



Outcasts:

Unleashing Ciaran

By

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Unleashing Ciaran

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Chapter One

A muted ringing woke Andrew Moore out of a deep sleep. With his keen hearing, it took only seconds for him to realize the source of the sound. He'd left his cell phone on the kitchen counter earlier. Who would call him at—he glanced at the clock on the bedside table—three a.m.?

The caller might have made a dialing mistake, but the few people he'd given his number to would only call in case of an emergency. He frowned and slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Ciaran. His mate had been a deep sleeper, until recently.

Getting kidnapped and nearly killed would do that to a person. A few days before Thanksgiving, the group of men who had summoned the half-fae, half-demon from Faerie had returned to try to recapture him. Just as he'd done before, Drew had helped Ciaran escape them, but not without a great deal more trauma than either of them had experienced the first time.

Drew had thought Ciaran was fine for the first few days after his rescue, and he did seem to be coping well during the day, but the past few nights Drew had awakened in the middle of the night to find Ciaran in the living room or kitchen, unable to sleep and unwilling to disturb Drew.

Drew shook off his thoughts and padded to the kitchen. He winced at the chill of the linoleum on his bare feet. His phone had stopped ringing by the time he reached it. A quick glance at the display revealed he had missed a call from an unknown number, and the person had left a voice mail. Puzzled, Drew dialed his voice mailbox and listened.

The loud hiss of a bad connection hit his ear first. He grimaced and held the phone a few inches away. A garbled yet familiar female voice began to speak. "Drew, it's your mother..." More static.

Mom! His mother hadn't disowned him, as his father had, when he came out. In fact, she'd begged him to stay with the pack. In the end she'd known that he couldn't. His father would never have allowed it. Why she would be contacting him now was a mystery. Clinton Moore would be enraged if he knew his wife had tried to call, no matter what the reason.

What could his family possibly want with him now? He'd left town and gone to a place where his existence wouldn't bother them anymore. For the past couple of months he had not attempted to contact them in any way.

"Father...your brothers...danger...careful...too late." On that cryptic note, the recording ended. The loud bursts of static had rendered her words almost indecipherable.

Frowning, he hit the callback button. The phone rang and rang until Drew gave up. She must have lost service, or maybe the battery on her phone had died. For his mother to try to call him, whatever she had been trying to say had been important enough to risk the wrath of Clinton Moore. And it had to do with his brothers as well as his father. That wasn't much to go on.

Drew stood at the counter, staring at the phone in his hand for several minutes, until the chill in the air got to him. He shivered. Next time he had to get up in the middle of the night, maybe he'd be smart enough to put on a shirt.

Whatever was going on would have to wait until morning. Drew carried the phone down the hall with him to the bedroom, in case his mother tried to call again, and set it on the nightstand. He slipped back into bed, careful to keep his icy feet away from Ciaran, who still hadn't awakened.

Ciaran murmured something and curled against Drew's side. Drew slid an arm around his lover's slim waist and held him close, hoping whatever his mother had called him about wouldn't disturb the peaceful, happy life they had created. Ciaran had experienced enough upheaval in

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the past few weeks. Drew would do just about anything to spare him more.

* * * * *

For the first time since he left, Drew dreamed of his family, his pack.

He ran with the other wolves, celebrating his first shift. Bathed in pale moonlight and cool shadows, they ran through the forest together. He nipped at the flank of a childhood playmate, who rounded on him for a playful fight. One of the older wolves broke up their play, and they all got down to the business of hunting. They brought down a deer, howling their triumph into the night. He was part of the pack now, a true wolf in all ways. The acceptance of his fellow wolves washed over him.

Then Clinton Moore looked up from the freshly killed deer and stared at Drew, his blood-dappled muzzle twisting into a snarl. Drew's brothers, Clint and Chad, flanked his father, their eyes burning with hatred.

Somehow, Clinton could speak even in wolf form. He snarled, "No son of mine will be a fucking faggot," and leaped for Drew's throat.

Drew jerked awake with a gasp. His heart raced as if he'd been running. He closed his eyes and took several slow, deep breaths. *Just a dream. Relax.*

His mother's call must have dragged out the conflicted feelings he thought he'd buried.

A warm arm slid across his chest. "Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes to meet Ciaran's concerned violet gaze. "Just a dream. No big deal."

Ciaran's brow creased. "About last month?"

Drew shook his head. "No. My father."

"And?"

Drew paused, considering what to tell him. "I don't want to worry you. It might be nothing."

That didn't deter his mate. "Tell me anyway."

"My mom called this morning."

Ciaran thought about that for a moment. "What did she want?"

Pushing aside the lingering anxiety from his dream, Drew shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know. I didn't make it to the phone, and the message she left was pretty garbled."

Ciaran frowned. "Perhaps your family is no longer angry?"

Yeah, right. "You don't know my father. I don't think he ever forgave or forgot anything that pissed him off. No, it sounded more like a warning." Drew forced himself to shake off the sense of foreboding the phone call and the dream had created. He smiled and brushed a lock of silky black hair behind Ciaran's pointed ear. "I'm not worried about it. I've got my mate, and that's all I need."

A light flush tinted Ciaran's pale cheeks a soft pink, and his eyes sparkled with pleasure. "I feel the same."

Drew gave him his most wolfish grin. "In that case..."

He leaned down to nibble at Ciaran's neck, which made his lover laugh. "None of that. I have to be at work early today."

"Then I'd better be quick." Undeterred, he returned to his task, determined to make sure they both started the day off right.

The laughter turned into a low moan when Drew switched from nibbles to openmouthed kisses. Ciaran tilted his head to give Drew access to his neck and throat. "Mm, that feels good. Don't stop."

As if he would. Still, Drew couldn't resist murmuring, "Are you sure? You have to get to work..." He brushed his lips over Ciaran's pale skin in a teasing caress. He paused at the juncture of Ciaran's neck and shoulder, where he'd bitten Ciaran to claim him as his mate. He licked the spot, knowing even after a couple of weeks it would still be sensitive.

Ciaran hissed. "Yes. More."

Already he'd reduced his mate to monosyllables. With a quiet chuckle, Drew licked the spot again, savoring the salt and spice flavor of Ciaran's skin. Then he bit down hard enough to make Ciaran gasp. Responsive as always, Ciaran arched against him. The sweet slide of skin on skin sent tingling warmth through Drew's body. He smiled and rolled onto his back, bringing Ciaran with him.

Now on top, Ciaran lined their bodies up. They fit like the pieces of

a puzzle. Ciaran pushed up onto his hands and gazed down at Drew. Slowly, deliberately, he rubbed their lower bodies together.

Drew let out a playful growl. "Don't tease me."

Ciaran shifted to straddle him. "Only in the best possible ways," he promised. He caught Drew's hands and moved them above Drew's head. He didn't use any real force, but the intent was clear. Ciaran wanted to take control.

Drew considered taking it back. He was supposed to be the Alpha of their little pack, such as it was. Then Ciaran's erection brushed against Drew's, leaving a tantalizing hint of pre-cum. Drew groaned and tried to move to get more contact.

Ciaran evaded him, laughing.

Drew hissed his displeasure. Before he could speak, Ciaran leaned down and kissed him, lips soft and yielding. Drew lost himself in the warmth of his mate's mouth. Their tongues met and twined together. The slick warmth of Ciaran's lips and tongue against his made him shiver.

Too soon, Ciaran pulled away. He sat up and looked down at Drew.

Drew frowned. "Hey. Come back here."

From behind Ciaran, two big, black, batlike wings unfurled. Drew's eyes widened. He gaped up at Ciaran, desire surging even higher. Something about his mate's wings, so rarely seen, turned him on like nothing else.

Ciaran smiled. "Don't worry. I'll let you touch soon enough."

Any thought Drew had of protesting flew out the window. He nodded.

Ciaran slithered down Drew's body until his head was level with Drew's cock. All Drew could do was whimper as Ciaran took Drew's dick into his mouth in a slow, hot slide. He pulled off just as slowly until he reached the head, but didn't let it slip out.

"Oh fuck." Drew's hands clenched into tight fists. "Please say I can touch you."

His violet eyes sparkling with amusement, Ciaran nodded.

"Thank God." Drew brought his hand down and slid his fingertips

along the velvety surface of one wing, making Ciaran shudder. Ciaran's wings were so sensitive. Drew continued to caress the silken skin. With his other hand he managed to yank open the nightstand drawer and fish around inside.

Ciaran licked a long line up his throbbing cock, stopping to lap at the leaking head. Drew's hand tightened convulsively around the tube he'd been searching for. "Up here. Please."

"Since you said please," Ciaran agreed. He made his way back up Drew's body, kissing and nipping at Drew's stomach and chest along the way.

Drew flipped the lube's cap and drizzled some of the cool, slick liquid onto his fingers. He found Ciaran's opening with unerring accuracy and pushed two fingers inside.

"Drew." Ciaran moaned and let his head fall back.

Drew ran his free hand up Ciaran's stomach and chest, feeling the muscles contract under his touch. He couldn't help but stare at Ciaran's slim, toned body, taut with arousal. Against Ciaran's marble-pale skin, his black hair and wings stood out in stark relief. *So fucking beautiful. And he's mine.*

Drew pushed another finger in. Ciaran opened as if made for him. He was warm and silky smooth, and Drew wanted to be inside. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. Now." Ciaran lifted his head and stared down at Drew, his eyes full of want.

Withdrawing his fingers, Drew caught Ciaran's hips and gave his lover free rein. Ciaran sank onto Drew's cock at a pace designed to drive them both insane. Rather than trying to speed him up, Drew closed his eyes and savored the slick heat as Ciaran's body swallowed him up.

When Ciaran had fully impaled himself, he stilled for a long moment. He tightened his channel around Drew's erection in a little tease that made Drew gasp. Finally he raised himself up again. Down. Up. Hot and tight and so damned slow.

Drew couldn't take it anymore. Growling low in his throat, he pushed up while yanking Ciaran's hips down to meet his movement.

Ciaran let out what could only be called a snarl and pushed down as well.

From then on, all Drew knew was heat, friction, and a wild need that drowned out every other thought in his head. They came together in a hard, frantic dance of thrust and retreat. Far too soon, the white-hot pleasure overwhelmed them.

Ciaran cried out and came. Thick, ropy semen splattered Drew's stomach, the scent sharp and bittersweet. Drew pounded up into Ciaran's body a few more times, the tight heat irresistible, before succumbing to his own climax. It burned through him with an almost painful intensity.

Ciaran collapsed onto Drew's chest, sweaty and sated. "Mm, good morning."

"Good morning to you." Drew kissed the top of Ciaran's head and idly traced a nonsense pattern along the delicate bones of one wing.

Ciaran shivered and sighed. After a few minutes, he opened one eye and glanced at the clock. "So much for being early."

Drew laughed. "We can still get you there." He slapped his mate's ass hard enough to sting, making the indignant demon glare at him. "C'mon, get up."

* * * * *

Close to an hour after they woke, Drew fired up his motorcycle. Ciaran pulled on a helmet and hopped onto the bike behind Drew, and Drew drove him to work. He let Ciaran off in front of the coffee shop right on time.

He smiled as he watched his slim, sexy lover walk into the shop. Ciaran moved with an innate grace unlike anything Drew had ever seen in anyone else. Drew could have watched him all day.

Unfortunately, he had errands to run. Christmas was coming, and he was determined to make his lover's first one wonderful. That meant presents, and a tree. The tree he'd get later. The presents, though, he could take care of today.

He smiled and pulled away from the curb. He had work to do.

Chapter Two

"Hey Janie." Ciaran slid behind the counter of Stomping Grounds and grabbed a clean black apron from one of the hooks. He smiled at his boss and friend, who was placing a tray of cookies in the glass display case. She had done a great deal for him, and for Drew, in the short weeks since he and Janie met in the city park. Having a boss who was a witch ought to have been frightening, but Janie was anything but.

"Good morning, sunshine." She threw a knowing grin over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Somebody's having a good day already."

Ciaran's cheeks heated. "Every day is a good day here at Stomping Grounds."

Janie burst out laughing. "Yeah, right. And I'm sure your chipper attitude has nothing to do with the guy who dropped you off."

"Nothing at all," Ciaran agreed, breezy and nonchalant.

The sly little grin he couldn't quite hide must not have fooled his boss. She tossed her ponytail. "Ugh, you two make me sick, all lovey-dovey all the time."

Her tone told him she was only joking, so he didn't take offense. He shrugged. "I can't help it. He's irresistible."

Janie nodded. "I have to admit, if I had a guy who looked like that I'd be the same way." She paused. "Does he have any straight brothers?"

The question reminded him of Drew's mother's call. A little chill of foreboding went through him, and he frowned. "I don't think you'd like

his brothers. They are not good men."

"Damn. That figures." Janie's brow crinkled, but she let the subject drop. "Can you go get the rest of the cookies from the back?"

Ciaran shook off his apprehension and got to work.

* * * * *

The day flew by, as most days at Stomping Grounds did. Ciaran loved working. Whether he was stocking the baked goods, ringing up customers' purchases, or even cleaning off tables, his job made him feel useful and like a part of normal human society. It also allowed him to contribute to his and Drew's household finances. Although Drew had never insinuated Ciaran had to work and pay his own way, Ciaran felt better about himself when he contributed.

Ciaran was wiping down the counter when the bell over the door jingled. He looked up at the newcomer, smiling in welcome. "What can I get for you?"

The tall, thin young man did not smile in return. Instead, his expression appeared to be a mixture of irritation and calculation. His nose and cheeks were red from the cold. He eyed the counter, and Ciaran, for a moment before he spoke, his words clipped, impatient. "I'd like some coffee, and some information."

"I will help if I can." Ciaran continued to smile despite the man's cold behavior. He put his cleaning cloth aside and moved to the register. "How would you like your coffee?"

The customer pulled off his baseball cap to reveal short, sandy hair. He shoved the cap into his back pocket and rubbed his hands together. The light coat he wore must not have been adequate for the chill outside. "Black, the biggest you've got."

Ciaran poured a large black coffee into a to-go cup and put a lid on it. "Would you like anything else?"

After a glance at the display case, the young man added, "Give me one of those double chocolate cookies, too."

Ciaran slipped a cookie into a paper sleeve and placed both items

on a tray. "That will be four fifty-three."

The man handed Ciaran a five-dollar bill. The brush of his cold fingertips against Ciaran's skin provoked a shudder Ciaran could not chalk up to the temperature. While there was nothing suspicious about a customer being in a hurry, or even a little rude, something about *this* customer felt...off. Ciaran attempted to cover his reaction, busying himself getting change.

The customer pocketed the change he was given. "This is Trenton, Missouri, right?"

Suddenly hesitant, Ciaran nodded without speaking.

"Good," the man muttered. An instant later, he refocused on Ciaran. "Is there any place to stay in this town? Like a motel or something?"

"I believe there is a small motel right outside of town." Ciaran looked around for Janie. Perhaps if she talked to the man Ciaran could ask her if she sensed anything odd about him. "I can ask my boss if you would like. She could tell you more."

"No." The customer shook his head. "I can find it."

"Will you be staying long?" Ciaran hoped the answer would be no.

The man smirked, his eyes narrowing. "Not long. My business here will only take a few days."

The man's self-satisfied expression unsettled Ciaran further. He didn't know what to say in response.

The customer must not have expected Ciaran to reply, because he gathered up his coffee and cookie and left the coffee shop.

Ciaran watched him go, trying to ignore his vague sense of unease. The customer hadn't done or said anything threatening or strange. Ciaran's feelings must be due to what he and Drew had been through last month. An overreaction, and nothing more.

* * * * *

Every bit of Ciaran's worry disappeared when Drew walked through the doorway an hour later. His green eyes sparkled, his brown

and blond hair was tousled by the wind, and he appeared invigorated by the cold rather than uncomfortable. He grinned at Ciaran. "You almost ready to go?"

Janie emerged from the back. "Hey Drew." She rounded the counter and enfolded Drew in a hug. "How are you?"

Drew hugged the petite Janie and tweaked her ponytail. "Fine. Everything's been good."

Ciaran was grateful when she refrained from teasing Drew about their morning. To make sure she didn't get a chance, he diverted her attention. "Do you need me to do anything else before I go?"

"No, hon, you can take off."

"Thanks." Ciaran untied his apron and put it on one of the hooks. "I'll see you tomorrow."

A buzzer went off somewhere, and Janie rolled her eyes. "Duty calls." She released Drew and headed for the back.

Ciaran rounded the counter. His strong, beautiful werewolf waited patiently, a smile tilting his lips just because he was pleased to see Ciaran. Had anyone—Fae, demon, or human—ever been luckier? It was all Ciaran could do to restrain himself from leaping into Drew's arms.

Instead, he fell into step beside his mate near the door. "How was your day?"

The question seemed to amuse Drew. "Fine, dear."

Ciaran frowned. Was Drew making fun of him?

"I'm teasing you." Drew bumped their shoulders together. "I had a really good day." He paused while they each got into the truck. As if he couldn't hold back, he added, "I bought you something."

That got Ciaran's attention. He watched Drew, hopeful. "A present?"

Drew started the truck and pulled away from the curb. His lips turned up farther. "Yep. It's a surprise."

After going his whole life without them, Ciaran adored presents. He managed not to show his glee, but just barely. "What is it?"

Laughing, Drew turned the truck toward home. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

Chagrined, Ciaran sat back. "I suppose not."

"Sorry. No more teasing, I promise." Drew put a hand on Ciaran's knee and squeezed. "I was going to give it to you for Christmas, but I want you to have it now. Reach under the seat."

Ciaran obeyed, and his hand brushed a small object. He grasped the item and pulled it out to reveal a box wrapped in shiny red paper with a bow on top. Drew had given him things before, but never a real, wrapped gift. Unable to hold back his excitement, he bounced a little in his seat. "It's beautiful."

"You haven't even opened it yet." Drew grinned at him, indulgent and pleased. "Wait until you see what's inside."

Ciaran ran a finger along the smooth, pretty paper, in no hurry to open the present. He wanted to savor the experience. He slipped a fingertip beneath one of the folds and lifted the tape, careful not to damage the paper. He did the same to another piece of tape without lifting any of the paper. Anticipation kept him from peeking.

Drew was laughing again, but not at Ciaran. While Ciaran contemplated his gift they'd arrived home, and Drew pulled into the driveway. He shut off the engine and unbuckled his seat belt. Then he leaned toward Ciaran and kissed him gently.

The soft kiss distracted Ciaran from his task. He smiled. "What was that for?"

"Just happy." Drew sat back and watched him, his green eyes almost glowing. "Go ahead, open it. I want to see what you think."

Excitement rose again, and Ciaran removed the rest of the paper from his gift. Inside was a plain brown box. He opened one end and pulled out some packaging. A slim black object fell into his hand. It didn't take long for him to figure out what the object was. He'd seen them on television many times. "A cell phone." He pushed the lone button, and the phone came to life. A picture of himself and Drew snuggled together was set as the background.

"I added you to my plan. I thought it would be good if you had your own, in case you need to call me or just want to talk to Janie. Or if you're going to be late, so I don't worry. You've got unlimited Internet

and text messages, and we can get you whatever applications you want.” Drew sounded anxious. “Do you like it?”

Ciaran smiled down at the picture of them, and then up at Drew. “I love it. And I love you.”

Drew grinned. “Want to show me how much?”

Ciaran slipped the phone into the pocket of his slacks and opened the truck door. “Race you inside.” He hopped out before Drew could answer and slammed the door.

He was halfway to the house by the time Drew got out of the truck.

Chapter Three

The phone rang at ten o'clock. Ciaran was chatting with Janie on his cell phone, which he hadn't let out of his sight since Drew gave it to him. Drew grinned, thinking about how seriously Ciaran had taken his cell phone lessons, and how excited he had gotten when he purchased his first phone application. Within the first hour he could text like a pro. Maybe Drew had created a monster.

Still grinning to himself, Drew picked up the phone. "Hello?"

There was a clicking sound on the line, and then silence. Drew tried again. "Hello?"

No response. The connection must have been bad. Drew hung up.

* * * * *

By the next evening, Drew had answered three more of the weird calls with nothing but clicking sounds. He was beginning to get annoyed when the phone rang yet again at eleven o'clock. Drew clenched his fist tightly around his toothbrush and scowled.

Ciaran frowned. Through a mouthful of toothpaste, he asked, "You want me to answer it?"

At least that was what Drew thought he'd said. The toothpaste made his words hard to understand. Drew had to smile. "No, I'll get it. It better not be another one of those damned hang-up calls."

He hurried into the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Andrew Moore?"

Drew didn't recognize the voice. "Yes?"

"Do you like wolves?"

"What?" Drew tensed. Was this a joke? Did someone know about him?

"I was wondering if you'd like to donate to the Save the Wolves fund."

A charity was calling him this late? *Weird*. "Do you have any information you could send me? It's kind of late."

"I'll send a pamphlet out to you in tomorrow's mail. Have a nice night." The man hung up before Drew could answer.

He frowned at the phone in his hand, suspicious. He didn't have any real reason to suspect a con, except that the guy had called so late. Maybe he was just paranoid.

From the other room, the ring of his cell phone shattered the stillness. Why the hell was he so popular all of a sudden?

He stalked to the other room and snatched up his phone. "*What?*"

The hiss of static greeted him, then a faint voice. "Drew?"

"Mom?" He held the phone to his ear and pressed the volume button on the side, straining to hear. "Mom, can you hear me?"

"Drew." A burst of louder static. "Planning something. I don't know what." More static. "Careful." *Hiss*. "To hurt you."

"Who wants to hurt me?" Drew plugged his other ear in a vain attempt to make the sound clearer. "What's going on?"

"Can't—"

"Mom?" His phone beeped and all sound cut off. He cursed and glanced at the display. *Call ended*. She must have lost her connection.

Ciaran entered the room, his forehead creased with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Damn it." Drew tossed his phone onto the bed. "My mom called again. I know she was trying to warn me about something, but I couldn't make it out."

Ciaran chewed his lower lip and moved closer to Drew, his anxiety clear. "Do you think you're in danger?"

Drew pulled Ciaran into his arms and held him tight. He wanted to reassure his mate, but he couldn't without lying. That he would never do. All he could say was, "I don't know."

* * * * *

For the next few days, Ciaran was on edge. It would have been impossible not to be. The situation was too similar to what had happened last month, only centered on Drew rather than himself. The mere thought of Drew being in danger terrified Ciaran.

At least Drew wouldn't be taken by surprise, like they had been last time. He was on high alert. He insisted on driving Ciaran to and from work. Ciaran didn't argue. He didn't really want to be by himself anyway.

The distraction of work helped him not dwell on Drew's mother and her cryptic warnings, but he worried about Drew being home alone. Drew insisted he could take care of himself, of course. Ciaran didn't find that terribly comforting. Drew might be a werewolf, but he wasn't immortal. Even a werewolf could be hurt or killed.

When they were at home, Ciaran immersed himself in preparations for Christmas. He was excited about celebrating a human holiday that included gifts as well as food. Janie had given him several recipes for holiday cookies, and he was determined to try them all. He'd also decided to bake a ham rather than turkey like he'd done for Thanksgiving.

Sometimes, with all the interesting things he had to think about, Ciaran managed to forget about the potential threat hanging over their heads.

In fact, he was in a good mood right up until the phone rang. Drew was busy in his office, working on a Web site, so Ciaran answered. "Moore residence."

An unfamiliar male voice demanded, "Who is this?"

Taken aback, Ciaran was silent for a moment. No one had ever responded in such a way on the telephone. He wasn't quite sure how to react. Hoping he was doing the right thing, he finally spoke. "Ciaran."

"You live there?"

"Yes," he replied slowly.

"Anybody else live there?"

The man's brusque tone and rapid-fire questioning bothered Ciaran enough that he bristled. "That's none of your business. Who is this?"

There was a loud *click*, and then the dial tone blared in his ear. Ciaran hung up the phone, puzzled and more than a little unsettled. Why had some man wanted to know if Ciaran lived here? And why had he hung up so abruptly?

Ciaran decided to tell Drew about the strange call. It might have been a very rude and nosy person, or it could have been something more sinister. Ciaran was not going to take any chances. He headed for Drew's office.

Drew glanced up and smiled as he entered. "Hey. What's up?"

"Someone just called. It was strange."

Drew swiveled in his chair until he faced Ciaran. "Strange how? Are you okay?"

"Yes." Ciaran chewed his lip, unsure how to describe the odd call. "It was a man. He asked who I was, and if I lived here. Then he asked if anyone else lived here, but I didn't tell him. I asked who he was instead. He hung up."

Drew's brow creased into a scowl. "It may have been nothing, but I don't like it. We've had too many weird calls lately."

"That's what I thought too." Ciaran hovered in the doorway, attempting to look unconcerned despite his rising worry.

"Come here." Drew patted his lap. Ciaran crossed the room and allowed Drew to pull him down into his arms. Drew held his gaze. "Don't worry, okay? I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Ciaran stared into his mate's green eyes. He believed his mate would protect him. That wasn't the problem.

Who will keep you safe?

Chapter Four

The call Ciaran answered was the last straw. Normally Drew wouldn't have thought they meant anything, but combined with his mom's warnings, they seemed sinister. He was determined to take every possible precaution this time.

After he dropped Ciaran off at work the next morning, he called Nick. Nick didn't answer, but Drew hadn't really expected him to. He left a message asking his friend to call him back. He didn't say what it was about, because he wasn't really sure yet. He wanted to see if Nick had heard anything about his father. From what little he'd managed to glean from his mother's calls, his father might be plotting against him. That really didn't make any sense to him, since he'd left the pack and gone off on his own. He shouldn't be a threat to Clinton Moore anymore. Unfortunately, his father wasn't always rational when it came to people he saw as enemies. Drew had seen that firsthand many times.

He shook off a chill as he remembered his father tearing another wolf apart in front of the whole pack. The wolf's infraction had been minor. Lost and confused, he'd accidentally strayed onto Moore land without asking permission. That small mistake alone had been enough to earn him a death sentence. No amount of explanation or pleading had swayed Clinton's decision.

Although he hoped his past wasn't about to collide with the present, Drew needed to find out as much as he could. Without any contacts in his hometown, other than his mother, he didn't have many

options. He went to his computer and opened the browser.

His father's e-mail wasn't difficult to hack into. Clinton Moore might be ruthless and cruel, but he wasn't very tech savvy. Drew scanned the messages in the in-box but found nothing incriminating: a few reports from his lieutenants about the security of their pack borders, a couple of e-mails from other pack Alphas, and some advertisements. None of the folders revealed anything suspicious or helpful either. He would have done the same with his mother's e-mail, but she didn't have an e-mail address. His father probably didn't want her to.

With a sigh, Drew leaned back in his chair and considered what he knew. His mother had called him, twice, with cryptic warnings, possibly involving his father and brothers. Then there were the hang-up calls, and that weird charity guy. So far he had nothing conclusive, but that many suspicious events had to add up to something. His father's e-mail didn't tell him anything, and his mom hadn't called back a third time to explain. He needed to be vigilant and talk to Nick ASAP. Maybe if he thought about it long enough he'd come up with another idea of how to get intel on his father too.

Determined not to dwell on possibilities, Drew spent the rest of the day working. Several of his clients were in need of Web site updates, and he had a couple of programs to finish. The day passed like most days did, uneventful and productive.

At three thirty, Drew shut off his computer, stood, and stretched. It was almost time to pick up Ciaran. While he was in town, he'd get some dinner too. Pizza would be good.

Drew found his keys and went out to the truck. A strange sensation of being watched hit him the moment he got outside. The feeling was strong enough to make the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He paused and sniffed the air, scenting trees, wood smoke, and other ordinary winter smells. A quick glance around him revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

"Getting paranoid," he muttered to himself. It was hard not to be paranoid, though, with what he and Ciaran had been through in the past few weeks. He stayed close to the house as long as possible and stayed

focused on his surroundings.

With a last look around, he got into the truck.

* * * * *

Twenty-five minutes later, Drew pulled up in front of Stomping Grounds. A large pizza—one half veggie in deference to his mate's tastes, the other half extra meat—and an order of breadsticks sat next to him. The scents of spicy pepperoni, rich mozzarella cheese, and fresh tomato sauce reminded him he hadn't eaten enough at lunch. His stomach growled just as Ciaran pulled the passenger door open and hopped into the truck.

Ciaran stared at him for a moment, his violet eyes amused. "Hungry?"

The word, said in Ciaran's husky voice, gave Drew ideas. Maybe pizza could wait. "Starving." Drew slanted a sly look at Ciaran, leaving no doubt what else he was hungry for.

His little mate blushed to the tips of his ears, but didn't look away. "Perhaps we should hurry home, then. I find myself hungry as well."

Although formal language wouldn't have been a turn-on from anyone else, coming from Ciaran it was sexy as hell. Drew let out a growl and put the truck into drive.

Ciaran smiled and scooted closer to him, shifting the pizza to the passenger seat. At Drew's raised eyebrow, Ciaran gave him an innocent look. "I am cold."

"Uh huh." A hand appeared on his thigh. Drew shifted in his seat to allow more contact. "I guess your hand's cold, too?"

"It is very chilly today."

Ciaran's hand slid higher on Drew's thigh. Drew's attempt at a laugh became a swallowed moan. He pushed the gas pedal down a bit farther. Pizza could wait.

* * * * *

The second he parked the truck in the driveway, Drew shut the

vehicle off and caught Ciaran's errant hand. "You're driving me crazy." He brought Ciaran's hand to his mouth and licked a line up Ciaran's palm, tasting salt, soap, and sugar. He must have been helping Janie bake again.

Holding Ciaran's gaze, Drew took one of Ciaran's slim fingers into his mouth and sucked lightly. He released it with a *pop*. "Any questions?"

Ciaran shook his head, eyes wide, pupils huge.

"After all that teasing, you've got nothing to say?" Drew sucked another finger in, running his tongue along the side of it.

"Just three words," Ciaran whispered. "Inside. In me."

Oh fuck. Drew stared at Ciaran for about half a second before he lunged for the door. Ciaran slid across the seat after him and they were off. Together, they raced for the house.

They didn't even come close to the bedroom. Drew slammed the front door behind them and pushed Ciaran against it. Their lips met with bruising force. Ciaran opened to him, and he swept his tongue in to claim his mate's mouth.

Ciaran whimpered and speared his hands into Drew's hair, holding him close. Drew's hands roamed Ciaran's body. He slid one under Ciaran's shirt. First he traced the flat plane of Ciaran's stomach, and then he moved up to tease a pebbled nipple. With his other hand, he fumbled at the button of Ciaran's slacks.

Ciaran's cock pressed against the fly, hard and ready. Drew paused to rub it through the material until Ciaran nipped his lower lip. He smiled into the kiss and popped the button. Seconds later, Ciaran's pants and boxers were around his ankles and Drew wrapped his hand around Ciaran's cock.

Head falling against the door with a *thunk*, Ciaran moaned. "Yes, Drew, please. Touch me."

As if Drew could refuse him anything. Drew pumped Ciaran's cock, slow and steady. He nuzzled Ciaran's neck, licking and sucking at the soft skin. His own dick pressed against the zipper of his jeans, painfully hard.

He thought he could ignore it until Ciaran started thrusting into his

hand. With a low groan of his own, he flipped Ciaran to face the door and dropped to his knees.

Ciaran let out a disappointed whimper. "What are you doing?"

"Shh." Drew palmed the perfect cheeks of Ciaran's ass and pulled them apart. He leaned forward and dragged his tongue over the skin he'd uncovered, pausing to blow a stream of cool air over Ciaran's hole.

"Drew!" Ciaran clawed at the door, pushing himself toward Drew. "So good. Don't stop."

Drew didn't stop. He licked the skin around Ciaran's entrance. His own body, now constricted further by his crouched position, demanded he stop teasing, so he did. He found Ciaran's hole and pushed his tongue in, lapping at the sensitive edges.

The sounds Ciaran made could not be identified as words. Drew heard Ciaran's hands scrabbling for purchase against the door. He grabbed Ciaran's slim hips and directed him the short distance to the couch, all without stopping.

Ciaran took the hint and placed his hands on the arm of the couch. Drew pushed a finger in beside his tongue. Ciaran was stretched and ready, and Drew couldn't wait any longer. He stood and ripped his jeans open.

Desperate, he spit into his hand and slicked his cock as best he could. "Tell me if I hurt you." He put his aching dick against Ciaran's entrance and began to push.

He almost lost control right then. Ciaran's body was incredibly hot and tight. Without lube, there was more friction than he was used to. Gritting his teeth, he paused. "You okay?"

Ciaran didn't respond. Fine tremors ran through his body.

Worried now, Drew rubbed his back. "Am I hurting you?"

Voice low and raspy, Ciaran muttered, "Hurts, but—" He pushed back toward Drew, taking another inch inside himself. "It's good."

Fuck. Drew hissed. Watching his cock disappear inside Ciaran was too much. Drew let Ciaran keep moving until he was fully buried inside his mate. The feeling was indescribable. Drew wished he could stop to savor it.

Unfortunately, his body was clamoring for release. He slid out most of the way and thrust back in, hard and fast. Ciaran met every thrust, his cries and moans spurring Drew on.

He reached for Ciaran's cock to bring him off, but the instant his fingertips brushed it, Ciaran gasped out his name and came. Semen splattered Ciaran's stomach and the arm of the couch. His channel tightened like a vise around Drew's dick.

Pleasure poured through Drew. A howl of triumph tore from his throat. He pounded into his mate a few more times to prolong the feeling.

Ciaran collapsed over the couch arm, panting. Drew leaned against Ciaran's back, breathing in the mingled scents of sweat, sex, Ciaran's own spicy scent, and—cookies?

Drew nibbled the back of his neck. "You smell delicious. You should help Janie bake more often."

Ciaran laughed and tried to move away. "That tickles."

"Oh, really?" Drew chuckled and nibbled some more. He wrapped his arms around Ciaran and held him.

They stayed that way for a minute or two, warm and content. Then Drew's back twinged. He stood and stretched, groaning. "I'm too old for this over the couch stuff."

Ciaran rolled his eyes. "Let's go clean up, old man."

* * * * *

After a quick shower, Drew threw on a pair of jeans and went back into the living room. Ciaran followed, dressed in his pajama pants and a T-shirt. One of Ciaran's shows was about to come on, so Ciaran flopped on the couch and grabbed the remote. Drew sat beside him. Ciaran snuggled up and got comfortable, clearly ready to relax for the night.

Drew's stomach grumbled loudly, reminding him of the pizza. Which he'd left in the truck. He sighed.

Ciaran lifted his head from Drew's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I left the damned pizza outside." Drew had to laugh. "I guess I had other things on my mind."

"I distracted you. I'm very sorry." Ciaran's mock-serious expression made him laugh harder.

"I'm sure you are." Drew stood and grabbed a shirt from the basket of laundry Ciaran had yet to put away. "I'll go get the food. It'll taste just fine reheated."

Ciaran put the remote down. "Do you need any help?"

"No, I've got it." Pulling his shirt over his head, Drew attempted to stuff his feet into his shoes without watching what he was doing. In the end, he had to sit on the arm of the couch to put them on.

"I'll get drinks. What do you want?" Ciaran hopped up and headed for the kitchen.

Drew shrugged. "Water would be good." He stretched and opened the door.

Seconds later, Ciaran came out of the kitchen. "Can you see if my house keys are in the truck? I must have dropped them."

Ciaran's keys were probably in the same place Drew always lost things, only on the passenger side. Drew smiled. "Sure. Be right back." He shut the door behind him, bracing himself against an unexpected gust of wind. It had gotten cold. He was glad he wasn't human. They all seemed to hate the cold.

He stopped at the passenger side of the truck. Ciaran's keys were there, as he'd suspected, having fallen between the door and the seat. Drew fished them out, stood up, and grabbed the pizza. He shut the door with his hip and turned to go back to the house.

He didn't have time to fully process the sound of the gunshot and the whoosh of something flying past his head before another shot shattered his momentary disbelief. Searing pain stabbed into his shoulder. He stumbled back, stunned. The pizza fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. His feet tangled beneath him. The ground rose up to meet him, and then his cheek was pressed against the hard gravel of the driveway.

"Drew!" Ciaran's voice rang out over the wild pounding of Drew's heart. He stood on the porch as if frozen, staring at Drew in horror.

Drew tried to tell his lover to get in the house, to stay safe, but no sound emerged. Agony pulsed through his shoulder in time with his

heartbeat. Blood pumped out, fast and hot. Dull, icy tendrils spread from his shoulder to his chest, and down his arm. Breathing suddenly became difficult.

In seconds, Ciaran knelt at his side, face white and afraid. "We have to get you inside. Can you move?"

Drew managed to force words from between numb lips. "You go. Call for help."

Ciaran darted a glance around the dark, silent yard. "I think they've gone. We'll stay low just in case."

"Too dangerous. Leave me."

"No! I'm not leaving you out here."

The anguish in Ciaran's voice stopped Drew's words. Unwilling to argue anymore, he said nothing. With Ciaran's help, he struggled into a sitting position, and then to his knees. A rush of dizzy weakness nearly sent him to the ground again. Ciaran caught him and, with surprising strength, half carried him toward the house.

Blood gushed down his arm, the flow increasing rather than slowing. His healing abilities should already have been working on the wound. Instead, it felt as if the wound worsened by the second. He panted through the pain and weakness and let Ciaran steer him up the steps and through the door. To his relief, there were no more gunshots. He was already in no shape to defend himself—or Ciaran, if it came to that—just from one shot to the shoulder.

His foot caught on the rug. Unprepared, he fell to his knees, barely able to avoid pulling Ciaran down with him.

Ciaran let out a pained sound and crouched down beside him. "I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

Drew shook his head, a strange lethargy joining the pain. He was not all right. This was not a normal reaction to being shot. Despite having never been shot before, he still knew that. His body should be making some attempt to heal the injury, like it had when he'd been smashed on the head last month. And that had been a more serious injury than a shot to the shoulder. Something was wrong.

Then the truth hit him, blinding and so obvious he couldn't believe

he hadn't realized it before. "Silver." His gaze met Ciaran's. "The bullet's silver. Have to get it out."

Those violet eyes widened, horrified. "How?"

Black spots danced in Drew's vision. They had to get the bullet out before the silver poisoned his whole system. It might already be too late. "Knife," he managed, before the black spots overtook him.

Chapter Five

A silver bullet. Despite taking a werewolf as his mate, Ciaran had much to learn about them. Silver was poisonous to them, he knew that, but how much so? Did he have time to call for help?

One look at Drew's normally tan skin, now ashy gray, told him he'd better not risk it. He had to do something now, before it was too late. He clambered to his feet and ran to the kitchen.

The butcher-block holder on the counter held an assortment of knives. Ciaran grabbed one with a long, thin blade and rushed back to Drew's side.

In the short amount of time he'd been in the kitchen, his mate's condition had already worsened. All color had drained from Drew's face. His breathing seemed labored. Ciaran cut through the sleeve of Drew's shirt and tore the material away from his shoulder. Heart pounding, Ciaran wiped at the blood coating Drew's skin. Strange metallic streaks radiated from the bullet wound like diseased veins just underneath the skin.

This is bad. Ciaran swallowed down the panic that tried to claw its way up his throat. The thought of cutting into Drew's flesh with a knife made him want to vomit, but if the only other choice was Drew's death....

He took a steadying breath. With his left hand, he held Drew's shoulder down as best he could. He guided the knife blade to the bullet hole and pushed. Drew barely moved. A few tiny sounds were the only indication he still lived.

Nausea rose at the sight of still more blood bubbling up, but Ciaran persisted. The tip of the blade hit something hard a few inches in. He forced himself to peer into the wound. A glint of metal other than the knife told him he'd found the bullet. He pried at the mass of metal as carefully as he could.

Finally he worked the projectile free and eased it out. He wrapped the bullet in a bit of material and set it aside. A dim part of his mind thought whoever came to help might need to see it.

"Now what?" he whispered aloud. With the hardest task finished, keeping the panic at bay was suddenly more difficult. He thought of the television shows he'd seen, and remembered something. He lurched to his feet and staggered to the bathroom. In the medicine cabinet, he found a bottle of peroxide and some bandage supplies. He grabbed what he thought he might need.

Back in the living room, Ciaran knelt at Drew's side once more. Heedless of the floor, he opened the peroxide bottle and poured the clear liquid over Drew's wound. Blood and silvery-gray residue bubbled out in a disgusting, pinkish froth.

Drew whimpered and shifted as if trying to get away from the stinging liquid, but he didn't awaken. The sight of his lover's pain was almost more than Ciaran could bear. He smoothed a hand over Drew's sweat-dampened forehead. "Shh."

Although he still seemed to be in pain, Drew's whimpers stopped. Ciaran turned his attention back to his task. He continued to pour peroxide onto the wound until the bubbles were white rather than pink. Then he taped a small gauze pad, the only kind they had, over the hole. It was like trying to dam a river with a few sticks. Stitches would be much better, but he didn't think they had a needle and thread in the house.

Janie. His friend and employer would know what to do. He would call her, and Nick. His new cell phone sat on the coffee table. Too shaky to stand, he crawled over to the table and picked up the phone. He returned to Drew's side and watched his pale, still mate anxiously as he dialed Janie's number.

She answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Janie. It's Ciaran. Can you come over?" His voice came out steadier than he expected. It almost sounded as if he was calling to say hello.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Drew's been shot."

He could hear Janie suck in a breath. After a second of silence, she said, "What have you done so far?"

In a flat, mechanical voice he didn't recognize, Ciaran recited the steps. "I got him inside and took out the bullet. I cleaned the wound with peroxide and bandaged it."

"Where? And is he conscious?" She'd gone brisk and businesslike, a sure sign she was worried.

"No. His shoulder." Blood already marred the white bandage. After he finished his calls, he would put pressure on the wound to try to stop the bleeding. He should have thought of that.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Ciaran ended the call and dialed Nick's number. Unlike Janie, Nick didn't answer. Ciaran listened to Nick's gruff voice telling him to leave a message, and then he spoke. "If you can get away, I need your help. Drew's been shot."

Ciaran brushed Drew's brownish-blond hair off his forehead. He ought to feel something. Part of him was screaming in terror that he would lose the one person he couldn't live without. The rest of him felt like a block of ice. He glanced at the lump of material covering the bullet. "I think the bullet was silver."

He pushed the button to end the call and stripped off his shirt. Pressing the material against Drew's shoulder, he hoped Janie would arrive soon.

* * * * *

Time passed in a nightmarish haze. Ciaran kept his shirt pressed against Drew's shoulder, watching, helpless, as blood continued to seep through the material. Drew's skin grew grayer, and his breathing became

shallower and more labored. Ciaran waited for each breath, worried that it would be the last.

Emptiness threatened to overwhelm him. Drew was dying, and he didn't know what to do to stop it, or even if he could. Desperate, he focused his gaze on Drew's still face. "You have to fight. Don't leave me. *I won't let you leave me.*"

He didn't even notice Janie had come in until she put a hand on his shoulder. "You can let go now, honey. I need to see."

Unclenching his clawlike grip on the shirt, he moved back to let Janie work. He clasped his hands together, trying not to notice how much of Drew's blood stained them.

Janie's eyes widened when she saw the wound. "What the hell?"

Ciaran opened the bundle of cloth to reveal the silver bullet.

She paled at the sight of it. Turning back to Drew, she traced a finger along one of the strange, silver-black lines spiderwebbing out from the hole in his shoulder. "This isn't that bad a place to get shot. It shouldn't have affected his breathing. I think these marks must be from the silver. All I know to do is clean it and stitch it up. I can do a healing spell too, but I don't think that's going to be enough."

"I can't lose him."

He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Janie turned to look at him, her expression grave. "I know. I'll do what I can, but we need someone with more expertise. Can you get Nick, or your grandfather?"

"I called Nick." He hadn't considered contacting his grandfather. He wasn't sure he'd be able to. All he knew to do was speak a Fae spell he'd never attempted before, which was supposed to be used to contact others in the Realms in times of trouble. He didn't know if it would work outside of Faerie, or if half-demons could use it. All he could do was try. Closing his eyes, he began to chant the spell, repeating the words over and over as Janie worked. Minutes stretched like an eternity, and he began to despair.

The cool hand that closed on his shoulder nearly made Ciaran cry out. He swallowed the sound when he realized who had touched him. "Grandfather. You came."

Lorcan Oir gazed down at him, his cold lavender eyes assessing. "You summoned me. What has happened?"

Although he was a grown man, and had left his grandfather's oppressive home, something about Lorcan's stare, combined with his terror for Drew, made Ciaran feel like a frightened, lonely child again. He struggled to keep his face expressionless. "Someone shot Drew. With a silver bullet."

His grandfather's blank facade cracked a bit at that. He nodded and knelt next to Janie. He spoke to her, his voice brusque and businesslike. "We must get the poison out first, or the werewolf will most certainly die."

Ciaran shivered. Drew was his mate, his life. Everything would be meaningless and empty without him.

Ciaran drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, hugging them to his chest. He longed to be near Drew, but he was afraid he'd be in the way. He watched, helpless and anxious, as Janie and his grandfather prepared some sort of poultice and smeared it onto the hole in Drew's shoulder.

Minutes stretched into hours. Ciaran was dimly aware of the passage of time, but he didn't move. He remained in his position on the floor, keeping vigil while Lorcan and Janie chanted spells to cleanse Drew's body of the poisonous silver. Throughout their treatments, Drew did not move or make a sound. His skin remained the same unhealthy gray, and the silvery lines on his shoulder and arm did not diminish. Ciaran tried to take comfort in the fact that they didn't grow either, but the observation was little consolation.

At last, Lorcan sat back. "We must move him to a bed."

Uncurling himself from the tense, tight ball he'd been huddled in, Ciaran moved to Drew's side. He and his grandfather took Drew's upper half, and Janie carried his feet. It was awkward and difficult, but they managed to get Drew to the bedroom and onto the bed.

When they had finished positioning him as comfortably as they could, Lorcan faced Ciaran for the first time in hours. "I have done all I can. My magic is strong, but silver poisoning is a tricky thing." His

expression held both weariness and compassion, which terrified Ciaran more than anything else.

Despite his inner turmoil, Ciaran remembered well the lessons Lorcan had taught. Even now, he would show no weakness. "Do you think he will survive?"

Lorcan lifted one shoulder in the elegant Fae version of a shrug. "I do not know. He is strong, but even the strongest wolf can be felled by silver."

Ciaran closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Agony, sharp and black, threatened to envelop him. He forced his eyes open and offered a hand to his grandfather in gratitude.

Lorcan clasped his hand for a moment and nodded. "I will return in three days. If you need to contact me before then, do so."

"I will."

Ciaran's grandfather inclined his head in acknowledgement of Janie's efforts and left the room without another word.

Alone, Ciaran and Janie stared at each other for a moment. Janie's tight, weary expression softened. "How are you holding up?"

How did she think he was holding up? His mate had been shot, and his odds for survival didn't seem good. The urge to lash out rose, but he choked back his angry response. Janie was a friend. She only wanted to help. Being cruel to her would not make anything better. He shrugged. "I'll be all right. The important thing right now is Drew."

She started to reply, but a loud pounding on the door interrupted her. Her eyes widened.

Ciaran sucked in a breath. If Drew's attackers had returned, they must not be allowed to hurt him any further. He had to be protected. Janie must have had the same thought, because when Ciaran jerked his head toward the door and held a finger to his lips, she nodded. In silence, they crept toward the living room.

Another series of blows hit the door as they neared the door. "Ciaran! Open up!"

Relief flooded through him at the familiar voice. He rushed to the door and yanked it open. "Nick."

The big werewolf stared back at him, disheveled and frantic. He grabbed Ciaran's arms and gave him a quick once-over. "Are you hurt? Where's Drew? What happened? Tell me I'm not too late."

Any other time, calm, steely Nick's panic would have been funny. Coming after everything else that had happened, however, his reaction pushed Ciaran a bit closer to falling apart. He swallowed hard before he answered. "I'm fine. Drew's in the bedroom. He's—" Ciaran paused, tried to collect himself. "It's silver poisoning."

Nick's eyes closed for a moment, his face tightening with pain. "Shit. I hoped you were wrong."

"So did I." Ciaran's lip trembled. He sank his teeth into the soft flesh until it hurt. He would not cry.

Nick's eyes popped open and he nodded, suddenly decisive. "What's been done for him so far?"

The abrupt change in Nick's demeanor helped Ciaran focus. "Janie and my grandfather cast healing and purifying spells, and put a poultice on the wound. Grandfather said he could do nothing more."

Nick ushered Ciaran toward the bedroom. He stopped in front of Janie. "This is twice you've helped my friends. I owe you a debt."

She shook her head. "No, you don't. I love them too."

Nick patted her arm. "You're not so bad, for a human."

She smiled a little. "Thanks."

A sudden, sharp need to get back to his mate made Ciaran interrupt them. "I must go to Drew."

"Let's go."

Ciaran hurried down the hall, Nick right on his heels. They reached the bedroom in a few moments, but it felt like too long. The instant they reached the door, Ciaran rushed to Drew's side. His mate lay exactly as he'd left him, pale and still, his breathing ragged. Ciaran sank onto the edge of the bed on Drew's good side and picked up his cold, limp hand. He cradled it to his cheek, fighting tears all over again.

Nick crossed to the opposite side of the bed. He leaned down to examine Drew's shoulder. Tracing a fingertip over the silvery lines on Drew's shoulder, he frowned. "When did this start?"

"Right after he was shot. It seemed to be getting worse at first, but nothing's happened since Janie and my grandfather cast their spells." Ciaran had no idea if that was a good sign or to be expected. He was too terrified and exhausted even to hope. He kissed the back of Drew's hand, rubbed his lips over the soft skin.

Nick's frown deepened. He continued his examination in silence for several minutes. Finally, he looked over at Ciaran. Their gazes locked. Nick's pale brown eyes held a riot of emotions Ciaran couldn't identify. "Silver poisoning is... Well, it's usually a death sentence. I've heard of a few recoveries, but I've never seen anyone survive."

No, no, no. A choked, almost animal sound of pain escaped Ciaran's throat. He clutched Drew's hand more tightly. He had never imagined someone so strong and vital could be taken from him in an instant. He didn't want to consider it.

Before he could manage to speak, Nick continued. "I've also never seen a case that was treated so quickly, or one when the poisoning seemed to be contained like this." He held Ciaran's gaze, refusing to let him look away. "Drew is strong, and he has a lot to live for. You're strong too. Give him a reason to fight. *Help him fight this.*"

The intensity in Nick's voice, and the unshed tears welling in Nick's eyes, told Ciaran more than words could. More than anything, he wanted to do as Nick said. His voice, when he spoke, came out as little more than a whisper. "*How?*"

Nick rounded the bed to stand beside him. He put a comforting hand on Ciaran's shoulder. "Just be with him. Talk to him. He'll react to your voice, and your scent."

"What if it's not enough?" What if *he* wasn't enough? The tears Ciaran had been holding back for hours spilled over. He scrubbed at them with his free hand, angry at himself. This was about Drew, not his own weakness.

Nick wrapped a strong arm around Ciaran. Unable to help himself, Ciaran leaned into his friend's embrace. Nick rubbed his back and kissed the top of his head. "He loves you more than anything. I think he'd fight his way through hell itself to get to you."

After a few seconds, Ciaran leaned back. He felt a little better. If nothing else, at least he was not alone. "Thank you. You are a good friend."

Nick's lips turned up in a half smile before his gaze shifted to Drew's still form. "No one can say that to me, except for you and Drew. I've never been one for making friends." He paused, shrugged. "I have to watch out for the ones I have."

Ciaran might have replied, but Nick didn't give him a chance. He offered Ciaran an encouraging smile, and then he turned and left the room.

Alone, Ciaran focused on Drew. His lover was so cold, and Ciaran could detect a faint trembling. Instinct told him to provide warmth and closeness. A doctor would most likely have scolded him, but Ciaran crawled into bed with Drew and stretched out beside him. He pressed as close as he could to Drew's uninjured side, trying to warm his lover with his body. It might have been his imagination, but the trembling seemed to ease.

"I'm here, my love," he whispered. "I won't leave you. Come back to me."

Chapter Six

The next couple of days passed in hellish similarity. The first night and the next day, Drew's body burned with fever. Ciaran bathed him with cloths soaked in cool water. He forced him to drink as much water as possible, which wasn't much. Janie dosed him with herbs, taking advice regarding werewolf physiology from Nick. Despite all their efforts, the fever went higher and higher. The streaks on his shoulder and arm grew more metallic and pronounced until he appeared to have rivers of molten silver running beneath his skin.

Grim didn't begin to describe the situation. Ciaran could see Nick and Janie steeling themselves for the worst. In his mind, he knew he ought to do the same. Yet despite the poor outlook, he refused to give up. He continued to follow Nick's advice. He talked to Drew until he was hoarse, and stayed near him. When exhaustion forced him to rest, he lay beside Drew, hoping to soothe his mate even in sleep.

In the very early hours of the third day, Drew's fever broke. Ciaran awoke from a restless doze to find that Drew's side was sweaty, but much cooler. Drew's chest rose and fell in breaths that were less labored than before. Though still too pale, he had a bit of color to his skin that wasn't the violent flush of fever.

Ciaran groped for the bell Janie had given him to ring when he needed help, and shook it a few times. Janie and Nick rushed in, their faces taut with worry. They both stopped dead.

Nick was first to speak. "Has the fever broken?"

Ciaran nodded.

Janie covered her mouth as if holding back some sound. From behind it, muffled, she muttered, "Thank God. He just might make it."

Ciaran nodded again. He glanced down at his werewolf, at the softly rising chest and the silver streaks that seemed less bright and stark than before.

He ran a finger along one of them, allowing sweet hope to well up inside him.

* * * * *

Drew woke feeling like he'd been hit by a truck. His whole body was weak and achy, as if he had the flu. He wanted to move, but a warm weight anchored him to the bed. Forcing his eyelids open took an unexpected amount of effort.

His eyes seemed to take forever to adjust to the room, despite the dim lighting. The weight against him shifted, and he glanced down. Ciaran's head lay on his chest, black hair tousled. He started to smile, until he noticed the dark circles under Ciaran's eyes and the pale, unhealthy cast to his skin. Ciaran looked as if he'd been sick.

Drew tried to bring the hand Ciaran didn't have trapped up to check his mate's forehead for a fever, but a dull, throbbing pain in his shoulder stopped him. A hazy memory popped into his mind, of being shot and telling Ciaran to get the bullet out. He stared at his shoulder. Faint silver lines radiated from beneath a bandage there.

He had been shot by a silver bullet and survived.

But how? Silver poisoning was an almost certain death sentence, especially since there had been no other werewolves around to remove the bullet and nurse him through the resulting sickness.

Drew watched Ciaran's brow furrow even in sleep. Judging from the smaller man's haggard appearance, Drew had been ill for a while.

Obviously Ciaran had been able to remove the bullet, or he'd be dead. Despite all he'd seen Ciaran do, the core of strength inside his seemingly delicate lover still surprised Drew. Not just anyone would have

been able to cut a bullet from the body of their werewolf mate and keep him alive afterward.

Of course, Ciaran wasn't just anyone.

Ciaran moved against him, restless, and whimpered. His eyelids fluttered and then opened. A moment passed before he seemed to remember where he was, and he shifted his gaze up to Drew's face. His eyes widened. "Drew?"

Drew smiled. "Hey." His voice came out thin and raspy, like an old man's.

Ciaran didn't answer. Maybe he couldn't. Silent, he buried his face in the crook of Drew's neck and held on.

Able to free his good arm, Drew wrapped it around his mate. Ciaran's hot tears dampened Drew's skin, but neither of them spoke. They didn't need to. Drew could feel the love, and the relief, in every line of Ciaran's body. He pressed a kiss to Ciaran's messy curls and caressed his back.

Finally Ciaran pulled away and sat up. He scrubbed at his wet cheeks. In a voice barely above a whisper, he said, "I was worried about you."

The clear understatement made Drew laugh, a rusty sound. "Well, you did great. I'm still here."

"Thanks to Janie, and Nick, and my grandfather." Ciaran looked down at the bed. "I didn't know what to do after I took the bullet out. There was so much blood, and I could *see* the silver moving under your skin." He shuddered. "So I called Janie and Nick, and summoned my grandfather."

Drew touched Ciaran's knee to get his attention. "Not just thanks to them. If you hadn't taken the bullet out, and gotten help, I would have died. Any wolf would be proud to have you for a mate."

Ciaran's gaze slid up to his. "I did what I had to. I couldn't lose you."

Taking Ciaran's slim hand in his, Drew brought it to his lips. He would have spoken, but a soft tap on the door interrupted. He shifted his gaze toward the door as it opened.

Nick stepped inside, carrying a tray. He stopped when he saw them, and his serious expression melted into a smile brighter than any Drew had ever seen on him. "Drew! You're awake."

"Unless this is a really good dream, yeah." Drew grinned. "We've got to stop meeting like this, man."

Nick rolled his eyes. "If you two would stop being so fucking dramatic all the time I could actually get some downtime. Go on vacation or something."

"Yeah, right." Drew couldn't help laughing. Nick had never gone on a vacation as long as Drew had known him.

Nick set the tray down on the bedside table. Then, to Drew's shock, Nick bent down and pulled him into a hug. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks." It was awkward with one good arm, but Drew hugged him back. "If you ever need anything, you know you can ask. Right?"

"I know." Nick released him and stood. He made a visible effort to shake off the moment and put on his normal, tough expression, although he wasn't completely successful. "Janie sent me to bring Ciaran some food, but she's gonna kill me if I don't go let her know you're awake. You guys try to eat something. I'll go get her."

After Nick left, Drew turned to Ciaran. "Janie's going to fuss over me like crazy, isn't she?"

Ciaran's grin was all the answer he needed. They both laughed.

* * * * *

As Drew had predicted, Janie did indeed fuss over him. She changed his bandage, dosed him with herbs, and in general fluttered around the room until he got tired, which didn't take very long.

Drew awoke from a nap to find Ciaran dozing in a chair he must have dragged beside the bed. His lover smelled fresh and clean, and his hair hung in damp ringlets from a recent shower. He looked a little better too, although Drew had no idea why he was sleeping in a chair rather than on the bed. If anyone needed rest, it was Ciaran. Drew had been doing nothing but sleep for days. He knew his body needed to rest to fight

off any lingering effects from the silver, but his weakness still annoyed him.

Shaking off his self-pity, Drew whispered, "Hey."

Ciaran jerked and almost fell out of the chair. He blinked at Drew in confusion.

"What are you doing in that chair?"

"I only meant to watch you sleep, not sleep myself." Ciaran's cheeks turned an appealing pink. "I was afraid if I left you alone something would happen to you."

"Come here." Drew held out his hand. Without hesitation, Ciaran moved to take it. Drew squeezed his hand. "Everything's going to be okay."

Ciaran tried to smile, but his gaze was dark and serious. "What if he comes back?"

"Who?"

"The person who shot you." Cradling Drew's hand, his lover nibbled at his full lower lip. "We don't know who did it. Or if they've gone."

That was true, but Drew wasn't about to live in fear. He'd come here in the first place to start a new life, and he wasn't about to let anyone destroy it. Or scare his mate. He gave Ciaran his most reassuring smile. "They probably took off, figuring I was dead." *And if the guy's still around, he'll be dead.* Drew didn't care for violence as a rule, but any time his mate was threatened he would make an exception.

For the second time that day, they were interrupted by a tap on the door. Drew sighed. "Come in."

Nick entered, followed by Ciaran's grandfather. Lorcan Oir paused at the foot of the bed to look at Drew. After a moment, he approached the side opposite Ciaran and inclined his head at them. "You look much better, wolf."

Thanks, Fae. Biting back his instinctive retort, Drew nodded back. He might not ever like the man after how he'd treated Ciaran, but the least he could do was show gratitude. "I hear you had something to do with that."

Lorcan lifted a shoulder. "I did what I could. Your witch friend helped a great deal, and Ciaran had already removed the silver."

A tremor ran through Ciaran's hand at the mention of removing the bullet. Drew frowned and squeezed his hand again. "I appreciate your help, at any rate."

"If you will allow me, I will examine the wound." Ciaran's grandfather indicated the bandage and waited.

"Sure, go ahead." Drew watched as Lorcan's thin, capable hands made quick work of the tape that secured the bandage.

The Fae removed the thick pad and eyed the angry red area with an assessing, dispassionate glance. "The silver poisoning is nearly gone. I expect you will be weak for some time, but I have no doubt you will recover." He replaced the bandage and leaned back with a "my work here is done" expression.

Drew wasn't sure what to say to that.

Nick broke the silence. "Drew's too stubborn to die."

The tiny tilt at the corner of Lorcan's mouth may or may not have been a smile. "I must take my leave." He paused, his gaze sliding to Ciaran. "May I speak with you for a moment, Ciaran?"

Although his hand tensed in Drew's, Ciaran nodded. He would probably never be comfortable with his grandfather, which Drew thought was sad. Of course, Drew's own family wasn't any better. At least Lorcan hadn't ever tried to kill Ciaran. That Drew knew of, anyway.

Releasing Drew's hand, Ciaran stood. His eyes met Drew's, uncertain. Drew wanted to reassure him, but Janie bustled in again and the moment was lost. Ciaran followed his grandfather out of the room without another word.

* * * * *

Elated, confused, anxious, and exhausted did not make a good combination. The events of the past few days had left Ciaran on a knife-edge of emotion, ready to tip headlong into tears or laughter at next to no provocation. He didn't feel up to a discussion with his grandfather.

The long, lonely years he'd spent in Faerie, separated from anyone who could care for him, were hard to forgive.

Still, Lorcan had saved his mate's life. That was no small thing. It would not have been acceptable to refuse the request for a word, no matter how ill-prepared he was to deal with the man right now.

For that reason, he followed his grandfather into the living room. Lorcan stopped next to the couch and turned to him. Resisting the urge to cross his arms in a defensive posture, he stood, uncertain, a few feet away.

Lavender eyes, lighter and colder than his own, met his gaze. Lorcan looked...troubled. He didn't speak for a few seconds. Ciaran had never seen Lorcan anything but assured. It was disconcerting.

Finally Lorcan cleared his throat. "Many in Faerie say demons are not capable of love, that they have no feelings other than anger and hate. I am ashamed to say I have always believed the same thing. You have shown me how wrong I was."

Startled, Ciaran could only stare at the older Fae.

His grandfather continued before he could marshal a response. "Even I can see you love your Andrew, as he loves you. The wolf is fortunate to have you. Sometime soon, I think he will need you again. You will know what to do." One thin hand rose, and cool fingertips brushed Ciaran's cheek. He gave Ciaran what passed for a smile—for him anyway—and left.

Ciaran stared after him, thinking, long enough that Nick came in looking for him. "Everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," he answered automatically. Everything wasn't fine, of course. His whole world had been turned on its head. Drew had nearly died. His grandfather's words confused him. The cryptic prediction that Drew would need him again soon, and that he would know what to do, further unsettled Ciaran.

On the bright side, Drew was recovering. Did anything else really matter after such a miracle?

Ciaran was able to smile as he turned to make his way back to his mate's side.

Chapter Seven

Drew lasted a couple of days before he could no longer stand being stuck in bed. He spent much of those days sleeping or eating. Ciaran stayed with him most of the time, and slept beside him, but that was as far as things went. To Drew's chagrin, Ciaran was in full-on nurse mode, and wouldn't let him exert himself in *any* way. Even showers were off-limits. Taking a bath instead of a shower made Drew feel like a child. At least Ciaran allowed Drew to work on a laptop for an hour or two a day, and he was able to reassure his clients, but that was the extent of his activity.

Nick, on the other hand, spent most of his time investigating Drew's shooting. He reported in occasionally via his cell phone, in deference to Ciaran's worry, but didn't return to the house. Drew suspected his friend was roaming around in wolf form. He wanted nothing more than to roam the woods with Nick. He needed to know who had shot him, and why. Knowing the person was still out there left him—and Ciaran—vulnerable. If he could be out there searching with Nick, at least he'd feel as if he was doing something.

His anxiety over the shooter was compounded by the fact that his wolf had retreated deep inside, beyond his reach. After he'd been hit on the head last month and rendered unable to shift, he had been able to feel his wolf, snarling inside him and waiting to be unleashed on Ciaran's kidnappers. Now he felt...nothing. Everything that made him a wolf seemed to have disappeared, leaving him weak and strangely empty. He hated the helplessness.

When he couldn't stand to be confined another minute, Drew waited until Ciaran left the room before he slipped out from under the covers. He stood on weak, shaky legs and made his way across the room. The air in the hallway chilled him through the thin T-shirt and boxers he wore, but he kept going. By the time he reached the kitchen doorway, he was wondering if getting out of bed had been such a good idea after all. How long would he be weak like this? How was he supposed to protect his mate when he could barely walk from one room to the other?

Ciaran came out of the kitchen, carrying a tray, and stopped to stare at Drew. "What are you doing?"

Impotent, unreasoning fury surged at Ciaran's worried expression. Words tumbled out. "Walking. What does it look like?" Drew regretted his snappish tone the instant hurt flickered across Ciaran's face, but he couldn't stop. "Just leave me alone. I'm not fucking helpless, and I don't need you hovering over me." The last few words came out as pure venom. They hung in the air, angry and cruel, and the few feet of distance between him and Ciaran seemed to stretch into a deep, black chasm.

Ciaran recoiled, stricken. Drew wanted to apologize. He even opened his mouth to say he was sorry. The words wouldn't come. The roiling anger, resentment, and fear inside him poisoned him as surely as the silver had. He *was* helpless. And useless. And he hated it.

The hurt left Ciaran's face, replaced by a blank, flat look Drew hadn't seen since Ciaran first arrived. Ciaran watched Drew for a long, silent moment, gaze dark and unreadable. After a minute, he sighed and turned toward the living room with the tray. He seemed brittle somehow, as if he wore a shell over his normal self.

Drew shuffled after him. The few steps to the couch felt like a mile. Guilt weighed him down more than his weakness had. Why had he lashed out at the one person in the world who loved him unconditionally? What the hell was wrong with him?

At last he reached his destination, and lowered himself onto the soft cushions. Ciaran busied himself setting up a TV tray and arranging Drew's food. Drew tried to catch his gaze, to say with his eyes what his mouth couldn't seem to express, but Ciaran avoided looking at him.

Before Drew could think of the right words, Ciaran finished his task and left the room.

Alone, Drew picked at his food, all appetite gone. A ball of ice seemed to be lodged in his stomach. He had what he'd asked for, to be left alone, yet he was miserable. He'd hurt his mate. Ciaran had only been trying to help him, to protect him as Drew himself would have done if their positions had been reversed. It wasn't right for Drew to take his fear and anger out on Ciaran.

He pushed his plate away, disgusted with himself. No more acting like a whiny child. His wolf had gone AWOL. Maybe it would be back. Maybe not. He couldn't do anything about it now, though. He needed to pull himself together, concentrate on letting himself heal, and not worry about what may or may not happen in the future. Except for the apology that would be in the very near future, he hoped. If Ciaran would let him talk after the stupid things he'd said.

Ciaran came back into the room a few minutes later, still avoiding Drew's gaze. He glanced down at the plate and the worried look returned for a couple of seconds before the blank face returned. He reached out to pick up the dishes.

Drew didn't think. He just reacted. He leaned forward and caught one of Ciaran's hands. "Wait."

Ciaran stilled. He seemed poised to yank his hand away and run. Drew watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, but he said nothing. His slim hand trembled in Drew's grasp.

If the tiny, involuntary movement jabbed at Drew's heart, Ciaran's whispered words broke it. "I never meant to treat you like you were helpless." He paused, swallowed again. "I'll leave you alone now. I'm sorry."

The heavy ache in Drew's chest had nothing to do with his bullet wound. "No, I'm sorry. What I said... I was out of line. I was stupid, and cruel, and I didn't mean any of it." He reeled Ciaran in, pulling until the smaller man landed on his lap. Despite the stiff way Ciaran sat, Drew wrapped an arm around him. Holding his mate in a loose embrace, he managed to get the painful truth out. "You've been trying to take care of

me, and I'm acting like a spoiled kid. The truth is, I'm scared."

Ciaran's gaze searched Drew's face. "Scared? Why? What's wrong?"

Now Drew was the one who wouldn't meet Ciaran's eyes. This was harder than he'd expected. "My wolf. It's gone. I've always been able to feel the Change there, right below the surface, but now, nothing." He stared down at the carpet. Misery washed through him, sharp and cold. "What if it's gone forever? What good will I be, a werewolf without a wolf? What kind of mate and protector will I be then?"

"You'll be *my* mate." Ciaran sounded fierce. He put a hand beneath Drew's chin, forcing Drew to meet his gaze. "I love you. I will always love you. If your wolf is truly gone, we will face it together. With or without it, I am yours and you are mine."

Some of the fear and desperation leached out of Drew at Ciaran's words. His little demon was so sincere. Whatever happened, Drew believed Ciaran was ready to face it at his side, and that made all the difference. The thought of living without his wolf still terrified him, but with Ciaran in his arms, the unknown was less daunting.

"I needed to hear that. Thank you." He buried his face in Ciaran's neck. He took a deep breath, inhaling spicy citrus and musk. The familiar scent and warmth of his lover comforted him. So did the way Ciaran curled into him without hesitation, hurt and anger put aside. "Love you," he whispered.

Ciaran shivered at the touch of Drew's lips. "That tickles."

"Oh?" Drew nibbled Ciaran's soft skin. "What about this?"

"Stop!" Ciaran squirmed in his lap, laughing.

Drew stopped. Their gazes met for a long moment. In Ciaran's violet eyes, Drew saw his future. He'd always known, intellectually, how lucky he was, but the truth of it hit him then. An unexpected prickling behind his eyelids made him blink. At the same time, intense desire washed over him. What an idiot he'd been, focusing on the negative when he was alive, and he had his mate.

Ciaran must have felt something like what he was feeling, because he focused on Drew's mouth, intent. They both leaned forward at the

same time. Their lips crashed together in a hard kiss. Drew wound a hand into Ciaran's dark curls and held his lover still so he could plunder the sweet recesses of his hot mouth.

Ciaran whimpered and clutched at Drew's back, hands burrowing under the thin T-shirt to caress bare skin. Drew wanted nothing more than to strip off both their clothes and take Ciaran right here on the couch, to claim him again as he had a few weeks earlier.

"Aw, come on."

Drew jerked back and faced the door, ready to take on any threat. Nick slouched against the doorway, his hands in his pockets, clothing and hair damp and disheveled. Despite his complaint, he looked anything but disgusted by Drew and Ciaran's display.

Drew and Nick had known each other for years, and Drew trusted him, but he didn't like the look in the older wolf's eyes. Feeling possessive, he shifted a hand to rest at the base of Ciaran's neck, over the place he'd marked Ciaran when he'd claimed him. He stroked his fingertips over Ciaran's soft skin and narrowed his eyes at Nick. "Don't you knock anymore?"

The gesture wasn't lost on Nick, who smirked. "Pardon me, lover boy. I didn't think you'd be recovered enough for any bedroom calisthenics yet." Nick wagged his eyebrows, something Drew was certain he'd never seen the other werewolf do and wasn't sure he wanted to see again.

"I had motivation." Drew bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "Did you need something?"

Nick went from teasing to serious in an instant. "I have news. I tracked the shooter to a crappy motel on the outskirts of town. I'm going to check it out. I wanted to let you know."

There was no way Nick was going alone. Drew opened his mouth to say as much. Ciaran beat him to the punch. His mate narrowed his eyes. "You are not going by yourself."

Drew expected Nick to argue. Maybe Ciaran's forceful tone convinced him. Maybe he was just feeling contrary and didn't want to do the expected. At any rate, Nick nodded. "All right. But I don't want either

of you in the line of fire. *Especially* you.” He pinned Drew with a hard stare. “We almost lost you once. I’m not nursing you through another bout of silver poisoning. Capisce?”

Drew could feel the scowl forming on his face. This was ridiculous. He’d been ill, but he wasn’t a baby. He knew what he could and couldn’t do.

The smile Ciaran gave him held a world of understanding. “I know you want to be in the middle of things as usual, but, just this once, don’t. Stay in the car until Nick and I check it out. Please? For me?”

It galled Drew to have to stay on the sidelines, but he couldn’t argue. He’d had trouble walking into the living room, for God’s sake. He wouldn’t be able to beat down the shooter like he wanted to.

Ciaran and Nick had his best interests at heart, no matter how annoying it was to admit that. Through gritted teeth, he muttered, “Fine.”

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Drew had managed to walk back to the bedroom under his own power and get dressed. Leaning on Ciaran, he made his way outside and got into the backseat of Nick’s Audi. Nick had never owned a home or anything else, but he always had a nice car. Ciaran hopped into the front and they were ready to go.

Nick started the car and pulled onto the gravel road. When he spoke, his voice was brisk, all business. “The shooter is a lone male, human. I tracked him to a tree not far from your cabin, but across the road. I’m not sure who owns that property, or if they were aware he was there, but he must have been there several times, to get the lay of the land and plan his attack.”

Anger surged and Drew growled. “How could I have missed that?”

“For all you knew, he could have been the landowner.” Nick shrugged. “He’s definitely an ordinary human. There’s no reason you should have been suspicious.”

Except for what we went through last month. Those were ordinary humans too. Drew stared out the window, furious with himself. He should

have been more vigilant. He'd allowed humans to sneak up on him twice. He couldn't help wondering if the loss of his wolf was punishment. He wouldn't allow it to happen a third time.

Ciaran's hand appeared on his knee. Drew glanced over to see his mate peering back at him from the front. "This is not your fault, Drew. I doubt a human wished to shoot you on his own. Someone set this up."

"I agree." Nick turned onto the main road, frowning. "What I don't know yet is who. Making sure you were okay let the guy get ahead of me. Another thing I don't understand is why the hell he's still here. Why wouldn't he just get the fuck out of Dodge? I would."

"Unless he has to make sure I'm dead first."

"That's a possibility." Nick fell silent. His brow creased in thought.

Ciaran squeezed Drew's knee tighter. His voice was a near snarl. "Well, whoever he is, and whatever his reason for still being here, he will soon regret what he's done."

Drew bared his teeth. He couldn't have said it better himself.

Chapter Eight

As they rode through town, Ciaran paradoxically grew both calmer and tenser. The source of the tension was obvious. The calm was...strange. The feeling seemed to stem from resolve and, somehow, from a deep-seated rage. Ciaran had never been a violent man, but he wanted to rip the person who'd hurt Drew to shreds. Lately Ciaran had discovered many facets to his personality he would have never guessed he had. The fierce protective streak he harbored was one of them.

The small, dingy motel came into view, and Ciaran sat up straighter. The sign, which should have read "Stay Inn," announced "S In" in flickering pink neon, the other letters having burned out long ago. The squat building had once been white. Now the paint was a mottled gray, spotted with dirt and mold. The windows didn't appear to have been cleaned in years, if ever. In short, the place looked like it ought to be condemned.

Nick pulled into the parking lot of a deserted gas station beside the motel and stopped the car alongside the building, where it could not be seen from the road. He turned to Ciaran and Drew, his face set in stern lines. "The shooter's trail led to town, and I heard the old man who owns this place talking about a strange man staying in room ten. I'm going to go in first. If I need help I'll signal you."

Drew scowled and leaned forward. "You aren't going in there by yourself. That guy shot me. With a fucking *silver bullet*. You're not invincible."

"I'm wearing a vest." Nick lifted his shirt, revealing the bottom part of a bulletproof vest, which Ciaran only recognized because he had seen them on police shows on television.

"A vest won't protect your head, jackass!" Drew seemed ready to leap out of the car and go to the room himself, despite his weakened state.

Ciaran couldn't allow that. Without looking away from Nick, he put a restraining hand on Drew's knee. "I'm going with you. Silver won't hurt me."

"No!" Both werewolves snarled the word at the same time. Their identical expressions of panic might have been amusing in a different situation.

Right then, Ciaran did not feel like laughing. He took a slow, deep breath to restrain himself from yelling at them both. "I am not a child, in need of protecting." He locked gazes with Drew. His mate's green eyes held fear and pleading, but Ciaran stood firm. "This time, I need to protect you."

He could see the moment Drew understood how important it was to him, because Drew's lips flattened into a thin line. Drew sighed. "All right." He lifted Ciaran's hand to his cheek and cradled it there for a moment. He didn't have to say anything else. His eyes said it all—*I love you*, and *Be careful*, and *Come back to me*.

I will. Ciaran brushed his fingertips across Drew's cheek. Then he leaned between the seats, ignoring the awkwardness of the movement, and kissed Drew gently.

When he broke the contact, Nick had already left the car. Since the werewolf had not argued or rushed off on his own, Ciaran knew he agreed to the plan. Ciaran gave Drew a reassuring smile and slipped out of the car to follow.

He tried not to let Drew's proud yet terrified expression haunt him.

* * * * *

Seconds later, they reached the motel. Nick stayed near the building, his walk slow, careful, and quiet. Ciaran trailed after him, silent

as well.

The short distance to room ten seemed to take an eternity to traverse. The motel had a strange, wrong sort of stillness to it. Ciaran knew something was amiss before they got to the room.

The smell of death hit him several doors away, faint but unmistakable. He unconsciously brought his hand to his nose. Ahead of him, Nick stopped. His nostrils flared. He sniffed the air.

Face twisting into an expression of pure disgust, Nick muttered, "I think we're too late." He pulled on a pair of leather gloves. He took a slim black case from his pocket, removed a small tool of some sort, and went to the door. He banged on it a few times. In a high falsetto, he called, "Housekeeping."

No one answered his knock. Nick didn't appear surprised. He pushed the tip of the thin tool into the lock and moved it around. Then he got out another tool and leaned closer to the lock, obscuring Ciaran's view for a moment.

Ciaran had seen characters on television shows open locks using such a method, but had not believed anyone could truly do so. He shifted a couple of steps so he could see again and watched in fascination, his earlier revulsion put aside for the moment.

At least until Nick managed to open the lock. He turned the knob and pushed the door with excruciating slowness and caution. Despite the cold temperature outside, and the even colder air streaming out from inside the room, the stench of death was overpowering.

When the door swung wide at last, they saw the reason. A young man sat against the headboard of the bed almost like he had been waiting for them, a large hole in the center of his forehead. Crusted blood and bits of flesh had sprayed across the wall behind him.

The smell and blood distracted him enough that it took Ciaran a moment to realize he recognized the man. Sandy hair, thin build—this was the odd customer from Stomping Grounds who'd asked him about a motel in the area.

Ciaran gagged. He brought an arm up and pressed his sleeve to his nose, trying not to vomit. Through the shielding cloth, he muttered, "I've

seen him. He came into the coffee shop."

That made Nick pause. "You know him?"

Ciaran shook his head. "No. I saw him once. He asked me about motels."

"Damn. Did he act like he knew who you were?"

Ciaran shook his head again.

"Hm. I guess now we know why he didn't leave town." Nick stepped past Ciaran and into the hotel room. After a few seconds, he looked over his shoulder. "You coming or what?"

How could Nick be so calm? His enhanced sense of smell had to make being in the same room as a rotting corpse difficult, yet he seemed unaffected. Ciaran pressed his sleeve a little closer to his face and followed Nick into the room. He closed the door behind them, just in case someone came by.

Once inside, Ciaran scanned the room. As he moved farther inside, a blast of cold air hit him. The air conditioner pumped out frigid air at the highest setting. That made no sense, given the recent cold snap.

The room contained no luggage or personal belongings of any kind, other than a wallet and baseball cap lying on the bedside table. The young man on the bed was not dressed for the cold weather, wearing only a white T-shirt stained with blood and a pair of worn jeans. His hand lay in his lap, still clutching a large handgun. By all appearances, the man, whoever he was, had killed himself.

"I don't buy it," Nick announced.

Hearing Nick's doubt solidified Ciaran's own disbelief. Perhaps Ciaran had watched too many forensics television shows, but the setup seemed wrong somehow. He moved a few steps closer to the bed. The dead man had a grimace of what might have been surprise or horror on his face. His skin looked waxy and pale. The position of his hand in his lap was too perfect, as if arranged.

A glint of metal on the blanket caught Ciaran's eye. He pointed. "Look."

"Silver bullets." Nick chewed his bottom lip. "Something's not right here. This guy's our shooter. Even dead, he smells like our man. But

there's no way he killed himself. Who the hell shoots himself right in the center of his forehead, instead of putting the gun in his mouth or going for the temple?"

The dead man's blank, filmy eyes gazed out at nothing, giving them no answers. Ciaran shivered. He didn't want to be in the room anymore. "We should take his wallet. And some pictures, if you have your phone. And then I think we should go."

Nick raised an eyebrow but did not argue. He took out his cell phone and took several pictures of the body from different angles. "Grab the wallet, but don't touch anything else. Pull your sleeve over your hand to pick it up."

As he crossed the room to collect the wallet, Ciaran felt a sudden stab of apprehension. They needed to be gone from here. Something was going to happen, and they must not be here when it did. He didn't stop to question the feeling.

The oppressive feeling of being watched grew. Scooping up the wallet, he turned to Nick. "We have to leave this place. *Now.*"

"Let's go." Nick took one last picture and headed for the door.

* * * * *

The walk back to the car went by in a blur of caution, stealth, and anxiety. Every second that ticked by fueled Ciaran's fear that they would not get out in time, although he had no idea what, if anything, they ran from.

When they reached the car, he slid into the backseat next to Drew. Drew pulled him close, communicating how much he had worried with the strength of his embrace and the racing of his heart. "What happened?"

Ciaran hugged his mate back just as hard. "We'll tell you everything at home."

Nick jumped in, started the car, and pulled out of the parking lot. He drove in a manner that was fast but unobtrusive. They had turned back onto the main road into town when a Missouri Highway Patrol car passed them, heading for the motel.

Ciaran looked up. His eyes met Nick's in the rearview mirror. One glance told him Nick had the same thought he did. "The police are headed for the hotel room."

Nick nodded. "Somebody tipped them off. The only question is who?"

Had the person who made the report been the motel owner or someone else who had noticed the horrible stench? Or had the tipster been the person who had killed the shooter? And *who* had killed the shooter? Was someone still out to get Drew? Ciaran's mind buzzed with questions—all of them unpleasant. He needed to find some answers, and soon.

The ride home passed in a blur. As soon as they were inside, Nick explained what they'd found to Drew.

Drew focused on the wall, thinking. "So you don't think he killed himself. That means someone else was involved."

Nick nodded. "Someone who knows you're a werewolf, obviously. Why else would the guy have used silver bullets?"

Ciaran removed the wallet from his pocket and handed it to Nick. Nick turned the slim leather trifold over in his hands several times before he opened it. He eyed the driver's license inside. "His name was Dan Richmond. Does that name ring any bells for you?"

"No."

"Hm." Nick leafed through the rest of the wallet's scant contents. "He's got a thousand dollars in here. And this." He withdrew a slip of paper and placed it on the coffee table.

The writing on the paper was a phone number. That Ciaran knew, but he didn't yet understand enough about phone numbers to be able to figure anything out from it.

Drew apparently could. His already pale face drained of all remaining color. "That number has the same area code and prefix as my hometown."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Fuck. Your father?"

"I don't know. It's not the one I remember, but they could have gotten new phones or something." Drew shrugged. "Who else could it

be?"

* * * * *

A few hours later, exhaustion and lingering weakness forced Drew to go to bed. Ciaran made sure Drew was safely tucked in and Nick was keeping an eye on the house before he went out to the garage. He sat in a corner and began to cast the summoning spell.

If Drew's father was coming, Ciaran needed to be ready. The only person who could help him was his own father. He hoped Faolan was listening, and would heed his summons.

It was time Ciaran learned how to be a demon.

Chapter Nine

Over the next few days, Drew regained his strength a little at a time. The slow pace of his recovery frustrated him. He couldn't shake the fear that his father would come to finish him off before he was ready to fight back. Nick and Ciaran were on high alert, which comforted him, but he didn't want anyone else fighting his battles. Unfortunately, his wolf showed no sign of returning. Each day increased his fear that it never would.

Ciaran's strange, secretive behavior didn't help. The half-demon had taken to slipping out of their room in the middle of the night, sometimes not returning for hours. He probably thought Drew didn't notice his nighttime absences, but Drew noticed. He might have worried that something was up between Ciaran and Nick if he didn't know them both so well. As it was, the whole situation bothered him. He resolved to ask his mate what was going on. Leaving things as they were wouldn't be good for anyone.

Each time he tried to bring up the subject, however, Ciaran managed to distract him. In spite of everything, Ciaran kept trying to cheer him up. First, his mate bought a Christmas tree—live, of course, to be planted in the woods after Christmas—which they decorated with lights and strings of popcorn and other biodegradable or edible ornaments. Next were the Christmas songs Ciaran learned to play on his guitar. Finally, Ciaran baked dozens of cookies, from gingerbread men to shaped sugar cookies with red and green sprinkles.

Even with the danger hanging over their heads, Drew appreciated Ciaran's efforts. The delicious scents of cinnamon and vanilla competed with the heavy fragrance of evergreen from the tree, leaving the house smelling like Christmas ought to. The tree looked nice, too. Nothing could take his mind off the chaos around him, but sitting in the living room looking at the tree made Drew feel a little better.

A week after Nick and Ciaran found Dan Richmond's body, Nick burst into the living room, clutching his cell phone. "Your father's dead."

"What?" The cookie Drew had been about to eat fell to the floor. He automatically leaned down to clean up the pieces before the full impact of Nick's words sank in.

Clinton Moore couldn't be dead. Drew had always believed the man to be nearly invincible. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I just got word from one of my contacts in your hometown. He had a heart attack last week, but he didn't die until last night."

Drew stared at the mess he'd made on the floor, unsure how to feel. His father had never cared much for him. Hell, he'd tried to kill Drew when he found out Drew was gay. Drew had attempted to cut his father out of his life as completely as Clinton Moore had cut Drew from his. Still, a part of him had always regretted their lack of closeness. Now his father was dead, and there would never be a chance for forgiveness or reconciliation. Not that it would have happened even if Clinton had lived... Relief, anger, and sadness warred inside him. The anger seemed to be winning.

The cushion beside him dipped, and a large, warm hand settled on his back. "You okay?"

"I don't know." He kept his gaze lowered, avoiding Nick's eyes. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel. I wanted him to love me, but he never did. At the end, he hated me. I should feel bad that he's dead. Right now all I am is pretty fucking pissed off."

Nick put an arm around Drew. "There isn't any 'supposed to' here. Whatever you feel is the right thing."

The man who had hated his own son enough to try to kill him,

more than once, was dead. He couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

Drew needed to shift, to howl out his conflicted feelings of anger and loss. He reached for the Change, wanting it more than he could bear, but nothing happened. Not a stirring. He shuddered. Perhaps his father had killed him after all.

"I want to shift," he said simply, knowing Nick would understand.

Rather than replying, Nick squeezed Drew's shoulder.

* * * * *

The arrival of Christmas was a welcome distraction. On Christmas Eve, Ciaran cooked a large dinner and invited Janie, her mother, and Ciaran's father, Faolan. Nick stayed for the festivities as well.

Drew tried to hide his preoccupation, not that he was successful. Ciaran noticed, and he was pretty sure Nick did too. Nobody said anything, at any rate, and he was grateful.

After dinner and dessert, they exchanged small gifts and sang carols together. For a while, Drew managed to put aside his worries and enjoy himself.

Janie and her mom left around nine. Faolan and Ciaran went outside to go for a walk. Drew had to smile as he watched the two men wander off together, their identical heads of black curls tilted toward each other as they talked. He was glad Ciaran and his father were finally forming a relationship. It made him a little sadder about his own father's behavior, but knowing there were good fathers out there made him feel better.

Alone with Nick, Drew asked one of the questions that had plagued him since he learned of his father's death. "Do you think it's over?"

Nick considered. "I think it's pretty likely your dad sent the shooter. If that's the case, now that he's dead you should be safe."

"He had to be the one. I don't have a long list of enemies." Drew sighed and leaned back into the couch cushions. "I guess I should have seen this coming."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah, because your dad sending a guy to kill you is a foreseeable thing. Come on, stop kicking yourself over this. You're going to be fine. Ciaran's fine. *Really* fine, actually."

That was definitely a lascivious tone. "Shut up." Drew punched Nick in the arm, unable to let the comment pass without retaliation. "I guess you're going to take off, then?"

Nick shifted his gaze to the Christmas tree. "That's what I do."

Drew put a hand on Nick's knee. "It doesn't have to be."

The smile Nick gave him spoke more of sorrow than happiness. "Someone has to save the world."

"But you don't have to do it all by yourself."

His words must have hit home, because Nick's smile vanished. "I know. But sometimes it feels like I do." They were both silent for a moment, then Nick shook his head. "What are we, girls? I have rogues to kill, and you've got a cute little mate who'll be coming back any minute."

Drew mock-growled. "You'd better not be looking at my 'cute little mate.'"

Nick grinned. "I'm not blind." He stood. His expression sobered. "I envy you, Drew. I hope you know how lucky you are."

"I do." Drew got to his feet and held out his hand. Nick reached out to shake, but Drew pulled him into a hug instead. "Thanks."

Nick squeezed him hard, and then stepped back. "I'll call you. And don't get into any more trouble, okay?"

"I'll try." Drew walked Nick to the door. "Don't forget you're welcome here any time."

Nick saluted him. "Gotcha." He slid into his car and drove away.

Drew watched the taillights of the Audi disappear down the narrow road. Then he closed the door and went to the kitchen to raid the Christmas cookies. Nick would be okay. He always was.

And now that Drew's father was dead, all should be well here too.

Chapter Ten

Being a demon, Ciaran learned, was easy to learn but difficult to master. By virtue of genetics, he *was* a demon, but acting like one was not easy for someone with his upbringing.

Faolan took this fact in stride. He was endlessly patient through Ciaran's questions, fears, and frustrations. He repeated the simplest spells over and over and allowed Ciaran to practice and make mistakes. He also agreed not to tell Drew what they were doing, although he seemed to disapprove of the secrecy.

Ciaran planned to tell Drew about his search for who he was. Soon. Now did not feel like a good time, with so much hanging over them. Besides, Drew might be uneasy about Ciaran's desire to unleash his inner demon.

As they often had in recent days, Ciaran and Faolan went for a "walk" to the garage after dinner. Inside, Faolan indicated Ciaran should sit. He did the same.

He watched Ciaran in silence for a moment before he spoke. When thoughtful, he had almost the same expression Ciaran himself wore. Ciaran smiled at the similarity.

Faolan smiled back. "It is right, I think, that you have mated with a wolf."

Ciaran was puzzled by the seeming non sequitur. "It is?"

"Indeed. Wolves value their packs as demons value their clans. It is fitting."

Ciaran considered that. "What about the Fae? What do they value?"

Faolan seemed far away as he thought. "Many things. Tradition. Rank and prominence in society. In their way, family."

"But not love." Ciaran understood that painful fact firsthand, although he was beginning to think his grandfather was more capable of emotion than he had believed. It was not the kind of emotion Ciaran had needed as a child, or now, but it was there.

Shaking his head, Faolan turned his attention back to Ciaran. "I find it sad that what they believe of us is more true of them. The Fae once warred with the dark demons. Perhaps that is where their misconceptions originated."

Surprised, Ciaran leaned forward. "Dark demons?"

"There are many kinds of demons, but all are aligned in one of three ways. There are dark demons, just as there are dark Fae—the Unseelie. Dark demons are concerned with themselves more than any others. They fight amongst themselves, and they war with other groups. They are hated and feared."

A chill went through Ciaran, and he shivered. "We aren't dark. Are we?"

Faolan shook his head. "Our race falls into the largest surviving group of demons. I suppose you would call us neutral. Clans are of primary importance, and we fight only when threatened. We tend to stay out of the affairs of others, which is why there are more of us."

Faolan had said there were three kinds. Ciaran frowned. "Then there are light demons too?"

"Yes, although there are not many of them left. They are said to be the most beautiful creatures in existence, like human descriptions of angels. Because of their beauty and power, they have been enslaved and hunted to near extinction."

"How sad." Ciaran thought of the gilded cage his childhood had been. How much worse would it have been to be enslaved rather than ignored?

Faolan shook off his melancholy expression and smiled. "We

should continue your lessons. I have several spells I would like to teach you, and Drew will worry if you do not return soon."

Ciaran sat up straight and listened, ready to learn whatever his father deemed necessary. Lorcan had told him Drew would need him one day soon. He planned to be ready.

* * * * *

Ciaran returned to the house an hour later, tired from his lessons and more than ready to be alone with his mate. He found Drew sitting by himself in the dim living room, with only the Christmas tree providing illumination. Nick must have gone. Ciaran wasn't surprised. Nick tended to swoop in during times of danger and out just as unexpectedly.

Ciaran focused on Drew. Drew's profile appeared pensive. He had seemed troubled at dinner, and before that. Now he looked even more so.

Ciaran sat beside Drew on the couch. "What's wrong?"

Drew faced him but did not smile. "Nick found out something. My father had a heart attack. He's dead."

"Your father is dead?" Ciaran watched Drew, attempting to gauge his mate's emotions.

Drew stared back at him, stone-faced. He nodded.

Despite his lack of expression, Ciaran could feel Drew's turmoil. Werewolves were pack-oriented. Family was everything to them. No matter that his father had cast him out and tried to kill him—Drew must be feeling loss and grief.

This must have been what he'd been hiding for the last few days, no doubt in an attempt not to ruin Ciaran's first Christmas. That was sweet, if unnecessary. Ciaran cared far more for his mate than any holiday. He touched Drew's hand. "I'm here."

Drew smiled and laced their fingers together. "I know. I'm glad you are."

Ciaran snuggled into his side. Drew wrapped an arm around him, still holding his hand. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Ciaran let Drew's warmth soak into him, hoping his presence would be a comfort.

Watching the tree, he fell into a near doze. Drew's voice pulled him back to wakefulness. "We should be safe. My father can't hurt anyone now."

But he'd already hurt Drew, both physically and emotionally. Ciaran lifted Drew's hand to his lips, wishing he knew what to say to make everything better.

Drew leaned back into the couch cushions and closed his eyes. He made no move to reclaim his hand, so Ciaran continued to cradle it in his own. Without opening his eyes, Drew began to speak again. "I don't understand why he wanted me dead. I left. I wasn't any threat to him or his leadership."

Ciaran chewed his lower lip. "Perhaps he didn't believe that. He might not have been able to understand that you didn't want power."

Drew opened his eyes and met Ciaran's gaze. "Like he did." Drew's lips thinned into an angry line. "I guess he couldn't accept that I never wanted to be like him."

"And you aren't."

"I hope not." Drew looked down at their joined hands. "All I ever wanted was for him to love me, or at least be proud of me, but I wasn't the right kind of son."

That made Ciaran angry. "You're a good man. The best. What more could he have wanted?"

Drew's answering smile was bittersweet. "My brothers are vicious, territorial, and follow him without question. And they're straight."

Ciaran had not spent much time thinking about Drew's father, but at that moment he hated the man more than he'd ever hated anyone or anything. Drew had as much control over his sexuality as Ciaran did over being half-demon. Why did people judge and condemn each other for such things?

Drew squeezed his hand. "It's okay. I won't say it doesn't hurt that he hated me so much, but I've got you now, and he's gone."

Half to himself, Ciaran said, "He didn't succeed." *I hope he knew you survived, and I hope it tormented him.*

"Not entirely, anyway." Drew stared at the tree again, and Ciaran

knew he was thinking of his wolf.

Ciaran slipped from Drew's embrace and stood. He held out his hand to Drew. "It's late. Come to bed with me."

Drew looked like he would refuse, but then he took Ciaran's hand. "You're right. It's late."

On the way out of the room, Ciaran stopped to unplug the lights on the tree. They got ready in silence. When they were both finished, Ciaran in sleep pants and a T-shirt and Drew in boxers, Ciaran pulled back the sheets.

Drew climbed into bed. Ciaran shut off the lights and made his way to his side of the mattress. Although Drew said nothing, Ciaran could feel his tension. He may have been conflicted over his father's death, but he was mourning the loss of his wolf. Ciaran couldn't imagine what it must be like to lose half of yourself. It might be something like having his wings torn from him, a thought that made him shudder.

He slid across the space separating them and curled up against Drew's side. He laid one hand over Drew's heart.

Some of the tension in Drew's body eased. He shifted toward Ciaran. Dim moonlight painted his face in light and shadow. He watched Ciaran for a moment, his eyes unreadable, before he buried his face against Ciaran's neck. His voice was the barest whisper. "If I could just shift—" His breath hitched. "I don't know what to do."

How afraid, how lost must he be to allow Ciaran to see it so clearly? Drew always tried to put up a strong front for him, no matter that Ciaran didn't need him to. It was Drew's way.

Ciaran stroked Drew's hair, torn by his distress. *Please let his wolf come back. And if it doesn't, let me be strong enough to help him through it.*

Chapter Eleven

The next few days were strangely ordinary. Drew helped Ciaran clean up the remnants of their Christmas celebration. He worked on his clients' Web sites and the programs he was designing. He had recovered enough to run each morning, the way he always had. He should have been relaxed and happy, without the threat of his father trying to have him killed hanging over his head.

Everything should have been back to normal. It wasn't.

Every time he put on his running shoes, a part of him longed to be running on four paws instead of two feet. His senses, not as acute in human form, seemed dulled. He'd given up trying to reach his wolf, had resigned himself to living a fully human life.

Ciaran's quiet presence comforted him more than anything else could. His mate's unconditional love reminded him that while he'd lost something important, he still had the most precious thing of all. He couldn't allow himself too much self-pity when there were so many less fortunate people out there.

On the whole, Drew thought he was handling the loss of his wolf pretty well. At least he hadn't turned into a blubbery baby. As Alpha of his own tiny pack, he refused to allow himself to behave that way. It was time to learn to live his life the way it was now.

In that vein, Drew continued to go about his everyday business. One day, running in human form wouldn't feel strange. His hypervigilance, that tendency to look around for watchers every time he

left the house, would disappear. They would settle into the normal, happy life he had always wanted.

He just needed time.

* * * * *

"I'm leaving."

Drew glanced up from his keyboard to see Ciaran standing in the doorway, dressed for work in his uniform of black slacks and a white shirt. "Do you want me to drive you?"

Ciaran shook his head. "It's not that cold today, and I have the coat you bought me."

Drew smiled, remembering Ciaran's reaction to the long wool peacoat he'd given him for Christmas. If Ciaran wore the hat, gloves, and scarf Janie had gotten him, he should be warm enough. "Okay. Be careful."

"I will." Ciaran crossed the room and dropped a light kiss on Drew's lips. "Love you."

"Love you too. Have a good day."

"I will." After a last quick smile, Ciaran turned to go.

Drew watched his mate leave, gaze drawn to his smooth walk and the slim form even the coat didn't disguise. He turned back to the computer, still smiling. Who would have thought he would love his settled, domestic life so much?

Work beckoned, and he focused on his computer screen once more. Time flew by as it often did when he immersed himself in programming. He paused in the middle of the day for a quick lunch and went right back to work afterward.

His normal quitting time was approaching when he heard a sound outside. He saved his work out of reflex and then stopped to listen. The sound came again, the crunch of leaves being crushed beneath something. A foot? Was there someone outside?

Drew waited, sure the sound must have been caused by an animal. His father was dead. Who else could possibly want to hurt him?

More crunching, followed by a *thump* and a muffled curse. Not an animal, then. Drew tensed and slid from his chair, careful not to make any noise. He didn't want to alert the intruder to his presence.

Whoever was outside might be harmless.

Somehow he doubted that.

By the time he reached the back door, his heart raced. His instincts screamed at him that something wasn't right. He opened the door and peered out before he slipped outside. He walked toward the woods, cursing his inability to shift and investigate.

"Hello, Andrew."

Drew jerked toward the unexpected sound of a familiar voice. At the edge of the woods, his brother Clint stood, arms crossed over his chest. "Miss us?"

Us? Chad must be here too. Drew shifted his gaze from side to side, looking for his other brother.

As he'd expected, Chad appeared from the side of the house. He must have been prowling around.

Drew watched warily as his brothers circled him, trying to follow their movements. "What do you want?"

Chad sneered at him. "What do you think, little brother?"

Clint, his father's namesake, spoke up from behind him. "We want you dead. You're a disgrace to the family name. When you were just a weakling, it was bad enough, but to find out you're a fucking queer?" He snorted. "Now that Dad's gone, you're a loose end. You could challenge me to become Alpha. We can't allow you to live."

They'd always hated him, thinking him weak because he didn't like to intimidate others or fight for no reason. Discovering he was gay had clearly fueled their hate. Still, for them to think he would come back to challenge them was ridiculous. Clinton Moore had taught his sons his paranoia.

"I won't go down easily, you know." Drew spoke in a conversational tone, keeping his gaze on both of them as best he could. He hoped they couldn't see his lingering weakness from the silver bullet. They'd find out he couldn't shift soon enough. "Too bad you failed when

you sent that guy to shoot me.” It was a guess. He didn’t know if they had had him shot, or if his father had.

Clint rolled his eyes. “We should have known better than to send a human. He paid for his error.”

“Don’t think because you beat Dad that time, you can beat us. We’re a lot younger than he was.” Chad circled behind him.

Clint stood in front of him now, and Drew could feel the hate as if the emotion poured off the other werewolf. He could almost *smell* how much his brother wanted to kill him. Clint’s smile was chilling. “And after we kill you, we’ll go after your pretty little boyfriend. I bet his screams will be even better music than his singing. At least until I rip out his throat.”

Drew snarled. His rage nearly choked off his voice. “You won’t fucking *touch* him. I may die here today, but I’m taking you with me.”

His eldest brother laughed and removed his shirt in preparation for the Change. “I doubt that very much.”

Drew began stripping as well, to stall for time and to hide his weakness. He prayed Ciaran would stay in town a while longer. Against two young, stronger werewolves, Drew knew he didn’t have a chance in human form. If he ended up dead his brothers would hopefully be satisfied and leave Ciaran alone. Even if he died, he wanted to at least make sure they were hurt.

He had almost finished removing his clothing when Chad, who’d been behind him the whole time he’d talked with Clint, leaped onto him and bit his bad shoulder. *Fucking bastard never had any honor*. Drew ripped the wolf off and threw him aside, his fury lending him strength. Blood tracked down his arm. He flexed the muscle, trying not to wince at the pain the movement caused.

At that moment, the back door opened and Ciaran walked out onto the steps, a happy smile on his face. The smile faded to a puzzled, worried look when he caught sight of Drew half-naked with a strange man and a wolf. “Drew?”

No! Drew’s worst fear had been realized. Stark horror seized him at the thought of his mate being hurt or killed. No matter what he had to do,

he would prevent that from happening. Meeting Ciaran's eyes, he tried to communicate his love. Then, he infused his voice with as much command as he could. "Run!"

For a moment Ciaran stood frozen, indecision written all over his face, but then he focused on Drew's bleeding shoulder. Drew thought he would run.

Ciaran didn't.

Instead, his eyes narrowed to slits and he leaped off the steps. His wings burst out, shredding the back of his shirt. Seconds later he hit the ground lightly, landing on his feet. His eyes were glowing bright violet, and his expression was one Drew had never seen before. Ciaran, one of the gentlest people Drew had ever met, looked as if he wanted to rip someone in half.

Drew didn't have time to wonder what the hell was happening, though. Instead, he turned to face Clint, who glared at him with hate-filled eyes. His brother muttered, "Change, damn you."

Clint would never know how much he wanted to do just that.

Apparently tired of waiting, Clint shifted and growled at him.

A sound of pain from Ciaran made Drew half turn, and Clint rushed him. Drew fell to the ground, his brother on his chest. *If he kills me, Ciaran will die.* Panic and rage filled him in a white-hot blaze he'd never felt before. The fire exploded through him, burning away everything but the need to protect his mate.

Sudden, blinding pain hit. He twisted, an involuntary half howl escaping. Clint jumped off him and watched, eyes wary. Drew's back bowed, the agony worse even than being shot. The world went black for a few seconds.

When he opened his eyes again, the world was gray. He clambered up and bared his teeth at his brother. Clint growled again.

They leaped at the same time, and met in midair. They crashed into each other and then hit the ground, snarling and biting. Drew wanted to make sure Ciaran was okay, but distraction could be deadly. He kept his focus on Clint. He fainted to the left before he tore into his brother's right shoulder, drawing blood. Clint yelped and drew back.

Another sound from Ciaran, and Drew involuntarily whipped his head around, seeking his mate. Clint darted in and bit his flank. Drew jerked away, blood seeping from the wound.

With a howl, he whirled and sank his teeth into Clint's back. Praying Ciaran wasn't badly injured, Drew refocused his attention on his adversary. They began circling each other again, rushing and retreating in a kind of dance.

Every time he drew blood, Clint did the same within a few minutes. Soon they were both bleeding and panting. Drew began to wonder if he would be able to outlast his brother. He could feel himself slowing, tiring, despite his efforts to hide his weakness. It had been too long since he changed, and he was still weak from the silver.

Finally, a pained yelp from Chad distracted Clint for a crucial second. Drew seized his chance, charging forward and fastening his jaws around the other wolf's throat. Clint went down, whimpering, and Drew held him there until his brother showed submission by flattening his ears and lowering his head as much as he could. Growling, Drew released the wolf.

He turned, but he didn't get far before he sensed movement behind him. Clint must have only been pretending to submit to trap him. He yelped as his brother bit down on his already injured back leg. Pain, rage, and desperation enabled him to pull away from Clint's teeth. Instead of coming for him, though, his brother bared his teeth in a soundless snarl and looked toward Ciaran and Chad. Drew knew Clint thought him beaten and wanted him to see Ciaran die before they killed him. *Never! Not even if I have to die myself.*

Clint drew himself up in preparation. Calling on his last reserves of strength, Drew intercepted the larger wolf's leap. They fell to the ground in a tangle of fur and limbs, snapping jaws and vicious teeth.

Drew wasn't sure how, but he ended up on top. Only the thought of what would happen to his mate if he failed enabled him to fend off Clint's attempts to bite him and grip his brother's throat again. This time, he gave no mercy. Clint's hot, coppery lifeblood filled Drew's mouth and soaked into the dirt and his fur when he clamped down hard. He held on

until he was certain his brother was dead. Then he shook the body just in case. He would take no chances this time.

Scuffling sounds from the other side of the clearing caught his attention. Ciaran needed him. He spun around. Just as he turned, Chad leaped for Ciaran's throat. He stared in horror, too far away to help. Ciaran dropped the large branch he'd been wielding and chanted some words in a strange, guttural language Drew had never heard before as the big black wolf's paws hit his shoulders and they went down.

No!

Drew rushed forward, knowing he'd never make it in time.

He didn't.

Before Drew reached them, Ciaran's slim hands reached up, gripped the wolf's head, and snapped its neck in one quick move. Then Ciaran shoved the body away calmly and sat up, his cold, glowing eyes scanning the clearing as if searching for something else to kill.

Drew stopped abruptly several feet away. He stood there, bleeding, pain reasserting itself in the wake of the adrenaline rush of the fight. This wasn't his Ciaran. Even the scent seemed wrong—overlaid with a smoky-metallic tang. Drew's ears flattened, a whine emerging unbidden from his throat. Uncertainty rose until Ciaran's gaze locked on him. The strange glow left Ciaran's eyes, and he focused on Drew.

"Drew..." The half-demon held his arms out, and Drew limped across the clearing to him. As soon as he reached his lover's side, he found himself enfolded in the other man's slim arms. The hands that had just snapped his brother's neck with brutal strength stroked his fur gently, searching for injuries. Drew could feel how they shook. "Are you all right?"

Wanting to reassure Ciaran, and heal some of his injuries, Drew changed. Pain overwhelmed him again, and he writhed on the ground while his body struggled its way through a shift that took twice as long as usual. Ciaran watched, wide-eyed and pale.

In human form again, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, trying not to show how much the fight and the shift had taken out of him. When he could speak, he murmured, "I'm fine." The last thing he cared

about was his own wounds. He examined his lover's chest, arms, and face for injuries. He found some cuts, scratches, and bruises, but nothing serious.

"You're not fine," Ciaran protested, batting his hands away. "You just shifted for the first time after having silver poisoning. And that wolf hurt you."

Drew shook his head. "I'll heal. I'm more worried about you. What the hell were you thinking? Why did you come down here? You could have been killed." His voice cracked on the last bit.

"And so could you." Ciaran glared at him. His fingers skimmed over Drew's shoulder. They came away wet with blood. His lip trembled. "I would never leave you to fight alone. *Never.*"

Of course Ciaran wouldn't leave Drew to fight alone. Drew would never let Ciaran fight by himself either, as long as there was breath in his body. And Ciaran had acquitted himself well in battle, better than Drew could have dreamed. How Ciaran had done that was a conversation for another time. He pulled his mate into his arms. "I know."

Now that the crisis had passed, Ciaran trembled with reaction. "I was so afraid for you. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

Drew held him tighter. "Don't worry about that now. You're safe, and I'm safe. That's what's important."

Ciaran hid his face against Drew's neck and wrapped his wings around both of them like a shield. "Safe," he echoed, not sounding sure at all.

Chapter Twelve

In Drew's arms, Ciaran could almost forget the last few terrifying minutes. He could pretend two wolves had not tried to kill Drew, and him. He could ignore the dead wolf—a wolf *he* had killed, thanks to his father's lessons—that lay near them.

He kept his eyes closed and let the steady beat of Drew's heart calm him. Drew's gentle hands on his back and wings helped. Slowly the leftover adrenaline and delayed fear drained away.

He lifted his head to meet Drew's eyes. "Who were those wolves?"

Drew sighed. "My brothers. They thought I might come back to challenge them for Alpha."

"They must not have known you at all." Ciaran glanced at the blood-soaked body of the wolf Drew had killed. They must have believed Drew was weak, as well as greedy and stupid. He couldn't hold back a flare of anger. "Two of them came to attack one man?"

Drew's faraway gaze refocused on Ciaran's face. "They also sent the guy who shot me. They took a page from my dad's playbook, I guess. Paranoid and dishonorable."

Any bit of guilt Ciaran felt for killing Drew's brother died. In their quest for power, Drew's brothers had done unforgivable things. If left unchecked, they would have done more horrible things. "They deserved to die."

"I know that. I do." Drew paused, his expression sad. "I just wish it could have been different. With my father and with them. I guess that's

stupid of me.”

His mate appeared vulnerable and uncertain. Ciaran hated Drew’s brothers and father all the more. He stroked his fingertips over Drew’s stubbled cheek. “Not stupid. Don’t you think I’ve had similar thoughts, about my childhood?”

Drew caught Ciaran’s hand and held it to his cheek. “I guess if anyone could understand, it would be you.” He kissed Ciaran’s hand and released it.

Ciaran smiled a little. They remained where they were for a few more minutes, not speaking. Drew appeared thoughtful.

At last he shook his head and refocused on Ciaran. “I can’t leave the bodies here. I don’t want to call Nick again. This is my problem.”

“What will you do?”

“Burn them. And then bury the remains. That’s traditional in some packs, and it’s the only real option, without a cleanup crew or family to claim them.” Drew shrugged as if his plan were no big deal.

Ciaran saw through his act. “I will help you.” He unfolded his wings and stood, shaking them out and resettling them against his back. His normal urge to hide them away was absent, maybe because he wasn’t entirely certain he and Drew were safe. Look what had happened the last couple of times they thought they were safe. Who knew what other enemies would appear without warning?

Drew stood as well, his movements slow and stiff. Ciaran half expected Drew to argue with him about helping, but his mate said nothing. Drew had to be in pain after the fight, which probably accounted for his silence.

Drew gathered his clothing and dressed, wincing as the shirt settled onto his injured shoulder. Then he crossed the yard to the wolf he had killed. After a brief struggle, he lifted the body into his arms. “We’ll take them to the clearing. We can burn them there without anyone seeing.”

And they wouldn’t have to worry about their fire getting out of control. Ciaran nodded and lifted the other body. He staggered a little, unprepared for the wolf’s weight.

Drew had already disappeared into the woods. Ciaran followed, his focus on not dropping his burden. When he reached the clearing, Drew had already placed the wolf's body in the center.

He frowned up at Ciaran. "We'll need wood, and something to get the fire started."

The only frame of reference Ciaran had was television shows. He recalled something from a forensics program. "We have a can of gasoline in the garage. I'll get it."

"Thank you." Drew spotted a tree limb and picked it up. "I'll get some wood."

Grateful to have something to do, Ciaran set off for the garage. The gas can was right inside the door, where he'd thought it would be. He grabbed it and started to head back to the clearing.

He stopped. In the television show, the arsonist had needed a lighter to start the fire. Drew did not have anything like that in the clearing. Ciaran sighed and detoured to the house.

In the kitchen, he rummaged through the junk drawer until he found a box of wooden matches. *That should work.* Box and gas can in hand, he started toward the back door.

The shrill ring of the kitchen telephone and a sudden, loud banging on the front door startled Ciaran. He dropped the matches and barely managed to hold on to the can of gasoline, not wanting to spill any on the floor.

While he stood frozen, the phone continued to ring. Whoever was at the door also banged again. The sounds set his heart pounding. His first instinct was to hide, or run. He pushed the feeling away. He had escaped captivity twice. He had fought a werewolf and survived.

He would never cower in fear again.

Angry now, Ciaran stalked to the front door and yanked it open.

* * * * *

Gathering sticks and tree limbs wasn't difficult work in the woods. Drew had gathered a large pile in only a few minutes. His shoulder ached

like a bitch, and the air felt cold without a shirt, but he'd soon have a fire to warm him. He sat on a large log at the edge of the clearing to rest for a few minutes. His breath made clouds in the air in front of him, and not for the first time he wished he was still in wolf form.

At least he had shifted. The relief of having his wolf returned to him couldn't be measured. Even in human form again, his senses were sharper. He sniffed at the air, glorying in the scents of distant wood smoke, animals, plants, and the crisp scent of upcoming snow. The winter so far had been strange, with a lot of rain, sleet, and ice but no snow to speak of. Ciaran had been disappointed by that. He wanted to see snow.

Drew frowned and stabbed a small stick into the damp ground. Ciaran had said he would get the gas can, but he was taking forever. Maybe something was wrong.

The sound of approaching footsteps crunching through the leaves only strengthened Drew's fear. Two sets of feet approached, not one.

Drew jumped to his feet and whirled toward the sound. His nostrils flared at the scent of another werewolf. Not Nick, but...familiar. Ciaran's scent was there too. Drew didn't detect any fear. But that didn't mean the approaching wolf was a friend.

A low growl escaped, unbidden. Drew moved toward the trees, hoping he would be able to shift again if he needed to.

He had crossed the clearing when Ciaran emerged from the trees, unsmiling. Nervous. Next to him was someone Drew knew very well. He stared.

"Mom?"

His mother looked at him. In the weeks since he'd seen her, more of her hair had silvered, and the lines on her face had deepened. "Drew. I'm sorry. I tried to warn you, and I tried to stop them. I failed." She glanced around the clearing, her gaze lingering on the two dead wolves. Her green eyes, identical to his own, were sad.

To say Drew had mixed emotions would be an understatement. He stared helplessly at his mother, sorry for her loss but unable to regret what he had done. Ciaran stepped closer, touched his arm in reassurance. The small gesture helped. Drew sighed. "Don't apologize. You did what you

could." *And I did what I had to.*

Apparently she didn't blame him for what he'd done, because she reached out and took his hand. "It wasn't enough this time. But then again, maybe it never was. If I had stood up to your father and brothers sooner, you would never have left the pack."

And he would have missed so much. Drew squeezed her thin fingers gently. "If I'd stayed, I would never have been happy. Not really." He slid his free arm around Ciaran to pull him forward. "If I hadn't left I wouldn't have met my mate."

His mother's eyes widened. "Is this...?"

Drew smiled. "Mom, meet my mate, Ciaran Black."

Her return smile took years off her careworn features. She held out her free hand to Ciaran. "Hello, Ciaran. I'm Elaine Moore."

His mate stopped attempting to blend into Drew's side and moved forward to shake Elaine's hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you." The formal words revealed Ciaran's nervousness.

Elaine appeared charmed by it. Her "mom" expression appeared. "I should've known Drew's mate would be unconventional." She eyed Ciaran with new interest. "Fae?"

"And demon." Ciaran stood straight and tall as he added the other half of his ancestry, no longer ashamed.

Drew could barely contain his pride.

His mother showed no sign of being disturbed by the revelation. "And you love my son enough to stay here with him?"

"I love him enough to die for him."

Her eyebrows shot up at that. "Do you feel the same?"

Her gaze remained locked on Ciaran, but Drew knew she spoke to him. "I do."

After a second of silence, she released Drew's hand and wrapped Ciaran in a tight hug. Turning teary eyes to Drew, she said, "You deserve nothing less. Both of you."

Drew's own emotions almost overwhelmed him at the sight of his mother's tears. He swallowed hard. "Thanks, Mom."

Ciaran's hesitation seemed to have vanished. He hugged Elaine in

return and then stepped back. "I am glad you have come, Mrs. Moore. Drew has felt the loss of his family most keenly."

Her eyes darkened. "Call me Elaine, please. I'm not Mrs. Moore anymore."

Drew put a hand on her shoulder. "I know living with Dad was hard."

She ran a hand through her silvery blonde hair. "It wouldn't have been, if he'd been my true mate, like your Ciaran." Her smile included them both. "Unfortunately, it was a political move by our parents to unite our two packs. It worked, at least."

Startled, Drew said nothing. No matter how bad things had been, his mother had never disparaged his father or her marriage. She had never seemed so defeated, either. While Clinton Moore was alive, she must have tried to make the best of things. Divorce was nearly unheard of in the werewolf world, especially among Alphas and their wives.

Ciaran broke the silence. "Many marriages in Faerie are built on similar foundations."

"In our case, not much of a foundation." Elaine sighed. "Clinton was a strong Alpha and a good provider, but I don't think he knew how to love. All he knew was control."

"Control is no substitute," Ciaran murmured, probably thinking about his own childhood.

"No, it isn't." Elaine stared at the bodies of her two eldest sons, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. They all stood in silence again for what felt like an eternity before she shook her head. "Clinton chose his path, and so did Clint and Chad. There's no changing that now. We need to move forward."

Drew nodded. If he could have done anything to avoid killing his brothers, he would have, but they had forced his hand by threatening his mate. He picked up the gas can and matches from where Ciaran had set them.

Together, he and his mother arranged his brothers' bodies and the pile of limbs into a passable funeral pyre. Ciaran fetched things when requested but otherwise stayed out of the way. As a last step, Drew took

the can Ciaran handed him and poured gasoline over the whole thing.

When they were finished, Drew took his mother's hand and stood before the pyre. Ciaran stood a little behind Drew. "Do you wish me to go?"

Drew shook his head and held out his free hand. Ciaran took it and came to stand beside him. Drew took a deep breath. Finding the words was difficult, given what his brothers had done. He relied on tradition. "Tonight, we return our brothers Clint and Chad to our Mother, the Moon."

Elaine spoke next, her voice quiet but strong. "We send them on their journey with open hearts, a bright fire to light their way."

Drew nodded to Ciaran. Ciaran let go of Drew's hand to light a match. He held the burning match a moment, and then tossed it onto the pyre. The fire caught with a *whoosh*. In moments the entire structure was ablaze.

Drew watched, dry-eyed, as the flames rose, devouring his brothers. "May you find your way to the Mother, and live at her side forever."

As the oldest member of the impromptu pack they had formed, Elaine turned her face to Mother Moon and howled, a sound no human throat could ever duplicate. Drew joined her. They sang of memories, loss, and loyalty. They sang of death and rebirth. Somewhere in the distance, a coyote joined their song. A few dogs did the same. Ciaran lifted his face to the sky and closed his eyes, listening.

At last, their song died out on a last soft, melancholy note. If this had been a normal funeral, members of the fallen wolf's pack would have spent the rest of the night dancing and reminiscing, sharing a celebration of life and love. Drew was saddened to realize he had few good memories of his brothers to share. They had tormented him from childhood, and they hadn't stood up for him when others teased him either.

His mother must have felt the same way. Her face tired and drawn in the flickering firelight, she went to the log and sat.

Drew remained where he stood. She needed time to process her loss. No matter how cruel they had been, Clint and Chad were her sons. In

the space of a few days, his mother had lost most of her family. He had too, but he had resigned himself to their loss long ago.

The fire crackled and popped, the chill chased away by its bright heat. A large black wing enfolded Drew like a one-armed embrace. Drew leaned into Ciaran's side, allowing his mate to comfort him.

Chapter Thirteen

The blaze burned long into the night. Ciaran remained at Drew's side the whole time. They didn't speak much, yet he knew his presence made the hours more bearable for his mate.

Drew's mother seemed lost in her thoughts. Ciaran could understand how losing her sons would be a hurtful thing, even if they had not been good men. He wanted to comfort her as well, but he did not know how. Maybe Drew's presence would help her.

At one point, Drew sat on the ground next to Ciaran, who perched on the log, and put his head in Ciaran's lap. Ciaran sifted his fingers through Drew's soft hair, admiring the way the blond and brown strands shone in the firelight. He didn't realize Drew had fallen asleep until Drew let out a funny little huff and shifted to get closer.

Drew's mother smiled. "He must be exhausted."

"He is." Ciaran debated how much to tell her. In the end, he decided she deserved to know at least a little of what had gone on. "The fight took a lot out of him. Until he shifted tonight, we thought he had lost his wolf."

"Lost his wolf? How?" Elaine's expression held both confusion and horror.

Nothing could soften the blow of what he had to say, so he just said it. "A man shot him with a silver bullet."

Every bit of color drained from her face. "He was shot with a *silver bullet*?" Her gaze dropped to Drew's sleeping face. After a moment, she

spoke again, her voice a raw whisper. "Who shot him? Why?"

"The man who shot him was a human, hired by his older brothers. They admitted as much earlier."

Elaine's face crumpled. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks. "I knew they were planning something. My baby almost died and I didn't know. I didn't stop it."

Ciaran reached across the space separating them and touched her hand. "What could you have done, other than incur their anger yourself? You had your husband to deal with, and you tried to warn Drew."

She shrugged. "I'm his mother. I'm supposed to protect him." She scrubbed a hand across her face. "How did he survive?"

Ciaran swallowed, remembering the terrible days when he had feared Drew would die. "My grandfather and a friend of ours were able to begin the healing process with spells and herbs. He did the rest himself."

"And you were by his side, just like tonight." Her words were not a question. She smiled again, a bittersweet tilt of lips. "Thank you."

Ciaran nodded, emotions too close to the surface to reply.

* * * * *

The funeral pyre had burned down to red coals and ashes. Ciaran half dozed, still stroking Drew's hair. Drew shifted on Ciaran's lap. His eyes opened.

Ciaran smiled down at him.

Drew smiled back, then seemed to remember where he was and why. He sat up.

Elaine turned toward them at the movement. "The fire is nearly done. When it's burned out entirely I'll gather up the ashes and take them to be buried."

"I can do that," Drew began.

"I want to." Elaine's voice was firm. "I may not have been able to stop them from becoming like Clinton, but I can do this for them."

Drew nodded.

Elaine stood and moved to sit beside Drew. "I want you to go

inside and get some sleep. I'll be leaving as soon as I can."

Drew seemed about to protest again. She held up a hand. "I'm needed at home. Hank will take over as Alpha. He's the strongest, and he will be a fair and honorable leader. With me backing him, the others will accept him. When things have settled down, I want to see you. I don't care whether you come to me or I come here. I just don't want to lose you. Ever again."

"Oh, Mom." Drew enfolded her in a tight hug. "You never lost me, and you never will."

Elaine hugged him back. "Good." She released him and made a shooing motion. "Go. Rest. Heal. Be with your mate. I'll see you soon."

* * * * *

Worn out and emotionally drained, Drew let Ciaran pull him up and herd him to the house. His little mate was in full-on protector mode, and Drew found he didn't mind it.

Inside, Ciaran turned to him, solicitous and sweet despite the late hour. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No. Thanks." Drew caught Ciaran's slim hand and twined their fingers together. "I just need you."

The truth of the words hit him the instant they were out. Food could wait. So could talking about everything that had happened. He was beyond relieved to have his wolf back, and his mother, but all he really needed right now was his mate.

Hand in hand, they made their way back to the bedroom. Drew stripped off his dirty, smoke-scented clothing and crawled into bed, unconcerned about the mess he had to be making. They could wash everything in the morning.

From his position snuggled under the covers, Drew watched Ciaran remove his torn shirt. His chest gleamed in the moonlight, marble-white and hard. In the short months they'd been together, Ciaran had put on some muscle. He would always be slim, but his wiry strength was obvious now.

He toed off his shoes, then pushed his pants and underwear off in one smooth motion. He stood beside the bed for a few seconds, watching Drew watch him, calm and unembarrassed by either his nudity or his wings.

Drew held out his arms in a wordless request. Ciaran smiled and climbed into bed, slipping under the covers beside Drew. He curled one wing around Drew in a gesture both protective and comforting.

Drew settled into Ciaran's embrace, weariness tugging at him.

Ciaran caressed his hair and kissed his cheek. Finally he whispered, "Do you think we're really safe now?"

Rather than just say yes or no, Drew paused to consider. They'd faced Ciaran's past head-on, and now his. "I don't know. I think so. We've had more than enough problems lately, I'd say."

Ciaran snorted. "That is true." He shifted his wing and settled it against his back.

Drew watched, fascinated as always, as Ciaran's wings seemed to melt into his skin. Until tonight, Drew hadn't realized just how fierce his mate could be. Now he had to see the wings as more than beautiful. They were an external symbol, part of what made Ciaran strong, and formidable. *A worthy mate indeed.* He smiled and kissed Ciaran's shoulder. "We've faced them all together."

"Yes. And we always will."

Drew lifted his head to meet Ciaran's gaze, pleased by what he saw there. "And we always will."

Ciaran closed his eyes and cuddled closer. He must have been tired from all his caretaking, because he fell asleep quickly.

Drew pulled Ciaran closer and let his own eyelids drift shut. Listening to his mate's soft breathing, he felt the tension seep from his muscles. Life would go on as usual. If they were lucky, and he believed they were, they'd dealt with the last of their enemies. If not, they had each other. Together they could accomplish anything.

Author Bio

By day, Cassandra is a (relatively) mild-mannered middle school teacher. At night, she lets the characters in her head out to play as she writes erotic romance. Unfortunately for her husband, neither of Cassandra's personas enjoys doing housework.

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