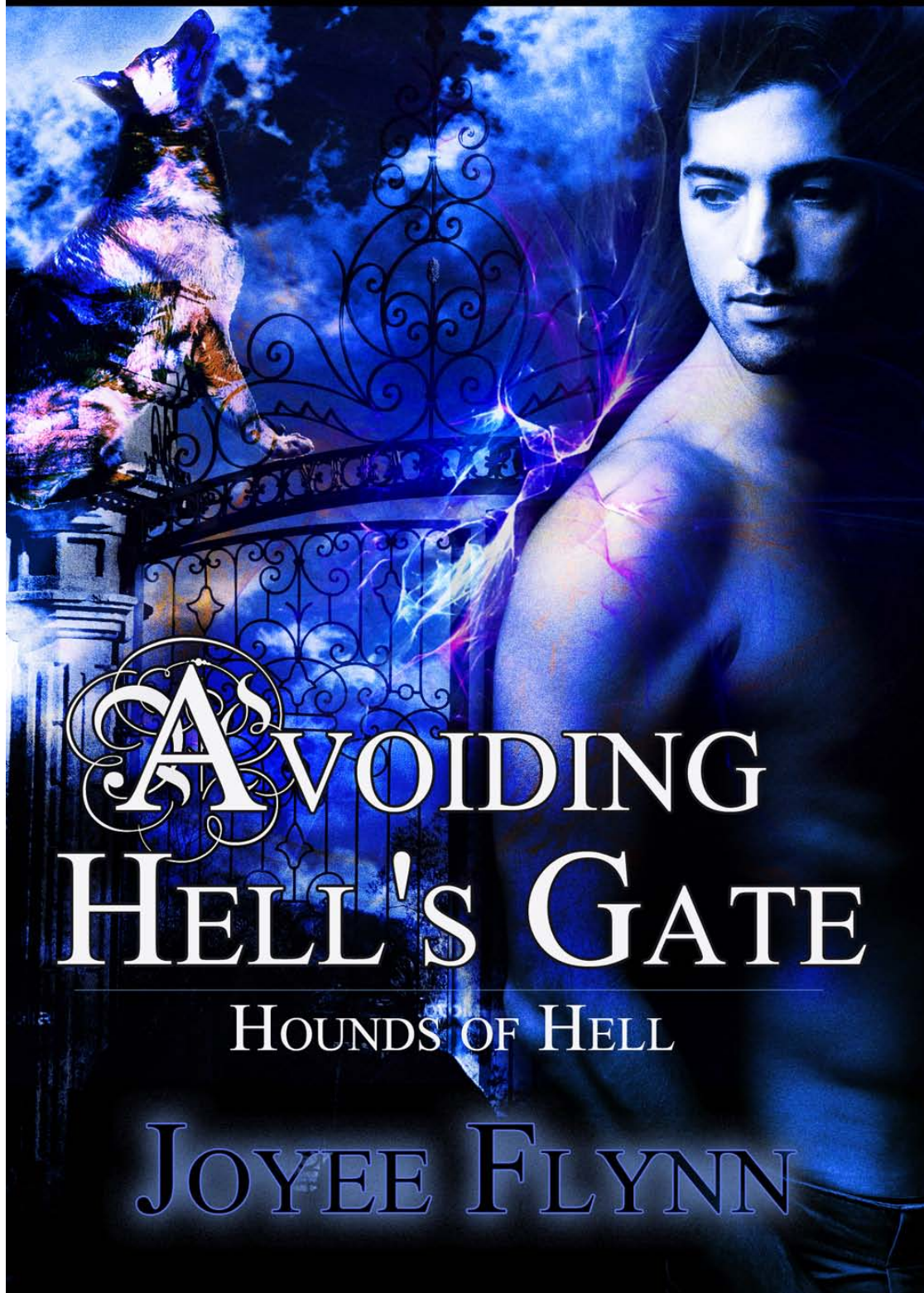


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Avoiding Hell's Gate
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Dedication

To my gals from the group: Lala, Donna, & Corrie. You came up with great names for the characters . . . hope you like what I've done with them!

Book Blurb

Stryker Magnus was born into a life no one would ever ask for. But working for Hell has it's perks, such as immortality, and Stryker's far from evil. He's really just the delivery man.

Rafe Damas lives a lonely life, ignored by his father, his only remaining family. When Stryker and his brothers walk into his life he's in shock to learn the Hounds of Hell are real . . . and they are there for him.

But when Stryker goes from trying to take his soul to Hell to protecting him, Rafe starts to fall hard for the man.

Can Stryker save Rafe's soul? And when is the right time to tell the scared man that they are mates?

Chapter One

"Alright you guys, we all know the drill," Stryker Magnus said to his team of four. "We go in, grab the soul we came to collect, and get out before anyone sees us."

He looked around at his crew as they nodded their affirmation before they all started to undress. When they all stood naked, the air around them vibrated as they shifted.

"Let's hurry this up; I have a date tonight," Jared said through the team's mental connection.

Stryker would have rolled his eyes if he could have, but he'd never pull that off in dog form.

Stryker looked at his teammates. Most men in their situation—always together, having to rely on one another—would have considered each other brothers. In Stryker and his teammates' case, they really were. They were all born of the same litter. The five of them were born of the same Bitch of Hell, and growing up they were inseparable. They all had the same dark hair and bright blue eyes, and they were all built like linebackers. In Hound form, they looked more like very large, black German Shepherds.

As they started to run toward the target's house, Stryker tried to swallow the guilt that always ate at him. Who they were really wasn't their fault. The Hounds of Hell didn't choose this life; they were born into it. And besides, you don't blame the repo guy when people don't pay their bills. The Hounds weren't evil; they just worked for the devil.

"We're within a block, boss," Tristan stated. *"I suggest we switch to cloaked."*

"Good call, Tristan. Do it, guys," Stryker replied. When they cloaked, they were not only invisible, they changed into something closer to spirits. They could walk through walls, unseen but still heard. No one knew why they had these powers and since you had to ask the devil to find anything out, no one asked. Stryker had yet to meet the devil in his 120 years, and he desperately wanted to keep it that way.

When they reached the house of one Rafe Damas, they walked right through the front door. Literally.

Stryker led his group farther into the room, intent on getting this job over and done with, but then stopped cold. The minute he laid eyes on Rafe, he realized there'd been a mistake. Rafe Damas' soul was clean. His aura sparkled, pure and white.

"Boss, you seeing what I'm seeing?" Jared asked, the confusion apparent in his voice. *"This is the guy from the file, but I'm not seeing any tarnish on his soul. I mean seriously, the guy couldn't be any cleaner."*

"Yeah, I see it," Stryker replied before thinking to himself . . . *and we're so fucked.*

Something — a noise, perhaps — must have cued Rafe in to their presence. He lifted his head, his gaze frantically looking around the room. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Stryker closed his eyes and swallowed audibly. This was just the icing on the cake. Not only was the soul they were sent to collect not tarnished, the man was his mate. Unlike other shifters, Hounds couldn't tell their mates by sight or smell. No, Hounds only recognized their true love by the sound of their voice. The second Stryker heard Rafe talk, every nerve in his body went on high alert.

"Boss, you good?" Tristan asked with concern in his voice. *"We have a plan?"*

"Yeah, get my mate the fuck out of here before another team comes along to collect him when we don't bring him to the gates," Stryker replied. He could hear the mental gasps and groans as his team grasped how deep of shit they were in. Stryker was too distracted by the angel in front of him to pay attention. Rafe couldn't have been more than five seven, a hundred and forty pounds. He had a crown of curly, sleep-tousled blond hair and gorgeous, sea green eyes.

"I know someone's there," Rafe said a little louder as he stood from his chair. Taking a few slow steps, he moved in front of the fireplace and grabbed one of the iron pokers. "Just come out, and you can leave. I won't hurt you if you mean no harm."

"Rafe, what is going on in here?" An older man strode into the room.

Stryker immediately recognized him as Rafe's father — the boy could have been his clone. The second thing Stryker realized was that the old man was evil down to his

very core. Good, or clean souls, showed as white – the cleaner the soul, the purer the white light that surrounded them. The more tarnished a soul, the darker the person looked around the edges. Humans would call this phenomenon an aura, but Stryker knew it was their actual soul.

"Un-cloak, guys; I'm going to shift to human form and find out what the fuck is going on," Stryker instructed his team. Quickly shifting before he had to listen to his brothers tell him it was a bad idea, Stryker made sure he was behind a chair to hide most of his nakedness. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other four members of his team follow his orders. Their unquestioning acceptance almost made him smile. Here they were, ass deep in alligators, and he never had to doubt his crew's loyalty.

"Holy shit, you're real," Rafe's father, Mr. Damas stated. "I knew this day would come; the demon said the Hounds of Hell were real."

"You know what we are?" Stryker asked, trying to hide his shock. "But how can you know? Only the one who made the deal would recognize us."

"I did make the deal," Mr. Damas answered, looking at his feet. "I just didn't deal with my own soul."

"You can't trade someone else's soul," Jared said in their group link.

Stryker nodded slightly, knowing his team member and friend would see it. "You cannot make deals with demons for anyone's soul but your own."

"You made a deal with a real demon?" Rafe asked quietly.

Stryker noticed his pale, pinched features. He looked ready to faint. When everyone else turned to look at the boy, Rafe started to shake.

"Dad, how could you do that?"

"It wasn't my soul I was selling," his father answered with a raised eyebrow.

In that moment, the pieces fell into place for Stryker. Without thinking, he moved out from behind the chair and stormed over to Mr. Damas.

"You sold your own son's soul? What could possibly have been worth selling your own child out to the devil and all eternity in hell?"

Mr. Damas rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a drama queen. What do most people sell their souls for?"

"We get varied reason," Stryker answered, folding his arms over his chest.

Mr. Damas avoided Stryker's gaze and sidled over toward his son.

"Don't hide behind him," Stryker growled at the older man.

"You're taking him anyway!"

Rafe turned to his father. "You sold my soul? How could you do that?"

Stryker's heart just about broke as it all seemed to finally sink in for Rafe. The look on the boy's face was one of pure torture.

"You weren't even born yet," Mr. Damas snapped.

Though Rafe had to be at least twenty, he still shrank away from his father, giving Stryker all the confirmation he needed to know that Mr. Damas was more than a bastard; he was an abusive monster.

"The demon was the one who told me your mother was pregnant. He explained to me that since you were still a part of me until you were born and received your own soul, I could promise your soul to him."

Stryker felt an evil smile come over his face as he made his way between father and son. "That doesn't save your soul when you die, Mr. Damas. It's as black as my hair. You will still spend all eternity in the fires of hell for your crimes."

"That's not what the demon said," Mr. Damas yelled. He moved toward Stryker, but backed down quickly as the other four Hounds moved in.

"He may have told you that your soul wasn't on the line for whatever you sold your son for," Stryker answered. "But that doesn't save your soul from hell because of the life you've lived."

"I have a plan in place for that." Mr. Damas snorted. "I will seek absolution from a priest before I die and all the money I received in trade for Rafe's soul will be donated to the poor. It's not like I'll have a living heir anyway."

"Of all the bastards we've seen over the years, this guy takes the cake," Jared said in Stryker's mind. *"Can we just scare him to death and take his soul now instead of the kid's?"*

"I think that's a great plan," Stryker replied with a smirk.

Mr. Damas' smile told Stryker the man thought Stryker was talking about his plan for absolution. He was in for a big surprise.

"Boys, take Mr. Damas away. Rafe doesn't need to see this," Stryker ordered. The Hounds started to move in, but Rafe stepped around Stryker in front of his father.

"No, you can't take my dad."

Mr. Damas gave Stryker a smirk over his son's shoulder.

"Rafe, your father sold your soul and yet you're trying to protect him."

"He's my dad," Rafe replied, shrugging as if that explained it all.

"You're protected now, little one," Stryker said gently as he moved closer to his gorgeous mate. He reached out to touch the man, but froze when Rafe shrank back.

"Don't be afraid of me; I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're evil," he whispered. "It's all in the name, isn't it? You're a minion of hell."

"We're not evil," Stryker replied, feeling his heart sink. He was used to this reaction, but he never thought he would have to explain what he was to his mate. "I can explain everything later, but right now we're on a deadline."

"A deadline?" Rafe asked, obviously confused.

"Yeah, when we're sent to collect a soul, we only have a few hours before they send in another team."

"There are more of you?"

"I promise you, Rafe, I'll explain everything later," Stryker said gently as he reached out and pushed a blond curl off Rafe's forehead. "We need to get you to safety until this all gets resolved."

Rafe didn't shrink away this time. The blush that covered his face when Stryker touched him made Stryker's cock hard. As if Rafe sensed Stryker's reaction, his gaze shifted toward Stryker's groin and the man's blush deepened. Stryker tried not to smile at the idea his mate was attracted to him.

"The deal was for his soul, not mine." Mr. Damas snorted. "You can't protect him."

"I can, and I will," Stryker said, snarling at the man as he turned and pushed Rafe behind him at the same time. "We can't take a clean soul to hell, no matter the deal you made. I'm not even sure that deal *can* be made. I will do what you failed to do as a father . . . keep your son safe. But you, you son-of-a-bitch, you're going with my crew to hell."

"I wasn't part of the deal, and I'm not dead."

"That can be fixed quite easily." Stryker chuckled, but stopped when he heard Rafe gasp behind him. He turned so only Rafe could see him and winked at his little mate. Rafe raised an eyebrow, his concern over the situation evident in his expression. Stryker addressed his teammates. "Jackson and Braedan, take Mr. Damas away. Jared and Tristan, you're staying with us until we can talk with Dante and fill him in on what's going on."

"*You got it, Stryker,*" Jackson said as they advanced on Mr. Damas.

"No, you can't do this," Mr. Damas yelled, looking around the room frantically to find some means of escape. "This wasn't the deal! Don't take me, take my son."

"And you wanted to save that bastard?" Stryker asked gently as he turned and leaned over to look into Rafe's face as his brothers dragged away the still-screaming Mr. Damas. "I can't imagine how you are this pure after growing up with that madman."

"It wasn't so bad," Rafe replied, craning his neck to see around Stryker. "He pretty much just ignored me. I always wondered why it didn't seem like he wanted me. So this actually explains a lot."

"Why were you still willing to go in his place after finding out what he'd done to you?"

"He's the only family I have left," Rafe whispered as tears formed in his eyes. "If my family doesn't even love me or want me, what's there to live for?"

"I want you," Stryker answered moving so that they were eye level. He looked into his mate's eyes, even as Rafe hung his head. "In every way one man can want another."

"You're gay too?" Rafe asked with a giggle as he wiped away the tears in his eyes. "I don't understand any of this. Well, I guess I understand part of it, but this is really, really confusing."

"I know, little one, and I promise to explain everything to you. But for right now, I need you to trust me. We need to get out of here."

Rafe searched his face for a few moments before nodding. "Okay. I mean what could you possibly do or have planned for me that's worse than eternity in hell?"

"Wow, that's the most convoluted reasoning to trust someone I've ever heard," Stryker answered sarcastically. "It's not because I've just saved you from hell, or am trying to right this wrong? Or fuck, that you want me as much as I want you? No, it's because there's nothing worse than hell."

"I'm sorry, but what do you expect from me?" Rafe asked, the tears overflowing his eyes now and running down his cheeks.

Stryker reached out to wipe them away, not stopping this time when Rafe flinched away from him. "You're right, I'm sorry, Rafe."

"It's okay," Rafe replied. He reached a tentative hand toward Stryker's face.

Stryker froze and held his breath. *Go ahead, he thought. Touch me. Yes, that's it. You feel the connection too, don't you?*

"Dude, this is wonderful chick flick shit, but we've gotta bounce," Jared said in Stryker's head. *"I know I'm being a dick, but seriously, this situation will get a hundred times worse if another team shows up!"*

"Right, good point," Stryker answered, then smiled at the look of confusion on Rafe's face. No doubt, his mate thought Stryker was talking to himself. "I'll explain later, Rafe. How quickly can you pack a couple of bags?"

"Five minutes," Rafe replied, but then paused before continuing. "I'm never coming back here again, am I?"

"I'm not sure, so err on the side of thinking you won't and maybe you will one day."

"Fair enough." Rafe gave a quick nod before rushing out of the room.

Stryker turned back to his two brothers still in Hound form. "Run back and get the car and our clothes. I'll hurry and help Rafe. We meet out front in five minutes."

"Watch your back, boss, we're kind of fond of you," Tristan said in their shared link.

Despite the note of sarcasm in his brother's voice, Stryker could tell Tristan was worried.

"Watch your own asses, guys," he replied, looking at them each in turn before heading in the direction Rafe had gone a few moments earlier. Following his mate's scent, he stopped in the doorway of Rafe's room. He stood there, leaning against the door frame, and watched his little mate rush around. Rafe zipped up a duffle bag then looked up, obviously sensing Stryker's presence.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Rafe asked, his voice breaking in a way that had Stryker swallowing a groan.

"How old are you, Rafe?"

"Twenty," Rafe answered then squished his eyebrows together and looked at the clock. "No, it's after midnight, I'm twenty-one."

"It's your birthday; that makes sense." Stryker rubbed his chin. While the legal age for an adult might be eighteen, according to Hell, you weren't an adult whose soul could end up there until you were twenty-one.

"Have you never had anyone look at you like that before?" he asked, addressing Rafe's initial question, trying to control his instant and overwhelming urge to touch his mate, rubbing his scent to mark him.

"I don't think so," Rafe said quietly, obviously confused. "No one has ever looked at me like they wanted to eat me."

Stryker felt a wicked smile crossing his lips. "I do want to eat you up. But not in the way I think you mean, Rafe. I want you."

"You want me to do what?"

"No, baby." Stryker chuckled as he moved toward his mate. "I want you. I want to touch you. I'm dying to kiss you."

"Then no. No one's ever looked at me like that before," Rafe whispered as Stryker pulled his mate in his arms. "My dad never let me out of the house, I had tutors and was home schooled. I'm a virgin."

"Oh god, you're killing me," Stryker moaned as he leaned down to claim Rafe's mouth.

"Please don't," Rafe whimpered before Stryker could kiss him.

Stryker pulled back and looked into his mate's wide eyes.

"I don't even know your name."

"Stryker. Stryker Magnus," he replied quietly. "Does it matter?"

"I think I should know your name before you kiss me," Rafe stated as his little body shook in Stryker's arms.

"Well now you know. May I kiss you now?"

"Oh, yes please," Rafe answered, lifting his chin.

Stryker lowered his head and gently brushed his lips against his little mate's. When Rafe gasped, Stryker took advantage of the moment to slide his tongue into Rafe's mouth. Stryker moaned as he deepened the kiss. His mate tasted every bit as good as Stryker always imagined.

Stryker just about lost his sanity when Rafe reached up and wrapped his arms around Stryker's neck. He grabbed Rafe's ass and yanked his little mate up, wrapping his legs around Stryker's waist. In that moment, Stryker felt a bliss like he never had in his hundred-twenty-plus-years.

"Oh, god, I don't know what's" Rafe hissed, humping his hips against Stryker's when they broke the kiss.

Stryker opened his eyes to stare into Rafe's wide, green eyes. He knew his scent was driving Rafe half insane, even if Rafe didn't know why. With everything Rafe had just been through, making out should be the last thing on his mind. But Rafe couldn't control the raging hormones running through him when he smelled his mate. It took him a few moments to realize that his mate was in the throws of his first orgasm with Stryker.

"Let go, baby," Stryker cooed, reaching in between them to rub Rafe's hard cock through his pants. "Ride the feelings, Rafe. I've got you baby, I won't let you fall."

"I feel like I'm going to explode," Rafe moaned, pushing his dick harder into Stryker's hand.

Stryker tried to focus solely on his little mate's pleasure, but started to shake with the desire to claim Rafe. In over a century of life, he had never seen anything more exquisite than watching the man in his arm in the throes of passion.

"Come for me, my little mate," Stryker said as he leaned over and started licking and sucking the side of Rafe's neck. That was all it took. Rafe screamed out his release, thrusting his hips forward a few more times before slumping into Stryker's arms. "I've got you, baby. It's okay, I promise."

He repeated the words over and over again, stroking Rafe's back until he felt him calm, until he realized his mate had passed out in his arms. Thankfully, Rafe weighed about as much as a loaf of bread, and Stryker was more than strong enough to carry him. Rafe would get used to the intensity of orgasms between mates; it far surpassed anything any human could experience with another human.

Chuckling to himself, he wrapped one arm around Rafe and grabbed the two bags. As he headed out the bedroom door, he paused and backed up a few feet.

A picture of a woman sat on Rafe's bedside table. Rafe's mother? Stryker reached over snatched it up. It was the only picture in the room; it had to be important to him. Smiling at the feel of Rafe in his arms, Stryker headed outside to meet up with his brothers. Now that he'd found Rafe, he'd never willingly give the man up, and he'd do anything to keep him safe.

Chapter Two

"So what's the word from Jackson and Braedan?" Stryker addressed the man sitting beside him in the front seat.

Rafe opened his eyes and saw he was lying in the back seat of his father's Hummer. At first, he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. But then like a ton of bricks, it hit him all at once. Everything that had happened that night, including the kiss, the orgasm, and passing out. Rafe rolled his eyes, completely embarrassed that he fainted during his first sexual experience.

"They're going to meet us at the rendezvous point," the other man replied. "Word is, Dante isn't too happy with any of us. He still wants the boy brought in."

"Not going to happen," Stryker growled, "he's not leaving my sight. He's mine now."

"I know, man. But Dante's point is that we aren't supposed to get involved in these things. We're the delivery men, not judge and jury. He wants Rafe brought in and let the demons sort out whose soul is going to the pit."

"We might just be the delivery boys," Stryker answered. "But we've still got guidelines. We don't ever, and I mean *ever*, bring untarnished souls to hell. I'll call Dante once we all meet up and get to the safe house."

Rafe opened his mouth to tell them he was awake.

"Damn it!" Stryker shouted and slammed his fists on the steering wheel.

The man in the passenger seat jumped at Stryker's outburst, and Rafe snapped his mouth closed. He lifted his head so he could see into the front seat.

"Fuck, this is not how I pictured meeting my mate," Stryker growled. "It's not supposed to be like this."

"It doesn't matter how you meet him, Stryker. You found him; that's more than most of us ever get. I mean you do *want* Rafe, right?"

"Of course I want him!" Stryker gasped, turning to look at the man in the passenger seat. "He's gorgeous and sweet, and you saw how wonderful Rafe was to that bastard of a father he has. It's going to be hard enough to explain all this to him and what mating with a Hound entails. To top that off, Hell supposedly has a claim on his soul, our boss is no help, and we don't know how the demon was able to have Rafe's father speak for Rafe's soul."

"What do you mean, I'm your mate?" Rafe asked sitting up and looking at Stryker in the review mirror.

"Hey, you're awake," Stryker said, looking at him in the mirror, meeting Rafe's eyes. "How long have you been up?"

"Long enough to know that I'm missing lots more than I thought I was," he answered.

"Most shifters, Hounds included, know when they find the one meant for them," Stryker answered, seeming to choose his words carefully. "It's not like animals mating. It's more like a mating of the soul; we just know when we find our other half."

"Do you even *have* a soul? I mean, you work for hell," Rafe asked, giving voice to the first thought that entered his mind.

Stryker veered the car to the side of the road and slammed on the breaks. Without a word, he jumped out of the car, ripped off his clothes, and shifted.

"Wait, stop! Hold on, Stryker." Rafe leaned his head out the car window.

"Let him go, Rafe," the man in the front seat said as he climbed out of the vehicle. Rafe felt the tears form in his eyes as the strange man walked around the front of the car and hopped in the driver's side. "Come on, climb up here. We're going to have a talk. My name is Tristan, by the way."

"Hi, nice to meet you," Rafe replied awkwardly as he climbed over the seat. He settled into the passenger seat and buckled himself in. "Well, in human form, that is. I mean you were at my house earlier, right? You were one of the dogs? Or sorry, Hounds, right?"

"Yes, I was one of the Hounds. Look, Rafe, I know you've been through more shit today than you ever thought possible," Tristan said gently before taking a deep breath and turning to look at Rafe.

Rafe couldn't get over how alike the Hounds all seemed. Not only did they look alike, but their demeanor, expressions, and even the way they spoke were all the same.

"But I'm about to dump more shit on you," Tristan continued, "because you just hurt my brother really badly."

"Your brother?" Rafe asked, and then shook his head. Yes, that made sense and accounted for the similarities between them. "So you're all brothers, and you're all on the same team or something?"

"Yes. The five of us were born in the same litter of pups," Tristan said, nodding as he started to fill Rafe in. "Every two hundred years, each Hound of Hell has to have sex with one of the Bitches of Hell. Their sole purpose is to provide more Hounds and Bitches of Hell. If the sex takes and the Hound knocks up the Bitch, she stays in Hound form for the duration of the pregnancy.

"Which for dogs, even Hounds like us, is nine weeks. The first born, in this case, Stryker, is the leader of the team. When we're born, we stay in Hound form until we're two years old. Then we're taught how to shift, and we start our training," Tristan said. He looked to Rafe as if gauging his reaction.

"So you're really dogs that can shift into humans?" Rafe asked. As the reality of the situation fully set in, his stomach rolled. He'd made out with an animal. Stryker might have been in human form, but still

"No, we're human, just as human as a werewolf or another shifter."

"Werewolves are real?"

"Yes, but that's not the point." Tristan sighed.

Rafe squirmed in his seat. He was pretty sure he was annoying the man, and a Hound of Hell wasn't someone he wanted pissed with him.

"We stay in Hound form until we're two for lots of reasons. One being that it's easier to take care of five puppies than it is five human children. It's not as if the Bitches of Hell are known for their loving ways."

"I guess that makes sense," Rafe replied. He nodded and stared at his hands. "But damn, that sounds like a crappy way to grow up."

"It wasn't bad, I had my brothers." Tristan shrugged. "Each litter has a telepathic bond. Staying in Hound form taught us to rely on that bond and work together from a very young age. When Stryker was talking earlier tonight, he wasn't always talking to you. He can hear all of us in his head."

"That must get confusing," Rafe answered, focusing on Tristan again. No matter how strange this all was to him, it was also fascinating. "How do you keep your sanity?"

"We grew up this way, Rafe. It's the only way we know how to live," Tristan replied, yawning. "We can't hear every thought the other has, it's like we have to talk to each other to hear anything. Just in our heads, does that make sense?"

"Not in the slightest, but I understand what you're saying. I don't think I could really get it without ever having experienced it."

"Fair enough." Tristan nodded.

"Why are we in my father's Hummer?"

"We decided to take another car in case we were pursued," the man answered as he rubbed his hand over his face. "My other brother, Jared, is behind us in our car. Braedan and Jackson should be taking our other car after delivering your father to the gates. They know where we're going."

"Where *are* we going?" Rafe asked. "I head something about a safe house?"

"Yeah, we keep a house off the books in case we ever needed to disappear," Tristan replied.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Tristan asked, his brows furrowed.

"That you're all going to this much trouble for me," Rafe answered quietly. He twisted his hands together in his lap. "I mean, you don't even know me, and I've hurt Stryker, which I didn't mean to do, I swear."

"I know that. But this is hard for him too," Tristan replied, looking at Rafe. "He's waited for over a hundred and twenty years to find his mate. And one of the first questions you ask is if he has a soul. That's after you accused him of being evil earlier tonight."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," Rafe said as tears started to fall. "I grew up really secluded. I wasn't allowed to leave the house unless it was to go to church. Which I ended up going to a lot, at first, just to get out of house. But then, after a while, it was

like a safe haven for me. After I was born, my father basically stuffed me in a room with a nanny. I barely ever saw him or my mother, never met any of my other family.

"I wasn't even allowed to go to my mother's funeral," Rafe whispered, trying to keep his emotions under control. "When I started to go to the church down the street, I made a friend. My only friend, really. Her name was Sister Mary Catherine. I was about ten years old at the time. For the first few years, I wouldn't even tell her my name. She seemed to think I was an abused child, since I was so socially inept and never came in with my parents."

"Yeah, that would have caused me to wonder too," Tristan answered. "So what happened?"

"At first, I just started to go to mass, learn as much as I could," Rafe explained, still twisting his hands nervously. "Then I started going up to her and asking questions. Eventually, she got me to understand that anything I said would stay between us. I explained to her who I was and how I lived. She didn't like it, but my dad wasn't breaking any rules. My mother had passed when I was eight, so she wasn't in the picture."

"That must have been hard, growing up that way."

"Yeah, it wasn't easy." Rafe chuckled. "I guess it depends on whether or not you consider neglect a form of child abuse. But the more I talked with Sister Catherine, the closer we became. I used to go there every day after my lessons and help her around the convent, church, or rectory. We became really close. My happiest memories were helping her and the other sisters in the gardens, talking about my lessons, theology, or current events."

"And I thought we were raised strangely." Tristan laughed. "I can't even imagine spending my days like that."

"It was pretty great, actually; they really cared about me. And it was nice to have some human interaction with someone besides just my tutors." Rafe shrugged. "She instilled a lot of the Catholic Church's teachings in me."

"Including the 'fact' that anything or anyone involved with Hell has to be evil."

"Yeah, pretty much." Rafe snickered. "But she also taught me that religion is like family, well a *normal* family, that is. You're never going to agree with everything they say; it's more important for you to generally agree or align together on the big stuff."

"She sounds like a smart woman," Tristan answered. "I would have loved to have grown up with that type of enlightened influence."

"Yeah, she was a great woman."

"Was?"

"Yeah, she disappeared when I was seventeen." Rafe sniffled. "Right after my father found out I was spending so much time with her and I told him I wanted to go to college. He stormed into the convent and got into a huge argument with her. I had never seen her so angry before. After the fight, she tried to get me to live at the rectory with the priests. She said I was old enough to leave home."

"What happened?" Tristan asked gently.

"A week later I went to find her and tell her that I would do it, but she was gone. No one could find her, the police got involved," Rafe answered, tears now flowing freely down his face. "I never saw her again, and when I asked my father about it"

"He made her disappear, didn't he?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he did. He said it was my fault for involving her in my life, that she knew too much," Rafe explained while wiping his eyes with his shirt. "I didn't really know what he meant, but now some of it kind of makes more sense. I mean, if anyone could have figured out what my dad did — you know, the deal he made before I was born — it would have been Sister Catherine. I don't know *how* she could have known, but she was one smart lady."

"I'm sorry, Rafe," Tristan replied, reaching over to pat him on the knee. "Losing your only friend like that couldn't have been easy for you."

"No, but at least she was there to help me work through figuring out I was gay."

"I thought the Catholic Church opposes being gay?"

"Yeah, but Sister Catherine always told me you can't help what you want," Rafe answered, smiling over the fond memories. "I told her one day that a guy on the street

had talked with me. He couldn't have been more than seventeen and I was fourteen, but just that conversation gave me my first boner."

"Oh nice." Tristan laughed heartily. "Might not want to tell that part to my brother. As I'm sure you noticed, we're very protective and jealous."

"No, actually, I didn't realize that at all." Rafe shook his head. He didn't recall any of the Hounds behaving in an overly protective or jealous manner.

"Didn't you wonder why Stryker kept stepping in between you and your father?" Tristan asked, raising an eyebrow as he looked toward Rafe. "He kept touching you and pushing you behind him. Even when we took your dad away."

"Tristan, I was a little distracted by the fact my father sold my soul," Rafe answered, rolling his eyes. "And then you guys took my dad to Hell. So yea, I'd say Stryker's actions were the last thing on my mind right then."

"Good point." Tristan snickered. "Okay, so you got your first boner, go ahead."

"So yeah, I talked to Sister Catherine," Rafe continued, his face heating at the memory. "That was an embarrassing conversation, to put it mildly."

"I'll bet."

"She explained that it was a normal reaction for a boy my age, even toward another man," Rafe said quietly. "She said all young men had raging hormones. But she also took me seriously, and didn't dismiss my feelings. We went over verse after verse in the bible and found all the parts that talk about homosexuality. She helped me figure out some of the older translations and stories. It never really says anywhere in the older versions that it's wrong to be gay."

"So that works out, being mated to Stryker and all."

"Well, that works out for me not going to hell because I'm gay," Rafe answered carefully. "I'm not sure about being mated to a minion of Hell."

"We're not minions of Hell, Rafe." Now Tristan rolled *his* eyes. "We're really neutral. We don't make the deals for souls, we don't corrupt anyone, no one even knows about us. We're just like the collection agency. You need to get off this minion of Hell shit."

"I get what you're saying, but you work for Hell," Rafe replied quietly.

"We didn't choose this." Tristan shook his head. "We were born into this, just like you were born gay. You make it sound like we saw an ad in the newspaper and said, 'Hey, let's go work for Hell!' That's not how it works."

"Okay, fair enough," Rafe answered, nodding. "It just takes a bit to wrap my mind around it, ya know?"

"I get that. So what else do you want to know?"

"Okay, so tell me about this mating thing." Rafe wearily rubbed his hands over his face. "It's not that I'm not attracted to Stryker, because I am. But this mating thing sounds like a *forever* thing."

"It is, Rafe," Tristan said. He glanced Rafe's way again, as if sizing him up. "Yeah, we mate for eternity. We're immortal, and once we mate, our mates become immortal too."

"How does the mating happen? I mean, you don't just say, 'we're mates now', right?"

"No, it happens during sex." Tristan chuckled and his cheeks grew red. "It's kind of carnal and heated. This is going to sound funny, but we're Hound — dogs — and as such, we do it doggy-style. Right before orgasm, we bite our mate on the side of their neck, near their shoulder."

"Wow, that's a lot to think about." Rafe closed his eyes. Stryker wanted to bite him?

"Yeah, and after we mate, we're incredibly possessive." Tristan laughed. "And our sex drive increases; we really do become Hounds."

"Oh, well that's . . . interesting." Rafe swallowed nervously.

"It's all good, kid," Tristan answered as he turned off the expressway. "We need to stop and get some gas."

"Okay, good, I have to use the bathroom." Rafe did his best to keep the fear from his voice. He was with one Hound of Hell, expected to mate another. Not to mention he

was looking at spending eternity as an immortal, mated to a horny, possessive animal. 'It's all good, kid'? Hardly. This was so *not* good, and he had to find a way out.

Chapter Three

Stryker ran along the highway, watching the Hummer closely while he spent over an hour calming down. He followed along as they pulled off on the exit and stopped at the gas station. Keeping to the shadows, he followed Rafe as his mate went to the bathroom. Once Rafe had closed the restroom door, Stryker headed over to the Hummer, which Tristan, thank goodness, had parked in the shadows. He shifted back into human form, then quickly opened the back door and climbed inside before he could be seen.

"How goes it?" he asked as he grabbed some clothes off the floorboard.

"I explained most of it to him, Stryker," Tristan answered, giving Stryker the once-over, his concern plainly written on his face. "It's a lot to handle in one night, man. And you need to talk to him about how he grew up. His reactions make a whole lot more sense when you consider his only friend growing up was a Catholic nun."

"Well shit, that does explain a lot." Stryker snickered as he got dressed. "Okay, I'm going to go talk to him."

"Good deal, brother." Tristan patted him on the back. "Go get your mate."

Stryker nodded before climbing out of the truck and heading back toward the bathroom. As he drew near, he saw Rafe exiting. Stryker opened his mouth to call out a greeting, but before he could speak, Rafe took off in the opposite direction from the Hummer.

"Tristan, what did you say to him? He's running for it," Stryker asked through their mental bond.

"I just told him what being mated to a Hound meant, and what happens to us after we mate."

"What? That we become controlling, domineering sex fiends?"

"Umm, yeah, pretty much. Sorry, man."

Stryker growled. If Tristan were standing beside him now, he would have smacked him upside the head. Pushing aside his irritation with his brother, Stryker headed after his mate. With his long-legged strides, he easily caught up to Rafe.

"Baby, wait, let me explain," Stryker said as he came up behind him.

"Tristan told me everything," Rafe yelled as he spun around to face Stryker. "I can't do it. I'm sorry; I can't go from one prison to another!"

"That's not how it would be, Rafe — "

"How are you even here?" Rafe screamed as he covered his face with his hands and collapsed on the ground. "I saw you shift into a dog and run off. You can't be here already. There's no way you could run as fast as a Hummer on the highway! This isn't real, *you* can't be real. I've lost my mind."

"Oh baby," Stryker said in anguish as he ran the last few steps and knelt next to his mate. He wrapped him in his arms and held him tightly. Rafe shuddered, and Stryker's heart broke at the young man's pain. "It is real, I swear to you. You've not lost your mind. I'm so sorry. I know this is more than one person should have to deal with in only a few hours."

"I-I can't do this," Rafe wailed, the sound demolishing the last of Stryker's previous anger. "I've nev-never been with anyone. How-how can my feelings be real?"

"Shh, baby, just breath," Stryker cooed as he stroked his fingers through Rafe's hair. "We'll figure this all out, okay? Right now I just need you to calm down. We can go as slow as you need. Nothing's written in stone. Right now, our top priority is to keep you safe. We'll work everything else out later."

"You swear?" Rafe asked. His shaking stopped and he wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand. Drawing a deep breath, he looked up into Stryker's eyes. "You won't force me to be your mate?"

"No!" Stryker gasped. "Force you? Why would you think that? What did my brother tell you?"

"He made it seem like I had no choice," Rafe answered, his eyes wide, his gaze darting around as his brows scrunched up. He scooted back a bit and sniffled. "Or maybe he didn't, and I just got that impression. I don't know, we went over so much in such a small amount of time, it's like a blur."

"Nothing will be forced on you, baby." Stryker took Rafe's hands in his. "Right now, we're keeping you safe until we figure out this shit with your soul. But I'm going to ask one thing of you, okay?"

"What's that?" Rafe asked, still sniffling.

"Promise me you'll keep an open mind, okay?"

"I don't get it."

"Well, I think everything's moved too quickly. I want you to get to know me," Stryker explained. "I want to know you. No pressure, just promise me you won't write me off as a minion of Hell."

"No, I'm sorry about that." Rafe reached over to touch Stryker's face. "I didn't mean it the way it came out; I'm truly sorry if I hurt you."

"It's okay." Stryker laid a hand over Rafe's. He recognized the lust and desire in his little mate's eyes, even if Rafe didn't realize his own feelings. "This is real, Rafe. You're touching me, I'm solid. Our attraction is real."

"You're attracted to me?" Rafe asked, blushing.

Those red cheeks were one of the hottest things Stryker had ever seen, and he felt his cock hardening.

"I thought it was just a fate thing," Rafe added.

"Fate wouldn't have deemed us to be mates if we wouldn't have been attracted to each other," Stryker smiled gently. "What we did earlier was amazing, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Rafe whispered as he started to shake. "I'm sorry I passed out, that was the first time being with someone."

"Don't be sorry," he answered as he leaned in, "it was one of the hottest things I've ever seen."

"Me passing out?" Rafe asked with a giggle.

"Well, you're awfully cute when you sleep," Stryker purred as he brushed his lips against Rafe's. "But I meant watching you cum. Your face was so intent on the pleasure I was giving you; it was amazing the way you responded to me."

"It's not always like that? I mean, other men haven't responded to you that way?"

"No, baby, they haven't." Stryker kissed along Rafe's jaw. "Do you like this?"

"Yes, please don't stop."

"I won't, not unless you ask me to, okay?"

"I like it, I swear I do," Rafe moaned.

"But promise me you will tell me if I go too fast or do something you're not ready for," Stryker said as he pulled away to look into Rafe's eyes.

"I promise, Stryker," he answered before leaning in to claim Stryker's lips. "Thank you."

"For what, sweetheart?"

"For understanding and being gentle with me," Rafe answered. He started shivering again, but Stryker sensed the difference. Rafe was no longer afraid, and he no longer shook with fear. Instead, he trembled with desire.

Stryker smiled. He leaned in and started licking along the side of Rafe's neck.

"Did Tristan explain to you the mating bite?" Stryker asked. Rafe's shaking grew more violent, and Stryker sighed. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Why do I want you to bite me? I've been obsessed with the thought from the moment Tristan mentioned it," Rafe said.

"Because your body and soul recognize me as your mate," he answered as he started to unbutton Rafe's shirt. He took his time, kissing the skin he revealed as he kept working the shirt open. Once he had it all the way off, he bent his head to lick and suck on Rafe's right nipple.

"Oh my god, I think I could orgasm just from that," Rafe cried out and held on tighter to Stryker.

Stryker smiled around the nipple in his mouth as he gently moved Rafe to lie on his back. As Stryker turned his attention to the other nipple, he moved his hands down Rafe's lean stomach to the fly of his jeans. Rafe arched his hips into Stryker's hands.

"Do you want me to touch you there?" Stryker asked trying to keep his words as gentle as his movements.

"Please, Stryker," Rafe gasped. "I need, I need!"

"I know what you need, sweetheart," Stryker purred as he kissed his way down Rafe's stomach and undid his fly. He reached inside and pulled out Rafe's hard cock. Stryker felt the huge dick in his hands and leaned back to take a good, long look at it. *Oh, god.* He groaned loudly. It had to be over eight inches long. Eight inches of pure perfection. "Oh, I'm going to have so much fun blowing you."

"Oh god, I'm not sure I'd live through that," Rafe cried as he arched his hips.

Stryker licked his lips at the drops of pre-cum that formed on the engorged head of Rafe's cock. Leaning down, he swiped his tongue over the slit and moaned at the wonderful taste of his mate.

"I've dreamed of this all my life," Stryker whispered before running his tongue around the wonderful mushroom head. He then licked up and down each side of Rafe's cock and took about half of it into his mouth. He moaned loudly around the shaft and started working it in and out of his mouth. Stryker couldn't get over his surprise at the size of Rafe's cock, considering the man's overall small stature.

"No, no, not yet," Rafe cried out seconds before exploding into Stryker's mouth.

Stryker groaned as Rafe's warm seed ran across his taste buds and down his throat. His little mate tasted of cherries and coffee, an ambrosia Stryker didn't think he could ever get enough of. He sucked down every last drop of his mates cum as Rafe pumped his hips before collapsing exhausted.

Stryker released Rafe's cock, licking him clean before tucking him back into his pants. He looked up at his gorgeous mate, only to realize Rafe had passed out again. Rafe would adjust to the intensity of orgasms between mates, but since he was a virgin, it might take a little longer. Chuckling, he righted Rafe's clothes and lifted him into his

arms. Stryker hugged him close, taking the time to memorize his scent as they made their way back to the Hummer.

"Why does he pass out every time we leave you alone?" Tristan asked with a laugh.

"Hey, guys," Stryker answered, his cheeks heating as he tried to avoid his brothers' knowing looks.

Jackson and Braedan were leaning against the Hummer with Tristan. Apparently, Stryker and Rafe had spent enough time off in the woods for the other men to catch up. "I didn't hurt him."

"Oh no, those weren't cries of pain we heard." Jackson snorted. "I'm pretty sure you were showing him the time of his life."

"All right, that's enough of that," Stryker growled. "Let's head out."

"Yes, boss." Jared smiled as they all piled into the three cars. Jackson and Braedan hopped into their Dodge Ram, while Jared got into their Audi. Stryker got Rafe buckled into the back seat of the Hummer and climbed into the passenger seat while Tristan got in the driver's side.

"Maybe I should let him go," Stryker said quietly as they got back on the highway. "This might not be the life for one as innocent as Rafe."

"You love him," Tristan stated, not as an accusation, but merely an observation.

"Not yet, but I find myself falling hard and fast," he answered honestly. "But this isn't about me, Tristan."

"It's not?"

"No," Stryker grumbled as he turned toward his brother. "He's so confused and lost. Everything he's had to deal with and accept has overwhelmed him. Now throw being mated to a Hell Hound into the mix. I mean, come on, he was sobbing when I caught up to him, saying he was going crazy."

"It is a lot for one person to take," Tristan answered, nodding thoughtfully. "But it will get better for him. You've already made the connection. Don't you think it would be even harder on him if he didn't have you to turn to?"

"He's not turning to me; he was running away from me."

"Oh yeah, he was running so hard. Took you *hours* to catch him." Tristan's voice dripped with sarcasm. "He's frightened and unsure of the present and the future, Stryker. He'll need you more than anything to help him. Besides, don't you think he's old enough to make his own choices?"

"What do you mean?" Stryker asked, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion. "He's very naïve and inexperienced. He just turned twenty-one today. He's never seen the world. Fuck, he's barely seen anything outside his own house."

"True, but don't make the decision for Rafe to let him go," Tristan answered gently. "Talk to him, tell him everything. He's smart, really smart. You two will make the decision that's best for you both, but you both need to make that choice."

"I get what you're saying. I wouldn't want someone to make that decision for me." Stryker nodded. He agreed with Tristan's wisdom. Sometimes he forgot Tristan wasn't years older than the rest of them, given how worldly he always seemed. He felt tears start to burn his eyes at his next realization. "But I also have to think about what's best for Rafe."

"True, but you also need to look at what's best for you, Stryker, and for both of you. Like I said, you both have to make these decisions. Together. I mean, unless you say yes and he says no, then of course one of you makes the decision," Tristan said, starting to unravel in his own logic.

Stryker couldn't help but laugh. "Smartass. I know you're just trying to lighten the mood." He wiped away his tears. "You know I do love you."

"Yeah, yeah, I've hit my mushy shit quota for the day."

"Aw, c'mon, give us a hug," Stryker teased and tried to wrap his arms around his brother.

Tristan laughed and swatted at Stryker's hands. "Get off of me, you dork."

"I'm not a dork; you're a loser," Stryker retorted like they were ten years old again. He slugged Tristan in the shoulder.

Tristan's eyes bugged out of his head, but then he turned and smacked Stryker right back. And on and on they went for several minutes, trading blows and laughing like idiots.

"Are you two fucking drinking up there?" Jared asked in their shared bond. "You guys are driving all over the friggin road. And I can't even tell you what it looks like your doing from my view behind you!"

"I got twenty on Stryker screwing Rafe again," Jackson threw in.

"No way. My twenty says Tristan was trying to talk sense into Stryker and resorted to smacking him around," Braedan replied.

"Actually, the fucker tried to hug me after he was crying like a little girl," Tristan answered, smiling wickedly at Stryker. "So I'd say Braedan is the winner."

"Fuck you all!" Stryker replied, injecting a note of venom into his tone as he tried to keep from joining his brothers in raucous laughter.

"By the way," Jackson said when they had all calmed down. "Figured I should tell you this sooner rather than later. Braedan and I talked dear old Rafe's dad into changing his will to leave Rafe everything. He seemed to think it might help keep him out of Hell, jackass. So when we get all this shit sorted out, at least your mate will get everything his dad had. He can donate it, do whatever he wants with it, but at least it will be his choice."

"Thanks guys, that was pretty cool of you," Stryker answered, touched his brothers would try to help his mate. "Not sure he'll want it, but at least he might not feel as trapped as he does right now if he's got money and options."

"He told me he wanted to go to college, but his dad wouldn't let him," Tristan added, looking at Stryker and shrugging. "Just a thought."

"No, it's a good one, thanks for letting me know," Stryker answered everyone, then turned to address only Tristan. "We should be coming up on the turn-off for the safe house."

"Yeah, I see it," Tristan answered as he got into the right lane for the upcoming exit. Stryker sat back and watched out the window as they got closer. He knew if anyone from Hell, including other Hounds, really wanted to find them, they would. But

at least this house outside New Orleans was a few states over from where they were currently living. There was no way to trace the property to the Magnus brothers.

While they actually did get paid for the work they did for Hell, over the decades they had also taken other side jobs here and there. Jackson was a computer genius and had made sure to filter some of their earnings through several offshore accounts. Then he arranged to buy the property in cash, through an estate sale and attorneys and a fictitious name so no one had ever even seen them.

Stryker knew how much they all loved this huge old house. All five of them had been on the same page when they had bought it. It was the perfect place for all of them to retire with their mates after they put in their five hundred years of service in Hell. The house still amazed him every time he set eyes on the place. This time was no different when they pulled into the driveway.

It was one of those huge, southern plantation houses from the 1800s updated, upgraded and remodeled, of course. There were over two dozen bedrooms and suites. Not to mention the two ballrooms, indoor swimming pool, kitchens, playrooms, tech room, workout room, and on and on.

When they got closer to the main house, Stryker noticed the lights turning on in the gate keeper's cottage. They employed a retired Hound, Mac Henson, who was over a century old. He lived full time on the property, along with his wife, Linda, and their children, Sam, Lana, Josh, and Chris, who ranged in age from thirty to forty years old. Stryker had never met them, despite the fact they'd owned the house for decades.

Tristan had met with the family in private; they knew what the Magnus family was and understood the need for secrecy. It would be nice, after all these years, to meet the family who lived at and took care of their dream house. Stryker glanced over at Rafe, still sleeping in the back seat, and allowed his mind to wander to dreams of this being their home one day.

Chapter Four

Rafe awoke the next morning cocooned in the most comfortable satin sheets he had ever felt. He moaned as he stretched out, then his eyes grew wide and he gasped. *Where the hell am I?* He sat up, frantically scanned the unfamiliar room. What the – ? Oh, yes, he remembered. The safe house Stryker had mentioned.

But just where is Stryker?" He wondered as he got out of bed and looked down at his clothes. Except they weren't his clothes. Someone had dressed him in a pajama top that was way too large for him. Someone had seen him naked. That thought led to memories of the previous night's events, and Rafe wanted to crawl back into bed and hide. *Oh, god. I fainted again.* His cheeks grew hot as he remembered Stryker had gone down on him.

Gathering up his courage, Rafe went in search of Stryker, even though he felt ridiculous wearing nothing more than an oversized night shirt. He opened the door as quietly as he could and realized it opened up to a larger suite.

"It's close to midnight, something evil's lurkin' in the dark" Stryker was singing off key as he danced with his back to Rafe. "Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops you heart."

Rafe leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms over his chest as he watched the very large man who was trying to win his heart. He suddenly didn't feel stupid standing there in the oversized night shirt. Of course, he wasn't the one singing horribly and dancing to a song on his iPod. That would be Stryker.

"You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it," Stryker continued. "You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes, you're paralyzed."

"Oh my god, he's doing the Thriller dance," Rafe thought as he slapped his hand over his mouth to hold back his laugh. He couldn't believe he was watching the hottest man he had ever seen doing something so insanely silly. Rafe had opened his heart to Stryker after everything that happened the day before, but it wasn't until that moment he realized he wanted to *be* with the man dancing in front of him.

Rafe watched Stryker sing and dance for a few more moments before he slipped back into the room and found his clothes. Smiling as he got dressed, Rafe figured out a plan. He was going to need to find Tristan to ask for help, but at least he knew what he wanted now. And he wanted Stryker.

When he went back into the other room, Stryker had disappeared. Figuring he had gone for breakfast, Rafe left the main suite and walked out into the hallway. Listening, he heard voices coming from downstairs. He walked long the hallway until he got to a large double staircase and descended the stairs.

That's where he found most of the Magnus brothers, minus Stryker. They all fell silent as he approached, but Rafe swallowed his fear and moved forward.

"Hey, kid," Tristan said, breaking the silence. "How did you sleep?"

"Great, thanks." Rafe cleared his throat. "I have a favor to ask you."

"All right, whatcha got, short stuff?"

"I need some help learning . . . um." Rafe looked down at his feet. "We talked in the car about my lack of experience"

"Dude, there is only so much I'll do for my bro," Tristan answered, waving his hands in front of him and backing away.

"Fuck, I'll take one for the team, I think he's sexy," one of the other brothers answered and rubbed his hands over his tight body. "I'm Jared, little man."

"Um, I didn't mean like that." Rafe's cheeks grew warm and he stepped away. "I just meant I need a ride to a book store, or an adult store. Where ever I can go to get some research materials. I figured that was the best first step."

"What changed your mind?" Tristan asked, raising an eyebrow. "Last night you ran."

"This morning I saw into Stryker's heart," Rafe answered, giggling when he saw the confused looks on the brothers' faces. "He was singing horribly and dancing around the room."

"Aw man, he was doing the *Thriller* dance, wasn't he?" Jared chuckled. "He always does that shit when he's got something on his mind."

"It was the hottest, most awful thing I've ever seen." Rafe looked up to meet Tristan's eyes. "Will you help me?"

After a moment's hesitation, Tristan nodded and grabbed a set of keys from one of the other brothers.

"You're going to need this, little man," Jared said, handing Rafe a wad of cash. He snickered when he saw Rafe's confused look. "Can't use credit cards, they can be traced. We got your dad to sign everything over to you last night. He told us how to get into the safe. We figured you might need some money to start your new life."

Without thinking, Rafe jumped into Jared's arms and hugged him. After a moment of awkwardness, Jared hugged him back.

"Thanks, that means a lot to me," Rafe said as he disengaged from the hug. "You guys may be Hounds of Hell, but you're not minions of Hell."

"Well, thanks, little man." Jared snickered as he gave Rafe the money.

Rafe nodded, then turned to job after Tristan, who was holding the door open for him and shaking his head.

"You ready for this?" Tristan asked.

"Not a clue," Rafe answered, "but I'm willing to try. I'm never going to know until I try."

"Good man," Tristan replied as they got into the car. "I'm so going to deny I ever took you anywhere if my brother asks."

Rafe just laughed as they headed out. It took only a few minutes for them to reach a strip mall with a store that had Xs all over it. He looked at Tristan with wide eyes, only to see Tristan smiling broadly back at him.

"Let's do this." Tristan snickered as they got out of the car.

Rafe met him at the back of the car and took his hand. He wasn't sure why he did it, but he felt comfortable enough with Tristan to trust him.

They entered the store and Rafe was so distracted by everything all around him, he barely noticed the other people browsing the display cases and racks. There were fake dicks all over the place, more than Rafe could count, in every color of the rainbow

and then some. Some of the fake cocks had compartments that looked like they'd hold batteries. Others had straps on them.

Rafe moved past them cautiously, clenching Tristan's hand for support. The light squeeze he got back was all the motivation he needed to continue. He made his way over to the book shelves, then released Tristan's hand and pulled down the first one that caught his eye.

How to Give Oral Sex. Rafe read the title, smiled, and handed the book to Tristan, who merely shook his head and laughed. Rafe smiled back as he kept looking through the books. Tristan became Rafe's personal shopping cart as Rafe handed item after item to Stryker's brother.

By the time he'd gone through every shelf, Rafe had given Tristan over a dozen books. As he moved over to the counter to pay, Tristan grabbed his arm and pulled him over to another rack.

"Look, you'll learn this in the books," Tristan said, not meeting his eyes. "But I figured as long as we're here, you might want to get some of the supplies now."

"What do you mean?" Rafe asked, looking at the various tubes in front of him. He picked one up and read the label. *Quick-Slick*. "So you use this —"

"Just get it, the books will explain," Tristan quickly said.

Rafe tried to hide his smile as he grabbed a few different types. When he was done, he turned back to Tristan, who had a package in his hand. "You'll also need these."

This time, Rafe didn't bother asking any questions. He took the package — a set of four rubber plug-like items — from Tristan's outstretched hand and flipped it over. He read the directions on the back, his cheeks growing warmer with every sentence. *Hole-in-One Butt Plugs will ready even the tightest ass for anal penetration*. God. Would Stryker expect him to use these? Rafe shook his head. In for a penny, in for a pound

"Thanks, Tristan," he whispered as they walked up to the counter.

The man simply nodded. "I'll wait for you outside."

Tristan walked toward the doors, and Rafe smiled at the woman behind the counter who looked like she was trying hard not to giggle.

"I'm new to all of this," he said.

"I can see that," she replied, coughing over a laugh. "Nothing wrong with wanting to learn."

"That's kind of how I always look at it," Rafe answered, beaming. He gladly handed over the money for the total when she told him. Then grabbing his bags, he hurried after Tristan.

"How bad was the damage?" Tristan asked as he threw Rafe's bags into the trunk.

"A little over three hundred," Rafe said as they hopped in the car. "Now let's get some food; I'm starved."

"Gotta keep up your strength with what you have planned," Tristan said before bursting out laughing.

"All I have on the agenda is to do some research and get to know Stryker," Rafe answered. He thought more about that as they stopped at a bakery on the way home. Rafe was excited to try all types of new things he'd never been allowed to before. Living with his dad, Rafe worked hardest at staying invisible. And right now, even with all the confusion and drama surrounding him, Rafe wanted nothing more than to try everything he'd missed.

"Man, Rafe, I think you bought half the fucking bakery." Tristan snorted as he loaded the last of the purchases into the car.

"Sorry, I've just never been to a bakery before, and everything looked so good."

"You're serious?" Tristan asked, shaking his head. "That was your first time inside a bakery?"

"Why would I make that up?" Rafe asked. *Why would Tristan think I'd lie about something like that?*

"No, I'm not saying you're lying, little guy," Tristan quickly replied, patting Rafe's hand as they pulled out of the parking lot. "I'm just shocked. It's wrong to be your age and just taking your first bakery trip."

"Oh, I get what you mean," Rafe answered. "Yeah, it was my first time, but now I'm free. And if everything tastes half as good as it looks, it won't be my last trip!"

"I think you're bound to find something you like." Tristan chuckled as they pulled into the safe house driveway.

"What is this place, Tristan?" Rafe asked, dying to know more, but not wanting to annoy his new-found friend.

"It's our safe house; we plan to retire here with our mates one day. We bought it under assumed names and we hired a family who knows to keep our secrets to be caretakers. Mac — you'll meet him soon — is a retired Hound."

"You guys get to retire?" Rafe asked. "I'm sorry if I'm being a pain with all my questions, but I just want to know everything."

"It's cool," Tristan replied with a smile as they parked in front of the house. "Yeah, we retire after five hundred years of service."

"Wow, that's a long time," Rafe said, shaking his head. Every time he thought he got a handle on the current situation, new facts threw him for a loop.

"When you have all eternity, the years actually fly by," Tristan answered as they hopped out of the car and made their way around to the trunk. "You'll see."

"Thanks again, Tristan." Rafe leaned over and hugged the man. "I'm glad we're becoming friends."

"Me too, little guy." Tristan chuckled. "I think you'll be a great mate for my brother."

"What the fuck is this," Stryker roared out behind them.

Rafe jumped as he moved away from Tristan to see what was going on.

"Get your fucking hands off my mate, Tristan."

"It's not like that, bro," Tristan replied grimly as he popped the trunk. "Rafe needed a ride to get some things; I was just helping him out."

"And touching him," Stryker growled.

Rafe froze where he was, still holding the bags he had just grabbed in his hands. "I hugged him as a way to say thank you," he said gently, trying to defuse the situation.

"Why did you go to Tristan in the first place?" Stryker asked as he took a threatening step toward Rafe. "Why didn't you come and find me?"

"Stop this, Stryker," Tristan said evenly, but forcefully. "Rafe's been through enough. He saw me and after we got to talking last night, felt he could come to me. There's nothing wrong with that."

"He should come to *me*." Stryker made a grab for Rafe.

Tristan moved to intercede. He pushed Rafe behind him and smacked away Stryker's hand.

"You so did not just do that." Stryker said.

"I did, because you're acting like a jealous dickhead," Tristan growled. "Calm down and talk to Rafe; you'll see why he asked for my help. You're overreacting here, Stryker."

"You're going out on little jaunts with my mate," Stryker snarled.

Rafe watched, wide eyed, as Stryker's hands start shifting into claws.

"I was looking for him everywhere, scared something happened. And I find the two of you hugging out here, and now he's standing behind you instead of here with me. Tell me I'm over reacting again?"

"He's here by me because you're scaring him!" Tristan yelled. "Calm down and control your shift and I'm sure he'll go by you."

"Stop telling me what to do, asshole," Stryker threw back. "You're trying to steal my mate!"

"Don't be ridiculous." Tristan gently pushed Rafe farther away from him and around the car. "It's not like that."

"I say it is," Stryker answered, moving closer. In the blink of an eye, he swung, striking Tristan across the face.

Rafe just stood there with his mouth hanging open for the split second until Tristan dropped the bags he was holding and launched at Stryker.

Rafe's whole body shook and he watched in horror as the two brothers fought. Tristan had Stryker on his back for a moment before Stryker rolled them over and landed another punch in Tristan's face. But Tristan was giving it as good as he was getting. He landed several punches on Stryker's body. Rafe couldn't get over how fast they were moving and the amount of blood they were spilling.

Unable to watch anymore, he turned and ran toward the house. He wasn't sure who was going to win the fight, only that he wouldn't be of any help to Tristan. And Rafe did not want to be there if Stryker won and started in on him next. Once he was through the main doors, he hid in the first room he found. Curling into a tight ball, he moved the bags he had been carrying to block him from view of the door.

It wasn't the best idea, Rafe was sure, but it was the only one he had at the moment. He was still shaking uncontrollably and kept trying to even out his breathing. Nothing seemed to work. As the tears started to fall, he berated himself for thinking this could work out. How naïve he'd been to think he and Stryker had a chance to be together.

Chapter Five

"What is wrong with you, Stryker?" Jared yelled as he pulled Stryker off of Tristan. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"He's trying to steal my mate." Stryker made another lunge for Tristan. "They went out together, and I found him touching Rafe."

"The little guy gave me a hug for helping him," Tristan replied, waving off help from Jackson. "You guys were there; tell him that Rafe just wanted some help."

"Yeah man, we were there," Braedan answered. "Rafe came to Tristan, not the other way around."

"Where is Rafe?" Jackson asked.

"I saw him race through the front door looking scared out of his mind," Jared replied, pointing toward the house. "That's when I yelled for you guys, thinking we had trouble. But all I found was dumb and dumber, here, slugging it out."

"I would never hurt Rafe," Stryker yelled. "He doesn't have any reason to be afraid of me."

"And he knows that how?" Jackson looked at Stryker with a raised eyebrow. "You just beat the shit out of your own brother; why would Rafe think he was safe?"

"Hey, he didn't beat me," Tristan grumbled. "But I get your point. Just go talk to him, Stryker. When you realize how big of an ass you've been, you can apologize to me later."

Stryker rolled his eyes at his brother but turned and made his way to the house. He followed Rafe's scent into one of the sitting rooms.

"Rafe?" he asked as he moved into the room.

"Go away, leave me alone," Rafe sobbed from behind the couch. "Did you kill Tristan?"

"No, baby, Tristan's fine," Stryker replied, grimacing as the damage he'd done started to sink in. "I'm sorry. I have no excuse for the way I reacted."

"No, you don't," Rafe answered, starting to cry louder. "And you wonder why I didn't come to you? You beat your brother for helping me."

"All I can say is I'm sorry and I want to make it up to you." He crouched down and slowly crawling toward Rafe. He stopped when got within a foot of his little mate. Stryker's heart broke when he saw how badly Rafe was shaking and all the tears he had shed. "I'm really sorry, Rafe. I came to talk to you, and I couldn't find you. I was so scared something happened, I looked everywhere. Then I find you in the arms of my brother . . . I just freaked."

"You think?" Rafe sneered as he finally looked up at Stryker.

Stryker winced as he saw the pain and anguish on his mate's face.

"Tristan didn't do anything wrong. I didn't either."

"No, you didn't," Stryker answered, nodding in agreement. "I was the asshole. I know that."

"So now what?" Rafe asked, wiping away his tears. "Do I get my beating next?"

"Rafe, baby, I would never hurt you," he whispered as he moved closer.

"You don't think that hurt me?" Rafe gasped as he scooted away from Stryker.

"Fine, you didn't hurt me physically, but your lack of faith in me hurt. You really think I would ever cheat on you?"

"Well, no. I don't think you ever would. And I know Tristan wouldn't either. I was just so upset to see you in another man's arms."

"It was your brother!" Rafe yelled as he scrambled to his feet and put more space between them. "I went to him and asked him for help, you jerk. I saw you this morning, and I thought I got a look into your heart. And I wanted to try and make this work, so I went to Tristan to ask for help on sex —"

"You did *what*?" Stryker growled. "He taught you about sex?"

"No, you big dope," Rafe replied, putting his hands on his hips as he stared holes into Stryker's head. "He took me to an adult store."

"Oh, yeah, this just keeps getting fucking better and better," he sneered, standing as well. He moved to grab Rafe, who bent over and grabbed one of the bags at his feet. Before Stryker could react, Rafe whipped the bag at his head.

"Hey! What the fuck was that for?" Stryker asked.

"Look in it!" Rafe yelled as he grabbed the second bag and started hitting Stryker with it. "I wanted to learn about sex so I got some books. I didn't want to be the stupid, inexperienced kid trying to please someone who obviously knows more than I do. I asked Tristan to take me there so I could get help and figure out how to do what you did to me!"

Stryker struggled to keep up with Rafe's mile-a-minute rant. He took the bag Rafe was beating him with and opened it up. He reached inside and pulled out the first book. *Anal Sex Made Simple*. Stryker looked from the book to Rafe's beet-red face, and then back to the book, at a complete loss for words.

"Still think your brother is trying to steal me and we're having an affair behind your back?" Rafe asked sarcastically as he stood there with his arms crossed over his chest.

Stryker was momentarily distracted at how hot his mate looked when he was pissed off. Shaking off his thoughts of lust, he turned back to the bag in his hand.

"No," he finally whispered before looking back at Rafe's face. Even though he was a foot taller than his mate, right at that moment he felt about three inches tall.

"Thank you."

"What?" Rafe asked, confusion written all over his face. "Thank you for yelling at you?"

"No, well, that too, I guess." Stryker dropped the bag and walked over to Rafe. He leaned down and captured his little mate's, pouring all his emotions into a deep kiss. He lifted his head and looked into Rafe's eyes. "Thank you for wanting to please me. Thank you for giving us a chance like I asked you to. I was so scared you would want to leave me after what you said last night. And when I couldn't find you —"

"You thought I left," Rafe finished for him. "I wasn't leaving, Stryker. I promised to keep an open mind and not run. And when I saw you this morning I knew I wanted to stay."

"Wait, what do you mean, you saw me?"

"I woke up alone and went looking for you," Rafe replied, his cheeks turning the cutest shade of pink. "And I saw you singing and dancing around. I just stood there watching you, seeing this glimpse into your goofy heart. That was all it took for me to know that I really want to try and see what we have. So I went and got dressed, and by the time I finished, you were gone. I heard people talking and followed the voices."

"You saw me singing and doing the *Thriller* dance?" Stryker asked, feeling heat rising in his cheeks. God, talk about embarrassing. He knew he couldn't sing worth a damn, but for some strange reason, it always made him feel better. "You saw that and you still wanted to give us a try?"

"Yeah, I thought it was one of the hottest things I've ever seen." Rafe took Stryker's face in his hands and pulled his face down for a quick, chaste kiss.

Stryker's eyes widened. Rafe had never initiated any intimacy between them before.

"So I found your brothers at the bottom of the stairs, and begged Tristan to take me somewhere I could get some research materials." Rafe acted like he didn't notice Stryker's shock.

"God I love Tristan." Stryker chuckled as he kissed his little mate again. He picked Rafe up in his arms, smiling when Rafe wrapped his legs around Stryker's hips. "So you got a bunch of books."

"And a few other things." Rafe buried his face in Stryker's neck.

"What other things, sweetheart?" Stryker asked gently, sensing Rafe's embarrassment.

"If I tell you, it doesn't mean you're forgiven," Rafe stated, leaning back and meeting Stryker's eyes. "If I'm willing to change my entire life, even if it was a crappy life, to try and have a relationship with you, no more blowing up like that."

"I can't promise that, baby," Stryker answered honestly. "I can promise to try my best, but I can't promise I won't, and I don't want to lie to you. I will work on my issues and give you the benefit of the doubt next time."

"Okay, good enough." Rafe smiled, quickly kissed Stryker's lips, then buried his face in Stryker's neck again. "Butt plugs and lube."

"Oh fuck me," Stryker groaned. Only through sheer force of willpower did he manage to keep his hands on Rafe's back. He so wanted to grasp his little mate's ass and pull him closer. But they were making good progress, and he didn't want to mess it up.

"Actually, I think it's so you can do that to me." Rafe giggled against Stryker's neck before planting a string of kisses on his neck. "Those were Tristan's idea. He said the books would explain it to me, but since we were already there to get the other items we'd need."

"I really love that brother of mine," Stryker moaned as he sat down on the couch before his knees gave out. Rafe's kisses were sending shocks all along his nerves, straight to his cock. And he wanted nothing more than to sink his hard dick into his mate's virgin ass. "Do you forgive me enough to let me see the plugs?"

"Am I not doing this right?" Rafe asked. He leaned back, his lips curving down at the corners and his brow creased in a frown.

"Doing what, baby?"

"Kissing you," Rafe answered, looking down at his lap. "If I was kissing you right, you wouldn't be thinking about the plugs."

"That's not how it works," Stryker replied as he lifted Rafe's chin so he could look into his mate's eyes. "The kissing was making me weak in the knees so I had to sit down. You being in my lap, touching me, makes my cock hard. And then all I can think about is when I can sink it into your tight, hot ass. But my brother is right; we need to start using the plugs and work our way up to that point."

"So my kisses were driving you crazy and you can't wait to ravage me?" Rafe asked, flashing a brilliant smile.

"I want to ravage you so fucking much it hurts, Rafe." Stryker grasped Rafe's shirt and yanked him close. He gave his little mate a kiss he hoped showed just how much he wanted him. When Rafe moaned against his lips, Stryker slid his tongue in his mate's mouth.

Stryker demanded Rafe's submission to him in that kiss. He gave his little mate a taste of everything he had in mind and wanted to do to Rafe. As he ravaged Rafe's lips, he grabbed the cheeks of Rafe's ass through his jeans and pulled him even closer until their hard cocks rubbed together.

"You're really hard to stay mad at," Rafe whispered against Stryker's lips. "But you're not off the hook yet."

"I know, baby, but please don't deny me right now." Stryker begged. "I'll do anything you want, just please let me see the plugs?"

"In the other bag," Rafe moaned as he pushed his ass harder into Stryker's hands.

Stryker reached down and grabbed the other bag. In his haste, he upended the bag, dumping its contents onto the floor. Tubes of lube and a package of plugs in four different sizes lay at his feet.

"Oh, Rafe, please let me show you how these work," Stryker groaned before quickly kissing Rafe again. "I'll do anything."

"Anything?" Rafe leaned back with his eyebrows raised.

"Yes, anything, I swear," Stryker panted, completely turned on by the prospect of playing with Rafe's ass.

"Okay, you can put the smallest one in me," Rafe replied. "But I get to put the second one in you later after I've read up on how to do it."

"That sounds fair," Stryker growled. *More than fair*, he thought. *Fan-fucking-tastic*. In a flash he had his shirt off and had torn Rafe's shirt off as well.

"Watch it, I don't have many clothes." Rafe giggled.

"Clothes are overrated." Stryker took in his mate's half naked body. Though small in size, Rafe was lean and toned in a way that made Stryker ache with desire. "Do you trust me, baby?"

"Yes, but you're going to go slow, right?" Rafe asked, searching his face.

"I promise." Stryker smiled. "Take off your pants and lay over my lap."

Rafe looked at him with wide eyes before shimmying off his lap and standing before him. His face was bright red as he reached and undid his fly. In a matter of seconds, he was naked and lying across Stryker's lap. Stryker opened the package and took out the smallest butt plug, which was purple.

"Can you tell me what you're doing before you do it?" Rafe asked, his voice shaking as much as his body.

"If that's what you want." Stryker grabbed one of the bottles of lube. "First, you squirt some lube on the plug so it goes in easily." He took a moment to do just that before pouring more lube on his fingers. "Then you put some on your fingers so you can stretch out your ass hole."

Rafe gasped as Stryker pulled the side of his ass to expose the most gorgeous, little, pink asshole Stryker had ever seen. He couldn't help himself as he leaned over and licked it, causing his mate to squirm and Stryker to moan. Then he slowly rubbed his index finger over his mate's puckered entrance, taking the time to make sure it was thoroughly coated.

"Now that your hole is lubed up on the outside, I'm going to gently push my finger in." Stryker sucked in a breath. He felt his cock twitch as he watched his finger sink into Rafe's ass. "I'm going to wait a few moments and allow your ass to get used to it before I start moving it."

"It feels weird, like pressure, but it doesn't hurt." Rafe gasped and grabbed onto Stryker's calf. "There's a slight burn."

"That's normal," Stryker answered as he used his other hand to stroke his mate's tight, firm ass. "You'll find that the line between pleasure and pain gets blurred during anything sexual. Some people don't like any pain, some like a little, and some even like a lot. There's really no right or wrong, just what feels good."

"I feel like I'm going to explode if you don't move," Rafe whimpered.

"Okay, but tell me if I do anything you don't like, baby," he cooed as he started to move his finger around. The moan Rafe gave told Stryker that his little mate liked this part just fine. After a few more minutes just working his finger in and out of Rafe's ass, Stryker was sure Rafe was ready for more. "I'm going to slide in a second finger now, okay?"

"I'm ready," Rafe panted, tightening his grip on Stryker's leg.

Slowly, Stryker pushed in a second finger, pausing when Rafe cried out.

"Don't stop, please don't stop." Rafe followed his cry with a plea for more.

"You're so fucking responsive." Stryker moaned as he pushed the second finger in the rest of the way. "Just wait until it's my big cock in your ass."

"The way you talk is so hot," Rafe hissed as he squirmed on Stryker's lap.

Without even thinking, Stryker smacked Rafe's ass.

"Stop teasing, or I might hurt you," Stryker said, his gaze fastened on the pink handprint he left on his mate's ass. The sight of his mark on his mate made Stryker's dick grow impossibly hard. Only when he heard Rafe mumble into his leg did he snap out of his erotic trance. "What did you say, baby?"

"Is it okay to like that?" Rafe asked at a whisper.

"You liked that I spanked you?" Stryker answered, a feral smile crossing his lips. "Oh fuck, that's hot."

"Really?" Rafe turned to look up at Stryker. "It's okay that I want you to smack my butt?"

"Yes, it really, truly is," Stryker whispered as he leaned over and sucked Rafe's bottom lip into his mouth. After a quick nip, he released it and smiled down at Rafe. "Can I do it again?"

Rafe's eyes glazed over in a haze of lust. His breathing quickened and he nodded. Stryker smacked Rafe's ass again as he pushed both fingers all the way into his mate's hole.

"Again," Rafe screamed and pushed his ass against Stryker's fingers. "Please, again."

Stryker couldn't keep the smile off his face as he spanked his little mate over and over again, working his fingers in and out of Rafe's ass at the same time. After about the tenth time, Rafe cried out and came all over Stryker's lap, humping his hips wildly. Before he could forget the whole point of this, Stryker quickly removed his fingers and gently slid in the smallest plug.

"Oh god, yes," Rafe groaned as the plug went right in. "That was amazing."

"For me too." Stryker wiggled the plug in his mate's ass, then moved to rub his hands all over Rafe's luscious ass, turned bright pink from the spanking.

"Can it be your turn?" Rafe asked with a moan as he turned to look at Stryker.

"What do you mean, baby?" Stryker lifted Rafe up to straddle his lap. "You want to put the plug in me now?"

"No, I still want to read about that first," Rafe answered, looking anywhere but Stryker's face. "I want to touch you. I've not even seen your penis yet."

"Oh, sweetheart." Stryker chuckled. "You don't have to ask. I'm all yours."

"Really?" Rafe asked, finally meeting Stryker's eyes. "I can touch you whenever I want?"

"God, yes." Stryker moaned as he took Rafe's face in his hands and licked his mate's lips. "Whenever, wherever you want to touch me, you can, Rafe."

"I like that." Rafe smiled and moved off Stryker's lap.

Stryker sat motionless while Rafe unzipped Stryker's fly, then reach in and free his cock from his boxer briefs. Rafe's jaw dropped as he pulled out all ten and a half inches of Stryker's cock.

"Holy shit, that's never going to fit in my ass."

"You swore!" Stryker gasped. "I've never heard you cuss before."

"I don't, normally; you're a bad influence on me." Rafe giggled but kept his gaze pinned on Stryker's dick. "How will you get all of that into me?"

"With a lot of fun for both of us," Stryker answered as he placed a quick kiss on Rafe's lips. "I promise."

"Okay." Rafe smiled up at Stryker, and the obvious trust on his face made Stryker melt.

Rafe wrapped both hands around Stryker's dick and started moving them. Stryker moaned and pushed his jeans down off his hips. He spread his legs wider to allow Rafe access to all of him.

"Oh, that's good," Stryker said as Rafe reached one hand down to cup his balls. "Remember when we were talking about the line between pain and pleasure, Rafe?"

"Yeah," Rafe answered, looking up to Stryker's eyes.

"I'm one of those people who like some pain with their pleasure," he said, feeling his face start to flush. "You don't have to worry about being too rough with me."

"Okay, as long as you tell me what you like." Rafe nodded.

"I'd like it if you licked and bit my nipples while you did that." Stryker moaned as Rafe squeezed his nuts harder. He watched Rafe lean in and tentatively lick his right nipple. Feeling himself melt more into the couch, he wrapped his arm around his little mate's back, pulling him closer. "Yeah, just like that, baby."

Rafe smiled up at him as he started to pull on his cock harder. Stryker tried to keep his eyes from rolling back into his head; he didn't want to miss a minute of Rafe's exploration of his body. The sight made him so fucking hot. He gasped as his mate took his left nipple between his teeth and bit down gently. He widened his legs, exposing himself more to Rafe.

"Harder, Rafe, pull on my cock harder," he moaned, trying to hold still and let Rafe keep control. Stryker hissed when Rafe started to stroke his dick firmly and faster. "Yes, fuck yes, don't stop. Please don't stop, baby."

"You like that? What else do you need, Stryker?" Rafe asked, his desire to please showing clearly in his eyes.

"Just you, baby," Stryker answered honestly as he leaned over and kissed his little mate.

The kiss must have fired Rafe's blood, because his hands started working Stryker's cock even faster. Stryker broke the kiss, crying out at the dual sensations of Rafe's hand on his dick and balls at the same time. "Yeah, squeeze my sac, that's it, roll it around against your fingers."

"Like this?" Rafe asked, doing just what Stryker had said.

"Oh fuck, yeah. Just like that, Rafe!"

"I want to lick it, like you did for me," Rafe purred before leaning over and biting Stryker's nipple again, much harder this time, and the sensation pushed Stryker right over the edge.

"No time," Stryker cried out as his cock exploded in Rafe's hand. Cum squirted out of the top of his dick, hitting Rafe in the face and landing all over Stryker's chest.

Rafe sat motionless, his eyes wide, as if mesmerized by the sight of Stryker's coming. Stryker pumped his hips into his mate's hand to keep up the rhythm.

He collapsed back on the couch when his orgasm started to subside, panting heavily. "That was amazing."

"I'm sorry I stopped. When you cried out, I got scared I hurt you," Rafe whispered as he cuddled against Stryker. "I'm sorry if I ruined it."

"You didn't ruin a damn thing." Stryker chuckled as he wrapped both arms around his mate. "That was the best hand job I've ever gotten. It was perfect, Rafe."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really, Rafe," he whispered as he kissed the top of his mate's head. "You are so perfect for me in everyway."

"You're just saying that because I forgave you." Rafe giggled against his shoulder. "Can I taste it?"

"What, baby?"

"Your cum, can I lick it off your chest?"

"Oh god, you do that and I'm going to get hard again," Stryker groaned, loving Rafe's innocently curious nature. "You don't have to ask permission, Rafe. Do whatever feels right."

Rafe pulled away, looked at Stryker's face for a minute before leaning down and licking some of the cum that landed on Stryker's nipple. Stryker moaned loudly, and sure enough, felt his cock start to harden.

"It's sweeter than I thought it would be," Rafe whispered as he leaned in to take another lick. "It tastes almost like pickles."

"Pickles?" Stryker asked, chuckling. "That's one I've never heard before."

"Sorry," Rafe replied quietly, his face turning bright red.

"Hey, no reason to be sorry, baby." Stryker lifted Rafe's face up to his. "I'm just curious as to what you mean."

"You know how pickles can be kind of sweet before you really bite in and taste the salt?" Rafe asked. Stryker nodded, and Rafe continued. "That's how your cum tastes."

"I don't think I'll ever get enough of you," he replied, gently cupping the side of Rafe's head. He ran his thumb over his little mate's smiling lips.

"I didn't pass out this time when I came," Rafe said, beaming with pride.

"No, but I'm ready to pass out; what do you say to a nap?"

"Sounds good, but my legs aren't working yet."

"I'll carry you anywhere, baby." Stryker chuckled as he quickly did up his pants and lifted Rafe in his arms. Not wanting to take the time to redress his little mate, he threw a blanket over him. He tossed everything back into the bags, lifted Rafe into his arms, and headed up to their room.

Their room, Stryker thought, as Rafe snuggled against him. He'd never wanted to share his room, his life, with anyone before. He liked this feeling.

Chapter Six

Rafe awoke surrounded by thick, strong arms and couldn't remember ever having felt as safe and peaceful as he did right then. Smiling, he uncurled himself from Stryker as an idea filled his head. After he got out of bed, he grabbed some clothes and threw them on as he raced out the door.

Since he still hadn't seen any of the house – other than the front hallway and the one sitting room – it took Rafe several tries to find the kitchen. He froze when he saw a woman bustling about the room.

"Hi," he said quietly, trying not to startle her. "I'm Rafe."

"Well, hello there, Rafe," she replied, smiling. "My name is Linda Henson; I work here for the Magnus brothers."

"It's nice to meet you." Rafe moved forward and shook her hand. "I was wondering if Tristan brought in all the food from the bakery."

"Yes, he did; you bought a lot of food." She chuckled. "Good thing we have several large men who eat their body weight in food a day."

"Yeah, I guess it works out then. I was wondering if there was a picnic basket. I wanted to grab an assortment of goodies and take a walk with Stryker," he said blushing.

"He's your mate, right?"

"That's the word." Rafe giggled, feeling at ease with the sweet woman. She was about his height, middle aged, slightly plump, and incredibly friendly. "Not sure how this whole thing works, but for now, I just want to get to know Stryker."

"I don't know any of the Magnus boys, really, but I think a picnic is a step in the right direction," she replied, winking. "You go wake up your mate and I'll pack some snacks for you boys."

"I can do it," Rafe started to say but Linda waved him off.

"Nonsense, that's what the boys pay me for. You go get your mate and I'll be done by the time you get back."

"Thanks, Linda." Rafe gave her a smile before rushing out of the kitchen and back upstairs to their room.

"I woke up alone, baby," Stryker said sleepily as Rafe walked into the bedroom. "I didn't like it."

"Sorry." Rafe smiled as he crawled into bed with Stryker and straddled his hips. "But I have a surprise for you, so you can't be cranky with me."

"Oh really, what kind of surprise?"

"You'll just have to wake up to see." Rafe giggled as he wiggled his butt.

"Baby, you keep doing that and the only thing getting up will be my dick," Stryker answered.

Rafe's cheeks grew warm, but he loved that he put a smile on his big guy's face. "I really turn you on that much?"

"Oh yeah." Stryker smirked a second before he pounced on Rafe and rolled him over. "I could just eat you up all day long."

"I like the sound of that," Rafe panted, suddenly breathless and aroused. "But I set up something fun for us. Well, I hope it will be fun."

"If you took the time to plan something, I'm happy to oblige," Stryker replied, rolling off of him.

Rafe watched in awe as the perfect specimen of manhood moved around the room completely naked, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"God, you're gorgeous," Rafe whispered.

"I'm glad you think so." Stryker threw Rafe a wink over his shoulder. Then he seemed to think better of it and turned to give Rafe the full view.

Rafe's mouth watered as he watched Stryker move his hands over his chest, down his tight abs, and over his hips before grabbing his hard cock.

"You really like what you see?" Stryker asked.

Rafe couldn't find his voice, so instead he simply nodded and crawled to the end of the bed. Deciding to be bold, he moved off the bed and knelt in front of Stryker. He looked up, giving Stryker a questioning look. When Stryker smiled, Rafe took it as a sign of encouragement to continue.

Slowly, Rafe leaned forward and licked the tip of the big man's cock.

"Oh, baby that's good," Stryker moaned as he grasped his cock and pumped the shaft.

Loving the encouraging words, Rafe braced his hands on Stryker's thigh and took the head of the huge dick into his mouth.

Rafe ran his tongue around the big mushroom head, smiling when he felt Stryker shiver. He kept rolling his tongue around it while he increased the pressure of his lips, like sucking on a lollypop. He glanced up when he felt Stryker's hands go into his hair, and the look on Stryker's face sent a thrill through Rafe that went all the way to his toes.

"Can you take more into your mouth, sweetheart?" Stryker asked, stroking his head gently.

Rafe didn't bother to answer; he simply swallowed more of Stryker's cock. He was surprised at the amount of saliva his mouth was secreting as he started to move his head up and down the thick shaft. He swallowed on the down stroke.

Stryker moaned loudly and tightened his grip on Rafe's head. "Fuck, do that again. Keep swallowing as you suck my cock, Rafe."

This time he did nod as he obeyed Stryker's request. He cupped Stryker's balls and gasped as Stryker cried out and thrust his hips forward, pushing more of the huge dick into Rafe's mouth. Rafe gagged, and Stryker immediately pulled back.

"Sorry, sweetheart, it felt so good, I couldn't help myself," Stryker said gently. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Rafe simply shook his head, never taking his mouth off the big man's cock. He started sucking on it as fast as he could, caressing Stryker's balls in time with his bobbing head. Glancing up every so often, he watched the bliss form over Stryker's face, noted the way his hands were fisted at his sides.

Rafe longed to take in all of Stryker's cock, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't take in more than half.

"Fuck, Rafe, don't stop, baby," Stryker moaned as his body started to shake. "Baby, I'm going to come. You're going to have to swallow or move your mouth."

Rafe answered by gripping Stryker's thighs harder and sucking as fast as he could. His neck hurt from moving it up and down so many times, but the discomfort paled next to the satisfaction he felt when he heard Stryker cry out and his mouth filled with warm, salty cum.

"Oh fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," Stryker yelled as each spurt of seed slid down Rafe's throat.

He swallowed it all as fast as he could, thinking it might be rude to spit some of it out. When Stryker's dick was spent, Rafe let it slip out of his mouth.

Stryker sank to his knees and pulled Rafe into a tight hug. "Thank you, Rafe. That was amazing."

"I'm glad, it was fun." Rafe chuckled as he snuggled into Stryker's embrace. "I'm going to need some practice. I was getting upset I couldn't get it all into my mouth."

"Any time you want to work on perfecting your technique, sweetheart, I'm all yours." Stryker snickered as they stood up.

Rafe sat on the edge of the bed and watched Stryker throw on some jeans and flip flops.

"No shirt?"

"Don't see a point in one; it's warm out today," Stryker answered with a shrug. "Plus, I like the way you look at me when I'm not wearing a shirt."

"I like the way you look without a shirt," Rafe mumbled, then yelped as Stryker threw him over his shoulder and jogged out to the hallway.

"We have really good hearing, baby." Stryker chuckled as they went down the stairs. "You better get used to it. So where's this surprise?"

"Kitchen." Rafe giggled, trying to catch his breath.

"Well, hello there, you must be Stryker," Linda said as they came into the kitchen.

Rafe's cheeks grew warm as he imagined how he must look, slung over Stryker's huge shoulder.

"I am, and you must be Linda," Stryker answered as he lifted Rafe off his shoulder and set him on his feet.

Rafe had a head rush as the blood returned to the normal places in his body. He smiled as Stryker reached over and shook Linda's hand; at least his mate had manners.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Stryker said.

"And you as well," she replied before turning to Rafe. "You'll find everything you need by the patio doors."

"Thanks, Linda." He smiled as he walked over to a set of French doors.

"Oh, you two have already met?" Stryker asked.

Rafe turned to find Stryker looking at him, brows raised.

"Yeah, we're old friends." Rafe giggled, rolling his eyes. "Linda offered to help me with the surprise. Now behave and get over here."

"Yes, sweetheart." Stryker chuckled as he walked over to Rafe. He squatted down on his haunches to try and see what Rafe had. "A picnic basket and blanket?"

"Yup, now come on." Rafe grabbed the basket with one hand, and Stryker's hand with the other.

Stryker leaned over and took the basket from him, and Rafe smiled at how kind his big, warrior-like man could be. They made their way out the patio doors, past the gorgeous brick patio, and down the back lawn several hundred yards."

"Does this work, baby?" Stryker asked once they were a good distance away from the house and under a large tree. "I think this will give us some privacy."

"Works for me." Rafe giggled as he spread out the blanket before sitting down in the middle of it.

Stryker set the basket in front of him and sat next to Rafe.

Rafe excitedly opened the basket and started to take out food. "Wow, Linda really did put a little of everything in here."

"What, did you buy a bakery when you went shopping?" Stryker laughed and Rafe sighed. God, how he loved the sound of his mate's laugh.

"It was my first time in a bakery, I might have gone a little overboard," Rafe replied as he started taking the covers off the food and setting everything out. "Everything looked so good, and for once no one was there to tell me I couldn't do something. Or not even tell me, but just that feeling that I have to hide and be quite."

"That's really how you grew up, wasn't it?" Stryker asked as he took Rafe's hand.

Rafe looked up and nodded. "Yeah, I hid mostly. I helped at the convent with my only friend, Sr. Catherine. I talked to Tristan about all of this on the drive here. The short version is that my father had Sr. Catharine taken care of when she tried to help me escape that house. When I was old enough, she said I could come live with them. She disappeared a week later."

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry," Stryker said as he pulled Rafe into his lap.

Although he felt like a child, sitting in Stryker's lap, Rafe wanted the comfort.

"He's gone now, he can't hurt you anymore," Stryker said.

"No, you took him to Hell and your brothers got him to sign over his money to me," Rafe replied. "I'm not sure how I feel about all of that, Stryker. I'm not going to lie to you; I love that I feel free for the first time in my life. I'm not constantly scared I'm

going to say or do the wrong thing. It's like this weight has been lifted off my shoulders and I can find out who I am."

"I want that for you." Stryker kissed along Rafe's neck. "I just want to be there with you while you figure it out. All I want is a place in your life."

"I want that too." Rafe turned his head to kiss Stryker's lips. "The more I get to know you, the more I want it too."

"Then I'm the happiest man ever, baby."

"All right, now that we've settled that, let's start tasting this food." Rafe giggled as he leaned forward and took a cupcake in his hand. He bit into it and moaned loudly, turning so Stryker could take a bite as well.

Within seconds, they'd gobbled up the cupcake.

"So, you like?" Stryker asked when Rafe reached for some napkins.

"I did, best cupcake ever." Rafe moved out of Stryker's lap, but sat close so their knees touched. "I'm feeling some of these cookies next."

"You're going to get me fat."

"Oh yeah, right." Rafe snorted as he shoved half a cookie into his mouth. He closed his eyes and chewed slowly, savoring the bittersweet chocolate. He swallowed and smacked his lips. "You so have to try this."

Stryker smiled and grabbed the other half of the cookie. He popped it into his mouth, then uttered an appreciative moan. Rafe nodded in silent agreement. The cookies were moist and bursting with chocolate. He and Stryker went on that way for awhile, sharing all the different goodies, along with details of their past.

It was one of the best afternoons of Rafe's life. One that he knew was the start of the love he was feeling for Stryker. One he would always hold close to his heart and look upon as the beginning of the rest of his life.

Chapter Seven

"Stryker!" Jared called out, running toward them. "We've got problems, man."

Stryker groaned, annoyed that reality was interrupting their perfect time on the picnic. He was getting to know so much about Rafe, wanted to learn everything he could.

"What's up?" he asked, wrapping an arm around Rafe's shoulders when he saw the concerned look on his little mate's face.

"Tristan got a scrambled call from Dante," Jared answered as he reached their spot beneath the tree. "He's pissed, and I mean *really* pissed. He says we disobeyed direct orders to bring Rafe in and he sent a team after us."

"They're coming to take me to Hell?" Rafe asked, looking scared beyond words.

"Not going to happen, little guy." Jared chuckled as he knelt on the blanket and grabbed a cupcake. "You're part of this family now, and we protect ours."

Stryker sat silently for a few moments, and then, like a light bulb coming on in his head, an idea came to him. "What about the rule that mates are off limits?"

"Tristan brought that up. Dante said you haven't mated yet." Jared shook his head. "He said since Tristan couldn't say you were going to mate for sure, it was out of his hands. Tristan got the distinct impression this went way over Dante's pay grade. Something's really going down, Stryker. This isn't normal procedure, man."

"I know, but we'll figure it out," Stryker replied before kissing the top of Rafe's head. "We need to talk with Mac; maybe he's heard about this selling souls before people are born shit."

"Good idea; you guys finish up here and I'll get everyone together." Jared nodded. He reached over and took a handful of cookies, smiling impishly before heading back to the house.

"Are we going to be okay?" Rafe asked.

"Yeah, we'll handle this," Stryker answered, trying his best to reassure his mate. "I promise you'll be safe."

"None of this would be happening if we were mated?"

"No, if we mate, you become immortal like us," Stryker answered carefully. "But that's not a reason to mate, Rafe. We will keep you safe."

"I know, I wouldn't mate with you just because of that, it would be wrong."

"That's not what I meant, I just want you to make the decision for what you want, without any outside pressure. I want you to mate with me because you want to spend eternity with me, Rafe. Not because you're afraid."

"You want me to mate with you?" Rafe asked slowly, looking at him with wide eyes. "I thought we were going to get to know each other?"

"Baby, I want to know everything about you," Stryker said, leaning to take Rafe's face in his hands. "But I knew you were the one as soon as I heard you speak. That's how it is for Hounds, we just know."

"What happens if I say yes?" Rafe asked in barely a whisper.

"Well," Stryker drawled, "we'd make love. And for Hounds, there's a certain way we have to do it. It wouldn't be just sex, it would have to be doggy style and I would shift in the middle of it and bite your neck."

"You'll shift into a dog?" Rafe gasped, glancing down to avoid Stryker's gaze.

"Actually, I'd shift into our third form," he answered, chuckling. "It's more half Hound, half man. We only use it when we need to fight, not when we collect souls. I would be much larger than I am now."

"I can't believe you're going to fit in me as is," Rafe said, looking away. "How can you fit if you get even bigger? You would rip me in half."

"Never happen, baby," Stryker replied, turning his little mate's face back to him. He leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "We'll make sure you're ready, Rafe. I won't ever risk hurting you."

"Won't biting me hurt?"

"For a bit, but I'm told it turns into the best pleasure ever." He smiled. "And before we both orgasm, you'll drink from my wrist and we will be bound together for all eternity."

"I'm scared, Stryker," Rafe whispered against his lips.

"Don't be, you don't have to decide yet," Stryker answered gently. "I will wait for you forever if that's what it takes, sweetheart."

"Thank you," Rafe said as he wrapped his arms around Stryker's neck. "I want to say yes — it's like I *need* to say yes — but I just want to be sure."

"Not until you're ready, until then, we just get to know each other," he answered, pulling Rafe onto his lap. "And maybe play a little along the way."

"What do you mean?" Rafe asked an instant before Stryker reached into the back of Rafe's pants and wiggled the butt plug. His little mate yelped in his arms and held on tighter. "Stryker, oh my god, the things you do to me."

"You like that, baby?"

"Yes," Rafe hissed as he wiggled on Stryker's lap. "Please, I want more."

"I thought you'd never ask," he replied as he reached around front and undid Rafe's jeans. Stryker quickly pulled them off and helped Rafe step out of them.

"Stryker, I'm naked in your backyard," Rafe whispered as if others could hear him.

"I know, and I love it," Stryker replied, never taking his eyes off Rafe's hard cock. He leaned down and wrapped his lips around the mushroom head. Rafe cried out and shook under Stryker's hands. As he moved his head up and down Rafe's dick, Stryker reached in his pocket and pulled out the lube he'd stuck in there when Rafe wasn't looking.

After he poured some on his fingers, he pulled out the butt plug. Rafe moaned and grabbed onto Stryker's shoulders as he moved his legs on either side of his lap. Stryker smiled around his mate's cock, loving how Rafe responded to him. He carefully pushed two fingers into his mate's ass, while he continued swallowing and sucking on the dick in his mouth.

Once he was sure Rafe's ass had adjusted, he started scissoring his fingers back and forth. He made sure to rub his fingers over Rafe's prostate each time. After a few minutes, he slid a third finger in his mate's little ass. It was then that Rafe's hips seemed to grow a mind of their own.

"So good, I don't know if I can keep going." Rafe panted as he thrust his cock forward and down Stryker's throat. When he pulled his hips back, he impaled himself on Stryker's fingers. "Harder, please, harder, Stryker."

He looked up at Rafe's face, trying to figure out what his baby wanted harder. But Rafe had his head thrown back, whimpering as his whole body shook. Stryker decided to try harder in his little mate's ass and pushed his fingers in farther.

"Yes, oh shit, don't stop," Rafe screamed.

Obviously, Stryker had made the right choice. He thrust his fingers in and out forcefully now, loving that his mate liked a little rough play.

"I-I'm going to come."

That was the warning Stryker had been waiting for. He quickly pulled his fingers out of Rafe's ass and pushed in the next size butt plug he had also brought with them. Rafe yelled his name loudly as his cock exploded in Stryker's mouth. He moaned at the taste of his mate's seed as it ran across his tongue and down his throat. Swallowing every last drop, he caught Rafe just as his little mate's legs gave out.

"I swore again," Rafe panted and giggled as he curled up closer to Stryker.

"I know. You keep this up and I'm going to have to paddle your ass." He chuckled as he rubbed his hands up and down Rafe's body.

"Promise?" Rafe smiled and then yawned. "I'll get into all kinds of trouble if this is the type of punishment I get."

"I'll hold you to that, my little mate."

"I really do like the sound of that," Rafe replied.

"Me too, baby," he said, giving little kisses all over Rafe's face. "And we got the next size plug in that hot little ass already."

"Feels funny, but good." Rafe giggled, as Stryker watched his eyes droop. Rafe smiled at him as Stryker cleaned up and redressed his mate. Laying Rafe down gently, he then moved to pack up what food they didn't eat. When Rafe moved to help, Stryker held up his hand, signaling he had it under control.

When he was all done, he lifted Rafe into his arms and grabbed the basket and blanket. As he made his way to the house, he thought about how easily he could get used to having a mate in his life. He knew he would do whatever he had to if it meant keeping Rafe in his life.

"You wore him out again?" Tristan asked as he opened the back door to let Stryker in.

"I'm awake." Rafe smiled.

"You're just jealous," Stryker snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, I am," Tristan replied quietly before turning away.

Stryker stared after him, stunned. He never figured Tristan would be envious of anyone, much less him. But looking down at the gorgeous man in his arms, he saw why. He would have been jealous, too, if one of his brothers was lucky enough to have found a mate like Rafe. And the little man belonged to him.

Hugging his mate closer, Stryker swore to protect Rafe no matter what. Even if it cost Stryker his life.

"So you must be Stryker." A man came in through the kitchen door. "I'm Mac Henson."

"Nice to finally put a face to a name," Stryker replied, as he set Rafe down on his feet. Rafe sat down as Stryker shook Mac's hand. "Thank you for taking such good care of our house."

"It's what you pay me for, son." Mac chuckled. "So this is the boy? The one you were sent to collect? I'm not sure I understand, his soul is clean."

"That's why we couldn't bring him in." Stryker glanced lovingly over at Rafe. "His father is a real piece of work. He said he sold Rafe's soul before he was even born. That somehow the demon he contacted was able to swing that deal."

"I've never heard of that," Mac said, rubbing his chin, seeming in deep thought. "When I was in the service of Hell, I saw lots of thing. Most of which I wish I could forget, but this is new to me."

"Our boss sent another team to come and collect him," Jared answered, striding into the room. "We can handle the team, but it's only a matter of time before something has to be done. We're just not sure what that is."

"Understandable," Mac replied. "Once, a long time ago, I knew a hound that had a team after his mate. He contacted an angel named Castillo. I'm not sure what went down, but his mate was safe after that. That's really the only advice I can offer you boys."

"You know how to contact this angel?" Stryker asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I do. I'll look through some of my old journals. I wrote down the summoning spell to call him," Mac answered. "It's not going to be easy, but I assume this is important."

"More important than my own life," Stryker stated, pleading with his eyes that Mac understand.

Mac nodded solemnly, and Stryker knew he got the message across. He looked up as the rest of his brothers entered the room.

"I'll go find that journal," Mac said, getting to his feet. With a nod to Stryker, he left.

"We'll figure this out, man," Jackson said once they were alone. He patted Stryker on the back. "Braedan and I will set up some cameras and security measures so we're ready for the team coming."

"Thanks, brother," he answered, trying to act more positive than he felt. "I appreciated it."

"Hey, that's what we do." Braedan chuckled as he and Jackson headed outside.

"I'm sorry, Tristan," Stryker finally said after several minutes of silence. "You were right, I'm an asshole."

"Yeah, you are," Tristan agreed, but his smile softened his words.

"But I'm your asshole." He smirked, knowing his brother wasn't really angry with him. "I talked to Rafe, and after he beat me with the shopping bag, we figured everything out. I promised to try and curb my temper and assumptions."

"Good, he's loyal to you."

"I know that, I just got so scared that he ran," Stryker replied, rubbing his hands over his face. "When I couldn't find him, I freaked. And then he went to you for help and not me —"

"And you lost it." Tristan filled in. "I get it, bro; just make sure Rafe does too."

"I think he does now."

"I do," Rafe said from the other sofa in a sleepy voice. "He's still an idiot and in trouble."

"I thought you forgave me?" Stryker asked, turning to see his little mate smiling up at him.

"Not until I heard what you said to Mac." Rafe got up and moved over to sit on Stryker's lap.

"I think we'll give you guys some alone time." Jared chuckled, and he and Tristan got up to make themselves scarce.

"I didn't know you were awake," Stryker said quietly. He kissed along Rafe's neck. Every time the gorgeous little man was in his arms, he couldn't help but touch and kiss any part of his body Stryker could reach. "I thought you were going to take a nap?"

"I thought so too, but as it turns out, I'm not tired," Rafe replied, wiggling his eyebrows at Stryker as he swung his leg around to straddle his lap. "Mate me."

"What?" Stryker whispered. He lifted his head to look in Rafe's eyes. "What did you just say, baby?"

"Mate me, Stryker," Rafe said quietly, his cheeks turning bright red. "What you said to Mac erased the rest of my doubts and fears. I want to be yours for all eternity."

"Baby, I'll protect you even if we're not mated."

"I know that," Rafe replied, nodding. "That's why I want us to be mated. No one's ever wanted to protect me, or even wanted me before. And you want to do both and make me happy. And I feel the same way. It's like everything inside me wants nothing more than to make you happy and be with you."

"Are you sure, baby?" Stryker asked, searching his mate's face. "Because once we do this, there is no turning back."

"I'm sure," Rafe answered as he leaned back and took off his shirt. "I want to be your mate, Stryker. I want you to take me and bite me. I want you inside me."

"Oh, you're so going to be the death of me." Stryker chuckled as he ran his hands over the lean chest in front of him. "I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you, Rafe."

"Me too," Rafe replied before leaning forward and taking his lips.

Stryker moaned, loving the fact that in such a short time his mate had started feeling comfortable enough to instigate kissing and touching him.

"We need our bed. Now," Stryker growled as he stood in one fluid movement and threw Rafe over his shoulder. He headed out into the hallway toward the stairs.

"Here's the summoning spell." Mac stepped through the front door just as Stryker entered the foyer. He handed Stryker a piece of paper. "It must be done at dusk, just before the sun fully sets."

"Hiya, Mac." Rafe giggled as he tried to turn on Stryker's shoulder, but Stryker barely noticed. He was more focused on the newest development.

"Hello there, son." Mac chuckled and nodded at Rafe before turning back to Stryker. "Getting Heaven's forces involved is a big deal, Stryker. Be sure this is what you want before you summon the angel."

"I don't see another way, do you?" he asked.

"No, but I wanted to make sure you were warned properly."

"I'm willing to take the risks for my mate." Stryker nodded as he set Rafe down on his feet.

"Wait, what risks?" Rafe asked, his grip tight on Stryker's arm. "I don't want you or your brothers to get hurt for me."

"We're immortal, baby; we can't get hurt," he answered, trying to convey more calm in his voice than he felt.

"Then what risks?" Rafe asked stubbornly, letting go of his arm and moving in front of Stryker with his arms crossed over his chest. "We said we wanted to mate, that means we're equals. I won't be kept in the dark on this shit."

"You cussed," Stryker said in an effort to distract Rafe

"Deal with it," Rafe replied, waving him off, "I find I'm liking it. Besides I think it's hot when you do it, so I figured it might be the same for you."

"I feel like I'm corrupting you," Stryker grumbled.

"Please do." Rafe snickered. "Now tell me about these risks."

"We've got company," Jackson yelled from the front of the house. "Perimeter sensors have been tripped."

"Mac, take Rafe," Stryker growled, pushing his mate into the man's hands. "You and your family hide in the panic room."

"You got it." Mac grabbed Rafe's arm, but Rafe turned and smacked the man's hand away. Stryker would have laughed if the circumstances were different. Mac was almost as big as Stryker, but that didn't seem to bother his little mate.

"No, I'm not leaving your side," Rafe yelled. "Equals, Stryker, I meant that."

"Baby, please listen to me," he said gently, grabbing his arms. "This isn't about being equal. I need to know you are safe and protected, otherwise I won't be able to focus on the task at hand. I will worry about where you are, if you're safe and if the other team can get to you. For this to work, I have to show fearless strength like a team leader. I can't do that if I'm scared for your safety."

"Okay," Rafe whispered as he stood on tiptoes to kiss Stryker. "But I will be so pissed if you get hurt and I lose my mate when I just found you. Don't let anyone get hurt for me, please? Promise me that?"

"I can't, baby. We all promised to protect you, but I can promise you won't lose me, okay?"

"I'll hold you to that," Rafe replied. They exchanged one more kiss before Stryker turned away.

"Come on, Rafe," Mac said. "Let's go."

Stryker didn't turn as he heard them leave through the front door. Instead, he addressed his brothers, who had gathered in the foyer, awaiting his orders. "Everyone ready for this?" Stryker asked.

They all nodded as they shed their clothes and quickly shifted.

"Things were getting boring around here anyways." Jackson chuckled over their shared mental link.

They moved into position inside along the front of the house. Just as Stryker was about to tell his brothers that the other Hounds were near, there was a knock at the front door.

"What the fuck?" Tristan said to the rest of them. *"Why are they knocking?"*

"We just want to talk, Stryker," a man yelled through the front door. "You know we wouldn't be standing on your doorstep if we wanted a fight. I swear we didn't come here for that."

"I know that voice," Jared replied to all of them. *"That's Colton Sethos. Stryker, I don't think they're here to fight, Colton's a good guy."*

"All right, shift back, guys," Stryker answered after he had already shifted. He pulled on his pants and walked to the front door. He took a deep breath before opening the door. "Colton, so nice to see you."

"You as well, Stryker," Colton replied as he held out a hand. They eyed each other as they shook hands. "We're not here to fight, can we come in?"

"Yeah, but if I feel you're here to threaten my mate in anyway, I will gut you all. Are we clear?"

"Your mate?" Colton asked, shock apparent on his face before he turned to look at his brothers, who shared the same look. "I knew something wasn't right when we got the orders to bring you all in."

"So why aren't you fighting us?" Stryker asked, feeling better about the situation then he had a few minutes before. "I mean, you knocked on the goddamn front door, man."

"We were ordered to find you and bring you in," Colton drawled with a smile. "If you guys could beat us. We decided on the way here to just lay our cards out and figure out what the fuck is going on. Hounds of Hell we may be, total bastards we aren't. I've never known you or your team to go off mission; we knew something wasn't right. We figured if we said we'd come get you, it would buy you some more time."

"You came to help us stall Hell?" Tristan asked, trying not to laugh. "That just fucking rocks."

"We thought so," one of the other Sethos brothers said from behind Colton. "Besides, we don't get paid to track down other Hounds. It breaks all the bro codes."

"Well then, come on in, team Sethos." Stryker laughed as he opened the doors wide. "Let's get some food going and we'll fill you in on what we know. We have to hurry; we've only got a few hours before dusk."

"What happens at dusk?" The same Sethos brother asked. "I'm Cameron, by the way."

"Oh right, manners." Colton laughed, pointing to people as he introduced them. "I'm Colton, this is Cameron, that's Taylor, Dex, and Rhyce."

"I'm Stryker," he replied, "and this is my team, Tristan, Jared, Jackson, and Braedan."

The men all shook hands and said hello all around, and Stryker smiled. It was nice when the minions of Hell had enough integrity to help out their own kind. Everyone could always use some more allies.

Chapter Eight

"Stryker!" Rafe yelled out as he raced out of the panic room when the doors opened. He just made it by Mac before the man could grab him. It never even crossed his mind to worry about what was outside the room. All he cared about was getting to the man he was falling in love with.

"It's okay, baby," Stryker said from the front hallway.

Rafe made his way there as fast as his shorter legs could carry him. He slid to a stop when he saw five men had joined them and everyone was joking around. Rafe felt his temper rise.

"Why are you guys all goofing around? You scared the shit out of me!" Rafe yelled, startling all ten men. "This is so not cool."

"Baby, you cussed again." Stryker chuckled as he moved away from the group toward Rafe. "I'm not sure how I feel about you starting to cuss."

"You curse all the time," Rafe replied, crossing his arms over his chest, while staring holes into Stryker's head. "And you didn't answer the question. I thought we were on lockdown because another team was coming. You had me taken to the panic room! Now I get out and you're all goofing around. What is going on?"

"They didn't come to fight or take you, little man," Tristan answered. "This is Colton Sethos and his brothers, Cameron, Taylor, Dex, and Rhyce. They took the assignment to buy us some time with Hell and try to figure out what was going on."

"We don't hunt other Hounds," the man Tristan had called Colton said, stepping forward. "So you're the clean soul that everyone's stressing over."

"He's my mate," Stryker replied evenly, but with firmness in his voice. "This is Rafe Damas."

"Hi everyone," Rafe said, moving quickly to stand next to Stryker. He had been so worried and then so confused, he hadn't been thinking about the fact that these very large men were Hounds as well. Rafe knew he shouldn't be scared; Stryker wouldn't let anyone hurt him. But you can't undo years of fear in just a few short days.

"Nice to meet you," Colton stated gently, moving to shake Rafe's hand once Stryker's arm was wrapped around his shoulders.

"Alright, now that we know you boys are all going to play nicely, let's get you fed," Linda said, walking into the room and grabbing Braedan and Jackson by the arm. "You two start up the grill."

"Yes, ma'am," they said at the same time, causing everyone else to laugh.

"Is everything really okay?" Rafe asked, standing on his tiptoes to whisper in Stryker's ear.

"Yeah, it really is, Rafe," Colton answered before Stryker could. "We have really good hearing. Never bother to whisper around a Hound."

"Good to know," Rafe replied, rolling his eyes. "So now we talk about the risks of calling the angel?"

"Oh my, what kinda hole are you guys all in?" Colton asked, laughing as everyone made their way to the kitchen.

"Long story short," Stryker answered as he moved Rafe in front of him. "Rafe's father sold his soul for money before he was even born. We were sent to collect it, but when we saw he had a clean soul, we couldn't take him in. Then his father told us he made the deal with the demon and I had my brothers take Mr. Damas instead. Then we headed out to here to lie low and come up with a next move."

"So far makes sense." Colton nodded. "Where's the angel fit in?"

"We talked with Mac, who runs the house when we're not here," Stryker continued, gesturing to Mac. "He knew of a Hound that had some problems with his mate's soul in the past. Told us he knew how to contact an angel named Castillo. Mac had just handed me the summoning spell when you all showed up."

"And that's where dusk fits in?" Cameron asked, joining them around the large kitchen table. "Most spells have to be done at sunset or sunrise."

"You know about these things?" Rafe asked as Stryker pulled him off his chair and onto Stryker's lap. Rafe looked up and smiled at his large mate, loving that Stryker always kept him as close to him as he could.

"I've seen a few spells done." Cameron shrugged.

"You might be of help then," Tristan said. Rafe turned to see him reading over the paper Mac had given Stryker. "This doesn't seem hard, but it's always good to have someone around who knows what they're doing."

"I wouldn't go that far." Cameron snickered.

"All right, who wants burgers and who wants brats?" Linda asked as she took a head count.

"I'm sorry we got interrupted, sweetheart." Stryker leaned down and whispered in his ear. "I was looking very forward to what we were going to do."

"Me too," Rafe replied as he leaned his head back so he could kiss Stryker upside down. When they stopped, he spread his thighs on either side of Stryker's, pushing his ass back against the large man's groin.

"Behave, baby," Stryker growled as he firmly grabbed Rafe's squirming hips. "You really don't want to be pushed down on the table and fucked in front of everyone, do you?"

"I can't believe you just said that," Rafe answered with wide eyes as his cheeks started to burn. "You wouldn't do that!"

"Don't tempt me. I might not ever share you," Stryker purred in his ear. "But that doesn't mean I'm not above giving everyone a show of what they can't have."

"Why does that idea make me hard?"

"Because you're perfect for me in everyway," Stryker answered as he moved their chair under the table more. Before Rafe could even say anything, his big mate had his hand down the back of Rafe's jeans again. Deciding no one could see, Rafe leaned forward and gave Stryker even better access. "Abso-fucking-lutely perfect for me."

"I'm so glad I am," Rafe panted as Stryker undid his jeans so he could slide his hand farther inside. He was starting not to care if the tablecloth was covering what they were doing or not.

"I can't get enough of this hot little ass," Stryker whispered as he licked the side of Rafe's neck.

He swallowed a screamed, grabbing Stryker's thighs and trying not to squirm when Stryker's fingers tapped the butt plug in him.

"We all know what you're doing there," Cameron said. Rafe looked up in shock as he realized Cameron was talking about them. "We can all smell both your desire. Hell, I can smell his pre-cum."

"Sorry," he whispered, wishing the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

"Don't be." Colton chuckled. "I was enjoying the show. My brother's just being an ass."

"Stryker," Rafe pleaded, hoping his mate understood his humiliation.

Stryker pushed Rafe's shirt down to cover his open fly and lifted him into his arms. "Well then this show is moving into the other room," he said, smiling down at Rafe.

"Can we still watch?" Colton asked with a laugh.

Rafe didn't bother answering him. He was too focused on Stryker's face. He couldn't have missed the lust that was in the man's eyes if he was blind. Stryker didn't say anything, didn't even seem to breathe as he stared at Rafe.

Realizing this was something his big mate wanted, Rafe swallowed his own embarrassment and nodded. It was worth it when he saw the shock than glee that ran across his mate's face.

"My baby says it's okay," Stryker answered as he carried Rafe across the kitchen, opened the door to the living room and went inside. "Are you really okay with this, Rafe?"

"Yes," he whispered, then cleared his throat to try again. "You really like the idea and I want to try. I can't promise I'm okay with always having an audience, but I've loved everything we've done so far. I trust you and want to try."

"You are the sexiest, most wonderful mate in the world," Stryker replied as he sat on the couch so that Rafe was straddling his lap. Before Rafe could even reply, Stryker had his shirt off and was sucking on Rafe's nipples.

"Oh god, I see why you like that so much," Rafe moaned. The intense shocks Stryker's lips sent to his cock had Rafe pulling at his mate's shirt, not even sure what he was trying to accomplish. "I need to feel your skin."

"Gladly," Stryker answered, smiling as he lifted his head, then whipped off his shirt. He moved Rafe off of him and quickly pulled off his pants before reaching for Rafe's.

"It's like you really want me naked or something." Rafe giggled as Stryker yanked his jeans off.

"I want you naked always, my little mate," Stryker growled when Rafe was completely nude and lying spread out on the couch. "Look at you, you're gorgeous."

"Yes he is," Colton groaned, reminding Rafe they weren't alone.

Rafe lifted his head and saw that Colton, Rhyce, and Dex had taken seats around the room and were watching them. Rafe wasn't sure how he felt about it, being naked in front of them. But in his lust-filled haze, all he could think about was that Stryker wanted an audience.

"How do you want me this time?" Rafe asked breathlessly. "Do you want me over your lap again so you can spank me?"

"Oh fuck, he likes to be spanked?" Dex moaned as he rubbed his crotch.

"My baby likes anything that involves my hands, and he's amazing when he comes," Stryker purred as he leaned over and licked Rafe's nipple. "I think I owe you a spanking for cussing, don't I?"

"Yes, please," Rafe whimpered as he felt his cock twitch. In an instant he was over Stryker's lap with his ass on display.

"You're going to want to be able to see his face during this," Stryker said, addressing their audience.

Squirming on his mate's big lap when he felt the plug in his ass move, Rafe yelped when a firm hand landed on his butt.

"Don't move, baby. You know that gets me hard."

"I like you hard." Rafe moaned as Stryker massaged his ass where he'd just slapped.

"You're going to like it even more when I'm hard and fucking your tight ass," Stryker growled. Rafe thought he would explode right there, just listening to Stryker talk to him like that.

"You haven't been in him yet?" Dex asked.

Rafe turned to look at the man and saw Dex already had his hard cock in his hand. Rafe gulped. The only dick he had ever seen up to that point was Stryker's."

"Nope, my baby's a virgin," Stryker said before smacking each side of Rafe's ass several times. "No one will ever be in this sweet little ass but me."

"Oh fuck, that's so hot," Rhyce moaned. "I'd love to be mated to a virgin."

"Really? I thought my inexperience would be a bad thing?" Rafe asked, looking up at his mate. He smiled when he saw the look of pure desire and passion Stryker gave him.

"No, I love that you're going to experience everything for the first time with me," Stryker growled as he smacked Rafe's ass again. "It drives me insane to know that all of you is mine, and only mine. Isn't that right, baby?"

"Yes," Rafe answered before turning back and grabbing onto Stryker's legs. "My ass is only yours, Stryker."

The growl his mate gave thrilled Rafe down to his toes. And when Stryker pulled the plug from his ass, Rafe cried out as his whole body shook.

"Fuck, this is way better than Internet porn." Colton half moaned, half chuckled. "Not that I'm demeaning you pleasuring your mate down to porn, but you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do," Stryker replied, still massaging Rafe's ass. "Baby, hand me the lube out of my jeans."

Rafe did what his mate asked, passing it up to him. He should have known his big mate would be prepared. But Rafe was still shocked to find the next size plug in his mate's jeans as well.

"When did you get this?" Rafe asked as he passed it to Stryker.

"I've had it since before the picnic," Stryker answered with a wide smile. "Call me hopeful."

"I don't ever seem to be able to say no to you anyway." Rafe giggled, but his laughter quickly turned into a moan as he felt two lubed fingers slide into his ass. "You got two in the first time?"

"You're getting stretched out, baby. Soon you'll be riding my big cock," Stryker purred as he moved his fingers in and out of Rafe's ass. "I might just keep this hot ass on my cock always, once I get in it."

"That might make walking around awkward," Rafe groaned, loving the images his mate gave him. "I'd probably enjoy it though."

"Yes, you probably would," Stryker answered. He leaned over and bit gently into Rafe's ass.

Rafe yelped, his ass constricting around the fingers pushing inside of him.

"It seems my baby likes it when I use my teeth."

"His cock's leaking down your leg," Dex said.

Rafe felt his face heat up, but what Dex had said was true. He watched as the large stranger stroked his own cock while watching Stryker play with Rafe's ass. It was then Rafe realized he was more turned on by the audience than embarrassed.

"Can he take a third finger?"

"Yes, please," Rafe moaned, trying to push back so Stryker's fingers went in deeper.

"Stop moving," Stryker growled again, smacking Rafe's ass hard.

But if smacking Rafe's ass was Stryker's way of dishing out punishment, it wasn't working. All it did was make Rafe harder and drive him closer toward an orgasm.

"Please, Stryker, I-I need" He whimpered as he moved all around his big mate's lap.

"I know what my baby needs," Stryker answered gently before pushing a third finger into Rafe's ass.

That was all it took to push Rafe over the edge. Screaming out his release, he thrust his hips against Stryker's lap, loving the friction it caused on his dick.

"Oh, fuck me," someone else groaned.

Rafe ignored the other man's excited whisper, too wrapped up in his own bliss.

"That was one of the hottest things I've ever seen," Colton said as Rafe's orgasm subsided and he started to calm down. "You're a very lucky man, Stryker."

"You should be on this end." Rafe giggled. "I'm the lucky man."

"I'm glad you think so." Stryker chuckled as he pulled Rafe up onto his lap. "But I agree with Colton, I'm very, very lucky."

"I want to make you feel even luckier," Rafe whispered as he waggled his eyebrows. Not waiting for Stryker to ask what he meant, Rafe moved off his mate's lap and pushed his way in between Stryker's thighs. His mate got the idea and spread them wide, inviting him in.

He leaned forward, making sure to stick his ass in the air for their audience, and licked the tip of Stryker's dick. Groaning as the salty/sweet taste of his man's pre-cum touched his tongue, Rafe went back for more.

"This is only my baby's second time giving head," Stryker moaned as he ran his fingers through Rafe's hair. "He's truly gifted."

"Fuck, I can't remember the last time someone sucked my cock," Colton moaned.

Rafe reveled in the praise Stryker gave him, sucking as much of the man's cock into his mouth as he could.

"Your mate seems to really enjoy it," Rafe heard someone say, but he was too focused on Stryker.

Rafe smiled around the dick in his mouth, looked up at Stryker and nodded. Then he reached up and started gently squeezing Stryker's balls. Stryker scooted forward on the couch, giving Rafe better access. Rafe bobbed his head, trying to take more of Stryker's cock with each downward stroke, but the long, thick shaft chocked him.

"Relax your throat, baby," Stryker cooed, gently playing with his hair. "Breathe through your nose and don't force it."

Taking the advice, Rafe was able to finally get past the halfway point. Considering how large Stryker's dick was, he was pleased with his progress.

"I know he's your mate and all," Rhyce said from behind Rafe. "And I mean no disrespect, but watching him blow you with that plug in his ass is killing me. I've never wanted to sink my cock into an ass so badly before."

"Mine," Stryker growled, tightening his hands in Rafe's hair.

Rafe yelped.

"Sorry, baby. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Rafe tried to show on his face that it didn't hurt him, just startled him. He kept sucking while he squeezed Stryker's sac harder. Stryker's loud moans and harsh, panting breath spurred Rafe on.

"Baby, if you keep squeezing like that, I'm going to shoot my load in your mouth soon," Stryker groaned.

Rafe grinned to himself and squeezed harder.

"Fuck yeah, Rafe. Just like that, sweetheart."

Rafe swallowed and sucked with everything he had, wanting to bring his mate the same pleasure he had received. Moments later he was rewarded when Stryker roared out his release and his mouth filled with his big mate's seed. Rafe swallowed every last drop, moaning at the wonderful taste.

When Stryker's cock stopped pulsing, Rafe let it slip from his mouth. He laid a gentle kiss on the tip, before climbing up and straddling his big man's lap again.

"You are so fucking perfect," Stryker purred before grabbed the back of Rafe's head and crushing his mouth down on Rafe's.

Rafe opened his mouth and moaned when Stryker's tongue slid past his lips and tangled with his own. Rafe melted into his mate, reveling in the passion and fierce need Stryker seemed to have for him.

"That was fun." Rafe panted when they came up for air. "I didn't even realize you had put the next plug into me until I started sucking on you."

"I'm glad you liked it." Stryker chuckled before gesturing behind Rafe. "I think they did too."

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the three men holding their spent cocks with cum all over their hands and pants. Rafe laughed before burying his head against the side of Stryker's neck.

"Oh yeah, I liked it a lot," Colton answered. "I so need to find me a mate like yours."

Chapter Nine

Later, after they got cleaned up and ate, Stryker stood in the backyard, along with his brother's and Colton's team. Stryker watched as Tristan and Cameron worked on the summoning circle and prepared everything to call the angel. Rafe stood in front of him, leaning back against his chest like it was the most natural thing in the world. It felt so right to have him there.

"Okay, I think we're just about ready," Tristan said as he wiped his hands on his pants. "And the sun is setting, so everyone brace yourselves."

Everyone took a few steps back as Cameron started speaking an incantation in Latin. The air began to vibrate, as if they were shifting, but on a larger level. Just as Cameron finished speaking, blinding white light shot up from the circle and wind blew out toward them.

"What the fuck," the figure in the middle of the circle yelled as the light and wind disappeared. "Where am I?"

"Castillo?" Stryker asked, blinking away the spots that still danced before his eyes from the flash of light they'd just seen.

"Who has called me forth?" The man barked.

"No!" Jared and someone else screamed, distracting Stryker as he watched his brother shift fully clothed and start howling.

"Rhyce, what's wrong?" Colton yelled while Stryker and his brothers were trying to talk to Jared.

"ENOUGH!" The man in the circle screamed in a way no mere man could yell. "Who has called me forth."

"I did," Stryker answered as he moved forward and pushed Rafe behind him. Now that his eyes had adjusted, he could see the handsome angel. Castillo was a large

man, lean and toned. "My name is Stryker Magnus. I was told this was the way to summon the angel Castillo."

"I am Castillo," the man said. The man turned, and the faint outline of wings at his back became visible. "Why have you called me here?"

"I'm sorry, but we need help, Castillo," Stryker answered. "My mate and I."

"I care not for the minions of Hell," Castillo replied with an arrogance Stryker didn't appreciate. "Release me from this circle and be on your way, or so help me I will slaughter you all."

"No, I can't do that until you hear me out." Stryker shook his head. "I'm sorry you're pissed, but I can't worry about that when my mate's soul is at stake."

"Fine," Castillo growled at him. "You have two minutes to explain. Then you release me or I will start killing you all."

"My mate, Rafe" — Stryker gestured toward Rafe, who stood next to him, shaking in his shoes — "his father somehow made a deal with a demon for his soul before he was even born. We were sent to collect his soul, but as you know, we can't take a clean soul to hell. You can see how good his soul is."

"I can, and I can also tell you are not lying," Castillo replied, seeming to lose some of his ego. "But what you are telling me isn't possible. One cannot promise or deal with another's soul."

"Which is why when another Hound told us of having heard of an angel being summoned before, we tried to call you," Stryker answered, nodding. "Again, I apologize for how we went about this, but it's not like this is our normal procedure."

"Nor mine, to be sure." Castillo rolled his eyes.

A low whine caught Stryker's attention. He swung around to find that both Jared and Rhyce had shifted. Both Hounds lay still, whimpering softly, their heads resting on their front paws.

"What's wrong with them? Did you do something to them?" Stryker asked. He took a threatening step toward the angel as both Hounds whined louder.

"I did not," Castillo answered before turning to the men in Hound form. "Believe me, I'm not a fan of this either. It is not for me to questions God's plan, but I don't have to fucking like it."

"What does that mean?" Colton growled, stepping up next to Stryker. "What is happening to them?"

"One issue at a time," Castillo snapped, then turned toward Rafe. "Human, come forward. You have nothing to fear from me, little one."

Rafe hesitated, and Stryker grabbed his mate's arm.

Castillo rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to smite the clean-souled human. I just need to touch him and read his mind."

"You won't hurt him?" Stryker asked, cringing at the way his voice shook with fear.

"No, I swear to you," Castillo answered, almost kindly. "I have my procedures to follow as well. Ours is reading the minds of those involved to make sure."

"He's an angel, Stryker," Rafe said as if that should explain it all.

But after over a century, Stryker knew not to trust anyone but his brothers. Still they'd summoned Castillo here, and what choice did they have, really? Reluctantly, he let Rafe go. He watched, feeling helpless, as Rafe stepped into the circle and Castillo touched the top of his mate's head.

"No, he has never been in the presence of a demon," Castillo answered after a few moments. "This is quite a dilemma, one that I do not have the answers for."

"Hell seems to want him in a bad way." Tristan took a step forward. "We told our superior that Rafe was Stryker's mate, and mates are supposed to be off limits. But the information only seemed to make heighten their desire to bring Rafe in, before he and Stryker had a chance to mate. They sent another team after us to get him within a day."

"Then something is very amuck." Castillo rubbed his chin. "I need you to release me from this circle. I will report to my superiors and come back with answers."

"You give your word?" Stryker asked.

"I do, Hound," Castillo replied with his hand over his heart in a pledge. "I fear something grave has been happening under Heaven's nose. This must be resolved. While I fucking hate being summoned, I am glad this was brought to our attention. Now, I need to be released from this circle to report back."

"Umm, this spell doesn't have anything about breaking the circle," Cameron said, stepping forward. "Tell us how and we will."

"Repeat the incantation while rubbing away the markings of the circle on the ground," Castillo answered with a huff. "You're minions of Hell; how do you not know how to work summoning spells?"

"We avoid anyone who works for Hell besides other Hounds." Stryker chuckled. "You don't ever ask to meet with anyone from Hell."

"Fair enough." Castillo laughed. His smile looked magical. He started to shimmer and the air moved as Cameron did as Castillo had instructed. Once he was done, Castillo turned and bowed to Cameron, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Cameron shrugged. "I was just kind of along for the ride."

"You can find your way back, right?" Rafe asked. "I mean no disrespect, but if you get the answers and then can't find us . . . well, that would really suck for me."

"Worry not, little human, I will find you," Castillo answered. With a smile and a nod, he vanished.

"Well, that was one I've never seen before," Colton said, shaking his head. "Now, let's figure out what's wrong with Rhyce and Jared."

"Are they mates?" Rafe asked, grabbing Stryker's hand.

"Why would you ask that, Rafe?" Colton asked, the surprise in his voice echoing Stryker's emotions.

"Because they freaked out and shifted when the angel spoke." Rafe looked between the two men. "Stryker told me Hounds know their mates when they hear their voice. But how could Jared and Rhyce be mated to the same man?"

"Is this true, Jared? Is the angel your mate?" Stryker asked as he moved closer to his brother and Rhyce.

"Yes, he's my mate. I think Rhyce is too, but I've not heard him talk yet," Jared answered, his words causing the brothers to gasp.

"Rafe, you're right; Castillo is Jared's mate." Stryker exchanged a look with Colton. "He thinks Rhyce is too, but he's not heard his voice."

"But we've all been talking during dinner," Colton stated. "How could they not have heard each other?"

"Because I wasn't talking during dinner," Rhyce answered when he and Jared shifted back. "I was just sitting back, enjoying my post-orgasmic glow."

"Wait, you watched them?" Jared growled as he moved away from the other man. "You've seen my brother naked?"

"Shit, man, we're Hounds." Rhyce reached for Jared. "All your brothers are seeing me naked right now. I didn't touch him; we just watched them fool around."

"Don't touch me." Jared moved out of reach before he turned and stormed back to the house.

"I didn't mean to" Rhyce trailed off, looking like he'd just been kicked in the nuts. Then he turned and looked at Colton, as if for support. "I didn't know."

"Give him time, little brother," Colton said gently as he wrapped his arm around Rhyce's shoulder. "You both need to let this sink in. You're mated to another Hound, which rarely happens, and an angel. Which I'm pretty sure has *never* happened before."

"I've never heard of it," Stryker answered as he pulled Rafe closer to him. "Jared's a great guy; you couldn't have been blessed with a better mate, Rhyce. Just let him cool off. This has to be messing with his head."

"Yeah, my head kind of hurts right now," Rhyce answered.

A blinding white light appeared several feet away. Quickly, Stryker pulled Rafe to him, pressing Rafe's face to his chest to shield his mate's eyes from the glare.

"It's safe to open your eyes now," Castillo said as the light faded.

The angel had returned, and he wasn't alone. Stryker gave Castillo a questioning look.

"This is the archangel, Gabriel, my boss, as Dante is yours," Castillo explained.

"Wow, like *the* Gabriel," Rafe said in awe.

Stryker felt the same sense of wonder.

"It's an honor to meet you," Rafe said.

"As it is you, little one," Gabriel said, advancing on Rafe.

"Me?" Rafe squeaked, looking up – way up – at the huge archangel.

The angel had to be almost seven feet tall, and unlike Castillo's vague outline of wings, Gabriel's were very obvious and fully formed. He had long, black hair he wore loosely braided down his back, and everything about him screamed *Heavenly*.

"Yes, you," Gabriel said gently as he moved to kneel on one knee in front of Rafe. "You've undergone something most humans are not strong enough to survive. And yet here you are, moving forward with an open heart, embracing your mate and the love he freely gives you."

"He's easy to love," Stryker whispered. "My mate is a gift that I will always cherish."

"As you should, Hound," Gabriel answered, smiling at him. "I know you have already worked through this, but it never hurts to hear it from an archangel. The Hounds are not evil, Rafe. We are all simply players in the game of good vs. evil. As I play my role, so does your mate. What we do in those roles is what makes us good or evil."

"I know that now, but thank you." Rafe squeezed Stryker's hand. "Stryker and his family are truly good souls; without ever questioning it or asking why, they immediately did everything they could to protect me."

"You are worth protecting, little one," Gabriel replied.

"But why?" Rafe asked, scrunching his eyebrows together.

"Because the demon found a way to exploit a loophole," Gabriel started to explain as he stood. "And allowed your father to sell your soul before you were born. If you had actually been taken to Hell it would have tipped a very delicate balance. Thank god your mate and his brothers protected you and contacted Castillo, or we may have

never learned of this. Unfortunately, you are not the only one this has happened to. You were simply the first."

"Does that mean you can save him?" Stryker asked, not even caring that his voice shook with worry and fear. "Please, if you can, save him. I'll forfeit myself in his place."

"Stryker, no!" Rafe yelled and turned in his arms. "Don't you dare say that!"

"Neither of you will be going to Hell." Gabriel interrupted them. "A deal has been made between Heaven's higher-ups and Hell's"

"That doesn't sound good," Colton said, reminding Stryker that there were others around.

"Jared, I know you're upset and hurt, but you're going to want to come out here and see this. I promise you, brother, this isn't something you want to miss," Stryker said in their shared link.

"Plus I need to speak with you as well," Gabriel said through their minds.

Stryker gasped. "I didn't mean to be rude and speak so you could not hear —

Gabriel held up a hand. "Not at all." The archangel chuckled. "I just have to speak with Castillo's mates as well. But to answer Colton's comment, we worked out the best deal we could."

"What does that mean exactly?" Colton asked.

"It means you all have new assignments," Gabriel answered with a smirk. "Ah, Jared, thank you for joining us."

"Holy mother of —" Jared gasped but stopped himself.

Stryker would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so serious.

"Castillo, Jared, and Rhyce have been assigned to track down this demon who made the deals," Gabriel informed them. "The rest of you will find the souls that were sold because of this loophole. That's the deal. Hell wouldn't turn the demon over, but nor would they protect him. And we were allowed to reassign you to saving these good souls without telling anyone else what has been going on."

"And our chain of command knows about the change?" Tristan asked. "And do they know which souls we seek? Are we going to be fighting other Hounds?"

"Slow down, Tristan," Gabriel said, and Stryker noted the archangel seemed to know everyone's name without having ever been introduced. "Yes, Dante has been informed, and cannot tell the other Hounds what your new assignment is. We have a few of the names of the souls who you need to find – souls that were sold without their consent before the demon fled. Hell doesn't have any of the names of the souls. When Castillo, Jared, and Rhyce apprehend the demon, you will turn him over to me and I will get you the rest of the names."

"So we split up and get the first souls while they get the demon," Colton replied. "Then we move on the other ones once we get them from you."

"Exactly," Gabriel answered, pursing his lips together and nodding. "Now, you must keep in mind that Hell wants these souls. Their rules are that they cannot warn the Hounds that will be sent to collect the souls. The other teams will have the option of either doing what you did and refuse to turn in a clean soul, or not caring and handing them over."

"But that's not right," Rafe said quietly, looking to Stryker for support. "That's not fair."

"That is the burden of free will, little one," Gabriel replied gently as well. "As you all have the choice to accept or deny taking on these tasks."

"That's not a choice; we won't stand by while innocents get taken to Hell when they didn't sell their souls," Jackson said, stepping forward. He then looked around to his brothers, all of whom nodded in agreement. "The Magnus brothers may work for Hell, but we play by the rules."

"As do the Sethos brothers," Colton said with a nod. "We accept and pledge ourselves to the task."

"I never thought otherwise," Gabriel replied. "But you have to keep in mind these souls are scheduled to be collected as Rafe was on his twenty-first birthday. Part of the deal was we could not mess with their timetable. So time is of the essence."

"We understand," Stryker said, hugging Rafe close to him again. "And I don't mean to beat a dead horse, but I need to know Rafe is safe."

"He is. His soul was not up for discussion; it belongs to you, Stryker," Gabriel answered. "I assume you are both still planning to mate?"

"We are." Rafe smiled. "As soon as possible."

"Good." Gabriel chuckled. "We told Hell in no uncertain terms that whether you mate or not, Rafe's soul is free. Call it part of the deal, since they were exploiting a loophole behind everyone's back. His soul was their good-faith concession when they got caught with their hand in the cookie jar."

Stryker froze as the words sank in. "So he's free whether he mates me or not?"

"That is so," Gabriel answered with another nod.

"But I want to mate you." Rafe squeezed Stryker's arms.

"I know, baby," he replied, kissing the top of his mate's head. "I just want to make sure all your options are clear. I don't want you to feel trapped or feel like you have to mate with me if you don't want to go to Hell. That's not an option that would be okay with me."

"Anymore questions?" Gabriel asked as he started to move toward the area where he and Castillo had first appeared.

"Why is my brother mated to an angel?" Colton asked. "And how is that even possible?"

"Castillo knows the answer to that," Gabriel answered, raising an eyebrow in amusement. "That is between him and his mates."

"I guess that—" Colton started to say.

Gabriel vanished.

"Well it seems we were done with that conversation," Colton finished.

"Well you were," Castillo answered, not taking his eyes off Jared and Rhyce. "I think we need to talk, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess we do." Jared sighed as he looked between Castillo and Rhyce.

"Castillo, can I ask a question?" Rafe asked.

Everyone looked to Rafe, and Stryker felt him shrink against him under the weight of their attention.

"Yes, human, you may." Castillo raised a brow.

"His name is Rafe," Stryker growled. Angel or no, Castillo had no reason to disrespect Rafe, and Stryker wouldn't stand for it.

"I apologize, Rafe; ask your question."

"What about my dad?" Rafe started to shake in Stryker's arms. "What happens to him?"

"I would have thought you would have explained this to him, Hound," Castillo said to Stryker, giving him a very disapproving look. "Don't you think he had the right to know?"

"I thought he understood," Stryker answered quietly as he turned Rafe around in his arms so he could look at his mate. "Baby, I didn't know you still wondered about your dad."

"Explain what to me, Stryker?" Rafe asked as tears filled his eyes.

Stryker's chest hurt, knowing he had put those tears there.

"What haven't you explained to me?"

"A human can't pass through the gates alive," he explained gently. "Your dad was dead the moment he was brought there."

Chapter Ten

"No!" Rafe screamed as he felt his knees give out. He struggled to free himself from Stryker's arms. How dare the man try to hug him — how dare he *touch* him — after what he'd done. "You knew he would die and you sent him anyway."

"I'm sorry, I thought you understood." Stryker tightened his grip.

"You killed him." Rafe sobbed.

"No, baby, he did that to himself. He tried to sell your soul, Rafe. It was either him or you."

"Let me go. Don't touch me," Rafe screamed.

"Rafe, please," Stryker begged, but did as Rafe requested and released him before falling to his knees. He tried to take Rafe's hands, but he jerked them away.

"Leave me alone," Rafe said. "I thought you weren't evil, but you sent my dad to his death."

"He made a deal for a soul; I sent his instead of yours, Rafe," Stryker explained. He got to his feet and again reached out, but Rafe staggered out of reach. Stryker sighed. "He was going to Hell no matter what, baby."

"Yeah, and we all die, but you don't get to decide that!" Rafe screamed, feeling the world spin out around him. "You decided to have him die now."

"Tell him why his soul was that dark and black," Castillo suggested. "That might make it easier for him."

"What do you mean?" Rafe looked between the angel and his mate. If possible, Stryker looked even more stricken than he had a moment earlier.

"No, I can tell him that later," Stryker answered. "This is enough for now."

"Don't make those choices for me," Rafe yelled. "You don't have that right!" Then he turned back to Castillo. "Please tell me."

"You want it gentle or rip the band-aid off?"

"Rip it off, please." Rafe nodded and tried to control his shaking.

"Your father's soul was black because he had killed another person," Castillo said.

Rafe felt his legs give out again. Strong arms wrapped around him and Castillo gently lowered him to the ground. Rafe put his head between his knees.

"Just breath Rafe," Castillo said.

"Who?" Rafe squeaked. He cleared his throat and asked again. "Who did he kill?"

"What do you remember about your mother?" Stryker asked, kneeling next to him.

"No, no, that can't be," he answered, shaking his head. "It was a skiing accident. They were on vacation . . ."

"Baby, do you remember something?" Stryker rubbed Rafe's back.

Rafe shrugged him off, still not wanting Stryker to touch him. Thinking back, he filtered through his memories; he was very young when his mother had died.

"The servants were talking; I was about fifteen," he whispered, wrapping his arms around his legs. "They said my father was implicated in her death, but they couldn't prove it and he had no motive."

"That they knew of," Castillo said gently.

Rafe tried to raise his head and look at the angel, but the world spun crazily. Rafe rolled to his side and threw up.

"Keep breathing, Rafe. Everyone give him some space," Castillo said.

"I'm not leaving my mate," Stryker growled.

"You're not my mate," Rafe sobbed, turning to face Stryker. As soon as he said the words he wished he could take them back. The raw anguish on Stryker's face hurt him worse than anything they were telling him. "Wait, Stryker –"

"No, you're right, I'm not your mate." Stryker moved away from him. "I'm sorry about your dad, but I wasn't going to let you go to Hell. He made a deal for a soul, it was only right it should have been his. He was going there no matter what, and you weren't. I'm sorry I didn't explain that taking him to the gates meant he died. I should have figured you wouldn't have known that. I did the best I could, Rafe. At least you can go back to your life now."

"Stryker, wait," Rafe cried as Stryker stood and walked away without a backwards glance. Rafe turned to Castillo. He could handle the situation with Stryker later; right now, he had more questions for the angel. "Why did he kill my mother?"

"She found out about the deal he made with your soul," Castillo answered, his voice laced with sympathy. "Stryker didn't know that – none of the Hounds did. But he knew your father had to have killed someone to have his soul be that dark."

"So he was purely evil," Rafe murmured.

"Yes. And in light of that fact, don't you think you're being a little rough on Stryker?" Castillo's gaze was piercing. "Should he have sent you to Hell when your dad

would have ended up there anyway? You still think you should have gone in your father's place?"

"No," he answered in a whisper. "I understand why Stryker did it, I just wish he had explained it to me."

"Would you really have gone with him or trusted any of the Hounds if they had told you?" Castillo raised an eyebrow.

Rafe wouldn't lie to an angel. "No, I don't think I would have."

"Then go find your mate," Castillo nodded and gracefully got to his feet. He held out a hand to Rafe. "Make this right."

"Thanks, Castillo," he said, taking the offered hand.

"We're in-laws, I guess; we have to be there for each other." The angel chuckled as he walked away.

Rafe shook his head. Castillo was unlike any angel Rafe could have imagined. He looked around, finding himself alone. What a mess he found himself in. He couldn't blame the others for making themselves scarce.

Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself as best he could before heading to the house. When he reached the back door, he walked in through the kitchen, up the stairs, and into their suite.

"Stryker?" he asked as he knocked and opened their bedroom door.

"Just go, Rafe," Stryker said quietly. He sat on the bed, his head in his hands.

"You have your life back without any strings; please just leave me be."

"I don't want to go." Rafe spoke past the tears clogging his throat. He'd thought if he came up here and they talked, they could work this out. But now he realized he might have been wrong. "I want to stay with you."

"You don't want me; you made your feelings quite clear. You're just scared to go back and afraid of what comes next. But you'll be fine, Rafe."

"That's not why, Stryker," Rafe said, shaking his head as he walked toward the bed. "I want you. I want to be your mate. I'm sorry about what I said. It wasn't fair of me to blame you like that; you were protecting me."

"I'm glad you see that now." Stryker finally lifted his head to face him.

Rafe's heart twisted in a ball when he saw the tears flowing freely down the big man's face.

"But it's over," Stryker continued. "You were right; we aren't mates. We're too different, and I can't live my life in the hopes you can ever get over what happened with your dad."

"I am over it — "

"Just go, Rafe." Stryker turned away. "I want you to go."

Rafe stood there frozen for a few moments, unable to move. Then when it started to sink in that the dream of being with Stryker forever was really over, he forced himself to move. He grabbed his bags from the corner of the room and snatched his wallet off the dresser. Finally, he turned to look at the gorgeous man once more. "I do love you, Stryker. You should know at least that much."

He waited another moment, but when the silence became deafening, Rafe left, closing the door behind him. The tears didn't start falling until he got back downstairs and found the keys to the Hummer. He grabbed them and headed out the front door, deciding it was better to just leave and not bother saying good-bye to the other Hounds. That would just be salt in the wound.

Once he was in the driver's seat and buckled in, Rafe tried to wipe away the tears. He programmed his address into the navigation system, grateful the vehicle had such a device. Rafe had no idea where he was.

The turn-by-turn directions were easy enough to follow and soon he was on the expressway back to Nashville. Trying to ignore the pain in his heart, Rafe started to plan his future alone. Always alone, all of his life.

At the first gas station he came to, he filled the tank and used the restroom to remove the butt plug before heading back on the road. As the hours passed by, he made some decisions. First and foremost, he wanted to set up an orphanage in Sr. Catherine's name. The woman deserved that much for all she gave to him, and the end she didn't deserve. Second, he decided to go to college and get his M.B.A. After all the tutors and

years of not leaving the house, he had his college degree at twenty. But he wanted to actually step foot in a classroom.

When he finally pulled into the long driveway of his father's — *my*, Rafe corrected himself — estate, he was shocked to see the police there. He'd only been gone a day and the servants never saw him; who would notice he was gone?

"Sir, you can't be here," the policeman said to him as he parked the Hummer and got out.

"I live here," he replied incredulously, gaze darting around. "What is going on?"

"Oh, um, then you're going to want to talk to that man over there, Mr. Damas," the officer said, pointing to a guy who seemed to be in charge.

"Thanks," Rafe replied as he walked that direction. "What's going on here?"

"Who are you?" the man asked, raising an eyebrow and looking down at Rafe.

"I'm Rafe Damas; why are you at my home?" Rafe squared his shoulders and straightened his spine. He'd had just about enough of people talking down to him, even if he was shorter than most men his age. "What is going on?"

"Where have you been this evening, Mr. Damas?"

"Out. Now what's going on here?"

"I'm asking the questions, sir," the man replied.

"No, you're not." Rafe crossed his hands over his chest and tried to control his temper. A temper he seemed to have only recently acquired. "This is *my* house. Who are you and why are you here?"

"I'm Detective Flandly, Mr. Damas, and I'm here because your housekeeper called the police."

"Is Dora okay?" Rafe asked. "What happened?"

"She found your father dead earlier today in his study," the man said, pinning Rafe with a piercing gaze. "And when she couldn't find you, she reported you missing."

"Dead in the study?" Rafe squeaked. But how could that be? If his dad died in his study, what had the Hounds taken to Hell? But then, of course there had to be a body left behind. "How? I mean, what happened?"

"Where were you this evening, Mr. Damas?"

"I went to visit my boyfriend yesterday and stayed overnight," Rafe answered. He figured it was as close to the truth as he really should tell anyone. "Why didn't anyone call me? Never mind. I don't have a cell phone. Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. It's understandable you're a little scrambled under the circumstances," Detective Flandly said. His tone sounded a little more sympathetic. "Why don't you just come over here and sit down."

"What? No, I'm okay, I need to see him," Rafe replied, pulling away from the detective.

"He's already been taken to the morgue, Mr. Damas." The detective led Rafe over to the front porch. "We were still here because we couldn't locate you, and the staff was concerned of your safety."

"How did he die?" Rafe asked, curious how this would all play out.

"It looks like a heart attack."

"I didn't know he had heart problems, but then again, we weren't close." Rafe sat on one of the stone benches. "This is just really sudden."

"It happens that way sometimes, son." Flandly patted Rafe on the back. "The staff had some concerns about the way your father treated you. Can you tell me why none of them said they had really seen you in months?"

"My father didn't allow the staff to interact with me." Rafe realized how bad that sounded, and hurried to explain. "It was complicated, Detective. After my mother died, I think I was just a reminder she was gone. He pretty much ignored me and wanted everyone else to as well, I think."

"That's a rough way to grow up," he said, writing in his little notebook. "So you didn't fight or argue anytime recently?"

"No." Rafe snorted. "That would have shown he gave a shit. I was just invisible. I had tutors and kept to myself, out of his way. I could go months at a time without even seeing him."

"When you lived in the same house?"

"It's a big house." Rafe shrugged. "I didn't really care to see him any more than he wanted to see me."

"Okay, son," the detective, though Rafe could tell he remained skeptical.

"What do I do now?" Rafe asked. Tears slid down his cheeks, and he silently cursed himself for being weak and crying over the death of his evil father. "I don't know what I need to do. Do I have to identify him for you?"

"No, the housekeeper took care of that," the detective answered, as his face tightened. "I would think you need to contact his attorney or business manager."

"I don't know who that is, but I guess I'll find all the information I need in his desk," Rafe whispered. "We didn't have any other family."

"So it's just you to inherit all of this?"

"I guess so." He shrugged. "We never talked about it. I mean it when I said I was invisible to him, Detective."

"You don't sound bitter about that."

"It is what it was," Rafe replied on a sigh. "My mother died when I was five, and the only people I saw after that were my nanny and tutors. Then I didn't need a nanny when I got older, so I only had the tutors then."

"So you were homeschooled?" Detective Flandly asked.

Rafe nodded.

"Seems to me like, after loosing your mother, he wanted to keep you in a safe bubble."

"I never thought of it like that," Rafe answered, injecting a note of thoughtfulness into his voice while trying not to laugh. "I guess that's a better way to think of it than he just hated me."

"Did you hate him?"

"Can't hate someone you don't know," he said as he stood. "I better go see to the staff and figure out who I have to contact. I'll need to make funeral arrangements too, huh?"

"Yeah, that will be a start," the policeman replied as he stood as well. "There will be an autopsy done, of course, but as long as that comes back indicating death by natural causes then we'll release his body to any funeral home you want."

"Someone will call and let me know?" Rafe asked, searching the man's face. "I mean, I get to know the results, right?"

"Yep, I'll make sure they know to speak to you."

"Thanks, Detective." Rafe extended his hand. He held back a sigh of relief when the other man shook his hand and then left without another word. Rafe stood there a few more minutes, watching all the police get in their cars and leave. When they were gone he went inside to deal with the staff and their concerns.

An hour later Rafe sat at his father's desk and started looking for the numbers he needed. His father's attorney picked up on the first ring when he called. Rafe was amazed the man had no knowledge of the will being changed recently, as the Hounds had told him. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how that happened. Rafe was just grateful that he didn't have to deal with it.

Once he'd finished speaking to the attorney, Rafe sat back and let the information settle in. He was a multi-millionaire. Some of the money originally came from the deal his dad made with the demon. That money was going to go toward the orphanage and various charities. The money his father's companies had made since would stay with those companies and all the people they employed.

Deciding he had done everything he could for the night, Rafe yawned and stretched his weary muscles. His eyes drooped as he headed upstairs, glad the attorney had specific instructions for how his dad wanted to be buried, and everything had already been paid for.

As he crawled into bed, he looked at the empty stretch of mattress beside him and sighed. He missed Stryker. Not just because Rafe needed to be held right then, but because he loved Stryker. And Rafe had only himself to blame that his mate wasn't there.

Chapter Eleven

"Where's Rafe?" Tristan asked when Stryker sat down at the kitchen table the next morning.

"I sent him home," Stryker replied, adding sugar to the cup of coffee Linda put in front of him.

"You fucking idiot," Tristan growled. "You are such an asshole, you don't deserve him."

"He didn't want me."

"The hell he didn't." Tristan slammed his hands down on the table. "He was scared and upset. Who wouldn't be after going through everything he's been through in the past few days?"

"You heard what he said to me." Stryker avoided his brother's gaze. He knew he deserved everything Tristan was saying and more. Stryker hadn't slept at all the night before, constantly rotating between sobbing his eyes out and cursing himself for letting Rafe go. "Besides, he left when I told him to. Obviously he didn't want to stay."

"He just found out that his dad was really dead, and his dad killed his mom," Tristan yelled. "Then you tell him to leave. What did you expect? He's been alone all of his life; his own father didn't want him. And then he screws up once and says something stupid and you tell him to leave? You're a dickhead, Stryker."

"You want him so badly, go to him," Stryker sneered, then felt even worse for being an ass to his brother now.

"Fine, I think he's hot." Tristan stood and stormed from the room.

Stryker sat there for a moment, stunned at what just happened. He shook it off and took after Tristan.

"The fuck you will," Stryker said grabbing Tristan's shoulder.

"Why not? You sent him away."

"That doesn't mean you get to have him."

"So you don't want him, but no one else can have him?" Tristan asked, shoving him away.

"Of course I want him," Stryker yelled. "I want him so much it hurts, but you heard what he said."

"He was upset and confused." Tristan shook his head. "Besides, you sending him away was way worse than anything he said. Even if you pulled your head out of your ass, I bet he wouldn't take you back."

"Then there's no point in going after him," Stryker replied as he turned back toward the kitchen.

"You son-of-a-bitch," Tristan roared as he tackled Stryker from behind. The fell to the floor, Tristan on top. "You found your mate and he's great. Most importantly he loves you, and you're just going to give up and walk away. I never thought you to be such a coward, Stryker."

"I'm not a coward." Stryker rolled them over and they crashed into the wall. "How can he ever move on from what happened and want me again?"

"I don't know," Tristan yelled before punching Stryker in the face. "But you're just going to give up without a fight? Isn't Rafe worth fighting for?"

"Yes!" Stryker screamed and went still. He covered his face with his hands and let out an ear-shattering wail. "Yes, he's worth it, okay? I fucked up and I don't know how to fix it."

"Try apologizing." Linda snickered from the kitchen doorway. "You'd be surprised how far an apology will go."

"And go fast before someone else scoops up that hot little millionaire of a mate you have," Colton threw in from his position leaning against the wall. "I'd take him in a heartbeat."

"Mine!" Stryker growled. He shoved Tristan off him, clambered to his feet, and walked toward the front door. "We meet back at the house tomorrow night to start planning out our next move with the souls and getting the demon. Make sure Castillo's there; he knows who we're going after."

"We got it, Stryker," Jackson said, holding the front door open for him, the car keys dangling in his other outstretched hand. "Now pull your head out of your ass and go get your mate."

* * * * *

Several hours later, just before dusk, Stryker pulled up to Rafe's house. Images of their meeting a few days ago flooded his mind as he swallowed his fear and got out the car. Walking toward the door, he was resolved that he wasn't leaving until Rafe forgave him. He took one last, deep breath, reached out and knocked on the door.

"May I help you, sir?" A man asked when he opened the door.

"I'm here to see Rafe Damas, please," Stryker replied, glad his voice sounded stronger than he felt. "My name is Stryker Magnus."

"Please follow me and I'll see if Mr. Damas is receiving visitors," the butler said as he let Stryker in and then led him down the hall to the library.

Stryker wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans as the butler closed the door behind him. Looking around the room, he tried to think of what to say if Rafe wouldn't see him.

He turned when he heard a ruckus in the hallway and then the door to the library flew open. Stryker opened his arms just in time to catch Rafe as he jumped into his embrace.

"I'm so sorry," Rafe sobbed, wrapping his arms and legs around Stryker. "I didn't mean it, I swear. I was stupid, and selfish, and mean, and everything's my fault. Please, please, *please* say you'll forgive me. I love you so much, please don't leave me."

"Oh, baby," Stryker cried as he dropped to his knees still holding Rafe. "I love you too."

"You do? Even after what I said?" Rafe raising his head to look at him.

"Yes, Rafe." Stryker nodded like an idiot. "And I was an asshole for telling you to leave. I didn't know how to handle what I thought was your rejection, but I should never have asked you to go. I cried all last night, wishing you would come back."

"It's not your fault, I was horrible. After everything you've done, for me to accuse you of being evil like that," Rafe cried, choking on his tears.

"It's okay, baby," Stryker cooed as he rubbed his hands up and down his little mate's back. "You had been through so much, I should have realized it would all be confusing for you. I'm so sorry; can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, I love you," Rafe blubbered all over him.

Stryker wiped away Rafe's tears before beginning an onslaught of kisses all over the gorgeous man's face.

"Please still be my mate. I'll never doubt you again, I swear. Just don't leave me, I don't want to live without you, Stryker."

"Oh, baby, I feel the same way," he replied in between kisses. "I want to be with you forever, Rafe."

"Then please, take me," Rafe whispered against his lips. "Mate with me, Stryker. Bite me and make me yours."

"Are you sure?" he asked between their heated kisses. "Rafe, you don't have to make this decision today; I'm not going anywhere. I want to be with you always."

"Yes I'm sure," Rafe answered as he tugged at Stryker's shirt. "I've never been as happy in my life as the time we've spent together. And that was even during some of the worst moments of my life. It's confusing, I know, but I want you forever."

"Bedroom?" Stryker panted.

"Upstairs, third door on the right," Rafe said as he kissed along Stryker's jaw and neck. "I need you so much, Stryker. Please don't ever make me leave again."

"I won't, my little mate." Stryker quickly stood and raced out of the room with Rafe wrapped around him. "I will never, ever let you go again."

"You promised I could ride around on your cock for the rest of my life once you got it in me." Rafe giggled as they started up the stairs. "I want that."

"Oh, god, you're going to kill me yourself," he moaned as he squeezed Rafe's ass and ran faster. By the time Stryker got them into the bedroom, Rafe's shirt had been torn off and Stryker's was almost off as well.

He kicked the door closed behind him, tossed Rafe on the bed and followed him down. Their lips met and all Stryker could think of was that he needed to feel Rafe's skin against his naked body.

"We're going to go through a lot of clothes that way." Rafe giggled, pulling Stryker from his haze.

Stryker looked down and saw that their pants were strips of material now hanging off of them.

"Sorry." Stryker smiled and his mouth watered as he took in the naked feast before him. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Rafe."

"I'm glad," Rafe said, reaching for him. "Because I'm all yours."

"Yes, yes you are," he replied as he mashed his lips down onto his mate's. He grabbed Rafe's legs and wrapped them around his waist. They both moaned when their hard cocks rubbed up against each other. "Fuck, that feels amazing."

"I want you inside me, please," Rafe groaned as Stryker pushed his cock against Rafe's hip.

He growled at his little mate's words, loving the passion and need in Rafe's voice. He moved Rafe's legs again and pushed them up to his chest.

"I will never get enough of this hot little ass," Stryker purred. He leaned down and started licking his mate's puckered hole.

"Oh, shit, please don't stop," Rafe cried out, shaking underneath Stryker's hands.

Stryker smiled as he ran his tongue around Rafe's tight asshole before pushing his tongue inside. Using his saliva, he moistened and lubed up Rafe's entrance.

"Lube?" Stryker growled and lifted his head.

Rafe was panting so hard he merely pointed to a bag by the nightstand. In a flash, Stryker moved up the bed, grabbed the bag,, found the lube and resumed his

position between Rafe's legs. He pulled Rafe up to straddle his lap as he reached back and grabbed the sides of his mate's ass.

"Yes," Rafe screamed as Stryker moved him around into the right spot roughly.

Stryker quickly squirted ample amounts of lube on his fingers, then tossed the bottle toward the pillows.

"You want me in this tight little ass, baby?" Stryker asked as he pushed one finger into Rafe's hole.

Rafe cried out and started moving his hips so their cocks were rubbing together again.

"You want my cock thrusting inside you?"

"Yes, please yes," Rafe whimpered. "I need you now, Stryker."

"You want to help me get you ready faster, sweetheart?"

"Anything, I'll do whatever you want," Rafe panted, nodding as he looked at Stryker.

"Reach back and pull your cheeks aside for me then," Stryker said, grinning when Rafe immediately did as he was told. "This way I can use fingers from both hands and stretch you out for me."

"I want another finger," Rafe moaned as he licked Stryker's neck. "It feels so good."

"Just wait until I sink my cock in that sweet ass," Stryker hissed in Rafe's ear as he pushed in a finger from his other hand. He moved both fingers in opposite directions, driving Rafe wild while stretching him faster. "Oh, my baby likes that."

"God yes," Rafe cried out. "Please, another one, Stryker."

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered as he moved his fingers faster.

"I liked it when it burned a little." Rafe buried his face in Stryker's neck.

Stryker'd come to realize that was his little mate's way of hiding when he was embarrassed.

"I like it that way too," Stryker replied as he pushed in a third finger. He smiled when Rafe cried out and warm liquid filled the space between them.

"I didn't mean to already, it just hit me so fast," Rafe moaned as Stryker continued working his ass open.

"That was my plan, sweetheart." Stryker chuckled as his mate slumped in his arms.

"It was a very, very good plan," Rafe panted. "I want to try a forth finger, Stryker."

"I have to if I'm going to get your ready for my dick," Stryker answered as he pushed in another finger. "Tell me if it's too much, baby."

"No, feels good, so full," Rafe moaned, pushing his ass back on Stryker's fingers. "Please, I want it to be your dick now."

"Baby, it might hurt if we go now," Stryker answered, fighting to control his own need and desire to be in Rafe.

"I like some pain with my pleasure." Rafe's giggle turned into a body-rocking groan. "I'll tell you if it's too much."

"Okay, baby," he answered as he pulled his fingers out of Rafe's ass. "On your hands and knees in the middle of the bed."

"I love you," Rafe said quietly as he gave Stryker a quick peck on the lips before doing as instructed.

"I love you too, Rafe," Stryker replied, rubbing his own cock a few times as he watched his mate move into position. He grabbed a few pillows from the head of the bed and stuffed them under Rafe's hips. "You can tell me to stop at anytime, and we'll just try later when we can stretch you out better."

"Okay," Rafe squeaked out.

Stryker bit back a growl of desire as he watched Rafe take a few deep breaths, even as he was shaking. He moved forward, rubbing both sides of Rafe's ass. He picked up the tube of lube he'd discarded earlier and squirted some on his fingers. He covered his cock, making sure he was nice and slick.

"Are you ready for me, my mate?" he asked as he lined up his cock with Rafe's little hole.

"Yes, please, take me," Rafe begged, sending another thrill through Stryker.

The need for his mate was primal and possessive. Stryker started to push in slowly, stopping when he was just in past the tight ring of Rafe's ass. He cried out, shivering even harder.

Stryker rubbed his hands up and down his mate's back in reassurance.

"More, Stryker."

Stryker pushed in a little farther, paying close attention to Rafe's reactions, ready to back off should his mate show any true discomfort. The moans that came from the beautiful man under him told him it was just right. Slowly, he started to work the first few inches of his cock in and out of Rafe's tight hole.

"You feel like heaven, baby." He moaned. "So tight and delicious."

"I've never felt so full, it's wonderful." Rafe pushed back against Stryker, causing his cock to slide three quarters of the way in.

He was mesmerized by the sight of his dick sinking into his mate's tight little ass.

"Please don't stop."

"Never, sweetheart," he said as he kept working it in and out. "Not unless you tell me it's too much. You feel so fucking good, baby."

Rafe mumbled something Stryker couldn't quite make out.

"What did you say, Rafe?"

"Harder, please, I want it harder," his little mate moaned.

The plea snapped what was left of Stryker's restraint. With one quick hip thrust, he slammed his cock the rest of the way in.

"Oh god, yes!"

"You like that my big cock's all the way in your ass, don't you, Rafe?"

"Yes, please, I'm so close," Rafe hissed. "I'm going to come again, please Stryker, I need —"

"Oh, baby, I know what you need," Stryker growled as he pulled out before slamming right back in. They both cried out. "Baby, I'm not going to last long enough to mate you this time."

"No, please, I want to be your mate," Rafe wailed.

But Stryker was lost in a haze of passion. He quickly pulled out and rolled Rafe onto his back, then pushed his mate's knees to his chest and thrust his cock back in.

"I promise I'll recover quickly," Stryker whispered as he leaned over to kiss Rafe. "Besides, I like fucking you this way; I can see your face. Taste your sweet lips."

"I like this too," Rafe moaned as he reached up and wrapped his arms around Stryker's neck. "Now stop holding back and fuck me like you want to."

"Baby, you swore again."

"Sorry." Rafe's cheeks turned bright red.

"Don't be; it was sexy as hell." Stryker smiled down at his mate. Taking Rafe at his word, Stryker stopped holding back. He thrust forward, hard and fast, over and over again. "So fucking perfect. You were made for me."

"I love you," Rafe screamed as he came, his warm cum filling the space between them.

The feeling of Rafe's ass muscles clamping down on his cock was all it took to throw Stryker over the edge as well. He roared out his release, snapping his hips lightning quick to prolong his orgasm.

"That was better than I could ever have imagined," he panted after his orgasm started to subside.

"You are so incredibly hot when you climax," Rafe said gently as he cupped Stryker's face and pulled him down for a kiss. "It drives me insane to see you in that much bliss and know I'm the reason for it."

"I love you so damn much, Rafe," Stryker replied, feeling the tears form in his eyes. "Thank you so much."

"For what? Letting you fuck me?" Rafe asked with a giggle.

"For loving me," Stryker answered, looking into his mate's eyes. "For wanting me, for accepting me for who and what I am. For giving yourself, body and heart to me. I promise I will love you forever and always put you first."

"I promise the same," Rafe replied with a grin. "Besides, after that, I don't think I could ever give you up. I have a feeling I'm a Stryker addict."

"A Stryker addict?" He laughed as he lowered Rafe's legs to the side. "I think I like the sound of that. I know I'm already a Rafe addict."

"Really?" Rafe asked, then groaned as Stryker pulled out of his ass and sat up. Rafe shook his head and smiled. "I could really get used to this."

"You better, because I'm going to want you morning, noon, and night." He chuckled as he got off the bed and walked over to the bathroom.

"I'm good with that." Rafe giggled from the other room.

Stryker couldn't wipe the goofy grin off his face as he wet a couple of wash cloths.

"I had sex! I really just had sex, I can't believe it." Rafe sounded like he'd just won the lottery.

"And you were fantastic," Stryker purred as he came back into the bedroom. "The best I've ever been with, by far."

"You don't have to say that, Stryker," Rafe said quietly. "I know you've had a lot of experience."

"You listen to me, Rafe Damas," Stryker growled as he moved to straddle Rafe's hips. He leaned over so their noses were touching before he continued. "I might have experience, but I don't say things I don't mean. That was the best sex I've ever had. You were the best, most passionate, fantastic partner I've ever been with. I would never lie about something that important."

"Thank you," Rafe answered.

Stryker bent to capture Rafe's lips and slip his tongue in his mate's willing mouth. He tried to put all of his feelings for Rafe into that kiss, moving so their bodies were intertwined.

"You feel so perfect to me, baby," he moaned as their cocks started rubbing together again.

"Stryker, you're hard again," Rafe whispered. "Can we mate now?"

"You're going to be sore tomorrow if we go again already," Stryker replied as he reached between them and wrapped his hand around Rafe's cock. "It seems you're ready again too, sweetheart."

"Yes, fuck me, Stryker," Rafe said, digging his fingers into Stryker's back.

Stryker didn't need any more encouragement. He rolled his mate over underneath him, then he pulled Rafe's hips up so his cock was snug between his mate's ass cheeks.

"Please, please, take me."

"As my baby wishes." Stryker chuckled as he reached up and grabbed the lube. Rafe was pretty slick from their last encounter, but Stryker didn't want to risk hurting him. He squirted some lube on his cock and rubbed it in. Leaning back he moved to spread Rafe's legs wider and gasped at what he saw. "Now that is a fucking beautiful sight."

"What is?" Rafe asked, looking over his shoulder.

"My cum is leaking out of your hot little ass and I'm going to shove my cock right back in," he said.

Rafe moaned and his body shook, causing Stryker to growl fiercely and quickly line up his cock with the puckered hole in front of him. On the first thrust he was able to easily bury more than half his cock into Rafe's ass.

"Oh god, yes, fuck me hard, Stryker," Rafe panted, pushing his ass back.

His mate's words and movements spoke to Stryker on a primal level. He grabbed Rafe's hips and slammed all the way in.

"Yes, so full." Rafe whimpered.

"You better love it; you'll never have another cock in this ass ever," Stryker snarled, feeling his need to shift. "You are mine, Rafe. All of you belongs to me, as I belong to you. I will kill anyone who touches what is mine."

"Always yours," Rafe grunted under Stryker's fierce and hard pace. "Fuck me, my big mate. Claim me as yours."

Stryker growled loudly and shifted into half hound, half man. He had meant to warn Rafe before the change, but his hot little mate took away the remainder of his control. Rafe screamed, digging his hands in the bedspread.

"Is it too much?" Stryker asked, freezing.

"Don't you dare stop, Stryker Magnus," Rafe yelled and that was all the green light Stryker needed.

He pounded into his mate like he never thought possible. When he could tell they were both getting close to finishing, he leaned over and licked Rafe's neck.

"You ready for this, baby?"

"Yes, do it," Rafe cried, pushing back against Stryker.

He kissed his mate's neck, then sank his canines into Rafe's flesh. Rafe screamed under him, as Stryker moaned at the taste of his mate's blood rushing his senses. Sensing their impending orgasms, he pulled back his head and wrapped an arm around Rafe's chest and yanked him up close.

Stryker bit his wrist and held it to Rafe's lips. "Drink from me," he growled.

He hissed at the divine pleasure of his mate drinking from him before moving to bite Rafe's neck again. The mating would be completed once they were drinking from each other and they climaxed. Even at the tighter angle, Stryker thrust his hips, pushing his cock in and out of his mate.

What hit them couldn't be called just an orgasm. Stryker felt as if their souls were intertwining, as both their cocks exploded together. Stryker had never felt such an onslaught of emotion as he came inside his mate, feeling Rafe's complete, blissful climax as well. They came wave after wave, together as one, unable to tell where one started and the other stopped.

As one, they lifted their heads and cried out. And when it was finally over, they slumped together onto the bed. Stryker was able to turn them at the last second so they landed on their sides so he wouldn't crush his little mate. They lay there together, still connected for several minutes, just panting.

Once he caught his breath, Stryker leaned over and licked Rafe's neck. His saliva would help heal and close the wound. To his surprise, Rafe did the same to the wound on Stryker's wrist.

"We belong to each other now, for all eternity, Rafe," Stryker whispered.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Rafe answered, turning his head to kiss Stryker on the lips. "And I like that your cock is still in my ass even when we're done."

"Me too, baby," Stryker replied before they both burst out laughing. This was the way it should be, this perfect melding. It was more than Stryker could ever have hoped for, and all because they had been thrown together, avoiding Hell's gate.

~The End~

About the Author

Joyee Flynn grew up in Chicago living in the same house all her life until she left for college. Though she has a great life, she loved to get lost in fantasy that only books could bring. She kept writing, short stories, romance, mystical, and of course adding in hot cowboys any chance she could. Her wide interest in reading was reflected in her writings. Currently Joyee lives with her dog, Marius, named after a vampire from Ann Rice's Interview with the Vampire series. She dreams of one day living out in Montana, own enough land to have a few horses, and find a couple cowboys of her own.

A lover of men, Joyee's all about them in any form in her books.

Vampire, werewolf, military, doesn't matter at all as long as they are hot, hard, and sex fiends!

To learn more about Joyee visit www.joyeeflynn.com