

True Blood Mate 1

Heart Song

Ten years ago, Darren Hart was rescued from a fall by a gorgeous man that tells him an outlandish tale. Once he returns to civilization, his memories blur and he begins to believe the voice in his head is a figment of his imagination.

Now, Darren is a successful veterinarian who believes he is just a bit crazy. After years of therapy and medications, he has learned to live with the sexy voice in his head. He even carries on conversations and occasionally fantasizes about the voice. When he's attacked, Darren doesn't know what to think but when the voice comes to rescue him in the form of the most gorgeous man he's ever met, Darren is positive he's lost his mind.

On the run from a killer, Darren has to come to terms with the fact that the voice is real and has a name. Asher Stone is the alpha of a werewolf clan and claims that Darren is his alpha mate. Can Darren believe in Asher's promise that they were meant to be together or will an unknown assailant kill him before he realizes that being the alpha mate is what he desires most in the world?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Paranormal,

Vampires/Werewolves **Length:** 52,101 words

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Stormy Glenn

EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

HEART SONG Copyright © 2010 by Heart Song E-book ISBN: 1-61034-080-9

First E-book Publication: November 2010

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PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc. www.SirenPublishing.com

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With deep gratitude,

Stormy Glenn

DEDICATION

To my Heart Song, thank you for everything. Each day has been a blessing. My heart sings only for you.

HEART SONG

True Blood Mate 1

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Chapter 1

"I'm heading home, Dr. Hart. Is there anything you need before I leave?"

Darren Hart glanced up from the papers he was working on to smile at the perky little blonde. "No, Chrissy, I'm good. I'm just going to finish up this paperwork, do another pass through the kennel, and then head home myself."

"Don't stay too long, Dr. Hart. You need your rest as much as the rest of us."

Darren chuckled. He held up his hand, two fingers pressed up and together. "Scout's honor."

"You were never a scout, Dr. Hart." Chrissy giggled.

"No, but I wanted to be." Darren chuckled again, shaking his head as he looked back down at the papers on his desk. "They had some awesome uniforms."

"Okay, on that note, I'm out of here." Chrissy laughed. "'Night, Dr. Hart."

"Goodnight, Chrissy, drive safe. I'll see you Monday, bright and early."

Darren listened to Chrissy leave, the distinct sound of the front door locking behind her. He liked his veterinarian assistant. She was a good kid, although a tad giggly at times.

Still, choosing Chrissy before she finished school to be his assistant was one of the best decisions he ever made. Chrissy worked hard, loved the animals they worked on, and she seemed to have a special affinity for them.

The biggest plus was that Chrissy never gave Darren any crap about being gay. Darren made it clear about that the day he hired her. He wanted his workplace to be a happy place to work. He refused to work with people that would put him down or make fun of him because he was gay. He had enough of that in school and growing up. Now that he owned and operated his own veterinarian clinic, he refused to deal with it if he could help it.

"She really is a cutie, isn't she?"

Darren rolled his eyes, refusing to answer the voice in his head. He knew it was a figment of his imagination. The doctors said so, every damn last one of them he'd been forced to go to since he first heard the voice.

Logically, Darren knew the voice was a symptom of his psychosis due to the head injury he suffered ten years before while on a hiking trip. At first, he'd taken the medications the doctors prescribed him, but after awhile he decided to just live with the voice. He hated the medications. They made him woozy and filled his head with a fog that made it hard to do just about everything. Not taking the medication meant the voice was always there. Sometimes Darren listened and talked back, usually when he was tired or lonely, but frequently he just tried to ignore it.

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"Not talking to me today, Dary?"
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[&]quot;I'm working."

[&]quot;You work too hard, my love."

[&]quot;I am not your love!"

Darren gritted his teeth, trying not to scream in frustration. He'd been over this before with the voice in his head, a voice that was kind enough to give himself the name *Asher*.

A part of Darren found it strange that the psychosis in his head had a separate personality from him, considering it was all in his imagination. Maybe he had a split personality or something.

"Ah, but you are my love, Dary. You will always be my love."

"Asher, look, you—"

Darren's head snapped up when he heard a noise outside his office. Dropping his pen to his desk, he climbed to his feet and walked to the doorway of his office. Looking left and right, Darren couldn't see anything out of place.

A short walk down the hallway took him to the lobby of his veterinary clinic. The lights were off, but there was enough light shining in from the parking lot that he could see a small cardboard box sitting several feet outside of the doorway.

"What the hell is that?" he whispered to himself, forgetting his *voice* could hear him speak.

"Darren, what's going on?" Asher asked.

"There's a cardboard box outside the front door."

"Darren, stay inside," Asher virtually shouted into Darren's head. "Don't open the door."

"It's just a cardboard box."

Darren walked to the door and reached for the lock. It wasn't unusual for people to drop kittens or puppies off at his front door during the night. He was used to it and figured it was just another box of pets. But as he started to unlock the door, a shadow crossed the pavement from one side of the building. Darren paused and tried to get a better look. He couldn't quite make out what it was, but it seemed to have four legs.

[&]quot;Darren, what's going on?"

[&]quot;I think there's something outside, a dog maybe."

[&]quot;Please, Darren, stay inside."

Darren rolled his eyes and unlocked the door, pushing it open. "You're being ridiculous. It's just a dog or something. Besides, if there are kittens or puppies out here, you know I can't leave them there."

Darren started to step out the door when the shadow suddenly took shape. It was the biggest damn dog Darren had ever seen. A shadow from the other side of the building caught Darren's attention as it stepped into view. Damn, the dog had a friend.

"Okay, maybe going outside isn't such a good idea."

"Darren?"

"Those are the biggest damn dogs I have ever seen." Darren looked a little closer through the glass as the two dogs growled at him, baring their teeth. "Actually, I don't think they are dogs at all. Asher, do you think it's possible for wild wolves to be this far inside the city limits?"

"Darren, please, love, don't go outside."

"Yeah, I'm thinking staying inside is a good idea."

Darren could feel the relief coming through from Asher. He always thought it was strange that he could feel Asher's emotions when the man was a figment of his imagination.

"Tell me what you see," Asher said, "exactly what you see."

"I told you, there's a cardboard box sitting outside the door. I started to open the door, but these two huge dogs came from the side of the building."

"Okay, just stay inside," Asher said. "You should be safe here."

Darren nodded even though he knew it made no sense to answer someone who didn't exist. Still, having the voice in his head worry about him made Darren feel a little better, more comforted and not so alone.

"Oh my god, no!" Darren cried out, pressing his hand against the glass as he watched one of the large animals reach into the cardboard box with its snout and lift out a small puppy with its teeth. The poor puppy whimpered and struggled in the strong jaws.

"Darren?"

"It's a box of puppies and that...that thing is hurting them." Darren's heart pounded frantically as the dog shook the puppy roughly. Darren started to push the door open, but the other dog lunged at the door, snarling and snapping its jaw at him. Darren jumped back and slammed the door closed. "Damn!"

"What?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy, Ash." Darren almost laughed at his words, considering he was talking to a voice in his head. "I think these things are trying to trick me and get me to come outside."

"That's exactly what they are trying to do, Darren," Asher replied. "Whatever you do, do not go outside. They want to kill you."

"Kill me? Have you lost your mind? They're dogs."

Darren cringed when the puppy whimpered again. He could see a small trail of blood sliding down its tan and red fur. He couldn't stand there and watch these vicious beasts kill a box of puppies.

Suddenly getting an idea, Darren ran back into one of the exam rooms and grabbed a dart gun used for keeping animals calm for examination. He loaded it and grabbed a few more darts, just in case.

Running back into the lobby, Darren squatted down to the mail slot and pushed the barrel of the dart gun through the small hole. He squeezed one eye closed and aimed for the dog with the puppy in its mouth then slowly pulled the trigger. The dog yelped and dropped the puppy to the ground. It staggered around for a moment, trying to get to the dart imbedded in its neck, then started to wobble. A moment later the large animal fell to the ground.

Darren aimed at the other dog, but before he could pull the trigger, it ran out of sight. He waited several moments to see if it would come back before standing to his feet, shoving the dart gun into his pocket, and opening the door.

[&]quot;Darren, what are you doing?"

[&]quot;Shh, I need to listen for the other dog. You need to be quiet."

[&]quot;Darren!"

"Please be quiet. I don't think I have very long before the other dog comes back. I need to get the puppies inside."

Darren kept one hand on the gun as he crept out the door toward the cardboard box. The wounded puppy whimpered and shuddered as Darren carefully picked it up and placed it back in the box.

Darren counted two other puppies in the box as he lifted it into his arms and hurried back inside the building. He just barely got the door shut and locked behind him when the other dog came running out of the shadows. It crashed into the door, making the glass shudder.

Darren backed away quickly, watching the dog snarl at him. There was something in the dog's eyes, a glint of intelligence that shook Darren down to his toes. There was a lot more going on here than Darren could understand.

A whimpering from the box reminded Darren one of the puppies was injured. He turned away from the growling animal and hurried into the back examination room. He set the box down on the table and started to gather some supplies together when he heard another noise outside. A cold chill ran down his spine. Darren rushed over to the door of the exam room and peaked out.

His eyes widening, he quickly shut the door and leaned against it. The dogs were gone, but two very large men were trying to get into the building by kicking at the glass. Darren knew it would only be a matter of moments before they broke through. He needed to be long gone by then.

Darren panted as sheer fright began to fill him. He didn't know what was going on, but he was in danger, life-threatening danger. He could feel it. Whoever these men were that were trying to break in, they weren't just here to rob the place. They were after him.

"Asher, I don't know what to do. The dogs are gone, but there are two guys trying to break in now. Ash, I don't think they are here to ask for help with an animal issue."

[&]quot;Run, baby, just grab the pups and run."

[&]quot;Where to?"

"Just get in your car and drive. We'll figure the rest out once you're on the road. Now go!"

Darren drew in a deep cleansing breath then hurried to get the medical supplies he'd been gathering a few minutes earlier. He still needed to treat the injured puppy. He just couldn't do it at this exact moment. Shoving everything inside a small garbage bag, Darren grabbed the box of puppies and the supplies. He headed for the door that led into the "Employees Only" area toward the back of the clinic. He opened the back door and looked out, making sure no one was around. Just before walking out, he hit the silent alarm button then hurried to his car. Darren was in his car and pulling out of the parking lot moments later.

He grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911, his heart pounding as he waited for the police to come on the line. Darren couldn't remember a time when he had been so scared.

"Police, fire, and medical," a voice said over the phone. "What is your emergency?"

"This is Dr. Darren Hart from the Hart Veterinary Clinic on Mission Street. Someone is trying to break into my clinic."

"Are you in danger, Dr. Hart?"

"I'm in my car right now. I hit the silent alarm, snuck out the back door, and drove away when they tried to break in."

"Who is trying to break in, sir? Can you describe them?"

Darren didn't think his story of two huge dogs trying to attack him would go over well and decided to keep that information to himself. "Two men, both with brown hair. I didn't really take the time to see what they were wearing. I just wanted to get away before they broke in."

"You did the right thing, Dr. Hart. Police are on their way right now."

"Should I go back?"

"No!" a voice shouted in Darren's head.

"Just wait until the police secure the scene, Dr. Hart. I have your number on my screen. Someone will contact you soon."

Darren finally felt like his heart rate was getting back to normal as he hung up his phone. He loosened his tight grip on the steering wheel and took several deep breathes as he pulled the car into the parking lot of a small all-night market.

He parked under a street lamp and turned the car off. Turning to the cardboard box, Darren gently lifted the injured puppy out. The puppy whimpered and cried out. Darren held it to his chest as he tried to assess its injuries.

"Shh, little guy, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Let him sniff your neck," Asher said. "Your scent will calm him."

Darren thought it was a good suggestion. And one he hadn't thought of. He should have. He was a veterinarian. He knew this bit of information. Rolling his eyes at himself, Darren did as Asher said, lifting the puppy up to his neck and cradling him there. The puppy wiggled closer and almost immediately settled down.

"Wow, it worked." Darren chuckled. And really well too. The puppy was totally pliant, almost asleep.

"Of course it worked, Dary. You have a very calming scent."

Darren rolled his eyes again. "Like you'd know."

"I know, Dary, love," Asher crooned, "your scent is one of the sweetest things about you."

Darren couldn't deal with this right now. The voice in his head, while he was used to it, did not know what he smelled like. Darren would bet his life on it. He just wasn't going to argue with Asher about it.

He decided to ignore Asher and concentrate on the puppy instead. He found four small puncture wounds around the scruff of the puppy's neck. The blood had pretty much clogged and stopped trickling down the puppy's fur, but he was still a mess. Darren cleaned the wounds with some antiseptic then covered it in a healing

ointment. He didn't want to cover the injury with a bandage because he hadn't been able to clear away the fur. The discomfort from having a bandage ripped off once the wound healed would hurt far worse than the benefits of having it covered.

"Okay, back into the box with your siblings," Darren said softly as he set the puppy back into the box. He grabbed his sweatshirt out of the backseat and pushed it into the box so the puppies would have something warm to lie on. Much to his surprise, all three puppies quickly snuggled into his sweatshirt and curled up to sleep.

"They need something to eat, Dary."

"I don't think they have puppy food at the all-night corner market, Asher."

"So, get them a hotdog or something."

"You don't feed puppies hotdogs," Darren scolded. "They need real food."

"It's meat, love." Asher's laughter slowly filled Darren's head. "They'll eat it up."

"Fine."

Darren started to climb out of the car when the entire box of puppies began yapping. Darren tried to settle them down, cooing at them and petting them. Nothing worked. Darren sighed and grabbed the entire box. The moment he lifted it, the puppies quieted down. He shook his head, unable to prevent the small smile from crossing his lips, and carried the box with him toward the store.

"Now, you guys be quiet inside the store," Darren whispered down to the puppies. "We don't want the clerk to toss us out on our ear before we can get you something to eat."

Darren could have sworn that one pup, the injured one, looked up at him like it understood exactly what he said and let out a small yip before curling up with the other two puppies.

Darren shook his head and walked in. He was really losing it. He bought two hotdogs, no bun, and a large jug of water. He tossed in a chocolate caramel candy bar for himself and paid the clerk.

"Hey, man, I think someone is breaking into your car."

Darren's head whipped around to look out the large front windows of the market. He could see two men looking through the windows of his car, one trying the door handle.

Darren's eyes widened. His heart pounded faster as he recognized the two men from his clinic. He quickly glanced around the store, looking for another way out as panic started to set in. Where was he going to go, and with a box of puppies at that?

"Ash? I need help. The guys from the clinic are breaking into my car." Darren wished beyond wish the voice in his head could help him, but it was just a voice. Still, Darren did feel a little better when Asher spoke to him.

"Go out the back, Dary. Markets always have back entrances for deliveries and such. Just quietly walk across the store and out the backdoor."

"And what in the hell do I tell the clerk?"

"You're a smart man. I'm sure you'll come up with something." Darren mentally rolled his eyes and sent the image to Asher, who simply laughed. "Go, love, before they figure out you're in the store."

"Is there a backdoor to this place?" Darren asked as he looked at the clerk. "Those guys out there are looking for me and if they find me—"

"What are they looking for you for?"

Darren pointed to the box, tilting it so the man could see inside. "I'm a veterinarian. They killed the mother of these little guys, and they've been trying to get them back. I can't do that."

Just about that time, the injured pup let out a small whimper as if on cue. The other two puppies crowded around the crying one, letting out whimpers of their own.

"These poor little things?"

Darren pointed to the injuries on the puppy's neck. "That's what they did to this poor little guy before I could save them." He shook his head. "I just can't let them have these puppies back."

The man reached into the box and gently pet one of the pups before pointing to the back room. "There's a back door that leads to the alley right through there. If you lock the bathroom door from the inside when you go through, I'll just tell them you asked to use the restroom. That should hold them for awhile."

"Look," Darren said "I don't want to get you into any trouble. These aren't nice guys. Is there any way for you to push the silent alarm or anything? The police should be just down the road at my clinic. They tried to break in there."

The old man nodded and hit a button just under the counter. Darren nodded and hurried down the hallway. He stopped for a moment to lock the bathroom door, darted out the back exit, and found himself in a dark alleyway. One direction led to the street. The other direction led down a dark alley for more than a block, tall brick buildings on either side. Despite the darkness, Darren ran away from the street and down the alley.

"Any bright ideas now, Ash?"

Chapter 2

"He's going to be okay, Ash. He has a good head on his shoulders. He'll get the pups somewhere safe, and then we can go get them all."

Asher Grayson looked over at the man casually leaning against the desk in his study and scowled. "I just don't understand how this could have happened, Dean. I thought you and I are the only ones who knew about Darren. How could they have found him?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know, Ash, I really don't, but it is obvious to me you can't hide him anymore. You're going to have to claim your mate, whether you want to or not, and bring him home."

"Fuck, man, you have no idea how much I want to bring Darren home." He leaned his head against the back of his chair and stared at the ceiling. "I've been waiting ten years to bring that man home."

"You could have brought him home when you found him if you hadn't been so damn stubborn."

"He would have died if I had, and you know it." Ash groaned and rubbed his hands down his face. "You know how things were, Dean. Christ, we've only had a cease fire between the clans for the last couple of years. If I claimed Darren before now, the other clans would have targeted him in a split second."

Dean stood up and walked over to a small table sitting against one wall. He pulled the top off a crystal decanter and poured himself a small amount of the amber liquid. Holding up the bottle, Dean glanced over his shoulder.

"You want some?"

Ash shook his head. "No, I need to keep my head clear so I can hear Darren if he needs me."

Dean shrugged and put the top back on the decanter. "Suit yourself."

Ash watched Dean swallow down a good portion of his drink then walk over to sit in the chair across the desk from him. Dean swirled the amber liquid around in his glass for several moments before looking over at him.

"You know someone had to tip them off, Ash."

"I know."

"Someone from inside the clan."

Ash nodded. He knew that, too. The only person he'd ever told about Darren was Dean, and Ash knew his best friend and brother would never say a word to anyone. That left just a few people that could have possibly said something, and Ash didn't know who.

While neither of them had told anyone about Darren, the others in the house knew Ash was preparing to claim his mate. They just didn't know who that mate was or that Ash had found him nearly ten years before.

The danger to Darren just increased. Ash hated the thought of bringing his mate into a house he wasn't safe in, but it was better than out on the street where his very life was now in danger.

"Who can we trust?"

"Anna would never say a word, neither would Gerald. They are both devoted to you. I'd count Reed and Logan in that group as well."

"Anyone else?" Ash asked.

"Truthfully, I don't know." The dark blue fabric of Dean's shirt moved across his shoulders as he shrugged. "Half the clan is in support of you, the other half follows Douglas."

"Fuck, I am so tired of this shit!" Ash snapped as he slapped his hands down on his desk. "I've run this clan for nearly eight years. I brokered the fucking cease fire with the surrounding clans. What more do they want from me?"

"You knew it wasn't going to be easy when you challenged Uncle Robert for leadership of the clan. Too many of the old guard still remain in power. They have too much influence over the clan. It's just going to keep getting worse until you challenge Douglas."

"I don't want to challenge Douglas, damn it." Ash pushed his hand through his unruly curls. "I didn't even want to challenge Uncle Robert, but he gave me no choice."

"I know that, and you know that, but the rest of the clan doesn't. You didn't want to give Uncle Robert a bad name because of Aunt Sarah, so you ordered all of us to keep quiet, remember?" Dean waved his hand around in the air. "Now Douglas is going around telling everyone whatever he wants to, and they believe him. You need to tell them the truth about what Uncle Robert was doing or challenge Douglas."

"Do you really think Aunt Sarah is strong enough to lose her son as well as her husband? It would kill her."

"I'm not sure you have a choice now, Ash. The minute Darren gets here, he's going to be a target for Douglas and anyone else that has a grudge against you."

"And we all know how long that list is." Ash chuckled.

"Well, if you'd stop pissing people off..."

"Do you really see that happening? I'm trying to pull this damn clan into the current century. We've spent too many years living in the past with old enemies and even older traditions. It's time we lived in the real world."

"Well, you're sure to do that when you bring Darren home." Dean snorted.

Ash grimaced. He knew Dean was right. The moment Darren set foot on the clan lands, everyone would know who he was and what he was. The shit was sure to hit the fan right after that.

It was one of the main reasons Ash waited so long to bring Darren home. A man being mated to another man wasn't a widely accepted

practice. Wolves mated to produce cubs for the clan, not for love or anything else. It was a concept almost as old as the clans.

Ash probably would have put aside his desire for men and done exactly that if he hadn't discovered Darren by accident while on a run one night. The sweet scent of the man drove Ash crazy. A bulldozer wouldn't have kept him from going to Darren.

One taste, one sweet scent, and Ash was a goner. He knew he'd never want another living being for the rest of his life. He spent the last ten years trying to make a place where Darren would be safe. It didn't look like he had done a very good job.

"So, what now?"

"Call Reed and Logan in here," Ash said. "We're going to need their help getting Darren and the pups to safety. I also want one of them assigned to guard Darren at all times unless he's with you or me. I don't want Darren alone for a minute."

"Ever?" Dean snickered.

Ash rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean, Dean."

Dean laughed. "Yeah, I guess I do. I'll go get Reed and Logan. You check in on your boy."

Ash nodded. He waited until Dean left the room, shutting the door behind him, then leaned his head back again, closing his eyes. He concentrated on the scent of Darren, the look of the man. He reached for their bond and followed it back to him.

"Dary, how's it going? Have you found a safe place for you and the pups?"

"It might be safe." Darren chuckled. "But it wouldn't be sanitary with a truck load of bleach."

"As long as you're safe, baby, that's all that matters."

"Well, I suppose I'm relatively safe then. I'm in some craptastic little roadside motel about a mile from my clinic. I didn't even know places like this still existed. It screams serious retro '70s."

Ash chuckled, trying to picture the room Darren was in. "Tell me about it."

"The bedspread is orange, if you can believe that, and I don't think the curtains have changed since they were first put in. I wouldn't exactly know what print you would call it, but it probably glows in the dark or something."

"Sounds ghastly," Ash replied.

"Well, to give the place some credit, the curtains do match the print on the two side chairs. It's kind of a mismatch of orange and blue and brown. It actually looks like someone swallowed paint then threw up all over the room."

"How did you find that place?"

"It was the first motel I came to where you could rent a room by the hour. I figured they wouldn't ask too many questions."

"Smart man." Ash was actually quite impressed with how smart his mate was. He remembered all the hours of studying Darren had put in during school, the exams, the homework, even the class work. Ash had been with Darren through all of it, even if just through their mental bond.

"Ash, I'm scared," Darren said softly. "I don't understand why these men are after me. If they just wanted the drugs from my clinic, they wouldn't have followed me to the market. It's obvious they are after me."

"I know, love. I'll make it all better soon, I promise."

Ash thought he heard a slight sniffle from Darren, but he couldn't be sure. His heart ached for his mate, for how scared he was, how much danger he was in, and for the battle Darren had no idea was coming.

Ash would spare Darren this if he could, but that wasn't to be. Because Ash couldn't stop himself from claiming Darren ten years ago, the man was now going to be thrust into a world he had no knowledge of. Ash just had to hope Darren wasn't thrust into his world kicking and screaming.

"You just get some rest, Dary. Everything will be better when you open your eyes."

"Easy for you to say." Darren chuckled. "You don't have three hot water bottles curled up on your stomach."

"The pups doing okay then?"

"Yeah, they seem fine. The little one that was injured should heal up pretty fast. The bite wasn't deep, and I was able to treat it fairly quickly. I just worry about where they came from, where their mothers are. They've got to be going out of their minds."

"Their mothers?"

"I don't think they have the same mother. There's too much of an age difference between them. One of these guys can't be more than a couple of months old. The other two seem to be a few months older."

"Don't worry, we'll find their moms. If not, I have no doubt you can care for them. You're a good veterinarian, Darren, and a good man. They will be fine."

"I hope so."

"You just rest, love. I'll be here if you need me."

"I'm not your love, Ash. I keep telling you that."

"You are my love, Dary, you will always be my love. Now, close your eyes and go to sleep. I'll be here if you need me."

Ash could tell how tired Darren was when he didn't even argue. A few moments later, Ash felt his link to Darren go fuzzy as it always did when the man slept. Ash allowed himself a few minutes to savor his mate's quiet slumber before reaching for his phone.

"Gerald, I need to see you and Anna in my office, please."

"Right away, sir."

"Gerald, don't call me sir."

"Yes, sir."

Ash shook his head and hung up the phone. He knew he wasn't going to win that argument with Gerald. He never did. In all the years he'd known Gerald, the man had referred to him as sir, and that was even before Ash won the challenge for alpha.

Dean was correct, though. Ash knew he could count Gerald and his wife, Anna, as those who would support him and help keep Darren

safe. Anna had been Ash's nanny when he was a child. Gerald was the right hand man to Ash's father. The two clan members had been a part of the clan long before Ash's birth.

"Come," Ash said when heard a light knock at the door. A moment later, it opened to admit Gerald and Anna. Ash stood and gestured to the two seats in front of him. "Please, have a seat."

Ash frowned at the worried look Anna sent her husband as they both sat down. He didn't want to upset them, but he was fairly certain what he had to say would do just that. He never shared his secret with anyone except Dean, and Darren was a huge secret.

"I asked you here because I need your help."

"Of course you have it," Gerald said. "You know that."

Ash held up his hand. "Before you say that, you need to know why I need your help."

"You're the alpha," Anna said. "You don't have to give us a reason."

"Let me explain first before you agree." Ash took a moment to gather his thoughts. He respected both Gerald and Anna. They had been like a favorite aunt and uncle to him while he was growing up. "I ask that what we discuss here, no matter how you feel, stays between us."

"Of course," the both answered at the same time.

"I've met my mate."

"Oh, Asher, that's so wonderful," Anna started gushing, pressing her hand to her chest. "I was so worried when you called us in here something had happened and to find out you—"

"Something has happened," Ash said, interrupting the older woman. He rested his elbows on the desk and folded his hands together. Now for the bomb he was going to drop in their laps. "I discovered my mate ten years ago, but due to circumstances at the time, I was unable to bring Darren home."

"Dar-Darren?" Anna asked. She gave Gerald a quick glance then turned back to Ash. "Your mate is a man?"

"And human." Bomb number two.

Anna gasped, a hand covering her mouth. Ash looked to Gerald to see his reaction. Would they turn from him now that they knew his mate wasn't a woman or even a wolf? Gerald seemed to just be watching him. Ash felt like squirming under the intense gaze. He'd received many a look like that from Gerald growing up, usually when he was in deep trouble.

"You waited ten years to bring your mate home, boy?"

Ash gapped. Gerald never called him "boy" anymore, not since he became alpha. "Before I became alpha, it was too dangerous to bring him home. Darren could have been killed. For the last several years, I've been working to make things here safe for him."

"And now?"

"Someone has discovered who Darren is. They tried to attack him tonight at his workplace. I can't wait to bring him home anymore."

"You know he might be in as much danger here as out in his world, right?"

Ash nodded at Gerald's words. He knew that, and it scared him more than anything. He didn't know if he could protect his mate in his own home. "That's why I'm asking for your help."

"You want our help protecting your mate?" Anna asked, bringing Ash's eyes back to her.

"I can't think of two other people in this clan I trust more than you and Gerald to protect Darren when he's here. Reed and Logan will be assigned his security, of course, and either Dean or I will be with him at all times. But he's going to need special care if he's going to learn what being mated to the alpha means."

"He doesn't know already?" Anna asked.

Ash grimaced. "He knows some. I thought it was better to leave him unaware of our world until I brought him into it."

"That was probably a wise decision, alpha," Gerald said, "but how is he going to take it? Humans don't always do well in our environment."

"Darren is a veterinarian, so he understands four-legged creatures rather well. I also believe his chosen profession could be an asset to our clan. I don't know of any other clans that have a modern-day doctor." Ash grinned, feeling proud of his mate. "In fact, the reason he's in this mess was from trying to protect a litter of pups."

"Pups?" Anna cried out.

"I don't know who they belong to or which clan they came from, but they are definitely clan pups. I felt it through my bond with Darren. Someone used these pups to get to Darren."

"Oh my, that's just...just..." Anna didn't look like she knew quite what to say. She kept glancing back and forth between Gerald and Ash. Gerald, on the other hand, just stared at Ash, his lips pressed firmly together.

"Gerald, do you wish to say something?" Ash barely refrained from growling. "Will you have a problem accepting my mate?"

"Boy, I should put you over my knee and paddle your ass like I did when you were ten years old."

"Uh..." That wasn't quite the response Ash expected.

"I knew Anna was meant for me the minute I saw her," Gerald said as he tapped his finger on the wooden desk. "There was never any question for me on whether I would accept her or not. And if I needed to move to another clan to have her, I would have done it without blinking an eye. She was mine, and I knew it. That was forty-seven years ago. For you to deny your mate for ten years," Gerald shook his head, the corners of his mouth pulled down into a deep frown, "why, I'm not sure you even deserve him."

"Gerald, I—"

"There's no excuse, boy," Gerald snapped. "A mate is a mate, pure and simple."

"Gerald, give the boy some credit." Yes, give him some credit, Ash nodded quickly, agreeing with Anna. "He was trying to do the right thing. You know how things were in between the clans ten years ago. Asher is right. His mate would have been in danger."

"Seems to me he's still in danger. How are things any different?"

"Things are different because now I'm alpha," Ash said. "I'm in a much better position to protect Darren."

"It also puts him in more danger. As the mate of the alpha, he will be a target."

Ash nodded regretfully. "I know. I'm hoping between you, Reed, Logan, Dean, and me, we can keep him safe. I wanted a little more time to bring about some more changes in the clan before I brought Dary home, but with this new threat to him, I just—"

"Dary?" Anna asked. "I thought you said his name was Darren."

Ash felt his face flush a little as he smiled. "I've always called him Dary, short for Darren. Darren Hart."

Anna smiled back and reached across the desk to pat Ash's hand. "You'll do just fine, Asher. Gerald and I will do whatever we can to help you with your mate. You just bring him home where we can care for him."

Ash couldn't even begin to tell Gerald and Anna how much their acceptance meant to him. Ever since his parents were killed when he was younger, Gerald and Anna cared for him as if he was their son. He would be devastated if they didn't accept his mate.

"Dary is truly a wonderful man," Ash said quickly. "He will be a great asset to our clan but beyond that, he's kind, I mean really kind. He braved two ferocious shifters to save a box of pups he didn't know were shifter pups. He just thought they were normal every day puppies."

"You're in love with him," Anna whispered, a bit of awe in her voice.

"I think I fell for him the minute I met him." Ash wasn't embarrassed to admit he cared for Darren. Unlike many of his kind, he wasn't afraid to admit his feelings where his mate was concerned, at least not to Gerald and Anna.

"How did you meet Darren?" Anna asked.

"I was on a midnight run stretching my legs when I heard a noise. At first I couldn't figure out what it was, but as I followed the sound, I discovered this young man, injured from a fall down the side of the mountain." Ash chuckled and sat back in his chair as he remembered that dark night ten years ago. "Anna, you should have seen him. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and he smelled so good. I could no more deny him than I could have cut off my own head."

Gerald chuckled and reached over to grab his wife's hand. "That's the way it should have been with your mate. That's the way it was with my Anna. I knew the minute I saw her I would never be able to stay away from her. Good thing she returned my affections."

"Did you claim him, Asher?" Anna asked.

"I gave him the mating bite so we would have a bond."

Anna frowned, her pale blond eyebrows drawing together. "You don't sound overjoyed by that, Asher."

"After I claimed Dary and insured our bond, I patched him up and returned him to where he would be found by others of his kind. I knew bringing him home at the time wasn't safe. But we had our bond. I knew I could find him wherever he was."

"But?"

"When he fell, he hit his head. He thinks I'm a figment of his imagination, a voice in his head he created due to his head injury. He was even on medication for awhile because he thinks he's nuts. I don't think he even remembers the mating bite."

Anna's mouth dropped open in shock. Gerald just started laughing. "Boy, you sure do know how to screw things up, don't you?"

"I seem to be rather good at it."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"Go get Dary and hope he doesn't freak."

Gerald started cackling again. "Good luck to you, boy."

Ash nodded. "Yeah, I think I'm going to need it. My Dary is stubborn if nothing else. I wouldn't put it past him to punch me right in the mouth after I tell him I'm real. He's going to be so pissed."

"You have been lying to him for the last ten years, Asher," Anna pointed out. "You can't fault him for that. This is no way to start a relationship."

"I know." Asher grimaced. "I just hope he forgives me."

Chapter 3

"Dary, love, open your eyes."

Darren smiled as he leaned into the hand cupped around his cheek. "Ash," he whispered. He was having the most wonderful dream of him and Ash lying together in a field of green grass, the forest all around them.

"Dary, come on, love, you need to open your eyes."

Darren frowned and tried to open his tired eyes. The voice he heard wasn't coming from inside his head like normal. It was coming from right over the top of him. Darren inhaled swiftly, his eyes suddenly popping open as he realized the hand touching his cheek was real.

A large man hovered over him. Wavy strands of blue-black hair hung down from the man's head, softly caressing his high cheekbones. The longest black eyelashes Darren had ever seen framed deep baby blue eyes. A dark five-o-clock shadow graced the man's chiseled jaw.

Darren's hand trembled as he reached up to hesitantly touch the man's face, first his cheek, then his nose, and over his eyelids before moving down to rest against his lips.

"You-you're real."

"Yes, Dary," the man said, his voice sounding just as rich and deep in person as it did in Darren's head, "I am very real."

"I thought you—I thought—"

"I know, love, and I'm sorry I had to let you believe that. It wasn't safe to let you know the truth."

"And now it is?"

"Not really." Ash chuckled softly, looking a little abashed. "But I can no longer keep you safe if you are away from me. The danger to you is worse now, and you will be safer by my side."

Well, that explained everything, didn't it?

Darren folded his arms over his chest and glared up at Ash. He knew something profound was happening. He just wasn't sure what it was. He also wasn't sure he hadn't lost his mind after all. It was a distinct possibility. The man he'd been hearing in his head for years, the man he dreamed about, was sitting right in front of him. And he was very real, not a figment of Darren's imagination.

Darren wanted to know why. He'd wait to see what Ash had to say before he lit into the man. The anger he felt at being lied to knew no bounds, but Darren was never one to be quick to act on his anger. He preferred slower methods, like torture.

"You can start explaining any time."

Darren suddenly remembered his run from two madmen, the puppies, and his bid to hide himself. He pushed himself up against the pillows and glanced wildly around the room for the puppies.

"Where are the puppies?"

"Shh, love, the puppies are safe," Ash said as he pointed to the large dark-haired man sitting on the floor playing with three very rambunctious puppies. "Dean is keeping them occupied."

"Dean?"

The man looked up and waved. "Hey, Darren."

"Hey." Darren waved back before glancing at Ash, arching his eyebrow.

"My brother."

Darren cast Dean a dirty look when the man started chuckling. Dean quickly stopped and lowered his head, seeming to be suddenly very interested in what the puppies were doing. Darren returned his gaze to Ash.

"I'm waiting."

As he watched Ash fidget with the edge of the blanket, Darren wondered if he'd look back on this time and remember it being a pivotal point in his life that changed things for him forever. Somehow, with the anxious look he could see on Ash's face, Darren felt that it would be.

"Do you remember when you fell down the side of that mountain ten years ago? You hit your head and broke your leg?"

"Yes." The injury he'd received to his leg still hurt when he was tired, still made him limp every once in awhile. He remembered it every time the weather got cold.

"I was out running that night. I found you."

"And?" Darren knew there was more.

"I'm getting to it," Ash said. "This isn't easy."

Dean snorted. Darren shot him another glare until he shut up again. "Just say it," Darren said as he looked back at Ash. As apprehensive as he was about what Ash was about to tell him, Darren couldn't get past how handsome the man was. He was absolutely stunning in a huge rugged, "fuck-me-against-the-wall" type of way.

"I knew the minute I saw you that you were the one for me."

"The one for you?" Darren scoffed. "If I was the one for you then why have you waited ten fucking years to come find me?"

"It wasn't safe, Dary."

"Safe for whom?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Look, you need to understand, I don't—"

"I don't *need* to do anything."

"Dary, please, just give me a chance."

Darren's head snapped back when he heard Ash's voice in his mind. He held up his hand and started shaking his head. "No, if you're real, you don't get to talk to me in my head anymore. I spent the last ten years thinking I was crazy. If you're sitting here and not

some fucked up image my brain created, then you talk to me out loud."

Ash paled and suddenly looked sad as he glanced away, but he nodded his head. "I understand, Dary, and I'm sorry. I would have spared you that if I could have, but it would have just made things harder for you."

"Harder?" Darren snapped. "I thought I was nuts. I spent the last ten years seeing psychiatrist after psychiatrist, taking drugs to keep myself sane. How could things have been harder than that?"

"I know, love, and I can't tell you how sorry I am for that, but when I met you, it was just too dangerous to bring you home."

Darren frowned. "You keep saying that. How was it dangerous?"

"Ten years ago, men in my uh...family didn't get together with other men. We were expected to mate with females and produce children for the family. I can honestly say if I had brought you home, your life would have been in danger."

"What, are you in the mob or something?"

"No," Ash chuckled, "but close enough. My family is very close-knit. There's a lot of traditions and—"

"And one of them says two men can't be together?" Darren snorted. "Yeah, been there, done that. So wasn't impressed."

"Yeah, I remember."

"How do you remember?"

"I...uh...well..." Ash stammered suddenly.

Darren cocked an eyebrow.

"You know that voice you keep hearing in your head?"

"Your voice, ves."

"Yeah, well, see, there's this bond between us, and I can not only talk to you in your head, but I can feel what you're feeling. I knew when you came out to your parents and how they reacted. I knew how much that upset you."

Darren wasn't sure how he felt about that, so he didn't say anything in response. He knew logically he needed more time to

process everything he was hearing. Inside of a dingy, disgusting motel room didn't seem quite like the place to do that.

"So, why have you come to find me now?" he asked after a moment. "Have things changed at home? Do they suddenly accept gay men?"

Darren rolled his eyes when Ash grimaced and shook his head. "Not exactly but it is getting better. However, the danger to you is such that I need you near me to protect you."

"What danger?"

"You know those two guys that attacked you?"

"Like I could forget about them." Darren snorted.

"They attacked you because of me."

Darren sat forward. "They attacked me because of you? Why? What did you do to piss them off so bad? And why go after me and not you?"

"Remember that mob thing you mentioned? Well, we're not the mob exactly, but our family is a lot like that. I guess you could say I'm the head of the family, and we've been at war with the other families for a lot of years. Since you are my mate, one of the ways to get at me is to go after you."

"Mate?"

"My partner, lover." Ash's forehead wrinkled as he seemed to strive for the right word. "In the eyes of my people, we're married."

Darren's mouth dropped open for a moment before he snapped it shut, rapidly shaking his head. "Oh, hell no," Darren snapped. "I don't even know you."

Ash's hand suddenly covered Darren's as the man looked intently into his eyes. Darren felt mesmerized. He couldn't have looked away if the room was on fire. "You do know me, Dary. You've been getting to know me for ten years."

Darren blinked, not sure if the heartrending tenderness he saw in Ash's eyes was real or not. He was having a hard time understanding if anything was real. This all seemed like some elaborate fantasy he

made up in his head, especially the handsome man sitting beside him. Maybe he needed to start taking his drugs again.

"Think back to all of the times we've talked, Dary, all the things we shared together. You know I'm right. Even if you did think I was just a voice in your head, we shared secrets with each other, our deepest thoughts. I shared everything with you."

A quiver surged through Darren's veins as Ash reached over and brushed his fingers over the nape of Darren's neck. Ash's thumb gently stroked the puckered skin just below Darren's hairline, sending tingles of delight shooting up Darren's arm.

"This wasn't from your fall, Dary," Ash said softly. "This is where I bit you, bonding us together as mates for all eternity. This is why you can hear me talking to you in your head. Bonded mates can talk telepathically to each other."

"B-bit m-me?"

Ash flipped his arm over and showed Darren two long scars on his own wrist. "There has to be a willing exchange of blood for our bonding to take place. You don't have the canines to bite like I do, so I did it for you. Then you drank from me."

Darren shuddered as he looked at the two scars, shocked beyond belief. His eyes locked with Ash's again. "I don't..." Darren tried to draw in a breath to his lungs, but it couldn't seem to get past the lump in his throat. "I don't understand."

"Think back to your fall, love, what do you remember?" Ash made no attempt to hide the fact he was watching Darren intently. When the strange glint in Ash's eyes became too much, Darren looked down at his hands, twisting them together nervously in his lap. "Close your eyes, Dary, and try to remember."

Darren closed his eyes and thought of that fateful day. He'd been hiking through the woods, his first weekend free of college classes for the summer. He'd been so excited. One wrong step and everything changed.

What did he remember about his fall? The pain, certainly. It had been intense and mind-numbing. Darren thought he would die out there in the woods all alone, his leg broken and his head bleeding. He never thought to see another living being.

He didn't remember how long he lay at the bottom of some ravine, hours maybe? He'd heard a noise—very faint but there. Opening his eyes took nearly all of his strength, but seeing the moonlight glowing around the man leaning over him was worth every effort.

"That's it, love, remember."

Darren's fingers curled into fists as memories started bombarding him. The pain, the intense attraction he felt for the man caring for him. Then the man disappeared to be replaced by...something that licked at the wound in Darren's leg, and the pain went away.

Darren remembered passing out after that. By the time he came to, a nice fire roared to life next to him, and Ash sat cuddled around him. The pain was still there, but it was a dull ache like a sore muscle. Ash cradled Darren in his arms as they talked for hours until dawn's morning light started to come up over the mountains. Then Ash kissed Darren and changed his life forever. The degree to which Darren responded stunned him even then, but he'd begged for more of Ash's touch.

When Ash told him of his nature, Darren knew even now he'd readily agreed to the exchange. A knot rose in Darren's throat as he remembered the blood exchange and his heartache when Ash carried him to safety, then left.

Darren opened his eyes and looked at Ash, inhaling sharply at the almost desperate need he could see in the man's eyes. No one ever looked at him like he was the most important person in the world.

"Why didn't I remember before now?" he whispered. "Why did I think you were a figment of my imagination?" Darren frowned. "Why didn't you ever tell me the truth?"

Ash squeezed Darren's hand as the corners of his lips turned up in a small smile. "I don't know why you didn't remember before now. The time we had together was so short, and you were injured. Maybe it was due to that."

"And the reason you didn't tell me?"

Ash drew in a deep breath then let it out slowly as he gazed down at their entwined hands. "I couldn't go to you, and you couldn't come to me, not at that time. You knowing I was out there and not being able to be with me wouldn't have done you any good. It just would have made you miserable."

"What about you?" Darren asked, suddenly feeling his heart ache at what Ash must have gone through. He could feel Ash's anguish as he was always able to feel the man's emotions. He knew Ash suffered during their separation.

"I still got to talk to you through our bond and I, at least, knew you were real." Ash's smile was small and sad, but there none the less. "I knew we'd be together some day."

Darren squeezed Ash's hand between both of his then let them rest on his chest as he looked up at him. "It doesn't sound to me like that was much of a trade off."

"It was. I got to watch you become the man you are today. If you remember back, I was there with you all through school, the late night cram sessions, the mid terms and finals. I was even there with you the day you graduated."

"Being in my head isn't quite the same thing."

Ash smiled. "I was there in person the day you graduated from college. There was no way I would have missed that. I was so damn proud of you."

"You were there?"

"Yes." Ash nodded. "I even have pictures."

"You have pictures?" Darren gapped. "When else have you been there?"

"I was in the crowd of well wishers the day you opened your veterinary clinic." The smile fell from Ash's lips as he gently patted Darren's hand with his free one. "I watched over you the day you moved out of your parents' house. I was even there the night you went out with Billy Mitchell."

Darren's eyes widened as he remembered that disastrous date then narrowed as a sudden thought occurred to him. "Did you have anything to do with Billy leaving so quickly?"

Ash glanced away, his face suddenly flushing. "We might have bumped into each other in the restroom."

"Ash!"

"What?" Ash exclaimed. "I was just supposed to let that man put his hands all over you? You're my mate. No one should be touching you except me."

Darren pulled his hands away from Ash and crossed them over his chest as he glared at the man. "Just how many dates did you accompany me on? Because I seem to remember quite a few guys that seemed very interested in me then suddenly split, never to call again."

The blood that drained from Ash's face fascinated Darren. There was a part of him that knew he should be pissed at the man for ruining any chance Darren might have had to have a relationship with someone. There was another part that was touched by the possessive manner in which Ash watched over him.

"So, all these years, it wasn't me these men were running from but you?"

"Does it make you feel any better knowing I've not been with anyone except you since the second I set eyes on you?"

Darren could hear the hope in Ash's voice and shrugged. "Not really, but it's nice to know it wasn't me."

Ash leaned back and fit his hands together, staring down at them. "It wasn't you, Dary, I swear. Any man would be lucky to have you. You're smart, handsome, you—"

"You think I'm handsome?" Darren whispered in awe.

Ash's eyebrows shot up in a surprised expression. His eyes glowed with a savage inner light that made Darren's heart thunder in his chest. When he spoke, Ash's voice was tender, almost a murmur.

"I've always thought you were handsome, from the very first moment I set eyes on you." Ash reached over to cradle the side of Darren's face in his hand, his thumb gently stroking the side of Darren's face. "You take my breath away every time I look at you."

Darren was mesmerized by the sensual glint in Ash's baby blue eyes as the man slowly lowered his head. He captured Darren's lips in a deep, spine-tingling kiss that rocked him all the way down to his toes.

Darren groaned at the strong, heady taste of the man kissing him filling his mouth. He grabbed the front of Ash's shirt and pulled him closer, needing more contact with Ash's body. The feeling of Ash's hard body against his was heaven. Darren bent his leg and pressed his knee against the outer edge of Ash's waist. His hands clenched in the fabric of Ash's shirt as the man's body pressed closer against him.

Darren wanted more. He tugged on Ash's shirt, pulling on him. He groaned, the tingles shooting throughout his body at the touch of Ash's hand moving down his body almost more than he could handle.

Ash gripped Darren's hips and pulled him closer. Darren shuddered when he felt the thickness of Ash's hard cock push against the apex of his thighs. He moved, crying out when his cock smashed against Ash's.

He looked up at Ash, the heat smoldering in the man's eyes burning into him. When Ash moved his hand and gripped his ass cheek, Darren couldn't help but arch up into the man's body. The sensations brought on by the man above him were just too great to ignore.

"Dean," Ash rasped out, "why don't you and the pups go get something to eat?"

"Yeah, it shouldn't take us too long to find something," Dean replied.

Darren glanced up to see Dean gathering the puppies up in his arms and carrying them out the door, shutting it behind him. He wanted the man gone so he could get busy with Ash, but he was concerned about letting the puppies out of his sight.

"Uh, he won't—"

"The pups couldn't be in safer hands, Dary," Ash murmured between kisses along Darren's neck and jaw line. "I promise."

Darren tried to reply, to make some intelligent response other than a strangle moan, but the blood was draining from his brain and pooling in his groin with each touch of Ash's lips on his sensitive skin.

"Ash...Ash, I—"

"Shh, Dary, I have you," Ash whispered. Darren groaned and arched into the hand Ash cupped around his aching cock. He shuddered when he heard the soft rasp of a zipper being pulled down. Cool air hit his shaft before it was quickly covered by Ash's hot hand. "I'll take good care of you, love."

"Oh, I dreamed of this," Darren whispered raggedly. "I dreamed of your hands on me. It's been so long, and all I've had is the voice in my head to jerk off to. It's—" Darren suddenly gasped and sat up, pushing Ash's hand away to bury his head in his hands as he groaned.

"Oh my god, I've been jerking off to the voice in my head." Darren never felt more embarrassed than he did at that moment. For years, he'd been jerking off to the sexy voice in his head...and the voice was real!

"And you wouldn't believe how sexy that was, Dary." Darren resisted the hands that pulled him back for just a moment then cuddled into Ash's broad chest, burying his face against the man. "And just a little bit dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Darren frowned then tilted his head back to look up into Ash's smiling face. "How could that be dangerous?"

"That voice thing goes both ways, Dary. I can hear you just as you hear me. I can also feel you like you feel me." Ash's smirk seemed to

be directed more at himself than Darren. "I'd be sitting in a meeting or something, and all of a sudden I'd be horny as hell, your sweet voice murmuring to me, every aroused emotion you had hitting me like a ton of bricks. You can't imagine how many times I've left a meeting right in the middle of it to go jerk off in my bathroom."

Darren started to chuckle as the image of Ash running from a meeting to go relieve himself in the bathroom filled his head. He didn't quite feel so bad knowing he affected Ash just as much as the big man affected him.

"So, this bond thing goes both ways then?"

"Yeah, it does," Ash said, frowning slightly. "Does that bother you?"

"No, it's just a little hard to get used to. I'm remembering everything I said to you, all the stuff I shared with the *voice*. It's a little embarrassing, you know?"

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Dary. We are bonded, we share everything."

"Yeah?" Darren liked the sound of that. He wanted someone special to share everything with. He hated being alone, although as he looked back, he never felt truly alone as long as he had the voice in his head talking to him.

"Yeah." One corner of Ash's mouth lifted up in a small smile. "If you remember back, I didn't just listen to you, I talked to you, too. I shared my deepest desires with you, even if you only thought I was a voice in your head."

"I just can't believe you're real."

Ash chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. Darren closed his eyes and groaned when he felt Ash's hand move down his body to wrap around his cock again. "I'm very real, Dary."

Darren couldn't believe how fast the touch of Ash's hands on his body could take him from normal to hot and horny in a matter of seconds. The man barely had to touch him and Darren felt like he was going up in flames.

"I want...I want..." Darren wasn't sure how to ask what he wanted. He wasn't even sure if he should ask. He wasn't even sure what he wanted. According to Ash, they had been getting to know each other for years, shared their deepest, most intimate thoughts with each other. Yet, they'd just met in person.

Darren shuddered when Ash's hands pushed down the back of his pants and between his ass checks, Ash's fingers skimming over his puckered hole. "Soon, Dary, soon I will take you here and make you all mine."

Darren wanted it now! He wanted the hard cock he could feel pressing against him to pound into his ass. His sensitive hole quivered at the mere thought. Darren started panting. He needed so bad.

"Ash, please!"

Chapter 4

Ash barely controlled himself from claiming Darren as the man's gorgeous body arched into him. Darren was more alluring in person than he ever was through their mental link, although that was something intense as well.

But to actually be holding his mate in his arms, his willing mate, that was all together different. Ash never met anyone that aroused him as much as Darren. He doubted that there was anyone alive as sexy as the man he held in his arms. It just didn't seem possible.

"I've been dreaming of this day for ten years, Dary," Ash whispered gently against Darren's soft sandy brown hair. "But I can't take you for the first time in some cheap motel."

Darren tilted his head back and frowned up at Ash. "Why the hell not?" He sounded almost offended, pissed.

"Because you're too precious to me," Ash said, slightly amused at Darren's outrage. He waved his free hand around to encompass the dingy room. "You deserve better than this."

Ash grunted when Darren grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him so close their noses nearly touched. His teeth were gritted, a wild glint in his golden eyes. "I deserve to have your dick pounding me into this fucking mattress."

"Dary," Ash groaned and closed his eyes, the image Darren sent him jumped up and down on the slim thread holding onto his control. He didn't know how much longer he could hold out from doing exactly what Darren wanted, exactly what he wanted.

Darren growled. Ash's heart fluttered as he opened his eyes and looked down into Darren's fierce features. He felt that deep growl

ricochet through his body like a bullet. He'd never heard anything so arousing in his life. He never expected to hear it from Darren.

Ash knew he didn't have any supplies with him. He didn't think things would progress this far when he left home to rescue his mate. He doubted Darren had anything with him as well. It wasn't exactly what you thought to bring when you were on the run for your life.

Ash reached down and wrapped his fingers around Darren's hard cock, stroking him rapidly but firmly. Darren's eyes seemed to just roll back into his head as he arched up, humping his hips toward Ash.

"Ash... Ash..." Darren panted.

"Do you like my hand on your cock, Dary?" Ash crooned.

"Yes!" Darren cried out. "Need more... need... need..."

The want in Darren's voice pulled on the last bit of Ash's control. He dropped Darren's cock, smiling when he heard the man whimper in protest, and moved down to kneel at the man's feet.

Grabbing Darren's jeans, he pulled them down and off his legs. Darren, bless his soul, spread his legs the moment the soft denim fell off his feet. Ash nearly swallowed his tongue when he looked up and saw Darren's puckered hole blinking back at him.

When Darren reached down and grabbed his ass cheeks, pulling them apart to give Ash a better view, the slight thread of control Ash had snapped. He lunged forward, sticking his tongue out to lick at the hot flesh.

Ash groaned, his body shuddering at the first taste of his mate in years. Darren had a musky scent, earthy and sweet. It transferred over in taste just as Ash dreamed it would. Ash wanted to eat him up.

He reached up and grabbed a couple of pillows, shoving them under Darren's ass. The raised angle gave Ash a direct line to the treasures he sought. Ash licked at the head of Darren's cock a few times, the pearly drops of pre-cum exploding across his tongue and driving his arousal up another notch.

Ash was getting to the point he didn't care if they were hiding from other clan members. He didn't care if Dean came back at any moment and caught them. He had to have Darren.

Ash started an all out assault on Darren's body, sure to drive him crazy. He wanted his mate mindless with lust. He wanted Darren to feel every last thing Ash did to his body, then beg for more. That's the way it should be between them.

Ash began at the small hole that quivered with every touch of his tongue, licking and nipping, pushing his tongue in as far as it would go. From there, he moved up, dragging his tongue over Darren's ball sac to his engorged shaft, then all the way to the tip to lick away more sweet-tasting pre-cum.

Each swipe of his tongue, each kiss of his lips, seemed to send Darren's body into one shudder after another until the man practically vibrated beneath Ash. Darren's hands clenched in the sheets, his head moving frantically back and forth on the mattress as the man cried out.

Ash stuck his fingers into his mouth and got them sloppy wet then pushed it against Darren's tight entrance. He groaned and nearly came in his jeans when Darren's body swallowed his finger right up as if it were made to be there. The gods were just too kind to him.

"Fuck, Dary, can you take another?" Ash asked as he stroked two fingers across Darren's soft skin. He didn't want to hurt Darren. He never wanted to hurt Darren. But, damn, the man was so fucking responsive to Ash's touch. Ash knew he could spend hours making love to Darren and never get his fill.

As gently as he could, Ash pushed a second finger into Darren's ass right along side of the first one. Again, Darren's body seemed to swallow him right up as if he was supposed to be there. Ash moved them around a bit then, without asking this time in case it was a fluke, he sank a third finger into Darren.

"Oh, fuck me!" Ash whispered as his fingers effortlessly sank into Darren's hole. It was like the man's body stretched just to

accommodate him. But still...Ash glanced around the room, anxiously looking for some sort of lube. Dry fucking Darren didn't sound like it would be enjoyable no matter how much the man's body stretched out for him.

Maybe the bathroom. Ash pushed Darren's legs up to his chest and took on his sternest look. "You keep these legs right where they are, Dary. I'll be right back."

Ash didn't wait for a reply before he jumped off the bed and dashed into the bathroom. He searched the counter top then dropped to his knees to look under the sink.

Groaning with disappointment as he slammed the cabinet doors closed, Ash rested his head back on his shoulders. He wanted to scream in frustration. He wanted to—was that a bottle of lotion in the shower stall?

Ash jumped to his feet and whipped the shower curtain back, his eyes landing on three small bottles sitting on the little shelf in the shower. He reached over and grabbed them, his heart pounding frantically.

Shampoo, conditioner, and hand lotion, all with the same cheesy motel logo on the bottle. Ash dropped the shampoo and conditioner, holding onto the lotion as if it were the Holy Grail as he ran back into the motel room.

His heart nearly jumped out of his chest when he found Darren just like he'd left him, legs pulled up to his chest and ass lifted into the air by a couple of pillows. Fuck, the man was gorgeous.

Ash quickly pushed his pants off his legs and whipped his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor. He climbed eagerly onto the bed and settled himself between Darren's spread legs.

Ash's hand trembled as he popped the lid on the lotion and liberally coated his fingers. He rubbed the lotion over his aching cock, knowing once he got Darren ready, there would be no stopping him from taking the man.

Once his cock was generously lubed, Ash coated his fingers. He dropped the bottle beside him on the bed then moved toward Darren. Again, his finger slid effortlessly into Darren's tight hole. Ash groaned, imagining how that tight hole would grip his cock when he finally got to fuck his mate.

He had waited ten years for this moment, and he didn't want to fuck it up. While Ash imagined they would have many moments together, there would only ever be one first time for them. He'd claimed Darren before, but the man had been half out of his mind from his fall. This time, Darren was fully aware of him and what they were about to do. Ash wanted to make it special for his mate.

If the moans and groans falling from Darren's lips were anything to go by, Ash was doing a stellar job. Darren's entire body writhed under Ash, the man's golden eyes pleading. Ash just needed to make sure.

"Do you want me to take you, Dary?" Ash whispered as he moved up to press the head of his cock against the tight entrance to Darren's body. "If I take you, you're mine for all time. I will never let you go." "Yes!"

Ash reached down to grab a handful of Darren's hair, tilting the man's head back so he could look into his eyes. "Be very sure, Darren Hart. Right now we are merely bonded mentally. If I take you, our souls will be bonded together for eternity."

Darren blinked several times. Ash's heart began to sink as the glossy-eyed look in Darren's eyes faded away, leaving them clear and golden bright. "We'll be bonded for all eternity?" Darren whispered.

Ash nodded, pressing his lips together to keep from begging Darren to accept him. He would not influence Darren's choice anymore than he had to. He pulled back from Darren until their bodies did not touch, then reached over to grab Darren's cock.

"We can just have a quick rub off if you prefer," Ash said as he stroked Daren's cock. "We can still enjoy ourselves together."

Darren's forehead crinkled as he frowned. "I don't want to lose you."

"You would never lose me, Dary, but you need to be aware of what would happen if I make love to you. We would be bound together more than we are now, never to be separated. We would share more than our minds."

"After ten years of being in my head, why are you even asking me?"

"Because I will not force this on you," Ash said harshly. "I will not take what you won't willingly give me. You have to want this as much as I do, to want me as much as I want you."

Darren's breath seemed to stutter in his throat. Ash didn't know if that was a good sign or not. "I want you, but I don't know what all of this means."

"It means we would be mated, married in the eyes of my people. It means we would always have each other. It would be you and me together always." Ash dropped Darren's cock and moved up over the man until they were face to face, reaching up to caress the side of Darren's face. "It means there would never be anyone in my life except you. I would willingly give you all that I am. My heart, my body, and my soul."

Darren's eyes widened. "Damn, you're good."

"Good?" Ash's eyebrows shot up. "And that means what?"

"That means you'd better take me now before I start asking you questions about this shifting business of yours and run for the hills."

"Dary, I don't want to hide anything from you," Ash said quickly. He didn't realize until this moment Darren even knew about his wolf side. Although, after everything they had shared over the years, it shouldn't have surprised him. "If you have questions..."

"I do, but I'd rather you pound me into the mattress before I ask them." Darren's eyes glanced away for a moment then came back. "So, make me yours."

"Dary, are you sure?" Ash could see the intent in Darren's face before he felt the man's legs wrap around his waist. Darren grinned.

"I'm sure," Darren said softly. "I want to be yours. I want you to be mine."

Ash closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Darren's as he took in the acceptance in the man's words. Even after everything, all the times they spoke together in their heads, Ash knew he never thought to hear those sweet words from Darren.

Ash wasn't stupid. He wasn't about to let the opportunity pass him by or give Darren enough time to change his mind. He grabbed his cock and positioned it against Darren's tight entrance.

Opening his eyes, he watched his mate as he slowly pushed in until he couldn't enter Darren any more. Darren's body cradled his like they were formed at the very same time, molded to fit together perfectly.

Darren's eyes turned a dark golden brown. His mouth hung open as little pants fell from his lips. His silky skin flushed as Ash began to move, gently at first, with more and more force as the arousal between them built.

Ash found he couldn't look away from Darren's eyes, mesmerized by the light smoldering in his golden-flecked eyes. It seemed to burn just for Ash, getting brighter and brighter with each thrust of Ash's hips.

The harder and quicker Ash pounded into Darren, the more brilliantly the light glowed. Darren's body tightened around Ash's cock as the man's breathing became rapid, breathless.

Ash's canines dropped down, the need to sink them into Darren's soft flesh almost as great as his need to sink his cock into the man's welcoming body. He pricked his finger on one tooth then pushed it into Darren's mouth.

"Dary," Ash hissed as Darren sucked on his finger. He never would have thought having his finger sucked on would be so erotic,

but it was, and it almost took him over the edge. He just needed one more thing.

Darren seemed to understand exactly what Ash needed as he grinned around the finger in his mouth then tilted his head to the side, baring his neck to Ash's hungry gaze. Darren refused to release Ash's finger, sucking on it even harder.

Overcome, Ash leaned down and sank his canines into the soft flesh between Darren's neck and shoulder, the sweet, heady taste of the man's blood spilling across his tongue. Lightning flashed behind his eyelids.

Ash groaned loudly, his wolf howling with satisfaction. His hips thrust furiously as he pounded his cock into Darren's tight ass. Ash's mouth was filled with Darren's sweet taste. His cock was being held by Darren's body as the world around him exploded into a million glowing stars.

Hearing Darren cry out as he found his own release, Ash closed his eyes and willingly opened himself up and gave his heart and soul to his mate as a wave of ecstasy washed over his body and took him into a realm of pleasure he'd never known before.

The shock of connection with Darren blinded Ash. He never knew such a bond was possible, even with his mate. He felt everything Darren felt, the wonder and surprise, the affection and growing love, the deep desire to always be close to Ash.

Ash even felt the secret desire Darren hid deep in his heart for the "voice in his head." Tears of gratitude prickled the corners of Ash's eyes as he realized the gift he'd been given. It was far more than he ever thought he'd have.

Ash opened his eyes to look down at the man he was now bonded to for all eternity. He knew it had to be the connection they built together, but he thought Darren looked even sexier than he did moments before.

"Dary," he whispered softly into Darren's head as he tenderly caressed the side of his face, "you're mine now."

"Yes."

Ash's heart jumped for joy, and his wolf howled happily when Darren answered him through their bond. He exhaled a long sigh of contentment, knowing he was right where he was supposed to be...in the arms of his mate.

"Uh, Ash, getting a little heavy, man. Can't breathe."

Ash chuckled as he gently pulled free of Darren's body and rolled to his side, keeping one arm firmly around his mate's body. Darren looked a little flushed, his eyes darting around the room as if he were nervous.

"What's wrong, Dary?"

More red filled Darren's face. "It's been awhile since I've done this, and I don't know what the proper etiquette is after—" Darren shrugged then finally lifted his eyes to meet Ash's. "Do I ask if you want to clean up or something?"

Ash chuckled as he cupped Darren's chin in his hand. "Love, it's been just as long for me as it has been for you, remember? I haven't been with anyone since I met you."

"You were serious?"

"Very," Ash said. "Why would I want to be with anyone else when I could be with you, even if it was just in our heads? I admit I was with a few different people before then just as you were, but—"

"Geez, do you know how weird it is that you know everything about me?"

"You know everything about me, too."

"Yeah, but..." Darren shook his head. "It's just weird."

"Bad weird or good weird?"

"Just weird."

Ash chuckled. He understood where Darren was coming from. Once a mental bond was formed between mates, not much could be hidden. It wasn't so much their every thought was shared, but a mate could feel emotions through the bond.

Darren would have known every time Ash was happy, upset, angry, everything. He would have felt it. More than that, because the bond was so intimate and just between the two of them, they tended to share everything...their secrets, desires, their lives.

"Do you regret our bond?" he asked hesitantly.

"No, never think that," Darren said quickly. "It's just going to take a little while to get used to. You might have known I was real, but I truly thought you were just a voice in my head." Darren dragged his hand down his face. "I mean, fuck, the things I told you, the things I shared with you. It's a little embarrassing."

"Too embarrassing?"

"No, and you need to stop questioning me about it." Ash cocked an eyebrow at Darren's rough tone. "I've already told you I don't regret being with you or even what we just did. I just need time to get used to it all."

"Time?" That didn't sound good to Ash. It sounded like Darren wanted space to figure everything out. Ash wasn't sure Darren understood they couldn't be apart now that they'd fully bonded. His wolf growled at the thought of being separated from his mate. "What do you mean *time*?"

Before Darren could answer, the motel door flew open, and Dean came rushing in, the three pups held tightly in his arms. His face was pale, sweat dripping down his temple as if he'd run a good distance.

"We have trouble, and it's just a few minutes behind me."

Chapter 5

Ash would have laughed as Darren scrambled under the blankets if the situation hadn't been so dire, but they had trouble. Giving into his amusement wouldn't have been nice or practical.

Instead, Ash rolled to the side of the bed and grabbed his clothes. He quickly pulled them on then tossed Darren his jeans. Ash grinned when Darren simply cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Dean, turn around." Ash chuckled.

"What?" Dean snapped. "Why would I...oh." Dean chuckled as he turned around.

Ash refused to turn around, watching with a great amount of interest as his mate pulled on his jeans and ran his hand through his sandy brown hair. "You look gorgeous as always, Dary."

Darren flushed. "Easy for you to say. You'd look good in a gunnysack."

"Glad you think so." Ash started toward his mate when a throat clearing behind him reminded him of the other occupant in the room and the three pups. He turned to face his brother, watching the man balance effortlessly from foot to foot. "What happened, Dean?"

"The pups and I found this little twenty-four-hour fast food joint down the street. I was ordering some food when I saw the Doc's car pull up in the parking lot. I ducked out the side entrance and ran back here."

"My car?" Darren asked, sounding seriously pissed. "They're driving around looking for me in *my* car?"

"Dary, I'm sure—"

Ash's words died when Darren crossed his arms over his chest and gave him a fixed stare. That couldn't be a good sign. Ash felt the man get angry plenty of times over the years, but he'd never actually seen him get mad. It was kind of hot.

Ash shook his head to clear his passion-filled thoughts. "Okay, come on, we need to get out of here and back to our territory. We were only given a few hours here anyway, and I'm sure our time is about up."

"You were only given a few hours here?" Darren asked. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Ash glanced at Dean and saw his brother roll his eyes. He wasn't much help. He looked back at Darren, noting the arched eyebrow. "We're not in our territory, Dary. I had to ask permission to enter this territory from the local alpha. He gave me six hours to come in and get you."

"Six hours to come in and get me?" Darren asked. "And what happens if we're here longer than six hours?"

"The local alpha has the right to order a hunt for us."

"A hunt?" Darren's eyes narrowed. "And what in the hell is a hunt?"

"It's where they hand us our heads if they catch us," Dean said.

"Hand us our—" Darren's mouth dropped open, his skin paling from the rosy flush that filled it just moments before to almost chalky white.

"Dary, every... uh... family has a territory that they oversee and—"

Darren smirked. "You can stop calling it a family, Ash. We both know you're talking about a wolf clan. At least give me some credit here. I did listen to the things you told me even if I thought you were just a voice in my head."

"Dary, I never told you about the wolf clans," Ash insisted.

"No, but you talked about running under the full moon enough times that I kind of figured it out myself." Darren shrugged and

waved his hand toward Ash. "Besides, that growly thing you do is kind of hard to miss."

"Growly thing? Really? And that doesn't freak you out?"

Dary rolled his eyes as he swept his hand out toward the bed. "I just had sex with a man I thought was a figment of my imagination for the last ten years. Your being a wolf is the least of my worries right now."

Ash shot Dean a deep glare when the man started to chuckle. "You seem to be having a lot of fun at my expense, brother."

"No, no, not at all." Dean quickly shook his head, the corners of his lips quivering as he tried not to smile. "It's just nice to know your Dary isn't going to roll over and show you his underbelly."

"Underbelly!" Darren snapped. His hands landed on his hips in a manner Ash just knew didn't mean anything good. The sparkle of gold in Darren's eyes told Ash a storm of epic proportions was about to be unleashed.

Ash groaned and dragged his hand down his face. This situation was just getting better and better. "When in wolf form, it's customary to greet the alpha of any given territory by a show of submission or nonaggression. For normal members of the clan, they show their underbelly. For another alpha, they show their neck."

"I'm not showing anyone my underbelly," Darren snapped, "I don't care who the hell they are."

"Things would be a little different for you, Dary," Ash said quickly. He really wished he didn't have to have this conversation in the middle of a motel room with people after them. "You wouldn't be required to show anyone your underbelly except me, and I've already seen it. In fact, it would be an insult to me if you did."

Darren's eyes narrowed. "Why am I different? Is it because I'm not a wolf like you?"

"Uh... no, not exactly," Ash said slowly. He could feel little beads of sweat trickle down the side of his face as he tried to figure out the best way to explain to Darren exactly what being mated to Ash meant.

"Dude." Dean laughed hysterically. "You're the alpha bitch."

Dead silence filled the room. Ash glanced at Darren through his eyelashes, wondering how his mate was taking Dean's ill-timed words. His brother was essentially correct, though. As the mate of the alpha, it made Darren the alpha bitch, even if he was a man.

"I'm the what?" Darren asked faintly, drawing a step nearer to Ash as if he couldn't believe what was being said.

"I'm the alpha of my clan, Darren." Ash took a deep breath. "That makes you my alpha bitch."

Darren's eyebrows drew together in an affronted scowl. "Did you just call me a bitch?"

"Dary, that word means something different in our world, I swear. It's actually a sign of respect, not a put down. You are the mate of the alpha, me. That means you are the alpha bitch of my clan."

"And that means what?"

"Dude, you're the queen."

Ash would be eternally grateful his brother had such a big mouth because he didn't want the fierce look Darren shot Dean turned in his direction. If looks could have killed, Dean would have been a bag of bones.

"Dean!" Ash nearly shouted. His brother was so not helping his case right now. Ash wanted to break these things to Darren gently, not use a sledge hammer. He turned to argue with Dean just in time to see the man stumble across the floor as someone tried to push the door open.

Ash didn't even think about what he was doing as he jumped across the room and tackled Darren. He heard the door crash open just as they hit the floor, rolling Darren beneath his body for safety.

He heard Dean next to him and looked over to see his brother set the pups down on the floor, scooting them toward him and Darren. "Go to Darren, pups," Dean said before turning back toward the two men breaking into the room.

Ash sat up and grabbed the pups as they ran toward him and Darren. He quickly picked them up and shoved them into Darren's lap. "Take care of them, Dary, and stay out of the way. You're not equipped to fight these guys."

Once Darren nodded and scooted into the corner, the pups held safely in his arms, Ash jumped to his feet. He pulled the mattress off the bed and covered Darren and the pups before turning back to the fight his brother was involved in.

Two large men were taking punch shots at Dean. His brother was fighting the good fight, putting up quite a struggle, but Ash could see fighting the two men by himself was taking its toll on the man.

Ash jumped into the fray, punching the nearest man to him in the face as Dean fell to the floor. The man fell back against the wall then shook his head, trying to shake off the punch. Ash didn't give him time, hitting him again.

He extended his claws and raked them across the man's abdomen. The scent of blood hit Ash like a freight train as beads of blood immediately started to form, soaking through the man's shirt.

Ash tilted his head back and howled out his triumph as the man slowly slid to the floor and slumped back against the wall. He turned to the other opponent and snarled as the man backed up toward Darren's hiding spot in the corner.

Ash ignored the crumpled body of his brother on the floor and stalked the man who took him down. He knew his brother was still alive. Ash could see Dean's chest moving up and down.

The man held up his hand to hold Ash off. "We just want the human."

"Mine," Ash growled.

"There are more of us coming," the man said. "We just want the human. Give him to us, and you can go on your way. We won't stop you."

"Not going to happen," Ash snapped as rage filled him. "The human belongs to me."

Ash's heart almost jumped out of his chest when he saw Darren climb out from behind the mattress just beyond the man's shoulder. He tried to keep his expression neutral and not give away the fact Darren was no longer in hiding. It was difficult, especially considering he wanted to paddle his mate's ass for disobeying him.

It also didn't help when he saw Darren raise a lamp up in the air then bring it down over their enemy's head. The man grunted. His eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped to the floor. Ash didn't even wait to see if he was unconscious or not before leaping over the body and pulling Darren into his arms, hugging his mate close to his body.

"Don't ever do anything like that again." Ash drew in a ragged breath as the implications of Darren's movements and the danger he was in hit him. "You could have been killed, Dary."

"Well, I wasn't, so get over it." Darren's words might have been fierce, but his body trembled in Ash's arms as the man burrowed closer to Ash's chest. Darren leaned back to look up at Ash. "Can we go now? Please?"

Ash stroked his hand down the side of his mate's face. "Okay, Dary, we'll go home."

"And the puppies?" Darren asked as he glanced over his shoulder to the mattress leaning against the wall. "Can we take the puppies home with us, too?"

"For now, Dary, but the pups have a home to go to. We just need to find their homes."

"They could be strays," Darren insisted.

"Dary, the pups, they aren't regular puppies," Ash said carefully. "They're like me."

Darren's mouth was already hanging open by the time he turned back around to face Ash. "They're wolves?"

Ash nodded.

"Then why haven't they turned back into human form?"

"I imagine they have been warned not to. Three lost children in the human world are a lot more unusual than three lost puppies."

"Oh man, their parents must be going crazy." Darren hurried across the room and pulled the mattress out, cooing to the puppies as he coaxed them out of their hiding place. He picked them up and cradled them to his chest as he turned sorrowful eyes toward Ash. "We need find their parents, Ash."

"We will, Dary, but first we need to get Dean and get out of this territory." Ash glanced anxiously around the destruction in the room. "We're in danger as long as we stay here."

Darren nodded. "I've got the puppies. You get Dean."

Ash stepped over to his brother and rolled the man onto his back. Dean had a few deep scratches and several bruises but nothing that looked life threatening. Ash smacked Dean's face a few times until he started to come around.

"Wha—"

"Get up, sluggy, we need to leave."

Dean grunted as he rolled to his feet and stood up. He looked a little dazed until he looked around the room and spotted the two unconscious men on the floor. His eyes widened.

"Dude!"

"Yeah, we can string them up later," Ash said as he urged Dean toward the door. "Right now, I'd like to get Dary and the pups out of here before anyone else shows up."

"No doubt, but we should at least search them or something."

* * * *

Darren bounced from foot to foot by the door as he watched Ash and Dean search the two unconscious men. He cocked an eyebrow when Ash leaned in to sniff at one man's neck. He felt confused by the sudden shot of jealousy filling him. He didn't want Ash sniffing anyone except him.

Darren rolled his eyes when it went on for several moments. He set the puppies down in their box then marched across the room and grabbed Ash by the arm, pulling him back from the body on the floor. "That's enough of that. You don't need to be sniffing anyone but me."

Ash's eyebrows shot up. "Uh, I need to figure out what clan they came from, Dary. I can only do that by smelling them."

"Then let Dean do it." Darren struggled with the uncertainty that had been aroused in him. He felt the words come out of his mouth. He just couldn't believe he was saying them. And he couldn't seem to stop himself from saying more. "You don't sniff anyone except me."

Biting his lip, Darren glanced away from Ash's shocked face. He didn't understand the emotions twirling through him anymore than he understood anything else that had happened tonight.

The words "uncharted territory" didn't even cover the turmoil he felt. He realized Ash was the voice in his head. He even understood he wasn't crazy and he and Ash had some sort of weird connection.

What he didn't understand were these feelings of possessiveness he felt for Ash. Just the thought of Ash anywhere close to another person, man or woman, made Darren see nothing but red rage. It made him want to kill, maim, or severely hurt someone.

Darren clenched his fists as he tried to figure out his intense emotions. He became more uncomfortable by the second as his dismay grew. When strong arms wrapped around him, Darren jerked, almost pulling away.

"Shh, Dary, it's okay, baby."

"It's not okay, damn it." Uncertainty made his voice harsh and insistent. "I can't...I don't..." Darren stomped his foot on the floor in frustration. How could he explain his feelings to Ash when he didn't even know himself?

Darren's skin tingled at the feeling of Ash's hands rubbing up and down his arms. He sighed deeply and leaned back against the man's broad chest, closing his eyes as calm suddenly filled him.

"Ash," he murmured.

"We're in a period of mating, Dary," Ash said softly. "While we've completed the bond between us, it's still new. Everything feels more intense right now. Things will begin to settle down in a few days."

Darren's chuckle was self-deprecating. "I'm not sure I'm going to survive a few days, Ash."

"I feel the same things you do, love. I don't want you near anyone, not even my brother, and he's my right-hand man. I'm even jealous of the way you hold those pups."

Darren glanced back over his shoulder at Ash, surprised by the fierce glint in the man's eyes. He looked like he actually meant what he said. When he tried to speak, Darren's voice wavered. "Re-really?"

"Well, I don't think the feelings of possessiveness between us will ever go away." Ash chuckled. "But it will be less intense over time. As my mate, you shouldn't be too close to anyone, ever. You belong to me and only me."

"Does that go both ways?"

Ash smiled. "Yes, I belong to you just as much as you belong to me."

"So, I'm supposed to feel this way?"

"Yeah, Dary, you are," Ash said as he caressed the side of Darren's face with the back of his hand. "The bond between an alpha and his mate goes a lot deeper than just falling for someone. We share everything, our hearts, minds, and bodies. We share a soul. We're not complete unless we are together."

"Does that mean you'll stop sniffing other people?"

"How about I promise not to sniff anyone unless absolutely necessary?"

"Well, I don't like it, but I suppose I'll learn to put up with it."

Ash's laughter filled the room. Darren felt a warm glow flow through him at the deep, rich sound. His mood seemed suddenly buoyant. He leaned and planted a small kiss along Ash's jaw line before walking over to pick up the box of puppies.

"Well, come on," he said as he looked back at Ash and Dean, "we don't have all day."

"Yes, boss," Dean said as he snapped to attention, saluting Darren.

Darren rolled his eyes and headed for the door. "According to you, I'm the alpha bitch." Darren tossed Dean an evil grin over his shoulder. "You do realize payback is also a bitch, right?"

Dean's eyes widened and he visibly gulped. "Yeah, well..."

Darren shook his head and reached for the doorknob, stopping when he suddenly felt Ash's hand cover his. He glanced up at him, questioningly. "What?"

"You always let Dean or I go first, Dary. You never open a door unless you know exactly who or what is on the other side. It's not safe."

"Then it's not safe for you, either."

"But I'm a lot better equipped to fight any threat than you are." Ash flicked his hand. Darren's eyes widened as long, lethal-looking claws grew out of Ash's fingertips.

"Fuck me!" Darren hissed.

Ash grinned, retracting his claws as he reached for the door. "Later, love."

Chapter 6

Ash kept glancing over at Darren as he drove. He couldn't help it. He just couldn't believe after all of this time his mate was finally sitting next to him. Despite the fact he'd seen Darren in person numerous times over the years, it just hadn't been the same as actually sitting next to him, being able to talk to him.

And damn, Darren had just gotten sexier with age. His slim form, while muscular like a swimmer's, was devoid of the thick muscles of Ash's larger body. He'd never admit it to his mate because he'd probably get murdered, but Ash loved the fact he could cuddle Darren's smaller body close to his.

The eyes that occasionally peeked at him from under thick, dark eyelashes were the same deep golden eyes Ash dreamed about for the last ten years. If anything, they had gotten darker, little flecks of green making them seem endless.

Ash reached over and patted Darren's leg, barely suppressing a growl when Darren flushed. His wolf started panting at the small touch, wanting to get out and be with its mate.

Ash drew in a deep breath and wrapped his fingers back around the steering wheel, his hands immediately gripping the hard plastic. It was going to be a contest of wills to see how long he could keep his hands off of Darren.

"How are you holding up, Dary?"

Darren arched an eyebrow as he turned his full attention on Ash. "Seriously? I've been attacked, not once but twice, mated the alpha of a wolf clan, making me his bitch, and I'm on the run with a box full of shifter puppies. I'm fucking peachy."

"Umm..." Ash swallowed past the lump that suddenly took hold in his throat. "Sorry?"

What else was he supposed to say? He wasn't sorry they were finally together, just sorry it had taken so long. He needed Darren more than he needed to breathe. He wasn't about to give the man up.

Darren waved a hand at Ash and looked back out the front window. "Don't be. Just let me have my little meltdown, and I'll be fine."

"I was hoping to claim you under better circumstances, Dary, I swear. I've been working the last ten years to make things safe to bring you home." Ash pushed his hand through his hair, tugging on the ends a bit. "Hell, I even brokered a cease fire with the other wolf clans, and there hasn't been peace between us in decades."

"Why not?" Darren asked.

Ash could see Darren watching him curiously out of the corner of his eye. He grimaced, not sure how to tell his mate about the world he'd just been tossed into. "When we met ten years ago, our clan was run by my uncle. We were swamped in traditions that were slowly killing us."

"You mean the whole no-mating-with-another-man thing?"

"It was more than that, but yes. My uncle was doing some stuff many of us didn't approve of, and he needed to be stopped, so I challenged him for leadership of the clan." Ash glanced over at Darren. "I won."

"And your uncle?" Darren asked. "What happened to him?"

"I killed him."

"Y-you killed him?" The horror in Darren's voice made Ash cringe.

"Dary, you need to understand how things are in a wolf clan. It's not like living in the human world. A challenge for leadership of the clan is always to the death. I didn't want to kill my uncle. He was my uncle after all, but he couldn't be allowed to continue to lead our clan anymore."

"What was he doing that was so wrong?"

"First you need to remember we were at war with the other wolf clans." Ash snickered coldly. "Hell, I think all of the wolf clans were at war. But that doesn't excuse what my uncle did. He was—"

"He was selling our pups to the highest bidder," Dean said from the backseat.

Darren frowned and darted a look back at Dean before turning to face Ash. "He was what?"

"Uncle Robert was selling our children to the other wolf clans."

"Why?" Darren cried out.

"Money, prestige, power, who knows?" Ash shrugged. "But by selling our children, he was slowly decreasing our ranks. Our clan grew smaller and smaller, and our women stopped giving birth because the loss of their children became too much for them. We were dying."

"How did he justify selling the children though?"

"He was alpha," Dean said harshly. "He could do whatever he wanted to do. He didn't have to ask permission to take the children. Until Ash came around, no one was strong enough to challenge Uncle Robert."

"No one said anything?"

"The alpha of a wolf clan has ultimate authority, Dary."

"Do you?"

"Yes and no," Ash said. "While I have ultimate authority, several of the other alphas and I set up a council that has the right to sanction us if we break clan laws. They can even remove us from our seat of leadership. It was part of the peace treaty."

"Geez," Darren said as he leaned back in his seat, "you guys are into some scary ass shit."

"One of the laws that was changed was due to you," Dean said. "No man or woman can be prevented from mating their true mate, no matter who they are. Ash did that for you."

"Really?" Darren sounded surprised, and pleased.

"I needed to make things safe for you." Ash smiled over at Darren. "I'd never admit this outside of the three of us, but I brokered that peace deal for you, not my clan. I guess I'm not a very good alpha."

Ash was thrilled right down to his toes when Darren smiled and reached over to pat his arm. "I'm sure you're a very good alpha. It doesn't always matter why things are done just as long as they *are* done."

"Things aren't perfect, yet," Ash warned. "There are still a lot of people that don't agree with two men being mated together. The upside is you will be the alpha bitch which means if they look at you wrong, I can stomp all over them."

"Ash—"

"You need to understand your position in the clan, Darren," Dean said. "You are essentially the queen of our clan. Any disrespect shown to you is disrespect to our alpha, and that is not allowed."

"Yeah, I'm not too thrilled about this whole queen thing."

Ash laughed at the disgruntled frown on Darren's face. "It's not that bad, Dary, I swear. Just don't let anyone intimidate you, and you'll be fine."

"The whole underbelly thing?"

"Yep." Ash nodded. "You don't show your underbelly to anyone except me. In our clan, the only person higher in ranking than you is me."

"Won't that piss a lot of people off, me coming in from out of nowhere and just taking over as alpha bitch?"

"Oh, it's going to piss a lot of people off." Dean chuckled. "There've been a lot of people in the clan that wanted to mate with Ash and take your position, but a mate is a mate. No one can argue with that."

"Is my arrival going to cause problems?"

"It might, but it's nothing Dean or I can't handle. We also have two men, Reed and Logan, that have been assigned as your

bodyguards. They will be with you at all times unless Dean or I are with you. Except for Gerald and Anna, I don't trust anyone except Dean, Reed, or Logan. You shouldn't, either."

"You're not making this a very inviting situation, Ash." Darren shuddered. "I think I was safer being oblivious and thinking I was just crazy."

"Do you want me to take you home?" Ash said the words, but he didn't know if he could go through with them if Darren said yes. He needed the man too much. But if that's what Darren ultimately wanted...

"No, I think it's a little too late for that."

Ash didn't realize he had been holding his breath until he heard Darren's words. He let it out slowly and unclenched his fingers from around the steering wheel. "Thank you, Dary."

"Don't thank me yet," Darren said. "I'm not sure how many more surprises I can take before I *do* lose my mind."

"Dary, you're not crazy," Ash insisted. "You've never been—" The ringing of Ash's cell phone interrupted his words. He pulled it off his belt loop and looked at the caller ID before flipping it open. "Yeah, Reed?"

"I did a little digging like you asked me to," Reed said. "Those pups you have? They belong to the Alpha of Redtail Clan."

"Redtail Clan? Are you sure?" *Please be wrong*, Ash thought to himself. The Alpha of Redtail Clan was one huge fucker. Ash wasn't sure even he could beat the man in a fight, fair or not.

"I'm sure. The pups were taken right out of their beds. And get this, Ash, whoever took them left a ransom note with your name on it."

Ash's heart lurched. "What?"

"Yep, you heard me, Ash."

"We are so incredibly fucked."

"Ash?" Darren asked. "What's wrong?"

Ash tried to smile at Darren, but it was hard to do when the level of danger they were in just increased so much. Someone was really out to get him, and Ash didn't have a clue who that someone was.

"Okay, I want the compound locked down. No one gets in without my permission. I also want word sent out to all of our clan to hunker down and be on alert. Until I can talk with the Alpha of Redtail Clan and work this out, we're in deep shit."

Ash closed his phone and tossed it onto the dashboard. He knew what he needed to do. He just hated to do it. Pulling over to the first available place, he put the car in park then turned to Darren.

"Dary, I need you to do something for me."

"What?" Darren sounded wary, and he had a right to be. Ash imagined he was about to see one of those meltdowns Darren talked about before.

"I need you to go with Dean and head to our home. You'll be safe there."

"And where are you going?"

"I need to go meet with the alpha of another clan." Ash pointed to the three pups sleeping peacefully in Darren's lap. "These are his pups. Someone took them and made it look like I did. I need to return the pups to him and hope I can make the man see reason."

"No."

"Dar—"

"No, I'm not leaving you, and you can't make me."

"I am the alpha, Darren."

"I don't give a fuck," Darren snapped, lifting his chin and giving Ash an icy stare. "I'm not leaving you."

"Dar—"

"Forget it."

Darren's determination and courage in the face of his fear made Ash's heart sing with delight. Ash couldn't help himself. He grabbed Darren's chin and pulled the man into a kiss. His mouth moved over Darren's, devouring its softness.

When he finally pulled away to look at Dary, dazed eyes blinked back at him. "Okay, love, you can go but only if you promise to do exactly what Dean or I say. This will be a very volatile situation. The man's children were kidnapped. He's going to be very upset."

Darren nodded and sat back in his seat. He didn't say anything, still seeming to be dazed. As Ash put the car into drive again, he saw Darren out of the corner of his eye. He brushed his fingers across his lips then grinned before looking out the passenger window.

"Dean," Ash said as he started driving again, "if anything happens to me, you get Darren someplace safe. Don't take him back to the compound unless you absolutely have to."

He watched in the rearview mirror as Dean nodded. It made him feel a little better but not totally. Ash hated taking Darren into a dangerous situation, but he supposed it wasn't any more dangerous than Darren going back to the compound without him. Until the clan accepted where Darren stood in ranking, they could be a danger to him.

* * * *

Ash's palms felt sweaty, clammy, as he pulled in front of a large set of double gates. He wiped one then the other on his pant legs as he waited for someone to come to the small speaker box outside of his window.

"State your business."

"Alpha Asher Stone of Gray Creek Clan here to see Alpha Silvanus." As soon as Ash finished speaking, he could hear the activity beyond the gate. He turned to Darren, reaching for his hand. "You stay in the car with Dean, no matter what you see, okay?"

Darren nodded, his eyes darting around nervously.

"Things are probably going to get a little rough until I can calm the alpha down. I don't want you to worry, though. It's against clan law for him to kill me without a trial, no matter how angry he is."

"Kill you!" Darren exclaimed as he clutched desperately at Ash's hand. "You said nothing about him trying to kill you."

"Dary, he thinks I kidnapped his children. How would you feel if you were in his shoes?"

Darren was quiet for a moment before Ash saw his lower lip stick out a bit. His eyebrows shot up when he realized Darren was pouting, a full-grown man. Ash felt pretty sure he fell just a little more in love with his mate in that moment.

"Well, I don't have to like it."

"No, love, but you do need to understand it. Just stay in the car with Dean, and you should be fine."

Ash turned back to face the front of the car when he heard the gates open. He wasn't surprised by the multitudes of men he found standing on the other side, Alpha Garret Silvanus right in the front of them.

He didn't think the way the man crossed his arms over his chest and the deep snarl on his face boded well for him. Just to be on the safe side, Ash backed the car up several feet before turning it off.

"Dary," Ash started as he cupped his mate's face in his hand, "I want you to know I don't regret the last ten years with you, even if we couldn't be together. I hope we have more time together, but if we don't, you need to know I love you. I have since the day I met you."

"Ash," Darren whispered. "Why are you telling me this now?"

Ash reached up and wiped away the tears he could see forming in Darren's eyes. "Because you need to know you were always the one for me, Dary, you always will be. Nothing will ever change that. No one can ever take away from us what we've had these last ten years."

Ash dropped his hand and started to scoot away, reaching for the door handle. His heart ached when Darren reached out for him, and he had to evade the man's grasp. "Hold him, Dean," Ash said as he quickly exited the car. He leaned down to look in the open window at his mate, taking in his beloved features in case it was for the last time. "I will always love you, Dary."

"Ash!" Darren shouted as Ash backed away from the car and started for the gates. "Ash! Asher Stone, don't you dare walk away from me."

Ash refused to look back as he walked away. He could hear Darren shouting his name, crying out for him, and it killed Ash inside to ignore his mate. But he had to and he knew it. Darren was safer where he was.

"Alpha Silvanus," Ash said, nodding his head respectfully.

"Alpha Stone," the man snapped. "Where are my children?"

"Your children are safe, alpha, I promise you that. No harm has come to them through my hand or anyone in my clan."

"Where are they?" the alpha growled.

"Before I tell you where they are, I need you to listen to me."

"I don't care to hear what you have to say unless it's about where my children are."

"Alpha Silvanus, you need to listen to me, I—" Ash held up a hand.

"I don't need to listen to a word you say. I want my children."

"I understand that, really I do, but—"

"Grab him," the alpha shouted as he pointed at Ash. "If he doesn't want to tell me where my children are then we'll force it out of him... slowly."

Ash started to take a quick step back, but two men stepped forward and grabbed him before he could get away. Ash tried not to struggle, knowing Dean and Darren could see the whole thing. They would go nuts. But being an alpha, he didn't take well to being restrained.

"Damn it, Silvanus, I didn't fucking take your pups."

Ash froze when he saw Silvanus flash his extended claws. He suddenly had the feeling coming here might have been a very bad idea. He just hoped Dean followed his instructions and took Darren to safety.

"Silvanus, you don't want to do this."

"I want my children!"

"This isn't the way to—" Ash's mouth dropped open as the men holding his arms suddenly dropped to the ground. He was paralyzed for a moment, unsure of what was happening until he spotted the red tipped darts sticking out of their backs.

Ash's heart froze in his chest when he swung around and saw Darren walking toward him and Alpha Silvanus. He had the largest of the three pups in his arms, a silver dart gun pointed at the pup's head.

Shit! He thought when he heard Silvanus growl behind him. "Dary, what the hell are you doing? Get back in the fucking car."

Darren just kept walking toward them, finally stopping several feet away. The pup in his arms wiggled a little and whimpered. Ash nearly passed out when Darren cooed to the pup and rubbed his cheek over the pup's head.

He was going to get them both killed. Darren didn't understand he was rubbing his scent all over the pup. Silvanus was going to be so pissed. Ash doubted he or Darren were going to get out of here intact, assuming they got out of there at all.

"These darts are packed with enough tranquilizer serum to take down a full-grown bear," Darren said casually. He gestured to the two fallen men on the ground. "Or a full-grown wolf. What do you think one of them would do to a little pup?"

"Darren!" Ash screamed through their bond. "You do not threaten to harm the pup of an alpha."

"You do when he's holding your mate," Darren replied before turning to face Alpha Silvanus. "Step away from Ash."

Ash was in no way surprised when Silvanus immediately took several steps back. He could see the barely controlled rage in the man, the bunching of his muscles. Silvanus was poised for attack, Darren his target.

"Now," Darren began. Ash turned back to see his mate kneel on the ground, cradling the pup between his knees. "Why don't you shift,

sweetie? I'm sure your daddy has been missing you something fierce. I think he'd be really happy to see you."

When the pup just whimpered, Darren glanced up at Silvanus. "Don't you want to see your pup, alpha?"

Garret gritted his teeth. "Shift for Daddy, Anya."

"Oh," Darren exclaimed softly when the pup in his arms shifted from four legged pup to a beautiful little girl with long, curly brunette hair and a winsome smile. "Hi, Anya, it's nice to finally meet you."

"Hi," the little girl murmured.

"You're such a pretty little girl," Darren said. "I'll bet your Daddy tells you that all the time, doesn't he?"

Ash swallowed past the lump in his throat. He couldn't believe Darren was sitting there having a friendly conversation with a little girl when their lives were in danger. The situation was unreal.

"Daddy says I'm a princess," the little girl said as she wiggled her body back and forth.

"I'll just bet he does." Darren smiled as he patted the little girl's back. "Anya, can you do something for me?"

Anya nodded, her little curls bouncing around her face.

"Can you look around at everyone standing here and show me who took you from your daddy?"

Ash held his breath as the child started to glance around at everyone standing there. He knew neither he nor Darren had taken her, but he didn't know if Anya actually knew that. When she pointed to a man standing slightly behind Alpha Silvanus, the breath Ash had been holding hissed out of his chest.

"Uncle Wyan," Anya said.

"She's lying!" the man shouted as he started to back away. "Garret, she's Mattie's daughter. You know I would never harm a hair on her head."

"Then why has she pointed you out, Ryan?" Silvanus asked. He gestured with his head and several men surrounded Ryan, preventing him from leaving.

"She's confused," Ryan said. "She's been traumatized. Who knows what they've told her to say?"

"Anya, do you know who that man is?" Darren asked as she pointed to Ash.

Anya shook her head.

"Do you remember where we were when he came?"

Anya's nose wrinkled and she leaned closer to Darren, whispering so loud everyone heard her. "He came when we was at the stinky place."

"That's right." Darren smiled. "Now, I want you to think really hard, Anya. Do you remember when you met me?"

"Oh yes," Anya said, as if it was a very important meeting. "You saved Bubby when the bad man was hurting him."

"Bubby?" Ash could see the confusion on Darren's face when he glanced over at him and Silvanus.

"Bu-Bubby is her baby brother, Brian." Silvanus's swallow was audible. "Is he okay?"

Darren nodded. "He has a few scratches, but he'll be fine."

"He's lying, Garret," Ryan shouted. "He probably killed Brian already. He's just trying to get you complacent before he kills us all."

Ash felt proud of his mate when he didn't even flinch under the fierce glare Silvanus sent his way. Darren just smiled at Anya and patted her again then pointed to the car behind them.

"Anya, sweetie, would you go back to the car and get the others for me? I need to have a word with your Daddy, and I'm sure he's missing you all very badly."

"No!" Silvanus shouted. Ash gave the man a warning growl when he took a step toward Darren. Silvanus stopped, casting him a quick glance before looking back at Darren and Anya.

Ash knew the man was just trying to protect his child. He didn't know who his enemy was right now. Letting Anya go back to the car in Silvanus's mind had to be as bad as letting her walk back into the clutches of strangers, possible enemies.

"Dean," Ash called out, "could you let the other pups out of the car?"

He kept his eyes on Silvanus as he heard the car door open. The man's body tensed. Ash saw a small, relieved smile cross his lips before Silvanus quickly pressed his lips together in a deep scowl.

Silvanus dropped down to one knee, opening his arms as the pups ran into them. The sigh of relief that came from the man said it all. Ash knew he would feel much the same if his loved one was suddenly returned to him.

Silvanus hugged the two small pups for a moment more before handing them over to a man standing off to one side of him. "Please take them inside. I want someone with them at all times."

The man nodded and turned toward the house. Silvanus turned back, his eyes going to Darren and Anya. Ash could see the deep desire in the man's eyes to have his daughter safe. Silvanus wanted to ask, but he couldn't seem weak by speaking.

"Dary, why don't you let Anya go to her father?" Ash said. "I know he's worried about her."

"Okay, Anya, you go see Daddy."

The quick raising of Silvanus's eyebrows caught Ash's attention. He turned to glance at Darren just in time to see Anya give his mate a huge hug before running across the ground to her throw herself in her father's arms.

Darren stood to his feet and walked over to stand next to Ash. Ash wrapped an arm around Darren's waist and pulled the man closer to his side, drawing in a deep breath of Darren's sweet scent. He didn't want to seem weak in front of Silvanus either, but the relief he felt at having Darren next to him went beyond his need to not appear vulnerable before the man.

"I can't believe you held a dart gun on a small child," Ash hissed into Darren's ear.

"Oh, please." Darren laughed, holding the dart gun up. "It wasn't loaded. I used the last two darts on the guys holding you."

"It wasn't loaded?"

"Like I'd hold a loaded weapon on a small child." Darren snorted.

"I would really like to know what in the hell is going on here," Silvanus said sternly as he handed Anya off to someone behind him. "Why do you have my children, and why were they taken? Why did I find a ransom note with your name on it, Alpha Stone?"

Ash grimaced. "I'm not sure I have the answer to that."

Chapter 7

Darren wanted desperately to roll his eyes, but he wasn't sure it would go over well considering the situation. The tension between Ash and Alpha Silvanus was so thick he could practically see it. Darren wouldn't have been surprised if they both started peeing all over the place.

"Okay, look, this is real simple," Darren said. "Someone ob—"

"Darren!" Ash snapped as he grabbed at Darren's arm. "Let me handle this."

Darren shook Ash's hand off his arm and stepped away from him. He knew he didn't understand how things were supposed to be done between alphas or wolf clans or any of that shit. He didn't much care.

"No, I'm tired of this. Someone is obviously trying to set you up, to put a wedge between you and the other clans." He tapped his finger against Ash's chest. "You know you didn't take those kids. And if Alpha Silvanus wasn't so upset, he'd know it, too."

"What do you mean?"

Darren swung around to glare at Silvanus when the man spoke. "If you were using your head, you'd know this was a setup. After working so hard to bring peace between the wolf clans, what possible reason would Ash have to take your children?"

"What would you know about it?"

"I know that last night I was minding my own business doing paperwork in my veterinary clinic when your children were used by two guys to try and lure me out so they could kill me. I know they were not above hurting your children to do it. And I know my Ash would never use children to get what he wants. He doesn't need to."

Silvanus frowned, crossing his arms over his chest as he regarded Darren carefully. "Why would someone want to kill you? And why use my children to do it? I've never met you before in my life."

"Because they didn't want me to mate with Ash?" Darren answered. "Because they wanted to start another war between the wolf clans? Because they're off their flipping rockers? Take your pick." Darren pointed to the man being held between two of Silvanus's guards. "Why don't you ask him why he took the children because I believe Anya. She's too young to lie."

Silvanus's expression was thunderous as he turned to look at his clan member. "Why would Anya say you took her and her siblings, Ryan? Out of all the people she could have pointed to, she picked you."

"She must be confused," Ryan said quickly. "She's just a small child."

"But the human has a point, Ryan. Anya wouldn't know to lie." He rubbed his hand over his chin. "Why would she say you took her? I've been awfully confused as to how someone could get into the house and take the pups in the first place. We have too many security measures in place."

"Alpha Silvanus," Darren said, interrupting the man, "I don't know how this man works into all of this, but he's not one of the two men that had your children. They had darker hair and scruffier looking features when in human form."

"Human form? You saw them in wolf form?"

"Of course." Darren nodded. "When I first saw them they were in wolf form. They had put the pups in a box outside my clinic. When I went to get the pups, they attacked." Darren shrugged, holding up the dart gun. "I shot one of them with this. The other one ran off."

"What color were they in wolf form?"

Darren frowned, confused by the question. It seemed out of place in the conversation. "Kind of reddish brown, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Hey," Darren snapped, "I was a little more concerned with getting your pups to safety than I was seeing what color those wolves were. Besides, it was dark out. They looked reddish brown."

Silvanus gestured to another man, who quickly stepped forward. "Shift."

Darren's eyebrows shot up when the man suddenly shifted. One minute a man stood there, the next a reddish brown wolf stood in his place. Darren inhaled sharply and took a quick step back.

"Did either of the wolves look like this?" Silvanus asked as he gestured to the wolf.

Darren nodded, but then he looked closer. "Well, they were about the same color but bigger, much bigger. And they were growling." Darren stepped closer to Ash when Silvanus began to swear up a blue streak. "Ash, what's going on?"

"Garret Silvanus is the Alpha of the Redtail Clan, so called because they have reddish brown fur. This means the two men you saw are most likely from his clan."

"But why would someone from his clan take his children?"

"Good question, Dary."

"Escort Ryan to a holding cell and keep him under guard," Silvanus directed the men holding Ryan. "I don't want anything happening to him before I can question him further. He knows something about this, and I mean to find out what."

Darren rolled his eyes. He didn't understand the politics between clans or what would cause people to use children in such a manner as the pups had been used. His heart ached for the trauma the pups might have gone through, but he was confused by the whole situation, and he just wanted it to be over.

"Ash, can we go home now? Please?"

"In a minute, Dary," Ash said. "I need to discuss things with Alpha Silvanus first. We need to figure out who took the children and why."

Darren rubbed his hands up and down his arms, a sudden chill filling the air around him. "Fine, you talk. I'm going to the car." Darren didn't wait for a reply, just turned and walked away.

"Darren!"

Darren ignored Ash and walked to the car. He was tired, hungry, and feeling totally confused with just about everything. He wasn't sure anyone knew exactly what was going on, but he knew no one would get to the bottom of things if they didn't stop trying to outdo each other.

This was all just one big pissing contest.

* * * *

"Magnificent creature."

Ash swung around to stare at Silvanus, stunned by his words. "What?"

Silvanus looked a little disturbed that his words had been overheard, but then a small grin came over his lips as he gestured toward the car Darren had just walked to. "I was pointing out what a magnificent creature he is."

Ash felt his hackles go up. He growled at Silvanus, clenching his fists. "Are you making comments about my mate?" he asked, spacing his words carefully.

Silvanus's mouth dropped open as shock covered his features. "I thought the little human was your mate."

Ash's eyebrows drew together. "Dary is my mate."

Relief instantly filled Silvanus's face as he chuckled lightly. "I was talking about the tall dark-haired man standing next to your Dary."

Ash glanced back toward the car, feeling like the ground was moving under his feet with every word the alpha spoke. "Dean?"

"Is that his name? He truly is a beautiful man. Are you related? I see a distinct similarity in your coloring."

"Dean is my brother."

"Hmmm," Silvanus said softly. "I believe he is also my mate."

"Your mate!" Ash snapped as he swung back around to stare at Silvanus again. "I thought you already had a mate. You have three pups."

"How old do you think I am, Alpha Stone?"

Ash looked Silvanus up and down, taking good measure of the man. He shrugged. "I don't know, thirty-five or so. You look to be around my age."

Silvanus chuckled. "I am one hundred thirty-seven years old."

Ash gaped. "How? I mean, I know that we live longer lives than most humans, but I have never heard of anyone living that long."

"The whys of it are no matter." Silvanus glanced around to the few men left standing around them. "It's also not for public discussion."

Ash nodded. He understood exactly what Silvanus was referring to. Obviously there was something different about him that could not be discussed in front of everyone else.

"However, due to my long life, I despaired of ever meeting my mate. I finally decided to find someone I could be happy with, someone that could provide me with children." Silvanus's smile was sad but there. "Mattie and I had five years together before illness took her just after our last child was born."

"I am sorry, Silvanus."

Silvanus nodded, looking back at Dean. "I never thought to meet my mate, and now here he is."

Silvanus seemed to almost be in awe of Dean, unable to take his eyes off of him. Ash grinned as he turned back to look at his brother. Dean stood next to the car talking with Dary. Ash didn't know what they were talking about, but Darren seemed less stressed than he did before.

"Would you like to meet him?"

Ash could hear Silvanus's knuckles crack, and knew the man was clenching his fists to prevent himself from demanding to meet Dean. The man was barely holding onto his control.

There was a part of Ash that found amusement in that fact considering all he'd been through tonight. Another part demanded he bring Silvanus together with his mate considering all he'd been through for the last ten years.

"Please," Silvanus bit out.

"Dary, would you and Dean please join me for a moment?" Ash asked through his mate bond. He smiled when he saw Darren roll his head before gesturing to Dean. Both men started toward them.

Silvanus growled.

"Careful, alpha, I don't want to take your desire to meet Dean as a threat against my mate," Ash said when he heard the low rumble. He held out a hand to Darren, grateful when the man walked right up to him and took it. Ash quickly pulled Darren to his side and turned to watch Dean's reaction to meeting Silvanus.

Dean froze several steps from Silvanus, drawing in a deep breath as he looked the man up and down. He seemed to be measuring Silvanus. Dean's lip curled as a low growl emanated from him. Silvanus growled back, louder, and took an aggressive step toward Dean.

Dean immediately dropped to his knees before Silvanus, tilting his head forward and baring the nape of his neck in a submissive gesture.

"Dean, what on earth ar—"

Ash covered Darren's mouth with his hand and pulled the man back several steps. "Shh, Dary, just watch."

Ash actually found it very touching to watch. It reminded him of the moment he found Darren. Time had stood still, the world around him ceasing to exist when he suddenly realized he had found his mate. Ash had been spellbound much as Silvanus seemed to be now.

Silvanus's hand trembled as he reached down to stroke his fingers across the nape of Dean's neck. Ash could well imagine the stunned

amazement Dean must be feeling as shudders rocked his brother's body at Silvanus's touch. Ash felt it nearly every time he touched Darren.

Darren jumped when Silvanus suddenly grabbed a handful of Dean's hair and dragged him to his feet. Ash wrapped an arm around Darren to keep him still, nuzzling the side of his mate's face.

"It's okay, Dary, Silvanus is not hurting Dean."

"What's he doing?" Darren whispered back.

"Silvanus is claiming Dean."

"Claiming?" Darren's hands gripped Ash's arm. "Like you did with me?"

"Exactly like I did with you. Not to worry, love, if Dean didn't want this, he wouldn't allow it to happen."

Silvanus stood just a couple of inches taller than Dean, but he was still easily able to tilt his head to one side and sink his teeth into Dean's neck. Dean's body seemed to melt into Silvanus's, a low cry falling from his lips.

"Ash!"

"I swear, Dary, Silvanus is not hurting Dean." Ash rubbed his free hand up and down Darren's side, trying to reassure his mate. Darren had never seen a mating before, and theirs was so out of ordinary it wasn't even funny. "In a moment, Silvanus will offer his blood to Dean, cementing their bond."

As he said the words, Silvanus pulled his teeth from Dean's neck and bit into his own wrist before offering it up to the man. Dean didn't even hesitate. He just leaned in and sank his teeth into Silvanus's arm.

"Tonight, Silvanus will shift into his werewolf form while he fucks Dean and finish the claiming like I did with you ten years ago. He will bite Dean on the nape of his neck and leave a mating mark for everyone to see, so all will know Dean has been claimed."

"That's why you bit me?"

[&]quot;Yep, it's a mark that all werewolves recognize."

When Dean finally lifted his head and licked at the bite mark he'd left, Silvanus tilted back his head and let out a loud howl that would have shaken the walls if they were indoors. As it was, it made Darren jump and press closer to Ash.

Ash held Darren close to his side as he stepped up to the newly mated pair. "Welcome to the family, Alpha Silvanus."

Silvanus grinned and wrapped his arm around Dean, pulling the man close to his side much as Ash held Darren. Dean seemed a little dazed as he looked from Silvanus to Ash then back again.

"Thank you," Silvanus said.

"Dean, how are you, brother?"

"Uh, I'm not quite sure yet," Dean said in a harsh, raw tone. "I certainly wasn't expecting this when we left home today."

"And I wasn't expecting to find my mate at the bottom of a ravine ten years ago, either." Ash chuckled and rubbed his cheek over the top of Darren's head. "But I've never regretted it."

"Ash, I don't understand what just happened," Darren whispered as he leaned closer to Ash. "Is Dean staying here or going home with us?"

"No, baby, this is Dean's home now. He's Silvanus's mate, and because Silvanus is the alpha, Dean will live here with him."

Darren was silent for a moment then he started laughing. He reached over and smacked Dean on the arm. "Who's the bitch now?"

Chapter 8

Darren smelled Ash's strong scent even before he opened his eyes and saw the man sleeping peacefully right in front of him. Ash's dark lashes lay gently against his cheeks, his mouth slightly open as little snores fell from his lips.

There was an inherent strength in Ash's face that drew Darren's attention. Ash's lips were firm and sensual even if the set of his jaw suggested a stubborn streak. His blue-black hair gleamed in the morning light streaming through the curtains.

Everything about him attracted Darren. Ash had an air of authority and the appearance of one who demanded instant obedience. He exuded masculinity. In a word, Asher Stone was gorgeous.

Darren couldn't keep himself from lightly stroking his fingers over Ash's strong features. He lightly fingered a loose tendril of hair on Ash's cheek then pushed it back from his face.

Darren traced his fingers over Ash's full lips, jumping and laughed nervously when Ash suddenly bit his finger. A moment later, deep baby blue eyes peered at him. The warmth of his smile echoed in Ash's voice as he spoke.

"Morning, love."

"Hi," Darren said uncertainly.

He couldn't ever remember actually waking up in someone else's bed. Besides the small jerk-off sessions he'd had with the voice in his head, the last ten years had been kind of lonely. Darren wasn't sure how to act now that he found himself waking up with someone.

"How did you sleep?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Just okay?"

Darren felt his face flush and tilted it down. He'd actually slept great, Ash's warm body wrapped around his. Ash was not that much bigger than him, but his presence gave Darren a sense of comfort and safety he didn't remember ever feeling before.

Darren shrugged. "Yeah, I slept okay," he said quietly.

Darren's eyes flew up when he felt Ash's arm wrap around him, pulling him closer until they were pressed chest to chest. It was only then that Darren remembered they had gone to bed naked. He could feel every inch of Ash's hard, muscular body pressed against his.

"I slept great."

Darren smiled. He couldn't help but be effected by the delighted grin on Ash's lips. The man seemed deliriously happy. "Yeah?"

"I've dreamed of having my Dary sleeping in my bed for ten years. I was starting to think it would never happen." Ash's breath seemed to catch in his throat as his arm tightened around Darren's waist. "I just can't believe you're finally here, Dary."

"This isn't exactly your bed," Darren said because he couldn't think of anything else to say. With the lateness of the evening, it was decided that they would spend the night at Garret's house. They hadn't reached Ash's place yet.

"Sleeping in my arms, then."

Darren was a little unnerved by how happy Ash seemed to be to have him there. He liked Ash a lot. He might even feel something for Ash if he could equate the man in his arms with the voice in his head. It was just hard for him to get past the fact they were one in the same.

"You know this is all still a little weird for me, right?" Darren felt embarrassed at how husky his voice sounded, especially when he saw a sensual glint enter Ash's baby blue eyes.

"Too weird?"

Darren shrugged.

"I always worried about that, you know," Ash said. "I hoped to meet up with you somewhere when the time was right and slowly get

to know you better, to work you into this life. I didn't want you thrust into it the way you have been. But I'm not sorry you're here, Dary."

"I'm not sorry I'm here, either, not exactly," Darren hurried to assure Ash when he saw the worried frown on the man's face. "It's just a little weird getting used to all of this. Yesterday I was just a crazy veterinarian with a voice in my head. Today..." Darren chuckled. "Today, I'm the alpha bitch."

Darren leaned into the hand Ash cupped against his cheek. He could feel the calluses on Ash's fingers as they grazed his cheek. A far off part of Darren realized the calluses on Ash's fingers meant the man wasn't just a figurehead. He worked just as hard as anyone else, and that made Darren feel proud.

"I promise to do everything in my power to make this as easy for you as possible. I won't leave you hanging."

Darren grabbed Ash's hand and brought the man's fingers to his lips, gently kissing each one before folding the hand against his chest. Darren tried to show his sincerity as he looked straight into Ash's eyes.

"Don't leave my side, and we'll call it even."

Darren's eyes widened when Ash suddenly rolled over on top of him, pinning him to the mattress. The man's grin was mischievous and sexy as hell. "Consider us attached at the hip."

"It may have been awhile for me, but I'm pretty sure that's not your hip," Darren said, referring to the hard length he could feel pressing between his thighs.

Ash's gaze was as soft as a caress as he looked down over Darren's body then back up to his face. Darren felt a tingling begin in the pit of his stomach as Ash grinned down at him.

"Maybe you should investigate just to be sure."

Darren's mouth dropped open. Was Ash daring him? The man might be the alpha, but Darren couldn't let a challenge like that stand. Besides the fact that he needed to let Ash know he wasn't a pushover,

Darren had a lot of interest in investigating every inch of the body towering over him.

Despite the time at the motel, Darren really didn't know that much about Ash's body, certainly not like he wanted to. It had been so long since he'd been this close to another naked body. He wondered if he knew what to do with it.

"Maybe I should."

Joyous laughter fell from Darren's lips as Ash suddenly rolled them over until Darren was on top. Ash spread his legs and arms wide, displaying himself on the mattress as Darren sat up, straddling him.

"Investigate away, love. I'm all yours."

Darren arched an eyebrow at Ash's words. The smoldering flame he saw in Ash's eyes startled him. Darren had a hard time grasping the idea he could do anything he wanted to Ash.

It wasn't that Darren thought he couldn't get a man that looked like Ash. He wasn't egotistical, but he knew he wasn't ugly, either. It was the stunning realization that the voice in his head, that dream man he'd fantasized about for so many years, was actually lying on the bed beneath him.

Darren tentatively reached out a hand and stroked Ash's smooth pectoral muscles. He swallowed tightly as Ash arched into his touch. The man was absolutely perfect, from the way he looked to the way the man's body responded to his gentle touch.

"Both hands, Dary, please," Ash pleaded as he reached for Darren's hands.

Darren laid his hands on the man's chest, his fingers clenching against the slick skin. A delightful shiver of wanting shook Darren's body at the simple touch. "You feel so good, Ash," he whispered, almost in wonder.

"Yeah?" Ash whispered back. His voice sounded breathless, needy. It made Darren ache.

"Yeah." Darren moved his hands over so he could gently tug at Ash's nipples. Ash's reaction to his simple touch was shocking. The man moaned, his entire body trembling.

Darren's senses reeled as if short-circuited. Ash's skin was flushed with desire. His eyes half hooded as he stared up at Darren. His mouth was partially open, small pants falling from his lips. He was breathtaking.

His heart pounding rapidly in his chest, Darren leaned forward and took one of Ash's nipples into his mouth, tugging on it gently with his lips then his teeth as the man's groans of pleasure reached his ears.

Apparently, he'd found a hot spot for Ash. He couldn't have been more thrilled. Darren intended to exploit that hot spot for all it was worth, or at least until he found another one. When Ash's hands stroked down his back and grabbed his naked ass cheeks, the air in Darren's lungs hissed out in a deep rush. He felt almost light-headed for a moment.

"Ash." Darren closed his eyes and rested his head against Ash's chest. The man's touch was just too much to take in. It felt too good and not good enough all at the same time.

"What do you need, Dary?"

Darren didn't have a clue what he needed, but he knew he needed something. He ached in a way he never had before. His cock felt so hard he could have cut marble, and it leaked as if preparing for something big.

Ash's touch was light and painfully teasing as his fingers moved between Darren's ass cheeks. Darren moved forward to give Ash better access then pushed back against the fingers that grazed his aching hole. Waves of ecstasy throbbed through Darren's body.

His mind swirled, jumping from one thought to another faster than he could keep track of them. He was supposed to be driving Ash insane with lust, but one touch of the man's hands and he came

unglued. He wanted to pleasure Ash, but he didn't want to stop the man from what he was doing, either.

"Ash," Darren groaned again as he raised his head to look down at the man. The sensual light burning in Ash's baby blue eyes took what remaining breath he had right out of his lungs.

Ash's mouth covered his, the hunger in his kiss rocking Darren down to his toes. It was hard and searching, and Darren loved every last second of it. He groaned in protest when Ash pulled away until the man pointed to the floor.

"Lube, love, in my jean's pocket."

Darren couldn't keep himself from grinning as he leaned over the side of the bed and reached for Ash's jeans. He felt Ash's hands grip him around the waist, keeping him from falling over the edge. Darren grabbed the small bottle and sat back up, arching an eyebrow when Ash just held out his hand.

"Am I always going to be on the bottom?"

"I am the alpha," Ash said as he took the bottle and popped the top, squirting some out on his fingers.

Darren rolled his eyes. "And I'm the alpha bitch, remember?"

Ash paused and looked up at him. "Does that mean you want to be on top?"

"I wouldn't mind it." Darren had no idea if he was supposed to be a bottom for the rest of his life because he was mated to an alpha wolf or not. Darren started to feel uncomfortable with the intensity of Ash's stare until the man held out the bottle of lube.

"Then show me what you can do, love."

Darren's eyebrows shot up as he took the bottle from Ash. The man was actually going to let him top? Darren didn't know what surprised him more, that Ash would be on the bottom or how much that acceptance turned him on.

Darren tossed the bottle down onto the bed and leaned over to give Ash a quick peck on the lips. "Next time," he whispered as he wiggled his butt. "Right now I want you to fuck me into the mattress."

Ash looked surprised, and Darren imagined the man was after his words about wanting to be on the top, but then Ash grinned and reached back to press his fingers between Darren's ass cheeks.

"Scoot up and grab the headboard," Ash said. "Straddle me."

Darren was confused for a moment but did as Ash asked. He got the idea quickly when Ash's lips wrapped around his cock. Darren almost collapsed down on top of the man as ecstasy shot through his body.

"Geez, warn a guy, will ya?"

Darren groaned a moment later when Ash's soft chuckle vibrated around his cock. His fingers dug into the wooden headboard as he hung on for all he was worth. Darren couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a blowjob. And he certainly didn't remember it feeling this damn good.

He was so intent on the feeling of Ash's mouth moving over his cock that Darren didn't even realize Ash's fingers had invaded his ass until they began to move. His grip on the headboard tightened as all the blood in his body pooled in his groin.

Darren didn't know whether to thrust forward or backward. Both movements felt great. Both movements made Darren tremble uncontrollably. Too many sensations filled his body to settle on one. He just soared higher until the peak of delight was reached and he shattered.

Before he could float down from the dizzying heights he'd reached, Ash scooted out from under Darren to kneel behind him. Darren groaned as he eagerly welcomed Ash into his body. Together, they found a tempo that bound their bodies together, Ash's arms wrapped around Darren's body as his cock pounded into him.

Darren gasped in sweet agony as Ash nailed his prostate over and over again. It seemed like Ash's cock knew the exact location of his sweet spot and aimed for it with every thrust. The pleasure was pure and explosive.

Darren shivered as his body was suddenly pulled back against Ash's body, the sharp edge of the man's canines dragging along his shoulder. "Oh god, yes, Ash," Darren pleaded as he tilted his head to one side and begged to be claimed again.

The pain was intense and over in the blink of an eye to be replaced with a level of ecstasy Darren never felt before. It washed over him like a tidal wave. Darren dug his fingers into Ash's hair, needing something to hold on to as his world spun on its axis.

He cried out as he came. His body melted against Ash's, and the world was filled by the man behind him, claiming him, filling him with his own release. A deep sense of peace entered Darren's being as the world slowly righted itself.

He could feel Ash's hands moving along his skin, soothing him. Ash's heartbeat thudded softly next to his ear, the man's heavy breathing blowing across Darren's cheek.

"My beautiful Dary."

Ash's tenderly whispered words drained away all of Darren's doubts and fears. He knew things weren't perfect or even settled between them. He should probably be angry with Ash for lying to him for ten years and making him think he was crazy, but that just seemed to pale in comparison to being held in Ash's arms, being loved by Ash.

Darren wasn't sure what he felt for Ash beyond not wanting to be anywhere else in the world than where he was at that exact moment. Darren pulled Ash's head down for a kiss, the gentleness of it bringing tears to his eyes.

There was a similar suspicious glint in Ash's eyes when he lifted his head to stare intently down at Darren. It was almost hard to see. Ash looked at Darren as if he were the man's entire world.

"Ash," Darren whispered as he stroked his hand down the side of the man's face, smiling when Ash leaned into the light touch. "One of these days you're going to have to explain to me how all of this happened."

Ash chuckled. "I will, my love."

"I guess I can't say I'm not your love anymore, can I?"

"Nope." Ash sounded almost giddy as he replied to Darren's question.

Darren rolled his eyes as he pulled away from Ash and lay down on the bed, rolling onto his back. Ash seemed incredibly pleased with himself. It was almost nauseating. Almost.

"So, what now, alpha?"

"Now?" Ash asked as he moved to sit on the side of the bed, reaching for his clothes.

"Yeah." Darren rolled over to his side, propping his head up on his hand as he watched Ash get dressed. "What happens now? I mean, do we go to your place or stay here? And since my clinic is in someone else's territory, do I have to move it, or will I be allowed to practice where it is now?"

Ash glanced over his shoulder at Darren, his expression so grim Darren knew he had spoken right. "It would be better if you opened a clinic in my territory where you will be safe."

Darren knew he could argue with Ash, throw a big fit over the high-handed way Ash was changing his life. Or he could accept that Ash loved him and wanted to keep him safe by his side.

"Is there a lot of need for a veterinary clinic in your territory?"

"Well, we are a clan of wolves, Dary," Ash said tentatively. "There is always a need for a good veterinarian."

Darren's interest was piqued when Ash's face flushed and he glanced away. "What?"

"I sort of set up a clinic for you already," Ash murmured.

"That sure of me, were you?"

"No, that hopeful."

Darren sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed to sit next to Ash. He should have felt weird sitting naked next to a fully-dressed man, but he didn't. How could he when he saw a sensual light start to burn in Ash's eyes when the man looked at him?

"You know things won't all be this easy, right?"

"I know." Ash chuckled awkwardly. "Truthfully, I didn't expect you to accept things so quickly. I thought you'd totally freak when you found out about me, or hate me for lying to you at the very least."

"Well, I'm sure not happy about it, but it's nice to know I'm not crazy." Darren shrugged as he reached for his clothes. He could feel Ash's intense stare like a caress on his body and shivered.

"You're not crazy, Dary."

"That remains to be seen." Darren chuckled. He paused in the act of pulling his jeans up his legs when Ash reached over and grabbed his hand.

"I hope you understand why I had to do what I did, Darren. I never wanted to be separated from you, but bringing you home all those years ago could have meant your life. I couldn't take that chance."

Did he understand? Maybe. Did he like it? Hell no. It was hard for Darren to let go of the fact he wasn't really crazy and he never had been. He'd lived with the voice for so long, it was hard to let go of it.

"I'm not sure I'm there yet, Ash. I don't think this is something you get over in a day."

"I am sorry, Dary," Ash said, his voice hard but quiet. "I never dreamed you'd think you were crazy, and once I figured out you did, well, by then it was too late. You were already on medication." Ash shrugged. "After that, I really didn't know quite what to do. If I'd had come to you then with my story, I know you would have thought we were both nuts."

"So, you just left me out there hanging by myself?"

Ash jumped to his feet and began pacing around the room, pushing his hand through his hair. Darren could see the tension in Ash's shoulders and wished he'd never brought the question up. It just kind of slipped out, and now the easy peaceful mood between them was gone.

"It wasn't like that, Dary, I swear. I found out about you taking medication right about the same time all of this shit with my uncle happened. I knew I could fix things here so I could bring you home, or I could tell you the truth and maybe lose you forever."

"And letting me think I was nuttier than a bed bug was the answer you came up with?"

"What would you have said if I told you the voice you heard in your head was real?" Ash waved his hand around the room as if trying to point out some unseen foe. "It wasn't like I could actually go see you in person, not then."

Darren frowned. "Why not? You've already said you came to see me on several occasions."

"Yes, I did, but not until my uncle was gone and I took over as alpha. Uncle Robert had people watching me. He knew I was going to challenge him. If I had gone to see you, he would have found out about you, and I couldn't let that happen."

"Why?" Darren asked. "Is it because I'm a human and can't shift? Are you ashamed of me?" It was a question that had floated around in Darren's brain since he heard Garret call him *human* in such a disdainful manner.

Ash quickly crossed the room and dropped to his knees in front of Darren, grabbing his hands. "Oh, no, love, I've never been ashamed of you. I couldn't have a better mate. You're everything I've always dreamed of."

"Even though I'm human?"

"Darren, I could care less about that. I couldn't let anyone know about you because they would have tried to use you against me, hurt you, or maybe even kill you. I couldn't let that happen."

"I guess maybe I'm not understanding all of this."

"Remember what I told you before? The mating between two men is not a widely accepted practice. I've been working to change that, but it's slow going. Before, when my uncle was alpha, if two men mated a hunt would be ordered."

"A hunt? Like if we stay in someone's territory too long?"

Ash nodded. "They could be tracked down and executed by clan law. Even if we weren't together, if anyone discovered you were my mate, by clan law they could kill you. I had to wait until I changed things enough that I could bring you home safely."

"So, that law Dean mentioned, the one that was changed? You really did change that for me?"

"For us, yes. There's still a lot of animosity when two men or two women mate, but it's getting better and better every day. As my mate, you have a lot more power than other members of the clan. Not only did the laws of mating change, but anyone that attacks you, attacks the alpha's mate. That's an offense punishable by death."

"Ash, I don't want anyone to die because of me."

Ash reached over and gently caressed the side of Darren's face. "I don't want anyone to die either, Dary, but I will not let anyone hurt you. You are more important to me than anyone or anything, even the clan."

Darren bowed his head as he thought about Ash's words. In a weird sort of way, they made sense. He still felt some anger over being led to believe he was nuts, but he could understand Ash's reasoning, even if he didn't like it.

Still, the man had worked ten years to put things in place so they could be together. That had to stand for something. Darren finally looked up and gave Ash a hesitant smile. "So, I guess it really does pay to be the alpha bitch, huh?"

Chapter 9

"Alpha Silvanus," Ash said as he greeted the man, shaking his hand.

Silvanus chuckled lightly and cast Dean a quick look. "Please, call me Garret," he said as he looked back at Ash. "We are family, after all."

Ash smirked when he saw Dean blush and wiggle in his seat a little, wincing. He wasn't surprised. Garret was an alpha. He'd want to be top dog, so to speak. Ash just hoped his overly macho brother could get used to it. Although he would have paid good money to be a fly on the wall in their bedroom last night just to see who came out on top. That had to be an interesting conversation.

"Garret it is."

"Can I offer you some coffee?"

Before Ash could answer, Darren shoved his way forward, looking desperate. "You have coffee?" Darren made it sound like coffee was the ambrosia of the gods. Ash would have to remember that and purchase a coffee pot.

"Yes, we are a civilized clan." Garret smirked as he walked to the counter and poured two cups of coffee. Darren was reaching out for one of the cups before Garret even turned around.

Ash arched an eyebrow in surprise when Darren took a sip and groaned, his entire body shuddering. He distinctly remembered Darren making the same groaning noises last night when they were making love. Ash wasn't sure he liked the fact the coffee got the same response. Besides, the sound made him horny as hell.

"I was wondering if you would like to accompany me down to talk with Ryan."

Ash tore his gaze away from his mate and looked at Garret, nodding. "Yes, I am very interested in what your clan member has to say. I'm particularly interested in why someone is trying to drive a wedge between the clans."

"Taking my children would do that."

"I imagine so." Ash watched Garret warily as he sipped his coffee. "You do know I had nothing to do with taking your children, right? If I had a beef with you, I would have brought it to your front door. I wouldn't use children to do it."

"I understand that, but can you say the same about all the members of your clan?"

"Can you?" Ash countered.

"Point taken."

"Do you think the two of you could wait until after I've finished my first cup of coffee before you start pissing all over each other?" Darren snipped.

"Darren!" Ash snapped, shocked by the man's words spoken in front of another alpha. Garret could rightfully demand retribution from Darren for speaking so disrespectfully.

Ash almost jumped out of his skin when Garret laughed and reached over to pat him on the shoulder, gesturing to Darren. "I like him. He cuts right through the bullshit."

Dean growled. Darren rolled his eyes. Ash asked for another cup of coffee. This morning was going way too weird for him to start it with only one cup. Maybe Darren had something with his love of coffee.

"Darren, I'd like to ask you something," Garret said when they were all finally sitting around the small kitchen table.

"So, ask already."

"I imagine since you know nothing of clan dynamics you might see things a little differently than we do. What do you think happened?"

Darren shrugged. "Truthfully, I don't know anything about clan dynamics, and I really could care less. What I do know is someone tried to kill me using your children to do it. Somehow they knew I wouldn't be able to leave those pups out there to be hurt, and they used the knowledge against me."

Ash wrapped an arm around Darren's waist and pulled the man closer to him. He didn't like to think about how much danger Darren had been in, how much danger he was still in.

"We need to figure out who is doing this and now." Ash growled.

"So, who wants you gone?" Darren asked.

"Gone?" Ash asked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious someone wanted you taken out of the picture. Who would benefit if you were gone?"

"Douglas!" Ash and Dean both said at the same time.

"Douglas?"

"Our cousin," Ash explained. "He was Uncle Robert's son. Under normal circumstances, if he's strong enough to lead, the alpha's son takes over the clan when the old alpha dies, but since I beat Uncle Robert in a challenge, I took over instead."

"While that might explain why they were after me, that doesn't explain why they used Garret's children to do it. If this Douglas wanted you gone, so be it, but why start a war between the clans? What does he have to gain by doing that?"

"It also doesn't explain why Anya said Ryan took her," Garret added, "or even who took her."

"So, let's go ask him," Ash said as he got to his feet.

When Darren started to get to his feet along with Garret and Dean, Ash put his hand on Darren's shoulder, stopping him. "Why don't you stay here and let us take care of this? It might get ugly."

"You're going to see ugly if you keep treating me like a girl."

Ash barely hid his amused grin as he stepped back and watched Darren stand up. His grin quickly fell away to be replaced with a confused frown when Darren walked into the kitchen and began going through Garret's drawers.

"Dary, what are you doing?"

Darren held up a couple of knives and some other kitchen utensils. "Tools."

"Tools for what?"

"Getting our answers." Darren's grin sent a chill down Ash's back and made him wonder for a moment about his mate's sanity. Maybe those ten years of thinking there was a voice in his head had messed Darren up more than Ash first thought.

"Uh, Darren..."

"Relax, Ash, I'm not really going to hurt him, but he doesn't need to know that." Ash felt his face flush as Dean and Garret laughed. Darren just rolled his eyes. "Have a little more faith in me, will you? I'm just going to scare him a little."

"Okay, on that note..." Garret chuckled as he led Dean out of the kitchen. Ash took a deep breath and followed them, Darren quick on his heels, a pile of kitchen utensils in his arms.

When they reached the basement, Garret nodded to the man standing guard outside the room Ryan was being held in and opened the door. Ash stepped in behind him, gesturing to Darren to stay back. He'd only bring his mate into it if he had to.

"So, Ryan," Garret said as he stepped up to the man, "Let's talk."

Ash crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall, watching Ryan's every movement carefully. At the first sign of aggression by the man, Ash planned to be all over him.

"Would you explain to my why my daughter believes you are the man that took her from her bed?"

"I'm telling you, Garret, she's confused," Ryan said. "I never did anything to Anya or the other children. I wouldn't. They are Mattie's children. I couldn't hurt them."

"But you do know who took them."

"No, of course not. I would nev—"

"I'm tired of hearing you say you would never hurt my children, Ryan. We both know you took them. I just want to know why."

"No, I never... I wouldn't..."

"Ryan..."

Ash growled and pushed himself away from the wall when Ryan suddenly jumped up from the small twin bed he sat on and advanced on Garret. He shouldn't have worried. Garret flicked out his claws, and Ryan screeched to a halt.

"I would never hurt Mattie's children."

"Ryan," Garret said, looking at Ryan quizzically, "Mattie was my wife. Those are my children."

"She should have been my wife!" Ryan suddenly shouted, his face turning red with rage. "She was meant for me!"

"She was never meant for you," Garret shouted right back. "If she had been meant for you, she would have married you and not me. She chose me."

"She was mine!"

Ash could see where this "discussion" was going, and it was quickly going nowhere. Both men would continue to yell at each other, both believing they were right. It wasn't going to get them the answers they wanted but maybe Darren could.

Ash pushed himself away from the wall and walked over to grab a chair. He set it down loudly in the middle of the floor then grabbed Ryan by the scruff of the neck, using his superior strength to force the man down into the chair.

"I don't care much who this woman belonged to. She's dead." Ash ignored the slight growl that came from Garret. "I care about the fact that something you've done, Ryan, has endangered my mate."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will." Ash walked over to the door and leaned out to look at Darren. "Could you join me, doctor? I have need of your special skills."

Darren's eye roll was dramatic and gone the moment he stepped into the doorway. He looked so serious Ash wouldn't have known the man was smiling a moment before if he hadn't seen it for himself.

"How damaged do you want him?" Darren asked as he began to lay out his tools on the small nightstand next to the bed. "Do you want him walking again when I'm done or do you care?"

Ash shrugged. "I don't care. He's not a member of my clan."

Darren nodded. "Please hold him." Garret's eyes were wide with amusement as he joined Ash in holding Ryan down to the chair. Ryan struggled, but Ash and Garret were stronger.

"Did you know the normal adult human body contains two hundred six bones? More than half of those are in your hands and feet. A wolf has between three hundred fifteen and three hundred twenty bones in its body, which is about one hundred more than an adult human."

Ash arched an eyebrow when Darren picked up a yellow corncob holder. "It's amazing to me what the normal kitchen holds, so many tools that can be used for so many different things. Take a corncob holder, for instance."

Darren walked toward Ryan, holding the small yellow holder in his hand. The closer he stepped, the more Ryan struggled. Ash had a hard time holding the man down to the chair. He had an even harder time keeping a straight face. Ryan was terrified. Ash could smell it on him.

"There are two small metal prongs meant to hold a hot corncob so you don't burn yourself. However, when inserted between two fingers, the metal prongs not only go into the skin but the muscles around the fingers, the nerves. I hear it can be very painful."

Ash noted the quick look Darren gave him as he bent over Ryan's hand and placed the corncob holder between the man's fingers. Ash

glanced back at the items Darren brought from the kitchen, trying to find just the right one. He knew Darren wouldn't actually hurt Ryan, but he didn't want Ryan to know that.

"Doctor, are those shish-kabob sticks?" Ash asked.

Darren raised his head, looking grateful as he nodded. "Why, yes they are. I brought both the wooden ones and the metal ones. I wasn't sure which ones would be needed."

"How do you use them?"

"Well, there are many ways, I suppose." Darren walked over to the nightstand and set the corn cob holder down, reaching for the wooden sticks. "The wooden ones, of course, are not good for inserting directly into flesh. They tend to break too easily, and you just have to start over again."

Darren reached for Ryan's hand and held one of his fingers between his. "Now, these wooden shish-kabob sticks are good for pushing under the fingernails. The skin under the fingernails is very tender and only connected to the fingernail by a small thread. Wooden shish kabob sticks will split that skin quite easily."

Just as Darren started to push the wooden stick against Ryan's finger, Ash pointed to the metal shish kabob sticks. "What about those? Are they used for the fingertips, too?"

"The metal shish kabob sticks?" Darren asked as he dropped Ryan's hand and walked back over to the table. He put the wooden sticks down and reached for the metal ones. "No, these are used for a much different purpose."

Ash made sure Ryan couldn't see him as he winked at his mate. He was starting to like this game. The scent of Ryan's terror was getting stronger by the minute. Darren was a genius, a little crazy, but still a genius.

"I feel truly inspired by these metal sticks," Darren said as he went to stand in front of Ryan. "The human hand has twenty-seven bones. The carpus or wrist bones account for eight of them, the metacarpals or palm contains five. The remaining fourteen are digital

bones or the fingers and thumb." Darren held up his hand and placed the end of the metal stick between two of his fingers. "Now, if we were to insert this metal rod directly into Ryan's hand, you would hit bone. However, if you moved it up just a bit, you could effectively insert the metal right under the skin and shove it back all of the way to Ryan's elbow."

Ash's eyes widened as Darren held up several metal shish kabob sticks. He hoped he never pissed his mate off because Darren had a wicked streak in him a mile wide. "I brought one for every section of Ryan's hand. I think we can effectively get three in each hand, but you're going to have to do the pushing for me. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to shove these rods all the way up to his elbow."

The sour smell of urine hit the air. Ash crinkled his nose and tried not to gag. Darren took a quick step back when Ryan started to struggle. The man was terrified, which was exactly how Ash wanted him. He'd probably never enter a kitchen again.

"I'm not going to be able to do this effectively if he doesn't hold still, alpha," Darren said as he held up the handful of metal rods. "If he moves, I could hit bone, and that might be very painful."

Ash grabbed one of Ryan's hands and held it in the air for Darren. "I'll try to hold it as still as possible, but I can't guarantee he won't move. Just let me know when you need me to take over, and I'll finish pushing the rod in."

"You can't do this to me!" Ryan shouted as he struggled.

"I believe we can do anything we wish to you," Ash said. "Isn't that right, Alpha Silvanus?"

"As Alpha of Redtail Clan, I give my full permission for you to use any means necessary to get the information you need out of my clan member, Ryan Morales." Garret's words were very formal sounding, and they had to be, otherwise the council could get involved.

"No!" Ryan screamed.

Ash could feel Ryan's skin ripple as the man started to shift. He grabbed a knife off of the nightstand and held it to Ryan's neck as he bent over the man. "Shift and I will slit your throat before you have a chance to scratch your fleas." Ryan froze and Ash slowly moved the knife away from his throat. "I'm glad we understand each other. Now, Dr. Hart here can continue with his fascinating explanation of what he can do with kitchen utensils or you can simply tell us what we want to know."

"Wh—what do you want to know?" Ryan stammered.

"Why did you take Alpha Silvanus's children?" Ash asked.

"They are Mattie's children," Ryan said quickly. "I would never—"

Ash grabbed a handful of Ryan's hair and jerked his head back. "We've heard that before, Ryan. Tell us something we don't know before I give the doc the go ahead to use his shish kabob sticks on you."

"The children were never supposed to be hurt, I swear."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Ash said as he released Ryan's hair and walked around to stand in front of the man. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave Ryan an intense, intimidating stare. "Tell us the rest of it, or I'll let the doctor do his thing."

"I was just supposed to take the pups to a man in a parking lot," Ryan said. "He said they would be safe but it was the only way to—"
"To what?"

Ryan cast a quick glance at Garret. "To get rid of Garret," he finally whispered.

Garret opened his mouth to say something, but Ash held up his hand. It was obvious to him Ryan hated Garret deeply, and Ash suspected it was due to Garret's dead wife. "How would taking Garret's children get rid of him?"

"It was the note," Ryan said. "They told me Garret would go after you and then the council would step in, removing Garret if you didn't kill him. You weren't supposed to bring the children back."

"You actually believe I wouldn't have talked with Alpha Stone before attacking him?" Garret asked. "I would have at least wanted to know why he took my pups."

"No, no," Ryan said, shaking his head, "they never said anything about you talking. This isn't the way it was supposed to happen, damn it. I was to turn over the pups to get Garret to goes after you, killing you so the council could take Garret away."

"And then what?" Garret snorted. "You'd be alpha?"

"No, of course not," Ryan said. "I'm not alpha material, but they promised to let me have Mattie's children. That's all I wanted, Mattie's children." Ryan glared up at Garret. "They should have been my children, and they would have been if you hadn't taken Mattie away from me."

"Who is 'they'?" Darren asked, reminding Ash the man stood in the room with them. Darren had been so quiet, Ash forgot he was there.

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know. They always called my cell phone, and the number was an unknown caller. When I dropped off the pups, I just left them in a box in a parking lot. I never actually saw anyone."

"You left my pups alone in a parking lot and turned them over to someone you didn't even know?" Ash could hear Garret's knuckles crack as the man clenched his fists. He knew the alpha was about to lose his temper. Ash quickly stepped between Garret and Ryan.

"Don't, Garret," he said. "Let the council deal with him. You got the pups back, and that was the important thing. We still need to find out who set all this up."

Garret growled, his upper lip curling to show a bit of fang. It was an aggressive movement, but Ash chose to ignore it, reasoning with the man instead.

"Just listen to me. We know why Ryan took your pups. He wanted you out of the way so he could have them. But we still don't know

why someone wanted me out of the picture, and it's obvious they used you to do it. We just need to know why."

"So what do you suggest?"

"How do you feel about family gatherings?"

Chapter 10

Darren was nervous. He could feel butterflies doing flip flops in his stomach. His hands felt clammy, and his breathing was rapid. The air was moving in and out of his lungs so fast he knew if he wasn't careful he'd hyperventilate.

Basically, Darren wanted to turn around and go back to his clinic, his house, anywhere except driving down the long dirt road that led to Ash's house. After everything that had happened in the last couple of days, Darren was scared out of his mind.

He didn't know what sort of reception he'd receive, especially since he was coming in as the alpha's mate. He'd picked up enough from the things Ash and Dean said to know his life was in danger the moment he stepped foot in the clan compound. There would be people there that would hate him just for being human. Others would hate him for being Ash's mate. And then there were those that wanted to kill him for reasons Darren had no idea about. None of which made Darren feel happy or the least bit comfortable.

He was a human walking into a world he had no idea how to navigate. Darren knew Ash would protect him, but at what cost? Already people were trying to kill the alpha, and they didn't seem to care who they harmed doing it.

Darren was used to working with animals, the domesticated ones at least. He spent his nights reading books and watching old black and white movies or listening to jazz music. His weekends were spent with friends on occasion, but more often than not, were the same as his weeknights. It was a boring life but one he was used to. Darren was not used to people wanting to hurt him.

"How much further, Ash?"

"The compound is about a mile from here, but we own all of the land you see around us. Our territory is actually quite large for a clan, about three hundred fifty thousand acres of woods, rivers, lakes, and the side of one very large mountain. We also have a small town that is operated almost totally by clan members."

"Three hundred fifty thousand acres? That's huge, isn't it?" Darren asked in astonishment. It sounded huge.

"It's pretty big, but you have to remember, close to two hundred people live in and around here. Even more come from the city during clan festivals and during the full moon. We need all of this space to run."

"Run?"

Ash chuckled. "We run, love, as much and as often as we can. Wolves are not normally indoor creatures. We crave the outdoors, the smell of the earth and the glow from the moon. Running invigorates us, renews us."

"We're not talking tennis shoes and jogging here, are we?"

"No." Ash shook his head. "We run in shifted form."

Darren frowned and turned to stare out the passenger side window. He leaned his head back against the headrest as he thought about Ash's words and realized he would never be able to run with Ash and the other wolves. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"You know, love, you could run with us, too."

"Ash." Darren rolled his head back over to look at his mate. "I don't think I could keep up with a bunch of wolves even if I had a million dollar pair of tennis shoes. I'm in pretty good shape, but even I'm not that good."

"I could bite you."

Darren blinked. "Ash, you've already bitten me, remember?"

"It's not the same kind of bite."

"There are different kinds of werewolf bites?" That bit of information had Darren sitting up straighter in his seat. He was

intrigued when Ash looked over at him then quickly glanced away. If Darren didn't know better, he would have thought Ash was avoiding his gaze. But that wouldn't make sense. Ash was an alpha. What did he have to be nervous about?

"There's a couple actually."

"A couple?"

"Well, you know about the mating bite."

Darren reached up and rubbed the back of his neck where Ash's mating mark was. His skin tingled under his hand. "Yeah."

"There's a defensive bite."

"Which you would use when defending yourself, I assume."

"Right," Ash replied. "It's a bite meant to maim and kill."

"Anything else?" Darren just knew there had to be by the way Ash gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles were almost white.

"There's one more bite, but it has to be approved by the alpha before it can be allowed, which in this case is me, so..."

"And that would be?"

"I can bite you and transform you into one of us."

"Transform me..." Darren's voice trailed off for a moment as he processed Ash's words. Ash was talking about making him a werewolf, wasn't he? "Is that anything like when a vampire bites you in the movies and turns you into another vampire?"

"It's something like that, yeah."

Darren was confused. "How can you have so many different bites? I mean, you've already bitten me on a couple of occasions. Why didn't I *transform* then?"

"It's a matter of releasing different hormones when we bite someone. When we mate, we release a hormone in our saliva that mates us with our, well, mate. If we're defending ourselves, the hormone is different, so we don't end up mating our enemy or transforming them. It's actually used to sedate our opponents and slow them down."

"That sounds fairly nauseating."

"It kind of tastes like thick cough syrup. Nasty, but effective."

"And the transforming hormone?"

"It works a lot like the mating bite. I bite you, and the hormone is released into your system. Within a matter of hours, you will start to transform into a wolf. You won't be able to fully shift until your first full moon, but after that you can shift whenever you want to."

"Does it hurt?" Even as he asked the question the sane, logical part of his brain was screaming at Darren that he was out of his mind.

"Not any more than the mating bite."

"What about the transformation itself?" Darren asked, stunned he was even considering the idea. "Does it hurt?"

"The first time you shift, it will hurt. I won't lie about that. You're body isn't used to shifting into wolf form, but after that it gets fairly easy."

"You keep saying wolf form, but that's not the only form you shift into, is it? I remember you shifting into something different ten years ago, back when you gave me the mating mark, something bigger and hairier but not a wolf."

"You remember that?"

"Um...yeah." Darren was a little confused by the huge smile that crossed Ash's lips. The man seemed almost overjoyed by Darren's admission. "Why?"

"It was a very special time for us, and I didn't think you'd ever remember it."

"I've remembered bits and pieces of it over the years, but I just chalked it up to being nuts." Darren chuckled. "I mean, I remembered having sex with a werewolf. How crazy was that?"

"You're not crazy, Darren," Ash said sternly.

"No, but my therapist said I was transferring my guilty feelings about having sex with other men into having sex with a werewolf because I was trying to tell myself to stop being gay." Darren grinned at Ash. "He wasn't my therapist very long."

Ash growled. "Maybe you should give me his address, and I'll show him how wrong he was."

"Yeah, and maybe I shouldn't."

Ash scowled for a moment, but then a slow grin spread across his mouth. "Yeah, that's probably a better idea."

"So, tell me more about this transforming bite," Darren said after a moment of silence. "Why didn't you give it to me when you gave me the mating mark? Why wait to tell me about it now?"

"Because I would never give it to you unless you agreed to it." Ash pushed a hand through his hair then gripped the steering wheel again. "Being transformed isn't something to do lightly. You can't change your mind once it's done."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"No." Ash shook his head vigorously. "Being clan is wonderful despite the things you've heard. There's a connection, a sense of belonging that is beyond description. If you're in trouble, you have the entire clan to back you, protect you. If you have something to celebrate, everyone is there to celebrate with you. It's..."

"A family?"

Ash quickly glanced at Darren then back to the road. "Yeah, it's a family."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Darren actually liked the way that sounded. He hadn't been a part of a family since his abandoned him when he came out. His parents kicked him out, and he hadn't spoken to them in years. They wanted nothing to do with his "immoral lifestyle". Being a part of a family again sounded pretty good.

"It's not, but like all families we have our disagreements."

"And that explains the situation we're presently in."

"Yes and no. There are always disagreements between clan members. That's to be expected when you get any amount of people together. What we're going through now is a little more than that, though. Someone is trying to tear the clan apart from the inside."

"And you think it's this Douglas guy?"

Ash nodded. "My cousin, Uncle Robert's son."

"So, Douglas really does have a reason for wanting you dead?"

Darren's eyes were drawn to the way the dark material of Ash's shirt moved over his broad shoulders when he shrugged. He wondered if he would always be in awe of the way Ash looked, the raw, masculine strength inherent in the man's physique. Even in a dire situation, Darren was stunned by how gorgeous Ash was.

And delighted the man belonged to him.

"Douglas hates me because he should have been next in line to be alpha. When I challenged his father, I took over that position, took it away from Douglas. He feels he should be alpha of our clan, not me."

"So the alpha position is inherited?"

"Yes and no. If the son is strong enough to lead, he inherits. If not, then someone else does."

"And Douglas wasn't strong enough?"

"He might have been had his father not lost the challenge, but as it stands now, he would have to challenge me to gain my position, and he knows he can't win, not in a fair fight. I'm stronger than Douglas."

"Which explains so much," Darren snapped. "No wonder he's trying to kill you."

"You also have to remember when I won the challenge, I killed his father. I'm sure there is some resentment there about that. It may have been a fair fight, and clans understand these things, but I still took Douglas's father away from him."

"Yeah, but the guy was a slime ball from what you've told me. Douglas should be happy he's gone."

"I'm not sure Douglas knows that, though." Ash sighed deeply. "When I won the challenge, I ordered everyone present not to say anything about why I challenged Uncle Robert. As far as everyone was concerned, it was simply a challenge for leadership."

Darren's mouth dropped open. "No one knows what this man did? How in the hell did you hide it? And why would you hide it?"

"I didn't want it falling back on Aunt Sarah. She didn't deserve to know how horrible her husband was."

"She was married to him," Darren shouted as he flipped his hand into the air. "You'd think she'd know something."

"Aunt Sarah is a sweet woman, but I don't think she's playing with a full deck, you know? She wouldn't hurt a fly, but she's not exactly worldly, either. I've often thought that was one of the reasons Uncle Robert mated her. He could get anything by her with just a smile."

"Geez, so this poor woman was married to a monster and didn't even know?"

"Not that I know of. She dotes on her son and daughter as much as she doted on Uncle Robert. When he died, she understood, but she still grieved. She poured all of her attention into Douglas and Jenny." Ash grimaced.

"That doesn't sound good."

"You're right. I think she gave them a little too much attention. She pretty much spoiled them rotten and gave them anything they wanted. I think it had a lot to do with why Douglas is the way he is. He never learned he can't have everything he wants."

"And Jenny?"

Ash burst out laughing. "Think a cougar in a sweet little package." "Excuse me?"

"Jenny has more men sniffing after her than I can count. I'm always breaking up some fight over her, and I suspect she enjoys every minute of it. On the other hand, she has this nature about her that makes her seem sweet and innocent. No one would believe she could harm a fly."

"She sounds like a cross between her mother and her brother."

The smile was still on Ash's lips as he nodded. "I think that's a pretty fair description."

"Is she dangerous?" Darren asked, already deciding he wasn't going to like the woman. The way Ash talked about her, Darren knew

Jenny had made a play for him. "Could she have anything to do with this mess?"

Ash was silent for a few moments then he pounded on the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "You know if you asked me that two days ago, I would have said no way in hell but now..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Now, I just don't know."

"Do you know who you can trust?"

"You."

Darren rolled his eyes but turned his head to hide his grin. He liked the thought that Ash instantly trusted him. It made him feel like he belonged to something bigger than just himself.

"Anyone else?"

"I trust Dean, of course. Until he mated with Garret, he was my second-in-command, my beta." Ash chuckled. "I guess now I'll have to find someone else to fill that position?"

"Is that something I can help you with?" When Ash reached over to pat his leg, Darren grabbed it, entwining their fingers together. He delighted in the warm smile Ash sent him at the gesture, feeling it in the little flutter his heart gave.

"No, love, you already have a position in the clan."

"Oh right, I'm the alpha bitch."

"You're more than that, Dary, I promise," Ash said quickly as he squeezed Darren's hand. "You're my mate, the one person in the world I don't question. No matter what happens, I know you'll always be there for me."

"How can you possibly know that?" Darren scoffed. While a part of him thrilled at the man's words, another part wondered how Ash could feel that way after so little time. "We've only known each other for a couple of days."

"Dary, you have to rid yourself of the idea we've only known each other for a few days. We've known each other for years. We know each other better than most married people. We've shared everything together."

"But I didn't know you were real!"

Darren wished he'd kept his mouth shut when Ash pulled the car over to the side of the road and shut off the engine. He stared out the front window for a minute then turned to look at Darren, the corners of his mouth drawn down into a frown.

"I'm sorry, Darren. I don't know how many times I can tell you that before you believe me. I didn't want to keep you in the dark, I swear, but if I had told you the truth and brought you home with me ten years ago, they would have killed you."

Darren groaned softly as he leaned his head back against the seat rest and stared at the ceiling. He knew what Ash was saying, he really did. He got that whole "hunt" thing. He just didn't quite understand how Ash could be so sure of him, and maybe that was the problem.

"How do you know, Ash, I mean really, how do you know?"
"You don't?"

"That's just it, Ash. I don't know what is real and what isn't. I've spent too many years thinking I was nuts. No matter how much I want to, I can't believe as easily as you do. What if I'm wrong?" Darren pulled his hand away from Ash's and rubbed it over his face. "What if this is just some fucked up psychosis? What if I need to go back on drugs? What if I've finally lost what is left of my mind and I'm fantasizing all of this, creating some little world where everything I've ever wanted is being handed to me on a silver platter when in reality, I'm in some padded room somewhere?"

When Ash didn't say anything, Darren glanced over at the man, inhaling softly when he saw tears streaming from Ash's baby blue eyes. Sadness and despair swamped Darren, but he didn't know if it came from him or Ash.

"I'm sorry," Darren whispered softly. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No, I think I needed to hear it." Ash opened his mouth as if to say something then snapped it closed. When he turned to look back out the front window, Darren couldn't stand the misery he saw on Ash's face. He reached over and grabbed Ash's hand. Ash squeezed

his hand and turned to look back at him, a sad smile on his lips. "I guess I just assumed you'd believe all of this when I told you, and I didn't take into account what you've been through, what I've put you through."

"Oh, Ash, I—" Ash reached over to press his fingers against Darren's lips.

"Please, let me finish."

Darren nodded, and Ash's fingers fell away from his lips. He watched Ash reach up and wipe his tears away, pressing his lips together in a grim frown. Darren wanted to reach out to Ash and make his pain go away, but he wasn't sure how to. He still had problems believing any of this was real.

"I wanted you to believe in us, to know everything we shared together over the last ten years was real, but I guess after so many years of believing you were crazy, bringing you into my world with no fuss was a little more than I could expect. And I understand that, I do."

"Ash, it's not that bad."

"Isn't it? I'm asking you to believe in something that is right out of a horror movie."

"Not all of it is scary, Ash, just this little thing with your cousin. The rest of it is actually very interesting." Darren pressed his lips together when they threatened to break into a grin. "I'm a veterinarian. You wouldn't believe how interesting I find some of this."

Ash smiled.

"You know at some point I'm going to pick your brain for information, right? I have a lot of questions about this shifting business of yours."

"I knew you would from the very first day I met you and you told me what you were studying in college. I've been collecting as much information on my kind as I could over the years. In fact, I have an

entire library of books on shifters for you to explore and read to your heart's content."

Darren was astounded at Ash's thoughtfulness. He couldn't remember the last time someone cared so much for him that they spent ten years building something for him to explore. Darren realized he might be suffering a psychotic episode believing in Ash and werewolves and everything the man represented, but he wondered if that was so bad.

"Thank you, Ash. That means a lot to me."

"I just want you to be happy, Dary. I meant what I said back at Garret's. I will always love you."

Darren unbuckled his seat belt and scooted across the seat to lean into Ash's arms. He snuggled his head into the crook of the man's neck and inhaled his heady scent. Darren felt a little weird being cuddled to Ash's chest, but he couldn't ignore the fact that he never felt safer in his life.

"Just give me a little time to get used to all of this, Ash. That's all I'm asking."

"I'll give you all the time you need, Dary," Ash said as his hands rubbed up and down Darren's back. "I'm just asking you give us a chance. I know you've been thrust into a crazy mess, but I swear it's not always this bad. And I'll do everything in my power to make it better for you."

"Just remember our deal."

"Deal?"

"We're glued together at the hip?"

"You're my heart song, Dary. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but at your side."

Darren frowned, never having heard that term. He tilted his head back to look up at Ash. "What is a heart song?"

"Do you remember how I told you when we mated we would become one, that our souls, and our hearts, and all that we were would become one for all eternity?"

"Yes."

"In my world, your world now, too, that is a sign of a true blood mating, when the simple sound of your voice makes me feel alive, when your sadness becomes mine and your happiness is my ultimate goal. It means my heart sings only for you."

Darren ducked his head when he felt tears spring up in his eyes. He'd never had anyone say something like that to him, not even when they were trying to get into his bed. And Darren doubted anyone could have said it so eloquently yet so simply.

"I think I like being your heart song."

"I'm glad, Dary."

"And when I'm ready, when I know for sure I'm not dreaming, I'll ask you to bite me again, Ash. And I'm not talking about the mating bite, either."

Darren felt rather than heard Ash's sharp inhale of breath. He smiled as he leaned his head back to stare up into Ash's stunned face. "And I expect you to be there with me when I transform to walk me through it."

"Are you sure, Dary?"

"Not yet." Darren chuckled nervously. "Give me just a little more time, Ash, but don't give up on me. I'll get there."

Ash's arms held Darren tightly as if he were afraid to let go. "Hell, Dary, you can have all the time in the world."

Chapter 11

Ash couldn't bring himself to release Darren's hand as they drove up to the gate in front of his clan compound. He could see the amazement in his mate's face as he saw the large clan compound for the very first time.

Traditionally, only the alpha's family lived in the clan compound. All other clan members lived in the surrounding area and local town, if there was one. Ash didn't like the showiness of living in a large mansion by himself. He chose to allow his brother Dean and several others to stay with him as well. Now that Darren was here, that might change.

"Well, what do you think of the place?"

"It's huge. I'll get lost going to the bathroom."

"Naw, it's actually not that big, and you'll get used to it in time. Besides, with me glued to your hip, I can always help you find your way." Ash chuckled at the glare Darren sent his way before looking back at the house again.

"Just how many people live here with you?"

"Well, Dean lived here until he mated Garret. I imagine he'll be packing his stuff up while he's here and taking it back to Garret's. Other than that, there is Anna and Gerald. They pretty much run the place and keep it in tiptop condition. And just so you know, they are two of the people I trust."

"So, I guess that means I should trust them, too?"

"That's the idea. The other two people I trust are Reed and Logan. I will be assigning them as your bodyguards. Whenever you're not

with me, they will be by your side. And you're not to go anywhere without one of us with you."

"Bodyguards? I have to have bodyguards?"

"Until we solve this thing with someone trying to kill us, yes. I refuse to take chances with your life, Darren. And at the risk of sounding totally domineering, that means assigning you bodyguards."

"I think being domineering is in your DNA." Darren chuckled.

"That's a strong possibility."

"Trust me, it is."

"Have I been that domineering with you?"

"Are you serious?" Darren seemed shocked. Ash frowned. He wasn't sure he liked the picture that drew for him. He knew he had a domineering personality. He was alpha born. How could he not? He just didn't want to force anything on his mate.

"I'm sorry."

"Ash, it's a part of who you are like being a veterinarian is a part of who I am. I'm not worried about it. If I need to put you in your place, I have no problem doing just that."

"Uh, okay, just don't do it in front of the clan, okay?"

"Why not?"

Ah, now the fun begins, Ash thought to himself. "I'm the alpha, Darren. If you were to confront me in front of the clan, they would see it as you challenging my authority. I would be expected to put you in your place, so to speak."

Darren was quiet. Ash didn't know what to think. He worried he might have said something wrong until Darren began to chuckle. He glanced over at the man, feeling his palms sweat with nervousness. "Darren?"

"I'm more than capable of keeping my mouth shut when the need arises, but you do realize when we're alone all bets are off, don't you? I refuse to keep my thoughts to myself if I feel you've done something wrong."

Ash grinned with relief. "Remember that wonderful little mental link we have?"

"I'm not sure I could ever forget the voice in my head." Darren snickered.

"It's only between the two of us. No one else can hear us talking. If you need to speak to me and we're in front of others, you can always use our link." Ash shrugged. "I'm not saying I will always be able to go off and talk privately with you or that I will even agree with you, but that is one way we can communicate without anyone else knowing."

"I suppose I can deal with that."

"It's also a good way for you to contact me if you're in trouble, so remember it's there. If you need anything and you can't find me, get to me, or know where I am, you can always reach me through our link. It's very a very important bond between mates."

"It certainly seems to have its uses."

Ash grinned as he rolled the window down. He reached out and punched in the gate code then waited for the security gate to open. He glanced over at his mate as he drove through the opened gate and down the driveway to the house.

"Are you ready for this?"

"Truthfully, no way in hell."

Ash almost stepped on the brake at Darren's words until the man let out a little laugh. There were times Ash felt like he was doing Darren a big disservice by bringing the man into his world, a world that might get him killed. He just didn't know of any other way to deal with the situation.

"But, I suppose I can deal with it."

"There are advantages to being part of a wolf clan, Dary."

"That whole family thing you mentioned?"

"That and being the alpha mate." Ash couldn't keep the grin off his face no matter how cheesy he knew it must have looked. "You're basically clan royalty."

"Oh, right, the alpha queen." Darren rolled his eyes.

"It's more than that, Dary. Our duty to the clan is to take care of them, protect them. We decide matters of law and mediate in conflicts. We celebrate with them and grieve with them. We give them a safe place to raise their families."

"Sounds very medieval."

"I guess it is in a way." Although Ash would never admit that to his clan. They would more than likely rip him limb from limb. "In exchange for what we do for them, they follow our lead and allow us to care for them."

"And that makes you feel good, doesn't it?" Darren chuckled.

"Yeah, I guess in a way it does. I like knowing I can help provide a safe place for my people to thrive. Our relations with the few humans that do know about us haven't been very good. Secrecy has kept us alive. And by providing protection as alpha, I can help insure that secrecy stays secret."

"Am I the only human that knows about you?"

"No, there are a few others. We don't go out and advertise our existence, certainly, but every once in awhile, someone finds out. There have even been a few matings with humans, so no, you're not the only one."

"Well, that's good to know." Darren laughed as he leaned back in his seat. "I'd hate to be the odd man out."

"There is one other group of people you need to be aware of. I doubt you'll ever run into them but in case you do—"

"What, werebears or something?"

"No, human hunters."

"Human what?" Darren's face had paled a little, and Ash almost wished he hadn't said anything, but if he didn't that would be just one more danger posed to the man.

"There is a group of fanatics that hunt us, Darren. They see us as abominations and want to wipe us off the face of the earth. We call them hunters, and they are very dangerous."

"Are you serious?" Darren gaped.

"Deadly."

"How can they do that?"

Ash exhaled slowly as he watched Darren come unglued before his very eyes. The man was agitated, his hands clenching into fists in his lap, his lips pressed tightly together. Ash parked the car and shut the engine off before turning to face his mate.

"Darren, I didn't tell you about the hunters to scare you, but the more you know, the more you will be aware of your surroundings. I also don't want to hide anything from you. You need to know what you're getting into up front."

"I'm just trying to see the good points in being part of a clan." Darren's hand trembled as he pushed it through his hair. "I know you've said there are some, but I fail to see them. So far, you've been the only good thing out of this whole mess."

"I'm glad you think so. About me being a good thing, I mean." Ash felt his face flame when Darren arched an eyebrow at him. "Just hope you continue to think that way. Life with me won't always be easy, Dary, but I promise I will always be there for you."

"I guess I can't ask for more than that."

"Well, if you need to, you know you can ask. If there is something I can do to make all of this easier for you, just let me know. Things aren't usually this crazy, I swear. Once all of this goes away and things settle down, you'll see how wonderful a clan can be."

Darren smiled then opened his mouth to reply when Ash saw his eyes widened suddenly. Ash started to swing around when he heard a tap at his window. His hackles rose until he recognized Logan.

Instead of opening the window, Ash opened the door and climbed out. He wanted to introduce his mate to Logan, but he was concerned with the worried look on Logan's face. "Stay in the car until I say otherwise, Dary," he said through their bond.

"Okay."

[&]quot;Logan, what's wrong?"

"I am so glad you're home," Logan said quickly. "Douglas started some of his shit and began insinuating stuff. One of the clan lost control. Several of Douglas's supporters attacked him, and he's in pretty bad shape."

"Shit." Ash rubbed his hand over his face then glanced back at the car, a sudden idea hitting him. He turned to look back at Logan. "Is he in wolf form or human?"

Logan frowned. "Wolf form, why?"

"I have an idea." Ash opened the car door and leaned in to look at his mate. "There's been a small incident, love, and I could really use your veterinarian skills."

Darren nodded and climbed out of the vehicle. Ash watched his adorable mate transform right before his eyes, not into a werewolf like he would, but a medical doctor for animals. He became suddenly serious, the grimace on his face falling away to become a stoic expression of complete professionalism.

Ash almost felt the need to kiss Darren and bring back the man he loved except he realized he was looking at that man, just another facet of Darren's personality. He waited until Darren walked around the front of the car before turning to face Logan's stunned face.

"Logan, this is Dr. Darren Hart, my mate."

"Uh, it's a pleasure," Logan said before lowering his head and tilting it to one side.

Darren frowned at Logan's gesture then glanced at Ash. "What in the hell is he doing?"

"Remember that underbelly thing?"

Darren nodded, still looking confused.

"He's showing his submission to you as the alpha mate."

"Okay, that's just a little weird."

Ash chuckled. He now knew weird in Darren's vocabulary could mean many things and not all of them bad, so he let it go without questioning it. "Just touch the back of his neck with your fingers. It's your way of showing your acceptance of his show of submission."

Ash couldn't prevent the small rumble that filled his throat when Darren reached over and stroked his fingers over the nape of Logan's neck. He realized it was necessary, but he also realized he didn't like the thought of his mate touching anyone except him.

As an alpha, Ash knew he'd have to get used to the sight. Darren would be accepting the submissive gesture from a lot of people. As a newly mated male, Ash wanted to rip Logan apart, and the man hadn't done anything out of the normal for a clan member.

"Okay, that's enough." Ash growled after a moment. "You can stop touching him now."

"Asher!"

Ash grabbed Darren by the arm and all but yanked the man up against his body. He was rubbing his face over Darren's before he even knew he was doing it, spreading his scent over the man.

"I was only doing what you told me to, Ash."

"I know, love. I just don't like watching you touch anyone but me. I guess it's the alpha in me."

"It wasn't sexual, Ash," Darren protested silently as he tilted his head back. "I'm not in the least bit attracted to Logan."

"Yeah?"

Darren's hand stroked the side of his face, and Ash almost purred. "No, you're the only werewolf I'm interested in."

Yep, that was a purr.

Ash hugged Darren for a moment before turning to look at Logan. He frowned at the wide grin on Logan's face and reached over to playfully cuff the man on the side of the head. "Knock it off."

"It's just good to see you with someone," Logan replied. "I know you've been waiting years to bring your mate home."

Ash started to smile when Logan's words sank in. He tensed, ready to defend his mate from any foe. "Does anyone else know about Dary?"

"Only Anna, Gerald, and Reed, as far as I know. Why?"

"Someone is trying to kill him, and—"

"And you," Darren added quickly.

Ash smiled down at Darren for a moment before looking back at Logan. "Someone is trying to kill both of us, and we suspect that it's an inside job."

"Douglas?"

"Geez, who is this guy?" Darren exclaimed. "I keep hearing about Douglas, and everyone instantly sees him as the bad guy. If he's so horrible then why in the hell is he still part of your clan? Can't you kick him out or something?"

"Not without good reason," Ash said. "And so far, besides being an ass, we have no evidence."

"And you can't kick someone out of the clan for being an ass," Logan said. "Although we might want to bring that before the Council of Elders the next time they convene. There should be some way to sanction someone when they behave the way Douglas does. You shouldn't have to put up with it, Ash."

"No, but until that happens, we have no choice." Ash gestured to the house. "This little situation with Douglas and his cronies attacking another wolf might be just the thing we need to get rid of him. I don't need dissention within the clan."

"That's assuming the guy lives. He's really in pretty bad shape, Ash. He can't even shift."

Darren stepped forward, surprising Ash. "He's in werewolf form?"

"Yes."

"Ash, you said you built me a clinic. How far away is it?"

"Well," Ash grinned because this was exactly what he hoped would happen when Darren found out someone was injured, "the actual clinic is in town, but we have a small infirmary on the side of the house. I figured you'd want something close to home in case there was an emergency, but it's not much, just a basic operating room of sorts."

"Do you have any medical equipment on hand? Sedatives? Medicine?"

"Yes, the infirmary is fully equipped. I thought you'd want it that way."

"Can you show me the infirmary while Logan brings this guy there? I need to see what you have before I can treat him."

Ash nodded. "Of course."

Darren stared between Ash and Logan for a moment before clapping his hands together. "Well? Let's go, I haven't got all day."

Ash rolled his eyes as Logan laughed hysterically. He pointed his finger at the man. "Just you wait, my friend. Your time is coming, and I plan on having a ringside seat."

"You say that like having a mate is a bad thing."

"No, not at all, Logan, in fact it's wonderful." Ash felt Darren's hand graze his at his words. "But it's not easy, either. I don't know if you've noticed, but my Dary isn't exactly submissive. I don't think he really gives a shit I'm an alpha."

"Not true," Darren broke in, but Ash could hear the amusement in his mate's voice. "I respect your status as an alpha. I imagine it takes a lot of work to lead any group of people, and it must be even harder with a clan of werewolves."

Logan was nodding as if he approved of Darren's words, but Ash held his breath with anticipation. The mischievous little smile crossing Darren's face told Ash his mate wasn't done yet.

"On the other hand, your status as an alpha has nothing to do with the relationship between you and me. You're my mate, pure and simple. That puts us on even footing as far as I am concerned. Your alpha status doesn't mean shit when it comes to us."

Logan howled with laughter.

Ash couldn't keep his grin off his face. He knew Darren would be trouble, and he was right. Luckily, Ash saw that as a plus. He didn't want a submissive mate. He wanted someone to stand by his side, not behind him.

"Come on, alpha mate, let's get you to the infirmary so you can treat your patient. We can discuss the relationship between mates at a different time." Ash pressed his hand into the middle of Darren's back and started escorting him toward the house when he suddenly remembered Garret and Dean. He glanced back over his shoulder, concerned when he didn't see their car.

"Logan, I'm expecting Dean and Alpha Garret Silvanus to be joining us soon. They should be right behind us. Alpha Silvanus is to be given every courtesy."

"Should I arrange a room for him?"

"No." Ash grinned. "I think Dean will be taking care of that."

Logan looked confused, but when Ash didn't add anything more, he simply nodded his head and walked toward the house with them. Ash drew Darren around to the side of the house, wanting to avoid the multitude of people he could see through the large front windows. Darren walked right in the front door.

"Just how many people are here, Ash?" Darren whispered.

"That's hard to tell, Dary. Only a few actually live here, but people come and go all the time. This is where the alpha lives, and clan members are always coming here to see me and seek my advice or assistance."

"Guess that means we're not going to get too many nights alone, huh?"

"Not true, love." Ash shook his head. "I've been an alpha long enough to see how crazy things can get, so I've made preparations for that. I've arranged for us to have one evening off a week, any day of your choice. So, barring any emergencies, no one is allowed to bother us on that night."

"A date night?" Darren sounded intrigued.

"Yep."

Darren grinned. "Cool."

When they came to a large closed door, Ash grabbed Darren's hand to pull him to a stop. Darren glanced at him with a confused frown. "Close your eyes, Dary."

Darren rolled his eyes then closed them. Ash unlocked the door and opened it, guiding his mate inside. He quickly glanced around the white infirmary room, hoping that it would meet Darren's approval.

Ash spent months researching what Darren would need and wanted it to be perfect for his mate. He'd even consulted with several other veterinarians so he could make sure everything Darren would need was in place.

The infirmary attached to the house was much smaller than the clinic in town and didn't have as much equipment. It was mostly for emergencies and such. The clinic in town had a lab, a surgery room, three exam rooms, an office for Darren, and a lobby. Ash knew if he missed anything, not only would Darren let him know, but Ash would be sure to supply it.

There was a twofold benefit to having both the infirmary and the clinic in town. One, it would make Darren happy, and that was Ash's ultimate goal. And two, it would provide a place for injured wolves to receive treatment. That would benefit the clan.

"Okay, open your eyes, love."

Chapter 12

Darren held his breath as he opened his eyes and looked around the room. He blinked then craned his neck to look around even more. He was astonished at what Ash had accomplished with the place.

"Ash, this is amazing."

"Did I miss anything?"

Darren waved his hand around the well-stocked room. "How could you have? It looks like you have everything here that a veterinarian could possibly need."

"This is just the house infirmary," Ash said quickly. "The clinic in town is much bigger, and has a lab, too. One of the veterinarians I talked to said one of the biggest problems veterinarians have is the waiting time to receive lab results. And I've posted a notice that you need a lab tech. I thought it would better for you to do the interviews since you'd know what you're looking for."

Darren's jaw dropped as he turned to look at Ash, mostly because of what Ash had done for him but also from the hesitant look on his mate's face. Darren suddenly realized Ash was nervous. He couldn't seem to decide whether to twist his hands together or shove them in his pockets. Darren didn't think this was something the big alpha was used to feeling.

"This is all wonderful, Ash, thank you."

"So, you like it?"

"I love it." Darren turned to look around the room again, taking in the pristine white walls, the equipment covered with protective plastic, and the tall cabinets filled with medical bins, medicine bottles, and just about every type of instrument Darren could imagine.

Curious, Darren crossed to one glass front cabinet filled with small bottles of medications. The door was locked, but Darren could see clearly enough to read the labels.

"Keys?"

Darren wasn't in the least bit surprised when Ash dug into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, tossing them across the room. He smiled and turned to unlock the cabinet, whistling when he read the labels.

"Ketamine, xylazine, and medetomidine, I'm impressed and a little confused." Darren glanced over his shoulder to Ash. "How did you get your hands on these drugs? They're pretty regulated."

Ash's face flushed. "I had a friend who had a friend who—"

"Had a friend." Darren chuckled. "Okay, I get it, but from now on, I order the drugs. I don't want you or the clan getting into trouble for shopping on the black market."

Darren started opening drawers and cabinets, assessing everything Ash had provided for the small infirmary. All in all, he was pretty impressed. There didn't seem to be much Ash missed. Darren couldn't even imagine what the clinic might look like.

"How do you feel about assisting me?" Darren asked as he pulled his jacket off and hung it on the coat rack by the door. "I'm going to need two sets of hands depending on how injured this guy is."

"Just tell me what to do."

"Wash your hands and put on some gloves."

Darren saw Ash start to pull his jacket off as he turned back to the cabinets and gathered together simple exam instruments. He had no idea how injured the clan member was, but he wanted to be prepared for anything.

Darren had just finished setting up the new sterilized instruments on a tray next to the exam table and snapping on some sterile gloves when the door opened and two men carried in a large, grey wolf. "Bring him over here," Darren said as he gestured to the exam table.

The men seemed to hesitate until Ash nodded and pointed to the table. "Do as he says. I trust him without question."

Darren ignored the raised eyebrows Ash's comment brought and started examining his patient. He could immediately see several deep slashes in the wolf's torso as well as one long one across his neck. Darren could tell just from looking at the wounds that whatever the man had been through, it was meant to be deadly.

"Oh my god, what is he doing?"

Darren glanced up when he heard the words shouted into the nearly silent room to see an older woman staring at him with an expression of horror on her face. He assumed from the way her face paled and her hand fluttered at her throat the woman was in some way related to the wolf on the exam table.

Darren ignored the woman and went back to examining his patient. Beyond the deep gauges in the wolf's throat and torso, there were numerous smaller abrasions over his entire body. Darren knew if the wolf lived, he would be sporting several nasty bruises the next day. His skin was already starting to darken.

"Ash, I need some light and that spectacle magnifier," Darren said when he spotted something that seemed a little out of place to him. There were some small particles in the wounds that didn't look like normal dirt.

"Alpha, what is going on?" the woman shouted although it sounded more like a shriek to him, kind of like fingernails on a chalkboard. "Why is he touching my son? Who is this man? What's he doing?"

"Marta, it's fine," Ash said as he handed the magnifier to Darren. "I trust Darren to take good care of your son. He's a veterinarian."

"He's a human?" Marta shouted the words, but the silence that followed seemed louder to Darren. He wondered if that was the reaction he would get from everyone he met. Darren rolled his eyes and fit the glasses onto his face.

Ignoring the war of words he could feel coming around him, he looked closely at the wounds he was inspecting. He reached back and held out the palm of his hand. "Ash, hand me those forceps."

"The what?"

Darren frowned and glanced over at the small tray of instruments then pointed to one. "Those, the tweezer looking things." Ash handed them over and Darren gestured to the far side of the table. "Stand over there. I'm going to need you to wipe away the blood while I examine these cuts."

"Alpha Stone," the woman screeched again, "this is totally unacceptable. I don't even know who this man is. He has no right to touch my son."

Darren needed to work. He needed to figure out what these small specks were in the wound. And he needed quiet to do it. With a small glare at the woman, Darren handed the forceps to Ash then crossed over to the cabinet holding the medications.

He searched through the small bottles until he found the one he wanted then reached for the quick injector gun he used when dealing with feral animals. It was quicker and safer than issuing a syringe and needle, which could potentially break off in a struggling animal.

Filling the injector with the proper amount of medication, Darren closed the cabinet then crossed the room to the woman. She gave him a strange looked when he smiled sweetly at her. Darren reached up and injected the sedative in her neck. He was done and turning away before she even knew what had happened.

"Someone might want to grab her before she hits the floor," Darren said as he walked back to replace the injection gun in the cabinet. He quickly took off his gloves and washed his hands then pulled on a new set. "She'll sleep for a little while, but she should be fine in a couple of hours."

Ash didn't say anything, but he did chuckle as he arched an eyebrow. Darren just shrugged and walked back around to his side of

the table. He noticed someone held the slumped woman from hitting the floor.

"Now, let's see what is wrong with our patient." Darren slid the magnifying glasses back up his nose and leaned over the wound. "Light, Ash." When Ash shone a light into the wound, Darren watched as small specks of silver came into focus.

"Forceps." Darren held out his hand. Once Ash slapped the small medical instrument into his hand, Darren reached in and grabbed the largest piece he could see. He leaned back and held the forceps up to the light. "Ash, what does this look like to you?"

"Dirt?" Ash asked as he squinted at the small speck.

"Try again, hon. I suspect that this is a silver fleck." Darren sent the words through their bond because he didn't really know if silver could harm werewolves or not. If it could, then they had a huge problem.

"How can you tell?"

Darren turned the forceps under the light. He heard Ash inhale sharply and move back just a little when the small speck sparkled in the brightness of the overhead light. "Am I correct in assuming you're allergic to silver?"

"Yes, it's deadly to us."

"Ash, this guy's wounds are lined with the stuff."

Ash inhaled sharply then turned to Logan. "Clear the room. I want everyone out except you, and have Reed standing outside. No one is to come, and I mean no one."

Logan nodded and started ushering everyone out of the room. Darren carried the small piece of silver over to a large microscope. He prepared a slide then slid it in. It took him just a moment to determine he was correct in his assessment. The man's wounds were littered with silver specks.

Darren grabbed a large bottle of saline solution and carried it back to the exam table. He started flushing the wound, picking away small

specs of silver with the forceps and dropping them into a silver container.

It was meticulous work, and by the time Darren felt the wound was clear of silver, his back ached from bending over the patient for so long. He stood up to stretch his back and stumbled. Two sets of hands instantly reached out to steady Darren.

"Are you okay, love?"

"Yeah, I'm used to this."

Ash leaned down and kissed Darren on the temple. "I'll give you a massage later tonight."

"Deal." Darren chuckled.

"So, how is Matt?"

"Is that his name?" Darren asked curiously as he looked down at the unconscious wolf. "Well, I believe Matt will be fine. The silver was impeding his ability to properly heal. I'm going to treat his wounds as I would for any canine, but I suspect leaving them unstitched would be our best bet for now."

"If he can shift, his wounds will heal very quickly."

Darren nodded. "I suspected as much."

"So, what now?"

"We need to clean Matt's wounds and insure there are no more signs of silver or dirt of any kind. I think for now we'll use butterfly bandages to keep the wounds closed. And then we need to give him an antibiotic in case of infection. The rest is up to Matt."

"Is it safe giving him an antibiotic?"

"I'll give him something that can be handled by both humans and canines. Until I learn more about your kind, I want to stay away from strictly canine medications."

"What about what you gave Marta?" Logan asked as he stepped forward and gestured over his shoulder toward the door.

"A simple sedative, nothing more." Darren smirked. "I couldn't think with all that screeching. That woman is loud."

"Wait until she wakes up," Logan snorted. "It gets worse."

"I'm giddy with anticipation."

* * * *

Darren closed the cabinet door after replacing the last of the cleaned instruments. He turned around to face his mate and leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. "So, what's up with the silver?"

"What can you tell me about Matt's wounds?"

"Well, they were obviously made with claws. I just haven't figured out how the silver got into the wounds." Darren frowned. "It was weird, Ash. I mean, the edges of the slash marks were lined with silver, not the open part of the wounds."

"I don't understand."

Darren didn't like the feeling he got in the pit of his stomach when he saw Ash clench his fists. "Ash, I suspect the claws that made those slash marks were dipped in silver."

"But how?"

"I think the claws themselves were either dipped in silver or had the silver painted on their nails like fingernail polish. Either way would make the nails not only stronger but more deadly. Every time they struck out at someone, the silver would be transferred to the victim."

"Shit!" Ash exclaimed as he pushed his hand through his hair. "Do you know what you are saying, Darren? If this is true, then whoever attacked Matt did it with the intention of killing him."

"Or causing you more problems."

"Either way we have trouble."

"I agree. So, what do you want to do about it?"

"Is there any way to prove what you're saying?"

"I can check the fingernails of everyone who was here when Matt was attacked to see if there are any signs of silver."

"You can do that?" Ash seemed skeptical.

"If there is silver on anyone's nails, I can find it. Mind you, it will take awhile, and I will need your help, but I am fairly confident I can find any traces."

"What can I do to help?"

"Order everyone to submit to my examination for starters. I don't want anyone attacking me while I examine them."

"Consider it done." Ash said. "Anything else?"

"I'll need a place with lots of light and my magnifying glasses."

"If we move Matt to another room to recover, will this room do?" Ash asked as he waved his hand around. "I can bring people in here one at a time. That will also allow me to have Reed and Logan at the door so no one gets in or out."

"You're really into this safety shit, aren't you?"

Ash shrugged. "It's a recent development."

"It's cute." Darren grinned when Ash snarled.

"Alphas are not cute," he snapped, but his voice lacked volume and conviction. The lower lip that started to stick out of his mouth, however, was just about the cutest thing Darren had ever seen. Ash was pouting.

Darren sauntered across the room until he could lean into Ash's tall frame. He smiled as he flicked his finger over Ash's lower lip. "Are you sure alphas are not cute? Because I have to tell you, this is just about the most adorable thing I've ever seen."

Darren laughed when Ash purposely stuck his lip out more. He just about pouted himself when Ash pulled his lip back in until he saw the grin that took its place. He felt Ash's hands land on his hips, pulling him closer. The hard cock pressing against Darren was a sure indication Ash liked his words.

"Would you prefer I said sexy?"

"I'd prefer if you shut the hell up and put your mouth to better use."

Darren's laughter was muffled beneath the mouth that covered his. His amusement quickly turned to burning hot arousal as Ash

assaulted his mouth. Darren moaned as Ash's tongue swept across his lips before delving inside to explore. He loved the shock of electricity that seemed to arc between them at that simple touch.

Darren wanted the kiss to go on and on and on. He wanted to strip Ash down and lick his body from head to toe. He wanted to do so many things, but he didn't know where to start. He didn't want to listen to the persistent knocking at the door.

Groaning, Darren pulled away from Ash's glorious lips to stare into his eyes. Ash seemed as dazed as he was. His eyes, normally a beautiful baby blue, had darkened with an arousal that made Darren pant with want.

"I guess we should get that, huh?" Darren whispered.

"Or not." Ash held up his hand, a small set of keys hanging from his fingers. "I have the keys. We could just lock everyone out and get naked."

The knock came again, more insistent this time.

"I am so in favor of that idea." Darren chuckled. "But, somehow I think they would break the door down. I'm sure they think I'm doing horrible things to you as it is."

"I can think of several horrible things I'd like you to do to me, love."

"Keep a list," Darren said as he pushed away from Ash so he wasn't molded to the man's body. "We can try them all out later, after I figure out who is using silver claws to hurt people."

"Spoilsport."

"Alpha bitch." Darren tapped his finger against Ash's chin. "Get it right."

"I'd go with that, but I'm pretty sure you'd hand me my head. I'll stick with something else, thank you very much."

Darren shuddered with need when Ash leaned in and gave him another toe-curling kiss. He wanted to grab the man and pull him back when Ash stepped away. His only consolation was the trembling he saw in Ash's hands as he straightened his shirt.

Ash's voice wasn't quite steady when he spoke. "Get whatever you need ready to go, doctor. I'll get the door."

Darren exhaled the breath he'd been holding and took several steps back. He needed to put some room between him and Ash if he had any hope of keeping his wits about him. The man was lethal to Darren's concentration.

He quickly gathered together the items he felt he would need, the magnifying spectacles, a box of sterile gloves, forceps, and just to be on the safe side, Darren filled the quick injector gun with more sedative. He wanted to be prepared for anything.

"Ready, love?"

Darren turned to Ash and nodded. "Let the games begin."

Chapter 13

Ash watched his mate work, impressed by the man's diligence and professionalism with each passing minute. Darren was meticulous, checking the fingernails of every member of the clan as they came in until he was satisfied they were in the clear.

He was confident in Darren's abilities, but as more time passed and more clan members were cleared, Ash started to doubt the merits of their plan. There had to be some other way to find out who attacked Matt, and maybe lead them to the people after him and Darren.

"Asher, honey, I've brought you and your little friend something to eat."

Ash smiled over at his Aunt Sarah and took the stray of food she held in her hands. He quickly set it on the counter behind him then turned back to his aunt. "Thank you, Aunt Sarah. That was very sweet of you."

"Nonsense, Asher," Aunt Sarah said as she made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "You've been in here for hours. I knew you would be hungry. I just had the kitchen throw something together for you."

"You take good care of me, Aunt Sarah."

"Of course I do, Asher, it's my job to care for the alpha and his mate."

Ash tilted his head a little, confused by that statement and the serene smile he saw on his aunt's lips. He didn't remember telling Aunt Sarah Darren was his mate. As far as he knew, no one else had said anything, either.

"My mate?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Your young man over there." Aunt Sarah pointed to where Darren stood checking over another clan member.

"How did you know about Darren? I haven't announced it to the clan yet."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everyone knows about your young man."

"Everyone?"

"Well, of course." Aunt Sarah gave a small sway of her head like she was trying to roll her eyes but didn't quite make it. "We've been waiting forever for you to bring him home. I'm just so glad you finally decided the time was right. It's important you're with your mate through all of this."

"Who's been waiting, Aunt Sarah?" Ash asked as something cold and foreboding crawled up his spine. "Who else knows about Darren?"

"I just told you, Asher, everyone knows." Aunt Sarah reached over and patted Ash's hand, smiling broadly. "Now, be a good boy and go eat your food with your young man. It will make everything better."

Ash's brows drew together as he watched his aunt sashay out of the room. He knew his Aunt Sarah was an odd woman, but he was beginning to think she was playing with less of a full deck of cards than he originally thought.

"Ash?"

Ash turned to look at his mate. He watched the clan member Darren had been working on shake Darren's hand then turn and nod to him, then leave the room. Once the door shut behind the man, Ash crossed over to stand next to Darren.

"Well? Did you find anything?"

Darren shook his head. "No, and that bothers me."

"You're bothered because you didn't find anything?" Ash scoffed. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Ash, you don't get it," Darren said as he leaned back against the exam table and crossed his arms over his chest. "I didn't find

anything, no silver, no dirt, no food, no signs of anything at all. Unless your clan is the cleanest clan on the planet, something is seriously wrong here."

"I'm confused."

"There was nothing under anyone's fingernails, nothing, not even a speck of dirt. It's like each and every person I examined cleaned their hands before they came in here. Now, if that's true, why?"

"But..." Ash rubbed his hands over his face and paced across the room.

"Look, Ash, everyone has something under their fingernails. We pick up flecks of dirt here and there, food, paper, just stuff. When we wash our hands, most of that is washed away but often, small flecks remain behind, caught under our fingernails." Ash turned around when Darren pulled on his arm. "But there was nothing. If I have to give an opinion, I would say they all scraped under their nails with something."

"Damn! That means whoever is behind this either has everyone under their control or everyone is involved."

"In which case, we're fucked."

Ash knew Darren was right. He also realized he might have signed Darren's death warrant by claiming him. Ash just didn't how to get either of them out of the situation they were in. They were in danger away from the clan and in danger with the clan. There didn't seem to be any place for them to go where someone wasn't trying to kill them.

Ash grabbed Darren's arms and pulled the man into his arms. He buried his face in Darren's hair and inhaled the deep, heady scent that was uniquely his mate's as a feeling helplessness swept over him.

"I'm so sorry, Dary, I should never have brought you into this."

"If I remember correctly, *you* didn't. Two flea-bitten dogs and a fall down a mountain did."

"But, if I hadn't—" The rest of Ash's words were muffled beneath the pressure of Darren's fingers against his lips.

"Do you love me?" Darren asked as he tilted his head back to look up at him.

"You know I do," Ash said through their bond since Darren's fingers were still pressed against his lips.

"Then I don't care about anything else. I know we're in a dire situation, but if we give in to whoever is doing this to us, if we let them take away what we have, then they win no matter what. And to tell you the truth, I'm not willing to let them win."

The amount of joy Ash took in Darren's fiercely spoken words brought tears to his eyes. He knew Darren had misgivings about their relationship so the fact he would willingly fight for them made Ash's heart sing.

"My beautiful heart song," Ash whispered silently. He cupped Darren's jaw with his hand and leaned in to kiss the man when a low rumble sounded farther down Darren's body. Ash blinked for a moment at the unexpected sound then grinned when he realized the noise came from Darren's hungry stomach.

"Sorry," Darren squeaked, his face flushing.

"Don't be, love, you've been working for quite some time, and I imagine you are very hungry. You haven't eaten since we left Garret's compound." Ash turned and gestured to the tray of food sitting on the counter behind them. "Aunt Sarah got us something to eat from the kitchen."

"Really?"

Ash nodded and walked over to the tray. He hadn't really taken the time to look before because he'd been too worried about Darren, but now that he did, he saw a plate of finger sandwiches, two plates of pasta salad, and a carafe of juice. It looked pretty good and smelled even better. Ash grinned over at Darren.

"Hungry?"

"Starving, actually." Darren snickered as he joined Ash at the counter, leaning his hip against it.

"I don't know exactly what is here, but it smells good." Ash poured them both a glass of juice then set a sandwich on each plate, pushing one plate toward Darren. "Now eat."

Darren grinned and picked up a fork, digging into the pasta salad. Ash enjoyed watching his mate eat, the small, delicate bites he took, the way he chewed each bite before taking another. He barely ate any of his sandwich before Darren was done with the pasta salad and moving on to his own sandwich.

"So, do you think we'll be able to figure out who is doing this?" Darren asked between bites.

Ash shrugged, finishing the bite of sandwich in his mouth. "Maybe."

"It might help to know who are the players are, well, besides Douglas, I mean."

"That's hard to say, Dary. Douglas has many followers, most of whom followed his father before me. They want to see Douglas put in power because they want things to be back to the old ways. I'm trying to bring this clan into the current century before we die out."

"Why are they fighting this so hard? Things evolve, people evolve. Change happens."

"And in the normal world, that may be true. In the werewolf world, things are a little different. We have to hold on to some of our customs because of what we are."

"For example?"

Ash smiled. Darren seemed truly interested, and that thrilled Ash to no end. "Take the mating for example. If we stay with tradition, our pups are taught how to find their mates and what to do when they find them. If we didn't have that, can you imagine how many wolves would be mated to the wrong people?"

"But I thought you said men were only allowed to be mated to men in the last few years."

"And that's one of the things that needed to be changed. Too many men have gone their entire lives without their mates because of that tradition. It's wrong."

"I couldn't agree more."

"And that's what these people have an issue with. They want things to stay the way they were. They can't. We need to change and adapt to the times, or we're going to die out. Already, many of our clan members have either left the clan or died due to illness or heartbreak from the lack of a mate."

"You can die from not having a mate?" Darren asked, his eyebrow shooting up.

"Yes."

"How?"

Ash set his sandwich down on his plate and tried to formulate an answer Darren would understand. "If you knew there was one perfect person out in the world made just for you, and you spent your entire life looking for him but never found him, don't you think you'd start to lose faith you would after awhile?"

"I suppose."

"And if you saw others around you finding their mates, building lives and having families while you still waited, wouldn't you be heartbroken?"

Darren grimaced and set his sandwich down. He looked a little nauseous. "Yeah, I can see where that would be an issue. Back before I knew the voice in my head was you, I couldn't seem to find anyone I was truly comfortable with. I thought I'd be alone for the rest of my life listening to a figment of my imagination."

"While it's not an actual medical diagnosis in the human world, being heartbroken in ours is an actual illness. It's a lot like what happens when mates are separated for long periods. We basically go crazy from grief and eventually die."

Ash watched Darren's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed then cleared his throat. "You'll die if we're separated?" Darren whispered.

"You're my heart song, Dary, remember? Without you, my heart doesn't sing anymore."

Darren was silent for so long, staring off into space, Ash began to get worried. When Darren finally inhaled then let a breath out slowly, Ash didn't know what to expect. Would all of this be too much for Darren? Ash knew he was asking a lot of the man, more than he could expect anyone to deal with.

"I guess being glued together at the hip takes on a whole new meaning with you, huh?"

"It does, but there are benefits to being mated to me." At Darren's arched eyebrow, Ash hurried to continue. "Wolves mate for life. I will never be unfaithful to you. You will always be the only one in my heart."

Darren's eyes narrowed. "You're not just saying that because you know I'm a veterinarian and I would neuter you in your sleep if I ever caught you with anyone else, right?"

Ash chuckled at Darren's words, but still dropped his hand to his lap to cover his groin, just in case. "No, it's the truth, I swear. Once we've mated, you're it for me." Ash frowned when Darren wrapped his arms around his stomach. "Does that bother you? I thought you'd be happy I wouldn't want anyone else."

"I am, believe me, I just—" Darren grimaced, his face going tense. "I don't feel very good, Ash. Maybe I ate too much."

"Damn, love, why didn't you say something," Ash said as he quickly stepped over to Darren and wrapped his arms around the man's shoulders. He started to lead Darren over to a chair. "Come over here and sit down."

"Ash, this isn't... this isn't..."

"Darren!" Ash exclaimed when Darren's legs gave out and he started to collapse onto the floor. Ash quickly swung Darren up into his arms and carried him over to the exam table, laying him down.

Ash's heart stuttered at the sight of his mate. Beads of sweat trickled down the sides of Darren's chalky white face. His hands

clenched together into fists. Darren looked like he was in agonizing pain.

"Dary, love, tell me what's going on," Ash said. "What hurts?"

"Stomach," Darren whispered through clenched teeth, "cramps. Hurts like... like... Oh god, gonna..." Darren suddenly pushed away from Ash, rolling over onto his side. His hands desperately reached for a small metal bowl sitting on the exam tray next to the bed.

A horrible retching sound filled the room followed quickly by a stench that made Ash's stomach roll. Something was very wrong. Ash wasn't an expert by any means, but he didn't think Darren should be this sick.

"Logan!" Ash shouted, refusing to leave Darren's side. He scanned the room until he spotted a stack of washcloths on the counter. The sounds of Darren throwing up filled Ash's ears as he raced across the room and grabbed one of the washcloths then held it under the faucet to get it wet.

Running back to Darren's bedside, he started wiping the man's face down, paying special attention to Darren's mouth between the man's retching. When the door opened and Logan stepped inside, Ash looked up at him, at a loss what to do for Darren.

"What in the hell is going on?"

"He said his stomach was cramping, and then he just started throwing up."

"Did he eat anything?"

Ash pointed to the tray of food on the counter then grabbed Darren as the man started another bout of retching. In between throwing up, Darren panted heavily, his eyes closed. Every once in a while, he would grab his stomach and groan, drawing his knees up to his chest.

"Hey, love, how are you doing?" Ash asked softly as he wiped the beads of sweat off Darren's forehead. "Is it getting any better?"

"Ch-check the f-food, Ash."

"Logan is checking it now, Dary."

"Onl-only thing I-I ate."

Ash nodded then glanced over his shoulder to Logan. "Did you find anything?"

"I'm not sure," Logan replied. "The sandwiches seem fine, but the pasta has a strange scent to it. I can't tell if it's just the sauce it's in or something else."

"Let me smell it," Ash said as he walked across the room to stand next to Logan. Darren's plate was empty, so Logan held up Ash's plate. Ash leaned in and took a deep inhale. He reared back, his nose wrinkling as a nauseous scent filled his nose. He shoved the plate away from his face. "It's the pasta."

"Did you eat any of it, Ash?"

"No, I just ate the sandwich. I don't like pasta salad very much." Ash frowned as a sudden thought filled his head. "The kitchen knows that. They wouldn't have put two plates of pasta on the tray."

"Who brought you the food? Anna?"

"No, Aunt Sarah. She said she had the kitchen make up a tray of food for me and my mate."

"Your mate?" Logan's eyebrows shot up. "Aunt Sarah knows about your mate?"

"I asked her the very same thing. Aunt Sarah said everyone knew about Darren, that they were all just waiting for me to bring him home."

"Who is everyone because I know Reed and I didn't say a word to anyone, just like you ordered. And I doubt Gerald or Anna would say anything, either. They are too loyal to you. Who does that leave?"

"No one," Ash snapped as he walked back over to stand next to Darren. He gently stroked his hand over Darren's back as he looked at Logan. "That's just it, Logan. None of us said anything to anyone, but somehow everyone knows about Darren."

"I'm a very popular person," Darren mumbled, instantly gaining Ash's attention. He was thrilled Darren seemed to be able to talk in

complete sentences once again. Ash leaned over Darren and brushed the sweat-soaked hair back from his face.

"Hey, love, how are you feeling? Is your stomach still cramping?"
"Yeah."

"Do you need to throw up some more?"

"Not sure. But I could really use something to wash my mouth out with."

"Logan," Ash said as he glanced up, "can you find something for Darren to wash his mouth out with? And wash this out, will you? I think we're going to need it for awhile."

"Yeah, sure." Logan grimaced as he took the metal bowl Ash held out to him.

Ash bent back over Darren's prone body while Logan searched for something for Darren to wash his mouth out with and washed the bowl out. He gently brushed the hair back from Darren's face again, frowning at the paleness of his skin. Ash felt totally helpless in the face of his mate's pain. He didn't have the first clue what to do, but maybe Darren did.

"Tell me what to do, Dary. How can I make this better for you?"

Darren started to chuckle, but it quickly turned into a groan as he grabbed his stomach.

"Dary?"

"It would be best if I had my stomach pumped, get out whatever is making me sick, but..." Darren shook his head. "You don't know how to do it."

"So tell me."

"Maybe...maybe we could use an activated carbon like Actidose or Liqui-Char. Do you know if you stocked any?"

"Activated carbon?"

"It binds to poisons and prevents its absorption by inducing vomiting. It won't be pretty, and I'm going to hurt like hell afterward, but it should get everything out of my stomach. Just...I'm going to need something to get my electrolytes back up after I'm done."

"Like Gatorade for example?"

"Gatorade would work if you have any of that. I just need something to rehydrate me."

"Alright, love," Ash said as he stroked his hand down the side of Darren's pale face, "you just lay here, and I'll go see if we have any of this stuff. I'll have Logan find you some Gatorade to drink."

"And a toothbrush."

Ash grinned. "You hear that, Logan? My alpha mate wants a toothbrush."

"I'll make sure of it," Logan replied.

Ash wasted no time. He quickly began searching the cupboards until he found a small brown bottle labeled 'Actidose'. He grabbed it and carried it back over to Darren. "I found it, love, now what do I do with it?"

"I have to drink it. And Ash..." Darren's eyes looked up and stared intently into Ash's, "be ready. This stuff should take effect almost immediately. I'll be puking my guts out for awhile, and I won't be able to stop until after everything is out of my stomach."

Ash nodded then swallowed hard as he realized what his mate was about to go through. As he opened the bottle of Actidose, Ash swore to himself he would find whoever did this to Darren and force them to go through the same damn thing.

He held the bottle up to Darren's mouth and watched him drink. Before the bottle was even half way gone, Darren's eyes widened and he started reaching for the metal bowl sitting on the exam bed next to him.

Ash winced as the sounds of retching filled the room again. All Ash could do was stand there and make sure Darren didn't fall off the bed, wipe his face between bouts of puking, and pray either Darren's stomach emptied quickly or the man passed out.

Ash was hoping for unconsciousness.

Chapter 14

Consciousness came slowly to Darren, but the pain hit him almost the exact same moment he opened his eyes. He groaned and rolled to his side, drawing his knees up until he was in the fetal position.

Everything hurt. The light was too bright for his eyes. The muscles across his stomach felt like someone tried to pull them out with a pitchfork. And Darren's throat was so sore he had trouble swallowing. Darren would have preferred to stay unconscious.

As he lay there with his eyes closed and his arms wrapped around his stomach, the events of the previous evening began to slowly filter into Darren's fog-filled brain. Little by little, his mind cleared, and the knowledge someone tried to kill him yet again solidified.

"Ash?" Darren asked through his bond with his mate as turning his head to look for him was out of the question. His stomach still felt queasy.

"Dary?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm downstairs, love. I'll be up in just a moment. You just stay in bed until I get there."

"Not like I'm going to be going anywhere anytime soon."

Darren could hear Ash's soft chuckle through their bond. "I'll be there soon, love."

Darren took a deep breath and rolled over onto his back. Pain racked his body, his stomach clenching so tight Darren wondered if he would throw up again. He just wasn't sure he had anything left to get rid of.

He remembered the previous night with more and more clarity and knew he'd given Ash quite the show. The Actidose had done its job and then some. Darren had thrown up for what seemed like forever. Even now his throat felt like swollen sandpaper, each swallow intensely painful.

Once he felt he would throw up again, Darren scooted himself back up against the pillows and looked around the room. He blinked in surprise when he took in the room around him.

The bed he lay on was against one wall, large windows directly across from him. There were two doors to his left and an open archway that led into what looked like a small office to his right.

The soft cream and tan colors of the room impressed Darren. He wouldn't have thought a man like Ash would know anything about decorating his room in soft, soothing colors. Even the pine floor boards and trim made the room seem light and airy.

Besides the massive bed and the two nightstands on either side, the only other pieces of furniture were two large, overstuffed chairs sitting by the windows and a small wooden table between them.

Darren could see a book on the table, a piece of paper situated between the pages. He guessed Ash was currently reading the book. He was intrigued by the idea his mate was a man of reading. He liked that.

"Ash?" Darren called out when he heard a noise outside the bedroom door. He held his breath when Ash didn't reply. Fear started to fill him when the door slowly opened. Darren gripped the blankets tightly in his hands when he watched an older woman walk into the room.

"Darren, dear, how are you feeling?" the woman asked as she carried a tray of tea over to the nightstand and set it down.

"Uh, I'm feeling okay." Darren frowned when the older woman casually poured a cup of tea then held it out to him as if he hadn't been poisoned just the night before. "Where's Ash?"

"Oh, not to worry, my dear, Asher is downstairs dealing with matters of the clan. The alpha sent me up here to take care of you."

"Who are you?"

"Oh my, I am so sorry." The woman's hand pressed against the white lace neckline of her dress. "I'm Aunt Sarah."

* * * *

Ash glared across the room at his cousin. The only thing that kept him from leaping across the space between them was the two large men that stood at Douglas's side. He knew they would never let him reach Douglas and do any type of real damage.

"Why, Douglas?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you go after my mate? I gave you every chance to live in peace, and you still tried to kill Darren." Ash slammed his hands down on his desk. "You've given me more than enough evidence to not only banish you from the clan but have charges brought against you with the Council of Elders."

"You don't have that kind of power."

Ash scowled. "And what makes you think that, Douglas? I'm the alpha of this clan."

"You're nothing!" Douglas shouted. "The only reason you have the position you do is because you murdered my father and took it. It should have been mine."

Ash saw the heads of several of the older clan members nod as if they agreed with Douglas's words. He was getting really tired of fighting the members of the clan while trying to bring peace for all of wolf kind.

Ash pulled a key out of his pocket and reached down to unlock the bottom drawer of his desk. He grabbed several files and slammed them down on his desk, flipping the first file open and pulling out the stack of photographs on top.

When he looked up at the people standing in the room, he could see the shocked looks on the faces of at least two of them. Logan and Dean knew what he had, and Ash was pretty sure they knew what he was about to do.

"Do you remember a young pup named Sandra Benson? She was about seven years old. Her parents were Robert and Linda Benson."

Douglas stared at Ash for a moment then shrugged. "I suppose, but what does she have to do with this conversation?"

"Sandra went missing, remember? We never found her. Eventually, her parents moved to another clan when the memories here became too much for them." Ash handed over one of the photographs to Douglas. He wasn't in the least bit surprised when Douglas looked at the photo of the young girl for a moment then handed it back.

"So what?"

Ash pointed his finger at Douglas. "And that right there is why you shouldn't be the alpha of this clan. You could care less about the members of this clan. As alpha, our duty is to them, not to what our position brings us."

"Duty! Duty!" Douglas shouted. "You want to talk about duty? The alpha has a duty to continue the line, and you've brought home an abomination in the eyes of everything we believe in. He's not even a werewolf. He's human."

Ash growled, clenching his hands to keep from clawing at Douglas. He would like nothing better than to wipe the floor with the man, but that wouldn't get his point across to the rest of the clan.

"Sandra," Ash said as he tossed the photograph at Douglas. It hit the man in the chest then floated to the floor. "Eric, Barbara, Judie, Thomas, Erin, Carolyn, Robby..." With each name, Ash tossed another photo at Douglas until the floor was covered in pictures of children. "Each of these pups went missing from our clan while your father was in charge, and do you know why, Douglas?"

Douglas shook his head slowly, his eyes on the pictures littering the floor. Ash could see the eyes of most of the people in the room looking at the pictures. Their faces were covered in different variations of shock and surprise.

"When I challenged your father, I did it to save this clan, not because I wanted his position. And due to your mother, I ordered my reasons for the challenge be kept quite. I didn't want her, or you and Jenny, to suffer because of what your father did."

"I don't believe you," Douglas said. Ash had an inkling that Douglas already knew what he was going to say by the paleness of the man's face. "You're lying."

"No, Douglas, I'm not. I wish I were." Ash crossed back to his desk and grabbed another file before turning back to face Douglas. "These are financial accounts of the money your father earned selling these pups, affidavits from witnesses, and testimony from everyone involved. The Council of Elders has all of these records, so if you have any questions, talk to them. It's all there, every last dirty deed your father ever did."

Douglas was stalk still except for the shaking of his head. One of the men with him, however, stepped forward and held out his hand. Ash arched an eyebrow as he handed the file over to the man and watched him leaf through the information.

"Why were we never told of this?" the man asked as he looked up at Ash in horror. "We never would have—"

"Followed Douglas? Tried to kill my mate? Tried to kill me?"

"Alpha Asher, we didn't...I mean, we never really...we just wanted your mate to go away. Without your mate, you might have given up your position so Douglas could be the alpha. We didn't—"

"And kidnapping my pups?" Garret growled as he stepped forward. "How did that play into your plan?"

The man frowned and shook his head. "We never kidnapped anyone's pups. I swear. We just—"

"I did."

Ash whipped around to find Douglas kneeling on the floor, several photographs held in his hands. "You kidnapped Alpha Silvanus' pups?"

"I thought if we could scare your mate away or make it look like you kidnapped Alpha Silvanus' pups the Council of Elders would banish you." Douglas's eyes were filled with anguish as he looked up at Ash. "I've done the very thing my father died for, didn't I? I took someone's pups away from them."

"Yes, Douglas."

"I didn't know," Douglas whispered as he looked back down at the pictures in his hands. "I swear I didn't know."

"You were never supposed to know, Douglas. That's a burden I chose to take on so you could live your life free of your father's guilt. That's what an alpha does." Ash squatted down in front of Douglas. He still needed to clench his hands to keep from strangling the man. "An alpha doesn't instigate the other members of the clan until they attack someone. Matt was innocent in all of this. You had no business attacking him. And to use silver? What were you thinking?"

"We thought you would have already transformed your mate by the time you brought him home. The silver was just to—"

"To kill Darren?"

Douglas nodded. "We knew he was a veterinarian, and if one of the clan members was injured, he would most likely work on him. You did build that infirmary and the clinic for him. So, we figured if he worked on Matt, well..." Douglas shrugged.

"If you planned the silver thing then why did you poison him, Douglas? Surely you knew we would figure out what happened."

Ash reared back when Douglas suddenly jumped to his feet and raced out of the room before anyone could stop him. Ash wasn't about to let the man get away before answering every last damn question he had. He stood up and ran after Douglas. Ash could hear several men running behind him.

He started for the front door when he heard the sound of running feet above him. Ash changed directions and went up the stairs, adrenaline kicking in when he realized Douglas was headed for the room Darren was in.

Ash ran around the corner of the hallway just in time to see Douglas race past Reed's unmoving body. He almost stumbled to a stop when he saw the bleeding wound on Reed's head, but the sound of Darren crying out inside the bedroom took his attention.

"No, Mother, stop!"

Ash ran into the room just in time to see Douglas grab his mother's arm and start wrestling with her. A large, sharp knife waved wildly around in Aunt Sarah's hand as she shrieked and struggled to get away from her son.

Ash took in the scene in a split second. Darren was crouched at the headboard of the bed, the blankets clutched in his hands as he watched the fight between Douglas and Aunt Sarah. A broken tea cup lay on the blankets at his feet.

"Darren!" Ash shouted as he ran to protect his mate.

Darren's eyes widened, the relief in them almost overwhelming the fear, almost. He started toward Ash when the knife in Aunt Sarah's hand swung close to his face. Ash held his breath as Darren pressed himself back against the headboard.

"Stay there, Darren. Keep out of their way," Ash said as he tried to scoot past the mother and son, but they moved between him and Darren every time he got close. "Move to the side of the bed, run into the closet and hide."

"Closet, what closet?"

"The door to your left!"

Ash watched Darren glance at the door to his left then back to the fighting duo. Darren kept his eyes on Douglas and Aunt Sarah as he scooted to the edge of the bed. Just as he reached the floor, Aunt Sarah lunged at him.

Darren cried out as the knife ripped down his back but jumped to his feet and raced for the closet door. The last thing Ash saw of him as the door slammed closed was a trail of blood trickling down Darren's back.

The scent of Darren's blood combined with Ash's fear for his mate's life tore apart what little control he had left. He roared as he allowed his fear and anger take over, clothes ripping from his body.

Ash transformed into something not quite human and not quite wolf. Long sharp claws grew out of his fingertips. Canine teeth dropped down in his mouth. Fur covered the body that grew several feet taller and much thicker.

The growl that fell from Ash's mouth wasn't human by any means, but it froze the people running into the room where they stood. Each and every one of them knew it was the roar of a pissed off alpha, and not one of them wanted to be on the receiving end of Ash's anger.

Bent on protecting his mate and eliminating the threat to him, Ash started toward Douglas and his mother. He just reached the fray when Douglas suddenly cried out and clutched his stomach.

"M-Mother," he moaned right before he collapsed on the floor, blood pooling out from beneath him.

Ash took just a moment to look at the man before turning his attention toward the woman holding the knife. Aunt Sarah's eyes darted wildly around the room. Ash knew she was looking for Darren. He jumped over the bed and stood in front of the closet door, barring Aunt Sarah from reaching Darren.

"Asher, dear, why don't you go back downstairs and let me take care of this?"

Ash blinked, suddenly confused by the sweetness in Aunt Sarah's voice. For a woman that had just attacked and possibly killed her own son, she seemed a little too out of touch with the tension in the room.

"Put the knife down, Aunt Sarah."

"Don't be ridiculous, Asher. I need my knife. How else am I supposed to take care of your little friend?" Ash tilted his head

slightly to the side as he regarded the strange glint in his aunt's eyes. They seemed glossy and not quite focused. "This would have been so much easier if he had just drunk his tea like a good boy. I really didn't want it to come to this, Asher, but I must do what I must do."

"What must you do, Aunt Sarah?"

Aunt Sarah made a *tsking* sound as she shook her head. "Asher Stone, you know as well as I do you can never make my Jenny the alpha mate if your little friend is alive."

"Jenny!" Ash exclaimed. "What does Jenny have to do with this?"

"She wants to be the alpha mate, Asher. That means she has to mate with you." Aunt Sarah waved a hand dismissively when Ash's jaw dropped open. "Oh, I know, you thought Douglas was going to be the alpha, but how can he be when he just won't listen? Now Jenny, she's a good girl. She listens to her mother."

"Aunt Sarah—"

"I told Douglas his plan to kidnap those pups would never work, but he's just like his father, always thinking he knows what's best. It was just a crazy plan, I'm telling you." Aunt Sarah shook her head again. "No, it's just better if you mate with Jenny, and then our family will be back in the seat of power where it should be before you killed my husband."

"Aunt Sarah, I don't want to mate with Jenny. I don't love Jenny."

"Asher, you're such a dear boy, but you just don't understand how these things are done. Love has nothing to do with choosing a mate. You should know that, but I suppose with your little affliction for men, you never learned." Aunt Sarah shook a finger at Ash, the knife jerking around wildly around in her other hand. "You know, none of this would have been a problem if you had just left your young man where he was. I never would have had to take these extreme measures if you had listened to me as well."

"You've lost your mind," Ash whispered. Aunt Sarah always seemed like such a sweet woman. She was the main reason he never

let out what he knew about her husband. He didn't want the shame of it to affect her and her children.

Knowing Aunt Sarah was talking about killing Darren with a smile on her face like she talked about baking cookies sent a chill down Ash's spine. He knew she wasn't right in the head, but he wondered how long it had been that way. Had Aunt Sarah always been crazy, or was it a recent development?

"Aunt Sarah, I can't let you harm my mate."

"I have to do what I have to do, Asher, now stand out of my way like a good boy. I promise to make this as painless as possible, but it has to be done." Aunt Sarah suddenly cocked her head to one side. "It would be easier if he just drank the tea, Asher, less painful, and it wouldn't make such a mess. Maybe you can convince him to drink the tea."

"Did you put poison in the pasta, Aunt Sarah?"

"Well, of course I did, Asher. You hate pasta. I knew you wouldn't eat it, and I was only trying to take care of your friend, not you. I never would have harmed you, Asher. You're the alpha now. I know that."

Ash was nonplussed. He just didn't know quite what to say to his aunt. It was blaringly clear she was a complete loon. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Planning what, dear?"

"Planning to kill my mate!" Ash snapped.

"I suppose since I found out about him a few years ago. I knew either you or Douglas had to be the alpha, and it didn't take me long to figure out Douglas is just like his father." Aunt Sarah's hand suddenly started waving the knife around, almost as if she were stabbing at someone. "I just don't understand men that think it's okay to separate a mother from her child. Our pups are what make us strong. That's another reason why your little friend has to go, Asher. You can't make pups with my Jenny if he's around. Surely you understand that?"

"You knew what Uncle Robert was doing?"

"I knew, but I never approved of it. Of course, his status as the alpha of our clan and my husband made it impossible for me to do anything about it beyond that information I slipped to you. But you're a good boy. I knew you would handle it properly."

"You're the one that tipped me off?"

"Of course." Ash was shocked by the insulted look on his aunt's face. "How could I in all good conscience stand around while Robert took those poor children away from their mothers and sold them off?"

Until that moment, Ash had never known who slipped a small note under his door warning him about what his uncle was doing. He'd always wondered, but the forthcoming investigation and challenge, then leadership of the clan, had taken precedence.

Now he knew.

"Thank you for telling me, Aunt Sarah. What Uncle Robert was doing was wrong."

"Of course it was."

"But killing my mate is also wrong."

"He's not really your mate, Asher. He's a man, and you can't mate with a man. You need to mate with my Jenny, and then I will have my grandpups to care for. Jenny promised if I took care of your little friend and helped her become the alpha mate, she would insure she would let me care for the pups you two had."

"Jenny promised?" Ash suddenly wondered just how many of his family members were in on the plan to kill his mate.

"Oh, Jenny will be much too busy being the alpha mate to have time to care for the pups all of the time. What, with you taking over Alpha Silvanus' clan and our own clan, why, I imagine you will both be too busy. That leaves me to care for them."

"Alpha Silvanus's clan?" Ash's eyes narrowed, and he gave a slight shake of his head when he saw Garret take a step toward his aunt. "Why would I be taking over his clan?"

"Asher, you must have mud in your ears. Haven't you been listening to me? Men can't mate with men. It's wrong. It's an affront to our traditions. Once everyone realizes your brother mated with alpha Silvanus, he will be removed from his position. Since he also attacked you, I see no reason why the Council of Elders won't give you the clan to lead as compensation."

"He never attacked me."

"Of course he did. He thinks you took his pups. That's the only good thing that came out of Douglas's plan. Once Jenny talks to the Council of Elders and tells them what Alpha Silvanus did, they will remove him from his position and put you in his place. Then all we need to do is get rid of your little friend and mate you to Jenny, and then you can both start making the pups for me. Now, either get your friend to drink the tea or stand out of my way, Asher. I still need to arrange dinner for all of our guests."

Ash tensed when Aunt Sarah waved her knife at him. He started to crouch down in anticipation of having to fight his aunt as she advanced on him, but she suddenly stopped. Her face paled, a strange wailing sound falling from her lips.

"Aunt Sarah?"

The woman just gasped, the knife falling from her fingers. Ash's eyes widened as Aunt Sarah clutched at her chest and blood started dripping out between her fingers. She pulled her hands away from her chest and looked down at them for a moment. When she looked back up, horror and confusion filled her pale face before she dropped to the floor.

Ash stared at her prone figure for a second before slowly raising his eyes to see Douglas standing there, his mother's bleeding heart in his hand. The man looked broken. Tears streamed down his face as he stared down at his mother.

"I'm sorry, Asher. I didn't know about any of this." Douglas looked up at Ash. "I truly thought you challenged my father because you wanted his position. I didn't know that he...I just didn't know."

Strangely enough, Ash believed his cousin. He just didn't know what to do with him. Douglas had planned and orchestrated the kidnapping of another alpha's pups. That alone could be a death sentence. The fact Douglas had ultimately saved Darren's life by killing his own mother bought him only a small reprieve.

"Douglas, you know you still have to face the Council of Elders for what you've done."

"Yes, I understand." Douglas' lips pressed together for a moment, and then he leaned down and set his mother's heart beside her body. Ash saw Dean cross over to the bed and pull a blanket off then walk over to cover the woman's body.

"I understand why you did what you did, Douglas. You thought I killed your father and took his position unjustly. Maybe that was my fault. Maybe I should have discussed with you what your father did. I just didn't want his shame to become yours."

"And yet, it has." Douglas chuckled bitterly. "I've turned into my father."

"No, Douglas, you haven't. Yes, what you did was wrong, very wrong, but in the end, you saved a life. You saved my mate's life, and you saved me, and at a great cost to yourself. That means you are nothing like your father. That is the behavior of a true alpha."

"Thank you for that, at least." A sad little smile crossed Douglas's lips. "But I know now I never would have made a good alpha, so maybe it's good you challenged my father and won. I would have brought the clan nothing but grief."

Ash really wasn't used to this new and improved Douglas, so he wasn't sure what to say. Instead, he just nodded and didn't say anything. When Douglas stepped away from his mother's body, Ash still tensed, though, ready to fight if need be.

"I know I don't have the right after what I've done, but I would like to ask you for something, Alpha Stone."

Ash nodded.

"Please see to it my mother receives a proper burial. She may have done some horrible things, but she was still my mother." Douglas's shoulders rose a little bit as he sort of shrugged and exhaled at the same time. "I loved her."

"I'll see it's done, Douglas. You have my promise as the Alpha of Clan Gray Creek."

"Thank you." Douglas cast one more look at his mother then inhaled deeply. "Now, I suppose I will need someone to escort me to the Council of Elders. I expect my sister is already on her way there, so you might want to call ahead and warn them."

Ash's eyes widened. In all of the danger and chaos, he had completely forgotten about Jenny's involvement in everything. His need to go to his mate warred with his need to call the Council of Elders until Garret stepped forward and raised his hand, a cell phone held between his fingers.

"I've already contacted the Council of Elders and made them aware of the situation. They have taken Jenny into custody and are awaiting Douglas's arrival. I've also informed them of Douglas's part in the kidnapping of my pups as well as Ryan's, who is also being escorted to the Council for punishment."

"Did you tell them Douglas saved the life of my mate?"

"I told them. They said they would take that into consideration when deciding Douglas's punishment."

"Thank you."

Garret nodded and turned his attention to Douglas. "I do have one question for you before you leave, Douglas. Who were the men that took my pups? Were they the same ones that attacked Darren at his clinic?"

"Yes, Ryan arranged for the pups to be taken to a parking lot where I picked them up and delivered them to two men named Steven and Greg." Douglas frowned as if trying to remember something. "I believe they are former members of your clan."

"Yes, I believe they are. I exiled them after they started bullying several members of my clan."

"I hate to tell you this, man, but they don't like you very much. When Ryan suggested them for our plan, they were all too eager to agree."

"Do you know where they are now?"

"I have an idea," Douglas replied. "I will inform the council of everything I know. I swear."

Garret looked like he wanted to argue, and Ash couldn't blame him. He would have wanted to take the two men down himself, but he understood when Garret just nodded and stepped back, allowing Douglas to pass by him.

"Ash, can I come out now?"

"Shit! Darren!" Ash swung around and opened the door behind him, catching Darren before he fell to the floor. He gently cradled Darren's body to his, hugging him as tightly as he could without hurting his injured back.

"I'm really starting to not like it here, Ash," Darren whispered against Ash's chest. "When does it start getting better?"

Chapter 15

Darren knocked softly on Ash's study door then opened it and walked in. He shut the door behind him and leaned back against it, turning the lock as he gazed across the room at the man he hadn't seen in two days.

Ash was on the phone, a stack of papers in front of him. He looked busy, writing stuff down as he spoke to someone. Darren just hoped he wasn't too busy. He had plans for the man, and they didn't involve a phone conversation or a stack of paperwork. They did involve Ash's desk, however.

Darren couldn't help grinning to himself as he thought about just what exactly he had planned for Ash's desk. When Ash looked up then gestured for him to come closer, Darren happily walked across the room to sit on the edge of Ash's desk.

While he waited for Ash to finish his conversation, Darren grew bored. He started fiddling with the container of pens, pulling them out and dropping them back into the cup. He jumped and pulled his hand back when Ash smacked at him.

"Knock it off," Ash sent to him. "I have to take this phone call. It's very important."

Darren sighed deeply and folded his hand in his lap, trying not to be too distracting while he waited. It was hard. He wanted Ash's attention. He felt like it had been weeks since he'd seen the man instead of just a couple of days. Darren hated it when Ash had to go away to deal with clan business. He much preferred Ash do it by phone...except for now.

With all of Ash's trips back and forth between home and the Council of Elders, they hadn't seen much of each other over the last few weeks. Add in the time it took Darren to pack up his apartment and clinic and move everything here and what time they did have together was less and less.

Still, Darren was excited about the new clinic, which was top of the line and more than Darren could have ever hoped for. He'd had no problem selling his old clinic to a friend from college and only felt slightly bad about leaving all of his clients.

His list of new clients was growing every day although Darren was beginning to wonder if they needed to bring in a physician to work with the clan members when they were in human form. It was something that would have to be discussed with Ash and probably the Council of Elders.

Darren let out a sigh of relief when Ash finally hung up the phone. He wasn't sure how much longer he could sit there without getting into more trouble. The moment Ash sat back in his chair, Darren jumped off the desk and ran around to the other side. He swung a leg over Ash and sat down on his lap.

"Hi, stranger," he said as he looped his arms around Ash's neck.

"Hello, love." Ash grinned. "Have you been good while I was gone?"

"Did Anna tattle on me again?"

"Should she have?"

"No." Darren stuck out his lower lip. "Well, maybe. I only invaded the kitchen once while you were gone, and it was the middle of the night. I was hungry, and I knew there were leftovers in the fridge."

Ash's eyebrow arched again. "You know Anna doesn't like anyone to be in her kitchen, not after what happened with Aunt Sarah. She sees it as her duty to personally oversee everything we eat."

"I don't mind Anna cooking for us, but the woman has no concept of munchy foods. I doubt there is a single snack item in her kitchen. That's just wrong, man."

"So maybe we should buy a small locking fridge for the bedroom. You know, one of those college dorm room fridges. We could hide it in the closet or the bathroom cupboard where Anna won't find it and fill it with munchies."

Darren chuckled. "She'd find it."

"Yeah, you're probably right, love, but have you ever thought of asking her to stock munchies in the kitchen? Maybe we could arrange to have a locked cupboard only you and Anna had the key to. That would be a good compromise."

"Maybe." Darren bounced a little on Ash's lap. He could feel Ash start to harden beneath him and grinned. That was exactly what he wanted. "So, did you miss me?"

"I always miss you when I'm away."

"Then maybe you shouldn't go away."

"And maybe you should just go with me when I go next time. It is the duty of the alpha mate to attend certain functions with the alpha, you know? I had a lot of people ask me about you this trip around. They all want to meet you."

"Me?" Darren squeaked. "Why would they want to meet me?"

"Because you're my mate? Because I couldn't stop talking about you? Because everyone who has met you sings your praises? Because the Council of Elders is very interested in meeting a veterinarian that has worked on werewolves?"

Darren felt his face flush and quickly buried it in Ash's neck, the deep chuckle the man let loose shaking his chest. He groaned as Ash's hands stroked down his back to cup his ass cheeks through his slacks.

"It's been two days, Ash," Darren murmured as he nuzzled the soft skin beneath Ash's ear. He gloried in the small shudder that racked Ash's body when he licked the same patch of skin with his tongue.

"An eternity, to be sure," Ash panted.

"Forever."

"I suppose we should do something about that, huh?"

Darren shuddered himself when Ash gripped his ass and pulled him closer. The hardness growing against the apex of his thighs was getting harder. Darren never had any idea when he found out about Ash that he would come to crave the man's touch as much as he did, but he ached for the man.

Darren leaned back and started unbuttoning his shirt. He delighted in the flames of desire he could see igniting in Ash's eyes as more and more skin was revealed. By the time Darren had his shirt off and slid it down his arms, Ash was breathing heavily.

"So, I was thinking..."

Ash lifted his eyes from Darren's naked chest and looked across to Darren, arching an eyebrow. "That could be dangerous."

"Funny!" Darren tossed his shirt over Ash's shoulder, not really caring where it landed. "As I was saying, I was thinking about that special bite of yours, the one that can transform me into a werewolf like you."

Ash's eyes widened, his lips parting a little. "And?"

Darren could tell from the hopeful expression on Ash's face his answer was important to the man. Darren had given the werewolf bite a lot of thought over the last month. He'd considered all of his options.

What Darren discovered was he didn't want any choice that didn't involve Ash. He knew he could stay with Ash for the rest of his life and remain fully human. Ash would never force the decision on him.

Darren also knew there would be a part of Ash's life he would never be a part of if he didn't accept the bite. As much as the prospect of becoming a werewolf scared him, the thought of not sharing everything with Ash scared him more.

"I want to share everything with you, so I guess when we fool around, you should bite me." Darren chuckled as he trailed his hand

down Ash's collarbone to the edge of his shirt. "I'm thinking getting the bite during sex is the best way to go."

Ash barely made a sound, just a sharp inhale of his breath, but the quick rise and fall of his chest and the tears that glittered in his baby blue eyes spoke volumes. Darren knew he'd made the right decision.

"Are you sure, love? We can still be together even if you don't change. That's not a requirement."

"I know," Darren said as he smoothed back the hair along Ash's cheekbone. "I've given this a lot of thought, and I've decided I want to experience everything with you, even turning furry and running under the full moon."

"I can wait if you need more time to think about it, Dary. We can just go on as we have been until you know for sure. I don't want to pressure you into anything."

"You're not. You've been very patient with me. I haven't felt pressured at all." Darren gently gripped the side of Ash's jaw and leaned in to give him a small kiss. "I just realize I love you and if—"

"You love me?" Ash whispered, looking more astonished than he did when Darren said he wanted the transformation bite. Darren could understand the man's shock. He'd held off saying anything about his feelings until he was absolutely sure. He was.

"Yeah, Ash, I love you. I'm pretty sure I always have. I was just too confused to know it. But I'm not confused anymore."

"You still love me even after I let you think you were crazy for ten years and all that shit with my family?"

"Well." Darren grinned." I still might make you pay a little for those ten years you let me think I was off my rocker, but most of that shit with your family was taken care of by the Council of Elders, so I can't hold that against you. But that has nothing to do with how I feel about you."

"Yeah?"

Ash looked so hopeful Darren couldn't help but feel his heart pound a little faster for the man. Darren grinned and reached for the

buttons on Ash's shirt with trembling fingers. He was determined to get them both naked and busy on the flat surface behind him in the next five minutes.

He was also ready to become whatever Ash needed him to be. He was ready to fulfill his role as the alpha mate, and he was ready to do it right now, preferably bent over Ash's desk with the man's body claiming his.

"Yeah. You're my heart song, Asher Stone."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul Mates, true love, and happy endings.

Stormy lives in the great Northwest region of the USA, with her gorgeous husband and soul Mate, six very active teenagers, two boxer/collie puppies, one old biddy cats, and three fish.

You can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand and a puppy in her lap, or on her laptop, creating the next sexy man for one of her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com.

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