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REDEMPTION

Stormy Glenn

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ManLove
Collection

True Blood Mate 4

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Redemption

Rogan Owens lives a life of secret misery. Three years ago, he lost his mate, who couldn't come out of the closet and acknowledge their bond. He's suffered in silence ever since, taking over as alpha of his mate's clan.

Rogan is overjoyed when he discovers Julian alive. He has so many questions. Where has Julian been? What are the long scars on his body? Most importantly, why is Julian running away from him?

Rogan finally comes to accept that his mate will never want him, only to have Julian decide it's time to come home.

But someone else doesn't want Julian and Rogan reunited, even if it means Julian's death for real this time. Between keeping each other safe and trying to solve the mystery of who wants Julian dead, they barely have time to learn to love each other. Will what they feel for each other make them stronger or be their downfall?

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

Length: 40,510 words

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**EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE**



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Gian Amor, the winner of my Romantic Hero/Heroine contest. I hope you enjoy your story. It was a blast working with you. You have a great imagination. We might have to try this again some time.

—Stormy

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True Blood Mate 4

STORMY GLENN

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Prologue

“I’m innocent!” he raged. “You can’t punish me without evidence.”

“We have all of the evidence we need, Julian Gallagher,” Elder Belikov replied, shaking his head as if displeased by Julian’s protest. “You have been found guilty of one of the worst crimes a clan member can commit, the crime of betrayal.”

“I didn’t betray anyone!” Julian shouted.

“The evidence says otherwise.”

“The evidence is wrong. I am innocent of the charges brought against me. I would never do anything that brought harm to my clan, no matter what the evidence says.” Julian had to make these men see reason. He didn’t betray his clan. He would never betray his clan. “If you’d just listen to me—”

“Enough!” Elder Belikov shouted as he held up his hand.

Julian felt the ominous silence that fell over the small area like a lead weight around his neck. He glanced from one man to the next until he had looked into the faces of all five and knew he was doomed. They weren’t ready to listen to reason.

“This is wrong!” Julian shouted. He could see another man pull something from the fire pit and walk toward him. He started to struggle between the two large council enforcers that held him.

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you betrayed your clan, Julian.”

“I didn’t betray my clan.”

“That is not the decision of this council.

“Council?” Julian sneered. “This isn’t a council, it’s a joke.”

Julian grunted as Elder Belikov stepped forward and backhanded him across the face. He licked at the trail of blood the dribble from his split lip and looked up to glare at the man. “Like I said, a joke.”

“You, Julian Gallagher, have been found guilty by this council. You will be taken from this place, stripped of your position as Alpha of your clan, punished as befitting your crime and status.”

“Punished?” Julian’s struggles stopped as he swallowed hard. “Don’t you mean attacked?”

“It is the decision of this council that you be punished, Julian Gallagher. You’re name will be stricken from all recorded records. No clan will accept you into their midst or acknowledge your existence from this day forward.”

“You can’t do this,” Julian whispered. “I have a mate. What’s to become of him?”

The frown that covered the man’s face sent a chill of foreboding down Julian’s spine. He wasn’t going to like what the elder had to say, and he knew it.

“Where is this mate, Julian?” the elder asked as he waved his hand around the small area. “Why does he not stand by your side to defend you?”

Julian didn’t have an answer for that. He knew his mate was deep in the closet and having a hard time coming to terms with their mating. But they were mates, destined to be together. Rogan should have been here.

“What is the name of this supposed mate?”

Julian pressed his lips firmly together. If he was to be punished and banished, he refused to drag his mate down with him. Rogan was everything in the world to him, more precious to him than even the clan he governed. He would no more betray his mate than he would betray his clan.

“That’s what I thought,” the man said after several minutes of silence. “No clan member would leave his mate to face the council all alone. As the mate you say you have is not standing here, then I can only assume he does not exist, or he believes you to be as guilty as we do.”

Julian inhaled sharply and struggled to back away when the man from the fire held out a small metal bowl to Elder Belikov. The liquid inside splashed around, and Julian got his first good look at the torture he was about to endure.

“This is wrong,” Julian cried out desperately. “I can’t be found guilty without a trial.”

“You lost your right to a trial when you betrayed your clan.”

“I didn’t betray my clan!” Julian shouted, but his words seemed to fall on deaf ears. The men holding his arms forced him down to his knees. Julian grunted when someone grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked his head back.

“Julian Gallagher, you have been found guilty of the crime of betrayal.” Elder Belikov spoke the formal words of the council, but Julian knew he was just doing it for the men surrounding them. Elder Belikov never cared a wit about the rules of the council. He cared about power, his power.

“The council will punish you for this.”

“Dear boy.” Elder Belikov chuckled. “I am the council.”

Julian felt the first cut before Elder Belikov’s words had even left his ears. He jerked and tried to pull away, refusing to utter a sound. He wouldn’t give Elder Belikov the satisfaction of hearing him beg. As the second and then the third cuts were made across his skin,

Julian wondered how long he could keep that promise to himself, especially when he saw the evil grin on Elder Belikov's face.

Julian's eyes widened when the bowl of liquid silver was brought closer to him. He felt true fear for the first time since he had been kidnapped from his bed in the middle of the night. Shifters didn't heal from silver.

White-hot agony filled Julian as liquid silver was poured over the cuts made in his skin moments before. He gritted his teeth and stiffened, trying to ride out the pain. But the agony continued, growing worse with each passing moment. The kicks and punches added to his torture between cuts only increased his pain.

Julian's mind began to wander as one ache melted into another. He didn't understand why he had been picked by Elder Belikov to be tortured, and he'd never have a chance to ask. Julian doubted he'd survive his injuries.

Julian was saddened by that knowledge. He'd never get to see his mate again, to hold the man in his arms or feel his sweet kiss. He'd never get to convince his mate to come out of the closet and live side by side with him.

Julian could only hope that Elder Belikov never learned the name of his mate. Julian had no doubt that the elder was evil enough to go after him. As much as he regretted it, Julian could die happy knowing his mate was safe.

Julian looked up through glossy eyes when he heard Elder Belikov's low laugh. The man really was just too happy. He had a right to be. There wasn't an inch of Julian's body that didn't scream in agony.

"You will pay for this, Belikov," Julian whispered.

"You might be right, dear boy, but not before your mate does." Belikov chuckled then leaned in close to Julian's ear. "Rogan, isn't that his name?" he whispered.

Julian roared in fury, the pain in his body suddenly forgotten as he realized that Elder Belikov had been playing with him the entire time. The elder knew exactly who Julian's mate was.

Where his sudden strength came from, Julian had no idea. And he didn't care. He was just grateful it gave him the ability to pull away from the men holding him on his knees and stagger to his feet. Julian ripped the bowl of liquid silver away from the man holding it and tossed it right back into his face.

He heard the man sputter as he screamed. He ignored the pain that came from the drops of silver spraying across his neck and chest, turning his attention to Elder Belikov. The man was slowly backing away, the fear in his eyes shining brightly in the firelight.

"You will die before you ever touch a hair on my mate's head," Julian growled.

"You first!"

Elder Belikov tossed something onto the fire, and it exploded, sending flames leaping into the night sky. The force of the explosion pushed Julian back. He fell back to the ground, unable to keep his screams to himself as his body caught fire and burned.

He rolled from side to side until the flames were out. The ache in his body made it hard to breathe, to think. Julian knew he needed to do something, but he was having a hard time remembering what that was exactly.

He stared up at the dark night and watched a star shoot across the sky. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to do anything. Even the pulse beating in his neck caused him pain. Julian just wanted to lie there and wait to die.

"Hey, man, are you okay?"

Julian saw a man lean over him and tensed, waiting for more pain to add to the agony already racing through his body.

"I saw the explosion from the road," the man said as he pulled his coat off and laid it gently over Julian. "You just lay there and don't move. I'm calling for an ambulance."

“N-no ambulance,” Julian whispered. The last thing he needed was to be taken to a human doctor or hospital. He’d end up on some slab in a government laboratory as a science experiment.

“Son, you’re hurt bad. You really need a doctor.”

“Please.”

“I don’t know if I can fix this.” The man looked Julian up and down, grimacing. “I’m not a doctor.”

“Please.”

The man sighed deeply. “Okay, but once this is all over, you’re going to tell me what in the hell is going on. This wasn’t some simple explosion. I saw people running off right before I found you.”

“Ju—just need help.”

“Let’s get you to my car.”

“Thank you, uh...”

“Thomas, Thomas Miller.” The older man grinned. “I’d say it was nice to meet you but under the circumstances...”

Julian gritted his teeth as he held out his hand. “Julian Gallagher.”

Chapter 1

Three years later...

“The retrofitting should only take a couple of months. I have my best crew working on it. But before we can get to that, we have to shore up the foundation and outer bricks. This was a pretty old building.”

Rogan Owens smiled across the table at Thomas Miller, the architect he hired to refit an old state asylum he’d purchased and turn it into a functioning community and living center. “I understand, but time is of the essence. I have people ready to move into this building the moment it’s finished.”

“This is a pretty big undertaking, Mr. Owens, I hope you understand that. The old asylum hasn’t even been used in fifty years. The place was built over a hundred years ago. It’s going to take some time to insure it’s safe before we can even begin to convert it to fit your needs.”

“Please, call me Rogan.”

“And I’m Thomas.”

“Thomas, I hope you understand the need for expediency here. The Gallagher Center is my most important project to date. The first in several I hope to eventually open throughout the country.”

Rogan folded his hands together and rested them on the table as he tried to decide how much information to tell the architect. Not everyone approved of Rogan’s vision of a center where young gay men could find counseling, health care, and a safe place to live until they were on their feet.

It didn't help that he absolutely could not tell Thomas that the young gay men Rogan had in mind were also shifters. That was one secret he could never divulge, at least not to anyone he didn't know and trust explicitly.

"I do understand, and like I said, I have my best crew on the job. If my foreman can't get the job done, no one can."

"He has experience doing this type of thing?"

"David has been building things for years." Thomas chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "The man has the touch. He can turn a pile of bricks and barbed wire into a three-bedroom condo in a week. I have every confidence David can have your asylum safety checked, shored up, and retrofitted in the time we specified."

"Good, good." Rogan nodded absently. "And he understands the special requirements I need for this building?"

Thomas rifled through the stack of papers on the table in front of him for a moment then pulled one out and spread it over the table. "You're referring to the rooms in the basement you want reinforced?"

Rogan nodded and stood to his feet. He looked down at the blueprints Thomas had spread out on the table trying to read them. Finally, he shook his head and chuckled. "I can't read a thing on these. It just looks like a bunch of blue lines to me."

Thomas smiled. "It takes a little know how and a ton of obsession to learn to read blueprints. You really have to like it, or your brain will explode." Thomas pointed to a small section on the paper. "This is what you're looking for right here."

Rogan looked but again, it just seemed like a lot of blue lines to him. "And this shows what I need done?"

Thomas nodded. "The walls will be reinforced with concrete and steel rebar. The door will be three inches thick with solid steel bars inside. And the window will be removed and covered with a wall. It will basically be a cell."

Rogan could hear the confusion in Thomas's voice tinged with a bit of animosity. He knew the man didn't understand the need for a

cell in a community center and residential facility, and he never truly would.

Rogan couldn't tell Thomas it was in case one of the young shifters became feral and dangerous. He could tell him something else, however, something that would make more sense to a human.

"This facility is a drug free zone, and we get a lot of young men coming off drugs. We need some place where they can safely detox before they start our counseling program. Being strung out won't help them get ahead or make their transition into adult life a very successful one. We will also have residents that need to know they are safe. With these rooms, we can help the young men come off the drugs and keep the others safe."

"Is a locked cell the best place for them?" Thomas asked. "Wouldn't they be better served being in a hospital or something?"

"For many people, that's a good option, but not everyone can afford a hospital stay or feels safe in that type of environment. We cater to mostly young men that have been driven away from their families because they are gay and have no other place to go."

"That makes sense, I suppose."

"Many treatment facilities are faith based, and many faiths do not accept homosexuality. These young men need a place to get cleaned where being gay isn't treated like a disease. It's hard enough to get off the drugs. It's even harder when you're being told that what you feel is wrong or sinful."

And Rogan knew all about that. He'd been told by his family for years that being gay was wrong. He had even started to believe it himself until he met Julian Gallagher and learned that what he felt wasn't wrong. In fact, it was very right.

Rogan would always regret that he hadn't figured that out in time to save Julian or tell the man how much he was loved. Rogan pressed his lips together and glanced away from Thomas before the man saw the sorrow Rogan tried so hard to hide from everyone.

Sometimes he was successful and no one knew of the second-by-second anguish Rogan suffered. Other times, Rogan couldn't keep his despair locked inside. On those times when thoughts of Julian became too much to handle, Rogan usually hid away in his study and drank himself into a stupor or went for a long run in the woods by himself.

"About this sculpture you want placed in the entrance, do you have a particular artist in mind to craft it or—"

"I'll be making it myself," Rogan said as he turned back to face Thomas and sat down. "Metalwork is a hobby of mine. The sculpture is almost done now."

Rogan reached into his leather briefcase and pulled out the drawing he'd done of the sculpture, handing it to Thomas. "This is what it will look like when it's completed."

"Very nice." Thomas smiled as he pointed to the words etched in the artwork. "And these words here? I assume they have some strong meaning for the facility?"

"*With Responsibility Comes Freedom, With Freedom Comes Responsibility*," Rogan repeated the phrase drawn on the paper as he nodded. "I learned the hard way that freedom comes at a price and that price is responsibility for our actions."

"I've always believed that to be true."

"Well, I didn't learn that until it was too late, and I lost someone very close to me because of my foolishness. I learned to accept who I am and earned my freedom, but the cost was too high."

"That's why you're opening this facility?"

"I don't want anyone else going through what I did. If I can offer these young men a safe place to be who they are, a place that has no judgment on who they care for, then maybe I can save someone from making the same mistakes I did."

"A lofty goal."

Rogan chuckled and rubbed his chin. "Yeah, well, it's the least I can do to honor Julian's memory. He deserved a lot better than me."

"Julian?"

“Julian Gallagher, my partner.” Rogan smiled as he pictured Julian’s face in his mind. “He died because of my foolish actions, or inactions to be more precise. I was too afraid of what everyone would say to come out of the closet. Because of that, I wasn’t there when Julian needed me the most, and he died. It’s something I will have to live with for the rest of my life.”

“I assume that means you’re out of the closet now?”

“And then some.” Rogan laughed. He was unsure of why he was telling a virtual stranger his life history, but something about the man felt like he could be trusted. “After Julian died, hiding in the closet didn’t seem to matter anymore.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Surely you’re not interested in hearing my sad tale,” Rogan scoffed. “I’ve probably bored you to death already.”

“No please, I want to hear it. I have a friend that was in a situation similar to yours, but I’m not sure he came out of it as well as you have. Maybe, if I hear your story, I can give him some hope.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Thomas said.

“Stop me when you get bored.”

“I don’t imagine I will.”

Rogan thought Thomas might be a little on the odd side, but the man was brilliant when it came to retrofitting buildings, the best in the industry. If he wanted to hear Rogan’s sad tale, Rogan would tell him.

“Julian was beautiful,” Rogan started. “His smile would light up a room, and he had one for every person he met. He’d step into a room, and there’d be dead silence because everyone was stunned at how handsome he was. But he was more than a pretty face. He was beautiful on the inside, too.”

“Sounds like quite the catch.”

“Oh, he was. I was just too stupid to see it before it was too late. He offered me the world, and I wanted to keep it a secret because I was afraid of what everyone would say, how they would treat us.”

Rogan clenched his hands then quickly dropped them to his lap, hiding his agitation from Thomas. "I think if he had lived, we might have been able to work things out. I might have even come out of the closet all of the way. We just weren't given enough time together."

"You mentioned that he died. Do you mind my asking what happened?"

"I've never really known all the details, just what I've been able to piece together." Rogan looked across to Thomas, wanting the man to see that he told the truth. "You have to understand, I was still hiding who I was and what I felt. No one knew I was gay except me and Julian."

"So what happened?"

"My parents sent me on a date with the daughter of a friend of theirs. I couldn't say no, or everyone would want to know why."

"And you couldn't have that?"

"No, so I went on the date. I knew my parents wanted a match between us, but I hoped they would lay off if I went out with her, at least until I could figure out how to let her down easy. It was stupid, but I thought it was the only thing I could do. I didn't learn until I got back that Julian had been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?" Thomas exclaimed.

Rogan nodded. "Someone took him right out of his own bed."

"Did they catch whoever did it?"

"No, but I think I know who did it. I just haven't been able to prove it. I will one day, and then they will pay for what they did to Julian." Rogan clenched his fists again under the table as he tried to control his anger. "They tortured Julian, burned him alive."

"My god!"

"All I ever found were his ashes and this." Rogan held up his wrist and pulled back the cuff of his shirt, showing the braided gold bracelet around his wrist. "This was Julian's. He never took it off. I found it where they killed him."

"There was no body?"

Rogan grimaced. “No, there were signs of a struggle and blood everywhere, but all I could find were ashes.”

“Are you sure he died then? Couldn’t he have gotten away?”

Rogan smiled, his heart feeling heavy. “No, if Julian had lived, he would have found some way to come back to me. He loved me.” Rogan swallowed hard, the lump of tears forming in his throat making it hard to talk. “Maybe almost as much as I loved him.”

“So, do you think they killed him because he was gay?” Thomas asked after a moment of silence filled the room.

“I don’t know, maybe. Julian was a pretty important person where we came from, the head of his family, and it is a very large family. A lot of people looked to him for guidance. Leadership seemed to come easily to Julian. I think a lot of other people were jealous of that.”

“What about his family? Did they know he was gay?”

“Oh yeah.” Rogan chuckled. “Julian never hid that from anyone, not like I did. He was proud of who he was and refused to let anyone demean him for how he felt.”

“You seem to be pretty proud of that now.”

“I learned it from Julian. Even if he can’t see it, coming out of the closet was the least I could do to make up for the mistakes I made when Julian was alive. And maybe, someday, he’ll forgive me.”

“You may have made some mistakes, Rogan, but from what you tell me, you weren’t responsible for what happened to Julian. I don’t think there is anything to forgive.”

“If I had been true to my feelings for Julian, instead of trying to live a lie, I would have been with him that night. I would have been able to save him.” Rogan clenched his fists again. He’d had this argument before with other people, and he knew he was right. Julian died because he had been too stupid to love the man openly.

“You didn’t kill him, Rogan.”

“I might as well have. Julian died...” Rogan closed his eyes for a moment as tears threatened to spill from his eyes. He drew in a deep breath then opened his eyes again. “Julian died alone never knowing

how much I loved him. He died thinking I was ashamed of him. He didn't deserve that."

"It sounds to me, son, like you need to rethink what happened and forgive yourself. You have no control over the actions of others, only yourself." Thomas pointed to the drawing of the sculpture sitting on the table. "Isn't that what this means?"

Rogan thought that Thomas was a pretty intelligent man, but he didn't understand the life that Rogan lived. Thomas didn't understand how much Rogan had betrayed Julian, and Rogan couldn't explain it to him. Thomas was human.

"I suppose that's something to think about," Rogan said as he stood. He reached down and grabbed the drawing and placed it back in his briefcase. "Thank you for listening to my tale. I hope now you understand why the Gallagher Center is so important to me."

Thomas stood also, holding out his hand. "You should come down to the construction site one of these days, take a look at what my crew has done so far and what we have left to complete. I think you'll be impressed. My crew is very good."

Rogan shook Thomas's hand. "I'd like that."

"Why don't you give me a call next week, and I can make arrangements for my foreman to show you around?"

"I'll do that."

Rogan grabbed his briefcase and headed for the door as quickly as he could without looking like he was in a hurry. He liked Thomas Miller, but at the moment, he wanted to be alone. Thoughts of Julian always made him depressed.

The three years since Julian's death had seen many changes in Rogan's life, some good, some not so good. Rogan just wished Julian had been there to see them all happen. He would have laughed himself silly.

The one thing that had changed in Rogan's life that he felt Julian would be most proud of was that Rogan had come out of the closet. If the man had been standing before him today in a crowd full of people,

Rogan would have shouted his love for everyone to hear. Rogan just wished he had been that brave when Julian was alive.

That might be Rogan's biggest regret. Julian died not knowing how much Rogan loved him. But Rogan hadn't known how much he loved Julian until after the man had died. And by then it was too late.

When Rogan learned of Julian's kidnapping and death, he had gone into a rage that people were still talking about today. Anywhere that Rogan went, shifters gave him a wide berth, doing everything in their power not to piss him off in case it happened again.

Rogan was pretty sure he had gone a little insane there for a while. His grief, while tempered by time, still filled him with a need for revenge. But Rogan had learned a lot from Julian, even if he hadn't known it at the time. He would bide his time until he could prove who killed his mate, and then he would do to them what they did to Julian.

Rogan reached up and brushed his hand over the back of his neck, feeling the tension in the bunched muscles there. Even knowing Julian was dead and long gone from this world, Rogan still felt a connection to his mate. He just bemoaned the fact that he had never allowed Julian to fully claim him. He'd been too scared at the time.

Rogan's family had been upset when they learned he was gay. They had been horrified when they learned he was mated to a man. His father had demanded that Rogan stop making trouble and marry a woman of their choosing. Rogan refused. He would never deny his mate again, even if his mate was dead.

That refusal gained Rogan two things, he lost the family that disapproved of him but gained another one when he moved in with Julian's clan. Most of the members of the clan accepted Rogan's right to be there as Julian's mate. The few that didn't accept him had moved to new clans.

Without Julian to lead his clan, they had looked to Rogan as the alpha-mate. He'd been unsure and frightened at the prospect at first, but in the time since he had taken over, Rogan had learned why Julian loved it so much.

A shifter clan was like a large extended family. Every birth was celebrated, every death mourned. Rogan's need to protect the clan and see to their welfare had not only gained him new clan members but strengthened his clan until it was one of the strongest in the region.

No one was turned away due to sexual preference, former clan association, or being mated to a human. Everyone was accepted as long as they followed the rules set down by Julian before he died, Rogan presently, and those governing them by the Council of Elders.

Rogan rather thought Julian would be proud of what he had done with the clan since the man passed away. He had wanted to make Julian proud of him, too, and in some way make up for the mistakes he made even though it would never be enough. Nothing he could do would ever be enough for letting Julian die.

Rogan shook his head, trying to get rid of his morose thoughts. They never did him any good other than send him into a depression. The last one had been just under a year ago on the anniversary of Julian's death. Rogan had been drunk for a week. He was hoping he would be able to handle this year's anniversary a little better.

Gallagher Center had given Rogan something else to think about other than Julian's death. It had given him a renewed vigor and a reason to get out of bed each morning. Rogan knew he was a little obsessed with building the place, but lately it seemed to be all he could think about. He wanted it to be perfect.

Rogan was just pushing open the door of the architect firm when his cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and hit the receive button as he walked through the door and onto the sidewalk.

"This is Rogan."

"Hey, Rogan, it's Asher Stone," the voice replied. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Certainly, what's up?"

"I was hoping you could do me a little favor."

"Anything," Rogan replied automatically. He couldn't think of anything he wouldn't do for Alpha Asher Stone. The man was a

legend among their kind. Many thought him so for his work to get the laws changed concerning gay mates. Many also thought him an abomination for the very same work. Rogan thought the man was a hero.

“Don’t say that until you hear what I have to say.” Asher chuckled.

“So, what’s this favor?” Rogan asked as he opened his car door and tossed his briefcase inside.

“Well, you know that my mate, Darren, is a veterinarian, right?”

“Yeah.” Rogan tensed as he started to get a funny feeling, like he was being watched.

“This litter of pups came in last night and...”

Asher’s words faded away as Rogan tried to casually glance around. If someone was watching him, he didn’t want them to know he knew he was being watched. At first, he didn’t see anything out of place. People came and went, no one paying him any more attention than was normal.

As Rogan looked toward the building he had just come out of, he suddenly felt like he couldn’t breathe, like all of the useable air had been sucked from his lungs. The cell phone dropped from Rogan’s fingers as he took a step closer to the building.

A tall man with shoulder-length brown hair stood staring at him from the doorway of the building. Normally, Rogan would have appreciated the man’s toned and muscular body and moved on. He hadn’t been more than visually attracted to another man since he met Julian.

What caught Rogan’s interest and made his heart thunder in his chest were the deep steel-blue eyes staring back at him. In all of his years, Rogan had never seen anyone that had blue eyes like Julian, not until now.

“Julian?” he whispered as he took another step closer to them man that looked so like his Julian. The face was slightly different, the

man's body more filled out, more muscular. But Rogan didn't think two people on the same planet could have eyes like Julian's.

"Julian?" he said a little louder.

The man seemed to be frozen, just staring at him. Not a muscle moved, not even a hair. He just stared intently with those deep steel-blue eyes. Rogan started to move toward the man when the sound of a horn blaring made him jump and swing around. A car sat just inches from him, the man behind the wheel shaking his fist.

Rogan flushed when he realized he stood in the middle of the road, his car door open and blocking traffic. He quickly closed the door then bent down to grab his cell phone off the ground. When he stood up, he turned and started toward the man once again.

Rogan's heart fell when all he found was an empty spot where the man had stood just a second before. He raced to the door, intent on finding him. He looked everywhere, but when he couldn't spot the man on the sidewalk, he figured he might have gone into the building.

Rogan opened the door and hurried inside. He couldn't see anyone except for the receptionist behind the welcome counter. Rogan quickly crossed the entry and waited for her to acknowledge him.

"Can I help you?"

"A man just came in here, brown hair, blue eyes..."

"Oh." The woman smiled. "You mean Mr. Miller."

"Miller?" Rogan's heart sank even further.

"David Miller," she said. "He's the son of the owner."

"Are you sure his name is David Miller?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Miller has been working here since long before I was hired. He's the *son* in Miller and Son Architectural Firm." The woman grinned. "I'd know him anywhere."

"Oh, okay, thank you." Rogan felt like shouting in frustration and disappointment. He knew it couldn't have been Julian. Julian was dead. But for a moment, for a very brief moment, he thought it might have been Julian, and his heart had sung with joy.

"Can I give him a message?"

“No, thank you.” Rogan turned away from the receptionist and started back for his car. His feet felt like they were tied to lead weights with each step he took. It was all he could do to keep walking.

Rogan climbed into his car and shut the door. He grabbed the steering wheel and rested his head on his trembling hands. It took several moments and several deep breathes before he could pull himself together enough to turn on the car.

As he did, his cell phone rang, and Rogan suddenly remembered he had been having a conversation with Alpha Stone when he’d spotted the man that looked so much like Julian. Rogan grimaced and flipped his phone open, hoping Asher wouldn’t be pissed.

“Asher, sorry about that man, I dropped my phone under the car and couldn’t get it out.”

“Oh, well, no problem. When did you lose me?”

“You were saying something about your mate being a veterinarian.”

“Oh, right, so you know that my mate, Darren, is a veterinarian, right? Well, this litter of pups came in last night and...”

Rogan sighed. He knew where this conversation was headed and he knew, after hanging up on the guy, he wouldn’t be able to say no. It looked like he had just inherited a new dog. Maybe he’d name it Julian.

“Just tell me about the pups and where I need to pick one up.”

Chapter 2

Julian watched from the second floor window as Rogan drove away. His heart felt frozen in his chest, unable to move, unable to pump blood to his brain. He couldn't seem to grab on to any one thought other than that he had just seen his mate.

"Why didn't you tell me that Rogan Owens hired us?" he asked after a few moments.

"You never asked."

Julian swung around to glare at his adoptive father, Thomas Miller, the man that had saved him the night he'd been attacked. "You know who he is, what he is. Why didn't you tell him no?"

"I wanted to meet him," Thomas said simply.

"Are you insane?" Julian snapped. "What if he discovers I'm here?"

"What if he does? Would that be so bad?"

Julian stormed across the large office and slammed his hands down on Thomas's desk. "You know it would be. You saw what they did to me. If they discover I'm still alive, Rogan won't have a chance."

"He still loves you, Julian."

"Don't be ridiculous." Julian snorted. "Rogan Owens is too terrified of coming out of the closet to ever love anyone."

"That's not what he said."

"Then he's lying." Julian was sure of it. He'd had time to think over his mating with Rogan and knew that things never would have worked out for them. Rogan was too far in the closet to ever be a proper mate.

At one time, Julian might have accepted having a mate in the closet but not anymore. Too much in his life had changed to ever go back to who he was before. He wasn't the same man. He didn't even look the same.

Julian brushed his fingers along the scars on the side of his face, following them down to where they dipped under the collar of his shirt. He knew if he stood there naked, he could follow the scars all of the way down one side of his chest to his hip. He'd done it before. He knew where each scar was, how big they were, and remembered the pain he suffered receiving them.

It wasn't something he thought he'd ever forget. Even now, three years later, Julian still woke in the middle of the night screaming, his sheets drenched with sweat and his heart pounding in fear.

"I talked with him, Julian. I don't think he's the same man he was when you knew him. He's changed, and for the better, I think."

"Good for him."

Julian knew he was bitter. It had taken him awhile to understand that the anger he felt wasn't directed at Rogan, but at himself. Rogan was Rogan. He was beautiful, inside and out. He was perfect in Julian's eyes.

Julian just wasn't perfect in Rogan's eyes. It started with him being a man. Rogan was too afraid of being thought gay to accept what they could have had together. Logically, Julian knew he couldn't force someone to love him, even his mate.

In reality, Julian wanted to rage at the injustice of it all. All shifters knew they had predestined mates. Julian's mate just happened to be a man that would never accept him or love him. As much as he tried to tell himself he accepted that, he knew he didn't.

He still had dreams of Rogan, fantasies that only came to light when he was sleeping and couldn't force them away. He woke many times covered in his own cum, his dick in his hand, panting heavily after dreaming he'd been with Rogan.

A part of him lived for those times, knowing that they would be the only ones he had with Rogan. Another part hated them, each and every one. They reminded him of what he could never have, who he could never have.

Even if Rogan magically accepted that he was gay, he would never want Julian now, and Julian knew it. He was no longer the handsome man that had tried to convince Rogan that they needed to be mated.

He was scarred, physically, mentally, and emotionally. The scars on the outside of his body only mirrored those on the inside. He could never be the man Rogan deserved, especially since he was a man. Rogan had clearly wanted to be mated to a woman.

“Julian, you really need to consider talk—”

“No.”

“Julian.”

“No!” he said a little louder. “If you want me to stay working here, then you are not to tell Rogan about me in any way. As far as he is concerned, I’m David Miller, your son. He doesn’t need to know any differently.”

“I wish you’d reconsider, Julian.”

“I won’t.”

Thomas sighed deeply. “I think you’re being stupid about this, Julian, but if that’s your wish, then I’ll accept it.”

“It is.” Julian pushed his hand through his hair. “This is the way it has to be.”

“Very well.”

Julian almost wished Thomas would argue with him about it. Then he might have a reason to give in to the need he had to see Rogan again. Those few seconds when he spotted Rogan standing by his car hadn’t been enough. Watching Rogan every second of every day wouldn’t be enough.

No matter how much distance was between them or how little time they had together, Julian would always need Rogan. They were

mates. Every other man on the planet paled next to Rogan. Julian hadn't even felt an inkling of desire for another man since meeting Rogan. His sex life didn't exist. His life sucked.

"I need to get back to the jobsite."

"Julian, you never said why you stopped by."

Julian frowned. "I... uh... I wanted to let you know that the safety review was completed. We can move on to retrofitting the place."

"And you couldn't have called me for that?"

"I had some questions about the retrofitting that I wanted to go over with you."

"Oh?"

Thomas Miller might not have been his biological father, but Julian could still read him like a book. Thomas thought Julian had other motives for coming back to the office. He was right. Julian had been coming back to find out why they were retrofitting a building to hold shifters.

"Just get the blueprints."

Thomas chuckled and turned to grab the blueprints off of the desk behind him. He turned back around and laid them out on the table. "I was just going over these with Rogan. He wanted to make sure we got his special modifications right."

"You know what these are for, don't you?" Julian pointed to the small section that would be a cell.

"Druggies detoxing?"

Julian rolled his eyes. "These are for holding shifters."

"That's not what Rogan said."

"I'll bet." Julian leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"What I'm curious about is what Rogan needs a shifter cell for."

"I can only tell you what I know."

"And that would be what?"

"I'm not sure you want to know."

"Thomas!"

“Rogan is opening the Gallagher Center so that young gay men have a safe place to be while they get off drugs and get their shit together. He plans to offer housing, detox services, medical care, and counseling to gay men that have been kicked out of their own homes because they were gay.”

Julian schooled his features, trying not to let his shock show. “The Gallagher Center?”

“The Gallagher Center is named after his partner who died.”

Julian’s hand shook as he reached for a chair and sat down, stunned by Thomas’s words. “Rogan thinks I’m dead?”

Julian had always wondered why Rogan never looked for him. He assumed at the time it was because Rogan didn’t want to be mated to a man. He never dreamed that Rogan would think he was dead.

“He does,” Thomas said softly. “He searched for you but only found your bracelet and some ashes, ashes that he believes are all that remained of your body.”

“He really thinks I’m dead?”

“Hell, Julian, Rogan thinks he killed you.”

“But, he didn’t have anything to do with the men that tried to kill me. You know that.”

“I do, but Rogan doesn’t. He believes that if he had come out of the closet when he had the chance, he might have been able to save you.”

“No.” Julian shook his head. “He couldn’t have stopped them. They wanted to punish me for something they believe I did. Rogan had nothing to do with it. If he had been there, they just would have killed him, too. Why do you think I’ve stayed away from him all of this time?”

“Cause you’re a blooming idiot.”

“Thomas!”

“Well, you are.” Thomas rubbed his hands down his face then folded them together, resting his elbows on the table. “Julian, I’ve accepted everything you ever told me without question, but this time I

think you're wrong. You didn't see the pain in Rogan's eyes when he was talking about his dead lover. I did, and I believe he meant every word he told me."

"I can't chance it, Thomas."

"Why?" Thomas tossed one hand up in the air, gesturing at Julian's face. "Is it because of your scars? If Rogan truly loves you, the scars won't matter."

"No!" Julian shouted, even though it made his stomach tighten just imagining Rogan's reaction if he ever got a good look at the scars that marred his skin. Rogan knew him from when he was handsome, not the scarred, messed up figure he was now.

He'd seen children run screaming from him. He couldn't stand to see the same look in Rogan's eyes. He'd wither up and die if he ever saw pity or disgust in Rogan's eyes. He'd rather the man remember him as he was before.

"No one can know I'm still alive, Thomas. If Elder Belikov ever learned that he didn't kill me, not only would my life be in danger but so would anyone that knew me. The man is certifiably insane."

"I don't think I will ever forget." Thomas frowned. "But I still think your selling Rogan short. He deserves to know you're still alive."

Julian clenched his fists and rested them on the table. "I can't, Thomas. You have to understand that. This is the best thing for everyone. I have to remain dead."

"Do you think that's possible? What if Rogan stops by the jobsite? What then?"

"Fuck!" Julian bent his head forward and rested it against his clenched hands as he tried to think of some way to avoid Rogan if he stopped by the jobsite. "Bobby! Bobby can help me. He looks enough like me to pass for me in a pinch."

"Bobby?" Thomas scoffed. "Are you crazy? The boy doesn't have a serious bone in his body."

"He'll do it if I ask him."

“Fine.” Thomas huffed and rolled his eyes. He wagged his finger at Julian. “But if this backfires on us, you deal with it.”

Julian chuckled. “Agreed.”

“Good, now go.” Thomas made a shooing motion with his hands. “Get out of here before I fire you for slacking off on the job.”

Julian laughed as he jumped to his feet and walked out of the room, but the smile fell from his face the moment he closed the door behind him. He knew sometimes he needed to put on a show for Thomas, or the man would be more worried about him than he usually was.

Thomas Miller had saved Julian’s life, not only by saving him when he was beaten and burned, but by giving Julian a new life. From the moment he met Thomas, the man hadn’t been anything other than good to Julian.

Because of that, Julian hated lying to Thomas, but he didn’t see any other choice. He didn’t want Thomas involved in the life he had lived before. Thomas was human, and that could be a very dangerous thing in the shifter world.

It had only been over the last few years that humans were even accepted into the shifter world, part of the work by another Alpha named Asher Stone. Alpha Stone was mated to a human, and a man at that. He had worked hard to change things so that his mate would be safe in the shifter world.

But, after being tortured by Elder Belikov and several of his followers, Julian couldn’t take the chance, not with Thomas and not with Rogan. It was just better if things stayed the way they were. No matter how much Julian wished they could be different.

Julian pushed away from the wall and walked toward the stairs. He needed to get his mind back on the job and off of the one man he couldn’t have. Julian just had to keep telling himself he had a good reason for it. Maybe at some point, he might even begin to believe it.

* * * *

“Julian, he’s on his way to your jobsite.”

“Gertie.” Julian gripped his cell phone tighter in his hand. “Why didn’t you warn me that Rogan hired my company to retrofit his new building?”

“I didn’t know until yesterday, Julian. By then, it was too late.”

“You should have called me the minute you found out.”

“I couldn’t. I haven’t been alone since I found out. Rogan has us preparing to receive visitors, and I’ve been working my fingers to the bone getting this place ready.”

“Visitors?” Julian felt a shiver of fear fill him. “What visitors?”

“Alpha Asher Stone and his mate are coming to dinner.”

“Alpha Stone? I wasn’t even aware that he and Rogan knew each other.”

“They met some time back at one of the Lyken Gatherings. They seemed to take quite the liking to each other.”

Julian growled low in his chest. “They both have mates. They have no business taking a liking to anyone.”

“Like you have a say in things,” Gertrude snorted. “You left, Julian. Rogan thinks you’re dead. As far as the rules go, he’s free to find another mate, and there is nothing you can do about it unless you decide to come back from the dead.”

“Gertie!”

“Don’t you *Gertie* me, young man,” Gertrude snapped. “You have a perfectly good mate here waiting for you, and yet you refuse to come home to him, to let him know you’re still alive. You have absolutely no right to get upset when he decides to find comfort somewhere else.”

Julian sighed. Gertrude was right, and he knew it. That didn’t make him feel any less angry or jealous. Rogan belonged to him. The man had no right to seek comfort anywhere else. Julian hadn’t.

He knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn’t seem to help it. Just the thought of Rogan in someone else’s arms made Julian so

angry his nails dug into the palms of his hand. He gritted his teeth and tried to keep his growl inside his throat. He really want to roar and rage and demand that Rogan be locked up away from anyone that even thought to look at him in a sexual manner.

“Just keep an eye on him, Gertie, please.”

“Haven’t I always?”

“You have, Gertie, and I can’t thank you enough. You’ve been a great asset to me.”

Gertrude sighed deeply. “Julian, you really should think about coming home. Three years is long enough to stay away.”

“They’re still out there, Gertie. You know that.”

“Rogan needs you, Julian. Your clan needs you.”

Julian’s breath caught in his throat. “I thought you said that Rogan was leading the clan just fine.”

“He is, but he’s not you. He’s the alpha-mate, not the alpha. He does the best that he can, and that’s pretty damn good, but this clan needs their alpha. Rogan needs his alpha.”

“Gertie—”

“You listen to me, young man. I’ve known you since you were in diapers. I watched you grow into the man you are today. I know you think you’re doing what is best for everyone, but you’re not. We need you to come home.”

“I can’t, Gertie. I can’t take the chance that they will go after Rogan.”

“Damn it, boy!” Gertrude snapped, which surprised Julian. Not because she was snapping at him but because she was swearing. Gertrude never swore. “They are already trying to come after him, and this time you’re not here to protect him.”

“What?”

“Valentina Belikov started sniffing around Rogan again.” Gertrude’s voice lowered as if she had to speak quietly. “She has the backing of her father, Julian. Rogan has been trying to put her off, but I don’t know how much longer he can do that. She’s very insistent.”

“Damn it!” Julian rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, the tension in his muscles making them ache. “All right, give me some time to think of something. I’ll call you back when I can.”

“Just think quickly, Julian. I’ve just about done all I can to dissuade Valentina, but I don’t know how much longer I can hold her off. If she’s not calling to talk to Rogan, she’s dropping by. That woman is bound and determined to get Rogan in her clutches.”

Julian couldn’t prevent his growl this time. “Just keep her away as long as you can, but be careful. The Belikovs are poison. They will take down anyone that stands in their way, including you, Gertie.”

“Oh, believe me, I know exactly what they are capable of, Julian. I’ve spent three years without my alpha because of them.”

“Rogan is your alpha now, Gertie.”

“You are my alpha, Julian. Rogan is just standing in until you come home.”

Julian opened his mouth to argue with Gertie, an argument they had had a hundred times in the last three years, but Gertie hung up on him. Julian looked at his cell phone for a moment then started chuckling.

Gertrude never cared that he was the alpha. She gave her opinion whether he wanted it or not. That was one thing he loved about the woman that had been his nanny and then his housekeeper. She told him what she thought no matter what his status was.

Shaking his head at her antics, Julian slipped his phone back into his pocket. He needed to form some sort of plan to protect Rogan and the rest of their clan from the Belikovs. He just didn’t have a clue what to do without allowing everyone to know he was still alive.

Chapter 3

Rogan couldn't stop thinking about the man with steel-blue eyes that he'd seen standing outside the architect firm. There was something about him, something that intrigued Rogan. Thoughts of the man had even invaded his dreams for the last several days, turning him from a stranger to Julian.

Rogan was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery of who the man was. He was going to start by making an unannounced appearance at Thomas Miller's architect firm and ask for a tour of the jobsite. From there, Rogan planned to wiggle information out of the man concerning his son.

At least, that was the plan.

"Rogan, darling."

Rogan cringed. He quickly unlocked his car door and opened it then slowly turned to face the woman that called out to him. Plastering a smile on his face that he didn't feel, he greeted the one person he hoped the most not to see.

"Valentina, I wasn't expecting you."

Hell, he hadn't even heard her pull up, but he could see her little red convertible sports car right behind her. Luckily, it wasn't blocking him in. He wouldn't put it past Valentina to do just that to keep him from leaving.

"I just had to see you, darling."

Rogan couldn't understand why. He had gone out of his way to show Valentina that he wasn't interested in her, but she wouldn't seem to give up. She dogged his movements, calling him or showing

up at his house several times a week. She didn't seem to understand the concept that Rogan preferred men.

"I was just on my way out."

The little pout that crossed Valentina's ruby red lips might have worked on other men. Rogan just found it frustrating. He especially didn't like it when she leaned close to him, and her overdone perfume filled his senses. The fragrance always seemed to linger even after she was gone.

"Surely you have time for little ol' me, Rogan."

"Not really, Valentina. I have a meeting to get to downtown."

"It's that center of yours, isn't it?" Valentina actually flounced as she crossed her arms over her stomach.

Rogan didn't miss the way they seemed to cross right under her breasts, pushing them up to possible overspill level. He almost rolled his eyes. The wave of her blonde hair, the perfectly manicured fingernails, even the tight shirt that he was sure was one size too small did nothing for him. And Valentina just would not understand that.

"Yes, it's my center. I have to meet with the architect and go over a few of the details with him."

"I was hoping we could go out to lunch together."

"I can't, Valentina, not today." Rogan grimaced as he realized he'd have to throw Valentina some sort of bone. While he didn't mind pissing her off, her father was another matter, and the man adored his daughter to the point of being obsessive. "Maybe we can get together next week."

"I don't know why you have to open this center anyway." Valentina huffed and tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder as if that might make Rogan change his mind. "It just seems stupid to me. I would think your money could be better spent on your clan, not some center that caters to humans."

Rogan was fully aware of Valentina's disdain at the idea behind the center. She'd made it more than clear on numerous occasions. It was the same attitude he received from a lot of people. They didn't

seem to understand his need to provide a safety net for young gay men that had nowhere else to go. Rogan thought maybe the only person that would have truly understood was Julian. He just wished he'd been able to share his dream with the man.

"The Gallagher Center will treat both humans and shifters, Valentina."

"The Gallagher Center?" Valentina scoffed. "That's what you're calling it?"

"I can't think of a better name." Rogan tightened his grip on the doorframe as his temper started to rear its head. "Julian would have loved the idea."

"Julian, Julian, Julian," Valentina snapped. Her face suddenly flushed as her features tightened. "When are you going to stop talking about that man? He's been gone for three years, Rogan. He's not coming back. People are going to start wondering about you if you keep obsessing over a dead man."

"People can wonder all they want. I refuse to let Julian's death be in vain."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing about Julian."

Rogan arched an eyebrow. "Then maybe you shouldn't stop by so often, Valentina, because I have no intention of not talking about Julian. He was my mate."

"He's dead!" Valentina's high-heeled foot stomped on the ground. It probably would have made more of an impact if it had been hardwood or cement. Instead, the spiked heel sank right into the soft dirt ground.

Rogan could barely keep his laughter to himself as he watched Valentina sputter and struggle to pull her shoe out of the dirt. "I appreciate you stopping by, Valentina, but I need to go, or I'm going to be late for my meeting." Rogan turned to climb in his car when Valentina's shrill voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Daddy thinks this center of yours is disgusting. When he hears that you’re calling it the Gallagher Center, he’s going to be very upset, Rogan. Julian is dead!”

Rogan glanced over his shoulder, trying to keep his features neutral when he really wanted to rant and rave at Valentina. “And that is why it’s called the Gallagher Center and not the Julian Center.”

Rogan turned away from Valentina and climbed into his car. He pulled the door closed and clicked the lock just as she tried to rush forward, but her heel was still stuck in the ground. Ignoring her outraged screech, Rogan turned on the car and quickly backed out of the driveway.

Valentina still stood in the driveway with her foot caught in the dirt as Rogan drove away. Only as she faded from sight did Rogan realize that arguing with her might not have been his smartest move. She could cause a lot of problems for him if she went crying to her father. And if she didn’t get her way, that was usually what she did.

It was the only reason Rogan hadn’t told her to take a long walk off a short pier ages ago. He couldn’t stand the woman but put up with her because he couldn’t find a way to get rid of her and not make her father angry.

Despite what Valentina, Elder Belikov, or his parents wanted, Rogan would not be hooking up with Valentina in any way. Not only was she not his type, and never could be. She wasn’t Julian.

Rogan wished that she would leave him alone. He wasn’t going to marry Valentina, or date her, or sleep with her, or whatever else she wanted. There was some part of him coming out of the closet that people didn’t seem to understand. It meant he liked men. Rogan would be more inclined to hook up with Valentina’s brother than her if she had a brother.

Arriving in town, Rogan parked his car across the street and a few parking spots down the street from the entrance to the architect firm. He wanted to have his car close at hand in case he needed it suddenly, but he also didn’t want to warn anyone that he was coming.

He watched the building for several minutes, seeing people come and go. Miller and Son Architectural Firm seemed to be a busy place. Finally deciding that he wasn't getting anywhere sitting in his car, Rogan opened the door and started to climb out.

Just as he stood up he noticed the door to the architectural firm open and three men walked out. Rogan hunched over his car as recognized two of the men, one being Thomas Miller and the other being the man with the deep steel-blue eyes. The third man, he didn't know. Rogan watched them walk down the sidewalk and climb into two separate cars.

He quickly climbed back into his car and started the engine, watching carefully to see which car the blue eyes man climbed in to. Once it pulled out into traffic, Rogan pulled out behind him. He tried to stay a few cars behind as he followed, but not so far away that he lost site of the car.

Rogan's heart pounded in his chest as he followed behind them. He still didn't know who the guy was, but he was bound and determined to find out by the end of the day. It might have been different if he hadn't seen the man's eyes, but he had, and now he couldn't stop thinking about them.

When the vehicles turned off on the road going to the new Gallagher Center, Rogan started to feel nervous and giddy all at the same time. Dropping by the site unannounced would be easily explained as he owned the place. He had that in his favor. But he was still nervous about the possibility of actually confronting the blue eyed man.

A trickle of sweat trailed down his temple as he pulled to a stop at the edge of the jobsite. Rogan could see the other two vehicles pull further into the jobsite and stop, all of the men climbing out. They joined up and began talking, another man on the site walking up to them.

Rogan watched them talk for a few minutes. He didn't want them to know he'd followed them from the office even if he had. There was

just something stalkerish about that. When Thomas went to his car for a set of blueprints and came back and spread them out over the hood of the other car, Rogan knew it was time to show his face.

He climbed out of his car and started toward the four men, his heart pounding rapidly the entire time. Just a few feet away from his destination, someone stepped in front of Rogan, cutting him off from his goal.

“Hey, man, this is a construction site,” the man said. “Didn’t you see the No Trespassing signs?”

Rogan arched an eyebrow. “I own the place.”

“Oh.” The man frowned. “Well, you still shouldn’t be on the site without an escort or a hardhat. There’s a lot of dangerous stuff going on here, and you could get hurt.”

“I appreciate your concern, however, Mr. Miller told me to stop by any time to see the progress.” Rogan pointed past the man. “And I see that he’s right over there.”

The man glanced over his shoulder. “Mr. Miller?”

Rogan gritted his teeth when all four men looked his way. So much for surprising them. He grew even more frustrated when the man with steel-blue eyes said something to Thomas then quickly walked off in the opposite direction. Rogan wanted to growl.

“Rogan?” Thomas asked as he walked over. “I wasn’t expecting you here at the jobsite.”

“I was in the area and decided to drop by.” Rogan shrugged. “Sorry for not calling first.”

“Oh no, that’s perfectly all right.” Thomas chuckled, even though he looked very nervous. “This is your site after all.”

“Do you have a few minutes to show me around, let me see what you have done so far?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Is your son going to join us?”

Thomas paled, which surprised Rogan.

“Uh, yes, that would be fine. Why don’t you wait here until we can get you a hardhat, and I’ll get David?” Thomas turned and hurried back to the two men he’d been talking with. He started talking and gesturing wildly with his hand.

Rogan couldn’t tell exactly what was going on, but a few minutes later, another man came running up with three hardhats in his hand, which he handed over to Thomas. Thomas placed one on his head then handed one to the other man that had come from the office with him. Together, the two men walked over to Rogan.

“Rogan, I’d like you to meet my son, David Miller,” Thomas said as he handed the remaining hardhat to Rogan.

“This is your son?” Rogan’s eyes narrowed as he looked the man over. He had similar looks to the man with steel-blue eyes, but not exact. And his eyes, while being blue, were a paler, lighter blue. This was not the same man.

“Yes, yes, of course, this is David.”

Rogan seriously doubted it, but held his hand out to the man anyway. “Rogan Owens.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Owens,” the man said. “Please, call me David.”

Rogan placed the hardhat on his head and smiled over at Thomas. He wanted to see how long Thomas was going to play out his little game. The man masquerading as David wasn’t the same man. Rogan knew it deep down in his soul.

“So, show me what you’ve gotten done so far.”

“Certainly, come right this way.”

Rogan arched an eyebrow and followed after Thomas. The man was just a little too pale, a little too nervous. There was definitely something going on here besides someone impersonating his son. Rogan just didn’t know what it was.

“What do you think of my little project here, David?” Rogan asked. “Your father seems to think you can have it done on time and on budget. Do you agree?”

“Well, I certainly think it’s an interesting undertaking. What made you decide to buy an asylum for your center?”

“One, the location. We’re far enough outside of the city that we won’t have to worry about tons of traffic. Two, the building design itself fits with my needs. And three, the price was right—dirt cheap.”

The David wannabe chuckled. “I can see that.”

“The state has been trying to offload this property for several years, but not many people want an asylum or take on the task of scrapping it. With each of the individual rooms, once we turn them into regular rooms instead of cells, and the industrial kitchen and cafeteria plus office spaces, I think it will meet the center’s needs quite well.”

“It is an interesting concept that you have,” David said. “It just seems strange to be converting an insane asylum to a residential center. These places can be kind of creepy.”

“I think there’s a bit of amusement in it.” Rogan chuckled as he followed the two men inside the building through the two large front doors. “What better use for such a facility than giving people new lives?”

“The renovations are actually going quite well,” Thomas broke in. “We’ve just finished the safety inspection and shoring up the foundation. There was a bit of electrical and plumbing upgrades that needed to be done to bring the building up to code, but now that that is done, we’ll begin working on retrofitting each of the rooms as you specified.”

“It sounds like you’ve gotten a lot done in the last five days.”

“I told you my crew was one of the best,” Thomas said. “David will have it done on time.”

Rogan glanced at the David impersonator to see how he was taking Thomas’s words. Again, Rogan’s belief that this wasn’t the same man was reinforced when he didn’t show a single reaction. Rogan wasn’t in the least bit surprised.

“Do you think you can get the job done on time, David?”

“Wha—oh, yeah.”

“Even the cells in the basement?”

The man’s eyes widened, and he quickly turned to look at Thomas. “Cells... uh, yes, I believe we can get the entire place done to your satisfaction on time.”

Rogan twisted his lips together as he tried not to smile. This man had no idea what Rogan was talking about. This wasn’t David. Rogan clasped his hands behind his back and continued to follow Thomas and the mystery man through the building, nodding when they pointed something out and making comments here and there.

He wanted to see what improvements had been made on the building, but his mind was caught up in who the other man was and where he was. He’d have to devise another plan for meeting him.

Like waiting outside the grounds until the man left then following him. Rogan smiled when the new plan began to form in his mind. He suddenly couldn’t wait to get back to his car, so he could wait until blue eyes left.

And then the chase would be on.

* * * *

Rogan rubbed his eyes then dropped his hand back into his lap and continued watching out his car window. He’d been sitting in his car for what seemed like hours, ever since he left the center property and parked on a small side road just down the way from the entrance to the site.

When he formed the plan, it had been simple, park his car down the road and wait until blue eyes left. He’d follow and confront the man, find out who he really was. Then maybe the visions of Julian would lessen.

The sun was starting to set. Most of the workers on the site had already left, including Thomas. Rogan knew blue eyes had to leave soon unless he was planning to spend the night at the work site.

The more he thought about that, the more he wondered if it could be a possibility. The man was obviously trying to avoid Rogan. What better way to do that than to hide out at the center? Until just this second, Rogan never would have thought of that.

After another hour of waiting, Rogan began to suspect his assessment was right. The man wasn't going to leave the center grounds. That didn't mean that Rogan wasn't going to confront him, however. Rogan would just have to do it there.

Rogan climbed from his car and quietly closed the door. He didn't want anyone to hear him coming if he could help it. Rogan crossed the street and walked down the side towards the entrance to the center.

Just as he reached the main gate, he heard a rustling in the bushes. Rogan froze then cocked his head to one side so he could hear better. It took him a moment to narrow in on where the noises were coming from, and by the time he did, they were going in the opposite direction from where he was.

Rogan started in that direction. The faster he ran, the faster the noise moved away from him. Rogan knew he was on to something as he reached the edge of the driveway and caught a glimpse of something brown moving off into the woods that grew on one side of the property.

Rogan stepped into the woods and shifted. The moment he did, the scents of the forest filled his senses. Rogan was momentarily overwhelmed, not having shifted in a few weeks. He'd been too busy trying to get his center up and off the ground. Now, he wondered how he had gone so long without it.

When another scent, a stronger more masculine scent, filled Rogan's senses, it was all he could do not to whimper. He knew that scent. He could never forget it. Rogan took off running through the forest, following the sweetest aroma he ever smelled until he came to a small clearing.

Standing in the middle of the clearing next to a small rippling brook stood a large dark brown wolf staring back at him. He may not have seen the wolf in almost three years, but Rogan would have recognized him anywhere.

Julian.

Rogan crept forward slowly, apprehension filling him with each step. He didn't understand how Julian could be standing right in front of him when the man was supposed to be dead. Maybe he was dreaming. It sure felt like a dream.

As soon as he was close enough, Rogan dropped to ground and crawled over to Julian then rolled over onto his back. He shuddered as Julian bit down on his neck, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to let Rogan know he accepted Rogan's submissive gesture. After Julian removed his teeth, Rogan shifted to human form. He threw his arms around Julian's neck, tears of joy coming to his eyes.

His mate was alive.

"Oh god, Julian, I missed you so much," Rogan cried out as he hugged Julian, sinking his fingers into the wolf's dark fur. "Where have you been? What happened to you? Why didn't you come back to me?"

Rogan sat back and grabbed Julian's muzzle so he could look him in the face. "Shift, Julian, please, I want to talk to you. I want to see you. I—Julian, where are you going?" Rogan asked when Julian suddenly pulled away from him and started backing up. "Julian, please, we need to talk. What are you—Julian!"

Rogan didn't understand why Julian was backing away from him. The man should be overjoyed that they were back together again. Rogan started to panic, his heart racing as Julian continued to back away from him.

"Julian, no, stay and talk to me," Rogan said as he reached out for him, but Julian jumped out of the way. Julian suddenly turned and bounded away, running for the edge of the forest. "Julian, please, don't leave me again."

Rogan still knelt on the ground, his eyes searching the tree line where Julian disappeared. "Julian, please," Rogan whispered as tears started dripping down his face. "I'm sorry."

Rogan knew Julian had reason to hate him, but he never thought his mate would pretend to be dead to get away from him. He supposed he could only blame himself. He had betrayed Julian and deserved whatever he got. It was just hard to grasp that fact that his mate hated him enough to hide in death from him.

Rogan dropped forward and rested his head on the ground, overcome with grief. The tears he'd been holding back fell from his eyes, blinding him to anything but the image in his head of Julian running away. Watching Julian run from him was like losing him all over again. And Rogan didn't know if he'd survive it, not this time.

Rogan sat back up and wiped the tears from his eyes. He pushed himself to his feet and started back toward his car, a new plan forming in his head. He needed to talk with Julian, to figure a way out of this nightmare. There had to be a reasonable, logical solution. There had to be some way that he and Julian could bridge the gap between them. They were meant to be together.

* * * *

"Where is he?" Rogan shouted as he stormed into Thomas Miller's office the next day. He saw the man jump from his chair in surprise and stormed across the room toward him. "Where's Julian?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," Thomas said quickly, almost too quickly.

Rogan reached over the desk and grabbed Thomas by his shirt collar and gave him a good shake. "You're lying to me. I want to know where Julian is, and I want to know right now."

"I... I don't know any Julian."

"Liar!"

"Please, I..."

“Rogan, let him go.”

Rogan swung around to see Julian standing in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyebrows were lowered in a stern gesture, his voice very alpha-like.

“Julian.”

“Let Thomas go, Rogan. He has no part in this.”

Rogan hadn’t even realized that he still held the man in his hands until Julian said something. He loosened his hands and smoothed down the man’s ruffled shirt. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Thomas said as he straightened his clothes. His hands shook a little, and he pushed on through his hair, looking over at Julian.

“Thomas, can we have a moment, please?”

Thomas nodded and made a hasty exit. Rogan looked back at Julian as the door closed behind Thomas, drinking in the man’s mere presence. It had been so long since he’d had a chance to look at Julian, really look at him.

“Julian.”

“You shouldn’t be here, Rogan. You need to leave.”

“How can you say that?” Rogan asked. Julian’s words felt like daggers stabbing into his heart. “You’re my mate.”

“Julian Gallagher was your mate,” he said simply. Not a hint of emotion showed on Julian’s face. “My name is David Miller now.”

“Julian, David, I don’t care. You’re still my mate.”

“No, I’m not. I haven’t been your mate in a very long time.”

Rogan frowned. This conversation wasn’t going the way he thought it would. They were mates. Julian should have been overjoyed that they had found each other again, yet he seemed to be trying his best to drive Rogan away.

“Julian—”

“David.”

“You’ll always be Julian to me.”

“My name is David now, and I have a life here, a life that I like.”

“Fine, then I’ll come here.” He didn’t care where they were as long as they were together.

“No.”

“But—”

Julian clasped his hands behind his back and started casually walking around the large office. He could have been having a conversation with anyone about anything. Nothing in his features or his posture showed that they were having a heart-to-heart talk.

“It’s time for you to leave, Rogan, and I don’t want you to come back.”

“Julian, you can’t mean that.” Rogan’s heart seemed to stutter in his chest at the stoic look on Julian’s face. He felt like it was breaking all over again.

“I do mean it. I don’t want you here.”

“How can you say this, Julian?” Rogan cried out desperately. “We’re mates. We’re supposed to be together. Haven’t you felt the pain of our separation?”

Why couldn’t Julian understand that?

“Pain?” Julian suddenly snapped. His face flushed red as anger filled his features. “Do you want to see what pain looks like, Rogan? I live with it every second of every day.”

Rogan watched in dawning horror as Julian unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the sides apart, baring the scars that covered one side of his body from his hip to the side of his face. Rogan lifted his hand to reach out for Julian, only to drop it a moment later when he caught the angry glare in Julian’s steel-blue eyes.

“This is pain, Rogan,” Julian sneered. “This is what happens when they pour silver on you and set you on fire. This is real pain. And I’ve felt it every day, every second, for the last three years. This is what they did to me.”

Rogan sucked in a ragged breath. He knew what Julian was saying, and it killed a piece of him deep inside. He watched Julian button his shirt back up and step back from him. Rogan suddenly

knew that the dreams he had of reuniting with Julian would never come to be. That's all they were, dreams.

"I'm sorry," Rogan whispered as he walked toward the door and opened it. "I know I don't deserve it, but please forgive me. I never meant for this to happen to you."

"Rogan—"

Rogan held up his hand to stop Julian. He didn't think he could stand to hear another word. He rested his head against the door for a moment and closed his eyes as tears of anguish filled them.

Julian hated him, and he had every right to that hatred. He would pay every day for the rest of his life because of Rogan's betrayal, and there was nothing Rogan could do to fix it. He'd sent his mate into hell.

"I won't bother you again," Rogan whispered.

He refused to look back at Julian as he walked out of the office. He knew he'd never be able to leave if he did. He'd drop to his knees and beg Julian for another chance. He wasn't strong enough to walk away if he saw Julian again. And walking away seemed to be all Julian wanted from him. Rogan could at least give him that.

"Good-bye, David."

Chapter 4

“And that’s it? He just walked away?” Bobby asked.

Julian nodded.

“He didn’t say anything?”

“No, he told me good-bye and walked out.”

“It sounds to me like he gave you exactly what you asked for then,” Thomas said.

Julian nodded, but his heart screamed in protest. Rogan had given him exactly what he asked for, but it wasn’t really what Julian wanted. What he truly wanted he knew he could never have. The price was too high.

“You don’t seem very happy about it,” Bobby continued.

Julian grimaced. “I’m not, but it’s what has to be done.”

“I’m not so sure about that, David.” Bobby ducked his head a little then tilted it to the side as if he were thinking hard. “I mean, is that what really has to be done, or is it the best solution for you?”

“What do you mean?” Julian asked cautiously. Bobby had been his best friend for some time now, and the man knew him pretty well. But there were some things that even Bobby didn’t know.

“You’ve been hiding away from the world since long before I met you. You’re secretive and mysterious, which drives all the guys crazy, and a few of the women. They all think it’s a show, but I know you. I know the truth. You’re hiding because of your scars.”

Julian’s hand brushed the side of his neck as he swallowed hard. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” Bobby asked. “In all of the time I’ve known you, I’ve never even seen you look at a man, let alone go out with one. I

thought for a long time that you were embarrassed by your scars, but now I'm beginning to think it has nothing to do with your scars and everything to do with Rogan."

"I thought you just said I'm hiding behind my scars?" Julian snapped.

"You are, David. Instead of grabbing on to what you could have with this man, you're hiding behind your scars. You have something being handed to you on a silver platter, something special. And you're tossing it away because you're afraid."

"He's right, David."

Julian's eyes snapped over to Thomas, and a small growl started to build in his throat. What did either Bobby or Thomas know about being afraid? They had never been tortured or burned alive. They hadn't gone through the pain Julian had suffered.

"I saw the desperation in Rogan's eyes when he came to my office last week." Thomas shook his finger at Julian. "That man needs you more than he needs his next breath. You'd be stupid to toss that away."

"There's some part of this that neither of you are grasping," Julian bit out. "If I show myself and people learn that I'm still alive, they will try to kill everyone I care about, including you two."

Bobby paled and licked his lips. Thomas snorted and rolled his eyes. Julian didn't know which reaction to address first, Bobby's sudden fear or Thomas's disbelief.

"Your lives will be in danger if anyone learns I'm still alive."

"Rogan knows you're still alive," Thomas said, "and we're not dead yet. Try again."

"Rogan would never try to kill me, but other people would." Julian pounded on the table with his fist as frustration overrode his anger for a moment. "What part of that aren't you getting?"

"If Rogan isn't a threat to you, then it seems to me like maybe he could be an asset."

“No!” Julian snapped, his anger suddenly back in full force. “Absolutely not. I will not put Rogan’s life in danger.”

“I think you’re too late, David. Rogan’s life is already in danger and has been since you left him.” Thomas grimaced. “I’ve listened to the stories you’ve told over the last few years about your life before. I know what kind of life Rogan is leading. If they haven’t gone after him before now, they will.”

Julian clenched his fists and clamped his mouth shut to keep himself from shouting at Thomas and Bobby. They just didn’t understand how things were in a shifter clan. They were raised in the human world where people were reasonable. Shifters were often ruled by their emotions.

“It’s just a matter of time, David, and you know it.”

“Thomas—”

“You know I’m right, David.”

“You just don’t—” Julian’s words were interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone. He quickly pulled it out and answered it, the unique ringtone telling him instantly who was calling. “Yes, Gertie?”

“You need to come home.”

“Gertie—”

“Now, Julian,” Gertrude said. Julian shivered when he detected a hint of panic in Gertrude’s voice, something he had never heard in all of the years he’d know her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Rogan came home several days ago. I could tell immediately that something had happened to him, but he refused to discuss it. He locked himself in his bedroom, and he hasn’t come out since.”

“So?” Julian asked. “He’s done this before.”

“Not like this, Julian. For the last couple of days we’ve all heard him shouting and yelling, furniture crashing around the room. Today, there’s been nothing, not a sound.” Gertrude exhaled harshly. “I’m scared, Julian. I can smell blood.”

Julian felt his face pale, and a cold sweat broke out over his skin. “Blood?” he whispered. “You can smell blood?”

“Julian, please, I need you to come home.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Julian snapped his phone closed before Gertrude could reply, his only thought to get to his mate. He looked up at the two worried faces across from him. “I have to go. Something has happened to Rogan.”

Thomas scooted out of the booth and stood up, Bobby right behind him. “We’re going with you,” Thomas said firmly.

“Thomas—”

Thomas held up his hand. “You can argue with us or you can accept the fact that we’re going. Either way, the faster we get to Rogan, the faster you can insure that he’s safe.”

Julian glanced at Bobby, only to find him standing there with his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his lips. Julian rolled his eyes. “Fine, you can go, but know that where we’re going is unlike anything you’ve ever experienced in your life.”

“Oh please, I’ve been to the bar with you on amateur night,” Bobby snorted and waved his hand at Julian. “There’s nothing scarier than a drag queen that has lost a beauty pageant.”

“A drag queen has nothing on a clan, Bobby, take my word for it. When I say they might eat you alive, I’m not joking.”

Bobby’s eyebrows scrunched together as a confused expression crossed his face. Thomas chuckled and slapped him on the back. “Come on, we’ll explain on the way.”

* * * *

Julian was enveloped in a huge hug the moment he stepped through the kitchen door of his old house. He grunted, suddenly remembering how strong Gertrude actually was, then hugged her back.

“Hey, Gertie.”

"I missed you, boy."

"I missed you, too, Gertie."

Gertrude squeezed him one more time, forcing the air from Julian's lungs, then dropped her arms from around him and crossed them over her chest. She stepped back and started tapping her foot, a sure sign that she was pissed off.

"Now, Gertie," Julian began, holding his hands up in surrender. He might be the alpha of his clan, but Gertrude was damn scary when she was mad.

"Don't you *Gertie* me, Julian Gallagher," Gertrude snapped. "I've waited three years for you to get your head out of your ass. It shouldn't have come to this."

Julian opened his mouth to argue, or try and placate Gertrude when he heard clapping behind him. He turned to see Thomas clapping his hands together. Julian arched an eyebrow at Thomas as the man stepped past him and reached for Gertrude's hand. He was shocked when Thomas brought that hand to his mouth and placed a small kiss on it.

"Thomas Miller, ma'am. I've been trying for ages to get Julian to see reason, but you put it much more eloquently than I ever have."

Gertrude stared for a moment, seemingly stunned, then laughed loudly. "I think I'm going to like you, Thomas Miller."

Julian blinked as he watched the man he considered a father flirt and charm the woman he considered a mother. Maybe coming home would create more drama than he originally thought.

"Thomas, why don't you stay here and keep Gertie company? I need to go upstairs and find out what's going on with Rogan."

"You go on, Julian," Gertrude said, waving her free hand at him. The other one was still grasped in Thomas's hands. "I'll take good care of your friends."

"You might want to get Bobby a stiff drink." Julian pointed to his friend standing in the doorway. "He's looking a little dazed. He didn't know about shifters until we explained it on the way here."

“Oh, you poor dear,” Gertrude said as she pulled away from Thomas and walked toward Bobby. “You just come right on in, and I’ll get you something to calm your nerves.”

Julian shook his head and walked out of the room, heading for the stairs. He knew Thomas and Bobby were in good hands with Gertrude. She wouldn’t allow any harm to come to them. Julian was pretty sure both men had garnered a spot in her soft heart already. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. If anyone could protect them, Gertrude could.

Julian was glad it was in the middle of the night as he bounded up the stairs and walked over to the bedroom that used to be his. The house was empty of other clan members except those that lived here, and they were asleep. He wanted to avoid as many people as he could until he knew exactly what was going on with Rogan.

Julian tried the door handle and found it locked. He knocked softly but received no answer. “Rogan?”

Julian began to grow concerned when he still received no answer. He grabbed the door handle and turned it as hard as he could then swung the full weight of his body into the door. It creaked but didn’t budge. Julian did again, then again, until the lock snapped.

Julian stumbled into the room when the door swung open. He stopped and looked around the room in shock. It was completely destroyed. Every last bit of furniture was shattered on the floor. No pictures remained hanging on the walls. The walls themselves were filled with holes as if someone had punched them repeatedly. The place looked like a war zone.

It was also empty. Julian knew Rogan had to be here somewhere because the door had been locked from the inside. He quickly looked over the room and decided Rogan wasn’t in it before making his way to the bathroom.

What Julian found in the bathroom stole the breath from his lungs and almost made his heart stop beating. What terrified Julian wasn’t that Rogan sat naked in the bathroom’s large soaking tub, his back to

Julian as he leaned against one end of the tub. It was the little cuts all over Rogan's body that horrified Julian.

"You kind of get used to them after awhile, don't you?"

Rogan's sudden words jarred Julian, especially since the man's back was to him. He didn't realize until Rogan spoke that the man knew he was in the room. Julian slowly crept forward, unsure of why Rogan was covered in bleeding cuts until he saw the knife in his hand.

"Rogan, what are you doing?"

"I wanted to know..." Rogan's whispered words faded off.

"You wanted to know what, Rogan?" he asked softly, not wanting to spook Rogan. Julian reached the side of the tub. As he knelt down, he got his first good look at Rogan and almost couldn't hold back his cry of disbelief.

Hundreds of little bleeding cuts covered Rogan's body, from his ankles all the way up to his neck. Rogan held a knife in his hand, slowly slicing another small cut on his arm. Julian started to reach for the knife to take it away from Rogan when he saw the man reach for a small bottle on the edge of the tub ledge.

"Rogan!" Julian exclaimed when he saw Rogan pour something out over the cut he'd just made and realized that it was liquid silver, the same thing that had made the scars on Julian's body.

Julian grabbed the bottle and the knife and ripped them out of Rogan's hand, tossing them across the room. He heard the mirror over the sink smash as the knife and bottle of liquid silver crashed into them, but he didn't care. He could replace the mirror. He couldn't replace Rogan.

"What are you doing, baby?"

Rogan's head fell back against the edge of the tub. Julian inhaled sharply when he saw the exhaustion and pain in Rogan's golden eyes. Rogan's fingers trembled as he reached up to stroke them against the side of Julian's face.

"It really does stop hurting after awhile."

“Oh, baby, what have you done?” Julian couldn’t find a spot on Rogan’s body that didn’t have a cut.

“One thousand thirty-five,” Rogan said as he looked down at his body. He seemed dazed and disconnected from the fact that he was bleeding all over the tub. “One for every day since you died.”

“Rogan.” Julian’s heart was breaking with each word that fell from Rogan’s lips.

“I thought... I thought if I was in the tub then Gertrude wouldn’t have such a mess to clean up.” Rogan frowned suddenly, his eyebrows drawing together. “But I guess I made a mess in the bedroom, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Julian whispered through the tears clogging his throat.

“Would you tell Gertrude that I’m sorry?”

“If we moved to the bedroom and cleaned up the mess, you wouldn’t have anything to apologize for. Gertie never has to know.”

Rogan seemed to think about it for a moment, but Julian wasn’t sure the man’s mind was making much sense. “I’m really tired, Jul—” Rogan swallowed and glanced away. “I’m really tired, David. I just want to sleep for awhile. Maybe we can clean up the bedroom later.”

A wave of apprehension filled Julian when Rogan’s eyes fluttered closed. Julian reached over and shook Rogan by his shoulders. “Rogan, wake up. Open your eyes for me, baby. Let me see those golden eyes.”

Rogan’s eyes fluttered again and slowly opened. He turned his head and looked at Julian. Julian’s heart ached when he watched the joy on Rogan’s face slowly fade. “Hello, David,” Rogan said as if they hadn’t been talking just moments before. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Why?” Rogan seemed truly confused. Julian wondered if the man even realized he was covered in hundreds of little bleeding cuts.

“I missed you.”

"I missed you, too." Rogan frowned. "But I'm not supposed to tell you that."

"Why aren't you supposed to tell me you missed me, Rogan?" Julian asked. He pulled a towel off the towel rack and pressed it over Rogan's naked body then he grabbed Rogan's arms and tried to urge him to his feet. He needed to get Rogan out of the tub and into the bedroom where he could lie down.

"You're not my mate anymore," Rogan said in an agonized whisper.

Julian choked back a cry, frightened by the way Rogan seemed to fold into himself. He stopped pulling on Rogan's arms and reached over to grip the man's face between his hands, forcing Rogan to look up at him.

"Rogan, I'll always be your mate."

"No, you don't have to say that." Rogan swallowed hard and glanced away. "I know what I did. I don't blame you for hating me. I just..." Rogan looked back for a moment, his eyes filled with tears. "I know it doesn't mean much now, but I want you to know how sorry I am. I never meant for you to be hurt."

"Oh, Rogan." Julian leaned forward to press his forehead against Rogan's. "You'll always be my mate, baby, and I don't hate you. I could never hate you."

"But, I..."

Julian sniffled, fighting the tears that threatened to spill down his face. He leaned back a little and shook Rogan's face. "You listen to me, Rogan Owens. You didn't hurt me. You didn't do this to me. What happened to me was not your fault."

"I should have been there. If I hadn't been so concerned with what other people might say, I would have accepted our mating, and I would have been there to save you."

"Baby, there was nothing you could have done. If you had been there, they just would have hurt you like they hurt me." Julian tried to smile, to reassure Rogan that he was telling the truth. "I will be

forever grateful that you were not there. I never wanted you to suffer the way I did.”

“I should have been there.”

“And you would have been, Rogan.” Julian suddenly knew he spoke the truth with a clarity that surprised him. “You would have eventually accepted our mating and come to me. Just because you weren’t there at the time doesn’t make you responsible for what happened to me.”

“Jul—” Rogan licked his lips. “David, I—”

Julian smiled as he rubbed his thumb over Rogan’s lips, quieting him. “My name is Julian.”

Julian took great delight in the way Rogan’s eyes widened. He took even more delight in the stuttering breath that came from his mate as he lowered his lips and kissed the man. Rogan’s lips were warm and lush but frozen in place. Julian licked at them with his tongue then leaned back just a fraction.

“Don’t you want to kiss me, Rogan?”

Rogan’s mouth dropped open in shock, and that was the opportunity Julian needed. He quickly leaned forward again and claimed Rogan’s lips, thrusting his tongue inside the man’s mouth before he could protest.

It had been so long since he felt the touch of Rogan’s lips on his. Julian couldn’t help groaning when Rogan moved, hesitantly returning the kiss. Little by little, Rogan started responding more until Julian felt his mate’s hands grip his shoulders.

Julian pushed deeper into the kiss, exploring Rogan’s mouth with his tongue. He wanted to explore Rogan’s body in the same intense manner, but he was afraid to touch him anywhere but on his face. It was the only place on Rogan he could find that wasn’t cut and bleeding.

Julian finally, reluctantly, pulled away from Rogan, but only a couple of inches. He smoothed his hand down the side of the man’s

face as he took in his stunned features. "Let's get you out of this tub, baby."

Julian didn't wait for Rogan's agreement, not that he thought he would get one. Rogan just stared at him as if he were in some sort of daze. Julian stood to his feet and pulled Rogan up. It was not an easy feat considering Rogan was bigger than him.

Luckily, Rogan seemed to follow Julian's directions and climbed out of the tub then followed him into the bedroom. Julian let go of Rogan for just a moment and swept everything off the bed except for the sheets and blankets, which he pulled back so Rogan could climb in.

"Come on, baby, climb in."

"I don't want to mess up the sheets." Rogan frowned and turned back toward the bathroom. "I really should get back in the tub."

"No, Rogan, you really should get on the bed," Julian said as he grabbed Rogan's arm and turned him back to the bed. "Come on, baby, I haven't held you in my arms in almost three years. If you get in the bed, I can hold you."

Julian was thankful that Rogan didn't argue with him, just climbed between the sheets and lay down. Julian pulled the blankets up over Rogan then took just a moment to grab his cell phone and call down to Gertrude, asking for her to send for a doctor. He pushed his shoes off his feet then climbed onto the bed.

"The doctor will be here soon to take a look at you. We'll just lie here until he gets here."

Julian could see Rogan's eyes go to the scars on his neck then fill with tears. He did his best not to shrink back when Rogan reached out to touch him. Since he had healed from his injuries, no one had touched his scars except him.

He held himself still, hovering over Rogan as the man's fingers gently grazed across the top of Julian's scars on the side of his face. When Rogan reached the collar of his shirt, his eyes shot back up to Julian's.

“I’m so sorry.”

Julian dropped down on the bed beside Rogan and drew the man into his arms. When Rogan didn’t move, Julian pushed his head down until it rested against his chest. He was momentarily stunned into silence at how good it felt to hold his mate in his arms again after all the time that had gone by.

On one hand, it was like Rogan had never left. The man fit in Julian’s arms as if he had been made to be there. On the other hand, Julian felt like it had been a hundred years since he’d held Rogan.

“I missed you, Rogan,” Julian said softly, finally coming to grips with the knowledge that their separation was more his fault than anything else. “I never should have left, but I thought it was the only way to save you.”

“Save me from what?”

“The men that took me,” Julian replied. “Elder Belikov.”

Rogan stiffed. “Belikov? He’s the man that did this to you?”

Julian nodded. “Yes.”

“But why?”

“I’ve never really known. He said that the Council of Elders had found me guilty of betraying my clan, and I was to be punished and banished, stripped of my status as Alpha.”

“But that’s not true,” Rogan cried out as he pushed himself up and looked down at Julian. “You would never betray your clan. Everyone knows that.”

The corner of Julian’s mouth drew up as he smirked. “I don’t think he cared, baby. It wasn’t his intention to punish me for something he felt I had done. He was trying to kill me. And he almost succeeded. If Thomas hadn’t found me, I’d be dead right now.”

“Thomas Miller, your boss?”

“Yeah, he saved me, got me medical treatment and hid me until I could heal.” Julian did smile this time. “Right now he’s downstairs charming Gertie.”

Rogan’s eyebrows shot up. “Gertrude can be charmed?”

“It appears so.”

“I guess miracles do happen.” Rogan chuckled as he laid his head back down on Julian’s chest.

Julian tightened his arms around Rogan and stroked his hands up and down the man’s back. Rogan’s back seemed to be one of the few places on his body that was uncut. Julian assumed that was because the man couldn’t reach it, but at least he could safely touch him there.

“They do happen, Rogan. You and I both being here in the same place is proof of that.”

“I still don’t understand why you are here, *David*.” Julian heard the stress Rogan put on that last word and grimaced. He might be holding his mate in his arms, but getting through to him was going to be a lot harder. He had a lot to make up for.

“I’m here because this is where I belong.”

“You’ve always belonged here. It didn’t stop you from leaving before.”

Julian sighed as he heard the bitterness in Rogan’s voice. He realized that he had a lot to be forgiven for. He had done almost as much damage to Rogan as Elder Belikov had done to him, only Rogan’s scars were emotional.

“I’m sorry, Rogan. I should not have left, and I will never forgive myself for it. I was hurt, and I didn’t know who I could trust.”

“You could have trusted me.”

Julian turned his head and grabbed Rogan’s chin, forcing his face up to meet his. “I’ve always trusted you, Rogan, always. You are the one person in the world that I knew would never betray me.”

Rogan’s eyes dropped. “But I did betray you, didn’t I?”

“No, you didn’t. You were scared. I get that. But I also believe that eventually you would have accepted us and come to me. I know it deep down in my heart. You never betrayed me, Rogan.”

“I let this happen to you,” Rogan cried out.

“No, you didn’t. What happened to me had nothing to do with you. I told you that. Elder Belikov was trying to kill me, Rogan. I

have absolutely no doubt that he would have killed you if you had been there.”

“I was on a date,” Rogan whispered.

“You were...”

“On a date,” Rogan finished for him.

“Why?” Julian had to ask before he jumped to conclusions. After seeing Rogan’s anguish, Julian knew there had to be a plausible explanation. Rogan cared about him too much to betray their mating bond in that manner.

Rogan shrugged. “My parents set it up, and I was too afraid to tell them no. I figured if I went out with Valentina that they would get off my back until I could figure out things with us.”

“Valentina Belikov?”

“Yeah.” Rogan glanced up at him, frowning. “Why?”

“It just seems a little strange to me that you were out on a date with Valentina Belikov at the exact moment that her father kidnapped me and tried to kill me, especially considering that Elder Belikov knew you are my mate.”

“He knew?”

“Oh yeah, he knew.”

“But we hadn’t told anyone yet.”

“It still seems like too much of a coincidence to me.” Julian grimaced. “I’d say we were both set up from the very beginning.”

“But why?” Rogan asked. “We’ve never done anything to Elder Belikov or Valentina. Why would they hate us so much?”

“I don’t know, baby, but I suspect we’ll find out pretty soon. Once they learn I’m back to stay, they will be forced to do something. Elder Belikov can’t let out what he did to me. He could be banished himself.”

“You—” Julian felt Rogan’s hard swallow against his skin and tightened his arms around the man to give him courage. “You’re staying?”

"I'd like to, Rogan." Julian leaned up and turned to look down at Rogan. He stroked his hand down the side of Rogan's pale face. "If you'll let me."

Before Rogan could answer him, the door swung open and Gertrude rushed in, followed by two other men. Julian hunched over Rogan to protect him until he recognized Alpha Asher Stone.

"Julian." Asher looked shocked to see him.

"Alpha Stone," Julian replied as he leaned back. "It's good to see you."

"I wasn't expecting to see you," Asher replied. He arched an eyebrow. "Ever."

"Reports of my death were a little premature."

"I'm sure you have a lot to discuss," the other man, a stranger, said, "but I'd really like to get a look at my patient."

Julian growled. He didn't know this man, and he wasn't about to let anyone near his mate that he didn't know. He'd spent too many years letting Rogan take care of himself. It was time to step up and be a true mate to the man.

"Get over yourself already," the man snapped as he dropped a leather doctor's bag onto the bed. "I'm the doctor *you* called for. Now get the hell out of my way before I have you removed."

"Dary, I suspect that isn't the way to get what you want with Julian," Asher said as he stepped forward to wrap an arm around the man's waist. "You might try asking nicely."

"I don't have time for nice. My patient is bleeding all over the place, and if I don't stop it now, it might be too late." The man made a shooing gesture with his hands. "Now move."

Julian suddenly understood that he was facing Asher Stone's very human mate. He tried to remember that as he scooted to the head of the bed behind Rogan and settled his mate's body back against him.

He arched an eyebrow at the doctor. "Better?"

Chapter 5

“I suppose that will work.”

Rogan stared back and forth between Julian and Darren as they argued. He wasn't sure if they were truly angry with each other or if they were just making conversation. The tension in the room was so thick that any bit of conversation would be a distraction.

It didn't help any that Darren started touching his cuts. The pain was starting to come back with a vengeance. The cuts had hurt in the beginning but after awhile, they all seem to kind of blend together until he felt nothing.

Rogan knew there was something wrong about that, but at the moment he couldn't seem to grasp what exactly it was. All that seemed to be making any sense to him was the feel of Julian's chest behind him, moving up and down as the man breathed. Each breath was a balm to Rogan's tired soul. It meant that Julian was alive.

“Now, what have you done to yourself, my friend?”

Rogan looked up. “Hey, Darren, did you bring my puppy?”

“Uh.” Darren glanced over his shoulder at Asher for a moment. He had a small smile on his face when he turned back to Rogan. “Not yet, she's not quite ready to leave the clinic. I think another couple of days will do it, though.”

“She's okay, isn't she?”

“Oh, yes, as right as rain. She's just very small, and I want to make sure she gets plenty of nutrients before I hand her over. I think she was taken away from her mother a little too early. That's all.”

Okay, that made sense to Rogan. “Puppies shouldn't be taken from their mothers before they are old enough.”

“No, no, you’re absolutely correct.”

Rogan winced when Darren’s fingers probed one particularly tender area just below his bellybutton. He stretched his arms and legs out when they started to ache then wiggled back against Julian.

“Are you okay, baby?”

Rogan pushed his head back against Julian’s chest. “Hurt.”

“Well,” Darren said, “I don’t think it’s going to get any better any time soon.”

“How bad is it, doc?” Julian asked.

“I won’t lie to you, Julian. It’s pretty bad.”

“David,” Rogan whispered. “His name is David Miller.”

“David? But I thought...”

Rogan felt Julian sigh behind him more than heard it, but he didn’t understand it. The sigh sounded frustrated. Rogan was just doing what Julian wanted. If he needed to be David Miller in order to stay, he’d be David Miller.

“My name is Julian Gallagher. I’ve been going by David Miller since I was attacked.”

“That would be why everyone thought you were dead,” Asher said. “We couldn’t find hide nor hair of you, Julian.”

“That’s the way it needed to be at the time,” Julian said.

“And now that’s changed?”

“It has. I thought I was protecting Rogan and the rest of my clan by staying away. I’ve found that I was wrong. They are in as much danger without me as they are with me. That being the case, I’d prefer to be at my mate’s side.”

“One of these days, you big bad alpha types are going to remember to ask us before making decisions that affect our lives so much,” Darren said then nodded down at Rogan. “Or things like this happen.”

“Darren.”

Rogan could hear the warning in Asher's voice and tilted his head up to look across the room at the man. Somehow, he wasn't surprised that Asher had his arms crossed over his chest as he glared at Darren.

He snickered, unable to help himself, and looked at Darren. "Being the alpha bitch kind of takes on a whole new meaning with these guys, doesn't it?"

"Oh, you have no idea." Darren laughed. "Although, you should have seen the look on my face the first time he called me the alpha bitch. I was ready to neuter him."

Rogan's eyes widened when Darren reached into his bag and pulled out a large syringe and two small bottles of liquid, one clear and one silver looking. "What's that?" he asked as Darren began to draw liquid from each bottle with the syringe.

Darren finished with the syringe and placed the bottles back into his bag. He sighed deeply when he looked over at Rogan, the syringe still held in his hand. "Rogan, you have silver poisoning, which is what happens when you get liquid silver in your bloodstream. It also means that you're dying, Rogan."

"No!" Julian shouted, tensing behind Rogan. The arms that had been resting against Rogan's chest tightened. "You can fix him. I know you can."

"I *might* be able to fix him, and I stress the word might." Darren held up the syringe in his hand. "This is basically a silver poisoning cocktail, one created by myself after an incident at our home when someone tried to use silver to harm us."

"A silver poisoning cocktail?" Julian asked. "What's in it?"

"Silver nitrate and wolfsbane, actually." Darren chuckled. "A strange combination, but it seems to do the job. However, there are dangers in using it, and I want you to be fully aware of them before I use it on you."

"What dangers?" Julian asked, his voice sounding strained.

"I'm using silver nitrate, which is basically silver. It was once called *lunar caustic* because silver was called *luna* by ancient

alchemists. Luna is derived from the Latin name for the moon. I'm sure you see the connection there."

"Yes."

"Wolfsbane, also known as aconitum, is used to prolong the Lykan condition in the event a werewolf comes under the full moon's influence. Taken internally, aconitum acts very notably on the circulation, the respiration, and the nervous system, slowing them down. Aconitum is also said to kill werewolves if they wear, smell, or eat it.

"And this means what?" Julian asked.

"The combination of silver nitrate and wolfsbane will drive the poison from Rogan's system. But it won't be easy. He will experience a sensation of burning, tingling, and numbness in the mouth and face, and burning in the abdomen."

"He's lived through worse."

"That's not all, Julian." Darren looked pensive. "When he comes out of the treatment, he will be feral."

"Might be, you mean?"

"No." Darren shook his head. "I mean he *will* be feral."

"This isn't sounding so fun anymore," Rogan complained.

"Then maybe you should have thought of that before you poured liquid silver into your cuts," Darren replied then he held up the syringe again. "There's only one way to force the silver from your system, Rogan, and this is it."

Rogan felt Julian's chest rumble against his back, and a deep growl sounded from behind him. He reached down and patted one of the legs surrounding him on each side of his body. "I'll be okay."

"No, you won't," Darren said. Rogan glared at him. The man needed to learn when to shut up. Julian was tense enough without Darren adding to it. "Rogan, you need to understand what you're going to go through before I do this."

"It'll hurt, and I'll turn feral. You already said that."

“Rogan,” Asher said, “if we can’t bring you back from being feral, you’ll have to be put down for the safety of everyone.”

“Damn!” Rogan dropped his head back against Julian’s chest again as Asher’s words sank in. He really knew how to fuck things up. He was just starting to realize his dream of having Julian back in his life, and he might lose him again. Didn’t that just suck?

“What happens if we don’t do this?” Julian asked.

“He’ll die,” Darren replied. “The silver has entered the bloodstream. I can’t pick it out with tweezers. This is the only way to get it out of his system.”

“There’s no other way?”

“No.”

“What do we need to do?”

“Once I give this cocktail to Rogan, it will force the silver out of his system. During that time, you can’t touch him. The silver will most likely pour out of the cuts he already has. However, the process will make him go feral. Rogan will shift. He won’t be able to stop himself. That’s a side effect of the wolfsbane.”

“I won’t leave him, not again,” Julian said. “I already did that and look what happened.”

“You didn’t do this, Julian,” Rogan said as he tilted his head back to look up at Julian. “You’re not to blame for what happened to me.”

“And you’re not to blame for what happened to me.”

A sudden thought struck Rogan. He sat up and looked at Darren, gesturing to the syringe the man still held in his hand. “That cocktail of yours, could it help Julian? They burned him and poured silver on him.”

The corners of Darren’s lips tilted down into a frown when he shook his head. “I’m afraid not, Rogan. Julian’s injuries have already healed. There’s too much scar tissue damage to reverse what happened to him.”

Rogan felt like finding a deep, dark hole, climbing in, and curling up to cry. The scars on Julian's body didn't bother him beyond the fact that they were a testament to the horror Julian had suffered.

The beauty Rogan had always found when looking at Julian was still there. Julian's naturally handsome rugged features could never be marred by scars, no matter how devastating they looked.

He had just hoped to relieve Julian of some of the memories that refused to leave because they were burned into his body. And maybe he wanted to relieve some of his own guilt feelings as well. No matter what Julian said, Rogan knew if he had been by the man's side, he could have saved him.

"Do the scars bother you that much?"

Rogan tilted his head back to look at Julian, his eyes going not to the man's eyes but the scars on the side of his face. He reached up and stroked the tips of his fingers over the scars on the side of Julian's face.

"Only in as much as they stand for what you went through." Rogan suddenly felt exhausted. The last week's upheaval was finally starting to take its toll on him. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against Julian's shoulder, pressing his hand against the side of Julian's neck. "You're still as sexy as you were the day I met you."

"Yeah?"

Rogan smiled at the thinly veiled anxiety he could hear in Julian's voice. "Yeah."

"Uh, I hate to break up this touching moment, but Rogan's blood pressure is starting to drop. If we're going to do this, then we need to get to it. Julian, you might want to move."

"I'm not leaving."

"I didn't say you had to, but the silver that comes out of Rogan can still hurt you."

"I've had worse," Julian said. "I'm not leaving."

"Julian—"

"Darren," Asher said softly, "let it be."

“Fine,” Darren huffed. “Rogan, I need your arm. We need to do this while we still have a chance of making a difference.”

“So, stick me already.” Rogan sighed and let his arm drop down beside him. A moment later he winced when he felt the needle of the syringe enter his arm. A burning sensation started from the injection site and slowly moved up his arm.

“Oh fuck, that hurts,” he hissed and opened his eyes as the sensation increased. It moved slowly throughout his entire body until he felt like hot lava flowed through his veins. Rogan clenched his hands together and pressed his lips together to try and not cry out in pain.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Julian whispered.

Rogan felt Julian’s arms tighten around him and turned his face into the man’s neck. He breathed in deeply as the pain invaded every cell of his body. It was unlike anything he ever imagined, even worse than the cuts on his body or the feeling of the silver he poured over those cuts.

His head pounded like someone was beating on it with a jackhammer. Rogan felt something trickle down the sides of his temple. At first, he thought it was sweat until he heard Julian hiss. Then he realized it was the silver pushing from his body.

He struggled out of Julian’s arms, pushing himself away from the man. When Julian tried to pull him back, Rogan scooted away then suddenly felt nothing but air behind him. He yelped as he fell over the side of the bed and landed on the cold hard floor.

Julian and Darren were instantly at his side, reaching for him. Rogan held up his hand to stop them. “No, don’t touch me. I don’t want this stuff to get on you.”

Darren did as he asked and moved back, but Julian just shook his head and continued reaching for him. “We’ve both spent enough time going through pain on our own,” Julian said as he wrapped his arms around Rogan again. “It’s time we started sharing with each other.”

“Don’t want you hurt anymore,” Rogan whispered, although he was grateful to be back in Julian’s arms. The pain somehow felt less when Julian was holding him.

“The only way I’m going to be hurt is if we’re separated again.”

“Okay.” Rogan was in too much pain to argue with Julian. He could feel the silver being forced from his body but more than that, he could feel his body starting to shift. He fought it as hard as he could, not wanting to turn feral. He grabbed onto Julian’s arms when he felt himself losing the battle. “Julian!”

“I’m here, Rogan,” Julian said as he brushed his fingers over the side of Rogan’s face. “I won’t let you go.”

Rogan could hear the others talking in the room, their voices raised as if they were arguing. He tried to listen to what they were saying, to hone in on any one voice, but all he could hear was a loud rushing in his ears.

He reached for Julian as panic filled him. He couldn’t discern Julian’s voice over the white noise filling his head and was afraid that he was losing the man. The burning lava in his veins seemed to take on an even higher heat, burning through him until Rogan felt like his entire body was on fire.

He knew his flesh would start falling from his body at any moment. He was dying. There was no other explanation. The sunshine had just come back into his cold world after three years of darkness, and he would die before he could enjoy it.

“Julian!” Rogan screamed. His body arched into the air, and his body stiffened as tight as a bowstring. The loud roar in his head grew louder, drowning out everything except his roar of anguish as he shifted into his werewolf form, that of a man but with wolflike features.

Claws extended from his fingertips. Hair grew to cover his entire body even as his body increased in size, growing more muscular, more dangerous. Sharp canine teeth dropped down from his gums, cutting into his lips as he tried to press them together.

Rogan's mind grew hazy, no longer filled with thoughts of losing his mate. Now, the only thing he could think about was escaping the pain shooting through his body. Rogan growled as he pushed himself up and leapt across the room. He landed on his hands and feet then turned to look around the room, surprised to find it nearly empty when he had heard people talking.

A low growl worked its way up his throat as he took in the destroyed room and its sole occupant. Rogan bared his teeth at the man. His hackles rose when the man simply crossed his arms over his chest and arched an eyebrow at him.

It was an aggressive move on the man's part, one meant to convey the fact that he was not intimidated by Rogan's threatening growl. Rogan tilted his head to one side, confused by the challenge he could feel coming from the man. He was the alpha of his clan. This man should be on his back, showing his belly to Rogan.

Rogan growled again and faked a lunge at the man, pulling back at the last second. The man didn't move, not even a muscle. Rogan started to circle the man, watching him carefully. The man didn't even move when Rogan leaned in and sniffed at him. His pulse didn't even speed up, and Rogan didn't understand that until the scent of the man reached him.

Rogan froze as the most wonderful scent he had ever smelled filled his senses. His body instantly went from cautious and concerned to hard and horny. This time, his growl was filled with need as he rubbed his face against the man's leg. He wanted to roll in the scent coming off the man, to saturate his body in the sweet fragrance.

Rogan shivered when he felt the man's hand settle in his hair. The simple touch was enough to make Rogan ache. He pushed his head up into the man's gentle touch, wanting more, needing more.

"Good boy."

Rogan stilled, bristling at those words. They didn't sound right to him. He leaned down and backed away from the man, watching him.

Tension began to make the muscles on the back of his neck ache. He growled low in his throat.

The ease in which the man walked around the room bothered Rogan. He didn't seem to be afraid of Rogan in the least little bit. Rogan tensed as he prepared to jump the man. He suddenly felt a deep need to make the man submit to him, to stop ignoring the fact that Rogan was the dominant in the room.

"You don't want to do that, love," the man warned.

Rogan ignored the man's words as if he had never spoken and lunged. His aim was for the man's throat. He never made it. Before Rogan could clamp his teeth around the man's neck he found himself flat on the floor, a large, heavy weight pressing down on him from behind.

Rogan roared and tried to toss the man off of him. His struggle gained him nothing but a few aches and pains from the hard floor and a set of very sharp teeth wrapped around his neck. Rogan froze at the touch of the man's canines on his skin.

There was something disturbing about the feeling of those teeth on the nape of his neck, something that Rogan's mind had a hard time processing. He liked it, and that confused the hell out of Rogan.

It also made him angry. Rogan renewed his struggle to get free. He would make the man submit to him if it was the last thing he did. Rogan tried to roll over onto his back so that he could claw and bite at the man pressing over the top of him, but the teeth on his neck refused to let go.

He pushed himself onto his hands and knees, hoping to dislodge the man that way, but all that gained him was a sharp smack to his ass. Rogan growled then froze when he felt something long and hard press against him from behind. The need he had to dominate the man was suddenly tempered with his need to feel that something dominate him.

The alpha that Rogan had been for the last three years warred with everything he was feeling, every cell in his body that was screaming

for him to submit to the natural dominance he could feel in the man pinning him to the floor.

Rogan shuddered as sharp claws dug into the skin of his hip, holding him in place. When two fingers suddenly entered his ass, Rogan pushed back against them until he realized what he was doing, and then he growled and started to struggle again.

He was alpha. He wasn't supposed to submit, no matter how much he wanted to. The hand digging into his hip and the teeth in his neck kept Rogan from moving away. It didn't keep him from struggling.

Rogan jumped when he felt the fingers in his ass pull free only to slap him on the ass again. He howled and fought when the hard shaft behind him suddenly pushed into him. He tried to jerk away from the teeth in his neck even as he acknowledged the fact that he was pushing back against the cock thrusting into his ass.

His body began to vibrate as the man behind him slammed into him over and over again. He'd never felt so full, so satisfied, so dominated. What the man was doing to him was simply a raw act of possession. There was no other way around it.

Electricity seemed to arc through him as the sharp canine teeth in his neck sank in. Rogan trembled as blood trickled down his neck. He felt something deep inside of him snap and cried out as he covered the floor beneath him with his sudden release. His mind blurred and he soared to an awesome, shuddering ecstasy.

"Mine!"

The simple word was filled with possession and echoed through Rogan's head. The rough masculine scent of the man claiming him combined with the scent of sex filled the room. Both scents surrounded Rogan, saturating him, sinking into every pore in his body until he knew he belonged to the man.

"Mate," Rogan sighed silently in pleasant exhaustion. After so many years of upheaval and pain, Rogan finally felt like he was at peace. All was right in his world because his world was right there with him, in him, over him, possessing him.

Rogan had been claimed by his werewolf mate. It was the only thought in his head as he faded off to sleep. Julian had finally come home and claimed him.

Chapter 6

Julian knew he held his mate in his arms even before he opened his eyes. The feel of the man, his mere scent, they both called to Julian. He stroked his hands down Rogan's sides as he opened his eyes.

His breath caught in his throat at the sheer beauty of the man sleeping peacefully in his arms, his square jaw, his gently curved brow, and strong Roman nose. But the small smile of contentment on Rogan's face was the most beautiful of all.

And he belonged to Julian, every last luscious inch. Julian had claimed Rogan fair and square the previous night. Their bond could never be disputed now. They were mated and would be until the day they died.

Julian couldn't have been happier with the prospect. He knew he still had a lot of making up to do to Rogan, and he would. He just needed to get a lay of the land first and figure out the best way to protect Rogan and his clan.

He needed to start by taking a shower, getting dressed, then informing his clan that he was back. It was sure to be a shocker to everyone but Gertrude. She was the only one he'd kept in contact with over the years. He needed some way to keep an eye on his mate. Gertrude was the logical choice, even if she chewed his ass every time he talked to her.

Julian leaned over and placed a small kiss on Rogan's brow then rolled out of bed. If he was going to start living his life again, he wanted to be clean first. An energetic bounce entered his steps as he made his way to the bathroom until he saw the tub.

It was still stained with Rogan's blood and brought back the memory of almost losing his mate. Julian sagged against the wall as he looked at the tub, remembering Rogan's cut and bleeding body lying inside of it. It was a memory he didn't think he would ever forget. It was burned into his mind.

Julian pushed himself away from the wall and walked over to the tub. He tried to ignore the drops of blood splattered all over the white porcelain and turned on the water. A washcloth and some soap took care of most of the stains. Hard scrubbing took care of the rest.

When he was done and the tub shined once again, Julian climbed into the shower and washed up. Once his hair was washed and his skin was clean, he leaned his head forward and rested it against the shower wall, letting the hot water spray down on the back of his neck.

As much as he was filled with joy at finally claiming his mate, he could still feel the tension in his neck from the stress of the situation. He never wanted to find Rogan in a tub of blood again. It almost destroyed him.

Julian still didn't know what kind of man he would find when Rogan finally woke up. Rogan wasn't exactly in his right mind, or body, the night before when Julian claimed him. He didn't know what to expect.

He knew what he hoped though. He hoped Rogan would be as overjoyed as he was that they were now forever bonded. No matter what happened in their lives from here on out, they would be mated, together. By right and shifter law, they could not be separated.

The mating mark on the back of Rogan's neck proved that. The fact that it would always be there for everyone to see sent a thrill of excitement through Julian. He groaned as his cock filled just from the knowledge that his mark would forever be on his mate, proclaiming their bond.

Julian turned the shower off and climbed out, reaching for a towel as he did. He made quick work of drying off and putting clean clothes

on. Luckily, and a tad bit strangely, all of his clothes were still in the closet. Rogan never threw any of it away.

He straightened up the bathroom, dropping his dirty clothes in the hamper and hanging up his wet towel then walked back into the bedroom. It was still a mess. There really hadn't been time to clean it the night before.

It took Julian far longer to tear his eyes away from the naked man sleeping in his bed than it did for him to straighten up the bedroom. There were several pieces of furniture that couldn't be saved. Julian stacked them next to the door to be taken out. The rest of the broken items were swept up and dumped in the bathroom trash.

Julian was just walking out of the bathroom when he saw the bedroom door fly open. He jumped back and pressed himself against the side of the doorframe as he watched a blonde woman run into the room and to the side of the bed. He tensed, ready to jump and defend his mate when her words trickled through his panic.

"Rogan, darling," she cried out, her hands running over Rogan. "I heard about what happened to you, my poor darling, and I've come to take care of you."

Julian rolled his eyes and stepped out of the bathroom. "Rogan already has someone to take care of him, Valentina."

"Julian!"

"The one and the same." He almost chuckled at the shocked look on Valentina's face, just barely preventing himself by pressing his lips together.

"What are you doing here, Julian?" she snapped. "You're supposed to be dead."

"You mean banished, don't you, Valentina?"

Valentina's face blanched, and Julian knew he had her. She was neck deep in this mess with her father. She expected him to be dead, not just banished.

"I'd appreciate it if you would step away from Rogan."

"You can't have him," Valentina snapped. "He's mine."

Julian could see her perfectly manicured fingers tighten around Rogan's arm. He had to wonder about Valentina's mental state. Her eyes were a bit glazed over, but the fury in them was shining bright straight through. It was obvious that Valentina hated him with every fiber of her being.

"I'm afraid I'd have to disagree with you there, Valentina. Rogan is mine. He always has been. He always will be."

"Rogan is mine. Daddy promised him to me. We're to be mated."

Julian crossed his arms over his chest as he slowly walked around to the end of the bed. He tried to act casual, but he could feel the tension growing in his muscles. Valentina was trying to lay claim to someone that belonged to him.

"You're a little too late, Valentina," Julian said carefully, trying to watch his words but wanting to get his point across to the woman. "I claimed Rogan last night. He's already mated, and not even your illustrious father can change that."

Despite everything, Julian wasn't prepared for the shriek that filled the air as Valentina jumped to her feet and raced for the door. Her face turned red as she stomped her foot, glaring at Julian.

"Just wait until I talk to Daddy," she shouted. "Rogan will be mine."

"Over my dead body."

"I'd like nothing better, but next time I'll see that it's done right. Next time you will be dead."

Julian winced as the door slammed behind Valentina. She was all fired up. Julian had no doubt that she would run straight to her father, which meant he had little time to prepare. Either Elder Belikov would be coming from him or the council would. Either way, everyone around him would be in danger.

"Well, you're certainly making friends fast."

Julian swung around, the frown on his face quickly turning to a smile when he saw Rogan's golden eyes staring back at him. He

quickly crossed the room to sit on the side of the bed next to Rogan, reaching for his hand.

“Rogan, how are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly well, considering.”

“Any pain?”

A light flush filled Rogan’s face. “Define pain.”

Julian frowned. “Does anything hurt?”

“Well, there’s a definite ache in my ass.” Rogan chuckled. “But other than that I feel fine, great, in fact.”

Suddenly understanding the meaning behind Rogan’s words, and enjoying the delightful man that had woken up, Julian stretched on the bed next to his mate. “I imagine I can help you with that ache if you want.”

“Not dressed you can’t.”

“Want to bet?” Julian grinned as he moved in, pressing his lips against Rogan’s. The man’s acceptance was instantaneous, which thrilled Julian down to his toes. A growl of satisfaction built in Julian’s throat when he felt Rogan lean into the kiss, his mouth opening and allowing Julian in.

It was a heady feeling, having such acceptance. It made Julian ache. The need to dominate Rogan again and claim him was almost overwhelming. He’d been pretty rough on Rogan last night, and he wanted to be just a bit gentler this time around. Rogan deserved it.

Julian kept his lips pressed against Rogan’s, their tongues brushing together as they explored each other. He pushed against Rogan until the man rolled onto his back then moved over the top of him.

The feeling of Rogan’s skin under his hands drove Julian crazy. It was soft and silky, hot and hard. It felt perfect under Julian’s fingertips. He pushed the blanket down as far as he could, wanting to explore more of Rogan’s skin.

“Julian,” Rogan moaned as he tugged at his shirt, “take off your clothes. It’s been so long. I want to feel you.”

“Me first.”

Julian didn't give Rogan a chance to say anything more. He claimed the man's mouth with a hunger that quickly consumed them both. He could feel Rogan's chest moving rapidly up and down as he panted.

Julian moved his lips away from Rogan's mouth and kissed a small trail down his face to his throat. He licked at the small pulse that beat against his lips. The sweet taste of the man's skin exploded across his tongue. Julian groaned, never having felt anything better in his life.

He moved further down Rogan's body, wanting to explore more, to taste more. He'd never tasted anything so sweet yet masculine. He took particular interest in the twin brown-hued nubs that decorated Rogan's chest. The musty taste there was stronger, more masculine than sweet. Julian paid them special attention, rubbing his tongue across them then gently biting down.

Rogan squirmed beneath him. The loud groans that filled the room also filled Julian's soul. He'd waited years to hear those soft sounds come from his mate, more time than anyone should have to wait. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of hearing them.

And the groans just turned louder the farther down Rogan's body that Julian moved. They turned into one continuous moan and full body trembles by the time Julian hovered over Rogan's hard cock. He gently blew across the straining erection.

“Fuck, Julian, what are you doing?”

Julian grinned as he licked away the small pearly drops pooling at the tip of Rogan's cock. “*I'm having fun,*” Julian said through their bond. “*What are you doing?*”

“Losing my fucking mind!”

“*Good.*” Julian chuckled then went back to what he was doing, admiring the thick solid cock in front of his face. But he wanted to do more than admire it. He wanted to taste it. Julian opened his mouth and gulped down Rogan's entire length.

“Julian!” Rogan screamed as he arched into the air.

Julian swallowed hard, trying not to gag when Rogan’s hard cock was shoved further into his mouth. His movements had an added effect when his throat muscles gently massaged Rogan’s cock.

“Like that, baby?”

“Oh god, don’t stop,” Rogan groaned. “I’ve never—”

“Never what, mate?” Julian had to ask. He was intrigued by the sudden intensity he could hear in Rogan’s voice.

“Never felt anything... anything like it.”

Surprised, Julian glanced up to Rogan’s face. The man’s head was moving back and forth on the pillow with wild abandon. His hands were clenched in the sheets besides his body. His face was flushed.

Rogan looked as sexy as hell.

“How about this?” Julian asked as swiped his tongue across the tip, licking away the drops of pre-cum gathering there. At the same time, Julian licked his fingers then reached back and pressed two of them into his own ass.

He had claimed Rogan last night and ridden him hard. This time, he wanted to be the one claimed. He knew exactly how gorgeous Rogan’s cock was, and how large. Rogan was even bigger than he was. The thought of the man pounding into his ass made Julian as hard as stone.

Julian released Rogan’s cock and worked his way down to the man’s balls, sucking them gently then licking them with his tongue. Rogan’s legs spread, giving Julian more access. Rogan brought his knees up then let them fall to the side.

Julian looked up and groaned at the wanton picture his mate made. He looked totally debauched spread out the way he was with a soft glow of passion making his skin look flushed. Julian couldn’t stand it anymore. He needed to feel Rogan inside of him before he exploded.

He quickly shoved two more fingers into his ass, stretching himself as fast as he could. Julian winced in discomfort but not much.

He liked a bit of pain with his pleasure. He liked knowing he was being taken.

“Are you ready for me, baby?” Julian asked out loud.

“Yes, god, yes!”

Julian grinned and pulled his fingers from his ass. He watched shock and amazement start to cover Rogan’s face as he climbed forward and straddled the man’s body. Rogan’s eyes widened until they dominated his face. His mouth dropped open.

When Julian started lowering himself down on his mate’s hard cock, Rogan grabbed his hips and held on. His breath seemed to stutter in his chest with each inch of hard flesh that disappeared into Julian’s body.

“Julian, that’s... that’s... fuck, that’s fantastic.” Rogan’s head fell back against the pillow and seemed to press into it, his throat arching. “I never imagined...”

Julian froze as Rogan’s words filtered into his passion-filled brain. “You never imagined what?”

“I never imagined it would feel so good.”

Julian swallowed hard, the lump in his throat making it nearly impossible to speak. He licked his dry lips before trying to speak again. “Surely you’ve done this before, Rogan.”

Rogan shook his head. “Not till last night.”

“But...” Julian licked his lips again.

Rogan’s golden eyes suddenly bored into Julian’s. They were intense but filled with overwhelming emotion. “I never wanted anyone but you.”

“Geez, Rogan.” Julian grimaced. “You’ve been alone all this time?”

“My mate was dead. Should I have been out partying?”

“No, but I at least expected that you’d—” Julian’s words trailed off when Rogan started shaking his head. “Never?”

“I only ever wanted you.”

Rogan's words were a lot for Julian to take in, especially knowing he was the one that had kept his mate from experiencing the joy of being with a man. On the other hand, Julian was thrilled right down to his toes that no other man had ever been with his mate. Rogan had saved the experience all for him, even if he didn't know he was saving it.

Rogan's eyes widened when Julian suddenly grinned. "Then let me show you what you've been missing."

Julian planted his arms on Rogan's chest and lifted himself up until just the tip of Rogan's engorged cock remained in his ass. He watched Rogan's eyes as he slammed back down, impaling himself on the man's massive cock.

Rogan's eyes rolled back into his head. His hands tightened around Julian's hips. A long, hungry groan fell from his lips. "Again, Julian," Rogan gasped.

Julian did it again and again until he worked up a steady rhythm. Each push of Rogan's hard length into Julian's body created a delicious ache. Julian glanced down at Rogan to see his mate watching him.

"Need to fuck you," Rogan whispered.

"You are fucking me."

Rogan growled as he suddenly moved, rolling Julian onto his back. Rogan's arms wrapped around Julian's thighs, and the man began pounding into him before Julian caught his breath.

"Need... to... fuck... you!" Rogan grunted between powerful thrusts.

Julian was shocked at Rogan's behavior, especially considering the man had never done this before. Rogan's teeth were bared, his lips pulled tight. His canines had even slipped down over his bottom lip. He looked ferocious.

He looked hot.

“Do you want to bite me, mate?” Julian whispered into Rogan’s mind. *“Do you want to claim me as yours, Rogan, and leave your bite mark in my skin so everyone will know that I belong to you?”*

Julian saw Rogan’s eyes stray to his throat, and then the man swallowed. *“Julian.”*

Julian tilted his head back, baring his throat to his mate. He cried out when Rogan struck, not from pain but from the intense pleasure that flooded his body. It was overwhelming, sending Julian spiraling into an orgasm so intense, he was pretty sure he lost consciousness for an instant.

When Julian opened his eyes a few moments later, it was just in time to see Rogan throw his head back. His loud roar of release filled the room. Hot seed filled Julian’s ass as Rogan continued to pound into him, riding out his orgasm for several seconds before finally collapsing down on top of him.

Julian rubbed his hands down Rogan’s sweaty back. He started to grow concerned when Rogan’s body continued to shake. Julian leaned back and tried to get a look at Rogan’s face, but the man buried his head in Julian’s neck.

“Rogan,” Julian whispered, “what’s wrong?”

Rogan shook his head, refusing to speak, but Julian could feel the man’s tears dripping down onto his skin. Julian stroked his hand through Rogan’s hair. He turned his head and kissed Rogan on the side of his head.

“I can’t fix it if you don’t tell me what’s wrong, baby.”

Rogan shook his head again.

Julian knew something drastic had to be going on for Rogan to cry. The man was too self-assured and strong to give in to his emotions easily. Julian tried to give his support by stroking his fingers through Rogan’s hair over and over again. He planted little kisses on the side of Rogan’s head until he felt the man start to relax.

When Rogan’s body finally settled down and he leaned back, his eyes were red-rimmed. He seemed to have trouble meeting Julian’s

eyes. Julian placed his fingers under Rogan's chin and raised his face up until their eyes met.

"I love you, Rogan."

The words were simple, but they seemed to fill Rogan's face with joy. He slowly began to smile even though more tears were filling his eyes.

"Yeah?" he murmured almost as if he was afraid to trust the words Julian spoke.

"Yeah," Julian said. He smiled and stroked the wavy black hair back from Rogan's face. "I've always loved you. And I know it doesn't excuse what I did, but I stayed away because I loved you. I didn't want anything to happen to you."

Rogan's eyebrows furrowed. "But—"

"I know, it was stupid, but it was the only way I could think of to protect you. Elder Belikov almost killed me. If Thomas hadn't found me, I wouldn't have made it through the night. It took me weeks to heal, to even know my own name. It wasn't like he could take me to the hospital. Thomas had to treat me at his house."

"I wish I had been there," Rogan whispered.

"I wish you had been there, too, baby. It just wasn't possible. Elder Belikov had to believe I was dead. I wasn't in any condition to protect myself."

"I would have protected you," Rogan growled.

"You did protect me, Rogan. You were the only thing that kept me alive." Julian grimaced as he remembered the time when he was healing. He had been in so much pain that the thought of the danger Rogan was in were all that kept him from giving up.

"I should have been there."

"Shoulda, coulda, woulda, Rogan. We both made mistakes, and we both suffered for it. What matters now is that we're together again. You've claimed me. I've claimed you. And no one can take that away from us."

“What happens when Belikov comes after you again,” Rogan asked. “Because you know he will come after you the moment he learns you’re not dead. He can’t allow you to live, Julian. You’re walking, talking proof that he lied to everyone.”

Julian’s hands tightened on Rogan as he pulled his mate close to his chest. “Then we fight, mate, because I’m not giving you up a second time.”

Rogan had a grin on his face when he leaned back. “Things have changed a bit since you’ve been gone, Julian. I know just the people to call to back us up.”

“Oh?” Julian asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“How do you feel about vampires?”

Chapter 7

“Are you sure about this, Rogan?”

Rogan glanced over his shoulder at Julian. The man looked incredibly nervous. His face seemed tense, his lips pressed tightly together. He kept looking out the front window then pacing before looking again.

Rogan knew Julian had reason to be nervous. When he left, their clan wasn't involved with vampires. The tension between vampires and wolf clans was longstanding, and that's what Julian was used to. He wasn't used to being friends with them or inviting one into his home.

“It'll be fine, Julian. Joel is unlike any vampire you've ever met, believe me. Besides, he's mated to two werewolves. He has a vested interest in keeping the peace.”

“Yeah, and how does that work?”

“What?”

“The whole dominance thing between Grayson Cane and Caleb Redding. If I remember correctly, not only were they at odds with each other, they were both very top dog, if you know what I mean.”

Rogan chuckled. “They are still both very top dog. The only person Caleb submits to is Grayson. He won't even submit to Joel.”

“And this Joel person, he's okay?”

Rogan chuckled. “Yes, he's fine, a pretty nice guy as long as you don't get on his bad side. His name is actually Alejandro Silvanus. Joel is sort of his nickname. It stands for Justice, Order, Ethics, and Law. He's a council mediator.”

Julian's face paled. "A council mediator? Are you crazy? The council is what got us in this position in the first place."

"No, Elder Belikov got us in this position, not the council and not Joel." Rogan shook his finger at Julian. "And I'd be willing to bet almost anything that the council knows nothing about it."

"Almost anything?" The corners of Julian's mouth started to tip up.

"I won't bet you."

"You still can't trust them, Rogan. The council has their own agenda, and it has nothing to do with what's good for the wolf clans."

"I don't trust anyone except you, Julian. I learned my lesson the hard way."

"What about your friends? Isn't that why you asked them here?"

"I asked them here because we need help, and they are the only ones I trust to help us. That does not mean I trust them as much as I trust you."

"How can you know that?" Julian asked. "Until a couple of weeks ago, you hadn't seen me in three years. How do you know that you can trust me?"

"You're my mate." It was that simple to Rogan. If he couldn't trust his mate, who could he trust? Julian was the other half of his soul.

Julian blew out a breath. "Wow, you really know how to say a whole lot in just a few words."

"Am I wrong?"

"No." Julian shook his head. "I believe the same thing. You're the one person on the planet that I know for a fact won't stab me in the back."

"I can ask you the same thing you did. How can you feel that way after all of this time?"

"You were an honorable man back then. I see no reason for that to have changed."

“I could have changed a lot in the last three years, Julian.” Rogan smirked. “I have gotten used to being the alpha of our clan. Maybe the power has gone to my head.”

Julian stared for a moment then burst out laughing. “Fine, be the alpha. I don’t care. Just don’t laugh at me when I demand to be the alpha-mate.”

Rogan grinned as he walked over and wrapped his arms around Julian’s waist. He leaned in and grabbed a quick kiss then stared into his mate’s eyes. “How about we settle on mate and leave it at that?”

“Sounds perfect.”

Rogan chuckled. “Say that again after I bring a vampire into your house.”

“Our house,” Julian reminded Rogan.

Rogan opened his mouth to tell Julian that it *was* their house when he heard a car pull up outside. He quickly crossed to the window and looked out between the white curtains. “I think our friends are here.”

“Perfect.”

Rogan glanced back at Julian. He looked anything but excited. His features had paled again. The corners of his mouth were drawn down in a frown. His steel-blue eyes had turned a dull grayish blue.

“Julian, it’s going to be okay. I trust these men. While it’s not common knowledge and needs to be kept between us, Joel’s son is Alpha Garret Silvanus. His mate is Dean Stone, who is Alpha Asher Stone’s brother and former beta.”

Julian blinked. He looked stunned for a moment then started chuckling. “Wow, it’s all one big circle, isn’t it?”

“It’s one big family, Julian. The closer our ties are to other clans, and even other vampire covens, the stronger we become.” Rogan smirked and shrugged. “Where do you think I got some of the financial backing for my center?”

“I guess I never really thought about it.”

“Joel is loaded.”

“You have investors?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call Joel an investor. More like an interested party. Being gay himself, and with his son being gay, Joel agreed with me that there needed to be some sort of facility for young gay men, be they human, wolf, or even vampire, where they could receive counseling, medical treatment, and a safe roof over their heads where being gay wasn’t an issue.”

Julian cocked his head to one side as he regarded Rogan. “You wanted them to be able to have options.”

“I didn’t want them to have to lose their mates because there were no choices open to them.” Rogan grimaced. “I didn’t want them to go through what I went through.”

“Do you ever talk to your family?”

“No.” Rogan pushed his hand through his hair, grimacing as he remembered his last contact with his family. “When I decided to stand in for you as alpha, my family washed their hands of me.”

Rogan laughed harshly. “Well, I wouldn’t say that is exactly true. After they realized I was going to take over for you and refused to accept the bride they chose for me, then they washed their hands of me.”

“They still tried to marry you off?”

“Yep. Valentina still pops up every couple of weeks. She’s convinced that I will suddenly become straight and marry her. She has the full backing of her father and my family. They want to merge our clans under a mate covenant.”

“I hope you realize that it’s impossible to have a mate covenant now that we’re mated, right?”

Rogan grinned, suddenly feeling better about the situation. “Just one more time that you’ve saved me from a fate worse than death.” Rogan shuddered. “Can you imagine being mated to Valentina?”

“Did I hear my name mentioned?”

A sudden chill of foreboding shot down Rogan’s spine. He swung around to see Valentina standing in the doorway, her father standing right behind her. The self-satisfied smile on Valentina’s lips scared

the crap out of Rogan. The woman was malicious and worked very hard to get what she wanted in life. Rogan suddenly had the feeling she was about to get him.

“Valentina, Elder Belikov.” Rogan nodded to the elder in deference to his position on the council, not because he felt any respect for the man. Rogan detested him. Valentina was evil, but she had learned it all from her father. “I didn’t realize we had an appointment.”

“And I didn’t realize you would break a council mandate so easily, Rogan,” Elder Belikov said as he followed his daughter into the room. His eyes strayed briefly to Julian then quickly back to Rogan. “This person has been banished from all clans. I cannot believe you are associating with him.”

“This *person* is my mate.”

“He is an outrage!” the elder shouted.

“He is my mate.” Rogan didn’t shout because that would be rude and disrespectful, but he did put as much steel into his voice as he could.

“He is dead in the eyes of all clans.”

Rogan smirked and crossed his arms over his chest as he sat on the edge of his desk. “Fine, then there shouldn’t be any problem. If he’s dead, then I’m not breaking any laws.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” Julian asked. “What did I ever do to you?”

Elder Belikov ignored Julian’s words as if acknowledging them would make him real. Valentina wasn’t so restrained. She turned to glare at Julian. Her eyes were filled with so much hate that Rogan suddenly worried for his mate’s life.

“You took Rogan from me!” she screeched.

“He was never yours.”

Rogan’s eyebrows shot up to his forehead when Valentina’s face turned red, and she stomped her foot. She might have been a full grown woman, and considered quite beautiful in most circles, but at

the moment, she looked like a small child throwing a temper tantrum because she wasn't getting her favorite toy.

Rogan had the strong feeling he was that toy. He had never kissed Valentina or touched her in any manner. He hadn't even held her hand. Beyond that one date they had three years ago, he barely associated with her. He had no idea how he had even come under her radar.

"Rogan is mine," Valentina said. "He has always been mine, and I will not give him up."

"I've claimed Rogan, and he's claimed me. We're mated, Valentina," Julian replied. "There is nothing you can do about it."

Rogan's heart seemed to stop beating in his chest as he watched the next few seconds like they were moving in slow motion. Julian had no idea how crazy Valentina was. She needed to be treated like a feral animal, with an extreme amount of caution.

Valentina screamed and launched herself at Julian. Her face took on the appearance of a demonic possession, all wrinkled up and flushed red with rage. Her claws extended as she jumped, and Rogan knew they were aimed at Julian. She planned to take his life.

Rogan moved as fast as he could, throwing himself in between Valentina and his mate. He winced when he felt Valentina's claws sink into his shoulders. Almost immediately, he could feel blood start dripping down his body, saturating his shirt. It wasn't a killing blow, but it hurt like hell.

"You will not harm my mate!" Rogan growled.

He grabbed Valentina's wrists and pulled them away from his body, yanking her claws from his skin. Giving her a little shove, Rogan pushed Valentina away from him and Julian. Almost instantly, he felt Julian press something against the bleeding wound in his shoulders.

"You've attacked my alpha-mate, Valentina," Julian said from behind him. "That's an offense punishable by death. Even your father can't get you out of this one."

“As you do not exist,” Elder Belikov said, “then there is no offense.”

“I may be dead to you, elder, but Rogan still has the rank of alpha-mate. As such, the offense stands, whether I am dead or alive.”

“Then dead you will be.” Rogan stiffened when Elder Belikov gestured to several men standing behind him. They walked into the room and stood beside the elder. The elder pointed to Julian. “Please see that that man is taken into custody to stand before the council for violating council mandates. He is to be held until such time as the council can decide on his fate.”

“No,” Rogan snapped, “you’re not going to take him.”

“You have no say in the matter, Rogan. He has broken council mandate by returning to this clan.” Elder Belikov grinned wickedly. “I imagine the council will have a lot to say about it.”

The man beside the elder started forward. They stopped when Rogan let his canines down and flashed his claws. He wasn’t going to let the elder take Julian away again, not without a fight. He remembered what happened last time, and he wasn’t going to let that happen again.

“I’ve seen what happens when people are in your custody, elder. I have no intention of allowing you to harm my mate for a second time. If you feel an appearance before the council is warranted, so be it, but you will not be taking my mate from this house. We will appear before the council willingly, but we will come on our own.”

“Do you really expect me to trust that you will willingly appear before the council?”

“I guarantee it.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

“If you don’t believe Rogan,” said a strong voice from the doorway, “then you can believe me. I will ensure that Rogan Owens appears before the council.”

Some of the tension released from Rogan’s shoulders as he looked beyond Elder Belikov to see Joel and his mates standing in the

doorway. Joel looked slightly amused as he sauntered into the room. His larger than life wolf mates walked in behind him, protecting the vampire.

“Elder Belikov,” Joel said as he gave the man a small nod of his head, “so nice to see you again.”

“Silvanus,” the elder said, nodding back.

Rogan almost laughed at the stricken look on Elder Belikov’s face. The elder clearly hadn’t expected to see a vampire coven leader and council mediator come to Rogan and Julian’s rescue.

“So, what seems to be the issue here, Elder Belikov?” Joel asked as he glanced between several of the people in the room.

Rogan wanted to laugh, but he knew now wasn’t the time to do so. Joel could be one scary dude when he wanted to be. He didn’t even have to become violent. Just standing there, his long black hair flowing down his back and his deep blue eyes taking in every move, he was intimidating. And strangely enough, except for Valentina, Joel was the shortest person in the room.

“I do not believe this is any of your concern, vampire,” Belikov sneered. “I did not call for the services of a mediator.”

Rogan grinned this time and raised his hand in the air. “I did.”

Elder Belikov’s eyes bored into Rogan when the man swung around to glare at him. “You called for a mediator?”

“Yep.”

Elder Belikov bristled for a moment then gestured toward the door. “Let’s go, Valentina.”

“What?” Valentina shouted. “No! You said I could have Rogan. I want him.”

“Do what I say, Valentina,” Elder Belikov said sternly. “There is nothing we can do about it now. Once they come before the council, we’ll see who comes out on top.”

“I’ll be expecting a call from the council then,” Rogan said.

Elder Belikov walked toward the door, pushing his daughter ahead of him. He stopped in the doorway and pointed at Joel. “I

expect you to see that they appear, mediator. Failure to do so would not look very good on your record.”

Joel smirked. “I will see to it personally, elder.”

“See that you do.”

Rogan didn’t breathe a sigh of relief until he watched Elder Belikov, Valentina, and their guards walk out of the room. A few moments later, a car started up outside and tore down the driveway.

“My, my,” Joel drawled slowly as he turned to look at Rogan, “if I had known this was a party, I would have brought gifts.”

“You being here was gift enough, Joel.” Rogan chuckled as he held out his hand and shook Joel’s. “And as always, your timing was impeccable.”

“Yeah,” Grayson said, “I thought Elder Belikov’s head was going to spin off.”

“He certainly wasn’t happy to see any of you here.” Rogan shook his head slowly. “I don’t think he expected us to put up a fight.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Joel said. “If you had attacked Elder Belikov, this conversation would be a moot point. Any attack on an elder is immediately punishable by death.”

“You do realize that a significant number of these clan rules need to be changed, right?” Rogan asked. “They’re wrong, outdated. It shouldn’t be against the law for us to defend ourselves against an attack by an elder.”

“First, you need to prove that it was an attack,” Joel said.

Joel crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back into Grayson and Caleb. Both men seemed to surround Joel, protecting him. It looked right that Joel’s larger mates would be protective except that Rogan knew Joel was stronger than both of them. He just hid it and gave off the impression of being weaker.

“Just how do we go about doing that?” Julian asked as he stepped forward to stand beside Rogan. He gestured to the scars on his neck. “I can’t even prove he did this, and I was there.”

Joel frowned and moved forward, pausing just as he started to reach up and touch Julian's neck. "Do you mind?"

Julian shook his head and tilted it to the side. Rogan tried to keep his growl to himself when Joel started touching Julian's scars. He knew he failed when Grayson and Caleb both tensed and grabbed for Joel, pulling him away from Julian. Rogan felt his face flush when both men turned to glare at him.

"Sorry." Rogan shrugged. "I guess I don't have a lot of control when it comes to other people touching my mate."

Joel's dark eyebrow arched. "Isn't that the way it should be?"

Julian chuckled and wrapped an arm around Rogan's waist. "I like him that way."

Rogan quickly glanced down when he felt his face burn red again. He could hear the others in the room laughing but knew they were just amused at his discomfort. They didn't mean anything by it. Besides, it gained him a quick kiss on the cheek from Julian, and any embarrassment was worth that.

"So, tell me, Julian," Joel said, "what exactly happened with Elder Belikov three years ago? Rogan has given me the brief story, but I'd like to hear it from you."

Rogan felt Julian tense beside him. He reached down and grabbed Julian's hand, giving him a tight squeeze of encouragement. "Go ahead, babe, tell them. I trust Joel, Grayson, and Caleb. They need to know exactly what happened so they can help us get out of this situation."

Julian drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The tension didn't leave his body, but it lessened. Rogan knew it wouldn't be easy for Julian to relive his torture at the hands of Elder Belikov, but Joel needed to know everything. Rogan was positive there was some way to prove that the elder was a monster.

"I was at home sleeping."

"Here?" Joel asked.

Julian nodded. “Yes, right upstairs. I was having a hard time sleeping because of everything that was going on with Rogan.”

“And that was?”

Rogan grimaced when Julian glanced over at him. “Go ahead and tell them. I have nothing to hide. I know what I did.”

Julian swallowed hard and looked back at Joel. “Rogan wasn’t very accepting of our mating. He was being resistant to the knowledge that his mate was a man. We were supposed to meet the next day and discuss things. I was excited because I knew that I could convince Rogan that we were meant to be together.”

“My parents had taught me my entire life that being attracted to men was wrong. That night, they set me up on a date with Valentina. I didn’t want to go because I knew Julian was my mate and I was starting to lean in his direction, so to speak. But I thought if I went out with Valentina, my parents would let up on me and give me time to decide what I wanted.”

“You were out with Valentina Belikov the night Julian was attacked?”

Rogan couldn’t hear any disdain in Joel’s voice, just curiosity. “Yes, I was.”

“That seems a little odd to me,” Joel said. “Quite a coincidence, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Julian said. “I didn’t know until last night that Rogan had been out on a date with Valentina at the time. It just seemed a little too coincidental.”

“So, what happened when you were taken?” Joel asked.

“I heard a noise. Before I could get out of bed and investigate, Elder Belikov came in with several of his guards. They took me to a place out in the woods and started torturing me.” Julian waved to the scars on his neck. “As you can see, they used silver on my wounds.”

“Did he ever say why you were taken?”

“Elder Belikov said I had been found guilty of the crime of betrayal, but he never said what exactly I did. I wasn’t in a position to ask.”

“There is no record of your trial.”

“That’s because there wasn’t one. Elder Belikov said that I had lost my right to a trial when I betrayed my clan. I was to be stripped of my position as alpha of my clan and my name was to be stricken from all records. I was to be punished as befitting my crime and status.”

“No, you don’t understand, Julian,” Joel said. “I looked in the council records before we came here. There isn’t any record of your trial or the council mandate that you be banished. The only record the council has is of your death.”

“What?” Julian whispered. “Surely there’s a record somewhere. That was the entire reason Elder Belikov took me, to punish me for whatever crime he thought I did.”

“I’m beginning to wonder about that, but it’s not something I can prove right now,” Joel said. “Do you remember who was there?”

Julian shook his head. “Beyond Elder Belikov, no. I know there were a few other men there because they helped hold me while I was tortured but after awhile, it kind just turned into one big blur. I don’t remember much beyond the pain.”

“What happened afterward?” Joel asked. “How did you survive?”

Julian smiled. “Elder Belikov started threatening Rogan, and I lost it.”

“Julian says Elder Belikov knew we were mates,” Rogan said. He was still stunned by that news. He always thought that he and Julian were the only ones that knew about their mating until he announced it to his parents after Julian was gone.

“At first, I didn’t think he did, but then he mentioned Rogan by name. He said that Rogan would be punished just like I was. That’s when I broke away from the men holding me and tried to attack the elder. I wasn’t about to let him lay a single finger on my mate.”

“That’s the way it should be,” Grayson said. He glanced at Joel and Caleb. “We protect our mates at all costs.”

Julian nodded.

“So, Elder Belikov knew you were mates, and his daughter wanted Rogan. That makes the fact that Rogan was out on a date with her at the time of your attack just a little more than suspicious, don’t you think?”

“How so?” Rogan asked.

“I believe that Elder Belikov planned to have you out of the way when he took Julian. What better way to do that then to make sure you were on a date with his daughter? It kept you out of the way and insured that no blame would be put on your head when Julian was killed.”

“Banished, you mean?” Rogan said.

“No.” Joel shook his head. “I believe that the good elder didn’t have any intention of letting Julian live. It interfered with his plans to mate Rogan and Valentina together.”

“But I would never mate with Valentina.”

“I’m sure Elder Belikov thought he could persuade you differently. If I remember correctly, at the time you were not out of the closet. If Elder Belikov assumed Julian was the only thing standing between you and Valentina, killing Julian was the logical step.”

Rogan suddenly felt like he couldn’t breathe. He wrapped his arms around Julian and pulled the man against his chest. His heart pounded fearfully in his chest. “Oh, god, I *was* the reason Belikov tried to kill you.”

Chapter 8

A couple of hours later, Julian leaned against the side of the desk and watched Rogan pace. Nothing he, or anyone else, said seemed to be calming Rogan down. The man was convinced that he had been the reason Julian was taken by Elder Belikov. Rogan was practically falling apart before Julian's eyes.

Julian wished that Joel and his mates had stuck around a little longer and helped him calm Rogan. His mate seemed to trust the three men. Unfortunately, Joel wanted to talk to some contacts of his on the council to see what sort of influence Elder Belikov really had on the council. Joel and his mates left soon after that.

"How do you think Elder Belikov knew we were mates?"

Julian blinked, surprised at Rogan's sudden words after so much silence. "I don't know. As far as I know, it wasn't common knowledge. Did you tell anyone?"

"Are you serious?" Rogan snickered. "I was so deep in the closet it would have taken a freight train to get me out."

"Well, I didn't tell anyone except Gertrude, and she wouldn't have told anyone. I would have told my clan, but I wanted you to be standing by my side when I announced it."

"Yeah, about that..." Rogan gripped his hands together and twisted them slightly. "I'm really sorry. I should have accepted our mating from the minute I met you. I felt the bond between us. I was just too afraid to acknowledge it."

"I understand, Rogan, really I do. You weren't raised in the same accepting clan that I was. Your parents taught you to disdain anyone

that was different than you, especially gays. It's no wonder you were afraid of accepting our mating."

"You know that's no longer true, right?"

Julian smiled and held out his hand until Rogan walked across the room and took it. He drew Rogan into his arms, brushing his hand gently down the side of Rogan's face. "I know that, baby. I've always known. I'm too irresistible. You would have given in eventually."

Some of the tension seemed to leave Rogan's body as he chuckled. "You think so, huh?"

"I know so."

"Prove it."

Julian cocked an eyebrow. Was he being challenged by his mate? How utterly perfect. Julian grinned and dropped to his knees in front of Rogan. He glanced up as he worked the man's zipper down and freed his cock.

Keeping his eyes glued to Rogan's, Julian leaned forward and sucked the man's cock deep into his mouth. Rogan groaned. His eyes briefly closed before popping back open to stare down at Julian. The passionate fire suddenly burning in Rogan's golden eyes had turned them a deep, amber brown.

"Damn," Rogan groaned. His hands landed on Julian's shoulders and held on tight. "You look so fucking sexy with my cock in your mouth."

Julian sucked hard and fast. It wasn't that he wanted Rogan to come quickly but more that he wanted the man to forget everything around them. Swallowing the thick erection to the root, Julian held Rogan's hips still. He ran his tongue around the head of Rogan's cock then swirled his tongue around him and sucked hard.

After a few moments, Rogan was beyond any other sounds but fast panting. His hands clenched and unclenched on Julian's shoulders. Julian wanted Rogan writhing, on edge, until he couldn't hold his orgasm back anymore.

Julian watched as Rogan clenched his jaw and tilted his head back. He deepened his sucking, moving quicker. He could tell Rogan was only moments away from coming. Julian felt Rogan thicken and stiffen in his mouth. Rogan roared, calling out Julian's name before he exploded deep in his throat.

Julian swallowed greedily, savoring the salty taste of his lover's hot seed as it shot into his mouth. He swallowed repeatedly until he felt Rogan's cock soften and slowly allowed him to slip free. Julian carefully put Rogan back into his pants and zipped him up then stood to his feet.

Rogan's eyes looked glazed. His face was flushed from his orgasm. Julian smiled and grabbed a quick kiss from his mate. "I told you I was irresistible."

"Okay, you win," Rogan murmured dreamily.

"You're easy."

"You have no idea." Rogan chuckled and leaned into Julian. "So, what are we going to do about Elder Belikov and his daughter?"

"Win."

"Julian."

"I'm serious," Julian said. "What we have is too precious to give up without a fight, and I refuse to lose. Hopefully, your friends can discover something we can use to make Belikov back off. If not, then we fight."

"Julian, we can't fight the entire wolf council. We'd lose."

"Ah, but we're not going to fight the entire wolf council. In fact, I seriously doubt they will even be involved."

"What?"

Julian tightened his arms in protest when Rogan pulled away from him, but when the man insisted, he let him go.

"How can you say that?"

"Because I believe it to be true," Julian replied. "I don't think the council has anything to do with this. I don't think they ever did. I

don't even think they have a clue as to what is going on. Belikov has done this all on his own."

Rogan's breath stuttered in his chest as he drew in a deep breath. "You're serious."

"Perfectly." Julian crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the desk top again. "Think about it, babe. Belikov and his men took me from my bed in the middle of the night. There was no trial. And according to Joel, there isn't even a record of my being banished, just my death. Does that make sense to you?"

"You think the whole thing was a setup?"

"I do."

Rogan grabbed his head with his hands for a moment then dropped them to his sides. "Geez, Julian, do you know what you're saying?"

"Pretty much."

"If Belikov is using his position as an elder to kill people, what are the chances you're the first one?"

"Not good."

With the efficient way Belikov and his guards had worked all those years ago, Julian was pretty sure he was one of a long line of people the elder had tortured and possibly killed. He wondered if they would ever know how many had suffered at the elder's hands.

"There's got to be some way to prove it, Julian."

"How?" Julian spread his hands wide. "I seriously doubt the man has kept records of all the people he's killed. That would be suicide."

"I wish." Rogan snorted.

Julian chuckled. "That would solve most of our problems, but not all of them. We'd still have the council and Valentina to deal with."

Rogan snorted again. It wasn't an attractive sound, but kind of appropriate under the circumstances. "Valentina I can deal with. She's crazy, but she'll get the picture soon enough. It's the council that worries me."

"Now that we're mated, there is nothing the council can do to us."

“I’ll believe that when I see it. I’ve spent too much time dancing to their tune to think that the council didn’t have some hand in this.”

“You may be right, but our main concern needs to be Elder Belikov. Until we have him out of the picture, we’re not safe, Rogan.”

Julian wondered if his words were some sort of omen. The moment they were out of his mouth, the window behind him shattered. Something flew through the window, and the room began to fill with smoke immediately.

Rogan and Julian ran for the office doorway at the same time. Julian ripped off a large piece of his shirt then ripped that material in half. He handed one half to Rogan and covered his mouth with the other.

He shoved Rogan through the office door just as another window shattered. Julian could see red laser dots appear on the walls over his head as he followed Rogan through. Bullets blasted holes in the wall behind him.

Julian tackled Rogan to the hard, wooden floor with such force that they skidded across it, crashing into a wall. As quickly as he could, he pulled Rogan to his feet and started running toward the stairs.

“Is there anyone else in the house?”

“Gertie should be in the kitchen,” Rogan replied. “I don’t know where your friends are. No one else from the pack should be here this early in the morning.”

“We need to protect them.”

“Head for the kitchen.”

Julian nodded, keeping low in case more bullets started to fly again. He quickly made his way toward the kitchen in the back of the house, praying that Gertie had heard the windows shattering or the bullets and gotten everyone to safety.

Just as he and Rogan rounded the corner of the hallway, bullets filled the entryway. Julian put on a burst of speed and ran around the

corner, flattening himself against the wall as soon as he was out of the line of sight. Rogan was right behind him, panting heavily.

“Who in the hell is shooting at us?” Rogan snapped.

“My guess? Elder Belikov or his daughter.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m living proof that the good elder is a lying son of a bitch.”

“So why are they aiming at me?”

“Collateral damage?” Julian laughed when Rogan gave him a deadpan look. “I’m just saying.”

“How about instead of saying, you start doing.” Rogan pointed toward the kitchen door, “Go, and stay the fuck down.”

Julian nodded and hurried toward the kitchen archway. He dropped to his knees and grabbed his head as pain exploded in his skull from someone hitting him with something hard.

His vision blurred for several moments. When it cleared and he looked up, positive he had just been shot or something. He found Gertrude standing over the top of him, a frying pan held threateningly in her hands.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Julian shouted.

Gertrude’s lips thinned. She planted one hand on her hip and waved the frying pan at him with the other. “And maybe you should announce yourself before entering my kitchen. I could have taken your head off.”

Julian wasn’t stupid. He knew better than to argue with Gertrude, even if it was his kitchen, technically. Gertrude ruled it, as she did most of the house. Julian allowed Rogan to help him to his feet, rubbing the back of his head. He had a nice-sized goose egg.

“Where are Thomas and Bobby?”

“In the pantry, where else? I had to put them somewhere when the bullets started flying,” Gertrude replied. She dropped the frying pan on the counter and placed her free hand on her other hip. “And just who is shooting up my house?”

“We’re not sure, but we think it might be Elder Belikov.”

“Blah.” Gertrude waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Weak-kneed backstabber if you ask me. The man never did have the courage to look you in the face while trying to kill you. He always had to have someone else do his dirty work.”

Julian blinked in shock. “Uh, excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“I heard you, but I wasn’t exactly sure what you meant.”

“How hard is it to figure out, boy?” Gertrude reached for her frying pan. “Do I need to hit you again to rattle your brains?”

Julian quickly held up both hands. “No, no, my brains are rattled enough, thank you very much. I just wanted to know what you meant by what you said. I didn’t even know you knew Elder Belikov.”

“Oh please, Nicky has been a thorn in my side since grade school.”

“Nicky?” Julian sputtered. “You call him Nicky?”

“That is his name you know, Nikolai Belikov.”

“What did you mean about Elder Belikov trying to kill people, Gertrude,” Rogan asked. “Do you know something that might help us when we go before the council?”

“Nicky is a bully. He has always been a bully. It only got worse after his wife passed away. She, at least, had been able to keep him in line for a few years.” Gertrude rubbed his chin. “Now that I think about it, her death was a little suspicious.”

“How so?” Julian asked.

“She died falling down a flight of stairs. The only witness to the accident was her daughter, Valentina. She was their only child. Valentina said that she was just coming in the front door when she heard her mother cry out and fall down the stairs. No one else was in the house.”

“Valentina, huh?” Julian asked. “That does seem a little suspicious to me.”

A loud crash suddenly sounded outside in the hallway. Julian tensed for a moment, his eyes meeting Rogan's. "Go, I'll get Thomas and Bobby."

Rogan nodded and grabbed Gertrude by the arm, propelling her toward the backdoor leading outside to the patio. Julian ran to the pantry and yanked the door open. Surprisingly, he caught the can of peaches Bobby launched at him.

"Painful but less than effective," Julian said as he set the can on the pantry shelf then gestured for the two men to follow him. "Come on, guys, we don't have a lot of time here. Head for the back door as fast as you can and keep your head down. Those are real bullets they are shooting at us."

Thomas ran for the backdoor.

Bobby froze in the pantry doorway, his face pale white. "Bullets? They are shooting bullets at us? Real bullets?" he squeaked.

"Move, Bobby!" Julian snapped. "Now!"

Bobby ran. Julian smirked and ran after him. He followed Bobby into the kitchen then toward the backdoor. Julian started to run through the door after Bobby when he heard a shot. A second later, agony exploded in his shoulder. Julian grabbed for his shoulder as he fell out of the doorway and hit the ground with a heavy, painful thud.

When Julian pulled his hand away from his shoulder and looked at it, it was covered in blood. He pressed his hand back to his shoulder and struggled to his feet, escape uppermost on his mind.

Just as Julian climbed to his knees, he heard a noise at the doorway. Julian's hope of escape died a quick death when he spotted the armed man standing in the kitchen doorway, a large menacing gun aimed in his direction.

Julian started to climb to his feet until the man gestured with his gun for him to stay where he was. Sighing deeply, Julian settled back on his knees and waited to see if he was going to live past the next few minutes.

The armed man walked out of the door and stepped to one side, keeping the gun on Julian. A moment later, Valentina stepped out of the kitchen. She wasn't armed, but the glee-filled look on her face told Julian she was the more dangerous of the two.

"Valentina," Julian said simply.

"I told you that Rogan would be mine."

"So, you've decided to kill me then?"

"I'm only carrying out the punishment you should have received three years ago." Valentina laughed harshly, sounding a little mad and a whole lot psychotic. "You're already dead as far as everyone is concerned. No one will know the difference if I kill you now."

"I will."

Julian closed his eyes. Anguish filled him when he heard Rogan's voice behind him. This was the last place he wanted his mate to be. He was prepared to face his own death. He wasn't prepared for Rogan to come to harm.

"Rogan, darling, you really shouldn't be here."

"*Yes, darling,*" Julian said mentally as he opened his eyes and turned to glare at Rogan, "*you shouldn't be here.*"

"*Where else would I be but by my mate's side?*"

Julian rolled his eyes. "*Somewhere safe would be my pick.*"

"*So, not happening. I go where you go.*"

"*Well,*" Julian said as he looked back at Valentina, "*if we don't figure a way out of this mess, it looks like we might both be going straight to hell.*"

"So, tell me, Valentina," Rogan said, "is there a reason you've brought armed men into my home?"

Julian tensed and anxiety filled him as Valentina tilted her head slightly, a confused frown on her face. He suddenly had the deep feeling that Valentina was slightly unhinged. She seemed totally baffled by Rogan's hostility.

"*Careful, love,*" Julian warned Rogan through their link. "*I don't think Valentina has all of her oars in the water.*"

"Yes, I can see that," Rogan replied silently. To Valentina, he spoke out loud. "I believe I asked you a question, Valentina. Why have you brought armed men into my house?"

"Well, to save you, darling, why else?"

"To save me from what?"

Julian felt Valentina's eyes land on him like a dead weight. Where she had seemed dazed and confused before, the moment they landed on Julian, they began to darken with rage and hatred so fierce, Julian shook. He didn't remember anyone ever hating him so much.

"He has to die, Rogan," Valentina said before looking over at Rogan. "Don't you understand, darling. If he doesn't die and go away, we can never be together. He'll destroy everything."

"Valentina, I want you to listen to me very carefully," Rogan began.

Julian suddenly had an idea of what Rogan was going to say and the fear for his mate that filled him would have brought him to his knees if he had been standing. He raised his hand in the air, reaching toward Rogan as if he could stop him for speaking. He was too late.

"I will never mate with you, Valentina," Rogan said, "not even if Julian dies. I don't want you. I never wanted you. That is all in your own twisted mind. No matter what you do to Julian, there will never be anything between us."

Valentina looked stunned. "You can't mean that, not after everything we meant to each other."

"Valentina, we went out on one date, one." Rogan held up a single finger. "And that was three years ago. That does not make a relationship."

"No!" Valentina shouted. "I know you love me. I know the only thing standing between us is that man." Valentina pointed to Julian. "Daddy told me so."

Julian perked up. "*Rogan, ask her about what her father said.*"

"Your father told you what exactly, Valentina?"

"He said we would be mated. He promised."

“When did this happen, Valentina?” Rogan waved his hands through the air, ending with them at his sides. “No one ever said anything to me.”

Valentina’s face instantly softened. “Oh, darling, I’m so sorry. With everything you’ve been through, I can understand how you could forget, but Daddy assured me that he had talked to you, that this was what you wanted.”

“*We are so fucked*,” Julian whispered.

“I know it was three years ago, but surely you remember something?”

“Well...” Rogan started.

“Of course you do.” Valentina smiled.

Valentina seemed very sure of herself as she walked toward Rogan. The closer she got, the more tension filled Julian’s body. He didn’t know what Valentina had planned, but the need to protect his mate was going into overdrive.

Julian pressed his lips together to keep from growling when Valentina placed her hand on Rogan’s chest. He wanted to tear the woman away from his mate then tear her in two. No one had the right to touch Rogan except him.

“What do you want me to say, Valentina?” Rogan asked. “I don’t remember talking with your father.”

“Not to worry, darling,” Valentina said as she patted Rogan’s chest. “I know just what to do.”

“Do?” Rogan asked.

“Of course, darling. Daddy taught me years ago how to get what I want, a lesson that I learned well. I know just how to handle this situation so nothing falls back on you.”

Rogan frowned. “I don’t understand, Valentina. So what doesn’t fall back on me?”

“Why, Julian’s death of course.” Valentina smiled. She suddenly looked more animated, excited. “Daddy always said that if you have to eliminate someone, so be it, but never leave any trace of your

involvement. Why do you think your family encouraged you to go out on that date with me the night Julian was taken. You needed an ironclad alibi.”

“Are you serious?” Rogan asked.

“Perfectly.”

Julian grew nervous when Valentina turned away from Rogan to face him. Her smile was malicious, and Julian knew it meant his doom. Valentina appeared to be way too happy for such a tense situation.

“Now, once we take care of Julian, nothing will stand in our way of being together.”

Julian blinked. Valentina was totally dismissing Rogan’s words of protest from a few minutes ago. She twisted them around until they fit into her perfect little world. She wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“And just how do you plan on killing me, Valentina?”

“Silver seemed to work last time,” Valentina said.

“Hardly.” Julian chuckled harshly. “I’m still here.”

“True,” Valentina said as she drew a large vial of silver liquid out of her pocket. She pulled a gun out of the other and pointed it at Julian. “But last time, you were given the opportunity to escape when you surprised Daddy. I’m not so easily spooked.”

“So, you know that your father tried to have me killed?”

“Of course, who do you think supplied the silver?”

“You?” Julian gasped.

“I learned many years ago that liquid silver was more poisonous to a wolf than solid silver. Solid silver, like a bullet, can be pried out of the body. Once that happens, the body begins to heal. Liquid silver, however, once it gets into the bloodstream there is no cure. You’ll die a slow and agonizing death.”

Julian realized almost at the same moment Rogan did that Valentina didn’t know about Darren’s little silver cocktail. He could tell by the strange look that Rogan gave him. It gave them an edge. He hoped.

“Besides, this time I have my darling Rogan to help me.” Valentina reached back and touched Rogan’s chest. “I’m sure he realizes how wrong you are for him. Just look at you, kneeling on the ground like a dog. Rogan would never lower himself to associate with someone like you.”

“And you think you’re better for him?” Julian snorted.

“I can give him cubs,” Valentina snapped as she waved the gun in the air. “I can rule by his side. With my daddy’s influence, we will be accepted into every wolf clan under council rule. We will be royalty.”

Rogan cleared his throat until Valentina turned around to look at him. “Um, do I get a say in this?”

“Of course, darling.”

“Then I say you’ve lost your fucking mind, Valentina.”

Julian fell back on his ass, shock filling him as he watched Rogan grab the gun out of Valentina’s hand with one hand and punch her in the jaw with the other one. Valentina went down like a box of rocks, crashing to the floor. Julian stared, waiting for her to move. She didn’t.

But the armed man with her did. He raised the rifle in his hands and pointed it at Rogan. Julian growled. He jumped up and dove toward the man, shifting as he did. The man turned the barrel of the rifle in his direction just as Julian landed on him.

Julian clamped down on the man’s arm as hard as he could. An unpleasant coppery taste filled his mouth even as the man’s screams filled his ears. He felt something slam into his head and realized the man was beating him with his fist. Julian started yanking, growling as he pulled at the torn flesh in his mouth.

“Julian, that’s enough.”

Julian growled again, unwilling to give up the arm in his mouth in case the man tried to go after Rogan.

“Julian! Enough!”

Julian stopped growling and yanking. He turned his head to look at Rogan, surprised to see him standing just a few feet away. He

dropped the arm in his mouth then licked the blood from his chops. It really was a nasty taste, unlike his mate who tasted like heaven itself.

“Come here, baby.” Rogan gestured with his hand.

Julian glanced down at the man lying on the ground. Satisfied that he was incapacitated, Julian loped over to his mate. His reward was a long scratch behind his ears, and Rogan knew just what spot to scratch. Julian’s leg began to thump in ecstasy.

Rogan squatted down beside Julian and wrapped his arms around Julian’s neck. “Oh, god, baby, I was so afraid I was going to lose you again.”

Julian shifted and found himself stark ass naked and still wrapped in Rogan’s arms. It was just where he wanted to be. Of course, it would have been nice if Rogan was naked, too, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Julian would take what he could get.

“Never going to happen, Rogan,” Julian said. “I’m here to stay this time.”

“You’d better be, or I’ll whip your ass, alpha or no alpha.”

Julian started to chuckle until his eyes fell on Valentina’s crumpled form. Julian shuddered. “Fuck, Rogan, that woman is off her rocker.”

“So it would seem,” Rogan said as he lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder.

“What in the hell are we going to do?”

“Ask them.”

Julian turned to see Joel, Grayson, Caleb, and two other men standing near the side of the house. He didn’t recognize the two men, but he understood the deep frowns of displeasure on their faces. Julian quickly climbed to his feet, wanting to meet whatever was headed their way while standing.

“You do throw the most remarkable get-togethers, Julian,” Joel said as he started to walk closer. “You simply must plan my next party. I know the most interesting guests to invite.”

“Oh?”

Joel gestured to the two men that walked up beside him. Julian could smell them and knew one was a vampire and one was a wolf. He still didn't know who they were and felt the need to move closer to Rogan.

"I would like to introduce you to Elder Carmichael from the Wolf Council and Elder De Luca from the Vampire Council." Joel smiled and clasped his hands together in front of him. "I told them of your story, and they chose to come here and speak to you personally. If we had known you had other guests, we would have called first."

Julian smiled and leaned into the arm Rogan carefully wrapped around his shoulders. "I'd say your arrival was timed perfectly, as usual."

Chapter 9

“How are you feeling?” Rogan asked as he sat on the edge of Julian’s desk.

It had been over a month since they had fought Valentina and her guards. The office was still in a bit of chaos, but it was slowly coming back together. The workers had just finished repairing the bullet holes today.

There was still a lot of damage from the attack to be fixed, but the house was coming back together day by day. Rogan couldn’t wait for the day when he didn’t look at walls and remember when he almost lost Julian for the third time. He was getting damn tired of his mate’s life constantly being in danger.

Julian sighed and dropped his pen down onto the desk. “Rogan, I’ve told you a hundred times. I feel fine. It was just a little bullet hole. It healed almost as soon as I shifted. There’s not even a scar. You need to stop worrying.”

“Yeah.” Rogan snorted. “Like that’s going to happen.”

Julian chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “You could at least pretend that I’m the alpha.”

“Oh, I have no problem letting you be the alpha.” Rogan wiggled his eyebrows. “I’ve always liked you on top. You’re pretty damn good at it.”

“You think so, do you?” Julian rested his elbows on his desk and clasped his hands together. He rested his chin on his hands. “What else am I good at?”

Rogan grinned. It was too good of an opportunity for him to pass up. “Being on your knees.” Julian’s mouth dropped open. Rogan

reached over and placed his finger under Julian's chin and lifted, closing his mouth. "Careful, babe, I might take that as an invitation."

Julian rolled his eyes. "Smart-ass."

"True," Rogan said, "but I'm your smart-ass."

Julian chuckled. "You are at that."

"Thomas called, and the new walls are up at the center," Rogan said. "He said we could come down and see it any time. Guess it pays to be mated to the owner's adopted son."

Julian grinned. "He does good work. You'll like it."

"How would you know? You haven't seen the place in almost a month."

"I trust Thomas. If he says he's going to build you a top-rate center, then he'll do it. Besides, you designed it. Now that Thomas knows what you really want Gallagher Center for, he's putting all of his resources into the place."

Rogan laughed. "Oh, you don't know the half of it. He's been talking with Joel. They've already found a site they want me to check out a couple of towns over for the next center."

"It's a worthy cause, Rogan."

"It's your cause. I never wanted anyone to go through what I went through, what we went through. I think everyone needs choices, even gay wolf shifters."

"I agree." Julian nodded.

Rogan frowned when Julian suddenly grinned. "What?"

"Thomas came to see me earlier."

"Oh?"

"It seems he wanted to formally ask my permission to pursue Gertie."

Rogan's mouth dropped open.

"Swear, Rogan, he was all polite and shit, calling me sir and son. You would have pissed yourself laughing. I imagine right about now he's trying to romance her with flowers and chocolates or something just as old fashioned."

Rogan smiled. "I think it's sweet."

"Sweet?" Julian barked with laughter. "Have you met Gertrude? She'll have Thomas running in circles inside of a week."

"Maybe." Rogan shrugged. "But I think it's about time she had something in her life besides worrying about us. Thomas knows what we are, and if he wants Gertrude and she wants him, then I say more power to them."

"You're a romantic."

Rogan scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "So what if I am?"

"Should I expect flowers and chocolates too?"

"You should expect to have your ass kicked if you continue to make fun of me."

The amusement on Julian's face instantly fell away. "Baby, I love your romantic streak almost as much as I love you. If you want to bring me flowers and chocolate, then do so. Just remember that I have the right to do the same."

Rogan's face gleamed with a soft flush. "Yeah? You don't think it's too girly?"

"I think that we are allowed to express our love to each other in any way that we see fit." Julian wagged a finger at Rogan. "And no one has the right to say otherwise. If they aren't smart enough to find someone that brings them romantic gifts, then too bad for them."

Rogan chuckled nervously. He loved Julian and wanted to show the man every minute of every day but getting used to having his mate back in his life on a full-time basis would take some getting used to.

A piece of hastily scribbled notes on the desk caught Rogan's attention. He reached down and grabbed it, starting to read Julian's ramblings. Rogan recognized a few of the names of council members, but that was about it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Joel called. He wanted to update me on what was going on with Valentina and Elder Belikov."

“And?” Rogan asked when Julian didn’t elaborate further.

“It’s been decided that both the Wolf Council and the Vampire Council will convene when they stand trial so that there is no favoritism. And they will stand trial for their crimes. Valentina was taken into custody here at the house. Elder Belikov was tracked down and taken into custody yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Rogan shouted. He jumped to his feet and started pacing, pushing his hand through his hair. “You mean to tell me that he’s been on the loose all of this time? I thought the council was trying to take him into custody weeks ago.”

“They were, but Belikov has been in hiding all of this time.” Julian tapped his fingers on the desk. “It would seem he still has a few friends out there somewhere.”

“That’s a creepy thought.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“So, what now?”

Julian shook his head. “I don’t rightly know. Joel said that both councils had some more investigating to do. Ours weren’t the only lives that Nikolai and Valentina Belikov threatened. The council wants to insure that they dig up as much dirt as possible before putting them on trial.”

“Perfect, and in the meantime? Are they going to keep them in custody or what?”

“Oh yes, Joel assured me that both of them have been taken to a secure location that they will be unable to escape from.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, Rogan, but they will be dealt with, for what they did to us and others. Belikov and his daughter will pay for their crimes.”

Rogan wanted to believe Julian, but he had waited so long to see justice done he had started to think it would never happen. Nikolai and Valentina Belikov had a lot to answer for. Rogan could only hope and pray that they got what was coming to them.

“There’s something else, Rogan.”

“There always is.”

“Your parents are being charged for complicity as well.”

Rogan swallowed hard. “My parents?”

“They knew, Rogan. They may not have known exactly what Elder Belikov was going to do to me, but they were involved with trying to separate a mated pair. They willingly set you up on that date with Valentina with the full knowledge that Elder Belikov was going to make me disappear.”

Rogan sat down in the chair across the desk from Julian and dropped his head into his hands. “Geez, Julian, my parents?”

“I’m sorry, Rogan.”

Rogan leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “No, you have nothing to be sorry for. I guess I always knew my parents were involved in some way. They were so insistent that I go on that date. I just wanted to shut them up. I didn’t realize it was part of some huge, elaborate plan to take my mate from me.”

“Makes you wonder what would have happened if you had said no, huh?” Julian smirked. “I guess they would have figured out another way to get me out of the picture.”

Rogan considered it for a moment and thought that Julian was probably right. If he had refused to go out with Valentina all that time ago, his parents would have just figured out another way to eliminate Julian from Rogan’s life.

“They really didn’t want me to be mated to you, Julian. I wish I could explain to you what it was like. I know it doesn’t excuse what I did back then, but it might make you understand. The constant harping about how evil it was to be gay or even attracted to men...” Rogan shook his head. “It was that way my entire life, every fucking day. If I even looked at another man, my parents were all over my ass. It got to the point where I just buried that part of myself and stopped looking.”

“Until I showed up.”

Rogan chuckled. “Yeah, you were a big fucking surprise. Not only was I attracted to you, but we were mates. The pull to bond with you was almost more than I could stand. Why do you think I avoided you so much?”

“Because you couldn’t keep your hands off me?”

“I’ve never been able to keep my hands off you.” Rogan rubbed his hands over his face as he remembered how drawn to Julian he had been. The obsession to touch his mate, to be near him, to just hear him breath, it hadn’t lessened in all that time.

“I’m not sure I see the problem then.” Julian chuckled. “I’ve never had a problem with your hands on me.”

“Julian, I was trying to be straight, remember? I was going to be a good boy and find some girl to settle down with, not a man. Then you walked into my life, and my world exploded.”

“Would you have preferred that I never entered your life?”

“Don’t even say that!”

Rogan blinked, suddenly realizing that his claws had extended and dug into the top of the wooden desktop as he shouted at Julian. He felt his face flush and extracted his claws, folding his hands together in his lap.

“Sorry.”

“No, no.” Julian waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “It’s nice to know that you react so strongly to the idea of us never being together. I just worry about our furniture.”

Rogan’s face flushed even more.

“I hope you understand that I never meant to throw your life into utter chaos, Rogan. We were mates, though, and we were meant to be together. I wanted to give you the time to get used to the idea. I never would have forced you.”

“Geez, Julian, I know that. You never pressured me into anything. I was just so scared of disappointing my parents, and I had seen what happened to other men that came out of the closet. I didn’t want that

to happen to me, but then you were gone and none of that mattered anymore.”

“I heard about the rage you went into after I disappeared. Believe it or not, I did keep tabs on you through Gertrude. I guess I couldn’t let you go completely, even when I thought I was never coming back.”

“You were always coming back.”

Rogan knew it like he knew his own name. They may have been separated by time and distance, but they were still mates. The need to be together was overpowering. Julian would have given in eventually and come home.

“You think so, do you?”

“I know so,” Rogan said as he stood to his feet. He started unbuttoning his shirt, grinning when he heard Julian inhale swiftly. He pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor next to his chair.

The look of pure lust on Julian’s stunned face made Rogan’s cock harden right up. The pheromones Julian was putting off would have done it if the look hadn’t. Julian wanted him, and he didn’t even attempt to hide it.

“You want me too much to stay away forever.” Rogan slowly walked around the edge of the desk. He could feel Julian’s hungry eyes devouring him with every step. When he reached Julian’s side of the desk, Rogan scooted in until he was between Julian and the desk. “Don’t you, Julian?”

“God, yes!”

Rogan watched the desire burning in Julian’s eyes start to combust as he dragged his hands down his chest. Julian took in every move he made. Rogan stroked his hands over his chest. He tweaked his nipples, groaning as pleasure shot through his body when he tugged on them.

His cock was throbbing in his jeans, pounding against his zipper. Rogan slowly moved his hands down his chest until he reached the

buttons and zipper that opened his pants. He saw Julian swallow hard as he pulled the button free then slowly lowered the zipper.

“You want to touch me.”

It wasn’t a question, but Julian nodded rapidly anyway. Rogan grinned as he kicked his shoes off under the desk and then pulled the edges of his pants aside, baring his hard, aching cock to Julian one slow inch at a time.

By the time his cock popped free and Rogan could push his jeans down his legs, Julian was biting his lip and gripping the arms of his chair so hard that Rogan heard the wood crack. Julian’s eyes were riveted on Rogan’s thick cock.

Rogan reached down and grabbed his cock, giving himself a couple of firm strokes. “Do you like that, baby?”

Julian nodded again. The man seemed beyond speech at the moment.

Rogan hoisted himself up onto the edge of the desk then scooted his butt to the very edge. He lifted his legs and planted them on the arms of Julian’s chair, spreading his knees as far apart as he could. He knew from where Julian sat that the man had a clear view of his cock, his balls, and his ass. He just hoped Julian enjoyed the show as much as Rogan did giving it.

Rogan continued to slowly stroke his cock as he reached out and stuck his fingers into Julian’s mouth. He groaned when Julian whimpered and sucked them into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the tips.

“Do you know how good it feels to have your tongue do that to my cock?”

Julian pulled away for a moment, his eyes glued to where Rogan was stroking himself. “I could...” Julian swallowed again. “I could do that.”

“Uh-uh, I have something else planned.” Rogan took the fingers that Julian had gotten wet and pressed them against his aching hole.

Julian's eyes grew round as he watched Rogan push them in, all three at the same time.

Rogan hissed, the burn of three fingers entering his ass at the same time stealing his breath away. He knew the pain would be over in a moment, but it was worth the look of stunned amazement on his mate's face.

"Do you like that, Julian?" Rogan whispered. "Do you like watching me fuck myself?"

Julian nodded.

"Do you want to claim me, Julian? Do you want to slam that big fat cock into my ass?" Rogan blinked in surprise when Julian growled and the arms of his chair cracked. He glanced down to see a large broken section in the arm. "I guess you do."

Julian pushed himself to his feet and started to reach for him. Rogan held up his hand to stop him. "Get rid of the clothes first."

Rogan was amazed at how quickly Julian stripped his clothes off, although he doubted they would ever be useable again. They were torn to shreds. When Julian went to reach for him again, Rogan stopped him for a second time.

"Get the lube."

Julian pulled out the drawer of the desk so fast that it came all of the way out and crashed to the floor. Rogan chuckled as Julian searched around in the drawer and grabbed the lube, holding it out to him.

Rogan grabbed the lube and popped the top. He poured a healthy squirt out on his fingers then pushed it into his ass, getting himself nice and slicked up. Once that was done, he lowered his feet from the chair and poured some more lube out on his fingers.

"We need to get you ready, too."

Rogan pushed Julian back just enough that he could drop to his knees. He didn't even pause before enveloping Julian's cock deep into his mouth. Drops of pre-cum exploded across his tongue as he swiped it over the small slit on the tip.

Julian's hips bucked, and a loud groan filled the room. Rogan sucked Julian's length down and swallowed before licking his way back to the tip. He did this several times, swirling his tongue across the tip then under the crown of Julian's cock.

"I want you good and hard when you fuck me," Rogan sent to his mate through their bond.

"Pretty... pretty sure I could pound nails right now."

Rogan gripped the base of Julian's cock with his lube-covered hand and started slicking the man up. He kept his mouth around the head of Julian's cock, sucking and licking the tip. He reached past Julian's cock and grabbed his ball sac, massaging it between his fingers.

"But you'd better hurry," Julian groaned as he started thrusting himself into Rogan's mouth. *"I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on."*

"Then I guess we should make sure you're ready."

Rogan kept his mouth around Julian's cock as he grabbed the lube again and squirted a bit more out onto his fingers. He tossed the lube onto the desk behind him then reached down between Julian's legs.

"Spread 'em, babe."

Rogan felt Julian rest his hands on the desk as he spread his legs. The moment Julian was open to him, Rogan pushed a lubed finger into the man's ass. He groaned when Julian's body seemed to suck him right in.

"God, I love your ass."

"You can have it."

"I intend to. Just need to get you ready first."

Julian grunted.

Rogan pressed a second finger into Julian's ass and started spreading the two of them around. Julian shuddered, but he didn't move away.

"More, Rogan, need more."

Rogan obliged Julian, pushing a third finger into the man's tight ass. Julian was slowly loosening up, but he was still too tight for Rogan to take him without discomfort. He pushed in a fourth finger and started moving them around. Julian cried out and started riding Rogan's fingers, pushing back against them.

"Hell, yeah, harder, Rogan, fuck me harder."

Rogan pushed his fingers in as far as they would go then curved them until he felt the walnut-sized sweet spot he was looking for. He gripped Julian's hip with one hand and dragged his fingers over the pleasure gland with the other.

"Rogan!" Julian screamed.

His body stiffened for a moment then he thrust his cock deep into Rogan's mouth. Hot cream filled Rogan's mouth even as the tight circle of muscles in Julian's ass clamped down on his fingers.

Rogan groaned around Julian's cock as he swallowed down every last drop the man had to give him. He could feel his own cock throb in response to his mate's orgasm and knew if he didn't get himself balls deep inside Julian in the next few seconds, he never would.

Rogan pulled off Julian's cock and swiftly stood to his feet. He swept his arm over the desk and cleared it, uncaring that everything fell to the floor. Lifting Julian's spent body in his arms, he lifted the man onto the desk and laid him back against the top.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll feel me in your ass next week." Rogan growled as he grabbed Julian's hips and pulled the man to the edge of the desk. He wrapped his arms around Julian's thighs and lifted his ass into the air, spreading his thighs apart.

Watching the head of his cock press against Julian's quivering entrance almost sent Rogan over the top. Each inch of his cock sinking into his mate was a visual aphrodisiac. It was better than a porno.

He wasn't a small man by any means. He was actually larger in both length and width than almost everyone he knew. The sight of his

massive cock spreading Julian's ass as he impaled him was one of the hottest damn things Rogan had ever seen.

He slowed his thrusts, so he could enjoy it as long as he could. But after a moment, he was to the root, every last one of his ten inches clenched tightly by Julian's ass.

Of course, pulling out was just as good, but it wasn't as easy. Julian's inner muscles seemed to grip him tighter when he pulled out as if they didn't want to let go of Rogan's cock. Rogan pulled out until just the tip remained then slowly pushed back in again. He did this several times until he heard Julian whimper.

Looking up, Rogan was shocked to see Julian's cock standing at full mast again. The man's cock was so hard and so engorged that he looked like he hadn't come a few moments ago at all.

"You like that, don't you?" Rogan said out loud. His voice sounded strange in the silent room. He started to pull out slowly again, keeping his eyes on Julian's face this time. "You like feeling every inch of my cock slide in and out of your ass."

"Yes!"

Rogan kept his arms wrapped around Julian's thighs and leaned over the man's torso. Not only did it give him an opportunity to kiss his mate, but it spread Julian open ever further. Rogan groaned when he felt himself sink in just a little bit more when he thrust back in.

"Love having you inside of me," Julian whispered.

Rogan grinned. "Then you're going to love this."

Rogan let the change come over him, shifting into his werewolf form, half man, half wolf. His bones cracked as he grew larger, growing from six and a half feet tall to nearly seven and a half feet tall. Black fur sprouted along his arms and legs, then his entire body. His teeth dropped down and claws extended from his fingertips.

Julian's breath hitched in his throat as his head fell back against the desk. Rogan knew the man was feeling his cock grow. He could barely move as it was. When he shifted into his werewolf form, not

only did his arms and legs get larger, but his cock did as well, taking his cock from its normal ten inches to nearly twelve.

Rogan stilled, waiting for Julian to become accustomed to his increased size. Finally, Julian relaxed and started breathing normally again. Rogan brushed the sweaty brown hair back from Julian's flushed face.

"Better?"

"Yeah."

"Are you ready for me to fuck you now?"

Julian nodded.

Rogan moved slowly again, pulling out until the head of his cock was all that remained in Julian's tight opening. He arched an eyebrow, concerned when Julian's body started to shudder and the man's eyes dropped closed.

"Are you okay, babe?"

"Again."

Rogan pushed back in then pulled out just a bit. The shudders racking Julian's body increased in strength. Rogan paused, worried he was hurting his mate. No amount of pleasure he was experiencing would ever be worth hurting Julian.

"Julian?"

Rogan was a little taken back by the fierce glare in Julian's eyes when they snapped open and stared up at him. The man looked possessed as he growled.

"Fuck me!"

Rogan blinked at the clear demand in Julian's voice. It was a mixture of steel resolve and authority. Julian was using his alpha voice on Rogan to get what he wanted, something no member of their clan could refuse. Rogan didn't want to anyway.

He leaned back and gripped Julian's thighs tightly with his hands. Clenching his teeth at the pleasure he knew was about to come, Rogan thrust back into Julian with no regard for the man's tender flesh.

Julian cried out and arched his body toward Rogan. “Harder, damn it,” Julian growled. “Fuck me like you mean it.”

Rogan gripped Julian’s thighs so hard that his fingers turned the man’s skin white. He knew Julian would have finger-sized bruises in the morning, but an order was an order. Rogan began a punishing pace, driving his hard cock into Julian’s body with all of his werewolf strength.

Julian’s cries and whimpers filled the room, overshadowing their heaving panting. The harder Rogan rammed into Julian, the louder his cries became. Sweat dropped down both of their bodies, the sounds of their flesh slapping together with the cries of pleasure.

Julian suddenly raised his arms over his head and gripped the edge of the desk. His steel-blue eyes met Rogan’s. “I’m gonna come.”

Rogan was a little more than surprised since he hadn’t touched Julian’s cock since sinking into his ass. He glanced down at Julian’s cock to see it bouncing back and forth with each thrust, slapping against Julian’s abdomen. Copious amounts of pre-cum leaked from the tip, dripping down the sides.

“Then come, my love.” Rogan started pounding into Julian even faster, driving himself as deep as he could go. He was fascinated by the way Julian’s cock thickened before his eyes, the head turning an angry red.

He almost lost the rhythm of his thrusts when Julian suddenly shouted, his body going ramrod stiff. Creamy, white cum shot out of Julian’s cock. It landed all over both of them until they were almost bathed in it.

“That is so fucking hot, Julian.”

“Yeah.” Julian lifted his hand as if to make some gesture then dropped it back to his chest. “Your turn.”

Rogan slowed his thrust down to barely moving, just leisurely moving in and out of Julian’s quivering hole. It was the only way he could keep from coming. He grinned down at Julian. “Uh-uh, I didn’t get my ass all slicked up not to feel you fuck me.”

Julian's eyes widened. "Can't."

"Oh yes, you can." Rogan made sure to keep his thrust even and slow, moving just enough to keep his cock hard and enclosed in Julian's ass. "I'm going to get you hard again, Julian, and then you're going to fuck me into tomorrow."

"You're crazy," Julian gasped. "I've already come twice. I can't come again."

"How much you want to bet?"

Rogan let go of one of Julian's thighs. He swiped his hand through the cum on Julian's abdomen then grabbed the man's softened cock. Using the cum as lube, he started stroking Julian's cock. He could feel Julian shake with each movement of his hand. The man had to be incredibly sensitive right now. It would help Rogan's cause.

"Rogan," Julian groaned, "I can't."

"You can, and you will." Rogan used the alpha voice he had developed out of necessity when standing in for Julian over the last three years. "We're not going to leave this room until I feel this cock in my ass. I don't care how long I have to fuck you."

"You're such a son of a bitch."

Rogan chuckled. "But I'm your son of a bitch."

Julian suddenly grinned. "Yeah."

It took a little while, but Rogan eventually felt Julian's cock start to take interest in what he was doing. Little by little, the cock in his hand began to harden. Julian's breathing started to pick up, becoming small pants.

Rogan increased the pace of his thrusts. He bent his knees just enough that he could get more leverage and come in from a different angle. He wanted Julian hard, and the faster, the better. Being inside his mate for so long without coming was almost more than he could continue to do.

"I'm going to come in your ass, love, and then you're going to fuck me until I come again."

“Are...” Julian panted heavily and licked his lips. “Are you trying to kill us?”

“Nope.” Rogan grinned. “I’m showing you how alive we really are.”

“Damn!”

Once Julian’s cock was hard again, Rogan knew it was time for him to come. He was so close to the edge anyway, a swift wind probably could have sent him over the edge. He grabbed Julian’s thighs again and tilted the man’s ass up.

“No coming until you’re balls-deep in my ass, understand?”

Julian nodded. “Right, you fuck me till you come then I fuck you until you come again.”

“And you can come again after that.”

“I’ll probably die if I do.”

“Fuck me in your werewolf form,” Rogan said as he started thrusting faster and harder. “You don’t even have to be gentle about it. I like it rough. Fuck me like you’ve always wanted to. I promise you, I’ll love every second of it.”

Instead of grabbing the edge of the desk, Julian reached down and wrapped his fingers around his cock. He started stroking his cock. With his other hand, Julian started playing with his nipples, tugging on them, pinching them between his fingers.

Rogan groaned, the sight of Julian playing with himself intoxicating. “You are so sexy, Julian,” he whispered.

“Yeah?” Julian replied. “Do you like watching me touch myself?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s very hot.”

“How about this?”

Rogan’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head when Julian let go of his cock and reached on past his balls to wrap his fingers around his cock where their bodies met. Rogan could feel Julian’s fingers on him and the pleasure of sinking into the man’s tight ass at the same time.

“Oh, fuck!”

Rogan's head dropped back on his shoulders as his body overloaded. He drove himself as deep into Julian's welcoming body as he could get then froze as his orgasm swept through him like a tidal wave. He trembled as spurt after spurt of cum shot from his body and filled Julian.

Rogan's body melted and shifted back to human. He couldn't catch his breath. He felt his legs start to collapse under him and grabbed the edge of the desk. "Julian."

"Oh, no, you don't," Julian growled as he pulled away and jumped off the desk. "I have orders to fuck you into tomorrow. Assume the position, love. You're about to be fucked."

Rogan dropped down over the desk where Julian had been a moment before. He grabbed the edge with his hands and spread his legs, pushing his ass up into the air and presenting his aching hole to his mate.

Rogan yelped in surprise when he felt Julian's hand come down on his ass cheek. A moment later his ass cheeks were spread wide and cold gel dripped down onto him. Rogan whimpered when Julian's fingers pushed into him, all four at the same time.

He wanted to be fucked. He wanted it rough. He was getting exactly what he wanted, and the mere thought of Julian not treating him like spun glass made his spent cock twitch with interest.

"Oh yeah, Julian, just like that."

Julian's fingers pulled away from his ass and his cheeks were spread again. Rogan felt the fur on Julian's arms as they brushed against him and knew his mate had shifted again. The logical conclusion was that he was about to be impaled on a cock almost as large as his.

"Fuck me, mate!"

Rogan's fingers dug into the wood of the desk as Julian's massive cock breached him, thrusting in deep. The bite of pain was glorious. Julian filled every inch of him. The feeling of Julian's cock dragging

against his prostate when he pulled out and thrust in again was ecstasy.

Julian's claws dug into Rogan's ass cheeks as they held them apart. Rogan started whimpering when Julian began smacking his ass cheeks in between thrusts, alternating cheeks. Rogan never knew which cheek would get smacked. He was positive his ass glowed red. He just couldn't seem to muster any concern about it. He loved the feeling of Julian spanking him.

Rogan's cock was hard and aching by now. He reached down to grab it, intending on stroking himself off when a particularly hard smack landed on his ass. Rogan cried out and turned to look at Julian over his shoulder.

"No touching," Julian growled. "Keep your hands on the edge of the desk."

Rogan grinned and turned back around, reaching up and wrapping his hands around the edge of the desk. He found it amusing when he received another smack on the ass, this one a bit gentler. One for punishment, one for praise, how weird was that?

Julian started moving faster and harder, impaling Rogan on his cock with so much force that Rogan needed to stiffen his legs and force himself back against Julian just to keep from flying off the desk.

"You tell me when you're about to come, Rogan."

Rogan nodded rapidly.

"I can't hear you, mate."

"Yes!"

"Good boy." Rogan received another smack.

Rogan's body began to ache, adding to the pleasure ripping through his body. His butt cheeks were hot and sore. His ass ached from the large cock pounding into him. Even his hips hurt from where Julian's claws dug into him. And Rogan liked every bite of pain.

"Lean back for a moment."

Rogan frowned, confused, but did as Julian asked. Julian placed his shirt on the desk top then grabbed his cock and pressed it against his stomach, holding it there.

“Okay, lie back down.”

Rogan understood when he laid back down over the desk. His cock was nestled in Julian’s shirt, pressed between his body and the desktop. When Julian started thrusting again, Rogan let out a long drawn out groan. Every time Julian pushed into him, it drove Rogan’s cock into the shirt. With the weight of his body pressing him down onto the hard desk, not only did it make his cock ache, but it felt like he was being massaged by Julian’s shirt.

“Oh, god, faster, Julian.”

Rogan grunted when Julian obliged him. His body was on sensory overload. The scent of sex that filled the air was strong but not as strong as the scent of his mate’s arousal. Add in the heavy panting and the groaning and...

“Julian, gonna...”

Rogan screamed when Julian’s sharp canines sank into the nape of his neck. The blood that instantly dripped down his neck was nothing like the cum that shot from his body and covered the desk as Rogan’s orgasm exploded in his body.

Julian roared around the flesh in his mouth. Rogan felt a series of short thrusts and one long one where Julian drove up into his ass and stayed there. Hot liquid filled his ass, each powerful spurt shooting against his sweet spot, making Rogan’s vision dim as even more pleasure continued to weave its way through his body.

He closed his eyes and laid his head down on the desk, unable to do anything but breathe, and even that was taking effort. He smiled weakly when he felt Julian extract his teeth and lick away the drops of blood then plant a small kiss on his temple.

“Love you, Rogan.”

“Love you, Julian.” Rogan opened his eyes and grinned up at Julian. “I told you that you could come again.”

“So you did.” Julian’s fingers brushed the side of Rogan’s face. “But we still have one little problem, my love.”

“Oh?”

“My legs don’t work, and neither do yours. Who’s going to carry our asses upstairs?”

Rogan chuckled and turned slightly, wrapping his arm around Julian’s shoulders. “We can just stay here until someone finds us.”

“Yeah, and flash your naked ass to the whole clan?” Julian snickered. “So, not going to happen.”

Rogan yelped when Julian’s hand came down on his ass.

“This ass belongs to me. Ain’t no one going to see it but me.”

“Ain’t?” Rogan frowned. “Ain’t is not a word.”

“Is, too.”

“No, it’s not.” Rogan rolled his eyes. “It’s obvious that I need to teach you the proper way for an alpha to behave. Not to worry, though, love. I have lots of experience being an alpha.”

Julian laughed. “Oh, so you think you can redeem me?”

The smile of amusement fell from Rogan’s face as he cupped the side of Julian’s face and looked into his steel-blue eyes. “I think we’re both due a little redemption, don’t you?”

“No, love, we’ve both suffered enough. I think it’s time for us to believe that what we have together is exactly what we deserve. And I dare anyone to try and take it away from us again.”

Rogan blinked away his tears and cocked an eyebrow, trying not to let Julian know how much his words affected him. “Is that an order, alpha?”

Julian flexed his hips, drawing a quick gasp from Rogan as the man’s cock moved inside of him. “Yes, even if I have to pound it into you.”

Rogan gulped at the heat he could see starting to build in Julian’s eyes as the man’s hands rubbed over his aching ass. “Okay.”

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 cat, and one 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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