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Relentless

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Southwestern Shifters

RELENTLESS

Bailey Bradford

Dedication

To the wonderful people who hang out at Bailey's Playroom.

You all have been incredibly supportive, thank you.

And to Jess, thank you for all the hard work you put into editing this,
you are a wonderful editor!

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Chapter One

Oh. No. Fucking. Way. That was the refrain screeching through Zane Mitchell's head as he sat at a

table in the Larchmont Lodge reception room. His second thought, as he pushed back panicked laughter, was that his Uncle John's threats and manipulations had all been for nothing.

The Dux Ducis alpha of the Southwestern Territories had called a meeting of all of the lesser alphas—Civitas alphas, who were in charge of all packs in their states, and those like Zane, who were just alphas, or leaders, of individual packs. Attendance was mandatory, as the newly appointed Dux Ducis wanted to familiarise himself with the alphas under his command. Not a bad plan, Zane had thought, wanting to meet the man who was farther up the totem pole, so to speak.

Except... *holy fuck!* Zane watched as the Dux Ducis, a shifter by the name of Aidan Criswell, made his way into the room. Criswell would have stood out no matter where he was. The man was at least six-five and looked to be heavily muscled. No doubt Criswell was considered gorgeous, with his short, pale blond hair spiked, rich brown eyes that tilted up at the outer corners, and a chiselled face graced with jutting cheekbones and a cleft chin. Then there was his mouth, which drew Zane's gaze; that mouth was made for sin, full-lipped and... *fuckfuckfuck!* Zane's balls tingled and his cock leapt to life.

This could *not* be happening! There was enough trouble in Zane's life right now; this would be the last nail in his coffin for certain. Dux Ducis Criswell turned his head in Zane's direction, sending bolts of panic shooting through the alpha of the Gila National Forest shifters. It wasn't strong enough, however, to wipe out the pull of desire that started simmering in Zane. Jesus, he felt like every fibre of his being was pulled towards Criswell...and that could only mean one thing.

Zane needed to get out, now. As Dux Ducis Aidan Criswell's eyes met Zane's, he realised he was already too late making his exit; any hope he'd had of avoiding this whole issue evaporated when gold-flecked brown eyes met Zane's for a brief moment. The attraction was instant and reciprocated—the Dux Ducis' eyes burned with a need that sent a scorching response throughout Zane's body.

One little problem there—well, okay, a really *big* problem—Zane couldn't be gay, no matter how much his body reacted to the higher-ranking alpha. So this had to be some kind of a fluke.

"Are you certain?"

The words popped into Zane's mind, and he felt his cock leak and knew he was in deep shit. He looked up to see those brilliant speckled eyes staring straight at him, felt them on him like a lover's touch.

"Are you absolutely positive?"

Hearing that voice in his head a second time had Zane pushing up from the table and bolting for the door as he slammed a barrier up against the mental link to make it impossible for that voice to get through again.

No, he wasn't certain, or absolutely positive. The only thing he knew was that he was hard and horny, and if that voice he heard inside his head belonged to Aidan Criswell, then Zane was in seriously deep shit.

* * * *

Zane's hands shook as he packed his clothes, shoving them in the black duffel bag angrily. Why was this happening? Was this karma's way of kicking his ass for all the mistakes he had made since taking over as alpha? Because, hell, Zane had made so many, and now the one thing he had never dared to hope he would find, knew he didn't deserve, had appeared. It didn't matter, really, that Zane's mate was another man; any shifter would do whatever he or she could for a mate. The attraction between a pair of mates was unbelievably strong.

That wouldn't matter, though. Once Zane had gotten past the shock of finding out his mate was a man—and the Dux Ducis of this territory at that—the impossibility of their union remained apparent. After all, Zane had done something that had left a foul taste in his mouth and a permanent stain on his soul. He could see no way to work around it, excuse it or forgive it, and God knew he would never forgive himself.

Why should he? He didn't deserve forgiveness, didn't deserve a mate, and certainly any mate deserved better than him, especially Aidan Criswell. Fuck. It made it so much worse, to know that Criswell would have to spend the rest of his life knowing he would never have a mate because there was no way the man would want Zane. Zane wouldn't wish that fate on anyone.

If he'd only been the alpha he should have been, so much pain could have been averted. Now, here he was hurting another person, albeit inadvertently; it wasn't like he could change whatever it was that made him Criswell's mate or he would.

As Dux Ducis, Aidan Criswell would need a strong mate, someone who wasn't a fuck-up and who wasn't afraid to stand his or her ground. But the fact that Zane, as alpha, had not taken a stand for what he knew was right... Zane had doubted his ability to lead every since. A strong leader would have refused to be bullied and found a way to protect the innocent. He hadn't, and that was something that tormented him daily. Yet even more so than the failure in his leadership, the failure as a friend was wearing on his soul.

And now this. He'd found his mate, and no amount of running would set either of them free. The Dux Ducis would have no problem finding out who he was, especially as Zane would be the only pack leader not at the mandatory meet and greet. Not to mention the man had already managed to establish the mind link that existed between mates. Hell, he could find Zane anywhere in the world just by scent.

Zane zipped the bag and double-checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Leaving was the right thing to do, for both of them. Sure, he could be found with little or no trouble on Aidan Criswell's part, but really, why would the man bother once he found out how Zane had treated Mika?

* * * *

Aidan remained calm despite the frantic beating of his heart as he watched his mate flee. There wasn't really any other word for it. It would seem his mate wasn't very happy about their pairing. Well, it wasn't exactly the most opportune time for Aidan, either, but the panic he'd felt when linking to the other man's mind was something to think about.

"Mariska," Aidan pulled the captain of his guards aside. "Find out who that was." He had no doubt that

Mariska had caught the exchange between him and his mate; her attention to detail and quick intellect was why she held the position of captain, something very few women attained. Aidan was well aware that the shifters as a society were slow moving and needed a swift kick in the ass to shake their archaic views on women and homosexuality.

The Alpha Anax was very much of the same opinion, which was one of the reasons Aidan had been appointed Dux Ducis for this territory. Change was coming for the shapeshifters whether they wanted it or not.

“That would be the man who upped your body temperature by several degrees then ran like his ass was on fire? The good-looking, terrified dude who is probably packing as we speak?”

And there was the downside to having Mariska as his captain—the woman was a master of sarcasm. Her green eyes gleamed as she grinned at Aidan. His captain dearly loved to poke at him.

He barely kept himself from rolling his eyes, because that would set off another round of volleys from her sharp tongue, and besides, she was probably right. Again.

“Yes, Mariska, that would be the one I’m speaking of. Evan and Jordan will remain here while you do as I asked.” Though he shouldn’t have to ask. Mariska was supposed to follow orders. She did, but tended to be rather...unpleasant if he didn’t couch the order in the form of a request. Aidan gestured to his other two guards who quickly came to his side. Mariska flicked a quick glance their way before giving them a short nod.

“Jordan, Evan, you are to stay with Dux Ducis Criswell until I return. Do not let him out of your sight.” Her eyes sparkled with the promise of retribution should her men fail to do as they were told. Jordan and Evan nodded and yes, captain’d appropriately before dropping to Aidan’s flank.

“Geez, Aidan, did you do something to set that woman off?” Evan kept his eyes on Mariska’s retreating form. Aidan laughed, shaking his head.

“You know that’s simply her way, just like addressing me as Dux Ducis to you both. She knows damn well it irritates me and that none of you are to use the formal address whether we are out in public or in the privacy of our own rooms.” Aidan mulled it over in his mind before continuing. “And you also both know that change has been too slow to come upon the shapeshifters; there are far too many who would look for any excuse to disbar a woman in a position of authority. As they would anyone who didn’t fall into what is, unfortunately, considered the collective norm for us.” He let his gaze encompass his two guards, easily scented as a mated pair. There were too many who would exile Jordan and Evan but for their strong link as mates, and their protection as valued pack members, which Aidan and the Alpha Anax made implicitly clear.

“That’s true,” Jordan grumbled, “but at least she hasn’t had anyone try to kill her just because she’s a female.”

Evan dipped his head in agreement. “At least no one’s tried to kill us since the Alpha Anax and Aidan intervened. That’s a bonus to working for one of the top dogs.” Jordan’s rare grin was brilliant and infectious, lightening the heavy mood that had threatened to take over.

Aidan clapped a big hand on each of his guard’s backs. “Yeah, that’s true. Working for me is all about the bonuses.” He kept his hands on Jordan and Evan’s backs, forcing them to stand beside him rather than behind as they started walking towards the large table where he would sit and greet his alphas.

Somehow, that whole setup just seemed pretentious. Aidan grabbed a handful of each man's shirt, pulling them to a halt and earning him two irritated glares. He made sure his smile was guileless.

"You could have just stopped walking, Aidan, instead of nearly jerking us back on our asses." Jordan was so easily irked that Aidan found it impossible not to do little things to prick the man's temper.

"I could have, but then your lover and I would have missed the red tipping your ears and the somewhat acrid scent of anger that you emit at the slightest provocation. In other words, buddy, this was just much more fun." Evan laughed, and Jordan darkened with embarrassment before giving up and laughing as well. Aidan waited until he held their attention.

"Okay, here's what we are going to do. I am not going to sit up there," Aidan turned and pointed to the elegant table fit for a king in the front of the room, "like some pompous ass while my alphas come to greet my one by one." Four arched brows greeted Aidan when he faced his men once again.

"Oh, come on. You both know me better than that. Now, let's get out here and have a real meet and greet, boys. But," Aidan's teasing demeanour dropped in the blink of an eye as he faced Jordan and Evan, "if anyone, and I mean anyone, alpha or not, shifter or not, gives you even a wayward look, you are to let me know. Change is coming whether I have to pound it into some narrow minds or they accept it on their own. Best smiles, everyone."

Turning back to the room, Aidan took a steadying breath and prepared to schmooze like a pro if it worked, but knowing he'd let fly with the intimidation at the drop of a hat with equal skill.

* * * *

Zane was headed back to Gila National Forest, had in fact been on the road for a few hours when he realised he didn't want to go back, not yet at least. Hell, he didn't know if he wanted to go back at all, but he would. Sometime between now and then, though, Zane needed to decide not only what he wanted to do, but also what was best for his pack. The nagging voice in his head telling him that whatever that was wasn't him had grown steadily louder over the past several months.

Now with the newfound discovery about his mate—Jesus fuck, he still couldn't wrap his mind around that—the voice had reached a shrill pitch that threatened to leech away the last of his confidence. That was one thing an alpha must have to lead, and Zane wasn't sure he would ever get his back. Was even less sure he deserved to have it back.

And then the whole mate thing... Zane exhaled hard enough that his chest burned. What kept popping up every time he thought about big blond Aidan Criswell wasn't *I'm not gay*. There were no feelings of disgust in regards to fucking another man—though he would admit to quite a bit of fear at the thought of being fucked.

No, what ate at him the most was that Criswell would not want a mate who had done what Zane had to the gay shifter in his pack. Any disgust he felt was for himself, something he had rather grown used to, more so since Mika and his mate Gabriel had actually confronted Zane on pack property. With that move, Mika had commanded all the respect Zane thought an alpha should have, at least from him.

The fact he had actually bowed and apologised to Mika and Gabe... The pack had seen that as a sign of weakness. Funny, those were about the only two things Zane had done in the past year that he felt sure were right. Why was it so wrong for a leader to admit he had fucked up? Why had he ever thought he was the right man for the alpha position his uncle appointed him to when the older man stepped down?

Or had he ever really thought that? God, everything was so messed up in his head right now, but he was pretty sure the whole mate issue would soon be a non-issue. There was no way Aidan Criswell would want to be saddled with someone who had acted little better than a gay basher in the past, no matter what the reasons.

The person who was getting screwed over the most was Criswell, and Zane was very aware of that. Shifters only ever had one mate, and they were damned lucky to find them. Criswell had found his, all right, and the Dux Ducis was going to come to the realisation that he would rather give up the once in a lifetime connection that all shifters dream about rather than be with someone as messed up and cruel as Zane had proven himself to be.

* * * *

"Shit. Are you fucking kidding me?" Aidan looked at Mariska, trying to ascertain if this was one of her twisted jokes. Her sombre look remained in place as she shook her head.

"No. I'm sorry, Aidan." Mariska slipped from the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts, which were mainly variations on, *what in the fuck kind of puppy kicker was I in a past life to warrant this kind of karma now?* Seriously, the one person in the entire world who was his mate turned out to be the same person who had instigated the need, in the Alpha Anax's eyes, for Aidan and his guards to oversee the Southwestern Territory. Fate hated him; that was all there was to it. No wonder the man had shut down the mental link and run like hell. Aidan had to be his worst nightmare.

He could not understand this. Mates were supposed to be perfect for one another, sexually and in all other ways. So how in the hell did he end up with a straight, bigoted homophobe for a mate? It made no sense whatsoever. There had never been an instance of mismatched mates in all known shapeshifter history, so again, what the ever-loving hell?

"Think logically," Aidan muttered to himself as he paced the room. Of course, thinking logically was hard when dealing with the illogical. "Damn it!" Aidan shoved his fingers through his hair, wishing he had his punching bag to work off some of his temper. A light tap on the door let him know his guards had heard his outburst.

"Everything okay in there?" Jordan's voice carried through the door loud and clear.

Would Aidan have no privacy at all? He took a few deep breaths before answering. "Everything's fine, Jordan. Why don't you go guard the end of the god damn hall or something?"

He watched incredulously as the doorknob turned. He wouldn't dare... Yes, they would. Jordan walked in with Evan at his side, so no, Aidan would not have any privacy. This was what he got for being friends with his guards. Aidan flung his hands up in the air and walked over to the chair in the sitting area.

“By all means, barge right in and make yourself at home. It’s not like I wanted any privacy or anything.” And didn’t he just sound like a bitchy queen? Jesus. He sat and braced his elbows on his knees as he waited for Jordan and Evan to make themselves comfortable, trying to ignore the amused looks on his guard’s faces.

“You do realise that you sound like Jordan,” Evan pointed out as he sat on the couch across from Aidan. Before Aidan could protest, Jordan plopped down beside his lover and tugged on Evan’s hair.

“What do you mean by that?” Jordan tugged again, earning his wayward hand a good slap from Evan, who didn’t look the least bit angry as he rubbed at his scalp.

“Please. You know exactly what I mean. You are the Queen of Snarly.”

“The *Queen* ? What the fuck?” Jordan lunged at Evan, digging fingers into the other man’s ribs and tickling until Evan slid off the couch.

“It’s ’cause you do it with such flair,” Evan gasped out between bouts of giggles. Aidan watched them both, envious of their obvious affection. This was what he wanted with a mate; someone he could tease and laugh with, share all his worries and all his hopes. A feeling of despondency washed over him as he realised it was never going to happen. That sent him right back into bitchy mode.

“Are you two done yet?” Jesus, surely that waspish voice wasn’t his. Two speculative glances told him that yes, it was. Damn it all. “I’m sorry, I just... Things are happening that I don’t understand. I shouldn’t take it out on you two.” Evan and Jordan resumed their seats on the couch and had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Well, we did sort of intrude on your brooding temper tantrum.” This time, Evan’s teasing had Aidan’s lips quirking up.

“And why, exactly, did you feel the need to do that?” Aidan looked at Evan, but was surprised when Jordan answered instead.

“Because we are your friends, Aidan, and it seems like you could use some help.” Jordan’s ears were tipped with red, much as Aidan figured his own were. As men, they may have been unusually in touch with their emotions, but they damned sure didn’t have to like it. Aidan let out a frustrated sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. He studied Jordan and Evan closely, noting the way they leant towards one another as though they couldn’t bear not to touch. Were they even conscious of it? Somehow Aidan doubted it. Their movements weren’t planned or even coordinated; it was just the way of mates to seek one another out. Except it couldn’t be that way for him.

“I found my mate.” The words rushed from Aidan before he could second-guess or stop them. Jordan and Evan looked happy for about one second, until they realised Aidan was miserable. Then they looked at each other and back at Aidan, confusion on their faces.

“And that’s bad...why?” Jordan jumped when Evan elbowed him in the ribs. “Oh. Oh! Is your mate a...a female?” The question came out in a high-pitched squeak, as though the very idea of a woman for a mate was unthinkable. Aidan supposed it was to all three of them, and wondered if that would have been worse than the situation he now found himself in. It was a tough call. The idea of trying to make love to a woman was one he hadn’t ever entertained and he simply couldn’t fathom it.

“Aidan?” Evan leant forward, drawing Aidan from his swirling thoughts.

“No,” Aidan shook his head vehemently. Twin sighs of relief echoed from the men on the couch. “Not a woman. I don’t know that it’s any better, though.”

“But, if your mate is a man, what’s the problem?” Jordan and Evan looked every bit as confused as Aidan felt.

“It’s complicated. This particular man has done something that makes me certain he won’t be receptive to the idea of us being mates. Something I don’t think we can get around to even try.” Saying it out loud made the situation more real. Aidan’s stomach clenched as his insides twisted with pain. It seemed evident to him that his mate—Zane Mitchell—had already made plain his distaste with the hand Fate had dealt them.

Aidan was vaguely aware of movement and only realised Jordan had moved when the man placed a hand on his shoulder. Jordan’s russet eyes bored into Aidan, demanding his attention.

“And you discussed this with him, whatever it is that he has done? Heard from him the why and what of his actions?”

In those words, Aidan found the logic he had struggled to ferret out earlier. “No, I didn’t. He ran—”

Jordan shook Aidan lightly, stunning him into silence. He wasn’t used to being taken to task by anyone else, with the rare exception of the Alpha Anax.

“And so you just convicted him of whatever it was. No,” Jordan cut Aidan off before he could speak. “I don’t want to know. That is between you and your mate, Aidan. Your mate. Don’t you think it’s worth talking to the man and at least hearing his side of the story?”

Aidan didn’t bother to defend his actions—or lack thereof. At this point, he wasn’t sure whether he’d handled the whole thing right or not. Too much was running through his head, and he couldn’t sort it out into neat little sections of right and wrong. This whole thing was such a clusterfuck and the only person who seemed to truly understand that was his mate, who’d had the good sense to run like hell.

Evan jumped off the couch and walked over to his lover. Their shoulders brushed each other’s in a way that had a pang of envy spiralling through Aidan.

“That’s not like you, Aidan, to judge somebody without having all the facts. And this is your mate—”

Aidan had had enough. He stood and stepped into Jordan and Evan’s personal space, letting them feel his anger and frustration.

“My mate,” the word was sharp and bitter on his tongue as he grated it out, “is none other than Zane Mitchell.”

If he’d hoped to shock his friends with that name, Aidan had been unerringly successful. Both men stumbled back, faces pale and mouths hanging open wide enough to catch flies.

Aidan nodded, removing any doubt of the sincerity of his words. “And so you see the hopelessness of this whole fucking mess.”

With that comment, Aidan turned and headed to the bathroom. Maybe at least there he would be left alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Two

Zane pulled his truck over at the rest stop. He had been driving on autopilot for hours and, after damn near rear-ending an eighteen-wheeler, knew he'd better stop and get his act together. He might be confused to hell and back, but he didn't want to die, and he couldn't live with himself if his careless distraction cost someone else their life. He parked the truck and fumbled for his cell phone, figuring to check one thing off his endless to-do list.

"Hey, Zane." Azrael Lowell, a beta whom Zane had left in charge, sounded strained over the phone.

"Azrael. How is the pack? Any problems?" Zane rubbed his temple when it suddenly began throbbing painfully.

"Well..."

Zane leant his head back, ignoring the pain that had almost distracted him seconds ago. He closed his eyes, waiting for whatever bad news Azrael was fixing to pass along. "What is it?"

"It's gotten worse, Zane. Worse than just the grumbling among some of the elder pack members. I know we had hoped the criticism of your leadership would die down, but there are a few sons of bitches who just won't stop."

"And?" Zane's stomach burned. There had to be more or Azrael wouldn't have bothered bringing up that same sad subject.

"And it seems that some of the elders are recruiting for their cause, stirring up some of the angry younger men who aren't content to follow."

"Shit." Zane bent forward, shoving his free hand against his stomach and twisting hard, trying to push away the pain in his gut. "How bad is it?"

The answering silence sent a chill down Zane's spine. That bad, then. "Can you tell me who at least?"

"Zane..."

"Tell me, Azrael. I need to know what I am coming home to." The steely note in his voice surprised Zane. He'd felt certain that he had lost that commanding tone along with his confidence.

"Yes, alpha, of course." Azrael's voice shook slightly, and it was then Zane realised the man was afraid of what he was going to have to tell his alpha. Azrael had been a good friend and guard, one of the few

people Zane actually trusted. Maybe the man's reluctance was due more to concern for Zane than it was anything else.

"I've heard rumors of Kent, Rance and... Damn it, Zane. I'm pretty sure the other person who is going to challenge you for leadership is Jared." Anger tinged Azrael's voice, but strangely enough, Zane didn't feel any such thing at the idea of one of his trusted guards turning on him. He didn't feel anything at all other than the stabbing pain in his belly.

"Okay, Az. That's good to know." And it was—wasn't it?—to be informed that he would have to take on three men when he returned if he wanted to retain his alpha status. Well, honour would demand he take them on regardless of whether he wanted to remain alpha or not.

"Zane, look, I—"

"Az, I need some rest. Just, thank you for telling me, okay? I have to go." Zane disconnected the call and turned his phone off. He actually needed sleep, but figured that was an unattainable goal at this point. Why bother when there was a very real risk that he might soon be sleeping permanently?

Zane leant back and envisioned his three challengers. Of the three, there was only one he felt was a threat. Kent was young and impulsive, not particularly skilled in combat and not particularly bright. The elders in the pack had probably picked the younger man for that reason, assuming he would be easily manipulated. Rance was a little older than Kent, hot headed and obnoxious. Big, bulky, and capable of backstabbing, literally and figuratively—the man was a narrow-minded bully.

But Jared... Ah hell. Zane and Jared had sparred and trained together for years, as Zane had with his other guards, Azrael and Fernando. Jared was fierce, and had a very real chance at becoming alpha—especially if Zane was already weakened from battling two other would-be usurpers. Yes, Jared could do it, and probably even live with the knowledge of his betrayal.

All guards swore fealty to their alpha, but it wasn't unknown for one to challenge their alpha. Uncommon, maybe, but not unknown. In most cases, the guard-turned-alpha found himself the object of mistrust and wasn't popular with his pack. After all, he was a traitor to his own alpha. Most alphas had a tight bond with their guards, and Zane had assumed such was the case in his own pack. How had he missed the scent of deceit, the looks of disapproval from Jared? A good alpha wouldn't have missed such things.

Zane wasn't sure he wanted to be alpha. Actually, he was pretty sure he didn't want the position—he lacked the confidence any more to lead. That didn't mean, however, that he wanted to just walk away. He may not have much of it left, but what honour hadn't been trampled and shredded demanded he return and fight. This, he would do. If it killed him, fine, but he could not, in good conscience, hand over the pack to any of the three men who were vying for the title. The pack would be their puppets, fed on a diet of bigotry and hatred when it was imperative that all shapeshifters step out of their archaic ways.

So, he would fight, and he would damn well win, because to lose would doom the pack whether they realised it or not. Then, once the challenges to his authority were met and crushed, Zane would do what needed to be done. His pack came first, despite how they felt about him. This time, Zane would remember that and do what he knew was best and be damned with what anyone else thought.

* * * *

Aidan flopped onto the bed and flung an arm over his eyes. His head was pounding from trying to figure out what he should do. Did he seek out his one and only mate, try to talk to the man and get his side of the story? Was there anything Mitchell could say to justify what he had done? Had he run because the idea of a male mate was distasteful? Aidan thought that was very likely, knowing what he did about the alpha of the Gila National Forrest pack.

But wasn't it just as likely that Zane had split because he figured Aidan would reject him once he'd discovered the man's name? Well, Aidan had to admit, that was very likely as well. It wasn't as if he had been ecstatic once he found out that Zane Mitchell was his mate.

Letting out a frustrated growl, Aidan rolled over onto his stomach and pulled a pillow over his head. He wasn't very proud of the fact he felt so angry about his mate being Zane. And he was angry. The irony of having the man for a mate was unbelievable. Never mind that there had never been a history of mates being wrong for one another; Aidan knew there was a first time for everything.

After all, he was the first gay Dux Ducis. He'd caught more than one alpha looking at him with something that bordered on disgust earlier, but none of them dared to speak out. Being the Alpha Anax's younger brother kind of discouraged such things—that, and being bigger—taller and more muscular—than most of the other men. But mostly it was the whole younger brother thing.

Aidan didn't particularly care to fall back on that one, but it was probably better than pounding the ever-loving hell out of someone. As a matter of fact, it wasn't very long ago he had said he would like to do just that to one Zane Mitchell. Of course, that was before he knew the man was his mate, before he caught a glimpse of those startling silver-grey eyes, that chestnut brown hair—

"Goddamnit!" Aidan rolled back over and sat up on the side of the bed. He got up with the vague idea of taking another shower or doing something to relax.

The sound of his cell phone ringing stopped him in his tracks. That was his brother's ring tone. Damn it. Aidan didn't know how his brother knew things, but the man did. It was eerie, and annoying as fuck, and if he didn't answer Marcus would simply keep calling until Aidan answered. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed his phone and punched the answer key.

"Yes, Marcus?" Aidan couldn't hide the irritation in his voice. He didn't want to deal with his brother—or the Alpha Anax—right now. The answering chuckle told him Marcus was well aware of his feelings.

"Come on now, it can't be as bad as that, brother." The amusement in that rich, deep voice only served to stoke Aidan's already frazzled nerves.

"Marcus, I'm not in the mood to play around. If you're wondering how it went with the alphas, I would have to say uneventful—" *Except for the fact that I found my mate and he ran—oh, and he happens to be one Zane Mitchell.*

"Hmm." Aidan could hear Marcus rifling through papers, no doubt searching for the list of alphas under Aidan's command. "So then, no trouble at all, not even from Zane Mitchell?"

Goddamnit. He should have known Marcus would have questions about the man who'd been

inadvertently instrumental in Aidan's appointment as Dux Ducis. Closing his eyes against the intensifying headache, Aidan tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

"Mitchell came and went without any incident." Which was true, in its own way. "As for the other alphas, there were some disapproving looks here and there behind my back, but no one questioned my authority—or yours."

Marcus didn't reply and Aidan let the silence stretch out between them. He knew what his brother was trying to do—wait until Aidan caved in to the uncomfortable quiet and started babbling to ease the tension. It usually worked, but this time, he couldn't give in, even if it made him feel as though he were disappointing Marcus. Manipulation was much less effective when the burdens pressing down on Aidan were so great.

"Aidan," Marcus was in Alpha Anax mode now, his failed attempt at making Aidan talk as a brother giving way to an oncoming demand from a commander. "What do you mean that Mitchell came and left? The alphas were ordered to attend for the weekend."

He did not want to get into this with Marcus in either capacity, as a brother or a subordinate.

"Would you rather I ask your guards?" Marcus' voice was hard and angry, patience with Aidan's reticence gone.

Aidan had no doubt that Marcus would do just that, putting his guards in an uncomfortable position. They were loyal to Aidan, fiercely so, but when it came down to it, their final loyalty belonged to the Alpha Anax, friendship with Aidan aside. He would not force his guards into such a situation. Anger sparked through him at the manipulation; that he would do the same were their situations reversed didn't matter at the moment.

"Aidan." The Alpha Anax was clearly out of patience.

"Damn it, Marcus," Aidan couldn't hold back the snarl. "Why can't you leave it the fuck alone? He came, he left, he—"

"He's fixing to be challenged and most likely overthrown as alpha." The words, spoken so coolly, sent a shiver down Aidan's spine.

"What are you talking about? I thought his pack was behind his decisions—a" His mate could be hurt, even killed. "How do you know this? And wouldn't it solve all of your problems with that pack?" Worry, anger, frustration and so many other emotions battled for dominance in Aidan.

"No, Dux Ducis, it would not solve all of our problems." Marcus threw Aidan's title at him, reminding him that any problem with Zane's pack was Aidan's problem as well. "As to how I know, it is my job as Alpha Anax to know. Maybe if the former Anax had been paying attention to his packs instead of sitting on his ass and reaping the benefits of his title, we would not have the situation with the Gila pack that we do." Marcus referred to Randall Dobson, the Alpha Anax he had challenged for position—and won easily. "Dobson may have been content to let the shapeshifters wallow in ignorance and fight amongst themselves, but I'm not."

Put like that, Aidan's problems seemed irrelevant. The fate of the shapeshifters as a whole should, and did, take precedence. But, still...

"I'm not saying you should do anything other than unite us, but I don't see why you are so determined in this one thing. It has nothing to do with shifters as a whole, Marcus. It's...it's personal." Aidan muttered the last, then realised the mistake he had made. His brother would never let it drop now. Marcus' loyalty was to the shifters, but it was equally as strong to Aidan.

A weary sigh came across the line. "Aidan, do you really think that is going to make me back off? I can hear the strain in your voice, the worry and anger. Please, talk to me." Gone was the commanding tone, replaced instead by concern that Aidan knew would be his undoing. He and Marcus had always been close, but since becoming Alpha Anax, Marcus had seemed to be his leader rather than the beloved brother Aidan had always confided in. He hadn't realised how much he missed his brother since Marcus had taken the title.

What was the worst that could happen? Aidan sat on the edge of the bed and stared sightlessly out the window.

"Aidan..." The slight plea in his brother's voice caused Aidan's walls to crumble. They had let themselves become less than they were, instead playing their roles and leaving their relationship to suffer. He wanted his brother back. Somehow, they had to find a balance. Maybe that started here.

"Am I talking to Marcus, or the Anax?" He needed to know that, at least.

"I..."

Aidan heard a tapping noise and could easily picture his brother's fingers drumming out a tune on his desk or whatever hard surface was near him. It was a familiar tell when the man was thinking, trying to compose his words.

"I will do my best to listen as your brother, Aidan, but I am also who, and what, I am." Marcus sounded weary and Aidan wondered if his brother missed the way things used to be between them. "I can separate the two, but only to a point, no matter how much I might wish otherwise at times."

He was right, and Aidan felt petty for his own selfish inclination to keep his brother for himself. He scooted to the middle of the bed and lay back, trying to get comfortable.

"Okay, Marcus. It's like this—I walked into the reception hall and felt my heart speed up, my senses became hyper-aware." Aidan closed his eyes, picturing the scene all over again. "There was a...a scent that was so appealing, I don't know how to describe it. Everything in my body was screaming *there, there!*" He heard the startled gasp as his brother suddenly understood what was being said.

"You found your mate?"

Aidan made an assenting noise, throat tightening with emotion at what he still had left to say.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Excitement and joy rang clear in Marcus' voice. "Why are you—Wait. It, your mate I mean, was...well, is, ah... Aidan?"

Was everyone going to assume his mate was a woman just because he hadn't chased said mate down? It might seem like a logical conclusion to some, but if every mate was perfect for one another, then of course his mate would be a man. Shit, did anyone doubt he was gay? He'd never pretended, never even been tempted to date a woman. So why would anyone think his mate was a woman rather than think his mate might be someone who was unsuitable?

“My mate, brother mine, freaked out when I made the mind link and then proceeded to run like hell.” And if he sounded snappish, why shouldn’t he? The man had run. “He seemed less than thrilled with finding out his mate was a man.” *Wait for it*, Aidan thought, almost envisioning the gears spinning in Marcus’ head as he processed that information. Any minute now...

“Fuck!” Never let it be said that the Alpha Anax was slow. “You’re telling me that Zane Mitchell is your mate? And that he is on his way back to his pack? Did you even talk to him, ask him why—“

Aidan wanted to scream with frustration. “I told you he fucking ran! What did you want me to do, tackle him and drag him off in front of all the other alphas? What kind of impression would that have made?”

Marcus growled and Aidan’s eyes popped open in surprise. He’d heard his brother do that once before, and it hadn’t been a good portent then.

“I would want you to find your mate, talk to him, at least give him a chance to explain himself! Christ, Aidan, you were sent there in part to find out why Zane Mitchell did what he did, not to judge him and find him guilty before you ever even spoke to the man!”

Marcus was nearly yelling. Aidan’s temper spiked. This whole debacle was not his fault!

“Does it matter why? He fucking—”

“Yes, Aidan! It fucking matters why, now more than ever!” Aidan’s mouth snapped shut as his brother went from nearly yelling to shouting. “And I would have had you stop him from returning to a pack that will most likely be planning a three-pronged attack; a God damned ambush that could very well leave the man dead!”

Aidan’s heart seemed to stop beating and a chill swept over him. The natural protective instincts for one’s mate roiled up and threatened to trample all rational thought. No one was going to hurt his mate, whether he wanted the man or not.

“That was information I could have used *hours* ago! Fuck!” Aidan jumped up from the bed and ran to the dresser to grab his keys.

“I only just got word.” Anger gone, Marcus’ voice was soft and full of worry. “What are you going to do?”

Aidan clenched the phone tightly as he headed for the door. “What the hell do you think I’m going to do? Gather my guards and go after Zane Mitchell.”

Chapter Three

Zane blinked, unsurprised for the most part at the sudden appearance of the three men in the road. He braked and considered his options, didn't really find any and resigned himself to the fact that this early morning ambush was what he deserved. The sun had barely risen and he had just entered pack lands. For some reason, he had expected this confrontation to occur in the traditional way.

Instead, it seemed his three challengers had decided he didn't even deserve the respect of being called to defend his title in front of the pack. And, of course, this way there would be no one around to ensure the fight was fair. For all he knew, he might very well have to take on all three men at once. If so, he was a dead man.

There was one thing he could do to thwart their plans, however. Zane fumbled for his phone, never daring to take his eyes off the three still figures. He felt the hard plastic casing and pulled the cell to his lap.

Whether his request would be granted or not, Zane didn't know, but for the sake of his pack, he had to at least try. Scenting the restlessness of his attackers, Zane spared a quick glance at his phone and sent off a brief text. As soon as it went through, he turned the phone off, tossed it under his seat and opened the truck door. There wasn't any sense in stalling even if he'd had the inclination to do so.

And fuck it all, he was so *tired* of feeling like a failure, of being disgusted every time he had to look at himself. He welcomed the anger that surged through him as he began tearing his clothes off, ignoring the surprised looks on the other men's faces. What, had they wanted conversation first? Too bad. Zane wasn't in an obliging mood. He kicked off his shoes and toed off his socks as Rance, Kent, and Jared started towards him.

"Zane, we would like to offer you the chance to step down—"

Zane growled, cutting off Jared's words. "Fuck stepping down." He tossed aside the rest of his clothes. Fury burned so hotly inside of him that he was surprised he didn't burst into flames. He watched as Kent scurried to strip while Rance and Jared stepped back.

So, this at least they would give him, one man at a time. For now, anyways. A token of honour on their part. Zane had a surprise for them; he wasn't fighting with honour—any such attempt at it had been discarded by their very manner of challenging him.

He was fighting to win, to survive and ensure that his pack had the leader it should have.

Zane shifted, changing from man to silvery coated wolf the instant that Kent was nude, uncaring that the smaller man was inexperienced and unprepared. He steeled himself against the guilt, knowing these three men wouldn't hesitate to leave him dead. The startled look in Kent's eyes as Zane lunged into the air brought up emotions Zane knew could cost him his life, so he shut down everything but his wolf, letting his alpha nature take over.

Kent was mid-shift when Zane's paws hit the smaller man in the chest, taking him down in a tangle of curses and limbs. By the time Kent hit the ground, he was in his wolf form, but Zane had the smaller wolf pinned. He lowered his muzzle, growling in Kent's face, fully prepared to clamp down on his throat and force a concession. A blur of movement in his peripheral vision was all the warning he had but it wasn't enough for him to avoid the booted foot that caught him in the side.

Pain exploded in his ribs as he flew through the air. What little breath he'd not exhaled with the kick fled his lungs as he hit the ground hard.

“Damn it, Rance, stay out of it!”

Zane watched with blurred vision as Jared grabbed Rance’s shoulder and spun him around. Maybe they’d go after each other and save him some trouble.

Kent was up and coming at him. Zane struggled to draw a deep breath, settled for a short one as agony shot through him. He forced himself upright and pushed the pain away, refusing to focus on anything other than the wolf approaching him.

He stood still, rangy body loose as he studied Kent. When he saw the wolf’s muscles tense, preparing to leap, Zane remained still. As soon as the smaller wolf lunged, Zane spun to the side. Kent was in the air, body contorting in an attempt to change directions but it was too late. Zane leapt, muzzle open in a snarl and barrelled into Kent. He bit deep, burying his teeth into Kent’s shoulder, his canines hitting the bone. The taste and scent of blood made his human side ill but thrilled his wolf’s senses.

Frantic yelping signalled submission as Zane locked his jaws and pinned Kent to the ground. He had to battle the wolf nature and force himself to release the injured man and back away rather than killing the threat to his pack.

Panting with exertion, trembling with pain and the need to defend and annihilate, Zane trotted in a half-circle, putting distance between himself and Rance—it would figure Jared hadn’t killed the bastard for him. Rance sent him a hate-filled look before turning and bending to carelessly pick up Kent, tossing him into a fireman’s hold over one shoulder. Zane watched in confusion as the injured man was carried off to an ATV he hadn’t noticed hidden in the tree line. Rance started the vehicle and floored it, peeling away with Kent still flopped over his shoulder in his wolf form.

What the hell was going on? Zane looked at Jared, noting the cocky smile on the traitorous bastard’s lips.

“A little confused, Zane?” Jared pulled off his shirt and reached for the snap of his jeans. “If you’d have been paying attention—well, you *were* a little busy with Kent, I guess. Anyway, you would have seen that Rance learnt he isn’t quite alpha material. Way too easy to alpha roll that dumb shit.” Socks and shoes were carefully set aside, then Jared was pushing down his jeans and underwear. He sat them on top of his shoes and looked at Zane carefully.

“You aren’t looking so good, buddy.”

Zane couldn’t bite back a low rumbling growl even though he knew Jared was trying to provoke him to do just that. Hadn’t they discussed that in practice before, how much easier it was to defeat an angry opponent? Because anger made them careless, incapable of thinking logically. Zane pushed the anger aside, burying it with the pain that still threatened to steal his strength.

Jared shook his arms out, loosening up his muscles. “It’s a shame Rance got that kick in, isn’t it? Too bad I wasn’t quick enough to stop him.”

Zane and Jared both knew better; it was just Jared’s way of telling Zane that he’d allowed it to happen. If Jared thought that would push Zane over the edge, he was wrong. Numbness flowed over Zane like a blessing, taking away the pain and anger he had been struggling with only seconds before. He kept his gaze on his enemy as they slowly began to circle each other.

“You really should just leave, Zane. No one wants you here. No one respects you.” Jared shook his head, as if to drive his points home. “You’re hurting, and we have always been evenly matched when you were healthy.” Jared started to shift, bones and sinew popping, muscles and tissue all reshaping as pale brown fur sprouted up all over his body.

Transformed, Jared was almost as big as Zane. His movements were fluid and graceful whereas Zane knew his own were stilted. He couldn’t allow Jared to wear him down with the constant circling, straining already injured muscles and bruised if not broken bones.

Zane stopped walking and stood facing the brown wolf. Jared growled, ears laid back and sharp teeth bared. Responding in kind, Zane flicked his tail and began stalking his prey.

In the distance, a howl pierced the silence, the sound long and full of warning. Jared turned his head slightly towards the haunting call.

Zane charged, hoping to use Jared’s distraction to get the upper hand. The injury to his ribs made him slower than normal, and Jared took advantage, head whipping back around to face Zane. With a powerful burst of speed, Jared met Zane halfway. Snarls rent the air as the two wolves collided, teeth gnashing and snapping.

Another howl, closer this time, but not close enough, Zane feared. He reared up to on his back feet, matching Jared move for move. Leaning forward, he attempted to use his weight to push the other wolf down and pin him. Jared’s head swung to the side, and Zane felt an intense, burning pain in his shoulder. He thrashed wildly, ripping free of Jared’s bite. The hair on his back raised at the look in his opponent’s eyes as his blood dripped from Jared’s muzzle. A frenzied look of bloodlust shone in the brown wolf’s yellow eyes. The wolf that had been held back by Jared’s human nature had broken free; the shifter was running on pure wolf nature.

Black dots danced before Zane’s eyes. He blinked them away, reminding himself that he had to do this, had to win and survive for the pack that didn’t give a damn about him. As true as that was, Zane had failed them before by giving in when he should have stood firm; he wasn’t going to do it a second time.

Jared lowered his head and stalked forward. Zane held his ground, waiting, not wanting to expend what little strength he had left. When Jared was close enough, Zane side-stepped to the left. The move set the brown wolf off; he thought his prey was fleeing. Jared spun to the right in pursuit, and Zane threw himself into Jared’s move, nearly blacking out as his injured shoulder slammed into the other wolf’s head.

The move stunned Jared, and Zane pressed his advantage, shifting quickly into his human form and diving onto Jared’s back. He thrust his arm around the wolf’s neck, hoping for a choke hold but Jared was already thrashing and shifting back into human form beneath him. An elbow to the ribs had Zane biting his tongue against a pained scream. He jerked his arm from around Jared’s neck only to find it held firmly by the man.

Jared twisted Zane’s arm, nearly dislocating it before Zane could think through the pain long enough to realise how much he had fucked up by shifting. His left arm was all but useless, the shoulder torn open by Jared’s massive teeth, and now, his right arm was being wrenched, possibly out of its socket.

Reacting without thought, Zane slammed his forehead into the back of Jared’s head. The cracking sound that followed suited the nausea that immediately welled in Zane’s stomach, and he couldn’t think to figure out which one of them had paid the most for the head butt.

Since Jared wasn't moving, Zane was going to have to believe the man had gotten the worst end of the move. He realised that Jared had gotten twice the head butt as he had, first from connecting with Zane's forehead then from having his forehead slammed into the hard ground.

"Fuck." Zane reached to feel for a pulse, afraid he might have killed the man. His fingers trembled as he did so. A relieved sigh left his battered body when he felt the faint pulse.

Zane tried to stand, falling to his knees on the first attempt. The howl of an approaching wolf gave him the impetus he needed to try again. He was done here. It was best if he just left. He managed to push himself up, trying to keep his weight on his legs and feet.

"Zane!" Azrael appeared at his side, naked as he had just shifted. "Jesus, Zane, let me help you."

No matter how much he'd wanted to leave before Azrael arrived, he hadn't managed it. Maybe it was better this way.

"Truck..." Zane couldn't concentrate, the pain in his head causing bright bursts of light interspersed with those dancing black dots to appear before his eyes. The pain in his body was even worse. He couldn't tell where he was hurt any more—it seemed like everything was throbbing and burning.

Azrael knelt down and wrapped his arms around Zane's waist, lifting with his legs to pull them both upright.

Zane groaned as the hold put pressure on his ribs. God, maybe he should have just crawled.

Azrael looked down and saw the bruising that mottled Zane's ribcage.

"Shit!" He scooted around to Zane's other side, saw the torn flesh on Zane's shoulder and paled. "Zane, I'm going to have to help you some way, unless you'll lie down."

"Not laying down, Az." Zane thought about it and decided it was just going to fucking hurt no matter how they did this. "C'mere." He managed to raise his arm, causing more blood to well from his shoulder.

Azrael scurried to slip the arm around his shoulders. "The others will be here in a few minutes, Zane. We'll—"

"No." Zane couldn't be here any longer. He knew that much, at least. Whatever hope he'd had that he could remain alpha was now as defeated as the three men who'd challenged him for the position. Staying would only increase the turmoil rippling through the Gila pack, and Zane loved his pack enough to step down to prevent such a thing from happening.

"Help me... Truck..." Zane tried to walk and stumbled when Azrael didn't immediately move with him.

"Zane, you can't just leave. You're our alpha; you just proved it again."

Zane shook his head at the pleading note in Azrael's voice and immediately regretted it. His stomach heaved and he gagged as his body protested the movement. Tears pooled in his eyes and his jaws tingled by the time the dry heaves passed and he could speak again.

"Get me to the fucking truck, Az. *Now*." He couldn't bite back the groan as Azrael half-carried him to his truck and leant him against the cab. "Can you get my clothes?"

Azrael gave a sharp nod, clearly disapproving but did as Zane asked. He brought the jeans and underwear over first, and to Zane's mortification, Az had to help him put them on.

Zane fumbled with the door handle, finally managing to get it open as Azrael handed him the remainder of his clothes. He was too weak to protest when the man helped him into his truck, but he did stop Azrael from buckling him in. There was no way his ribs were going to be able to handle it.

"Zane..." The concern in Azrael's amber eyes brought a flicker of warmth to Zane's battered heart. "Not everyone here feels like they do."

Zane hardly thought having one person on his side made a difference, even if that person was Az. He studied the man closely, unsure if they would ever see each other again and wanting to be certain to memorise the face of the only person he could call friend.

"I'm appointing you alpha." It was the one right thing he *could* do. An alpha could appoint a leader, as Zane's uncle had done for him, or an alpha could come into the position as the three traitors had just tried to do. Although, usually, it was done in a much more honourable manner.

"You can't, I can't..." Azrael looked completely stumped.

"I can, I did, and you're it." Zane started to take a deep breath, but cut it short when pain nearly doubled him over. Panic overtook the pain at Azrael's next words.

"The Dux Ducis will be here soon; we'll let him decide."

No fucking way! Zane's heart raced for a minute before he realised what an idiot he was. Whatever Aidan Criswell's reason for coming, it wasn't for Zane—unless it was to relieve him of his position. Zane wouldn't blame him one bit, but he had already handled the situation himself. Now it was time to leave. *I'm not running again. I'm just following my plan and taking care of my pack.* And he would keep telling himself that with every mile he put between them.

"I've already decided, Azrael. I'm done. Now let me shut the damned door so I can leave." Zane glared at Azrael until the man stepped back from the open door. He started to slam the door shut, but Azrael caught the edge in his hand.

"Wait. Zane..." Azrael suddenly looked very uncomfortable. "I'm not good with this, this... mushy stuff. But you've been a good friend and, despite what you think, a good leader."

Zane started to shake his head, caught himself before he could make the dry-heave inducing move. "No. Az, let it go. You've got my number; you can call me if you need to." *Or if you want to.* Zane wouldn't say it out loud. He didn't want to burden Az with his friendship, and having one of his own guards turn on him had just taught Zane a harsh lesson about taking anything for granted.

"All right, but I think you're wrong." Azrael let go of the door.

"No, I'm not. Trust me in that, Az." Zane slammed the door and put on his sunglasses before starting the truck. He put the truck in gear and turned around, not daring to look at his friend, even in the rearview mirror, as he drove off pack property.

* * * *

Aidan treated the speed limit as a suggestion rather than a law as he sped down the highway. Jordan and Evan sat silently in the back seat while Mariska occupied the front passenger seat. He was aware that the tension roiling through him was encompassing his guards. The silence in the truck was oppressive rather than companionable. Aidan couldn't take the time out from his frenzied thoughts to concentrate or worry about it.

Mariska's cell phone rang, a quick chirp she quickly cut off by answering. Aidan ignored the buzzing sound of her voice as he tried again and again to reach Zane with their mind link. He had debated whether or not he should even try, but the need to know that the alpha was alive, and hopefully unharmed, overrode Aidan's reticence to reach out to his mate.

"It seems that your mate appointed Azrael DeLuna pack alpha and resigned his position." Mariska's voice was neutral, but when Aidan glanced at her, he thought he saw a flash of disapproval in her eyes.

"And you have a problem with that *why*, exactly? You didn't seem thrilled with the idea that Mitchell was my mate." Aidan's fingers tightened on the wheel. The bond between mates was already growing inside him, kicking his protective instincts into overdrive, whereas the day before he had been thinking the best thing to do was walk away.

Mariska snorted. "I never said anything about Zane Mitchell's suitability to be your mate—though right now, I *am* questioning yours."

"Uhm, Mariska—" Evan, always the peacekeeper in the group, leant forward. Aidan shut him down.

"Stay out of this, Evan. This is between me and my captain." Aidan looked at Mariska again, letting her see the temper burning in his gaze. "Explain yourself, now."

Refusing to be intimidated, Mariska shrugged. "He's your mate. Whether either of you want to accept it, you two are destined for one another." She shook her head again, voice dripping with disgust. "And you just let him go. We've always been taught, and it has always proven true, that mates are perfectly suited. That being the case, Zane Mitchell can't be a bigot; there has to be a rational explanation for his past behaviour." Mariska narrowed her eyes at him. "Tell me this, would you be going after him even now if he wasn't in serious danger?"

Would he? Despite the anger he felt at Mariska's chastisement, Aidan rolled the question around in his mind. Would he have come to his senses as his brother had encouraged—okay, damn near ordered him to do? He knew himself to be a patient and understanding man, and his own sexuality had helped him to be less judgmental than most. Yet all of those things had ceased to exist in this case... *the minute his mate had rushed out the door*. And that was really the root of his anger, Aidan realised. He'd been hurt and had wanted to lash out, the sting of rejection at his mate's hands causing a tidal wave of fury to break free. Damn.

But he had been thinking about what Marcus said.

"I don't know, Mariska. But," Aidan stressed the word when his captain opened her mouth to argue, "I would have come for him soon, that much I can promise you."

He could feel Mariska studying him and almost smiled when she scented the air, using all her senses to discern the truth of his words.

Apparently as satisfied as she was going to get, Mariska nodded at him and released him from her penetrating gaze.

“Then I should tell you that Mitchell was stopped entering pack territory by three challengers.” Again, that neutral voice, except this time Aidan picked something up in it that had the fine hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“And?”

“He somehow managed to text Azrael, then got out of his truck and proceeded to take on Rance Atkins, Kent Studdard, and one of his guard, Jared Byerly. “

“Damn it!” If Zane’s own guards were turning on him, things within the pack must be worse than Marcus had suspected. And three to one? Aidan realised he had the gas pedal pushed all the way down and lifted his foot a scant half inch.

“Azrael said he was injured, severely enough that he should have received immediate medical attention.” Mariska turned to Aidan again, her voice softening as if to ease the panic her words brought on.

Aidan’s blood ran cold. “How fucking bad, Mariska?” The three men had better hope Zane survived, because if he didn’t, Aidan knew with a sudden certainty that he would tear them apart, one by one. Brother to the Alpha Anax, Dux Ducis or not, he would do it.

“Aidan.” Mariska reached out and placed a hand on his arm. The touch did nothing for him. The anger he felt was a living thing, the likes of which he had never felt before.

“How. Fucking. Bad.” Aidan gritted the words out, battling to hold back his temper.

“I only know what Azrael said he saw. Bruising on the right side of Zane’s rib cage, what he thought was a... a boot imprint—”

Aidan’s muscles started to contort, his anger making it nearly impossible for him to prevent shifting.

“Aidan! Stop!”

Mariska reached for the wheel as two pairs of hands reached from the back seat and held Aidan fast against his seat.

He managed to shove the change back down, snarling and cursing as he did so. He braked hard, jerking the wheel to steer the truck onto the shoulder of the road, knocking Mariska’s hands aside as he did so.

Slamming the truck in park with enough force to nearly crack the gearshift, Aidan turned and faced Mariska.

“What else, Mariska?”

In a move completely unlike her, Mariska lowered her eyes and stared at the seat. Whether it was a sign

of submission or an attempt to hide the pity in her eyes, Aidan didn't know or care.

"Mitchell—" she began.

"Zane," Aidan snapped, unwilling to allow any of them to continue making this impersonal, making Zane impersonal. "His name is Zane."

"Yes, Dux Ducis Criswell." This time when she used his title, he could hear the respect instead of the mocking tone Mariska normally used. "Zane had a shoulder wound—a deep bite on the left shoulder..." Where Aidan had no doubt one of the three men had tried to pin him. "As well as bruising on his forehead and around his eyes. He was also reluctant to move his right arm, though he did have use of it."

"Christ! And is that all?" Aidan had to find Zane, now. If he had to batter his way through the man's mental barrier to do it, so be it. "Any idea where he is headed?" It would make it easier to know, but Aidan could track his mate regardless. He would just prefer to find the man alive.

Mariska looked at him with sympathy, not pity, shining in her eyes. "Azrael thinks Zane is trying to fix the things he, ah..."

Evan leant over the front seat, almost vibrating with excitement. "If he is trying to right wrongs—so to speak," he clarified at Aidan's sharp look. "What would be the biggest one he felt he had made so far, do you think?"

The hope that sprung up had Aidan's lips quirking up in a smile. Of course.

"Mariska, you drive." No sense risking an accident if he lost it again. Aidan got out of the truck and jogged around the hood, passing Mariska as he went. He slid into the passenger seat and slammed the door. Turning to look over the seat, he pointed at Jordan. "You."

Jordan sat up straighter. "Yes, Dux Du—"

"Get on the phone with Marcus and fill him in. Get me a number and address for Mika Blackwell and Gabriel Staley."

"Yes, Dux Duc—"

Aidan spun back around, facing Mariska as she fired the truck up. "And you..." He dropped his hand to his lap before he pointed at her, warned by the flash of irritation in her eyes. "Ah, turn this truck around, we need the exit a few miles back. We're going to Shasta, Texas."

Chapter Four

"Yeah, Mika, harder!" Gabe's back bowed as he pushed his ass into Mika's pounding thrusts. His

hands twisted the sheets and his knees dug into the mattress as rough hands gripped his hips, keeping him from slamming into the headboard. It had been over a year, and the sex had only gotten better as their bond strengthened each day.

Shit, Gabe thought if it got any better it was going to kill him. Pleasure didn't spread out in little pin pricks; it exploded inside him and consumed him as Mika continued to hammer away at his ass.

"Gabe...fuck! Gonna." Mika bent over Gabe, hips driving his thick cock in short, sharp bursts that had Gabe whimpering. He tried to reach for his cock, felt Mika's chest press to his back and the pleasure-pain of Mika's teeth sinking into the place where his neck and shoulder met.

"Gahhh!" Coherent as usual when his orgasm hit, Gabe's eyes rolled back as warm come hit his chest and God only knew where else. Only Mika could do this to him, make him come without every laying a hand on his dick. Mika's growl vibrated from the place he held between his teeth, spreading throughout Gabe's body as his inner muscles clenched tight, forcing Mika to hold still deep inside him.

"Fu...fu...fu..." Mika panted, pulling his mouth away from Gabe's skin as his body tensed and a tremor worked him over. "Uck!"

Mika's cock jerked, pulsing as searing jets of spunk spewed in his ass, marking him as Mika's mate. As if he needed marking again. Not a day went by where he wasn't filled one way or another with Mika's come. Unless he was wearing it. Then there was the always-present proof at the base of Gabe's shoulder and neck.

Gabe's legs shot out from under him as Mika collapsed on top of him. No doubt he had fucked himself senseless. Gabe couldn't hide his smug feeling, but he couldn't breathe very well, either.

"Get up, caveman!" The words came out garbled as Gabe's face was mashed into his pillow. Mika grunted and didn't budge.

All right, then. Evil grin in place, Gabe flung an elbow up and caught Mika in the ribs. "*Get off me, caveman; I'd like some air, too!*" Satisfaction poured through Gabe as Mika's breath exited his lungs with a whooshing sound. Music to his ears, Gabe snickered.

Mika wheezed and rolled over to the side, one hand on his battered ribs. "*One of these days, babe...*"

Gabe propped himself up on an elbow and eyed his mate. "One of these days, what? You're gonna manage to dodge?"

Mika snorted. "It's your fault, you know. I'm pretty sure that tight ass of yours melted my brain for a few minutes there." He wagged his eyebrows at Gabe.

Gabe loved the man like crazy, but there wasn't a chance that he was going to pass up this opportunity. "Yeah?" He gave Mika the sweetest smile he could—which had the opposite of his desired effect. Mika looked at him suspiciously and scooted away a few inches.

"So what's the excuse for the other twenty-three hours and fifty-seven minutes of the day?"

"You—"

Laughter erupted between them as Mika dove at Gabe, flipping him onto his stomach and straddling the

backs of Gabe's thighs.

"I think you need to learn to respect your mate, babe." Mika's big hands glided over Gabe's ass cheeks. Gabe hummed his approval—until one hand lifted and came back down in a stinging little slap on his butt. His cock twitched and his hole clenched, but he was not going to admit any of that to his mate, no way in hell!

"I can scent your arousal, babe." The words were filled with laughter in Gabe's head, as well as a liberal dose of horniness.

"Yeah, well, maybe it wasn't the spanking that turned me on, maybe it was—"

Smack.

Oh, fuck, he was so busted! Gabe moaned and grabbed onto the headboard as he ground his cock against the mattress. Looked like Mika had just stumbled onto one of his secret fantasies.

But he would *not* be thanking his man and asking for another. Hopefully.

"Looks like, or smells like, rather, that it *was* the spanking," Mika purred, gently massaging the stinging skin.

Mika's hand lifted again and Gabe heard his mate groan. "God, Gabe, you have no idea how pretty your ass looks right now."

Gabe twisted his head around, trying to get a peek. He caught a glimpse of flaming red skin then got distracted by something he considered rather pretty himself—Mika's huge prick.

He was just about to point out how much he really liked the view when he saw Mika stiffen, head tipping back slightly. Mika's nostrils flared as he scented the air. Searching for what, Gabe had no idea.

Gabe figured that if he did find out what it was, he was damn sure going to kill it or beat or something, because whatever it was, it had Mika sliding off of him and reaching for his sweats.

Gabe rolled over and winced when his freshly spanked cheek met the quilted blanket.

"Mika, what's going on?" Gabe scooted off the bed and stood. He reached for his jeans, thought about the rough denim against his flaming ass. Tossing the jeans aside, he hurried over to the dresser to grab a pair of sweats as well.

"Mika?" Gabe stared in confusion as Mika pulled on his sweats.

"Someone's here, and I think... Wait here." Mika jerked the bedroom door open and left Gabe standing there.

"Oh I don't fucking think so!" Gabe stepped into his sweats and hauled ass after his mate. "*Mika! Don't you dare think you can order me around like some... some whatever. Just because I let you smack my ass—*"

"Gabe—" Mika swung around as Gabe ran up, almost toppling them both as he tried to skid to a stop.

Iko started barking, toenails scrabbling on the floor as the big puppy ran for the front door. A ridge of hair stood up along his back and his ears were laid flat. Gabe had never seen their baby act like that before.

An uneven pounding on the front door sent Iko into a frenzy and got Mika and Gabe into gear again. Gabe grabbed Mika's arm when his mate would have raced to the door. He held on, waiting until Mika's whisky brown gaze met his.

"Stronger together, remember?" They'd had this conversation before, when Gabe had went with Mika to confront his former alpha.

Mika's lips twisted in an ironic smile. "Funny you should say that. Guess who is at the door?"

Gabe goggled—he'd always wondered what that word meant; now he was pretty sure he knew. Zane was on their front porch, banging on the door? What the—

"Get out of my way, Mika, I'm going to tell that asshole what he can do with his surprise visit!" Gabe tried to push Mika behind him, but his mate was bigger and stronger. Damn it! He had thought they had made an uneasy sort of peace with the alpha, but if Zane was showing up here, it couldn't be for anything good. Gabe was not going to let the man hurt Mika again. He pushed at Mika once more to no avail. Instead, Mika grabbed Gabe's upper arms and held him still.

"I smell blood, Gabe. Too much. Let me get the door." The concern in Mika's warm brown eyes was Gabe's undoing. He nodded.

"Fine, but I'm coming with you. Not behind you, either, caveman." Gabe laced the fingers of their hands together and walked with Mika to the door.

Mika signalled with his hand, silencing Iko and sending him across the room. A slight limp was the only evidence of the shattered hip Iko'd had when they rescued him a year ago.

Nudging Gabe to the side just a bit, Mika reached for the door. The shrill ringing of the phone gave them both a start.

"Gabe, babe, would you please—" Mika sighed when Gabe shook his head and gave him that look, the one that made his ribs ache.

"Open the damn door, Mika." Gabe's vibrant green eyes promised retribution if Mika didn't comply.

Despite his sex-induced brain melts, Mika wasn't stupid. He reached for the handle and pulled the door open. The sight that greeted him through the screen door sucked the air from his lungs—Gabe's, too, if the loud gasp near his ear was any indication.

"Jesus—"

"—Christ!"

Mika would have been amused at his and Gabe's outbursts, but Zane was right on the other side of the screen, bloody and beat to hell, barefoot and bare chested. Blood splattered jeans hung low on his

hips—and the buttons on those jeans weren't even done up all the way.

Mika pushed the screen open cautiously, waiting for Zane to step back so the door wouldn't hit him.

Zane stumbled backwards, one arm hanging uselessly and the other flailing with a limited range of motion for the porch railing.

"Mika!" Gabe let go of his hand and shoved Mika out the door. He caught Zane around the middle. A strangled groan was rent from the alpha, so tortured that Mika almost let him go.

Mika held on as they both threatened to tumble off the porch, one arm latched around Zane and the other grabbing for the rail. He brought them to a jarring stop and looked down at Zane's ribs. Shit, no wonder the man had groaned. The whole right side of his torso was bruised, and there, almost right in the middle, was a big boot print.

The phone started ringing again and Mika looked at Gabe. His mate was a sickly shade of green, not dissimilar to the colour of Zane's unbruised skin.

"Can you get that now, babe?" Mika watched Gabe blink a couple of times then nod.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll just..." Gabe snapped out of his shock. He glared at Mika. "What are you doing? Get him in the house!" Gabe spun on his heel and ran to the phone.

Mika turned his attention back to Zane. There was a huge knot on the man's forehead, bruising from it spreading down below his eyes. His left shoulder had a deep bite wound that had bled a great deal, and the arm on that side hung limply. Mika had seen Zane try to use the right arm, so he knew the alpha had some movement there, but it was obvious the arm was hurting him.

"Come on, Zane, let's get you inside." Mika figured anywhere he touched Zane was going to hurt him, unless he dangled the man by his ankles.

Zane shook his head and made a sound of protest. Mika wasn't having it. Zane wasn't his alpha, but he had been a friend, once. Bending his legs, Mika scooped Zane up in his arms. Whether he liked it or not, Mika didn't particularly care—and it didn't matter to Zane, either, since the man was out cold. Mika stepped in the house and his attention was immediately diverted to his mate's voice.

"I'm not one of your damn pack members and I don't owe you shit!" Saying Gabe sounded bitchy would be like saying the ocean was damp. Mika hovered with Zane in his arms, wondering who his mate was fixing to tear into.

Gabe listened, lips pursed in disapproval. One hand rested on his hip, that deadly elbow pointed out like a weapon aimed at Mika. Huffing out a breath and rolling his eyes, Gabe glared at him like it was his fault.

Well, if it involved shapeshifters—and it obviously did—then it had some relativity to Mika. But this, whatever was going on, was so not his fault.

"You know what? Fine. Do whatever you damn well want, but don't expect me, or Mika, to kiss your hoity-toity ass!" Gabe hung up and tossed the phone down.

Mika smirked and arched a brow, hoping he was safe from the elbow from hell since he had a double

armload of injured man. “Uh. Hoity-toity?”

Gabe’s cheeks pinkened, which sent Mika’s mind straight into the gutter. Images of a different set of pink cheeks—or one pink cheek rather, but he could dream—popped up in his mind.

“Oh for God’s sake! Go put the man in bed and stop thinking dirty thoughts!” Gabe turned and went into the bathroom, shaking his ass and winking at Mika over his shoulder.

“Tease.”

Gabe’s laughter rang out over the sound of running water. “*Yeah, and you love the hell out of me!*”

Can’t argue with that, Mika thought, then carried Zane into the guest room.

Mika was stripping the bloody jeans from Zane’s body when Gabe walked in, wet cloths in one hand and dry towels in the other.

“Huh. Why am I surprised that someone who could be a big dick would have a big—”

“Gabriel!” Mika turned to glare at his mate. Gabe stuck his tongue out, unfazed.

“Like you didn’t notice?” Gabe stopped at the side of the bed, staring at Mika but tipping his chin at Zane. Mika felt the blush staining his cheeks and quickly snapped his head back around.

Well, of course he noticed; he just wouldn’t have pointed it out to his mate.

“Uh huh.” Laughter laced Gabe’s voice. “You did! Is that, like, a shapeshifter thing? All the males are very well-endowed?”

Mika finished pulling Zane’s jeans off and quickly tugged the blanket up over the part in question, hesitating to stop at the man’s waist. Despite the bruising and blood, the man had a pretty attractive chest; maybe he should pull the sheet up to his neck. That would just leave Zane’s face, which normally was damn near flawless, but with that big bump and the black eyes...

“Mika, drop the blanket and stop being insecure. He isn’t anywhere near as sexy as you, not above the sheet or below it.” The teasing note was gone from Gabe’s voice, replaced with a firm conviction that warmed Mika from the inside out.

Gabe handed him a wet cloth then moved to the other side of the bed and waved a hand at Zane’s still form. “You know, maybe we should try to get him in the shower.” Gabe wagged his brows at Mika. “I’ll even let you put a pair of your boxers on the man first.”

“I can handle him naked as long as you don’t drool, babe.” Mika looked at his mate and pointed a finger at him. “You still haven’t told me about that phone call that had you all bit—snarly.”

Gabe laughed and rolled his eyes. “Bitchy was what I was aiming for, you’re off the hook, caveman.”

“So who was it, then? Obviously some shifter, but which one and what did he do to piss you off?” Mika needed to know in case someone needed their ass kicked.

“Oh, some duck’s douche dude ordering—”

Mika burst out laughing and didn't know if he would be able to stop. Some duck's douche? Oh hell. Tears streaked down his face as Gabe watched him like he was losing his mind.

"What's so funny? That's what he said."

"Dux Ducis," Zane's voice was faint and sandpaper rough. His eyes snapped open and he groaned as he turned his head to look at Gabe. "The Dux Ducis knows I'm here?"

Mika frowned, hearing the underlying panic in Zane's voice. What had the man done that had put the Dux Ducis on his trail?

"Fine, the Dux Ducis—but he really *was* a douche, trying to order me around." Gabe looked at Zane, his gaze lingering over each injury. "So what did you do to this man and why is he on his way here?"

"What? No!" Zane tried to sit up but Mika planted a hand on his chest and held him down. "Damn it, Mika. Please, I just... I can't."

Mika studied Zane, thinking about the panic and pain in his cloud-grey eyes, the multiple wounds—and the telling one on his shoulder. He felt like smacking himself. He should have known what that particular one meant.

"Gabe, what else did the Dux Ducis say?" Mika kept his gaze locked on Zane's.

"Only that Zane was injured—obviously—and that we were to keep Zane here until he arrived. That would be when I told him we weren't his pack members to order around."

Zane had grown even paler, which made the darkening bruises stand out that much more. The man looked awful.

"What happened, Zane?" Mika asked softly.

Gabe walked over and squatted at the side of the bed, putting a hand on Zane's arm. Mika wasn't surprised at the compassionate move; his mate had a tender heart under that he tried to keep hidden.

Zane looked startled, darting a glance to the hand on his arm, then to Mika.

"I had to come tell you, to do it right, Mika." Grey eyes darkening with emotion, Zane tried again to sit up. This time, Mika and Gabe helped him. "I need to tell you that I'm so...sorry. What I did was wrong and why I did it doesn't matter."

Mika had heard Zane's apology before, but this time was different. This time, the words seemed to pour from Zane's soul. He felt Gabe's other hand stroking his thigh in a reassuring caress. "*I'm okay, babe.*"

"Of course you are," Gabe murmured. "And the 'why' might matter, so maybe you should explain it to us."

"No, it doesn't, because when it came down to it, I am the one who cast Mika from the pack. Me. The alpha—" Zane's bitter laughter was cut short by a low groan. "Former alpha now."

There was a time when Mika would have thought that bit of information would have brought him a lot of

spiteful joy. Instead, his stomach felt queasy at the news.

“Did you...” Mika looked at Zane’s wounds and decided to rephrase his question. “Who challenged you?” He immediately regretted the question when he saw moisture gleaming in Zane’s eyes before the man turned his head. Mika watched him swallow, trying to fight back his emotions.

“Mika, maybe we should just clean him up and let him rest. He’s... I think he’s hurting worse on the inside than the outside.” Gabe’s eyes were narrowed and his brow wrinkled, but Mika could scent the concern in his mate.

With a sharp nod, Mika turned back to Zane. “*I think you called it, babe. Whatever happened, it’s tearing him apart. Let’s get him up.*”

“Come on, Zane. Let’s get you in the shower and clean this shoulder off.” Mika slipped a hand under Zane’s back and started helping him up as Gabe went and started the water.

“Mika, just let me go. I did what I came to do. It wasn’t eloquent, but it was sincere. Now I need to leave.” Zane sounded as broken as he looked.

“I don’t think so, Zane. You need some help, and you’re going to get it, or Gabe will put another knot on your head—and I’ll probably have a cracked rib or two.” Mika considered carrying the man again when Zane bit back another pain-filled sound. No, he wouldn’t carry him now; the man needed what little pride he had left.

God, had he ever seen anyone look so fucked up? Mika didn’t think so. He’d been a mess when he was kicked out of his pack for being gay, but he hadn’t been this bad.

“It was damn close if not just as bad,” Gabe informed him, letting Mika know he had shared the thought. “*The difference is, you had me, your mate. Zane has no one, and even though part of me still wants to kick the bastard, the majority of me feels the need to help. After all, if he hadn’t banned you from the pack, we might never have met.*”

Gabe had a good point, and besides, it went against both of their natures to walk away from someone who so obviously needed help. “*You’re right as usual, babe. No matter how much it hurt at the time, Zane kicking me out was the best thing that has ever happened to me—it brought me to you.*”

Holding back the shower curtain, Gabe smiled, looking so fucking sexy that Mika’s cock tented up his sweats in a heartbeat. And, of course, his mate noticed.

“Lucky I know that’s for me instead of the naked man plastered to your side,” Gabe teased.

And great, now Zane had noticed, too. Mika shot Gabe an evil glare.

“Aw, come on now, mate. That monster cock in your sweats is something you should never be ashamed of—and I’m sure the cold shower will help you out there.” Gabe winked, Mika glowered, and Zane groaned.

“Fine, fine,” Gabe sounded exasperated. “I’ll turn the hot on, too.”

Chapter Five

Aidan wasn't surprised in the least to see two figures sitting on the porch of Gabriel Staley's house when Mariska turned into the drive at three in the morning.

"Maybe you should let us come in with you," Jordan suggested from the back seat.

"No, I don't think so. As it is, I'm certain that Mika's mate doesn't like me—"

"Well, maybe you should have used some of that notorious Aidan Criswell charm instead of being an ass when you called." Mariska glared at him, her earlier submissiveness long gone.

Aidan bristled with indignation. "I was worried and he wasn't being cooperative!"

Mariska snorted and flapped a hand at him. "Oh, sure. 'I demand that you keep Zane Mitchell there until I arrive. I'm the Dux Ducis of the Southwestern Territory.' Blah, blah, blah. I would have hung up on you, especially after the experience those two have had with shapeshifter politics."

He hadn't thought it possible to bristle any more, but Mariska's words proved him wrong. "I did not throw my title around!"

"Uhm, actually, Aidan, you kind of did," Evan offered.

Aidan pinched the bridge of his nose and thought about the conversation with Gabriel Staley. Ok, maybe he had been a bit overbearing, but Mika's mate had been damned bitchy.

Aidan sighed and opened his door. Maybe he had given Gabriel a reason to be bitchy. God knew his normal diplomacy skills had hauled ass and abandoned him.

"Look, just take the truck and get to the Gila pack as soon as possible. The Alpha Anax will be sending someone to make sure that pack gets straightened out." And hopefully someone to mete out punishment for the three men who had illegally challenged their alpha.

"What happens if Mika and Gabriel tell you to take a hike?" Jordan, ever the optimist, asked.

"Then I will deal with it when it happens, but I will not leave without speaking to Zane first." Aidan stepped out of the truck and slammed the door, waiting until his guards drove away before turning to face the two men on the porch.

He hadn't gone two steps before a voice he recognised from the phone conversation called out.

"Are you sure that was a wise move? You are going to have a hell of a walk if you aren't careful." Gabriel Staley didn't sound any friendlier in person than he had on the phone.

Aidan didn't answer until he reached the porch steps and walked up them. The fact that neither man rose to greet him was telling and a disrespectful gesture that he wasn't used to as Dux Ducis. Reminding himself that neither man was a pack member and that Mika considered himself disowned by shapeshifters as a whole helped Aidan let his anger slide.

"I apologise for my rudeness earlier, Gabriel Staley, and to you as well, Mika, for offending your mate." Aidan studied both men as they stared at him. He knew they were conversing in the way of mates and couldn't help but feel a little jealous of their bond. The handsome pair was obviously well suited, as had been the case with every mated pair Aidan had met. Finally, Mika and Gabriel looked at each other and shrugged. What the hell did that mean?

"We will accept your apology—for now." Mika stood and tugged Gabe up as well. "You must be a new Dux Ducis. Not surprisingly, I was unaware there had been a change in...management."

That is not right, Aidan thought. *We need to be united, not scattered and forgotten.* Something to mention to Marcus.

"Yes, there have been quite a few changes, Mika. I'm sorry that no one kept you informed."

Mika waved him off and Gabriel muttered a string of rude words.

"It doesn't matter to me..." Mika paused, raising an eyebrow at Aidan.

Aidan stuck out his hand. "I apologise again. Aidan Criswell."

Mika took his hand. "Mika Blackwell, though I'm sure you know that." Releasing Aidan's hand, Mika turned to his mate, a tender smile on his lips. "And this is my mate, Gabriel Staley."

Aidan reached for Gabriel's hand, impressed with the firm grip and the complete lack of hesitation he sensed in the man. Mika's mate wasn't intimidated in the least and probably never would be by anyone.

"A pleasure to meet you, Gabriel Staley. I'm very glad Mika found you."

"Actually," Gabe's bright eyes gleamed as he let go of Aidan's hand, "I found *him*. And it's Gabe. What do you want with Zane?"

Aidan shouldn't have expected anything less than for the man to be direct and blunt as well. He leant back against the porch railing, mulling over how much to tell them. He watched Mika check his scent, trying to discern his trustworthiness. Aidan almost laughed when Mika's eyes rounded, and Gabe's followed suit shortly thereafter. Mika must have shared his discovery with Gabe through the mind link mates shared.

"You're gay? No fucking way!" exploded out of Gabe's mouth. He had the grace to look embarrassed at the outburst, but Mika just pinned Aidan with his amber-coloured gaze.

"Yes, fucking way, Gabri—Gabe. What happened with Mika," Aidan tipped his head at the shifter, "is completely unacceptable. Upset a lot of shapeshifters, actually. Including my brother, who is now the Alpha Anax."

Instead of reassuring the two men before him, Aidan's proclamation seemed to put them on alert. Mika stepped forward, undaunted by Aidan's greater height and build.

“And what is it, exactly, that you want with Zane Mitchell?” There was no mistaking the protectiveness in the man’s words or stance, nor in that of his mate who moved to stand by his side. Aidan might have been intimidated if he didn’t think he could take them both. Probably. Still, Mika and Gabe, protecting the man who had made Mika an outcast? They were either two of the most amazing and kind people Aidan had ever met...or two of the dumbest.

One look into each of the man’s eyes and Aidan had the answer he suspected. It brought him a measure of relief. He’d been worried about what Mika and Gabe might do to Zane when his mate showed up. Now he knew they would help the man however they could despite his past behaviour.

Aidan spread his hands wide on the rail and decided to trust them with the truth. After all, they had first-hand experience with Zane Mitchell.

He looked at Gabe and Mika, considered, then laid it on the line. “I want to speak with my mate.”

Mika reeled back as if he’d been struck, but Gabe just narrowed his eyes and glared at Aidan.

“You’re joking, right? Because, let me tell you, that is not funny.”

“No, he isn’t joking,” Mika answered before Aidan could.

“All right, then,” Gabe crossed his arms over his chest and nodded at Aidan. “I think you need to tell us what exactly is going on, because you are not getting through the front door until you do.” Gabe’s eyes narrowed even more, until Aidan wondered if the man could even see. “And even after you do tell us, that still doesn’t mean you’re coming in.”

Aidan saw the determination etched in Gabe’s features and considered his options. He had clearly underestimated Mika’s mate. The man looked quite capable of violence if provoked. It was also apparent that Gabe was fiercely loyal and protective. Mika was a very lucky man.

“Very well, but I think in the face of your honesty, it’s only fair to warn you that I will not leave here without speaking to my mate. Under any circumstance.” Aidan held Gabe’s stare, refusing to look away even when Mika tried to nudge Gabe aside.

“I don’t tolerate threats, Criswell, and as Gabe pointed out so clearly earlier, we are not a part of your pack.”

“And you wouldn’t walk off and leave your mate, either, would you Mika?” Aidan spared the man a glance. He could see the anger in Mika’s tensed body, scent it in the air.

“No, I wouldn’t, but I wouldn’t hand over an injured man to someone he was running from, either.”

Aidan nodded. “I didn’t think you would, and believe me, I am quite aware of the fact that Zane is running.” He sighed, suddenly feeling exhausted, what little hope he’d held onto skittering away. “That doesn’t change the fact that he is my mate, and I’m his. If we can’t at least talk...” Aidan shrugged and looked away, thinking that talking might not be any help at all.

“Mika,” Gabe’s voice held a wealth of understanding, “he’s right. I’m not saying you’re wrong, but what would happen if they both walk away?”

Even hearing it said out loud caused Aidan's heart to stutter. Mika just shook his head.

"All right then, you two boys quit playing my-penis-is-bigger-than-yours and let's talk." Gabe plopped back down in his chair and tugged on Mika's arm hard enough to make him stumble back. He shot Gabe a look that promised retribution.

"Mine is, regardless." Mika leered at Gabe then faced Aidan. "So talk."

* * * *

Aidan's eyes were dry and gritty with the need for sleep and the sun was just starting to rise when Mika and Gabe led him to the guest room where Zane lay injured. Once or twice during their conversation, Gabe had gotten up to check on Zane, only nodding to Aidan when he returned back to his place by Mika's side. Aidan took those nods to mean Zane was doing as well as could be expected.

He took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for the flood of emotions that would kick in once he saw his mate. The smell of blood, pain, and hopelessness hit him like a Mack truck, nearly bringing him to his knees.

"Oh God," Aidan murmured, bracing one hand on the door.

"Hey," Gabe slipped up beside him, eyes soft with compassion, "do you want us to go in with you? It might help, if he's awake."

"No; I need to... But thank you, Gabe Staley." Aidan looked over Gabe's shoulder at Mika. "You're a very lucky man."

The tips of Gabe's ears turned red, but Mika practically glowed with pride. "Yes, I am, aren't I? Come on, babe; we never did finish..." Mika wrapped an arm around a now-entirely flushed Gabe and led him away.

Aidan pushed aside his envy and slid his hand to the door knob, grateful when it twisted silently and that the door opened without making a sound as well. He leant against the door, forehead against the cool wood and tried to get his riotous emotions under control. Being this close to his mate was wreaking havoc on his self-control. His cock was hard as steel and throbbed with each beat of his heart. He took several shaky breaths, trying to control the need that demanded he turn and claim his mate in the most basic of ways.

The rustling of material had Aidan's spine stiffening and his shoulders pulling back. He pushed away from the door and faced Zane, expecting to see a panicked look on the man's face. Disappointment coursed through him when he realised Zane had only shifted in his sleep.

Ignoring the feeling, Aidan strode quietly to the bed, hoping the frantic beating of his heart would not give away his presence. Despite the bruises marring his mate's face, the man was breathtaking. It was the only word he could think of as his gaze travelled over the length of his mate's body. A white bandage on Zane's chest covered what Aidan suspected was the bite he'd been told about. That wound, he expected, but what were the small silvery scars from that dotted Zane's torso? Aidan would have to ask,

if he got the chance. Not many things left permanent scars on a shifter.

Zane was on his back asleep, blanket kicked to the foot of the bed and the sheet tangled around his long, muscular legs. The sheet was pushed low on Zane's lean hips, low enough that Aidan could see the top of his dark, springy pubic hair. Rigidly defined abs were bisected by a dark trail of hair that swirled around a tempting belly button. Aidan's mouth watered as he imagined dipping his tongue into Zane's navel, fucking it with that slick muscle like he wanted to do to his mate's ass.

And how pervy was he to be thinking about doing such things to a seriously injured man? Aidan's disgust with himself extinguished the flames of desire, leaving only a smouldering need he couldn't quite snuff out. He came closer, until the mattress brushed against his legs, eyes darting to the bandage then back to Zane's face. Up close, the damage to his mate's face looked even worse, and it made Aidan's chest ache with the need to comfort the man.

"Shit," he muttered, reaching out to run a fingertip over the bruised skin under Zane's eyes before he could stop himself. Slate grey eyes popped open and Zane jerked his head, nearly causing Aidan to poke him in the eye. Aidan started to snatch his hand back, then reconsidered. He met Zane's gaze and held it while he gently traced the darkened skin under Zane's eyes.

Heat arced between them from the simple touch. Zane's sharp inhalation went straight to Aidan's dick, making it throb painfully with need. The fact that his mate didn't pull away from the touch gave Aidan some hope—until he remembered the extent of Zane's injuries. The knot on the man's forehead alone had to have addled him.

Aidan almost brought his hand back to his side, but Zane's wary grey eyes suddenly weren't wary any more. The sharp scent of his arousal filled the room, causing Aidan's gut to clench with need. His cock jerked and he felt the warmth of precome seeping out and dampening his jeans. Aidan tore his gaze from his mate's and settled it on the erection that tented the sheets, pulling the material up and baring Zane's pubic hair to the base of his cock.

Fuck. How was he supposed to control his own body's demands when Zane's need was battering at him, too?

A strangled groan as the mattress shifted drew Aidan's attention away from Zane's cock. He looked back up the length of Zane's body and noticed he was still brushing his fingers back and forth along his mate's cheek. Aidan brought his errant hand back to his side, wondering if the rumble from Zane was in protest or relief.

He realised that Zane was struggling unsuccessfully to push himself up into a sitting position.

"Let me..." Aidan leant forward, reaching for Zane. He saw the bruising that covered the man's right side and bit off a curse. Jesus, was there anywhere his mate wasn't hurt? Aidan fumbled. He didn't know where to grab on to Zane to help him up, not without hurting him, anyway. Zane was still trying to push himself up, panting with the effort, no doubt feeling the damage to his ribs and shoulder with each breath.

"Zane. Stop." Aidan couldn't let him hurt himself any worse. He watched Zane stiffen, then take a slow, shallow breath and close his eyes as he nodded. "You want to sit up, I'll help you. Otherwise, you'll stay on your back."

Zane's eyes flew open the same time his mouth did. "Fuck that—"

The bed dipped and Zane found himself straddled by what had to be two hundred and fifty pounds of ripped muscles. One large hand was planted firmly on his chest, pressing him back against the mattress. Heat radiated outward from Aidan's hand, slowly spreading throughout Zane's body. All the pain that had been tormenting his nerve endings suddenly vanished under a feeling of security and desire. He held himself still, refusing to give himself over to either feeling. He deserved neither and Aidan deserved better.

But the man was so damn close... Aidan Criswell wasn't sitting on him, not exactly, but he had his knees planted on either side of Zane's hips. The mattress dipped deeply under Aidan's knees, bringing him down, or Zane up, he wasn't sure which. All he did know was he suddenly felt like a sacrifice offered up to the man looking down at him.

The close proximity of their cocks sent a shiver through him as Aidan leant over him. Two big hands slid under his back.

"This isn't going to feel good any way we do it." Aidan's lips quirked. "If you can, maybe hold onto my arms or shoulders."

Zane nodded, his throat too tight with desire and shame at his own past actions to try to speak. He couldn't hold back a whimper as he reached for Aidan's arms. The need to touch the man was overpowering. His palms tingled as his hands hovered over Aidan's biceps.

Zane gripped hard flesh and his moan mingled with Aidan's. Caught in the rich brown gaze of the man half-lifting him, Zane didn't realise the sheet had slid down, baring his cock, until the sensitive head brushed against Aidan's denim clad balls. The jolt of lust that shot from his cock to his brain had him gasping and fighting to keep himself from thrusting his hips for a more intense touch.

"Fuck, Zane," Aidan's eyes seemed to spark with heat, specks of amber suddenly appearing around the edges of his pupils. He held Zane suspended for a moment, gaze lowering to Zane's parted lips.

Zane *felt* the look like a velvet caress on his lips. He told himself he wasn't going to do it, but his head tipped forward and he brushed his lips across Aidan's, unable to resist.

Aidan leant into the kiss with his whole body, pushing and pulling until Zane was propped up against the headboard. The hands that had braced his back were suddenly cupping his face as Aidan tilted his head and lapped at Zane's bottom lip.

"Let me in."

Zane heard Aidan's voice in his head and didn't have the will power to block the mind link any longer. He groaned as he parted his lips and opened for his mate. The taste of Aidan exploded on his tongue. Strong and smoky, it fuelled the fire pounding in Zane's cock.

Aidan's tongue slicked over the roof of Zane's mouth as he rocked his hips, rubbing his cock against Zane's. The dual strokes broke down Zane's reserves. He grabbed the firm globes of Aidan's ass in his hands, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises. Pain shot up his arms, his bitten shoulder throbbing and his ribs aching as though he had just been kicked all over again.

The pain brought him back to reality, overriding the pleasure as guilt swamped him. He jerked his hands back and tried to twist his head away only to have Aidan follow, capturing his mouth once again as

Aidan's hands grabbed his, stopping the panicked retreat. Zane swallowed the growl that flowed from Aidan's mouth into his. The need to submit to his mate's demand for obedience weighed down on him, nearly making him forget that he wasn't deserving of this gift.

Nearly, but not quite. Zane tried to free his hands, tugging against Aidan's restraining grasp. The effort only succeeded in earning him another rumbling growl of displeasure and a sharp burning pain in his injured shoulder.

Desperation seized him as Aidan thrust against him, the friction of denim scraping along his cock, causing his balls to draw tight. A tingling pressure in the base of his spine built and spread as Aidan continued the sharp, fast rhythm that brought their cocks together. Zane's mind was a tangled knot of need and fear, his body screaming for release while a part of him wanted to fight what was happening.

Zane felt a sharp nip to his lower lip then Aidan was sitting up, fully straddling Zane's thighs. The sudden loss of the man's mouth, of his closeness, left Zane feeling bereft in a way he didn't understand. A whimper of protest left his lips, the sound both startling and embarrassing him. He wanted to turn away but found himself trapped by Aidan's heated gaze.

Aidan released Zane's arms, but before Zane could do anything more than twitch his fingers, a big, rough hand gripped his cock. Aidan's other hand splayed open low on Zane's belly, pressing down to keep him from moving his hips.

"Come." The order was accompanied by a quick stroke of Aidan's hand, and with that one move, Zane's defences were devastated. He yelled as his orgasm ripped through him, pain and pleasure mingling together as his body jerked and tensed. The tangy scent of his come filled his senses as he felt the first pulsing release.

"Fucking beautiful," Aidan murmured as Zane felt warm, wet spunk hit his chest. The words seemed to spur him on, his cock ejaculating with a force he had never felt before.

Leaning down over Zane once more, Aidan held him pinned with his molten stare. Zane watched as the man brought his come spattered hand to his mouth and licked it clean. He thought it was the most erotic thing he had ever seen in his life—until Aidan leant down and began licking the come off his chest.

"Oh God," Zane moaned, feeling completely undone as he watched. The feel of Aidan's slick tongue on his skin had him imagining the man's tongue on his prick. That image had him half hard in seconds. Aidan's lips curved into a smile and he chuckled as he swiped his tongue over Zane's skin one last time before sitting up.

"I think that's enough on your battered body for now." Aidan studied him closely.

Chapter Six

Zane wasn't as concerned about his battered body—it would heal relatively quickly, and if it left scars, they wouldn't be the first. It was everything else, what had just happened, what he wanted to happen, and what he was afraid would happen that he couldn't reconcile. Everything had just become infinitely more complicated, and Zane knew that, like everything else in his life, he would somehow screw this up in the worst way.

“Stop.” The word invaded his mind and Zane started to block Aidan from using their link. Aidan grasped his head and forced Zane to look him in the eyes.

“Don't. Not ever again, Zane.” Aidan stared at him so intently, Zane worried the man could see everything he thought, all of the emotions swirling inside him. It made him feel vulnerable and exposed, and he didn't like it one bit.

“I'm not yours, Criswell. I'm not anyone's anything, not any more.” Zane refused to look away from the anger he saw in Aidan's eyes, that he could scent, sharp and bitter. Even as Aidan leant in so close that Zane's vision blurred, he refused to avert his gaze and submit to the stronger alpha. The only alpha in this room now, he reminded himself.

“That's where you're wrong, Zane. Very wrong.” Aidan's mouth crashed down on his in a violent kiss. Zane felt the stinging bite to his lip, tasted the coppery tang of blood—and figured he must be bent since it turned him on.

Emotions flooded his mind, hot, burning need, longing and regret, and anger. It was the last one that made him realise Aidan had pushed into his mind and opened his own as well. The man was angry with him for running, angrier still that Zane had risked his life taking on three men—and downright furious that Zane was trying to shut him out and thinking of running again. Under it all, he could feel the hurt Aidan was trying to push down, and the patience the man wanted to have with him but was afraid he wouldn't be able to give.

Zane tried to keep his own doubts and fears buried, but his mind felt as plundered as his mouth. Moaning in defeat, he thrust his tongue into Aidan's mouth, tasting and exploring before biting at the man's lower lip. A growl rumbled from Aidan's mouth into Zane's, and suddenly, Aidan broke the kiss, pushing himself up and easing off the bed.

“What—” Zane snapped his mouth closed. He didn't want to know what he'd done that had turned Aidan off. Zane sniffed and scented Aidan's desire—and anger. A quick glance told Zane Aidan was fully erect. The wet spot where precome had seeped through the denim of Aidan's jeans let Zane know that the other man had been into what they'd been doing.

None of those things told him why Aidan had backed away as though his ass was on fire, which left Zane with the conclusion that while Aidan wanted his body, the Dux Ducis didn't want anything to do with Zane on any other level. Zane wanted to close his eyes and escape into sleep, but he wouldn't let himself run away again, not in any manner.

He met Aidan's gaze unflinchingly even as his stomach pitched.

Aidan was furious with himself. Zane looked like death warmed over, and what had Aidan done? Jumped on the man and mauled him. Where was the restraint he normally had? Was the desire to touch one's mate so strong he couldn't stop himself?

No, Aidan wouldn't take such an out. What had happened was squarely on his shoulders. The fact that Zane had participated, and had an explosive orgasm, was probably due to the fact the man was too wounded and out of sorts from his head injury. And Aidan was scum to have taken advantage of that. He closed his eyes as he stood by the bed, trying to get his breathing and temper under control. He could feel Zane's nervous gaze, could sense the man's need and confusion, which made it that much more difficult for Aidan to sort out his own emotions. Everything he felt seemed to mix in with Zane's feelings, and it was confusing as hell. Aidan shook his head sharply and opened his eyes, only to find Zane staring at him with a shuttered expression.

Shame at his actions soaked into Aidan. No matter that he was an alpha, Zane was still his mate and, as such, deserved better than what Aidan had done to him. He studied Zane and tried to organise his thoughts, but he couldn't get his mind to stop spinning. It didn't help that Zane was still uncovered, his thick, pretty prick lying softly against his thigh. Aidan forced himself to look into Zane's silver eyes instead of staring at that tantalising piece of meat.

"I apologise. I normally have more restraint than that." Aidan shrugged and gestured to Zane's nude body with one trembling hand. "I've never done anything like...that." It sounded lame even to his own ears. Aidan could only imagine what Zane must have thought. He held himself still while Zane studied him intently.

"Is that why you stopped, because I'm hurt?" Zane's hand plucked nervously at the edge of the sheet.

Aidan felt his brow furrow as he frowned. "Isn't that enough reason?"

Zane started to shake his head but stopped with a groan. He blinked slowly, but never let his gaze drift from Aidan's. "I thought maybe you didn't want me to..." Zane could feel the heat rising under his skin and knew his face had to be red. Wishing he were a stronger man, he closed his eyes, unable to watch Aidan any longer. "Didn't want me to touch you. I wouldn't blame you."

Zane hissed as his hand was grabbed and pain shot up his arm. His eyes shot open in surprise as Aidan pushed Zane's hand against Aidan's denim clad erection.

"Does this feel like I don't want you to touch me?" Aidan's voice held an angry tone, but Zane didn't think it was with him. He didn't think at all as he stared at his hand cupping Aidan's prick through Aidan's clothes.

"There is no excuse for me losing control like I did, not the fact that we are mates, or the fact that you do this," Aidan tipped his hips, nudging his cock firmly against Zane's hand, "to my dick. I should not have forced you—"

Zane couldn't stand it any longer. He squeezed the steely length that had been tormenting his hand, effectively silencing Aidan—once the man had drawn in a startled gasp. "You didn't force anything, except the whole stopping part. That was all you." Zane applied more pressure to Aidan's prick, then released it suddenly to run his index finger around the wet spot that had spread on Aidan's jeans. He couldn't fight down a smile at the shudder that went through Aidan.

"As to why you couldn't stop yourself, it probably has to do with you being the alpha and me, ah, running." Zane glanced up at Aidan. "I doubt that I drive you to lose all control, but it's in your nature to

pursue and..." There was no way he wanted to finish that sentence with the word 'dominate' as he'd intended to. No way in hell, but why Aidan was so angry at himself for doing what came naturally as an alpha was confusing to Zane.

"Maybe," Aidan conceded as he grabbed Zane's wrist and gently placed Zane's arm across his bare stomach. Aidan stroked his fingers over Zane's belly, which caused Zane's breath to stutter almost as frantically as it did his heart. A slight smile curled the edges of Aidan's lips as he pulled his hand back and stuffed it into his back pocket.

"Regardless, I'd just as soon not do anything that isn't something we *both* agree on." Aidan walked to the foot of the bed and untangled the sheets and blankets. He tugged them up over Zane's nude body and gingerly tucked Zane in.

Zane would have protested, but his tongue seemed to have thickened as exhaustion swept over him. He was too tired to even be embarrassed over being tucked in to bed like a small child. His eyelids were already sliding down when Aidan stepped back from the bed.

"Get some sleep. We'll talk when you wake up."

Zane didn't know whether Aidan's words were reassuring or threatening as he drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Gabe looked at Mika.

"Holy shit, I don't know what's going on in the guest bedroom, but even I can pick up on the sexual vibes coming out of there!" And he had already been rock hard just from thinking about Mika's hand coming down on his ass.

Mika frowned and glanced in the direction of the room where Aidan and Zane were doing...something. Gabe didn't think they were talking, not with what he was picking up on. Unless they were talking about sex, but why talk when you could do?

He watched as his mate's frown turned into a grimace, his brow wrinkling as he continued to glare at the wall.

"Mika, I really don't think that poor wall did anything to deserve that look."

Mika shook his head and faced Gabe. "I'm just worried about Zane. I know it's stupid after what he did, but..." He shrugged. "Something is going on in there, and I can't figure out if it's what Zane wants or not."

"Well, hey," Gabe walked over to his mate and gave him a quick kiss, "if you want, I can barge in there. Say it's time to change Zane's bandages or something."

"No, because they do need to work out their differences." Mika strolled over to the bed and sat on the edge. "This whole thing is just a clusterfuck. I've known Zane since we were kids. There's a lot of good

memories between us and only a few bad—but some of those are incredibly bad.”

“Oh.” Gabe thought about that and decided it didn’t mean that his mate would rather be part of the pack than here with him. Hadn’t Mika told him time and again how glad he was to have found Gabe?

“Babe,” Mika’s voice had lost its worried tone and taken on the husky, sultry sound that made the fine hairs stand up on the back of Gabe’s neck. Gabe looked into his mate’s heavy-lidded whisky brown eyes and felt his balls snug up against his body.

“One look, Mika, and you have me ready to come.” Gabe watched the effect his words had on his mate, saw the way Mika’s whole body seemed to tense with need.

“Strip. Now.” Mika was already removing his clothes as he spoke. He had them off and kicked aside before Gabe had his own shirt pulled up halfway.

Gabe couldn’t get naked fast enough. He wanted to feel Mika’s big hand warming the skin on his ass, feel him spreading the tender flesh and burying his cock so deeply inside that Gabe could feel him for days. He pulled off his clothes and dropped them by his feet. He watched as Mika poured some lube in his palm and coated his cock.

“In a hurry there, caveman?” Gabe teased. It made him feel warm and fuzzy inside to know that this beautiful man wanted him so badly.

Grinning, Mika nodded. “I know if we do this, I’m not going to have the patience to grab the lube after I’ve warmed your ass and turned it pretty and pink with my hand. I’ll need in you before the last blow lands.”

Gabe’s knees nearly gave out at the image those words supplied. It was hotter than nine hells.

Mika spread his legs and patted his lap. “Come lay right here.”

He wanted this, but suddenly Gabe felt shy and a little nervous, two things he wasn’t used to feeling.

“We don’t have to do this, babe. It’s fine if you don’t feel comfortable with it.”

Gabe looked at his lover, so patient and beautiful. Mika would never hurt him, not really. And the way it had felt, handing over all control to his mate, the stinging slap on his bare skin—he would be able to feel Mika’s hand hours after they were done, maybe even a couple of days. That would be erotic as hell, Gabe thought, just like it was when Mika bit into the tender flesh where his shoulder met his neck, sometimes breaking the skin and... Fuck, it was hot, the pleasure and pain mixing together and giving him an orgasm so intense Gabe nearly passed out.

What it really came down to was this—he trusted Mika with everything, probably more than the man trusted himself.

“I trust you, Mika, and...” Gabe studied his mate closely, looking for any signs of discomfort. “You want this, right?”

Instead of answering out loud, Mika opened his mind and let Gabe feel the need, lust and love that bordered on overwhelming, patience and acceptance, everything Gabe had ever wanted. He’d had no idea when he went out on a rescue that he would find it all in the form of one wounded wolf.

Gabe didn't question or hesitate any more. He walked to his mate and let Mika help him lay across Mika's lap. Gabe's cock was pressed between Mika's thighs; the feel of those hard muscles squeezing his throbbing erection had Gabe moaning already.

Mika placed one hand on the small of Gabe's back and gently kneaded his ass with the other.

"Ready for this?" Mika's voice in his head soothed Gabe as much as the hand caressing his ass did.

"More than," Gabe let his head drop forward, then the first stinging slap landed on his ass.

"Fuck! Mika, aga—" Gabe moaned as another slap landed, this time harder than the first and on his other ass cheek. He rocked back to meet the next blow, the pain and pleasure mingling together so tightly he couldn't tell them apart. Words were lost to him; all that existed was the feel of his mate's hand on his ass, the thrusting of his cock between Mika's hard thighs.

Something deep inside Gabe seemed to swell and crack open with each blow, a part of himself working free and baring that part to Mika. It was as if he was finally whole, complete and everything he was became intertwined with his mate in a deeper way than he had ever dreamt possible.

He didn't count how many times Mika's hand struck his flesh. Instead, he gave himself over to his mate, to the experience, and found a new way to soar. Another stinging slap, this time on his the back of his thighs, and Gabe felt his climax bubbling up from his balls. He tried to warn Mika but couldn't find his voice—but Mika knew. Gabe found himself tossed onto the bed on his back, the sudden roughness of the blanket on his ass causing him to hiss at the burn.

Even that, the material abrading his stinging ass, fuelled his orgasm. The first jet of semen shot from his dick as Mika spread Gabe's legs wide and pulled them over his shoulders. He nudged his cock against Gabe's hole and froze, a look of strained disbelief on his face.

Gabe moaned as another spurt of come burst from his cock. He used his legs to pull Mika to him, trying to get his mate inside him.

"Didn't stretch you, baby, I didn't think—" Mika tried to back away.

"No!" Gabe didn't know where he got the energy to speak as his cock pulsed with another spurt of come, but all that mattered was the need burning in him. "Do it, now, probably still stretched from—"

It was as far as he got before Mika slammed his hips forward and impaled Gabe on his cock. Gabe would have screamed with the pleasure from it but he couldn't get his vocal chords to work. A low, strangled noise was pulled from the depths of his chest instead as every thick, glorious inch of Mika's cock filled him.

Mika made up for Gabe's lack of volume, yelling loud enough that Gabe's ears rang with it. Then Mika leant down, putting his weight on Gabe and nearly folding him in half. Mika let Gabe's legs slide down into the crook of his arms, then he found his favourite place, that sexy spot where neck and shoulder met. Gabe felt the quick swipe of a tongue, once, twice, then Mika bit down. Gabe's balls pounded and his cock swelled and he was coming again, those familiar black spots dancing behind his eyes.

Mika tugged with his teeth and thrust his hips hard, grinding them against Gabe's ass as his own release tore through him. He felt almost mad with the lust and love that was pouring through him, had thought he would come just from the trust Gabe gave him by laying across his lap and giving himself over completely.

He heard the rumbling noise work free from his mate and felt it vibrate throughout his own body. Gabe's channel clamped down almost painfully tight on Mika's cock, holding him still buried inside those warm, rippling muscles as his cock filled Gabe with his seed. Mika yelled again as the last bit of semen shot free. He dug his toes into the mattress and tried to get deeper, needing Gabe to take every bit of his cock, wanting to stay inside his mate for eternity.

A violent shudder went through him, or maybe it was Gabe, Mika couldn't tell any more. They were so wrapped up in one another he couldn't tell who was feeling what. He saw Gabe's eyes cloud, saw them roll back then shut as Mika collapsed on top of Gabe, weak and drained in ways he couldn't explain.

Panic shot through him as the blood finally flowed back into his brain. He pushed himself up and looked down at Gabe. His mate was breathing slow, steady, his heart pounding fast but strong. One bright green eye peeked out from a nearly-closed lid and a silly grin spread across Gabe's face. Mika grinned as he leant down for a kiss that Gabe melted into.

Mika's ego puffed up and his heart swelled with something stronger than he'd ever felt before. Their bond was more than it had ever been, more than he'd thought it could be, and all because he and Gabe had reached for each other with unwavering trust and boundless love.

He placed a soft kiss on Gabe's slightly parted lips and carefully pulled out from his mate's body. Shifting to his back, he wiped the sticky mess off of Gabe's body with the edge of the blanket; his mate was already asleep. He rolled Gabe over, cushioning Gabe's head on his shoulder and holding him tight.

With his mate in his arms, Mika realised he didn't feel angry or hurt any more by Zane's actions. In fact, he really was grateful to the man for kicking him out of the pack. It had brought him to Gabe, and what they had was more precious, more... Just more than anything Mika had ever hoped for.

Because of it, he would forgive Zane everything. Fate had a way of ensuring she got her way. In this instance, Mika knew the gain far outweighed the cost. He owed his former alpha, and it was obvious the man needed a friend. Well, he would get two. Mika knew his soft-hearted mate wouldn't be able to stay pissed at the man forever. Especially not if Gabe thought Aidan might hurt Zane.

Feeling better having made that decision, Mika let himself relax. He didn't drift off as he would have liked to; he had sensed an aggression in Aidan that put him on alert. The man would have to be aggressive to hold the position he did, and Mika knew that in itself didn't make Aidan a dangerous or cruel man...though he didn't doubt for a minute Aidan could be both of those things if needed.

What Mika didn't know was if the Dux Ducis would rein those instincts in when dealing with Zane. Mika wouldn't sit by and watch the man bully his former alpha, and Gabe would shit bricks and probably take a swing at Aidan if he did such a thing. Then all hell would break loose, and personally, Mika had come to appreciate the peace he had found with his mate.

He would just have to do whatever it took to make sure Aidan didn't abuse his position and that Zane... Well, he wasn't sure what to do with Zane, but the man needed a friend. Mika would start with that.

Chapter Seven

Aidan walked through the kennels behind Gabe and Mika's house. He couldn't help feeling admiration for Mika's mate. The man obviously had a big heart as the dozen rescued stray dogs attested. He squatted down and stuck his fingers through the chain link fence to pet one dog in particular that caught his attention. It looked at him with large wounded eyes and Aidan felt his heart melt.

"Come here, girl." Aidan kept his voice low and soft as he wiggled his fingers. "It's okay, yeah, that's a good girl." He scratched behind the black dog's ear, smiling when she groaned in approval.

"That's Sophie." The announcement startled Aidan. He'd been so involved in petting Sophie he hadn't heard Gabe approach. He glanced back and saw the man standing there with a yellow dog sitting at his side.

"And who's that?" The dog was better behaved than most people, Aidan mused.

"This," Gabe bent and ran his hand over the yellow dog's head, "is Iko, our baby." The last two words came out defiantly, as if Gabe thought Aidan might laugh. He didn't though. He thought it was rather sweet—which must have showed on his face, because Gabe glared at him.

"I'm sorry. Believe me when I say I'm not making fun. I think what you do here is amazing."

"Hmm. Well, I'm not sure what you were doing in Zane's room, but if you hurt the man, I will use your ass for dog food." Gabe looked Aidan up and down, frowning severely.

Aidan thought about standing but didn't want to make Gabe think he was trying to intimidate him in any way. Instead, he plopped down on his ass, back against the chain link fence and his fingers still poking through to pet Sophie.

"I have no intention of hurting him, Gabe. He's my mate." Aidan looked away as his vision blurred. "Even if he doesn't want to be."

"Iko, go in the house." There was the sound of scrambling feet then silence.

Aidan kept his gaze averted, afraid Gabe would look at him and see everything he felt. He heard the soft footsteps as the man walked over, saw the denim clad legs step into view. Gabe squatted down in front of him and Aidan found that he couldn't look away this time. He regarded the other man warily, feeling every bit exposed as he'd feared under Gabe's intense scrutiny.

"Let me ask you this, Aidan, Do *you* want *him* to be your mate, even after he kicked out the only gay guy in his pack? After he ran from you?"

Aidan felt his temper rise. "Do you know why he did either of those things? Do you have any idea how much he hates himself for what he did to Mika? How much he regrets—" He bit off the rest of his rant

when Gabe waved a hand in the air to shush him. He was too stunned to continue. He hadn't been blown off in such a manner since he was a small child. Who the hell was this man to do so now?

"Worked, didn't it?" Gabe laughed and shook his head. "You know, everything shows on your face, Aidan. Yeah, I shushed the big, bad Dux Ducis, brother to the Grand Poobah. Now answer my damned question."

Aidan knew his mouth was hanging open. No one made fun of the Alpha Anax. And why in the hell had he ever thought Mika was a lucky man when his mate had such a mouth on him? For shit's sake, Gabe had to have balls the size of—

"I'm waiting, in all of my irreverent glory," the man with the big mouth and bigger balls pointed out.

"Jesus, don't you have any respect—" Aidan bit out, unsurprised when he didn't get to finish.

"Uh, not one of you guys, remember?" Gabe tapped himself on the chest. "And definitely not one of your pack." Gabe leant closer, his nose only inches from Aidan's. "You want respect? Then earn it, because your fucking title doesn't mean a thing to me—and neither does your brother's."

That's why he thought Mika was lucky—his mate had a spine of steel, balls to match, and a heart big enough to take in every stray he could find. And Aidan suddenly realised that, despite the questions Gabe had flung at him, the man had obviously decided to take in Zane as another of his rescues. Gabe was goading him, wanting to judge his reactions, trying to discern how he felt about Zane.

Aidan had the man figured out now. He smiled and watched the wary look come over Gabe. That just made him smile bigger. Aidan reached out and poked Gabe on the chest and snickered when the man landed on his ass, hissing first—and wasn't that interesting?—then scowling as though he intended to smack Aidan upside the head.

"You don't fool me, Gabriel Staley." He laughed as Gabe's scowl deepened. "The only answer you're going to get is this—Zane is my mate, and I want him, and I think, despite being scared, he wants me, too." At least, he prayed Zane did.

Gabe didn't smile, but at least he stopped scowling. He started to speak but Aidan cut him off, figuring turnabout was fair play.

"Now let me ask you this—if you think my mate is, well, evil incarnate, then why are you out here riding my ass?" Aidan expected Gabe to hesitate, but the man surprised him again.

"Because I don't know that he is." Gabe shrugged. "What he did was wrong, but Mika thinks Zane deserves a chance, and I trust Mika." He pinned Aidan with that glittering stare again. "And I don't trust you. I don't even know if I like you."

"Fair enough." Aidan's lips twitched as he thought about the sound Gabe had made when he'd hit the ground a few minutes ago. "So, since you don't trust me, I guess you're not going to tell me why you made that hissing sound when your ass hit the ground?"

Gabe turned red, the flush rising from his neck to his hairline in an instant. He shot Aidan a nasty look but couldn't hold onto his mad. Instead, he ended up smirking, even snickering as he pushed himself up off the ground.

“Maybe if you tell me what was going on in Zane’s room a few hours ago.”

Aidan felt his own skin burn with embarrassment as Gabe dusted his hands off on his jeans and waited, tapping his foot in what Aidan decided had to be the most annoying manner. The man was demanding, and refused to kowtow to him and probably anyone else.

“You know, you’d make a great alpha,” Aidan pointed out. That stopped the foot and drained all the colour from Gabe’s face as the man shook his head violently. “What?”

“No way.” Gabe started backing away, looking at Aidan as though he were some psychotic axe murderer. “I don’t. I’m... That whole change-into-a-shapeshifter thing is just... Nuh uh.”

The whole—oh. Gabe was referring to the only commonly known way to change a human into a shifter. Having one’s penis bitten mid-climax was definitely a deterrent for most humans—and shifters, since they had to be bitten by their human lover as well. Aidan watched Gabe backpedal and somehow managed to keep from laughing at him as he stuttered through a litany of excuses until Aidan finally decided to have mercy on him.

“You know, you’re kind of cute when you’re a stuttering, panicking mess.” Aidan grinned as Gabe sputtered and tried to look indignant instead of pleased. “However, I think I will be the better man here and tell you there might be another way to make the transition.”

Gabe stopped so suddenly he nearly fell backwards, stumbling a few steps and flailing his arms until he righted himself.

Aidan had no doubt the man didn’t want to land on his sore ass again.

“How? Because that whole getting bit on the dick thing, that’s just wrong, Aidan. Way too wrong.”

Aidan nodded. “If you’re not into biting, or, say, mild to moderate BDSM...” Gabe’s face turned that brilliant shade of red again and Aidan thought, *Ah-ha! Gotcha!* Now he had a damned good idea of why the man didn’t want to sit.

“Just quit poking at me and tell me already!” Gabe crossed his arms, and his foot started that tapping again.

Aidan pushed himself up and headed out of the kennels, smiling as Gabe turned and walked by his side. “I have to do some checking first, Gabe—and no, I’m not messing with you on this. It’s just something I remember hearing rumours about years ago. Let me research it and maybe talk to Marcus—the Grand Poobah, if you will—and see what we can find out, okay?”

Gabe looked at him while they made their way to the house, nodding once they reached the back porch. “All right, but patience isn’t my virtue, and this doesn’t mean I trust you or like you.” He reached over and smacked Aidan on the shoulder. “But I might consider it, if you find a way around the biting thing.”

“That’s incentive enough, then. If I can’t impress you—and Mika—with my charm and wit, maybe I can bribe you both with a less painful way for you to be turned.”

Gabe snorted at that and pulled the door open, muttering as Aidan walked by. “You sure aren’t going to impress me with your humility.”

Aidan laughed and winked at him, then winked at Mika as well as the man looked at him suspiciously. He pointed at Gabe while looking at Mika.

“He started it.” Then he turned and went to check on his mate.

“Did not!” Gabe yelled back. “And don’t go doing...anything in there! I’ll be bringing a breakfast tray and don’t want my eyeballs scorched!”

Aidan turned back around. “I can take it—“

“Oh, I don’t *think* so, Double D.” Gabe planted his hands on his hips, obviously pleased with himself, and even Mika’s lips curled up in a smile.

“Double D?” Aidan used his haughtiest tone. He would not be reduced to some...pornographic actress’s bra size!

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, you know, it stands for—”

“I know what it better stand for.” Aidan toyed with threatening to rescind his earlier offer of help to the evil man, not that he’d actually follow through on the threat. He took a good, long look and realised Gabe was just trying to piss him off. He didn’t know why, but he was sure Mika’s devious mate had a reason. Probably a very sound reason, which was scary as hell and not one Aidan cared to discover at this moment...maybe not at any moment.

He gave a slight bow in Gabe’s direction. “Whatever you want to call me, it’s fine with me.” Aidan waited until he had turned and headed towards his mate before he let himself smile.

That shocked look on Gabe’s face, and the utter failure of the man to retaliate had been worth the humiliation of being called Double D. Aidan knew he’d better enjoy it while he could. He was fairly certain that there weren’t too many times when Mika’s mate was shocked speechless.

Aidan paused outside the bedroom door and took a moment to make sure his emotions, as well as his body, was under control. When he was as sure as he could be that it was safe, Aidan opened the door, surprised to find his mate sitting up and watching him with troubled grey eyes.

Aidan closed the door and leant back against it, tucking his hands behind his lower back and regarding Zane warily. The bump on his head had gone down considerably, and the bruising was already beginning to fade.

“How do you feel?”

Zane tipped his head to the side and studied him for so long Aidan didn’t think the man was going to answer—and was startled when he finally did.

“Like shit, which is better than cold shit, which was what I felt like yesterday.” Zane glanced down and sighed. He pushed himself up, sitting straighter, then looked back at Aidan. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah, after Gabe brings breakfast.” Aidan pushed off the door and walked over to the chair beside the bed. “Will you let me check your shoulder?” It was a good excuse to touch Zane, but also a necessity. Aidan wanted to make sure the wound was healing properly.

Zane reached up and started picking at the tape that held the bandage on. "If you want to." He managed to work a piece of the tape free. "It will save Mika from having to do it again—and Gabe from turning green." Zane jerked the tape and grunted as it was ripped from his skin.

Aidan grabbed the loose end of the bandage and looked at Zane. "Are you an all-at-once person, or would you rather I take the tape off one side at a time?"

"All at... shit!" Zane's eyes opened wide as Aidan pulled the bandage off quickly. "Damn! How much tape did Mika use?"

"No more than I had to," Mika answered as he held the door open for Gabe. "Just be glad Gabe found the medical tape. I was going to use duct tape."

Aidan dropped the bandage into the trash can and glared at Mika when Zane shuddered. Needing to touch his mate, Aidan sat on the edge of the bed facing Zane. He leant in and looked at the wound, carefully running his fingers around the edges of the bite.

"It's healing nicely; shouldn't be more than a few days until it's healed over." Unable to stop himself, he traced the slight bump on his mate's forehead, trailing a fingertip down to the bruising under each of his warm, grey eyes. "And the bruising is already fading here..." Aidan glanced at Zane's bruised ribs. "And here, though I imagine you're still sore as hell." He looked at Zane for confirmation.

"Not as bad as you might think."

Zane's eyes reminded Aidan of molten silver. He couldn't look away from the need he thought he saw in his mate's unwavering gaze. Aidan felt his heart rate increase, felt the answering rush of blood to his cock. Zane's nostrils flared and his pupils dilated as the scent of Aidan's arousal reached him.

Gabe tapped his foot, breakfast tray balanced on one hand. "You know, you two might want to eat before going at it like bunnies." Neither Aidan or Zane acknowledged him. "Hey, you two—"

"Just set the tray down, babe." Mika reached around Gabe and took the tray. He set it on the desk then took Gabe by the elbow, leading him back out of the room.

Gabe glanced over his shoulder at Aidan and Zane, then at Mika, a worried look in his eyes. "Are you sure we should leave them?"

Mika pulled Gabe through the doorway and shut the door. "That was mutual lust in there, Gabe. Let's leave them alone for a bit."

"But what if—" Gabe was reaching for the door again.

Mika grabbed his mate and pulled him away from the door. "But what if I give you something else to think about?" He reached down and slapped Gabe's ass, leering at his mate when Gabe moaned and his bright green eyes darkened with desire.

"I think they're both big boys," Gabe conceded, grabbing Mika's hand and leading him to their room.

Chapter Eight

Zane could feel the need roiling in Aidan. It matched the lust burning in his own veins, pulsing in his cock.

“My first crush was on Mika.” He watched the effect his words had on his mate, felt the jealousy and surprise that flared up in the man.

Aidan straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. “But you never did anything about it?”

“No, nothing that would make anyone think I was gay.” Zane fingered the edge of the sheet nervously. “My uncle would have killed me, literally. So I ignored it and found, in time, that I could, ah, compensate to a point with females, even if it wasn’t particularly fulfilling. It was necessary.” He shrugged, forgetting about the bite and hissed when pain shot through his shoulder.

Aidan frowned, his brows knitting together. “What do you mean, he would have killed you?”

“He knew Mika was gay. Mika didn’t advertise it, but he didn’t hide it, either.” Zane closed his eyes and leant his head back, remembering how much he envied Mika his freedom. “His parents were pretty influential in the pack, so no one raised much of a fuss about it. But once they disappeared, people started talking. Someone stirred them up.” And Zane knew who it was, though he had no proof. “I was alpha by then, but only a figurehead. My uncle John had taken over as alpha when my father died.” Zane opened his eyes and regarded Aidan solemnly.

“When did your father die, Zane?” Aidan stood and took two steps to the chair and sat. Zane felt the loss of the man’s body heat acutely. Had he already said enough to discourage Aidan from wanting him as a mate?

Aidan laughed softly and shook his head. “No, but the need to touch you is too distracting when I’m that close.”

Zane tensed, wondering if he would ever get used to someone else knowing what he was feeling—or if he’d ever need to. He forced himself to relax and remember what Aidan had asked. His father...

“I was four.” But it seemed like yesterday, rather than twenty-three years ago. “He...” Zane swallowed, trying to work the words past the tightness in his throat. “Uncle John said my father killed himself; guilt over my mother’s death, supposedly.” Zane shook his head and kept his gaze averted. “Maybe, I don’t know. Mom was found in the dry riverbed; she’d fallen several hundred feet to her death. I don’t,” his breath was shaky as he tried to compose his thoughts, “I don’t remember her, not really. I wish I did.”

Aidan cursed and came back to sit beside Zane. He placed his larger hand over Zane’s, stilling it from plucking at a loose thread on the sheet. He tipped Zane’s head up with his other hand and waited until Zane met his penetrating stare.

“That is a terrible thing for a small child to experience, losing first your mother, then your father.” He squeezed Zane’s hand. “Who decided the cause of both deaths?”

Zane knew who he thought had decided, but he had been too young when his parents died and didn't know for certain. But he did know something. "He found them both. Uncle John." He watched Aidan tense, felt the suspicion that matched Zane's own.

Aidan arched his brows. "And no one thought that was suspicious?"

"I doubt anyone would have spoken up if they did." Though surely he wasn't the only one who had wondered? Zane shrugged and pulled his hand from Aidan's. A low growl from the man had the hairs on the back of Zane's neck standing up. "I need a drink," Zane offered by way of explanation.

A glass of orange juice was placed in his hand almost immediately. Zane closed his eyes as he let the tangy citrus drink sooth his parched throat. He drained the glass and was in the process of setting it on the nightstand when Aidan took the glass and set it on the breakfast tray instead.

Aidan turned and hesitated. "Do you need anything else?"

Zane considered the question. "That depends. How long are we going to be talking?"

"Maybe you should eat," Aidan suggested. He twisted around and grabbed the tray, setting it on the bed beside Zane.

"That isn't a good sign." Zane couldn't help but share his somewhat amused thought.

Aidan chuckled and Zane began eating. He hadn't realised he was hungry until the first bite was in his mouth. Talking about his past, and his uncle, had tied his stomach in knots.

He ate quickly, not tasting anything—not that he would tell Gabe that. Zane valued his balls too much to say something so foolish. The food looked good, however. Gabe had made pancakes, sausage, and a half-dozen eggs, sunny side up. He glanced over at Aidan, noting the plate piled high with food balanced on Aidan's knees. Gabe must have been a busy man this morning. He'd fixed enough food to feed four or five men rather than just himself and Aidan.

Zane found himself distracted by the strong line of Aidan's jaw, the flex of muscle under the skin as he chewed. His cock twitched when Aidan swallowed, the bobbling of his Adam's apple bringing Zane's erection from semi-hard to full and aching with need.

"Zane, you can't look at me like that when you're still injured." Aidan set his plate on the floor and leant forward, forearms resting on his knees. Zane looked at the man's mouth, discounting the words that were coming out of it. Aidan had nice, full lips that made Zane think about what it would feel like to have those lips wrapped around his prick. He could imagine the muscles in Aidan's jaws contracting as the man sucked his cock, his sharp cheekbones protruding over hollowed out cheeks... He groaned and met Aidan's searing gaze.

"We could—" It was all Zane got out before Aidan flew into action.

Aidan rose and reached for Zane's tray, lifting it and setting it on the floor with a dish-rattling thud. He grabbed the sheet and tore it from Zane's body with a sharp tug, tossing the light material off the foot of the bed.

Zane was torn between trying to hide his various parts or spreading out like a slut. The heat in Aidan's dark brown eyes sent an answering swirl of heat to Zane's balls and he found his legs opening, not

timidly, either. The speed with which he splayed his legs wide would have embarrassed him had it not ratcheted up the lust he could feel in Aidan.

There was a rush of emotion and need in Zane, feelings too long denied and suppressed. *I'm not the alpha of Gila any more—not even a member of the pack.* The realisation flooded his mind and he shared it with Aidan. The things he had done, had agreed to do despite his own sense of right and wrong still burdened Zane. But right now, at this moment, all he wanted was what he had denied himself through fear and manipulation for years.

“Please, Aidan.” Zane shifted his legs restlessly, unsure of exactly what it was that he wanted.

Aidan's hands trembled as he reached for the hem of his shirt. He studied Zane, his breath hitching when Zane reached for his own cock and started stroking. Aidan grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and started to lift it from his body, hesitating as doubt flickered in his eyes.

“You're not anywhere near healed yet,” Aidan pointed out, gripping the cotton shirt so tightly his knuckles went white.

“We can be careful.” Zane let his gaze move over Aidan's body, lingering on the bulge pressed up against his zipper. “Or not. Just... I need.” Zane groaned and pumped his prick, sliding his palm over the head. He flicked his thumbnail over the weeping slit and groaned again as his hips jerked. His body was a confusing mix of pleasure and pain and it stimulated him unbearably.

He wanted to yell out in triumph when Aidan whipped the shirt over his head and kicked off his shoes. His hand fumbled mid-stroke, falling to the side as he visually devoured Aidan's broad chest, humming in approval at the light smattering of blond hair there. Two flat, small brown nipples made Zane's mouth water with the need to taste. They hardened as he stared, and Zane thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Then Aidan shoved his jeans down off his lean hips and kicked them aside. His prick stood up and tapped against his stomach, a white string of precome bridging the gap from his cock head to his chiselled abs. Zane couldn't take his eyes away from the sight as Aidan stalked over to the bed and crawled between Zane's thighs. He knelt then lay down, his broad shoulders pressing against the backs of Zane's thighs as Aidan placed Zane's legs over his shoulders.

Zane met Aidan's burning gaze and felt the air rush out of his lungs. He felt the presence of the other man pushing into his mind, seeking the link that scared the hell out of Zane. He resisted until Aidan, eyes still locked with Zane's, lowered his head and ran his tongue from the base of Zane's cock to the spongy head. Zane gasped, heat zinging from his prick to his balls and up his spine. Every reason he had for keeping Aidan out crumbled and then he was feeling the other man's need, his hunger to be buried inside Zane's ass, to dominate and force his mate to submit. Visions of being tied to Aidan's bed flashed through Zane's head, and he moaned, some part of him thrilling at the idea of being bound and at his mate's mercy.

Aidan's moist mouth closed around the head of Zane's prick and Zane thought his brain was going to melt. White sparks danced in his vision as Aidan's head sank down and he swallowed Zane's cock to the base. Zane fought against thrusting, muscles quivering with the need to move.

“No.” The word was firm and clear in Zane's mind, Aidan answering Zane's unspoken need. Aidan's rough hands gripped Zane's hips, pinning them to the mattress. Zane opened his mouth to protest, but Aidan began sucking and swirling his tongue, sliding it over the slit of Zane's prick, dipping into the little

reservoir and draining the precome gathered there. Aidan's tongue swirled again, teasing the small patch of nerves under the mushroomed head and Zane screamed. His balls drew tight as Aidan engulfed his cock again, swallowing when Zane's cock hit the back of his throat.

Zane fisted the sheets, muscles clenching as Aidan swallowed again. Zane tried to hold out, wanting to prolong the ecstasy coursing through him. One hand left his hip and Zane felt two fingers slide into Aidan's mouth. Aidan's head bobbed up and back down, bringing Zane's thick length all the way in again.

Aidan's fingers slid out and teased Zane's hole and that was all it took. Zane yelled and bucked as Aidan swallowed his cock and pushed a finger deep into Zane's ass. The burning and stretching fuelled Zane's orgasm, his cock throbbing as jet after jet of spunk shot out. The finger in his ass continued to pump in and out. Aidan worked a second finger into his ring, still sucking and licking Zane's prick.

Burning pain spread through Zane's channel as Aidan scissored his fingers, stretching the resistant ring of muscles. Zane thought he might not be able to handle Aidan's thick fingers, then Aidan did something with those digits, touching something inside Zane that made him scream again. "*Never felt anything like that, Aidan!*"

Aidan lapped at Zane's cock, keeping him hard. He rubbed the spot inside Zane again and again, fucking him thoroughly with his fingers. A third finger breached Zane's opening, sending a scorching sensation shooting from Zane's hole into his rectum, and he started to struggle. Aidan released Zane's cock from his mouth with an audible pop and growled. He nipped the inside of Zane's thigh and thrust his fingers hard and deep, adding a twist so he hit Zane's prostate. He repeated the movement until Zane was writhing and begging for release.

Zane protested when Aidan's fingers left his body. He was panting and aching, his balls painfully tight. "Please, Aidan..." Zane heard the pleading note in his voice but didn't care. He just knew that he needed to come; his balls ached even though Aidan had brought Zane to orgasm only moments earlier.

Aidan crawled up the length of Zane's body, holding himself up over Zane. Confusion washed over Zane. Had he done something wrong? He'd been sure that Aidan wanted to fuck him. He met Aidan's heated stare, struggling to understand what was happening.

"What are you...? I thought—oh God!" Zane's breath rushed from his lungs when Aidan lowered his hips and rubbed their cocks together. The rumbling groan that tore from Aidan's chest made Zane's hips jerk as he chased after more of the pleasure that was zinging through his body. Aidan pressed his lower body down harder, and the friction against his prick nearly took the top of Zane's head off.

"Aidan, please, help me." Zane thrashed almost violently, trying to thrust against Aidan's greater weight. He fisted his hands into the sheets, then deeper into the mattress, trying to find something to cling to. Aidan ground his hips in a series of sharp, hard moves that had Zane's eyes rolling back in his head.

The sound of their sweat-slicked bodies rubbing together along with their panted grunts was an erotic medley that shoved Zane over the edge. Without warning, his balls drew up and his cock pulsed. Warm, tangy spunk spread between Zane and Aidan's bodies, then Aidan was growling as his hips jerked frantically. Aidan tensed, his prick throbbing between them, then his mouth crashed down on Zane's, nipping and invading as heated bursts of come shot out and mixed with Zane's seed.

Fine tremors shook Aidan's big frame and seemed to pass to Zane as Aidan's hips stilled and the kiss gentled. Zane felt sated and boneless, his muscles relaxed as Aidan's tongue stroked over the roof of his

mouth. Slowly he became aware of a cramping sensation in his hands. Aidan licked Zane's lips then lifted his head, peering down at Zane with heavy lidded eyes.

"Are you all right?" Aidan's voice was a rough whisper that sent Zane's mind spiralling right back to what they'd just done together. God, he'd had no idea sex included things other than blow jobs and fucking. He felt happy and ridiculously naïve—and his hands hurt like a bitch.

"My hands..." Zane and Aidan turned their heads at the same time, looking to where one of Zane's hands was buried in the mattress, his fingers tangled with the inner springs. "*Shit! Gabe is going to kill me!*"

Aidan's eyes narrowed as he heard the edge of panic in Zane's thoughts. He glanced at Zane's other hand and saw that he had shredded the mattress there as well. "*Not if we flip the mattress.*" Zane started to speak but Aidan shook his head. "*I'd bet that after all the noise we just made, at least one of those two are listening at the door. We will flip the mattress for now. I'll replace it before we leave.*"

And that was something Zane wasn't ready to think about. He hadn't given any thought to what would happen after they had sex, any kind of sex. After all, he was still Zane Mitchell, ex-alpha, bigot, coward, hypocrite. Fuck up extraordinaire. Zane looked up to find Aidan studying him and hoped the man hadn't picked up on any of his thoughts. Despite the fact he felt he was useless, Zane realised he didn't want Aidan to know just how much he despised himself.

Zane really didn't want to feel like a pity fuck.

Aidan stood and offered his hand to Zane. "Can you stand?"

"Sure. I got it." Zane had been able to walk after getting the shit beat out of him. He figured it should be easier today than it had been then. He sat up and put his feet on the floor. Aidan's hand gripped his elbow and Zane fought the impulse to pull away. It would be petty and immature. Almost as immature as refusing to admit how much he liked feeling Aidan touch him, even in such a nonsexual manner.

Zane pushed to his feet—and nearly toppled over. Aidan caught him to his chest, arms wrapping around him. Zane cursed as his bruised ribs were squeezed and Aidan immediately loosened his hold.

"Sorry." Aidan nuzzled Zane's cheek as he petted Zane's back. "Instinct, you know. Let's get you to the bathroom."

"I don't know what happened," Zane muttered, embarrassment tinting his skin pink. "I shouldn't be so weak."

The vibrations of Aidan's soft laughter seeped into Zane. "Oh, I think I know, Zane." Aidan tipped Zane's head up and leered at him. "I just brought you off twice, mate—" Just hearing it spoke out loud had a near-devastating effect on Zane's knees. "And I will do it again and again, until you get it through your head that you're not running. And then I'll do it just because we both want it." The leer had disappeared and Aidan regarded him intently. "You'd better understand one thing, Zane Mitchell. I am the most relentless son of a bitch you'll ever meet. And you will never be free of me unless I desire it."

Zane tried hard to suppress the icy shiver that ran down his spine. Aidan kept him pinned with that dark glare. What did Aidan want from him? Zane didn't know and was too scared of the answer to ask.

“I want you to understand that I mean what I say. You belong to me. Run from me again and I will be very unhappy with you, Zane.”

Zane lowered his eyes in a sign of submission and refused to let himself think about what Aidan had just told him. He didn't trust that the man wouldn't be able to pick up on his thoughts, so for the time being, Zane decided to keep his mind carefully blank.

Chapter Nine

Pulling up his jeans, Aidan thought about what had just happened, his prick already half-hard again. It had been difficult, but Aidan had managed not to climb into the shower with his mate, cleaning himself at the sink instead. They had just had spine-meltingly hot orgasms, and Zane still looked bruised and battered, but Aidan had found himself wanting to mount Zane and ream his ass. His false show of submission hadn't fooled Aidan, and the need to dominate and force his will on Zane was driving Aidan's wolf into a frenzy. He had held back and kept from sinking his teeth into his mate earlier, and now, Aidan regretted that bit of compassion for Zane's injured body that had kept him from being marked.

Aidan wandered over to the bed and stripped the blanket and sheets from the mattress. Gripping the sides of the firm king-sized mattress, he flipped it over and straightened it on the box springs. He glanced at the headboard and was weighing the possibility of tying Zane to the heavy oak posts when he heard the water shut off. Hurrying to the bathroom, he opened the door and grabbed the towel from the towel bar just as Zane pushed the shower door aside.

Glistening beads of water were trapped in the fine dark lashes surrounding Zane's grey eyes. More droplets ran from his wet hair down his neck. Aidan stood entranced by the path one particular drop took, sliding down the centre of Zane's broad chest, slipping into the line that divided the defined abs. Aidan licked his lips as that lucky bead of water trailed around Zane's navel and into the thick, dark curls that nestled around the base of his cock.

His very erect cock. Aidan's gaze shot up to Zane's, and he read the hunger in the man's eyes. Aidan's own cock was hard and aching as though he hadn't just come less than half an hour ago. He wanted to taste Zane's fat prick, but with the unresolved issues between them, Aidan wasn't sure kneeling in front of the man was the wisest course he could take at this time.

He could almost feel the caress as Zane's gaze flitted down to his erection. The tip of Zane's tongue peeked out and swiped along the full lower lip, leaving a slick trail of moisture. Aidan's cock pressed painfully against his zipper and he knew what he wanted even more than to taste his mate's prick.

The towel landed on the floor in front of him, the movement causing Zane to jerk his head up and look at Aidan. A flash of irritation passed across Zane's face but Aidan ignored it. He could feel what Zane wanted even if the man wouldn't admit it.

“Come here,” Aidan ground out, unbuttoning his jeans. Zane looked like he was going to resist, and

Aidan wasn't having it. *"You forget, I can feel what you want. And right now, you want my cock fucking your mouth. You want to taste my come, feel me take control and fist my hands in your hair as I teach you how to please me."*

Zane shook his head as though he could deny it, but he stepped out of the shower and walked to Aidan. "Why do I want that, Aidan? Not to blow you, but why do I want to give you that kind of control?" Zane seemed genuinely puzzled as he stopped at the edge of the towel. He blinked and shook his head again. "I don't understand it. I've been an alpha, but with you, I want to fight you for dominance and obey at the same time."

Aidan had ideas about it but thought his mate needed to figure it out on his own, though if the man didn't do it soon, Aidan would help him. For now, he would let Zane learn another lesson about the power of the attraction between mates. Aidan unzipped his jeans and shoved them down until they pooled at his ankles. He kicked the clothing aside and looked at his mate.

"And which will you do now, Zane?" Aidan watched the play of emotions dance over his mate's face. He knew the exact moment Zane made up his mind, felt the rush of heat surge through the man and saw it in Zane's eyes.

Zane didn't break off eye contact as he gripped Aidan's hips and dropped to his knees. Aidan felt the trembling of Zane's hands and grunted when his mate dug his fingers in bruisingly deep. His prick was so hard he ached and the added bite of pain from Zane's hands only heightened the need spiralling inside Aidan.

His cock jerked, smacking into his stomach when Zane leant forward and ran his tongue from the base of Aidan's cock to the underside of the plump head. The sight of that slick pink tongue on his shaft was too much. Aidan reached down and fisted the base of his cock with one hand and wound the other in Zane's damp hair.

"Open your mouth. I want to feed you my dick." Aidan tapped Zane's lips with his prick. He growled when Zane's tongue darted out to swipe at the precome leaking from the heavy length. Aidan tugged at Zane's hair and his mate's mouth opened in a gasp. With a tip of his hips, he slid the head of his prick between Zane's lips.

Zane closed his eyes and moaned around Aidan's cock, sending vibrations down it straight to Aidan's balls. His hips jerked and more of his prick slid into the warm depths of Zane's mouth. *"Suck it."* Aidan sent a graphic image along with the thought, showing Zane what he wanted. A shudder shook Zane and his mouth tightened around Aidan's cock.

Aidan began rocking his hips slowly, not wanting to gag Zane as the man learned how to please him. He pushed in, stopping before he could hit the back of his mate's throat, and pulled back out. Zane sucked harder and swirled his tongue along the underside of Aidan's cock.

When that probing muscle found the bundle of nerves under the spongy cock head, Aidan couldn't hold back a moan. His fingers tightened in Zane's hair, and Zane responded by swiping his tongue over the sensitive spot again.

"Fuck. You learn fast." Aidan's control slipped as he gave in to his body's demands. The sight of Zane's mouth stretched wide, his full lips wrapped around Aidan's prick, was an image that would be seared into his mind forever. Right now, it was the very thing that caused Aidan to snap.

“Touch yourself. Now.” Aidan was moving before Zane’s hand left his hip to grip his own cock. Hips pumping in quick, short jerks, Aidan fucked Zane’s mouth. Watching his saliva-slicked prick work in and out while Zane jerked himself off had Aidan’s balls drawing tight. The tingling spread from the base of his spine as he thrust in harder than he’d intended. Zane gagged but didn’t pull back, diving forward instead to try to swallow Aidan’s prick.

Zane sucked hard and moaned. The scent of his mate’s come hit Aidan and his thrusts became erratic as he chased his orgasm. With a swipe of his tongue into Aidan’s slit, Zane sent Aidan into overdrive. His head flung back, he yelled as he pumped his cock into Zane’s mouth, holding the man’s head still. Aidan felt Zane’s tongue sweeping over his cock, felt the humming sound of approval Zane made as he swallowed each jet of come that shot from Aidan’s prick. Aidan let go of his cock and reached back to support himself by grabbing the edge of the sink. Zane continued to suckle and lave Aidan’s softening cock, stopping only when Aidan pulled back. His cock slid from between Zane’s puffy lips. The man looked so fucking hot with his mouth opened and swollen, his pink tongue darting out to catch the lingering taste of Aidan on his lips.

Aidan’s cock twitched and he almost snorted. Christ, at this rate, they were going to kill each other. He reached down and traced a finger over the chiselled planes of Zane’s face, feeling his heart twist when the man opened his grey eyes, soft and sated, to stare at Aidan.

“I didn’t know,” Zane murmured, the hand still on Aidan’s hip caressing.

Well, he wasn’t the only one. Aidan hadn’t known how intoxicating it would be to teach his mate how to please him. The man was a natural, with a mouth made for Aidan’s cock. Aidan caught the hand at his hip and pulled, signalling to Zane that he should stand.

He did, and Aidan leant against the sink as he wrapped his other hand around the back of Zane’s neck. He tugged Zane closer, needing to taste his mate. Zane’s eyes drifted shut as Aidan brought his mouth down to Zane’s. The scent of his come on Zane’s lips made Aidan groan as he plundered Zane’s mouth, claiming him with lips, tongue and teeth.

Zane let Aidan control the kiss, submitting to the near-violent assault with a whimper that Aidan swallowed. He swiped his tongue over the roof of Zane’s mouth and gentled the kiss, feeling the exhaustion that swept over his mate. The need to control the man before him worried Aidan somewhat, but he couldn’t fight it. If he was completely honest with himself, he didn’t want to. He placed a hard, closed-mouth kiss on Zane’s lips, then pulled back.

Aidan dropped his hand from Zane’s neck but kept his other hand clasped around his mate’s. Zane opened his eyes and looked at Aidan questioningly.

“You need to rest.” Aidan turned and led Zane back into the bedroom—where an irritated Gabe and an angry looking Mika stood waiting for them. Shit! Aidan didn’t know why he suddenly felt like a kid who got busted sneaking back into the house after curfew, but he didn’t care for it one bit. Zane’s snort of laughter behind him didn’t help any, either.

“Looks like someone’s in trouble,” Zane thought and Aidan shot him a nasty look. The smirk on Zane’s face made Aidan want to turn the man over his knee. And that thought had Aidan’s cock jerking. A hiss from Gabe drew Aidan’s gaze to him and he realised Gabe was glaring at his cock... and that he and Zane both were bare-assed naked.

Aidan stopped so quickly Zane slammed into his back and groaned at the shock to his injured body.

Aidan reached back and placed a gentle hand on Zane's hip, trying to offer comfort with the small touch.

"Do you mind?" Aidan arched his brows and glared at Gabe and Mika.

Gabe started to speak but Mika shook his head. "Not very well. What the fuck is going on?"

A soft puff of air brushed against Aidan's neck as Zane laughed silently. "*Glad you find this so amusing.*" Aidan tried to keep the anger he felt from the thought. Having two nosy men glaring at him grated on his nerves. That they were doing so out of concern for his mate tempered his anger some, and Aidan vowed to try to remember that their reasons for being so...annoying were based on good intentions.

Taking a deep breath, Aidan forced down his anger. "Would it be okay if I got dressed and Zane got back in bed before we have this discussion? His body is nearly shaking with exhaustion."

Gabe stepped forward, stopping only when Mika grabbed the back of his mate's belt. "Then maybe you shouldn't be tiring Zane out!" Anger brought red slashes to Gabe's cheeks, but it was guilt that brought them to Aidan's.

Once again, he had put his body's needs before his mate's health. What kind of mate was he, to be so selfish? He deserved whatever ire Gabe and Mika—and Zane, for that matter—tossed his way.

Zane tensed against Aidan's back, and he extended a hand forward, letting it brush against Aidan's for a brief second before dropping it back to his side. Aidan felt his mate's confusion. Zane's need to reassure Aidan that everything that had happened between them earlier was fine battled with his mate's fears and self-loathing. Aidan ached to comfort the man, but now was definitely neither the time nor place, and even if it were, it would take more than a few softly murmured words from Aidan to ease Zane's fears. And how could he do that when he was busy doubting his own actions and thoughts?

"You," Gabe snapped, clearly out of patience, "get dressed, then you can tell me what the hell happened to my mattress." He turned and took Mika's hand, leaving the bedroom so suddenly the silence seemed to ring in Aidan's ears.

"How'd he know about the mattress?" Zane wondered. Aidan pulled him to his side and they both looked at the now-made bed. They saw the stuffing on the floor at the same time. Twin 'ohs' echoed in the room.

Zane shook his head, the movement stiff, from physical pain or emotional discomfort, Aidan couldn't tell. "Come on, how could you not notice that when you were flipping the mattress?"

Aidan fought the temptation to topple Zane onto said mattress. Instead, he leant over and pulled down the blanket and sheets. He pulled Zane over and, gesturing to the bed, ran his hand over Zane's round ass.

"I was more than a little distracted." *And am getting so again*, Aidan thought as he watched Zane crawl onto the bed. Zane carefully positioned himself on his back and reached for the covers. Aidan batted his hands aside.

"I'll do that." Aidan tugged the sheets and blanket up to Zane's chest. He looked at his mate and Gabe's accusations replayed in his mind. Aidan leant over and placed a chaste kiss on Zane's lips. "I'm sorry. I haven't been taking very good care of you."

Zane reached up and grabbed Aidan's shoulders before he could straighten up. Surprise rippled through Aidan as Zane pulled him back down until their lips brushed together.

"I think you've been taking very good care of me," Zane murmured before slanting his mouth over Aidan's and running his tongue over Aidan's lips. Aidan opened and let Zane in, twining his tongue with his mate's as need reared up and clawed at Aidan's insides. He got tenuous control on his body and licked Zane's lips as he ended the kiss. Zane's pleasure was palpable, his sincerity touching Aidan in a way that he had never experienced before.

Aidan rested his forehead on Zane's and rubbed their noses together before he realised what he was doing and stopped. What kind of a mushy idiot was he? And when had he become one? Aidan stood and pushed the thoughts away. He studied Zane, felt his mate doing the same to him in return. The wound on Zane's shoulder was much better, and the bruises on the man had faded even more since this morning. The bags under his eyes, however, fuelled Aidan's guilt.

"Get some sleep. I'll be back with lunch for you in a bit." Aidan waited until Zane nodded. He left the bedside and found his clothes. They were rather dirty but Aidan hadn't thought to grab his bag from the truck. Well, there was no help for it right now. He kicked aside his underwear and pulled on his jeans. Glancing at the shirt, Aidan decided not to wear it. He would see if Mika and Gabe would let him use their washing machine...if they weren't intent on kicking him out, anyway.

Grinning as he walked to the bedroom door, Aidan thought that if they did want him to leave, at least he and Zane would go somewhere they would have some privacy. One thing was for certain—there was no way that Aidan would leave here without his mate.

Chapter Ten

The sound of angry voices woke Zane from a light sleep. That, and the anger and amusement he felt coming from Aidan. The man couldn't seem to decide which feeling was the most appropriate. Zane opened his mind fully and felt the fondness Aidan had for Gabe, the bit of envy for Mika and admiration for both men. The irritation Aidan felt over the ass-chewing he was getting, along with the jealousy Zane felt over his mate appreciating Mika's 'feisty' and 'sexy' mate had Zane rising out of the bed. He looked around and decided clothes were too much trouble. Wrapping the blanket around his waist, Zane groaned as the movement taxed his already sore body. Tough shit, he thought. He wasn't going to lay back while Aidan assaulted him, unintentionally or not, with his feelings about Gabriel Staley.

Zane opened the door and snuck down the hall. He knew they would scent him soon enough, or at least Mika and Aidan would.

"That doesn't mean you should be mauling the man! Damn it, Aidan, he looked like he was at death's door less than twenty-four hours ago!" Gabe's voice rang with accusation.

“Not to mention the fact that he might not be a willing participant, not if he was healthy—” Mika sounded protective and disgusted. How he managed it, Zane had no idea, but he’d already heard enough. He sped up and stumbled into the kitchen when the edge of the blanket slipped from his grasp.

Aidan, Mika and Gabe all ran towards him, but it was Aidan who pushed to the front and caught Zane, holding him tightly with one hand and grabbing the blanket with the other. Zane could feel the intense glare from his mate. He looked up and met Aidan’s eyes.

“I told you to get some sleep.” Aidan’s voice was closer to a growl than anything else.

Zane shrugged and winced. By the time he remembered that his shoulder was injured, it would probably be healed. “I’m not your bitch.”

Anger sparked in Aidan’s eyes as his lips thinned with displeasure. Too bad. Zane might submit to the man sexually—okay, he *did* submit to the man sexually and loved it—but that didn’t mean Aidan was going to control everything else in Zane’s life.

“Enough, you two.” Mika stepped to their sides and pushed them apart. Gabe slipped in and looped an arm around Zane’s waist and led him to a chair. Zane shot Aidan a quick glare and slapped Gabe’s prodding hand away. Mika’s growl was a warning not to do it again, and Zane nodded in acknowledgement of that fact.

“Stop it, Gabe, before I piss Mika off any more.” Zane tried to lean away from Gabe’s questing hand as the man reached for Zane’s sore ribs.

“I’m just checking to see how you’re healing, geez. Chill out.” Gabe’s exasperation showed in his touch, which wasn’t as gentle as it could have been. Zane grunted, and Aidan’s head snapped up and his shoulders stiffened. Zane wanted to laugh. It was like a roomful of testosterone-crazed alphas...and that could be dangerous, because it wasn’t *like*, it *was*. And two of those alphas, Aidan and Mika, were definitely ready to butt heads. Add to that their mates touching another man and it could be an explosive situation. Zane darted a glance at Mika and saw the tensing of the man’s muscles. A quick glimpse of Aidan and Zane felt a trill of fear.

“Gabe, stop.”

Gabe’s eyes met his, narrowed with irritation then widened when Gabe finally realised their mates were pulsing with anger. He nodded and dropped his hands from Zane’s side and stepped back. Spinning around, Gabe pointed to Mika.

“Cut it out, caveman. Your chest-thumping is gonna get you a night on the couch.” Mika’s eyes widened in alarm, then he lunged for Gabe and pulled him to his side. A loud grunt left Mika as an elbow from his mate smacked into his ribs.

“You will pay for that and the threat both,” Mika promised as he stared at his mate.

Gabe grinned so big Zane thought it looked painful. “I’m counting on it.”

Okay, so he could maybe see why Aidan was a bit envious. Damn it. Aidan inhaled sharply and Zane had a sinking feeling he hadn’t blocked that thought like he should have. Not daring to look at his mate just yet, Zane instead looked at Mika.

“What is the problem? Is it just that you think I’m too fucked up to know what I’m doing? Both mentally and physically?” Zane watched Mika’s mouth do a fine imitation of a goldfish. “Or is it just one of the two?”

Gabe squeaked when Mika tightened his arm around him to keep Gabe quiet. “So what, Zane? I’m supposed to think the man who kicked me out of his pack for being gay just suddenly decided to be gay himself?” Mika snorted and shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

No, he knew it didn’t work that way. He felt Aidan watching him and would have bet the man was standing with his arms crossed over his chest. A quick glimpse told Zane he was right. He sighed as he realised he was going to have to explain everything, and not just to Aidan. Mika—and Gabe as well—also deserved to know the truth. If after that, Mika and Gabe wanted him to leave, he would do so immediately. And if it humiliated him to tell the tale, it was no worse than he deserved.

Zane had been so focused on his own thoughts that he hadn’t heard Aidan approach. Aidan stepped in front of Zane and bent at the waist. He cupped Zane’s cheeks and tipped his head up. “*You do not have to explain anything to them.*”

“Just to you?” That came out a bit bitchy and Zane hadn’t meant it to be. He smiled at Aidan, trying to soften the words. “Yeah, I do. They deserve it, and more importantly, so do you.”

Aidan studied him intently. “Are you sure? We can leave. I can have Marcus send someone for us, or rent a car and we can go home.”

Home? Zane wasn’t sure where that was any more. His doubt must have shown on his face, because Aidan’s expression hardened.

“My home, Zane. You’re my mate; that makes it your home, too.” Zane felt Aidan battering at his mental shield again and had to struggle to keep the man out. He didn’t want Aidan knowing what a confused mess he was. Probably too late for that, but right now, there was too much racing around in his head for him to comfortably share.

Zane looked over Aidan’s shoulder. “Can everyone sit down so I don’t have to keep looking up at you all?”

Mika and Gabe walked over to the table and sat. Aidan stood and scooted Zane’s chair around—like he couldn’t do it himself, Zane fumed. He was injured, not a freaking invalid.

“Wow, you look pretty pissed for someone whose mate was trying to be considerate,” Gabe pointed out. And why was the man taking up for Aidan now when only moments ago he’d been reaming him? Zane shook his head and gave up trying to figure out Mika’s mate.

“I can turn my own damn chair around,” Zane said and wanted to smack himself for that bitchy tone that permeated his voice. Again.

Mika snorted and Gabe rolled his eyes. Aidan clenched his jaw and just looked at Zane, frustration evident in his stance.

“Fine.” Zane raised his hands up in surrender. “I’m an asshole, but that’s nothing new.” Aidan’s eyes narrowed as he glared at Zane. Sighing, Zane let his hands drop to the table. “Will you just sit down?” He looked at his hands and fisted them. “Please.”

He saw Aidan move out of the corner of his eye, but the hand that squeezed his uninjured shoulder still startled him. Zane wasn't expecting the touch or the feelings it stirred up inside him. Sure, he was Aidan's mate, but that didn't mean the man had to be kind, compassionate, protective, or anything like that. Did it? He couldn't figure it out, and trying to frustrated the hell out of him.

Aidan pulled his chair up beside Zane's, close enough that their shoulders bumped. That innocent touch sent a jolt straight to Zane's prick, and he closed his eyes, trying to will away the erection that had sprung up. A hand closed over his and he opened his eyes to find Aidan entwining their fingers, bringing their palms together on the table top.

That simple, comforting touch had Zane's eyes stinging, and he blinked away the sensation. He would not be a weeping wuss, for shit's sake. Aidan squeezed Zane's hand and leant in to press his lips to Zane's cheek. The stinging kicked back in and Zane blinked furiously.

"You don't have to do this," Aidan's voice was barely even a whisper against Zane's ear.

"Yes, I think he does," Gabe butted in before Zane could answer. "Mika deserves to know, and it would really help me to make up my mind whether or not I like Zane. Right now, I keep bouncing back and forth between feeling protective of him and wanting to kick his ass."

Aidan started to rise but Zane used his grip on the man's hand to pull him back down.

"Stop, okay? He has every right." Zane gave in to his impulse and reached for Aidan with their link. Instead of the instant rush of Aidan's presence in his mind, Zane only felt a reassuring presence, as though Aidan was holding back in an attempt not to intrude. Zane sent him a small smile before facing Mika and Gabe.

"Gabe," Zane shook his head. "It doesn't matter why, really. I still did what I did, so you can stick with the 'wanting to kick his ass' thing." He held Gabe's gaze, refusing to look away from the man's probing eyes. Mika murmured something in Gabe's ear, and Gabe shook his head, never breaking eye contact with Zane.

Finally, Gabe leant forward and placed his elbows on the table, bringing his hands palms up to rest his cheeks on. "I reserve the right to do just that if you don't have a fucking brilliant reason for what you did. Then again, if you hadn't..." Gabe turned to look at Mika, giving him a once-over before facing Zane again. "I wouldn't have found Mika, so maybe I won't kick your ass either way."

Zane shook his head. Gabe finding Mika was a stroke of luck, or maybe it was Fate, but it wasn't because of Zane. Clearing his throat, Zane tried to compose his thoughts and figure out where to begin.

"Just start at the beginning. With your mother's death." Aidan's calm thoughts helped Zane to settle his nerves.

"I don't know that it's necessary to go that far back—"

"It is," Aidan interrupted out loud. "You just don't realise it yet."

What the hell did that mean? And how could Aidan know that if Zane didn't know it himself? Then again, Zane knew it wasn't as though he had a lot to lose.

“Aidan seems to think I should start way back with my mother’s death.” Zane looked at Mika. “I don’t know that I need to go back that far.”

“I think you do.” Mika didn’t even hesitate to give his opinion. Gabe nodded as well.

Zane leant back in his chair. He owed these people, his mate included.

“When I was three, my mother fell to her death off one of the cliffs at Gila. She was found by her brother, my Uncle John.” Zane thought about the bandage Aidan had ripped off in one quick move. Maybe he could make this experience as brief. “My father was alpha. When I was four, he put a gun to his head and killed himself.” Images of the terrifying scene rushed through Zane’s head. He heard Aidan’s sharp gasp and quickly tried to shut him out. Those were memories he wouldn’t wish on anyone.

“No!” Aidan’s harsh command startled Zane enough that he quit trying to force the man out of his head. He looked at Aidan and wanted to argue that it was his head. One glance of the determination in Aidan’s deep brown eyes and Zane rethought his position.

“You didn’t tell me you were there.” Aidan kept Zane’s hand in his. With his other hand, he reached over and stroked Zane’s thigh. It wasn’t a sexual touch. Zane could have handled that easily. But that damned attempt to comfort had Zane feeling things he didn’t have a right to feel.

Zane turned back to face Mika and Gabe.

“I remember.” Mika’s eyes narrowed as he studied Zane. “Didn’t your uncle find him, too?”

A bitter smile twisted Zane’s lips. “Yeah, sure did. I had been asleep in my bed. A loud noise woke me up and I wanted my father.” Zane couldn’t repress the shudder the memory caused. “I got out of bed and went to his bedroom, but he wasn’t there. Then I went into his office...and there was my father. And Uncle John.”

Mika’s gaze bounced from him to Gabe then to Aidan. Zane knew what they were thinking; he’d thought the same thing himself numerous times. Still, he had no proof, and for all he knew, despite his gut feeling, Uncle John had told the truth.

“Uncle John said he had arrived just prior to the...to my father’s suicide, that he had been in the hallway, heading to the bedroom when the shot was fired.” Zane shook his head and dragged a hand down his face. “Said he knew something was wrong because my father had sounded off on the phone, so he rushed over. It could be true, but I just don’t know.”

Aidan felt the anger coiling tightly in his stomach as Zane spoke. He would be willing to bet there had been no investigation, that Zane’s uncle had declared himself alpha and his claim had went uncontested. Zane’s next words confirmed it.

“Uncle John said my father had named him alpha over the phone.” Zane looked down at the table. “He rushed over to find out what was wrong and my father killed himself before Uncle John could stop him.”

“And no one thought it was suspicious? First, your mother—John’s own sister—and then your father? And suddenly, John has the alpha position, the man who found them both dead.” Mika’s voice was laced with sarcasm.

Zane jerked and brought his head up, meeting Mika's angry glare. "Who was going to question him? He either told the truth, or he had murdered two people, and that would scare most people. It did scare me, and I still don't know the truth behind both deaths. Maybe he is innocent."

The look in Zane's eyes said he didn't believe that any more than Aidan or Mika did. Aidan glanced at Gabe. The man was completely expressionless. Aidan wouldn't want to play poker with him if Gabe could hide his thoughts so well.

"So no one called in the police or whatever because this was a pack matter?" Gabe's question broke the silence.

Aidan nodded, answering for Zane. "It isn't as if the pack would have wanted an autopsy done. We may look like everyone else while in human form, but of course there are...anomalies, if you will."

"Of course," Gabe muttered, looking at Mika. "Anomalies."

"Our DNA is slightly different, and our bones—" Mika began.

Gabe waved a hand through the air and Aidan smirked. He wasn't the only one who got shushed. "I figured that. I just wondered how you felt being labelled an anomaly."

Aidan sat up straighter. "Wait, I didn't say that—"

Gabe's hand flapped again. "Chill, Double D. I was just teasing Mika."

Zane snickered at the nickname Gabe had given him. Aidan felt his cheeks heat but ignored the moniker. He tried to ignore the urge to do something juvenile, like roll his eyes or retaliate with a name for Gabe, and hoped the conversation would get back on track. Unfortunately, his mate wasn't going to let it drop.

"Double D?" Zane's lips quirked as he studied Aidan. "Seriously?"

Aidan gave in and rolled his eyes—it seemed the lesser of the two evils. "Yes, and I told him he could call me it—not that telling him he couldn't would stop him." Aidan smiled as he looked at Gabe then at Zane. "Agreeing just keeps me from being called something much worse, I'm sure."

"Damn." The curse word was followed by a laugh from Gabe. "You figured me out, Double D."

"Not a chance in hell." Aidan shook his head. "Now, Zane, can you continue? You can laugh at Gabe's wit later."

Zane shrugged. "Uncle John became alpha and he took me in."

The scent of nervous sweat suddenly increased. Aidan tried to soothe his mate but the man refused any offer of comfort. He pulled his hand from Aidan's and moved his leg out from under Aidan's touch.

"He, ah," Zane took a deep breath and exhaled slowly "he wasn't abusive, so I really don't know what excuse you're looking for here."

A memory flitted through Zane's mind and Aidan stilled, his lungs freezing in mid-breath as images assaulted him. He pushed against the barriers Zane was trying to keep in place, ploughing through them

and feeling his breakfast try to rise back up.

“Zane.” Aidan reached for his mate, ignoring the man’s attempts to evade him. Aidan put an arm over Zane’s good shoulder and hooked the man’s neck in the crook of his arm. He tugged until he had Zane’s head pressed to his shoulder. “That is abuse. How could he...?” Aidan shook as anger ripped through him. He would find John and—

“No,” Zane mumbled. “I asked questions I shouldn’t have and he punished me. It wasn’t abuse. He just punished me.”

Aidan felt moisture on his chest. He looked at Gabe and Mika as he cradled Zane’s face with his other hand, trying to give his mate some privacy. “*They need to know this.*” Aidan ignored Zane’s protests as he held the man.

“Zane asked his uncle about his father’s death. His uncle’s response was to drive Zane out into the middle of Gila National Forest and leave him there for days...and nights.” Aidan would kill the man. The terror Zane had felt as a small child left alone was overwhelming.

He watched Gabe and Mika, knew they were communicating silently when they looked at each other before turning back to him. Anger burned in their eyes. Aidan wished he was capable of sharing the images and feelings tearing at his mate. Who wouldn’t forgive the man everything if they knew?

“Actually,” Mika’s voice was a low rumble, “I remember that. It wasn’t long after your father’s death, and your uncle said you went missing. He had people searching the southern part of the forest.”

“He left Zane in the northern part.” Aidan was growing angrier with each memory, and Zane was still fighting him, trying to shut off their mental link. “Stop it.” Aidan stopped himself before he shook Zane. He wouldn’t add to his mate’s pain, and he wouldn’t let him hide from it, either.

“What kind of sick fuck leaves a small child out in the middle of nowhere like that?” Gabe’s poker face was gone, replaced by an impressive anger. “Zane, you know that’s wrong. I can’t imagine...”

“No, you can’t, nor do you want to,” Aidan pointed out as Gabe’s voice trailed off.

“I thought I was going to die, Aidan. That I would be killed by some animal or... And then it was night, pitch black, and I was so hungry, but the thirst *was the worst*...” Zane quit fighting him and let Aidan feel it all. He didn’t think he could be more horrified as a confusing mix of memories assailed him. Then he understood.

“Goddamnit!” Aidan wanted to pound something, but he didn’t want to let go of the man in his arms. “How often, Zane?”

“I can remember at least four times that John said Zane had wandered off, but there were probably more times that we were never told of,” Mika offered. “Did you ever wander away?”

“That was how he punished me,” Zane protested.

Mika and Gabe’s voices erupted at once, arguing Zane’s refusal to see the truth.

“That’s not punishment!”

“Bullshit! He was trying to kill you, too!”

Aidan looked at Mika. “I think you probably have that right, but after the deaths of Zane’s mother and father, John would have had to be very careful not to bring suspicion down on his head. John was most likely hoping Zane would die of exposure, and John would proclaim his innocence since Zane ‘wandered off’. When that didn’t happen, John had to quit trying, because eventually, Zane would tell someone what he was doing, or someone would figure it out.”

“The last one that I know of was what worried him, I think.” Mika’s eyes looked a little hazy as he searched his memories. “I remember the last time. Zane was probably six or seven. My dad was leading one of the search teams, and he pointed out to John that there was no fresh scent of Zane anywhere. There never was, he said. Then he looked at John and said he was amazed that Zane always happened to be in the opposite side of the forest than the one John swore Zane was lost in.” Mika’s lips turned up in a small grin as he shrugged. “So Dad said he was taking his team in the opposite direction.”

Aidan wished he had met Mika’s father; the man would have made a strong alpha. “And?”

“And of course, they found Zane a lot faster than they had the other three times.”

Zane pushed against Aidan, signalling that he wanted free from Aidan’s arms. Aidan wanted to argue but he didn’t.

“That’s right,” Zane’s voice was rough and strained. Aidan noted the ravaged look on the man’s face and felt his heart twist. “That was the last time, for a while, and I was only left out there for one night.”

Mika scowled at Zane. “It was the middle of winter, there was at least a foot of snow on the ground, and you weren’t wearing anything other than your pyjamas and a windbreaker when Dad brought you to our house!”

“He wouldn’t let me take my coat,” Zane murmured. “He dragged me out of bed, and I knew he was going to do it again...and he wouldn’t let me take anything other than the windbreaker.”

Aidan could see what Zane wasn’t sharing with Gabe and Mika. Memories of how as a small child he begged John not to leave him again. He would be good, never ask another question. Even in the memories, Aidan could see and feel the hatred John had for Zane. He wondered how Zane hadn’t realised it, or maybe the man just couldn’t deal with it. For a child alone, never knowing if he would live or die from day to day... And Zane didn’t think it was abuse.

“How about attempted murder?” The words left Aidan’s mouth before he could second guess them.

“What?” Zane’s startled look told Aidan his mate wasn’t delving into Aidan’s thoughts or feelings.

“If it wasn’t abuse, then can you at least agree it was attempted murder?”

“I...” Zane started to shake his head.

“What would you say if it was someone else?” Aidan prodded. “Step away and look at it as though it happened to another child. What would you call it then?”

Zane paled and his lips thinned as he looked at the floor.

Aidan glanced at Gabe and Mika. "I think we are done for now."

They may not have gotten very far into what had made Zane kick Mika out of the pack, but they had forced the man the bare his soul enough for one day. Aidan would brook no argument. He was taking his mate back to bed.

"I won't argue with you." Mika actually looked a little relieved. "And neither will Gabe."

"Nope." Gabe stood and walked over to the refrigerator. "But I will drag Mika with me to town and grab some lunch for us."

Aidan pasted on a smile as he pulled Zane up with him. He held on to the blanket until Zane fisted the material in his hands to keep it in place. "Sounds good." He turned and led Zane out of the kitchen, the turmoil his mate felt running through Aidan as well.

They reached the bedroom and Aidan locked the door behind them once they'd entered. He stopped and cupped Zane's face with both hands, tipping his mate's head up until Zane met his gaze. The pain in those eyes nearly brought Aidan to his knees. He placed a gentle kiss on Zane's full lips and stepped back, sliding his hands down to Zane's biceps.

"I want you to sleep for a while." Aidan used as firm a voice as he could manage when he felt like his heart was breaking for his mate.

Zane's eyes flashed with something that burned the pain right from them. "I don't think I can, Aidan. Unless..." Zane let the blanket drop from his hips and stepped closer, bringing their chests together. "Maybe you can help chase the memories away."

Chapter Eleven

Indecision flitted over Aidan's face. Zane grabbed Aidan's hips and ground his cock against Aidan's thigh. The feel of Aidan's hard prick rubbing against his hip bone made Zane moan. For whatever reason, whether it was pheromones or something else, Zane needed this man. He tipped his chin up and brushed his lips across his mate's. Aidan's hands were suddenly everywhere on Zane, stroking and squeezing as Aidan slanted his mouth over Zane's and kissed the ability to think right out of his head. Zane closed his eyes and met Aidan nip for nip and stroke for stroke.

He wasn't aware of being herded over to the bed, so when the backs of his legs hit the mattress, his eyes flew open and he drew back from the kiss. Aidan gripped the back of his neck and brought Zane's lips back to his. This time the kiss was sweet and slow, and it sent a tingling heat straight to Zane's balls. Aidan crowded in closer, and Zane half-fell onto the bed, the kiss ending as one of Aidan's strong arms prevented him from hitting the mattress in a freefall.

Zane's legs were bent at the knees and dangling off the bed.

“Scoot down,” Aidan tugged on Zane’s hips, guiding him until his ass was on the edge of the mattress. “Perfect.”

Watching through nearly closed eyes, Zane felt his prick leap when Aidan unfastened his jeans and pushed them down. He kicked them aside then spread Zane’s thighs before stepping between them. Aidan knelt and placed Zane’s legs over his shoulders. He cupped Zane’s balls and leant forward, engulfing his cock in one smooth move.

Zane’s back arched as Aidan sucked his prick down to the base. When his cock hit the back of Aidan’s throat and Aidan swallowed, the air rushed from Zane’s lungs in a strangled exhalation. His balls tightened painfully and his hips jerked. Aidan swallowed again then sucked hard, his cheeks hollowing out as he swirled his tongue back up the length of Zane’s aching erection. The feel of Aidan’s teeth scraping over the sensitive head of his cock had Zane’s head spinning. Aidan’s head bobbed one more time, then he pulled off Zane’s prick with a slurping sound.

Zane pushed himself up on his elbows and looked at Aidan. “What? Why did you stop?” Aidan’s answering look nearly curled Zane’s toes.

“What do you want, Zane? What do you want me to do?” Zane couldn’t look away from Aidan’s molten stare. Heat crawled over Zane when he realised with crystal clear clarity what he wanted Aidan to do to him. He just didn’t know if he could say it.

“You’re going to have to tell me. I want the words.” Aidan’s tone told Zane he would brook no arguments on this matter.

Zane took a deep breath and felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. “Why? Why are you making me say it?”

One of Aidan’s rough hands stroked down Zane’s thigh. “Because I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding. I know what I want, but I need to be sure you know what you want.”

Then Zane understood. After feeling as though he’d attacked Zane when he first arrived, Aidan was now feeling the same push he’d felt then but needed reassurance that Zane wanted him. Shit, this mate stuff was complicated. Zane wondered if he’d ever figure it out.

Aidan’s thumb trailed down Zane’s balls, stroking over the sensitive patch of skin underneath them, then gently rubbed at Zane’s puckered hole. Zane sucked in a harsh breath and fell back on the bed.

“Yessss...” He thought he did well to get that much out, but it wasn’t enough for Aidan.

“Yes, what?” Aidan continued rubbing Zane’s opening, reminding him of how it’d felt earlier to have Aidan’s thick fingers inside his ass.

“Yes, that.” How could Aidan expect Zane to speak in sentences? He could hardly breathe, much less speak.

Aidan tapped his thumb against the flesh he was tormenting. “My thumb?”

Aidan’s voice was silky and sexy, and it was frustrating Zane to no end. Zane knew his mate was quite aware of what he wanted. Zane growled before he could stop himself, then yelped when Aidan pinched

the inside of his thigh. The little bite of pain was enough to kick the words out of Zane.

“Fuck me! Stop teasing me and fuck me!” Zane cringed at the volume of his voice. There was no way Gabe and Mika hadn’t heard if they were still in the house. Aidan’s chuckle was strained, but he brought his thumb back to Zane’s rosette, this time pushing the tip of his thumb inside.

“Oh shit, more!” Zane squirmed, wanting to be filled as he had been earlier. Instead, Aidan’s thumb disappeared. Zane’s thighs were pushed wide and his ass cheeks grabbed and spread. Aidan’s warm, wet tongue lapped over his anus. Some part of Zane’s mind was shocked, but his body told that part to shut up. A shudder worked over him as Aidan repeated the gesture, this time gently scraping at the wrinkled folds with his teeth.

Zane couldn’t breathe. All he could do was pant while Aidan continued to lave his hole. When Aidan’s tongue stabbed through the tight ring of muscles, Zane let loose a strangled yell. He was dimly aware of moisture running from the corners of his eyes into his hair, but he couldn’t dwell on it. What Aidan was doing felt too good, too intimate and perfect for Zane to care about anything else.

Zane felt Aidan’s arm brush over his thigh and heard his mate’s hand slapping against the nightstand. A drawer opened then shut. Zane cracked open one eye and saw a tube in Aidan’s hand.

“What?” He wished he hadn’t asked when Aidan’s mouth left Zane’s tender flesh so he could answer.

“Lube. Gabe put a tube in there when they came in earlier.” Aidan winked and Zane propped himself back up on his elbows, wanting to see what Aidan was going to do to him. He watched as Aidan popped the cap and squirted the viscous stuff onto his prick and smeared it around. The sight of Aidan’s big cock glistening with lube made Zane’s balls pull tight and his dick leak a bead of moisture. When Aidan squeezed a dollop of the lube onto his fingers, Zane groaned. He felt needy and achy—and more than ready for Aidan to put those fingers to work.

“Lay back.” Aidan recapped the lube and tossed it aside as he watched Zane. Zane didn’t have to be told twice; anything that would get any part of Aidan in him immediately was a necessity.

A burning pressure caused Zane to clench his ass. Aidan growled but the pressure let up. Aidan raised his head and looked at Zane. “Relax. I need to stretch you.”

Zane felt his cheeks being spread again, then the pressure and burning were back, but this time, he welcomed it. It faded quickly as Aidan sank his finger deeply into Zane. He brushed over Zane’s prostate and pulled his finger back. Aidan repeated the move but added another finger. Zane didn’t think about the burning or stretching. All he could do was feel the rippling of his inner muscles as pleasure shot through him. When Aidan worked in a third finger, Zane was ready to beg, because this slow, torturous finger fucking was driving him insane.

He tried to speak but the only thing that came out was a whimper. It was enough. His hole clenched as anticipation spun through him.

Aidan gently slid out from under Zane’s thighs.

“Wha—“

“You’re going to ride me.” Aidan’s brown eyes had darkened to nearly black, the amber flecks around the irises like flames sparking in the depths of his heated gaze. “I’m afraid I’ll hurt you any other way.”

Zane's cock pulsed and he was afraid he'd come just from looking at the sexy-as-fuck man in front of him. Aidan smiled slowly, seductively, and Zane's balls pulled tight. He sat up too fast and gritted his teeth against the pain. He would deal with it if it would just get Aidan inside him now.

"Anything you want," Aidan crawled onto the bed beside Zane and flipped to his back. "Whenever you want it."

Zane swallowed twice before he found his voice. "I want that inside me, now." He pointed at Aidan's bobbing prick.

"What's stopping you?" Aidan's brows arched almost up to his hairline.

Heat flooded Zane's cheeks and he was pretty sure the tips of his ears turned red as well. "I'm not sure how... Do I just...?" Oh yeah, he wasn't completely mortified. He flicked a quick glance at Aidan's face, afraid of finding amusement there.

"Ah." Aidan's look of understanding stopped Zane from panicking, but it didn't do anything for the flush staining his skin. "I imagine it's similar to when a woman is on top?"

Aidan was asking him? "You've never..."

"Never what?" Aidan reached down to stroke his erection. "I've never wanted to have sex with a woman."

Zane almost snickered at the shudder that worked over Aidan. "No. I meant you've never, you know." He let his gaze drop to the big hand working over the equally impressive cock. Damn, that was just...the sexiest thing Zane had ever seen. The hand stilled for a few seconds, and Zane glanced up to see comprehension flash in Aidan's dark eyes.

"Oh. No, I haven't ever bottomed—never wanted to." Aidan's hand started stroking again, and Zane decided to let the subject drop. For now, anyway.

Zane turned and crawled over to Aidan. He straddled the bigger man's thighs and leant forward, bracing himself with his hands on either side of Aidan's neck. Zane found that if he arched his back just a bit and lowered his torso, he could bring their cocks together and...

"Oh damn!" It felt so good Zane leant down further and wiggled his hips. Aidan moaned and grabbed Zane's hips.

"Another time, maybe, you can experiment for a while." Aidan's fingers dug in, gripping hard. "Right now, I need to fuck you."

That sounded good, too. Zane pushed himself up and rose on his knees. He took Aidan's prick in one hand, unable to resist stroking the slick flesh. Aidan rumbled a warning and Zane grinned at him. He lined Aidan's cock up to his hole and began to bear down. Zane's legs trembled as Aidan's fat cock head began to breach his entrance. Searing pain shot through his rectum, and he looked at Aidan. Maybe he couldn't do this, after all.

"Breath, Zane. Breath and... push." Aidan's eyes were full of need and Zane couldn't resist it. He lowered himself down and gasped when the swollen head slipped into his ass. Aidan's hands left Zane's

hips to pet his stomach and thighs as Aidan murmured encouraging words. Zane heard him in his head, too, coaxing and comforting but never relenting.

The pain subsided, and Zane sank down slowly, trying to give his inner muscles a chance to adjust. His thighs ached from holding himself in such a position, and finally, he thought of the bandage Aidan had ripped off of him. Aidan's eyes widened and his lips started to form 'no' when Zane slammed down onto Aidan's cock.

"No—fuck!" Aidan's yell turned from an order to a moan.

Zane's ass cheeks and balls slapped against flesh but he didn't notice. A bolt of scorching pain engulfed him from the inside out. He fought through it, breathing and willing his body to adjust. Zane squeezed his ass and felt pleasure ripple through his channel. Aidan's strangled moan made him feel pretty damn good, too, Zane decided. He leant forward and braced his hands on Aidan's chest and began lifting himself off Aidan's cock.

Aidan's hands shot straight back to Zane's hips and gripped them tighter than before. He let Zane set the pace at first, slowly rocking up and down Aidan's thick prick. Zane moved his hand and flicked Aidan's nipple, then repeated the act with his other hand. Aidan purred in approval, a sound Zane would never have thought the man capable of making. He pinched Aidan's nipple, then did it again harder when Aidan moaned and arched his back. So, his mate liked that? Zane felt his lips curl into a satisfied smile.

"Yes, I do." Aidan's smile was predatory. His hands shifted to get a better hold on Zane's hips then he jerked them down while thrusting his own hips up. Zane saw stars as Aidan buried his prick deep inside. He let Aidan move him, raising and lowering him at an astonishing rate that sent all kinds of ecstasy spinning through Zane.

His cock throbbed painfully but Zane was afraid to jerk himself off; he didn't want to break the gruelling rhythm that was doing such wonderful things to his ass. Aidan pulled him down almost brutally hard and ground his hips against him. Zane's eyes fluttered shut as he felt come erupt from his prick. His arms trembled and he collapsed onto Aidan as hot bursts of spunk filled his ass. He felt every burning spurt splash against his inner walls and wanted to stay like this, Aidan buried deep inside him, forever.

Aidan stilled beneath him and Zane realised that he had once again forgotten to censor his thoughts. He started to push up so he could flee into the bathroom, but Aidan's hands skimmed up from his hips and his arms wrapped around Zane's middle, holding him loosely. He could break away, maybe, if Aidan didn't tighten his arms... which would probably hurt like hell with Zane's bruised ribs.

"Stay."

Zane bristled at the order.

"Please."

Then he melted. Sighing, he let himself relax and enjoy being held in his mate's arms.

Chapter Twelve

The darkness was cloying and terrifying. He hadn't come into his wolf yet; his eyes were not capable of seeing in the extraordinary darkness of the forest. The night sounds of animals hunting prey, the rustling of leaves in the wind—everything served to increase the fear coursing through him.

Aidan huddled into a tight ball, his gangly, thin arms wrapping around his knees. What had he done this time? He'd only asked his uncle if he could take flowers to his parents' graves. His uncle had looked at him with hatred burning in his pale blue eyes. "Do not talk about them! I warned you before..."

His uncle had grabbed him with a bruisingly strong grip and pulled Aidan to the door. Chills shot down his thin body as the realisation struck him that he was going to be punished.

"Please, I didn't mean it! I won't ask again!" Aidan tried to dig his heels into the wooden floor. His bare feet made a hideous scraping sound as he was jerked violently towards the door.

"You're damn right you won't, you little shit!" His uncle lifted Aidan by one arm, and he dangled painfully from the big man's grasp. A twisted grin spread on the alpha's face. "You will be lucky if anyone finds you this time. Maybe if you beg nice enough on the ride to your special place, I will eventually let the search teams look for you in the right direction."

Pleas stuttered from Aidan's frozen lips. He didn't want to die! His uncle merely laughed and dropped him to the floor before grabbing him by the back of the neck.

"Get up and walk. Now."

Aidan scrambled to obey the order. Maybe there was still hope, still time to convince his uncle not to do this again—

"Get your ass moving, Zane!"

Zane? What the hell—

Aidan came awake violently, his body jerking as his mind tried to make sense of what it had just seen. He pushed himself up out of the chair as a groan, followed by the sound of thrashing limbs, echoed in the bedroom. Fear was receding but it left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. Aidan's heart skittered as he watched his mate fight against invisible hands.

"Zane." Aidan sat on the bed and reached for Zane's hands as he struck the air. "Wake up!"

Zane fought his hold, twisting and wrenching out of Aidan's grasp. The sounds that came from his mate's lips were laced with pain, and Aidan feared the man would aggravate his injuries.

He reached for the link they shared and found Zane locked in his memories. It wasn't a man he was dealing with, but a terrified child in Zane's mind.

"Zane. It's over. Wake up before you hurt yourself." Aidan repeated the thought over and over until the memory faded and Zane began to wake. The images Aidan had seen made the bile rise up in his throat,

but he ignored it, choosing instead to stretch out beside Zane. When his mate's eyes opened, they glistened with tears, and Zane tried to turn away. Aidan grabbed his chin and pulled his head back around, refusing to let Zane hide from him.

"Stop. Let me help you." Aidan watched the indecision in Zane's eyes as the man blinked furiously, trying to get his emotions under control. He released Zane's chin and slid his arm under his mate's neck. With his hand on Zane's back, Aidan pushed and encouraged Zane to lay his head on Aidan's shoulder. A shudder racked Zane and he rolled, placing his head on Aidan's chest. A strong arm draped Aidan's waist and a muscular leg lay over his. He held Zane as the man's body shook with the force of his emotions. Aidan felt wet heat on his chest, and the ache inside him increased until it felt as though it were a physical pain.

Aidan held Zane tighter, wondering how in the hell they were going to get through everything, or if they even could, to make it possible for them to live as mates. He'd caught glimpses of other times Zane had been abandoned by his uncle, and if what he had seen was accurate, it had happened more than anyone knew—other than Zane and his uncle. The problem was he didn't know what were memories, what were nightmares, or what were fears. Now didn't seem to be the time to ask, either.

Aidan petted Zane's back and cupped his head, holding him close until the tension left his mate's body. The feel of warm lips pressing up against his skin, of teeth scraping over his nipple had Aidan's cock springing to life.

"I want you." Zane murmured the words against Aidan's chest and ground his erection against Aidan's hip.

"I don't think you're up to having me fuck you." Aidan trailed a hand down to Zane's ass.

"Yes I am—" Zane's words were cut off by a hiss when Aidan traced a path down Zane's crease and over the ring of muscles nestled between his butt cheeks.

Smiling slightly, Aidan brought his hand back up to Zane's ass and rubbed. "We heal fast, but your body isn't used to taking my cock. You'll be sore for a few more hours at least."

Zane cursed and started to move away. Aidan let him roll onto his back, grinning at the disappointment he could feel coming from his mate. Aidan sat up and leant across Zane, grabbing the lube from the nightstand.

"I wouldn't want you to suffer." Aidan popped the cap on the lube and poured some in his hand. Snapping the lid closed, he looked at Zane and saw the heat flare in those silvery eyes. Aidan tossed the lube onto the nightstand and reached for Zane's prick.

"What about... ungh!"

Zane's hips shot up as Aidan fisted Zane's shaft. He set a hard, fast pace, forcing Zane to give up control and only feel. He didn't want his mate thinking about nightmares, memories or fear. He didn't want his mate thinking at all. Aidan gripped Zane's cock harder and brought his palm over the leaking head. His thumbnail glanced over the wide slit in Zane's cock, and Aidan was rewarded with a strangled yell. The thick prick throbbed in his hand as Zane's balls gave up streams of pearly white come. Aidan shifted the angle of Zane's cock so each stream of ejaculate landed on Zane's stomach and chest.

Zane's laboured breaths and dazed look made Aidan's balls ache for release, but he didn't want this to

be about him. He wanted to give something to his mate, and what Zane had needed was what was important. Aidan let Zane's softened prick slip from his grasp. He leant over and licked the come off of Zane's body, taking his time and placing nibbling kisses over Zane's tantalising skin.

When he had licked the man clean, Aidan pulled Zane to his side once again, this time pillowing his mate's head on his shoulder. Zane reached for Aidan's cock, and Aidan stopped him before the man could touch it. There was no way he would be able to tell Zane no if he touched Aidan's cock. He tugged Zane's hand up and held it over his heart.

"Don't you want me to...take care of you?" Zane's voice was drowsy and sated. And yes, Aidan would have liked that very much, but this wasn't about his needs.

"What I want is for you to sleep, here, with me." Okay, so maybe it was about Aidan's needs in a way. He really wanted to hold this man in his arms; wanted to wake with Zane at his side.

"Doesn't seem fair," Zane pointed out.

Aidan chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not keeping a score card, Zane. Neither should you." Aidan rubbed Zane's back, enjoying the feel of the man's sleek muscles. "Now sleep."

Zane grumbled and started to pull away. Aidan gave himself a mental slap to the forehead. "Please." His lips quirked as Zane settled back down. Damn, his mate was prickly.

"I heard that," Zane muttered. "You're not exactly the easiest man in the world, either."

Aidan blanked his mind and bit his lip to keep from replying. Now wasn't the time, and besides, he knew Zane's statement was nothing more than the truth.

* * * *

Gabe nudged Mika. Now that the blood had returned to his brain he was ready to talk—and Mika wasn't going to get any sleep until Gabe was done.

"What do you think about Zane?" Hunh. Could he possibly be any more vague? "I mean, what he told us today?"

Mika opened one eye and looked at Gabe. "I think his uncle is a murdering asshole."

Gabe waited patiently...for about a minute. "That's it? Nothing else about the whole Aidan-as-his-mate or what the rest of the story is?"

Mika sighed and his other eye popped open. "I think his mate is exactly who Zane needs him to be, I think Zane's uncle manipulated and fucked up Zane's head, and I think it doesn't matter anymore why he kicked me out."

"Okay." Gabe scooted up until his back was against the headboard. "I'd have to agree, since the whole mate-business is supposedly never wrong; and yes, it seems that he did; and what?"

Confusion flashed in Mika's whisky brown eyes. "The 'mate-business' is never wrong. And what do you mean, what?"

"I mean what do you mean that it doesn't matter why Zane kicked you out?"

Mika shrugged his big shoulders. "It doesn't matter. He did it, yeah. But even if he did it all on his own, I guess I forgive him, you know?"

"Hm." Gabe couldn't keep himself from running a hand over Mika's chest. He'd never been good at resisting temptation. "And why would you do that?"

"Because he was once one of my closest friends." Mika grabbed Gabe's hand and tugged until Gabe snuggled up against him. "He wasn't a bad person, but his uncle... That man feels evil. I don't know if I was the only one who felt it, because he damn sure hated me. Maybe other people noticed it too but were afraid to do anything about it. After all, John probably got away with murdering at least two people."

"So why didn't anyone do anything? Like alert whoever was in charge—that alpha whatever-dude like Aidan's brother?"

Mika snorted. "The former Alpha Anax was in command for half a century. He was lazy and didn't give a shit what happened to the shifters. That attitude made its way down to pretty much every level of shifter." Mika's gaze turned thoughtful. "Some people were going to confront John—I'd forgotten about it. My parents started recruiting people who were unhappy with the man as alpha, but then they had to go..."

Gabe barely managed to catch himself as Mika sat up suddenly. Gabe didn't need to be a shifter to feel the anger and suspicion in Mika—he would swear he could scent it as surely as any of the shifters could.

"And then they disappeared on their trip. Goddamnit!"

Gabe lunged for Mika as the man started to bolt off of the bed. With his arms around Mika's waist and his head to the side, Gabe pulled and brought Mika down on top of him. Mika's back smacked into Gabe's chest and knocked the breath out of him.

"Damn it!" Mika pried Gabe's arms from around him and turned to look at Gabe. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." It was a breathy reply, but Gabe figured it was true. Besides, it wasn't the first time he'd gotten the wind knocked out of his sails because of his own impetuosity. "Didn't want you to do anything foolish."

Mika looked astonished. "I don't do foolish things!"

"Right." Gabe rolled his eyes and snickered. "So where were you running off to? Gonna wake up Zane—or, I dunno, maybe barge in on a hot sex session—and grill him while Aidan drills him?" Gabe snorted at his own joke.

Mika pinked up and Gabe knew he had his mate. "You were! You really think Zane would have the answers to what happened to your parents?"

“Probably not.” Mika ran a big hand through his hair.

“Probably?”

Mika sighed and flopped back. “Okay, no, I don’t believe Zane knows anything about it. I guess I just wanted... I don’t know. It wasn’t him I was wanting to talk to.”

“Then who... Oh I don’t think so!” Gabe poked Mika in the ribs. “You were going to run out of here ass-naked with your dick in the wind and go find John? That’s not foolish?”

Aw, Mika looks so cute when he squirms! Gabe had to struggle to keep his expression one of irritation. He wanted to smile and lick the flushed parts of Mika’s skin.

Mika groaned and reached for Gabe, pulling him fully on top. “You sent that loud and clear, babe. And yes, I was being foolish, but I will be talking to Aidan tomorrow. And I...” Gabe arched his brow at Mika. “We,” Mika corrected, “will be getting some answers from John whether he’s willing to talk or not.”

“All right, I agree with the plans for tomorrow. But for tonight...” Gabe leant in and ran the tip of his tongue around the shell of Mika’s ear, “tonight, I get to have you any way I want.”

“Oh yeah,” Mika’s head bobbed up and down as his eyes slid shut. “Whatever you want.”

Chapter Thirteen

Aidan woke up with a raging hard on and a warm body sprawled across him. He wasn’t normally a morning person, but if this was how his mornings were going to be from now on, he could certainly become a morning person real quick. He ran his hand down Zane’s warm back to his firm, round ass and squeezed. God, the man had the sweetest bubble butt Aidan had ever seen. He reached down to where Zane’s ass and thigh met and squeezed again, thoroughly enjoying the firm flesh and the way it fit so perfectly in his hand. Zane murmured sleepily and rubbed his erection against Aidan’s thigh.

Oh yeah, that felt perfect—

A sudden and loud pounding on the bedroom door had Aidan and Zane wide awake and jumping up so fast that Zane’s head smacked into Aidan’s chin.

“Fuck!”

“Shit!” Zane rubbed his head and glared at Aidan.

Aidan glared back and touched a finger to his tongue. His index finger came back speckled with blood. No wonder he wasn’t a fucking morning person.

“Are you okay?” Zane’s irritation fled and he shot Aidan a worried look.

“Yeah, just bit my tongue.” Aidan grinned ruefully. “Probably should do that more often.”

“Hey!” Gabe called out through the door. “We need to talk to you both ASAP!”

Aidan looked down at his wilting dick then looked to find Zane’s in the same state.

“We’ll be there in five minutes,” Aidan called back.

“Fine. If you two aren’t out by then, I’ve got a key and I will be coming in with a bucket of ice water and a spatula!”

As a warning, it was effective. Aidan and Zane both knew Gabe would follow through on his threat, and neither of them was willing to find out what the man intended to do with the spatula. Whatever it was, it wouldn’t be good.

“Go ahead.” Aidan gestured to the bathroom. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Nodding, Zane headed to the bathroom. Aidan watched him, noting the improved ease of the man’s movements and the barely discernable bruises. He glanced at the wound on Zane’s shoulder. Another day or two and his mate would be almost as good as new.

Aidan gathered up his clothes—still dirty; he’d gotten distracted yesterday. He went to the dresser and pulled open a drawer. Sweats and t-shirts, socks and underwear. Since neither Gabe nor Mika had come in here searching for clothes, Aidan was going to assume it was safe for him and Zane to use them. If not, oh well. He was not going to put on his dirty clothes if he had any alternative.

He grabbed two of everything and walked into the bathroom, grateful Zane had left the door open. The sight of Zane standing naked and beautiful under the shower had Aidan’s prick trying to perk up. Aidan looked away quickly and thought the unsexiest thoughts he could dig up. He had to piss like a racehorse, and that wasn’t going to happen if he kept looking at Zane’s water-slicked body.

Groaning, Aidan glared at his dick and thumped it with his finger. The pain shot straight to his balls and did the trick, causing his cock to soften. Aidan peed and flushed—and Zane let out a startled shout.

“You flushed the fucking toilet!” Zane accused.

Aidan felt like an ass. “I didn’t... I’m not used to having to worry about it!”

Zane opened the shower door and flung water at Aidan. “It’s not like I wasn’t right here showering!”

“Yeah but I...” Aidan looked at Zane and realised his mate was teasing him. Laughter brought a sparkle to Zane’s normally sombre eyes, and his full lips curled up in a breathtaking smile. A bolt of fear shot through Aidan as he realised he was sunk. If Zane looked at him like that and asked him for anything, Aidan would do it, or give it. When Zane’s brow arched, Aidan panicked. Surely he hadn’t been careless and let Zane hear that thought? There was no way he wanted the man to know how he felt; not now when Aidan didn’t know anything about how Zane felt. God, no.

“You going to shower?” The question was muffled as Zane turned away and began towelling his hair and

face.

“Not sure we have time,” Aidan pointed out.

Zane grunted. “Go ahead, I’ll go out and hold Gabe off. Just don’t take too long. That whole spatula threat gave me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Aidan turned and grabbed socks, underwear, sweats and a t-shirt. He pivoted back and handed them to Zane. “Here, I found these in the dresser. Thought you might like something other than the blanket, and my clothes are kind of rank.” Aidan stepped into the shower. “I’m pretty sure my jeans could walk themselves to the washer.”

Laughing, Zane hung up the towel. “I’ll ask Gabe about washing them.” Zane looked at Aidan but gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “Your clothes in there?”

“Yeah,” Aidan grabbed the bar of soap. Thank God there wasn’t any of that girly body wash crap. “Thanks.”

Zane nodded and left the bathroom. Aidan stopped washing long enough to watch the flex of his mate’s very fine ass as he walked from the room.

“Damn it,” he muttered, looking down at his hard prick. “And damn Gabe’s timing.”

Zane pulled on the borrowed clothes and gathered Aidan’s dirty ones. He glanced at the bathroom doorway and saw that Aidan’s back was to him. Zane quickly turned away and gave in to the impulse riding him. He buried his face in Aidan’s dirty clothes and sniffed. The scent of sweat and musk swamped him and he groaned. Aidan was wrong; his clothes weren’t rank. They smelled like man and sex and...

And Zane better get his ass in gear before Gabe came pounding on the door. Or walking in with the ice water and spatula. The image lit a fire under Zane’s ass, and he nearly ran to the bedroom door. He stopped and picked up one of Aidan’s socks then cautiously opened the door, trying not to drop anything else.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he came face to face with Gabe—who, true to his words, held a pitcher in one hand and a spatula in the other. The man also wore a grin that had the hairs on the back of Zane’s neck standing up, and his balls were trying to crawl up into his body. Okay, so he feared Gabe a bit, but in Zane’s opinion, that just made him a wise man. Only a fool would think Gabe’s good looks were all there were to the man.

“Dare I ask?” Zane ventured.

Gabe laughed and shook his head. “Probably not. Where’s Aidan?”

Zane felt the sweat break out on his upper lip. “He’s showering—but he will be here in just a couple of minutes. In the meantime, I was wondering if I could use your washer? Please?”

“Sure, and get that look off your face, Zane.” Gabe turned on his heel and Zane followed. “I swear to you I didn’t have a specific plan for the spatula. It was just the second thing that popped in my head, right behind the ice water.”

Zane snorted. "Somehow I doubt that, Gabe. But if it is true, I have no doubt you would have found a way to inflict some serious damage with that spatula."

Gabe grinned over his shoulder. "Damn straight I would have." He turned into a room off of the kitchen. "Here." Gabe opened the washer's lid and poured in some soap. "Just press this button and you're good to go."

"Okay, thanks." Zane dumped the clothes in and hoped nothing needed a special setting. He wished he could take one more deep sniff of Aidan's clothes, but Gabe was watching him, and it wasn't like Zane wasn't already enough of a freak to him and Mika. Zane pulled the lid down, pressed the button and walked out of the washroom.

"We're doing this in the kitchen, right?"

"Yeah, Mika will be in here in a minute or two. He's finishing up at the kennels and letting Iko have a good run before putting our baby in the fenced part of the yard." Gabe strolled over to a cabinet and pulled out a box of Pop-Tarts. "And this is the breakfast of champions today, buddy. I don't feel like cooking."

Zane sat in a chair and looked at the box. Cherry. He could do that. "Sounds good to me."

Gabe opened two packets and dropped the pastries into the toaster. He pushed the lever down and faced Zane.

"How are you doing, Zane? Seriously." Gabe studied him and Zane had to concentrate on not flinching under Gabe's scrutiny.

"I'm healing, so that's..." Gabe's eyes narrowed in warning. Zane sighed and leant back in the chair. "I don't know what you want me to say, Gabe. I'm fucked up. Aidan's fucked—"

Gabe snorted. "Somehow I doubt you mean that literally. Aidan doesn't strike me as a happy bottom."

The pastries popped up and Gabe turned from Zane to plate breakfast.

"A happy bottom? I don't think he's a bottom at all." And Zane didn't mind it one bit, though he was still curious.

"No, not at all," Aidan's voice rumbled behind Zane, startling him enough that he jumped. "Anything else you want to know about our sex life, Gabe?"

Gabe had the grace to look embarrassed. "I was just joking. Sort of," he muttered as he handed Zane a plate. "Do you want any, Double D?"

Aidan pulled out a chair and sat down and eyed Zane's breakfast. "I think maybe, if you and Mika will let me borrow the truck, that I will take Zane to town in a bit. Surely there's a place or two there to grab some breakfast? Plus we need to take care of a few things."

"Yeah, there is. A couple of diners and three fast food joints." Gabe looked down at his own plate. "I'd be offended, but if you want to pass up a sugar rush, it's no skin off my nose."

Aidan chuckled and shook his head. "I think it would take more than a couple of those things to do the trick."

The back door creaked open, and everyone turned to watch Mika as he walked in.

Mika stopped and looked at each one of them. "Why do I feel like I walked in to a room full of people talking about me?"

Zane and Aidan offered protests but Gabe talked over them. "We weren't talking about you. I don't know why they're looking at you, but I just wanted to ogle your sexy self." Gabe waggled his eyebrows and Mika grinned before looking at Zane.

"What do you remember about when my parents disappeared?"

The question shook Zane. Maybe he should have expected it as he had his own suspicions, but he hadn't. He clenched his hands as he held Mika's gaze. "I wasn't there when it happened. It was right before Uncle John appointed me alpha; that's really all I know."

"Come sit down. You look all pissed and intimidating standing there like that." Gabe pulled out a chair for Mika before sitting himself. Mika crossed the kitchen and took the chair Gabe had indicated, never looking away from Zane.

"Where were you? I don't remember hearing anything about you going away."

Zane's stomach lurched as he looked at his plate. Vision blurring, he searched frantically for some excuse for his absence, one that wouldn't leave him feeling humiliated. He could feel Aidan's presence in his mind, not pushing him but offering support, telling him he could do this. "*But I don't want to do it. I don't want to think about it!*"

Aidan took Zane's hand and tugged. Zane looked into his mate's warm brown eyes and felt humbled by the understanding he saw there. He had done nothing to deserve it.

"Zane," Aidan murmured before leaning in and placing a soft kiss on his lips. "You can do this."

"You'd better do this," Mika grumbled.

Aidan pulled back and faced Mika. "I understand this is important to you, but Zane is mine and you will not threaten him in any way." Aidan's voice never raised in volume. He sounded calm, controlled, and much more dangerous because of it.

Mika started to rise, anger flushing his features. Gabe grabbed his mate's shoulder and pulled him back down.

"God, would you all quit with the whole testosterone bit? It's fucking ridiculous. Aidan," Gabe thrust a finger in his direction, "I know you're doing the whole 'I'm-the-alpha-protecting-my-mate' bit, but cut it out. No one is threatening Zane." Gabe turned his finger and mouth on Mika. "And you, quit acting like a caveman. Just because I call you one doesn't mean I'm into the whole Neanderthal crap. You would be mad as hell if someone spoke to me like you did Zane so cut it out."

Mika and Gabe glared at each other but, much to Zane's amusement, it was Mika who nodded and dropped his gaze. Gabe's slight smile as he kissed Mika's cheek wasn't smug, either, just happy, and

Zane thought there was much more to Gabe than anyone, except possibly Mika, would ever know.

"I apologise," Mika's voice was laced with sincerity and amusement. "Gabe is right. Maybe we should all try to curb the alpha tendencies."

A murmur of agreement was made by all. Zane felt Mika's questioning gaze on him once again and knew he had to do the right thing—no matter how much it made him look like a pussy. Taking a deep breath in a vain attempt to settle his nerves, Zane tried to decide where to begin. Probably at the beginning as he knew it—except he wasn't sure where that was.

"Start where you can first see a connection," Aidan encouraged.

"Okay. Ah, I'm not sure whether it's connected or not, but..." Zane closed his eyes and let his memory kick in. "About a week before your parents went missing, John and I got into a huge argument. Normally, I wouldn't argue. He'd broken me of that habit when I was a child." Aidan's thumb stroked the top of Zane's hand. "But this was—I didn't want it."

"Didn't want what?" Mika prodded.

Zane opened his eyes and met Mika's near-golden gaze. "I didn't want to be alpha. I think now he wanted to appoint me because he must have known what your parents were doing, and must have feared they would succeed. But then, I didn't know anything about it. I just knew he was trying to make me do something I wasn't prepared for and didn't want." Zane's hand shook as he ran it through his hair. "I didn't ever want it." And speaking that truth felt like an elephant had been lifted off Zane.

"You could have refused." Aidan's voice was soft and inquisitive.

"I did. That was the last time I argued with John until he wanted you gone, Mika." And that hadn't gone over well, either.

"So what happened?" Mika's eyes never left Zane's face.

What happened? Zane only had vague memories of some parts, memories he wasn't sure were true or not. Everything was so messed up in his mind about that time and he just didn't know—or maybe he did.

It wasn't as though he couldn't remember, but parts were hazy and maybe there was a reason for that. He examined the images of pain and fear, that terrifying feeling of being abandoned again, and the certainty that this time he would die. The images mixed with others, and Zane wondered if he was losing his mind. God, what was wrong with him? Zane felt his lungs constrict as he tried to sort it out.

"Zane, Mika needs to know. And it may help you, too, to talk about it." Gabe's voice was full of sympathy and understanding—but how could he understand? How could anyone?

Zane looked at Mika, noting the compassion in his expression. He owed it to this man to help in any way possible, even if it meant reliving something he would prefer to forget. Striving to regulate his breathing Zane turned to Aidan and nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak and not say 'no'.

"Can we go into the living room? I'd like to..."

"... *be able to hold you*," Aidan finished silently to Zane.

“That would probably be best.” Mika stood and took Gabe’s hand. Together, they led the way to the living room.

Zane sat on the couch and Aidan quickly followed, putting his arm over Zane’s shoulders. Aidan’s other hand stroked Zane’s thigh in a gentle caress.

Mika sat in the chair across from the couch, Gabe perched on the arm of the same chair. Mika slid an arm around Gabe’s waist and tugged, dumping the man into Mika’s lap.

“You were too far away,” Mika explained as Gabe glared up at him. Zane smiled as Gabe rolled his eyes but snuggled closer to his mate before turning to look at Zane.

He had put it off long enough. Zane leant forward and braced his forearms on his knees, trying to counter the burning in his gut.

“What I remember before your parent’s went missing, Mika... I know I told you all that John stopped, uh, punishing me—”

“Zane, that wasn’t punishment!” Aidan’s big body tensed. Zane cast a quick glance at his mate and nodded.

“Okay. This is hard enough. Do you think maybe you could refrain from critiquing my choice of words?” Because Zane wasn’t sure he could do this if Aidan didn’t stop.

Aidan’s lips thinned and Zane could see how badly the man wanted to argue. “I’ll stop, for now. But we will discuss this, Zane.” The promise was evident in Aidan’s dark eyes and made Zane’s stomach burn even worse.

Zane turned back to Mika and Gabe. “He didn’t stop, exactly, and before we get to your parents, I think you should know this. John hated you. He said it was because you were gay, but I’m not sure that’s it, or at least not all of it. I think he saw you as a threat to his position, and I know he saw your parents that way. John didn’t want me associating with you, but he couldn’t come out and say that, not to your folks—but he could say it to me, and he did, often.” Not that Zane had listened. It had been his one rebellion, strengthened by his puppy love for Mika. “Mika, you remember when we were about sixteen, and we’d been out exploring some of the caves?”

Mika’s eyes seemed to lose focus as he remembered. “Yeah. We were bored and had too much time on our hands. We laughed a lot.” Mika smiled and looked down at Gabe. “I kind of had a crush on Zane back then.”

Zane expected some kind of withering comment from Gabe and was surprised when he didn’t get it. Instead, Gabe turned his sparkling gaze on Zane and winked.

“Well, he is cute, so I can see that.”

Aidan laughed beside him. “Cute? Gabe, he is so much more than ‘cute’!”

Zane was ready to melt into the couch. He found Mika’s sympathetic gaze. “We, ah...” Well, now Gabe and Aidan both might get a bit... irritated. “Messed around some. Before we went home.” And now, he sounded like an idiot.

Gabe sat up and raised his brows at Zane. “Really? That sounds amazingly hot. Go on.”

“It doesn’t bother you that Mika and I... “

“Uh, no. It’s not like I was a vestal virgin until Mika came along—and neither was he. I know he’s mine, and I’m his, and that’s what’s most important now.”

Zane looked at Aidan. “Is that a problem for you?”

“No,” Aidan didn’t look happy though. “But it would have been nice to know when I was so certain you were straight.”

“Aidan, all we did was jerk off together. I’m sure there are plenty of straight teenage boys who do the same,” Mika pointed out. “I didn’t think it made Zane gay, just a typical horny teenager, like I was.”

“And did you know you were gay by then?” Aidan’s question came out more like a challenge.

“Of course, but that didn’t mean Zane was, and I didn’t ask.”

Everyone looked at Zane as his face heated. “I didn’t know. I liked Mika, wanted to do things with him—though I honestly wasn’t sure what exactly those things were. But as I was saying, John hated Mika. When I got home, he knew what we had done.”

And it had been ugly. The names his uncle had called him and Mika alone were...

“There was a lot of yelling, mostly him because he grabbed the rope and I knew what that meant.” Zane wanted to get up, to pace and burn away some of his nerves like he wished he could burn away the shame. “It meant I could either get in the truck and cooperate or else I was going to wake up tied to the tree John always used to pu—used. If I fought him, he would pull out this little vial of liquid—no. It was powder. The three or four times he tossed it on me, I remember this... searing agony shooting through my chest. Then I woke up naked and tied to that tree, unable to shift, unable to call out for help because that bastard would tape my mouth shut.”

“Datura,” Aidan muttered.

Zane didn’t hear him. He was so angry that he didn’t know if he could continue. All these years, he had kept it inside, blamed himself for being flawed, and no doubt he was. But John was something else, and Zane’s fear of the man had kept Zane from being able to be angry at John. He’d turned those feelings on himself instead, and now, talking about it, thinking about it was stirring up so much pain and fury he felt like he might combust from it.

“Datura,” Aidan said again, his voice trembling with the force of his anger. “That son of a bitch used datura.”

“What the hell is datura?” Mika’s question caught Zane’s attention. He turned to look at Aidan.

“Datura has several different names. It can render shifters unconscious, cause extreme scarring, it can eat through skin, muscle and bone in minutes—” Aidan flicked a look at Zane before grabbing a handful of Zane’s shirt and pulling it up to his armpits, exposing the several shiny scars on Zane’s chest. “These scars tell me that John had the datura mixed with something so that it wasn’t at full potency. If it had been, Zane would have been dead. Even a small amount can kill us. You don’t hear about it much

because it's something we would rather not become common knowledge."

"No wonder. That's like sprinkling holy water on vampires." A worried look shone in Gabe's eyes.

"Except vampires aren't real. Silver doesn't hurt us, though any bullet to the heart, silver or not, will kill a shifter as sure as it would anyone else. Datura, on the other hand..." Aidan shook his head and pulled Zane's shirt back into place. "That's what John used. It would have knocked Zane out and left scars that don't heal, not like most other wounds we get."

Zane flinched when Aidan's fingers touched his chin, tipping his head up. He wasn't afraid. He'd been lost in his own thoughts and hadn't even realised Aidan was reaching for him. Zane caught the hurt that flickered in Aidan's eyes before the man suppressed it.

"I'm sorry, it wasn't you." It was the best Zane could do right now, with so many emotions spinning around inside him.

Aidan nodded and let it lie. "How many times did he do this?"

Another vivid memory screamed to life in Zane's mind, this one the confrontation with his uncle right before Mika's parents went missing.

He had come home from a run after visiting Mika, hoping the scent of a fresh kill would cover any lingering trace of arousal he felt when around his friend. He had to hide it or his uncle would kill him. Zane couldn't bring himself to go fuck around with one of the willing women in the pack; he'd done that before, hoping to quell the rising need he felt for something... unacceptable. He would rather be alone than with someone he had to force himself to fuck.

Zane opened the door and broke out in a sweat when he caught the scent of his Uncle John. The familiar smell of anger and hatred combined with cruelty always made Zane feel that he was on the verge of a panic attack. He started to slip back out the door. Maybe he could stay gone long enough that John would *give up and leave. Zane really didn't want whatever confrontation was coming; he could feel the tension in the air.*

Why was he so scared? He was an adult now, stronger than John and quicker as well. John appeared in the hallway before Zane could make his escape.

"I've been waiting for you, boy." John looked Zane up and down and sneered. "Been out trying to hide, haven't you?"

A chill of fear slithered through Zane. His uncle couldn't know! He couldn't! Zane pushed down the panic and stepped back inside, carefully shutting the door as he composed himself.

"I have nothing to hide, Uncle John. My wolf just needed to run." Zane faced his uncle.

"You're a fucking liar, you little shit! You were hanging around that faggot again, weren't you?" John stalked up to Zane. The hatred in his uncle's *pale blue eyes was beyond frightening to Zane. He had to steel himself not to drop to his knees and beg forgiveness. He wouldn't do it, not this time. Never again.*

"I was visiting my friend. That's more than you need to know. I'm not your—"

The blow to the side of his head was unexpected. He couldn't recall his uncle ever striking him. Zane stumbled sideways and slid down the wall as his vision blurred. John wasn't a small man at all. In fact, he stood taller than Zane. At fifty two, John still retained his bulky and intimidating physique.

Zane's temple throbbed as John squatted down in front of him. "I've told you to stay away from that queer and his troublemaking parents." John reached in his shirt pocket and took out something...

"Christ!" Aidan stood and pulled Zane with him. "That's enough for now!"

"Wait, please." Mika and Gabe stood as well, walking around the coffee table to stand in front of Zane and Aidan. "Aidan can fill us in on what just happened later, if you are okay with that."

Zane's head swam with anger and fear, but he nodded.

"Can you tell me this much?" Mika looked from Zane to Aidan. "Zane said John used the datura on him three times. Can you tell me when those times were?"

Zane noticed Mika seemed to be holding his breath. "Go ahead," Zane told Aidan. The man knew what had happened now as surely as Zane did—maybe even better since Aidan knew about the datura and Zane had never heard of it.

Aidan took a shaky breath before answering. "The first time was when he came back from his outing with you. The second was after a visit with you, right before your parents' disappearance. And the last time—"

Mika's curse cut Aidan's sentence short. "You don't have to tell me. The last time was right before I was kicked out of the pack."

"Right. Excuse us please." Aidan gripped Zane's hip.

Zane vacillated between a burning fury and numbness. His uncle was a fucked up, cruel man, but what kind of man was Zane to have let it happen? Sure, he couldn't do much about it as a kid, but as an adult, why hadn't he done something?

"Zane," Aidan's breath tickled the fine hairs at the back of Zane's neck. "Stop blaming yourself. It's very common for abuse victims to continue being victims into adulthood."

He wasn't a victim, he was a damn idiot. Aidan sighed and shook his head.

"That's bullshit, but you aren't going to listen to me right now. Sit on the bed."

"Aidan, I can't just undo a lifetime of thinking because it pisses you off." Zane sat and let Aidan pull off his shirt and socks. "I know that John was wrong, okay? I even know that he was abusive." Though saying it out loud was nearly impossible for Zane. "But was I a victim? How could I be a victim now? I can't... A victim is powerless."

Aidan carded his hand through Zane's hair. "Just sleep, Zane. Sleep and we'll talk about it when you wake up. Please."

"I don't know if I can. There's so many thoughts and feelings spinning around in my head," Zane protested.

Aidan petted up and down Zane's back. "I think you can. Your body is worn out. Lay down and try to relax your body at least. When your body is relaxed, your mind will soon follow." Aidan sounded so sure it irritated Zane.

"When did you get your psych degree?" Snide and bitchy, but Zane couldn't seem to help himself.

"About five years ago at Harvard," Aidan answered, sounding only a little bit smug. "Now go to sleep."

Well, shit. Zane closed his eyes and let the darkness wash over him.

Aidan listened to Zane's breathing. He waited until it slowed and his mate's hard body relaxed. He had felt the emotions battling beneath the surface in Zane, fury and self-loathing that he had allowed himself to be abused. Aidan knew it wasn't a case of allowing. His mate had been a victim—another word that Zane didn't like and couldn't separate from being weak. John had kept Zane under his thumb through violence, physically and mentally, for most of his life. That wasn't something that someone could put a stop to just because they became a legal adult.

He would find a way to convince Zane of that; he had to. Zane was teetering on the edge of some dangerous emotions, and Aidan didn't want his mate to collapse under the weight of them.

There were things he needed to take care of while Zane slept, and as much as he hated to leave Zane's side, Aidan made himself slip quietly from the bed. He needed to call and check in with Mariska—and where was his cell phone? Shit. Aidan realised he hadn't seen it since he'd been in the truck on the way to Shasta. He would have to use Mika or Gabe's phone and reimburse them for it.

Aidan closed the bedroom door and walked to the living room, unsurprised to find Gabe and Mika sitting on the couch. They looked up when he entered the room, twin expressions of anger on their faces. Aidan raised one hand up to forestall any questions.

"I need to call and check in with my captain before we talk. Can I use a phone since I seemed to have misplaced mine?"

"Sure, you can use mine." Mika stood and tossed Aidan the cell phone that had been clipped to his belt. "Gabe and I need to go check on Iko and the other dogs, so you'll have privacy for a few minutes."

But not much more than that, Aidan could tell from the look in Mika's eyes.

He opened the phone and dialled Mariska's number as Gabe and Mika left the room.

She answered on the first ring, efficient as always. "Mariska Rugaby."

"Mariska, how is everything with the Gila pack?"

"I haven't had this much fun since...ever. Everything is stable here. I was going to call you today if you didn't check in. And you left your phone in the truck." Mariska's sarcastic reply was actually nicer than what Aidan had expected, which worried him.

"I realise that—now. Look, you might have some trouble with Zane's uncle, John Trainer. He's the

former alpha and he is dangerous.”

“There’s been some grumbling about Azrael being appointed alpha. If Zane isn’t returning to his position, I would suggest you get here when you can and make it clear that Azrael is the rightfully appointed alpha. As for John Trainer, I haven’t seen him.” Zane could hear voices in the background—Jordan and Evan asking questions.

“I want John Trainer found and held for attempted murder. It’s quite possible that he also murdered four more people—that we know of.” Aidan didn’t know if they would be able to prove those claims, but he knew they could bring John Trainer before the Alpha Anax for attempted murder and not just because Zane was Aidan’s mate. He heard Mariska issue the orders to Evan and Jordan before she returned to their conversation.

“The guards are going after him right now. And in case you’re wondering, we have the three men who attempted to take out your mate. What do you want us to do with them?”

“Just keep them locked up for now. I don’t know what Marcus—I mean, the Alpha Anax—will want to do with them. I suppose I should call him, too. No,” Aidan decided. “You call him and fill him in.”

“Of course,” Mariska’s usual sarcasm vanished. “Aidan, is everything... How are you doing? And Zane?”

Aidan supposed that was her way of asking if he and Zane were working out or not. “Better than I would have hoped, Mariska.” Aidan heard the back door open. “Look, I have to go, but call me back at the number on your caller ID—it’s Mika Blackwell’s phone—if you need me. I’ll try to get there as soon as possible. We still have a few things to work out here.”

They said their goodbyes while Mika and Gabe returned to their seats on the couch.

“Thank you,” Aidan handed the phone back to Mika.

“You’re welcome.” Mika gestured to the chair across from them. “Have a seat.”

Aidan sat and forced his body to relax. He wanted to be back at Zane’s side when he awakened. Zane’s emotional turmoil worried Aidan. He didn’t know what the repercussions might be. If there weren’t any immediate ones, surely there would be at some point in time, and he wanted to be there for his mate whenever it was.

He looked at Mika, easily picking up on the guilt the man felt, and shook his head. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Maybe not, but it feels like it is. I knew John didn’t want Zane hanging around me, but I still encouraged him to do it anyway.” Mika’s cheeks darkened. “I’ll admit that part of that was because I wanted more than friendship from him at the time.”

It was unreasonable to feel jealous, Aidan knew that. He glanced at Gabe and noticed Gabe didn’t seem bothered by Mika’s admission. “Why doesn’t that bother you? Or why does it bother me?” Aidan wanted to smack himself for asking.

Gabe smiled, his whole face lighting up, and stroked his hand down Mika’s chest. “Because he loves me. So what if he had a crush on Zane. I had crushes at that age, too. But this, what’s between us now is so much more than that. I have no reason to be insecure—oh!” Gabe sat up and leant towards Aidan.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that like it sounded. I think."

Aidan couldn't stifle a laugh. "No, I think you're probably right. I'm secure enough to admit when I'm insecure."

"That makes a strange sort of sense." Gabe looked at Mika. "Doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Mika tugged on Gabe, pressing him to his chest. "So what are we going to do about John Trainer? I want to know, once and for all, what happened to my parents."

"I have my guards looking for him. I don't know if he's there and just lying low or if he's taken off. I told Mariska—she's my captain—to call your number since I left my phone in the truck like a dumbass." He shrugged at Mika and Gabe's amused looks. "What can I say? I was too busy trying to figure out whether I was going to have a fight on my hands when I got out of the truck. I wanted to see Zane. Those were the things I was thinking about, not my phone—or my bag with clean clothes in it."

"You're welcome, as you two have figured out, to whatever is in the dresser in the guest room." Gabe shrugged. "Other than that, you, at least, will have to either buy some clothes in town or have someone send a few things down."

"I don't imagine we will be here that much longer. If we head to town today, we can grab what we need then. Now," Aidan studied the mated pair, "are you part of the shifters or not?" Mika started to puff up and Aidan cut him off. "Because I'd hate to lose you two. I think you would both be incredible assets and positive examples that would help bring the shifters into the twenty-first century."

Stunned was pretty much how Aidan thought he would describe Mika's look, whereas Gabe looked pleased.

"Think about it before you give me an answer." Aidan stood and started to turn but stopped. "And Gabe?"

"Yes, Double D?"

"Either way, I will do what I can about finding you another option."

"Huhn." Gabe chuckled and winked at Aidan. "Looks like I'll think of you as friend whether you find one or not. Who knew?"

Chapter Fourteen

Zane woke up disoriented. He sat up and looked around. This wasn't the living room and he wasn't on the couch. He blinked until his sleep-blurred vision cleared. That's right, Aidan had brought him back to the bedroom. Then he remembered what had happened leading up to the trip back to the bedroom.

It was like a whirlwind, all the emotions that exploded inside Zane. He grabbed his head and slammed his eyes shut. His stomach heaved and he stumbled from the bed, opening his eyes when his shin slammed into the edge of the footboard. Zane's hands slid down to his belly as his muscles contracted, and he ran for the bathroom, sliding on his knees to hunch over the toilet as his body rejected his stomach contents. He gripped the toilet seat and gagged as he threw up again, a nasty liquid that made him heave painfully.

"Oh fuck, fuck. Aidan!" Zane's voice cracked as he yelled for his mate. He felt the man's presence in his mind first, trying to soothe and calm Zane before the thundering sound of footsteps shook the hall. The bedroom door was swung open violently and it made a cracking sound as it hit the wall.

"Zane!" Aidan's strong arms were around him, pressing Zane's back to Aidan's chest. Shudders racked Zane's body, so strongly they were painful. His teeth chattered and he tried to speak but couldn't seem to form the words.

Aidan sat and slid his legs along the outside of Zane's thighs. He rocked back and forth, murmuring soothing words as he stroked over Zane's chest and stomach. Apologies and soft promises surrounded Zane, loosed from Aidan's lips and mind. Aidan turned his head, and Zane tried to focus on what—no, who—his mate was looking at. Gabe and Mika stood in the bathroom doorway, fear and regret on their faces.

Zane didn't want to see it, didn't want their pity or guilt. He squeezed his eyes shut but popped them back open. Closing them only brought anger closer to the surface. The force of his fury terrified him. Zane groaned and tried to grab his head. Aidan's hands caught his forearms and locked them to his sides. He began to struggle with all his might, trying to break free. The need to strike out against the man who had hurt him was overwhelming and the wolf in him wanted to escape.

"Mika, Gabe," Aidan's voice was firm and left no room for arguments. "Get over here and fucking help!"

"Are you sure holding him back is the right thing to do?" Gabe asked anyway.

"I know turning him loose right now would be the wrong thing to do! He's hurt and scared—" Aidan jerked as Zane managed to land a blow to Aidan's ribs.

Two more pairs of hands reached for him. Aidan stood and pulled Zane up with him, keeping Zane's back pressed to his chest. Zane tried to fling his head back, but Aidan slid his arms up under Zane's armpits and brought his forearms up to clasp his hands to the back of Zane's head. Gabe and Mika grabbed his legs and Zane howled with fury as the three men carried him back to the bed.

Zane landed face first on the mattress with Aidan's full weight coming down on top of him. It was enough to startle him into submission—at least until he could breathe again.

"Leave!" Aidan snapped the command out.

"Aidan, maybe we should—" Gabe's opinion was cut short by Aidan's angry growl and Mika's sharp voice.

“Gabe! Do what Aidan says! If Zane’s wolf is fighting to get out, and it’s anywhere near as angry as he is...” Mika let the rest of the sentence trail off.

“Fine. But I don’t like it.” The door slammed shut as Gabe and Mika left.

Aidan grunted as Zane resumed thrashing beneath him. He was terrified of what would happen if Zane shifted right now. There were cases where shifters had given up their human sides and reverted to their wolf natures. If Zane shifted and that happened, there would be no way to bring him back. Aidan’s chest hurt at the very idea of losing his mate in such a manner...in *any* manner.

Zane’s elbow made contact with Aidan’s jaw and had him seeing stars.

“Fuck! Goddamnit, Zane! Stop it!” Aidan’s patience was wearing thin. Guilt at forcing Zane to recount his abuse and accept it as such ate at Aidan. Zane jerked his head back and caught Aidan square in the face. Pain and fury vied for dominance inside him as his own wolf demanded submission from its mate.

Aidan struggled with himself, but in the end, he couldn’t see any other way. This wasn’t how he’d wanted to mark Zane, but enough was enough. If Aidan didn’t do it now, one of them would very likely end up seriously hurt. Need tinged with excitement washed through him as he pushed Zane’s head to the side with one hand. His other gripped his mate’s shoulder, pulling the skin taut where neck and shoulder met.

Zane bucked beneath him and Aidan dropped his head down, growling as he gave a warning lick to his mate. When Zane bucked again and snarled in response, Aidan’s temper snapped. He bit quick and deep, burying his incisors into his mate’s flesh. The taste of Zane’s blood on his tongue shot straight to Aidan’s cock, making him hurt with the need to claim his mate. Zane scrabbled at the blankets and mattress, twisting and trying to free himself.

Aidan clamped his mouth down harder, pinning his mate to the mattress. Another rumbling growl worked its way free from his chest, and Zane finally stilled, body going limp as he submitted to the more powerful wolf. A soft whimper left Zane’s lips, and he pressed his ass up, rubbing against Aidan’s aching erection.

Aidan didn’t let up. He sucked hard and kept his grip, needing to ensure that the mark he left on Zane was unquestionable. After the fight the man had put him through, the fear that Zane would be lost to him forever, Aidan needed to make sure his mate knew Aidan wouldn’t let him go. Not now, not ever.

When moans and pleas for more started falling from Zane’s mouth, Aidan began to lave the mark with his tongue. He peppered the bite with kisses and licks that had Zane squirming beneath him instead of thrashing, begging for Aidan to fuck him instead of cursing him.

Aidan lifted enough to pull his and Zane’s sweats and underwear down. He used his feet to kick them the rest of the way off. Aidan whipped his shirt off and threw it to the floor. He glanced at the nightstand but didn’t see the lube. A quick look around didn’t turn it up anywhere on the floor.

Aidan slipped an arm under Zane and pulled him up onto his knees. His mate was flushed with need and Aidan was, too. The sight of Zane’s pale bubble butt thrust up in the air, his head lowered onto his forearms on the bed... Aidan couldn’t wait. He grabbed Zane’s ass, parted his cheeks and leant in to run his tongue over the tight pink hole. Zane moaned and pushed his ass against Aidan’s face. Aidan squeezed the firm cheeks in his hands and licked Zane’s snug pucker with slow strokes, using his lips, tongue, teeth, and fingers to push himself and his mate as far as he could.

When Zane's entire body was trembling, his breath a series of spastic pants, and the only sounds the man could form were whimpers of need, Aidan pulled his mouth and fingers away from Zane's saliva slicked hole. He spit in his hand and coated his cock then plunged in hard and deep, burying his prick to the hilt in Zane's ass.

Aidan's shout of triumph covered Zane's strangled yell. Aidan shouted again as Zane shoved back and gyrated his hips, trying to get Aidan to move. He leant over Zane, covering his body completely and wrapped his arms around Zane. Short, hard thrusts were what they needed, rocking and shoving against each other, Aidan grinding his hips into the firm flesh of Zane's ass.

Zane's hand slid down and he fisted his cock as Aidan was drawn to the mark he had put on his mate. As Zane's inner muscles tightened around Aidan's prick, Aidan sucked on the mark he had left on Zane. His hips pumped faster and erratically as the scent of Zane's seed filled the air. Aidan grunted and thrust once more, stilling as Zane's ass clamped tight, holding Aidan's dick still in its silken vice. He felt each jet of come work up from his balls almost painfully as he groaned and dug his feet into the bed searching for a way to get deeper.

Zane collapsed, his legs shooting out from beneath him. Aidan tried to catch himself but his body felt utterly boneless, and he landed without the least bit of grace on top of his mate. They lay pressed together, Aidan's greater weight pinning Zane down. Sweat coated their bodies as their lungs pumped hard. When their breathing slowed, Aidan started to slide off of Zane with the intention of crawling from the bed and grabbing a cloth to clean them both. As soon as he started to move, Zane gripped Aidan's hip.

"Please." The word was spoken so quietly Aidan wasn't sure he'd heard it until Zane repeated it again.

"I want you to be able to breathe a bit easier," Aidan pointed out, but Zane shook his head.

"I need this." Zane's voice cracked as he tried to continue. He swallowed and looked at Aidan with the one silver eye that wasn't pressed into the pillow. "I feel... safe."

Every one of Aidan's arguments withered up and died right then. He lay back on Zane fully, covering his mate with his body and silently vowed to do everything he could to make sure Zane felt safe from now on.

* * * *

Zane's rumbling stomach woke him, that and the fact he had what had to be over two hundred and fifty pounds of rock hard man lying on top of him. This time, the chaotic emotions didn't assail him—they were there, and he did need to deal with them, but they were under control. Zane had thought he was losing his mind earlier when he had been unable to control his violent reaction to his suddenly overwhelming emotions.

If it hadn't been for the man now squishing him into the mattress... Well, it didn't bear thinking about. Aidan shifted and rubbed his erection against Zane's ass. A big hand traced down Zane's side, and Zane's stomach rumbled again. Aidan rolled off of Zane and sat up. Zane flopped onto his back to find

Aidan studying him carefully, his brows knitting until they nearly touched over his nose.

Aidan's gaze shifted to the mark on Zane's neck—Zane hadn't forgotten for one moment that it was there, or what it felt like to be claimed by his mate. Had Aidan done it to prevent Zane from fighting him any more, or was it because he felt something for Zane? He didn't know and very much wanted to. Asking, though, was a bit daunting at this point. Aidan reached out and stroked the bite mark he had left. The gentle touch sent a shiver rippling down Zane's body.

"How do you feel?" Aidan kept tracing the mark even as his brown eyes met Zane's. The things Zane thought he saw in the depths of his mate's eyes made his heart beat faster and his breath stutter.

"Better than I did a few hours ago, in some ways. Most ways." Zane didn't trust his voice to speak. Zane could still feel the man's comforting presence in his mind, not prying or guiding, simply there. It reassured him in ways he would never have expected. With Aidan's help, Zane knew he would be able to deal with what had happened to him. He wouldn't shift and flee and possibly lose his humanity, nor would he lose his mind as he had often feared.

A slight smile tipped Aidan's lips. "Good. Let me get a cloth and clean us up, then we will see what we can do about getting us both fed."

"I can get up—" Zane started to sit up but Aidan's big hand landed on his chest and pushed Zane back down.

The gentle look Aidan sent him nearly undid Zane. "I know you can, but I want to take care of you, please."

Zane nodded, touched unbearably by the simple request. It had him daring to believe Aidan had chosen to mark him for reasons other than the need to show dominance.

"Yes, although I will not lie to you and tell you that need wasn't there. Your wolf brought out the need in mine." Aidan's words were barely a whisper in Zane's mind, as if the man were afraid of hurting Zane through their link. *"But the man in me had an entirely different reason for placing that mark on you. It had nothing to do with being the alpha and everything to do with how I feel about you."*

It was enough for Zane. He didn't need words when he could feel the emotions burning bright in Aidan. Nodding, Zane let his head sink into the pillow and closed his eyes, savouring the novel experience of being cared for. He listened to the sounds of Aidan's movements as the man found a cloth and turned on the water to wet it. Even with the warning of the faucet being shut off and Aidan's approaching footsteps, Zane still jumped when the warm wet material swiped over his skin. Aidan's murmured apology sent a rush of tender feelings through Zane, and he reached out to capture Aidan's hand in his own.

The mattress shifted as Aidan's knee touched his side then there was the soft brush of Aidan's lips across his. He sought to deepen the kiss but Aidan pulled back. Zane peeked at his mate to find the man shaking his head.

"None of that, or we will end up missing another meal or two," Aidan teased. "Now, let's get dressed before your stomach gnaws its way through your backbone. I think mine has already started that process."

Letting go of Aidan's hand, Zane sat up and looked for his clothes. They dressed quickly, with Zane doing his best to keep from staring at his mate's sculpted body. His stomach was cramping with hunger

pangs and his prick was trying to do its best to get Zane to ignore the need for sustenance. Zane reached down and pressed the heel of his hand to his erection, hoping to get himself under control.

“God, Zane...”

Zane looked up to find Aidan staring at his hand, or more appropriately, his prick. In a blur of movement, Aidan was before Zane, cupping the back of his head with one hand and his ass with the other. Aidan brought their hips together at the same time his mouth plundered Zane’s in a kiss that was demanding and desperate and pretty much short circuited Zane’s brain.

Aidan stepped back as quickly as he had approached and shook his head. “Come on, we both need food.” He walked to the door and held it open for Zane, shooting him a sharp look. “No more touching yourself until we’ve eaten.”

That had to be the oddest order Zane had ever gotten. Laughing, he headed out the door, making sure to brush his hip against Aidan’s erection as he passed. The resulting growl from his mate didn’t surprise him, but the swat on his butt did. Zane glared at Aidan over his shoulder, and the expression on the man’s face made Zane’s balls tingle and tighten. He refused to believe it had anything to do with Aidan’s big palm making contact with his ass.

Aidan gave him a knowing smirk and snickered. “The things I can teach you, mate,” he purred against Zane’s ear as he slung an arm around him.

“Oh shit,” Zane muttered as he stumbled over his own feet, images flashing in his head that he was certain Aidan must have supplied, because surely he wasn’t that creative. Aidan’s arm tightened around him, helping Zane to keep from tumbling to the floor.

“I think you’re very creative,” Aidan whispered in a silky voice. “Those are all your ideas.”

“Oh shit,” Zane muttered again, but he couldn’t fight back a smile. He felt happy and wanted for the first time since he could remember. He had Aidan beside him, his mate, and Aidan would help Zane deal with what had happened in his past. He wasn’t alone, not any more, and that surety was embedded in his heart. Aidan was his, and he would stop at nothing to protect Zane. His mate was, as he had said before, relentless, and that was exactly what Zane needed.

Chapter Fifteen

Zane couldn’t say that he thought the small town of Shasta was enchanting. He and Aidan got some very curious and sometimes nearly hostile looks from the townspeople as they ate their meal. How in the world did Gabe and Mika tolerate this kind of scrutiny? Were people staring because they were strangers or did they give off some...gay vibes? Something?

Aidan coughed suddenly and Zane realised his mate was smothering a laugh.

“Well? What do you expect me to think?” Zane set the salt shaker down a little harder than was necessary. He didn’t know how to handle the looks they kept getting.

“I expect you to realise that most of these people here are curious as to who we are...and quite a few have been leering at you in a truly slutty manner.” Aidan winked and resumed eating his meal.

Zane tried to look around without being obvious about it. Okay, so maybe some of those looks were, ah, rather lusty. At least the ones from the women, and Zane didn’t think for one minute they were directed at him, not with Aidan sitting across from him. That man could inspire anyone, male or female, to drool a bit. Okay, a lot.

Aidan coughed again, this time choking on his food. He grabbed his glass and took a quick drink before narrowing his eyes at Zane. “*Stop it! You’re going to kill me!*”

Zane opened his mouth to reply but was stopped by the approach of a sheriff. Oh shit, what had they done now? Zane could almost hear the sound of banjos playing in his head. He bit his tongue against a yelp when Aidan kicked his shin under the table.

“Stop it! You’re going to getus *killed!*” The humour in Aidan’s message was mixed with enough sincerity to encourage Zane to get his wayward thoughts under control. He and Aidan both watched the sheriff watch them as he drew nearer.

The sheriff stopped at the edge of their table and looked at them for a long minute. Zane felt his defences kick in and would have said something that most likely would have caused them trouble if Aidan hadn’t been a reassuring presence in Zane’s mind.

“Just wait him out. Aidan brushed Zane’s calf with his foot and then stilled, every sense on alert. “*Zane, do you—*”

Zane inhaled and froze in surprise. “Yeah,” he muttered, forgetting that Aidan had spoken to him silently.

“Yeah?” One of the sheriff’s sandy coloured eyebrows shot up.

Oh shit. Zane sputtered, trying to think up an excuse. Aidan stepped in and saved him.

“I believe he was answering a question I asked before you arrived, Sheriff.” Aidan kept his voice calm and friendly. The man didn’t look the least bit rattled, which made Zane want to start reeling off scenes from the movie *Deliverance* in his head.

Aidan glared at him. “*Stop. It!*”

“You two pulled up in Gabe’s truck,” the sheriff stated. “Who are you, and why are you driving his truck?”

Aidan’s smile was damn near angelic. “We’re friends of Mika’s, and now Gabe’s. I’m Aidan Criswell, and this is my...” Aidan paused and winked at the sheriff, “my close friend, Zane Mitchell.”

The man’s cheeks pinkened as he realised what Aidan meant. “And you’re introducing yourselves in such a way... why?”

Aidan and Zane both looked past the Sheriff to the dark headed man wearing a lab coat who was standing by the door. They turned back to the nosy man at their table and offered him two looks that should have answered the question for him. When the sheriff remained silent, Aidan tipped his head in the direction of the man wearing a lab coat.

“He’s why.” Aidan leant back in the bench seat. “You can call Mika or Gabe and they’ll verify what I’ve told you.”

“They’re not answering.” The man turned a deep red when Zane snorted with laughter.

Amusement danced in Aidan’s brown eyes as well. “They are probably taking advantage of their privacy. We’ve been there a few days, and that had to stifle their—“

“Yeah, yeah I got it.” The sheriff ran a hand down his heated face. He turned and motioned for his partner to join them. “I’m Todd Benson, and this is—“

“Adam Soames. Nice to meet some friends of Mika’s.” Zane and Aidan slid out of the booth and shook hands with the two men.

If Zane hadn’t noticed the initials DVM after Adam’s name, he still would have known the man was a veterinarian, or at least worked for one. The scent of dogs and cats, as well as a few smaller and larger animals, clung to the man. Not in an offensive way, however, for which Zane was grateful.

They invited Todd and Adam to join them and ended up having a pleasant lunch with the couple. When Zane had asked how Todd and Adam managed to live successful lives in such a small town without fear of repercussion, Todd had looked haunted for a moment. He shook his head and said that, in some ways, people in small towns could be more accepting because of the fact they tended to be tight knit communities. His partner then changed the subject, leading them away from the topic that had upset Todd.

Zane hadn’t forgotten, though, and he figured that Gabe and Mika would be able to explain it to him. It bothered him to see the pain in Todd Benson’s eyes, but the bond the man had with his partner was almost as strong as any Zane had seen between that of shifters and their mates, though his knowledge there was extremely limited.

After they finished their meals and parted company with Todd and Adam, Aidan and Zane decided it was time to head back to the house. Zane knew there were things he needed to talk to Mika—and Gabe as well—about, unless Aidan had...? “Did you tell them anything specific about what John did to me?”

“No, I didn’t.” Aidan glanced at Zane then looked back at the road. “I didn’t think it was all necessary for them to know, didn’t know how much you wanted me to tell. But most importantly,” Aidan dropped one hand from the steering wheel and clasped Zane’s hand, pressing it tight to Aidan’s thigh “it wasn’t my story to tell. If and when you want to share it with Mika and Gabe, that is your decision. Only yours.”

Zane stared at Aidan. “I don’t know if telling them all of the gory details would help. I certainly don’t see how it would help Mika learn anything about his parents.”

Aidan shook his head. “I doubt it would.”

“What does that mean, you doubt it? Could you be a little more vague?” Zane cringed at how petulant he sounded. When had he become such a whiny shit?

Aidan laughed and pulled the truck off the road and onto the shoulder. He unsnapped his seatbelt, then Zane's, and pulled Zane over to his side. Zane shivered when Aidan ducked his head and bit at the mark under the collar of his shirt.

"I don't think it would help. I'm just distracted because I need to taste you."

Aidan swooped down and took his mouth in a searing kiss that had Zane's cock pushing past the elastic waistband of his sweats. He moaned and pressed their joined hands to his aching groin, thrusting his hips to get the friction his prick needed.

Aidan lifted his mouth and pushed Zane until he was reclining against the passenger door. With a sharp tug, he had Zane's prick free. Aidan crammed his hand into the sweats and cupped Zane's balls at the same time he engulfed Zane's cock, sucking him down until Aidan's nose was buried in the dark nest of pubic hair. Zane didn't have the breath to scream or even whimper when Aidan tugged on his balls and swallowed. Zane's ass came off the seat as his hips jerked, and he came so violently his back popped as it arched. Aidan licked and sucked Zane's prick until Zane was ready to beg him to stop.

Only then did Aidan sit up and hitch Zane's sweats back up. Zane started to push himself up as well but a movement outside Aidan's door caught his eye.

"Aidan—"

A figure appeared and slapped a big hand on the glass, startling Zane and drawing a string of curses from Aidan. Zane clenched his fists and started to open his door to confront the idiot outside of the truck. He glanced at Aidan and stopped as he realised his mate was grinning at the hulking figure backing away from the driver's door.

"Aidan," Zane began again, feeling a tad left out of the loop. "Who the hell is that?"

Aidan shook his head and pulled Zane over for a quick kiss before cupping his chin in one big hand. "That, my dear mate, is my obnoxious brother—" Zane felt his stomach drop to his knees, "—Marcus Criswell."

"Oh fuck." Zane closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. He didn't feel ready for this, felt raw and exposed after recounting his past as well as everything that had happened recently.

"Hey, it will be okay, I promise." Aidan stroked Zane's neck and down his back. "Besides, he just got a free show, so he better be damned nice—"

Zane's eyes flew open and he scooted as far away as he could. "You mean he... You knew he was... He... Oh God!" Zane was mortified, and even that was an understatement.

Aidan shook his head and grabbed Zane, pulling him over just in time to keep him from tumbling out the passenger side door as someone—Zane knew it must be Marcus Criswell—opened the door.

"What the fuck—" Zane's sentence was cut short by Aidan's blistering string of curses directed at his brother. Zane turned his head and found himself looking at an almost exact replica of his mate. The only immediate differences he noticed, other than scent, was that Marcus Criswell's eyes were a darker shade of brown, nearly black, and the man sported a neat beard clipped close to his skin.

Marcus threw up his hands and laughed. “Enough! I wasn’t going to let him fall out on his head, Aidan!”

Aidan stopped his tirade and pulled Zane closer to his side. Zane could feel amusement warring with anger in his mate. “And just how were you going to stop him?”

Marcus shrugged and grinned. “I would have caught him.”

Zane felt the rumbling growl before it worked free of Aidan’s lips. He didn’t understand why Aidan was so angry. It was obvious his brother was teasing him.

“You will not touch him.” *Oh*, Zane thought. *That’s the problem*. A little ridiculous since he was sure Marcus wouldn’t be poaching.

“It wouldn’t be the first time we both wanted the same man.” Aidan tightened his hold on Zane.

Zane looked at Marcus again. Okay, maybe there was a bit of...admiration in the man’s dark brown eyes, but that didn’t mean he would expect his brother to share his mate, for shit’s sake. Or that Zane would do it even if Aidan was so inclined.

Aidan’s grip increased to the point of being painful. “I’m not.” The words were barely more than a growl.

“Well, me neither,” Zane pushed against Aidan’s restraint. “So quit trying to break me in half already!”

“Yes, Aidan,” Marcus reached around Zane and smacked Aidan’s thigh. “By all means, quit trying to kill the man. I wouldn’t ask you to share this one any more than I would offer to share my mate, were I so lucky to find him.”

Share this one? Zane’s mind tried to wrap around that. “You two...uh...”

Aidan let go of Zane and caught Marcus in the chest with an open-handed slap. “Shut up, asshole!”

Zane shook his head. “*Aidan, cut it out. It’s not like I’ve never... Well, okay, I haven’t. But I would have—before you.*” Zane tacked the last two words on before Aidan’s temper could spike any higher.

“I’m sorry.” Marcus sounded contrite, maybe even a bit ashamed, Zane thought.

“Fine, he accepts,” Zane answered before Aidan could. He was already starting to ache from being twisted around so that none of his body came anywhere close to Marcus Criswell’s. “This is fucking ridiculous. Aidan, stop it already. I’m not meant to be bent this way.”

Aidan loosened his grip a little but nowhere near enough. Zane glared at Aidan first, then Marcus. “Get out of the damned truck already so your crazy brother will quit trying to squeeze me to death.” Then Zane realised that he’d just snapped at the Alpha Anax, not just Aidan’s brother. “I mean—”

Marcus chuckled and opened the door. “It’s all right. I’m here as a brother, not as the Alpha Anax.” He shut it and leant his back against it, seemingly in no hurry to leave them alone.

Zane hoped the man didn’t carry a grudge. He pried Aidan’s arms from around him and gave his mate an irritated look. “Seriously, Aidan, don’t do that shit. You think I’m some kind of man-slut or

something?”

Aidan looked embarrassed as hell as he shook his head violently. “No! I just. . . The idea of someone else touching you is just wrong.” Aidan shrugged. He flashed a bashful grin. “You’ll see. If someone comes up to me and tries to touch me, you won’t like it either.”

And Zane did see, because just hearing it pissed him off to an unreasonable degree. “Yeah, okay, I get it. But it won’t do you any good if you suffocate me while you’re being all jealous.”

Aidan arched a pale eyebrow. “Protective, not jealous.”

“Right.” Zane rolled his eyes. “Protective. Because that’s what I feel when I think of someone other than me groping you.” He shook his head and kissed Aidan’s cheek. “You have nothing to worry about, you know.”

Aidan studied him with a sombre expression. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, it is.” Zane gestured with his thumb at Marcus. “Now why don’t you find out what your brother wants so we can get back to Mika and Gabe’s and see what we can do about taking care of you?”

Zane laughed as Aidan nodded and practically sprang from the truck. Looked like his man liked the idea of being taken care of, and Zane damn sure liked the idea of taking care of Aidan.

Aidan shut the truck door, only then noticing the SUV that was pulled off the side of the road behind them. Christ, he’d been so lost in Zane that he hadn’t even heard or scented his brother’s approach. He stopped at the back of the truck and waited for Marcus to join him. The silly grin on his brother’s face melted away the last traces of Aidan’s anger. He reached out and hugged Marcus, grunting when his brother thumped him hard on the back a few times in return. They stepped back and looked at each other.

“Not that I’m not glad to see you, despite wanting to beat your ass in the truck, but why are you here?” Aidan was sure the man had better things to do, being Alpha Anax and all that.

“I haven’t been able to get a hold of you, baby brother. And some things are more important than my position, as someone pointed out to me.” Marcus nodded at Aidan.

“I didn’t exactly point it out.” Not really, he thought.

“Close enough. Where’s your phone?” Marcus’ voice lost its teasing tone.

Aidan looked at his shoes, feeling like a small child who had screwed up. “I, uh, left it somewhere in the truck when my guards dropped me off here.” He looked up at Marcus and shrugged. “I kind of forgot about it. Things have been— ” *sexy, scary, scorching—and he was the king of alliteration,* “—hectic.”

Marcus laughed so hard Aidan thought the man was going to fall over. He finally stopped and brushed the moisture from his eyes as he looked at Aidan. “Yeah, that in the truck? Looked hectic as hell. Wish that’s what kind of hectic I had—not with your mate!” Marcus laughed again and pointed at Aidan’s fisted hands. “Geez, bro, calm down!”

It took a few deep breaths but Aidan managed it. He thought back to what they had been discussing—the phone. “I’m really sorry, Marcus. There’s no excuse for me being out of touch.”

“I disagree,” Marcus said solemnly. “Mariska called me. It seems that she, Jordan, and Evan have kept Gila under control, along with Azrael. So far.” He let that sink in. “You needed to take care of things between you and Zane, I understand that. And apparently, he isn’t the incarnation of evil everyone thinks him to be?”

“No, he’s not, but there’s someone else who is and needs to be dealt with. We’ll explain it when we get to Gabe and Mika’s. I don’t want to discuss it out in the middle of the road, or the shoulder of the road, as the case may be.”

“Okay. I’ll follow you there.”

Aidan got in the truck and reached for Zane, needing to hold him even if only for a few seconds. “We’re going to have to tell him. Do you think you’re up to it, or would you rather I do it?”

Zane tensed and leant back to look in Aidan’s eyes. “I haven’t even let myself think about it, not after what happened earlier. What if I can’t handle it, or shift and...”

“No.” Aidan strung kisses over Zane’s brow, cheeks and lips. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promised, didn’t I?” He held his breath as he waited for Zane’s reply, nearly sighing with relief when his mate nodded and relaxed against him. “Just remember that.” Aidan wanted to say more, but what he wanted to say was still a feeling growing inside of him that he didn’t quite know how to verbalise.

Zane seemed to understand the confusion Aidan was experiencing. “I know.”

Aidan smiled. It wasn’t a complete declaration, but it was enough for now. The rest would come.

Chapter Sixteen

Gabe and Mika were sitting on the porch when Aidan and Zane pulled up, Marcus right behind them. Aidan found himself fighting back a wicked smile. He winked at Zane and shared his thoughts. Zane’s eyes widened and he burst out laughing.

“Do it,” he urged when he finally caught his breath.

“Certainly.” Aidan got out of the truck and waited for Zane and Marcus to join him. They walked up the porch steps, and Aidan couldn’t help but notice that this time, unlike when he arrived, Gabe and Mika both stood to greet their third visitor. The nervous flicker of Gabe’s eyelids made it hard for Aidan to keep a straight face.

“Mika, Gabe,” Aidan looked into Gabe’s eyes and nodded. *Yep, it’s going to happen*, he thought. Gabe glared and the tips of his ears started to turn that bright shade of red Aidan had only ever seen on Mika’s mate.

“Don’t you dare,” Gabe muttered, drawing confused stares from Mika and Marcus.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Aidan smiled. “I’d like you to meet the Grand Poobah, as Gabe likes to call him.” Every bit of Gabe’s exposed skin flushed. Mika shot his mate a stunned look before offering his hand to Marcus. Marcus was biting his bottom lip to keep from laughing.

Aidan could feel the heat of Gabe’s angry glare and studiously avoided meeting the man’s eyes. He wasn’t totally stupid. Zane’s muffled snicker was drowned out by Marcus’ proper introduction of himself, *sans* title.

“Asshole,” Gabe murmured as Aidan slipped by him.

Aidan wanted to get in and let Zane clean himself up before everyone gathered around to hear what had to be said.

“It seems you know my brother very well,” Marcus pitched his voice to make sure Aidan heard it. He grinned, knowing that Gabe tended to take sides in any battle.

“Yeah, well, you two obviously shared a womb, so I doubt you’re any different.” No one would ever accuse Gabe of being a soft touch—unless they knew him well.

Marcus laughed and followed Aidan and Zane into the house, Mika and Gabe bringing up the rear. “True, but let me tell you how I found my baby brother this afternoon...”

Aidan wrapped an arm around Zane’s waist and practically dragged him to the bedroom. He’d barely shut the door when the sound of the other three men laughing reached his ears. He looked at his mate and Zane just shook his head.

“And now we have to go out there and face them.” Zane tugged off his clothes and headed for the bathroom. The sight of his nude body and the fact that Aidan spotted the lube lying on the nightstand—apparently Gabe or Mika had been in the room and found the missing tube while they’d been gone—stopped Aidan from thinking and spurred him to act. Aidan stripped then grabbed the lube and slid in to the shower with Zane only seconds after his mate.

“Then let’s give them something to talk about.” Aidan spun Zane around and pressed him against the shower wall.

Zane grunted as his chest made contact with the cold tiles but he didn’t protest. Instead, he lifted a leg and planted his foot on the lip of the tub, spreading and opening his body to Aidan. Zane’s arms splayed out over the tiles, his palms flattening against the slippery surface.

Aidan turned the water off and opened the lube, pouring it straight onto his prick. He stroked himself a couple of times, spreading the thick liquid around then running his slick fingers over Zane’s tight pucker. He pushed a finger in as Zane arched his back and moaned. The way his mate’s lips parted on the sound was an image Aidan would never forget.

Zane pushed his butt back, demanding more, and Aidan obliged, working two more fingers into Zane’s

ass. Feeling the tight ring of muscles clamp down on his fingers was too much and Aidan pulled them out as Zane protested. Those protests died on his mate's lips when Aidan wrapped his arms around Zane and buried his cock so deep Zane was standing on his toes, his raised leg sliding as he lost purchase.

Aidan wasn't so far gone yet that he would let his mate get hurt. Aidan leant and pinned Zane to the wall, holding him in place until Zane regained his footing. When Zane nodded, Aidan began pumping his hips in hard, fast thrusts, not wanting his prick to leave Zane's heated channel any more than was absolutely necessary.

Aidan's mouth sought out the mark at the base of Zane's neck. He sent a silent apology as he bit deeply, fearing Zane would be hurt. Instead, Aidan felt the burst of pleasure shoot through Zane, heard his mate's hoarse cry as the scent of Zane's come reached his senses. Aidan fucked Zane almost frenziedly, his vision blurred as his body was spurred to a heightened need that scared some part of his brain that was still functioning. A final thrust and Aidan ground his hips against Zane's ass, panting around the flesh still gripped in his teeth as he spilled his seed into his mate's body.

Aidan held on to Zane until he felt his knees give out. He released Zane's flesh from between his teeth and let his softened cock slip from Zane's body and half-fell, half-sat in the tub, landing with an audible smacking sound that was as painful as the noise implied. He only had a second to catch himself before Zane toppled down as well in an undignified sprawl that knocked Aidan on his back. His head hit the porcelain bottom of the tub hard enough that white spots danced before his eyes. The back of Zane's head collided with Aidan's chin and he tasted blood. The stinging sensation on his tongue told Aidan he had bit that particular part again.

He couldn't help it, laughter welled up in him, and he held Zane tight, feeling beat to shit and better than he ever had. Zane's laughter joined his, and Zane turned to lie on top of him, chest to chest.

Aidan's laughter died down as he met Zane's glittering gaze. Zane dipped his head and kissed Aidan, soft and sweetly, stealing a piece of Aidan's soul with the chaste touch of lips.

"I do," Zane's breathe carried the words against Aidan's mouth. "I do love you." And with those four words uttered so quietly against his skin, Aidan handed Zane the rest of his soul.

* * * *

"I'm beginning to associate this room with unhappy memories," Zane quipped as he sat on the couch. Aidan pushed him over and sat in the middle of the couch with Marcus on Aidan's other side and Gabe and Mika once again sharing the chair.

"Oh I don't know. I have some very fond memories of this room, especially the couch." Mika's eyes sparkled with mischief until an elbow from Gabe knocked a grunt from him.

Zane looked at Aidan and Marcus. "I think I'm either getting turned on or grossed out. I can't decide which."

"At least you're not getting a free show," Gabe muttered, "Unlike our friends Todd and Adam a while back."

“That would be the sheriff and the veterinarian.” Aidan nodded. “We met them in town when Todd seemed to think we had murdered you both and stolen your vehicle since he couldn’t get you on the phone.”

“Well damn. Todd always has the worst sense of timing.” Gabe laughed and wiggled his eyebrows. “I think he just hopes to interrupt, spice up his sex life a bit.”

“Hmm. He seemed happy enough with his own. In fact, I’d say he had just gotten laid not long before he and his partner joined us.” Zane pretended to give it some thought. “Yeah, he definitely smelled like—”

“Okay, all ready! I don’t want to know.” Gabe shuddered and glared at Zane. “Ick. You now have sufficiently paid us back for the couch remark.”

Zane doubted that as he was sure Mika hadn’t been joking but he let it pass.

“However...” Marcus leant forward to look at Aidan and Zane both. “We might discuss all the, ah, noise that was coming from the guest room a few minutes ago.”

Aidan glared at Marcus while Zane considered whether or not he could make it back to the guestroom before anyone stopped him. Maybe if he went over the back of the couch—

“I don’t think so.” Aidan’s grabbed the back of Zane’s neck and gave him a playful squeeze. “You aren’t leaving me in here with this bunch of nosy pervs.”

“Uh, we aren’t pervs,” Marcus argued. “You two were loud enough that people in town could hear you.”

“And what was with that—” Gabe shut up when he looked at Aidan. Zane looked at Gabe, then Aidan, trying to figure out what magic Aidan had found that managed to make Gabe stop talking.

“He’s afraid I will bring up a little incident in the barn the other day—when his ass was too sore to sit comfortably.”

Zane looked at Gabe and watched the man shake his head almost frantically. What would—The image of Aidan’s hand coming down on Zane’s pale ass flitted then froze in Zane’s mind, courtesy of his mate.

“Fuck,” Zane said the word out loud and Gabe glared daggers at him, then ruined it by laughing.

“I’m obviously missing something here,” Marcus complained. “What is it?”

Zane shook his head, trying his best to will away the semi-erection Aidan’s little gift had given him. He definitely did not want anyone noticing it.

“It’s not my place to tell,” Aidan said, and at first, Zane thought the man was talking to him until Marcus replied.

“I suppose Gabe isn’t going to fill me in, either?” Marcus tilted his head towards Gabe and Mika.

“Nope. I didn’t fill your big-mouthed brother in, either.”

Zane's jaw dropped open. Gabe was calling Aidan a big-mouth? That was like the pot calling... Well, no it wasn't, because Aidan didn't have a big mouth. It was wide and sexy, though, Zane thought as he snapped his mouth shut and looked at Aidan's full lips.

"Best stop staring at me like that, Zane, or we will both have to excuse ourselves and give the nosy pervs even more to talk about."

Aidan had a point. Zane dragged his gaze off his mate's tempting mouth and leant back on the couch.

"So what brings the Alpha Anax to our door?" Mika looked relaxed as he asked. If it was an act, it was a great one, because Zane couldn't sense any tension in the man.

Marcus' pale blond brows shot up. "Why is it so surprising that I would check on my baby brother?"

"Baby brother my ass," Gabe declared. "You two are twins."

"Yes, but I was born thirteen minutes earlier than he was." Marcus sounded entirely too smug.

"And he never lets me forget it." Aidan shrugged. "So he's older. Doesn't mean he's wiser."

"No, but I am—" Marcus began.

"If you say 'Alpha Anax' I will beat your ass, bro. I didn't want that position, or this one but you—"

"Children! Behave or I will grab the spatula!" Gabe's order had the desired effect. Aidan shut his mouth because he was smart enough not to argue with Gabe, but Marcus just looked completely stunned.

"What exactly are you going to do with a spatula?" Marcus looked at Gabe like the man was crazy.

"You don't want to know," Mika intoned.

"I might." Marcus lips tilted up at the corners. "It might come in handy to know."

Gabe hopped up off of Mika's lap and walked over to Marcus. "I tell you what, you tell me how Mika can change me without the whole bite-the-penis bit and I will tell you the best use for a spatula."

Marcus shot Aidan an incredulous look. "You told them there was another way?"

"I told Gabe that I thought there was another way and that I would talk to you about it. I wanted to get all the information first, and before you shit bricks, Gabe and Mika are my friends. I trust them implicitly, as I do Zane." Aidan clasped Zane's hand in his. "Not to mention, bro, would you really want to be changed by having your mate bite you like that?"

Marcus' shudder was answer enough. "Fine. You trust them, I trust you, therefore we are all one big, happy group."

"I don't know about that, though I do like Aidan and since you are Aidan part deux—" Gabe threw his hand up to shush Marcus, much to Aidan's delight. "I don't care who popped out first. I met Aidan first, so you, Grand Poobah, are part deux."

"If I agree, will you drop the Grand Poobah bit?" Marcus asked hopefully.

“Maybe you aren’t as bright as your brother. Even he knows I will just come up with something worse if you don’t like option A.” Gabe walked back over and dropped onto Mika’s lap.

“I’m a fast learner, though. Grand Poobah it is...but what do you call my dear brother?”

Zane grinned as Aidan fidgeted. “Gabe calls him Double D.”

It was a long time before the laughter stopped and they managed to get down to serious business, but Zane was more at ease with his mate and their friends than he’d ever been with anyone else.

When he recounted his abuse—he could finally admit that was what it was—at the hands of his uncle, Zane still felt the anger but it was more of an ember than the solid wall of flame from earlier. He found it easier to meet his friends’ eyes, and he didn’t find pity in any of them. Sympathy, anger and concern he sensed and could handle.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself,” Marcus sounded so much like Aidan that Zane nearly smiled, but the fact that the man could read him so well was a little disturbing.

“It’s not that he is so attuned; you broadcast your guilt...but you have no reason to feel ashamed. If you don’t believe me, you can find thousands of stories online alone.”

Zane looked at Aidan and wondered if his mate was right. But how could he reconcile the fact that he, as a grown man, hadn’t fought back against his abuser? Zane felt the trembling begin deep inside of him—that anger and fear fuelled volcano that threatened to erupt all over again.

“We’ll work through it,” Aidan whispered in Zane’s ear. Zane forgot about the fact that there were other people around them. He wrapped his arms around Aidan and buried his face in Aidan’s neck. Aidan held him and rubbed his back, murmuring tender words in his ear. It seemed that Aidan’s hands stroked the anger and pain away, soothing him from deep inside.

Zane managed to calm down and hold himself together throughout the rest of the conversation, but when it was over, he was more than ready to hide for a while. All the emotions that had been tamped down were beginning to press at him again, along with a healthy dose of fear after his reaction earlier in the day. Zane closed his eyes and forced himself not to take off for the guest room.

His world tilted as Aidan stood and carried him to the guest room. Zane wanted to protest being swept up like a girl, but since he suddenly began shaking all over and didn’t care to break down in front of an audience, he knew it was the least embarrassing option.

When his back touched the mattress, Zane tightened his hold on Aidan, bringing him down as well. Zane rolled to his side and burrowed against his mate, gritting his teeth against the spasms that shook his body, refusing to let a sound pass his lips.

Feeling another shudder work through Zane, Aidan closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Zane’s forehead. This silent mix of grief and anger was the most agonising thing Aidan had ever experienced. He wanted to find John Trainer and tear the man to pieces but knew that wouldn’t undo the past. Aidan struggled to get a tenuous grip on his emotions to keep Zane from feeling them as well as Zane’s own.

One look at his mate's ravaged features drowned out everything but the need to comfort Zane. Aidan held him until the shuddering turned to trembling, then that, too finally stopped as Zane went limp in his arms.

"I need to run," Zane mumbled against Aidan's chest.

That sounded good to Aidan now that Zane had released some of the pent-up emotions that had ridden him so hard today.

"I'll speak to Mika. I'm sure there's somewhere he goes to let his wolf free." Anticipation simmered in Aidan. The night air and the freedom to run as a wolf with his mate by his side would be nirvana after the events of the past few days. "Maybe soon we can run with Mika and Gabe both. I bet Gabe will be a very interesting wolf."

"He will at that," Zane agreed. "How can he become one of us without doing it the, uh, regular way?"

Aidan rolled to his back, tucking Zane up against his side. "It's more complicated but less painful. It involves a ceremony of sorts and then there's some mix of plants that are digested. Oh and bloodletting. There's going to have to be bloodletting one way or the other."

"That is a definite deterrent to turning into one of us, isn't it?" Zane looked thoughtful. "Why do you think it has to be that way?"

Aidan shook his head. He'd wondered the same thing himself. Why give shifters human mates when the whole turning process was such an awful procedure? "I have no idea, but Fate has a way of getting things done." Aidan placed a sloppy kiss behind Zane's ear. "I will say however, that I am *really* glad you and I are both shifters."

Aidan laughed and hugged Zane as tight as he dared. "On that, mate, you and I both agree."

Chapter Seventeen

It wasn't a forest, Zane thought, but it would do. Mesquite and shrubs along with entirely too many prickly pear cacti scattered the area. He looked at Aidan and grinned.

"Bet I can get naked first," Zane challenged, already toeing off his shoes and shoving his sweats down.

The rustling sounds of clothes coming off surrounded him as Aidan, Marcus, and Mika stripped. Gabe sat on the tailgate and let loose a loud wolf whistle.

"Ya know, this has got to be every gay man's fantasy." Gabe laughed at Mika's snarl. "Oh come on, you know I love you, but you can't tell me you didn't peek."

Mika kicked off his jeans and tossed them with the rest of his clothes before walking over to Gabe. “I can tell you that I didn’t point that little fact out.”

“You didn’t have to, caveman.” Gabe reached up and tapped his head with one finger. “I can hear you.”

“Busted,” Marcus taunted. “That’s the thing about mates, you can’t get away with anything.”

“And you know so much about mates because—how?” Aidan teased.

“I’m not sure I want one, not right now or any time soon at least.” Marcus sighed and looked up at the clear night sky. “I have my hands full as it is, and taking these few days away, even though they are at least partially work-related, is going to put me behind for weeks.”

“Marcus, I’m sorry if—” Aidan began as he walked to his brother.

“Don’t even start that shit. You would do the same and you know it.” Marcus’ voice held a note of command that surprised Zane—and Gabe and Mika too, if their expressions were any indication. Aidan, on the other hand, walked right up to Marcus and swept him up in a hug that Zane at first thought was a nice show of brotherly love. Then the sight of those two sexy, nude male bodies embracing did some things to his cock that made him decide it was time to shift. He knelt and caught sight of Mika doing the same, shaking his head as Gabe whistled again.

The usual discomfort that he felt when he shifted was magnified this time as bones began altering in shape and size, muscles and tendons popped, stretching and shrinking. His shoulder and ribs throbbed for a few brief seconds then Zane’s vision blurred as his skull was rearranged, eyes moving to the sides of his head and a muzzle pushing its way forward. Thick silver hair coated his body, completing the change.

A howl rent the air behind Zane, setting every hair running down his spine on end. He turned and looked at Aidan. His mate was breathtaking—a hulking white wolf with deep brown eyes that shone with intelligence. Zane trotted over to rub against Aidan, rumbling at the pleasure the touch brought him. Another white wolf appeared, nearly a mirror image of Aidan except this one’s eyes were almost pitch black.

Mika joined the group, his large black form contrasting with the three lighter coloured wolves. Gabe walked over and squatted beside Mika, running his hands through the thick black fur. He buried his face in the nape of Mika’s neck and murmured softly in his ear.

Zane watched the easy interaction between Mika and Gabe. That was what he wanted with his mate, the love and trust that seemed to come so naturally to the other two men.

“We’ll get there,” Aidan’s thought reassured Zane, “*and go farther together still.*”

Marcus howled and glanced back at them before loping off. As Zane, Aidan and Mika followed, Zane couldn’t help but feel bad about leaving Gabe behind. He knew Mika must be torn between letting his wolf run or staying with his mate.

For Zane, running through the night with his mate was thrilling and brought him a sense of peace that was a balm to his soul. They explored shrubs and crevices, chasing anything that dared to appear, simply because the chase was exciting. Aidan seemed content to let Marcus lead, though Zane noticed Mika didn’t hesitate to go off on his own when the urge hit him. Whether it was a show of independence or just Mika’s nature, Zane didn’t know, but Marcus didn’t try to keep Mika with the pack.

They ran and played until Mika signalled he was ready to get back to his mate. Zane pushed away his reluctance to return to his human form and fell into step beside Aidan, brushing up against his mate's bigger body every chance he got. The look in Aidan's eyes promised retribution, and Zane wasn't so reluctant to shift back, after all. Sex as wolves was possible, but there were times when it was better to have hands rather than paws.

Anticipation to get Aidan alone made the trip back to the truck seem longer than it really was. Zane shifted as soon as he cleared the scrub by where the vehicles were parked and immediately realised the error of his impatience when Gabe's gaze dropped to Zane's groin. The smirk on Gabe's face had Zane reaching down in a vain attempt to cover his erection as he hurried over to his pile of clothes.

"Looks like someone is a happy boy," Gabe teased as Aidan, Marcus and Mika appeared. Zane felt four gazes on him as he kept his back turned. He couldn't wait until Gabe was turned into a shifter; then let the man see if he didn't get a hard on from playing with Mika.

"He's not the only one," Mika pointed out. Zane couldn't help but peek over his shoulder. Aidan was right behind him, blocking out his view of the other two shifters. Zane grinned, because Aidan did indeed look like a 'happy boy'.

"I'm not sure if Mika was referring to me or himself," Aidan shook his head and reached for his clothes. "But I do know it's going to be a damned uncomfortable ride back."

* * * *

"We need to head up to Gila as soon as possible," Zane announced. He knew he was only saying what everyone was thinking. They'd been hesitant to speak out because they were concerned with how he would handle returning to his former pack lands.

"Yes," Aidan agreed. Zane held himself still while Aidan studied him. "Are you ready?"

Zane turned and looked at Mika, Gabe and Marcus before facing Aidan again. "Yeah. I am." He couldn't deny that he was scared. The idea of facing his uncle was daunting but Aidan would be there, and, hopefully, the other three men behind him would also be there.

"I'm assuming you two will want to come as well?" Aidan tipped his chin in Mika and Gabe's direction.

"Yes. We'll need to make some arrangements for Todd and Adam to take care of Iko and the rescued dogs. Shouldn't be a problem." Mika nudged Gabe. "Can you give them a call real quick? See if they can stop by or stay here, whichever, starting..."

"We can leave in the morning, if that works for everyone," Zane offered. "I'm sure Marcus needs to get back to being, uh, the Alpha Anax," which seemed surreal to Zane, "and I know you need answers, Mika. I wish I had some for you."

Mika nodded. "Maybe I'll have some soon. Marcus, looks like you get the couch."

“That will work, just don’t tell anyone. It wouldn’t do for it to get out that the Grand Poobah was relegated to a sofa.” Marcus’ eyes glittered with laughter. “It would ruin my image.”

Zane took Aidan’s hand and lead him to their room, leaving the other three men laughing and poking at each other.

“Your brother isn’t quite what I expected,” Zane couldn’t help but point out.

Aidan gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Don’t let him fool you; he’s every bit the AA when he needs to be. For now, he’s able to simply be my brother. It doesn’t get to happen very often, and...” he smiled lopsidedly, “I miss him, you know. We’ve always been close.”

“So I gathered.” If they’d shared men, they would have had to be close. “Just, ah, how close?”

Aidan stopped so fast Zane nearly stumbled stopping as well. “Not,” Aidan glared at Zane, “that close. We tried a threesome once or twice, but it just wasn’t for us. But we never—”

“Okay, I’m sorry I asked.” Zane gave Aidan a shove. “Can we start walking to the room again? Because I’ve been hard or half-hard all damn night—oomph!” Zane’s back hit the wall as Aidan’s mouth crashed down on his. Hands gripped his butt and lifted as Aidan ground his prick against Zane’s. Zane grabbed Aidan’s shoulders and moaned as his lover’s teeth nipped and scraped.

“Take it to the bedroom!” Marcus called out as Mika and Gabe laughed.

Aidan pulled back and traced Zane’s lips with the tip of his tongue before releasing him and pulling him into their room.

As soon as the door shut, Zane found himself pinned again. This time Aidan’s nimble fingers worked Zane’s sweats down with ease. A swift shove had Zane’s sweats and underwear halfway down his thighs. Aidan dropped to his knees so swiftly Zane blinked in confusion. He didn’t have the chance to process what was happening before Aidan’s hot mouth engulfed Zane’s prick, swallowing it down to the base as Aidan’s hand cupped Zane’s balls, rolling them in his palm.

“Aidan!” Zane’s head slammed back into the door as heat zinged through his body. He thrust his hips, chasing after Aidan’s receding mouth. Aidan shook his head and brought his other hand up to hold Zane’s hips still. A whimper slipped from Zane’s lips as Aidan’s head bobbed back down. The feel of Aidan’s tongue swirling down the length of Zane’s cock as his balls were gently tugged made Zane bite his lip to keep from screaming. Instead, a hiss slipped free as the head of his cock tapped the back of Aidan’s throat.

Zane’s orgasm hit him all at once. No tingling or tightening, just a massive explosion of pleasure that slammed into him as Aidan hummed his approval. Aidan backed off and fisted Zane’s prick, sucking hard on the bulbous head as streams of spunk shot out.

The soft noises Zane had been making turned into the shout he had been trying to bury as Aidan’s tongue ran across the slit of Zane’s cock. Aidan licked and sucked Zane’s cock until Zane was sure his brain had melted just like his bones must have. As soon as Aidan let Zane’s prick slip from his lips, Zane slid down the door, grunting when his ass smacked the floor. He looked at Aidan, whose lips were red and swollen from sucking on Zane’s cock and thought the man had never looked sexier.

Aidan rose and unfastened his jeans. He slipped his hand into his underwear and began stroking his

heavy prick. Zane felt a renewed burst of energy. He pulled off his shoes and socks and pushed his sweats and underwear down his legs until he could kick them off. He reached for the edge of his t-shirt and pulled it off, tossing it aside. He started to reach for Aidan's prick but Aidan shook his head.

"Now get down on all fours." Aidan's cock was pulsing and Zane felt goose bumps working over his skin as he caught a glimpse of the heat and determination in Aidan's eyes. "Head down." Aidan pointed at the floor.

Zane braced his forearms on the floor and placed his head on top of them. He heard Aidan walk away, the slight scraping sound of something against the top of the night stand. The pop of the lube cape opening sent a shiver of anticipation through Zane. He listened as Aidan walked around him. There was a soft, muffled sound, then the gurgling noise of the lube being squeezed from the tube.

The cold liquid landed at the top of his crease and Zane sucked in a startled breath. The feel of Aidan's fingers tracing down his crack had Zane rocking backwards, trying to get Aidan's fingers inside his hole. A sharp, stinging slap landed across Zane's right butt cheek. He moaned but stilled his hips.

"Good. Just like that," Aidan murmured. He teased Zane's opening, brushing his fingers back and forth over the puckered skin. Zane wanted to howl in frustration, but he kept himself from moving. The sudden invasion of two thick fingers into his body made Zane suck in a strangled breath. Aidan buried them deep, twisting inside until he found Zane's prostate. Zane couldn't hold back a moan as Aidan did nothing more than press against the gland for several seconds.

When Zane felt certain that his nerve endings were going to fry, Aidan began thrusting his fingers, pressing against the spongy little gland with each thrust. Zane protested when Aidan's fingers slipped out, but groaned as a burning sensation spread from the tight ring of muscles into his rectum. Aidan pushed in steadily, giving Zane time to adjust.

"That's three," Aidan said as he began pumping his fingers back and forth, this time only sporadically hitting Zane's gland. The burning stopped and Zane tilted his hips, ready for more. When Aidan pulled his fingers out, Zane expected to feel Aidan's thick cock slam into him. Instead, there was that burning, stretching pain again.

"Four." Aidan pushed his fingers in and Zane gasped at the sensation of being so full. The pain was tempered with the pleasure of Aidan rubbing against Zane's prostate, then holding his fingers against the gland until Zane was moaning, needing release. Aidan fucked Zane with his fingers for several strokes, reaching around with his free hand to grip Zane's prick hard enough to stop him from coming.

Zane forgot about everything but what he was feeling, pleasure that was causing spikes of heat to shoot through him and the aching need to come.

"Please," he begged, and didn't care that he was doing so. "Aidan, please!" Yet when Aidan's fingers finally slipped from his body, Zane groaned, feeling empty and needy. Only the feel of Aidan's prick pressing against his stretched ring kept Zane from begging again. He sighed as Aidan's hands grasped his hips, expecting Aidan to bury his cock to the hilt.

Instead, Aidan worked his prick in slowly, rocking back every so often and starting the drive in all over again. By the time Aidan's balls slapped against Zane, the tingling in the small of Zane's back had spread to his balls and he knew he was going to come—and he prayed Aidan wouldn't stop him because he was afraid he might cry if that happened.

Aidan chuckled and squeezed Zane's hip. "Come." Aidan moved, a small adjustment that placed his cock against Zane's prostate, and Zane let out a breathy moan as he came. As soon as the first pearly string left Zane's cock, Aidan began fucking him with long, full strokes, prolonging Zane's orgasm, as each one ended with Aidan's prick buried deep. Zane's gland was stimulated over and over again as Aidan filled him. Only when Zane's cock had emptied what he thought must have been every drop of semen from his balls, did Aidan thrust hard and grind his hips against Zane's ass and pump him full of spunk. Zane's channel was over-sensitised by the prolonged and thorough fucking, so that each shot of come from Aidan's cock felt scalding hot, and Zane couldn't help but feel that his mate had marked him in another way.

Aidan rotated his hips as the last bit of seed spewed from his prick. He rested his forehead against the back of Zane's neck for several moments as they both struggled to gain their breaths. Zane couldn't stop a hiss from escaping when Aidan pulled out. Careful or not didn't matter at this point. Zane knew he would be feeling Aidan for days.

"Let's get you up and cleaned off." Aidan's voice held a tender note that warmed Zane all the way down to his toes. When he went to push himself up, Aidan slid his hands under Zane's arms and lifted him. That was a good thing, Zane realised, because his legs were shaky as hell and he would have probably landed back on his ass if it weren't for Aidan's help.

He looked at Aidan, intending to thank him, but he stopped, mouth open and the words abandoning him. No one had ever looked at him like that, with such love and tenderness glowing in their eyes. It simply stole Zane's breath right back away.

Aidan dipped his head down and kissed Zane with every bit of those emotions. Zane didn't even try to stop the moisture that was stinging his eyes. He opened for Aidan and gave everything he had, opening his mind and heart and giving it as fully and freely as he had given his body.

"Zane," Aidan murmured against his lips.

"Yes," Zane whispered back. Aidan's arms tightened around him and Zane held on as tightly as he was held. They stayed that way for several minutes, until Aidan finally loosened his grip enough to lead Zane into the bathroom for their shower.

Chapter Eighteen

The feel of a plump, round ass pressing against his hard prick woke Aidan up before the alarm went off. He thrust his hips instinctively, still not fully awake. A low moan from the warm body beside him had Aidan's eyes snapping open.

"Shit," he muttered, pulling his cock away from the warm cradle of Zane's crease. If Zane's body hadn't had to expend so much energy healing the wounds from the attempted coup, Aidan wouldn't have hesitated to slide his prick deep inside his mate's warm body. However, even a shifter's healing

properties had limits, and besides, there were other things he could do.

Aidan slid his hand down from Zane's chest until he had a nice fat cock in his hand. Zane had the prettiest prick Aidan had ever seen, tempting enough to make him think about his refusal to ever bottom. Maybe, someday, but for now... Aidan stroked Zane's prick and smiled when his mate's hips jutted forward to fuck his hand. The friction of Zane's ass rubbing against Aidan's cock wiped the smile away. Aidan slipped his other arm under Zane and pulled Zane's back up against his chest.

Now he had his mate where he wanted him. Aidan licked at the mark he'd left where Zane's neck and shoulder met. Zane moaned and rocked his hips harder. Aidan pumped his arm faster and rubbed his prick almost desperately against Zane's firm ass. He gave a warning nip before he bit into the sweet spot he had marked, his senses flooded with the touch, taste and scent of his mate. Zane's entire body clenched as a guttural groan sprang from his lips, his fat cock coating Aidan's hand and the sheets with the pungent scent of semen.

It set Aidan off like a rocket, his hips pistoning erratically as heat flared in his balls. He held Zane tight with hands and teeth as his prick coated Zane's lower back and Aidan's stomach with come. He rocked gently against Zane, enjoying the way his cock slid in the warm, wet spunk.

Zane wasn't quite as content. "S'cold," he said, sounding so sleepy and grumpy that Aidan wanted to laugh. Instead, he moved the hand that had been jerking Zane off—and encountered what was indeed a cold gob of come.

"S'your fault," Zane accused. Aidan thought about and figured that it was, in a way.

"You enjoyed every minute of it," Aidan teased as he scooted off the bed. The wood floor was a little chilly as he headed to the bathroom. "I'll be right back with a—fuck!" Zane's cold, wet, sticky body smacked up against Aidan's back as Zane wound his arms around Aidan's waist. "You are evil, mate!"

"I've got spooze on my front AND my back, and it's cold and sticky! You're lucky I didn't roll on your clothes!" The laughter in Zane's voice took the sting out of his words, and the feel of Zane's prick rubbing up against Aidan's ass, despite the gooeey mess, felt better than Aidan would have thought.

The alarm went off and Aidan grabbed Zane's arm and tugged, pushing him towards the bathroom.

"Go on, I'll kill the damn alarm." Literally. Aidan waited long enough to watch his mate's sexy ass as Zane walked into the bathroom. Once that temptation was out of sight, Aidan moved over and smacked the alarm clock, hoping he did some permanent damage to the thing while he was at it. He heard Zane rummaging for a cloth and hurried into the bathroom.

"I think you'll need some help there," Aidan offered, reaching for the washcloth.

Zane raised his brows. "We could just take a shower."

Aidan knew exactly what that would lead to. A pissed off Gabe and Mika—and very likely Marcus as well—banging on the wall or door or hell, even picking the lock and telling them to hurry up. He shared the thought with Zane, who shrugged.

"So? Let 'em watch," Zane wiggled his eyebrows.

"It's not the—you'd let them watch?" For some reason, that boggled Aidan's mind.

Zane laughed and grabbed the cloth back out of Aidan's hand, running it under the hot water again.

"I wouldn't let them watch, but if they walked in and we were fucking like monkeys, I sure as hell wouldn't stop."

"Fucking like monkeys?" Aidan's lips twitched. That was a description he wouldn't have thought of.

"Sure." Zane started wiping the drying come from his body. "I coulda said spawning, you know, like salmon do, or rutting like wild boars, or bumping uglies, or—"

Aidan was laughing so hard he didn't hear the rest of Zane's descriptive terms for fucking. He was pretty sure it was the 'bumping uglies' that got him, not that Zane had an ugly part on him.

Zane was looking at him like he was crazy. "It wasn't that funny. And Marcus is banging on the bedroom door."

"It was, too," Aidan managed to say. He took the cloth from Zane's hand and rewet it. "Turn around." The sight of his seed on Zane's lower back and the top of his crease turned Aidan on so fast that the laughing bout was forgotten.

"Damn, Zane, just... damn." Aidan ran the cloth over Zane's skin reluctantly. He didn't like washing his scent from his mate's body. The pounding on the bedroom door grew louder.

"Cut it out, Marcus!" Aidan's voice echoed in the bathroom. "We'll be out in a minute!"

"Don't go getting distracted or I'll break the damn door down!" Marcus yelled and Aidan snickered as he heard Gabe's irritated voice. No doubt the man was letting Marcus know exactly what he thought about that threat.

Aidan finished cleaning Zane off then took care of the mess on himself as his mate used the toilet. They switched places and took care of the rest of their needs, laughing and enjoying each other as they got ready for the trip. Zane didn't seem nearly as worried about it as Aidan had expected him to be; he was only feeling peace and contentment from his mate.

"I'm too happy to be worried about it right now," Zane explained, feeling Aidan's concern and curiosity. "Trust me, I will be plenty nervous enough the closer we get to where we're going."

"Zane," Aidan waited until his mate looked at him, "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know you want to protect me, but I'm not going to hide away while the big boys do all the dirty work." Zane's gaze was steady and sure. "I can't do that, so please don't ask me to."

He wasn't going to... was he? Aidan thought about it and realised that he had been toying with the notion. That would be a sure way to emasculate his mate, and he was glad Zane had brought it up.

"I won't," Aidan promised. "But I do expect you to do what I tell you. Not..." Aidan raised his hand to cut off whatever Zane was going to say, "that I would ask you to do anything unreasonable. I do respect you, Zane, but I will also protect you without running roughshod over you."

He held Zane's stare, not looking away from the scrutiny of his mate's molten eyes.

“Okay, but that works both ways.” Zane nodded. “Isn’t that what people do who... you know.”

Aidan watched with amusement as the flush spread from Zane’s neck up to his hairline. “People who love each other?”

Zane shrugged and dipped his head. The tips of his ears turned red. “I thought maybe...”

“What? That I didn’t feel the same way?” Any irritation Aidan felt was directed at himself. He should have realised that Zane would need reassuring. He couldn’t focus on that fact, though, since Zane was nearly as red as Gabe turned when embarrassed, and it fascinated Aidan to no end. He would have to see what he could do to turn his mate this particular shade in the future, because it was sexy as hell.

“Maybe. Look,” Zane’s head bobbed up and the blush receded as quickly as it had occurred, “can we just drop it?”

“I don’t think so.” Aidan let his voice drop low and soft. “I think maybe you need to hear it.” He pulled Zane into his arms with little resistance from the man. “I didn’t tell you before that I love you. Can’t you feel it?”

Zane cuddled up against him and Aidan thought it was a better feeling even than what he’d felt this morning when he’d woken Zane up.

“Yeah, I guess I can.” Zane rubbed his cheek against Aidan’s shoulder. “And I love you, too.”

“That’s all very sweet and touching,” Gabe’s voice came from the bathroom doorway, startling Aidan and Zane both badly enough that they jumped. “And I hate to break it up, but we need to go. Todd and Adam are here and you two are... hmm.” Gabe’s gaze skimmed down them slowly. “Definitely not ready yet.”

Gabe turned and walked into the bedroom, sitting down gingerly at the foot of the bed. He stared at Aidan and Zane, tapping his foot impatiently.

Aidan looked at Zane, who looked amused and irritated at the same time. He glanced back at Gabe.

“You can leave and we’ll get dressed.”

Gabe shook his head. “I don’t think so. Two gorgeous, naked men who just confessed their love, alone in a bedroom that smells...” he sniffed a few times, “like it’s been doused in spunk? I don’t think so. Now, get dressed and be glad I came in here instead of Marcus. He likes to look at Zane way more than I do.”

That got Aidan into gear. He tapped Zane on the hip and they left the bathroom. With Gabe watching, they managed to get dressed and gather their few personal items without getting distracted again.

They pulled into Gila National Park nine hours later, Aidan and Zane riding with Marcus behind Gabe and Mika in their truck. The tension rolling off of Zane was palpable; he knew it by the way Aidan's body went ramrod straight. Marcus seemed to be watching Zane in the rearview mirror more than he was watching the road in front of him.

"Marcus, for shit's sake, keep your eyes on the road. I'm not going to fall apart." But if he did, he knew Aidan would help put him back together.

"You won't," Aidan's reassured him, the thought strong and full of pride. "*You're so much stronger than you know.*"

Zane doubted that but figured it wiser not to comment. The quiet rumble from Aidan let Zane know his mate had picked up on the thought regardless.

Marcus turned onto the dry creek bed, the SUV jostling its occupants over the multitude of rocks lining the bed.

"Mariska had said she and Azrael would meet up with us where you met up with Gabe and Mika." Aidan looked at Zane and grimaced as they hit a particularly bumpy patch of the creek bed. "How much further is that, just out of curiosity?"

"It's about twenty minutes or so, depending on whether or not your brother tries to hit every boulder he can find." "*I'd swear he's doing it on purpose.*" Zane gripped Aidan's thigh as the SUV bounced violently along.

"Sorry," Marcus muttered. Zane noticed the death grip Marcus had on the steering wheel, his knuckles white with the force of his grip.

"If you loosen up a bit you might have better control. Or I can drive, if you want," Zane offered, leaning forward a bit.

The glare Marcus shot him was answer enough. Zane leant back and resigned himself to being jostled within an inch of his life.

"At least the ride makes it impossible to think about anything long enough to worry." It was the only positive thing Zane could think of to say.

"Hard to talk, too." Aidan snapped his mouth shut with a loud click. "*Gives a whole new meaning to 'bite your tongue'!*"

Mika stopped the truck and Marcus skidded to a stop behind him, nearly clipping the bumper.

"Christ!" Aidan was opening the door before Marcus had put the vehicle in park. "Your driving sucks!"

"Got us here, didn't I?" Marcus grinned and shut the SUV off.

"We'll be lucky if we don't have any internal injuries." Aidan waited for Zane to climb out before speaking again. "You sure you're okay?"

Zane stopped himself from rolling his eyes—barely. "Yes, for the hundredth time. Can we just get on with this?" He knew Aidan had to be aware of the fact that Zane was running on sheer nerves now. His

stomach pitched, and Zane straightened his shoulders. This was something that he had to do, much like stepping down from his alpha position. He wasn't in charge of the pack any more, but he still cared a great deal for the welfare of the pack—and John Trainer was a definite threat that needed to be removed.

Mariska and Azrael were introducing themselves to Gabe and Mika, Zane noticed. "Let's go." He would make it through this, Zane thought as he looked at Aidan. There was too much to lose if he didn't.

Zane nodded to Mariska and greeted Azrael with a hug. "How does it feel to be top dog?"

"I'd hardly say I'm that when I'm standing here with the Dux Ducis and Alpha Anax." Azrael bowed slightly and kept his eyes averted from the higher ranking alphas.

"Aidan, Marcus, meet Azrael Bannon, alpha of the Gila pack." Zane kept a hand clasped to Azrael's shoulder in a show of support. After the introductions were made and both Marcus and Aidan had insisted that their titles be dropped for the time being, Mariska filled them in on what they had found out.

"It seems John Trainer has gone into hiding. I think he is somewhere on the pack territory. If his intention has always been to control the pack—" Mariska looked at Zane for confirmation. He nodded in assent and she continued, "I can't see someone who went through such extreme measures simply giving up."

"I don't believe he would." Zane reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, which was tingling. "It would be more likely that John would wait until he caught Azrael in a vulnerable position and then strike. Where are the three men who he sent after me?"

"Yes." Aidan's voice carried more than a hint of anger. "I would particularly like to talk to Jared."

Zane narrowed his eyes at his mate. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. You're forgetting that I wasn't a very good alpha."

"That's not true," Azrael argued. "You loved this pack, even if you didn't care for the title. You made some mistakes but—"

"But nothing, Az." Zane waved his hand at Mika and Gabe. "I didn't fight hard enough for what was right, and that made me a weak and pathetic alpha."

"Enough!" Aidan's terse outburst was followed by him grabbing the back of Zane's waistband to pull Zane to his side. "It wasn't like you were in a position to do anything else."

"I still could have refused." And that was something Zane wasn't sure he could ever reconcile with.

"I'm glad you didn't," Mika stepped forward. "Otherwise, I might never have found Gabe—or he might never have found me, as he likes to point out. So thank you." He hugged Zane and slapped him on the back a few times before moving back to Gabe's side. Zane was too stunned to say anything. The tingling on the back of his neck became more pronounced at about the same time Mariska's head flew up. Zane didn't even have time to ask her what she sensed before he was being tackled to the ground, his head making solid contact with the rocky creek bed. He'd have bruises from the impact of Aidan's big body ploughing him into the rocks, but Zane didn't care. He was too busy focusing on the sound of a rifle firing and the grunting noise as the bullet impacted someone. The scent of gunpowder and blood filled the air.

Chapter Nineteen

“Aidan!” Panic welled up in Zane’s chest.

“I’m fine.” Aidan grabbed Zane and dragged him to the side of the SUV. Zane looked around frantically as everyone sought cover.

“It’s Az, Aidan! Let me go!” Zane struggled to free himself from Aidan’s grasp. “God damn it!” Zane’s teeth clacked together as Aidan shook him.

“Stop it, or I swear I’ll knock you unconscious if that’s what I have to do!” Sincerity shone in Aidan’s dark brown eyes. “You are not going to run out in front of some lunatic with a rifle!”

Zane stilled, too shocked and hurt by the realisation that Aidan would do just as he threatened.

“Zane, I can’t...I can’t lose you,” Aidan whispered as Zane looked away.

“Azrael needs help.” Zane couldn’t look at Aidan, knowing his mate thought him so weak—or so easily cowed. He threw up the strongest blocks he could, pushing Aidan relentlessly from his mind. There was no way he wanted Aidan knowing what he was feeling right now.

“Zane—” Aidan reached for Zane’s chin.

“Just fucking help him!” Zane swatted Aidan’s hand away then finally met his eyes. “Do it or I will—and no matter how big and bad you are, you will not stop me.”

Aidan’s lips thinned in anger but he nodded and dropped to his stomach to work his way over to where Azrael was lying at the edge of the creek bed. Mariska darted out from the safety of cover as well, her sharp voice snapping at Marcus to stay back. Zane turned his head and found Gabe and Mika watching him. He kicked off his shoes as his gaze locked with Mika’s. Mika nodded and silenced Gabe with a look.

They were stripped and shifting before anyone other than Gabe knew what they were doing. Zane and Mika bounded from the side of the SUV as Marcus yelled out in protest. Zane glanced back over his shoulder as his paws struck the rocky creek bed, and wished he hadn’t. Aidan’s furious expression had Zane snapping his head back around and running full tilt, Mika keeping pace beside him.

Another shot rang out. Zane flinched and nearly turned back when he realised the target wasn’t him or Mika, but their loved ones and friends left behind. Mika’s low growl changed Zane’s mind. If they didn’t put a stop to this, there was a good chance they would be picked off one by one. Or the shooter could hit the gas tanks—

That thought spurred Zane to run harder. He dropped his mental barriers long enough to make sure that Aidan was unharmed, but he quickly slapped the barrier back in place. He couldn’t function with the

weight of Aidan's scorching fury battering at his mind. At least he knew Aidan wasn't hit, and from Mika's behaviour, neither was Gabe. Zane could only hope that everyone else had been as lucky.

The acrid stench of gunpowder grew stronger, and as the breeze shifted, Zane picked up a familiar scent that made his blood run cold. Mika's snarling growl told Zane he wasn't alone in recognising his uncle's foul scent. The rifle sounded again as Zane and Mika cleared a particularly large boulder.

John Trainer was crouched above them behind a large outcropping of rock. Zane could see his uncle's cruel smile as the man fired again then quickly dropped the rifle.

"Bet you wonder which one I got that time," John taunted as he shed his clothes. Zane howled in fury and pushed himself to run faster as his uncle shifted and took off, running nimbly up the steep cliff side. He could see a faint, well-worn path that his uncle was using.

Zane cut in front of Mika, nearly tripping them both and receiving a hard nip to his backside from Mika for the manoeuvre. His feet hit the path and Mika was right on his heels. John disappeared around a sharp turn ahead, and Zane felt Mika's muzzle bump his flank. Mika was probably worried about John setting up an ambush, but Zane wasn't. He was suddenly certain where his uncle was leading them to.

Ignoring Mika's attempts to slow him down, Zane whipped around the curve. A quick glance told him Mika had followed, so Zane turned his head back around and focused on putting the pressure on his uncle. He suppressed the shudder that threatened to roll through him when he entered the tree line of the forest; Aidan might not have faith in him, but Zane would do what was right this time.

He just hoped it didn't get him and Mika killed. Leaving Mika behind had never been an option. Zane owed the man, and he knew in his heart John was responsible not only for the disappearance of Mika's parents, but for their deaths. They wouldn't have stayed away had they been alive, not when they loved their son, and their pack, as much as they did.

Zane slowed down as they approached a clearing. He could see his uncle, shifted back into his human form, nude and leaning up against the tree that haunted Zane in his nightmares. Mika stepped up beside him and bared his teeth.

"Come on, you worthless shits," John called out as he reached behind the tree. "I've got something for you." He waved a vial in the air with one hand while his other held a pistol.

Of course, Zane thought. It couldn't be easy, he shouldn't have expected it to be—but he had hoped it wouldn't be deadly. With the gun and the vial, which he was certain contained datura, Zane knew the likelihood of either Mika or himself coming out unscathed was rapidly shrinking.

"Zane tell you about this tree, Mika?" John's voice rang clear, the hatred in it almost palpable. "Well, I guess you could say it was your folks' tree, too, except they didn't make it. Too much of this stuff." John waved the vial again.

Mika went perfectly still, his whisky-coloured eyes burning with hatred as they locked with Zane's. Fear for Mika's safety speared Zane, giving him a sudden understanding of Aidan's earlier threat. Mika wasn't his mate, but Zane loved him as a friend, and the thought of John killing him was unacceptable.

Zane would just have to make sure that didn't happen then, because it was equally as unacceptable to forbid Mika to act against John. Zane hadn't liked it when Aidan had done so to him. He leant forward and licked Mika's muzzle, hoping his friend would recognise it for what it was. Friendship, a request for

forgiveness and a promise to keep him safe. Mika's tongue rasped over Zane's muzzle in return, then they both shifted into their human forms and stepped out of the relative safety of the trees.

John's taunting smile stayed in place as he aimed the gun at them. "Bet you'd like to know where your parents' remains are, wouldn't you, Mika? Well, all I can tell ya is they're scattered everywhere. This stuff does a number on us shifters."

Zane saw Mika's step falter briefly as he struggled for control.

"Don't let him tear you apart," Zane whispered. "He's hurt enough people."

"Stop right there." John's smile vanished as hatred washed over his features. "You two fucked up everything! Everything!"

"Sorry to ruin your plans," Zane kept his tone bland, knowing it would serve to infuriate his uncle, "which must have been plotted out decades ago since you killed your own sister and my father—all so you could be alpha."

"Took you long enough to catch on; you never were very bright." John's gaze swept up and down Mika then Zane before locking onto the mark Aidan had left at the base of Zane's neck. John's nostrils flared as he drew in Zane's scent. "So it's true, you found your mate, huh?"

Zane didn't feel the need to answer; everyone in the pack must know by now.

"Who would have thought..." John flicked the gun back and forth, aiming it at Zane and then Mika, then back at Zane, "that the Dux Ducis would have been interested in someone who kicked out the only gay member of their pack?"

"But he wasn't the only gay member of the pack," Zane pointed out. "Obviously."

John shrugged. "I didn't care one way or the other. I just wanted Mika gone, and him being gay was a convenient excuse." He pointed the gun back at Mika, his finger already pressing down on the trigger. Zane hit Mika hard and dove at his uncle as the gun was fired. John cursed loudly and swung the gun around aiming at Zane just as Zane's hand closed over the vial in his uncle's other hand. Mika flung himself at John, gripping the forearm of the hand John had the gun in. A shot rang out, the bullet tearing through a tree across the clearing.

John dropped the gun and tried to jerk the vial away, pulling out the cork stopper in the process. His eyes grew wide and he screamed as the vial's contents spilled out onto him, the sudden lack of his grip causing Zane to stumble and the vial to tip forward.

Datura, ground into a fine powder, covered a swath of John's chest and neck. Zane stood transfixed, horror swamping him as his uncle's skin and flesh deteriorated before Zane's eyes. The screams from the man had stopped as the datura ate away at his throat. A hand grabbed Zane's wrist and squeezed hard, making him drop the vial.

"Don't, Zane." Mika's voice was hoarse and thick with tears as he turned Zane away from the horrific image. "God, don't look any more."

A gargling noise came from behind him, and Zane dropped to his knees, retching until there was nothing left in his stomach. Dry heaves shook him for several minutes as Mika patted his back.

Zane sat and wiped his mouth before he looked at Mika. "I'm sorry."

Mika shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. John was a sick fucker and everyone was intimidated, or terrified, of him."

"Not your parents. They weren't going to let him continue—"

"No," Mika agreed softly. "They weren't. They were great people, Zane. He killed them, and I'm glad he's dead. If that makes me a bad person, then..." He shrugged.

"I don't think it does. He wouldn't have stopped, you know." Zane knew that was the truth. "He killed our parents, and who knows if there were any more victims—"

They had a few seconds warning, the sound of rustling in the forest before Aidan and Gabe burst into the clearing.

"Oh fuck!" Gabe stumbled when he saw John's body. Aidan blanched and ran to where Zane sat, passing Mika as the other man hurried to reach Gabe. The sound of Mika soothing his mate as Gabe was violently ill was quickly muffled by Aidan's voice as he dropped to Zane's side and wrapped Zane in his arms.

"I should be furious." Aidan squeezed Zane hard enough Zane's back popped. "I should blister your ass. But I'm just glad you're okay."

Zane thought about the datura tipping out onto his uncle and wasn't sure if he would ever be okay. "It was an accident." Wasn't it? He didn't think he'd deliberately doused John with the deadly plant.

"I know, baby. I felt it when it happened." Aidan peppered Zane's face with kisses. "The shock that went through you nearly stopped me in my tracks. It was an accident." Aidan pulled back and let Zane see the truth in his warm brown eyes. "Don't think any different, but I would have, Zane. I would have done it without thinking twice for what he did to you."

And knowing that as the truth didn't make Zane love the man any less. "Maybe I'm bent, but I think that might be the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

Aidan flushed a brilliant red and Zane laughed. "Come on, let's get Gabe out of here before he ruptures something." Zane's laughter stopped as he remembered John's taunt. "Who else was hit? How's Azrael?"

"No one." Aidan's brows knit in confusion. "We were just pinned in place for a while, and Azrael will be fine; Mariska dug the bullet out and he's going to be good as new in no time."

"But John said..." Zane trailed off as Aidan helped him up.

"John was fucking with your head. Everyone's alive and only Azrael was injured." Aidan put his arm around Zane's waist and walked them to where Mika was sitting on the ground, Gabe cradled against him.

"Do you need some help?" Zane asked, taking in the green tinge of Gabe's skin.

“No, let’s just get out of here.” Mika stood, pulling Gabe up as well.

“That,” Gabe gestured with his thumb over his shoulder, “is fucking nasty. Let’s go home.”

Chapter Twenty

Going home sounded great to Aidan, but he knew there were things that needed to be done before he and Zane could head to Aidan’s house in Colorado . As they made their way down the path, Aidan came to the uncomfortable conclusion that he owed his mate a very sincere apology. As mad as he wanted to be at Zane for taking off after John, the fact was that he might not have done it if Aidan hadn’t been so high-handed. Or at least, maybe Zane would have taken Aidan with him instead of leaving him behind.

“This whole loving someone thing is trial and error, right?” Aidan bumped his hip against Zane’s.

Zane looked at him warily. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I mean, I get to make mistakes—and so do you,” Aidan tacked on quickly. “But we move past it because we love each other, right?”

Zane dug his heels in, forcing Aidan to stop. Mika and Gabe smirked at him but continued down the path.

“Apologies help people to move past things.”

And damn, Zane sounded pretty firm on that, Aidan thought.

“Think of it like taking off a bandage,” Zane offered.

“What happened to love and never having to say you’re sorry?” Aidan was sure he’d heard that line numerous times.

“That is a load of shit,” Zane pointed out archly. “No doubt created in a vain attempt to get men out of having to apologise. Testosterone has been thought to impair good judgement, you know.”

“I think you made that last bit up.” Aidan gave it some thought. “Maybe more than just that last bit. But...” he tipped Zane’s chin up, “I am sorry for being so... so...”

“Overbearing?” Zane offered, a slight smile playing over his lips. “Domineering? High-handed? Inconsiderate?”

“No!” Aidan cringed at his snapped denial. “No, I mean, overprotective. I’m sorry for not trusting you to keep yourself alive. You’ve done so for years, and there’s no reason for me to doubt your ability to

continue to do so. I apologise.” It wasn’t nearly as hard as he’d thought it would be, once he started talking—and he’d even managed to keep from tacking on a ‘but’ to the apology. Somehow Aidan didn’t think ‘I apologise, but I was only trying to keep you safe’ would work with Zane.

“Apology accepted.” Zane started walking and Aidan let himself lag a step or two behind so he could enjoy the view of his mate’s bubble butt. “You didn’t happen to grab my clothes did you, or at least my jeans?”

“Not to be sarcastic, but...” Aidan waved his empty hands in the air. He hadn’t been thinking about his mate’s clothes when he’d taken off after the man.

“Oh.” Zane stopped suddenly again. “This should be interesting then, because there are quite a few people down there—”

Aidan pulled Zane behind him. There were, indeed, a large number of shifters in the dry creek bed, many of them chatting with Gabe and a jean-clad Mika.

“Most of them have probably seen me naked before anyway.” Zane nudged the back of Aidan’s knee. “Pack hunts and such.”

Aidan turned and placed his hands on Zane’s waist. “Why don’t you wait here and I’ll run down and grab your clothes for you?”

Zane looked like he wanted to argue, but when Aidan sent him the visual of Aidan walking down bare-ass naked into a group of people, Zane nodded.

“See, mate, it works both ways,” he teased Zane. “You wouldn’t want anyone to look at my parts any more than I want that group looking at yours.” Aidan placed a quick kiss to the tip of Zane’s nose and made his way to the SUV as quickly as possible.

Marcus saw him coming and gathered Zane’s things. He met Aidan at the base of the path, laughing as he handed over the bundle of clothes and shoes.

“Protecting your mate’s virtue?” Marcus glanced up at the path, his eyes narrowing when he spied the bend behind which Zane was waiting.

“Would you want to parade your mate around naked in front of a group of people?”

“Well...” Marcus looked at Aidan, then back up the path, “if my mate looked like yours, probably.”

Aidan was tempted to smack Marcus, but he really couldn’t blame his brother. Zane was beautiful; a naked Zane was, well, exquisite.

“You won’t feel that way once you find your mate.” Aidan knew his brother. It was one thing to joke, but Marcus was too much like him. Marcus wouldn’t want to share his mate any more than he had to. “Thanks.”

Aidan turned and hurried back up the path. He followed the curve around and found Zane leaning up against a boulder, ankles crossed and one hand idly stroking his taut stomach. Then there was the man’s thick, sexy prick...

“Jesus, Zane!” How was he supposed to hand over Zane’s clothes when his mate looked so damn sexy it made Aidan’s balls ache? Aidan thought about dropping the bundle and dropping to his knees as well. It was going to be a long drive home.

“Aidan, I don’t think we should—oh fuck!” Zane’s hand dropped from his stomach as Aidan pressed up against him, pinning Zane between a hard rock and a hard body. Aidan buried his hands in Zane’s hair and tipped Zane’s head back. He took Zane’s mouth in a demanding kiss, wanting everything from the man, needing to know that Zane would deny him nothing. In return, he offered his mate his heart and soul—and his body as well, Aidan realised as he trailed kisses down Zane’s jaw. Aidan licked his way to the juncture of Zane’s neck and shoulder and latched on to the mark there as he ground his prick against Zane’s.

“Shit! Aidan, I can’t, we can’t!” Zane’s words became a blend of nonsensical sounds as Aidan suckled and licked Zane’s salty skin. When Zane’s breaths were stuttering and his body shuddering, Aidan placed one more soft kiss on his mate and stepped back.

“Better get dressed,” Aidan suggested, though he thought he could be happy spending a few hours with Zane right here.

“What about this? And that?” Zane stroked his wet prick with one hand and brushed the zipper of Aidan’s jeans with the other.

Aidan couldn’t hold back a wicked grin. “I will be more than happy to suck you until your knees give out once we are done here. Then you can take care of me slowly and thoroughly later.” And he meant to make sure Zane did just that.

*

Zane managed to get dressed once his legs quit feeling like they were made of Jell-O. He couldn’t help glancing at the erection pressing hard against Aidan’s zipper. Maybe he could—

“Zane, quit looking at my dick like it’s your favourite treat.” Aidan pressed the heel of his hand against his prick and groaned.

“I think it is.” Zane reconsidered quickly. “No, it is, no question about it.”

“Zane...” Aidan growled and swatted Zane’s butt. “Walk.” He pointed down the trail. “That way.”

“Fine, but you could be a lot more comfortable in a few minutes if you’d just let me—Okay!” Another swat convinced Zane to shut up. He headed down the trail and Aidan quickly moved to walk beside him.

“This should be fun,” Aidan muttered.

Zane looked up to find several pairs of eyes on them. “It was worth it, but it *could* have been even *more* worth it.” He could handle the knowing smirks if it meant he’d get to feel Aidan’s mouth sucking him until his eyes crossed in a little while. Oh yeah, that was well worth the trade off of teasing that was sure to come.

“Sure took your time,” Gabe called out. Zane wasn’t the least surprised Gabe was the first to start in on them.

“Some things are worth the wait—for us, anyway. I can’t speak for you or anyone else.” Zane grinned as Gabe gave him a thumbs up.

“Can’t disagree with you there.” Gabe turned to Mika. “Why didn’t we stop and fool around like they did?”

Mika looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights as he stuttered uselessly.

“Come on, Gabe, give the man a break.” Marcus bumped shoulders with Gabe. “I’m sure I saw someone’s head dipping down a time or two when we were driving behind you earlier.”

Gabe’s smile lit up his whole face. “You do have a point. There was quite a bit of head bobbing—“

“Gabe!” Mika clamped his hand over Gabe’s mouth. A grunt sprung from Mika’s lips as Gabe’s elbow dug into his ribs. “Damn! You would think I’d learn.” Mika let go of Gabe and placed a quick kiss on Gabe’s lips.

Two men stepped forward, both tall and dark-headed, but the similarity ended there. One was muscular and darkly tanned while the other was lithe and rather pale. Zane caught their scents and felt his brows trying to climb into his hairline. Another mated pair?

“Zane.” Aidan paused and waited until the two men reached them. “These are two of my guards, Jordan and Evan.”

Zane shook hands and greeted each man. “So it’s you two and Mariska who are Aidan’s guards?”

Jordan and Evan looked at each other nervously then shrugged. They turned back to Aidan and Zane. Evan, the lithe one, as Zane thought of him, nudged Jordan.

“You tell him,” Evan hissed softly.

Jordan looked at Evan like he was insane. “No. Fucking. Way. You tell him!”

Zane watched with fascination as Jordan and Evan bickered back and forth. These two reminded him of a bad comedy movie.

“Enough!” Aidan’s voice was laced with amusement. “Jordan, spit it out.”

Jordan glared at Evan. “Thanks a lot.”

“Oh fine,” Evan rolled his eyes and looped his arm around Jordan’s waist. “Mariska will probably be staying here since Azrael’s her mate.”

Aidan looked more stunned than Zane felt.

“But she didn’t say anything. They didn’t have the scent of a mated pair.” Aidan’s protests sounded weak even to Zane.

Jordan snorted. “Yeah, well, you know Mariska. Nothing gets in the way of her doing her job. She wouldn’t mate with Azrael until this whole thing was taken care of.” Jordan paused and seemed to reconsider. “Except, maybe him getting shot changed her mind. They were in an awful big hurry for us to

leave them alone.”

“That’s just...” Aidan started laughing.

“It is taken care of now, so she’s free to, uh. They can...” Zane wasn’t quite sure how to put it.

“Bump uglies?” Aidan finished for him. That set off a whole other round of laughter.

“I think the pack is going to be okay, mate.” Aidan wrapped his arms around Zane’s hips and pulled him backwards until Zane’s back was snug against Aidan’s chest. Aidan rested his chin on Zane’s shoulder.

“I think you’re right.” And maybe, finally, everything else was right as well.

Chapter Twenty-One

Zane was more than a little nervous when they pulled up to Aidan’s house—their house, Aidan kept telling him—just outside of Trinidad. Actually, Zane guessed it was a cabin, not a house. But it was a huge cabin. Was it still a cabin if it was a few thousand feet? Or was it called something else?

“Quit worrying, you’ll love it.” Aidan parked the truck and gave Zane a worried look. “Right? Because we can redecorate, or sell it and buy something else if you want.”

Zane felt some of his own nerves settle. “It will be fine, I’m just... I feel like a new groom or something.” And now he felt like an idiot for saying so.

“Wait a minute.” Aidan leant over until he was nose to nose with Zane. “I am so not the bride.”

Zane made sure he was unbuckled and the door was partially opened before he replied. “I called groom first!” He slid out the door and almost made it around the front of the truck before Aidan caught him, dropping his shoulder down to catch Zane in the stomach. Hard hands clamped onto him, and before Zane knew it, he was being lifted from his feet and carried over Aidan’s broad shoulder.

Right towards the front door.

“*I don’t think so!*” Zane tried pinching Aidan’s ass and digging his fingers into the normally ticklish spots along his mate’s ribs, but Aidan was not giving up his hold.

“Aidan, I swear, if you think you’re going to carry me across the threshold like some trussed up bride, I’ll—“

“You’ll what?” Aidan swatted Zane’s ass hard enough to sting. The fact that it also made Zane’s prick hard as a steel pipe was just a bonus. It didn’t negate the fact he still didn’t want to be carried through the damn doorway.

When he peeked around Aidan's side, Zane had a close-up view of Aidan singlehandedly selecting the key to the front door from his key ring. Zane growled when Aidan slipped the key in the lock and turned the knob. Aidan kicked the door open and started to step through the doorway.

Zane thrust his arms out and caught the door frame, the strength of desperation halting Aidan's forward progress.

"Zane, let go of the damn door frame." Aidan turned his head and nipped at Zane's butt. "Or we won't get inside and you'll ruin my surprise."

Zane's head was starting to pound from all the blood rushing to his brain. "Oh yeah? And what's the surprise? You have a frilly white gown you're expecting me to wear? 'Cause it isn't happening!"

"Don't be ridiculous." Aidan paused and caressed Zane's ass. "I had planned on letting you top."

Zane's arms dropped so fast Aidan stumbled through the door, grappling at the wall to keep them upright.

"Holy shit! You can't just... Saying something like that is... Fuck!" Zane would have liked to attribute his lack of verbal skills to the blood pounding against his skull. The throbbing in his balls wouldn't let him get away with that lie.

Aidan let Zane slide down the front of his massive chest before kicking the door shut behind him. "Unless you don't want to, of course. Then we can—"

"No." Zane wasn't even going to give Aidan a chance to back out of this. "I mean, yes. Oh hell. Let's get to the bedroom now!"

Need flared in the depths of Aidan's eyes and Zane realised Aidan hadn't been about to change his mind. No, his mate had been goading Zane into agreeing. Like he needed to be goaded.

"Which way?" Zane grabbed Aidan's hand and looked around. Later, he would check the place out. Right now, he only needed to see one thing. Well, two. A bed and Aidan, naked and spread out on it. Even the bed was an extra. He'd be fine with Aidan. Naked.

Aidan's laughter was strained. "Zane, God, the images you're sending me... Come on."

"Haven't I already said that?" Zane followed Aidan down a long hallway, passing too many doors before finally stopping. "Aidan, are you sure? Because you said you don't, ever."

Aidan smiled as he opened the door. "True, but no one has ever made me want to." He shrugged then traced the line of Zane's jaw with one finger. "Every time I look at that pretty cock of yours, it makes me wonder how it would feel to have you buried inside my ass. Would I feel your cock swell, each shot of your seed as it filled me?"

Zane's mouth had gone dry and he was pretty sure most of his brain cells had just sizzled to nothing with the images Aidan's words had painted.

"Besides," this time Aidan's smile was wicked as sin, "you seem to like it. A lot."

Instead of reassuring Zane, that caused a new fear. Performance anxiety. “What if I do something wrong? Or I hurt you, or—”

“Zane. Relax.” Aidan pushed Zane into the room. “If it hurts—and I’m sure it will, at least a little—I’ll get over it. I just want to know, at least once. Maybe only once, and I love you.” Aidan dipped his head down and kissed Zane, pulling back when the kiss would have went from sweet to demanding. “And I trust you.”

Zane’s heart melted into a puddle right then and there. “Okay, then let me do this?” He knew giving up control would be the biggest issue for Aidan, but Zane wanted to make this...romantic. He would have cringed at the idea, but Aidan deserved to be treated special.

Aidan studied him intently before finally nodding. Zane let out a breath he hadn’t realised he was even holding. He took Aidan’s hand and led him to the bed.

“Is there... Do you have lube?” God, Zane hoped so. He might just cry if Aidan said no.

“Right here,” Aidan turned and reached for the nightstand drawer. Zane saw the fine trembling in his mate’s hand, and seeing that fine tremor chased Zane’s nervousness and worries away. He loved Aidan too much to screw this up.

Zane took the tube and laid it on the bed. “Come here, please. I want to undress you.” He stopped himself from reaching out and pulling Aidan to him. Zane wanted Aidan to be sure. That tremble in Aidan’s hand might have been from fear, or desire, or a combination of those two things along with any number of others. But that tremble meant Zane needed to know this was what his mate wanted.

Aidan didn’t hesitate. He opened his mind completely to Zane, and instead of fear or even desire, the most overpowering emotion Zane felt from Aidan was love.

Now it was Zane’s hand that trembled as he began undressing Aidan. His fingers fumbled over the buttons on Aidan’s shirt, but the smooth feel of Aidan’s bare skin as Zane skimmed the shirt off his mate’s shoulders helped steady Zane’s hand.

Zane knelt and looked up at Aidan’s flushed face. “Lift your foot.” He tugged off Aidan’s boot and sock, then did the same to the other foot. Zane stood and unbuckled his mate’s belt, the aching need in Zane’s prick keeping him from taking the time to pull the belt free from the jeans. He unbuttoned Aidan’s pants and slid his fingers under the elastic waist band of Aidan’s underwear, shoving the final pieces of clothing to the floor.

Before Aidan could step out of the clothes Zane took his mouth in a hungry kiss as he ran his hands up and down Aidan’s strong back. Aidan slid his hands to the back of Zane’s neck, loosely linking his fingers together. Zane’s cock was pressed so hard against his zipper that he ached. If Aidan continued rubbing his body up against Zane’s, this might end before it really began. That thought had Zane stepping back and gesturing to the bed.

Aidan stepped away from the clothes pooled around his ankles and sat, scooting to the centre of the bed before laying back. He bent his legs and brought his heels to his ass and Zane felt his prick leak at the sight. Zane simply stared, his gaze raking over every inch of Aidan’s sculpted body. He watched as Aidan’s prick bobbed with each heartbeat, tapping out a white-beaded rhythm on Aidan’s stomach.

“Zane.”

Aidan's voice drew Zane's gaze back to his mate's dark eyes. The smouldering look Aidan gave him had Zane removing his clothes quickly. He grabbed the lube and crawled onto the bed until he was kneeling between Aidan's spread legs.

"Pillows." Zane reached over Aidan and began grabbing pillows and placing them under Aidan's hips. His gaze was drawn to the small pink hole nestled beneath Aidan's balls. It looked too small.

"I don't know if this is a good idea." Zane stared at the puckered skin until he couldn't help but trace it with his fingertip. "It doesn't seem like this..." Zane touched the tip of his cock, "can fit in there." He traced a circle around the tight ring of muscles.

"Zane, it'll be fine. Okay, maybe not at first, but your ass is so fucking hot and tight, and this fills your ass perfectly." Aidan fisted his cock, his eyelids drooping down so low they were almost shut. "Now either fuck me or I'm going to flip you over and ride your ass until neither one of us can walk!"

"Well, when you put it like that..." Zane still had his doubts, but Aidan might never want to try this again. "Would you rather be on your hands and knees?"

Aidan shook his head almost violently. "No." He let go of his prick and grabbed the back of his thighs, pulling his legs up. The position spread his ass cheeks wider and sent Zane's need rocketing into overdrive.

"Fuck, Aidan!" Zane was trying to get the cap off the lube as fast as he could.

"I'm trying to get you to do just that," Aidan pointed out.

Zane grunted, too busy trying to open the lube while taking in the near-orgasm-inducing image of Aidan's ass being offered to him, his heavy balls hanging low and his hard prick leaking glistening drops of precome.

The cap finally popped off, and Zane poured a liberal amount on his cock first, because he wasn't sure if he would be able to touch himself without coming in a few minutes. He poured more of the thick stuff onto his fingers, and more again directly under Aidan's balls. Zane traced the lube running down Aidan's perineum, working as much as he could around Aidan's virgin opening.

He teased the wrinkled skin, pressing almost hard enough to penetrate. Aidan tensed even as he moaned softly. Zane's fingertip slid in to the snug hole and Zane froze, studying Aidan's face for signs of discomfort. What he found in his mate's gaze was impatience and need. Aidan nodded and Zane worked his finger inside, marvelling at the heat and tight squeeze of muscles.

Zane thrust his finger slowly at first, giving Aidan time to get used to the feeling of having something in his ass. He twisted his wrist and moved his finger around until he found Aidan's prostate—and there was no doubt that he had. Aidan gasped and nearly lost the grip he had as his thighs as his body jerked.

"Never felt anything like that, have you?" Zane couldn't help smiling at the stunned—and horny—expression on Aidan's face.

"Do it again." Aidan was pushing his ass down, trying to get Zane's finger back on that magic spot.

"Yes, sir. But first..." Zane pulled his finger out then pressed two into Aidan's snug channel. Aidan

hissed, and Zane fisted Aidan's cock with his other hand, stroking hard to distract his mate from the discomfort of taking two fingers. He moved his fingers, searching again for the spongy little gland and grinned when he found it. Zane pumped Aidan's cock and stroked his prostate at the same time until Aidan was writhing and his balls were drawing up to his body. Then Zane released Aidan's cock and pumped his fingers in fast strokes, scissoring them a little more every few thrusts and tapping Aidan's gland often enough to keep his mate moaning. When he slid in the third finger without any resistance, Zane moaned himself. He pulled his fingers out and reached for the lube.

"Zane, damn it..." Aidan wiggled his hips. "Get in here!"

"Is that topping from the bottom?" Zane poured a glob of lube onto his fingers and quickly smeared it over Aidan's stretched hole.

"Quit talking and fuck me!" Aidan glared and Zane shook his head. He should have known Aidan would be a top whether he was giving or receiving.

"Okay, but move your hands." Zane's hands took the place of his mate's, gripping the backs of Aidan's thighs. "You should probably stroke your dick while I..." He let go of one of Aidan's thighs long enough to line his aching cock up to the snug hole he had prepared so carefully.

Aidan fisted his prick and nodded. Zane moaned as he began pushing the flared head of his cock into Aidan's ass. He tried to go slow, wanting to savour each second.

"Aidan. So fucking tight, can hardly get in." Zane had to push. He groaned and thrust as gently as he could manage. Aidan didn't protest, so Zane did it again, and this time, Aidan bore down. Zane's shout overpowered Aidan's, but not by much. Zane tried to hold still, but Aidan squirmed and squeezed his inner muscles all around Zane's cock.

"Move!" Aidan pumped his prick faster and faster, his breath coming in short panting sounds.

Zane pushed Aidan's thighs up as far as he dared and began moving his prick inside Aidan's scorching ass in short, rapid strokes. He glanced from Aidan's cock down to where his own dick was buried deep inside his mate's body. The sight of that ring of muscles, stretched wide around his prick as he thrust into Aidan's ass, the wrinkled skin nearly white from taking in Zane's girth had Zane's balls drawing painfully tight. His thrusts became harder and erratic as he watched Aidan's hole take his prick. He was going to come soon, and Aidan... He wanted Aidan to come sooner. Zane canted his hips and buried his cock to the hilt.

Aidan shouted and pearly strings of spunk shot from his cock, coating his hand, stomach and chest. His orgasm sent clenching ripples through his tight channel. Zane let out a strangled yell as his cock swelled and pulsed, spurting out jet after jet of his seed. When the last bit of come was drained from his prick, Zane let go of Aidan's thighs and stared in wonder at his mate. A smug smile stretched Aidan's lips.

"Shouldn't I be the smug one?" Zane was pretty damn sure he had cause to be.

Aidan laughed and shook his head. "But I taught you everything you know; therefore, I get to be the smug one."

"Damn it!" Zane couldn't think of a way to refute his mate's logic. "You do have a point."

"Of course I do." Aidan pushed himself up on his elbows. "And I have another point for you." He

gestured to his semi-erect prick.

“God, Aidan, that is just bad,” Zane rolled his eyes. He carefully withdrew his softening prick from the warmth of Aidan’s body.

“Really? If you don’t want it then...” Aidan’s voice trailed off as he sat up and swung his leg over Zane so that he could get up off of the bed.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want it, just that your joke was a bad one.” Zane scrambled to get off the bed and follow Aidan into what he discovered was a huge master bathroom.

“But it wasn’t a joke,” Aidan insisted.

Zane stopped and planted his hands on his hips. “Okay, then. What was it?”

Aidan wiggled his eyebrows and leered. “An offer.”

Zane wasn’t stupid; he decided to take the out. “That’s different then.” He looked at Aidan’s prick and leered back. “That is a very fine offer that I will gladly accept.”

Laughing, Aidan reached for him—and then proceeded to show Zane just exactly how fine of an offer it was.

Epilogue

Aidan stood behind Zane, his arms wrapped around his mate as they stared out the window. The snow had started falling hours ago, not too hard, but slowly, steadily—and enough that they were both worried that their guests wouldn’t be able to make it to the cabin. Or that, once Gabe and Mika arrived, they might all be stuck here for days.

That wouldn’t have bothered Zane or him normally, but this wasn’t a normal visit. This was getting together to prepare for the ceremony that would make Gabe one of them, without the painful biting. Just the thought made Aidan shudder.

“Me, too,” Zane muttered, “So feel free to quit sharing those particular thoughts.”

“Sorry, sort of,” Aidan teased, nipping at Zane’s neck before resting his chin on his mate’s shoulder. “I would have thought Marcus would have been here already.” The fact that he wasn’t worried Aidan. Marcus had to be here for the ceremony to work.

Zane turned his head, worry in his silver eyes. “Try to call him again. Maybe he’ll have signal now.”

“Maybe, but there’s several stretches between here and Gila where service sucks, or doesn’t exist at

all.” Aidan released Zane and stepped back, digging his phone out of his back pocket. He dialled Marcus’ number but it went straight to voice mail. Again. Aidan shook his head at Zane’s questioning look.

“I’m sure he’s okay.” Zane’s voice was soothing, but the frown he wore wasn’t. The frown deepened as Zane tapped his chin with his index finger. “But you know, even taking into consideration multiple stops, he really should have been here already.”

The sound of tires crunching snow had them both hurrying to the door. Aidan flung it open and, while he wasn’t disappointed to see Mika and Gabe, he was even more worried now.

“Your face is going to freeze that way, Aidan!” Gabe glanced from Aidan to Zane. “Okay, what’s wrong? Did you find out there was something incredibly painful involved, after all?” Mika grabbed a duffle bag from the cab of the truck in one hand and took Gabe’s elbow in the other, pulling his mate towards the door.

“It’s not that at all.” Aidan smiled despite his concern for his brother. It was hard not to be delighted by Gabe and Mika. He stepped back and ushered them inside, waiting until Zane had been hugged and greeted by both men before offering his hand to Gabe.

“Yeah, right.” Gabe rolled his eyes and batted Aidan’s hand aside, diving in for a hug as well. Aidan met Mika’s amused gaze over Gabe’s shoulder as he patted Gabe’s back. “You should know better, Double D,” Gabe scolded as he stepped back.

“Yes, I should.” Aidan extended his hand to Mika, fairly certain that would be fine with the man. Mika’s firm shake turned into a one-armed hug with a quick tug.

“He’s rubbed off on me,” Mika claimed. His eyes grew wide as he realised his mistake.

“Duh. I rub off on you every chance I get. Not to mention—umph!” Mika silenced Gabe with a long kiss. Gabe’s face was flushed when the kiss ended. “Shit, caveman. Geez.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve seen Gabe flustered,” Zane murmured so softly. “Looks good on him.”

“Works, too,” Mika agreed.

“Very funny, jackasses.” Gabe looked around the living room. “Speaking of which, where’s Marcus?”

Worry hit Aidan again and he frowned. “That’s the problem. He isn’t here yet. We were expecting him hours ago.”

“Is he not answering his cell?” Mika was frowning now as well.

“Goes straight to voice mail. Maybe I’m worrying for nothing, but it isn’t like him, and this is important.” And he was going to babble if he didn’t watch himself.

“What do his guards say?” Gabe’s eyebrows tipped up when Aidan didn’t answer. “You haven’t called them?”

“The thing is, only Alex, the captain of Marcus’ guard, knew he was coming here,” Aidan confessed. “This ceremony isn’t something we want everyone knowing about, you know?”

“Right,” Mika nodded, “Since it works on people who aren’t mates as well as mates. Could be a disaster if it became common knowledge.”

“Exactly. But maybe...” Aidan glanced at Zane, “we should call and ask Alex if he’s heard from Marcus.”

“I’ll do it, if you want to show Gabe and Mika to their room?”

“Okay.” Aidan gestured for Mika and Gabe to follow him. “Different room this time, guys. We put you two in the room beside ours in case there are any complications—”

“What? Complications how?” Gabe’s voice had a tinge of panic to it.

Aidan laughed and shook his head. “Sometimes the first shift is kind of painful, and the shifter can be rather graceless, I guess you might say.”

Gabe grabbed Aidan’s arm and spun him around. “How painful? I thought the whole point of this ceremony was to avoid something painful!”

“Gabe, it won’t be that bad,” Mika soothed, prying Gabe’s hand from Aidan’s arm. “Really. And certainly not as bad as having me bite your prick.”

“Better not be,” Gabe muttered, “Or I reserve the right to bite yours.”

“I’ll bend you over my knee if you try it.” Mika’s threat might have backfired on him, Aidan mused. The scent of Gabe’s arousal as soon as the words were spoken.

Mika realised it as well. “Try it and my hand won’t slap your ass for a year.”

“I wouldn’t do it, caveman. I love your dick—and the rest of you—way too much to hurt you like that.” Gabe patted Mika’s groin softly. “This guy here is my friend.”

“Aidan,” Zane called out.

Aidan turned to see Zane walking towards them. “Did you find out anything?”

“Only that he left when he told us he would. No one has heard from him since he left Gila after checking in on the pack there.” Zane put his arms around Aidan’s waist. “Alex is doing some GPS-thing and will call us back as soon as possible.”

“Hey, he may be just fine,” Gabe offered. “Let’s give him a few more hours before we decide he’s lost.” He punched Aidan on the arm. “Besides, you two are twins; don’t you and Marcus share any of that much-vaunted twin mojo?”

“Twin mojo?” Aidan shook his head before Gabe could start asking questions. “Marcus does. He can’t read my mind, but he’s sometimes sensed things—injuries and such, like broken bones, you know? Sometimes even when I’ve been really pissed or upset.” Surely Aidan’d know if something horrible happened to his brother?

“Right. Maybe he just found an irresistible piece of ass and made a little detour.” Gabe wiggled his

eyebrows as he teased Aidan.

“Better be a damn great piece. Why don’t you put your things up and join Zane and me in the living room?”

“Will do, though we might shower first.” Aidan couldn’t believe Mika said that with a straight face.

“You do that.” Aidan didn’t bat an eyelash, either. Instead he took Zane’s hand and led him into the living room where he pulled his mate down onto the soft leather couch.

“You’re still worried, Aidan.” Zane’s eyes held a great deal of worry as well.

“I don’t believe he’s dead, or badly injured, but I still don’t know where he is or why he isn’t here.” And it was going to worry him until he saw Marcus pull up, safe and sound.

Zane leant in for a soft kiss, barely brushing his lips over Aidan’s before pulling back. “I understand, but remember, you have Gabe and Mika here to help you. And me, of course. I’ll do whatever I can. But you have friends, too.”

Aidan smiled. “You’re right, babe, and you’re all that I need, but it is nice to have my brother, and our friends, as well.” Aidan held Zane tightly, sighing when his head rested on Aidan’s shoulder. His mate was an exceptional man, his brother was alive, and soon they would be in the company of good friends.

It was more than many people had, and Aidan knew it. He nuzzled his face into Zane’s hair and smiled. Everything was better than fine with Zane at his side.

About the Author

A native Texan, Bailey spends her days spinning stories around in her head, which has contributed to more than one incident of tripping over her own feet. Evenings are resounds for pounding away at the keyboard, as are the early morning hours. Sleep? Doesn’t happen much. Writing is too much fun, and there are too many characters bouncing about, tapping on Bailey’s brain, demanding to be let out.

Caffeine and chocolate are permanent fixtures in Bailey's office and are never far from hand at any given time. Removing either of those necessities from Bailey's presence can result in what is known as A Very, Very Scary Bailey and is not advised under any circumstances.

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