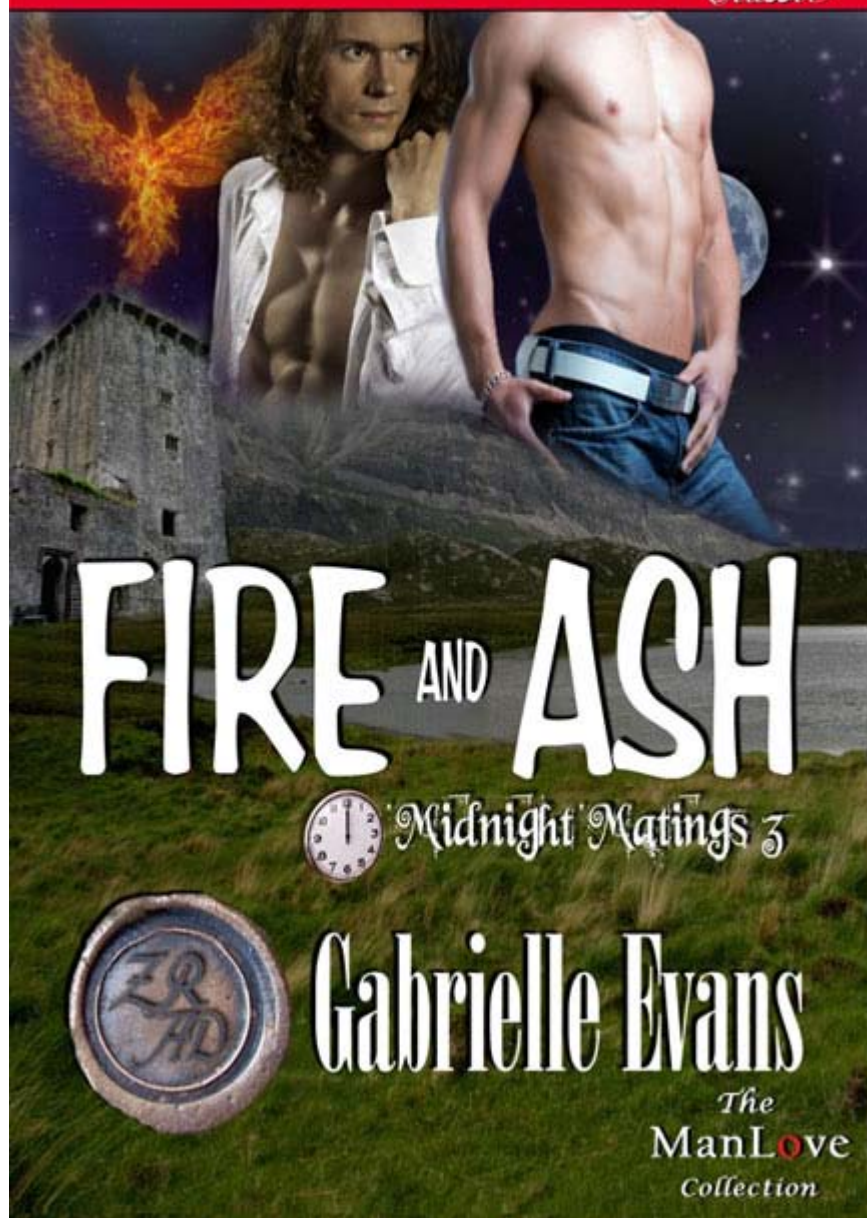


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Midnight Matings 3

Fire and Ash

The paranormal world is in chaos. The elders are tired of their younger people playing the field, causing trouble, and fighting with each other. Everyone who attends the UPAC Conference now has twenty-four hours to claim a mate of a different species. If they don't, they will never have a mate. The spell is cast. There is no escaping the Midnight Matings.

Ten minutes after setting eyes on the sexy little phoenix shifter, Zaiden finds himself accidentally mated to the man. He doesn't know how it happened. The last thing he remembers, they'd been trying to escape.

Asher isn't exactly thrilled about their mating either, but he doesn't have a choice. Giving up his life and everything he owns in Mexico, he commits himself to Zaiden and their new relationship. Luckily, he actually kind of likes the guy. Unfortunately, someone else does, too. Someone who's willing to do anything to remove Asher from the picture.

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

Length: 40,561 words

FIRE AND ASH

Midnight Matings 3

Gabrielle Evans

**EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE**



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK
IMPRINT: Erotic Romance ManLove

FIRE AND ASH
Copyright © 2011 by Gabrielle Evans
E-book ISBN: 1-61034-538-X

First E-book Publication: May 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston
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DEDICATION

To the amazing and talented Joyee Flynn: Thank you for listening to me whine, pout, and complain, knowing when to push and when to back off, but most of all for believing in me. Sometimes I don't know what I would do without you.

FIRE AND ASH

Midnight Matings 3

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

“Welcome. I am Elder Burke.”

Asher leaned back against the wall and stared down into his glass. He wished the elder would just get on with it so he could tip back a few and peruse the crowd for a little action.

“I want to thank you all for being here tonight. This is a momentous occasion for us. It’s been twenty-five years since the Great War between all paranormals ended, taking a large portion of our population from us.”

Yeah, that kind of sucked. Nice of the elder to bring it up.

“I would like you all to drink a toast with me in memory of those we lost.” The elder held up his champagne glass. “May we never forget them.”

Asher tipped back his glass, draining it one swallow and started to push away from the wall. Now that they’d gotten that out of the way, there was a cute little blond that Asher very much wanted to get better acquainted with.

“As I have said, this is a momentous occasion for us all. In the twenty-five years since the Great War ended, the United Paranormal Alliance of Cooperation has watched and waited. We will wait no more.”

Asher rolled his eyes and groaned as he turned around to refocus his attention on the dais where the elders stood.

“The fighting between species must stop.” Another elder stepped up beside the first as he spoke. “We are known to the humans and they have learned to accept us in their midst. However, their tolerance will only last so long. The constant fighting among the paranormal communities has come under scrutiny. We no longer have the luxury of watching you solve your own disagreements.”

Asher stopped listening after that. He didn’t fight with anyone, so the man was obviously talking to someone else. Scanning the room for the blond he’d misplaced, he jerked his head up when several gasps and shouts went up around the room. What was everyone’s problem?

“Because of your continued squabbling between races, you may not claim a mate of the same race. You must claim a mate outside of your own species.” The elder looked like he was enjoying this a little too much.

“If you fail to bring a mate before this council by the stroke of midnight tomorrow night, you will be hunted down and executed as a rogue paranormal.”

Asher snorted. They were going to have a hell of a time enforcing this new ordinance. How did they expect to force everyone to mate outside of their species? It was ludicrous.

“To insure that you will find a mate, something special has been added to the potion that each of you drank,” the elder continued. “It will insure that the need to mate outweighs your need to fight. It is a particular additive that induces the mating heat in each of you. You will not be able to deny the need to mate.”

Asher stared down into his champagne flute and grimaced. *Motherfucker!* Man, his roommate, Colton, was going to be pissed. The man hated coming to these things, but Asher always dragged him along. *Oops.* Not like he knew the elders were going to shanghai all of them.

Still, there was probably a way around it. There was always some kind of exit clause.

“And just in case you think to try and break this spell,” Elder Burke said, “we have added a special clause.”

Aha! Asher knew it. The elder had his full attention now as he waited eagerly to find out how he was going to get out of this mess.

“Anyone that attempts to negate the covenants of this spell will instantly be cursed as befitting their race. Vampires will no longer be able to drink blood. Shifters will no longer be able to shift. Magic user will have no magic, and so on. I’m sure you get my point.”

Yeah, Asher got the point, and he wanted to punch the old bag right in his smirking face. Who the fuck did the elders think they were? They couldn’t do this to them!

“Now, children, good luck. We expect to see each of you in twenty-four hours. May your hunt be successful.”

The elder barely got the last sentence out of his mouth when the room erupted into total chaos, the noise level reaching deafening volumes within seconds as people yelled, snarled, hissed, growled, and roared. Asher pressed himself against the wall, trying to become invisible as the elders filed through the door beside him.

Some huge blond guy came sprinting directly at him, and Asher closed his eyes and gulped. He didn’t know exactly what kind of shifter the man was, but he smelled like a big cat, and cats had some wickedly sharp teeth.

“What the fuck is this shit? Why include me? I don’t fight with *anyone!*”

Asher’s eyes snapped open as he watched the shifter grab one of the elders by his elbow and snarl in his face. Oh, this couldn’t be good.

Before he could hear the elders reply, strong fingers wrapped around his forearm and spun him around. *Great, a fucking vampire.* Just what he needed. Smirking up at the guy, Asher felt the fire flow

through him, heating his skin until half-inch orange flames leapt merrily along his arm.

The vampire hissed, jerking his hand away and glaring. Before he could retaliate, some guy sprinted past them, brushing against Asher and sending him tumbling backward to land on his ass.

“Fuck this,” Asher grumbled as he climbed to his feet. He didn’t want a mate, and he damn sure didn’t want to be saddled with someone he’d known for like five freakin’ minutes. They could hunt him down if they wanted, but good luck catching him. Half the damn population thought he was nuts already. So what if he went a little crazier because he didn’t claim a mate?

Dipping, ducking, spinning, and dodging attacks and advances, he made his way toward the double doors on the other side of the ballroom. He was getting the fuck out before the entire place imploded upon itself.

He ducked again as some guy came flying through the air and sailed over his head. Whipping around to see who had thrown the human cannonball, Asher’s eyes landed on the most gorgeous man he’d ever seen. Well, what he *could* see of him anyway. Three men surrounded the guy, pawing at him from all directions.

Long golden hair flew around the stranger’s lean face, and his green eyes flashed with a ferocious light as he sent another of his would-be suitors hurling across the ballroom. Damn, he packed a hell of a punch.

Shaking his head, Asher continued toward the doors. Yeah, the guy was hot, but he could obviously take care of himself. Before he could escape, a heavily muscled arm lifted him off of his feet, and Asher found himself tossed over some dude’s massive shoulder.

“You’re as good as any,” the man growled.

“Yeah, not happening, buddy.” Asher took a deep breath, reaching deep to find his fire, stoking and building it until his entire upper body burst into orange flames.

The man carrying him screamed and dropped Asher to the floor where he landed heavily on his already sore ass. Groaning as he rubbed his abused backside, Asher ran his other hand over his now nude torso. Damn, he'd really liked that shirt, too. Now, it was nothing more than a few smoldering ashes.

Shaking his head, Asher started to push to his feet when a pale hand with long fingers reached out to help him. Following the hand up, Asher let his eyes roam over the corded muscles in the man's arm before moving on to the broad expanse of his chest, then following the line up the column of his throat. His eyes rounded, and his heart jumped inside his chest, beating frantically against his sternum.

Much taller and much sexier up close, the man he'd seen moments before had apparently dispatched his crowd of admirers. Taking his hand cautiously, Asher allowed the man to help him to his feet, then took several hasty steps in retreat.

"Don't worry," the guy said. "I'm not going to try to mate you."

Well, thank fuck for small miracles. "Can you believe this shit?" Asher stretched his arms out to encompass the chaos surrounding them.

"Look at the women." Mr. Hotness nodded toward a group of giggling girls huddled together in the middle of the ballroom. "They're eating this up."

Sure enough, Asher could see them pointing and whispering, hand-picking which man to lure into their web. He shook his head and sighed. "I didn't sign up for this."

"Yeah, well, I'm not exactly dancing a jig about it either." He looked over Asher's shoulder as his eyes narrowed. "The elders have returned."

Asher spun around and shook his head again. "I'm leaving."

"Lead the way."

* * * *

Zaiden bit the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning as his eyes locked on the tight little ass he followed. The man's bare back glistened with a fine sheen of sweat, the muscles bunching and flexing as he swung his arms. It had taken Zaiden a full minute to realize the person heaped on the floor had been a man. That was one hot little birdy.

"So, you're a phoenix, right? I've heard of your kind, but I've never met one."

"Yeah, we're rare, and most of us went into hiding when the Great War started." He looked over his shoulder and smiled. "I'm Asher by the way, Asher Deacon."

"Zaiden Reed."

Asher led the way down a long stone hallway, presumably heading toward the exit. Hell, the castle was so huge, and even though this wasn't his first gathering, Zaiden still got lost more times than not.

The front door came into view as they rounded the corner, and two guards stepped forward as they approached. "You've mated?"

"Uh, sure," Asher said with a bright smile.

"I need to see your mating mark."

"Uh, it's on my ass," Asher countered, still smiling.

"Then drop your pants."

"That's my mate you're talking to," Zaiden sneered as he stepped forward and pushed Asher behind him. If they were going to play this game, he might as well go all out.

"Rules are rules." The guard shrugged. "I need to see a mating mark."

Before Zaiden could speak again, a ball of fire flew past him and hit the first guard in the chest, crumpling him to the floor. The other guard advanced, and Zaiden swung out, connecting solidly with his jaw and sending the man to the ground beside his partner.

Whirling around, he poked a finger in Asher's chest. "Warn a guy next time, would ya?"

Asher just shrugged and winked before pushing past him and running toward the door. The next thing, Zaiden knew, the little man was flung backward, rolling ass over head until he sprawled at Zaiden's feet.

"Well, fuck me sideways," Asher groaned as he sat up. "A damn barrier enchantment."

"So, we have to have the mating seal before we can pass through it." Zaiden nodded. He didn't like it, but it made sense. The elders were smart.

"So, now what?"

Zaiden shook his head as he helped Asher to his feet. "You've got me." A tingle started where their hands met, racing up his arm, and spreading throughout his body. "I can feel the mating heat starting, though."

Asher reached down to readjust the impressive bulge behind his zipper and groaned. "Yeah, same here."

"So, as you said—what now?"

Asher looked him up and down as he smirked. "Nice shoes. Wanna fuck?"

Zaiden echoed Asher's earlier groan as he grabbed the man around the wrist and practically dragged him down the hall and toward his room in the wing the elders had designated for the fae.

Asher chuckled breathlessly as he jogged along behind Zaiden. "Do you even know where you're going?"

Zaiden came to a sudden stop as he reached a four-way intersection. He looked right, then left, then right again. He didn't have a clue which way to go. His cock throbbed inside his jeans, pressing against his zipper and begging for a little playtime with the delectable morsel still clutched in his hand.

Crap! He didn't recognize anything, didn't know how many turns they'd made on the way toward the front doors. "Point the way," he growled. His skin felt itchy and heated, beads of sweat broke out

across his forehead, and lightning bolts of pure lust slammed into him with every breath he took.

“Do I look like a fucking bloodhound to you?” Asher scoffed, arching an eyebrow and jerking his hand away.

“I could care less if you were a purple reindeer. I intend to have you naked and screaming my name in about three minutes. If you want to do that in the middle of this hallway, that’s fine by me.” Zaiden’s voice flowed harsh and feral. The mating heat overwhelmed him, and his mind swirled with a lusty haze he couldn’t shake off.

Saliva pooled in his mouth as he watched Asher’s lithe body tremble before him. Long black hair with pure white streaks, pale creamy skin, and the most gorgeous amber eyes Zaiden had ever seen—Asher was his every fantasy come to life.

Jerking on Asher’s wrist, Zaiden hauled the man against him, his small body fitting perfectly against Zaiden’s chest. Leaning down to whisper in Asher’s ear, Zaiden brushed his lips across the delicate shell. “So, what’s it going to be, little birdy?”

Asher groaned, gyrating his hips and grinding his erection against Zaiden’s thigh. “Not so little,” he teased.

Everything inside Zaiden screamed for him to claim the phoenix, force him to submit, and take him as his own. The need clawed and scraped, burning in his belly and spreading out to his entire body.

Asher tugged on Zaiden’s shirt, walking backward until he leaned against the stone wall. Zaiden covered his body, pressing Asher firmly against the wall as he trailed his lips up the smooth column of his throat.

Asher arched against him, dropping his head to the side to give Zaiden more room to play. His small hands fumbled with the button on Zaiden’s fly, yanking and tugging until it popped open. The zipper followed quickly, and long fingers wrapped around Zaiden’s leaking cock, pulling him free on his confinement.

Groaning loudly, he thrust into Asher’s loose grip. “Harder,” he panted.

Asher's grip tightened, and his hand began to move, stroking Zaiden in long, fast strokes. Doing a little fumbling of his own, Zaiden continued his assault on the supple skin along Asher's shoulders as he worked to divest the man of his clothing.

Getting the buttons undone, he pushed the denim down Asher's lean hips, until his thick cock sprang free, jumping up to meet Zaiden's waiting palm. "Damn, you're short," he mumbled against Asher's jaw.

Grabbing his lover's cute little bubble butt, Zaiden squeezed, lifting Asher off his feet and pinning him against the wall. They both groaned as Asher wrapped his hand around their heated pricks, stroking them together as he humped against Zaiden's groin.

"Fuck. Close," Asher panted, letting his head fall back against the cool stones. He jerked them faster, arching his back as his hips rocked and swirled.

Zaiden closed his eyes, his breathing becoming shallow as his balls drew close to his body, and electricity raced along his spine. Close, so close. He needed more. Just a little something more to push him over the edge.

His eyes flew open when Asher's free hand tangled in his hair, yanking him forward until their mouths collided in a demanding kiss. Zaiden gasped in surprise as new sensations zinged through his body. Asher took full advantage of his shock, thrusting his tongue between Zaiden's lips and laying siege the warm depths of his mouth.

Oh, hell, he'd never felt anything like it before. Asher's tongue tangled with his, twisting, twining, and demanding a response. Lost in his pleasure, Zaiden dueled back, swirling his tongue around Asher's before sucking the man's bottom lip into his mouth and nipping at it.

Asher cried out, the sound muffled against Zaiden's mouth, and never-ending ropes of hot, sticky semen erupted from Asher's slit, coating his hand and Zaiden's shirt.

A thin, silver smoke floated from Asher's mouth, bathing Zaiden's face as he breathed in the deliciously sweet smell. He didn't

know what it meant, where it came from, or why it excited him. He only knew he wanted more.

Claiming Asher's lips again, Zaiden licked inside his mouth as his hips jerked, and his orgasm rocketed through him. His muscles tensed, and he shuddered as his cock pulsed inside Asher's hold, and creamy cum erupted from the engorged head of his shaft to bathe the space between them.

Finally sated, the burn began to lessen, and Zaiden's mind cleared as he braced himself against the wall and slowly lowered his lover to his feet. "Fuck," he breathed, resting his brow against the cold wall and grinding his teeth together.

"We just did. Kind of," Asher quipped as he tucked his flaccid dick back inside his jeans and grinned. "Or were you referring to us mating?"

"Yep," Zaiden mumbled as he pushed away from the wall and began to put himself to rights. "That's the one."

Chapter Two

“Did you do that on purpose?”

Asher finished zipping his pants and looked up to see one seriously pissed off fae. “What are you?” He tilted his head to the side as he inspected his new mate. Slightly pointed ears, shining emerald green eyes, pale, flawless skin—Zaiden was stunning.

“Did you just intentionally ignore me?” Zaiden took a threatening step forward, his hands fisting at his sides as he snarled down at Asher.

Asher rolled his eyes. He’d make charcoal out of the guy in three seconds flat. Zaiden’s bark didn’t scare him one damn bit. “I would like to know exactly who I just mated.” He arched a brow, crossing his arms over his chest, and waited.

“Sprite.” Zaiden bit off the word, practically spitting it at him.

Asher’s eyes widened, and his mouth fell open in a rather undignified display of shock. “Fan-fucking-tabulous. I totally just tongue-raped your virgin mouth.” His brow wrinkled, and he glared at Zaiden. “Way to make me feel like an asshole. You should be ashamed of yourself.” Then he stuck his nose in the air and turned his back on the man.

He didn’t know much about any of the faes, but he did know that sprites mated through a chemical exchange in their saliva. They never played tonsil hockey until they chose a mate, and it seemed Asher had just been awarded that honor. Still, if he’d known, he wouldn’t have just attacked Zaiden like that. Now he felt bad, and it was all the damn sprite’s fault.

Then Zaiden smacked him in the back of the head. Asher spun around, his mouth hanging open again. "What the hell was that for?"

"Would you get over yourself for five minutes so we can figure out what to do now?" Zaiden crossed his arms over his muscled chest and glared. "Yeah, it was my first kiss, but I liked it. Stop being such a drama queen."

Asher preened at the compliment, puckering his lips and puffing his chest out. "Would you like another one?"

Zaiden cuffed him in the back of the head again. "Focus."

Rubbing his head, Asher glared. "Are you always this violent?"

"Asher!"

"Okay, okay." He held his hands up in surrender. "Well, we can't undo it, so I guess we make the best of it."

"Wait." Zaiden started pacing the hallway, staring down at his feet as he waved his hands around wildly. "We mated. We get the seal and get out of this damn castle." He stopped and looked down at Asher with a mischievous smile. "After we get the seal, we're golden. You go back to your life, and I'll go back to mine. Everyone's happy."

Asher's lips spread into a wide grin as well. "I like the way you think, Zaiden Reed." He held his hand out and bowed slightly. "Let's get hitched."

Zaiden snorted, ignored his hand, and turned to walk down the hallway in the direction they'd come from. Asher shook his head and stuck his tongue out at Zaiden's back. Hell, they were essentially saying, "I do." Couldn't a man offer up a little romance to his betrothed?

"Move your ass, Asher!"

Apparently not.

"Hey, wait up!" Asher jogged up to his mate's side. "Can anyone else claim us before we get the seal?"

Zaiden's steps stuttered, but he kept walking. "Not sure, but we should get our name in that book fast."

Asher dipped his head in agreement, but otherwise didn't comment. Somehow, he didn't think it would be that easy.

Entering the doors of the ballroom, he immediately realized just how correct he'd been in his assumption. He hadn't taken more than two steps before someone tackled him from the side, sending them both sliding across the floor. The guy bared his teeth, snarling and hissing as he pinned Asher to the floor.

Before Asher could shake off the surprise, Zaiden appeared over them, lifting the redhead to his feet and tossing him aside like a ragdoll. "Guess that answers our question," he mumbled as he reached down to help Asher up from the floor. It seemed he'd been spending a lot of time there since the elders' announcement.

Instead of standing to his feet, Asher grabbed Zaiden's hand and yanked him to the floor as a petite blonde woman threw herself at his back. Zaiden landed heavily beside him, and the shifter went sailing over their heads to hit the ground and roll before jumping to her feet and scanning the room for her next victim.

"Okay, new plan." Zaiden stood quickly and grabbed Asher, hauling him over his shoulder. "You watch the back. I'll get the front."

Though he didn't exactly care to be carted around like a sack of potatoes, Asher understood the need. "Hurry."

Zaiden sprinted across the room, spinning and sidestepping when someone came too close. Asher held a small ball of flickering flames in his hand, daring anyone to try and attack Zaiden's back.

He breathed a silent sigh of relief when Zaiden bounded up the stairs to the platform and lowered Asher to his feet. Extinguishing his fire, he turned with his mate to face the elders. "Asher Deacon," he said.

"Zaiden Reed."

"And you've mated?" one of the elders asked.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Asher just nodded in response.

"Yes, we've mated, sir," Zaiden said respectfully.

The elder smiled and nodded in return as he bent and etched their names into the record book before him.

Asher heard Zaiden hiss beside him. As he turned to ask what had happened, white-hot pain burned the inside of his thigh. That mating seal was a bitch and a half. Bouncing from foot to foot, he clamped his lips together and tried not to cry out as his mating mark branded its way onto his skin.

“Are we done?” Zaiden asked in a shaky voice.

The elder smiled again as he handed over an envelope with the UPAC seal on it. “These are your mating instructions. It is of the upmost importance that you read them.”

“Uh, right.” Asher took the envelope and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. “Well, yeah, this sucked, but at least it wasn’t boring.” He gave a little wave and leapt off the stage with Zaiden right behind him.

* * * *

“I need to see your mating marks,” the guard announced as they lugged their bags toward the front door. He didn’t approach them this time and looked a little wary. Zaiden had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

Asher huffed and dropped his bag, reaching for the buttons on his jeans.

“It’s really on your ass?” Zaiden did laugh this time.

“Inside of my thigh, and shut up,” Asher grumbled.

Zaiden placed a hand on his mate’s shoulder as he chuckled. “Let me.” He stepped forward and spun around, tugging his shirt off to show the guard his mating mark just between his shoulder blades.

He had no idea what the mark looked like, but apparently it appeased the guard because he grunted his acceptance and stepped away. Pulling his shirt back over his head, Zaiden lifted his bag off

the floor and jerked his head from Asher toward the door. “After you, my little birdy.”

Asher rolled his eyes as he hoisted his bag over his shoulder and led the way through the doors. “You really have to stop calling me that.”

“Oh, don’t get your feathers all ruffled.”

“Ugh! You are impossible.” Asher bitched and moaned the entire way down the steps and out to the waiting UPAC vehicles.

“Why is the United Paranormal Alliance of Cooperation based in Scotland?” Zaiden asked as he slipped into the backseat beside Asher.

“Really? After everything that happened last night, that’s your big question?”

Zaiden shrugged. “Just trying to make conversation. So, where do you live?”

Asher slumped down in his seat and closed his eyes. “Isla Blanca, Mexico. You?”

“Just outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee.”

Asher’s eyes fluttered open, and he sat up a little straighter. “Should we exchange numbers or something?”

Zaiden nodded slowly. “Yeah, might be a good idea.” He pulled his cell phone out and opened up the contact application before passing it to Asher. “Just program your number in there.”

Asher did as asked before pulling out his own cell phone and passing it to Zaiden with instructions to do the same. Once finished, they settled back in their seats and stared out their windows in silence.

Arriving at the airport, they unloaded their luggage and made their way inside the sliding glass doors. “I’m this way,” Asher said, pointing in the opposite direction of Zaiden’s check-in counter. He stuck his hand out and waited for Zaiden to grasp it. “Well, it’s been...yeah. Maybe I’ll see you at the next gathering.”

Zaiden released his mate’s hand and nodded. He didn’t know the guy, honestly had nothing invested in their mating. So why did the thought of not seeing the little phoenix again make his gut tighten?

Pushing away the irrational feeling, Zaiden stepped away and grinned. “Take care, little birdy. You have my number if something comes up.”

Asher dipped his head and gave a little wave. “Later, dude.” Then he turned without another word and disappeared into the crowd.

Chapter Three

Fifteen hours later, Asher dropped down on the love seat in his living room and groaned. He scratched his jeans, just over where the mating mark was on his thigh. The damn thing had been itching like crazy since he'd left Zaiden in the airport. He hoped it wouldn't be a permanent situation.

Though his brain was tired and his eyes burned, the rest of his body felt keyed up and anxious. The entire trip home, he'd felt as though he was waiting on something. He just didn't have a clue what.

Glancing at the clock in the DVD player, Asher shook his head and sighed. He wondered if Zaiden had made it home safely, what the man was doing, if he was thinking about Asher. Pushing to his feet, Asher began pacing the small space in front of the coffee table. He'd gotten exactly what he wanted—a no-strings-attached mating that would allow him to live his life as he chose.

So, why did he miss the big sprite already? Barely twenty-four hours since they mated, and less than that since he'd seen Zaiden, and Asher couldn't get the guy out of his head. Good grief, he was losing it.

He continued to pace, scratching absently at his neck, his arms, then his chest. When had it gotten so hot? Pulling his shirt over his head, Asher mopped his sweaty brow with it before flinging it to the side. He marched over to the thermostat and cranked his air conditioner as high as it would go.

He stripped out of the rest of his clothes and continued his pacing. His body shook, his hands trembled, and a raging firestorm worked its

way through his body until he felt his skin would melt right off the bones.

Hurrying down the hallway, he tripped into the bathroom, turning the shower on and jumping under the icy cold spray. His skin continued to heat, and his cock filled and swelled, pulsing between his legs and screaming for attention.

Sharp cramps stabbed his belly, and his muscles felt sore and tired. His breathing came in short, shallow pants, and his head swam, making him reach out for the wall to steady himself.

What the hell was going on?

His cock ached, leaking more pre-cum than he'd ever seen as it jerked and throbbed to the point of pain. Slumping back in the corner of the small shower stall, Asher palmed his overheated erection and stroked himself quickly.

It only took three pumps and a slight twist under the head before he threw his head back and cried out as his orgasm ripped through him. Rather than soothing the burn, the need and carnal hunger clawed more desperately at him.

His erection never flagged, but seemed to grow harder, and the pressure built in his balls until Asher was afraid they'd explode. Images of Zaiden flashed through his mind, and his body reacted by bombarding him with another breath-stealing orgasm. Scalding ropes of cum exploded from his slit without any provocation at all.

Asher slowly lowered himself to the shower floor, too weak to stand. The fire built and burned, his skin scrawling, and his dick still hard as stone. Not even bothering to turn off the water, he crawled from the shower and stumbled down the hall toward the living room and his phone.

Fumbling with his discarded jeans, he pulled his phone from the pocket and opened up his contacts, trying to get his bleary eyes to focus. Finally finding Zaiden's name, he sent the call, pressed the phone to his ear and waited.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Zaiden’s breathless voice came over the receiver after the second ring. “What the hell is going on? My dick is hard enough to pound nails. I’ve jerked off like four times, but it just keeps getting worse.”

“Yeah, same here. I shot my load without even touching myself. I was hoping you’d have some ideas.”

“Did you read the instructions the elders gave us?”

Asher wanted to smack himself. He’d tucked the envelope into his back pocket and completely forgotten about it. “Hold on.” Snatching his jeans up again, he grabbed the instructions and ripped open the envelope.

After withdrawing the parchment inside, he unfolded it with shaking hands and skimmed over the writing. “You sitting down?”

“I can barely stand,” Zaiden replied, his voice thin and strained.

“Well, not only are we connected now, and I’m talking mind, body, and spirit, but we have to consummate our mating at least once every twenty-four hours until the next gathering.”

“Wait. It feels like my brain is melting. Start over and go slower. One thing at a time.”

Asher understood the feeling, but he still had to swallow back his impatience. “We’re bonded, Zaiden. As in if you die, I die, and vice versa.”

“Oh fuck me,” Zaiden groaned.

“Yeah, that’s the next part.” Asher rolled to his side, curling up in a ball as his stomach cramped violently. Sweat rolled off him in rivers, soaking the floor beneath him. His eyes widened, and he gasped as flames flickered and died across his skin, singeing the carpet beneath him.

“Asher? What’s the next part? What’s going on?”

“I’m going to burn down my damn house,” Asher mumbled. Shaking his head to clear it, he looked over the instructions again before responding to Zaiden’s frantic questions. “We have to consummate our mating at least once every twenty-four hours.”

“You’re fucking kidding, right?” Zaiden yelled.

“Nope. It says it right here in black and white.”

“For how long? Just the first twenty-four hours or what?”

“It says until the next gathering. So, for the next four years until February twenty-ninth rolls around again.”

“And what happens if we don’t?”

“I’m guessing the same as if we don’t find a mate. We go apeshit. I’d lose my phoenix, and you’d lose your magic.”

A long pause met his words. Unable to take the silence any longer, Asher spoke again. “I can’t live without my phoenix, Zaiden. I was so pissed, I was ready to walk out of that castle without any thought to the consequences. I’m okay with crazy, but I can’t lose my bird.”

“I know,” Zaiden whispered. “I won’t let that happen. Does it say how long we have to fix this?”

Asher re-read the letter for the fourth time. “No, but judging by the way I’m feeling right now, I would guess it’s not long. A few hours maybe. No more than six or so.”

Tapping on the other end of the line preceded Zaiden’s low, sexy growl. “I can’t find a flight that would get me there in six hours!”

Closing his eyes, Asher groaned as another wave of pain and heat coursed through him. “I’ll come to you.”

“Are you listening to me? There aren’t any flights. In either direction.”

“Zaiden, man, I’m a freakin’ bird, and a phoenix at that. I can make it in three hours.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to shift and fly that far?”

Zaiden’s concern pulled a soft smile from Asher’s lips. “I’m honestly not sure, but I don’t see any other option.” Moaning in pain, he rolled into a sitting position and carefully climbed to his feet. “I can’t bring anything with me but my phone, so I’m going to need some clothes and stuff when I get there.”

“I’ll take care of it. Hurry and be safe. Do you need directions?”

“No. I can feel you.” Asher frowned and shook his head. “I can’t explain it, but I know I’ll be able to find you.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Snapping his phone shut, Asher grabbed his wallet from his jeans and struggled toward the door. Stepping out into the night air, he glanced over his shoulder, taking one final look at his little beachside home, then closed the door and his eyes as he called on his phoenix.

The change was much longer, much more painful than usual, but eventually he was able to shift. Picking up his phone and wallet in his talons, he spread his red and gold wings and took flight over the Caribbean waters.

* * * *

Zaiden paced his backyard, completely nude and staring up at the sky as sweat poured from his overheated skin. The latest weather report had the temperatures hovering just above forty, but to Zaiden it felt like the pits of Hell.

His cock bounced between his legs as he strode across the dew-covered grass, swollen and throbbing as it leaked copious amounts of pre-cum from the tip. His wrist and forearm felt sore from the number of times he’d jerked himself off. After the eighth round, he’d finally given up. Each release only served to push the burn closer to the surface until he felt he would combust with it.

A light mist began to fall, washing away some of the perspiration as steam rose from his flushed body. Three and half hours since Asher’s call, and Zaiden began to worry. He’d been walking a rut into his backyard for nearly forty minutes, his cell phone clutched in his hand, desperate for some news, some sign of his mate.

As the four-hour mark drew near, a soft, musical call sounded from overhead, and Zaiden snapped his head up, blinking through the steady drizzle, searching the night sky. A large, crimson bird circled overhead, coming closer to the ground with each rotation. His beak

opened again, emitting the most amazing sound Zaiden had ever heard.

The calls from his phoenix sounded like a love song—joyous, beautiful, and heartbreakingly tender. The eagle-sized bird landed in front of him, folding his wing and dipping his head as his body began to transform. Within minutes, Asher stood before him, flushed, wet, and absolutely gorgeous.

They looked at each other for a moment before Asher launched himself at Zaiden, locking his arms around Zaiden's neck and attacking his mouth like a starving man. Stumbling toward the back door of his house, Zaiden groaned as Archer humped against him, grinding their diamond-hard erections together.

"Need you," Asher panted against his lips once Zaiden managed to get them safely into his dimly lit kitchen.

Zaiden's blood boiled at having the man in his arms, recognizing Asher as his mate and demanding they find a flat surface and soon. "I know, baby. Just hold on. I'm going to fix this." The endearment rolled off his tongue without thought, and Zaiden found he didn't care.

Setting his lover on the counter, Zaiden continued to lay claim to his luscious mouth as he fumbled blindly for the olive oil dispenser behind Asher.

"Hurry," Asher whispered. He trailed his lips down Zaiden's neck, biting at the sensitive flesh, then slipping his tongue out to soothe the slight burn.

Wrapping his fingers around the glass bottle, Zaiden drizzled the slick oil into his palm and quickly coated his jutting cock. He gripped Asher's hips, jerking him forward until his ass hung off the edge of the counter.

"I don't know if I can be gentle," he warned.

"I don't care. I need you in me."

Zaiden eased his slippery fingers between his lover's rounded globes and stroked his fluttering opening, relaxing the muscles before pushing in with two fingers.

Asher cried out, tossing his head back and rocking against the invading digits. "More, Zaiden. I need more."

"Shh, baby. I'm working here." Zaiden scrunched his eyebrows together as he concentrated on stretching the muscles that clamped down around his fingers. "Relax, Asher. Take a deep breath."

Zaiden's head swam, and his muscles quivered as he used every last resource in his arsenal to hang on to his fraying control. Asher's hole began to open for him, and he slipped in a third finger, sawing in and out of the velvet-lined entrance.

"Enough. Now, please," Asher begged. He pushed up on the counter, supporting his weight with only his arms as he thrust against Zaiden's hand. "Zaiden, please, oh fuck, please. It hurts."

"Okay. Okay, baby," Zaiden said shakily. He eased his fingers from Asher's tunnel, gripped his straining cock, and nudged against his mate's opening. Rocking his hips as gently as he could, he worked the engorged head past the guarding muscles as he slowly penetrated his eager lover.

Asher pushed back against him, impaling himself on Zaiden's prick in one fast, hard motion. Zaiden moaned loudly, gripping the man's hips and holding on for dear life as his orgasm barreled down on him.

"Down and dirty, Zaiden. Fuck me like you mean it," Asher demanded.

Taking his lover as his word, Zaiden began a punishing rhythm, slamming into Asher's welcoming body again and again. "Can't last. You feel goddamn amazing." Zaiden lifted Asher higher, slamming home over and over.

"Gonna," Asher panted raggedly.

"Do it. Come for me, my little bird. Show me you belong to me."

Asher's eyes squeezed shut as he screamed out his release. His inner walls tightened, clenching in waves, as semen shot from the crown of his swollen cock in spurt after spurt of thick creamy fluid.

Satisfied that he'd taken care of his lover, Zaiden threw his head back and roared, pumping through his orgasm and bathing Asher's still-convulsing channel with his seed. The climax felt like a soothing salve, calming the burn and easing the clawing need inside him.

He slumped forward over his lover, pulling the man to him as he clutched him close. "Looks like you're stuck with me," he whispered.

"There have been worse things," Asher answered just as quietly. "At least I kind of like you." He eased away and looked up into Zaiden's face with a smirk. "And the sex is fucking hot."

Zaiden's chuckle turned into a soft hiss as he gently slipped his still half-hard prick from Asher's hole. "No argument there."

Looking over his mate's nude body like it was the special on the menu, Zaiden's eyes landed on what looked to be a dark birthmark on the inside of Asher's thigh. Running his fingertips over it lightly, he smiled when his mate shuddered.

The letters *AD* and *ZR* twined together, woven around each other in an intricate knot. "Does my mating mark look like this?"

"Yep." Asher smiled softly. "I saw it when you showed the guard."

Zaiden dipped his head. "Cool."

"I just flew four hours and had the best sex of my life. I'm hungry." Asher's bottom lip poked out as he eased himself down from the counter. "Feed me."

Rolling his eyes and nipping at the protruding lip, Zaiden pushed away from the counter and helped his lover to the floor. "So, what took you so long? I thought you said it would only take three hours?"

His brow forming a shallow *V*, Asher shook his head slowly. "I circled back a couple of times once I'd hit the States. I had this weird feeling like someone was watching me—following me." Then he

shrugged and smiled. “Silly, I know. I just didn’t want to bring trouble to your door.”

“Oh, but you did,” Zaiden said as he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “And I opened right up and invited him inside.”

Chapter Four

Asher slipped out the door and hurried across the back lawn to retrieve his cell phone and wallet. Thank the gods the drizzle had ceased. Now he just hoped his cell phone was still functional.

His answer came within seconds when his phone began to ring just as he snatched it up from the damp grass. Eyeing the name and number on the display screen, he smiled widely as he answered. “Hello, honey.”

“Don’t ‘honey’ me! I come home to find the shower running, the carpet burned, and your clothes in the middle of the damn floor. Where are you?”

“Close to Chattanooga, Tennessee, I think.”

A long pause met Asher’s words before his best friend’s voice drifted over the phone. “Exactly why are you in Tennessee?” He spoke slowly, as though trying to piece together a puzzle.

“Well, my mate lives here. Where else would I be, Colt?” Asher could just picture Colton shaking his head in exasperation.

“I get it. You could have at least told me, though. You just fucking disappeared after the elders’ announcement, man. I didn’t know where the hell you’d gone.”

“Aww, you love me.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, asshole,” Colton said gruffly. “So, I guess that answers the shower and singed carpet question. You didn’t read the letter did you?”

“Shut up,” Asher grumbled.

Colton just laughed. “Are you coming back, or do you need me to pack your stuff up for you?”

“Uh, I’m not really sure yet. We haven’t discussed specifics, ya know?”

“Well, if you’re coming back, you should know we have a new house guest.”

“Your mate,” Asher deduced.

“Yep, and boy is he a handful. He almost got me fucking arrested at the airport.”

A broad grin crept over Asher’s lips. Colton needed a little spice in his life, and it looked like his new mate would be just the person to liven things up. “Okay, I need to get back inside before Zaiden thinks I abandoned him again. I’ll let you know what to do with my stuff.”

“Stop that!”

“What?” Asher frowned in confusion.

“Not you,” Colton sighed. “Yeah, just give me a call when you figure it out.” He growled deeply. “I gotta go, man.”

Asher laughed as he closed his phone and made his way back inside the house. The sweet smell of buttermilk biscuits wafted through the kitchen, making his mouth water and his stomach snarl. “That smells awesome, but you didn’t have to cook.”

Zaiden stood near the oven, still completely nude. He smiled over his shoulder and shrugged. “I didn’t really have any insta-food. Biscuits were fast and easy.”

“Do you mind if I take a quick shower?” Asher grimaced as he ran a hand over his chest. “I’m totally gross right now.”

“Sure. Down the hall, second door on the left is my bedroom. The attached bathroom has soap and stuff, and you can grab some sweats from my dresser.”

Asher inclined his head in thanks. “Food, shower, and clothes—I knew I liked you.”

Zaiden chuckled and waved his hand. “Hurry up.” He rapped his knuckles against the front of the over door. “These are almost done.”

Asher grinned as he sauntered down the hallway in search of Zaiden’s bedroom. He and Colton had been best friends and

roommates for centuries, but neither of them could cook worth a damn. Now he had a gorgeous, naked man in the kitchen making him biscuits at one o'clock in the morning. He could definitely get used to that.

* * * *

Zaiden swallowed back a groan as he watched Asher's cute ass sashay out of the room and around the corner. Shaking his head to clear his lusty thoughts, he ducked into the living room and grabbed the sleep pants he'd discarded when the mating heat had become too intense.

After sliding them up his hips and tying the drawstring, he hustled back to the kitchen and began preparing white gravy from scratch. He didn't know what his mate would like, but he didn't really have many options. They would definitely need to go shopping.

The thought froze him mid-stir as he whisked the milk and flour in the saucepan. Would Asher be moving in? Or did he expect Zaiden to travel back to Mexico with him? Hell, he didn't even know what his mate did for a living.

Zaiden loved his job, his home, and mostly everything about his life with one exception. That exception was another thing he needed to talk to Asher about. What would the man say when he found out that Zaiden had lost his magic?

"Stop thinking so hard. You're making my head hurt." Asher's voice drifted to him from across the room, and Zaiden closed his eyes briefly. Perhaps it would be better to get the less pleasant subjects out of the way in one clean shot.

"We need to talk." Zaiden spoke without turning.

"I really don't like the way you said that, but yeah, we do."

Pulling the biscuits from the oven, Zaiden placed the pan on top of the stove and reached for the plates he'd set beside the sink. After filling both dishes, he finally turned and eyed his mate.

The guy looked like a little boy who'd raided his dad's closet. He had the sweats rolled up several times at the waist, but they still swallowed him. The shirt wasn't much better. The sleeves fell down past his elbows, and the hem reached almost to his knees.

Zaiden smiled. His mate looked damn cute in his clothes. "Can you grab the silverware?" he asked, jerking his head toward the drawer near the fridge.

Asher smiled brightly and nodded as he bounced over and began gathering the silverware, napkins, cups, and milk. After placing them all on the table, he sat across from Zaiden and dug in hungrily, moaning around his fork. "This is fantastic."

Chuckling lightly, Zaiden cut into the steaming bread and took a bite, closing his eyes in appreciation. Yeah, it was pretty damn good for a last-minute meal.

"Okay, so let's talk." Asher poured himself a glass of milk before reaching over to fill Zaiden's glass. "Am I staying here, or did you want to go back to Mexico?"

Well, his little mate certainly cut right to the heart of the problem. "I like it here," Zaiden said slowly. "I have a good job. I own this house outright. I wouldn't exactly call them friends, but I know a few people here."

"Okay, then we'll stay."

Tilting his head to the side, Zaiden looked his mate over curiously. "Just like that?"

Asher shrugged adorably. "I have one friend in Mexico, and we can visit each other anytime. I have more money than I know what to do with, so I don't really need to work. I'll just move in and be your housewife." He winked impishly.

Zaiden snorted, almost shooting milk from his nose. "How is it you have so much money?"

"Well, when you've lived as long as I have, it just kind of accumulates."

Well, shit! Zaiden hadn't wanted to get to that part of the discussion yet. Oh, well, better to just rip the Band-Aid off and lay open his wounds. "Exactly how old are you?"

Asher's brow wrinkled, and he scrunched his nose. "Just shy of four thousand."

Zaiden began coughing, choking on the bite he'd just taken. "Four thousand," he gasped. "And I thought I was old at two hundred."

Rolling his eyes, the grin never slipped from his mate's beautiful face. "I'm a phoenix, man—the absolute epitome of immortal."

Zaiden frowned as he stabbed at the remaining food on his plate. "Yeah, about that." He spoke without looking at Asher. "I lost my magic," he blurted.

The room went unnaturally silent for a long moment. When the silence became too much, Zaiden looked up to study his lover's expression. Sadness and shock warred for dominance on Asher's visage. His golden brown eyes pinned Zaiden in place with the intensity of their gaze, as though Asher peered right into his soul.

"How?"

Sighing, Zaiden pushed his plate away from him, no longer hungry. "It happened at the last gathering. Long story short, I trusted the wrong man, and he screwed me."

"Another sprite?" Asher asked quietly.

"No." Zaiden shook his head. "He's a witch. He syphoned my magic during sex." He growled the last word as the bitterness of the memory washed over him.

"You loved him."

Without looking up, Zaiden nodded slowly. "Yeah, I loved him."

How messed up was he? Darkin hadn't been his lover. The man had been his obsession for nearly three decades, and he hadn't thought twice about jumping in the sack with him when the witch finally showed a tiny spark of interest. He'd heard all the stories, all the rumors about Darkin's misdeeds. Then he'd brushed them all

aside, unwilling to believe the worst about the man who had haunted his every thought for so long.

The sex had been rough, bordering on brutal, and the next thing he knew, he'd been left bleeding and sobbing in the middle of the room with his face turned into the carpet to hide his shame. Weak as a newborn with the sudden loss of his magic, he'd struggled to his feet and gone directly to the shower to scrub away his humiliation.

"I'm sorry," Asher whispered, and he actually sounded it. "Is that why you don't live with your clan?"

Looking up into his mate's eyes, Zaiden nodded again. After he'd showered in the castle, he'd packed his bags, caught the first flight home, grabbed the few things that held any value to him, and left without a word to anyone. No way could he face his family, let alone the entire clan, and tell them what he'd allowed the witch to do to him.

"I was too embarrassed to tell anyone, so I left. I mean, what kind of fae has no magic?"

"And now that you've lost your magic, you're aging as a human," Asher deciphered. Damn, the man was smart.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do this to you—to shorten your lifespan."

To his utter bewilderment, Asher began to laugh. "Dude, how many times have I told you I'm a freakin' phoenix? We don't die. You could stab me in the heart right now, and I'd just burst into flames and be reborn." He smirked and dipped his head. "As my mate, our life threads are woven together. Welcome to immortality."

Zaiden opened his mouth to reply, then snapped it closed and scowled. Finally working through the jumbled thoughts in his brain, he voiced the first thing to come through clearly. "So, you become a baby again when you die?" He shook his head in finality. "Not only is that fucking weird, but I'm not about to wipe your ass or change your diapers."

Asher burst out laughing, thumping his fist against the table and causing the forks to clank against their plates. “I won’t become a baby,” he gasped through his mirth. “Yes, I’ll burst into flames, but I will be the same as I am now. The fire merely heals me. The whole rebirth thing is just kind of symbolism.”

Zaiden smiled, his breath rushing out in relief. “Thank mercy, because you scared the hell of me for a minute.”

“So, I take it you don’t want children?” Asher arched a brow. “I thought male fae could become pregnant, just like the females.”

“No, I have never envisioned myself as a father. Yes, male faes can carry children, but I can’t. Men are not built for childbirth. The ability comes from our magic. Without mine, I can’t become impregnated.”

Asher grinned wickedly. “So, I don’t have to worry about knocking you up when I’m fucking you against the wall. Good to know.”

Zaiden groaned as his cock twitched and his ass clenched greedily. “Be nice.”

“How nice would you like me to be?” Asher purred.

Balling up his napkin, Zaiden threw it at his mate’s face. “You want my bed or the sofa?”

“How about your bed with you in it?” Asher wiggled his eyes brows, drawing a strangled chuckle from Zaiden’s lips.

“You’re going to make my life very interesting, aren’t you?”

Asher rose from his seat and gathered the plates. “Well, I certainly intend to try.”

Chapter Five

Rolling over, Asher reached out, smoothing his hand over the sheet where his mate should have been. He barely remembered falling into bed, but he knew Zaiden had been beside him, just as he'd been every night since Asher had moved in.

Crawling to the edge of the bed, Asher rolled his eyes and smiled. "You're on the floor again."

Zaiden's eyes blinked open, and he frowned. "It's like sleeping next to a damn furnace. Don't you come with a thermostat or something?"

Chuckling, Asher rolled from the bed and padded naked into the bathroom. "You should be used to it by now."

"It's been three days, man," Zaiden grumbled from the bathroom doorway.

Asher just grinned over his shoulder as he turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat. He may have lived for thousands of years, but the last three days had been filled with the most fun he'd ever experienced.

He enjoyed spending time with Zaiden. Had they met under different circumstances, Asher could definitely see them becoming fast friends. Being mated to the man didn't really change anything. They enjoyed some hot sex, but Asher liked just kicking back and watching television with the guy as well.

He felt drawn to Zaiden, a feeling he associated with their bond. Beyond that, however, he just genuinely liked the man. He shuddered a little at the idea of being connected to someone he couldn't stand for

all of eternity. Zaiden may not have been his destined mate, but perhaps fate knew a little something she was keeping to herself.

“So, what are you doing today?” Zaiden asked as he stepped into the shower.

Asher followed, almost swallowing his tongue when his mate dropped his head back on his shoulders and moaned as the steaming water cascaded over him. “Uh, what was the question?”

Zaiden lifted his head and smirked. “Do you ever think about anything besides sex?”

Asher placed his hands over his quickly growing erection and tried to appear innocent. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Shaking his head, Zaiden snorted as he reached behind him for the soap. “Come here, little bird.”

Asher glared because Zaiden expected it. Inside, however, he was smiling. Yeah, it had been annoying at first, but the little nickname had kind of grown on him. That didn’t mean he’d let anyone besides his mate call him that, though.

Stepping forward, he closed his eyes and choked down a moan when Zaiden began lathering his body with the soap. The act wasn’t sexual in its intent, but Asher couldn’t help but respond to his lover’s touch. Mating instinct or whatever, Zaiden had the most talented fingers, and Asher shivered in anticipation as they roamed over his body.

His eyes snapped open when Zaiden growled, and his hands ceased their exploration of Asher’s slick skin. “I don’t have time to play this morning. I have an appointment in twenty minutes.”

Aww, his mate looked so adorable when he pouted. Pushing up on his toes, Asher brushed a kiss over Zaiden’s protruding lower lip. “We’ll play tonight.” Rocking back on his heels, he tilted his head to the side and frowned. “What kind of appointment? Are you sick?” Since the man had lost his magic, he would be susceptible to all kinds of human frailties.

Zaiden laughed as he washed and rinsed quickly. "I have an appointment with a patient. *I'm* the doctor."

"Ooh, rich, smart, and sexy," Asher cooed. "All my favorite qualities." He winked impishly as he stepped past Zaiden and rinsed the soap bubbles from his body. "What kind of doctor?"

"I work with couples that are having intimacy problems."

Asher whirled around and almost fell on his ass as his feet slipped on the shower floor. "You're a sex therapist?" How freakin' cool was that?

Zaiden just rolled his eyes. "It's just my job. You look like I found the Holy Grail or something."

Asher slapped playfully at his lover's chest. "Oh, hush, and let me be excited for a minute." He turned off the water and followed Zaiden out of the shower. He caught the towel his mate threw at him and began to dry off absently as his mind wondered. "What's the strangest thing someone's ever told you?"

Zaiden swatted him with his towel. "I can't tell you that. It's against doctor-patient confidentiality."

Wrapping his towel around his waist, Asher shrugged. "It was worth a shot. Do you want some breakfast before you leave?"

"Are you cooking?" Zaiden eyed him apprehensively.

Asher threw his hands in the air and groaned. "I only set the kitchen on fire once!" Good grief, his mate really needed to learn to let things go.

"Uh, I'll just grab an energy bar. I don't really have time for anything more elaborate right now, anyway." Zaiden still looked nervous as he went to the closet and began pulling out clothes. "Oh, and I'll bring a pizza home for dinner. So, don't worry about cooking, okay?"

Asher pressed his lips together to hide his smile and plopped down on the end of the bed. "I want mine with mushrooms." He hadn't really meant to set the kitchen ablaze, but if it got him out of cooking, he couldn't feel too sorry about it.

* * * *

“Hello, Andrew.” Zaiden stood and moved around his desk. He looked around the man at the empty doorway behind him. “Where’s Denise today?”

“Well, I, uh, I wanted to talk...to talk to you alone, today. I–If that’s o–okay,” Andrew stuttered.

Zaiden frowned, but nodded. Andrew closed the door, and they each moved over to the cushiony armchairs in the middle of the room. Zaiden continued to frown, his eyebrows drawing together as he studied his patient.

Andrew looked pale and clammy. His hands trembled visibly as he twirled them together nervously in his lap. He swallowed several times, and his tongue darted out to moisten his parted lips.

“What did you want to talk about today, Andrew?” Zaiden eased back in his seat and folded his hands together in his lap.

Andrew inched closer to the edge of his seat, his knee bouncing as he rubbed at the denim covering it. “Well, it’s about me and Denise, but mostly about me.”

Zaiden nodded and smiled. He had an idea of where the conversation would lead. He’d had an inkling for several months about Andrew.

“We’ve been coming to you for a while now, and things aren’t getting better. In fact, they’re getting worse. I need to stop lying to myself...and my wife.”

Zaiden nodded again as he sat forward in his chair. “And what have you been lying about, Andrew?”

“I’m not attracted to Denise,” his patient blurted. He pressed his lips together tightly as they turned down at the corners. “I...I’m not attracted to women at all,” he mumbled.

Zaiden smiled softly. “Have you told Denise?”

Andrew shook his head quickly. "I haven't told anyone yet. I wanted to talk to you first. Do you think I'm gay?"

Continuing to smile, Zaiden arched his eyebrow. "That's not something I can tell you. What do you think? How do you feel? Are you attracted to other men?"

Andrew didn't move or speak for several minutes. Then he dipped his head once, slowly, almost imperceptibly. "Yes, I find other men attractive." He looked into Zaiden's eyes with such intensity, Zaiden almost felt the need to look away. "I find myself thinking, dreaming...fantasizing about one man in particular."

"Have you talked to this man? Does he know how you feel?"

Shaking his head, Andrew began fidgeting with the buttons on his shirt. "No, he doesn't know. What should I do, Dr. Reed?"

"That's not for me to decide. I will help you in any way I can, but you have to make the decision to tell your wife."

Another several minutes passed in silence before Andrew bobbed his head. "Would you help me tell her? Can I bring her here?"

Zaiden debated for a moment before answering. "I will help you, Andrew. I understand you feel that you need a safe place to voice these emotions you're feeling. I want you to think about talking to Denise alone, though. She's a good woman, and I believe she will be more understanding than you think."

"Okay," Andrew mumbled. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss today?"

"No. These feelings just kept bubbling up inside of me, and I didn't know where else to go, or who to talk to about them." Andrew stood from his chair and shuffled his feet. "Thank you for listening, Dr. Reed."

Zaiden stood as well and patted the man on the shoulder. "Thank you for talking to me, Andrew. I know this is hard. You can come and talk to me any time, okay?" He waited for Andrew's nod of assent before patting his shoulder again and stepping away.

"Are you gay, Dr. Reed?"

“Yes,” Zaiden answered immediately. Though he didn’t normally share anything about his personal life with patients, Andrew was scared and looking for solidarity. If he could offer the man even a margin of support and comfort, he would.

Andrew nodded and a soft smile played over his lips. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I’ll call you.”

“See that you do.” Zaiden watched Andrew slip out the door, then turned toward to his desk. He had a feeling he’d be hearing from Andrew George before their next scheduled appointment.

His phone began to vibrate, moving across the top of his desk as it hummed against the wood. Picking it up, he smiled at Asher’s name on the display screen. The first day they’d been apart since Asher’s arrival, and his mate did not seem to be doing well with the separation. The thought kicked Zaiden’s smile a notch brighter.

“Hello, Asher. Do you miss me already? It’s only been an hour since I left,” Zaiden teased.

“Uh, can you come home?” Asher sounded nervous, and his voice shook as he spoke, putting Zaiden on alert.

“Why? What happened? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Asher snapped. “Why do you automatically assume I did something wrong?”

“Asher?” Zaiden growled in warning.

“It was just a tiny little accident.”

“Would you just freakin’ tell me already!” Zaiden paced his office, running his fingers through his long blond hair as his heart galloped inside his chest.

“I set the house on fire, okay?” Asher wailed as though he’d been stabbed.

Zaiden froze mid-step, and his mouth hung open. “Holy fuck,” he breathed. “I’m assuming you’re fine since I’m talking to you. Did you call the fire department?”

“No, I put it out myself, but I just need you to come home, okay?”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Just come home, please.” Then the line went dead.

Chapter Six

Asher trembled as he paced the living room, mumbling under his breath and waving his hands around wildly like a crazy person. He'd never lost control like that. He'd never let his fire get away from him.

What if Zaiden had been beside him when it happened? What if he couldn't control his flame during sex—or worse, when he was sleeping? God, he didn't even know it was happening until half the damn room had been charred crispy.

The front door swung open, and Zaiden hurried inside, whipping his head one way and then the other, frantically searching the room. His eyes landed on Asher, and he rushed to him, touching and inspecting him everywhere.

"You're okay," he breathed as though confirming it to himself. The idea that Zaiden had been genuinely concerned for him gave Asher a tingling feeling in his belly.

His lips turned up just a bit at the corners, and he took Zaiden's roaming hands in his own. "I'm fine. Fire doesn't affect me."

Zaiden nodded once as he stood to his full six-three height. "So, tell me what happened?" He scanned the room again. "Everything looks just the same as when I left."

With a heavy sigh, Asher squeezed his mate's hand and led him down the hallway to their bedroom. Stepping inside the room, he waved his hand and bit his lip as his cheeks colored. Shit, this was embarrassing.

Zaiden released his hands and traveled closer to the bed. His eyes narrowed, and the muscles in his jaw ticked. Asher could actually

hear the sound of his lover's teeth grinding together. Of all the reactions he imagined Zaiden would have, anger wasn't one of them.

"I'm sorry, Zaid. I'll pay for it. I'll buy you a new one." Asher dropped his head and continued to chew on his bottom lip.

"Is there a reason you set my bed on fire?" Zaiden turned and arched one of his eyebrows in question. His arms crossed over his chest, and he looked at Asher expectantly.

"It's not like I did it on purpose!" Self-righteous indignation came to his rescue, shielding him from Zaiden's anger. "You just left me high and dry, hard and unsatisfied this morning. What the fuck was I supposed to do?"

Zaiden cocked his head to the side. "What does that have to do with my bed?"

"Well, I had to take care of myself. I was jerking off, and when I came, I just kind of ignited." Asher shook his head, his shoulders slumping as some of the ire drained from him. "The next thing I know, the bed and half the fucking rooms lit up like a bonfire."

Zaiden stared him blankly for a moment, then his eyes started to dance, his lips stretched across his face, and he burst out laughing. "You really know how to heat up the sheets, don't you?"

Groaning, Asher rolled his eyes. "You're being a dick."

"Oh, come on! This is too good. You got yourself so worked up, you actually set the bed on fire. I am never letting you live this down." Zaiden clutched at his stomach, rocking back and forth with his mirth.

Asher frowned at his mate before his eyes roamed to the charred remains of the bed, then over to destroyed curtains and the long, black scorch marks on the wall. The carpet still smoldered. The dresser and all of their clothes had been reduced to little more than ash by the time he'd been able to put out the flames. He just felt horrible.

"It's not funny," he grumbled. "This is dangerous, Zaid. I've always been able to control it." He ran a shaky hand over his face. "I

didn't even know it was happening until I smelled the smoke. What if we'd been sleeping? You could get hurt!"

"Okay, calm down." Zaiden walked over to him and placed his hands on Archer's shoulder, squeezing lightly. "It'll be fine."

Asher's eyes widened in disbelief, and he pointed at the remains of the bed. "How is that fine?"

"Well, you see, I have this theory." Zaiden smirked at him as he stepped away and began to undress. Asher just wanted to smack the look right off his face. How could he be so calm about this? "Why the hell are you taking off your clothes?"

"It's not the first time it's happened." Zaiden finished disrobing and pulled Asher back into his arms.

"What are you talking about? Of course it is! I've never lost control like this before."

Zaiden's fingertips glided up the side of Asher's neck and along his jawline. "Yes you have, Ash. You just didn't know it." He spoke softly, a half-smile playing over his plump lips. "Let me show you."

Before Asher could respond, Zaiden lean in, pressing their mouths together in a toe-curling kiss. His head swam, his heart rate accelerated, and a breathy moan escaped his lips as he opened to his mate's questing tongue. Winding his arms around Zaiden's neck, he pulled him closer until he could feel every last ridge of his lover's long body pressed against his.

Growling in frustration, he chased Zaiden's retreating lips when the man pulled away with a chuckle. He hadn't had nearly enough of that luscious mouth.

"Look," Zaiden whispered. His long fingers reached up to grip Asher's wrist and pull his arm away from Zaiden's neck. "Look," he repeated.

Asher gasped, jerking away and stumbling backward. Tiny red and orange flames danced merrily over his bare body. As he put distance between himself and his mate, the flames flickered, growing smaller until they completely died away.

“What’s happening?” Even he could hear the panic in his voice. He didn’t like this at all.

Zaiden still smiled, moving closer to him, stalking him until he had Asher pressed up against the wall. “It doesn’t hurt me,” he murmured against Asher’s collarbone. “In fact, it feels amazing. It happened last night as well. Your handprints are burned into the front door.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Asher panted, arching his neck to the side to give his mate more room to play. “You should have told me.”

“I thought you knew, little birdy.” Zaiden’s tongue ghosted up the column of his throat as his hands smoothed up Asher’s thighs and over his hips. “What were you thinking about when you had this beautiful cock in your hand?” One hand trailed down Asher’s flat stomach and wrapped around his jutting erection.

“You. Us. The things we did last night.” God, it was so hard for him to form coherent sentences with his lover’s hands on him.

“Did it feel good? Did it make you wish I was home to bury myself inside you?”

“Fuck, yes,” Asher breathed. Opening his eyes, he was unsurprised to find the flames had rekindled across his skin. He was finally beginning to understand. “You’re my fire.”

Zaiden stroked him from base to tip, dipping his thumb into the leaking slit, and Asher’s hips jerked forward. “I don’t know what that means, but I like it.” He smiled warmly before pressing their mouths together again.

Several long minutes later, Asher tore his mouth away and gasped for breath. “I can’t think when you do that.” The sound came out somewhere between a groan and a whine. His cock ached and throbbed in Zaiden’s hold, pleading for more attention.

“Good.” Then without another word, Zaiden lowered himself to his knees and swallowed Asher to the root.

Slick, wet warmth encased his throbbing shaft, and Asher came immediately, crying out to the ceiling as he pushed to the back of his

lover's throat and unloaded his balls. He couldn't help it, couldn't stop it, and damn, did it feel like heaven.

Slumping back against the wall, he watched as Zaiden sat back on his heels and grinned like a fool. "Better?"

The firestorm inside him calmed, beaten back to mere embers. He felt relaxed and much more in control. "Definitely better."

* * * *

"Do you need me to take care of you?"

Zaiden rose gracefully to his feet and looked down at his half-flaccid cock. "I'm good."

Asher scowled at him. "I feel like a cheap whore now. You didn't even get hard?"

Sniggering, Zaiden pointed at the creamy puddle on the carpet at his feet. "Uh, I did a lot more than get hard." He stepped forward and kissed the tip of his mate's nose. "Don't ever worry about me not being attracted to you." He skimmed his fingers over Asher's chest and abs. "I pop a tent just thinking about all this creamy skin."

Asher sighed heavily as he looked around Zaiden's shoulder. "So, what do we do about this mess?"

"We aren't going to do anything. You made the mess. You can clean it up." Turning away to hide his smile, Zaiden reached for his clothes and began dressing. "I have to go back to work. I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Oh, you suck." Asher pushed away from the wall and walked slowly around the room.

Zaiden follow his sexy little ass, watching it bunch and flex with each step. His dick took notice as well, twitching and swelling as it strained toward its new favorite place on earth. Choking down his moan, Zaiden pulled his slacks on and carefully maneuvered his fully erect cock behind the zipper, promising himself some playtime with his mate later.

“Move whatever is salvageable into the spare bedroom. Sheets and blankets are in the hall closet to make the bed in there. We’ll make a list of what we need to replace after that.” Zaiden pulled on his jacket and reached out to gently squeeze the back of Asher’s neck. “Sound good?”

“I’m really sorry,” Asher whispered.

Tugging playfully on his lover’s long ebony locks, Zaiden titled the man’s head back until he could look into his eyes. “It’s not your fault, and this stuff is replaceable. Stop feeling guilty. It’s fucking depressing.”

Asher scrunched up his nose and stuck his tongue out, causing Zaiden to chuckle. “Fine. I’ll get started on this. Don’t forget the pizza.”

“I’m all over it. Don’t try to cook, and if you feel the need to relieve a little sexual tension, try to do it in the shower, hmm?” He jumped back, narrowly missing the elbow Asher aimed at his ribs, laughing the entire time.

“Oh, just get out of here.” Asher shooed him away and slapped him hard on the ass. “I have work to do, and you’re in the way.” He looked down at his nude body, then back up to Zaiden. “Uh, could you maybe pick me up something to wear? The few things I had just got incinerated.”

Zaiden nodded reluctantly. He really liked seeing Asher in his clothes. He liked watching him walk around buck-naked even more. Then an idea crossed his mind, and he smiled devilishly as he turned to leave the room. His lover hadn’t specified what he wanted to wear. Zaiden had some excellent ideas, though.

Chapter Seven

“You’re kidding, right?” Asher held up a pair of jeans at least a size too small for him. Tossing them aside, he rummaged through the bag, almost swallowing his tongue when he found several G-strings. “You really have to be kidding.”

“Well, those are just for around the house,” Zaiden said, pointing at the thin strip of material in Asher’s hand. The man hadn’t stopped grinning since he had come home.

“Exactly when did I give you the impression that I liked butt floss?”

“Well, you seem to like having my cock up your ass. What’s wrong with a little piece of fabric?” Zaiden wiggled his eyebrows playfully.

“Point taken. That doesn’t mean that I want to walk around with it up my ass all day long.”

“And that’s a shame.” Zaiden shook his head in mock disappointment as he poked out his bottom lip and made it tremble.

Asher rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t stop his laughter. “Did you get me any real clothes?”

Zaiden continued to pout as he pointed to a larger bag on the sofa. “I don’t like them, though.”

Pulling out the clothes one by one, Asher nodded his approval at the loose-fitting jeans, simple T-shirts, sweats, boxers, and socks. “This is more like it.”

“I don’t like them,” Zaiden repeated as he watched Asher pull on a pair of black sweatpants.

“You are an idiot. I can’t walk around naked all the time, Zaid.”

“I don’t see why not. It would make my life much more pleasant. Not to mention, I’d have easier access to that tight little body of yours.”

Deciding to ignore his lover, Asher looked around the room. “So, where’s the pizza? I’m starving.”

“You didn’t even look in the last bag!” Zaiden hurried over and lifted it off of the coffee table, presenting it to Asher as though it held gifts fit for a king.

Curious despite himself, Asher took to the bag and peered inside. His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. “Where the hell did you get this?” He pulled out a sleek, black silicone butt plug, two cock rings, and a pair of velvet-lined handcuffs.

“Condom Sense,” Zaiden said proudly. “They have the coolest shit in there. You’ll have to go with me next time.” He snatched the bag from Asher’s hands and pulled out two fancy looking bottles of lube. The black bottle even had little rhinestones on the damn thing.

He held them up, turning them one way and then the other, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Warming and flavored. Which one do you want to try first?”

“What else do you have in the little bag of toys?” Asher crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head to the side. He didn’t have a problem giving into his lover’s fantasies, but he wanted to know exactly what he was getting himself into first.

“Just one more thing.” Zaiden withdrew something that looked like a lollipop. “Pleasure pops,” he said as he handed it over to Asher. “We don’t need it, but it was too cool not to buy.”

Upon closer inspection, Asher realized it wasn’t candy at all. It was actually a flavored condom, inside a cellophane wrapper, and attached to a little white stick. He had to admit it was kind of clever.

Handing the goody back to his mate, he grinned widely. “Okay, we can play after we eat. I’m serious. I haven’t eaten all damn day. Where’s the pizza?”

Zaiden's cheeks flushed, and he dropped his head as though he'd been caught doing something bad. "I got excited and kind of forgot to get the pizza," he mumbled.

"Fabulous." Asher's stomach rumbled, demanding sustenance. "Well, then I guess you better order one."

"How about I got get us some Chinese? There's a place right around the corner that's pretty good. It would be faster."

Asher's stomach approved. "Sounds good. Just get me whatever. I'm not picky."

Zaiden nodded eagerly, obviously pleased that he'd gotten himself out of trouble. "I'll just get a little of everything. How's that sound?"

"Sounds like you need to move your ass." Asher winked and turned his back to sashay out of the room.

* * * *

Fumbling for his cell phone, Zaiden groaned as he turned off the alarm on it and rolled off the sofa. With his bed burned to the ground, and the one in the guestroom too small for both of them to sleep together comfortably, he'd spent the last three nights in the living room.

Surprisingly, he found he didn't like sleeping without his mate. He'd never had anyone to share his bed for more than a few hours, but he liked waking up to Asher's cute little button nose snuggled in his neck. Even if he ended up on the floor more nights than not because of Asher's extreme body heat, he liked knowing the man was close.

They definitely needed to get a new mattress, and the sooner the better.

Reaching his arms over his head, he groaned again as the sore muscles in his back stretched. Shuffling into the kitchen, Zaiden smiled widely as the aroma of freshly made coffee scented the air.

The newspaper lay folded beside his favorite coffee mug on the counter, and a white card leaned against the side of the coffeemaker.

*Wear the green button-down shirt today.
It brings out your eyes*

Smiling fondly, Zaiden prepared his coffee and strolled down the hallway in his boxers to give his lover a proper thank-you for the little surprise. Stepping into the room, his smile softened when he found Asher sleeping. Well, he'd just have to thank him later.

Tiptoeing through the room, he made his way to the closet and opened it quietly. Looking over the clothes that had survived Asher's little mishap earlier in the week, his eyebrows drew together when he didn't see his sage-colored shirt. Why would Asher ask that he wear it if he didn't have it hanging in his closet?

Shrugging, he selected a charcoal-gray shirt instead. Gathering what he needed, he eased out of the room, careful not to wake his sleeping mate. He carried his clothes down the hall to the guest bathroom, showered and dressed in a hurry, then made his way back to the kitchen for a quick breakfast.

He found his lover had finally dragged himself out of bed and was currently moving about the kitchen, gloriously naked and humming softly as he prepared toast and pulled jams and butter from the fridge. Clearing his throat to announce his presence, Zaiden sauntered up to his mate and wrapped his arms around his thin waist. Placing a quick peck on the top of Asher's head, he released him and went to sit at the table.

"I really need to teach you how to cook."

Asher grunted, bringing the toast and condiments to the table. "More coffee?"

Zaiden pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. His little mate was so not a morning person. Which was the reason he'd been awed to find his little surprise when he'd woken up. The thought that Asher cared enough for him to wake up early to prepare coffee—even if he had crawled back into bed afterward—made his heart melt.

“That’s a nice shirt,” Asher said as he took his seat. “I like that color on you.” He gave Zaiden a crooked smile and bit into a piece of toast.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I couldn’t find the green one.”

Asher frowned and wrinkled his nose. “The one that looks like cat puke? I tossed that one when I was cleaning out the room the other day. I’m sorry, but that was one hideous shirt.”

Zaiden paused with his buttered toast halfway to his mouth. “I thought you wanted me to wear the green one today? You said it brings out my eyes.”

Asher’s frown deepened, and he shook his head slowly as he set his toast down on his plate. “Uh, when did I say that? Honestly, that shirt doesn’t bring out anything but my nausea.”

“You left a note by the coffeemaker.”

“No, I didn’t leave any note. I swear, Zaiden. I hated that damn shirt. I threw it away.”

Zaiden’s head reeled with the information. Was Asher messing with him? He could still see the note over on the counter near the sink. “Well, I appreciate you making coffee this morning. I was going to thank you properly,” he wiggled his eyebrows as innuendo slipped into his voice, “but you looked so tired that I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Zaid, what the hell are you talking about? I thought you made the coffee.”

Disquiet settled over him, and Zaiden rose from his chair and crossed the room to grab the little white card. He brought it back and thrust it under Asher’s nose. “You didn’t write this?”

Asher took it from him, reading it over and shaking his head. “This is not my handwriting, man.”

“Ash, this isn’t funny. If you didn’t do it, that means someone was in the house while we were sleeping. That doesn’t exactly give me the warm fuzzies, so stop messing with me.”

Pushing up from his chair, Asher placed a hand on Zaiden's chest as he looked into his eyes. "I'm not messing with you, Zaid. I swear I didn't do anything but make toast this morning."

"Then who made the coffee and left the note?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it. Should we call the police?"

Pulling his mate into his arms, Zaiden sighed as he rested his chin on the man's head. "It wasn't exactly a threatening gesture."

"Yeah, but someone was in our house without our knowledge."

Zaiden grinned. He liked how Asher referred to it as their house. "Okay. I can reschedule my appointments for this afternoon. Go take a shower and get dressed. I'll call the police."

Asher brushed a soft kiss over his collarbone and pulled out of his embrace. "You don't want the piggies ogling my hot ass?"

Zaiden growled, slapping that particular part of his mate's anatomy. "No one but me, little bird."

Chapter Eight

The police came, basically rolled their eyes as they assured them that they would look into it, then left. Zaiden left soon after to prepare for his afternoon appointments, leaving Asher to sulk about the house on his own.

He didn't like the idea of someone being inside their house without their knowledge. He may have only been there for a week, but it was now his home, and someone had invaded his sanctuary. Not to mention his mate had been sleeping just a few feet from the kitchen.

Asher shuddered as he pictured some faceless person standing over Zaiden, just staring, watching him sleep. Pushing away the thoughts before he crept himself out too much, he went to the kitchen and began clearing away the breakfast dishes. He loaded the dishwasher, his mind drifting over the things he needed to accomplish before Zaiden came home.

He had several phone calls to make. They needed someone to come in and clean up the mess and replace the carpets in the bedroom he'd set on fire. Rolling his eyes, Asher began wiping down the counters and tables. He still felt like a huge shmuck for that little incident. He hadn't lost control since, but he'd been very careful to focus on keeping his flame buried. No easy task considering the pleasure that overwhelmed him every time Zaiden touched him.

Though he'd briefly considered asking his roommate to pack and ship his belongings to Tennessee, Asher had eventually decided to just buy everything new. He had the money to buy what he wanted,

and it wasn't like he owned anything of sentimental value back in Isla Blanca.

Maybe he should start looking for a job. The idea didn't much appeal to him, but neither did sitting about the house awaiting his mate's return each day. It had been less than an hour since Zaiden left, and Asher was already bored out of mind. If he wanted to maintain his sanity, he needed to find something to occupy his days.

Back in Mexico, he'd had the beach and his best friend to help stave off the boredom. What the hell was there to do in this town anyway? Realizing he hadn't even left the house since he'd arrived, Asher decided that perhaps it was time to see the sights and meet the locals. They planned to go shopping the next day for a new mattress, but that didn't mean that Asher couldn't buy some things to fix the place up a little.

Walking through the house, he took mental pictures, thinking up different ways to add a little color and liveliness to the drab, bland décor. He didn't want to overstep his boundaries or insult his lover, but if this was to be his home for the next however long, he should at least have some say in the decorating.

With a new plan firmly in place, Asher grabbed his wallet from the end table near the sofa and slipped it into his pocket. He called a cab, then went to sit on the front steps to wait while he browsed his phone's search engine for local car dealerships. He didn't mind taking cabs, but he liked the freedom of being able to go wherever and whenever he wanted.

The cab pulled up near the curb, and Asher ran out to climb into the backseat, almost giddy with the idea of his first purchase of his new life.

Now he just needed to decide what kind of car to buy. Images of something flashy and fast swirled around in his head, and Asher had to grin. That sounded perfect. He could already picture the look on Zaiden's face when he drove up in a shiny red sports car. Maybe they

could even trade in his lover's boring sedan and get him something a little more eye-catching as well.

Compared to Asher, the man was still practically a baby, yet everything he owned looked as though he was nearing the twilight of life. Well, Asher would just have to see what he could do shake things up a little and pull his mate back into the land of the living.

* * * *

"Denise. Andrew." Zaiden smiled brilliantly and waved a hand toward the love seat in his office. "I'm sorry that I had to reschedule at such short notice. I'm glad that you could make it. How are you today?"

"We're good, Doctor. How are you?" Denise gave him her normal cheery smile, and Zaiden began to relax a little.

"Yes, we're good," Andrew mumbled. He pushed his dark brown hair back from his forehead and sighed heavily as he sat beside his wife.

Not willing to assume they'd spoken of Andrew's questions of his sexuality, Zaiden reclined in his chair and waited. The couple always did better without prodding. They would come around to the issues they wanted to discuss in their own time.

Sure enough, it only took moments for Andrew to speak. "I talked to Denise about our discussion last week." He wouldn't look at anyone in the room, but at least he was talking.

"I'm sure that must have been very difficult for you." Zaiden turned to the pretty redhead and held his hands out, palms up. "How did that make you feel, Denise?"

Folding her hands in her lap, Denise smiled sympathetically at her husband. "I've suspected for a while." Then she reached over and took Andrew's hand before turning back to Zaiden. "It is a relief to be able to understand, and to realize it wasn't just me."

Zaiden gave her a warm smile before his eyes cut over to Andrew. "And how about you, Andrew? How do you feel, now?"

Lifting his head, Andrew finally met his eyes and a tiny smile flickered over his lips. "I feel like I can really breathe for the first time in years. I'm nervous, of course, but Denise has been wonderful." He placed a small peck on her cheek. "You'll always be my best friend," he whispered to her.

Denise giggled like a schoolgirl and blushed a very becoming shade of pink as she slapped at his shoulder. "I'm just glad that you finally told me."

Zaiden watched them with a mix of pride and sadness. They obviously loved each other, and he hated to see their marriage end. There was no hostility between them, however. He hoped they really would remain friends after this. "Is there anything else you wanted to discuss today? Have you talked about what steps to take from here?"

"We're just working on one day at a time," Denise said with a smile. "I understand that Andrew has met someone that he's rather smitten with." She giggled at Andrew's embarrassed groan. "It so happens, there's someone that has caught my eye as well."

"You've been seeing someone?" Zaiden kept his face impassive, the judgment from creeping into his voice. He was neutral as always.

"Oh, no, no." Denise waved her hand in dismissal. "I would never be unfaithful to my husband. A girl can look, however. Andrew and I have decided to see other people. I have even offered to accompany him on a double date to help break the ice."

"That's very generous of you, Denise. Andrew, are you comfortable with this arrangement?"

Andrew bobbed his head. "We are filing for divorce tomorrow. This is the best thing for us both."

"Agreed." Denise nodded her head in finality. "I will always be there for you, though," she whispered to Andrew.

“Wonderful!” Zaiden clasped his hands together. “We still have a few minutes left. Did either of you have anything else you wanted to get out in the open?”

They each shook their heads and rose from the love seat. “As we are no long technically a couple, this will be our last visit, Dr. Reed.” Denise held her hand out for him to shake.

Zaiden clasped her hand briefly, then the one Andrew offered him. “I understand, Denise. I hope that you will still call me if you ever need someone to talk to, though.”

“Thank you.” Andrew began edging toward the door.

“That is a lovely shirt, Dr. Reed. The color is quite striking on you.”

Andrew frowned at his wife, then at Zaiden, eyeing his shirt as though it had morally offended him. Then he disappeared through the doors. Denise just rolled her eyes, gave Zaiden a small wave, and slipped out behind her husband.

Zaiden fingered the buttons on his shirt as he strolled back toward his desk. Why were so many people taking such an interest in his clothing all of the sudden? And what exactly had upset Andrew so much before he left?

* * * *

Zaiden pulled up in his driveway and gaped at the shiny red Ford Mustang GT parked beside him. His mouth hung open, and he actually drooled just a little. Climbing out of his boring sedan, he walked around the automotive masterpiece and whistled. He hoped he could persuade his little mate to let him drive the beauty at least once.

Hurrying up the walkway, he hurdled the steps and burst through the door, eager to see his mate and congratulate him on the new car. He froze just inside the doorway, then turned and walked back out, looking up at the numbers above the door to make sure he had the right house.

“Four-seven-nine,” he mumbled under his breath then turned and walked back into the house.

He barely recognized any of it. Gone were his squashy brown sofa and love seat, the chipped and faded coffee table, and his sturdy, squat-looking lamps. Big, suede, burgundy sofas now adorned his living room. A gorgeous cherry oak coffee table, matching end tables, and sleek floor lamps accompanied the sofas. New paintings hung on the walls, burgundy drapes covered the windows, and a thick, plush area rug finished off the room.

“I kept all of the old stuff in case you didn’t like this,” Asher said from the kitchen doorway. “I guess I should have asked first, but I wanted to surprise you.” He rocked from foot to foot, fidgeting as he looked at Zaiden. “Do you like it?”

Though he wanted to tease his lover, Zaiden couldn’t find it in himself to do it when the man looked so nervous. “I think it looks amazing. We can trash the old stuff.” He crooked a finger for Asher to come to him.

Without missing a beat, Asher bounded across the room to stand directly in front of him. Pulling his mate into his arms, Zaiden placed a soft kiss on his temple. “It’s always just been me, and I never needed much. You can change anything you like.”

“Thank you,” Asher whispered against his neck, sending faint shivers along Zaiden’s spine. “I didn’t buy anything for the bedroom. I wanted us to do that together.”

“I like that. Thank you.” Zaiden kissed Asher’s temple again and stepped away. “Did you happen to get any food on this little shopping spree of yours?”

“Not exactly.” Asher grinned mischievously as he began stripping out of his clothes while he traveled backward toward the hallway. “I did pick up some chocolate sauce, though.”

Zaiden gulped audibly, and heat spread throughout his body. He prowled forward, stalking his mate as a low, rumbling growl began in

his chest. “What do you intend to do with this chocolate sauce, baby?”

Asher paused in the act of pushing his jeans down his hips and frowned. “Why do you do that?”

Zaiden stopped as well, tilting his head to the side in confusion. “Do what?”

“You only call me baby when you’re horny. Why?”

Try as he may, he didn’t have a good answer. “I don’t know. I don’t really think about it,” Zaiden answered honestly. “Guys say dumb shit when they’re thinking with the wrong head.”

Asher pulled his jeans back up his hips, and Zaiden wanted to smack himself in the forehead. “I didn’t mean it like that, Ash.” He took a step toward his mate, but Asher halted him with a raised hand. “Ash, c’mon, you know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Just don’t.” Asher shook his head as he glared at Zaiden. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he said flatly, then turned on his heels and marched down the hall.

Zaiden winced when he heard the door to the guest bedroom slam shut hard enough to reverberate through the house. Looking over his shoulder, he eyed the sofa and sighed. At least it looked more comfortable than his old one.

Chapter Nine

Groaning and panting, Asher rolled from side to side on the mattress, soaking the sheets beneath him with his sweat. His stomach cramped, his skin crawled, and his heart raced inside his chest. His cock throbbed, jerking and dribbling pre-cum between his legs.

Reaching down his shuddering body, Asher hissed in pain as he wrapped his fingers around his heated shaft. His balls pulled so tight to his body, he just knew they were trying to crawl up inside of him.

His muscles tightened, and electricity raced through him, cranking him up and leaving him jittery and anxious. He gave one slow stroke to his demanding cock and cried out as his back bowed up off the bed. Nothing had ever felt so painful. It was as though someone had kicked him in the dick, then set it on fire for good measure.

Still angry over Zaiden's careless words, Asher didn't revel in the thought of being intimate with the asshole. Unfortunately, he didn't have any other options. The heat spreading through him, taking over him, would be enough to drive him to insanity soon. He didn't know people could sustain such temperatures and still live. Hell, he could practically feel his brain sizzling inside his skull.

He struggled to his side, gasping as he tried to roll out of bed. Before he could make it off the mattress, though, the bedroom door banged open, bouncing off the wall with a loud crack. Zaiden stood in the doorway, his eyes wide, his nostrils flared, and his chest heaving. His pale skin glistened in the moonlight filtering through the windows, slick and drenched in sweat. His long blond hair lay damp and limp over his shoulders, and his hands fisted and relaxed as he stared at Asher.

Without thought, Asher rolled to his back as though his body had been trained to do so at the sight of his lover. He opened his arms and wiggled his fingers, beckoning his mate to him. Zaiden didn't even hesitate. He took two steps and launched himself onto the bed, covering Asher's body with his own.

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to say those stupid things." Zaiden's hands were everywhere, and he spoke between desperate kisses along Asher's neck and shoulders. "I'll call you baby every day. That's all I'll call you. I'm so fucking sorry. Don't be mad. Please, stop being mad at me."

Asher moaned and writhed as his arms wound around Zaiden's neck and pulled him closer, crushing their mouths together as they each battled for dominance. At this point, he couldn't even remember why he'd been upset with the sprite. His phoenix cried out, a beautiful song that filled his heart and soul, rejoicing in the closeness of their mate.

As Zaiden licked inside his mouth and nibbled at his lips, Asher decided he'd just be mad later and enjoy the pleasure of the moment. Zaiden's touch soothed the burn, even as it stoked the flames of his desire to a raging wildfire. Maybe it was because of the elders' trick, but Asher couldn't get enough of his mate.

A little voice in his head called him a dirty liar. Even when he wasn't in the throes of his mating heat, he still desired the big man. He dared anyone who looked at his lover to not want him. Damn, the man was gorgeous.

"Need you, Zaid."

"Need you, too, baby. I'm sorry I was an idiot." Zaiden stretched over him to reach for the lube on the nightstand. "Tell me what you want, Ash. Anything you want."

"I want to handcuff you to the bed and lick chocolate sauce off every inch of your skin. Then I want to bury myself in your tight ass and fuck you until you pass out." Asher smirked as Zaiden moaned and his body jerked. "But for now, I just want to ride you."

Zaiden growled, rolling over quickly to pull Asher on top of him. The motioned sent them falling over the side of the mattress to land on the floor with a hard thump. Yeah, they really needed to get a new bed.

Asher couldn't help but laugh as he pushed up on his hands and stared down at his dazed lover. "Slick move, Zaid."

Zaiden frowned, and a sharp smack landed on Asher's naked ass. He closed his eyes and moaned, wiggling his ass and begging for another swat. "Behave," Zaiden admonished.

Blinking open his eyes, Asher smiled widely. "Where's the fun in that?"

Then he gasped as Zaiden rolled them again, pressing Asher's back to the carpet and pinning him to the floor. Without a word, two slick fingers zeroed in on his clenching hole and pushed inside. The burn, the slight bite of pain, sent Asher's head swimming, and he arched his neck back, moaning like a slut.

"Yeah, I like you better this way," Zaiden murmured as he pumped his fingers in and out of Asher's body. "Just look pretty and let me take care of you." His fingers disappeared, replaced by the blunt head of his cock. "Deep breath, baby."

Asher did as instructed, groaning on the exhale as his mate invaded his dark depths. His head whipped back and forth on the floor as lightning bolts of pleasure zipped through his body. "Fuck, this isn't going to take long."

"You're such a romantic." Zaiden chuckled breathlessly as he seated himself inside Asher's hungry ass.

"Just shut up and fuck me."

"Bossy little bird." Zaiden thrust back in hard, nailing Asher's prostate and pulling a strangled sob from his open mouth. "Oh, you like that?" Zaiden pulled out slowly and rammed back in. "You want it rough, baby?"

“Oh, god!” Asher locked his ankles behind Zaiden’s back and tangled his fingers in his mate’s hair, jerking it sharply. “Yes! Harder!”

Taking him at his word, Zaiden slipped an arm under his hips, lifting him up as he plowed into him hard enough to rattle his bones. “You fucking love my cock, don’t you, baby? Tell me you love it.”

“Yes, oh sweet hell, I love it!”

Faster and harder, the intensity built until Asher was out of his mind with pleasure. He couldn’t think, couldn’t speak, could do nothing but accept the glorious fucking Zaiden delivered. His orgasm raced toward him like a runaway locomotive, signaling one hell of an explosion.

“Open your eyes, Ash. Look at me,” Zaiden demanded.

His eyes sprung open, widening at the beautiful mix of pain and pleasure on his lover’s face. Their eyes locked and held, and the rest of the room seemed to melt away. Asher’s fire bubbled to the surface, and little flames licked over the skin on his arms and hands. He felt it, finally understood it, and therefore was able to control it.

Zaiden Reed was his fire. The man controlled him, owned him, body, soul, and flame. Staring into his mate’s emerald eyes, his phoenix called out to Zaiden, soothing Asher’s fears and doubts. He could trust Zaiden to never betray the gift.

With the knowledge firmly in place, Asher finally let himself go, falling over the edge and crying out as his climax rippled through him, sending scorching ropes of pearly seed shooting from his pulsing cock.

Zaiden dropped forward, buried his nose in Asher’s neck, and groaned as his release coated Asher’s inner walls to the point of overflowing. “Fuck, it’s always so good with you.”

“It’s supposed to be,” Asher mumbled. “You are my fire, Zaiden Reed.”

* * * *

Gasping as his flagging prick slid from Asher's still-clenching hole, Zaiden rolled to his side and tried to regain his breath. That was the second time Asher had said that, and he still didn't know what he meant. "Explain that."

Asher maneuvered closer, curling up to Zaiden's side. "You are my mate."

"I get that, baby. It's the other part I'm having a little trouble comprehending."

Pushing up on his elbow, Asher beamed at him. "You called me baby."

Zaiden rolled his eyes and wrapped an arm around his lover's back, pulling him down to settle over his chest. "I told you I was sorry about that. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I catch myself wanting to say it all the time, but I wasn't sure if you'd welcome the endearment. When we're together like this, though, I can't think."

"I get it now," Asher whispered. "I don't mind you calling me baby. It makes me feel special."

Giving his mate a squeeze, Zaiden dropped a chaste kiss on top of his head. "Good, because you are. Now, will you please explain this fire thing to me? It's driving me nuts."

"When a phoenix claims his mate, he gives himself over to that person. We are bound for eternity." His small hand inched up to rest over Zaiden's heart. "Our hearts beat as one." Those slender fingers moved to brush over his lips. "Our breaths are synchronized. Our minds and souls are intertwined." He tilted his head back to look into Zaiden's eyes. "Are you getting it yet?"

Zaiden stroked his mate's cheek lovingly with the back of his knuckles. "How does that make me your fire, baby?"

"You calm me or entice me. When I'm excited, my flame burns brighter. When I'm content like now, my flame barely smolders. You do that to me. I was trying so hard to deny it, to fight it. Now that I

understand and accept our mating, it's easier for me to control." He smiled softly. "You can still call my fire, though."

"How do I do that? And why would I want to?" Zaiden wasn't opposed to the idea. He just didn't understand how he could control something integral to his mate's very being.

Asher held his hand up, his palm facing Zaiden's face. Hesitantly, Zaiden lifted his hand as well and pressed it to Asher's. "You've seen my fire. Think about what it looks like, what it feels like when I touch you. Imagine the flames dancing over our hands."

Staring intently at their clasped fingers, Zaiden pictured tiny orange flames leaping across their skin. He gasped when fire immediately flickered to life, engulfing their hands and wrists. It wasn't orange though, but a deep purple. He had never seen anything like it before.

He didn't have long to dwell on it, however. The pleasure followed immediately, starting in his fingertips and spreading throughout his body as it set a quick course to his already filling cock.

"Feels good, right?" Asher moaned quietly, gripping Zaiden's hand a little tighter. "You do that."

"Are you messing with me?"

"Nope. I'm not doing anything. You're doing it all." Asher licked over Zaiden's collarbone. "So, now you tell me. Why would you want to call the fire?"

"Cause it feels fucking awesome," Zaiden whispered breathlessly. "You know what would feel even better?"

"What's that?" Asher mumbled as he crawled on top of him and nibbled down his chest.

"If you wrapped those pretty lips around my cock."

Asher snorted and bit Zaiden's nipple roughly before sliding down his body to rest between his legs. "I guess we're going to have to test that theory."

Stroking him slowly from base to tip once, Asher leaned forward and engulfed the spongy head in his mouth. He licked at the oozing

slit, capturing Zaiden's pre-cum on his tongue as his muffled moans vibrated along Zaiden's shaft.

Holy mother of mercy! His mate's mouth felt like heaven on him, and Zaiden couldn't stop himself from arching up into the welcoming heat of Asher's mouth. Pushing up on one elbow, he watched the erotic show with heavy-lidded eyes. He swallowed back a cry of pleasure when Asher wrapped his hand around the base of Zaiden's dick and began to bob his head, dragging his lips along the upper half.

Then he popped off completely, looking into Zaiden's eyes with a wicked grin. "You ready?"

Zaiden nodded dumbly. He didn't know what he'd just agreed to, but he would happily accept anything his lover was willing to do to him. He followed Asher's gaze down to where his hand still gripped Zaiden's leaking cock.

His entire body tensed, as purple flames erupted over Asher's hand, slowly dancing up the length of his prick. The pleasure swamped him, immediate and intense. Then Asher dove forward, swallowing him to the back of his throat, and Zaiden completely lost it.

He had never felt anything so amazing in his life. It was as though his very soul burned for the man between his splayed thighs. Dropping back to the floor, he twined both hands into Asher's long hair and began to thrust up into his mouth, nudging the back of his mate's throat with each push.

Asher's other hand slid beneath his tightening sac and stroked his perineum before moving further down to caress his fluttering entrance.

One stroke, another, then Asher swallowed around the head of his cock, and Zaiden erupted like a bottle rocket, screaming until his throat felt raw as he unloaded his balls, shooting rivers of cum into his mate's waiting mouth.

Slumping back to the carpet, he tried to control his racing pulse as he panted and moaned, shaking his head from side to side. His brain

wouldn't work, he could barely see, and his tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth. The room blurred around the edges and began to fade until he finally gave up the battle and slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter Ten

“I like this one.”

Rolling off the mattress, Zaiden stood to his feet and shook his head. “Let’s keep looking.”

“But, I want this one,” Asher whined.

“We can come back,” Zaiden cajoled. “Let’s just keep looking.”

Asher arched an eyebrow at him before he flopped back on the bed and moaned loudly. “Oh, wow! This is awesome. I want this one.”

Zaiden’s cock twitched in interest at the sight of his mate squirming and moaning on the mattress. Glancing around, he realized he wasn’t the only one who’d taken notice. A few women and even a couple of men had stopped in their conversations and browsing to watch Asher’s little show in the middle of the furniture store.

Growling, Zaiden stepped closer to the bed and smacked his lover on his hip. “Fine, we can get this one,” he hissed. “Now, will you stop that!”

Asher just smiled evilly as he arched his back and moaned louder. “This bed is so perfect. Just imagine how hard you could fuck me on this.” He spoke loudly, much louder than the distance between them warranted.

Zaiden closed his eyes, his cheeks heating as he heard several gasps and a few sniggers behind him. “Get up, Ash.”

Flipping over to his stomach, Asher rocked his hips into the mattress, humping it with quick, sharp jabs. “Oh, yeah. It’s really sturdy. I don’t think we’ll break this one like we did the other two.”

Squeezing his eyes tighter, Zaiden fought against his utter embarrassment. He was going to kill the little punk when they got home. "Asher, I swear to everything that is holy, if you don't get the fuck up in the next two seconds..." He trailed off, leaving the threat hanging.

"I'm not sure I'm doing this right. I think we need to make sure that it will stand up to our combined weight." Asher pushed up on his hands and knees. "Get behind me the way I like it, so I can make sure this is comfortable."

Without thought, Zaiden reached down and swatted his mate hard on his rounded ass in reprimand. Asher moaned and whimpered like a pro, lowering his chest to the mattress and wiggling his ass. "Fuck yes," he cried out. "You know how I like it rough. Do it again, baby. I could come just from you spanking my ass."

Changing tactics, Zaiden lowered his voice, letting it flow deep and commanding. "Get up from the bed, and I promise to make this ass glow nice and hot for me when we get home."

Asher wouldn't let up, though. "Oh, but I need it now, Zaid. I'm so hard," he whimpered.

"Fucking faggots," some guy grumbled as he stalked by them, shooting death glares in their direction.

Sudden rage overcame his embarrassment, and Zaiden turned to follow the man. He didn't care what people said about him, but no one spoke about his mate in such a way. A tight grip on his wrist stopped him, and he looked back to see Asher staring up at him in apology. "Sorry, Zaid. I was just having some fun."

"He has no right to talk about you that way."

"Let it go. He's not worth it." Asher crawled off the bed and molded himself to Zaiden. "Are you mad at me?"

With a deep sigh, Zaiden grinned crookedly and tapped the tip of Asher's nose with his forefinger. "I'm not mad, baby."

A pretty brunette cleared her throat beside them as she wrung her hands together nervously. "Can I help you gentlemen?"

“I really want that spanking,” Asher whispered seductively.

“We want this one.” Zaiden spoke to the saleswoman without taking his eyes from his mate’s hypnotizing gaze. “I’ll pay extra if you can get it there today.”

* * * *

After purchasing the mattress, they picked out a nice bed frame with a slatted headboard, perfect for attaching handcuffs or tying scarves around. It took all of Asher’s willpower not to bounce as they made their way through the mall in search of a bed and bath shop to purchase new linens.

Happy right down to his toes that Zaiden wasn’t mad at him for his little stunt in the furniture store, he practically vibrated with excitement. He hadn’t set out to embarrass his mate, but boy, had it been fun. Zaiden looked so adorable when he blushed, and that deep, sexy voice of his sent shivers right down Asher’s spine as he replayed it over and over in his head.

“I like the blue ones.” Zaiden brought him out of his thoughts as he pointed toward a plain navy blue bed set.

Asher wrinkled his nose. “How about something with a bit more flair?” He perused the aisle, looking over the options, until his gaze landed on the perfect set—a deep crimson comforter with gold satin sheets. He could already picture his mate spread out for him, his pale skin a perfect contrast to the bright red and faded gold.

Zaiden shrugged and bobbed his head. “That works. I’m not picky.”

“Ugh! You are no fun!” Asher huffed as he tossed the comforter and sheets into the basket. “Ok, we need pillows, curtains, and probably an area rug until we can have the carpets replaced.”

“Whatever you want, baby.” Zaiden smiled indulgently, but Asher could practically see him rolling his eyes internally.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Just let me have my way. If there’s something you like or don’t like, you need to tell me. Otherwise, how will I know? You make me feel like I’m just taking over your house.”

Zaiden’s smile never faltered as he shook his head. “It’s as much your house as mine. I’m really not picky. I told you that. If I feel strongly about something, I’ll let you know. Otherwise, I’d just rather let you have your fun. You’re too cute when your eyes light up like that.”

“I am not cute,” Asher grumbled.

Zaiden looked as though he’d argue for a minute, then his eyebrows drew together, and he tilted his head to the side as he stared at something just over Asher’s shoulder. Glancing over his shoulder to see what his lover was frowning out, he spotted a tall good-looking man watching them from the end of the aisle.

“Andrew?” Zaiden pushed past Asher and walked right up to the man. He held his hand out, smiling as they shook.

Asher watched them talk and laugh for a minute before curiosity—and a bit of jealousy—got the better of him. Strolling up to the pair, he wrapped a possessive arm around Zaiden’s waist and plastered the biggest smile on his face he could muster. “Hi. We’re fucking.” Okay, so there had been a teensy bit more jealousy than curiosity.

The man Zaiden had called Andrew nearly choked at Asher’s announcement. His eyes went wide, and he coughed a few times before he could finally pull himself together. “Well, congratulations, I suppose,” he answered when he could speak again.

“Asher.” Zaiden wore the biggest shit-eating grin on his face as he spoke. “This is Andrew George, a former patient of mine.”

Asher nodded his head, but didn’t release his hold on his lover or offer his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Andrew said around a smirk. He eyed Asher up and down, letting his gaze linger a little too long on Asher’s groin before

moving on to do the same thing to Zaiden. “How long have you two been together?”

“Long enough,” Asher sneered icily. “I’m not going to mince words. I don’t like you, and we’re leaving now. Later, dude.” He turned away and tugged on Zaiden’s elbow. He didn’t know what the hell had gotten into him, and he didn’t much care. Zaiden was his, lock, stock, and barrel. Andrew George could go fuck himself.

“Little hostile, don’t you think?” Zaiden chuckled as he allowed Asher to pull him back toward their shopping cart. “He’s a nice guy once you get to know him.”

“Whatever. I don’t like him, and you can’t make me.” Asher knew he’d moved past the point of jealous lover and right on to petulant child. He’d claimed Zaiden, and Zaiden had claimed him in return. He felt fully justified in his possessive attitude.

Zaiden eased up behind him, pressing Asher’s chest into the bar of the cart as he leaned over him to whisper in his ear. “You’re sexy as sin when you get jealous. Maybe I should invite my ex-boyfriend over for dinner one night.”

“Do it, and I will castrate you. That’s not even funny, Zaiden.”

Zaiden chuckled lightly, then nipped Asher’s earlobe playfully. “Duly noted, baby. Your little possessive streak gets me going, though. I want to bend you over the nearest flat surface and to hell with anyone who wants to watch.

Asher moaned, pushing his ass back into Zaiden’s crotch and grinding against the hard ridge there. “Can we go home now? I really think we need to go home now, Zaid.”

“Our new bed won’t be there for another couple of hours. Let’s finished our shopping and grab something to eat.”

“Goddamn tease,” Asher mumbled as he worked to calm his labored breathing.

“Not a tease. I’m going to take special care of you tonight, baby.” He scraped his teeth over the back of Asher’s neck, sending electricity

down his spine and straight to his already straining cock. “Will you trust me, Ash?”

“Yeah. Okay,” Asher breathed. With Zaiden’s mouth and hands on him, he’d agree to just about anything at that point. If Zaiden said to drop to his knees and suck him off, Asher would have that gorgeous cock in his mouth in nanoseconds.

“You’re not moving, Ash.” Zaiden smirked at him, one eyebrow cocked.

“Shut up. I’m trying to remember how to breathe. You fight dirty.”

“This coming from the man that practically fucked his imaginary friend in the middle of a freakin’ furniture store.”

A very unmanly giggle escaped his lips, and Asher slapped a hand over his mouth to cut it off. “Oh, you loved every minute of it,” he mumbled around his fingers.

Rolling his eyes, Zaiden slapped Asher’s ass and gave a little nudge between his shoulder blades. “You’re going to kill me. I just know it.”

“Naw, I’m immortal, remember? You’re stuck with me forever.” Asher made a kissy face at his mate, then ducked around the cart and hurried down the aisle, laughing like a loon.

Judging from the look in Zaiden’s eyes, Asher was going to get a good paddling when they finally made it back to their house. He absolutely couldn’t wait.

Chapter Eleven

“What the hell?” Zaiden pushed his lover behind him and hurried across the parking lot to his vehicle. He stood there in shock, his mouth hanging open like a guppy as he shook his head in disbelief. Who the hell would have done such a thing?

“Seriously?” Asher growled as he stepped up beside him and dropped the bags to the concrete. “Is there something you need to tell me?” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared up at Zaiden.

Zaiden just continued to shake his head like an idiot. “I have no idea who did this.” He moved closer to his vehicles, running his fingertips over the words etched into the hood.

HE IS MINE!

“Maybe it’s a jealous lover or something. Maybe they just got the wrong car,” Zaiden said hopefully. He might have teased Asher earlier, but he didn’t have any exes that would do something like this. Hell, he didn’t really have any exes at all. Which would explain why he kept fucking up with his mate left and right.

“Well, we need to call the police.”

“I don’t think there’s much they can do about this.”

“Probably not,” Asher agreed. “But your insurance company is going to want to see a police report before they pay to have this fixed.”

Nodding like a bobble-head doll, Zaiden could think of nothing to say. Thank heavens one of them was working with a full deck.

A sudden thought occurred to him, chilling his blood, and stealing the breath from his lungs. What if whoever did this had the right car, but wasn't referring to him. What if someone wanted Asher?

Fear had him spinning on his heels and dragging his mate into his arms, crushing him close as he peppered kisses over the top of Asher's head. He didn't know if he loved the man yet, but he did know he was quickly on his way to not being able to live without him. He'd do whatever needed to be done to keep his mate safe. No one would take the man from him. No one.

Asher pushed away, staring up at him as though he'd lost his damn mind—which he probably had. “What is wrong with you? You're shaking like a leaf.” Asher's voice softened, and he placed his hand over Zaiden's heart. “Your heart is beating so fast,” he whispered. “What's wrong, big guy?”

Zaiden shook his head, trying his best imitation of a reassuring smile. “Nothing. Just a little shocked I guess. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

“You are lying.” Asher glared at him. “Don't lie to me, Zaiden. I'm not a child.”

Sighing heavily, Zaiden dropped his chin to his chest and reached up to rub the tension from the back of his neck. He didn't want to sound paranoid, but maybe if he expressed his concerns, Asher could put his mind at ease.

“What if that message isn't about me?”

“Yeah, you already said that. Like maybe your car just looks like someone else's.”

“No.” Zaiden cupped Asher's cheek in his palm as he stared into his amber eyes. “What if the message is *to* me, not *about* me?”

“You think someone wants you to stay away from me?” Asher's brow wrinkled as he thought over the statement. “I don't think that's likely. I just moved here. I've barely even left the house, and I definitely haven't spoken with anyone longer than it's taken me to purchase something.”

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders and Zaiden let out a breath of relief. “Yeah, you’re probably right. I just got paranoid and overprotective.”

Asher’s eyes softened, and he smiled tenderly. “I like that,” he whispered. His cheeks flushed, and he looked away, suddenly finding the left front tire on Zaiden’s car very interesting.

“Hey.” Zaiden held his lover’s chin and urged his face back to look into his eyes again. “None of that. We might have been tricked into this mating thing, but I like you a lot, okay? If I have to be stuck with someone for the rest of my life, I don’t think I could have picked anyone better. We’re a team now.”

Asher’s eyes misted a bit, shimmering in the sunlight as he nodded slowly. “Okay,” he whispered thickly. Then he cleared his throat and stepped away, turning around and swiping at his eyes with the sleeve of his checkered shirt. “Hurry up and call the police, because I’m starving.”

Zaiden rolled his eyes but allowed Asher to take charge of the situation. If that’s what his mated needed to feel more grounded, he wouldn’t argue.

* * * *

They finished talking to the police about the vandalism to Zaiden’s car and arrived home just in time to unload their purchases before the delivery van pulled up to the curb with their new bed. Zaiden insisted on supervising the setup, hovering over the deliverymen and watching them like a hawk.

Once the men had left, glaring daggers at Zaiden the entire way out, Asher set to work hanging the new blinds and curtains as his lover made the bed with the new bed set. It really did look nice, and matched perfectly with the shimmery gold drapes Asher had found on their third stop.

"It looks good," Zaiden complimented when he'd finished. He took a few steps back, surveying the room as he smiled and nodded. "It looks *really* good. You did a fantastic job, baby."

Asher preened at the compliment, huffing on his knuckles and pretending to polish them against his chest. "Yeah, I'm awesome. Say it again."

Zaiden snorted and rolled his eyes before flipping Asher the bird and walking out of the room. Jumping down from the stepladder he'd been using to hang the curtains, he raced after his mate, catching up with him in the kitchen. "Why'd you just leave like that? I was only joking."

Whirling around, Zaiden stared at him in shock. "Asher, I'm not mad. I just came to the kitchen to get a beer. What's up with you?"

Biting his lip, Asher shook his head quickly. Damn, he could be such a bonehead sometimes. "Nothing's wrong. I was just mad because you were acting all pissy, and I didn't do anything wrong."

Zaiden eyed him for a long time, then finally nodded and turned back to the refrigerator. Asher sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. He'd demanded total honesty from Zaiden earlier. The least he could do was reciprocate the request.

"I really like you, Zaiden. I know it's not been very long, but I can see this really going somewhere. Not just us being stuck together." He watched Zaiden slowly straighten and close the door to the fridge before turning around to frown at him.

"Some weird shit has been happening, and it makes me wonder if maybe you have somebody else. Someone who's not happy that I'm here." Asher shrugged and looked down at his bare feet. "I don't like it when you're mad at me," he mumbled. "It makes my stomach feel funny, and not in a good way."

The room went deafeningly quiet. It pressed in on him, surrounding and suffocating him, until he couldn't take it anymore. Lifting his head, Asher opened his mouth to saying something stupid no doubt, but snapped it shut when he saw the look on Zaiden's face.

The man had his head tilted to the side, his hands resting on his hips, and a half smile on his mouth as if he knew a secret and wasn't about to share. Then he lifted a hand into the air and crooked a finger at Asher. Twice.

Moving as if in a trance, Asher drifted across the room, his eyes never leaving Zaiden's until he stood directly in front of him. Tilting his head back on his shoulders to adjust for their almost thirteen-inch height difference, he waited patiently for whatever his mate had to say.

"I've never really had boyfriends," Zaiden began. "I don't have anyone else in my life. I don't want anyone else." He wound his arms around Asher back and leaned down to kiss his forehead. "To be honest, I've never wanted anyone like I want you. I just haven't worked through why that is."

Nodding his understanding, Asher snuggled closer to his mate's chest. "I get that. Everything just happened so fast, and I feel like I'm struggling to keep up. Some days I'm not sure I even manage to keep my head above the surface."

"I know exactly what you mean, baby." Zaiden nuzzled the top of Asher's head with his cheek and sighed. "We'll figure it out together, but we have to be honest with each other. Deal?"

"Okay. Deal."

"Now, what do you want to do, baby?" Zaiden stepped away and wiggled his eyebrows playfully. "How about a movie in bed, and then we can break in our new mattress."

"Oh, yeah, I can get behind that plan. You make the popcorn, and I'll run to Blockbuster. Your movie collection sucks."

"I'll agree with you on that one." Zaiden grimaced as he pulled the popcorn bags from the cabinet over the sink. "I don't watch a lot of television, so I never really saw a need to buy movies. Before you moved in, I spent the majority of my time at the office. Hell, there were nights I even slept there."

“That’s just sad.” Asher shook his head in mock despair and grabbed his car keys from the hook beside the back door. “Do you have a preference?”

“Either horror, action, or something with half-naked, sweaty men.”

“I like the way you think. I’ll get one of each.” Asher, blew Zaiden a kiss, and hurried out of the kitchen.

Chapter Twelve

“That man is a freakin’ god,” Asher breathed before shoveling another handful of popcorn into his mouth. “Have you ever seen so many muscles in your life?”

Zaiden had to agree, but he found his taste in men ran a little more on the small and dainty side. He’d watched more of Asher than he had the movie, sneaking glances at him from the corner of his eye as often as possible. He loved the way his mate had gasped and clung to him, practically crawling up in his lap during the horror film.

Now, they’d moved on to the action adventure, and damn had Asher picked a good one. He’d combined some top-notch fight scenes with plenty of slick, glistening bare chests and abs. If the tent in his sleep pants was any indication, he was enjoying the movie immensely.

Zaiden’s cock screamed at him as it throbbed between his legs, demanding to be the focus of Asher’s attention. He wrapped a chokehold around his desire, though, and settled back against the headboard to just enjoy spending time with his mate.

“This is nice.”

Peeking over at his mate’s softly sighed words, Zaiden smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve never done anything like this before. I like it.”

“I have something I think you might like a little better.” Asher turned and knelt on the bed in front of him with a teasing glint in his eyes. He pulled his hands from behind his back and presented Zaiden with a pair of handcuffs and a bottle of chocolate syrup.

Trying desperately not to swallow his tongue, Zaiden’s eyes widened and he continued to nod dazedly. “Oh, yeah. I like.” He

started to reach for the handcuffs, but Asher held them out of reach as he clucked his tongue.

“I want that spanking. Then I’m going to handcuff you to the bed and ride you until you scream my name. Can you handle that?”

Zaiden growled as he lunged for his mate, tackling him to the mattress and pinning him by the shoulders. “You really were a brat at the mall today. I think you need to be reminded who’s in charge here.”

Asher swallowed hard as his mouth opened and his tongue snaked out to moisten his dry lips. “Oh, yes. I need you to punish me, Zaid.”

Zaiden closed his eyes briefly, trying to grab hold of some semblance of control. His mate proved too tempting when he thrust up against him and ground their cotton-covered erections together.

Rolling off the bed with a grunt, Zaiden stood at the foot of the mattress and pushed his boxers down his hips to pool on the floor at his feet. “Get naked, and then I want you to lay over the bed here.” His voice dropped low and husky, rough and demanding. He’d never heard anything like that come from his mouth before.

Asher nodded quickly as he jumped from the bed and stripped off his sleep pants in record time. He hurried around to stand in front of Zaiden, then turned and sprawled over the mattress on his stomach, his feet on the floor, and his ass pushed high in the air.

“Like this? Is this how you want me?”

Zaiden caressed the rounded globes one by one before giving each a light swat. “This is perfect, baby. Don’t move.”

Asher started to lift up on his hands, his head moving to look over his shoulder. Zaiden swatted him hard, his dick jerking as he watched his hand print appear on his mate’s ass. “I said do. Not. Move.”

“Yes, sir,” Asher panted.

Satisfied that his mate would comply with his command, Zaiden hurried to the closet and dug through the top of it until he came up with his little bag of goodies. Pulling the slim butt plug and the

warming lube from the bag, he rushed back to his mate and dropped to his knees.

Without a word or other preliminaries, he spread Asher's cheeks and licked a long swatch from his taint to his hole. He swirled his tongue around the pretty little starburst, growling and groaning at the taste of his mate.

Asher whimpered and moaned, but remained perfectly still. *Good boy*. Zaiden licked and prodded until the muscles began to relax, then pushed his tongue inside, licking at the inside of Asher's entrance.

He squeezed and massaged the muscles cheeks before delivering a stinging smack to the right one. Asher cried out, his muscles tensing around Zaiden's invading tongue. "Oh, shit. Do that again," he whimpered.

Zaiden set a steady rhythm, fucking his mate's hole with his tongue as he continued to spank him over and over, alternating sides. When he felt he had reduced his lover to a writhing pile of mindless goo, he grabbed the lube from the floor and popped the cap one-handed. Sitting back on his heels, he worked quickly, slicking his fingers and dribbling a little extra along Asher's crease for good measure.

He circled the muscles once before pushing into the second knuckle with his index finger. He licked and nibbled, scraping his teeth over Asher's glowing hot ass as he pumped in and out of him, twisting his wrist and stretching the muscles.

"You look so fucking hot like this, baby. Do you like it? I want to hear how much you like it."

Asher moans grew in volumes as they stuttered from his mouth in broken sobs. Zaiden added a second finger, scissoring them back and forth, stretching his mate for the fun he had planned. Once he could easily fit a third digit, he pumped a few more times before gently removing them from Asher's convulsing tunnel.

Growling, Asher pushed his ass back toward Zaiden, silently begging for more. It would have been funny if Zaiden hadn't been

fighting like hell to not blow his damn load just from the sight. Grabbing the black silicone butt plug, he slicked it quickly and pressed the tip against his mate's opening.

"You ready, baby?"

"What is that?" Asher didn't sound worried—merely curious.

"Do you trust me?" As much as he wanted this, it had to be Asher's decision. He would never force anything on his mate that the man wasn't comfortable with.

"Yes, Zaid. I trust you. Whatever you want. I'm yours."

Gripping the base of his cock to stave off his orgasm, Zaiden moaned pathetically at Asher's words. He could hear them over and over and never grow tired of it. Pushing away his own desire, he concentrated on his mate, nudging the tip of the plug through the tight muscles and rocking it gently. Asher's hungry ass clamped down around the tip, sucking in more of the toy until the flat base rested against his cheeks.

"God, I feel so fucking full."

Zaiden stood to his feet, admiring his handy work as he smoothed his palms over his lover's still-heated bottom. Then he swatted him lightly, again and again with no pause between. The intensity increased, his hand stinging from the punishment he delivered to his eager mate.

Asher went wild, screaming and moaning, wiggling around on the bed to slip a hand beneath him to grip his turgid flesh. Zaiden swatted him over the base of the plug, pushing it deeper as he growled. "Uh-uh, little birdy. Not touching what belongs to me."

Mewling pathetically, Asher moved his hand from beneath him and placed it flat against the mattress. "I need to come, Zaid. My goddamn dick is going to fall off and my balls are going to explode if you don't let me come."

"Oh, I'm going to let you come, baby. Just not until I say so." Three more swats to Asher's ass and Zaiden grinned broadly as the pretty shade of red that greeted his eyes. "You should see yourself,

Ash. I've never seen anything more gorgeous than how you look right now."

Leaning over his mate, he braced his hands on either side of Asher's head, curling over him until his chest rested against Asher's back. They both hissed, and Asher actually cried out as Zaiden's leaking cock slid over his scorching hot ass.

"Fuck me, Zaiden. Please, I can't take anymore." Asher sounded near hysteria, and it scared the shit out of Zaiden.

Sitting up quickly, he rolled his lover to his back and pushed the sweaty hair back from his face. "Shh, baby. It's okay." He gripped Asher's cock in his hand and stroked him quickly. "Come for me, baby. If that's what you need, then do it."

Asher's head whipped back and forth on the comforter, and he swatted Zaiden's hand away. "I want to fuck you," he said, staring into Zaiden's eyes. "I want to come inside that sinfully gorgeous ass of yours and brand you as mine."

Zaiden's cock pulsed and throbbed, dripping copious amounts of pre-cum from the slit as a mental movie reel flipped through his mind of his mate plowing into his ass again and again.

"Yes," he hissed. "Fuck me, Asher." Moving up the bed, he positioned himself on his back in the middle of the bed and spread his legs wide in invitation.

Moving faster than Zaiden had ever seen him, Asher sprang off the bed, grabbed the handcuffs and had them looped around Zaiden's wrist before he could protest. Then he slipped the over cuff through the metal slats on the headboard and locked it around Zaiden's other wrist.

"Okay? Not too tight?"

Zaiden turned his wrist one way and then the other, pulling lightly against his restraints. "Not too tight, but I want to touch you," he pouted.

“Later.” Asher wasted no time as he pushed Zaiden’s knees to his chest and pushed two well-lubed fingers into his eager ass. “Oh holy hell, you’re fucking tight, babe. I didn’t realize. Are you okay?”

Zaiden closed his eyes and breathed through the burn and slight bite of pain from Asher’s forceful entry. His erection never lagged, though, and his breathing accelerated until his head began to swim with lack of oxygen. Hell, he didn’t even remember Asher grabbing the lube.

“Feels good. Keep going.” He wasn’t lying. He liked that quick jab, the instant zap of pain before the pleasure took over and swamped him in sensations. “I love what you do to me.”

Asher stretched him quickly, his entire body trembling as he worked to prepare Zaiden’s hole. Then the fingers disappeared and the blunt tip of Asher’s prick nudged against his opening. Asher paused and looked to him as though asking permission. Zaiden had only one answer to give.

“Fuck me, Ash. Hard and fast, slow and easy, however you want it, baby.”

“Can’t go slow,” Asher ground out through gritted teeth. “I need you too bad.”

“Oh thank fuck,” Zaiden gasped as his lover pushed in to the root with one long glide.

“So tight. So damn good,” Asher moaned as he eased into his rhythm, working his glistening shaft in and out of Zaiden’s clenching passage. “Your ass just swallows my cock, babe. It’s so hungry for me.”

He leaned forward, covering Zaiden’s body, and began kissing down his neck and chest as he set a hard, fast pace that left Zaiden struggling to keep up. “Gonna,” Zaiden warned.

“Not without me you aren’t.” Sitting up to kneel between his legs, Asher held a bruising grip on Zaiden’s hips as he drove into him.

Zaiden rocked against his lover, meeting him thrust for demanding thrust. “Stroke me, baby. I need you touch me. Fuck, I need to come.”

“No,” Asher growled. “You’re going to come just from cock in your ass.” Then Asher right hand burst into purple and orange flames, and he rubbed it down Zaiden’s chest, bypassing his straining cock and cupping his heavy sac instead. “Come for me,” he whispered so softly Zaiden barely heard him, but had no choice but to obey.

The heat spread through him, choking off his cry of completion in a strangled sob as jets of pearly spunk blasted from the head of his dick to paint his chest and stomach. His eyes rolled back in his head as his heart thundered inside his chest, knocking against his breastbone like a hammer.

“Stay with me, Zaid,” Asher demanded as he jerked on Zaiden’s hips and slammed home once again. He froze, his eyes squeezing shut as his body jerked and trembled, and hot lava filled Zaiden’s ass, coating his inner walls and pulling another soft groan from his heaving chest.

Asher slumped over him, planting a soft kiss on Zaiden’s lips. “Incredible,” he whispered tenderly.

“Always is,” Zaiden answered, still trying to catch his breath.

“I didn’t get to play with my chocolate,” Asher pouted.

“Next time, baby. I promise.” Zaiden adored the way his mate’s bottom lip stuck out—the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. He clinked the handcuffs against the headboard and arched an eyebrow. “Get me out of these so we can get cleaned up.”

Nodding once, Asher sat up, eased out of Zaiden’s body, and moved to the nightstand to retrieve the keys. Working quickly, he unlocked the cuffs, tossing them aside, and frowned as he rubbed the circulation back into Zaiden’s wrists.

“What’s wrong, Ash?”

“The cuffs marked you.” He held Zaiden’s hand up, tracing his fingertips over the red skin on his wrist. “I didn’t think they would do that.”

“It’s just a little chaffing,” Zaiden assured him. “It will be gone by morning. I’m fine.”

“You’d tell me if I hurt you, right?”

The distress in Asher’s eyes tugged at Zaiden’s heartstrings. He opened his arms, beckoning his love to him. “You didn’t hurt me, so stop it. I enjoyed every second of it.”

One hand slipped into Asher’s hair, massaging his scalp. The other traveled down his side, over his hip, and around to trail down the crease of his still-heated ass. He brushed over the base of the plug still lodged in his mate’s hole, tapping it lightly to wiggle it just a little.

Asher’s soft gasp turned to a muffled moan as he pushed his face into Zaiden’s neck and squirmed against him. “Feels good.”

“Did you like being filled while you pounded that monster cock into my ass?”

Asher nodded against Zaiden’s throat. “I’ve never felt anything like it. It was freaking awesome. It was supposed to be about you, though. You keep messing up my plans.”

Zaiden chuckled softly as he held his mate to him. “Are you complaining?”

“No. There’s so many things I want to do to you—with you.”

“And we have all of eternity to experiment, baby.” He patted Asher’s hip and sighed. “I’d prefer not to spend that time stuck together, though.” Zaiden wrinkled his nose as the jizz on chest began to dry, causing his skin to itch. “Shower.”

Chapter Thirteen

The remainder of March sped by in a blur of total bliss. Zaiden and Asher spent every available moment together, talking and laughing, learning a little more about each other with every passing day. Everything Asher learned about his mate nudged him that much closer to slipping over the edge and into free fall.

He'd never met anyone like Zaiden in all of his millennia on earth. Kind, giving, charming, and witty, Zaiden was everything he had ever hoped to find in a mate. Though their union had been sealed by trickery and happenstance, Asher didn't doubt that fate had brought them together.

Zaiden looked up from his morning paper as though he'd felt Asher's gaze on him, and smiled that special heart-stopping smile that left Asher feeling weak in the knees. He sighed like a lovesick fool, and could actually feel the goofy, dazed smile spread over his lips in response.

"What are you thinking about, baby?" Zaiden's voice floated across the table to him, deep, rich, and smooth as honey.

Shaking his head to clear the fog, Asher sat up a little straighter in his seat and cleared his throat. "Oh, nothing. So, what did you want to do today?"

Zaiden eyed him knowingly, his eyes dancing with enlightenment, but he didn't say anything. Asher knew he wouldn't, and it just made him love the man that much more. Yes, deep in his heart, he knew he'd fallen for the big, gorgeous sprite, but he wasn't ready to say it. It had been barely more than four weeks since they'd been thrust

together and had their lives turned upside down. He just needed a little more time to be positive his feelings were genuine.

“I thought maybe we’d drive into Memphis for the weekend. Go see Graceland, get a hotel, and veg out on room service.”

Asher’s pressed his lips together to keep his mouth from falling open like a guppy. Clenching his hands into fists and lowering them to his lap to conceal their trembling, he nodded his head slowly in acceptance of the idea.

“Are you okay, baby?” Zaiden’s brow wrinkled, and he looked instantly concerned. “We don’t have to go. I just thought it might be fun. You can pick what we do, anything you want.” He rose from his seat and hurried around the table to kneel beside Asher. “You’re scaring me, Ash.”

He couldn’t hold it any longer. Whooping like an idiot, Asher launched himself into Zaiden’s lap, wrapped his arms around the man’s neck, and squeezed the life out of him. “Please, please, please!”

Zaiden laughed loudly as his arms wound around Asher’s back. “So, I take you like the idea?”

“Hell yes! I just didn’t want to seem like an overeager toddler, but holy crap, I’m so freakin’ excited! I’ve never been to Graceland before.”

“Never?” Zaiden looked appalled. “You are so missing out, darlin’.” He winked and kissed the tip of Asher’s nose. “Go pack our bags, and I’ll clean up the kitchen. We can leave in an hour.”

The excitement bubbled over, and Asher crushed his mouth to his mate’s in a soul-searing, toe-curling, mind-melting kiss. Jerking away and panting through his ridiculously huge smile, Asher jumped up from his lover’s lap and held out a hand to help Zaiden to his feet as well. “Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome.” Zaiden chuckled, slapping Asher’s ass and flicking his wrist toward the hallway. “Now hurry up or we’ll never leave.”

Asher nodded once, blew Zaiden an air kiss and hurried out of the room. Crap! He had no idea what to pack. What did one wear to Graceland? Would they be going anywhere else? Should he pack something nice in case they went out for a night on the town?

Oh, screw it. He'd just pack everything.

"And don't pack the whole damn closet," Zaiden called from the kitchen.

Asher covered his mouth with his hand to muffle his giddy laughter. The man knew him too well.

* * * *

Zaiden had just turned on the dishwasher when the doorbell rang. Hoping it was the surprise he'd ordered for Asher, he hurried from the kitchen to answer it.

"I'll get it!" Asher flew out of the hallway and pounced on the door before Zaiden had even cleared the threshold of the kitchen.

Asher pulled open the door and froze, the muscles in his shoulders and back tensing, as his fingers still held a white-knuckled grip on the doorknob. "What the fuck do you want?"

Frowning at the less than friendly welcome, Zaiden hurried across the room to his mate. He stopped just behind Asher and stared in shock at the sight of Andrew George standing on his front porch. "Andrew?"

"Hello, Dr. Reed," Andrew said shakily. "I'm sorry to bother you at home, but it really couldn't wait."

Torn between his ethics as a doctor and anger at the personal invasion, Zaiden didn't say anything for several seconds. Finally, duty won out, and he nodded, placing a hand on Asher's shoulder to pull him away from the door. "It's okay, Andrew. Please come in."

Asher snarled, his upper lip curling over his teeth, and Zaiden swallowed down a sigh. As hot as he found his mate's little possessive streak, this was neither the time nor the place for it. "Why

don't you go finish packing, baby?" He kissed Asher's temple and squeezed his shoulder.

Asher continued to stare at Andrew for several minutes before he nodded curtly, whirled around, and stomped from the room without another word.

Plastering a smile on his face, Zaiden motioned Andrew into the house and indicated he should take a seat on the sofa. "What can I do for you today?"

"I'm in love," Andrew blurted out nervously.

Zaiden's eyes widened before he schooled his features and nodded. "Congratulations. I'm not sure I understand what that has to do with me, however."

"He doesn't know I exist. I don't know how to make him notice me. I can't stop thinking about him."

"Have you told him how you feel?"

Andrew chewed on his lower lip and shook his head. "I'm scared," he whispered.

"It's perfectly natural to be nervous," Zaiden said gently. "How do you know he doesn't return your feelings? Maybe he is as nervous as you are, and worried that you will reject him."

"I'd never reject him," Andrew stated firmly. "He is the most beautiful, amazing, perfect man I have ever met. I just want a chance."

"Then you have to take that chance, don't you? No one is going to hand it to you on a silver platter. If you want something, you have to go out and get it."

Andrew cocked his head to the side as though considering Zaiden's words. "You are absolutely right. I can't wait for him to come to me."

"Have you talked to Denise about this? Maybe she could help."

Sighing, Andrew shook his head sadly. "I haven't spoken with Denise since we filed for divorce. She moved out, changed her number, and practically vanished overnight."

Zaiden's heart hurt for the man. "I'm sorry to hear that. Perhaps she just needs a little time to come to terms with the end of your relationship."

"I think she's found someone else." Andrew's eyebrows drew together. "I'm okay with that, and I hope she's happy. I just thought that we could still be friends."

"I'm sure you will, Andrew. Just give her a little time."

"She said I was crazy," Andrew whispered. "She doesn't understand how I can love someone so quickly after meeting them."

"Love is curious, don't you think?" Zaiden's thoughts drifted to Asher, and he grinned like a sap. He had the perfect night planned in Memphis. He never wanted his mate to forget the night Zaiden professed his feelings.

"I have to agree." Andrew pushed a hand through his hair and sighed. "So, you think I should just tell him. Just get it out in the open and let the chips fall where they may?"

"Perhaps try courting this man. Everyone appreciates a little romance, Andrew."

"Yes. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do." Andrew sprang up from the couch so quickly, Zaiden jumped in surprise. "Thank you for your time, Dr. Reed. I'm sorry again to bother you."

Then he practically ran to the door, threw it open, and hurried outside.

Shaking his head and chuckling, Zaiden rose from the cushions and turned to go find his peeved lover. He didn't have to look far. Asher stood just inside the room, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned his shoulder against the wall.

"You are an idiot, Dr. Reed."

"Excuse me?"

Asher growled, pushing away from the wall and letting his hands drop to his sides. "You know he's talking about you, right? You just gave that psycho permission to stalk you!"

Rolling his eyes, Zaiden fought to keep his temper leashed. “He’s not a stalker, and I very seriously doubt he was referring to me.”

“Oh, don’t be so damn naïve, Zaiden! The man looks at you like you’re the last drink of water in the desert.”

“You mean kind of the way I look at you?” Zaiden clamped his mouth shut and looked away. Not that the words weren’t true, but he hadn’t meant to say them out loud.

“Don’t think you’re going to distract me with mushy words.” Asher’s glare slowly melted into a half smile, and he shook his head. “I don’t want to ruin our weekend, so I’ll drop it for now. We will talk about this when we get back, though. Understood?”

Satisfied that he’d won this round, Zaiden couldn’t resist a little teasing. He dropped his head to stare at his shoes and linked his fingers behind his back. “Yes, sir.”

“God, you’re trouble,” Asher huffed. “Come in here and help me finish packing, you big goof.”

“I have something I’d like to pack right inside that tight little a—”

“Zaiden!” Asher threw his hands in the air, rolled his eyes, and turned to walk down the hall, shaking his head the entire way.

Zaiden made to follow his mate, but the doorbell stopped him in his tracks. Growling in frustration, he marched over to the door and yanked it open. It was freaking nine o’clock on a Saturday morning. Why couldn’t people just leave them alone? “What?” he barked.

“Package, sir,” the UPS man said with a smile. Obviously, he was used to receiving such greetings, but Zaiden still felt like an ass.

Signing for the package, he smiled in apology and took the box from the man’s hands. “Thank you.”

“Have a good day, sir.”

Clutching the package in both hands, Zaiden hurried down the hall and burst into the bedroom. “Happy Anniversary,” he sang as he thrust the gift at his bewildered-looking mate.

“Anniversary?” Asher asked, slowly reaching out to take the box.

“We’ve been mated for one month today.” Zaiden puffed his chest out, proud of himself for having remembered such an occasion.

Asher bit his lip and set the box down on the mattress without opening it. “I didn’t get you anything,” he said quietly.

Waving away his concern, Zaiden plopped down on the bed and nudged the box toward Asher. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need anything. Now, open your present.”

Giving Zaiden a small grin, Asher set to work ripping off the tape on the brown box and opening the top to reveal a smaller box inside. His mouth hung open, and his head shot up to stare at Zaiden with rounded eyes. “You got me a laptop?”

Zaiden nodded enthusiastically. “You’re always writing your little stories in those notebooks you have. I thought maybe this way, not only could you write them faster, but maybe you could actually do something with them.” His voice softened and caressed Asher’s cheek with the back of his hand. “You’re incredibly talented, baby. You need to share your gift.”

Asher’s lower lip trembled and moisture gathered in his eyes as he continued to look into Zaiden’s eyes. “Thank you, Zaiden. This means so much,” he murmured.

“Hush now.” Zaiden coughed to clear the roughness from his voice. “Hurry up and finish packing.”

“Can I bring my present with me?”

Zaiden’s heart melted, and his insides turned to goo. “Anything you want, baby.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Holy crap, I’m exhausted,” Asher moaned as he climbed out of the driver’s seat and stretched his arms over his head. “That was awesome, but the drive sucks.”

Unfolding his long frame from the sports car, Zaiden had to agree. He’d suffer through it a thousand times over to see the look of excitement that had been molded on Asher’s face all weekend, though.

“We need to plan one of these trips like once a month. It was really nice to just get away and forget about everything.” Asher moved to the back of the car to pop the trunk and extract their luggage. “Thank you for taking me.”

“You’re more than welcome, and I think that’s a great idea. Where would you like to go next?” Zaiden lifted the larger suitcase from the trunk and drugged up the driveway toward the front door.

“How about Nashville? The drives not as long, and there’s some really great things to see there.”

“I like it.” Zaiden smiled as he pulled the front door key from his pocket and slipped it into the lock. “Plan out what you want to do, and we can go in a couple of weeks,” he said, looking over his shoulder at his lover.

“Perfect!” Asher beamed at him.

Zaiden pushed open the door, stepped through, and fumbled for the light switch to the side of the entryway. Light bathed the living room, illuminating the total destruction and chaos. Dropping the bag to the floor, Zaiden’s arm shot out to prevent his mate from entering the house. “Call the police.”

"I'm on it," Asher replied, his voice tense.

"I'm going to check out the rest of the house. I want you to stay outside."

"I'm more than capable of taking care of myself, Zaid. In fact, I'm a lot less fragile than you are. Why don't you call, and I'll search the house."

"Call the police and do not fucking move!" Zaiden roared as he whirled around to face his lover.

Asher grunted, but nodded his head in assent. "If you're not back in five minutes, I'm coming to find you."

"Fair enough." Zaiden left his mate standing on the front porch as he went to survey the damage to the rest of their home. As he feared, each room held the same wreckage that had greeted them in the living room. Lamps turned over, cushions shredded, their belongings broken and smashed.

Stepping into their bedroom and flipping on the light, Zaiden's heart seized in his chest, and his blood turned to ice. The mirror over the dresser was smashed, the curtains and comforter slashed and torn, and their pillows shredded to scraps. Picking up one of Asher's shirts, Zaiden's hands shook when he found it little more than torn rags.

"Where are you?" Asher asked as he stepped into the room behind Zaiden.

"What are you talking about? You're looking right at me."

"No, Zaid. Look." Asher pointed toward the ceiling, and Zaiden followed his finger, looking up and gasping in shock. Big, bright red letters marred the white paint on the ceiling, spelling out the question. "I told you Andrew was a fruitcake."

"Andrew didn't do this," Zaiden said immediately. "He wouldn't hurt a fly. He just doesn't have it in him."

"Open your eyes, Zaiden! The man is completely off his rocker!"

"Did you call the police?" Zaiden asked, changing the subject. He didn't want to argue with his lover. He just wanted some answers.

"Yeah," Asher sighed. "They'll be here in a minute."

“I thought I told you to wait outside?”

“Yeah, and it had been more than five minutes. So,” Asher held his arms wide, “here I am.”

Staring into his mate’s eyes, Zaiden’s heart galloped inside his chest. He never told Asher how he felt during their stay in Memphis. After a lot of debate, he finally decided he wanted the first time he said the words to be in the house they shared—their home. The words tumbled to the tip of his tongue, but Zaiden choked them back. Now was definitely not the time.

A car door slammed outside, pulling Zaiden from his daze, and he shook his head as he slipped past Asher and headed toward the front door to greet the officers.

* * * *

Zaiden canceled all of his appointments for the next three days, and they set to work cleaning the debris from the house and purchasing new furniture and clothes. Since the police could find no signs of forced entry, they also bought new locks and deadbolts for the doors.

The locks seemed sturdy enough, but Asher wanted more. He needed to know they were safe and his mate was protected at all costs. So, he’d had a home security system installed with all the bells and whistles that would automatically alert the police at the first signs of a break-in.

He’d tried to convince Zaiden to move back to Mexico with him, but the man refused to allow the incident to drive him from his home. So, Asher respected his mate’s decision and did all he could to support him.

By the following Saturday, they had cleared all traces of the vandalism from their home, and with no other uninvited visitors, Asher finally began to relax. He lounged on their new, black leather

sofa with his feet resting in Zaiden's lap as they laughed at the television.

"Did you still want to go to Nashville next weekend?" Zaiden asked out of the blue.

Asher considered the offer for a minute before bobbing his head. "Yeah, I think that sounds like a great idea. After this week, I wouldn't mind getting away again."

"Are you sure you want to leave the house?" Zaiden sat forward and cocked his head to the side as he frowned. "You know what happened last time. Do you really want to come back to something like that?"

Asher swung his feet to the floor and stood up, leaning over his mate with his hands on his hips. "You are the one that said you wouldn't cower in fear or run away from our home. Why are you doing a complete one-eighty on me all of the sudden?"

Zaiden smiled as he reached out to grip Asher's hips and pull him between his big thighs. "You're absolutely right, baby. Gorgeous and smart. I hit the jackpot."

Asher rolled his eyes and snorted. "Pretty words will get you everywhere."

"I was hoping you'd say that." Zaiden smirked as he tugged more insistently until Asher tumbled into his lap. Their lips met, sweet and gentle, and Asher couldn't stop the smile that spread over his face.

Before things became too heated, a knock sounded on the back door, and they pulled apart, both looking toward the kitchen and frowning. Why would someone be at the back door at this time of night?

Another knock came, then a pause, then another knock. Though it didn't sound like knocking really. It was muffled thumps, as if someone were throwing something at the door.

"Call the police?" Asher asked as he eased out of Zaiden's lap and started toward the kitchen.

Zaiden grabbed him around the elbow to stop his forward progress. “Yes. Call the police. I’ll go check it out.”

“Zaid, I’m perfectly capable of going to loo—”

Zaiden cut him off by spinning around and placing his hand over Asher’s mouth. “Would you just cut the crap this one time? I’ve heard this song and dance before, and I don’t really need an encore. Just do what I asked. Please?”

Asher glared at him but nodded slowly as he wrapped his fingers around Zaiden’s wrist and removed his mate’s hand from his mouth. “I’ll stay here and call the police if you promise to yell if you need help. Don’t try to be a hero, Zaid.”

“I promise. If I need you, I’ll yell and you can come blow some shit up. Deal? I just need you to be safe right now.”

Though the idea of staying behind while Zaiden faced possible danger was not an appealing one, Asher’s heart melted at the concern and tenderness in his mate’s eyes. “Hurry,” he said as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and began dialing.

He spoke with the dispatcher, outlining the problem and giving their address as he watched Zaiden cautiously approach the back door and peek through the curtain. He flipped the light switch, bathing the back patio in light, and Asher saw the tendons in his neck tense and the muscles in his jaw twitch as though he were grounding his teeth together.

After the dispatcher assured him that a squad car was on the way, Asher slowly walked to the threshold of the kitchen and stopped, not wanting to break his promise to keep himself safe. It was so damn hard, though. His curiosity ate at him, and he wanted nothing more than to sprint across the room, shove Zaiden out of the way, wrench open the door, and confront whoever was trying to sabotage their relationship.

He would bet everything he owned—every penny in his substantial bank account—that Andrew George was behind it all.

They didn't have any proof, and his mate wouldn't hear a bad word against the man, so there wasn't really much Asher could do.

"Zaiden?"

"Stay there," Zaiden called over his shoulder as he reached for the doorknob and turned it slowly before easing open the door and slipping out into the night.

Asher bounced from foot to foot, nervously waiting for his mate to return safely, which was completely ridiculous considering that though the smaller of the two, he was without a doubt the stronger. At least magically, anyway.

Creeping across the linoleum floor, he eased up to the door and peeked through the slit where Zaiden had left it ajar. He saw his mate standing just outside the door, his back muscles flexing, and a low, rumbling growl emanating from his massive chest.

"Asher, why can't you just fucking listen to me?" he asked dangerously.

"For the same reason you wanted me to stay inside in the first place. I need to know that my mate is safe. Besides, I figure this has something to do with me or you wouldn't be so upset."

He slipped outside and stood beside his lover, scanning the yard for their intruder. "I don't see anyone."

"Whoever it was is already gone," Zaiden growled. "They left us a little parting gift, though."

Asher followed Zaiden's gaze and grimaced. Three dead birds lay at their feet on the cement patio. He couldn't really tell what kind of birds they were, though he would guess maybe crows. Each of them had been painted red, their wings dipped in something gold and sparkly. If that didn't make a statement, he didn't know what would.

"They know what you are, Ash."

"It would appear that way."

"We have to leave. We can't stay here."

“What the hell are you talking about? We just finished cleaning this place up and bought all new furniture. I don’t want to leave because some sicko is leaving dead birds in our yard.”

“Are we even looking at the same thing?” Zaiden turned and gripped Asher’s upper arms in a bruising hold. “Someone definitely wants you gone, and I will not come home to find you in the place of these crows. Do you understand me?”

Finally getting the full magnitude of his mate’s distress, Asher’s eyes softened, and he nodded slowly. “You wait for the police, and I’ll go start packing us some bags. We can get a hotel for a little while until we figure out what’s going on. I’m not running away, though. This is our home.”

Zaiden dragged Asher into a crushing embrace, burying his face in his hair and shuddering violently. “Thank you for not arguing with me, baby.”

Asher rubbed his palms up and down his mate’s sides, soothing him as best he knew how. “We’re a unit remember. Where you go, I go.”

Chapter Fifteen

As they crept into the third week of April, Asher began a downward spiral of outright depression. Though he loved the time he spent with his lover, he was beginning to find those times few and far between. Zaiden had been spending more and more time at work, not stumbling in until well after midnight and, just as often, falling-down drunk.

Several times he'd left Asher hanging until the mating heat had become so intense that Asher practically attacked him when Zaiden finally waltzed—or staggered—through the door.

No matter what he said, or how many times he asked, Zaiden would dismiss his concerns with some half-assed excuse about being tired and overworked. They ate breakfast together every morning, the sex was still earth-shattering, and Zaiden was still just as attentive as ever—when he deemed it necessary to actually be present.

Asher missed his lover. He missed the easy camaraderie they shared. He missed waking up to find Zaiden sleeping on the floor because Asher's core body temperature had chased him from the bed. He missed Zaiden's teasing, the endearments, and even the little smirk his mate wore when Asher attempted to cook.

He saw the man every day and slept next to him every night, yet he felt as though an insurmountable distance stretched between them.

Pacing around the common room of the hotel suite, Asher wracked his brain to try to pinpoint exactly what had gone wrong in their already muddled relationship. He knew *when* the trouble had started, but he couldn't put a finger on *why*.

Two days after they'd arrived at the hotel, he'd woken up to find Zaiden sitting at the little table in the corner of the room, staring vacantly into his coffee cup. It had taken him three attempts to gain his mate's attention.

Things had gotten progressively worse since then, and he couldn't count the number of times he'd found Zaiden staring off into space with the same lost expression. His brain still rebelled against the idea of him being in love with the man, but Asher's heart knew the score, and it broke a little more each time Zaiden pushed him further away. Hell, he couldn't even remember the last time they just sat and talked, or cuddled on the sofa to watch a movie.

Asher had never particularly enjoyed those things before, but he missed doing them with Zaiden. He needed to find a way to get through to his mate before everything crumbled down around them. They didn't have an "out" clause in this mating, and he refused to spend eternity with a sullen, moody drunk.

He paused in his trek across the room when the front door of the suite banged open and Zaiden toppled in, falling to the floor and groaning miserably. Throwing his hands up in exasperation, Asher marched across the room and stood over his mate with his hands on his hips.

"Again, Zaiden? Really?" A sudden thought occurred to him, and Asher nudged Zaiden's hip with his foot. "Did you drive?"

"Yep," Zaiden sniggered.

Growling under his breath, his face contorting with rage, Asher slammed the door hard enough to rattle the windows.

"You selfish, arrogant, stupid bastard!" he screamed. "If you want to fucking kill yourself, that's your business, but did you ever stop for one second to think of what that would do to me?"

"You're immortal," Zaiden slurred as he stared up at Asher with bleary eyes. "Even if I die, you'll just burst into your little flames and be reborn." He waved his hands around over his head like a lunatic.

“No, asshole, I won’t.” Asher shook his head sadly. How was he supposed to have a conversation with the man when he likely didn’t even know his own name? “If I die, yes, I will be reborn. Which means that you will always be safe from death in that aspect as well.”

“See? Told ya so,” Zaiden mumbled sleepily.

“If you die,” Asher continued icily, “you take my fire with you and shatter my soul. A phoenix cannot live with the absence of either.”

“You said you can’t die.” Zaiden pushed into a sitting position and laboriously climbed to his feet. He held both hands to his head as he swayed dangerously from side to side. “You can’t die, Ash.”

“I can’t be killed,” Asher amended. “I can die, however. That’s why most phoenixes will only take another phoenix for a mate.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Zaiden’s eyes narrowed, and he sounded angry.

Asher shrugged. “It never came up. I would have gotten around to it eventually.”

“Eventually?” Zaiden dragged the word out, as though turning it over in his head to find the meaning. “You lied to me.” Yep, he’d discovered the definition.

“I didn’t lie,” Asher said, defending himself. “I just didn’t think you were ready to hear all the facts.”

“I told you everything. I told you about my magic. About leaving my clan. I’ve never kept anything from you!” Zaiden’s voice grew in volume until he shouted the last words.

“Nothing except why you keep coming home drunk.” Asher spat the words as he took a step away from his mate. “That is, if you even decide to come home at all. If you don’t want to be around me, all you have to do is say so. My ass will still be available to you until the next gathering, simply because I won’t lose my bird over some pathetic asshole like you!”

He waited for Zaiden to reply, hoping he’d goaded the man into spilling what was really going on with him. When Zaiden merely

continued to glare at him, Asher had had enough. He snorted and rolled his eyes as he pushed past his barely standing mate and hurried into the separate bedroom.

He'd start looking for his own place close by in the morning. He didn't have a choice about being mated to the man, but that didn't mean he had to live under the same roof.

* * * *

Zaiden shuffled around the sofa and plopped down on the cushions. He didn't know what to think about what had just happened. Oh, he knew he'd fucked up...again. That didn't give Asher the right to lie to him, though. Or withhold information, which was tantamount to lying as far as he was concerned.

If he'd known his actions could bring harm to his mate, he'd never have set out on his path of self-destruction. He thought he'd been protecting Asher by his actions. Could he do nothing right? It seemed that no matter how hard he tried, he just kept getting it wrong.

Yes, and maybe he was being a filthy hypocrite. He'd been keeping things from Asher for weeks, but he'd only done it to keep his mate safe.

Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands. Why did everything have to be so fucking hard? He had never wanted any of this. Especially, after what had happened with Darkin at the previous gathering. No one deserved damaged goods, and that's exactly what the witch had made of him.

He hadn't been ecstatic about finding himself accidentally mated to Asher, but the weeks they'd spent together had been some of the happiest of his life. He felt like he could tell Asher anything, rip open his wounds and leave them bleeding at Asher's feet, and his mate would only pick up the pieces and mend them.

Then the craziness began, and Zaiden had freaked. He'd never allow what had been done to him to happen to his mate. Judging by

the little gifts that had appeared on their doorstep, someone knew what Asher was, knew about his phoenix, and sought to harm the man. Zaiden couldn't allow that to happen.

Lost in his thoughts, he tensed as a warm body slid in behind him on the sofa and slender arms wound around his chest, holding him in a tight embrace. "Are you ready to talk?"

Asher's hand drifted over his chest in soothing strokes as he rested his cheek against the nape of Zaiden's neck. Soaking up the offered comfort, Zaiden closed his eyes and sighed. He'd tried things his way, and he'd only succeeded in alienating his mate, his only willing friend and ally, and making himself miserable.

Lifting his face from his hands, he caressed Asher's forearm with his fingertips, loving the silky feeling of his lover's skin. The sex had been amazing over the last couple of weeks, but it lacked the closeness and intimacy they once shared. He missed holding his mate, listening to him ramble, or just simply lazing about the house on Sunday afternoons.

"I miss you," he whispered softly, not even realizing he'd intended to speak the words until they'd already slipped through his lips.

"Funny, I've been right here this whole time. You just had to stop being a dick and open your eyes."

His lips twitched, and Zaiden didn't fight the smile that stretched across his face. "Yeah, I miss that, too."

"Me being a smart-ass?" Asher chuckled softly and placed a soft kiss on the side of Zaiden's neck. "Talk to me, Zaid. Tell me what's going on."

"Can I hold you?" He had no right to ask after the way he'd behaved, but he wanted nothing more than to have his man in his arms.

"Please," Asher whispered, his soft breath fanning over Zaiden's ear, causing him to shiver. He scrambled around Zaiden, crawling into

his lap and snuggling close with his head resting on Zaiden's shoulder. "I've needed this."

Holding his lover tightly, Zaiden closed his eyes and breathed in the warm, sweet scent of his mate. Asher always smelled like spring, and Zaiden loved it. "Me, too, baby. Me, too."

"Hey, Zaid?"

"Yes?"

"I miss you, too, big guy." Asher skimmed his nose over Zaiden's collarbone and his hand came up to rest on Zaiden's chest. "Even when you're here, you're a thousand miles away. I need you to come back, okay?"

Squeezing his eyes closed, Zaiden fought back the emotions that threatened to drag him under. "Okay," he managed to whisper thickly.

"Good. You can start with telling me what's going on in that head of yours, and why you've been acting like you have multiple personalities."

"Start some coffee." He pointed toward the little coffeemaker that sat above the mini-fridge. "I'll get some aspirin. This could take awhile."

Chapter Sixteen

Setting a cup of steaming coffee in front of his mate, Asher slid into the chair opposite of Zaiden and clasped his hand together on the table. “Okay, start talking.” He didn’t want to be harsh or snippy with the man now that they were finally getting somewhere, but he still felt angry and hurt at Zaiden’s recent attitude.

“Okay, you know the birds we found on the patio?”

Asher nodded slowly, not understanding where the conversation was going. He thought they had moved past that. “What does that have to do with you coming home drunk and being a douchebag?”

“It wasn’t just the birds.” Zaiden sighed as he gripped a handful of his long locks and jerked on it hard. “Things started happening after that. Just little things at first.” He wouldn’t look at Asher, but stared down into his coffee cup. “My office would be neat as a pin when I knew I’d left it a total mess the day before.”

“Well, maybe your secretary or someone cleaned it,” Asher offered.

“Yeah, I thought about that at first. I even asked her, and she said she hadn’t done it.” He shook his head and chuckled without much humor. “Then the gifts started. Just little things at first like flowers or chocolates.”

“What gifts?” Asher sat up straighter, eying his mate. “You never told me about any gifts.”

“I know,” Zaiden murmured. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You said they started small at first. So what happened after that?”

"I started getting more expensive gifts like watches, and bracelets, and things like that. Then, about three days ago, there was a little black velvet box sitting on my desk with a gold band inside."

"An engagement ring?" Asher gasped, his eyes going wide as he slapped a hand over his mouth.

"That's what I'm assuming. There was a note." Zaiden finally looked up and Asher could see the unshed tears shimmering in his eyes. "It basically said that you weren't the right person for me, and I needed to get rid of you or bad things were going to happen."

"Where's the note?"

"In my desk at work, beside the ring. I was going to call the police, but then decided getting plastered sounded like a better idea." Zaiden slid his hand across the table, palm up in an obvious sign of needing to be touched and comforted.

As much as he wanted to remain peeved at his lover for hiding things from him, Asher knew the reasoning behind it. He would have totally freaked if he'd known about any of those things. If he were being honest with himself, he would have done everything in his power to keep his mate from something like that as well.

His fingers trembled as he slowly placed his hands inside Zaiden's and squeezed. "You should have told me."

"I know," Zaiden whispered. "I was scared, and I didn't know what to do. I would never put you in danger for anything in the world."

"I know that," Asher answered just as quietly. "But I could have helped you deal with this. You didn't have to take it all on yourself. That's what mates are for isn't it? We're supposed to be there for each other. If you shut me out, how can we really be a team?"

"I know, baby. I'm so damn sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Asher didn't say anything for a long time. Of course he was going to forgive the man, but maybe it would be a good idea to let Zaiden fidget and worry for a little while. "So, why have you been staying out late and coming home drunk?"

Zaiden dipped his head as though he understood that Asher wasn't going to just roll over and forgive him on the spot. "I stayed away as much as possible because I thought that if I wasn't with you, then you would be safe. Whoever this is wants us apart. If I'm not with you, then they're not a threat to you."

"And getting drunk?"

"I missed you," Zaiden whispered thickly. "I missed just holding you, laughing with you, the way your nose scrunches up and your tongue sticks out between your teeth when you get into your writing. I just miss every damn thing about you, baby. I was miserable, and the booze helped dull the pain."

"That is one pathetic story, Zaiden Reed." Asher swallowed around the lump in his throat as he released Zaiden's hand and stood from the table. He'd heard enough.

Zaiden's head popped up, and he looked so lost, so afraid, Asher couldn't take anymore. Hurrying around the table, he crawled into his lover's lap, wrapped his arms tightly around Zaiden's neck, and planted a kiss on him that he hoped would rock his mate to his core.

Zaiden responded with appropriate enthusiasm, gasping and groaning, crushing Asher to him as he devoured his mouth with enough heat and passion to set the room on fire around them. Long minutes later when they finally broke apart, Asher nuzzled his nose into Zaiden's neck and tried to catch his breath.

He just couldn't hold it in any longer. "I love you, Zaiden," he whispered softly, peppering wet kisses over the damp skin of his lover's throat.

His mate tensed, his arms tightening around Asher, and a soft moan vibrated his chest. "Thank God," he whimpered.

Struggling against Zaiden's hold, Asher leaned back and stared up into his mate's eyes, cocking an eyebrow in confusion. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I was so worried that you wouldn't forgive me, that I was going to lose you. It means that you are the best thing that ever

happened to me, and the most important person in my world. Hell, you are my world.” He brushed his lips over Asher’s once, twice, a third time, before he smiled widely. “It means I love you, too, baby.”

Asher couldn’t speak, couldn’t think—he could barely even breathe. He had never thought to find a mate, let alone, someone to love him. It was more than he could have ever hoped for. He just hoped he could be enough for his mate.

“You will not keep things from ever again. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Zaiden answered seriously with a quick nod of his head. “I promise, baby. Never again. And the same goes for you.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Asher. “We need to talk about what happens if I die.”

Asher pouted. He didn’t want to talk about anyone dying. He wanted to take his mate to bed, strip him down, and lick every inch of his body. He wanted to make love to his man, take a nap, then wake up and do it all over again. Several times, if he had his way about it.

“Asher, I’m serious.”

“Fine,” Asher sighed. “Let me get more coffee, and I’ll try to explain it to you.”

* * * *

“So, that purple fire that you do when we’re making love. That comes from me? You can’t do that without me?” Zaiden’s head reeled with the information Asher had just given him.

“Nope. Only orange flames without you, babe. I told you that you were my fire.”

“Yeah, I get that. I just don’t understand what that has to do with you dying. You’re saying that if I die, I take your fire with me?” Zaiden tried to work it all out in his muddle brain. “But you had your flame long before I came along.”

Asher smiled sweetly and nodded. “Yes, I did. But when I mated you, and my phoenix accepted you, we gave you that flame.” He

leaned over the table and took Zaiden's hand. "And we bound our souls together. Neither my phoenix nor I can live without our soul."

Zaiden's throat burned, and he blinked rapidly to dispel the tears he felt gathering there. It was probably the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to him—in a completely morbid kind of way. "And your fire? You said you couldn't live without your fire, either."

Asher sighed and dropped his head to the table to roll his brow against the wood. "Are you even listening to me?" He raised his head and looked into Zaiden's eyes. "You. Are. My. Fire!" He banged his other hand against the table. "I gave you that gift when we mated. If you die, you take that gift with you. Bye-bye, flames. Bye-bye, phoenix. Bye-bye, Asher."

"I don't like this." Zaiden didn't think he could handle such responsibility. "Take it back. I don't want it."

"It's too late. I can't take it back, and I wouldn't if I could." Asher smirked at him and winked. "You'll just have to take better care of yourself and stop doing stupid shit like driving while you're smashed."

Guilt and shame overwhelmed him, and Zaiden couldn't speak for several minutes. "I'm sorry, Ash. I didn't know. I would have never done anything so stupid if I'd realized what could happen to you."

"I know. And it's partly my fault for not giving you the full facts. Now that you know, I expect you to treasure and protect the gift I've given you, though."

"Always," Zaiden whispered. "You are my gift, Asher. I never thought I would be mated. After what happened with Darkin, and the way he left me broken, I never wanted to inflict myself on someone else."

"You are not broken," Asher said fiercely. Then his eyebrows drew together in confusion, and he cocked his head to the side. "Who's Darkin?"

"The witch who took my magic. I told you about him."

"Yeah, I remember. I just never got a name."

“So, what do we do now?”

“That, I don’t have any answer for,” Asher said, shaking his head and standing up from the little table. “We need to figure out who’s harassing us because I hate this stupid hotel bed, and I want to go home. This atmosphere is not conducive for good writing.”

Zaiden chuckled, feeling better than he had in days as he stood to his feet and moved around the chairs to his mate. “Ok, so let’s go over the facts and see what we have. I really want to hold you though, so can we do that in the bed you hate so much?”

Asher laughed as he pulled his shirt off and headed into the adjoining bedroom. “It’s not so bad when there’s someone here to share it with.”

“You mean when *I’m* here to share it with you.” Zaiden’s jealousy at the thought of his mate in the arms of another man boiled under the surface, and he had a hard time choking it back. “No one else, Asher. Never anyone but me.”

“You know what I mean, Zaid.” Asher rolled his eyes as he shimmied out of his jeans and went to pull the blankets down. “Lose the clothes and crawl in. I can’t sleep without you here, and I’m exhausted. We can talk until I fall asleep.”

That sounded like the best idea Zaiden had heard all week. Quickly stripping down to his skin, he crawled into bed and immediately reached for his mate, pulling Asher into his arms and tucking his mate’s head under his chin.

“So, I think we can safely assume that this person is after me,” he said after they’d gotten settled.

“Yeah, I think that’s a pretty accurate assumption,” Asher agreed around a yawn. “And I still say it’s that Andrew guy.”

“We haven’t heard anything from him since we went to Memphis.”

“Which reminds me that you never took me to Nashville. You owe me.”

“Ash, please try to focus.”

“Oh, okay, but it does make sense. Perfect sense. Andrew shows up just as we’re about to leave, tells you that he’s got the hots for some guy, and then you just disappear on him. He might have known we were leaving, but we didn’t say for how long or where we were going. He completely wiggled.”

As much as Zaiden hated to admit it, his little mate made a pretty good argument. “But why hasn’t he just told me. That’s what we talked about. That he should tell this person he’s in love with how he feels.”

“No, you told him to try courting the guy.” Asher snorted. “He’s courting you, Zaid.”

“Motherfucker! It does make perfect sense when you say it like that.”

“I know. That’s why I’m the smart one, and we just keep you around to look pretty and get the stuff off the high shelves.

“Brat,” Zaiden said around his chuckle. “Okay, enough for tonight. I’m exhausted as well, and we need clear heads if we’re going to deal with this shit. Let’s get some sleep, and we’ll figure it out in the morning.”

“Uh, Zaid?”

“Yes, baby?”

“I’m all about sleeping and everything, but there are two things I would like to bring up.”

Zaiden groaned but nodded his head. “Go for it.”

“Number one, you just told me you loved me, and I would really like to make love to you now. And number two, we kind of need to do that anyway because otherwise I’m going to be setting the bed on fire here in about three hours.”

Zaiden wanted to smack himself in the head. With everything going on, everything they’d just discussed, and still feeling a little woozy from the liquor he’d consumed, he’d completely forgotten about consummating their mating every twenty-four hours. He winced

as he remembered the nights he'd stumbled into the hotel, barely able to stand and burning from the inside out.

He knew it had to be worse for Asher because the man had basically attacked him on each of those nights. God, he'd been a selfish prick. He really didn't deserve Asher's forgiveness. "I'm sorry, baby."

Asher reached up and placed two fingers over his lips before he could say anything else. "Don't apologize, Zaid. Just make it right."

"My pleasure," Zaiden mumbled around Asher's fingers. Then he smiled wickedly and dove on top of his man. "Any last words before I fuck you to death?"

"Oh, that was so bad. You really should just try to be pretty and leave the cleverness to me."

"Okay." Zaiden shrugged in a noncommittal kind of way. "We'll wait and see what you have to say about it when I'm finished with you."

"Hey, Zaid?"

"Yeah, baby?" Zaiden arched an eyebrow. He really liked playing this game.

"I love you, okay?"

Zaiden's entire body softened toward his mate as he covered Asher's body and pressed a tender kiss to his lips. "I know, baby, and I love you, too."

Chapter Seventeen

“Dr. Reed, there’s someone here to see you,” his receptionist said over the intercom.

Zaiden frowned. “I don’t have any appointments for another hour, Abby.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but she said it’s an emergency.”

“Who is it?”

“Denise George, sir.”

His eyes widened a little, and he sat up straighter. “Send her in.” Zaiden straightened his tie and rose from his seat to move around the mahogany desk to meet his former patient. After several weeks of her being missing in action, he couldn’t help his curiosity at what had brought her to his office now.

The willowy woman slipped into the room, looking very lovely in her beige lightweight sweater and black skirt. She closed the door quietly and hurried across the room to him, throwing herself into his arms and sobbing.

Stunned into action, Zaiden wrapped his arms around her and petted her head awkwardly. “Denise, what’s wrong? What’s going on?”

“It’s Andrew,” she sobbed. “He’s completely crazy.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, not me.” Her sobs faded after a few seconds, and she leaned away to blot at her eyes with her fingertips. “He’s going to hurt your lover, Dr. Reed.”

“What!” Zaiden yelled. “How do you know this?”

“He keeps calling me. I don’t know how he got my new number, but he keeps begging me to help him. He’s obsessed with you, Doctor. He never talks about anything else. That’s why I changed my number in the first place. I was scared.”

“Asher’s safe,” Zaiden said firmly. “Andrew doesn’t know where he is.”

“You’re staying at the Dorchester,” she answered back with confidence. “Andrew told me that he followed you there after work one night.” She took a couple of steps away and shook her head sadly. “He’s on his way there now. You’ll never make it in time.”

“Call the police. Room four-forty-one.” Zaiden growled the words as he shoved past the woman and hurried toward the heavy wooden door on the other side of the room. Pausing for just a second, he looked over his shoulder and nodded once. “Thank you, Denise.”

“Please hurry, Dr. Reed. I’ll call hotel security and then the police and have them meet you there.”

Zaiden nodded again then hurried out of the room, rushing past his very confused-looking secretary and out the doors of the lobby to the parking lot. He would make it in time. He’d just found Asher, and no one would take his mate from him.

Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, he quickly dialed Asher’s number as he fumbled in his pocket for the keys.

“Hey, babe,” Asher answered on the second ring. “What’s shakin’, bacon? We still taking that note to the police department on your lunch break?”

“Asher, lock the doors and do not let anyone in that room. I’m on my way.”

“Zaid, what’s going on?” He sounded nervous, and Zaiden couldn’t help but be thankful for the fact. If Asher was scared, he’d be on his guard.

Yanking his keys out with shaking hands, he dropped them to the ground, and cursed as he bent to retrieve them. He didn’t have time for this crap. “I’m on my way,” he repeated.

Something big and heavy hit the side of his head, causing him to stumble and fall to the ground on his hands and knees. His phone skidded across the pavement and underneath his sedan. Before he could shake off the attack, another blow caught him in the temple, and Zaiden fell to the ground as the world went black.

* * * *

“Zaiden!” Asher yelled into the phone, panic rising up in his chest and making his throat burn. He heard a muffled thud and a loud grunt, then everything went silent. “Zaiden!”

When he received no reply, Asher snapped his phone closed and sent it sailing across the room to smash against the opposite wall. Raking his fingers through his hair, he paced the carpet, trying desperately to figure out what to do.

He assumed Zaiden had been at his office when he called, but Asher didn’t even know where that was. Almost two months they’d been together, and he’d never been to his mate’s work, or even thought to ask where it was located.

Still, he couldn’t just sit there and do nothing. Should he call the police? He honestly didn’t have any information to give them, nor did he have any proof that Zaiden had actually been hurt. “Fuck!” he screamed as the frustration wrapped around him in a strangle hold.

Grabbing his keys from the end table, he hurried across the room to the door. He didn’t know where to start looking, but he had to do something. Jerking open the door, he almost collided with a very flustered looking Andrew. “You,” he growled vehemently. “What did you do to him!”

Andrew took a hasty step in retreat and held his hands up, palms out, in a show of surrender. “I didn’t do anything, Asher. I swear it.”

“Where is Zaiden?”

“I d–don’t know,” Andrew stammered. “I came to speak with you.”

“Well, I’ve used up my quota of friendly conversation with the room service guy, so try again tomorrow.” Asher shoved past the man, almost knocking him down as he took off running down the long corridor.

“Asher, wait! I can help,” Andrew called as he jogged up behind him. “I think I might know where he is.”

Spinning around, Asher wrapped his hand around the fucker’s throat and slammed him up against the wall, pinning him there in an iron grip. “Stop playing games with me and tell me where my goddamn mate is!”

Andrew’s eyes looked in danger of popping out of his head, and his mouth fell open in shock. “Mate? You’re mated?”

“Yes,” Asher hissed. “He is my mate, my lover, and my entire fucking world. I will burn down this entire city to find him. Do I make myself clear?”

Bobbing his head rapidly, Andrew wrapped his fingers around Asher’s wrist and tugged lightly. “I’ll help you.”

Asher released him abruptly and spun on his heels to march toward the elevators. “This doesn’t mean I trust you,” he called over his shoulder. “If you try anything, I will incinerate you and laugh while you scream. Got it?”

“Got it,” Andrew repeated as he stepped up beside Asher and jerked his head toward the door to the stairwell.

Asher nodded his agreement, motioning for Andrew to go first. No way would he turn his back on the man in such a confined space. Andrew sighed and pushed through the door first, leading the way.

They took the stairs two at a time to the ground floor and went swiftly but as casually as possible through the main hotel lobby and out to Asher’s Mustang. Once inside and buckled up, Asher popped the clutch and peeled out of the parking lot, anxious to find his mate.

“How do I get to his office?”

“Broadway to Commercial, then straight down on the left,” Andrew answered tightly as he gripped the door handle.

Asher mashed the accelerator to the floor as he zipped in and out of traffic, honking his horn and weaving through the slower moving cars. Following Andrews directions, they swerved into the parking lot in front of Zaiden's office in four minutes flat.

Leaving the engine idling, Asher sprang out of his seat and sprinted over to Zaiden's car. Maybe his mate was still inside the building. Relief tried to creep its way in, but Asher shut it down firmly. He needed to see Zaiden with his own eyes.

"Look," Andrew said as he stepped up beside Asher and pointed toward the ground.

Asher's heart flopped over in his chest as he squatted down and dipped his fingers in the dark liquid pooled beside the back tire. Lifting his hand, his face fell at the crimson staining his fingertips.

He started to rise, but a flash of light from beneath the vehicle drew his attention. Ducking his head and pressing his chest closer to the pavement, he fumbled around until his fingers wrapped around something cold and hard.

Pulling the object from beneath the car, he jumped to his feet and stared down at Zaiden's cell phone in his hand. Someone had put their hands on his mate, had hurt him, and Asher wanted their blood. "We have to find Zaiden."

"I don't know where to look, man." Andrew crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "This is insane."

Asher still didn't know what the hell Andrew had been doing at his hotel room, or even how he'd known where to find them. He didn't really have time to prod for answers right then, either. He'd have to save it for after they found Zaiden.

His phoenix cried out, his song beautiful while heartbreaking as it searched for their missing mate. Asher smacked himself in the forehead and groaned. God, he was such an idiot. "I know how to find him."

"What do we do?"

“I have to shift. I’ll be drawn to him, and my phoenix will know where to go.” Asher jerked his head toward his car. “I need you to follow me, then call the police when I land, okay?”

“Let’s go.” Andrew hurried to Asher’s car and slid in behind the wheel.

Stripping off his clothes, Asher figured he should probably be concerned with public decency laws, but at the moment, he just didn’t give a fuck. All he cared about was finding his mate. Once naked, he closed his eyes, spread his arms out wide, and let his phoenix take over.

* * * *

Groaning as consciousness slowly came to him, Zaiden rolled over on his side and reached for his throbbing head, hissing when his palm brushed over the gaping gash just below his hairline. His eyelids fluttered open, and he had to blink several times to dispel the blariness that surrounded the edges.

What the hell had happened? Where was he, and how did he end up there? Struggling to push into a sitting position, Zaiden took in his surroundings, almost passing out again when he realized he was back home in his own bed.

“Ah, there you are, then.” Denise bustled into the room, pushing on his shoulders and urging him back down to the mattress. “I was beginning to think you’d never wake up.”

Zaiden knocked her hands away and growled as he ripped the blankets off his legs and climbed to his feet. “Where the fuck is Asher?”

“He’s perfectly safe, I assure you. Now sit down and let me look at your head. It’s still bleeding a bit, I’m afraid.”

“You fucking hit me!” he roared.

“Well, of course I did.” Denise continued to smile brightly as though they were discussing nothing more than the weekend weather report. “How else would I have gotten you back here?”

“You?” Zaiden’s heart hammered against his sternum, and heat spread throughout his body as rage settled over him. “Female or not, if you do not move the fuck out of my way, I will knock your ass into next week.”

“You are being completely overdramatic.” Denise huffed and clucked her tongue. “That little bird can’t take care of you the way I can. You’ll see this soon and forget all about him.”

Zaiden had heard enough. He went to push past the delusional woman, but found himself frozen in place. No matter how hard he fought against the invisible constraints, he couldn’t move. Glaring at the bitch in front of him, he bared his teeth and snarled. “Witch!”

Tossing her head back on her shoulders, Denise laughed high and shrilly. “Just now figuring that out, are you? How did you think I knew about your little phoenix?” She winked at him impishly, then waved her hand in front of his face.

Zaiden’s eyes rounded when he felt himself fly through the air and land on his back in the middle of the bed. Still, he couldn’t move.

“Now, just stay there and rest. We don’t want any accidents, now do we?”

“Let me go!”

“Now stop that, or I’ll have to gag you. I plan to use that pretty little mouth later, so that would be most unfortunate.”

Ceasing his struggles, Zaiden continued to stare back at her mutinously. “I trusted you.”

Denise’s eyebrows rose to her hairline, and she stared at him in shock before bursting out in laughter. “Oh, that’s a good one,” she finally managed around her mirth.

When she’d calmed herself, she prowled toward the bed and leaned over Zaiden, crushing their mouths together in a kiss that left him wanting to vomit. “I seem to recall you made the same mistake

the first time,” she said sweetly. Then Denise’s voice deepened, flowing smoothly like clear water over river stones and sounding all too familiar. “You really are quite redundant, my little broken toy.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Darkin,” Zaiden growled. It seemed as though his old flame had gained a few more powers over the years. Not many magic users could change their shape and hold it for long periods of time.

The woman beside the bed began to vibrate, moving so quickly she became nothing more than a shadowy blur. When the shaking finally stopped, Darkin stood where Denise had just been, his long black hair flowing over one bare shoulder. He looked just as gorgeous as ever, dressed in only a pair of low-slung jeans, flaunting his immaculately muscled body.

His lips curved into a wicked grin as he held his arms out to the side and turned in a slow circle. “Still like what you see, Zaiden?”

“Fuck you!”

“Oh, we’ll get to that part.” Darkin laughed at his own joke longer than was really necessary. “You don’t look very happy to see me, little sprite.”

Pure hatred coursed through Zaiden as he struggled against the magical bonds that held him to the mattress. With no magic of his own and Darkin’s powers far greater because of his unfortunate habit of draining his victims, he knew he had no chance of overcoming the bastard. That didn’t mean he would just wait patiently for whatever games Darkin had planned for him, though.

“You already took my magic. What more do you want from me?”

“I don’t want you, silly boy.” Darkin scoffed as he paced about the room. “You’re just the bait.”

Cold fear seeped into Zaiden, chilling him right down his bones. “You can’t have him!” he roared. “He never did anything to you!”

Darkin just rolled his eyes. “They rarely do. It’s nothing personal. I simply desire his flame. It’s not as though I’m going to kill him. He’ll just be a bit more...fragile.”

“You can’t do that to him! Even you can’t be that cruel.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of, Zaiden.” Darkin shrugged. “Sacrifices have to be made. I’ll make sure he goes out with a smile on his face.” He leered at Zaiden as he cupped his groin and rubbed his palm against his growing erection.

Gnashing his teeth, Zaiden snarled and growled straining toward the bastard across the room. “If you so much as breathe on him, I swear there is nowhere you will be able to hide where I can’t find you. I will hunt you down like a dog and rip your balls out through your belly button.”

“Enough.” Darkin spoke calmly as he flicked his wrist lazily.

Zaiden yelled out as his clothes disappeared, and he was thrust into the air before he flipped over and dropped back to the bed on his stomach. Strong hands gripped his ass, squeezing the globes roughly and pulling them apart.

“Get your fucking hands off me!”

“Play nice now, love.” Darkin’s fingertips brushed over the skin between his shoulder blades. “And what do we have here? A mating mark. You’ve mated the phoenix?” Darkin sounded thoughtful as he spoke, drawing the words out slowly.

A sudden idea sparked to life inside Zaiden’s mind, and he went perfectly still, working to calm his voice and his breathing. “You know he’s immortal right?”

“Yes, but then, so am I.”

“True, but not like Asher. He can’t be killed. You can’t syphon that from him, though, can you?” Zaiden let the smirk leak into his voice, goading the man. “As long as I’m mated to him, I can’t die either.” Okay, so that wasn’t *exactly* true, but he hoped Darkin wouldn’t know that.

“What are you trying to say? That I should mate with the phoenix?” Darkin scoffed at the idea, but Zaiden could hear the hesitancy in his words. “True immortality,” the man murmured.

“Yes. Imagine the kind of power that would bring you. You’d have to mate both of us,” Zaiden hurried to add. “We are already mated and can’t break the bond. You can’t claim him as your mate unless you accept us both.”

The room was silent for several long, agonizing minutes. Zaiden remained silent, praying his insane plan would work. He only needed Darkin to release the binding spell. If he could lure the witch into a false sense of security, play to his ego, then just maybe he’d have a chance to make it out of this alive.

It was complete bullshit, of course. Their mating had been etched in the record book, the seal forged, and never would he or Asher be able to claim or be claimed by anyone else. If Darkin had been at the gathering, he would know this. Zaiden hadn’t seen him there, but he’d been purposely keeping to the shadows so as not to gather attention and awkward questions from his former clan.

“Why weren’t you at the gathering?” Zaiden blurted in panic.

Darkin laughed darkly. “It seems one of my...acquisitions was rather upset when I took his ability to manipulate water. He went crying to the elders at the last gathering. I’ve been in hiding ever since.”

The last gathering. Not only had Zaiden been nothing more than a toy and a source of power for the bastard, but he hadn’t been the only one to suffer that night. The knowledge only served to make him feel like a cheap whore. What had he ever seen in this man?

Musical cries drifted through the room, beautiful and amazing, but Zaiden could detect the underlying menace in his mate’s call. Still, the sound calmed and comforted him, reminding him of the strength his lover possessed. Asher could take care of himself. He didn’t need Zaiden’s protection. If anything, Zaiden was in need of his own hero just then.

Asher's cry echoed through the room again, louder and much closer this time. Biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling, Zaiden relaxed against the comforter and waited. His mate was pissed, and Darkin was about to have his ass handed to him.

* * * *

Asher circled the sky, skimming just above the roof of his home, following the tether that would lead him to his mate. He kept one eye on the street, waiting until he saw his Mustang pull up to the curb before landing on the shingles and letting out another loud cry.

He didn't know who was inside the house with his lover, but he knew they were preternatural, and extremely powerful to boot. Asher didn't really give a shit. He would torch the fucker to the ground, then spit on the ashes. No one touched his mate.

Gripping the apex of the roof with his talons, Asher bent his head and folded his wings, trying to calm his rage to shift back to human. It took him several minutes of deep breathing before he felt his feathers begin to recede, giving way to his usual creamy skin. His torso shrank, his limbs lengthened, and his long, ebony hair fanned out over his shoulders.

Opening his eyes, Asher shook his head to clear the disorientation from his shift and stood slowly to his feet. He watched Andrew jump from the driver's seat of his Mustang and pull his cell phone from his pocket.

"No police," Asher called. He knew anyone in the house would hear him, but his phoenix had been so angry, crying out for its mate, they would already know Asher had arrived anyway. "Stay outside."

"I'm coming with you," Andrew called back, running across the front lawn toward the front door.

Asher sighed and shook his head. He didn't have time to argue with the guy. He just hoped the idiot didn't get himself killed.

Hurrying quietly across the roof, Asher scurried down the trellis that climbed along the siding on the back of the house.

Approaching the widow of his bedroom, he reached down deep, gathering his spark, fanning and stoking it, forming the flames in his hands.

Asher directed all of his energy into the softball-sized fireball, took a deep breath, and hurled it toward the glass separating him from his mate. It zoomed through the air, smashing the widow and invading the room beyond. A loud crash, cursing, and his mate's muffled yell followed swiftly as Asher took a running start and propelled himself through the gaping hole and into the house.

"Asher!"

Rolling across the floor feet over head, Asher came to an abrupt stop when he collided with the bedroom door. Damn, he'd kind of overshot that landing.

"Just look at his power," someone breathed from behind him. "I need it."

"Then come and get it," Asher growled as he jumped to his feet and whirled to face his enemy. His eyes darted around the room, taking in his mate's prone form, naked and sprawled face down on the bed. His fists clenched and a red haze of fury settled over him.

Turning his attention to the half-dressed man standing beside the bed, Asher advanced slowly, moving on pure rage and instinct, and completely forgetting his nudity. Fire licked up his arms, over his chest, and down his thighs, growing brighter and more vicious with each step he took.

"Release him," he snarled.

"Give me your power," the douchebag countered.

The demand gave Asher pause. Cocking his head to the side quickly, hard enough to audibly crack his neck, a slow, devilish smile covered his face. "Darkin." Oh, could this get any more perfect? He'd been practically salivating to get a piece of the asshole who'd hurt his man.

“Ah, my reputation precedes me.” Darkin gave a tiny bow, proud and cocky, sweeping his arm in front of him to wrap around his opposite flank.

The action snapped the frayed thread on Asher’s self-control, and he roared loudly as he forced a stream of fire from his hand toward Darkin. The man deflected his attack, shooting out his arm and redirecting the fire away from him. The flames fanned over Zaiden’s back, pulling a soft moan from him.

Asher called back his flame and had the insane urge to laugh. Even in the midst of a crisis, Zaiden still got off on the feel of Asher’s fire. He started toward the bed, but movement from the corner of his eyes caught his attention, and he whirled around, dropping to the floor just as a fist swung out toward his head. Diving forward, he wrapped his arms around Darkin’s legs, driving his head into the man’s knees.

The witch cried out as he tumbled to the floor, landing in a heap on top of Asher. They struggled for dominance, pulling, shoving, biting, and punching as they rolled across the floor. Asher gained the advantage, ending up straddling Darkin’s hips, and plowed his fist into the man’s nose.

Darkin roared, one hand going to his nose and the other pushing into Asher’s chest. Pain lanced through him, quick and fierce, as the magic tossed him through the air to crash against the metal bed frame. His head cracked against the bedpost, dimming his vision and making his ears ring.

When sight finally returned to him, he found Darkin on his feet, stalking toward him with a murderous expression in his black eyes. He lifted his arm, pointing his fingers at Asher as he mumbled unidentifiable words under his breath.

Asher arched his back, the cords in his neck straining and his eyes shutting tightly as he cried out in pain. His chest burned, feeling shredded, as though he were being ripped from the inside out. His muscles locked down, and he began to convulse, jerking and shaking as his heels pounded against the floor.

A loud roar reverberated around the room, and Asher pried his eyes open in time to see Zaiden leap from the bed and tackle Darkin to the floor. "I'll kill you," he chanted over and over as his fists flew, landing blow after blow to the witch's face and body. With all of his attention and hatred focused on Asher, Darkin had apparently forgotten all about holding his control over Zaiden.

Sagging to the floor, Asher gasped for breath as the pain slowly drained from his body, taking most of his energy with it. Summoning his waning power, he held his hand out in front of him, palm up, and worked to rebuild his flame.

The pair continued to grapple, Darkin rejoining the fray instead of just taking his beating like a good boy. His powerful thighs wrapped around Zaiden's waist and flipped him sideways to the carpeted floor as Darkin rolled on top of him. "I'm finished playing games with you," he panted.

"Hey, shithead," Asher called to him weakly. "Still want a piece of me?"

Darkin's head snapped around, and he pinned Asher with his onyx gaze as he began to move off of Zaiden. Asher waited for another heartbeat until he had the perfect shot, then sent his fireball screaming across the room.

Caught by surprise, Darkin's eyes widened as the flames struck him in the chest, igniting his entire body upon impact. Zaiden scrambled out from under the burning man and crab-walked backward to press himself against the wall.

Darkin rolled on the floor, screeching for only a moment before the magical fire overtook him, reducing him to ashes in mere seconds.

Exhausted and hurting, Asher dropped his hand and fell over on the floor, panting against the carpet. Before he could catch his breath, however, Zaiden's blood-freezing scream had him pushing upright again as panic seared his heart.

Zaiden had his head thrown back, whipping side to side with his eyes open and bulging as he continued to scream. Then everything

stopped abruptly. His voice cut off in mid-cry, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he toppled over on his side, limp and unmoving.

Chapter Nineteen

“Zaiden! Zaiden!”

Shaky hands touched him everywhere, caressing his sensitive skin as he shivered and whimpered. It wasn't pain, exactly, just as though he'd been pumped full of electricity.

“I love you, Zaid. You can't leave me.”

“Not going anywhere, baby,” Zaiden tried to reassure his lover. He heard Asher gasp and felt him scramble over his body before a soft hand gently caressed his cheek.

“Open your eyes, big guy.”

“I'm trying,” Zaiden grumbled. God, he was so tired. He just wanted to sleep.

“Try harder,” Asher said around a chuckle.

With great effort, Zaiden was finally able to drag his eyelids open and blink up at his mate. “Bossy bird,” he mumbled.

Asher laughed again as he stretched out on the floor, and snuggled close to Zaiden's chest. “I ruined the carpet again. Sorry, man.”

Snorting softly, Zaiden wrapped his arm around his lover and pulled him tighter to his body. “We'll fix it, baby.”

The floorboards in the hall creaked, and Zaiden snapped his head up, groaning at the ache in his temples. With just a thought and a wave of his hand, he covered himself and his mate in T-shirts and sweats.

“Oh,” Asher gasped. “That is wicked cool.” He looked up and wiggled his eyebrows playfully. “Does it work in reverse?”

“Perv,” Zaiden teased, but he didn't look at his mate. His eyes were locked on the doorway, and his muscles tensed, a feral growl

working its way up his throat when Andrew stepped into the room. “Run,” he warned.

“What? Why?” Asher asked as he whipped his head back and forth, staring first at Andrew and then up to Zaiden. “He’s not going to hurt us. I already told him what I’d do to him. Why do I need to run?”

“He’s talking to me,” Andrew answered softly from the other side of the room. He kept his distance, never coming any closer, but Zaiden didn’t relax his angry posture.

“Did you know?”

Andrew looked at Zaiden in confusion. “Know what? I have no idea what’s going on here. I went to the hotel to talk to Asher, and he damn near rips my throat out.” He grew more hysterical with each word, waving his hands around wildly as his voice rose. “Then he turns into a goddamn firebird, and I find out that you’re both preternaturals and *mated*, for the love of God!”

“Humans know about preters,” Asher said softly. “Everyone found out when the Great War began.”

“Yes,” Andrew huffed. “I didn’t know that you two were, though.”

“Is there a problem with that?” Zaiden eased Asher away from him and climbed to his feet, wobbling only slightly as he prepared to defend his mate if necessary.

“I don’t care what you are. I care that you’re mated,” Andrew whispered the last part sadly. “I’ll never have a chance now.”

Asher rose from the floor and stood beside Zaiden, taking his hand and linking their fingers together. “No, you won’t. He’s mine.”

“What?” Andrew’s brows drew together, and he stared at Asher as though he’d grown a second head. Then very slowly his forehead smoothed out and his eyes widened as his jaw unhinged. Zaiden could almost see the lightbulb go off in his head. “You thought I wanted Dr. Reed?”

“Don’t you?” Asher sounded as confused as Andrew had looked. “The birds, the message on the ceiling—all of it was you. You wanted me out of the way so you could have Zaiden. Don’t lie to me.”

Andrew shook his head slowly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I certainly don’t want Dr. Reed.” He smiled a little at Zaiden as his cheeks tinted pink. “No offense.”

Zaiden couldn’t help but chuckle. Even though he knew where this conversation was headed, he couldn’t fault the man. “You want him.”

The flush in Andrew’s cheeks deepened as it spread down his neck. “Since the minute I laid eyes on him,” he confirmed. “I didn’t realize you two were exclusive. When he said you were fucking, I just assumed that was it and maybe I had a shot.”

“Me?” Asher squeaked.

Andrew gave him a *duh* look. “You are gorgeous, Asher. How could anyone not want you?”

Rather than being jealous, pride swelled inside Zaiden’s chest, because Asher was his. People would always desire the gorgeous man, appreciate his beauty, but Zaiden owned his heart. The next words out of his mate’s mouth solidified the feeling, and Zaiden almost melted to the floor in a puddle of goo.

“I’m Zaiden’s,” Asher said firmly. “He is everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Andrew smiled in understanding and dipped his head. “I know, Asher. I swear I didn’t understand the extent of your relationship.”

“But we were living together!” Asher went back to being pissed off in a flash. His head tilted one way on his shoulders and then the other as he took a deliberate step toward Andrew. “You’re lying,” he said with confidence.

“What? No!”

Asher pointed toward what remained of Darkin—still-smoldering ashes mere feet from Andrew. “You haven’t said one word about that.

Any other human would have completely freaked. At the very least they would want to know what that was.”

“I-I don’t know w-what you’re t-talking about,” Andrew stammered as he inched backward toward the door.

Zaiden waved a hand, freezing the man mid-step. He didn’t have a clue what was going on, or where Asher was headed with his newly formed hypothesis, but he trusted his mate with his life. If Asher felt something was amiss, Zaiden damn sure wanted to hear the rest of this.

“How did you know Darkin?” Asher continued forward, circling around Andrew’s immobile form as he spoke. “Why were you helping him?”

“I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Andrew cried, but the nervous darting of his eyes told another story.

“I’d start talking,” Zaiden said calmly. “I warn you, though. My mate is liable to burn your sac off if he’s not satisfied with your answers.”

Asher winked over his shoulder and snapped his fingers, producing tiny orange flames to dance at the tips. “Want to try again?” he asked, turning back to Andrew and holding his burning hand close to the man’s groin.

“Okay, okay!” Asher backed off a little, and Andrew took a couple of deep breaths. His eyes locked with Zaiden’s as he began his story. “Remember when I came to your office that day? When I told you I thought I was gay and had met someone I couldn’t get out of my head.”

“Yes.” Zaiden wasn’t likely to forget the conversation anytime soon.

“It was Darkin,” Andrew whispered. “We met in line at the convenience store, and he was so handsome and charming, and everything about him just sucked me in.”

“Get to the good stuff,” Asher ordered, increasing the flames in his hands.

“Wait,” Zaiden said. “How did he find me? How did he even know about Asher? We’ve only been mated a couple of months.”

“He said he’d been searching for a phoenix for years. Fire manipulation was the only power he’d yet to acquire. He found Asher just before the gathering. Since he couldn’t show himself in front of the council, he waited until Asher returned to Mexico, then followed him here.”

“How?” Zaiden demanded. “Asher came here as a phoenix.”

“He can change his form,” Andrew expanded. “He traveled as an eagle.”

Zaiden and Asher exchanged looks, and Zaiden fought the urge to roll his eyes. Asher looked so damn smug. The smile on his face practically glowed neon, yelling, “*Told you so!*”

“The gifts?” Asher wanted to know, returning his attention to Andrew.

“That was just to lead you in the wrong direction. I didn’t want to help him, but it was like I couldn’t stop myself. He wanted you to think that you were the one being stalked,” Andrew finished, still looking at Zaiden.

“So I would think I was a threat to my mate. He knew I wouldn’t put Asher in danger,” Zaiden mumbled more to himself than anyone. “Then when I tried to put distance between us, he could slip in and play the hero. Pick up the pieces and talk Asher into bed so he could syphon his powers.”

“Yes.”

“So, do you want me or not?” Asher poked his bottom lip out. Zaiden rolled his eyes and shook his head at his lover’s pouty face.

“You are gorgeous, Asher,” Andrew said, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. “But it was all just part of the game. I didn’t know what Darkin had planned today. I was only supposed to show up at the hotel and keep you occupied. When I found out that Dr. Reed was missing, something snapped, and I just couldn’t do it. I’m sorry for all of this.”

“So, was Darkin actually Denise all this time?”

Andrew looked back at Zaiden blankly. “Denise moved our pool boy into the house the day we filed for divorce. I honestly don’t know anything about Darkin pretending to be Denise.”

“I believe you.” Zaiden scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed heavily. “So now what?”

“I have some money saved,” Andrew said. “I want to move, find a place where no one knows me, and start over.”

“Ash?”

Asher stood silently for several minutes before he finally nodded curtly. “I suspect you may have been under some kind of spell, so I’m going to have mercy on you this time.” He pressed right up to Andrew, standing on his tiptoes until they were nose to nose. “But, if you ever come anywhere near me or my mate again, you will not find me as agreeable. I will kill you, Andrew.”

Andrew gulped audibly. “I understand. You will never see me again.”

“Okay.” Asher stepped back and turned around to look at Zaiden. “Release him.” Then he glanced at Andrew over his shoulder once more. “Run.”

Zaiden waved his hand, and Andrew stumbled back a few steps before turning on his heels and fleeing the room. “You really have a way with people, baby.” Zaiden chuckled as he moved in behind Asher and wrapped his arms around his slim waist.

Asher snuggled back into him and sighed. “Sweet talker.” He pointed toward Darkin’s remains. “I guess we need to report this to the elders, huh?”

Zaiden curled his lip and wrinkled his nose at the pile of ashes. “No. I doubt anyone will miss him.”

“Whatever.” Asher shrugged. “I know I torched him and all, but he was your crazy ex, so I vote for you to clean up this mess.” He snickered as he danced out of Zaiden’s embrace. “Would you like me to get you a broom?”

Zaiden shook his head in mock exasperation. “You are a brat, Asher Deacon.”

Chapter Twenty

“Honey, I’m home,” Zaiden sang as he walked in the front door two weeks later.

Asher closed his laptop and jumped up from the sofa, throwing himself into his mate’s arms. He plastered his mouth to Zaiden’s, kissing him fiercely before pulling away, grinning like a loon. “Welcome home.”

“Mmm,” Zaiden purred as he lifted Asher into his arms, squeezing his ass and grinding against him. “With a welcome like that, I might have to work late more often.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Asher teased. His excitement bubbled to the surface, and he couldn’t wait another minute to share the news with his lover. “My book is being published!”

Zaiden gaped at him for a second before one hand tangled in Asher’s hair, jerking him forward as Zaiden sealed their mouths together once again. “Congratulations, baby,” he panted against his lips long moments later. “I knew you could do it.”

“Thanks,” Asher responded dazedly as Zaiden carried him down the hall to their bedroom.

He eased Asher down on the mattress and covered his body, biting and sucking at his neck. “Want you, baby.”

“Yes,” Asher moaned as he arched up against his mate. “Hurry.”

In the next blink, their clothes vanished, and a slick finger brushed over his fluttering entrance. Wiggling his ass against the too-light caress, Asher stared into his lover’s eyes and smirked. “Did I mention that I love that you have your magic back?”

“Only about a hundred times,” Zaiden answered distractedly as he pushed into Asher’s hole with one lubed finger. “Did I mention that you talk entirely too much?”

“More,” Asher whimpered. Zaiden wouldn’t have to worry about conversation for a while. His mate’s touch always short-circuited Asher’s brain and left him struggling to form words.

A second finger pushed inside him, and his back bowed up off the bed as he rocked himself back and forth on the thick digits. “Now, Zaid.”

“Shh, baby. You’re not ready.”

Zaiden pumped his fingers in and out, twisting his wrist and scissoring, until he was able to add a third. Asher moaned and writhed, whipping his head back and forth on the pillow. “Please,” he begged. No matter how many times they came together like this, it only got better.

His eyes flew open when cold, sticky liquid drizzled over his nipples. “Where did you get that?”

“Magic,” Zaiden murmured, setting aside the bottle of chocolate syrup before leaning over him and sucking one of the coppered-colored buds into his mouth.

“I love magic,” Asher breathed as his fingers fisted in Zaiden’s long, golden hair.

Zaiden’s tongue swirled around his pebbled nipple, licking him clean while his fingers continued sawing in and out of Asher’s needy channel.

Asher’s cock throbbed and twitched, leaking pre-cum onto his belly as he shuddered beneath his lover’s mouth. Trailing moist kisses across his chest, Zaiden set to work, lavishing attention on his other nipple, licking it clean and tugging at it with his teeth.

Once he’d finished, he sat back on his heels and licked his lips seductively before palming Asher’s aching prick and diving down to swallow him to the back of his throat. His fingers turned and curled

inside Asher's tunnel, brushing over his sweet spot and causing stars to explode behind his eyes.

Crying out, Asher threw his head back as his orgasm took him by surprise, and he unloaded into his mate's willing mouth, pouring his seed down Zaiden's throat. Zaiden swallowed everything Asher had to give him, then licked him clean and eased his fingers from Asher's clenching hole.

"Need you now, Ash."

Sated and content, his body soft and relaxed, Asher still wouldn't say no to another round with his gorgeous mate. "Make love to me, Zaid."

He'd no more than gotten the words out of his mouth before his lover leaned over him, nudging the blunt head of his lubed cock against Asher's entrance and pushed in slowly. "Fuck," Asher moaned, rising up to meet his mate and taking him deeper. "I love magic."

Zaiden chuckled breathlessly, nuzzling his nose against Asher's neck as his hair fanned out around them. "I love you, baby." He whispered the words as he began rocking his hips in slow, tender movements. "You are my life."

Asher swallowed around the burn in his throat, and he felt the tears prickle the corners of his eyes. No one had ever said anything like that to him before, and he didn't think he'd ever grow tired of hearing it. "Love you, too, big guy."

The moved together, slow and lazy at first and then building in speed and intensity as their climaxes raced toward them. Over and over, Zaiden pounded into him, his chest heaving, his nostrils flaring, and his skin dampening with perspiration.

Then he pushed up to his knees, took one of Asher's hands, and wrapped it around his weeping cock. Zaiden's hand covered his, helping stroke him in time to his jarring thrusts. Purple flames flickered over their combined grasp, dancing down Asher's already heated shaft and pushing his pleasure to the boiling point.

“Ahhh!” Asher cried out, the sensations overwhelming him as electricity raced through his entire body.

“Come for me, baby.” Zaiden demanded, lifting Asher’s hips and slamming into him again.

Asher had no choice but to obey. He screamed out his release as he painted his chest and stomach with hot, creamy ropes of cum.

“Asher!” Zaiden roared as he pushed into the root and froze as the tendons in his neck strained and the muscles in his chest and arms bulged.

Scorching heat splashed against Asher’s inner walls, and he moved again, rocking against his mate to prolong his climax. Then Zaiden slumped over him, catching himself on his hands as he panted against Asher’s chest. “Holy damn.”

“Mmm,” Asher hummed sleepily. “I think I need a nap after that.”

Zaiden’s breath stuttered across his chest as he chuckled before sitting up and pulling gently from Asher’s body. “Don’t tell me you’re tired.”

“You wear me out,” Asher mumbled as he rolled out of bed and plodded toward the bathroom. “Believe me, it’s a compliment.”

“So, I guess you’re too tired for what I have planned?” Zaiden asked from the bedroom.

“And what would that be?” Asher wet a washcloth and began cleaning himself. Cum leaked from his ass, dripping down his thighs and causing him to grimace. On second thought, maybe he should just take a shower.

“We still have a whole bag of toys we haven’t played with yet,” Zaiden called to him.

His traitorous dick perked up at the mention of toys and a wet, happy, naked Zaiden. Dropping the cloth in the sink, he hurried back out to the bedroom and tackled his mate to the mattress. “Shower can wait,” he mumbled as he covered Zaiden’s mouth with his own.

“Who said we can’t play in the shower?” Zaiden rubbed their noses together and patted Asher’s hip. “We still haven’t tried out that *Shower Sutra* game.”

Asher went from half-limp to raging hard-on instantly. “Race you,” he suggested. “First one there gets to wear the butt plug.” Then he sprang off the bed, all drowsiness disappearing, and sprinted into the bathroom.

“Cheater!” Zaiden yelled.

Asher covered his mouth to muffle his laughter before calling back, “Quit whining and get your ass in here!”

“I’m coming. I’m coming.” Zaiden waltzed into the bathroom, his gorgeous cock jutting out between his legs, and smirked. “Bossy little bird.”

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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