turned to greet the officers. “Woo, Jenkins.” Nodding, he fished the newly created registration papers out of the pocket of his scrubs and smoothed them against the counter. “I think I have what you're after.” With a nervous grin, he slid a crumpled page over to the officers. The sweat-stained, creased paper looked more authentic to Jamie's eyes than a fresh, pristine page would have.

Jenkins took the page off the counter and, with a dark, suspicious glower, read it quickly, then put it in the breast pocket of his freshly starched uniform. Jamie took a long swallow of the hot, bitter coffee and struggled to focus.

“This right here, Dr. Bretton”—Officer Woo held out a folded packet of papers—“is your summons. Municipal court 23. Don't be late.”

Jamie rubbed his eyes, then grabbed the papers. Brianna snatched them out of his hand as Woo continued. “And this?” Woo smiled, brandishing an unsealed envelope. “This, Dr. Bretton, is your fine for a first offense.” He handed over the mystery envelope, and Jamie put his coffee on the countertop and pulled out the letter inside. Brianna peered over his shoulder.

“Four hundred dollars? You're kidding!” She popped her gum in Jamie's ear, and he took a startled step to one side.

“It's...” Jamie took a deep breath. “I'll pay it. It's—”

“It happens again, and the dog's ours. You understand, Doctor?” Jenkins stepped around his partner and tapped Jamie's chest with one finger.

Jamie fought rising panic. “Yes, sir, I understand. Thank you.”

Brianna's shrill voice interceded. “What? Are you kidding me? All because some guy—”

“Brianna!” Jamie looked up sharply.

“What guy would that be?” Jenkins narrowed his eyes.

Jamie closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He just wanted the whole thing done with. He was exhausted, and he wanted them all to leave him alone, let him go home, get some sleep. Try to forget about Rob Nichols.

Jenkins stepped closer, his breath hot and sour on Jamie's face. "I asked you a question, Bretton. And you know why I asked? Because something about this whole thing stinks; that's why. There's something about you that—"

The front door jerked roughly open, the bells jangling once more. The dogs in back renewed their chorus of barks and wails. "Where's my dog? Where's Bella?"

Jamie opened his eyes just as Jenkins took a step back and whipped around to face the door.

Rob looked like he hadn't slept since Jamie'd seen him last, and a scruff of dark fuzz was visible along his jawline. Abruptly Jamie wondered what it would feel like to run a hand over it, to nuzzle against it, to wake in the crook of that strong neck, nestled against the dark curls just visible at the open collar of Rob's shirt.

Brianna elbowed him, and Jamie came to his senses. He picked up the coffee again, just so his hands would have something to do besides reach for Rob. "Uh, Rob! Mr. Nichols. We'll be with you in a moment."

Rob's eyes narrowed. "Jamie, I need my dog. Where is she?"

"Right. She's in back, and as soon as I'm done here, I'll go grab her for you, okay, buddy?"

"Jamie, please..."

Jamie ached at the fear in Rob's eyes. It echoed the look he'd seen when Rob had arrived with Bella dying in his arms. But there was something more now, something new. Jamie locked on to Rob's gaze and felt a shiver of recognition run through him.

"Did you say your dog's name was Bella?" Jenkins frowned, his pale eyebrows nearly invisible under the fluorescent lights.

Rob opened his mouth to reply, and Jamie saw exposure looming in front of his eyes.

“Mr. Nichols! Please give us a moment here!” Brianna's commanding attitude demanded obedience from everyone she turned it on, man and dog alike. Jamie took a deep breath as Brianna summoned up her most forbidding scowl.

“Well, Officers?” she demanded. “You've seen the dog's registration, and Dr. Bretton told you he will pay the fine. You've delivered your summons. Is there anything else this hospital can do for you today?”

Jamie bit back a smile. Rob alternated between staring at him and staring at Brianna but stayed quiet. Finally his gaze settled on Jamie.

Jenkins shot a questioning glance at his partner, but Woo shook his head. He looked around the clinic, his gaze then lingering on Rob. “Thank you for your cooperation, Doctors. We'll be keeping an eye on things in this neighborhood. I hope we don't come across Bella again.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jamie saw Rob start at the mention of his dog's name. Jenkins stepped forward, squaring his shoulders, but before he could speak, a loud howl echoed from the back of the clinic. The other dogs, who had quieted in the meantime, rejoined the fray. Brianna took the opportunity to usher the animal control officers out of the door.

“Bella!” Rob made for the back room, but Jamie stepped in front of him, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. Rob stopped, his face inches away from Jamie's.

“What have you done with my dog?” Rob's expression was fierce and wary.

Jamie spoke softly, his tone low and even. “I kept her safe, buddy. She nearly bit someone, and I didn't know how to get in touch with you, so I told everyone she was mine. That's all. Everything's taken care of.” Feeling his heart pounding, Jamie searched Rob's face for a long moment. He felt like he'd never needed anything as much as he needed Rob to believe him. To trust him.

“Is she okay?”

“Who? The lady Bella took a swipe at?” Brianna interjected. “Because the dog's just—”

“Brianna, go grab Bella from the back, will you?” Jamie didn't take his gaze off Rob. He doubted he could have even if he'd wanted to. Rob's eyes were pale blue, intense, and beautiful, but the haunted look Jamie'd thought he'd seen before was still there, along with the fear he'd seen earlier. What was this guy so afraid of? Whatever it was, Jamie knew he'd do anything to make it disappear, make Rob feel safe instead, and wanted. Because there was no doubt in Jamie's mind. He wanted Rob Nichols.

And he was positive Rob wanted him too. There was more in those eyes than just fear; he was certain.

“Look,” Jamie began, holding his hands wide. “Bella's fine. You can take her home right now. All her tests look fine, and well, Rob, I think the only thing wrong with her now is that she misses you.”

Rob's expression softened, and one corner of his mouth pulled up in a smile. He stuck his hand out.

“Thanks, man. I just wanted—”

Another unearthly howl erupted from the back room, followed by a series of vicious snaps and snarls. Rob pushed past Jamie with a look of surprise and jogged toward the back room, calling for his dog.

Brianna stood in the middle of the room. She had a squirming Pekingese tucked under one arm and was barely restraining Bella with the other. There was blood on Bella's snout. “Get this dog out of here!” Brianna yelled.

“Bella! What'd you do to my dog?”

At the sound of Rob's voice, the malamute wriggled free and ran to her owner, tail wagging happily. Rob knelt and examined her muzzle, patting her shoulders and crooning to her. He rose suddenly. “Just fine, huh? What happened?”

Rob addressed the question to Jamie, who shrugged and appealed to his partner. “Brianna?”

“I don't know how it happened, but just as I was bringing Bella up to the front desk, Delilah got loose and went for her!” The Pekingese gave a sharp yap, as if confirming the story proudly.

Rob glared at Jamie. He stalked out, the malamute trotting happily at his heels. She didn't appear to be injured at all, but Jamie wanted to make sure. “Rob! Hey, Rob, wait up!”

Jamie dropped a hand on Rob's shoulder, but he shrugged it off. The look in his eyes stopped Jamie cold. His eyes spoke of anger and betrayal. Jamie's mouth hung open. “Rob...”

Rob flattened his full lips into a tight line, eyes glittering. Watching Jamie, Rob fished a wad of crumpled bills out of his pocket and tossed them on the counter. Without another word, he stormed out of the clinic.

Jamie ran a hand through his thick blond hair and debated whether to follow. Every instinct urged him after the mysterious stranger, but the hurt look in Rob's eyes—he was terrified of making things worse. With a shake of his head, Jamie came to a decision. At the very least he needed to check on the dog.

He took a step toward the door, reaching for the handle, but it was ripped from his grasp, bursting open to admit a hysterical woman. “Benji! Please help Benji!” she cried, clutching a whimpering dog to her bosom. Jamie saw shards of bone protruding from one of the dog's front paws. He pushed Rob Nichols from his mind and ushered his new patient inside.

* * *

Rob drove through the morning rush hour in a fury, and Bella whimpered a question at him from the passenger seat. He glared at his dog. “You wanna tell me what that crazy stunt was back there?”

Bella turned to look out the window, ignoring his question, the bustle of the city infinitely more interesting than her ranting owner. Rob shook his head. “Don't tell me that wasn't deliberate. What, you just thought today would be a good day to get us both found out?”

Bella continued to blithely ignore him.

“And you had to go and bite—fine—*almost* bite someone. Again.” Rob gestured widely with one hand. “What, you didn't like the way they smelled? The way they walked? The kind of shoes they had on? Bella, you've gotta learn to control your temper!” He jammed on the horn as a tricked-out Mustang zipped across the intersection against the light. “Could you just do me a favor and try not to bite anyone between here and the apartment? Huh? Do you think you could manage that?”

Bella turned from the window and stood in the seat, bumping Rob gently in the shoulder with her muzzle. Her message sent, she jumped down and headed for the back of the van. Rob circled his apartment building looking for a space. Suddenly he jammed on the brakes and turned to look over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “What do you mean she was trying to take my mate?”

But Bella had curled up into a ball, her back to Rob, and seemed unwilling to say anything more on the subject.

A car pulled up alongside the van, the driver honking angrily and gesturing. Rob was too stunned to respond. *My mate?*

“Bella?” he called. The malamute responded with a single thump of her tail against the rough metal floor.

Rob continued to sit and stare as more cars wove around him with a stream of angry yells and gestures. *My mate.*

Even thinking about Jamie now, Rob's breath caught in his throat. He was beautiful: tall and athletic with a strong chin Rob longed to nip and kiss and taste, blond hair he could almost feel between his fingers. And the sound of his voice: low,

just this side of raspy, with a soft tremor Rob didn't know if anyone but he could even hear. He shivered at the memory of it.

But it was more than that. The way Jamie'd looked at Rob both times they'd met, as if he understood, as if he was willing to take a chance on Rob the same way he'd taken all those risks to save Bella.

Weary, Rob pinched the bridge of his nose. What the hell was he thinking? It had been a long damn time since he'd trusted himself to touch someone, since he'd found someone he wanted so badly. He was a werewolf. There was no happy ending for him, no tall, blond, too-human vet, no mate—

Bella let out a whine, and Rob turned to look at her. She stretched languidly, standing and shaking out her ears, tail waving happily back and forth. She whined again, short and sharp, head to one side.

“Yeah, yeah, Bella. You're always right. I get it.” Rob let out a groan of frustration and, with a last harried look over his shoulder, put the van back in gear and eased back into traffic, eyes peeled for a space on the street somewhere in the vicinity of the apartment. He hoped if he called dispatch in the next hour and begged a little, maybe pleaded a sick mom or dead grandmother or something, he'd be able to hang on to his job. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and swore as a tan Saab nosed its way in front of him and stole the last spot at the light.

The phone's display blinked urgently, showing a new voice mail. Rob's stomach flipped over. Maybe the only thing he'd be doing this morning was returning the company van. With a resigned sigh, Rob turned the van around and headed back toward the freeway.

* * *

Rob's fears were realized on his arrival at the dispatch yard. After he was fired, he and Bella made it back to the small downtown apartment without incident and Rob spent the rest of the day looking online for a new job. “What was I supposed to tell them, huh, girl? 'Sorry I forgot to return your van, but I had my

monthly werewolf problem.' I'd lock me up too, you know?" Bella made no comment, just lay at Rob's feet and chewed a Nylabone contentedly.

As the day wore on, Rob diligently submitted applications for jobs he knew he probably couldn't keep: bus driver, dishwasher, taxi driver. None of them really mattered. It had been the same thing ever since he'd escaped from the Center: his condition was only ever hideable for a couple of months, and then everything went to hell. He'd had better luck in St. Louis than anywhere else, mainly because there were so many jobs no one else wanted to do.

Bella woofed softly, rising nimbly and trotting to the front door. Rob rubbed his eyes and looked up from the laptop. The afternoon was quickly being consumed by evening, and as he followed Bella to the door, Rob switched on the light. Bella was dancing in a circle in front of the door, bowing and prancing. Rob stopped, arms folded across his chest. He whistled a question at the dog, but she ignored him, continuing to bounce happily.

Rob closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting his sense of smell answer the question. It hit him with the force of a freight train.

Jamie.

There was a tentative knock at the door. Rob stared at Bella, mouth open. Bella stared calmly back.

Rob took the remaining steps to the door slowly, not understanding what was happening. How had the vet found him? Why had he come here? What did he want? Rob pressed his forehead to the door, struggling to master his rising emotions.

Jamie called out hesitantly, "Rob? Rob Nichols?"

That voice. Rob couldn't get the locks open fast enough.

He opened the door, and Bella cannoned out from behind him like a furry shot put. She jumped up on Jamie even as Rob tried to keep her back. She was having none of it. Rob grimaced, watching Bella paw at Jamie, slobbering and licking madly. This really wasn't the impression he wanted to convey.

“I'm sorry. My dog, she just gets a little excited sometimes. Bella, come on, girl. Behave yourself.”

Jamie looked up from the excited dog and smiled slightly. “I was in the—That is, I just...I thought I should check on Bella, you know. See how bad the wound—uh, her snout—” He licked his lips and turned his attention back to the malamute.

Rob watched intently as Jamie ran his hands over Bella's snout, checking her over after the morning's adventures. Bella whipped madly around in a circle before burying her nose in Jamie's crotch. Rob winced and grabbed for her again. “Oh, man, I'm so sorry. I mean, she's not like this with other people...”

All at once, Bella calmed down. She dropped into a sit, gazing coolly at the two men as though they were the ones misbehaving.

Rob stopped and stood back in the doorway.

Jamie met Rob's eyes. Both of them were silent.

Bella disappeared back inside the apartment, tail held high.

Jamie smiled again, shyly. “Listen, Rob. Did you wanna—”

A thunder of footfalls on the stairs made them both look down in surprise. Two teenagers dressed in Blues jerseys ran up the stairs, laughing and out of breath. Reaching the landing at the top, they poked each other significantly and loped toward the two men, eyeing Jamie suspiciously. The taller of the two sported a kelly green Mohawk.

Rob looked at his neighbors and nodded. “I know what you're here for, guys. Come on. Keep your hair on.” With a nod, he indicated the leader. “Looks like I'm too late on that one.” The two teenagers snickered, and Rob cracked a grin.

Turning to Jamie, Rob met his eyes. “Lemme take care of this, okay? Then we can...go back to talking about what Bella needs next.” He tried an apologetic smile.

Jamie nodded, backing away from the kids on the stairs. Rob disappeared inside his apartment. As he left the doorway, he heard one of the teenagers try to

engage Jamie in conversation, his sallies met by awkward pauses as the young vet stammered out his responses.

Rob shook his head, crossing his tiny apartment in a few brisk strides to pull a bag from the pocket of his leather jacket where it hung on the back of his chair in front of the computer. He returned to the front door triumphant. "Here." He thrust the bag of dried leaves at the green-haired boy. "Exactly what you need."

Jamie sucked in his breath. Rob looked up sharply.

The vet's eyes were wide and scared, darting from the teenagers to Rob and back again. "Listen, Rob, I just remembered. I have—There's this dog—I mean, at the practice?" Rob smelled the change in him, from nervousness to all-out panic, and he reached for Jamie's arm to keep him close.

"He's real—Well, he's not..." Jamie sighed, unable to meet Rob's eyes. "Maybe some other time, okay?" Jamie shook off his hand and turned away. Pushing past the two boys on the landing, Jamie fled, soft work shoes tapping against the old wooden stairs as he went. Rob listened to him go and tried to master his disappointment.

His neighbors watched Jamie disappear without comment, then turned back to Rob. "Friend of yours?" one of them asked.

Rob shrugged. "It's not important." He turned his attention back to the kid with green hair. "Hey, you let me know if those don't do the trick for your grandma, okay?"

The kid nodded, sticking a hand out for Rob to shake. "Thanks, Nichols. I owe you one. It's a long way to Chinatown from here."

Shaking his hand, Rob answered softly, "You and your grandma, you don't owe me anything, you hear me?"

The boy swallowed hard, then nodded. Rob clapped him on the shoulder. "You take good care of her, okay?"

The green-Mohawked kid turned away and followed his friend along the hallway. Rob watched them go, then retreated back inside his apartment. Bella whined, long and worried, nuzzling at the backs of Rob's legs as he headed into the kitchen.

"I don't know, girl. I really don't. I guess Jamie just got spooked." Rob sighed. He'd thought for a minute there when he first saw Jamie on his doorstep that maybe the two of them had a shot. Maybe they could work past the whole...whatever. Rob had no idea what he'd been thinking.

Bella whined, the high pitch descending and then ending in a growl.

"I'm not feeling sorry for myself. Lay off, will ya?" Rob pulled a beer from the fridge and found a cookie for Bella. She swallowed it with one snap of her jaws, then sat staring expectantly until he fished out another. Uncapping his beer, Rob made his way to the ratty couch and sat heavily. Single, unemployed, and a werewolf. He figured he had better reasons than most for feeling sorry for himself.

Chapter Five

Outside, Jamie leaned against the brick building, chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. He closed his eyes and saw Rob hand the bag of dried leaves to the kid over and over again. Of course Rob was too good to be true. A drug dealer. How could he have made such a fool of himself?

Opening his eyes, Jamie took in the urban neighborhood around him, watching the streetlights flicker on, the streets emptying of people as the workday drew to a close and night descended on the city like a shroud. He'd seen the evidence with his own eyes: Rob Nichols was a drug dealer. He'd fallen for a criminal. In the space of forty-eight hours, he'd gone from a hardworking small-business owner who didn't even cheat on his taxes to someone who lied to the police and was in love with a—

Sagging heavily against the wall, Jamie thumped his head softly against the bricks. He couldn't be in love with someone he'd only seen three times. Someone he'd never even been on a date with.

Someone he'd never kissed. Someone he'd never watched wake up in his arms.

After pushing himself up, Jamie headed back toward the practice. He'd deliberately set out on foot, detouring through the park with the thought that some fresh air might bring him to his senses. Despite his best intentions, his head-clearing walk had led him straight to Rob's door.

At least seeing Rob calmly handing over whatever drug was in that bag to those...”hooligans” was the word Jamie's disapproving mom would have used—that had done the trick. Still, Jamie couldn't help remembering the pleased, relaxed look in Rob's eyes before his customers arrived. Had there been a spark of interest there?

Jamie sighed. Even though he'd only met the guy twice, he was letting his libido do all his thinking. Whether Rob was interested or not didn't matter. All signs pointed to Jamie having made a fool of himself yet again. He became aware of the pounding at his temples and groaned. A perfect ending to the day.

Putting a hand to his temple, Jamie looked both ways along the street. Luckily a yellow taxi was motoring toward him out of the darkness, its soft light growing brighter as it approached. Jamie stepped off the curb, careful to stay back near the sidewalk as the cab drew to a halt. All he wanted right now was to down some aspirin and crawl into bed, drawing the covers over his aching head, forgetting yet another in a long line of hopeless romantic endeavors. He sank against the torn vinyl seat with relief, squeezing his eyes shut, letting the cab door seal him off from the world.

The yellow cab crawled through the clogged and lonely city, carrying Jamie away from Rob and into the busy and alien night.

* * *

It was Brianna who finally bearded Jamie in his office lair following a morning of snapping, snarling, and dogs. "You need to take a couple of days off."

He snorted and continued sorting through a week's worth of mail. "Yeah, Brianna? How would that work exactly? And who are you to be telling me what I need?"

Jamie looked up just in time to see the flash of hurt in her eyes. He took a deep breath. "Brianna, I'm sorry. I'm just—"

"Working too many hours without a break and eating your heart out for a complete stranger?" Brianna tapped her nails against the door frame. "Yeah, happens to the best of us. Listen, I've taken you off the calendar starting the day after tomorrow for two whole days and then again from the nineteenth through the twenty-first, okay?"

Jamie scowled. "You changed the calendar round without asking me? Brianna, there's nothing wrong with me, okay? I can handle this! I don't need a break, I don't need a day off, and I don't need you giving me advice about my love life!"

The practice fell silent, and only then did Jamie realize he'd been yelling. He dropped his gaze to the desk. In the six years she'd worked with him, they'd seen innumerable horrors come through the door, the unspeakably cruel things fate and people dished out to innocent animals, and Jamie'd never once seen Brianna cry. She was a tough little East Sider, all raw sinew and tightly woven braids. And now her eyes were wet with tears.

"Brianna," Jamie said softly. "I'm real—"

"Yeah," she said, turning away sharply. "You are."

* * *

Jamie made a final check on Benji. The little dog whined with interest, and Jamie patted his raggedy head. "You feeling a bit better, huh, little guy?" The dog whined again, brown eyes soulful, and Jamie nodded, satisfied. The small dog was much brighter than he'd been earlier, and it looked like the antibiotics were combating the threat of infection. "You're gonna make it, pal." Jamie patted the dog's head again and locked his enclosure.

He made his way slowly into the waiting room and tidied up perfunctorily, piling the magazines back on the corner tables and retrieving a cushion from the floor. Behind the counter, Jamie checked that the register was locked up and eyed the next day's appointments, laid out already for the morning.

He was still tired, and Benji's improvement had been the only bright spot in a long, disheartening day. What had made it worse was the feeling he'd had, at odd moments, that someone was watching him. He'd looked up time and again over the course of the day, half expecting to see Rob Nichols in the room, feeling the unwavering gaze of those demanding blue eyes. But each time, he'd been alone, and feeling foolish, he'd returned to his patients and his paperwork.

"It's better this way," Jamie told himself, exiting the front door and carefully fastening the lock. "He's got his dog back, and she's fine, and I'll never see him again."

Outside, it was a beautiful evening, the blue sky fading to gold as the sun sank over the tops of the surrounding buildings. But as he made his way to the parking lot at the rear of the building, Jamie looked only at the dirty concrete under his feet. He kicked a piece of broken glass aside. The evening stretched ahead of him, barren and boring, and he shuddered at the thought of Brianna's enforced vacation. Maybe he did need some time off, he wasn't denying that, but right now the idea of his own company was anything but appealing.

He pulled his car keys out of his pocket and looked toward his parking place. The setting sun glinted on his white Jetta, and he narrowed his eyes against the glare.

Jamie took two more steps and stopped. There was someone standing beside his car. He shot a glance over his shoulder, his tiredness and depression forgotten in a rush of adrenaline. The parking lot was deserted now, the other businesses in the strip mall already long closed. He took a half step back, wondering if he should turn and run, and then the figure moved.

"Hey, Jamie." The voice was soft, low, and uncertain.

"Rob?" Jamie squinted into the sun, feeling a surge of hope and excitement.

Rob smiled at Jamie hopefully. "I-I wanted to come by and apologize for last night," he said hesitantly. "Those kids—my neighbors—" He stopped, gesturing with both hands, and then shrugged. "I'm sorry is all."

Jamie swallowed hard. He reminded himself sternly that Rob sold drugs, that he had no traceable past, didn't even exist as far as Leonard could find, and if Leonard couldn't find him, no one could.

"I'm sorry," Rob repeated while Jamie was still searching for words. "I shouldn't have come." His smile had disappeared, and the hopeful look had been replaced by the haunted loneliness that had tugged at Jamie's heart the first time

they'd met. "Look, forget I came." Rob dropped his gaze to the ground. "I won't bother you again."

"Rob! No!" Jamie sprang forward and grabbed Rob's arm. Tensing, Rob looked at Jamie with surprise and uncertainty.

"Don't go." Jamie saw something spark in Rob's eyes and hurried back into speech. "I mean...Bella—she might...might need follow-up care or...or anything. Or if something else happened to her..." Jamie trailed off, aware he was babbling. He took a deep breath.

Rob stood looking at him, waiting, and Jamie caught his breath. "What were you giving them?" he blurted. "Those kids last night, Rob. What'd you give them? Tell me!" Jamie tightened his grip on Rob's arm.

Rob's voice shook a little. "Jamie, you didn't think... Man, it was a Chinese herbal thing, okay? For the kid's grandma. The old lady's got arthritis; she uses this special mixture of clematis and stephania? And I dunno what else, and there's only this one guy in Chinatown will make it for her. I pick it up for them when I get over that way for work."

Jamie felt relief flooding through him. Rob was smiling again, and Jamie found himself unable to look away.

Rob's smile widened to a grin. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't even think of how that might've looked last night, you know?" He stepped closer to Jamie, so close that Jamie could feel the heat of him through their shirts. "You think you'll let me apologize properly?"

Jamie's mouth worked soundlessly, his heart in his throat. This was nothing like what he'd expected. He sighed happily as Rob's arms closed around him, hard and strong; he gave in to the temptation to let those strong arms take his weight. "Rob..."

Then Rob's lips gently made contact with his.

With a whimper, Jamie melted into Rob's kiss, the heat of Rob's body sending thrills through him, the soft explorations of Rob's tongue making him weak at the knees.

Rob broke the kiss first but didn't pull away, instead letting his forehead rest against Jamie's. Jamie blinked his eyes open, finding Rob's blue eyes only inches away, magnified and blurred. He didn't understand the look in them, deep and intense and almost frightened, but he badly wanted to.

“Rob?”

A smile started in Rob's eyes, and he pressed his lips to Jamie's again, soft and deep. Jamie grabbed Rob's shoulders and kissed him back fiercely, pressing against him urgently. Kissing Rob was magic. Jamie could feel the connection alive between them, and this time when Rob broke the kiss, Jamie whimpered at the loss.

The strong hands sliding over Jamie's back nearly made up for it. “Jamie,” Rob said thickly. “Let's go back to my apartment, all right? I promise no one's gonna interrupt us tonight.”

Chapter Six

Rob pushed Jamie through the doorway and toward the bed, holding him close, kissing him roughly as they went. Letting go only long enough to pull his own shirt off, Rob bore Jamie down onto the bed, nipping, grasping, ripping at Jamie's clothing.

Jamie pulled back to stare for a moment. Rob's shirt had lost many buttons on the journey, and the bulge in his jeans bore witness to how much he was enjoying Jamie's company. Jamie reached for Rob's jeans with fingers trembling. He took his time unbuttoning them, sliding them and his briefs down over Rob's muscular thighs. His eyes widened with approval as Rob's cock sprang into view. Rob bit gently at Jamie's collarbone and shoulder, and Jamie wriggled pleausurably, a soft moan escaping him. He looked up at the beautiful man on top of him.

Smirking, Rob leaned down and stole a kiss, then turned and pulled open a drawer of the nightstand, then rummaged. He turned to face Jamie and smiled widely. They each had a condom in one hand. Jamie tossed his over his shoulder, then leaned forward and took Rob's. His clothes had joined Rob's on the floor.

"Let me," he whispered. Rob sat back, legs spread, and looked at Jamie's face.

Jamie tried to make his touch light on the shaft, teasing, and Rob groaned, fisting the bedsheet as Jamie moved his hands, sliding, grasping, fingering Rob's slit.

With a grin, Jamie slid the preslicked condom slowly down over Rob's erection. Growling, Rob grabbed his wrist, and Jamie looked up in surprise. "Need you, Jamie," he panted. "Need you right now."

Jamie seated the rubber ring of the condom flush at the root of Rob's cock before he was overpowered, pushed back onto the thin cotton comforter. Rob thrust his hips against Jamie's, peppering Jamie's chest and shoulders with hard kisses, teeth, and force. Jamie whimpered. "Rob." He moaned weakly. "Please, Rob, yes."

Rob growled again in response and mouthed Jamie's neck roughly, bearing down with his hips. Jamie thrust up to meet him, and they rocked against each other in a tangle of limbs and heat. Panting, Rob scrabbled one-handed in his nightstand again and returned brandishing lube. His other arm was around Jamie, holding him close, giving no ground. The two of them struggled together with the cap. Then Jamie managed to slick gel onto two of Rob's fingers.

Cupping Rob's jaw with one hand, he kissed him deeply, his tongue sliding over Rob's, searching him, challenging him. When they broke apart, Jamie leaned his forehead against his lover's, eyes still closed. "Fuck me," he whispered. "Please. Want you so much."

Rob kissed him again, tender this time, soft and gentle, and Jamie nuzzled him, sighing with desire.

Rob grinned. He ducked his head against Jamie's neck, then nipped gently at the skin there, sliding his hand down between Jamie's legs. He trailed his fingers around the base of Jamie's cock for a moment. Then, ignoring Jamie's attempts to get his crown into his hand, Rob continued down past Jamie's sac and circled a finger gently at his entrance. Jamie groaned and arched his back, thrusting toward Rob's finger. Moving his mouth to Jamie's shoulder, Rob slid his lips softly over the skin there, until he was lapping the edge of Jamie's collarbone. With a wicked grin, he closed his teeth around the hard muscles there and simultaneously pushed a finger against Jamie's pucker.

Jamie yelled, grabbing at the comforter. Rob chuckled against his shoulder as Jamie panted wildly. "Yes, please, Rob. Come on." Rob worked his finger deeper, Jamie moaning softly in his ear now, rubbing his head against Rob's jaw with desperate need. "Rob...oh God, Rob." He whimpered, and his lover added a second

finger to the first, then worked them in and out of Jamie's hole. Jamie moaned with pleasure, crying aloud with every movement.

Rob reached deep, fingers moving, searching, until he found the small nub, and Jamie cried out again, bucking against Rob's hand.

Rob massaged firmly, kissing Jamie's jaw and ear, all tenderness and gentle affection. Sobbing with pleasure, Jamie arched and bucked against Rob's touch. His hands were in Rob's hair, cradling his head, holding him close. Rob growled as Jamie tightened his grip.

Rob pushed himself out of Jamie's embrace and slid his fingers out to the accompaniment of Jamie's outraged whimper. Rob moved one hand to the base of his own cock, hanging his head, fighting back the tide of pleasure seeking to crash over him. He panted deeply, and Jamie pushed himself up to a sitting position. He reached a hand out to lie flat against Rob's darkly furred chest. "Rob..." he whispered.

Rob pinned him with the intensity of his gaze. "Turn around, Jamie," he said softly. "Grab the headboard."

Jamie nearly didn't recognize Rob's voice so low and gravelly with desire. He thought he might come from the sound of it alone, but he did as he was told and struggled to his knees. He wrapped his fingers over the top of the faded wood, the varnish cool to the touch.

Rob moved behind him and gently pushed his knees farther apart with one of his own, his cock grazing the crack of Jamie's ass. Jamie moaned as Rob slid his strong arms around him, enveloping him in a tight embrace. "Need you," Rob whispered softly. "Need you so fucking much."

"Take me, then, Rob," Jamie growled back. "Now."

Rob chuckled against Jamie's jaw and moved his cock to Jamie's entrance. They both moaned as he pushed gently in, Jamie bending forward to accommodate him. Inch by inch he slid inside, and Jamie bit back the noises he longed to make as

Rob stretched him, filling him with solid heat. Finally Rob's hips rested flush against Jamie's ass, and both men were breathing hard.

Rob took his first stroke, long and slow, and returned to push deep into Jamie, arms tightening, holding him close. Jamie leaned his head back on Rob's shoulder and cried aloud as Rob continued to move. Each stroke became stronger than the last as Rob picked up the pace, his movements faster now, shorter. Jamie gripped the headboard with all his strength and sobbed. He was close to the edge already, and the feel of Rob's arms holding him fast, his hips moving madly against him, was better than anything Jamie had ever known.

Rob grunted with each stroke, his body hard against his lover's, and Jamie yelled again as Rob's cock grazed his pleasure point. He wanted to move, wanted to buck and writhe as Rob took him, but the arms around him were unyielding, pinning him against his lover's broad chest and torso. Jamie cried out at each stroke, head back, and Rob nipped his shoulder, his neck, teeth sharp against his tender skin.

"Baby," Jamie said. "Please..."

Rob pulled back, moving his hands to Jamie's hips, taking quick, shallow thrusts punctuated by grunts of effort. Jamie felt his balls tighten and tried to fight against the pleasure building at the base of his spine, wanting this to last forever. Rob's hands tightened on Jamie's hips, fingers digging into the sensitive skin as he fucked Jamie with everything he had.

Jamie came with a roar of pleasure, the orgasm ripping through him until he saw red, lost to everything except the feel of Rob in him and against him. Loving him.

Jamie moaned as the waves continued to sweep through him, and he felt Rob push deep, staying there, trembling against Jamie, touching him deep inside, shaking him to the core. Rob collapsed against his shoulder, and Jamie turned his head and kissed his lover's temple, tasting the sweat there, skin moist against his

lips. Nothing in his life had ever approached this moment, and he wanted the connection to last.

Gradually the two of them slowed their movements until Rob pulled Jamie down onto the bed, sliding free. Jamie slid his arms around Rob's torso and leaned in for a kiss, pulling him close. Rob kissed him back, strong and deep, and the heat of their encounter died down to warmth of a different kind, returning to the fire that had been lit the first time they'd laid eyes on each other. Jamie wriggled into Rob's embrace, settling in.

Jamie drowsed, pleurably sated and warmed by Rob's body against his. Curling up in the lee of Rob's broad chest, Jamie was too exhausted to do anything more than murmur happily as Rob planted kisses on his neck and jaw.

When Rob rose and padded over to the bathroom, Jamie managed to crawl under the covers, claiming the bed's lone pillow in its worn cotton cover. Through heavy lids, Jamie watched as the bright yellow light silhouetted his lover in the doorway. Rob's muscular build, the ease with which he moved in his skin, put Jamie in mind of a predator, a big jungle cat maybe. He smiled into the pillow. One good fuck and he lost his mind, apparently.

Watching Rob return to the bed, Jamie figured he'd rather entertain those thoughts than the ones he found really crazy: how he knew already, even after so short an acquaintance, that he'd fallen for the guy. Hard. In Jamie's experience, the guy who did all the loving usually wound up with the fuzzy end of the lollipop. The trick now, he figured, was keeping Rob from finding out until they'd both had a chance to think things through. Or have a second date.

"Penny for your thoughts," Rob murmured, settling comfortably back around him, arranging the covers.

Jamie's eyes flew wide. Rob frowned and slid an arm round Jamie's waist, pulling their bodies together. Rob kissed his chin with a slightly puzzled stare. "Was it something I said?"

With an effort, Jamie mastered himself and smiled as Rob moved his attentions to his cheekbones and forehead. "It's nothing, Rob, really. It's..." He hesitated. He didn't know if he was ready for this. If he was ready for Rob.

Rob stiffened as though he knew what Jamie was thinking. "If you ask me what we're doing here, Jamie, you'd better be prepared for me to demonstrate again."

Jamie bit back a moan as Rob nuzzled at his neck and jaw. He wrestled a hand free and slid it along Rob's jaw, cupping it so he could better admire Rob's face by the soft light of the bedside lamp. Rob stared at him, frank and open, and Jamie hoped he was reading those blue eyes correctly, hoped he wasn't imagining the feeling he saw in them. Rob turned and kissed Jamie's palm, then looked back up, laying his jaw back in Jamie's hand, rubbing against it gently.

Jamie was entranced. The intimacy of the gesture, the penetrating confidence of Rob's gaze, was telling him what he wanted to hear. Rob felt it too. This was real.

Jamie leaned in for a kiss, palm still cupping Rob's jaw, the prickle of stubble endearing and pleasurable against his soft skin. They kissed long and sweet, Jamie's tongue making a home of Rob's mouth. He bit his lover's full lower lip gently. Rob reciprocated, giving Jamie everything he asked for and more. He kissed with need and just the right amount of force. When they broke apart, Jamie was gasping for air. He opened his eyes and—

Caught sight of the glowing green digital clock by the side of the bed: 12:19.

Jamie panicked, pushed Rob away, and scrambled for the edge of the bed. "The clinic, Rob! I was supposed to check on the dogs more than two hours ago!" He dug through the pile of clothes next to the bed until he located his jeans. After pulling them on, he checked the pockets for his keys and froze, surprised to see Rob crawling out of bed after him. "Rob?"

"I'm going with you."

Jamie shook his head. "No, you stay here, pal. No sense both of us getting cold."

Buttoning his jeans, Rob sat shirtless on the edge of the bed with a grin. He reached out and grabbed Jamie's belt loops, then tugged him near. Jamie nearly fell, grabbing his lover's shoulders for balance. Rob placed a gentle kiss on Jamie's stomach, just under the navel, and Jamie, feeling Rob inhale deeply, fought the urge to pass out from a dizzying sense of pleasure.

Rob leaned back and looked up into Jamie's eyes with a smirk, then gave his ass a resounding smack. "Wasn't a question."

Jamie rubbed his butt in amusement as Rob rose to his feet. "Come on, Rob. You don't have to go. I make these rounds all the time. It's my job."

Rob pulled Jamie to him and claimed a kiss, quick but full of promise. "Now you're with me, it's my job too, okay?"

Jamie leaned in, enjoying the sear of Rob's bare chest pressed against his. "Rob—" He broke off as Rob kissed him again with a quiet noise of satisfaction.

"Besides," Rob continued, "gotta make sure you take care of yourself." He bent and retrieved their shirts from the floor. "Come on. Let's get this done and get back here. I got plans for the rest of the evening."

Jamie was sure his blush would have ignited the drapes if he'd been close enough. With a quick peck on the cheek, Rob pulled him toward the door.

Chapter Seven

Rob parked the Jetta directly outside the back door of the darkened clinic, even as Jamie indicated the parking spot he usually took, farther away, out of the path of any traffic. Rob refrained from pointing out the likelihood of one car causing a traffic jam in a deserted parking lot in the middle of the night was low. Lower, anyway, than the likelihood of one man being jumped and robbed—or worse. Shivering, Rob moved closer to Jamie, one hand protective on his back as they stood outside the clinic door.

He couldn't believe Jamie'd been doing this night after night for six years. Well, he could, because it was the right thing to do, and it was clear to him that Jamie was the “right thing” personified. On all kinds of different levels. The blond vet frowned as he punched in the key code, and Rob fought the urge to kiss all the worry from his brow. Not here. Not in the middle of the night, out in the open. All his urges could wait until later.

As they approached the door, Rob scanned the parking lot behind them with practiced suspicion. His heightened senses were alive in the night; this close to a building full of dogs, his wolf brain was at full alert, perilously close to the surface.

But it was more than that. Taking Jamie earlier had changed him. He could smell Jamie on him and himself on Jamie, their combined musk heady and pungent and...perfect. He could almost see the bond arcing between them as they headed into the darkened clinic. Jamie was his now, and he was Jamie's. That couldn't be undone.

Rob followed Jamie to the inpatient room, the row of enclosures. But as soon as he stepped through the doorway, it was like someone took a baseball bat to the back

of his head. The enclosures were all full, and the dogs there recognized him as one of their own.

They went wild.

Jamie spun, alarmed by the chorus of barks and growls. He tried in vain to quiet everyone as Rob fought to stay on his feet. *So much noise, so many messages.* The change from earlier was astonishing. Both times in the lobby he'd been fine, even right before his transformation. Rob closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing the human part of his brain to regain control. *Something's changed.*

As Jamie moved from pen to pen, shushing and comforting vainly, Rob sent thoughts to the dogs, announcing himself as a friend, the vet's protector, willing them all quiet. One by one, the dogs fell silent.

Jamie turned to Rob with a pleased grin. "See, buddy. You've just gotta know how to handle them."

Rob smiled back sardonically. "Nice work."

"Shouldn't take me long to get through this, Rob. You good?" Jamie walked briskly along the pens, consulting each clipboard briefly.

"Yeah, don't worry about me. Just pretend I'm not here."

A German shepherd near the back door growled a response Rob didn't dignify with an answer. As Jamie worked his way methodically from pen to pen, Rob's attention was drawn to a small, wiry West Highland terrier shivering on his mat. As Rob approached, he sensed pain coming off the tiny dog in waves. He knelt and offered his knuckle through the bars. The terrier looked up weakly, and Rob softly whistled a question.

"Hurts. Ribs hurt. Want out."

"Something you ate?" Rob growled.

"No. Big foot," the terrier answered. *"Foot... Chest hurts."*

Rob's blood ran cold. He opened his wolf mind a little, asking more. The terrier lay back on his pallet, too weak to resist. Rob apologized as he scanned the tiny

brain. What he saw infuriated him. A woman in furs, a high-heeled shoe, the terrier's unquestioning love, her anger. The kick had broken his ribs.

"Hurts."

Rob rose. "Jamie? Babe? C'mere."

"Just a second, Rob." The vet was inside one of the enclosures, changing the dressing on a Dalmatian's foot. Rob undid the latch to the terrier's enclosure and bent again, soothing the dog with gentle touches. Rob gave a short, low whine. *"Help's coming, guy. I got your back."*

The terrier licked weakly at Rob's hand, then lay still on the blanket. "Jamie!"

Jamie hurried over. "Rob! What are you doing? You can't just go in—"

Rob waved away the protests. "What's this little guy's story?"

Jamie knelt next to them. "Mutt? Oh, he's here a lot. I guess we're cheaper than boarding him. He just needs a little love and attention." He rubbed the terrier's belly, and Mutt whined in pain. Jamie frowned. "Hey, wait a minute. Something's not right here."

Rob sighed with relief, watching Jamie attend to the small dog's injuries. He'd hate to have to explain to Jamie how he knew the little dog needed more than just attention. That conversation would have to happen soon enough, and for Rob, it would be sooner than he'd like. He watched Jamie's face as he sized up the terrier with practiced hands. The vet encountered the break in Mutt's ribs, and his eyes grew wide. "Rob! I think Mutt's really hurt this time!"

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Rob asked, "You sure, man?"

Jamie palpated the dog's side gently, and Mutt whimpered. "Yeah, that's definitely not good. Not good at all. Feels like at least three of his ribs are broken. What happened to you, buddy?"

Mutt whimpered but made a valiant attempt at licking Jamie's hand.

“Poor little guy, lying here all alone. Well, I can x-ray him, but I need a tech for that. First thing in the morning, okay, buddy? Until then let me get you something for the pain.” Jamie rose. “Rob, stay here a second? I’ll be right back.”

“Sure thing.”

Jamie hurried toward the front of the clinic and headed through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. He shut the door behind him, and Rob saw a light go on behind the frosted-glass window making up the upper half.

Rob turned back to the terrier lying on the blanket.

“Thank you,” Mutty whined softly.

Rob scrubbed his knuckles over Mutty’s forehead affectionately. *“Don’t mention it. You’re gonna be just—”*

There was no sound Rob could identify, but somehow the air had changed, become charged with something sharp and sour. He closed his eyes, opening his wolf senses to the night.

And felt Jamie’s terror.

No. Not his mate. *No.* Before Rob could call out to him, the feeling became more acute, and Rob smelled blood. Jamie’s blood.

And then the red rage, the wolf rage, descended.

His.

* * *

Jamie fumbled with the key in the pharmacy’s lock, shaking his head. How had he missed Mutty’s injury? He knew that dog better than he knew most of his family at this point. It should have been obvious. His preoccupation with Rob was quickly becoming unprofessional. And yet...Jamie thought back a few short hours ago—Rob’s strong arms holding him fast, his growls of lust in Jamie’s ear.

Jamie managed to turn the key and get the door open even as he resolved to be more attentive to work in the future. He couldn’t let his need for Rob undo everything he’d built here, no matter how good it felt to simply give himself over to

Rob's intense gaze, the need in his eyes speaking volumes, answering all Jamie's questions at a glance. The vet shook his head, refocusing on the task at hand.

The clinic pharmacy had originally been a storage closet, long and narrow with one door and a small rectangular window set high in the outside wall. Jamie closed the door firmly behind him and flicked on the overhead light.

The guy crouching in the middle of the narrow aisle met Jamie's gaze and sneered.

For a moment neither of them moved. Then Jamie stepped back, his hand on the doorknob, and the intruder sprang, flicking open a switchblade. He was taller than Jamie but heavyset, with grizzled jowls, thick, heavy eyebrows, and wild salt-and-pepper curls. And from the looks of things, he hadn't planned on being interrupted. Jamie saw no dark clothing, no ski mask. In jeans and a blue plaid shirt, the intruder looked like any other guy you might meet in a bar. Except for being in the locked pharmacy of a very locked vet clinic at one in the morning.

The intruder grabbed Jamie's jacket roughly and placed the point of the knife at his throat. "One word," Jamie's captor snarled. "One word and you're breathing out the side of your neck." Jamie didn't hazard a nod. The tip of the knife dug into his skin, and Jamie squeaked at the painful cut. He felt wetness on his neck and fought the urge to swallow, not knowing how deeply the knife was dug in.

"Now here's what we're gonna do, Doc. You're gonna point out the good stuff here; then you're gonna help me carry it out to the register. Between that and the safe—"

The growling took them both by surprise.

As a vet, Jamie had a vast and varied experience of growls, but this was like nothing he'd ever heard in his life. This growl was feral, primal, and could have been made by nothing in the *Canis* genus. The rest of the dogs had fallen silent, as if acknowledging the supremacy of the beast that had come among them.

The intruder turned wild eyes to Jamie and tightened his grip. "Okay, Doc. I don't know what the fuck you've got out there, but you call it off right now."

Jamie held his hands up in surrender, trying not to move with the knife at his throat. "Look, all the dogs are locked in their pens. You have nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about? You call that noise nothing—"

The growling stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Jamie hazarded a breath and then another. After a long minute, the prowler slapped him on the chest in a brotherly fashion. "Turns out you were right after all, Doc! I got nothing to worry about. You, however, will have plenty to worry about unless you gimme my money. Yeah," he continued as if the thought just occurred to him, "fuck the drugs. Just gimme the money and I'll get out of here."

He grabbed Jamie's shirtfront again, and Jamie managed a nod, then turned to open the door.

The prowler gave him a quick shake. "Easy, Doc, easy. Don't get hasty there." Jamie stopped, and then at a sign from his captor, he slowly eased the door open.

The clinic was deserted.

Rob was nowhere in sight, and the only sounds were familiar ones: dogs snuffling and pacing, whining and huffing, muffled traffic outside on the street, too far away to be of any use.

Jamie felt his captor sigh with relief, and the knife at his throat dropped. He'd had a brief thought earlier that he might be able to overpower the man and get the knife away, but he knew his limitations. His fighting skills versus a guy like this?

"Let's go, Doc. I ain't got all day."

"Okay, okay, just relax. I'll give you anything you want." Jamie walked slowly toward the front desk, his mind racing. Where was Rob? Had he gone for help? Was he hiding? Did he even know there was an intruder? Jamie flashed on Rob stumbling upon the situation. At the thought of the knife against Rob's skin, a chill went through him. He realized then what he'd told the prowler was true. Jamie would give the man anything he wanted just to leave them both alone.

“Okay, friend. The register's empty. We put the cash in the safe each night, and it's just here under the counter. I'm gonna bend down here to open it, and—”

The attack came out of nowhere, taking them both by surprise.

A huge body dropped the attacker where he stood and knocked Jamie across the lobby to stumble and fall on the tile. The unearthly growl sounded again, and Jamie scrambled for purchase on the cold floor, sitting up to find a huge gray wolf standing on the intruder's chest, snarling.

Staring, wide-eyed and openmouthed, Jamie froze.

Jamie knew enough about wolves to determine this was no ordinary specimen. He was huge, larger than a full-grown male had any business being, even if right now that seemed to be a damn good thing. The wolf's lips were peeled back in a brutal snarl, his forepaws balanced at the base of the prowler's neck. The intruder squealed. “Get him off me, Doc. Come on now. Fight fair!”

“He's not mine!” Jamie pushed himself back against one of the chairs. “I don't know where he came from, okay? Now just calm down. Stay still.”

At Jamie's words, the wolf turned his head. The vet froze. The wolf's eyes were pale blue, the pure clear blue of mountain lakes and early-spring skies. Intelligent, knowing eyes. Eyes just like Rob's.

Jamie drew a sharp breath.

The growl died away, and with a bound, the wolf stalked toward Jamie, nails snicking against the tiles. Jamie scooted across the floor until his back was to the wall. He stared as the wolf stalked closer.

Jamie tried not to panic, his breath coming in small hitches.

The wolf took another step toward him, then abruptly sat and lowered his chest to the floor, facing the vet. His eyes were still cool, calculating, but Jamie felt unafraid. “Rob?” he whispered. He leaned forward, even as his rational mind screamed with fear and disbelief.

His lover was a man, not a wolf. Yet Jamie knew those eyes. He'd swear it.

With an oath, the prowler jumped to his feet, ran past the two of them, and cannoned into the locked, chained front door. After balling his jacket around his fist, he smashed the glass in the bottom half and crawled through, out into the night.

The wolf turned at the disturbance, growling and hackling. He rose, bounded over to the broken door and, with a low whine, leaped through. He flicked his hind leg as it caught on an errant shard, then disappeared after the prowler. Jamie found himself all alone in the clinic as a chorus of howls sprang up from the back room. He stared, unseeing, breath slowly returning to normal. He'd surprised a burglar in his clinic, had a knife pulled on him, and then been saved...by a wolf.

The howls of his patients grew in both volume and intensity, and Jamie pushed himself up off the floor, his hand going to the cut on his neck. The blood had dried in a stiff crust, and only a small ache remained. With trembling fingers, Jamie dialed 911. Hopefully the prowler would still be nearby. Hopefully, Jamie thought, so would the wolf. Those blue eyes appeared in his mind again, and his thoughts spun back to Rob.

Jamie's heart dropped. He knew he was babbling at the dispatcher, and he gave up, dropping the phone in midsentence.

"Rob! Rob!" Jamie ran from room to room, desperate. Finally he burst through the back door with an oath, breathing hard. The parking lot was deserted; the only car his own, right where they'd left it, parked just outside the door. The other buildings were dark and silent. No one was in sight.

"Rob!" Jamie hollered, his heart in his throat. He no longer cared if Rob had run, if Rob had left him alone with danger. He just wanted to know his lover was safe.

Jamie heard retching close by. His eyes adjusted to the night, and he saw Rob doubled over next to the passenger side of the car. Jamie ran to his side and pulled Rob into his arms. "Easy, buddy, easy. The guy hit you?"

Rob stumbled on the asphalt, shivering, and Jamie took on his full weight, murmuring softly. Jamie managed to get the car door open with one hand and

lowered his lover to the seat. Rob's clothes were torn and in disarray, and Jamie saw a dark stain on the calf of his jeans. "Rob! You're hurt! Did he cut you? We've gotta get you to a hospital!"

Rob gripped his arms tightly. "No hospital, Jamie. I'm fine, okay? It's just a little cut."

Jamie broke away and reached for Rob's leg. As he watched, the stain on Rob's jeans grew, blood seeping through the fabric. "Rob! Let me take a look at that!" Jamie pushed up the denim, revealing one end of a deep cut slicing down the outside of Rob's calf. "No, Rob. That's gotta be looked at. You're lucky the guy didn't take out your tendon! Come on. Let me take you to the hospital."

"No!" Rob's shout was low and rough, almost a bark. He closed his eyes. "No hospital, Jamie. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Rob! That cut is not fine!" Jamie continued protesting, but Rob pulled him into an embrace and silenced him with a quick kiss. He tightened his arms around Jamie until the two of them rested forehead to forehead. "Jamie," Rob whispered, "please, baby. Do you trust me?"

Jamie looked into Rob's eyes, hearing the wail of a siren in the background. "Please," Rob whispered again. "I've gotta get out of here."

Jamie's heart skipped a beat. He'd never seen such naked terror. Seeing fear in Rob's eyes hurt him in a way he couldn't explain. He knew he'd do anything to drive it away, to keep Rob safe. "Rob! You can't leave; you're hurt. Look, just let me—"

Rob's eyes flashed, and this time Jamie couldn't tell if it was fear or anger. He pushed himself to his feet and shoved past Jamie, wavering unsteadily.

Jamie reached for him, but Rob pushed him away. "Jamie," he whispered. "If you feel anything for me at all, anything, you have to trust me. I've gotta get out of here, but...I can explain...later. It's just that—"

The siren grew louder, and Rob looked worriedly in its direction, taking another step away from the car. "Jamie, please. I just need you to trust me on this."

At that moment Jamie realized he had no choice. What he felt for Rob was so immense, so consuming, that whatever he'd done, whatever he was mixed up in, didn't matter. Jamie would protect him with everything he had, no matter what the cost. And it seemed like Leonard had been right: there was something real bad going on with this guy.

Jamie claimed Rob's mouth again, hard, needing to feel Rob against him once more. He nuzzled Rob's cheek for a second, then took a step back. "Just go! I'll take care of things here. I'll check on you later, okay?"

Rob squeezed his shoulder and nodded, then turned and began limping across the parking lot.

Jamie watched him go, worry gnawing at his heart. "Rob?" he said softly.

His lover stopped and turned with a worried stare. "Yeah, babe?"

"I do trust you, okay? Now just don't bleed to death on the way home."

Rob gave him a lopsided grin. "You've got a deal." He stared a moment longer, then melted into the shadows running along the building and was gone. Jamie blinked, unbelieving. It was like he'd simply vanished before Jamie's eyes. Then a squad car turned into the parking lot, the siren deafening, and Jamie shielded his eyes against the headlights, the red and blue spin of the flasher painting the strip mall like a cheap hooker.

Jamie sighed, pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket, and dialed Brianna's number. He supposed it was only fair that he warn her she'd likely be taking on the brunt of the morning's clients while he gave his statement to the police about how their clinic had not only been burgled, but that he'd been saved by the timely intervention of a giant wolf who had subsequently disappeared without a trace.

It was shaping up to be a really long day.

Chapter Eight

Rob lay on the floor of his apartment and shook with a mixture of exhaustion and relief. St. Louis cabs weren't known for their pristine interiors, and to Rob's heightened senses, riding among the detritus of cigarette butts, fast-food wrappers, lipstick smears, and harsh smells he refused to think about was agony. He'd wound up asking the guy to let him out a block early, even though his leg throbbed.

As soon as he made it through the front door, he sank to the floor and gave in to the agony. Bella bounded over and licked his face with a questioning whine. Growling, Rob pushed her away and rolled up into a ball next to the door.

It had been so long, he thought, so long since he'd lost it that badly and brought on a transformation. But Jamie's terror had been so real, and the connection between them... Rob raged, burying his head in his hands to quell the screams of anger he longed to voice. *How could I have been so stupid? How could I have gone and fallen in love?* Even if Jamie could somehow miraculously buy his story, what normal human wanted to be saddled with a werewolf?

Bella gave a sharp bark, bowing. She barked twice more.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You've heard this song before." Rob tried to get his bad leg under him and gave a soft cry. Pulling himself up, he clung to the doorknob. His leg had held long enough to get him home, and that was all that mattered.

Bella trotted at his heels as Rob made his way to the bathroom. He refused to look at the bed as he went. *Only a few short hours ago, Jamie was lying in my arms.* He pulled off his jeans, then flipped on the light and began rummaging through the medicine cabinet. *What a difference a little blood loss makes.* The cut on his calf was long and shallow, running from just above his ankle to nearly halfway to his knee.

He found some hydrogen peroxide under the sink and poured it over his skin, hissing at the sharp bite of the bubbling foam.

Bella watched attentively from the bathroom door, ears high and ready. She said nothing.

With a look of regret at the darkened bedroom, Rob bent and turned the shower on full blast. Only a few short hours ago, he'd held his mate on that bed. Watched his face as pleasure claimed him, pleasure Rob had given and received in kind. Rob smiled at the memory of Jamie's cries, his tight heat, the sour, salty tang of his cum.

With a shake of his head, Rob rid himself of his remaining clothes and stepped under the shower's icy spray. *I'm a moron to think I could even have a mate.* His whole body ached, a lingering reminder of the cost of transformation. The cool water felt good on his skin, his joints still on fire where the wolf had broken free once more. "A guy like that deserves better than me," he muttered.

Rob leaned into the spray. "A guy like Jamie deserves..." He shook his head and reached for the shampoo. *A guy like Jamie.* Rob hadn't ever dreamed he'd meet a guy like Jamie, for a start. He grinned into the spray, adjusting the nozzle to let the water warm. Bella disappeared from the doorway with a soft *woof*. Rob shot her a dour glance as she went, then returned his attention to the shower. Shampoo suds slid down his back and thighs, and he closed his eyes.

A guy like Jamie.

Rob gave in to the tidal wave of feeling sweeping through him, picturing Jamie's warm, sunny smile when Rob had asked him out. That smile alone would have made Rob's evening, let alone everything that came later. And what had come later... Rob felt Jamie's mouth on him again, desperate and hot and needy. His hands grasping at Rob, fingers seeking out Rob's skin, gentle over his back, even as Rob had torn roughly at Jamie's clothes, needing to have Jamie bare against him. Under and around him.

Rob groaned, bracing himself on one arm against the cool yellow tiles of the shower wall. Despite his pain and exhaustion, he couldn't help sliding one hand along his length as it filled. The water was hot now, running in rivulets down his skin. He slid his thumb over his cockhead, slick with more than soap now, as he remembered the cry Jamie had made as Rob breached him with a finger, sliding deep into his satiny passage.

Rob firmed his grip, each stroke long and sure, desire building urgent and hot in his spine. He imagined Jamie arching against him as Rob bore down, those beautiful hip bones sharp against Rob's stomach; he watched Jamie watch him, staring at Rob in disbelief when Rob found his pleasure spot, then looking up at him, eyes wide as Rob moved his fingers, stretching him, fucking him.

Rob winced pleasurably and turned his head up into the spray. *Oh, Jamie, yes.*

He sped up his stroke, his cock swelling, hot and tight in his hand. He heard again the soft, weak cry Jamie'd made just after he came, his body still pulsing around Rob. It pushed Rob over the edge, waves of pleasure coursing through his tired body, spurts of cum mingling with the shower spray, wringing the last of his energy from him. Rob only opened his eyes when the hot water ran out, the spray's return to ice waking him from his sated reverie.

Too bad it'll never happen again. Too bad I'm...whatever the fuck I am.

Rob padded into the bedroom after only a cursory toweling off and dived under the coverlet, wet and aching and exhausted. The cut on his calf had finally stopped bleeding sometime during the shower, and he paid no attention to the soreness there. Pulling the pillow over his head, he loosened his hold on the day and all its worries. The dirty yellow glow of the bathroom light stayed on, unheeded. With a soft whimper, Rob gave himself over to sleep.

* * *

The forest was dark and close. Just ahead two huge gray wolves slipped in and out of the black night shadows. Hurrying, Rob desperately tried to catch up, to warn them somehow, but the cold, wet air ate every scream.

The wolves ran purposefully between the trees, oblivious to Rob's warnings, their movements silent and sure through the dark, until the trees began to thin and they trotted along the edge of a steep cliff.

Far, far below, the river burbled, singing magic to itself and the stars, and Rob's blood ran cold.

"No!"

But the two wolves seemed not to hear. Purposefully their shadowy shapes continued on, fast approaching a rocky outcrop. "Stop," Rob pleaded. "Come back—Don't—"

At the foot of the outcrop, the bigger of the two wolves stopped and looked back. Rob found himself looking into his own light blue eyes, and he raised his hands imploringly.

But with a switch of his tail, the great gray wolf spun around and disappeared into the mountain with his companion.

A thunderous explosion ripped through the night, bringing the smell of burning, a scarlet, flaming sky, and a booming roar that went on and on and on.

The booming continued, penetrating his unconsciousness, until Rob sat up with a gasp, wide awake. Someone was knocking on his front door.

Bella regarded him balefully from the foot of the bed, where she'd been licking at his bare feet in a fruitless attempt to wake him. Rob's heart thudded in his chest, out of sync with the fist at his door. He heard someone calling his name. Even through three walls and a door, Rob knew that voice. *Jamie. Mine.*

Rob rolled out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweats and an old gray T-shirt, then padded barefoot across the apartment to the front door. He raked a hand through his hair, not pausing long enough to worry about brushing it. With what he had to say, hairstyle was the least of his worries.

Not bothering to confirm the evidence of his other senses at the peephole, Rob unlatched the door and pulled it open. Jamie's hand hung in midair. The two of them stared at each other for a long moment.

"I said I'd check on you later," Jamie managed. "You gonna invite me in?"

Rob dropped his gaze, holding the door wide. Jamie brushed his shoulder as he passed, and Rob fought the urge to nip at him, inhaling deeply. The rightness of him washed over Rob again. He followed Jamie to the kitchen. "Hey, you want coffee?"

Jamie leaned against the counter, rubbing the back of his head nervously. "Yeah, that'd be great, Rob. That'd be..."

Jamie sighed deeply, and Rob tore himself from the sight long enough to scoop out coffee grounds into a filter.

"You know what? Let's skip the coffee." Jamie scrubbed his hands over his face. "I've drunk enough coffee over the last eight hours to power a whole—" He shook his head. "Rob, what's going on with you? What kind of trouble are you in?"

Refreshingly direct, Rob thought, slotting the full filter into the coffee machine. He filled the pot from the sink, buying time with silence. Ignoring Jamie's obvious agitation, he washed the pot out a few more times than it warranted, stalling, searching for a starting point. Some way to explain his words at the clinic. He filled the coffee machine's reservoir and turned it on, then stood silent and tense, hands gripping the counter.

Jamie slid his arms around Rob from behind, ignoring his flinch, and crushed him against his chest. "Hey," Jamie said softly. "You asked me to trust you, remember? Well, that goes both ways." He kissed Rob's jaw softly, his breath deep and sweet against Rob's neck.

It would all be so easy, Rob thought. It would just be so easy to give in, let Jamie in, tell him everything. Stand naked before him, hoping for acceptance. Rob leaned back against Jamie, letting a soft groan escape his lips.

He needed this. Wanted it, more than anything, despite being terrified by the possible outcome. Rob turned around and leaned back against the sink. Jamie stood in front of him, arms folded, looking nervous and determined all at once.

“Rob...” Jamie hesitated. “I gotta know what's going on, okay? I—Look, I know this sounds weird after one date and all, but you're too goddamn important to me!” He stopped, breathing hard. “Tell me what it is. Tell me what you're running from. Is it the cops?”

“Not exactly.” Rob smiled mirthlessly, clenching his teeth. “Jamie, you're important to me too, okay? But I'm so damned scared you're not gonna believe me—” He broke off and walked quickly across the room, out from under Jamie's hungry, anxious stare. But he felt his lover's gaze on his back as he crossed the room.

Rob stopped beside the window leading out onto the fire escape and rested a hand on the cold plate glass. He could hear Jamie's breathing, ragged and uncertain, and his heart pounded in his ears.

He started at the beginning and explained.

Chapter Nine

“Jamie,” Rob said, and his voice hardly sounded like his own. “You know all those conspiracy theories you hear about? All those Web sites that say secret government agencies are out there snatching ordinary people and...and screwing with them?” Rob looked over his shoulder, saw the frightened look on Jamie's face, saw him take a hesitant step forward. “It's all true, okay? I'm one of...one of the guys they screwed with.”

“What do you mean?” Jamie crossed the room to stand beside his lover. “What did they do to you? Is that why you have all those...?”

Scars, Rob finished silently. *I know you saw them.*

Choking back rising nausea, Rob pressed both hands against the glass and turned away, not able to bear the thought of seeing disbelief and anger chase the concern—the warmth—from Jamie's eyes.

He spoke very slowly, choosing his words with care. “They made me different, Jamie. Those scars on my back—they did operations. They gave me drugs until...until I changed. And now every month at the full moon, it happens. I change.”

“You...change? Because of the moon? What, you mean like a werewolf, Rob?” Jamie said in a tone of forced cheerfulness.

Rob pushed himself away from the window and took a step back, looking at his lover steadily. “Yes, Jamie. Exactly like a werewolf.”

He held Jamie's gaze, watched incredulity give way to confusion as Jamie realized he was serious. “Rob...” Jamie's voice was tight with emotion. “Rob,

werewolves are just something out of fairy tales and B movies. What's really going on with you?"

"Jamie, I really am a werewolf." The words were rough in his mouth, words Rob had never said out loud before. "When the full moon comes—or if I'm really angry or really frightened—I-I turn into a wolf."

"A wolf? Rob?" Jamie said thickly.

"Look, I know it's hard for you to believe." Rob shivered and turned away, then headed for the kitchen and the coffeepot. "I don't know what else to tell you. I—It happens; it's true." He grabbed a cup and poured coffee with an unsteady hand, the dark, aromatic liquid splashing over the side and onto the counter.

"Easy." Rob started at his lover's voice so close behind him and slopped more coffee. "Take it easy." Jamie took the cup and coffeepot out of his unresisting hands and put them down. "Rob, at the clinic. The wolf that chased the burglar off. Was it—" Jamie broke off, and Rob just looked at him, unable to answer.

Jamie stepped closer and raised his hands, then gently cupped Rob's face. "Whatever happened to you, whatever this is, we're in it together, all right?"

Rob nodded numbly, still unable to speak, and let Jamie pull him into his arms. Unresisting, he let himself be guided to the couch, let himself curl up in Jamie's arms. Jamie held him close, whispering against his skin, and Rob felt safe, for the first time in his life.

He closed his eyes and began to speak.

It had all begun when Rob was twelve and being shuffled around Pennsylvania's foster-care system. One night, without warning, he was taken from the spartan group home where he'd spent the last two months and driven to a camp in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but rocks and trees and a big metal fence running round the perimeter. In the beginning there were only ten of them, all foster brats, and they divided their time between schoolwork and military-style games: obstacle courses, firearm proficiency tests and target practice, long runs in heavy rain.

“You know,” Rob commented, “the kinds of thing kids usually prefer over basketball or watching TV.”

Jamie snorted.

But then, after a few weeks, there were other things too. Strange vitamin compounds with every meal, medical examinations every other day, and—Rob swallowed hard, and Jamie tightened his arms around him. Group exercises, team-building challenges with very real consequences for failure. And all the kids there started having terrible nightmares—the same nightmares, it seemed, about terrified pursuits and running on too many feet. Until one night the surgeries began, and when Rob woke up, groggy and still nauseated, he was finally told the reason they were all there: they were to become werewolves in the service of their country.

“Handpicked, they told us.” Rob blinked away tears. “Yeah, right. We were a bunch of kids no one was looking out for, kids who wouldn't be missed when they disappeared. All we were to them were lab rats: convenient, easily controlled, and completely disposable.”

Jamie murmured into Rob's hair, holding him close. Rob could just make out the words he spoke, but he clung to the sound of Jamie's voice, low and sweet against him.

He'd dreamed of freedom, of escape, but when it had happened, it had been pure luck. The training mission gone wrong, the explosion, the rocky outcrop beneath his paws collapsing into the swift and icy river below, carrying him away to safety. Far from the center, far from the rest of his pack. Even now he never liked to think back on that awful night.

Six years. It had been six years since he'd fled. Six years, five cities, and innumerable thankless jobs where employers didn't ask many questions and were just happy if you showed up and got the work done. Until, of course, you missed one too many shifts around the full moon, and they were sorry and all, but it was time to move on.

The whole time Rob spoke, Jamie's arms never faltered, one hand rubbing Rob's back in a soothing, proprietary movement as Rob struggled with words he'd never thought he'd speak. His voice shook and broke as he tried to communicate the long years of imprisonment, the often-barbaric experimental treatments, and the lonely life he'd led since his escape. He'd realized long ago that the Center and his pack believed him dead, killed in the explosion, but even that knowledge couldn't stop his looking over his shoulder. Jamie held him close, silent, until at last Rob ran out of words.

"I'm sorry," Rob choked out and tried to pull away.

"No," Jamie whispered, and Rob heard his voice crack. "Don't be sorry. Oh God, Rob, God. That's just..." Jamie leaned in and kissed Rob gently.

Rob raised a shaking hand and gripped Jamie's shoulder, eyes locked imploringly on his lover's. "You...you still wanna be with me? Even though I'm...I'm...what I am?"

"Yes, Rob," Jamie said softly, his gaze steady. Rob saw fresh tears well in his lover's blue eyes. "What you are, Rob...what you are is mine. All mine."

Jamie didn't shy away from his intense gaze. The fear and need in Rob's eyes were palpable and nearly undid him right there. They were so naked, so unvarnished. He found it hard to believe Rob could have lied about his story. Rob's eyes just wouldn't let him. Jamie leaned forward and kissed Rob softly, murmuring against his jaw. "All mine."

At that, Rob sagged heavily against his shoulder. "Jamie," he whispered. "Don't say that unless you mean it. Don't do this to me."

Jamie tightened his arms around Rob. "I mean it." He kissed Rob's temple lightly. "Just like you did."

Rob's eyes glittered again, this time with unshed tears. "Jamie...please. Please."

Jamie unfolded gracefully from the worn sofa, tugged Rob to his feet, and led him to the bedroom. As they passed through the doorway, Jamie turned and pulled his lover close. "Oh yes, Rob. Whatever else you are, you're definitely mine. Don't you doubt that for a second."

Rob leaned into him, letting his forehead rest against Jamie's, breathing heavily. He didn't say a word.

Jamie smiled wickedly. "Back at the clinic you saved me, didn't you? That was...that was you?"

Rob didn't look up, but Jamie felt his gentle shrug. He brought one hand up and traced the line of Rob's jaw with his fingers. He sneaked his other hand up under the back of Rob's T-shirt, fingers spread, lightly skating across the thick swell of muscles flanking his lover's spine. Rob reached for him, giving himself over to the embrace, eyes closed, rubbing his jaw gently against Jamie's cupped hand.

"Remember that night you came to the clinic with me? Before we left, remember what you said?" Jamie whispered.

Rob looked at him, eyes heavy with hope and lust.

Jamie leaned in and stole a quick, light kiss. "It works both ways. You're mine now, and whatever your burdens, I wanna help. However I can."

Rob choked off a moan.

Jamie pushed Rob onto the bed and climbed on top, kissing and licking. Rob bucked against him with a whimper, and Jamie felt a pulse of anticipation at the base of his spine.

Jamie yanked Rob's shirt over his head, leaving him bare chested against the coverlet. As Rob made a small mew of desire, Jamie licked his way down Rob's neck, his hands roaming the thicket of dark fur covering his chest, fingers finding his nipples, bringing them to attention with hard pinches that made Rob buck against him.

Bearing down with his hips, Jamie pinned his lover, giving free rein to his need for Rob. The memory of the coolly varnished headboard under his palms gave Jamie a quick frisson of desire; he wanted to reciprocate, wanted to feel Rob come again, wanted to see his face, feel the clench of his fingers when he did. Rising up on his arms, Jamie took Rob's mouth roughly, dominating his tongue, seeking, searching, challenging, until Rob broke the kiss, panting for air, eyes wide with wonder.

Jamie grinned.

He moved over Rob's body, hands flat on his muscular chest, enjoying the swell of his firm stomach, until he was biting at the base of Rob's navel.

Rob thrust his hips into Jamie's chest in response, groaning softly, head thrown back. Jamie left a soft, wet kiss on his lover's stomach, feeling the dramatic rise and fall of Rob's ragged breaths against his forehead. His balls tightened at the sensation, and he pulled away and straddled Rob's bare torso.

"Tell me you want this, Rob," Jamie growled. "Tell me you feel it too. Tell me—"

Rob lifted up, stomach taut, and kissed Jamie hard. Jamie could feel the tremors in Rob's hands as he undid Jamie's shirt and gently brushed his fingertips against the skin beneath. Jamie pushed Rob back onto the bed and gave him a warning nip at the collarbone. He resumed kissing his way down Rob's stomach before stopping to lick at the sharp curve of his abs appreciatively. Rob wriggled as Jamie's finger grazed his ribs, and Jamie looked up, questioning. Rob grinned sheepishly.

Jamie nipped again at the firm, darkly furred skin just under Rob's belly button. His lover hissed and bucked, and Jamie felt the reassuring heat of Rob through his sweatpants, throbbing against his chest.

He sat up on his knees with a pleased expression and reached for the drawstring of Rob's sweats after placing his hand briefly, palm down, against Rob's heat. He tugged at the knot in the drawstring, releasing it with a gentle *twang*

before sliding the sweats down off Rob's hips, then dropped them on the floor. Moving between Rob's legs, he took Rob's cock in his hands, savoring the hard heat against his skin, how it jumped at his touch. Jamie bent and lapped the glistening drop of precum off the tip, and Rob whined, rocking his hips and digging his heels against the cotton sheets.

Encouraged, Jamie slipped the tip of Rob's cock past his lips, tasting the wet slit; he took him deep, sucking gently. A murmur of pleasure escaped Jamie's throat as he tasted Rob, salty and musk, as he flicked his tongue against the veined underside. Rob groaned loudly, spreading his legs wider.

He pulled himself up and reached for Jamie. "Oh baby, yes," he whispered. Jamie overpowered him, forcing him back down, and nipped at his belly, a warning this time that Rob bucked happily against. He ground his head back against the comforter, eyes closed. Jamie smiled and licked gently where he'd bitten.

Taking Rob's cock back into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the spongy tip, Jamie slipped his hands over Rob's, gripping the wrists firmly, caressing the strong bones of one with his thumb. Rob mewled, half pleasure, half frustration, and, encouraged, Jamie held Rob's wrists down against the comforter, pinning them in place.

Jamie swallowed him deep in one slow, continuous movement, tongue sliding firmly over Rob's shaft, blindly memorizing the heat of it, the strength. Jamie's erection throbbed insistently through his jeans, but he paid no attention to it. There would be time for that later. Right now, Jamie sucked Rob deep, making small noises of pleasure. He pulled back, moving one hand to the shaft, keeping his eyes open only long enough to note Rob hadn't moved his wrist from where Jamie'd pinned it to the bed earlier. The faith in this gesture, the submission, melted him, and he sped up his stroke, mouth and hand moving together, slow, hard strokes interspersed with soft, wet swipes across Rob's slit. Jamie savored the taste of Rob on his tongue, tangy and sour, and then he felt Rob swell in his hand, his whole body tensing.

Jamie opened his eyes and watched Rob's stomach muscles tense, and then his cock pulsed, once, twice, a third time, and Jamie swallowed the hot seed that filled his mouth as Rob cried out.

Jamie closed his eyes, concentrating. And he felt the moment Rob surrendered entirely, heard the contented sigh that escaped Rob's lips, felt all the tension leave Rob's body. Jamie released Rob's dick and leaned gently up to place a kiss on his stomach, softly through the thatch of dark pubic hair.

Rob opened his eyes and regarded Jamie hazily. "Baby," he said. "That just..."

Jamie crawled up the bed to stop Rob's mouth with a long, sweet kiss. He pushed himself up off the bed and pulled his sweater and shirt off, conscious of Rob's eyes on him the whole time. He unzipped his jeans and slid them down his slender hips, noting with approval how Rob watched still, without moving. The nightstand he'd seen Rob delve into last time yielded condoms and lube, and after turning back to the bed, Jamie knelt between Rob's legs, then laid his body atop Rob's and gathered his lover in his arms.

Rob slid his arms low around Jamie's torso, nearly boneless with contentment. Jamie mouthed his neck and jaw wetly, and Rob writhed with pleasure, murmuring indistinctly.

After leaning up on one elbow, Jamie slid a slicked finger between Rob's legs and penetrated him gently but insistently, working his finger in and out of Rob's hole. Jamie watched his face intently as Rob whimpered in his arms.

Catching his breath, Rob slid a hand alongside Jamie's cheek, angling for a kiss. Jamie obliged, then nudged Rob's head back onto the comforter with soft touches, exposing more of his neck to be licked and kissed. Rob submitted with a pleased grin, closing his eyes, sinking down under Jamie's weight.

By the time Jamie entered him, Rob was mewling with need, and Jamie encountered little resistance as the head of his cock slid past the ring of tight muscle. He kept going, taking Rob in one long movement, crushing Rob against his chest, feeling him sob and buck. Jamie kept his strokes slow and deep, pushing hard

into Rob each time, holding him close, peppering his jaw and chin with featherlight kisses. Rob clung to him, crying out softly, thrusting in time with each stroke.

Rob nuzzled his jaw insistently, asking for Jamie's lips against his, and Jamie relented, taking Rob's sweet mouth with the same firm rhythm he was grinding into his hips. The scent of Rob's sweat, his need, the feel of him slick and hot around Jamie's cock, was overwhelming, and Jamie slowed his strokes, staying deep, his movements growing smaller as he felt his cock swell against the tight walls of Rob's ass. Just as Jamie reached the edge, Rob arched beneath him, digging his fingers into Jamie's shoulder blades with a harsh cry, and the wet heat Jamie felt between them set his own orgasm free, pulsing up and down his spine as he bore Rob down against the bed. Waves of pleasure rolled through him as Rob's ass milked his cock, and Jamie burrowed in the crook of Rob's neck, giving himself over with a long moan to the release they'd both been seeking.

Chapter Ten

Rob crossed the parking lot in the dwindling twilight with Bella trotting hard on his heels. He and Jamie had become as inseparable as the busy vet clinic allowed, and Rob's new courier job conveniently saw him often on the East Side. With today's run over, he couldn't wait to see Jamie. Then again, he couldn't ever wait to see Jamie.

At the clinic it was the kind of pandemonium Jamie had assured him was normal: an influx of late-day clients checking in and out after the workday was through. Rob skirted easily around the edge of the chaos and dropped unnoticed into a chair in the lobby. Bella curled up attentively at his feet.

As he took his seat, a spirited chorus of barks and growls sprang up from the back room. Grinning, Rob shook his head at this newfound effect he was having on the dogs. He still hadn't got over the fact that his connection with the beautiful blond vet had apparently changed him in a fundamental way.

I wonder if the Center knew about this.

Suddenly Rob felt hostile eyes on him, and he tracked them quickly, his reverie broken. Brianna, Jamie's partner in the practice, was standing at the desk, watching him suspiciously. Rob stared right back, his gaze even and open but unbowed.

He wondered how long she'd been staring, then, with a jolt, realized that a year ago—hell, a month ago—he'd have known to the second and have already gauged her as a potential threat. What the hell happened? What's become of the old vigilant, cautious Rob? he wondered.

After his escape from the Center, it had taken him a long time to accept that he was truly free. Even though he knew rationally that no one was hunting him, that his pack and the Center's research team believed he'd died in the explosion the night the final test had gone so horribly wrong, he'd spent the last six years looking over his shoulder.

Rob rubbed his neck absentmindedly, watching as a harried mother with a bad dye job hung on to a bouncing Irish setter, two happy, grubby children clinging to her as she left. Rob's broken, suspicious self was gone, replaced by a guy with a boyfriend and a dog and an apartment full of secondhand furniture fucked on or against at every conceivable turn. He'd turned into a guy who could sit in the waiting room of a vet clinic, a place full of all different varieties of people and canines, and just...wait. Rob grinned, and Bella thumped her tail on the floor.

He bent and scritched her ears affectionately. "That's right, girl. Not such a lone wolf after all, huh?"

Bella licked at his hand in approval. "Good girl," Rob murmured. "Keep it up, you might be getting a doggie bag from dinner, huh?"

Bella whined happily, rubbing the top of her head against Rob's palm. "What are you in the mood for, girl? Indian? Vietnamese? Korean? Or just a good old-fashioned hoagie?"

"Rob!" Jamie came round the corner with a huge smile, and Rob got to his feet, Bella bouncing excitedly at his side. The lobby had emptied, and Jamie pulled Rob into his arms and stole a soft kiss.

And then another. Rob leaned his forehead against Jamie's as their lips parted. Jamie's eyes were filled with love and genuine excitement at seeing him, and Rob smiled. He knew exactly who'd broken through the paranoid shell he'd occupied for so long, and he couldn't be happier. He rubbed his head happily against Jamie's, ignoring Brianna's snort from the front desk.

"Rob." Jamie stroked his cheek softly, and Rob snapped playfully at his fingers. Jamie giggled and pulled him closer. "Been waiting for you all day."

“You have? You should've called. I'd've come right over.”

“And have your bosses wonder why all your deliveries wind up at my clinic?”

Rob tried for a smirk. “Lot of important business goes on here, you know? Vaccinations, checkups, surgeries, theft...”

“Hm. Theft, Rob?”

Rob tried to keep a straight face and failed. “You stole my heart, didn't you?”

Jamie laughed, and Rob felt it in the marrow of his bones. “I hope I did, 'cause that way we can keep 'em in the same place.”

“That right?”

“Mm.” Jamie kissed him again in earnest, and Rob heard another soft *tsk* noise, then Brianna's thick-soled tread receding, headed toward the back room. They both jumped when the back door slammed.

Jamie turned to look after the sound, and Rob took the opportunity to suck on the earlobe brought closer, pulling gently. Damn, he loved his mate. Jamie's scent was sweet and fresh like newly mown grass or hay, with notes of something deeper. Something spicy and arousing. Rob's cock filled in his jeans as he pressed his nose into the hollow behind Jamie's ear.

“Hey, hey, I may need that later. If I go out in public with just one, people might stare.” Jamie made his protest a lie by pulling Rob closer, rubbing against him needily. Jamie gasped as Rob used his teeth. “They might comment, say unkind things behind our—*oh*—behind our backs.”

Rob giggled against Jamie's skin. “Let 'em. Better yet, I'll get the other one too, so you match. That way”—Rob licked Jamie's neck and was rewarded with a shiver—“they'll have nothing to complain about.”

“You always have the best ideas,” Jamie murmured, dropping his hands to Rob's butt. “Oh, Rob, needed this. All day.”

“Me too. Do that some more.”

“What, this?” Jamie squeezed Rob's cheeks, and he arched against Jamie's body with a moan.

“Maybe,” Rob said, panting. “Try it again, and I'll let you know for sure.”

Jamie pulled away and kissed Rob's forehead. “Come on. There's time enough for that after dinner. I'm starved.”

Rob stepped back sharply. “You skipped lunch again, didn't you? What have I told you about that? It's not healthy.”

“I tried, I really did, but—”

“But nothing, Jamie. You gotta eat. Otherwise you get to this part of the day and you're all...”

“Horny?”

Rob attempted a stern look, wagging a finger. “Horny's fine. You start eating lunch and you lose horny, then we're gonna have to talk.”

Jamie grabbed the finger and kissed it, lips parted just enough to leave Rob woozy. He forestalled Rob's next protest with a kiss. “Let's go. I'm starving. I know this great greasy-spoon diner on Twenty-fifth—”

Rob grimaced. “You had me at greasy spoon, Jamie. Sounds delicious. Healthy too.”

Jamie grinned. “It is. But more than that, you know what else it is?”

Rob shivered inside his leather jacket. “What's that?”

Jamie's grin widened, and he trailed Rob's captive finger down the front of his scrubs, past the drawstring at the waist, over the outline of his hard cock, barely restrained by the thin cotton. “It's fast. We can be in and out in a half hour, tops.”

“Sounds just the thing, babe.” Rob stepped forward with a smile that promised more than dinner, and Jamie's eyes filled with desire. Just as he reached for Rob, there was a sharp rapping at the front door. “Who knows we're here?” Rob asked suspiciously. *Apparently the hunted wolf in me isn't entirely free after all.*

Jamie crossed the lobby, shaking his head. "No one, but lots of people have after-hours—Aw hell."

Rob was instantly on alert. "Who is it, babe?"

"Trouble," Jamie said softly. "That's who." He unlocked the door and pasted on an appropriately welcoming grin. Rob suspected he was the only one not fooled.

A slight young woman of obvious wealth stalked into the lobby with a small white dog in her arms. Her hair was arranged provocatively around her cheeks and chin, and she wore a low-cut sweater over tight-fitting leather pants and heels.

And she was completely unable to take her eyes off Jamie. Rob suspected that what she'd come there for tonight had very little to do with the health of the West Highland terrier she was holding. Rob recognized him from the night of the break-in, although he now looked much more hale and hearty and none the worse for his injury. As soon as Mutty caught sight of Rob, he began wriggling with frantic happiness in his mistress's arms. She paid no attention.

"Oh, Jamie, I'm so glad I caught you. Mutty's been a bit under the weather, and well, frankly I was hoping we could talk about our little...misunderstanding from the other day." She looked up at Jamie expectantly from under long, heavily mascaraed lashes.

Behind them, Bella growled low in her throat, and the woman leaped into Jamie's arms with a startled cry Rob was sure she practiced at home. "Oh, that terrible beast is back! Why isn't she locked up somewhere? We'll all be killed!" The young woman clutched at Jamie's biceps with long, perfectly manicured nails, and Rob restrained the urge to growl. Instead he inclined his head at Bella, indicating the back room.

The malamute obeyed, trotting off with tail held high. Rob could have sworn he'd just seen his own dog roll her eyes at him.

Jamie took a step back, prying the woman's hands loose. "Mrs. Corrigan, it's so good to see you again. May I introduce my associate, Rob Nichols? Rob, this is Gale Corrigan and her dog, Mutty."

Rob stepped forward with his hand outstretched. "A pleasure," he lied expertly. "I've heard so much about you." That last at least was the truth: Jamie had filled him in about Bella's little indiscretion during their first date. When he'd shyly admitted to having claimed Bella as his to avoid having her taken off by animal control, it had taken all the self-possession Rob had to stop himself from leaping over the picnic table and ripping the vet's clothes off there and then. Far from being upset by the deception, as Jamie had feared, Rob had fallen even more deeply for his tall, sweet blond. Until that moment, he hadn't known just how much he admired a guy willing to go to bat for the underdog. So to speak.

Mrs. Corrigan stared at Rob as if he were on fire. "Your...associate..." She ignored Rob's proffered hand and returned her gaze to Jamie, tightening her hold on Mutty. The dog wriggled, looking a question at his mistress.

"I didn't know you'd taken on a new partner, Jamie. I hope this doesn't mean we'll be seeing less of you around the practice."

"Ah. Rob's not that kind of associate, Mrs. Corrigan."

Rob sent Jamie a warning glance as she continued. "Oh? What kind is he? Are you treating his dog too?"

"Actually, Mrs. Corrigan, his—"

"That's it exactly, ma'am." Rob decided to intervene before Jamie's too-honest nature got them both in hot water. "And I think we're almost done here."

The woman shifted her hold on the terrier as she visibly dismissed Rob. "Excellent. Jamie, I had been hoping to find you alone. I feel like maybe"—she pressed a finger to her brow—"maybe I overreacted. And I'm sure if we just talked about what happened, we could come to some sort of arrangement."

Rob folded his arms. He knew Jamie liked to handle everything in relation to the running of the clinic, but this lady was trouble. She smelled of spoiled gardenias and disappointment.

Jamie looked uncomfortable. "Look, Gale—Mrs. Corrigan—I really appreciate your being forgiving about the incident with Bella the other day, but—"

She laid her hand back on Jamie's arm, almost caressing, and Rob again fought the urge to growl. "I'm not sure 'forgiving' is the word yet, Jamie. But it might be. If you can convince me."

Coloring, Jamie said slowly, "What type of convincing do you need?"

The kind you'll be horrified to consider, pal, Rob thought. The kind I have no intention of letting you get yourself into.

Mrs. Corrigan shot a look in Rob's direction. "I'd prefer to discuss it privately if it's all the same to you."

Jamie straightened. "Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Rob."

The young woman looked from one of them to the other and back, as if seeing them both for the first time. Her expression changed almost immediately. "Oh," she said softly. "Oh no. You're..." Her nostrils flared, and she shot Rob a look that would have felled a lesser man where he stood. But Rob Nichols was no lesser man. He smiled pleasantly.

Recollecting herself, Mrs. Corrigan continued more primly, "I can see I'm wasting my breath. Here." She all but tossed Mutty into Jamie's arms, where he promptly sat up and began licking at the vet's face, tiny tail wiggling happily. "Damn thing's cost me more money than he's worth. Didn't get a thing in return." She spun on her heel.

"Wait, Mrs. Corrigan! Gale!" Jamie struggled. "You're just leaving him here? Don't you want him?"

She turned, regarding him icily. "I feel he brings back too many unpleasant memories of the attack. Besides, Jamie, when I walk out that door, I won't be back."

Jamie and Rob stared at each other and then back at Mrs. Corrigan.

"You're blaming a dog because you're not getting laid?" Rob asked. The young woman's frown deepened, and Jamie shot Rob an impatient look.

“Dr. Bretton, you'll be hearing from my attorneys.” Mrs. Corrigan stalked across the lobby and slammed out through the front door and into the night.

With a wry grin, Rob followed and pulled the door shut. He locked it, then double-checked the lock and turned to regard Jamie with a rueful grin. “You're better off without her, man.”

“I am, huh, Rob?” As Mutty whined, Jamie gave him a rough scratch along the jawline. The whine turned excited in a heartbeat. “Well, ol' buddy, I think you're stuck here for a bit while we sort out what to do about your owner.” He looked back at Rob. “I dunno. She's been a problem from day one, and now this biting thing?” He set Mutty down on the floor, where he promptly bounced in a circle before trotting confidently toward the back room. Jamie followed at a more leisurely pace, Rob bringing up the rear. “Lemme just get this little guy set up for the night, and we can go grab that dinner we talked about, huh?”

“You got it.” Bella bounded over to Rob, confident of praise. Rob gave it to her. She'd spotted the danger, alerted him and Jamie, and then backed off when he'd asked her to. She was a helluva dog; Rob'd known that the first time he laid eyes on her. He ran a hand down her side, giving her flank a brisk pat. “You wanna get takeout or eat there?”

Jamie shrugged, latching Mutty into an enclosure. He turned, water bowl in hand. “Makes no difference to—”

Bella stopped in midbounce, then sniffed. She turned and made a beeline for Mutty's enclosure and promptly went wild. Tail high and flicking from side to side, she barked excitedly, unleashing a frenzy of noises from the other pens. Rob frowned, approaching. He and Jamie exchanged a look. For his part, Mutty wasn't in the least bit cowed by the big dog's attentions, and he bounced happily up and down behind the wire fence separating them. His cheerful yips formed an odd counterpoint to Bella's full-throated barks.

“Rob?” Jamie asked.

Rob knelt next to his dog and rubbed her ears with concern. “What, girl?” She danced happily outside the terrier’s cage, ears high, tail rapidly blurring with excitement. She whined, low and happy, then bounded in a circle.

Rob narrowed his eyes. “No. Bella...”

She bowed with a low growl before resuming her dance.

“Please tell me you’re kidding, Bella.”

She regarded him balefully, her pale blue eyes striking him to the heart.

Jamie came close. “What is it, Rob? What does she want?”

Rob rose. He tried for a winning expression. “Jamie, I don’t suppose you want another dog—”

“What?”

Rob sighed. “I’ll tell you on the way to the restaurant. Let’s get these guys packed up and get moving, okay?”

Chapter Eleven

Jamie laughed when Rob tried to explain Bella's unlikely, if somehow appropriate, choice of friend. One look at the way Bella stared obsessively at the terrier and the way Mutty responded with happy, excited little circles, and Jamie realized Mutty's sunny disposition suited the big malamute's more solemn, dignified demeanor to a tee.

Jamie looked at Rob, who was watching in the rearview mirror as the two dogs wrestled in the backseat of the Jetta. He reached over and squeezed Rob's knee lightly. "Watch the road, buddy."

Rob shook his head and returned to dividing his attention between St. Louis's happy-hour drivers and his dog's new friend. Jamie left his hand on Rob's knee.

The dinner rush at Maudie's was barely worthy of the name, so they had their pick of booths, and Rob headed straight to one in the back corner. They nursed cups of charred black coffee, waiting for their order. Jamie sipped his, the bitter brew turning his stomach while he watched Rob gulp his down before setting the heavy mug on the scarred Formica tabletop with a soft *thump*.

Jamie loved watching Rob, taking in the strong lines of his jaw, already stubbled even though he'd shaved that morning. The strong, worn hands, thick fingers drumming impatiently on the table. He noticed too how Rob automatically scanned the diner—just like he did every room—as if he expected a platoon of marines to come crashing through the windows at any minute. Jamie shook his head. "You always look over your shoulder, Rob."

Rob shifted on his side of the booth, the cushion squeaking softly beneath him. His expression, so open and unguarded in the privacy of the locked clinic, was shadowed and hard out in public. Always.

Now he regarded Jamie warily. "If I'm found, they'll come for me, Jamie."

"You're a popular guy."

Rob didn't laugh, and Jamie raised an eyebrow, scanning his lover's face for clues, already regretting his weak attempt at humor. "Never mind. It was a dumb joke." He gripped the ceramic mug tightly, wondering how their earlier levity had vanished.

"It's not a joke, Jamie," Rob said cautiously, looking at the tabletop. "I don't know how to tell you what it's like to live looking over your shoulder. Not knowing if they're coming—And there's no one you can trust, not the guys that fucked you up in the first place or the...the ones who were supposed to be your friends, your own pack. I don't know how to joke about that."

Jamie gripped the mug tighter. "I'm sorry, Rob."

He watched Rob worry his bottom lip with his teeth. They were so far from the realm of normal date conversation, he wasn't sure how to proceed. There was so much he didn't know about Rob, so much he was having to take on faith about Rob's story. Sure, he'd seen—and felt and tasted—the scars Rob said were from Center surgeries, but the whole idea that Rob could transform into a wolf—it was a helluva lot to swallow. But damned if he wasn't gonna try.

"Rob, I can't even imagine what you've been through, what that does to—"

Their waitress, a buxom, tired redhead, appeared at the table, making them both jump and saving Jamie from finishing his sentence. She set down steaming plates of bacon and eggs and two stacks of toast.

"There y'are," she announced. "Oh, and hang on. Lemme get you a refill on those coffees." She spun away across the red-tiled floor while the two of them stared at each other.

“Here ya go.” The waitress reappeared and refilled Rob's cup. She gave Jamie's a cursory splash before plunking down a fresh dish of creamers and a collection of jams. “Anything else you guys need?”

There was a too-long silence before Jamie cleared his throat awkwardly. “Thanks. I think we've got more than enough right here.” He couldn't move his eyes from Rob's face.

She tore their check from her pad and weighted it to the tabletop with Rob's water glass. “You two have a great night, yeah?” There was a shout from the chaos of the kitchen and she was gone, sensible shoes squeaking across the tile.

Neither of them made a move toward the food. Jamie reached for Rob's hand across the table, needing to reconnect with him, needing to know the bond they were forging still thrummed strongly.

With a quick look around, Rob laced his fingers through Jamie's. Jamie exhaled softly as Rob gave him a quiet smile.

“Jamie! Oh, Jamie, I've been looking all over for you! I'd hoped I'd find you here! You'll never guess what I've discovered about—” The sentence ended in a shriek as Leonard screeched to a halt in front of their table, eyes bugging out behind his thick glasses.

Jamie released Rob's hand and rose with a puzzled smile, mentally cursing Leonard for the interruption. “Leonard Harper, this is Rob Nichols. Rob, this is Leonard. I've known Leonard since vet school. I saved his cat's life once.”

Leonard kept staring at Rob. “It, uh...it died later, of course, but at the time, yes, technically Jamie's correct; he saved its life. Um.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a frown. “Um, Jamie, could I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, Len. Have a seat.” Jamie indicated the side of the booth he'd just vacated.

“No! Uh, no, I mean, can I talk to you someplace else?” Leonard held a hand in front of his face and mouthed, *Someplace away from him?*

Rob chuckled, shooting Jamie an understanding smile. He waved Jamie away, picked up his fork, and speared a piece of bacon.

Leonard tugged Jamie along between the row of booths and the counter until they stood in front of the cashier's station.

"Leonard, what's this all about? Come on! Sit down, hang out, have coffee with me and Rob. This guy's so great. You've gotta get to know him; he's just so, so..." Jamie faltered, at a loss for words.

"Anonymous is what he is, Jamie! This is the guy you had me check out, remember?" Leonard jabbed a sharp finger into Jamie's chest, emphasizing each point. "The one with the hinky records? The guy who appeared out of nowhere?"

Jamie held his hands up against Leonard's onslaught. He chose his words carefully. "I'm sure there's a very good reason Rob's past is hard to track down. Uh, like a-a, a computer accident, for instance."

Leonard folded his arms, giving Jamie a skeptical look.

"All right, maybe several computer accidents. Or...paperwork. You know how St. Louis bureaucracy is...right?" Jamie gave Leonard a hopeful look. The two of them stepped to one side as a family of four pushed their way to the register, and Jamie grabbed Leonard's shoulder. "Come on, Leonard. Give this guy a chance. There's gotta be some legitimate reason his paperwork's gone astray in this city's notoriously top-notch bureaucracy, right?"

Leonard looked at the tiles, then back up at Jamie. "Maybe. But the chances of his paperwork going astray in St. Louis and Harrisburg? Virtually nonexistent."

Jamie put his hands on his hips. "Harrisburg."

Leonard nodded vigorously. "Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I, uh, well—" He pulled Jamie against the wall, looking around them suspiciously. "Based on the address we pulled up, I was able to work backward from the lease he signed and— Now, Jamie, I'm not proud of this next bit, so I don't want to get into it, but..." Leonard grasped Jamie's shoulders firmly. "I think I've traced Rob. I think he went

missing from foster care in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, when he was twelve. Now that's all I've got so far, but—”

“You *what?*”

The restaurant fell silent. Leonard gave an embarrassed wave to the eatery, and after a few seconds, normal conversation resumed. Jamie put a hand to his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut. Everything had been going so well, and now this. “Leonard, what could have possibly possessed you to do that?”

“Jamie, you may not believe this, but I care about you. You take up with a mysterious stranger with no past, and I'm just supposed to stand by and watch you throw away everything you've worked for? Brianna told me that—”

Jamie gasped. “Brianna told you what? She called you?” He was dimly aware he'd raised his voice again, but he was so aggravated, he wasn't sure he cared. “What the—”

“Jamie, we care about you. We just don't wanna see you get hurt.”

“Leonard, where do you and she get off making decisions for me about my life? Why would you...?” Jamie trailed off as Rob pushed angrily past the two of them, out the door, and into the cold night without a backward glance.

Jamie stood in stunned disbelief, watching his retreating form. Rob crossed the parking lot and hailed a yellow cab. The lights flared briefly red and were gone, absorbed into the city's bloodstream.

Jamie turned and stared at Leonard, mouth open. “Leonard, what have you done?”

* * *

Jamie really had no concrete idea where Rob would go when he was upset, just a suspicion he was pinning all his hopes on. He just hoped he'd guessed correctly, that Rob was wolf enough to retreat to where he felt safest: his apartment. His den.

Jamie stood in the hallway outside the front door and knocked again, louder this time. His heart sank. He couldn't bear to think he'd been wrong with his den

theory, because he truly had no idea where else to look for Rob, and there was too much at stake. He'd never felt this way about anyone else, and he was horrified to think it could all be over so quickly, that he'd screwed things up beyond repair.

Bella tugged impatiently on her leash and as Jamie turned to her, the big dog sprang forward, jumping up and planting her forepaws squarely against the door. "Bella!" he remonstrated, just as the malamute gave a satisfied *woof*. There was an audible *click* as the heavy door shifted on its latch.

It was unlocked.

The knob turned freely in Jamie's hand, and Bella shouldered it open. With a reproachful glance over his shoulder, Mutty followed the big malamute. Shutting the door behind them, Jamie unleashed the dogs and flicked on the living-room light. "I know, you guys, I know," he murmured. "But I'm here to put things right."

Bella stared at him, head cocked to one side, then padded disapprovingly over to her bed while Mutty cautiously explored his new environs under her watchful eye. Jamie had been dismissed. He breathed a sigh of relief and made his way to the bedroom.

Rob was sitting on the bed, knees drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped around them tight. He was staring out the big arched window. Jamie stood for a second in the doorway, resolve faltering. From the light streaming in from the living room, Jamie could see Rob had been crying. He wasn't surprised. He'd quickly learned Rob's emotions ran heavy and close to the surface. They'd run into Rob's teenage neighbors one day in the lobby, the kids who'd so terrified Jamie the first time he'd seen them. While Rob put a comforting hand on his shoulder, the younger one told them that his grandmother's pain was back and the doctors weren't sure what else they could do. Once they were safely upstairs in the apartment, Rob had hung over his kitchen sink and silently wept while Jamie had held him, soothing, comforting him as the tears flowed.

Jamie took a few tentative steps into the bedroom. "Rob? Rob, I'm so sorry." He waited, but the only sound was Rob's ragged, tortured breathing. "Leonard just...

He gets a little overexcited sometimes. I swear he only means well, but sometimes he goes overboard. He's a little protective.”

Rob looked over at Jamie finally, pale blue eyes looming large in the gloomy light of the bedroom. “Who's gonna protect me, Jamie?”

Jamie's heart melted in his chest. “Rob,” he said brokenly. “I'll protect you. I swear.”

They both jumped as the building's ancient heating system sprang to life. Jamie ignored the clangs and groans from the pipes in the wall and crossed to the bed, then perched lightly on the edge. “It's all true, isn't it, Rob? The government center, the kidnapping, the...the werewolf thing—it's all true.”

Rob looked back out the window. “You thought I lied to you?” he asked in a small voice.

“No, Rob, not lied. I just... I never believed in werewolves...and it's so much to get my head around. I hadn't realized... Rob. I just didn't get it, I guess.” Jamie broke off.

Rob said nothing, tears continuing to run unchecked down his face.

Jamie looked at his lover, curled up miserably against the headboard. “Rob,” Jamie whispered, “I love you. I believe you. Please, baby, give me another chance.”

Rob looked up, surprised. “Give you another chance? Jamie, it's me that's the fucked-up one here. Leonard's right, you know; you deserve better than me, better than some wolf who's gonna fuck up your life every chance he gets. I wouldn't blame you if you walked out—”

It took Jamie only a second to crawl onto the bed and pull Rob into his arms; both of them were crying and kissing all at once. “No, Rob, oh no, please. Please.”

Rob looked at Jamie, his wide, pale eyes making him suddenly young and vulnerable in the dim light. Jamie continued softly. “You said you couldn't trust your last pack. But Rob, you can trust me, okay? I might not be much use in a pack—”

“Jamie—” Rob's voice sounded strangled, and he gripped Jamie's arms. “Jamie, you're the only pack I want. I want you to be the whole thing.”

Jamie's heart felt as though it might burst. “I want that too,” he said, his voice catching. He tightened his grip, rolling Rob on top. Rob's kisses were sloppy and frantic, and Jamie gave himself to them wholeheartedly, overwhelmed with relief.

Jamie kissed every inch of Rob that he could reach, thorough but gentle, with Rob lying compliant and needy in his arms. When Rob opened his eyes, Jamie answered all his unasked questions with lips and tongue, hands soft on Rob's skin. He paid special attention to the sets of thin, raised scars occurring at intervals along the sides of Rob's spine, licking and mouthing them, conscious of their import. With every touch, Jamie willed away the damage they represented. He built a barrier between the past and the present with every tiny movement, using his body to erase Rob's pain and replace it with pleasure, tenderness. And love.

Afterward, Jamie wasn't sure which had been his climax and which Rob's. They'd moved together as one for so long, in such perfect harmony, that nothing had mattered except the look in Rob's eyes as pleasure chased away his fear, the noises Rob made as Jamie's body covered his, rocking gently, with small movements that kept him buried deep, kept the two of them as close together as possible.

Jamie returned from the bathroom, clambered back into bed, and fit his chest to Rob's broad back. The rest of their bodies aligned with ease. Jamie settled the comforter around the two of them, Rob murmuring sleepily. Pulling Rob into his arms, Jamie nuzzled his collarbone. “Mine. You're mine, Rob.”

Chapter Twelve

The next morning dawned cold and stormy, and it had never been harder for Jamie to crawl out of Rob's arms, out of their warm shared bed, and shiver his way into cold, stiff scrubs. Rob was no help at all, stretched languorously across the bed, watching Jamie dress with sleepy, appreciative eyes, and it was all Jamie could do to get out of the bedroom, out of the apartment, and on the road to the clinic.

All morning Jamie's mind stayed more than half with his lover, and he reflected that it was lucky the practice was quiet. Amy had called in sick and it was Brianna's day off, so it was just him and Tessa running things.

He was partway through a pug's eye exam when the jangling bells of the clinic door jerked him off autopilot. Tessa gave Jamie a nod and took over, and he stepped out of the exam room to see who the client was, only to be greeted by the sight of Woo's portly frame filling the clinic doorway, his partner at his heels.

"Gentlemen"—Jamie tried an ingratiating smile—"how can I help you this morning? Picking up or dropping off?"

Officer Woo shook water off his uniform jacket. It pebbled the magazines on the small end table before settling in puddles on the green tiles. "Neither. As a matter of fact, we're here to ask you a few questions about the trouble you had here the other night." He nudged his partner, who withdrew a notebook and pen from his jacket with a scowl.

Jamie's heart sank.

There had been no further talk of the break-in, and the police had been in no hurry to solve a crime with no victim, nothing stolen, and which prominently featured a mysterious and disappearing wolf.

There had been a few snickers at the crime scene, and one officer had gone so far as to give Jamie unsolicited advice about getting clean and sober. Now Jamie was glad of the lack of interest; Rob's secret was his to guard too.

"Some junkie and his dog?" Woo asked.

"That's right," Jamie said nervously. "But nothing was taken, and he hasn't been back, so I don't think there's a need to—"

"If it was a dog, Dr. Bretton, why'd you tell the reporting officer you saw a wolf?" Jenkins looked up expectantly from his notebook, and Woo folded his arms over his belly, gaze level.

Jamie swallowed hard. "I...must have been mistaken, I guess. I mean, easy mistake to make—dog, wolf. It was late and—"

"That's right. It was late," Jenkins continued. "D'you mind telling us what you were doing at the office so late? One a.m.'s a little outside normal business hours."

"I check on the inpatients, the overnight dogs, most nights. Some of the critical cases need attention between closing and morning. What's this about, anyway?"

The animal control officers conferred wordlessly for a moment. Woo broke the silence. "Seems like a strange mistake for you to make, *Dr.* Bretton, confusing a dog with a wolf. Seeing what you do and all."

"I told you, it was late," Jamie said. "I was tired." He softened his voice, using the tone he reserved for calming aggressive patients. "He had a knife to my throat, and...and I was scared."

"I'll bet you were, Dr. Bretton. I'll just bet you were."

Jamie folded his arms across his chest, unconsciously mimicking Woo's stance. "Is there..." Jamie chose his words carefully. "Is there something you'd like to ask me, Officer Woo?"

Woo grunted. "You have another dangerous animal on the premises?"

Jamie grinned disarmingly. "None that aren't clearly caged and labeled. Would you care to take a look?"

To his surprise, Woo nodded. "We'll be doing just that." He took a piece of paper from his jacket and handed it to Jamie. Even though it was damp and curled from the rain, Jamie was easily able to make out the words: *Warrant for Search of Business Premises*. "What's this about?" he asked.

"We'll let you know when we find it," Jenkins said brusquely, pushing past him and disappearing into the back room. Woo gave Jamie an apologetic look before he followed.

Trailing in their wake, Jamie scanned the warrant: *Keeping and breeding of illegal species within St. Louis city limits*.

Jamie swallowed hard. The authorities were taking the break-in seriously, all right. In the worst way possible. Now they were looking for Rob.

The current lot of inpatients were a motley assortment, but all breeds generally considered harmless: Pekingese, puggle, Boston terrier, shar-pei. Benji, well on the road to recovery, had gone home that day.

And of course, a selection of St. Louis Specials, the city's own native alley mutt. If any of them could be considered dangerous, it was these dogs cobbled together from the genetics of a couple of hundred years of life on the city's cold and heartless streets. Even so, the mutts currently in residence were blends that leaned more toward the soft and fuzzy end of the spectrum.

Woo stopped in front of the Pekingese and spun on his heel. "Where's the big Alaskan you had in here? The biter?"

"Bella? I left her home today." That was technically true. She and Mutty had become fast friends, usually spending the better part of each day curled up in Rob's apartment. Each time he or Rob went back to let them out, they seemed exasperated by the interruption to their busy schedules.

Woo fidgeted uneasily. He'd been making eyes at the Pekingese, poking a finger through the fence at it with soft cooing noises. Now, however, at the mention of Bella's name, he seemed to remember something disturbing. "Gale stopped by the

office,” he said. “She wants both of us to testify for her on the biting thing. She's taking it to civil court and—” At a look from Jenkins, the officer fell silent.

Jamie closed his eyes, inwardly seething. In all the excitement of the past few days, Rob and Jamie had both forgotten all about Bella's incident with Mrs. Corrigan. It seemed she had not. “A lawsuit?”

“Sure looks that way, Dr. Bretton,” Woo continued. “Leastwise, that's what she said she'd be doing when she stopped by—” He broke off again as Jenkins's dark look ramped up a few notches. The Pekingese, watching the exchange, suddenly launched into a series of high-pitched yaps, which were gleefully responded to by the room's other inhabitants.

Woo waved Jamie over. “That the only other exit?” He pointed to the back door. Jamie nodded.

“How many other rooms in the building?”

“Six—three exam rooms, my office, Briana's office, and the pharmacy.”

“Show me.”

Jamie was nearly through giving the officers an exhaustive tour of the small facilities when Tessa emerged from the exam room with a questioning look that turned defensive as soon as she laid eyes on the animal control officers. “Dr. Bretton, do you think you'll be much longer? Izzy's chomping at the bit in there.”

“Izzy? Who's that?” Woo took a step toward the closed exam-room door, and Tessa placed herself in front of it, one hand on the frame.

“A client, that's who,” she snapped. “Shouldn't you be off condemning innocent animals to death somewhere?”

“Tessa...” Jamie tried, then shook his head. He briefly wondered if at some point he should start hiring staff who were a little less outspoken.

“Show me.” Woo stepped closer, and Tessa's perfectly manicured brows drew together in an angry V.

“They have a warrant, Tessa,” Jamie said. “Go ahead. Let him see.”

She stepped aside with obvious reluctance. She and Jamie regarded each other nervously across the corridor as Woo's entrance caused Izzy to discover a new range in his repertoire of protests. *Warrant?* Tessa mouthed at Jamie in confusion.

Jamie held out his hands placatingly. "I'll explain later. Trust me—"

"You know, Tessa, that's not the best advice to follow." Jenkins stuck his hands on his hips, chewing the inside of his cheek as he looked at Jamie appraisingly. "I'm not sure you should be trusting Dr. Bretton right now." He cast a glance in her direction. "He says he saw a wolf on the premises."

Tessa's expression was guarded. "If Dr. Bretton says he saw a wolf, there was a wolf."

"Is that so? You wouldn't by any chance have seen that wolf yourself? Or any others like it?"

"Wait a minute," Jamie interjected. "I told you I could have been mistaken. Maybe it was just a dog after all."

Woo emerged from the exam room and pulled the door shut behind him. The rain, which had drummed on the roof with a steady, low thrum, began to grow in volume, until it sounded as if the clinic was under attack.

"Which was it, Dr. Bretton? Was it a dog or a wolf?" Jenkins deliberately invaded Jamie's space, stepping close enough for Jamie to smell the garlic on his breath.

Jamie looked over his shoulder at Tessa, her expression puzzled. He wanted badly to be able to tell the truth, stick to his story, the one he'd related to her and the rest of the staff time and time again, despite all their teasing. But now he knew the truth about the wolf—about Rob—he'd protect his lover at any cost. Rob had been through too much and was too important to him.

"I told you, I could have been mistaken. It was late. I was tired. It might easily have been just a-a big dog."

"No, Dr. Bretton," Jenkins said with a sneer. "You were right the first time: it was a wolf. Oh that's right. I guess nobody told you that, huh? That's what the guys at the crime lab said. A wolf."

"What?"

"The lab got a good DNA sample off a shard of glass. Your intruder got a nasty cut, and so did the wolf." Jenkins stepped in closer, until his chest bumped against Jamie's. He brushed off the restraining hand Woo laid on his arm. "Two sets of DNA. One human, one lupine. Not canine, Bretton. Wolf." Jamie stood his ground, refusing to be cowed, and Jenkins stared menacingly. "First you keep a dangerous animal that just happens to look like a wolf, and now you say a wolf mysteriously appeared on the premises and chased away your intruder, huh? Sounds like you like having predators around. They bring big money on the black market? You selling them to help with the bills? Or maybe you just like keeping them for yourself?"

Jamie stayed silent.

Jenkins seemed pleased by his reaction. "That's what I thought. We'll be back for that wolf, Bretton. You can count on it."

Jamie watched as they made their way back through the clinic to the lobby. Woo looked with disgust at the sky outside before pulling his jacket up around him and exiting into the gray day. Jamie turned to apologize to Tessa, but she brushed past him without a word, turned her back, and busied herself with the medical records at the front desk. Jamie grasped the knob of the exam-room door. No one was more important to him than Rob, and Tessa, even if she was a friend, couldn't compete with the fierce loyalty he felt to his lover. His soul mate. Jamie entered the exam room with a calming glance for Izzy and an apology for his owner. Even so, he remained uneasy as he conducted the exam.

Rob was Jamie's one chance for happiness, he was sure of it, and he'd help keep Rob's secret no matter if it cost him everything.

* * *

Fresh from the shower, Jamie lay naked and facedown across Rob's bed, waiting for Rob to finish shaving. Muted late-afternoon light from the large, arched window washed down the length of his body but did little to dispel the chill from his heart. He'd been keeping an eye on the calendar, and as of today there were only two days left before the next full moon.

What he wanted to propose to Rob was dangerous, but from where Jamie lay, it was the only option if he and Rob were to move forward together. Rob was his soul mate. There wasn't room for secrets between them. Jamie had to see Rob's transformation for himself.

"Beautiful," Rob pronounced. The bedsprings twanged softly as he stretched out on the bed next to Jamie. "Mine." He nipped softly at Jamie's shoulders and neck, trailing his fingers lightly down his back. His hand came to rest on Jamie's ass, and he gave one cheek a gentle squeeze, growling contentedly. He continued to mouth Jamie wetly, then slid a knee up between Jamie's legs and pushed them apart as he climbed on top.

"Rob, we have to talk."

Rob stopped chewing on Jamie's earlobe long enough to ask, "Something on your mind, baby?"

Jamie thought about it while Rob sucked at his ear again, making him shiver. "Mmm. Nothing as important as this. It'll keep."

"Glad to hear it." Rob lay half on top of Jamie now, and as he kissed the underside of Jamie's jaw, he skated the fingers of one hand down Jamie's back, this time sliding one finger down the crease of his ass. Jamie gasped at the feel of Rob's slicked finger circling his entrance.

"I didn't hear you grab the..." Jamie's sentence died away in a moan as Rob pushed a finger inside him. "Oh...oh God. Yes." Jamie bit his lip, arching as Rob slowly began to work the tight ring of muscle with soft, twisting movements.

“You were pretty lost in thought there, man. You sure whatever you wanna talk about can keep?” Breathing heavily, Rob deftly added a second finger to the first, his movements sure and gentle.

Jamie groaned. He pushed back onto Rob's questing fingers. “Please. Don't stop.”

Rob chuckled against the back of Jamie's neck, kissing him harder now, fingers reaching deeper. Jamie fucked himself on them needily, his cock full and leaking. He shivered again, and Rob pressed his warm body against him. He was still wet from the shower, and Jamie enjoyed that as much as his warmth. He bucked against Rob's damp, furred body with a wordless cry as Rob found his pleasure spot. Rob humped his hip gently as Jamie sobbed with pleasure.

It felt incredible: Rob next to him, on top of him, in him. “Yeah, right there,” Jamie whispered. “Please.”

Rob clenched his teeth against Jamie's shoulder, then slid his fingers out entirely. Jamie propped himself up on an elbow and looked hungrily over his shoulder at his lover.

He watched Rob with the condom and lube, and then Rob crawled across the bed to kiss him, fierce and hot. When they broke apart, he smacked Jamie's ass. “Up on your knees, babe.” Rob scrambled off the bed.

Jamie didn't need to be told twice.

Lowering his head to his elbows, Jamie raised his ass and parted his knees, displaying himself to Rob. Offering himself. He'd never been comfortable doing that before, showing himself wantonly to a partner, but being with Rob felt like nothing he'd ever experienced. He knew the effect it had on Rob, knew how turned on it made him—both the position and Jamie's willing trust. Rob wanted him, fully.

And Jamie was only too happy to oblige.

Spreading his knees farther apart on the thin cotton sheet, Jamie heard Rob's ragged breathing behind him. He whined, impatient, as Rob made him wait, tracing his crack with his fingers, rubbing his knuckles along the backs of Jamie's thighs.

“Since you asked so nicely,” Rob murmured. A smile warmed his voice.

Jamie felt the tip of Rob's cock nudging his ass, Rob grasping his hips, the heat of Rob's wet skin hard against his thighs.

Rob pushed in slow, and Jamie gasped into the comforter as his ring opened. The crown slid inside, and then inch by inch, Rob entered him, groaning softly. Jamie exhaled in a rush, settled himself higher, then pushed farther back. He loved this moment, loved feeling his body accept Rob, drawing him in, adjusting to the penetration. “Rob,” he moaned. “Oh, Rob.”

Rob took his first stroke, soft and deep, rocking his hips gently against Jamie's ass, moaning. “Oh yes,” he whispered. “Yes, babe, come on.” Jamie smiled into the sheet, the words as good to him as the feel of Rob's cock in his tight passage.

Rob began to move more freely, his strokes still deep but faster, and Jamie groaned, scrabbling for purchase against the cotton. Rob's hands held his hips fast, giving no quarter, and Jamie whimpered, ecstasy building deep at the base of his spine.

A few more strokes and then Rob slid his hands up Jamie's back, using his weight to push Jamie facedown on the bed until he was fully pinned. Bearing Jamie hard against the mattress, Rob kept moving his hands upward until his fingers were interlaced with Jamie's. As Rob growled against his neck, Jamie arched his hips up to meet each of Rob's soft thrusts.

Rob's cock grazed his prostate, and Jamie bucked, crying out. Each stroke now brought him closer to the edge, Rob deep inside him, stoking him white-hot. Jamie sobbed louder, ragged, pushing back as much as he was able.

He pulled a knee up on the bed, opening more fully, and Rob pushed himself back up, braced with a hand on either side of Jamie's chest, his strokes shorter, harder. Jamie whimpered, trying to keep pace with Rob's thrusts. Rob grunted with effort, and Jamie felt him swell, tightening his slick tunnel further.

Then Rob reached down, around Jamie's hip, and captured his cock in one sweat-slick hand. Jamie yelled, unable to keep his orgasm at bay any longer. It

washed over and through him, surging along his spine like an electrical current. Jamie bucked hard, wild, and then Rob pushed down, holding him still. His cock pulsed deep in Jamie, that touch soft where all the others had been rough. Rob moaned.

Jamie whimpered as the aftershocks raced through him, quick and sharp, the feel of Rob inside him strong enough to unleash a full storm of pleasurable quakes. Keeping him a willing captive to Rob's hold.

Afterward, they lay next to each other in the sunbeam, sweaty and warm and spent. Every moment was still new, every touch a delicious luxury.

Jamie rolled over and scooted closer. He kissed Rob's shoulders, tasting his still-damp skin, and Rob slid a hand along Jamie's jaw, smiling sleepily. Jamie kissed him lazily, gently sliding his tongue over Rob's again and again, until they both pulled back, needing air. Rob's blue eyes were filled with wonder and contentment. He traced Jamie's cheekbone lightly. "What'd you wanna talk about, baby? Earlier."

Jamie looked at him. Since they'd talked that night after the break-in, when Rob had laid himself open so fully, trusting Jamie with his deepest secret, it was as if Rob had no way to go back, no way to close himself up. Every time Jamie looked at him, he saw the perfect trust in Rob's expression, the love and need. No one had ever looked at him that way before.

He bent to kiss Rob again, soft and light. "Nothing. Nothing that can't wait."

Rob smiled again, lazy and pleased, and Jamie slid a knee between his legs, laying his head on Rob's chest, letting sleep claim them both.

Chapter Thirteen

“No, absolutely not! It's out of the question!” Rob shook off the restraining hand Jamie laid on his arm as several shoppers cast suspicious glances their way.

“Rob, come on.”

Rob paid no attention. “Jamie, no. We're not even having this discussion.”

The discussion they weren't having was taking place in the linens department on the second floor of St. Louis's historic Magnum department store. Ostensibly, they were looking for a thicker comforter for Rob's bed, and Rob had trailed cheerfully along in Jamie's wake for nearly an hour while his lover checked the thread counts and down weights of at least a dozen brightly patterned contenders.

The cold was the only thing about Rob's apartment that Jamie complained about. Rob's volcanic core temperature was a source of wonder and amusement to them both, but even sleeping on, under, and around him didn't seem to keep Jamie warm enough. Replacing the thin cotton blanket would help, Rob hoped.

Frankly Rob was surprised at how much Jamie liked the apartment. The tiny downtown space was a far cry from Jamie's huge white condo in ritzy Clifton Heights. But not only was it within walking distance of both the clinic and the park, it was also denlike and broken-in, the place Rob felt safest and most comfortable. The place they'd first become lovers and where they spent their free time together—most evenings and every night.

Until tonight. Tonight was the full moon, and Rob knew that no matter how much he wanted Jamie in every part of his life, no matter how much Jamie wanted to help, there were some things that would have to remain a mystery between them. It was the only way to keep his lover safe.

“Rob...”

“No. Not open for discussion. You don't know what you're asking.”

Jamie sat heavily on one of the display beds, jouncing the mattress and sending a decorative cushion tumbling to the floor. “Come on, Rob! How are we supposed to live with this thing otherwise?”

“How can you say that? I thought we were past that, Jamie! You've seen the scars—”

“Rob, please.” Jamie gestured for him to lower his voice as a salesperson looked at them sharply.

Rob continued in a frustrated half whisper. “I thought we'd been over this! I know you might have doubts—hell, half the time I can't believe it's true, myself—but there is no way I'm letting you stick around to watch me turn into a fucking wolf! It's not safe!”

Jamie retrieved the errant pillow and clutched it to his chest, glowering angrily.

“Oh no, Jamie. No. Cut me some slack here! I'm terrified something might happen to you—something I did!” Shaking his head, Rob stuck his hands on his hips. “Out of the question.”

Jamie rose from the bed and tossed the pillow over his shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, Rob saw the salesperson start toward them, lips set in a grim line. “Listen, Rob. A werewolf—that's a hell of a lot for me to take on faith, pal, but I did. I believed you. And now you won't let me close to you. You won't have faith in me—”

“That's not it, Jamie.” Rob turned away. He trailed a hand over the surface of a comforter nearby; the cool blues and slate grays of the patterned cover reminded him of the riverbed he'd fled in, the rocks he'd lain on under a moonless sky, gathering enough energy to get moving, to get himself away from the Center, out into the free world. Rob shook his head, willing himself back to the present. “I do have faith in you, baby,” he said, very low. “It's me. I don't trust myself to keep you safe. Please, Jamie, it's only two nights.”

“Rob, you know it's a helluva lot more than that. Don't even try that with me,” Jamie growled. “You turned into a wolf at the clinic, and you didn't hurt me. You saved me. And now you won't let me be there—when it happens in the safety of our—your apartment—”

“Our apartment,” Rob said quietly.

“See? So let me be there! I can help!”

“Jamie, come on. I told you I was the wolf you saw at the clinic. That was me. You saw me. You saw the cut on my leg. Look! I still have the scar!” Rob bent to pull up the leg of his jeans.

“I'm not saying you weren't, I'm just—aahh—” Jamie scrubbed a hand roughly over his features. “I don't know what I'm saying.”

“Look, I know how this sounds, okay?” Rob said quietly. “But dammit, I'm telling you the truth! I don't know what I'll do when I'm a wolf, and I'm not risking your life to find out!”

“Gentlemen, is there some kind of problem here?” The salesman stood primly before them, gaze moving from one to the other.

Jamie managed a wan smile. “No, no, we're just...we're just browsing. Lovely sheet sets you have here. Just lovely.”

The salesperson frowned slightly as Jamie tugged Rob off toward a display of window treatments. Both of them trembled with emotion.

Come on, say it. This might be your only chance. Rob broke away from Jamie's grasp, then stepped in front of him. “You know I love you, Jamie, but maybe I've told you too much. Hell, maybe this thing is too much for either of us to handle, you know? I've never found anyone who's even half the guy you are, and I wouldn't have made them watch it. Hell, I've never even told anyone before you. Just knowing you know, that makes this easier to do.” Rob finally met Jamie's eyes. “I love you, man. I really do. But you've gotta stay away. You've gotta stay home tonight and tomorrow, okay?”

Jamie sank onto a velvet chaise longue, hands folded between his knees. He looked somewhere between miserable and determined. “What makes you think I’m gonna go home, Rob? Plenty of places to go besides your place.”

Rob’s heart was in his throat. “Don’t do this, baby. Don’t. You know I’m only asking you this—”

“Because it’s not safe, right. I heard you the first time. But maybe you’re the one who isn’t listening.”

“Jamie...” Rob was at a loss to explain. *How did things even get this far?* “But it’s for your own good. Do you know what I’d do if anything happened to you? If I”—Rob choked back a sob—“if I did something to you? If I hurt you?”

Jamie looked at the floor, and his refusal to meet Rob’s eyes was all the answer Rob needed. He’d had one shot at getting this right, and he’d blown it. He looked Jamie up and down, memorizing him in case it was the last chance he got. His lover’s wavy blond hair was getting too long, and it hung down over his eyes. Eyes that were tired from too many late nights looking after every charity sob story that crawled through the door of his clinic, needing to be fixed.

Including me.

Rob spun on his heel and stormed away toward the escalator.

* * *

Jamie sat and waited for Rob to return, watching the other shoppers go about their business while his heart broke in his chest. His threat to Rob had been idle, something to cut at the guy’s stubbornness with, something to batter against the wall he was trying to throw up between them.

As Jamie looked around at the stylish furnishings arranged around the store’s showroom, he thought of his condo: the sterile white kitchen with its state-of-the-art appliances, the elegant living room, the dining suite that had never hosted a dinner party. That wasn’t his home. Even when he’d bought it, it had felt more like an

investment, a place to while away the time waiting for...something. He hadn't known what at the time, but now everything was clear—he'd been waiting for Rob.

The three small rooms of Rob's apartment should have seemed cramped and confining, but somehow there always seemed to be room enough for both of them and the two dogs to boot. The fridge was always full, and the rickety kitchen table with its mismatched chairs had seen its fair share of candlelight dinners already. Jamie brushed tears angrily away while he watched the salesperson primp and fluff the bed he'd disturbed.

He had no idea why he was being so stubborn about this, why he couldn't just respect Rob's wishes and stay away. Logically he understood Rob's objections, but...he just wanted so badly to prove that he was perfect for Rob, that Rob could trust Jamie to be there through thick and thin, through anything and everything life could throw at them. That Rob could trust Jamie to keep him safe.

But Jamie admitted to himself it was more than that. Much more. What he and Rob had together was like nothing Jamie'd ever experienced. It blew him away, humbled and awed him. Rob was the one, the guy he'd been waiting for all his life, and Jamie wanted nothing to stand between them. He wanted to know everything about Rob and have him know everything in return, for them to be as close as two people—or one person and a-a werewolf—could be.

He shivered, wondering if Rob had believed his lie, wondered if Rob really thought he'd throw their relationship away over this. The idea was terrifying, and Jamie jumped to his feet. There was only one thing to do.

Jamie headed for the exit, and as he passed the display of comforters, his eye was caught by the one Rob had fingered earlier. The modern-looking swirl of blues and grays wasn't something he would have chosen, but it was the only one Rob had shown interest in. Jamie checked to make sure it was 100 percent down, then grabbed the queen-size and headed for the register. If nothing else, Rob would be a very warm werewolf.

As Jamie walked briskly toward the Metro stop, he felt a momentary pang of fear, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Wondering if Rob had told him the truth after all, and if he had, Jamie hoped to God Rob would recognize him. Thinking back to the night of the break-in, the way that wolf had stared at him with Rob's eyes, Jamie felt confident. It was almost like they'd already had a trial run. He couldn't believe this would be anything different.

Besides, if Rob's dirty monthly secret turned out to be anything decidedly non-wolflike, Jamie needed to know. Even if, in the end, the only thing he could do for Rob was kick his ass and give him the name of a good therapist.

* * *

Rob swore loudly and creatively in the privacy of the courier van as it crawled back up the expressway. Mainly, Rob riffed on themes involving the stubbornness of one beautiful blond vet and his own personal stupidity at having become so deeply attached. But in his heart Rob knew he wouldn't have had it any other way. He leaned back in the seat, resting his head wearily. *I've gotta find a way to make this work.*

As the days had passed and he and Jamie had found more of themselves in each other, Rob had briefly toyed with the idea of letting Jamie stay, letting him watch. Jamie had the brains and the background to understand what had been done to him, and he knew Jamie had studied both dogs and wolves in his—*Jesus, nine years of college?*

Still, that was only half the time Rob had spent being warped into a deadly predator at the hands of the government's finest sadistic fucks.

The risks were too great and the stakes too high and...Rob sighed. *All that other hero bullshit.* He changed lanes like a battering ram, cutting off a big-haired blonde in a Honda Accord whose vocabulary impressed even him. *God bless St. Louis.*

Rob fixed his eyes on the van's smudged and dirty ceiling.

As a wolf, he couldn't trust himself. That was what Jamie couldn't—wouldn't—understand. Just because Rob had refrained from attacking Jamie once was no guarantee he wouldn't do it a second time.

He'd left plenty of time to drop off the van at the depot downtown and catch the Metro back to the East Side. Even if the traffic continued to flow like a clogged artery and the train ran late, he should still make it home before sunset. Plenty of time to get situated before moonrise. He'd left Mutty and Bella home today, hoping that Bella was using the time to prepare the new pup so he'd know how to react.

Rob honked angrily at the stopped line of cars in front of him but was rewarded with only a few desultory fingers stuck out windows and in mirrors. *What am I talking about? Of course Bella's prepping Mutty. Hell, I wouldn't put it past her to have gotten groceries and run the vacuum too.*

By the time Rob rolled through the depot gates, the light had begun to fade, turning all the industrial hangars, fences, and parking lots a uniform band of gray. Rob could feel the itching begin in his joints, like the knit of broken bones, and he shifted from one foot to the other to relieve the discomfort. Catching his supervisor's eye, Rob realized the guy thought he was on something, but he figured that was way better than the truth. Half the drivers out here had a little help in 'em anyway.

Rob shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket, nearly jogging over to the thick iron gates leading to the raised platform. The spring afternoon was too warm for heavy leather, but when Rob had left the apartment that morning, the sky had been spitting with a rain that was nearly sleet. Besides, the jacket's pockets hid his fists, clenched so hard, the knuckles were white. Standing alone at one edge of the platform, Rob took a slow, deliberate breath, trying to control his hands, loosen his fingers.

The resulting spasm left him with cuts in the palm of one hand where his nails broke through the rough skin. Rob could smell the blood as it rose to the surface and smeared on his fingertips.

The sky was a sickly dying lilac by the time the train pulled in, sparking along the rails to come to a screeching, groaning stop. He bit his lip, hard, willing his legs to carry him forward and onto the train.

By the time he reached the stop at Eighteenth and Cabot, Rob could barely make it down the steps to street level. The familiar liquid fire had invaded his joints, twining round his spine, threatening to crack his hips apart as he stumbled the four blocks home.

Rob concentrated on moving one step at a time. His feet were cramped nearly double in his shoes, and the tang of bile was sharp in his throat. A couple of times he lurched drunkenly toward the street and once too close to a junkie, who lurched back, dancing his own St. Vitus waltz inside a dirty army jacket. "You need, man? Or you have some?" Rob brushed off the junkie's whispers, needing to stay focused on getting home.

Dimly Rob wondered why this time the change had come so early. It wasn't yet dark, the moon not yet visible over the tops of the tall buildings.

I guess some things you don't need to see to know. A sharp stab of pain in his shoulder made him growl through gritted teeth, and a black woman in a business suit and sneakers glared at him, lips pursed with disapproval. Rob ignored her, pushing on. His building was just across the street, and he focused all his attention on the comforting brick contours. Almost there. As he waited for the light to change, Rob worked his key free from his wallet. It took four tries, but finally he grabbed it between sweat-slicked fingers, gnarled into claws and still stained with the blood from his palms.

Fire boiled in his gut, and Rob knew he'd run out of time.

He ran across the street against traffic, ignoring the honks and yells, uncaring of the taxi bumper that grazed his knee. It threw him off course, and he staggered. Recovering, he dragged himself the remaining few steps and stabbed at the lock before struggling into the lobby and over to the bank of elevators.

Jamie. Rob stopped cold, the scent of his lover clear and unmistakable.

"No," Rob growled. "Get out. Get the fuck out." He nearly didn't recognize his own voice, turned low and raspy. His breath came out as tortured gasps, and the effort of speaking burned his lungs. "Go home, Jamie. While you still can." Rob's heart thudded in his chest, and he fought back tears. "Please, baby. Don't do this."

Jamie rushed to his side, reaching for him, but Rob tore himself away. "You have. To leave. Not. Safe."

Jamie shook his head. "I'm not afraid of you, Rob. I wanna be with you every step of the way." He moved closer again, and Rob held his hands up, warning him back.

"Jamie." His voice was nearly gone, and his throat felt as if it were lined with razor blades. "Go. Home." Rob tried to focus on his lover's face, but a wave of cramps ripped through him and he bent double, vomiting on the faded tiles, his hips and knees giving under his own weight. As Rob put out a hand to catch himself, he felt strong arms around him, holding him up and pulling him close. Jamie's unique, indefinable odor filled his nostrils, overwhelming him, fighting somehow against the pain that was threatening to rip him apart.

"I love you, Rob," Jamie whispered. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Rob fought to look up, to see Jamie's eyes at those words, but all the color was leaching from his vision, and he felt as if a giant steel pin was forcing his head downward. He heaved again, bringing up nothing, clutching at Jamie's hands.

The elevator arrived with a soft *ding*. Rob growled, and the doors slid open. A wave of lavender and hairspray washed over him. *Mrs. Cray. Oh no no no.*

Rob felt Jamie stiffen beside him. "Food poisoning," Jamie said. "Bad Thai food. He'll be fine in a couple hours. And uh...I'll call someone to come clean up the mess."

Mrs. Cray sighed, her breath rolling over Rob as a wave of denture cream and meatballs. "He gets that a lot," she said, her breathy, little-old-lady voice soft on Rob's ears.

Jamie dragged him into the elevator. As the doors shut, Rob heard faintly: “That boy needs to learn how to do his own cooking.”

The elevator floor pushed up to meet him, and Rob hung on to Jamie as he felt his skin stretch, his bones cracking and boiling with foreign growth. Words were beyond him now, and all Rob could do was whimper into Jamie's chest as the final stages began. Rob's clothes felt too small, and he clawed futilely at his shirt. One claw caught a button, shredding the fabric and opening a long scratch in his chest. He licked his lips at the coppery blood smell, and Jamie's hands tightened on him. He fought as Jamie restrained him, only vaguely aware of his lover carrying him to his front door, and then, as the door opened, he fell from Jamie's arms with a howl, landing hard on unfamiliar joints.

Rob pawed and struggled his way out of his clothes and sank with relief into the end stage, giving himself over fully to who he'd been made to be.

There were no words for what was going on in front of Jamie's eyes.

Rob, his Rob, his lover and soul mate, was writhing naked on the kitchen floor, his body at war with itself. Rob's skin stretched over impossible configurations of bones and tendons, as if it would tear itself apart before him. Skin that Jamie had kissed a hundred times by now, all over.

Rob keened and howled throughout, his pain-filled eyes turned to Jamie for succor and assistance. For forgiveness.

Jamie sat down on the floor next to him and wept, powerless and desperate. He longed to reach a hand out and offer some measure of comfort, to take away some of the pain as Rob shuddered and whimpered, his body in flux.

Jamie cried out, sliding down onto one elbow, lying as close to Rob as he dared. Tears ran unheeded down Jamie's face and trickled down under the collar of his shirt. “Rob,” he whispered. “Oh shit, Rob, what's happening?” Jamie reached a hand out, mesmerized, only to be arrested by a sharp warning bark from under the kitchen table. He twisted around.

Bella and Mutty sat huddled together, watching Rob's transformation from a safe distance. Jamie had no doubt what the malamute's bark had meant, and he scooted quickly across the floor toward the two dogs, then crawled between the chair legs until he was pressed up against Bella's haunches.

Rob continued to growl and writhe in the middle of the floor, but the noises and movements were quieter now, until they finally died away entirely, and he lay still.

Silence descended on the apartment.

Jamie's breathing was loud in his ears, and Bella's breath was hot on his neck in the confined space, but none of them moved for what felt like an eternity.

And then the creature in the middle of the floor rolled to its feet, shaking its fur as if emerging from a pool of water. Where his lover had lain, a full-grown gray wolf now stood, sniffing the air suspiciously, looking out at the world through Rob's distinctive pale blue eyes.

Jamie held his breath, struggling to comprehend. He'd believed Rob; he'd known his lover was a werewolf, but seeing it with his own eyes, seeing the wolf where the man had been, was terrifying. But despite his fear, he couldn't help but feel a surge of triumph. He'd been right to believe. His faith in Rob was justified.

The big gray wolf padded over to the fridge, nosed the door open, and tore into the ground beef left open on the bottom shelf, powerful jaws snapping shut around the snack as he shouldered the fridge door closed. He stretched languorously, powerful haunches rising in the air as he bowed before turning an inquisitive nose in the direction of the three of them. Growling, low and menacing, he lifted one lip into a snarl, baring impressive white fangs.

Mutty was the first one to move. He slithered out from under the table, slow, keeping low to the ground. When he was clear of the chairs and directly in front of the wolf, he flopped onto his side in one quick movement, then rolled over entirely, front paws in the air, belly exposed to the wolf's powerful jaws.

As Jamie watched, the wolf fell silent and lowered his snout to the terrier, sniffing cautiously. Mutty lay patiently on his back, unmoving, until the wolf nudged him gently with an approving snuff.

Mutty rolled happily to his feet, tail wagging, and let out a quiet bark of satisfaction.

The wolf quelled Mutty's enthusiasm with a glance, and instantly Mutty adopted a more subdued attitude, taking three wobbling steps back. At this sign, Bella bounded out from under the table, then danced and bowed at the wolf in the kitchen. He paid her little mind, just a quick nuzzle before she pranced away, tail held high. The wolf stared warily around the kitchen before fixing on Jamie, then took a cautious few steps back and stood, tail up, silent and watching.

Rob. The wolf. Jamie reeled with the knowledge. It was all true. Everything Rob had said about being a werewolf, about being controlled by the moon, even the agony of the transformation—Jamie pushed the images away with a shudder—was all true. He leaned heavily against a chair leg, his mind spinning.

It simply wasn't possible.

But Jamie couldn't refute the evidence before him. Rob was just as much a wolf as he had been two minutes ago.

Surprised to find he was breathing heavily, Jamie gingerly extricated himself from under the table, shouldering the chairs impatiently out of the way. He pushed up onto his knees, and Bella and Mutty trotted daintily into the living room. "Great," Jamie muttered. "Thanks for the help, guys."

As Jamie approached, the wolf's fur hackled up and the snarl returned. He threw back his snout with a howl. The sound was unearthly, incredibly loud in the small confines of the apartment.

Jamie blanched. "Rob?" he asked softly. "Rob?"

The two of them watched each other, unmoving. This was the same wolf who'd driven off the prowler at the vet clinic. The same wolf who'd chased that prowler

into the St. Louis night. There was no doubt in Jamie's mind. The same wolf wandering around with Rob's eyes.

And he was beautiful.

There was an innate grace to Rob's lupine form, the indication of power and strength present in all predators tempered in him by eyes that spoke of pain and sacrifice, a dignified suffering. Jamie took a step toward his backpack, where it had fallen off his shoulders getting Rob through the door earlier. Rob growled, and Jamie held his hands out placatingly, showing he meant no harm. Whether Rob believed him or not, he wasn't sure. The growl continued, a low, dangerous hum, like high voltage running along the wires.

Jamie moved slowly, reaching for the zip on the backpack until his hand lit on the rough canvas, fumbling for the metal. Rob rose to his feet like a ghost and padded over in equal parts grace and menace, hackling. His eyes, still so thoroughly the eyes of the man Jamie loved, were hostile and questioning. The pupils were huge and liquid, oil slicks on ice. And there was no recognition in them.

Rob's eyes at the clinic had looked nothing like this. That time he had lain in front of Jamie, reassuring and protective. An illusion of tame. Jamie wondered for a moment if Rob had been right to be worried for him earlier.

He recoiled as the wolf snarled again, and suddenly understood: here, he was on Rob's turf. Rob was defending his den. Slowly Jamie let go of his pack and backed up, putting space between them. He slid backward across the floor until he reached the wall of the living room, where he collapsed with a relieved gasp. Rob watched every move he made, his growl dying back to a slow, deep rumble. When Jamie finally was still, the wolf dropped to his haunches, but his gaze never wavered.

The two of them—the man and the werewolf—sat at opposite ends of the room. Watching each other.

Chapter Fourteen

Rob woke slowly, the taste of blood in his mouth. His whole body ached, like someone had taken a hammer and systematically pounded him all over, then fed him the hammer for good measure. He stretched each limb in turn, wincing at the seethe of sore muscles and tender skin. One calf twitched and spasmed as he stretched, and he groaned, clutching feebly at his leg.

"I gotcha," Jamie murmured. "Take it easy, pal."

Rob opened his eyes at the sound of Jamie's voice and reveled in the touch of his lover's skilled hands as Jamie smoothed away the knot, his thumbs pressing deeply into the tight muscle. "Jamie," Rob croaked. "What are you doing here, man? What day is it?"

"Wednesday. The full moon was last night." Jamie released Rob's calf and crawled back up the bed. He lay down close, propped himself up on one elbow, and leaned in to kiss the back of Rob's neck.

"That still doesn't explain what you're doing here." Rob rolled over and met Jamie's gaze.

Jamie reached a hand out, then hesitated before laying his palm flat on Rob's chest. "Rob," he asked softly. "How much do you remember?"

Rob closed his eyes, letting his head fall back on the pillow. "I never remember much," he said finally, "and none of it...none of it makes a whole lot of sense. Sounds, smells...impulses." Rob's eyes flew open, and he glared at Jamie. "You stayed."

It wasn't a question. Rob knew how he looked right now, weak and sick and—His breath caught, and he closed his eyes again. He remembered Jamie in the lobby,

catching him, holding him up. The look on Jamie's face, accepting and unquestioning and solid. Safe.

"I love you, Rob. And I'm not going anywhere."

Jamie'd seen it, the transformation. He'd seen it, he'd stayed, and he'd kept his word. And whatever Rob had done in his wolf form, he hadn't hurt Jamie. He hadn't driven him away.

Rob turned his face into Jamie's shoulder and let sleep take him once again.

* * *

Jamie watched Rob settle back to sleep, light flowing over his face from the arched window in the bedroom. He'd wrapped Rob in the new comforter as soon as he'd managed to carry him to the bed, a dead, insensate weight in his arms that was more frightening than anything Jamie'd seen in the previous twelve hours. None of his vet-school training had been able to reach Rob in that state: not the sound of his voice, not rubbing Rob's wrists, not even ammonia, a smell that usually woke the dead. But Rob's pulse had been slow and strong, so Jamie had opted to wait him out.

Jamie shook his head. He still had a hard time believing the things he'd seen. But now he knew for certain: somehow Rob lived half as a wolf, half as a man.

In the early dawn Rob had changed back, the wolf he'd become dropping to the floor in a ball of snarling, snapping fury as his body turned on itself, until finally he lay whimpering in the human form Jamie knew so well again. Only when the sun came up, the long, wide beam of dancing motes bathing his tired form, only then did Rob start to relax.

Jamie breathed deeply, slowly running his hands over his partner's back. The transformation had laid Rob bare before him, and Jamie knew that their long night together in the apartment, wolf and man, had sealed their bond. Rob's secret was his secret now too, the two of them bound by more than mere love.

Curling closer to his lover, holding him tight, Jamie let himself relax at last. It had been a long night.

A shrill chirping summoned Jamie back to wakefulness with a groan. Rob twitched and mumbled in his sleep.

Jamie pushed himself up off the bed and headed for his backpack in the other room. Bella and Mutty looked up expectantly as he padded through the door. He flipped open his cell phone without looking at the number. “Hi, Brianna.”

“Jamie, where the hell are you?” Brianna's anger crackled down the line, and Jamie winced as she launched into a tide of invective. One day Brianna was gonna peel the paint right off the apartment's dingy walls.

“Brianna? Brianna, listen, I can't come in today.” Jamie spoke over the top of his business partner's rising voice. “I've got—”

Brianna cut him off. “Whatever bullshit excuse you're thinking up, forget it. I walk in here this morning to find that Jenkins in here bullying Tessa and going through our appointment book, spouting some shit about closing us down—Jamie, whatever the fuck is going on with you, you get down here now if you still wanna have a business tomorrow!”

“Animal control can't close us down, Brianna,” Jamie said soothingly, frowning. “I guess he wanted something clarified after that search warrant the other day. Whatever it is, I need you to handle it, okay? Today I really can't come in.”

“Jamie, what the fuck?” Brianna's shout rose to a crescendo. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Brianna, I just—” Jamie paced the living room, looking over his shoulder toward the bedroom again. “Brianna, I don't want to talk about it. I'll explain when I—”

There was a soft, firm knock at the front door, just as the phone launched another stream of invective. Jamie moved for the door while trying to interrupt his colleague. “Look, Brianna, I'll—Brianna, Brianna? Brianna?” Jamie gave up with an

exasperated snort and flipped the phone closed. Jenkins, Woo, and their warrants were the least of his worries right now.

Slipping the phone into the pocket of his jeans, he peered through the peephole of Rob's front door.

There was no one there.

Jamie turned from the door and met Bella and Mutty's questioning stares. He shrugged, and Mutty gave one of his high-pitched, insistent yaps. Bella licked her companion's ear affectionately, then turned and stared at Jamie, her head on one side. The knock was repeated.

Jamie returned to the peephole. It continued to show an empty hallway, but Jamie heard a gentle shuffling and a quiet cough. "Hello?" he called through the door.

A quavering voice responded. "Young man?"

Jamie grimaced, then rearranged his features into a pleasing smile and fumbled with Rob's many locks. "Just a minute; hang on."

He finally wrenched the door open to find the diminutive figure of Mrs. Cray standing in the hallway. Her faintly purple hair was arranged in an immaculate beehive, one Jamie suspected could withstand gale-force winds. "Mrs. Cray," he began, "I'm—Rob—We..." He started over as she blinked at him from behind huge, bug-eyed glasses. "Sorry about yesterday, but Rob really wasn't feeling well, and...well, you know how it is..."

"Young man, are you going to invite me in, or should I stand here with this stew pot until you figure out how to end that sentence?"

Jamie looked down. Mrs. Cray was clutching a large, worn dutch oven between two lilac quilted oven mitts. He rushed to take it from her, then recoiled from the heat with a startled hiss.

Mrs. Cray gave an audible sigh.

Jamie held the door wide, ushering the old woman inside. She shuffled forward, carrying the covered metal pot in shaking hands. As Jamie rushed to find pot holders, Bella rose to her feet, hackling with a low growl.

"Oh my." Mrs. Cray stopped in the middle of the room as Jamie tried to simultaneously take the covered pot and shush Bella. He was successful with the pot, but Bella continued to growl low in her throat, and Mutty hopped to his feet, contributing a high-pitched purrlike buzz.

Jamie glared at the dogs, then firmly turned his back. He'd seen the mischievous glint in Bella's eye. "Mrs. Cray," he said, working on his smile, "this is so—Thank you, Mrs. Cray."

"*Pomidorowa*," she answered. Jamie stared, and the old woman's face crinkled into a grin at his discomfort. "Just tell Robert tomato soup, with meatballs."

Jamie nodded, satisfied, and smiled back. "Thank you, that's very—"

Bella broke into a full-fledged snarl while Mutty jumped up and down, barking with excitement at her side. Mrs. Cray twisted her hands, one inside the other, as Jamie returned to scolding the dogs. He had as little success as the first time, and Mrs. Cray shook her head and turned to leave.

"Robert is such a nice boy," she told Jamie. "I don't know why he wants to keep such dangerous animals in his apartment. Why, that big one's gonna kill a person someday, I just know it, and then where will he be?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cray, I don't know what Bella's upset about." Jamie wondered if his smile looked as forced as it felt. Despite the old lady's kindness, he was in complete agreement with Bella: Mrs. Cray couldn't leave soon enough.

Mrs. Cray shuffled back across the kitchen without a backward glance at the two dogs. "Oh that's all right. I know what's wrong with that dog." She turned and patted Jamie's arm. "That dog has the devil in her."

Jamie stared. Luckily his feet kept moving.

"No matter, young man," Mrs. Cray said as they reached the door. "Hopefully you can help Robert get her under control." She looked at Jamie expectantly. He stopped, nonplussed. "Well, you are Robert's new young man, aren't you?" Rheumy brown eyes of piercing intensity blinked at him behind big glasses. Jamie blushed, unsure how to respond.

Mrs. Cray giggled and patted Jamie's arm. "You hang on to him, dear. He's a keeper." She shuffled through the doorway. "Even if he can't cook worth a damn," she muttered.

Jamie stared after her, one hand on his hip, shaking his head with a soft smile. It takes all kinds, he thought, especially on the East Side. He shut the door quietly, the locks slotting back into place with soft *clacks*.

Jamie glared at Bella as he crossed over to the window at the far side of the kitchen. "No wonder the neighbors don't like you," he said, raising the sash. Bella responded with a sniff, and Jamie jumped out of the way as she and Mutty hopped out onto the fire escape, claws ringing on the metal as they climbed to the roof to relieve themselves.

Jamie shook his head, scooping kibble from the large bag in the pantry cupboard. He'd spent most of his adult life around dogs, but Bella remained a mystery to him. That she was protective of Rob was easy to understand, but her mercurial moods were tough to fathom. He knew she and Rob shared a special bond, but he suspected Bella's intelligence far outstripped that of darn near every dog he'd ever met. On that score alone, he was surprised she hadn't become frustrated enough with Mutty to toss him over the edge of the fire escape. The terrier's heart was in the right place, but his head was stuffed with cotton wool.

Bella chose that moment to reappear at the open window, and Jamie took an involuntary step back. He refused to acknowledge how closely the look on the malamute's face resembled a satisfied grin.

She jumped back through the window, and Mutty followed, albeit less gracefully. The two of them made a beeline for the kibble. It was gone in seconds. As

Jamie refilled the big water bowl at the sink, he watched the two dogs head over to Bella's bed. After a few preliminary negotiations, they curled up into a contented, sleepy ball together, and Jamie headed back toward the bedroom with a similar plan in mind.

Rob was just crawling back into the safety of the comforter as water banged through the bathroom's ancient pipes. Jamie smiled. He hadn't thought Rob would be moving for a few more hours yet.

Jamie's phone began to chirp again, and Rob grimaced, pulling the covers over his head. Turning the phone off, Jamie placed it in the drawer of the nightstand before lying down in the sun next to Rob. "Hey, sleepyhead."

"Hey," Rob murmured, turning toward him. "Someone at the door?"

Jamie registered the alarm on Rob's face and couldn't resist kissing it gently away, moving his lips softly over the planes of Rob's face. "Mrs. Cray," Jamie whispered back. "Tomato soup, with meatballs."

Rob nuzzled him gently back, grinning deeply. "Pomidorowa. Excellent." He rolled over and slid an arm along Jamie's ribs, pulling him close and kicking free from the comforter to twine his legs with Jamie's. Jamie held back a little, unsure of what still hurt, until Rob said softly, "Need you, baby. Need you so much."

At that, Jamie tightened his arms around Rob, kissing his temple with a soft, contented noise.

"You've got me," he answered. "Now and always, Rob."

Chapter Fifteen

This time, they were hunting him.

Struggling against the freezing water, Rob heard measured footfalls in the undergrowth, heard the brush of thick fur against branches on the cliff top far above, and redoubled his efforts to get his feet under him and get out of the water. But his body, weak and aching, would not obey, and his paws slipped on the wet rocks of the riverbed.

In an instant the fast water had him in its grip, pulling him into its unrelenting flow. But instead of carrying him away to freedom, washing away all traces of his scent as he had hoped, the river had become Rob's enemy, his captor, holding him fast and carrying him to the waiting pack.

The black water sucked at him, tugging with a fierce and merciless hunger. Terror rose in Rob, huge and overpowering, as the rushing river slammed him this way and that. He grabbed for purchase, but the current was too strong, tearing the tenuous handholds from his grasp, rushing over and through him, freezing and choking him by turns.

And over it all came the cries of the pack, mingling with the chuckling rush of the water into an eerie hunting song that raised Rob's hackles.

Suddenly, the darkness cleared and he saw them, nine gray wolves racing along the bank, flanks silver in the moonlight. Their hunting cries grew louder.

They had found him, they would take him, they were nine to his one, and he in human form with no strength left to change.

As the howls of the pack rose to their bloodthirsty crescendo, Rob screamed.

The sound brought him awake, fighting to free himself from the comforter. He sat on the bed and shook, the sour stench of the lingering nightmare warring with the ache of the transformation in his limbs.

Bella and Mutty came bounding into the room, Jamie wide-eyed and anxious at their heels. “Rob!”

The malamute jumped up on the bed and poked questions at him with her snout, just as Jamie sank onto the mattress on his other side and pulled Rob into his arms. “I’ve gotcha. I’m right here. Right here, it’s okay. Ssh.”

Mutty hopped up and down next to the bed, barking in concern.

The cozy, comic domesticity of the scene was enough to dispel the nightmare’s lingering terror, and Rob relaxed into Jamie’s embrace, waving Bella off with a soft scratch behind one ear.

Rob rubbed his head against Jamie’s firm chest, nuzzling into his neck greedily. Jamie’s scent filled and overwhelmed Rob. With his transformation only just passed, he experienced the odor with more than human receptors, and Rob was struck again by how right Jamie smelled to him, how perfectly his. He took a deep breath, inhaling deeply, giving himself over to the embrace, feeling Jamie against him, soft and sweet. Bella jumped down from the bed and led Mutty from the room.

After a few minutes, Rob looked up to find Jamie watching him wonderingly. “What? You’ve never seen a guy snort another guy before?”

Jamie chuckled and dipped his head, kissing Rob’s forehead. “How you feeling?”

Rob stretched in Jamie’s arms. “Better,” he admitted. “Much better.” He took another experimental sniff. “But I think I could use a shower.”

“I wasn’t gonna say anything, but—”

“Jerk.” Rob pushed himself out of the embrace, then climbed out of bed. He wavered a little on his feet.

Jamie was up instantly, putting an arm around his back. “Easy, pal. Easy.”

Rob leaned heavily on his mate for a moment, letting Jamie take his weight while the room spun.

“Looks like I'll be taking that shower too,” Jamie commented.

Rob drew closer. “I should turn into a wolf more often.” The two of them looked at each other for a minute, then both snickered. “Forget I said anything,” Rob said. He leaned up and kissed the side of Jamie's neck, feeling Jamie's appreciative murmur.

“Thanks,” Rob whispered against Jamie's skin. He placed a kiss over the word, sealing it there, then pulled away and headed for the bathroom.

Jamie followed, pulling his sweater and shirt over his head as he went.

Reaching for his toothbrush, Rob said, “I'm okay, babe, really. I'm much better. My strength usually returns fairly soon after I wake up from the Big Sleep.”

“The big sleep?”

Rob squirted some gel on his brush. “Yeah, that's what I call it. After I'm done going”—he gestured with the brush—“and then coming back, I'm wrecked for a while, and I sleep like the dead.”

“I noticed.” Jamie kissed the back of Rob's neck and began unbuttoning his jeans.

Rob gave Jamie a wry look, then started brushing his teeth. He stopped midstroke. “What time is it, babe?” he said indistinctly. “Aren't you supposed to be at the clinic?”

Jamie shrugged, his back to Rob. “Six o'clock. And I called in, told them I had an emergency.”

Rob bent, gripping the sink with both hands. Foam from his toothbrush dripped into the basin. “I'm sorry,” he said softly. “I know how much the practice means to you, know how you are about always being there. Jamie, I'm real—”

Turning, Jamie slid his arms around Rob, his torso bare and warm against Rob's back. "Don't be sorry, Rob. I'm not. I can't be there twenty-four hours a day. I need to be able to take care of the important things."

Rob hung his head. "Like your fucked-up wolf-man lover?"

Jamie released him and took a step back to push his jeans down to midthigh. "Exactly. I'll just have to tell them I had to take him for a walk, and then he bit someone—"

Rob laughed. "Don't. Not funny, babe." He went back to brushing his teeth, chuckling around the toothpaste.

"And then he was all dirty afterward," Jamie continued, stepping out of his jeans. He turned on the water. "So I had to get him cleaned up. It took a while, because he's really furry and tends to be sort of naturally dirty—"

Rob choked on a mouthful of toothpaste as Jamie climbed into the spray. Jamie slid the door closed, and his next words came indistinctly through the beveled glass and the noise of the water.

Rob slid the door back. "What was that last bit?"

Jamie opened his eyes under the spray. His lean, muscular body glistened, and the room began to fill with steam. "I said, 'But he's mine. All mine.'" He grinned, then tilted his head back under the stream of hot water.

Rob stepped into the shower and closed the door behind him. He watched Jamie unselfconsciously soaping himself, suds cascading over his skin, running together and sliding slowly downward, tracing the outline of firm muscles, following the line of sparse gold hair trailing down from his navel before pooling in the thatch of rough pubic hair nestled between his hips. Jamie opened his eyes again and caught Rob watching. "Now if only he was housebroken."

Rob groaned, shaking his head and taking the soap from Jamie with a soft chuckle. "I'll try to be better about that, man." He stepped closer, pushing his way into the spray next to his lover.

Jamie stared at him, lips slightly parted, his expression turning serious. "I couldn't have left you, Rob. Not then. Not now." He closed his eyes, water running down the sides of his face. "Not then, and not ever."

Rob kissed him, sweet and eager. "I love you too. I didn't get a chance to say it earlier this morning, but I wanted to, you know?"

Jamie smiled shyly, then kissed Rob back. "Actually, I'm kinda glad you didn't say it then."

"You are?" Rob took a step back, but Jamie trapped him in his arms.

"Yup. 'Cause if you had, I'd've kissed you right then and there, like this—" Jamie demonstrated lustily, and Rob gave himself over to the magic of Jamie's sweet and questing tongue, his soft, eager lips. Jamie pulled back. "But you'd just gotten done puking, so..."

Rob groaned again, giving Jamie a sideways glance. Taking a step back, he lathered up, enjoying the clean, sharp smell of the soap as much as Jamie watching him appreciatively. He waited for Jamie to give him a turn under the water.

And waited.

Finally he understood and pushed close to his lover with a grin, sharing the spray, feeling lather slide between their slick bodies. Jamie turned Rob around and wrapped his arms around him from behind, pulling him flush against his wet skin, and Rob felt the insistent bump of Jamie's full cock nudging the cleft of his ass, the tip rubbing across his sensitive tailbone. "Jamie," he groaned. "Oh fuck, yes."

Jamie slid one hand down, low across his stomach, fingertips skating in the soapsuds. The other he slung high across Rob's chest, resting his hand on Rob's shoulder. Nudging his jaw away, Jamie licked Rob's neck in long, urgent swipes of tongue and lips, until all Rob knew was wet skin. His. Jamie's. The two of them sliding against one another, the tip of Jamie's tongue unerringly finding the tender spot just at the edge of Rob's collarbone, right where the bones fused to form his shoulder.

Rob whimpered at the insistent, slick dart of tongue against his skin. Jamie's hand slid lower until it captured Rob's length, stroking slowly, squeezing, pulling. Rob bucked against Jamie, loving being held in Jamie's grasp, kept on his feet by the warmth and strength of Jamie's body and his eager, questing hands.

Turning, Rob slid a hand around the back of Jamie's head into the wet blond locks. Jamie wriggled against him, pulling back to catch Rob's lower lip between his teeth, tugging gently. Rob gasped.

He let his hands roam over Jamie's back, feeling the power of the muscles nestled just beneath the skin. Jamie's hands dropped to his ass and held him captive as he ground his erection against Rob's stomach. Rob bit gently at Jamie's neck, hearing him hiss at the fine line between pain and pleasure, feeling him arch as Rob sucked on the tip of his chin. Jamie pulled back at last, fixing Rob with a look of need, of vulnerability. "I meant what I said, Rob. I love you. I need you."

Rob slid a soapy hand between them and captured both their cocks, aligning them under the warm spray. He rocked his hips gently, eyes on Jamie's face. "Love you too," he gasped. "Love you so damn much."

Jamie moaned, fingers kneading the flesh of Rob's buttocks, and Rob sped up his stroke. Jamie matched the speed, moving hard against him, whining now, a sound of pure need and lust. The two of them fucked Rob's hand relentlessly, peppering each other with soft, light kisses, fighting to stay on their feet.

Jamie's cock swelled, hot and tight, breaking Rob's firm grasp on both of them. His body responded in kind, and then pleasure took him and he pushed hard against Jamie with a sharp cry. Jamie's hands tightened on Rob's ass almost to the point of being painful, and Jamie cried out softly, throwing his head back under the spray, and Rob felt warmth cascade over his hand, both of them coming at once, hot seed mingling between their wet bodies.

This time both of them wavered on their feet, meeting each other's eyes with soft smiles. Jamie chuckled, releasing his grip on Rob's ass, and moved his hands up over Rob's back, holding them together.

The water ran between them, and Rob moved his hand to Jamie's back, matching his partner's embrace. He'd learned that Jamie looked quietly pleased after sex, as if rediscovering some forgotten skill. Rob loved that look. He kissed his way along Jamie's jawline, feeling Jamie smile under his lips.

The water turned ice-cold.

The two of them sprang apart with cries of surprise and laughter. Rob managed to get the water off and the door open in one fluid movement, and Jamie slipped past him and out into the warm bathroom.

Rob followed, reaching for a towel, but Jamie captured his hand and pulled him through the door into the bedroom, both of them dripping on the carpet as they went. Rob let Jamie tow him over to the bed, and he was more than happy to climb atop Jamie's warm, wet body, their hips and legs sliding together and over one another as they resumed kissing. Jamie broke off for a moment to retrieve the pillow from the foot of the bed, then slid his hand along Rob's jaw and leaned up to claim another kiss.

The evening had turned cold, so Rob pushed himself back and straddled one of Jamie's thighs as he pulled the comforter up around their dripping bodies. Then he lay back on top of Jamie, slipping his hand up to cradle the back of Jamie's wet skull. He stopped for a moment, blown away by the love in Jamie's eyes. *I just want to be worthy of that love.* He stroked the skin under Jamie's ear with one thumb. Jamie smiled again, sleepy and replete with happiness, pulling Rob back down to be kissed again.

Night fell over the city, and neither of them noticed.

Chapter Sixteen

It was much later in the evening when they emerged from the bedroom, still holding fast to one another. Jamie let the dogs out onto the fire escape, while Rob heated up the soup and laid out bowls and cutlery. Jamie knew Rob didn't like the dogs going out at night alone, so he climbed gingerly up the staircase after them.

A wind had sprung up, shoving its way through the city to nip and pinch at exposed skin. Jamie turned his back on it, ducking his head, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. To the east, past the lights of the raised Metro track, Jamie could see the towering skyscrapers of St. Louis's financial district. Jamie remembered how he used to think the city was so impersonal, so empty. That every window hid a party he wasn't invited to. How the only way to escape his loneliness had been to throw himself into making the clinic a success, controlling every aspect of it, taking the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

Just a few short weeks with Rob had changed everything, had changed him. The only party he wanted to go to now was the one in Rob's apartment: the two of them, their dogs, and homemade soup.

With a soft whistle, Jamie herded the dogs back down the fire escape, following them at a brisk pace, eager to escape the wind. As he stepped back through the window, Rob looked up from the stove with a ready smile. "I was starting to worry about you guys. You writing a novel up there, babe?"

Jamie stepped up behind Rob and slid his arms around him, kissing the side of his neck softly in answer. Rob's smile grew, and he ladled the soup into bowls for them. "Thank you, Mrs. Cray," he said, carrying them over to the table.

Jamie scooped out two bowls of kibble for the dogs and set them on the floor before he sank into a chair in front of the steaming soup. "Smells amazing, Rob. She do this often?"

Rob nodded, dropping into the other chair. "Every chance she gets. I haven't the heart to tell her I know how to cook. Besides, it's nice to have someone looking out for you, you know?"

Jamie slid his hand across the table and rubbed Rob's arm. "I'd have to agree with you on that, buddy. It's damn nice."

Rob smiled at him around a mouthful of soup, and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He caught Jamie's hand in his and brought the palm to his lips. Jamie filled with love at the look in Rob's eyes, and the two of them grinned at each other like idiots for a moment. "Eat your soup," Rob told him. "You don't wanna break an old woman's heart."

Jamie returned to the business of dinner, leaving his arm pressed gently against Rob's on the table. The soup was thick and spicy, with chunks of onion among the tender, savory meatballs. Jamie couldn't identify more than half the ingredients, but he knew what he liked. His skills in the kitchen extended to heating up soup from cans. The one time he'd tried to make Rob dinner, he'd managed not to burn the spaghetti too badly while heating up marinara from a jar. Unfortunately they hadn't had a chance to sample the results; Jamie had left the congealing pasta to drain in the sink while he answered his phone. When he turned back to the sink, he'd found Bella had overturned the whole strainer onto the floor and the marinara had formed a thick, scorched crust. Rob had come home to delivered pizza instead. Jamie smirked at the memory.

"Penny for your thoughts," Rob said, collecting Jamie's bowl. He rose and helped them both to a second serving.

Jamie sighed. "This is nice, Rob. And I'm not talking about the soup."

Rob sat back down next to him. "I know you're not. And yeah, it is. Real nice."

Jamie sighed again. "I don't wanna go back to work tomorrow. I'm guessing when I check my voice mail, I'll find out Brianna's threatening to leave again or to sue me for my half of the practice and throw me out."

Rob stopped, spoon halfway to his mouth. "She'd do that?"

"She threatens every three months or so when she builds up a head of steam about something. Twice it's been over something Tessa's done, and a couple times I'm still not sure what the hell happened."

"This chick sounds crazy."

Jamie nodded, chasing a meatball with his spoon. "She is. She's also a great vet and a good friend. So most of the time it's easy to put up with. But do me a favor, will ya? Remind me to pick up some chocolate on the way in to work tomorrow."

Rob snickered. "You got it, babe."

The conversation turned to other things—their schedules for the rest of the week, whether the Blues would make the playoffs, whether the roadwork on I-64 would be finished in either of their lifetimes. Finally Rob rose and carried their bowls to the sink. Jamie elbowed him gently and took the bowls out of his hands. "You cooked; I'll clean." Placing everything in the sink, Jamie turned on the hot water and squirted detergent onto a sponge.

"Deal, man, but that can wait." Rob opened the freezer. "You want ice cream?"

Jamie shook his head. "Nah, I can't imagine eating anything else after that soup. It was almost too good, you know?"

Rob shut the freezer door quietly, remaining in front of it, hanging on to the handle.

Jamie forgot all about the dishes. "Babe, what's wrong?"

Rob took a deep breath. "You're right, Jamie; it is almost too good. Us." Rob looked up, and Jamie saw the fear in his eyes. After crossing the kitchen in three

short strides, he reached for his lover, but Rob put his hands up, warding Jamie back.

“Jamie,” he continued. “This? It's so right, so perfect, and I'm—What I am is so wrong that I can't believe it won't wreck everything.” He sighed. “I can't stop the transformations—hell, I can't even control them, and I'm terrified that's gonna be too much for us. I hate thinking that this could be taken away and—”

“I love you, Rob. More than anything.”

Rob fell silent, looking at Jamie cautiously.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Jamie continued. “I love you. I love everything about you. No matter what.” He came a step closer.

“I love you too, Jamie. So much. That's what scares me. I didn't think I could have this. Not with what I am—”

“Rob, what you are is mine. Man and wolf. You got that?” He stepped in close. After sliding his arms around his lover, he laid Rob's head on his shoulder and tousled the thick black hair, enjoying the rough prickle of Rob's stubble against the side of his neck. “I can't imagine what you've been through, but I'll be with you the rest of the way. Okay, buddy?”

“Jamie,” Rob whispered. He kissed Jamie's neck. “I love you so much. So damn much.”

Jamie kissed Rob, light and teasing. “Glad we got that cleared up, then.” He pulled out of the embrace and headed for the couch. “So you didn't just say that earlier because you were trying to get laid?”

After a few seconds, Rob recovered his poise and followed with a smirk. “Wiseass. I've gotten into your pants a couple of times without that line, remember?”

Jamie tossed a couch cushion at him. “Guess I'm just helpless before your charms.”

Rob caught the cushion and sat at one end of the tweed monstrosity. After putting the cushion in his lap, he patted it invitingly, and Jamie stretched the length of the couch and dropped his head onto the proffered pillow. He stretched happily, looking up at Rob, who returned his smile and let one hand drop into Jamie's hair, tangling his fingers in it gently. Jamie wriggled, settling in, holding Rob's other hand flat on his chest, over his heart. Neither of them spoke for a while, and a comfortable silence descended.

Finally Rob asked, "Jamie? What was it like?"

"What?"

"When I was...you know. What'd you do while it was going on?"

Jamie looked up at his lover. "You really don't remember?"

Rob shook his head, lower lip held lightly between his teeth.

Jamie's gaze went to the ceiling, losing focus as he thought. "Well, Rob, I watched you transform"—he rubbed Rob's hand gently—"and then you, well, you seemed to be meeting Mutt for the first time. Looked like it went well—nobody got eaten, at least. Then you and I..."

"What?" Rob's hand tightened in Jamie's hair. "You and I, what?"

Jamie sat up, pulled his legs up, and folded them one across the other. "We just sat and watched each other. You didn't seem real keen on me at first, Rob, but then, after a while, you seemed to calm down."

Rob watched Jamie closely, and Jamie smirked, enjoying his turn as documentarian. He leaned in for a kiss, but Rob held him off with a hand on his chest. He took a deep breath. "Jamie, did I attack you at all?"

Rob's eyes had turned large and worried. Watching him, Jamie ducked around the outstretched hand to steal a kiss. "You growled." He stole another one.

Rob smiled warily, returning Jamie's kiss. "Growled, huh?"

Jamie beamed. “Yup, but apparently my charms were simply too much for you, even in your highly wolfed-out state—and you make quite a handsome wolf, by the way—”

Rob grinned widely, letting his head fall on his chest. “Great. And for the record, I had my suspicions that's how you leaned.”

Jamie roared with laughter. He kissed Rob again, light and promising, then lay back down in Rob's lap, getting comfortable. “Really, Rob, it wasn't a big deal. We just sat and watched each other. No matter what you said at dinner earlier, I was pretty sure you wouldn't attack me. After all, you were downright friendly at the clinic the other night.”

“Yeah, but that was your turf, Jamie. I was just a visitor.”

“No, babe, that's our turf now. You're welcome there anytime. But anyway, I'd hedged my bets. I brought some beef in case I needed to distract you and make a quick getaway.”

It was Rob's turn to laugh. “Beef? I'm too predictable.”

“Well, it seemed fairer than my other idea.”

“Which was?”

Jamie took a deep breath. “You seemed so upset by the idea that you might hurt me that you almost had me convinced. I wondered if I should bring some diazepam. Load up a syringe with it.”

“Jamie...” Rob said softly.

Jamie could hear the catch in his throat, and he sat back up again, quickly, and turned to face Rob, one palm on either side of his shoulders. “Listen to me. I thought about it, but then I realized there was no way I could do that to you. I'd rather you attacked me than me betray your trust, do something to you against your will.”

Rob stayed silent, eyes wide, and Jamie forced himself to keep talking. “You know what else I thought about? I thought about you at the clinic, protecting me

from that guy with the knife. I knew you wouldn't do it, no matter what turf you were on. I knew, Rob. I just knew."

Rob's eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and he looked away quickly, biting his lip.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Rob tried to push him away, wriggling between his arms, his hands hard on Jamie's chest. Jamie gripped the back of the couch harder, pinning Rob where he sat. "Rob? Talk to me. It upsets you that much? That I even thought about it?"

Rob fought to free himself from Jamie, but Jamie hung on, using his weight to hold Rob where he was. Eventually Rob gave up and dropped his head forward, blinking back the tears. "Jamie," he said softly. "It's not you, it's that—"

"What, babe?" Jamie put his arms around Rob's shoulders, one hand gently stroking his hair.

Rob swallowed hard. "Diazepam," he whispered. "That's what they gave us at the Center, each time they did thi—each time they took us for another operation." The effort at holding the tears back became too much, and Jamie thumbed them off his lover's cheeks as they fell. "I remember every time. Every time! The...the metal table in the operating room, the way the drug made it impossible to move." Rob closed his eyes, biting back a sob, and Jamie pulled him close into his chest, murmuring softly into his hair.

Jamie kissed the top of Rob's head, letting his lips rest in the thicket of dark hair. "I'm so sorry. That's not gonna happen anymore. Not ever again. I'm so sorry, pal."

Rob buried his face against Jamie's shoulder, shaking. Jamie held him numbly. He hadn't given much thought until now about just what it would take to modify a human body to make the transformation possible. Many times he'd run his hands over the two scars on the back of Rob's neck, high up, above his hairline, but he hadn't given much thought to how they'd got there or what they meant. Thinking about it now, of course it made sense: they'd have wanted to access the central

nervous system as close to the brain stem as possible. The changes they wanted to trigger were so massive, so complex, they would have needed to come from the autonomic nerve fibers.

Which meant the patient would need to be awake the whole time.

“Oh God, Rob.” Jamie tightened his hold on his lover, rocking them both, gentling Rob as he released remembered pain and fear against Jamie's chest.

A faint whuffling sound came from next to his knee, and Jamie looked down to find Bella and Mutty standing next to the couch, concerned. Bella met Jamie's eyes and uttered a soft growl, low in her throat. Mutty was nuzzling Rob's knee with a whine, licking at the denim of his worn jeans.

Rob raised his head off Jamie's chest in concern. “Bella, no, girl. Go lay down.” His words came out hoarsely, but they were no less commanding than usual, and Bella and Mutty both headed for the bed in the corner of the living room. Rob rubbed his forehead against Jamie's shoulder with a sigh. “Some fucking wolf I turned out to be,” he said indistinctly. “Crying in front of my pack.”

Jamie skated his fingertips softly across Rob's cheek, kissing his forehead. “I'm sorry I doubted you.”

Rob leaned back, scrubbing at his red and swollen eyes. “Well, you had reason to. Technically, I was a wolf. I could've ripped your throat out.”

“Good point,” Jamie said softly. “But you were still you, wolf or not. You were still you.”

Rob dropped his hand from his face and met Jamie's eyes. He leaned in slowly for a kiss. The two of them kissed lazily, affectionately, banking the heat of their connection without stoking it, reveling in the nearness of each other. Rob ran a finger along Jamie's jawline before Jamie captured his hand and kissed each fingertip softly. “What do you wanna get up to for the rest of the evening?”

Rob yawned, stretching in Jamie's embrace. “It's already past midnight. And it's been a long couple of days, you know? Let's hit the sack, and you can hold me

some more, decide whether or not I'm truly dangerous." Rob yawned again, and Jamie found himself doing the same.

Swinging his legs down off the couch, he commented, "Even when you're not a wolf, that's a tough decision to make. I might have to hold you for a while."

The look in Rob's eyes took Jamie's breath away, and he stopped, stock-still in the middle of the living room. Rob moved closer, his warm body pushed up against Jamie's. "I'm counting on that, buddy. Take as long as you want."

Chapter Seventeen

The next day, Jamie arrived at the clinic with some trepidation. In the six years the Lake Park Canine Veterinary Hospital had been open, he'd never taken so much as an afternoon off sick without carefully planned backup and preparation.

But the building was still standing and inside, Jamie found that Brianna and the team had coped admirably in his absence, even if his reception was a little chillier than usual. The only sign of Jenkins and Woo was a scrawled receipt on animal control letterhead and a missing stack of paper from Jamie's in-tray. As far as Jamie could recall, the only things in that tray had been vaccination records waiting for filing and the blood results from a litter of Labrador pups he'd treated for a rare genetic disorder.

Jamie didn't have time to wonder what animal control wanted with his paperwork. He worked extra hard all day, showing his contrition by picking up Brianna's paperwork while the other vet took a much-needed lunch break. On her return, she nearly smiled at him, and Jamie breathed a sigh of relief.

Despite the bustling pace of the clinic, Jamie couldn't keep his mind off Rob. Partway through the morning, he remembered today was their one-month anniversary, a thought that sent thrills racing up and down his spine. One month—such a short time for so much to happen, for his whole life to change.

Yet he felt like he'd known Rob forever.

Rob was coming by after work with dinner, and Jamie couldn't help wondering if his lover realized the significance of the day. He told himself Rob had other things on his mind, what with turning into a werewolf the day before.

Jamie stopped in the doorway to his office, and the client record he was holding fell disregarded to the floor. He'd never asked Rob why he'd disappeared from the clinic on the first day they'd met, leaving Bella abruptly after being so keen to stay, but suddenly it all made sense. As Jamie stood motionless and pondering, everything about that night fell into place: Bella's howls from the back room, Rob's unexplained vanishing act. The moon had been full and rising, and Rob had had to go.

"Jamie, we gotta talk." His business partner's clipped tones summoned Jamie back from his contemplations. Brianna all but pushed Jamie the rest of the way into the office, shaking her head, her dark eyes stormy.

"Brianna, I already told you I'm sorry," Jamie began. "I couldn't help it, believe—"

"I know what you told me, but that's not what this is about. I want to talk to you about Rob."

"What about Rob?" Jamie was on the defensive immediately.

Brianna glared at him. "Jamie, I don't like what he's doing to you, honey."

"What he's doing to me? What are you talking about?"

"You're acting different, Jamie. Real different." Brianna held up a hand. "First"—she ticked off on her fingers—"you're damn near impossible to get hold of after-hours anymore. Second, we've got prowlers and wolves running amok in the clinic at night, apparently, and then to top it all off, animal control's getting pushy, and you disappear for two days and won't even return my calls!"

Jamie swallowed, looking away guiltily. "You're right, I guess. But this isn't something Rob's 'doing to me,' okay? It's—"

Brianna interrupted him, hands on hips. "It's always me that has to pick up the pieces, Jamie. And I'm not having those pieces include filing for bankruptcy, okay? You think I'm gonna stand by and let you destroy everything we've worked so hard to build?"

“Nothing got destroyed.” Jamie looked at his business partner impatiently. “Brianna, I haven't stolen the payroll or gone AWOL for a month, all right? Let's keep this in perspective. Rob's my partner, a part of my life, and everything else is just gonna have to work around that.”

“Jamie, you've dated a lot of losers since I've known you, but—”

They both jumped as the front door of the clinic slammed, accompanied by the frantic jingling of its bells. Brianna's glare faltered, and she shrugged, turning away. “Listen, Jamie, I'm just concerned about you, okay?”

“I appreciate it.” Jamie bit back his anger, bending to retrieve the client record he'd dropped earlier and smoothing it on the desk, not looking at his business partner. “But you know, I'm more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“So shoot me for caring.” This time, Brianna didn't wait for a response; her rubber soles squeaked their way purposefully toward the back room.

Jamie groaned softly and took a deep breath, composing himself. He did appreciate Brianna's concern, but there was no way to explain Rob's secret or his mysterious absence, and he had no intention of trying. The clinic would just have to get used to second place.

Smoothing his hair back, Jamie deposited the folder into his in-tray and went out into the lobby. The last of his chores were done for the day, and all he had to do was wait for Rob to arrive, then lock up. He stepped behind the desk to check out the appointment book for the next morning, and froze in his tracks.

The lobby was empty, but on the high counter sat a bag that smelled temptingly of Indian food. A bag stamped with the logo of his and Rob's favorite Indian takeout.

A chill started in Jamie's chest as he recalled the violent slam of the lobby door that had interrupted his altercation with Brianna. If Rob had come in and overheard the exchange—

Jamie was running for the door before his thought was complete, looking around wildly as the bells jangled in protest. He finally spotted Rob's van in a parking spot two doors down. With a gasp of relief, Jamie sprinted toward it.

Rob was sitting in the driver's seat, head down, shoulders slumped, and when Jamie hammered on the window, he jumped as though he'd been shot. The eyes Rob turned to him were huge and guilt filled, and Jamie wrenched fruitlessly at the door handle. It didn't give, and Jamie yelled desperately, "Open up, Rob. Open up!"

Rob hesitated for a long moment, then reached with a trembling hand and released the lock. Jamie nearly fell into the van in his anxiety to get to Rob, to touch him. Rob's eyes were wet with tears, and Jamie choked back a sob of his own.

"Rob, I'm sorry—" he started, but Rob shook his head.

"Jamie," he said hoarsely, "she's right, you know? All I'm gonna do is screw up your life. I'm a fucking werewolf, man. You're already lying because of me, losing days at work, screwing up your relationship with your business partner—I'm a fuckup, but I'm damned if I'm gonna fuck up your life along with everything else!"

"No, Rob." Jamie reached for his partner. "No, that's not true. Don't you get it? I love you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. The clinic, Brianna—they matter, but not like this, Rob. Not like you."

Rob looked into Jamie's eyes, fear and hope warring on his face. Jamie looked back at him, frightened and determined. He had to make Rob believe. "Really?" Rob said, his voice a strangled whisper. "Jamie, you really think we can—"

"No." Jamie cut him off, shaking him almost roughly. "I don't think we can, Rob. I know we can."

"Are you sure?" Rob asked hoarsely. "Jamie—"

Jamie kissed Rob fiercely, silencing him, all his hunger, all his love in the kiss. Rob kissed him back, fierce and true, answer and acceptance in one, and Jamie felt as though his heart would burst.

* * *

The evening was warm, spring living up to the promise of its name. They took their dinner to the park, over to a picnic table in a quiet lakeside clearing, one of their favorite spots. The park was popular at this hour, full of pale but hopeful city dwellers eager to get a head start on summer. Strains of hip-hop came faintly from somewhere, and a family argument was under way two tables over.

Jamie watched the gray surface of the lake riffled by the evening breeze. The wind that whistled down across the prairies was sharp, its teeth belying the bright sun that bathed the quiet clearing. He shivered, and Rob scooted closer, pressing his hip against Jamie's, immediately extending an arm to rub Jamie's back.

Jamie looked at his lover—the guy he already thought of as so much more than a lover. Partner, best friend—lover, yes, but it was more than that. A slow smile spread across his face. He'd thought it before, but now he was certain. Rob was his soul mate.

Rob wordlessly reached over and squeezed Jamie's hand, his eyes saying everything about the evening.

Jamie ducked his head, forking up a generous mouthful of the korma and rice. “Had a voice mail from the homeowner's association. They want us each to cough up three hundred dollars to fix the roof.” Jamie shook his head, savoring the mild, buttery taste of the chicken dish on his tongue. “I haven't been home more than a handful of nights in the last month, and besides, keeping track of you is way more important than any old condo.”

Rob looked down at his naan. “So rent it out.”

Jamie paused, another forkful halfway to his mouth. “What?”

“Rent out your condo and come live with me instead. My apartment's small, but doesn't seem like we've had trouble so far. We're there every night, and it just seems like your place could be put to better use, you know?” Rob continued to stare at the dinner laid out in front of them on the wooden table before hazarding a look at Jamie.

Jamie grinned. “Done.”

A smile dawned on Rob's face. "You mean that?"

Jamie nodded happily. "Makes sense to me. As long as it's all right by you..."

"All right doesn't begin to cover it, Jamie." Rob's hand lingered for a moment between his lover's shoulder blades; then they reluctantly separated. St. Louis was a modern city in any number of ways, but it also stayed true to its roots, and both of them knew better than to take any chances.

"Only thing is," Rob continued, "I don't know how we're gonna get all your furniture in."

The nearby family argument escalated to a crescendo, and Jamie chased a piece of chicken around the Styrofoam container as he waited out the noise. Still shouting, the group marched past them, heading back toward the parking lot, and Jamie turned back to Rob with a shrug. "I'll rent it out furnished."

"But, baby, all I've got is the bed, that table and chairs in the kitchen, that ratty old couch..."

"I like that couch, Rob. It's...bouncy." Jamie grinned suggestively.

Rob chuckled and shook his head. "Jamie, I've seen your place. You have a full set of spotless white leather furniture in your living room. An oak office suite. The big, you know, curvy bed thing." He used a piece of naan to push the piece of chicken onto Jamie's fork.

"The sleigh bed?" Jamie shook his head. "Let's just leave it all there. My sister picked all that stuff out, and besides, I like yours better. It's more...familiar. It's us."

Rob stopped, naan halfway to his mouth. "You have a sister?"

Jamie frowned, chewing. He generally tried not to talk about his stuffy East Coast family. They'd never reconciled themselves to any of the choices he'd made: opening a clinic in downtown St. Louis, failing to marry, failing to date as far as they were concerned. Despite his success as a veterinarian, a small-business owner, and a loyal friend, he'd never be anything more than his father's major

disappointment. The quiet one at Christmas. Jamie said softly, "It's not important, Rob. None of that stuff is. I just have a few boxes of personal stuff, and all my clothes—"

Rob rolled his eyes, and Jamie chose to ignore the unoffered comment.

"Besides, furniture's overrated."

"S that right?"

"Yup, buddy. Well, except for a bed. That's pretty important for what I've got planned for you."

Rob had finished the masala and was using the rest of his naan to soak up korma sauce from Jamie's container. "Smart-ass. How'd I wind up with such a wise guy for a partner, anyway?"

"Partner, Rob?" Jamie grinned.

Rob leaned close, his lips just inches from Jamie's. His expression was serious, intense, and Jamie felt his stomach flutter. "Soul mate," Rob whispered.

The whole world dwindled down to Rob's eyes and lips, and Jamie couldn't have cared if they were on the JumboTron at the Scottrade Center. He pressed his lips to Rob's, breathing him in, Rob's hand soft on his back, feeling Rob lean into him, just as hard, as needy.

* * *

"Yeah, just like that," Jamie moaned. "Oh yeah. Oh." Rob's fingers slid inside him, slick and hard, and Jamie thrust against them, eyes closed. He knelt on the plaid couch, spread thighs on either side of Rob's. They'd barely made it through the door with their clothes intact.

"Fuck, yes." Jamie panted. He leaned forward with a soft hiss. Sitting under him, Rob nuzzled Jamie's breastbone, kissing his chest softly, fingers continuing to explore, reaching deep. Jamie ground down on them, gratified by Rob's low, pleased growl.

"You are so hot," Rob murmured. "So hot, baby."

But Jamie was beyond words, fucking himself on Rob's fingers, feeling Rob's tentative searches for—

Jamie's guttural cry emerged beyond his control. Rob continued to stroke his pleasure point: firm, rhythmic, insistent, and Jamie gripped the back of the couch for support. He whined as Rob's fingers stretched him, making him ready to be taken, making him ready for Rob's cock. The whines became cries for release as Jamie anticipated his lover inside him.

Then Rob's fingers were out of him, gone, scrabbling for more lube, accompanied by a crinkle of foil. Jamie came out of his reverie long enough to lean to one side and grab the condom roughly from Rob's hand. He tore the package quickly open, then tossed it behind him.

Rob chuckled. "You in a hurry, baby? I promise you these are my only plans for the—" Rob's comments died away in a groan as Jamie slid the preslicked latex sheath over his heavy prick, clasping the shaft, working the thick vein there before gently pinching the tip. He looked up to find Rob watching him, breathing heavily. "I love the way you do that. I really do." Rob panted.

Jamie grinned widely, then grabbed the back of the couch again, maneuvering himself over Rob's cock. He felt Rob's hands on him, thumbs sliding over the thin skin of his hip bones; then the blunt tip nudged at his entrance, and Jamie threw his head back, giving full rein to the feeling of being opened, laid bare by the insistent push of Rob's cock. He cried out wordlessly as Rob slid inside him, the brief sting soon replaced by soft waves of pleasure as Rob pushed deeper, until Jamie's ass was flush against the tops of Rob's thighs, his own legs as spread as he could manage, the rough fabric of the couch ticklish against his skin.

He took a few breaths, adjusting to the penetration, then looked at Rob, whose eyes shone with heat and desire. "I love you, baby," Rob said.

Those words, as much as anything Rob could do to his body, set Jamie alight.

"I love you too, Rob," Jamie whispered happily. He leaned in for a kiss, feeling Rob settle his hips farther forward, firming his feet on the carpet. Jamie broke the

kiss to lean against Rob's cheekbone, grinding his hips into Rob's, beginning to rock on his firm prick. Rob's hands tightened, fingers digging into Jamie's buttocks as he rocked. Jamie found himself hoping there'd be bruises; he needed something this intense to leave marks, to remind him of how good it felt to be Rob's. He drove harder against Rob's hips, hearing Rob's surprised moan as he sped up his stroke.

There was a rustle of denim, and Jamie glanced over his shoulder, enjoying the sight of Rob fighting to be rid of his jeans, which were pooled around his feet at the base of the sofa. He looked back at Rob and grinned. Rob shot him a smirk back. His next thrust took Jamie by surprise; Rob braced his feet and used his muscular thighs to drive his cock deep into Jamie. Jamie hung on to the couch and let Rob take him, hard.

Jamie leaned back to watch, loving the intense, focused expression on Rob's face. The sight made him push back harder against Rob's thrusts, Rob's cock hitting him just right, ripping moans from his throat as he was claimed.

Leaning forward, Jamie crushed his chest against his lover's, his own cock sandwiched between them, surrounded by sweat-soaked hair and skin, the prickle of Rob's stomach fur nearly painful against his sensitive ridge and glans. Jamie moaned softly.

Then suddenly, Rob pinned his hips in place, thrusting hard into him with one huge movement.

Jamie struggled to buck, buttocks crushed against Rob's thighs, but Rob dug his fingers in, sweat sheening his naked arms and chest as he hung on. Rob sobbed, calling Jamie's name.

Jamie felt Rob's cock swelling against the sensitive walls of his passage, and he looked down to find Rob watching him with a fierce intensity.

So fierce, Jamie had to close his eyes against it.

Rob's full prick throbbed inside him, against his rim, and Jamie felt the cry building in his throat just seconds before it was ripped from him, and he yelled his lover's name as the soft pulses arrived, so soft as to be nearly imagined, taking him

instantly to the edge. Jamie spurted against Rob's chest and stomach, still feeling the iron vise of his lover's hands gripping his ass cheeks, holding him tight. "That's it, baby." Rob panted, and Jamie felt another tremor rush through him at the love in Rob's voice. He whimpered.

Rob's hands softened as he gentled Jamie through the remainder of his orgasm, voice soft in Jamie's ear, his lips sweet and light against the sweat-slicked skin of Jamie's neck and jaw. Jamie moved his hands from the couch to Rob, seeking purchase anywhere he could, gripping tightly, panting. It had never been like this with anyone else. Not once. But every time he got near Rob, the earth didn't just move, it shattered.

"Easy, babe," Rob whispered. "I gotcha, I gotcha." Jamie held him close, inhaling deeply the smell of their sex, feeling Rob's warm, sweaty chest hair scratch his bare skin.

"Rob," he whispered. "So good. So...intense."

"Mmm." Rob rested his head against the back of the couch, looking up at Jamie with contented, smiling eyes. "I'm glad you liked it. I'm hoping you'll even wanna do it again sometime."

Jamie kissed him hard, surprising even himself with the fierceness with which he claimed Rob's mouth.

He pulled back finally, gratified to see Rob pant. "Every chance I get." He kissed Rob softer this time, lingering and gentle. "Rob," he whispered against his lover's lips. "Don't suppose we can have our anniversary tomorrow too?"

Rob chuckled, puffs of warm air that Jamie breathed in greedily. "Whenever you want. Whenever you want." He gave Jamie's ass a sharp squeeze, and Jamie yipped. Rob smirked, rubbing the cheek. "C'mon. Let's hit the sack. You're late to work tomorrow, your entire damn staff's likely to stage an intervention."

Jamie ruefully agreed, detangling himself from Rob's lap, standing and gingerly stretching his limbs. "They worry about me. They're just a little—"

“Protective. Yeah, I noticed.” Rob pushed himself up off the couch and pulled his jeans up, then bent to retrieve Jamie's from by the side of the couch.

Jamie waved them away, ambling naked toward the bedroom. “Their hearts are in the right place.” The two dogs appeared, pushing past him on their way to the kitchen. “Give them time,” Jamie called as he continued on to the bathroom. “They'll come around.”

Just before he shut the bathroom door, Jamie heard the telltale sound of the kitchen window going up, paws skittering on rungs, then Rob's measured tread as he followed the dogs up. While he took care of business, Jamie thought back to Rob's words in the park, and he only emerged from the bathroom when he heard the dogs' nails on linoleum and the *thump* of the window closing behind them.

Rob captured Jamie from behind as he came out of the bathroom. Pulling him close, Rob kissed his way along Jamie's neck until he reached his ear. “Love you,” Rob whispered. He released Jamie in one smooth motion.

“Rob,” Jamie said softly.

“Yeah, babe?” Rob was silhouetted in the doorway of the bathroom, the fluorescent light casting his bare, muscular torso and arms into shadow. One arm was braced high against the door frame.

Jamie looked at the floor. “What you said earlier, about renting out my place. You mean it? You want me to move in with you?”

The smile spread slowly across Rob's face. “Jamie,” he said finally, “you're already moved in. Got it?”

Jamie beamed, then turned away and crawled happily under the comforter, claiming Rob's lone pillow, listening to the dogs settle in the living room. He lay curled up facing the big arched window. The city that had once seemed to him so threatening, so lonely, lay safely behind the lead-framed glass, reduced to a picturesque jumble of lights and sounds in the darkness. All of it worlds away from him, from Rob. From home.

The bathroom light fell back across the bed briefly, then flicked off, and Rob climbed under the comforter to fit his warm body against Jamie's, kissing his way up Jamie's spine as he went.

With one last look at the city outside their window, Jamie turned in his lover's embrace and slept.

Chapter Eighteen

“Rob!”

Rob stopped brushing his teeth and peered through the open bathroom doorway. Jamie stood naked in the middle of the bedroom, hands on hips. Rob took a moment to admire the view before spitting out a mouthful of foam. “What, babe?”

Jamie turned around, displaying his rounded, muscular ass. He looked back over his shoulder. “I have bruises on my butt!”

Rob rinsed his mouth with water, then wiped it with the back of his hand. “C'mere. I'll kiss 'em better.”

Jamie regarded his butt mournfully, then spun back around, hands still on hips. Rob burst out laughing. “Wasn't a joke. Here, turn back around.” He emerged from the bathroom, adjusting his sweats as he crossed the room.

Jamie grinned. “Rob, you start kissing 'em better, I'm gonna be late for work again, and—”

Rob wrapped his arms around his lover, and they kissed lingeringly, affectionately. Rob finally broke away to regard Jamie with amusement. “And you'll probably cause another staff mutiny. I get it, I get it.” He released Jamie with obvious reluctance, giving his ass one last playful smack.

Jamie pulled Rob back into his embrace, nibbling gently at his lips. “Besides. You just brushed your teeth.”

“So?”

“So keep your minty mouth off my tender places—”

Rob giggled, dropping onto the bed. “Your tender places? Really?”

Jamie folded his arms. "Really."

Rob leaned back on the bed and crossed his arms behind his head. "You know you're gonna like it once I get started. Once I start, you're gonna beg me not to stop."

"Is that a fact?"

Rob grinned, and Jamie climbed on top of him happily, leaning down for a kiss. And another one. And another after that. Rob finally squeezed Jamie's ass again, causing his lover to rear back with a squeak. He kissed Rob's nose with a playful growl, then clambered off the bed, stretching, headed for the bathroom. Rob watched him go, still appreciating the view.

Jamie's brief pleased look as he shut the door let Rob know he knew he was watching.

The door shut with a *click*, and Rob flopped back on the bed, eyes closed. Until he'd met Jamie, he had no idea what happiness meant. He'd had no idea he could be so wrapped up in another person's well-being, their fulfillment. Nothing at the Center had prepared him for this. Nothing in his life had remotely prepared him for Jamie. He stared up at the ceiling, dimly aware that he was grinning like a madman. Having Jamie in his life was...indescribable. He understood now what it meant to have a partner, to have his whole focus wrapped up in something other than survival. Rob lived for every one of Jamie's smiles.

He was still wrapped up in contemplation when the dogs bounded in. Bella bounced up on the bed and pawed at him, while Mutty worried his ankle with admirable ferocity. "Yeah yeah yeah," Rob muttered. "I'm going." He pushed up off the bed and quickly changed into his work shirt and jeans.

Jamie emerged from the bathroom as Rob finished, and Rob captured him happily, kissing and nipping at him. Jamie submitted with a grin before pulling out of Rob's grasp, batting his hands away. "You want me to show up naked to work?" He held up a finger, forestalling Rob's answer. "No. No one but you wants that, pal. Now hand me my pants."

Rob complied, watching Jamie tie the drawstring of the teal scrub pants tight over his narrow hips. He handed over the top, then watched quietly as Jamie shrugged into it too. Jamie caught him watching. “Rob?” he asked softly.

Rob smiled. *How do you tell a guy he makes your heart beat? Not just beat faster or anything like that, but you're pretty sure he's the whole reason it bothers to keep going?* Rob leaned in for a quick kiss. “Love you, babe.”

As Rob pulled away, Jamie grabbed him tight. The kiss that time was longer, more focused. “I love you too.”

Jamie tugged Rob's hand and led him from the room. “Come on. Naked or not, I do have to get going. You too. Although if you think about it, no one would know if you did your rounds naked. Just stay in the van, toss the packages out the window at each stop.”

“Oh very good, Jamie. Now why didn't I think of that?”

“Dunno. You should've asked me earlier; I could've told you. No charge either.”

“That's very big of you.” Rob glanced at his watch. “Hey, babe, how bad you think traffic's gonna be getting to the freeway right now?”

Jamie shrugged, digging through his backpack. “It's what, half six? You've got maybe another twenty minutes before the expressway starts really filling up for the day.”

“Twenty minutes, huh?”

Something in Rob's tone made Jamie look up questioningly, so he was just in time for Rob to scoop him into his arms. “Rob! I can't be late! Come on—” Jamie protested halfheartedly.

“Not gonna be late, baby.” Rob began mouthing his way down Jamie's neck, and the vet's protests died away in contented moans.

Rob reached for the drawstring of the scrub pants with a wicked grin.

They both wound up late for work.

* * *

Jamie put the phone down with a sigh. It had been a busy day, made busier by his attempt to cram all the paperwork and other routine chores he normally completed after closing into his day's schedule. He'd hoped he could finish at five for once, get home early, and surprise Rob.

But Rob had just called to say he was stuck in traffic on I-64, a late, urgent delivery having dropped him right in the midst of the worst rush-hour crawl. He wouldn't be home for a good couple of hours, and Jamie figured he might as well use the time to catch up on invoicing.

Jamie headed into his office, looking moodily around. He'd once thought of this space as his haven, his hideaway. The bookshelves above the desk held the medical and canine texts he'd used to bury himself away from the world, and on the walls hung the diplomas, awards, and qualifications he'd collected.

Today the office seemed foreign and unfriendly, and he thought longingly of the ugly couch that took up most of the space in Rob's living room.

Their living room.

A smile spread unbidden across Jamie's face. The apartment on Fourteenth was his haven now. The home he shared with Rob was the only place he'd ever want to hide.

Still smiling, Jamie sat down at his desk and took a pile of papers from his in-tray. Slowly and methodically, he started to put the bills in order, conscious of the warm feeling inside him. Their home. He was going home to Rob—not just tonight but every night.

A sharp rapping brought Jamie's wandering attention back to the present. His first thought was that Rob had come by as he often did after work, until he remembered his lover was stuck in gridlocked traffic, miles away.

Jamie's heart sank as he unlocked the front door of the clinic and recognized the short, barrel-chested man standing outside.

"What can I do for you, Officer Woo?" Jamie asked resignedly. "Another search warrant? And where's your partner?"

“Nothing like that, Bretton.” Woo looked at him levelly, and Jamie saw something different in his eyes. “I haven't got a warrant today. But if you'll let me come inside, I'd appreciate it.”

Jamie looked at the officer in surprise. The man was being positively polite. Jamie stood back, holding the door open hospitably. “Be my guest. You won't find any wolves here today either.”

“I'm glad to hear that.” Woo crossed the threshold and stalked slowly around the waiting room, gazing at the colorful posters covering the walls. “You believe this?” he asked, gesturing at a glossy ad: VETERINARIANS FEED THEIR DOGS HILL'S. WHY DON'T YOU?

“That one I do.” Jamie shrugged. “I feed Bella Hill's. What, you came here to discuss dog food?”

“I need a sack of kibble. Figured I'd get an expert opinion from a guy in the business.” Woo's eyes glittered dangerously. “Most so-called experts, I wouldn't trust 'em as far as I could throw 'em.” He lifted a ten-pound bag from the shelf and carried it over to the counter.

Jamie watched him in confusion. “Wait a minute. Last week you acted like I was some kind of crook and all but threatened me. Today you come by to get my expert advice? Officer Woo, cut the bull, all right? What's this about?”

Woo tapped his keys on the counter, looking pensively at Jamie. “Dr. Bretton, after we were here last, I checked you out. I gotta tell you, I figured you for the kind of scum I take pleasure”—Woo spat the word out in satisfaction—“hauling into court on a daily basis and seeing locked away where they can't do no more damage.” He paused. “I asked around some, and you better believe me, if there's dirt to be found, Bretton, I know how to find it.”

Jamie swallowed hard.

“So I figure you're a straight-up guy,” Woo continued. “I dunno what that wolf was doing here the other night, and maybe it had nothing to do with you, just like you said. Or if it was here because maybe it was sick and you're a vet? Well,

Bretton, I wouldn't blame you. But if it's still around somewhere, you better get rid of it and get rid of it fast. Jenkins is pretty damned convinced you got yourself a whole pack of wolves, damn smart wolves at that, and he ain't gonna let it go."

"Wait—" Jamie shook his head, still confused. "You're...you're warning me? And I don't know anything about the wolf—"

"Only thing I came for is a sack of kibble." Woo pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "You got any kind of discount for city employees?"

* * *

Jamie wondered about the encounter all the way to the park. He and Rob had begun taking advantage of the spring weather and giving the dogs a quick run before dinner. Despite the traffic, Woo had kept him long enough that Jamie'd had to hurry to change into his shorts and T-shirt, and when he arrived, Rob was already playing with the two pups in what they'd come to think of as "their" clearing. Jamie took a moment to drink in the sight of his lover, the strong, firm body hinted at by his long-sleeved T-shirt and sweatpants. No matter the temperature, Rob was sensitive about his scars being seen.

"Hey, baby." Jamie jogged up and kissed Rob lightly, the dogs jumping expectantly at their legs. The picturesque, intimate grove was deserted, and even though he'd seen a few people already out on the wide tarmac path leading round the lake, Jamie figured it was worth getting caught. He needed to touch Rob, to reassure himself after Woo's disturbing suspicions.

"Hi." Rob grinned and stole another kiss, one hand at Jamie's hip, pulling him close. "You get stuck in traffic too, huh?"

"No, it was Woo." With an anxious look around, Jamie released Rob and crossed his arms over his chest. "He came by to warn me that his partner, Jenkins, is on a full-scale wolf hunt. Rob, it's got me kind of worried."

"Woo came to warn you?" Rob frowned in concentration. "About his partner? That's pretty odd. Y'ask me, I would have said Woo was the dangerous one. Tell me what he said."

Jamie related the unusual visit as Rob stretched desultorily, and Jamie for once was too upset to be distracted by the sight. He looked around the clearing anxiously, and his gaze landed on a lone paddleboat being slowly propelled across the surface of the shimmering green water. The woman piloting it looked up suddenly, as if sensing Jamie's gaze.

"Smart wolves," Rob mused. "Jamie, it's got me a little worried too, you know?"

Nodding slowly, Jamie looked at his lover unhappily. "Do we...?" He swallowed hard. "You're not gonna leave, are you, Rob? I mean, in case this really is about werewolves?"

Rob returned his gaze to Jamie. "I've been running a long time, but I've told you before: I'm pretty sure everyone at the Center thinks I'm dead. Besides, I got you now, and that makes everything different. I'm not gonna run anymore. Not without you."

Jamie searched Rob's face and felt the knot of tension between his shoulder blades release just a fraction. "Yeah," he said quietly. "And I'm gonna be beside you, every time."

Rob didn't reply. Instead he stepped in close and leaned his forehead against Jamie's; when Jamie opened his eyes, Rob was so close, his features were a blur, and all Jamie was aware of was a well of deep blue eyes staring right through him.

"Love you," Rob whispered. He kissed Jamie, hard and deep.

The interlude was broken by Mutty, who chose that moment to dash headlong toward the lake, barking madly. An innocent mallard flapped angrily into the sky, squawking and honking while the indignant dog read it the riot act from the edge of the water. Bella strolled leisurely over and herded the errant terrier back to the safety of the sandy, packed dirt.

Jamie chuckled.

"Yeah, he's a little clown." Rob bent and scratched between Mutty's ears. "But he's our little clown." Straightening up, he asked, "You ready to get this over with?"

Jamie rolled his shoulders and shifted his weight from foot to foot, testing his knees out. "No time like the present, Rob. I'm already hungry, so the faster we run, the faster we can go home to dinner."

"It's good to set yourself goals, babe." The two of them headed up toward the promenade, the two dogs trotting gamely at their heels. Jamie punched Rob in the arm, then bent and clipped a leash to Mutty's collar. When they ran, the terrier had a tendency to let his attention wander, and it was usually followed by the rest of him.

Rob set an easy pace, and Jamie fell in beside him while Bella loped on ahead, ears and tail high. The evening had turned crisp and cool, with a pleasant chill coming off the water, and Jamie relaxed, sinking into the rhythm of the run. The four of them pulled off onto the grass to pass a cluster of young, fashionable women pushing a fleet of jogging strollers. Bella gave a short, reproachful bark as a chorus of giggles reached them. Jamie shook his head. "This place. I never gave it much thought, but I really like this city."

Rob nodded. "I've lived in worse places; that's for sure. Everything in Ohio, for a start."

Jamie snickered.

"But I think it's more than that, man." Rob turned around to jog lightly backward, facing Jamie, a gentle smile playing over the corners of his mouth. "You belong with me, and I belong with you. As long as we're together, Jamie, we're gonna be happy wherever we are."

Jamie drank in the love in Rob's eyes. "I think you might be on to something there."

"Of course I am. And if we weren't out in public, I'd show you just how happy."

Jamie felt himself glowing with happiness. "Let's pick up the pace, then. That's an even better goal than dinner."

Rob turned back around and jogged at Jamie's side again. "You sure? I picked up steaks."

Jamie shot Rob a sidelong glance and lengthened his stride, Mutty puffing furiously along beside him.

“Don't make me choose, Rob.”

After a mile and a half, they cut the run short and headed back to the apartment. By midnight, they'd remembered the steaks.

Chapter Nineteen

Rob pulled the van into a parking space behind the clinic and switched off the ignition. He opened the van door and would've jumped out, but Jamie's hand on his arm restrained him.

"What is it, babe?" he asked.

"I'll only be five minutes," Jamie said, leaning forward. "You may as well wait here, huh?"

"If you want." Rob leaned in, closing the distance between them and softly kissing his partner's lips. Jamie's eyes dropped closed, and he parted his lips, mouth lingering on Rob's, light and sweet.

"God, Rob," he whispered, his hand tightening on Rob's arm. He sat back reluctantly. "Really, I won't be long."

"Don't be," Rob advised him throatily, shifting in his seat. His body had already responded to Jamie's nearness, and his cock throbbed, aching and captive in his jeans. "I might get lonely."

"Don't do that." Jamie grinned and, with a final squeeze of Rob's arm, slipped out of the van.

Rob watched his lover walk toward the low building. Jamie was beautiful from behind, he reflected, tall, rangy build highlighting narrow hips. Beautiful from every angle, in fact. Rob licked his lips as his gaze traveled down, lingering on Jamie's rounded, perfect ass.

As Jamie disappeared inside the building, Rob leaned back against the seat, already thinking about all the things he wanted to do to Jamie once they got home.

But unbidden, a memory suddenly surfaced of the prowler in the clinic. Rob's blood ran cold at the thought of another intruder.

He slipped out of the van and jogged over to the clinic door. It gave at his touch, and Rob swore under his breath. He was always telling Jamie to lock himself in when he was in the clinic alone. He closed the door behind him, and the dogs went wild in their enclosures. So much for the element of surprise.

Jamie emerged from his office, looking startled and slightly harassed. "Rob! I thought you were waiting in the car!"

With a silent word to the dogs in their pens, Rob crossed the space in a few short steps and took Jamie's elbow with a growl at his ear. "How many times I gotta tell you to lock yourself in here, baby?"

"You were right outside," Jamie said. He laid a conciliatory hand on Rob's arm. "I knew you were guarding the door."

"Not the point." Rob kissed him, hard and deep. "Jamie, you promise me you'll lock it next time. Please?"

"I promise." Jamie pressed close, wrapped his arms around Rob, and angled up for another kiss.

"Mmm." Rob kissed Jamie again, slower, exploring his lover's mouth, savoring the sweet taste of his man. "On second thought," he whispered against Jamie's lips, "I'm not sure I trust you."

"Rob!" Jamie pulled out of his arms. "I can't believe you wouldn't—"

"You so can." Rob leaned in and claimed Jamie's lips again. "I still think I'm gonna come with to make sure."

Jamie groaned softly. "Every time?"

Rob chuckled in response and moved his hands to Jamie's hips, pulling him close. "How much you gotta get done here? I wanna go home."

Jamie grinned, nuzzling. "Who says we have to go home?" He took Rob's hand and tugged him back in the direction of the office.

“Babe...” Rob made a halfhearted attempt to hang back.

With a satisfied grin, Jamie pulled him through the office door, and Rob kicked it closed behind them, letting Jamie pull him hard against his body. “Always wanted to try this.”

Rob mouthed his way down Jamie's neck. “I'm game. No one's due in, right? No techs, no—Ah...” Rob arched as Jamie slid a hand up under his shirt and thumbed one nipple to tight, hard attention. “Just us, right, babe?”

Jamie groaned softly in answer, and as he moved, Rob felt Jamie's cock hot and hard, pushing against his jeans. Jamie moaned, and Rob slid his hands down to cup his ass.

Rob guided Jamie backward until he was perched on the edge of the desk, Rob standing between his spread legs. Jamie shuddered, leaning against Rob's body as Rob's hands ran over his back and down to his ass.

“Rob,” Jamie managed breathlessly, fumbling with the buttons on Rob's shirt.

“Yeah, baby.” Rob pulled Jamie's T-shirt over his head and pinched one of his nipples. Jamie mewled and struggled with the waistband of Rob's jeans as Rob rolled the bud between his fingers.

Rob batted Jamie's hands away gently and, grinning, turned his attention to Jamie's pants, freeing his cock. Jamie hissed, his eyes dark with lust as Rob handled him. His cock pulsed in Rob's hand, and Rob smiled with satisfaction. “Yeah,” he muttered, pulling Jamie's jeans down the rest of the way.

Jamie leaned back, holding on to Rob for support as he parted his legs. Rob moved in close, pressing his still-clothed groin against Jamie, and Jamie groaned. Rob kissed Jamie, cutting off the sound as he explored Jamie's mouth, feeling his lover's surrender in the kiss, and in the pliant hungry body in his arms.

“Need you. Please.” Jamie's voice was hoarse, raw with need. Rob groaned, letting his partner go and tearing at his own clothing, desperate for skin on skin.

“Rob, please.” Jamie leaned back farther, bracing himself on his arms, and Rob licked his lips at the sight. His beautiful mate, exposed and lewd, his expression one of lust and need. Jamie's swollen cock stood proud and hungry, glistening with his juice, while his heavy balls coyly hid his waiting hole.

Impatiently Rob kicked free of his pants and slowly ran his hand over his length. The thrill was soft inside him, nothing more than a promise of what was to come. Nothing could compare to Jamie's sweet passage, tight and true, clasping Rob as though he'd never let go. Rob growled.

Jamie's eyes repeated their invitation, and Rob caught his breath. “Not like that,” he said breathily. “I need—want to see you. Want you to show me.”

Rob saw the lust spark in his lover's eyes. Jamie gave his cock a leisurely stroke, and Rob watched, mesmerized, as a pearly drop formed at the tip, fat and full.

Jamie smirked, then shot a quick glance around the room. “Here.” He reached for the shelf above the desk and tossed Rob a small box.

“What?” Rob grabbed it in confusion, then grinned as he read the label: *sterile surgical lubricant*.

His partner stood up and turned around slowly. Rob forgot all about the box in his hand. Jamie's creamy, rounded ass was beautiful, never more so than when Jamie displayed it for him. Rob groaned aloud as Jamie bent forward over the desk, leaning his chest down onto the hard wood, his tight little butt angled upward. As Rob watched, Jamie slid his feet apart, spreading wide. His balls were tight against his body. His cock, heavy and full, bobbed beneath him, and his hole pulsed with his readiness.

Rob didn't keep him waiting. With trembling fingers, he got the box open and tore frantically at the foil package inside. The gel was cold on his fingers, and he felt Jamie jump under his hand as he rubbed the slick stuff down his crack. Then Jamie was whining, pushing back into his touch, and Rob closed his eyes as his finger slipped into the tight warmth.

Jamie gasped, bucking, and Rob groaned. He squeezed the last of the lube from the packet and pressed another finger in, moving gently. Jamie shuddered and picked up the pace, moaning as he fucked himself on Rob's fingers.

Rob braced a hand against the side of the desk for support. "So hot, babe." Watching Jamie open himself, undone with lust for him, went straight to Rob's core, setting him alight with want. He trembled with it, love and need mingling inside him until he felt he was about to explode.

Jamie's passage gripped his fingers, hot and tight, pulsing around him, and Rob groaned helplessly.

"Babe," he growled, leaning into Jamie's body, thrusting his fingers deep inside. "Babe, gotta be in you now."

"Rob...God, yes." Jamie panted, looking at him over his shoulder. His eyes were dark with desire, and he licked his lips, whimpering as Rob slid his fingers out. "Please, Rob."

After pulling back, Rob knelt and fumbled in his jeans, searching for the condom in his wallet. Jamie whimpered again, and Rob looked up, enjoying the view of his lover from a new angle. "Fuck, babe. Just..." Rob hurriedly rolled the latex over his length and rose, grasping Jamie's hips. "Oh yeah," he muttered breathlessly. His cock throbbed as he aligned it with Jamie's pucker, and Jamie gasped and pushed back. The feeling was overwhelming, building inside him as he was drawn in deeper, his ecstasy voiced in Jamie's helpless moans.

At last Rob's hips were hard against Jamie's ass, and he was still for a moment, hands sliding over Jamie's back as he looked down at their connection. He took the first stroke, slow and sure, and Jamie sobbed beneath him, bucking, searching for more.

Rob felt Jamie's movement right through him, so much more than the physical pleasure of their coupling. He stroked faster, crying out wildly as Jamie yelled his name, his passage tightening, muscles clenching. Rob thrust in deep, grinding his hips against Jamie's ass. "Jamie," he gasped, gripping his lover's hips tighter.

Sensation consumed him until he was lost: in Jamie, part of Jamie, holding on, body and soul, with all his strength.

Rob shuddered with the perfection of it and let himself fall forward onto Jamie's trembling body, then wrapped his arms around his lover's chest.

"So good," Jamie whispered unsteadily.

Rob pressed a kiss against the back of Jamie's neck. "Always," he whispered, moving slightly, feeling his softening cock slip free of his lover's body. He stood up slowly, gently pulling Jamie with him, then slid his arms around Jamie's naked chest.

"I love you." Jamie pressed against his body.

"I love you too." Rob ran his hands over Jamie's sweat-slicked skin. Jamie turned in his arms and bit gently at his neck, then angled up for a kiss.

Rob couldn't stop the grin that broke across his face as he whispered, "You ready to go home?"

"Oh yes." Jamie grinned back wickedly and stole another kiss. "I can't wait to go home."

The jangle of the front door bells made them both jump. Visions of another prowler sent a tremor of alarm through Rob.

Jamie glanced up at the wall clock. "Three already!" He pulled away and grabbed for his clothes. "Rob, it's Brianna come to do the afternoon meds. Quick!"

Relaxing, Rob bent down and retrieved his pants. He grinned at the expression of anxiety on his lover's face and leaned his body against the office door, making sure it stayed closed. "Take it easy, baby," he whispered, pulling Jamie close. "She won't suspect. You're always here on the weekend. Just act natural."

Jamie nodded, his nervous expression turning into a smile. "You're right." He finished buttoning his shirt, and by the time they heard the squeak of Brianna's rubber soles, they were both presentable.

Brianna's voice came from the back room, slightly muffled, and Jamie put a hand on Rob's arm as he went to open the door. "Wait," he muttered. "Sounds like she's talking to someone." Jamie stood at attention, head cocked as he listened intently.

Rob nodded, hand resting on the door handle. He left the door closed and watched his mate with a smile. His own wolflike sense had already picked up the second voice and identified it. "It's that friend of yours," he told Jamie quietly. "The one who came to the diner."

"Leonard?" Jamie whispered. "Are you sure, Rob? He and Brianna hardly know one another."

"Dunno about that." Rob shrugged. "But that's who's out there, all right."

The voices got louder as Brianna and her companion came toward the office. Leonard's voice was unmistakable now, and Jamie nodded to Rob. "No reason for them to come in here," he whispered against Rob's ear. "Let's not get caught, huh?"

Rob nodded, wrapping his arms around Jamie. Waiting out the interruption this way, holding Jamie close, was no hardship. He rested his head on Jamie's shoulder and closed his eyes.

They both listened as Leonard spoke again. "Brianna, I'm still worried about him. I just can't find out anything about this Rob Nichols!"

"You know what, Leonard, I was worried too." Brianna's lilting voice was clear and calm, punctuated by the rattle of a cage door as she tended to one of the patients. "Jamie started acting different, started taking time off."

She paused, and Rob tensed. He knew Brianna didn't like him—hell, it stood to reason; she was protective of Jamie, and Rob knew he must seem like just another loser to her—and now all Jamie's friends were banded together. He couldn't suppress the shiver that went through him.

"I may even, on several occasions, have given them both a piece of my mind. Several pieces." Another cage door squeaked open as Brianna continued, "But then I

figured out the main difference I was seeing in Jamie.” She paused again, and Rob heard the clatter of steel on steel. He winced.

“The difference is that these days Dr. Jamie Bretton shows up to work smiling.”

Rob blinked, wondering if he'd heard correctly. “Leonard, every day he shows up smiling. In all the years I've worked with him, every morning he showed up looking tired and worried. And what I figure”—there was another loud clatter followed by the squeak of Brianna's retreating footsteps—“is that if Rob Nichols put that smile there, then even if he's a mystery man that rode into town on a coal black horse, I think we gotta give the man a chance.”

Leonard's reply came more faintly as he followed Brianna down the corridor. “You're right about Jamie being happier. It's just that...well, none of us know anything about Rob. And if he's on the run from something—or someone—I guess I'm just scared of what could happen.”

“I hear you on that, but...hell, honey, we gotta take some risks in this life, you know, if we want the rewards.”

“You're right,” Leonard said, sounding breathless. “I guess I just still worry; that's all.”

“Course you worry. You're Jamie's friend, just like me.” Brianna's rich chuckle floated down the hall. “Now come on, Mr. Smooth Talker. Let's go on home. I got some rewards in mind, if you're a guy who'll take a risk.”

“Mr. Smooth Talker? Rewards?” Jamie's eyebrows shot up, and he glanced at Rob. “You don't think they're...?”

“Guess so.” Rob grinned.

The front door bells jangled again as Brianna locked it behind her, and Jamie turned to face Rob. “Buddy, I'm sorry about this,” he said anxiously. “I never thought they'd do this sort of thing—Leonard running computer searches on you—”

"It's okay, Jamie. He just worries about you." Rob took a deep breath, thinking of the moment in the diner when Leonard had mentioned Harrisburg. For one cold, awful second Rob had been twelve years old again, terrified and alone, seeing the Center for the first time. Knowing even then that no one would look for him, that he was entirely at the mercy of the impersonal, white-coated men.

After that, waiting for dinner had been impossible. He'd had to run away, get to the safety of his den and simply hope Jamie would follow.

And he had. Despite the efforts of his friends and even faced with Rob's lupine alter ego, Jamie remained steadfast at his side, loving him. And Rob wasn't going to let the life he'd run away from so many years ago come between them now.

"Listen," he said softly. "I've spent enough of my life worrying about my past. All I'm interested in now is the future. Our future." He breathed in deeply, watching a smile chase the worry lines off Jamie's face. "I love you."

* * *

Their East Side apartment was smack in the middle of a diverse and bustling neighborhood Jamie'd once thought of as dangerous and forbidding. Now though, he saw it through new eyes.

Whenever Rob didn't feel like cooking, they had their choice of takeout from any one of a dozen places: *pho* from M. Saigon, beer-battered hot links from Norton's on Tenth, thick, spicy Reubens from Della's Subs and Suds, where they sat smiling at each other, enjoying the huge sandwiches while their clothes dried in the industrial front-loaders.

Then there were the doughnuts. Every time Jamie stepped inside the door of Branston's Bakery, he was greeted by a rush of warm air heavy with the scents of sugar and yeast. Bella and Mutty tugged at the ends of their leashes, sniffing wildly. Branston's was dog friendly to the point of ridiculousness, with each canine client receiving a complimentary cheesy biscuit.

"What d'you think, man: cinnamon cruller or Boston cream pie?" Rob squatted next to the big glass case showcasing the day's offerings, and per usual, he was

having trouble making up his mind. "Or maybe one of the maple bars? Are those filled, by the way?" Rob rose and directed his last question at the smiling young man behind the counter, who nodded slowly.

Jamie dragged the dogs farther back from the case, out of the flow of customer traffic. A long string of drool hung from one corner of Mutty's mouth as the little terrier tracked the biscuit Jamie held. "Rob, come on. Those things are so bad for you!" Jamie mock scolded. He knew Rob would leave with at least half a dozen, if not more. Rob loved doughnuts with a fervor that bordered on religious.

Jamie toyed with the cheesy biscuit in his hand, waving it backward and forward over Mutty's head, trying to keep the little guy interested while Rob called out more questions. Bella growled short and low at Jamie's feet. Her message was clear, and Jamie relented, giving her and Mutty their snacks and a brief snuggle. On the other side of the big plate-glass window, St. Louis was gearing up for another beautiful, sun-drenched early-summer weekend, and the sidewalks were thronged with smiling people in shorts and sundresses.

Jamie frowned. Out among the crowds on the busy street, he was fairly sure he'd seen a tall, thin, redheaded guy staring in his direction with an expression of pure fury. Jenkins. What had Woo said? Something about the guy getting obsessed? Jamie shivered. A stalker was the last thing either he or Rob needed. A second later Jamie's attention was stolen by a small and sticky olive-skinned boy waving at Mutty through the glass. Mutty licked the glass in happy recognition of the tribute, and Jamie tried to push all thoughts of the rogue animal control officer from his mind. It was the weekend, and he intended to make the most of it.

"What's eating you?" Rob appeared at Jamie's elbow, proudly bearing a flat pink cardboard box.

"Just thought I saw someone. You know that guy Jenkins, from animal control?" Jamie scanned the busy sidewalk, straining to see if he could spot the man again. But the sea of anonymous passersby yielded no clues, and Jamie decided he easily could have imagined the whole thing.

“What about him?”

Jamie turned to respond and couldn't restrain his laughter. The lower half of Rob's face was smeared with white baking sugar, and as Jamie watched, Rob popped one last bite in his mouth. Bella and Mutty bounced and whimpered at Rob's legs as Jamie extended a thumb to wipe away most of the damage. “How many?” he asked with amusement.

Rob scrubbed at his face without a trace of guilt. “Nine. They had the strawberry-jelly iced ones Bella likes.”

Jamie sighed and nodded farewell at the grinning baker behind the counter. Once they were safely outside, he asked, “Nine? Rob, do you have any idea—”

“How bad they are for me?” Rob put a gentle hand to Jamie's elbow, steering him expertly through the thin stream of people, back in the direction of the apartment.

Jamie relished the touch, Rob's warm skin driving all thoughts of stalkers and animal control officers from his mind. “I don't get it, Rob. You love good food, like really good food, and run and workout all the time so you have this amazing body”—Rob grinned—“and yet every week's the same thing. What is it about those doughnuts?”

Rob shrugged, his shoulder bumping lightly against Jamie's own. “At the Center, we weren't allowed any white sugar or white flour. It—I don't remember; it screwed with the results of some damn variable or other they were trying to control.”

Jamie stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, laying a hand on Rob's arm.

“Anyway,” Rob continued, getting Jamie moving again, “when I got out, I spent some time in Columbus, Ohio. I was staying in this beat-up little—it doesn't matter. Point being, there was this great all-night doughnut shop right next door, and all night I could smell them. Warm and sugary and just perfect.” The two of them went single file for a moment so a tiny elderly couple could pass. “So finally I went in there, right, and it was just...” This time Rob stopped in the middle of the sidewalk,

and Jamie watched him, overwhelmed by the sight of Rob claimed by good memories for once. "It was like everything in there was even better than it had smelled, you know? The way the doughnuts looked, with all the shine from the icing and the puffed-up pastry, and then I tried one. Oh, man, Jamie. I don't think I can describe it. It was like nothing I'd ever tried. Nothing I'd ever come across in my whole life. I gained ten pounds in the six weeks I lived there, easy."

Jamie's tongue felt like lead. Rob's strange life, the hardships and all the time he'd spent on the run, kept blindsiding him at the strangest moments. "I'm sorry, babe," Jamie said. He felt tears pricking his eyes.

"Why?" Rob was digging in the box for a second doughnut. "I'm not. I kept moving, kept going, and now I'm here." He grinned. "With you. See, there's nothing doughnuts can't do, man."

Jamie shook his head, smiling ruefully. They were a block from home, and Bella chose that moment to begin barking as if the world were ending. Rob grabbed Jamie's arm so tight it hurt, looking up and down the street, eyes hooded and suspicious. Bella continued to bark.

"Rob? What is it?" Jamie whispered.

"I don't know, baby, but Bella's got a reason for everything she does."

Jamie scanned the street again, looking for the telltale thatch of fire red hair above the crowd. Once he thought he glimpsed someone who could have fit the description, but then the man turned and kissed his girlfriend, and Jamie relaxed into Rob's arms. "Rob, I don't see anyone."

Jamie heard Rob's breathing, harsh and raw, slowly mellow as he tracked the same street scene. He reached out and rubbed Rob's arm, gentle. "Maybe Bella just got spooked."

They looked down together at the anxious malamute, baying and bowing in place. Rob looked at Jamie, then slid his hand inside the pink cardboard, returning with a sugared pink confection. Bella's howls died away to anxious moans.

Rob tossed the doughnut to her, and she snatched it out of midair, her snout a blur of movement. Jamie grinned. "Seems like she likes doughnuts nearly as much as you do, pal. Come on. I'm sure it was nothing. Let's just enjoy the weekend, okay?"

After a few seconds, Rob nodded, and they crossed to where the light was waiting to turn green. Endeavoring to lighten the mood, Jamie said, "That was pretty impressive. You teach her that yourself?"

"Naw. There's not a lot I could have taught Bella. Mostly she teaches me."

Jamie nodded, watching Mutty bark at a piece of gum stuck to the base of the lamppost.

They reached their building without further incident, even if it seemed like Rob did stay extra vigilant on the way. They were halfway up the stairs to the fourth floor when thundering feet came at them from the opposite direction. Rob laid a restraining hand on Jamie's chest as the two kids Jamie'd first seen Rob with came barreling toward them. Today the Mohawk was purple.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey. What would your grandma say about you running down the stairs like this?" Rob was instantly more at ease.

Purple Mohawk shrugged. "She'd say, 'Stay in school and don't forget to tape *Days of Our Lives*.'"

Rob smirked. "Yeah, she would at that."

"Hey, are those doughnuts?" The Mohawk's companion eyed the pink box greedily.

"Oh yeah, help yourselves." Rob flipped open the lid and held it out to the two kids without a second thought. Jamie felt like his heart might burst in his chest.

"C'mon, c'mon," Rob said. "Take two. There's plenty here for all of us. C'mon. You need to keep up your strength to make it through one of those soap operas."

The two of them cheerfully dug out seconds, and Rob's smile widened. Jamie let his hand rest gently in the small of Rob's back. He couldn't help laughing as the

two teenagers in front of him regressed at least ten years apiece at the first bite of the sweet pastries. He looked at Rob. The bear claw his lover had been so looking forward to was quickly disappearing down a kid's gullet. But Rob's expression showed only happiness, and Jamie felt that much further for him.

The two kids continued their downward bound, shouting thanks as they went, and Rob turned to Jamie with a shrug. "See? Told you we needed nine."

Chapter Twenty

Rob looked up over the edge of his paperback, watching Jamie frowning over a notebook down at the other end of the couch, chewing on the end of a pencil. Jamie was working on an article for one of the journals he occasionally wrote for; Rob was doing his best not to distract him, but it was so damn hard when he looked that good.

They'd taken Bella and Mutty for a run by the lake in the late afternoon and hung out on the long sweep of manicured lawn while they watched the two dogs play. Jamie was still wearing the tight cotton shorts he'd donned for the summer afternoon, and the way he was sitting, long legs drawn up with his notebook resting on one muscular, delectable thigh—Rob licked his lips.

Through the thin fabric, Rob could see the outline of Jamie's cock, at rest now, but Rob knew how fast it would respond if he slid down the couch and ran a palm up the tempting line of his lover's bare legs. Rob felt his own cock twitch at the thought and looked determinedly back to his book. It was only seven. There was plenty of evening ahead, and just now Jamie was working.

Rob tried to concentrate on the story, but his mind kept returning to his beautiful blond mate. He was acutely aware of Jamie. Even without watching, Rob sensed his every move, heard every nuance of his breathing.

Jamie sighed and scribbled in the small notebook before returning to chewing the pencil. His scent was heavy on the air, full and alluring, and finally Rob gave up any pretense of reading. *Mine*.

“Jamie, you're gonna get lead poisoning, you keep that up.”

Jamie raised puzzled blue eyes to his, then removed the pencil from his mouth with a wry smile.

“Maybe so.” He eyed his lover appraisingly. “What else am I gonna get?”

Grinning, Rob dropped his book and crawled down the couch to join his lover. “Kissed,” he said, “for starters. And then after that...” He reached for Jamie, nibbling at him, running his fingers down Jamie's side to the spot just below his ribs where he was ticklish. Jamie squeaked and wriggled, and Rob smiled against his neck. “Then maybe a little...” His fingers crept lower, sliding inside the waistband of Jamie's shorts, trapped between cotton and warm, velvety skin. “After that...” Rob kissed a line along Jamie's neck, nuzzling and nipping. He gave the job his full attention, and Jamie gasped when he sucked on one earlobe. Jamie's hands moved beneath the polo shirt, finding Rob's sensitive nipples hidden among the dark hair on his chest, pinching and teasing them to attention.

Jamie stopped suddenly, fingertips still clenched around one sensitive bud. “Rob?”

“Mmm?” Rob continued to suck and lick Jamie's ear, knowing it drove his lover wild.

Jamie pinched his nipple harder, and Rob gave a little yelp and sat back, concerned. “What, babe?”

Jamie looked at him, cheeks flushed, eyes wide with desire. “I want it all, Rob. Right now.”

A wicked grin stole across Rob's face. He pushed himself up off the couch and took Jamie's hand, then pulled him to his feet. As Jamie struggled out of his shirt, Rob admired the slender, sculpted planes of his lover's torso. Then Jamie's hands were back up under his shirt, roaming, savoring.

Rob walked them back toward the bedroom, cupping Jamie's butt through the shorts that had started it all. “You got it, Jamie,” he managed between kisses. “Anything and everything.”

He felt Jamie's grin against his cheek as they passed through the bedroom door. Rob pushed Jamie down against the comforter and slid his fingers up the leg holes of Jamie's shorts. Jamie bucked as Rob's fingers found the sensitive cleft between thighs and torso, rubbing, seeking.

"First thing," Jamie said breathlessly, "is get me out of these damn things."

Rob regarded the tented fabric at the front with hungry eyes and a wicked grin. "Actually, Jamie, I kinda like you like this."

Jamie gave him a dark look.

Laughing, Rob knelt, shouldering Jamie's legs apart, and mouthed his way up the front of the conspicuous bulge, enjoying its heat and strength. Having Jamie's erect cock almost accessible but still hidden was hot as hell; he nuzzled the twin globes hidden below it, inhaling appreciatively. Jamie reached a hand out to twine questing fingers in his hair.

Rob growled against the fabric and moved his attention to Jamie's spread thighs, licking his way along the sensitive insides, until he was pushing the cotton aside with his mouth, the tip of his tongue flicking over the taut tendon there. He nuzzled and pushed until he was lapping at Jamie's ball sac, drawing the soft, sensitive skin into his mouth.

Jamie made a high-pitched, strangled noise, thrashing his head against the comforter. "Fuck, Rob. Oh fuck. Oh..." He pushed his hips eagerly against Rob's mouth. "Please," he whispered.

Rob slid his fingers along one spread thigh, still sucking and licking at Jamie's balls through the openings of his shorts. Rob groaned, half relief and half desire, as Jamie's balls tightened away from his questing mouth. His own jeans were now uncomfortable, and he reached a hand down to adjust the pressure there, but the only relief he could find was to unzip the fly and expose his throbbing erection to the cooler air.

Jamie's head shot up off the bed. "I heard that!"

Rob chuckled against his thigh, biting the skin gently. "Can't help it, babe. You're so fucking hot. Can't help what you do to me." He slid a hand down and stroked himself, spreading precum over the tip with a growl. He stood, still working himself, and took in the sight of his debauched blond, legs spread wide, shirtless, and hard as a rock, one thigh still glistening with saliva.

"Rob Nichols"—Jamie panted—"if you don't get these shorts off me right now, I won't be held responsible for my actions." Jamie's gaze dropped to Rob's waist, and he shook his head. "Fuck, you're hot." Jamie assumed a playful expression, letting his head drop back on the bed. "Y'know, maybe I better take care of this myself." He closed his eyes and unbuttoned his shorts, his long, graceful fingers lingering on the zipper.

Rob was on him in an instant, tugging the shorts down over his narrow hips and dropping them to the floor. He leaned over the bed, a hand on either side of Jamie's head, his erection brushing Jamie's stomach, full and leaking. "Remember, Jamie," he said with a wicked smile, "you get everything you want." He ground down against Jamie's hips, feeling his lover's cock throb against his stomach. Jamie made a needful sound and leaned up for a kiss.

Rob gave it, then pushed himself off the bed and dropped to his knees. He pushed Jamie's thighs apart and began sucking him in earnest. Jamie bucked against him with a sharp cry, bringing his legs back to rest over Rob's shoulders, one hand returning to grasp his hair. "Oh fuck, oh...oh!" Jamie pushed against his mouth, and Rob slid his hands under Jamie's buttocks, holding him close. He took Jamie's full length in his mouth, licking at the shaft as the cockhead rested against the back of his throat.

Jamie mewled with pleasure as Rob worked him, licking and mouthing his way back to the tip and pressing his tongue against the sensitive slit before drawing him back in deep. Jamie's thighs clenched around Rob's ears, and all he knew was Jamie: the tangy taste of his precum, the deep, rich musk of his sex, the heat and strength of his thighs blotting out everything else.

Rob groaned around Jamie's cock, staying deep, tightening his fingers on Jamie's ass.

"Rob! Oh fuck, Rob, fuck!" Jamie bowed off the bed, writhing and crying out. Rob hung on tight as Jamie's cock swelled in his mouth, humming with tension. Then Jamie was thrusting hard, fucking Rob's mouth, coming with one long cry, hand tightening in Rob's hair, hot seed rushing out of him down Rob's throat as the cry escalated. Rob buried his nose in Jamie's golden curls, rocking against them as Jamie's climax ran its course, until finally his lover's cries turned to whimpers and he collapsed back on the comforter with a sigh.

Rob let him slide free and stood up, kissing Jamie's stomach tenderly, running a palm up and down one of Jamie's thighs, where it lay against the edge of the bed. "Hi, baby," he said softly. "Did you get—"

The bedroom wall shook as someone pounded on it from the other side. Rob heard each word of his neighbor's commentary clearly but knew it would be muffled and indistinct to his lover's unenhanced hearing. *You really would be happier if you moved, guy. 'Cause it's not about to get any quieter in here. Not if I can help it.*

The two of them looked at each other and grinned. Whispering, Rob continued to run his hand along Jamie's thigh, knuckles gentle over the inside. "Did you get everything you wanted, Jamie?"

Jamie looked up, his golden hair damp with sweat. His grin widened. "Nearly. Come up here."

Rob unbuttoned his jeans and started to slide them down, but Jamie stopped him. "Uh-uh. Just like that, Rob."

Rob looked down to where his proud, swollen cock stood out over the V of his open jeans under his untucked shirt. "You gonna at least let me get the shirt off?"

Jamie propped himself up on his elbows. "Nope. I want you just like that."

A drop of precum formed on the tip of Rob's cock, and he reached for the head. "Uh-uh," Jamie interrupted. He raised one eyebrow. "Right now."

Rob thought he might come against the side of the bed just listening to Jamie's low, sweet voice issuing demands. "You got it, babe." He climbed onto the bed and, under Jamie's direction, positioned himself so he was straddling his lover's chest.

"Lean forward," Jamie whispered.

Rob moaned but did as he was told, bracing himself against the window frame as Jamie strained his head up and captured Rob's cock in his mouth. Rob moaned again, nearly falling, overwhelmed by Jamie's wicked lips and tongue on him, the sight of Jamie straining up to suck him. He reached one hand down to support Jamie's neck and rocked softly against his lover's mouth with quiet whimpers. He felt Jamie's hands on his ass, holding him close, pushing him deep into Jamie's throat. He began murmuring his lover's name over and over as Jamie mouthed him, lapping eagerly at the underside, teasing the sensitive ridge and slit.

Rob whimpered, letting go of Jamie's head for a moment to tug his shirt up, relishing the sight of Jamie sucking him, eyes wide, cheeks hollowed.

Rob closed his eyes, feeling Jamie's talented tongue swirl over the tip of his cock. He bucked into his lover's mouth, struggling in the tight jeans to spread his thighs farther. Jamie licked and sucked at him, and Rob cradled his lover's head. "Coming, baby. Coming—ah!"

Rob looked down to find Jamie's eyes were open, big blue eyes wide with desire and love. Rob came hard, waves of pleasure nearly knocking him over, but he kept his eyes open, locked on Jamie's forthright, honest gaze.

Jamie lapped at him until he was too sensitive to stand it any longer. With a satisfied smirk, Jamie lay back against the comforter, eyes half-closed and satisfied, and Rob rolled onto his side, finally managing to get his jeans off before collapsing next to his lover. He stroked Jamie's arm, relaxing and enjoying the contact. Pleasant, satiated fatigue stole over him as night crept across the city, cooling the sweat on their skin.

"Hey, Rob?"

"Mmm?"

“You know...you're everything I've ever asked for.”

Rob chuckled, pulling him closer. “Mmm. You're more. So much more.”

One of Jamie's hands played over Rob's shoulder blades. “Love you.”

“Mmm...you too, baby.” As Rob drifted off to sleep, he felt Jamie pull the cover out beneath him and arrange it around them both before curling up against his chest. *Love you so much. Anything and everything for you.*

* * *

Jamie was woken by the sound of a frightened whine. Opening his eyes to darkness, he had a moment of confusion, wondering which of the dogs needed to go out in the middle of the night, before Rob's heel made contact with his shin. His lover thrashed violently against him, whimpering.

The nightmares came all too frequently. What Rob had been through, what had happened to him, haunted him even in sleep. Jamie reached out and turned on the bedside lamp, then extended a cautious, gentle hand to slide across Rob's stomach, comforting without restraining.

Rob's eyes flew open, and he cried out sharply.

So much for that approach.

“Sorry, pal,” Jamie murmured. “You were having a nightmare again. I was just trying to—”

Rob turned and reached for him desperately, burrowing his head against Jamie's sternum, wrapping his limbs around him, shaking in Jamie's arms.

“I'm so sorry,” Jamie whispered. He held on tight. “So sorry, buddy. I gotcha. I'm not going anywhere. I won't let anything happen.”

The tension in Rob's body subsided, and he nuzzled Jamie's chest. “Jamie,” he whispered, voice still filled with terror.

“Gotcha. Right here.” Jamie smoothed a hand over his brow and pressed his lips to Rob's temple, leaving them there, whispering softly against Rob's skin,

benedictions against the past, keeping him safe and anchored to the present. Rob wriggled against him with a shuddering sob.

Jamie tightened his arms, and his fingers accidentally brushed a thin, raised line of scar tissue running vertically along the outside of Rob's bicep. It had a twin on the other arm, and Jamie shuddered to think of what had caused them.

It haunted Jamie, the thought of Rob, twelve years old and all alone in the world. So young, with no one to defend him, no one to protect him; Rob had been stolen away, changed...hurt.

Jamie breathed against Rob's skin, fighting back tears. He focused on calming his breathing, giving it to Rob as a guide, keeping him calm, protecting him as best he could from the things that stalked him in his sleep. Listening until Rob followed the pattern.

Another tremor stole through Rob's body, and Jamie stroked his hair. "Bad one?"

Rob shrugged, panting. Jamie kept stroking.

"After a while they're all the same," Rob said in a low, frightened voice. "Different beginnings, you know, like I have no idea what's gonna happen. But as it goes on I keep seeing signs, things I remember, and the worst part is, I get this bad feeling in my stomach as it's happening, Jamie. Everything ends in the same place. The same things keep happening—" His voice broke, and Jamie leaned close and shushed him, covering his face with kisses, covering Rob's scarred body with his own.

"Talk to me, baby. Please. Help me." Rob sniffed against Jamie's chest.

Jamie kissed the top of his head. "What about?"

Rob laughed darkly. "Anything, man. Anything. Just...talk to me, okay? Tell me a story or something."

Jamie leaned back on the pillow, hand still moving softly over Rob's hair. He cleared his throat. "Once upon a time, there was a handsome prince, and um...he was stolen away by dark forces...who were really...dark."

Rob snorted wetly against Jamie's chest. Undaunted, Jamie continued, "But because the prince was not only handsome, but brave, and strong, and clever, he escaped and made his way to a nearby city—"

"Where he met another handsome prince?"

Jamie laughed. "Where he met a very lonely veterinarian, who—"

"What kind of fairy tale is this?"

Jamie rolled his eyes in the darkness. "Look, Rob, I'm doing the best I can here, okay?"

Rob giggled, breath tickling Jamie's bare skin. He settled closer, resting across Jamie's hips and torso. "Mmm. Tell me more about this lonely veterinarian."

"Well..." Jamie suddenly had no idea what he was doing. "Well, this veterinarian, see, he loved his work, and his friends took good care of him, but he hated going home to his empty..." Jamie sought words to describe the echoing, white-walled condo in Clifton Heights.

"Castle?"

"Yeah. He hated that thing. Anyway, all the lonely veterinarian really wanted was someone to share his castle with. He felt like an impostor, like someone who'd been given this really great life to hold on to for someone else." Jamie felt Rob rub at him with the knuckles of one hand. "And then one day, he met this handsome prince, who was on the run from"—Jamie cleared his throat hurriedly—"who was on the run, and that prince rescued the lonely veterinarian. Took him home, fed him, kept him safe, fucked his brains out—"

Rob giggled again. "What else'd he do?" he asked muzzily.

"The handsome prince was everything the lonely veterinarian had ever wanted. They shared everything together, and every night the veterinarian went to

sleep happy. He wasn't lonely anymore.” Jamie stared up at the ceiling, realizing how true the story was. Rob was everything to him. He'd been rescued.

“What else?” Rob murmured.

“The two of them ruled a very small kingdom high above the land. It was called, um...Fourteenthia.”

Jamie felt Rob's silent laughter against his chest.

“They were attended by two very loyal but furry subjects, who maintained a constant vigil over any evildoers who would try to invade the kingdom from the rooftop. In fact,” Jamie said, growing bolder, “they laid land mines all over the roof to prevent the evildoers—”

Rob cackled against Jamie's sternum, and Jamie's heart lightened as he felt the tension leave his lover's body. He rubbed Rob's back gently, comforted by the nighttime settling of the old apartment building around them, muting the city's sounds, keeping them at bay. He hadn't lied to Rob; this place was their kingdom, and as long as he had Rob in his arms, Jamie didn't care if he ever ventured outside the boundaries again.

Rob chewed lazily at Jamie's chest, his breathing even and easy now. “Mmm...anything else?”

“Uh, they made soup,” Jamie finished lamely.

Rob raised his head, staring at Jamie blearily. “Soup?”

“Yeah, you know, that Polish thing with the meatballs—”

“Pomidorowa.”

“Yeah, that.”

“We didn't make that. Mrs. Cray did.”

“Gimme a break here, Rob. Stories aren't really my thing.”

Rob pressed his lips against Jamie's. “S'good story,” he murmured. He lay back down and sighed against Jamie's chest. Jamie stayed still and waited. After a few minutes, he heard low snores.

“Good night, my prince.” He stretched under Rob's weight, trying to get comfortable for the remainder of the night, closing his eyes determinedly.

But he left the bedside lamp on.

Chapter Twenty-one

Rob looked through the windshield at the gloomy interior of the parking structure and shivered. Sometimes he let his imagination run away with him, let his mind play tricks, making him think danger lurked round every corner, that he'd never simply be free to let his guard down and be happy.

"I promise you," Jamie said from the driver's seat, "we'll just be in and out. A quick trip up to Magnum's second floor and two pillows later, we'll be on our way." He swung the Jetta into the entrance to the garage, the cool darkness swallowing them up like a hungry, open mouth. "Trust me; they're worth it. Just think of this as a surgical shopping strike."

Rob laughed as the side of his face was suddenly wet. Chuckling, he reached a hand up to scratch at Bella's muzzle. "Don't you worry, girl," he advised the big dog. "Next stop'll be your run, promise. Then maybe if you're good, toy store on the way home, okay? Pick up some new stuff for you and Mutty to destroy."

Hearing his name, the terrier turned from the window, fixing bright, inquiring eyes on Rob.

"You guys stay put," Jamie said. He pulled the car into a free space and lowered his window a couple of inches. "We won't be long."

Mutty yipped, jumping up and down on the seat until Bella gave a soft growl. Chastised, Mutty lay down, and Bella approvingly curled up next to him. The two dogs looked up as Rob and Jamie got out of the car and locked it behind them.

Heading toward the elevator, Rob rested his hand lightly on Jamie's back. Jamie moved closer to him as they walked, until their hips brushed lightly with

every step. Several of the overhead lights were out, and even Rob's wolflike vision was still adjusting to the gloom when Jamie cried out sharply and staggered.

"What in the—I walked into something, Rob! Some random piece of concrete left out in the middle of everywhere!" Jamie stopped, rubbing his leg anxiously. He pushed up the leg of his scrubs to inspect the damage.

"Let me see that," Rob said, leaning closer.

"I'm fine," Jamie said, but as he spoke, another sound reached Rob's ears, so insignificant it was hardly a sound at all. Rob's wolf senses honed in on it effortlessly as it came again: the soft scrape of a footstep, muffled but close by. The sound of someone trying to move unnoticed.

All the hair on the back of Rob's neck stood up. He forced himself to take a deep breath, fighting the adrenaline coursing through his veins. A mugger would be unlikely to take on both of them, he reasoned, and Bella would be a sufficient deterrent for most car thieves. So what was up with this guy?

"Rob? What's up?" Jamie asked quietly.

"There's someone here." Rob hesitated, looking from the elevators to the parked car and back again. "Jamie—"

Rob was interrupted by wild barking. Whirling around, he saw Bella flinging herself against the car window, snarling and yelling. He could feel her fury even from this distance but couldn't see its cause. "Bella!" He started back toward the vehicle at a jog.

The tone of Bella's bark changed, deepening with anxiety. Too late, Rob realized what she'd been trying to tell him. He heard Jamie's shout behind him—a surprised yelp cut short. Rob spun back around. Where he'd left Jamie, all he could see was row upon row of silent cars. Rob's heart raced, terror making it nearly impossible to think.

"Jamie! Jamie?" Bella's barking resumed, shrill and anxious, then something struck Rob hard across the back of the head. He tumbled to the cold, oily concrete, fighting for breath and struggling to think clearly, head pounding. *Jamie. Jamie's*

gone. Muzzily, Rob made to get to his feet, but raising his head brought a wave of nausea, and he only managed to lift his shoulder off the ground before he had to quit, falling back to the hard, unyielding concrete. “Jamie,” he whimpered.

Bella had fallen silent, and Rob lay stunned and blinking, trying to force his eyes to focus. But what light there was swam and moved, and huge, frightening shapes loomed out of nowhere. Another wave of nausea swamped him, and Rob collapsed, retching, squeezing his eyes shut against the nightmare visions.

The thought of Jamie nagged the edges of his brain but disappeared every time Rob tried to reach for it. Instead, memories of cold metal and the tang of iodine rushed in to take its place. At any moment the needle would bite into his arm, and the pain would come again. For now, being still was enough.

Insistent barking slowly penetrated his stupor, and Rob struggled to focus. *Barking. Wolves don't bark. No one ever barked at the Center. That sounds like Bella. Bella?*

Rob pushed the thought away, curling up tighter. He wished the noise would stop. But instead, another sound came from farther away. He didn't recognize the voice, but the tone was all too familiar. Rob cringed, scrunching himself up even smaller. He knew that tone, and it was always followed by pain. He whined softly to himself.

“I know you've got wolves. I've seen 'em. I can see that wolf you've got there in that car, and just as soon as I get this dart gun loaded up, I'm taking it in with me. And that little dog too. And then, Mr. Vet, you an' me are going for a little ride to your clinic and to your house and to any other place you got them wolves stashed away.”

“I don't have wolves. I don't know what you're talking about.” The second voice sounded frightened, and it acted on Rob's confused brain like a bucket of ice water.

Jamie! Rob pushed himself to his knees, fighting another wave of nausea. The parking garage, Jamie, the danger came back to him in a rush, driving all confusion from his mind.

“You do have wolves. I know it, and when I've got 'em, the CIA is gonna be glad to hear from me! Oh yes they are!” All at once, Rob recognized the owner of the voice. It was Jenkins, the animal control officer, and Rob remembered the strange warning Woo had delivered.

“If you don't hand over the wolves nicely, Dr. Bretton, why, I'm just gonna keep this up until you do.”

There was a sickening *thud* as something hard connected with flesh, and Jamie cried out. The fear and pain in his voice went straight to Rob's core, igniting his deepest, most primal instincts.

The change was on Rob like lightning, his body on fire as his wolf nature broke free of its human shell. He dropped back to the ground, writhing, snarls and growls torn from his throat as his body transformed. When at last he stood, kicking free of his clothes, it was on four feet, not two, and his eyes glittered with predatory purpose. Rob shook his shaggy gray mane, breathing deep. He paused for barely a second, ears pricked toward the voices. Soundlessly he cleared the concrete barrier in a single bound and loped across the parking garage.

Sounds and smells flooded in on him from all sides, but nothing could deflect him from his purpose. In moments his mate was in view, sprawled on the concrete floor beside a pillar, breath coming in short, hitched gasps. Jenkins was bending over him, clutching a tire iron and speaking in a voice that raised the hackles right down Rob's back. Rob was too much wolf now to understand the words, but he understood the threat implicitly.

A bellow of rage escaped Rob's throat, and he sprang. In one corner of his mind, he heard Jenkins' scream of terror over Jamie's voice calling his name, but his fury was beyond control. His wide wolf chest connected hard with Jamie's assailant and sent him sprawling. Rob pinned him to the ground, snarling and ready to kill.

A strangled gurgle escaped Jenkins's throat, and he went limp. The satisfaction of victory flooded through Rob. *Kill. Win. Safe.*

“Rob! No!” The two words barely penetrated Rob's wolf brain, and he bared his fangs for the kill.

“Rob, don't!” Suddenly Jamie's hands were on him, in his fur, tugging, pulling him away from the prone victim. “Don't! Rob, please!”

Confusion flooded Rob's brain as his human side tried to answer, even as his wolf side struggled against Jamie's restraining hold. Rob clung to the waves of need in his mate's voice, the call for him to be a man once again. Rob fastened his instincts to Jamie's voice, his pleas, and while he struggled still, now he was fighting his own body rather than Jamie. Rob whined softly as the crushing pressure of the change came back upon him, the iron band around his chest and the agonizingly familiar heavy ache in all his limbs. It was hard to move, hard to breathe, but harder still to hear Jamie's frightened, desperate breathing and his choked-off sobs.

“Jamie...Jamie!” Rob fought the words out through his sore, congested throat, fighting to take a full breath, to get his head up off the ground. “Jamie!”

“Rob! Rob, baby—” Jamie was grabbing at him, voice rising with stress and anxiety, hands on his shoulders, and it was only through Jamie's touch that Rob could tell the change was complete and that he was a man again.

An uncontrollable shudder rolled through him. *What happened? Jamie?* His wolf memories were hazy at best, consisting of feelings and images. And the impressions he retained this time were of uncontrollable rage and the urge to kill. “Did I—” Rob coughed harshly, trying to clear his throat. “Jamie, did I kill someone?”

“No, baby. No.” Jamie pulled him into his arms, holding him close, curling around Rob's naked body. “Jenkins is out cold, but you didn't kill him. I stopped you. I stopped you just in time.”

Rob sighed with relief and buried his head against his lover's shoulder, closing his eyes and burrowing closer, breathing Jamie in. The scent of his mate, the sound of his voice filled Rob's senses, and he hung on.

“Rob? Come on, Rob, we've gotta get you back to the car, okay?”

Rob nodded sleepily against Jamie's shoulder and concentrated on getting his feet under him. The air in the garage was chill and damp, and after a few seconds, Rob's brain registered that the danger wasn't over after all. *I'm naked. In public. In the middle of St. Louis.* Rob's hysterical giggle turned into a coughing fit as Jamie towed him back toward the car. After what felt like an eternity, Rob heard the car door open, then felt the soft leather against his skin. He wanted to ask questions, wanted to help as he felt Jamie gently dressing him, the two pups whining questions from the backseat. Rob tried to tell Bella to calm down, but it came out in a growl, and both dogs fell silent.

Just as Rob felt Jamie slide a scrubs top over his head and wrestle his arms into the short, cool sleeves, he heard voices shouting questions, concern, and running footsteps. “Jamie,” he whimpered. “Jamie, they're coming. Be careful.”

Jamie answered with lips against Rob's forehead, soft and light. “Don't worry, Rob. I've got a plan. I've got your back.”

The love and promise in Jamie's voice resonated throughout Rob's exhausted body, and with barely a nod, he let his head fall back against the seat, and darkness claimed him once again.

* * *

Jamie beamed at the look of pleased surprise in Rob's eyes as he related the rest of the story.

“And they bought it? You've gotta be kidding me.”

“Nope! Apparently you do a great impersonation of a diabetic in a sugar coma.”

“I'll add that to my résumé, then.” Rob's eyes drifted closed. He sighed. “I remember you holding my hand, telling me everything would be fine, while a couple of other people asked questions. They smelled like betadine and french fries.” Jamie snorted as Rob continued. “You kept answering all their questions, and they were

getting mighty testy about it.” Rob paused, pushing himself farther up in bed with a wince.

“Hey! Take it easy, Rob. You've been through a lot. I mean, after wolfing and everything—I didn't even expect you to be awake yet.”

“Baby, I'm good,” Rob protested. “How you feeling? That asshole hit you pretty hard.”

“I'm fine. In a few more days I'll be good as new.” Jamie looked anxiously at his lover. His own left side was adorned with a purpling bruise where the tire iron had connected, and judging by the sharp pain when he moved the wrong way, he had at least one cracked rib. But for now he was more concerned about Rob.

“Liar. How bad is it?”

Jamie smiled softly. “Not as bad as it could've been, and that's what counts. You—”

He was interrupted by Rob's coughing fit, rasping, growling shudders that shook him like a rag doll.

Jamie waited until it had subsided. “Rob, are you sure you're okay?”

“I'm good, baby. I'm gonna get up in a bit and make some dinner.” Rob leaned back against the headboard, eyes closed. “What you in the mood for anyway?”

Jamie took his hand. “I'm in the mood for you staying right here and not pushing it. You turned into a wolf again, Rob. It's not like you just hit the lats machine a little hard.”

Rob smirked. “Smart-ass. I'm fine, really.” He shuddered a little and sank back down onto the pillow, pulling the comforter round his shoulders. “Who's on at the clinic?”

Jamie scooted closer. “Luckily Tessa's got tonight, then Brianna tomorrow. I'm not due back until tomorrow night, and if you're not better, I'll ask Tessa to do that one too.” He put the back of his hand to Rob's forehead. “Listen, Rob, are you sure you're all right?”

Rob was silent so long, Jamie thought he'd gone back to sleep.

"It's different when it's not the full moon. It's not so hard." Rob frowned. "This...this is what we were created for. To turn into a wolf on command or by choice. Our primary purpose."

Jamie swallowed hard. His mouth had gone dry. "You don't have to talk about this right now."

"S'fine, Jamie. I'm okay." Rob spoke very softly, hands pleating the thick blue comforter fretfully. "We were told that the change caused by the moon was a side effect. All I know is, when it's the full moon, I—the change takes over. It's everything; it's like being on fire from the inside. Like some part of me is melting down. That's why it wrecks me so bad."

"Whereas right now you look ready to run a marathon," Jamie said softly. He brushed Rob's forearm with his fingers.

Rob smiled weakly, eyes still closed. "The other times, it's like...like the wolf rises inside me," he explained, finally opening his eyes. "I...it's not something I can explain very well." He hesitated, and Jamie gave a small nod, encouraging him to continue. "The change still burns, but...I've got more control, I guess, is part of it."

"You can control it?" Jamie leaned forward. "Rob—"

"No." Rob was shaking his head. "They started teaching us. With"—he closed his eyes again briefly—"electric shocks. They were teaching us to change on command. And that's when I figured out that we were meant as spies or soldiers. To transform into a wolf and go behind enemy lines, unsuspected, and steal, or kill. That's when I ran away." He stopped, looking mutely into Jamie's eyes, and Jamie saw the frightened boy he'd been naked in his eyes.

"Rob..." Jamie whispered. He remembered the night before, Rob's terror that he'd killed someone, and his heart ached. Scooting up the bed, Jamie slid under the comforter with his lover, eyes filled with tears. "I love you," he whispered, pulling Rob down so their foreheads rested together. "I love you, and there's nothing that

will ever alter that. You hear me? Nothing. And Rob...Rob, you saved me. You changed...for me!"

"S'nothing, baby," Rob whispered, closing his eyes. Jamie felt Rob relax and melt against his chest. "Oh God, Jamie," Rob whispered fiercely. "I love you too."

Jamie stripped off his clothes and Rob's with quiet efficiency, and the two of them lay together, skin against skin, under the thick down comforter. Each moved his hands over the other with tenderness and warmth, reassuring themselves of their connection, their inherent, primal rightness. Rob's eyes filled with tears as he stopped his hand before it contacted Jamie's purpled ribs, but Jamie kissed away his pain, letting those touches explain his vast, immeasurable relief that what they'd gone through hadn't been any worse than a cracked rib.

Eventually they slept, curled tightly around each other. The last thing Jamie saw before he let fatigue close his eyes was Bella's snout peeking over the side of the bed. She sniffed at them, and Mutty gave a soft inquiring woof from down on the floor. Jamie extended a hand and rubbed Bella's head, scratching behind her ears. "Good dog," he whispered.

* * *

Jamie woke in the middle of the night and watched Rob sleep, reveling in just having Rob with him, the two of them having faced down this latest challenge to their happiness. Jamie couldn't deny he'd been terrified—absolutely terrified—when Jenkins had stepped out of the shadows with the tire iron. One look at the crazed gleam in his eyes and Jamie's insides had turned to jelly. In more than a dozen years in the city, Jamie'd only been mugged once, and even then the mugger had fled as soon as he had what he'd asked for. But Jenkins... The gleam in his eyes, the *thwap* of the tire iron against his palm, and all Jamie could think of was how he'd get Rob to safety, get him far away from a man who was on a path entirely too close to their secret.

Jamie shuddered, snuggling closer, and Rob's hand set up a pattern of circles on his back, slow and sweet. Jamie kissed Rob's chest, pressing his lips softly

through the thicket of dark hair to the skin beneath. He was the one who should be comforting Rob, Jamie thought lazily. Rob's hand kept moving on his back, and Jamie slept once again.

When morning came, an interlude of a more vigorous nature in the shower together left them both relaxed. Rob had applied a liniment Jamie couldn't identify to Jamie's bruised, aching ribs, explaining it was a concoction he got from the same Chinese herbalist who fixed the arthritis potion for his elderly neighbor.

Jamie had been dubious, but Rob had insisted—and looking into Rob's eyes, Jamie wondered if he'd ever be able to deny him anything. And now Jamie was stretched out on the couch in a worn terrycloth robe, the liniment pleasantly warm on his skin and the ache in his ribs definitely less painful. Rob returned the liniment to the bathroom and climbed onto the couch next to Jamie, avoiding his sore ribs as he pulled him close.

"You're right," Jamie admitted, nuzzling Rob's neck. "It does feel better."

"Told you." Rob kissed Jamie's forehead. He took a deep breath. "Babe, that Jenkins guy—they locked him up, right? He's not gonna turn up again with another tire iron or something worse?"

"What d'you remember?" Jamie asked, tilting his head back so he could look into his lover's eyes.

"Not much," Rob replied quietly.

"You went to see what Bella was barking at, and then Jenkins—he grabbed me." Jamie took an unsteady breath and forced a chuckle. "Only then, you came. You knocked him down, and I thought for a minute you'd kill him then and there. I've never been so scared in all my life."

Rob didn't say anything.

Jamie held him fast. "I was scared for us. For you. All I could think was that I had to stop you or they'd find out—they'd find us. Rob, I couldn't let that happen. So I grabbed you, I pulled you off him, and then...well, then you changed back."

"You pulled me off?" Rob raised his head, looking at his lover in surprise. "I let you?"

"Of course you let me. Even when you're a wolf, you're still you." Rob raised a hand and traced Jamie's cheek, and Jamie grinned, pressing into the touch. "Anyhow," he continued, "after that, you were pretty out of it. I got you dressed again and put you in the car, and then the cops arrived."

"What'd you tell them?"

"When Jenkins came to, he started raving about wolves, said a wolf had attacked him." Jamie shrugged. "I told the cops my friend managed to get away from Jenkins and let Bella out."

Rob choked off a laugh. "Good one. And that's when you told them that same friend was spaced-out in a sugar coma in the car?"

Jamie shrugged at Rob's raised eyebrows. "Well, I had to tell 'em something. By that time the paramedics had arrived and were talking about taking you to the hospital—" Rob shuddered, and Jamie pulled him close. "I knew I couldn't let that happen. And luckily you pulled it together enough to tell them name, address, Social Security number—"

Rob took Jamie's hand and brought the knuckles to his lips. "I'm gonna go out on a limb here and guess I had help."

Jamie's grin widened, and he pulled Rob close for a kiss. And another one. Rob pulled one side of Jamie's robe open and kissed his collarbone. "So the cops arrested Jenkins, huh? What happens now?"

"No idea." Jamie rolled onto his back, and Rob curled against his shoulder. "The way Jenkins was acting last night, I think he'll end up in some kind of psychiatric facility. But I'm a little worried. Jenkins kept going on about wolves. About the CIA." Jamie took a deep breath. "D'you think he knows something? D'you think...the Center sent him?"

Rob frowned. "Wolves and the CIA... Well, it could be the Center, but you know what, Jamie? I don't think the Center would tell its secrets to a guy like

Jenkins. I mean, they can't afford for the public to hear a whisper of werewolves, or even experiments on wolves. If the papers got hold of a story like that... I don't think they could risk it. It's more likely that Jenkins is just some kind of lunatic with a fixation on wolves and conspiracy theories."

Jamie studied Rob's face, reading the sincerity there, and smiled slightly. "I hope so, Rob," he whispered. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. Or if you had to run away again."

"Nothing's gonna happen to me. And I'm not going anywhere. Not without you, at any rate." Rob leaned forward and kissed Jamie, soft and deep. "You're stuck with me, all right?" Rob smirked. "Now c'mere. Let me see if I can get you comfortable."

The robe wound up in a heap on the living-room floor, and the two dogs hastily headed under the kitchen table.

Chapter Twenty-two

Rob flexed his shoulders under the warm water, enjoying the shower's soft massage. He was still a little sore from his unexpected transformation two nights ago, and he lingered under the spray, letting the heat and steam work their magic on his abused body. *Still, it pales in comparison to the magic Jamie works on my body.* He'd left his lovely blond still asleep in bed and the door to the bathroom open; he figured if Jamie woke up, he could join Rob in the shower and, possibly, Rob thought with a grin, some other healing activities. If not, well, Rob would happily wake him.

With a last blast of extra-hot water, Rob rinsed off and stepped out into the empty bathroom. "Jamie," he called, toweling off. "You feel like Chinese for lunch?"

There was no response, and Rob shrugged, figuring his lover had taken the dogs up to the roof. But when he emerged from the bathroom, he found the window closed, Mutty curled on his bed in the living room, and no sign of Jamie or Bella in the small apartment. Rob's heart started to pound.

A scrap of paper on the table caught his eye. "Gone to the clinic," he read. "Took Bella with me—I figured she could use the walk. Back in an hour and a half. Don't miss me too much."

Rob swallowed hard. First the pharmacy intruder and then Jenkins. He figured the guy must still be in jail for coming after two unarmed men with a tire iron, but the thought of Jamie out in the city alone still set Rob's teeth on edge.

Jamie's not really alone this time. He has Bella with him. Bella understood what Jamie meant to him. Jamie was his mate, and Bella was loyal to the bone. Anyone came near Jamie, she'd bite first and listen later.

Still, Rob tried Jamie's cell; he didn't care if he seemed needy or overprotective. Both options were better than losing Jamie to some random—or nonrandom—act of violence.

The call went straight to voice mail. Rob swore, and Mutty trotted over with concern.

Rob glared at his cell phone. If he headed to the Chinese food place to grab them lunch, it'd be way more productive than just sitting around the apartment worrying about things he had no way of controlling.

Heading back to the bedroom for his keys and his wallet, Rob nearly tripped over Mutty, who wove around his feet tenaciously, stubby tail wagging wildly. “D'you want a walk too?” Rob grinned down at the small white dog, who gave a sharp, happy bark in response. “C'mon then, pal. Let's go.”

The wait for their order was longer than usual, and Mutty spent his time sniffing and marking with far more attention and enthusiasm than Rob thought the dirty sidewalk warranted.

As Rob stood outside with the little dog, waiting for his number to be called, he looked back down the street toward their apartment building. The sun was breaking through a bank of threatening gray thunder mass, and Rob squinted against the brightness, searching for any sign of Jamie. But the intersection at Fourteenth and Chadwick was just busy enough to make a tall, handsome blond and a malamute hard to spot. When his number was called, Rob grabbed the bag from the guy behind the counter and sketched a wave, not bothering to check the contents.

On the way home, Rob scanned the street thoroughly, letting his wolf senses rise to the surface, growing desperate for any sign of Jamie and Bella. Mutty, picking up on his distress, trotted bravely along at his heels, his earlier enthusiasm channeled into a workmanlike determination to help. Rob sent Mutty a brief pulse of approval. *I knew there had to be more to this dog than meets the eye. I'd expect nothing less of Bella's chosen companion.*

At the entrance to their building, Rob called Jamie's cell again. Still no answer. Despite the Chinese food growing cold under his arm, Rob decided to retrace the route Jamie would have taken. Mutty yapped a quick assent, and the two of them took off.

To Rob's anxious wolf senses, signs of his lover marked the trail clearly. A quick whiff of Jamie's scent near a traffic light: Sea Breeze aftershave laid over Jamie's particular essence, the smell Rob knew would thrill him to his dying day. Another jolt of it, just there by the entrance to the raised train. Rob frowned. Jamie wouldn't have taken the Metro to work; the clinic was easily walkable. The day was still nice, and besides, Jamie's note had said he would be on foot. Jamie was a creature of habit, if nothing else.

Panic rose in Rob's gut as the blocks sped by under his feet, Mutty trotting gamely beside him, head raised, expression intense and serious. Before Rob knew it, they were halfway to the clinic, the city having grown cold and forbidding around them, the sun dipping back behind the clouds. Distant thunder rolled, and Rob hurried, not wanting to get caught in the coming storm.

He stopped suddenly at one corner, puzzled. The way to the clinic lay dead ahead, but Jamie's scent went in two directions: ahead to the clinic, and then it seemed to double back, across Fourteenth in the opposite direction from the clinic. Rob forced himself to remain calm, letting his wolf senses tell him which way to go. But the city teemed around them, crowding out rational thought and wolf instinct both.

Mutty whined, tugging on the leash, headed towards the clinic. Rob looked down. The terrier remained unmoved, still convinced of the right way. "You sure, buddy?"

Mutty tugged harder, leaning with all his might.

With one last look over his shoulder, Rob shrugged and let his pack member lead the way. The remaining eight blocks took forever.

When they reached the clinic, Rob was relieved to see the lights on inside. The back door was locked, so he went to the front and was even more relieved to find Jamie'd remembered to lock himself in. He knocked, half apologetically.

"Rob! What are you doing here? I said I'd be right back!" Jamie opened the front door, the bells jangling merrily against the metal door frame.

Rob said nothing, just pulled his lover close, dropping the bag of food on the lobby's tile unheeded. Jamie's arms tight around him, holding him as he stammered out his worries, set Rob's mind at ease and his pulse at rest. He focused on breathing, remembering Jamie's cracked ribs in time not to squeeze too hard. *You're still here. You're okay. I didn't fail you this time.*

Jamie soothed and shushed Rob, holding him tightly. "I gotcha, Rob. It's okay. We're both okay."

Rob still shook in Jamie's arms. It was good to hear those words, even better that they were true. That nothing—not Rob's shadowed past at the Center, not some unhinged maniac, nothing—had happened to Jamie, despite Rob's worry. As Jamie held him, Rob watched Mutty give Bella a serious what-for: prancing and yapping in high dudgeon, the terrier read his big malamute girl the riot act for making everyone worry. Rob stifled a laugh as Bella looked over at him and very carefully didn't roll her eyes.

Finally Rob stepped back from Jamie's embrace, feeling sheepish. Jamie was a grown man walking just over a mile in broad daylight, accompanied by a big dog with teeth that could puncture leather. Rob pointed to the white paper bag on the floor of the lobby. "Brought you lunch."

Jamie folded his arms, his expression guardedly amused. "And lunch couldn't wait until we got home?"

Rob hesitated, and Jamie smiled shyly. "Thanks for coming to check on me, Rob. As you can see, we're both fine. Meds are done, and we were just about to head for home."

"I suppose you think I overreacted."

Jamie's smile widened. "Don't care. It's nice to be worried about."

"It is?"

Jamie moved close, kissing Rob firm and sweet, making Rob's knees wobble with the love he felt thrumming between them. Jamie nuzzled Rob's jaw briefly before kissing his nose and taking a step back. "That's how nice it is."

"That's pretty damn nice, Jamie," Rob said softly. He stepped in for another kiss, but Jamie danced gracefully out of reach, his smile turning pleased and teasing. "What?"

"Got a surprise for you. It's why we're late coming back. Stay here a second, okay?"

Rob nodded dumbly as Jamie disappeared in the direction of his office. Outside, the clouds made good on their promise, and the skies over the city opened, washing the concrete with a serious rain shower. Thunder rolled in the distance.

"Close your eyes!" Jamie called from the back.

Rob complied, but his nose told him exactly what the surprise was before Jamie was halfway through the doorway, and he couldn't help the happy, stunned noise that escaped his throat.

Jamie let out an aggrieved sigh. "Surprises are no fun with you sometimes."

Laughing, Rob opened his eyes as Jamie set a big pink cardboard box on the lobby counter. Rob rushed over and tore the lid open. Gleaming with sugar and sprinkles and icing were a dozen doughnuts—bear claws, crullers, maple bars, twists, raised, jelly filled, and plain cake. The combined scent of them washed over Rob in a rush, and he felt his worries evaporate. He looked over to where Jamie was beaming with satisfaction.

"Surprise," Jamie said. "Hope you like 'em."

"I love 'em," Rob replied, grinning madly. "Bout half as much as I love you, you big sneak. Now c'mere."

“Big sneak? I get you a dozen of your favorite food ever and get called names for my troubles?” Jamie walked over and stood in front of Rob, fingers hooked in his belt loops, his face a picture of mock umbrage.

“Did you tell me you were going out for doughnuts? No. I had to worry about you.”

“If I'd told you, then it wouldn't have been a surprise, because you would've insisted on coming with.”

Rob kissed him lightly. “Don't like surprises.”

“Mmm.” Jamie kissed him back. “In that case it was Bella's idea.”

Rob laughed. “Nice try, but I can tell this one was all you. Thank you, baby.”

“Oh, now you like surprises, huh?” Jamie wriggled happily in Rob's arms, exposing his neck for Rob to mouth and nibble.

“No,” Rob managed, coming up for air, “but I still love you. Even if you are a big sneak.”

“Rob...” Jamie renewed his halfhearted protest, and Rob overrode it with more kisses.

The front door bells jangled behind them, the door swinging wide and admitting a gust of moist wind and rain. Bella and Mutty commenced a round of enthusiastic barking, trotting over to the front door with their tails held high.

“You know, I got enough to worry about in a day without coming to work to find the two of you playing grabass in the lobby. What, you can't keep it at home?” Brianna shook rain off her braids and shrugged out of her jacket, then crossed the lobby with the wet coat at arm's length.

Rob's good mood evaporated. Cautiously, he pushed the box in Brianna's direction. “Doughnut?”

“No, thanks. I'd like to leave in the same size scrubs I arrived in. Jamie, do you know why Woo left us a message saying he'd be by today? First time I've ever

known the man to want to see us outside of business hours. Any idea what's going on?" Brianna lingered in the doorway to the back.

"Maybe he just wants to stop by and pick up more dog food?"

Brianna snorted. "Yeah, I'm still not buying that story. I swear to you, either he was just messing with you that day, or else he was casing the joint for his partner. That man gives me the creeps."

Jamie looked sheepishly at the floor. "Ah. Funny you should mention that. Woo might be coming by because...there was an...incident with Jenkins, his partner."

Rob's heart sank, and he bit back a groan. Brianna stalked back into the lobby, brows lowered with concern. She folded her arms across her chest and regarded Jamie narrowly.

Jamie held up his hands. "You know how he suspected we had wolves in here, right, the search warrant, the whole nine yards? Well, he sort of...waylaid us in a parking garage and—"

Rob made a small, frustrated noise but held his tongue.

"Waylaid? Jamie, what do you mean he waylaid you? In plain English, what did the crazy man do now?"

"Look, Brianna, we're both fine, okay? The police are handling it, and—"

"Police? Seriously, Jamie, what did Jenkins do to you? Are you all right? What happened?"

"We're both fine, seriously. Jenkins got a little physical—"

Brianna gasped and laid a hand on Jamie's arm.

"But when he saw Bella, he dropped the tire iron and—"

"Tire iron? Jamie!"

Rob winced. *You knew Brianna would go off the deep end. Why did you have to mention the tire iron?*

As Jamie recounted a very abbreviated version of the attack, Rob pursed his lips thoughtfully. The details Jamie gave Brianna matched up perfectly with what he'd told the cops. *At the very least, Jamie can keep his story straight.*

Brianna's expression turned to horror as she listened. Finally, when Jamie fell silent, she turned to Rob. "Is this all true? Jenkins attacked Jamie with a tire iron?"

Rob nodded silently. Brianna's deep brown gaze searched his face. "And your dog kicked his ass and saved Jamie's life?"

Rob shrugged as Jamie launched into a recitation of how Rob had whomped on the rogue animal control officer. To Rob's intense surprise, Brianna stepped forward and gave him a gentle hug. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you."

Jamie trailed off midsentence, and Rob met his stunned blue eyes over the top of Brianna's head. Rob gingerly returned her embrace. "He's everything to me, Brianna. Everything."

Brianna kissed his cheek. "He better be, or you are next on the list for an ass kicking. And you just try to get a tire iron away from me, friend."

Rob grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

Brianna turned around and raised her finger to Jamie, springing into full lecture mode. "Now you listen to me, Jamie Bretton. I am not having my friends menaced by wild men with tire irons. Just as soon as Woo gets here, I am going to give that man a piece of my mind about his wolf-crazy partner. Jenkins needs to be locked up. He has been just plain crazy for a while now, and this wolf thing has sent him over the edge. You wait till Woo gets here. You just wait." With a shake of her head, Brianna headed for the back room, eliciting a chorus of barks and yelps as she went.

Jamie looked at Rob. "You wanna wait till Woo gets here?"

Rob shook his head vehemently. "You can, but I'm gonna make myself scarce." He bent and retrieved the bag of cold takeout. "I'd better take Bella with me too. We don't need Woo getting even the vaguest reminder of Bella's existence."

Jamie pulled Rob into his arms and held him close. "Let's go home, Rob," Jamie murmured against his neck. "Let's go home and curl up in bed together and wait out the storm, okay?"

Holding Jamie tight, it was all Rob could do to nod, breathing Jamie deep, letting his scent fill him, comforting and right. He couldn't have put it better himself.

Chapter Twenty-three

The meal was as good as Jamie had come to expect of the takeout, and he pushed his plate aside. Rob was finishing a pork bun with evident enjoyment, and Bella and Mutty had made short work of the sweet-and-sour chicken they'd shared.

Jamie shook his head, watching as Bella tried to lick the pattern off the edge of her dish. She'd consent to kibble for breakfast but much preferred to eat whatever he and Rob had for dinner. And judging by her glossy coat and bright eyes, her somewhat exotic diet agreed with her.

She ran her muzzle over Mutty's back, checking where he'd been during her absence for perhaps the tenth time since their return to the apartment, then herded the smaller dog toward their bed in the living room.

Rob stood by the counter, bear claw held thoughtfully in one hand. Catching sight of the expression on Jamie's face, he swallowed hurriedly and replaced the pastry in its box. Jamie sauntered over and stood in front of his lover with an amused expression. "That all you want for dessert, Rob?"

Rob reached for him, eyes heavy with desire, and Jamie took his hand and walked them both into the bedroom.

They took their time.

As they kissed, Jamie felt the tension from their confrontation with Brianna melt away. Rob tightened his arms, holding Jamie close as he explored his mouth, and Jamie moaned, pressing against Rob. They shed their clothes in a heap next to the bed and crawled companionably under the comforter, settling in for the afternoon.

Rob shifted his attentions to Jamie's neck, biting gently, and Jamie moaned again, holding on to Rob and dropping his head. "I love you," Rob growled, and Jamie heard the naked need in his voice.

"Love you too." Jamie's voice was unsteady with his own desire, thrumming urgently in his veins. Jamie arched up with a gasp, shaking with pleasure as Rob held him down against the bed and stroked his length, rhythmic, firm, perfect. Rob's hands on Jamie's skin felt like magic, and Jamie gave himself over to their expert touch. They found a rhythm together, gasping against each other's skin, their climaxes building hard and fast. Rob cried out, arching into his lover's touch, and Jamie's own orgasm rushed through him. He collapsed back against the damp cotton sheets, and the two of them clung to each other, sweaty and sated.

Rob pushed the pillow over and arranged it under Jamie's head. Curling alongside him, Rob slid a hand down over Jamie's stomach, lightly toying with the sweat-damp curls at the base. "Better?" he whispered.

"Always." Jamie opened his eyes and smiled into Rob's. "Perfect, in fact."

Rob kissed him again, settling back against the mattress. His eyes were heavy with fatigue, and Jamie pushed the pillow back toward him, then tucked the new comforter around his lover. "M'fine," Rob said muzzily.

"Agreed." Jamie dropped a kiss on Rob's forehead and let his lips linger there. "But you're also exhausted. Sleep. I'll be right here."

Rob put up a token show of protesting, but Jamie knew he welcomed the chance to let his tired body rest in the comfort of their home. He never saw Rob relax completely until the four of them were all home together with the door barred against the world. Which was just fine by him. He'd never dreamed being part of anyone's "pack" could be so fulfilling. "I'm right here, Rob. Sleep."

Rob's eyes closed, and he exhaled heavily. Jamie stroked his cheek, smiling.

A soft whine came from the kitchen, and Rob's eyes flew open.

"Correction," Jamie said softly. "I'm taking the dogs up to the roof for the sake of our kitchen floor, and then I'll be right here."

Rob nodded sleepily, rolling onto his stomach and stretching across the wide mattress. Jamie kissed the back of his neck softly and extracted himself from the bed, then located jeans and a sweatshirt. In the kitchen, the two dogs sat at attention beneath the window. “Yeah yeah yeah,” Jamie said good-naturedly. “At least you held it until we were finished.”

Mutty jumped up, leaning his front paws against the wall, and gave an anxious yip. Jamie hurriedly got the window open, watching as the terrier scrabbled indelicately over the sill and up the fire escape. Bella followed with one graceful bound, her footfalls on the iron softer and more sure. Jamie grabbed a couple of plastic bags from a drawer in the kitchen. Earlier that week they'd found a note slipped under the door reminding them to clean up the roof at regular intervals. The missive was unsigned, but between the delicate copperplate script and the faint scent of violets, he and Rob were pretty sure who'd sent it.

The storm had cleared the air over the city, making way for hazy sunshine and the fresh-start smell common to wet asphalt and concrete the world over. Jamie did a quick tour of the roof, filling and tying off plastic bags as he went. Not even the unpleasant if necessary nature of his errand could break his good mood, and the three of them returned to the apartment with a ringing clatter of nails on metal, Jamie whistling soft and tunelessly. As soon as they entered the apartment, though, Bella began to growl deep in her chest.

“Let it go, Bella,” Jamie said. He lowered the old metal entrance to the trash chute and popped the plastic bags inside, then let the weighted door swing shut with a muted *clang*. Washing his hands at the sink, Jamie frowned down at the big dog. She was still growling, nudging and nipping at his legs.

“Hush, Bella. Rob needs his sleep, and the last thing I wanna do is have you wake him.” Bella looked at him reproachfully, and Jamie stuck his tongue out in return.

A sharp rap at the front door made him jump.

Jamie made a quiet, irritated noise in the back of his throat. Right now he would cheerfully have sold his half of the practice to have the rest of the day alone with Rob. He just wanted to shed the rest of his clothes and crawl back under the covers on top of Rob's warm, needing body.

The knock came again, and Bella resumed barking, ignoring Jamie's attempts to shush her. He made his way to the front door and looked through the peephole.

Brianna and Leonard stood outside, looking at the door expectantly. At Jamie's feet, the two dogs pranced and cavorted, Bella snuffling quietly now, tail wagging back and forth. But Jamie stood paralyzed. This place was his and Rob's, and he had a hard time shaking the feeling that letting other people inside would break its spell. And Rob... Jamie leaned his forehead against the thick wood of the front door. He couldn't imagine letting other people invade his lover's space, his den. Jamie had vowed to protect Rob at any cost.

The knocking came again, and Jamie jumped, his head still against the door.

"Jamie, you in there?" Leonard's nasally whine, usually a welcome sound, suddenly grated on Jamie's nerves. Tossing an anxious look toward the bedroom, Jamie stayed quiet, trying to soundlessly shush the two dogs at his feet.

"Jamie Bretton, you answer this door right now, or you can kiss good-bye any chance of me still being your partner come Monday."

Jamie hung his head, admitting defeat. "Okay, hang on, hang on," he called softly. The many locks on the door took some doing to operate soundlessly, but Jamie gave it his best shot. Finally he got the door open and slipped out into the corridor, wedging his body into the door's narrow opening, blocking the two excitable dogs with his legs. "Hi, guys. What are you doing here?"

"What are we...what are we doing here?" Leonard threw his hands in the air. "Jamie, you guys were attacked!"

"Leonard, calm down. It wasn't that big a—"

"Tire iron," Brianna interjected.

“Exactly!” Leonard pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Jenkins attacked you with a tire iron! Your ribs were broken? Rob went into a diabetic coma? Not that big a deal? Jamie, you—”

“Leonard, Leonard, we're fine, okay? We're both fine. Everything worked out. There's nothing to get upset about.”

Brianna gave him a look Jamie recognized well. He realized he'd just stepped in it, big-time.

Leonard fell silent, letting his hands drop to his sides. “We just wanted you to know we care about you—about you both,” he said quietly.

“Oh, Leonard... Look, I'm sorry.” Jamie shifted his body in the doorway as Mutty sniffed wetly at the back of one knee. “Thank you. I do appreciate it, believe me, but we're both okay, and Rob's still sleeping now—”

“No I'm not.”

Jamie whirled. Rob came into the kitchen, and with a stern nod, he indicated to the dogs to go to bed. They took off in high dudgeon, and Rob put a hand on Jamie's back. “Who is it, baby?”

Jamie turned to look at Rob's face, then back to Leonard and Brianna. He attempted a smile. “Would you...would you two excuse me for just one moment?”

Brianna rolled her eyes, and Jamie pulled himself back through the narrow opening and shut the door firmly. He regarded his lover with alarm. “Rob, it's the weekend, and you're hurt—you need me. I can get rid of these people and go back to being—”

Rob stopped Jamie's mouth with a kiss, firm and gentle. He slid an arm around Jamie's lower back and pulled him close. “They're not just people, baby. They're your family.”

Jamie stared, relief and confusion washing through him in equal measures. He chuckled, blushing. Rob laughed too, then kissed Jamie again lightly. “Come on, baby. Open the door already. Otherwise the neighbors are gonna talk.”

Jamie gave Rob a look that was equal parts love and exasperation. Just before Rob pulled the door open, Jamie leaned in and stole another kiss. Rob grinned at him, and together they threw the door wide, standing back to usher their guests inside. "Welcome to our home," Rob said expansively. Jamie didn't trust himself to speak and instead let his relieved and somewhat dazed smile do all the talking.

* * *

"I can't believe Jenkins ever thought Bella could be a wolf," Brianna said later. The four of them were sitting round the table.

As soon as Leonard and Brianna had made it past the front door, Rob had become the consummate host, setting them up with beers and tea and getting out the ingredients for pasta. Announcing she had the perfect recipe for comfort food, Brianna shooed Rob back to join Leonard and Jamie on the couch. Rob had allowed himself to be seated with a wry grin as Brianna bustled around the tiny kitchen, whipping up a truly astonishing casserole of ground beef, chilies, cheese, and corn chips. The four of them had fallen into companionable conversation over it and sat picking at the remains over the coffee Jamie had made to end the meal.

"I mean, look at her. Just look at her. Does she look like a wolf to any of you?" Brianna shook her head. "That man has been out of his mind for a long time." She gestured with her fork. "Remember when he was convinced that little schnauzer mix we had was Reagan reincarnated? Woo laughed it off, but let me tell you. Jenkins—he was on a mission. And that time he wanted to open all our bags of Hill's because he just knew that each of them had that one little piece of kibble that told you which inspector reviewed it. Then something about that inspector, you find the kibble, he sends you some coupon. And now wolves! Looking back, it was just a matter of time." She scooped ground beef onto her fork and chased some shredded cheese around her plate.

"Well, to be fair now, honey," Leonard said, "malamutes are fairly closely related to the quote-unquote 'first dog,' that mythic missing link between wolves and domesticated canines, and there's a good amount of physical resemblance."

Leonard spread his hands wide. "Maybe he just didn't have a lot of experience with dogs. Or wolves, for that matter."

"Does that look like a wolf to you?" Brianna pointed a perfectly polished neon green fingernail at Bella. The dog thumped her tail on the floor.

Rob craned his neck to look over at his dog. "Looks like a good dog to me. Unlike the other one," he said pointedly. Mutty was in bed, pretending to be in disgrace after scaling Leonard's lap and making a heartfelt attempt on the casserole. Currently fast asleep, he looked like a contented if shaggy volleyball at rest.

Jamie reached down and scritchd Bella's ears, and she rumbled happily. "That's 'cause Bella is a real good dog. The best kind. Aren't you, girl?"

"Still, honey," Leonard continued, "I think you've gotta give Jenkins the benefit of the doubt: malamutes and wolves do share a certain physical resemblance. Especially to the layman. Or late at night. Or just catching a glimpse—Say, I'm sure Jamie can tell you exactly what characteristics the two share, right, Jamie?" Leonard appealed to his friend.

"I'm sure Jamie can tell when to keep his mouth shut and not aggravate his business partner—and friend," Jamie answered evenly. Rob smirked.

"Thank you, Dr. Science, for your learned opinion." Brianna stared at Leonard like he'd grown a second head. "Honey, Jenkins was an animal control officer. What kind of animal control officer doesn't know a wolf when he sees one?"

Rob and Jamie very carefully didn't meet each other's eyes.

"Hey, you two, enough talk about Jenkins, okay?" Jamie said hurriedly. "What I wanna know is how long you two have been seeing each other? I didn't even know you knew each other, let alone...this." Jamie blushed, and Rob chuckled, putting a hand on his arm.

"Don't get me started on what you don't know, Mister." Brianna began, and Jamie stuck out his tongue with a rude noise. Everyone laughed.

Brianna looked at Leonard. “You tell ‘em, baby,” she said softly. “I like the way you tell this story.” She toyed with a slender gold chain around her neck, eyes shining.

Leonard grinned shyly. “Well, Jamie, it was about a week after your famous Fourth of July barbecue last year, and—”

“Wait a minute! You’re telling me this has been going on for nearly a year, and I didn’t notice? How is that even possible? You two are my closest friends!”

Leonard considered, head to one side. “Jamie, up until you met Rob, you were pretty wrapped up in the clinic. And when I say wrapped up, what I mean is practically obsessed. You spent nearly every day there, and when you did manage to tear yourself away—and by that I mean that Brianna or myself managed to convince you to leave the building for your own sanity—you went on all those horrible blind dates. Man, you found some stinkers! Like that guy who brought his mother? Or that other guy who ran into his parole officer at the restaurant? You know, the one he hadn’t seen in a little too long?”

Rob choked on his coffee, fighting back laughter.

“Honey,” Brianna said warningly.

“Or that other guy—What was his name? The one with the thing, you know, that thing? On his head?”

“Thank you, Leonard,” Jamie said, hurriedly placing a hand on his friend’s arm. “I don’t think we need to rehash the train wreck of my romantic life pre-Rob. I wanna know about you and Brianna.”

“I don’t know, Leonard. I could stand to hear a little more about these blind dates of Jamie’s. What thing on his head?” Rob gave Jamie a teasing smile. “And what barbecue?”

“No, no,” Jamie said with an alarmed look, “stay focused, Leonard. You and Brianna.”

“Well, you know, you have that barbecue every year—”

“He does?” Rob asked. “You do?”

“Rob, can you let the man finish his story?” Jamie held up a warning hand, and Brianna snorted. “Leonard, I don't think I've seen the two of you exchange more than a hello at any of them. Don't tell me you got together at one.”

“Well, kind of. See, at the last one I left my prescription sunglasses at the park, and when I went back, I didn't see them, but next time I stopped by the clinic to pick you up for that Cards game, it turned out Brianna had grabbed them off the table when it started raining.”

“So you asked her out.” Rob wrapped his hands around his coffee cup and leaned forward with interest.

“Well, no, actually I fled—”

“He made this adorable little squeak of terror when I said his name,” Brianna interrupted. “Then he fled.”

Rob and Jamie laughed, and Leonard waved his hand in protest, blushing. “It wasn't a squeak. It was more of a—Anyway”—he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose—“I kept thinking she was out of my league, but I wanted to at least take her to dinner to say thank you, so I called the clinic and asked about dinner. You know, something formal. Just thank you.” He looked happily at Brianna, who smiled back. “And the rest is history.”

The four of them sat in silence, digesting the story and nursing their coffees. In the living room, Mutty began to snore.

“Yeah, but how did I miss that you two were together? For nearly a whole year?” Jamie got up to grab the coffeepot for refills.

Brianna shook her head. “Baby, I think that's our cue to go.” She rose, and Leonard pushed his chair back from the table. “Jamie needs to take a moment. Possibly several.” She looked at Rob.

“Thanks for having us over. I'm glad you're both okay.”

Rob got to his feet with a grin. “Me too. And thanks for coming by to check.”

Brianna put a hand on Leonard's back as she regarded Rob and Jamie narrowly. "You see that crazy man around, you call me. Immediately. I am not having any of my friends beat on. Life's hard enough as it is." She held her arms out and gave Jamie, then Rob, a brief hug. Bella sauntered over and rubbed against Brianna's leg. Brianna bent and scratched between her ears. "You keep these two safe, okay, girl? They're very important to me."

Jamie looked at Rob, whose eyes said he was having the same thought.

Brianna straightened up. "Come on, Leonard. Let's head out. Leave Rob and Dr. Observant some peace and quiet."

"Hey," Jamie protested halfheartedly as they showed them to the door. "Name-calling is—"

"Totally appropriate in this case." Leonard patted him on the back, then held out a hand to Rob.

"Night, guys. I'm really glad you're okay. Stay that way, huh?"

"You bet, Leonard." Rob put an arm around Jamie's back as their guests headed out, and Jamie latched the door behind them.

The apartment immediately seemed emptier, but no less cozy in their absence. Jamie had been so worried that opening their space up to admit other people would bother Rob, worry him, and make him feel unsafe, but he'd seemed to have really enjoyed the impromptu dinner party. Jamie started ferrying dishes to the sink, then filled one side with hot, soapy water. The building's ancient hot-water system mustered its usual litany of complaints in the walls as he waited, while over in the living room, Mutty continued to snore, having taken exactly zero notice of the leave-taking. Bella stayed in the kitchen, nuzzling Rob's thigh with her snout while whopping Jamie with her upturned tail.

"Penny for your thoughts," Rob murmured. He kneed Bella aside to clasp Jamie from behind. He placed a kiss on the back of Jamie's neck.

"Good penny," Jamie answered contentedly.

"They're good thoughts, I can tell. Worth that penny." Rob began to gnaw gently at the side of Jamie's neck, and Jamie relaxed into his lover's embrace, simply enjoying the feel of Rob's arms around him, the two of them alone together. He reached out and turned off the water.

"That was nice," Rob said softly.

"Well, I didn't want it overflowing and getting on the floor."

"Smart-ass. I meant tonight, the dinner party. It was nice."

Jamie turned in Rob's arms, facing him. "Did you really not mind them coming here?"

Rob kissed his forehead. "No, I didn't. They're your—our friends."

Jamie tightened his embrace, laying his head on his lover's shoulder. In the living room, Bella picked up a squeaky fish and began chewing on it lustily. Mutty sat up with a strangled snort, looking at her with interest. Jamie laughed, returning his attention to his lover. It was hard to believe it had been less than two months since Rob had shown up at the clinic with Bella in his arms, setting in motion the events that had altered both their lives so drastically. Events that had brought Jamie everything he ever wanted.

In a couple of days the moon would be full again, and Jamie had already made arrangements with Brianna and Tessa for coverage, telling them that he and Rob were taking a short break out of town. It freed him up to stay by Rob's side, keeping him and his secret safe. After that, it was just one month at a time. A small price to pay for the love that overflowed Jamie's heart, suffusing him with a constant feeling of well-being.

Jamie leaned back against the sink, looking up into Rob's eyes. "I love you."

"Mmm, love you too. So much." Rob reeled Jamie back in, holding him with fierce strength, and Jamie let his forehead rest against his lover's, feeling complete.

There was a growl from the living room, and then a brief snapping and an anguished squeak that trailed off into a dismal honk. The two of them looked at

each other with resigned grins, and Jamie turned to the dishes. Rob headed over to retrieve whatever was left of the formerly squeaky fish. “So, Jamie, tell me about the guy and his mother. Bet that was awkward.”

“Rob...”

“Did you kiss 'em both good night or what?” Rob popped the pieces into the garbage chute. The door swung shut with a *clang*.

“Rob! I really don't wanna talk about it, okay? Let's just say it didn't go well.” Jamie rinsed a plate under cool water before setting it in the dish rack to dry.

“She didn't like you?”

“Okay, you know what?” Jamie turned, wet mug in hand, but Rob was back by his side, laughter brightening his features. Jamie rinsed the mug and reached for the dish rack, but Rob took the mug in a clean towel and dried it briskly.

“Mothers have such high standards, Jamie. Don't feel bad.”

Jamie shook his head, bumping his lover with one hip.

Outside the small apartment, night blanketed the city of St. Louis, squares of soft gold light appearing all around. And high above, watching over it all, hung a fat and waxing moon, nearly full.

THE END

Kate Roman

Currently based in Northern California, Kate divides her time between dreaming of beautiful, heartbroken men and the men who love them, and working in IT support. She's ably assisted by one cat, an assortment of dogs and several rabbits, and doesn't want to talk about the shameful state of her garden. She also reads more books than can possibly be healthy