



SHIFTERS' HAVEN

CODY'S REVELATION

LAVINIA LEWIS

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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*.

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CODY'S REVELATION

Lavinia Lewis

Dedication

Thank you to everyone at Total-E-Bound for believing in me and allowing my stories to find a home, and to Stacey, my wonderful editor, for her patience and support.

Chapter One

Cody unfolded the single piece of white paper and stared at it for what must have been the tenth time that day. The letter was succinct. No fond greetings or questions about his health. Just like the man himself, his brother's letter was straight to the point.

Cody,

I need you here at the ranch.

Come home.

Kelan.

With a sigh, Cody placed the letter back in his jacket pocket. He leaned his head back against the pillar in the only quiet corner of the busy room and closed his eyes. He wished he could just ignore the letter but there was no way that was going to happen. Kelan was his brother. More importantly, Kelan was his Alpha and, like all good little wolves, he could not disobey him. When Kelan called, Cody came running, even when his feet wanted to carry him in the opposite direction.

When he opened his eyes, Cody noticed his agent Tom trying to get his attention from the other side of the room. Grateful for the distraction, he made his way over, snaking through the crowd of people immersed in meaningless conversations.

Cody made sure not to catch anyone's eye. He knew these exhibitions were important to sell and raise awareness of his work, but he was a shy artist, not a salesperson. In fact, Cody didn't consider himself a 'people person' in general. He would much rather be back at his apartment alone than in a room full of people he didn't know and didn't want to know.

When Cody reached his agent, he could smell excitement pouring off the portly, older man in waves. Tom's face was flushed. Normally, Cody would have guessed the cause to be too many glasses of champagne, although his acute wolf senses were picking up something more than mere excitement—something woodsier.

Arousal.

"Hey, Cody!" Tom grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away to the side of the crowded room. "You see that guy over there? The cute one in the dark suit?"

Cody looked over his shoulder and scanned the crowd. He spotted the man in question and nodded. The guy *was* good looking—in fact, he was exactly Cody's type. Tall and muscular with dark hair, dark eyes and a totally killer smile.

"Yeah, what about him?" Cody grinned knowingly at Tom.

"He's been asking about you all night."

"Is he a collector?"

"No idea. Never seen him before, but he's certainly taken an interest in you," Tom said with indifference, although Cody could tell his agent felt anything but.

"Maybe he's a fan of my work." A faint blush spread across Cody's cheeks. He still found it difficult to believe that so many people were interested in his artwork. They paid well for it, too. He was sure the handsome man was not interested in him personally—after all, the man couldn't keep his eyes off Tom. Tom, however, seemed to be genuinely unaware of that fact.

"Maybe, or maybe he just wants to jump your bones," Tom said.

Cody didn't miss the underlying hint of jealousy to his agent's teasing words.

Cody groaned. "Seriously, is that all you think about?"

"Hell, yes. You ought to be thinking about it a bit more too. Something's got to get you out of this dry spell."

Cody rolled his eyes. They'd been having the same conversation, or some version thereof, for the past six months.

"I'm not going through a dry spell," he insisted. "I'm just not interested in dating at the moment."

"Whatever you say, honey. Well, if *you're* not interested..." Tom waggled his eyebrows and walked off in the direction of the handsome stranger.

Cody grabbed Tom's arm and pulled him back.

"Have fun," Cody said. "But be careful, okay?"

Tom let out a peal of laughter. "Always am, honey, always am."

Tom turned and sauntered off towards his prey. His round, chubby bottom swayed suggestively with each step. Cody grinned. The man wouldn't know what hit him. Tom was not the best-looking man Cody had ever seen, but he had a charm and charisma about him that never failed to draw people in. In fact, Cody had yet to see any man turn him down. A

couple of years ago, Cody would have been interested in the handsome stranger himself but things were different now. As lonely as he was, Cody could not let himself get involved with anyone. It wasn't worth it.

His grin broadened as the stranger threw his head back and laughed at something Tom said to him. Yep, someone wasn't going home alone tonight. Cody sighed and made for the door. He was more than happy for Tom, but deep down Cody wished that *he* had some gorgeous man to go home with.

The exhibition was nearly at an end. If Cody slipped out quietly now, he was sure he wouldn't be missed. He'd done the meet and greet that was expected of him and he'd mingled to within an inch of his life. He'd smiled at the right people and laughed at all the terrible jokes. It was time to call it a night.

As soon as he let himself into his apartment, Cody headed straight for the shower. He groaned as the hot spray started to pummel his neck and shoulders. It had been a long day, but he knew it would be worth it. He had made a good life for himself in New York. Business was good. He had money in the bank and he'd just found another two galleries that had agreed to show his work. He was also the proud owner of a beautiful loft-style apartment in Manhattan that had nearly tripled in price since he'd bought it.

What Cody didn't have, however, was the one thing he wanted most—a partner, someone he could share his life with. A warm body to cuddle up with at night and wake up wrapped around in the mornings. Cody was lonely. He was only twenty-seven, not old by any stretch of the imagination, but he was a gay man and a wolf to boot. The two did not go hand in hand together.

As Cody grew up, he had watched many of his pack members find their mates. The one person in life who was made for them. It was destiny. A destiny he longed for.

As a gay man, Cody was sure he would not get a mate. After all, mates were for heterosexual wolves, weren't they? Men and women who could produce cubs. Sure, he could meet a man and fall in love with him. They could build a life together and maybe they could be happy. But Cody knew he would always long for something more. There would always be that missing piece of his soul that would do nothing but haunt him. While he could just

about live with that himself, he didn't think it was fair to inflict that pain on someone else. Nobody deserved that.

As much as Cody loved New York, it still didn't feel like home to him. At least in Texas he had a family, people who loved him. Then there were his pack mates, of course—people he had grown up with who were like an extended family of sorts. It had been nearly two years since Cody had last been home and, if he was honest with himself, he had missed it something fierce. It was a no-brainer. The more he thought about it, the more resolute he became.

He switched off the shower and grabbed a large, fluffy towel to dry off. Wrapping it around his hips, he padded into his bedroom barefoot. With a renewed sense of purpose, Cody retrieved his suitcase from his closet and started to pack.

Chapter Two

The heat hit him like a freight train when he stepped off the plane at George Bush International. Cody smiled and closed his eyes for a moment, basking in its warmth. The sunshine always made him smile, just as it should.

Cody had missed the wide open spaces of Texas very much. The crowds in New York were unpleasant for a wolf. The busy streets always made him feel caged in and claustrophobic.

Back home, there were hundreds of miles of pack land for a wolf to explore and hunt on. Cody couldn't wait to get back to the ranch and go out on his first run. His skin itched with excitement just thinking about it. Twenty minutes later, he was walking through arrivals feeling happier than he had in months.

"Hey, Cody, over here!"

Cody grinned—he'd recognise that voice anywhere. He turned to face the slight, blond-haired man who was waving frantically at him and practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He rushed over to the smaller man, dropped his suitcase and took Luke in a large bear hug, lifting him clear off the ground.

"Hey, little brother, what gives?" Cody said with a smile, placing Luke down on his feet and taking a step back.

Cody was not an exceptionally tall man, at five foot nine, but his brother barely came up to his shoulders.

"Man, I've got so much to tell you," Luke said, a goofy grin on his face. "You're not going to *believe* it!"

Luke's mood was infectious. Cody hadn't realised until that moment just how much he had missed his younger brother.

"Good news by the look of it," Cody said.

"Oh man, the *best*."

Cody laughed. His brother was practically glowing. He followed him towards the exit and the freedom waiting for him beyond it. Luke led Cody to where his pickup was parked.

They made small-talk on the way, but Luke stayed clear of the topic that had clearly put a sparkle in his eye and a bounce in his step.

When they had stowed Cody's luggage in the bed of the truck and were seated in the front, Cody turned to face his baby brother and waited. Well, his brother was now twenty-two years old. Not so much of a baby any more.

"Come on, then, out with it. I'm surprised you lasted this long."

Luke's smile was dazzling. Cody was sure if his brother wasn't strapped in, he'd be floating inches above his seat by now. He could smell the excitement oozing from his brother's every pore.

"Okay..." Luke began. Either he was enjoying dragging this out or he didn't know where to begin. "The thing is, I...I've found my mate."

Cody gaped at his brother. He sniffed the air between them and his eyes widened in wonder. Only then did he notice the change in his brother's scent. When a wolf was fully mated, his mate's scent mingled with his own.

"Holy crap, Luke!" Cody exclaimed. "Who is she? When can I meet her?"

Luke's face turned a fierce shade of red, and he averted his eyes from Cody's. He looked adorable when he was embarrassed, and much younger than his age.

"Ah, well...the thing is, it's not a *she*, exactly. It's a *he*. His name is Mark and you can meet him as soon as we get home."

Cody stared at his brother, uncomprehending. Surely he had heard him wrong.

"A he?" he squeaked. "But that's not... It can't be... Are you sure?"

Luke laughed and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure, bro. Trust me, it's not something you can easily mistake, you know?"

"But – but, you're not even gay," Cody stuttered.

This was too much information for him to process. Was there hope for him after all? He didn't dare to dream.

"I know," Luke said with a chuckle. "Fate's a bitch, huh? But to be honest, I wouldn't want it any other way. Mark is incredible."

Luke's face reddened further and a dreamy, distant expression swept over it. Cody had never seen his brother look this happy.

The ride home to the ranch took a little over two hours. Cody was silent for most of the journey. He didn't mean to be rude, but his brother's revelation had shocked him to the core. He had all but given up on finding someone special to spend his life with, and now it seemed there could be a man out there for him after all. Someone that was just his—made for him. The thought sent a shiver of excitement down his spine.

Cody avoided the topic of why Kelan wanted him home, and Luke didn't bring it up either. He knew their brother well enough to know Kelan would want to tell Cody himself. Luke filled most of the gaps in the conversation. He talked about members of the pack, gossip from town and what had been going on at the ranch. Every time he mentioned Mark, Cody noticed the light in his eyes shone a little bit brighter.

As they were pulling up to the ranch, Cody saw two people sitting together on the porch. When they got closer, he realised one was his brother, Kelan, and the second was a man he didn't know. Mark, maybe? Luke's joyous grin at the sight of the man told him all he needed to know.

As soon as they'd parked, Luke quickly got out of the truck and made his way to the porch. Mark was already halfway down the steps to meet him. Cody trailed behind and was surprised when Luke threw his arms around the taller man's neck and kissed him passionately. Cody stared, surprised by such an open display of affection from Luke. Mark returned Luke's kiss with fervour. He reached down and grabbed hold of Luke's buttocks and lifted him off the ground, pressing their bodies together.

Cody was so embarrassed he had to look away. That was his kid brother locked in an intimate embrace with a man. He'd *never* thought he'd see that day. His attention was diverted by a low chuckle. He turned to see his older brother smirking at him. Kelan nodded in the direction of the free porn show that was going on behind them.

"They're at it all the time," Kelan said, rolling his eyes. "It's enough to put a man off his lunch."

Cody raised his eyebrows at his brother's response. When he had come out to his family at fifteen, his father had all but disowned him and Kelan, while not exactly siding with their father, had done nothing to stick up for Cody, either. Cody couldn't help but resent his brother for that.

Kelan was older and Cody had always looked up to him, but Kelan had refused to get involved. Cody thought that maybe Kelan had also been afraid of their father, but Kelan's indifference had hurt him all the same. Things had certainly changed in the years he'd been gone, and changed for the better by the look of it.

"Come on, guys, give it a rest," Kelan moaned good-naturedly.

Mark set Luke down at last and their younger brother turned to face them, grinning sheepishly.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He took hold of Mark's hand and pulled him along to stand in front of Cody and Kelan.

"Mark, this is my brother, Cody," he introduced. "Cody, meet Mark, my mate."

The absolute joy and pride on his brother's face was touching. Cody felt a lump forming in the back of his throat. He couldn't have been happier for Luke. He reached out to shake Mark's hand.

For the first time since they arrived, he got a good look at his brother's mate. Mark was about the same height as Cody, but he had much broader shoulders and a firm, muscular body. Mark was handsome—not Cody's type exactly, but there was definitely something appealing about him. Mark was blond, whereas Cody usually liked dark hair on his men, and while he had a youthful face, he was a lot older than Luke. At a guess, Cody would say mid-thirties, but the age difference didn't seem to bother either of them. Mark was wearing the same sappy grin as Luke.

"It's good to meet you, Mark," Cody said. "Welcome to the family."

"Thank you," Mark replied, taking Cody's hand and shaking it. "It's good to meet you, too. Luke has told me a lot about you."

"All good, I hope."

"Nothing but," Mark said.

"I've called a pack meeting tonight, Cody," Kelan said. Straight to business as usual. "I want you to come, but there are a few things I need to discuss with you first so if you need to get cleaned up, I'll be out in the barn."

Cody nodded, intrigued by his brother's request. He had never been invited to a pack meeting before, and he couldn't understand why his brother would want him at one now. Would this have anything to do with why his brother had told him to come home?

Thirty minutes later, Cody had finished unpacking. He took a quick shower, dressed and went in search of his elder brother. He didn't think he could be more embarrassed than he had been while watching Luke kiss Mark earlier, but when he walked past his brother's bedroom and heard Luke shout, "*Oh god, yes, harder!*" through the closed door, he quickened his step and felt a blazing heat fill his face in an instant. He wasn't naïve enough to think his younger brother didn't have sex, but knowing it and hearing it were two different things.

Cody found Kelan in the barn, tending to the horses. His brother jerked his head up when Cody entered Misty's stall and nodded in greeting. Cody had missed the horses. He'd loved to ride as a kid and would happily spend hours in the stables grooming and cleaning tack. Anything to be near the beautiful creatures.

Kelan stopped what he was doing and handed the brush to Cody. Cody began to brush the beautiful stallion's coat. Misty had always been his favourite.

"Hey, pretty baby, did you miss me?" The horse whinnied and nodded his head. Kelan laughed.

"About as much as you missed him, I'd say."

Kelan moved around and leaned against the stable door, crossing his arms. His six-foot-four, bulky frame meant he could be imposing when he wanted to be. If Cody didn't know his brother so well, he would be feeling very intimidated by now. Cody sighed and turned around to face him.

"Now would be a good time to tell me why you asked me to come back."

Kelan frowned. "I shouldn't *have* to ask you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you miss home, Cody?"

"Of course I do, but my life is in New York now."

Cody knew that was a cop-out answer. His *work* might be in New York, but what life did he really have there? Kelan snorted. He clearly didn't believe Cody any more than Cody believed himself.

"You're an artist, Cody. You could paint anywhere. I want you to come home."

Cody stared at Kelan open-mouthed. He couldn't believe his brother's nerve. Kelan had no right to tell him where to live. He hadn't wanted to get involved in Cody's life in the past

when Cody had really needed him, so why should he start now? Cody didn't need his brother's help anymore, and he certainly didn't appreciate Kelan telling him what to do.

"Is that an order?" Cody asked, feeling his hackles begin to rise.

"No, it isn't. I don't want to order you to do anything, but I need you here."

Cody was confused. What wasn't Kelan telling him?

"Why could you possibly need *me* here?"

Kelan grunted and averted his eyes from Cody's. He shifted from foot to foot before meeting Cody's gaze.

"Marianne has mated with a beta from a pack in New Mexico. She'll be leaving us soon."

Ah. That explained everything, then. Marianne was an omega wolf, just like Cody. Omegas were special and an important part of any pack. They were peacekeepers of sorts and had a calming influence on the pack as a whole. While it wasn't essential that a pack had two Omegas, or even one, it was definitely beneficial.

It surprised Cody to hear that Marianne had mated. She'd been his best friend growing up and was one of few people he had kept in touch with since he'd moved to New York. Marianne rang Cody at every opportunity to tell him the latest gossip, so he was surprised she hadn't called him to tell him something so significant. He felt a little bit hurt by that.

"When did she find her mate?"

"A couple of weeks ago. Don't take it to heart that she didn't tell you. When a wolf finds their mate, it pretty much consumes their every waking thought, you know? It's been over a week for Luke, too, but you're only now finding out about him, and he's your brother. It's not personal, Cody. It's what happens when you find your mate. Common sense seems to go on vacation." Kelan chuckled.

Cody hung his head. There was nothing more to say—he had to come home. He might not like it, but he didn't want the pack to suffer because of his choices.

"I'll need some time to sort things out in New York," he said at last. "I shouldn't have any trouble selling my apartment, but I'll need to sub-let my studio and meet with my agent."

Kelan let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Thank you, Cody. You won't regret this, I promise."

Cody nodded.

"I'd better go and make some calls," he said, handing the brush back to his brother.

"Sure thing. I'm going to announce your return at the meeting tonight. I'd really like you to be there."

"I'll be there."

* * * *

Before they left for the pack meeting, Cody made a call to his agent. Both Tom's office phone and his mobile went to voicemail. It wasn't like Tom to switch off his cell phone. Cody had rarely seen it out of the man's hand. In the end, Cody left a message informing him he would be at home in Texas for a while.

He had decided to stay for a few weeks before going to New York so he could make all the necessary arrangements to move home. He knew deep down his brother had been right earlier when he'd said Cody could paint anywhere. He could always go back and forth to New York for exhibitions and the like. Cody left his contact details and hung up.

He wondered if maybe Tom was out having fun with the man he'd met the previous night. Cody certainly hoped so. Tom was a great guy and had been a good friend to him since he'd moved to New York, but he never seemed to have any luck with men. He didn't have a problem meeting them, but they never stuck around. He hoped this one would be different.

"Hey, you ready to go?" Kelan asked, pulling Cody out of his thoughts.

Cody nodded. He'd try Tom again later.

"Sure thing. Be right there."

Cody looked over his shoulder to where his younger brother sat on the sofa with Mark. They were cuddled together and looking at each other with matching soppy expressions. He felt a pang of jealousy in his chest whenever he looked at the two men. He desperately wanted what Luke had with Mark. He brushed the feelings aside. Cody was happy for his brother—he'd never seen Luke this happy before.

"Hey, you two not coming?"

Luke's face reddened with embarrassment, and he averted his gaze from Cody.

"Nah, we're going to have a quiet night in," he said, his voice almost inaudible.

Kelan snorted. "Quiet night, my ass."

Cody looked over curiously at his older brother but he was shaking his head and already walking through the door. He was sure he heard Kelan mutter, "*Loud night in is more like it,*" before the door slammed behind him.

The crowd that had gathered in the clearing was enormous. Under normal circumstances, Cody would be feeling pretty uncomfortable about now—especially since most eyes were trained on him—but he felt oddly at ease being surrounded by the wolves in his pack. Most of them he had known since he was a kid. Cody had lost count of the number of hands he had shaken and times he had explained his whereabouts for the past few years. Everyone was curious about his life in New York and equally so about his return. A gentle hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Hey, Cody, how are you doing?"

Cody grinned at the petite, blonde woman who had sidled up beside him.

"Marianne!" Cody exclaimed, pulling the smaller woman into a hug. "I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thanks. I'm sorry I didn't call you to tell you, but it's all happened so fast I don't know which way is up."

"Don't worry about it, I understand. Must be a lot to take in."

"It is. I guess leaving home is going to be the hardest part. I'm really gonna miss Texas."

"It's certainly a hard place to get out of your system," Cody said. "But then, they do say home is where the heart is."

Marianne giggled. "Or soul, in this case."

Cody laughed. "True enough. So where is this new man of yours? Do I get to meet him? I thought there was some law that said all newly-mated werewolves had to be joined at the hip."

Marianne blushed.

"Actually I'm expecting him any minute. He's gone to meet his brother, who's coming to Texas on business. He's going to be staying with us for a few days."

"When are you moving to New Mexico?"

"A couple of weeks. I have to work out my notice at the hospital and get things in order. I didn't realise before, but there's just so much involved in moving home."

Cody sighed. "Yeah, tell me about it."

The expression on Marianne's face changed in an instant. Cody could see the realisation wash over her delicate features.

"Oh, Cody, I'm sorry, I didn't even think about how this would affect you. I guess my leaving means you're gonna be moving home, huh? I'm sorry to be the one to put you in that position."

Cody nodded. "Yeah, but don't worry yourself about it. To be honest, I really missed this place. It will be good to be home for a while. I could do with the slower pace after living in the Big Apple. New York is great, but it sure isn't home. Anyhow, enough about that – tell me more about this brother of your mate. Is he cute?"

Marianne giggled and threaded her arm through Cody's.

"Well, now that you mention it—he's hot! Not that *I've* noticed personally, of course. But I don't think he's sing..."

Marianne gasped, her words cut off when a strong arm yanked him out of her grasp. Cody was turned to face the most beautiful man he had ever laid eyes on, bar none. He had wavy, dark hair that fell forward slightly over his eyes, which were the deepest shade of blue Cody had ever seen. Cody could get lost in eyes like that. A low growl erupted from the man's throat as he tugged Cody towards him.

"Mine!" he all but shouted before leaning forward and covering Cody's mouth with his own.

Chapter Three

Cody was about to protest. He tried to pull away, but he swallowed his objection as soon as the man's lips touched his own. His tongue pushed at Cody's lips, demanding entrance. Cody had no choice but to open up and let the man plunder his mouth.

Cody was on fire at the touch of the man's lips and the taste of his sweet mouth. He honestly felt like he had never been kissed before this moment. Every other guy he'd known paled in comparison to this mountain of a man who was now devouring his mouth with a passion Cody had never before experienced. A rock-hard cock pressed against his own, which was now swollen inside his pants and pushing painfully against his zipper, begging for release.

His whole world tilted on its axis. Cody forgot where he was and the fact they had an audience—damn, he could barely remember his own name. It was as though they were the only two people who existed in the world. Cody felt himself start to tremble—he couldn't control it. If the man didn't have such a tight hold on him, he knew his legs would have given out by now.

Cody could do nothing but surrender to the all-consuming kiss. It was as if every nerve ending in his body led directly to his cock. He ground his hips against the man in an effort to get closer, which solicited another growl from the chest of the larger wolf. He reached down to grab hold of Cody's ass and pressed them closer still. As soon as he became capable of rational thought again, Cody narrowed it down to only one. *It's him!* He wanted to scream it to the entire world. *It's him! He found me!*

"Ahem."

Cody was awakened from his stupor and broke away from the man. His lips were released reluctantly, but the man's hands moved up and took hold of Cody's waist, keeping them pressed closely together. Cody looked around to see his brother Kelan standing next to him, arms folded and eyebrows raised in query. He tried to focus on his brother's face but he realised he was seeing in black and white. His eyes had shifted to their wolf form during the

kiss, something that had never happened to him before. He blinked a few times to regain his focus and return his sight to normal.

Kelan kept quiet but he continued to look at Cody questioningly. Cody couldn't find the words to answer his brother. He looked up at the stunning, dark-haired wolf as though he could offer an explanation, but the man looked just as dazed as Cody felt. His eyes had also shifted to their wolf form and his sharp canines were visible beneath his upper lip. Cody had never seen anything so beautiful or so sensual in his entire life.

Marianne began giggling and all three men turned to face her.

"Well," she said, her face breaking into a wide grin. "I was about to tell Cody more about my mate's brother, but it looks like he wanted to introduce himself."

The tall wolf shook his head as though to clear it and his eyes returned to normal, his teeth receding slowly into his gums. He let go of Cody and stared at his feet. It looked like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him where he stood.

"Would you care to tell me what is going on here?" Kelan demanded of Cody. "Jesus, Cody, we've only been here ten minutes. What the hell is *wrong* with you?"

Cody was shocked by Kelan's outburst. He hadn't been doing anything wrong. This man was his mate. The tall man's head jerked up and he stepped forward, in front of Cody, blocking him from Kelan.

"What's it to *you*?" he asked, positioning himself in a protective stance.

Kelan looked ready to burst a gasket. The shock on his face at being addressed so aggressively by another wolf was quickly replaced by anger. As alpha, very few men had the nerve to stand up to Kelan—and when a wolf did, it could be considered a challenge.

"I am his brother and his alpha!" Kelan boomed. "Who the hell are *you*?"

Cody rolled his eyes and stepped out from behind his mate. His mate! He couldn't believe he was now able to say it after all the years he had wrongly believed there was no one out there for him at all. He put a hand on each of the wolves' chests and looked at them in turn.

"All right, that's enough. Will you both just cut this shit out? This is my brother, Kelan. Kelan this is..." Cody's brow furrowed. He turned to the man and grinned. "Who are you exactly?"

"Ah, sorry," the man said in an almost bashful tone that completely belied his size and stature. "When I saw you and realised who you were, all thoughts of introductions went clear out of my head."

He reached a hand out for Cody to take.

"My name is Stefan, Stefan Drake. Pleased to meet you." Stefan winked at Cody as he said it.

Cody took hold of Stefan's hand and an electric current ran through his body and went straight to his dick, which was still painfully hard. God, this man was going to kill him. If a simple wink and the touch of his hand could set his knees trembling and make his breathing accelerate, he dreaded to think of how he would react when he had this man naked and in his bed.

"Cody Morgan. Good to meet you, too."

Cody turned to face his brother, whose expression had changed from furious to completely confused.

"Kelan, this is Stefan, my mate," Cody said, at last. "Please don't kill him."

Stefan stepped forward and offered his hand. He was as embarrassed as all hell. He had known Cody was his mate the minute he got near the young man, and when he'd seen Marianne thread her arm through Cody's—as irrational as it was—he'd been as jealous as hell. His only thought had been to separate them and claim Cody as his.

"Sorry about that," Stefan said. "I didn't know who you were. I just heard the angry tone and I saw red, you know? My only thought was to protect my mate."

Kelan nodded and shook Stefan's hand.

"I see that now. It's good to meet you, Stefan. For what it's worth, I'm glad Cody has mated with someone that is able to protect him. Between me and you, I think he had given up hope of ever finding a mate."

"So had I, but I'm more than happy that isn't the case."

Wasn't he just. Stefan had been on the lookout for his mate for many years but he'd been starting to think maybe there wasn't one out there for him. Even if there was, he could have been one of the unlucky wolves who never found their mate. He had never been so happy to be proven wrong in his entire life.

"So what brings you to Texas?" Kelan asked.

"Ah, that would be me," Marianne said. "Kelan, Stefan is my mate John's brother. He's here in Texas to do business with John, so he's staying with me for a while."

"Damn, you mean I'll be losing my brother and *both* my omegas to you? You are one lucky alpha."

Cody's head whipped around to face Stefan. He stared at his mate in wonder.

"Alpha? You're an alpha?"

"Cody, of course he's an alpha," Kelan said. "Didn't you feel the power he was giving off?"

"I was too busy feeling something else," Cody mumbled.

Stefan chuckled at his mate's response. He was actually pleased that Cody hadn't realised he was an alpha wolf. While some wolves bristled at the power they felt in Stefan, most wolves cowered. He was pleased Cody had neither reaction to him. In his opinion, his mate was his equal. Stefan was so used to being treated differently because of his status, he had always longed for someone to see him as a man first. He gazed thoughtfully at his mate.

"You know, for what it's worth, I didn't realise you were an omega wolf, either. I guess we were both too distracted to notice anything else."

Kelan and Marianne offered their congratulations, then left Cody and Stefan alone to give the couple some time to bond. They were barely out of earshot when Stefan leaned in close and spoke in Cody's ear.

"Distracted or not, I'm not sorry about that kiss. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I can't wait for a repeat performance, either."

Cody shivered and looked up into Stefan's face. His mate's eyes had darkened with lust and Cody could smell his arousal. It was intoxicating. His breath whooshed out of his body and he let out an honest-to-God whimper.

"Please? Now?"

Stefan groaned and closed his eyes. Cody was pleased with the effect he was having on the larger wolf, and he was equally excited. It seemed they were the perfect fit. He couldn't wait to get to know Stefan better.

"Damn it, Cody. Do you know what it does to me when you beg me like that? My cock is aching to be buried inside that hot little body of yours. Why don't you take me home where we can be alone? Then we'll see if I can make you beg some more."

Stefan's words went straight to Cody's dick and he damn near came in his pants.

"Oh God," he whispered. "Home. Bed. Now?"

Stefan laughed and wrapped his arms around his mate.

"I'm glad to see I can reduce you to incoherent sentences too. Lead the way."

Cody found Kelan to tell him he was leaving. Kelan laughed and shook his head, regarding his brother and his new mate.

"Oh man," Kelan groaned. "Are you two going to be as bad as Luke and Mark now? Do I need to make myself scarce on the ranch for a while? I don't think I can handle *two* newly mated couples in such close proximity."

Cody mock-punched Kelan in the arm but Stefan raised an eyebrow at his words. He obviously didn't know Kelan well enough to decide if he was joking or not.

"Cody could always come back with me if it's a problem," he said. "I'm sure Marianne wouldn't mind."

Kelan shook his head.

"What? No, man. Don't pay any attention to me. I was just teasing Cody. The ranch is his home as much as it's mine. You're welcome there for as long as you want."

Stefan nodded, but Cody could tell by his eyes that he was wary of Kelan and unsure of his words.

"Don't listen to him, Stefan," Cody said. "He's just *jealous*."

He turned to Kelan in time to notice his eyes travel the length of Stefan's body before coming back to rest on him.

"Damn straight." Kelan grinned.

What the fuck? Cody glared at his brother. Had Kelan just been eyeing up his mate? Kelan wasn't even gay. Cody had met a ton of girls that Kelan had brought home in the past, but he was sure his brother's eyes had been filled with desire as they took in Stefan's impressive form. Cody growled.

"He's mine!" he all but shouted in his brother's face.

Kelan took a step back, visibly shocked by his brother's outburst. He raised his hands in front of him. "Calm down. I was only saying you're a lucky guy, bro."

Stefan's brow was creased. Clearly he'd missed Kelan's lustful gaze on his body. Cody might have just met Stefan, but he already felt possessive over the man. He was going to have to speak to Kelan tomorrow, but right now he had more important things on his mind. He relaxed slightly and nodded but he couldn't help the way his body moved in front of Stefan's, blocking him from Kelan's view. He had just found his mate, nothing and no one was coming between them.

He borrowed the keys to Kelan's truck as Stefan had arrived with his brother and Kelan said he would grab a lift with one of his betas. Five minutes later, they were on their way back to the ranch. Cody was sure his face would be hurting the next day because he couldn't keep the grin from it. Stefan seemed to be in the same state. He had not taken his eyes off Cody once since they had started the drive home and now he was smoothing his hand over Cody's jeans-covered leg. Cody whimpered.

"Oh God, if you don't stop doing that I'm going to come in my pants," he said with a hint of desperation.

Stefan's hand was beginning to drive him crazy. He could already feel the tingle at the base of his spine that told him he was close, all without a single touch to his dick. Stefan slid his hand higher and pressed it over Cody's groin, his fingers circling the head of Cody's cock.

"Now I'm betting that would be a sight to see," Stefan teased. "'Why don't you show me?'"

Cody gasped when Stefan's thumb and forefinger lightly squeezed the head of his cock. He knew he was already leaking pre-cum and he was sure if he looked down he would see a wet patch on the front of his pants. Stefan continued his ministrations, seemingly encouraged by the noises Cody was making. The strong scent of arousal permeated Cody's senses.

"Fuck! Pull over," Stefan growled abruptly. "I can't wait until we get back. I need to taste you *now*."

Cody swerved the car when Stefan undid the clasp on his belt and his fingers slipped inside his jeans and skimmed over the head of his throbbing erection. He was overwhelmed by Stefan's words. The thought of his cock sliding in and out of the much larger man's hot,

wet mouth had him breathless with need. He just managed to pull over before Stefan began pulling at his button and zipper.

Cody took off his seatbelt and quickly reached for his mate, need overriding everything else. Their mouths came together almost fiercely and just when Cody opened his mouth to welcome Stefan's tongue inside, he felt Stefan's firm hand close around his shaft and squeeze. He gasped. The sensation was too powerful. There was no way he was going to last more than a couple of seconds with Stefan's hands on him. He was already too close to the edge.

Stefan pulled back from Cody's mouth and looked down at his dick. He lifted Cody's shirt up so they could better see the action. Pre-cum was seeping out of the slit of Cody's cock and trickling down the head onto his fingers. Stefan brought his fingers to his mouth and tasted his Cody's essence. He groaned as he watched his mate perform the sensuous act.

Cody was almost frantic with the need to come. He reached down to grab his dick but Stefan batted away his hand and replaced it with his own. He stroked up and down the shaft, once, then twice. Then Cody threw his head back and screamed out his mate's name as he came harder than he ever had before.

"Stefaaannn!"

Stefan could only stare in complete amazement. He had never witnessed such an erotic sight in all his life. Cody continued to jerk and shake as stream after stream of warm, creamy liquid shot out of his dick onto his stomach. His face was even more beautiful when he came. Stefan knew in that moment he would never tire of watching Cody this way. He would quite happily spend the rest of his life trying to please his mate so he could see that look on his face again and again.

"Oh God, Cody, I need you," Stefan panted. "I need to be inside you."

Cody opened his eyes and stared at Stefan.

"Do it, please," he begged. "Fuck me. I need it. I want to feel you in me, filling me. I need to feel you come in my ass."

Cody's words were too much for Stefan. He lost his last shred of control when his mate begged him to fuck him. He grabbed hold of Cody's pants and tugged them down his legs, pulling them and his shoes off his feet at the same time. It happened so quickly, Cody looked

down at his naked bottom half in surprise. Stefan could smell that Cody's arousal had increased in intensity. So his mate liked his dominant side, did he? That was something he would be sure to explore later. He was relieved Cody liked to go commando. He didn't think he could take another barrier between them, so desperate was he to be inside his mate.

Stefan made quick work of opening his jeans, then wiped his fingers through Cody's cum and smeared the head of his dick with it, eyes not leaving his mate's in the process. As desperate as he was to be inside his mate, he did not want to hurt him.

"Ride me," Stefan commanded.

Stefan watched the shudder that rolled over Cody's body. Without hesitation, Cody lifted himself up to straddle Stefan's lap then leant back exposing his puckered entrance. Both men hissed as Stefan's cock made contact with Cody's eager hole. Stefan gritted his teeth as Cody slid down a little and his dick broke through the tight ring of muscle. Stefan was barely holding on to his sanity.

Cody stilled his body, his expression an intense mixture of pleasure and pain.

"Oh God, are you all right? Am I hurting you?" Stefan asked in alarm.

Cody grinned down at his mate. "No, you're not hurting me. It's just been a while," Cody panted.

"Shit, then stop, let me stretch you first."

Cody looked at Stefan as though he were insane.

"Stop?" he squeaked. "No fucking way. I'm good. Just give me a minute, okay?"

Stefan nodded and stayed as still as he could, but the feeling of his aching cock breaching his mate's ass was so intense, he knew he was going to come before he even had the chance to fuck Cody properly. Never in his life had his feelings been this powerful. He wanted Cody with a passion so deep he thought he would drown in it.

When he thought he could not wait a second more, Cody sank the rest of the way down his dick and that was all it took. He grabbed Cody's hips to hold him in place, thrust up hard, then threw his head back and cried out his release. Somewhere in his lust-filled haze, Stefan was aware of Cody screaming out his name again.

Stefan was still shuddering with his orgasm when he looked up to find Cody baring his neck. *Fuck*. Without pause, Stefan leant forward and sank his teeth into his mate's neck. The taste of Cody's blood seeping over his tongue only caused his orgasm to intensify. It seemed

the bite deepened Cody's orgasm too — ropes of pearly, white liquid were still shooting out of Cody's cock. When he finally stopped shuddering, Stefan removed his teeth from Cody's neck and fell back against the seat, totally spent.

Stefan was at a loss for words. He had never come that hard or that quickly in his life. Cody was everything he had ever hoped for and more. His softening cock was still buried deep inside his mate and although he felt completed, sated, he didn't want to be parted from his mate's warm body. He felt like he'd come home.

When Cody came around, he stared down at his new mate in awe. His second orgasm had taken him completely by surprise. He had barely adjusted to the feel of Stefan's large cock breaching him when he sank down on Stefan's lap. Then Stefan's cock had grazed his prostate, causing a kaleidoscope of lights to dance behind his eyes. A rush of adrenaline had shot through his body with such force Cody was amazed he had not passed out from it. He still couldn't get his breathing under control and his body continued to jerk and tremble.

Some minutes later when Cody's breathing returned to normal, he reluctantly lifted himself from Stefan's lap. He whimpered at the loss but he had woken up enough to realise they were still parked on the side of the road. Anyone could have driven by and caught them in the act. He grinned at his mate when Stefan looked around him and obviously become aware of the same thing.

Stefan reached over and grabbed his hand.

"I think you'd better get us out of here before we get arrested."

Cody laughed and reached for his clothes and shoes, pulling them on quickly before putting the car in drive.

"As long as we share a cell, I'm cool with that."

"Mmm, I can think of worse things than being locked up in a confined space with you, but I can think of better things too. I've yet to see you fully naked, and right now I want nothing more than to feel your bare body pressed against mine in a warm bed."

Cody sucked in a breath. Unbelievably, he felt his cock twitch back to life. His mate was certainly good for his recovery time. Cody smiled to himself at that and drove home a little bit faster than he normally would have.

The elation Cody felt at having finally found his mate was almost indescribable. He had *never* been this happy. He'd been sure that nothing would be able to dampen his good mood, but when he pulled up outside the ranch, Cody's stomach did a somersault and the dinner he had eaten earlier threatened to make a reappearance.

Two patrol cars were parked outside, their flashing beacons lighting up the night. Police and ambulance crew were scattered around the yard barking orders at each other. Mark was being escorted from the house in handcuffs, and from where he sat in the car, Cody could see his baby brother Luke's body lying limply on the ground, his chest covered in blood.

Chapter Four

With shaking hands, Cody opened the door of the truck and walked towards the house. Stefan was beside him in an instant. His strong arms snaked around Cody's waist, keeping him upright. When he reached the steps to the porch, Mark was being led down past him, his hands and body covered in what must have been Luke's blood.

"What have you done?" Cody whispered.

With the size of the lump that had formed in the back of his throat, Cody was surprised he was able to speak at all. Mark's head snapped up and he met Cody's eyes.

"This wasn't me, Cody," he choked out. "I would never hurt Luke. You've got to believe me. Call Kelan, tell him to come home. You'll need him here."

Mark was led away at the same time as the sheriff approached Cody and Stefan, ushering them away from the house.

"Cody." The sheriff nodded in greeting. "I'm sorry we had to meet again under such unfortunate circumstances."

Cody pulled in a shaky breath. "My brother. Is he...?"

"Cody!"

He spun around to see Mark fighting off the two officers who were trying to manhandle him into the patrol car.

"Cody, tell Luke I'm sorry," Mark shouted, still resisting the officers. "Tell him I love him."

Cody didn't realise he'd been holding his breath until he heard Mark's plea. The look in Mark's eyes was haunted and Cody knew in that instant that he never would have hurt his mate. He watched numbly as Mark's head was pushed inside the car and the door slammed shut. Cody looked over at his brother, who was now being lifted onto a gurney by two EMTs.

"Your brother is being taken to hospital," the sheriff said. "He's been in and out of consciousness since we got here. The bullet went through his back and came out through his chest."

"Bullet?" Cody repeated in horror. "But what happened? Did Mark...?" He couldn't believe Mark would hurt Luke, but what if — ?

The sheriff held up his hand.

"No, seems your brother's partner had nothing to do with this. From what your brother just told the EMT, it looks like Mr Malone was trying to save his life."

Cody's brow furrowed.

"I don't understand, then why is he being arrested?"

"Ah, well Mr Malone got involved in an altercation with some of my men. He was almost hysterical when we got here and when we tried to get near your brother so the paramedics could take a look at him, he attacked us. We had no choice but to arrest him."

Cody's head was buzzing. He couldn't believe any of this was happening. His kid brother had been shot in the chest. He could have died. Yes, wolves had great healing abilities and were very difficult to kill, but it wasn't impossible. If the bullet had hit Luke's heart, he wouldn't have been able to heal from that.

Cody felt a tear roll down his cheek but he felt too weak to lift a hand to wipe it away. He was dimly aware of Stefan talking to the sheriff, then the paramedics walked by with the gurney and Cody went to his brother's side. Luke was very still and almost ghostly pale. The metallic smell of his blood reached Cody's nose and the strength of it made him sick to his stomach.

"Luke? Honey, can you hear me?"

Luke's eyelids flickered and slowly opened but he couldn't seem to focus on anything. He looked drugged. Cody looked to one of the paramedics questioningly and the soft smile he received reassured him a little.

"We've given him morphine for the pain. He's going to be out of it for a little while."

Cody nodded and reached for his brother's hand. He squeezed it and smiled down at his brother.

"You're going to be okay, Luke, just fine. I'll see you at the hospital, okay?"

Luke nodded and tried to speak but it resulted in a coughing fit.

"Don't try to speak," Cody said. "Just concentrate on getting better, okay?"

"Mark," Luke croaked at last. "Where's Mark?"

Cody didn't know what to say. He was sure now that Mark had nothing to do with what had happened to his brother, but he didn't want to upset Luke.

"Don't you worry yourself about Mark, he's fine," Cody soothed. "He said to tell you he loves you, and he'll be down at the hospital as soon as he can, okay?"

A faint smile ghosted over Luke's lips and his eyes fluttered shut.

"Sir, we have to get Mr Morgan to the hospital now," the paramedic said.

Cody nodded and let go of his brother's hand. He watched as his brother was loaded into the back of the van then turned to find his mate. Stefan was barking orders into his cell phone. When he hung up, he walked back to the sheriff and spoke with him briefly. The sheriff nodded and they both walked towards Cody.

"Cody, I understand that you weren't here tonight, but it looks like what happened to your brother was a personal attack. Can you think of anyone who would want to see your brother hurt in any way? Maybe someone he got into an argument with recently?"

Cody shook his head. None of this made any sense to him. Luke was the most placid man he knew. As far as Cody was aware, Luke had never been in an argument with anyone, ever.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't think of anyone that would do something like this to Luke."

"Well, I have some leads I want to follow up on, and of course I need to speak to Mr Malone, but if you think of anything yourself, however small, please call my office. I can be reached at any time."

Cody nodded numbly and reached out for his mate's hand. Stefan took it instantly, moving to Cody's side. They thanked the sheriff for his help and watched as he walked off.

"I guess we'd better head to the hospital." Cody looked up into his mate's eyes. "I bet you're wondering what you've got yourself involved in, having me as a mate. My life isn't always this traumatic, you know?"

"Nonsense. That's what mates are for. To be there for each other through the good *and* the bad. I'm glad I can be here for you now."

"I'm glad you're here too."

Stefan leant forward and kissed Cody tenderly on the lips.

"Always."

"I'd better call Kelan to tell him what happened."

"Already done."

Cody looked up into his mate's face in surprise.

"What? How?"

"I called my brother. He'd just left the meeting with Marianne, and Kelan was following them home with his beta, Rick. Kelan called me straight back. I told him what had happened. He asked that you come back to Marianne's place with me. He doesn't want you staying here right now, Cody – it's not safe."

"But..."

"And I happen to agree with him," Stefan interrupted. "I just found you. I can't lose you before I've even gotten the chance to get to know you. Just humour me on this, okay?"

"What about Luke? He can't be at the hospital on his own, he needs us."

"Kelan is on his way to the hospital. He knows a couple of doctors there that are wolves, so he's calling them to tell them Luke is on his way in. He said he's gonna call in a favour with the sheriff, too, and get Mark released. In the meantime, a couple of his betas are going to come over and stand guard. We'll get to the bottom of this, Cody, I promise."

When the last of the sheriff's men had cleared out, Cody led Stefan into the house.

Cody sighed. "Who would do something like this? Everyone loves Luke."

Stefan looked thoughtful.

"Maybe they weren't after Luke at all. They could have been out to get his mate. What's his name again?"

"Mark. But he wasn't even hurt."

"Not on the outside, no."

"Huh?"

"Think about it, Cody. If someone was out to get Mark, who's the best person to go after? His mate, that's who. The person he cares most about in the world. I've only just met you, but I can already tell you that I would protect you with my life. It takes years to get over losing a mate and some wolves *never* get over it."

Cody noticed a sad knowledge pass over his mate's face as though Stefan could identify with what he was saying.

"I've looked for you for so long and I now just finally found you. If anything happened to you, I don't know what I'd do."

Stefan's cell phone rang and he leant forward and pressed his lips against Cody's forehead before answering it. Cody thought about what Stefan had said. Yes, they'd only just met, but Cody could easily see Stefan becoming his everything. He seemed to have a kind and loving heart and damn, was he sexy. He was the finest specimen of a man Cody had ever seen.

He wondered if Stefan was right. Could this have been an attack against Mark? He didn't know the man at all. He had no idea what sort of person he was or if he had any enemies. Cody certainly hoped not. He didn't want his brother involved with a man like that.

Cody made quick work of packing a bag to take to Marianne's. He didn't have a lot of belongings with him, as most of his possessions were still in New York. When he'd finished packing, he went downstairs to find Stefan talking to a few wolves he recognised as members of his pack. They nodded in agreement to whatever Stefan was telling them and walked around to the back of the house.

Stefan caught sight of his mate watching him from just inside the house. Damn, his mate was beautiful. He couldn't keep the smile from his lips as he went to meet him on the porch. When he reached him, he wrapped his arms around him and gave him a long, lingering kiss.

"What was that all about?" Cody asked when he pulled away from Stefan's lips.

"Oh, those were a couple of your brother's betas. I was just filling them in on what happened and telling them to keep guard around the back of the house. I'm going to cover the front until the others get here."

Cody grinned. "You're very organised, aren't you? And I definitely like this take-charge attitude you've got. It's sexy."

Stefan laughed. "I'm an alpha, Cody. It's what I do. And I'm glad you find it sexy, you'll be seeing a lot of my take-charge attitude in the future."

"Is that a fact?" Cody giggled.

"Sure is. Hey, it's not going to be too much of a problem for you leaving your home and family here and moving to New Mexico, is it? Although I don't really think there's an alternative—it would be too difficult for me to leave my pack."

"I hadn't even thought about it yet, but I don't live here anyway. I'm just visiting. I live in New York."

"Oh? What do you do in New York?"

"I'm an artist. I paint."

"Wow, that's impressive. I can't wait to see your work. I wish I had a talent like that. What do you paint?"

"Landscapes mainly, but I do portraits too, although those are mainly on commission. And I'm betting *you* have lots of talents."

Stefan laughed. "Well yeah, but none I could talk about in polite conversation."

He leant forward and covered Cody's mouth with his own, thrusting his tongue inside, swallowing down Cody's reply. Within seconds, they were both breathless and desperate for more. Stefan pulled back reluctantly.

"Damn it, you make me forget myself. Why don't you go and wait inside the house until the rest of Kelan's betas get here? We can continue where we left off as soon as we get to Marianne's. You know, I'm still looking forward to making you beg."

Cody groaned, his cock twitching in his jeans at Stefan's suggestive words.

"Okay, fine, but be careful, please?"

"Now that I've got you waiting for me, I'll be extra careful, I promise," Stefan said, brushing the back of his fingers down Cody's cheek.

"I'll hold you to that."

Inside, Cody paced the length of the living room. He had to find something to do to take his mind off what had happened to Luke. He was sure his brother would be okay – wolves healed very quickly – but things could have been far worse.

While he waited for Stefan, Cody set to work cleaning the house. He washed some dishes he found in the kitchen then set to work on the living room floor. By the time he had finished, the whole house was spotless. He checked his watch and realised a couple of hours had passed since Luke had been taken to the hospital.

Cody took out his cell phone and dialled his older brother's number.

"Kelan?"

"Cody, where are you? Are you at Marianne's yet?"

"No, I'm still at the ranch. How is Luke doing?"

"He's gonna be fine, Cody. The bullet missed all his internal organs, so he's healing already. Another few days and he'll be good as new. Mark is in with him now."

"Good. Do you know who did this? Who would have hurt Luke like that?"

"Yeah, we know who it was and don't worry about it—he won't get away with this, I swear. What's going on at the ranch?"

"Stefan is outside guarding the front of the house. A few betas turned up earlier so he filled them in on what's been going on and got them to guard out back. We're just waiting for the others to arrive then we're going to head on out."

"Sounds like your man has got everything under control there. He seems like a nice guy, Cody."

Cody's chest swelled with pride at Kelan's compliment of his mate. He had only known the man a few hours, but already he could tell what a wonderful man Stefan was.

"Yes, he is."

"Well, I'm gonna stay here a while longer to see Luke, then I'll meet you at Marianne's, okay?"

"I'd like to see Luke, too. I was thinking we could stop off at the hospital on the way to Marianne's."

"There's no need to rush. Doc just told me Luke is gonna be out of it for hours yet. Why don't you take your things to Marianne's first? You can come by the hospital later—Luke should be awake by then."

"Okay, sure, I'll catch you later, then."

"See you."

Cody hung up the phone, feeling much better now he knew for sure his brother was going to be okay. Half an hour later, Stefan walked into the house. He looked tired but his face lit up as soon as he set eyes on Cody.

"Hey, how you doing?" Stefan asked, crossing the room and placing a tender kiss on Cody's lips.

"Better now. I spoke to Kelan—he says Luke is going to be okay. He's going to meet us at Marianne's. Did the other betas get here?"

"Yeah, all briefed and guarding the house until further notice. I'm glad your brother is okay. We'll get to the bottom of all this, Cody, I promise you. You ready to go?"

"Yeah, let me just grab my bag."

Cody was quiet on the way to Marianne's but the silence in the car was comfortable and made him feel at ease. He kept glancing at Stefan as though to reassure himself that Stefan was real and the entire night wasn't some figment of his overactive imagination.

It had only been a few hours since they'd met, but already Cody felt like they'd known each other for a much longer period of time. There was a connection between them that Cody knew would only grow stronger over time.

When they arrived at Marianne's house, Cody was surprised at the number of wolves he found there. Most were from his own pack, but some he didn't know. He watched Stefan greet them one by one before stopping to chat with a dark-haired wolf who had similar features to Stefan but was slightly shorter. Cody stood away to the side and saw Stefan and the other man exchange some heated words, with both men glancing at Cody in the process. A moment later Stefan called him over.

"Cody? Come over here, there's someone I want you to meet."

Cody walked over and stood next to his mate. Immediately Stefan wrapped his arms around Cody's waist and planted a kiss on his head.

"Cody, I'd like you to meet my kid brother, John. John is also one of my betas. John, meet Cody, my mate."

"Kid brother!" John snorted. "By five minutes, asshole, and that's only 'cause you're so damn impatient all the time."

"Hey, watch your mouth," Stefan admonished playfully.

"Cody, it's a pleasure to meet you," John said.

Although John smiled at him, Cody could sense the nervousness in Stefan's brother and he couldn't understand the cause. Wasn't John happy that Stefan and Cody had mated?

"Actually, Marianne has already told me a bit about you."

That wasn't good. He and Marianne had got into quite a few scrapes together growing up. She knew things about him even his own family didn't know. Then, of course, there was the really touchy subject of Cody coming out at fifteen and being treated like a pariah by practically the whole town. He had spent years being the brunt of jokes and the focus of the

local bullies. Maybe that was it. Perhaps John thought Cody wasn't good enough for his brother.

"Oh, really?" Stefan asked. "Maybe Marianne and I should have a quiet chat."

Cody's eyes widened. He swallowed loudly and looked away, feeling heat fill his face. Stefan laughed out loud.

"Wow, Cody, you look terrified," Stefan chuckled. "I'll definitely have to talk to her now."

Cody groaned. "Don't believe anything Marianne tells you."

"Hey, I heard that!"

Marianne stood next to her mate and snaked an arm around his waist. John kissed her gently on the lips before turning back to Cody.

"Looks like you're in trouble now," John teased.

"Oh, I'll get him back," Marianne said, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Cody didn't doubt her for a second.

"I really need to be getting to the hospital to check on Luke," Cody said when Marianne and John became immersed in a private conversation.

"Of course. I'll drive you. Just give me a few minutes to talk to John."

Cody nodded his agreement. "I'll wait for you out on the porch."

Cody made his way through the busy room and headed towards the front door. He was almost through it when he heard his name mentioned in conversation just outside. He stopped where he was while the two men outside carried on talking about him.

"I just don't understand it," said a male voice Cody didn't recognise. "How the hell can he say they're mates?"

"I've no idea," his friend replied. "It's ludicrous. Have you ever heard of wolf having two mates?"

Cody's blood ran cold. Two mates? What the hell were they talking about?

"Nope. It's not possible and, even if it was, John said this Cody is gay. I doubt very much he's going to want to share his bed with a woman."

The second voice snorted. "Forget about Cody, what do you think Stefan's wife is going to say when she finds out her husband has gone and found himself a fancy man?"

Cody felt his whole world fall apart in that instant. His stomach lurched violently and he had to hold on to the doorframe to keep upright. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Stefan was married? When exactly did he plan on telling Cody? The last nail in the coffin came a moment later.

"I just feel sorry for Stefan's son. What the hell is all this going to do to him?"

Cody couldn't listen to any more. He had to get some air before he lost the contents of his stomach. He ran from the house to his truck in the yard, his heart breaking with each step he took away from his mate. Stefan had seemed perfect, almost too good to be true.

Clearly, that was exactly what he was.

Cody slid behind the wheel and turned on the ignition. He was just pulling out of the yard when Stefan came out of the ranch. He stared at the alpha wolf, taking in every glorious feature. Sadness and regret coursing through his veins, he pulled away, leaving Stefan alone in the yard, calling out his name.

Chapter Five

By the time Cody reached the hospital, he was numb. He had genuinely thought all his prayers had been answered when he'd met Stefan earlier in the evening. Now he was sure he had been right all along. There really was no one out there for him.

He was shown the way to Luke's room and met Kelan in the corridor. Kelan immediately got to his feet and put his arms around Cody, hugging him tightly.

"How is he?" Cody asked into his brother's shoulder.

Kelan released Cody and took a step back.

"He's doing good. Doc says he's going to heal just fine."

"Thank God. Who did this to him?"

Kelan took a seat in the corridor and motioned for Cody to do the same. When his brother was seated next to him, Kelan sighed loudly.

"It was Ethan."

"Huh? Ethan? As in Ethan Walker?"

"Yeah. Seems he's had a thing for Luke for quite some time. Looks like this is all the result of his jealousy because Luke has mated with Mark."

Cody thought back to his childhood. He tried not to think of those times often because the memories were too painful. Ethan Walker had been a few years above Cody in high school. He had been one of the main instigators of the bullying Cody had suffered when he came out at fifteen. Cody had lost count of the times he had been beaten up by Ethan and his friends.

"Are you sure?" Cody asked. "There's no way Ethan can be gay."

"That's what I thought, but it seems we were both wrong."

The more Cody thought about it, the more it made sense. If Ethan didn't want anyone to know he was gay, what better way avoid suspicion than to openly oppose and abuse other gay men?

Cody would never be able to understand men like that. He had always been proud of who he was and couldn't imagine trying to hide that part of himself. Even though it had

given him nothing but grief growing up, he had never regretted his decision to be open and honest about who he was.

"Cody, there's something else I need to tell you," Kelan said, meeting Cody's eyes.

"About Ethan?"

"No, this is about me." Kelan looked down and began picking at a frayed piece of cotton on his shirt.

"What is it?" Cody prompted.

Kelan took a deep breath then once again met Cody's gaze.

"I'm gay, too."

Cody gasped. "What? Since when?"

"I've always known," Kelan said with a shrug.

"But why didn't you say anything before? All those times Pop gave me shit about being gay and you never said a word —"

Kelan hung his head in shame.

"I know and I'm deeply sorry about that. I should have stuck up for you back then, but I was so worried Pop would think less of me I kept it to myself. I wish more than anything I could turn the clock back and do things differently. I paid too much mind to what that old man thought. I wanted him to be proud of me, and he was, but for the wrong reasons. It was all a lie. I was a coward. I'm sorry if my actions caused you pain."

Cody was quiet for a moment while he tried to process what Kelan had told him. There was a chance his life might have been made easier back then if his older, stronger brother had been there standing by his side and looking out for him, but he doubted it would have made that much difference. In fact, it was likely that Kelan would have suffered the same shit Cody had. It might even have hindered his chances of taking over as pack alpha when their dad died.

There were a lot of prejudiced people in the town Cody and his brothers had grown up in. Wolves were no different than humans in that respect, and some of them were worse. Cody was sure there were those who wouldn't have taken kindly to being led by a gay man.

"It's okay," Cody replied at last. "I can't say that I agree with your reasons for keeping quiet all these years, but I understand them and I don't think it would have changed anything anyway."

"Maybe. I just wish I could have been as open as you were. You were a braver man than me in many respects."

Cody shrugged. "I never really saw it like that. I just didn't want to live a lie. We both did what we had to do to survive."

"Yeah, I guess we did."

"So is Mark in with Luke now?" Cody asked.

Kelan's mouth turned up into a smile.

"Yeah, hasn't left his side since he got here."

"That's nice. It's good that he has someone like Mark in his life."

"Yeah, it is. Mark is a good guy. Speaking of mates, where's yours hiding?"

Cody sighed. He debated whether or not he should tell Kelan what he had overheard, then decided his brother should know the truth. He proceeded to tell his brother everything. Throughout Cody's speech, Kelan's eyes darkened with fury.

"He has a family and he didn't even have the decency to tell you?" Kelan shook his head. "What sort of wolf would marry someone anyway, knowing his mate is out there somewhere? So what, he's straight?"

Cody thought back to their lovemaking earlier in the car.

"Definitely not. Not that it matters. I've got to somehow try to forget about him and get on with my life. There is no way I would ask him to leave his wife and son, and I couldn't share him. What other choice do I have?"

"I could kill him for doing this to you," Kelan seethed.

Cody raised his hand. "Kelan, please don't start anything, not on my account. I'll be okay. I just wish I could forget I ever met him."

"If you need me, I'm here for you. You know that right?"

Cody tried to swallow down the lump in his throat. "I know. Thanks."

When Cody looked up, Mark was standing in the corridor outside Luke's room. Cody and Kelan got up to greet him.

"Hey, how is he?" Cody asked.

"He's good. He's asleep now. I thought maybe you and Kelan would like to go in and see him."

Cody nodded. "Thanks, Mark. Kelan, you coming in?"

"You go on ahead – I'll go in after you."

Cody braced himself and pushed open the door to his brother's room. His first reaction was shock at seeing his baby brother hooked up to so many machines. But the shock was quickly replaced by relief as he moved around the bed and realised Luke was sleeping peacefully, a small smile playing on his lips.

Cody sat down in the chair beside the bed and took hold of Luke's hand.

"Hey, Luke," Cody said. "You scared me there for a while. Don't you ever do that again, you hear me?"

Luke murmured in his sleep and a soft snore escaped his lips. Cody chuckled.

"I'll take that as your agreement."

Cody sat with Luke for a few more minutes. He didn't want to stay too long because he knew Kelan would want to see their brother, and he was sure Mark was itching to get back in the room too. Cody knew if it was Stefan lying here in the bed, he wouldn't want to leave his mate's side for too long either.

As soon as the thought entered his head, Cody shook himself. He could not think about his mate anymore. Stefan was off-limits and dwelling on something that could never be would only cause him more heartache. Although he didn't think he could feel any worse than he already did. Cody said goodbye to his brother and quietly left the room.

When he stepped back out into the corridor, Cody was met with complete chaos. Kelan had Stefan pinned to the wall by the throat. Mark was trying to pull him off but his much smaller frame was ineffectual against Kelan's mass. A doctor Cody recognised as a member of Kelan's pack was hovering beside them.

"If you don't stop this, you'll be asked to leave the hospital," the doctor said.

"I want to see my mate," Stefan said. "Get off me!"

"You're not welcome here," Kelan snapped back. "Leave."

"The hell I will."

From where he stood, Cody could see the ripple rolling over Stefan's skin. It looked as though he was barely managing to contain his wolf. Stefan got both hands on Kelan's chest and shoved. Kelan stumbled backwards but quickly regained his balance and grabbed hold of Stefan once again. The men were staring each other down and snarling.

"Hey!" Cody shouted, jumping into the fray. "What in God's name is going on here? Kelan, let go of him."

Kelan scowled at Cody, but his grip on Stefan's throat loosened and he reluctantly stepped back.

"Fine, but tell him to get the hell out of here," he ordered.

"Don't tell me what to do," Cody snapped. "And we're in a hospital for God's sake. What is wrong with you? Go on in and see Luke, I'll deal with this myself."

Kelan eyed Cody for a moment before nodding and walking into their brother's room. Very few people would dare speak up to the alpha like that, but as an omega, Cody had the ability to calm Kelan down and make him listen to reason.

"What the hell was that all about?" Stefan asked, calming visibly now that Kelan had left. "Have I done something to upset him?"

Cody's eyebrows shot upwards. "Upset *him*? You mean, you can't think of anything you could have done to upset *me*?"

Stefan frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about, Cody."

Cody glanced around him before continuing. The doctor and Mark had left them to talk in private and there was no one else within hearing distance.

"Don't play the innocent with me, Stefan Drake," Cody fumed. "How dare you? I'm so angry at you right now I could scream."

"Cody," Stefan said, putting a hand on his mate's shoulder. "Tell me what's wrong."

Cody batted Stefan's hand away and started to pace the corridor. Even though he was immensely angry with Stefan, he felt equally sad. Stefan had claimed him. There could be no other for him now. Not that he could imagine ever wanting anyone else again anyway. Cody cleared his throat before he spoke.

"Why, Stefan? Why didn't you tell me you had a wife and son?"

Stefan lowered his eyes. He had the good grace to look contrite, but it did nothing to ease the ache in Cody's heart. If anything, the remorse on Stefan's face made Cody feel worse.

"How did you find out?"

"What? That's all you have to say to me. How did I find out? Does it matter? I can't believe this!"

"Look, it's not what you think."

Cody snorted. "Really. So you're not married."

"No, I mean yes, but..." Stefan sighed. "It's complicated."

"I'd say it's a damn sight more than complicated, wouldn't you?"

"I didn't want you to find out from someone else. I wanted to tell you myself. To be honest, when we first met it didn't even enter my head. I was so excited to have finally found my mate that everything else in my life was forgotten. Then we got back to the ranch and you were so upset about Luke... I thought it could wait until later. I'm sorry you didn't hear it from me."

"It doesn't matter how I found out *or* who I heard it from. The fact is, you're married. How could you claim me knowing you have a wife and son?"

"I can explain everything. Firstly, Aaron is not my son, at least not in the traditional sense. Leah and I are married, yes, but we're not a couple, in fact we never have been."

Not a couple? Cody could feel hope start to swell in his chest. Was there a chance he and Stefan could be together after all? Or was Stefan feeding him a pack of lies? Cody didn't know what to believe.

"I don't understand. What does that mean, exactly? Are you saying that you and Leah are married but that you're not together?"

"Leah and I have never been together, at least not in a sexual way."

"Then why...?"

"Stefan!"

Cody and Stefan both turned to see Stefan's brother John rushing along the corridor towards them. He smiled briefly and nodded to Cody then turned to face his brother.

"Stefan, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course," Stefan said.

"Uh, I meant in private," John said, looking from Stefan to Cody and back again.

"Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of my mate," Stefan answered. His firm, even tone brooked no argument.

John nodded. "Fair enough. We have a problem."

"What sort of problem?" Stefan asked.

"I just got word that Devlin is on his way here and he's bringing three council members with him."

Stefan's face turned stone cold and his eyes darkened with fury. Cody couldn't believe how quickly his mate's demeanour had changed.

"Who's Devlin?" Cody finally asked when Stefan didn't respond to his brother's statement.

"My wife's brother," Stefan said at last. "It sounds as if he's heard that I've found my mate."

"But why would he bring council members with him?"

"There's only one reason. He's planning on challenging my authority as alpha."

Cody sucked in a shaky breath. "What? You're going to fight him?"

"Not if I can avoid it," Stefan answered. "But I might have no choice."

Cody felt as though his insides were doing somersaults. He had never witnessed a fight for alpha position first hand, but he had heard about them and knew they weren't pretty. They were savage and bloody and sometimes fatal, depending on the parties involved. Even though Stefan was an alpha wolf and could more than likely take care of himself, Cody didn't want to think about his mate being involved in something so dangerous. He wouldn't be able to bear it if Stefan got hurt.

"Do you want me to call your other betas?" John asked. "Tell them to get over here?"

Stefan considered the question then shook his head.

"You can call Ben and Evan, tell them what's going on, but there's no reason for them to come. Just make sure they don't mention anything to the rest of the pack. We'll have chaos on our hands if word gets out my position as alpha isn't safe."

"Will do," John said. "Uh, what about Leah? You want me to call her too?"

Stefan looked at Cody then shook his head.

"No, I'll call her myself. She'll need to come here. She's not safe at home now. She needs to be here where I can protect her."

Cody bristled at his mate's words. Even though Stefan had told him he and Leah were not together as a couple in the traditional sense, that didn't mean he wanted to meet her. It was hard for Cody to stand back and listen to Stefan talk about a life he knew nothing about and could never be a part of. How was he supposed to deal with something like that?

"Okay, I'll go and make the calls," John said. "Cody, is there someplace around here where Leah and Aaron can stay?"

"Uh, yeah, there's Marnie's guesthouse. She's normally pretty quiet at this time of the year."

"Thanks. I guess I'll see you both later."

"Yeah, see you back at Marianne's," Stefan said.

Cody waved goodbye to his mate's brother. The night's events had taken their toll on him and he felt exhausted. He sighed deeply and scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I know this is a lot to take in. I'll explain everything to you fully when we get back to Marianne's, but please don't think this is going to have any effect on our relationship. I meant what I said. I've waited a long time to find my mate. Now that I've found you, nothing is going to come between us."

"How can you even say this is going to have no effect on us, Stefan? You're *married*. Where I come from that means something. Whether or not you are living together as man and wife is irrelevant. You took vows with this woman, you're responsible for her. And come to think of it, what will Leah have to say about all of this? How is she going to feel when she discovers you've found your mate?"

"Leah will be extremely happy for me to have found you."

"What? You've got to be kidding me!"

Stefan sighed. "Neither Leah nor I wanted to get married but we were forced into it, by *her* father and mine. I'll explain the rest to you later, okay? Just believe me when I say everything is going to be okay between us."

"I wish I could believe you."

"You will in time. I'll prove to you that I'm genuine and you can trust what I say."

Cody nodded. "I guess I don't have a lot of choice."

Stefan leant forward and placed a tender kiss on Cody's forehead. "Thank you, baby. You won't regret this, I promise."

Cody had never wanted something to be truer in his life.

"I'd better make a call to Leah. I don't know if her brother has said anything to her, but I'd rather she heard about all of this from me."

Cody nodded. He had to accept that Leah and Aaron were a big part of Stefan's life, whether he liked it or not.

"Okay, you go ahead. I'll wait here for you."

"Thanks, love," Stefan said.

"For what?"

"For being so understanding. I don't know that I'd be as calm as you if the situation was reversed."

Stefan walked off to make the call to his wife. Cody shook his head. He couldn't believe he was being so calm about the situation either. But Cody knew he'd have to hear the full story before he made any decisions on their future together.

A few minutes later, Stefan strolled back down the corridor, a small smile playing on his lips. Cody stood up to greet his mate.

"Everything okay?" Cody asked.

"Everything is perfect. Leah was very happy for me, just as I knew she would be. She and Aaron are going to come out here in the morning. Leah said she can't wait to meet you."

Cody couldn't say he felt the same way.

Stefan wrapped his arms around Cody and kissed him. Even though he felt so torn, he couldn't deny the attraction and longing he felt to be with his mate. He opened his mouth to accommodate Stefan's tongue and groaned into the kiss when it finally entered his mouth. Cody wrapped his arms around Stefan's neck and deepened the kiss. He could already feel Stefan's hardness pressed against him, mirroring his own. He knew he should stop, but Stefan's mouth felt so good against his.

"What in the hell is *he* still doing here?" Kelan demanded, closing the door to their brother's room.

Stefan sighed. "I think we all need to go someplace to talk."

It took Cody five minutes of reasoning with Kelan before he agreed to hear what Stefan had to say. Kelan found Mark, who would be staying overnight with Luke, and told him they were leaving the hospital. The three of them climbed into Kelan's pickup and drove back to the ranch.

When they arrived home, Kelan spoke to his betas and dismissed them from their guard duty. It was unlikely that Ethan would show up again and, if he did, there were now two alphas at the ranch who would be able to take care of him.

Cody poured three large bourbons and handed one each to his brother and mate before seating himself on the sofa and taking a long sip of his own. Kelan had calmed down on the drive back to the ranch and his features remained stoical. Cody watched Stefan swirl the contents of his own glass before taking a sip. He cleared his throat.

"When I was seventeen, my elder brother Joshua came home one day to tell us he'd found his mate, Leah Anderson. Joshua was the golden boy in my father's eyes. He could do no wrong. He was to take over as pack alpha when my dad died.

"Over the next few months, we got to know Leah and we liked her. She was a shy little thing back then, wouldn't say boo to a goose. One night, Joshua took Leah out for a meal and proposed to her. They already knew they were mates, so she said yes, of course. But on their way home to tell us the news, they got into a wreck. Leah got injured pretty badly, but she pulled through. Josh wasn't so lucky. He hadn't been wearing his seatbelt and was thrown clean through the window. His internal injuries were so bad, the doc said he never stood a chance."

Cody gasped. "Oh, Stefan, I'm so sorry. That must have been awful for you."

"Yeah," Stefan nodded. "It was hard on all of us, but it hit Leah the worst. She was inconsolable. A couple of weeks later, Leah found out she was pregnant. She came from a very rich family and to them appearances were everything."

"What did she do?" Cody asked.

"She told her parents. Her father was a member of our pack and very influential. He came and spoke to my father, and together they agreed that Leah and I should get married."

"Why would your father agree to that?" Cody asked his mate.

"Money. My father wasn't a very nice man, Cody. He was greedy. He had been so happy to find out that my brother had mated with a girl from one of the richest families in the state. He was devastated by my brother's death, as we all were. I'm sure, however, it also crossed his mind that after my brother had passed he would no longer have an alliance with Leah's family. When her father came and spoke to him he jumped at the chance of the two of us marrying."

"Why did *you* agree to it?" Kelan asked. "Surely you could have said no."

"I could have, yes. But you've got to understand, Kelan, I was seventeen. My father was a bully and while I hated that side of him, I loved him too. I'd have done anything to make him happy, to make him proud of me."

Cody and Kelan shared a knowing look. Kelan could certainly relate to that part of the story.

"I might understand your reasons for getting married to Leah, but where does that leave my brother? I can smell your scents. You've claimed him. How could you do that knowing you have a wife and son at home?"

"Leah and I have never been together in that way. And Aaron is eighteen now. Leah and I have explained everything to him. He understands that whatever happens between his mother and me, he will always be my son. I've raised him since he was born and I love him as if he were my own. That will never change."

"So are you planning on divorcing Leah?"

Stefan nodded. "I will. Leah and I discussed it when her father passed away a few years ago, but we decided to stay together until Aaron was older. I didn't have anyone in my life and there has never been anyone else for Leah since Josh passed, so there didn't seem any point in disrupting Aaron's life back then."

"What about Leah's brother?" Cody asked.

Stefan sighed. "He could be a problem."

"What do you mean?" Kelan questioned.

"Devlin has never liked me. I guess it's because he wants the pack for himself. To be honest, although I was always a strong wolf, I never had any desire to lead. I didn't have to think about it when I was younger, because I took it for granted that Joshua would take over the pack. But when Joshua died, the responsibility fell to me being the next oldest and strongest. Devlin knows of my indifference and he resents me for it."

"So why don't you just hand the pack over to him?" Cody asked.

"Devlin might be strong but he has no other qualities that would make for a good alpha. He's conniving and cruel and just as money-oriented as his father before him. He sees the position as nothing but a way of getting the power he desperately wants. I'm afraid of what would become of the pack if he took over."

"Devlin is already on his way here with three council members," Cody supplied.

"Shit, then he does plan on challenging you?" Kelan enquired.

"It would seem so, yes."

"Are you going to take up the challenge?" Kelan asked.

"If there's no way to avoid it, yes."

Kelan nodded. He got up from the chair and poured another bourbon. "Well I'm going to go to bed. It's been a long, stressful day. If you need anything, Stefan, you can count on me and the rest of my pack to help. Make yourself at home here."

Stefan got up and shook Kelan's hand. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Night, Cody."

Cody threw his arms around his older brother and hugged him tightly to his chest.

"Thank you," he whispered in Kelan's ear.

"Any time, bro."

After Kelan had left the room, Cody had no idea what to say to his mate. He believed Stefan's story, and although part of him empathised with Stefan and the predicament he had been put in, Cody still couldn't help worrying about their future together.

"Well I guess I'd better head on back to Marianne's," Stefan said. "Do you want to come with me?"

"No, I'm gonna stay here. Don't want to leave Kelan alone after what happened tonight."

"Of course. I understand," Stefan said, although his dark eyes grew forlorn. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

Cody knew he had two options. He could let Stefan walk away, giving himself time to think about what he'd learned and to decide on their future together, or he could ask Stefan to stay. In his heart, Cody knew the decision had already been made. Stefan was his mate, the only mate he would ever get, and that was too precious a gift to throw away because it didn't come wrapped in a perfect package.

"Yes," Cody answered. "You will. Preferably for breakfast."

"Huh?"

"Stay with me."

Stefan's mouth curved up into a smile. "You mean that?"

Cody closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Stefan's neck. "I do." He leaned up on tiptoes and touched his lips to Stefan's. Stefan groaned, pulling Cody closer and deepening the kiss.

Cody panted when they finally pulled apart. "I can't let you go now that I've found you."

"I've waited a long time for you," Stefan said. "I know I come with a lot of baggage, but I hope you can see past that. I promise I'll spend the rest of my days trying to make you happy."

"That's all I can ask for."

Cody led Stefan upstairs to his bedroom. He closed the door quietly and stood in front of it, eyes to the ground. Now that they were alone in his room, Cody suddenly felt very nervous. It wasn't the sex he was worried about. They had already discovered they were more than compatible in that department. Cody was afraid that the closer they became, the harder it would be to lose Stefan if things didn't work out between them. But then, that was what most people feared when they entered a new relationship, wasn't it?

"Hey, everything okay?" Stefan asked.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"You know, we don't have to do anything you don't want to. We can just sleep. I'm happy to just be here with you."

Cody smiled up at his mate. Stefan really was something else. The more time Cody spent with Stefan, the more reasons he found to like him.

"You don't mind?"

"What? Of course not. We don't have to rush into anything. We have all the time in the world."

"Okay, thanks. You want to take a shower?"

"A shower sounds perfect about now."

Cody showed Stefan where everything was kept in the bathroom and returned to his room. He turned down the covers on his bed, undressed and climbed in. The cool sheets felt perfect against his overheated skin. Cody had planned to jump in the shower when Stefan got out, but he didn't even hear Stefan get back to the room. No sooner had his head touched the pillow than Cody fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

* * * *

The mid-morning sun was shining through the gap in the curtains, casting a warm glow over the room when Cody opened his eyes. He yawned and stretched out his arms languorously.

"Morning, sleepyhead. You finally awake?"

Cody all but jumped out of bed with shock when he heard Stefan's voice behind him. He was so used to sleeping alone, it was going to take him a while to adjust to sharing his bed. Stefan chuckled and snuggled up to Cody's back.

"Sorry, did I scare you?"

"Yeah, guess having someone in my bed is going to take some getting used to."

"I know what you mean. It's been years since I shared a bed with anyone," Stefan admitted.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't forget for appearances' sake I've been married for the past eighteen years. It might only be in name but I never wanted to embarrass Leah by letting word get out I was sharing my bed with men. The most I've had is the odd casual hook-up when I was out of town on business and believe me — they were few and far between."

"Wow, so you've had no relationships at all these past years?"

"Not a one. What about you? Has there been anyone important in your life?"

"That's an easy question to answer," Cody said. "No."

"How come?"

Cody sighed. "I didn't think it would be right to get involved with anyone. To be honest, being gay I thought I wouldn't get a mate. I hoped, of course, but I didn't think there was any chance. I guess I was afraid I wouldn't be able to fully commit and that wouldn't be fair to the person I was with."

"As selfish as it might sound, I'm glad. Although I certainly *would* have, I wouldn't have wanted to have to fight for you, and I definitely couldn't share you."

Cody smiled to himself. Those had been his sentiments exactly. Stefan snuggled more closely behind him. His long, hard body was pressed firmly against Cody's own, and his

now rock-hard cock was nestled between the cheeks of Cody's ass. Cody couldn't help the moan that escaped his lips as he pushed back into Stefan's hardness, his own member stiffening to match his mate's.

Stefan trailed his fingers along Cody's hip bone as he leant forward and traced his tongue down Cody's neck. The sensations caused a shiver to travel the length of Cody's body.

"I'm going to fuck you now, Cody," Stefan said against his mate's neck. "You'd better tell me if you want me to stop."

"No," Cody moaned. "Please don't stop. I want this. I want *you*."

Stefan grabbed hold of his dick and rubbed it between the cheeks of Cody's ass. Pre-cum was oozing out of his slit, lubricating the way. Cody arched his back, pushing himself closer to what he desperately wanted.

Cody reached into the nightstand beside the bed and pulled out a tube of lube. He popped open the top and squirted a generous helping into his hand. Reaching behind him, he slathered the sticky liquid onto Stefan's cock, stroking it a few times before using the excess to prepare himself.

Stefan hissed.

"Fuck that's hot, baby. I could watch you do that all night."

Stefan watched in awe while Cody slipped his index finger inside himself and slowly glided it in and out. After a few moments, he added another. Stefan's dick jerked at the action. Finally, Cody removed his fingers and used his hand to spread open the cheeks of his ass.

"It's all yours," he said over his shoulder.

Stefan took hold of his cock and placed it against Cody's entrance. He used his other hand to hold on to Cody's hip, pinning Cody to the mattress to keep him still. He rubbed his now slippery cock back and forth against Cody's quivering hole.

"Don't tease me, Stefan. Please, I need it."

"You're going to get it, love," Stefan said, pressing his dick harder against Cody's entrance.

With one more firm push, Stefan breached his mate. Cody cried out, reaching behind him to grab hold of Stefan's hip and pull him closer still. Stefan slid his hand under Cody's leg and lifted it to give himself better access. The new angle drove him deep into Cody.

Cody started panting as Stefan pointedly grazed his sweet spot. "Stefan," Cody moaned. "So hot."

"You feel incredible," Stefan groaned. "So tight."

Cody had a death-grip on the mattress—it was the only thing keeping them grounded to the bed. Stefan pulled almost all of the way out before pushing back inside, hard. He shifted his hips slightly so that his cock jabbed Cody's gland on every pass.

Stefan leant forward and swept his tongue along Cody's neck, his teeth scraping over the mating mark. He'd already claimed Cody but he'd do it again and again if he had to, just to prove to himself that Cody was his.

"Do it," Cody begged. "Bite me."

Stefan did as his mate asked and sank his teeth into Cody's neck. They cried out in unison as a feeling of shared ecstasy rushed through them.

Stefan was on fire. He set a brutal pace, fucking Cody in earnest. He reached his hand around and began to stroke Cody's rigid cock. A few pulls was all it took. Cody cried out as he coated his mate's hand with his sticky seed. All the while his ass muscles contracted, clamping down on Stefan's already oversensitive dick.

Stefan couldn't contain the roar that tore from his throat as his orgasm crashed through him without warning and he filled his mate with his essence. He was still shaking from the aftershocks when he heard a pounding on the front door. The sound was loud enough to wake the dead.

"Stefan! I know you're in there! Get your ass out here now!"

"Who the hell is that?" Cody asked in alarm.

"It's Devlin," Stefan answered, slipping his dick out of Cody's ass. "My wife's brother."

Chapter Six

"How did he get here so fast?" Cody asked, diving out of bed and reaching for his jeans.

"I don't know. But I'd better go and sort this out. Stay here, okay? I don't want you involved in this."

"I'm already involved," Cody retorted, pulling a shirt on over his head. "And don't tell me what to do, Stefan. I don't appreciate it."

Stefan frowned, pulling on his own clothing. "I'm sorry, I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Well, that works both ways. I'm coming."

Stefan nodded and quickly finished dressing. Cody led the way out of the bedroom and down the stairs. They met Kelan in the hall just as he was about to open the front door.

"A friend of yours?" Kelan asked, his eyebrows raised in amusement.

"Not exactly," Stefan replied. "You'd better open the door quickly before he breaks it down."

Kelan snorted. "I'd like to see him try."

"Trust me, you don't want to see Dev in a temper, it's not pretty."

Kelan pulled open the door and had to jump back to avoid a fist in his face as Devlin's hand came down to pound on the glass.

"Can I help you?" Kelan asked.

"Where's Stefan?" Devlin demanded, straightening his back and squaring his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, I think you've made a mistake," Kelan said. "There isn't anyone by that name living here."

Stefan hid his grin behind the door. Devlin was going to be pissed off if they kept this up for much longer.

"Don't fuck with me," Devlin fumed. "I know he's here. I can smell him. You'd better tell him to get his ass out here right now, or so help me God..."

"All right, all right, I'm here," Stefan said, walking around the door and standing next to Kelan. "What can I do for you, Dev?"

Devlin puffed out his chest and stood nose to nose with Stefan. They were almost the same height but Devlin was bulkier. His physique came from hours of working out in the gym. He was a formidable opponent, and his attitude was even larger than his muscles. Devlin's face was puce. The more he stared at Stefan, the redder his face became.

"Is it true?" he asked at last.

"If you're referring to the fact that I've mated, then yes, it's completely true," Stefan replied.

Devlin balled his hands together into fists. "How dare you!" Devlin raged. "How could you do this to Leah?"

"I haven't done anything to Leah," Stefan said. "This doesn't involve her."

"What!" Devlin shouted. "How the hell can you say *that*? This has everything to do with Leah. She's your goddamn wife! And have you even considered what this is going to do to Aaron?" The veins in Devlin's neck pulsed. If the man got any redder, Stefan feared his brother-in-law might have a heart attack.

"This isn't going to do anything to Aaron," Dev argued. "I'm sure Aaron will be as pleased for me as Leah is. They'll both be here later today. If you are concerned about how they feel, I suggest you ask them."

"So you've spoken to Leah then?"

"I have."

"And?" Dev prompted.

"And nothing. What goes on between us is none of your concern. You know the circumstances under which Leah and I got together. We were both forced into our marriage by your father and mine. You also know that I'm gay. It was not inconceivable that I would one day find my mate, and now that I have, I refuse to give him up."

Kelan patted Cody on the shoulder then leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

"I'll put some coffee on. This could take a while."

Cody nodded and continued to listen to the exchange in silence from behind the safety of the front door. He wanted to move to Stefan's side. He knew he should stand by his mate

and offer his support, but in truth he didn't know what to say. Although he could understand Stefan's argument and empathise with it, he could also appreciate Devlin's point of view.

What *would* his relationship with Stefan do to Stefan's son? To all intents and purposes, Aaron was a normal eighteen-year-old who was about to discover his father, the only father he had ever known, was leaving him and his mother to be with a man. Whatever way Stefan chose to sugar-coat the matter, that would still have to hurt. Cody wasn't sure he could do that to a young man.

"This is not acceptable," Devlin continued. "What sort of example are you setting to the pack? You have been married to Leah for over eighteen years. As far as the pack is concerned, Leah is your mate. You cannot suddenly come home with a male mate. Our pack is a traditional one. Family values are important."

Stefan raised his hand.

"Whoa. Wait just a minute. Think about what you just said, Devlin. As far as the pack is concerned Leah is my mate? Surely you are not stupid enough to think anyone in our pack believes Leah to be my mate."

Devlin looked confused. "Why wouldn't they believe that?"

Stefan spoke slowly as though he were addressing a child.

"Any wolf that's been within smelling distance of the two of us knows we are not mated," Stefan said calmly. "If we were, our scents would be combined."

Devlin appeared to realise his mistake and back-pedalled.

"That is beside the point. They may know she is not your true mate, but to all intents and purposes, when you married her, you acknowledged her as your mate. You are perceived as a family man. Our pack members relate to you. This is not good PR."

"PR?" Stefan shouted. "You think I give a shit about PR? As far as I am concerned this discussion is closed. Cody is my mate. He will return to New Mexico with me and he *will* be recognised as my mate, whether you or anyone else in the pack likes it or not!"

Devlin stepped back and straightened his shoulders.

"Then I'm afraid you leave me with no choice, Stefan. I was hoping to be able to talk some sense into you, but it appears I was mistaken. If you insist on going down this avenue,

then I have no other option but to challenge your authority as alpha. I believe you are not of sound mind and are no longer capable of leading our pack."

Cody sighed. He had known the challenge was coming, but he had hoped Stefan would be able to avoid it. He might not want to be involved in all of this, but he was right in the middle of it. The only thing left to do now was to show Stefan his support.

He walked around the door and slipped his arm through Stefan's. Devlin's eyes widened when he saw Cody but he didn't say anything or acknowledge Cody's presence in any other way.

"I accept your challenge," Stefan said, straightening his body so that he stood an inch taller.

Devlin nodded. He turned to leave but not before Cody noticed a satisfied smirk on his lips. "I have already informed the council this might be a possibility. You'll be hearing from us with details of the challenge."

"I'm sorry that it had to come to this," Stefan said.

Devlin ignored him and strode to his car. He got in and pulled away without so much as a backwards glance. Cody closed the door and wrapped his arms around his mate, pulling him tightly against his chest.

"This is all my fault," Cody whispered.

"What? How do you figure that?"

"If you'd never met me, you wouldn't be going through this right now. You wouldn't have to fight him."

"Now listen here," Stefan said, pulling back so he could look Cody in the eye. "Devlin has been looking for an excuse to challenge me for years. He would have found one eventually, with or without you in the picture. Don't blame yourself. Aside from having Aaron in my life, you are the best thing to ever happen to me. I mean it, Cody. This is not your fault."

Cody nodded and laid his head against Stefan's chest. "Just promise me you'll be careful. I don't want to lose you."

Stefan smiled and ran his hand over the top of Cody's head.

"That makes two of us."

Cody and Stefan went into the kitchen where Kelan had kept himself busy making breakfast. Cody yawned loudly and stretched his arms above his head as he waited for the coffee to brew.

"I'd tell you to go back to bed but you're going to have guests arriving in about, oh, fifteen minutes?" Kelan said, checking his watch.

"Huh?"

"Marianne just called – John is on his way over here with Leah and Aaron."

"What?" Cody glared at Stefan.

"Sorry," Stefan mumbled. "I didn't think they'd get here so soon."

"Shit! Why didn't you tell me? I've got to take a shower!" Cody sprinted from the room, his coffee already forgotten.

"What was all that about?" Stefan asked, pouring himself a coffee. "He doesn't need to make an effort on Leah's account."

Kelan grinned, knowing his little brother's somewhat vain streak. "You've got a lot to learn about your mate."

Cody showered quickly and brushed his teeth. He was just pulling on his underwear when he heard a knock on the front door.

"Shit!"

A moment later, Kelan knocked at the bedroom door and poked his head inside.

"Sounds like your guests have arrived," he said with a smirk on his face.

"Shit!" Cody repeated, fumbling with the buttons on his jeans. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. "Look at the state of my hair!"

Kelan entered the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Will you just relax?" he soothed. "You're going to be fine."

"That's easy for you to say. You're not the one about to meet your mate's wife and son for the first time."

"Are you sure you're okay with all of this?" Kelan asked.

"I don't know." Cody sighed. "This has all happened so fast, you know? But I don't know what choice I have. Stefan is my mate and I don't want to lose him, but I don't want to

get in the way of his relationship with his son either. I guess I'll have to see how Aaron and Leah take all of this before I make a firm decision."

Kelan nodded and got up from the bed.

"You really are a strong man, Cody. I don't know if I would take this as well as you have. I'm going to grab a shower myself. I'll let you get acquainted and I'll be down soon, okay?"

Cody nodded. "Thanks."

Cody finished getting ready and made his way downstairs. His hands were clammy and his heart was beating nineteen to the dozen when he finally walked into the living room.

"So, *you're* the wolf my father has mated with," a young man who must be Aaron said.

Aaron's eyes travelled the length of Cody's body and widened. His gaze rested on Cody's crotch and he licked his lips.

"Wow," he whispered, almost reverently.

Cody looked from Stefan to Aaron and then back again.

"Is he checking me out?"

Stefan frowned. "Don't mind Aaron. He's an eighteen-year-old teenager whose hormones are in overdrive. He checks everyone out."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "I don't check *everyone* out, Dad. Only the hot ones."

Cody opened his mouth and then closed it. What was he supposed to say to that?

"Cody, I'd like you to meet my son, Aaron. Aaron this is Cody, my mate."

Cody moved forward and extended his hand to Aaron.

"Uh, pleased to meet you, Aaron."

"Likewise," Aaron said, taking hold of Cody's hand and grinning salaciously.

"Leah is just using the bathroom to freshen up, I hope you don't mind," Stefan said.

"Of course not," Cody replied. He still couldn't get Aaron to release his hand.

Kelan chose that moment to walk into the kitchen.

"Wow!" Aaron exclaimed loudly, finally releasing Cody's hand. "Who are *you*?"

"Aaron, this is Kelan, my older brother. He's the alpha of our pack. Kelan, this is Aaron, Stefan's son."

"Pleased to meet you, Aaron," Kelan said, extending his hand.

Aaron's mouth hung open. He took hold of Kelan's hand and gasped.

"Does he have a boyfriend?" Aaron asked his father.

Stefan scowled. "It doesn't make any difference to you if he does or not."

Kelan's mouth curved up into a smirk. "I like him," he said, nodding in Aaron's direction.

Stefan rounded on Kelan. His eyes instantly shifted to their wolf form.

"He is my son!" Stefan boomed. "And he's only eighteen years old!"

"Hey," Kelan said, holding up his hands. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just meant he's a nice kid."

Stefan's shoulders relaxed with Kelan's clarification. "Sorry, I get over-protective sometimes."

"Over-protective?" Aaron repeated. "Gee, at this rate I'm never gonna get laid."

"Aaron! Enough!" Stefan shouted.

"Fine," Aaron said, his bottom lip protruding. He then sidled up next to Cody and whispered in his ear.

"Do you have any *younger* brothers, Cody?"

Cody couldn't help himself. He threw his head back and laughed. All the time he'd been worried about what effect his mating with Stefan would have on Stefan's son, and it appeared Aaron couldn't care less. All he seemed to be concerned about was what effect it would have on his own love life.

Cody couldn't help but like Aaron. He was reminded of himself when he was that age. Cody had never hidden the fact that he was gay. The thought hadn't even occurred to him. It seemed Aaron felt the same way.

"One younger brother," Cody whispered in an aside. "But I'm afraid he's already spoken for. Don't be in such a rush, Aaron. You'll find your mate eventually. Look at me and your father, we found each other."

"Oh God," Aaron groaned. "Please tell me I don't have to wait *that* long."

"Wait that long for what?" a beautiful woman asked, breezing into the room.

Cody turned to look at Leah. She was breathtaking and Cody felt an irrational pang of jealousy stir within him, even though he knew there was no real reason for it.

Leah was about an inch shorter than Cody, slim and elegant with waist-length, dark brown hair. As she walked the length of the room, Cody noticed a poise and gracefulness about her which complemented her good looks.

She stopped in front of Cody and studied him. After a moment, her face broke out into a warm and friendly smile. Cody was about to introduce himself when Leah threw her arms around him and pulled him against her chest.

"It's so good to finally meet you," Leah said, pulling back to study Cody some more. "I've been waiting years for this day. Stefan is too good a man to be lonely. I knew there was someone special out there for him."

Cody didn't know what to say. He hadn't expected open hostility from Leah, yet he was surprised by the level of her enthusiasm.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. It's good to meet you too."

"Your brother already paid us a visit this morning," Kelan said.

Leah gasped and moved to Stefan's side.

"Uncle Dev was here?" Aaron asked. "What did he want?"

"Nothing to worry about," Stefan reassured his son. "He heard about me meeting Cody is all."

"Aaron, why don't you let Kelan show you around the place?" Cody said, trying to save his mate from further interrogation.

"Would you like to go for a ride on one of the horses?" Kelan asked.

"I'm not a kid! I'm eighteen and a half!" Aaron fumed, straightening his back and eyeing Stefan defiantly. "I want to know what's going on."

"There is nothing going on," Stefan insisted. "Go on out with Kelan."

Aaron looked at Kelan and his father in turn, evidently torn between his new infatuation and wanting to know what was going on with his father. In the end, Aaron's hormones won out.

"Okay, fine," Aaron said, moving to stand next to Kelan. He looked the cowboy over from top to bottom and licked his lips. "Can I ride behind you, Kelan?"

"Aaron, behave!" Leah chastised.

Kelan grinned. "Come on, trouble. Let's go give Misty some exercise."

Aaron nodded and followed in Kelan's wake. When they were out of hearing distance, Leah turned to Stefan and frowned.

"Okay, tell me. What sort of trouble is my brother causing now?"

Stefan sighed. "You're not going to like it."

"When my brother is involved I never do."

"He's challenged my authority as alpha."

"Over my dead body." Leah's eyes were dark with rage. Cody could feel the fury pouring out of the beautiful woman's every pore. He could tell she would make a formidable opponent and vowed to never get on the wrong side of her.

Cody and Stefan spent a couple of minutes calming Leah down. She had become increasingly quiet since she'd heard about her brother's plan to challenge Stefan. It had clearly upset her.

"Why don't we go and see how Aaron is getting on with Kelan?" Cody asked. You can ride one of the horses too, if you like."

"Goodness. I haven't been on a horse since I was a young girl. I'm not sure I remember how to ride."

"It will all come back to you as soon as you get on."

Leah looked dubious. "Okay, well, maybe. I'll see how I feel when we get out there."

"Cool."

As they drew near to the barn entrance, Cody could hear Kelan and Aaron's voices coming from one of the stalls—he thought it might be Misty's. It was only when they were inside that Cody could actually make out what was being said.

"Wow, Kelan, it's so big," Aaron said in wonder.

"I know. Go ahead, you can touch."

"Really, can I?"

"Of course," Kelan said, "Stroke gently, Aaron. Oh yes, that's good."

"Okay, I'm just a bit nervous."

"Go on, steady, ah, that's it, just like that."

"Is this good?"

"Mmm, very good, Aaron. You're a natural. Keep doing that."

"Like this?"

"Perfect. Now, if you're good, you can ride m..."

Stefan pushed past Cody and threw open the stall door.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" he shouted, entering Misty's stall and getting up in Kelan's face.

Kelan, obviously confused, nevertheless held his ground.

"Uh, we were brushing Misty and then Aaron was going to ride him. I thought that would be okay with you."

Stefan took a step back. He looked at his son, who was standing with a brush in his hand raised near the beautiful stallion's neck.

"What the hell, Dad? *You* told me to come out here."

"Watch your language, Aaron," Leah chastised.

"Um, yes, no, this is good. Fine. Keep doing what you were doing," Stefan stuttered, scratching his head.

Cody couldn't contain his mirth. Aaron was looking at his father like he'd lost his mind. Stefan looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

It only took a moment for Kelan to clue in to what was going on.

"Hey, wait a minute. You didn't think...that I...that we... God damn it, Stefan, he's eighteen years old! What sort of man do you think I am?"

"Sorry, but when I heard... Look, I'm sorry, okay? Come on, let's go back inside the house," he said to Leah and Cody.

"Did he just think we were having sex?" Aaron asked, as Stefan stormed out of the stall.

"Something like that," Kelan answered.

Cody looked over his shoulder at Aaron as he followed Stefan outside. If he wasn't mistaken, he thought he saw Aaron mouth, "*I wish.*"

* * * *

It was nearly ten by the time John came to collect Leah and Aaron. Cody had invited them to stay at the ranch but Leah had refused, insisting they stay at the guesthouse as planned. Aaron did his best to persuade his mother to stay, probably so he could hang

around with Kelan some more, but after the third time Stefan caught his son ogling Kelan's ass, Stefan had insisted they stay at Marnie's, too.

"You okay?" Cody asked, wrapping his arms around Stefan's waist after they waved goodbye to Leah and Aaron.

"Yeah, I'm good. Thank you for today. You were wonderful with Leah and Aaron."

Cody shrugged, blushing. "It's okay. I liked them—a lot. Leah is an incredible woman, and Aaron?" Cody grinned. "He's a handful, but he's a good kid."

"Yeah, he is."

"Tired?" Cody asked, kissing him gently.

"Exhausted," Stefan said. "Boy, do I feel my age."

Cody chuckled. "Well, come on, old man, let's get you to bed. I wouldn't want you to miss out on your beauty sleep."

"Hey, I'm not that old!" Stefan grumbled, following in Cody's wake.

"Prove it," Cody said, dragging Stefan into his room and closing the door behind them.

Stefan pushed Cody up against the wall and took his mouth in an all-consuming kiss. Cody groaned when he felt Stefan's hard cock press up against his own. When they broke apart for air, Stefan reached down and palmed Cody's dick through his jeans.

"What did you call me again?" Stefan asked, rubbing his hand up and down Cody's length.

"Uh, stud?" Cody attempted around a gasp.

Stefan chuckled. "No, don't think that was it."

"Then I can't remember. Fuck me?" Cody panted.

"Don't you want to fuck me?" Stefan asked, unfastening the button on Cody's jeans.

Cody froze.

"Cody, you okay?" Stefan asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I don't, I can't... I mean, what did you just ask me?"

Stefan's face turned bright red and he averted his eyes from Cody's. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. His big man looked as embarrassed as all hell. Cody sat down next to Stefan and placed a comforting hand on his knee.

"I thought you might like to," Stefan said, scrubbing his hands over his face.

"I've never done that before," Cody replied. "I didn't think you'd want to. I mean, I just assumed because you're so big and manly that you'd always want to top."

"Manly!" Stefan exclaimed. "What exactly are you saying, Cody? Do you see yourself as less of a man because you like to be fucked? Because let me tell you something, you don't look like any woman I've ever met."

"No, it's not that, I..."

"Would you think of me as less of a man if I liked it?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that. I just didn't think." Cody hung his head and picked at a hangnail.

Stefan sighed. "Just forget it."

"No." Cody looked up to meet Stefan's eyes. "I don't want to forget it. I don't want there to be anything we can't talk about or that you can't ask me for. I want to do everything with you."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. So, uh, *do* you like it?"

Stefan shrugged. "Yeah. I've only done it a couple of times because, well, like you I guess most men assume I only top because of my size. And the couple of wolves I went with were probably too afraid to ask because I'm an alpha but, yeah, I like it just fine."

Cody nodded and dropped his gaze. He could do this. But what if he wasn't any good at it? What would Stefan think of him then? He couldn't stand for Stefan to think any less of him.

"Hey," Stefan said, putting his finger under Cody's chin and lifting it so that Cody looked at him once again. "You're thinking too hard. We don't have to do it if you don't want to. I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with, you hear me?"

"I don't want to disappoint you," Cody said, finally voicing his fears.

"You think I don't feel the same way?"

"You do?"

"Of course I do, Cody, it's natural not to want to let down the ones we love."

Cody's jaw practically hit his chest as he gaped at Stefan in awe.

"You love me?"

"Wow. I hadn't meant to say that." Stefan's face coloured but he held Cody's gaze. "Look. I know we only just met but it's going that way, sure. I've never felt this strongly about anyone before, and the more time I spend with you, the stronger my feelings become."

Cody lunged forward and attached his mouth to Stefan's. He pushed his tongue inside forcefully, duelling with Stefan's. Cody placed both hands on Stefan's chest and pushed the larger man backwards onto the bed. He climbed on top of Stefan and ground his pelvis against Stefan's while still attacking his mouth with a ferocity he hadn't known he possessed. When he finally pulled back, his eyes had shifted to their wolf form and his canine teeth had lengthened.

"I like this take-charge attitude of yours, I must say." Stefan's mouth curved into a smirk. "Does this mean you want to fuck me?"

"Hell yes." Cody grinned and his mouth found Stefan's once again.

It took him a matter of minutes to divest Stefan of his clothing. There was something extremely erotic about him being fully clothed and taking charge while Stefan was naked and laid out before him like an all-you-can-eat buffet. Cody licked his lips while he took his fill of Stefan's magnificent body.

He leant forward and captured Stefan's left nipple in his mouth. He flicked it with his tongue, watching it harden and delighting in the moan he elicited from his mate. When it was fully erect, he moved across Stefan's chest and gave the other nipple the same treatment. This time he bit down gently, causing Stefan to cry out. Cody felt Stefan's dick twitch against his stomach.

So, his mate liked a little pain with his pleasure, did he?

Stefan writhed on the bed while Cody trailed his tongue down Stefan's chest. He didn't stop until he reached Stefan's beautiful prick. Cody blew gently on the head then used his tongue to trace the vein down to Stefan's balls. Stefan groaned when Cody sucked one into his mouth while his finger traced a path along Stefan's perineum and gently teased his entrance.

Cody was in completely new territory now. Sure, he knew how to suck cock. But while some of the men he'd dated had enjoyed a little anal play, that was the extent of his experience. He willed himself to calm down as he followed the path his finger had taken with his tongue until he reached Stefan's eager hole.

"Oh God, lick me, Cody," Stefan ground out.

"You know, there's nothing worse than a pushy bottom."

Stefan groaned. "Don't push your... Oh God, yes, there."

Cody chuckled and continued to sweep his tongue over his mate's entrance, getting it nice and wet.

"There?" he murmured, before pushing his tongue inside.

"Cody!"

He replaced his tongue with his index finger. "I'll take that as a yes."

Cody began to move his finger in and out of Stefan's hot ass while he swept his tongue back along Stefan's balls and up to his dick. Stefan was panting beneath him, his head rolling around on the pillow. When Stefan's groans grew louder, Cody inserted another finger and at the same time engulfed Stefan's cock with his mouth.

"Jesus, Cody, yes!" Stefan shouted.

Cody's dick was painfully hard and in desperate need of some attention of its own. If Cody didn't get inside his mate soon, he was going to come all over the sheets.

"Stefan, hand me the lube."

"Huh?"

"Top drawer of the nightstand right next to you."

Stefan fumbled around for a moment, found the tube and tossed it onto the bed next to Cody.

"Hurry, Cody."

Cody was about to remind Stefan who was in charge here, but his dick was aching so badly, he had no choice but to hurry the fuck up. He popped open the tube and squeezed some of the cold gel into his hand. He met Stefan's gaze and held it as he coated his dick, stroking it up and down a few times to further tease.

Stefan watched the action intently, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. Cody groaned and squeezed a little more lube onto his fingers. He returned his fingers to Stefan's hole and slid a digit inside. At the same time, he stretched out over Stefan's huge frame and stole another kiss.

Cody pushed his tongue inside Stefan's mouth and added another finger, gliding them in and out to the same rhythm as his tongue.

"Now, Cody," Stefan panted against his mate's lips.

Cody leaned back to study Stefan's face. "You sure?"

"Fuck yeah. Do it."

Cody nodded and removed his fingers from Stefan's ass. God he wanted this, but he was so nervous he might screw it up. His hands began to tremble as they reached down to take hold of his dick.

"It's been a while, so go slow at first, okay?"

Cody nodded his agreement. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt his mate, but how the fuck was he supposed to go slowly? It was taking all his restraint to stop from coming before he even entered Stefan's ass, and now the man wanted him to go slow? Well, shit.

Stefan grabbed hold of his legs and lifted them, exposing his well-oiled hole. Cody lined up his cock and pushed, inching inside as slowly as he could manage. He couldn't take his eyes off the action as Stefan's muscles loosened to accommodate him. Cody gasped, stunned by the incredible sensation. Stefan's ass felt like a vice around his cock. It was hot, intense and absolutely wonderful. Was this what he'd been missing out on all these years?

"Oh God, it's so good," Cody groaned, staring down at Stefan's face in astonishment.

Stefan grinned at Cody. "I know, right?"

"I didn't think it would feel like this."

"Like what?"

"Amazing."

Stefan's chuckle was strained. "Cody, can you move now? You're killing me here."

"Shit, sorry," Cody said, realising his dick was buried only half way inside his mate's ass. He thrust forward one last time until he slid the rest of the way inside. They both groaned when Cody bottomed out.

Stefan met Cody's eye and nodded. "Fuck me."

Cody obeyed. He withdrew his dick and thrust it back inside in one smooth, fluid motion. He soon built up a rhythm, fucking Stefan with ease. All too soon, he felt the familiar tingle in the base of his spine that told him he was close. He took one hand off Stefan's thigh, grabbed hold of his mate's dick and began stroking it in time with his thrusts.

"Shit, Cody, close."

"Come with me," Cody commanded. He stared down into Stefan's face, and the love he found shining in his mate's eyes sent him over the edge. He screamed out his release, dimly aware of the ropes of hot, sticky seed jetting out of Stefan's dick, covering his hand and his mate's stomach. He was still juddering when instinct took over. Cody leant forward and sank his teeth into Stefan's neck, claiming him.

"Wow," Cody breathed when he finally pulled his teeth free of Stefan's neck.

Stefan chuckled and pulled Cody down against his chest.

"Like that did you? Huh? Cody?"

Stefan's chest rumbled with silent laughter when a soft snore broke free from Cody's lips. "I guess you did," he whispered.

Stefan closed his eyes and stroked his mate's back as he slept soundly atop him. He wished he was able to fall asleep as quickly but he knew that wasn't going to happen. He hadn't wanted to upset Cody earlier, but the thought of having to fight Devlin worried him.

Stefan was a powerful wolf, sure, but he wasn't a fighter. He couldn't even remember the last fight he'd been involved in. Maybe when he was a teenager? In the past he had always resolved conflicts without the need for aggression. He doubted this situation would be the same. Devlin wanted the alpha status leading Stefan's pack would give him, and there was no way he was going to back down until he accomplished his goal.

Stefan sighed and prepared himself for a long, sleepless night.

Chapter Seven

Cody yawned loudly, stretching his muscles and reaching behind him to find his mate. His hand came up empty. He blinked his eyes open and looked at the time on his alarm clock—it was nearly midday. Cody couldn't believe how late he'd slept in, but he'd definitely needed the rest.

"You're awake."

Cody looked across the room to where Stefan sat in the chair next to the window.

"What are you doing sitting over there?" Cody asked around another yawn.

"Just watching you sleep. I haven't been up long."

Stefan might not have been out of bed for very long but Cody was sure his mate had been awake all night. He'd awakened several times in the night himself and heard Stefan's long sighs.

"Was I snoring? I didn't drive you from the bed, did I?"

"No. Not loudly, anyway. It was cute."

Cody groaned. "I think it runs in the family—you should hear Luke. He sounds like a pig that's being strangled."

Stefan chuckled. "I can imagine."

"You should have woken me up. Just poke me in the ribs next time, okay?"

Stefan nodded. "Got it, although I *can* think of better ways to wake you up."

Cody liked the sound of that. His cock did too, judging by the way it was starting to stiffen under the sheets.

"Really? Like how?"

Stefan must have been able to smell Cody's arousal because his eyes darkened and he got up from his chair and crossed over to the bed.

"Well, for starters I could have kissed you," Stefan said, leaning forward and brushing his lips over Cody's.

Cody shivered, his cock getting harder still.

"And then?"

Stefan slid under the sheets behind Cody.

"Do you think maybe this would have woken you up?" he asked, running his hand over Cody's hip until it came into contact with his mate's now rock-hard cock. He stroked his hand over it a few times before grasping it firmly in his palm.

"Shit!" Cody squeaked. "Yeah, I think that would have done the job. I'd be wide awake by now."

Stefan chuckled and continued to work his hand up and down. He started slowly but increased his tempo when Cody started writhing on the bed, his cock jerking in his hand. He ran his thumb over the head, spreading the pre-cum he found there around the sensitive nerve endings.

"Shit, close," Cody groaned. "Gonna blow."

"Come."

The simple command was enough to send Cody flying into orbit. His cock exploded, coating Stefan's hand and the sheets above him. When his breathing returned to normal, Cody turned in the bed and kissed his mate passionately.

"Your turn," he said, getting onto his knees and moving his head to Stefan's groin.

"Cody! Stefan!" Kelan called from the bottom of the stairs. "You'd better get up. I just had a call from the council. They're on their way over here to issue Stefan formal notice of the challenge."

"Fuck," Cody and Stefan said in unison.

"Be right there!" Cody shouted.

"Guess this is going to have to wait, baby," Stefan said, getting out of bed.

"We've got time," Cody said, reaching out to pull Stefan back.

"No, come on, I've got to get my head in the game."

"Okay, I guess you're right."

Cody showered quickly, dressed and joined Kelan in the kitchen while Stefan got himself ready. "Hey," Cody said, pouring himself a coffee from the pot. "How is Luke is doing?"

"Good. I spoke to Mark this morning. He said Luke's much better and already kicking up a fuss about coming home."

"Sounds like Luke." Cody chuckled.

"Yeah, I bet he's giving the nurses hell. Doc said he should be out in another couple of days or so."

"That's good. It's not the same here without Luke."

"True enough. I'm on my way over there now, actually. Got to take some clean clothes for Mark—he refuses to come home and get some rest. Hasn't left Luke's side since he went in the damn place."

"It's good that he has Mark looking out for him. I'm gonna pop over to visit him after the council leaves. Did they say what time they'd get here?"

"Nope, just said they're on their way."

"Is it normal to bring council members to issue a challenge?" Cody asked. He had never had much to do with council politics and didn't know the correct procedure.

"Yeah. I don't know the ins and outs much myself, having never been challenged, but I think it's pretty much standard."

"Do you think there's a way Stefan can get out of fighting?"

"I don't think so, Cody. When an alpha is challenged, he has no choice but to accept. If he turned Devlin down, that would be seen as a sign of weakness. Devlin could then argue Stefan is not fit to lead and the council would have no choice but to remove him."

"Well that sucks."

Right on cue, there was a loud banging on the front door. Cody nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Crap!"

"You'd better call Stefan."

"No need. I'm here," Stefan said, crossing the length of the kitchen to stand at his mate's side.

Stefan placed a gentle kiss on Cody's cheek, then ran his thumb over the creases in his forehead.

"Will you quit worrying? Everything is going to be just fine."

Cody nodded but he didn't say anything. He knew any objection would be futile. Stefan had to fight. There was no way he could get out of it, and he didn't want to add another burden to his mate's shoulders.

"I know," Cody said with a confidence he didn't feel on the inside. "Just fine."

Stefan went to answer the door with Cody following closely behind.

"Give Luke my best," Cody called over his shoulder.

"Will do. See you both later. Good luck."

When Stefan pulled open the door, they were faced with three official-looking wolves, all of whom were smartly dressed in dark suits. Two of them looked to be about mid-thirties and the third was elderly. Cody would have put him in his late seventies. Devlin was bringing up the rear with a tall, dark-haired wolf who looked about ready to spit nails.

"Mr Drake?" the older wolf asked.

Stefan nodded and reached out his hand. "Please, call me Stefan."

"Stefan." The wolf took hold of Stefan's hand and shook it firmly. "My name is Bill Silvers. I'm the head of the wolf council in New Mexico. This here is Gabe Johnson," he said, gesturing to his left. "And this is Carter Luna. They are my deputies."

"Pleased to meet you all," Stefan said, shaking each hand in turn. "This here is Cody Morgan, my mate."

Cody shook each man's hand. He noticed Gabe's nose turn up in what could only be disgust, whereas Carter smiled brightly at him. Bill didn't so much as raise an eyebrow.

"Would you like to come inside?" Cody asked, moving aside from the door and gesturing into the house.

"Thank you," Bill said, following Cody inside. Gabe and Carter trailed closely behind the older man but Devlin and his friend remained on the porch. "That's very gracious of you, under the circumstances."

"You mean you coming into my home and accusing my mate of... What exactly are you accusing Stefan of?" Cody asked, frowning at Bill.

"We are not accusing Mr Drake of anything," Bill said. "Unfortunately a challenge has been issued against him. Under those circumstances, we have to ensure the law is adhered to."

"But Devlin has no grounds to challenge Stefan," Cody argued.

"I'm afraid the matter has already been investigated and the council feels Mr Anderson has just cause to challenge Mr Drake."

Cody gaped at the old man.

"Just cause," he sputtered. "How could he possibly have just cause? Stefan was pushed into marrying Devlin's sister by her father and his. They are not mates and have never been together in that way. So why the hell would you think Devlin has just cause to challenge Stefan just because he met his true mate?"

"We are well aware of the circumstances," Gabe responded derisively. "The fact remains that Stefan is pack leader. As alpha, he is a representative of this council and he is a married man. What impression would it give to other wolves if we simply let him continue his polygamous relationships?"

Cody could do nothing to prevent the growl that tore from his chest.

"Did you listen to a word I just said?" Cody fumed, inches away from Gabe's face. "Stefan doesn't have a relationship with Leah. They are married in name only!"

Bill got between Cody and Gabe, separating them before the argument escalated.

"Unfortunately that is beside the point, Mr Morgan. To all intents and purposes, Stefan and Leah are married with a son. Our council promotes family values, we cannot be seen to condone relationships conducted outside of the family unit."

"And if Stefan and Leah were to divorce?" Cody asked.

"I'm afraid that would make no difference whatsoever. In fact, a man who leaves his wife and child to be with another man would not be viewed favourably by the members of his pack or any other pack for that matter."

Cody sighed. He knew he was fighting a losing battle but he had to try. Stefan meant everything to him and he didn't want to see him get hurt.

"Thank you for trying, Cody," Stefan said, rubbing his hand down his mate's back to soothe him. "But this is something I have to do."

Cody nodded and leant back into his mate's touch.

"But," Stefan continued, turning to face the three council members, "when I win this fight, and I *will* win this fight, I am stepping down as alpha. You can take this as my resignation. I will not resign presently because I do not want a power-hungry, cold-hearted bastard like Devlin in charge of the pack. I will consult with my betas to find which of them would be interested in taking over after I leave."

Cody gasped. "Stefan, you can't. Why would you do this? Oh God, this is all my fault."

"Cody, listen to me. The council have just made it perfectly clear they are not happy about me remaining as pack leader whether I win the challenge or not. Even if that weren't the case, I never wanted the position in the first place. It was pushed on me when my brother died."

"I know, but you're being forced into making this decision now because of me."

"No, Cody. I've led the pack for ten years since my father died and led it well by all accounts. I'm tired, and besides, the position is not what it used to be. There is too much politics involved now. This is something I've been thinking about for a long time."

"If that's what you want then I'll support you in your decision," Cody said.

"Okay, Mr Drake," Bill said, stepping forward. "My colleagues and I have just discussed the matter and we accept your resignation. We are happy to wait for the outcome of the challenge and, if you win, we will await your proposal for the new alpha."

"So it's settled then. And what of the rules of the challenge?"

Carter, who had remained quiet up until this point, stepped forward.

"The challenge will take place at ten o' clock tonight," he said. "You are permitted to fight in either human or wolf form, but other than your claws, no weapons are to be used. You must fight alone and the fight ends as soon as either wolf has submitted to the other."

Stefan nodded solemnly. "Sounds fair."

"Where will the challenge take place?" Cody asked.

"Normally we ask only that the fight take place on neutral ground. However since neither Mr Drake nor Mr Anderson are from these parts, the council will choose the arena."

"Arena!" Cody exclaimed. "You make it sound like some sort of archaic, barbaric fight to the death!"

"Unfortunately on some occasions that's exactly what it is."

Cody's face paled. The idea of Stefan fighting was bad enough but the thought of him actually getting killed during this fight was unacceptable to Cody. He could not lose his mate so soon after he'd found him.

"This is where the fight will take place," Gabe said, handing Stefan a folded piece of paper. "Please arrive no later than nine forty-five."

"Thank you," Stefan said, taking the address. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to spend some time alone with my mate before the challenge."

"Uh, I'm afraid that won't be possible," Carter said, eying Stefan nervously.

"What do you mean, not possible?"

Gabe sneered, "Your *mate* comes with us."

"What?" Cody looked to Stefan for clarification.

"The hell he will!" Stefan shouted.

Bill stepped forward again to defuse the situation. If Cody wasn't mistaken, Bill was an omega wolf like himself, and a very powerful one at that. Cody felt calmer just being in the man's presence and he could see the tight set of Stefan's shoulders relax when the old man got near him as well.

"I'm afraid you have no say in the matter," Bill said. "That is one of the fundamental rules of any challenge. Surely you must realise that, as alpha, anything that belongs to you will become the property of your successor in the event of a lost fight. If Mr Anderson wins this challenge, he will also win your mate."

Cody's jaw dropped. He saw Stefan begin to shake, his skin rippling and stretching.

"Shit, he's shifting," Carter said. "Do something!"

Gabe pushed Carter out of way and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a syringe and stuck it into Stefan's arm. Stefan noticed a moment too late what was happening. He screamed in frustration before falling backwards and hitting the ground with a thud.

"What did you just give him?" Cody yelled, running to his mate's side.

Strong arms yanked him up and dragged him towards the door. He tried to pull free but Gabe was a much bigger wolf than he and he had a tight grasp on his arm.

"It was only a sedative," Bill said. "He'll sleep for about six hours then he'll be right as rain. You'll see him at the challenge tonight."

Cody's last thought as he was being dragged from the house was at least Stefan would get some sleep before the challenge after all.

Chapter Eight

Cody spent the rest of the day sitting in the windowless room of an old warehouse on the edge of town. He'd tried several times to get out but the door to the room was locked and there was someone outside, standing guard. He could smell them. With nothing to keep his mind occupied, he'd spent his time worrying about Stefan.

He prayed Stefan would be okay after the sedative Gabe had given him. He couldn't believe they'd just left him lying on the floor, unconscious. Cody knew wolves had fast healing abilities but that was beside the point. He hated that he couldn't do anything to help his mate.

Stefan would be pissed off when he woke up. Cody would bet his life on it. He only hoped his mate wouldn't do anything stupid. Stefan needed to be firing on all cylinders for the challenge.

Cody straightened in his chair when he heard voices talking quietly outside his room. His hearing was good but the conversation was so quiet Cody struggled to make out what was being said.

"I think his name is Aaron."

"And the woman?"

"Don't know but she's a fine piece of ass, eh?"

Cody gasped. The council must have collected Leah and Aaron too. Were they being held in the same place he was? Cody knew Stefan had wanted to protect his son and not tell him about the challenge, but it was too late for that now, since the decision had been taken out of his hands.

Cody tried to swallow down his anger. Leah was Devlin's sister and Aaron was his nephew. Didn't he care at all about his own flesh and blood? Cody jumped up when he heard the door to his room being unlocked. He shuddered when an angry-looking Gabe strode into the room.

"Time to go," Gabe said.

"Go where?"

"The challenge, of course, or don't you care who wins?"

Cody ignored Gabe's jibe. It was clear the man got off on baiting him. So it was nearing the time of the challenge. Cody's heart sank. Part of him didn't want to watch his mate fight but he had to be there to lend Stefan his support. He nodded and followed the gruff wolf from the room.

Gabe led Cody to the back of the old warehouse and outside into the yard. Bill and Carter were already there. Devlin stood to the side with the wolf Cody had seen him with at the ranch. There was no sign of Stefan. Gabe motioned to Bill then went back inside the warehouse.

"Ah, Mr Morgan," Bill said, walking over to greet Cody. "I'm glad you decided to join us."

Cody snorted. What was he supposed to say to that? He'd been held captive for the entire day. Besides, Stefan was his mate. Where the hell else would he be?

"Where is Stefan?" Cody asked, looking around the yard, trying to catch a glimpse of his mate.

"Mr Drake hasn't arrived yet and it's already nine forty-five. He has precisely fifteen minutes to get here, or he will forfeit the challenge and Mr Anderson will be declared the winner."

"He'll be here."

"I'm sure you're right," Bill said.

"Cody!"

Cody span around to see Leah and Aaron being escorted out of the warehouse. He left Bill and rushed to their side.

"Cody, what's going on? Where's Dad?" Aaron asked, scanning over the faces in the small gathering.

Cody looked to Leah for confirmation.

"They kept us separated," Leah said. "I haven't had the chance to tell him."

"Tell me what?" Aaron asked, looking from his mother to Cody. "And what is Uncle Dev doing here? What's going on?"

"Aaron, my brother has challenged your father's position as alpha."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"It seems your uncle isn't happy about your father's relationship with me," Cody supplied.

Aaron frowned. "But why? You're mates."

"I don't know why," Cody answered. "Maybe he doesn't like the fact that I'm a man."

Aaron shook his head. "Nah, it can't be that. I've seen the way he looks at Tom."

"Who's Tom?"

"His *friend*," Leah said, nodding her head at the man standing next to her brother.

Cody's jaw practically hit the floor.

"Are you serious? You mean he's been making all this fuss about family values and keeping up appearances for the sake of the pack, and all the while he's been boning *Tom*?"

Aaron chuckled.

"Sorry," Cody apologised when Leah looked at him sternly.

"I don't think it's got anything to do with you," Aaron said. "Devlin just wants to be pack leader. I think he's just using you as an excuse."

Cody looked at Aaron in surprise. Smart kid.

"Stefan?" Leah asked.

Cody shook his head. "He isn't here yet."

"But it's nearly ten. He's only got another ten minutes to get here."

"I know. He'll be here," Cody said again.

He had to believe it was true. If Stefan didn't turn up, Devlin would win the rights to Stefan's alpha position by default, and that was not acceptable. By pack law, Cody would then belong to Devlin, and Cody would see that happen over his dead body.

"Wait here," Cody said, an idea forming in his head.

Cody walked over to talk to Bill, who was standing in the corner of the yard with Carter and Gabe.

"Your mate's cutting it fine," Gabe said.

"Stefan would be here if he could. Maybe he hasn't woken up from the sedative you gave him, did you consider that?"

"Impossible. He would have woken from that hours ago," Gabe said.

"Are you sure? Because *I'm* sure of Stefan and I know nothing would stop him from being here if he was able. Maybe you gave him too high a dosage?"

"Mr Morgan, I can assure you the amount of sedative we carry is double-checked by two wolves from the council. Both Gabe and Carter checked the dosage before we left this morning."

Cody looked at Carter. The man's gaze shifted nervously before falling to rest on the ground.

"Enough," Gabe said. "Stefan has ten more minutes to get here. If he doesn't arrive, he will lose the challenge by default."

"Unless someone fights on his behalf," Cody said.

"Stefan is pack leader," Gabe said, looking at Cody as though he was stupid. "When an alpha is issued a challenge, no one is permitted to fight on his behalf."

"Uh, that's not entirely true," Carter said, looking at Gabe nervously. "In the event that an alpha is unable to fight in a challenge, by pack law his *mate* is permitted to fight on his behalf."

Gabe swung around to look at Bill questioningly.

"That's ridiculous! We don't know that Stefan is unable to fight. It's more likely he was too afraid to fight," he ranted.

"We don't know that either," Bill said. "And technically, Carter is correct, although in this case I hardly see how it matters. Cody is not strong enough to fight Devlin. It would be suicide."

Gabe appeared to like that idea very much. He turned to Cody and nodded.

"If Stefan doesn't show, *you're* fighting in his place."

Gabe left to tell Devlin the news. Cody frowned as he watched the surly werewolf walk away. He couldn't understand what Gabe had against him and Stefan. It couldn't just be that they were gay, because he didn't seem to have a problem with Devlin. If anything, they looked to be the best of friends, judging by the way they were laughing and joking together.

Gabe had seemed genuinely pleased by the idea that Cody, a much smaller and weaker wolf, would be fighting on Stefan's behalf. The question was, what did Gabe have to gain by Devlin winning the challenge?

The more Cody thought about it, the more he believed that Gabe was the reason Stefan hadn't showed up. Just how much sedative had the man given Stefan?

"You don't have to do this," Carter said.

"Yes, I do."

"But you can't beat Devlin. He's a stronger wolf than you."

"We'll just have to wait and see."

After countless beatings as a teenager for being gay, Cody had spent the years since training in martial arts. He had sworn to himself to never let it happen again. It had helped him out of a few scrapes back in New York, although he doubted it would help him against a wolf as powerful as Devlin.

Still, this was something Cody had to do. He knew how strongly Stefan felt about Devlin taking over the pack. Cody couldn't let that happen. If there was something he could do to avoid it, then he had to try.

"I hope you know what you're getting yourself into," Bill said, checking his watch once again. "Devlin is a very powerful wolf."

"I don't doubt that," Cody said. "But I'd do anything for my mate."

"Even die?" Carter asked, staring into Cody's eyes as though he could see into his very soul.

Cody stared back, unblinking. "Even die."

"Five minutes," Bill said.

Cody rejoined Leah and Aaron.

"What's happening?" Aaron asked. "Where's Dad?"

"It doesn't look like Stefan is going to make it, Aaron."

"Why not? Where is he?"

Cody sighed. "When the council came to see us this afternoon, Gabe shot Stefan with a sedative. He said it would wear off in six hours, but I guess it didn't."

"Is Dad going to be okay?"

"I'm sure your dad's going to be fine, Aaron," Cody's eyes flickered to Leah's. She gave the briefest of nods. Stefan had to be okay, Cody didn't know what he would do without his mate.

"But what does that mean? What's going happen now? Will Dev become alpha?"

Cody straightened his shoulders. "Not if I can help it. I'm going to fight on Stefan's behalf."

Leah gasped. "But you can't! Devlin will kill you."

"I can't *not*," Cody replied. "Stefan doesn't want Devlin running the pack, so I'm going to do everything in my power to see that he doesn't."

"Stefan wouldn't want this, Cody. I've known him a long time. I know the pack means a lot to him, but do you have any idea how long he's been looking for you? I'm sure you mean more to him."

Cody shrugged. "Maybe, but I can't just sit back and watch him lose everything he's worked so hard for all these years. Besides, if Devlin won then I would become his property, too, and I don't intend on becoming any man's property, least of all his."

Leah looked over at her brother and sighed.

"He wasn't always like this, you know. When we were growing up, Dev would always stick up for me against our father regardless of what it cost him. But since Pop died, he's changed. Now I barely recognise him at all. He's become more greedy and power-hungry than our father ever was. Sometimes I'm ashamed to call him my brother."

"Do you think he can change?"

Leah shook her head sadly. "I wish he could, but I don't think there's any chance. He's too far gone for that. You be careful, okay? If it gets bad, you must submit."

"What? No! You can't let him do this, Mom," Aaron pleaded with his mother.

Leah pulled Aaron against her chest. "It'll be okay, sweetie, you'll see."

"It's time!" Bill called across the yard. "Can I see the challengers, please?"

"Leah, if anything... I mean, if I..." Cody sighed. "Can you tell Stefan I love him?"

Leah nodded, tears in her eyes. "It won't come to that, Cody. You can tell him yourself when you get home."

Cody nodded. "Thanks. And thank you for all your support. Not every woman would have accepted my relationship with Stefan so readily."

Leah grinned. "I'm not every woman."

Cody hugged Leah and Aaron in turn, then joined Bill and Devlin in the middle of the yard. He took a few calming breaths as he walked, trying to slow his heart rate before he approached Devlin. Wolves could smell fear and feed off it. Devlin would eat him for breakfast if he knew how terrified Cody was on the inside, but Cody refused to let it show. He had to win this fight for Stefan—nothing else mattered.

"Do you accept the challenge on Mr Drake's behalf?" Bill asked.

"I do."

Bill frowned but nodded. "Mr Anderson, are you happy for Mr Drake's mate to accept the challenge?"

"Yes," Devlin said, grinning from ear to ear. "I couldn't have planned this better if I tried."

"Very well. Let it be known that I'm not happy about this situation. Cody is an omega and a much smaller wolf than you. Omegas are rare and should be cherished, but I have to abide by pack law. If Cody readily accepts this challenge then I have no choice but to allow it.

"Before you begin you must hear the rules of the challenge once again. If any of the rules are broken then I will end the fight and the rule breaker will be declared the loser. Do you both understand?"

"Yes," Cody said.

Devlin nodded, his eyes never leaving Cody's.

"Do you understand, Mr Anderson?" Bill asked again.

"I understand," Devlin said, looking at Bill contemptuously.

"Very well. Carter!" Bill shouted over his shoulder. "Can you join us, please, and remind these gentlemen of the rules of the challenge?"

Cody wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Bill's eyes land on Devlin when he said the word '*gentlemen*'. He definitely heard the emphasis on the word. He smiled to himself. It seemed as though Bill didn't hold Devlin in much regard. Cody could only hope that if he were to lose this fight, the council would think twice about allowing Devlin to take over as pack leader.

Carter joined them and began going over the rules. Nothing had changed. They could fight in either wolf or human form and were not permitted weapons of any kind, other than their claws. They had to fight alone.

"The challenge will end as soon as one wolf submits to the other," Carter finished.

Devlin snorted, loudly. Well, that was one thing they agreed on at least. He would rather be dead than submit to Devlin. What sort of life could he expect to lead anyway if he was always under the man's power?

"Good luck," Carter said before leaving. As he walked off, he caught Cody's eye and nodded.

Bill joined Carter and Gabe at the side of the yard. Cody glanced over at Leah and Aaron. Leah nodded at him and mouthed, "*Good luck.*" Aaron looked terrified and was clinging to his mother's side. Cody wished he didn't have to witness this. It was too much for someone his age to have to deal with. It was a big thing for anyone to deal with, period.

"Let the challenge begin!" Bill shouted.

Cody whipped his head around to face Devlin. The man was grinning incessantly.

"This is too easy," he said.

Cody ignored him and took up a fighting stance. He tried to call on every martial art lesson he had ever taken. He had to remain calm and centre himself. He might be small, certainly when compared to Devlin, but that *could* work in his favour. He would be lighter on his feet and much faster.

Devlin struck out. Cody jumped back at the last minute, missing his fist by mere inches. Devlin growled and lunged for him again. Cody was able to sidestep him, but this only served to infuriate Devlin more, and the third time he hit out Cody wasn't as lucky. Devlin's fist made contact with Cody's jaw and pain ripped through him, blurring his vision for a fraction of a second.

"Too easy," Devlin said again.

Cody was enraged. His only thought was that this could be Stefan Devlin was hurting. This man wanted nothing more than to see his mate suffer and to take what was his. He struck out with a blow of his own. His fist came into contact with Devlin's nose and Cody heard the sickening sound of snapping bone.

Devlin fell backwards, his eyes filled with surprise. Blood fell from his nose and trickled down his face to land on his striped shirt. He lifted his hand up to wipe it away.

"You're going to pay for that," he said, spitting blood onto the dusty floor.

Devlin charged. The action was so fast it caught Cody off guard and he fell backwards onto the ground with Devlin on top of him. Devlin balled his hand into a fist and drew his arm back, ready to strike, but Cody realised what he was about to do and shoved Devlin off him before his fist could meet its target.

Devlin grabbed hold of Cody and hit him in the stomach. The blow left him gasping for breath and, before he could recover from it, Devlin began to rain down a succession of

punches, each harder than the one before. Cody was able to block most of the strikes and get in a few of his own, but Devlin's eyes were wild, his face devoid of all sense and reason.

"Submit!" Devlin shouted. "We can end this right now."

"Never," Cody replied. He would see this through to the end.

Cody managed to get to his feet but Devlin was beside him in an instant, his claws extended. Before he was able to move away, Devlin sliced across Cody's chest, cutting deep. The pain was intense. Blood started seeping from the wound, soaking his shirt. Cody was dimly aware of Aaron shouting across the yard, begging Devlin to stop.

"Submit!" Devlin said.

Cody didn't get the chance to reply. Devlin struck out again with his claws and sliced the side of Cody's face. Cody stumbled backwards and fell to the floor. He wasn't sure how much more he would be able to take. Every part of his body ached and blood was pouring from his face and chest.

Devlin advanced on him. He grabbed the collar of Cody's shirt and drew his arm back, ready to strike.

"Stop!"

Cody turned to the voice and saw Stefan racing into the yard.

"Stop! You have to stop this," he was shouting to the council officials observing the fight. "He's going to kill him. Stop this at once."

Devlin released Cody's shirt and pushed him backwards. He sneered.

"Look who decided to drop by," he said.

Cody felt his spirits lift at once. Just seeing his mate had a profound effect on his state of mind. The three council members positioned themselves between Cody and Stefan.

"Mr Drake," Bill said. "The challenge cannot be stopped until either wolf has submitted to the other. As you were not present for the challenge, your mate accepted it on your behalf."

"I was not *present* because I was given enough sedative to knock out an elephant!" Stefan raged.

"You were given a standard dose," Bill argued. "You would have been asleep for no longer than six hours."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"This is ridiculous," Gabe said. "The challenge cannot be stopped. If your mate wants the fight to end, then he must submit."

Cody stood and walked to his mate's side. When he looked at Carter, the man was shuffling from foot to foot, eyes to the ground. He looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to be anywhere other than where he was.

"Why don't you ask Carter how much sedative was in that syringe?" Cody asked Bill.

"I..." Carter's gaze shifted between Cody and Gabe.

"Is there something you wish to tell me?" Bill asked.

Carter looked at Gabe, then shook his head. Cody could smell the fear oozing out of Carter from where he stood.

"No," he said at last.

Bill walked to Carter's side and placed a hand on his arm. Carter's whole body was trembling. Cody knew the instant Bill began to use his omega power. He could feel it rush through him even from several feet away.

"Look at me," Bill commanded.

Carter slowly raised his head and met Bill's eyes.

"I'm going to ask you again, and I want you to tell me the truth. What are you not telling me, Carter? How much sedative was given to Mr Drake?"

"It's not my fault!" Carter blurted. "Gabe made me do it!"

Gabe's eyes grew dark with fury. "He's lying."

"What did he make you do?" Bill asked, his calm voice soothing.

"I saw him put double the amount of sedative in the syringe he used on Stefan," Carter confessed. "When he realised I was going to say something, he threatened my family. I had no choice, Bill. Please believe me. I had to protect them."

"I may understand your reasons, but you have still committed a crime in the eyes of the council. It cannot go unpunished."

Carter nodded, "I know and I'm sorry."

Bill rounded on Gabe. "Why did you do it?"

"He doesn't have proof I did anything," Gabe said. "It's his word against mine."

Carter sighed. "Be that as it may, you are no fool, Gabe. You know we have wolves working for the council that can tell if you are lying, and they are *more* than capable of

getting the truth from you. The council will be more lenient on you if you admit the truth now."

Gabe's face paled. The realisation of what he'd done and the trouble he now faced showed clearly on his face.

"He put me up to it," Gabe said, pointing at Devlin.

"Shut up, you idiot!" Devlin shouted. "Don't say another word."

"He paid me to make sure Stefan wouldn't make it to the challenge," Gabe said. Now that he had started his confession it came out thick and fast. "He told me he had connections on the council and he'd see to it I got promoted."

"And you believed him?"

"It's true," Leah said, entering the conversation for the first time. "I know of a handful of council members my brother has done business with. I've met them personally. They are high up in the council ranks and they are quite loyal to my brother."

"You bitch!" Devlin shouted.

"I'm sorry," Leah said. "But you brought this on yourself."

Devlin rounded on his sister, his hands wrapping around her throat, choking her. Cody didn't have time to think before he reacted. He threw his fist back and punched, the blow hitting Devlin between the eyes. Devlin stumbled backwards, his hands falling from Leah's neck.

Instantly, his eyes shifted to their wolf form and his canine teeth lengthened. His hands shifted and razor sharp claws emerged from the tips of his fingers. He growled and charged.

Cody braced himself for the impact, but it never came. Stefan threw himself in front of Cody and lashed out with his own claws as Devlin reached him, slashing open the angry wolf's throat. Devlin's eyes went wide before he fell backwards to the ground. Cody rushed to Stefan's side and threw his arms around his mate.

"Oh God," Cody said. "Is he...?"

Bill knelt down and felt for a pulse in Devlin's neck.

"He's alive," he said. "Carter, call council headquarters and get them to send a healer."

Carter nodded and ran into the empty warehouse. Bill sighed.

"Under the circumstances, the challenge is to be called off. Stefan, you are to remain alpha until such time as you provide the council with the name of a suitable candidate."

"Very well," Stefan replied.

"Gabe. Get him inside," Bill ordered, nodding down at Devlin.

Gabe was quick to do as he was told. He lifted the unconscious wolf and carried him inside the warehouse with Bill following in his wake.

"Mom!" Aaron shouted, running to Leah's side. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine, darling," Leah said, embracing her son. Cody noticed a dark bruise already appearing on her neck.

"I can't believe it's finally over," Cody said, wrapping his arms around Stefan's waist.

Stefan nodded. "It's up to the council to deal with Devlin now. I'm sure he won't get away with what he's done. Either way, he's banished from the pack. Come on, let's get you home. I want those wounds on your chest and face looked at."

Cody nodded and let Stefan lead him out of the yard, Leah and Aaron following closely behind. It had been a long day. One Cody hoped to never see the likes of again.

Chapter Nine

"How you feeling?" Stefan asked as he stretched out on the sofa and draped an arm around Cody's shoulders.

"Better. I think the rest I got last night did me a world of good, and with Luke coming home tomorrow, I think things can finally start to get back to normal around here."

"How is your brother?"

"Good. When I went to see him today, he was almost back to his old self. He seemed nervous, though, probably because Ethan's still on the loose."

"Don't worry. He can't hide forever. Sooner or later, he's gonna make a mistake and then we'll find him."

"I hope you're right." Cody noticed the frown on his mate's face. "What's wrong?"

"Your scars still haven't healed. You know, if you shifted they would heal completely."

"I know. Maybe we could go out for a run?" Cody suggested. He'd actually been itching to shift into his wolf form ever since he'd arrived home from New York.

"Sounds good to me," Stefan said. "Is there someplace around here we can hunt?"

"Yeah, I know the perfect spot. Luke, Kelan and I used to go there when we were cubs."

Cody led Stefan into the kitchen and threw open the back door. They quickly divested themselves of their clothing and knelt down on all fours. Cody felt his skin prickle as it stretched to accommodate his lengthened bones and increased tendons and muscles.

When he changed often, the process was easy and pain-free, but since it had been a while since he had last shifted, the act was uncomfortable. It took him a moment to get used to the sensation. Soon the shift was over and he was shaking out his fur and staring into the eyes of a very large, tawny wolf.

Cody inched forward, sniffing the stranger. He had always been an inquisitive wolf, never aggressive or dominant like his older brother – probably because he was an omega.

The other wolf stayed where he was, eyeing Cody suspiciously. Cody moved slowly and kept his eyes to the ground, being careful not to provoke this much larger wolf. If he thought Cody was challenging him, he would attack.

Cody used his omega power to calm the dominant wolf. Immediately he relaxed his shoulders and took a step in Cody's direction. He sniffed the air, scenting Cody, then his eyes widened and he leapt. Cody braced himself for an attack, but when the wolf careened into him, he began licking his muzzle and nipping his neck.

When the disorientation of the shift wore off and Cody got a good smell of the wolf, he realised who he was. *Stefan*. He danced around the much larger wolf, teasing and playing. After their wolves had got to know each other, Cody led Stefan out into the yard and set off on the same route he had taken hundreds of times before with his brothers.

Stefan scented the air as he trotted alongside Cody. There didn't appear to be any other wolves in the area, but Stefan kept vigilant, obviously feeling it was his job to protect his mate.

Cody led Stefan to a quiet spot by the river that he and his brothers had visited often. They ran for a while, playing happily and chasing each other around until Stefan caught the scent of a rabbit and they began to hunt.

Cody let his predatory wolf senses take over. Every sight and sound was amplified. Cody could detect sounds coming from the forest he never would have heard in his human form. They stalked the rabbit until they caught the tasty treat and shared it. When they had both eaten their fill, they curled up together on the banks of the river and napped.

It was hours later when Cody awoke in human form, naked, with a hard body holding him from behind. Stefan's stiff cock was pressed up against Cody's ass. He turned in his mate's arms.

"Your scar is gone," Stefan said, tracing a finger down Cody's cheek.

"Good. I don't want any reminders of what happened with Devlin."

"When I ran into the yard and saw you bleeding, I felt sick to my stomach," Stefan said. "I was terrified I was going to lose you."

"You can't get rid of me that easily," Cody joked.

Stefan smiled, his eyes falling from Cody's cheek to his mouth. He licked his lips and leant forward, brushing his lips against Cody's. Cody kissed back, his mouth opening to allow Stefan's tongue entrance.

The kiss built in intensity until Cody was panting, grinding his hips against Stefan's in a silent plea for release.

"No lube," Cody groaned when he eventually pulled back from the kiss. He was already aching and desperate for release and Stefan's cock rubbing against his own was driving him insane.

"Don't need it for what I have in mind," Stefan said, leaning forward and nipping the skin on Cody's neck.

Cody shivered. "And what would that be?"

"Wanna taste you."

Stefan reached his hand down and began stroking Cody's cock. Cody groaned and pushed into his mate's hand, demanding more.

"Get up here," Stefan commanded. "Feed me your cock."

Cody didn't hesitate. He climbed up his mate's body and holding his dick out, he pushed it into Stefan's warm and welcoming mouth. Cody cried out when Stefan sucked it deeper into his mouth, his tongue teasing the sensitive nerve endings underneath.

"Shit, wait," Cody said, pulling his dick free.

If he wasn't careful, he was going to shoot before Stefan even got started. As much as he was enjoying the attention to his own dick, what he really wanted was his own mouth wrapped around Stefan's cock.

"What for?"

Cody didn't answer, deciding actions spoke louder than words. He climbed off Stefan's chest and turned his body around so that he was lying with his face near Stefan's groin. He snaked his tongue out and swiped it over the head of his mate's dick, before taking the length in his mouth and sucking on it hard.

Stefan grunted a second before Cody felt his dick enveloped once more in the silky depths of his mate's mouth. God, he could do this for a lifetime and he hoped they would. Stefan's mouth felt perfect wrapped around his cock. Cody couldn't make his mind up what he enjoyed more, the giving or the receiving, then decided it didn't matter. It was all good.

They moved in and out of one another's mouths with ease. All too soon, Cody could feel his climax building and was powerless to prevent it. He backed off Stefan's dick and shouted out his release as with spurt after spurt he emptied his seed into his mate's mouth.

Cody's climax triggered Stefan's own. He barely had time to recover from his own release before he felt Stefan's cock jerk in his mouth and swell. He sucked harder and was rewarded with a mouth full of his mate's essence. Cody made sure he had captured every last drop of Stefan's seed and cleaned his dick with his tongue before falling back to the ground to allow himself time to recover.

Cody wasn't sure how long they stayed by the river bank locked in each other's arms but the sun was making an appearance over the horizon by the time they decided to move and head back to the ranch.

* * * *

"Thank you," Leah said, hugging Cody close to her chest. "You saved my life. I suppose I was naïve, but I never thought Devlin would hurt me."

"I'm sorry that he did. It must be terrible for your own brother to turn on you like that. I can't even begin to imagine what you're feeling. But what I did was nothing. Anyone would have done the same thing under the circumstances."

Leah shook her head. "Not anyone, Cody. You're brave and you have a good heart. I'm so happy Stefan found you. He's a very lucky man."

"I'm the lucky one," Cody said.

"I'm just sorry it all happened in the first place and that you were dragged into it. I never thought my brother would go this far to get what he wants."

"Greed is a terrible thing. It can eat people up, make them do things they wouldn't normally."

"I think Devlin was always capable of bad things. I just never saw it before. Sometimes it's easy to ignore the faults of the people you are closest to."

"What's going to happen to him now?"

"I spoke to Bill this morning. Devlin is healing from the wound on his neck but he's being held while they look into his dealings with the council. It appears they have a lot of corrupt members who were working with him, so they're holding an investigation. It could take some time."

"Wow. I didn't realise things ran that deep."

Leah nodded. "Devlin has been building his contacts for years. He's made a lot of money, too. Bill said most of it was not earned legally."

"What about Carter and Gabe?"

"Gabe has been dismissed from the council. Bill said under the circumstances, Carter has been allowed to remain. I don't think he can be blamed for anything. He only did what he did to protect his family. I think they'll be keeping a close eye on him from now on, though."

"Poor guy," Cody said. "I can't say for sure if I would have done anything differently. I'd like to think I would have been honest and come clean to the council, but it's difficult to know what you would do unless you're put in a situation like that."

Leah smiled sadly. "I know what you mean. I would have done anything to protect my mate."

"You still miss him?" Cody asked.

"Every day."

"Hey, you all set?" Stefan asked, carrying Leah's bags to the pickup. Aaron followed his father out of the guest house with more bags.

"Yep. Don't be a stranger." Leah hugged Cody one more time before she got into the truck.

"I won't. I'll see you soon anyway. I just have to tie up some loose ends here and in New York, then I'll be on my way to New Mexico with Stefan. At least until he decides what to do about the alpha position of the pack."

"For the pack's sake, I hope he decides to stay on. Stefan is a good leader, and unless his brother John decides to take over, I think we'll be hard pressed to find someone suitable."

"Is John interested in the position?" Cody asked.

"He never was before," Stefan said. "But now that he's mated and settled, I think he might be coming around to the idea."

"I'm sure it will all work out for the best," Leah said.

"Actually I've already decided what I'm going to do about the pack."

"You have?" Cody asked.

"Yeah. I'm definitely going to quit. I need to speak to John, but I think he'll be happy to take over. What I need to tell you concerns all of us," Stefan said.

Leah looked intrigued. "What is it?"

"Well, seems to me if Cody moves to New Mexico, Kelan would be left without an omega, and that's not a good position to be in."

"What are you suggesting?" Leah asked.

"I thought it would be a good idea for us to live here. I was hoping you and Aaron would consider moving here too," Stefan said.

"Really? You want to move here?" Cody asked.

"Well, you wouldn't want to leave your brother without an omega, would you?"

Cody threw his arms around Stefan's waist and hugged him tightly.

"Thank you, Stefan. That means a lot to me."

"Welcome."

Cody turned to Leah. "What do you think?"

"I wouldn't want to be in the way," Leah said.

"Are you kidding?" Cody said. "You wouldn't be. I'd love to have you and Aaron here. It would be great to get to know you better."

"Then I think it's a great idea," Leah said.

"Aaron?" Stefan asked. "What do you think?"

"Would I get to have a horse?"

Stefan smiled at his son. "I can't see any problem with that, as long as you look after him, of course."

"Cool!" Aaron said. "Count me in."

Stefan chuckled. "Well, that settles it, then. Come on, we'd better get a move on or you'll miss your flight."

"It was good to meet you, Cody," Aaron said, taking a seat next to his mother.

"You too," Cody said. "Look after your mom, okay?"

"I will. Will you say goodbye to Kelan for me?"

Cody grinned. It appeared his older brother had left quite an impression on the young man. He'd be sure to tease Kelan about it later.

"Of course I will. You'll see him soon anyway if you're moving here."

Aaron's eyes widened with excitement.

"Don't encourage him," Stefan said. "He hasn't stopped talking about Kelan all morning, and I'm trying to keep him away from men until he's at least thirty."

Cody chuckled when he saw the look of horror on Aaron's face.

"He can't help it if the Morgan brothers are irresistible," Cody said.

"I don't know about the *other* Morgan brothers," Stefan said, catching Cody around the waist and planting a sloppy kiss on his lips. "But this one is definitely irresistible – to me."

About the Author

Lavinia discovered reading at an early age and could always be found with her nose in a book. She loved getting lost in a fantasy world even then. When her parents bought her a typewriter for Christmas at age eleven, her fate was sealed. She spent hours dreaming up characters and creating stories. Not a lot has changed. Now when she is not writing you can find her enjoying a new release e-book.

Lavinia has lived all over the UK but currently resides in London, England. She has travelled extensively to places including Africa, Asia, Australia, America and most of Europe. Although some of her books are set in Texas she has never visited the state but plans to spend time there in the near future.

She is an avid reader and her favourite authors include J L Langley, Carol Lynne, Chris Owen and Andrew Grey. Lavinia particularly loves supernatural fiction and her favourite authors in this genre include Kelly Armstrong, Keri Arthur and Charlaine Harris.

Although Lavinia is a huge fan of the romance genre, she will admit to reading anything and everything. She loves horror, a good thriller and if a book has the capacity to make her cry, well, all the better. One thing she does insist on in a book, however, regardless of genre, is a happy ending, so you will always find one in the books she writes.

Email: lavinialewisuk@yahoo.co.uk

Lavinia Lewis loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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