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Kelan's Pursuit

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

**Shifters' Haven**

# **KELAN'S PURSUIT**

**Lavinia Lewis**

## *Dedication*

For Alison, Daniele and Rhiannon. Thank you for being great friends and for supporting me.  
I feel truly blessed to have you all in my life.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Coors: Molson Coors Brewing Company

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company

## Chapter One

Jake came with a grunt. He looked down at his eager bed partner and desperately tried to remember his name. *Corey, was it?*

He let Jake's spent cock slip from between his lips and grinned at Jake bashfully.

"Good one?" he asked in a small voice that was barely audible to Jake over his own breathing.

"Fuck yeah, that was incredible," Jake said, still trying to get himself under control. *Conway, maybe?* "You're a fucking god."

The smile on the man's face grew and a deep crimson blush spread from his neck upwards until he looked like he was on fire with it.

"Thanks," he said, his blush deepening. His face was so red Jake thought the kid was about to combust. Jake closed his eyes and felt the waves of sleep begin to wash over him. He reached a hand down and patted the guy's shoulder.

"Just give me a minute and I'll help you out, okay?" He'd jerk him off quickly then send him packing.

"Uh, that's okay. No need." His voice was still barely louder than a whisper.

Jake cocked one eye open and looked down to see the guy's limp dick and the spatter of cum on his hip. He smiled inwardly. He'd shot when he'd been sucking Jake off. Bonus!

"Damn, you came!" Jake exclaimed. "And I was really looking forward to sucking you." *Yeah, right.*

The man's eyes widened and his cock made an involuntary jerk. Jake leapt off the bed.

"Right, well I'd better clean up. Got an early start tomorrow. You want me to call you a cab?"

His hookup looked disappointed for a moment but he covered it quickly. "No, that's okay. There'll be plenty outside."

"Cool."

Jake got under the spray and soaped himself up, letting the lather carry away the smell of sex and sweat. The guy couldn't be more than, what, nineteen or twenty? Cute as a button. Not very good at giving head, though. Still, it was better than using his own hand, right?

When Jake entered the bedroom, his visitor was fully dressed and hovering near the door.

"Oh, you leaving already?" Jake said, climbing into bed. "Well, thanks, Casey, I'll call you."

"For the third time tonight, it's Cary," the man—*Cary*—said with a huff. "And don't bother." He turned on his heel and stormed out, slamming the door loudly behind him. A few minutes later, Jake heard the front door slam, too.

"Jeez," he muttered. Some men could be so sensitive. He covered himself with the sheet and fell almost instantly into a deep, contented sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't need excuses, Rory, I need results. I want those forms signed and on my desk first thing Monday morning, *capiche?*"

Jake ended the call and sat back in his expensive, black leather swivel chair. He felt a familiar tingling sensation deep in his gut. Jake loved the adrenaline rush he always got when a deal was going his way.

He turned and gazed out at the twinkling lights of the Manhattan skyline. God, he loved this city. He'd moved to New York from Boston after graduating with honours, and he was *never* leaving. Where else could he live where the money was this good and the sex was essentially on tap? He loved his life. There was nowhere else in the world he'd rather be.

A smug smile crossed Jake's lips as he dialled another number. His friend picked up on the third ring.

"Tony, my man!" Jake said, making himself comfortable.

"Oh, hey, Jake—listen, I can't talk right now. I've got a ton of work on. Can I call you back?"

Jake ignored his friend's question and continued with his conversation.

"What's up? We going to Liberties tonight?"

"Liberties? Uh, sure, all right, count me in," Tony said, sounding flustered.

"Good man. Meet you there at eight."

\* \* \* \*

Kelan knocked on the door to the top-floor apartment and waited patiently for an answer. He knew his brother and Stefan were inside—he could smell them—but they were sure taking their sweet time answering. A moment later a shirtless, flushed-faced Stefan opened the door and grinned at him.

"Cody! Your brother's here!" Stefan shouted over his shoulder.

Cody squeaked. "Just a minute!" Heavy footsteps sounded on the parquet floor and a door slammed shut.

"Come in."

Kelan nodded, took off his Stetson and strode past Stefan into the wide, open space of his brother's loft-style apartment. He threw his bag down and took a seat on the large, L-shaped sofa.

"Hope I didn't interrupt anything."

Stefan shrugged. "Sorry, guess the time got away with us. How was your flight?"

"Cramped. Next time I'm paying the extra for first class. Damn seats weren't built for anyone over six-foot."

Cody's bedroom door opened and his brother appeared, tucking a shirt into his jeans as he walked. "Hey, Kelan, you're early."

"Actually I'm thirty minutes late."

"Oh." Cody's eyes widened and flickered to Stefan's, then he shrugged and flopped down on the sofa next to Kelan. "How is everything at home?"

"Good. Slowly getting back to normal, anyways."

"How's Luke?"

"He and Mark are all over each other like a rash."

Cody and Stefan chuckled.

"Sounds about right," Cody said.

"Any luck tracking down Rick's brother, Nate?" Stefan asked.

Kelan sighed. "Yeah, I got hold of him. Man was working on a ranch in Montana. Didn't even know about Rick's death or the problems with the ranch. By the time he got home he was too late to do anything. Bank had already foreclosed."

"Wow, must have hit him hard," Cody said.

"Did. The man is broken. Blames himself for what happened."

"Why? He's not responsible for his brother's actions."

"I know, tried telling him that but he won't listen. Seems he and Rick had fallen out over money. Hadn't spoken in near two years. I gave him a job on the ranch."

Cody's mouth curved up into a smirk. "Kelan to the rescue?"

Kelan shrugged. "You know I'm a sucker for a hard luck story. So, you all ready for the big move?"

Cody looked at his mate and smiled. "Yeah, I'm looking forward to it."

Kelan glanced around Cody's apartment. He'd been roped into helping his brother pack. "What do you want me to do first?"

"Uh, why don't you take it easy tonight? Stefan and I have to go out later to meet with my agent, Tom, and his new boyfriend."

"No problem. Might go out for a drink while I'm here. Anywhere you'd recommend?"

Cody pursed his lips and his eyes twinkled with mischief. "Now that I know of your, uh, *preference*, I know of the perfect place. It's called Liberties."

\* \* \* \*

Jake glanced around the busy room, subtly eyeing the talent. Liberties was his favourite gay bar in New York—although tonight, he had to admit, the pickings were slim. Half the men in here he'd already had, and the other half were not to his liking. *Shit*.

He caught the eye of a tall, muscular man who stood nursing a beer at the bar. The guy smiled at Jake in an almost predatory manner, a wicked glint lighting up his dark blue eyes, which were just visible under the wide brim of his cowboy hat. You didn't see many of those in New York. Jake turned away quickly. The guy was hot, without a doubt, but he was around thirty—Jake's own age—and he was *built*. Jake had no doubt a man like that would



want to top and Jake never gave up control—ever. But something about the man intrigued him, and he found his gaze drifting to those dark eyes once again.

“Hey, Jake, sorry I’m late. My boss cornered me on my way out the office, kept me talking for an age, so I was late getting back to my apartment.”

Jake barely acknowledged his friend. He stole his eyes away from the gorgeous man at the bar and continued to eye the room. Damn, the last thing he felt like was going home alone tonight. He turned to Tony and grinned wickedly, leaning in to whisper in his friend’s ear.

“What do you say you and I go back to my place and have some fun tonight?”

Tony appeared to be considering the question, but Jake knew Tony would never turn him down. Jake was hot, so other men said, and he was used to men throwing themselves at him, including Tony. They had been friends for a long time, since they’d interned at the same office, and they used to have something of an arrangement. Every now and then they had fooled around a little, although Jake had had to put a stop to that several months ago when Tony had appeared to be developing feelings for him outside their ‘friends with benefits’ relationship. He was not the settling down type.

Still, needs must.

Tony raised an eyebrow at Jake, then his face broke into a wide, impish grin.

“Sure, why not? It *has* been a while.”

Jake knocked back the rest of his scotch and grabbed Tony’s arm, heading for the door. Tony groaned but kept following.

“Don’t I even get to have one drink? I’ve been working like a dog all day.”

“There’s booze at mine,” Jake said. “You can drink all you want there.”

Jake had almost made it to the door when someone got a firm hold of his arm and yanked him away to the side. He turned to face the man who had grabbed him and was about to tell the loser to get lost when his gaze met with a man who had the most beautiful dark blue eyes he had ever seen.

It was the mountain of a man from the bar. Up close, the guy had to be at least six foot four. At five ten, Jake was not a small man, but he had to crane his neck to look up at this god. Jake was mesmerised.

The guy was beautiful. Broad shoulders that led down to strong, powerful arms and a chest and stomach to die for. Jake's eyes travelled lower. The man's button-down shirt was tucked into a pair of tight, black denims which accentuated his *very* large package. Jake found his mouth watering at the sight. He could do nothing but stare.

The man kept hold of Jake's arm and stared down at him as though he wanted to devour him. He raised an eyebrow and one side of his mouth lifted into a sexy grin.

"Howdy. You leaving already?"

"I..."

The man's grin grew wider, teasing.

"Good to know I leave you speechless. Come, let me buy you a drink."

Was that a Texan drawl? Wherever the guy was from, he had Jake practically panting. All thoughts of Tony fled from his mind. Jake started to follow the man until Tony's words cut into his trance.

"Jake. What the hell? I thought we were leaving."

The man turned around and literally growled at Tony. The sound sent a shiver of excitement through Jake's body but at the same time alarm bells went off in his head.

"He ain't leaving with anyone but me. Go and find someone else to play with."

Okay, Jake should have been pissed off by the man's words but there was something about his possessive tone that had Jake drooling. Tony's mouth fell open and he stared at the man in shock.

"I..."

Jake was pleased he wasn't the only one left without the ability to form a coherent sentence in the man's presence. Tony scrunched his eyebrows together and turned once more to face Jake.

"Jake?"

"Look, Tony, I'll catch you later, okay?"

Tony stared at Jake, uncomprehending at first, then a look of sad understanding covered his face like a mask. He shook his head, turned on his heel and stormed out of the bar. Great, Jake would have some serious crawling to do tomorrow.

"Look, buddy, I don't know who you think you are, but —"

"Kelan."

"Huh?"

"My name is Kelan. Kelan Morgan. And you are?"

"Oh, uh, Jake Bradfield."

"Well, Jake Bradfield, shall we get that drink, or are you in a hurry to get me home so I can fuck you into the mattress?"

Jake gulped. The sound was so loud to his ears, he was sure Kelan had heard it even over the boom of the deafening music. Although Jake *never* bottomed, the idea of this giant of a man on top of him, thrusting into him, caused his heart to speed up in his chest.

Kelan continued to fix him with those piercing blue eyes of his.

"Well. What'll it be?"

Jake stared at Kelan. He wanted Kelan to think he was considering his options...even though he knew he really didn't have any. Something about this man called to him on a very basic level. Jake had to have him in his bed. It was all he could think about.

Jake didn't know where the thought had come from, but going home with Kelan felt as important as breathing. It was more than a need or a want—it was a necessity. Besides, he was sure Kelan would let Jake fuck him. No man he had propositioned had *ever* refused him before. How could they? He was as sexy as hell. He always got his own way in the end. Jake smiled inwardly. This was going to be fun.

"Home," he said, offering Kelan his most seductive smile.

Jake apparently only lived a couple of blocks from the bar. Kelan was sure if they didn't get back soon, he would shove the smaller man up against the nearest wall and fuck him right there in the street. His control was diminishing with every step he took.

Kelan had realised Jake was his mate the minute he'd laid eyes on him. He had felt an unusual tingle throughout his entire body at the mere sight of the man, and it had been all he could do to keep his eyes from shifting and his canines from protruding right there in the bar.

As soon as he had got near the man, there had been no doubt in his mind. His scent was the sweetest thing he had ever smelt, and he'd been rock hard ever since. Now all he could think about was claiming Jake. It was driving him insane. Nothing else mattered but sinking his cock into Jake's tight channel while sinking his teeth into the man's neck.

Kelan slowed his pace a little so he could stroll behind Jake and watch that fine ass of his sway while he walked. The man was a wet dream come true. While shorter than Kelan, he was not a small man by any means. He had a tight, lean body that Kelan was sure came from hours working out in the gym. He liked a man who looked after himself, and Jake was groomed to perfection. Jake was a stark contrast to Kelan's blond, blue-eyed all-American look, with his wavy, dark brown hair and the richest chocolate-brown eyes imaginable.

There was something in the way Jake carried himself—confidence seemed to ooze out of his every pore, and he looked like he could take care of himself. That was a good thing. Kelan was the alpha of his pack in Texas, and when Jake came to live with him, there would initially be those unhappy with his arrival.

The most difficult part was going to be explaining to Jake that Kelan was a wolf. The mating aspect was less consequential as far as Kelan was concerned. Jake would be feeling the pull as much as he was. Although, Kelan had to admit, it was easier when your mate was another wolf. Usually both parties had already been on the lookout for their mate. Still, they were destined to be together. For whatever reason, fate had given him a human mate...so things would work themselves out, right?

Jake paused and looked over his shoulder.

"Are you checking out my ass?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Hell, yes, and that's not all I'm gonna be doing to it when I get you alone, so just hurry the fuck up, will you?"

Kelan saw the shiver that ran through Jake's body. He could smell that Jake's arousal had turned up a notch, too. Kelan was relieved Jake appeared to be feeling the same things he was. Even better was the fact that Jake seemed to be aroused by his dominance. As alpha, he was used to people doing as he said. It would not do to have a mate that wanted control, especially in the bedroom. Kelan would not be able to relinquish it. He just wasn't wired that way.

"Patience, man," Jake admonished, but his pace quickened, undermining his words.

Kelan growled and grabbed hold of Jake's hips from behind. He thrust his hard cock against Jake's ass and hissed when Jake pushed back into him. He licked a trail down Jake's neck before biting down sharply, causing Jake to cry out and tilt his head to the side in an

unconsciously submissive gesture. Kelan nearly came unglued. It was all he could do to keep from coming in his pants. Jake was driving him insane.

"Damn it, Jake, get us home, now," Kelan said through gritted teeth.

Despite his words, Kelan wrapped his arms around Jake and continued to lick and suck at his neck. He just couldn't get enough of the taste of the man. Jake bore faint traces of aftershave. Kelan was sure he detected rosewood and sandalwood. But the underlying scent was something that was all man. Kelan couldn't wait to get Jake naked so he could taste every inch of him.

"What's wrong?" Kelan asked when he suddenly felt Jake tense in his arms.

Now the man wouldn't even look him in the eye.

"Jake, did I hurt you?"

"This isn't going to work," Jake said. His voice was suddenly as cold as ice.

Kelan frowned. He couldn't understand why Jake had gone so cold on him all of a sudden. A moment ago Jake had been all systems go, and now Kelan could feel him pulling away. Had he done something wrong?

"What isn't going to work?"

Jake looked up at him at last, but Kelan couldn't read anything in his eyes. Nothing. He was like a closed book now.

"Jake?" Kelan prompted when Jake didn't answer him.

"This...us," Jake said, sweeping a hand between them. "Look, I'm sorry to lead you on, but this isn't going to happen. I think it's best you go back to the bar and find someone else to go home with tonight."

The hell he would. There would be no other man for him *ever* now that he had found his mate. Wolves mated for life. But there was no way he could explain that to Jake just yet. A wave of sadness washed over Kelan. His mate didn't want him. Had he misread the signals? He thought he had smelt Jake's arousal earlier, but maybe he'd been mistaken. Kelan could feel a lump rise in his throat and tears begin to form in his eyes.

Wolves searched for many years to find their mates and some never found them at all. When a wolf did meet his mate, the event was almost sacred and the only thing that could separate them from then on was death. But Jake wasn't a wolf. Maybe humans were

different. He knew that some members of his pack were mated to humans, but they all seemed blissfully happy together. Kelan had always longed for the same thing.

The sensation of Kelan's tongue teasing Jake had been almost too much for him to bear. But he didn't want to move any further away. The feeling of Kelan's strong arms wrapped around him had felt divine. It was almost as though he belonged in the bigger man's arms. He wished he could stay like that for a very long time.

As soon as that thought had hit, Jake had tensed and pulled away from Kelan. Jake didn't do commitment in any shape or form, and he was sure that was the last thing Kelan wanted, too. The guy just wanted to fuck him, right? For all Jake knew, in the morning, Kelan would be on his merry way back to Texas or wherever the hell he was from, and Jake would never see him again. He should have been happy about that. After all, he never wanted to see any of his conquests again after he'd finished with them. But the thought of never seeing Kelan again caused a pain in his chest so sharp, he thought he was going to pass out from it.

Jake turned to leave and with each step he took away from Kelan, the pain in his chest grew more and more intense. He couldn't understand it but when he had told Kelan to go and find someone else, he could almost feel Kelan's sadness as though it were a physical thing. But that was insane. No one could experience other people's emotions—but that was exactly what it had felt like.

Jake was shocked when he felt a tear slide down his cheek. *What the fuck?* What the hell was wrong with him? He was sure he hadn't had *that* much to drink, and drinking never made him sad—it usually just made him angry. Angry with his parents for getting themselves killed in a wreck when he was only eight. Angry with his grandparents for not being there for him when he'd needed them. Angry with Matt, his first and only love, for screwing his roommate and leaving him. In the end, everyone left.

Now, Jake didn't let anyone close enough to hurt him. He had learnt a long time ago how to put up a barrier to keep people at a distance, and it had served him well for the last ten years. Kelan was the first person Jake had met that he actually *wanted* to get past his barriers...and that was as scary as hell. Jake had to walk away before he did something he would later regret.

Kelan watched the man he had waited his whole life for walk away from him. It was all he could do to not to throw himself at Jake's feet and beg him not to go. Kelan's heart ached at the loss. He was sure without Jake in his life he would never be happy again. How could he? If his own mate—the person that was destined to be with him—didn't want him, who would? Not that he wanted anyone else anyway. Kelan couldn't imagine ever being turned on by another man now that he knew Jake existed.

He just couldn't figure it out. What the hell was wrong with him? *Why* didn't Jake want him? He couldn't understand what had gone wrong. One minute they'd been getting on like a house on fire, and the next there wasn't so much as a burning ember. Kelan was confused, upset—worse, he was angry. Jake had offered him no explanation and Kelan damn well deserved one. With each moment that passed, Kelan's anger grew more pronounced. He would not let it end like this. He was an alpha wolf, damn it, not some timid little cub. Mind made up, Kelan stormed down the street in search of his mate.

He caught sight of Jake a few hundred yards down. He watched as Jake crossed the road and let himself into a large brownstone apartment. *Crap*. What the hell was he going to do now? He couldn't just stand there in the damn street. He felt like a freaking stalker. He thought about going home to Cody's, giving up, but he couldn't let things end like this, could he?

Kelan would never forgive himself if he left without even trying to talk to his mate to find out what was wrong. He'd seen Cody nearly throw away his relationship with Stefan when he'd discovered Stefan had a wife and son. Kelan couldn't blame Cody, of course—the discovery had been a harsh one. Kelan might have done the same thing. But the fact of the matter was, the drama might have been avoided if Cody had only talked to his mate first, found out his side of the story.

If Cody were here now, Kelan knew what he would say. He'd tell him to stop overthinking things. He'd tell him to swallow his pride and knock on Jake's door, tell him everything. Honesty was always the best policy. But then, Cody had always been the brave one. His brother had never been anything but honest. And then there was Luke. His youngest brother wasn't even gay, and yet when he'd found out he had a man for a mate, the thought of hiding that fact or denying it hadn't even occurred to him.

Kelan was an alpha wolf. He was supposed to be strong, the strongest of his brothers — hell the strongest in his pack. And yet here he was, lurking on a street corner, afraid to knock on a man's door for fear of getting hurt. Kelan shook his head. *Time to grow a pair.* He pulled in a deep, calming breath and crossed the street to talk to his mate.

Jake let himself into his apartment and, after pouring himself a scotch, he flopped down onto his custom-made, black leather sofa. He had never felt like this before — so *alone*. He felt like he could never be happy again. Christ, he hadn't even known Kelan for an hour but already the loss felt like a physical blow. Jake felt exhausted. Maybe he was coming down with something. Yeah, that had to be it. It was the only way he could explain his bizarre behaviour. Maybe a hot shower and an early night would help. He had been partying a little hard lately.

He had stood up and was headed for the shower when he heard someone banging on his apartment door. Hell, the whole neighbourhood must have heard it, it was so loud. Warily, Jake crossed the room and opened the door, only to be pushed out of the way as Kelan stormed into the room.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jake asked, closing the door and staring at Kelan in disbelief. "I told you nothing was going to happen between us. I'd like you to leave."

Kelan watched Jake's face closely, then his eyes travelled the length of Jake's body. Jake squirmed under the scrutiny. He might have told Kelan to leave but his body was saying something else entirely. He couldn't hide the erection that tented the front of his trousers, and he knew the moment Kelan noticed it, too. Kelan's eyes widened and he licked his lips.

"Now, see, I think you're lying to me, Jake. You don't want me to leave at all, do you? In fact, I think you want me here as much as I want to be here. So why don't you cut the crap and tell me what you really feel?"

Jake had no words to answer Kelan. He obviously couldn't tell the man the truth. That deep down he was afraid one night wouldn't be enough. Jake wanted more, and even if Kelan wanted the same thing, he certainly wouldn't stick around forever. Where would Jake be then? In the same damn situation he'd been in at twenty. He'd come too far to open himself up to that kind of heartache again.



Kelan crossed the room in three long paces. He grabbed Jake around the waist and pulled him up against his long, hard body. Jake opened his mouth to object but before he could get the words out, Kelan covered his mouth with his own, shoving his tongue inside forcefully. The instant Kelan's mouth touched his, Jake felt the last of his resistance to the man crumble. He eagerly opened his mouth, groaning loudly when Kelan's tongue pushed inside and began to duel with his own. Jake usually didn't kiss the men he brought home—it was too personal—but Kelan's mouth felt so good against his own, he could quite happily kiss the man for an eternity.

Kelan grabbed hold of Jake's ass and lifted him until his feet were dangling off the floor and he had no choice but to wrap his legs around Kelan's waist. Kelan ground their hard cocks together and walked forward until he had Jake's body pressed up against the apartment door. He continued to devour Jake's mouth, spurred on by his mate's wordless cries and moans. Jake tasted incredible. Kelan couldn't believe this insanely sexy man was all his. When the need to take a deep breath overrode his desire, Kelan reluctantly parted from Jake's mouth.

When Kelan pulled away from him, Jake whimpered at the loss. He looked searchingly at Kelan, begging him with his eyes to take his mouth once more. Kelan shook his head.

"Take me to your bed, baby," he commanded.

Jake nodded. The desperate look in his mate's eyes told Kelan that Jake would have agreed to anything he asked of him in that moment.

Kelan set Jake on his feet and grabbed hold of his hand. He followed his mate into the bedroom and gasped in shock when he was pushed up against the wall and his mouth taken almost desperately. He felt Jake's hand reach down and squeeze his cock firmly, and he very nearly lost it right then.

Jake gasped and pulled back from Kelan, staring open-mouthed down at the bulge in his jeans.

"Fuck, you're huge," Jake said, shaking his head. "I can't, I don't think I..."

"Shhh, don't worry, baby," Kelan soothed. "I won't hurt you, I promise. You will enjoy feeling every inch of my cock inside you."

Jake looked at Kelan dubiously, but he allowed Kelan to push him backwards towards his bed. Kelan lifted off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. Jake couldn't seem to take his eyes off Kelan's torso while he stripped. Kelan was happy the sight of him turned Jake on. He could tell there was still something bothering his mate but now was not the time to discuss it. He'd have to have a long conversation with Jake later when they were both sated and not out of their minds with lust.

Jake leant forward and ran his tongue around Kelan's erect nipple before taking it into his mouth and nipping it with his teeth. Kelan sucked in a breath and groaned.

"Jake, you're killing me. Get naked, now."

Jake ignored Kelan and moved to his other nipple, giving it the same treatment as the first. Kelan growled, grabbed hold of Jake's shirt and pulled. Jake's mouth fell open and he looked down in shock at his shirt, which had been torn clean in two.

"If you don't hurry, your pants will get the same treatment," Kelan said, already removing his tight-fitting denims.

Jake didn't move. His eyes were fixed on Kelan's hands while he removed his jeans. Kelan stopped what he was doing.

"I wasn't joking about the pants," Kelan said. "Get them off."

Jake made quick work of removing the rest of his clothing. Kelan was naked and waiting when Jake next looked up. His mate stepped back and stared, seemingly in shock. His eyes fell upon Kelan's erection and widened.

"Oh God," he whispered *sotto voce*.

Kelan knew his mate was nervous and he desperately wanted to make it clear to him that he had nothing to worry about. They were made for one another. Not only would Jake be able to take him, he was going to fucking love it. Kelan thought about stopping and explaining everything to Jake but decided to show him instead. By the time he had finished with him, Jake was going to be begging Kelan to fuck him.

Kelan took the few steps towards Jake that put them nose to nose.

He pushed Jake's shoulders so that he was lying down on the bed then came down slowly on top of him. He grabbed Jake's hands and lifted them over his head.

"Keep them there and don't move them," Kelan instructed.

Kelan licked a path down Jake's neck until he reached the large vein pulsing with Jake's life-blood. He desperately wanted to bite Jake, to claim him and mark him as his own, but he knew it wasn't time for that yet. He would have to wait until Jake knew him a little better and was truly comfortable with him before he dropped the wolf-and-mate bombshell on him. Instead, Kelan scraped his teeth over the vein, which made Jake shiver beneath him.

He moved down Jake's body, sweeping his tongue as he went and placing soft kisses on every inch of flesh he encountered. When he got to Jake's nipple, he took it in his mouth and bit down gently. Jake cried out, arching his body towards Kelan's mouth.

He continued licking down Jake's muscled stomach until he reached the head of Jake's cock. A small drop of pre-cum had beaded on the slit, so Kelan snaked his tongue out to capture it. It was Kelan who shivered this time. Jake tasted divine, just as Kelan had known he would.

"Oh God," Jake groaned. "Please?"

"Please what, Jake? What do you want from me? Do you want me to take this beautiful cock of yours in my mouth? Do you want me to suck you until you can't take it any more, until you're shooting your load down my throat? Is that what you want?"

Jake nodded frantically. "Yes," he said at last. "Please. That. I want that."

Without further preamble, Kelan engulfed the whole of Jake's cock in his mouth, swallowing him down to the base. He sucked his way back up and paused at the head to lave it with his tongue. When he looked up he saw that Jake had grabbed hold of the headboard, his knuckles white from the pressure with which he was holding on to it. His head moved from side to side on the pillow and his bottom lip was caught between his teeth.

Kelan had never seen such a sensual sight. His gorgeous mate all spread out beneath him, practically out of his mind with lust. Kelan growled—he couldn't help himself. He was grinding his cock into the bed as he sucked on Jake's dick in an effort to relieve some of the pressure. If he wasn't careful, he was going to shoot his load before he even got inside Jake.

Jake looked as though he was barely holding on. Kelan slid a finger into his mouth alongside Jake's cock to wet it before pressing it against his entrance. Jake squirmed and opened his legs wider to give Kelan better access. Another loud growl ripped from Kelan's chest. When he looked up, he could see that Jake had been surprised by the sound, but he didn't appear to be afraid. In fact, the growl seemed to make him even more excited.

After teasing around his outer muscles, Kelan finally pushed his finger inside. He waited until Jake had become accustomed to the sensation then began sliding it in and out, in time with his mouth on Jake's cock.

Jake was back to making wordless moans and grunts. When Kelan looked up, Jake was pleading with his eyes.

He released Jake's dick with a loud pop. From the desperate look in the man's eyes he knew Jake needed more and he knew just what to do to blow Jake's mind.

"What is it, baby? Huh? Something you want?"

Kelan grinned and slipped Jake's cock into his mouth once more. He sucked a couple of times, then curved his finger upwards until he found Jake's sweet spot, then sucked Jake's cock once more, hard.

Jake screamed, quite literally screamed, his back arching off the bed. He began to convulse as his orgasm hit him full-force. Immense jerks and shudders rolled through his body as he filled Kelan's mouth with his seed. Kelan continued to suck on Jake, swallowing every drop he was offered.

The taste of his mate's essence sent Kelan into a frenzy and, before he could stop himself, his eyes shifted into their wolf form and he felt his canine teeth protrude over his bottom lip. *Crap*. He lowered his head and tried to get his breathing back to normal so he could concentrate on shifting his eyes back. The last thing he wanted to do was scare the hell out of Jake before their relationship had even begun.

"Oh God," Jake groaned, looking down at Kelan, "that was the best—" His words cut off abruptly.

Kelan turned his head away from Jake but he knew he wasn't fast enough. Jake's loud gasp told Kelan his mate had caught a glimpse of two long, pointy teeth poking over his bottom lip. Kelan lifted himself off the bed and edged away, lifting his hands in front of himself in an effort to calm Jake.

"Please, Jake," Kelan said, keeping his eyes downcast. "Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you, I promise. I..."

"You're a God damn wolf!" Jake spat.

Kelan's head jerked up and he stared at his mate in shock. He still hadn't managed to shift his eyes back, but that seemed like a moot point now. *A wolf? How the hell did Jake know that?*

## Chapter Two

Kelan stared at Jake in confusion. "You know about wolves?"

"More than I want to know. Now get your shit together and get the hell out of my apartment!"

"Jake, you don't understand. I can't leave—you're my..."

"I don't want to hear another word," Jake interrupted. "You should have told me. I never would have let things go this far. I swore I would never get involved with another wolf, and I won't. Now leave, *please*."

Kelan bristled at Jake's words. He felt a low, rumbling growl rip from his throat and could do nothing to prevent it. Wolves were in general very territorial and possessive over what they considered theirs. Being an alpha, Kelan's protective and possessive instincts were far greater than normal.

"You were involved with a wolf? Who was he?" Kelan demanded.

"That is none of your damn business—and stop growling at me. I already told you, I want you to go."

Well, his mate certainly knew how to put him in his place. This was not how he had envisioned the evening going when he'd found Jake in the bar. Christ, it was supposed to be a happy time when a wolf found his mate, something to be celebrated, but Kelan had never felt more miserable. He couldn't bear the thought of his mate pushing him away like this.

"Jake, please, if you'd just let me explain for a moment, baby—"

"I am *not* your baby and you don't need to explain anything. I don't want you here. Now leave before I call the cops and have you thrown out."

Kelan nodded reluctantly. Maybe it would be better if he left Jake to cool down for a while. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but he had to think of what was best for Jake. Kelan could sense the fear and confusion in his mate, and the sadness Jake was feeling felt like a knife straight through his own heart. Kelan was only sure of one thing—if another wolf had hurt Jake in any way, he was going to make him pay.

Kelan got dressed quickly, trying not to look at his mate in the process. The emotions he sensed in him were bad enough, but when he had looked into Jake's eyes they had seemed almost haunted. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Now that he had found his mate, he was loath to walk away from him while there were so many unresolved issues between them.

Kelan was determined to discover what was holding Jake back. It was clear that Jake was attracted to him physically, but something had happened in his past to make him wary of wolves, and he intended to find out what. He would just have to take things slowly with Jake. He needed to get the man to trust him.

When he'd finished dressing, Kelan walked to the bedroom door and paused, looking over his shoulder at his mate. Jake had pulled the sheet up to his neck and was staring at the wall. Kelan couldn't believe how sad and lost he looked. It was breaking his heart into little pieces.

"Jake?" Kelan waited for his mate to look at him before continuing. "I'm leaving now but I'll be back tomorrow and the next day and *every* day until you realise that I'm not going to go away. You're my mate, God damn it, and I *will* fight for you."

Kelan left the room without looking back.

"Mate?" he heard Jake whisper as he closed the door to Jake's bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Jake tried to concentrate on his work but his mind kept drifting back to the events of the previous evening. He had only gone out looking to get laid and now he had a damn wolf thinking he was his mate. It had been a long time since he had heard that phrase and it still had the ability to twist his insides into knots.

Jake couldn't believe his suspicions about Kelan had been confirmed. Kelan's growling, his commanding aura, even his mannerisms and the way he moved had had alarm bells ringing in Jake's head. Now it all made sense. Jake hadn't thought about wolves in a long time, and he had certainly hoped never to meet one again.

His thoughts drifted back to his college boyfriend, Matt. Jake had been so in love with Matt, and he'd thought the feeling was mutual. Sure, Matt had professed to love him. He had

entrusted Jake with his secret of being a wolf, and Jake had kept it for the duration of their time together. He would have done anything to protect his Matty. Their relationship had ended ten years ago, and ended badly, but not once since had Jake thought about revealing Matt's secret.

He'd called Tony several times to apologise, but his friend refused to take his calls. Each time his secretary had said he was busy, but Jake knew it was because Tony was pissed off with him. The more he thought about it, the less surprised he felt. He had treated Tony like an asshole last night. The guy had every reason to be pissed off with him. Jake would *never* let someone get away with treating him like that. Not anymore.

As the day drew to an end, Jake became more and more nervous about going home. Would Kelan be there waiting for him? Last night Kelan had told him he'd be back to see him again. Although he didn't want the complication, he shivered in anticipation. Part of him was more than excited at the thought of seeing Kelan again.

Jake had to admit he was attracted to Kelan—who wouldn't be? Kelan was the most striking man he had ever had the pleasure of meeting, and the confident and commanding aura he gave off was as sexy as hell. His southern drawl practically had Jake panting. And the sex... Jake shivered when he remembered the mind-blowing orgasm he'd received at Kelan's hands and mouth. He couldn't remember the last time he'd come that hard, if ever. Though it pained him to admit it, he was desperate to see Kelan again.

\* \* \* \*

Kelan tried to pay attention to what he was putting in the cardboard boxes but every few minutes he found his mind wandering and had to unpack everything and start again. His brother Cody might only be a small man, but boy, did he have a temper on him, and he liked things just so.

"When you've finished with that box, can you make a start in the kitchen?" Cody asked him from across the room.

Kelan grunted and emptied the box for the third time. He had tuned out of the conversation a while ago, but he had caught his brother raising his eyebrows at his mate, Stefan, who had shrugged his shoulders in reply.



"Uh, why don't I go and get us all coffee?" Stefan asked, crossing the room and wrapping his arms around Cody.

Cody leaned up and kissed Stefan full on the mouth. Several seconds passed before they reluctantly pulled apart.

"Thanks, babe," Cody said, staring lovingly into Stefan's eyes.

Stefan grabbed his jacket and, with a parting wink at Cody, he left the apartment. Cody crossed the room and sat down next to Kelan. He took the vase out of Kelan's hands and placed it on the floor next to them.

"Okay, out with it," Cody said. "You've been on another planet since you woke up today. What's bothering you?"

"I found my mate." Kelan shrugged.

Cody squealed and threw his arms around Kelan, crushing him in an embrace.

"Oh my God!" Cody yelled in his ear. "That's fantastic, Kelan. Who is he? Where did you meet? Where's he from?"

"Calm down," Kelan said, extracting himself from his brother's steely grip. "His name is Jake, we met in a bar last night. He's not a wolf, he's human, and it's not so fantastic, Cody. He doesn't want me."

Cody scrunched his eyebrows together in confusion.

"Huh?"

"You heard me. He doesn't want me."

"But that's impossible. You're mates. How can he not want you?"

Kelan shrugged again, feeling more depressed than ever. Cody hadn't had this problem when he'd met Stefan—both had been elated to find each other, just as it should be. The same went for his youngest brother, Luke. Even though neither Luke nor his mate Mark had been gay when they met, the pull of the mating bond was so strong, they soon got over that inconsequential fact and became inseparable, almost from the beginning.

The mating bond usually transcended everything when a wolf found his other half. It was much more than simple attraction—it was a compulsion to be with that person. Something that was very hard to fight. But Kelan had to keep reminding himself that Jake was not a wolf. Clearly the bond didn't have the same effect on humans.

"I don't know, but he told me to leave or he'd call the cops and have me thrown out."

Cody's mouth fell open in shock.

"I don't understand, did he ask you to leave when you told him you're a wolf?"

"I didn't have to tell him, he just knew."

When Cody's face became even more confused Kelan continued.

"My eyes and teeth shifted in front of him. I couldn't control it. But he knew I was a wolf, Cody. He said he had promised himself he would never get involved with a wolf again."

"Wow. I wonder what happened to him. Do you think this wolf hurt him?"

"If he did, he'll regret it," Kelan growled.

"Why don't you ask him about it?"

"Did you not hear what I just said? He doesn't want me. He never wants to see me again."

"He told you that?"

Kelan thought back to the previous evening's conversation. He remembered Jake asking him to leave a lot, but he didn't think Jake had said he never wanted to see him again.

"No, he didn't."

"Well, there you go, then. Even humans feel the pull of the mating bond, Kelan. He'll probably want to see you again just as much as you want to see him."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Kelan felt emboldened by his brother's words. He got up and grabbed his jacket.

"You mind if I come back and help you with this later?"

"Of course not. Go to your mate — you'll never forgive yourself if you don't try."

"Thanks, bro."

\* \* \* \*

Jake let himself into his apartment. He was disappointed at first that Kelan wasn't there waiting for him when he got home. He shook his head, trying to banish the thought. He couldn't think about Kelan any more. He'd thrown him out last night, and if the man had any sense, he wouldn't come back for more of the same treatment.

He poured himself a drink and sat down heavily, the word still running through his mind. *Mate*. He knew enough about wolves to know if Kelan truly believed that, there was no way he would let Jake go that easily.

Hope began to swell in his chest. Maybe this time would be different. Maybe Kelan wouldn't leave him like everyone else in his life did. *No*. He couldn't think like that. He wouldn't let himself. He would only end up getting hurt again, and this time he was sure it would be worse than before. He had only known Kelan for a short time, but he could see how easy it would be to fall in love with the man. He didn't think he'd be able to live through Kelan leaving him, too.

Matt's betrayal all those years ago had hurt like hell. It had taken Jake a long time to get over the pain of losing his first and only love. Could he open his heart to another person? Jake wasn't so sure.

There was only one solution. He needed to get laid. He was sure some hot young thing at Liberties would help take his mind off the wolf. He finished his drink and strode to the bathroom to get ready.

Twenty minutes later, Jake started the short walk to the bar. His heart sank with each step he took. This had seemed like a good idea at first, but now he wasn't so sure. He wasn't in the mood to pick someone up. It felt like a betrayal of Kelan. Jake scoffed at the ridiculous thought. He barely even knew the man. But the thought of being intimate with someone else right now, instead of starting a fire in his belly, left him feeling chilled to the bone.

Kelan was across the street from Jake's apartment when he spotted Jake walking away from the building. He frowned. He'd told Jake the previous evening that he'd be back tonight. Didn't Jake believe him? Or was the man purposely avoiding him? He was about to turn around and go back to Cody's, but the thought caused an ache in his chest. He needed to be with his mate.

Kelan followed Jake down the street. He was close enough to pick up Jake's scent on the wind and it was all he could do to keep from running to the man and carrying him home like some sort of caveman. Jake's scent called to him. It was sweetest thing he had ever known. But as he got closer, he could sense the emotions pouring out of Jake, and they nearly brought him to his knees.

Jake was miserable.

The confusion and sadness rolling around inside him made Kelan want to throw his arms around Jake and promise him that everything would be all right. But would it? Kelan wasn't even sure of that himself. All he knew was that Jake was suffering and he felt powerless to do anything about it.

A little while later, Jake stopped walking. He stood in the street unmoving before taking a seat on the steps of a nearby apartment building. Kelan watched as he leaned his arms on his knees and hid his face in his hands. With a heavy heart, Kelan crossed the road and walked over to his mate.

"Jake?"

Jake's head snapped up and his eyes widened.

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you I'd be back tonight. We need to talk, Jake, this is important."

"I was on my way to Liberties, the bar I met you in last night. Was going to pick someone up and take him home with me."

Kelan felt a growl begin to form in his chest but, with effort, he kept it inside. The thought of Jake being intimate with another man was suffocating. He pulled in a shaky breath and took a seat on the step next to Jake before his legs gave out.

"Then why are you sat here?"

"I couldn't go through with it. I don't know why."

"I do."

Jake met Kelan's eyes and seemed to be eager for his answer.

"It's because we're mates, Jake. I don't know exactly how the mating bond works in humans, but for wolves it's very strong. Now that I've found you, the thought of ever being with anyone else repulses me. I can't describe how much it hurts to hear that you want to be with someone else."

Jake sighed. "I don't want to, but I think it would be for the best if I did."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I can't do this, Kelan."

"Do what?"

"This, us. A relationship."

"You don't want a relationship with me." It wasn't a question but Kelan hoped Jake would give him an answer anyway. Preferably one that wouldn't break his heart and shatter his whole world.

"I don't want a relationship with anyone."

"Why not?"

Jake stayed quiet. Kelan thought he wasn't going to answer his question, but then Jake sighed again and looked up at him.

"If I don't get involved with anyone, then I can't get hurt."

"That sounds like a very lonely existence to me."

Jake shrugged. "Maybe, but it's worth it."

"I don't think it is. Besides, that isn't even an issue. You're my mate. I could never hurt you."

"How can I trust what you say? You probably believe what you're saying is true but you can't know that for certain. Things happen."

Kelan wasn't sure Jake was taking about the two of them anymore. At a guess, he'd say Jake was referring to whatever had happened in his past.

"I'll earn your trust, Jake. You'll realise over time that this was meant to be and that I would never hurt you. Can't you at least try? What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could leave me," Jake said, quietly.

Kelan frowned. Is that what had happened? Had Jake been involved with a wolf that had left him? Broken his heart? He took hold of Jake's face, forcing him to meet his gaze.

"Only when I'm dead," he said, with conviction. "Wolves mate for life. I would *never* leave you, nor would I want to."

"You *can't* know that for sure. You don't even know me. What if you get to know me and decide you don't like what you see? Where would that leave me?"

"That wouldn't happen. This is destiny, Jake. You and I were made for one another. You can't fight fate. You have to take a chance on us. I promise you it will be worth it in the end. We can be very happy together."

Kelan saw a glimmer of hope on Jake's face and relief surged through him. He slid along the step and put his arm around Jake's shoulders. Jake tensed at first, then relaxed into the hold. He kissed the top of Jake's head then ruffled his hair.

"Does this mean you're willing to try?" Kelan asked, holding his breath in anticipation.  
"I'll try."

Kelan let out a relieved breath. "That's all I ask, baby."

\* \* \* \*

Jake poured Kelan a drink then sat down next to him on the sofa. Now that he had made the decision to try to make things work with Kelan, he felt as though a lead weight had been lifted from his chest. He was still nervous and worried that Kelan might disappear but if he wanted someone in his life—no, if he wanted *Kelan* in his life—it was a chance he would have to take.

Kelan was right about the mating bond. What Jake felt for Kelan was more than attraction or desire. He couldn't call it love, of course, because he barely knew the man, but he could quite easily see it heading that way. Despite his reservations, he felt happy when he was with Kelan and all of his insecurities and doubts seemed to fade with the man's presence.

"So is that a Texan accent I detect?" Jake asked, taking a sip of his scotch.

Kelan nodded. "Sure is, born and bred."

"What brought you to New York?"

"My brother," Kelan said, fondly. "He recently mated with an alpha from New Mexico, so he's going to be moving there for a while. I'm here to help him pack. General **Dogsbody**, at your service." Kelan chuckled, lifting his drink in a salute.

"New Mexico!" Jake spluttered. "Rather him than me. I can't imagine living anywhere but here in New York."

Kelan nearly choked on his drink.

"What do you mean? I can't stay here forever, Jake. At some point, you're going to have to come back to Texas with me."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, yeah. I'm the alpha of my pack back in Texas, and it's not like I can ask the entire pack to move here. You're going to have to move to Texas."

## Chapter Three

Jake glared at Kelan. He couldn't believe the man's audacity. They'd only known each other for twenty-four hours and yet Kelan expected him to up stakes and move to God only knew where in *Texas*? Like that was going to happen.

"I'm not moving anywhere."

"You don't have much of a choice. I told you, I can't move here."

"I wasn't asking you to."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Look, I told you I was prepared to see where this goes, but if you thought that meant I'd be quitting my job and moving to Texas with you after only knowing you for a day, you can think again."

Kelan lowered his eyes and stared at his drink.

"Oh my God, you did think that, didn't you?" Jake fumed. "You selfish son of a bitch! What? Is your career more important than mine?"

"Being pack alpha isn't a career choice. It's who I am."

Jake sighed. He was tired of fighting with Kelan, but he couldn't see any way this was going to work out. They were two very different people from very different lives, and never the twain shall meet.

"There will be a way around this. We just have to find a compromise."

"Please tell me you're not proposing a long-distance relationship," Jake scoffed.

"Hell, no. I have no intention of being separated from you for long periods. I couldn't stand that. How could I protect you?"

"Protect me?" Jake spluttered. "Protect me from what? There was no price on my head last time I checked. What the hell?"

Kelan had the good grace to look embarrassed. Jake sat staring at the man, waiting for him to answer. Eventually Kelan lifted his head and met Jake's eyes.

"Uh yeah, about that. I'm an *alpha* wolf, Jake. I don't think you really understand what that entails. I don't like being jealous or over-protective, but unfortunately that's who I am. I *want* to protect you. It makes me feel good to know that I can. It's my job to keep you safe."

Jake sighed. "I don't need protecting. I'm a grown man. I can look after myself."

Kelan put his drink down on the coffee table and shifted closer to his mate. He cupped Jake's face in his hands and placed a chaste kiss on Jake's lips.

"I know that, but you have to understand, I *want* to look after you. It's important to me."

"Maybe we'll have to agree to disagree on this one," Jake said with a smirk.

Kelan grinned and took Jake's drink out of his hands, placing it down next to his own.

"I can live with that, for now."

Kelan slanted his mouth over Jake's and pushed his tongue inside. Jake didn't fight him, just opened right up, his arms sliding around Kelan's neck, pulling the man closer. Kelan seemed surprised when Jake pushed him back on the sofa and straddled his legs, seating himself in his lap. He sucked on Kelan's bottom lip, biting it teasingly before plunging his tongue inside Kelan's mouth. He was sure Kelan never gave up control in the bedroom but, if he wanted to be with Jake, he was going to have to learn to do just that. At least some of the time.

"I want to fuck you," Jake panted, releasing Kelan's mouth and licking a path down his neck.

Kelan stilled.

Jake set to work sucking up a mark on Kelan's neck. He didn't know how the alpha would feel about Jake marking him, but he had a strong desire to let the world know that Kelan was off-limits. The wolf still hadn't responded to his request. Jake was sure Kelan would be struggling with his dominant side, but Jake would not back down. If Kelan wanted him as a partner, then that partnership had to be equal. Jake would accept nothing less.

"Okay."

Jake stopped what he was doing and sat back on Kelan's lap. Had he heard Kelan correctly?

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I said okay. If you want to fuck me, fuck me."



"Just like that, no arguments? I really thought you'd give me shit over this."

"I'll be honest with you, Jake, it's been a long time since I let anyone do that to me. I like to be in control, you know? But you're my mate. I want to share everything with you."

Jake was at a loss for words. He was touched that Kelan trusted him enough to want to be with him in that way. Even though Jake always topped, he was used to twinkies that expected it, asked him for it, even. He knew how difficult a decision that must have been for Kelan—it would be for him, too. When you'd fought hard your entire life to gain control, relinquishing it was never easy. Kelan seemed better able to compromise than Jake had expected him to be. Maybe things could work out between them after all.

He captured Kelan's mouth again, kissing him hard. Within minutes both men were panting, their cocks hard and aching. Kelan lifted Jake off his lap and got up. He pulled Jake up and led him to the bedroom.

Once inside, both men began removing their clothes. When Jake was naked, he lay down on the bed and began stroking his cock, admiring Kelan's firm, muscular body and golden skin that was revealed when his pants and briefs were removed.

Kelan lay down on the bed next to Jake and grinned.

"Well, I'm all yours," he said, watching Jake's hand slide up and down his hard shaft.

Jake reached into the drawer in the nightstand beside him, pulled out a bottle of lube and tossed it onto the bed. Kelan had begun stroking his cock in earnest, his other hand busy squeezing and rolling his balls. Jake groaned—he was quite sure he could come just from watching Kelan jacking off. The sight was incredibly erotic.

He placed his hand on top of Kelan's, stilling the wolf's hand.

"Not so fast," Jake said. "Tonight, you're all mine."

Kelan threw his head back on the pillow and groaned.

"Please, Jake, you're killing me."

Jake chuckled and grabbed both of Kelan's hands, placing them above the wolf's head. He straddled Kelan's lap, leant down and planted a kiss on his lips.

"Keep them there," he breathed, grinning against Kelan's mouth.

"You're pushing it," Kelan said, but there was a trace of amusement on his face and he didn't resist—in fact, he grabbed hold of the bedpost behind him. "I guess I deserved that one."

Jake shifted down Kelan's body a little until their hard cocks came into contact. Kelan shivered when Jake took both of them in his hand and began stroking them simultaneously. Both men were leaking pre-cum, so Jake swiped his thumb over the heads, spreading it down the shafts to lubricate his path.

Jake picked up the pace until Kelan was panting, his eyes falling shut and his knuckles white from the pressure of his grip on the bed post. Jake was salivating at the sight of Kelan's cock leaking in his hand. He desperately wanted to taste it. He released their cocks, lifted himself off Kelan's legs and scooted down on the bed until Kelan's cock was in front of his face.

Jake licked around the crown of Kelan's cock, capturing the drop of pre-cum, tasting Kelan's delicious, spicy essence. He groaned as the flavour invaded his senses, driving him wild with passion and need. With a smile on his face, he opened his mouth and slid his lips over the head of Kelan's cock, soliciting a moan from Kelan, who still had his eyes squeezed shut.

As Kelan's huge cock slid into his mouth, he opened the back of his throat and swallowed Kelan's length in one smooth and fluid movement. Kelan arched his back off the bed, his eyes popping open as he stared down at his mate in astonishment. "Fuck Jake! How? Oh God, good, so good."

Jake smiled around the cock in his mouth. He knew he gave great head even though he didn't do it very often. He was delighted with Kelan's response—it was exactly what he had been hoping for. He hollowed his cheeks, sucking Kelan's dick hard on the way up before sliding back down to the base again. With each suck, Kelan grunted loudly, his hips moving off the bed, forcing his length further into Jake's mouth.

"Fuck Jake, gonna shoot," Kelan panted. "Don't stop, please don't stop."

When Jake looked up, Kelan's eyes were wide, desperate, pleading with him to make him come. Jake would have loved nothing more than for Kelan to empty his load in his mouth, but he wasn't ready for Kelan to come yet.

Jake's own cock was hard to the point of being painful, and leaking pre-cum onto his sheets. He knew he had to stop. He wanted to be buried balls-deep in Kelan's ass before he let the bigger man come. He pulled off Kelan's cock and squeezed the base hard with his hand. He grinned at Kelan wickedly.

"Not yet, you don't. You don't come until I say you can."

Kelan growled. It was a low, deep sound that excited Jake even more. He wanted Kelan to growl like that when he was plunging his cock in and out of the man's ass.

"You're torturing me, Jake."

Jake chuckled in reply and buried his face against Kelan's balls, inhaling the incredible, musky aroma. He licked and sucked at the soft skin, nipping it lightly with his teeth then blowing on it to cool it.

Jake opened the bottle of lube and squeezed some onto his fingers as he licked a path down to Kelan's waiting hole. He circled it once before plunging his tongue inside Kelan's ass. Kelan groaned.

"Jake, please."

Jake was elated to have been able to make the big, strong wolf beg. Kelan's legs trembled as Jake fucked his ass with his tongue, pushing it inside almost forcefully then pulling back and licking around the tight ring of muscle.

Jake replaced his tongue with a finger, teasing around the outside before slipping it inside.

"Jake!"

Jake slid his finger further until it was buried all the way inside Kelan's ass. He stilled it for a moment to give Kelan time to get used to the foreign sensation, then began slowly moving it in and out. He picked up the pace when Kelan began panting and grunting and moving his hips to meet Jake's thrusts.

There was no way Jake could mistake the look of ecstasy on Kelan's face for anything other than what it was. With that in mind, he added a second finger and moved them in and out together in unison. Spurred on by Kelan's moans, he curled his finger until he found...

"Holy fuck, Jake! Yes!"

"That feel good?" Jake panted, more turned on than he could remember being.

"God yes. Again."

Jake continued to work his fingers in and out, scissoring them sporadically and grazing over Kelan's sweet spot on every other pass. By this point, Jake had started thrusting his aching cock against the mattress in time with the movement of his fingers in Kelan's ass. He hoped Kelan was stretched enough to take him, because he couldn't wait any longer.

He removed his fingers and applied a generous helping of lube to his cock. The temptation to stroke himself until he came was great. His wet, sticky fingers sliding over his cock felt incredible. Kelan reached down and grabbed hold of his own legs, pulling them up towards his chest, further exposing his tight hole to Jake. That was enough of an invitation for him to let go of his cock and lean forward over Kelan's body.

"You ready for me?"

"Fuck me."

Jake didn't need telling twice. He grabbed his cock and positioned it at Kelan's hole. Jake pushed forward slowly and the head of his cock slipped through the tight muscles in Kelan's ass, meeting little resistance. Jake hissed at the initial penetration. Kelan felt amazing wrapped around him. He was hotter and tighter than he ever would have imagined. Jake closed his eyes and held his breath as he slipped the rest of the way inside.

"Jake, look at me," Kelan panted.

Jake obeyed Kelan's command at once. He'd never thought of himself as the type of person who liked to be told what to do, but in that moment he knew he would do anything for Kelan. It gave him immense pleasure to please the man. Kelan's eyes were filled with want, but it was the trust he found on Kelan's face that blew him away.

Jake pulled out and groaned as the muscles in Kelan's ass fought to keep him inside.

"You feel so good, Kelan. So hot."

"Do it, fuck me."

Jake grabbed Kelan's legs and thrust back inside, spurred on by Kelan's request. He started to set a rhythm, pushing in hard then pulling almost all the way out before thrusting in again. Kelan's breathing was becoming shallow, his moans and grunts louder with every movement of Jake's hips.

Jake slid his hand under Kelan's ass and lifted his hips, changing the angle slightly on his next thrust to hit Kelan's prostate. As much as he loved being inside Kelan, he tried to concentrate on Kelan's pleasure more than his own. He knew he'd found the spot when Kelan arched his back and cried out Jake's name.

"Jake! Oh god, yes! There!"

Jake thrust in again and again, each time hitting Kelan's prostate. Kelan was trembling beneath him, eyes wide and desperate.

"Harder!" Kelan demanded.

Jake grunted and gave Kelan what he asked for. He pounded into Kelan's ass, bringing himself that much closer to release with every stroke. Kelan met every one of Jake's thrusts, bucking against him, pulling his cock deeper inside until Jake thought he would go insane with desire and the need to come.

Kelan was lost. Lost to the pleasure and lost to himself. He had been fucked before but it had been almost ten years since the last time. Although he'd been born an alpha wolf, his more dominant tendencies had developed later. They had become more prominent still when Kelan had taken over the pack after his father had died a couple of years ago. Since then, he'd found it almost impossible to submit to anyone. He didn't have that problem with Jake.

Kelan's eyes and teeth shifted to their wolf form and all his senses seemed to heighten. He could feel Jake everywhere. Jake's cock filled him, taking him hard and fast until he couldn't take any more. He howled out his release, his engorged cock spilling its seed between them without a single touch to it.

Jake let out a low, primal groan. While Kelan shuddered through his climax, his ass squeezed tightly around Jake's cock, bringing on his own release. He thrust one last time and yelled out Kelan's name, gripping his hips tightly as his balls emptied their contents deep inside Kelan's ass.

Kelan grinned when Jake's body gave out and he collapsed on top of him in a heap. Jake's neck was tilted to the side and, before Kelan even realised what he was doing, a deep, rasping growl tore from his throat and he sank his teeth into the exposed skin and drew out Jake's blood. Jake cried out above him. Kelan wasn't sure if it was from pleasure or pain, but when he felt Jake's cock twitch in his ass as though trying to refill, he guessed it was mainly from pleasure.

Kelan couldn't help himself. His only thought had been to claim Jake, mark him as his. He knew he should have warned Jake first, but his head had been still fuzzy from the force of his orgasm and he hadn't been capable of thought at all, let alone rational thought.

As he pulled Jake's blood into his mouth, his wolf was howling within, happy and contented to finally have claimed his mate. After a few moments, Kelan pulled his teeth out of Jake's neck and swiped over the wound with his tongue to seal it.

Now that Jake was marked, any werewolf with an ounce of self-preservation wouldn't dare go near the man. Jake would smell like Kelan now, too. Kelan could already smell their scents mingling together—and it pleased him no end. But now he had to face his mate. He was sure Jake would be pissed off with him.

Kelan laid back on the pillow and gently stroked Jake's head.

"Jake?" Kelan asked tentatively.

Jake looked up at him, eyes filled with tears. Wonder and confusion warred with each other for supremacy on Jake's face. Kelan felt his words stick in his throat.

"You claimed me," Jake said quietly.

Kelan nodded—he could hardly deny it, although he was surprised Jake knew what that meant.

"Yes."

"Thank you," Jake whispered then his head fell forward and he promptly fell asleep, a soft snore rumbling against Kelan's chest. Kelan closed his eyes, offering a small prayer of thanks to whomever was listening. Jake wasn't pissed off with him at all—in fact, Jake was...grateful? Kelan wondered dimly about that as he wrapped his arms tightly around his mate and drifted off into oblivion, Jake's softening cock still buried deep inside his ass.

## Chapter Four

Kelan woke up with a huge smile on his face. He felt blindly around for Jake but it only took him a few seconds to realise he was alone in bed. He used his heightened sense of smell to locate Jake in the apartment. Jake's scent hit him immediately – maybe in the kitchen? He breathed in his mate's essence deeply to double-check, when another smell hit him so hard the hackles rose on the back of his neck and his teeth and eyes simultaneously shifted to their wolf form.

He could smell blood. Jake's blood.

Kelan flung the covers off and dived out of bed. He didn't bother putting any clothes on, just ran into the living room, his heart beating furiously in his chest.

"Jake!"

"I'm in here!" Jake called back.

Kelan rushed into the kitchen and stopped short just inside the door. Jake was standing by the kitchen sink, a blood-soaked towel wrapped around his hand. Jake's face was as white as snow.

"What the hell happened?" Kelan asked, walking to Jake's side. "Jesus, I could smell blood and I... I was so worried Jake, I thought..."

Jake managed a smile, but it turned into a wince when Kelan reached for the towel to inspect the damage.

"It's nothing, 'm okay. Was making you breakfast. Cut my damn hand with the knife."

Kelan pulled the towel off Jake's hand and sucked in a sharp breath. The cut on the pad of Jake's hand was deep and bleeding profusely. Kelan squeezed the the edges of the wound together to try and stem the flow, but the bleeding continued.

"Jesus, it's deep, Jake."

"Yeah, think I need stitches."

Kelan thought for a moment. He remembered hearing that a wolf's blood had healing properties for his human mate. Without hesitation, he grabbed the knife from the counter top and slashed it across his own wrist. Jake's eyes widened.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jake asked, horrified.

"Here, drink this," he said, holding his wrist to Jake's lips.

"Are you crazy?"

"Do it. It will help you heal."

Jake was dubious, but he was starting to feel light-headed from the blood loss, so he used his good hand to hold Kelan's wrist to his mouth and drank. The first drop of blood that entered his mouth tasted bitter and tangy, but the more he pulled into his mouth, the sweeter it became.

Jake began to feel better at once. The dizzy sensation left his body and a feeling of euphoria rushed through him. He pulled back reluctantly when Kelan's blood ceased pouring into his mouth. He looked at Kelan's wrist in shock. The cut had already healed over. He looked down at his own hand, surprised to discover the blood pouring from his hand had slowed down to a light trickle. He watched in awe as it stopped bleeding altogether and the deep gash started knitting back together before his eyes.

"That should do it," Kelan said, nodding.

In a few moments, the slash on Jake's hand had closed completely. A small pink scar was all that remained.

"Wow. How?" Jake asked, stunned.

"A wolf heals faster than a human. By taking my blood, my healing ability transferred to you. But it only works between mates, and only with human mates, at that. Wolves that are mated don't need their partner's healing ability – they have their own."

Jake sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

"So we really are mated?"

Kelan took a seat at the table and reached out to grab Jake's hand.

"Yes. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah. It's just a lot to take in, you know?"

"I know, baby, but we have all the time in world for you to get used to the idea. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm beginning to think you mean that," Jake said, averting his eyes from Kelan.



"I've never been more serious about anything in my life. It's you and me, Jake, till the end."

"I like the sound of that. I like the sound of that a lot."

"Jake? What happened with the wolf you were involved with before? Did he hurt you?"

Jake hung his head. He wasn't sure he was ready to tell Kelan about Matty, but if things were going to work out between them, they shouldn't have any secrets. He let out a long sigh then nodded.

"Yes, he did."

Kelan's eyes darkened and a ripple passed over his skin. Jake noticed Kelan's knuckles were white as he gripped the kitchen table. He placed his hand over Kelan's and stroked it lightly.

"He did hurt me, but not in the way you're thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"I met Matt when I started college in Boston. We were both juniors. Matt was a business major and I was studying finance and economics. It was kinda funny, actually, when I saw him for the first time at a frat party. I remember thinking he had an animal magnetism about him." Jake chuckled. "Little did I know."

Kelan smiled. "What happened?"

"Matt sauntered over to me and asked if he could buy me a drink. I said, 'But the drinks are free here.' Matt just grinned and said, 'Sure, but we're not staying here. I'm taking you out to dinner and then you're coming home with me.' Believe it or not, I was a shy little thing back then. I'd never met anyone as confident."

"Did you go home with him?"

Jake blushed. "Yeah, I did. We had dinner together, got along, and pretty much from that night on we were inseparable."

"So how did he come to hurt you?"

"We dated for a few months. I was head over heels for him, and Matt said he loved me, too. He told me his secret, told me he was a wolf. I didn't believe him at first, so he showed me. After that we became even closer if that was possible. Then..." Jake paused.

"Go on," Kelan prompted.

Jake sighed. "After about a year, I got a new roommate, Chris. He was gay, too, but I wasn't interested in him, of course. For me, no one could compare to Matty. One day I came home from class and I caught Matt and Chris in bed together."

"Shit," Kelan said. "That's harsh."

"Yeah, it was. Thing is, Matt seemed to be as cut up about it as I was. He said he loved me but that didn't matter anymore because Chris was his mate."

"Ah. I see."

Jake nodded. "At the time I thought it was a line, you know? Just something he said to get rid of me. But now, after meeting you, I think maybe he was telling the truth. Still, it hurt like hell back then and, after that, I guess I stopped trusting people altogether."

"It sounds like he didn't set out to intentionally hurt you. I'm sure he did love you, but when a wolf finds his mate, it's not something that can be overlooked. You don't just want to be with that person—you *have* to be. It's a yearning you can't control."

"Is that how you feel about me?" Jake asked.

Kelan nodded. "It damn near broke my heart when you sent me away the night we met. I can't describe how painful it was, and I didn't even know you at all then."

"I'm sorry," Jake said, leaning forward and placing a kiss on Kelan's lips. "It won't happen again."

Kelan grinned. "I sincerely hope not."

\* \* \* \*

Jake and Kelan skipped breakfast and instead took a long shower together to wash off the dried blood they were both covered in. Jake leaned his head back against the shower stall and closed his eyes while Kelan soaped up his body with firm yet teasing strokes of his hands.

Kelan couldn't seem to take his eyes off Jake's body. With each slow sweep of his hands over Jake's muscles, Jake's cock grew harder, twitching every time a moan escaped Kelan's lips. Kelan lathered up Jake's chest, then slid his hands down his abdomen before reaching the dark curls above his hard cock. He was driving Jake insane.

He groaned when Kelan's hand skimmed over his dick, but Kelan didn't stop there for any length of time. He moved his hands lower, massaging soap onto Jake's balls and below. Kelan's eyes were hot on him, his own breathing becoming as shallow as Jake's own.

"Turn around, Jake," Kelan commanded.

Jake didn't hesitate. His legs were already trembling, so when he turned around he placed his hands on the wall in front of him to brace himself while Kelan set about soaping up his back and shoulders.

Kelan's hands moved lower, tracing patterns down his spine with almost feather-light touches. He skimmed over Jake's ass and slipped his fingers into the crease, cleaning Jake in his most private place. Jake's breath caught in his throat. He was so turned on he thought he might explode, but he needed more.

"Kelan," Jake breathed.

"Yes, baby?"

Jake looked over his shoulder and met Kelan's eye. The lust on Kelan's face made his mind up.

"I want you inside me."

Kelan gasped and closed his eyes. He reached down, grabbed hold of his cock and squeezed hard. Jake's words nearly had him shooting where he stood.

"Are you sure?" he asked, voice thick with need.

"Yes."

Kelan nodded. He leant forward and kissed Jake tenderly, teasing his lips with his tongue. At the same time, he reached down with his soapy fingers and traced the crack of Jake's ass. Jake gasped into the kiss and thrust his ass back to meet Kelan's fingers. Without preamble, Kelan slid one finger smoothly into Jake's eager hole. Jake broke away from the kiss and turned his head away, leaning his forehead against the wall.

"Oh God," he breathed. "More."

Kelan gave it to him. He sped up the finger in Jake's ass, adding another when Jake's hips thrust back to meet his every movement. He curled his fingers and felt the raised nub inside his mate's ass and stroked it a few times.

"Fuck! Please, Kelan. I need you in me now."

Kelan growled and moved his fingers in Jake's ass with more force. His other hand snaked around Jake's hips, holding him in place. He leant forward and licked a path up Jake's neck until he reached the small scar from the mating mark he'd given Jake the night before. He felt Jake go loose and pliant in his hands as he scraped his teeth over the wound. A whimper escaped Jake's lips. He was shaking and seemed barely able to stay upright.

"Please," he moaned again.

Kelan removed his fingers from Jake's ass and squeezed a generous helping of liquid soap onto his hands. He smoothed it over his aching cock and positioned the head at Jake's hole.

"I'm going to fuck you now," Kelan whispered into Jake's ear. "Then I'm going to bite you again, baby, just like I did last night."

Jake's only response was a low moan. His head fell back against Kelan's chest and he ground his ass back against Kelan's cock, forcing the head inside.

"Jesus, Jake," Kelan breathed.

Kelan grabbed hold of Jake's hips and eased his cock the rest of the way inside his mate's ass. Jake was so hot and tight wrapped around him, he didn't think he'd make it all the way inside before emptying his load. He managed to hold on, but only barely. Kelan stilled his hips and took a deep breath to calm down. He desperately wanted this to last but Jake wasn't making it easy on him.

When Jake started wriggling and grinding his ass back into Kelan's groin, Kelan knew Jake was ready. He started thrusting his cock, slowly at first, pulling almost all of the way out before plunging back inside, hard. Jake gasped, his hands slipping on the wall in front of him when he tried to find purchase.

Soon Kelan was pounding into Jake, grabbing Jake's waist and pulling the smaller man onto his cock to meet his thrusts. Jake cried out every time Kelan nailed his prostate. His legs were trembling so much he knew Kelan's strong hands on his hips were the only thing keeping him upright.

"You feel fucking perfect," Kelan growled in his ear. "Better than I ever imagined. I want you to come for me."

It was as though Kelan's words tripped a switch inside Jake—as if he had been holding out, staving off his orgasm until Kelan told him to come. He threw his head back and screamed out his release, his spunk shooting out and hitting the wall in front of him. He shot harder and cried out again when Kelan's teeth sunk into his neck and white-hot liquid spurted in his ass.

Kelan continued to jerk, Jake's ass milking every last drop out of his cock. When he eventually stopped coming, he withdrew his teeth from Jake's neck and licked over the wound to close it. He was barely able to keep upright, and the fact he was supporting Jake's weight as well as his own made it even more difficult.

He slipped his cock out of Jake's ass, eliciting a low moan from his mate. He chuckled and turned Jake around in his arms.

"You still alive?"

"Don't know. Can't think right now," Jake said around a yawn.

Kelan switched off the shower and lifted Jake out onto the bathroom floor. He towelled him dry then roughly dried himself before carrying Jake to his bed. He got in behind Jake and pulled him to his chest, wrapping his arms around Jake's waist.

"Come on, it's still early. Let's take a nap," Kelan said, making himself comfortable against Jake's back.

Jake nodded and within minutes his breathing had deepened and Kelan heard a light snore muffled by the pillows. Kelan closed his eyes and buried his face in the damp curls on the back of Jake's head, inhaling his mate's scent. He'd fucked out all of the tension his body had carried earlier. While his own eyes drifted shut, it occurred to him that things between Jake and him were going to work out after all.

\* \* \* \*

The first letter arrived later that morning. It was in a plain white envelope with no address and no postmark, hand-delivered. The words on the page were succinct.

*Jake, I'm going to make you pay.*

Jake stared at the letter in confusion, then handed it to Kelan to read. Kelan read the line three times.

"What the fuck does this mean?" he fumed, staring at the letter in outrage.

"Damned if I know," Jake replied with a shrug of his shoulders. He took the letter from Kelan and threw it in the trash. "Some weirdo who gets his jollies trying to scare people?" he wondered out loud.

Kelan frowned. He retrieved the letter from the waste paper basket and read it again.

"I don't like this Jake, I don't like it one bit."

"I wouldn't worry about it. It's probably just a prank."

Jake's words did nothing to ease Kelan's mind. If some nut job thought they could threaten his mate, they had another think coming. They certainly hadn't reckoned on a six foot four, pissed-off Texan wolf, that was for sure.

"What are you doing later today?" Kelan asked.

"Well, Saturday mornings I usually work out, but seeing as I missed it this morning, I was going to go later this afternoon. Why?"

"I'm supposed to be helping my brother move, thought you could give me a hand, maybe have some dinner there."

Jake went rigid, staring at Kelan in shock.

"You want me to meet your brother?"

"Yes."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Kelan. Don't you think it's a bit soon for the whole meeting the family part?"

"No, I don't. Besides, after that letter, I don't want to let you out of my sight until we figure out who sent it and deal with them."

"I think you're taking this a bit far. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. I don't need protecting. I can look after my —"

Kelan raised his eyebrow, staring at Jake and willing him to finish that sentence.

"Fine, I'll go to your brother's with you," Jake conceded.

Kelan turned his face away from Jake and grinned. It seemed his mate was starting to see things his way. Perfect. Now if he could just convince Jake to move to Texas with him...

\* \* \* \*

It was starting to get dark by the time Jake and Kelan made it to Cody's apartment. Jake stood nervously at Kelan's side while they waited for the door to open. Kelan knew his mate still wasn't sure about this, but it was too late to back out now. Stefan opened the door with a huge smile on his face and ushered them both inside.

"Cody! Your brother and Jake are here!" Stefan shouted over his shoulder.

Cody poked his head out of the bedroom and squeaked when he saw them. He rushed across the room and flung his arms around Jake.

"Oh my God, it's so good to meet you!" he cooed.

Kelan and Stefan both growled at the same time. Kelan pulled Jake away while Stefan grabbed hold of Cody and tugged him away, too.

"Hey!" Cody shouted, still wriggling in Stefan's arms. "I was just saying hello to my brother's mate. Back off!"

Stefan and Kelan shared the same look of guilt while Jake just stood stock-still in the middle of the room, shocked and very wary.

"Don't take any notice of these two idiots," Cody said, glaring at his mate and brother in turn. "You'll find that all alphas have over-inflated egos and even bigger jealous streaks."

"Sorry," they mumbled in unison.

Jake stepped forward and shook Cody's hand, ignoring Kelan's glare.

"It's good to meet you, Cody."

"Come on in, Jake. Can I get you something to drink?"

"He'll have a scotch with a little water," Kelan said.

"I can answer for myself, thank you," Jake reprimanded. "I don't need *you* to do my talking for me."

Jake didn't miss the knowing look that passed between Cody and his mate.

"He's got teeth," Stefan said with a chuckle. "I'm glad you've mated with someone who can keep you on your toes, Kelan."

Kelan mumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "Figures."

"I don't know what *you're* being so cocky about," Cody chided. "You're just as bad as he is. Come on, Jake, come and help me in the kitchen."

Cody threaded his arm through Jake's and poked his tongue out at Kelan before dragging Jake into the kitchen. When they were safely out of hearing distance, Jake turned to Cody and sighed.

"Do you ever get used to that?" he asked, nodding his head towards the living room.

"You will. It's different for me because I grew up around alpha wolves so I knew exactly what to expect when I met Stefan. Just don't let Kelan get away with any shit. For example, if you want him to do something for you, you have to plant the thought in his head and make it seem like it was his idea in the first place. That always worked for me with Kelan. Stefan is a little different," Cody said. "But whining and moaning until I get my own way seems to do the trick with him just fine."

Jake laughed. He was already warming to Kelan's brother. He'd been nervous before arriving, but Cody made him feel right at ease. If only he were staying in New York. Jake was sure they could become friends.

"Kelan told me you're moving to New Mexico to live with Stefan. Aren't you going to be sorry to be leaving New York?"

"Yes and no," Cody said, tilting his head sideways, thinking about the question. "I'm an artist, so, although I can paint anywhere, all the galleries that show my work are here in New York. We'll only be staying in New Mexico for a short while until Stefan's brother takes over as pack leader, then we'll be moving to Texas, which is home for me. It'll be a hassle coming back and forth to New York, but it'll be worth it to be with Stefan."

"Wow, you must really love him," Jake said.

"We're mates," Cody replied simply with a shrug of his shoulders. "Of course I love him."

"You make it sound so easy," Jake said. "As though being mates can solve anything."

"It can. When you find your mate, you find your other half. Nothing else matters but being with that person. Your mate becomes the most important thing in the world to you. Any problems, you can work around."

"I wish I had your blind faith."



"The thing is, I grew up knowing about mates. I've wanted to find mine my entire life. But before I met Stefan, I thought maybe there wasn't a mate out there for me at all. You wouldn't believe how happy I was to realise that wasn't the case. Stefan feels the same way."

"So it was easy for you both right from the start."

Cody laughed. "Easy? Hell no. There were times when I didn't think things would work out between us at all. I'll tell you about it someday," Cody said at Jake's raised eyebrows. "The point is, life isn't always easy but when you find the person you were destined to be with, that's something worth fighting for."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Cody had given Jake a lot to think about. He was still nervous that Kelan would wake up one day and see through him, realise that Jake was not the person Kelan thought he was. Jake knew his actions of late had been despicable. He felt ashamed at how he had treated people. Especially those who were supposed to be his friends. He made a promise to himself to try to change his ways. As corny as it sounded, Kelan made him want to be a better person, a better man.

\* \* \* \*

Jake and Kelan left Cody's apartment around midnight. Neither Cody nor Stefan could cook worth a damn, so Cody had ordered take out and they'd shared a few bottles of wine. Well, Jake, Cody and Stefan had drunk the wine. Kelan had insisted on beer.

Kelan couldn't believe how much he'd enjoyed the evening, and both his brother and Stefan had seemed to like Jake. Cody and Jake had got along especially well together. Kelan had been jealous at first, but he'd done his best to rein in his feelings. Kelan knew Cody was blissfully happy with Stefan and wouldn't even dream of looking at another man. If he wanted to build a life and a future with Jake, then he had to learn to trust him, too.

Jake had started to relax more as the evening wore on, and by the time they were ready to leave, he was happier than Kelan had ever seen him. Kelan felt his chest fill with pride. His mate really was something else, and Kelan could already envision them living together on the ranch with his brothers and their mates.

When they arrived back at Jake's place, Kelan's light and happy mood darkened in an instant. The door to Jake's apartment was ajar, and Kelan could smell an unfamiliar scent in the hallway outside. Someone had been inside his mate's apartment.

No, a *shifter* had been inside.

## Chapter Five

"Huh, I thought I'd locked that," Jake said, pushing the door wider.

"Get behind me, Jake," Kelan ordered.

"What?"

"Someone's been inside. Does anyone have a key?"

"No, no one. How can you tell?"

"I can smell them."

"But how could they get in without a key?"

"I don't know. Wait here."

Kelan pushed in front of Jake and shouldered his way into the room. He could only make out the scent of one person—a man whom he didn't recognise. The apartment was now empty and at first glance nothing appeared to have been disturbed.

"Does it look like he took anything?" Kelan asked when he'd given the all-clear and Jake had joined him in the living room.

"Not that I can tell," Jake said, looking around the room. "How do you know it's a he?"

"Men and women have different scents. It's definitely a man, and I don't think he's human."

"What do you mean, not human? Are you saying another *wolf* has been in here?"

That would be impossible. Kelan was the only wolf Jake knew. Except, of course, for Matty, but Jake hadn't seen him for over ten years.

"Not a wolf, no, but definitely another shifter."

Jake stared at Kelan, uncomprehending.

"I don't understand. Are you saying there are different types of shifters, other than wolves?"

"Well, sure. Mainly cats, but I've heard of a few bird shifters, too."

Jake wasn't sure he was able to process that information. Cat and bird shifters? Jake had had a hard enough time accepting that werewolves existed.

"Do you know of any?"

"Not personally. Shifters tend to stick to their own species and most cats are solitary, except, of course, for lions and such, who live in prides."

"Lion shifters?" Jake said, eyeing Kelan dubiously.

Kelan chuckled at the look on his mate's face.

"Yeah, but I think they're rare. Leopards and jaguars are the most common."

"Huh. Who would have thought? What do you think he was doing in here? Do you think he was disturbed before he could take anything?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it. Especially after the letter you got this morning."

"You don't think they're connected, do you?"

"Could be. Either way, I don't want you to be alone here until we get to the bottom of this. It could be dangerous."

Jake rolled his eyes. "I really think you're overreacting, Kelan. Look, I probably just forgot to lock the door on the way out and some chancer thought he'd come in to find something he could fence. One of my neighbours probably disturbed him before he could take anything."

"Maybe," Kelan conceded. "But I'm not taking any chances. You're not staying here anymore on your own."

"And where *am* I staying, may I ask? Shall I commute to work from my place in the Hamptons?"

"You have a place in the Hamptons?" Kelan asked, agape.

Jake sighed. "No, I was being sarcastic. This is it. I have nowhere else *to* go."

"Don't worry about it. I'll think of something. It doesn't matter right now, anyway, because I'm staying with you tonight."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Kelan paused. "Where did you think I was going?"

"Uh, home, back to Cody's? I don't know."

"Are you trying to get rid of me already?"

"No, I just didn't think we'd be spending *every* night together is all."

Kelan frowned. "I intend to spend every night with you for the rest of my life. You have a problem with that?"

Jake's instincts were screaming at him to cut and run. Kelan was moving fast. Very fast. Jake didn't know how to deal with that. He must have looked like a deer caught in headlights because Kelan walked up to him and placed his hands on his shoulders, his expression soft.

"Jake, will you quit worrying? Stop waiting for something to go wrong between us. It isn't going to. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere, okay?"

Jake nodded. "Sorry, I guess old habits die hard."

"Don't worry," Kelan said. "I'll be sure to tell you every time you act like an idiot."

Jake threw his head back and laughed. "I'll hold you to that."

\* \* \* \*

When Jake awakened the next morning, he felt incredibly happy, his doubts and reservations from the previous evening gone. Kelan was sleeping soundly at his side and Jake had to pinch himself to prove he wasn't asleep himself. Although Jake had convinced himself he had been happy in the years he'd spent alone, he had to admit how incredible it now felt to have someone to wake up to in the mornings, especially someone as amazing as Kelan Morgan.

Jake imagined the two of them spending a lazy Sunday morning together. Maybe they would eat breakfast in bed, read the papers, snuggle up. Do the things other normal, happy couples did together on their weekends off.

He should have known better than to hope for something so mundane. When he went out to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, he discovered another note pushed under his apartment door. His stomach tightened when he opened it and began to read.

*Nice apartment you have, Jake, even if you don't deserve it.*

*Scum like you don't deserve anything good.*

*I'm going to see to it you get what's coming to you for what you've done to me.*

Well, shit. That at least proved Kelan had been right. Whoever left the first note was the same person that had been in his apartment last night. It was obvious now this wasn't some

silly prank like he'd first thought. The person who was leaving these notes had some sort of grudge against him and now they'd taken it one step further. They'd actually broken into his apartment.

Jake shivered as he looked around the living room. He hated the fact that someone had been in his home, his sanctuary. What had they been doing in here? Had they been through his personal belongings?

Jake folded the note and stuffed it into the pocket of his robe. Maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to tell Kelan. The man was already insanely overprotective. If he read *this* note, Jake doubted Kelan would leave his side for a single second.

"What do you have there?" Kelan asked, walking in and nodding to Jake's pocket.

*Crap.*

"Uh, nothing," Jake said, being careful not to look Kelan in the eyes.

"You know I can tell when you're lying, don't you?" Kelan said. "Your scent changes."

Jake sighed. So much for keeping this to himself. He pulled the note out of his pocket and handed it to Kelan. "I didn't want to worry you."

Kelan read the note. He growled, his eyes instantly shifting to their wolf form.

"Does this guy have any idea who he's fucking with?" Kelan raged.

"I think we should call the police. There's obviously something wrong with this guy. He could be dangerous. We don't know what he's going to do next."

"I don't think that's necessary. Trust me, this creep won't get the chance to get anywhere near you any time soon. I'll make sure of that."

"I don't understand who would do something like this. And how did he get in here?"

"Are you sure no one has a spare key?"

"No, I haven't given a copy to anyone. Although I do keep one here." Jake crossed the living room to a hook that hung next to his bookcase. "Yep, still here."

"Is there any way someone could have taken the key, copied it?"

"I don't know. I haven't left any men alone in here for any length of time."

"Just how many men have been in here?" Kelan asked. "No, wait, don't answer that. I don't think I want to know."

Jake rolled his eyes. "There haven't been *that* many men in here. Well, maybe there have, but I hardly left them alone in here. We usually go straight to the bed —"

"That's enough information, Jake," Kelan interrupted, looking at his mate sternly. "Jealous alpha wolf here, remember?"

Jake grinned. "For what it's worth, you're the first person to fuck me in over ten years."

Kelan crossed the room and took Jake's mouth with a fierce possessiveness.

"And the last," he said against Jake's lips.

Jake groaned into the kiss, grinding his now very interested cock against Kelan's equally impressive erection.

"And the last," he agreed.

\* \* \* \*

After another bout of hot sex, Jake called a locksmith to change the locks on his apartment door. They still weren't sure that someone had got in with a key, but Kelan didn't want Jake to take any chances. The locksmith put on an extra lock and gave Jake the number for a firm who could come out and talk about the different types of security options available. It was gone five by the time the man left.

"At least now he won't be able to get back in here," Kelan said, wrapping his arms around Jake's waist. "If he had a key, that is."

"Yeah. I just wish I knew what he was doing in here in the first place. What does he want from me?"

"I don't know but I intend to find out."

"What are your plans for this evening?" Jake asked.

"I told Cody I'd help him with the rest of the packing. You wanna come?"

"Thanks, but I need to go to the gym. I've put it off all weekend. I need to get a session in before work tomorrow."

"Fair enough. Shall I meet you here later?"

"Okay, I'll only be a couple of hours."

"Cool. Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"Watch your back. Until we figure out who broke in here and sent those notes, I don't like the idea of you going anywhere alone. I know that's not practical," Kelan added, when Jake opened his mouth to object. "Just promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

Jake nodded his agreement.

"I'll be careful."

After Kelan left, Jake settled himself on the sofa and dialled Tony's cell. He had to try to apologise to his best friend for the way he'd treated him. Not just on Thursday night, but on more or less every night they'd been together for the past ten years. The more he came to think about it, the more he was surprised Tony had stuck around for as long as he had. Tony didn't pick up the call, so when Jake got Tony's voicemail, he left a message telling him where he'd be.

\* \* \* \*

Jake wrapped his scarf tighter and quickened his pace as he took his usual route home from the gym. It was only October, but already the temperature had taken a nose-dive and he could feel the onset of winter in the crisp, evening air. As much as he loved New York, he hated its long, cold winters. Texas was starting to look more and more attractive.

*Absurd.* Jake could hardly believe he was contemplating a move to Texas, but the more he thought about it, the more the idea grew on him. Yes, he loved the fast pace of the city, but if he wanted things to work between he and Kelan, then he had to at least consider the possibility of moving to be near him.

As Jake rounded another corner, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. A shiver passed over his body, and it had nothing to do with the cold. Jake was certain someone was following him, but when he turned around, the sidewalk behind him was empty. Jake rolled his eyes and kept on walking. The letters he'd received and the break-in at his apartment must have had more of an impact on him than he'd first realised.

Just a couple more blocks and he'd be home. If he was really lucky, Kelan might be there waiting for him when he arrived. He could think of no better way to warm his bones than having Kelan's sweat-soaked, muscular body writhing in ecstasy above him.



A car backfired, causing Jake to jump. He put his hand over his heart and stopped walking, taking a moment to calm himself. He was about to set off again when he thought he heard footsteps walking behind him. But when he turned around and scanned the area the street was practically empty.

"Get a grip," he mumbled, continuing on his journey home. "Great. Now I'm talking to myself too."

After another block or so, he heard the same heavy footsteps pounding the pavement behind him. *Shit*. Jake knew if someone was following him it could very well be the person who had broken into his apartment, and that person clearly disliked him. What if he had a knife or a gun?

"Jake!"

Jake span around when he heard his name. He squinted in the darkness to make out the features of the man running towards him.

"Jake! Wait up!"

"Tony?"

"Hey, Jake," Tony said, stopping at Jake's side.

"Have you been following me?"

Tony frowned. "Excuse me? You know you really ought to get over yourself. *You* called *me*, remember?"

"Uh, yeah, sorry. I just thought there was... Oh, forget about it." It had probably been his overactive imagination. "Look, I called to apologise to you about the other night."

"Huh?"

"Thursday night in Liberties. I..."

"Yeah. I know what you're talking about. I just can't believe you're actually apologising. I don't think I've ever heard you use the word 'sorry' before, like *ever*."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that, too."

Tony scrunched his eyebrows together in confusion. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Never better. You wanna come back to mine for a drink?"

Tony hesitated then shook his head. "Sorry I can't. Got a date tonight."

"Wow, good for you. With who?"

"Just someone I met at Liberties Saturday night. We got on, so I decided to see him again. What happened with that guy from Thursday night? You take him home?"

"Yeah," Jake said. "Actually I spent all weekend with him."

"You did? That's not like you. So you like him, then?"

"Yeah, I do. His name is Kelan. He's from Texas. I'm even considering moving there with him."

Tony looked like he'd been hit over the head with a flat iron.

"You're *what*? Are you insane? You've only known the guy for four days, Jake. Don't you think that's a little soon?"

*Crap.* When was Jake going to learn to keep his big mouth shut?

"Well, yeah. I don't mean right away, of course...but it's a possibility, uh, for the future."

"Oh, right. Look I can't stop or I'll be late, but if you want to talk we can meet up tomorrow night, say at Liberties?"

"Yeah, sounds good. I'll meet you there at eight."

"Cool. See you then."

Jake waved goodbye to his friend and made his way towards his apartment. He wasn't far away, but he couldn't get there quickly enough. He felt vulnerable and exposed, and those weren't emotions he was used to.

Jake had always been able to take care of himself. Not that he got into fights often—he didn't—but he knew how to handle himself in one if the situation arose. The scary thing was, Jake didn't know what he was facing, and if this guy was a shifter like Kelan said, he'd be strong.

Jake had made a point of telling Kelan he could look after himself, and under normal circumstances he could...but these weren't normal circumstances. Jake had to concede that maybe he'd need Kelan's protection after all.

For the rest of the short walk home, Jake couldn't shake the feeling someone was following him.

## Chapter Six

"Is there some reason you keep staring at your watch every two minutes?" Cody asked his older brother.

Kelan sighed. "Jake's gone to a gay bar to meet with his ex."

Cody nearly choked on his beer. "And you're okay with that?"

"Don't have much choice. I'm just going to have to trust him."

"Wow, that's mature of you, Kelan. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Shut up," Kelan mumbled.

"I gotta say, being with Jake is changing you for the better," Stefan said with a trace of amusement on his lips.

Cody giggled. "So who is this ex he's meeting up with?"

"A friend he's known for about ten years, apparently. Jake didn't say it was his ex, but that's the impression I got when he talked about him."

"Why didn't you just ask him?" Stefan said. "I'm sure he would have told you."

Kelan shrugged. "Because I don't think I'd have liked the answer."

"Man, you've got it bad," Stefan said.

"And you haven't?" Kelan said defensively. "Please. You forget I've seen the way you walk around the place like a lovesick puppy."

Stefan chuckled, pulled Cody onto his lap and planted a sloppy kiss on his lips, much to Kelan's embarrassment.

"I never professed otherwise."

"Is it safe for Jake to be going around on his own right now?" Cody asked. "I mean, the person that's been leaving him notes and broke into his apartment could be anyone, right? And didn't Jake say he thought someone was following him home last night?"

"Yeah. I told him I didn't like him going there on his own, but he thought I was being jealous. Told me I had nothing to worry about."

"How do you know this Tony guy isn't the one sending the notes?" Stefan asked. "Could be he's jealous that Jake is seeing someone else."

Kelan's eyes darkened.

"Shit, I hadn't thought of that. Now that you mention it, I think Jake was with Tony the night I met him."

"You don't remember his scent?" Cody asked his brother.

"No. Don't think I even caught it. You know what it's like, Cody. I was so shocked to have found my mate, I wasn't paying attention to anything else around me."

"I think you should go to the bar, Kelan. Make sure he's all right."

"How the hell am I going to do that, Cody? If I show up at Liberties, Jake's gonna be pissed. He'll definitely think I'm being a jealous boyfriend. And I gotta say, he'd only be half wrong."

Cody sighed and leant back against Stefan's chest.

"I'm sure Jake will forgive you, but right now his safety is more important, isn't it?"

Kelan nodded and got up from the sofa.

"Yeah, you're right. I couldn't stand it if something were to happen to him. I'd rather he was pissed at me and safe than the alternative. I'll see you both later."

"Okay, call us if you need us," Stefan said.

"Will do."

\* \* \* \*

Jake pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into his favourite bar.

Liberties was located in the old meatpacking district of New York. It had once been a haven for sex clubs and the BDSM subculture, but in the nineties it had been transformed into a fashionable neighbourhood for young professionals.

It was only Monday night, but the bar was buzzing. Loud music bounced off the walls and all around him men of every age and description gyrated their hips to the beat.

Snaking his way through the throng, Jake made his way to the bar and stood in line. While he waited to be served, he scanned the faces in the crowd. The busy bar was full of people he recognised, but none of them were Tony. Jake checked his watch—he was a few minutes late, but that didn't mean anything. Tony often got held up at work.

"What can I get you?" the bald, good-looking bartender asked, pulling Jake out of his musings.

"Uh, I'll take a Coors, thanks, Andre."

Andre nodded and turned to get the drink. Jake had known Andre for about five years. He'd never fucked him, but only because he knew Andre was big into the Dom scene and was a regular at some of the leather clubs in town. Although Jake had nothing against it, the scene had never floated his boat. Although maybe with Kelan...

Jake paid for his drink, tossed a couple of dollars into the tip jar and made small talk with Andre. When the handsome bartender was called away to fix another drink, Jake leant back against the bar, sipping his beer and enjoying his view of the room.

Liberties was more like a club than a bar. It had booths around the edges of the room and a small dance floor in the middle, with stairs that led up off either side to a balcony on the second floor. Jake had spent many a night up there, watching the dancers and searching for someone fuckable to take home.

It occurred to him he wouldn't be doing that anymore—ever. Jake thought he should be freaked out by that, but he wasn't. Kelan was perfect for him and, now that Jake had him in his life, he couldn't imagine ever wanting anyone else. Not that he didn't find other men attractive anymore, of course. He was still human, still a man. But as he watched the sexy men in the room strut their stuff, he had no desire to do anything with them other than look. Who would have thought?

"Jake?"

Jake turned to the small man standing beside him. He had been so engrossed in his thoughts he hadn't even seen the young man approach. *Crap, what was his name again? Ah, Cary, that was it.*

"I just wanted to say sorry for my temper tantrum last week. It was childish of me," Cary said, blushing furiously.

Jake couldn't believe the young man was apologising—he'd done nothing wrong. Jake had been the one to behave badly. If anyone should be apologising, it was him. He just didn't know how to make it up to the young man.

"No need," Jake said, shaking his head. "I'm the one that needs to apologise. I didn't treat you right, Cary. You deserve better."

Cary's eyes widened and his mouth hung open.

"What do you say? Friends?" Jake asked, extending his hand.

Cary shook Jake's hand tentatively. A small smile played on his lips.

"Friends," he said at last.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Thanks. I'll have a Coke."

Jake paused for a moment then nodded and turned to get Andre's attention. After he ordered the drink, he turned back to Cary, eyebrows raised.

"How old are you, anyways?"

Cary's blush deepened. "Twenty, but I'll be twenty one in the spring. Listen, are you doing anything la—"

"Sorry, I'm late," Tony said, stepping up next to Jake and interrupting Cary's question.

Jake turned to his friend and smiled.

"That's okay. I was just having a drink while I waited for you. Tony, this is Cary. Cary, this is my friend, Tony."

"Pleased to meet you," Tony said in a clipped tone, extending his hand.

"Likewise." Cary smiled, reached out and shook Tony's hand in a friendly gesture. The temperature in the room plummeted a few degrees, however, as Tony studied Cary uneasily. Jake had never known his friend to be so frosty before. Maybe he was worried that Jake would ditch him again. Cary grew visibly uncomfortable under Tony's stare.

"I guess I'll leave you two alone," Cary said. "It was good to see you again, Jake."

Jake nodded. "You too. See you around. And Cary? I really am sorry."

Cary nodded and walked off. Tony raised his eyebrows but he didn't say anything until Cary was out of hearing distance.

"You apologising again? What's got into you lately?"

"Guess I've seen the error of my ways," Jake said with a shrug.

Tony chuckled. "Well, I'm all for you turning over a new leaf so long as I don't lose the old Jake I know and love. Uh, I mean..."

Jake didn't have time to process Tony's words. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a large man grabbing Cary roughly and dragging him to the side of the room. They exchanged

heated words, then Cary tore himself out of the larger man's grip and rushed out of the bar. He looked as though he was about to burst into tears. *Shit.*

"Tony, can you hold that thought? I'm going to check on Cary."

"You've got to be kidding me! You're not seriously bailing on me again?"

"What? No, I'll be a couple of minutes. Order yourself a drink, I'll be right back."

Tony shook his head and muttered something under his breath Jake didn't quite catch. As he wound his way through the crowd and headed for the door, Jake looked for the man Cary had been arguing with but he couldn't see him anywhere in the room.

He exited the bar and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The street to the right of Liberties was practically deserted and Cary was nowhere to be seen. Taking a chance, he turned the corner and walked left, just in time to see Cary slip into a back alley that led around to the back of the bar.

"Cary! Wait up!"

Jake cursed, zipping up his jacket against the cold as he quickened his pace, his footsteps echoing along the quiet street. When he reached the entrance to the side alley, Jake squinted into the darkness while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the change in light.

"Cary? You down there?"

Jake had never been afraid of the dark before, but the whole business with the notes and the break-in at his apartment had him spooked. And he was certain someone had followed him home the night before.

"Cary!"

Jake sighed and started down the alley. It was dark, damp and smelt of urine. Why the hell had the kid come down here? Trash cans were lined up along one side, and on the other, rusty old fire escapes climbed the walls of the old warehouse buildings.

Jake moved farther into the bowels of the alley, listening carefully for any sign of his young friend. Where the hell had he got to? He was about to turn around and go back to the bar when he heard a noise farther ahead.

"Cary! That you?"

Jake's question was met with silence. He stilled his body and cocked his head to the side to listen more closely. The quietness in the alley was eerie. There was a wrongness about it that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

It was only then that Jake realised his stupidity. There was a psycho stalker roaming the streets with a clear dislike of him. A man that had actually gone to the trouble of breaking into his apartment, and instead of being *more* cautious, Jake was wandering down a deserted back alley, essentially offering himself up on a plate. *Way to go, Jake.*

The longer Jake stood in the dark alley, the more uneasy he became. He had exactly the same feeling he'd had the previous night when he'd been walking home from the gym. It wasn't his imagination. Someone in the alley was watching him, he was certain of it.

Jake had to get out of the alley and back to the safety of the bar, but when he turned around he came face to face with a very large, black cat.

"Oh, shit," he breathed.

The cat was huge. Some sort of panther, maybe? Its black coat almost blended in with its surroundings but there was no mistaking the fierce glint in its yellow eyes or the sharpness of its teeth when it opened its mouth and snarled.

Jake was under no illusions. Panthers didn't just wander freely around the streets of New York. From everything Kelan had told him, he knew the cat was a shifter, but who? Surely it couldn't be quiet, mild-tempered Cary?

Jake edged backwards very, very slowly, afraid to take his eyes off the large cat for a single second. The panther hissed another warning and took a step forward. Jake brought to mind everything he knew about big cats. He knew the one thing he should not do was run. It would only give chase. And Jake had no doubt the panther would catch him. But then, the panther was also a man. Maybe he could talk to him, reason with him, even?

"Cary, is that you?" Jake asked.

The cat hissed again and prowled closer. The irony wasn't lost on Jake. He'd thought he was being harassed by some random stalker, and now he was quite literally being stalked.

Jake raised his hands in front of him and took another step back.

"Cary, it's Jake, can you understand me?"

The cat made a gurgling noise in its throat. The sound was inhuman and sounded almost like the cat was laughing at him.

Jake chanced a look at the fire escape beside him. He wasn't sure he could make it to the ladder before the panther reached him, but he had to try something. He couldn't just stand there, waiting for it to attack.



The panther took another step forward. A second later, a noise from outside the alley caught the cat's attention and Jake saw his chance. He leapt for the ladder and began to climb. He had only made it a couple of rungs when the cat turned, realised what he was doing, and pounced.

Its long talons clawed at Jake's calf, cutting deep. White-hot pain shot through his leg and he cried out while still trying to keep his grip on the ladder. Hot wetness from the wound seeped through his jeans and trickled down his leg. Jake grabbed hold of the next rung of the ladder and heaved himself upwards. His leg throbbed from the cut, but he ignored the pain and kept on climbing.

The panther hissed. When Jake looked down, the cat was starting to climb up behind him. It swiped at him again, but this time Jake was able to move his leg in time, narrowly missing a blow from the sharp claws.

Jake kicked out and his foot caught the top of the panther's head, but it wasn't enough to stop its pursuit. All it did was infuriate the panther further, and after another series of snarls and hisses, it swiped out again, its claws once more finding their target.

The second blow was too much for Jake. The pain tore up his leg, stealing his breath, causing lights to dance in front of his eyes. Blood from the wound ran down his leg onto the rung of the ladder beneath him. His foot slipped on the wet surface and he fell.

Jake hit the ground with a loud thud, the back of his head slamming down onto the hard concrete surface. As the dizziness passed, Jake looked up into the gleaming yellow eyes of the panther as it loomed over him, lips curled back around sharp, pointy teeth.

The last thing he remembered before the darkness took him was the cat's huge paw raised, its claws inches away from his throat.

## Chapter Seven

Jake gagged. He tried to move his head away from the stream of hot, thick liquid that was pouring into his throat, choking him. A large hand held the top of his head, pinning him in place. He fought to open his eyes but they were too heavy.

"That's it, Jake, drink." Kelan's soothing voice invaded his senses and Jake relaxed, opening his throat to drink whatever Kelan was offering him.

Jake's head was thumping and his leg throbbed like a son of a bitch. But the more liquid that poured into his throat, the better he began to feel. A moment or two later, the flow stopped and Jake was able to crack open his eyes.

Kelan was looking down at him with an anxious expression on his face. His forearm was raised to Jake's face and a deep cut on his wrist was closing up before Jake's eyes.

"Kelan?"

"I'm here, baby. Try not to move for a while, okay? You're still healing."

"Blood?" Jake croaked.

"Yes. Your leg is in a bad way, so I gave you some of my blood to help you heal."

"What happened?"

Kelan frowned. He reached down and stroked the side of Jake's face. "You don't remember?"

Jake tried to recall what had happened to him but his mind was foggy. He fought off the dizziness and, slowly, pictures began to form in his mind.

"There was a cat," he said at last. "A big, black cat."

Kelan nodded. "A shifter. I came to the bar to make sure you were okay, but I caught your scent outside before I went in, and I followed it to this alley.

"When I got here, you were unconscious and a panther shifter was standing over you. Do you remember any of that?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, I fell from the fire escape and hit my head. What happened to him?"

"I chased him, but he was fast. I couldn't catch him. In truth, I was too worried about you. I had to come back to make sure you were all right."

"You saved my life," Jake said, "If you hadn't got here in time, I might be dead by now."

"Shh, don't say shit like that, Jake. Don't *ever* say that. If anything happened to you, I..." Kelan hung his head and Jake noticed a tear fall from his eye and slide down his cheek.

"Hey, I'm okay," Jake soothed, reaching up a shaky hand to wipe it away. "You *did* get to me in time. I'm going to be fine, right?"

Kelan nodded. "You'll heal, but the cuts on your leg are deep. You'll probably be left with scars."

Jake shrugged. "Scars, I can deal with, so long as the sight of them doesn't turn you off me."

Kelan growled. He leant down and captured Jake's mouth in a fierce kiss, shoving his tongue inside forcefully. Jake opened right up and surrendered to the kiss.

"Never," Kelan said, against his lips.

Jake threaded his fingers through Kelan's hair and held on tight. He could feel Kelan's hardness pressing against him. It made him shiver with desire and ache with the need to come.

Kelan reached for the zipper on Jake's jeans, pulled it open roughly and slid his hand inside. He took hold of Jake's cock and released it from the confines of his pants. Jake gasped when Kelan squeezed him firmly then began to stroke, his thumb brushing over the sensitive nerve endings on the head of his cock.

Kelan trembled as he tugged Jake's cock, grinding his hips insistently against Jake's leg. Jake wasn't surprised to see Kelan's eyes shift to their wolf form and his incisors break free from his gums.

Kelan was afraid, Jake was certain of that. The man was practically desperate in his movements and he looked barely able to contain his wolf. Jake couldn't blame him. Kelan must have been as worried as all hell about him. Jake knew he would feel exactly the same way if the situation was reversed.

"Feels good," Jake said, his hands moving to Kelan's jeans and fighting with the button to get his lover's cock out, too. He was in urgent need of the contact.

Kelan growled when Jake took him in his hand and started stroking. The sound was loud to Jake's ears, especially in the stillness of the deserted alley. It sent a shiver of

anticipation along his spine. That, and the feel of Kelan's firm hand working his own cock, was enough to send Jake close to the finish he was now so desperate for.

Even in the darkness, Jake could see a flicker of emotion in Kelan's eyes, but he was afraid to put a name to it. When Kelan growled again, more loudly than the first time, and gripped his cock harder, Jake could not hold back his orgasm any longer. He cried out when the force of it rocketed through him, his eyes never leaving Kelan's.

Jake's orgasm set off Kelan's own. He threw back his head and shouted out Jake's name as he came, coating Jake's stomach with his seed.

It took Kelan a couple of minutes to stop juddering from his release. When he did, he looked down to meet Jake's eyes.

"Don't ever do that to me again, understand? If I lost you, I..."

Jake couldn't contain the sob that tore from his throat as he looked up into Kelan's eyes and saw the worry, relief and affection all shining back at him.

"I promise."

\* \* \* \*

"Here, drink this," Cody said, placing a large scotch in Jake's hands.

Jake still felt like shit, but at least his head wasn't hurting anymore and the acute pain in his leg had lessened to a dull throb. He still hadn't plucked up the courage to take a look at it. Even though he'd told Kelan the scars wouldn't bother him, he was afraid they'd be worse than he imagined.

Sure, Kelan had said they wouldn't put him off him but what if they did? His looks were the best thing he had going for him, weren't they?

"Thanks," Jake said, taking a sip of the scotch. He moaned as he felt the familiar burn in the back of his throat. "I needed that."

Kelan took a seat on the sofa next to Jake and studied him, a frown playing on his lips.

"What the hell were you doing in the back alley of a bar, Jake?"

Cody shuffled from foot to foot. "Uh, I'm just going to see how Stefan is getting on in the kitchen," he said, practically tripping over his feet in his rush to leave the room.

Great, so now even Kelan's brother thought that Jake was screwing around. Jake waited until Cody had left before meeting Kelan's eye.

"It's not what you think."

"Really. And what am I thinking exactly?"

Jake shrugged. "That I went out there to hook up with some guy."

"Did you?"

"No, I didn't." Jake put his glass down on the coffee table in front of him and took hold of Kelan's hand. "I don't want anyone else, I promise you that."

Kelan looked torn. Like he wanted to believe Jake, but he wasn't sure if he did. After a moment, Kelan sighed, his thumb rubbing over the back of Jake's hand.

"I believe you. But that doesn't answer my question. What the hell were you doing out there alone? How could you be so careless after everything that's happened in the last few days? You need to take better care of yourself."

Jake tried not to be offended. He *could* take care of himself...well, usually. But now that there was a pissed off panther shifter out to get him, maybe he needed Kelan's protection more than he'd first realised.

He settled back on the sofa and proceeded to tell Kelan the whole story about Cary, omitting nothing. He was terrified his tale would make Kelan realise what a horrible person he was mated to. What would Kelan think when he found out how much of a slut Jake had been? How he'd used people for his own ends? Maybe this would be the breaking point for Kelan. Jake didn't know what he'd do if the big, handsome wolf realised he could do better than him.

It had hurt Jake when Matt had left him all those years ago. However, he now knew that his feelings for Matt were nothing compared to what he felt for Kelan. It would quite literally break him to lose Kelan now, his feelings were so strong.

When he'd finished his story, Jake leaned his head back on the sofa and closed his eyes, waiting for Kelan's harsh words. They never came. After a few moments of silence, Jake cocked one eye open and peeked at Kelan.

"Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Yeah. Looks like we found our stalker."

That certainly wasn't what Jake had expected to hear.

"You really think it could be Cary?"

"Who else could it be? Unless Tony followed you from the bar."

Jake slapped his palm to his forehead.

"Fuck! Tony! I forgot all about him. He was waiting for me. Shit, he's gonna be pissed. There's no way he's gonna forgive me again."

"Look, we don't know for certain that Tony is innocent yet, although from what you've told me it does sound like Cary is our panther. Do you know where he lives?"

"No, he came to my place," Jake said, feeling his face fill with heat.

Jake did not want to be having this conversation with Kelan. Although it was fair to say Kelan knew by now he wasn't a saint before they met, he still didn't want Kelan to hear about the men he'd slept with. He sure as hell didn't want to know about Kelan's conquests.

"Don't worry, we'll find him," Kelan said.

"What about Tony? I'd better call him."

"No, I think it's best if we go and see him tomorrow. That way I'll know for sure if he's the shifter, and if he's not, we can rule him out. Then it has to be Cary. It will probably be better for you to apologise to Tony face to face anyway. If he's as good a friend as you say he is, he'll understand."

"Understand? What the hell am I going to tell him? That I was attacked by a giant, black panther? Somehow I don't think even Tony would swallow that one."

"You don't have to tell him the truth. Don't worry, you'll think of something."

"I don't know. I don't think he'll forgive me for this. Besides he's probably better off without me in his life. I've treated him like shit one too many times."

"Then you can make it up to him."

Jake sighed. "I guess you're right."

"What else is bothering you?"

Jake stared at Kelan. "Can you read my mind or something?"

Kelan chuckled. "Or something." At Jake's raised eyebrow Kelan continued, "Your scent changes when you're upset. It's subtle, but I can still tell something is wrong. What is it?"

"I'm not a very nice person. Why would you still want to be with me?"

Kelan shook his head. "You may have done some things that you're not proud of but who hasn't? Besides, you can't live in the past. It's what you do from here on out that's important."

Jake felt a lump rise in the back of his throat. "I'm so lucky to have found you."

"No." Kelan took Jake's face in his hands and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. "I'm the lucky one."

\* \* \* \*

"What did they say?" Kelan asked, helping himself to a coffee from the pot.

Jake shrugged. "Not a lot they could say. I haven't taken a sick day since I started at the company, so I figure I was long overdue one."

"Did you call Tony?"

"I tried. His secretary said he was in a meeting but I know he's avoiding my calls. After last night I can't blame him."

"So what are we going to do now? You want to wait until he finishes work and go to his apartment?"

Jake thought about his options for a moment, then shook his head.

"He probably wouldn't let me in. I think our best chance is to catch him when he goes out to lunch."

"How do you know where he'll be?"

Jake grinned. "Tony is the most predictable man I know. He eats lunch at the same restaurant every single day. Twelve fifteen on the dot. If we show up there, we'll definitely get to talk to him. I know Tony, and he's not going to make a scene in his favourite restaurant."

"Fair enough, twelve fifteen it is, then," Kelan said, checking his watch. "What *are* we going to do to amuse ourselves for the next three hours?"

Jake chuckled and straddled Kelan's lap.

"I'm sure we can come up with something."

Kelan leant forward and gave Jake a long, leisurely kiss. He traced his hands over Jake's sides and up his back, causing him to shiver. Jake was already hard and aching as Kelan's hands ghosting over his body made him hotter still.

The wounds on Jake's leg had healed considerably since the attack the night before, but the scars were a deep shade of pink, and angry-looking. After having a look at them, Kelan had promised him the scars would fade until they were barely noticeable, but Jake wasn't as bothered by them as he would have been months, even weeks ago. They didn't seem to bother Kelan in the least, and that was all that mattered to Jake.

Until it was time to meet with Tony, Jake allowed Kelan to distract him with kisses and touches. He became pliant in Kelan's arms and let the wolf love him until he forgot all his worries and could barely remember his own name.

\* \* \* \*

Jake lifted the newspaper higher to shield his face and peered over the top of it. Kelan chuckled at his side.

"All you need is a raincoat and a dodgy moustache and you'd be good to go, Inspector Clouseau."

Jake folded the paper and threw it onto the table in front of him.

"I'm trying to be inconspicuous."

"Why? We're not on a stakeout. As soon as Tony arrives, we'll be going over to talk to him. What does it matter if he sees us?"

"It doesn't, I guess," Jake mumbled. "I think this is all pointless anyway. No way is Tony a shifter. I'd know."

"You're probably right, but I'm not taking any chances until we know for sure."

"Shit, there he is," Jake said, ducking behind Kelan.

Kelan rolled his eyes and got up from his seat at the café table opposite the restaurant.

"Come on, let's get this over with."

Jake followed Kelan across the street and stopped outside the entrance to the restaurant. He grabbed hold of Kelan's arm and yanked him back before he could walk inside.

"What the hell?"



"Maybe I should talk to him on my own first."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I trust him, Kelan, and I think I should apologise to him first before he sees you. He's not going to start anything in a busy restaurant, is he?"

"Okay, fine, five minutes and I'm coming in," Kelan said, crossing his arms over his chest, brooking no argument.

Jake nodded, took a deep breath and pushed open the door. He spotted Tony in the corner of the crowded room. He had his nose buried in a menu—although what he was reading it for, Jake didn't know. Tony ate here every single day. He must know the damn thing by heart.

Jake crossed the room and took a seat at Tony's table. His friend's eyes widened when he looked around the menu and saw Jake seated opposite him.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" he asked, throwing down the menu.

"I came to apologise."

Tony snorted. "Yeah, good one. Isn't that what you were supposed to be doing last night? You remember last night? It's when you ditched me...*again*."

"Yeah, about that..."

"I don't want to hear it, Jake," Tony interrupted. "I've heard enough of your bullshit to last me a lifetime. Why don't you leave?"

"Not until you've heard me out."

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say to me. You've done that to me one too many times. I'm through with...whatever this is." Tony waved his hand vaguely. "It sure isn't a friendship, at least not on your part."

"Look, I know I've been a dick..."

"You think?"

"But last night wasn't my fault, I swear. Something urgent came up and I had to leave."

"That's your excuse. Really? Something urgent came up. Is that the best you can do? Why don't you tell the truth for once in your life? You left for a booty call, plain and simple."

"No, I didn't, I swear. I..."

"Hey, baby," Kelan said, leaning over Jake and placing a kiss on his lips. He took a seat next to Jake and smiled over at Tony. "Hello, Tony, good to see you again."

Tony's mouth fell open. "What is *he* doing here?"

Jake glanced sideways at Kelan. When his lover gave a slight shake of his head, Jake answered his friend.

"He came to meet me. Tony, if you'll just let me explain properly..."

"I don't want to hear it," Tony said.

"But I..."

"Jake was attacked last night," Kelan interrupted.

Tony's head swivelled back and forth between Jake and Kelan before finally resting on his friend's face. His features softened, the angry expression disappearing to be replaced by concern.

"What? Attacked? What do you mean attacked? What the hell happened?"

Jake glared at Kelan.

"Uh, it's not as bad as it sounds," Jake said, turning to face Tony. "I was mugged."

Tony sighed. "Why didn't you tell me? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just shook me up is all. I hit my head, think I was knocked out for a while, but I'm all right now."

"Christ, Jake. I'm sorry. If I'd have known, I..."

"Don't worry about it," Jake said. "You didn't know. I can't blame you for jumping to conclusions. I would have done the same thing under the circumstances."

"You sure you're okay?" Tony asked quietly.

Jake nodded. "I'm good. So how did your date go the other night?" he asked his friend.

"Turns out we didn't have a lot in common after all."

"Damn, I'm sorry."

Tony shrugged. "I'm used to it. To tell you the truth, I'm tired of the whole dating game. I've given up on finding someone special."

"You should never give up." Kelan smiled at Jake fondly. "There's someone out there for everyone."

\* \* \* \*

"He's in love with you," Kelan said as they climbed the stairs to Jake's apartment.

They hadn't spoken on the way home from the restaurant, but Kelan had to say what he thought was on both their minds. He'd had to grip the table at the restaurant and take deep breaths to stop the growls that threatened to break free from his chest whenever he saw the affection shining in Tony's eyes.

"I think so, yes," Jake agreed.

"Do you love *him*?" Kelan prayed Jake wouldn't give him an answer that would break his heart.

"I love him, yes, but I'm not *in* love with him. Tony and I have been friends for a long time. Haven't always treated him right, but I do care about him."

Kelan nodded, relief seeping through his bones. He wasn't sure what he would have done if Jake had said yes. Jake had become the most important person in his life, and the bond between them was strengthening with every passing day. He didn't know how he'd cope if he lost his mate.

As they approached the corridor to Jake's apartment, Kelan's relief was quickly replaced with anger.

"He's been here again," Kelan gritted.

"Who? Tony?"

"No, the shifter. I can smell him."

When they reached Jake's door there was a note pinned to the front of it.

*This is your last warning.*

*Stay away from him or next time you won't be so lucky. You won't always have the wolf around to protect you.*

"Stay away from him? Stay away from who?" Jake asked, confused.

Kelan frowned. "I think we need to pay Cary a little visit."

## Chapter Eight

"Hi, Andre, I'll take a scotch, no ice. Thanks. Kelan?"

"I'll have the same."

Andre nodded and turned to fix the drinks. While they waited for them to arrive, they scanned the faces in the busy room.

"You see him?" Kelan asked.

Jake shook his head. "No. What are we going to do if he doesn't show?"

Kelan used his wolf sense of smell to search for any sign of shifters, but he wasn't picking up on anything.

"You think anyone here knows him?"

Jake shrugged. "Could be."

Kelan paid for the drinks when they arrived and tossed a few dollars into the jar. Before Andre was called away again, Jake decided to try his luck.

"Andre, did you see the young guy I was talking to last night?"

"You mean Cary?"

Jake was so relieved he could have kissed the man.

"Yes, you know him?"

"Sure, I know him."

"You know where he lives?"

Andre narrowed his eyes. "Don't you? I've seen you with him a couple of times."

Jake felt his face fill with heat. A couple of times? He could only remember the once. But then, Jake often forgot the names and faces of the men he took home. That would certainly explain why Cary had been so pissed off about Jake forgetting his name the week before.

"I never got his address."

"What do you want him for?" Andre asked, suspicion evident on his handsome features. His gaze shifted to from Jake to Kelan. "He in some kind of trouble?"

"No, nothing like that," Jake replied. "Actually, I'm worried about him."

Andre frowned. "That loser of an ex been sniffing around again?"

Jake thought back to the argument he had seen Cary involved in the night before. He hadn't recognised the man, but they'd definitely looked as though they knew each other well. You didn't get involved in arguments like that with complete strangers.

"I think so," Jake said. "I saw him here with someone last night. The guy was shouting at him. Cary looked upset when he left, so I wanted to check he was okay."

Andre's eyes darkened. "That piece of crap was in here? He'd better not show his face again or I'll kick his ass."

"The guy trouble?" Kelan asked.

"A real low-life. Used to beat up on Cary, from what I've heard, until Cary got wise to his ass and kicked him out a while back."

"What's his name?" Jake asked.

"Gill. But you don't want to mess with him. Guy's not right in the head, if you know what I mean. He recently started showing up at some of the leather clubs I go to. Fancies himself a Dom, I think, but he crosses the line. Most of the subs I know wouldn't be caught dead with him."

"We'll be careful," Kelan said.

Andre sighed. "Cary and I went out a couple of times but it never amounted to much. Even so, he's a great guy. I wouldn't want to see anything bad happen to him. I kinda feel protective of him, you know?"

Kelan nodded. "We don't want to see him get hurt."

Ten minutes later, Kelan and Jake left Liberties with Cary's address in hand. It was only a few blocks away from the bar.

"So now it's looking like Cary's ex could be the shifter that's been bothering you."

Jake nodded. "Cary is really sweet. I was hoping it wasn't him but, well, I'm not sure of anything anymore."

Kelan tried not to be made jealous by Jake's words. He couldn't wait to get Jake home to Texas with him. He knew his mate had a past, as did he, but he wasn't sure how many more of Jake's hookups he could stand to meet.

"This the place?" he asked, stopping outside an old tenement building that had long since seen better days.

Jake squinted in the darkness at the slip of paper in his hand.

"Yeah, this is the right address."

"Christ, it's a dump," Kelan said, taking in the building's dated and run-down façade.

Jake pressed the number on the keypad outside the main entrance door. He waited for an answer then buzzed again.

"Shit, what are we going to do now?" he asked, looking around the building for another entrance.

Kelan stepped forward and pressed every number on the keypad.

"Pizza delivery," he said, when a male voice answered.

Jake raised an eyebrow when the door in front of them was buzzed open.

"Huh. Why didn't I think of that?"

They made their way up to the fourth floor of the building. When they found Cary's apartment, they knocked on the door and waited.

"I guess he's not home," Jake said.

"He's home. I can smell him in there. He's a shifter, definitely a cat but not the one from the alley and your apartment."

"Then it has to be his ex."

"It would seem so, yes."

Jake knocked on Cary's door again.

"He's afraid," Kelan said. "His apartment reeks of fear."

"Cary! It's Jake, open up!" Jake shouted through the closed door.

A moment later, they heard several locks on the door snick open. Cary peered out tentatively from behind the barrier.

"Jake? What are you doing here?"

Kelan heard Jake gasp when he saw the cuts and bruises adorning Cary's face. His left eye was swollen and half-closed, and his lip was split.

"What the hell happened to your face?" Jake asked. "Let me in."

"You can't be here," Cary said. "Go away."

"Cary, let me in. We just want to talk to you."

"We?"

Cary pulled the door a couple of inches wider, his eyes widening when he took in Kelan's height and stature. He sniffed the air between them, and the moment he realised Kelan was a wolf showed clearly on his face. He looked terrified.

"Who is *he*?" Cary asked, trembling.

"I'm Jake's mate," Kelan said, stepping forward. "Can you let us in? We really need to talk to you."

"Mate?" Cary squeaked. "What do you want with me?"

"We just want to talk to you, Cary. It's important."

"You shouldn't be here. It's not safe."

"Don't worry," Kelan soothed. "Gill won't hurt you while I'm here. I promise you."

Cary looked shocked by Kelan's statement, then resignation set in. He sighed and pulled the door wider to allow them both access. When they were all inside, Cary closed the apartment door behind them, re-bolting each of the locks in turn.

"How do you know about Gill?" he asked, finally turning to face them.

"Was it Gill that did this to your face?" Kelan asked, ignoring the question.

Cary nodded and strode past them into the living room, gesturing for them to follow.

"Yes," he said, finally, slumping down into an easy chair in the corner of the room, his eyes downcast. "Take a seat."

Jake looked around the small apartment. Cary had made the best of the small space, but the furnishings were old and well-worn. Kelan sat down on the end of the threadbare sofa and Jake sat next to him.

"Jake was attacked last night," Kelan said. "It happened in the alley behind Liberties. We think it was Gill."

Cary gasped and looked at Jake wide-eyed.

"What? Are you okay? What happened?"

"I saw you arguing with someone in Liberties," Jake said. "You looked upset, so I followed you to make sure you were okay. I lost you in an alley and when I turned to leave, there was a large, black panther blocking my way. It attacked me."

Tears filled Cary's eyes. "This is all my fault. I'm sorry to drag you into my shit. Gill told me to stay away from you, but I never thought he'd really hurt you, I swear."

"Gill broke into Jake's apartment the other night, too," Kelan said. "And he's been leaving notes, threatening notes."

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

"Why don't you tell us what's been going on with your ex?" Kelan asked.

A tear slid down Cary's cheek. He lifted a hand to swipe at it, but more fell in its place.

"Gill isn't just my ex," Cary said. "He's my mate."

Jake's mouth fell open in shock. "Your what?"

"I'm sorry, Cary," Kelan said. "I'd like to think all of us shifters get the mate of our dreams like I did, but sadly I know that isn't always the case."

Cary nodded, his eyes filled with misery. "Gill wasn't so bad when I met him. Well, he had a fierce temper, but the first few months we were together he didn't lay a finger on me."

"What changed?" Kelan asked.

"I don't know. He started getting more and more possessive. At first he had a problem with me meeting my friends. He was jealous of the relationships I had with them, I guess. Then it was literally everyone. It got to the stage where I couldn't go out with him in public anymore, because he'd end up accusing some guy of looking at me and start a fight."

"How long were you with him?" Jake asked.

"Two years."

"And when did he start to hit you?" Kelan asked, gesturing to Cary's face.

Cary slumped forward in the chair. Kelan had never seen anyone look so dejected, so lost. "About four months after we met."

"But why did you put up with it for so long?" Jake needed to know. He had never been able to understand why anyone would stand for something like that.

Cary met Jake's eyes. "Because he's my mate."

Jake scrunched his eyebrows together in confusion. "But even so, how could you let him treat you like that?"

"You only get one mate, Jake. You're human, you wouldn't understand."



Jake glanced at Kelan then back to Cary. He knew how important Kelan had become to him in such a short space of time, but he was beginning to realise the importance shifters placed on their mates. Did Kelan feel that way about him?

"Try me," he said.

Cary sighed. "I hoped that things would get better between us, that somehow Gill would realise the way he was treating me was wrong, that he would see how it affected me, how much he hurt me. But he never did."

"So you left him?" Kelan asked.

Cary nodded. "We were living together in New Hampshire and one day, about six months ago, he beat me up pretty bad, so I packed a bag and left."

"That must have been difficult," Kelan said.

Cary nodded. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. Even after everything he did to me, I didn't want to walk away. But if I'd stayed, he would have killed me, I'm sure of it."

"You did the right thing," Kelan said.

Cary hung his head. "Yeah. But my heart still aches for him."

"I'm sure it does," Kelan said. "But you can't put up with that shit, mate or not. We're supposed to cherish our mates, love them and protect them, not hurt them."

Jake felt a lump rising in the back of his throat. He couldn't believe what Cary had put up with in the last couple of years. His life must have been hell. It was a lot for someone so young to have to deal with. Hell, it was a lot for anyone of any age to deal with.

Jake felt worse knowing the way in which he'd behaved towards Cary himself. As if the kid hadn't been through enough in his young life, then Jake had come along, treating him no better than a piece of meat. He felt thoroughly ashamed of himself and made a silent promise he would make it up to the young shifter. Whatever he could do to help him, he'd do it gladly.

"I'm so sorry," Jake said. Somehow the words didn't seem enough.

"How did he find you here?" Kelan asked.

"I was still in contact with a couple of my friends from back home. Gill threatened one of them until they told him where I was. I don't blame him," Cary said ruefully. "Gill is a difficult man to stand up to."

"When did he show up here?"

"A couple of months ago. He didn't confront me at first, though, just followed me around. He never showed himself to me, but I could sense he was close. I could feel him, you know? I think he was watching to see who I was meeting. He probably wanted to know if there was anyone else in my life before he did something about it. I guess that's how he knew about you." Cary gestured towards Jake.

Cary looked at Kelan apologetically. Kelan shrugged. There was no point him getting angry about something that had happened before he had even met Jake. Even though his natural wolf instinct was to be jealous, he didn't see the young shifter as a threat. Besides, he felt sorry for Cary. The young man had been through a lot. Kelan wanted to help him.

"What happened after you left Liberties?" Jake asked.

"I ran into the alley to shift so no one would see me." Cary said. "I was going to stick to the back streets to get home, and I can run faster in my panther form. I was worried Gill would follow me back, so I climbed one of the fire escapes at the end that led around the side of the building. When I made it to the next street, I ran home. I'm real sorry, Jake. If I'd known you followed me into the alley, I never would have left. I wouldn't have intentionally put you in danger like that, I swear."

"That's okay," Jake said. "There's not a lot you could have done anyhow."

"What happened next?" Kelan asked. "How did Gill catch up with you, do that to your face?"

"I was nearly home and I thought I'd got away from him. I had shifted back just around the corner when he caught up with me. He was furious. I've never seen him that mad before. I really thought he was going to kill me. Then a couple of men showed up and said they'd called the police, so he ran off. But he promised he'd be back."

"How come you haven't healed?" Kelan asked, pointing to Cary's face.

"I have," Cary said. "Mostly. I looked a lot worse than this last night."

Jake gasped. Cary's face was in pretty bad shape now, so Kelan couldn't begin to imagine what state it had been in the night before.

"You can't stay here, Cary," Kelan said. "If everything you've said about Gill is true then you're not safe here. If he gets hold of you again, there's no telling what he'll do next time."

Fresh tears fell from Cary's eyes.

"I know that, but I don't have anywhere else to go," he said, in a small voice that tugged at Kelan's heartstrings. "I used all my savings to get this place and my job doesn't pay much. I haven't been able to put anything away."

Kelan nodded, his mind made up. He had to do something to help Cary. He couldn't just leave him here at the mercy of Gill.

"How do you feel about Texas?"

"What do you mean?" Cary asked, confusion evident on his bruised and battered face.

"Well, I'm the alpha of my pack back home. You'd be more than welcome there. I have a working ranch, but if you're not up for manual work then I'm sure someone in my pack would be able to find you a suitable job."

Jake looked at Kelan in surprise. Kelan didn't even know Cary, and yet here he was offering him somewhere to go, a home, a new life. It made his love for Kelan even stronger, if that were possible. Suddenly, Jake couldn't think of a single reason why he shouldn't move to Texas to be with Kelan.

"You mean, come to live there?" Cary asked. "With *wolves*?"

"Do you have any better options?" Kelan asked, with a roll of his eyes.

"But you don't even know me," Cary said. "Why would you help me?"

Kelan grinned. "I guess I'm a sucker for a hard luck story."

"I'm not a charity case," Cary protested.

"Whoa, I wasn't offering charity," Kelan said. "You'd have to work for a living, earn your keep, but if you want a fresh start, then the offer is there."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I'd do the same for any of my friends. I realise I don't know you, but you're a friend of Jake's and that's good enough for me."

Cary looked from Jake to Kelan and back again, his eyes wide with wonder.

"Wow. You'd really do that for me?"

"Sure."

Cary smiled for the first time since Kelan and Jake had arrived.

"Thank you," he said at last. "Thank you so much. This means a lot."

"Well, that solves your plans for the future," Kelan said. "But you need somewhere to stay right now. I don't think you should be here even temporarily. Gill could show up at any time. My brother Cody has a spare room. I've been staying in it myself, but you're more than welcome to it. I know my brother won't mind. That is, if Jake will put me up at his apartment." Kelan looked at Jake expectantly.

Jake smiled. He leant forward and gave Kelan a peck on the lips.

"Where else would my mate stay?"

Kelan felt his heart soar. That was the first time he had heard Jake refer to him as his mate, and he liked it. He liked it a lot.

Kelan looked down when he felt something brush against his legs. He smiled when he saw a jet black cat rub against him. Jake reached down to pet it and it arched into his touch, purring loudly.

"Friend of yours?" Jake asked, continuing to stroke the sleek, black coat on the cat's back.

Cary grinned. "Yep, this is Henry. He keeps me company here. I think he likes you."

To confirm Cary's words, Henry jumped up into Jake's lap and began circling before settling himself down, making himself at home.

Kelan chuckled. "I'd say you're right. He has good taste."

Henry's head jerked up when Kelan spoke, as though he had only just noticed Kelan was in the room. He jumped up, arched his back and hissed at Kelan before fleeing to the kitchen.

"Uh, sorry about that," Cary said. "I guess he's not a fan of wolves."

Jake burst out laughing at Kelan's wounded expression.

"Cats never did like me," Kelan mumbled.

"I like you," Cary said. "And Henry will come around when he gets to know you, too."

Kelan nodded and smiled. He was so distracted by the cat he almost didn't catch the strong smell that was slowly making its way through the small apartment.

"What the hell?" Kelan said. "Is that smoke?"

Cary sniffed the air and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Shit, yes!"

Cary ran to his apartment door, unbolted the locks and threw it open before Jake or Kelan could tell him not to. The corridor outside was filled with smoke. It immediately caught in his throat, making him cough. He slammed the door shut and quickly turned around to face Kelan and Jake.

"Fuck! The building is on fire!"

## Chapter Nine

"Is there another way out?" Kelan asked, running through the small apartment to throw open the window in the living room.

"Yes, the fire escape," Cary said, "but you can only access it through the bedroom."

Smoke was already making its way under the apartment door.

"We need to hurry," Jake said. "We're not going to be able to breathe in here soon."

"Come on, it's this way." Cary ushered Jake and Kelan into his sparsely-decorated bedroom.

He ran to the window and threw open the curtains.

"Shit, it's stuck," Cary said, fighting with the latch on the window.

"Here let me try," Kelan said, gently nudging Cary out of the way.

Jake watched as Kelan used all his strength to pull at the latch. He cursed loudly when the damn thing broke off in his hand.

"We're gonna have to smash the window," Kelan said. "Cary, can you find me something?"

Cary nodded and Jake looked around the bedroom. He didn't have much. All of his meagre earnings must have gone to rent and necessities. Cary rushed to the nightstand and unplugged a heavy bedside lamp before carrying it to Kelan.

"Here, use this."

"Okay, stand back."

Jake moved Cary back from the window and they waited at the bedroom door for Kelan to break the glass. The smoke was thick in the living room now and already making its way through the rest of apartment. Jake started coughing as he couldn't avoid inhaling it. His eyes stung from the fumes and tears slid in quick succession down his cheeks.

"Kelan, hurry – we haven't got much time."

Kelan nodded, took a few steps back then smashed the lamp against the window. The glass shattered under the pressure. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around his hand,

using it to knock out the rest of the glass until the hole was large enough for them to climb through.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand to Jake.

Jake moved to Kelan's side. He was halfway out of the broken window when he looked over his shoulder. Cary had disappeared from his place at the bedroom door.

"Oh God, Cary," Jake said, looking desperately at Kelan. "He must have gone to find Henry."

"Fuck! Climb down. I'll get him."

"What? No way, I'm not leaving you."

"Please Jake, don't give me shit over this. I won't let anything happen to Cary, I promise, but I need to know you're safe."

Jake nodded reluctantly. "Okay, but please be careful."

Kelan gave a sharp nod of his head. He leant forward, placed a firm kiss on Jake's lips, then turned to leave. Jake watched Kelan rush to the bedroom door as panic and fear coursed through his veins.

"Kelan!" he called out, before Kelan had made it through the door. Kelan turned to face him.

"I love you." It had been a long time since Jake had used those words, but they felt right. He'd never meant them more than he did in that moment.

The love and affection shining back at him through Kelan's eyes brought tears to Jake's own.

"As I love you," Kelan replied.

Jake started to climb down the fire escape steps. He had made it down two floors when he heard an almighty crash above him. *Shit*. It sounded as though it had come from Cary's apartment. What the hell was he doing? He couldn't just climb down to safety knowing Kelan and Cary were still inside. He would never forgive himself if something were to happen to either of them.

Jake climbed back up to the apartment and heaved himself in through the window. The smoke was thick in the bedroom and he could barely find his way to the door. He lifted his shirt to cover his mouth and nose and fought his way through the haze back into the living room.

"Kelan! Cary! Where are you?" he called out. The polluted air had him coughing and spluttering.

When Jake got back to the living room, he noticed the door to the apartment was hanging off its hinges. He rushed to the door and gasped when he saw Kelan's motionless body on the hallway floor.

"Kelan! Oh God, no!" Jake shouted, rushing to his lover's side.

He knelt down next to Kelan's body and checked his neck for a pulse. It was faint, but Kelan was alive. Thank God.

"Kelan, wake up!" Jake said, shaking Kelan's shoulders roughly.

There was no sign of Cary anywhere in the hall. Jake got up, grabbed Kelan under the arms and began dragging him back into the apartment. Kelan was heavy and Jake had to keep stopping as coughing fits overcame him.

He managed to get Kelan back into Cary's bedroom, but the difficult part proved to be lifting him to get him out of the window. Jake heaved and, finding a reserve of strength he didn't know he possessed, he climbed out of the apartment window with Kelan in his arms and placed him on the fire escape landing.

Jake looked anxiously from Kelan back to the apartment. He didn't want to leave Kelan out here alone, but he had to help Cary. He had made a promise to himself he would make it up to Cary for the way he had treated him, and he would, God damn it, if it was the last thing he ever did.

Jake covered his mouth again and fought his way through the apartment out into the hall. He still couldn't see any actual flames, but the heat in the corridor was intense. He stuck to the wall and felt his way along to the stairwell. He was deciding whether he should go down or up when he heard an ear-splitting scream coming from the floor above.

"Cary!" Jake called out, starting up the stairs.

When he reached the next floor, Jake called out again. There was no reply. The smoke on the fifth floor wasn't as thick as on the floor below, so Jake knew the fire had started lower, the smoke, heat and flames making their way up. There was no sign of Cary in that corridor, so Jake climbed up another floor.

"Cary!"

"Jake, no! Go back, get out!" Cary called out. "Argh!"



*Fuck.* Jake had to get to Cary. Gill had him, it was obvious. Now that Jake came to think about it, Gill had probably been the one to start the fire, too. Jake didn't know how he could fight someone as strong as Gill, but blind fury clouded his mind when he heard Cary cry out in pain once again. The sound was quieter this time, though, further away. Gill must be taking Cary to the roof.

Jake kept on climbing. At least there was less smoke the further he climbed, making it easier for him to breathe. He finally reached the top floor of the tenement building and stood in front of the roof door.

"Christ, please let him be okay," Jake mumbled, pushing open the door.

Jake shivered involuntarily when the cold night air hit him, but he was so pumped on adrenaline, he barely noticed it. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then climbed the four narrow steps that led up onto the roof.

"Jake, no!" Cary shouted. "Get out of here!"

Jake span around and gasped at the sight before him. Gill stood behind Cary, one arm wrapped around his waist, the other holding a knife to his mate's throat. Blood poured from Cary's nose, and the cut on his lip had re-opened.

"Well, look who it is," Gill said, pressing the knife closer to Cary's throat. "Your new *fuck-buddy*."

Jake saw blood trickle down Cary's throat from where the knife was cutting into his skin.

"It's not like that between us," Jake said. "We're just friends."

"Don't fucking lie to me!" Gill shouted, using the knife to point at Jake. "I know you've been screwing him!"

Gill's face contorted with rage. His eyes gleamed yellow in the moonlight and, from where he stood, Jake saw a ripple pass over the shifter's skin. He looked like a madman that had nothing to lose, a very dangerous combination.

"Gill, put the knife down," Jake said. "You don't want to do this."

"How the fuck do you know what I want?" Gill seethed. "I want my mate! That's what I want."

"You had me," Cary said. "We could have been happy together, Gill, but you ruined it. You ruined everything."

Jake saw the confusion in Gill's eyes. He thought that maybe Cary was getting through to him, but then the coldness returned and Gill sneered.

"Don't put this on me. You should never have left me. It's your fault I got so fucking angry all the time, the way you pranced around, flaunting yourself at any man that would look twice at you."

A lone tear trickled down Cary's cheek.

"That's not true," he said quietly. "I loved you. I never looked at another man when we were together. I didn't want anyone else."

"Bullshit!" Gill spat. "You couldn't wait to get rid of me so you could start fucking around. I'm not stupid. Well, now you're going to fucking *pay*!"

Cary screamed when Gill replaced the knife at his throat, cutting deeper into his skin and drawing more blood. Jake didn't spare a thought for his own safety, or for the consequences of his actions. He lunged at Gill and made a grab for the knife.

Kelan cracked open his eyes and squinted in the darkness. Where was he? And what was that damn smell, was it smoke? He jumped up hastily when the fog in his brain cleared and he remembered where he was and what had happened to him. *Gill. Shit.* At first Kelan couldn't understand who had put him out here on the fire escape, but then it hit him. It had to have been Jake. Damn it, he'd told him to stay out. He had no doubt Jake would have then gone back in after Cary, too.

"Jake!"

Kelan climbed back into Cary's apartment, but the smoke was thick. By the time he made it into the living room, he saw huge flames outside the apartment door.

"Jake!" Kelan shouted.

He stood for a moment, paralysed by fear. *Please God, let Jake have got out.* The heat and smoke coming from the fire spurred Kelan into action. He ran back into the bedroom and clambered out of the window. He was about to climb down the fire escape when he heard shouting coming from the roof.

Without conscious thought, Kelan grabbed hold of the ladder above him and began climbing. He was enraged. His only thought was to get to his mate. If Gill had harmed one

hair on his mate's head, Kelan was going to kill him. He wouldn't let the panther shifter get away a second time.

As Kelan approached the roof, he could clearly hear Jake's voice. He was trying to reason with Gill. Gill's voice was louder, angry. As he reached the last rung of the ladder and peered over the top, Kelan's rage and panic caused his eyes to shift instantly. His skin trembled – his wolf itching to break free and get to his mate.

Gill had a knife to Cary's throat, its blade cutting into his skin. Kelan watched in horror as Jake charged at Gill and made a grab for the knife. Kelan didn't hesitate. He vaulted over the top of the ladder and landed hard on his feet on the roof's concrete surface.

Gill threw Cary aside and fought with Jake for possession of the knife. Jake had a grip on the handle, but Gill twisted it and tugged it away. Jake made a grab for it again, but the blade sliced across his palm, cutting deep. The scent of Jake's blood reached Kelan's nostrils, making them flare. His heart accelerated until he feared it would burst right out of his chest. Kelan ran for his mate. The last thing he saw while still in human form was Gill shoving the knife into Jake's chest, the blade disappearing until only the handle was visible.

"No!"

Kelan's scream echoed out across the rooftop. It changed midway into a howl when he shifted and his wolf leapt at Gill, knocking him off his feet. Without hesitation, he bit into Gill's neck, ripping at flesh, tendon and bone. Gill screamed once, eyes wide with fear, before he became pliant under Kelan's weight, his body still and lifeless – dead.

Jake fell backwards to the floor. He raised his hand to his chest and felt the metal of the knife embedded there. Blood trickled through his fingers, soaking his shirt. He had never felt such pain in his life. And he couldn't breathe properly, either. When blood travelled up his throat and caught there, he started to cough. Fear gave way to panic when the metallic taste of his own blood entered his mouth and he felt it escape his lips and trickle down his chin. He started to feel light-headed. Was this what dying felt like?

He watched as the large, grey wolf turned and quickly ran to his side. Kelan, his Kelan. The wolf whimpered, pushing its muzzle into Jake's hand. He reached out with his uninjured hand and ran his fingers through the fur on the wolf's head. Jake could only stare

in awe. Kelan was magnificent in wolf form. He was glad Kelan was here with him if these were the last moments of his life.

Jake tried to tell Kelan he loved him, but the words came out as a gurgle in his throat. The last thing Jake saw were the amber wolf eyes staring at him forlornly before changing back into the deep blue human eyes of the man he loved with every fibre of his being.

## Chapter Ten

Jake awoke to the sound of beeping. Where was he? He tried to think around the fog in his brain. He could hear muted voices talking from somewhere around him, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He cracked his eyes open and blinked when the harsh white light stung his eyes, making them water.

When he looked down at himself, he realised he was in some sort of hospital bed. The voices must be coming from the corridor outside his room. Wires and tubes were coming from his hands and fingers and connected to a machine at the side of his bed. It was the machine that beeped.

"Jake? Baby, you're awake."

Kelan appeared at his side. The look of relief on Kelan's face was palpable.

"Kelan?" Jake croaked. The word caught in his throat when he spoke. It felt as though he'd been swallowing sandpaper.

"Here, drink this," Kelan said, holding a plastic cup with a straw to Jake's mouth. "Just take a little sip, okay?"

Jake nodded and slurped at the proffered drink.

"Thanks."

"How are you feeling?" Kelan asked.

"Like I've been hit by a tank. I ache all over and my chest hurts."

"You were stabbed, Jake," Kelan said, choking on the words as he said them. "You nearly died."

Jake's eyes widened, then he gasped, trying to sit up in the bed.

"Cary! Is he...?"

Kelan placed a firm hand on Jake's shoulder and held him down on the pillow.

"Don't try to get up. You need to rest, your body needs time to heal. Cary's fine – well, on the outside at least."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"The cut on his throat was pretty deep, and he'd lost a lot of blood. It healed, for the most part, when he shifted. But on the inside..." Kelan shook his head. "On the inside he's a mess. I killed Gill."

"I remember. Don't blame yourself. Gill would have killed Cary *and* me. You were protecting us."

Kelan nodded. "Cary says he understands why I did it. When I saw you fighting with Gill, when I saw the knife go into your chest, I...I saw red."

Jake started to speak again, but it resulted in a coughing fit.

"Easy, Jake," Kelan said. "Don't try to speak too much right now. Your throat is sore from all the smoke you inhaled and the breathing apparatus they had in you."

Jake shook his head and made a grab for the cup on the table in front of him. Kelan lifted it to his lips.

"Just small sips. The nurse said when you woke up they'd get me some ice chips for you."

Jake took another sip of the tepid water. He took a few breaths, then continued with what he had to say. He had to make Kelan understand that none of this was his fault. Gill had been crazy, and Jake and Cary were lucky to be alive. That they were was all because of Kelan.

"Cary knew better than anyone what Gill was capable of," Jake whispered. "He knew the man wouldn't stop until he was dead."

"I know," Kelan said. "But Gill was his mate. He might say he's okay, but he's cut up on the inside. Your mate is like the other half of your soul. You don't really know it's missing until you meet your mate, but when you lose them, it's like losing a piece of yourself. A piece you can never get back."

"But will Cary be able to find another mate?"

Kelan sighed. "I don't know. I only know about wolves. Some wolves that have lost their mates have been lucky enough to find another, but it's extremely rare. Hell, it's difficult enough to find one mate. Some wolves *never* find their other halves."

"That's really sad. I hope Cary can find someone else. He's a sweet guy and he deserves something good, someone good."

"Yeah, I hope he finds someone, too."

Jake felt his eyes grow heavy. He struggled to keep them open, but he was fighting a losing battle.

"Tired," Jake managed.

"I know, baby. You need more rest. Go to sleep now. I'll be here when you wake up."

Jake nodded, or at least he thought he did. He was almost asleep when he felt Kelan's warm lips place a tender kiss on his forehead.

\* \* \* \*

The second time Jake awoke, he knew exactly where he was. When he opened his eyes, the light in the room was dim and it didn't hurt his eyes as much. He looked down at his hands. One was covered in a bandage. Kelan was holding the other in his own, rubbing circles over Jake's palm with his thumb.

Even though the action was meant to soothe, Jake couldn't help the way his cock twitched and stirred under the sheets. Kelan had that effect on him, and Jake was powerless to do anything about it, not that he wanted to.

"Welcome back," Kelan said.

"Hi," Jake replied hoarsely.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Horny."

Kelan threw his head back and laughed. "If your dick is hard, then you *must* be feeling better."

Jake nodded. "How long have I been asleep?"

Kelan sobered at once. "This time, just a few hours. But you've been in here for almost four days."

"What?" Jake gasped.

Kelan reached for a cup on the table, fished out an ice chip and placed it on Jake's tongue.

"Here, have this," Kelan said. "It's better for you right now than water."

Jake nodded and let the ice melt on his tongue.

"Four days," he said at last. "How so long? Have I been asleep all that time?"

"You weren't asleep. You were in a medically-induced coma. The knife pierced your lung and you had to have a breathing tube put down your throat. They pulled you out of the coma this morning."

"A coma," Jake repeated.

"Yeah. I tried to give you blood, but your injury was so bad it hardly helped at all. I was terrified, Jake, so afraid I was going to lose you. I couldn't bear that."

Jake wasn't sure he could process what Kelan was telling him. A coma? Christ, he must have been in a bad way for the doctors to do that to him.

"Jake, there's something else we need to discuss. There's a shifter working here at the hospital, a doctor. Cary and I explained what really happened to him, but with a stab wound, the police had to be called in. It's hospital procedure. They want to talk to you when you wake up. I told them you were mugged and that your wallet was stolen. I think it's best if we stick to that, okay?"

Jake nodded. "What about Gill? What happens when they find his body on the roof?"

"They won't. Cary carried Gill from the roof. We managed to get away before the fire service showed up. We contacted Cary's council and they came to collect Gill's body. The police will never know of his involvement in all this."

"Where is Cary now?"

"He's at Cody's apartment. He and Stefan are keeping an eye on him until I get him back to Texas, but I think it's going to take a while before he's able to work again. He's in a bad way. When you see him... He can hardly function properly at all."

"So he's still going to go with you, even though his life is not at risk anymore?"

"I'm making him," Kelan declared. "He has nothing left here. His home was destroyed, his mate is dead and in the state he's in, he wouldn't be able to hold down his job anyhow. I'm afraid he'd end up on the streets, and I'd never forgive myself if that were to happen to him when there was something I could have done about it."

Jake smiled. Kelan was the most selfless man he knew. He couldn't imagine his life without Kelan in it. That would hurt worse than the knife in his chest had.

"When are you going back to Texas?"



Kelan's eyes grew sad. "I don't know. I need to go home pretty soon because there are a few problems in the pack, but I'm not leaving until you're better. You are my first priority Jake, everything else can wait. Of course I had hoped that..."

"I'm coming with you," Jake said in a rush.

"You want to come and visit?"

"No."

Kelan screwed his eyebrows together. The confused look on his lover's face made Jake smile.

"I'm coming for good."

The smile on Kelan's face lit up the whole room. Jake couldn't help but smile back. What was there to keep him in New York? A job? He could work anywhere, but Texas was where Kelan would be and that was all he needed to know. If he had Kelan in his life, he could face anything else that came his way. They could face things together.

"You mean that? For good?" Kelan asked, holding his breath in anticipation.

Jake was everything he had ever wanted in a mate. His life would be complete if Jake was home with him in Texas. His whole family would be together. He couldn't think of a better way to spend his days.

"For as long as you want me," Jake said.

Kelan chuckled. "But I'll *always* want you."

"Then you'll always have me."

## About the Author

Lavinia discovered reading at an early age and could always be found with her nose in a book. She loved getting lost in a fantasy world even then. When her parents bought her a typewriter for Christmas at aged eleven, her fate was sealed. She spent hours dreaming up characters and creating stories. Not a lot has changed. Now when she is not writing you can find her enjoying a new release e-book.

Lavinia has lived all over the UK but currently resides in London, England. She has travelled extensively to places including Africa, Asia, Australia, America and most of Europe. Although some of her books are set in Texas she has never visited the state but plans to spend time there in the near future.

She is an avid reader and her favourite authors include J L Langley, Carol Lynne, Chris Owen and Andrew Grey. Lavinia particularly loves supernatural fiction and her favourite authors in this genre include Kelly Armstrong, Keri Arthur and Charlaine Harris.

Although Lavinia is a huge fan of the romance genre, she will admit to reading anything and everything. She loves horror, a good thriller and if a book has the capacity to make her cry, well, all the better. One thing she does insist on in a book however, regardless of genre is a happy ending, so you will always find one in the books she writes.

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Lavinia Lewis loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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