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Whispers in the Night

The Moonlight Breed 3

Gabrielle Evans

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Whispers in the Night

Shot and left to die on the side of the road. That's not how Jackson had hoped to meet his mate. He remains understanding for four long years, waiting for his eighteenth birthday, the day Talon will claim him. Now twenty-one, he's losing patience, and Talon is still holding out.

Brooding and gruff, Talon doesn't exactly have a reputation for being soft and gentle. Cursed by a rare genetic heart disease, he knows his days are limited. By claiming his young mate, he binds them together, heart and soul, and he refuses to allow Jackson to suffer the same fate that awaits him.

Dreams of a brother he left behind when he fled his birth pack plague Jackson, becoming more intense until he finally realizes they're calls for help. Can Jackson save his brother and convince his stubborn mate to claim him? Or will he lose them both forever?

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

Length: 40,329 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE



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DEDICATION

I believe every brief meeting, every chance encounter, happens for a reason. That's why I dedicate this book to Susan Stork. Her well-timed and beautifully written email gave me the push and motivation I needed to finish Talon and Jackson's story, and I will forever be grateful.

WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

The Moonlight Breed 3

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

“And that’s how I broke my collarbone sliding into home plate.”

“Mm, amazing,” Jackson murmured. He closed his eyes briefly to keep from rolling them. His date was such a twit. He’d just sat through the last hour being bored to tears with the guy’s baseball career—from T-ball all the way through one year in the minors.

“So, what is it that you do?”

Jackson was stunned speechless for a moment. He hadn’t had a chance to say much about anything, and certainly nothing that applied to him or his life. “Uh, I’m a home security specialist.”

“Oh, our centerfielder in college went on to do something with security systems.” And he was off talking about baseball again.

Jackson had had enough. It wasn’t as if he opposed baseball. It was actually his second favorite sport after football. The pompous ass sitting across from him was beginning to sour his opinion on the great American pastime, however.

Damn, he couldn’t even remember the dude’s name.

He would have much rather stayed home. He hated going on these dates. There was only one person that held any interest for him. Only one person his heart would ever belong to.

“Well, this has been...” Jackson searched for something polite to say without outright lying. “Well, the food was good, but I have to get going.”

“Oh.” His date looked mildly perturbed. “Okay, well, here, let me give you my number. Maybe we can do this again sometime.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s not going to happen. Later, dude.” Jackson didn’t care if he sounded rude or not. He just wanted to get as far away from the man as possible. He threw a handful of bills on the table to cover his part of dinner and hurried out of the restaurant.

* * * *

Talon stood in the shadows near the corner of the house when Jackson pulled into the drive. Just as he always did whenever Jackson came home from a date.

Turning off the engine, Jackson slowly climbed out of his car. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to Talon, but he knew he’d have to before the man would give him any peace. *Might as well get it over with.* So, he stuffed his fists into his jeans and marched straight over to stand in front him.

“I didn’t kiss him, and I didn’t fuck him. I didn’t so much as let him breathe on me. He was an arrogant prick, and I’ve had more fun clipping my toenails. The food was good. I paid for myself. I didn’t eat dessert.” Jackson paused and ran a hand through his sandy blond curls. He needed a haircut. “He was decent looking, late twenties, and I won’t be seeing him again.”

He dropped his head and reached around to rub the tension out of his neck. “Is there anything else? I’m tired, and I just want to go to bed.”

“Come here,” Talon said quietly.

“Talon, please, just ask me whatever you want to ask me and let me get inside.”

“I said come here, pup.” He still spoke in that low, calm voice.

Jackson sighed and took a step forward until he stood toe to toe with the bigger man. "What?"

Talon said nothing as he stepped around Jackson and began rubbing the knotted muscles in Jackson's neck and shoulders. Jackson couldn't contain his groan of pleasure.

"Feels good?"

"God, yes." Jackson dropped his chin to his chest and moaned again.

"I'm sorry you had such a bad night, baby. I'm sure next time will be better," Talon whispered as he moved his hands lower down Jackson's back.

Jackson shivered and squeezed his eyes shut. He both loved and hated when Talon called him baby. "There's not going to be a next time. I'm done. If you don't want me, fine. I'm not doing this anymore, though." Bitterness tinted his words.

"You know that it's not because I don't want you. You agreed to this, so just suck it up, kid." Talon's voice remained calm, but Jackson detected the steel beneath it.

Spinning around and baring his teeth, he growled. "I was fucking fourteen when I agreed to this shit! I'm not a damn kid anymore, Talon. I stopped being a kid a long time ago." He shook his head. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve such an asshole for a mate."

Jackson snorted in disgust when Talon merely stared at him. Pushing past the man he loved more than his life, he stalked toward the front door.

"Jackson."

He ignored the summons and continued inside, straight to his room, and began packing. If Talon didn't want him, then he wouldn't burden the man with his presence anymore. He didn't know where he was going to go, or what he was going to do, but he couldn't stay a minute longer.

"Hey, Jackson! How was the...What are you doing?"

Jackson bit back his annoyance. "I'm packing."

“Well, I can see that, but why?” Keeton wandered into the room and began folding Jackson’s clothes and placing them neatly inside the suitcase.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he answered shortly.

“Oh, I see. This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain pack member that just happens to look a lot like my mate, would it?”

Jackson jerked his head up and stared at Keeton with wide eyes. “I...I don’t...I mean.”

“Calm down, Jacks. I won’t tell anyone. That’s between you and Talon.”

“How did you know?” Jackson had never said a word to anyone. He was so careful to hide his feelings when Talon came around.

“I can see your aura, doofus. Talon’s, too. They light up like the Fourth of July when you get within ten feet of each other. Plus, Talon isn’t such a dick when you’re around.”

“You can’t tell anyone, Keeton. Please. Talon would shit a damn brick if anyone found out,” Jackson pleaded with the smaller man.

“Don’t have a stroke. I told you I wouldn’t say anything. I don’t understand why you both hide it. I think it’s great, but it’s not my business.” Keeton folded a pair of Jackson’s jeans and placed them inside the suitcase. “I’m pretty sure Braxton suspects, though.”

Jackson groaned. “Wonderful.”

“Man, you have got to calm down. It’s not the end of the world if the pack finds out that Talon is your mate.” Keeton sighed as he packed the last of Jackson’s clothes.

“Shh!” Jackson hissed. “Look, just don’t say anything, not even to Logan, okay? I know he’s your mate, and you guys don’t keep secrets, but he’s also Talon’s brother. His *twin* brother.” Jackson took a huge breath and let it out slowly. “I gotta go.”

Keeton rolled his eyes. “Where are you going to go?” When Jackson didn’t answer, he rolled his eyes again. “Hang on, don’t move.” Then he hurried out of the room.

Jackson zipped up his suitcase and sat it beside the door just as Keeton stepped back into the room. He handed Jackson a small gold key. "This is to my cottage. You remember how to get there?"

Jackson nodded. He'd only been there twice, but he remembered. "Yeah, I remember. I thought you sold that place."

"Nah, I decided to keep it as a place for me and Logan to have somewhere to go to be alone sometimes. I understand that we have to live with the pack, but it's nice to have a place that is just ours, even if it's only for a weekend."

"You want me to stay there?"

"Nope." Keeton shook his head. "I want you to stay here. But, I also know what it's like to feel frustrated and angry. So, go to my place for a few days. It's quiet, and no one will bother you. Take some time to think, but don't forget the full moon is in three days. Feel free to run the woods around my place, but be careful."

Jackson didn't know what to say. He leaned forward and kissed Keeton's cheek softly. "Thank you. Your mate is a damn lucky man to have you."

Keeton just laughed. "Yeah, tell him that. He thinks I'm a pain in the ass."

"'Cause you are," Braxton said from the doorway. He eyed the key in Jackson's hand and kicked the suitcase lightly. "You going somewhere, Jacks?"

"Uh, yeah, for a few days. Just need to get away for a little bit," Jackson answered nervously. How was he going to get out of the house without everyone questioning him?

"Because of Talon?" Braxton arched an eyebrow.

"Fuck! Does everyone know?"

"Nope." Braxton chuckled. Jackson didn't really see the humor in the situation. "Your brothers are about as observant as a rock." Braxton kicked the suitcase again. "Come on. We'll create a diversion so you can sneak out."

"Really?"

“Sure,” Keeton said. “We’ll even get you right out of the front door. Just wait for the signal.” He grabbed Braxton’s arm and shoved him out the door.

“Wait, what’s the signal?”

Keeton just smirked. “Oh, you’ll know it.” He pushed Braxton again and hurried down the stairs after him.

Two minutes later, Jackson heard it. Both Braxton’s and Keeton’s bloodcurdling screams echoed from somewhere near the back of the house. He guessed maybe the kitchen. He waited a few seconds just to make sure, then hurried down the stairs and quietly slipped out the front door.

“What? What? Braxton, what’s wrong?” Xander’s worried voice carried to him where he stood on the front porch.

Just before he slipped the door shut, he heard Keeton answer calmly, “Oh, we thought we saw a spider. Guess not.”

Chapter Two

Talon stood in the doorway of the kitchen laughing. “You two are a mess.”

“It’s not funny, Talon.” Logan growled, then turned to Keeton and sighed. “You scared the hell out of me, angel. Don’t do it again. I think you just took ten years off my life.”

“Same goes for you, *chulo*,” Xander added to Braxton as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes?”

Keeton and Braxton both hung their heads and looked properly chastised. “Yes, sir,” they mumbled in unison.

Talon just continued to smile. His pack brothers certainly had their hands full with their little mates. Braxton and Keeton were always getting into some kind of trouble. Just like his mate.

The smile slid from Talon’s lips, and he echoed his brother’s sigh. He didn’t know what to do about Jackson. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be mated to the man—quite the opposite really. He wanted Jackson more than words could describe, but he was just so damn young. At twenty-one, he may not be a kid anymore, but he was still twelve years Talon’s junior.

He watched Keeton tilt his head to the side, smirk, and nod. Talon didn’t know what the little shit had up his sleeve, but it had to be something devilish. Keeton looked much too satisfied with himself.

That’s when he heard it. A car door slammed, and a car engine roared to life out front. Turning on his heels, he sprinted to the front door and threw it open just in time to see Jackson’s Camaro reach the end of the drive. His back tires slung gravel as he peeled out onto the county road and raced away as if the devil himself were after him.

Slamming the front door with enough force to rattle the windows, Talon fisted his hands at his sides and seethed. “Keeton! Braxton!” he bellowed. “Get your asses in here!”

Keeton emerged from the kitchen first, followed closely by his mate. Braxton came next, taking his position beside Keeton, with Xander on his other side. Everyone crossed their arms and glared at Talon. He didn’t care.

“Is there a problem?” Keeton asked calmly.

“Yes, is there something we can help you with?” Braxton asked innocently. “Have you misplaced something?”

“You know damn well I didn’t misplace anything. Where the fuck is Jackson going?” Talon could tell from the look on his brother’s and his alpha’s faces they were seconds away from tearing in to him, but he couldn’t stop yelling.

“Not a clue.” Keeton shrugged.

“And why do you care?” Braxton asked, placing his hands on his hips.

Talon gritted his teeth and breathed in deeply through his nose. “Tell me.”

“Like I said,” Keeton shrugged again, “no clue.”

“He’s a big boy, Talon.” Braxton moved to stand in front of him. “He’ll be fine.”

Keeton stepped up beside his best friend and pushed his hip out to the side. “Yeah, you don’t need to worry about him. Maybe he’s found someone that will give him what he needs. Maybe he won’t even come back.” He raised his eyebrows with a knowing smirk.

Before Talon could think better of it, before the action even registered, both hands shot out and gripped the men’s shirt collars. Pissed off and wanting answers, he didn’t have the patience for their little games. “Tell me where he is.”

“You don’t deserve him, and I will...ah!” Braxton yelped as Xander ripped him from Talon’s grasp.

Loud and vicious snarling filled the room as Xander pushed Braxton behind him and prowled slowly toward Talon, rage blazing in his eyes. Logan stalked him from the other side, angry growls spilling from his open mouth.

Talon felt sickened with himself. What the hell was he thinking? Quickly releasing his hold on Keeton's shirt, he took several steps back, prepared to accept the consequences like a man. To his surprise, Keeton didn't move away. Instead, the little man stepped closer to him and turned to face his advancing mate. "Logan, chill out. He's your brother."

Braxton stood in front of Xander, pushing on his chest. "Come on, big guy. Ease up."

"I don't care who he is," Logan growled. "He put his hands on you, Keeton."

Xander still snarled, prowling toward Talon. "Move, Braxton."

"God save me from fools," Keeton muttered. "Everyone, calm the hell down!" he shouted.

Everyone froze, and the room went silent.

"That's better." Keeton motioned for Braxton to join him as they formed a barricade between Talon and their mates. "He didn't hurt me."

"Me either," Braxton agreed. "And it's not his fault anyway. Either of you would react the same way if you knew what was going on."

"Then I suggest you fill us in, Braxton." Xander had risen from his predatory crouch, but he still looked angry and menacing.

Talon couldn't blame him. If someone had dared to put their hands on his mate, he'd rip them limb from limb. He still didn't understand why the little runts were protecting him. Part of him warmed to the knowledge they actually cared about him and his well-being. The other part of him was irritated they felt he needed their protection.

“Guys, I appreciate this, but...” Talon trailed off when Keeton turned to glare at him.

“I suggest you keep your mouth shut unless you are ready to let everyone in on your little secret.”

Talon clamped his lips together and looked away from the other men in the room.

“Spill it,” Xander demanded.

Talon sighed. He didn’t have a choice. He’d never intended it to go this far, and the entire situation had gotten completely out of hand. Maybe years of denying himself the comfort of his mate had finally sent him over the edge. “Jackson is my mate, my *sienota*.”

Logan and Xander both stared at him as if he’d just admitted to killing the Pope. “Since when?” Xander asked.

“I guess since always.”

“How long have you known? Does he know? Why didn’t you ever tell anyone?” Logan fired questions at him.

Keeton and Braxton moved over to stand beside their collective mates and stared at Talon. Obviously, everyone expected answers.

“Since we found him in the woods, shot and bleeding, when he was fourteen.” Talon sighed and ran a hand over his face.

“Why haven’t you claimed him?” Logan asked. “No wonder you’re such an asshole.”

Talon snorted. “Well, it doesn’t help, but I was an asshole long before Jackson came on the scene.” He let his shoulders drop and shook his head. “He’s so young, Logan. I just wanted him to experience the world before he was tied down to one man.”

“Does he know?” Logan repeated. He cocked his head to the side when Talon looked away and didn’t answer. “I guess so. Wow, you really are a grade-A prick.”

“I deserve that.” Talon winced. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I just wanted...Hell, I don’t know what I wanted. It certainly wasn’t this.” He stepped forward cautiously and looked at Keeton. “Is he really with someone else?”

So many emotions whirling inside him, he felt like a ticking bomb, ready to explode at any second. If Jackson had found someone that made him happy, then Talon would let him go. He'd only ever wanted the best for Jackson. Talon certainly didn't fit that category.

Keeton shook his head. "You don't want him, and I don't see how it's any of your business where he is."

"Keeton," Logan warned.

"No." Keeton turned to point his finger at his mate's chest. "Don't you start in on me." He turned the slim finger on Talon. "And you can just go screw yourself. I'm not going to tell you anything until you get your head out of your ass and stop acting like an idiot." Then he turned and stomped from the room.

"Thanks, brother." Logan frowned. "I was really looking forward to getting laid tonight." He shook his head and hurried after his mate.

Talon watched him go, then turned to look at Braxton pleadingly. "Please, Brax. If he doesn't want to see me, fine. I just need to know he's okay."

"Nope." Braxton shook his head. "Keeton's right, and you won't get anything from me." He pulled Xander along as he made his way up the stairs.

Talon stood rooted to the floor, his heart beating a quick staccato inside his chest. His mate had left. He had no idea where to find the kid. Now, his family was mad at him. "What a damn disaster," he mumbled under his breath.

Digging his keys out of his pocket, he headed out to his truck. He needed a drink.

Chapter Three

Jackson swung lazily in the oversized hammock in Keeton's backyard. Looking out over the trees that lined Keeton's property, he smiled. The beautiful reds, yellows, and oranges of the leaves, the wonderful smells, the crisp morning air, he loved everything about autumn in Georgia.

The three days since he'd arrived were three of the most calming and relaxing days he'd ever spent. He hadn't bothered to show up for work, or even call in. He hated his job and couldn't care less if they fired him.

The wind whistled through the trees as the sun began its descent on the western horizon. Jackson sighed as he flipped himself out of the hammock and slowly made his way inside. The sun would be setting soon, leaving way for the full moon. He hated being bound to the lunar goddess, the forced compulsion to shift on the full moons. It was just one more thing in his life he couldn't control.

Then again, his aversion to the full moon could come from the buckshot he'd taken during his first shift. When Xander and Talon had found him near the forest that night, he'd been in bad shape with a bullet lodged in his shoulder. He'd still been in his wolf form, not much more than a pup at the age of fourteen.

Xander had taken him in, and the pack had become his family. They all assumed Jackson had been shot by a hunter or poacher, and he'd never bothered to correct them. He had even been able to convince himself for a while that some stranger had shot him.

On nights of the full moon, Jackson couldn't deny the truth, though. Memories assailed him, and he knew a random hunter hadn't

shot him. His father had pulled that trigger. His own father had tried to kill him. Jackson hadn't even known why at the time.

He knew now that his father had been afraid of him. As a white wolf, Jackson was more than just a freak. He was a danger to his family and his pack, an abomination.

Flopping down on the sofa in the living room, he tried to push away thoughts of his family. He'd never been particularly close with his father. A brilliant doctor and the pack alpha, his dad had spent the majority of his time in his lab or tending to his responsibilities to the pack. It didn't leave much time for his family.

Apparently, Jackson's mother had felt the same way. She'd taken off just after his eighth birthday, leaving him in the care of his then ten-year-old brother. They'd done okay, though, and Cole had always been his best friend. They stuck together, didn't make waves with their father, and life had been tolerable.

Damn, he missed his brother like crazy. He'd spent a few years hoping Cole would come and find him, but had since given up the dream of a family reunion.

It still hurt sometimes, but he had a new family now. A pack full of great men who cared a great deal for him, made sure he finished school, and had even offered to pay for his college.

Talon still hounded him insistently about college. Jackson smiled at the memory of how frustrated Talon had been when he'd refused. The man had stomped around for a week, growling and snapping at everyone.

Traveling further down memory lane, he thought back to the first time he'd set eyes on Talon. He'd woken up on some ugly couch, sore and hurting, unsure where he was, or how he'd gotten there. The most gorgeous man he had ever seen sat in the chair across from him, just watching him.

Not quite fifteen, Jackson didn't know anything about mating or *sienotas*, but his hormones had kicked into overdrive, and he'd wanted the man with a desperation that made him ache.

He sighed wistfully. Some things never changed. He still wanted Talon, still desired him. His mate remained just as gorgeous, just as sexy, as he'd been seven years ago. Long, black hair, smooth, golden skin, hard muscles, and gorgeous, ice-blue eyes, Jackson could barely keep from panting every time the man walked into a room.

It was a shame Talon acted like such a prick.

There was so much more to the man, though. He had a big heart and cared deeply for those who earned his trust. He rarely showed it, and Jackson had an idea only he had seen that side of Talon. He just couldn't fathom why his mate insisted on acting like such a douche the majority of the time.

He'd never met any of Talon's friends. Didn't think the man had any. Talon never talked about his family, other than Logan. Every look, every move, every subtle glance dripped with intimidation, and most people just avoided him completely.

Not Jackson, though. No, he had the utter misfortune to love the stubborn fool.

* * * *

Talon paced the living room, his arms stiff, hands fisted at his sides. Three days since the full moon, and six days since he'd seen Jackson, he didn't think he could take much more. The first full moon without his mate since Jackson came to live with them, it made him nervous for the kid to be out on his own.

He'd called Jackson's cell phone, several times a day, every day he'd been gone. It always went straight to voice mail. Jackson's work hadn't seen or heard from him all week. They also informed him Jackson needed to find a new job.

Braxton ambled into the room, smirking the entire way. "Beginning to rethink your position on not claiming your mate?"

Talon just glared at the man. "You're so damn cocky. What if something happened to him? Did you ever think about that?"

“There’s nothing wrong with Jackson. I talked to him this morning. He’s completely safe.”

The realization that Jackson purposely ignored him made Talon’s heart sink like a lead balloon. How had he allowed things to get so bad?

“I need to see him, Braxton. I need to know he’s okay.”

“Why? So you can hurt him some more. I don’t think so.” Braxton shook his head in finality. “He’s better off without you. The fact that you haven’t even tried looking for him just proves that.”

“I have looked for him!” Talon shouted. “I called his work, his cell phone. I’ve called every motel, hotel, inn, apartment complex, and hospital within a twenty-mile radius. He doesn’t have any friends he talks about, so I can’t ask them. What the hell do you want from me?”

“I want you to pull your head out of your ass and own up to your feelings!” Braxton shouted right back. It never failed to amaze him that, though much smaller, neither Braxton nor Keeton ever backed down from him. “I want you to stop being an arrogant prick and just admit you love him!”

“Of course I love him, you little twit!” If they had neighbors, every one of them would be on the phone to the police at this point. “I’ve loved him every day for seven fucking years! Do you have any idea how hard it is to love and need someone you can’t have for that long?”

“It’s your own damn fault. Don’t sit there and piss and moan to me about something you could have changed a long time ago.”

“He’s a baby, Braxton!” Why did no one understand this? Jackson had just turned twenty-one, while Talon stared down his thirty-third birthday. “He’s got his whole damn life ahead of him. He’s so smart, and he has a real chance to make something of his life.” His voice softened until he spoke just above a whisper. “It’s not fair for him to be tied down to someone like me. I just want him to be happy.”

“He’s at my cottage,” Keeton said quietly as he walked into the room.

Talon’s head snapped up, and he stared at the little blond. Tears pooled in his blue eyes, and his bottom lip trembled before he sucked into his mouth and chewed on it.

Great. Talon hadn’t meant to upset him, and he just knew Logan was going to have his ass for this. Then Keeton’s words finally sank in, and Talon sucked in a breath.

“Keeton!” Braxton shouted.

“Enough, *chulo*,” Xander admonished as he came down the stairs. He paused halfway down and crooked his finger at his mate. “Come on. You’re finished here.”

Braxton crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Talon. “Fine,” he huffed before hurrying up the stairs after Xander.

“Thank you, Keeton.”

“Just don’t screw it up.”

Talon nodded, though he couldn’t promise anything. He seemed to be good at screwing shit up. He gave Keeton a crooked smile and hurried out the door.

Talon groaned when he saw his twin standing next to his pickup.

“If you don’t do right by Jackson, I’ll make sure you never see him again.” Logan spoke without preamble. “You need to decide what it’s going to be.”

Talon shoved past his brother and climbed into the driver’s seat. It got damn tiring listening to people tell him what a dickhead he was. None of them could understand what the last several years had been like for him.

Making decisions for Jackson may have been wrong, but he’d done them with the purest intentions.

And paved his road right to Hell.

Chapter Four

Pulling up in front of Keeton's cottage, he cut the engine and just sat there, staring through the window at the front door. Would Jackson even let him inside? What would Talon say if he did? What would he do if Jackson slammed the door in his face?

Taking a deep breath and trying to steady his racing pulse, Talon slid out of the vehicle and marched determinedly across the lawn and up the front steps. One more deep breath and he rapped loudly on the door. Jackson could try to turn him away, and the pup would find out just how stubborn Talon could be.

Pounding on the wood hard enough to shake the glass panes of the windows, he pulled his foot back to kick at the door, just as it swung open. Jackson stood in the doorway, staring back at him as if he were crazy.

"What the hell, Tal?"

Talon had to grit his teeth to keep from moaning. Jackson wore nothing but a pair of loose-fitting boxers, his well-defined abs on prominent display. His hair stood out in disarray, and his eyes appeared heavy with sleep. He was the most gorgeous thing Talon had ever laid eyes on.

"Can I come in? Please," he added grudgingly. This would be harder than he thought.

Jackson just shrugged and stepped away from the door, motioning Talon inside with a wave of his hand. Pushing in past the man, Talon clenched his fists to keep from gliding his fingertips along the smooth skin taunting him.

Jackson shuffled over to the couch, wrapped himself in an enormous fleece blanket, and plopped down on the cushions. Looking over at Talon, he jerked his head toward one of the armchairs near the fireplace.

Talon didn't want to sit in the chair. He wanted to sit beside his mate. Better yet, he wanted to pull Jackson into his lap, wrap his arms around him, and keep him there forever. He walked over and sat in the chair.

"So, I see you've found me. What do you want?"

Talon couldn't fault the guy for his anger. Still it hurt to hear the indifference in Jackson's voice. He wanted Jackson to be happy to see him, not act as though it were an inconvenience.

Not that Talon had ever given him any reason to be excited by his presence. He'd done everything in his power to push his mate away.

"I want you to come home." Snapping his mouth shut, his lips pressed together firmly, he looked away. He hadn't meant to say that. Not yet anyway.

"And if I don't want to? I like it here."

Talon closed his eyes and fought to leash his impatience. As much as he wanted to throw the stubborn punk over his shoulder and carry him out, he couldn't. He'd hid behind Jackson's age for too long, and they were going to talk this out—a talk they should have had a long time ago.

"I know you're angry and hurt and probably a little confused," Talon began. He held up a hand when Jackson snorted. "Okay, maybe a lot confused. Tell me what it is you want to know, and I'll answer you the best I can."

Jackson sat up a little straighter on the sofa and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands clamped together between them. "Why don't you want me?"

He should have seen this coming. Jackson always cut right to the heart of any issue. No beating around the bush or tiptoeing around the

issue, the kid went straight for the gut. “I do want you. How can you not know that?”

Well that did it.

Jackson threw off his blanket and sprang to his feet with an angry growl. He marched straight over to Talon, placing his hands on the arms of the chair, and leaned in until they were eye to eye. “Let’s see, hmm? You won’t claim me. You won’t touch me. You force me to go out on these ridiculous dates. You treat me like a child and act as though I need training wheels for life.”

His lips curled over his teeth in a sarcastic grin. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone you’re my mate. No one can ever know how I feel about you. You make decisions for me without asking what I want, and you treat me like a dirty little secret.”

He pushed away roughly and resumed his seat on the sofa. “So, no, I can’t imagine why I’d think you don’t want me. Maybe you should spell it out, so the stupid kid can understand it.”

Talon shook his head to clear it, his mate’s scent still swirling inside his nose and making his brain fuzzy. “I just wanted you to have a chance to grow up first.”

“Well, I’ve been grown up for a while now, and it hasn’t made a difference.” Jackson threw back at him. “Try again.”

“Jackson, you are so smart. You can do anything you set your mind to.” Talon hung his head and stared down at his feet as he continued. “I didn’t even graduate high school. I dropped out my freshman year and never went back.”

Gathering his waning pride, he looked up at his mate and sighed. “You deserve a whole lot more than what I have to offer. You were so young when we found you. Not really more than a baby. It wasn’t right for me to claim you then or have any kind of physical relationship with you.”

“I get that.” Some of the anger had drained from Jackson’s voice leaving way for confusion. “But I turned eighteen three years ago. Why not then?”

“Oh, believe me, I wanted to.” Talon chuckled without humor. He had been so proud the day Jackson graduated from high school, and with honors to boot. He’d wanted to take his mate home and celebrate all night.

“So, why didn’t you? I was ready, Talon. I was so excited the day I graduated. I had already turned eighteen, and I kept thinking maybe you were just waiting until I finished school.” Jackson’s muscles relaxed further, more of the tension easing from his body.

“I know, baby. I wanted to. I just kept thinking if I put it off a little longer, gave it just a little more time...” Talon trailed off and scrubbed both hands over his face. “Me, Xander, Logan, we’ve all had to grow up a lot faster than we should. I didn’t want that for you. I wanted you to date, have friends, get drunk, start fights, get in trouble.”

Staring at the floor, he narrowed his eyes as he tried to put what he wanted to say into words. “I’m a mean, selfish, stubborn bastard. I can be hard to live with.”

Jackson snorted. “You have no idea.”

Frowning at his mate, Talon continued, “I’m no prize, and I know that. You deserve a hell of a lot more than I have to offer.”

“So, you wanted me to go on these stupid dates for what? In hopes that I would find someone better? Or did you just not want to be saddled with a naïve kid as a mate?”

“I’m trying to explain. It would be helpful if you could lose the fucking attitude for five seconds!” Damn, the kid irritated him to no end.

“You aren’t explaining anything. You’re talking in circles and not a word of it makes sense. If you don’t want me, I can accept that. I need a damn good reason, though, and so far all you’ve given me is piss poor excuses.”

“Damn it, Jackson! I’m trying to tell y—”

“No!” Jackson jumped to his feet again and began pacing the room. “You aren’t telling me anything. Everything you’re saying is

full of holes and just makes me want to punch you in the face.” He stopped in the middle of the room and crossed his arms over his chest. “You have one last chance to tell me the truth, or you can get the fuck out.”

“I’m going to die, okay!”

Jackson’s mouth dropped open, and his hands fell limply to his sides. “What? When? Why?”

“I don’t know when, but much sooner than you will.” Talon pushed to his feet and walked slowly toward his mate. “It’s some kind of genetic birth defect. My heart can’t hold up to shifting every full moon.” He stopped in front of Jackson and placed a hand on his hip. “Now, do you get it?”

Jackson stared at him for a full minute before he shook his head. “Shifters don’t have heart disease and things like that.”

“It’s not a disease. It’s a birth defect.”

“How do you know? Have you seen a doctor?” Jackson’s voice wobbled, and his hands shook as he placed them on Talon’s chest.

“My tribe’s doctor diagnosed it when I was twelve.”

“That was twenty years ago, Talon. Maybe he was wrong.”

Talon wished it were true, but he knew better. Reaching up to cup Jackson’s jaw, he smiled crookedly. “My father died from the same condition at the age of sixty-one. He stopped shifting in his fifties, but I don’t really have that option.”

“Your dad was sixty when he died? That’s really old.” Jackson’s eyebrows drew together, and he frowned.

Rolling his eyes, Talon rested his forehead against his mate’s. “I’m sure it sounds old to you, baby, but it was more than forty years before he should have passed.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve. Our mom had us tested right after he died. They weren’t *sienotas*, but they were so in love. It devastated her to lose him, and she became a little overprotective.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jackson shoved him away roughly and glared. “All this time, all these years, all the secrets you made me promise to keep, and this is the reason? Why the hell didn’t you just tell me?”

“Logan is the only one who knows. It’s not something I like to spread around.”

“Give me one good reason why? What if something happened to you? No one would know what was wrong. No one would know what to do!” Jackson continued to shout, waving his arms around wildly. “You stubborn asshole!”

“Jackson, calm down.”

“I will not calm down. You just told me that you could die. Not to mention I find out this is the reason you’ve kept me at arm’s length for the past seven years, and you want me to calm down?” Jackson stomped forward and poked a finger right in his chest. “I want an apology. And it better be a damn good one, Talon Cartwright.”

Normally sweet and goofy, Talon had never seen Jackson so angry before. His cock perked up quite inappropriately, taking notice of his mate’s flushed skin, the fire that lit up his eyes. The kid had a lot of passion. Talon wondered if he could redirect it toward less verbal pursuits.

“I’m sorry, baby. I did what I thought was best for you.”

“It’s my life. Maybe it’s time you stopped trying to control it, and let me make my own decisions.” Moving closer, Jackson molded his body to Talon’s and soft lips slipped over the skin just under his chin. “I don’t care. I’ll take you anyway I can get you, but you have to stop treating me like a kid.”

Talon groaned and stepped away, whirling around to take up Jackson’s earlier pacing. “You are my *sienota*, Jackson. If I claim you, we’re bonded. You know this. How can you think I’d risk you that way? This is not up for debate. I refuse to do something tha—”

“Talon?”

Fighting back a growl, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, Jackson?”

“Do you love me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then shut up and kiss me.”

Talon did growl then. “You’re killing me, pup.”

“Well, I’m not hiding anymore, so you need to make a decision now. Either you let everyone know you’re mine.” Jackson paused and shrugged. “Or I will find someone who actually wants me.”

Talon’s grin started small and slowly spread until it stretched from ear to ear. Jackson was playing him like a fiddle, and the little shit knew it. If Talon had learned anything in the last week, it was just how *not* okay he would be if Jackson found someone else.

“I already told the guys, so I guess you can tell whoever you want.”

Jackson just shook his head as if completely exasperated with him. “I’m no expert on fairy-tale endings, but I’m pretty sure this is the part where you’re supposed to kiss me.”

Talon might be an idiot, but a fool he wasn’t. Cupping Jackson’s face in both hands, he pulled him closer and slanted their mouths together. Jackson gasped, his lips parting, and Talon swept his tongue inside, groaning as his mate’s sweet taste flooded his senses.

Pulling away much too quickly for Talon’s liking, Jackson shook his head, and a soft snort escaped his lips. “You really suck at apologies. That was the wor—”

Wrapping his fingers around his mate’s neck, Talon jerked him forward and crushed their mouths together, effectively cutting off Jackson’s smartass reply.

Jackson moaned, rubbing against him and wrapping his arms around Talon’s neck to pull him closer. “Fine,” he panted against Talon’s lips. “We’ll talk about it later.” He moved closer until his straining cock pressed tightly against Talon’s stomach.

Gliding his fingers down Jackson's neck, Talon caressed his mate's arms, his sides, all the way down to grip his hips. He pulled Jackson closer, encouraging the younger man to move against him.

Jackson continued to moan as he humped against Talon's midsection. His fingers twined in Talon's hair, and he attacked his mouth like a starving man. Cradling Jackson's head with one hand, Talon used the other to map and explore the lean muscles of his mate's back.

Pulling out from the kiss, he didn't venture far, but used his lips and tongue to leave a wet trail along Jackson's jaw and down his neck. Talon worked his way across the man's shoulder then back up to his ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth and nipping it lightly.

Jackson panted heavily, and his body jerked as he grinded his groin against Talon's jean-clad erection.

"That's it, baby. You like that? Feels good, doesn't it?" Talon whispered roughly. He trailed his fingers across Jackson's tensing abs and feathered the tips along the waistband of his mate's boxers.

Jackson's entire body tensed, and the muscles under Talon's hands bunched and tightened. His head dropped back on his shoulders, and Talon watched as the chords strained in the man's neck.

He gripped the hard flesh tenting Jackson's boxers, and his mate's hips jerked forward, warm wetness seeping through the thin cotton. Realization that Jackson had just come in his boxers sent Talon into a tailspin of desire. He'd barely touched the kid, and Jackson had exploded like a bottle rocket. If that didn't make a man feel ten feet tall, he didn't know what could.

Then he saw the look on his mate's face. Jackson's cheeks flushed a vibrant red, his eyes downcast, and he looked so ashamed, so embarrassed. Slipping two fingers under Jackson's chin, Talon exerted pressure, tilting Jackson's head up, until the beautiful blue eyes he adored stared back at him.

"What's all this? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," Jackson whispered, still trying to look away.

"Why on earth are you sorry?" Talon had loved every minute of it and thought Jackson had as well.

"I didn't mean to...I was...I tried to stop. I'm sorry."

Understanding came swiftly, and Talon bit the inside of cheek to keep from smiling. "You didn't mean to come so quickly."

Jackson just bit his lip and nodded, but still refused to look Talon in the eyes. That just wouldn't do.

"I think it was hot as hell. You are sexy as sin when you come." Oh, what it was like to be twenty-one. "You're young, Jackson. You can come a few more times before the night is over." Talon smiled and winked when Jackson finally looked up at him.

"You aren't mad or disappointed?"

"Not at all," Talon assured him. It did make him curious about one thing, though. He probably shouldn't ask, but he just couldn't help himself. "How many people have you been with, Jackson?"

"None," Jackson stated firmly and immediately. "I am a twenty-one-year-old virgin. I have never even had so much as a hand job. I kissed a few people when I was younger, but not in the last couple of years."

Stunned didn't begin to cover what Talon felt. A young, healthy male, Jackson's hormones had to be in constant overdrive. How could he be a virgin? "Why?" Talon shut his mouth quickly. There was that damn word-vomit again.

"Because none of them were my mate," Jackson answered with a pointed look. "It just felt wrong to let someone other than you touch me that way."

Talon held back his smile and hoped his relief and happiness didn't show on his face. He'd spent so many sleepless nights making himself sick with thoughts of Jackson naked in some faceless person's bed.

“So, I don’t have any real experience, and I need you tell me what to do to make you feel good, Talon. And, I need it to be real damn soon. I absolutely cannot believe I am still a virgin.”

Talon chuckled softly. “You know, Keeton was a virgin before he mated Logan.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “He told me, and it is so not the same thing. He’d just never had intercourse. He’d done everything else though—hand jobs, blow jobs, rim jobs—the whole enchilada! So, I mean, it barely even counts, ya know?”

Talon laughed again. “Whatever you say, baby.”

Chapter Five

Jackson couldn't believe it. After years of wanting, yearning, he finally had Talon in his arms. He knew Talon loved him, but his mate had never uttered the words. Jackson felt like he could walk on water.

"So, you told everyone? That you're my mate, I mean."

Talon looked so gorgeous when he smiled. "Yep."

Pressing his lips together, Jackson glared playfully. His mate looked much too pleased with himself. "It's about time."

The smile slid from Talon's face, and he nodded gravely. "I know. I've been a complete idiot." He caressed Jackson's cheek with his knuckles. "I have only ever wanted what is best for you. I swear to you, Jackson. I should have told you, but I know you so well. I knew you wouldn't care, and I can't do that to you. Do you understand? Can you forgive me?"

Jackson looked down at his stained boxers and back up at Talon with an arched brow. "I think it's fairly obvious that you're forgiven."

Talon snorted as he took a step in retreat. "Way to kill the moment, pup."

Crossing his arms over his bare chest, Jackson eyed his mate for several seconds before he spoke. "No, I still don't understand. If you didn't want everyone else to know, that's your business. You should have told me, though. You should have trusted me."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on someone your age. I was going to tell you eventually, when you'd grown up a bit and weren't so irrational."

Jackson's eyes almost popped out of his head. His arms dropped to his sides, and his hands clenched into angry fists. "Irrational?"

Talon sighed. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. You let your emotions get away from you and cloud your judgment. We're talking life and death here, Jackson."

"I'm perfectly aware of what's at stake." Jackson wanted to punch his mate in the mouth, but he wouldn't. It would only prove Talon's point. *The prick.*

Talon sighed and held out a hand to him. "I don't want to fight with you. Please, can we just discuss this later? I can't sleep without you in the house, so you need to come home. I'm exhausted."

Jackson melted, his insides going all gooey. In a strange way, it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to him. "Fine." He reached out and took Talon's offered hand. "You can't keep distracting me forever, though. We *are* going to talk about this."

"You also need to start looking for a new job," Talon said, ignoring him completely. He pulled Jackson along through the living room, toward the back of the cottage. "Or, you know, maybe you could enroll in some college courses or online classes."

Jackson rolled his eyes as Talon led the way to the bedroom. He should have seen that coming. He also knew Talon wouldn't give up on the topic easily. He didn't want to go back to school, though. He'd had a lot of time to think since he'd arrived at Keeton's place. He'd debated back and forth, but he'd come up with a few ideas on what he wanted out of life.

"I think I'm going to join the academy." Jackson released his mate's hand when they stepped into the bedroom and walked over to pull his suitcase out from under the bed. Looking around the room, he grimaced at the clothes, shoes, and trash littered across the floor. Wow, he was a slob.

"I think that's great." Talon beamed. "What college did you want to go to?"

Jackson sighed as he crossed the floor to the bathroom. The sticky mess inside his shorts had started to dry, and his balls itched like crazy. He really didn't want to have this conversation. "Not academy

like university. Academy like police cadet training. I want to be a policeman, Talon.”

“I don’t understand.” The grinding of Talon’s teeth told another story.

Slipping off his boxers, Jackson grabbed a cloth from the cabinet, wet it, and began cleaning himself the best he could. “I want to be a cop, a pig, the five-0, the po-po, a black and white. You know, ‘serve and protect,’ and all that.”

“No.”

Jackson tossed the cloth in the sink, put his hands on his hips, and glared at his mate. “You asked what I wanted to do, and this is it. I want to be a police officer. Maybe work my way up to detective. I want to help people.”

“Then be a fucking social worker,” Talon snapped. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared right back. “They don’t get shot at.”

Jackson closed his eyes and groaned. “I will be fully trained and have a gun of my own. Why can’t you just support me?”

After several minutes of glaring at him, Talon finally dropped his arms and relaxed his stance. Moving across the room, he wrapped his arms around Jackson’s waist and pulled him close. Jackson loved the feel of his mate’s body pressed against him. If only Talon would ditch the clothes.

“Add it to the list of things we’ll talk about later.” Talon nipped the flesh beneath Jackson’s ear, drawing a quiet moan from his parted lips.

He knew he should stand his ground. He knew he shouldn’t let Talon distract him, but damn it felt too good for him to care. The feel of Talon’s lips ghosting over along his neck, barely more than a velvet brush, sent a shiver up his spine.

Talon bit at Jackson’s jaw once, twice, before placing a light kiss on his lips. “Hurry up. I want to go home.” Talon slapped him on the ass and strutted out of the room.

Frozen in place, rooted to the floor, Jackson cocked his head to the side and frowned. “What the hell just happened?” One minute he had been talking about being an officer of the law, and the next his brain had turned to total mush. *Then*, when things were starting to get good, Talon just walked away.

Oh, he definitely needed to learn that little trick. Talon may have won this round, but Jackson would be ready next time. He had a plan and knew what he wanted to do with his life.

Well, kind of. He wanted to be a cop. Maybe. He really liked computers, but he’d need college classes to get a decent IT job. College held little appeal for him. He liked food. Maybe he could be a chef. Frowning, he shook his head. No, he liked to eat, not cook.

Okay, so he didn’t know what the hell he wanted to do, but he would make his own decisions, his own mistakes. He didn’t need Talon telling him what to do or how to do it.

Grabbing the least wrinkled pair of jeans off the floor, he slipped them on and began gathering his clothes and tossing them toward the suitcase on the bed. He sniffed a couple of shirts, chose the least smelly, and tugged it on over his head. He wondered if he had time to clean the place up a little.

“Hurry the fuck up already!” Talon shouted from the living room.

Guess that answered his question about cleaning. Zipping up his suitcase, he scanned the room again, looking for anything he might have missed. Wiggling his bare toes, he looked down at his feet and pursed his lips. Where were his shoes?

“What have you been doing here?” Talon walked into the room holding Jackson’s sneakers. “You’re usually neat as a pin, but this place is a wreck.”

Jackson grimaced as he took his shoes and pulled them on sans socks. “Yeah, I really should clean before we leave.”

“We’ll come back tomorrow, and I’ll help you.” Talon hauled the suitcase off the bed. “Come on, baby. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m exhausted. I don’t think I’ve slept all week.”

Jackson glanced at the mess of sheets and blankets on the bed and bit his lip briefly before speaking. “We could stay here, and you could nap. Then we could clean after you wake up.” He wound his arms around Talon’s neck and nuzzled him under his chin. “I finally have you, Talon, and I’m not ready to share you yet.”

“Share me?” Talon’s voice sounded shaky and distracted.

“If we go home, everyone will be there, and they’re all going to have a thousand questions. Can’t we just stay for a little while?” He ran his tongue along the curve of Talon’s jaw. “Please?”

“Whatever you want, baby.” Talon’s voice dropped to a thick whisper.

Jackson’s cock strained against his fly, begging to come out and play, but Talon needed sleep. Thursday night meant bar specials down at *Carpe Noctem*. Talon would be working his ass off, doubling as both bartender and bouncer during his ten-hour shift.

Taking in the dark circles under his mate’s eyes, the weariness on his face, Jackson felt a stab of guilt that he had caused this. If he had caused it, he could certainly fix it, though.

“Strip,” he ordered. Releasing his hold on Talon, he began straightening the bedding. Once finished, he shimmied out of his own clothes and climbed into bed. He settled down under the blankets, finally looked up at his mate, and almost swallowed his tongue.

Talon stood beside the bed, completely naked and hard as steel, his thick cock jutting proudly from its nest of black curls. Gorgeous sun bronzed skin stretched across Talon’s hard, rippling muscles. Broad shoulders, huge biceps, corrugated abs, and his lean waist rounded out all six-foot-three of the beautiful god before him.

Jackson licked his lips as he stared openly at his mate’s weeping erection. God, he wanted to taste him, but he wasn’t sure what to do. He’d never given a blow job before, and he wanted it to be good for his mate—wanted to please him.

Looking away as his face flushed, Jackson worried his bottom lip between his teeth and fingered the sheet around his waist. What if he disappointed Talon? What if he couldn't make the man feel good?

So preoccupied with his thoughts, he didn't realize Talon had slid into bed beside him until he felt a warm hand cup his jaw. Talon urged Jackson to face him and placed a tender kiss on his forehead.

"We don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with. I just want to hold you. Is that okay?" Talon settled back on his pillow and opened his arms wide.

Moving into Talon's embrace, pressing himself as close to his mate as he could, Jackson closed his eyes and choked back the groan that swelled in his throat. He'd fantasized about this for years, lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling, and imagining Talon's heated body curled around him.

He'd pictured Talon's nude body hovered over him, the man's mesmerizing blue eyes staring into his as Talon moved inside him, each working toward a common goal. He'd conjured all kind of images filled with sweat-dampened bodies, soft moans, and explosive endings.

Now that he finally had the man in his bed, he didn't know what to do with him. The need to please his mate overwhelmed him, until Jackson felt he'd go crazy with it. If he just knew where to start.

"It's not that I don't want to do anything with you," he whispered as he buried his face in the crook of Talon's neck and inhaled deeply. His cock jumped and his mouth watered at the intoxicating scent of sandalwood and vanilla. The delicious scent of his mate had tortured him for years, making him yearn for something he couldn't have.

"Then what is it?" Talon threaded his fingers through Jackson's hair and massaged his scalp. "You know you can tell me anything."

Yes, Jackson knew he could. Though they had never been lovers, and Talon often treated him like a child, he had been a good mate. Jackson had never wanted for anything, and Talon had always been

there for him. Confusing and awkward, Jackson didn't know how he would have made it through his teens without the man.

Talon always had a shoulder to lean on, or an ear to bend. He didn't talk much, but he listened, really listened. He bought Jackson his first car, though he still didn't know how his mate had come up with the money for the Camaro. Jackson loved that car for the simple reason Talon had given it to him.

"I just don't want you to be disappointed. I want us to be together, but I don't know how to make it good for you."

He felt a tug at his hair and lifted his head to look into his mate's eyes. "I doubt there is anything you can do that I won't like," Talon said seriously. "I'm more interested in the *together* part. Everything else is just a bonus."

Damn, Talon was racking up brownie points left and right. The man was well on his way to being forgiven for any and all future infractions. "Tell me what to do."

"Whatever you want, baby."

"No." Jackson shook his head. "I want to suck your cock. Tell me what you like."

Talon's nostrils flared and a soft growl emanated from his mouth. He inched up the mattress until he leaned against the headboard. Tossing aside the blankets, he gestured toward his still raging hard on. "You are seriously overthinking this. It's pretty instinctual, not to mention self-explanatory. Insert tab A into slot B."

Nodding once, Jackson wiggled around until he lay between his mate's splayed thighs. His hand shook as he reached out hesitantly and wrapped his fingers around Talon's pulsing shaft. He jumped in surprise when Talon moaned loudly and thrust his hips up into his grip.

Jackson stroked the turgid flesh in his hand, adding a little twist around the head, just the way he liked when he pleased himself. The clear drop of liquid leaking through the slit fascinated him, and he wanted to taste it.

Looking into his lover's eyes, he darted his tongue out, swiping it across the tip of Talon's cock. Salty with a hint of sweetness, the flavors exploded across his tongue, pulling an involuntary moan from deep in Jackson's chest. Talon tasted amazing, and he wanted more.

Gripping the base of Talon's weeping cock and swirling his tongue around the crown, Jackson enveloped the spongy head in his mouth.

* * * *

Electricity raced along his spine and heat pooled in his groin, and Talon almost came up off the bed. The warm, wet mouth encompassing his aching flesh was bliss. It had been so long since he'd felt something this amazing.

For so long he'd denied himself the pleasure of his mate, relying only on his own hand and imagination to ease the ache. To feel Jackson against him, to openly desire him, to have the desire returned, left his head spinning.

The warm, full lips around the tip of his erection slid down his demanding shaft until Jackson's nose pressed into the curly hairs at the base of Talon's dick. *Holy shit, the kid's a natural.* Or he had been lying about never being with another man.

Talon preferred the former.

Jackson didn't waste any time as he set up a steady rhythm of tongue, lips, and hand. Talon watched his spit-slicked flesh slide in and out of his mate's welcoming mouth, the blissful look on Jackson's face as he closed his eyes and moaned around Talon's length.

The sight, the sounds, the slight vibrations racing down his shaft, pushed Talon closer to the edge until he gripped the sheets in both fists, shaking with the effort to remain immobile.

His lover took him to the back of his throat again and swallowed, contracting the soft walls of his throat. Talon cried out and thrust his

hips, pushing his cock deeper into Jackson's mouth. He couldn't hold back anymore.

Fisting Jackson's hair, he gave it a sharp tug, but his young mate would have none of it. Jackson shook his head and redoubled his effort, sucking harder, hollowing his cheeks as he bobbed his head faster.

"Oh, fuck, baby. I'm gonna...you gotta...oh, fuck!"

Jackson buried his nose against Talon's groin once more and fondled his balls, rolling them gently with his long fingers.

Talon's lower belly tightened, the pressure built in his sac, and electricity shot straight up his spine. He roared as he held the back of Jackson's head in both hands, pushed his cock as deeply into his lover's throat as he could, and erupted like a fucking geyser.

Once he had spent himself, Talon slumped back against the headboard, his entire body twitching with aftershocks. "Damn, baby," he panted. "Where the hell did you learn to do that?"

Jackson sat up and wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb. He just shrugged and smiled. "Instinctual, right?"

"You need me to take care of you? Come here, pup." Talon motioned for Jackson to come to him. No way could he move just then.

Jackson, however, crawled to his side of the bed and burrowed under the covers. His face flushed, and he shook his head. "I um...came when you did," he mumbled.

Talon couldn't hold back his smile. "That's hot."

Scooting down to lay behind his mate, he wrapped his arms around Jackson and pulled the younger man against his chest. He had been a fool to think he could ever give the man up. He needed Jackson more than his next breath, and it felt so good to finally have Jackson in his arms.

For the first time in his long, miserable life, Talon felt at peace. His body was sated and relaxed, he finally had his soul mate beside him, and everything was right in the world.

He squeezed Jackson gently and kissed the soft skin at the back of his lover's neck. "I love you, baby."

"Love you, too." Jackson yawned. "Get some sleep. You have work in four hours."

Other than Logan, Talon had never had anyone worry about him or want to take care of him. He found he rather enjoyed it. Grinning, he closed his eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Six

It was full dark when Jackson pulled up in front of the house he shared with his pack. He had forgotten to set the alarm, causing Talon to nearly be late for work. His mate hadn't had time to do more than give Jackson a quick kiss before running out the door, leaving him to clean Keeton's house on his own.

Talon had offered to help him the next afternoon, but Jackson didn't mind doing the work. He'd made the mess after all.

Besides, even after his nap, Talon still looked completely drained. Jackson made a mental note to make sure his lover spent the day in bed after his shift. Even if that meant Jackson had to stay in bed with him. Not that it would be hardship.

Jackson smiled to himself as he cut the engine and climbed out of his car. His heart felt light and buoyant as he jogged over the gravel and bounded up the front steps. The freedom to proclaim Talon as his—and quite loudly if he wanted to—felt like an enormous weight lifted off his shoulders. Finally his to love openly, he didn't have to guard his emotions or watch his every step around the man anymore.

The front door flew open just as he reached for the knob. Keeton and Braxton stood in the doorway, beaming like a pair of Cheshire cats. Jackson knew he wore the same mile-wide grin on his own face, but he pushed past the little pests without a word and flopped down on the sofa.

"So?" Keeton moved in front of him in a flash.

"I don't kiss and tell," Jackson teased.

"Ooh, so you did kiss him!" Braxton sang as he sidled up next to his best friend.

“Was it good?” Keeton asked. “Did you do anything else? We require details.”

“My lips are sealed, gentlemen.”

Braxton rolled his eyes. “You’re no fun.”

“Okay, hypothetically speaking, if you were to happen to kiss a very sexy shifter and possibly do a little—” Keeton began with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“Or a lot,” Braxton chimed in.

“More,” Keeton continued without missing a beat. “Would you say that experience was enjoyable?”

Jackson doubled over laughing. The pair of them was just too much. “Did you ask Talon when he came home to change?”

“Of course.” Keeton sounded as if it were absurd to think otherwise.

“He wouldn’t tell us anything,” Braxton whined.

“Then why should I?”

“Because you love us and want us to be happy?” Keeton’s hopeful look only made Jackson laugh harder.

He loved teasing the two, but he was bursting to tell someone. “It was amazing,” he blurted excitedly.

“Oh goody, give us details.” Braxton clapped his hands together and sat on the floor in front of Jackson.

Keeton sat beside Jackson on the sofa and looked at him expectantly. “Leave nothing out,” he demanded.

“You two gossip like a bunch of teenage girls.” Logan ruffled Keeton’s hair as he walked past to sit in one of the overstuffed armchairs. “Spill it,” he said to Jackson with a wink.

Keeton snorted. “Dirty hypocrite,” he muttered under his breath.

“What the hell is wrong with you guys?” Xander asked as he strode into the room. He sat on the love seat and motioned Braxton to him. Braxton jumped up immediately and went to perch in Xander’s lap.

“What bug crawled up your ass?” Keeton glared at the alpha. “We just want to know what happened.”

Jackson was grateful to Xander. Though excited to be able to tell everyone he was mated to Talon, he didn’t feel comfortable sharing the more intimate part of their relationship. He smiled at his alpha and relaxed a little when Xander smiled back and winked at him.

“He just got home, and you guys are already interrogating him.” Xander frowned down at his mate. “And you didn’t even come get me.”

Everyone in the room burst out laughing as Jackson’s face burned scarlet. They were all assholes. Every one of them.

“Easy, Jackson.” Logan chuckled. “We don’t need to hear all the gory details. We just want to know what you guys talked about and if he claimed you.”

Jackson eased his tense posture and settled back against the cushions. That didn’t sound so bad. He was dying to share that part. He gave them an abbreviated version of his conversation with Talon, leaving out the less verbal parts. “Then we took a nap, woke up, and he went to work.”

Braxton had a dopey look on his face. “That’s so sweet. I knew he had it in him.”

“Congratulations,” Xander added.

“He didn’t claim you?” Logan didn’t sound angry or worried, just curious.

“Well, there wasn’t really time for all that.” Jackson shrugged. “Besides, he’s got some hang-up about claiming me. We have our whole lives together, though. I’m sure I’ll be able to convince him.”

“His heart.” Nodding his head, Logan frowned at the floor. “I had a feeling that was the reason, but it wasn’t any of my business.” He looked up at Jackson, still frowning. “I understand where he’s coming from. I wouldn’t ever risk Keeton that way.”

“Wait. Risk me what way? Whose heart?” Keeton whipped his head back and forth between Logan and Jackson.

“Nor would I put that on Braxton.” Xander dipped his head solemnly.

“You know?” Anger bubbled up inside Jackson’s chest, and he wanted to lash out and hit something. “Talon said he never told anyone.”

Shaking his head, Xander smiled crookedly. “He didn’t. Logan did.”

Jackson turned to glare at the brother. “And you didn’t think it was a good idea to fucking tell me?” He jumped to his feet and started pacing the room, growling and grumbling under his breath. They had all lied to him.

“It wasn’t my place to tell.” Logan spoke quietly, calmly.

“Who the hell are you talking about?” Keeton jumped to his feet as well and started waving his hands over his head to get their attention. Everyone ignored him except Braxton.

“Pay attention, Kee. Talon apparently has something wrong with his ticker, and that’s why he won’t claim Jackson. Logan and Xander are agreeing with Talon.” He turned and glared at his mate. “Which is really pissing me off.”

Keeton’s mouth snapped shut, and he crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes at Logan. “So, you’d just make the decision for me? You wouldn’t even tell me?”

“I didn’t say that,” Logan backpedaled. “I just see where Talon is coming from, and I think Jackson needs to think long and hard about what he’s asking of his mate.”

“I’m right here, Logan.” Jackson ceased his pacing and turned to face the men assembled in the living room. Would they ever stop treating him like a child? “If you have something to say, then let’s hear it.”

“Fine.” Anger seeped through Logan’s calm façade. “I wouldn’t have told you either. You are young and impulsive. I know you want to be with him, but you aren’t even considering what you’re doing to him by asking him to claim you.”

"If your positions were reversed, and you knew you were going to die, would you still want to claim him?" Xander spoke quietly, almost sadly.

"Talon's going to die?" Braxton sounded horrified.

"Oh, my god," Keeton whispered.

"He still should have told me," Jackson defended himself. He understood what they were trying to tell him. No, he wouldn't ever put Talon in danger purposely, but he still would've had the decency to tell the man why they couldn't be together.

"What would you have said if he told you?" Logan's soothing voice just pissed Jackson off even more.

"I don't know what I would have said. Probably what I told him earlier. That it doesn't matter to me, and he needs to let me make my own goddamn decisions!"

"That's exactly why he didn't tell you. You're yo—"

"If you say I'm young one more time..." Jackson trailed off, letting the threat creep into his voice.

"I agree with Jackson. Talon should have told him." Keeton huffed, turned on his heels, and marched toward the staircase. "I can't deal with any of you right now." Then he disappeared up the stairs.

Logan groaned and stood to his feet. "Damn it. What is it with you guys pissing off my mate and ensuring I never get laid again?" Then he took off after Keeton.

Jackson stood there fuming. How was any of this his fault? He looked to Xander and Braxton. Xander stood resolutely in the opposite direction, not meeting Jackson's gaze. Braxton, however, looked back at him with a mix of worry and sympathy.

"I'll see you in the morning," Braxton whispered. He climbed out of Xander's lap, took his mate's hand, and pulled him up the stairs.

All the happiness, excitement, anger, and indignation drained from Jackson, and he slumped back on the suede sofa. Was he really such a selfish prick? He didn't think so. He loved Talon and wanted him any way he could get him.

It's not like he wanted to die. He'd be risking his life by completing his mating with Talon, but he'd rather follow the man into the unknown than try to survive without him. Why couldn't the pack comprehend this? Logan and Xander were mated. Would they rather watch their mates die while they continued to live? Jackson didn't think he could do it.

The mating bond ensured neither mate ever had to live without the other. So why was everyone making a big deal about it? Sure, his lifespan would be shortened, but it would be damn worth it to have the closeness and peace his mate brought him.

The only option Talon offered him was to be together, but never fully bond. To a shifter, it was the equivalent of ripping their soul in two. For too long Talon had hidden the truth from him, leaving Jackson to wonder and worry that he somehow didn't measure up in some way. Now, he knew the truth, and he still couldn't have what he wanted.

Talon would fight him to the end on the issue. If Jackson argued too vehemently, would Talon run again? Would he decide being without Jackson was better than the constant reminder that they could never claim one another? Is that why he'd hidden the truth to begin with?

It made sense. Talon would shoulder the burden, never sharing the heavy load. He'd take it upon himself to protect Jackson from anything Talon perceived would hurt him—even the truth. Jackson finally got what Logan had been trying to tell him.

Pulling a pillow to him and curling around it, he stretched out on the couch. So many questions and not nearly enough answers. He felt confused, torn, and uncertain. It seemed whatever choice he made was wrong and selfish.

Maybe he should have just stayed at Keeton's and never let Talon in that door.

Chapter Seven

Looking down at the man on the sofa, Talon smiled. Jackson looked so young, his knees bent to his chest, his hands pressed together and resting under his cheek. The corners of his lips twitched, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply. “Talon.”

Happy that his mate could sense his closeness even in sleep, Talon knelt beside the couch and gently stroked Jackson’s hair. “Let’s get you in bed, pup.”

Dead on his feet, his mattress called to him, and Talon wanted Jackson beside him. After the brief taste of what life could be like with the man, he never wanted Jackson away from him again.

Jackson’s brows drew together. “Where are you?”

Talon frowned in confusion, but didn’t stop his petting. “I’m right here, Jackson.”

“Where? I can’t see you. Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” Talon repeated. “Open your eyes, baby.”

“I’m coming. I’ll find you. Keep talking.” Jackson’s voice grew in volume, panic written in every syllable. “I can’t find you. Tell me where you are. I’m coming for you, Cole.”

Talon jerked his hand back and growled. “Who the hell is Cole?”

Jackson’s eyes flew open, and he gulped audibly. His face looked pale and his body trembled visibly. “Talon?” Launching himself off the sofa, he threw his arms around Talon’s neck and squeezed him tightly. “I missed you.”

Jackson’s warm body, his sweet scent, the enthusiasm in which he laved kisses over Talon’s neck, sent a bolt of lightning straight to

Talon's groin. His brain short-circuited as his heart tripped into a wild gallop, and Talon almost decided to let it go.

He couldn't, though. He needed to know whom Jackson had been dreaming about. Had his mate found someone else? Talon thought they had worked out their issues. Maybe he'd been wrong. Pushing Jackson away gently, he cupped the younger man's cheek and tried to smile. "Baby, who's Cole?"

The remaining blood drained from Jackson's face, and he reeled backward as if Talon had slapped him. "Why? Where did you hear that name?"

The coldness crept in, the ice reforming around Talon's heart. "You said it in your sleep." His voice shook with jealousy. "I thought you wanted to be with me?"

Jackson blinked twice, looking more like an owl than the wolf he became. "I do want to be with you. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Then who the fuck is Cole?" Talon growled the last word, holding Jackson by the arms and shaking him roughly.

Rather than getting angry or dropping his head in guilt, Jackson looked him right in the eye. "He's my brother. I haven't seen him since before I ended up shot on the side of that road."

Talon closed his eyes and sighed. Not in relief, but in exasperation with himself. Jealousy did not look good on him. "I'm sorry, baby. I shouldn't have been such an ass." He opened his eyes to look at his mate again. "Were you dreaming about him?"

Jackson nodded slowly, but he looked confused. "It started a couple of weeks ago. It's always the same dream. Cole is calling to me, and I stumble around in this dark forest, but I can't find him." He tilted his head to the side. "What does it mean?"

Talon shook his head. "You're the smart one here, Jacks. I'm just here to look pretty and keep everyone in line."

Jackson rolled his eyes and kissed the end of Talon's nose. "You don't give yourself enough credit. Though, I admit you're the pretty

one.” He smiled impishly, leaning in to lick at Talon’s mouth. “No more talking.”

“Mmm, this is why you’re the smart one.” Talon opened willing, groaning at the tentative brush of Jackson’s tongue against his own. He palmed the back of Jackson’s head, his other hand gripping at his lover’s hip, tugging him closer.

His prick sat up to take notice of Jackson’s firm ass grinding against his crotch. It ached and throbbed, pushing insistently against his zipper, begging to be buried inside his mate.

Breaking the kiss, Talon trailed his lips along the smooth column of Jackson’s throat, inhaling his rich, musky scent. “God, you smell good.” He swirled his tongue around the fleshy lobe of the pup’s ear, nipping it between his teeth. “You always smell so fucking good.”

“Uh-huh.” Jackson sounded distracted as his head fell back on his shoulders, and his fingers fumbled with the buttons on Talon’s shirt.

Talon smiled against the warm flesh of his lover’s throat before swirling his tongue over the pulsing vein there. His teeth skimmed over the soft skin, and Jackson stilled instantly. His muscles tensed, and Talon could smell the anxiety permeating the air.

“Jackson?” He sat back, looking into the beautiful blue eyes he loved so much. “What’s wrong?”

Jackson shook his head quickly. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. I’m hungry.”

Normally, Talon would have believed him. No one could eat like Jackson. The kid stayed hungry. Right now, however, Talon called bullshit. He tightened his arms when his mate tried to wiggle free, pinning him in place. “Tell me what’s going on inside that head of yours.”

Jackson sighed, all the fight leaving him, and he slumped against Talon’s chest. “Logan agrees that you shouldn’t claim me.”

Talon’s heart stuttered, tripped over, and took off into a full gallop. He didn’t know if he should feel angry, hurt, jealous, or protective. None of the emotions felt right. “Why did he say that?” He

spoke calmly, but he knew Jackson could hear his racing heart, smell the uncertainty on him.

“The same reasons you do.” Jackson sat up, his bottom lip poking out as he pouted. “It’s not fair. Xander has a dangerous job. Every time he rushes into a burning building, he’s risking his life.” Jackson looked him in the eye. “And Braxton. How come no one is yelling at him?”

Talon bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Jackson looked so young, so adorable when he pouted. “What do you think?”

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. “I think I could get hit by a bus tomorrow. I think you could wreck your car on the way to work. I think a meteor could fall from the sky and squish us all. Why do you have to be so damn stubborn?”

“All those things *could* happen. However, my heart condition is a given. I will die, Jackson. I just don’t know when.”

“But, that’s my point! None of us knows when we’re going to die. I’d rather spend what time we have together actually *being* together than worrying about what-ifs and whens.”

Sighing, Talon dipped his head. He really didn’t give Jackson enough credit. The kid had a point, but the idea of knowingly putting his mate in jeopardy went against every protective instinct he had.

“I’ll think about it.”

Jackson looked stunned. He opened his mouth, but no words came out—a first for him. He loved to talk almost as much as he loved to eat.

Talon licked a line from Jackson collarbone to his chin. “Forget about tomorrow and the next day, or years down the road.” He kissed Jackson’s lips once, twice. “What do you want right now?”

“I want you to take me to bed and fuck me until I can’t walk. I want you to rub your scent all over me. I want you to bite me, claim me, and finally show everyone I belong to you.” Jackson’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as if daring Talon to argue.

“I won’t claim you tonight, but the rest I can do.” Talon smiled wickedly before he grabbed his mate around the waist and flipped him around to kneel on the floor. He pushed between Jackson’s shoulder blades until his lover leaned forward, his chest resting on the cushions of the sofa. “Who says we need a bed, though?”

Jackson groaned, arching his back, his perfect little ass pushing back into Talon’s groin. “Someone could walk in.”

“So? How many times have we walked in on Xander and Braxton, or Logan and Keeton?” Talon nibbled along his lover’s spine, caressing every inch of skin he could reach with his palms. “Although, living with a bunch of hornballs does have its benefits.” He slapped Jackson’s jean-clad ass and chuckled. “Get these off, and I’ll get the slick.”

Talon crawled over to the end table, rummaging in the drawer until he came up with an almost empty bottle of lube. Now that he had a reason to use it, perhaps he should make a conscious effort to restock.

Turning back to Jackson, Talon almost swallowed his tongue at all of the smooth, tanned skin on display. His eager mate knelt on the sofa, his legs spread wide, his muscled ass upturned and begging for Talon’s touch.

He moved slowly, dropping the lube beside Jackson’s knee, and cupping the rounded globes in both hands. He smoothed his fingertips over the supple flesh before digging in and massaging.

The muscles in Jackson’s broad back flexed, his cheeks drawing together, as his hips arched forward away from Talon’s grip.

Talon let his hands fall away and climbed up to sit on the couch beside his nervous mate. “Come here, baby.” He opened his arms, relieved when Jackson immediately turned and snuggled in close. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m just scared,” Jackson whispered. He sounded ashamed and embarrassed. “Will it hurt?”

Talon kissed the top of Jackson's head and sighed. "I won't lie to you. It will burn at first. That's why we're going to get you nice and stretched before I take you. It will be uncomfortable until you get used to it, but it shouldn't be unbearable."

Jackson sat back and looked up at him with wide eyes. "You know from experience?"

"Yeah, I know." Talon looked away, unwilling to travel further into the discussion. He didn't want to keep things from his mate, but he also didn't want to talk about previous lovers in their current situation. He pulled Jackson's head back to his chest and sighed. "We can wait until you're ready."

A soft kiss landed on his jaw, and Jackson squirmed out of his embrace. "I'm ready. I want this, Talon." He bit his lip and breathed in deeply through his nose before continuing. "Just go slow, okay?"

"I'd never hurt you, Jacks. I promise."

Jackson nodded, and a slow, sensual smile spread across his lips. "Make love to me."

Talon smiled in return and began pushing Jackson back down to the cushions. "My pleasure."

"Wait!"

Growling in frustration, Talon sat up and ran a hand through his dark hair. "You are the only person I know who can be indecisive and bossy in the same fucking breath." He didn't want to sound short-tempered with his mate, but the kid was making him nuts. His cock felt in danger of snapping in two, and his balls were so tight and achy, the slightest touch would set him off.

Jackson rolled his eyes and snorted. "Stop bitching and lose the clothes."

"Again with the bossy." Still, Talon wasted no time standing from the sofa and stripping out of his clothing. "Anything else, princess?"

Without a word, Jackson dove forward, capturing the leaking crown of Talon's cock in his mouth. He swirled his tongue under the

head, then flicked at the slit, before inching down the hard length, burying his nose in Talon's groin.

"Holy fuck," Talon hissed. He grabbed on to Jackson's shoulders to prevent himself from collapsing right there on the floor. "That's it, baby. Right there. Keep doing that." He kept up a constant flow of encouragement, delighting in the onslaught of sensation.

Then suddenly, everything stopped. Jackson pulled away with one last lick at his slit and sat back on his heels. "Can we fuck now?"

Talon closed his eyes and groaned. The kid was going to kill him. When he finally dragged his eyelids open, Jackson had turned around, his chest flat against the cushions, and his ass tilted just right.

Gripping the base of his cock to stave off his orgasm, Talon moved to sit on the sofa beside his lover's head. Jackson looked up at him, his eyebrows draw together, confusion written all over his face.

"C'mere, baby." Talon patted his thigh with one hand and crooked a finger on his other. "I want to see you. I want to look into those eyes and see that you know exactly who's taking you."

Jackson's features smoothed out, and he smiled tenderly as his eyes softened. Moving quickly, he straddled Talon's lap, easing down until their straining erections pressed together. Talon growled, and Jackson hissed as their heated skin met, pushing Talon's desire to the boiling point.

"I can't wait anymore, Talon."

"Shh, pup. We have to get you ready." He pressed the slick into Jackson's hand and nodded. "I won't last if I do it. You're going to have to stretch yourself."

Jackson's cheeks burned, and he shook his head. "I don't know how."

Whoa! Talon hadn't seen that one coming. "You've never..."

Shaking his head again, Jackson looked away. "I wanted you to be the first."

His heart melted into a pile of goo, and Talon gripped the back of his lover's neck, pulling him into a kiss full of love, desire, and

passion. Somehow, during the dueling of their tongues, the mating of their lips, the lube found its way back into Talon's hand. His mate was tricky.

Trailing his fingertips along the smooth crease of Jackson's rounded globes, he continued to suck and bite at his lover's lips. Jackson lifted to his knees, arching his hips, and pushing into Talon's questing fingers.

"So eager," Talon breathed between kisses. "I love how you respond to my touch—the way you beg for more."

"Please," Jackson whimpered. "I'm going to die if you don't do something, and you'll have no one but yourself to blame."

Chuckling lightly, Talon popped the cap and dribbled the slippery oil over his fingers. "Come back here."

Jackson complied instantly, crushing their mouths together and sucking on Talon's tongue. Parting his mate's cheeks, Talon ringed the virgin entrance, caressing it lightly, then more insistently as the muscles began to relax. He pushed in with just the tip, and Jackson jerked out of the kiss, moaning like a twenty-dollar whore.

"Damn, that's good. More, give me more."

Only too happy to give in to his lover's pleas, Talon slipped his digit into Jackson's hungry ass up to the second knuckle. He sawed in and out, pumping his finger until Jackson relaxed further, and he could add a second.

Jackson panted and squirmed above him, his skin flushed and damp with sweat. When he felt confident he could add a third finger without hurting his baby, Talon pushed in and latched onto one copper colored nipple at the same time.

"Fuck!" Jackson cried out, his body convulsing and shuddering. "Now, Talon. I need you now."

Talon bit into the flesh in his mouth in reprimand, though it only served to increase the volume of Jackson's moans. "Please, please, oh, holy shit, please!"

Though a strong man, even he couldn't resist the innocent pleading in Jackson's voice. "Okay, baby, okay." With shaking hands, Talon scooped up the lube and coated his throbbing prick. He just prayed he lasted long enough to get inside Jackson's tight little ass.

Popping his lover on the hip, he looked up into his eyes and nodded. "It's all on you. Go as slow as you need to, or not at all." Talon gripped his cock at the root and held it upright.

Jackson bit his lip, his nose crinkling in concentration as he slowly lowered himself, lining up the crown with his quivering hole. "Ready?"

Talon wanted to laugh. He'd never been more ready for anything in his life. Instead, he nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek to help battle back his impatience.

Jackson pushed down, the helmet of Talon's dick breaching the guarding ring of muscle, and froze. "Fuck, fuck, oh goddamn that burns!"

Reaching up, Talon smoothed his palm over his lover's chest. "Okay, baby, calm down. Big breath and relax."

Nodding, Jackson did as asked, inhaling deeply through his nose. He let it out in a whoosh and lowered himself, sheathing Talon's shaft in his velvety heat.

"Motherfucker!" Talon growled, digging his fingers into his mate's hips to prevent him from moving. "You are so fucking tight, baby. Give me a minute." He didn't miss the irony. Jackson should be the one begging for a chance to adjust.

After several deep breaths, Talon gave up hope that he could fend off his climax, and just prayed that he'd last long enough to drag Jackson over the edge with him. "Move."

* * * *

Holy hell it burned. Jackson wanted to move, but he didn't want to move. Why did he ever think he could do this?

“Move.”

Talon’s deep, commanding tone sent a shiver up his spine, and Jackson obeyed without thought. Rising up, feeling every vein and ridge sliding over his opening, he groaned loudly. Oh, out felt great!

Slow and steady, he set a rhythm, panting and shuddering as his body relaxed and pleasure bombarded him. Staring into his mate’s dazed eyes, everything disappeared until only he and Talon existed. “I love you.” He spoke quietly, not wanting to disturb the serenity of the moment.

Rocking his hips, rising and falling, moving on instinct and need, he made love to the man that had stolen his heart at first sight all those years ago. “Claim me, Talon. We’ve waited long enough. We belong together.”

A long, sexy growl emanated from Talon’s parted lips. “Mine.” Talon’s fingers wound in his hair, jerking him down and tilting his head to the side. A wet tongue swiped along the sensitive flesh at the apex of his neck and shoulder. “No,” Talon whispered, then slammed up into him, nailing Jackson’s prostate and sending him into overdrive.

Screaming, he bucked and thrashed, grinding against his lover, meeting him push for shove. Electricity sped along his spine and straight to his balls to swirl and burn like molten lava. Talon’s hand wrapped around his weeping cock, and that was all she wrote.

Jackson erupted, his orgasm ripped from him, exploding through his slit in ropes of hot, pearly cum. Sagging against his mate, he felt Talon’s chest vibrate as his lover stilled and roared out his release.

Wet heat coated his convulsing channel as wave after wave of aftershocks rocked his body, leaving his brain fuzzy and threatening to drag him under.

“Wow,” he panted. Not the most brilliant thing he’d ever said, but his brain refused to work correctly.

When he didn’t receive an answer, he eased away from Talon’s warm body, and stared down at his lover and grinned.

His poor, exhausted mate was sound asleep.

Chapter Eight

“Jackson! Jackson! Where are you?”

Jackson stumbled through the trees, the fog rolling thickly over his feet as the night pressed in on him. “Cole? Cole, where are you? Keep talking, I’m coming.”

“It’s so cold here. Please, hurry.”

“Tell me where you are!” Jackson almost sobbed in frustration. He kept going, pushing through the underbrush, barely registering the thorns that cut into his bare legs.

“It hurts, Jackson.”

Jackson tripped, sprawling out on his stomach, the bitter coldness seeping into his bones. A soft, flickering light appeared just through the trees, teasing him. Struggling to his feet, he traipsed onward, but never came any closer to the amber glow. “I’ll find you, Cole. I promise.”

“Jackson. Jackson.” His brother’s voice became faint, softening with each repetition of his name until the cries were nothing more than whispers in the night. Then all sound floated away completely, swallowed by the roaring of the harsh wind.

“Cole!”

“Jackson! Can you hear me?” The new voice sounded louder, closer, as if right beside him. “Baby, you’re scaring me!”

Jackson came awake with a gasp, jerking upright and panting. He could still feel the cold, the numbness right down to his soul. His brother’s voice echoed inside his head, strained and pleading.

He didn’t even realize he’d been crying until Talon reached out with a shaky hand to wipe away the tears. “There you are.”

Without thought, Jackson launched himself into his mate's arms, clinging to him like a lifeline, needing the warmth of his body. He buried his face against Talon's throat, breathing him in, letting the familiar scent comfort and soothe him.

"Want to talk about it?"

Jackson shook his head quickly.

"C'mere." Talon eased them to a horizontal position, tucking Jackson's head under his chin, and holding him tightly.

Neither spoke again. Eventually, Talon's soft snores reached his ears, and his hold loosened. Jackson pressed himself closer, staring at the tan skin of his lover's chest, too afraid to close his eyes.

* * * *

Talon choked down his pride as he stepped up to his brother's door and rapped twice. Every night for two weeks his mate had woken, sobbing and shivering in the middle of the night. He still refused to breathe a word to Talon about it.

The door opened, and a face so similar to his own stared back at him. "Hey, brother." Logan smiled and opened the door wider. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to Keeton."

Logan's smile slipped from his face, the corners of his lips turning down. "What's going on?"

Fighting back the urge to growl, Talon clenched his fists at his sides. "It's Jackson."

He watched his brother's eyes widen and a little *O* form on his lips. "Maybe you should come in."

Talon nodded, stepping past his brother and into the room. He spotted Keeton immediately, sitting at the vanity Logan had built for him, painting his toenails in a brilliant shade of purple.

He looked up and smiled brightly, setting the nail polish aside. “Hey, Talon.” His smile faded away, much as Logan’s had. “You look like shit. What’s wrong?”

Sighing deeply, Talon perched on the end of the bed, rubbing his palms against his thighs. “I need you to talk to Jackson.”

Keeton’s brows drew together, and he cocked his head to the side. “Why?”

Damn it, he hated asking for help. “He’s been having dreams.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I think he has, anyway. He won’t talk to me, but he’s been waking up at night, and he can’t go back to sleep for several hours. In fact, I don’t think he’s slept at all in the last two nights.”

“He hasn’t said anything?” Logan moved further into the room and sat down beside Talon.

“No. I ask him, but he refuses to talk about it. He mutters in his sleep sometimes, though. I think he’s dreaming about his brother, Cole.” He paused to take another deep breath. “From what I could get out of him, it’s always the same dream, and he’s been having them for weeks, maybe longer.”

Logan and Keeton exchanged a look Talon couldn’t decipher, and it pissed him off. Before he could say something he might regret, Keeton spoke. “I’ll do it, but I think you should try one more time. I also think we need to call Blaise.”

“Your cousin? Why?”

“I think there might be more going on than just nightmares. Besides, Blaise is a wolf shifter. Maybe he’ll know something we don’t.”

“What do you mean, more than nightmares? Like he’s seeing the future or something?”

Keeton nodded, then paused and shook his head. “No, not exactly. Maybe he’s seeing the *now*.”

Standing from the bed, Talon strode to the door. “Why can’t we have just one normal fucking day around here?” Then he left without another word.

* * * *

Jackson sat on the sofa in the game room, staring blankly at the black screen of the television. His eyes burned and his brain lagged with exhaustion. Two anxiety-filled, sleepless nights left him little more than functional.

He didn’t understand, couldn’t explain the bone deep terror, the throat-clogging desperation, the breath-stealing cold he felt when he awoke from one of his dreams. He just wanted them to stop.

Talon was worried about him. He could see it in his mate’s expression, the tense set of his shoulders. Talon still wouldn’t claim him, so he couldn’t feel the man’s emotions, but he knew. He hated that he heaped this burden on his mate—especially since Talon didn’t even know what was going on.

“Are you ever going to talk to me?”

Jackson snapped his head to the side to see Talon enter the room. Mm, the man was gorgeous. Dark hair, tan skin, rippling muscles, and a killer smile—Jackson could stare at him forever. Saliva pooled in his mouth, and he swallowed reflexively.

“What do you mean?” His voice sounded hoarse, thick, unused.

His lover frowned and shuffled forward to take a seat beside him. Jackson leaned into his embrace and immediately felt his eyelids droop. There was just something comforting about Talon’s presence.

“Can we just cut the bullshit, pup? You haven’t slept in days. When you do sleep, you wake up sweating, but cold as ice. The anxiety in you is eating away at me. It’s thick enough to cut with a knife, and I can’t even feel your emotions like other mates.”

A callused finger slipped under his chin and tilted his head up. “I want to help, baby, but you’ve gotta talk to me.”

Scanning the dark circles under Talon's bloodshot eyes, the distressed lines of his face, the overall haggard appearance of his mate, Jackson sighed. "My dad shot me."

Talon's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "What? When?"

"Three days after my fourteenth birthday, I shifted for the first time. Cole and I were outside. I can't remember what we were doing, but he was being a pain in the ass. I just got so...so mad at him."

"You shifted."

Jackson nodded slowly against his mate's shoulder. "We were fighting, rolling around on the ground, fists flying, the whole nine yards." He took a deep breath to steady his emotions. "The next thing I knew, I had him pinned beneath my paws, growling and snarling at him."

"And your dad shot you?" The steel in Talon's voice left him shivering.

"Cole was so cool about it. He's a great kid." Jackson smiled fondly for a second before it slid off his mouth. "I guess dad heard us, though. He came running out the back door, shotgun in his hand, and I don't remember anything else until I woke up on the couch with you sitting beside me."

"I'm sorry, baby." Talon pulled him closer, nuzzling his cheek against the top of Jackson's head. "You're safe now. I'd never let anything happen to you."

Melting into the embrace, Jackson placed a soft kiss on Talon's throat. "You are just a big teddy bear, Talon Cartwright."

"Only with you," his mate whispered into his hair. "Don't go spreading that shit."

Jackson snorted, but sobered quickly. "I've always worried. What if Cole is a Moonlighter? What if he's not, and I made him all loopy? What if my dad went insane because of me, and he hurt my brother?"

Talon cuffed him lightly on the ear. “Hush now. None of this is your fault.” His lips brushed over Jackson’s temple. “If you want, we can try to find out what happened to them.”

Jackson thought it over for a minute before shaking his head. “Something bad is happening with my family.”

Tilting his head up again, Talon searched his face before raising his eyebrows in question.

“I don’t think these are just dreams. I think Cole is calling to me.”

Chapter Nine

“When’s Blaise coming?”

“Keeton said he’d be here soon. We just called him yesterday. It may be a few days.” Talon smiled indulgently at his impatient mate.

Jackson shrugged. “Whatever. I’m hungry.”

Talon shook his head and chuckled. The kid was a bottomless pit. Rising from the sofa in the game room, he held out a hand to Jackson. “C’mon, and I’ll feed you.”

Whooping, Jackson took Talon’s hand and jumped up from the sofa, pulling him through the house toward the kitchen. “I love when you cook. Can you make me peek-a-boo eggs? I really love when you make those.”

Talon rolled his eyes. No one loved when he cooked. Hell, he could barely stomach it. He could cook peek-a-boo eggs, though. It had been a favorite of his as a kid, and he’d made them a thousand times for Jackson.

Releasing his hand, Jackson sauntered over to the kitchen table and sat, grinning from ear to ear.

“You know, you could help,” Talon told him as he went to the refrigerator and opened the door to peer inside.

“Nah, they’re better when you make ’em. I’ll just screw it up.”

Talon snorted with his head still inside the fridge. Scanning the shelves, he frowned and rose up to look over at his mate. “Where are the eggs?”

“I ate them.”

Glancing back inside the fridge, Talon shook his head. “And the bacon?”

“Ate it.”

Talon closed the door on the refrigerator and stood with his hands on his hips. “Bread?”

“Ate it.”

“Butter?”

“Ate it on the bread.” Jackson beamed at him. “These are really easy questions. Go on. Ask me another one.”

Talon blinked twice, then threw his head back and roared with laughter. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard. The kid just had a way about him that warmed Talon’s heart and brought sunshine into his life.

“C’mon. You ate it. You can replace it.”

Jackson wrinkled his nose. “I hate grocery shopping. I like eating food, not buying it or cooking it.”

Laughing again, Talon walked over and popped his mate in the back of the head. “Get up and quit bitching.”

Jackson rubbed the back of his head and mock pouted. “Fine, but I want a blow job out of this.”

Talon’s prick twitched at the mental image of his mate’s hot length sliding in and out of his mouth. He could almost feel the heavy shaft against his tongue, the salty pre-cum exploding over his taste buds. “Deal. Now, hurry up.”

* * * *

Another four days passed with little or no sleep, and Talon had reached his breaking point. Hopefully, they were about to get some answers. “Thanks for coming, man.”

Blaise grinned and waved away his gratitude. “It’s no big deal. I just finished up an assignment, so I had the time.” He glanced between Jackson and Talon. “Want to tell me what’s going on? Keeton didn’t give me much information when he called.”

Talon looked at his lover. “Go ahead, pup.”

Taking a deep breath, Jackson outlined his dreams, the feel of fear and anxiety they left him with, and the concern that they were more than dreams.

"I agree," Blaise said when he'd finished. "What do you know about pack telepathy?"

Jackson just looked at him in confusion.

"Okay, from the top then." Blaise smiled and dipped his head. "Wolves are the only shifters I know of with the gift, but once they reach puberty and shift for the first time, they can communicate telepathically with other members of their pack."

"Holy cow," Jackson breathed.

Holy cow, indeed. Talon scratched the back of his head. He'd been happy to escape the winters in Wyoming, but so much weird shit had happened since they'd dropped down in Georgia. He constantly felt like he was missing something.

"The bond is strong within families, especially between siblings. How old is your brother?"

"Cole is a couple of years older than me. He just turned twenty-three."

"I thought you said Cole was your *little* brother?"

Smiling sheepishly, Jackson shook his head. "He's older than me, but he's kind of the runt of the family. I was twice his size by the time we started kindergarten. I've always called him my little brother."

Talon looked his mate over and couldn't help but smile. At six-foot-one, and no more than a buck-seventy, Jackson definitely qualified as the smallest member of the pack. If he was literally twice his brother's size, the man had to be tiny.

"Okay, so you think Cole really is calling to me? That he needs help?" Jackson's voice quivered and died away on the last word.

Wrapping an arm around his shoulders, Talon pulled his lover to him as he watched Blaise nod solemnly. "We'll find him."

The front door banged open and a loud squeal preceded Keeton into the room. "Oh, my God, you're here! Why didn't you call me?"

When did you get here? How have you been? It's really good to see you. Why don't you come around more often? Yay, you're here." He wrapped his arms around his cousin's neck and gave him a loud smacking kiss on the cheek.

A deep chuckle announced Logan's arrival. "Calm down, angel, and let the man breathe."

Keeton just turned and stuck his tongue out as he plopped down on the sofa beside Blaise. "I'm just happy to see him is all."

Blaise laughed along with Logan. "It's good to see you, too, little cousin."

"Come on, Keeton, and let the grown-ups talk." Logan crooked a finger at his enthusiastic mate.

Keeton huffed and rolled his eyes, but sprang up from his seat. He gave everyone a bright smile and wiggled his fingers. "Later, dudes."

"At least some things never change," Blaise said as they watched Keeton bounce out of the room.

"Sorry to interrupt the little family reunion, but I'd like to have one of my own. How do we find my brother?" Jackson sounded calm, but Talon could sense the frustration and annoyance flowing just under the surface.

"Keeton said you came from Wyoming. I did a little research and found only three major packs in the area. Which one are you from?"

"Cloud Peak," Jackson answered immediately.

"I was afraid of that. I can't get into the log files for the Cloud Peak Pack. They've been locked, and not even The Council has access to them. It's strange and illegal as hell. We've tried to contact the alpha, but so far nothing."

"I can do it. I can get into the files."

Pride and wonder waged war inside Talon's heart, spreading a very unfamiliar warmth through his limbs and down to flutter in his belly. Settling on the pride, he squeezed the back of his mate's neck, hoping to convey just how amazed he was at Jackson's intelligence, determination, and courage.

Apparently, he got the point across because Jackson turned to wink at him over his shoulder. “Love you, too,” he mouthed.

“Good grief, this place is turning into the fucking Love Boat.” Blaise grumbled and groaned, glaring at them.

Talon just shrugged. The guy obviously needed to get laid.

“Get me to The Council files, and I’ll get what we need.”

Confidence, not cockiness, colored Jackson’s voice. Smart, sexy, and humble, Talon couldn’t believe the man belonged to him. Wracking his brain, he couldn’t think of one single thing he’d ever done in his miserable life to deserve someone like Jackson Cunningham.

Blaise stared at them for a long time before nodding. “We’ll give it a shot after dinner. I have some phone calls to make.”

* * * *

The hot water sloshed over his body, pulling a jagged moan from deep in his chest. Exhausted did not even begin to describe how he felt. Reaching for the soap, Jackson jumped, cursing under his breath, when the shower curtain whipped back, and Talon stepped inside.

“Jumpy,” Talon commented around a chuckle.

“You did that shit on purpose.” The words held no real heat. A wet, naked, happy Talon equaled all things good in Jackson’s book.

Raking his gaze over his own personal wet dream, he licked his lips, stepping forward and plastering himself against his lover. They’d both been lost inside their own heads, struggling with sleep deprivation and Jackson’s constant anxiety that they hadn’t done more than kiss and cuddle since their first night together.

Jackson needed his mate. He needed to feel the hard, hot muscles under his palms, the warm wet heat of his lover’s mouth, and the throbbing thick length of Talon’s cock sliding in and out of him.

Licking and biting at the jumping vein snaking along Talon’s throat, he swiveled his hips, grinding his erection against his mate’s

groin. “Want you, babe. Need you to make me forget everything but you.”

Talon’s fingers tangled in his hair, yanking his head back sharply. “Be careful what you ask for, pup. I’ve had your scent in my head, your sexy little ass snuggled against me all week, and I can’t be gentle now.”

Jackson couldn’t agree more. Talon’s unique scent permeated the air until he could almost taste it. Sandalwood and vanilla, the smell swirled inside his head, making him weak in the knees every time his lover came within sniffing distance.

“Fuck me. Hard and fast, down and dirty, whatever you want, but do it soon.”

Talon pushed him to the side and reached over to turn off the water. “Out,” he commanded.

Disappointed and not bothering to hide it, Jackson stepped out of the shower crossed his arms over his chest. “What the fu—”

Talon came at him swiftly, whirling him around and pushing roughly. Jackson had just enough time to unwind his arms from his chest and brace himself against the vanity. Talon’s steel-hard erection pressed against his ass cheeks as the man licked up his spine, noises emanating from his mouth somewhere between growl and groan.

“You drive me fucking insane. All I think about anymore is sinking my cock into this perfect ass and never leaving. I want you all the fucking time.” Talon bit into his shoulder as though it were Jackson’s fault. “I keep thinking it will get better, but it doesn’t. Every second, I want you more than I did the one before.”

Shaking, trembling, practically vibrating with his desire, Jackson soaked up the harshly rasped words that poured from his mate’s mouth. “Please.”

Talon groaned and rested his head between Jackson’s shoulder blades. “God, I love the way you beg.” His strong hand gripped one of Jackson’s globes and squeezed, kneading and massaging the muscle.

Watching his lover in the mirror, seeing the raw lust shining from his eyes, Jackson decided he loved it as well. "Please, Talon. I can't wait any longer. Fuck me."

Talon disappeared from view, sinking down toward the floor, and leaving a trail of liquid heat in his wake as his lips and tongue smoothed over Jackson's skin. Cool air swept over his quivering hole as his ass cheeks parted and a slippery appendage bathed his needy entrance.

Gripping the counter until his knuckles ached, Jackson moaned, pushing back into his lover's mouth, quivering as electricity rocketed down his spine and exploded in his gut. "You can't even imagine how many ways I've dreamed of having you. No more dreaming," Talon breathed over his opening before diving back in to lap and suck at the ring of muscles.

"You're mine, baby. No one is ever going to love this body but me." Talon invaded his depths with his tongue, stabbing it in and out while his fingers kept a death grip on Jackson's ass. "Say it. Tell me who you belong to."

"You," Jackson cried out. His cock jerked and bobbed between his legs, leaking freely from the engorged head. "Yours, Talon. I've always been yours."

His mate's handsome face appeared over his shoulder in the mirror. He didn't say a word, but continued his assault on Jackson's senses by kissing and licking at his neck. A finger caressed his entrance, circling and probing, before slipping in and nailing Jackson's prostate on the first try.

Stars exploded behind his closed eyelids, and his hips bucked forward. His inner walls clamped down on the invading digit, and his prick erupted without warning, coating the counter and drawers with his creamy seed.

"It's so damn sexy when you lose it like that. Want you to come again, baby. Can you come for me again?"

A firestorm started in his empty balls and spread throughout Jackson's body in a hurry. Oh, yeah, he could definitely do that again. Bobbing his head, his eyes still closed, he felt another finger breach his entrance, pumping in and out, stretching him to receive his mate.

Within minutes, Talon had four fingers buried deep in his ass, and Jackson's cock ached and throbbed once again. "Now!" He couldn't take anymore. His belly burned and his balls tightened against his body, his ass hungry and begging for Talon's hot length.

The drawer to his left slid open, then closed, and he heard the snap of a bottle. Thank mercy they lived in a house with a bunch of hormone driven nymphos. There weren't many places you could go in the house without having some sort of slick close at hand. He wondered where he and Talon could hide their own personal stash.

Then all thought fled when the crown of Talon's heavy prick nudged his opening, pushing in with steady pressure. Moaning like a pro, Jackson leaned further over the sink and tilted his hips up, trying to take in as much of his lover as possible.

He wiggled a little at the slight burn, but it quickly faded as Talon started moving in and out of him in slow and steady thrusts. Before long, Talon's movements increased in speed and intensity until each shove of his hips rattled Jackson's teeth. Fingers gripped both of his shoulders, pulling him back to meet each of his lover's forceful jabs.

"Touch yourself, baby. I want to see you touch yourself." Talon's voice slipped in octave and clarity, causing him to sound more animal than human.

Never allowing his eyes to stray from Talon's reflection in the mirror, Jackson eagerly palmed his jutting shaft and stroked it furiously.

"No coming," Talon ordered.

What? No! Talon couldn't do that to him. He *needed* to come, and pretty fucking soon, or his goddamn dick was going to fall off!

"Trust me, pup."

Dipping his head in grudging assent, Jackson slowed his movements, but didn't release the grasp on his prick. Several more wild thrusts, and Talon stilled, groaning his release as molten lava scorched the lining of Jackson's channel.

"Now? Please, Talon. I need to come now."

Gently pulling from Jackson's hole, Talon whirled him around and shoved his ass back against the counter. Dropping to his knees, he batted away Jackson's hand and replaced it with his own firm grip. "Then come for me, baby."

Then he opened his mouth and dove forward, sheathing Jackson's prick inside his gloriously heated mouth. Just a couple of quick bobs, and Jackson knew he was a goner. "Close," he panted, digging his fingers into Talon's scalp.

Talon gripped his hips in both hands, pushing him almost roughly against the vanity, stilling any movement. Jackson peered down at his mate in frustration and confusion. "Talon, stop fucking teasing me! If you aren't going to—"

Two fingers dipped below his sac, stroking his perineum and cutting off anything Jackson might have said. Talon released his hold on Jackson's hips and buried his nose in the light spattering of curls at the base of Jackson's cock.

Jackson completely lost it. Fisting his hands in Talon's hair, he slammed forward, shoving his length to back of his mate's throat. Over and over, he thrust as lightning bolts of pure pleasure zapped straight to his balls. It took only seconds before he threw his head back and howled, actually fucking howled, as his climax shot from his sizzling cock and straight down his lover's throat.

His whole body burned, his stomach did flips and loops, and his head swam with the indescribable sensations that coursed through him. He'd never felt anything so incredible in his life.

When the last drop of his essence dribbled from the slit, it took his ability to stand with it. Jackson crumpled to the tiled floor, sagging

against his mate. Tilting his head up to deliver a kiss to Talon's swollen lips, he paused and frowned.

Reaching up, he gently ran the pad of his thumb over his lover's lip, grimacing when it came away smudged with blood. "Crap. Sorry, Talon."

Talon just smiled and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm fine. It will heal in a minute. It was worth it to see the look on your face. You're so gorgeous when you come."

Unappeased, Jackson continued to frown. "Yeah, but I'm still sorry I dick punched you in the mouth."

Snorting into Jackson's hair, Talon squeezed him once more before releasing his hold and patting Jackson's hip. "Let's finish our shower, and you can make it up to me."

Chapter Ten

“We don’t have permission from The Council, so you need to be fast. I’d say probably an hour tops.” Blaise sat across from Talon and Jackson at the kitchen table. He opened a laptop and slid it in front of Jackson. “Try not to leave a trail, yeah?”

Jackson dipped his head as he pulled the computer closer. “No problem.”

Talon glanced at the screen over Jackson’s shoulder, but didn’t know what to look for. It looked like a regular website to him.

“So, this is The Council registry for each pack.” Jackson pointed to a column on the screen with the little arrow. “See, here we are.” He clicked the mouse a couple of times, and a list appeared with the names of each member of their pack “And right here. Xander had to file with The Council when Braxton and Keeton joined our pack.”

Talon nodded, but felt unsettled that The International Council for Preternatural Justice knew so much about everyone. It was a little too Big Brother for him.

Jackson continued to tap away at the keyboard or click the mouse, his eyebrows drawn together and his tongue poking out between his teeth. He kept muttering things under his breath, and Talon thought he caught the words, “ghost proxy” and “data encryption.” Whatever the hell that meant.

“The files have been corrupted. It’s like a virus.” Jackson glanced over at Talon as he spoke, his eyes a bit glazed. Talon had seen him this way numerous times. The kid was in the zone. “See this file here is for my birth pack. It’s supposed to link to a registry for pack members, the same as the link I clicked for our pack.”

He clicked the blue words on the page and another list of names appeared. “Isn’t that what this is? Looks like a list of members to me.” Talon scratched the top of his head.

“It is, but it’s not.”

“Well, now that we have that all cleared up.”

Jackson snorted and rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a dick, Talon. I’m trying to explain.” He pointed to the screen. “Yes, it is a list of pack members, but it’s not linked to The Council registry. All of the other data on this site comes from the same database, displaying the same IP address.”

Talon stared at his mate in awe. Though he didn’t understand a word of it, he found Jackson’s intelligence a complete turn-on. His prick jerked inside his jeans, and he leaned closer to his mate, bending over him to trail his nose along the smooth skin of Jackson’s throat.

Jackson inhaled deeply, his chest heaving, and let the air out in a soft moan. “I can’t think when you do that,” he said breathlessly.

Talon could get behind a plan of Jackson not thinking, only feeling, but he knew they didn’t have a lot of time. “Hurry, baby, so we can go play.”

Jackson nodded quickly, eagerly, and turned his attention back to the computer screen. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “Okay, so now when I click on the registry for the Cloud Peak Pack, the data comes from a different source, a separate URL.”

Talon shook his head and chuckled. “I love listening to you talk, but I don’t know what any of that means.”

“I think someone is trying to fool The Council. It wouldn’t be hard either. The security on this page is a fucking joke. Okay, so when I click on the link for the Cloud Peak Pack, the information displayed comes from a different URL, and I’m assuming a different server.”

“So, if someone is manipulating these files, then you think they have something to hide?”

Jackson beamed at him and kissed his lips quickly. “Yes, now I just have to follow the data trail and try to identify the server. Once I do that, it should be fairly simple to gain access to the information stored in the database.”

“Uh, yeah. You do that.” Talon stood and kissed the top of his mate’s head. “I love how smart you are, but I’m just in the way here. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

Jackson nodded, not even looking at him, as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

Would Talon always be so lost when he tried to have conversations with Jackson? Did the kid deserve a mate who could not only understand, but reciprocate intellectual conversation? His heart heavy, he shuffled out of the kitchen.

* * * *

“Uh, guys, you’re going to want to see this.” Jackson frowned at the data glaring back at him on the laptop screen. If he read the information correctly, they had bigger problems than anyone could imagine.

“Did you find something?” Blaise sounded hopeful, though a little shocked.

“What’s going on?” Talon followed Blaise into the room and perched in the chair beside Jackson.

Nodding toward the computer, Jackson scrolled down the page. “It took a little work, but I finally managed to gain access to the pack files we need. There’s a lot of information here, and I’m not sure what all of it means.” He highlighted his former best friend’s name and the information connected to it on the page.

“Garrick Lawson, September of this year, Redway Clan,” Blaise read aloud. “What are these numbers here?”

Jackson swallowed around the bile that clogged his throat. “I think this is a sales report.”

Blaise's eyes widened, and his face paled. "They're selling pack members? That's not possible."

"Who is the Redway Clan?" Talon asked as he wrapped his fingers around the back of Jackson's neck and squeezed gently.

Some of the tension drained from Jackson as the action helped calm him, and he drew from the strength his mate offered.

"It's a vampire coven in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Are there others listed?"

Jackson nodded, his stomach churning with anger. "There are seven different clans listed here, one hundred and sixty-eight pack members, and over a quarter million dollars."

He scrolled down further and froze when his brother's name glared back at him on the screen. "Cole Cunningham, December third," Jackson whispered. "That's in two weeks."

"Why are they selling them?"

Blaise looked over at Talon and shook his head. "The only reason I can think of would be as blood slaves."

"You mean, my brother is..." Jackson trailed off as realization dawned. "We have to save him!" Out of his seat and moving before he realized he intended to do so, he raced up to his room and pulled a bag from the closet.

He had to get to his brother. He'd drive all night if he had to. Memories of his dreams bombarded him, and Jackson shivered as the cold seeped in, right down to his toes.

Pausing in the act of pulling clothes from his dresser, he whirled around when his mate's scent filled his nose. Without a word, Talon strode across the room, took the clothes from Jackson's hands, dropped them to the floor, and pulled him into his arms.

"We'll get him, baby. I promise I will do whatever I can to help you find him."

Jackson clung to his lover, gripping his shirt in a white-knuckled grip and shaking. "I let him down. I should have gone back, or

checked on him, or something. He's so scared. I can feel it in my dreams."

Talon gripped his shoulders and pushed him back to look into his eyes. "This is not your fault. What could you have done? You have to pull yourself together. We can't just go charging in there like the fucking cavalry. We need a plan, and a damn good one." He smiled crookedly and winked. "You're the smart one, remember?"

Jackson chuckled softly and nodded. Talon had a point. If he let his emotions lead the way, he'd end up getting them all captured or killed. They needed a strategy. "Okay, round up the troops, and let's make a plan."

Chapter Eleven

“I’m in,” Logan said immediately after Talon, Blaise, and Jackson had filled the rest of the pack in.

“Me, too,” Xander spoke next.

“So, are we.” Braxton pointed between himself and Keeton. They each crossed their arms over their chests and glared at their partners, daring them to argue.

Everyone turned to look at Boston. Jackson thought the brother looked a little green around the gills, but he nodded stoically. “We’re family. I’m in.” Geez, the guy looked like he was going to blow chunks.

“Boston, is everything okay? You don’t look so good, man.”

He didn’t answer. Just shook his head, his lips pressed together in a thin line. It was strange behavior for the normally sarcastic brother, but Jackson didn’t have time—or the brain capacity—to worry about it. His brother controlled the majority of his thoughts, and the small part that wasn’t preoccupied with how to save his sibling, was trying to figure out how best to get Talon alone, naked, and on his back.

His mate sat on the sofa, and Jackson lounged on the floor between his lover’s spread thighs. Long fingers continuously worked their way through his hair. Talon’s heat surrounded him, and his unique scent saturated the air in their little space of the room.

Worried for his brother, nervous about traveling back to Wyoming, and angry at his birth pack for their role in the entire mess, he still desired his lover with an intensity that made him ache.

“Boston, you don’t have to go. No one will think any less of you.” Xander spoke from the love seat, worry written all over his face.

Boston shook his head again. "I'm going."

"Okay, great." Blaise paced the living room, his hands linked behind his back. "The full moon is tomorrow night, so I think we should wait until Thursday to leave. We can't have a bunch of non-native wildlife roaming the hills of Wyoming."

Though Jackson didn't like it, he understood the need for discretion. "Okay, so we leave at first light Thursday morning. I know the way, and I can take us through the woods along the edge of town."

Blaise waved a hand, but didn't cease his pacing. "That sounds good. Your father is the alpha of the pack, correct?"

Jackson nodded.

"Do you think he's in on this? Can we trust him?"

"Oh, I think he's up to his eyeballs in this shit." Jackson fisted his hands in his lap. "No, we don't trust him."

Blaise sighed and shook his head. "I was afraid of that. Then we need information."

"Okay, how do we get it?" Talon shifted in his seat, squeezing Jackson with his thighs. The unease in his voice set Jackson on alert.

Not wanting to call attention to his mate's distress, Jackson wrapped his fingers around Talon's ankle and massaged it in comfort. Everything would be fine. He had to believe it if he hoped to make it through the next few days.

"Cole," Blaise answered simply.

"How are we going to talk to Cole?" Keeton's brow furrowed in confusion, and he wiggled in Logan's arms.

"We aren't. Jackson is."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jackson pushed away from his mate and stood to his feet. "Stop talking in circles and just spit it out."

Blaise held his hands up in surrender. "You hear Cole in your dreams, right?" At Jackson's nod, Blaise continued, "Then you can talk to him as well. Your brain is more susceptible to outside

influence when you're sleeping. Also, the pack telepathy is stronger when you're in your wolf skin."

"So, Jackson needs to shift and fall asleep, then try to talk to Cole in his dreams?" Jackson grinned at his lover. Talon was much smarter than he gave himself credit for.

"Exactly." Blaise nodded once. "It's hard to maintain our shifted forms during sleep though, so we'll have to wait until tomorrow night. Once the moon rises, he won't be able to shift back to human until daybreak. It gives us plenty of time for trial and error."

"Blaise, you can't be here." Braxton fidgeted beside Xander.

Blaise waved away his concern. "I know. I'll stay at Keeton's cottage. You guys are going to have to try to help him, though. It's the only chance we have."

Jackson swallowed hard. *Yeah, no pressure or anything.*

* * * *

Stripping out of his clothes, Talon felt weary down to his toes. He wanted to help Jackson, to rescue Cole, but he had reservations about Jackson actually going into the lion's den. His protective instincts screamed inside him, demanding he force his young mate to stay behind.

Logically, he knew Jackson would be instrumental in achieving their goal. Plus, he highly doubted the kid would stay out of the fray without one hell of a fight. Maybe he could just tie him up to the bed when the time came.

"Stop it." Jackson came into the room, already pulling his shirt over his head. "I'm going, I'll be fine, and you need to stop worrying."

"How do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"It's written all over your face."

"Maybe I'm just constipated."

Jackson shook his head and chuckled. "You're an idiot, but you really need to chill. I'm wound up enough for both of us, and I need you to be the cool and collected one." He rubbed the back of his head as he traveled farther into the room. "Hopefully, we won't have to fight anyone. Blaise is trying to talk The Council into sending Enforcers to check out the situation."

"I have a bad feeling about The Council. According to those records, this has been going on for years." Talon sat down heavily on the end of the mattress. "I also doubt your birth pack is the only one involved in this little scheme. Why haven't those old fools put a stop to it before now? Surely they know what's going on."

"You think The Council is involved?" Jackson sounded shocked. "I don't know much about them, but that seems a little farfetched."

Talon growled in frustration. It wasn't his story to tell, but Jackson needed to understand the world wasn't all rainbows and fairness. Pushing to his feet, he undressed quickly and crawled into bed. Holding the blankets back, he motioned for Jackson to join him.

Once his mate had settled in beside him, he propped up on one elbow and waited for Jackson to meet his gaze. "You saw how nervous Boston acted downstairs?"

Jackson nodded, a small frown marring his lips.

"We were living in Montana at the time, just a few months before we moved to Wyoming." He paused to kiss Jackson's nose. "And found you. We moved to keep Boston safe."

"Why? What happened?" Jackson rolled to his side and pushed up on his elbow, mirroring Talon.

"We found him, strung up by his ankles, in the middle of the woods we used to hunt in. It was the dead of winter, nine inches of snow on the ground, and he was completely naked." Talon caressed his mate's cheek, unsure if he should continue with the tale.

"Please, tell me what happened," Jackson whispered, nuzzling into Talon's palm. "I'm not as fragile as you like to think."

Talon snorted and rolled his eyes. "I never said you were." He sobered, his chest tightening as the memories came back to him. "He'd been sold by his pack to a clan there in Montana, and had been a blood slave for almost three years when we found him. They nearly drained him dry, then left him in the cold to die." Talon still didn't know how the brother had survived.

"That's horrible. So, Cole...Cole..." He trailed off, and his eyes went round as saucers. "We have to go now!" He struggled to get out of bed, but Talon held him immobile.

"Oh for the love of everything holy, would you calm the fuck down and start using your head? It's like you have split personalities or something. One minute you're fine, the next you're acting like a complete basket case."

Sighing deeply, Jackson nodded and slumped back against the bed. "Yeah, I know. There's just all this shit swimming around in my head. I can tell you've been upset lately, and I just worry that you're going to get fed up with me."

Talon smiled and kissed the tip of his mate's nose. "Never gonna happen, baby."

The corners of his lips twitched, and Jackson shook his head. "Then during these dreams, I can feel how scared Cole is, and it kind of lingers for a while. I'm all over the damn map right now."

"We'll figure it out. I didn't tell you about Boston to worry you. I'm trying to explain why I think The Council might be into some shady dealings. That was about eight years ago when we found him. We reported it, but nothing ever came of it. A few weeks after we filed the report, our house burned to the ground." Luckily, none of them had been home, but it had sure scared the shit out of them. "We packed up and left that night."

"We need to tell Blaise."

"Agreed." Talon started to rise from the bed, but Jackson's hand on his arm stopped him.

"How did you and Logan meet Xander?"

“I offered him a blow job.”

“What?” Jackson came up off the bed, his hands planted on his hips. “What the fuck are you talking about? So, you and Xander used to fuck?”

Talon turned away to hide the smile on his face. Not only could he hear the jealousy in his mate’s voice, he could read the possessiveness all over Jackson’s face. He liked it...a lot.

“No, I never fucked Xander.”

“So, you just sucked him off?” Jackson sounded more like a wolf than a man, his voice barely recognizable through the growl.

“No, I didn’t suck him off either.” Talon stood as well, and prowled around the bed toward his mate. “Logan and I had been on our own for a while. We were just kids, barely seventeen. We were cold and hungry, and Logan refused to shift out of his leopard skin.” Standing in front of Jackson, he looked his mate in the eye.

“I went into town to try to steal some food. Xander caught me, and I offered to blow him. He knew what I was, and he offered to help.” He cupped Jackson’s jaw and smirked at him. “I like when you get jealous.”

Jackson shoved his hand away and huffed. “I’m not jealous, asshole. Much,” he added under his breath.

Talon laughed and pulled the sulky man into his arms. “You and me, right, pup? It’s always gonna be just you and me.”

The pout slid from Jackson’s mouth, and he smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

Chapter Twelve

He prowled through the thick snow, crouched low on his haunches. The full amber moon beat down on his back, illuminating the forest with an eerie, almost ethereal glow. No sound other than the crunching of his paws through the icy wilderness reached his perked ears.

The silence felt oppressive, surrounding him, closing in on him. A soft flickering light caught his attention through the trees, and he changed directions. He didn't know why, didn't understand the pull, but he needed to get to that light.

"Jackson." The voice called to him, soft, distant, a breath on the night wind.

"Cole? Cole, can you hear me?"

"You have to go back. Don't follow the light. Go back, man."

"Cole?" His brother sounded much calmer than he had in previous dreams. "You called for me. You need my help. I'm coming for you."

"No, Jackson. You can't come here. I was wrong. I see what they're doing now. You have to go back."

That cold fear invaded his heart again, leeching the remaining warmth from his body. "Cole, I won't leave you. We'll be there soon."

"They know about you. They know about your pack. You can't bring them here. It's too dangerous. I mean it, Jackson. Do not come to Wyoming!"

The knowledge that this old pack knew about his family paused Jackson in his tracks. Still, he couldn't leave his brother to suffer at their hands. "We're strong, Cole. We can get you out of there. I need

to know more about what's going on, though. I need to know what Dad's up to. Help me."

"I love you, but you have to run. You can't save me, but you can save yourself. Save your pack. They're coming for you." Cole spoke quickly, frantically, his voice quaking with panic.

"Why do they want us?"

"Because you're special. You have power they want. I don't have time to explain it. You have to go back. Take your family and run."

"You're my family, Cole. I can't just leave you. Tell me what to do."

"It's too late. Save yourself, and forget about coming here. Now, go. The sun is rising."

"Cole!"

He received no response. Sprinting through the snow, charging toward the flickering light, Jackson growled deep in his chest. He needed to reach that light. He needed to...

Jackson jerked awake, blinking as the first light of morning peeked over the horizon. The rays warmed his face as he panted for breath, feeling as though he had really just sprinted through the forest.

His mate curled closer against his back, also having shifted into his human as the sun began its slow trek across the eastern sky. A sharp breeze drifted over them, pulling a violent shudder from him. His wolf may not have a problem sleeping on the ground in the winter, but Jackson was freezing his balls off.

Shaking Talon awake, he waited for the man's eyelids to flutter open before placing a soft kiss against his lips. "Inside, babe. It's too damn cold out here."

Talon shivered and nodded his agreement, silently climbing to his feet and helped Jackson up as well. They walked hand and hand through the trees and straight in through the backdoor of the house.

The smells of pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage wafted through the kitchen, causing Jackson's mouth to water.

“Ooh, I love mornings after the full moon.” Keeton stood at the refrigerator pulling out jellies, jams, butter, and other assorted condiments. “Naked man parades are my favorite part of this shifter gig.”

“It is the best part of waking up,” Braxton teased as he lifted his coffee mug to his lips. “Way better than Folgers.”

Jackson’s cheeks flamed, and he quickly hid his morning wood behind his hands, sidestepping to cover his ass and his mate’s goody-bits in one move. “I’m never going to get used to you two.”

Keeton giggled, and Braxton snorted. “Oh, quit being a prude and let us admire the view.” Braxton winked before turning back to the stove.

“I don’t know about you, but I want to do more than look.” Keeton practically purred, and his eyes darkened with lust as Logan stepped through the door. “Need me to warm you up, love?”

Logan pretended to pout, poking his bottom lip out, and nodded. Keeton smiled wickedly and began backing out of the kitchen. “I have a surprise for you if you can catch me.” Then he turned and bolted from the room.

Logan sped from the kitchen in a blur, and if Keeton’s shrieks were any indication, had no trouble catching his little mate.

Reaching behind him, Jackson tugged on Talon’s hip to get the man moving. “We need to talk,” he whispered.

Talon’s lips ghosted over the back of his neck, his nose skimming along the sensitive skin there. “Lead the way, baby.”

* * * *

The only conversation Talon was interested in was the kind where Jackson said, “Harder,” and he said, “Yes, sir.” Following his mate’s bouncing ass up the stairs, he decided no one should look that tempting before noon.

Reaching their room, Talon shoved his mate through the door, walking him backwards until they fell to the mattress in a tangle of limbs. Pinning his lover beneath him, he attacked Jackson's mouth, using his hands to encourage the man to move against him.

"Want you, Talon." The sweet, breathy moan, sounded like music to Talon's ears.

"You got me, pup. Tell me what you want."

"Fuck me. Hard and fast." The raw desperation in Jackson's eyes, the thick, strained quality of his voice, finally gave Talon pause.

Easing off of his mate, he pulled Jackson into his arms, resting his chin on top of the kid's head. His dick screamed at him, demanding to know what the fuck was going on and why it wasn't encased in something hot and silky. Pushing away his desire, he cuddled his lover closer, using his touch to soothe him.

"Talk to me, Jacks. What happened?"

"Cole wouldn't give me anything. He just kept telling me to turn back." He paused and a deep shudder wracked his body. "He says they're coming for us."

"What?" Talon pushed his lover back by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Who's coming for us?"

"I think he means my birth pack. It's the only thing that makes sense." Jackson frowned. "He wasn't exactly forthcoming with information. He just said they know about us, and they're coming for us. Cole says we need to run."

"Sounds like it's time for another pack meeting." Talon patted his lover's hip and rolled from the bed. "Get dressed."

Chapter Thirteen

“The clan is coming here? Cole said that? Are you sure?” Blaise stomped around the living room, waving his hands like a madman. “This is crazy. This is insane. Why do they want you?”

“Cole said we’re special, and they want the power we can give them.”

Blaise paused, his hands suspended in midair, making him look like some giant bird ready to take flight. Jackson bit the inside of cheek to keep from laughing.

“It always comes back to this damn curse,” Logan muttered from across the room. “Why the hell can’t everyone just leave us alone?”

“The Council has been no help, either.” Blaise shook his head, his eyebrows drawing together. “I don’t understand it.”

Jackson nudged Talon with an elbow to his ribs. “Maybe we should tell him.”

Talon shook his head fractionally, his eyes darting to Boston. “It’s not our story to tell,” he whispered.

He understood, but he also felt it was important information that Blaise needed if he hoped to help them. Besides, he worked for the I.C.P.J. He had the right to know. “This has happened before,” he blurted.

Everyone turned to stare at him, the room falling quiet. He chanced a look at Boston and winced inwardly as the blood drained from the brother’s face before his eyes.

“A few years ago, it happened to a pack in Montana. They went to The Council, but nothing happened. They ended up having to move

because a vampire clan came after them when they realized the shifter they left in the woods was still alive.”

He looked at Boston again, tilting his head a little at the look of gratitude on the man’s face.

Blaise cursed under his breath and resumed his pacing. “So, we’re on our own, is what you’re saying. We can’t depend on The Council, and I’ve possibly given them too much information already. We’ll need a damn good plan if we’re going to pull this off.”

“We need to leave.” Braxton climbed out of Xander’s lap as he addressed the room. “Cole says they’re coming for us. Well, I’m damn sure not going to sit around and wait for them to get here.”

“Smart and sexy.” Xander chuckled from his chair. “I agree, though. Grab whatever you need for, let’s say a week, and meet back here in twenty minutes.”

At their alpha’s words, everyone jumped up and hurried from the room. “We don’t have a plan,” Jackson said to his mate as they climbed the stairs. “We can’t just go in there blind. Someone is going to end up dead.”

“I agree, but we don’t have a lot of options right now. Let’s just get packed and on the road. We aren’t going to be much good to anyone if we get ambushed in our own home.”

Walking into the bedroom, Jackson grabbed the bag he’d packed the night before and sat it next to the door. A sense of déjà vu overcame him, but at least this time, he wouldn’t be leaving alone. “Will we have to move again?”

Talon grabbed his suitcase as well and brought it over by Jackson’s. “I don’t know, baby. One step at a time, okay?” He took a handful of Jackson’s T-shirt and tugged him forward, planting a toe-curling kiss on his mouth. “One step at a time.”

* * * *

“Jackson would you stop! You’re shaking the whole damn truck.”

Jackson jerked his head up and smiled apologetically at Braxton. He stretched his legs out, hoping it would stop the nervous bouncing of his knee. Talon's strong hand slid over his thigh and squeezed.

They hadn't even made it out of Georgia yet, and Jackson already had a horrible case of the are-we-there-yets. It hadn't taken long for everyone to gather what supplies they needed, load up, and hit the road. He and Talon slouched in the backseat of Xander's pickup, while the alpha and his mate rode up front. Boston, Logan, Keeton, and Blaise all piled into Logan's SUV, and off they went on their grand adventure.

Jackson snorted, rolling his eyes at himself as he looked out the window at the passing trees. Some grand adventure. He felt like he was going to hurl, his head pounded, and his fingers stung where he'd bitten his nails down to the quick.

While he appreciated his mate's need to comfort him, if Talon said everything would fine one more time, Jackson was going to punch him in the balls. Not a damn part of this was "fine." His own crazy father held his brother hostage for who knew what reasons. They had no plan, no help, no advantage, and now his dad, and whoever else, had set their sights on his adoptive family.

His eyelids drooped, and his body leaned heavily against the door. Maybe if he could sleep, just for a little while, he'd wake up and find it had all been some elaborate dream.

"C'mere, baby." Talon's fingers wrapped around the back of his neck and tugged gently.

Too tired to argue, he maneuvered himself until his head rested in Talon's lap. Strong fingers massaged the tense, aching muscles in his neck, while the fingers on his mate's other hand trailed through his hair.

Groaning quietly at the feel of his mate's hands on him, he closed his eyes and let the gentle rocking of the pickup lull him to sleep.

* * * *

Talon looked out the window at the shabby little diner and moaned. His stomach snarled, twisting and cramping, trying to eat itself, he assumed. He turned his attention to his mate, Jackson's head still resting in his lap, his skin almost glowing in the moonlight that filtered inside the cab of the pickup.

"Wake up, pup." He tickled his lover under the chin, smiling at the soft hum the touch elicited. "Are you hungry?"

"Where are we?" Jackson mumbled without opening his eyes.

"Missouri. We're going to grab a room here for the night and drive on to Wyoming in the morning."

Jackson groaned, stretching out as much as he could in the small space, arching his back against Talon's thighs. Damn, if the action didn't cause Talon's dick to perk right up. His stomach snarled again, like a caged animal trying to crawl out of his belly button.

"Fine. Burgers, then dessert."

Jackson's eyes popped open, and he stared up at him with raised eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

Talon just shook his head. "Nothing. C'mon, kid."

Jackson nodded, and they filed out of the truck, dropping their heads and rounding their shoulders against the brisk wind. Talon reached the door first and held it open for his mate before hurrying in behind him. And he'd thought Georgia was unseasonably cold for November.

Spotting the rest of the pack seated at a large corner booth, he gave Jackson a little push to get him moving, and they wound their way through the tables and patrons to join their brothers.

"Not a lot of people here." Talon looked out over the diner after sliding into the booth beside Logan.

"Good. Maybe we'll get our food faster. I'm starving."

Talon snorted and rolled his eyes at his mate. "Do you ever think about anything besides eating?"

Jackson just shrugged and pushed at him to slide into the booth first. The door opened, bringing the cold wind, and six men stepped into the diner just as Jackson sat down beside him.

Something felt off about the men. They all looked similar in appearance and dress, each one at least six feet tall and built like linebackers. Well, except the one standing in the back of the group. The smallest of them, he looked young, probably no more than Jackson's age, and he appeared miniscule next to his companions.

Dressed from head to toe in black, with matching leather trench coats, they made Talon nervous.

A waitress sashayed up to the men, a smile stretching her too red lips. Her bleach blonde hair pulled back tight from her face, hanging down her back in a scraggly looking ponytail that bobbed as she bounced on her toes.

Talon watched the smile slip a notch on her painted face as she spoke with the newcomers. Then she motioned for the men to follow her to a table in the opposite corner of the room.

The little guy in the group stopped at each occupied table along the way, smiling brightly, and speaking with the patrons for a minute before moving on. Perhaps they were regulars. The tacky little burger joint would certainly appeal to bikers and the like.

The petite blonde waitress hurried over to their table, carrying a large tray laden with glasses of water, bread, and butter. She sat the entire tray on the table, dipped her head without smiling, and left. Her behavior seemed odd and a little rude, but Talon shrugged it off and reached for one of the glasses.

"Any ideas yet?" he asked Blaise with a raised eyebrow.

Blaise shook his head. "We need Cole to talk. Without the help of The Council, he's our only hope of getting in that place."

All eyes turned to Jackson. He rubbed a hand over his face and nodded once. "I'll try tonight."

"I guess we need to go in at night. If we can't trust Jackson's father, then we can't trust the rest of the pack. It's better not to call

attention to ourselves until we know what's going on." Blaise paused and looked around the table. "And someone needs to stay behind to call for help in case something goes wrong."

Keeton crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. "I guess we will." He tilted his head to the side to include Braxton.

"Good boy," Logan whispered to him and kissed the tip of his nose.

Talon listened to the conversation with half-attention. He continued to watch the other men in the restaurant, but none of them paid any attention to their group in the corner. Still, something ate at Talon's instincts.

"This tastes funny." Keeton wrinkled his nose as he took a drink of the water.

"It's just tap water." It did leave a bit of an aftertaste, but in a place like this he expected it.

"Yeah, well, it's gross," Braxton added even as he took another drink. "I'll stick with bottled water, thank you very much."

Mentally rolling his eyes, Talon watched as the customers began trickling out of the restaurant. Weird that almost everyone decided to leave at the same time, but perhaps they'd arrived together as well.

Where the hell had their server gone? She hadn't even asked what they wanted to drink, let alone taken their orders. Not like she was busy. Only he, his brothers, and the men in the other corner remained.

Intent on his paranoia, it was several minutes before he noticed the agitated fidgeting of his pack mates. Breathing shallowly, they all stared around the table at each other with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

The scent of lust hung thick in the air, saturating it, and pulling a groan from Talon's chest as his nostrils flared and his dick strained against his fly. A slow burn worked its way across his skin as his heart tripped into a quick gallop. What the hell was going on?

A soft growl beside him had his focus whipping toward his mate. Jackson's eyes traveled over Talon's body, undressing him with his

eyes. His lover's hand slipped into his lap, gripping and squeezing the bulge behind his zipper roughly.

Talon tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone desert dry. He didn't know what was happening, but he wanted his mate with an intensity that went way beyond desire. A feral snarl escaped his lips, and he fisted both hands in Jackson's short hair and yanked him forward, crushing their mouths together.

Several loud groans filled their area of the diner as Talon continued to attack his mate's mouth, licking and sucking at his lips, shoving his tongue inside and plundering the warm depths.

"Xander?" Braxton's voice shook and cracked twice, penetrating the fog in Talon's brain, but only barely.

He peeked over when he heard Braxton's yelp of surprise. Xander had the little man in his lap, laying claim to his mouth much the same as Talon did to Jackson.

"What's wrong with me?" Keeton asked in a breathless whisper just before Logan snatched him up, dragged him into his lap, and devoured him.

"God, I need you, baby. I gotta have you." Talon bit the sensitive flesh between his lover's neck and shoulder.

"Do it," Jackson panted. "I feel like I'm on fire. I fucking burn, Talon."

Talon gave his mate a hard push, tumbling him out of the booth and onto the floor to sprawl on his back. Jackson didn't seem to mind. He reached out, grabbing Talon around the neck and slamming their mouths together when Talon landed on top of him.

Talon worked quickly, divesting Jackson of his jeans and pulling his own down his hips. Reaching up blindly, he dipped his fingers in the butter on the table, coated his demanding prick and circled Jackson's fluttering hole.

"I can't stop. I can't control it." Fear seeped into the lust surrounding him as he realized the truth of his words. He couldn't

stop. If he didn't get inside Jackson in the next half second, he was going to explode.

It clawed at his insides as fire swept through his body, leaving him panting, sweating, and shaking. He pushed two fingers deep into Jackson's ass and pumped hard and fast. A loud cry had him jerking his head around to look over his shoulder.

Xander had Braxton completely naked in his lap, his arms locked around him as he slammed up into his small body. Another ragged moan drew his attention to his twin. Logan draped Keeton over the table, his tiny feet dangling off the ground, as Logan pounded into him from behind.

Still sawing his fingers in and out of his mate's heated channel, Talon watched as Blaise stood up in the booth, pulling his weeping cock from his jeans, and stroked it furiously. Then Boston's fingers encircled the base, and he tugged Blaise forward, wrapping his lips around the spongy crown.

"Oh, shit," Xander groaned as he continued to thrust up into his mate.

Blaise's head dropped back on his shoulders, and he moaned loudly, working his slippery cock in and out of Boston's mouth. Boston swallowed around the turgid flesh as he jerked himself roughly, his hand a mere blur on his long shaft.

Talon couldn't hold back any longer. Lining his greased pole up with his mate's sweet opening, he pushed in to the hilt, pulling a loud grunt from Jackson. His hips jerked and his eyes crossed as his lover's silky tunnel clamped around him. Without further delay, he began thrusting wildly, plowing into Jackson's yielding body, growling, hissing, and snarling like the animal he was.

Again and again, he sank and retreated, driving into his mate with a punishing rhythm. His fingers tangled in Jackson's hair, jerking him upward to meet Talon's mouth in a demanding kiss.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Logan pull out of Keeton's body, flip his little mate around, and lift him up to sit on the table. He

pushed Keeton to his back before driving back into him, covering the smaller man's body with his own, and sinking his canines into his lover's neck.

Without warning, Talon felt his orgasm rip through him as his balls unloaded, spilling his seed into Jackson's scorching hot ass. He vaguely heard Logan's muffled roar above him, followed by Keeton's ear-piercing scream. Jackson groaned, his inner walls clamping down on Talon's dick, and Boston's cry of release came out garbled around Blaise's cock as creamy ropes of semen erupted from his slit. Blaise groaned and shuddered, Braxton screamed, much as Keeton had, and Xander threw his head back, roaring out his mate's name.

Chapter Fourteen

Jackson slumped back to the floor, sweating and gasping for breath. The gnawing need to be fucked into oblivion began to ebb, leaving him confused and a little afraid. “What the hell just happened?”

The sound of applause had him swinging around to stare at the six men he’d seen when they first entered the diner. Tall, lean muscles, and so pale they almost glowed, the men appeared to be a unit.

His brothers jerked out of their haze and quickly began pulling on clothes and putting themselves to rights. Anxiety settled over Jackson like a blanket, leaving little room for embarrassment. Something about the men set his teeth on edge, and the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end.

“Hello, gentlemen.” One of the men stepped forward, assumedly the leader of the group.

“Who are you?” Talon spoke calmly, but Jackson detected the anxiety in his voice.

“I didn’t realize Inhibitors would have quite that effect on shifters of your particular...persuasion.” The man spoke as though he hadn’t heard the question. “Then again, we did give you a pretty big dose. I wasn’t sure if they would even work on Moonlighters.”

Cold dread settled in Jackson’s heart. Whoever these men were, they knew he and his brothers were members of the Moonlight Breed. Nothing good could come from the knowledge.

“We’re leaving,” Xander said coldly, stepping forward and pushing his mate behind him.

The crooked smile slipped from the pale man's face, and he shook his head. "I need you to come with us. We don't want any trouble."

Talon was on his feet instantly, shielding Jackson with his body. "Where are you taking us?"

"We just want to talk." The guy held his hands up, palms out. "Please, just come with us."

Logan and Boston moved to take up ranks beside Talon and Xander, each crossing their arms over their chests and glaring. "Not going to happen," Logan said flatly.

Jackson slowly gained his feet, positioning himself beside his mate, ready to fight for their freedom or their lives.

"We are prepared to use force." The stranger continued to hold his hand up in a peaceable gesture. "I hope it won't come to that."

"We're leaving," Xander repeated.

The next thing Jackson knew, fists, feet, hair, and bodies were flying everywhere. The smallest of the opposing group had him pinned to the ground with a knee in his chest, hissing and snarling as his canines elongated.

"Holy shit! You're really a vampire?" Jackson didn't know why he said it, but the man seemed taken aback, cocking his head to the side and closing his mouth.

The brief instant of hesitation was all it took for Jackson to flip their positions and gain the upper hand. His fist connected squarely with the man's jaw over and over until strong arms lifted him into the air. The man beneath him just shook his head and rose to his feet with murder in his gaze.

"Run!" Talon slung him around and shoved him toward the diner exit. After watching the guy get to his feet after the beating Jackson had just given him, he decided retreat was definitely in order.

"Take Braxton and Keeton," Xander yelled at him as he grabbed a man off his back and sent him sailing through the air to bounce off one of the tables.

Keeton and Braxton huddled in the corner of the booth, clutching at each other as they watched the fray with wide, terrified eyes. “Guys! Let’s go!” Jackson yelled and motioned them to crawl under the table.

They hesitated for only a moment before quickly scrambling out of the booth and flying past Jackson, sprinting for the door. He hurried behind them, looking over his shoulder repeatedly, checking for any danger.

Once in the parking lot, he shoved both men into the pickup with orders to lock the door and keep low, then hurried back toward the restaurant. Logan came barreling out of the door just as he reached it, ramming into him hard enough to steal the breath from his lungs. “Where’s my mate?”

“In the truck,” Jackson said around a cough.

Logan pushed past him and raced for the pickup. Next through the door was Xander with the same question and same reaction. Jackson waited for Talon to emerge, panic bubbling inside his chest when his mate didn’t immediately appear through the door.

Just as Jackson made the decision to go in after his lover, the door swung open again and Talon rolled out, one of the pale men clinging to his back, his mouth locked on Talon’s throat. A deep, all-consuming rage built inside Jackson as he rushed forward and plowed his knuckles right into the man’s temple.

The guy grunted, releasing his hold on Talon’s neck and turned his menacing glare on Jackson. Before he could react, the vampire leapt into the air, straight at Jackson’s throat. A loud yell signaled Blaise’s arrival as he burst through the open door and flew through the air, connecting with the stranger mid-jump.

Pulling Talon to his feet, Jackson breathed a sigh of relief when Logan’s Jeep slid to a grinding halt just beside them. Dumping his mate into the backseat, he turned just in time to see Boston come smashing through the pane glass window and roll across the gravel.

Though he seemed a little shaken, he quickly gained his feet and hurried to jump into the backseat with Talon.

“Blaise! Let’s go!”

Blaise snapped his head up from the man he kneeled over and quickly hurried over to dive into the backseat and over the back into the cargo hold. Jackson slid in beside Boston, slammed the door, and beat on the back of Keeton’s seat. “Go, go, go!”

Logan peeled out of the parking lot, slinging gravel just as Xander’s huge pickup flew past them on the main road.

* * * *

“What the hell was that? Who were those guys? Why the hell did we just have a fucking sexfest in the middle of a goddamn diner?” Boston paced about the small motel room, waving his hands wildly as he yelled.

Jackson had never seen him like this before. Usually easygoing and laid-back, Boston appeared highly agitated at the moment. Not that he didn’t have good reason to be, but it did nothing to calm Jackson’s already frayed nerves.

All of the men in the room stared off into opposite corners of the room. Everyone seemed uneasy and embarrassed, not willing to travel into the sexcapades they’d entertained at the restaurant. They needed answers though, and evasion wouldn’t get them anywhere.

“Where the hell are we?” Okay, not the most important question, but they’d driven for hours after leaving the diner, and Jackson didn’t even know what state they were in.

“Omaha, Nebraska,” Logan answered, still staring at some ugly painting over the bed.

Blaise sat on the edge of the mattress, frowning and shaking his head. “Boston, if you will sit down and stop yelling, I will explain as much as I know.”

Boston glared at him for a minute before nodding curtly and flopping heavily onto the lumpy-looking sofa.

“Blaise, what were those things?” Keeton spoke from Logan’s lap where he had a blanket wrapped around him, curled inside the protection of his mate’s arms.

“Vampires,” Boston, Xander, and Blaise, all spoke at the same time.

“Why didn’t we smell them when we walked in?” Talon stretched his neck to the side as he spoke. The wound had already begun to heal itself, but Talon said it still ached like a bitch.

“Why did I feel like I was going to die if I didn’t get a cock in my ass?” Braxton asked, the irritation evident in his voice.

“Are we safe here?” Keeton asked quietly.

“Why are they after us?” Jackson wanted to know.

“What the fuck are Inhibitors?” Logan threw out the next question.

“Whoa! One question at a time.” Blaise stood from the bed and started pacing the room. “I don’t know why we didn’t scent them. We were kind of distracted, weren’t expecting it, and they were on the other side of the room. That’s the best I can come up with.”

“I’ve never met a vampire, so I wouldn’t know if one was sitting on top of me. Obviously,” Jackson added with a self-deprecating smile as he remembered the vampire hovered over him in the diner. “But the others have. Didn’t you guys realize what they were when they got closer?”

“I recognized them by appearance, but not scent,” Boston said.

Xander nodded his agreement. “I didn’t smell anything.”

“Well, we’ve never seen vampires either,” Talon said with a wave at his brother.

“Okay, so we’ll put that on the list of shit to figure out later.” Blaise resumed his pacing. “Inhibitors are like tranquilizers, I guess. It’s a drug used to prevent the transformation in a shifter from either beast to human, or vice versa, depending on the need. Sexual arousal

is a side effect, but what we experienced is not something I've ever heard of before. It had to be one hell of a dose."

"I'm never going to be able to look at any of you again." Braxton buried his flaming face in Xander's neck.

Jackson understood the feeling. His own cheeks flushed, the heat crawling up his neck to the tips of his ears.

"No offense, but I'm not even gay." Blaise frowned down at the floor. "So, let's not talk about uncomfortable."

Braxton's head popped up, and he arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying Boston doesn't give a good blow job?"

Blaise's eyes almost popped out of his head, and his mouth hung open stupidly. "Braxton—I'm. Not. Gay!"

"Oh, you know you loved it," Keeton quipped. "We'll bring you over to the dark side eventually." He wiggled his eyebrows, and the room erupted into laughter. Leave it to the squirt to ease the tension.

"Can we get back on track here?" Boston still sounded like a grumbly bear, but he looked pale and shaken.

Blaise growled at his cousin before turning his attention to Boston. "I don't know what they want with you, but I doubt it's your amazing conversational skills. They've obviously been following us."

"Why did everyone leave?" Jackson cocked his head to the side. "And what was up with that waitress?"

"The power of suggestion."

"Uh, okay." Why couldn't Blaise just talk like a regular person?

"Vampire mind control, Jacks."

"Holy crap! You mean that stuff's true? I thought it was just like in movies and books."

Everyone in the room chuckled, even Boston, though his came without much humor. "Oh, it's true. You don't even have to look into their eyes for it to work either. They just slip inside your head, and plant little ideas that sound really appealing."

"Then why didn't they do that to us at the diner?"

Everyone turned to look at Keeton. “Good question.” Blaise’s brows drew together. “I don’t like not knowing what’s going on,” he mumbled under his breath.

No, he wouldn’t. Blaise was the most anal-retentive person Jackson had ever met—a total control freak. “So, are we good here?”

“We should be safe here. Sunrise is in about four hours, but we need to sleep in shifts.”

“I’ll take the first shift.” Jackson head spun with all the information that had been crammed into it in such a short space of time.

To his surprise, Blaise shook his head. “We need you to sleep and try to communicate with Cole. We’re running out of time, and we need a plan. He’s the only one that can help us right now.”

He had serious doubts that he’d be able to fall asleep, but realizing the importance of the task he’d been set, dipped his head in agreement. Surely, someone had a sleeping pill. Hell, NyQuil would do in a pinch.

Talon’s arms wrapped around him from behind, and he rested his chin on Jackson’s shoulder. The warmth seeped into him, the presence of his mate calming and relaxing him. Seemed he’d just found his drug of choice.

Chapter Fifteen

Talon curled around his mate on the bed, stroking his hair and peppering kisses along the side of his face. He tried to tame his emotions and let the tension drain from his body in an effort to help his lover relax and drift off to sleep.

Fear and anxiety bubbled just beneath the surface, though. A slight twinge of jealousy poked at him, but he brushed it away quickly. They had all been out of their minds with lust at the diner, but he still didn't like the others seeing his baby naked and wanton.

He prayed Jackson could get something useful from his brother this time. How long could they continue to outrun the threat that nipped at their heels? Not long if the tenderness in his neck was any indication. He couldn't believe the fucking bloodsucker had actually bitten him.

"Will you sing to me?" Jackson whispered the words, barely loud enough to Talon to hear.

He stopped petting his mate's hair and looked around the room at the rest of the pack. They all seemed preoccupied with their own tasks or conversations, but it would still be easy to hear him in the small room. He'd sung to Jackson as a kid, when he first came to live with the pack and woke up at night screaming and shaking.

"Please, Talon?" Jackson's soft plea undid him. He'd do anything for the pup.

"What would you like me to sing, baby?"

"Can you do that one I like by the guy with the big, weird glasses?"

Talon snorted against Jackson's neck.

“Okay. Close your eyes, and I’ll sing.” He waited for his mate’s eyelids to drift closed, took a calming breath, and started to sing quietly. “*I feel so bad. I’ve got a worried mind...*”

Talon peeked out over the room, unsurprised to find everyone staring at him in astonishment. He didn’t exactly have a reputation for soft and gentle, but they didn’t have to look so dumbstruck.

Closing his eyes and focusing on the lyrics, he sang softly in his mate’s ear, running his fingertips lightly along Jackson’s side. The man felt so right in his arms, and Talon couldn’t stop the small smile of contentment tugging at the corners of his lips. Damn, he was one lucky son of a bitch.

Yeah, he finally understood all the hype about *sienotas*. He had never loved, trusted, or respected anyone more than he did the man in his arms. The void in his soul had finally been filled, replaced by warmth and happiness. God, he was turning into a sappy bastard. If he wasn’t careful, he’d be eating rainbows and coughing up butterflies.

Finishing the last line of the song, he opened his eyes, grinning at Jackson’s soft snores. “Works every time,” he murmured, placing a quick kiss on his lover’s forehead.

“That was beautiful, Talon. I didn’t know you sang.” Keeton stepped closer to the bed, speaking softly so as not to wake Jackson.

Talon just grunted. “Thanks, and I don’t.” He gently caressed Jackson’s smooth cheek with his knuckles. “Well, I don’t for just anyone.”

* * * *

He could see the damn light, but he couldn’t get any closer to it. The moon hovered high in the sky, the same eerie amber glow as before. Snow covered the forest floor, and a harsh wind blew at his back, raising the fur along his spine.

“Cole, you’ve gotta help us. You have to tell me what you know.” Jackson tried to remain calm, but desperation left his voice shaking.

“You’ve already come too far. They won’t stop until they have you now,” Cole responded sadly. “You have to challenge Dad. It’s the only way to stop the cycle.”

“Cycle? What cycle?”

“There’s not much time. Now shut up and listen, asshole.”

Jackson grinned inwardly. There was the Cole he remembered. “Yes, sir.”

“There are four other shifters, eight vampires, a witch, two elves, and a few hybrids here with me.”

“Elves? A witch?”

“Jackson,” Cole growled in his head. “Get the ADD under control and focus. We’re out in that old shithole barn on the edge of town. You know the one?”

“Seriously? Witches?”

“Jackson, damn it, would you pay attention? Do you want my help or not?”

“Sorry. The one those kids set on fire near the old rodeo grounds, yeah?”

“Right. Your best bet is to come in during the night.”

“We figured the same thing. Didn’t want to draw attention, or clue Dad in that we’re coming. Okay, so how do we get in?”

“Just come in through Crystal Creek Woods. They don’t have guards on the place.”

“Then why don’t you just leave?”

“Well, I would if I could get out of this fucking cage,” Cole spat.

Jackson growled. His dear father would pay for this. “Yell for help?”

“No one would hear us. Dad made the rodeo grounds private property. No one comes out this far. Besides, most of us are too weak to talk above a whisper.”

“I’m going to get you out,” Jackson vowed. “Is anyone hurt? Are you okay?”

"I'm fine, but a couple of the others need medical attention. Nothing serious, but you need to hurry. I wanted to protect you from this, but one of the hybrids...He's my mate."

Fantastic. This just kept getting better.

"They're talking about testing their little science experiments on one of the vampires. They don't deserve this, Jackson."

Jackson agreed. No one deserved to be kidnapped, imprisoned, and experimented on—which led him to his next question. "What experiments?"

"They're testing our blood. All kinds of different preternaturals have been in here at one point. Dad is working with some asshole named Cyrus. They're trying to find a way for vampires to walk in the sunlight, and they're going to test it on one of them at sunrise in two days."

"Fuck," Jackson spat. "How did you end up there anyway?"

"Someone's coming. I have to shift back. Hurry, Jackson!"

The voice inside his head faded away, and Jackson jerked awake with a gasp. "They're not blood slaves."

Talon's arms wrapped around him tightly, and the rest of the pack hurried over to the bed to huddle around him. "What are you talking about, baby? What happened?"

Jackson gave them all a quick rundown of the information he'd received from Cole. "They're planning to use some vampire as a test subject tomorrow morning."

Muttered curses sounded around the small circle. Everyone looked tired and weary. It seemed shifts hadn't been necessary. Just looking at the dark circles and bloodshot eyes, Jackson knew he'd been the only one to find sleep.

Blaise looked at his watch. "Sunrise is in two hours. We won't make it in time."

Shaking his head, Jackson sat up a little straighter. "No, not *this* morning. Tomorrow morning."

“Then we need to hurry. We have to save them all. We can’t just leave them there.” Braxton spoke with courage and conviction.

“I’m not rescuing a fucking bloodsucker!” Boston stomped across the room and threw himself into one of the chairs, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at them.

“Oh, can it, would you?” Jackson threw his hands up in the air. “I’m sorry about whatever happened to you to make you hate vampires so much, but this isn’t about you. If you don’t want to help, then you can sit here and pout. Otherwise, get your head out of your ass and man up.”

Boston continued to glare at him for a full minute before he nodded curtly. “I’m in.”

“Okay then,” Talon said, smoothing his palm down Jackson’s back. “Let’s make a plan.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Have you ever seen so much snow?” Keeton looked out the window with his mouth hanging open as Logan struggled to keep the Jeep from fishtailing across the slick road.

“Yes,” Logan, Talon, and Jackson all answered in unison.

“Oh, phooey on you. I’ve lived in Georgia all my life. This is beautiful.”

“Just wait until you have to be out in it,” Logan said around a chuckle. He followed Xander’s pickup off the main road to a row of rustic looking log cabins. “Here we are.”

“Ooh, they’re so cute,” Keeton squealed.

Talon snorted at the runt’s enthusiasm. His brother was right. He couldn’t wait to see how Keeton and Braxton would react to the cold, and snow up to their knees.

“Look, angel.” Logan pointed past the cabins to a mountain range not far beyond. “The Bighorn Mountains.”

“They’re beautiful,” Keeton whispered.

“And over there,” Jackson pointed toward the West, “is where we’re going. Through Crystal Creek Woods.”

Talon could hear Keeton’s gulp from the backseat and bit his tongue to keep from laughing. Oh yeah, the princess was in for a rude awakening.

Sure enough, Logan ended up with Keeton in his arms, carrying him, as he trudged through the thick snow. Braxton tried to dig his way through the white wonderland, but in the end, gave up and allowed Xander to carry him as well.

Jackson stumbled, almost going down, but Talon grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close. “Want me to carry you, too, pup?”

An elbow caught him in the ribs, causing a stream of thick smoke to erupt from his lips as he grunted. “Don’t even think about it,” Jackson growled playfully.

The cold wind whipped around them, shredding through their clothing, and stealing the breath from Talon’s lungs. It didn’t take long for him to remember exactly why he’d been happy to escape this damn place. Give him the heat and rain of Georgia any day.

He sighed in relief when he stepped into the small cabin, the warmth surrounding and thawing him. His fingers stung, his toes ached, and his wet clothes actually steamed as he stepped closer to the fire.

“Are we really walking in this crap through the woods?” Keeton asked as he grabbed a blanket off the sofa and wrapped it around him. Braxton hurried over, grabbed a corner of the blanket, and huddled in close to his friend.

Not his place to say so, but Talon had doubts about taking Braxton and Keeton along with them. Not only were they likely to get hurt, but the trek through the trees wouldn’t be an easy one.

Thankfully, Xander seemed to have the same idea. “You two aren’t going anywhere.”

To Talon’s surprise, neither Braxton nor Keeton argued. They just nodded their heads enthusiastically as a unit.

“It’s still a few hours until sunset. Let’s get some shut-eye, and then we’ll go over the plan one more time before we set out.” Xander motioned for his mate to follow, and exited through one of the three bedroom doors.

“I slept on the ride here, so I’ll take watch duty.” Jackson dragged a chair across the room, placing it just to the side of the window.

“I’ll sit with you.” Though exhausted, Talon couldn’t sleep if he’d wanted to. His nerves were shot, his stomach twisted in knots, his

mind working overtime as it flipped through all the ways this rescue mission could go wrong.

* * * *

“Did you hear that?” Talon jerked his head up, sniffing at the air. He crept closer to the window, standing just to the side, and parted the curtain a bare centimeter.

The moon glowed yellow, giving a creepy look to the fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the last hour. A small, lone shadow pushed his way right up to the front door and tapped softly. Even in the dark, Talon could see the paleness of his skin, the soft glow of his yellow eyes.

“Wake the others.” He spoke softly, barely more than a breath.

“What? Who is it? Who’s out there?” Jackson stepped up behind him to peer over his shoulder. “Shit,” he hissed. He left immediately, moving quietly across the common room and knocking on doors.

Talon inched toward the front door, standing to one side of it and closed his hand over the knob. Taking a deep breath to steady his resolve, he flung the door open and pounced. His tackle caught the smaller man in the chest, toppling him over backwards, and sending them both rolling into the icy snow.

Oddly, the bloodsucker offered no resistance, made no sound. Talon hovered over him, straddling the man’s hips, one hand wrapped around his slender throat. His other fist hovered near his ear, ready to plow into the man’s face at the first sign of struggle.

“You!” His voice sounded guttural, even to his own ears. He recognized the man as the little vampire from the diner in Missouri. “Why are you here? Why are you following us?”

“Please.” The vampire lifted his hands in a show of surrender, but made no move to free himself. “We’ve come to offer aid. We just want to talk.”

“Where’s the rest of the men you were with?” Talon lifted his head and scanned the area. He saw no one. “Show yourself,” he called.

“They will not show themselves unless we have your support. We fight for the same side, Moonlighter. Let us help you. You cannot hope to defeat your enemy without our assistance.”

“What fight? What enemy?”

“The Cloud Peak Pack.”

“I’m pretty sure we can take on one old man and his pack.” Talon refused to loosen his grip on the man’s neck. His mate was just on the other side of those walls, and he would die before he let anything happen to him.

“I’m sure you can, but they’re not alone. We have information you need.”

“What information? Who’s helping them?”

“They are holding a wide range of preters, including several vampires.”

Talon resisted the urge to shake the bloodsucker. “I already know this. Get to the fucking point.”

“Cyrus Redway is helping them. He is the leader of the Redway Clan, and he has gone mad. He is desperate to find a way to walk in the sun.”

“This isn’t your fight. Why do you care?”

“They have a member of our clan, the Snake River Coven.” The vampire looked him in the eye, never blinking, shaking his head as much as Talon’s grip would allow. “Cyrus has to be stopped. Let us help you.”

“Talon, let him up.” Xander’s deep, commanding voice rumbled from just behind him.

Though reluctantly, Talon let his hand slip away from the vampire’s neck, and slowly moved off of him. His eyes never left the man’s face, his muscles tense and prepared for trouble.

“Tell your brothers to come in out of the cold. We’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“Xander!” Talon wanted to rip the alpha’s head off. “They attacked us, and you’re just going to let them waltz in here so we can have a nice little *chat*?”

“You said the Snake River Coven?” Blaise appeared just behind Xander, looking out into the trees.

The vampire nodded, though he looked confused.

“Enforcers?”

Nodding again, the man rose gracefully to his feet to face them.

“Yes, the men with me are Enforcers.”

Blaise looked pleased as punch. “Get them in here.”

The little guy looked over his shoulder and whistled softly. Five dark figures appeared as if out of thin air and hurried to them.

The largest of the group looked about Talon’s size, maybe a little broader in the shoulders. He clapped the small man on the back and grinned. “You did well, Malakai.”

The little guy smiled and nodded. “Thank you. I thought he was going to eat me.”

“I am Stavion, leader of the Snake River Coven Enforcers. I’m sorry for intruding, but I think we can be of help to each other.” He looked back at the man beside him. “This is Malakai. He is the smallest of our clan, and we sent him to speak with you in hopes his small stature would prove less threatening.”

“I’m Xander, alpha for all intents and purposes. Let’s move this party inside and finish the introductions there. I’m freezing my balls off.”

Talon agreed with the last statement. It was damn cold in the wilderness of Wyoming. He didn’t like the idea of five large—and one little—vampires being in the same room with his mate, however. Rushing ahead, he went through the door first, across the room, and took up a protective stance in front of his lover.

“What the fuck are they doing here?” Boston roared as the rest of the men trailed into the room single file.

Xander held up his hands, palms out. “They’re here to help. Calm down, and let’s hear what they have to say.”

Boston nodded, but glared mutinously at the newcomers. Xander sighed and dipped his head as well, then made the introductions.

The vampires stood together on the other side of the room. They looked as nervous as Talon felt, and it helped ease some of his distrust.

Stavion stepped forward and waved a hand toward his coven. “These are my men, Raven, Varik, Demos, and Cassius.” He turned to the smallest man in the group and smiled. “This is Malakai, the tech man, and kind of a liaison of sorts.”

Malakai wasn’t looking at him though. His eyes were locked on Boston, and a small rumbling started in his chest, rising up through his parted lips. As if hypnotized, he glided across the room, through the pack, and right up to stand in front of Boston.

Boston looked down at the vampire, his nostrils flaring and his eyes darkening with what Talon could only assume was lust. Hell, he could smell it wafting from them both clear across the room.

Then the brother shook his head and stumbled backward. “I will not have a vampire for a mate,” he spat, then turned and walked into one of the bedrooms, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Seventeen

Ah, hell! Jackson took a step forward, shaking off Talon's hold when his mate tried to stop him. "Malakai? Are you all right?"

The vampire turned to him and smiled sadly. "I will be. I should have shown more discretion. The shock of meeting my mate overwhelmed my good sense. I apologize."

"Don't." Keeton stepped out of Logan's embrace and walked over to Malakai. "I thought only shifters were mates of shifters." He tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips. "Did that makes sense?"

Malakai actually chuckled softly. "I understand what you meant. I'm a hybrid. Both vampire and shifter, though more vampire."

"Sweet." Keeton beamed at Malakai as he took his arm and steered him toward the door. "He'll come around. Let's go talk to him."

"I'm coming, too." Braxton shook off his mate's restraining arm and hurried over to them.

Malakai looked hesitant, but he nodded and allowed the runts to lead him into the room where Boston had disappeared.

"Get him out!" Boston's voice echoed around the small cabin.

"Oh, shut up already. We're right here, and we're not fucking deaf." Braxton slammed the door, and the silence that followed covered them like a physical force.

"Uh, is he safe?" Stavion looked as though he wanted to go in and snatch Malakai from the irate shifter. Jackson couldn't blame him.

"Boston won't hurt him," Xander assured the coven leader. "My mate will hand him his ass if he even thought about it. We'll leave them to work out their differences." He waved a hand toward the

closed door and the muffled voices beyond. “We only have eight hours until sunrise, and we need to leave soon if we hope to make it back before then.”

Stavion stared at the closed bedroom door for a moment longer, then nodded, returning his attention to Xander.

Jackson moved into Talon’s arms, kissing the underside of his mate’s chin. He understood full well how Malakai felt. It sucked to have a mate that didn’t want you. Luckily, Talon had finally come to his senses because Jackson couldn’t picture his life without the big asshole. Smiling fondly, he kissed Talon’s jaw again. “Love you, yeah?”

Talon nuzzled his cheek across the top of Jackson’s head and sighed. “Yeah, baby. Love you, too.”

“Tell us what you know.” Blaise stepped forward, speaking as though nothing had happened. That was Blaise—all business, all the time.

“The small contingent that followed you has been dealt with,” Varik stated immediately.

“They won’t send others. They know you’re coming,” Raven spoke next.

“Someone has been following us other than you?” Talon spoke angrily, his chest vibrating against Jackson’s back.

“Yes,” Raven answered flatly.

“I suppose I should apologize for the Inhibitor incident in Missouri.” Stavion shook his head as his lips turned down at the corners. “We wanted to talk, but figured you might not be keen on speaking with a group of vampires.” He glanced over to the bedroom door as he spoke. “We just wanted to make sure you didn’t shift, but we weren’t sure how much to give you. It’s not really supposed to be taken orally. Obviously, I misjudged.”

Jackson snorted derisively. “Yeah, no shit.” He pushed out of Talon’s arms and started pacing. “How are we supposed to get in and out if they know we’re coming?”

“That’s where we come in.” Cassius stepped forward, nodding solemnly.

“This can’t be all Alpha Cunningham. He has to have help. I mean, where is he getting these vampires from?” Blaise scratched the back of his neck as he paced.

“Cyrus Redway,” Jackson and Stavion said together.

Blaise stopped so abruptly, he nearly fell over as he whirled around to gape at Stavion. “Cyrus?”

“Who’s Cyrus?” Logan looked back and forth between Blaise and the Enforcer leader. Tension filled the space between the men, but it didn’t seem directed toward each other.

“Cole said he’s helping our father,” Jackson offered. That’s all he knew.

Blaise looked like he might choke. “Cyrus Redway is the vampire representative for The Council.”

* * * *

Jackson trudged through the snow around the frozen lake a few miles west of the Bighorn Mountains. The frigid wind blew hard and fast, swirling the snow around them. Talon walked just beside him, Xander, Blaise, and Logan in front with the vampire Enforcers. Boston stomped along behind them. Cassius remained behind at the cabin to protect Malakai, Braxton and Keeton.

He didn’t know if Boston and Malakai had worked out their problems or come to any kind of agreement, but at least they had refrained from open hostility before Boston left. He hoped the brother could overcome his prejudice about vampires and accept his mate. Malakai seemed like a nice guy, though maybe a little reserved.

Jackson couldn’t blame him. If he found himself mated to a big ole shifter that didn’t want him and hated everything about him, he probably wouldn’t have much reason to smile either.

The farther they trekked through the woods, the harder Jackson's heart beat against his sternum. The amber moon overhead, the harsh wind, the snow-covered forest all looked exactly the same as in his dreams. Soon, they would see the flickering light through the trees.

"You okay, pup?" Talon shouted over the roar of the wind, but Jackson still had to strain to hear him.

Instead of trying to make himself heard, he just nodded. He didn't know if he was okay, but he didn't really have a choice. He had to save his brother.

Sure enough, a quarter mile later, he spotted the flickering light from his dreams, shining softly through the closely packed limbs of the frost-lined trees. He half expected to keep marching toward the light, but never getting closer.

Thankfully, it took only minutes before they stepped through the tree line and up to the old barn on the very edge of town. It had been there on the abandoned rodeo grounds for as long as he could remember. The adults never strayed this far outside of town limits, which made it great for kids to hang out, drink, and get high.

Not that he'd ever done those things.

The glowing amber light came from a small window near the back of the dilapidated building. It flickered and dimmed, then grew brighter, dancing across the window. A four-foot chain-link fence surrounded the building with a big red-and-white sign proclaiming it "Private Property" and giving a warning against trespassing.

Jackson gripped the top of the fence and jumped over it. Yeah, that had been a great deterrent. Not just crazy, his dad was an idiot. How no one had stumbled upon his scheme was beyond Jackson. Hell, the sign alone would be enough to have the kids in the area flocking to the barn, eager to flout authority.

The rest of the men hurdled the fence as well, standing clustered together beside the barn and staring at it as though it were haunted. Jackson shook his head and started forward.

Before he could take a step, however, Talon jerked him around and slammed their mouths together. His warm tongue forced its way into Jackson's mouth as his mate clutched him close. The fear and desperation in the kiss scared the hell out of him.

Talon's lips abandoned their claim on Jackson's mouth and trailed along his jaw and up to his ear. "Just in case," Talon said just loud enough for him to hear, "I want you to know I've always loved you. Only you, Jackson. You are my heart."

The tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes threatened to spill over, but Jackson blinked them away quickly. It wasn't often he saw this side of Talon, and damn, the man had horrible timing. Still, the words melted his heart and gave him courage to face whatever waited on the other side of that wall.

"No goodbyes. We've got this. You ready?"

Talon stepped back and nodded. He looked exhausted, and his face seemed paler than usual. Jackson prayed the strain of the last few weeks didn't affect Talon's heart. His mate had promised him at least another twenty years, and Jackson intended to hold him to it.

"Not too concerned about security, is he?"

Jackson turned to look at Raven, shaking his head and frowning at the huge hole in the side of the falling down barn. His dad was one cocky bastard. No guards, no locks, nothing to keep anyone from stumbling upon his little secret.

He followed the other men in through the side of the barn and froze as his stomach curled and his gag reflex kicked in. He covered his nose, breathing through his mouth at the rancid smells coming from inside the room.

The smells of dead animals, rotten food, and human waste assaulted him, making his eyes water and his nasal passage burn. How could anyone do this to another human being?

"Keys?" Xander asked.

Jackson didn't have a clue what he was talking about until he stepped further into the barn and saw the steel cages, stacked three

deep against the back wall. Grabbing the single torch from its holder on the wall, he held it high and approached cautiously.

There had to be at least a dozen men crammed into the six tiny cages on top. The cages on the bottom weren't exactly cages, but more like steel boxes. Jackson guessed those held the vampires. Huge padlocks secured each door, ensuring its captives didn't escape.

Rage bubbled up inside of him, blurring his vision, and causing his heart to thunder inside his chest.

"Jackson?"

Hurrying over to one of the smallest cages, Jackson ignored the disgusting mess beneath his boots and reached his fingers through the bars. "Cole? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. I'm so glad you're here. Please, get us out."

"I'm on it." Demos dropped the black backpack he carried to the floor and pulled out two pairs of wicked-looking bolt cutters. He handed one to Raven, and the pair set to work cutting the locks from the cages.

They freed Cole first, and he burst from inside his confinement to wrap his arms tightly around Jackson, nearly choking him in his enthusiasm. "I'm so glad you came."

Jackson stumbled backward, gripping his brother firmly to his chest. "Did you ever doubt me?"

He released his hold and took a step away shaking his head. "Not for a minute, but we need to hurry. It's not long until sunrise, and I'm sure Dad knows you're here by now."

Jackson nodded, keeping a protective hand on the small of his brother's back. Cole may be older, but Jackson had always been bigger—always been his protector.

A soft growl behind them had him whirling around, crouching low and pushing Cole behind him. He relaxed marginally and tilted his head to the side when he realized the sound came from Blaise.

"Blaise? Man, you all right?"

Blinking several times, Blaise shook his head and coughed. “Uh, I don’t think so.”

Immediately concerned, Jackson rose from his defensive stance and took a step forward. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“He’s my mate.”

Jackson closed his eyes and groaned at his brother’s softly whispered words. Though he didn’t begrudge Cole finding his mate, and he even liked Blaise, this wasn’t the time to deal with this crap.

“And mine,” came another soft voice beside him.

Jackson turned to find a small, delicate-looking man covered in dirt, his hair matted and clinging to his bare shoulders. Cole hurried over to the little man, wrapped him securely in his arms, and whispered soothing words into his ear.

Blaise’s head snapped around and his nostrils flared. Another low growl escaped his lips before he clamped them tightly together and dropped his chin to his chest. “This is not fucking happening.”

Rolling his eyes, Jackson reached out and cuffed Blaise in the back of the head. Where was Braxton and his affinity for bashing people over the head when you needed him? “Can we maybe work this out later?”

Blaise glared at him, but nodded. “We need to get them somewhere safe, somewhere protected. I’m going to need them to testify once I gather enough evidence to bring formal charges against Cyrus.”

“We’ll take them back to our coven.” Stavion stepped forward, his arms wrapped around another small man with long black hair. “They will be protected there, and we can help the ones with families find their way home.”

Nodding, Blaise clapped the vampire on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. That would be a huge help.”

“I’m staying,” Cole said defiantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I want to stay with you,” Blaise’s other mate whispered.

Hoping to avoid an argument, Jackson dipped his head curtly. "Fine. Let's move."

Ten minutes later, they gathered everyone outside of the barn to begin the brutal journey back through the woods to the small clearing where they had parked the vehicles.

"You take them in the cars. We have a certain alpha we need to pay a visit." Blaise tried to push Cole toward Varik, but the man was having none of it.

Jackson snorted. Damn, his brother could be a stubborn twerp. "I know the way." He jerked his head for the rest of the men to follow him, as the vampires led the prisoners back into the night.

"Hey! Who the hell is the alpha here?" Xander grumbled as he stomped along behind.

Stopping in his tracks, Jackson bowed deeply and waved a hand for Xander to precede him. "Then lead the way, Oh Great Leader of Freaks."

Talon came up behind him, chuckling, and elbowed him in the ribs. "Stop being a smart-ass and let's go."

Xander shook his head and gave Jackson a light push. "Just don't get us lost, kid."

Just as he turned to lead the way, several loud shrieks, vicious snarling, and frantic voices echoed from the trees and into the night.

Chapter Eighteen

“Run!” Jackson screamed as he took off sprinting for the tree line.

Talon’s heart seized in his chest, and a sharp pain shot down his left arm. Pushing away the pain, he took off after his mate with the rest of the pack trailing behind.

“Stay here,” he heard Blaise yell and assumed the man spoke to his new mates.

Just as he reached the edge of the trees, a black blur darted past him, snarling and barking. Blaise had shifted into his wolf and raced through the snow and underbrush, intent on finding his target. Then a much smaller silver wolf zipped past Talon as well, growling as he raced over the frozen ground.

“Cole!” Blaise’s little mate ran up beside Talon, his lips blue and teeth chattering from the cold.

Talon snagged him around the waist and hoisted him off his feet. “Whoa! You can’t go in there.”

“He’s my mate! They both are!” Kicking and contorting his body, he fought like a wildcat to escape Talon’s hold.

“What’s your name?”

“Willow.”

Turning and dropping the man to his feet, Talon pointed a finger in his face. “It’s too dangerous, Willow. Your mates will be distracted trying to protect you. You need to hide.”

“I can help.”

Talon didn’t have time for this. His own mate waited for him through those trees, and Talon needed to see for himself that Jackson wasn’t hurt. “You can’t. Now, go!” Without waiting to see if the man

would comply, Talon left him in the snow and hurried into the woods, following the sounds of battle.

His breathing came in shallow pants, and his heart beat painfully against his sternum as he stumbled to a stop near the group of captives huddled together behind a tree. He followed their combined gaze to the all-out brawl between animal and beast.

Eight humongous russet wolves, presumably from local pack, were locked in battle with the vampire Enforcers, the pack, Blaise and Cole, and...

“Jackson!”

Talon raced ahead, stripping off his shirt as he ran, prepared to shift and defend his mate if necessary. One of the russet wolves dove through the air, his gigantic paws catching Jackson in the chest and propelling him backward to land in the snow. The momentum of the blow combined with Jackson’s hard kick, propelled the lupine over his head to land twenty feet away.

Jumping to his feet, Jackson shook his head to brush away the snow and jumped back into the fray. Grunts, growls, howls, and moans filled the night as the fight raged on.

Talon didn’t have to wonder why none of his brothers had shifted. It was the same reason he felt reluctant to call upon his leopard. Since none of the vampires were Moonlighters or mates of white shifters, and he assumed none of the captives were either, the powerful magic from his shift would drive them to insanity within minutes. Four large, crazy, and armed vampires did not sound appealing in the least.

One of the Cloud Peak wolves stalked Xander from behind as the alpha circled around another lupine in front of him. Taking a running start, Talon tackled the wolf his alpha had yet to see, wrapping his arms around its chest and rolling with him across the forest floor. By some miracle, Talon landed on top and snapped his fist forward with enough force to shatter the bones of the shifter’s muzzle.

A loud, pain-filled yelp ripped from the beast’s mouth, and his paw kicked out, trying to dislodge Talon from atop his chest. Talon

wouldn't budge. Another blow, this time to the side of the head, and the shifter stopped in his struggle and went motionless beneath him.

Three more russet wolves sprawled limply on their sides with crimson drops splattered around them in the snow. Three others had shifted back to their human forms and knelt before Xander and Stavion with their heads bowed. Talon knew he'd counted eight wolves from the pack when he'd burst into the clearing. Where was the eighth wolf?

Whipping his head one way and then the other, Talon searched the trees for the remaining lupine. Paralyzing dread consumed him when he spotted a shadowy figure stalking up behind his mate in the shadows created by the low-hanging tree branches. He opened his mouth to yell out a warning, but Jackson's next words stopped him.

Without turning, Jackson crossed his arms over his chest, and said, "Hello, Dad."

* * * *

Taking a deep breath, Jackson tried to calm his racing pulse as he looked over his shoulder just in time to see his father step out from behind the trees and walk forward into the moonlight. His pack, his brother, his new allies, and his mate stood behind him, ready to have his back if things with his father turned violent.

He hoped it didn't come to that. His father needed to face justice for what he'd done to those men in the barn, but that didn't mean Jackson wanted him dead. Crazy, unstable, and even cruel, the man was still his father.

Slender fingers wrapped around his wrist and squeezed gently before falling away. "You can do this." Cole stood beside him, stark naked and shuddering in the cold wind. He gave Jackson a weak smile, then stepped back to stand beside an equally naked Blaise.

Talon started forward, but Jackson waved him away.

"Jackson."

The angry quality of his dad's voice sent a shudder through him, same as it had as a child. Still, Jackson held his ground, turning to face the man as he approached. The spicy scent of anger wafted off of his father, accompanied by the stench of body odor and stale whiskey.

Once proud and handsome, Roan Cunningham looked far older than his forty-seven years. Deep lines marred his face, his salt-and-pepper hair had begun to thin on top, and the trim waist Jackson remembered rounded and sagged around his hips, spilling over the waistband of his jeans.

"Dad." Jackson nodded sadly, but didn't make a move to approach the man as he continued forward. "What have you done?"

Roan dropped his hand and shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about." His tone of his voice told another story.

"Your own son, Dad? Was the money really worth it?" Jackson waved a hand behind him at Cole. "What else did Cyrus offer you?"

His dad glared at him, but didn't answer. Jackson hadn't expected him to, anyway. "It's time for you step down. You've hurt this pack long enough." Jackson motioned for the scared men behind the tree to come forward.

Slowly, hesitantly, they moved as a group, shuffling forward as their eyes darted back and forth between Roan and Jackson. Keeping his eyes locked on his father, Jackson spoke to Stavion. "Get them out of here. Take them somewhere safe."

"I am Alpha here. You can't take them!"

"I'm not going to let you hurt them anymore. You're done here."

Stavion gathered the frighten captives and the three surrendering members of Roan's pack. Varik, Raven, and Demos collected the four unconscious wolves that had yet to shift back to their human forms, and they all disappeared into the trees as Jackson's dad snarled and spluttered.

"What would you possibly know about running a pack?" Roan spat at him. "I did what I had to do to protect them. You can't take those men."

“I just did.”

“I need them!”

“To lock in fucking cages and experiment on them?” Jackson’s voice rose with each word until he shouted the last.

“You always were an ungrateful little shit. I wouldn’t expect you to understand about responsibilities. You ran from yours, didn’t you?” His dad snarled at him, his lip curling over his yellow teeth.

“I didn’t run from anything. You shot me, you bastard!”

He heard several gasps from behind him, followed by the collective grumble of agitated voices. Damn, when would he learn to keep his mouth shut?

“Your father’s the one who shot you?” Xander asked, his voice laced with steel.

“Of course I shot him!” Roan turned to point a finger at Xander. “He’s an abomination! He doesn’t deserve to live!” His right hand jerked up and a soft *whoomph* reached Jackson’s ears just before the sharp prick of pain in his neck.

Before anyone could move, an angry, feral cry rent the air. Spinning on his heels, and plucking the dart from his neck, Jackson’s mouth dropped open as a sleek white leopard hissed and spat. His ears lay flat against his head, and his shoulder blades seesawed as he prowled toward Roan.

Jackson expected to go numb, get sleepy, or pass out...something. None of those things happened. Within seconds, however, his prick hardened and pushed against his zipper, his pulse accelerated, and his skin heated to near boiling.

Not again. Not now.

Fighting against the overwhelming lust that swamped his senses, Jackson tried to think around the fog in his brain. He just couldn’t do it. The only thoughts that flickered through his mind were those of Talon’s thick cock pounding into his ass.

His cock strained, leaking from the slit, pre-cum already creating a dark spot on the front of his pants. His balls felt achy as his sac

tightened, and his breath created clouds of smoke where it stuttered from his panting mouth.

Roan yelled in fear as he backpedaled, lifting the dart gun to shoulder height and squeezing the trigger several times in quick succession. The gun clicked, but nothing happened.

Talon reached him in three long, powerful strides, sailing through the night wind and knocking Roan to the ground. He landed on the man's chest, his fangs bared as he yowled and hissed.

Roan stared up at the cat, his eyes rounded and his mouth hanging open in a silent cry. Then his lips began to move, but no sounds escaped him. His head whipped back and forth in the snow, and he reached up to cover his ear, his entire body quaking beneath Talon.

Then he stopped. Just stopped everything. His hands fell limply to his sides, his body stilled, and he stared blankly up at the night sky. His lips still trembled, working to form words, but only a slight hum vibrated in his chest.

Approaching the big cat slowly, Jackson reached out and stroked the top of his mate's head. "He's done, Talon. Come on, babe." His voice shook as he worked to control the consuming desire that coursed through him.

Talon turned and nuzzled into his palm, then stepped over the prone figure on the ground to butt against Jackson until he fell on his ass in the snow. Laughing, he wrapped his arms around his mate's furry neck as Talon leaned over him, licking him from cheek to temple with his rough tongue.

"Eww. Okay, okay, stop it!" He pushed playfully at his mate.

Talon made a grumbling sound in his throat, his eyelids drooped, and he staggered back before dropping to the ground heavily.

"Talon?" All thoughts of lust and passion fled, and Jackson scrambled over to his mate, running his hands over the furry flank. "Talon! Talon, get up!"

He heard footsteps crunching in the snow as his brothers rushed over and dropped to their knees beside him.

“What happened?” Logan demanded.

“I don’t know. He just fucking dropped.” Jackson looked at Logan, the fear and desperation clawing at him. “Help him.”

Logan leaned over his brother, resting his ear against the cat’s chest. His face went slack and rose up, shaking his head. “It’s his heart.”

“What?” Jackson shook Talon’s limp body roughly. “No. Talon, wake up.” The glared over at Logan. “He is not dead!”

“No, but he won’t make it long enough to get him to a hospital.” Logan’s voice cracked and unshed tears glimmered in the moonlight.

“Fuck you. He’s not going to die! What about my blood? Yours saved Keeton.”

Logan shook his head sadly. “It’s not the same thing. If he’d been shot in the heart, it might help. This is different, Jacks.”

“I can help him.” A soft, musical voice spoke from just behind him.

Looking over his shoulder, Jackson frowned at Blaise’s other mate. “How?”

“Willow is part elf,” Cole explained as he knelt beside Jackson and wrapped an arm around his waist. “He’s...special. Let him help.”

Jackson nodded and shifted to the side to make room for Willow. He didn’t know shit about elves, but he’d do anything to help his mate.

Willow crouched down in the snow and began rubbing his hands over Talon’s side, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. A soft, golden glow began to shine from beneath his palms and seemed to seep right into Talon’s skin.

Several minutes passed, and Jackson’s anxiety kicked into high gear. It wasn’t working. Why the fuck wasn’t it working? He could see the freaky voodoo glowing of Willow’s hands. Why didn’t Talon just open his god—

The big cat sucked in a great lungful of air, and his body jerked and shuddered. His limbs lengthened, his fur began to recede, and within seconds he'd shifted completely.

Willow slumped over, and Jackson caught him before he could hit the ground. "I'm fine," Willow whispered. "Just tired."

"I've got him." Blaise lifted Willow into his arms and backed away, staring down at the little man with a mix of awe and trepidation.

"Talon?"

So slowly Jackson wanted to slap him, Talon's eyelids flickered before finally flipping open. He stared up at Jackson blankly for just a moment before a slow grin spread over his face. "Hey, baby."

Jackson wanted to cry. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to punch the asshole in the face for scaring the shit out of him. "Hey," he answered back. "Scared me."

Reaching to cup his cheek, Talon caressed the skin with the pad of his thumb. "Sorry, pup. Wanna know a secret?"

Jackson rolled his eyes, but couldn't keep from smiling. "Sure, tell me a secret."

"You are the best thing that ever happened to me. The only good thing that ever happened to me. He had no right to say those things about you."

Glancing over at his father's still unmoving body, Jackson grimaced. "I don't think he's going to be saying anything about anyone for a while."

"Cut it out, Jacks. I'm trying to have a moment here."

Jackson grinned and leaned over to rub his nose against his mate's. "Spoilsport. Can you get dressed now? I don't like everyone ogling your goodies."

* * * *

Talon pushed into a sitting position as Jackson stood and offered a hand to help him up. Gaining his feet, he gratefully took his clothes from Logan's outstretched hand and dressed quickly, his teeth chattering from the bitter coldness.

"How do you feel?" Logan asked, eyeing him with concern.

"Great. Better than I have in years. What did he do to me?" He looked over to where Blaise still cradled Willow against his chest and smiled.

Willow smiled back at him and nodded. "Your heart was very sick. I healed it."

"You...you healed it?" Talon spluttered.

Willow nodded again. "Yes."

Talon didn't know what to say. "Thank you." It sounded inadequate considering the gift he'd been given, but he didn't know how else to express his gratitude.

Continuing to smile, Willow shrugged, just a small movement of his shoulders. "I like you, and we're family now. I'm glad I could help."

Glancing up at Blaise, Talon had to turn away to hide his smile at the look on the man's face. Oh, the big, bad Hunter was in for a rude awakening.

"Uh, so, which one of you is a Moonlighter?" Blaise asked, looking between Cole and Willow.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cole frowned and cocked his head to the side. "You just saw me as a wolf. I'm silver, not white."

"What's a Moonlighter?" Willow asked quietly.

"I am," Talon answered. "All three of you should be nuttier than a fruitcake right now, unless one of you is a white shifter."

Willow continued to look confused. "I suppose I could be. I've never shifted before."

“Then I guess you’re the winner.” Talon chuckled. Walking over and placing his foot on Roan’s hip, he pushed the man over in the snow to reveal the dart gun on the ground beneath him.

Snatching it up, he turned to glare at his mate. Oh, he was going to paddle the kid’s ass good when they got out of this mess. Talon thought his heart would explode out of his chest as he watched Jackson’s dad reach for that gun. Though proud as hell of the pup, he still shook from fear of what could have happened had it been a real gun.

It had taken him seven years to pull his head out of his ass, and now that he’d claimed Jackson for himself, he wouldn’t lose him. Jackson may be a shifter and able to take care of himself, but that didn’t stop Talon from wanting to protect him.

He was still trying to decide whether to kiss the man he loved or chew his ass out for being reckless when Cole walked up to him and knelt at his feet. Looking between the small man on the ground, his mate, and the rest of his pack, Talon frowned. What the hell just happened?

“Cole, dude, what are you doing?” Jackson placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder, shaking him a little. “The man has a beautiful cock, but I gotta tell you, I kind of have this covered.” He grabbed Talon’s flaccid cock through his jeans for emphasis, pulling a strangled grunt from him.

His brothers snickered in the background, and Talon felt his cheeks heat as he knocked away his mate’s hand. A paddling was definitely in Jackson’s future.

“He is our alpha now. He deserves our respect and submissiveness.” Cole lifted his head to stare up at Talon. “Welcome to the pack. I’m sure you will be a great leader.”

“Whoa! Hold the fuck up! I am not an alpha, and I already have a home back in Georgia.” He waved his hands around as panic reared its ugly head. Hell, he could barely take care of himself. What did he know about running a pack? “Give it to someone else.”

Blaise snorted as he set Willow on his feet and marched over to him. "This isn't a democracy, Talon. The alpha isn't elected by majority vote. You challenged Roan, and you won." He nodded toward the man on the ground who'd begun to rock back and forth in the snow. "Congratulations."

"No way. Huh-uh. Not going to happen." Talon took several jerky steps back, almost tripping over Cole where he still knelt on the ground.

"Sorry, man." Blaise clapped him on the shoulder. "You're the alpha now."

"I thought a challenge was to the death?"

"No." Blaise shook his head solemnly. "It usually happens that way because neither is willing to surrender. All it really takes is for one to concede defeat and show an act of submission."

Talon dropped to his knees, turning his head to the side to bare his neck. He had never submitted to anyone, and it made something burn in his belly. He'd much rather appear weak than be in charge of the Cloud Peak Pack, though.

Frowning down at him, Blaise growled softly. "You son of a bitch."

"I relinquish my status as alpha and defer to your leadership."

"You son of a bitch," Blaise repeated.

A loud squeal rent the air, and Talon jerked his head around just as the little elf came flying across the snow and launched himself into Blaise's arms again. "My mate is the alpha."

Blaise looked like he would swallow his tongue. He gently pried the man from him and sat him on his feet. "Uh, hi. Willow, right?"

"Willow," the little man said happily as he nodded. Then he turned to Cole, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "And this is your other mate, Cole Cunningham."

Talon rose to his feet and wrapped an arm around Jackson as they watched the three tiptoe around each other. Talon kind of felt sorry for Blaise, but mostly he just found the whole thing hilarious. Blaise

had been quick to remind them on several occasions that he wasn't gay. Now, he had two very male mates. Priceless.

The guy would be better off if he'd just accept his mating and get on with it. Bumping Jackson's hip with his own, Talon grinned inwardly. He definitely knew from experience.

"So, what now?"

Blaise snapped his attention to Jackson, looking very thankful for the reprieve. "I have to take your dad to The Council. I also need to question the prisoners and gather as much information as I can before I even attempt to bring formal charges against one of the elders." He took a deep breath and turned his gaze to Xander. "Would you be willing to stay and help until we can get things settled and running smoothly?"

Xander eyed each member of the pack before he spoke. "We'll have a meeting and discuss it. I think we can help out for a bit, though."

Blaise dipped his head in thanks. Then he turned and growled at Talon again. "I really hate you."

Talon just snorted and pulled his mate closer. He had everything he needed, right in the palm of his hands.

Chapter Nineteen

The trip home gave Jackson plenty of time to think over the events of the last several weeks. A tiny part of him ached for the loss of his father, but in reality, the man had been dead to him for years. He'd miss his brother, though. Cole had promised to visit, but Jackson knew his brother would have his hands full with his new alpha mate.

He should probably feel sorry for the self-professed straight man, but Keeton had promised to bring him over to the dark side. Well, it looked like fate had stepped in and taken the matter out of their hands. If anyone could bring Blaise around, it would be Cole.

Though he didn't know Willow well, he had an idea the little man would be just the glue to hold them all together. Smiling at the thought, he reached over and wound his fingers through Talon's. So much had happened, and he'd barely had time to just enjoy being with his mate.

It had taken only three days for them to confiscate the blood samples, the vials of serum, and question all the captives. Blaise had called in the Snake River Coven to look after his new pack while he delivered the evidence and Jackson's loopy father to The Council.

Cyrus Redway currently had a cell all to himself while he awaited trial for various crimes against the preternatural population. Jackson didn't really understand the laws, but he did know that the charges would be quite different than kidnapping or manslaughter.

While Cyrus remained securely inside his prison, Blaise still felt concerned for the safety of the pack. He had made them promise to remain vigilant and had even gone as far to call in an Enforcer to stay

with them until after the trial. Flynn Murphy was set to arrive the following Saturday.

Logan's Jeep bumped along the gravel drive, and Jackson sighed. It felt good to be home. He may have lived the first fourteen years of his life in the Cloud Peak Pack, but this is where he'd grown up, became a man, found his mate, and had a family. This was home and where he belonged.

"I can't believe Boston just left Malakai like that," Keeton said sadly.

"He didn't even say goodbye," Jackson added.

Talon squeezed his hand, gaining his attention. "Don't worry. Boston just has some issues he needs to work through."

"He won't be able to stay away for long," Logan said as he pulled to a stop in front of the house. "It's not something you choose, but something that chooses you. He doesn't really have a say in the matter."

Keeton giggled as he opened his door. "Are you saying you don't enjoy being mated to me?"

Logan laughed and winked at his mate. "Get out of here, goofball. You have a wedding to plan, remember?"

"Oh!" Keeton stood beside the Jeep, flapping his arms around. "It's only three weeks until Christmas, and then we have the New Year's party. Valentine's Day is in February, and I don't even know when I'm going to find time to plan a March wedding."

Jackson snorted and shook his head. He didn't think it was exactly a life-altering dilemma, but then, he wasn't getting married.

As if reading his mind, Talon groaned and turned to look at him. "Please tell me you don't want to get married."

Chuckling, Jackson shook his head once. "Not on your life."

"Thank God." Talon sighed and opened the door to climb down from his seat. "So, are you going to take Blaise up on the offer?"

"I'm thinking about it." Jackson slid out of the Jeep and grabbed his bags from the back. "He said I wouldn't have to move, and I could

do all the work from here. I'd have to get a new computer and set up a work station, though."

He spoke lightly, calmly, but inside he practically bounced with excitement. He still couldn't believe Blaise had offered him a job as the Security Administrator for The Council. Not only would he work on securing The Council database and managing their records, but he'd also be designing interlinks to connect the different packs, covens, colonies, and whatever else via the web. He already had big ideas on how to modify the existing registry as well as the registration process itself.

"What do you think?" He wouldn't let on to it, but Talon's opinion meant everything to him.

Talon didn't speak until they made up the stairs and into their room. Oh, Jackson liked the sound of that. *Their room*. He made a mental note to move all of his things to Talon's room after a nice long nap.

His mate dropped his bag just inside their door, stripped out of his clothes, and went over to plop down on the bed. Lifting up on his elbows, he smiled widely. "I think it's a great idea. It's a fantastic job. You get to do what you love." He crooked his finger for Jackson to come closer.

Jackson disrobed as well and moved to stand between his lover's spread thighs. Talon tugged at his hip until Jackson fell over him.

Laughing like a loon as he straddled Talon's hips, Jackson bent until their noses were almost touching. Talon's hand cupped the back of his head and pulled him forward, sealing their mouths together in a heated kiss.

"And, I won't have to worry about you getting hurt," he whispered against Jackson's parted lips.

Jackson grinned and licked at his lover's mouth. "You like having me around, huh?"

Talon flipped them so fast it left his head spinning. His mate hovered over him, pinning his shoulders to the bed. “Yeah, pup. I like having you around.”

“I’m hungry.”

* * * *

“Way to kill the mood, Jacks.” Talon laughed and pushed off of his mate. Good grief, the kid would eat them out of house and home. He started to roll from the bed. “Come on, and let’s ge—”

Jackson tackled him to the mattress, covering his body, and shoving his tongue down Talon’s throat. Talon hesitated for a heartbeat before fisting his hands in Jackson’s hair and attacking the younger man’s mouth like a starving man. They had important things to discuss, but he was only human—kind of—and his mate proved too tempting to resist.

Breaking the kiss, Jackson slid his lips down Talon’s throat, rocking against him and grinding their renewed erections together. “Didn’t say what I was hungry for. Need you now, Talon. Can’t wait anymore. It’s gotta be now.”

Oh, yeah, Talon liked *now*. Patience not being one of his virtues, he was definitely an instant gratification kind of guy. “Get the lube.”

Jackson dove across the bed and ripped open the drawer with such eagerness it flew out of the nightstand, its contents spilling to the carpet. Wiggling his delicious ass, Jackson inched over the edge of the bed, growling in frustration.

Talon almost laughed. Almost, but he figured it wouldn’t earn him any kudos with his lover. The sight of those perfect round globes wiggling invitingly gave him some ideas though. Moving across the mattress quickly, he parted Jackson’s cheeks and zeroed in on his tight little pucker. Without wasting time on preliminaries, he dove in, licking and sucking, pushing his tongue against the tight muscles.

Jackson groaned, pushing back into Talon's mouth and humping his hips against the bed. Talon pushed a finger inside the satin heat beside his tongue, sawing it in and out, stretching his lover as quickly as he could without hurting him. Damn, he needed inside.

Once he had three fingers pumping into Jackson's hole with ease, he moved away and slapped his mate's ass. "Get up here and ride my cock, baby."

Jackson growled, the sound deep and primal and sexy as sin. Talon moved to sit on the edge of the mattress, spreading his thighs wide and stroking his weeping prick. Once on his feet, Jackson flipped the cap on the lube and poured a generous amount into his palm before taking over Talon's ministrations and coating his cock with the slick.

Without a word, he turned, straddled Talon's lap, pressing his back against Talon's chest. Talon gripped his cock by the base, lining it up with Jackson's entrance, and held perfectly still. "Climb on, baby."

Lowering himself, Jackson took him in slowly, inch by torturous inch. "Oh, damn, you feel fucking good." He looped an arm over his head and around Talon's neck. "Don't know how long I can last, babe."

"Just take what you need, baby." Talon nipped at the damp skin on his lover's throat. "I've got you."

Once fully seated, Jackson paused to turn his head and claim Talon's mouth in a kiss that left his balls burning with the desire to come. Grasping at his mate's hips, Talon lifted him, moaning at the wonderful friction dragging along his throbbing shaft. "Fuck me, Jacks."

Grinning against his lips, Jackson tightened his inner muscles, clamping down on Talon's cock. "With pleasure." Leaning forward and bracing his hands on Talon's knees, Jackson planted his feet on the floor and began jackhammering his hips up and down on Talon's slick rod.

Still grabbing at his mate's hips, Talon held on for dear life. Holy shit, he'd never felt anything like it. He just hoped he could hold out until Jackson found his own release. Luckily, it only took a few more strokes before Jackson began to pant and whimper, his movements becoming wild and erratic. "Now, Talon."

"Hell yes." Talon pulled his lover back against his chest, fell back to the mattress, planted his feet, and began thrusting up into his mate in quick, hard jabs. Keeping a bruising grip around his waist, his other hand wrapped around Jackson's bouncing dick and stroked him hard and fast.

"Come for me, Jacks. Strangle my cock with this sexy ass." He rammed into his mate harder, his brain going fuzzy, and speech becoming more difficult. "God, I love this ass. My sexy baby."

"Claim me, Talon. Please, claim me."

He'd waited so long for this. Talon needed the bond between them, the closeness that came from claiming his mate. He licked a long, wet path along the side of Jackson's neck before sealing his lips over the jumping vein and sucking hard.

"Mine," he whispered, then bit into his mate's neck, his canines pushing effortlessly through the supple flesh. Groaning at the sweetest taste to ever pass through his lips, he couldn't even remember why he'd waited so long to do this.

Jackson stiffened, yelling out Talon's name as he bathed his chest and stomach in thick ropes of pearly seed. Removing his teeth from Jackson's neck, Talon wrapped both arms around his mate as he pumped through his climax, murmuring his lover's name again and again.

* * * *

Talon collapsed back onto the bed, his arms spread wide, and Jackson rolled off him slowly. They both hissed as Talon's flagging erection slipped from Jackson's ass with a wet squelch.

“Love you,” Jackson panted from where he lay beside Talon.

“Yeah. Me, too. You.” Talon waved his hand around halfheartedly. “You know.”

Jackson just laughed. It seemed the connection between Talon’s brain and tongue had shorted out.

Nuzzling his nose against Talon’s throat, he inhaled the warm, sandalwood scent, moaning with renewed need as his canines elongated. Exhausted, but he had one thing left to do. One thing he’d been waiting on for seven years.

“Mine,” Jackson murmured softly against the damp skin before biting into the warm flesh, claiming his mate, and bonding them forever.

Talon’s sweet blood filled his mouth, and Jackson sighed in contentment. So many years wasted, but it had been well worth it. Talon was his.

His cock twitched, swelling and filling with renewed interest. He knew they needed to talk. He knew Talon had to be exhausted. He didn’t care.

Pulling his canines from his lover’s neck, he licked over the bite marks as his hand skimmed down his mate’s stomach to grasp and fondle Talon’s limp prick. With a little persuasion, he hoped to wake up his new favorite toy and create his own whispers in the night.

Talon arched his hips into Jackson’s hand and groaned loudly.

Okay, maybe something a bit more vocal than whispers.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We are talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, she parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing your happy-ever-after with both hands. She also believes that a great cup of coffee can cure anything.

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