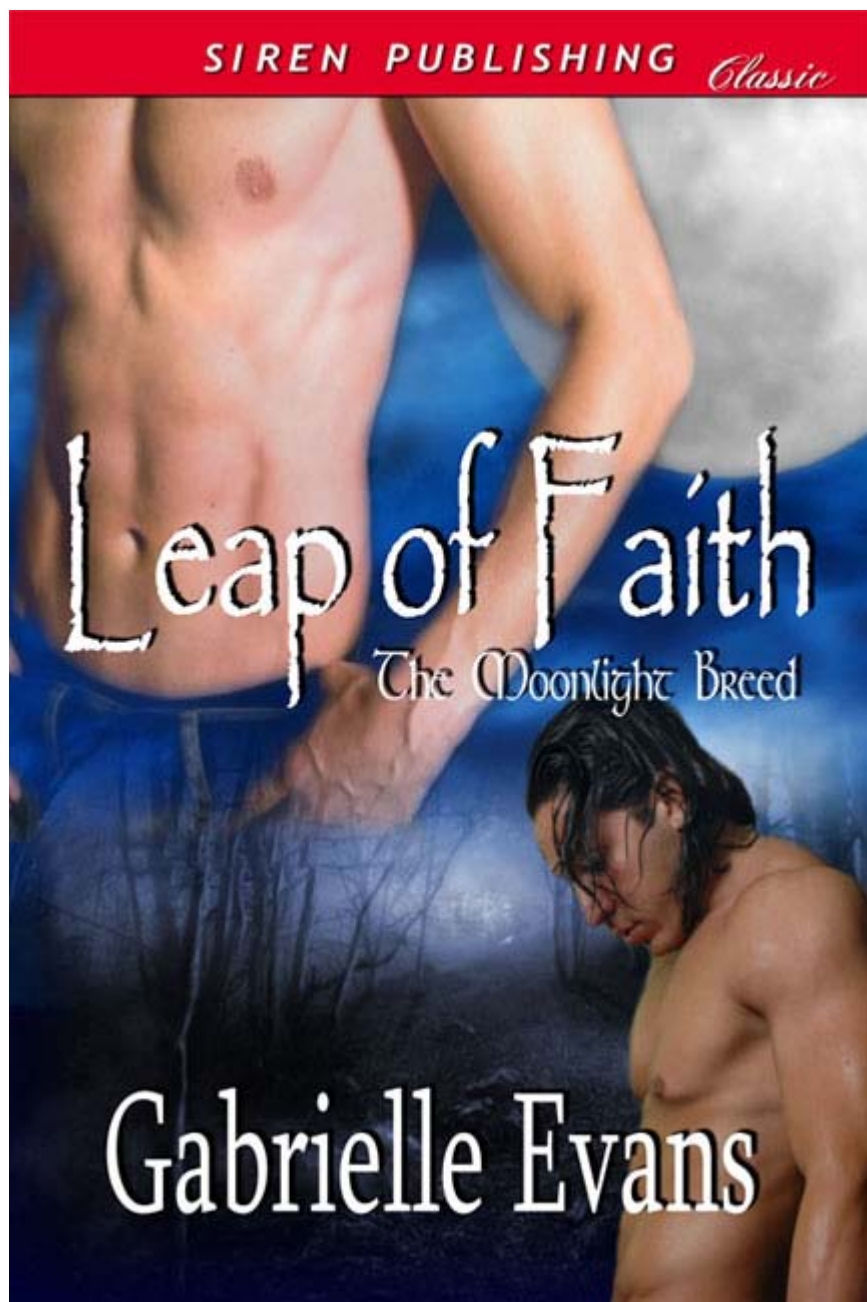


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

Leap of Faith

The Moonlight Breed

Gabrielle Evans



The Moonlight Breed 1

Leap of Faith

After kicking his two-timing ex-lover to the curb, all Braxton is interested in is getting started on his next graphic novel. That is, until he meets sexy firefighter and cursed shifter, Xander Brighton.

Xander has never given much thought to having a mate. Now that he's found Braxton, though, he will do whatever it takes to keep his new partner safe and happy.

But Braxton's ex-lover, Mason, isn't about to let them move on to their happy-ever-after without a fight. In fact, he will stop at nothing to reclaim his ex, and Braxton begins to suspect that Mason may be hiding an ulterior motive. With Xander's help, Braxton races to unravel the mysteries surrounding his ex before someone ends up hurt...or worse.

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Paranormal, Shape-shifter

Length: 43,583 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

LEAP OF FAITH

Copyright © 2011 by Gabrielle Evans

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-055-8

First E-book Publication: January 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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DEDICATION

To the love of my life...Thank you for your constant support, endless encouragement, and for taking the leap with me.

LEAP OF FAITH

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

“Brax, honey, I say this as your best friend, and you know I love you, but...you need to get laid, babe,” Keeton announced.

Braxton rolled his eyes. Of course, that was Keeton’s answer for any- and everything. Had a bad a day at work? Get laid. Car broke down? Get laid. Found out your boyfriend is cheating on you? Get laid, of course.

“Shut up, Kee.” Braxton grinned to soften the admonishment and took a sip of his coffee. He couldn’t be mad at Keeton, even if he had a tendency to be the most obnoxious person on the planet.

They sat side by side on a stone bench near the fountain in Tipton Park. Braxton eyed his best friend, the eyeliner, the vivid purple silk shirt, the skintight, white leather pants, and felt his grin grow wider. Keeton was funny, kind, and wildly flamboyant. Braxton loved him more than anything.

“Okay, so what’s up? I know you didn’t want to meet here just to discuss my sex life—or lack thereof.”

“Nope.” Keeton smiled devilishly. “I need you to help me find something for Dylan’s birthday.”

Braxton groaned. “Honestly, Keeton! You’ve known the guy for three weeks! I don’t see the big—” He bit his lip, eyeing the mutinous set of Keeton’s jaw. Was he actually pouting?

Ah, hell. Braxton held his hands up in surrender. “Fine,” he

sighed. “When is his birthday?”

“Today, of course.” Keeton sounded as if this should have been obvious. “In fact, I’m meeting him for lunch at one, and then we’re going to Atlanta, so we should get moving.”

“Sure.” Braxton rose from the bench. “Lead the way to the three-week-boyfriend tacky tie shop.”

* * * *

Two hours later, Keeton kissed Braxton’s cheek and hurried off to meet Dylan. Braxton let out a relieved breath. He’d been serious about buying Dylan a tie. It didn’t even have to be tacky. Keeton, unfortunately, felt Braxton’s gift lacked proper character.

Keeton had led him from store to store, scouring the mall for the perfect gift. After hours of searching, several heated debates, and one very serious threat of bodily harm from Braxton, Keeton had ended up choosing the new Dolce&Gabbana cologne. A very appropriate been-banging-for-three-weeks gift as far as Braxton was concerned.

It was such a nice day that he had walked the mile and a half from his town house to meet Keeton. He briefly debated taking the bus home, but in the end decided to walk. It would give him time to think about the new series that he was dying to get started on.

With his *Crusader* series finished, Braxton couldn’t wait to begin his next graphic novel, *Quest*. He had the story line, but he was having trouble bringing his hero to life. He’d spent hours with Keeton—who, besides being his best friend, was also his business partner and illustrator—poring over sketches, but nothing fit. None of them felt right.

Braxton stood at a crosswalk, waiting for the light, still trying to visualize his fictional Casanova, when a pale hand landed gently on his shoulder.

“Braxton?”

Braxton flinched inwardly. He’d know that voice anywhere.

Turning slowly, he looked up into the gunmetal gray eyes, set in a classically handsome face and framed by perfectly styled platinum waves.

“Mason,” Braxton said flatly.

“You look great! How have you been?” Mason practically bounced, his hand still resting on Braxton’s shoulder.

Braxton took a step back and looked up at his ex-lover. At five foot six, he was used to looking up at people. Shrugging Mason’s hand off, he took another step back, grinding his teeth together as he fought to keep his temper leashed.

“It’s good to see you. I’ve tried to call, but the number has been disconnected. I even dropped by a couple of weeks ago. When did you move?” Mason gave Braxton a winsome smile. “Here, let me buy you lunch, and we’ll catch up. Sound good?” He grabbed Braxton’s wrist and tugged insistently.

“No.” Braxton tried unsuccessfully to free himself from Mason’s grip. “I don’t want to have lunch. I don’t want to catch up. I don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

It had been nearly seven months since Braxton had come home on his and Mason’s one-year anniversary to find his lover in bed with some barely legal blond. Braxton had kicked him out on the spot, not even allowing Mason time to gather his belongings.

Mason had been angry when he’d stormed out of the house, but Braxton had felt liberated. Their relationship had been on a downhill slide well before the infidelity.

The week after their fallout, Braxton had packed all of Mason’s things and called Mason’s brother to come pick them up. He’d ignorantly believed that had been the end of it.

Unfortunately, this was only the most recent in a string of uncomfortable—and sometimes strange—encounters with his ex. He had been blunt and straightforward, to the point of cruelty. Still, Mason seemed oblivious to the fact that Braxton didn’t want him.

Mason’s grip tightened painfully around his wrist, drawing

Braxton back to the present. “Is there someone else?” Mason demanded.

“What?” So today’s reunion was going to be both strange *and* uncomfortable.

Mason pulled Braxton to his chest roughly. “Tell me who he is.”

“Mason, let go!”

“Answer me!” Mason snarled.

“Fuck you,” Braxton replied coldly. “What I do and who I see is none of your business.” He shoved against Mason’s chest, twisting his arm free.

Mason shoved him back. “Fine,” he answered just as coldly and pushed Braxton again.

Braxton lost his footing, stumbling backward off the curb and into the street. The sound of screaming tires against the asphalt had him whipping around to see the grill of a sleek, black Dodge pickup bearing down on him. Braxton stood as frozen as the proverbial deer in the headlights. His muscles tensed, and he squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for impact.

Then the only sound was Mason shouting his name. He opened his eyes and gasped. The shiny chrome bumper was mere inches from his body, but he wasn’t hurt.

“Holy shit,” Braxton whispered, then fainted right there in the middle of the street.

* * * *

Braxton came to with a groan. His hip and shoulder ached, and his head felt like his brains were probably leaking out of his ears. Without opening his eyes, he raised a hand to his throbbing temple. Long, warm fingers gently wrapped around his wrist.

“Oh, no you don’t.”

Whoa. Deep, rich, smooth as honey, with just the trace of an accent, the stranger’s voice washed over him, sending electricity

straight down Braxton's spine.

A slightly smaller hand squeezed his fingers. "Braxton, can you hear me? It's okay. I'm here. Open your eyes, please. C'mon," Mason crooned.

Braxton squeezed his eyes shut tighter. *Great*. After a quick internal debate, he decided against feigning unconsciousness. Of course, they knew he was awake.

He let his eyelids flutter open and gasped as his mouth went desert dry. *Yum!* Oh yeah, this was much better than being unconscious. Kneeling over him was the most gorgeous example of the male anatomy he'd ever seen. Long black hair, dark skin, and eyes that held Braxton mesmerized—warm, golden brown with flecks of chocolate around the pupil. He bit back a moan as his cock twitched in interest.

The stranger met his gaze, and Braxton's mind went fuzzy—though that could have been from whacking his head on the pavement. He felt his stomach clench, and for some reason, his gums itched.

Braxton smiled and blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Wow. You're hot."

The bigger man's eyes widened, and Braxton felt his face flush. He hoped he wasn't about to get his ass handed to him. Why the hell had he said that? He wasn't in the closet, but he didn't exactly go around broadcasting his sexual preference either.

Then the guy's eyes crinkled at the corners, and he smiled just a little. Braxton sighed in relief.

"Braxton, you're going to be okay. There's an ambulance on the way. Just stay still." Mason held on to Braxton's hand with both of his own.

Reluctantly, Braxton turned his focus to him. He was so not in the mood for this right now. "I'm fine," he said coolly, pulling his hand from Mason's grip. "You need to leave."

"You don't mean that," Mason said.

"Yes, I do."

“Brax, don’t be ridiculous. You need me,” Mason said soothingly. He reached for Braxton’s hand again.

“Get the hell away from me!” Braxton growled.

“Baby, you’re just confused.”

“I am not confused, and I am not your baby!” Braxton’s voice rose to a shout as he tried to push himself into a less vulnerable sitting position. He groaned, wincing at the pain that shot through his head.

“Easy there, *chulo*.” A large hand pushed gently on his stomach to keep him in place, then began to rub slow, soothing circles. “Stay still. I hear the sirens now.” The stranger stood and faced Mason.

Holy hell! The guy was massive. He had to be at least a whole foot taller than Braxton, if not more. Mason was no short stack, but the other man towered over him.

“Look,” the man addressed Mason, “the guy obviously doesn’t want you here. Maybe you should just take off.”

“Nonsense,” Mason scoffed. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“*Ex*-boyfriend,” Braxton mumbled.

“What was that?” The unknown man folded his massive frame to kneel over Braxton again.

“He’s my ex-boyfriend. He has been for nearly seven months now,” Braxton explained. Anything else he might have said was cut off when a squad car arrived, followed by an ambulance.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Yummy brushed his knuckles softly down Braxton’s cheek and gave him a warm smile. Then he rose and stepped back to make room for the EMTs. Braxton glanced toward where he’d last seen Mason, but his ex was nowhere to be seen.

Ten minutes later, Braxton was strapped to a stretcher, a brace around his neck, and wheeled to the back of a waiting ambulance. Braxton spotted his beautiful stranger talking to an officer. When the man noticed him, he held up one finger to the officer and jogged over to Braxton’s side.

“How are you feeling?” he asked seriously.

“Like I got hit by a truck,” Braxton answered truthfully without

considering his words.

The big man winced and looked down at his feet. When he raised his head again, Braxton could see the guilt swimming in his amber eyes. "I'm so sorry," the giant whispered. "I tried to stop."

Oh, poor guy. Braxton's heart broke at the softly spoken words. He reached out with his good arm and took one large hand into his much smaller one.

"This is not your fault." He shook his head. "It was a stupid accident, and I'll be fine. You know, you didn't actually hit me. All this"—Braxton nodded toward the ambulance—"is because I fainted. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

He wasn't so sure about the accident part. He was pretty sure he remembered being pushed, but he couldn't really think around the throbbing in his head and the twitching of his cock every time Mr. Wet Dream here looked at him.

The EMTs loaded him into the back of the ambulance. The pretty redhead was about to close the doors when Braxton suddenly shouted, "Wait!"

Everyone froze, stunned by his outburst. Braxton smiled sheepishly and turned his gaze to his unlikely hero. "I don't know your name."

"Alexander Brighton, but you can call me Xander. Everyone does."

"Xander," Braxton said with a nod. "I'm Braxton. Braxton Carmichael."

"Sorry, but we have to go," the female EMT said as she crawled into the back of the ambulance and closed the doors.

Braxton eased back, trying not to put pressure on his left shoulder. Damn, it hurt like a bitch. He closed his eyes. "Xander," he whispered, smiling to himself.

"I know," the woman sighed as she leaned over him, cleaning the dried blood from his forehead. "He is gorgeous, isn't he?"

Braxton smiled back at her. "Definitely. You know him?"

“Not well, but we’ve ended up on a few of the same calls.”

Did that mean that Xander was an EMT as well? Braxton was about to ask the redhead when she spoke again.

“I hear he swings both ways.” She winked at him.

Braxton’s eyes widened, but he said nothing. It didn’t matter. Not as if he’d ever see the man again.

Chapter Two

Xander finished answering the officer's questions, climbed into his truck, and headed in the direction the ambulance—and Braxton Carmichael—had gone. He just wanted to go check on the little man. That wasn't weird, right? Hell, he'd almost made roadkill out of the guy!

Oh, who was he kidding? He just wanted to see Braxton again. The little man was the hottest thing Xander had seen in a while. He groaned as he shifted in his seat, trying to make room in his suddenly too tight pants. Just thinking about those full pink lips made him hard as a rock. Add the fact that Braxton was his mate, and the option of not going to the hospital was fairly nonexistent. It had taken every ounce of self-control that Xander possessed not to claim the man right there on the street.

He had been scared shitless when he'd seen the man stumble off the curb and right in front of his truck. Then Braxton had fallen to the ground, and Xander had just known he'd killed the smaller man.

He had jumped out of his truck, cell phone already to his ear as he spoke with the 911 dispatcher. The wind had shifted just as Xander was rounding the front of his pickup, carrying the most intoxicating scent he had ever smelled. His cock had gone ramrod straight in the span of two seconds. There had been a tingling feeling in his belly, and the gums around his canines had itched.

When Xander knelt beside Braxton on the street and realized the strange scent was coming from the prone figure on the ground, he had the almost uncontrollable urge to sink his teeth into the man's neck.

Xander hadn't known what the hell any of it meant until Braxton

had opened his eyes and stared straight into his. It hadn't exactly been a glowing light with the "Hallelujah" chorus, but more a rubber band snapping in his brain, and he'd known. Braxton was his mate.

Judging by the way Braxton had been eyeing him, and his comment about Xander being hot, he felt confident that Braxton was gay. Not that it would matter, but it certainly made things a lot easier for Xander.

He pulled into the parking lot of Community North Hospital and wondered if Braxton would still be in one of the ER rooms. He would check there first.

The young woman behind the counter informed him that Braxton was still in the ER. Xander had seen her a time or two during his first-responder runs.

"Room eight. Through the double doors and to the right," she answered with a smile. Knowing the staff certainly had its benefits.

He found the room without any problem, but he still couldn't find Braxton. He could smell the man's scent, but the room was most definitely empty. Xander headed toward the nurses' desk, running a hand through his long, dark hair.

The male nurse looked up at his approach and smiled brightly. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for the guy that is supposed to be in room eight." Xander jerked a thumb at the empty room he'd just come from. "Braxton Carmichael?"

The nurse glanced toward the room and sighed dreamily. "Little guy, hot as hell, with a face like an angel?"

Xander smiled. "That's him. Has he been moved to a private room?"

"Here, let me check. Are you family?" The nurse gave him a knowing smirk.

"Yes, his brother." Xander lied without hesitation.

The nurse eyed him for a moment then grinned. "Right." He turned to one of the computers and began tapping at the keyboard.

“Hmm, he’s been taken for a CT scan to check for internal bleeding and such,” the nurse said casually.

Xander’s stomach dropped to his feet. *Internal bleeding?*

“It’s standard procedure when someone comes in with a concussion,” the nurse explained when he noticed Xander’s panicked expression.

“Concussion?” Xander choked out.

“Yeah,” the guy looked at the screen again, “a mild concussion and a bruised shoulder. He has to stay overnight for observation, but he should be released in the morning. He’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll just come back when they get him in a room,” Xander muttered as he turned to leave.

* * * *

An hour later, Xander had showered, changed, wolfed down some cold pizza, and in a rare stroke of genius, made a stop at Target. Braxton would need something to wear. Something other than those stupid hospital gowns, anyway.

After checking at the front desk, he made his way to the elevator, up to the third floor, and followed the signs until he found Braxton’s room at the end of the hall. Inside, a nurse was checking Braxton’s pulse as she eyed the monitor. She smiled when she noticed Xander standing just inside the door.

“Come on in, sugar,” she said in a low voice. “You can just set that over on the little table there by the window.” She gestured toward the bag in Xander’s hand and then to the little table.

Xander did as directed, placing the bag from Target on the table. He turned back to the nurse and asked uncertainly, “How’s he doing?”

“Oh, well, he’s just fine. Resting. The pain medication makes him a bit sleepy, bless his heart. Doesn’t he just look like an angel?” She smiled fondly down at Braxton.

Xander grinned and thought about the male nurse from the ER. “Yes, ma’am, that does seem to be the general consensus.”

The nurse turned her smile on Xander and gave him a quick pat on the arm before she disappeared out the door.

Xander stood by the side of the bed, staring down at the angel in question. He really was beautiful. His face was all soft lines and gentle curves, with full lips that begged to be kissed, licked, and nibbled.

Xander gently pushed the inky black hair back from Braxton’s face and cupped his cheek, avoiding the white gauze bandage over his left eyebrow.

Braxton turned his face, nuzzling into Xander’s palm. The corners of his lips twitched, and he made a happy little humming noise in the back of his throat. And really, how cute was that?

“Xander,” Braxton sighed without opening his eyes.

“Yes, *chulo*?”

Braxton breathed out Xander’s name again, barely audible this time.

He’s dreaming—about me? Oh, hell to the yes! Xander smiled and moved the single chair in the room closer to the bed. He didn’t know who to contact for Braxton, and he didn’t want him waking up all alone.

* * * *

When Braxton opened his eyes, the light outside his window came from the streetlamps. It was completely dark. He wondered vaguely what time it was, then decided it really didn’t matter. A single, shaded fluorescent bulb behind his bed illuminated the room.

Ah, he felt like hell. His head throbbed, his stitches itched, and his shoulder and hip protested any movement. Braxton ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt fuzzy, and his mouth dry and sticky. He’d kill for some water. Well, maybe not kill, but definitely maim.

Turning his head to the opposite side of the bed in search of water, he inhaled sharply when he saw the huge figure sitting there. “Xander,” Braxton croaked. Oh yeah...needed water.

He hadn’t spoken loudly, but it had been loud enough. Xander jerked awake with a small snort, running his hands over his face. He looked up at Braxton and smiled shyly.

“Hey. How are you feeling?” Xander leaned forward and eyed him critically.

“M’kay.”

“How about some water?”

Braxton nodded carefully and reached out to squeeze Xander’s fingers in thanks.

“Okay. Let me go find a nurse, *chulo*. Are you in pain? Do you need anything else?” Xander looked at him with concern.

Braxton shook his head and then winced when the motion sent a sharp stab of pain through his temple.

Xander frowned. “Easy. I’ll be back in a minute. Rest.” He smiled, then turned and left the room.

Braxton leaned back against his pillow and closed his eyes. Why was Xander here? He wasn’t complaining, quite the opposite actually.

He had thought that he’d never see that gorgeous man again. And, oh, Xander was spectacular to look at. But there was more than just the wrapping and bow to the man. Braxton felt...peaceful when Xander was close.

Which is stupid, Braxton thought to himself. He’d known the man for less than twelve hours—the majority of that time he had spent unconscious. He didn’t know Xander from Adam, but he felt something there. Some sort of connection, like an invisible line drawing him toward the bigger man. He didn’t know what it was, but he really hoped he’d have a chance to find out. He wondered if the EMT was right about Xander batting for both teams.

Braxton rolled his eyes at himself. He was hopeless, always the romantic. Always falling too fast and too hard and always for the

wrong guy. He *was* a romantic, though. He believed in love at first sight, soul mates, and happy-ever-after. Just because he hadn't found his yet, didn't mean that it wasn't out there waiting for him. Xander had to feel the spark too, right? Why else would he be there?

Guilt. The small voice in the back of his mind was an evil little bastard. The bigger, much louder voice—likely connected to his cock—gagged the smaller voice and shoved it ruthlessly into a closet, slamming the door.

Whatever was going on with Xander, if anything, Braxton intended to find out. *Life is all about taking chances.* If it turned out to be just a hefty dose of lust...well...maybe he'd at least get laid and get Keeton off his back. If he was way off base, and Xander was just playing the Good Samaritan...well, he'd worry about that later.

The door opened, and a sweet, grandmotherly little nurse came in carrying a small plastic cup and a Styrofoam pitcher of water. She poured some water for Braxton and added a straw.

"Here you are then, and this too." She handed him the water and small pill cup with two white pills in it. "It's Tylenol with codeine. They'll help with the pain and soreness."

Braxton obediently swallowed the tablets and drank down the water in the cup. He wondered where Xander had gone.

As if just the thought of his name had summoned him, Xander stepped through the door with a small paper bag in his hand. He smiled when he saw Braxton and eased into the chair beside the bed.

"Hi," Braxton whispered. His mouth had gone bone-dry despite the water he'd just drank. That man's smile should be illegal. Tingles of pure lust raced down Braxton's spine and pooled in his groin.

Xander just nodded as he continued to smile that heart-stopping smile. He looked over at the nurse where she was bustling around, pushing buttons on the monitors and writing down whatever it was that nurses wrote down. "When can he eat?" Xander asked.

She turned and smiled at each of them. "Whenever he wants. Just call down to the cafeteria, and they'll bring it up to him." She patted

Braxton's foot as she eased out of the room.

Once the door had shut, Braxton turned to Xander. "Thank you."

"Why?" Xander looked confused.

Braxton bit his bottom lip, looking down at his hands clasped in his lap. "Just...well...thank you...for, you know...for being here," he stammered out. He took a deep breath. Oh, that had been brilliant. He closed his eyes and his mouth before he made a complete fool out of himself. When he finally felt in control, he opened his eyes and gave Xander a small smile. "It really means a lot. Thank you."

Xander just smiled in return. He eased away from Braxton, standing tall and arching his back, stretching.

Braxton looked from Xander over to the chair the big guy had been sleeping in. It didn't look very comfortable. "You don't have to stay. I'm sure your girlfriend is missing you." Braxton fished for information.

Xander smiled again, a knowing look in his eyes. "She might, if I had a girlfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Braxton asked cautiously.

Xander leaned over him, their noses almost touching, and smirked. "Depends."

Braxton's breath hitched, and his heart rate quickened. He felt the moisture dampen his palms, and his brain went fuzzy again. "On?"

"Are you applying for the position?" Then Xander tilted his head slightly and pressed his lips to Braxton's.

Chapter Three

Braxton's soft moan as their lips met sent a jolt straight to Xander's groin. His cock stood up and took notice, filling, swelling, eager for more.

More. Oh yeah, Xander needed more. He moved his hands up to cradle Braxton's face with both palms, and ran his tongue slowly over those luscious lips, seeking, begging for entrance.

It was Xander's turn to moan when Braxton opened for him, and he swept his tongue against Braxton's, tasting him for the first time. It was amazing. Braxton tasted sweet and warm—almost like honey, but not quite. More like liquid sunshine, and Xander could not get enough.

Braxton's tongue thrust into Xander's mouth, twisting and sliding, caressing, dueling with Xander's. Every brush of their tongues sent another pulse of need straight to his already aching cock. His erection pushed painfully against his zipper, demanding release, and soon.

Xander groaned into Braxton's mouth. He was hard enough to cut glass and all he'd done was kiss the man. He imagined he would probably pass out if he was ever lucky enough to actually get inside Braxton's hot little ass.

Braxton was his, and Xander longed to bury himself deep within his mate. More than the obvious physical attraction, he felt protective and possessive.

Mine.

Xander slid one hand around to the nape of Braxton's neck and pulled him closer. He nipped at Braxton's lips, then trailed kisses along his smooth jaw to his ear, where he whispered roughly, "God

help anyone that tries to hurt you again.”

He had seen that asshole of an ex-boyfriend push his mate off the curb. Maybe the uppity blond hadn’t actually meant to push Braxton into the street, but Xander didn’t much care. The bastard had put his hands on his mate, and Xander wanted his blood.

Thinking about the dickhead ex brought some facsimile of reason back to Xander’s lust-hazed brain. They were in a hospital. Braxton was hurt. He had a concussion, for fuck’s sake. Not to mention that Xander had probably just scared the shit out of him with the whole *Me, Tarzan* bit.

He pulled away reluctantly and rested his forehead against Braxton’s as he tried to catch his breath. Slowly he shifted back to look at his mate. The unveiled desire shining from Braxton’s eyes almost undid him.

He brushed the hair back gently from Braxton’s face. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve this man for his mate, but he wished he knew so he could keep doing it. There was no way he could leave Braxton now. He’d just have to be careful—cool his overactive libido and smother his natural instincts to claim his mate until Braxton was better, and he could explain everything to him.

Braxton’s eyebrows drew together, and his forehead wrinkled. “Xander?”

He hated the look of uncertainty in Braxton’s eyes. His mate’s eyes were a gorgeous earthy green, like new spring grass, and should never have that look in them.

Xander smiled and kissed the top of Braxton’s head. “You need rest, *mi papi chulo*.”

“What does that mean?”

Huh? Maybe he wasn’t as well as Xander thought.

“*Mi papi chulo?*” Braxton repeated, butchering the accent. It was kind of cute.

“My pretty boy.” Xander winked and bit back his chuckle as he watched the smaller man’s face redden. “Now, rest.”

“I’d rather kiss you again.” Braxton grinned slyly.

“Oh, you are trouble.” Xander chuckled, shaking his head.

Braxton looked down to where the sheet tented between his legs and sighed. “Well, that’s going to be embarrassing.”

Xander glanced down at the bulge in his own pants. “Yeah, tell me about it.” He grabbed the Target bag off the shelf and handed it to Braxton. “But these might help some. At least you can flip and tuck.”

“You bought me sweats?” Surprise colored Braxton’s voice.

Xander flushed. “Well, yeah. I mean, I didn’t know if you had anyone coming that could bring you something, and I always hated those hospital things. You don’t have to wear them...I just...well...”

“Thank you.” Braxton saved him from making a total idiot out of himself. “But what exactly did you mean, ‘flip and tuck’?”

“You know. Flip your dick and tuck it under the waistband of the sweats.”

“Oh, I see. Then no one can tell...” Braxton trailed off.

“Oh, and here.” Xander tossed the small bag he’d brought up from the gift shop on the bed.

“Toothbrush...toothpaste...” Braxton named the items as he removed them from the bag. He looked at Xander for a long moment before blinking rapidly and looking away. “Thank you.”

He didn’t understand what would make Braxton so emotional over simple toiletries, but Xander was glad he could do this for him. He’d never had anyone to take care of before, and he found it made him happy to lavish attention on his mate.

“Do you need help?” he asked Braxton.

“I think I’ve got it.” Braxton swung his legs off the bed and stood. He took one step, then two, then swayed and fell forward. Xander caught him up in his arms, holding him close. “Dizzy,” Braxton mumbled sleepily as he nuzzled his face into Xander’s neck.

Rather than making his dick hard, the action caused Xander’s heart to melt. He placed his mate gently back in the bed and pulled the blankets up around his small shoulders. “Sleep,” he murmured into

Braxton's hair.

Thin, elegant fingers wrapped around Xander's forearm as he stood. "Stay. Please," Braxton whispered.

"I'll be right here. Just rest. I promise I'm not going anywhere." Xander bent, placing a chaste kiss on Braxton's cheek. Braxton exhaled softly and was asleep in seconds.

* * * *

Soothing fingers lightly caressed his face, his hair. Warm lips brushed against his brow. Braxton sighed contentedly without opening his eyes. "Xander," he whispered dreamily.

The petting immediately halted. "Who the hell is Xander?"

Braxton's eyes snapped opened, and he cringed back into his pillow. He eyed the man leaning over him warily. "Mason? What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see you, of course. I was so worried about you, love." Mason looked at him with concern. "Can I get you anything? How are you feeling?"

"Leave."

Mason ran one finger down the curve of Braxton's jaw, smiling sweetly. "You've proven your point. Now, stop all this foolishness and let me come home."

Braxton shoved roughly at Mason's chest with both hands, ignoring the pain in his left shoulder. "Nothing has changed, and I'm tired of having this conversation." He rose from the bed and stood toe to toe with Mason. He jabbed his finger into Mason's stomach. "Since it's obviously too complicated for you to comprehend, let me break it down for you. I. Don't. Want. You." He prodded Mason's abs with each word.

Anger flashed in Mason's eyes along with something that looked a lot like panic. His hand shot out, wrapping those long fingers around Braxton's throat and backing him up against the bathroom door.

“You make me fucking crazy,” Mason ground out through gritted teeth.

Braxton couldn’t breathe. The room started to spin and go fuzzy around the edges. He clawed at Mason’s hand, trying desperately to drag in air to his screaming lungs. He had never feared Mason before—never had reason to—but alone and unconscious in the same room with his ex now was in no way an appealing idea.

“You need me, Braxton. You know you do,” Mason continued as if he wasn’t choking the life out of him.

The blackness was closing in. Braxton dropped his hands to his sides and waited for the darkness to claim him.

There was a loud *clang*, the sound of someone yelling, and the hand around his throat vanished. Braxton dropped to his hands and knees, sucking in one lungful of air after another. He vaguely heard another crash, a grunt, and footsteps, before big, strong arms enveloped him and cradled him against a warm, solid wall of muscle.

“Xander,” Braxton whispered roughly. He clutched the front of Xander’s shirt and buried his face in his neck, inhaling the scent of him. He smelled like man and sweat, and a faint hint of soap that reminded Braxton of open meadows and forest streams.

“Shh, you’re okay now. I’ve got you.” Xander petted and soothed him.

Braxton nodded and was able to slow his rapid breathing, but he didn’t release his hold on Xander. He wrapped his arms around his neck and burrowed in closer. Braxton could take care of himself, but it was nice to have someone there for him.

A nurse came bustling into the room. She looked worried, asking if everything was all right. It had taken some convincing, but eventually she nodded and hurried out of the room.

* * * *

Don’t shift. Don’t shift. Do not chase down that piece of shit and

rip his fucking heart out through his navel.

Xander kept up the litany in his head as if it had become his own personal mantra. He knew he would have to tell Braxton he was a shifter—and soon—but somehow he didn't think transforming into a four-hundred-pound white Bengal tiger in his hospital room was the way to break it to him. So, he just stood in the middle of the room with Braxton cradled in his arms, held close to his chest, and breathed in his mate's scent, letting it soothe him, calm him.

Xander eased onto the bed, still holding Braxton to his chest, and settled the smaller man more securely in his lap. Wrapping his arms around him in comfort, he ran his fingers along Braxton's spine, soothing himself as well as his mate.

"I'm sorry," Braxton whispered into Xander's neck.

"Sorry? What on earth for? You have nothing to be sorry for." If anyone had reason to be sorry, Xander felt he should. He had promised that he wouldn't leave Braxton's side. He should have been there to protect him.

Braxton lifted his head, looking into Xander's eyes. He bit his lip, his brow furrowed in thought. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it. After another pause, he said, "I'm not really sure, but I feel like I should be apologizing for something. Maybe for being so much trouble?" The way he inflected the sentence, it sounded like a question.

Xander couldn't help but smile. "I assure you, *chulo*, there is nothing for you to be apologizing for."

"In that case," Braxton's gaze heated with desire, turning his eyes to pools of liquid emerald, "how about thank you?" Then he leaned forward and captured Xander's lips with his own.

Xander groaned as Braxton's tongue swept inside his mouth. Everything about his little mate was intoxicating. His smell, the sound of his voice, his taste—*oh yeah, his taste*—even the little moaning sounds he made as he wiggled in Xander's lap were positively addicting.

His dick hardened instantly as Braxton rocked against his groin. It pushed against his zipper, straining to get out, begging to be buried balls deep inside his mate. He wanted Braxton *right fucking now*, and his aching cock agreed wholeheartedly.

With another groan—this time in frustration—Xander pulled his mouth away from Braxton’s and gently pushed on his chest.

Braxton ducked his head and smiled sheepishly. “Oops. Sorry, got a little carried away.”

Xander chuckled and was glad that it didn’t sound as shaky as he felt. “It’s more than okay, baby, but you need to rest so you can heal. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I’m starved.” Braxton’s stomach growled in support of the idea of food.

“Why don’t you go clean up a bit, and I’ll get you something to eat,” Xander suggested.

Braxton’s fingers grasped Xander’s shirt again, and he looked into his eyes, searching.

Xander smoothed Braxton’s hair back and kissed his temple. “I won’t go anywhere. I promise. I’ll have the nurse bring something, okay?”

Braxton nodded, his tensed muscles relaxing a bit. “Thank you. I’m just going to wash my face and change into those sweats.” He ran his tongue over his top teeth and mumbled, “And brush my teeth.” He eased off Xander’s lap and gathered what he needed.

Xander watched him, partly for pleasure, partly to make sure he was steady on his feet. When Braxton made it into the restroom without incident, Xander pushed the call button for the nurse.

Chapter Four

The smell of pancakes with syrup hit Braxton like a Mac truck as he stepped out of the bathroom. His mouth watered, and his stomach snarled. Xander slumped in the chair beside the bed, remote in hand, surfing channels on the small television bolted high on the wall. When he saw Braxton, his face split into a wide grin, and he started to rise.

“No, no. Sit.” Braxton waved his hand. He glanced out the window as he made his way to the bed. The sky outside was just beginning to pale. “What time is it anyway?” He crawled up into the bed and snuggled under the blankets.

“Almost seven. The doctor should be in soon to check you over. Then you’ll just have to wait for them to get your discharge papers together.” Xander stood and moved around the bed to prepare Braxton’s breakfast tray. “Is there someone you need me to call?”

Braxton’s heart sank, and the smile slid from his lips. He didn’t know why Xander was even still there anyway. *Oh, right, because I freaked out like an idiot.* He inwardly rolled his eyes. He hadn’t meant to lose it like that, but he’d also never been choked before. Braxton knew he wasn’t strong enough to fight Mason, and the crazed look in his ex-lover’s eyes had left him deeply unsettled.

Braxton hardly knew Xander, yet he felt safe and comfortable with him, like he’d never felt with anyone else. Not even Keeton. Not his family. It was as if he’d been searching for Xander his entire life, which, of course, was completely absurd. He was losing his mind.

Xander had said he would stay. Did he just mean that he’d stay until someone could come get Braxton? Was Xander only there out of

guilt and some misplaced sense of responsibility? And why the hell did Braxton even care? He didn't know this man, and he definitely should *not* be so attached already. He most certainly should not be thinking about wrapping his lips around Xander's cock. Oh, but the man got his motor going. Braxton felt his own dick begin to stir.

Down, boy. Xander obviously didn't want him, but Braxton was determined to leave this room with his pride intact. He would not give Xander even the slightest hint that this hurt him.

"Braxton?" Xander's voice interrupted his internal ramblings.

All thoughts of pride and dignity apparently forgotten in the span of three seconds, Braxton blurted, "Why are you here?"

Oh sweet hell, did I just say that out loud?

"What?" Xander's face fell, and he stilled completely. Braxton could see the bulging muscles tense and tighten.

Yep. He'd said it out loud.

"Do you not want me here? Should I leave? I thought...I didn't...I just..." Xander trailed off and looked down at his feet.

"No!" Braxton shouted. "No, that's not what I meant," he continued in a softer tone. "It's just that you've been so kind to me, but you don't even know me. Not really. I just don't want you to stay because you feel guilty or because—"

Braxton's words cut off abruptly when Xander's tongue pushed its way down his throat. Xander kissed him roughly, sucking on Braxton's tongue and drawing a deep moan from him. Braxton crawled to his knees, not breaking the kiss, and wrapped his arms around Xander's neck. He pulled him closer, pressing their chests together, trying to crawl inside his skin.

Xander smoothed one hand down Braxton's back to cup his ass, squeezing and kneading the muscle. With his free hand, he took one of Braxton's from around his neck and pressed it to the bulge behind his zipper. Braxton squeezed, smiling against Xander's lips at the big man's deep groan. Braxton was so hard, so turned on, he felt he would go off like a Roman candle at the slightest touch. It was nice to

know he wasn't the only one affected. No one had ever gotten him this revved up with just a kiss.

"Do you think this is guilt?" Xander whispered roughly against Braxton's mouth. Without waiting for an answer, he slanted his mouth over Braxton's in another searing kiss.

Only when Braxton thought he might pass out from the lack of oxygen did he pull away, gasping for air. He whimpered with loss when Xander released him and took an unsteady step back. Grasping his pulsing cock through his sweats, he reached for the man again.

Xander chuckled breathily and shook his head. "We are in a hospital room, in a public hospital. We need to stop. If we keep this up, I'm going to take you here and now."

Braxton failed to see the problem. "It's a private room," he offered, looping a finger in the front of Xander's jeans and pulling him closer to the bed, closer to him.

"Still, someone could walk in anytime—doctors, nurses, those people that clean stuff."

"Janitors?" Braxton smirked.

"Yes. Them."

"Live dangerously." Braxton gave Xander's waistband another tug, a little more insistent this time. He didn't know what had gotten into him. He wasn't normally so aggressive, especially not with a man he'd known so short a time, but his entire being screamed out for Xander. Braxton's body felt like it was on fire, and only Xander's touch could soothe the burn.

"B-But..." Xander stammered.

"Don't you want me?"

Xander blinked, looking for all the world as if he thought Braxton had lost his mind. "Of course I want you." He reached down to readjust his jeans, reiterating his claim.

"Then get over here." Braxton smiled mischievously as he reached for Xander, flipping open the button on his pants and sliding down the zipper in one smooth motion.

“We’re in a hospital.”

“You already said that.” Braxton leered up at Xander. Then his eyes widened as Xander’s jeans opened to reveal thick, dark curls. The man had gone commando. *Nice.*

“But, we should talk...or something.” Xander’s voice lost conviction with every word.

“We will. Later.” Braxton reached inside Xander’s pants and freed his cock from its confinement. He wrapped his hand around the hard, warm flesh and squeezed as he licked his lips. He couldn’t wait to taste him. He wanted to feel that throbbing cock in his mouth, sliding down his throat. Braxton didn’t know where his sudden boldness came from. All he knew was that he wanted Xander like nothing else, and he intended to have him.

“But...we...I mean...you...”

“Yes?” Braxton smiled seductively. He stroked Xander’s leaking shaft slowly, snaking his tongue out to catch the glistening drop of pre-cum there. Xander slipped a hand into Braxton’s hair and gasped.

“I-I need to...”

“Don’t worry, babe. I got this. Just say yes.” Braxton continued to stroke Xander, reaching his other hand into Xander’s jeans, lightly cupping his balls.

“I think...I should...I got nothing.” Xander finally surrendered.

“Bout time.” Braxton leaned forward, licked a slow circle around the crown of Xander’s cock, then swallowed him to the root.

* * * *

“*Ah, dios mío,*” Xander moaned. *Oh my god!*

Braxton came back up slowly, pressing his tongue to the underside of Xander’s cock as he did. He swirled his tongue around the head once, twice, then licked at the slit. Xander trembled with the effort to remain still and allow Braxton to go at his own pace. He didn’t want to hurt his little mate, but holy hell, he gave great head.

“Damn, baby, that feels amazing,” Xander panted out. He was already so close.

Braxton wrapped his slender fingers around the base of Xander’s dick and began a delicious rhythm. Using his tongue, lips, teeth, and hand, he brought Xander closer and closer to the edge.

Braxton used his other hand to push his sweats down around his thighs, freeing his own straining erection. He began jerking himself furiously, moaning around Xander’s flesh in his mouth. The sight of Braxton stroking himself with those luscious lips wrapped around his cock sent Xander reeling. He plunged both hands into Braxton’s hair, gripping tightly, and began rocking his hips, fucking his mouth.

Braxton released his hold on Xander’s shaft and moved his hand around to grab his ass, urging him on as he did sinful things with his tongue. The head of Xander’s dick hit the soft flesh at the back of Braxton’s throat, causing his balls to tighten as they drew up close to his body.

Braxton opened his mouth wide, and Xander felt his mate’s tongue snake over his tight sac, even as Braxton swallowed around the head of his cock.

He closed his eyes and groaned. He had never felt anything like it in his life. Braxton’s fingers skimmed the underside of Xander’s sac and along his perineum, as he continued to suck him and tongue his balls at the same time.

“Oh, fuck...can’t...I’m almost...aaahhh!” Xander tried desperately to give some type of warning.

Braxton seemed to get what he was trying to say. Instead of pulling away, however, he buried his nose in Xander’s pubes and sucked hard. Xander’s grip tightened in Braxton’s hair as he threw back his head and roared his release, spilling down Braxton’s throat. He swallowed every drop, bless his heart, humming happily as he cleaned Xander up with his tongue.

Xander pulled out of Braxton’s mouth and pushed the little man down on to his back. He had to taste him. He batted away the hand

that continued to tug at Braxton's prick, bent over his mate, and swallowed him whole.

Oh yeah. Xander moaned long and deep. Braxton tasted better than he'd imagined. He couldn't get enough. He needed more, and he knew the only way to get it. He hollowed his cheeks as he dragged his lips up Braxton's hot shaft, then swallowed him back down again.

"Ah! Oh, fuck...oh fuck...oh, Xander!" Braxton yelled, arching his back, pushing his prick deeper into Xander's mouth, filling it with his warm, salty seed. Xander cleaned his mate up, making sure not to miss a single drop, then rested his forehead against Braxton's thigh and tried to catch his breath.

"Wow. That was incredible," Braxton huffed.

Xander smiled. He straightened and put his own clothes in order before slipping Braxton's sweats back up his hips. He kissed Braxton's brow, his temple, his cheek, along his jaw to his ear. "Yes, it was."

Suddenly, Xander thought of something that really should have crossed his mind before he'd had his cock down Braxton's throat. "Is there someone waiting for you? Will anyone worry that you didn't come home last night?"

"Well, not really. Keeton would be the only one that might worry, but he's indisposed for the weekend."

"Keeton?" Xander swallowed back a wave of unreasonable jealousy.

"Yes, my best friend," Braxton answered.

"Oh, okay." Xander let out a breath. This mating thing was going to be trickier than he thought. "Well, I'm more than happy to take you home." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Or I would also be happy to call Keeton to come get you, if you'd prefer," he lied.

"Really? You don't mind?" Braxton beamed at him.

"Not at all." His answer was mild, but inside Xander was doing a very elaborate victory dance.

"Thanks for everything. Really." Braxton reached over and took

Xander's hand, squeezing it. "I don't know what I would have done without you. I really don't like hospitals." He looked around the room with a frown, then back to Xander. "Now, when am I getting out of this joint? My food is a cold glob, and I'm starved."

* * * *

A couple of hours later, they were in Xander's truck on their way to Braxton's town house.

"Now this is a real breakfast," Braxton moaned around another bite of his breakfast burrito.

Xander's cock twitched, his fingers tightened on the wheel, and he bit back a moan of his own as Braxton wrapped his lips around the burrito again.

After what seemed like a torturously long time, with his mate's scent filling his nose and those happy little whimpers making his dick fill and ache, Braxton directed Xander into a swank apartment complex.

"Damn." Xander whistled low as he pulled up to the enormous gate.

"Nine-one-five-three," Braxton said.

"Huh?"

"The keypad there." Braxton gestured to the metal box just outside Xander's window. "My code is nine-one-five-three."

"Oh, what, no security guard?" Xander rolled down his window and keyed in the entry code. He eased his truck forward and through when the gate swung open.

"Only at night. I'm at the end there, last building on the right."

"So, how long have you lived here?" Xander asked as he pulled into a space in front of Braxton's town house. It was basically a triplex, like all the other buildings he had passed.

"Not long, just a couple of weeks, actually. I hate it, and the privacy blows, but the security is great." Braxton shrugged, but his

body was tense, and Xander could smell the anxiety wafting from him. There was a story there, and Xander would bet his truck it had to do with Braxton's ex, but he wouldn't pry. Yet.

Braxton reached into the clear plastic bag containing the clothes he had worn into the ER. He patted the pockets of his pants, then upended the bag into his lap. "Un-fucking-believable," he muttered as he turned the pockets of his jeans out.

"What's wrong?" Xander reached over and stilled Braxton's frantic hands.

Braxton slumped in his seat, seeming totally defeated. He closed his eyes, and Xander could hear him grinding his teeth together.

"Not again," he whispered.

Xander didn't know what was causing his little mate's distress, and it didn't really matter. He reached over and gently pulled him across the seat and into his arms. Braxton didn't resist, but slumped against Xander's chest. They just sat there, neither saying a word until Braxton took a deep breath and sat up.

Xander kissed Braxton's hair. "Better?"

"Not really." Braxton gave a watery chuckle. "Everything is gone. I can't even get into my house."

"What are you talking about? What's gone?"

"Keys, wallet, cell phone, everything," Braxton sighed.

"Maybe they're still at the hospital," Xander suggested without much conviction.

"No. It was Mason. I can't prove it, and I know it sounds crazy, but it was him. I know it."

"Your ex?" Anger boiled in Xander's blood. He really didn't like that fucker. He gritted his teeth against his fury. He needed to be calm for Braxton. "He's the reason you moved. Isn't he?"

Braxton turned and looked out his window, not meeting Xander's eyes. He was quiet for so long Xander thought he wouldn't answer. Then, so softly he almost didn't hear it, Braxton whispered, "Yeah. He was the reason."

Xander took Braxton's hand, stroking the knuckles with his thumb. "It's okay, *chulo*. You don't have to talk about it now." He spoke calmly, but every fiber of his being screamed out for Mason's blood. "Do you know why he would have taken your stuff?"

"Not really. Every time he shows up, he says it's because he wants me back." Braxton's eyebrows drew together. "But...I think there's something else. I just don't know what it is," he finished wearily.

Xander wanted to press the issue, but he knew it was not the time. Braxton already seemed more withdrawn since bringing up the subject of his ex, and Xander didn't want to push him away any further. Besides, it all seemed pretty clear when he thought about it. Take the wallet to get the new address. Take the keys to get into said address. But why? And why take the cell phone? Xander bit the inside of his cheek to keep from growling in frustration.

"I'm really sorry about this," Braxton murmured.

"No more of that," Xander reprimanded, drawing a small smile from Braxton. "Now, does anyone have an extra key to your place?"

Braxton's lips quirked in a crooked half smile. "Keeton does, but I don't know how to get in touch with him. I don't have anyone's number without my phone," he admitted sheepishly. "Besides, he's off in Atlanta with his new boy toy."

"Hmm, building supervisor?"

"He'll need ID or proof of residency. Neither of which I can provide until Monday at the earliest." Braxton shook his head. "I can't even get a locksmith out here without the super's authorization." He slid across the seat and reached for the door handle.

"Where are you going?" Xander's tone was a bit sharper than he had intended, but it got the job done. Braxton paused and looked back over his shoulder.

"This is not your problem. Thank you for everything, Xander. I can't begin to tell you...well, just thank you. I'm going to get out of your hair now."

“And go where exactly?” Xander raised an eyebrow at his mate. There was no way in hell he was letting Braxton out of his sight. He smiled as Braxton bit his lip and his brow wrinkled. “Put your seat belt on. We’re going to my place.”

Chapter Five

Braxton knew he should be concerned that he was going home with a guy he'd only known for about twenty-four hours, and with no way to contact anyone. He'd also gone and admitted that there was no one to worry about him if he went missing. He wasn't afraid, though. He didn't know how he knew it—instincts, something—but he felt positive that Xander would never hurt him. Besides, Xander wasn't exactly a stranger anymore. No. They had been up close and personal, so to speak.

Braxton smiled at the memory. He could not wait to get that big, beautiful cock in his mouth again, as well as other places. It was completely unlike him. He normally tended to be shy and almost elusive when meeting someone, which would explain why his only real relationship had been with Mason.

He decided not to worry about his uncharacteristic behavior and went back to fantasizing about the man sitting next to him. His smile grew wider, and he shivered in anticipation of getting his hands on all those huge, rippling muscles.

Suddenly, Xander groaned, shifting in his seat and looking uncomfortable. Braxton blushed guiltily, but it wasn't like Xander could read his mind.

"Braxton." Xander's voice was soft, husky.

Oh, no way! "Yes?"

"What are you thinking about, *chulo*?" he asked in just barely more than a whisper. He shifted again, and Braxton caught a glimpse of the unmistakable bulge at Xander's crotch.

"Why do you ask?" Braxton inquired cautiously.

“I can smell—” Xander cut off abruptly, his hands tightening on the wheel.

Huh? Smell? Braxton discreetly sniffed under his arm. He didn’t exactly smell like daisies, but he didn’t reek either. “What do you smell?”

Xander bit his lip and didn’t reply.

“Xander?” Braxton reached over and squeezed Xander’s knee. “What is it?”

“We’re almost there,” Xander replied.

“And when we get there?”

“We need to talk,” he sighed.

That statement sounded a little too ominous for Braxton’s comfort, but he took a page from Xander’s book and said nothing.

Ten minutes later, according to the radio clock, the truck turned onto a long gravel driveway, flanked on both sides by a fence made from metal pipes. When Xander stopped the truck in front of the house, Braxton scurried out and stood gaping in awe.

The two-story house, with big bay windows on the first floor, and a beautiful wraparound porch, looked like a huge log cabin or maybe a ski lodge from one of those travel magazines. It left him struggling for words.

“You live here?” he asked when Xander came around the truck to stand beside him.

“Yep. Me and my brothers.”

“Brothers?” Braxton frowned.

“Well, not biologically, but we’ve been together a long time. We’re family,” Xander stated firmly.

Braxton’s frown faded, and he grinned. “I think that’s great.”

Xander grinned back, looking very relieved. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you to everyone.” He linked their hands and led the way inside.

As soon as they walked in, the sound of music, accompanied by clacking noises, laughter, a thud, a grunt, followed by more laughter

assaulted them. Xander just rolled his eyes and led Braxton through the living room toward the back of the house. Braxton caught glimpses of a big, beautiful rock fireplace and overstuffed chocolate-colored suede sofas. An enormous LCD flat-screen television was definitely the main focal point.

Xander pulled Braxton along into what he assumed was supposed to be a den of some sort. In the center of the room stood a pool table with four very large, very muscled, and very gorgeous men gathered around it. All movement stopped as soon as the men spotted Xander and Braxton. They all smiled and started talking over one another, shouting to be heard above the music.

“Hey!”

“Where the hell have you been?”

“Who is this?”

“Where can I get one?”

Another chorus of laughter, some shoving, and a few grunts and howls followed the last statement.

“Whoa!” Xander called. “Someone turn that shit off for just a minute.” The music cut off instantly, plunging the room into silence.

Xander nodded. “Everyone, this is Braxton Carmichael. Braxton, this is Talon and Logan Cartwright, Jackson Cunningham, and Boston Mackey.” Xander went around the table, and each man gave a small nod as he introduced them. “Braxton’s going to be staying here for...a while, and I expect you guys to behave yourselves.”

Braxton just stood there, gaping stupidly. They were all just so big! None of them looked much alike otherwise, well, except Logan and Talon, but damn, they were huge. Jackson appeared to be the smallest, and even he was over six foot tall. And all those rippling muscles were like every wet dream Braxton ever had rolled into one. He felt nothing for any of them, though. He appreciated their beauty, but his cock didn’t even express a passing interest. Not until he glanced back at Xander, anyway.

“So, this is him?” Logan asked. “The one you mentioned on the

phone? Your—”

“Yes.” Xander cut Logan off, giving him a sharp look.

Logan’s eyebrows drew together, and his eyes narrowed. “You didn’t tell him, did you?” he demanded.

“Tell me what?” Braxton suddenly remembered what Xander had said about needing to talk. “Does this have something to do with you smelling me in the truck?”

Boston and Jackson burst out laughing. Braxton flushed bright red. Xander just sighed. He took Braxton’s hand and pulled gently.

“Come on. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Xander led him back to the living room, up the staircase, to a large room with a king-size bed covered with a beautiful black-and-maroon comforter and several pillows. A black dresser with a mirror sat against one wall. The other wall appeared to be reserved for the enormous walk-in closet.

Xander sat on the edge of the bed, leaned his elbows on his knees, and put his face in his hands.

Braxton approached him slowly. Keeping his voice soft, he asked, “Xander? What’s wrong?”

Silence.

“Xander, talk to me.”

Silence.

Braxton laid a hand on the back on Xander’s bowed head, stroking his long, dark hair. The strands parted, revealing a dark birthmark in the shape of a perfect spiral. He ran his fingers lightly over the birthmark as he considered its meaning.

When Braxton finally had his thoughts in order, he spoke again, “Tell me what’s going on. I deserve that much at least.”

“If I tell you, then you’ll leave,” Xander mumbled into his hands.

“How can I leave? You brought me here,” Braxton joked, trying to lighten the mood and pull Xander out of his funk.

Xander lifted his head and pinned Braxton with his honey brown gaze. He took a deep breath, as if steeling himself, then said in a

monotone, "I'm a shape-shifter."

Braxton held back a snort, but couldn't contain his smile. "I know."

Xander jerked back. "What? How?"

"My friend Keeton I told you about, his grandmother, uncle, and cousin are shifters." Braxton paused and thought for a minute. "Though, his dad isn't. Keeton's dad and his uncle have different fathers."

Xander nodded understandingly. "So, Keeton's uncle's father is a shifter, but his dad's father isn't. Makes sense."

Braxton just nodded and continued to smile. "Right. Keeton's family sort of adopted me when my parents were killed in a house fire when I was twelve. I don't think they ever planned to tell me about the shifter stuff, but I saw Blaise, Keeton's cousin, shift when we were all about fourteen."

"Puberty," Xander mumbled. He looked at Braxton and spoke more clearly. "We shift for the first time when we hit puberty. It's difficult to control."

"Well, it scared the shit out of me then, but now it's not a big deal."

"That still doesn't explain how you knew I was a shifter. It's not like it's obvious."

"I saw the birthmark on the back of your neck." Braxton watched Xander reach up to finger the mark. "Grandma Ida, Blaise, and Uncle David all have the same mark. You're always sniffing me. You can smell when I'm turned on." He felt his cheeks heat at that, but shrugged and continued. "I put two and two together."

Xander said nothing, just stared.

"So, you're all shifters? You and your brothers are like a pack? A herd? A what?" Braxton rambled when Xander just continued to stare at him.

"Yes, we're all shifters," Xander said after a moment's hesitation. "I guess you could call us a pack. We stay together for protection. It's

safer that way.” He looked away. “What else would you like to know?”

“What do you shift into?”

“A white Bengal tiger.” He said it as if he were ashamed. Braxton thought it was cool. “Okay.” He knelt in front of Xander and placed a hand in the crook of his elbow. “Cool. I do have some questions, though. There’s a lot I don’t understand.”

“You lived with shifters and no one ever explained anything to you?”

“Well, I didn’t technically live with shifters. We only saw that part of the family occasionally. Since it didn’t really concern me, no one ever bothered to explain. I’d like to know more, if you’ll tell me.”

* * * *

Xander stared at Braxton in shock. He never would have imagined that Braxton knew all about shifters or had family who were shifters. The knowledge gave him immense relief. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all.

He stroked his fingers down Braxton’s cheek and smiled. “Sure, I’ll answer anything I can. What would you like to know?”

“So, are you the alpha?”

“Yes, though I don’t pull rank very often.”

“I knew it.” Braxton smirked. “Do I smell different to you than other people?”

Xander leaned forward, burying his face in Braxton’s hair, and inhaled deeply. He groaned, “Oh, definitely. You smell amazing.”

“Do you heal really fast?” Braxton blurted out after a pause. “Are you immune to disease and stuff?”

“Um...yeah. That’s one of the things that Hollywood got right.” He chuckled. He wasn’t sure where this was going, but judging by the pink flush covering Braxton’s face, he would want to find out. “It’s certainly a perk.”

“So, we wouldn’t...I mean...if we...I’m not saying that you would want to, but...I’m clean—”

Xander took mercy on his flustered mate and cut off his stammering with a swift kiss. Braxton’s face had turned several different shades of red, and he bit his lip so hard Xander was afraid he would draw blood. So, that’s what all this was about. The man was adorable.

“No, baby, I can’t give or receive any kind of human diseases. We’re safe. You’re safe. I wouldn’t lie to you about that.” Xander kissed the tip of his nose, then continued seriously. “I would never risk your life that way, Braxton.”

Braxton smiled, some of the tension leaving his body, and took Xander’s hand in his own smaller one. “Okay. So, is there anything else I should know?”

Xander chuckled. His mate amazed him.

Mate. Shit. “Uh, yeah...there is something else.”

Braxton rolled his eyes and snorted. “I figured. Well, lay it on me, big guy.”

Xander took a deep breath and then another. “When shifters mate, we mate for life. One shot. One chance. No repeats. No do-overs. If our mate dies, that’s it. There will never be another. Ever.” *Well, that had been cheerful.*

Braxton didn’t miss a beat. “Well, that blows. Can you mate with someone whose animal form isn’t the same as yours? Do you choose your mate? Or how does that work?”

Xander laughed, bringing their linked hands up to brush his lips softly across Braxton’s knuckles. “Calm down, baby. One question at a time.”

* * * *

“So, how do you choose your mate?” The thought of Xander with someone else made Braxton want to hit something. He didn’t know

where the feeling came from, so he choked it back.

“We can choose our mate the same as humans choose a spouse,” Xander answered a bit tightly. “We can choose anyone to share our life with, but it’s not the same as our *sienota*—our fated mate. Our *sienota* is our destiny. Fate guides us to one another. We can never be complete without them. It would be like living without your soul.”

Braxton’s gut twisted. How in the hell was he supposed to compete with that? “So, do you think you will ever find your *sienota*?”

“I already have,” Xander whispered.

Braxton’s heart fell to his stomach, and he clenched his hands into fists. Somehow, he managed a smile, even as he moved away from Xander’s body.

“That’s great. So, will I get to meet him? Or her?” And why was Xander messing around with him if he already had a mate? An explanation suddenly occurred to him. “Did he...she...whatever...refuse you?”

Xander looked him directly in the eye. “Not yet. And I hope he doesn’t.” He pulled Braxton back to him, reaching up to run his fingertips along the curve of his jaw.

Braxton’s heart broke into a gallop. Did Xander mean what he thought he meant? How did he feel about that? “Am I...am I your mate?” Braxton choked out.

Xander nodded, not looking away from Braxton’s face. “Yes,” he whispered.

“And what does that mean exactly?”

“It means you are my *sienota*, my destiny. If you accept me, allow me to claim you, you will belong to me. You will be mine, and I will be yours.” Xander leaned forward, nuzzling the hollow of Braxton’s throat, whispering into his skin. “It means that I would destroy anyone that even thought of harming you.”

That didn’t seem so bad. It sounded really tempting, actually. Especially with Xander’s mouth on him, driving him crazy. There

was probably a catch.

“And...” Xander hesitated, pulling back to look down at him apprehensively.

Yep. Here it comes. There's always a catch.

“Well, shifters are extremely possessive and equally protective. If I claim you, it's for life. You will always be mine and *only* mine.” Xander seemed fiercely adamant about the last part. “I won't be able to let you go, but the same works in reverse. I will always be yours, Braxton.”

He couldn't doubt the sincerity in Xander's eyes, or the conviction in his voice.

“You would have to live here.” Again, Xander looked apologetic. “I couldn't be away from you, but it is too dangerous to separate our family.”

“Why is it dangerous?”

“My brothers and I...we're different from the rest of our breed. They fear us because of our difference and believe that we should be eradicated.” Xander paused, his brow furrowing. “It's not a pleasant story.”

Braxton could tell Xander wasn't comfortable talking about it, but still...

“Will you tell me sometime?”

Xander nodded. “I will.” His brow wrinkled further. “Will you stay?”

It all sounded like a dream come true. Braxton had always hoped when he met *the one* it would be a crazy, love-at-first-sight, sweep-you-off-your-feet, knock-you-on-your-ass, all-consuming experience. This thing with Xander came pretty damn close, but he wanted the big alpha to *want* to be with him, and not because he didn't have a choice.

“So, how do you claim me?” Braxton stalled.

* * * *

Holy shit! Was Braxton saying...What the hell was he saying? Braxton hadn't said he would stay, but he was still there, still talking, so Xander took that as a good sign.

"Well, first I'd mark you—" Xander began, only to be cut off.

"You're going to pee on me?" Braxton yelped. "'Cause I have to tell you, I am *not* okay with that!"

Xander bit the inside of cheek to keep from laughing. "No. I am not going to urinate on you. During sex, my body releases an oil through my skin. That oil will be absorbed into your own skin and last for days. My scent on you will let other shifters know that you are mine. That you are off-limits." He held his breath, waiting for his mate's reaction.

"So, we just have sex?" Braxton asked, frowning.

Xander nodded, though it did not sound nearly as alluring when put that way.

Braxton bit his lip, his brow creased.

"Talk to me, Braxton. Tell me what you're thinking," Xander murmured. Obviously, something was going on in the man's head. He just hoped it wasn't an escape plan.

"Do you want me? I mean, I know what you said about fate and all that, but do you actually want me?" Braxton met Xander's gaze, never looking away. "If I wasn't your mate, prepackaged, so to speak, would you still want to be with me?"

Xander was stunned into silence. He gathered Braxton into his arms, stroking his hair. What could he say? It was true that Braxton wasn't really his type. Xander was bisexual—as were his brothers—and he liked his women soft, petite. The men he had been with, however, had always been big and muscular like him, with more dominant personalities. Braxton definitely did not fit into that category.

None of that mattered to him, though. Braxton was his. Given the choice, he may not have chosen him as a mate, but fate had. Xander figured fate knew something he didn't, and he had long ago learned to

trust in that untold knowledge.

Now, how did he explain that to Braxton without making it sound like exactly what Braxton thought it was? He thought Xander did not have a choice, and he was partly right. The compulsion to be close to his mate was a powerful thing. Braxton may not have been his type before, but now, Xander couldn't imagine being without the man.

When he felt Braxton begin to tense, he closed his eyes and sighed. He had been hoping to put this off until later—much later—but it was probably for the best to get it out of the way.

He opened his mouth and answered Braxton by repeating his question. "If I wasn't your mate, prepackaged, so to speak, would you still want to be with me?"

Braxton reared back and stared openmouthed. "What?"

"It's...complicated."

"So, I'm not your mate?" Braxton spoke the words slowly.

"No. I mean yes. I mean...fuck!" Xander sat up straighter, rubbing his hands over his face. God, he was screwing this up. "Yes, of course you're my mate."

"Then what? I don't understand, Xander." Braxton sounded anxious, his voice strained.

Xander sucked in a huge breath and blew it out slowly. "Our *sienota* is always another shifter." He held up a hand when Braxton opened his mouth to interrupt. "Please, let me finish."

Braxton pressed his lips together and nodded curtly.

"Our *sienota* is always another shifter," Xander repeated. "It may be dormant. Our mate may appear to be completely human, but they will always have shifter blood, no matter how diluted." He watched as understanding lit Braxton's eyes.

"Holy shit! So, you're saying I'm fuzzy somewhere in here?" Braxton poked at his own abs, eyes wide and mouth open.

* * * *

After the initial shock, Braxton felt his brow crease, and he glared up at Xander. “You knew! You knew, didn’t you?” He jumped to his feet and began pacing the bedroom like a caged animal. “Xander?”

Xander had asked Braxton to stay and let him claim him without even bringing up the fact that Braxton was part shifter. He had a feeling Xander hadn’t been planning on mentioning that part.

“Yes. I knew.” Xander blew out a breath and ran a hand through his long hair.

Braxton paused and took a deep breath. He needed answers, not an argument.

“So, now what?”

“We can’t change humans like in the movies, but since you are my mate, that means you have some shifter genes. I can...activate it, for lack of a better term,” Xander answered hesitantly.

“And that means?”

“Well, you probably wouldn’t shift, but there are other benefits.”

“So, I’m kind of a shifter, and you’re my mate?” Braxton tried to work it all out. Damn, his head hurt. “Is that why I feel drawn to you? The reason I agreed to jump in a pickup with you—a total stranger more or less—and come home with you? Is that why I practically attacked you and sucked you off in my hospital room?”

Xander’s face fell, and his body tensed. Braxton knew his words had hurt the bigger man.

“Probably,” Xander mumbled.

Braxton had the urge to go to Xander and comfort him. It hurt him to see the big guy hurting. He felt the tingle in his belly again and ran his tongue over his itchy gums.

Xander watched for a moment before arching a brow and giving him a knowing smirk. “You feel it.”

“What?” He demanded. He was getting tired of this cryptic bullshit.

“Your gums itch.”

“Well, congratulations, Captain Obvious,” Braxton remarked

sarcastically. “Want to tell me why, or should we play Twenty Questions?”

Xander rose from the bed and made his way slowly to where Braxton stood near the closet. “Your gums itch because the shifter in you recognizes me as its mate. When we find our mate, our canines elongate, and we claim them with a mating mark—a bite to the neck.” Xander smirked again. “Your shifter wants to claim me.”

“I do not have a *shifter*, and I do not want to claim you!” Braxton yelled.

Xander just continued to smile at him. “You’re being an asshole, Braxton.”

He knew he was, but he couldn’t stop himself. This whole thing was too much. He could deal with Xander being a shifter. He was fine with being the mate of a shifter. He was surprised to find out that he had some diluted shifter blood as well, but he was even okay with that. He was *not* okay with having his choices taken from him.

Braxton admitted that fate could have done a worse job in choosing a partner for him. Xander was gorgeous, and he had felt an instant attraction to him. He had stupidly believed it was the love-at-first-sight moment he had been waiting for. Now, he just felt manipulated and confused.

“Braxton?” Xander’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

“I need to think. Can someone take me to Keeton’s house?”

Xander did not look happy, but he nodded. “I’ll take you.” He reached out and cupped the side of Braxton’s face.

Braxton found himself nuzzling Xander’s hand and jerked back quickly. “I just can’t be close to you right now.” He took a step back. “Please understand.” As unhappy as he was about the entire situation, Braxton still did not want to hurt Xander.

Xander closed his eyes for just a moment, then leaned down to place a soft kiss on Braxton’s forehead. “Okay. Will you call me when you’ve had time to think? No matter what you decide...please?”

Braxton nodded and stepped away.

Chapter Six

Braxton turned to Logan as he climbed out of the man's Jeep Liberty. "Thank you. I know you probably aren't my biggest fan right now, but—"

"Hey." Logan cut him off. "We're cool. I understand it's a lot to take in, just...well, think about it, okay? You'll never find anyone that will treat you better than Xander." He grabbed a scrap of paper and a pen from his console, scribbled for a minute, and handed it to Braxton. "Call me if you need someone to talk to."

Braxton nodded as he took Logan's number. "Thanks." He closed the door and watched, frowning, as Logan drove away.

When he turned to face Keeton's house, he had to smile, though.

He loved the small white stone cottage with its red front door and bright blue covered porch. Red, white, and blue petunias bloomed in window boxes and from huge planters on either side of the front steps. It looked like the headquarters of the one-man gay USO.

Braxton climbed the front steps, hoping Keeton still had the spare key under the doormat. The door flew open before he had even reached the top step. Keeton stood in the doorway, wearing nothing but a white T-shirt and Scooby-Doo bikini briefs, and his eyes were red and puffy. Braxton could only think of one thing that would cause his friend to look so disheveled.

"When did you break up?" He asked gently, reaching for his friend.

"Yesterday." Keeton dismissed his breakup with Dylan with a flick of his wrist.

Oh-kay. Braxton was missing something then. "Kee...what—"

“What the hell are you thinking, Brax?” Keeton yelled, effectively cutting off Braxton’s inquiry.

Huh? “Huh?”

“How could you end up back in bed with that two-timing, arrogant, piece-of-shit, pecker-brained, narcissistic pig?” he ranted, waving his arms around wildly.

Braxton inwardly marveled at Keeton’s use of adjectives. He had no trouble figuring out to whom his irate friend was referring. That didn’t answer the what or why, however.

“Why on earth would you think that I was back with Mason?” He pushed Keeton through the door and sighed. “Go get dressed, and then we can talk.”

Keeton just rolled his eyes, grabbed a pair of jeans off the back of the couch, slipped them on, and slumped back in his favorite chair. Braxton plopped down on the love seat, kicked his shoes off, and pulled his feet up under him.

“Why did you think I was back with Mason?” Braxton repeated his question.

“Considering that the cockroach answered both your house phone and cell phone when I called last night, what was I—”

“What?” Braxton interrupted. “He was actually in my house?”

“Well, I’m guessing he was in your house since he answered the phone.” Keeton’s tone suggested he was dealing with an overemotional toddler. “I asked to speak to you, well, after calling him a few choice names, of course.” He shrugged as if it were only natural. “He said you weren’t home.”

Braxton ground his teeth together. He did not need this shit right now. “Keeton, I promise you I was not with Mason last night, or any time since I kicked his sorry ass to the curb.”

Keeton just nodded and cocked his head to the side. “What happened to your head?” He pointed to the gauze bandage on Braxton’s forehead.

So, Braxton told his best friend the entire sordid tale, beginning

with his encounter with Mason, almost being hit by a car, the incident at the hospital, and ending with the whole mess with Xander.

“Okay, let me get this straight,” Keeton said when Braxton had finished. “You are part shifter...sort of...a little? Whatever.” He waved his hand. “And, you are mated to a full-blooded shifter?”

Yeah, that about summed it up. Braxton bit his lip and nodded.

“That is so freaking awesome!” Keeton shouted, startling Braxton and causing him to jump. “Wait! Why are you here? Do you not like him?”

“I like him a lot, and that’s the problem.”

Keeton raised an eyebrow and twirled his hand in a “go on” gesture.

“Well, if I’m part shifter, that means that I’m not only Xander’s mate, but he’s mine as well. I don’t really get the whole fate thing, but it sounds like entrapment to me,” Braxton grumbled. “I mean, I don’t even get a choice? Fate just decides that some random person is meant for me, and that’s it?”

He stood and began pacing the room. “I can’t even think straight when I’m around him.” He waved his hands around as he spoke. He could hear himself getting slightly hysterical but didn’t know how to stop it. “My head gets all fuzzy, I get this weird tingling in my stomach, and my gums start to itch. What the hell is that about?”

Keeton just sat calmly and listened to Braxton rant with an amused expression on his face.

“I want to be with him right now. I want to pick up the phone and call him just so I can hear his voice. I barely even know him, Keeton!” He paused in front of Keeton and crossed his arms over his chest. “This is not normal,” he mumbled.

“Is he hot?”

Keeton’s question shocked a small chuckle from Braxton. “He’s gorgeous.” He sighed and took up his place on the love seat once more.

“You believe in love at first sight, right?”

Braxton nodded at his friend's question. They had had this conversation before.

"So, what do you imagine love at first sight feels like? When you imagine it, how does it happen?" Keeton turned a little in his chair to face him.

"Well, I would meet a guy, maybe on the street, or in a coffee shop, or wherever. My heart would race, my palms would start sweating, my body would tingle, and then we'd look into each other's eyes, and everything else would go blurry and fade away, except for him."

He bit his lip as he paused to think. "It would just feel...right, like something was pushing us together, like..." Braxton trailed off, and his eyes widened.

"Like what?" Keeton smirked.

"Like fate had guided us to each other," Braxton whispered.

"Now, how is that any different than being mated? Sounds like the same thing to me, honey." Keeton rose from his seat and headed toward his kitchen. "My cell is on the mantel," he called out as he left the room.

* * * *

"Are you sure he didn't say anything else?" Xander stood in the kitchen watching Logan prepare dinner.

Braxton had called only a couple of hours after Logan had dropped him off, saying that he needed more time to think, and he would call again soon.

That had been three days ago. Xander was going crazy. He'd replayed their conversation in his head a thousand times and still didn't know what he could have done differently. This was something Braxton needed to work out for himself.

Logan sighed as he turned away from the stove to face him. "No. He didn't really say anything. He just agreed to think about it. He will

call, Xander.”

The doorbell rang, and Xander yelled out for someone to get the door. It was probably one of those church groups. They didn’t get many visitors or salesmen where they lived outside of town.

“But what if he doesn’t call?” He returned to his conversation with Logan. “I mean, he seemed really freaked out.”

“Put yourself in his place. He just found out that not only is he part shifter, but you are his mate. Anyone would be freaked out.”

Logan spoke calmly, and Xander envied his brother’s easygoing manner, his patience.

“He will call,” Logan repeated.

“Or, I’ll just show up.”

Xander spun around to find his mate standing in the kitchen doorway.

“Hi,” Braxton said, giving Xander an uncertain smile.

“Braxton,” he sighed. The tightness in chest seemed to loosen, and he breathed, really breathed, for the first time in days.

* * * *

“Okay, so what is it that you guys do? You know, like jobs?” Braxton asked the room at large.

They all sat around the kitchen table, eating an early dinner. Braxton perched in Xander’s lap, at his mate’s insistence, smiling at Xander’s brothers. It had been a week since he had showed up at Xander’s door, admitting he still didn’t know what was going on, but he was willing to give it a chance.

Braxton could not remember a happier time in his life than the week he’d spent with Xander. Though he had refused to move in yet, he spent more nights in Xander’s bed than he did his own. He insisted they take things slow, so they had done nothing more than kiss and cuddle, but he loved falling asleep curled up next to Xander’s big, warm body.

Xander agreed not to push the mating thing until Braxton was ready. They had spent time getting to know each other, walking in the woods that surrounded Xander's house, cooking dinner together, and talking ceaselessly. They talked about movies, books, music, their likes and dislikes on everything from food to politics.

The more he learned about Xander, the more Braxton felt himself falling for the alpha. Xander was kind and giving, sweet and charming. Plus, he was a fireman, which Braxton found sexy as hell.

He had set down the rule for no sex in order to get to know Xander better without the physical attraction clouding his judgment. It seemed to be working, but Braxton did not know how much longer he could keep up his vow of celibacy. He didn't know if it was the mating bond or just his natural attraction to the man, but every time he was near Xander, he imagined himself doing things to the bigger man that were probably illegal in several states.

Braxton had been so wrapped up in Xander, he hadn't paid much attention to the rest of the men. He figured it was time he got to know Xander's pack.

"Well, Talon and I work down at Carpe Noctem," Boston said. "I bartend. Talon, he's a bouncer—what with his sparkling personality and all."

Everyone laughed, including Talon.

"Yeah, that's me." Talon smiled. "I'm just one big fucking ray of sunshine."

Braxton snorted. He didn't believe for a second that Talon was as big of an asshole as he would have everyone think.

"Jackson's our tech guy," Boston continued. "He can hack anything. Guy's a genius."

Jackson grinned. "He's exaggerating. Right now, I'm working for Watson Security. I design and install security systems." He snorted and rolled his eyes.

"What about you, Logan?" Braxton asked.

"I'm a paramedic," Logan said in his quiet, mellow voice. "Get to

see a lot of Xander when we go out on calls. I wouldn't trade jobs with him, though."

"Yeah, I'm the shit." Xander puffed out his chest, and everyone laughed.

"I think what Xander is trying to say, in his own poetic way, is that he's an excellent fireman, one of the best." Logan chuckled.

"That's what I said, asshole," Xander grumbled.

"Right, very eloquent," Jackson muttered around a sly grin.

Braxton just sat in Xander's lap, grinning like a fool.

* * * *

Eventually, Boston and Talon had to get ready for work, and Jackson announced that he had a date with a cute guy he'd met at the deli by his office.

"So, are all of you gay?" Braxton asked.

"We're basically gender neutral." Boston laughed. "We really don't care what accessories come with the total package."

Everyone nodded agreement.

"We're more interested in the person than what's between their legs," Talon added.

"Got it." Braxton smiled and nodded.

"What about you, Braxton? Ever been with a girl?" Logan teased.

Talon and Boston stopped on their way out of the room and turned to hear his reply. Xander couldn't blame them. Judging from his mate's flaming red cheeks, and the way he had his head ducked, this was going to be good.

"Once," Braxton mumbled.

"Spill it," Jackson demanded, grabbing a kitchen chair and turning it backward to straddle it. He rested his chin on his folded hands over the back of the chair and stared at Braxton expectantly.

Braxton sighed. "Long story short, we got naked, and I couldn't get it up. I panicked, and decided going down on her seemed like the

best course of action. Obviously, I didn't have a clue about what I was doing. It's not like with guys, you know...not at all self-explanatory," he stated indignantly. "Anyway, she seemed to be enjoying it until..." Braxton trailed off, looking sheepish.

"So, what happened?" Boston urged.

"I bit her. Just a little nip, ya know."

Everyone just stared in shock before bursting into laughter. Xander tightened his arms around Braxton's midsection in support, though he, too, was laughing.

"Yeah, it shocked her, too." Braxton blushed again. "So much, in fact, she yelled, which scared the shit out of her cat that was hiding under the bed. The cat took off like a rocket, hissing and shrieking, which scared *her*. She jumped and kneed me in the face." He rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Split my lip open, blood went everywhere. Completely accidental, of course, but the poor girl was so embarrassed, she ran into the bathroom and locked herself in. It took me close to an hour to talk her out."

By the time Braxton finished his story, the entire room had filled with roaring laughter. Jackson had fallen to the floor, clutching his sides as tears streamed down his face. Xander was trying to cram his entire fist into his mouth to stifle his amusement. Oh, his mate was going to be a handful. At least they would never be bored.

Chapter Seven

“I’m beat.” Braxton yawned as they made their way up the stairs to Xander’s room.

Xander scooped his mate into a fireman’s carry, ignoring the smaller man’s protests. He bounded up the stairs, two at a time, and dropped Braxton like a sack of potatoes onto the bed. “Are you staying tonight?” he asked uncertainly.

He had promised he’d take things slow, but it was so damn hard with his mate wrapped around him at night, his sweet scent filling his head. He was hard all the time, frustrated, and irritable. He didn’t know how much more he could take.

“Yep.” Braxton gave him a sexy grin.

Xander felt his cock begin to fill, the need and desire to possess his mate overwhelmed him, and he decided to take a chance. “Strip,” he ordered.

Braxton just looked at him, one eyebrow raised. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and smiled mischievously. “No.”

“No?” Xander wasn’t sure, but he thought Braxton was teasing him. He sure as hell hoped so.

“That’s right.” Braxton stood up and made his way to the bathroom, putting a little extra sway in his hips and looking over his shoulder to wink at Xander.

Oh, so his mate wanted to play? Xander reached the smaller man in two strides and hauled him up over his shoulder.

Braxton laughed even as he beat on Xander’s back with his small fists. “Put me down, you big bully!”

“Give me your lunch money, punk,” Xander growled.

Braxton laughed even harder, but still protested. “You are an idiot. Now, put me down!”

What his baby wanted, his baby got. Xander deposited his wiggling bundle into the shower, clothes and all, and turned on the water. Cold water rushed out of the showerhead, falling over them both. Braxton yelped. Whipping around, he glared at Xander as he pushed his wet hair out of his eyes. Xander decided his mate looked cute as hell when he was pissed.

“What the fuck was that for?” Braxton demanded, slapping at Xander’s chest.

Xander just snickered, pulling Braxton to him and cutting off the rest of his outburst by crushing their mouths together. He broke the kiss long enough to pull Braxton’s wet shirt over his head and drop it on the tiled floor with a *plop*.

He leaned back just far enough to look into Braxton’s eyes. “Are you sure, baby?”

“Hell yes,” Braxton growled and pulled him down into another mind-bending kiss.

Within seconds they were both fully naked, panting and moaning, undulating together under the warm spray of the shower. Braxton climbed his body, wrapping his legs around Xander’s waist.

“Mmm, I want you,” he breathed into Xander’s mouth.

Xander’s cock throbbed, demanding attention. “Tell me what you want, baby,” he murmured. His head was spinning just thinking about finally being inside his mate.

“I want you deep inside me. Stretching me. Filling me. Fucking me. I want you to come so hard you overflow my tight ass. I want to ride your dick. Ride it hard, until I scream,” Braxton whispered raggedly into Xander’s neck between licks and nips.

Oh, fuck.

Xander closed his eyes and groaned. The naughty words coming from such an angelic mouth had him squeezing the base of his cock to keep from blowing his load. He braced his mate between his own

body and the shower wall. Braxton locked his ankles behind Xander's back, grabbed the bottle of shampoo, flipped open the lid, and poured a generous amount into Xander's waiting hand.

Xander slicked his hard length, then moved two slippery fingers down to rub against Braxton's tight entrance. He pushed both fingers in, pulling a deep gasp from his lover. Braxton let his head fall back, rocking his hips, pushing against Xander's fingers.

"More. Need more. Fuck me, Xander!"

Xander gripped his leaking cock in one hand, holding one perfect globe of Braxton's ass in the other. He lined the dark red tip of his erection up with that sweet pink hole, and pushed. The tip slipped in past the first ring of tight muscle, and they both moaned loudly.

Xander pushed forward slowly, seating himself to the root inside his lover. It amazed him that someone so small could take all of him.

"Damn, you feel good, *chulo*. So tight. So hot. You were made for me." He pulled Braxton to him, running his hands over him, pressing their chests together, and nuzzling his face against his hair.

He bathed his mate in his scent. Xander knew Braxton wasn't ready to be claimed yet, but he wanted everyone to know that the little man belonged to him.

Braxton began rocking his hips as much as his position would allow, grunting in frustration. "Xander, move. Fuck me, damn it." He leaned forward, latched on to the sensitive flesh where Xander's neck met his shoulder, and bit. Hard.

Xander gasped as his hips jerked, slamming into his lover's welcoming body. He tilted his hips for a better angle and nailed Braxton's sweet spot on the next thrust.

"Oh yes. Harder. Fuck me harder," Braxton cried.

Xander increased his pace, driving into Braxton's sweet body with abandon. "Stroke yourself, baby," he panted. "I want to feel those muscles clamp down and strangle my dick, want you to come on my cock."

Braxton gripped his hard prick and began pulling in time with

Xander's thrusts.

"Who do you belong to?" Xander demanded.

Braxton groaned, his body going stiff.

"Say it," Xander growled. "Say you're mine." He needed Braxton to say it, to admit they belonged together.

"Oh fuck...ah, Xander!" Braxton yelled. Hot, slick ropes of cum shot from his slit, filling the space between them.

Braxton's ass clutched his shaft, causing Xander's head to swim. He gave one hard thrust and exploded into his mate's hot, silky channel. Braxton rocked his hips, his inner muscles milking Xander's orgasm and draining him.

Braxton leaned forward again, whispered, "Yours," in Xander's ear, then bit the other side of his neck, harder than the last time.

Visions of sinking his canines into his mate's neck, of claiming him, of Braxton doing the same, caused Xander's body to tighten and jerk, and he roared. Throwing his head back, he came instantly, as if he hadn't just had the orgasm of his life seconds before. His seed overflowed his mate's clenching ass, dripping down his now softening prick. He moaned pathetically, resting his forehead against Braxton's, and tried to calm his labored breathing.

"You're going to kill me, *chulo*."

* * * *

The next morning, Xander drove Braxton over to Keeton's place to pick up some sketches Keeton had been working on for *Quest*. Braxton was having a hard time bringing his demon characters to life and hoped that the visuals would help.

Braxton's key to his Mustang had been on the key ring that had mysteriously disappeared, and he had yet to find the time to get to the dealership to have a new one made. He missed his car.

Braxton shifted in his seat, his ass pleasantly sore from the previous evening, and smiled to himself. His determination to take

things slowly and not let sex cloud his judgment had flown right out the window. He'd been fighting back his desire for Xander all week. The burning embers of desire in his belly had finally erupted into a raging wildfire.

He had no regrets. Xander had taken him twice more in the night, before they had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep. He didn't even care if it was just some shifter pheromone thing. Sex with Xander was amazing, mind-blowing—earth-shattering. The feeling of finally having those hard muscles under his hands, pressed against his body...Braxton shuddered with renewed desire.

Now that he knew how good things could be between them, he couldn't get enough of his big alpha.

"Braxton," Xander warned in a low growl as his nostrils flared.

"Shit, sorry," Braxton mumbled, reaching down to run his palm over his hardening cock. He knew Xander could smell his desire, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

"I have shift change starting today." Xander changed the subject. "I'll be working third shift, six to six."

Braxton knew this, of course. They'd talked about it a few times. He still couldn't help feeling a little depressed. With Xander working nights, Braxton had the choice of sleeping in Xander's bed—alone—or staying at his own place—alone. Neither was an appealing option.

"You know, if you just moved in with me..." Xander trailed off.

Braxton smirked. It had been a constant subject for debate, but this thing with Xander was barely a minute old, and Braxton was not sure it was a good idea. "I'll think about it," he answered.

They rode in comfortable silence for a few miles. Braxton's thoughts strayed back to Xander's job. Sure, he found it sexy, but he also knew it could be deadly. Fire consumed without prejudice. Braxton had learned that the hard way. It would be fourteen years in December since he had lost his parents in that fire. He missed them every day.

"What are you thinking so hard on, baby?" Xander asked, startling

him out of his thoughts.

“How long have you been a fireman?” He tried for casual, but judging by the look on Xander’s face, he hadn’t succeeded.

Xander’s entire body seemed to soften toward him. Even his voice came out low and soothing. “Twelve years in October. I’m fully trained, and I’m very good at my job. I’m always careful, and I have a partner with me in case something does go wrong.” He glanced over and winked. “Besides, I heal fast.”

Braxton wasn’t exactly reassured. “But you aren’t immortal or invincible, Alexander Brighton.” He pointed a finger at his mate. How could the man be so flippant?

“Now, you can just wipe that smirk right off your face. Overconfidence leads to carelessness. Carelessness leads to accidents, and accidents lead to someone being dead. I won’t have it,” Braxton huffed, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his seat. The idea of something happening to Xander made his stomach churn.

Xander just smiled. “You’re quite the little pistol when you get riled up. I like it. It’s hot.”

Braxton rolled his eyes. The man was incorrigible. “Dickhead asshole,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’d love to put my dickhead in your—”

“Xander!” He threw his hands up in exasperation. *Stupid shifter super hearing.*

Xander just chuckled unapologetically as he pulled into Keeton’s driveway. “Hey, you give pretty good directions.”

The surprise in his voice didn’t sound like a compliment to Braxton. In fact, it sounded pretty damn insulting. He glared at his lover’s back as he climbed out of the cab of the truck.

Keeton answered the door almost immediately after Braxton had knocked. He wore only a Superman thong, a pair of blue-and-yellow toe socks, and a gold tiara. He grinned devilishly at them.

Braxton glanced over his shoulder at Xander. The poor man looked like he was about to swallow his tongue. “Close your mouth,

Xander. It helps if you don't react to his ploys for attention."

He turned back to Keeton, rolled his eyes, and pushed his friend out of the way. "Go get dressed, Slutarella."

* * * *

Xander cocked his head to the side as he watched Braxton's friend disappear toward the back of the house. "Nice ass," he smirked.

"Xander," Braxton growled.

Xander slid up behind his mate, running both hands down Braxton's hips, then around to squeeze his ass. "Oh, but yours is much nicer, *chulo*." He turned the smaller man, cupped the part of his anatomy currently in question, and lifted Braxton off his feet. Braxton's arms went around Xander's thick neck, and his legs locked around Xander's hips.

"Your ass is perfect." He nuzzled Braxton's neck, trailing wet kisses along his soft skin. "So firm. So tight. So damn perfect." Xander claimed his lover's mouth in a possessive kiss.

He broke away from the kiss almost immediately when a soft whimper, which hadn't come from the man in his arms, reached his ears. Keeton stood in the doorway, dressed in skinny jeans and a red tank top.

"Damn, that's freakin' hot!" Keeton exclaimed.

Xander felt his face burn crimson under the little blond's scrutiny. He started to lower the lithe body in his arms to the floor, but Braxton was having none of it. He locked his arms and legs, squeezing, clinging tight to him.

Braxton shook his head. "He's just being a dirty skank. Now kiss me."

Xander didn't need to be told twice. He took Braxton's mouth again. One hand continued to support his lover, the other sliding through the silky waves of Braxton's hair. He was soon panting, grinding against Braxton, his cock straining at his fly. He had

completely forgotten the other man in the room until he felt a hand slide over his ass and another up the inside of his thigh. Xander jerked back, breaking the kiss, and looked down to find Keeton staring at him hungrily.

“Oh, don’t stop,” Keeton whined.

Braxton jumped from Xander’s arms and marched up to his best friend.

“He’s mine. Mine!” Braxton snarled.

Xander didn’t know what had come over his mate, but he quite liked the sound of that.

“Don’t be a hooker,” Braxton threatened.

Keeton held both hands up, palms out, in a show of surrender, but he winked over his shoulder at Xander.

Xander failed to scent even a trace of lust from the man. He had a feeling Keeton was provoking Braxton on purpose. He just didn’t know why.

Keeton looked down at Braxton and very seriously stated, “Braxy, dear, you are short.”

Xander was baffled. Keeton only stood a couple inches taller than his mate did. He probably wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference if they weren’t standing almost on top of each other.

“You’re a cow,” Braxton deadpanned back.

Huh? Keeton, though slightly taller, had the same lean, wiry build as Braxton. Xander was becoming more confused by the second.

“Your hair is so 1985. Get your roots done,” Keeton shot back.

Okay. Xander didn’t even know what that one meant. He liked Braxton’s hair. A lot. Especially when his fingers were tangled in it and Braxton’s lips were wrapped around—well, yeah, he liked it.

Then suddenly the two friends were hugging, laughing like idiots. When they pulled apart, Xander heard Keeton whisper, “Your boyfriend is totally hot, though.”

Braxton kicked him in the shin.

Xander stood frozen for half a heartbeat, then doubled over in

laughter as he watched Keeton hop around on one foot, his wounded shin clutched in both hands.

“What the hell?” Keeton demanded.

Braxton stood with his hands on his hips, staring calmly back at his friend, completely unrepentant. “I told you, he’s mine.”

Xander was finding his man’s possessive streak a complete turn-on. He shook his head, trying to clear it. He guessed that was the reason Keeton had taunted Braxton. If so, Xander definitely owed the guy one for that.

“You must be Xander.” Keeton held out a hand. “How’s it going Z-Dog?”

Xander wrinkled his nose as he took Keeton’s hand. *Z-Dog*? “Uh, there’s no Z in my name,” Xander stated, then added firmly, “and I am most certainly *not* a dog.”

“Sure thing,” Keeton smirked. “I’ll just call you Der, then. Cool?”

Xander rolled his eyes and sighed. “Z-Dog is fine,” he grumbled. He took a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs Keeton indicated and pulled Braxton down to sit on the arm of the chair.

Keeton lounged on the love seat, eyeing Xander with fascination. “You have an awesome aura, Z-Dog.”

“Uh, thanks,” Xander replied uncertainly, looking up at his mate.

Braxton smiled and shrugged. “It’s his thing.”

Xander shrugged as well. He turned into a four-hundred-pound tiger. Keeton’s gift seemed pretty tame in comparison.

“So, how does this whole aura thing work anyway?” He turned his attention back to Keeton.

“Okay, so everyone has their own core of energy that is virtually unchanging. But, there are rings that encircle that core, that change with a person’s mood,” Keeton explained. “Kind of like a giant mood ring.”

“And this core is what? Like the person’s soul?” Xander asked.

“Oh, he’s a smart one.” Keeton beamed at Braxton as if Braxton had a well-trained puppy.

“Okay, do mine,” Xander demanded.

“Oh, you have a fabulous aura, Z-Dog.” Keeton smirked at him. “The core is a very intense blue, very bright, vibrant, almost electric. Everything surrounding that core is all shades of blue, green, and white...and a little pink. Oh, and it shimmers.”

“So, what does all that mean?” Braxton asked.

“Well, his core color means he is essentially a good person—loyal, trustworthy, completely willing to make sacrifices for others’ happiness. The outer rings just signify that Z-Dog here is happy and content at the moment...and horny.” Keeton gave Xander a mischievous grin. “Oh, and the shimmer is just a shifter thing. They all seem to have it.”

Xander was about to ask another question when Keeton spoke again.

“Braxton, I think you need to plan on staying with Xander for a while.”

“What? Why?”

Braxton didn’t sound opposed to the idea, Xander was happy to note, just curious about why Keeton had suggested it.

Keeton squeezed his hands together in his lap, and his brow furrowed. “I went by your place last night to pick up some of the story panels we’ve been working on, and I saw Mason coming out of your apartment. I didn’t stop, just turned around and left, but I guess he saw me. He called from your cell phone right before I got back home and said that if I didn’t stay away from you, I’d be sorry.”

He shrugged, but Xander could sense his unease. He was not happy about the news either. He didn’t trust Braxton’s ex, and he didn’t want the asshole anywhere near his little mate.

“Then he said...he said that by the time he was finished...you’d be begging him to take you back.” Keeton paused to take a deep breath before he continued. “He told me to tell you that he is done playing games and he can’t wait to make you scream.”

* * * *

Xander came out of the chair so unexpectedly that Braxton toppled off it and onto the floor. Vicious snarling sounds were coming from his lover's mouth. Xander breathed heavily, his chest heaving, his eyes sparking with rage.

Braxton scrambled to his feet and rushed to his lover. Ignoring Keeton's protests, he laid both hands on Xander's chest, rubbing big, slow circles. He kept his voice low, soothing. "Xander, calm down, babe. Look at me. C'mon, big guy."

Xander's breathing seemed to slow, and the snarling subsided to a soft growl, but he still wasn't looking at him.

"Xander, look at me." Braxton climbed up on the coffee table, cupped his lover's face in both hands, and leaned in close until their noses were almost touching. "Alexander Brighton, snap out of it. Look at me." There was a change in Xander's expression, his eyes finally focusing on Braxton. "That's it, big guy. Here I am. I'm right here."

Xander's arms shot out like ropes, winding around Braxton and crushing him close.

After a brief struggle, he managed to push himself back and look into Xander's face again. "You know it's not going to happen. I don't want him. I was in *your* bed last night, not his. I want you..." Braxton trailed off as the reality of what he'd just said hit him. He wanted Xander, not for the night, not for a week or a month, but forever. He wanted Xander to be his...his mate.

Xander took a deep breath and blew it out in a rush. "I know, baby. I know. I just can't even *think* about him touching you, his hands being on you. You belong to me." Then he crushed his mouth to Braxton's in a possessive kiss, licking inside his mouth, sucking on his tongue. It felt as if he was trying to get inside Braxton's soul. Braxton knew his mate was marking him, and he loved it.

Once he had decided to stop holding back, stop trying to

overanalyze everything, and accept Xander completely, calling the man his mate seemed to come naturally. It felt right to think of Xander that way. He figured it always had—he had just been too stubborn to see it that way.

“Let’s go,” Xander barked. “Grab what you need, and meet me at the truck.” Then he walked out of the room, leaving Braxton and Keeton staring after him.

“He’s lost his mind,” Braxton mumbled.

“No,” Keeton said. “He cares about you.”

Chapter Eight

“Xander, this is ridiculous,” Braxton snarled in irritation. “You have to work tonight. You should be at home sleeping.”

“I’m fine. Pack faster,” Xander responded, not even looking away from his task. “My brothers are here because they *want* to be, so don’t try to use them as an excuse to get out of this either. You and your safety is all that matters right now.”

“You know, I don’t remember saying that I would move in with you.”

“Fine,” Xander snapped. “Move in with Keeton, or get a hotel. I don’t fucking care, but you are *not* staying here!”

Braxton threw his hands up and stormed out of the room. On his back patio, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself before he cheerfully beat the hell out of his mate.

They had left Keeton’s place in a rush. Braxton barely had time to grab the sketches and give his friend a brief hug, promising he would call soon. He had run out the door after Xander, who was already waiting in his monster of a pickup, the engine running and phone to his ear.

Xander hadn’t even looked at him. He had just whipped out of Keeton’s driveway and driven at breakneck speeds to Braxton’s town house. Once there, he had forced Braxton to remain inside the truck while he checked things out inside. Braxton had been about to demand to know what was going on when Logan, Boston, and Talon had pulled up in Talon’s pickup.

Everyone had now been packing for nearly two hours, and Xander still wasn’t speaking to anyone except to bark out orders. He knew

Xander was angry, and maybe even a little afraid for him, but all this urgency seemed so absurd.

“Hey. You all right, Brax?” Logan asked as he joined Braxton on the patio.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just need to get a little distance from Attila the Hun back there.” Braxton smiled halfheartedly.

“I know it’s irritating as hell, and you’re probably even thinking he’s lost his mind, but don’t be too rough on him, okay? He’s going about it the wrong way, but he’s just trying to protect you. It’s his instinct. We’re all a bit overprotective.” Logan shrugged.

“Ya think?” Braxton gestured toward the patio doors and the stack of boxes beyond.

Logan just laughed. “What would you do to keep him safe?”

“Anything,” Braxton answered immediately.

Logan arched an eyebrow and nodded, then turned and walked back into the house, leaving Braxton alone on the patio.

Okay, so he needed to cut Xander some slack, but damn it, he wasn’t a child, and he wasn’t some damsel in distress. He didn’t need someone to swoop in and save the day, or spirit him away from the castle under siege, and he certainly didn’t need someone else to fight his battles for him.

He appreciated that Xander wanted to keep him safe, take care of him even. Braxton knew he was smaller, not as physically strong as most men. He had a tendency to be overly sensitive, and he wore his emotions on his sleeve. Did Xander see him as less of a man because of those things? Braxton took a deep breath and went to find his mate.

* * * *

Xander was in the upstairs library when Braxton found him. He stood in the doorway watching the big man pack his books with a scowl on his face, as if they had morally offended him. Braxton was momentarily distracted by the way his lover’s shirt pulled tight over

his rippling muscles with every movement, the sway of his hips, the way his well-worn jeans clung to his ass like a second skin.

Suddenly, Xander's head snapped up, his nostrils flared, and his beautiful, honey brown eyes fell on Braxton.

"Xander," Braxton croaked. Mmm...the man got his motor running.

Focus.

He cleared his throat and licked his dry lips. "Xander, talk to me. What's going on?"

"You're moving," Xander replied shortly as he continued his packing.

"Well, yes, I can see that. But, why right this second?"

"He was in your house. He has a key, Braxton." Xander stated the last part as if Braxton was very slow indeed.

"You didn't think maybe we could just change the locks?"

Nope. Braxton could see the answer on his lover's face.

"Or that we could have just picked up my clothes, and I could stay with you for a few days until we get this straightened out?" Braxton's voice was rising with every word. "That everyone didn't have to drop what they were doing and pack up *immediately*, like a bunch of damn gypsies!"

He took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He didn't want to fight. He went to his mate and knelt on the floor with him, taking one of Xander's hands in both of his. "Please, talk to me, babe."

Xander sighed and hung his head. "I'm sorry, *chulo*. I know you don't understand, but I just...I can't..."

"Can't what?" Braxton urged him to continue.

"You're mine. I hate the idea of him having any part of you. I hate that he's been in your home, touched the things you've touched." Xander's voice dropped to a menacing growl. "Just the thought of him touching you makes my stomach burn."

He sighed again and rested his forehead against Braxton's. "I'm

sorry. I know I'm overreacting, but I can't seem to stop myself. I don't trust him, Braxton, and he's already tried to hurt you once. I'd lose my fucking mind if anything ever happened to you."

When put like that, it was actually very sweet and wonderful—in a total caveman kind of way.

Braxton gave Xander a little half smile and nodded. "Okay, but I'm not weak. I don't need you to protect me or rescue me from everything. I'm man enough to admit that this whole Mason thing has me thoroughly freaked out, but there will be times when you're going to have to let me fight my own battles. I like that you feel protective of me, but it's okay to just have my back, not rush in and save the day. Deal?"

"You want me to be your sidekick?" Xander snorted.

Braxton rolled his eyes. "I was thinking more of us being a team, asshole."

Xander smiled. "I know, baby. I don't think you're weak at all, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to take care of you."

Braxton nodded. "Now, here's what we're going to do. We are going to pack the important things into your truck—clothes, books, my laptop. Then we are going to go back to your place. I'm not saying I'm moving in, but I will stay until we know what's going on." He gave Xander a swift kiss on the lips.

"Sure, baby, whatever you want." Xander captured Braxton's lips again in a lingering kiss. "Mmm, love it when you get all bossy."

Hell, if being bossy got him a kiss like that, Braxton decided he loved it as well. He climbed up into Xander's lap, straddled his thighs, and attacked his luscious mouth with such ferocity Xander fell over backward.

Braxton landed on top of his mate and immediately began trying to divest him of his clothing. He needed Xander with an urgency that scared the hell out of him. When Xander wouldn't cooperate, he gave up on the shirt and slid down the bigger man's body to fumble with the button fly of his jeans.

Xander began to laugh as he covered Braxton's hands with his own, halting his frantic movements. Braxton snapped his head up and growled at his mate.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. He felt like he was on fire. He began to tremble and pant as sweat beaded across his body. His dick jerked and jumped with each beat of his heart. "What's happening to me?"

"Shh, calm down, baby." Xander sat up and tried to gather Braxton into his arms. When he reached for him, Braxton launched himself at his lover, running his hands and mouth over every inch of skin he could find.

Braxton realized the whimpering sounds filling the room were coming from him, and he abruptly jerked back to stare into Xander's eyes. "What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you." Xander cupped Braxton's face and grinned. "I kind of like it, actually. What is happening," he hastened to explain when Braxton glared at him, "is that we got into an argument. Your adrenaline was pumping, revving you up for a fight. There was no physical fight, so now your body is trying to release that pent-up energy in another way."

"So, it's a shifter thing?"

"Yes and no. I'm sure you've felt it before, but all your senses are heightened when you're close to your mate."

"When I'm close to you," Braxton said clearly. He hoped Xander got the silent message that he was ready to accept their mating, because he wasn't in the mood for a lengthy discussion at the moment.

He started to rise, but Xander wrapped his arms around him, holding him in place. "Where are you going?" His voice sounded low and husky.

"To get lube so you can fuck me."

"Got it covered." Xander chuckled as he leaned back and pulled a small, travel-size bottle of lube from the pocket of his jeans.

“You carry lube with you all the time?” Braxton raised both eyebrows.

“Nope. Just since I met you.” Xander winked.

Braxton stood and sauntered over to his writing desk, removing his clothing along the way. He swiped his arm across his desk to clear it, then turned to Xander. “Are you just going to sit there, or are you going to get over here and fuck me?”

* * * *

That was all the invitation Xander needed. Before he knew it, he was across the room, grabbing a handful of Braxton’s hair and crushing their mouths together. He devoured his mate, Braxton opening right up for him. He thrust his tongue into his lover’s mouth, their tongues twining and twisting, each fighting for dominance. Braxton wrapped his arms around Xander’s neck and moaned, humping his fully erect cock against Xander’s thigh.

Braxton slid his hand between them to tug at Xander’s waistband. “Lose the clothes,” he growled.

Xander immediately pulled his shirt over his head and kicked off his boots. He hissed with pleasure when Braxton latched on to one of his nipples as he fumbled to get his jeans undone and pushed down his legs.

Without saying a word, he lifted Braxton, setting him on the desk, and stepped in between his open legs. He watched hungrily as Braxton leaned back on one elbow and palmed his hard shaft.

“You’re gorgeous,” Braxton panted as he stroked himself slowly.

Xander gently lowered himself over Braxton’s body, careful to hold his full weight off his lover. They both groaned at the contact, and Xander’s eyes actually rolled back in his head. He was so hard he could pound nails.

“You are the gorgeous one, so beautiful...so soft...so warm.” Xander punctuated each comment with nibbling kisses along

Braxton's slender neck. "Tell me what you want."

"You," Braxton answered immediately.

"You have me."

"Inside me," he elaborated, breathing heavily. "Now, please, Xander."

Xander bent and scooped the lube off the floor where he'd dropped it, stepped back between his mate's legs, and pulled Braxton to the edge of the desk. "Spread 'em," he commanded as he snapped open the lid on the bottle of lube and squirted a generous amount into to his palm.

Braxton spread his legs wide, planting his heels on the desk beside his ass, his tight, little hole on clear display. Xander slicked the lube over his throbbing erection, hissing at the contact to his aching flesh. There would be a time for slow, sensual exploration, but this wasn't it. Xander just knew he would die if he didn't get inside his mate. *Right. Now.*

Braxton eyed him, licking his lips, his lithe body writhing in anticipation. "Xander, please, hurry. Touch me. I need..."

"I know, baby. Just relax." Xander poured more lube onto his fingers and reached down to circle Braxton's quivering entrance with one slick finger.

Braxton pushed against his finger as he eased the digit past the tight ring of muscle and inside Braxton's hot channel.

His mate moaned loudly, his head rising off the desk. "Oh shit."

Xander added a second finger, pumping them in and out, circling and scissoring, stretching the perfect little pucker. By the time he added a third finger, Braxton was making the most delectable sounds. He had his head thrown back, and his entire body shook with need. He looked extraordinary.

Xander leaned over his mate, balancing his weight on one hand, and captured Braxton's lips, swallowing his lover's moaning sobs.

Braxton wrenched his mouth from Xander's and growled in frustration. "Quit teasing me," he demanded.

Xander was only too happy to comply. He removed his fingers, lined up his hard cock, and thrust into his mate's willing body in one long, slow stroke. He immediately pulled out partway, then thrust back in quickly, biting the crook of Braxton's neck as he did so.

Braxton cried out, arching his back, his fingers gripped in Xander's hair as he came in a gush. Hot liquid filled the space between them, covering Braxton's stomach and chest.

Xander groaned when Braxton's inner muscles clenched around his slick shaft. "Oh fuck, that was sexy. You're so tight, baby. Damn, you feel amazing." He sat up, hooked his forearms under Braxton's knees, and increased his pace, thrusting harder and faster into Braxton's eager ass.

Damn, Braxton was still hard, his long, thick cock bobbing between them with each thrust. Xander released his legs and guided them around his waist. He slid one arm under Braxton's shoulders, raising him and pressing their chests together. He rubbed his face, his hands, his torso, over every part of his mate he could reach, covering him in his scent.

Before long, Braxton's moans had reached full volume again. He tilted his hips up to meet Xander's thrusts as his head whipped back and forth on the desk. Xander felt the shiver rush down his spine and the pressure build in his scrotum. He could barely think, but he knew he wanted Braxton to come with him.

Reaching between their sweat-slicked bodies, he gripped Braxton's erection and began stroking him in time with the motion of his hips. "Come for me, baby," he rasped. "I want you to come for me again."

As if he'd simply been waiting for the command, Braxton yelled out Xander's name as milky ropes of semen covered Xander's hand and wrist.

The sounds and scents of Braxton's orgasm pushed Xander over the edge. With a loud roar, he came, filling his mate's hot passage with his seed, marking him further. He collapsed forward over

Braxton, careful to not crush his little mate, and just breathed in their combined scent.

Braxton had finally admitted that Xander was his mate. He had stopped denying the bond between them, and Xander couldn't have been happier. Well, maybe a little happier, but he still wasn't sure if Braxton was ready to take that final step. Besides, he had almost lost the man once by withholding information from him. He wouldn't do it again. There were things that Braxton needed to know before Xander claimed him.

They both groaned as Xander's flagging cock slipped from Braxton's twitching hole.

Xander smiled hugely. Braxton was his. He stood and gathered his mate in his arms, lifting him and cupping his ass in both hands. Braxton laughed, his legs still locked around Xander's waist and his arms wound around Xander's neck.

"Are you hungry?" Xander asked. They had skipped breakfast, and he was sure it was well past lunchtime.

"Starved," Braxton answered immediately.

"C'mon. I'll feed you." He kissed Braxton's temple and sat him on his feet. He took his hand and started toward the door.

"Uh, Xander?" Braxton pulled on his hand to stop him. Xander turned to his mate, eyebrows raised in question.

"Not that I'm complaining, the view is spectacular, but do you think we might want to put some clothes on first?"

Chapter Nine

Braxton sat, curled up on the sofa, in the game room with his laptop as he watched Talon kick Jackson's butt at pool. Boston lounged at the other end of the sofa, surfing channels on the flat-screen. Logan and Xander had left for work half an hour earlier, and Braxton missed his lover already.

Under different circumstances—ones not involving him—he'd be the first to say they were living together. Yet, he still insisted he had not moved in, despite the fact his things were slowly making their way to Xander's house. Yeah, so denial wasn't just a river in Egypt.

Maybe the time had come to swallow his fear and just take a leap of faith. Jump in feet first and see where the tide took him.

Though exhausted, he hated the thought of sleeping alone—or, more to the point, without Xander. He couldn't wait until Xander's schedule change, when the big man would be working days and be home at night to keep him warm.

He had made excellent progress on his latest novel, but his brain was tired, and he needed a distraction from his jumbled thoughts. Braxton powered down his laptop, put it back inside its case, and turned to Boston. "So, how did you all come together?"

"Xander," all three men answered in stereo.

"We were all basically feral when he found us," Talon said, his voice quiet.

"But, Xander took us in, kept us safe," Boston added.

"He made us a family," Jackson continued seriously. "We owe him our lives."

Braxton swallowed around the lump in his throat. It was obvious

these men loved his mate. Pride swelled in his heart, spreading warmth throughout his body.

“Why were you feral?” Did they not have families?

“We were abandoned by our packs,” Jackson said flatly.

“Herd,” Boston sniggered.

“Tribe,” Talon smirked, and they all laughed.

Huh? Braxton didn’t get the joke. “Uh...what?”

“Logan and I come from a tribe, or a leap.” Talon lined up the three ball and sank it in the corner pocket. When he looked up, he must have seen the confusion on Braxton face, because he added, “Leopards.”

“Wolf pack.” Jackson raised his hand in a mock salute.

“Deer herd.” Boston nodded, still smiling.

“But, why—” Braxton started to ask.

“Logan and I are snow leopards,” Talon began explaining, anticipating Braxton’s continued bafflement. “And you know that Xander is a white tiger?”

Braxton nodded his agreement. Of course he knew that.

“Goldilocks here is a white wolf.” Talon shoved Jackson playfully.

“And I’m a white stag,” Boston finished.

“So, you’re all white animals,” Braxton said slowly, still trying to piece together why this was a bad thing. He shook his head. He just thought it was amazing.

“Xander said it was safer for you guys to live together. Why?” Braxton remembered Xander promising to explain it to him on that first night. It had completely slipped his mind until now.

“I know it seems absurd to you, Braxton, but a shifter with a white pelt...” Jackson trailed off, his brow furrowed.

“It’s a curse. We are freaks of nature. Abominations. We bring danger to our families.” Talon’s tone was very matter-of-fact. Though his words were harsh, Braxton couldn’t detect even a trace of bitterness.

“We are too different, cursed.” Boston shook his head.

“Why do you keep saying that? What do you mean cursed? Are you serious, or is it just a figure of speech?”

Boston opened his mouth to reply, but Talon cut him off. “No. It’s not our place,” he said to his brother before he turned to Braxton. “Ask Xander,” was all he said.

* * * *

“You hungry?” Jackson stood and stretched lazily. Talon and Boston had already left for work.

Braxton just grinned. He liked the youngest brother. Jackson had a “boy next door grows up to be a Calvin Klein underwear model” look—wholesome with just a dash of hunky beefcake. He was kind and generous, always smiling...and always hungry.

“Brax?”

“Oh. Um, yeah, sure, actually, I really want some hot chocolate and maybe some popcorn.”

“Great! Let me see if there’s any cocoa mix.” Jackson drifted off toward the kitchen.

“I’ll grab the popcorn.” Braxton stood and followed him.

He easily found the popcorn bags and started one in the microwave.

“Found it!” Jackson held up a large canister of cocoa mix, grinning as if he’d found the lost city of Atlantis.

His open, carefree smile made him look younger than usual. Jackson was smaller than his brothers, not so much shorter, just considerably less bulky. He had short, sandy blond hair that he covered with a baseball cap about eighty percent of the time. His big, round, hazel eyes held an excitement about the world that Braxton had lost long ago.

After everything that Jackson had been through, Braxton found his attitude and sweet disposition to be nothing short of a miracle.

Xander had told him how he and Logan had found Jackson, shot and still in his wolf form, bleeding on the side of a dirt road. Jackson had been on his own since he was fourteen—the first time he had shifted.

Braxton didn't know how long Jackson had run feral before he'd been shot by that hunter, then brought to live here, but he imagined it couldn't have been that long. Jackson didn't look any older than eighteen, maybe twenty.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face because Jackson asked, "Braxton? Is something wrong?" His smile faltered, and he took a step forward.

"I'm fine." Braxton smiled reassuringly. "Jacks, how old are you?"

"Jacks? I like that!" Jackson laughed as he handed a mug of hot chocolate to Braxton. "No one ever calls me anything except Jackson, or kid, which is dumb since I'll be twenty-one in October."

Braxton snorted into his cup. Surely, he'd heard that wrong. "Repeat that."

"I'll be twenty-one on October eighth."

"Oh, yes, Jacks, you are positively ancient."

Braxton froze. He suddenly had an incredible idea for the demons he and Keeton had been working on. "Ancient demons that look like children," he mumbled under his breath. It was brilliant, not to mention creepy as hell. He needed to talk to Keeton.

"I have to go." Braxton started for the door, but stopped when he realized Jackson was looking at him as if he'd grown another head. "Sorry." He tried to curb his enthusiasm long enough to explain. "I just had a great idea for my novel, and I need to go see Keeton."

Jackson laughed and waved a hand. "Okay, I get it. Are you going to stay there, or will you be back tonight?"

"I'll be back in a couple of hours. Do you want me to grab some movies and pick up a pizza?"

"Awesome." Jackson beamed.

"Okay then, I'll see you in a few hours." Braxton grabbed his key

from the pegboard, thankful he'd finally found time to get to the dealership to have it made, and walked out the door.

Chapter Ten

It had taken longer than he'd planned, but three hours later, Braxton and Keeton had created the perfect demons.

Braxton decided to swing by his apartment and grab his DVD collection for Jackson before picking up the pizza and going home.

Home. He liked the sound of that.

The first thing Braxton noticed when he stepped through the front door of his town house was that the lights were on. The second thing he noticed was a seriously agitated-looking Mason, tearing through the boxes still strewn across the living room.

"What are you doing here?" Mason yelped.

"I live here." Well, it was *technically* true. He did still pay rent on the place. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Where are the books?" Mason demanded, ignoring Braxton's question.

"Since they are mine, I don't see how that's any of your business. Now get out." Braxton glared at Mason, arms akimbo.

Mason straightened, his body becoming relaxed and his eyes softening. He took a step forward and smiled tentatively. "Brax, how are you? I've missed you."

"Stop right there." Braxton shook his head, holding up a hand. "You can cut the crap. We both know that you couldn't care less about me. Why don't you just tell me what it is you want and save us both time?"

Mason's mouth thinned into an angry line. The muscles in his jaw ticked, and his hands curled into fists. "Whatever," he ground out, pushing roughly past Braxton.

“Mason.”

Mason paused and turned back to glare at him.

“Give me my keys.” Braxton held his hand out, palm up.

Mason snorted and continued toward the door.

Braxton hurried forward, grabbed Mason by the forearm, and spun the bigger man around to face him. “I’m not feeling just *real* stable right now, so just give me my fucking keys, and get the hell out.” He stepped closer, still holding on to Mason’s arm. “Now.”

Mason’s fist swung out, connecting with Braxton’s temple. He stumbled backward, placing a hand to his throbbing head. “What the—”

Another blow sent him to the floor. A heavily booted foot connected repeatedly with his shoulder and his back, his hips. Braxton curled into a ball, making himself as small as possible, covering his face with his hands. Never would he have imagined that Mason had this kind of violence in him. As pain coursed through his body, he had to admit that Mason had completely lost his mind.

He was going to die. No one could live through the kind of beating Mason was giving him.

“You’re going to ruin everything, you little piece of shit!” Mason roared at him as he continued to pummel him. “Where are the fucking books?”

A vicious kick connected with the back of Braxton’s head, and darkness swallowed him whole.

* * * *

Braxton’s eyes fluttered open, and his heart pounded up into his throat. He took a deep breath and immediately coughed it back out. The acrid smell of smoke burned his nostrils and his throat. The scream of the smoke detector competed with the roar of the blood in his ears.

As more hard coughs wracked his body, the pain threatened to

take him under again. His head throbbed with every beat of his heart, causing his vision to blur. He coughed so long and so hard, it amazed him that his sternum didn't crack wide open. Braxton tried to sit up, but lightning bolts of pain lanced through his shoulder, causing him to cry out and fall back to the floor. He clamped his mouth closed, grinding his teeth together, fighting the wave of nausea that rolled over him. Though, not a doctor, but he was pretty sure that his left shoulder was dislocated.

Braxton finally managed to struggle into a sitting position. It was so hot. He reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead and froze with his hand halfway to his face, his brain finally surfacing from its pain-induced stupor.

His house was on fire. Flames licked up the walls of his living room, engulfing the front door and cutting off any escape in that direction. His kitchen was already a roaring inferno, and flames leapt merrily along his furniture.

Braxton doubled over with renewed coughs. The smoke thickened, the fire spreading much too quickly.

He slowly crawled to his staircase and pulled himself up the steps one by one. Surely, someone had called the fire department. If he could just make it to his upstairs balcony, maybe he could make it out alive.

* * * *

Unease curled itself in Xander's gut as he jumped from the rig in front of the blazing town house.

This was Braxton's unit—most of his things were still inside. His mate was going to be upset, but thankfully, they had moved the important stuff already.

Like Braxton. Xander's mate was home, safe.

Xander jogged around the back of the truck, pulling on his heavy gloves. His steps faltered and his heart turned over in his chest when

he glimpsed a very familiar car in the parking lot.

“No.” No. That was definitely not Braxton’s Mustang parked in front of the raging fireball.

But it was. He could see the dent in the rear fender where Braxton had backed into their piped fence.

“No!” Xander roared, charging toward the building. “Braxton!”

Strong, muscled arms wrapped around his chest and wrestled him to the ground. Xander struggled, trying to claw his way across the front lawn. “Braxton!” he screamed again.

“Xander! Snap out of it. What the hell is wrong with you?” Logan growled in his ear.

Xander looked up at his brother, naked panic clear on his face. “Braxton’s car.” He nodded toward the vehicle.

Logan narrowed his eyes, looking confused for a split second, before his gaze landed on Braxton’s dark green Mustang. Realization turned his face into a mask of worry.

Xander pushed at him, trying frantically to gain his feet. “I have to save him. I have to get in there. Let me go!”

“Brighton!” The sharp voice cracked through the night like a whip. Carmen Mendoza, Logan’s partner, stood with her hands on her hips, glowering down at the two men still grappling on the ground.

Xander’s head snapped up with a pleading look at her. “He’s in there. I have to...I’ve got...You have to...” He looked over his shoulder at his brother. “Let me go!”

“Enough,” Carmen barked.

Xander pressed his lips together tightly, but continued to struggle against Logan’s hold. He stared at Carmen mutinously.

Carmen Mendoza was a little bit of a thing—no more than a hundred pounds dripping wet—but she had a reputation for bringing grown men to their knees. No one wanted to tangle with her.

“Baker and Franklin are on their way in now. They’ll save whoever needs saving. Trust them, sit yourself down, and stop being an ass.” She pointed her finger in Xander’s face, cutting off his

argument. “You go running in there like this, and you’re going to get someone killed, Brighton.”

Xander knew she was right. He was so scared that he couldn’t even think straight. Knowing that she was right didn’t make it any easier to just sit and do nothing, though.

Then commotion near the front of the house caught his attention, and someone shouted, “Up there!”

Xander was on his feet and moving before the action even registered. He watched as Braxton carefully climbed over the railing of his balcony, put his back to it, and held on for dear life.

He had to get to Braxton. Nothing else mattered in that moment. Nothing else had *ever* mattered more than having Braxton in his arms in the next two seconds.

“Braxton!” Xander yelled up to his mate. He stood directly beneath the man and held up his arms.

“Xander?” Braxton called, then began to cough violently.

“Baby, listen to me.” He waited for Braxton to nod his head. “I want you to jump. I’m going to catch you, okay?”

Braxton shook his head, and Xander could see his one-handed grip tighten on the railing. “I’ll hurt you,” he yelled and coughed again.

“You won’t hurt me. I can catch you. You know how strong I am.” Xander tried to subtly remind his mate that he was stronger than a regular human. “C’mon, baby, I won’t let you fall. I promise.”

Braxton bit his lip and nodded once. Slowly, he let go of the railing, gripped his left wrist with his right hand in front of him, and stepped off the balcony. Xander caught his lover, wrapping his arms around the small body as the impact knocked him to the ground.

Someone grabbed Braxton from him, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from hissing and growling. He got to his feet and stalked toward where they had taken Braxton.

“Hold up, Xander.” Logan stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

“Move,” Xander growled dangerously.

“No,” Logan replied calmly. He glanced over his shoulder, where Mendoza was checking Braxton’s vital signs. “Let her check him out. Give her some room.”

“You will move out of my way, or I will move you. Your choice.”

“Xander...”

“Logan, I mean it. You are in a very dangerous position right now, standing between me and my mate. My *injured* mate. I don’t want to hurt you, but if you do not move the fuck out of my way, then I—”

Xander cut himself off when he heard his name rasped, followed by another bout of violent coughing. He shoved Logan away roughly and moved to Braxton’s side in three long strides. He stopped abruptly and gasped when he finally got a good look at the little man. The black soot covering his sweaty face couldn’t hide the bruising from temple to jaw. His left eye was almost swollen shut, and copious amounts of dark red blood matted his wavy hair, drying where it had run down his face and neck.

Xander bit his lip to hold back the string of curses that would have made truckers blush. He lifted Braxton’s hand instead, intending to bring it to his lips, until Braxton cried out. Xander dropped his hand as if it had electrocuted him. The quick movement jarred Braxton, causing him to cry out again.

“Oh, baby,” Xander nearly sobbed. “I need to touch you. I don’t know where...”

“My lips don’t hurt,” Braxton whispered roughly.

Xander wasn’t so sure about that. They were dry and cracked from the heat of the fire, and his bottom lip was split clean open. He leaned in slowly, gently placing a kiss on Braxton’s dirty forehead instead.

“You caught me,” Braxton whispered.

“Yeah, baby, I caught you.”

* * * *

Braxton closed his eyes and sighed. Xander had caught him. He had swallowed his fear and taken that leap of faith...and Xander had caught him.

He shifted on the stretcher, trying to get more comfortable, and groaned as the movement sent pain coursing through his entire body.

“What’s wrong?” Xander asked anxiously.

Braxton opened his eyes to answer, but realized that Xander wasn’t looking at him, but over him, at the female medic.

“He’s dehydrated. There’s lots of bruising, lacerations on the back of his head that will need stitches, and maybe more here.” She gestured to the cut over Braxton’s eyebrow. “He has a mild concussion, and his right shoulder is dislocated.”

It sounded bad when she said it like that, all his injuries strung together that way. Braxton just wanted to sleep—preferably with Xander wrapped around him like an ACE bandage.

“It’s really not as bad as it sounds,” the medic added. Apparently, she had seen the same stricken look on Xander’s face that Braxton had. “Some fluids, a few stitches, and lots of rest and TLC.” She turned her gaze to Braxton, smiling sweetly. It looked a little fake, which immediately made him nervous.

The tiny female, Mendoza, he had heard someone call her, moved around to the other side of the stretcher, nudging Xander out of the way.

“What are you doing?” Braxton asked, wincing at the burn in his throat.

“We have to reset your shoulder,” Mendoza stated. The *duh* was implied.

“But—”

“Now, honey, I’m not gonna lie to you. It will hurt. Here or at the hospital, it will still hurt. Might as well get it over with, yes?” She smiled at him again.

Braxton didn’t trust that smile. No sir.

“Brax, it will feel a lot better once it’s back where it’s supposed to be,” Logan said as he stepped up behind Mendoza.

Well, he sure as shit hoped so, because it hurt like seven shades of hell at the moment. “Do it.”

Logan leaned over and whispered in Braxton’s ear. “Try not to scream, or Xander is liable to go postal. I have a date on Friday with this smoking hot Italian chick, so it would be highly inconvenient for me to die tonight.”

Braxton couldn’t stop his grin. He nodded once and laid his head back.

Logan braced him to the stretcher as Mendoza lifted his arm, gripping it firmly. “Okay, take a deep breath and let it out slowly. On the count of three.” Logan spoke quietly near his ear. “One. Two.”

“Son of a bitch!” Braxton yelled when Mendoza gave a sharp pull to his arm. Acute pain and sickening heat spread up his arm and into his shoulder. “Where the hell did you learn how to count?” he shot at the tiny woman.

“Okay. Great. So that’s that, and let’s get you loaded up and to the hospital.” She slid Braxton’s arm into a sling, looping the strap over his neck. “Would you like to ride with him?” They both looked over at Xander, who, Braxton noticed, had gone very still and quiet.

He examined his lover with a critical eye. Xander’s eyes were shuttered, his lips pressed into a thin line, hands balled into fists and held tightly at his sides. His breathing came quick and uneven, and his face flushed a mottled red. He looked...majorly pissed off.

“Xander?” Braxton reached for him with his good arm.

Xander took a step back. “I need to help here. I’ll meet you at the hospital and take you home, *chulo*.” Even with the endearment, his tone was hard, distant. Braxton let his hand fall, and nodded. Xander gave him a curt nod in return and walked away.

Braxton looked up at Logan for an explanation, but Logan just shook his head slightly and muttered, “Later.”

He didn’t know what was going on or what had crawled up

Xander's ass, but he was too tired to worry about it just then. He'd think tomorrow. He closed his eyes and let the exhaustion claim him.

Chapter Eleven

Xander walked into his and Braxton's room to find a suitcase open on the bed, clothes folded and packed neatly inside. It did not look like the haphazard display of an emotionally charged departure. There was no anger here. This had been thought out carefully.

He'd fucked up. He knew it, but he didn't think it was this bad. Seemed he had a lot of explaining to do—and even more groveling. He'd do whatever it took.

It had been four very long, mostly silent days since the fire. He and Braxton had done little more than exchange pleasantries over breakfast. Xander was so afraid of accidentally hurting Braxton that he had taken to sleeping on the couch at night—or *not* sleeping as it were.

He missed his mate's sweet little body, all warm and soft, cuddled next to him at night. He missed Braxton's breath on his neck, his thin leg draped over his, his small hand resting on Xander's chest. Braxton practically slept on top of him. Xander loved it, and he ached for it.

Then there was the less than noble part of him—the part between his legs, to be exact—that ached as well. He'd become accustomed to frequent, spectacular sex since Braxton had come into his life. He was in hell. His own self-imposed hell, true enough, but still torture.

Xander had not handled the situation well at all. Even if he hadn't known it on his own, his brothers were quick to tell him. He had seen the bruises, the cuts, the blood, the dislocated shoulder, and he'd lost it. It was obvious that someone had intentionally hurt his mate—then attempted to kill him with that fire—and Xander thought he had a pretty good idea who that *someone* was.

Braxton's bruises were just beginning to heal, and Xander felt his anger rise again every time he saw them. Braxton was his to protect, and he had failed the little man.

Braxton walked out of the bathroom with a small bag of toiletries, and his steps stuttered when he saw Xander. "Sorry," he murmured. "I'll be out of your way soon."

Xander's heart felt like it would shatter at the dejected look in Braxton's eyes. "Don't go." It came out more of an order than the plea he had meant it to be..

"Xander, I can't do this. I understand if you don't want me—"

"Who said I don't want you? I can't breathe without wanting you." Xander took a step toward Braxton, but stopped when he stepped back away from his advance.

"You won't talk to me. You don't touch me. You barely look at me. You won't even sleep in the same bed with me." Braxton shook his head, tears filling his eyes. "I can't do this."

"Do what?"

"Be here with you."

"Braxton," Xander whispered, taking another step forward. Shit, this hurt. "Don't go. Please."

Braxton just shook his head again, taking another step back. "Why are you doing this?" he asked miserably. "You don't want me, so just let me go."

"I can't do that." Xander gave him a half smile. "I told you in the beginning that I'd never let you go."

"I'm not your fucking *property*, Xander!" Braxton yelled.

"No." Xander's voice shook with emotion. "You're my mate."

Braxton set the bag of toiletries on the bed and zipped up his suitcase. It did not escape Xander's notice that his lover's hands were shaking.

Braxton looked up, tears spilling down his soft cheeks. "I can't. "You'll keep me posted about the arson investigation?"

Xander just nodded numbly. Braxton picked up both of his bags

and walked past him and out the door. Xander stood frozen, staring at the space by the bed where his mate had just been. Slowly, he turned and walked from the room, down the stairs, and to the kitchen. There he stood, staring at nothing, his entire body trembling.

“Xander?” A hand landed on his shoulder. He turned toward the voice, unseeing, uncaring.

“Xander?” Logan gave him a rough shake. “What are you doing?”

“He’s gone,” Xander whispered around the lump in his throat.

“No, he’s not. Not yet. He’s on the front porch, waiting for me to get my keys so I can take him to Keeton’s.” Logan gave him a little shove toward the door. “Go get him.”

Xander blinked, finally focusing on his brother. “He hates me.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s hurt, and he’s confused.”

“But, Logan...”

“No, you have made a fine mess of things. Get your ass out there, and make it right,” Talon said as he entered the kitchen.

“You can’t let him go, Xander. You’re not the only one that loves him, ya know,” Boston added as he trailed in behind Talon.

Love? Did he love Braxton? The answer came swiftly and without hesitation. *Yes.* He didn’t even have words to describe how much he loved the man.

“I do love him,” Xander said absently.

“Well, then why are you still here?” Jackson wandered into the kitchen, grinning. “Go tell him, not us.” He jerked his head toward the door. “Oh, and I think he got tired of waiting, because he left his bags on the porch and is currently walking down the driveway. Mumbled something to me about getting his stuff later. He looked like crap.”

All four men circled around Xander, glaring at him. “Go!” they all shouted in unison.

Xander bolted from the kitchen, hitting the front door at a dead run. Thank heavens Jackson had left it open. He could see Braxton halfway down the drive, shuffling slowly, his head down and shoulders slumped.

“Braxton!”

His mate whipped around, looking thoroughly miserable. His eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, and tears fell freely down both cheeks.

Xander stopped a few feet from Braxton, feeling just as miserable as his lover looked. “Don’t go. Please. Don’t go.”

He received no answer. Braxton just dropped his head, looking at his feet.

Before he could reject him, Xander fell to his knees in front of his mate, wrapped his arms around his tiny waist, and buried his face in his stomach. “I’m sorry, baby. I was an idiot. Please, don’t leave me.”

When Braxton didn’t react in any way, Xander just pressed his face harder into his midsection. “Please,” he whispered. “Please, baby.”

Then he felt Braxton’s hand stroke down the back of his head, his fingers combing through Xander’s long ebony hair.

Hope blossomed in his heart. Now, came the groveling. “I’m so sorry. It’s my job to take care of you. I promised I’d never let anyone hurt you again. I broke my promise,” he murmured. “I’m sorry I didn’t protect you, baby. I’m just so fucking sorry for everything. Forgive me. Don’t hate me. Please, don’t hate me.”

* * * *

Braxton kept up the gentle caress as he let his mate’s muffled words wash over him. What a damn mess this was.

He had assumed Xander avoided him because he was tired of dealing with all the drama and wading through Mason’s bullshit.

He had thought Xander was tired of him, period, and had decided that Braxton was too much trouble. He couldn’t fault the man. The situation with Mason had reached critical mass.

Braxton hadn’t blamed Xander, but he knew he couldn’t continue to stay. It hurt too much for Xander to be near him, yet so far away.

Instead of talking to his mate and demanding to know what the

hell was going on, Braxton had shut down and closed up. He had protected his heart in the only way he knew how, effectively pushing his lover further away in the process.

Their communication skills sucked big, hairy monkey balls.

“Did you think that I blamed you? Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?” he asked.

Xander nodded into Braxton’s stomach, still clinging to him.

“So, you thought I was mad at you? That I didn’t want you anymore because you didn’t protect me?”

Xander nodded again, and suddenly things seemed much clearer.

“And here I thought you were angry with me.”

Xander finally released his death grip on him and leaned back to look up into his face. “Why on earth would I be mad at you?” He looked so genuinely confused that Braxton had to swallow down a chuckle.

“Come on, love, let’s go inside and talk. I bet your knees are killing you.” He untangled himself from Xander’s arms and stepped back, offering a hand to the big man.

Xander just rocked back on his heels and rose gracefully, as if he had not just spent the last five minutes on his knees in the gravel.

Braxton couldn’t contain his snort this time. “Show-off.”

Xander scooped him up, forcing him to wrap his arms and legs around all those hard muscles—not that he was complaining.

“So, why did you think I was mad at you?” Xander asked as he walked them back toward the house.

“Not so much mad, just tired of me,” Braxton mumbled distractedly as he basked in the feel of his lover’s arms around him for the first time in days. It felt wonderful.

“Huh?” Xander sounded even more confused than before.

“I figured you were tired of dealing with all my baggage,” Braxton explained. “I know you didn’t exactly sign on for the whole psychotic ex bit.”

“You are mine, and I will take you any way I can get you. Even if

we have to deal with that bastard ex of yours,” Xander added ruefully. “The only thing I’m tired of is seeing you hurt.”

“Okay.” Braxton breathed into Xander’s neck, trailing kisses along the sensitive skin there.

“Okay?”

Braxton was pleased to note that Xander’s voice was a bit unsteady, and he didn’t think it was from the exertion of carrying him.

“Yeah.” He nibbled his way up to Xander’s ear, sucked the lobe into his mouth, then ran his tongue along the outer shell. “Hurry,” he whispered, delighting in Xander’s shudder.

Xander reached the house, bounding up the steps and through the front door with Braxton in tow.

“Xander!”

“Braxton!”

“So, I guess you guys made up.”

The brothers’ voices called after them as they made their way through the living room to the staircase. Braxton grinned. They were his family, and he loved them, almost as much as he loved the man in his arms. He wasn’t sure when it had happened, but Braxton knew he was in love with Xander. The idea both scared and thrilled him.

“Hey, where are you—”

“Not now,” Xander growled, cutting Boston off. He flew up the stairs, two at a time, Braxton’s weight not slowing him in the least. He hurried into their room, falling on the bed, rolling so that Braxton landed on top of him. They both laughed, holding on tight to each other.

If felt like coming home. Right here was where Braxton belonged.

He placed his hands on either side of his mate’s face and looked deep into his honey brown gaze.

His mate. His destiny. His happy-ever-after.

Braxton leaned down to whisper his lips across Xander’s. Once more, he steeled himself, took the leap, and prayed Xander would catch him. “I love you, Alexander Brighton, with all my heart.”

Xander closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Not exactly the response Braxton was looking for. Not exactly a response at all, for that matter, so he waited, breath held, unmoving.

When Xander opened his eyes, he gave Braxton a look so tender, so adoring, that it melted him.

“And I love you back, Braxton Carmichael, more than anything. Please, don’t ever leave me, baby. I don’t think I could survive it.”

He reached up to cup the back of Braxton’s head and gently pulled him down, claiming his mouth in a kiss that had Braxton arching his back and moaning as his cock began to stir. Oh, he had missed this.

Braxton fisted both his hands in Xander’s shirt, clamped down on his lover’s hips with his thighs, and began to rock, grinding his erection against Xander’s. There had to be some way to get closer. He *needed* to be closer.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Xander whispered against Braxton’s neck as he licked a path up to his ear, “but I have to have you. Please, let me have you. Say yes.”

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Braxton shuddered at the raw desire in his lover’s voice. “Yes,” he breathed, even as he tried to work out the logistics in his mind. He had stitches on the back and front of his head, and his shoulder was still too sore to support his weight. Only one way left for it then. “Strip,” he ordered. “Then I want you on your back.”

Braxton stood and carefully removed his own clothes, mindful of his injuries. He snatched the bottle of lube from the nightstand and turned to see Xander, his gorgeous, naked body sprawled out on the bed for him. He leaned against a stack of pillows he’d pushed against the headboard, legs wide, his thick cock in hand.

“Hurry,” he growled.

Oh, hell yeah. Braxton popped the cap on the lube and poured a generous amount of the slippery liquid into his palm. He closed the lid, tossed the bottle—letting it fall where it may—and crawled up the

bed to straddle Xander's lap again. He lubed up both of their hard, aching shafts, then reached around with his good arm to prepare himself for Xander.

"Oh, damn, that's fucking hot, baby." Xander rose up and devoured Braxton's mouth in another soul-searing kiss. One of his large, calloused hands wrapped around their erections, slowly stroking them together. His other hand caressed Braxton's flank, across his belly, and up his chest before pinching and pulling at his nipples.

Braxton moaned loudly, his urgency increasing to the point of pain as he fucked himself on his fingers and rocked his slick cock against Xander's.

"Please." Xander's plea was part groan, part whimper, and sexy as hell.

Braxton removed his fingers and lined up Xander's fat, leaking crown with his quivering hole. Xander gripped his hips, digging into the flesh as he struggled to remain motionless. They each moaned loudly as Braxton pushed down hard, impaling himself on Xander's hard prick.

He rocked his hips, rising and falling, delighting in the feel of Xander deep inside him. "Fuck me. I need you to fuck me hard and fast, Xander. I want your scent on me. Want everyone to know I'm yours." Braxton spoke the deliciously naughty words he knew drove his mate wild. "I want to feel you come in my ass. You won't hurt me. Fuck me, Xander."

Xander growled long and low. He dug his heels into the bed, tilted his hips, and began an intense pace, slamming into Braxton's welcoming body.

"Ah! I missed you, baby," Xander ground out. "Fuck, you feel good."

Braxton moaned louder, arching his back to take Xander deeper. He could feel his orgasm cresting, his balls tightening, and the flash burn across his skin. Four days was far too long to go without this. He

reached down and stroked his leaking cock, pulling hard, desperate for release.

“Xander! Oh, oh, oh!” Throwing back his head, Braxton yelled out as his orgasm rocketed through him. His brain short-circuited, his ass clenched around his lover’s hard cock, and sticky, white streams of semen erupted from him, coating Xander’s chest and abs.

Braxton felt his lover tense, saw his eyes roll back in his head, heard the deep groan from his massive chest. He yelled out again as he felt Xander’s hot, wet release filling his depths.

He collapsed onto Xander’s sweat- and semen-slicked chest and smiled. He nuzzled into his mate’s neck as Xander stroked his spine lazily. Sex with his mate was always so intense, he often felt like he needed a long nap afterward.

Xander spoke, breaking the silence. “You want to go sit in the hot tub, baby? It’ll help your shoulder.” He slid his hand down to give Braxton’s butt a nice squeeze.

Braxton grinned and kissed the underside of Xander’s chin. “Sure. Do you want me to go ask the guys if they want to join us?”

“Anything you want, *chulo*.” Xander chuckled.

Braxton laughed along, feeling better than he had since the fire. He knew they would fight and argue. He knew they wouldn’t always agree on everything, but they were going to be just fine. “I love you, Xander.”

“Love you back, baby.”

Chapter Twelve

“Mmm, this is nice,” Xander murmured. His body felt sated and relaxed, the water was perfect, and he had his baby in his arms again. Life didn’t get much better.

“Yes, it is,” Braxton purred as he curled up beside him. “I’ve missed you, haven’t been able to sleep without you.”

“I’ve been sleeping downstairs because I was afraid I’d hurt you in my sleep,” Xander answered sheepishly. Their miscommunication had given him four miserable days. He didn’t want to repeat the experience anytime soon.

Braxton sat up, searching Xander’s face for the truth. “Really? That’s it? You weren’t mad at me?”

“No, *chulo*, I was never mad at you.” He kissed Braxton’s temple. “You know, now that you don’t have an apartment, you could move in here.”

“I thought I already lived here.” Braxton smirked.

Xander was so happy he grabbed Braxton and crushed the smaller man to his chest. “Thank you. You won’t regret it. I love you, baby.”

“Uh...Xander...” Braxton’s voice sounded strained. “I love you, too, but you’re crushing me.”

He abruptly released his mate and looked at him apologetically. “Oops. Sorry, I’m just really excited that you’ve decided to officially move in.”

“I’m happy too. I don’t know how much ‘moving in’ I’ll be doing, though. Everything I have left is already here.”

“So, what do you want for your birthday, Brax?” Xander knew his attempt to change the subject was not very smooth, but he didn’t want

to talk about the fire, or Mason, or anything else unpleasant.

Braxton took a deep breath and drew his lower lip between his teeth. Was it that bad? Xander would give him anything he asked for. He held his breath as he waited for him to speak.

Finally, Braxton blurted, "Can I get a new writing desk?"

Xander breathed out in relief. If that was all that Braxton wanted, Xander would make him a desk for every damn room of the house. "Of course. Do you have a specific desk in mind, or would you like me to make you one?"

Braxton just raised an eyebrow, looking too sexy to be legal.

Xander laughed. "Yes, I know how to make a desk. I won't screw it up, promise."

"Really? That would be awesome! You're the greatest." He kissed Xander's cheek. "I'm so excited! How long will it take you to finish it?"

"Not long, couple of weeks maybe, so it will be a late birthday present."

Braxton just waved his hand. "Oh, that's fine. Thank you, Xander." Braxton kissed his cheek again and continued to grin like a loon. "So, when is your birthday?"

"Next month."

"Your birthday is next month?" he yelped. "And you didn't tell me? Oh my God! What is wrong with you?"

Xander threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"What?" Braxton demanded, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at him.

The look just caused Xander to laugh even harder. "You should see your face. After all the shit we've been through, what gets you riled up is that I didn't tell you my birthday was coming up." He kissed the tip of Braxton's nose. "You are something else, Braxton Carmichael."

Braxton's lips twitched, and his nose wrinkled, but he still continued to glare at Xander. A few seconds later, he gave up the

pretense completely and gave him a smile that stopped his heart. “So, what day is it?”

“Uh, Friday,” Xander answered distractedly.

“No, genius, I meant your birthday.” Braxton snickered.

“Oh. The twenty-first.” Xander cocked his head to the side as an obscure thought occurred to him. “Why were you at your apartment that night?” His desire to stay away from unpleasant topics floated right out the proverbial window.

Braxton’s smile slipped from his face. “I went to work on some ideas for the new novel with Keeton. Then I went to my place to pick up my DVDs so Jackson and I could watch a movie.” His brow wrinkled, and he frowned. “I never got to pick up the pizza.”

“Pizza?”

“Yeah, you know how Jackson is. He looks like a baby, but he eats like an army.”

“True, and I am part canine, so you know I heard that, right?” Jackson laughed as he walked out of the sliding patio door to join them.

Braxton blushed. “Sorry, but you do look like a baby, Jacks.”

“So do you, *chulo*,” Xander crooned to him, causing Braxton to blush even more.

“So, I see you two have made up.” Boston climbed into the hot tub behind Jackson. “Though it’s a shame...he sure is pretty, Xander.”

Xander’s deep growl had them all laughing.

“Just teasing you, boss.” Boston punched him in the shoulder playfully.

“Now, wait just a damn minute! I do not look like a baby,” Braxton snapped.

“Yes, you do,” Talon called from the door. “And you’re acting like a brat. Shut it, runt.” He grinned and winked at Braxton.

“Where’s Logan?” Braxton asked, looking toward the door for the missing brother.

“Date,” they all four chorused.

“Oh, that’s right. He told me when he and that Mendoza chick were torturing me.” Braxton winced at the memory.

“Torturing you?” Boston asked, his eyebrows drawn together

“I wouldn’t put it past Mendoza. She’s a firecracker.” Jackson grinned and nodded. Xander had to agree with the kid on that one.

“They were, eh, relocating my shoulder, I guess you could call it,” Braxton replied to Boston’s question.

Now, it was Xander’s turn to wince. If he lived forever, he’d never get the image of his mate’s battered body out of his head.

“And what did he tell you about this date? Because he’s been clamped shut tighter than a virgin ass with me,” Talon laughed.

“Can’t imagine why,” Xander muttered sarcastically.

Braxton chuckled at the pair. “Just that she was smoking hot, Italian, and that he very much preferred to live until his date.”

“Uh, is there a reason why he wouldn’t have lived until tonight?” Jackson frowned in obvious confusion.

“Xander,” Braxton replied simply.

Everyone nodded as if that explained everything.

“Braxton?” The look of confusion melted away, and Jackson appeared more serious than Xander had ever seen him. He looked...angry. “Who hurt you?”

Ah. Xander knew how much his brothers cared about Braxton. He was family as far as they were concerned, and if you messed with one, you had to deal with the rest. He glanced at Talon and Boston, not surprised to find similar looks of menace on each of their faces.

Secretly, Xander was glad that someone else had broached the subject. He’d been wanting to ask Braxton what happened since he’d first seen him lying there on that stretcher behind the ambulance, but he held back, not wanting to cause his mate any more stress than necessary.

Braxton ducked his head and curled in tighter to Xander’s side, wrapping Xander’s arm around his torso like a security blanket. His distress was obvious—the scent wafting off of him sour, bitter.

“Baby,” Xander spoke quietly into Braxton’s hair as he nuzzled him, “who hurt you?”

“Mason,” Braxton answered in a clear voice, startling Xander. He was sure his lover wouldn’t want to talk about the incident.

“Who’s Mason?” Boston asked.

“My ex-lover. CliffsNotes version is that we were together for about a year. He moved in with me, and things were good.” Braxton snorted, shaking his head. “I came home early on our anniversary, wanting to surprise him, ya know? Well, it was certainly a surprise—for me, him, and the twink he was banging in our bed.”

Braxton’s lip curled up over his top teeth, and he growled low and threatening. Though a completely human sound, Xander was impressed.

“I kicked him out on the spot,” Braxton continued. “He kept coming back, though. He’d follow me when I’d go out, leave gifts for me on my front steps. He’d call me at all hours of the night. Then one day, I came home to find him going in through a broken window. That’s when I changed my number, sold my car, and put my house up for sale.”

“Did you get a restraining order?” Talon asked.

“No. What would that do? Unless the police catch him harassing me, there’s nothing they can do. It’s just a piece of paper, Talon. It doesn’t mean anything.”

No one knew what to say. They all knew Braxton was right.

“How did you get hurt? What happened?” Xander squeezed his mate to him. He was going to kill that asshole who hurt his man.

“Mason was in the house when I got there, digging through all the boxes we left. When he started to leave, I told him to give me back my keys. He laughed and kept walking, so I grabbed his arm. He sucker punched me, then hit me again while I was still surprised from the first hit. That one knocked me on the ground, and he kicked me until I passed out. When I came to, the place was on fire.” Braxton spoke quickly and without inflection. Then he stood, climbed out of

the tub, wrapped his towel around him, and walked into the house without saying another word to anyone.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, Xander had Braxton wrapped in his arms on the sofa. Talon and Boston had gone to work, Jackson was off on yet another date, and he and Braxton had the house to themselves.

“Are you okay, Braxton?” he asked.

“You never have Friday nights off. We should go out.” Braxton yawned, pulling the blanket up around his shoulders and snuggling in closer to him.

Xander didn’t miss the fact that Braxton had blown off his question, but he didn’t push it. Instead, he brushed the hair back from his mate’s face and asked, “Where would you like to go, baby?”

“Oh, nowhere. I was just saying that we *should* go out. I like it right where I am, though.”

Xander grinned like a fool. Yeah, he liked it too. A lot.

They sat quietly for several minutes, just enjoying the feel of their warm bodies pressed together. Xander combed his fingers through Braxton’s silky hair, using his other hand to hold his mate close to him. He was so content, he closed his eyes and sighed. He was almost asleep when Braxton spoke.

“Do you not want to claim me anymore? I mean, I know things have been crazy, but you haven’t brought it up in a while.” Braxton had his face pressed against Xander’s neck, muffling his words.

Xander’s heart hurt at the sadness in Braxton’s voice. He placed a finger under Braxton’s chin and gently urged his mate’s face upward. “Look at me, baby.” When Braxton looked up at him, Xander swore he would do anything not to ever see that look on his mate’s face again. “Do you remember what I told you about *sienotas*?”

Braxton’s brow wrinkled in concentration. “Your *sienota* is your destiny—your one true love, your soul mate, your other half.”

Xander smiled and nodded. "And?"

"And...you only get...one." Braxton's eyes widened, and he gripped Xander's shoulders. "Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm not." Xander chuckled. "Calm down, Braxton. Breathe."

"Xander, this isn't fair to you. What if you decide you hate being mated to me?"

"You're right. It's not fair." He pulled Braxton to him and kissed his lips softly. "You are so much more than I deserve, and I will never regret being your mate." He kissed Braxton's nose, his cheek, his jaw.

Braxton stretched his neck to give him easier access, and Xander grinned against the soft skin of Braxton's throat. He loved how responsive his man was. "There are things you need to know before I claim you, though."

"What?" Braxton sat up quickly, causing Xander to fall backward off the couch and land on the floor with a heavy thud. "Oh, I'm sorry, love. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Xander laughed, settling himself back on the sofa with his mate.

"Now, what things do I need to know?"

* * * *

"Shifters are not immortal, and we don't live forever, but we do live a bit longer than the average human. We heal quickly, and we aren't susceptible to diseases, so we tend to live well past our hundredth birthday," Xander explained. "Once we are fully mated, you will live as long as I do."

Braxton arched a brow. That was certainly an odd way to phrase it. He stared at his lover, taking in the tense set of his shoulders, the bowed head, the bottom lip Xander worried between his teeth. His lover was obviously hiding something that he worried would upset him.

Braxton didn't need to be able to smell emotions to sense the ones

warring inside of his mate. He sighed. “Whatever it is, just tell me.”

Xander’s sigh echoed his own. “If we do this, if you allow me to fully claim you as my mate...if you claim me in return,” He took another deep breath and looked Braxton full in the eyes, “we will be bonded. Forever.”

Braxton rolled his eyes. He already knew that, and he couldn’t have been more thrilled. He opened his mouth to say just that, but Xander cut him off.

“Our lives will be bound, twined, molded into one. When you feel sorrow, joy, anger, lust—I would feel those same emotions within myself. If you are wounded, I may not bleed, but I would feel your pain. If you sustained a fatal injury, I would also die, and vice versa.” Xander’s eyes never left Braxton’s face. “Are you willing to suffer that?”

Braxton did not answer right away. He was finally beginning to understand the full magnitude of what Xander asked from him. Would he be willing to die for his mate? The answer was confident and immediate. *Yes*. He already hurt when Xander did. He couldn’t stand to see his lover in any sort of pain.

As far as dying *with* Xander, he doubted he would survive without him anyway. He knew he certainly didn’t want to. Xander had become his entire world in a very short space of time. Braxton figured it was fate’s way of making sure neither of them had to face a cheap imitation of life without the other.

Take the leap.

“Yes,” Braxton said simply.

Xander shook his head. “It’s a huge sacrifice, Brax. Once you do this, it can’t be undone. You need to be sure. You have to keep the secret. We move around a lot. We never keep close friends because it’s too dangerous to let anyone get close to us.” He took Braxton’s hand and squeezed gently.

Braxton frowned. He opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned again. Finally, he asked, “I could still have Keeton, though, right?”

“Since Blondie already knows about shifters, I think that will be fine. Why don’t you talk to him about all of this? It is your decision, and I will take you any way I can get you, so no pressure.” Xander smiled tenderly at him.

Braxton crawled up into Xander’s lap, straddling his powerful thighs, and wrapped his arms around his lover’s thick, corded neck. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Not everyone understands how important Keeton is to me.”

“I know, baby. I know.” Xander pulled him close and gave him a quick peck on the lips. “We’re a family now—you, me, my brothers—and what’s important to you is important to us. Keeton will always be welcome here.”

Xander got it. He understood, and in that moment, Braxton fell in love with him all over again.

Chapter Thirteen

“You should probably go get packed, *chulo*.”

“What? Why am I packing? Are we going somewhere?”

“Just you. I’m working twelve-hour shifts this weekend, and I know how much you hate sleeping alone.” Xander smiled indulgently as he brushed the hair back from Braxton’s face. “After our talk last week, I called Keeton. He has cleared his schedule, and you are going to spend the weekend with him.”

Braxton didn’t even know what to say. Mason had always been jealous, feeling threatened by Braxton’s relationship with Keeton.

He launched himself at Xander, forcing the bigger man to catch him. “Thank you, for everything.”

Xander chuckled. “You’re welcome, for everything. Now, go get packed.” He sat Braxton on his feet and swatted his ass.

A few minutes later, Xander walked into the room where Braxton was busy packing. “Hey, baby, are you about ready?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Braxton raised his eyebrows.

Xander just laughed. “Never.” He walked up behind Braxton and wrapped his big arms around his waist. “Never,” he repeated in a thick whisper.

Uh-oh. Braxton knew that tone. He turned in Xander’s arms to face his mate. “Whoa there, big guy. I thought I was supposed to be leaving.” He placed both palms against Xander’s rock-hard chest and gave him a light push.

Nothing.

He rolled his eyes. It was like pushing on a brick wall. Kind of like talking to one, too, since Xander was now trailing kisses down

his neck and sliding his hands under Braxton's shirt.

"You could wait and go tomorrow," Xander breathed in his ear.

"Mmm, yes," Braxton mumbled as he pulled Xander's shirt over his head. "I can *so* go tomorrow."

The next thing he knew, he was completely naked, standing in the middle of the bedroom, with Xander on his knees in front of him.

"I'm going to miss you, baby." Xander took Braxton's straining erection in his hand and stroked slowly. "I haven't been away from you for so long since we've been together," he continued casually, as if he wasn't driving Braxton out of his mind. He leaned forward and licked the glistening drop of pre-cum from Braxton's cock. "Won't you miss me, *chulo*?"

"Yes. Fuck. Now suck my cock already." Braxton wasn't usually so aggressive in their lovemaking, but he knew his mate teased him on purpose. Xander loved it when he took charge, and since it gave Braxton a bit of an ego trip as well, he was happy to play along.

"Mmm, demanding, aren't we?" Xander swirled his tongue around the head of Braxton's cock, clamping his lips around the hard flesh and sucking lightly. Braxton moaned, doing his best to keep his hips still.

When Xander pulled back again, letting Braxton's prick slip from his mouth with a pop, Braxton thought he might hurt his mate. "Xander," he meant to growl, but it came out as more of a pathetic mewling. He was so hard he thought his dick might explode if he didn't get relief—preferably in the next three seconds.

Xander just chuckled as he slowly stroked Braxton's spit-slicked erection. "Yes, baby?"

Braxton twisted one of his hands in Xander's long, thick hair, jerking his mate's head back and effectively cutting off his laughter. He batted away Xander's hand and gripped his aching cock in his own. If Xander wasn't going to get him off, he'd finish the job himself. He closed his eyes and began stroking himself quickly, almost roughly.

It felt great. Not as good as Xander's mouth had, but it would get the job done. He opened his eyes to find Xander staring up at him through long lashes. The pure, animalistic lust on his lover's face pushed Braxton closer to the edge.

Xander grabbed Braxton's hips and pulled him forward. "Let me. I want you to fuck my mouth and come down my throat."

Braxton's balls drew up at the words and the images they produced. He knew he wasn't going to last long. With one hand still tangled in Xander's hair, Braxton pulled his mate's head toward him as he thrust his hips forward. Xander opened right up for him, enveloping his cock with the warm, moist heat of his mouth.

Braxton pushed forward again, and Xander swallowed him to the root. The sight of his lover's full, beautiful lips wrapped around him had Braxton growling, snapping his hips, pushing into Xander's mouth over and over. Although Xander was not delicate by any definition of the word, Braxton grew afraid he was being too rough with his mate. He couldn't stop himself, though. His balls tightened further, and he felt the burning heat low in his belly.

"Oh, God. Oh, yes. Yes, love. Feels so good," he panted.

Xander moaned his approval, sending faint vibrations down Braxton's shaft and straight to his balls. With one hand, he pushed Braxton's legs wider as he placed one finger from his other hand in his mouth, alongside Braxton's slick flesh. The realization of what Xander meant to do tripped Braxton's heartbeat into a full gallop.

Xander pulled his now slippery finger from his mouth, reached between Braxton's legs, and slid it home into his tight, clenching hole.

"Oh my...fucking...hell. Too good. Can't last...Oh, don't stop."

Xander curled his finger, rubbing against Braxton's sweet spot. Braxton froze, and stars exploded behind his closed eyelids. He yelled out Xander's name, spilling his seed down his mate's throat.

He pulled his spent cock from Xander's mouth and unwound his fingers from all that beautiful hair. He collapsed into Xander's arms,

sated, happy, and content. Kissing the hollow of his lover's throat, he sighed, smiling lazily. "Thank you."

"Anytime," Xander whispered into his hair.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Braxton reached between their bodies and groped the hard bulge behind Xander's zipper. "Need me to take care of this?" he purred.

"Yes, I did it on purpose. I love it when you lose control and take what you want." Xander gently lifted him out of his lap and rose to his feet. "And I'm fine."

Braxton eyed Xander's groin. A small, wet stain darkened the fabric where he leaked pre-cum, and his zipper looked in danger of bursting. It was obvious that he needed to come, so why wouldn't he let Braxton take care of him?

"What's wrong, Xander?" He stood and stepped closer to his mate.

"Nothing."

Xander's short, crisp reply made Braxton pause. *What the hell?* "Xander?"

"I said it's nothing, and I'm fine. Finish packing, baby." Xander moved toward the door as if to leave the room.

"Oh, no you don't." Braxton grabbed Xander's forearm to stop him.

He swung around so abruptly that Braxton stumbled backward, lost his balance, and fell to the floor on his ass.

Xander knelt at his side instantly, pulling him to his feet. "Shit. I'm sorry, baby. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Xander." Braxton rolled his eyes and pushed against Xander's chest. "Get off me."

Xander released him and took a step back, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"What the hell is going on with you, Xander? You come in here and tease me until I basically attack you, and now you act like I have rabies or something." Braxton threw his hands up in exasperation

when Xander merely stared at him. "Fine. Whatever. Don't talk to me."

Xander sat on the edge of the bed, buried his face in his palms, and breathed deeply. "It's the moon," he mumbled.

"What?"

He dropped his hands and looked up at Braxton. "The full moon. It's close. It's harder for me to control my...more basal instincts near the full moon. That's why I forced you to take control." Xander reached for him, and Braxton went willingly into his mate's arms. "I don't want to hurt you."

Braxton snorted. "First of all, you didn't *force* me to do anything." He kissed Xander's nose. "Second, you won't hurt me." He held up a hand to forestall Xander's argument. "And on the other hand, your communication skills leave something to be desired. Was it really so hard to just tell me?"

Xander rolled his eyes and smiled. "You're right. Sorry, but I still don't want to risk it. So, get packed, and go have fun with Keeton. I'll see you when you get back." Xander kissed him long and hard, then pulled back with a jerk, panting. "Go."

"And if I don't want to go?" Braxton wanted to see Keeton, but the thought of being away from Xander for several days was not an appealing one. "When is the full moon?"

"Saturday," Xander answered immediately.

"My birthday? Oh, well that stinks! I want to see you on my birthday." Braxton pouted.

Xander smiled again and shook his head. "I'll see you Sunday evening. We can celebrate properly then."

Braxton sighed. "I still think you're being ridiculous, but if it will make you feel better, then fine. I'll go. It's only three days."

"True. Even you should be able to stay out of trouble for three days."

Braxton didn't think that was fair at all. Sure, he'd had a couple of accidents since he'd come to live with Xander, but they weren't his

fault. Even the time he'd backed Xander's truck into the fence...well, he just wouldn't count that one. That damn fence was always jumping up behind him.

"Right." Talking about the full moon made him think of the conversation he'd had with the brothers about being "cursed." Talon told him to ask Xander. This seemed as good of a time as any.

"Why do you all think you're cursed?" Braxton bit his tongue. He hadn't exactly meant to blurt it out like that.

Xander sighed, but nodded. "Shifters are the children of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec goddess of the moon. Vampires, they are the children of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the moon."

"Vampires?" Braxton yelled.

Xander actually snorted. "Yeah. Snobby bunch of assholes."

"Huh?" Braxton's head was beginning to hurt.

"Brax, you didn't really think that shifters were the only supernatural beings out there, did you? C'mon, that is like saying Earth is the only inhabited planet in the universe. Absurd."

Aliens? Now they were talking about aliens? Vampires? Moon goddesses? He wondered if elves and fairies existed as well. Braxton had no idea what to say, so he said nothing. Xander looked at him with concern, but continued his story.

"Coyolxauhqui and Artemis were constantly bickering over whose creation was superior. Coyolxauhqui felt her shifters were superior because we were not dependent on the moon. We didn't have to hide from the daylight."

Braxton nodded. It was somehow comforting to know that at least some of the myths were true.

"So, Artemis became enraged, more or less threw a temper tantrum, and cursed the children of Coyolxauhqui. Every generation, each shifter colony would produce an offspring enslaved to the moon."

Braxton opened his mouth but shut it quickly when Xander held up a hand, halting him.

“Shifters can change their form at any time. The full moon calls to us. It excites us. Most choose to shift, to run and play in the moonlight, but they are not forced. My brothers and I are. When the moon is full, those like us will shift into our beasts, whether we want to or not.”

Braxton’s eyes widened, and he was speechless.

“Our pelts are pale, like moonbeam, making it nearly impossible to blend in with our surroundings. The magic surrounding us when we shift is so powerful that it will drive anyone near us to insanity within minutes.”

“But, I saw you shift,” Braxton protested. After all the claiming, bonding, mating, and dying talk the week before, he had wanted to see Xander shift.

Xander was the most gorgeous white tiger Braxton had ever seen. His fur was silky soft, and he made the most adorable purring sounds. Not that Braxton would ever tell his big, macho alpha that.

“Anyone, except others like us, and our mates.”

“So, I won’t ever be able to see your brothers when they shift? Ever?”

Xander shook his head. “No. Never.”

“So, like, mumble-and-drool, straightjacket-and-padded room insane?”

“Some, yes, and others are more along the lines of flip-out, Michael Myers, ax-murderer insane.”

“You know this all sounds crazy, right? Goddesses and vampires and curses?” Braxton shook his head. “And you said each colony would produce one white-coated shifter per generation. How do you explain Talon and Logan? They were obviously from the same colony.”

“I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the legend that was told to me when I was a child. As far as Talon and Logan go...they’re twins. That’s the best explanation anyone has been able to come up with.”

“What happened when you shifted for the first time?” Braxton

asked quietly.

“I told you before that we shift for the first time when we hit puberty, and it is very difficult to control.” Xander waited for Braxton to nod in acknowledgement. “It was my fifteenth birthday, and we were all gathered around the table to cut the cake.”

Xander’s eyes had a faraway look in them, and he spoke quietly, sadly. “I shifted right there at the kitchen table. My mother started crying. My father was cursing as he rushed my sisters out of the room. I kept trying like hell to shift back, but I just couldn’t do it.”

A single tear fell from Xander’s watery eyes. Braxton reached up to brush it away even as he let his own tears fall freely. The pain in Xander’s voice tore at his heart, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear the rest of the story.

“I remember my mother saying that she loved me and then running from the room. My father came back, opened the kitchen door, and told me to go. He said I could never come back, or the rest of the colony would kill me. Then he ran from the room after my mother.”

Xander’s eyes had a dead look to them that scared Braxton. He wrapped his arms tightly around his mate and just held him. Braxton had lost his parents when he was young, but at least they hadn’t sent him away. He couldn’t even imagine the pain Xander must have felt.

“I didn’t even know why they were sending me away,” Xander continued. “I just ran. A few hours later, I found a small stream to drink from, and that’s when I saw my reflection in the water.” He finally returned Braxton’s embrace, let go, and cried.

Braxton just tightened his grip on Xander and cried with him. “I’m sorry, Xander. I’m sorry you had to go through that, but you have us now. Me, Logan and Talon, Jackson, and Boston—we are your family now. I love you, babe.”

Xander’s sobs faded, and he leaned back to give Braxton a small smile. “I love you back, Braxton. You and my brothers are all the family I need.”

Chapter Fourteen

“What exactly are we looking for?” Keeton asked as he walked back into the room with two bottles of orange soda.

Braxton took the offered bottle and shook his head. “I’m not really sure.” He sat on the floor amidst the three boxes of books he had picked up from The Book Doctor. He’d dropped them off ages ago to be rebound and had completely forgotten about them. He had already looked through the few books he had at Xander’s house and found nothing.

He knew he probably should have told Xander what he was up to, but he also knew his mate would just worry and obsess about it. Braxton was not about to give him any reason to be distracted. In Xander’s line of work, distractions got you killed.

Besides, there wasn’t really anything to tell. Yet.

Keeton sat down and pulled a box to him. “Well, that’s helpful. Good thing, too, because here I was thinking that this might be difficult.”

Braxton glared at his best friend. “Your sarcasm is not lost on me, Kee.” He sighed. “I told you. Mason looked crazy. He was digging through my boxes at the apartment, and he asked where the books were. None of them are his, or worth much, so I’m assuming there’s something hidden in one of these books.”

“Like a hidden code or a piece of paper or...what?” Keeton flipped through a copy of *Peter Pan*.

“Just look for anything that shouldn’t be there—bookmarks, writing, underlining, highlighting.”

“So, what’s going on with the arson investigation?” Keeton asked

as he continued to flip pages.

“Xander said it was definitely arson. The police questioned Mason, but he made it sound like we’d just had a lovers’ quarrel and he had left to give us both a chance to cool down.” Braxton rolled his eyes and grabbed a book from the box closest to him.

Keeton actually laughed. “I bet Z-Dog was pissed about that.”

Braxton nodded. “Oh, yeah. Anyway, there wasn’t any evidence against Mason, other than he’d been there before the fire started. Even the 911 call came from one of those prepaid cell phones. They let him go.”

“What? They just let him go?” Keeton screeched.

“They didn’t have any evidence against him, Keeton. The fingerprints they found on the gas can didn’t even match Mason’s.” Braxton shook his head and sighed again. “I don’t know. C’mon, we have a lot of books to look through.”

Keeton shrugged. “Okay then. Let’s do this, Nancy Drew.”

* * * *

Three hours later, Braxton concluded that their investigative skills were more in line with Inspector Clouseau than Nancy Drew. They had been through every page of every book in every box.

“Bummer.” Keeton smiled. “Is this all of your books?”

“Yeah,” Braxton answered automatically. “Wait! No!” He jumped to his feet and began to pace. “My copy of *The Odyssey* is in my locker at the gym. Damn it!” He smacked himself in the forehead.

“You read at the gym?”

“When I’m on the stationary bike,” Braxton answered defensively.

“You need to tell him, Brax.”

“There’s nothing to tell!” he snapped. He didn’t need to ask who Keeton was talking about.

Keeton raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow, but otherwise did

not comment on his outburst.

“Sorry,” Braxton mumbled. “I know you’re right, and I will tell Xander, just not yet. I don’t want to worry him if it’s nothing.”

“Brax—”

A loud crash sounded from the front of the house, followed by the rhythmic blaring of Braxton’s car alarm.

He raced to the front door with Keeton close behind, wrenched open the door, and stared openmouthed. Braxton’s Mustang was in flames. Smoke poured from the broken windshield. Fire danced along a twisted piece of cloth that had been shoved into...the gas tank.

“Oh shit,” Braxton breathed. He wrapped his arms around Keeton and threw them both to the floor just inside the front door.

The explosion was deafening. Keeton’s little cottage shook, and the two front windows shattered inward with the force of it.

Braxton waited a minute to make sure it was safe before he raised his head slowly and allowed Keeton to do the same. They climbed to their feet, walked silently, side by side, to one of the broken windows, and stared out at the still burning remains of Braxton’s car.

Keeton spoke without looking away from the wreckage. “So, can we tell Xander now?”

* * * *

Xander flopped over for what felt like the thousandth time, trying to fall asleep. He punched his pillow in frustration and sighed. He missed his baby. He was used to coming home from work and wrapping himself around Braxton’s warm, naked, still sleeping body. Braxton would snuggle in close, whisper, “*Welcome home, love,*” and they would sleep.

Even when Braxton wasn’t in bed with him, Xander knew he was close by. Now, the only scent of Braxton was what lingered on the sheets, and that was more torture than comfort. What the hell had he been thinking sending Braxton off to Keeton’s for the *whole damn*

weekend?

Maybe the guilt kept him awake. He hated lying to his lover. He *did* have shift change that weekend, but had requested Saturday off. He just needed to put distance between himself and Braxton until after the full moon. All of his senses shifted into overdrive around his mate, and Xander wouldn't risk hurting him.

It was Braxton's birthday, though. Maybe he could call, just a quick call.

Xander groaned to himself. His mate would be home in less than twenty-four hours. He could wait that long.

His cell phone rang with Braxton's special ringtone. He nearly threw himself off the bed to get to it. "Hey, baby," he said into the phone a bit breathlessly. "I was just thinking about you."

"Aww, I miss you, too, Pooky Bear," the voice on the phone teased. "I was thinking about you as well, Z-Dog."

"Keeton." Xander chuckled. He just couldn't help but like the little blond. "What's up? Where's Braxton?"

Keeton's tone became serious. "You need to get over here. Now."

Xander went on instant alert. He jumped up and began pulling on his clothes. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Just get over here."

"Keeton," Xander growled. He was tugging on his boots when a sudden thought sent him into a full panic. "Is Braxton okay? Answer me!" he barked.

"He's fine. Physically. Just hurry, Xander." Then the line went dead.

What the hell did that mean? Something had happened. Something *bad* had happened. Xander ran out of the house, jumped into his truck, pushed the gas pedal to the floor, and broke every traffic law in the state of Georgia to get to his mate.

* * * *

Braxton paced in front of the still smoldering car. Fortunately, he and Keeton had managed to put out the worst of the flames with extinguishers from the garage. He bit his lip and breathed in deeply through his nose.

“Shouldn’t the police be here by now?”

Keeton shuffled his feet guiltily. “I didn’t call the police. But, I will when...” He trailed off, his eyes glued to his shoes.

“Keeton?”

“Now, Brax, don’t be mad at me. I’m scared,” Keeton whispered. “This is insane.”

Before Braxton could reply, a big black Dodge Ram came barreling down the street and skidded to a screeching halt in front of Keeton’s cottage. Xander jumped down from the cab and came striding up the driveway. He stopped beside the charred remains of what had been Braxton’s car and stared, horrified, before zeroing in on Braxton himself.

Braxton took three running steps and launched himself at Xander. He buried his face in his mate’s chest and breathed in deeply.

Xander held him in the security of his arms, and Braxton could feel him shudder. From fear, anger, or relief, he wasn’t sure.

“I’m scared,” Braxton admitted.

“It’s okay. I’m going take you home now, okay? I need you to come home now, *chulo*.”

Braxton just nodded.

“Should we call the police?” Keeton asked in a quiet, subdued voice.

“No. I mean yes. I mean...I just...I have to take him home.” Xander pulled Braxton closer to him. “I need to take him someplace safe right now. I’ll call when we get home and send Talon to take care of it.”

Braxton studied Keeton’s worried expression, the way his hands twisted together, how he chewed on his lower lip. Keeton was afraid, and for good reason. Although it was Braxton’s car that had been

destroyed, it had happened at Keeton's house. He couldn't risk his best friend.

"I think Keeton needs to come with us," he whispered to Xander.

Xander stared down into Braxton's face for a full minute before he turned his attention to Keeton. "In the truck, Blondie."

Keeton didn't hesitate. He hurried around and clambered in through the passenger door as Xander pushed Braxton in through the driver's door. Braxton slid to the middle of the bench seat, took his friend's hand, and squeezed. "Everything will be okay, Kee."

* * * *

"Yes...yes...right...yes...okay...of course...thank you, sir. I just need to get this taken care of, and I will be in Monday night."

Braxton sat in his favorite overstuffed armchair, watching Xander pace the living room with the phone to his ear. He was on the phone with his chief, arranging to trade shifts with another firefighter. Braxton still couldn't believe the asshole had lied to him.

"Drink," Xander ordered as he passed by, pointing one long finger at the glass in Braxton's hand.

Braxton sighed and sipped the brandy in his glass. Xander was pissed.

Keeton—the dirty, rotten traitor—had sang like a canary on the way back from the cottage. He had told Xander all about what Mason had said at the town house, what he and Braxton thought it might mean, and how they had spent hours searching through Braxton's books.

Xander had listened, never saying a word. In fact, "drink" was the first thing Xander had said to Braxton since getting in the pickup at Keeton's.

Once they had made it home, however, Xander had had plenty to say to his brothers. Now, Talon and Keeton were off dealing with the police and Braxton's car. With Keeton cosigning, and his name on the

damn thing, Braxton really hadn't had an argument to tag along.

Boston and Jackson were running the woods behind Keeton's house, trying to find...Well, he wasn't exactly sure what they were looking for.

He envied Logan. Logan had taken advantage of his three days off and was now in Atlanta with his new girlfriend, Mariah.

Braxton sat his drink on the end table and stood up. He had screwed up by not telling Xander about the books, yes, but he would not sit there and be glared at like some three-year-old in time-out.

"Sit!" Xander barked at him as he snapped his phone shut.

He looked lethal, and the rational part of Braxton's brain said he should do as he'd been told. The larger, more pissed-off part, however, had him striding across the room to the staircase.

"I am not a fucking dog," Braxton shot over his shoulder.

He took the stairs two at a time up to his room. He'd barely made it through the door when Xander stomped in behind him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Taking a piss," Braxton answered calmly. He went into the bathroom and did his business. "Wanna shake it for me?" He smiled in satisfaction at Xander's answering growl. He zipped up and washed his hands before strolling back out to the bedroom.

"I told you to stay," Xander shot at him immediately.

"Actually, you told me to sit, but either way, like I said downstairs, I am not a dog. Nor am I a child." Braxton crossed his arms. "So, you can take your commands and go fuck yourself with them."

Xander gaped at him for a moment before he found his voice. "You are acting like a child, which is why I am treating you like a child. What on earth were you thinking? Or were you thinking? Why would you keep something like that from me?"

"Well, I knew you would freak out!" Yeah. That sounded like a brilliant defense, even to Braxton.

Xander just raised an eyebrow.

“I was going to tell you. After the weekend,” Braxton mumbled. “I just didn’t want you to worry. I didn’t think it was such a big deal.”

“You almost died, Braxton!” Xander was back to yelling. “That’s not a big deal? I’m not supposed to worry about that?”

Braxton flinched, taking a step back from the hostility in Xander’s voice. “I didn’t think—”

“No, you didn’t think,” Xander interrupted. “That asshole beat you bloody, then set your house on fire. While you were in it! Then he follows you and blows up your fucking car, and it never occurred to you to tell someone that you might know what he’s after?”

“I didn’t know for certain what he was after. I didn’t want to say anything until I checked it out first. And, I’m not sure it was Mason that blew up my car. I mean, I didn’t see anyone.” Braxton knew he was doing a pretty poor job of defending himself.

“Damn it! Are you really that stupid?” Xander roared.

Braxton bit his lip and opened his eyes wide. He had never seen Xander like this. Xander never lost his temper, never yelled. For the first time, Braxton truly appreciated how big and intimidating his mate actually was.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

* * * *

Ah hell. It just wasn’t right. Xander wanted to be mad. He had the right to be mad. Braxton looked so pitiful, though, that it broke his heart. He took a deep breath, then another. If he was being honest with himself, he was more scared than angry. This made the third time someone had tried to take Braxton from him.

Braxton was safe, though—right in front of him, close enough to touch—and all Xander could do was yell at him. He was treating the man he loved like a...dog. *Shit.*

“Oh, *chulo*,” he breathed. He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, reaching a hand out for Braxton. “Come here, baby.”

To Xander's immense relief, Braxton didn't hesitate. He crawled up into his lap and wrapped his arms around Xander's neck.

"I'm so damn sorry," Braxton whispered again.

Xander rested his forehead against Braxton's and closed his eyes. "Me, too." He sat back and framed Braxton's face with his hands. "No more secrets. We're a team, remember? You can't keep things like this from me."

Braxton grinned. "I promise. Go team!"

Xander rolled his eyes, but couldn't hold back his smile. "I love you, goofball."

"Love you back," Braxton whispered as he ran his nose along the underside of Xander's jaw. "I want to be with you forever," he breathed. His tongue snaked out, tracing along the curve of Xander's ear, then sucking the lobe into his mouth. "I'm ready."

Xander tilted his head back to give his lover better access. Braxton kissed his way back down his neck and nibbled at his collarbone. Xander liked the idea of forever. What he really liked the idea of was pressing his mate into the mattress and having his way with him.

Xander was about to do just that when Braxton's meaning penetrated the lusty haze surrounding his brain.

He pushed Braxton back, holding him by his shoulders, searching his face. "Do you mean it? You want...I mean, you would...You'll let me keep you?"

This time, Braxton rolled his eyes. "I'm not a stray cat or something you picked up in the lost and found." He smiled that special heart-stopping smile that always turned Xander to putty. "But yes, I mean it. I want, I would, and I'll let you keep me."

Xander beamed like an idiot. He knew it, but really couldn't bring himself to care. Braxton was his, truly his.

He kissed his mate slowly, sweet and tenderly. He poured every bit of his joy, anticipation, and love into the kiss. "There is nothing that I wouldn't do, be, give, or fight to keep you safe and happy.

Anything you want. Anything you need. All you ever have to do is ask.”

Braxton just continued to smile. “All I want or need is for you to love me back, Alexander Brighton. This right here,” he pressed himself closer to Xander, “makes me feel safe and happy. I love you.”

Xander swallowed around the lump in his throat. He nuzzled his mate’s neck, murmuring against the soft skin, “Mmm, my sweet baby. I want you, Brax. I *need* you,” he growled.

He abruptly sat up straight and pushed Braxton gently from his lap. He wanted his mate more than he had ever wanted anything, but he wouldn’t risk it—not with the full moon only a few hours away. He was terrified that he would lose control and somehow hurt the little man. Braxton was just so small and fragile, so...breakable. Xander would never be able to live with himself if he ever hurt him.

Xander stood and began to pace around the room. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled without looking at his mate. He could smell the lust and desire, mingled with the frustration, coming from Braxton. “I can’t. I just can’t. I won’t. Not tonight.”

Braxton positioned himself directly in front of Xander, blocking his escape. When he finally looked at his lover, Xander was surprised to see the smirk on his face. Braxton pushed him roughly back toward the bed until the back of his knees hit the mattress and he sat down heavily. Braxton crawled back up into his lap, straddling him, pushing him to lie back flat on the bed.

He leaned over until they were nose to nose and whispered seductively, “Let me be in charge then. Let me take care of you.” He nipped at Xander’s bottom lip, pulling a strangled moan from him.

If his little man kept it up, Xander wasn’t sure how much longer he could continue to resist.

“I want in, Xander. Let me in.”

Chapter Fifteen

Braxton froze as he felt Xander tense beneath him. He eased back to look into his lover's face, worried that he'd gone too far.

Xander stared back with a look that he couldn't decipher, which only made him more nervous. He had become very good at reading Xander's facial expressions over the last few weeks.

"I've never let anyone..." Xander trailed off.

Never? Braxton tried to mask his surprise. He supposed it really shouldn't have shocked him. Xander was an alpha—the *alpha*. "It's okay, love," he said quietly. "You don't have to. I know some guys just aren't built that way."

He started to climb off Xander, but his mate was having none of that. He gripped Braxton's thighs, holding him in place.

"I want to try." Xander swallowed hard. "Just...go slow."

"You don't have to. You have nothing to prove to me. I want you to want it, not just agree to it because you think that's what I want." He caressed Xander's face. "I don't need this. I'm happy with the way things are."

Xander shook his head. "No. I want to do this. I just never trusted anyone enough before. I trust you." He pulled Braxton's mouth to his in a fiercely possessive kiss.

Braxton sat back, gasping for air. It took everything in him to ask one simple question. "Are you sure?"

Xander pulled Braxton's shirt over his head and latched on to one of his nipples, sucking, biting, and licking. Braxton groaned, his eyes rolling back in his head. He guessed he had his answer. He quickly divested Xander of his shirt, then slid down his gorgeous body to

remove his boots and socks.

Soon, they were both naked, rolling around on the bed, devouring each other in hot, steamy kisses. “Hands and knees, love,” Braxton ordered as he reached for the lube on the nightstand.

He positioned himself behind Xander and smoothed his palms down Xander’s perfect, muscled ass. “Breathe. Try to relax, babe.” Braxton could see the tension in Xander’s body, in the tightly corded muscles along his back. He knew how nervous his mate must be. He was going to have to do something about that, or there was no way that Xander would enjoy this.

He placed open-mouth kisses along Xander’s lower back, moving slowly down to the two beautiful globes of his ass. Xander’s breathing became faster and more ragged with each stroke of Braxton’s tongue, but he was still tense. Braxton bit lightly at the crease where Xander’s ass met his thighs. His gasp of surprise, followed by a long groan, gave Braxton an idea.

He bit again, harder this time, sucking the warm flesh into his mouth. Xander’s moan sent molten desire straight to Braxton’s cock. He straightened, smoothing his hands over Xander’s ass again, then gave it a sharp smack.

Xander cried out, pushing his hips back into Braxton’s crotch. So, his big alpha male had a bit of kink in him. Nice to know. Braxton landed another smack to his other cheek, harder than the last. Encouraged by his lover’s response, he continued to spank him, alternating sides, until Xander’s ass glowed brightly.

“You should see your ass, love. So beautiful. All red and hot for me.” He pushed Xander’s legs further apart with his knees and reached between them to grip his turgid flesh.

Oh fuck, Xander was hard as stone, pre-cum leaking freely from the thick head of his cock. Braxton was so hard it felt tantamount to pain. As much as he wanted to bury himself inside Xander *immediately*, it was more important that he make this good for his mate. He would rather cut off his own dick than ever hurt Xander.

Braxton grabbed the lube and poured a sizeable amount over his fingers. He spread Xander open with one hand and used just one lubed finger to trace circles around Xander's tight opening. As expected, Xander tensed. Braxton kept his touch light and continued his slow caress of the twitching muscles with his finger, never entering.

"Shh, relax. I'm going to make this so good for you."

He lay on his back and slid his head between Xander's spread knees until he captured his lover's thick, pulsing cock in his mouth. Xander cried out and lowered his hips, pushing his length all the way to the back of Braxton's throat. Braxton hummed his approval, never stopping the intimate touch with his finger.

When Xander started to hump into his mouth in earnest, Braxton very slowly inserted his slick finger, slipping just the tip past the guarding ring of Xander's anus. When Xander didn't react, he pushed gently, sliding his finger deeper into his lover's hot channel.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. What are you doing to me?" Xander cried as he pushed back against the invading digit.

Braxton smiled around the hard shaft in his mouth. He continued to work his finger in and out of Xander's ass for several moments as he worked his lips up and down his cock. He pulled his finger free, smiling again at the whimper of protest from his mate. He pushed back in with two fingers, as far as he could go, twisting, turning, stretching.

"Ahhh! Oh, God. Feels so good. I'm not going to last long."

That was Braxton's cue. He pulled back, inserting a third finger and swallowing Xander to the root all in one swift movement. He curled his fingers, hitting Xander's prostate as he worked his throat muscles around the thick cock in his mouth. Xander yelled, his body stilling as he erupted down Braxton's throat.

Braxton moved quickly but carefully, removing his fingers, wiggling out from under his lover, grabbing the lube, and slicking his aching cock. He was so turned on, he didn't know if he would even

make it long enough to get inside his mate.

Xander lay with his chest and head on the mattress, his ass still in the air, his body shaking from his orgasm.

“Are you ready for me, babe?” Braxton asked, holding on to his control by a thread.

* * * *

Xander grunted. He was far beyond anything resembling coherent speech. Though not certain, he thought he may have just had his brains sucked out through his cock. He wiggled his ass, pushing back against Braxton.

He felt the head of Braxton’s hard prick nudge against his opening. He wanted this. “Do it,” he managed to rasp.

He pushed in slowly, and Xander winced at the burn as his lover breached him. Braxton continued to move slowly until he seated himself to the hilt, then stilled, giving Xander a chance to adjust to his thickness.

Xander breathed deeply, trying to work his way through the burn and the pressure. He felt so full. For such a small man, Braxton’s cock was definitely not size proportionate. Xander began to have doubts that this was going to work.

“I’m going to pull back, and I want you to push out, babe,” Braxton coaxed as he ran his hands up and down Xander’s spine. He slowly began to slide out, and Xander did as he was told.

Ah. It was like magic. The burn began to subside, and the fullness became something he craved. His cock twitched, and it slowly began to fill again. “Fuck me,” he ordered.

“Remember who’s in charge here,” Braxton scolded, pushing in quickly as he gave a hard slap to Xander’s ass.

Xander groaned and closed his eyes. Damn, he loved that sharp bite of pain. He’d thought he’d lose his mind when Braxton had spanked him earlier. Picking up on his cues, Braxton’s hands began a

steady rhythm, spanking Xander's ass with each outstroke. Xander's breathing sped, and he clenched the sheets tightly in his fist.

Braxton abandoned the spanking, and Xander groaned when he felt his mate's fingernails clawing down his back. It wasn't hard enough to draw blood, but he imagined he would have some nice marks from it. The thought of Braxton marking him sent his head spinning. Then Braxton's hand fisted in his hair, pulling Xander's head back roughly as his other hand landed a sharp slap to his ass.

Xander cried out, rocking back against his lover. So swamped in sensations, so turned on, his body felt like it was on fire. He didn't know how much more he could take, but at the same time, he never wanted it to stop.

Braxton gripped his hips with both hands and began to pound into him in earnest. "Let yourself go, babe. Want to feel your tight ass squeeze my cock," he ground out. "Come for me, Xander. Show me how much you want me."

Xander braced himself on one hand and used the other to fist his throbbing prick. Braxton leaned forward slightly, changing the angle, and nailed his prostate. Xander threw his head back, yelling out his release, as hot, creamy ropes of cum shot from his slit, coating his hand and the sheets below him. Braxton gave two more quick jerks of his hips before he froze, crying out Xander's name, and coating his clenching tunnel with his warm seed.

He pulled out gently and collapsed on the bed beside Xander, lazily running his fingertips up and down Xander's side as he gasped for air. "Are you okay?" he managed to ask through his labored breathing.

Xander turned and pulled his man into his arms, kissing his forehead. "Amazing," he breathed.

He tucked Braxton's head up under his chin and squeezed him gently. They needed to clean up, but he didn't think he could move. Xander smiled contentedly. It could wait. He squeezed his mate again and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Braxton woke up and reached for Xander. Nothing. The space next to him was empty, but still warm. He frowned until he heard the shower running in their bathroom. His face split into a mischievous grin as he jumped from the bed and went to find Xander.

Pausing just inside the door, he admired his lover's slick, naked body through the glass of the shower door. Xander's head tilted back under the spray, one hand wrapped around his beautiful cock, the other gently tugging at his balls. Braxton's mouth watered. His man was simply gorgeous.

Braxton slid one hand slowly down his chest, stopping to tweak his nipples, and finally palmed his suddenly hard shaft. He stroked himself slowly, lightly, biting his lip to contain his moan of pleasure. He watched as Xander's hand began to move faster over his own hard flesh, his chest rising and falling as his breathing turned to shallow panting. Braxton knew his mate was getting close, but he wasn't about to let Xander come without him.

"Need a hand with that?" he asked in a low, husky voice as he walked slowly toward the shower.

Xander's head snapped up, and his eyes widened briefly. Then he raised the hand that had been cupping his balls and crooked a finger at Braxton.

Braxton's pulse sped along with his breathing as he opened the shower door and climbed in, immediately pressing himself against his lover.

"On your knees," Xander commanded.

Braxton's entire body shook with his desire. Oh yeah. He loved it

when Xander went all alpha male on him. He lowered himself to his knees and looked up into his lover's face. The love and desire warring for dominance on Xander's handsome visage turned Braxton to goo. He knew that he wanted to be with this man for the rest of his life. Their lives. He was ready. Whatever his man wanted, whatever he needed, Braxton wanted to give it.

Xander reached down, pushed the wet hair back from Braxton's brow, and cupped the back of his head. Meeting no resistance, he pulled Braxton's head toward his jutting cock. "Suck me, baby. Show me what that talented mouth can do."

Braxton moaned as he dived forward, capturing the bulbous head in his mouth. He twirled his tongue around the crown, then licked at the weeping slit. Xander groaned above him, his fingers fisted in Braxton's hair, and he pushed forward with his hips. Braxton smiled to himself when he felt Xander's spongy flesh tickle the back of his throat. He wanted—*needed*—Xander to lose control.

He was just beginning to get into it when Xander suddenly lifted him away and pressed him roughly against the shower wall. Xander's body covered his, and he growled in Braxton's ear. "Why are you doing this to me? I don't want to hurt you, but I can't resist you either." He ran his tongue up Braxton's neck, nipping lightly at his earlobe. "Do you want this fat cock up your ass that much? So much that you would risk me hurting you?"

He pushed away abruptly, turning his back on Braxton.

Braxton couldn't help but grin. He was about to get the fucking of his life. "Claim me."

Xander snapped his head around to look at Braxton over his shoulder. "What?"

"You heard me. Make love to me. Take me right here and now, claim me, and make me yours forever."

"Are you sure?" Xander turned slowly, never taking his eyes from Braxton's.

"Yes." Short and simple, there was nothing else to say.

Braxton could see Xander's body vibrate with the energy he exerted to hold himself in check. That just wouldn't do.

"Not tonight," Xander finally said, shaking his head. "It's too dangerous. I will not risk hurting you. Now please, go." His voice sounded almost pleading.

Braxton bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He knew there was absolutely no way Xander would ever hurt him, and he did not intend to go anywhere until his mate ravaged and claimed him to his satisfaction. Maybe twice if he was lucky.

He turned and reached for the shower door. "Fine," he threw over his shoulder. "If you don't want me, I will go find someone else to claim me."

He heard a deep growl a split second before Xander gripped him around the waist and pushed him up against the shower tiles again. He winced at the cold, but still fought desperately to hide his smile.

"No one else. Mine!" Xander growled.

Yes! This is what Braxton wanted. The possessiveness in Xander's voice sent electricity straight to his throbbing erection.

"Well, I'm just saying," Braxton shrugged. "If you don't want me, then I can alwa—"

Xander cut him off by plunging his tongue deep into Braxton's open mouth. He moaned, his tongue dueling with Xander's, giving as good as he got.

Xander pulled back and stared hard into his eyes. "I hope you're ready because I can't stop now. I have to be inside you."

"Oh, hell yes! Fuck me, Xander. Claim me now!"

Xander lifted him, giving Braxton no choice but to wrap his legs and arms around his lover. Xander growled loudly, taking just enough time to slick himself with the liquid body soap. The head of his cock pressed firmly against Braxton's quivering entrance. He took a deep breath and winced as Xander breached the first ring of muscle, never stopping until he was balls deep inside Braxton's eager ass.

Damn, it burned, but not enough for him to even consider

stopping.

Xander gave him just a moment to adjust before he began to thrust into him quickly, wildly. The burn soon gave way to pleasure, and Braxton held on tighter to his mate as his head dropped back to the tiles. “Oh, fuck yes! Feels so damn good. Love the way you feel inside me.”

Xander’s thrusts came harder, faster, more punishing. He licked and sucked at Braxton’s neck, shoulders, chest, anywhere his mouth could reach. Braxton felt his balls tighten, his muscles clench, and the tingling heat in his lower back. More, just a little more. He needed...something.

“Xander, please. I need...I need...Oh, God. Please!” Braxton wasn’t sure what he pleaded for, but he knew if he didn’t get it, and *right damn now*, his entire body was going to combust.

“Bite me,” Xander ordered.

Braxton didn’t hesitate. He leaned forward, pulling himself closer to Xander, and bit his mate’s chest hard. Xander roared, slamming into Braxton’s body.

“Harder. Drink from me.”

Braxton did hesitate then, but only for a second. His need quickly took over, and he sank his teeth into Xander’s soft skin and sucked as blood rushed over his tongue.

Xander’s blood tasted amazing. Nothing like the salty copper taste he associated with blood. Xander tasted sweet, almost like liquid candy.

After several moments, Braxton pulled back and licked slowly at the wound. He moaned at the continued pounding to his ass. If he did not come soon, his dick was going to fall off. He slumped back against the tiles again and reached down to pull insistently at his leaking prick.

“Xander! Please...Oh, hell...need to...need...”

“Come,” Xander commanded right before he leaned forward and sank his teeth into the soft flesh between Braxton’s neck and

shoulder.

Braxton screamed, actually screamed. His cock erupted, shooting streams of pearly white semen from the head. He pressed Xander's mouth harder against his neck, never wanting him to stop. He had never felt anything so incredible.

Xander withdrew his canines from Braxton's neck, threw his head back, and roared as hot lava exploded within Braxton's still convulsing channel.

His head fell forward, and he claimed Braxton's lips. "Mine," he whispered.

"Yours."

* * * *

"We need that book."

Xander sighed. He was content to just lie in bed with Braxton and never move again. His mate was right, though. They needed to figure out what Mason was after so they could finally get rid of the bastard. He would do whatever it took to make sure that asshole never came near what belonged to him again.

"Easy there, big guy." Braxton smoothed his hand down Xander's chest and kissed the spot right above his heart. It wasn't until then that Xander realized he'd been growling.

He placed his hand on top of Braxton's and squeezed gently. "I'm okay. I will feel much better when this is all over with, though. I don't want him anywhere near you, *chulo*."

"Well, I would prefer that as well, so let's go get that book," Braxton said around a yawn.

"And why do you think it's this book? You said you and Keeton didn't find anything in any of the others. Why this one?"

"Well, it's *The Odyssey*. Mason used to do photography for a company called Odyssey. Kind of makes sense. Besides, it's the only book left." Braxton shrugged and yawned again.

Xander chuckled as he sat up on the side of the bed and stretched his arms over his head. "I'll get the book. You sleep." He bent down and placed a quick kiss on Braxton's forehead. "What gym and what's the combination to the lock?"

"Eclipse Fitness over on Oakdale." Braxton yawned, and mumbled the combination sleepily.

Xander kissed his head again and smiled. "I'll be back before you wake up."

"M'kay." Braxton snuggled back into the blankets and was asleep before Xander even made it to the closet door.

A tingling at the base of his spine had the smile slipping from his face, and he grimaced. Almost sundown. He would have to hurry if he was going to get that book before the moon rose. He dressed quickly and headed to the gym.

* * * *

Braxton woke with a start, sitting bolt upright in bed. Something had woken him, but with his head still groggy from sleep, he couldn't figure out what it had been.

"Hello, love."

Braxton jumped out of bed and spun toward the door. His body tensed when he spotted Mason standing there, a 9 mm trained at Braxton's heart.

"How did you find me?" Braxton was glad his voice didn't let on to his sudden panic. He sounded cool and calm, almost bored, and mentally patted himself on the back for it.

He felt especially relieved that he had pulled on a pair of boxers after his and Xander's shower in anticipation of going to the gym. Standing naked at gunpoint was...Well, there were worse things, but it would have to be near the top of the list.

"Where is the book?" Mason sneered.

Okay. So, they weren't going to two-step here. Good. Braxton

was tired of playing games with the psycho. “Xander went to get it. He should be back any minute. I would be gone by then, if I were you.”

Mason cocked an eyebrow and smirked. “Oh, I plan on it.”

* * * *

Xander sat in his truck, thumbing through the pages of *The Odyssey*. So far, he had not found anything out of place. No pages folded down, no highlighting, writing, or any other marks besides the printed words on the pages. He sighed and looked out of his windshield at the parking lot of Eclipse. Maybe this wasn’t the answer. He tossed the book roughly onto the passenger seat, wincing when it tumbled off the seat and onto the floorboard.

Leaning over to retrieve the book, he paused when a tiny black piece of plastic fell from the pages and down to the floor mats. Picking it up, Xander studied it carefully. It was a small memory card. He’d seen Jackson use them in his digital camera. He clutched the small rectangle in his fist and smiled. Assuming the card didn’t belong to Braxton, they had the bastard.

He glanced at the sun where it hovered over the horizon. He didn’t have time to go to the police station. There would be a hundred questions, and he’d never get out of there before the sun set.

Xander put his pickup in drive and headed home.

* * * *

Braxton looked out at the darkening sky. He guessed there was less than an hour until sunset. Where the hell was Xander? Turning his attention back to Mason, he asked, “What’s in the book?”

Mason eyed him for a moment. “You always were a curious little shit.” He cocked his head to the side, considering Braxton.

“Why all the acting like you wanted me back? Why not just ask

for the book? It makes a lot more sense than spending months pretending like you give a shit.” Braxton tilted his head, mirroring Mason’s pose. “So, why?”

“Needed to make you trust me, didn’t I?” Mason said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Had big plans for you. You were going to make me a very, very rich man. You were always so damn stubborn, drove me crazy, but oh, how I loved to make you beg.”

Braxton’s stomach rolled. He couldn’t believe he’d let this man inside him. He felt contaminated. “What plans? What money?” He had to keep him talking until he could work out a plan.

“You’ve caused me a lot of trouble, you know. Made a fucking mess of things that I have to clean up now,” Mason sneered. “Important people are counting on me to deliver you, the famous B. Isaacs,” he expanded, referring to the pseudonym Braxton used for his graphic novels.

“Why blow up my car?” *Keep him talking.*

“Evidence. I saw you load up those books, but I wasn’t sure if you’d unloaded them at the slut’s house.” Mason shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

“If you need me so much, why try to kill me with that fire?” Braxton forgot that he was supposed to be coming up with a way out of this mess. He was finally getting answers.

“Oh, you wouldn’t have died. I called the fire department before I even lit the match. I just wanted to shake you up a little.”

“Shake me up!” Braxton yelled. “You beat the shit out of me, set my fucking house on fire, and blew up my car just to *shake me up a little?*”

Mason rolled his eyes and sighed. “Always the fucking drama queen.”

“What’s in the book?” Braxton tried again.

“Maybe I could play with your new boy toy before I kill him. Think he would beg as pretty as you?” Mason leered.

Braxton's heart seized, and his hands clenched at his sides. *Not Xander!* Mason could do whatever he wanted to him, but there was no way Braxton would let him lay a finger on Xander.

"Fuck you," he spat. "If you touch so much as one hair on his body, I swear, I'll gut you and bathe in your blood."

"Drama queen," Mason muttered and rolled his eyes again. He reached for Braxton. "Let's go."

Braxton launched himself at Mason, knocking them both to the ground.

* * * *

Pulling onto their gravel drive, a sense of fear so great Xander had to stop his truck, hit him like an emotional wrecking ball. His heart pounded, and drops of sweat beaded on his forehead, but he could also feel an underlying determination behind the fear. He gripped the steering wheel, trying desperately to make sense of it all.

Braxton.

Xander jumped from his truck and sprinted up the drive to the house. "Braxton!" He yelled out his lover's name, leaping onto the porch and barging in through the front door.

His steps faltered as another wave of anxiety washed over him.

A loud crash, followed by sounds of a struggle, told him what he needed to know. Braxton was upstairs...and he wasn't alone. He raced for the stairs and took them two at a time. The crack of gunfire echoed through the house, and Xander stopped cold. White-hot pain scorched through his shoulder and chest, and he collapsed on the upstairs landing.

"No," he gasped. Not Braxton. He had just found him. He could not lose him now. He wouldn't.

He struggled to his feet and stumbled toward the open door of their bedroom. "Hold on, baby. Just hold on. I'm coming for you," he whispered.

The sight before him caused his heart to stop beating. Braxton lay curled on the floor, blood pooling under his small body. Mason stood over him, gun in hand, and a manic gleam in his eye.

“You fucking asshole! What the hell am I supposed to do with damaged goods?” He screamed down at Xander’s mate.

Xander snapped. In that moment, all he saw was red. All he knew was rage. He gladly surrendered to the beast within him, closing his eyes and letting the change take him.

* * * *

Braxton stared, mesmerized, as the sleek, white tiger that was his mate slowly stalked forward. The growls and hisses emanating from his mouth were truly terrifying. At least they would have been if they had been directed at him, but Xander’s gaze was locked on Mason.

Braxton’s shoulder hurt like hell, and there was a lot of blood, but he figured he would live. He also believed the pain was a good thing. At least he didn’t feel numb and cold. Though that would have been preferable to the pain, it would also mean he was going into shock. But why did it always have to be his left shoulder?

“What the—sweet hell!” Mason shouted.

Braxton looked up to see Xander swat at Mason with one huge paw. Mason screamed, and the gun went flying out of his hand to land under the window behind Braxton. His ex-lover stumbled backward, trying to put distance between himself and the tiger.

Stupid. Mason had nowhere to go and no one to help him. Braxton had told him to be gone before Xander came back. He didn’t even think he could get through to the big cat at the moment. Xander’s full attention focused on Mason, and there was death in his gaze.

Braxton pushed up into a sitting position, grinding his teeth together to keep from yelling out in agony. As much as Mason deserved to be ripped to shreds, Braxton knew he couldn’t let Xander do it.

“Xander.”

Xander’s ears twitched, and he froze for a mere second before he continued to prowl toward Mason.

Mason had backed himself into a corner, and he stared wide-eyed at the beast stalking him. Seconds later, he began to mumble nonsense to himself as he rocked side to side.

Braxton sighed and, with a lot of pain and struggle, managed to get to his feet. “Look at me!”

Xander stopped, his body tensing, but he didn’t look at him. *“I’m going to kill him. He is vile...poison...filth. He doesn’t deserve to live.”*

Braxton shuddered at the hostility he could feel emanating from his mate. Then he stilled completely when he realized he was feeling Xander’s emotions, *and* he had just heard Xander inside his head. *What the hell?*

“Probably,” Braxton replied out loud, “but he’s not worth it.”

Finally, Xander turned to look at him. His big feline eyes closed tightly, then opened, and he let out a huff of air that sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

Mason began to laugh maniacally, if not a little hysterically, drawing Braxton’s attention. He followed Mason’s gaze to the gun resting just under the window.

“Fuck,” Braxton mumbled under his breath. Mason had been crazy before, but now, with the powerful magic surrounding Xander, he was certifiable. Why couldn’t Mason be one of those who just sat and drooled on themselves?

No, Braxton got to deal with batshit crazy, ax-murderer insane. *Yippee!*

He lunged toward the gun, gritting his teeth as fire lanced through his wounded shoulder.

Mason dove for the gun as well, landing on top of Braxton and reaching over him to get his hand on the weapon. Braxton heard Xander hiss and growl and prayed that his mate stayed out of the way.

He struggled and bucked, trying to dislodge Mason as his he scrambled frantically for the gun.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than a few seconds, Braxton managed to wrap his fingers around the butt of the gun, and he drew his elbow back into Mason's ribs. Mason grunted, and loosed his hold just enough for Braxton to flip over onto his back.

Mason landed on top of him again, his face a twisted mask of rage, desperation, and insanity. His hand slipped between their tangled bodies and grabbed at the barrel of the gun wedged between them. He yanked roughly, trying to pull the weapon from Braxton's grasp.

The sound of gunfire was deafening in the small room. Mason jerked and grunted, his lips forming a small O. Braxton watched the light drain from his eyes as his ex-lover fell, limp and lifeless, on top of him.

He pushed and struggled until he wiggled out from beneath Mason's much larger body.

Xander eyed him keenly before he padded over to Mason's still form and sniffed him.

"Is he... Is he dead?" Braxton panted. The adrenaline was beginning to ebb, and pain gripped his body.

"Yes."

Braxton took a deep breath. "Good."

Chapter Seventeen

“Would you stop it!” Braxton snapped at Xander.

Xander’s head shot up, and he watched Braxton walk into the room. It had been two weeks since his lover had come home from the hospital, but every time Xander looked at him, he saw him lying on the floor of their bedroom in his own blood.

“Stop what?” he asked.

“Sulking. I’m fine. In fact, the doctors are amazed at my recovery.” Braxton smirked down at Xander where he sat on the couch.

Xander smiled back at him weakly. Braxton was everything to him, and he had almost lost him. He hadn’t been able to call 911, or go with Braxton to the hospital, or even hold his mate and comfort him. By the time Xander had shifted, the moon had risen, and he’d been trapped as his tiger counterpart. He’d tried like hell to shift back, but the moon held too much power over him.

He’d never felt so helpless in his life. Once again, he’d failed to protect his mate.

“Xander,” Braxton growled.

“Sorry. Are you hungry?” He started to rise from the couch, but Braxton waved him away.

“I’m fine. Gonna go grab a beer, though. Want one?”

Xander just nodded as he gave Braxton another halfhearted smile. He watched his lover walk out of the room and sighed. He really didn’t deserve the man. Time after time, he had proven that.

His heart had seized as he’d watched his mate struggle for that gun...and his life. Xander had wanted to tear Mason into tiny little

pieces, but he had been too afraid of hurting Braxton. When he'd heard the gunshot, Xander thought he'd pass out from the sheer terror of it.

He hadn't even been able to help Braxton deal with the aftermath. Once Braxton had called the police, he knelt down on the floor and cupped Xander's chin in his hand.

"You have to go, Xander, out in the woods. You can come to the hospital and get me tomorrow, after you sleep."

Xander hadn't been able to contain his growl. *Fuck that.*

"Did you find anything in the book?"

"Memory card. In the pocket of my jeans," he had sent to Braxton's mind.

Braxton had retrieved the card and walked Xander to the back door. "So, how come I can hear you in my head now? Is it a mating thing? Can I only hear you like this when you shift? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, it's a mating thing. Yes, it's only when I shift. No, I can't hear you, because you don't shift. Sorry, I forgot to tell you. Guess I kind of dropped the ball on that one. Does it freak you out?"

Braxton shook his head. "No. I think it's cool." He leaned down and scratched behind Xander's ear. "Where are the rest of the guys?"

"Out in the woods somewhere. They know they can't shift around you."

"Oh, right." Braxton had then kissed Xander on the nose and opened the door. "Go."

And reluctantly, Xander had gone.

* * * *

Braxton leaned against the counter, sipping his beer. The despair he could feel flowing from Xander was exhausting. He couldn't smell emotions like his mate, and he couldn't feel them from other people, but it seemed he was hardwired to Xander. Anything Xander felt,

Braxton felt as his own. He had to find a way to snap his mate out of it.

Xander had been morose when he'd shown up at the hospital the morning after the shooting. Things had only gotten worse when the detectives arrived shortly after.

Braxton groaned at the memory.

He'd expected it, of course. He had shot a man. The officers on the scene had ruled it justifiable self-defense, but Braxton had known he would still have a few questions to answer.

What he had not expected were the detectives' questions about illegal sex trades.

Braxton didn't think he'd ever find out what was on that little piece of plastic once he'd turned the memory card over to the police. He wished he were still clueless. There were hundreds of photos of young boys in various states of undress and sexually explicit poses. Technically, they had all been of legal age, but just barely, and they all had the same dead look in their eyes.

The detectives had asked Braxton repeatedly if he recognized any of the boys. He had vehemently denied knowing any of them or anything about the photos. Xander, of course, had gone apeshit, yelling and snarling at the men. When Braxton had asked why they thought he should know those boys, they had shown him more pictures.

They were actually still shots from a video. The first photo showed Mason sprawled out on the bed, his hands fisted in Braxton's hair as Braxton sucked his cock. The next shot was of Mason fucking Braxton's ass from behind. There were eight in all. Xander had stormed from the room after the second one.

"We've heard rumors about a sex slave trade in the area," the older detective had told him. "These boys are most likely runaways or boys that have fallen through the cracks in the system. Our guess is that they're picked up off the streets, drugged, and sold to the highest bidder."

“And the pictures?” Braxton asked, his stomach rolling with revulsion.

“Advertising.”

He still felt dirty. A large majority of those photos had been taken in the house he had shared with Mason. How could he have never known? The police assured him he was not a suspect or person of interest—while in the same breath ensuring Braxton knew they would be in touch.

He now understood Mason’s comment about Braxton making him a lot of money.

Yeah, he figured some dirty old pervert would pay top dollar for someone even semi-famous like Braxton. He shuddered in disgust at the thought.

“Baby?”

Braxton jumped and looked over at Xander standing in the kitchen doorway. “The video.”

Xander’s brows drew together. “Huh?”

“Those pictures of me and Mason together were stills from a video. Like a camcorder. He was taping us having sex.”

“So, now you’re telling me there are videos of you out there somewhere?” Xander growled. “I don’t like this, Braxton.”

“Well, me either, love, but hopefully the police have confiscated them from Mason’s apartment. We can call and check.”

From the look on Xander’s face, Braxton could tell the thought was not exactly comforting to his mate.

Xander moved across the room and took Braxton’s face in his hands. He stared at him for a long time, never saying a word. Finally, he lowered his head and gave Braxton the sweetest kiss he’d ever received.

“Xander, talk to me,” he whispered when they broke the kiss.

Xander shuddered and pulled Braxton tight against his body. “I was scared,” he admitted.

Braxton melted. His mate’s love pushed at him like a physical

force, and Xander crushed him closer to his massive chest.

"I thought I was going to lose you. You can't ever do that shit to me again." He pushed Braxton back far enough to look into his eyes. "I can't lose you."

"Hush." Braxton reached up and covered his lover's lips with two fingers. "We are alive and together. We'll work out the rest." He pulled Xander's head down and kissed him long and deep. His lips curved against Xander's when he heard his mate purr. "Take me to bed. I need to feel you."

He yelped when Xander ripped his gym shorts away from his body and turned him easily, pushing Braxton's chest down against the kitchen table.

"Don't move," Xander commanded.

Braxton moaned, and his body trembled with need.

Then Xander was back, running one hand down Braxton's spine as two oiled fingers pushed into his ass. "Olive oil." Xander chuckled from behind him.

Braxton cried out, clutching at the table edges. "Oh, oh my God! More."

Xander took his time, kissing and licking, touching every inch of Braxton's body he could reach in a sensual caress. He continued to fuck Braxton with his fingers as he reached around to grip his pulsing erection. He stroked slowly, applying just enough pressure to push Braxton to the edge, but not enough to let him fall over.

"Xander!" he yelled in frustration.

He heard the rasp of a zipper, and then the blunt head of Xander's prick replaced his fingers.

Thank fuck!

"Who do you belong to, Braxton?" Xander whispered roughly against his shoulder.

"Yours. I belong to you. Only you. Only yours."

Xander pushed in, and they both groaned. He immediately pulled back, then thrust in again, setting a pace that was fast and hard,

bordering on animalistic.

“Mine,” Xander growled right before he sank his teeth into the back of Braxton’s neck.

Braxton came. He couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop himself. He fell forward, sprawled across the table, and groaned as his release ripped through him. Xander pushed forward, burying himself as deeply in Braxton as possible, and tensed, yelling out Braxton’s name as he joined him in orgasmic bliss.

Xander slumped over him, blanketing him with his big, warm body. Eventually, he pulled his softening cock carefully from Braxton’s ass and sat in one of the kitchen chairs. Braxton climbed into his lap, and they cuddled together, caressing each other’s sweat-slicked bodies as their breathing and heart rates returned to normal.

“Wow,” Braxton breathed. He leaned back to look at his lover.

Xander smiled the first true smile Braxton had seen in weeks. “Yeah. Wow.”

Braxton couldn’t contain his joy. He dropped his head back and laughed. He had a new family, his best friend, and the love of the most gorgeous, most amazing man on the planet. He had found his happy-ever-after.

Once his laughter trailed off, he leaned forward and kissed the tip of Xander’s nose. “I love you, Xander. So much.”

Xander placed a kiss on Braxton’s sweaty forehead and smiled tenderly. “Love you back, baby.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We're talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart, and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, Gabrielle parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight and taking chances. She enjoys dreaming up and watching ideas come to life the push the boundaries of "normal" society. When she's not writing, she can usually be found testing those same boundaries.



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