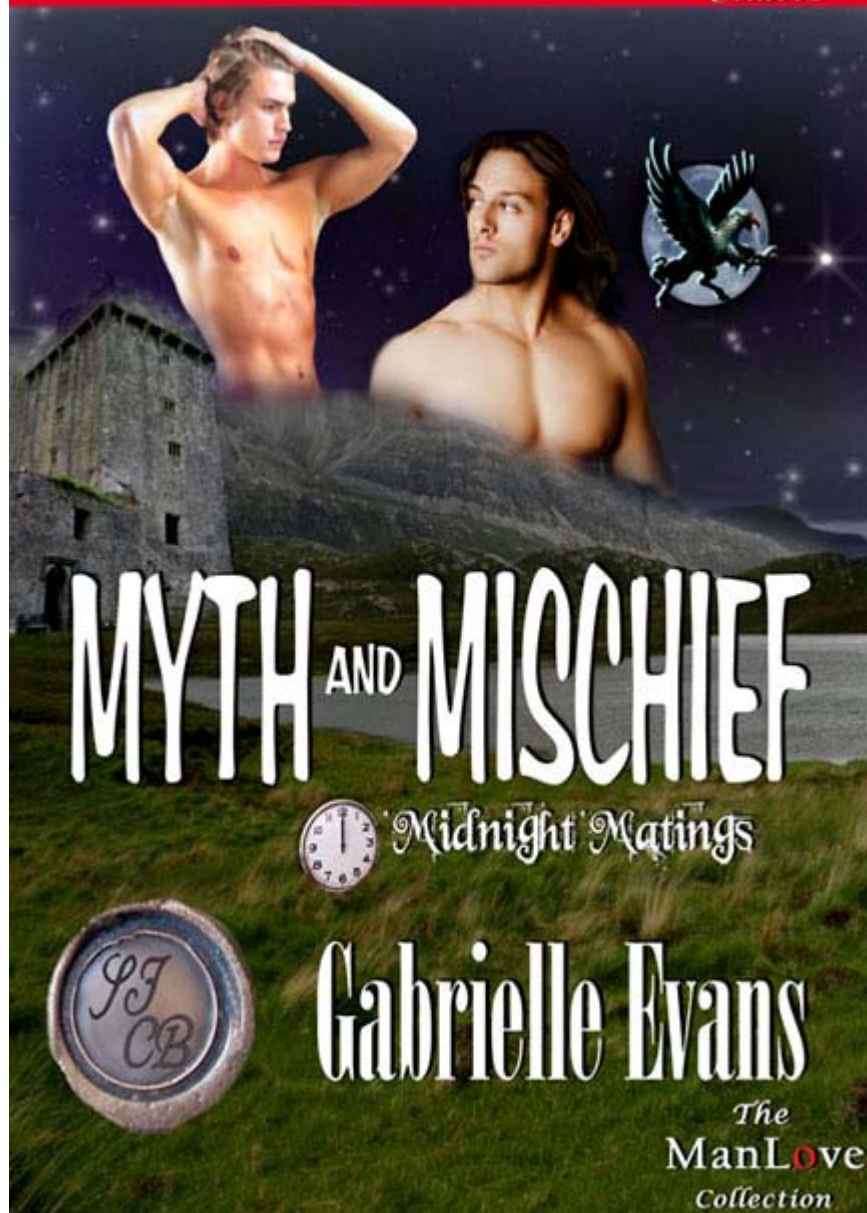


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Midnight Matings

Myth and Mischief

The Gathering is called. The spell is cast. There is no escaping the Midnight Matings.

Colton isn't happy with the elders' trickery, but he's not opposed to choosing a mate. Sly may not be exactly what he had in mind, but if he can get past his instinct to eat the little ferret, they might just be able to make it work.

Sly has wanted a mate for as long as he can remember. When he crawls up Colton's leg while trying to escape his ex-lover, he quickly realizes that the big hippogriff shifter is just what he's been looking for.

Sly possesses something very special, though—something anyone would kill to have. Unfortunately, it's also his only hope of achieving immortality if he wishes to stay with Colton forever. But how long can he keep his treasure hidden from those who seek to take it as their own?

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

Length: 40,228 words

MYTH AND MISCHIEF

Midnight Matings

Gabrielle Evans

EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK
IMPRINT: Erotic Romance ManLove

MYTH AND MISCHIEF
Copyright © 2011 by Gabrielle Evans
E-book ISBN: 1-61034-632-7

First E-book Publication: June 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston
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DEDICATION

A little encouragement goes a long way when it feels like nothing is going right. So, I dedicate this story to the amazing Stormy Glenn, for keeping me sane, reminding me what's important, and showing me how to let go of the little things. Thank you!

And to Abree, for helping me decide on the perfect title—all in exchange for a puppy. I think it was a fair trade.

MYTH AND MISCHIEF

Midnight Matings

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

Pressing his back flat against the stone wall, Sly peeked around the corner, staring down the long corridor at the two men standing near one of the windows. Well, he assumed it was two men. One was hidden behind a parapet, but his voice sounded masculine enough.

The other man he recognized all too well. Grant Billings had terrorized him for years. Just when Sly thought he'd finally found a means of escape from the man, here he was in the flesh and blood, upsetting the delicate balance of Sly's fragile world.

He started to push away from the wall, intent on finding a place to hide before his ex-lover saw him. The last thing he needed was a run-in with the asshole. He'd been living in the castle for two weeks, two of the best weeks of his life, and he didn't need Grant mucking things up for him. Sly highly doubted the elders would turn a blind eye to a scuffle during one of the biggest paranormal events of the year.

Just as he started to turn, Grant held something up to the moonlight spilling through the window. Between his thick fingers, he held a small stone, its beautiful swirling colors noticeable even in the dim light.

The stone Sly recognized as well. Gasping softly, he ducked back around the corner and pressed a hand to his chest, trying to even his

breathing and calm his racing pulse. That stone had been in his family for as long as he could remember. He thought he'd lost it years ago—around the same time he met Grant and moved in with him.

Knowing that the bastard had stolen it from him boiled Sly's blood and left him gritting his teeth to keep from growling in rage. It wasn't that the rock was worth anything, but it belonged to him, and Grant had taken it without permission! Why did everyone always want to take his treasures?

"The toast is about to begin, love." The unknown man spoke softly. "We should be going."

Love? So Grant had already found someone to replace him. He'd been gone less than a month. He understood there was never any love in their relationship. Hell, he assumed Grant pretty much loathed him, but the idea that he had been so easily replaced hurt more than it should.

"Let me put this in our room for safekeeping and fetch Seth. I'll be along shortly."

"Don't take too long."

Sly heard a soft moan and a deep sigh then footsteps hurried down the hallway, fading as they moved further away from him.

Making a decision on the spot, Sly closed his eyes and let the shift take him. If he could get inside Grant's room, he could get his prize back. It wasn't stealing, not really. The stone had belonged to him first after all.

Crawling out of his clothing, he kept close to the wall and followed the sounds of Grant's retreating footsteps. When the footsteps died away, Sly used his nose, sniffing at the air as he continued down the corridor in search of the man who had ruined his life and stolen the only thing he owned that meant anything to him.

Coming to a heavy wooden door, he sighed mentally when he found it slightly ajar. Slipping into the room, he darted across the floor and under the bed before anyone could notice his unwelcome arrival.

“Are you ready yet?” Grant grumbled.

Sly poked his head out from under the bed, making sure to keep as much of himself hidden as possible as he watched the two men moving about the room.

“Yes, I’m ready.” Seth, Grant’s brother, sighed and scratched at the back of his neck. “I still don’t know what you see in him.”

“It has nothing to do with you. I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Grant scoffed. He held up Sly’s stone and grinned wickedly at it. “This little gem is going to make me a very, very happy man.”

“You can’t buy or fabricate happiness, Grant. That rock will cause you nothing but misery.”

“You’re just jealous. You want it for yourself.”

Seth sighed again. “No, I don’t, but I still think you should return it to its rightful owner.”

“Shut up,” Grant snarled. “I am the rightful owner now.” He flipped the stone into the air, intending to look cool, Sly assumed, and fumbled the rock until it fell to the floor and rolled under the bed. “Damn it, Seth! Look what you made me do!”

Sly didn’t hesitate as he snatched the gem up in his mouth and shot across the room for the door.

“You little fucker!” Grant roared. “Get back here, Sly!”

Wiggling through the narrow crack in the doorway, Sly bounded down the hall, looking left and right, searching for anywhere he could hide his treasure before Grant caught up to him.

Rounding the corner that would take him to the great ballroom, Sly spied a rather odd-looking potted plant. It looked kind of like a palm tree, but kind of like a cactus. Whatever. It didn’t matter what type of plant it was. It suited his needs just fine. Plus, it was just strange enough for him to remember when he came back.

Climbing up the side of the planter, Sly quickly dug a hole in the damp soil, buried his stone, and covered it. Looking over his shoulder,

he gave an internal sigh of relief when he didn't immediately spot Grant or Seth.

Hopping down from the plant, he ran toward the double doors of the ballroom, praying someone would open them for him. He'd left his clothes back in one of the hallways, and he wasn't about to walk into a crowded room stark naked. That was way worse than any nightmare about giving a class presentation in his underwear.

Luckily, someone stepped through the doors just as Sly reached them. Not so lucky, Grant and Seth rounded the corner just in time to see him dart through the open door.

"Sly!" Grant's voice echoed around the hallway.

"The fighting between species must stop," one of the elders spoke from the dais where they were all standing. Hmm, seemed Sly had missed something important. However, now was not the time to stop and take notes. He slithered through the throng of people, continuously looking over his shoulder and almost squeaking when he saw Grant following him.

"We are known to the humans, and they have learned to accept us in their midst. However, their tolerance will only last so long. The constant fighting among the paranormal communities has come under scrutiny. We no longer have the luxury of watching you solve your own disagreements," the elder continued.

Wow, this sounded big. Sly began to think he might want to pay attention. And he would, just as soon as he found a safe place to hide.

"Each of you has twenty-four hours to find and claim your mate. If you fail to claim a mate in twenty-four hours, and bring him or her before this council to be recognized, you will not have a mate. You will go feral inside of a week."

Sly stumbled to a stop as he listened to the elder speak. Oh, this was bad. Who the hell wanted to mate a ferret like him? He didn't know how he was supposed to find a mate, but he damn sure didn't want to go feral.

The next part of the elder's speech was drowned out by the gasps, groans, and grumbles of the agitated crowd. Sly ducked and dodged, trying desperately not to get stepped on and squished. The next thing he heard the elder say had him halting once again.

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

Oh, well, fuck me sideways, Sly thought as he started moving again. This shit just kept getting better and better.

Peeking over his shoulder again, Sly squeaked and chattered when he spotted Grant no more than a foot behind him. Looking around the room, he spotted a lone figure standing in one of the shadowy corners. The guy looked massive, and if Sly could just make it to him, hopefully he would have sanctuary. If nothing else, maybe the man would be just big and intimidating enough that Grant would think twice about tangling with him.

Changing his course, Sly hurried across floor, intent on reaching the man before Grant could catch him. He had almost made it to the corner when the elder spoke again, and all hell broke loose.

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

* * * *

Colton seethed. He stared down into his flute glass for just a moment before sending it flying across the ballroom to smash into the wall. Scanning the crowd through all the disorder, he spotted his roommate, Asher, standing near the wall, locked in some kind of confrontation with what appeared to be a vampire.

He wasn't worried. Ash might be a little guy, but he could take care of himself. Sure enough, in the next moment, little orange flames danced along his forearm, and the vampire released his hold, jerking

away while Ash just smirked. Being a phoenix shifter certainly had its perks.

While Colton loved Asher like a brother, he had no interest in being mated to the man for the rest of eternity. He had nothing against claiming a mate, but the idea of being forced into a life with someone he'd known for less than a day didn't sit well with him. Judging by the mutinous glares, the roaring, snarling, hissing, and growling, the rest of the room shared his sentiment.

Shrinking back into the shadowy corner, he curled his lip as he watched men and women alike scramble around the room, either fighting off advances or making their own. They'd all gone completely insane. While the thought of going feral and being hunted down didn't really bother him as much as it should, he couldn't stomach the thought of losing his beast.

Watching the chaos unfold around him, Colton sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. He had twenty-four hours to present a mate to the elders. No need to rush into it. He would just go back to his room, crash out for a few hours, and maybe things would seem better in the morning. Hell, even better, maybe he'd wake up to find it had all been some alcohol-induced nightmare.

He hated these damn gatherings. Every leap year, he'd swear up and down he wasn't going, and every freaking time, Asher would talk him into it. He didn't even understand why his friend insisted on coming to these things. The man had the social elegance of a gnat.

Leaning back against the wall, Colton decided it might be better to wait until things calmed down a bit before he tried to make a break for it. No one had noticed him yet, and he'd very much like to keep it that way.

The thought had no more passed through his brain when he saw two big, muscled men sprinting across the room in his direction. Well, fuck! He really didn't want to deal with this shit. He just wanted to go back to his room and think. The elders had royally screwed them all,

and he just needed ten minutes to get his head on straight and figure out how to proceed.

At six-foot-eight and close to three hundred pounds of pure muscle, there weren't many men brave enough to mess with him. Mostly, people gave him a wide berth and stayed out of his way. Apparently, the two shifters racing toward him hadn't gotten the memo. He'd have to see what he could do to rectify the situation.

Strangely, the men didn't appear to be looking at him, though. They were half crouched as they sprinted in his direction, their eyes locked on the floor, darting one way then another as though following the movement of some invisible specter.

Pushing away from the wall, Colton stood tall, rolling his head on his shoulders and preparing to defend himself if necessary. His eyes surveyed the floor between him and the advancing men, looking for whatever held their attention so firmly that they had yet to see him.

There was nothing. He couldn't see anything. Glancing back up at the men, he watched them stumble to a stop, their eyes starting at Colton's boots and slowly working up to his face at the same time he felt a tug on his jeans, and something crawling up his back.

"He's ours!" one of the shifters snarled at him, his eyes locked just over Colton's shoulder.

Turning his head slightly, Colton stared in shock at the slim, cream-colored ferret perched on his shoulder, chattering madly at his two unwelcomed suitors. This had to be the strangest moment of his very long life, and it surprised a quiet chuckle from him.

Turning back to Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber, Colton continued to chuckle as he shook his head. "I'd say that means he's not interested in your proposal."

"Huh?" The blond guy cocked his head to the side and his eyebrows drew together in confusion. Damn, how thick could he be?

"He said no," Colton drawled. "So fuck off." The tiny ferret chattered a little more, before running around his neck to curl on the

other shoulder and nuzzle against his throat. It was actually kind of cute if you were into the whole fluffy, cuddly weasel thing.

“Sly, don’t make me come over there,” the other man said icily. “You’re making this harder than it has to be. You really don’t want to piss me off, do you?” His eyes held steel and a hint of threat that set Colton’s nerves on edge.

“Yeah, Sly,” the blond mumbled, but he didn’t look nearly as intimidating. “You know what happens when Grant is angry.”

The ferret on his shoulder trembled, pressing closer to Colton’s neck, but continued to hiss angrily. Damn, the little guy was feisty. Turning back to address the idiots in front of him, Colton held his arms out wide, flexing the muscles in his chest and curling his fingers to beckon them forward. “Try to claim him. I dare you.”

Though he no designs on taking the sleek little shifter as his own, he couldn’t just stand by and let a couple of Neanderthals claim the man against his will. He understood the adage about life not being fair, but this seemed a little different.

“He is no concern of yours,” the one that seemed to be the leader spat. “I don’t want any trouble. Just hand him over.”

“Yeah, not going to happen. Why don’t you just claim Blondie here and be done with it.”

“He’s my brother, you idiot.”

Colton shook his head and sighed. He really didn’t want to deal with this shit. The three obviously had some kind of past, and it definitely wasn’t his problem. Yeah, it sucked for the guy, but the ferret wasn’t his responsibility. Still, it felt wrong to hand him over without any thought for his safety or well-being.

He could feel the headache forming behind his eyes, and his temples ached the longer the jackass droned on. “Whatever.” Colton cut off the shifter’s rambling then gestured toward the throng of people behind them. “Find someone else. He stays with me.”

The ferret’s furry head rubbed under his chin for a moment before he settled back on Colton’s shoulder and let out several small noises

that sounded suspiciously like barking. Not that Colton really knew anything about ferrets other than the fact that they tasted delicious with ketchup. As a rare hippogriff shifter, ferrets were a delicacy for him, and even now, his mouth watered at the sweet scents drifting from the animal.

Shaking his head to clear it, he returned his attention to the bigger shifters who were pressing them into the corner and glared. “We’re done here.” Colton clenched his fist as he felt the shift roll through him. Concentrating the power, he uncurled his fingers, smirking as the assholes’ eyes widened when his hand changed into the large, clawed foot of a giant eagle. “Questions?”

Both men shook their heads and backed away slowly. “This isn’t over, Sly,” the man named Grant said coldly. “You can’t run forever.” Then they each turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Taking a deep breath, Colton let it out slowly, his hand transforming back to normal. He reached up and scratched the ferret under his chin. “What mischief have you been up to, little one? Would you like to shift back now?”

The ferret made a couple of little happy clicking sounds in his throat, then the next thing Colton knew, a slender man with shaggy blond hair clung to his back, humming as he rubbed his face over Colton’s neck. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Are you going to be okay now?” Colton reached behind him and tried to pry the man from his back. “Sly, is it? You can get down now.”

“Yes, and I know,” Sly whispered. “I don’t want to, though.” Then he licked a wet path up the side of Colton’s neck. “I like it here. Besides, we need to register our mating with the elders.”

“Whoa!” Colton grabbed the man’s forearm in one hand and his nude hip in the other, pulling him down from his back to stand in front of him. “I helped you out, but I have no intentions of mating you.”

“You don’t want me?”

Colton growled and pushed a hand through his dark hair. "I don't even know you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed before my head explodes."

"Can I come with you?" Long and lean, not as small as Colton had originally assumed, the top of Sly's head brushed just under his chin when the man stepped closer, pressing against Colton's chest. "Mmm, you're really big."

"Are you always like this?" Colton leaned back against the wall, placing a hand in the center of Sly's chest to keep him from following. "You don't even know my name, dude."

"I'm doing it again, aren't I?" Sly backed off and shook his head. "Sorry, I have a tendency to come on kind of strong. The mating heat is already starting for me, and you're really fucking hot. Plus, you kind of saved my ass just now." Ducking his head, he snorted self-depreciatively and started to turn. "I'll leave you alone."

He'd taken no more than two steps when a petite female vampire tackled him to the ground. "You'll do," she hissed before attempting to sink her fangs into the exposed flesh of his neck.

Sly's hand pushed at the female's face as he wiggled beneath her, trying to squirm away from her searching mouth. "I'm gay, you crazy bitch. Get off of me!"

"Not my problem, sugar."

She lunged for his throat once more, but Colton caught her around the waist and tossed her to the side. "Get lost," he growled. Then he turned back to Sly, offering a hand to help him up from the floor. "Are you always this much trouble?"

"Yeah, kinda," Sly mumbled before he bit his lip and blushed. "Thanks again."

Maybe it was the mating heat beginning to affect him, but something about the guy just called to Colton. The man seemed nice enough. He certainly wasn't hard on the eyes, and he definitely needed a protector. If he had to choose a mate, why not Sly?

Because you'll try to eat him, dumbass. Well, there was that little problem, but really, as long as they were never in their shifted forms at the same time, it shouldn't be a problem. "Let's talk." Sly took his hand, and Colton pulled him to his feet. "Where do you live?" he asked as they dodged bodies on their way toward the double doors on the other side of the room.

"Here," Sly answered, jumping out of the way of some huge shifter carrying a small ball of white fluff. "Was that a freakin' bunny?"

Colton shrugged. He was entertaining the idea of claiming a ferret as a mate, so he didn't really feel he had the right to judge. "You mean you live here in Scotland?" Sly didn't have an accent, so maybe he had just recently relocated.

"I live here in the castle."

"I thought only the elders resided in the castle." Okay, something definitely wasn't adding up.

"I've only been here for a couple of weeks. I petitioned Elder Rice for sanctuary, and the elders allowed me to stay here." Sly went quiet after that, and Colton didn't think he'd get any more out of the man.

"So, you wouldn't be opposed to moving? You have nothing keeping you here?" God, was he really considering this? It had to be the stupidest idea he'd ever had. Scanning the room, he sighed in frustration. He didn't see Ash anywhere. He'd really have liked to talk to his best friend before making a decision like this.

With the mating heat beginning to claw at him, making his skin itch and his cock swell, he didn't think he'd be able to wait until the next day—or even the next ten minutes.

"What are you asking me...?" Sly trailed off and lifted his eyebrows in question.

"Colton Bishop." Colton offered a hand as he used the other to push open one of the double doors.

Sly took it, squeezing it firmly for a moment, then stepped through the door. "Sylvester Jordan, but everyone calls me Sly. So,

again, what exactly are you asking me? Because it sounds like you want to claim me, but just ten minutes ago you gave me the brush off.”

Colton scratched at the back of his neck as they strolled down the stone corridor. “Yeah, well, I’m not really excited about being forced into a lifetime commitment with someone I’ve just met. I don’t see a way out of this, and at least you didn’t try to claim me without my consent. If I have to choose a mate before midnight tomorrow, I figure I could do worse.”

“Wow, how romantic,” Sly mumbled sarcastically. He sighed and shook his head. “I get it, though, and I’m just pathetic enough to leap at the offer. I just hope I don’t disappoint you once you get to know me.”

Colton didn’t know what to say to that, so he said nothing. However much he wanted to reassure the smaller man that he wouldn’t be disappointed, he couldn’t offer those kinds of guarantees. Other than his name and the fact that he had sought asylum with the elders, Colton didn’t know a thing about Sly. “If you’re game, I guess we’ll figure it out together.”

Sly stopped and turned to look up at him with a soft grin on his lips. “I think I’d like that.”

Without conscious thought, Colton reached out and brushed the blond locks away from Sly’s face. “Oddly enough, I think I would, too.”

Chapter Two

Sly found himself leaning into Colton's touch, nuzzling his face against the shifter's palm. "What exactly are you?" he asked distractedly. God, it felt so good to be touched like this. He hadn't any intentions of claiming Colton for a mate when he'd scampered up the man's pant leg. He'd just been trying to get away from Seth and Grant.

"Hippogriff," Colton answered just as distractedly. He stared at his hand where it cupped Sly's cheek as though he couldn't believe what he was doing. "I feel strange."

"Me, too," Sly whispered, but he didn't think it was for the same reason as Colton. His heart thundered in his chest, his body felt overheated, and his cock throbbed as it jutted from his groin. "Oh, fuck," he groaned, looking down his nude body. He'd completely forgotten he'd lost his clothes when he shifted.

Colton just chuckled, whipping his T-shirt off over his head, and pushed it into Sly's hands. "Can't have everyone seeing my little mate's gorgeous body, now can we?"

"Really? You think I'm gorgeous?" Sly preened at the compliment, but quickly resumed his somber, bored expression. "Thank you," he mumbled.

"What just happened?" Colton tilted his head to the side, his hands fisting on his hips while he waited for Sly to don the cotton shirt he'd been given.

"I don't know what you mean." Sly looked down his body again, chuckling when the shirt came almost to his knees. He was pretty average in the height department, but he had nothing on Colton. The

man was just massive. Broad shoulders, a muscled chest, shoulder-length raven hair, and eyes as dark as storm clouds—Colton Bishop made his mouth water.

“I don’t know what I mean either.” Colton stepped closer, crowding Sly until he took a step back and collided with the wall behind him. “There was this little light in your eyes, a soft little sparkle, and then you shut down almost immediately. Why?” Colton leaned over him, pressing their bodies together as his nose skimmed up Sly’s neck. “Why?” he repeated.

“I don’t want you to change your mind,” Sly panted. He couldn’t think with Colton this close. The man’s scent filled his nose and left his head spinning. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

Colton’s teeth scraped over the sensitive flesh just behind Sly’s ear. “I want you to be yourself. Whoever that is, that’s who I want you to be. No hiding from me, Sly.”

“You won’t want me,” Sly argued.

“Try me.” Colton’s hand skimmed down his body then gripped Sly’s hip, pulling him forward to grind their covered erections together.

Well, fuck it all. It wasn’t like he could keep the charade up forever. At some point he’d grow tired of pretending to be *normal*, and all of his secrets would come spilling out anyway. Maybe it would be best to get it all out in the open. If Colton decided he didn’t want him after that, well, it would be better than spending an eternity with someone who couldn’t accept him the way he was.

“Later,” he mumbled, arching his neck to give Colton more room to play. “I want you.” Oh, how he wanted the man. His breathing accelerated, his heart knocked against his ribs, and his dick leaked freely from the slit.

“Shh, I’m going to take care of you,” Colton cooed.

And for some reason, Sly believed him. Then the warm weight pressed against him disappeared, and he whimpered softly as he watched Colton stand straight and look up and down the hallway.

Without warning, Colton grabbed him around the wrist and practically dragged him down the hallway, through a door on the left, and right into a library.

Colton kicked the door closed behind him and started walking toward Sly, his long fingers going to the buttons on his jeans. "If you want to be mine... You do want to be mine, right?"

Sly nodded eagerly, but he took a step back. He wasn't afraid, but the lust shining in Colton's eyes set him on fire. Never had anyone looked at him with such desire, and he didn't know what to make of it.

"Good." Colton popped open his button fly then tucked his thumbs into the waistband, pushing the fabric down his lean hips. "Then we need to set down some rules."

Sly nodded again. He liked rules. Just tell him what, how, and when to do it, and he'd be all over it. Left to his own devices, he usually ended up in trouble. He didn't want to be trouble for Colton.

"Rule number one," Colton drawled as the denim slid down his muscled thighs to pool on the floor around his ankles. His cock bounced free, long and thick with a perfect mushroom-shaped head, and Sly licked his lips, wanting to taste the man that would soon become his mate.

Colton palmed his length, stroking it slowly as he cleared his throat and waited for Sly to meet his eyes. "I don't share, Sly. No one will ever stroke, lick, kiss, caress, or otherwise touch all of this perfect skin besides me. Understood?"

Sly nodded dazedly. Damn, he was beginning to feel like a stupid bobblehead doll. He understood exactly what Colton wanted from him, though, and he couldn't have been more thrilled to give it to him. The man was demanding Sly's commitment, and he was finding Colton's possessive attitude a complete turn-on.

"Rule two," Colton said in his deep, sultry voice as he continued to prowl forward, "I expect you to answer me when I ask you a question. Now, do you understand?"

“Yes,” Sly croaked.

“Good. Rule three.” Colton stepped right up to him, gripped the neckline of Sly’s borrowed shirt, and ripped it right down the middle. “I like to be in charge. Can you handle that?”

“Yes,” Sly whispered, his eyes going wide as his cock jumped and pulsed at the erotic display of power. “I don’t like being forced, though,” he added just as softly. He had no problem letting Colton play the dominant in the bedroom, or even in their relationship in general, but he wouldn’t fall victim to his past mistakes.

Colton’s eyes softened, and he gently eased the shredded cotton from Sly’s torso before reaching up to cradle his face in both hands. “I like to be in charge, but that doesn’t mean I want a doormat as a mate. If you feel strongly about something, I want to know it. If you don’t like something, tell me. I won’t claim you as mine if you’re just going to roll over and submit to me. I need a challenge.”

A mischievous smirk spread over Sly’s face, and he nodded rapidly. “I’ve been challenging authority my entire life. I think I can handle one big, bad bird.”

“I’m not a bird,” Colton grumbled. “I’m a hippogriff.”

Sly rolled his eyes, but continued to grin. “I know, big guy. Relax. I’m going to warn you up front, though. I can be a bit of a handful. I’ve been trying to tone it down and blend in for this stupid gathering, but it’s hard, and I honestly hate it.”

“Then I guess you should stop pretending, huh?” Colton smirked at him as he put a hand in the center of Sly’s chest and gave him a little shove.

The back of his knees hit the edge of the sofa, and Sly plopped down on the cushions with his legs splayed wide. When the elders announced their little deceitful plan to have them all shack up and procreate, Sly never imagined he’d find someone to ring his bells like the big man currently kneeling between his knees. Everything about the guy just set his body burning, though. Maybe for once in his life, this might actually work out.

Colton's hand wrapped around Sly's hard length and gave him a couple of good tugs. "Are you sure about this, Sly? We don't know anything about each other, but I'm not going to just claim you and send you on your way. I don't like being tricked, but I'm very much in favor of having a mate. You're always going to be mine."

Sly didn't like being tricked either. He couldn't deny that he was insanely attracted to the man before him, but Colton was right. They didn't know anything about each other. Still, the elders had made it perfectly clear that they had only until the stroke of twelve the next night to present a mate. Sly didn't know for certain, but he'd heard murmurs through the crowd that they had even gone as far as to cast a barrier enchantment on all of the exits. No one could pass through without a mating seal. And there was only one way to get one of those.

Besides, he didn't relish in the idea of going feral and being hunted down like a rabid dog. Nor did he like the idea of not being able to shift. He might only be a ferret, not exactly high on the food chain, but he loved the freedom he felt when he shifted. He definitely didn't want to lose that.

When he finally came out of his thoughts, he found Colton still kneeling between his legs, both of his massive hands resting on Sly's knobby knees. He looked so concerned, Sly melted right into the sofa. He doubted Colton could fake a look like that. "I'm sure," he said softly. Then, so as not to look completely lame, added, "Though you might change your mind about never letting me go."

"I'll be the judge of that." Apparently, Colton was finished with the conversation because he gripped the base of Sly's prick and dove forward to wrap his lips around the spongy head.

Sly moaned loudly, arching his hips up into Colton's moist mouth as his skin heated and tingled. "More," he pleaded.

Colton worked Sly's cock with his mouth, his long fingers slipping between Sly's legs to fondle his heavy sac. Up and down, he dragged his lips along Sly's spit-slicked length, taking him a little

farther each time until the tip nudged against the soft lining of his throat.

With his pulse racing and electricity zipping up his spine, Sly didn't think he'd be able to hold back for long. Already his balls ached, his dick throbbed, and his stomach tightened with the need to come. His canines elongated just a fraction, and his mouth watered at the thought of sinking his teeth into the back of Colton's neck and claiming the man as his.

The blissful thought suddenly turned to panic. He'd have to fuck Colton for that, make the man submit to him. Colton said he liked to be in charge. No way would he offer himself up to Sly like that.

The longer he thought about it, the more the panic ate away at him, until Colton finally released his flaccid cock and sat up, eyeing him curiously. "Are you not enjoying this? Did you change your mind?"

Heat infused Sly's cheeks, and he groaned in embarrassment. Could this get any worse? Well, of course it could. He still had to explain to Colton why he'd just went limp in the man's mouth. "How do you claim your mate?" he asked instead.

"With my talons," Colton answered immediately. He reached up and trailed his fingertips over the side of Sly's neck. "I'd cut you right here, not too deep, but enough so everyone would know you were mine. Is that what happened? Are you afraid?"

"No." Sly prayed a hole would open up in the middle of the library and swallow him in one big gulp. "I'm not scared of that."

"Then what's wrong?" Colton didn't sound angry or even frustrated, only concerned.

"I have to bite you on the back of the neck, just below the hairline, to claim you," Sly whispered with his eyes closed. "You would have to submit to me."

"Okay."

Sly's eyelids snapped open, and he stared at Colton in shock. "But you said you like to be in charge! I didn't think...You'd really let...It's okay?"

Colton chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. "It's fine. I don't think it's something I'd like to make a habit of, but if that's what we need to do for you to claim me, then I'm okay with that."

"You are kind of amazing, you know that?" With his fears put to rest, Sly's cock perked right back up, filling and swelling as it strained toward the man in front of him. Then another thought occurred to him, and he bit his lip and looked away once more.

"What now?" Colton sighed as he gripped Sly's chin and turned his head back to face him. "Just tell me."

"I've never done that before."

"Well, I'm glad I could be your first." Colton winked, pulling a breathy chuckle from Sly, and suddenly, none of his insecurities seemed quite so important. "So, you ready? Or are you backing out on me?"

"Oh, I'm ready." Sly grinned wickedly as he pounced on Colton, tackling him to the floor and claiming his mouth in a hungry kiss. He'd been wanting a taste of those luscious lips since he'd laid eyes on the big shifter.

Taking advantage of Colton's surprise, Sly thrust his tongue through the man's parted lips and swept it over the inside of his mouth as he moaned loudly. Mmm, even better than he imagined. He could definitely get used to this.

"Need you now," he growled as he jerked away from Colton's mouth. Then he dropped his forehead to his lover's and groaned. "No lube."

"In my pants' pocket."

"You just carry lube around with you?" Sly sat up and grinned. "You slut."

Colton rolled his eyes and pushed Sly off of him. "My roommate thinks I need to be more socially active."

“In other words, he wants you to get laid.”

Chuckling as he pulled a little travel-sized bottle of lube from the pocket of his discarded jeans, Colton turned and tossed it into Sly’s fumbling hands. “That sounds closer to the truth. So, how do you want to do this?”

“Wow, you really have a way with words, huh?”

Colton winced, looking properly chastised. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Yeah, Sly knew that, but he couldn’t help ribbing the man a little. “Fine. You’re forgiven. Now, get your sexy ass over here and kiss me again.”

He yelped when Colton immediately launched himself across the room, landing on top of him and pinning him to the floor. “My pleasure.”

The kiss seemed to go on forever, their tongue sliding and dueling as Sly roamed his hands over Colton’s strong body, mapping the dips and valleys, learning every inch of his new lover. When the need became too much, he pushed at Colton’s chest, urging him to his back. “I can’t wait any longer,” he panted.

“Thank fuck!” Colton snatched the lube where it had been forgotten on the carpet and thrust it into Sly’s trembling hands. “Hurry.”

Nodding once, Sly popped the cap open, poured a generous amount of the slick oil into his palm, and quickly coated his aching cock. Using one slick finger, he separated Colton’s rounded cheeks, zeroing in on the tight opening and caressed the muscles the way he liked for his lovers to do to him.

“Don’t need all that,” Colton hissed as his back bowed, and his hips arched up off the carpet. “I like the burn. Just hurry the fuck up.”

“You are awfully demanding,” Sly admonished, but did as Colton asked. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he pushed past the first ring of muscle with two fingers.

Colton groaned and rocked his hips against Sly's hand, fucking himself on the invading digits. "More."

"Hush, I need to stretch you first." Sly worked his fingers in and out, twisting his wrist to loosen the snug opening. Colton was damn tight, and Sly would never forgive himself if he started off their new mating by hurting the man.

When the muscles finally began to relax, he slipped a third finger alongside the others and pumped quickly as he bent over his lover and licked wet kisses over his taut abs.

"Fuck! Enough!" Colton shouted. "Fuck me."

Sly wasn't sure if he'd stretched Colton enough, but his dick screamed at him to shut the fuck up and just do as he was told. Easing his fingers out of the man's clenching channel, Sly patted him on the hip. "Roll over."

Colton complied immediately, rolling to his hands and knees and pushing his ass in the air, wiggling it invitingly. Rising up on his knees, Sly didn't waste time with words as he gripped the base of his cock and lined up the weeping tip with Colton's fluttering hole.

They both moaned loudly when Sly pushed forward, sheathing himself all the way to the root inside the velvety heat in one clean thrust. Instinct took over, the need too much to fight, and he began snapping his hips, driving wildly into Colton's ass. His eyes crossed, his brain went fuzzy, and his entire world centered around the place where their bodies met.

All too soon, his balls began to tingle, his spine stiffened, and lightning bolts of pleasure ricocheted around his insides. Kicking Colton's legs wider, he bent over him, changing the angle and nailing his lover's sweet spot on the next hard thrust.

Colton groaned, his inner walls clamping down around Sly's cock like a vise as he pushed back against him.

Sly brushed Colton's hair to the side and swirled his tongue around the salty skin on the back of his neck. "Mine!" he growled.

Reaching under his lover, he wrapped his hand around Colton's pulsing cock and jerked him fast as he sank his canines roughly into the nape of his neck. He groaned, shaking his head just a bit, as the coppery taste of his mate's blood washed over his tongue. His hips drove forward punishingly, and some voice in the back of his head warned he was being too rough with his lover, but Colton seemed to love it.

"Fuck yes!" Colton's head dropped on his shoulders, the muscles in his back tensed and rippled, and his ass strangled Sly's cock to the point of pain as warm, sticky cum gushed over Sly's hand and wrist.

Releasing his hold on his mate's cock, Sly withdrew his teeth from Colton's flesh then tossed his head back and moaned loudly, pumping through his orgasm and filling his mate to overflowing with his scorching seed.

When Colton had wrung the last drop from him, Sly gently separated from his lover and slumped over to the floor. "Thank you," he whispered.

Colton crawled over to him and placed a gentle kiss on Sly's lips. "Not done yet." He lifted his hand, and Sly watched as it transformed into the claw of an eagle right before his eyes.

Tilting his head to the side willing, Sly sighed happily. "Do it."

The pain lasted for only a second as the sharp talon cut into the flesh on the side of his neck. Then a warm tongue replaced it, licking the wound closed. "You're mine," Colton whispered.

Smiling serenely, Sly rolled over, curling into Colton's arms, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

“Would you stop that!” Colton swatted Sly’s wandering hand away from his ass. “Let’s just get through security without getting arrested, okay?”

“It itches,” Sly whined as he scratched at his left hip. “I didn’t know the mating seal was going to hurt that much.” He pulled down at the waistband of his jeans and stuck his hip out for Colton’s viewing pleasure. “It’s kind of pretty, though.” He traced a finger over their initials where they were twined together in a knot to form their mating seal. “Still hurt like hell, though.”

Colton nodded in sympathy. Registering their mating with the elders hadn’t been a huge ordeal, but the magical branding of the mating seal onto their flesh burned like a bitch. He reached up absently to finger the mark just next to Sly’s claiming bite. It somehow seemed appropriate for his seal to be there.

“The itch will go away soon.” Colton nudged his new mate in the back to move him forward in the line as they waited to pass through security.

He hadn’t been able to find Ash anywhere before they departed the castle. Sly had bitched and complained constantly since climbing into the UPAC vehicles that would bring them to the airport. Getting a last-minute ticket for Cancun had been nothing short of a nightmare. They’d ended up having to book a later flight and had now been wandering about the airport for hours.

Needless to say, he wasn’t in the greatest of moods. His head throbbed with every beat of his heart, the muscles in his neck felt stiff and tense, and he just wanted to get on the plane and sleep. He still

hadn't had a minute alone to process what had happened at the conference, or to fully come to terms with the fact that he would be making the trip home with not his best friend, but his new mate—a man he knew absolutely nothing about.

"I'm bored. And I'm hungry. This line is moving too slow. My freakin' hip still itches." On and on it went, the endless complaints. Colton didn't know how much more he could take.

Then the questions started.

"Where do you live? What do you do for a living? Have you ever thought about cutting your hair? What's your favorite shampoo?"

Colton wrapped his hand around the back of Sly's neck and turned him around as he bent to press their faces only an inch from each other. "Would you please shut the fuck up for five goddamn minutes," he growled.

Sly's eyes rounded, and he pressed his lips together as he nodded slowly.

"Is there a problem here?" A man stood just beside them, his badge proclaiming him airport security.

"No problem," Colton mumbled as he released his mate and stood straight.

The guard looked at Sly for confirmation.

"He assaulted me," Sly whimpered immediately. "And I think he's smuggling drugs. You should probably do a strip search on him. In fact, you should probably do a full cavity search, just to be sure."

Colton started choking as he looked between Sly's smirk and the security guard's frown. "He's lying."

"We take any accusations of illegal transport very seriously, sir. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

"What? No!" Colton rounded on his mate. "Tell him the truth, or I swear to everything that is holy, I will beat the ever-loving shit out of you."

"You heard him," Sly said immediately, pointing a finger in Colton's face. "He just threatened me."

Then the next thing he knew, Sly and the security guard were falling against each other, laughing their fool heads off. “Oh, you should have seen your face!” Sly gasped for breath, his face flushing pink.

“Excuse me?” Colton asked dangerously. The little shit had almost gotten him arrested, and he thought it was funny?

“I’m Conner Forbes.” The security guard held out his hand to Colt. “I met Sly a few years ago when he flew into Glasgow for one of the conferences. When he called to tell me that he’d been departing with his new mate today, I just couldn’t resist.” Conner chuckled again. “Sorry, man.”

Colton shook the man’s hand, releasing it quickly, and pressed a shaky hand to his temple. “Right.” What could he possibly say to that? Oh, his mate was in for a good spanking when they finally got back to Mexico.

* * * *

“Are you still mad at me?” Sly shifted in his seat as he stared out the window of the taxi.

“No, I’m not mad. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to redden your little ass good for that stunt, though.”

Turning slowly, Sly gave him a wicked grin. “Oh, I like that. I’m going to have to be naughty more often.”

Colton leaned over, crooking his finger for Sly to come closer. “I’ll tell you a secret.” He waited for his mate to nod. “I’ll paddle your sexy ass anytime you want. You don’t have to be a brat.”

“But it’s so much more fun.” Sly kissed Colton’s lips quickly before settling back in his seat. “Are we almost there?”

“We’re here.” Colton gestured out his window to the little house.

“Oh, it’s cute!” Sly flew out of his door and hurried around the back of the cab to stare at the house with his hands fisted on his hips.

Colton chuckled, paid the driver, and climbed out as well. Pulling the keys out of his pocket, he held them over Sly's shoulder and jingled them. "I'll get the bags. You go unlock the door."

"Yay!" Sly snatched the keys and hurried up the walkway without a backward glance.

"He seems like a handful," the driver observed as he pushed open the trunk lid and started pulling their luggage out.

Colton snorted. "You have no idea, friend."

"Colton!" Sly yelled from inside just as Colton was making his way up the walk. "Someone set your house on fire!"

Dropping their bags, he hurried up the steps and through the door. "What? Where? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, but look at this." Sly pointed to the singed carpet, and then to a pile of clothes beside it. "You said your friend is a phoenix, right?" He looked up at Colton, his eyes shining with concern. "Do you think he's okay?"

"I don't know. He should have arrived home before us." Colton's heart tried to climb up in his throat. "Maybe he didn't find a ma—" He cut himself off and tilted his head to the side as he listened to the sounds in the house. "Is that running water?" Pushing past his mate, Colton touched his shoulder gently. "Stay here."

Hurrying down the short hallway, Colton followed the sounds of the water right to Asher's bathroom. "Ash?" He waited several seconds without an answer then finally pushed the door open and found...nothing. The shower was on, but there was no sign of his friend. What the hell was going on?

He turned off the shower spray and pulled his cell phone from his pocket as he made his way back to the living room. After punching in Asher's number, he held the phone to his ear and waited.

"Hello, honey," Asher answered on the second ring.

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

Yelling wouldn't get him answers any faster, but it sure as hell made him feel better. Glancing over at Sly, he found his mate looking at him with an amused expression on his face. He looked like he was up to something, and Colton had a feeling he wouldn't have to wait long to find out just what it was.

"Close to Chattanooga, Tennessee, I think."

Colton opened his mouth to reply then snapped it shut. This was insane. "Exactly why are you in Tennessee?" he asked slowly. He tried to piece it together, but he could think of one good reason Ash would be in the states.

"Well, my mate lives here. Where else would I be, Colt?"

Colton shook his head in exasperation. "I get it. You could have at least told me, though. You just fucking disappeared after the elders' announcement, man. I didn't know where the hell you'd gone." They had been friends for centuries, and Colton had come to think of the little phoenix as family. He just wanted to know that the guy was safe.

"Aww, you love me."

"Don't let it go to your head, asshole," Colton said gruffly. Yeah, he loved the little shit, but Asher didn't need to go around spreading that kind of thing. People might get the wrong idea. "So, I guess that answers the shower and singed carpet question. You didn't read the letter did you?"

Colton pulled the envelope with the broken UPAC seal on it from his back pocket. There was a lot of information in there, including that mates must consummate their relationship at least once every twenty-four hours until the next gathering.

"Shut up," Asher grumbled.

Nope, Asher hadn't read it, and it made Colton chuckle. He had no idea why that surprised him. "Are you coming back, or do you need me to pack your stuff up for you?"

"Uh, I'm not really sure yet. We haven't discussed specifics, ya know?"

“Well, if you’re coming back, you should know we have a new house guest.” Colton looked over at Sly again and almost swallowed his tongue. The man lounged in one of the armchairs, completely naked, his legs draped over each arm while he stroked his hard cock. He stared back at Colton and licked his lips, then slipped two fingers into his mouth, swirling his tongue around them.

“Your mate,” Asher deduced.

“Yep,” Colton agreed. His cock swelled inside his pants, and he was having trouble forming coherent sentences. “And boy is he a handful. He almost got me fucking arrested at the airport.”

Asher said nothing to this, but Colton could just picture the shit-eating grin on his friend’s face. “Okay, I need to get back inside before Zaiden thinks I abandoned him again. I’ll let you know what to do with my stuff.”

Sly pulled his fingers from his mouth and immediately inserted two into his twitching hole, dropping his head back and moaning loudly. Colton couldn’t think around the throbbing in his cock. He didn’t even know what Asher had just said.

“Stop that!” He shook his head and grinned to lighten the admonishment. “Wait,” he mouthed to Sly.

“What?” Asher asked.

“Not you.” Colton sighed when Sly showed no intentions of stopping. He really needed to get off the phone. “Yeah, just give me a call when you figure it out.” He growled deeply when Sly lifted his other hand and crooked a finger at him. “I gotta go, man.” Then he flipped his phone shut, tossed his over his shoulder, and dove across the room for his mate.

Chapter Four

Sly glanced over his shoulder repeatedly as Colton lead him off the back porch and across the pristine white sand toward the ocean. He pulled his baseball cap farther down on his head and pushed his sunglasses up his nose. He looked over his shoulder again.

“What are you doing?”

Sly jumped and looked up at Colton nervously. “What?”

“Why do you keep looking over your shoulder? What are you worried about?”

“I’m just watching for Colombian drug lords. You can never be too careful.”

Colton stopped in his tracks and cocked his head to the side. “We’re in Mexico, Sly. No Colombian drug lords here.”

“Okay, well then Meh-he-can drug lords. Same thing. They’re tricky. You have to watch out for them.”

Colton blinked at him for a minute before throwing his head back and roaring out his laughter as he clutched at his side. “Meh-he-can drug lords? Sly, it’s *Mexico*.” Colton emphasized the word. “Not Meh-he-co.”

Sly just shrugged. “Well, that’s what my friend, Juan, calls it.” He fisted his hands on his hips and glared, though Colton couldn’t see his eyes through the sunglasses. “He’s from here, so I figure that makes him an expert.”

Colton continued to laugh, shaking his head as he grabbed Sly’s wrist and tugged him along. “C’mon, I want to show you something.”

Sly allowed himself to be pulled along, but glanced over his shoulder again. Maybe he didn’t have to worry about drug lords, but

he wasn't taking any chances. Being careless is what had gotten him into this mess in the first place.

"Would you calm down? No one is out here besides us. You're as twitchy as a..."

"Ferret?" Sly smirked up at his mate. In the three days since he'd arrived in Isla Blanca, he'd learned quickly that Colton had a penchant for cramming his foot in his mouth often. Sly wasn't offended, though. He actually found it kind of cute. Not that he would ever say that out loud. He figured Colton would paddle his ass good for calling him something that girly.

Hmm, on the other hand...a spanking sounded kind of kinky. Sly's cock jumped, throwing in its agreement. Maybe that's something they could discuss later. Right now, Sly had to watch his back.

"Sly, what's going on?" Colton asked seriously when they neared the edge of the water. "You're making me nervous. I know you're not looking for drug lords, Colombian or otherwise. I need some answers."

"I'm an undercover secret agent," Sly answered just as seriously.

Colton rolled his eyes and huffed out a breath in exasperation. "Fine. Come find me when you're ready to talk." Then he left Sly standing alone and took off down the beach.

"Wait!" Sly jogged through the sand until he caught up to Colton. "That's it? I won't tell you one little thing, and you're just going to leave?"

Colton didn't look at him, just stared down at his bare feet as he continued to walk. "It's not just one thing, Sly. I don't know anything about you. I don't know where you're from, what you did for a living there, or why you were hiding out in Scotland. One minute you're quiet as a mouse, almost withdrawn, and the next you're chattering on incessantly. It's like you're two completely different people."

Sly bit his lip as his eyes and throat began to burn. Everything Colton said was the truth, but he didn't know the man well enough yet

to trust him with his secrets. "It's not really that big of a deal," he mumbled.

Colton stopped and turned to face him. "I have no idea what has you so jumpy or acting like a lunatic, but I seriously doubt it's not a big deal. I'm not asking for you to spill your guts, Sly. Just give me something!"

Sly felt guilty, and he didn't like it. So instead, he got angry. "Yes, because you've been just brimming with information!" He pointed a finger in Colton's chest. "I know where you live and your name. That's all you've given me. I don't know where you work, anything about your family or your life, or even how old you are. Don't be such a hippogriff."

Colton looked at him like he'd lost his mind, and then his face slowly relaxed, and he grinned broadly. "I think you mean hypocrite."

"That's what I said." Sly huffed and threw his hands up. "You make me so crazy, I don't even know what I'm saying. The sex is hot, so ya know, thanks for that. But, this really isn't working."

"It's a little late for second thoughts and regrets, Sly. You read the letter. We're stuck together until the next gathering—in four years."

"Yippee for me," Sly tossed back sarcastically.

"How the hell is any of this my fault?"

"I never said it was."

"Then why are you being such a fucking brat?"

Sly didn't want to do this. He hated fighting, hated the way Colton yelled at him. Mates weren't supposed to shout or treat each other this way.

"Sly?" Colton said dangerously.

Looking out over the water, something caught his eye near the water's edge as it twinkled and gleamed in the sunshine. "Oooh!" Without even looking back at his mate, Sly took off running and dropped to his knees in the sand. Taking off his hat and sunglasses, he tossed them aside and extricated his prize.

“Oh, it’s so pretty!” He held the beautiful blue glass up to Colton. “What is it?”

Colton looked at him for a long time before he finally smiled and came over to kneel beside Sly in the sand. He took the new treasure and turned it over in his hand then held it up to the sun. “It’s sea glass. Some people make jewelry or art out of it. I guess you could call it nature’s way of recycling. This was probably once just an old bottle, carelessly tossed into the ocean.”

“It’s really pretty.” Sly’s fingers itched to snatch the glass back from Colton. He’d found it first. It was his.

“It is,” Colton agreed softly. He handed the glass back to Sly and grinned softly. “There’s a ton of this stuff all up and down the beach.”

“Can we find more?” Sly asked excitedly. Then he bit his lip and looked out over the ocean. “Umm, I mean, that’s cool,” he said in a bored voice.

“Hey.” Colton touched Sly’s cheek gently, not forcing, but urging his face back around. “We’ve talked about this. You be who you want to be—not who you think *I* want you to be.”

“People don’t really like excited, bouncy ferrets,” Sly mumbled, still unwilling to meet Colton’s eyes. “I can’t help it though. I really like shiny stuff, and I’m really possessive of my things. They’re my treasures. I don’t mind sharing, but it’s not right for people to just take them!” His chest heaved, and he closed his eyes. “It’s better if you just tell me what you want and how to act. I don’t screw up as much that way. I don’t get into so much trouble.”

“Sly, look at me.”

“I don’t want to,” Sly pouted.

Colton chuckled, and Sly felt a light caress along his cheek. “Open your eyes, babe.”

The endearment had Sly’s eyelids snapping open as he gaped at Colton in shock. “You called me babe.”

“Yeah, I did. Is that okay?”

Sly nodded slowly. "Does this mean that you're not mad at me anymore? I don't like it when you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad." Colton sat down in the sand and motioned Sly to him.

He hesitated for just a second before scrambling up into Colton's lap and resting his head on the man's muscled shoulder with a happy sigh. "This is how mates are supposed to be."

"I agree, but we're still going to talk about whatever has you freaking out."

Sly cringed, burying his face into the warm flesh of Colton's neck. "Do we have to talk about that? Maybe we can talk about something else."

Colton's deep laughter vibrated in his chest. "How about we start slow and build up to it?"

Sly thought it over for a long time. That sounded reasonable. "Okay. I can do that."

"Good. Now remember those rules we talked about?"

Sly nodded, his muscles tensing in apprehension.

"Well, I'm adding another one."

"I like rules, but not too many. It's hard to keep up with all of them."

"You'll like this one, and I promise it's easy to remember." Colton kissed the top of his head. "From now on, you are to only be yourself. No more hiding from me. If that means you want to dance naked in the moonlight while shouting lines from bad rap songs, that's what I want you to do."

Sly sat back to stare up at his mate, looking into Colton's eyes to gauge the truthfulness of his words. Colton ran his knuckles along Sly's cheek and smiled. "I like excited, bouncy ferrets."

"Okay," Sly whispered. "I think I'd like that."

Colton smirked at him, and Sly realized those were the same words he'd said when he'd agreed to get to know Colton and be his

mate. Then Colton kissed him, just a soft, chaste brush of their lips. “Oddly enough, I think I would, too.”

* * * *

“So, what do you do?” Sly sat at the kitchen table, bouncing in his seat as he sorted through all the sea glass they’d collected on their outing. “I’ve been here for three whole days, and you haven’t left to go to work.”

“I’m a professional beach bum.” Colton slid into a chair across the table from his mate. Damn, Sly really was cute when he was happy. He’d have to see what he could do to keep that smile on his lover’s face.

“Well, that doesn’t sound very interesting.” Sly didn’t even look at him. He picked up a piece of glass and held it to the light, turning it one way and then the other. “I think I like the blue ones the best. Can we find more blue ones?”

“We can go out tomorrow and find some blue ones.” Colton bit his lip to keep from laughing. The man was obsessed with the shiny glass, but at least he was being himself.

“Are there any clear ones? I would really like some clear ones. And maybe purple. Have you ever seen a red one?”

Ten minutes after their conversation by the water, and Colton had begun to see a dramatic change in the way his mate talked and acted. Though some would probably find Sly’s little quirks and his excitement over something as simple as glass to be annoying, Colton found them endearing. Not enough people stopped to appreciate the beauty in the world anymore. It made him long for a time when things had been much simpler.

“I think we can find some clear ones. I don’t know about red, but I’ll help you look. Maybe you could paint one.”

Sly shook his head rapidly. “It wouldn’t be as special if I painted it.”

“So, you really like to collect shiny stuff? Just like a real ferret?”

“Oh, I like all kinds of trinkets and baubles, but yes, sparkly ones are my favorite.” Sly finally placed the piece of glass on the table and looked up at him. “Thank you, Colt. I had a lot of fun today.”

Colton melted right there in his seat. “Colt?” Only Asher had ever called him by anything other than his given name. He liked the intimacy it represented.

“Oh, do you not like that? Do you want me to call you Colton? It’s an awfully long name just like mine, and I don’t really like my name very much, but your name is okay, and if you want me to call you Colton, then I guess that’s okay, too.” Sly sucked in a big lungful of air and blushed all the way to the tips of his ears. “Oops. I did it again, huh?”

Colton chuckled and shook his head. Oh, the man was going to make things very lively for him. “It’s fine, Sly. I ramble sometimes when I’m unsure or nervous about something.”

“Really?” Sly scooted forward in his chair, looking for all the world as if Colton’s answer held the meaning of life.

“Of course. Everyone has flaws, Sly. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s what makes us different—unique. Life would be pretty boring if everyone was exactly the same.”

“You’re really smart,” Sly whispered in awe. “I like listening to you talk, so you can ramble any time you want.”

“I don’t know if I’m that smart.” Colton frowned, his eyebrows drawing together. “I’ve just been alive for a long time.”

“How old are you?”

“Almost three thousand, give or take a decade. I stopped counting somewhere around my four hundredth birthday.”

“Oh, wow!”

Colton grimaced, waiting for the comments on how incredibly old and decrepit he was. Even for a paranormal, he was damn old, and he knew it. He didn’t need people rubbing it in his face.

“You must have seen and done so many things. I bet you have some really awesome stories to tell! Did you ever meet anyone famous?”

Colton stared at his mate in shock. The man looked like he might bust at the seams. His eyes lit up, his lips stretched into a goofy smile, and he literally vibrated with excitement. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know. We’ll trade. One of my stories for one of yours.”

Sly wrinkled his nose in distaste. “I don’t have any fascinating stories. I’m really boring and lame.”

“Rule number five,” Colton said firmly.

Sly closed his eyes and groaned. “You have a lot of rules.”

“You will not talk about yourself like that. You are not lame and boring. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as complicated as you.”

“That didn’t exactly sound like a compliment.” Sly opened his eyes and tilted his head to the side. “You’re serious?”

Colton dipped his head once.

“Fine.” Sly huffed, but Colton could see the corners of his lips twitch. “I’m only twenty-eight, though. So, I honestly don’t have very many interesting stories.”

“Twenty-eight?” Colton swallowed hard to keep from groaning.

“That’s actually middle-age for a ferret shifter.” Sly frowned and ducked his head. “Just like real ferrets, we’re extremely prone to cancer. Not many of us live past the age of sixty.”

Though the topic was utterly morbid, Colton couldn’t contain his curiosity. Besides, at least Sly was talking. “So, you mean you aren’t immune to diseases like other preternaturals?”

“Oh, we are. It’s just cancer that we’re susceptible to, and only a certain form. I can’t get or give colds or STDs and stuff, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried, baby. I just want to know more about you.”

Sly looked up at him and smiled widely. “I like that even better than babe.”

Returning Sly's mile-wide grin, Colton nodded. "Okay, then." The smile slid from his lips after only a moment though, and he addressed his mate seriously. "Sly, did you read the letter we got when we registered our mating?"

"Yeah." His eyebrows drew together in confusion. "Why?"

"It says our life forces—whatever the hell that is—are joined together now. If one dies, so does the other."

Sly's eyes widened almost comically, and his bottom lip began to tremble. "I didn't know," he whispered. "I'm really, really sorry. Don't be mad." He shook his head frantically. "I don't like it when you're mad."

"I'm not mad, baby. Calm down." Colton rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "You're not immortal, but I am. So, I don't have to worry about you dying on me. It's a good thing."

"But, what about the cancer?"

"Sly, there's no guarantee that you'll get it. You said most ferret shifters do, not all of you. Let's just be optimistic and cross that bridge *if* we come to it."

Colton watched his mate chew on his lip for a minute as he stared down at his fingers where they twined together nervously on the table. "Okay," he finally murmured.

"Good. So, tell me more."

"Well, what do you want to know?" Sly cocked his head to the side and twitched his nose.

"Everything, I suppose. Where are you from? What's your family like?" Colton paused and lifted an eyebrow. "Why you were hiding out at UPAC." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Sly?"

He didn't think Sly had done anything wrong, at least not purposely. The guy seemed to live in his own little world half the time, though. There was a very real possibility that he had inadvertently screwed up something.

Colton didn't like that idea, so he pushed it to the back of his mind. No, Sly had sought sanctuary from the elders, which could only mean that he was running from something...or someone.

"What time is it?" Sly stood up and hurried around the table to get a closer look at the clock on the microwave. "Oh, yay! It's my favorite time of day!"

Sighing, Colton turned in his seat to stare up at his mate. Obviously, Sly wasn't ready to talk yet. The man couldn't hide from him forever, though. "What time would that be?"

"The time when you get to shut up and fuck me into the wall." Sly grinned wickedly as he started unbuttoning his cargo shorts. "If you think you're up for it, that is."

Colton groaned, reaching down to readjust his swelling cock inside his own shorts. "I don't think that's going to be a problem."

"Mmm, then maybe I should make it a little...*harder* for you." Sly purred, swaying his hips as he shimmied out of his shorts. Then he turned in a circle, slowly working his shirt up his slim torso before whipping it over his head and tossing it at Colton. "Catch me," he whispered seductively then darted out of the room.

Chapter Five

Racing down the hallway toward Colton's bedroom, Sly had to slap a hand over his mouth to muffle his very unmanly squeal when strong arms wrapped around his chest and lifted him off the floor. Seemed his little game of catch the ferret was working out perfectly.

While he'd enjoyed the frequent and mind-blowing sex since he'd mated Colton, he felt it lacked something. Of course they didn't love each other, maybe one day, but still there should be more. Hopefully, a little playfulness in their carnal bouts would shake things up between them.

"Mmm, I caught you," Colton purred against his neck. "What do I win?"

"What do you want?" Sly moaned, tipping his head back to rest against his lover's shoulder. Then a small yelp escaped him as he was tossed through the air to land in the center of the bed.

Flipping over quickly, he licked his lips, skimming his fingers down his bare midsection until he reached his swollen cock. "Is this what you want, big guy?"

Colton growled, the sexiest sound Sly had ever heard, and began stripping out of his clothing, ripping them in places in his haste to get undressed. "The things you do to me. I can't even think straight sometimes." He knelt on the foot of the bed and began crawling toward Sly. "You are so gorgeous."

"You think I'm gorgeous?" Sly puffed his chest out and gave a sexy little pout of his lips. "Oh, I like it when you stroke my ego. Stroke it," he demanded. "You know you want to. Strooooooke it."

Colton blinked at him a few times then buried his face in Sly's lower belly as his entire body shook with mirth. "Oh, you are too much," he gasped through his laughter.

His warm breath stuttered over Sly's aching cock, causing it to jerk. Flopping back on the pillows, he arched his hips, moaning like a slut and praying Colton would get the hint. They still had several hours before the mating heat would become unbearable, but this had nothing to do with animal instinct or stupid magical potions. He wanted his mate, pure and simple.

"I'd rather stroke something else," Colton said huskily. His tongue darted out, swirling around Sly's bellybutton a few times before placing a sweet kiss just below it.

Then he left. He just fucking left, and Sly wanted to strangle him. He didn't even realize he'd whimpered until Colton chuckled from beside the bed. "I'm right here, Sly. I want you to do something for me."

Sly turned his head slightly so he could see his mate, but the majority of his attention was focused on the hand he currently had wrapped around his throbbing dick. "Uh." Okay, not a brilliant response, but what did the guy want from him? His goddamn dick was going to fall off, and it was all Colton's fault.

A cold, plastic bottle landed on his chest with a smack, causing Sly to hiss. Snatching up the lube with his unoccupied hand, he held it up as he quirked an eyebrow at his lover. "I thought you were supposed to use this."

"I want you to stretch yourself. I'll be right back."

"Where the hell are you going? You know, this kind of requires both of us."

Colton just chuckled again, shaking his hips so that his jutting cock swayed back and forth between his thighs. "Trust me."

Sly thought about arguing for all of a heartbeat, and then he shrugged and popped the lid on the bottle. If Colton wanted to go off and balance his checkbook, Sly would just handle himself. Granted, it

wasn't nearly as much fun, but he was too needy, too desperate, to say no.

After generously coating his fingers, Sly tossed the bottle aside, pulled his knees up to his chest, and pushed into his hole with two slick fingers. They'd been having so much sex, his ass just seemed to know what to expect and relaxed at the slightest touch.

Throwing his head back, Sly moaned and whimpered, rocking his hips as he fucked himself on his fingers and pumped his cock in fast, jerky movements. Within minutes, the tingle began in the base of his spine, and heat spread through his body. So close. So fucking close. Should he wait for Colton? Gods, he just wanted to come.

Inserting a third finger, he stretched his thumb up, caressing it over his tightening sac. His breath stuttered out, his heart pounded inside his chest, and electricity zoomed up his spine. "Colton!"

"Holy shit!" Colton's voice sounded a little strained and a lot needy.

"Please!" Sly cried out as he watched Colton crawl back up on the bed beside him. "I need you, Colton."

"I know, baby. Shh, relax. I'm going to take good care of you. I have something for you." Colton covered Sly's hand where it fisted around his cock and slowed his movements. "Look, baby." He held up a large black butt plug and wiggled his eyebrows.

"But...b-but, I want you in me," Sly whined. While he appreciated the gift, he needed his mate.

"And you'll have me. I thought you wanted to play?" Without waiting for a response, Colton moved between Sly's splayed legs and wrapped his fingers around Sly's wrist. He pulled gently, extracting Sly's fingers from his hole, and immediately replaced them with the tip of the butt plug. "Deep breath, baby."

Sly nodded rapidly, sucking as much air into his aching lungs as possible and letting it out slowly as the silicone toy began pushing into his loosened entrance. Though bigger than his fingers, the plug had nothing on Colton's cock. Still, if his mate wanted to play, Sly

would happily turn over the reins to him. This is what he'd wanted after all. Something more than sweaty monkey sex.

"You have the prettiest little hole, Sly. It looks so nice all stretched around this plug." He looked up, meeting Sly's gaze with lust blazing in his eyes. "Do you like that, baby?"

Sly felt the flat base push against his spread cheeks just before Colton wiggled the toy inside his ass. "Yes!" Sweat beaded across his body, and his heart thundered up in his throat. "More!"

"Oh, I have more," Colton purred.

Then something smooth and flexible encompassed Sly's balls, and he snapped his eyelids open, pushing up on his elbows to get a better look. Whatever Colton was wrapping around his balls looked kind of like a tiny clear yoga ball. "W-what's that?"

Colton gave him a deviant grin but didn't say a word. Then suddenly, vibrations began in Sly's balls, shooting pleasure all the way up to the leaking tip of his cock. "Oh, my god! What are you doing?"

"There's more."

Sly didn't know how much more he could take. He writhed on the bed, panting and sweating as sensations overwhelmed him. Just when he thought it couldn't possibly get any better, heat surrounded his sac along with the vibrating, and Colton's wet mouth wrapped around the head of his cock.

"Ah! Colt!" His head whipped back and forth. His fingers tangled in Colton's long, black hair. He couldn't breathe. It was too much and not enough, all at the same time.

Colton hummed around Sly's throbbing shaft, swirling his tongue around the head then dipping it into the slit. Sly nearly came up off the bed. He wasn't going to last. The need to come drowned him until it was the only thought in his muddled brain.

"Colt...need...oh, fuck!" The toy in his clenching ass began to move, slowly at first, then harder, faster, pumping into him in time with the bobbing of his lover's lips along his cock. Then Colton

pulled the plug almost all the way out and shoved it back in roughly as he sucked hard around the spongy crown of Sly's dick.

Stars exploded behind his closed eyelids, and Sly couldn't hold back any longer. With a loud cry, he arched his back, pushing his cock as far into Colton's mouth as he could go and erupted, spilling his seed into his mate's welcoming mouth.

He cried out again when the toy was pulled from his still convulsing channel, and Colton's cock pushed into him, nailing his prostate on the first thrust. "Open your eyes, baby. I want you to look at me when I take you."

It was a struggle, but Sly eventually managed to drag his eyelids open and stare up into the dark gray depths of his mate's eyes. The look on Colton's face was so tender, yet so intense, Sly had to fight the urge to look away. No one had ever looked him that way. Never.

Colton pulled all the way out until the tip of his rock-hard cock just kissed Sly's fluttering hole then pushed back in to the root slowly. He did it again, pulling all the way out then back in, over and over, teasing until Sly thought he'd lose his mind. The contrast between being filled and emptied short-circuited his brain, and it was all he could do to remember to breathe.

The toy around his sac continued to vibrate and warm his balls, sending lightning bolts of pleasure racing up his still hard cock. He'd always had great recovery time, but this was ridiculous. Within minutes of Colton's hard length filling him, Sly felt like he'd blow again any minute.

His eyes started to drift closed, but he snapped them open again when Colton growled. "Keep your eyes open. I want you to see me, to know I'm the only one that will ever have you in this way again. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Sly whispered. Not just because he knew that's what his mate wanted to hear, but because he believed it. He'd always belong to Colton, and not only because they'd mated. He felt it deep down in his heart, and it made his chest constrict with emotion. "Only you."

“That’s right, baby. Only me. You’re mine.” Colton continued his slow glide, thrusting his hips gently as he bent over Sly and claimed his lips in a scorching kiss.

As the intensity of the kiss built, so did the snap of Colton’s hips. He slammed into Sly hard enough to move him up the mattress and rattle him right down to his bones. It was as though the man was trying to prove something—to claim Sly from the inside out. And Sly loved every fucking second of it.

When the need for oxygen finally drove their lips apart, Colton slid his arms under Sly’s back and buried his face in Sly’s neck. He growled and groaned, his thrusts becoming erratic and jerky, and Sly knew his lover was close.

Wrapping his arms around his mate’s broad shoulders, Sly scraped his teeth along the side of Colton’s neck, nipping at the salty flesh before swirling his tongue around it to soothe the burn. “Come for me, Colt. Show me I’m yours.”

“You *are* mine,” Colton growled just before driving into Sly forcefully then stilling completely. His deep, drawn-out groan was muffled against Sly’s neck as the scorching lava of his release exploded inside Sly’s hungry ass.

The feelings, both physical and emotional, hit Sly like a freight train, and he pressed his mouth against Colton’s shoulder to muffle his screams as hot, sticky ropes of cum burst from his slit to fill the marginal space between them. His head swam, his body burned, and he suddenly couldn’t get enough air into his lungs.

He didn’t know what had just happened, but he knew it was something important. Confused and unwilling to examine the whirling emotions inside him, he wrapped his arms around Colton’s neck and held on for dear life. Maybe with a little more time, his brain would finally catch up to what his heart was trying to tell him.

* * * *

Colton grumbled around the house the next morning, digging through drawers and tearing the sofa apart. "Sly!"

His mate came bounding into the room, his bottom lip clenched between his teeth and his hands behind his back. He didn't say anything, but looked up at Colton expectantly.

Colton knew Sly hated it when he yelled. He didn't know what had happened in the man's past to make him so nervous, but Colton never wanted Sly to be afraid of him. Walking around the sofa, he stood in front of his lover and reached out slowly to cup his cheek. "I didn't mean to yell. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Sly whispered.

"No, it's not. I know you don't like that, and it makes you afraid. I promise to be more careful."

"Thank you. I know you wouldn't hurt me, and I'm sorry that I freak out sometimes. I'll try to do better, too." He gave Colton a sweet smile and nuzzled into his palm. "So, why were you calling for me?"

"Have you seen my watch? I've looked all over the damn house, and I can't find it anywhere."

Sly's eyes widened, and his face paled as he jerked away from Colton's hand and took several hasty steps backward. "I didn't steal it, Colton. I promise."

"Sly, calm down." Colton's eyebrows drew together in concern. "I never said you stole it. I just wondered if maybe you'd seen it." He took a step forward, but stopped and frowned when Sly stepped away from him again. "What's going on?"

"It was just lying there, and it was so sparkly, and I really didn't steal it. I know it's yours, and I wouldn't steal your stuff," Sly rambled so quickly, Colton barely understood him. "I just wanted to put in my box with all my other shiny stuff to keep it safe for you. You can have it back whenever you want. I just like to look at it with all my other treasures."

Tears pooled in Sly's eyes, and Colton felt so lost. Why was his mate so upset? "Baby, I don't understand," he confessed.

"I can't help it!" Sly wailed. "I'm a ferret by nature, Colt. When I see something shiny or sparkly, I just have to have it. I can't stop myself. I'm sorry. I didn't steal it," he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time.

Heartache and anger warred inside Colton. Not anger at Sly, but at the person who had put such fear into his mate. "Sly, come here," he said gently.

Sly sighed, his entire body trembling, as he ducked his head and walked over to stand in front of Colton. "Now, look at me." Very slowly, Sly lifted his head. "Baby, do I look angry or upset?" Sly stared at him intently for a long moment then shook his head. "Good, because I'm not. I understand it's in your nature. I would like to wear my watch during the day, but if you want to keep it in your box of treasures at night, I'm okay with that. Sound good?"

Sly's eyes lit up with excitement, and he bobbed his head quickly. "Really? I can do that?"

"Of course. It's called compromise, baby. I can see your need to horde shiny things, even if I don't fully understand it."

"So, we're okay now?"

"We were never *not* okay." Colton wrapped his fingers around the back of Sly's neck and pulled him forward to brush their lips together. "Don't hide from me, remember?"

"Okay," Sly mumbled distractedly. Then he reared back and frowned. "In that case, I have a question I've been wanting to ask since last night."

"Ask away."

"Where did you get those toys? Did you have them for another lover? Because I really don't like that," he huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "You haven't left the house since we've been here, so you obviously had them before you knew you'd be bringing me home."

Colton had to laugh at the pout on his mate's face. The man was jealous, and it was too cute. "I bought them the day after we arrived home. If you didn't feel the need to sleep until noon every day, you could have come with me."

"Hey, it's only ten o'clock. I didn't sleep until noon today!" Sly continued to pout, but Colton could see the relief in his eyes and posture.

"Yes, and I'm pretty sure Hell is freezing over as we speak."

Sly smiled and shrugged. "Well, everyone needs a purpose in life. Making goals and achieving them, that's me."

Chapter Six

Slamming the pan down on the stove, Colton growled in frustration. Two weeks since his and Sly's mating, and he was ready to bang his head against the wall. Just when he thought he was making progress with the man, things would go tumbling downhill again. The sex was hot, the conversation fun, although sometimes strange, and they seemed to have quite a bit in common, liking many of the same things from books to favorite foods.

"Are you mad?"

Colton closed his eyes and prayed for patience. He couldn't even count the number of times Sly ask that question since he'd arrived. Would he always have to walk on eggshells around his mate? "No," he ground out.

"You sound like you're mad."

"I'm not mad," Colton growled. And he wasn't exactly. He was damn frustrated, though.

"Uh-huh, right." Thin arms wrapped around Colton from behind, and Sly pressed his face between Colton's shoulder blades. "It's okay if you're mad. I just want to know why."

Colton lost the fragile hold he had on his self-control and spun around in Sly's arms, his chest heaving as he stared down at his mate. "I'm pissed off because I wake up alone in my bed every fucking morning. You're my mate, damn it! You're supposed to be with me!"

Sly still slept in Asher's old room. He still hoarded his possessions and became angry or nervous when Colton would ask to look at them. Though the split personalities had finally seemed to meld themselves into one, there were still times when Colton just felt like Sly was

hiding something from him. Something a hell of a lot more important than his watch.

Even when Sly would fall asleep in Colton's bed after a particularly strenuous round of sex, Colton would always wake up in the morning to find him gone. He didn't like it. In fact, he hated it. Sly should be with him, cuddled against him every morning when he woke up. Colton hadn't pushed the issue, understanding that Sly would need time and his own space to adjust to this new life that had been forced upon each of them. How long was he supposed to wait, though?

"Okay," Sly said with a smile.

"Okay?" Colton deflated some and began to feel like a gigantic jackass. "Just like that?"

"Well, yeah. I would love to sleep in your bed. I just didn't know if I was welcome. You never asked, Colt."

True, he hadn't asked Sly to share his bed or his room. He just assumed the man would know he was wanted. Okay, so maybe some of their issues could be solved with some good old-fashioned communication.

"So, what else are you mad about? You're all grumbly this morning."

"You keep things from me. We're supposed to be a team. You get mad when I want to see your little knickknacks, and if I say something wrong, you clam right up and won't talk to me for hours. You're always twitchy, and I'm constantly afraid of saying or doing something that's going to make you run." Once Colton got started, he couldn't seem to stop himself. He had to get it all out before it ate away at him.

"I feel guilty when I'm angry about something, even when I have a right to my anger. I know you don't like it when I yell, but sometimes I just can't help how I feel. That doesn't even mean that I'm angry with *you*. I always thought that my mate would be the one

person I trusted more than anyone in the world. That I could tell them anything.”

“You can tell me anything, Colt.”

“No, I can’t!” Colton eased Sly away as gently as he could and started pacing the kitchen. “If I show the slightest bit of aggression outside of the bedroom, you act like I’m going to chain you to the wall and beat you. I don’t get it! I don’t know anything about you! How am I supposed to make you happy if I don’t know you?”

“Colt.”

Colton ignored him. “You said you were hiding out at UPAC, but I don’t know why. You obviously have some kind of history with those two assholes that tried to claim you. I don’t know if the two are related, and if they are, what the fuck happened? Are they going to keep looking for you? Do we need to leave? How am I supposed to protect you if I don’t know what the hell is going on?”

“Colt!”

Stopping in his tracks, Colton turned and looked at his mate hopelessly. “You gotta give me something, Sly. I’m sinking here, baby.”

“I told you that I’m really protective of my things. I have to be, or people try to take them. I don’t like it when people take my stuff without permission. It’s rude.” Sly crossed his arms over his slim chest, and his bottom lip slid out.

Colton had the insane urge to laugh. The man was so adorable, and he didn’t even know it. “I can understand that, and it is rude, but I don’t want to take your things away from you, Sly. I just want to feel like I’m part of your life, even just a tiny part.”

“See, you say all the right things, but then so did Grant. Then he’d smack me around when he got angry. And no, he didn’t even have to be mad at me to do it. I’ve had broken bones, bruises, cuts, burns, and he once even tore the tendons in my knee. Then he stole something very special from me.”

Colton didn't know what to say, and he couldn't seem to settle on one emotion either. Part of him was pissed off that Sly would compare him to that asshole. Another part wanted vengeance on anyone stupid enough to hurt his mate. His heart broke for the sadness in Sly's voice, and yet some other little part of him wanted to whoop for joy that his lover was finally opening up to him. Unsure of what to say or do, Colton did nothing. He stood perfectly still and barely even breathed, afraid it would startle Sly, and he'd run again.

"Grant and his brother, Seth, are dingoes."

"You mean dingbats? Like they're idiots? Yeah, I kind of caught that." Colton snapped his mouth closed when Sly just glared at him.

"No, I'm not stupid. I know what I said. They are dingoes, like the wild hunting dogs from Australia."

"They don't have accents."

Sly actually rolled his eyes and snorted. "Where were you born, Colt?"

"Europe," Colt answered immediately. "Near Italy."

"You don't have an accent." Sly tilted his head to the side and smirked.

"Okay, point taken." Colton chuckled, realizing the idiocy of his earlier statement, and reached out to take Sly's hand. "I really want to hear more. Do you want to go sit in the living room with me?"

"Can we cuddle? I'd feel better if I could cuddle while I tell you this."

"Anything you want."

"Oh, I like it when you say that. Say it again," Sly purred.

Colton laughed as he swatted his ferret's ass. "Brat."

They made their way to the living room hand in hand, and Colton plopped down on the couch, opening his arms for Sly to come to him. His mate rolled his eyes and took a seat next to him, snuggling against his side instead. "I'm a grown man, Colt."

Colton felt a little disappointed, but he guessed he understood. He'd feel damn silly sitting in someone's lap, even someone bigger

than him. “Okay, so keep going. Seth and Grant are the two assholes from the conference, and they’re dingo shifters. I don’t think I’ve ever met a dingo shifter before. They sound tasty.”

Sly looked up at him in shock before he burst into laughter. “You’re serious?”

“Baby, I’m part griffin, a hunter by nature, the same way you like to collect shiny objects. Griffins eat entire horses. So, yes, a wild dog sounds fairly delicious.”

“Do you eat ferrets?”

Colton knew his face had turned about five different shades of red, but he nodded in assent. “Yeah, they’re a delicacy for me. I don’t eat them often, though, and you never have to be afraid of me. I wouldn’t eat you.”

Sly laughed even harder. “Oh, I’m okay with you eating me, just not in that way. Have you ever eaten a ferret shifter? Or just real ferrets?”

“Only the naturally born kind...that I know of,” Colton added under his breath. Then he looked at his mate sternly. “You’re distracting me. I want to know what Grant has to do with you seeking asylum with the elders.”

Sly sobered immediately and pressed himself closer to Colton’s side. “I put up with Grant’s shit for years. I was young and stupid, and figured it had to be my fault that he treated me that way. He hated it when I got excited about things—said I was annoying. So, I tried really hard, I did, but sometimes I just can’t help it.”

“No one has the right to hit you, baby. No matter how angry they are, or even if you do something wrong, it doesn’t mean it’s okay for them to hurt you.” Colton wanted to hiss and growl then run out and find the stupid *dog* and beat him bloody. Hypocritical maybe, but he didn’t really give a shit.

“I know that now.” Sly nodded seriously. “By the time I figured it out, I was already in too deep, though. Grant had taken over my entire life. He controlled my bank accounts, sold my car, and cut off any

kind of communication with the outside world. I wasn't his lover. I was his prisoner."

"But you got out," Colton said softly, encouraging Sly to continue. He hoped the worst part of the story was over.

"Yes. He and Seth came home drunk one night, and Grant wanted to play."

Colton closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. The worst definitely wasn't over.

"I told them no, that I wouldn't be passed around like a fucking toy." Sly went quiet, and Colton could feel his body tremble against him. "I've never seen Grant lose it like that before. He was still hitting me when I passed out."

"Then what?" Colton could barely get the words out around the lump in his throat and the rage boiling in his gut.

"Even though I'm a shifter, and we heal pretty fast, it took me two weeks before I could even get out of bed on my own. Grant came to my room with his lame ass apologies as usual, and I told him I was finished. I wouldn't stick around to be his punching bag."

"Good for you," Colton whispered into Sly's hair as he wrapped his arms around him. "That took a lot of courage. I'm proud of you."

"He completely lost it, yelling and screaming that he would kill me before he ever let me leave. He even shifted and bit me." Sly continued the story in a slow monotone as though Colton hadn't spoken. "I remember thinking I was going to die, and I was okay with that. If that was the only way I could escape, I'd still win, ya know?"

Colton blinked rapidly when his eyes and nose began to burn. He couldn't even imagine the hell his little man had lived through. "How did you get to Scotland?"

"Grant's sister, Jessie. She called Elder Rice and asked him to provide sanctuary. She told him the whole story, but left out the little part that Grant was the one terrorizing me. She made him sound like the fucking hero, going on about how he saved me, but they didn't know if they could protect me if whoever did those things to me came

back. I know she just wanted to keep her brother safe, and she did help me. So, I guess I should be grateful.”

“No matter her faults, she saved your life, Sly. I’m very grateful to her.” Colton rested his chin on the top of Sly’s head and closed his eyes. “Did you ever tell Elder Rice the truth?”

He felt Sly’s head shake back and forth. “I was going to talk to him when he arrived for the gathering.”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“Grant and Seth showed up first.”

* * * *

Their lovemaking that night was slow and lazy, and Sly had never felt more cherished or wanted. Every move Colton made was tender and gentle as he whispered words of acceptance and promises of forever. He never said the words that Sly longed to hear, but it was close enough for the time being.

Their releases found them at the same time, catching Sly by surprise and causing him to gasp into Colton’s mouth as his mate kissed him with enough passion to set the mattress on fire. When they were each sated, and Colton had cleaned them up, they snuggled down beneath the blankets and Sly smiled in contentment.

“I like this,” he whispered. “I feel safe.”

“I will never let anything or anyone hurt you again, baby. Never,” Colton vowed as he kissed Sly’s temple and tightened his arms around him.

“I know. That’s what makes it so perfect.” He wanted to say the words in his heart, but held back, afraid of ruining the moment. They’d only been mated for two weeks. It was too soon. Not only for him to confess the feelings that whirled inside him, but too soon for him to even feel those kinds of things for Colton. Right?

Maybe it was just infatuation. Or better yet, perhaps he felt this deep affection for Colton because the man had essentially rescued

him from a fate worse than death. He hadn't been looking to spark up a relationship so soon after escaping Grant's clutches, but something about Colton just called to him. He'd known the minute he laid eyes on the huge shifter that he had to have him.

What would Colton do when he found out about Sly's deceit?

Moaning miserably, the tears springing to his eyes, Sly tried to wiggle away from Colton. His mate just tightened his arms, crushing Sly back to his chest. "Calm down, Sly. What's wrong? Are you crying?"

Colton flipped him to his back and hovered over him as he swiped at the tears on Sly's face with his fingertips. "What, baby? What's wrong? Please, talk to me."

The concern in his lover's voice only made Sly feel that much worse, and a small sob escaped his lips before he could stop it.

"Sly, you're scaring me," Colton whispered. "Please, tell me what to do."

"You can't do anything!" Sly cried out. "I tricked you! I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry!"

Colton paused in the act of wiping away more stray tears and just stared. "How did you trick me?" he asked slowly.

"I didn't have a drink during the toast. I was running from Grant and Seth, and I barely even made it into the ballroom when the elder finished his speech about the matings." He tried to wiggle away from Colton again, but the man held him firmly to the mattress by his hips.

"You didn't drink the champagne? You never went into a mating heat?"

Sly squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head frantically. "I'm sorry. You were so gorgeous, and you saved me from Grant. Then you were so nice, and you wanted me. You wanted me, not what I could give you or to slap me around to make you feel better about yourself. And I only heard part of the elders' speech, so I thought, oh, it doesn't matter what I thought."

"Sly, open your eyes."

Sly shook his head again. He didn't want to see the anger and disappointment in Colton's face. "I didn't know that you were going to be stuck with me for the next four years. I promise! I thought that we could just mate, and then you could send me on my way when you got bored with me. I just wanted someone to want me for like five freakin' minutes, ya know?"

His eyelids snapped open in surprise when Colton bent over him and pressed his lips to Sly's, cutting off his hysterical babbling. "That's better," Colton said around his smirk when he pulled away. "Baby, I did drink the champagne. I would have had to choose a mate either way. I'm glad it was you."

"You're not mad?" Sly felt more confused than ever. "But I tricked you."

"Yes, and I hope it won't happen again. I understand why you did it, though. Besides, like I said, I had no choice but to choose a mate within twenty-four hours. I'm just sorry that you tied yourself to me if you didn't have to."

"I'm not sorry," Sly whispered. "I've wanted a mate for as long as I can remember. You're more than perfect for me. I don't think even fate could have chosen someone better."

"I feel the same way." Colton kissed his lips again and rubbed their noses together. "You're special, Sly. You're just what I needed in my life." Then he sat up and winked. "Now, what was that about only hearing part of the elders' speech?"

Sly smiled sheepishly. "I didn't know I had tricked you until I heard you talking to your friend on the phone about the champagne. The only thing I heard from the elders was that we all had to mate within twenty-four hours. I didn't know they'd put something in the drinks."

Colton snorted and rolled his eyes. "Then what is all this about? You didn't trick me, baby. You just didn't know. There's a big difference."

“I know, but I figured you would still be angry. I should have paid more attention, found out more about what was going on before I just hauled off and claimed you. I really am sorry, Colt.”

“Stop it.” Colton stretched out again and pulled Sly close to his chest. “I’m glad you’re here.” Soft lips brushed against the back of Sly’s neck. “So, thank you for tricking me—or not tricking me. However you want to look at it.”

Chapter Seven

“I’ve been thinking,” Sly said just before shoving a bite of his omelet into his mouth the next morning at breakfast.

“Alert the media,” Colton teased as he settled into the seat across the table from him with his own plate.

Sly swallowed and wrinkled his nose. “Oh, hush. It’s not right for Grant to get away with the things that he did to me. What if he hurts someone else? I don’t want to be a snitch, but I think we should tell UPAC.”

Colton nodded seriously. “I think that’s an excellent idea, baby. It doesn’t make you a snitch. People like Grant and Seth are dangerous. The elders need to know about it.”

“There’s something else.” Sly hesitated for just a moment before he dug into his pocket and extracted the treasure inside. He clenched it possessively in his fist and stared at Colton for a long time. “I want to show you something, but it’s mine. You can’t have it.” God, he sounded like a whiney toddler, but this was important. Colton needed to understand. “It’s okay if you want to see it or hold it, but you can’t take it away from me.”

“Sly, I would never take your things away.” Colton sighed in exasperation. “How many times do we have to go over this?”

“I know, but a lot of people have tried to take it. A lot of really good, honest people.”

“Okay, I get it.” Colton didn’t look like he understood at all, but at least he was trying. “So, what do you want to show me?”

Sliding his arm across the table, it took every ounce of willpower he had to unclench his fist and drop the object into his mate’s waiting

palm. "It just looks like a pretty rock to me, but people always want it—not one like it, but this exact one."

Colton turned the stone over in his hand as he stared down at it intently. "Sly, do you know what this is?"

"It's an opal, right? It's so colorful."

"Right. Where did you get this, baby?"

"Which time?"

Colton looked at him with raised eyebrows. "How about you tell me the whole story?"

"Well, it belonged to my dad. He used to wear it in this pendant around his neck. Then Mom got really sick. I was little, so I don't remember much. I think it was cancer that made her sick though." Sly paused and took a deep breath to keep from rambling. "Anyway, Dad let her wear it a lot when she was sick, and it always seemed to make her feel better."

"I'm sorry about your mom," Colton said quietly.

Sly nodded his thanks. "Well, then Dad got sick, too. I heard them arguing one night about who should wear the necklace. Dad wanted Mom to have it, but she just kept crying and saying she didn't want it."

"So, who ended up taking it?" Colton looked so sad, like he knew what was coming.

"Neither. They sent me and the stone to live with my grandmother, and they both died a week later."

"I'm sorry," Colton whispered.

Sly shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I was only five, so I don't really remember them that well."

"When did your grandmother give it to you?"

"Just after I turned eighteen. Grammy said she was old and tired, and that it was time for her to rest. Then she kissed me on the forehead, put the stone in my hand, and told me to always keep it with me. She died three months after that."

Colton opened his mouth, but then quickly pressed his lips together and shook his head slightly. "So, then what happened? You said it was given to you more than once."

"No, only Grammy gave it to me. I stole it the second time."

"Care to elaborate on that?"

Sly shrugged. He hadn't really done anything wrong. "I lost it right after I moved in with Grant. I looked for it everywhere. It never crossed my mind that he'd taken it. Then I saw him with it at the gathering. That's why I was late for the toast. I shifted and snuck into his room in the castle and took it back. It was mine first! I can't get in trouble if it already belonged to me. Right?"

"No, Sly." Colton chuckled softly. "You're right. It was yours first. Baby, did your grandmother ever explain what this stone is?" He rolled the stone between his fingers again then passed it back to Sly.

Wrapping his fingers around it, Sly sighed in relief. He knew Colton would never force him to give up something so important, but he just felt better with it in his hand. "No, she just said to never give it to anyone and always keep it with me. Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing is wrong, Sly. Can't you feel it?"

Sly frowned, wrinkling his nose and pulling his eyebrows together. "Feel what?"

"Baby, I can feel the power in that little stone from clear across the table. I even felt it when you had it in your pocket. I just couldn't figure out what I was feeling."

"My little stone is powerful?" Sly snorted. Colton was obviously messing with him.

"Very powerful and very rare. I've only seen one in my lifetime—this one makes two. It's a *fortuna lapidem arcus* or simply the *iris lapis*. It means the rainbow stone of fortune, and it is one of the most powerful magical objects in our world."

Sly snorted again. Now, he knew Colton was yanking his chain. "Right. Colton, it's just a damn rock! A pretty one, granted, but still just a little stone."

Colton smiled indulgently and shook his head. “The *iris lapis* is said to give the owner eternal life, provide healing from sickness and injury, and grant infallible good fortune. You said your mom got better when she wore it.”

“I said it made her feel better. Maybe because it was something special from my dad.” Sly shrugged. He might be naïve about some things, but he wasn’t stupid.

“Do you trust me?”

Sly snapped his attention back to Colton, scrutinizing him for a long minute before slowly nodding his head. “Absolutely.”

“Then come here.” Colton stood from his seat and waved a hand for Sly to follow him. He led him over to the kitchen counter, pulled a knife from the butcher’s block, and held out his other palm. “Let me see your hand.”

Taking a deep breath, Sly hesitantly placed his hand in Colton’s, trying not to shake as his mate flipped his hand palm up and brought the point of the knife to it. “Deep breath,” Colton murmured. “I won’t cut very deep, and it will only sting for a minute.”

Sly nodded, placing his full trust in his obviously crazy mate. Did that make him insane as well? Probably.

He sucked in air through his teeth as the blade sliced across his palm. It was a shallow cut, but blood beaded to the surface immediately, and Sly felt his stomach roll. Colton took his wrist and pulled him to the sink, running cold water over the wound. “Now, hold the opal and think about the wound being healed.”

Sly shrugged. If it would appease his mate, and they could move on from this crazy talk, he was willing to give in to it. Transferring the stone to his still bleeding hand, he closed his fingers around it, grimacing at the blood that must be coating his beautiful treasure.

Closing his eyes, he thought about the wound closing, healing, leaving no scar or evidence behind. A warm tingle began in his palm, then radiated out to his fingertips, and the gash began to itch.

Gasping softly, Sly opened his hand. Colton removed the small rock from his palm, and Sly stood there, gaping in shock. The cut was completely healed like nothing had ever happened. There was no pain, no tenderness, not even a pink line to prove there had ever been anything wrong.

Shaking his head in denial, Sly looked up at his mate and frowned. “Okay, but what about this good fortune crap? I don’t call being held and beaten against my will for four fucking years good luck!” Yeah, he was pissed. If this stone was supposed to be so goddamn magical and powerful, then why hadn’t it protected him when he’d needed it most?

“The *dog*,” Colton growled the word, “took it from you. He became the owner, Sly. Think about it. What was your life like before he took it?”

“I had a great life. Well, I mean, other than my family dying. It started around the time I was eighteen. It seemed I could never do any wrong. Everything I wanted just kind of fell into place or dropped into my lap like a gift. I was the lu...” Sly trailed off, his eyes widened, and he almost collapsed right there on the spot.

“Easy,” Colton cooed. He wrapped an arm around Sly’s waist to hold him up then led them both to the living room where he gently set Sly on the sofa before taking a seat next to him. “And what about since you’ve recovered the *iris lapis*? Have good things happened since then?”

Tears pricked the corners of his eyes, and Sly’s lips turned up in an adoring smile as he gazed at his mate. “I found you,” he whispered. “I’d call that pretty lucky.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Colton smiled, proud and cocky, but his eyes were soft as he bent forward and brushed a soft kiss over Sly’s brow. “I think we should keep this between us for now. There are people in the world that would do anything to get their hands on that little gem.”

Sly snorted derisively as he thought about Grant. “Believe me, I know.”

* * * *

“I need to find a job.”

Colton groaned and rolled his eyes. They’d been having this conversation every day for the last week and half. “Sly, I have more than enough money to take care of us. I’ve told you this a million times. There is no need for you to work. Besides, I like spoiling you.”

“I know, but I want to do nice things for you, too,” Sly pouted. “I know you have money, Colt, but that’s just it. It’s *your* money. I need something for me!”

“Baby.” Colton sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “You’re my mate, my partner. There is no more mine and yours—only ours. I’ve put your name on all of my bank accounts and credit cards. You have the same access to that money as I do. Use it however you want. Lord knows I never touch it.”

“It’s not the same.”

“What if I gave you an allowance? Would that work?”

“So, now I’m twelve?”

“Ugh!” Colton threw his hands in the air and stormed out the back door, slamming it behind him. Sly had to be the most infuriating man on the planet. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t seem to please the stubborn little shit.

“And apparently, you’re an overgrown five-year-old.” Sly stood inside the open doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest. “What’s the big deal about me getting a job?”

Colton didn’t know how to explain it without coming off as a chauvinistic, overbearing pig. He blew out a breath, shoving his hands through his hair as he paced the faded planks of the back porch. “I don’t want you to work, okay? I want you here with me. I want you to enjoy life and have fun. I want to take care of you,” he finally

admitted. "If you need something to occupy your time, then get a hobby, not a job."

Sly didn't say anything for a long time, and Colton couldn't bring himself to turn around and look at the man. He knew he was being completely unreasonable, and maybe even a little domineering, but he couldn't help the way he felt.

"That is either the sweetest or most arrogant thing I've ever heard."

Colton finally turned to look at his mate, only to growl when he found Sly smiling at him. "This isn't funny. I have no idea how to act around you. It's like everything I try to do is wrong. How about you just tell me what you want, and I'll do that? Maybe then you'll finally be happy, princess!"

Sly didn't even bat a lash. "Come in, and I'll make you one of my famous grilled cheese sandwiches."

"With tomatoes and mayonnaise?"

"Is there any other way to make one?"

Colton thought it over for half a second then sighed and nodded his head. "I'm being a dick, huh?"

"Just a little, but it's kind of cute."

Colton opened his mouth, ready with a snappy comeback, but Sly held up his hand to halt him. "Food first, and then we'll talk. I'm okay with you wanting to take care of me, but I'm not okay with you wanting to run my life."

"I don't want to run your life." Colton stepped closer to his mate and reached out to brush a lock of golden hair back from his face. "I just want you to be happy. I like taking care of you. I've never had anyone to take care of before. It makes me happy."

Sly groaned and pulled away as he turned to go back into the kitchen. "Sexy and manipulative," he grumbled. "There should be a law against it."

Chapter Eight

As they moved into the first full week of April, Colton began to get nervous. The full moon was fast approaching, and while he'd somehow managed to survive the first one, it had been a test in strength.

"The full moon is tomorrow night," Sly announced as he sidled into the living room. "It's going to be so much fun!" He beamed from ear to ear, and Colton just wanted to bury his face in his hands and groan.

"Sly," he moaned pathetically. "I can't be around you when we shift. Don't you remember what I am?"

He wasn't bound by the lunar orb like werewolves or some other shifters, but it still called to him, and he liked to shift and fly in the night sky on those nights. It also seemed that his mate felt the pull to shift on those nights as well. Colton had flown for hours during the last full moon, staying as far away from Sly as possible. He hadn't returned home until the first rays of morning had crested over the horizon, so exhausted, he did nothing more than stumble into the house and pass out on the sofa.

Apparently, his little mate hadn't like that one bit if the ass chewing he got that afternoon was any indication. Sly wanted to play, and he didn't want to play alone. Colton just didn't know how to tell his lover that every time he got near him in his ferret form, all he could think about was how delicious he smelled.

"Well, yeah." Sly tilted his head to the side, looking thoroughly confused. "But I'm your mate. Surely you don't want to eat your mate."

“Sorry to break it to you, but I do.” Colton stared at Sly, trying to make him understand the seriousness of the situation. “It’s like having a T-bone waved in front of a starving man. All of my instincts kick in, especially when you run, and I just want to...well...”

“Eat me,” Sly supplied for him when he couldn’t finish. “How romantic.”

“I can’t help what I am any more than you can!” Colton didn’t mean to get snippy. He knew it wasn’t Sly’s fault, but the guy could at least try to understand.

“Well, I have a plan if you’re interested.”

“If it involves you being anywhere near me when we shift, then no, I don’t want to hear it.”

“Fine, have it your way.” Sly turned on his heels and flounced out of the room as if they hadn’t just had a life and death discussion. “I’ll just have to find someone else to play with while you’re off flying,” he called from down the hall.

Colton was off the sofa and stomping after his mate before he even realized he intended to move. “Sly! Get your ass back here!” he bellowed.

His mate froze, turning slowly to look up at him with a wicked grin. “I’m right here. You don’t have to yell.”

“You’re not going to make me jealous and trick me into something I know is dangerous. I don’t appreciate you trying to manipulate me either. How do you think I’d feel if I accidentally hurt you? Never mind the fact that if you die, so will I. Forgot the little part about us being bound together, did you?”

“I wasn’t trying to trick you or manipulate you. I just wanted to get your attention.” Sly wiggled his eyebrows. “Now that I have it, I would like to discuss my idea like two rational adults. Do you think you can handle that?”

Colton stared at his mate in shock. Had he just been scolded? It sure as hell sounded like it, and worse, he felt like he deserved it. “Okay, I’m sorry. I really suck at this whole relationship thing.”

“Not at all.” Sly stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Colton’s waist. “We’re both still getting to know each other. I don’t know your whole *extremely* long past”—he paused and grinned playfully—“but from what you’ve told me, you’ve been alone for a while.”

“I’ve had Asher.”

Sly wrinkled his nose at this and started to step away, but Colton locked his arms around his mate and held on tight. “Don’t get jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” Sly mumbled.

Colton bit the inside of cheek to keep from chuckling. He wasn’t buying a word of it. Instead, he continued as though he hadn’t heard his lover. “Asher is my best friend, and we’ve lived together for centuries. As a phoenix shifter, he understands what it’s like to be so different. We’re both outcasts. Even in the paranormal world, we’re still technically mythological beasts. It hasn’t always been easy.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Sly seemed to find the buttons of Colton’s shirt very interesting. “I just don’t see why you have to talk about him all the time.”

“I just told you. He’s been my best friend, really my only friend, for what seems like forever. I love him like a brother, but that’s all. We were never lovers, and we never will be. Asher is definitely not my type. You have absolutely nothing to worry or be jealous about.”

Colton was a little surprised when Sly continued to avoid his gaze and started fidgeting with the hem of Colton’s shirt. “I’m not jealous like that. Even if you two were lovers, I know that you wouldn’t be unfaithful to me. I guess I’m just jealous because he knows so much about you, and I feel like I’ve barely skimmed the surface.”

Cradling his mate’s face in both palms, Colton eased his face up and kissed the tip of his nose. “He may have known me longer, but you know me in ways he doesn’t. Plus, we have an eternity to get to know each other. It’s only been a month, baby. Now, where’s my excitable little ferret?”

Sly snorted and rolled his eyes. "You're a dork."

Colton let the comment slide and brushed his lips over Sly's. "You wanted to ask me something?"

"Can I ride you?" Sly blurted then turned the most adorable shade of pink as he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and began to chew on it vigorously.

"You already have." Colton let the innuendo slip into his voice. "I seem to recall we both enjoyed it."

"Well, yeah, and I do love it." Sly groaned, and his face flushed an even deeper red. "You have no idea how much I love it." Colton could feel the heat radiating from his mate's cheeks as the man continued to speak. "That's not what I meant, though."

"Spit it out, baby."

"I want you to take me flying."

Colton walked his mate backward, pressing him against the wall, and covered his body, holding him in place. "Oh, I'll make you fly," he murmured huskily against the warm skin of Sly's throat.

He didn't have an answer for Sly's request. Not one his mate would want to hear anyway, but maybe he could distract him. The little brat did it to Colton constantly. Turnabout was only fair play.

Sly started to protest, but Colton cut him off quickly, thrusting his tongue through his mate's parted lips and licking at the inside of his mouth. He purred in satisfaction when Sly moaned into his mouth, slid their tongues together, and reached up to snake his arms around Colton's neck.

Looping an arm under his lover's ass, Colton lifted him easily, anchoring him between his body and the wall. Sly's hold around his neck tightened, and his legs wound around Colton's waist in a vise grip. He moaned and whimpered, rocking himself as much as the position would allow so that his jean-clad erection rubbed over Colton's stomach.

What started out as a means of distraction quickly became a clawing need as Colton's cock hardened painfully inside his own

pants, pressing against his zipper until he felt sure the seams would pop. Breaking the kiss, he trailed his lips along Sly's jawline to his ear and sucked the lobe into his mouth, nipping at it lightly.

"I have a surprise for you," he whispered seductively. "Do you want to see it, baby?"

"Yes!" Sly hissed, dropping his head back on his shoulders and moving his hands up to twine his fingers in Colton's hair. Using his legs to pull Colton more firmly against him, he humped his hips faster, panting and shaking, begging wordlessly for more.

Holding his lover securely to his chest, Colton swung them around, pushed through his bedroom door, and kicked it closed behind him. He fell to the bed, dropping Sly and catching himself on his arms so as not to crush his smaller mate. "Wait right here," he ordered.

"Hurry," Sly breathed as he sat up and started stripping off his shirt. "I need you, Colt."

"Need you, too, baby." Then Colton claimed his lips again, pushing him back flat against the mattress and crawling over top of him. Gods, would he ever get enough of Sly? He hoped not. The little man had come to mean so much to him in such a short space of time. In fact, he was quickly becoming Colton's entire world. From quiet and brooding, to excited and bouncy, every little idiosyncrasy Sly possessed Colton found charming and endearing.

Breaking the kiss, Sly pushed at Colton's shoulders and gasped for air. "Hurry. I'll start getting ready for you."

Colton nodded firmly, kissed Sly one last time, then pushed off the bed and hurried over to his closet. He dug through the boxes on the top shelf, pulling things out and tossing them over his shoulder like a madman, until he finally came up with the box he was looking for. Snatching it up, he whirled around and almost fell to his knees.

In just the few short seconds it had taken him to find the box of goodies, Sly had disrobed, and was currently sprawled in the middle

of the bed, jerking his hard cock and pushing two fingers into his pretty little pucker.

“Holy damn, baby, that is fucking sexy.”

“My ass would look even sexier wrapped around that huge cock of yours.” Sly leered at him, his face flushed, and beads of sweat coated his forehead. “Please,” he begged.

Colton stripped quickly, rushed over to the bed, and dropped the box beside his mate as he crawled up on the other side of him. “You are so beautiful, baby.” Colton trailed his fingertips down the flexing muscles in Sly’s arms then continued along his lean hip, drawing little circles on his smooth skin. “Are you ready for your surprise?”

“Oh, please!” Sly’s back arched as he pushed up into his fist and buried his fingers deeper into his tight hole. “Can’t last,” he panted.

Colton retrieved the box and ripped the lid away, digging inside until he came up with a roll of black satin bondage tape. He held it in front of Sly’s face and lifted an eyebrow. Sly’s eyes widened and all the air seemed to whoosh out of his lungs. His mouth fell open slightly, his hands slowed in their erotic task, and his tongue darted out to moisten his bottom lip. The sight alone had Colton groaning and gripping the base of his cock to stave off his orgasm.

“Will it hurt?” Sly finally asked.

“I’d never hurt you.” Colton rolled until he could capture those sweet, pouty lips. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“You like the idea of tying me up, don’t you? The thought of having me helpless and at your mercy while you take charge of my pleasure turns you on.” He released his jutting cock and reached up to press his hand flat on Colton’s chest, right over his heart. “It’s beating so fast,” he whispered.

Colton swallowed hard, but dipped his head in agreement. “You have no idea how much it turns me on. I won’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable, though.”

“I’m not afraid.” Sly grinned sweetly at him. “You’d never hurt me, and I know that.” His fingers eased out of his puckered entrance, and he stretched his arms over his head, pressing his wrists together. “I’m waiting.”

Colton didn’t need any more invitation than that. He’d been dying to see how all of his mate’s creamy skin would look next to the black satin of his restraints. Just the mere thought of Sly being at his mercy sent his heart racing and his body burning.

Pulling out a long strip of tape, he tore it off with his teeth and leaned forward to wrap it around Sly’s wrists, but paused. “Turn over.”

Sly arched an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything as he quickly scrambled to flip over to his stomach. He moved his knees under him, lifting his ass into the air and wiggling it at Colton.

Colton gave one rounded globe a good swat, groaning in appreciation when the skin reddened almost instantly. “Fuck, that’s so hot. Hands behind your back.”

Sly nodded, pressing his shoulders into the mattress and wrapping his arms around his back until his wrists met just over the small of his back. Colton wrapped the tape around them, securing them together, and gave a little tug to make sure it was tight, but not painful. “It doesn’t hurt?”

“No,” Sly panted. “You need to hurry, though.”

Colton nudged Sly’s knees wider but pulled his ankles together. “Still okay?”

“I’m pretty flexible, Colt. I feel kind of like a damn frog, but it doesn’t hurt. Just hurry up and fuck me already.”

“Patience.” Colton chuckled as he tore off another piece of tape and wrapped it around his mate’s ankles. Finally satisfied that Sly wouldn’t be going anywhere, Colton tossed the roll of tape aside and moved in behind his lover. Spreading his knees wider, he straddled Sly’s ankles, gripped the base of his hot length, and slid just the head along the slick crease of his mate’s ass.

Sly moaned, trying to push back against him, but Colton kept the touch light and teasing, pulling his hips back so that he only brushed Sly's snug entrance with the tip of his cock. "Patience, baby," he repeated.

His other hand roamed Sly's body, touching every inch of flawless skin he could reach. The afternoon sunlight drifted in through the parted curtains, spilling over them and making Sly's sweat-slicked body glisten. Colton had never seen anything more beautiful in any one of his three thousand years.

Sly's left ass cheek still burned red from Colton's hand. Settling the spongy crown of his dick between Sly's cheeks, Colton nudged against his hole, but didn't enter. He smacked his lover's ass again then smoothed his hand over it to ease some of the burn. "Squeeze my cock, baby. It's your job to make sure it stays right where it is. Got it?"

His body quaking, Sly groaned loudly, but nodded his head, rubbing his face against the sheets.

Colton spanked his ass again, harder than the times before. "What's rule number two, Sly?"

"Yes," Sly hurried to say. "I understand." The twin globes contracted, squeezing together to hold Colton's prick in place, and Colton growled his approval.

He landed another swat to the opposite upturned cheek, loving the sting in his hand and the beautiful red that spread over the otherwise perfect skin. Judging from Sly's moans and gasps, the way his globes constricted around Colton's cock, his mate loved it just as much.

Colton spanked his lover over and over, sometimes hard, sometimes soft, never following a pattern so Sly would never know what to expect next.

"Please!" Sly cried out, pushing back against Colton's cock until the head pressed more firmly against his hole. "Fuck me, Colt. I need you!" He panted and whimpered, the cords in his neck straining as he peeked over his shoulder with pleading eyes.

“Shh, okay, baby. I’m going to take good care of you. I want you to do one more thing for me.” Colton grabbed the lube from beside his lover’s hip and dripped it over his throbbing dick. “Can you do it, Sly?”

“Anything,” Sly promised.

Colton arched his hips back, stroking his cock and coating it in the slippery oil as he dribbled more into Sly’s crease. Smoothing the lube down his mate’s crack, Colton caressed his clenching hole then pushed in with two fingers, wiggling them around.

Sly cried out, the muscles in his back bunching and flexing. “More!”

Colton added a third finger, pumping into his mate’s silky channel as he turned his wrist, stretching Sly as quickly as possible. Once positive that he wouldn’t hurt his mate, he pulled his fingers free, lined up the head of his cock, and thrust forward, feeding his pulsing cock to Sly’s hungry ass.

When he was fully seated, he bent slightly, curling an arm around his mate’s chest and lifting him to his knees so that his slim back pressed against Colton’s chest. “That thing I wanted?”

Sly’s head lulled against Colton’s shoulder, the most delicious sounds pouring from his parted lips. “Yes,” he breathed.

“I want you to scream, baby. I want the entire world to know you belong to me. You’re *mine!*” Colton growled as his hips snapped forward, driving into Sly’s convulsing channel.

“Yes!” Sly cried out, but it wasn’t good enough. Colton wanted him screaming, his voice raw by the time he finally found his release.

“Louder, Sly.” He punctuated the statement with another sharp plunge, bottoming out and grinding his pelvis against Sly’s ass.

“Fuck!”

Still not good enough. Colton smoothed his hand down his lover’s damp chest until he reached Sly’s jumping cock. Wrapping his fingers around the heated length, he began pumping, stroking his mate hard and fast and rubbing his thumb over the slit on each upward glide.

His other palm pressed flat against Sly's chest, holding him up as Colton drove into him at a demanding pace. Burying his face in Sly's neck, Colton breathed in his sweet scent then licked a slow path along the salty flesh. "Scream for me, baby. Come on my cock, and scream my name."

He leaned them forward just slightly, changing the angle as he slammed home again. That finally did it. He heard the breath catch in Sly's throat just moments before his lover screamed out to the heavens, and rope after rope of hot, creamy seed spilled over Colton's hand and onto the sheets beneath them.

Sly's inner walls contracted almost painfully, squeezing Colton's cock and demanding his release. Colton had no choice but to obey. Pulling out until only the crown remained, he drove back in forcefully, growling against Sly's shoulder as his orgasm rocket through him, filling his lover to the brim with his scorching semen.

Once completely sated, Colton gently lowered his mate to the mattress and eased out of his still fluttering hole. Sly groaned shakily while his entire body heaved with each breath he sucked into his lungs. "Thank you," he whispered. "That was amazing."

Colton agreed. He couldn't even find the words to describe it. He'd never experienced anything on that level of intensity with anyone. Shaking his head to clear the thoughts, he worked quickly to remove the bonds around Sly's wrists and ankles. Then he stretched his lover's legs out, massaging them to encourage the blood flow before moving onto his arms to do the same. "How are you feeling, baby? Are you okay?"

"Sleep." Sly yawned and rolled over to his back. "Take a nap with me?"

Colton grinned, his heart swelling inside his chest. In that moment he realized that he'd not only found his match, his mate, but the missing piece of his soul. Sly was just so damn perfect for him.

Leaning down, he kissed Sly's forehead, squeezing his eyes closed and enjoying the moment. "Let me get us cleaned up, and we'll

sleep as long as you want,” he murmured against his lover’s brow. Sitting up, he looked into Sly’s gorgeous chocolate brown eyes and dipped his head in acknowledgement. Not to Sly, but to himself. “Anything you want.”

Chapter Nine

Sly frowned when his cell phone began vibrating against his thigh. No one had called him since he'd arrived in Mexico. Pulling the phone from his pocket, his frown deepened when the screen displayed a private number.

Maybe it was a telemarketer. A few of them had gotten ahold of his cell phone number in the past. Shrugging, he flipped the phone open and pressed it to his ear. "Yep."

"Sly?" a feminine voice asked.

"Yeah, who is this?" His brows drew together in confusion. He vaguely recognized the voice, but he couldn't place it.

"Sly, this is Jessie." She spoke quietly, almost as though she was afraid of being overheard.

"Jessie." Sly growled, jerking his head up to make sure Colton was nowhere around. He didn't want his mate getting worked up over this. "What do you want and how did you get this number?"

"Sly, listen to me. I know you're mad because I wouldn't turn in Grant and Seth, but I just couldn't. They're my brothers—the only family I have."

"That's nice. I'm going to hang up now." He started to pull the phone away from his ear, but Jessie's low cry stopped him.

"Sly, you have to get out of there. Take your mate and run. Grant knows where you are, and he's coming for you. He should be arriving in Isla Blanca by nightfall. You have to go."

"Why are you telling me this?" Sly was proud of how steady his voice sounded considering his heart was hammering inside his chest and trying to claw its way up his throat.

“Grant may be my brother, but he’s been acting very strange since he returned home from Scotland.”

Sly didn’t bother to hide his snort of derision.

“Okay,” Jessie conceded on a sigh, “even stranger than normal. He’s very angry all the time, even with me, and he looks awful. I don’t know what happened at the gathering, but I do know that you need to take your mate and get out of Mexico as quickly as possible.”

“How did he find out where I am? And what does he even want with me? Didn’t he bring a mate home from Scotland?”

“A mate?” Jessie’s confusion sounded genuine. “Look, Sly, I don’t know anything about a mate, but he keeps mumbling something about rainbows. It’s very odd, and quite frankly, he’s scaring the shit out of me. Me and Seth are on our way, but you need to hide until we get there.”

“Did Seth bring home a mate?” Sly didn’t know why he felt it was so important for him to know, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“Yes,” Jessie said slowly. “How did you know that?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll explain later. I have to go find Colton. Just call me when you and Seth land in Mexico, okay?”

“I will. Sly, I’m sorry for everything that my family has done to you. I’m trying to make it right.”

Sly didn’t know whether to trust her or not. She sounded sincere, but he’d been duped too many times in the past. “We’ll talk when you get here.” Then he disconnected and snapped his phone closed before shoving it back into his pocket.

Oh, Colton was going to love this one. Sly swallowed back his groan as he made his way through the kitchen and out the back door. He spotted Colton immediately, sitting in the sand down by the waterfront, just staring out over the waves.

Sly descended the steps and made his way across the beach to plop down on his butt beside his lover. “What are you doing out here, big guy?”

Colton turned to look at him, a little smile tugging at his lips. “Just thinking.” He wrapped an arm around Sly’s shoulders and pulled him forward to drop a quick kiss on the top of his head. “Missed you.”

“You just saw me an hour ago.” Sly chuckled and elbowed his mate in the ribs playfully. He sobered quickly, snuggling closer to Colton’s body, and started stroking the man’s chest without fully realizing he was doing it. “I need to talk to you.”

“What happened?” Colton asked immediately, the muscles under Sly’s hands tensing.

“I got a phone call from Jessie. She said Grant is on his way here. He knows where I am.”

A feral growl escaped Colton’s lips, and his arm tightened around Sly almost painfully. “I’ll kill him if he hurts you.”

“And while I appreciate that, I’d kind of rather no one died. Jessie said we should leave. She and Seth are on their way, but Grant should be here by dark.”

“What the fuck are they coming for? I don’t like this, baby. Where do they live?”

“Alberta, Canada. I don’t know when Grant left, though, only what Jessie said. She said she and Seth were coming to help. To talk some sense into Grant and take him home.”

“I don’t trust them. It’s been three months since the gathering. Why has he waited all this time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he just now found me?”

“But how? How did he know where you are? Something doesn’t add up.” Colton paused for a minute and cocked his head to the side. “Doesn’t he have a mate of his own? What does he want with you?”

“I’m going to overlook the way you just said that, but I don’t think so. Jessie sounded confused when I asked her about it. She did say that Seth had brought home a mate, though.”

Colton growled again then jumped to his feet, pulling Sly up with him. “Go back to the house and lock the doors. Do not let anyone in and scream as loud as you can if you need me. I’ll be right behind

you.” He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and started punching numbers.

“Who are you calling?”

“Please, baby, for once, just listen to me and don’t argue. I’ll explain everything as soon as I’m done. Now, go.”

Sly nodded firmly, though he wasn’t exactly happy about the way he’d just been dismissed. He turned and started across the sand just as Colton spoke into the phone. “Zion, I need your help.”

* * * *

“What’s going on?”

Colton sighed. He knew he could count on his brother. They may not speak very often, but his brother was always there when he needed him. “Someone is after my mate. I don’t honestly know any more than that, but we only have a few hours until he gets here.”

“Motherfucker,” Zion ground out. “I’m on my way.”

The line went dead, and Colton had the insane urge to laugh. That was his brother. Zion never wasted words. Though Asher had been his best friend forever, the man had a new mate as well. Not only that, but there were just some things that required family.

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, he jogged across the beach and bounded up on the back porch. Jiggling the doorknob, he smiled widely when he found it locked. He hadn’t meant to be short with Sly, but sometimes the man just tested his patience. With his mind already whirling with the implications of their uninvited visitor, he just didn’t have time to tread cautiously with his mate.

Rapping his knuckles on the wood, he called out to his lover. “Sly! It’s me. Open the door.”

The dead bolt clicked back, and the door eased open to show Sly’s shining eyes through the crack. “Who’s Zion?”

Stepping past his mate, Colton shut the door and locked it again. “Zion is my brother. He’s coming to help.”

“You have a brother? Why didn’t I know you had a brother?”

“I have two brothers actually, one older and one younger. They both live near my parents in Brazil.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me? The way you talked, I thought your family was dead like mine!” Sly’s eyes flashed with anger, and his fists clenched at his sides. “Tell me, damn it!”

“Sly, I’m sorry. I don’t speak to them often. We’re not close in any sense of the word. I can count on Zion when there’s trouble, though. He’s older, bigger, stronger, and if anyone can keep you safe, it’s him. I didn’t mean to keep anything from you.”

“Fine.” Sly huffed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “We’re going to talk about this later, though. Right now I need to get this place cleaned up before your brother gets here.”

Colton looked around the spotless kitchen and frowned. He knew the rest of the house looked much the same. Sly was meticulous when it came to cleaning and organizing. It was one of those things that Colton didn’t understand, but he loved about the man just the same. Besides, the place looked better than it had since the day he and Ash had moved in.

“Sly, you don’t need to cl—”

Sly held up his hand, silencing Colton instantly. “I do need to clean. I also need to shower and do something with my hair, change my clothes, and change the sheets in the guest bedroom. I will not meet your brother looking like a hobo, or appear as though I can’t take care of you.” Then he spun around and marched out of the room.

Colton started to call after him, but clamped his lips shut at the last minute. Sly needed this. He needed to be doing something to keep his mind and hands occupied. Otherwise, he’d be a nervous wreck, just sitting around waiting for Grant to show up on their doorstep.

Maybe they should leave. Colton didn’t like that idea. Grant wouldn’t stop until he was either caught and punished, or he got what he wanted. They’d spend their entire lives looking over their

shoulders, and that was no way to live. No, it was better to just deal with it head-on before it blew up in their faces.

Perhaps he should send Sly away. That idea didn't sit with him any better than the first. He needed his mate close to him, to know that he was safe. Yes, they needed to stick together.

Colton didn't know how long he stood in the kitchen arguing with himself. When he finally came out of his thoughts, he could hear Sly moving about the living room with hurried steps. His poor baby was so nervous. Not that Colton blamed him. He'd be just as nervous if he was meeting Sly's family for the first time. Add to that, some abusive, crazy asshole ex-lover was after him, and Colton thought Sly was handling himself remarkably well.

Strolling into the living room, Colton walked right up behind Sly and wrapped his arms around his waist, pulling him back to his chest. "Everything is going to be okay, Sly. I want to tell you that Zion will love you, but to be honest, I don't think he even likes himself very much."

Sly chuckled softly and turned to rub his face against Colton's chest. "He's not going to try to eat me is he?"

"Oh, fuck." Colton closed his eyes and groaned as he dropped his chin to rest on the top of Sly's head. "I didn't even think about that. I mean, he's obviously not going to eat you like this." Why the hell hadn't he thought to explain to his brother was type of shifter Sly was? He could be so fucking dense sometimes. "I think you'll be fine as long as you don't shift."

"If I feel cornered or threatened, I won't be able to stop it."

"I'm going to be right beside you the entire time—no matter what happens." Wrapping an arm around Sly's neck, Colton held him close, nuzzling his cheek over Sly's blond curls. He could feel his lover trembling, and though Sly was putting up a good facade, he had to be scared out of his mind. A distraction was definitely in order.

Easing away, Colton grabbed Sly's shoulders and turned him around before giving him a nice swat on his cute little ass. "The house

looks fine. Go jump in the shower, and I'll make us something to eat. Anything special you want?"

"You, naked, wet and moaning," Sly called over his shoulder as he sashayed out of the room, pulling his clothes off as he went.

It took Colton exactly four seconds to rip his clothes off and sprint down the hallway after his mate.

Sly squealed when Colton caught him up and threw him over his shoulder. "Stop wiggling," Colton ordered and reached up to slap his mate's naked ass.

Sly stopped struggling, and a long, needy moan escaped his lips. "Okay, forget wet. Just fuck me here."

Colton chuckled as he carried his mate into the bathroom and deposited him into the shower. No matter what was coming, they had these few minutes to just enjoy each other, and Colton intended to make every one of them count.

Chapter Ten

The loud banging at the door had Sly jumping where he snuggled against Colton on the sofa and pretended to watch the television. Jerking his head up, he stared at the door like it might suddenly grow legs and sharp teeth and try to devour him.

“Open the fucking door, asshole.”

Colton chuckled, running his hand up and down Sly’s arm. “It’s just Zion, baby.”

“Is he always like that?”

“Pretty much.” Colton extracted himself from beneath Sly and stood, arching his back and stretching his hands over his head. “You’ll get used to it.

Sly highly doubted that. He’d gotten better with Colton, but large, angry men still left him nervous and looking for a place to hide. The man currently standing in their doorway certainly exemplified large and angry, too.

Zion stood several inches taller than even Colton’s six-foot-eight, and he had to duck his head as he stepped into the living room. Long, black hair, chiseled jaw, and high cheekbones, Sly could definitely see the family resemblance. Unlike Colton, however, Zion didn’t look like he’d ever smiled a day in his life. The perma-scowl might give him the look of a badass, but it did nothing for his charm.

He watched the brothers exchange a rather stilted handshake, and then Colton turned and motioned for Zion to have a seat in one of the arm chairs. Neither of them said a word through the entire exchange. Colton settled down on the sofa next to Sly again and shifted slightly to face his brother.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“We’re family.” The way Zion said it made it sound like he did it out of obligation rather than any sort of real caring for his brother. He looked around the room, his eyes settling briefly on Sly then moving past him as though he were nothing more than a piece of furniture. “So, where is this mate of yours?”

Colton reached over and took Sly’s hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Zion, this is my mate Sylvester Jordan.” He looked over and gave Sly a smile so sweet it melted him right there on the spot. “This is my Sly.”

“You mated a man?”

Sly snapped his attention to Zion, his muscles tensing and his blood pressure rising at the disdain in the man’s tone. “Yes, I am a man. Do you have a problem with that?” It wasn’t in his nature to be confrontational, but no one had the right to speak to his mate in such a way. Colton had done nothing wrong.

Zion sighed, pushing a hand through his ebony hair and stared down at the floor. No one spoke for a long time, and tension settled over the room like heavy blanket. Finally, Zion looked up, pinning Sly with his dark gray eyes—eyes so very like Colton’s, but lacking in warmth. “I’ll deal with it.”

“Well, fuck a chicken!” Sly extracted his hand from Colton’s grip and slumped back on the sofa, crossing his arms over his chest. It had never even occurred to him that Colton’s family wouldn’t know he was gay. What a damn disaster!

“Did you just say...?” Zion trailed off, and Sly swore he saw the corners of the man’s lips twitch.

Colton didn’t hide his amusement quite as well. In fact, he didn’t bother to hide it all. He fell back against the cushions, laughing his fool head off. “I think you meant fuck a duck, baby.” He continued to laugh, completely ignoring Sly’s death glare.

“Chicken, duck, whatever.” Sly waved a hand around. “It all means the same thing.”

“Oh, hell.” Colton reached up to swipe the tears out of his eyes. “Now do you see why I love him?”

Sly froze completely, his mouth hanging open like a guppy. “What...What did you just say?”

Colton’s laughter cut off abruptly, his muscles tensed, and he turned slowly to look at Sly. Reaching out almost hesitantly with shaking hands, Colton cradled Sly’s face as though he were made of spun glass. “I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to tell you that way. It should have been special, but I won’t take it back. I understand if you don’t feel the same way, or aren’t ready to hear it.” He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “I love you, Sly.”

Sly was out of his seat, crawling into his mate’s lap, and attacking his lips before he’d even registered the intent to do so. Licking, biting, sucking, he laid siege to Colton’s mouth, claiming the man as his own. “I love you. I love you. I love you,” he chanted breathlessly between the mating of their lips and tongues.

Zion cleared his throat, and Sly jerked away from Colton’s mouth. “Oops.” He grinned broadly at his mate’s brother. He’d completely forgotten the man was still there. “He loves me.”

A slow smile started at the edges, but soon stretched across Zion’s face. The contrast between the gruff, brooding man of only a few seconds before was astounding. “I heard, little one. Congratulations.”

Sly tilted his head in confusion. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I never said that. I was just concerned for my brother. I didn’t know if this is what he really wanted. I heard what happened at UPAC.” Zion shook his head, a soft growl bubbling up in his chest and pouring through his parted lips. Then he shook his head again, the smile playing over his lips once again. “If he loves you, that’s all I need to know. You can’t cast a spell or brew a tonic for love.”

“I’ll take good care of him.” Sly nodded firmly. “He kind of needs a keeper, ya know?”

Zion chuckled. It sounded rusty and unused, but it seemed to soften him around the edges. “I have no doubt that you will keep him in line.”

“Hey!” Colton grumbled indignantly. “*Him* has a name, and he’s sitting right here!” He pressed his lips together, and his brow wrinkled. “I mean, *I’m* sitting right here!”

Sly patted him lovingly on the top of his dark head. “Yes, we know, honey. You have to admit that you need me, though. You were a miserable old hermit before I showed up.”

Colton huffed in obvious exasperation and rolled his eyes. His fingers curled around the back of Sly’s neck and pulled him forward into a brief, but scorching kiss. “Always need you, baby.”

“Sorry to interrupt what I’m sure is a very special moment, but”—Zion waved a hand toward the window—“it is almost dark, and I believe you said you have a guest arriving?”

“Right.” Colton became all business, easing Sly off his lap as he launched into the entire sordid story about Grant.

Sly already knew the tale. Hell, he’d lived it for too many years. So he pulled his stone from his pocket and began rolling it around in his palm while he let his mind wander. He had so many questions, and not nearly enough answers. The foremost in his mind was why the hell Grant would bother coming for him.

He knew Grant was possessive, viewed Sly as property, and would be pissed that someone had staked a claim on what he believed to be his. Coming clear across three countries to retrieve him seemed a little extensive even for Grant, though.

“Sly, can I see that, please?” Colton interrupted his thoughts, and Sly looked up at him sheepishly as he handed over the small opal.

Colton passed the rock onto his brother, and Sly had the very childish urge to snatch it back. He fidgeted in his seat, his eyes locked on the stone as Zion pinched it between his fingers and held it up to the light.

His mate's hand settled on his thigh and squeezed gently. "Relax, baby. No one's going to take it from you."

Zion's eyes moved from the stone to Sly, and he smiled crookedly as he passed the treasure back to Colton. "You don't even realize the power you hold, do you?"

Sly took the stone back from Colton and clutched it in his fist. "It's important to me, but no, I didn't know it was more than a pretty rock until Colton told me."

"And this is what your ex-lover is coming for?"

Sly's mouth dropped open, and he stared at Zion with a mix of shock and guilt. How arrogant was he that he thought Grant was actually coming for *him*? "I guess so," he mumbled as he dropped his chin to his chest.

Colton's finger slid under his chin and urged his face up with gentle pressure. "What's all this?"

"I dunno," Sly mumbled, and he shrugged. "It's not like I want anything to do with the asshole, but it's the same as always. No one wants me—just what I can give them."

He watched the emotions play over his lover's face and felt his heart sink to the pit of his stomach. Crap, he was such an idiot. "I didn't mean it that way, Colt." He wrapped his fingers around Colton's wrist and moved his mate's hand up so he could nuzzle against his palm. "I'm sorry, love."

Colton's thumb brushed gently over his bottom lip. "You know I always want you, right?"

"You two are enough to give a man a cavity," Zion grumbled.

Sly shot him a dirty look then went back to soaking up his mate's attention.

Colton just laughed and kissed Sly's forehead. "Okay, I guess we need to figure out what to do about this asshole ex of yours. I mean, he's just a stupid dog. What the hell can he do? I'm bigger than him in this form alone. I'd tear him to shreds if we were shifted."

Groaning, Sly shook his head slowly. "He's not going to fight fair, Colt. It's not like he's just going to walk up and ring the fucking doorbell. I thought you understood that when you called your brother for help." He sighed as he turned his attention to Zion. "I doubt he'll come alone either. Jessie didn't say anything about it, but I know him."

"Wait, who's Jessie?"

"Grant's sister." Sly quickly explained about the phone call and his ex-lover's siblings' plans to help them.

"This reeks of deception," Zion mumbled as he rubbed the back of his neck. "They gain your trust, wait until you let your guard down, and then they double-cross you, and you're left for dead in some Mexican ghetto."

"They live in Canada."

Both men turned to glare at Sly, and he held his hands up in surrender. "Fine, I'll die in some Mexicali ghetto."

"You are not going to fucking die!" Colton yelled loud enough to vibrate Sly's chest.

"Whoa!" Zion stood to his full and impressive height. "Everyone just calm down. No one is going to die." He waited a beat for Colton to turn his attention toward him before continuing. "I agree with Sly that this douche bag isn't going to just announce his presence and nicely ask for what he wants. I also think that you need to be leery of his siblings."

Sly opened his mouth to speak, but Zion held a hand up to stop him. "I know they sound like they're on your side, but have they ever done a damn thing for you in the past?"

"Jessie helped me find sanctuary in Scotland."

Zion shook his head. "Then her dickhead brothers show up two weeks later for the gathering? Trust me, Sly. These people are not your friends."

Sly was getting tired of people telling him to trust them without giving him a reason to. Unfortunately, he really didn't have much of a

choice this time. Besides, he trusted Colton. If Zion's word was good enough for his mate, then Sly figured it should be good enough for him.

Still, if Grant was coming with some of his lackeys, then they could use all the help they could get. Jessie had called to warn him, so that should count for something. On the other hand, if Grant was coming with a full contingency, why hadn't Jessie told him about that?

He argued back and forth with himself for so long his head began to throb. Pressing his fingertips to his temples, he rubbed them slowly as he tried to make sense of the conflicting thoughts inside his muddled brain.

"C'mon, baby, let's get you something to eat. It'll make you feel better." Colton rose from the couch and held out a hand for Sly.

Taking it gratefully, Sly rose to his feet with a sigh. He wanted food, sleep, and sex...in no particular order. Well, okay, he wanted food first, but after that he was willing to negotiate. Sure, they'd fooled around in the shower before Zion's arrival, but that was before he knew Colton loved him. It was all he could do not to strip his mate right there in the living room and lick him from head to toe.

A shudder raced through him, and Sly grabbed Colt by the wrist and practically dragged him toward the kitchen. "Hurry up and feed me, because I'm much more interested in dessert."

Chapter Eleven

The night passed without incident, and Sly felt more nervous and wound up than ever. If something bad was going to happen, he'd prefer to just get it done and over with. The fear and anxiety of waiting for the unknown was driving him insane.

To make matters worse, Colton and Zion had retreated to the back porch and refused to let Sly join them. He didn't think they were hiding anything from him, though. More like they just needed a few minutes to escape his incessant rambling. Not that he could blame them. He'd been babbling nonstop since the sun came up.

Colton had to be at the end of his rope, but he never yelled, never told Sly to shut up. He had, however, suggested that Sly find a more productive outlet for his nervous energy. Zion hadn't said a word, but the man looked ready to pull his hair out by the time they'd finished breakfast. Apparently, he had a lower tolerance for bouncy ferrets than his brother did. At one point, Sly had feared the man might actually have an aneurism right there at the kitchen table. He'd never seen anyone's face turn that particular shade of red before.

So they'd banished him to the house with strict orders not to answer the phone or door as if he were a child that didn't know any better. Sly had tried cleaning, but he'd pretty much scrubbed the place from top to bottom the day before in anticipation of Zion's arrival. Then, he'd tried reading, but he couldn't sit still, and his mind wandered until he realized he'd been reading the same paragraph over and over for fifteen minutes.

Next, he'd tried rearranging the furniture. Considering Colton's living room furniture consisted of a sofa and two armchairs, the task

had taken all of ten minutes. For such a wealthy man, Colton lived like a freaking bum. Perhaps after they had rectified the situation with Grant, Sly could talk his mate into replacing the threadbare furniture and possibly adding to the collection.

A knock on the door drew his attention, and he started toward it without thought. Halfway across the living room, Sly paused and bit his lip. He wasn't supposed to answer the door, but Zion and Colton both agreed that Grant wasn't just going to show up and announce his intentions. Who the hell else could it be, though? They hadn't had one visitor besides Zion since Sly arrived in Isla Blanca months ago. That was something else he intended to change once everything had settled down. Nearly three thousand years old or not, it was time for Colton to enter the land of the living.

"Sly, it's me! Open up!"

A wide smile stretched across his lips, and Sly bounded across the remainder of the room, disengaged the lock, and threw the door wide open. "Conner!" He grabbed his friend by the wrist and yanked him into a fierce hug.

He'd met Conner eight years ago when he attended his first UPAC gathering. Though he only got to see Conner every four years, they talked ceaselessly on the phone during the times between, and the man had quickly become Sly's best friend. Okay, maybe that wasn't exactly true. More like he had become Sly's *only* friend...kind of.

But damn, it was good to see a friendly face after being isolated from everyone for so long.

"What are you doing here? I mean, it's great to see you, but how did you even know where to find me?" The moment the words left his mouth, dread filled Sly's heart, and he slowly released Conner and stepped away slowly. "Um, well, uh, yeah, come in. I'm just going to, uh, I'll go, and, uh...Colton!"

Sly whirled around, desperate to reach his mate, but dropped to the floor as electricity ricocheted inside his body. Not the good kind of sexual charge either, but volts upon volts of debilitating electrical

currents. His body convulsed, his muscles spasmed, and he snapped his teeth together to keep from biting his tongue. All the time his mind raced, trying to figure out why Conner was doing this to him, and what connection he had to Grant.

Then a boney fist connected with his temple, and all thoughts disappeared as he slipped into darkness.

* * * *

“Did you hear that?” Colton shot up from the wooden rocker on the porch and started for the door. “I swear I heard Sly call for me.”

Zion chuckled. “He’s probably just pissed because you wouldn’t let him come out and play with the big kids.”

Colton turned and glared at his brother. “He’s not a child, Zion. If he really wanted to be out here, neither you nor I would be able to stop him. I just thought he might need some time alone to process everything that’s going on.”

“You mean you didn’t want to deal with his chatter anymore.” Zion chuckled. “I don’t blame you, brother.”

“You are a complete asshole.” Colton opened his mouth to say more, but the sound of a slamming door drew his attention. “Sly,” he growled. “Where the hell does he think he’s going?”

“Wherever it is, it may not be by choice.” Zion leapt off the porch and started around the side the house. “Go!” he barked.

Colton jerked at the command in his brother’s voice. His heart thundered inside his chest, and his blood boiled with his rage. If someone had hurt Sly, they would pay dearly. Shoving open the door, he let it bang back against the kitchen wall as he stormed into the house and went directly toward the living room.

“Sly!”

No answer.

Reaching the living room, he found no signs of his mate, or even that of a struggle. The front door was closed, and everything looked as it should be. So, what the hell had happened, and where was Sly?

“Sly!”

Still no response.

Colton jerked open the front door and threw himself across the threshold, only to barrel right into his brother. Zion grunted, catching Colton around the waist to keep them both from falling over. “Did you find him?” Colton asked, immediately trying to shove past Zion. He didn’t even have a clue where he was trying to go.

“Colton!” Zion grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “Snap out of it. He’s gone.”

“No,” Colton growled. “He is not fucking gone! He can’t be *gone*! I left him right fucking here!” Stopping in his struggle, he leaned against his brother and groaned. “I left him. I just left him.”

“Oh, shut up.” Zion pushed him roughly inside the house. “I’m sorry, but you don’t exactly have the luxury of falling apart right now. Yeah, you left him inside the house. We were just outside on the back porch.”

Colton shoved both hands into his hair and tugged roughly. “Okay, so where do we start?”

“Was the front door unlocked?”

He had to think about it for a minute, but then finally nodded.

“So, Sly had to know whoever it was that took him. I don’t think he would have answered the door for his ex, and we warned him about the siblings. Who else does he know?”

Colton sighed. “I don’t know. He doesn’t have any family, and he’s never talked about any friends. If he has friends, though, why would they be trying to hurt him?”

“Can you not thinking of a reason?”

“The *iris lapis*,” Colton mumbled. That damn piece of rock had been more burden than luck since long before he found out about it.

“That still doesn’t tell me anything. I don’t even have a place to start looking for him.”

“Sly’s smart. He’ll keep himself safe until we can figure out something.”

Colton knew his brother was trying to comfort him, but other than having Sly in his arms, he didn’t think anything could at the moment.

Zion pulled his cell phone from his pocket, punched in a couple of numbers, and held the phone to his ear.

“Who are you calling?”

Zion lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “The cavalry.” Then he strolled out of the room toward the kitchen.

Colton didn’t know what that meant other than they had possible help coming. The idea that he couldn’t defend his mate on his own rankled. He was supposed to be this big, badass hippogriff, but he couldn’t protect his mate from a couple of deranged dingoes? What kind of sense did that even make?

Pulling his cell phone out of his pocket, he pushed the speed dial, held the phone to his ear, and waited.

“Hel-lo.”

“Hey, Ash.”

“What’s wrong?” Asher asked immediately, his tone becoming serious.

“I just needed to hear a friendly voice,” Colton hedged. He didn’t want to admit to his best friend that he had lost his mate. Just how big of a loser did that make him?

“Yeah, right. Cut the shit, Colt. What’s going on?”

“Sly’s gone.”

“Like he left?” Asher’s voice held steel, and Colton jumped to defend his mate.

“No, he didn’t leave. Someone took him.” He gave a brief rundown of the events leading up to Sly’s disappearance, fighting the entire time to hold on to his emotions. “I love him, Ash. I have to find him.”

"I know, Colt, but it's more than that. If you don't find him quickly, you're going to lose your ability to shift. You heard what the elders told us, and I've experienced it firsthand. The mating heat is a bitch." Asher snorted into the phone. "Luckily, you've come to the right place."

Hope tried to wiggle into his heart, but Colton tamped it down until he could hear Asher's plan. "I'm listening."

"Colton, you big jackass. He's your mate! You can feel him. If anyone can find him, it's you."

"Huh?" What Asher said made sense, but Colton was skeptical about how far the bond would reach. "I don't know where they took him, Ash. He could be on his way back to Canada by now, for all I know."

"Doesn't matter. I followed my bond to Zaiden all the way from Isla Blanca to Tennessee. You'll be able to find him. Just shift and fly, my friend. He'll call to you."

"Are you sure?" Colton didn't think his friend would lie to him, but he refused to get his hopes up only to be crushed when it didn't work.

"Trust me, Colt. Even if it doesn't work, what do you have to lose? Do you have some great plan to find and rescue him?"

"Zion is on the phone with UPAC," Colton offered. Yeah, that plan sounded weak even to him.

Asher snorted again. "Well, good luck with that one. UPAC doesn't often become involved in our petty little squabbles. Unless you can prove that Sly was taken by another paranormal..." He trailed off, and Colton sighed heavily.

"I get it. Okay, we do it your way."

"I'm on my way."

"No." Colton shook his head though he knew Asher couldn't see him. "You stay and take care of your mate. This is my mess, and I'll find a way to clean it up."

“Colt, this is more than a mess. Your mate is missing, and I’m assuming you have less than twenty-four hours to find him before the mating heat begins to consume you. You’re my best friend, man. I’m coming to help.”

“No,” Colton repeated. “With any luck, I’ll find him before you even make it here.” Asher had just rescued his own mate from a psychotic witch who’d stolen Zaiden’s magic. Asher deserved this time to just enjoy being with his lover—not flying across two countries to come bail Colton out his predicament.

They were silent for several minutes before Asher spoke again. “Okay, Colt. Call me if you don’t find him by nightfall. I don’t know the guy from Adam, but if he’s important to you, then he’s important to me. I’m not going to let either of you lose your shifters over this.”

They said their good-bye, and Colton pushed his phone back into his pocket as he rose from the sofa and went in search of his brother. “Zion?”

“In here,” Zion called from the kitchen.

“So, what did you find out?” Colton stood in the middle of the kitchen, watching his brother build a sandwich. How the man could eat at a time like this was beyond him. Then again, Sly wasn’t his mate. It was no skin off Zion’s nose if they never found him.

“A whole lot of nothing,” Zion growled. “We have to prove that it was other paranormals who took Sly before UPAC will get involved.”

“That’s what Asher said.”

“Yeah, they told me unless we can provide concrete evidence, we should call the police.” Zion rolled his eyes and bit into his double-decker sandwich.

“The human police?” Colton groaned and pressed his fingertips to his temples. Not that he had anything against the police. The humans were amazingly perceptive when it came to dealing with ordinary crimes. He doubted they’d have the first clue of where to start with this one, though.

Humans had known about the existence of paranormals for years now. Their reactions to the discovery varied widely from the radicals that thought all preternaturals were spawns of Satan, to those that had read one too many vampire novels and wanted to be “changed.” For the most part, though, the humans were indifferent to their existence, and that suited Colton just fine.

“I’m sorry, Colt. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Asher says I can find him—something about our bond. I should be able to shift and follow this...feeling, I guess.” Colton shrugged. “Either way, it’s more than we have now and worth a shot.”

Zion chewed slowly, and he looked to be lost in thought. “I realize the humans know about us, but do you really think it’s a good idea to shift and fly around Mexico in broad daylight?”

Colton shrugged again. “I don’t really have a choice.” Holding up his arm, he checked his watch and felt a lump form in his throat. Sly loved this damn watch. Pushing away his emotions, he looked back at his brother. “I have four hours until the mating heat starts.”

Zion popped the last bite of sandwich into his mouth and swallowed it whole as he dipped his head. “Then what are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

Chapter Twelve

Sly's head bounced against the floor of the trunk, causing him to groan and reach for his aching temple. He didn't know how long they'd been driving before he'd awoken, but it must have been a good twenty minutes since then.

His head pounded, his stomach rolled, and he felt smothered inside the small space. The roar of the tires against the asphalt competed with the swooshing of his blood in his ears with every beat of his heart. His frazzled brain tried to wrap itself around the idea that Conner had done this to him.

It wasn't like they were best friends that did everything together, but Sly never imagined the guy would be capable of something like this. Then again, he supposed he really didn't know Conner all that well—only what the man chose to tell him during their many phone conversations.

He'd never had an easy time making friends, so when Conner had shown interest in sparking up a relationship with him—no matter how platonic it was—Sly was just desperate enough to jump at the offer.

Now, here he was, trapped inside the trunk of a car that smelled of sweaty gym socks, and his “best friend” had done this to him. Colton was going to be pissed, and honestly, Sly couldn't blame him. How the hell did he keep managing to get himself into these situations? Wasn't his little rock supposed to bring him good fortune?

The thought of his precious stone sent him into a full panic, his breaths came faster, shallower as his heart raced and his head swam. Patting at his pockets, he whimpered softly when he found them empty.

No, no, no! Oh, fuck, this was bad. If what Colton had told him about the power of the stone was true, Sly had to find a way to keep the stone from reaching Grant. Oh, and he had no doubt that Conner was working with his ex-lover. He hadn't quite pieced together how the two fit, or even knew each other, but it was just too much of a coincidence that Conner had showed up on his doorstep just hours after Jessie's phone call.

Running his hands along the front of the trunk near the locking mechanism, he searched for the child latch. He whimpered again when he found nothing more than a gaping hole where the release device should have been. Seemed Conner had thought ahead. Still, there had to be some way out. Damn, he wished he had more space to move around and explore his temporary confinements.

Though he had no doubt that Colton would come for him, he refused to lie down and play the damsel in distress. He'd fucked up and trusted the wrong person. The least he could do was figure a way out of the fucking trunk. If he could just get free and find his mate, maybe they could figure out a plan to rescue the opal. No way should something that powerful be in the hands of someone as cruel and evil as Grant.

Rolling to his back, Sly tried to maneuver enough to press his feet against the ceiling. He just couldn't seem to get the leverage he needed. He'd spent so long around Colton, who made him feel tiny in comparison to the man's enormous size, that Sly had forgotten exactly how long his legs were.

His knees were pressed into his chest, and no matter which way he turned, he just couldn't put enough force behind his kicks to do any real damage. Fuck, he wished he had more room to move.

The thought froze him in place, and Sly groaned, rolling his eyes inwardly at himself. He was a goddamn ferret shifter for pity sakes. How much smaller could he get than that?

Closing his eyes, he tried to calm his frantic heartbeats as he called on his ferret. Never had he imagined that being such a small, insignificant shifter would come in so handy.

As wound up as he was, the change took a lot longer than usual, but eventually Sly began to feel his body shrink, his bones realign, and soft, silky fur covered his skin. Blinking several times, he slowly crawled out from beneath his clothing and lifted his nose, sniffing around the trunk.

Though ferrets didn't have night vision like a cat or horse, he could see much better than with his human eyes. More fuzzy shapes and silhouettes than anything else, but it was better than the pitch black from moments before.

Plus his sense of smell was vastly improved in this form, and he could scent the fresh air—slightly marred by the exhaust fumes from the car—flowing into the trunk from a small, rusted hole in the corner near the taillight. It wasn't a large hole, roughly half the size of baseball, but Sly didn't need much.

Crawling over to it, he peered out, instantly getting dizzy as he watched the yellow lines zoom past in the waning light of day. Damn, they'd been traveling for a lot longer than he originally assumed, which meant he needed to find a way out and fast!

Though he wasn't afflicted by the spell cast at the gathering, Colton was. If he didn't get to his lover soon, Colton would go into his mating heat. The longer it took him to get to his mate, the more chance of Colton going feral and losing his ability to shift. No way would Sly let that happen.

Renewed determination built inside him, and Sly started wiggling through the hole, stopping when he'd pushed half his body through. It wouldn't do him any good to escape if he ended up road kill before he could find Colton. He didn't see any other cars on the road with them, but at this speed, the fall alone would likely kill him.

Then, as though fate had heard his plight, the vehicle began to slow and veer to the left. Turning maybe? Sly didn't know, nor did he

care. It was the opening he'd been waiting for, and he intended to take full advantage of it.

He poised on the edge of the small hole, waiting until he heard the rev of the engine that signaled the car's acceleration once again. They were still moving faster than he would have liked, but he doubted he'd get a better opportunity. Closing his eyes, he prayed to whoever was listening that he wouldn't break every bone in his body, and leapt.

* * * *

Colton narrowed his eyes, scanning the ground far below for any sign of his mate. Not that he had X-ray vision and could see the little runt inside a car, but he was close. He could feel it. Turning to his brother, he let out a soft caw and flapped his ebony wings.

They'd been flying for hours, and Colton had nearly given up hope in the beginning. The only thing that kept him going was the slight tug he could feel when he thought of his mate, pulling him forward, leading him...somewhere. With each passing hour, the feeling grew stronger until Colton's felt positive they were on the right track.

Zion let out a loud screech of his own and dropped back behind Colton, giving him the lead and support he needed. Spying three cars below, all traveling in the same direction, almost bumper to bumper, Colton knew. Sly was in one of those cars. Soaring lower, he put his mate forefront in his mind, trying to determine which vehicle to attack.

Not that it mattered, really. He would destroy them all to bring Sly home safe. He didn't want to alert the others to his presence, though, so it would be nice if he could get it right on the first try.

To his surprise, the invisible line that tethered him to his mate was pulling him away from the vehicles. A very subtle tug, but there nonetheless. Hesitating for only a moment, Colton followed his

instincts, allowing the bond with his mate to guide him. He didn't completely understand it, but it had led him this far, and he'd be a fool to ignore it now.

Altering his course, Colton made a wide arch, circling back as he flew even closer to the ground. His eagle eyes picked through the twilight, picking up even the slightest movement from below. Inhaling deeply, he caught the sweet, delectable scent of ferret, and almost fell out of the sky when relief slammed into him.

He'd no more than spotted the sleek, creamy ferret scampering along the side of the mostly deserted road when the sound of screeching tires reached his ears. Glancing under his outstretched wing, he watched as all three vehicles skidded to a stop and turned around, peeling out as they raced toward them.

In his desire to get to his mate, Colton had forgotten to stay high enough in the sky to not be seen through the rearview mirrors. Not that he was worried. He had a several second head start on the vehicles, and it would take a fraction of that to scoop his mate up and fly him to safety.

He let out a loud cry to warn his brother then swooped low, descending over his lover and catching him as gently as possible in his clawed foot. The ferret screamed, literally screamed, wiggling and flailing as he tried to escape Colton's clutches.

Colton cawed softly, almost cooing to his mate to calm him as he flapped his giant wings and rose into the air once more. He must have gotten through to him because Sly ceased in his struggles almost immediately and looked up over his furry shoulder.

Relief, joy, and love filled Colton's heart as he tucked his front feet as close to his body as possible and released his hold just enough for Sly to grasp onto his feathers and crawl up his shoulder to nestle on his neck. The little ferret rubbed against him, chattering madly over the roar of the wind.

Colton didn't have a clue what his mate was saying, and it didn't matter. He had his baby back, safe and sound, and no one would take

him away again. Casting a look under his wing once more, he laughed inside his head when he spotted the vehicles parked in the middle of the road with four men gathered around, staring up at them. He just imagined the vile words pouring from their mouths. The thought would have had him smiling if he had a mouth instead of a beak.

In the next instance, the barely perceptible weight of his ferret disappeared, replaced by the much more substantial weight of a grown man. Slim arms wound around his neck, and Sly's face nuzzled against him. "Missed you," he said, just loud enough to be heard over the wind.

Colton couldn't speak, so he offered another soft coo instead. The sun was just setting over the horizon, and he could feel the mating heat beginning to burn inside him. He had a million questions for his little mate, but just then the only one that mattered was where to find the nearest flat surface.

"Uh, Colton!" Though he tried to hide it, Colton could still detect the fear in his mate's voice. Maybe Sly was afraid of heights. Colton couldn't think of any other reason for the man to sound so afraid.

"Colton!" Sly yelled again, and there was no hiding his agitation this time. "They brought a freakin' dragon!"

Before Sly even finished speaking, a loud roar rent the air, and Colton closed his eyes, groaning internally. They were so fucked.

* * * *

Okay, so Sly knew there were dragon shifters, but he'd never actually seen one before. Now did not seem like the greatest opportunity to make one's acquaintance either.

His hands fisted in the soft feathers on the sides of Colton's neck, and he pressed himself flat to his lover, holding on for dear life as Colton rocketed through the sky. Glancing over his shoulder, he let out a little squeak at the sight of the red, scaly beast gaining on them. Damn, the fucker was fast.

Sly knew the dragon was neither Grant nor Seth, and he seriously doubted it was Conner. The man was just too little to transform into such a large monster. Right? Isn't that how it worked? Oh, he didn't have a freaking clue. For all he knew, the dragon could be Santa Claus, and instead of coal in his stocking, he was going to be eaten for being on the naughty list this year.

The last thought made him chuckle, though the sound was slightly hysterical. How the hell were they supposed to outrun a goddamn dragon? And what happened if they couldn't dodge it? Colton was big in his hippogriff form, but he wasn't that big, and he definitely didn't breathe fire!

"Go! Go!" he yelled. He didn't know what else to do. Looking left and right, he searched for Zion, but couldn't find him. Panic reared its ugly head, and Sly almost lost his grip on Colton as he whipped around, desperately trying to find the other hippogriff.

Scrambling to stay seated, he glanced over his shoulder again and almost wished he hadn't. He felt the blood drain from his face, and his fingers tightened convulsively in Colton's feathers. The good news was that he'd found Zion. The bad news was that he found him currently engaged in an aerial battle of claws and wings with the dragon chasing them. The pair screeched and roared, clawed and beat their massive wings against each other. The ultimate struggle for dominance paralyzed Sly in place as he watched, unable to tear his eyes away.

Zion was bigger than Colton, a deep gray where Colton was black, but he was still roughly half the size of the beast he fought. No way would he come out victorious.

Jerking on Colton's neck, Sly tried to draw his attention, turn him around, something! They needed to help Zion before the man ended up dead. Colton kept flying straight ahead, though, moving like lightning as he took them further and further away from the ferocious battle behind them.

“No! Go back!” Sly may have only met Zion the night before, and he still wasn’t exactly sure if he like him, but for better or worse, the guy was family. He couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. “Zion needs us!” Well, he didn’t know about the *us* part. There was very little he could do to help in the fight.

Colton screeched, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge him. How could his lover be so cold? Zion was his brother! Sly didn’t have any family left, but if he did, he’d be doing everything in his power to protect them.

That’s when it hit him. Zion was Colton’s brother, but Sly was his mate. Colton’s protective instincts had kicked in, and his only thoughts at the moment were getting Sly to safety. Nothing would deter him before he’d accomplished his goal.

Continuing to watch the fight over his shoulder, Sly wanted to whoop for joy when one of Zion’s front claws caught the dragon in the eye, causing the beast to roar loudly and shake its enormous head. Zion spun around, presenting the dragon with his backside, and kicked out hard with his back legs, the long, strong legs of a horse. His hooves connected solidly with the dragon’s snout, pulling another vicious roar from its gaping mouth.

Then miraculously, the dragon retreated, descending rapidly through the air and back down to earth. Zion screeched once then looped around in the air, a kind of acrobatic victory dance, Sly supposed, before turning and darting toward them like a bullet.

Sly’s mouth hung open in shock. He’d never seen anything move that fast in his life. Smiling at his mate’s brother as Zion pulled up beside them, Sly stretched across Colton’s neck and closed his eyes.

They may have won the battle, but he knew the war was far from over. They still needed to retrieve the stone and see his ex-lover brought to justice for the crimes he’d committed. But for just this one small moment, he wouldn’t worry about it.

Chapter Thirteen

The minute his feet touched the ground in front of his house, he started to shift. The firestorm raged inside him, burning him from the inside out, and he needed his mate with an intensity that scared the shit out of him. Not only was his beast chomping at the bit to reestablish the claim on its mate, but the mating heat was in full force, driving Colton to his knees and stealing the breath from his lungs.

Without a word, he rose to his feet, snatched Sly up, and flung him over his shoulder. Carrying him into the house, he ignored his mate's struggles, marching down the hall to his bedroom and tossing Sly to the bed, where he bounced twice before glaring up at him.

"What the fuck, Colt?"

"Mine," he growled. He was far beyond anything resembling coherent speech. His instincts had taken over, and right now that instinct screamed that he needed inside his mate five minutes ago.

"Oh, shit," Sly breathed. He scrambled backward on the bed until his back hit the headboard, looking up at Colton with a mix of desire and a bit of trepidation.

Colton couldn't blame him. He had long lost any semblance of self-control. "Need you," he panted as he reached down to stroke his throbbing cock. The long, thick shaft in his hand pulsed and jerked, leaking freely from the slit as Colton eyed his mate like a piece of prime beef.

Sly nodded slowly then reached over to the nightstand to snatch up the bottle of lube sitting there. He never took his eyes off of Colton as he moved down the bed, spread his legs wide and popped the cap on the lube.

Too slow. His little mate was moving way too slow. Colton dove on the bed, ripped the lube from Sly's hand, and poured half the damn bottle into his palm. He slicked his shaft quickly then pushed two oiled fingers into Sly's snug hole.

Sly cried out, his muscles straining as his head fell back to the mattress and began whipping from side to side. His cock slapped against his belly, dotting the perfect skin with pre-cum as he writhed beneath Colton's touch, pushing back against his hand and fucking himself on Colton's fingers.

Mother of mercy, Colton was already so close to blowing his load, he didn't know if he'd even be able to make it inside his mate's tight little ass. Adding a third finger, he pumped fast and hard, intent on driving his lover out of his mind.

It seemed to be working if the moans and whimpers coming from Sly's mouth were any indication. The faster he moved his finger, the louder Sly's cries grew until he was practically screaming. "Now, Colt!"

Wrapping his arms around his mate, Colton lifted him from the bed and spun them around, holding Sly's body between the bedroom door and his own body. He looped his forearms under his mate's knees, spreading him wide, and stared into his eyes as a soft rumble started in his chest.

"Let me in, baby."

Sly looked dazed and disoriented, but he reached between their damp bodies, gripped Colton's hard dick, and lined the crown up with his fluttering entrance. Colton nudged his hips forward until the head popped through the guarding ring of muscles then drove the rest of the way home, until he bottomed out inside Sly's heated channel.

It felt like bliss—like coming home, and Colton couldn't hold back any longer. Covering his mate's body, pressing him more firmly against the door, he claimed Sly's mouth in a hungry, demanding kiss, needing to taste the sweetness of his lover, feel the slippery glide of Sly's tongue against his own.

His balls drew close to his body, his skin burned, his head swam, and all Colton could think was that he'd never get enough of the man in his arms. Jerking away from Sly's mouth, he buried his face in his mate's neck as his hips snapped forward, setting a hard and desperate pace, slamming into Sly's silky hole again and again.

Gods, he needed this. He needed the connection to his mate—needed Sly period. The harder he drove into his lover's welcoming body, the more he needed. His orgasm raced toward him, but never seemed to get any closer. "Please," he begged against the warm skin of Sly's throat. He had no idea what he pleaded for, didn't even realize he was begging.

As always, his mate knew exactly what he needed, though. Slim fingers tangled in his long hair, jerking his head back roughly, and eliciting a strangled groan from him. Sly's wet tongue licked a path up the side of his neck before he wrapped his lips around the sensitive skin, and he sank his teeth into the yielding flesh.

"Sly!" Colton screamed, his cock exploding as his release rocketed through him, robbing the breath from his lungs and spilling unending ropes of cum into his mate's clenching ass.

Sly released the hold on his neck and moaned loudly, dropping his head back to the door with a thud as his untouched cock erupted into long streams of pearly seed. Colton had never seen a more beautiful sight.

He continued to pump slowly, loving the way Sly's convulsing inner walls grabbed and massaged his sated cock. When the last drop of semen dribbled from Sly's slit, Colton eased his softening prick from his lover's hole and wrapped Sly's legs around his back as he lifted him away from the wall and carried him over to the bed.

Placing him in the center of the mattress, Colton stretched out beside him, running his hands over every inch of his lover he could reach, assuring himself that the man was unharmed. Once satisfied, he curled his fingers around Sly's cheek, pulling his flushed face around until their gazes locked.

“Thank you for coming after me,” Sly whispered, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

“I’d fight Heaven, Hell, Earth, and Martians if that’s what I had to do to keep you safe.” Colton bent forward, brushing his lips over Sly’s and teasing the seam with his tongue until his mate opened for him on a happy little sigh.

They kissed for a long time, slow and lazy, as their hands roamed and explored each other’s bodies. Finally, Colton eased away, brushing the hair back from Sly’s forehead and smiled. “I love you, baby. Don’t ever forget that.”

Sly nodded, and his arms came up to snake around Colton’s neck, pulling him down into another kiss. He kept the kiss brief, and when he pulled away, he gave Colton a smile that left him little more than a boneless pile of goo. “And I love you,” Sly whispered. “Don’t ever doubt it. I need you more than anything.”

Rolling his lover to his back, Colton covered Sly’s body, trailing his lips along the sweat-slicked skin of his neck. He couldn’t agree more, and just then, he definitely needed more of his mate.

* * * *

“I want my ira labium thingy back.” Sly crossed his arms over his chest and pouted. He and Zion sat around the kitchen table, while Colton hovered over the stove, stirring something that made Sly’s stomach growl. Being zapped, punched, and kidnapped did that to a guy. Add escaping, running for his life, and two rounds of hot, vigorous sex, and he was pretty sure he could eat the table if he had enough salt.

“*Iris lapis.*” Zion chuckled and shook his head as if he found Sly a complete riot.

Uncrossing his arms, Sly waved a hand around and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I want it back. It was mine first. I’m tired of people stealing my things.” He sighed and slouched down further in his chair.

“Besides, if it’s as powerful as you say it is, Grant doesn’t need to have it. There’s no telling how much damage he could do with something like that.”

“I agree,” Colton said over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, baby, we’ll get your opal back.” He finally turned around and leaned against the counter as he crossed his arms over his muscled chest. “So, do you think UPAC will get involved now?”

Zion seemed to think it over for a minute before he slowly nodded, then paused and shook his head. “Oh, yeah, UPAC would be more than willing to go to bat for something like the *iris lapis*. Would they give it up once they had it is another story.”

“But, it’s mine!” Sly cried. Why did everyone want to take his stuff from him? “It belonged to my father, and then my grandmother, who gave it to me when I was eighteen. They have no right to it!”

Colton crossed the kitchen and knelt down beside Sly’s chair, taking his hands and squeezing them gently. “I know, baby. I know. UPAC aren’t the bad guys, but you can see how they’d want something that special for themselves. Just think of the good the elders could do with your stone.”

Sly’s bottom lip slid out, and he stared down at his lap. “I get that, but it’s mine. If I give it up, I won’t be able to stay with you. I’ll die, Colt.” He looked up and met his mate’s eyes, swallowing hard while he fought to tame his emotions. “Maybe not tomorrow, or even in ten years, but the cancer has taken everyone I love. I’d be a fool to think it would pass over me.”

Colton started shaking his head before Sly had even finished speaking. “You don’t know that, Sly. As long as we’re mated, we’re bound together. I’m immortal, babe. You never have to face death.”

“Not true,” Zion mumbled from across the table. “If what he says about the cancer is true, then your bond won’t save him. You’ll both succumb to the disease—Sly literally, you more symbolically—but I still lose my brother. I won’t let that happen. The stone stays with Sly.”

Sly blinked stupidly at Zion before his lips stretched into a wide grin. "Thank you." Then he turned back to his lover and stuck his tongue out. "You heard the man. The stone stays with Sly." He pointed a thumb to his chest. "That's me."

Colton snorted as he rose to his feet and ruffled Sly's hair. "Trust me, no one could forget who you are. Thieving little runt."

"Hey!" Sly glared up at his mate. "I never stole anything!"

"Where's my watch?" Colton smirked as his eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

"And my money clip," Zion added, frowning as he tilted his head to the side.

Sly bit his lips as he felt the blush work its way clear up to the tips of his ears. "I didn't steal them. I'm keeping them safe."

Colton threw his head back and roared with laughter, wrapping an arm around his waist as if he needed to hold himself together. "You are too much."

"You told me it was okay," Sly argued. How the hell was he supposed to get anything right if Colton kept changing the rules on him?

Colton sobered and reached out to tap the end of Sly's nose with his fingertip. "It's fine, Sly. Though you should probably ask Zion's permission before you take his things."

Sly's cheeks heated further as he stared across the table at Colton's brother and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, Zion. I just couldn't help myself. The money clip was just sitting there, so shiny and pretty with the little diamonds all over it. I didn't steal it, though." He shook his head firmly. "It in my box with my treasures, and you can have it anytime you want it. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you."

"Sly really likes things that glitter and sparkle," Colton added. "He didn't mean any harm, brother."

To Sly's utter amazement, a slow, soft smile flitted over Zion's lips, and he chuckled under his breath. "My brother really is mated to

a ferret.” He shook his head, little snorts escaping him until he finally doubled over in his chair and roared with uncontained laughter.

Sly stared at him in disbelief and a little indignation. What exactly was so fucking funny?

When Zion finally pulled himself together, he looked over at Sly and bobbed his head. “You keep the money clip. I have others.”

Sly’s mouth dropped open in shock. He looked at Zion, then up to Colton, and finally back at Zion. “Thank you!” Leaping up from the chair, he dove across the table, slid into Zion’s lap, and squeezed the life out of the man. “Thank you! Thank you!”

“Uh.” Zion cleared his throat. “Um, you’re welcome.” He tried to push Sly out of his lap, but Sly wasn’t done thanking him yet. “Colton?”

Colton chuckled and came around the table to gently pry Sly from his brother’s lap. “What if I said you can keep the watch as well?”

Sly couldn’t believe his ears. Two sparkly presents in one day? Jumping into his lover’s arms, he peppered kisses all over Colton’s face. “Thank you. I love you. Gonna give you the best thank you blow job ever.”

“Hey! What about me?” Zion asked from his chair.

Sly jerked around to stare at him then snapped back to look at Colton when his mate began to growl. “I don’t really have to do that do I?” Sly whispered to his lover.

“No,” Colton snarled.

Zion just laughed and held his hands up in surrender. “I was only joking, brother.” Then he gestured toward the kitchen doorway as he rose from his seat. “By all means, go get your wonderful thank you gift. I’ll check on dinner.”

Colton didn’t even reply, just clutched Sly to his chest and darted out of the room.

Chapter Fourteen

Sly tensed when his phone began to vibrate on the nightstand, but Colton nodded his head, so Sly grabbed it, flipped it open, and pressed it to his ear. “Hello,” he squeaked. He cleared his throat and tried to adopt a manlier tone. “Hello?”

Colton snorted and rolled his eyes as he eased down on the edge of the bed beside Sly. “Speakerphone,” he whispered.

Sly nodded and pressed the button, pulling the phone away from his head as a feminine voice drifted over the line.

“Oh, thank you, Sly! Thank you for giving the stone back to my brother,” Jessie gushed. “He and his mate are so happy.”

Sly frowned down at the phone where he held it in his lap. “I thought you said Grant didn’t choose a mate at the gathering.”

“H—he didn’t,” Jessie stammered. “I mean, h—he, he already had a m—mate.”

“He what?” Sly’s voice lowered dangerously. “Since when?”

“Oh, Sly, well, I don’t know. I m—mean...he...well...”

“Jessie,” Sly said icily. “Tell me.”

“Five years,” she whispered.

“Five years!” Sly jumped up from the bed and began pacing the carpet. “What the fuck do you mean he’s had a mate for five goddamn years? All that time he kept me there, forcing me to do things I didn’t want to do. All those times he hit me, kicked me, and bit me. Every ounce of abuse I suffered at his hands, and you mean to tell me the man was actually cheating on me as well.”

His chest heaved, and his unoccupied hand curled into a fist as he beat against the side of his leg. He had never hated another person like he hated Grant Billings.

“Technically, he was cheating on his mate,” Jessie replied snidely. “What did you expect, Sly? That you two would ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after?”

“You fucking cunt,” Sly spat. “You knew all this time, and yet you did nothing to stop it. You watched him kick the shit out of me day after day, and still you did nothing. What the fuck do you want from me now?”

“They, that is Grant and Conner, they don’t know how to use the stone.”

Sly threw his head back and howled with laughter. “Oh, that’s rich. And you think I’m just going to gift wrap the answers and present them to you with a pretty bow. Go fuck yourself, Jessie.”

“I helped you,” she whined. “I helped you get out of here.”

“Did you really? I know that’s what you told me, and I was in no position to argue, but I can’t help but think you had your own agenda. Tit for tat, Jess. You want answers from me, you gotta give me something first.”

“Fine,” she snarled. “I didn’t get you out of here. Seth did. I could have cared less if you fucking died. The only reason Grant kept you around is because he couldn’t figure out how to work that damn rock. He believes you and the stone are connected. Otherwise, we would have disposed of you long ago like the fucking rodent you are.”

“Right,” Sly spoke calmly. “I’m not a rodent, but you get a B for effort in snappy comebacks.” He heard Colton chuckle behind him, but ignored his lover. “So, let me get this straight. My ex is mated to my best friend—has been since before I met him. Seth is the one that called the elders and found sanctuary for me. And Grant thinks I’ve done something to bewitch the gem.” He snorted derisively. “Yeah, and I’m the king of France. Something isn’t adding up, Jess. Maybe you should try again.”

"I'm telling the truth!" she screeched. "Seth has some kind of sick crush on you. It just broke his poor pathetic heart the way we treated you. Weak, that's what he is. He went to the elders, told me he'd spill everything if I didn't agree to help get you out of there. What was I supposed to do? Throw away everything over a fucking *ferret*?"

Sly paused in his pacing and stared at the phone in shock. Seth had a crush on him? Would wonders never cease? "Doesn't Seth have a mate?"

"Yes." She didn't sound too pleased by the prospect. "He took a mate at the conference, but he never came home. He called to tell us to all go to hell. We haven't seen or heard from him since."

"Smart man." Sly silently applauded the man. How Seth had lived with his sibling for all those years was beyond him. If what Jessie said was true, Seth deserved a clean break and a fresh start. "What about Grant and Conner?"

"Conner is Grant's true mate. A magnificent dragon and a warrior, he is a mate anyone would be proud to have."

So, it had been Conner who'd tried to attack them during their escape. For some reason, the information made Sly's chest hurt. "He's a security guard. That's not exactly a warrior."

"He found you, little ferret." Jessie laughed evilly. "Took you all of ten minutes to start spilling your guts to him, didn't it? While you were babbling on about your precious treasures and showing off your pretty little stone, Conner was already plotting how to take it from you."

"He used me?"

"Oh, don't sound so shocked. Why would anyone want you unless you had something to give them?"

Sly swallowed around the burning in his throat. Jessie Billings was a lying, manipulating whore. Colton loved him, and that's all he needed. "Why does Grant want the stone?" he asked calmly.

"Grant is sick," Jessie said quietly. "At first, he and Conner just wanted the power that the stone could give them. Now, Grant needs

the healing it can provide. It's not working for him, though. I need your help, Sly."

The woman had some nerve asking his help after all the vile and hateful things she'd just said to him. Fortunately, her desperation played right into Sly's little scheme. "Bring Grant and Conner to me. I'll help him. Come at sundown. The stone will only work in the moonlight."

"They'll be there at dusk." Then the line went dead.

Strong arms enveloped him from behind, and Colton placed a kiss on the top of his head. "You are a devious little ferret. Remind me to never piss you off."

Sly chuckled and shook his head. "They deserve everything that's coming to them."

"Why sundown? That's hours away, and you know perfectly well the stone doesn't need the moonlight to work."

Smirking, Sly turned in his lover's arms and held the phone out to him. "Call UPAC. I have a plan."

* * * *

They stood on the beach behind their little home, just as the last rays of sunlight retreated to give way to the silvery moonlight.

"Let's get this over with," Grant mumbled as he stepped closer to Sly.

Colton growled, pushing his lover behind him as he met Grant toe-to-toe. He understood the importance of what they were about to do, but he was having trouble letting go of his natural instinct to protect his mate.

Sly stroked his arm then stepped around, looking up at him without a trace of fear on his face. Colton finally sighed and stepped to the side, but didn't move far. If Grant tried anything, he'd be dead before he even hit the sand. Colton might have to play nice for the time being, but that didn't mean he wasn't ready for trouble.

"I need the stone." Sly held his hand out, palm up, and looked at Grant expectantly.

"Why do you have to hold it?"

"Because I'm the guardian."

Colton had the distinct feeling that his little mate was making this up as he went along.

"The guardian? What do you mean? The *iris lapis* has no guardian," Grant scoffed. "You're trying to trick me."

"If it has no guardian, then how do you explain the fact that it will not work for you? Has it healed you? Have you ever been able to garner any power from it?"

"Fine." Grant grumbled under his breath as he reached into his pocket and removed the little rock that had caused so much trouble. Hesitantly, he reached out, placing the stone in Sly's outstretched hand. "Just heal me." He looked over his shoulder at Conner, and Colton thought the man's eyes may have softened marginally. "I can't let him die."

"What exactly is wrong with you?" Sly asked.

Colton glanced at his brother, who stood on the other side of Sly, and arched an eyebrow. His brother shrugged then returned his attention to the men in front of them. Yeah, Colton didn't know what his mate was playing at either. He just wanted to get this over with. Sly was running this show, however, and they'd go at his speed, or they wouldn't go at all. Colton decided it wasn't even worth the breath to argue.

"I don't know," Grant growled. "No one can tell me either. Why is it any of your business?"

"You want my help," Sly said calmly. "That makes it my business."

Grant sighed and scrubbed a shaky hand over his face. Colton could sense the barely contained fury roiling inside the man. His muscles tensed, and he shifted closer to his mate, prepared to step in if things turned sour.

"I can't shift. I can barely drag myself out of bed anymore. Just standing here for this short time, I feel exhausted."

Conner stepped up beside Grant and wrapped an arm around his waist to support him. "It's okay, love. Lean on me." He turned to address Sly. "He hasn't eaten in days. Just look at him. He's wasting away."

Colton eyed the pair curiously. Grant did look a little green around the gills, and he'd lost a bit of his considerable bulk since the last time they'd met in the castle. Still, the changes were minimal. So what was happening to the man?

"Why do you live in Scotland?"

Conner curled his lip at Sly's question. "I don't. I make my appearance once every four years, the same as everyone else. With such a high number of paranormals arriving and departing the airports, UPAC places guards to insure the safety of both our kind and humans." He kissed his lover's cheek. "When I am not fulfilling my duties, I live with Grant."

"I thought you were a UPAC guard." Sly tilted his head to the side in apparent curiosity.

"I was a personal guard for the elders that remain in the castle year round, yes."

"That doesn't sound like something you can just resign from."

Conner said nothing, but continued to glare at Sly.

"And if you live with Grant, how come I never saw you there? I lived there as well, you know."

A feral snarl escaped Conner's lips. "It is a large house. It's very easy to miss a person if you're not looking carefully. Besides, you were kept in the basement mostly. What would you know?"

"Uh-huh." Sly chewed on his lip as he nodded thoughtfully. His small hand wrapped around Colton's wrist and squeezed gently before releasing it and taking a step away from Conner.

Colton understood clearly. Whatever Sly was about to say wouldn't be taken well.

“Why are you killing Grant?”

Colton almost groaned. He certainly hadn’t seen that one coming, and he couldn’t even begin to follow his mate’s logic.

“What!” Grant pushed away from Conner and growled viciously. “He’s not doing anything to me!”

“He’s draining you,” Sly said. “Did you know he’s part demon? Did he ever tell you that?”

This gave Grant pause, and he glanced over his shoulder to look at his lover. “Conner?”

“It’s true,” Conner answered the accusation with a hint of shame. “I apologize for never telling you, but you know what a bad rap my kind has. I was afraid that you would reject me if you knew.”

This seemed to appease Grant, but Colton wasn’t buying it. He would never keep something that important from someone he had professed to love. Then again, he’d had the sneaky suspicion that Conner loved Grant about as much as Grant loved Sly.

“Why would you tell Sly, but not your mate?” Zion asked, speaking for the first time since this little rendezvous had begun.

“I needed to gain his trust.”

Yeah, definitely not sitting well with Colton. The little asshole was hiding something, and he damn sure intended to find out what it was.

“Did you know there are several kinds of demons?” Sly began rolling the stone around in his palm as he spoke. Something he always did when he was nervous or anxious.

“Do tell,” Colton answered when no one else spoke.

“The most commonly known, though the humans still believe them to be myths, is the...incubus.”

Colton’s jaw almost hit the ground. A preternatural himself, even he believe the incubi to be a myth. If Conner was indeed part demon, and an incubus to boot, the only question that remained was why it had taken Grant so long to fall ill.

“You wouldn’t have sex with him while he was with me, would you?” Sly asked quietly. “Afraid he was tainted with my filth.”

“You dirty little liar!” Conner yelled.

“Now that I’m out of the picture, you’ve been going at it like rabbits. You had to gain his trust, of course, because how else would you convince him that he needs the stone to heal himself?” Sly took a step forward, and Colton’s arm shot out, catching his lover in the chest and preventing him from moving any farther.

“Stop it!” Conner roared.

“I’m such a bleeding heart.” Sly chuckled softly. “You always did tell me that. I just wouldn’t be able to resist helping him, no matter how many horrible things he’d done to me. Then once he had the stone, you’d slowly continue to drain him until nothing was left, and you’d have possession of the opal.”

“Conner?” Grant’s voice wobbled when he spoke. “Why? I would have shared the gift with you. It would have been us against the world.”

“Because I don’t fucking want you!” Conner screeched. “I’ve never wanted you. It’s Seth! It’s always been Seth! How the fuck could he find another mate and just leave me alone with you?”

Colton pressed a palm to his spinning head. This was the most fucked up love triangle he’d ever witnessed. Neither of the men before him cared for anything but themselves. “You agreed to come tonight because you needed the stone back—not because you gave a flying shit whether Grant was healed or not.” Colton pointed a finger at Grant. “You would have eventually turned on Conner because you want the stone for yourself as well. I don’t even understand how you could treat Sly the way you did, but your own mate?”

“Sly deserved everything he got,” Grant snapped. “I can’t help it if he’s too weak to take care of himself.” He spun around and grabbed Conner around the throat. “You evil, lying, manipulative son of a bitch, give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you right here.”

“Because you can’t.” Conner smirked, easily breaking Grant’s hold on him.

“I have someone I’d like to introduce you to, Conner.” Sly waved a hand behind him, and Colton had to bite his cheek to stop his laughter as four UPAC guards stepped forward from the shadows near the house. “Will that be sufficient to bring them to trial for crimes against other paranormals?”

“That’ll do,” one of the guards said as they moved forward as a unit and surrounded Grant and Conner. “Someone will be in touch about the *iris lapis*.”

“It’s just a rock. It has no special powers,” Colton hurried to say. “We merely used it to trick them.”

The guard looked at him for a long time then moved on to Sly, looking him up and down before smiling widely. “Very well then.” He winked, and Colton felt his knees tremble in relief.

“I get to keep it?” Sly looked up at him, his eyes shining in the moonlight.

Colton wrapped his arms around his mate and kissed his forehead. “Yeah, baby. You get to keep it.” And Colton got to keep Sly. He couldn’t have asked for a more perfect ending to this entire mess.

Chapter Fifteen

“Colton!”

Colton stepped into the room with his hands behind his back and grinned broadly. “Yes, dear?”

Sly’s face flushed the prettiest pink as he smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. I can’t find my stone, though. I’ve been looking for it all day. It’s not in my box with my other treasures.” His bottom lip slid out and began to tremble. “I worked damn hard to get it back, and now I’ve lost it.”

Oh, poor baby. The last week had been a rough one. Zion had gone home to South America, and Colton had an idea that Sly missed his brother almost as much as he did.

Conner and Grant had escaped the guards and fled the country with Jessie in tow. She’d gone with them willingly, however, sealing her own fate when they were finally captured in Uganda. Tried and convicted as rogue paranormals, the trio had been executed the same day. Though Sly had suffered nothing but cruelty at their hands, his tender heart still hurt for the loss of their lives.

Deciding that his mate deserved a good dose of happiness in his own life, Colton swallowed back his chuckle as he moved his clenched fists in front of him. He held them up to Sly’s face and dipped his head. “Pick one.”

Sly eyed him curiously then slapped at Colton’s left hand. Laughing loudly, Colton opened his hand, pinching the silver chain between his fingers as he let the pendant dangle in front of his mate’s nose. “Surprise.”

“Oh, it’s gorgeous!” Sly reached out and stroked the delicate chain all the way down to the small sterling silver cage that held the opal firmly in place. His eyes moved back up to Colton’s, and he swallowed audibly. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Colton unhooked the clasp and moved around Sly, draping the necklace around his throat as he refastened the chain. Smoothing it over the nape of his lover’s neck, Colton placed a soft kiss over it, smiling widely at the shiver that rippled through Sly’s lithe body. “You’re very welcome,” he mumbled against the satiny skin as he trailed his lips further up Sly’s neck.

Sly spun around, fire and passion blazing in his eyes, and he pushed roughly at Colton’s chest, moving him back toward the sofa. “I want to ride you.”

Colton could definitely get on board with that plan. Without a word, he stripped out of his clothes as top speed and dropped down on the sofa, stroking his very interested cock. “Climb on, baby.”

Sly undressed slowly, shaking his ass and swaying his hips—deliberately driving Colton out of his mind with impatience. When he’d finally shed the last of his clothing, he sashayed closer, straddling Colton’s thighs as he eased down into his lap.

Colton gripped his lover’s hips, staring up at the perfection that was his mate. How the fuck had he ever gotten so lucky? His hold tightened on Sly’s waist, and he dropped his head back to the cushions with a groan. “No lube.”

“Already taken care of,” Sly said, and Colton could hear the smirk in his voice.

Moving his hand down Sly’s hip, he caressed the perfectly rounded globe of his ass, moving around until his fingers skimmed along his lover’s crease. “You planned this,” he accused without any real heat when his fingers encountered the flat base of a butt plug.

“Well, I didn’t know about the necklace, but yes, I had every intentions of seducing you once I found my stone.” Sly flicked the chain of his necklace and grinned broadly. “Found it.”

“Maybe I should make you beg for it,” Colton teased as he gripped the base of the toy and wiggled it around in Sly’s ass. “You think you can just strut your sexy ass in here and get whatever you want from me?”

“Yes,” Sly moaned, then dropped his head forward, his hair cascading around his face, and grinned wickedly. “I do.”

Colton groaned. He knew when to admit defeat. Sly had him wrapped around his little finger, and they both knew it. “What do you want, baby?”

“I want you to fuck me hard and fast, Colt. And I want it to happen now.”

“Anything you want.” Colton pulled the plug free of Sly’s clenching hole and tossed it to the cushion beside him. Gripping the base of his cock, he held it upright, lining it up with Sly’s sweet entrance. “It’s all you, baby.”

Sly bobbed his head once then gripped Colton’s shoulders as he slowly lowered, impaling himself on Colton’s thick cock. They both groaned, their eyes locking as Sly’s soft ass brushed against the top of Colton’s thighs.

They moved together, slowly at first then picking up the rhythm as their pleasure spiked and the heat threatened to overwhelm them. Colton loved being inside his man. It didn’t matter if Sly had tricked him at the gathering. He liked to think he would have chosen the man regardless. They just fit so perfectly together, Colton couldn’t even picture his life without Sly.

“More,” Sly moaned breathlessly, leaning forward and changing the angle as Colton took over the thrusting, driving up into his willing mate. “Harder, Colt. Fuck me harder, love.”

Colton didn’t need to be told twice. Wrapping his arms around Sly, he grasped his lover’s ass cheeks in both hands, spreading them wide as he slammed into Sly’s silky channel repeatedly, driving his aching cock as far into the glorious heat as he could go before retreating then thrusting home again.

Sly moaned and panted above him—not those fake, cringe-worthy moans you heard in cheap porn movies, but the real, passion-filled, fuck-me-harder noises that drove Colton wild. His lover rocked against him, meeting his thrust for forceful thrust, demanding Colton give him everything he had to offer.

Unwilling to disappoint, Colton kept a firm hold on Sly's ass and flipped them over, pushing his mate's back into the cushions, then sliding into his clenching hole again. "Hold on, baby," he ground out as Sly's hungry ass sucked him right in and refused to let go.

Growling, grunting, moaning, and panting, Colton thrust harder, deeper, snapping his hips and grinding his pelvis against the rounded hills of Sly's bottom.

Sly cried out, his head dropped back, and the tendons in his neck strained. Reaching between their undulating bodies, he gripped his rock-hard erection, stroking it quickly as his inner walls clamped down on Colton's cock in a stranglehold. "Gonna," he warned seconds before jets of creamy spunk shot from his slit, painting his chest and abs.

Colton groaned against the instant pleasure as Sly's ass massaged his cock in waves, milking him and demanding he follow his mate over the edge. He gave one last hard thrust and swiveled his hips. His balls unloaded, scorching streams of semen spraying from his dick to coat the inside of his mate's velvety tunnel.

Sated and happy, he slumped over his lover, pulling a grunt from Sly's panting lips. "You weigh a ton," Sly groaned. "Get off me, ya big lug."

"Tired," Colton slurred.

"Well, so sleep somewhere else. I'm all boney. I wouldn't make a very good pillow."

"I have a bone for you." Colton tried to leer, but he just didn't have it in him. He was so damn tired.

"Oh, that was just bad."

Colton chuckled and pushed away from his lover, hissing as his flagging erection slipped from Sly's body. "Shower and a nap. In that exact order."

"Wait!" Sly scrambled off the sofa and ran from the room.

Before Colton could even question what the hell had gotten into his man, Sly was back, his hands fisted in front of him as he arched an eyebrow. "I have a surprise for you, too."

"Baby, I don't think I can handle any more surprises. You damn near killed me just now."

"Oh, go on. Please?"

"Fine." Colton tapped Sly's left hand, grinning when Sly rolled his eyes and held open the right one. "Eh, what's that?" No way in hell was he going to wear that.

"It's a Buddhist phallic amulet," Sly said as though stating the obvious. "It's supposed to bring wealth and the pleasures of life to the wearer. I figured since I had a lucky amulet, you should have one as well."

"Sly!" Colton groaned and scrubbed a hand over his face. "It's a freakin' monkey sitting on top of a giant dick! Plus it's pink."

"So? I thought it was pretty. And it's not really pink. It's more of a metallic mauve. I thought it would go nice with your hair."

"It's a monkey on a dick!"

"So? It's not supposed to be sexual."

"I'm not wearing it." Colton crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head like a child. "Not going to happen."

"Please?"

"No."

"Pretty please?"

"Absolutely not!"

"For me?" Sly slid into Colton's lap and looked up at him with those big, puppy dog eyes that did Colton in every time. "I got it special just for you."

“Sly, what are people going to think when they see me walking down the street with a big-ass dick hanging around my neck?”

“That it’s a representation of the real thing?” Sly said cheekily as he reached down and groped Colton’s naked cock. “That you have a man that loves you with all his heart and would do absolutely anything for you?”

“You can’t make me wear that.” Colton was losing conviction with every word, and he knew it. There was just no way in hell he was going to wear that. It was pink for crying out loud!

“Please?”

“Sly, we can sit here and argue and negotiate all day, and the answer is still going to be the same. There is absolutely no fucking way I’m going to wear that. It makes me happy that you thought enough of me to want to get me a gift, but this...” Colton trailed off as he pushed a hand through his long hair. “I don’t even know what this is.”

“It’s a Buddhist phallic amulet,” Sly answered as if he thought Colton was the one who’d lost his marbles. “Didn’t you hear me the first time?”

“Yeah, I heard you.” Good grief, Colton just didn’t know what to say to get through to the man. He didn’t want to hurt his baby’s feelings, but this was, well, it was a bit extreme, even for Sly. “How about you just keep in your box of treasures?” Colton grinned broadly at his quick thinking. “It’s very pretty, and I’m sure it would look really nice next to all of your other sparkly things.”

Sly looked at the necklace for a long time with his eyebrows drawn together and his bottom lip sucked in between his teeth. Colton held his breath, hoping that his suggestion would work. Sly loved shiny things more than anyone he’d ever met. Surely he wouldn’t be able to pass up something like this.

“But I bought it for you,” Sly finally mumbled. “I don’t understand why you don’t like my gift. I looked all over the place to find the perfect thing for you. I wanted something that would bring

you happiness and good fortune.” Sly ducked his head, and Colton thought he might have heard a little sniff. “I’m sorry that you hate my present.”

Sighing, Colton dropped his chin to his chest and grumbled under his breath. It just wasn’t fair. He knew Sly was manipulating him, and doing a fantastic job of it as well. Still, he just couldn’t find it in him to deny his mate in anything. If wearing the stupid necklace meant that much to his lover, then Colton guessed it was a small sacrifice on his part.

That didn’t mean he thought it was fair, though. He was twice the man’s size, if not bigger. Shouldn’t he get to call the shots? No, the little runt had wormed his way into Colton’s life and his heart, and there was no turning back. He’d do anything in the world to make his little ferret happy.

Sighing again, he leaned up to kiss Sly’s forehead, his heart melting at the sweet smile Sly gave him. Yep, he was a goner. Taking the necklace from his mate’s hand, he slipped it over his head and patted the amulet where it rested over his heart. “Thank you. I’d be honored to wear the monkey cock.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We are talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, she parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing your happy-ever-after with both hands. She also believes that a great cup of coffee can cure anything.

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