



# Reckless

SOUTHWESTERN SHIFTERS

BAILEY BRADFORD

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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**

# **RECKLESS**

**Bailey Bradford**

## *Dedication*

For A&M, with love.

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## Chapter One

*Cold.* He was so cold his bones ached and each beat of his pulse sent icy shards through his veins. The chains rattled each time he shivered, a near-constant medley reminding him of his bonds. Thick shackles bit into his wrists and ankles, reopening the scar tissue that had built up under the heavy steel.

Time had ceased, stopped completely when he'd been captured. How many days, weeks, months since he'd seen sunlight, felt safe and warm, hadn't felt the burning edge of pain exploding into agony, the almost endless hunger or the bitter, cotton-dry torturous thirst?

It didn't matter. He was here, and those who'd brought him had abandoned him to die, as he knew they would. Even the one man who'd tried to help him, who'd offered comfort and the only gentle touch to counter the beatings and pain, had disappeared.

That man had kept him alive, sneaked him extra food so that he'd had some strength, some hope left. Maybe he'd even known this would happen; the man had been bringing more food recently, at least up until everyone vanished. The strength he'd managed to regain would soon wane. What would happen to him now, when his almost-saviour was gone?

Ghost-like images of mocking faces, sneering, hate-filled smiles and taunting words swam around in his head. They'd left him, after keeping him in this cold, dark cave, left him to wither and die, forgotten and wasted away, a pathetic shell of who and what he used to be. Didn't even think he was worth the effort of killing quickly, mercifully.

The small bowl of water his captors had left him was now empty. His throat burned, the only heat in his body, the craving for water, anything liquid to soothe those desiccated tissues, was almost maddening.

*More maddening.* Even now with his body shrivelling in on itself and his mind skittering everywhere, wasn't enough to block out the fact he wasn't ready to give up. He knew he didn't *want* to die, especially not like this, alone, despised and discounted, with nothing left of the man he was before. Shifting was a long-lost dream, something unattainable in his weakened, disoriented state. He mourned the loss of the ability, but couldn't dwell on it, not if he wanted to survive.

Shifting didn't matter at this point. He was alone, utterly alone, without food or water, clothing or warmth. He'd rather have his torturers back, rather be spat on and reviled than be here in this dark hell by himself.

A half-sob, half-laugh ripped from him. His lips cracked and bled as he screamed, the sound ungodly and filled with all the anguish that had built inside him. Head swimming, body shuddering, he pushed up to his knees, uncaring of the sharp rock cutting through his skin. His Sahara-dry mouth opened, working furiously to pull out more sound. Alone and scared, angry and hurting, he shouted the one thing he still knew was true. The reason he'd been brought to this hell.

*Marcus. I am Marcus.*

\* \* \* \*

Nose twitching, Nathan crawled on his belly towards the clump of scrub. His ears pricked as a wordless scream was carried on the breeze. Upwind was the source of his current dilemma. Every fibre of his being was rooted to this spot, had been for three days now, when all he'd meant to do was go out for a run and give his wolf a chance to stretch its legs. Nathan hadn't had the slightest clue that he'd end up surrounded by danger, waiting to rescue a man he didn't even know.

No, not just a man—a shifter, and because of that fact, Nathan could only assume he'd lost his damned mind.

\* \* \* \*

### **Three days earlier...**

Nathan bounded out of the cabin in human form, barely able to wait until the dense pines closed in around him. He began stripping in the cover of those magnificent trees, and filled his lungs with the scent of the forest, the pungent, earthy essence of this part of New Mexico he loved so much. It was as integral a part of him as the blood that coursed through his veins.

Within seconds, Nathan was nude. He hid his clothes under a thicket, setting his shoes on top of them in hopes the weight would hold them down should the wind kick up. Then

he shifted, his body contorting, bones and muscles, tendons and flesh rippling, freeing his other part. His paws clenched, his toes digging into the soft ground. The fur on his paws looked darker than the fur further up his legs, but distinguishing the exact colour was impossible while in wolf form. He could make out a slight variation in shading, but where else exactly that was so on his body, Nathan hadn't any idea.

It wasn't as if he'd ever had a photo taken of himself like this so he could look at it when he shifted back. Maybe if he'd had a pack to run with, someone would have told him what he looked like. But he didn't want a pack, didn't want to have anything to do with other shifters. They were cruel, dangerous creatures. That was all he knew of them, and it was more than enough.

Besides, it didn't matter what he looked like, it was time to run. Nathan took off, letting his long legs carry him wherever his nose guided. There were so many scents he could detect when he was in his human form, having a shifter's heightened senses. But when he finally got to let his wolf out, every particle of air seemed to carry its own unique smell, and Nathan often found himself exhausted and miles from his clothes by the time the exhilaration of chasing the enticing odours had worn off.

That was the usual pattern, and this time when he finally grew too tired to run farther, Nathan wasn't surprised to find himself deep in Lincoln. The national park was over a million acres in size, and as worn out as he was when he finally stopped, Nathan figured he might have loped through more of those acres than he should have. He didn't even have the energy left to chase after a rabbit, at least not right then.

Chastising himself for being reckless once again, Nathan slunk towards the stream, his nose and ears easily leading him to the welcome water. Dusk was settling over the forest. As the evening darkened, Nathan's vision would sharpen. There was no point in him shifting back to human form, not when he was going to be stuck out here for the night. He'd need his fur to keep him warm, and, anyway, a wolf was more intimidating than a man to the other creatures lurking about.

As Nathan neared the stream, a spike of heat chased by a fur-ruffling chill skittered down his spine. Hackles raised, he laid his ears back and dropped down low, looking for the source of his sudden unease. Once he realised what it was, Nathan mentally cursed himself over and over. How could he have been so careless? All his life, he'd been so careful to avoid other shifters, unwilling to risk losing Rick, and yet here Nathan was, and his senses were

telling him he hadn't just discovered one of them, but what might well be an entire pack across the stream. They were upwind of him, but that didn't mean Nathan was safe, not at all.

A wolf's pack land could extend over a hundred miles, and they were definitely territorial. He didn't know much about other shifters, but Nathan had no reason to believe they'd be any less aggressive than regular wolves. It was a no-brainer that Nathan, less than a hundred yards from the source of the scents he was picking up, was assuredly somewhere he shouldn't be. He tried to calculate how far he was from the cabin, but, with all the winding paths he'd taken, and the numerous tantalising scents he'd sniffed out off-path, he figured he could be anywhere from ten to thirty miles from where he'd started.

Easing away from the direction he'd been heading in, Nathan tipped his muzzle up, carefully checking for immediate danger. A gust of wind whipped over him, and he froze in his tracks as a fiery bolt of desire speared through him. Nathan had never found himself aroused while in his wolf form before, and he wasn't happy to experience the sudden and intense burst of hormones, pheromones, whatever it was that he was swamped in now. He didn't care what it was—he just wanted it to stop, because, in the split second when the wind rushed over him, his wolf and his man came to a glaring difference of opinions.

His wolf said, 'We're staying, there's no other choice.' The man in him thought the wolf was fucking nuts. If they—he—didn't get out of here now, chances were better than good that the shifters upwind would find him. And even with the overpowering, alluring aroma that had lit up Nathan's body like a supernova to the nth degree, Nathan hadn't missed the other odours. If evil had a smell, it was right there as well, permeating each breath he took.

Nathan didn't want anything to do with shifters, period, and certainly not with ones he was positive were exactly like his father. The part of him that was wolf may have yearned for a pack, to run with others of his kind, but Nathan would be damned before he let that side of himself make such a foolish decision. He forced himself to back away, suppressing the urge to snarl as his wolf clamoured and railed against leaving.

Then he heard it—or, more precisely, him. The wind seemed to amplify the agony in the man's scream. Nathan's heart gave one hammering beat then another as he smelt, heard, almost felt the tortured man's pain. His sympathetic whimper was torn from him as he dropped to his belly, his front paws curling and digging into the moist earth.



Nathan's chest ached like someone had taken a knife to it and cut a six-inch swathe clear to his bones. Over his soft whimpering, taunts and laughter filled the night air. Nathan buried his head between his paws as best he could, trying to block out the sounds and muffle his own. Images flashed behind his closed lids, angry, mocking faces, a pair of cold blue eyes filled with so much hate...

Emotions assaulted him; ones he knew couldn't be his own. Nathan wanted to howl. It felt like someone else was in his head, someone who'd suffered, was still suffering. Shift, he thought, meaning it for the poor man whose screams continued to assault Nathan's ears. A wave of hopelessness filled him, and the desolation was so intense he found himself shifting back into his human form, his eyes filling and flowing over with tears as he curled into a tight ball on his side. The presence inside his head vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Nathan dragged himself away, although not very far, tucking himself into the first semi-decent bit of shelter he found. *What the fuck just happened?* he wondered as he lay shivering in the chilly night air. He didn't know enough about what he was to determine if that whole awful experience was a common thing with shifters. Maybe some of them were telepathic, or maybe one of them was. Either way, it seemed these shifters—other than the one who was obviously suffering—were damn near evil incarnate. He wanted nothing to do with them. Come first light, if he hadn't been found and torn to pieces, he'd be out of this freaking nightmare.

\* \* \* \*

*Right, that worked so well.* Nathan crept closer, still more than a little angry at his wolf having won out over a man's ability to reason. Apparently there was no place for that or logic in the beast he shared his body with. Nathan sniffed the air nervously. This was the closest he'd dared to come in the past three days. There was an urgency pounding at him, telling him that waiting was no longer an option—time was up for the man inside the cave. The other shifters had left the morning after Nathan had stumbled upon them—all except for two big, mean-looking guys who'd vacated the cave with the others but returned before Nathan could attempt a rescue.

Whether the lurkers—the *other lurkers, anyway*—suspected Nathan's presence or simply wanted to hang around and make sure no one accidentally stumbled across the poor guy in the cave was a mystery, but the why of it didn't matter. All that mattered was that Nathan

couldn't do anything—the bigger men didn't stay at the cave, keeping themselves mostly hidden from sight. They were always nearby, though.

But Nathan hadn't missed the guns the men carried, and the cautious way the two shifters moved from place to place. If it weren't for the nine-millimetre and that big-ass rifle, and if the guys would have stopped being paranoid long enough for Nathan to get behind them, he could and would have taken the big fuckers out. Although maybe not while they were in wolf form, unless he was human and had one of the guns—preferably the handgun.

That morning there'd been no sounds from the cave, the pathetic whimpering Nathan had heard through the night having ceased as the sun rose. He'd feared the worst—then there'd been that sudden garbled scream. There'd been nothing but silence since.

Nathan's stomach was coiled with tension. If he was too late, he had only himself to blame. *Well, and the sons of bitches who left the guy in there.* One thing was for certain—the man inside the cave couldn't possibly survive much longer. The nights were cold up here in the mountains, and, on top of that, there were the injuries Nathan felt sure the man must have—that phantom pain in his chest hadn't been his own, and he highly doubted that anyone had left food or water behind, either.

He caught a hint of movement to his left. One of the other shifters, the big dark-haired one, was creeping towards the cave. The way he held the nine-millimetre steadily in front of him spoke of his intentions towards the man in the cave. Nathan couldn't wait any longer. At least he'd crossed downstream yesterday and didn't have to worry about being a target doing so now. Not that that was really any help. He was a target unless he stayed hidden.

The second shifter, this one bald, appeared behind the first. "Hey, I wanna watch, since you won't let me have some fun with the fucker."

The dark-headed shifter didn't even look at him. "Shut up, Bryce. The way you go on about him, I'm beginning to think your idea of *fun* involves something faggy."

Nathan saw in Bryce's expression what the other man missed. Guilt, desire and fear all passed over Bryce's face. He sputtered then took an indignant tone and began babbling. "I ain't queer like him! Shit, James, you've known me most of my life! Have I ever smelt like I went out and fucked a man? No. It's always been straight-up pussy for me. Just ask your sisters." Bryce snapped his mouth shut, but even Nathan could tell he'd done it too late. James spun around and delivered a bone-cracking left hook to Bryce's jaw.

"You fucking asshole," the enraged man yelled as Bryce stumbled and crumbled to the ground, his head smacking the outside of the bumpy cave wall as he went down. "I'll kill you if I find out you ever touched any of my sisters!" He loomed over the unconscious—or, Nathan fervently hoped, dead man—as if waiting for some sort of response. Nathan didn't feel bad for wishing the bald man dead. He hadn't been the one who'd struck him, and truthfully, Nathan's chances of coming out of this alive were better if he only had one crazy gun-toting psycho to deal with.

Besides, both Bryce and the idiot who'd decked him had revelled in torturing the man in the cave. Nathan had heard them bragging about it enough for the past two days and the details would forever be etched in his brain. If he hadn't already thought these shifters were on a level with hellspawn, what he'd seen and heard here would have convinced him of it. Yet he couldn't walk away and live with himself—though he did rather think dying was a high price to pay to assuage his conscience.

His feet seemed to move of their own accord, carrying his small body within feet of the cave's entrance. He was still downwind, but, given his proximity to the big ugly shifter now turning away from Bryce, Nathan knew he'd soon be found out. 'Soon' was sooner than he thought.

"Come out of there, you fucking traitor," James said as he pointed the gun at the thicket Nathan was hiding in—*no, reconnoitring*, Nathan corrected, *'ll be damned if I'm going to be hiding like some scared*—A bullet spewed from the gun, ripping through the dense foliage and sending Nathan skittering backwards in a moment of panic. "That's right, run! Make this fun—for me anyway."

Another bullet zinged by Nathan, nearly singeing his fur. He got his feet under him and bolted, running full out, his wolf moving with a speed that wouldn't have been possible in the animal alone.

"You look like a fox," the other man sneered, then fired again. "You musta been the runt 'cause you're about the size of a fox, too."

Nathan's hackles rose as he fought the impulse to turn and lunge at the asshole shooting at him. Sure he was small-ish, but he was a lot bigger than a fox, and tougher than most people expected. It was not, he assured himself for the hundredth time, that he had a case of little-man syndrome. It was simply that he was a badass in a smaller than average package. All the better to fool his adversaries with.

Nathan slowed down, wanting to lead the other man away from the cave. He didn't want to get shot though, so he zigged and zagged through the forest, easily picking up the other man's crashing footsteps as he chased Nathan. When he thought he'd run far enough, Nathan put on a burst of speed. *Now* he wanted the shifted off his tail.

Nathan looped around, making his way back towards the cave, realising that Bryce might very well be alive and conscious and free to do what he wanted to their captive. That wouldn't do—even the idea of the unknown man in the cave being hurt in the least sent a scalding flood of fury through Nathan. He snarled as his paws slapped at the forest floor, his nails digging in with each step, pushing him off to elongate his strides and leaps.

A loud whistling sound and a stinging heat made his ear throb. He thought he'd been nicked, the way his ear was pounding with each beat of his heart. That really pissed him off. He was done playing moving target for this idiot. Nathan surged ahead and cut to his left, counting on his pursuer's rabid need to kill to make the man careless. Nathan wound through the firs until he came to a spot with a decent amount of foliage. He shifted and shoved his way into the branches, ignoring the scrapes and cuts as he concentrated on his prey.

The man had all the grace and stealth of a drunken elephant. Nathan heard him long before he started to pass the spot where Nathan waited. Unable to risk peering around the tree to see at exactly what height the man held the gun, Nathan used his judgement and lashed out with a powerful kick to the shifter's stomach. As the bigger man's eyes bugged out and his breath rushed from his lungs, Nathan kicked out again, snapping bones in the man's wrist and sending the weapon flying several feet away.

He fisted his hand and slammed it against the shifter's temple, pulling his punch slightly at the last second. As much as his anger fuelled his moves, Nathan had no desire to be a killer. With the self-defence classes that Rick had forced him to take as a boy, and his own short temper, shifter strength and abilities, Nathan could have ended the man's life. His wolf wanted him to, seeing the downed man as the threat that he was. Nathan refused to give in to the urge.

He squatted and felt for a pulse, making sure he hadn't inadvertently killed the man. The sluggish beat under his fingers wasn't entirely reassuring, but he knew how quickly he could recover from injuries. Surely he wasn't an exception.

A sense of terror ripped through his mind, shaking him to the core. The other presence, the one he'd felt before, filled him. Nathan felt the imaginary weight of another man on him, sensed the cruel intentions. Goose bumps rippled over Nathan's sweat-slicked skin as protests welled within him. He *knew* that voice.

Rage tinted his vision red as he ran and picked up the gun. Even in his fury, Nathan knew he'd use it only as a last resort, but he wouldn't leave it here for the other shifter to kill him with. Weapon in hand, Nathan raced towards the cave as another cry pierced the eerie silence.

Uncaring of the rifle he'd seen Bryce carrying, Nathan tore into the cave, his mind processing the scene before him. Whatever compunction he might have had against killing another man wavered as he looked at the filthy, emaciated man in chains, trying, despite injuries and weakness, to fight off Bryce. The shifter had one hand on the fastening of his pants as he pinned the chained man down with his greater weight.

Nathan growled, a low, deadly sound unlike any he'd ever thought to make. Bryce looked up, a snarl on his bloody lips. The man beneath him grunted but didn't stop fighting against his attacker. Nathan took one look at those dark, wounded eyes and raised the nine-millimetre.

"You fucking sick bastard," he muttered as the deafening sound of the weapon firing resounded in the cave. Nathan's wrath drained away with the fading echo.

The chained man grunted again, heaving his body up until Bryce, gasping as his eyes rolled back in his head, thudded on to the cave floor. Nathan lowered the gun and started to tremble.

*Don't think about it, not now! You can fall apart later! At least you didn't kill him...yet.* He didn't think the wound was a fatal one for a shifter—that would have to be one through the head, heart or a major artery, he hoped. Nathan had shot the shifter below the shoulder, but not near centre mass. For all he knew, Bryce could be up and after them in hours, which would mean two deadly nutjobs pursuing them.

He hadn't forgot there was another shifter out there who could come to at any moment, and while Nathan now knew he could indeed shoot another man he really, really didn't ever want to have to do so again. That meant he needed to move, now. His nervous breakdown would definitely have to wait.

Nathan slowly approached the captive, noting the way the man tensed up the closer Nathan came to him. He was definitely a shifter, and not much more than skin and bones, long, matted hair and huge dark eyes. A scruffy beard hid much of the man's lower face. The moustache growing wild below his nose was probably bushy enough to cover the man's entire mouth. Nathan felt pulled towards the stranger, his wolf and man in accord once again.

How had he ever thought to run off and leave this man behind just because he was scared? Nathan blinked at the pain the thought caused him and wondered what the hell was wrong with him. He'd never had such a visceral reaction to another man, and the way every cell in his body seemed to be trying to blend into the wounded man's was just too bizarre to process right now. He wasn't even going to think about the feelings he'd experienced upon entering the cave and finding Bryce attempting to rape this chained, abused man. And he wasn't going to think about how easy it had been to pull the trigger.

## Chapter Two

The man he'd rescued was hunched over, his head dropped low to his chest, his beard hiding much of his expression except for that in his eyes. He glared up at Nathan through filthy clumps of hair. Nathan wasn't entirely too certain the guy was sane, or safe, or anything else that would encourage Nathan to move the necessary steps closer to try to free him. Something about the chained man unnerved Nathan more than either of the other two shifters had.

Then there was the curling, spreading heat in his core, the pressure in his cock threatening to fill it even now. Nathan hoped to hell it was an adrenaline rush, because if he was getting a boner from looking at the obviously damaged, emaciated guy in front of him, then he had a whole new set of problems.

Nathan realised he still had the gun in his hand and the man watching him might see him as a new threat. Setting the weapon down and out of reach should the captive—or Bryce, if he suddenly regained consciousness—decide to try to grab it, Nathan talked in a low, soothing voice as the man's gaze stayed locked with his own.

"I'm not going to hurt you, just going to set this right here so you can see it." Nathan inched closer to the man, noting how close his irises were to black, such a rich dark brown and so full of anger and pain. The man was expressionless except for those eyes. A tingle crawled down Nathan's spine.

"I need to get you out of here. The other shifter, the dark-haired one—ah, James—I only left him unconscious. I couldn't—" Nathan swallowed convulsively as bile rose in his throat.

He dropped his gaze away, looking instead at the shackles on the man's thin wrists. "Anyway, I left him there, and we really don't want to be here when he wakes up, even if we do have the weapons. So, let's get you out of here." *And please, please don't go nuts and try to kill me after we do.* Physically, Nathan could take him easily, but he didn't want to. Didn't know if he could make himself, even with his greater strength. The man had been hurt enough, and Bryce had nearly —

*"I am Marcus."*

Nathan's head snapped up so quickly his teeth clacked together. His startled yelp was smothered by the other man's shuddered gasp. *Now* there was a definite expression on the man's dirty face discernible even through the facial hair, and it matched the hope that lit his eyes.

"You're Marcus?" Nathan asked, hoping to clarify the state of his own sanity. He felt a little ridiculous asking, but the name seemed to fit, and it kept repeating in his mind. Even in this tension-filled situation, his manners kicked in, an imaginary Rick scolding him in his head. "I'm Nathan Grant."

The man's moustache moved as if his lips were shaping words, then he nodded. "*Marcus Criswell.*"

He flung his arms forward, as if reaching for Nathan. Confused by the confirmation—he had heard that voice in his head, hadn't he? But how?—Nathan stopped his slow approach. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples, as if he could stimulate his brain into figuring out what was happening.

He eyed Marcus, biting back the numerous questions he wanted to ask. Now wasn't the time, and the other man was in no shape to answer. Already his entire body was drooping, as if whatever strength he'd had had been sapped by the struggle with Bryce.

"Well, duh," Nathan mumbled in disgust. Just looking at Marcus' appearance, it was a miracle the man had been able to put up even the slightest fight against Bryce. Marcus' head tipped to the side, nearly resting on his bony shoulder as his eyes slid shut.

Panic pricked at Nathan's heart until he saw the shallow dip and rise of Marcus' chest. The man was alive, just unconscious, which was probably a blessing for them both. Marcus wouldn't have to be afraid of Nathan's approach, and Nathan wouldn't have to be afraid of being bitten or otherwise attacked by the man.

Nathan grimaced and closed the short distance between them. Marcus sat perfectly still, and Nathan stifled a gasp as he noted the jutting press of bones through Marcus' skin. His ribs were clearly outlined, as was his sternum and collarbone. Underneath the filth, Nathan could see scars—one in particular hadn't quite healed all the way yet.

A long cut went down the centre of Marcus' chest, right where Nathan had felt the scalding hot stripe of pain when he'd first stumbled onto these shifters. The implication that he shared Marcus' pain was disconcerting, if not outright unbelievable. Nathan traced the phantom shadow of the cut on his own chest. He'd felt it, he *knew* he had.



"I can't deal with this right now," Nathan muttered. Studying the shackles, he considered the best way to remove them. He started to reach for Marcus' left wrist then hesitated, visions of Bryce pinning Marcus under him. What had Marcus suffered? Would he flip out and go crazy if Nathan touched him? They needed to get out of here.

"Marcus, I need to touch your wrist so I can see how tight this thing is." He didn't know whether or not Marcus could hear him, but Nathan thought it best to warn the man regardless. It would really suck to have his hand crushed or worse if Marcus came to in a panicked state. Hopefully announcing his intentions would prevent that.

Shoving back his own little swell of panic, Nathan gingerly slid his hand under the shifter's forearm and lifted it so he could inspect the shackle closely.

The fine hairs on Nathan's arms stood up. His heart pounded in his chest as he glanced at Marcus. The man was awake now and regarded him with expressionless dark eyes. "I won't hurt you," Nathan promised, the words breathy as he tried to quell the unease caused by Marcus' stare. "I'm going to get you out of here."

After several taut seconds, Marcus blinked, a slow drop and rise of lids that caused a warmth to coil in Nathan's lower stomach. Ignoring the feeling as best he could, Nathan turned his attention back to the shackle. "This isn't very tight around your wrist." *But it probably was, at one time.* The difference in the size of the cuff and Marcus' thin wrist made Nathan wonder exactly how big the man used to be. *Doesn't matter. What's important is how loose the thing is now.*

"I think we can work it off over your hand, but it might cause you some pain, and it could scrape your skin—hey!" Nathan toppled back on his ass as Marcus jerked his arm free. The shifter had suddenly and fiercely become active, tugging and pulling on the shackle, grunting as the edge of the thick steel cut into his skin.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Nathan scrambled up, his fear of Marcus forgotten in his need to stop the man from hurting himself. "I was going to say, we might be able to slide it off *if Bryce doesn't have a key!*" Nathan pinned Marcus' hand between his, ignoring the shifter's efforts to pull free. "Think. We can't slide your feet free, the heels will catch on the shackles no matter what we do. Stop pawing at yourself and let me look for a key first. If Bryce doesn't have one, maybe James will."

Marcus stopped fighting, panting harshly as he went limp, his head thumping the cave wall. Nathan nodded once then released Marcus' hand and crawled the few feet over to

Bryce. Wrinkling his nose as the scent of blood became cloying, Nathan gritted his teeth and forced himself to grab the shifter's shoulder. He swallowed against a heave and blanked his mind against the fact that he had shot this man.

With a grunt and a few creative curse words, Nathan managed to roll Bryce on to his back. The wound on his chest had already stopped bleeding. It was only a matter of time before the bullet was pushed out by the shifter's healing abilities, then good old twisted Bryce would be one very pissed off pervert.

Scrambling down to dig in the pockets, Nathan also ignored the open waistband and genitals that were exposed. He'd done what he had to, and he'd keep telling himself that until he believed it. The first pocket had a ring of keys in it. Nathan pulled them out then searched the other pocket just to be safe. He didn't want to find that none of these keys fit, then have to come dig through the man's pocket again. It was hard enough doing it this time. If Bryce so much as twitched, Nathan just knew he was going to screech and humiliate himself.

Finding no other keys, Nathan hurried back to Marcus, afraid the shifter would gnaw his appendages off to get free. Even though he was in human form, Marcus reminded Nathan of a trapped wolf, and those were very dangerous creatures to get near.

"I found some keys," Nathan said, waving them in front of Marcus. "Hopefully it's one of these."

As he lifted Marcus' arm, a shudder rolled over the other man's body. Nathan was suffused with thoughts other than his own, random bits that mostly made no sense. The burning desire for water, the longing to feel sunshine on chilled skin, those were the two that steadied his grasp as he fitted key after key in the lock.

A raspy *click*, inordinately loud to Nathan's ears, sounded in the cave. The shackle tumbled open and he moved his hand, letting the steel cuff fall to the ground.

"There, Marcus! I have the key!" Nathan's excitement was muted by a wave of less ardent joy that he could only assume was Marcus'. Why he could feel or hear what the shifter thought was beyond him, and they didn't have time for Nathan to fret about it. He took Marcus' other wrist in hand and quickly unlocked that shackle as well before moving on to free the man's ankles.

"All done," Nathan proclaimed, his senses spiking. How long had he been in here? Was James even now waiting to ambush them? Would he wait for Bryce to recover, or come after them alone? "Let's get moving."

Nathan reached for Marcus only to find him unresponsive. "Marcus? Marcus!" He scrabbled towards the other man and placed his hand on Marcus' thin chest. The erratic *thud-thump* of the man's heart wasn't reassuring. It seemed to Nathan that the organ was struggling mightily to beat.

"All right, then, this isn't going to be comfortable for either one of us." Nathan stood and reached down for Marcus. A tug on the man's wrist had him flopping forward. Nathan caught him and, squatting, hefted Marcus over one shoulder. He peered around the cave. The guns—he couldn't leave them here for Bryce or James to find and use against them, but it wasn't likely he could carry both of them and Marcus for very far.

One arm latched around Marcus' thighs, Nathan used the other hand to pick up the rifle. He tucked it under his arm and crouched to pick up the handgun. His quads and calves screamed in protest, but Nathan only grunted through the discomfort. It wasn't the first time he'd pushed his body, and this was likely to get worse before it got better. *If it gets better. For all I know, the other shifters will be out hunting us down soon.* Whereas he might stand a chance evading James, Nathan wasn't so foolish as to believe he could escape a whole pack of murderous shifters.

Seeing nothing else in the cave that could be of use—the ratty old blanket by where Marcus had been chained was months past filthy and practically shredded as well—Nathan turned and headed towards the entrance. Before stepping out, he spent several minutes listening and scenting the air.

When he was as assured as he could be that James wasn't lying in wait, Nathan cautiously stepped out into the bright morning light. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the change then began making his way towards the stream. Marcus desperately needed to drink, and Nathan had an idea for ditching the weapons. First he wanted to put some distance between them and the hellhole Marcus had been kept in.

Nathan shifted Marcus on his shoulder, aware the man's knuckles were dragging the ground. He had to be almost a foot taller than Nathan, and the length of his arms and legs reflected that. There wasn't much Nathan could do about it right now other than try to avoid

rocks and anything with thorns. Luckily there were no cactus in this area, but he was going to have to figure out a better plan than this one or Marcus might just wake up to nubs.

"I should have watched those damned survival shows instead of *Family Guy* and *South Park* reruns," Nathan muttered. At least then he might have some idea of how to make a portable stretcher from grass, rocks, twine and freakin' air. He could have just muted the whole drink-your-own-urine-and-eat-disgusting-bugs parts. Somehow he doubted his ability to mimic Stewie and the entire *South Park* crew was going to do him any good out here.

He could hear Rick now — "I told you that shit would rot your brain."

"Shut up," Nathan muttered to the imaginary Rick. "That *shit* was the only thing that made me laugh for a long time."

Marcus groaned, his moist breath puffing against Nathan's bare ass cheek. An unreasonable tingling spread in his balls, and Nathan nearly snarled. What the hell was wrong with him, getting turned on by that, when Marcus was in such bad shape? When, for that matter and despite Bryce's and James' comments, he didn't even know if the other man was gay? When there were, in most likelihood, going to be others hunting them down soon?

If Marcus wasn't so weak, Nathan could leave him at the stream to fend for himself. His wolf railed against the thought, causing Nathan to stumble as the beast nearly overpowered the man.

"What the fuck?" Nathan managed to keep himself, and Marcus, from falling. "I'm not leaving him, Jesus! Calm down!" He wasn't sure his wolf would listen, but he meant it. There was no way he could leave Marcus in the shape he was in—he'd be dead before morning. If some predator or another didn't get him, the forty-degree drop in temperature at night would.

Finally feeling like he'd put enough distance between them and the cave for a quick stop, Nathan set the weapons down then carefully lowered Marcus to the ground. The man was all long legs and elbows—at least it seemed that way to Nathan after getting cracked in the cheek with a dagger-sharp elbow. Rubbing the burgeoning knot on his face with one hand, he tapped Marcus' cheek with the other.

"Marcus, I need you to wake up." The only response was a flickering of eyelids. Nathan patted the man's cheek again, this time a little harder, remembering the feelings that had washed over him earlier. "Marcus! Come on, man, we're right by the stream, out in the sunshine—"

Marcus' eyes snapped open on a long inhalation. His unfocussed gaze skittered over Nathan before Marcus rolled his head towards the stream. Nathan had laid the man out on the bank, thinking it would make it easier to scoop water up to him. Marcus, however, seemed to have a different idea. Nathan's hand was batted away in a surprisingly strong swat, then Marcus tumbled into the stream.

"Shit!" Nathan leapt off the bank into the shallow rapids where Marcus had landed face down. "Shit, shit, shit! Of all the stupid—" Nathan bit off his bitching. If Marcus felt even half the thirst he'd projected to Nathan, how could Nathan blame him for his misguided move? He gripped Marcus' shoulders, shivering from the stinging cold water surrounding his lower legs. Marcus fumbled, pushing himself upright, sputtering and lapping at the gurgling water.

"Slow down or you'll make yourself sick," Nathan advised, kneeling beside Marcus. He fitted his arms around the man and pulled him into a sitting position. Nathan moved until he was seated behind Marcus, his legs pressed along the outside of the other man's as Marcus snarled and fought him.

Panic, fear of being deprived what his dehydrated body craved—Nathan knew what clawed at Marcus because he felt it as well. It was almost overpowering, making Nathan want to dive into the stream as well, even though he wasn't in anywhere near the depleted state Marcus was in. So far, at least that he could tell, this whole sharing emotions or whatever it was sucked. He had enough of his own fears without needing someone else's riding on him. Still, he couldn't bring himself to show anything other than compassion for the wounded shifter now shivering in his arms.

"I'm not going to deny you what you need," Nathan soothed in a voice that startled himself. He'd no idea he could sound so patient or...compassionate. Usually he had the redhead's temper and, at most, a thimbleful of patience. Marcus brought out something in him that seemed almost alien to the man Nathan thought himself to be. Pushing that realisation away, Nathan rubbed his hands over Marcus' chest, grimacing at the lack of flesh under his palms. The man was too thin, dangerously so.

"It won't do you any good to throw up what you drink. Just calm down a bit and I'll help you." Nathan repeated the words again, silently urging Marcus to trust him. He lowered one hand into the stream and scooped up a palmful of water. Peering around

Marcus' arm, Nathan raised his hand up towards the shifter's mouth. "Here, now, take it slow —"

Marcus clamped his trembling hands around Nathan's wrist, sloshing out most of the liquid. Nathan tried to keep the tangle of hands steady as he brought his cupped palm to Marcus' lips. He felt rather than heard Marcus groan, not in his head this time, but through Marcus' back pressed against his chest.

The rough wet scrape of Marcus' beard across his palm caused Nathan to twitch in a place the cold water should have made impossible. It was like sitting in an ice cube, and how Nathan's cock could respond to anything other than that frigid temperature was a mystery he chose to ignore. He was afraid it might send Marcus into a fit of fear and anger if he felt Nathan's stiffening rod behind him. Nathan willed the semi-erection away and was proud of himself for doing so. Then Marcus laved his palm, licking away all traces of moisture and all Nathan's hard work was shot to hell.

He got up and scooted to kneel beside Marcus, one knee bent up to hide his cock. He kept an arm around the shifter and scooped more water up to him with his other hand. Nathan closed his eyes at the sensation of water coating dry tissues. How had Marcus stood it, feeling as if his body was the Sahara, his throat and mouth dry, cracked ground?

Marcus gulped down Nathan's offering, coughing when in his haste he inhaled some of the liquid.

"Slow down," Nathan murmured, "I'll give you more, don't worry." Marcus lapped at his skin, sending more spikes of heat through Nathan. He wasn't even aware of the temperature of the water now. Each swipe of Marcus' tongue over his skin set Nathan's blood boiling in his veins. The scrape of teeth over the base of his thumb nearly rocketed him into orgasm.

Nathan gasped and tried to tug his wrists free, but Marcus' desperation gave him a strength Nathan wouldn't have expected him to have. He growled as his fingers tightened their hold. Laving Nathan's skin, Marcus glared up at him, a look that dared him to make Marcus stop. Lowering his gaze, he watched Marcus lick at his hands.

"I wasn't trying to get away, just wanted to get you some more," Nathan said, his voice cracking several times as he spoke. The faint scent of desire rolled off of him and he prayed Marcus wouldn't notice it.

Marcus pushed at Nathan's wrists, a silent command for more.

Nathan dipped his hands back into the stream and brought another dripping scoop of water to Marcus' lips. He continued in this manner until Marcus calmed and no longer seemed to fear being denied what he needed so badly.

A last drag of tongue over his skin, then Marcus drooped, his body racked with chills. Cursing his own wandering mind, which had spiralled right down to the gutter with each swipe of that slick muscle over his palm and fingers, Nathan rose and pulled Marcus out of the stream. He half-dragged, half-carried the shifter up the bank and settled him on his back in a thick patch of grass. Marcus gasped and rolled to his side, curling into a tight ball as his teeth chattered.

Nathan picked up the handgun and popped out the clip. He emptied the cartridge and threw the few remaining bullets as far as he could into the stream, watching them scatter in the air and hit the water in various places. Small ripples rolled across the surface, and Nathan found himself mesmerised by the spreading rings until he remembered the gun in his hand. Knowing he had to be breaking a dozen different federal laws, Nathan tossed the gun into the stream as well. Leaving it behind for James or Bryce or any other shifter to load wasn't an option.

"Now for the rifle..."

Maybe disposing of both weapons wasn't the best idea, but Nathan couldn't carry either efficiently if he was also carrying Marcus. He wouldn't have time even to fire off a shot if they were confronted, and after shooting one man he was unwilling to repeat the action. If they were caught, the lack of weapons might keep them from being killed immediately, and Nathan could perhaps then take anyone who tried to harm them by surprise.

It was the one good thing about being his size—he was often underestimated. As Rick used to say, if Chihuahuas were the size of Great Danes, there'd be no people left in the world. Fortunately, Nathan could back up his bark with more than a nip to the ankles.

"We really should head..." Nathan stopped when he turned to where Marcus lay. The man was shaking hard enough to rattle his brain. A strange pinching sensation in the area of his heart made Nathan pause. Surely it wouldn't hurt to shift and warm Marcus up for five minutes before they left this spot? The man didn't have an ounce of fat on him, and hardly any muscle at all, to help generate and hold in body heat.

Nathan shifted into his wolf and cautiously approached the shivering man. Marcus opened his eyes and Nathan found himself captured by the shifter's gaze. He started to step

back, only to have Marcus clumsily raise his arm in an unspoken request. Plodding over to him, Nathan let Marcus hook his arm around his neck and pull him down.

As Marcus buried his face against Nathan's ruff, both parts of Nathan, man and beast, were in perfect agreement. Marcus would be protected at all costs. Nathan didn't even try to figure out why he felt that way. Some things were inexplicable, but true none the less.



## Chapter Three

Nathan groaned as he dropped down onto his butt, his back scraping against the bark of the pine tree. He was so tired, and his body ached from carrying Marcus for miles over the past two days. At this rate, he knew they'd be lucky to make it to the cabin by tomorrow night.

Even then, he couldn't stop to recuperate. There was too great a risk that, regardless of his precautions, which mainly consisted of walking through the stream where possible, James and Bryce would find them. Nathan hadn't caught so much as a whiff of the other shifters, but that didn't mean they weren't out there.

If Marcus could just shift—but the man had barely been conscious for most of the trek, and the one time he'd seemed lucid Nathan had asked if he could walk with assistance. It was his own fault for giving in to his body's aches.

He should have realised that Marcus still had pride even in the state he was in. Instead, he'd taken the man's nod as a certainty rather than a wish, and they'd ended up in a tangle of limbs. Nathan had twisted around so he would take the brunt of the fall and had received a searing pain in his groin in return. As fast as he could heal, he still didn't *ever* want to strain anything in that area again.

The man curled up at his side mumbled, the words too low to make out as they weren't much more than a breath of air. Nathan reached down and rubbed Marcus' shoulder, chasing chill bumps the length of his back. There'd been several instances of whispered words and broken cries over the past two days. Each time he'd heard the deep, cracked rumble of Marcus' voice, Nathan's guts had clenched: sometimes with desire, sometimes with fury, but always with a growing sense of possessiveness that frightened him.

He didn't understand his increasing attachment to the man, and trying to put it down to sympathy for Marcus' plight simply didn't work. Not when he lay pressed against him, burning with lust and fantasies that had no place in his head.

It shouldn't turn him on to stroke his fingers over a thin, emaciated frame. And in truth, it didn't. What did was something at the very core of the man himself, but Nathan didn't

have a clue what that was or why it was. It wasn't as though they'd had a conversation, although he did still get glimpses of Marcus' thoughts and emotions. Memories of pain and torture would wash over Nathan at the worst times, sometimes causing him to stumble.

The glimpses he'd got of Marcus being cut, of some powder dusted over parts of him that seared through skin and shot agony into the other man's bones, seemed to seep into Nathan and become a part of him as well. Those images and the knowledge of what had been done to Marcus would never leave him, any more than Marcus would ever forget them.

Ignoring his own hunger—what edible plants they'd come across, Nathan had insisted Marcus eat—Nathan slid down the rest of the way to the ground. He shifted into his wolf and pressed up against Marcus, nearly purring when the man rolled over and wound his arms and legs around him.

Eventually, as had happened each time they'd paused to rest and Nathan had shifted to warm Marcus, he would end up lying on the man, covering as much of him as possible. That was more than all right with Nathan—he had no problem with being used as Marcus' personal blanket.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan Criswell stared out of the penthouse window, watching the rain fall over the city. He hated this concrete and smog-infused hell. He wanted to be back in his home, not in this sterile, presumptuous apartment filled with expensive shit he'd rather watch burn than look at. He wanted to go home, wanted his brother back, wanted to find whoever had taken him and peel the skin from their—

"Aidan, please, you can't be so angry all the time."

Aidan glanced up and saw Zane's reflection in the window as Zane pressed against him, sliding his arms around Aidan's waist.

"The fuck I can't. Six months, it's been over six goddamn months! Don't tell me I can't be angry we haven't found Marcus yet!" Aidan grabbed Zane's forearms, pulling until he loosened his hold and Aidan could turn in his arms.

Despite his anger, worry and fear, Aidan didn't mean to direct any of it at his mate. Zane was the one person who'd kept Aidan from going insane since Marcus had vanished. Burying his face in Zane's dark hair, Aidan breathed in the soothing scent of the man. "How

can we not have found even a trace of him? I just don't understand how he could have vanished so thoroughly that even Alex couldn't track him down."

"We'll find him and bring him home. You have to believe that."

"I do," Aidan murmured, then, louder, "I *do*. I may not be the twin who can sense the other's pain like Marcus always sensed mine, but I'd *know* if...I would." Surely, he would, wouldn't he?

*"Of course you would. He's alive, and we'll find him, with or without Alex's help."*

Aidan heard the words in his head, Zane's smooth voice filling his mind through the telepathic link mates shared. There was no doubt in the words, and it shored up Aidan's own flagging hope.

"I just want him back—" Aidan's voice dried up, his throat closing as emotion threatened to overwhelm him. *"I want him home. I want to hear him give me shit about being older than me, or hear him take that commanding tone he uses when he's acting the part of Alpha Anax instead of my brother. I want him to walk in the door, and tell me to step the hell down and hand over his position as leader of the North American shifters. I want him to tell me what a shitty job I've done, and how he could have done and will do it better —"*

Zane's arms tightened around him, almost shaking him. "But you haven't done a shitty job as Alpha Anax! Marcus' disappearance and your taking his place—temporarily, as you made it very clear—has galvanised the shifters and brought them together under one command as they've never been before! You've only been challenged for the position once," which Aidan knew had terrified his mate, as the challenger had been a damned big shifter and meaner than the devil himself.

"And, even then, you had that fool pinned, with him begging forgiveness and swearing fidelity in five minutes flat," Zane continued. "You've brought the shifters together and —"

"I didn't bring them together," Aidan said, cutting Zane off. "Marcus brought them together, and his disappearance, *that's* what motivated them, what finally united us as one whole pack and made them see the necessity of its being that way. Someone dared to strike out against their leader, the Alpha Anax, and that meant the every shifter pack in North America had failed to protect him. Their divisiveness made him vulnerable to attack, and they know, as do we, that Marcus didn't simply drop off the edge of the Earth. Someone took him. When I think of all the things they may have done to him —"

“Don’t.” This time, Zane did shake him, startling Aidan into silence. Zane tipped his head back and gave him a look full of fierce tenderness. “Don’t think like that. He isn’t dead. You’d know—I believe that and so do you. That’s what’s important, along with your holding his position as Alpha Anax for him even though you hate being the AA and all the politics that come with it. When he comes back, he’ll find the attitude of the shifters as a whole much more accepting and supportive than...than before.”

Aidan hoped so. Short of the man in his arms, Aidan wanted nothing so much as to have his brother back and in place as Alpha Anax. It was that desire that had given him the strength to defeat a challenger he’d never thought he’d be able to force to submit. Anything he could do to make it easier for Marcus once he returned, Aidan would do, even if it meant taking on every shifter in North America.

A knock on the door shattered the intimate moment between Aidan and Zane. A finger of unease tickled at the back of Aidan’s neck as he called out and watched Alex, the captain of his guard, enter the room. Alex’s worried expression caused the tickle to ramp up to full-scale dread.

“Marcus?” Aidan’s voice was stretched thin with fear for his brother. Zane released him and stood at his side, facing Alex as well, although Zane did reach for Aidan’s hand.

Alex dropped his gaze to the floor and shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, Alpha Anax. I haven’t been able to find anything new. I’ve failed in my duty. You’d be more than justified to demand my resignation at the least—”

Aidan sighed at the old argument. Alex had been the captain of Marcus’ guard, and, as such, had been responsible for keeping Marcus safe. Short of accompanying Marcus on the trip he’d taken when he’d vanished—something Marcus had firmly refused to allow—Alex wouldn’t have been able to do anything more to protect Marcus. Still, Aidan understood the guilt. It ate at him every day as well.

“I wouldn’t do that, and you know it. It isn’t your fault Marcus insisted on travelling alone. We’ve been over this before.”

Alex nodded, a sharp, short jerk of his head, as if he had to force his body to make some sign of agreement. He continued to stare at the floor. Aidan took in the clenched jaw, the tic beneath Alex’s eyes, the fisted hands.

“If it isn’t Marcus, then what bad news are you bringing me? You look like you’d rather be anywhere but here.”

Alex swallowed audibly and finally raised his eyes to Aidan's. "There are rumours, what I'd call reliable ones, that you'll soon be issued a challenge."

Zane grunted out a small sound filled with a world of unhappiness. Aidan squeezed his hand and frowned at Alex. "And?"

"And this challenger is said to be determined to proclaim it a death match."

"Shit," Zane murmured.

Aidan glanced at him. "Zane?" Did he doubt Aidan?

"Never," Zane assured, smiling tremulously. *"I just don't want you to have a death on your hands. I'd never want that for you. Killing someone, even accidentally, can be...difficult to deal with."*

Aidan's heart ached for his mate. It hadn't been long ago when Zane had accidentally had a hand in his Uncle John's death. That the man had been a cold-blooded murderer who'd wanted Zane dead, and had indeed tried to kill him numerous times during his childhood, didn't seem to matter. Zane still felt guilty, but Aidan would have gladly killed John as slowly and painfully as possible and never felt a moment's regret. He wasn't sure he could say the same about whoever this challenger was, but he would do what was necessary.

Turning back to Alex, Aidan nodded. "If this happens, and the challenger approaches you in proper ritual manner, talk to him first. Make sure he really wants to die." Anything, he'd do anything for Marcus, including this.

"I don't believe he'll change his mind." Something in Alex's voice had the fine hairs on the back of Aidan's neck standing up.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," Alex began, then took a deep breath and exhaled it steadily, as if forcing himself to remain calm. "This supposed challenger is said to be a devout member of Joshua Dobson's pack. The son of Randall Dobson, the Alpha Anax Marcus deposed."

\* \* \* \*

"There's the cabin, see?" Nathan pointed through the tree line towards the small cabin he'd bought from Rick. "We're almost there."

Marcus, leaning heavily on Nathan, merely grunted. They'd argued – or rather, Nathan had argued while Marcus had refused to do more than shake his head – over whether or not Marcus should walk. Granted, Nathan's entire body was still sore, his hard-earned muscles

unused to this particular brand of work, but he still would have preferred to carry Marcus, at least part of the way.

Instead, the stubborn man had given him a look that had shut Nathan up. Nathan had been so startled by his response to the unspoken demand in those eyes he'd been tempted to argue more just to prove he wasn't cowed. He wasn't, but his wolf had nearly tied him in knots when he'd even thought about it. Usually, the man controlled the wolf, but not in that instance and it irritated and confused Nathan.

"Move!"

Nathan jerked upon hearing the sandpaper-rough command. Marcus tensed beside him, his thin body vibrating against Nathan's side. Nathan tipped his head up and sniffed. A tendril of fear ghosted down his spine, quickly chased away by anger.

They were here, waiting. James and Bryce had been smarter than he hoped. It must have been easy for them to skirt around and pick up Nathan's original trail. Nathan had come back a different way, hoping to avoid running into the shifters. All he'd done was avoid a confrontation until he was so exhausted he was ready to drop.

Marcus shoved at his hip. *"Now!"*

The snapped command echoed in his head as he grabbed Marcus' arm and began running back into the forest. He didn't hold out much hope that the other shifters hadn't seen or scented them. The best they could do was buy a little time.

Marcus' hand clamped down bruisingly hard on Nathan's forearm. He skidded to a stop alongside the other man just as two wolves burst through the foliage in front of them. Growling, tossing their heads, ears laid flat, the wolves began slowly stalking forward.

The bigger one, a stark black wolf with silver-tipped ears, was James, and he was already moving in, his target the man at Nathan's side. Nathan snarled and tried to put himself between Marcus and James. Marcus jerked him back, but Nathan had sworn to himself he wouldn't let the other man be harmed. He sent his own mental command, nowhere near as succinct as Marcus' had been, and certainly laced with a few more curse words.

Digging in his heels, he planted himself firmly in front of Marcus. Divide and conquer, that was the plan. He hadn't forgotten James' accusations towards Bryce.

“He” —Nathan pointed at the smaller brown wolf —“was trying to rape Marcus when I found him! Just like you thought, he wanted Marcus—and this is the man who’s had sex with one or more of your sisters?”

James’ amber gaze darted to Bryce, who showed his displeasure at Nathan’s disclosure by lunging at him. Nathan bellowed, his fury bursting free as he shifted and met the wolf midair. Bryce’s surprised yip caused a gleeful snort to slip from Nathan’s muzzle. Had he startled the wolf with his rapid shift, or just his speed in attacking?

*Doesn’t matter*, Nathan decided as he twisted his body round and sank his teeth into the wolf’s shoulder. He’d aimed for the one Bryce had been shot in, knowing it still had to be healing. Bryce’s howl of pain was gratifying, spurring Nathan to hope he and Marcus might have a chance of surviving. He shook the clump of hair and flesh he’d latched on to, causing another eardrum-splitting cry from Bryce.

A muffled sound behind him told Nathan Marcus was now engaged in a battle with the bigger wolf, and, for a moment, Nathan was distracted with fear for the man. Bryce’s snapping maw and the scrape of sharp teeth against fur and skin forced Nathan’s attention back to his own fight. He had to end this quickly and help Marcus. Unable to see behind him, Nathan reached out the only way he could, searching for the other man’s presence in his mind.

The force of Marcus’ fury bordered on madness. Nathan leapt aside from a running attack by Bryce. He spun round and immediately charged the stumbling wolf, who was trying to curtail a headlong rush into a pine. Nathan sprung on to Bryce’s back, sinking his teeth into the furry neck.

Bryce bucked under him, trying to throw Nathan, but even in wolf form Nathan was flexible. He clung with paws and limbs, his teeth penetrating deeper with each gyration of the wolf under him. Nathan could feel Marcus’ determination to survive, to make the ones who’d hurt him—taken everything from him—pay.

Nathan kicked off of Bryce’s back as he tried to dial down the intensity of his connection to Marcus. Being inundated with images of what Marcus had been like before was too distracting, though Nathan now knew the man would be stunningly gorgeous if they survived this and if Marcus recovered.

Backstepping rapidly away from Bryce, Nathan growled a challenge to the limping shifter. *“Come and get me, fucker. You’re gonna be taken out by a wolf who’s seventy pounds of pissed off, you fat-ass bastard!”*

Nathan felt Marcus’ fury shift, and was very nearly too distracted by the man’s amusement to avoid Bryce’s next attack. He dropped down to his belly as Bryce leapt—and that’s when Nathan lost control of his wolf. Instinct had him moving, darting up, his muzzle snapping closed around the other wolf’s jugular.

The man in Nathan watched in horror as his wolf rolled and clamped down and shook his muzzle, tearing through flesh and fat, cartilage and tendons. Arterial spray spurted out, coating parts of Nathan’s fur as his jaws remained locked tight.

*Oh God, oh fuck! Rick was right. Oh fuck – what have I just done?*



## Chapter Four

Marcus hadn't thought he'd be able to shift, being as weak as he was, and he wouldn't have been able to had his mate not been threatened. Even with his messed up body and fuzzy thinking, Marcus had recognised Nathan for who and what he was immediately. He'd been confused when Nathan hadn't seemed to realise it, but eventually, in the small part of his brain that could deal with reality, he'd been glad of it. Who would want a fucked-up man like him for a mate?

He stumbled under James' assault, the black wolf knocking the wind out of him as his shoulder slammed into Marcus' ribs. The additional onslaught of Nathan's revulsion brought him the rest of the way down, and Marcus found himself pinned on his side, James' muzzle lowering in a flash for Marcus' vulnerable neck.

A growling mass of fur and snapping teeth knocked James off of him just as the black wolf's teeth scraped at Marcus' fur. Marcus ignored the lethargy that threatened to make him and Nathan corpses and rolled to his feet. Even as he dove into the *melée*, he marvelled at the smaller wolf—Nathan was quick as a fox, and, from what Marcus had seen before he shifted, coloured like one as well.

And ferocious—he couldn't forget that. As Nathan charged the bigger wolf, frothing and furious, his bearing showed his confidence. James' look of trepidation would have been humorous had the situation not been so dire. Nathan looked for all the world like a rabid beast, his eyes wild as he twitched all over and lunged repeatedly at James.

Marcus reached for Nathan through their link and felt fear coil in his gut. Nathan the man was cowering inside, horrified by his wolf. Violence like this brought memories to Nathan's mind that he always tried to shove aside. Even more evident in Nathan's thoughts was that he had no experience with other shifters. Discovering that bit of information shocked Marcus to the point he missed James' frenzied attack.

A blur of movement and hot daggers spearing through his back brought Marcus to painful reality as James tore into him. Marcus swallowed back an agonised howl as he tried to keep upright under the black wolf's weight.

A series of sharp barks ending in a growl signalled Nathan's rapid counterattack. Marcus was knocked off his feet as Nathan threw himself onto James' back.

James released Marcus in favour of trying to escape the smaller wolf. Marcus smelt the black wolf's blood, felt it dripping onto his fur and mingling with his own. Kicking and bucking, Marcus shook off the two wolves and, remembering the utter desolation Nathan had felt as he'd killed Bryce, grabbed the smaller wolf by the scruff and stiffened his legs. He pulled as he backed away, dislodging a startled Nathan. Marcus tossed him aside as carefully as he was able and growled a warning at him to stay back.

James started to rise and Marcus put on a burst of speed he hadn't known was in him. Straddling the downed wolf, Marcus caught James' neck between his jaws. He tightened his hold as he stared down at the wolf, fighting against the temptation to rip out his throat and put an end to one of his tormentors. Shaking his head as he let his teeth sink into skin, Marcus gave his victim a choice: submit to the stronger wolf and go free, or die.

He could scent James' fear, his wavering allegiance to Joshua Dobson. Marcus growled in warning, his patience wearing thin. James' eyes rounded and his muzzle opened and closed, as if the wolf were speaking for the man. His body started to contort, twisting as tendons popped and bones bent. Marcus felt the deception roll off the man a split second before he released him.

The shifting reversed before it had much of a chance to begin. A snarling black wolf lunged, narrowly missing Marcus' throat. Nathan came running from the left. Marcus slung his backside around, knocking his mate aside with his flank. He couldn't let Nathan kill again. James attacked, and Marcus, furious and saddened by the shifter's refusal to submit, didn't step aside.

Clumsy in his hate-filled state, James stumbled and Marcus was on him in an instant. There was no hesitation this time as he tore through the wolf's throat; no offer of mercy, not even any anger or joy in killing one of the shifters who'd made him want nothing more than his own death. All Marcus felt was numbness at the senseless loss. James would rather die than swear allegiance to Marcus, and so he did. Marcus wouldn't have had it end that way.

Releasing the dead wolf's throat from his mouth, Marcus stepped back and promptly landed on his butt. His vision swam as he struggled to keep his form. The feel of teeth nipping against his fur then clamping his ruff between them didn't even startle him.

Nathan's scent surrounded him. Marcus closed his eyes and let Nathan drag him to the cabin.

\* \* \* \*

Rick was right in keeping him away from other shifters. The thought pounded in Nathan's mind over and over. Killing hadn't been anything new to the two now-dead wolves. Nathan had scented their desire to rip and render flesh and bones. If that's what being a member of a pack encouraged one to do, he really wanted no part of it. Even as he told himself it had been necessary to kill Bryce, Nathan felt sick down to his soul.

He also felt massively confused and embroiled in inner turmoil. To cast all shifters raised in packs as inhumane beasts like James and Bryce would mean condemning Marcus as well. Nathan had seen enough of Marcus' memories to know he'd been a pack member of some sort.

Marcus had been determined to keep Nathan from having another death on his conscience. And he *did* have a conscience, and so did Marcus. Those feelings of hope as Marcus had stepped back to give James another chance, the anger and disgust he'd felt at having to kill the shifter—and, more importantly, the distinct lack of thrill at killing one of the people who'd hurt him.

All of those things spoke of a man, a shifter, with a sense of honour few humans would have. Nathan found it hard to believe most people wouldn't have felt some sense of satisfaction; even, though he quelled at admitting it, a justified sense of revenge.

Nathan had felt nothing of the sort as he'd torn Bryce's throat out, but his wolf...his wolf had been proud of the victory, of his ability to defend Marcus. That was something Nathan didn't know how to reconcile himself with.

Shifting back into human form, Nathan gagged at the taste of blood in his mouth. He turned from Marcus and heaved, the clenching spasm causing his worn muscles to burn then throb. His stomach didn't have anything to offer up other than bitter, stinging bile. Nathan swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, fighting against the roiling in his stomach. The longer he stayed out here hunched over, the longer the taste of death would linger on his lips.

Turning back to Marcus, Nathan took a minute to examine him in his wolf form. The white coat was dull and mostly splattered with blood. Still, Nathan bet he was beautiful when he was healthy. The images he'd gleaned of Marcus as a healthy, muscular man flickered through his mind. What had it done to Marcus, being brought to this current state, and what had it done to the essence of the man mingled with those memories?

It certainly hadn't destroyed Marcus' honourable nature. Nathan knelt and slid his arms under Marcus. His muscles were quivering with exhaustion, but he needed to take care of this man. With his hold secured, Nathan rose, something in his lower back pinching as he stood. Ignoring the pain, he trudged up the three steps on to the porch, only then did he notice the open door.

"Shit," Nathan muttered, squatting so he could set Marcus down. He wasn't surprised the shifters had broken in, but the door was undamaged. A glance up told him why. The key he'd wedged between two slats on the porch's ceiling was gone. *Great.* He hesitated at the doorway and took a cautious sniff, then another. There were no other scents coming from the cabin besides his and the other two shifters. It was safe to go inside. He turned and promptly squeaked when he found Marcus shifted and standing, his body slumped against the porch railing.

"You scared the crap out of me!" As if he needed to point that out. He'd squeaked like a terrified mouse. Nathan's cheeks burnt fiercely and he dropped his gaze to the wood floor.

"I'm sorry," Marcus rasped. Goose bumps ran over Nathan from head to toe at that rough, cracking voice. He wondered if Marcus' voice had always been like that or if it was strained and he was unused to speaking.

*Probably the latter, Squeaky.* Nathan hunched his shoulders and started to turn back to the open door. That damn squeak was going to haunt him, but it was better to think about that than what he'd done to Bryce.

A shaking hand gently gripped his arm. Nathan bit back another embarrassing sound as he glanced up at Marcus, his skin heating under the calloused skin of the shifter's palm. Wide, dark eyes stared back at him, solemn and more lucid than Nathan had yet to see them. Nathan stood immobile, held by the power he felt in the other man.

"Not—" Marcus stopped, cleared his throat. He shook his head slightly, never breaking their visual lock. *"Not squeaky. Sexy, even..."* Marcus' forehead brightened and Nathan realised the man was blushing up to the roots of his hair.

"Even what?" Nathan asked, his curiosity piqued.

*"You'll think it's stupid, inane."*

Surprised by the coherence in Marcus, Nathan could only stare. An image of a red wolf, paws, ears and tail tipped in black, appeared in his mind. A wide swath of white fur ran from his muzzle to his underbelly. Nathan gasped as he realised the wolf was him.

"I never knew," Nathan whispered, burning the picture into his memory.

*"You're the most beautifully coloured wolf I've ever seen, like a fox..."* Something flickered in Marcus' eyes, an ember of gold flaming around the pupil, brightening the dark chocolate colour of the irises.

Nathan felt the man's mind slip into his, calmer this time, without the jutting confusion of spiralling bits and pieces that had assailed him before. It was a cooling, soothing mating of one spirit with another, and Nathan wanted to reject it even as he wanted to embrace it.

"No," Marcus ordered calmly, pushing against Nathan's inclination to close himself off to the other man. *"This is right. Leave it."*

The wolf in Nathan howled with joy. The man in him was teetering on the brink of freaking the hell out.

"What are you doing? How can you..." Nathan rubbed at his forehead but still held Marcus' gaze. "How can we do this? Is it a shifter thing?"

*"It's us, just us."*

Nathan narrowed his eyes, knowing there was more to it than that, but not certain he wanted to find out just how much more. Deciding he'd had enough to drive him mad over the past few days he looked away and sighed. "Come on, let's get inside."

As he led Marcus into the cabin, heat suffused Nathan as he suddenly knew without a doubt what Marcus had been about to say. *You look like a fox...*

Jaw dropping, Nathan spun and pointed an accusing finger at Marcus. "Foxy? Foxy! Really?"

Marcus shrugged, the movement more of a jerk than a roll of the shoulders. Nathan swept a glance over the man from head to toe, noting the way the flush ended at his chest and picked up again at the tops of his thighs. He pointedly didn't look at Marcus' cock and balls, afraid of his own body's reaction if he did.

"I think I'm suitably mortified," Nathan decided as he stared once more at Marcus' face. "Foxy. Oh Lord." Snorting, Nathan turned around and tried not to stomp as he made his

way to the small bathroom. He grimaced as he saw what looked to be the remains of his laptop and cell phone, and —Nathan stopped long enough to be sure. Yep, bastards had even shattered his broadband card. The little neon green bits of plastic could only have come from that. “Assholes,” he muttered, then shied away from thinking about James and Bryce’s fates.

“There’s a generator here, so you can shower with hot water. Take as long as you want, but it’ll turn freezing cold after about fifteen minutes.” Nathan turned the knobs and dug out a towel. At least the bathroom was still relatively clean. Apparently the other shifters hadn’t bothered with personal hygiene. He wrinkled his nose when he saw a puddle of dried urine by the toilet. Someone had been a lousy shot. He’d have to take care of that later, right now he had to get Marcus settled, and then —

“I’ll fix us something to eat, then —” Nathan looked over just in time to see Marcus’ knees hit the floor, his arms flailing in an attempt to catch himself as he fell over.

He should have expected it, should have paid attention, Nathan fumed as his heart raced up into his throat. Skidding on to his knees, he reached for Marcus’ wrist. The pulse was steady, stronger than it’d been days earlier. Nathan looked at Marcus’ unconscious form, wondering how he’d been so stupid as to forget about the man’s injuries, new and old.

“Too wrapped up in my own little psychosis.” Nathan needed his ass kicked for being such a self-centred prick. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up so I can play doctor.”

Marcus didn’t respond to the teasing, but Nathan thought he felt a glimmer of amusement in his mind. It couldn’t be his own—he wasn’t the least bit amused by the fact he’d let the other man topple like a felled tree. Nathan felt the back of Marcus’ head, worried he’d cracked his skull in the small bathroom, but it seemed Marcus had managed to keep from doing any more damage to himself.

Relieved, and mindful of the time limit for a hot shower, Nathan hooked his arms under Marcus’ and lifted. The height discrepancy made it impossible for Nathan to hold Marcus upright, but he simply didn’t have the strength left to carry the man any more. Hefting as much weight as he could, Nathan lugged Marcus to the shower stall. Getting them both over the lip of the stall was tricky, and Nathan banged both of their heels, but he finally got them in and under the stinging hot water.

Groaning, Nathan sat down, holding Marcus as he’d done in the stream, his legs bracing Marcus’. He tipped his head back and rinsed out his mouth; he wouldn’t be good for anything if he didn’t get the taste of blood washed away.

By the time he'd scrubbed every inch of Marcus, stoically ignoring the man's erection and his own, and washed Marcus' hair and beard twice, the water was already beginning to chill.

Having had enough of frigid water courtesy of his trips through the stream, Nathan shut the shower off. He'd dry Marcus, do what he could for the man's injuries, find them both some clothes, then feed them. By that time the little hot water heater should be full again. At least it had better be.

After towelling Marcus as best he could, Nathan then left him sitting propped against the bathroom wall. He needed to check the bedroom, likely change the bedding, so he couldn't very well haul Marcus in there yet. The couch was out as well since his laptop, phone and broadband card were strewn across the surface. He'd feel like a total asshole if he moved Marcus onto the couch and the poor guy got jabbed with something.

And sure enough, the bedroom reeked of the others. It made Nathan's stomach cramp. He didn't want to think about those two, not for anything.

Nathan got busy, stripping the bed and tossing the dirty bedding into the hamper. He sprayed a light coating of unscented sanitiser – and despite the claim, it was *not* unscented – that made his nose burn, but the room smelt better than it had before.

Satisfied he'd done the best he could for now, Nathan went back in the bathroom and squatted beside Marcus. The man was still out cold. And probably literally cold, Nathan realised as a shudder worked over his thin form. "All right then, up you go." He pulled Marcus' arm over his shoulders and slid one arm around the man's waist. With his other hand, he held Marcus' wrist where it dangled by Nathan's collarbone.

Nathan counted to three in his head then stood, bringing Marcus up with him. It wasn't graceful, not anywhere near it, but he finally managed to get him into bed. He covered him with the heavy comforter then tucked it in around Marcus, wondering at the protective way he felt towards this wounded man. He wanted to take care of him and God help anyone who interfered. Nathan couldn't for the life of him figure out *why* he felt that way. It was frightening, really, but it was something to focus on rather than what had occurred outside the cabin earlier.

Even though he was exhausted from the past several days' ordeal, Nathan couldn't sleep. His thoughts kept bouncing from the moment he'd first caught Marcus' scent to the moment he'd settled Marcus in bed. Nathan refused to think about the confrontation in the

forest, the two dead shifters, or his part in those deaths. That was something he just couldn't deal with. Instead, he set about cleaning up the mess in the living room, cursing the entire time. He'd have to buy another laptop and broadband card, but at least his cell phone had been insured – although he didn't think he'd be telling the customer service agent exactly how his phone had been destroyed.

Once he had the living room as clean as he could get it, Nathan tidied up the bathroom then went into the kitchen and began cleaning up the dishes and food that had been left out. He studiously kept his mind off the who and why of it as he scrubbed and put away what he could. A check of the cabinets showed that almost half of the supplies he'd bought were gone. Nathan was glad he'd brought extra, and the protein shake mixes would probably be good for Marcus.

"And on that note..." Nathan opened the refrigerator and breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the two gallon containers of milk. At least those hadn't been drunk. *There might be a good reason for that.* He pulled each jug out and checked the expiration dates. *Almost a week to go.* The milk would be long gone by now, with him and Marcus both drinking it.

Nathan kept one container out and took a glass from the cabinet. He opened the shake mix and measured out two scoops then added milk. After stirring it until the powder was only marginally dissolved, he chugged the drink down in four gulps. Then he mixed another batch, adding more of the protein powder than he had before and stirred it until it was smooth and lump-free.

The need to take care of Marcus was confusing, annoying, and irresistible. Nathan didn't have the energy to fight it. He did wonder why it was so, though. Was it because he'd saved Marcus? Or was there something more between them? It felt like more. Even thinking the man's name made Nathan's pulse race and his cock start to harden. That made him feel like a pervert, considering the shape Marcus was in. Despite that, the attraction felt right in some intrinsic way he didn't want to question.

Maybe it was just something that happened between shifters, Nathan thought as he set the glass on the nightstand. He truly didn't know enough about shifters even though he was one. The memories he might have been able to pour through for information weren't ones he cared to examine. Nathan knew much more of the human ways of life. That's how Rick had wanted it, and since the man had raised him, that's how it was. Rick hadn't wanted Nathan to be around other shifters any more than Nathan wanted to be around them. Now he kind



of wished he'd had someone else, someone like himself, to talk with about the feelings he was developing for the unconscious man in his bed.

Nathan stared down at Marcus. The man's lips were parted. Soft breaths caused the pale blond hairs of his moustache to flutter. Nathan reached out and touched it; the hair was soft, not wiry like he'd thought it would be. His eyes widened as from that small touch, heat coursed up his fingertip, streaking through his hand and up his arm to his shoulder. It shot down his chest, spreading out to warm him through before coiling around his cock and bringing it to full staff.

Damn, he wanted this man, wanted him with a power that shook him. Nathan had had lovers in the past, he'd even had a few boyfriends, and never had he felt this pull of desire like the one he felt for Marcus. It was as if he needed the man in order to continue living, and that scared the hell out of him.

Nathan jerked his hand back and took a deep breath. Marcus' scent flooded his entire being, seeping into his pores and binding into his very essence. Nathan was inexorably drawn to him; his body ached to feel Marcus' pressed beneath it. His mind conjured up images of that long, thin frame writhing, moans slipping past Marcus' lips, his tight, hot ass engulfing Nathan's dick... He could see it all so clearly, and he yearned to bring his fantasies to fruition.

*I don't understand, but I want him, any way, every way...* Nathan's balls ached for release, his shaft leaked, dampening the sweats he'd put on earlier. A soft moan eased past Marcus' parted lips. Nathan trailed his gaze down the length of Marcus' thin chest, once again noting the silvery scars and the protuberant bones under pale skin. Then, further down, the thick column of Marcus' cock where it pushed against the covers.

He was a pervert, plain and simple. He must be, to be standing here ogling a man who'd been brutalised for who knew how long. Yet Nathan couldn't ignore the desire making his pulse hammer in his ears. He couldn't ignore the man's scent, now tinged heavily with arousal. His mouth watered to taste Marcus' cock, to swallow the bitter load that would pour from the tip.

Marcus gasped and undulated on the bed. His hips jerked as Nathan envisioned swallowing the heavy cock. It would fill his mouth, stretch his jaw wide until it ached. The flared crown would slide right down his throat, almost gagging him, then Nathan would swallow while his tongue teased that steely length.

A whimper sounded in the silence, and once Nathan figured out it was he who made the noise, he found a second one sneaking past his lips. Marcus made a desperate sound, low and rough with need. Nathan reached for Marcus' covered dick then stopped, his hand no more than two inches away from its goal. What was he doing? Marcus was hurting, probably more mentally than physically, and here Nathan was, nearly coming in his shorts and almost groping the man.

It should have felt wrong, like he was taking advantage, but when images of his hand on that tempting length stole into his brain, Nathan knew two things. One, it wasn't *his* imagination that brought those pictures up, and two, even out of it like he was, Marcus needed to be touched. Nathan could feel the longing for it in Marcus. It had been ages, weeks, months—he wasn't sure which, but it had been so very long since anyone had touched the man sexually.

Before Nathan could decide whether to proceed or pull away, his wrist was snatched in a strong grip. He was jerked hard enough that he stumbled, his knees smacking the wooden bed frame. It smarted, but Nathan was too distracted by the fact that his hand was now on top of Marcus' dick. If it wasn't for the blanket and sheet, he'd be feeling skin on skin. Even through the layers of material, Nathan could feel Marcus' scorching heat under his palm.

It took every bit of Nathan's restraint not to close his hand around that hard length. Only the knowledge that Marcus was still unconscious kept him from stroking, gripping, peeling back the blanket and sheet and taking that thick cock in his mouth. He wanted to, so bad his legs were quivering, but that would be taking advantage. *It's wrong, it's wrong, I can't—*

But Marcus could, and did, his other hand coming down on top of Nathan's, forcing Nathan's to press firmly against Marcus' cock. And Marcus began to move, jerky little twists of his hips, thrusts up, back, his shaft a hard, hot friction against Nathan's palm.

Grunts, little more than pants at first, soon escalated into low rough moans that stripped Nathan's inhibitions away. He shoved his hand into his sweats and fisted his own dick as he finally curled the fingers of his other hand around Marcus' prick as best he could. *If only the blanket and sheet weren't there...* Marcus made a sound that seemed like it must have stripped his throat raw as wet heat spread under Nathan's hand.

Nathan's own cock responded in kind as the tangy scent of Marcus' cum permeated the air. Balls drawing tight, Nathan's climax slammed into with the force of a tidal wave. He

gasped, both his hands clenching tight as jets of spunk shot from his dick. Head spinning and his knees giving out, Nathan jerked his hand out of his sweats to grab the edge of the mattress. Marcus' grip went slack and Nathan dropped to the floor, leaning against the bed as he panted.

Shame warred with the pleasure that still had him tingling from head to toe. He'd just given an unconscious man a hand job, had come like a kid first discovering his dick – and it'd been the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced.

Nathan rested his head on the bed and looked up at Marcus. He thought that just maybe the curl of his moustache meant the man was smiling, that his features looked more relaxed. His breathing was slow, easy. Nathan could feel, if he dared to let himself, Marcus' contentment. It eased his guilt somewhat, and as soon as Nathan thought his legs would hold him he stood. Wiping his sticky hand on his thigh, he took a last look at Marcus then remembered his original reason for coming into the bedroom.

The glass was no longer cool; it felt warm and the shake itself looked congealed. If that's what it did once it'd been drunk, it was no wonder the stuff was so filling for so long. Still, it was gross warm, and Nathan wouldn't want to drink it much less make the man in his bed drink it.

He took the glass into the kitchen to rinse it out and made another shake. Marcus needed to be taken care of. That did not include bringing the man off, Nathan told himself, although that *had* seemed to bring Marcus peace. At least he was resting well. Nathan had been expecting nightmares, really, not...not what had happened back in the bedroom. He should be relieved that the other shifter wasn't so mentally scarred by what had happened to him that he couldn't let go and enjoy a few minutes of pleasure, even if Marcus had been out of it when it had happened.

As for himself, how could he resist the man? Nathan wasn't usually drawn to the wounded sort; he'd always taken lovers who were strong, arrogant, even. Yet Marcus aroused him like no one else ever had. More than that, he called to Nathan on some primitive level, as if Nathan's soul recognised its mate.

Nathan snorted at his melodramatic thoughts. Obviously he was so exhausted that his imagination was running wild. Granted, he'd been attracted to the man from the first whiff he'd caught of Marcus' scent, but that didn't mean they were soul mates or anything. It just meant their pheromones really, really liked each other.

Now, if he could only make himself believe that was the sole reason he couldn't bear the idea of being away from the man...

## Chapter Five

When he'd first fallen asleep, Marcus had been so relieved to be free and to have found his mate that he'd sunk right into a pleasant place. Dreams of rough hands on his cock, shaky pants and moans from Nathan and him both—those had lulled him into a false sense of security. He'd been vaguely aware of being woken, of Nathan pouring some cold, thick, *nasty* liquid into his mouth. It was only the sound of Nathan's soothing voice encouraging him to swallow that had kept Marcus from spitting the crap back out.

So he drank it every time Nathan pressed a glass to his lips. Marcus somehow even managed to keep it down, he thought, although he couldn't swear to it. There were vague memories of trips to the bathroom, tantalising images of Nathan curled up at his side on the bed—and stronger, frightening visions of his months in captivity that stripped away any lingering feelings of comfort he'd had.

Too many times Marcus was pulled back into that cave. The days rolled through his mind like a movie reel, starting with the one thing Marcus could only recall bits and pieces of—the reckless decision that had landed him in Dobson's clutches.

It had seemed harmless enough, stopping in the middle of the night at the rest area between Gila and Colorado. After all, Marcus was the Alpha Anax, the strongest of the shifters in North America. And it was his ego that let him forget being AA was the very reason he couldn't be careless, not for a minute. Less, even, as he'd barely got out of his Hummer before the first dart hit him.

From there it was a void until he came to, shackled in the dank cave. He'd thought at first he'd escape easily. He'd been a vain fool. Joshua Dobson hadn't waited for Marcus to do more than open his eyes before the beatings started. Shifter or not, AA or not, having the skin flayed from his back had sent Marcus straight back into that black void, but not for nearly long enough.

Joshua Dobson had been infuriated and thrilled at the same time to discover how quickly Marcus healed. Dobson had seen Marcus' ability to heal quickly as a challenge, and Marcus had, for the first time in his life, seen that same ability as a curse.

Dobson had broken him, made Marcus want to die. It was only the glimpses of his brother's emotions and the kindness of one terrified but brave little shifter that had kept Marcus from just giving up. He'd known Aidan would blame himself for Marcus' death, and he couldn't let Sean Dobson's risks be for naught.

And he absolutely wouldn't let Joshua Dobson take over as leader of the North American shifters. His own suffering was nothing compared to what his pack would suffer under Dobson's leadership. So Marcus hung on, sometimes through the sheer force of his anger. When the pain was too intense, he'd let the blackness take him. He'd wake up with scars that either healed completely, or ones that left behind silver marks if datura had been used.

The plant was one of the few things that could scar a shifter, and once Dobson discovered that not even Marcus' remarkable powers could heal from the stuff, he'd taken great pleasure in using it often. It was that more than the feel of the whip or whatever Dobson hit him with that haunted Marcus' memories. The datura had been more painful than any of those things, but even so, it couldn't compare to the isolation and fear he'd experienced those few days he'd been left alone to die.

How many times he woke up, his throat sore from crying out, he hadn't a clue. Each time, though, Nathan was there, watching him, comforting him, holding Marcus in strong arms and promising to keep him safe. Marcus would drift back to sleep, clinging to his mate, only to be chased back to wakefulness by another memory of agony and shame.

The last time it happened, he'd seen tears on Nathan's cheeks, and it had hurt, God, it'd hurt worse than anything Joshua Dobson had done to him. And so Marcus shoved the memories down deep, locking them away. He wouldn't hurt his mate, wouldn't share any more of the painful things that had been done to him.

The determination to protect his mate was stronger than the memories of anything that had been done to him, and finally, Marcus slept, safe in the arms of the man who'd saved him.

\* \* \* \*

After forty-eight hours of being bombarded by Marcus' memories of torture at a madman's hands, Nathan was even more exhausted than before. The things he'd seen

through their link, the pain he'd experienced as Marcus relived the beatings, the ache of hunger and thirst, the slow drain of strength from a once-strong body—all of it was now a part of Nathan, just as Marcus was now a part of him. He couldn't walk away from this man, and the link they shared didn't frighten him—much—any more. Not when it had allowed him to see inside this strong, amazing man.

There was plenty Nathan didn't understand. He hadn't been raised around other shifters, so some things just didn't make sense. Why Dobson had taken Marcus in the first place, the way Marcus could heal so fast from almost any injury... Nathan shuddered at that thought. He'd seen the things Dobson used on Marcus, anything from a whip to a limb, whatever the asshole had in his hand. He'd felt the searing agony, or at least Marcus' memories of it. But the worst had been whatever left those silver scars. Nathan didn't know how Marcus hadn't gone insane from the pain, but he hadn't.

The man was more than remarkable, he was...Nathan searched for a word to describe Marcus. Extraordinary, amazing—they all fell short, and maybe they weren't as important as the one fact Nathan knew as surely as he knew his own name.

As he looked at the man beside him, curled into Nathan, holding onto him like a lifeline, he knew what mattered most was that Marcus was his, just as he belonged to the sleeping man. It should have freaked him out, but it didn't, and Nathan wasn't going to waste any more time examining why that was so. He pressed a kiss to Marcus' soft beard then nuzzled the pale hair and closed his eyes, content to hold the man while they slept.

\* \* \* \*

An aroma so enticing he wanted to weep woke Marcus. He blinked sleep-heavy lids at his mate, his mind still fuzzy. Nathan was his mate, *his*. Marcus felt a swell of elation until the slumberous cloud dissipated from his head. Reality slid in and Marcus cringed inwardly as he thought of his emaciated body and all the scars that now shone in silvery streaks and pits on his skin.

The wounds from their confrontation with James and Bryce would heal without leaving a mark, but the others, courtesy of Joshua Dobson, would never go away.

And what was he now, anyway? Nothing but a deposed Alpha Anax, former leader of all North American packs. Even though he hadn't been challenged and hadn't stepped down,

his position would still be gone. Someone would have taken the sovereign, and Marcus was in no shape to challenge them, and wouldn't be for some time.

"You're thinking awfully hard," Nathan said, frowning. He was standing in the doorway holding a tray with a bowl and a mug on it, and the contents of both were steaming. "And you're not sharing anything up here—" Nathan rolled his eyes up until they were nearly all white. "So it's either bad, or out and out filthy, which, just so you know, is *never* bad."

The weight of all Marcus' worries didn't lift, but they did lighten. He pushed himself up until he was leaning against the headboard, the pain the move caused to his newer injuries negligible after everything he'd been through at Dobson's hands.

Nathan grinned, and the suddenness of it completely disarmed Marcus. Nathan just sat down on the side of the bed and placed the tray on Marcus' lap.

"Eat while you stare, buddy. I don't fix a real meal for just anyone. Same goes for the Decadent Dark Hot Chocolate." Nathan's grin stretched wider as he waved a hand at the tray.

Marcus flinched despite knowing Nathan wouldn't harm him. He gave the man an apologetic look and tried to explain. "I haven't seen a friendly face for months."

Except there had been one shifter in Dobson's pack who'd tried to sneak a kind word, along with food and water. Marcus hoped the young man hadn't been killed for it, but he wouldn't have put it past Dobson, even if it had been his own flesh and blood.

Nathan frowned. "Who was that you were just thinking about?"

Marcus thought about not answering. He had decided, after all, not to expose Nathan to any more of the hellish things that had happened to him. But Nathan already knew most of it, didn't he? Marcus peered into the man's pretty eyes and saw not only concern but curiosity and affection as well.

Nathan hid those emotions quickly under creamy white lids. "You don't have to talk about it. It's just that while you were sleeping, I saw things..." He hesitated, his cheeks turning an entrancing shade of red as he peeked through his lashes at Marcus. "I think you're an incredibly strong man. I just wanted you to know that. I've seen what you've been through or some of it at least. That you survived as long as you did is a testament to how exceptional you are and..." Nathan's eyes opened fully and he groaned as the blush on his cheeks spread over his forehead. "God, I sound like an idiot! How did we get from me asking



about a kid you were thinking of to this...this humiliating rendition of a teenage crush I'm doing? It's that link thing, isn't it? Because I'm not usually a mushy guy, you know? Not at all."

Marcus was sure Nathan was more 'mushy' than he wanted to let on, and that was fine with him. He was also puzzled by the fact that Nathan didn't recognise the mate bond strengthening between them, but now wasn't the time to pry. He was enjoying the way Nathan's fair skin darkened, but the man's embarrassment was unnecessary—or would have been, had he known what he should about shifters.

"Anyway, you don't have to talk about it," Nathan went on as he shifted the silverware around on the tray. "I'd just seen that kid in your memories and thought you might want to talk about him. You seem to feel kind of fond of him."

Which would bother his mate, Marcus realised. He didn't want to think of Nathan having any fond thoughts towards other men. It made Marcus want to snarl even to consider it, so despite the cramping hunger pangs—he was used to them now anyway—he would pull out some of the things he'd vowed to keep from his mate. Marcus nodded in the direction of the nightstand. "Set the tray there for me and scoot closer."

Nathan moved the tray, but not without scowling at Marcus first. "A 'please' would be nice. I'm not your houseboy to order around."

"No, you're not," Marcus said as he reached for Nathan's hand and pulled him to his side. "I've obviously lost my manners, haven't I?" He smiled as Nathan grumbled, but the smaller man didn't hesitate to curl up against Marcus. His head fit perfectly on Marcus' shoulder, even as thin as he was. Marcus brought a hand up to Nathan's cheek and brushed away a strand of red hair that had escaped its braid. "Thank you for this." He hugged Nathan with one arm. Nathan grunted and Marcus found himself fighting back a grin. The man was just...delightful.

"Everything's going to have to be reheated, you know."

Marcus quit fighting the smile and let it pull his lips up. Nathan sounded so put out, and yet he snuggled even closer to Marcus. *Such a contrary man.* Marcus was glad his mate wouldn't be a biddable, easy thing. He'd always preferred some fire in his men, and Nathan was promising to be a whole raging wildfire.

"So are you going to talk, or did you just want to snuggle?" Nathan asked, saying the last word like it was something gross. And yet his hand stroked up Marcus' chest, stopping at his collar bone where Nathan proceeded to trace circles over his skin.

Marcus let one of his hands drift down to caress Nathan's arm while the other learned the contours of the man's leanly muscled back. The thin shirt Nathan wore did nothing to dampen his body heat nor the delineated ridges where his spine divided his back.

"Both," Marcus informed him, because the truth was, holding Nathan made it easier to talk. He took a deep breath then blew it out steadily. "Sean Dobson was Joshua Dobson's younger brother. Is still I hope, although he may be dead. Joshua is a twisted fuck, a bully with the power to back up his threats."

Nathan snorted hard enough to tickle the hairs on Marcus' chest. "No, he isn't. He had to tranq dart you and chain you, Marcus. That isn't power, that's fucking evil and malicious. I don't know him, but I don't have to in order to know he wouldn't have been able to take you in a fair fight."

"'Wouldn't have' being the operative words there. He could probably kill me easily now." His strength was already returning with a startling quickness, but that didn't mean he wasn't still weak, or damaged in ways other than physically. A good percentage of winning any battle was mental, and Marcus knew he was a mess in that department.

"That's not going to happen," Nathan muttered. "Bastard better not come anywhere near you."

Marcus tipped his head down and found Nathan staring at him. The fierce expression on Nathan's face—his eyebrows scrunched down and drawn together until the almost met above his pert nose, the spark of anger in his eyes, even the frown that pulled his full lips down at the edges—all of it served to make Marcus feel as if he was something precious to this one man. In that moment, some of the damage he'd gained at Joshua Dobson's hands began to heal. He was still afraid to hope it would do much good, though. Marcus was well aware he was a bag of bones, scarred deeper on the inside than the outside.

"I mean it. I'll neuter that fucker and make him eat his balls if he shows up."

"Vindictive," Marcus murmured as he clenched his thighs together. Even if it wasn't his balls being threatened, they still wanted to crawl up into his body and hide.

Nathan blinked, as if surprised by his proclamation. "Not normally, no, but what Dobson did was...it was...I don't even have words. And that he did it to you? Makes me so

angry I can't think straight." He stopped scowling and now looked confused. "Why is that? From the first second I caught your scent, I couldn't leave you. I thought about it, because I was scared shitless, and I know that makes me a horrible person—"

"No." Marcus brought his hands up to frame Nathan's face, holding him in place when he would have turned away. "No, it doesn't. You would have been a fool not to be scared coming upon a situation like that, and you don't strike me as foolish at all. Yet you didn't let that fear drive you away. You stayed and fought to free me. I think that makes you the exceptional man."

"We're the presidents of each other's fan clubs," Nathan mumbled as Marcus released him, but Marcus didn't miss the pleased smile on his lips or the rosy bloom to his cheeks. "And that doesn't explain why I feel like you belong to me."

Marcus could feel Nathan's confusion, but he was wary of explaining their link just yet. Something inside him warned him to be cautious. If he said something that made Nathan run right then, Marcus wasn't sure he could catch him, and losing his mate was more than he could bear. "It's like that between shifters sometimes, Nathan. If they're very lucky, two of them will just...click." It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't a full explanation, either. Nathan seemed satisfied with it for the moment though.

"Okay." He wiggled, settling into a more comfortable position then turned his attention back to Marcus. "So, about this Sean Dobson? What's the deal with him?"

Marcus easily detected the underlying agitation in Nathan's tone. He wouldn't even have to be a shifter to pick up on it. He linked his hands together over Nathan's hip and sent out as much reassurance as he could to the man. "Sean was tasked with feeding me. His brother was quite clear on the fact that he wanted me to have only enough food and water to survive on. Sean did what he could, sneaking me extra of both. He also tried to clean up some of the worst wounds, although that was more difficult. Joshua caught him twice because my scent was on him. I thought he was going to kill Sean both times, but the last was the worst. Sean couldn't even get up for a week. He wasn't the only one that nearly died then."

Nathan's growl vibrated through Marcus, causing his own chest to rumble. "Was he alive when they left?"

"Yeah," Marcus said, watching that scene unfold behind his closed lids. "Joshua was furious. I think maybe someone in his pack had broken free and he was afraid they'd rat him

out. He ordered me to be left there to die, and Sean argued with him, something I'd not seen happen before. It got very ugly. Sean was able to stash some food and a small bowl of water—Joshua gave his permission for the water, he thought it'd be great fun to draw out my suffering. But he broke Sean's arm right after that, and as he dragged the kid from the cave, Joshua promised that was only the beginning."

"You think he's dead." Nathan's body was tense, his hands fisted on Marcus' chest. He was practically vibrating with anger; the scent of it coated Marcus' nasal passages and throat. His wolf clamoured to be let free, to rend the one who'd infuriated his mate, but Marcus held his wolf back. There was nothing he could do for Sean Dobson right now.

"I do." Marcus admitted. The words tasted bitter on his tongue. His stomach roiled despite the hunger pangs. Sean Dobson was a little thing, not even Nathan's height and nowhere near as muscular. He wouldn't have stood a chance against his much bigger brother.

"He won't get away with what he's done." Nathan pushed himself up. Marcus grudgingly let go of him then promptly gasped when Nathan's leg brushed over his groin. Marcus' dick, which hadn't been the least bit interested while Nathan had all but been lying on him, now perked up with a swiftness that would have done him proud any other time. After the conversation he and Nathan had just had, Marcus wasn't in the mood for sex. Even if he were, there was still the matter of his ravaged body and—

"Oh, stop whatever it is you're thinking." Nathan eased off the bed but stood at the side, smirking at him. "I get that this isn't the time, but that doesn't mean you should go all moody on me." The smirk turned to a contrite looking grin. "Actually, you'll probably think I'm a pervert, because I sure did, but that first night you were here, you kind of got hard and kind of grabbed my hand and..." Nathan averted his gaze as he hunched his shoulders.

Marcus thought the man looked adorable but he didn't have any cause to be ashamed. In fact, he should be proud, because if the orgasm Marcus had only thought he'd dreamed of having had really happened, then Nathan, quite simply, rocked. Even as out of it as he'd been, Marcus had thought his head was going to blow right off his neck. "I remember. I thought I was dreaming, but I grabbed your hand. I hadn't been touched like that since before I was abducted, Nathan. It was exquisite. Please don't regret giving me that."

Nathan raised his head and he shrugged as if shaking off his guilt. His lips twitched and he cocked one hip, propping a hand on it. "Does that mean I don't have to regret jacking myself off at the same time? Because that was the absolute best climax I've had in ages."

The confession was almost enough to sweep away Marcus' doubts about himself. It *did* quash the moodiness Nathan had accused him off. "That would be a shame, so no, I don't think you need to feel bad about that, either."

They stared at each other as the air around them thickened with the scents of their arousal. Marcus took a careful sniff, his lids drooping closed as he absorbed the mix of man and need, his mate's earthy aroma tinged with the fragrance of pre cum. The smell was familiar, already logged in his brain as *Nathan's pleasure*. He opened his eyes and mouth at the same time, desperate to ask for something, a taste, a touch. Instead his stomach growled loudly and Marcus found himself smacked back into reality by the sound.

He was fucked up, in no shape to do the things he wanted. Nathan was handsome, healthy, unscarred. It made Marcus even more self-conscious of his own physical imperfections, and he quickly blocked that realisation before he could over-share.

"I should warm up your dinner."

Marcus gave a jerky nod as he tried to will his body to behave. "Have you eaten yet?" he asked as Nathan picked up the tray. The man was all fluid grace even when it came to the simple task.

Nathan held the tray in one palm as he faced Marcus. "Before you woke up. I was going to make something with more protein but the steaks were gone."

"Gone?" Nathan's expression had darkened as he spoke, and the man was shaking his head now as if Marcus had repeated back the wrong word. He knew he hadn't.

"I don't want to talk about it." He turned on his heel and left the room.

Marcus mulled over the short conversation while Nathan was in the kitchen. Nathan had made it clear the discussion was over, but for the life of him, Marcus couldn't figure out why. It bugged him, because Nathan seemed to be a rational man. There was no way he could just let it drop, not when Nathan's behaviour seemed so *irrational*.

Not wanting to risk getting scalded by the steaming food and drink on the tray, Marcus waited until Nathan once again set it on the nightstand. Then he patted a spot beside his hip. "Sit." Nathan's eyes narrowed and those full lips thinned. "Please," Marcus added.

Apparently Nathan's glares could scorch every bit as much as the dinner he'd prepared. Marcus wouldn't have been surprised if that look had singed the hair off his head.

It didn't, however, keep him from prying after Nathan sat down. "Will you tell me what just happened before you went to the kitchen?" If nothing else, he'd always been a quick learner. Nathan wouldn't have cause to level that glare on him again, not for lack of manners, anyways.

And if Marcus had thought Nathan had given him the evil eye before, it was nothing compared to the narrow-eyed look the man pinned on him now. "I don't want to talk about those other two," Nathan snapped. "And you need to eat, not ask me questions."

It wasn't just anger causing Nathan's body to tense. There was fear and disgust leaking from his mind to Marcus' in the split-second before Nathan broke the connection. Marcus watched him for a moment, unable to look away. His wolf wouldn't allow him to submit any more than the man in him would.

Nathan finally grunted and dropped his gaze. "Just eat already. Please."

Mollified by Nathan's capitulation, Marcus twisted around and lifted the warm bowl from the tray. The aromas coming from the food made his mouth water. Marcus' hand shook as he spooned up a bite. He leant over the bowl and moaned as the flavours exploded on his tongue.

"Beats the protein shakes I've been pouring down you," Nathan said, smiling once again. Marcus nodded and scooped up some more of the goulash. He watched Nathan as he chewed. The man was really very attractive. Marcus hadn't particularly been drawn to redheads before, but he certainly was now, or at least he was drawn to *one* redhead.

Nathan arched a fine, dark-auburn brow at him. "See something you like?"

Marcus swallowed then dragged his gaze away long enough to spot the cup of hot chocolate. He lifted the cup and cradled it in his hand before taking a sip of the liquid. "Yeah," he finally said, to which Nathan merely grinned. Marcus took another drink and set the bowl down beside him. Then he let himself have a few minutes to truly examine his mate.

With Nathan sitting facing him as he was, Marcus had a much better view of the man, and without the lust pounding through his veins, he could actually process what he was seeing instead of thinking about how badly he wanted to feel Nathan's cock spearing into him. *And that kind of thinking is going to distract me all over again. Stop it.*

He didn't hide from Nathan how handsome he thought the man was, with those high, chiselled cheekbones and large, uptilted eyes. Marcus had never seen eyes the colour of pines before. The deep green was ringed with a smoky grey, and a starburst pattern of lighter grey circled the pupils. As he watched, Nathan's pupils dilated, pushing the green and grey out to a thin ring.

"So." Nathan blinked and lowered his gaze, hiding his entrancing eyes behind long lids and thick auburn lashes. "I take it you're gay too, then, since you're looking like you'd eat me up if you could – and you didn't go apeshit over me touching you."

"How could you even doubt it?" Marcus' lips twitched under his furry beard and moustache. He hated the scruff, would love for it to be gone as soon as possible, but, for now, he wanted to look at the man Destiny had decreed as his.

Milky white skin offset the rich colour of his hair: auburn laced with lighter shades of red, and straight and long. Marcus had seen it unbraided and yearned to feel that gorgeous hair on his skin. "*Turn your head,*" Marcus asked, thinking the sharp point to Nathan's chin gave him a fox-like appearance even in his human form. "*And yes, to answer your question.*"

Nathan looked at him through his lashes and slowly turned to give Marcus his profile. "Well, it's always best to make sure. I didn't want to assume since you said it'd been a while since anyone touched you, you know."

The slightly pointed upturned nose was almost feminine in its delicate appearance, although Marcus had more sense than to let that thought slip through. He'd felt Nathan's anger boil and crackle, and wasn't eager to find himself wearing his dinner.

"It hadn't been so long that I've forgotten what does it for me." Marcus cleared the dishes off the bed. After returning them to the tray, he took Nathan's hand in his and tugged him forward. Nathan came willingly, stopping when his lips were only inches from Marcus'.

Marcus released his hand, reaching instead for the long, thick braid hanging down Nathan's back. It was cool and silky, and Marcus immediately imagined the drag and weight of the tresses over his aching cock and balls. He wasn't hard yet, but a few more seconds of feeling the heavy braid in his hand –

Marcus dropped the plait and snapped his hand back. He tried to throw up the walls he needed to keep Nathan from delving into his thoughts and feelings, but Nathan pinned him with a puzzled look, his Cupid's bow of a mouth pursing. He leant back and folded his arms over his chest.

"What just freaked you out? I was enjoying the detailed porno running through your head."

"Nothing," Marcus gritted out, reaching for the cup or the bowl, he didn't care which, he just needed to put something between them. He snagged the drink and brought it to his lips and sipping carefully. The taste of rich, bittersweet chocolate slid over his tongue and Marcus closed his eyes and moaned, forgetting for the moment how disgusting he now looked and how much Nathan deserved a better mate than him.

"You're brooding again, but I guess you're allowed." Nathan nudged Marcus until he scooted his legs over to give Nathan more room. "Since you don't seem to feel like talking, I will."

Marcus opened his eyes just enough to see his mate and the grin on his face. "About?"

"About me, the gym I own where I teach gymnastics classes and hordes of little girls with dreams of being cheerleaders. I'm actually a decently successful business owner. Not rich," Nathan tacked on, "but I make a nice profit and I love what I do."

Marcus murmured his assent and sipped the chocolate drink in between taking bites of his meal as Nathan entertained him with anecdotes about cartwheeling kids and chanting cheerleaders in training. By the time he wound down, Marcus was full and more than a little groggy, but there was something he needed to ask, someone he needed to speak to, whose voice he needed to hear.

"Do you have a phone I could use?" he asked, anticipation making his heart slam in his chest.

Nathan paled slightly and shook his head. "No, I...I did." He stopped and cleared his throat, a haunted look coming into his eyes. "They—the other shifters, they did a smash-up on anything we could have used to communicate with. My laptop, broadband card, cell phone—they're all in little pieces in the trash."

Marcus could feel Nathan's discomfort, his need to get off the subject, but he didn't have the strength to pry, not when disappointment was pressing down on him and he was so tired he could hardly think.

Nathan lightly rubbed his hands over his thighs as if brushing the material off, or perhaps, wiping something from his hands. He glanced up from watching the movement and looked at Marcus. "So, uh, who'd you need to call? I still have my car. In a few days, if you're doing better, we can head into Ruidoso and you can..." Nathan sucked the edge of his



bottom lip in between his teeth then released it. The skin glistened, tempting. Marcus' mouth watered as he imagined taking that lip between his own teeth and sucking hard.

"Actually, you're doing a lot better than I'd expected," Nathan was saying, a slight frown marring his brow. "Maybe it's all the protein shakes I poured down you. Either that, or you heal even faster than I do."

He used to. Apparently, he still did, Marcus corrected silently. *I guess losing my position as Alpha Anax didn't change that, at least.* It was too bad that didn't make him feel any better. There were too many other things losing his position had changed for him. Marcus drifted back to sleep thinking about all the ways he was damaged, and he couldn't believe it wasn't permanent, either.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan circled his challenger, relieved to note the black wolf—Jacob Flanders, cousin to and devoted follower of Joshua Dobson—was panting harder than he was, and limping from the bite wound to his rear leg. Aidan had snapped the bone clean through, feeling the grind and crack as blood filled his muzzle. In return, he'd taken a deep wound himself, his right shoulder throbbing and steadily oozing blood down his white coat.

The shifters witnessing the challenge were silent. Even Zane's presence in Aidan's mind was muted, the man too worried about distracting Aidan to dare risk even encouraging words. Aidan could feel Zane's concern just as he felt his confidence. Zane didn't doubt Aidan would win, but how badly he'd be wounded weighed heavily on Zane's mind. The bite to his shoulder wasn't the only one, just as Flanders had more than the broken, torn leg slowing him down.

Snarling and gnashing his teeth, Flanders charged at him, a wild, reckless move that signified his death. Flanders couldn't expect Aidan to stand still and allow himself to be taken down, not when murder gleamed clearly in the black wolf's yellow eyes.

Aidan leapt to the side as Flanders stumbled. He slammed into the dark wolf, his injured shoulder bearing the brunt of the impact. Pain sliced through Aidan. Bright white spots exploded in front of his eyes, and he nearly dropped to the ground. Twisting his neck, Aidan clamped his jaws around Flanders' throat, biting down, the threat clear as he pinned Flanders to the ground. Submit or die.

The impulse to rip Flanders' throat out was tempered by the knowledge the man might truly rather serve Aidan than die, now that he was faced with the dire truth. Aidan locked his gaze with the other wolf's. The hatred burning in that yellow glare seemed to imply Flanders chose death, but Aidan needed to be sure.

Zane stepped into the circle where the challenge took place. Aidan could scent him even over the almost stifling odour of blood. His mate knelt, placing a soothing hand on Aidan's shoulder.

"Do you submit, Jacob Flanders?" Zane asked calmly. "You have only to agree and the Alpha Anax will –"

Despite Aidan's hold on him, Flanders snarled and tried to lunge at Zane, his teeth narrowly missing him. Aidan's jaws clamped down instinctively, the need to protect his mate rising up before Flanders could make another sound. Aidan cringed even as he bit deep, shaking his head to ensure a quick kill. A gurgling sound slipped from Flanders' muzzle, then he was shifting, and Aidan's stomach heaved as he found himself tearing into a man instead of a beast.

He recoiled, knowing it was too late. The damage was done, and he'd see this moment forever in his mind. Flanders managed a sickly, smug smile as Aidan shifted as well, feeling something more than guilt wash over him. Fear, icy cold then fiery hot, rippled over him in waves.

"Now you'll never know where we left him," Flanders rasped, his shifter abilities trying their best to heal what couldn't be healed. "He'll die, chained, scared...alone. In my pocket...something for you." Flanders burbled, a sickening death chuckle as his breath stilled.

Aidan's heart stuttered, pain spearing through him. He reached for Flanders even as he saw the life leave his eerie eyes, smelt the odour of death. "No! You fucking bastard!"

"Alex!" Zane snapped. "Bring Flanders' clothes!"

Strong arms encircled Aidan, pulling him back against Zane. "He knew he wasn't going to defeat me once I took him down. He may have had Marcus, or known where he was, and I killed him before I could find out –"

"You didn't know, and he wouldn't have told you anyway. Flanders was obviously loyal to Joshua Dobson. I bet Dobson planned this *knowing* his own cousin would die. He

was never a match for you.” Zane rocked Aidan slightly, murmuring softly, “He may not have known anything about Marcus’ disappearance, maybe he just wanted to hurt you —”

“I don’t think so. And I think this proves Joshua Dobson took Marcus. Jacob Flanders wouldn’t have been a member of anyone else’s pack.”

Aidan and Zane looked up at Alex, who stood in front of them, Flanders’ dead body between them. His arm was extended, and in his hand was a photograph. Aidan felt the fury enveloping his body even as he reached for the picture, already able to make out a nude, gaunt form with dirt-caked pale blond hair.

By the time he had the picture in front of him and could see it clearly, his fury had turned to agony as he stared at his brother’s emaciated, battered body. He roared his anguish as the image of Marcus stared back at him with a hopeless expression and dull, dark eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Nathan let Marcus sleep for a while after he’d eaten and Nathan had redressed his injuries. There were signs of older wounds, silver lines, some jagged, some straight, and well over a dozen silver, pitted marks on Marcus’ chest, stomach, back and thighs. Nathan even thought he’d seen a few on the man’s genitals when they’d showered, but he’d felt like a pervert when he’d tried to move things aside and get a closer look.

The scars puzzled him since shifters...didn’t scar. As much as he’d like to think he was special, different from other shifters, today’s events had proven Nathan was not. How could he believe he wasn’t like them after what he’d done outside?

Shying away from those thoughts, Nathan dug in the bathroom cabinet until he found what he was looking for. He’d picked up on more than Marcus knew he had earlier, and while he couldn’t do anything about the man’s disgust with his thin form, at least not yet, he *could* help him rediscover the attractive man underneath all the facial fur.

As for the long, curly blond hair, well, as much as Nathan liked it, Marcus’ memories of himself had clearly depicted him with a cut so short and pale that Nathan had first thought the man bald. The fact that he’d been distracted and more interested in memorising the man’s gorgeous mug might have contributed to Nathan’s first erroneous assumption.

“Scissors, electric razor, good ol’ kajillion-bladed razor, shaving cream.” Nathan considered his selections and scratched at his own chin. He’d never grown any facial hair,

and if that made him a freak, oh well. The only reason any of the shaving stuff was here was because he preferred to keep the rest of his body—from the neck down, anyway—virtually hairless as well.

“Oh! Washcloth, hand towel...” Nathan turned to dig in the small linen cupboard beside the sink. A glimpse of movement in his peripheral vision was the only warning he got, that and the intoxicating scent he knew was solely Marcus’.

“Did you sleep well?” Nathan turned, cloths in hand, and felt his dick swell in his sweats. Marcus had wrapped the sheet around him, but damned if it mattered. Nathan had been dealing—or not dealing, as the case may be—with spontaneous erections since he’d first caught a hint of Marcus’ smell. He was resigned, and not unhappily so, to the fact that Marcus just did it for him.

He wasn’t as easily accepting of the man being a shifter, but that was a hurdle Nathan knew he’d have to cross. Rick wouldn’t be happy about it, and Rick’s opinion was one of the few that mattered. This was something he really needed to examine—later. He knew with a surety that thrummed throughout his body that Marcus wasn’t a mindless, vicious killer. Neither was he, but, again, he didn’t want to dwell on any of that right now.

Marcus was staring at him with an unfathomable expression. If it wasn’t for all the facial fuzz, Nathan might have a clue what the other man was thinking. Prying through the weird link they shared wasn’t productive—sometime during the past few hours, Marcus had put up some very effective mental barriers.

Nathan crossed his arms over his chest, tucking the cloths under his elbows, and jutted out one hip as he glared at the bigger man. “That’s not fair. You can pop into my head whenever, but I can’t do the same?” Nathan twisted his upper body round as he waved one hand at the items on the counter by the sink. He turned back to Marcus and thrust the washcloth and hand towel at him. “I *thought* you might like to whack off that gnarly beard, but you probably already knew that.”

Nathan wanted to take back the bitchy words immediately, but Marcus’ eyes crinkled in the corner and a huff of skittery breath Nathan suspected might be laughter sent all of Nathan’s thoughts scattering in the wind. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He knew he had to look like a fool, but he was utterly astounded by the resiliency of the man before him.

"You're cute when you're pissy," Marcus scratched out. "I think I like it." *"Makes the green in your eyes darken and the silver stand out in an amazing contrast."*

Nathan rolled his pretty eyes and huffed. "Flatterer. Way to kill off a hissy fit. Come on. Sit on the toilet and let me get to work."

Marcus moved steadily, his strength already returning, Nathan noted. Nathan also couldn't miss the fact that, seated as Marcus was, his head came too close to the middle of Nathan's chest. Nathan's sexual attraction to this man was growing exponentially with each interaction between them, and he knew Marcus was drawn to him as well. What he *didn't* know was whether they would be able to work things out between them. Men often made the wrong assumption about Nathan's preferences, and it'd caused more than one uncomfortable scene when he'd set them right.

Tapping his foot as he stared into Marcus' eyes, Nathan gave a mental shrug. "Top, bottom, or switch?"

"What?" Marcus barely got the word out before Nathan sensed the man's sudden swell of panic. Marcus lowered his head and stared at something on the floor.

"Marcus?" Nathan glanced at the floor just to make sure there wasn't something he needed to stomp on or run from down there. *Nope, nothing but bare toes and Marcus' attempt to evade.*

"Not this time, sweetheart." Nathan's cheeks burned at having let the endearment slip out, but, despite Marcus' inner strength, there was a fragility to him that made Nathan ache for the man. Cupping a hand under Marcus' chin—at least, he thought it was his chin underneath all that crinkly hair—Nathan pushed gently until Marcus grudgingly raised his head. "Top, bottom, or switch?"

Marcus still wouldn't look at him, but Nathan could feel the fine tremors rocking through the man. "Nothing now," Marcus said, so softly Nathan thought at first he'd misunderstood.

He played the words, sound and cadence over in his head. Nope, he'd heard right. Nathan frowned so hard he felt the beginnings of a headache. What did that even mean? Had someone—

"Marcus," Nathan spoke quietly, infusing his voice with as much warmth and caring as he knew how. "Did someone...were you..." *Shit! If I can't even say it, how could I ever expect*

him *to*? Nathan took a deep breath and forced himself not to rush out the question or garble it into one long, unintelligible word. “Did someone rape you or hurt you sexually?”

Marcus’ entire body jerked in a denial that was sent snapping into Nathan’s head. “No! *I just...just...*”

Nathan’s relief was swallowed up by his confusion. “Okay, that’s good, great, excellent. What, then, is the problem? Are you impotent? I could see where that could –”

“No!” This time Marcus’ denial was vocal and loud, and Nathan was glad to know the man’s voice was recovering. He’d like to keep from sustaining damage to his eardrums, though. Tact was something he lacked at times but needed to scrounge up quick. Before he could think of a response, Nathan’s hand was yanked from Marcus’ chin and shoved against a very large and very hard sheet-covered erection. Nathan felt the smile curling his lips even as he started to squeeze the tempting package.

Marcus yelped and tried to jerk Nathan’s hand away, but he also sent the man an image of how tight a grip he wanted to get on a very important – and very functional – piece of his body. While Marcus didn’t let go of Nathan’s wrist, he did stop trying to emasculate himself via the hand hold.

“Now,” Nathan purred, bringing his face only inches from Marcus’. “Top. Bottom. Switch.” He heard Marcus swallow and saw the nervous flicker of his eyes.

“I don’t have time for this, I –”

“Could have answered the question minutes ago and not cost yourself so much time, hmm?” Nathan was not giving the man an out, because the more nervous Marcus got, the more those mental barriers were dropping, and Nathan thought he was getting a glimpse of the real reason Marcus didn’t want to answer.

“Bottom, but nothing is happening so –”

Nathan tuned out the rest of the denial as he allowed himself one stroke of Marcus’ length. He pulled his hand away and didn’t miss Marcus’ hiss as he did so. “I didn’t say anything was happening. You were the one with the vivid porno rolling through our minds earlier,” Nathan pointed out, trying not to let Marcus know he knew the true reason the other man was trying to deny there’d be any fucking between them.

There would be, Nathan didn’t doubt it, but he’d give Marcus a little time to come to terms with it. If the man felt even half the attraction Nathan did – and Nathan could tell by the scent of Marcus’ arousal that he was every bit as turned on as Nathan – then the

insecurities plaguing him would soon crumble under the need to feel Nathan's dick buried in his ass.

It was probably a good idea for Marcus to gather some more strength first anyway — Nathan knew he was voracious and had worn out every lover he'd ever had. Stamina of the shifter, no doubt. Or he was just really, really good. Nathan would take a combination of the two.

Stepping back to the sink, Nathan did his best not to smirk, though he thought he failed and he was more than certain Marcus liked it. The man's eyes lit up and the outer edges crinkled.

"Man, I have got to see that." Nathan trailed a fingertip over the wrinkles that framed Marcus' eye. He wanted to see the smile that caused those fine lines. "I was going to ask if you wanted any of this stuff left on your face, but I think the matter has just been taken out of your hands — though I'm not averse to a little bit of hair, like a soul patch or something."

Marcus' crinkles disappeared and his voice conveyed his horror at the thought of a soul patch. "Just take it all off then."

"Oh, I will sweetheart," Nathan said in a smarmy tone, leering at Marcus, "and you're gonna enjoy every minute of it."

\* \* \* \*

Clutching the sheet tighter at his chest, Marcus struggled to tamp down his arousal and corral his wayward thoughts. Keeping Nathan out of his head was getting more difficult the longer they were together, and Marcus knew he wouldn't be able to fight his instincts to mate with Nathan if they grew much stronger.

The idea of Nathan seeing his nude body in a state of arousal, of having the man cover him while Marcus was nothing more than skin and bones, was almost more terrifying than the months he'd spent in the cave chained like a wild beast. How could Nathan, even with the bond between them growing by the moment, bear to look at him, to see his ribs, the knots of his spine, to touch him? And there was no way Marcus wanted to let the man look at him from behind. The ass he'd once been so proud of couldn't be tempting at all. If it weren't for them being mates, Nathan wouldn't look at him once, much less twice.

"Quit glowering and twitching," Nathan told him, tugging on his beard. "You'll make me snip off the tip of your nose or something and I'll feel bad. I'm absolutely no fun when I'm sulking or in a guilt-induced funk."

"Sorry," Marcus mumbled, only to be shushed by Nathan. An image of Gabe Staley, mate to Mika Blackwell, danced behind Marcus' closed lids. Nathan, with his teasing snark and bossy attitude, reminded Marcus of an edgier Gabe.

Thoughts of the human who was mated to a shifter brought to focus Marcus' lost responsibilities, and he wondered if Gabe had ever been brought into the shifter fold. If so, who had performed the ceremony, turning the human into a shifter? Marcus knew Gabe would never have done it the only commonly known way, which involved turning the pleasurable experience of a sixty-nine into a biting, bleeding, cum-covered nightmare. Both partners had to be bitten as they came, a mixture of semen and blood ingested, or, in the case of a female, her juices and blood. Most human-shifter mates took a pass on that way of converting. Marcus couldn't blame them.

Nathan gasped and dropped the scissors. Marcus looked up to find a traumatised expression on his mate's face.

"Are you serious? That's the way a human becomes a shifter?" Nathan spluttered

Marcus felt tendrils of disgust with shifters as a whole winding through Nathan's thoughts. He wondered what Nathan's problem was with them. It wasn't as if Nathan was human himself. "It's the known way. There is another, though."

Nathan glared so hard his eyes started to cross. "Well, why the hell would anyone do it that way if there's another option? That makes no sense at all." He reached down and patted the thick erection tenting his sweats. Marcus had been trying to ignore that tempting slab and the spot of moisture that had soaked the front of the material. "Don't you worry, boy, no one is *ever* sinking their teeth into you. Scrape, maybe." Nathan winked at Marcus and rubbed his cock. "But absolutely never, ever any biting. Got that, sweetheart?"

And just like that, Marcus' thoughts of his life before his abduction disappeared behind other much more pressing ones. If he closed his eyes, he could picture Nathan kneeling before him, those small, full lips stretched wide around Marcus' dick. He'd fill Nathan's mouth, bury the tip in Nathan's throat—

"Oh yeah, we can do that," Nathan purred in a voice so sensual it almost startled Marcus as much as the firm grip on his erection. "It's amazing how quick my hands can get



to where I want them, isn't it? But, more importantly, do *you* want them there?" Nathan pumped Marcus from root to tip, swirling his thumb over the pre cum gathered at the slit. "Or would you rather have my mouth? Just tell me and it's yours."

Marcus wanted to hide, wanted to be the man he used to be—strong, assured, attractive. He opened his mouth to say something, not the pathetic crap he thought about himself, and not what came out.

"Please," Marcus whimpered, his entire body burning, his veins shooting lust and fire throughout his core. "It's been so long..." Since he'd been touched, felt compassion and companionship, which Nathan exuded. Those things would have been enough, but Nathan's desire slammed into Marcus, destroying his resistance and obliterating his pride.

If he could just have this, one moment of forgetting everything bad and everything he lacked, why shouldn't he grab on to it with both hands? It didn't matter why Nathan wanted him, only that he did.

Opening his own eyes, Marcus found himself ensnared by the lust and caring he saw in the depths of Nathan's. Some soft emotion darkened the pine green colour even as Nathan's entire face lit up. The scent of his body was a mix of desire and happiness, wanting and affection. Marcus couldn't fight it and didn't want to.

Forcing his white-knuckled grip on the sheet to relax, Marcus dropped the material and hoped Nathan wouldn't be turned off by his scarred, bony body. Placing himself literally and figuratively in his mate's hands, Marcus opened his mind fully to Nathan.

"Please touch me."

## Chapter Six

Pressing back against the flow of too much information at once clambering into his head, Nathan narrowed his focus to two things—the gift Marcus was giving him and the silk-encased steel-hard cock in his hand. Marcus hadn't specified a preference, but Nathan knew what his was. Dropping to his knees, he shouldered Marcus' thighs apart. Gaze locked on the fat plum-coloured head, mouth watering at the promise of tasting this spectacular man, Nathan dipped his head down and laved the tiny opening for his first taste of Marcus.

He didn't know which of them shuddered the hardest or moaned the loudest, and Nathan didn't particularly care. All he wanted was more. Sliding his hand down to the base of Marcus' long dick, Nathan cupped the man's heavy balls in his other hand.

"Please," Marcus whispered, his voice cracking as he dug his fingers into the back of Nathan's hair.

Nathan opened his mouth and sucked the spongy cap into his mouth, twirling his tongue around the sensitive knot of nerves on the underside. Marcus' breath rushed over the top of Nathan's head, the sound a sob rather than a gasp. Nathan's eyes pricked as he felt the intensity of the man's need, not for a blowjob or a fuck, but just to be touched, to feel cared for, remembered, alive. He sought to reassure Marcus even as he sucked the man's cock harder.

*"All of those things, sweetheart, you are all of those things."*

Marcus' breath hitched and Nathan delved the tip of his tongue into the weeping slit, sucking out as much of Marcus' juices as he could. The hands clamped around the back of Nathan's head clenched, pulling the fine hairs not woven into his braid. The zing of pain speared Nathan on and he slowly sucked Marcus' dick down, hollowing his cheeks out, giving the man the pressure and sensation he needed.

The tip of Marcus' cock tapped the back of Nathan's throat before he'd sunk all of the tasty length into his mouth. Nathan purred his approval of the broad dick, swallowing convulsively, willing his throat to open.

Marcus screamed, a hoarse shout that sounded painful, and thrust his cock deep. Nathan rumbled at the feel of Marcus buried inside him, wrinkling his nose as the wiry

white pubes tickled the tip of it. He drew in the musky scent that was all Marcus, a mix of pine and oak, earth and man, and it burned in Nathan's gut, drawing his balls up as his own cock pulsed in his pants.

Swallowing so the muscles in his throat constricted, Nathan then swirled his tongue around a thick vein in which he could feel Marcus' pulse. He rolled the man's balls in his hand, tugging on one nut then the other. Pulling back up the length of Marcus' dick, Nathan made a tight seal of his lips and sucked until his jaw ached, twirling his tongue to lap at as much of the meat in his mouth as he possibly could.

The sounds Marcus was making were eroticism vocalised—grunts, pants, murmured words and curses, and long, throaty moans. Nathan pumped his hand up and down the spit-slick shaft as he suckled and nipped at the crown. He sought out the slit again, pulling salty-sweet liquid from the opening as he twisted his wrist and set a faster rhythm with his hand.

Marcus was writhing, his hips jerking in little spasms as Nathan worked his cock. He caught a few of the hairs covering Marcus' sac and tugged just enough to make the man feel it. Marcus planted one hand on the wall and shouted, shoving Nathan back down on his shaft, filling Nathan's mouth and throat again.

Nathan moaned at the forceful move, so turned on he knew he would come when Marcus did if not before. He held still and let Marcus plunge into his mouth over and over, soaring on the man's pleasure, the sting of pain from Marcus' grip, the loss of control as Marcus cried out and his balls drew taut. Nathan pushed back against Marcus' hold just enough to feel the spurt of cum shoot onto his tongue.

The taste of Marcus sank into Nathan, burrowing in his cells, binding with his DNA. He knew in that instant he'd never get enough of this incredible man, would never let him go because Marcus didn't want him to, and Nathan wouldn't be able to bear it. The knowledge flooded into him with each jet of semen flooding his mouth, and Nathan shook from the inside out as his balls sent hot bursts of spunk up through his prick, spewing into his sweats.

If asked, Nathan would deny he'd done more than lose track of time, but somewhere between the time when he and Marcus had come and Nathan's awareness had returned, he'd pulled Marcus down to the floor and covered them with the sheet. The bathroom floor may not have been the best place for them to crash, but Nathan had been damned if he could have found the strength to move when Marcus fit so perfectly in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

"There has to be some way to find him." Aidan paced the living room, his long legs making a circuit of the large area rapidly. Zane watched from his seat on the couch, his arms aching to hold Aidan but knowing he needed to move. The picture of Marcus had devastated them both, seeing him in chains, his formerly heavily-muscled body pared down to prominent bones and pale, bruised skin. The look in Marcus' eyes had been so pained Zane had nearly wept. His eyes had blurred with tears even as he'd noticed the scars on the once-broad chest, silver-white flecks and long, thin lines.

Zane knew marks like that, had several smaller ones himself, and he knew Aidan recognised them for what they were as well. Datura, a common plant in the southwest, incredibly toxic to shifters. Even a small amount could cause death. Zane's uncle had used a diluted mixture of it on him more than once, forcing him to inhale the mind-altering substance. His memories had been scrambled, his skin pitted with scars where the nasty stuff had been used to inflict excruciating pain.

Wounds from datura were one of the few things that could leave permanent scars on a shifter, their healing abilities incapable of eradicating the damage done by the plant. And what would be the long-term effects from exposure to datura? Marcus had more damage on his body from it in the past six months than Zane had retained over his lifetime.

"Zane?"

Zane blinked and looked at his mate. He'd been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't even realised Aidan had stopped pacing and was now standing still in front of him. "I'm sorry, I was thinking. What did you say?"

Aidan twisted round and flopped on to the couch beside Zane, heedless of the injuries he'd received in the challenge earlier. "I said, do you have any ideas on how to find Marcus? If Dobson left him alone, I don't—" Aidan's voice cracked. Zane reached for his hand, feeling his turmoil as well as his own. "I don't know how long Marcus has been alone, if he has any food, water, any way to stay warm. I keep thinking I should know. I should be able to *feel* where he is, if he's hurting."

Though Aidan didn't say so, Zane also knew he felt like he'd failed his brother again, and worse, by killing Jacob Flanders, their one possible lead, than ever before. Zane couldn't convince Aidan he wasn't at fault for his brother's abduction any more than he could convince him he wasn't responsible for not knowing Joshua Dobson was the one who'd

taken Marcus. He'd tried, during the past several months, and again today after Flanders had spewed his sick shit. Still, he wouldn't give up.

"He knows you're looking for him," Zane said, infusing his voice with the conviction he felt. "You said he could always sense your distress when it was dire enough, and I don't think there's been a more extreme time than these past six months. He's got to have felt it, and he'd kick your ass for blaming yourself."

Aidan huffed and squeezed Zane's hand. "He would. Marcus always believed himself to be responsible for everything, carried the weight of the shifters and the world on his shoulders."

Images of Marcus' emaciated frame flashed into Zane's mind as Aidan moaned. He leant closer as Aidan shared his memories of the photograph. Marcus' shoulders, once broad and thick with muscles, were, in the picture, still broad, but now each bone seemed to bulge under the skin. His shoulders and clavicle were prominently displayed, his ribs clearly evident, his stomach concave, and his hips were sharp blades that looked as though they were capable of slicing through the thin skin covering them.

"We'll find him. Alex is looking for any hint in the picture. He's as determined as we are to find Marcus and bring him home." Alex had never once given up hope, though whether it was guilt, loyalty, or a combination of both that drove the man, Zane didn't know. Didn't care, either, as long as he found Marcus.

As if conjured by Zane's thoughts, a knock on the door and a light, tangy smoke scent signalled Alex's arrival. Aidan was up and opening the door before the last rap of Alex's knuckles, and Zane was right on his heels.

"What have you found out?" Aidan asked before he had the door opened more than an inch. Zane hooked his arm through Aidan's and tugged until he stepped back and opened the door wide enough for Alex to enter.

Alex shoved his hands into his front pockets and looked down. "Nothing from the picture."

Zane's stomach plummeted as Aidan tensed beside him.

"But," Alex continued, "Alison called. She got a lead from someone in the Gila pack, a loyal member who got a call from a relative. This man, Stewart Combs, was panicking. Seems the alpha he was following disbanded his pack, sent them scattering, after having them help

abduct Marcus and keep him prisoner." He looked at Aidan expectantly, and Zane couldn't understand what the man wanted. Apparently neither could Aidan.

"Where?" Aidan snapped. "Tell me that and *then* I'll tell you what a good job you and your sister have done."

Alex blanched and dropped his gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry, I'm just—" He stopped when Aidan growled. "She said Stewart told her they'd been keeping Marcus in a cave in one of the mountain ranges close to Ruidoso. She didn't have an exact location, but Alison was going after Stewart. His sister, Mary Combs—that's who he called—agreed to meet with Stewart and help Alison set a trap. Alison'll have him soon. She doesn't fail in any task."

"Get us a private jet," Aidan ordered. "I want to leave here as soon as possible, within the next few hours at the very latest." He turned and strode towards the bedroom without waiting for a reply.

Alex opened his mouth to protest.

"I wouldn't. Aidan will rip your head off and leave you here," Zane assured the captain. "You can't honestly expect him to sit here while someone else goes after his brother?" He'd thought Alex had more sense than that.

"No, but it'll take me at least an hour or two to get things ready so we can leave, and—" Alex paused, his gaze darting from Zane to the bedroom door then back to Zane. "I have to make sure he's safe, and you as well. I failed to do so with Marcus, and I don't want anything to happen to Aidan. Just because Stewart Combs said they'd left Marcus alone doesn't mean it's the truth. It could turn out to be a trap to lure Aidan there. Or..." Alex looked away, swallowing convulsively. "Marcus might not be alive."

Zane knew he looked as angry as he felt when Alex cringed and hunched his shoulders. Try as he might, Zane wasn't able to hide the emotion, or the cause of it, from his mate. "I suggest you leave, now," he advised as Aidan's fury erupted, washing over Zane as well. Aidan's shout rattled the windows as Alex hastily exited the apartment.

"How could he *say* that!" Aidan roared as he tore into the living room. "We're so close to finding Marcus, and Alex spews that...that bullshit!"

"It's only because he's concerned about you," Zane said as he met his mate halfway across the room. Zane wrapped himself around Aidan, hoping to soothe them both. Aidan snarled and held Zane tight enough to make breathing difficult. The air left Zane's lungs with a *whoosh* and Aidan let up on his hold, still clinging, but not as forcefully. "You know

Alex would do anything to protect you. As tactless as his words seemed, he truly didn't mean anything cruel."

If he did, Zane would flay him alive, but he had no reason to doubt Alex, and neither did Aidan. Alex had been a loyal and supportive captain from the time Marcus had appointed him, and those qualities had been transferred—or shared with, Zane corrected—Aidan when he became temporary AA.

"I don't care why he said it. I don't want to hear that shit again. Marcus *is* alive, and he *will be alive when we find him!*" Aidan was vibrating with anger and fear for the state they'd find Marcus in.

Zane sensed no doubt in Aidan's declaration, but he easily felt the concern over how bad a shape Marcus would be in. He had worries about that as well, but locked them away, not wanting to add to Aidan's burdens. "Yes, he will, and we'll take care of him and make sure nothing like this ever happens to him again, even if it means moving up here permanently to do it."

Aidan looked at him with such love he felt his knees go weak. "You really are okay with staying here?"

Zane smiled and cupped the back of Aidan's neck, pulling his head down for a tender kiss. "More than okay, though I'll miss being a day's drive from Mika and Gabe. But I know they'd understand. I should call them and fill them in before we leave."

"Definitely," Aidan agreed. "They've been unfailingly supportive, with Gabe even refusing to have the ceremony bringing him into the shifter society until Marcus is home to perform it."

"He's a stubborn man. He'd make a great Dux Ducis of the southwestern states if you really don't want to go back to it," Zane said, referring to the position Aidan had held before stepping up as Alpha Anax. "Anyone stupid enough to argue with him would find themselves on the wrong end of an inventively dangerous man. Add to that, Mika would tear apart anyone who even looked at his mate cross-eyed, and they'd have the southwestern packs heeling like never before."

Zane didn't get a laugh, he'd known that was too much to hope for, but Aidan did grin and kiss him again, deeper this time. Aidan's lips bore down on his. His agile tongue speared into Zane's mouth, possessively seeking out every spot that sent heat coursing to Zane's

cock. Aidan's big hands were squeezing Zane's ass, massaging and tugging Zane's hips closer until he and Aidan were pressed as close together as possible.

"How long will it take you to pack and call Mika and Gabe?"

Zane's throat was so tight with desire it took him two attempts to force his vocal cords to work. "However much time I have left after you're through having your way with me."

It was the right answer for them both.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus woke with his stomach rumbling, hunger snapping him from the first truly peaceful sleep he'd had in months. How many months he wasn't sure, and the overwhelming sensation of things he needed to know and should be doing had him rolling himself off of his mate. His thoughts were clear and unclouded by his experience in the cave—the gratitude he felt at being able to think rationally was tempered by the man snoring softly on the bathroom floor.

*My mate, who doesn't seem to have a clue that he is, or that I belong to him.* How had Nathan come to be so ignorant of shifters and their ways? Marcus could pry, poke around in Nathan's mind until he had the answers, but he would much prefer Nathan to confide in him. Maybe, with time, Nathan would tell his tale.

Edging away carefully so as not to wake the sleeping man, Marcus hitched himself up with the help of a towel bar. He stood and looked down at Nathan, stunned that the man was his. *Such a passionate, beautiful man...*

Nathan's lips twitched into a smile as he murmured Marcus' name. With his hands curled under his chin, Nathan looked the picture of innocence, but the way he'd sucked Marcus off put a lie to that impression—at least sexually. Nathan was innocent or at the very least misguided when it came to shifters, otherwise he would have known, as Marcus had immediately, what they were to one another.

Then there was the way Nathan had reacted to killing Bryce. He had buried the whole traumatic event rather than trying to work through it and understand that the only other option would have meant Nathan's own death and possibly Marcus' too. He'd heard about the torment Zane, his brother's mate, had gone through from repressing horrific events.



"I won't let that happen to you," Marcus whispered, watching Nathan's eyes flicker behind pale lids. "I won't let anything hurt you, not even yourself."

Slipping away before the intensity of his emotions awakened his mate, Marcus went into the bedroom to find something to cover himself with. True, Nathan hadn't hesitated or been the slightest bit repulsed by Marcus' body, but, then again, he hadn't looked, really. That hot silver-green gaze had been locked on Marcus' cock, or tangled with Marcus' own. It'd been the ultimate aphrodisiac, seeing the need burning in Nathan's eyes.

Marcus regretted only that he hadn't been able to return the favour and taste Nathan's cream, but he'd come when Marcus had. That Nathan was so turned on by Marcus' climax was a boost to his flagging ego, and he didn't think anything could knock it back to the depths it had been, not after that. Even now, Marcus' dick was filling with the memory and the scent of Nathan's release. If this kept up, he wasn't going to get anything done other than himself, by his more than willing mate, and Marcus wasn't ready to have Nathan see him yet.

Marcus grabbed a pair of sweats and pulled them on. "Definitely Nathan's." The elastic bands at the bottom of the legs barely came past Marcus' knees. The T-shirt he put on didn't quite meet the waistband of the sweats, leaving a strip of skin bare around Marcus' middle. Shrugging, Marcus stepped back into the bathroom and took the shaving gear off of the cabinet. He wanted the hair gone; then he'd tackle the other things he needed to do.

By the time Nathan stumbled into the kitchen, his shuffling footsteps proclaiming his barely awake status just as the fists rubbing at his eyes and the huge yawn did, Marcus was a mass of nerves. Anticipation made him jittery so that he was twitching as though he was on a bad acid trip with hallucinated bugs tickling over his skin. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at Nathan head on, so instead stared at a point right over his shoulder.

Nathan finished his yawn on a groan. "Are you hungry—" His eyes widened and stripes of red bloomed on his cheeks. The scent of his arousal filled the room and Marcus nearly slumped to the table in relief.

"Damn! You are even sexier than I thought you'd be. Just look at those eyes." Nathan purred the last sentence, stalking towards Marcus with a hip-rolling gait that drew Marcus' attention straight to Nathan's cock. Straining against the loose sweats Nathan had apparently changed into, the man's impressive erection was already leaking proof of his excitement.

"And those lips, mmm," Nathan crooned, his visual caress to the aforementioned part of Marcus' anatomy making them tingle. Marcus, feeling more like the man he used to be with each second he spent under Nathan's worshipful gaze, dared to part his lips and lick the full lower one with the tip of his tongue.

"Oh, you *are* a tease, aren't you? Or is it that you *really* want to feel my dick sliding between your lips, filling your mouth, pumping my cum down your throat?" Nathan stopped in front of him, so close his body heat mingled with Marcus'. "That's what you want, isn't it?" He cupped Marcus' cheek, one elegant thumb tracing the path his eyes had seared.

Marcus parted his lips further and darted his tongue out to flick over Nathan's thumb. The sweet taste of his mate shook Marcus to his toes. His eyes closed as he sucked the digit into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the knuckle and nipping at the base.

Nathan hissed and pressed his groin against Marcus' thigh. His other hand gripped Marcus' hip, urging him to move into Nathan. "Oh, that's—"

A loud growl and gurgle had Marcus' eyes flickering open and embarrassment clawing at his newly pumped ego. He tried to jerk away, but Nathan hooked his thumb behind Marcus' bottom teeth even as his hold on Marcus' hip tightened.

Lips curling in a sly smile, Nathan looked up at him through heavy-lidded eyes. "That's a sign we need to eat first. I'm not sure if that was your stomach or mine, but mine's been gnawing on my backbone for a while now."

As if in agreement, Nathan's stomach rumbled. He winked at Marcus, then pulled his head down by applying pressure with the thumb hooked in Marcus' mouth. "There's just one thing I have to have first."

Pushing up to his toes, Nathan slipped his thumb free. Marcus didn't need the encouraging hand pressing against his nape, but it felt so good to have that strong grip there, to see the open desire in Nathan's expression, the silent command in the parted lips. Eyes drifting shut, Marcus lowered his lips to his Nathan's, moaning as the smaller man immediately took control of the kiss.

Marcus reached under Nathan's arms, lifting the man up and against him, grabbing the tantalising braid in both hands. It was worth the pain he felt from James' bites to hold his mate. Nathan shimmied and wrapped his legs around Marcus' waist as he plundered

Marcus' mouth. Marcus chased Nathan's tongue with his own, tangling the slick muscles then backing off to let Nathan explore every nook of his mouth.

Nathan squirmed in his hold, his lips mashing harder on Marcus', sharp teeth nipping and pulling. *"Wider. Open for me more."*

Marcus loosened his jaw and offered himself fully to his mate. Nathan moaned, the vibrations running through him and bleeding into Marcus. Every thrust of Nathan's tongue sent a resounding promise of a deeper, harder penetration that had Marcus clenching his ass in anticipation. His hole fluttered, as hungry as his belly to be filled. God, it'd been so long, and there'd never been a man like this one —

Humming into his mouth, Nathan lapped at his tongue then sucked Marcus' top lip in between his teeth. The stinging tug pulled a corresponding burst of pre cum from Marcus' cock, pressed snug against Nathan's ass through two layers of material.

"I'll have you soon," Nathan promised after he laved the burn from Marcus' lip. "And you'll realise that I want all of you, that I think you are the single sexiest man I've ever seen, ever will."

Marcus cast his gaze down and started to shake his head, only to get a taste of the strength hidden in his mate's smaller body. Gripping Marcus' chin so tight he couldn't continue his nonverbal negation, Nathan forced Marcus to look him in the eyes.

"You're going to believe it because it's true," Nathan stated in a firm tenor. "You could look in my head and see it, but I think you need to learn to trust me without the crutch of sorting through my thoughts — and I need to do the same, right?"

Hadn't Marcus just thought something similar while Nathan had slept? He wanted Nathan to trust him, but Marcus wasn't sure he could trust himself, not when he didn't yet know what exactly was left of himself and how badly he was damaged.

## Chapter Seven

“What’s the date?”

Surprised at the question after several moments of companionable silence, Nathan swallowed the mouthful of hot soup he’d just shovelled in. Sputtering as the liquid scorched its way down to his stomach, he reached for the glass of water in front of him. Nathan’s eyes blurred as he gulped the liquid, tipping the glass up to empty it.

His vision cleared with a swipe of his hand, Nathan found himself stunned stupid by Marcus’ amused expression. Full lips stretched in a wide smile, his cheeks plumped up to accentuate the fine bones underneath and his dark eyes glistening. Nathan could only stare at the beautiful man. With the halo of pale blond curls framing his face, Marcus was breathtaking, and Nathan couldn’t get his mind to function beyond the wave of gratitude he felt that this man was his — or would be soon.

Marcus’ chuckle spiked a heat like flowing lava through Nathan. The rough texture of his voice reminded Nathan of the sharp igneous rocks left once lava cooled. He’d marvelled at the change nature afforded the deadly burning river the one time he’d gone to Hawaii. The active lava fields had been entrancing, but nowhere near as much as Marcus was.

“Nathan?” Marcus arched his eyebrows and seemed to stiffen his features as his lips twitched. “What’s the date? I need to know how long I’ve been...gone.”

“Gone.” Marcus’ spell dissipated with that one word. He hadn’t been *gone* — he’d been held prisoner, chained and tortured, starved and denied the water he needed to survive. If Nathan hadn’t chosen that day to shift and run, or that particular direction to run in —

After a quick calculation in his head, Nathan answered the question. “It’s May 12th 2011.”

Marcus flinched then pushed his chair away from the table. He stood then started walking, his long legs moving in short jerky strides. Nathan shoved away as well and went after the pacing man. He hesitated to reach for Marcus, thinking it might be best to let him burn off some of the extreme agitation rolling off of him.

Anger, fear, anxiety and a whole slew of other emotions pounded into Nathan courtesy of the link he shared with Marcus. Glimpses of names and faces came unbidden into his mind, but the most disconcerting of all was Marcus' concern over Nathan's reaction to taking a man's life. Knowing Marcus meant to make him 'deal with it' chilled the blood that moments before had been near to boiling with the passion in his veins.

Buried images he kept secreted away, blood and death, a savage attack that devastated his young life, had Nathan reeling. He spun away from Marcus, chased by the man's shout, and sprinted into the bedroom.

Slamming the door shut and flicking the lock into place, Nathan pressed his back to the solid barrier and slid to the floor. Pulling his knees up, he looped his arms around them as he struggled to calm himself.

The door shook as Marcus pounded on it, rattling it and Nathan both. "Nathan, open the door. Talk to me. Let me help you."

Nathan clawed at his knees as he fought against the urge to bend to Marcus' will. He shook his head, banging the back of it against the door as he forcibly threw Marcus out of his mind. Wild with fear of himself and the horrific memories leaking into his brain, a feral snarl ripped free from deep inside Nathan's chest. The sound and force of it scraped the muscles in his throat and his body began to shift as he lost control.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus felt Nathan's control snap even though Nathan had somehow blocked their link. It was in the anguished sound Nathan made as he shifted to wolf, the scent of fear and fury that wafted over Marcus, the clicking of nails and the slap of paws on the wooden floor.

He'd done this to Nathan by losing control of his own thoughts and emotions. The realisation that he'd lost more than six months of his life had shaken him. Thinly formed plans to regain his position had been replaced by fear for Nathan as Marcus realised what he'd done. Now Nathan was paying the price, and Marcus' concerns for himself vanished under those for his mate.

Whatever it was he'd seen in Marcus—narrowing it down was nearly impossible since Marcus' soul had been gutted and laid bare in the kitchen and everything he might have

hidden had spilled free—had set off something in Nathan. Something he either couldn't comprehend, or didn't want to.

A window shattered in the bedroom and Marcus' heart nearly stopped beating. Nathan had leapt through the window. He had *run* from Marcus, not because he found fault with Marcus' body, but because—why? Marcus had picked up too many emotions too quickly and now wasn't the time to sort them out.

Stripping his clothes off mid stride, Marcus ran to the front door. He unlocked the deadbolt and grabbed the knob, twisting it and flinging the door open. A glimpse of cream-tipped red fur was all he saw of Nathan's retreating form. Marcus shifted and howled his pain and frustration. Another howl proclaimed his fear for his mate. A flicker of awareness in his mind sent Marcus bounding off of the porch. Nathan had heard him—had, for a brief moment, reached out to Marcus.

Paws digging into the ground, Marcus lengthened his strides, knowing he'd need the longer gait to make up for Nathan's speed. The dull throb of his wounds went unnoticed as he tracked Nathan through the forest. Nothing mattered now but finding him.

\* \* \* \*

They were so close, Aidan felt it in his bones. "How much longer?"

Alex's phone beeped. He read the message and nodded. "She's almost here. Another five minutes at the most. I'll go and wait outside in case Alison needs a hand with Combs." Alex hooked the phone back on to its clip on his belt. He rested his other hand on the butt of the gun in its holster on his hip. "She doesn't carry a weapon so this might come in handy, scare the shit out of him if he acts up."

Zane snorted. "Right. I doubt she'll need any help since she said she beat the hell out of him when he tried to run. That woman *is* a weapon. But it probably wouldn't hurt to make sure she doesn't kill the bastard before we get a chance to question him."

Alex gave a half smile to Zane, the small expression making him look suddenly younger. "Alison is something else," Alex admitted. "I sure wouldn't want to take her on. Excuse me, Alpha Anax, Zane." Alex lowered his gaze and left the room.

Aidan started pacing the length of the living room. Alex had arranged for them to stay at a large adobe house on the outskirts of Alamogordo, not far from the winding mountain

road up to Ruidoso. Isolated on several acres, the house was the perfect place for Aidan to interrogate Stewart Combs. There were no neighbours nearby to hear the man scream, though Aidan hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Yeah, me too," Zane murmured as he stepped behind Aidan, enfolding him in his arms. Zane pressed his body against Aidan's back from chest to knees. Aidan nestled his forearms along Zane's so their hands met and their fingers twined together. Zane propped his chin on Aidan's shoulder and blew a puff of air over the side of his neck.

"Zane..." Aidan flushed with heat even as chills rippled over his arms. "Baby..."

"We'll find him soon, I feel it." Zane tightened his arms, squeezing a huff from Aidan's lungs. "You feel it, too. Stop thinking any different. Trust your brother to be smart and survive. There's a reason he was, and will be again, Alpha Anax."

"Not soon enough," Aidan said, a common refrain on his part. "I hate pack politics and always feeling like someone is out to get me. I don't know how Marcus ever stood it. He was always so calm about it all, said let whoever wanted to challenge him do so and he'd kick their ass, but no one ever came forward."

The sound of an engine chased off the recounting of memories. Anger burned bright and hot in Aidan's mind. He tugged against Zane's arms, urging his mate to release him. Zane did, partially, though he kept one arm hooked with Aidan's, a silent promise to pull him back if Aidan decided to bolt for the door and tear Stewart Combs apart.

"He can't tell us anything if he's dead," Zane pointed out.

Aidan was stopped from making a reply he would have regretted by Alison and Alex's angry shouts. Aidan ran for the door, jerking it open in time to see Stewart Combs put Alex's gun to his own head and pull the trigger. The resounding explosion of sound and brain matter was like something he'd seen in a horror film, and the loss of hope of finding his brother was like a rending of his soul.

"God damn it!" Zane shouted, pushing them both out of the door as Combs' body hit the ground.

"You idiot!" Alison screamed, swiping at the blood and tissue on her face. She rounded on Alex and caught the stunned man with a right hook that laid him out alongside Combs' twitching body. "How could you let that fucker get your gun? He was the only lead we had!"

Aidan snarled and stormed over to where Alex lay. Zane tried to hold him back, but Aidan was more furious than he could ever remember being since this whole nightmare had

started. He shrugged off Zane's hand and suggestions to calm down and knelt beside the captain of his guard. *Former captain, now.*

"Your sister is right," Aidan snapped. "I find it an extremely unlikely coincidence that you let the one man who could lead us to my brother get hold of your weapon."

Alison gasped and stumbled back. Only Zane's quick reaction as he jumped over Combs' feet to land beside her and latch on to one of her flailing arms kept Alison from taking a fall. Aidan sent Zane a silent thank you even as he stared down at Alex.

Alex blanched, his eyes dilating with fear, the scent of it overpowering the odours of blood and death. Aidan growled as he pinned Alex with a firm hand clasped around the other shifter's neck.

"Tell me, Alex, was it an accident? Or did you want to make sure Stewart Combs didn't spill any information that might implicate you in Marcus' disappearance?"

"No!" Alex croaked, not even trying to stop Aidan from applying more pressure to his throat. "Never! I swear!"

"You've been distracted since my brother was taken," Aidan continued. "And you had no qualms about implying he might be dead."

Now Alex fought to pull Aidan's hand away, tearing at it with a grip that made Aidan grunt and lessen his hold. Not because he had to, but because he wanted to see what the other shifter had to say, and Aidan had been, up to that point, shutting off nearly every bit of air to the man's lungs.

Alex knocked Aidan's hand away, shoving himself backwards, legs kicking as he pushed himself into an upright position. Alison and Zane both started to lunge at the man, and while Aidan was touched at the display of Alison's loyalty to him over her brother—her intent was clear in her expression and scent—he didn't ever want one sibling to be responsible for another's death.

A gesture stopped Alison and Zane in their tracks. Aidan watched Alex gasp, looking for any deception, any attempt to escape. Alex only slumped his shoulders and shook as a sob ripped free.

"Never. I would *never* betray Marcus," Alex whispered, his whole body now shaking as he was overcome with emotion. "I loved him, *love* him, and I failed him. I should have kept him safe, should have insisted he not go alone..."

*"Oh shit, I think he's telling the truth."*



Aidan was afraid Zane was right, which, while it meant that Alex hadn't betrayed Marcus or him, also signified there was no hope of gaining any information from Alex. He would almost rather have been betrayed.

"So you're saying you and Marcus were lovers?" Aidan knew better, at least he thought he did, but he hadn't picked up on Alex's proclaimed love for Marcus, so maybe he wasn't as aware as he thought.

"No, he wouldn't ever fuck around with someone under his immediate command," Alex said angrily, glaring at Aidan in a way he'd never have dared before. "Marcus isn't like that. You of all people should believe in him!"

Aidan did. It was himself he doubted. How had he missed what was so clearly in Alex's eyes? What Aidan had taken for guilt at failing to protect Marcus had really been so much more, and he hadn't even noticed.

"Did he know?"

Alex glared for a long moment then dropped his gaze down to his hands folded in his lap. "Of course not. He would have replaced me. I knew nothing would ever come of it. Marcus deserved—deserves a mate, not some fuck-up who'd let him get taken and tortured by a pack of traitors." Alex fisted his hands, raising them and slamming them down hard on his thighs. "I should have known about Joshua Dobson, should have suspected. I knew him when we were both younger."

That was news to Aidan, and apparently to Alison as well, judging by her demand for an explanation.

Alex only shook his head as more tears streamed down his cheeks. "We were each other's first years ago, when we were stupid kids trying to work ourselves out. After that, the only time we had sex, every time I saw Joshua he was covered in bruises and sporting broken bones. He looked at me with so much hatred; I knew he blamed me for what was happening to him."

Alex took a shuddering breath and looked at his sister. "And I never did anything to help him. I was too afraid of our parents, and of being beaten to death by whoever was beating Joshua. Is it any wonder he's so messed up? Maybe if I'd done something..."

"Someone should have done something," Zane said, kneeling beside Alex. Aidan wasn't surprised by the move—his mate was soft-hearted and forgiving, despite his own

hellacious past. Zane slipped an arm around Alex's shoulder and hugged him. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen," Alex mumbled, "But that was no excuse not to —"

"And Joshua?" Zane asked, cutting Alex off. "How old was he?"

Alex blinked several times before answering. "He... I think he was twenty, but —"

"So you were a kid and he was the adult?" Aidan's stomach clenched at the thought of Alex being sexually abused as a teen, but if what he was saying was true then that was exactly what had happened.

"I was mature for my age and —"

"Stop it!"

Aidan looked at Alison, unsure just who she was ordering about.

"I meant him." Alison pointed to her brother, clarifying Aidan's unspoken question. "Alex, really. What would you say if I'd had sex with a twenty-year-old when I was sixteen?"

Aidan stood and waved Alison over. This was a conversation for the two of them — he wouldn't intervene unless necessary. Zane joined him and together they looked down at Stewart Combs' body, ignoring the heated argument between the siblings.

"Shall I call in some more of the guards?" Zane asked.

"Probably wouldn't be a bad idea, unless you want to spend the night digging."

"Yeah, no." Zane tucked his hand in Aidan's as they walked back to the house. "We need to call Mika and Gabe. They've been waiting to hear what we found out."

"Which is nothing," Aidan said, the words bitter on his tongue. "Except for the fact that Alex was, or is, in love with Marcus, and was also" — he rethought that — "is also a victim of Joshua Dobson."

"We know Marcus is somewhere in the mountains around Ruidoso, and, yes, before you get in a snit, that's over a million acres, but we'll start looking for him as soon as we get everyone gathered together. Other shifters will join us as soon as word gets out their Alpha Anax is out here."

"I'd also like to talk to Alison. Maybe Combs' said something to her, something she missed the significance of —"

Zane snorted. "That's about as likely as the sun rising in the west, but yeah, we should talk to her, and call Mary Combs, too, see if she knows anything else, and she needs to be told her cousin is dead."

"Damn it!" Aidan looked behind them, peering out over the mountains in the background. If he could only sense Marcus, just once... "I just want to go find him, now!"

"I know you do, Aidan." Zane pressed a hand to his forearm, comforting Aidan with the touch, his grey eyes lit with an earnestness Aidan couldn't miss seeing. "So do I, but we need more people. There's a lot of ground to cover, and if we can find out anything else, anything to narrow down the search area, we need to do so. We won't do Marcus any good if we waste time running all over the damned forest when we could be gathering information to shorten the search."

Aidan knew Zane was right, and while it was only a few hours, those hours could cost Marcus his life. But so could ineptitude on his part. God damn it, he *hated* being Alpha Anax! This had always been Marcus' dream, not Aidan's. He wasn't cut out for this. He'd only been Dux Ducis of the Southwestern packs was because Marcus had needed him to be.

"And he needs you to be the Alpha Anax for just a little while longer," Zane said softly.

"Yeah." Aidan needed to get over his snit and do what needed to be done without whining about it, mentally or out loud. "Let's get the calls made and start mapping out Lincoln. I do think we need to be careful with who we ask to help us. We still don't know if there was anyone involved in Marcus' abduction besides Dobson's pack." He led Zane into the house and shut the door.

"Shit." Zane plopped down on to the couch and leaned his head back, eyes closed, his dark hair a lovely contrast against the white leather. Aidan felt the familiar thrilling stirrings of desire but set them aside. There was too much to do to pounce on his mate right then.

Zane lifted his head and peeked through his lashes at Aidan. "Probably not, but it *is* a lot of land to cover with only a handful of us."

*"Alison, Alex – if he can pull himself together – you, me, the other four guards, Gabe and Mika. We can cover more ground than you think. We can even have Azrael and Mariska from your old pack come up. They are both loyal to Marcus and me – and you."*

Zane grunted and patted the cushion. Aidan walked over and sat beside him. He settled an arm on Zane's shoulders and pulled the man closer. The heat rolling off Zane's body warmed Aidan through to his bones. He hadn't even realised he was cold, though now that he'd acknowledged it, Aidan doubted it was a physical chill. Even though they were working out a plan to find Marcus, Aidan still felt edgy with worry. Zane soothed him as only a mate could.

"I'll call Mika and Gabe, they'll be here before morning," Zane murmured as he rested his head on Aidan's shoulder. "Once that's done, we can call the others, then there's the matter of Combs, and we have to make sure Alex will be able to help with the search. Alison will be able to focus on finding Marcus if she isn't worried her brother is falling apart, and we need as much help as we can get."

"Of course. I'll call Mary Combs. That's my responsibility anyway." At times it seemed everything was Aidan's responsibility in his temporary position as Alpha Anax. He wondered, as he often did, how Marcus had made it look so easy.

Zane tipped his head back and Aidan bent to brush a tender kiss over the man's lips. "You do an amazing job, Aidan," Zane said. His cheeks were flushed, his lips wet and parted, and his grey eyes dark with emotion. Aidan thought he was the most beautiful man ever, inside and out.

"I'm glad I came after you," Aidan told him, referring to Zane having run in borderline terror upon finding out they were mates. Aidan had chased the man down and claimed him as his own, just as surely as Zane had laid claim to him.

Zane's lips curled in the sweetest smile, causing Aidan's heart to thump crazily in his chest. "So am I." Zane kissed him again, stoking the ember of desire that always burned between them. "Now, let's get these calls made and Lincoln National Forest mapped out into searchable sections so we can find Marcus, then I'll spend the rest of my life showing you exactly how glad I am you didn't just let me go."

With a promise like that, being responsible for all North American shifters suddenly didn't seem nearly as burdensome.

## Chapter Eight

Nathan had run until his legs had given out, but he couldn't escape the chaos in his head. It was as though, by finding out Marcus wanted him to accept the necessity of killing Bryce, Nathan could think of nothing else. Except he didn't think of the why, he only kept seeing his teeth ripping out the shifter's throat, tasting the blood on his tongue.

He curled up in a tight ball on his side, shivering in the cold night air. Even his thick coat couldn't prevent the icy chill in his bones, the one caused by fear. Tucking his tail up under his chin, he tried to work through the God-awful fight and reassure himself that what he'd done had been unavoidable. He wasn't sure he could successfully do that, not when he kept remembering something else he'd rather remained in the past as well.

He yelped when, without warning, a big wolf leapt out of the brush behind him, landing on him before he could begin to try to get away. Heart pounding in his throat, Nathan scented anger, worry – and Marcus. Nathan thought about fighting him off, escaping and running some more, but he had neither the energy nor the desire to continue fleeing.

*"Don't ever run from me again,"* Marcus roared in Nathan's head, knocking aside the walls that had held up so well earlier. Nathan didn't even try to fool himself – Marcus was a force of nature, stronger even now, after hours of chasing Nathan, than he'd been back in the cabin.

*"No more thinking. That's what caused this, although whatever you were thinking was wrong."*

Nathan closed his eyes and tried to follow Marcus' order, but words like *alpha* and *mate* kept adding to the confusion in his head. Marcus growled and began rubbing his bigger body over Nathan's, warming him and scattering the very thoughts that had set the chill in his bones.

*"That's right, just feel me. The time for being afraid, for not trusting me – all of that is over. Shift."*

Nathan's wolf and man were in agreement in that they had to obey the stronger wolf. *The alpha*, Nathan thought as he shifted, and earned a nip on the back of his neck for it. A very human Marcus pinned Nathan down, still rubbing against every inch of Nathan's exposed skin possible.

"Enough," Marcus muttered, his voice tight. "I would never hurt you, Nathan. Mates can't do what I saw in your memories. It's impossible and goes against everything inside of a shifter. Feel, look, you'll see I'm telling the truth."

"I can't, please." He couldn't take any more, not now, when the turmoil in his mind had blessedly died down. Not when Marcus felt so warm and sensuous as he writhed against Nathan. Not when the steely length of Marcus' cock was riding into the dip of Nathan's pressed-together thighs. And certainly not when every particle of his being was screaming and burning and aching to feel the tight clamp of Marcus' ass on his dick.

"Fuck, yes." Marcus lifted up on his elbows and spread his legs until he straddled Nathan's thighs. "Roll over. Let me have you."

"We don't have any condoms—"

Marcus shook his head. "We don't need them. Shifters can't get communicable diseases." He tapped his head. "It's all right in here. That's something else about shifters you didn't know, I take it."

"No, I didn't." Nathan searched his face for several moments and found no trace of deception. He delved into Marcus' mind cautiously, concentrating on finding only the information he needed. Satisfied, Nathan rolled on to his back gracelessly, his dripping erection bouncing as he did so. A smart remark about who was having who died on his tongue when he saw the look in Marcus' dark eyes. He knew without a doubt Marcus had it right.

\* \* \* \*

He'd been stupid, too insecure about the shape he was in to bind Nathan to him the way he should have. Sex wouldn't make Nathan love him, wouldn't assure that Nathan wouldn't run again, but it *would* strengthen the bond between them and make both possibilities more likely.

Besides which, Marcus needed his mate, especially after the long hours of chasing him. The wolf's urge to dominate blended smoothly with the relief at catching the man and the desire that had been building inside him each second he'd spent with Nathan. Marcus' fears and insecurities were just going to have to shut the hell up.

Fisting his hands in Nathan's silky hair, Marcus held Nathan's head immobile while he looked his fill. The trembling of Nathan's lips fascinated him, and he gave in to the raw lust pounding throughout his body. Crushing his lips to those tempting, quivering ones, Marcus bit at the plump flesh and demanded entry.

Nathan opened for him with a soft sigh that Marcus swallowed and made his own. He swept his tongue into Nathan's mouth, thinking to softly seduce him rather than give in to his need to fiercely claim him. Nathan growled and bucked beneath him, his hands gripping Marcus' buttocks hard, short nails piercing his skin.

It was what Marcus wanted, needed, but had been afraid would frighten his already skittish mate even more. He bit and sucked at Nathan's lips and tongue, loosening his grip on Nathan's hair. The force of his assault on Nathan's mouth drove the smaller man's head back. Then Nathan turned his face away slightly, arching his neck in an offer of submission that made Marcus want to howl in triumph.

Nathan's nails dug in deeper and Marcus answered the bite of pain with a thrust of his hips, rubbing his cock against Nathan's. He trailed a chain of biting kisses down Nathan's jaw and along the side of his neck. Marcus swirled his tongue over the skin where Nathan's pulse beat then bit down hard enough to drive a grunt from the smaller man.

The scent of his arousal increased the longer Marcus sucked and bit the sensitive spot, encouraging him to work the darkening flesh until Nathan was steadily driving his hips up, stabbing his thick cock against Marcus in a rhythm that promised Marcus a punishing ride.

"You like that, my little fox?" Marcus knew he did, could feel it in the increasingly faster gyrations of Nathan's hips, but he wanted to hear it as well.

"Yes, fuck yes, mark me!" Nathan rolled his head to the side again, offering Marcus more skin to torment. Nathan's hands slid over Marcus' ass, his fingers delving into Marcus' crease, teasing up and down the length, stopping just before brushing over Marcus' fluttering hole.

The first tap of those fingers over Marcus' greedy opening set his ass on fire with the need to be filled. Marcus moaned as he found the spot he'd been seeking, the tender join of neck and shoulder. He licked the salty sweet spot once then bit, holding himself back enough to keep from breaking the skin. Nathan answered the bite with a hard press against Marcus' anus, and the practicality of their needs suddenly flared in Marcus' mind.

After sliding down the length of Nathan's body quick enough to startle one of those squeaks he so loved hearing out of him, Marcus opened his mouth wide and engulfed the tip of Nathan's cock. The sound that Nathan made wasn't the second squeak Marcus had expected. Instead, a deep, throaty moan rumbled out, and Marcus answered in kind as the first exquisite taste of his mate hit his tongue.

Marcus sucked down Nathan's cock, his jaws stretched to the limit as he surrounded the thickly veined length with suction. The cap of Nathan's cock hit the back of his throat just as Nathan made another one of those sexy-as-sin sounds and grabbed a double handful of Marcus' hair.

Flicking his gaze up to meet Nathan's, Marcus smiled around his mouthful and swallowed, his throat opening to take more of Nathan's dick. He pulled back up slowly, holding Nathan's hips down as the man tried to shove his shaft back into Marcus' throat. Marcus growled his displeasure, knowing the vibrations would serve to drive Nathan close to the edge. Nathan shouted and squirmed, his hands tugging at Marcus' hair, his legs shifting restlessly beneath Marcus.

His own dick aching for release, Marcus ground down against Nathan's smooth calf. He let go of one trim hip to raise his fingers to Nathan's lips. *"Suck them, make them good and wet because that's all the lube we've got and I have to feel your cock inside me very, very soon."*

Nathan hesitated for a second as he frowned down at Marcus. "We should wait until we go back to the cabin—ah! Damn!" Marcus sucked Nathan's cock down hard and fast, his tongue slicking the big slab he wanted in his ass. Nathan released his hair and grabbed Marcus' hand with both of his own, bringing Marcus' fingers into his mouth.

Marcus worked Nathan's cock like Nathan worked Marcus' fingers, sucking and licking, swirling his tongue, coating every bit of skin with saliva. Nathan's cockhead leaked steady beads of pre cum, tempting Marcus back to the narrow slit again and again as his dragged his lower lip over the sensitive underside of Nathan's crown.

Nathan shoved at Marcus' hand, knocking it away almost violently. "Enough! Holy fuck, I'm gonna come if you don't stop!"

"Can't have that," Marcus rasped, already working the wet tip of one finger into his hole. He brought his other hand up to pinch at the tight little nubs of Nathan's coral-coloured nipples.



"Please, that's so good." Nathan thrashed his head from side to side and grappled for a hold on Marcus. His hands closed over Marcus' thighs, squeezing hard. Marcus twisted one of the nipples he'd pinched, using more force as Nathan's grip increased.

"Ah...yesss! Again!"

Marcus grinned at the order, repeating the rough treatment even as he thrust his second finger past his opening. The burn around the clenching ring spread into his rectum, the muscles no longer used to such an invasion, but Marcus knew the pain would be worth feeling Nathan buried balls-deep in his ass.

Nathan's other nipple received the same harsh loving. Both buds were thick and erect and hard as stones, and the most beautiful ripe colour Marcus had ever seen. He pushed a third finger inside his opening, grunting at the stretch to the guardian muscle that wasn't anywhere near comfortable. It didn't feel good yet, but it would.

"Marcus, please." Nathan gasped and bit his bottom lip, his eyes nearly hidden behind narrowed slits. "I can't, I need —"

"I know what you need, what we both need." Marcus slid his fingers out of his ass while his other hand gripped the base of Nathan's cock hard enough to keep him from coming. He took the thick shaft in his mouth, saturating it as much as he could, then shimmied up Nathan's body.

Nathan's hands shook as he reached for Marcus, cupping the sharp blades of Marcus' hips. "Marcus, are you sure?"

In answer, Marcus held Nathan's cock up and slowly lowered himself down until Nathan's tip kissed his hole. Nathan's fingers clenched bruisingly hard against Marcus' flesh, the perfect distraction as Marcus pressed down, willing his body to open to Nathan's dick.

"Marcus," Nathan pleaded, concern etched in his expression even as he tipped his hips up, increasing the pressure against Marcus' opening. Marcus grunted then hissed as the broad tip speared into his ass, the rim stretching him wider than the three fingers he'd prepped himself with.

"Fuck, you're so tight, I can't move, can't thrust." Nathan shuddered and brought his legs up, the heat from his muscled thighs warming Marcus' back even from inches away.

"But I can," Marcus pointed out, then bore down and sank further on to Nathan's dick. He'd thought to take it all, but pain flamed through his rectum, the walls protesting the sudden stretch and the lack of appropriate lube. *"Too fucking bad, not stopping."*

But Marcus did pause long enough to spit in his palm and coat the rest of Nathan's shaft. Nathan leaned up on one elbow and brought a hand to his mouth. Then he reached down with glistening wet fingers and rubbed around Marcus' stretched opening. Satisfied and too horny to wait any longer, Marcus locked gazes with him and nodded.

Nathan grabbed on to Marcus' hips and thrust up at the same time Marcus dropped his weight down and didn't stop until his ass and balls slapped firmly against Nathan.

Despite the scorching bolts of pain in his passage, Marcus moaned with pleasure. Nathan's dick was wide and long, and Marcus was finally stuffed full like he'd never been before.

"I can feel your heartbeat," Nathan whispered, his eyes wide and his chest rising and falling with the rhythm of rapid breaths.

Marcus couldn't resist dipping down for a kiss, this one sweet and tender, a direct counterpoint to the fucking that had begun and would soon continue. "*I will mark you.*" Marcus nuzzled the sweet spot at the base of Nathan's neck and shoulder, biting it lightly. His mouth watered with the need to sink his teeth in deep, to leave proof of his claim to his mate's flesh. "But I will never truly hurt you. I would sooner hurt myself."

Marcus saw the dawning realisation in Nathan's eyes and began riding his cock hard and fast, unwilling to give him a chance to think about what had just been said.

The slide and drag of Nathan's dick sapped Marcus of the ability to think as Nathan began pumping into him. Again and again he slammed up, filling Marcus with the most perfect sensations, the hottest cock. Hard and fast, tenderness something they'd have to experience another time, Marcus took Nathan's dick, demanded it, snarling for more, harder, deeper, *now!*

Nathan answered each need, his hips pistoning as he pulled Marcus down on him. Marcus felt Nathan's cock so deep inside he could nearly taste him, and the sounds slipping from Nathan's lips were going to toss Marcus into orgasm before he was ready.

"Never be ready for this to end," Marcus rasped even as he reached for his dick. He fisted his erection and jerked with a tight, punishing grip. "Oh fuck, Nathan, fuck!"

"Yeah, that's right," Nathan gasped, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Give it to me." He fucked Marcus harder, demanding everything Marcus had. "Let me see you come, sweetheart!"

The endearment shattered what little control Marcus had. He came with a wrenching shout as Nathan pounded into him, whispering 'sweetheart' and filthy words that set Marcus to flame. Cum spewed out, splattering Nathan's shoulder and chest, then Nathan was moaning, his hips losing their rhythm as he filled Marcus' ass with his release.

Marcus jerked the last spurt of semen from his dick, shooting the thick glob onto Nathan's sweaty six-pack. He swivelled his hips and clenched his butt, milking the final drops of Nathan's climax from him, immersing himself in the sounds and feel of the man in the tail-end of his orgasm.

"You look beautiful covered in my cum," Marcus observed once he gathered enough moisture in his mouth to speak. "Gonna look even more so once I mark you as mine." He trailed his fingers over the spot he was drawn to, relishing the shiver the soft strokes caused Nathan.

"It'll hurt," Nathan stuttered out, sounding more excited than worried.

"In the best way." And it would be very soon, because Marcus could think of little else at that moment. Then Nathan spoke and melted every cold spot caused by Marcus' captivity.

"Okay, I trust you."

One look at Nathan's guileless expression and tremulous smile and Marcus dropped down on top of him, taking his mouth in a gentle kiss filled with all the emotions welling inside Marcus. He sealed his lips over Nathan's, drinking in the taste of the man, giving himself in return.

Nathan whimpered and clutched at Marcus' arms, his palms smoothing over skin, caressing rather than clenching. Marcus revelled in the gentle kiss, the tender touch of his mate's hands. He sipped at Nathan's kiss-swollen lips, laving the sweet flesh until Nathan's cock began to harden again inside Marcus' ass.

"We should go back to the cabin," Marcus said reluctantly, knowing even with his healing abilities that another lubeless round would be a bad idea. Added to that, there were things that needed to be discussed, explanations owed to and from each of them.

"We should," Nathan agreed. "But this time, you might have to carry me. I swear my legs have turned to jelly."

"We're really not too far from the cabin. You ran in a circuitous pattern—I think your subconscious was steering you back to me."

Nathan snorted as he helped Marcus dismount from his cock. "If that were the case, all I had to do was stop. Even half out of my mind, I knew you were right behind me and, if I did lose you, you'd hunt me down."

Marcus froze. His heart thudded rapidly as he stared into Nathan's exquisite eyes. "I told you I wouldn't hurt you, not like that, what I saw in your memories. That isn't what mates do, ever."

Dropping his gaze to somewhere around Marcus' knees, Nathan began shimmying out from under Marcus.

"Nathan? You said you trusted me."

Nathan stopped trying to get up long enough to nod. "And I do. The other, though...that's something else entirely."

Catching Nathan's shoulders, forcing him to hold still, Marcus waited for Nathan to look at him, not speaking until he did. "That is exactly about mates, which is what we are, and what your mother and your father were *not*. It's more common for shifters to choose a lover than it is for them to find their mate, but when a shifter *does* find his or her mate it's a cause for celebration that even their former lovers acknowledge."

"Yeah, well." Nathan shrugged and Marcus let him go. "That isn't what I was told for the past twenty-five years, so don't expect me to just suddenly toss out what's etched in up here." Nathan tapped his temple and stood up.

Marcus expected exactly that but would wait until they were safely tucked away at the cabin to argue his point further. He frowned as he replayed Nathan's words in his head. Nathan's memories and the years he spouted out just didn't mesh with the man's appearance.

"How old are you?"

The grin Nathan gave him made Marcus' stomach flutter as if he'd swallowed a net full of butterflies.

"Thirty as of May 1st, why? How old did you think I was?"

Marcus returned Nathan's grin with one of his own. "Let's just say I thought I'd get to play the part of the lecher, but now...not so much."

"Oh really?" Nathan spun on his heel, presenting Marcus with a view of his very tight, muscled ass. "Does this look like the ass of a dirty old man?" Nathan slapped a cheek and not a bit of flesh jiggled. "How old are you?"

"How old do I look?" Marcus cringed after he asked. He didn't doubt he looked at least a decade older than he actually was, though hopefully, given some time to recuperate —

"Oh no." Nathan snickered as he turned back to Marcus, shaking a finger back and forth. "*I am smart enough not to ever make any verbal or written assumptions that could get this fine ass in trouble. I wouldn't presume to —*"

"Twenty-nine," Marcus answered, snickering himself at Nathan's shocked expression. "As of May 5th. You're over a year older than me, and you might not have spoken or written down any guesses about my age, but that expression right there? The one with your mouth hanging open and your eyes all wide and startled looking? Those two things speak volumes."

Nathan snapped his mouth shut and glared at Marcus. "You did that on purpose, set me up to make an idiot of myself."

"No, I didn't." But it had been a damned good distraction for them both. "I honestly wanted to know your age. You really do look as though you're about nineteen or twenty. Twenty-one when you're naked and fucking me, your skin flushed and those sexy noises coming from those sweet lips..."

"Sweet talking isn't getting you out of the dog house," Nathan said haughtily, but the wicked glint in his eyes and the laughter that followed his proclamation ruined the whole attempt to come off as offended. "You obviously need some lessons on respecting your elders. Come on, let's go."

That reminded Marcus of something he'd have said to Aidan, and a pang of remorse shot through him. His brother had been so worried. Marcus had got small hints of Aidan's feelings during extreme emotions ever since he could remember. That hadn't changed over the past six months he'd been chained in a cave. Knowing Aidan was alive, even if he was at times so filled with anguish, had been the only thing that had kept Marcus from giving up and lying down to die.

Marcus owed Aidan for that, and so far he hadn't had the chance to let his brother know he was alive. As Marcus shifted and followed along behind Nathan's foxy wolf, he vowed to right that wrong just as soon as he set things to rights with his mate.

## Chapter Nine

Moonlight rippled through the trees, providing sporadic patches of light along the path. The forest at night was a magical landscape in shades of grey and black. It was easy to imagine fairies and sprites flitting through the wind-tipped leaves; the moths and insects flying about were really magical beings too quick to be detected by the human—or shifter—eye. The mind would process them as something common rather than acknowledge their true nature.

Nathan rolled his eyes at his whimsical thoughts. His imagination had always easily tumbled free, distracting him from other, darker things. He trailed along behind Marcus, impressed with and a little envious of his long, steady strides. There hadn't been even a hitch in Marcus' step the entire trip back to the cabin, which was just ahead through the tree line.

*"But you're quicker."*

*"So was the hare, and look how that whole story ended. Bet someone made key chains with his fuzzy feet after that, and some other kind of bunny got his tail to slap on the ass-end of her skimpy costume."* Nathan dredged up a burst of speed and started to pass Marcus as they entered the clearing around the cabin. Marcus nipped at him playfully, trying to slow him down.

*"Not happening, sweetheart."* Focussed on winning *this* race, he didn't register the new scent or the danger that set his fur on edge until a loud sound blasted through the night.

*"Nathan!"* Marcus grunted and spun to the side, knocking Nathan towards a plant that had more thorns than leaves. Nathan yelped as spiky prongs jabbed into his ribs, his thick coat not protection enough as Marcus landed on him, covering Nathan with his bigger body. The scent of blood filled Nathan's nostrils, his mind trying to register what had happened as another loud burst rent the air.

*"Stay down. Someone's shooting at us..."*

Marcus' grunt, the scent of blood—and now he was covering Nathan, protecting him with his own body.

*"Nathan? Did I kill that fucker?"*

The familiar voice so startled Nathan he nearly lost his shift.

*"You know that lunatic?"*

Nathan squirmed beneath Marcus, trying to wriggle free of the thorns and the wolf pinning him down before panic caused Rick to fire another shot. Marcus' white fur wasn't any camouflage at all in this instance.

*"Let me up! That lunatic is Rick, and he's likely to shoot you if I don't answer quick!"*

*"Shoot me again, you mean."*

Marcus' voice was firm, his heart beat and breathing steady. He wasn't in any immediate danger of dying—yet. Nathan twisted and brought his hind legs up, hooking them under Marcus' hips and shoving the shifter off. *"He'll kill you, Marcus, unless I stop him."*

Nathan burst out of the thorny cover, his head low and his legs flying as he barrelled towards the man standing on the porch steps. Rick wouldn't shoot him once he saw it was Nathan coming up, would he? Would Rick even *recognise* him? He'd always hated it when Nathan shifted.

The tall thin man kept the rifle pointed at Nathan, but he didn't fire. Nathan considered stopping, but he knew Rick would pull the trigger the second he got a shot at Marcus. Nose nearly to the ground, he raced forward, unable to hold in a warning growl.

Rick's eyes widened and the rifle bobbed in his grasp. "Nathan? Boy, I know that's you! You just stop now, I won't let that other wolf hurt you. I saw him try to bite you—"

Nathan leapt, praying to whatever deity there might be who cared about shifters that Rick wouldn't shoot him. Rick tried to swat at him but turned the barrel away as Nathan's feet slammed into his chest. They toppled back on to the porch, Rick swearing and Nathan snarling.

"Always—" Rick kicked up, catching Nathan's knee with a steel-toed boot tip, his big meaty fist thumping against Nathan's ribs. Nathan howled and rolled to avoid another punch, trying to keep one eye on the weapon in Rick's other hand. "Afraid they'd get to you."

The gun was wrenched from Rick's grasp even as Nathan shifted and reached for the weapon. Marcus slid his arm around Nathan and lifted him to his feet.

*"I'm tempted to beat him with this,"* Marcus fumed, his scowl deepening as he glared at Rick. *"Hurts like a bitch being nicked."*

"Better than being dead," Nathan replied to Rick and Marcus both. "But I am sorry you were hurt again," he added for his lover. A quick glance turned into a longer one as Nathan noticed all the scratches marring Marcus' body. It was difficult to tell where he'd been nicked

with so many new wounds. He wondered if they'd disappear completely or heal but leave behind more of those pale silvery scars.

Marcus pointed at Rick, the gesture more intimidating than Nathan would have thought possible. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't snap this guy's neck."

It was the exact wrong thing to say. Rick came up swinging with a swiftness that belied his age, or would have if Nathan hadn't already been fully aware of Rick's skills. The man was a former SEAL, and, even though he hadn't been in the military in over two and a half decades, he'd always kept himself in shape.

Nathan started to lunge at Rick, intending to take him back down, but Marcus had his own set of skills. The butt of the rifle impacted Rick's stomach, driving a wet coughing huff from him. Marcus had his hand wrapped around the back of Rick's neck in an instant and was bringing his knee up even as he pulled Rick's head down.

Throwing himself against Marcus' arm in an attempt to break his hold on Rick, Nathan screamed at the two men. "Stop! Stop it *now*, both of you!" He slipped under Marcus' arm when he failed to make Marcus release Rick.

Planting a hand on each man's chest, Nathan shoved them both, the move strengthened by the fear-fuelled adrenaline zipping through him. Marcus grunted and stepped back with a measured move that made it clear he did so because he wanted to, not because Nathan had forced him to. Rick stumbled back and hunched over, with his arms around his stomach, as he retched on the porch.

Concerned when Rick immediately vomited again, Nathan hurried to his side and wound his arm around Rick's shoulders. Bending so that he could help hold the man up should he pass out, Nathan shoved his other arm under Rick's and braced his legs to support Rick's weight.

"You need to stop this crap," Nathan snapped, unsure of just exactly who he was scolding. "You said you were always afraid of shifters getting a hold of me, but you're the one who tried to kill an innocent man."

Okay, so he *did* know. Rick's behaviour shouldn't have surprised him. Rick had always tried to drill into Nathan the necessity of staying clear of other shifters.

"You're the one trying to kill someone," Nathan reiterated, and this time Rick seemed to hear him because he spluttered and tried to push Nathan away. One of the man's elbows



connected with Nathan's already-sore ribs and Nathan thought he might just be sick alongside of Rick.

"Enough," Marcus ordered, his voice steely. "You—" He pointed at Rick. "If you hurt my mate again, I will kick your ass—and Nathan *will not* save you from it. Are we clear?"

The stricken look on Rick's face was all the warning Nathan got. The bigger-than-life badass who'd raised him blanched and dropped to the floor, his eyes rolling back in his head as Nathan toppled down with him.

\* \* \* \*

*Shit!* Marcus dove for the falling duo and caught Nathan by the waist before he smacked into the floor. He'd fucked up royally, blurting out the mate bit. Nathan hadn't known anything about mates until Marcus had flooded Nathan's mind with it. Or, to be accurate, Nathan hadn't had the correct knowledge of what mates were and meant to each other. His misinformation must have come from this Rick.

"Help me get him inside." Nathan was still clinging to the unconscious man, grunting with the effort it took to hold Rick up.

"Take this." Marcus handed Nathan the rifle as he worked an arm around Rick, taking most of the man's weight. "I'll carry him in, but if he comes to swinging, he's going right back out." Of the door, of consciousness, both—Marcus didn't care. He was sick and tired of people trying to hurt him—or, in this case, outright kill him.

"He raised me, Marcus, when he could have left me." Nathan frowned and rubbed at his forehead as if to erase the fine lines that appeared with his grimace. "Rick isn't a bad person, he was just...he was afraid for me, I think."

The surprise in Nathan's voice twisted Marcus' heart. Why should it surprise Nathan that the man who was like a father to him was concerned about him?

"That doesn't excuse him, I know," Nathan continued, walking over to open the door for them as Marcus lifted Rick into his arms. "He shouldn't have shot first—"

"He shouldn't have shot at all," Marcus sniped. "It's dark as hell out here even with the moonlight. He could have hit you instead, even killed you." Just the thought of it caused shards of icy fear to stab at Marcus, prickling his skin. "I don't know how good a human's night vision is, but—"

"Good enough that I hit you like I meant to," Rick rasped. Marcus looked at the man's angry expression and released him gracelessly. "Shit!" Rick's feet hit the floor and his legs started to buckle. Under Nathan's accusing glare, Marcus grabbed Rick's arm to steady him, holding on until the other man jerked out of his grasp. Rick rounded on him immediately.

"What did you mean, calling Nathan your mate? He's queer —"

"Which makes me queer as well," Marcus interrupted, pointing out what seemed glaringly obvious to him. "And that works out perfectly since Nathan and I *are* mates."

Rick swayed and Marcus reached for him only to have his hand knocked aside. "I'm not gonna keel over again. That outside was just...just shock. I didn't really pass out, I was just catching my breath," Rick muttered, blushing to the top of his bald head.

Marcus fought the urge to roll his eyes at the man's machismo. He knew a big, strong man could be brought low hard and fast, didn't he? There'd been more than one occasion when Marcus had passed out from the intensity of the pain when Dobson had been torturing him, and he'd been damned glad for the respite the darkness had brought.

"I thought him being like that would maybe keep him safe from the whole mate shit!" Rick walked over to the kitchen table and slumped down in a chair, his head in his hands. "I didn't want him hurt, kept him away from others like you —"

"Like *him*," Marcus snapped. "You kept him from knowing anything about who and what he is. You made him fear what is an integral part of himself, which is a shifter's desire for his mate."

"I don't fear it," Nathan butted in. "I just wish I was normal, a regular human being instead of a freak." He cast Marcus an apologetic look and shrugged.

Marcus kept his expression blank even as the words crushed him. "I'm going to shower and get dressed. Try not to let *him* kill me while I'm doing it." Unable to look at Nathan just then, Marcus turned and left him alone with Rick. He spotted a mobile phone lying on the coffee table as he strode by and stopped. It was Rick's he supposed.

The urge to speak to Aidan, to hear his brother's voice, had Marcus picking up the phone. Rick could just deal with it if he didn't like Marcus using it. He was hurting inside, his heart and mind aching with the knowledge his mate thought of him as something abnormal and unwanted. Even more troubling was knowing Nathan thought of himself that way.

Marcus stepped into the bathroom and started the shower. His hands weren't quite steady when he dialled Aidan's number. It had been so long since he'd heard his brother's voice—

The call went straight to voicemail. Marcus' mind blanked, his throat muscles tight from the powerful emotions he could hardly breathe. The sound of Aidan's voice brought hot stinging tears to Marcus' eyes. He swallowed past the constriction and tried to speak, murmuring his brother's name just as the phone screen went dark.

Heart tripping over itself, Marcus scowled at the phone and pressed buttons, but the screen remained off. Had the phone simply died from lack of charge, or had it truly bit the dust? Had he got Aidan's name out in time? What would Aidan do if he listened to that message and all he heard was his name, whispered in a broken voice? Would he know it was Marcus, realise he was free even if he was damaged? Or would it cause him more pain, more fear and hurt?

Marcus set the phone down on the counter and closed his eyes. Hurting Aidan was something he'd never wanted to do. He loved his twin, loved and admired him. The link Marcus had with him, the ability to sometimes feel and hear Aidan's distress, or, on rare occasions, his joy, had been one of the reasons Marcus had survived captivity as long as he had.

There were times he'd felt Aidan's worry, his fear, so intensely that Marcus had sworn to survive and come back to his brother. The small bursts of happiness Aidan had experienced had shored up Marcus' determination as well. It had given him something to hope for. If it hadn't been for that tenuous link, and the unexpected kindness from Joshua Dobson's brother, Sean... He wouldn't delude himself into thinking he'd ever been strong enough to survive without help from either of them.

He didn't know where Sean Dobson was now, or if he was even alive. Joshua had nearly killed the smaller man on two occasions Marcus could remember. Each time had been when Sean had helped him in some way, either by bringing him food or tending to his wounds. While his brother hadn't caught him, exactly, he'd picked up Sean's scent too close to Marcus's, and the punishment to the small shifter had been...brutal. And yet, Sean had continued to try to help him, even after being beaten nearly to death.

Marcus wouldn't let such loyalty be forgotten—and it was loyalty, to *him*. Sean may have been forced to be a member of his brother's pack, but he'd served Marcus. Secretly, yes,

but any other way would have resulted in both their deaths. Sean may very well be dead now, if Joshua found out how much the little shifter had helped him before the pack departed. Sean had hidden food sealed in several layers of sealed plastic bags, and had insisted on leaving a small bowl of water for Marcus. It hadn't been enough, but that food and water had bought Marcus a little more time, a little more strength.

Leaving Sean in Joshua's hands wasn't an option if Sean was alive. Once Marcus talked to Aidan, held his brother in his arms, he'd tell Aidan about Sean Dobson. Whether Marcus was ever Alpha Anax again or not—that would depend on who the current AA was, a thought which caused Marcus no small pang of regret—he would find Sean, alive hopefully. If not, he'd make sure Joshua Dobson's death was exceptionally painful.

Until then, Marcus had a mate who was emitting waves of distress he could feel, and he needed to contact Aidan. He opened his eyes and sighed. Exhaustion was riding him hard; even his superior healing abilities couldn't wipe away six months of abuse in a few days. Everything ached down to the very bones in his toes, and his world was full of chaos, and he didn't know his place in it any more.

But he had his mate, and he'd have his brother back, soon. It was enough for now, and more than he'd thought to have in that dark hell Dobson had kept him in. Now, he needed to stop brooding and get up off his ass. Nathan needed him, that was what he needed to focus on right now. So, he would shower quickly and get back to the kitchen or wherever Nathan would be then. He'd had more than enough time to dwell on himself. It was time he started trying to be at least something like the man he used to be.

\* \* \* \*

"Shit."

"Yeah, stuck your foot in it pretty deep there." Rick nodded in the direction Marcus had taken. "He wasn't quite quick enough with that stoic bit to hide the way that freak comment made him feel."

Nathan scowled at Rick. "Like you care? You just tried to kill my mate! You'd probably dance a freaking jig if he left me now."

"Nathan, son..." Nathan started at that. Rick had almost always called him by name, or by the now irritating 'boy'. He could count on one hand the number of times Rick had called him son in the last twenty-five years. "Come and sit down before you drop."

Rick kicked at the leg of the chair closest to him. Nathan pulled it out farther and sat, folding his arms on the table top. Chin in hand, he faced Rick and waited, knowing there was a lecture coming as Rick cleared his throat, his gaze flitting about the kitchen.

"I guess, no, fuck it." Rick shook his head then looked at Nathan with a reluctance that burned hot in Nathan's belly. "You didn't come back. You left a message saying you were coming out here for the weekend, then didn't answer your phone when I called."

Nathan didn't think now was the best time to explain why he hadn't answered his phone. And really, he hadn't thought there was anyone he needed to check in with.

"You know I closed the gym for two weeks. I needed a break, and a lot of the kids won't be signing up for more classes until school lets out. I still don't get why you showed up here." It wasn't the first time Nathan had taken a vacation.

"Because," Rick thumped the table hard enough to make the legs slip and skitter on the wood floor, "you didn't come back! You think I don't check up on you all the time?"

Nathan narrowed his eyes and started to speak but Rick waved him off with a firm slice of his hand through the air.

"Not like that," Rick snapped. "You're a man, not a kid, and you've been taking care of yourself for a long time now, but that doesn't mean I don't make sure you're okay. I've *always* checked to make sure you made it home when you come out here or when you go off somewhere else. This time you weren't back when you said you'd be and it...it scared the shit out of me, okay?" Rick swallowed noisily as he looked down at the spot on the table he was scratching with his thumbnail. "I couldn't get you on the phone, and you weren't home or at the gym. I just had to make sure you were okay."

Nathan thought his eyes were going to bug right out of their sockets as he tried to process what Rick was and wasn't saying. There were too many fears churning in his mind. Rick's fear of shifters, which Nathan had adapted to a milder degree and turned on himself, his own casual—although unintentional—condemnation of Marcus, and what he realised now was a possibly incomplete, if not outright erroneous, opinion on mates. And now Rick was saying—what?

His confusion must have been evident because Rick drooped in his seat, his broad shoulders sagging as he turned red-rimmed eyes on Nathan.

Rick squirmed for a second, then straightened his shoulders. Nathan thought he must have fallen into an alternate universe when the big, gruff man reached across the table and laid his hand over Nathan's.

"I know I don't ever say it, but I always think of you as my son," Rick rasped out, his voice quivering. "And it's obvious to me I fucked up something fierce, raising you to hate yourself like this."

"I don't hate myself," Nathan protested, but even to him it came out sounding more like a question than a statement.

"Part of yourself, then; because I was afraid and angry, and...and ignorant." Rick squeezed his hand, his long rough fingers stroking over Nathan's wrist. "You never gave me any cause to think you'd turn out like your father, Nathan, not once, but I still held it against you, didn't I? Blaming you for his sins."

"Did you?" Nathan clenched his hand into a fist under Rick's. "Were you ignorant, or did you deliberately use your hatred of my father to keep me from seeking out other shifters?" A prickle of awareness like a feather tickling down his spine told Nathan Marcus was nearby. Rick's pinched expression confirmed it, as did the way his gaze darted from Nathan to a point over his shoulder and back.

"The truth," Marcus demanded from behind him. Nathan wanted to turn to him, to offer his hand and feel Marcus' bigger, rougher one folding around it. He wanted to feel safe, when Rick was rocking every one of Nathan's beliefs. He wanted Marcus, but, after the freak comment, would Marcus want him?

"*Always.*" The thought slipped in as Marcus' scent surrounded Nathan. He felt a wave of heat at his back, then the press of Marcus' body against him, two scraped, scarred hands coming to rest on his shoulders.

Nathan sighed and closed his eyes, leaning his head back against Marcus' stomach. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean you were a freak."

"Just other shifters are freaks," Marcus clarified in a neutral tone.

"It's my fault," Rick said, when Nathan would have explained. How, he wasn't sure. "Nathan's mom, Brenna, she was...she was my mate. And it cost Brenna her life, because she was his father's mate too."

\* \* \* \*

"That's not possible." Marcus knew better. He'd seen the memories buried deep in Nathan's mind. "There is only *one* mate for a shifter, and that's only if a shifter is lucky enough to find their destined mate. The majority of shifters never do, and so they marry someone they love or desire, or take lovers as they choose. If they find their mate at any time, any shifter, whether he or she was a spouse, a lover, a casual fuck—the unmated shifter would immediately step aside. That is one of our laws, and it's usually never necessary to enforce it. Every shifter understands the importance of finding a mate and knows that all lesser relationships are null when it occurs."

Rick was shaking his head before Marcus was halfway through trying to explain. Nathan had tensed under Marcus' hands but remained silent. Marcus carefully sent comforting thoughts to him, keeping his own emotions under control. Inundating Nathan with everything at once had been disastrous, so, despite his need to merge as wholly with his mate as possible, Marcus restrained himself.

"No!" Rick jerked his hand off of Nathan's. "Warren said he was her mate too! And when she found me, and we...we—" Rick's breath hitched, his shoulders trembling as he struggled to continue. "He knew we'd been intimate, and he killed her because of it! If I hadn't...I didn't know she was married, but, even if I had, I couldn't have—it wouldn't have mattered." The older man bowed his head, swiping at the tears streaming down his cheeks. "If I'd walked away, she'd still be alive. It's my fault, all of it, and it cost Brenna her life and Nathan his real family."

"Rick." Nathan stood up and moved over to Rick's side before bending to hug him. "You didn't kill her, you didn't kill my father. I was there, remember? I saw him." Nathan looked up at Marcus, pain etched in his features. His pupils dilated until the fine ring of grey around the outer edges seemed to disappear. Images slammed into Marcus, vivid in detail and wrapped in a child's terror.

"I heard them arguing. They did that a lot. If it got too bad, Mom would send me outside so Da—Warren wouldn't hit me." Nathan's voice was soft and flat, as if he was telling a story about someone else. "He did that, he'd just go off and punch a wall or me or Mom. She sent me outside. I didn't want to go, but Mom promised me, if I did, we'd be able

to leave. She said Warren had to let her go. But he didn't. I ran inside because there was a silence, except it wasn't, not really. He was choking her, and the sounds she was making, her heels striking the floor, her breath..."

"Nathan," Rick sobbed, turning towards Nathan, but Marcus was already there, pulling him into his arms.

"He wasn't her mate, honey," Marcus said, barely able to scrape the words out past his tight throat. "I could never hurt you in such a way any more than you could me."

Nathan trembled so hard in Marcus' arms he was afraid the man might very well fall apart. "I couldn't, I can't even stand to think about hurting you, choking you. I'd rather let you go. I *would* let you go."

Marcus kissed the top of Nathan's head and held him as tight as he dared. "*That's* what a mate would do," he agreed, staring at Rick. "Warren wasn't your mother's mate. He sounds like he was a twisted bully who thought he owned you both."

"He was our alpha," Nathan mumbled as he fisted his hands against Marcus' back. "He shot himself in the head, after. I...I was so scared, and I left Mom in there. Warren just threw her down when he was done with her like she was a bag of garbage. I ran back outside, then there was this... I thought something in the house blew up. Rick found me, cowered in the oak in the front yard."

"How did you know to come to Nathan's house?" Marcus thought he knew, but he needed to hear it, and so did Nathan.

Rick swallowed then cleared his throat. He shook his head and met Marcus' gaze. "I heard Brenna, up here—" He tapped his head. "She'd told me about mates, and I didn't doubt her since I'd already seen her change from wolf to woman in the blink of an eye. After wrapping my mind around that, why would anything else seem impossible?"

"But I hadn't heard her like that until Warren began threatening her. She was so scared for Nathan. I heard everything he saw, but Brenna, she wasn't aware her boy came back into the house. She was almost gone by then, and I couldn't get there fast enough to save her."

Marcus risked removing one of his hands from Nathan and placing it on Rick's shoulder. The man was in so much pain—the loss of one's mate often resulted in the other dying within a few months' time. But Rick hadn't known Brenna long, or maybe taking care of Nathan had given him a reason to survive.



"I'm sorry for your loss, for both of you." Marcus kissed his mate again, this time on the temple, letting his lips linger for a few sweet seconds. "I don't understand why you think Warren was her mate as well, Rick. Can you explain it to me?"

"Because I could hear him! When he was ki—" Rick bit off the word, shooting Nathan a worried glance. "When he was hurting her, I heard everything he said, and before that, too, when Brenna slammed into my head, so afraid—"

"*Brenna* slammed into your head, not Warren," Marcus reiterated. "What you heard was what she heard, true, but it wasn't because Warren was in her head or yours. It was the link between you and Brenna, it was wide open and she was" —*unable because she was being murdered*— "she couldn't filter it or censor anything. All she could do was reach out to you and ask you to save her child, which is what you did."

Rick blinked as more moisture pooled in his eyes. "She begged me to take care of him, keep him safe. That's all I was trying to do. I didn't know whether most shifters were like Warren, or whether they'd take Nathan away from me if I tried to find a pack to take us in. I couldn't lose him." Rick stood and spread one arm out away from his body, an unasked question in his pain-filled eyes. "I swear, I just didn't want to lose you, son. Your mother loved you, and you were all I had left of her. You look so much like her."

A nudge from Marcus was all it took for Nathan to step into Rick's embrace.

"I know I did things wrong," Rick said brokenly. "I didn't take it so good when you told me you were, uh, gay, and I said a lot of bad shit about shifters. Being ignorant about 'em wasn't an excuse. All I can tell you, and it won't ever make it right, is that saying about people fearing what they don't understand? That's so true, and so wrong. I'm sorry, Nathan—son." He looked up at Marcus and tipped his head. "And I'm sorry I almost killed you—I don't even know your name."

"You didn't almost kill me, you barely even grazed me. And I'm Marcus Criswell." It felt damn good, even with the sad tinge of emotions, to say that to someone else instead of repeating it in order to stay sane.

## Chapter Ten

"I still think it's crap that I can't help," Gabe bitched, glaring at him.

Aidan shrugged and pointed his thumb at Mika. "Take it up with your mate."

That got him a glare from Mika as well. Aidan tossed his hands up and glared right back. "What? You said you didn't want him running around the forest since we'll all be shifted and he can't keep up! We don't have time for this pissing match, so you—" Aidan pointed at Gabe and knew he'd catch hell for it later. "Stay here at the house. Keep the doors locked. We don't know where the members of Dobson's pack are. Use Alex's gun if you need to."

Gabe shuddered as he looked at the weapon Combs had used to kill himself. "I don't wanna touch it."

"Babe," Mika muttered, hooking an arm around Gabe's waist. "It's been cleaned and—"

Gabe turned a shade of green that set off his bright eyes. "Shut up. That isn't helping at all!"

Alison muttered something that sounded a lot like 'wuss' and called another guard over. "Trent, give Gabe your weapon."

Trent, a short stocky shifter whose average looks let him blend in anywhere, pulled his gun from the holster at his hip and handed it butt-first to Gabe. "Be gentle with her."

Gabe took it from him, plucking it out of Trent's hand and promptly setting it beside Alex's. "I'll be gentle when I shove it up Alison's—"

"Don't start," Aidan said, his intended order coming out more like a plea. "It's still a couple of hours before dawn, and I would really like to go now."

"Right, I'm sorry. I just want to help." Gabe's bottom lip plumped out in the beginnings of a pout, but he sucked it between his teeth and started to nibble on it. That small action caused a distraction even for Aidan.

"What? What?" Gabe asked, letting the now red lip slip free. He narrowed his eyes at all of them—Aidan, Zane, Mika and even Trent. "You're all a bunch of pervs. Get out of here before I start kicking your asses. Except for you, caveman, *you* have to give me a kiss first."

Aidan spun round and pulled Zane with him, Trent hot on their heels. Watching those two kiss would result in the rest of them, even Alison, Aidan was willing to bet, becoming uncomfortably aroused.

"Make it quick," he called over his shoulder as he stepped outside. Aidan looked at his guards, the six men and women who'd been under his brother's command and were now under his. He nodded to Azrael and Mariska, the alpha of Gila pack and his mate, whom he'd spoken to after their arrival an hour ago. *There's only eleven of us, but we are going to find you, brother, I swear.*

"Let's go bring Marcus home," Aidan said determinedly when Mika joined the rest of the group. The hope in the choruses of agreement made his eyes burn and reminded him he wasn't the only one who loved Marcus.

\* \* \* \*

Nerves pinged even while he felt emotionally wrung out, Marcus had left the kitchen while Nathan explained to Rick about Marcus' months spent in captivity. Rick had looked stricken, shame and guilt making him stutter more apologies for his behaviour. As much as Nathan still wanted to be angry with him over the whole disastrous first meeting, he'd accepted Rick's apologies, knowing the man truly had thought he was protecting Nathan. Of course, now Rick wanted to go hunt down the shifters who'd taken Marcus...

Nathan watched Marcus pull back the covers on the bed they would share. Rick was asleep on the couch, and the three of them had decided to get some sleep before heading back to Santa Fe. Someone had taped a plastic bag over the broken window. Marcus, he supposed, probably while Nathan had showered. The light from the lamp caused the silver scars caught in its reaches almost to glow.

Marcus stood by the bed, looking down at it and gnawing on his bottom lip. He reached down and traced a wrinkle on the sheet. "I took Rick's phone earlier and tried to call my brother when I went to shower."

Judging by the way Marcus' shoulders slumped, it either hadn't gone well or...or something. Nathan couldn't parse it out and Marcus wasn't exactly sharing through their link. Nathan tipped his head to one side as he studied the man for clues, then gave up and just asked. "What happened?" He wasn't even going to try to guess.

Marcus glanced up at him and Nathan caught a fleeting glimpse of the man's pain in his dark eyes before Marcus went back to studying the sheet. "I guess I waited too long. It went to voicemail, then I..." Marcus shrugged but continued, although his voice was tighter. "I couldn't speak at first, just...just hearing Aidan's voice again—"

When Marcus didn't continue after a long moment, Nathan decided it was okay to prod him a little. "You're close, you and Aidan?"

"Twins," Marcus answered, his lips curling up slightly. "Although I'm older by a few minutes. But yeah, we've always been close." His voice was almost soundless as he added, "We have one of those twin things, you know? Like you hear about, where one can feel the other's pain and such. Except it only ever worked one way, and I've never been so grateful for that as I was those months spent...I wouldn't have wanted Aidan to feel, hear any of that."

Marcus had a link like theirs with his brother? Not just a brother, but a twin, Nathan thought, irritated by the niggling jealousy that swirled to life at the idea of the twins sharing a bond. It was petty of him, but he couldn't help it. He wanted what was between them to be special, and even reassuring himself that Marcus didn't have a sexual relationship with his own twin—which was both hot and disgusting to think about—didn't quell the irrational feeling. And apparently, he hadn't hidden it, either. Marcus' head snapped up and he gaped at Nathan.

"That's just—we don't," Marcus blinked then sounding sheepish, added, "we've shared men, back when we were younger, but believe me when I say we weren't groping each other during those times."

Nathan decided he was just perverted enough to be turned on by the idea of Marcus and Aidan screwing some random guy together, as long as it was in the past. He was still kind of jealous about the link the brothers shared, though.

"It's nothing like ours," Marcus said, proving Nathan had once again not kept his thoughts to himself. It's not words exactly, it's...it's more like an echo of how he feels, I suppose, and it only works one way. He can't feel anything from me. Like I said, I've never been so thankful of that as I was when..." He stopped and glanced down, biting at his lip again.

Knowing his and Marcus' bond was different from Marcus' and Aidan's chased off the jealousy more efficiently than Nathan's silent chiding had. But as he watched the other man,

he sensed the vulnerability in him, could feel that Marcus was letting thoughts of those months in captivity bleed into his mind. Not that Nathan blamed him; it'd probably take years to undo the damage done by Joshua Dobson.

Nathan scrunched his brows and realised that the long scar on Marcus' chest was healed, yet that strange silver sheen demarcated the injured area. Then he frowned harder as he saw that all of Marcus' wounds were healed, which meant his ability was much stronger than Nathan's. So why the scars?

"Why do you have those scars?"

Marcus' hand flinched on the blanket, and Nathan wanted to kick himself. He was an ass, that's all there was to it. First the freak comment, and now he'd made Marcus, who already felt insecure about his body, scramble to get under the covers.

"Stop!" Nathan barked when Marcus reached for the lamp. "Leave it on. I didn't mean anything bad by my question, but I seem to keep fucking up with you tonight" —he glanced at the digital clock—"or this morning, rather. I think I need to make it up to you."

Stalking his mate—Nathan needed to get used to thinking and saying that, didn't he?—he watched the indecision flit over Marcus' features as he glanced back and forth from Nathan to the lamp.

"Don't touch it," Nathan warned, letting his voice thicken and emerge in the throaty purr he knew turned Marcus on. "You need to understand that I think you are perfect—ah!" Nathan leapt forward and caught Marcus' hand as he reached for the knob on the lamp. With his other hand he grabbed the comforter and pulled it off along with the sheet. Tossing them towards the foot of the bed, he visually devoured the sexy man.

"Nathan, don't, don't look at me," Marcus whispered, and it broke Nathan's heart. "It was different outside, in the forest, you couldn't see—"

"I saw everything," Nathan clarified, "*everything*. The moonlight really made these almost shine." He trailed his fingers over a handful of scars on Marcus' chest. "And it didn't gross me out, turn me off, or anything else you seem convinced is going to happen." There was a longish one, right about three inches, jagged and curving up Marcus' breast to the peach-coloured edge of his areola. "I ask only because I've never scarred, just like I've never got sick, and you told me we don't get communicable diseases. I don't know much about shifters, so I'm curious, and..." Nathan lowered his head and followed the scar to Marcus' nipple.

Marcus gasped and one big hand palmed the back of Nathan's head. Marcus' fingers clenched into Nathan's hair, and for a minute Nathan was sure he was going to be pulled away from the treat he was about to taste. Instead, Marcus kept his hand still, neither urging Nathan forward nor pulling him off.

Humming his approval, Nathan teased at Marcus' nipple with his tongue, barely flicking the stiffening nub. He slid his hand over to the other nipple, using his forefinger to mimic the actions of his tongue.

"You like that, hmm?" Nathan nipped at the tip, his fingers pinching and teeth catching with enough pressure to draw a hiss out of Marcus. "Was that a yes or a no?" he asked, but he knew. Nathan could feel Marcus' arousal, his surprise at Nathan's acceptance of his thin, scarred body, although in truth, Marcus had already begun to put on weight. Nathan assumed it was part of the healing ability.

"Yesss." Marcus brought his other hand up to tangle in Nathan's hair. "Fuck yes, ahh..."

Nathan sucked the nipple into his mouth while he twisted and tugged the other. Marcus thrust his chest up, his dark eyes sliding closed.

"Fucking hell, Nathan, please, I need..."

*"I know what you need."* A stronger bite, a harder pinch. Marcus gave a hoarse shout as he thrust his hips. Nathan could smell the pre cum leaking from his mate's dick, and it made his own aching shaft weep. *"Oh yeah, sweetheart, let's do that again."*

Nathan switched his hand and mouth, giving each nipple equal attention. Nipping and pinching until both buds were hard as stone and a deep shade of red, he then began licking every scar he found, sucking on some of the bigger ones until Marcus was squirming and moaning steadily.

"Datura," Marcus suddenly spat. Nathan paused in his laving of the long scar on Marcus' chest and looked at him questioningly. "The scars, Datura. It's a plant that's very toxic. Please." Marcus' fingers clenched in Nathan's hair, a not-so-gentle encouragement that sent a bolt of desire straight to Nathan's balls.

Later he would ask more questions, or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe it would be best to let Marcus talk in his own time.

Licking at several small silver pocks, Nathan smoothed his hands down Marcus' sides, ignoring his flinch as Nathan brushed over protruding ribs. He likewise ignored Marcus' attempts to shy away when he rubbed his palms over the man's blade-sharp hip bones.

When Marcus continued to squirm, Nathan licked a path down his stomach, slicking over the fine, pale blond fuzz leading Nathan right where he wanted to go. Pausing to twirl his tongue into Marcus' belly button, Nathan scraped his teeth over the sprinkling of hair and skin surrounding the dip.

Marcus' squirming took on a different meaning then. Hips jerking, the tip of Marcus' cock battered at Nathan's chin, an insistent plea for attention. Nathan grinned as he tipped his head and engulfed the whole spongy cap, rolling his tongue over the slit to taste his mate's seed. It was sweet and briny, and it spiked Nathan's lust. He moaned around his mouthful, running his tongue under the rim of the crown, his hands now gripping Marcus' hips firmly to hold him still.

Nathan sucked hard, nothing but the force of it holding Marcus' dick perpendicular to his flat belly. Releasing the tasty treat with a popping sound, Nathan sat up and pulled off his shirt. He tossed it aside with one hand while the other was pulling his sweats down. Marcus was panting, his hand reaching for his dick.

"I don't think so," Nathan crooned as he caught Marcus' hand in his. "You're going to stand up and fuck my mouth while I sit here on the edge of the bed, unless you really would rather jack off."

Marcus stilled for less than a second then, in a flurry of moving limbs, he was off the bed and in front of Nathan, his insecurities over his body forgotten as he held his dick in one hand and reached for Nathan's head with the other. Nathan grinned and let himself be guided forward. He glanced up and felt his heart cartwheel in his chest as he took in Marcus' expression.

The mix of need, demand, tenderness and hope sent that same careening heart tumbling over a ledge Nathan hadn't even realised it was perched on. Hands resting on Marcus' thighs, Nathan's lips parted on a gasp then that thick cock was pressing into his mouth, filling it in torturously slow increments. Nathan lowered his lids and let Marcus work his length in deeper, wanting it all, craving it so much that he ached to think of Marcus pulling out.

“Not happening,” Marcus told him, then he cupped Nathan’s head with his other hand as well and began a series of slow, shallow thrusts.

Nathan moaned as he tongued a thick vein, hoping the vibrations would spur his mate on and they did. Marcus tightened his grip in Nathan’s hair and began to fuck Nathan’s mouth with more force, burying his cockhead in Nathan’s throat over and over as his hips picked up speed.

Grunts and moans from both of them were accentuated by the slap of Marcus’ balls against Nathan’s chin. His hands seemed to move of their own accord around to the small tight globes of Marcus’ ass. The light coating of soft fuzz on Marcus’ cheeks tickled Nathan’s palms, and he squeezed the flexing flesh, relishing the taut muscles and warm skin.

Marcus groaned then his rhythm faltered as he realised where Nathan’s hands were. Nathan felt the burst of self-doubt flow into him, and he jerked Marcus forward, gripping the man’s ass hard enough to bruise. When that didn’t shove Marcus out of the sudden return of his fears, Nathan slid his fingers into Marcus’ crack and rubbed the puckered entrance nestled there.

Like spurring a horse, it drove Marcus to move and he began plunging his thick length deep into Nathan’s throat. Nathan continued to tease at his hole with one hand while he brought his other around to cup Marcus’ balls. He rolled the heavy orbs in his palm then tugged at the wiry hairs sprinkled over Marcus’ sac.

Marcus’ breath hitched as he shoved his dick in hard, burying it in Nathan’s throat. Nathan swallowed around the thick piece of meat and Marcus wailed as his cock pulsed and his balls drew up. Pulling back to catch his bounty, Nathan moaned as the taste of his mate’s semen flooded his tongue.

Hot, thick jets filled Nathan’s mouth almost quicker than he could swallow. He rumbled in irritation because he wanted to savour each mouthful, but settled for rolling the last spurt around on his tongue, coating his mouth thoroughly with Marcus’ essence.

When Marcus’ legs began to quiver, Nathan gently sucked his cock clean of every bit of juice, then he let the softening prick slip from his mouth. Standing, he placed his unsteady hands on Marcus’ hips and guided him to the bed. When Marcus would have crawled up on to the mattress Nathan stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. Marcus looked at him questioningly, his dark eyes still hazy from coming so hard.



Nathan shook his head and leaned around Marcus. He grabbed a pillow and tossed it on to the floor beside the bed. "I want you to kneel there for me. Bend over the bed and let me fuck you like this."

That chased the relaxed, just-been-fucked look right off of Marcus' face. "I— but I—" He glanced at the lamp and Nathan shook his head again.

"No, Marcus. I want to see you, all of you." He wanted that almost more than he wanted to bury his dick inside the man's scorching hot ass, but—"I won't insist if you're really too scared to do it this way, or too self-conscious. But you should know, I loved feeling your ass in my hands, the way each cheek fit so perfectly against my palms. I could have come just from that, feeling your ass flex and release as you fucked my mouth. God, it was so damn hot, sweetheart. Hot enough that even thinking about it has my dick leaking. Look at it."

Nathan held his dick in both hands, one at the base, the other under the cap so he could drag his thumb through the moisture dripping from the slit. "See what you do to me?"

Marcus licked his lips, his gaze nearly burning Nathan's dick with the intensity in those dark brown eyes. "Jesus, Nathan, you look... I want you in me any way you'll have me." Marcus faced the bed and dropped to his knees. He took a deep breath then lay his upper body down on the mattress. Marcus stretched his arms out above his head, grabbing the fitted sheet in both hands.

Tension tightened his muscles and kept him from spreading his legs. Nathan ran a finger down Marcus' crack and the man nearly sprang up off the bed.

"Relax," Nathan purred, repeating the touch until Marcus gentled. "Just like that, sweetheart, very good. So fucking perfect, Marcus, I swear. Feel—" Nathan concentrated on sending all of the sexy, ball-tingling thoughts Marcus inspired in him and shared them with Marcus. "How can you think I would be turned off in any way when this is how you make me feel?"

"Oh," Marcus sighed, "I didn't... I couldn't believe you'd find anything attractive about this scrawny, scarred body."

"I find *everything* attractive about your very sexy, very beautiful body." Nathan palmed one of Marcus' ass cheeks and was delighted when he didn't pull away at all. "Spread a little for me, sweetheart. I want to taste you."

"Nathan," Marcus groaned, the sound so full of need the air nearly shimmered with it. His long legs spread, hesitantly at first, then eagerly as Nathan stepped between Marcus' calves.

Nathan murmured as he knelt behind Marcus, smoothing his hands over the backs of his trembling thighs. He scraped his thumbs along the crease at the top of Marcus' thighs where they joined his ass, and Marcus groaned again and rolled his hips, his legs spreading even further apart in invitation.

"You're doing so well," Nathan said as his gaze darted from the fluttering pink swirl to Marcus' balls hanging heavy between his thighs. "So beautiful..."

Nathan slicked his hands up Marcus' ass, his thumbs delving in the musky crack, pulling it open to expose the snug little hole. Leaning in, he blew a puff of warm air over the twitching flesh, then licked it with the flat of his tongue.

Marcus' breath left him in a whimper, and Nathan, despite his desire to tease, buried his face between Marcus' firm cheeks and lapped at the striated muscle. The flavour of his mate, salty and strong, pulled a rumble of approval from Nathan. With one hand working Marcus' cock while the other rolled and pulled at his balls, Nathan licked and nibbled, rubbing his lips, tongue and teeth over Marcus' core, working the puckered ring until it loosened enough to thrust his tongue inside.

"Guhhnn... Nathan," Marcus panted, his voice thick and slurred. Nathan began fucking his tongue into his mate, long, slow penetrations that brought a fevered wave of lust over him. His dick was leaking like a faucet now, his balls already drawn tight as each whimper and moan from Marcus pushed him closer and closer to his own climax.

"I have to be inside you," Nathan muttered, still brushing his lips over Marcus' opening "Let me just..." He placed a firm kiss on the relaxed bud, then scooted back and reached for the nightstand drawer.

After finding the lube, which took entirely too long as he slapped blindly around the drawer, his gaze locked on Marcus' ass, Nathan popped the cap off and poured a decent amount into his palm. He slathered some over his cock, then rubbed the excess over Marcus' opening, working two fingers into the tight channel.

"Nathan, please, I need you." Marcus thrust back on his fingers. The tips brushed over the small gland buried inside and Marcus shouted loud enough to wake the dead—or Rick, who no doubt was now wide awake and cringing.

"Shh," Nathan whispered as he pumped his fingers in and out of Marcus' pucker, making sure to hit that special spot with each penetration. "Rick's gonna be traumatised..."

Marcus made a garbled sound, his back heaving as he tossed his head. *"Too fucking bad,"* he snarled in Nathan's head, but he did reach for the other pillow and pull it under him, burying his face in it as he screamed again.

Nathan pulled his fingers out and gripped Marcus' cheeks in his hands. Spreading them wide, he looked at the gaping, quivering hole and felt like shouting himself. Releasing one cheek, he fisted the base of his dick and guided it to the well-prepared opening, hissing at the first brush of it against his swollen crown.

*"I hope you want this hard and fast, sweetheart. Don't think I can be gentle right now."*

Marcus answered by shoving his ass back, lodging the tip of Nathan's cock inside the fiery hot hole. Nathan's bellow made his own ears ring, and he didn't give a damn if Rick was traumatised or not. He reached for Marcus' dick with both hands, wanting to immerse the man's length in sensation.

"Ready?" Nathan ground out, trembling with the force of his need. Marcus' inner muscles were already clamping down, massaging Nathan's cockhead, and he needed to *move!*

"Y-yes—fuck!" Marcus had barely got the first word out and Nathan snapped his hips forcefully, sinking into the other man's ass balls-deep. "More, fuck, damn it, please—"

"Whatever you want," Nathan rasped, his ability to speak disintegrating with each drag of his dick against Marcus' tight walls.

Marcus began to babble as Nathan plunged into him repeatedly with long, thorough strokes. The sheer perfection of the way Marcus' passage clutched and rippled around Nathan's dick was mind melting, and soon his rhythm was shot, his hips jerking as he pounded into Marcus' ass. Marcus' hand covered his hands, encouraging a firmer grip as he fisted Marcus' cock.

The steely flesh swelled and pulsed even as Nathan's own climax threatened to sear through him, sucking his balls up tight and sending white hot streaks of ecstasy lighting up every nerve ending in his body. He reamed Marcus' ass harder and stripped his shaft with the brutal grip and pace Marcus demanded, wanting, needing him to come first.

Marcus' inner muscles convulsed and fluttered, gripping Nathan's dick so tight he couldn't move. Marcus' muffled scream was drowned out by Nathan's as the feel and smell of cum erupting from Marcus' dick rocketed Nathan into orgasm.

The first spurt of spunk from his slit seemed to be pulled from the core of his being and the tips of his extremities. He tingled from his curled toes to his fingers clasped around Marcus' cock and up to the top of his head. Each jet of cum that followed caused his head to swim and his gut to clench even as he tried to burrow his prick deeper into Marcus' ass.

Marcus twisted and ground his hips back as he filled Nathan's hands with semen. The pulsing of Marcus' rectum around Nathan's dick grew stronger and Nathan's vision stopped swimming and started dimming. He finished shooting his load after Marcus, then carefully pulled his softening shaft from the warm quivering passage. The way his legs were trembling, Nathan was afraid he'd fall and hurt Marcus with an abrupt withdrawal if he tried to linger in that tight, hot channel.

"Next time," Nathan promised as his tip slipped out, drawing a cracked moan from Marcus. He started to stumble to the bathroom but let out a startled squeak when he found himself spun round and toppled onto the bed.

Marcus landed on top of him, catching his weight on his elbows so Nathan didn't get crushed. He stared down at Nathan with such intensity it made Nathan's skin prickle with goose bumps.

"But this time..." Marcus' gaze dropped lower, and Nathan could feel it searing into the spot where his shoulder and neck met. His eyes rounded even as anticipation welled up inside him.

"Will it hurt?" Nathan whispered, aware he'd asked before but too scattered to remember the answer.

"Yes," Marcus said without hesitation, "but it will also feel so good you may come just from this." He teased at the spot with his fingertips and Nathan shivered. His dick was already trying to fill again and he had no doubt Marcus was right about the effect the bite would have on that unruly part.

Nathan turned his head to the side, offering Marcus more skin, more control, more everything.

"Yes, just like that, mate, just like that." Marcus scraped his teeth over the spot once, twice, sending delicious fingers of pleasure from that spot to Nathan's cock and balls. Nathan

closed his eyes and hissed out a breath when he felt a harder press, the sharper pinch of teeth. Marcus released the tingling flesh then gripped Nathan's biceps hard enough to bruise.

Nathan tensed then shattered into a thousand tiny pieces as Marcus struck, biting hard and deep, his canines those of his wolf as they sank into Nathan's flesh. It hurt, pain spiralling out to his back and chest, but Nathan couldn't focus on that, not when ecstasy was coursing through his veins, throbbing in his head, spewing from his cock. All that mattered was the exquisite pleasure and knowing he now truly belonged to this one man.

## Chapter Eleven

The search wasn't as coordinated as it should have been, but Zane would be damned before he would mention that to his mate. He buried the thought deep, knowing Aidan didn't need any criticism right now. And who could fault him for wanting to find Marcus? After having seen that picture, Zane had wanted to curl into a ball and weep for the man and for Aidan as well. It'd been much harder on Aidan, seeing Marcus like that.

The pressure to find the former AA had increased exponentially, and it'd never decreased from the time Marcus had gone missing. Zane was afraid for Aidan, afraid for Marcus, and absolutely terrified of what it would do to Aidan if they didn't find Marcus in time. *But we will find him in time.* Zane wouldn't let doubt creep in again.

They finished searching the area they'd mapped out when the sun broke over the mountains. Zane loped beside Aidan as they headed to the designated rendezvous point. The rest of the searchers were there, some shifted and some not, waiting for Aidan to arrive. Mika in particular was bristling and edgy, his thick black fur standing nearly on end. As soon as Zane and Aidan entered the clearing Mika was shifting and talking, his hands swinging in wild gestures.

"There was a missed call on your phone, Aidan," Mika said, his words almost blurring together as he spat them out. "And Gabe tried to call it back but the phone was off or something. He got online and checked the area code, said it was a cell phone in Santa Fe. Maybe it was a mis-dial, but it seems too coincidental that we're here looking for Marcus and you get a call on your phone—not many people have that number, right?—and you've kept the same number in case Marcus called..." Mika stopped as suddenly as he'd started, his eyes sparking with hope and his nude body jangling with excitement.

All in all, it was so unlike Mika, or maybe more like the Mika Zane had known as a kid, that Zane stumbled back and landed on his ass after he shifted forms.

"Uh, Zane? You okay?" Mika frowned and started to offer him a hand, but Aidan shook himself out of his stunned stupor and pulled Zane up instead.

"How long ago was this?" Aidan asked. Zane snuggled up to him, looping his arms around Aidan's hips.

"The missed call came a few hours ago, but Gabe didn't check your phone until he heard it beeping when he walked into the kitchen. You left it on the table, and he'd been in the living room until he got hungry."

"Alex!" Aidan called out, pointing to the shifter then crooking his finger.

Zane noted the slight flinch as Alex stood. The poor man was a mess inside, but he was as insistent on helping as he was on resigning his position. That might not be a bad thing, but Zane was worried about what would become of Alex without his job to keep him tethered to the pack.

"I need you to go back to the house and help Gabe," Aidan began, and Zane saw Alex flinch again, saw the subtle droop of his shoulders.

Zane squeezed Aidan's hip in a silent plea. *"He thinks you're sending him back because you don't think he's up to helping with the search."*

Aidan sighed and reached out to put his hand on Alex's shoulder. Alex jerked away from the intended touch, a flush rising up from his chest to tint his cheeks.

"Alex, stop it!" Aidan snapped, and Zane pinched his hip in rebuke for the harsh tone. "I'm sorry," Aidan gritted out, glaring at Zane before turning back to Alex. "I don't have the patience I should, but this is important, Alex. I need you to find out everything you can about the owner of that phone number. You know only a select number of people have *my* number. Maybe it was a misdial, but I can't help but hope..."

"You're the best person we have to research something like that," Zane continued when Aidan trailed off. "You know how to dig up information none of the rest of us do. That's why we need you to go back to the house."

Alex's head snapped up as he firmed his shoulders. "Oh. Okay. Yes, I can... I thought—"

"I know what you thought," Aidan interrupted, still sounding too irritated in Zane's opinion, "and it's bullshit. You're the one who's beating yourself up, and if you keep wallowing in guilt you'll end up making a mistake that could cost Marcus his life."

*"Way to go. You should stop speaking now before you drive Alex away permanently. Tearing down what little confidence he has isn't going to help at all."*

"Shit! Alex, I'm sor—"

"Don't be," Alex muttered, looking more defeated now than he had before. "You're right." He turned and shifted, sprinting away as Aidan sputtered and Zane tried to resist the urge to kick the man's ass.

"You should. I deserve it."

Zane nodded and kept his arms around Aidan even as he tried to pull away. "I should, but you'll do a good job of tormenting yourself over it soon enough. Better than I could do." Then Zane would have to cheer Aidan out of his funk, which usually consisted of a few rounds of rough, heart-stoppingly hot sex.

"Are you *trying* to encourage me to sulk?" Aidan asked in a strangled voice, his fat cock filling and the scent of his arousal flooding the clearing. Zane watched the reaction in the other shifters. His gaze met Mika's, and Zane couldn't quite stop himself from letting it slide down to peek at the stiff erection bobbing under Mika's belly button.

"Ah...we should resume the search," Zane said as the others shifters turned to look at them. The air in the small clearing was thick with pheromones and the scents of sexually stimulated shifters. "Otherwise this could turn into a big orgy real quick." His gaze flicked back up to Mika's face.

The man smirked at him and shook his head. "That wouldn't be fair since my mate is miles away," he pointed out. "I'll take the third area we mapped out. Alison will come with me." Mika dropped to his hands and knees and shifted.

Alison scowled but dropped down as well. "Bossy son of a bitch," she muttered then shifted as well. The pair loped off to the west and Zane breathed a little easier at the reduction of sexual tension. Seeing Mika with that huge hard-on had made Zane ache with the need to feel Aidan slamming into his hole.

"Not helping," Aidan snarked as he slapped Zane's ass. "All right, has everyone got their assigned areas?"

Zane rubbed his stinging butt. The cheeks on his face were stinging for an entirely different reason—Aidan knew damn well what a slap on the ass would do to him, and now Zane's dick was so hard he hurt from it. He wasn't unaware of the amused glances he was getting for it, either.

"Serves you right for starting this whole horny mess," Aidan told him. "Come on, we have the area to the east."



Great. Now everyone knew how much he liked it when Aidan smacked his butt. That was a humiliation he could have done without. He pointedly ignored his mate's snickering and shifted, letting his long legs carry him off, feeling a surge of satisfaction as he left Aidan cursing, trying to shift and bellow at Zane to wait up all at the same time.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus' eyes popped open, his senses prickling. He blocked out the soft sounds of Nathan's snoring beside him and strained to find what had woken him. He heard movement in the other part of the cabin—the kitchen, he thought. A scuff of a heel on the floor, a low murmur. His pulse soared until he remembered Rick was there, and realised the voice he heard belonged to him.

"What's wrong?" Nathan whispered, startling Marcus so badly he yelped.

"Don't *do* that!" Marcus grumbled, hugging his mate to him tightly. "I was concentrating, trying to figure out what woke me." He felt his cheeks burn as he tipped his chin towards the kitchen. "I kind of forgot Rick was here."

Nathan's snicker was interrupted by a yawn. His jaw popped and he smiled smugly as he tickled his way down Marcus' belly, stopping only when his hand touched the top of Marcus' erection. Nathan patted it softly and chuckled. "That's 'cause I fucked you until your brain melted. Twice."

The sense of peace flowing from Nathan reassured Marcus that some of the things he'd told Nathan in between bouts of lovemaking had sunk in. Nathan wasn't totally at ease with having killed Bryce and he didn't like thinking of the violent end to his parents' life, but he was no longer burying either and trying to pretend those traumas had never happened.

"You're the one who passed out," Marcus reminded him, "although you did light me up. It was like someone dropping a match in a fireworks stand, there was heat and bursting flames in every cell in my body."

"And explosions and flying limbs and screaming masses," Nathan sniped, rolling his eyes. "You need to work on your analogies, sweetheart. Seriously."

Marcus was saved from a comeback that undoubtedly wouldn't have lived up to Nathan's snark standards by a loud curse from Rick. Both Marcus and Nathan bolted up out

of the bed and were reaching for their clothes when the bedroom door was flung open and Rick stomped in.

The three of them froze, Rick staring at them and they at him. Rick turned a shade of red that verged on purple then rounded on his heels and quickly left the room.

"Need to put a lock on that fucking door." Nathan laughed and winked at Marcus. "Though that right there will probably keep Rick from ever barging in unannounced again."

"I still want the lock," Marcus said. He didn't use to be shy about anyone seeing him naked—there was no point when one ran with a pack. Everyone saw each other's bits. But that was before, and he really didn't ever want Rick walking in when Nathan was fucking him, or when he was sucking Nathan's dick like it was—

"Watch the analogy there," Nathan warned. "If you tack on something like sucking Nathan's dick as though it was a Popsicle I will be forced to retaliate. This"—Nathan grabbed his now jeans-encased dick and jiggled it—"is *way* bigger than one of those little ice lollies."

"Fine." Marcus pulled on another too-short pair of Nathan's sweats, trying to think of some other comparison. "How about sucking it like it's one of those foot-long summer sausages?"

Nathan wrinkled his nose and looked at Marcus like he'd dropped one of his oars. "You suck on sausage? That's just...well, it's kind of hot to picture it, but, really, it's just weird as hell. I think you should acknowledged that you suck at analogies and stick to thinking about how, when you're sucking my dick, you do it like you love it, like it's the best thing you've ever sucked in between those pretty lips..."

Marcus' stomach felt all tingly and light as blood rushed to fill his cock. "I do, it is." And Nathan was hard now too, so much so that he was unbuttoning his jeans and reaching in to—

"I'm just trying to get comfortable in here, get that thought out of your head. We should go and see what was so important. Rick risked going blind to come in here."

Marcus watched with hungry eyes as Nathan adjusted his cock and balls until he found a comfortable position. Hips writhing in an enticing way, Nathan slowly began refastening his jeans, bringing his other hand around to rub at his groin. Marcus wanted to protest each button sliding back through the buttonhole, sealing off that mouth-watering prick. Rick's bellow of outrage snapped them both to attention and out of their lusty teasing.

"Right. Rick." Marcus spotted a shirt balled up on the dresser. "Excuse me." Stepping around Nathan, Marcus scraped his erection over one firm flank, smirking at the gasp and shiver the move got from Nathan—until Nathan spun round and palmed Marcus' length, squeezing hard enough to make him moan.

Nathan tapped his forefinger over the wet spot spreading on Marcus' sweats. "You might want to find another pair. There should be an old pair of Rick's buried in the back of the bottom drawer. They'd probably fit you better." Nathan patted Marcus' package and sauntered into the bathroom, grinning like a loon.

"Now you mention something that might actually fit." Marcus squatted and dug through the bottom drawer, finding a pair of faded sweats that might once have been black but were now a dull fuzzy grey. An equally faded sweatshirt, its sleeves ripped off, was nestled alongside the pants. Marcus pulled both out and quickly dressed, relieved to have his body mostly covered, even if the lack of sleeves did serve to accentuate his pale skinny arms. At least his torso was no longer bare—the shirt was big enough that it hung to his hips.

After taking care of his bladder and brushing his teeth, Marcus joined Nathan and Rick in the kitchen. Both men were huddled together, muttering and gesturing at the phone. It lit up and a twanging ringtone that made Marcus simultaneously want to grind his teeth and dive off a high cliff split the air. The number on the caller ID sent duelling emotions, fear and joy, straight to Marcus' brain.

"See? That's him again! He won't stop and I told the fucker I *did not* call him!" Rick reached for the phone at the same time Nathan did, but Marcus' quiet, "It was me, I called him," had them both pulling their hands away as Marcus approached the table.

"Who did you call?" Rick asked, giving Marcus a worried glance. Nathan

"My brother," Marcus croaked, his voice thickening in a humiliating manner as tears stung his eyes. "I called but your phone died before...I think before I could even leave a message."

Marcus reached for the phone but his hand was shaking so badly he succeeded only in knocking it off the edge of the table. Nathan caught it and offered it up to Marcus. The ringing stopped and Marcus couldn't quite stifle the sob that slipped free. *He'd been too slow, too shocked and afraid and hopeful*—

"Hey, we can call him back," Nathan soothed, standing up. He walked around the table and hugged Marcus, rubbing at his heaving back.

"Or he'll call back," Rick said. "He won't quit calling. I'm sorry, he didn't ask for you, just asked me who I was and why I called, but I didn't, and that number's not on the outgoing call list—"

"I called him, Rick. I did. " Marcus wasn't going to explain to him why the number didn't show on the outgoing call list. Thanks to Alex's younger brother, Aaron, their numbers wouldn't show on anyone's call list without special programming. That kid was a genius when it came to anything technical. That skill had kept their numbers from getting into the hands of anyone they didn't want to have them.

The phone rang and Rick gestured towards them. "One of you answer it. That poor man has been hounding me for an hour."

Nathan took a step back and held the phone out to Marcus. Holding one of Marcus' shaking hands in his free one, Nathan tapped the accept icon. Smiling encouragingly, he pressed the phone to Marcus' ear, which got Marcus blasted with, "Someone better start telling me who the fuck called from this phone or so help me God I will find you and kick your mother-fucking ass from here to kingdom come, do you *hear* me?"

"Hey!" Nathan growled and started to pull the phone away but Marcus, on a gasping chuckle, shook his head and clutched the phone.

"Gabriel Staley, is that any way to greet me?"

\* \* \* \*

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Marcus!" Gabe couldn't help it, he screeched and bounced and leapt on Alex when the man came running into the room. "It's Marcus, Alex! Oh shit! I'm so fucking glad—no, I'm ecstatic, except, even more than that, whatever is more than that, to hear you! Are you okay? No, of course you're not okay. I mean, you are, kind of, but you've been missing for over six months and—where are you?"

Gabe slapped Alex's hand away when the man tried to take the phone. Covering the bottom of the phone so hopefully Marcus wouldn't hear—though he probably would, shifter hearing being what it was—Gabe pointed a finger at Alex and glared so hard it made his head hurt. "Try that again, dude, and I'll rip your balls off and feed them to the new dog I rescued. He's a mean one, vicious." 'He' being the cute and cuddly five-pound poodle mix Gabe had found wandering along the side of the highway, but Alex didn't have to know that.

"Be nice to Alex," Marcus said, and Gabe couldn't help but hear the tears in the man's voice. He still sounded like the same Marcus, though, the one who'd promised to perform the ceremony that would turn Gabe into a shifter without having to get his dick bitten. For that alone Gabe would always love the man.

"Where are you? Are you in Santa Fe?" Gabe slowed down, trying to organise his questions. '*Go get Aidan*' Gabe mouthed to Alex. Mika already knew through their link as mates that Gabe was talking to Marcus, but didn't know how quickly he could find Aidan.

Alex hesitated until Gabe made a snipping motion with his fingers. Then he ran, which worked well. Gabe liked it when people did what he told them, it made life so much easier.

"No, we're in – this is outside of Ruidoso somewhere, isn't it, honey?"

*Honey?* Gabe heard a soft tenor in the background as well as a gruff baritone. "Honey?" Patience had never been his thing, and, as much as he wanted to know what had happened to Marcus, he wanted to know about *Honey* more just now.

Marcus, however, didn't seem to want to share that bit of information. "Where are you? Where's Aidan?"

"Oh!" Gabe bounced on his toes, wanting to tell Marcus everything at once. *Where to start?* "We're all here, just outside of Alamogordo, which is only about half an hour from Ruidoso. One of Joshua Dobson's pack members challenged Aidan for the position as Alpha Anax –"

"What? *Aidan* is the Alpha Anax now?"

"That was probably one of those things I should have explained before I blurted it out, huh?" Gabe heard muffled voices and wished like hell he had the ability to hear a mouse piss a mile away the way the shifters seemed to be able to do. He'd also settle for a modicum of tact, because it sure would have come in handy before he'd opened his mouth. "Uh, Marcus? Aidan hates being the AA, he just did it for you. He always –"

"What's an AA? An Alpha Anax?" the warm, rich tenor that definitely didn't belong to Marcus asked. Gabe thought that if fresh honey could be turned into a voice it'd sound like this man's. "And who are you, if you're not Marcus' brother?"

"Gabe," Gabe said, answering the last question first because that sexy voice had scattered the other questions right out of his head. "What? What else did you ask me?"

"*I should* ask if you're a little slow," that sweet voice sniped, but Gabe couldn't even get irritated, which was unlike him enough that it shoved him out of his gap-jawed daze.

"You're not...ah." Maybe asking the man if he was or wasn't a shifter wasn't the best idea. Gabe was glad his brain was finally beginning to function before he blurted out anything else he shouldn't. "I'm a friend of Marcus and his brother Aidan." There, that sounded intelligent, sort of. "And you are?"

"Someone who's watching his mate trying to hold it together," the man snapped – and Gabe dropped the phone.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!" Gabe scrambled for the pieces of the phone. "Of *course* the fucking battery would *have* to pop off!" He picked up the back, battery and phone and slapped it all back together. "Well, at least I know the dude knows about shifters." Pressing the on button, Gabe glanced at the cordless phone on the table in the hall. Would they answer if he called from a different number? He had to find out where Marcus was, or Aidan was going to kill him for screwing this up. And Gabe wouldn't blame him.

The phone in his hand vibrated, and Gabe wanted to scream with frustration as it rolled through its opening sequence. "Smartphone my ass. Takes longer to get started than my granny did the morning after a rousing night of bingo and a pitcher or two of Bloody Marys. Sheesh."

The home screen finally appeared and the phone rang immediately, almost causing Gabe to drop it again. He tapped the screen and didn't need enhanced senses to hear the pissed off voice snapping at him over the line.

"Did you hang up on me? I swear, if you did, all those threats you were spewing when Marcus answered your call...I'll make you *wish* I was going that easy on you when I find you!"

*Honey and Red Hots. Damn.* Now Gabe wanted some of the spicy cinnamon candy! "I dropped the phone, killer, so calm down. You shocked the shit out of me with that mate bit, and the phone slipped. The battery popped out and bounced across the room –" Oh God, he really needed to shut up.

\* \* \* \*

Nathan held the phone away from his ear and looked at Marcus – *the former leader of all wolf packs in the North American continent, for Christ's sake. Something he might have mentioned!* He handed Marcus the phone. "Maybe you can get him to make some sense."

Marcus turned his back to Nathan. It seemed like a dismissal and trying to rationalise it without taking it personally was next to impossible. Nathan walked out of the kitchen, his mind occupied with questions and accusations. *He's been through hell, for months! Don't expect him not to withdraw at times. Especially not when he's just been told his brother jumped right in and took over his spot as leader of the packs. Think about that stricken look from just a few minutes ago.*

The shock of hearing that his brother had stepped in to fill his position had floored Marcus. Nathan wasn't sure why, and Marcus was holding his emotions tightly to his chest, or locked in his head, more appropriately. His blank expression hadn't given away any clues as to his thoughts, either, and while Nathan could logically understand why Marcus hadn't told him about being the Alpha Anax, it still hurt.

Sure, they hadn't known each other long, and there were lifetimes full of things they'd yet to share, but keeping something secret like that? Something equal to being the freaking king of a nation, at least to the shifters?

*But you weren't exactly open-minded about them, were you? Didn't make it easy for him to talk about it. Look how you freaked out over the whole mate thing. Ran off like a wuss, nearly flipped your lid...went on about what freaks shifters are. Why the hell would he think he could tell you he was the leader of all of them?*

Nathan blinked, surprised to find himself standing with one hand on the knob of the door leading out to the porch. He hadn't even realised he'd walked out of the kitchen, he'd been so lost in his thoughts. What was he doing? Running again? Was that really the kind of man he wanted to be?

"No." Nathan started to take his hand off the knob when a sound outside made his skin prickle. Wolves, several of them, calling back and forth to each other. And the click of the safety being released on a rifle. Rick. "Shit!"

Nathan opened the door and rushed on to the porch as Rick raised the gun. The wolves were close—Nathan would have heard them sooner had he been paying attention to anything other than his own internal snit fit. The sound of paws pounding through foliage seemed amplified as he watched Rick stare down the scope and press his finger to the trigger.

"Rick." Nathan spoke softly, not wanting to startle an armed man, especially not one who'd shoot. Rick cut his eyes in Nathan's direction for a second in acknowledgement then

focussed on the tree line. "Don't shoot first this time, Rick. These might be the ones who've been looking for Marcus."

"Might be more than one pack looking for him, and we don't know if this is a friendly one or not."

"That's true, but don't shoot any of them in case they *are* friendly. If they aren't, we'll know soon enough."

Rick grunted and held his position. A long haunting howl pierced the air and Nathan's wolf clawed at him, wanting to be released so he could join the chorus of answering notes that followed. It was oddly reassuring to Nathan—surely if there was any sort of threat in the wolves' song his own wolf wouldn't be clamouring for companionship with the pack, right?

Then the first wolf burst into sight, a huge beast followed immediately by a smaller grey one. Nathan slapped his hand on Rick's shoulder, his gaze locked with the first wolf—a stark white one that looked so much like Marcus must have before he'd been kidnapped. The wolf skidded to a halt when he saw Rick standing on the porch with the rifle aimed at him. He nipped at the grey wolf, snapping until it edged behind him. The forest had grown silent around them, but Nathan could hear what Rick couldn't.

"Put it down," Nathan murmured.

"Not risking your life, son."

"Rick, put it down, or aim it away from that white wolf and the grey one, quick, before you get us both killed."

"Why? What's—"

A light-brown wolf leapt on to the side of the porch, his head low and his ears back. The throaty growl coming from the creature was more menacing than anything Nathan had heard since he'd been a child. Rick cursed and swung the rifle towards the wolf. Nathan lunged for Rick as another wolf, this one a tawny gold colour, came up from the other side of the porch.

Nathan slapped at the rifle, knocking the barrel up as Rick pulled the trigger. He kicked out at the light-brown wolf when it started to charge, then jerked the rifle from Rick's hands in a move that put him between Rick and the wolf. Pressing his back against Rick's chest and backing the man up against the house, Nathan pointed one shaking finger at the beast stalking them.



"Marcus will be very, very pissed off if you hurt us." The wolf stopped and cocked his head, his growling slowing to more of a questioning rumble than anything else. Nathan kept his gaze locked with the wolf's narrowed one. "That goes for you, too, the one to my left. To all of you. Back off, because he isn't going to like this."

"He's right. I *am* very pissed off," Marcus said, stepping on to the porch. He reached out and pulled Nathan to his side, staring at the white wolf in the yard, although his words when he spoke were clearly for the two on the porch. "Trent, Alison, get your heads out of your asses. Don't tell me you can't scent that Nathan is my mate."

## Chapter Twelve

Stomach churning with fear and joy, Marcus met his brother's gaze as he ordered Trent and Alison to stand down. Nathan trembled at his side, and Marcus had to suppress the urge to beat both of the shifters who'd scared his mate.

*"I wasn't scared of them. I was trying to keep Rick from getting us killed."*

Marcus' lips twitched as he hugged Nathan to him. He'd let Nathan have his pride. *"I'm sorry. I should have been here sooner. Gabe can be a distraction, a loud one at that."*

Nathan wrapped his arms around Marcus' waist and nodded. "No shit. That's your brother out there, isn't it?"

"Yes." All of the tightly bound emotions Marcus had tried to keep under control began unravelling as Aidan shifted. Seeing his brother's tear-streaked face as Aidan dropped to his knees, Zane and the other shifters following suit, was too much.

"What are they doing?" Rick asked from behind him.

Marcus tried to speak past the emotion clogging his throat.

"They're showing their respect to the Alpha Anax," Nathan answered, his own voice sounding thick with the threat of tears. "They're bowing, submitting to their leader. Go on." Nathan nudged at his back, "They're waiting for you. Your brother is waiting for you."

Marcus forgot about his pride, about putting up a strong front as an alpha. His breath hitched as he clutched at Nathan, his legs too unsteady to carry him. "Aidan," he whispered, his heart aching for his brother. Then Nathan was leading him, holding him steady and murmuring encouragement as Marcus leant on him. Together they walked down the steps, Marcus' pulse racing, tears on his cheeks as he tried to keep from breaking down.

Aidan had no such qualms, shoving to his feet, chest heaving with sobs as he ran towards Marcus. Nathan stepped aside but kept one hand on the small of his back. Marcus had enough time to open his arms, then Aidan was there, embracing him, as Marcus enfolded his brother in his arms.

"I knew you'd be back," Aidan rasped unevenly, his cheek pressed to Marcus'. "That's the only reason I stepped in as Alpha Anax, so when you returned...I wouldn't let you down again."

"You've never let me down, little brother," Marcus whispered. "I knew you were looking for me, that you hadn't ever given up hope of finding me. Sometimes that was the only thing, the only reason I had to survive. Thank you, Aidan."

Then Marcus rested his chin on his brother's shoulder and let go of all the anger and fear he'd been carrying inside.

\* \* \* \*

Nathan swiped at his cheeks and sniffed as he watched the two brothers. He kept his questions and concerns about Marcus resuming his position as AA locked away for now, reminding himself there was a time and place for everything, and here and now wasn't it. Now was for Marcus and Aidan, not Nathan's selfish crap.

"Maybe we should get them inside."

Nathan bit his tongue to keep from squeaking as he spun to the side. A dark-haired man with red-rimmed grey eyes and a tear-wetted face stood beside him.

"I'm Zane Mitchell, Aidan's mate," the man said, extending his hand.

"Nathan Grant." Marcus had already declared Nathan his mate so he didn't bother adding it again. He shook Zane's hand, studying the attractive man closely, taking his measure just as his own was being taken. His lids flickered when he saw the silvery scars marring Zane's otherwise perfect body.

Zane grunted and lifted his hand until it almost touched his chest then he let it drop back to his side. Nathan realised he was staring and that Zane had likely been about to try to cover his scars before catching himself. *If only I could kick my own ass...*

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, it's just—" Nathan sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth and shook his head.

"It was incredibly painful," Zane said in a flat voice. "And I could do nothing to stop it. Luckily, Aidan sees past the scars."

Nathan was so hot with the intensity of his blush he thought he might just melt. "I swear, they don't bother me at all, it's... I've..." Nathan darted a quick glance at Marcus, looking at the little flicks of silvery scars on his bare arms. He knew the exact moment Zane saw them, because Aidan jerked back and grabbed Marcus' arms, holding them in his grip when Marcus tried to pull away.

"Inside," Nathan hissed, knowing how self-conscious Marcus was of the scars, how flawed he thought he was. Having every shifter here see them would only make him even more insecure. "Come on, sweetheart," Nathan said as he stepped between the brothers, relieved when Aidan released Marcus without arguing. "Let's get in the cabin where we can sit down and talk. Maybe just us, Rick, Aidan and Zane?"

Marcus nodded woodenly as Nathan hooked an arm around his hips. Marcus set his arm on Nathan's shoulders, his big hand squeezing Nathan's far biceps. "Thank you."

Nathan smiled and winked at him, hoping to chase away some of the sadness that had rolled back into his mate. "I'll always take care of you," Nathan said, the words slipping free before he could censor them. Marcus would think he was crazy, making a pledge like that after knowing each other a week or so.

*"It's the way of mates,"* Marcus explained, and his voice, at least the version of it Nathan heard in his head, was strong and liberally laced with happiness. *"For some it might take a little longer, or at least longer to admit, especially if a shifter has a human mate, but between shifters who are mates love blooms strong and quick, and it only continues to grow through the years. So don't be ashamed, ever, of speaking what's in your heart. You've held mine in your hands from the moment I looked up, thinking I was going to die, and saw you standing there lit by the sun at your back, pointing a gun at Bryce. Steps."*

Nathan was glad Marcus warned him; otherwise he'd have ended up sprawled in a heap of humiliation. Marcus' words and the unspoken implications had Nathan's head spinning and his heart trying to pound right out of his chest. And there wasn't any way he could question Marcus further now—Rick, Aidan and Zane were right behind them as they entered the cabin.

"Gonna go find those two a blanket or something," Rick said as he scooted past Nathan. "Or a hand towel to hang over those damn things." He walked away mumbling about naked men everywhere, and Nathan couldn't hold back a snicker.

"Poor Rick is going to end up gauging his eyes out if this keeps up," Nathan told Marcus.

"Who is he?" Zane asked. "He's human, so I know he—Rick, right?—he isn't your father."

Nathan's amusement vanished. "He raised Nathan," Marcus explained for him. Nathan was relieved when Zane left it at that. Not only did he not want to have to recount his

history, but Marcus and Aidan needed this time to reconnect. Both men were still shaky, their faces glistening with fresh tears.

"We can sit in the living room—" Nathan began, only to have Rick interrupt him.

"Not until I find something for them to cover their asses with! I sleep on that couch and I'll be damned if *anyone's* naked ass and...and other parts are gonna touch it!"

"Ah, well, maybe I should just grab the blanket off of our bed."

"Bath towels would work," Zane said. "Just tell me where they are."

"I have some sweats and shirts right here. Good thing I packed a bag." Rick tossed clothes to Zane. "Now cover those things up already. I swear it's a pain in the ass being the only straight guy here."

"Oh really?" Nathan teased Rick, hearing at least one of the other shifters snicker. "A pain in the ass, is it?"

Rick's face lit up bright enough to glow in the dark. "You just stop that right now, son, or so help me I'll start telling tales about some of the crap you did when you were a kid. Like that time I caught you with that maga—"

"All right!" Nathan snapped as Rick walked back out of the room laughing his head off. Nathan remembered all too well when Rick had walked in on him. Nathan had been fifteen and had just figured out he was gay, with a little help from the magazine in his hand. It wasn't exactly porn, as all the men wore underwear—thongs and G-strings counted as underwear, so did jock straps. And of course Nathan had been keeping his other hand fully occupied as he flipped the pages of the magazine. That was how Rick had found out Nathan was gay, too.

"Maybe Rick and I should have a long talk."

Nathan glared at Marcus. "Do it. See what that *doesn't* get you, sweetheart."

"I think your mate has you by the balls," Aidan said, slapping Nathan on the back hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. Nathan turned his glare on Marcus' brother.

Marcus cocked his head towards his brother. "I think he's fixing to have yours if you smack him like that again."

Aidan grinned and patted Nathan's back much more softly. "Sorry. You seem bigger than you are."

Nathan rounded on Aidan ready to lay the man out or at least try. Marcus pulled him back with his arms wrapped around his chest, pinning Nathan's arms to his side.

Aidan's eyes were comically wide, or at least it would have been funny seeing the man's eyes bugging out if Nathan hadn't wanted to kick his ass. Aidan took a step back and waved his hands in front of him. "I swear that didn't come out right! I didn't mean that you're little, or short, just that you...seem..."

"I think you're fucked on the whole apology bit," Zane said in such a serious voice that Nathan quit glaring at Aidan long enough to look at Zane. Aidan's mate shook his head slowly and clucked his tongue. "How many times have I tried to tell you to think before you speak? I'll have to think of an appropriate punishment."

"I can think of a few things," Nathan muttered. "I'll even make a list and draw pictures."

Marcus chuckled behind him but he wasn't joking at all, his voice serious, when he spoke. "Really, Aidan, is that any way to act towards the man who saved me from...who saved my life?"

Nathan knew what Marcus had stopped himself from saying, had seen the memories in vivid enough detail so that it felt like he was the one pinned under Bryce, knowing he was about to be violated and hurt, more pain on top of pain. It was so clear in his mind, the fear so real that beads of sweat broke out on his brow.

Aidan stepped closer and stared down at Nathan. "What do you mean, he saved you? What's making your mate afraid?"

"Nathan Grant," Marcus emphasised his name as he smoothed a hand over Nathan's chest. "I haven't introduced you, but I'm sure Nathan knows who you are. Anyway, he found me, chained and dying, close enough to it at least. I'd been left there without food, only a small amount of water. I could hear the stream nearby but couldn't get to it. Do you know how maddening that was, to be so thirsty, so dehydrated you couldn't spit, couldn't piss, and yet you knew there was water only a few yards away if you could only..."

Aidan's anguished cry came seconds before Nathan was yanked from Marcus' arms and hauled up into Aidan's.

"Thank you, God, thank you, Nathan."

Nathan was being squeezed so hard he couldn't do any more than squeak. Aidan's hands tangled in Nathan's braid as Aidan rubbed his back, which only made Nathan yelp as a few hairs at the base of his neck were pulled.

"Klutz," Marcus grumped as he tugged Nathan back into his arms. "Really, Zane, you *do* need to work with him. Here, honey." Marcus tipped Nathan's head forward and pulled up the braid. Seconds later Nathan's hair was loose and Marcus was gently rubbing his scalp before carefully finger-combing the long mass out. "Better?"

"Yeah," Nathan mumbled. He pointed at Aidan. "Keep him away from me. He's dangerous to me physically and emotionally."

Aidan ignored the comment, his attention on Marcus' hands still smoothing Nathan's hair. Nathan looked to see what Zane thought of that and found him watching as well.

"What? What are you two staring at?" Nathan turned his head to glance at his mate. "What is it?"

Marcus' smile was so far past sexy Nathan thought he could come just from seeing it. "This." Marcus lifted a lock of Nathan's hair, then let it go. "Turn around, honey."

"Haven't they ever seen long hair before?" Nathan bitched as he turned to press his chest against Marcus. "Or is it the colour? Don't tell me there aren't any other shifters with auburn hair."

"None with that particular shade of it," Aidan answered. "It's p—"

"Don't say it!" Zane warned. "If you're about to say anything that sounds chick-ish, just keep it to yourself. Your hair is really...it looks..."

"Oh yeah. And I'm the one getting snapped at."

"It's auburn, it's straight, and it hangs to my very fine ass," Nathan supplied for Aidan and Zane since the two of them together seemed incapable of one coherent thought regarding the heavy mess. "It's not as sexy as Marcus' curls. Now that we've got that cleared up, does anyone want a drink?"

Aidan and Marcus nodded. Nathan looked at the fourth man.

"I'll help you," Zane offered. "And *your* curly locks are *very* pretty," Zane aimed the comment at Marcus. "Maybe you can talk to your brother and get him to grow his hair out."

They left their mates in the living room and walked into the kitchen. "How bad are his other scars?"

Nathan flicked Zane an irritated glance. "They're fine. Nothing he should ever be ashamed of."

"But he is, isn't he? It took me a long time to quit being self-conscious of mine, but I eventually succeeded" — Zane quirked his lips and patted at his chest — "most of the time. I'll

admit, when you were staring at my scars outside, not covering them was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I hate to see Marcus going through the same thing."

"I don't get why they're so traumatic," Nathan said as he dug four glasses out of the cabinet.

"Do you have any scars, Nathan?"

"No, why would I? I'm a shifter...ah." Well, he sure felt like a moron.

"Right," Zane agreed, "you're a shifter, and you don't scar—unless someone exposes you to datura. It eats right through the skin, you know, and the pain is unbelievable. I've never had anything hurt me like that before or since. That kind of thing is hard on a man's ego—anyone's ego, I'd imagine—and worse on a shifter's. The scars set us apart, and it's very hard not to look at them and be reminded that you're different, or not to think of yourself as flawed."

"But why would he—you, anyone feel like that?" Nathan asked, trying to understand. "Marcus didn't do it to himself, neither did you, I'm assuming, so why would either of you blame yourself?"

Zane looked at him with a haunted expression so like the one Nathan had seen on Marcus that it wrenched at his heart. "Because, no matter what anyone else says, we did something that allowed us to be put in the situations we were in. For me, that was staying on as alpha of a pack when I was really only a puppet for my uncle. I knew the consequences if I went against him." Zane touched his scarred chest. "And I was too weak to stand up to him. It was easier to accept that it was just the way things were going to be. I could have left at any time, or asked the Alpha Anax—once Marcus was in power, at least—for help. But I didn't. It took meeting Aidan, finding out the man, a man, was my mate, to shake me up and make me realise things were going to change and I was going to have to change as well. Even then, I fought it and ran from him."

"And I caught you," Aidan said as he entered the room with Marcus on his heels. The look Aidan gave Zane was hot enough to singe the hair off of Nathan's body.

"Yes, thankfully you did." Zane smiled and gestured to the glasses. "We got a little distracted."

"I heard." Aidan turned to Nathan, who braced for another insult, intentional or not. "I am sorry for sticking my foot in my mouth earlier. Seeing my brother again was... I can't tell you how happy I am. I let that joy override my common sense—"



"As usual," Marcus said from behind his brother.

Aidan flicked Marcus a sheepish look before turning back to Nathan. "I'm really not usually such an asshole. Can we try again?"

It was too hard to hold on to his anger and Nathan didn't see any reason to. Aidan was obviously very important to Marcus, and it'd be best if they could get along. "Yeah, we can do that. Nathan Grant," Nathan said as he offered his hand.

Aidan's smile lit up his whole face as they shook hands. "A pleasure to meet you, Nathan Grant. Aidan Criswell. You've already met my mate Zane Mitchell." Aidan stepped further into the room and gestured towards the table. "Would you have a seat? Or would you prefer to have this conversation in the living room?"

Nathan sputtered for a second as he gaped at the man. "Would *I* prefer? What? Am I being interrogated here?"

Aidan groaned and slapped a hand to his brow. "No! No, I just...we need to know what happened, who was involved—" he dragged his hand down his face and looked at Marcus. "I know it won't be easy to talk about, but we *do* need as much information as possible. And," Aidan took a breath as he straightened his spine, "I need to know what happened to you, what that bastard did to my brother. I don't want you to carry that burden alone."

Marcus tilted his head and peered at Nathan. "I'm not. I have my mate, Aidan. He knows, but yes, I think I need to tell you as well. Zane, too, since he's your mate."

Nathan forgot about the drinks he'd been preparing and rushed to Marcus' side. He slid an arm around Marcus' waist and pressed closer to Marcus as the man draped an arm over his shoulders. Never once did he or Marcus look away from one another.

"Shit," Aidan muttered. "Nathan, I'm sorry, again. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," Nathan said, waving a hand at Aidan. "You and Marcus are close, I get that. That's good; he needs to be with the people who love him."

Marcus' dark eyes glowed and a slow smile spread over his lips. "Are you saying you love me, Nathan Grant?"

Swallowing past a lump in his throat—either of fear or joy or both, he couldn't decide—Nathan nodded. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I love you." He remembered their audience and more heat rushed to his already flaming cheeks. But that expression on Marcus' face was worth a little embarrassment. Or a lot.

Then Marcus made it worth anything, everything, by taking Nathan in his arms and bringing him flush to that long, lean body. He fisted one hand in Nathan's hair and tugged, pulling Nathan's head back. Then he melted every single cell in Nathan's body.

"I love you too, mate," Marcus said as he lifted Nathan to his toes. Nathan parted his lips as Marcus dipped his head, then those smiling lips came down on his and Nathan clung to his man, opening wider as Marcus claimed him, body and soul with a tender kiss.

Nathan's cock was aching hard when it ended, as was Marcus' where it pressed against his belly. Nathan closed his eyes and rested his head on Marcus' chest as they held each other. After several minutes, Marcus finally spoke, and Nathan pried his eyes open and found Aidan and Zane wearing identical goofy expressions that quickly faded.

"I want Alex here so he can hear this, too. As captain of the guard, he should be here now. Why isn't he?"

It seemed clear to Nathan that Aidan didn't want to answer, and Marcus must have agreed. He growled, a low deep rumble that had Zane tipping his head down and Aidan narrowing his eyes for a second before answering.

"Alex resigned his position. He felt he mishandled your abduction, and was careless when he allowed the one lead we had, a man named Steven Combs, to get hold of his gun and kill himself." Aidan flicked a glance at Nathan then continued. "There was also the fact that he thought he was in love with you."

Marcus' shock rolled into him and suffocated the ember of anger that threatened to burn bright in Nathan. No matter how this Alex had felt, Marcus hadn't returned the emotion. He was too stunned by the revelation to have had a clue.

"He still needs to be here," Marcus finally said. Nathan wasn't so sure about that, but he wouldn't argue with his mate. "Alex needs to know he wasn't at fault for what happened, at least not when it came to Joshua Dobson. I don't know about what happened to Combs."

Aidan nodded and touched Zane's shoulder. "Would you call Alex and ask him to come?"

"Yes. I'll do it in the other room so you can fill Marcus and Nathan in on what happened to make Alex resign."

Zane left the kitchen then and they walked to the table and sat down. Aidan told them about Mary Combs calling, and the events up to Alex's resignation, including Steven's suicide. He also informed Marcus who the new captain of the guard was.

Nathan found Alex's entire situation sad. He couldn't blame the shifter for being in love with Marcus, nor could he fault him for anything other than being careless in his eagerness to rescue Marcus. Nathan couldn't say he'd have done anything differently had he been in Alex's shoes. But he wasn't exactly looking forward to meeting the man, or watching him stare at Marcus like a lovesick puppy. It might not be so easy to remember feeling sorry for Alex then.

"I can have Zane call Alex back and tell him not to come," Marcus offered, but Nathan knew Marcus needed to do what he could to put some of Alex's guilt at ease if he could.

"No, it's fine. I'll be good." He'd try at least.

Zane came back into the kitchen and Nathan could tell something bad had happened. The man was frowning hard enough that it looked painful.

"What's wrong?" Marcus asked a heartbeat before Aidan did the same.

Zane walked to the table and pulled out a chair. He slumped into the seat, a worried expression darkening his features. Aidan took his hand and Zane looked at Marcus. "Gabe said Alex left as soon as he found out you were okay."

Marcus scowled but Nathan saw the slight droop of his shoulders. Marcus wasn't angry, he was confused and hurt by Alex's departure. "Why did he leave? Did he say anything? Did he tell Gabe where he was going?"

"Yeah." Zane glanced at Aidan, then Nathan, and finally Marcus once again. "He left a note. Gabe found it. Alex wrote that he was going after Joshua Dobson and his pack, and he'd bring you every one of the traitors, dead or alive."

Marcus stood so suddenly his chair toppled backwards. "I have to get a hold of him! There was one shifter in the pack, Joshua's brother Sean—I probably wouldn't be standing here now if he hadn't helped me!"

Zane tipped his head down and held out his phone. "I tried. Alex left his phone behind. Gabe heard it ringing and answered it. That's how he found the note, it was beside the cell. I'm sorry, Marcus."

Nathan stood and looked at the other three men. "Can't someone go after him? Follow his scent? Surely he can't have got very far."

"We'll try," Aidan said, "that's all we can do. But Alex is very smart, and he's probably covered his tracks and scent both."

"Has anyone talked to his sister?"

Nathan shrugged as three startled gazes met his own questioning one. "What? It seems like the obvious thing to do to me." Maybe it was easier for him to think since the others were closer to Alex and he didn't even know what the man looked like.

Zane hopped back up and in short order returned with a petite woman. She bowed her head at Marcus. "Alpha Anax Criswell, I would be honoured to serve as your captain as I have for your brother, if you would allow it."

The words, the woman's tone and submissive stance, all of it drove home to Nathan that his mate was truly the Alpha Anax. It was intimidating for him since he hadn't been raised in a pack, but as Marcus' smoothed a hand down his back, Nathan vowed to adapt and make his man proud.

*"I couldn't be prouder, Nathan."*

Nathan was pretty sure he was glowing from the praise as Marcus touched the side of Alison's neck.

"Alison." Marcus waited until she raised her head. Nathan noticed she kept her gaze averted, somewhere in the area of Marcus' chest most likely, considering her height. "Alex has gone after Dobson and his pack."

That brought her head up further. Her expression hardened, giving a dangerous look to her pixie-ish features. "Alex isn't a traitor, Alpha Anax."

"I didn't believe he was," Marcus told her, his voice firm. "He intends to bring each member back, 'dead or alive' according to the note he left behind."

Alison inhaled sharply and stood even straighter than before. Nathan was afraid the woman would snap in two any second now.

"There's a member of the pack who helped me. If Sean Dobson is still alive, I don't want him harmed, although I do want him brought to me for his own safety, especially if Joshua is still free. It's imperative that we get in touch with Alex and, if he won't be talked out of this, that he at least be informed that I want Sean Dobson unharmed."

Aidan stepped forward and placed his hand on Alison's shoulder. "He left his phone behind, so you'll have to try to track him down immediately."

Alison nodded even as she cursed Alex for being a stubborn fool. "I love my brother, don't get me wrong, but he can be so frustrating at times," she explained before excusing herself to begin the search for Alex.

Marcus steered Nathan back to his seat then gestured at Aidan and Zane, who'd also risen from their chairs, to sit as well before resuming his spot at the table. Nathan tried to look calm, but he didn't think he was going to be able to pull it off. There was no way he could sit here and listen to Marcus recount his abuse at the hands of a sadistic bastard without either breaking down or breaking *something*. But, he'd do his best.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus grabbed the back of Nathan's chair and pulled it closer, a move which earned him an annoyed huff from the man. Nathan then leant against him, though, so he wasn't *that* annoyed about being moved without warning. Marcus honestly hadn't even thought about what he was doing. He'd sensed the tension in Nathan, saw the way he had stiffened up, and had immediately wanted to comfort his mate—and maybe, even himself. Talking about what had happened to him was going to be difficult, but Aidan had helped him get through those six months. He deserved to know that, as well as the rest of it.

And so Marcus began, hesitantly at first, to speak of the night he was abducted from the isolated rest area so many months ago. Then he found the words pouring from him, as purging as tears, as Nathan wept silently beside him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Marcus watched from the porch as Aidan and Zane got into the Hummer one of the guards had driven over to pick them up in. The guard—Marcus recognised him, a tall wiry shifter named Elwin—bowed his head but didn't approach. The smile on Elwin's lips when he raised his head made it clear he was happy to have Marcus back in charge. Marcus tipped his chin at the man in acknowledgement then went back to pondering something he simply couldn't figure out.

"Why are you frowning? Did you want to go with them?" Nathan asked beside him. "I could stay here with Rick, since he doesn't want to go, and you could—"

"No, it isn't that. I don't think I'm quite ready to have everyone staring at me, pitying me," Marcus said absently as he watched Elwin get in the backseat so Aidan could drive with Zane at his side. "And I do *not* want to be anywhere you're not." He reached for Nathan, smoothing a hand over his long, unbound hair. "I was just wondering how I missed seeing Alex thought he was in love with me. I can't think of a single instance where either of us behaved inappropriately, or where I caught him ogling me. It seems like I should have known, don't you think? At least scented his arousal, because if he loved me, then he should have been attracted to me, and surely I would have picked up on *that*."

Nathan snorted and patted Marcus' ass. "Not to belittle your feelings or anything, but I can assure you he looked at you all right. There's just no way he didn't, but he was obviously smart enough to be very careful not to let you notice. And I'd think Alex wouldn't risk doing anything that would get him removed from his position, because then he wouldn't be able to be near you. He wouldn't have been able to sneak glances at your very fine body, or gaze at your handsome face when you weren't paying attention. God, that must have sucked for him, living like that. Poor guy, no wonder he left. It probably would have been too painful to see you with your mate."

Marcus was dumbstruck as he looked at Nathan, who only quirked a brow at him. "Didn't think about that last part, did you?"

"No. I can't even wrap my mind around the rest of it!"

Nathan smirked at him and pinched the flesh he'd just patted. "Well, I can't blame him for falling for you or this sweet ass, though I am glad he didn't ever get to fuck it. Then I might have to hunt him down myself."

Marcus gave his mate an arch look as he rubbed his butt cheek. "You do know I wasn't a virgin when we met, not anywhere *near* being a virgin."

"Neither was I," Nathan retorted, which made a—totally unfounded, Marcus knew—kernel of jealousy pop open inside him. He took Marcus' hand and led him inside, speaking as they walked into the living room. "The difference, my sweet man, the reason it would bother me to no end if Alex was going to be near you, is that he thinks he loves you. I get that people are going to look at you, want you, but they best have enough sense not to encroach. People who think they're in love though? They can end up doing stupid, desperate things. Like trying to seduce someone who's taken, or causing trouble between a couple. Or even something like take off after a pack of psychos."

"But we aren't just a couple," Marcus said as he pulled Nathan to him. He hooked an arm under Nathan's butt and lifted the man to his toes, which almost lined their cocks up, but not quite. "We're mates, Nathan, and no one comes between mates. Nothing Alex could have done would have changed the way I feel about you."

"Take it into the bedroom, you two. Christ." Rick scowled at them both then turned back to the TV, pushing a button on the remote until the sound was nearly deafening.

"Maybe we should have left him here after all," Nathan half-shouted, his scowl ruined by the affection dancing in his eyes as he looked at Rick. "Hey, Rick! Knock first!" That got Nathan a one-fingered reply that sent his mate into a laughing fit. Marcus let the rich, sexy sound of Nathan's amusement wrap around him, warming him like an invisible blanket as they walked into the bedroom.

"We should talk more about being mates," Marcus began, only to be silenced when Nathan spun him round and pinned him to the door. Ah well, he had a lifetime to prove to Nathan how devoted mates were to one another.

Nathan was on him in an instant, his lips crashing on to Marcus' as he climbed up Marcus' body.

Marcus groaned as his mouth was invaded, his lips bruised and nipped, his tongue sucked and chased. He palmed the full, firm mounds of Nathan's ass then stepped away from the door so his sexy lover could wind his legs around Marcus' waist. Nathan's hands

were buried in Marcus' hair, his palms cool and smooth against Marcus' scalp, even as his fingers clenched and pulled at the blond curls.

"Fuck me," Nathan murmured against Marcus' lips.

"I can do that, ride you like—"

"No," Nathan rasped. "*Fuck me.*"

Marcus stumbled, his arms going numb so that he very nearly lost his grip on Nathan. "What? But you said you top, and I haven't—"

Nathan slithered down his body, staring up at him with kiss-swollen lips and needy, lust-filled eyes. "And I always have, but I want..." He glanced away, colour rising in his cheeks, his voice suddenly sounding uncertain. "I never wanted anyone else to fuck me, but it's fine if you don't want to. I would never make you do anything."

Flames of need licked at Marcus' cock at the thought of sliding into Nathan's virgin ass. His preference for bottoming melted away under the heat of the desire to feel Nathan's body clenching around him, milking his prick until his balls were drained dry.

"But I *do* want to," Marcus whispered as he took Nathan's hand and pressed it to his groin. "I just hope I can keep from coming before I know what it's like to be inside you. Fuck!" He was dangerously close to shooting his load already, and putting Nathan's hand on his dick hadn't helped. Marcus grasped his mate's wrist and pulled until the risk of embarrassing himself was slightly lessened. "It's probably best if you don't touch me like that any more, or this whole conversation will have been for nothing."

Nathan grinned and grabbed the waistband of Marcus' sweats. "Well, if you're really that close, and since this might be the only time I ever want to try this, maybe we should have you release a bit of pressure first, hmm?" Nathan dropped to his knees, pulling Marcus' sweats down with him. "It's not like I can't get you hard again. We both know I can."

"You're going to have to," Marcus ground out, struggling to find a sliver of control as Nathan buried his face in Marcus' groin and inhaled deeply. Marcus fisted his hands in silky long hair and pressed Nathan's face into the thick patch of curls beneath his cock. "Damn, I'm not going to last long at all."

"Maybe I can help with that." Nathan gripped the base of Marcus' shaft, squeezing until Marcus had to bite his lip against yelping. "That knock the urgency down a notch?"

"Definitely," Marcus croaked, relieved when Nathan let up just a bit on his grip.



"Good." Nathan nuzzled the patch of skin between Marcus' dick and balls, flicking his tongue over the sensitive skin until Marcus was right back on edge. The hand grasping his shaft tightened again, then Nathan ducked his head, prodding at Marcus' thighs until he spread his legs. "Perfect."

"Oh fuck, Jesus, that's—" Marcus gave up talking and moaned as Nathan rubbed his face against Marcus' balls, scraping his teeth over the wrinkled sac with every pass of his lips.

*"I love this, it's my fetish, rubbing my face over your balls, covering myself in your scent, feeling you quiver and hearing you moan..."*

Marcus wanted to say something, think something but Nathan sucked a nut into his mouth and laved the ball thoroughly, tugging with his lips as one of his hands kept Marcus' dick from spewing and the fingers of his other scratched down the inside of Marcus' thigh.

*"So fucking good, sweetheart. Your taste, your body, just all of you, everything about you..."*

Nathan treated the other nut to the same oral worship, then a tug and a push and Marcus' entire sac was sucked into that warm, wet haven. Nathan's hand slid up Marcus' cock to gather the pre cum leaking from the tip. Marcus' moan turned into a shout as Nathan smeared the viscous fluid down the thick stalk and began jerking him off.

The combination of Nathan's hand stroking him and his mouth surrounding his balls nearly drove Marcus to his knees. Nathan sucked hard on his nuts and flicked the tip of his thumbnail in Marcus' slit, and Marcus knew it was all over then. There was no way he was strong enough to hold his climax back. Marcus roared as the first shot of cum ripped from his balls and spewed from his dick.

Nathan moaned around his mouthful then let Marcus' sac slip free. Marcus curled over him, unable to hold himself upright as more spunk jetted out. He felt Nathan squirm under him, the brush of soft hair against his stomach, then Nathan's lips kissed his slit, sucking down each spurt of seed from Marcus' prick.

"God...damn," Marcus wheezed as he tried to stay upright. Nathan slid out from under him and locked his arms around Marcus' stomach.

"Need a little help getting to the bed?" Nathan sounded extremely smug, but Marcus couldn't blame him.

"I think you melted most of my brain cells and sucked 'em right out of my dick. Fuck, Nathan." Marcus tumbled on to the bed, his lungs heaving as dots danced before his eyes. "Jesus."

Nathan grinned as he moved back across the room. "How about a little show?" He started pulling off his clothes. "Might help bring that beast back to life," he said, the words muffled as he stripped his shirt off over his head.

Just seeing Nathan naked, even with the infernal spots floating in his vision, was enough to make Marcus' prick start to fill. "Don't think you're gonna have to work very hard at it."

"Well, maybe this will help." Nathan turned and flexed his ass, the divots in his cheeks deepening as he clenched the firm muscles. "This isn't just any ass. *This* is a work of art, finely chiselled and honed from years of gymnastics. Think about what it'll feel like being in here—" He reached back and prised his cheeks apart. "Tight and hot, my ass will feel like silk squeezing your dick, pulsing around it, massaging that big rod of yours until you think you'll die 'cause it feels so fucking good. That's how it feels when I fuck you, like nothing can ever be wrong and nothing could ever possibly feel better."

Nathan's words, along with the glimpse of his tight little pucker, finished the job his strip show had started. "Come here," Marcus growled, not yet trusting his legs to hold him. He sat up and took off his shirt, throwing it towards the foot of the bed. Nathan turned with a slow roll of his hips, his walk languorous as he came to Marcus.

Marcus tried to look everywhere at once, into Nathan's sloe-eyed gaze, at his plump Cupid's bow lips, his flushed cheeks, the tiny pebbled nipples on his well-defined pecs, the delineated planes of his abs, the fat bobbing cock with its glistening tip, the heavy balls hanging underneath. Nathan's thighs were thickly muscled, his calves sculpted into artistic angles and curves.

"Like what you see?" Nathan purred, running one hand over the taut muscles of his abs as he stood several feet away. "Wanna play with this?" He palmed his cock, stroking it as Marcus stared with hungry eyes.

"Come *here*," Marcus ordered, pleased when Nathan's eyes dilated at the firm command. "*Now*," Marcus added, his lust increasing exponentially with each shiver that rippled through his mate.

"Yes, sir." Nathan lowered his gaze and came forward, stopping in front of Marcus. "Whatever you want, however you want me."

Marcus closed his eyes and battled back the urge just to toss Nathan on the bed and slam his dick deep in Nathan's ass. He knew for a fact that wasn't enjoyable, had learned early on in his sexual experiences that fantasy and reality were, at times, best kept divided. Even his healing abilities hadn't been able to let him walk comfortably for almost a week after that misguided demand to play out one of his fantasies.

"Yeah, I'd rather skip that one, too," Nathan muttered. "You were either way too horny or not the brightest crayon in the box when you were younger if you thought that wouldn't hurt like a bitch."

"I was an unfortunate mix of both," Marcus admitted, able to laugh at himself about it now, glad for the distraction as it helped him rein back his impulse. "And I thought having a shifter's ability to heal would keep me from feeling much pain. I learned rather quickly how erroneous my thinking was."

"Well, sharing that made *my* ass hurt, so you'd better be gentle," Nathan warned, only a hint of teasing in his voice.

Marcus reached for his mate, pulling him onto the bed to lie beside him. He slid his arm under Nathan's head as they lay on their sides facing each other. Cupping Nathan's cheek with his free hand, Marcus tipped his head for a kiss. "I'll be as gentle as you want me to be, but you'll beg me to fuck you hard and deep before we're done."

"Oh, okay," Nathan said softly, his lips parting in an offering Marcus had no desire to resist. Taking his time, Marcus licked Nathan's lips, slicking the plump flesh until it glistened. Marcus pulled back to look at the beautiful man, his heart thudding heavily in his chest. Nathan's wide eyes were shut, his long lashes fanning his flushed cheeks. Red and swollen, his lips brought to mind sweet berries, tender and ripe and ready to be devoured.

Marcus did just that, sucking in the top lip first, moaning at the tangy sweet flavour. Sliding his hand around to Nathan's back, Marcus pulled him closer until their bodies were pressed together. Nathan's hot, sticky cock was leaking on Marcus' stomach as Nathan ground against him. Marcus scraped his teeth over Nathan's lip then sought out the bottom one as he palmed Nathan's ass.

Feathering his fingers over Nathan's crease, Marcus nipped at Nathan's lower lip then slid his tongue into that tempting mouth. Nathan opened for him, his jaw dropping as he

thrust his ass back. Tongues chasing and twining, slicking over each other and seeking out hidden erotic spots, Marcus and Nathan clung to each other and feasted.

*"Please, God, sweetheart – "*

The thought whispered into Marcus' mind wrapped in Nathan's need. Marcus could feel the coiled tension in his mate, the lust roiling through him matching Marcus' own. Marcus left the savaged lips that had further stoked his desire and trailed nips and kisses down Nathan's jaw and neck. He lingered over the bite, knowing he'd soon be sinking his teeth into it again as he sank his cock into Nathan's body. The thought alone sent a shiver down his spine as he lapped the mark with the flat of his tongue.

"Marcus." Nathan writhed against him, pulling Marcus over him as he rolled on to his back. "I need...something."

Marcus knew that empty, aching feeling that had Nathan's legs falling open, spreading wide as Marcus settled between them. He reached and hooked his arms under Nathan's knees, sliding down to suck and bite first one small nipple and then the other. As much as he'd have liked to work those small buds into points of ruby flesh, Nathan's need was swamping him, the scent of his arousal entering Marcus' lungs and dispersing into his bloodstream, becoming a part of him.

He couldn't resist sucking a mark on one of the rigid panels of Nathan's abs. Nathan squirmed and pulled at Marcus' hair then pushed as he thrust up, his wet cockhead bumping Marcus' chin. Marcus slid down even as he reached up to grab Nathan's biceps, the man's legs caught in the crook of Marcus' elbows. The move spread Nathan open and forced his butt up, curling those taut stomach muscles.

Swooping down, Marcus engulfed Nathan's cock, not stopping to savour the taste of the pearly liquid smeared on his crown. Marcus didn't stop until he had that thick cock lodged in his throat, knowing the burning need for relief was twisting Nathan's gut. Swallowing, tensing and releasing his throat muscles, Marcus moaned around the fat mouthful. Nathan's throaty purr turned into a strangled shout as his hips jerked.

Marcus sucked his way back up Nathan's dick, nibbling at the rim of the spongy cap before delving his tongue into the salty slit. Nathan's hands tightened in Marcus' hair, pulling the strands until Marcus' scalp stung and his eyes watered. He bobbed back down, stiffening his tongue and dragging it along the underside of Nathan's cock. The first stream

of cum hit Marcus' throat as Nathan hissed, and Marcus backed off to catch the rest of the release on his tongue.

Letting Nathan's still-hard length slip from his lips, Marcus lifted Nathan's hips higher by spreading his arms. He could see the tight swirl, fluttering below Nathan's balls. Thinking of Nathan's fetish, Marcus stuck his nose under Nathan's sac and lifted it, dragging his tongue over the tiny clenching pucker. Nathan's body jerked, his heels striking Marcus' shoulder blades. Marcus wanted a deeper taste, the very essence of his mate.

"Pull your legs up and open," Marcus ordered, the visual from it alone making his dick leak. Nathan moaned as Marcus shared the image, mimicking it in seconds.

"Just like that," Marcus murmured approvingly, his gaze riveted to the exposed bud. Looking away long enough to grab the lube from the top of the nightstand nearly killed him, but he managed, knowing he'd need it very soon. Marcus popped the top and slicked up one hand then propped the tube up against Nathan's side. With his other hand he prised one butt cheek aside, stretching the wrinkled skin of Nathan's hole until it turned a striated pale pink and white.

Marcus shared that image as well, adding—"And think how you look here, spread wide for my cock."

"Marcus, swe—" Nathan's voice broke on a moan as Marcus delved into his crease, licking and sucking the tempting little opening. Rimming wasn't something he'd done very often—as in, not at all—but he knew what he liked and was sure Nathan would enjoy it as well.

Although *enjoy* was an understatement. Nathan bucked and screamed, grinding his ass against Marcus' face, begging for *something* and *please, fuck, more!* Marcus ate Nathan's ass, fucking his tongue into his body, tasting him in a way he'd never thought he'd be able to.

When Nathan was trembling constantly, his cock leaking copious amounts of pre cum, Marcus slowly worked one finger into his hole. Nathan gasped and tensed, his arousal diminishing under the stinging discomfort as his ass was invaded.

"Just try to relax," Marcus thought. "It's something you've never experienced before, but I promise I'll make it so good, honey."

"K-kay," Nathan said breathlessly. Marcus waited until he felt the circulation return to his finger then he gently inserted it deeper until it was fully sheathed.

Nathan felt even better than he'd told Marcus he would, his channel smooth, searing hot and so tight Marcus was beginning to think he might not get anything more than this one digit inside. He crooked his finger carefully, looking for that special spot —

"Ohmyfuckngod!" Nathan screeched, letting go of his legs as his shoulders came up off the bed. "Touch that again! Touch it!"

Marcus had just managed to avoid getting kicked in the head, but he tickled Nathan's gland again and was rewarded with a wail, so unlike any noise he'd thought to ever hear from the man. Marcus grabbed the lube and poured a liberal amount over the rest of his fingers, wanting to ensure he had them well and truly coated. He rubbed Nathan's prostate again then edged another finger into Nathan's hole.

Nathan's groan sounded like it was rent from his very core, so low and deep and gravelly it sent goose bumps skittering over Marcus. He worked Nathan's ass open patiently, thrusting his digits in slow and deep, each full penetration ending with a soft rub that loosed a slew of new sounds from Nathan. By the time he had three fingers inside that hot silky channel, Marcus was ready to weep with the force of his own need. He coated his dick with enough lube for an engine then removed his fingers from Nathan's hole.

The pervasive edge of fear made Marcus hesitate as he knelt between Nathan's spread legs. His gaze bounced from Nathan's stretched opening to his eyes, the heavy lids lowered so only a hint of the intriguing colour could be seen.

"I'm afraid it will hurt you," Marcus admitted.

Nathan reached for his legs and pulled them up until his knees were by his ears. The silent plea shook Marcus, the trust his mate had in him suffusing him with emotions he couldn't keep to himself. Nathan's breath stuttered from his lungs as his eyes opened wide, his lips trembling as he tried to speak. Shaking his head when nothing but a hoarse sound left his throat, he gave a shrug made clumsy by his curled-up position.

*"If it does, you'll make me forget it soon after."*

Marcus scooted forward, tipping Nathan's hips up and sliding his knees under his ass, then further forward until Nathan's bottom rested on Marcus' lap. His hand shook as he held his cock and lined it up with Nathan's slick hole. Gaze locked with Nathan's, Marcus rocked forward, breaching his ass in tiny increments, watching for signs of pain, seeing them in the sudden flare of Nathan's nostrils, the tightening of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Marcus whispered, unable to stop when his cockhead slipped past the quivering ring, damning himself for each inch his dick sank in deeper.

"Don't," Nathan snapped, his pained expression turning to one of anger. Marcus froze, his prick throbbing in protest, his lungs constricting with panic. "Don't think you're doing something I don't want. Don't demean what we're doing. Love me, Marcus."

"How can I do anything else?" Marcus asked, his eyes stinging, his arms aching to hold his mate. That need was greater than the one urging him to push into Nathan, and Marcus gave in, dropping down over Nathan, trying to keep from hurting the smaller man as he covered him. Forearms resting beside Nathan's head, Marcus brushed his lips over those sweet red ones. "Nathan, my mate, you're becoming everything to me."

Had become, Marcus knew, but the ripple of Nathan's inner muscles around the part of his dick within them sent his thoughts up in flames. Groaning, he began a slow glide into Nathan's velvety heat, driving steadily deeper into his core. His fingers clenched in the scattered strands of Nathan's soft hair, his lips feasted on the bounty of those plump lips. Nathan's legs wrapped around his waist, his arms around Marcus' shoulders, encasing him in warmth and intense pleasure as Marcus' balls pressed against Nathan's ass.

Nathan's rectum contracted and released, contracted and released, driving Marcus mad with the need to thrust.

*"Do it, sweetheart. Fill me up and make me scream."*

"Fuck," Marcus mumbled into Nathan's mouth, his hips already pulling back, the drag of Nathan's inner walls against his dick sending spears of ecstasy from his buried length straight to his balls. He thrust back in carefully, controlling the movement until Nathan's hands fisted on his back and he jerked his hips up, impaling himself on Marcus' cock. Then Marcus could hold back no longer.

His mouth settled on the spot he'd marked earlier and his hips pumped hard and deep, the rhythm picking up with each withdrawal as his dick protested leaving the clenching heat of Nathan's ass. Over and over he slammed into Nathan's hole, his balls slapping noisily against Nathan's butt, his hands winding Nathan's hair around them, and his tongue worrying the place where he'd marked Nathan as his own.

Canting his hips, Marcus' cockhead brushed over Nathan's gland. Nathan's back bowed, his elegant neck arching as his eyes shot wide open, his lips parting on a scream.

Marcus fucked him mercilessly, rubbing against Nathan's prostate with each penetration. Nathan's screams were nearly constant, his voice breaking and sandpaper-rough.

Marcus didn't feel the usual tingling in the base of his spine—he felt an explosion of heat cover his entire body. Nathan's passage rippled in a series of fluttering contractions that pulled Marcus' climax out of him even as his mate's cock sprayed spunk on their bellies. His teeth sank deep while he shouted, the sound stifled by the flesh he bit and the blood that flowed over his tongue. Marcus' hips froze and he sucked and swallowed the coppery liquid. His butt clenched tight, his dick buried to the hilt as it spewed load after load of cum into Nathan's ass.

Marcus collapsed onto Nathan, releasing the skin and muscle where he'd bitten and licked at the wound. Nathan's breath gushed from his lungs, and together they rolled onto their sides, Marcus' softening cock slipping from Nathan's hole. He pulled Nathan into his arms, and they fell into a sleep so deep that neither of them heard Rick's yell to keep it down, for God's sake, or he was going to get really liberal with his roll of duct tape.



## Chapter Fourteen

The pounding in his ass woke Nathan before the pounding on the front door. He groaned as he rolled over on to his back, hissing as the pressure on his butt made the pain flare white-hot. Obviously bottoming was *not* for wimps. Anyone who thought people who bottomed were weak needed to be held down and have their asses kicked until it hurt to even yawn.

"Take it you're sore," Marcus rumbled beside him, his dark eyes crinkling at the outer corners.

Nathan would have snorted but feared the consequences. "Little bit. Someone's here."

Marcus rolled until he lay half on top of Nathan. He studied Nathan intently, probably castigating himself for fucking Nathan in the first place. Nathan crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue then pushed at Marcus' chest. "If you're not gonna kiss me, just stare at me like that, then back off, buddy. I need to piss, and a kiss is worth putting that off for but being examined like something under a microscope, not so much."

When Marcus only blinked and continued looking at him Nathan sighed and gave up on getting to drain his bladder or get a kiss any time soon. "Look, of course my ass hurts. I *knew* what a fucking like that could do. Maybe not from being on the receiving end before, but—"

That got a reaction from Marcus. "I really don't want to know intimate details about your past lovers. Just thinking about that subject makes me—"

"Jealous? Angry? Possessive?" Nathan supplied.

"Yes!" Marcus flopped on to his back and covered his eyes with his forearm. "All of that, and it sucks. And I could have been gentler instead of ploughing into you with all the finesse of a rutting bull."

Nathan propped himself up on one elbow, being very careful not to moan at what moving did to his behind. He pulled Marcus' arm away from his eyes and tapped Marcus on the nose. "Now, come on, your dick *is* big, but comparing it to a bull's? That's more bragging than I'm comfortable with. It might actually be tipping into delusional territory."

"But I—"

The bedroom door was banged on hard enough to rattle it on its hinges. "You two need to get up—Marcus, your brother's here along with a herd of other...people."

"Maybe we should tell Rick it isn't offensive if he refers to us as shifters."

Nathan shook his head. "Nah, let him worry. It'll be good for him and as a bonus it'll amuse me."

"You're mean," Marcus grumbled, his lips curling up in a smile. "I like it."

"Until it's directed at you." Nathan winked then scooted away. "Dibs on the shower. You can join me or—"

More pounding on their door. Marcus snarled and sat up. "What?" he bellowed. Nathan grinned and gingerly got out of bed. If someone walked in, oh well. He smelt like cum, which wasn't so bad, but the sticky, itchy part sucked ass.

"Are you coming out any time soon?" Aidan hollered back, louder than necessary. Nathan figured he was just repaying his brother for yelling first. "Poor Gabe is going to wear a hole in the floor. He's practically bouncing with excitement over seeing you again."

Nathan stepped into the bathroom and started the shower. While the water warmed up he relieved his bladder. After washing his hands he brushed his teeth then stepped into the shower, sighing as the hot water eased some of his discomfort. A bath would have been ideal, but their quarters had only a shower.

Marcus stepped into the bathroom and leered at him through the clear shower door. Nathan toyed with the idea of jacking himself off just to tease his mate, but doing so in a cabin filled with shifters who'd probably scent, if not hear, what he did was more than he felt capable of dealing with, at least before his first cup of coffee. He finished washing up as Marcus stepped to the toilet, a towel in his hand that he held out to Nathan as he got out of the shower.

"Need some help drying off?"

"Is anyone going to walk in while you're doing it?"

Marcus shrugged. "So what if they do?" He took the towel back and dried Nathan off, starting with Nathan's hair, taking his time and being very thorough. "Are you really very sore?" Marcus palmed Nathan's ass, his touch gentle.

"Not too bad," Nathan said. It wasn't exactly a lie. As long as he didn't move, it didn't hurt too bad.

"So if I wanted to slap you on the ass?"

Nathan shoved at Marcus hard enough to make the man stumble back. "You do *not* want to do that, not today, and probably not ever. What condition my ass is in has no bearing on that particular kink."

Raising his hands up in a sign of surrender, Marcus nodded. "Got it. No spanking. No problem. I've never tried it so I don't know whether it'd work for me or not."

The sound of their bedroom door opening killed off the rest of that discussion. Nathan rolled his eyes and Marcus shut his. "Who is it now?"

"It's just me," Aidan called out. "I brought you some clothes, thought you might appreciate having something to wear other than Rick's sweats. I'll just leave them on the bed."

Nathan saw Marcus flinch. "Thanks, Aidan. He'll be out in a minute to get them. Don't slam the door on your way out."

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Nathan took Marcus' hand in his, knowing already what the problem was. The bond between him and his mate seemed to be stronger, the link open and—

"Which is how I know your ass really is sore," Marcus muttered. "I can almost feel it like a...a ghost pain."

"A ghost pain in your ass? Amazing the things I've missed out on, being raised by a regular ol' human."

"And I also know you told Aidan as much as you could yesterday."

"Oh." Nathan started to step back, worried Marcus was upset with him.

"Does it feel like I am?" Marcus asked.

"No," Nathan admitted, frowning as he tried to ascertain what Marcus *did* feel about Nathan's talk with Aidan. "You're relieved you didn't have to recount it? Sorry I had to? Dreading filling in the gaps I couldn't? And you think the clothes Aidan brought might be your old clothes, or some of his, either of which will be too big." Nathan didn't like the man's thinking on that subject at all. It was time to set the man straight, so to speak. "Marcus, there's not one person who loves you who is going to take a look at you and be repulsed or pity you. You didn't notice yesterday when you stepped on to the porch and everyone shifted? Every one of those shifters out there looked at you like you were a miracle or their dearest wish come true. No one grimaced, or flinched, or anything like that. To them you're

still Marcus Criswell, Alpha Anax, and they love you. The fact that you don't look exactly like you did months ago means nothing to them. They're all just glad you're alive and they have you back. Sweetheart." Nathan framed Marcus' face with his hands. "You're the only one who sees a damaged man. I don't even notice the scars for the most part, but if I do, I only think of what an amazing, strong man you are. They only emphasise to me that you refused to give in, which makes you one very sexy, very gorgeous man."

"Oh," Marcus murmured, his hands resting on Nathan's hips.

Every word he'd spoken was true, and Nathan could feel them sinking into Marcus, who couldn't deny what flowed between them through their link. Nathan pulled Marcus down for a tender kiss, infusing it with all the new emotions that had bloomed inside him. Love as strong as the bond between them, strengthening with each moment they shared together, filled Nathan and, he knew, Marcus as well.

"Go ahead and get cleaned up. I'll go visit with the mysterious and apparently bouncy Gabe." Nathan gave Marcus another kiss then slipped from the bathroom, closing the door softly then nearly yelping as he looked up to find Aidan still in the bedroom. "Do you just live to give me a hard time?" Nathan asked as he tried to cover his groin with his hands.

Aidan shook his head, and it was only then that Nathan noticed the tears brimming in Aidan's eyes. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I was still in the room and I..." Aidan waved a hand, uncaring of the tears that now spilled over on to his cheeks. "What you said is true. I fought a challenge against one of Dobson's pack, and after I...he wouldn't submit, and he tried to hurt my mate. He had a picture of Marcus, chained like you told me, but when I saw my brother again I didn't see the man in that picture. I saw the man I've always looked up to, a man who, like you said, is so strong he faced six months of torture and captivity and never gave up. I see a man who is even more amazing than I ever believed him to be. That's who we all see."

Nathan smiled and decided he liked Aidan a lot after all.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus stood with his forehead pressed to the bathroom door, his mate's presence humming in his head, Aidan's words ringing in his ears. His battered confidence was

stitched back together by Nathan's love, and Aidan's only strengthened the seams. "*Thank you, Nathan.*"

\* \* \* \*

Deciding on a loosely faded pair of jeans that framed his package rather attractively if he did say so himself, Nathan slid them on, sighing when the soft, worn denim brushed over his skin. A dark green long-sleeved silk turtleneck set off his auburn hair and dual-coloured eyes. Sleek black boots and a thick leather belt pulled the outfit together. Nathan plaited his hair then brushed it back out, thinking Marcus would prefer it loose to run his fingers through it.

Plus it was still damp and braiding it would result in a hairstyle he'd rather avoid once it dried. He would look like he'd been electrocuted. If his hair curled like Marcus' did naturally, that'd be different. Instead, anyone who saw Nathan would think he had a serious fixation with eighties-hair bands.

Normally Nathan didn't take quite so much care with his appearance, figuring jeans and a faded T-shirt along with a pair of flip-flops was just fine, but something about this forthcoming day felt different. Important. Maybe it was the fact that his mate was the Alpha Anax, which Nathan wasn't sure exactly how he felt about just yet, or maybe it was because of the clothes and shoes Aidan had left for Marcus.

Black trousers that were softer even than Nathan's turtleneck, and an equally pleasing-to-touch black button-up shirt, the threads in it so fine it was difficult to make out the material's weave. Silver matte buttons kept the shirt from being too stark, and then there were the black leather loafers sitting beside the bed. Nathan would be willing to bet the shoes were some fancy Italian designer's creation. They looked comfortable and elegant and expensive.

Then again, what did he know? His shoes usually came from whatever discounted shoe store was nearby when he needed a pair. As long as they didn't pinch his toes Nathan was happy.

Minding his promise to go mingle, and admittedly more than a little curious about his mate's friends, Nathan quietly left the room, only to be startled yet again by a very attractive man with vibrant green eyes and a mischievous grin who was leaning against the wall across from the bedroom door. A very attractive *human* man.

The man's eyes practically glowed as he raised a finger to his lips, his eyes darting towards the living room. He pointed at the bedroom with a questioning look and seemed to exude a sudden burst of energy. So this was bouncing Gabe. Nathan twisted the door knob and stepped back into the room, waving an already moving Gabe inside.

Nathan let Gabe close the door, waiting to see what had the man trying to be so stealthy. He was in the act of folding his arms over his chest when Gabe rushed to him and lifted him in a bone-grinding hug.

"I'm Gabe. Thank you," Gabe whispered, his lips loosing the words right into Nathan's ear. "And I thought I should warn you, Mika overheard Aidan betting on how long it'd be before you and I started sniping at each other."

Nathan shifted Aidan back into the annoying category, though he couldn't help but grin as he gripped Gabe's shoulders. He'd been worried about the same thing himself, afraid that his snark and Gabe's exuberance might lead to contrasting and clashing personalities.

"Got it," Nathan replied just as quietly. "You're my new best friend."

Gabe's chest shook as he snickered softly. "S'what I was thinking. Like I'd ever be able to bitch at the man who brought Marcus back to us." His arms tightened even more and Nathan feared for his ribs.

"Stop already," he hissed as the bathroom door opened.

"Yes, do, before you break him," Marcus said, shattering Nathan's and Gabe's attempts to keep the meeting quiet. At least, it shattered Gabe's as the man shouted and released Nathan, who watched in amusement as his deliciously naked mate was tackled by Gabe.

"Ooph!" Marcus grunted as he received one of Gabe's hugs. "Christ, you're going to break *me* now!"

"Sorry." Gabe laughed and lifted Marcus, twirling him round in circles until Marcus was laughing as well, his hands slapping at Gabe's back.

"Enough already," Marcus rasped. "Mika will get all jealous if he catches you groping me while I'm naked."

"Oh shit!" Gabe stopped spinning and set Marcus on his feet. Both men swayed as Gabe looked Marcus up and down. "You *are* nude! Who knew?" His grin belied his innocent look. "And I doubt Mika would approve of me groping you even if you were dressed." Gabe shot a worried glance at Nathan. "Not that I was groping him or anything."

"I'd have ripped your arms off if you were." Actually it had been kind of sexy seeing the two men embrace, a fact that was evident as Nathan's dick had reacted immediately to the sight. Marcus' delight at seeing his friend again had been just as evident, as was his body's lack of interest in Gabe in a sexual manner.

Gabe wrinkled his nose as he swatted at Marcus' hip. "The Grand Poobah is hot, I'll admit, but that'd be like lusting after my own brother, which is just...ew. No. Not that I even *have* a brother, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah. Your mate's aware of that, right? Because I think that's who's outside the door" —Nathan hitched his voice a notch louder— "eavesdropping, which is rude, by the way!" *"You might want to get dressed, sweetheart. I think we're about to be invaded by visitors."*

Marcus made a mad dash for his clothes, snatching them off of the bed. The door knob was twisted from the other side as Marcus ran into the bathroom.

"He forgot his shoes," Gabe pointed out. "Those look like they cost more than my entire wardrobe."

Nathan picked up the shoes and read the label inside. Yup, Italian. "Mine, too. I can't even pronounce the name of the designer."

Another shifter entered the room. Nathan got a glimpse of dark hair and broad shoulders then he opened the bathroom door and handed the shoes to a half-dressed Marcus.

"Very nice," Nathan purred, forgetting about everyone else but Marcus. The black trousers hugged the rounded mounds of his ass and emphasised the narrow hips to perfection. Though the legs were loose it was easy to see that Marcus tucked to the left. "Hard to hide something that size. Yum."

Gabe's voice sounded a little breathless as he declared, "See? I told you, Mika! Nathan's voice sounds like honey and Red Hots vocalised! Oh, hey! I think I just decided on Nathan's nickname."

Nathan met Marcus' amused gaze and frowned. "Should I be worried, Grand Poobah?"

"Probably, but it's best not to argue."

Reluctantly turning away from Marcus, Nathan closed the door and leant back against it as he arched a brow at Gabe and Mika. "So, what's it going to be? I'll warn you now, if it has little, cute, or pretty in it, the whole best buddies thing is going to be shot to hell."

Mika's barked laughter earned him two glares. He shrugged at Nathan then looked at Gabe. "What? I just think you've met your match in the snark department. If you two do become friends, the rest of us are in for it."

Gabe chewed on his lower lip for a moment as he studied Nathan. "I don't think it's bad. It's not like Double-D—which I called Aidan, even when he was the Alpha Anax and not the Dux Ducis anymore. That was his position in Marcus' hierarchy, Dux Ducis of the southwestern packs," Gabe explained, which told Nathan he must have looked as confused as he felt. "It means he was the head honcho over the packs in that territory, answerable only to the AA."

"Ah. Okay." He had a lot to learn about shifters and their society. For Marcus' sake, Nathan needed to do it quickly. Embarrassing his mate through ignorance wasn't an option. "And you were saying before that?"

Gabe bit his lip again. Mika grinned and answered in place of the other man. "He was thinking a convoluted—well, not to him—mix of things. The light was reflecting off your hair, bringing out streaks of red, your voice—which, I'll admit, Gabe is right about. Then there's the fact that he thinks you're hot—"

"Not as hot as you!"

Mika glanced at Gabe. "And not as hot as your ass is going to be as soon as I get you alone."

Nathan thought interrupting their flirtatious banter was only fair, as *his* attempt to ogle Marcus had been brought to a screeching halt. "So, Gabe, your plan was to call me the name of a candy? Seriously? I expect better from the man who's been proclaimed my equal in snarkiness."

The bathroom door was pulled open and Nathan tumbled backwards. Marcus' arms came around his middle and kept him from landing on his tender ass. "I don't know, I can see where it fits, although I prefer to call you honey." *"That's part of the reason I called you it in the first place, along with the fact that you taste so sweet."*

"I doubt you'd want anyone else calling Nathan 'honey'," Mika pointed out as he stepped towards them. The smile on the man's face quivered as he looked at Marcus. Knowing what was coming, Nathan eased to the side as Mika reached for Marcus.

"It's not quite the same when neither of the two guys hugging is naked, is it, Nathan?"

"No," Nathan agreed with Gabe, "but they're still worth watching."



## Epilogue

Marcus had to admit Nathan had been right. There was just something about New Mexico that drew one in. Standing in the forest, with Nathan beside him and Aidan and their friends around them, Marcus knew that moving his headquarters to Santa Fe had been the right decision. And his mate had shown his appreciation in the most exquisite ways.

Right now, however, Nathan was silent by his side. He was still intimidated by his sudden immersion in the shifter society and his position as mate to the Alpha Anax. Most of the time Nathan didn't let the whole AA thing bother him, but occasionally he'd have doubts about his suitability as mate for the reigning alpha. Marcus always soothed those fears away with the gentle reminder that it was him Nathan was mated to, not the title.

"I don't know if I can do this. It's kind of gross."

Marcus looked at Gabe, noting the green tinge to his face. "It beats the alternative method."

"I could just not do it. Mika would still love me. He fell in love with me as a human to begin with."

"That's true," Mika admitted from where he knelt beside his mate. "It's your choice, but you'd be more...resilient, safe from so many of the diseases regular people are susceptible to."

Gabe swallowed noisily and bowed his head. "And you wouldn't be so worried I might die from something I could have avoided having. I'll do it, but if I throw up will it still work?" Gabe turned his worried green gaze up to Marcus.

"Not if you haven't ingested enough of Mika's and my blood first."

Nathan stepped forward and bent to place his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "You'll do just fine. I do not have wimpy best friends, though I do wish you'd hurry. All this naked flesh everywhere I look is, hmm, disconcerting."

"More like distracting," Gabe muttered, glancing around at the other shifters. "The girl bits are scary."

Alison rolled her eyes and wiggled her hips, which set everything to jiggling. "You can deal with it. I think it's only fair since I'm surrounded by built, attractive men, all of whom are mated and gay. It's a double whammy to my libido."

Marcus ignored his captain's wiggling and jiggling, preferring to keep his image of Alison as a fully clothed lethal guard, thank you very much.

Nathan turned his head towards Alison. "Look at it like this—now's probably the only time you could ever stand naked with six also nude men and not have to worry about being pressured to put out."

Alison grinned and nodded. "Nathan, you do always seem to find the silver lining."

"Back to the ceremony," Marcus said, "before the cut to my wrist heals up or I bleed out."

"Sorry." Nathan moved back to Marcus' side and bowed his head. The contrite pose caused a stirring in Marcus' groin that he really wished he could act on, but it would have to wait for a few minutes.

"Gabriel Staley." Marcus waited until Gabe looked up at him. The man's nervousness was so evident Marcus ditched his plans for a prolonged speech and held out his bleeding wrist. "If you choose to become one of us of your own will, take my offering and drink."

"I can do this," Gabe mumbled as he wrapped his fingers around Marcus' forearm. "Just think about Mika, think about Mika..." He brought Marcus' wrist to his lips and closed his eyes as he opened his mouth to suck at the wound. Gabe's fear that he would be ill was almost realised as he swallowed then heaved.

Marcus put his other hand up to stop Nathan from moving to his friend's side. "*He can do this. Look.*" They watched as Gabe squared his shoulders and forced himself to continue drinking. "That's enough," Marcus said after he was certain Gabe had ingested enough of his blood. He pulled his arm back and gestured to Mika.

"That was disgusting," Gabe grumbled as he lowered his head to the ground, folding his arms under it and pushing his butt up. "Hurry up so we can get to the good part."

Mika growled and moved behind Gabe, trembling as he guided his cock into the man's entrance. Gabe's complexion went from green to red as a flush swept from the middle of his back up to his hairline with the penetration. The scent of arousal grew thick as Mika seated his cock fully.

"Alpha Anax Criswell, I offer my blood and seed to my mate, my loyalty to him and you, as Gabe becomes one of us." He held his arm up and Marcus felt so much pride he thought he might burst. Mika had refused to rejoin any pack, saying he needed no one other than his mate. His promise of fealty was unexpected and something Marcus would never have thought to hear.

"Thank you, Mika." Marcus blinked against the stinging in his eyes as Aidan handed him the knife. He drew the blade across Mika's wrist, deep enough to make the wound bleed steadily but not dangerously. "Give your mate what he needs to bring him fully into our world. Let him drink, then take Gabe with my blessings and those of the pack."

Marcus handed the knife back to Aidan and watched only long enough to ensure Gabe drank enough of his mate's blood. Once he had, Marcus told Mika. Then Marcus nodded at Amber, the signal for her to give the mating pair as much privacy as possible. He took Nathan's hand and led him farther into the forest. Aidan and Zane headed in the opposite direction as well, leaving Mika and Gabe to complete the ceremony with minimal prying eyes.

"You're not as voyeuristic as other shifters?"

Marcus pulled Nathan into his arms and nuzzled the top of his head, enjoying the smell and texture of Nathan's hair. "Watching—and being watched—can be fun at times, but that was...It's personal, bringing your mate over. Gabe was nervous, and—"

Gabe's shout of release sent the birds screeching and flying out of the trees.

"He doesn't sound so nervous now," Nathan said around fits of laughter.

Another sound, this one a long, low groan, followed Gabe's. "No, they both sound like they came hard, which is no doubt what my brother and Zane are off doing and exactly what I intend for us to do."

"Poor Alison, she's like the designated abstainee of something." Nathan sighed then wiggled his eyebrows. "So, about your intentions?"

Marcus took one of Nathan's hands and pulled it back to his crack. Nathan delved his fingers in eagerly, a big grin splitting his face when he teased over Marcus' hole.

"Lubed and stretched. I like it a lot. I'd like it even more if you were on your knees with your ass up in the air."

"Can do," Marcus mumbled. He knelt and reached for Nathan's cock, cupping his balls as he sucked the leaking length to the back of his throat.

"Oh, fucking hell," Nathan gasped, his hips driving his dick further into Marcus' throat. "You're so good at this, so beautiful with your lips stretched wide around my dick. Take it."

Marcus let his lids drop down as he moaned, Nathan fucking his mouth just the way Marcus loved it, rough and deep. Maybe he would do this instead, suck Nathan's cock until every bit of cum was swallowed...

Nathan fisted his hands in Marcus' hair and prised him away from his shaft. "No, no, no. I want the other orifice, sweetheart. I need to fuck you, please."

Marcus could understand completely. Occasionally he needed to fuck Nathan and Nathan needed to be fucked. It worked out well for both of them. Elbows down and ass up, Marcus wiggled his hips. He wasn't as thickly muscled as he used to be, but he was no longer skin and bones. Even if he had been, he wouldn't be ashamed. Nathan loved him too well to let Marcus feel bad about his appearance.

"Do that again," Nathan ordered from behind him. "Show me how much you want it."

"Bossy." But it turned Marcus on like he'd never have believed possible. Arching his back, Marcus pushed his ass out as far as he could and spread his legs wide. "How's that?"

"Oh, perfect," Nathan rasped. "I can just see a hint of your hole, and the way your cock and balls are dangling between your thighs, damn! You are the sexiest man I have *ever* seen. One day you're gonna get sick of me saying that, but it's true."

"I'll never get sick of it, but I *am* getting impatient..."

Nathan laughed as he knelt between Marcus' calves. "Well, the problem is I want to stand back and enjoy the view, and I want to sink right into it at the same time. That's gonna be the winner every time."

Marcus felt Nathan's hands spreading his ass cheeks apart. He closed his eyes, his body thrumming with need and anticipation. Nathan's tip pressed into him slowly, then Nathan gripped Marcus' hips and stopped.

"Are you ready for all of it?"

"Fuck yes, ready, want it, need it—ah!" The stretch and burn from his pucker through the length of his rectum was such a perfect mix of pleasure and pain that Marcus had to scrabble to grab the base of his dick. Using Nathan's 'squeeze till it hurts' method, Marcus clamped his prick tight, forcing back his climax.

"Gonna make you blow no matter how hard you try not to," Nathan promised, then began pummeling Marcus' ass in a way that guaranteed to do just that. Marcus grunted as

Nathan's thick dick filled him, pumping deep into his needy passage. Every withdrawal dragged moans of protest from Marcus as he clenched his inner muscles, trying to keep that tantalising sense of fullness. Every drive back in brought Nathan's crown bumping against Marcus' gland in a maddening dance of ecstasy.

Nathan slid a hand down to tug at Marcus' ass cheek, pulling him open. "Yeah, fuck yeah," Nathan purred, driving into him forcefully as Marcus shivered. One blunt fingertip prodded at his stretched ring, stimulating nerves pulled tight. Marcus' gut clenched as he started jerking his cock, that finger rubbing harder as Nathan's hips slammed against Marcus' ass, the hand on his hips gripping, bruising Marcus' flesh. His lungs emptied in a gush of air as his balls drew up, signalling the end of his restraint.

Marcus' body went rigid, muscles tightening and he yelled as the first jet of cum shot out and splattered on his chest. Nathan was gasping as his load flooded into Marcus' ass. Marcus on to his stomach as his passage was painted with Nathan's cream.

His legs slid out and Marcus hit the ground with a thud, Nathan's weight driving him down as he toppled too. They lay panting, their lungs dragging in great gulping breaths, satiated and one step closer to the peace they sought. There was still the matter of the traitorous shifter pack led by Joshua Dobson, there was the doubts and fears Marcus had to work through every day as he grew more comfortable in his skin, closer to the man he once was. But these were things that would come with time. There'd be retribution, and there would be renewal, and he would be a better Alpha Anax for it all.

As he linked his fingers with his mate's, Marcus couldn't help but smile. His gaze locked with Nathan's while the sound of wolves howling filled the forest.

"Listen," Nathan whispered, tilting his head to the left. "Do you hear it?"

His hand tightened on Nathan's as he did indeed hear it. Marcus' heart swelled with happiness as a new wolf joined the song.

## 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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