



Moonlit  
Book Three

WHISPERS IN THE  
NIGHT

GABRIELLE  
EVANS

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NIGHT

*Moonlit Book Three*

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WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

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Cover Art by Black Butterfly Designs

Published by Peccavi Press INC

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## SYNOPSIS



AT JUST FOURTEEN YEARS old, Jackson Cunningham quickly learned his place in the world when he was shot and left for dead on the side of the road. He didn't expect to be rescued, and he never imagined his savior would turn out to be his own mate.

For the next four years, he waits patiently, eagerly looking forward to his eighteenth birthday, to the day that his mate will finally claim him. Only, that day never came, and now, at twenty-one, he's done waiting for Talon to want him.

Talon Cartwright doesn't exactly have a reputation for possessing a kind and gentle nature. There are very few things in life he cares about, and Jackson is right at the top of that list. Claiming him, however, binding them—body, heart, and soul—isn't an option. Cursed by a rare genetic disease, he knows his days are numbered, and he refuses to allow Jackson to suffer the same fate that awaits him.

When dreams of a brother he left behind begin to plague Jackson, it doesn't take long for him to realize they aren't

dreams. They're calls for help. Can he save his brother and convince his stubborn mate to claim him? Or is he destined to lose them both forever?



## A NOTE FROM GABRIELLE...



*WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT* was originally released in 2011 by a different publisher as the third book of *The Moonlight Breed* series. This new version has been significantly edited to add details, smooth out any rough spots, and include updates from this decade.

It does not, however, contain any meaningful changes to the characters or the storyline.

# ONE



“AND THAT’S HOW I broke my collarbone sliding into home plate.”

“Mm, amazing.”

Doing his damndest to appear even remotely interested, Jackson Cunningham blinked rapidly when he felt the overwhelming urge to roll his eyes. Gods, this idiot liked himself, and he clearly didn’t care that people knew it.

Case in point, Jackson had just sat through a recap of the guy’s entire baseball career, from T-ball all the way through one season in the minors.

“So, what is it that you do?”

Jackson actually looked over his shoulder, convinced the guy had to be talking to someone behind him. Not a huge stretch since he hadn’t been given an opportunity to say much about anything, and certainly nothing that applied to him or his life.

“Oh, um, I’m a home security specialist.”

“That’s great.” Mr. Tall, Dark, and Stupid pushed his shaggy hair back from his brow and reached for his beer. “You know, I think our centerfielder in college went on to do something with security systems.”

And he was off talking about baseball again.

Jackson pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. It wasn’t as if he opposed baseball. It was actually his second favorite sport after football. The self-important ass sitting across from him, however, was beginning to sour his opinion on the great American pastime.

Damn, he couldn’t even remember the guy’s name.

Objectively, his date had a lot going for him. A thick head of dark hair. Strong, square jaw. Warm brown eyes. He coached high school baseball—shocker—and by all appearances, he had his life together.

Good for him. Jackson just couldn’t find it in himself to care.

Fuck, he hated going on these dates. He would rather be at home, doing literally anything else. If he thought it would help, he would even volunteer to fold everyone’s laundry—by far his least favorite chore.

Because not only did he dislike these dates, but he also considered them utterly pointless. Only one person had ever held any interest to him. Only one person owned his heart.

Even if the asshole didn’t want him.

“I have to go,” Jackson interrupted. Leaning to the side, he pulled his wallet from his back pocket and extracted a couple

of twenties. “This has been...” He searched for something polite to say without outright lying. “Well, the food was good.”

“Oh.” His date looked from the money to him, his brow deeply creased. “Okay, well, maybe we can do this again sometime.”

“No, thank you.” Manners were important. That was what Talon always said, though he never followed his own advice. “Later, dude.”

Frankly, he didn’t care if he sounded rude or not. He just wanted to end this farce and go home.

Tossing the bills onto the table to cover his part of dinner, he gave the guy—David, maybe?—a nod and hurried out of the restaurant.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned onto the long, gravel drive that led to the cabin he shared with his pack. Well, they called it a cabin. In reality, it looked more like a ski lodge, or maybe even a bed and breakfast.

Instead of regular bedrooms, the house boasted five suites, each complete with their own private bathrooms. They also had a study, a den, and a couple of rooms they didn’t even use. Despite its enormity, it still felt claustrophobic some days.

With seven grown men sharing the space, privacy was more of a luxury than a right. Add in their supernatural senses, and secrets weren’t really a thing, either. Yet, he had somehow managed to keep a pretty damn big one for seven years now.

As he pulled to a stop, his gaze immediately went to the corner of the house and the man waiting for him in the shadows.

Turning off the engine, he climbed out of his car with a sigh. He wasn't in the mood to talk to Talon, but he didn't exactly have a choice. It had become as routine as the setting sun, and he hated these follow-up reports even more than he did the actual dates.

Talon would hound him for the details until he eventually gave in, so he figured he might as well get it over with instead of trying to fight it. Stuffing his fists into the pockets of his jeans, he took a deep breath and strode toward the shifter.

"I didn't kiss him, and I didn't fuck him," he said without preamble. "I didn't so much as let him breathe on me. He was an arrogant prick, and I've had more fun clipping my toenails." He went down the list of the usual questions Talon asked. "The food was good. I paid for myself. I didn't eat dessert." Pausing, he ran a hand through his shaggy curls. He needed a haircut. "He was decent looking, around thirty, and I won't be seeing him again."

Talon's dark hair hung loosely around his face, the tips brushing the tops of his broad shoulders. Though a shadow on the wrong side of five o'clock covered his jaw, Jackson could still see the muscles twitch beneath the stubble.

Trying to ignore the way those icy blue eyes made his heart flutter and his cock ache, he lowered his head and rubbed the tense muscles in the back of his neck. "Is there anything else? I'm tired, and I just want to go to bed."

“Come here.” Though dressed in only a pair of tight jeans and a simple black tee, he appeared unaffected by the cold wind that whipped through the surrounding trees.

“Talon, please, just ask me whatever you want to ask me so I can go inside.”

“I said come here, pup.” Talon spoke with a quiet authority that invited no argument.

Unable to resist, Jackson sighed and took a step forward with a shiver that had nothing to do with the weather. “What?”

“Turn around.” Without waiting for a response, Talon gripped his arms and urged him to face the opposite direction. His hands came to rest on the tops of Jackson’s shoulders, and he began kneading the knotted muscles. “Feels good?”

“Gods, yes.” Letting his head loll forward, he closed his eyes and groaned. “Don’t stop.”

“I’m sorry you had such a bad night, baby.” He used his thumbs to massage a particularly painful spot at the base of Jackson’s skull. “I’m sure next time will be better.”

Jackson shivered and squeezed his eyes shut. He both loved and hated when Talon called him that. Just as he both loved and hated these stolen moments.

“There’s not going to be a next time. I’m done.” Bitterness tinted his words, but it couldn’t completely hide his pain and frustration. “If you don’t want me, fine, but I’m not doing this anymore.”

“You know that it’s not because I don’t want you.” Talon continued to speak calmly, but with a thread of steel beneath the dispassion. “You agreed to this—”

“When I was fourteen!” Spinning around, Jackson bared his teeth and growled.

“Look, kid—”

“I’m not a damn kid anymore, Talon. I stopped being a kid a long time ago.” As quickly as it had flared, all the anger and fight drained away, leaving him exhausted down to his soul. “I don’t know who I pissed off to deserve such an asshole for a mate, but I can’t do this anymore.”

“Jackson.”

Ignoring him, Jackson pushed past the man he loved more than his life and stalked toward the front door. He didn’t know where he would go, but he refused to stay where he wasn’t wanted and continue to be a burden.

Inside the house, he slammed the door closed behind him and stomped up the stairs to his bedroom. Was he being childish and petulant? Probably. He didn’t care, though. He’d had enough, and he needed to get out before he suffocated beneath the weight of Talon’s rejection.

Since he’d never been on vacation before, he didn’t own a proper suitcase. Instead, he grabbed an old gym bag from the back of his closet and tossed it onto the mattress. Then he began grabbing clothes at random—from the closet, his

dresser, the floor—and slung them in the general vicinity of the bed.

He didn't have enough savings to start a whole new life, but he could at least afford a motel room until he figured out his next move. It would have to be something cheap, preferably that he could rent by the week, but anything was better than staying there.

“Hey, Jacks! How was the—” Keeton stopped in the open doorway and tilted his head. “What are you doing?”

There was no censure. No judgment. He sounded curious and nothing more.

“I'm packing.”

“Well, yes, I can see that,” Keeton continued conversationally. “What I really meant was why?” Wandering over to the bed, he began folding the clothes there and placing them neatly inside the gym bag.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Oh, I see.” The little blond's lips twisted on one side of his mouth. “This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain pack member that just happens to look a lot like my mate, would it?”

Jackson froze, his heart jackknifing up into his throat. “I...I don't...I mean,” he stammered as he stared at Keeton with wide, terrified eyes. “It's not like that.”

“Calm down, Jacks.” Keeton popped one hip out to the side and rested a delicate hand on it. “That's between you and



Talon.”

Realizing there was no point in denying it, he asked instead, “How did you know?”

He had never said a word to anyone. He had been so careful to hide his feelings around Talon. Not an easy feat, considering they lived with a bunch of shifters.

“I can see your aura.” Keeton shrugged nonchalantly, but his tone suggested Jackson was kind of thick. “Talon’s, too. You both light up like the Fourth of July when you get within ten feet of each other. Besides, Talon isn’t such a dick when you’re around.”

That last part was kind of debatable. In fact, he would argue that Talon was *more* of a dick when he came around. At least, that was how it felt.

“You can’t tell anyone, Keeton. Please,” Jackson pleaded. “Talon would shit kittens if anyone found out.”

“Calm down before you have a stroke. I told you, that’s between you and Talon. I won’t pretend to understand why you feel the need to hide it, but I’m not going to say anything.”

Jackson released the breath he’d been holding. “Thank you.”

Keeton folded a pair of jeans and placed them inside the bag. “I’m pretty sure Braxton suspects, though.”

“Wonderful.”

Just what he fucking needed. He loved Keeton and Braxton. Even if they weren’t mated to members of his pack, he would

still consider them family. Subtle, however, was not in their vocabulary.

“Jacks, please, relax. So what if people know Talon is your mate? It’s really not the end of the world.” Sighing, he packed the last of Jackson’s clothes and flopped down on the mattress.

“Keep your voice down.” He worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he glanced at the bedroom door. “Look, just don’t say anything, not even to Logan, okay? I know he’s your mate, and you guys don’t keep secrets, but he’s also Talon’s brother. His *twin* brother.” Jackson took a huge breath and let it out slowly. “I have to go.”

Crossing one leg over the other, Keeton leaned back on his elbows. “And exactly where are you going to go?” When Jackson didn’t answer, he rolled his eyes and pushed up from the bed. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

While he waited, Jackson grabbed a few necessities from the bathroom and crammed them into the side pockets on either side of the gym bag. He had just finished zipping it closed when Keeton reentered the room, holding out a small, gold key on a glittery rainbow ring.

“This is to my cottage. You remember how to get there?”

Jackson nodded as he accepted the key. “I thought you sold that place.”

“I decided against it. I understand that we have to live with the pack, but it’s nice to have a place that is just mine and Logan’s, even if it’s only for a weekend.”

He tilted his head, a frown tugging at his lips. “And you want me to stay there?”

“No.” Keeton smiled and shook his head. “I want you to stay *here*. But I know what it’s like to feel frustrated and angry.”

Of course, he did. He was mated to the other half of the Cartwright twins. While Logan had a reputation for being the calm, easygoing one of the group, he was just as stubborn and high-handed as Talon.

“Go to my place for a few days,” Keeton continued. “Take your time. Think it over. Just remember the full moon is in three days. You can run the woods around my place, but please be careful.”

Overwhelmed with gratitude, he leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to Keeton’s cheek. “Thank you. Logan is damn lucky to have you.”

Keeton laughed and patted his arm. “If you get a chance, be sure to tell him that. He thinks I’m a pain in the ass.”

“That’s because you are,” Braxton said from the doorway. Leaning against the frame, his gaze flittered from the key in Jackson’s hand to the bag on the bed. “Going somewhere, Jacks?”

“Just for a few days,” Jackson answered nervously. “I just need to get away for a little while.”

How was he going to get out of the house without everyone questioning him?

“Because of Talon?” Braxton arched an eyebrow.

Well...fuck. "Does everyone know?"

"No." Braxton pushed away from the doorjamb with a chuckle.

Jackson didn't really see the humor in the situation.

"I swear, the men in this house are about as observant as a rock." Braxton jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Come on. We'll create a diversion so you can sneak out."

Christ, Xander and Logan were going to kill him. Well, if Talon didn't get to him first.

Boston might take his side. Maybe. Too bad he had disappeared.

No one knew where the hell he had gone or why. He had taken two weeks off from the nightclub he and Talon worked at, packed a bag, and took off. Before leaving, he had insisted that they not call him unless someone died.

If it had been the first time, Jackson might have been worried, but he had become used to Boston vanishing at least once a year. They all had shit in their past, trauma that they had to live with. Everyone had their own ways of coping, and he figured this was Boston's.

"Are you sure?" he checked, still hesitant about the plan.

"Absolutely," Keeton answered as he shoved Braxton out of the room. "We'll even get you right out of the front door. Just wait for the signal."

Jackson bobbed his head a few times, then stopped abruptly. “Wait, what’s the signal?”

His only answer was a mischievous laugh that reverberated down the hallway.

Jackson didn’t know exactly what he was supposed to be waiting for, but he figured he better be ready. Grabbing his bag, he slung the strap over one shoulder and crept down the hall to the stairs. Then he pressed his back to the wall to keep out of sight and waited.

A couple of minutes later, bloodcurdling screams echoed from somewhere near the back of the house. He guessed the kitchen. That had to be the signal.

He waited, listening to the thundering footsteps that hurried toward the sound of the commotion.

“What? What happened?” Xander’s worried voice floated up the stairs to him. “Braxton, what’s wrong?”

Slipping down the stairs as quietly as he could, Jackson slipped out the front door. Just before he closed it behind him, he heard his co-conspirators in the kitchen.

“Oh, we saw a spider.” Keeton spoke as if he hadn’t just screeched loud enough to wake the dead.

“It’s gone now,” Braxton added. “Our bad.”

Jackson smirked and jogged down the porch steps to his car.

# Two



TALON STOOD AT THE threshold of the patio doors, his heart slamming against his ribs. He'd still been outside, pacing the backyard and contemplating going for a run when he'd heard the screams.

Clearly, no one was under attack, and he wasn't buying the spider excuse, either. He didn't know what the brats were up to, but if their mates didn't throttle them, he would.

His twin stood in the middle of the kitchen with his hands on his hips. "Fuck, Keeton. I think you just took ten years off my life." A shallow V formed between his eyebrows. "Don't do that again."

"Same goes for you, *chulo*," Xander added to Braxton as he folded his arms across his chest. "Understood?"

Keeton and Braxton both hung their heads, both looking properly chastised.

"Yes, sir," they mumbled in unison.

Talon shook his head, a faint smile playing across his lips. There was never a dull moment since Braxton and Keeton had moved into the house. It seemed like the pair couldn't go a single day without getting into some kind of trouble.

Just like his mate.

Thinking of Jackson wiped the smile from his face and pulled a deep sigh from his chest. He didn't know what the hell do to about the kid. Jackson thought he wasn't wanted, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. Though his actions might speak to the contrary, he couldn't breathe without wanting him.

Jackson was just so damn young, though. No, he might not be a child anymore, but at twenty-one, he was still twelve years Talon's junior. He had his whole fucking life ahead of him, and he deserved a hell of a lot better than being tied down to a surly bastard like him.

Keeton glanced toward the living room, then to Braxton. Some sort of silent communication must have passed between them because they both smirked, looking incredibly satisfied with themselves.

At first, Talon was inclined to dismiss it as their usual antics. That was, until he heard a car door slammed, and an engine roared to life in front of the house. He looked at the troublemakers again and growled as realization dawned.

Shoving past them, he sprinted through the house to the front door and jerked it open. He was too late, though. All he could do was watch as Jackson's black Camaro sped toward the

main road, throwing up a cloud of dust behind it. Practically vibrating with anger, he fisted his hands at his sides and watched until the taillights faded into the distance.

He took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself. It didn't work. Returning to the living room, he slammed the door behind him with enough force to shake the whole damn house.

Keeton emerged from the kitchen first, followed closely by everyone else. They formed a loose huddle, their arms crossed, and their eyes narrowed as they glared at him.

“Is there a problem?” Keeton blinked big, innocent eyes at him.

“You look upset,” Braxton added conversationally. “Have you misplaced something?”

“Where is he going?”

“Not a clue.” Keeton shrugged.

“And why do you care?” Braxton asked, placing his hands on his hips.

Talon gritted his teeth and breathed in deeply through his nose.

“Tell me.”

“Like I said—” Keeton shrugged again. “—no clue.”

Braxton shuffled closer until he stood just inches from Talon.

“You don't need to worry about him. He'll be just fine without you.”

Keeton followed suit, coming forward to take up ranks next to his friend. “It's not like you cared before. Maybe he's found



someone else.” His pink lips curved into a taunting smirk.  
“Maybe he won’t even come back.”

Before Talon could think better of it, before the action even registered, both hands shot out, fisting in the cotton fabric of their shirts. Pissed off and wanting answers, he didn’t have the patience for their fucking games.

“Tell me where he is,” he demanded with a threatening growl.

Not remotely intimidated by his outburst, both brats glared back at him, their jaws jutting out in defiance.

“No,” Keeton answered coldly.

“We won’t tell you anything,” Braxton added. “You’ve had all this time, and—”

Whatever he’d intended to say ended with a loud yelp when Xander grabbed him around the waist and yanked him from Talon’s grip. Booming growls and vicious snarls filled the room as both Xander and Logan prowled toward him, rage burning in their eyes.

Disgusted with himself for his quick temper and lack of control, Talon released Keeton and dropped his head, prepared to accept the consequences for his actions. Hell, he couldn’t blame them. He’d destroy anyone who put their hands on his mate, even his own brother.

Only, Keeton didn’t scurry away or duck behind Logan for protection. Instead, he spun around to face his advancing mate and flung his arms out to the sides.

“Logan, chill out. He’s your brother.”

Braxton hurried to stand in front of Xander, placing both hands against the alpha's chest. "Come on, big guy. Ease up. Two against one isn't exactly a fair fight."

"Enough," Keeton shouted when both shifters continued to growl. "Just calm the fuck down!"

Everyone froze, including Talon, and the room went eerily silent.

"That's better." Keeton motioned for Braxton to join him as they formed a barricade between Talon and their mates. "First off, he didn't hurt me."

"Me either," Braxton agreed. "And it's not really his fault."

"It kind of is," Keeton whispered to him.

"Yes, okay, but I just want him to suffer a little. Not die." He pointed to the floor in front of the sofa. "Besides, the rug is new."

"Oh, good point. I really like that rug."

"I know, right? I got a great deal on it, too. I wasn't sure about the color at first—"

"Will someone explain what the hell is going on?" Xander interrupted. He had risen from his predatory crouch, but he still looked menacing.

"Guys, I appreciate this, but you can stop now." Talon held his hands up in surrender when Keeton turned to glare at him. "Or not."

“I suggest you keep quiet unless you want everyone to know your secret.”

Talon clamped his lips together and looked away from the other men in the room.

“Spill it,” Xander ordered.

Talon rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. He had never intended to let things go this far, and the entire situation had gotten completely out of hand. Honestly, he should have just told the truth from the start, but he had been trying to avoid exactly this.

Pressure to act. Judgment when he didn't. Assumptions about why he refused.

“Jackson is my mate,” he admitted. “My *amada*.”

Xander and Logan glanced at each other, then turned to stare at him as if he'd just admitted to willful homicide.

“Since when?” Xander asked.

“I guess since always.”

“How long have you known?” Logan took a step forward, but he appeared more confused than angry now.

“Since we found him in the woods, shot and bleeding, when he was fourteen.”

Things had been so innocent back then. Obviously, he wasn't about to claim the kid at that age. Instead, he had taken on the role of the protective older brother. And it had seemed like that had been enough for Jackson.

Until it wasn't.

It had started shortly after his eighteenth birthday with awkward but charming attempts at flirting. By the following year, it had progressed to the pup sneaking into his room in the middle of the night. Every time, it had taken all the self-control he had to send him back to his own bed.

With every birthday that came and went, it became that much harder to resist him. Now that he had turned twenty-one, Jackson was clearly done being kept at arm's length. Talon couldn't blame him, but every decision he had made had been with his mate's best interests in mind.

"Damn," Logan breathed. "No wonder you're such an asshole."

Talon snorted. "Well, it doesn't help, but I was an asshole long before Jackson came on the scene." His attempt at humor fell flat, and he exhaled in a rush as he shook his head. "He's so young. I just wanted him to experience the world."

More importantly, he wanted Jackson to understand that he could be happy without a mate.

"Experience the world?" Keeton parroted with an arched eyebrow. "Is that what all these dates are about?"

"Whoa, wait." Xander waved his hand to get everyone's attention. "*You* sent him on those dates? What the actual fuck?"

Talon stared straight ahead and didn't answer. Yeah, he knew what it looked like from the outside. Hell, he even understood

how it must have seemed to Jackson. If the pup had met someone, if even one of those dates had led to more, he would have been grateful.

Jealous, heartbroken, and miserable, but still grateful.

If there was someone out there who could love Jackson the way he did, someone who could take care of him and make him happy, that would be enough.

“Does he know?” Logan cocked his head to the side when Talon looked away and didn’t answer. “I guess so. Wow, you really are a piece of shit.”

Talon winced. He deserved that and so much worse. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I sure as hell didn’t mean for him to leave.” He looked at Keeton and chose his words carefully. “Were you serious? Is he with someone else?”

Considering Jackson’s resistance to the very idea of these dates, he had assumed he had more time. If the pup really had found someone, though, he wouldn’t stand in the way. He only ever wanted the best for Jackson, and as much as it killed him, he damn sure didn’t fit that description.

Keeton shook his head. “You don’t want him, and I don’t see how it’s any of your business where he is.”

“Keeton,” Logan warned.

“No.” Keeton turned to point his finger at his mate. “Don’t you start on me.” He whirled back around and jabbed the same finger into Talon’s midsection. “And you can just go screw

yourself. I'm not going to tell you anything until you get your head out of your ass and make things right."

Without waiting for any type of response, he huffed dramatically and stomped out of the room.

Logan frowned and followed after him at a more sedate pace. "Thanks, brother," he muttered as he neared the foot of the staircase. "Really appreciate it."

Talon ignored and shifted his gaze to Braxton instead. "Please. If he doesn't want to see me, fine. I just need to know he's okay."

Braxton eyed him for a moment before dipping his head. "He's safe."

Thank the gods. "Where did he—"

"Nope," Braxton cut him off. "Keeton's right, and you won't get anything else from me."

Taking Xander by the hand, he pulled him across the living room to follow Keeton and Logan up the stairs.

Talon stood rooted to the floor, his chest tight, and his temples throbbing.

His mate had left, and he had no idea where to find the kid. Worse, even if he did, there was a good chance that Jackson wouldn't want to talk to him. Everyone was pissed at him, which he deserved.

Keeton had told him to make things right. Easier said than done.

He had made so many mistakes he didn't even know how to start mending what he'd broken.

# THREE



WRAPPED IN AN OVERSIZED fleece blanket, Jackson lounged in the free-standing hammock behind Keeton's cottage. Fluffy white clouds floated across a brilliant blue sky, and sun rays shimmered through the barren tree branches in the surrounding forest.

Despite the unseasonably cold temperatures, it was a beautiful day. Quiet. In fact, the three days since he'd left home had been some of the most calming and relaxing he had ever spent.

After the past few months, calm felt like an exquisite luxury.

He didn't blame Braxton or Keeton, but trouble did seem to follow them, sticking to them like a magnet. First, it had been Braxton's insane, despicable ex-boyfriend. Then, it had been a literal demon who wanted to make little baby demons with Jackson's entire pack.

To be fair, the demon in question had been Logan's ex-girlfriend, so that one was kind of on him. Keeton had only been the catalyst that set things in motion.



For years, he had been going through the same boring routine, day in and day out, with the same lecture repeated countless times. Keep his head down. Don't draw attention to himself. Avoid drama. Above all, don't let anyone get too close.

He understood the need for discretion. He got that Talon and the others only wanted to protect him. Since they were different—not just from humans but from other shifters as well—it was even more imperative to keep a low profile.

But by trying to prevent anything bad from happening, it had the unfortunate side effect of ensuring *nothing* happened. For that reason, he admitted to being a little excited by the sudden upheaval of their lives.

Well, until he and everyone he loved had been threatened. After that, it hadn't felt quite so fun anymore.

He closed his eyes and groaned when his phone rang, the generic music loud and abrasive. Had his ringtone always been that obnoxious? Digging the device from the pocket of his sweats, he didn't even check the screen before sending the call to voicemail.

It was either Talon or his boss, and he had no desire to talk to either. Talon wanted him to come home. His boss wanted him to come back to work. Neither was going to happen. At least, not anytime soon.

Gods, he hated his job. It was tedious, boring, and really, any trained monkey could do it. The pay was decent, which was the only reason he had stuck around as long as he had.

Not showing up for three days, or even calling to let anyone know, probably wasn't the most professional or mature way to quit. Since his boss was a raging dick who used and abused his employees, however, he couldn't bring himself to feel too bad about it.

His phone rang again.

This time, he cracked one eye open to peek at the screen. Once he saw Talon's name and his picture pop up, he sighed and sent it to voicemail. His phone immediately started pinging with incoming messages.

*TALON: Jackson, answer me.*

*TALON: Can we talk?*

*TALON: I just want to know that you're okay.*

*TALON: Call me now.*

Since none of the messages contained an apology, Jackson ignored them as well.

The cold wind kicked up, whistling through the nearby trees as the sun slowly crept toward the horizon. No matter the season, he resented being bound to the moon, the forced compulsion to shift, but winter, with its torturously long nights, was the worst.

Then again, his aversion to the full moon might come from the trauma of his first shift. He'd been just fourteen when Xander and Talon had found him bleeding out on the side of the road with a bullet lodged in his left flank. He'd been in bad shape,

and for a while, no one—including him—had thought he would survive.

By some miracle, he had, and from that point on, the pack had become his family. Which was why he hated lying to them, even by omission. They all assumed he had been shot by a hunter or poacher, and he'd never corrected them. For the first year or so, he had even been able to convince himself that he'd been shot by a stranger.

But every month, on the night of the full moon, memories assailed him, a violent reminder of the truth. It hadn't been some random hunter in the woods that night. It had been his own father who had pulled the trigger.

At the time, he had been too young to understand, but now, he knew everything that had happened that night had stemmed from fear. As a white wolf, he was more than just a freak or an outcast. He had been a literal danger to his family and his birth pack.

Heaving himself out of the hammock, he pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders and trudged toward the back door of Keeton's cottage. Though he usually tried to suppress thoughts of his family, on this occasion, he didn't stop his mind from meandering down memory lane.

His mother had taken off when he was six. As such, he didn't have many memories of her in general, and even fewer happy ones. Sadly, he hadn't been particularly close with his father, either.

A brilliant doctor and the pack alpha, his dad's entire life had revolved around his clinic and the pack. Which naturally hadn't left much time for family, even if he had given a damn about his kids.

Instead, Jackson had been left in the care of his then ten-year-old brother. He thought they'd done okay, though. Life had been tolerable for the most part, and even when things got bad, they'd always had each other.

Damn, he missed Cole like crazy. For years, he had imagined his brother scouring the country to find him. Eventually, however, he'd been forced to accept that Cole feared and hated him just as much as their father did. As such, he had given up the dream of a family reunion.

Sure, it hurt, but he comforted him with the fact that had a new family now. They had taken him in when no one had wanted him. They had put clothes on his back, food in his stomach, and made sure he finished school. Hell, they had even offered to pay for his college.

He grinned as he thought about how frustrated Talon had been when he had explained higher education just wasn't for him. The man had pouted like a petulant child for an entire week. Three years later, he still brought up the idea every few months.

Gods, he still remembered the first time he'd set eyes on the guy. He'd woken up on some ugly couch, unsure where he was, or how he'd gotten there, and in the worst pain he had

ever felt. In an even uglier chair across from him, the most gorgeous man he had been sitting there, just watching him.

At that age, he hadn't known anything about mating or *amadas*. He'd just known that despite being in an unknown place with a total stranger, he had felt utterly safe. Peaceful. Almost euphoric. Then, his teenage hormones had kicked into overdrive, and he'd gotten his first taste of desire.

Jackson sighed wistfully. Some things never changed.

He still wanted Talon, still desired him with a desperation that made him ache. His mate was just as gorgeous as he'd been seven years ago. Talon was still his safe place. His comfort. A balm to the harshness of life.

Too bad he acted like such a controlling dick.

There was so much more to the man, though. He had a big heart and cared deeply for those who earned his trust. He rarely showed it, and Jackson had an idea only he had seen that side of Talon. Furthermore, he couldn't fathom why the guy insisted on pushing everyone away, even his family.

He'd never met any of Talon's friends. Couldn't be sure he actually had any. Talon never talked about his life before they'd met. Never revealed anything about his past. Every look, every move, every subtle glance dripped with intimidation, and most people avoided him completely.

Not Jackson, though. No, he had the utter misfortune to love the stubborn asshole.

# FOUR



TALON PACED THE LIVING room, his arms stiff, hands fisted at his sides. Three days had passed since the full moon, and six since he'd seen Jackson. He didn't think he could take much more. While aware that his mate was a fully grown adult capable of taking care of himself, it still made him nervous as hell to think about the pup out in the city on his own.

Every call was sent to voice mail. Every text had been steadfastly ignored. Jackson's work hadn't seen or heard from him all week. They also informed him Jackson needed to find a new job.

On his next pass in front of the sofa, he paused when Braxton ambled into the room with a smirk.

“Beginning to rethink your position on not claiming your mate?”

Talon rested his hands on his hips and glared. “This isn't a fucking game. What if something has happened to him?”

“He's completely fine. I talked to him this morning.”

Having his calls and texts ignored had been bad enough. Having it shoved in his face that Jackson was only blocking *him* fucking sucked. How had he allowed things to get so bad?

“Tell me where he is,” he demanded. “I need to see him.”

“Why? So you can hurt him again? I don’t think so.” Braxton shook his head in finality. “He’s better off without you. The fact that you’re still making it all about you only proves my point.”

He couldn’t be fucking serious. Everything he did was for Jackson. Somehow, he didn’t think Braxton would believe him. Which wouldn’t matter to him if he didn’t information from the asshole.

“What the hell do you want from me?”

“I want you to pull your head out of your ass and own up to your feelings!” Braxton shouted. “I want you to stop being selfish and just admit you love him!”

“Of course, I love him!” If they had neighbors, every one of them would be on the phone to the police at this point. “I’ve loved him every day for seven fucking years! Do you have any idea how hard it is to love and need someone you can’t have for that long?”

“It’s your own damn fault. Don’t sit there and piss and moan to me about something you could have changed a long time ago.”

“He’s a kid, Braxton!” Why did no one understand this? Jackson had just turned twenty-one, while Talon stared down

his thirty-third birthday. “He’s got his whole damn life ahead of him. He’s so smart, and he has a real chance to make something of his life.” The fire faded, and his voice softened until he spoke just above a whisper. “It’s not fair for him to be tied down to someone like me. I just want him to be happy.”

“He’s at my cottage,” came an equally quiet voice from the other side of the room.

Talon’s head snapped up, and he watched Keeton step out of the shadows of the hallway. Blondie stared back at him, tears pooling in his eyes, and he bit his bottom lip between his teeth to stop its trembling.

*Great.* Talon didn’t even know what he’d done to upset him this time, and it didn’t matter. Logan would hand him his ass for it anyway.

Then Keeton’s words finally sank in, and he froze. “What did you say?”

“Keeton!” Braxton shouted.

“Enough, *chulo*,” Xander admonished from the second-floor landing. Looking down over the railing, he crooked a finger at his mate. “Come on. You’re finished here.”

With a last scathing glare at Talon, he huffed dramatically before marching across the room and up the stairs to join his mate.

“Don’t screw this up,” Keeton told him once they were alone.

Talon nodded, though he couldn’t promise anything. He seemed to excel at screwing shit up. “Thank you.”



Grabbing his keys from their designated hook, he bounded through the front door and across the porch. Halfway to his pickup, he pulled up short when he found Logan leaning against the tailgate with his arms folded.

“If you hurt him,” he said in lieu of a greeting, “I’ll make sure you never see him again.”

Fair, but Talon didn’t want to hear it. Everyone loved to tell him how wrong he was, how much of a dick he’d been. They didn’t know anything, though. No one knew what it was like for him. No one knew or cared how much he had agonized over his decision, or how much his heart had bled.

Yes, okay, maybe he could have handled the situation better, but everything he’d done had been with the purest of intentions.

And it had paved his road right to hell.

Dozens of questions raced through his mind as he made the drive across town. Would Jackson let him inside? Would the kid slam the door in his face? What would he say if Jackson did agree to talk to him? How much did he reveal? How much did he explain?

By the time he pulled to a stop in front of Keeton’s cottage, he still didn’t have the answers. He just had to bite the bullet and hope for the best.

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he exited the pickup and marched determinedly to the front door. On the covered

porch, he rang the doorbell, but though he could hear it echoing inside the house, he didn't receive a response.

Irritation and frustration quickly replaced his worry, and he rapped loudly against the frame. Jackson could try to ignore him, but he would quickly learn just how determined Talon could be.

When he still didn't receive a response, he pounded on the door hard enough to shake the windowpanes. Growing increasingly impatient, he shouted Jackson's name. When that still didn't produce the desired results, he kicked at the doorjamb with a vicious growl.

That seemed to do the trick. The door swung open, and Jackson stepped up the threshold, staring back at him as if he had lost his mind. Which he had.

“What the hell, Tal?”

Talon gritted his teeth and choked back another growl. Jackson wore nothing but a pair of loose-fitting boxers, his well-defined abs on prominent display. His hair stood out in disarray, and his eyes appeared heavy with sleep.

Like always, he was the most gorgeous thing Talon had ever laid eyes on.

“Can I come in?” When Jackson continued to stare at him, he begrudgingly added a clipped, “Please.”

Fuck, this would be harder than he thought.

Jackson shrugged and turned away from the door. He didn't say anything or motion for Talon to enter. He did leave the

door open, though, which was a start.

Following him into a small living room, Talon clenched his fists at his sides to stop himself from reaching out to the pup. Jackson shuffled over to the couch, wrapped himself in an enormous fleece blanket, and plopped down on the cushions. Then he jerked his head toward one of the armchairs near the fireplace.

Talon didn't want to sit in the chair. He wanted to sit beside his mate. Better yet, he wanted to pull Jackson into his lap, wrap his arms around him, and keep him there forever.

He sat in the chair.

“What do you want?”

Talon winced. He couldn't fault Jackson for his anger, but it still hurt to hear the coldness in his voice. As much as he wanted Jackson to be happy to see him—not act as though it were an inconvenience—he realized most of the blame resided with him. It wasn't as if he had ever given him any reason to be excited by his presence.

Arguably, it was the exact opposite, and he had done everything in his power to push his mate away.

“I want you to come home.”

The instant the words were past his lips, he snapped his mouth shut and looked away. He hadn't meant to say that. Not yet anyway.

“No.”

Talon blinked. Jackson had never refused him before. “No?”

“I like it here.”

Closing his eyes, he inhaled through his nose and reminded himself that losing his temper would only create more problems. As much as he wanted to throw the pup over his shoulder and carry him out to the pickup, he couldn't. He had hidden behind Jackson's age for too long, and they were going to talk this out—a talk they should have had a long time ago.

“I know you're angry and hurt and probably a little confused,” he began. “Tell me what it is you want to know, and I'll answer you the best I can.”

Jackson moved to the edge of the cushion and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands clamped together between them. “Why don't you want me?”

He should have seen this coming. Jackson always cut right to the heart of any issue. No beating around the bush or tiptoeing around the issue. The kid went straight for the jugular.

“I do want you.” Fuck, he was so tired of people thinking they knew him or understood his motivations. This was different, though. He had always assumed his mate knew how he felt about him. “How can you not know that?”

He didn't know what he had expected, if anything, but the visceral reaction to his words wasn't it.

Throwing the blanket off, Jackson sprang up from the sofa with an angry growl and practically launched himself across the small space. He stood between Talon's bent knees and

placed his hands on the arms of the chair, leaning in until their noses almost touched.

“How can I not know? How about the fact that you won’t claim me? Or that you never touch me. Maybe it’s because you force me to go on these stupid dates, yet you won’t tell me why.”

His chest heaved, and his eyes flashed with righteous fire. He wasn’t done, though. A snort escaped his nose, and his upper lip curled over his teeth in a sarcastic grin.

“I can’t tell anyone you’re my mate, not even the rest of the pack. I have to hide how I feel about you. You make decisions for me without asking what I want, and you treat me like a dirty little secret.”

Pushing away roughly, he dragged his fingers through his hair and returned to his place on the sofa.

“Well, say something,” he demanded a few seconds later. “Spell it out so the stupid kid can understand it.”

Talon shook his head to clear it, his mate’s scent still swirling inside his nose and making his brain fuzzy. “I just wanted you to have a chance to grow up first.”

“I’ve been grown up for a while now, and it hasn’t made a difference.” Jackson arched an eyebrow at him. “Try again.”

“Jackson, you are so smart. You can do anything you set your mind to.” Talon hung his head and stared down at his feet as he continued. “I didn’t even graduate high school. I dropped out my freshman year and never went back.”

“I don’t—”

“You deserve a whole lot more than what I have to offer.” Gathering his waning pride, he lifted his head and sighed. “You were so young when we found you. It wasn’t right for me to claim you then or have any kind of relationship with you.”

“I get that, and it would be creepy if you had.” Some of the anger had drained from Jackson’s voice, leaving way for confusion. “But I turned eighteen three years ago. Why not then?”

“Oh, believe me, I wanted to.”

Talon chuckled without humor. Jackson had just started his senior year when he’d turned eighteen. Still young. Still impressionable. So, Talon had continued to wait.

He had been so proud the day Jackson had graduated, and with honors to boot. He’d wanted to take his mate home and celebrate all night.

“Why, Talon?” Jackson’s muscles relaxed further, more of the tension easing from his body. “I was ready. I’ve been ready.”

“I know, and I wanted to, but I just kept thinking if I put it off a little longer, gave it just a little more time...” Talon trailed off and rubbed both hands over his face. “Me, Xander, Logan, we all had to grow up a lot faster than we should have. I didn’t want that for you. I wanted you to date, have friends, get drunk, start fights, get in trouble.”

“Aside from the dating, I could still do all those things as your mate,” Jackson countered.

Staring at the floor, he furrowed his brow as he tried to put what he wanted to say into words. “I’m mean, selfish, and stubborn. I can be hard to live with.”

Jackson snorted. “You have no idea.”

Talon narrowed his eyes but otherwise ignored him. “I’m no prize, and I know that. You deserve a hell of a lot better than someone like me.”

“Let me get this straight.” There was a hardness to Jackson’s voice again, and a vein in his forehead had started to throb. “You wanted me to go on these stupid dates because you hoped I would find someone better? Is that what you’re saying? Or was that just an excuse because you really don’t want to be mated to some stupid kid?”

“I’m trying to explain,” Talon snapped. “It would be helpful if you could lose the fucking attitude.”

“You haven’t explained anything. You’re talking in circles and not a word of it makes sense. If you don’t want me, fine, but I’m going to need a better reason than the fact that I’m smart.”

“Damn it, Jackson! I’m trying to tell y—”

“No!” He jumped to his feet again and loomed over Talon. “You aren’t telling me anything. This ‘you’re too good for me’ stuff is bullshit, and we both know it.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared. “I’m done, Talon. So, either tell me the truth, or get the fuck out.”

“I’m going to die, okay!” Not exactly how he had wanted to deliver the news, but it was too late to take it back now.

Jackson’s mouth dropped open, and his hands fell limply to his sides. “What? When? Why?”

“I don’t know when, but much sooner than you will.” Rising out of the armchair, he crossed the room to his mate and took both of his hands. “It’s a genetic heart condition, a birth defect. My heart just can’t hold up to shifting every full moon.” He brought their joined hands to his lips and kissed Jackson’s fingers. “Now, do you get it?”

Jackson stared at him for a full minute before he shook his head. “Shifters don’t get heart disease.”

“It’s not a disease. It’s a birth defect.”

“How do you know? Have you seen a doctor?” Jackson’s voice trembled, and his hands shook as he pulled them free of Talon’s grasp.

“A doctor diagnosed me before I left my tribe.”

“That was twenty years ago, Talon. Maybe he was wrong.”

A nice thought, but he knew better. “My father died from the same condition at the age of sixty-one. He stopped shifting in his fifties, but I don’t really have that option.”

“Your dad was sixty when he died?” Jackson’s eyebrows drew together, and he frowned. “That’s really old.”

Chuckling, he gripped the back of Jackson’s neck and pulled him close to rest their brows together. Oh, to be twenty-one



again.

“I’m sure it sounds old to you, baby, but it was more than forty years before he should have passed.”

“How old were you when you found out?”

“Nine. Mom had me and Logan tested right after our dad died. They weren’t *amadas*, but it devastated her to lose him. After that, she became a little overprotective of her sons.”

He had been prepared for shock, fear, and uncertainty. He hadn’t anticipated Jackson’s palpable anger.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jackson shoved him away roughly, his face a mask of indignation and resentment. “All this time, all these years, all the secrets you made me promise to keep, and this is the reason? Why the hell didn’t you just tell me?”

“It wasn’t—”

“What if something happened to you?” Jackson continued, speaking over him. “No one would know what was wrong. No one would know what to do!” He threw his hands in the air and growled. “You fucking asshole!”

“Baby, calm down.”

“I will not calm down.” Spinning around, he began pacing the living room, his lean muscles flexing with every jerky step. “You just told me that you could die. Not to mention I find out this is the reason you won’t claim me, and you want me to calm down?”

“It’s not that I didn’t—”

“I want an apology.” He stomped over and poked a finger right in Talon’s chest. “And it better be a damn good one.”

Talon didn’t think he had ever seen Jackson so angry before. The kid was usually sweet and goofy, quick to laugh, and he always had a smile for everyone he met.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, his cock perked up to take notice. Jackson had a lot of passion, and the not-so-honorable part of him wondered if he could redirect it toward less verbal pursuits.

“I’m sorry. I never meant for things to turn out like this. I was just doing what I thought was best for you.”

“Maybe it’s time you stopped trying to control everything and let me make my own decisions.” Moving closer, he pressed against Talon’s chest and brushed his lips over the sensitive skin at his neck. “I’m all grown up now, Tal, and I know what I want.”

Groaning, he pushed him away and whirled around to take up Jackson’s earlier pacing. “You are my *amada*. If I claim you, we’re bonded—heart, body, and soul. Our lives become one.” How could he think Talon would risk him that way? “This is not up for debate. I refuse to do something that—”

“Talon?”

Fighting back a growl, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What?”

“How do you feel about me?”

He looked up to meet Jackson's gaze. "You know I love you."

"Then stop fighting it."

Talon groaned. "You're killing me, pup."

"Well, I'm not hiding anymore, so you need to decide. Either you let everyone know I'm yours." Jackson paused and shrugged. "Or I will find someone who actually wants me."

A low, threatening growl rumbled up from his chest. If he had learned anything during the past week, it was just how *not* okay he would be if Jackson found someone else.

"I already told the guys, so I guess you can tell whoever you want."

Jackson sighed and shook his head, clearly exasperated. "Will you please stop talking and just kiss me already?"

Talon might be obstinate. Maybe a little high-handed. He might have made all the wrong choices. He wasn't an idiot, though.

Grabbing Jackson's face in both hands, he pulled him closer and slanted their mouths together. Jackson gasped, his lips parting, and Talon swept his tongue inside to taste his mate for the first time.

He had imagined this moment a thousand times, but all those fanciful daydreams were nothing compared to the reality of finally having Jackson in his arms. It was like a weight had been lifted from his chest, allowing him to take his first real breath in years. Or like finding a part of him he hadn't even known was missing.

Pulling away much too quickly for Talon's liking, Jackson shook his head with a soft chuckle. "You really suck at apologies. That was the worst—"

Talon tangled his fingers in Jackson's hair and jerked him forward to crush their mouths together again, effectively cutting off his smartass reply.

Jackson's answering moan went straight to Talon's cock. While he ate at Jackson's mouth, hard, hungry, and possessive, his mate responded more tentatively. Not like someone who lacked experience, but almost...submissive.

Whatever the reason, it flipped all his switches.

With a sexy shiver, Jackson wrapped his arms around Talon's neck and arched against him, grinding his straining erection against his hip.

Unable to resist all that soft, sun-kissed skin on display, Talon slid a hand down his mate's back, touching and caressing every inch of him he could reach until he reached his hip. Inserting one leg between Jackson's thighs, he pulled him closer, encouraging him to move against him.

Moaning and gasping, Jackson rocked against him. A sweet flush swept across his body, and his arms tightened as he molded himself against Talon's chest.

"Talon."

That was all he said. Just that one word, yet it spoke volumes. Gods, he was so responsive, so absolutely beautiful in his desire, and Talon ached for him.

When Jackson jerked away to gasp for breath, Talon nuzzled the side of his neck, urging his head to the side so he could trail kisses along his jaw. He worked his way down to the pup's shoulder, then back up the column of his throat to the little hollow behind his ear.

Jackson panted, and his muscles coiled tight as his entire body quivered. Quiet whimpers punctuated every breath, and his ribbed stomach clenched as he rocked his hips harder and faster.

“That’s it, baby. Feels good, yeah?” He moved his hand across Jackson’s tensing abs and feathered his fingertips along the waistband of his boxers.

Jackson’s entire body stiffened. His head dropped back on his shoulders, the chords in his neck straining as a low growl rumbled through his chest.

A dark, wet circle formed on the front of his gray boxers as he came practically untouched. Fuck, it was the hottest damn thing Talon had ever seen. Combined with the scent of Jackson’s desire, it was too much, and he struggled to maintain some semblance of control.

Until he saw the look on his mate’s face.

Jackson’s cheeks flushed a vibrant red that had nothing to do with need or exertion. He had his eyes downcast, and he looked so ashamed, so embarrassed, that it tore at Talon’s heart.

Tucking a knuckle beneath Jackson's chin, Talon exerted pressure until his mate finally met his gaze. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," Jackson whispered, averting his eyes again.

"Why are you sorry?" He had a pretty good idea, but he didn't want to assume. Not with something so important.

"I didn't mean to...I was...I tried to stop." Jackson pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Talon grinned. Yep, it was exactly as he had suspected. "You didn't mean to come so fast."

Jackson pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and nodded, but he still refused to look Talon in the eyes.

"It was hot as fuck." And a total ego trip, but he kept that tidbit to himself. "You have nothing to be sorry for, pup."

"You aren't disappointed?"

His smile stretched a little wider. "No. You're young. I have no doubt you can come a few more times before the night is over." It did make him curious about one thing, though. "How many people have you been with, Jackson?"

"None," he answered firmly and without hesitation. "I've never even kissed anyone until now."

Stunned didn't begin to cover what Talon felt. How was that possible? As a young, healthy male, Jackson probably thought about sex at least a dozen times per day.

"Why? Were you never—"

“Because none of them were my mate,” Jackson interrupted with a pointed look. “It just felt wrong to let someone other than you touch me that way.”

Talon sagged with relief, and he hoped his happiness didn't show on his face. He had spent so many sleepless nights making himself sick with thoughts of Jackson naked in some faceless person's bed. Realizing those concerns had been baseless appeased a primitive, possessive part of him he rarely acknowledged.

“So, I don't have any real experience,” Jackson added. “I need you to tell me what to do to make you feel good, and I need it to happen really damn soon.”

Talon chuckled as he dragged his mate into his arms and held him close. “Whatever you say, baby. Whatever you say.”

# FIVE



JACKSON COULD BARELY BELIEVE it.

After years of yearning, he finally had everything he'd ever wanted. Of course, he had always known Talon loved him, but an insecure, vulnerable part of him had still wanted to hear the words. Now that he had, it was going to take a crowbar to pry the smile off his face.

“So, you told everyone?” Sauntering back into the living room after cleaning up and pulling on a pair of sweats, he dropped down on the sofa beside Talon. “That you’re my mate, I mean.”

Talon nodded. “I did.”

He tucked his feet under him and glared playfully. “It’s about time.”

Talon nodded again, a whole fucking world of guilt swimming in his eyes. “I know. I’ve been a complete idiot.” Stretching his arm out along the back of the couch, he urged Jackson closer. “I know now that I should have told you about my heart



a long time ago, but I know you, pup. I knew you wouldn't care, and I can't do that to you." He toyed with a lock of Jackson's hair and sighed. "Can you forgive me?"

Snuggling against his mate's side, Jackson couldn't help but chuckle. "Considering what just happened, I figured it would be obvious that you're forgiven."

Talon growled in warning but ruined it by pressing a kiss to his temple. "I'm trying to be serious here, pup."

They sat in silence for a long time, each of them lost in their own thoughts. For Jackson, he was sorting through a list of questions, rearranging them based on importance and the likelihood of receiving an answer.

"Yes, you should have told me." He spoke quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "You should have trusted me."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on someone your age. I was going to tell you eventually, when you'd grown up a bit and weren't so irrational."

Jackson stilled, and his eyes narrowed at the corners. Sitting upright, he shifted around until he could glare at his mate. "Irrational?"

"This is exactly what I'm talking about. You let your emotions get away from you and cloud your judgment." Talon dragged a hand through his hair and sighed. "We're talking life and death here, Jackson."

"I'm aware of what's at stake." He didn't shout. He didn't growl. Oh, he wanted to, but it would only lend credence to

Talon's point.

The dick.

Sighing again, Talon pulled him back into his arms and rested his chin on the top of Jackson's head. "I don't want to fight with you. We can talk later, but right now, I just want to hold you. I can't sleep without you in the house, so I need you to come home now, okay? I'm exhausted."

Jackson melted, and he suddenly felt all warm and floaty. In a strange way, it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to him. Coming from Talon, it was practically a love letter.

"Fine." He pressed a kiss to Talon's cheek and pushed to his feet. "You can't keep distracting me forever, though. We *are* going to talk about this."

"You also need to start looking for a new job." Joining him, Talon took his hand and began pulling him toward the back of the house. "Or, you know, maybe you could enroll in some college courses or online classes."

Jackson pointed to an open door when Talon hesitated at the end of the hallway, indicating the room he'd been using. It didn't surprise him that Talon had brought up college again, and he knew the guy wouldn't be dissuaded easily.

Nothing had changed since their last conversation on the subject, though. He still had no desire to return to school or pursue a degree. The benefit of spending the last week at Keeton's place was that it had given him a lot of time to think.

After a lot of internal debate and even more research, he had finally decided what he wanted to do with his life.

Inside the room, he released Talon's hand and walked over to pull his bag out from under the bed. He grimaced at the clothes, shoes, and trash littered across the floor. Wow, he was a slob.

"Jackson?"

Oh, right. They were talking about his future. "I want to join the academy."

"That's great." Talon's eyes lit up like Christmas morning. "Do you know which college you want to attend? Have you chosen a degree?"

Jackson turned away to hide his scowl. Talon had either heard what he wanted to, or he was purposely misunderstanding him. Either way, it didn't make for a productive conversation.

"Not academy like university. Academy like police training."

"I don't understand." The way he spoke through clenched teeth told a different story.

Grabbing a couple of dirty shirts from the floor, he shoved them into his bag. "I want to be a cop, the five-O, the popo, a black and white, the boys in blue. You know, 'serve and protect,' and all that."

"No."

Jackson straightened and turned to glare at his mate. "You asked what I wanted to do, and this is it. I want to be a police

officer. Maybe work my way up to detective. I want to help people.”

“Then be a fucking social worker,” Talon snapped. He fisted his hands at his sides and glared right back. “They don’t get shot at.”

Jackson closed his eyes and groaned. “I will be fully trained and have a gun of my own. Why can’t you just support me?”

After several seconds of glaring at him, Talon finally dropped his arms and relaxed his stance. Moving across the room, he wrapped his arms around Jackson’s waist and hugged him tight. Jackson loved the feel of his big, muscular body pressed against him, but he’d love it more if Talon ditched the clothes.

“Add it to the list of things we’ll talk about later.” He nipped at Jackson’s earlobe, drawing a quiet moan from his parted lips.

Jackson knew he should stand his ground. He knew he shouldn’t let Talon distract him, but damn, it felt too good for him to care. The feel of those soft lips ghosting along his neck sent a shiver up his spine and a jolt straight to his cock.

Talon’s blunt teeth grazed over his lower lip once, twice, before he kissed away the sting. “Hurry up. I want to go home.”

With a playful slap to Jackson’s ass, he spun around and strutted out of the room, looking far too pleased with himself.

Frozen in place, rooted to the floor, Jackson cocked his head to the side and frowned. What the hell had just happened? One

minute he had been talking about being an officer of the law, and the next his brain had turned to total mush. Then, when things had been getting really good, Talon had just walked away.

Oh, he definitely needed to learn that little trick. His mate may have won this round, but Jackson would be ready for him next time. He had a plan and knew what he wanted to do with his life.

Well, kind of. He wanted to be a cop. Maybe. Probably.

He liked computers, but he'd need a four-year degree if he hoped to land a decent IT job.

He liked food. Maybe he could study to become a chef. He dismissed that idea quickly. He liked to eat, not cook.

Okay, fine. He clearly had no idea what the hell he wanted to do with his future, but he would make his own decisions, his own mistakes. He didn't need Talon telling him what to do or how to do it.

Grumbling under his breath, he finished packing, wadding his clothes up and shoving them into his bag. It wasn't nearly as neat as when Keeton had helped him pack, and the zipper strained to keep the top closed. He wondered if he had time to tidy up a little.

"Hurry the fuck up!" Talon shouted from the living room.

He guessed that answered his question about cleaning. Scanning the room one last time, he searched for anything he might have missed. He had his phone in his pocket. The

charger on the nightstand belonged to Keeton. All of his toiletries were crammed into one of the side pockets of his bag.

Slinging the strap over one shoulder, he made it about two steps before he realized what he had forgotten. With pursed lips, he looked down at the floor and wiggled his bare toes. Where had he left his shoes?

“What have you been doing here?” Talon walked into the room, holding Jackson’s sneakers between his fingers. “You’re usually neat as a pin, but this place is a wreck.”

Jackson grimaced and took the shoes, pulling them on, sans socks. “I should probably straighten up before we go.”

“We’ll come back tomorrow, and I’ll help you.” Talon took the gym bag from him and hooked it over his own shoulder. “Come on, baby. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m exhausted. I don’t think I’ve slept all week.”

Jackson glanced at the mess of sheets and blankets on the bed, an idea forming. “We could stay here, and you could nap. Then we could clean after you wake up.” He palmed the side of Talon’s neck and nuzzled him under the chin. “I finally have you, Talon, and I’m not ready to share you yet.”

“Share me?” Talon’s voice sounded shaky and distracted.

“If we go home, everyone will be there, and they’re all going to have a thousand questions. Can’t we just stay for a little while?” He ran his tongue along the curve of Talon’s jaw. “Please?”

“Whatever you want, baby,” Talon relented, his voice a thick whisper.

Jackson’s cock twitched, swelling to tent the front of his sweatpants, but Talon needed sleep. Thursday nights meant bar specials at Carpe Noctem. Talon would be working his ass off, doubling as both bartender and bouncer during his ten-hour shift.

Taking in the dark circles under his eyes, the weariness on his face, Jackson felt a stab of guilt that he had caused this. If he had caused it, he could certainly fix it.

“Clothes off,” he ordered.

Without waiting to see if Talon would comply, he kicked his shoes off and shuffled over to the bed. Once he finished straightening the sheets and blankets, he shimmied out of his own clothes and climbed onto the mattress beneath them.

When finally looked up at his mate, he damn near swallowed his tongue.

Talon stood beside the nightstand, completely naked and hard as steel, his thick cock jutting proudly from its nest of black curls. Beautiful, bronzed skin stretched across hard, rippling muscles. Broad shoulders narrowed to a lean waist, and thighs the size of tree trunks rounded out all six-foot-three of the stunning man before him.

Licking his lips, he stared openly at his mate’s thick erection. He wanted to taste him, but he didn’t know what to do. He’d

never given a blow job before, and he wanted it to be good for Talon. He wanted to please him.

Heat crept up his neck and into his cheeks, and turned his head as he fingered the sheet around his waist. What if he proved to be terrible at it? What if he disappointed his mate? What if he completely humiliated himself?

Preoccupied with his spiraling thoughts, he didn't realize Talon had slid into bed beside him until he felt a warm hand cup his jaw.

"We don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with." Talon pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek, then settled back on his pillow with his arms open wide. "I just want to hold you. Is that okay?"

Moving into Talon's embrace, pressing himself as close to his mate as he could, he closed his eyes and choked back the groan that swelled in his throat. He'd fantasized about this for years, lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling, and imagining Talon's heated body curled around him.

He'd pictured Talon's hard body hovering over him, the man's mesmerizing blue eyes staring into his as he moved inside him, each of them working toward a common goal. He'd conjured all kinds of images filled with sweat-dampened bodies, soft moans, and explosive endings.

Now that he finally had the man in his bed, though, he didn't know what to do with him. The need to please his mate overwhelmed him until Jackson felt he'd go crazy with it, but he didn't even know where to start.



“It’s not that I don’t want to do anything with you,” he whispered, burying his face into the crook of Talon’s neck and inhaling deeply.

His cock jerked and his mouth watered at the intoxicating scent of sandalwood and vanilla. That scent had tortured him for years, making him ache for something he couldn’t have, but he didn’t have to hold back anymore.

“Then what is it?” Talon threaded his fingers through Jackson’s hair and massaged his scalp. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Yeah, he did. Although they had never been intimate, and Talon often treated him like a child, the guy had been a good mate. Jackson had never wanted for anything, and Talon had always been there for him. Confusing and awkward, Jackson didn’t know how he would have made it through his teens without the man.

Talon had been a shoulder to lean on or an ear to bend. He didn’t talk much, but he always listened, really listened. He’d bought him his first car for his sixteenth birthday. He still didn’t know how his mate had come up with the money for the Camaro, but he loved that car for the simple reason Talon had given it to him.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed,” he admitted. “I want us to be together, but I don’t know how to make it good for you.”

He felt a tug at his hair and lifted his head to look into Talon’s eyes.

“I doubt there is anything you can do that I won’t like. Besides, I’m more interested in the *together* part. Everything else is just a bonus.”

Damn, he was racking up brownie points left and right, and he was well on his way to being forgiven for all past, present, and future infractions. “Tell me what to do.”

“Whatever you want,” he answered easily.

“No.” Jackson shook his head. “I want to suck your cock. Tell me what you like.”

Talon’s nostrils flared and a soft growl vibrated his vocal cords as he inched up the mattress to lean against the headboard. Tossing aside the blankets, he gestured toward his swollen length.

“You are seriously overthinking this. It’s pretty instinctual, not to mention self-explanatory. Insert tab A into slot B.”

Nodding once, he wiggled around until he lay between Talon’s splayed thighs. His hand shook as he reached out hesitantly and wrapped his fingers around the pulsing shaft. Then he jumped in surprise when Talon moaned and thrust up into his loose grip.

Okay, maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all.

Jackson stroked the swollen length from base to tip, adding a little twist around the head, just the way he liked when he pleased himself. The clear drop of liquid that pooled along the slit fascinated him, and he wanted to taste it.

Looking into Talon's eyes, he darted his tongue out, swiping it across the spongy crown. Salty with a hint of sweetness, the flavors exploded across his tongue, pulling an involuntary moan from deep in his chest.

Fuck, he wanted more.



ELECTRICITY RACED ALONG TALON'S spine and heat pooled in his groin. When Jackson dove forward to envelop the bulbous head with the wet heat of his mouth, Talon almost came up off the bed. It was heaven and hell, and he struggled to remain still, to allow Jackson time to explore.

It wasn't easy, though, not when it had been ages since he'd felt anything so amazing.

For so long he'd denied himself the pleasure of his mate, relying only on his own hand and imagination to ease the ache. To feel Jackson against him, to openly desire him, to have the desire returned, left his head spinning.

Warm, full lips slid down his hard shaft until Jackson's nose pressed into the curly hairs at the base of his dick. Then the velvety walls of his throat contracted around the crown, massaging him in rhythmic waves that almost undid him.

Either it was as instinctual as Talon had said, or Jackson had been lying about never being with another man.

Talon preferred the former.

Jackson didn't waste any time as he set up a steady rhythm of tongue, lips, and hand. Talon watched his spit-slicked cock slide in and out of his mate's welcoming mouth and fought back a growl. The blissful look on Jackson's face as he closed his eyes and moaned around the length tripped his pulse into a gallop and pushed him closer to the edge.

The sights, the sounds, the slight vibrations racing down his shaft, had him teetering on the precipice. Fisting the sheets in both fists, he shook with the effort to remain still and passive.

Jackson took him to the back of his throat again and swallowed, the soft walls of his throat contracting around the crown. That frayed thread of self-control finally snapped, and Talon growled as he thrust his hips, pushing his cock deeper into Jackson's mouth.

Releasing the sheets, he tangled his fingers in his mate's hair and tugged sharply in silent warning. Jackson, however, was having none of it. He shook his head and moaned, redoubling his effort by sucking harder and hollowing his cheeks as he bobbed his head faster.

“Oh, fuck, baby. I'm almost there.”

With a happy hum, Jackson buried his nose against Talon's groin once more and fondled his balls, rolling them gently with his long fingers.

Talon's lower belly tightened, the pressure built in his sac, and electricity shot straight up his spine. He roared as he held the back of Jackson's head in both hands, pushed his cock as

deeply into his lover's throat as he could, and erupted like a fucking geyser.

Once he had spent himself, Talon slumped back against the headboard, his entire body twitching with aftershocks. "Damn, baby," he panted. "Where the hell did you learn to do that?"

Jackson sat up and wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb. He just shrugged and smiled. "Instinctual, right?"

"You need me to take care of you? Come here, pup." Talon motioned for Jackson to come to him since he doubted his ability to move just then.

Jackson, however, crawled to his side of the bed and burrowed under the covers. He shook his head as an adorable pink crept into his cheeks. "I um...came when you did."

Talon grinned. "That's hot."

Scooting down to lay behind his mate, he wrapped his arms around Jackson and pulled him against his chest. He had been a fool to think he could ever live without this. He needed Jackson more than his next breath, and it felt so good to finally have the pup in his arms.

For the first time in his long, miserable life, Talon felt at peace. His body was sated and relaxed, he finally had his soul mate beside him, and everything was right in the world.

He squeezed Jackson tighter and kissed the back of his neck. "I love you, baby."

"Love you, too." Jackson yawned. "Get some sleep. You have to work in a few hours."

Other than Logan, Talon had never had anyone worry about him or want to take care of him. When his twin did it, he just felt irritated. With Jackson, he kind of liked it.

Grinning, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

## SIX



IT WAS FULLY DARK when Jackson pulled up in front of the house he shared with his pack. He had forgotten to set the alarm, causing Talon to have to scramble to make it to work on time. His mate hadn't had time to do more than give Jackson a quick kiss before running out the door, leaving him to clean Keeton's house on his own.

Talon had offered to help him the next afternoon, but Jackson didn't mind doing the work. He'd made the mess after all.

Besides, Talon had still looked completely drained when he'd left for the club. Jackson made a mental note to keep the guy in bed once he got home. Even if that meant he had to stay in bed with him. Not that it would be a hardship.

Feeling lighter and happier than he had in a long time, he cut the engine and climbed out of his car before practically bouncing up the front steps to the door. The freedom to proclaim Talon as his—and quite loudly if he wanted to—felt like a dream, and he was still having a hard time believing it was real.

He no longer had to guard his emotions or watch his every move. He didn't have to censor his every word. The shifter was finally his to love openly.

Before he could even reach for the knob, the door flew open, and the Trouble Twins stood in the doorway, beaming like a pair of Cheshire cats. Jackson knew he wore the same mile-wide grin, but he didn't indulge them right away. Instead, he pushed past them without a word, dropped his bag on the floor, and sauntered over to the sofa.

"So?" Keeton bounded over and flopped down on the cushion beside him.

"I don't kiss and tell," he teased back.

"Ooh, so you did kiss him!" Braxton sang, sitting down on his other side.

"Was it good?" Keeton asked. "Did you do anything else? We require details."

He and Braxton glanced at each other and nodded.

Jackson shook his head, doing his damndest to maintain a neutral expression. "My lips are sealed, gentlemen."

Braxton rolled his eyes. "You're no fun."

"Okay, hypothetically speaking," Keeton began with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "If you *maybe* happened to kiss a certain shifter and *possibly* did a little—"

"Or a lot," Braxton interjected.



“More,” Keeton continued without missing a beat. “Would you say that experience was enjoyable?”

Jackson lost it. Throwing his head back, he pressed a hand to his stomach as he barked out a sharp laugh. Gods, they were just too much.

“Did you ask Talon when he came home to change?” he countered once he had sobered a little.

“Of course.” Keeton sounded as if it were absurd to think otherwise.

“He wouldn’t tell us anything,” Braxton pouted.

Jackson arched an eyebrow at them. “Then why should I?”

“Because you love us and want us to be happy?” Keeton’s hopeful smile only made him laugh harder.

As much as he loved to watch them squirm, in reality, he was bursting to share his excitement with someone. “It was amazing.”

“Oh good.” Braxton rubbed his hands together almost maniacally. “Details, please and thank you.”

Keeton wore a similarly expectant expression as he waved his hand in the universal gesture for “go on.”

“Leave nothing out,” he demanded.

“You two gossip like a bunch of teenage girls.” Striding out of the kitchen, Logan stroked his mate’s hair, then rounded the sofa to claim one of the armchairs, his full attention on Jackson. “Tell me everything.”

“Hypocrite,” Keeton muttered under his breath.

“What the hell is wrong with you guys?” Xander asked from the top of the stairs.

Jogging down the steps, it lowered himself into the other armchair and motioned Braxton to him. Without hesitation, Braxton jumped up from the sofa and hurried over to crawl into his mate’s lap.

“We didn’t do anything.” Keeton batted his lashes innocently. “We just want to know what happened.”

Though excited to be able to tell everyone he was mated to Talon, Jackson didn’t feel comfortable sharing the more intimate parts of their relationship. At least, not yet. Maybe once he gained some experience, he would feel differently.

He flashed a grateful smile at his alpha and relaxed a little when Xander smiled back and winked.

“He just got home, and you guys are already interrogating him.” Xander’s voice was full of authority as he frowned at the other males in the room. “And you didn’t even come get me.”

Jackson’s face burned scarlet as his family burst into peals of laughter. They were all assholes. Every damn one of them.

“Easy, kid.” Logan chuckled. “We don’t need to hear all the gory details. We’re just interested in hearing what you guys talked about and if you made up.”

Jackson eased his tense posture and settled back against the cushions. That didn’t sound so bad. He was dying to share that

part. He gave them an abbreviated version of his conversation with Talon but left out most of the less verbal parts.

“Then we took a nap, woke up, and he went to work,” he concluded.

Braxton stared at him with a dopey smile and misty eyes.

“Aww, that’s so sweet. I knew he had it in him.”

“Congratulations,” Xander added.

“He didn’t claim you?” Logan sounded more worried than curious.

Jackson shrugged, but some of the tension returned, knotting the muscles in his upper back. “It’s complicated.”

Which was putting it mildly. They had their whole lives to figure it out, though. Besides, he could be incredibly persuasive when he needed to be. He had no doubt he could eventually convince Talon to take that next step.

“His heart.” Logan bobbed his head slowly, knowingly. “That makes sense.”

“So, you know?”

Logan frowned at him. “Of course, I know. He’s my brother.” He sighed heavily and carded his fingers through his hair. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but I get where he’s coming from. I wouldn’t ever risk Keeton that way.”

“Wait. Risk me in what way? Whose heart?” Keeton whipped his head back and forth between Logan and Jackson. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Nor would I put that on Braxton.” Xander dipped his head solemnly.

“You know?”

Irrational anger bubbled inside Jackson, and he fisted his hands atop his thighs to hide their shaking. Talon hadn’t outright said no one else knew, but he had kind of assumed.

“I do.”

Jackson narrowed his eyes. “Does Boston know?” He knew the answer when Logan dropped his head and avoided his gaze. “So, I’m the only one who didn’t know? No one thought it was a good idea to tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place to tell.” Logan spoke quietly, calmly.

He sneered at the obvious copout. “Oh, fuck off.”

“Who the hell are you talking about?” Keeton jumped to his feet and started waving his hands around to get their attention.

Everyone ignored him except Braxton.

“Pay attention, Kee. Talon apparently has something wrong with his heart, and that’s why he won’t claim Jackson. Logan and Xander are agreeing with Talon.” He turned and glared at his mate. “Which is really pissing me off.”

Keeton’s mouth snapped shut, and he crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes at Logan. “So, you’d just make the decision for me? You wouldn’t even tell me?”

“I didn’t say that,” Logan backpedaled. “I just see where Talon is coming from, and I think Jackson needs to think long and

hard about what he's asking of his mate."

"I'm right here, Logan." Jackson moved to the edge of the cushion and clasped his hands together between his knees. Would they ever stop treating him like a child? "If you have something to say, just say it."

"Fine." Anger seeped through Logan's calm façade. "I wouldn't have told you, either. You are young and impulsive. I know you want to be with him, but you aren't even considering what you're doing to him by asking him to claim you."

"If your positions were reversed, and you knew you were going to die, would you still want to claim him?" Xander spoke quietly, almost sadly.

"Talon's going to die?" Braxton sounded horrified.

"Oh, my god," Keeton whispered.

"He still should have told me," Jackson said defensively.

He understood what they were trying to tell him. No, he wouldn't ever put Talon in danger purposely, but he would have had the decency to tell the man why they couldn't be together.

"What would you have said if he told you?" Logan's soothing voice just pissed Jackson off even more.

"I don't know what I would have said. Probably what I told him earlier. That it doesn't matter to me, and he needs to let me make my own goddamn decisions!"

“That’s exactly why he didn’t tell you. You’re yo—”

“If you say I’m young one more time…” Jackson trailed off, letting the threat creep into his voice.

“I agree with Jackson. Talon should have told him.” Keeton looked at each of them in turn and huffed. “I can’t deal with any of you right now.”

Logan groaned and pushed to his feet when Keeton stomped out of the room and up the stairs. He shot Jackson a withering glare before taking off after his mate.

Jackson fumed. How was any of this his fault?

Looking for an ally, he turned to Xander and Braxton. Xander stared resolutely in the opposite direction, unwilling to meet his gaze. Braxton stared back at him, his expression a mixture of worry and sympathy. Yet, even he didn’t hurry to Jackson’s defense.

Instead, he climbed out of Xander’s lap without a word, took his mate’s hand, and disappeared up the stairs.

All the happiness, excitement, anger, and indignation drained from Jackson, leaving him completely numb. With a weary sigh, he slumped back on the sofa and closed his eyes. Was he really such a selfish prick?

He didn’t think so. It wasn’t as if he wanted to die, but he loved Talon more than anything. Yes, he could be risking his life by bonding with his mate, but he’d rather follow him into the unknown than try to survive without him.

Why couldn't everyone else understand this? Logan and Xander were mated. Would they rather watch their mates die while they continued to live? Jackson didn't think he could do it. A slightly shortened lifespan was well worth the closeness and peace his mate brought him.

Currently, his only option was to continue his relationship with Talon but never fully bond. Never claim each other. Never have that soul deep connection that every shifter longed for. Then, at the end, watch Talon die while he tried to continue on as if his heart wasn't completely shattered.

For too long Talon had hidden the truth from him, leaving Jackson to wonder and worry that he somehow didn't measure up. That he was lacking in some way. Now, he knew the truth, but he was still being denied what he really wanted.

Talon would fight him to the end on the issue. If Jackson argued too vehemently, he feared his mate would run again. He worried Talon would retreat into himself and decide being without Jackson was better than the constant reminder that they could never have a true bond. Hell, that was probably why he had hidden the truth in the first place.

Unfortunately, it made sense.

Talon had a tendency to shoulder life's burdens on his own, always refusing to share the heavy burden. For years, he had taken it upon himself to protect Jackson from anything he perceived as a threat—even the truth.

Feeling confused, torn, and uncertain, he stretched out on the couch and curled around one of the oversized throw pillows. It

seemed no matter what choice he made, it would be viewed as wrong and selfish.

Maybe he should have just stayed at Keeton's and never let Talon in the door.



# SEVEN



IT WAS JUST AFTER four in the morning when Talon arrived home from his shift at the club. Thursday nights were always a little. With college kids pouring in for two-dollar well drinks, he could count on having to break up at least one fight.

This Thursday had been particularly rowdy, but for once, he hadn't minded. It had kept him busy, distracting him from thoughts of his mate. All it had taken was one little taste for him to become completely addicted, and he'd spent his downtime counting the minutes until he could leave.

Slipping through the front door, he moved quietly, taking extra care to make sure the door didn't slam behind him. At that time of morning, he had expected everything to be dark apart from the nightlight plugged in beside the door.

With his supernatural senses, he didn't need any kind of illumination to navigate the room, but he still smiled at the light every night when he came home. Braxton had bought it

specifically for him and Boston, so they would feel like someone was waiting for them when they came home.

It was such a small thing, but it had touched him more than he could say.

This night, however, he found both lamps burning softly on the end tables that bracketed the sofa. Talon's gaze went to the figure on the cushions, and a soft smile pulled at his lips.

Sprawled on his stomach with both arms wrapped around a fuzzy black throw pillow, Jackson looked cute as hell. As Talon came closer, the corners of his lips twitched, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply.

“Talon.”

Knowing Jackson sensed him, even in sleep, and was apparently happy about his presence, sent a rush of warmth coursing through his veins. He crouched near his mate's head and gently stroked his soft curls.

“Come on, pup. Let's go to bed.”

Dead on his feet, his mattress called to him, but he wanted Jackson beside him. After the brief taste of what he'd been missing, he never wanted to be away from him again.

Jackson's brow creased, and his eyes tightened at the corners.

“Where are you?”

A frown tugged at his lips, but he continued his petting. “I'm right here.”

“Where? I can't see you. Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” Talon repeated. “Open your eyes, baby.”

“I’m coming. I’ll find you. Keep talking.” Jackson’s voice grew in volume, panic bleeding from every syllable. “I can’t find you. Tell me where you are. I’m coming. Cole, where are you?”

An involuntary growl rumbled in his throat, and his fingers stilled in Jackson’s hair. Who the fuck was Cole?

Jackson’s eyes flew open as he jerked away with a loud gasp. His face appeared pale, but not alarmingly so, and his whole body trembled visibly. He blinked a few times, drifting somewhere between sleep and waking before he finally focused on Talon.

“Tal?” Rolling off the sofa, he launched himself at Talon and hugged his neck, clinging to him as he peppered kisses over his face. “I missed you.”

Jackson’s warm body, his sweet scent, the enthusiasm in which he nuzzled his neck, sent a bolt of lightning straight to his groin. His brain short-circuited, his heart tripped into a wild gallop, and he almost decided to let it go.

It took about three seconds to realize that wasn’t going to happen. He had always been protective of the pup, but the recent changes in their relationship had triggered a possessiveness he couldn’t ignore.

Had his mate found someone else? Talon thought they had worked out their issues, but maybe he’d been wrong. Either

way, he had to know who Jackson had been searching for in his dreams.

Easing Jackson back so he could search his face, he cupped his clammy cheek and smiled. “Baby, who’s Cole?”

The remaining blood drained from Jackson’s face, and he reeled backward as if Talon had slapped him. “Where did you hear that name?”

The coldness crept in, the ice reforming around Talon’s heart. “You said it in your sleep.” His voice vibrated with jealousy. “I thought you wanted to be with me?”

Jackson blinked slow and lazy, looking more like an owl than a young wolf. “I do want to be with you. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Then who the fuck is Cole?” Talon growled the last word, unable to rein in his impatience.

Rather than getting angry or dropping his head in guilt, Jackson looked him right in the eye. “Cole is my little brother. I haven’t seen him since I left home.”

Talon dropped his head and sighed. Not in relief, but in exasperation with himself. Irrational jealousy was not a good look on him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“It’s okay.” Coming closer, he rubbed their noses together. Slow. Sweet. Gentle. “I forgive you.”

Talon stood by what he had been saying for years. He didn't deserve this man, but it was too late now. He couldn't let him go.

“You were dreaming about him?”

Jackson nodded, but he looked confused. “It started a couple of weeks ago, and it's always the same dream. I'm in this dark forest, and Cole is calling to me. No matter how hard I try, I can't find him, though.” He pursed his lips and tilted his head to the side. “Do you think it means something?”

Talon shook his head and shrugged. “You're the smart one, Jacks. I'm just here to look pretty and keep everyone in line.”

Jackson rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched at the corners. “You don't give yourself enough credit. Though, I'll concede that you are the pretty one.” He smiled impishly, leaning in to lick at Talon's mouth. “I don't want to talk anymore.”

“Mmm, this is why you're the smart one.”

Talon opened willingly, groaning at the tentative brush of Jackson's tongue against his own. Palming the back of his head in one hand, he gripped his hip with the other to drag him closer.

Jackson squirmed in his lap, grinding his pert ass against Talon's groin. His cock swelled and ached, pushing insistently against his zipper, and he shuddered with the intense need to be buried inside his mate.

Breaking the kiss, Talon trailed his lips along the smooth column of Jackson's throat, inhaling his rich, fragrant scent.

“Gods, you smell good.” He swirled his tongue around the pup’s earlobe, then nipped it between his teeth. “You always smell so fucking good.”

“Uh huh.” Jackson sounded distracted as he fumbled with the buttons on Talon’s shirt.

Talon grinned against his mate’s throat before swirling his tongue over the pulsing vein there. His teeth skimmed across the soft skin, and Jackson stilled instantly. His muscles tensed, and Talon could smell his anxiety permeating the air.

“Jackson?” He sat back, looking into the beautiful blue eyes he loved so much. “What’s wrong?”

Jackson shook his head quickly. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. I’m hungry.”

Normally, Talon would have believed him. No one could eat like Jackson. The kid stayed hungry. At that moment, however, Talon called bullshit. He tightened his arms when his mate tried to wiggle free, pinning him in place.

“Talk to me. What’s going on in that big, beautiful brain?”

Jackson sighed, all the fight leaving him, and he slumped against Talon’s chest. “Logan agrees that you shouldn’t claim me.”

Talon’s heart stuttered, tripped over, and took off into a full gallop. He didn’t know if he should feel angry, hurt, jealous, or protective. None of the emotions felt right.

“Did he say why he thinks that?” He spoke calmly, but he knew Jackson could hear his racing heart, smell the

uncertainty on him.

“The same reasons you do.” Jackson sat up, his bottom lip poking out as he pouted. “It’s not fair. Xander has a dangerous job. Every time he rushes into a burning building, he’s risking his life.” Jackson looked him in the eye. “What about Braxton? How come no one is yelling at him?”

Talon bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Jackson looked so damn adorable when he pouted. “What do you think?”

Jackson sighed as he continued to toy with the buttons on Talon’s shirt. “I think I could get hit by a bus tomorrow. I think you could wreck your car on the way to work. I think a meteor could fall from the sky and kill us all. Why do you have to be so damn stubborn?”

“All those things *could* happen. However, my heart condition is a given. I will die, Jackson. I just don’t know when.”

“That’s my point!” He sat up straight, his expression blazing with determination. “No one knows when their time will come. I’d rather spend what time we have together actually *being* together than worrying about whens and what-ifs.”

He really didn’t give Jackson enough credit. The kid had a point, but the idea of knowingly putting his mate in danger went against every innate instinct he possessed.

“I’ll think about it,” he conceded. He doubted it would change anything, but he would give Jackson’s words the consideration they deserved.

Jackson looked stunned. He opened his mouth, but no words came out—a first for him. He loved to talk almost as much as he loved to eat.

Talon licked a line from his collarbone to his chin. “Forget about tomorrow or the next day. Forget about the future for a minute.” He kissed Jackson’s lips once, twice. “What do you want right now?”

“I want you to take me to bed and fuck me until I can’t walk. I want you to rub your scent all over me. I want you to bite me, claim me, and finally show everyone I belong to you.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as if daring Talon to argue.

“I won’t claim you tonight, but the rest I can do.”

Talon smirked and grabbed his mate around the waist to him around so that he knelt on the floor. Placing his palm between Jackson’s shoulder blades, he applied pressure, urging him forward until his chest rested against the sofa cushions.

“And who says we need a bed?”

Jackson groaned, arching his back, his perfect ass pushing back against Talon’s groin. “Someone could walk in.”

“Do you really care?” If he did, Talon would stop right there and move the party to his room.

“Not really,” Jackson answered. “I mean, how many times have we walked in on Xander and Braxton, or Logan and Keeton?”



“Good point.” Pushing Jackson’s cotton shirt up his back, Talon nibbled soft kisses along his spine as he caressed his soft skin. “Although, living with a bunch of nymphos does have its benefits.” He slapped Jackson’s jean-clad ass and backed away. “Get these off.”

He stretched to the side, reaching toward the nearest end table. Pulling open the top drawer, he rummaged through the contents until his fingers encountered a small plastic bottle. He held it up to the light and scowled when he saw that it was nearly empty. Now that he had a reason to use it, perhaps he should make a conscious effort to contribute to the stash.

Turning back to Jackson, Talon almost swallowed his tongue at all the smooth, tanned skin on display. His mate knelt on the sofa, his legs spread wide, and his muscled ass upturned, just begging for Talon’s touch.

He moved slowly, dropping the lube beside Jackson’s knee, and cupped the rounded globes in both hands, kneading the firm muscles. Jackson’s broad back flexed, and his cheeks squeezed together as he arched his hips forward, away from Talon’s grip.

Talon didn’t take it personally. Putting himself in Jackson’s place, remembering how nervous he’d been his first time, he had no problem interpreting the reaction. Dropping his hands, he lifted himself onto the sofa beside his mate.

“Come here, baby.” He opened his arms, relieved when Jackson immediately turned and snuggled in close. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Jackson whispered. “I’m just scared.” A hint of embarrassment colored his words. “Will it hurt?”

Talon kissed the top of his head and sighed. “I won’t lie to you. It might hurt a little at first. That’s why we’re going to get you nice and stretched, and we’re going to go slow. It will probably be uncomfortable, but it shouldn’t be unbearable.”

Jackson sat back and looked up at him with wide eyes. “You know from experience?”

Talon looked away, unwilling to travel further down that conversational road. He didn’t want to keep things from his mate, but he also didn’t want to talk about previous partners in their current situation. Palming the back of Jackson’s neck, he encouraged him to rest against his chest again.

“There’s no rush. We don’t have to do anything until you’re ready.”

A soft kiss landed on his jaw, and Jackson squirmed out of his embrace. “I’m ready. I want this, Talon.” He bit his lip and breathed in deeply through his nose before continuing. “Just go slow, okay?”

“I’d never hurt you, Jacks. I promise.”

Jackson nodded, and a slow, sensual smile spread across his lips. “Make me yours.”

Talon mirrored his smile and began pushing Jackson back down to the cushions. “You always were.”

“Wait!”

Growling in frustration, Talon sat up and ran a hand through his hair. “You are the only person I know who can be indecisive and bossy in the same fucking breath.”

He was doing his best to put Jackson first, but the kid was driving him nuts. If Jackson pumped the brakes, Talon could respect that. The hot and cold, top and go, was giving him whiplash, though. His cock throbbed against his zipper, and his balls were so tight and achy, he imagined the slightest touch would set him off.

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Lose the clothes.”

“Again with the bossy.” Rising to his feet, he undressed without ceremony, then faced his mate with his hands on his hips. “Anything else, Your Highness?”

With a quiet growl, Jackson dove forward, capturing the leaking crown of Talon’s cock between his lips. He swirled his tongue under the head, then flicked at the slit, before inching down the hard length to bury his nose against Talon’s groin.

“Fuck,” Talon groaned. He grabbed on to Jackson’s shoulders to prevent himself from collapsing right there on the floor. “That’s it, baby. Fuck, yes. Keep doing that.”

He kept up a constant flow of encouragement, delighting in the onslaught of sensation.

Then suddenly, everything stopped. Jackson pulled away with one last lick at his slit and sat back on his heels.

“Can we fuck now?”

Talon closed his eyes and groaned again. The pup was going to kill him. When he finally dragged his eyelids open, Jackson had turned around, his chest flat against the cushions, and his ass tilted just right.

Gripping the base of his cock to stave off his orgasm, Talon resumed his place on the sofa. Jackson looked up at him, his eyebrows drawn together, and confusion written all over his face.

“Come up here, baby.” Talon patted his thigh and crooked a finger. “I want to see you. I want to look into those eyes and see that you know exactly who’s taking you.”

Jackson’s features relaxed, and his eyes softened. Standing, he shuffled closer and straddled Talon’s thighs, then eased down until their straining erections pressed together.

“I can’t wait anymore.” He rocked his hips, his breaths coming quick and shallow.

“Shh, pup. We have to get you ready.” He pressed the slick into Jackson’s hand and nodded. “I won’t last if I do it. You’re going to have to stretch yourself.”

Jackson’s cheeks burned, and he shook his head. “I don’t know how.”

Well, he sure as hell hadn’t seen that one coming. “You’ve never...”

Shaking his head again, Jackson looked away. “I wanted you to be the first.”

His heart melted, and he gripped the back of Jackson's neck, pulling him into a kiss full of love, desire, and passion. Somehow, during the dueling of their tongues and the mating of their lips, the lube found its way back into Talon's hand.

His mate was tricky.

Trailing his fingertips along the smooth crease of Jackson's backside, he continued to suck and bite at his lips. In response, Jackson rose up on his knees, arching his hips, and pushing into Talon's questing fingers.

"So eager," Talon breathed between kisses. "I love how you respond to my touch. Love the way you beg for more."

"Please," Jackson whimpered. "I'm going to die if you don't do something."

Talon chuckled at the exaggeration as he popped open the cap and dribbled the slippery gel over his fingers. "Come back here."

Jackson complied instantly, crushing their mouths together and sucking on Talon's tongue. Parting his mate's cheeks, Talon ringed the virgin entrance, caressing it lightly, then more insistently as the muscles began to relax. He pushed in with just the tip, and Jackson jerked out of the kiss with a long, deep moan.

"Damn, that's good. More. Give me more."

Only too happy to comply, Talon slipped his digit into Jackson's hole up to the second knuckle. He sawed in and out,

pumping his finger until Jackson relaxed further, easing the way for him to add a second.

Jackson panted and squirmed, his skin flushed and glistening with perspiration. When he felt confident he could add a third finger without hurting him, Talon pushed in and latched onto one copper colored nipple at the same time.

“Fuck!” Jackson cried out, his body convulsing and shuddering. “Now, Talon. I need you now.”

Talon nipped the pebbled bud in reprimand, though it only served to increase the volume of Jackson’s moans.

“Please, please. Oh, holy fuck. Please!”

Though a strong man, even he couldn’t resist the desperate plea in Jackson’s voice. “Okay, baby, okay. Relax.”

With shaking hands, Talon scooped up the lube and coated his throbbing cock. Wound tight, teetering on the edge, he prayed he didn’t lose it the moment he invaded that tight ass. Once he had some semblance of control, he smacked Jackson on the hip and nodded.

“All you, baby. Go as slow as you need to, or not at all.”

Jackson bit his lip, his nose crinkling in concentration as he slowly lowered himself, lining up the crown with his quivering hole. “Ready?”

Talon wanted to laugh. He’d never been more ready for anything in his life. Instead, he nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek to help battle back his impatience.

Jackson sank over him until the crown breached the guarding ring of muscle. That was as far as he made it before he froze completely, and every inch of his body stiffened.

“Fuck, fuck,” he panted. “Goddamn, that burns.”

Reaching up, Talon smoothed his palm over Jackson’s chest, across his shoulders, and down his arms. “Easy, baby. Deep breath. Try to relax.”

“Relax?” Jackson practically screeched. “I have a fucking two-by-four lodged in my ass, and you want me to relax?”

Torn between amusement and pride, Talon gritted his teeth and said nothing. He didn’t think he had ever been both complimented and reprimanded all in the same breath before.

Jackson took a few deep breaths, then nodded resolutely before sliding down Talon’s length, sheathing him in velvety heat.

“Motherfucker!” Talon growled, digging his fingers into his mate’s hips to prevent him from moving. “You are so fucking tight, baby. Give me a minute.”

He didn’t miss the irony. Jackson should be the one begging for a chance to adjust, but it was what it was.

After several deep breaths, Talon gave up hope that he could fend off his climax, and just prayed that he’d last long enough to drag Jackson over the edge with him.



HOLY HELL, IT BURNED. Jackson wanted to move, but at the same time, he *didn't* want to move. Why did he ever think he could do this?

“Move.”

Talon's deep, commanding tone sent a shiver up his spine, and Jackson obeyed without thought. Rising up, feeling every vein and ridge sliding over his opening, he groaned loudly. Oh, okay, that wasn't so bad. Despite the intense pressure, it actually felt kind of amazing.

Slow and steady, he set a rhythm, panting and shuddering as his body relaxed and pleasure bombarded him. Staring into his mate's dazed eyes, everything disappeared until only he and Talon existed.

“I love you.” He spoke quietly, not wanting to disturb the serenity of the moment.

Rocking his hips, rising and falling, moving on instinct and need, he made love to the man who had stolen his heart at first sight all those years ago.

“Claim me, Talon. We've waited long enough. We belong together.”

A long, sexy growl emanated from Talon's parted lips.

“Mine.”

Talon's fingers wound in his hair, jerking him down and tilting his head to the side. A wet tongue swiped along the sensitive flesh at the apex of his neck and shoulder. But the sting of sharp teeth never came.



Instead, Talon grabbed his hips and slammed up into him, sending Jackson careening toward release.

Screaming, he bucked and thrashed, grinding his hips with jerky, uncoordinated movements, meeting him push for shove. Electricity sped along his spine and straight to his balls to swirl and burn like molten lava. Talon's hand wrapped around his aching cock, and he couldn't hold back any longer.

He erupted, his orgasm ripped from him, exploding through his slit in ropes of hot, pearly cum. Sagging against his mate, he felt Talon's chest vibrate as his lover stilled and roared out his release.

Wet heat coated his convulsing channel as wave after wave of aftershocks rocked his body, leaving his brain fuzzy and threatening to drag him under.

"Wow," he panted. Not the most brilliant thing he'd ever said, but his brain refused to work correctly.

When he didn't receive an answer, he eased away from Talon's warm body, and stared down with a grin.

His poor, exhausted mate was sound asleep.

# EIGHT



*“JACKSON! JACKSON! WHERE ARE you?”*

*Jackson stumbled through the trees, the fog rolling thickly over his feet as the night pressed in on him. “Cole? Cole, where are you? Keep talking, I’m coming.”*

*“It’s so cold here. Please, hurry.”*

*“Tell me where you are!” Jackson growled in frustration. He kept going, pushing through the underbrush, barely registering the thorns that cut into his bare legs.*

*“It hurts, Jackson.”*

*Jackson tripped, sprawling out on his stomach, the bitter coldness seeping into his bones. A soft, flickering light appeared just through the trees, teasing him. Struggling to his feet, he traipsed onward, but never came any closer to the amber glow.*

*“I’ll find you, Cole. I promise.”*

*“Jackson. Jackson.”*

*His brother's voice became faint, softening with each repetition of his name until the cries were nothing more than whispers in the night. Then all sound floated away completely, swallowed by the roaring of the harsh wind.*

*"Cole!"*

"Jackson! Can you hear me?" The new voice sounded louder, closer, as if right beside him. "Baby, you're scaring me!"

Jackson came awake with a gasp, jerking upright and panting. He could still feel the cold, the numbness right down to his soul. His brother's voice echoed inside his head, strained and pleading.

He didn't even realize he'd been crying until Talon reached out with a shaky hand to wipe away the tears. "There you are."

Without thinking, Jackson launched himself into his mate's arms, clinging to him like a lifeline, needing the warmth of his body. He buried his face against Talon's throat, breathing him in, letting the familiar scent comfort and soothe him.

"Want to talk about it?"

Jackson shook his head quickly.

"Come here." Talon eased them to a horizontal position, tucking Jackson's head under his chin, and holding him tightly.

Neither spoke again. Eventually, Talon's soft snores reached his ears, and his hold loosened.

Jackson pressed himself closer, staring at the tan skin of his lover's chest, too afraid to close his eyes.

# NINE



TALON CHOKED DOWN HIS pride as he stepped up to his brother's door and rapped twice. Every night for two weeks, his mate had awoken, sobbing and shivering in the middle of the night. He still refused to breathe a word to Talon about it.

The door opened, and a face so like his own stared back at him. "Hey, brother." Logan smiled as he stepped up to the threshold. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to Keeton."

Logan's smile vanished, and the corners of his lips turned down. "What's going on?"

Fighting back a growl, he clenched his fists at his sides and took a deep breath. "It's Jackson."

He watched his brother's eyes widen and a little *O* form on his lips. "Maybe you should come in."

Talon nodded, stepping past his brother and into the room. He spotted Keeton immediately, sitting at the vanity Logan had

built for him, painting his toenails in a brilliant shade of purple.

He looked up and smiled brightly as he set the nail polish aside. “Hey, Talon.” His smile faded once he got a good look at him, much as Logan’s had. “You look like shit. What’s wrong?”

Standing at the foot of the bed, Talon rubbed his palms over his cotton-covered thighs. He really didn’t want to do this, but he couldn’t see another way. “I need you to talk to Jackson.”

Keeton’s brows drew together, and he cocked his head to the side. “Why?”

Damn it, he hated asking for help. “He’s been having dreams.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I think he has, anyway. He won’t talk to me, but he’s been waking up at night, and he can’t go back to sleep. In fact, I don’t think he’s slept at all in the last two nights.”

“He hasn’t said anything?” Logan moved further into the room and perched on the end of the bed.

“No. When I ask him, he refuses to talk about it. He mutters in his sleep sometimes, though. I think he’s dreaming about his brother, Cole.” He paused to take another deep breath. “From what I could get out of him, it’s always the same dream, and he’s been having them for weeks, maybe longer.”

Logan and Keeton exchanged a look Talon couldn’t decipher, and it pissed him off. Thankfully, before he could say something he might regret, Keeton spoke.

“I’ll do it, but I think you should try one more time. I also think we need to call Blaise.”

“Your cousin?” Why the hell did they need a demon hunter from the Council? It was just a fucking dream.

“I think there might be more going on than just nightmares. Besides, Blaise is a wolf shifter.” Keeton shrugged. “Maybe he’ll know something we don’t.”

That last part he could agree with, at least. “What do you mean, more than nightmares? Like he’s seeing the future or something?”

Keeton nodded, then paused and shook his head. “No, not exactly. Maybe he’s seeing the *now*.”

At that point, nothing would surprise him, but it sounded batshit crazy. “Call him.” Then he strode out of the room, his temples throbbing as he tried to make sense of everything. “Why can’t we have just one normal fucking day around here?”



JACKSON SAT ON THE sofa in the game room, staring blankly at the black screen of the television. His eyes burned, and his brain lagged with exhaustion. Two anxiety-filled, sleepless nights had left him barely functional, but trying to hide it from his overprotective mate was even worse.

He didn’t understand, couldn’t explain the bone deep terror, the throat-clogging desperation, the breath-stealing cold he felt

when he awoke from one of his dreams. He just wanted them to stop.

Talon was worried about him. He could see it in his mate's expression, the tense set of his shoulders. Talon still wouldn't claim him, so he couldn't feel the man's emotions, but he knew. He hated that he heaped this burden on his mate—especially since Talon didn't even know what was going on.

“Are you ever going to talk to me?”

Jackson snapped his head to the side to see Talon enter the room. Mm, the man was gorgeous. Dark hair, tan skin, rippling muscles, and a killer smile—Jackson could stare at him forever. Saliva pooled in his mouth, and he swallowed reflexively.

“What do you mean?” His voice sounded hoarse, thick, unused.

Talon frowned as he crossed the room to ease down onto the cushion beside him. Jackson leaned into his embrace and immediately felt his eyelids droop. He just found something incredibly comforting about Talon's presence.

“Can we cut the bullshit, pup? You haven't slept in days. When you do sleep, you wake up sweating, but cold as ice. The anxiety in you is eating away at me. It's thick enough to cut with a knife, and I can't even feel your emotions like other mates.”

A callused finger slipped under his chin and tilted his head up.

“I want to help, baby, but you've got to talk to me.”

Scanning the dark circles under Talon's bloodshot eyes, the distressed lines of his face, the overall haggard appearance of his mate, Jackson sighed. "My dad shot me."

Talon's eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. Clearly, he hadn't been expecting that little bombshell. "What? When?"

"Three days after my fourteenth birthday, I shifted for the first time. Cole and I were outside. I can't remember what we were doing, but he was being a pain in the ass. I just got so...so mad at him."

"And you shifted."

Jackson nodded slowly, rubbing his temple against his mate's shoulder. "We were fighting, rolling around on the ground, fists flying, the whole nine yards." He took a deep breath to steady his emotions. "The next thing I knew, I had him pinned beneath my paws, growling and snarling at him."

"And your dad shot you?" The steel in Talon's voice left him shivering.

"Cole was so cool about it. He's a great kid." Jackson smiled fondly for a second, but he couldn't maintain it. "I guess Dad heard us, though. He came running out the back door, shotgun in his hand, and I don't remember anything else until I woke up on the couch with you sitting beside me."

"I'm so sorry, baby." Talon pulled him closer, nuzzling his cheek against the top of Jackson's head. "You're safe now. I'd never let anything happen to you."



Melting into the embrace, Jackson placed a soft kiss on Talon's throat. "You are just a big teddy bear, Talon Cartwright."

"Only with you," his mate whispered into his hair. "Don't go spreading that shit."

Jackson snorted but sobered quickly. "I've always worried. What if Cole is a Moonlighter? What if he's not, and I made him all loopy? What if my dad went insane because of me, and he hurt my brother?"

Talon cuffed him lightly on the ear. "Hush now. None of this is your fault." His lips brushed over Jackson's temple. "If you want, we can try to find out what happened to them."

Jackson thought it over for a minute before shaking his head. "Something bad is happening with my family. I can feel it."

Tilting his head up again, Talon searched his face before raising his eyebrows in question. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think these are just dreams. I think Cole is calling to me."

# TEN



“WHEN’S BLAISE COMING?”

“Keeton said he’d be here soon. We just called him yesterday. It may be a few days.” Talon smiled indulgently at his impatient mate.

Jackson shrugged. “Whatever. I’m hungry.”

Talon shook his head and chuckled. The kid was a bottomless pit. Rising from the sofa in the game room, he held out a hand to Jackson. “Come on, pup. I’ll feed you.”

Whooping, Jackson took Talon’s hand and jumped up from the sofa, pulling him through the house toward the kitchen. “I love when you cook. Can you make me peek-a-boo eggs? I really love when you make those.”

Talon rolled his eyes. No one loved when he cooked. Hell, he could barely stomach it himself. He could cook peek-a-boo eggs, though. It had been a favorite of his as a kid, and he’d made them a thousand times for Jackson.

Releasing his hand, Jackson sauntered over to the kitchen table and sat, grinning from ear to ear.

“You know, you could help,” Talon told him as he went to the refrigerator and opened the door to peer inside.

“Nah, they’re better when you make them. I’ll just screw it up.”

Talon snorted with his head still inside the fridge. Scanning the shelves, he frowned and stood straight to look over at his mate.

“Where are the eggs?”

“I ate them.”

Glancing back inside the fridge, Talon shook his head. “And the bacon?”

“Ate it.”

Talon closed the door and stood with his hands on his hips.

“Bread?”

“Ate it.”

“Butter?”

“Ate it on the bread.” Jackson beamed at him. “These are really easy questions. Go on. Ask me another one.”

Talon blinked twice, then threw his head back and roared with laughter. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard. The kid just had a way about him that warmed Talon’s heart and brought sunshine into his life.

“Get dressed. You ate it. You can replace it.”

Jackson wrinkled his nose. “I hate grocery shopping. I like eating food, not buying it or cooking it.”

Laughing again, Talon walked over and cuffed his mate lightly on the back of the head. “Get up and quit complaining.”

Jackson rubbed the abused spot and pouted. “Fine, but I want a blowjob out of this.”

Talon’s dick twitched with interest at the mental image of his mate’s hard length sliding in and out of his mouth. He could almost feel the heavy shaft against his tongue, could practically taste the salty precum exploding over his taste buds.

“Deal. Now, hurry up.”

He wished he could say things had gotten a little better after that, but it would be a lie. The next four days passed with little to no sleep, and by the time Blaise arrived on their doorstep, he had reached his breaking point.

He didn’t think he had ever been so grateful to see someone, and he hoped the wolf’s arrival meant they would finally get some answers.

Once they finished the initial greetings and what felt like endless banal small talk, he led Blaise into the kitchen and motioned to one of the chairs. Then he sat down across from him and waited for Jackson to take the seat at his side.

“Thanks for coming.” As much as he wanted to get right to the point, they were essentially asking for a favor. He could bear another minute or so of pleasantries.

Blaise grinned and waved away his gratitude. “I just finished up an assignment, so I had the time.” He glanced between Jackson and Talon. “Want to tell me what’s going on? Keeton didn’t give me much information when he called.”

Talon looked to Jackson. “Go ahead, pup.”

Taking a deep breath, Jackson outlined his dreams, the feelings of fear and anxiety they left him with, and the concern that they were more than dreams. “It just feels so real, you know? I can’t shake this feeling that Cole needs help.”

“I agree.” Blaise rested his hands on the table and splayed his fingers. “What do you know about pack telepathy?”

Jackson tilted his head and frowned.

“Okay, from the top then,” Blaise said without an ounce of judgment. “Wolves are the only shifters I know of with the gift, but once they reach puberty and shift for the first time, they can communicate telepathically with other members of their pack.”

“Oh,” Jackson breathed. “Really? That’s fucking cool.”

Talon scratched the back of his head. He didn’t know that “cool” was the word he would use. He’d been happy to escape the winters in Colorado, but so much weird shit had happened since they’d dropped down in Texas. He constantly felt three steps behind.

“The bond is strong within families, especially between siblings. How old is your brother?”

“Cole is three years older than me. He just turned twenty-four.”

“I thought you said Cole was your *little* brother?”

Smiling sheepishly, Jackson shook his head. “He’s older than me, but he’s kind of the runt of the family. I was almost twice his size by the time I started kindergarten. I’ve always called him my little brother.”

Talon looked his mate over and couldn’t help but chuckle. At six foot even, and no more than a buck-seventy, Jackson definitely qualified as the smallest member of the pack. If he was literally twice his brother’s size, the man had to be tiny.

“Okay, so you think Cole really is calling to me? That he needs help?” Jackson’s enthusiasm faded toward the end, and he spoke the last word in a strained whisper. Then he popped up, his back ramrod straight. “We have to find him!”

The fear and urgency in his eyes shredded Talon’s heart, and he wrapped an arm around his mate’s shoulders in comfort. “Don’t worry, pup. We’ll find him. I promise.”

A pretty lofty promise, considering he didn’t even know where to start looking, but he’d scour the planet if that was what Jackson wanted.

Before he could offer any further reassurances, the front door banged open and a loud, ear-piercing squeal preceded Keeton into the house. “Oh, my god, you’re finally here!” Bounding across the living room, he entered the kitchen with a little skip in his step. “Why didn’t you call me? When did you get here?”

How have you been? It's really good to see you. Why don't you come around more often? Yay, you're here."

When Blaise stood to greet him, he wrapped both arms around his cousin's neck, forcing him to bend down so he could place a loud smacking kiss on the cheek.

A deep chuckle announced Logan's arrival. "Calm down, angel, and let the man breathe."

Keeton glanced over his shoulder and stuck out his tongue. "Can't I be happy to see my favorite cousin?"

"I'm your only cousin," Blaise muttered under his breath, earning him a pointed glare.

"So, what are we talking about?" Keeton asked. Without waiting for an invitation, he slid onto one of the barstools at the kitchen island and stared back at them expectantly.

"Wolf telepathy," Talon deadpanned.

"Oh, fun! Tell me more."

"Quiet, angel," Logan teased as he settled onto the stool beside him. "Let the grown-ups talk."

Keeton snorted and rolled his eyes, but he zipped his lips and refrained from additional sarcasm. At least, for the time being. Talon doubted his self-control would last long.

"It's nice to know that some things never change." Blaise sounded exasperated, but an indulgent grin played over his lips.

“I’m really happy for you.” On the surface, Jackson seemed calm, almost bored, but he sat so rigidly, the lightest touch would probably shatter him. “And I’m sorry to interrupt your family reunion, but I’d like to have one of my own.” He placed his palms flat against the tabletop and leaned forward. “How do we find my brother?”

Blaise turned away from his cousin and refocused his attention. “You’re from Colorado, right?”

“Right.”

“Which pack?”

“Crystal Creek.”

Blaise sighed quietly, and disappointment tightened his eyes. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Why?” Talon asked. “What’s wrong?”

“When I was doing research on packs in the area, I hit a roadblock with the Crystal Creek Pack. Namely, all evidence of their existence has been wiped from the Council database.”

“Is that even possible?” Logan cocked his head, his brow creased.

“It shouldn’t be. It’s strange and illegal as hell. We’ve tried to contact the alpha, but so far, nothing.”

“They might just be hidden,” Jackson suggested, his tone contemplative. “I can get in. If there’s anything there, I can find it.”



Pride swelled Talon's chest and spread warmth throughout his body. Resting a hand on the back of his mate's neck, he squeezed gently, hoping to convey his amazement at Jackson's intelligence, determination, and courage.

Apparently, he got the point across because Jackson leaned sideways and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Love you, too."

"Not you guys, too," Blaise grumbled as he watched their exchange. "How long has this been going on?"

Jackson shrugged. "A while."

It was vague, yet diplomatic, and Talon felt no need to elaborate. He was, however, amused by the wolf's obvious aversion to all things romantic. One day, love would sneak up on him, and Talon hoped he would be there to watch the fallout.

Or maybe the guy just needed to get laid. Whatever.

"If you can get me access to the database, I can recover the files."

Confidence, not cockiness, colored Jackson's voice. Smart, sexy, and humble. He really was the total package, and Talon couldn't believe the man belonged to him. Wracking his brain, he couldn't think of one single thing he'd ever done in his miserable life to deserve someone like Jackson Cunningham.

Blaise stared at them for a long time before nodding. "Let me make some calls."

# ELEVEN



THE HOT WATER CASCADED over Jackson's shoulders and down his back, and steam swirled around him to fog the glass of the shower stall. Exhausted did not even begin to describe how he felt.

Resting his hand against the tiles, he dropped his head, groaning from deep in his chest as the pressurized water beat against the knotted muscles in his neck. Only half awake and distracted by his misery, he cursed under his breath when the shower door swung open.

"Jumpy much?" Talon chuckled as he stepped into the shower behind him.

"You did that on purpose." The words held no real heat. A wet, naked, happy Talon equaled all things good in Jackson's book.

Raking his gaze over his own personal wet dream, he licked his lips, stepping forward and plastering himself against his mate's warm body. They'd both been lost inside their own

heads, both struggling with sleep deprivation and Jackson's constant anxiety. As such, they hadn't done more than kiss and cuddle since their first night together.

Jackson needed him. He needed to feel all those hard muscles under his palms. He needed to lose himself in the desperate way Talon kissed him. He needed the slight pinch of pain as his mate's thick, throbbing length slid in and out of him.

Licking and biting at the jumping vein that snaked along Talon's throat, he swiveled his hips to grind their erections together. "I want to forget," he whispered. "Make me forget, Talon."

Talon's fingers tangled in his hair, yanking his head back sharply. "Be careful what you ask for, pup. I've had your scent in my head, your sexy little ass snuggled against me all week, and I can't be gentle now."

Jackson couldn't agree more. Talon's unique scent permeated the air until he could almost taste it. Sandalwood and vanilla, the smell swirled inside his head, making him weak in the knees every time the male came within sniffing distance.

"Fuck me. Hard and fast, down and dirty, whatever you want, but do it now."

Talon pushed him to the side and reached over to turn off the water. Then he pushed the door open and motioned Jackson out ahead of him.

Disappointed and not bothering to hide it, he grumbled under his breath as he stepped out of the shower and reached for the

shower on the vanity. His fingertips had just brushed the cotton when strong hands gripped his hips and shoved him forward.

Throwing his hands out, he braced his hands on the countertop and moaned when Talon's steel-hard erection pressed against his ass cheeks. Animalistic sounds, somewhere between a groan and a growl, rumbled from his mate's mouth as he kissed a wet line up Jackson's spine and across his shoulders.

"You drive me fucking insane. I can't even think straight anymore. I want you all the fucking time." Talon bit into his shoulder as though it were Jackson's fault. "I keep thinking it will get better, but it doesn't. Every second, I want you more than I did the one before."

Shaking, trembling, practically vibrating with his desire, Jackson soaked up the harshly rasped words. "Please."

"Gods, I love the way you beg."

Talon groaned and rested his forehead against Jackson's nape. His hands continued to wander, traveling down Jackson's sides and over his hips before palming his upturned ass.

Watching him in the mirror, seeing the raw lust shining from his eyes, Jackson decided he loved it as well. "Please, Talon. I don't want to wait anymore."

Without another word, Talon disappeared from view, sinking below the mirror. He kissed and licked down Jackson's back, his touch light, teasing, and incredibly frustrating. Cool air swept over his quivering hole as his cheeks parted, and he

nearly fell to the floor when Talon's wet tongue bathed his entrance.

Gripping the counter until his knuckles ached, Jackson moaned and pushed his hips back. His legs shook, the muscles quivering as electricity rocketed through his veins.

"You can't even imagine how many ways I've dreamed of having you." Talon breathed warm air over his opening before dipping his head again to lap and suck at the ring of muscles. "You're mine, Jacks. No one is ever going to love this body but me." Talon invaded his depths with his tongue, stabbing in and out. "Say it. Tell me who you belong to."

"You," Jackson moaned. His cock jerked and bobbed between his legs, leaking freely from the engorged head. "Yours, Talon. I've always been yours."

His mate's handsome face appeared over his shoulder in the mirror. He didn't say a word but continued his assault on Jackson's senses by kissing and licking at his neck. A finger caressed his entrance, circling and probing, before slipping in to rub against his prostate.

Jackson screwed his eyes closed, and lights exploded behind his closed lids as he bucked his hips bucked. His inner walls clamped down on the invading digit, and his cock erupted without warning, coating the counter and drawers with his release.

"It's so damn sexy when you lose it like that, but I want you to come again, baby. Can you come for me again?"

A firestorm started in his empty balls and spread throughout Jackson's body in a hurry. Oh, yeah, he could definitely do that again. Bobbing his head, his eyes still closed, he felt another finger breach his entrance, pumping in and out, preparing him to receive his mate.

Soon, Talon had three fingers buried deep in his ass, and Jackson's cock ached and throbbed once again. Fuck, he couldn't take anymore. His belly clenched, and his balls drew tight against his body. His channel convulsed, pulling Talon deeper, and a quiet, desperate growl spilled from his lips in a wordless plea for more.

The drawer to his left slid open, and a moment later, he heard the snap of a bottle cap. Thank mercy they lived in a house with a bunch of hormone-driven shifters. There weren't many places you could go in the house without having some sort of slick close at hand. He wondered where he and Talon could hide their own personal stash.

Then all thought fled when Talon's fingers eased free from their sheath, and the thick crown of his cock nudged his opening, pushing inside with steady pressure. Moaning at the invasion, Jackson leaned over the sink and tilted his hips up, trying to relieve some of the intense pressure.

He gritted his teeth against the burn, but once Talon started moving, it eased quickly. Starting slowly, his mate thrust in long, languid strokes, sinking deeper with every plunge. As the urgency built, however, the snap of his hips increased in

speed and force, building to a brutal rhythm that had them both panting and growling.

“Touch yourself, baby. I want to see you touch yourself.” Talon’s voice slipped in octave and clarity, and his fingers dug into Jackson’s shoulders, pulling him back to meet every hard thrust.

Never allowing his eyes to stray from Talon’s reflection in the mirror, Jackson eagerly palmed his jutting shaft and stroked it furiously.

“No coming,” Talon ordered.

Jackson’s eyes widened. Surely, Talon wouldn’t do that to him. He *needed* to come, and pretty fucking soon, or his goddamn dick was going to fall off.

“Trust me, pup.”

Dipping his head in grudging assent, Jackson slowed his movements, but didn’t release the grasp on his cock. A few more wild thrusts later, Talon stilled, burying himself to the root and groaning as he filled Jackson’s channel with his release.

“Now? Please, Talon. I need to come now.”

Gently pulling from Jackson’s hole, Talon whirled him around and shoved his ass back against the counter. Dropping to his knees, he batted away Jackson’s hand and replaced it with his own firm grip.

“Then come for me, baby.”

He opened his mouth and dove forward, taking Jackson clear to the back of his throat. Just a couple of quick bobs, and Jackson knew he was a goner. “

“Close,” he panted, tangling his fingers in Talon’s thick hair.

He gripped his hips in both hands, pushing him almost roughly against the vanity, stilling any movement. Jackson peered down at his mate in frustration and confusion. “Talon, stop fucking teasing me! If you aren’t going to—”

Two fingers dipped below his sac, stroking his perineum and cutting off his argument. Talon released his hold on Jackson’s hips and buried his nose in the light spattering of curls at the base of his cock.

Jackson completely lost it. With a dark, animalistic growl, he thrust forward, shoving his length to the back of his mate’s throat over and over again. Lightning bolts of pure pleasure zinged up his spine. His heart crashed against his ribs. The muscles in his stomach and thighs tensed, and a faint ringing started in his ears.

When he couldn’t hold back any longer, he threw his head back and howled—actually fucking howled—as he hurdled over the edge, spilling himself into his mate’s mouth.

His whole body burned, his stomach did flips and loops, and his head swam with the indescribable sensations that coursed through him. He’d never felt anything so incredible in his life.

When the last drop dribbled from the slit, it took his ability to stand with it. Sliding down to the tiled floor, he slumped



forward, sagging into Talon's embrace. He tilted his head up to kiss Talon's swollen lips but stopped short.

With a look of contrition, he reached up and gently ran the pad of his thumb over Talon's lower lip to wipe away the smudge of blood there. "Crap. Sorry, Tal."

Talon smiled, proud and cocky, and wrapped his arms around him to hold him close. "I'm not. It will heal in a minute, and it was worth it to see the look on your face. You're so gorgeous when you come."

Unappeased, Jackson shook his head. "Thanks, I guess, but I'm still sorry I dick punched you in the mouth."

Leaning back against the wall, Talon chuckled into his hair. "The things you say."

"I'll do better next time."

"Practice does make perfect," his mate agreed teasingly.

Jackson nodded and scrambled to his feet, holding his hand out to help Talon up as well. Talon cocked an eyebrow but took the offered hand and pushed to his feet.

"Where are we going?" he asked when Jackson began dragging him out of the bathroom.

Without looking back, Jackson smirked and kept pulling. "To practice."

# TWELVE



LATER THAT NIGHT, THEY were back at the kitchen table with Blaise sitting across from them. From the look on the wolf's face, Talon could already tell the news wasn't good.

"I couldn't get permission from the Council, so you'll need to be fast." He opened a laptop and slid it in front of Jackson. "Try not to leave a trail, yeah?"

Jackson dipped his head as he pulled the computer closer. "No problem. How much time do I have?"

"An hour," Blaise answered. "Two tops."

Talon glanced at the screen over Jackson's shoulder. While it looked like a regular website to him, he knew he wasn't seeing what Jackson was seeing. Gods, he loved how that beautiful brain of his worked, even if he didn't understand it.

As if sensing his confusion, Jackson indicated a column on the left side of the screen. "This is the registry every pack has to file with the Council," he explained. "See, here we are." He clicked the mouse a couple of times, and a list appeared with

the names of each member of their pack. “And this here. This is the amendment Xander had to file when Braxton and Keeton joined our pack.”

Talon nodded, but it unsettled him that ICCE—the International Council of Code Enforcement—knew so much about them.

Logically, he understood it was no different from registering for a social security number or a driver’s license. The government kept all sorts of records about its citizens. They recorded when a person was born. When they got married or divorced. The moment they died.

They kept track of how much money they made. Where they went to school. Where they lived. What kind of car they drove.

That, however, was the devil he knew.

He had only learned about the ICCE a couple of months ago. He was still trying to come to terms with the idea that the paranormal world even had its own government. Now, he had to wrap his head around the fact that an institute he hadn’t even known existed had so much information on him and his family.

Seemingly not sharing his concerns, Jackson continued to tap away at the keyboard or click the mouse, his eyebrows drawn together and his tongue poking out between his teeth. He kept muttering things under his breath, and Talon thought he caught the words, “ghost proxy” and “data encryption.” Whatever the hell that meant.

“The files aren’t gone,” Jackson said nearly half an hour later.  
“They’re just corrupted.”

He glanced over at Talon as he spoke, his eyes a bit glazed. Talon had seen him this way numerous times. The kid was in the zone.

“See this file here?” he continued. “This is my birth pack. It’s supposed to link to a registry for pack members, the same as the link I clicked for our pack.”

He clicked the blue words on the page and another list of names appeared.

“Isn’t that what this is?” Talon scratched the back of his head.  
“Looks like a list of members to me.”

“It is, but it’s not.”

“Oh, okay, glad we cleared that up.”

Jackson chuckled and leaned sideways to bump their shoulders together. “Don’t be a dick, Tal. I’m trying to explain.” He pointed to the screen. “Yes, it is a list of pack members, but it’s not linked to the ICCE registry. All of the other data on this site comes from the same database, displaying the same IP address.”

Instead of looking at the screen, Talon stared at his mate. Though he didn’t understand a word of what the pup was saying, he found Jackson’s intelligence a complete turn-on. His cock jerked inside his cotton sleep pants, and he leaned closer to nuzzle the side of his mate’s neck.

Jackson inhaled deeply, then let it out with a little shiver. “I can’t think when you do that.”

While he liked the idea of Jackson getting out of his head and just feeling, he also knew they were working against the clock. “Later.”

Jackson nodded and returned his attention to the computer screen. A few minutes later, he sat up straighter and cleared his throat. “Okay, look here. When I click on the registry for the Crystal Creek Pack, the data comes from a different source.”

Talon shook his head and chuckled. “I love listening to you talk, but I don’t know what any of that means.”

“I think someone is trying to fool the Council. It wouldn’t be hard either.” His upper lip curled in disgust. “The security on this page is a fucking joke.” He sighed and shook his head. “Okay, in simple terms, this information isn’t actually from the ICCE database. It’s coming from somewhere else.”

“And the only reason someone would be manipulating the files is if they have something to hide.”

Jackson beamed. “Yes, now I just have to follow the data trail and try to identify the server. Once I do that, it should be fairly simple to gain access to the information.”

“Uh, yeah. You do that.” Talon stood and kissed the top of his mate’s head. “I love how smart you are, but I’m just in the way here. I’ll make something to eat.”

Jackson made a noncommittal voice in the back of his throat as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

He might not understand all the tech talk, but he could take care of his mate while Jackson worked his magic.



“GUYS!” JACKSON CALLED FROM the table a while later.  
“I think you’re going to want to see this.”

He frowned at the data glaring back at him, his stomach knotting with apprehension. If he was reading the information correctly, they had bigger problems than anyone could have imagined.

“Did you find something?” Blaise hurried into the kitchen from the living room, and he sounded hopeful, though a little surprised.

“What is it, pup?” Rounding the island, Talon slid into the chair beside him and placed a plate with a stack of sandwiches on the table.

For once, however, Jackson wasn’t hungry.

He nodded at the computer and scrolled down the page. “I found what we’re looking for, but it’s not what I expected.”

There was a lot of data in the files, a lot of names. Some he recognized—like that of his former childhood friend—and some he didn’t. The information attached to them, however, was concerning.

“Garrick Lawson,” Blaise read aloud over Jackson’s shoulder. “September of this year. Redway Coven.” He pointed to the last column. “What are these numbers?”

Jackson swallowed around the bile that clogged his throat. “I think this is a sales report.”

Blaise’s eyes widened, and his face paled. “They’re selling pack members? Are you sure?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I can’t be certain, but that’s sure as hell what it looks like.”

Taking a sandwich off the top of the pile, Talon forced it into Jackson’s hand and stared silently until he took a bite. Satisfied, he glanced behind him, speaking directly to Blaise.

“Who is the Redway Coven?”

Jackson took another bite to appease his mate, but his stomach rolled with nausea as he chewed. So, once Talon wasn’t watching him anymore, he placed the sandwich back on the edge of the plate.

“It’s a vampire clan outside Fort Collins, Colorado,” Blaise said, blanketing Jackson’s back as he pressed his face closer to the screen. “Are there other clans listed?”

Jackson nodded and scrolled farther down the page. “There are seven different clans listed here, one hundred and sixty-eight pack members, and over a quarter million dollars.”

He paused in his scrolling when a familiar name jumped out at him like a blinking neon sign. “Cole Cunningham. January

twenty-eighth,” he whispered, his heart climbing into his throat. “That’s next week.”

His mate’s hand immediately landed on the back of his neck and squeezed comfortingly. “It’s okay, baby. We’re going to find him.” Talon glanced up at Blaise. “Why are they selling them?”

Blaise swallowed audibly, and his scent soured with a mixture of anger and anxiety. “Blood slaves,” he growled. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“You mean, my brother is…”

Jackson trailed off as the gravity of the situation hit him full force. Then he was out of his seat and moving before he registered the intent to do so. Even then, he didn’t stop. He didn’t even slow when Talon called his name. Racking up the stairs, he threw open the door to his room and went straight to the closet to grab a bag.

A shiver rippled through him as he remembered the dark, cold dread he always felt in his dreams. He had to get to his brother. He’d drive all night and face down his entire birth pack on his own if he had to.

Pausing in the act of pulling clothes from his dresser, he whirled around when his mate’s scent filled his nose. Without a word, Talon strode across the room, took the clothes from Jackson’s hands, dropped them to the floor, and pulled him into his arms.



“Breathe, baby. Everything is going to be okay.” He stroked his fingertips up and down Jackson’s back. “I promise I will do whatever I can to help you find him.”

Jackson clung to him, gripping his shirt in a white-knuckled grip and shaking. “I let him down. I should have gone back, or checked on him, or something. He’s so scared. I can feel it in my dreams.”

Talon gripped him tighter as if he could hold him together by sheer force of will. “This is not your fault. You were just a kid, Jacks.” He paused to press a hard kiss to Jackson’s temple. “You have to calm down, though. We can’t just go charging in there like the fucking cavalry. We need a plan, and a damn good one.”

Jackson sighed. His mate made a good point. If he let his emotions lead the way, he’d end up getting them all captured or killed. Probably both. They had to be smart about this.

“Okay, round up the troops, and let’s make a plan.”

# THIRTEEN



“CAN’T THE COUNCIL DO something?” Xander leaned forward in the armchair and rested his elbows on his knees as he stared up at Blaise.

The entire pack had gathered in the living room so Blaise could fill them in on what they’d learned from the Council database. After he had outlined the situation and potential dangers involved, Jackson had swallowed his pride and asked for their help to rescue his brother.

“They can,” Blaise assured him. “It’s going to take time, though, and Cole doesn’t have time.”

“Fuck it. I’m in.” Logan stood from where he’d been resting on the arm of the sofa and nodded.

Xander pushed to his feet, his expression a mixture of worry and determination. “Me, too.”

“So, are we.” Seated on the floor by the coffee table, Braxton pointed between himself and Keeton.

Then they both glared up at their mates, daring them to argue. To everyone's surprise, including Jackson's, neither male did.

They all turned to look at Boston. Jackson couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. He had returned from his pseudo vacation only to be pulled directly into this drama. While he hadn't been all that surprised to find out about Talon and Jackson's relationship, he looked a little green at this new request.

After a heavy pause, however, he pulled his shoulders back and nodded stoically. "We're family. I'm in."

Only, he looked about two seconds away from losing his lunch.

"Boston, is everything okay?" Jackson asked, taking a step toward him. "You don't look so good."

"I'm fine." He pressed his lips into a thin line and shook his head.

Although it was strange behavior for the normally sarcastic male, Jackson didn't have time—or the brain capacity—to really study the reaction. His brother controlled the majority of his thoughts, and the small part that wasn't preoccupied with how to save his sibling, was trying to figure out how to make sure no one died.

Sitting on the floor in front of the sofa, he lounged between Talon's legs with one arm hooked around his mate's calf. Talon's heat surrounded him, and his unique scent saturated the air in their little space of the room. Long fingers

continuously worked their way through his hair, calming and soothing him.

Worried for his brother, nervous about traveling back to Colorado, and angry at his birth pack for their role in the entire mess, he was more grateful than ever to have Talon by his side. He honestly didn't know if he would have the strength or courage to do what needed to be done without him.

"Boston, you don't have to go," Xander said. "No one will think any less of you."

There was clearly something bigger going on than Jackson had realized, and he wondered if it had something to do with Boston's latest disappearance.

Boston tilted his head, his jaw set at a stubborn angle. "I'm going."

"Okay, great." Blaise stood at the front of the group with his hands linked behind his back. "It's late, and we still need more information. I think it's best if we wait until Thursday to leave."

Though Jackson didn't like it, he understood they couldn't rush in blind. Getting themselves killed certainly wouldn't help his brother. "I can help. Once we get there, I know the way through the woods at the edge of town. It'll take us right to the pack lands."

Blaise dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Your father is Alpha Cunningham?"

Jackson nodded. No matter how much he wanted to deny the connection to the asshole, it was technically true.

“Do you think he’s in on this? Can we trust him?”

“Oh, I think he’s up to his eyeballs in this shit.” Jackson fisted his hand atop his thigh. “We definitely can’t trust him.”

“I was afraid of that.” Blaise rubbed the back of his neck, his unfocused gaze directed toward the floor. “If we want to get in and out without tipping off the pack, we need to know exactly where Cole is being held.

“And how do we find out?” Talon shifted in his seat, squeezing Jackson with his thighs. The unease in his voice set Jackson on alert.

Not wanting to call attention to his mate’s distress, Jackson wrapped his fingers around Talon’s ankle and massaged it in comfort. Everything would be fine. He had to believe it if he hoped to make it through the next few days.

“Cole,” Blaise answered simply, his eyes alight with realization. “Cole can tell us.”

“How are we going to talk to Cole?” Keeton’s brow furrowed in confusion. “It’s like we can just call him on the phone.”

“*We* aren’t.” Blaise turned to look pointedly at Jackson. “He is.”

“How? What do I do?”

“You hear Cole in your dreams, which means you can talk to him as well. Your brain is more susceptible to outside

influence when you're sleeping." Blaise shrugged. "Also, the pack telepathy is stronger when you're in your wolf form."

"So, Jackson needs to shift and fall asleep, then try to talk to Cole in his dreams?" Talon asked.

"Exactly." Blaise nodded, but a crease formed across his brow. "It won't be easy, though."

Yeah, no shit. With the exception of the full moon, when he was trapped in his animal form until sunrise, it was almost impossible to maintain a shift during sleep.

Blaise focused his attention on Talon. "You have to help him. It's the only chance we have."

Jackson swallowed hard. Yeah, no pressure or anything.



SHUFFLING INTO HIS BEDROOM, Talon stripped out of his clothes, feeling weary down to his bones. He wanted to help Jackson rescue his brother, but he had reservations about letting his mate walk into the lion's den.

Logically, he knew Jackson would be instrumental in achieving their goal. Plus, he highly doubted the kid would stay out of the fray without one hell of a fight. Maybe he could just tie him to the bed when the time came.

"Stop it." Jackson came into the room, already pulling his shirt over his head. "I'm going. I'll be fine, and you need to stop worrying."

“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“Maybe I’m just constipated.”

Jackson shook his head and chuckled. “You’re an idiot, but you really need to chill. I’m wound up enough for both of us, and I need you to be the cool and collected one.” He scratched a spot behind his ear as he traveled farther into the room. “Hopefully, we won’t have to fight anyone. Blaise is trying to talk the Council into sending Enforcers to check out the situation.”

That did nothing to alleviate Talon’s concerns. “I have a bad feeling about the Council. According to those records, this has been going on for years.” He dropped down heavily on the end of the mattress. “I also doubt your birth pack is the only one involved in this little scheme. Why haven’t those old fools put a stop to it before now?”

“What are you saying?” Jackson tilted his head, a shallow V forming over the ridge of his nose. “You think the Council is involved?” His voice matched the skepticism in his expression. “I admit I don’t really know anything about them, but that seems kind of farfetched.”

Talon hesitated to reveal more. It wasn’t his story to tell. At the same time, and considering the danger they were now facing, he needed Jackson to understand that the world wasn’t all rainbows and fairness.

Standing, he finished undressing quickly and crawled into bed. Holding the blankets back at one corner, he motioned for Jackson to join him. Once his mate had settled in beside him, he propped up on one elbow and waited for Jackson to meet his gaze.

“You saw how nervous Boston looked downstairs?”

Jackson nodded, his eyes flickering toward the closed bedroom door.

“Me, Logan, and Xander were living in Wyoming when Boston came to live with us. We took him in just a few months before we moved to Colorado.” He paused to kiss Jackson’s nose. “Before we found you.”

“Why are you telling me this? What happened?” Jackson rolled to his side and pushed up on his elbow to mirror his pose.

“We found him strung up by his ankles in the middle of the woods. It was the dead of winter, nine inches of snow on the ground, and he was completely naked.” He caressed his mate’s cheek, unsure if he should continue with the tale.

“Keep going,” Jackson whispered, nuzzling into Talon’s palm. “I’m not that fragile.”

“I never thought you were.” His chest tightened as he traveled deeper into the memory. “His herd had sold him to a vampire clan outside of Cheyenne, and they had kept him as a blood slave for almost three years. When they were done with him, they left him in the cold to die.”



Talon still didn't know how the hell the male had survived.

"That's horrible. I never knew." Suddenly, he stilled, his body completely rigid. "Is that what will happen to Cole? We have to go now!"

He jerked upright, struggling with the blankets, but Talon grabbed him and pulled him back down. "Calm down. We talked about this, remember?"

With a heavy sigh, Jackson nodded and slumped into his arms. "Yeah, I know. There's just all this shit swimming around in my head. I can tell you've been upset lately, and I just worry that you're going to get fed up with me."

Talon smiled and pressed a chaste kiss to his brow. "That's never going to happen, baby."

The corners of his lips twitched, and Jackson shook his head. "When I have these dreams, I can feel how scared Cole is, and it kind of lingers for a while." He used his index finger to draw little circles over Talon's chest. "I know I'm kind of all over the place right now, but just be patient with me."

Patience might be a virtue, but it wasn't really one of his. At the same time, there wasn't a single thing Jackson could do that would make him give up on the pup.

"I didn't tell you about Boston to worry you. I'm trying to explain why I think the Council could have their fingers in some shady shit."

That had been about eight years ago. Unaware that the ICEE even existed, they had instead reported the incident to the local

police. Nothing had ever come of it, but a few weeks after they had filed the report, their house had burned to the ground. Luckily, none of them had been home, but it had sure scared the hell out of them.

They had packed the few belongings that had survived the fire and moved that same night. Knowing what he did now, his gut told him that the Council had been involved, even if he couldn't prove it.

“We need to tell Blaise.”

“Agreed.”

“How did you and Logan meet Xander?” Jackson asked around a yawn.

“I offered him a blow job.”

“What?” Jackson popped up, all vestiges of sleepiness gone.

“Are you serious? You and Xander used to fuck?”

Talon ducked his head to hide the smile that stretched his lips. Not only could he hear the jealousy in his mate's voice, he could read the possessiveness all over Jackson's face. He liked it...a lot.

“No, I never slept with Xander.”

“So, you just sucked him off?” Jackson sounded more wolf than man, his voice barely recognizable through the growl.

“No, I didn't suck him off, either.” Still smiling, he grabbed the pup by the wrist and jerked him back down on the bed.

“Logan and I had been on our own for a while. We were just

kids, barely seventeen. We were cold and hungry, and Logan refused to shift out of his leopard skin.”

Some of the heat faded from Jackson’s eyes, and the tension drained from his muscles.

“I went into town to try to steal some food. Xander caught me, and I panicked. So, I offered to blow him.”

“Oh,” Jackson breathed. “I’m sorry.”

Talon kissed the top of his head. “He knew what I was, and he said he could help. We didn’t trust anyone back then, but we weren’t really in a position to turn him down, either.” He tucked a knuckle under Jackson’s chin and urged his head up.

“I like when you get jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.” Jackson shoved his hand away and sniffed. “Much,” he added under his breath.

Talon chuckled and pulled his sulky mate into his arms. “You and me, right, pup? It’s always going to be just you and me.”

The pout slid from Jackson’s mouth, and he smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

As much as he wanted to simply bask in the moment, they had a job to do. “Jackson, it’s time.”

With a heavy sigh, Jackson crawled out of bed and knelt on the floor. “I hope this works.”

So did Talon because if it didn’t, they didn’t have a backup plan.

# FOURTEEN



*HE PROWLED THROUGH THE thick snow, crouched low on his haunches. The full amber moon beat down on his back, illuminating the forest with an eerie, almost ethereal glow. No sound other than the crunching of his paws through the icy wilderness reached his perked ears.*

*The silence felt oppressive, surrounding him, closing in on him. A soft flickering light caught his attention through the trees, and he changed directions. He didn't know why, didn't understand the pull, but he needed to get to that light.*

*"Jackson." The voice called to him, soft, distant, a breath on the night wind.*

*"Cole? Cole, can you hear me?"*

*"You have to go back. Don't follow the light. Go back."*

*"Cole?" His brother sounded much calmer than he had in previous dreams. "You called for me. You need my help. I'm coming for you."*

*“No, Jackson. You can’t come here. I was wrong. I see what they’re doing now. You have to go back.”*

*That cold fear invaded his heart again, leeching the remaining warmth from his body. “Cole, I won’t leave you. We’ll be there soon.”*

*“They know about you. They know about your pack. You can’t bring them here. It’s too dangerous. I mean it, Jackson. Do not come here!”*

*The knowledge that this old pack knew about his family paused Jackson in his tracks. Still, he couldn’t leave his brother to suffer at their hands. “We’re strong, Cole. We can get you out of there. I need to know more about what’s going on, though. I need to know what Dad’s up to. Help me.”*

*“I love you, but you have to run. You can’t save me, but you can save yourself. Save your pack. They’re coming for you.” Cole spoke quickly, frantically, his voice quaking with panic.*

*“Why do they want us?”*

*“Because you’re special. You have power they want. I don’t have time to explain it. You have to go back. Take your family and run.”*

*“You’re my family, too. I can’t just leave you. Tell me what to do.”*

*“It’s too late. Save yourself and forget about me. Now, go. The sun is rising.”*

*“Cole!”*

*He received no response. Sprinting through the snow, charging toward the flickering light, Jackson growled deep in his chest. He needed to reach that light. He needed to...*

Jackson jerked awake, blinking as the first rays of sunlight peeked through the blinds on the windows. Stretched out on the floor of Talon's bedroom, he panted for breath, feeling as though he had really just sprinted through the forest.

His mate curled against his back, his arm draped protectively over Jackson's hips. Even with Talon pressed against him, there was still a chill to the air that pulled a deep shiver from him. His wolf may not have a problem sleeping on the floor in the winter, but Jackson sure as hell did.

Rolling onto his side, he brushed Talon's hair away from his face and gently shook him. "Hey, Tal. Come on, wake up." When his mate's eyes fluttered, he dipped his head to capture his lips in a soft kiss. "You can keep sleeping but get in bed. It's too damn cold down here."

Talon shivered and nodded his agreement, but instead of crawling under the blanket, he climbed to his feet and went straight into the attached bathroom. Following at a sedate pace, still trying to shake off the anxiety from his most recent dream, Jackson reached the doorway just as Talon reached inside the shower to start the water.

They washed quickly, their touches filled with comfort and love rather than desire. It was quite domestic, and by the time he stepped out onto the bathmat, most of his lingering anxiety had dissipated. He still worried, still had thoughts of his

brother in the back of his mind, but it didn't seem quite so overwhelming anymore.

Rather than crossing the hall to his own room to find something to wear, he grabbed a pair of Talon's sweats and matched them with one of his mate's T-shirts. He knew Talon wouldn't mind, but he hadn't been prepared for the pure satisfaction shining in his icy blue eyes.

"You look good in my clothes."

He really didn't. The pants were a size too big, and the shirt billowed around him. Which led him to believe it was less about aesthetics, and more about possessiveness. By wearing Talon's clothes, it was just one more way for the male to lay claim to him.

He could live with that.

The smells of pancakes, eggs, and bacon wafted up the stairs to him, causing Jackson's mouth to water and his stomach to grumble. He had barely even the previous night, and now that he was a little clearer headed, he felt fucking ravenous.

"Good morning," Keeton sang when they entered the kitchen. He stood at the refrigerator, pulling out jellies, jams, butter, and other assorted condiments. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Tell me something new," Braxton teased as he lifted his coffee mug to his lips at the island. "So, did it work? Were you able to contact your brother?"

Jackson sighed and shook his head. “Let’s wait for everyone else. I’d rather just say it once.”

Keeton turned to face him with a pinched expression. “That bad, huh?”

Well, it wasn’t good. He had made contact with Cole, but he wouldn’t exactly call the mission a success.

Talon’s lips ghosted over the back of his neck, his nose skimming along the sensitive skin there. “You okay, baby?”

“I’m fine.”

Ten minutes later, the entire pack, plus Blaise, was gathered around the table, their plates stacked high with fluffy pancakes and crispy strips of bacon. Jackson grabbed a flapjack off the top of the stack and shoved the entire thing directly into his mouth while he waited for Talon to finish filling his plate.

His mate rolled his eyes but didn’t comment as he grabbed the maple syrup from the center of the table and handed it to him. While he ate, Talon poured him a glass of milk and placed it at the edge of his plate as well. Jackson didn’t need all the special attention, but it did feel nice to be taken care of.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Talon answered as he dug into his own breakfast.

No one asked him about Cole again, but Jackson could feel the anticipation, the expectation. Conversations seemed forced. Their actions looked almost robotic. It was as if they were all simply going through the motions while they waited for him to say something.



“I talked to Cole.”

Silence descended over the table, and all seven males turned their attention on him.

“He wouldn’t tell me where he’s being held. He just kept telling me to turn back.” He paused, a shudder wracking his body as he remembered the panic in his brother’s voice. “He said they know about us, and they’re coming.”

“What?” Talon barked, his fork clattering to his plate. “Who is coming for us?”

“I think he means our birth pack.” Jackson frowned. At least, that was how he had interpreted it. “He wasn’t exactly forthcoming with information. He told me not to come for him. He said they know about us, and I should take you guys and run.”

“Could he have meant the vampires?” Blaise asked. “The Redway Coven?”

Jackson shrugged. “Maybe? Does it matter?”

Wolves or vampires, someone was coming for them, and they weren’t arriving with a gift basket.

Shoving his chair back from the table, Blaise launched to his feet and started pacing the kitchen. “This is crazy. It doesn’t make sense. Why would they come all the way here for your pack?”

“Cole said we’re special,” Jackson explained. “They want the power we can give them.”

Blaise paused misstep and swung around to face him. “They know you’re Moonkin?”

“It always comes back to this damn curse,” Logan muttered under his breath.

“You’ve already been kicked out of your packs,” Keeton added, his voice dripping with indignation. “You’re not hurting anyone. Why the hell can’t everyone just leave you guys alone?”

“What about the Council?” Xander leaned back and twisted around in his chair. “Will they send Enforcers?”

“No.” Blaise shook his head, his eyebrows drawn together as he resumed his pacing. “They said this isn’t a Council matter.” He spat the words as if they tasted bad in his mouth. “I don’t understand it.”

Jackson rocked sideways, nudging Talon with his elbow. “Maybe we should tell him.”

Talon shook his head fractionally, his eyes darting to Boston. “It’s not our story to tell.”

Yeah, okay, he got that, and he felt bad for Boston. Placing himself in the male’s position, he wouldn’t want to share the worst moment of his life. At the same time, if it could potentially save lives, he wouldn’t hesitate to tell the truth. Maybe there was an in between, a compromise.

“This has happened before in Wyoming,” he blurted into the silence.

Everyone turned to stare at him again. He chanced a look at Boston and winced inwardly as the blood drained from the male's face. Their gazes met, held, and Jackson softened his eyes, begging forgiveness and understanding.

"It happened to a pack almost a decade ago," he continued, speaking to the room. "One of their members was left barely in the woods in the middle of the winter. The pack went to the local police, but no one would help them."

He looked at Boston again, relieved to see trust and maybe a little gratitude on the male's face. Jackson inclined his head, a barely visible motion. He would do his best not to betray that trust.

"They had to move when vampires came after them. The coven realized the shifter that they had left in the woods was still alive, and they burned down the house the pack was staying in."

"Oh, my god," Braxton breathed. "That's awful. How do you know this?"

Jackson shook his head. "I just do."

Xander and Logan glanced at Boston, then to him, and they both dipped their heads in approval.

Blaise stopped behind Logan and cursed under his breath. "There is no way the Council didn't know about this, which makes their refusal to intervene now even more suspicious." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "And I've probably given them too much information already."

“We have to leave.” Braxton stood, though with his petite stature, it didn’t make much difference. “If some corrupt wolves or crazy vampires are coming for us, I’m damn sure not going to sit around and wait for them to get here.”

“Smart and sexy,” Xander teased with a chuckle. “You heard him.” His gaze went around the room, landing on each of them in turn. “Pack what you need and meet back here in an hour.”

At their alpha’s dismissal, everyone jumped up and hurried to comply.

“Talk to me, Jacks,” Talon said as they made their way up the stairs. “What are you feeling? What are you thinking?”

“I’m scared,” he admitted. “We don’t have a plan. We don’t even know where Cole is. Now, we’re all in danger, and I can’t help but feel like it’s my fault.”

“Whoa, you can stop that shit right now.” At the top of the stairs, Talon pulled him to a stop and jerked him into his arms. “If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t have had any warning. We wouldn’t know what we’re up against.” His fingers slipped into Jackson’s hair to massage his scalp. “None of this is your fault.”

“I guess.” It still felt that way, though.

“Come on. Let’s get packed so we can hit the road. We aren’t going to be saving anyone if we get ambushed in our own home.”

Following Talon down the hallway, he detoured into his own room to grab the gym bag he had just recently unpacked. A

sense of déjà vu overcame him, but at least this time, he wouldn't be leaving alone.

“Will we have to move?” he asked as he shuffled across the corridor to Talon's room.

Dropping his own suitcase onto the mattress, Talon turned with a heavy sigh. “I don't know, baby. One step at a time, okay?” He closed the distance between them and pulled Jackson into a slow, tender kiss. “One step at a time.”

# FIFTEEN



“JACKSON, WOULD YOU STOP! You’re shaking the whole damn truck.”

Jackson jerked his head up to see Braxton staring at him between the front seats of Xander’s double cab pickup. Smiling apologetically, he stretched his legs out, hoping it would stop the nervous bouncing of his knee. Talon’s strong hand slid over his thigh and squeezed.

They hadn’t even made it out of Texas yet, and Jackson already had a horrible case of the are-we-there-yets. It hadn’t taken long for everyone to gather what supplies they needed, load up, and hit the road. He and Talon slouched in the backseat of Xander’s pickup, while the alpha and his mate rode up front. Blaise and Boston had piled into Logan’s SUV with him and Keeton, and they had started their long drive to Colorado.

Before leaving, Jackson had stood in the driveway and taken a last, long look at the cabin. His pack had given up so much for the house, and he hoped it wouldn’t be the last time he saw it.

“Try not to worry, pup. It’s going to be fine.”

While he appreciated his mate’s need to comfort him, if Talon said everything would be fine one more time, Jackson was going to lose his shit. Not a damn part of this was *fine*. His own crazy father was holding his brother hostage, possibly so he could sell him to a vampire coven.

They had no plan, no help, no advantage, and now his dad, and whoever else, had set their sights on his adoptive family.

Every time he thought about it, he felt like he might hurl. His head pounded, his stomach cramped, and his fingers stung where he’d bitten his nails down to the quick.

Leaning heavily against the door, he crossed his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. Maybe if he could sleep, just for a little while, he’d wake up and find it had all been some elaborate nightmare.

“Come here.” Talon’s fingers wrapped around the back of his neck and tugged gently.

Too tired to argue, he maneuvered himself until his head rested in his mate’s lap. Strong fingers massaged the tense, aching muscles in his neck and carded gently through his hair.

Feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally drained, he closed his eyes again and hoped the gentle rocking of the pickup would lull him to sleep.



TALON LOOKED OUT THE window at the shabby little diner and moaned. His stomach snarled, twisting and cramping in a painful reminder that he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

He turned his attention to his mate, looking down to where Jackson still rested in his lap. He looked so peaceful in slumber, almost ethereal, his skin practically glowing in the moonlight that filtered into the cab of the pickup.

"Wake up, Jacks." He tickled his mate under the chin, smiling at the soft hum the touch elicited. "Are you hungry?"

"Where are we?" Jackson mumbled without opening his eyes.

"Amarillo. We're going to crash here for the night and drive into Colorado in the morning."

Jackson groaned, stretching out as much as he could in the small space, arching his back against Talon's thighs. His cotton shirt rode up, exposing a strip of smooth skin just below his belly button, and Talon couldn't help but growl in response.

Gods, he really was a goner, if that was all it took to get him going.

"Let's go. Burgers, then dessert."

Jackson's eyes popped open, and he stared up at him with raised eyebrows. "What does that mean?"

Talon shook his head and gave him a little nudge. "Nothing. Come on, kid."



They filed out of the pickup and took a moment to stretch before dropping their heads and rounding their shoulders against the brisk wind. Talon reached the door first and held it open for his mate before hurrying in after him. Houston had been unseasonably cold for the past week, but it was nothing compared to the frigid temperatures in the panhandle.

Spotting the rest of the pack seated at a large corner booth, he led the way, winding through the mostly unoccupied tables to join them.

“Not a lot of people here,” he commented as he slid into the booth beside Logan.

“Good. Maybe we’ll get our food faster.” Jackson entered the booth and immediately grabbed the laminated menu in front of him. “I’m starving.”

Logan snorted. “Do you ever think about anything besides eating?”

Jackson shrugged, clearly unconcerned. He had heard it so often over the years, it really didn’t faze him anymore.

Grabbing his own menu, Talon had just started looking over the dinner options when the door opened again. A rush of cold wind swept into the diner, bringing with it a group of six males that instantly put him on alert.

Similar in appearance and dress—all black and matching trench coats—each man stood at least six feet tall, with broad shoulders and thick thighs. With one exception. The smallest

of the group looked young, probably around Jackson's age, and he appeared miniscule next to his companions.

Though they hadn't even glanced in the direction of their table, their presence still made Talon twitchy.

A server sashayed up to the men, a smile stretching her painted pink lips. A bleach blond ponytail bobbed atop her head as she bounced on her toes and offered a cheerful greeting.

Almost immediately, the smile slipped from her face, and her spine stiffened when the male who appeared to be the leader spoke. Talon could hear what was being said, but her entire demeanor changed as she motioned for the men to follow her.

As she led them to a table in the opposite corner of the room, the little guy in the group stopped at each occupied table along the way. He would smile brightly, charmingly, and after speaking with the patrons for a moment, he would move on to the next.

It was fucking weird.

A few minutes later, the same blonde server hurried over to their table, carrying a large tray laden with glasses of water, bread, and oil. Without a word, she placed the entire tray on the table, dipped her head without smiling, and left.

It was odd, and maybe a little rude, but Talon shrugged it off and reached for one of the glasses. Maybe she was still shaken by her interaction with the other group of males.

"Any ideas yet?" he asked Blaise with a raised eyebrow.

The wolf shook his head. “We need to convince Cole to talk. Without the Council’s help, he’s our best chance.”

All eyes turned to Jackson. His shoulders sagged, and he rubbed a hand over his face before nodding. “I’ll try again tonight.”

“Going in after dark is probably our best bet. If we can’t trust the alpha, then I doubt we can’t trust the rest of the pack. It’s better not to call attention to ourselves until we know what’s going on.” Blaise paused and looked around the table. “And someone needs to stay behind to call for help in case something goes wrong.”

Keeton accepted a glass of water from his best friend and sighed. “I guess Braxton and I can do that.”

“Good boy,” Logan whispered to him and kissed the tip of his nose.

Talon listened to the conversation with half-attention. He continued to watch the group of males on the other side of the restaurant. None of them seemed to be paying any attention to them, but something about them scratched at Talon’s instincts.

“This tastes funny.” Keeton wrinkled his nose as he took a small sip of the water.

“It’s just tap water.” It did leave a bit of an aftertaste, but in a place like this, he expected it.

“Yeah, well, it’s gross,” Braxton added even as he took another drink. “I’ll stick with bottled water, thank you very much.”

Mentally rolling his eyes, Talon watched as the customers began trickling out of the restaurant. It didn't escape his notice that they had all finished their meals at the same time. None of them stopped by the counter to settle their bill, nor had they left money on their tables.

What the hell was going on? And where the hell had their server gone? At the very least, he had expected her to ask for their drink orders.

Committed to his growing paranoia, it was several minutes before he noticed the agitated fidgeting of his pack mates. Breathing shallowly, they all stared around the table at each other with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

The scent of lust hung thick in the air, saturating it, and pulling a groan from Talon's chest. His nostrils flared, his heart pounded, and his dick swelled to strain against his fly. A slow burn worked its way across his skin, and his gums began to ache around his canines.

A soft growl beside him had his focus whipping toward his mate. Jackson's eyes traveled over Talon's body, undressing him with his eyes. Without warning, he pressed a hand to Talon's groin, gripping and squeezing the bulge behind his zipper.

Talon tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone desert dry. He didn't know what was happening, but he wanted his mate with an intensity that went way beyond desire. A feral snarl escaped his lips, and he fisted both hands in Jackson's hair to yank him forward, crushing their mouths together in a brutal kiss.

Several loud growls filled their area of the diner as Talon continued to attack his mate's mouth. Licking and sucking at Jackson's lips, he shoved his tongue inside and groaned as he plundered the warm depths.

"Xander?" Braxton's voice shook and cracked twice, penetrating the fog in Talon's brain, but only barely.

He peeked over when he heard Braxton's yelp of surprise. Xander had the little man in his lap, laying claim to his mouth much the same as Talon did to Jackson.

"What's wrong with me?" Keeton asked in a breathless whisper just before Logan snatched him up, dragged him into his lap, and devoured him.

"Gods, I need you, baby. I have to have you." Talon bit the sensitive flesh between his lover's neck and shoulder.

"Do it," Jackson panted. "I feel like I'm on fire. I fucking burn, Talon."

Talon gave his mate a hard push, tumbling him out of the booth and onto the floor to sprawl on his back. Jackson didn't seem to mind. He reached out, grabbing Talon around the neck and slamming their mouths together again.

Talon worked quickly, divesting Jackson of his jeans and pulling his own down his hips. Reaching up blindly, he dipped his fingers in the small container of oil on the table, using it to coat his aching cock and slick Jackson's fluttering hole.

"I can't stop. I can't control it."

Fear seeped into the lust surrounding him as he realized the truth of his words. He couldn't stop. If he didn't get inside Jackson in the next half second, he felt like he might die.

It clawed at his insides as fire swept through his body, leaving him panting, sweating, and shaking. He pushed two fingers deep into Jackson's ass and pumped hard and fast. A loud cry had him jerking his head around to look over his shoulder.

Xander had Braxton completely naked in his lap, his arms locked around him as he slammed up into his small body. Another ragged moan drew his attention to his twin. Logan draped Keeton over the table, his tiny feet dangling off the ground, as Logan pounded into him from behind.

Still sawing his fingers in and out of his mate's heated channel, Talon watched as Blaise stood up in the booth, pulling his weeping cock from his jeans, and stroked it furiously. Then Boston's fingers encircled the base, and he tugged Blaise forward, wrapping his lips around the spongy crown.

"Oh, fuck," Xander groaned as he continued to thrust up into his mate.

Blaise's head dropped back on his shoulders, and he moaned loudly, working his slippery cock in and out of Boston's mouth. Boston swallowed around the hard flesh as he jerked himself roughly, his hand a mere blur over his shaft.

Talon couldn't hold back any longer. Lining his greased cock up with Jackson's entrance, he pushed in to the hilt. His hips jerked, and his eyes rolled back in his head as his mate's silky

tunnel convulsed around him. Lacking any semblance of self-control, he began thrusting wildly, plowing into Jackson's yielding body, growling, hissing, and snarling like the animal he was.

Again and again, he sank and retreated, driving into his mate with a punishing rhythm. His fingers tangled in Jackson's hair, jerking him upward to meet Talon's mouth in a demanding kiss.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Logan pull out of Keeton's body, flip his little mate around, and lift him up to sit on the table. He pushed Keeton to his back before driving back into him, covering his small body, and sinking his canines into his neck.

Without warning, Talon felt his orgasm rip through him as his balls unloaded, spilling his seed into Jackson's clenching ass. Jackson groaned, his inner walls clamping down on Talon's dick as ropes of pearly seed erupted from his slit.

He vaguely heard Logan's muffled roar above him, followed by Keeton's ear-piercing scream. Boston's cry of release came out garbled around Blaise's cock, and Blaise groaned and shuddered through his own orgasm. Braxton screamed, much as Keeton had, and Xander threw his head back, roaring out his mate's name.

As quickly as it had started, the burn faded, leaving them all confused, afraid, and in Talon's case, pissed the fuck off.

# SIXTEEN



JACKSON SLUMPED BACK TO the floor, gasping for breath. The gnawing *need* to be fucked into oblivion had ebbed, and all he felt now was utter bewilderment.

“What the hell just happened?”

The sound of applause had him swinging around to stare at the six men who had entered the diner behind them. Tall, muscular, and so pale they almost glowed, the males appeared to be a unit.

Despite his nudity, anxiety settled over Jackson like a blanket, leaving little room for embarrassment. Something about the men set his teeth on edge and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Everyone hurried to pull their clothes back on and put themselves to rights. Then they stood as a group in front of their booth, strategically pushing Keeton and Braxton to the middle of the circle.



“Hello, gentlemen.” One of the men stepped forward, presumably the leader of the group.

“Who are you?” Talon spoke calmly, but Jackson detected the apprehension in his voice.

“I didn’t realize the blockers would have quite that effect on shifters of your particular...persuasion.” The man spoke as though he hadn’t heard the question. “Then again, we did give you a pretty big dose. I wasn’t sure if they would even work on Moonkin.”

Cold dread settled in Jackson’s heart. They knew what he and his pack were, and nothing good could come from that knowledge.

“We’re leaving,” Xander said coldly, stepping forward to place himself between his pack and the other males.

The crooked smile slipped from the pale man’s face, and he shook his head. “I need you to come with us. We don’t want any trouble.”

Talon took a step forward as well, sidestepping to shield Jackson with his body. “Why should we go with you?”

“We just want to talk.” The guy held his hands up, palms out. “Please, just come with us.”

Logan, Blaise, and Boston moved to take up ranks beside Talon and Xander.

“Not going to happen,” Logan said flatly.

Jackson stepped around his mate, positioning himself at Talon's side, ready to fight for their freedom or their lives.

"We will use force if we have to." The stranger continued to hold his hands up in a peaceable gesture. "I hope it won't come to that."

"We're leaving," Xander repeated.

The next thing Jackson knew, fists, feet, hair, and bodies were flying everywhere. The smallest of the opposing group had him pinned to the ground with a knee in his chest, hissing and snarling as his canines elongated.

"Holy shit! You're really a vampire?" Jackson didn't know why he said it, but the man seemed taken aback, cocking his head to the side and closing his mouth.

The brief instant of hesitation was all it took for Jackson to flip their positions and gain the upper hand. His fist connected squarely with the man's jaw over and over until strong arms lifted him into the air. The guy on the floor should have been a bloody mess, possibly unconscious.

Instead, he rose gracefully to his feet and shook his head, murder in his gaze.

"Run!" Talon slung him around and shoved him toward the diner exit.

Yep, it was definitely time to go.

"Take Braxton and Keeton," Xander yelled at him as he grabbed a man off his back and sent him sailing through the air to bounce off one of the tables.

Keeton and Braxton huddled beneath a nearby table, clutching at each other as they watched the fray with wide, terrified eyes.

“Guys! Let’s go!” Jackson yelled and motioned them to him.

They hesitated for only a moment before quickly scrambling to their feet and flying past Jackson, sprinting for the door. He hurried after them, looking over his shoulder repeatedly, checking for any danger.

Once they reached the parking lot, he shoved both men into the pickup with orders to lock the door and keep low. Then he hurried back toward the restaurant. Logan came barreling out of the door just as he reached it, ramming into him hard enough to steal the breath from his lungs.

“Where’s my mate?”

“In the truck,” Jackson wheezed.

Logan pushed past him and raced for the pickup. Next through the door was Xander with the same question and same reaction. Jackson waited for Talon to emerge, panic bubbling inside his chest when his mate didn’t immediately appear through the door.

Just as Jackson made the decision to go in after him, the door swung open again and Talon rolled out, one of the pale men clinging to his back, his mouth locked on Talon’s throat. A deep, all-consuming rage built inside Jackson, and he lunged forward to plow his knuckles right into the man’s temple.

The guy grunted, and he released his hold on Talon's neck to turn his menacing glare on Jackson. Before he could react, the vampire leapt into the air, straight at Jackson's throat. A loud yell signaled Blaise's arrival as he burst through the open door and flew through the air, connecting with the stranger mid-jump.

Pulling Talon to his feet, Jackson breathed a sigh of relief when Logan's Jeep slid to a grinding halt just beside them. Dumping his mate into the backseat, he turned just in time to see Boston come smashing through the pane glass window and roll across the gravel.

Though he seemed a little shaken, he quickly gained his feet and hurried to jump into the backseat with Talon.

"Blaise! Let's go!"

Blaise snapped his head up, dropped the man he'd been pummeling, and hurried over to dive over the backseat and into the cargo hold. Jackson slid in beside Boston, slammed the door, and beat on the back of Keeton's seat.

"Go, go, go!"

Logan peeled out of the parking lot, slinging gravel just as Xander's huge pickup flew past them on the main road.

No one spoke. They barely seemed to breathe. The wound on Talon's neck and had already started to heal, and some of his color had returned. A small relief, but one he felt grateful for.

He didn't know how long they drove, but it felt like hours before Logan slowed to follow Xander into the parking lot of a

small motel off the highway. With orders to stay put, Logan joined their alpha, entering the lobby together to secure rooms for the night.

Rooms. Multiple. Yet, fifteen minutes later, they pulled around the back of the building and all filed in through the same door. Yes, they needed to talk, but Jackson had a feeling no one wanted to be separated at the moment. Safety in numbers and all that.

“What the hell was that?” Boston demanded almost as soon as the door closed behind him. “Who were those guys? Why the hell did we just have a fucking sexfest in the middle of a goddamn diner?”

Jackson had never seen him so agitated before. While usually easygoing and laid-back, Boston now appeared frantic, panicked. Not that he didn't have good reason to be, but it did nothing to calm Jackson's already frayed nerves.

No one answered him, too busy staring at different points on the worn carpet or papered walls. Unease and embarrassment hung over them, thick enough to taste, and it didn't seem that anyone was willing to discuss the sexcapades they'd entertained at the restaurant.

Well, tough shit. They needed answers, and evasion wouldn't get them anywhere.

“Where the hell are we?” Okay, not the most important question, but they'd driven for hours after leaving the diner, and Jackson didn't even know if they were still in Texas or not.

“Boise City, Oklahoma,” Logan answered, still staring at some ugly painting over the bed.

Blaise sat on the edge of the mattress with a sigh. “Boston, if you will sit down and stop yelling, I will explain as much as I know.”

Boston glared at him for a minute before nodding curtly and flopping heavily onto the lumpy-looking sofa.

“Blaise, what were those things?” Keeton spoke from Logan’s lap, where he had a blanket wrapped around him, curled inside the protection of his mate’s arms.

“Vampires,” Boston, Xander, and Blaise all spoke at the same time.

“Why didn’t we smell them when we walked in?” Talon stretched his neck to the side as he spoke. The wound had healed, but Talon said it still ached like a bitch.

“Why did I feel like I was going to die if I didn’t get a cock in my ass?” Braxton asked, the irritation evident in his voice.

“Are we safe here?” Keeton asked quietly.

“Why are they after us?” Jackson wanted to know.

“What the fuck are blockers?” Logan demanded.

“Whoa! One question at a time.” Blaise stood from the bed and started pacing the room. “I don’t know why we didn’t scent them. We were kind of distracted, weren’t expecting it, and they were on the other side of the room. That’s the best I can come up with.”

“I’ve never met a vampire, so I wouldn’t know if one was sitting on top of me. Obviously,” Jackson added with a self-deprecating chuckle. “But the others have. Didn’t you guys realize what they were when they got closer?”

“I recognized them by appearance, but not scent,” Boston said.

Xander nodded his agreement. “I didn’t smell anything.”

“Well, we’ve never seen vampires, either.” Talon motioned toward his twin.

“Okay, so we’ll put that on the list of shit to figure out later.”

Blaise threaded his fingers through his hair and resumed his pacing. “Blockers are like tranquilizers, I guess. The Council uses them to prevent a shifter from changing from man to animal, or vice versa, depending on the need.”

“And the other thing?” Braxton asked, his face about a dozen different shades of red.

“Sexual arousal is a side effect, but what we experienced is not something I’ve ever heard of before. That had to be one hell of a dose.”

“I’m never going to be able to look at any of you again.”

Braxton groaned and buried his face against his mate’s neck.

Jackson understood the feeling. His own cheeks flushed, the heat crawling up his neck to the tips of his ears.

“No offense, but I’m not even gay.” Blaise frowned down at the floor. “So, let’s not talk about uncomfortable.”

Braxton's head popped up, and he arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying Boston doesn't give a good blowjob?"

Blaise's eyes almost popped out of his head, and his mouth hung open stupidly. "I didn't...that's not...Braxton!"

"Oh, you know you loved it," Keeton quipped. "We'll bring you over to the dark side eventually."

He wiggled his eyebrows, and the room erupted into laughter. Leave it to the brat to ease the tension.

"Can we get back on track here?" Boston spoke sharply, but he still looked pale and shaken.

Blaise growled at his cousin before turning his attention to Boston. "I don't know what they want with you, but I doubt it's your amazing conversational skills. They've obviously been following us."

"Why did everyone leave?" Jackson cocked his head to the side. "And what was up with that waitress?"

"The power of suggestion."

"Uh, okay." Why couldn't Blaise just talk like a regular person?

"Vampire mind control, Jacks."

"Holy crap! You mean that stuff is true? I thought it was just like in movies and books."

Everyone in the room chuckled, even Boston, though his laughter came without much humor. "Oh, it's true. You don't even have to look into their eyes for it to work, either. They



just slip inside your head and plant little ideas that sound really appealing.”

“Then why didn’t they do that to us at the diner?”

“Good question.” Blaise’s brows drew together. “I don’t like not knowing what’s going on,” he mumbled under his breath.

No, he wouldn’t. Blaise was the most anal-retentive person Jackson had ever met—a total control freak. “So, are we good here?”

“We should be safe for now. Sunrise is in about four hours, but we need to sleep in shifts.”

“I’ll take the first shift.” Jackson’s head spun with all the information that had been crammed into it in such a short space of time.

To his surprise, Blaise shook his head. “We need you to sleep and try to communicate with Cole. We’re running out of time, and we need a plan. He’s the only one that can help us right now.”

He had serious doubts that he’d be able to fall asleep, but realizing the importance of the task he’d been set, he dipped his head in agreement. Surely, someone had a sleeping pill. Hell, NyQuil would do in a pinch.

Talon’s arms wrapped around him from behind, and he rested his chin on Jackson’s shoulder. The warmth seeped into him, the presence of his mate calming and relaxing him.

Apparently, he had just found his drug of choice.

# SEVENTEEN



TALON CURLED AROUND HIS mate on the bed, stroking his hair and peppering kisses along the side of his face. He tried to tame his emotions and let the tension drain from his body in an effort to help Jackson relax.

Fear and anger bubbled just beneath the surface, though. A slight twinge of jealousy poked at him, but he brushed it away quickly. They had all been out of their minds with lust at the diner, but he still didn't like that so many people had seen his mate naked and needy.

He prayed Jackson could get something useful from his brother this time. How long could they continue to outrun the threat that nipped at their heels? Not long if the tenderness in his neck was any indication. He couldn't believe the fucking bloodsucker had actually bitten him.

"Will you sing to me?" Jackson whispered the words, barely loud enough for Talon to hear.

He stopped petting his mate's hair and looked around the room at the rest of the pack. They all seemed preoccupied with their own tasks or conversations, but it would still be easy to hear him in the small room.

He used to sing to Jackson often, back when he had first come to live with the pack. When he would wake up at night, screaming and shaking, Talon had stroked his hair and lulled him back to sleep with a song.

That had been a long time ago, though. And he had never done it in front of an audience.

“Please, Talon?”

Jackson's soft plea undid him. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for him. “What would you like me to sing, baby?”

“How about that one I like by the guy with the big, weird glasses?”

Talon snorted against Jackson's neck.

“Okay. Close your eyes.” He waited for his mate's eyelids to drift closed, took a calming breath, and started to sing.

He peeked around the room, unsurprised to find everyone staring at him in astonishment. He didn't exactly have a reputation for being soft and gentle, but they didn't have to look so dumbstruck.

Closing his eyes and focusing on the lyrics, he sang the words softly into his mate's ear while he lightly caressed Jackson's side with his fingertips. Gods, he felt so right in his arms, and

Talon couldn't stop the small smile of contentment tugging at the corners of his lips.

Yeah, he really was one lucky son of a bitch.

He finally understood all the hype about *amadas*. He had never loved, trusted, or respected anyone more than he did the man in his arms. The void in his soul had finally been filled, replaced by warmth and happiness.

Gods, he was turning into a sappy bastard. If he wasn't careful, he'd be eating rainbows and coughing up butterflies.

Finishing the last line of the song, he opened his eyes, grinning at Jackson's soft snores.

"Works every time," he murmured, placing a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"That was beautiful, Talon. I didn't know you sang." Keeton stepped closer to the bed, speaking softly so as not to wake Jackson.

"Thanks, and I don't." He caressed Jackson's smooth cheek with his knuckles. "Well, I don't for just anyone."



*JACKSON COULD SEE THE damn light, but he couldn't get any closer to it. The moon hovered high in the sky, the same eerie amber glow as before. Snow covered the forest floor, and a harsh wind blew at his back, raising the fur along his spine.*

*“Cole, you have to help us. You have to tell me what you know.” Jackson tried to remain calm, but desperation left his voice shaking.*

*“You’ve already come too far. They won’t stop until they have you now,” Cole responded sadly. “You have to challenge Dad. It’s the only way to stop the cycle.”*

*“Cycle? What cycle?”*

*“There’s not much time. Now shut up and listen, asshole.”*

*Jackson grinned inwardly. There was the brother he remembered. “Yes, sir.”*

*“There are four other shifters, eight vampires, a witch, two elves, and a few hybrids here with me.”*

*“Elves? A witch?”*

*“Jackson,” Cole growled in his head. “Please focus. We’re out in that old shithole barn on the edge of town. You know the one?”*

*“Seriously? Witches?”*

*“Jackson, damn it, would you pay attention? Do you want my help or not?”*

*“Sorry. The barn the Baker kids set on fire near the old rodeo grounds?”*

*“Right. Your best bet is to come in during the night.”*

*“We figured the same thing. Didn’t want to draw attention, or clue Dad in that we’re coming. Okay, so how do we get in?”*

*“Come in through Crystal Creek Woods. They don’t have guards there.”*

*“Then why don’t you just leave?”*

*“Well, I would if I could get out of this fucking cage,” Cole spat.*

*Jackson growled. His dear father would pay for this. “Yell for help?”*

*“No one would hear us. Dad turned the rodeo grounds into private property. No one comes out this far. Besides, most of us are too weak to talk above a whisper.”*

*“I’m going to get you out,” Jackson vowed. “Is anyone hurt? Are you okay?”*

*“I’m fine, but a couple of the others need medical attention. Nothing too serious, but you need to hurry. I wanted to protect you from this, but one of the hybrids...is my mate.”*

*Fantastic. This just kept getting better.*

*“They’re talking about testing their little science experiments on one of the vampires. They don’t deserve this, Jackson.”*

*Jackson agreed. No one deserved to be kidnapped, imprisoned, and experimented on—which led him to his next question. “What experiments?”*

*“They’re testing our blood. All kinds of different supernatural have been through here at one point. Dad is working with some asshole named Cyrus. They’re trying to find a way for*

*vampires to walk in the sunlight, and they're going to test it on one of them at sunrise in two days."*

*"Fuck," Jackson spat. "How did you end up there, anyway?"*

*"Someone's coming. I have to shift back. Hurry, Jackson!"*

The voice inside his head faded away, and Jackson jerked awake with a gasp. "They're not blood slaves."

Talon's arms wrapped around him tightly, and the rest of the pack hurried over to the bed to huddle around him. "What are you talking about, baby? What happened?"

Jackson gave them all a quick rundown of the information he'd received from Cole. "They're planning to use some vampire as a test subject tomorrow morning."

Muttered curses sounded around the small circle. Everyone looked tired and weary. It seemed shifts hadn't been necessary. Just looking at the dark circles and bloodshot eyes, Jackson knew he'd been the only one to get any sleep.

Blaise looked at his watch. "Sunrise is in two hours. We won't make it in time."

Shaking his head, Jackson sat up a little straighter. "No, not *this* morning. Tomorrow morning."

"Then we need to hurry. We have to save them. We can't just leave them there." Braxton spoke with courage and conviction.

"I'm not rescuing a fucking bloodsucker!" Boston stomped across the room and threw himself onto the small sofa, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at them.

“Oh, can it, would you?” Jackson threw his hands up in the air. “I’m sorry about whatever happened to you to make you hate vampires so much, but this isn’t about you. If you don’t want to help, then you can stay here. Otherwise, lose the fucking attitude.”

Boston continued to glare at him for a full minute before he nodded curtly. “I’m in.”

“Okay then,” Talon said, smoothing his palm down Jackson’s back. “Where do we start?”



# EIGHTEEN



“HAVE YOU EVER SEEN so much snow?” Keeton looked out the window with his mouth hanging open as Logan struggled to keep the Jeep from fishtailing across the slick road.

“Yes,” Logan, Talon, and Jackson all answered in unison.

“Yeah, well, I’ve lived in Texas all my life. This is beautiful.”

“Just wait until you have to be out in it,” Logan said around a chuckle. He followed Xander’s pickup off the main road to a row of rustic looking log cabins. “Here we are.”

“Ooh, they’re so cute,” Keeton squealed.

Talon snorted at the runt’s enthusiasm. His brother was right. He couldn’t wait to see how Keeton and Braxton would react to the snow and ice once they weren’t safely inside a heated vehicle.

“Look, angel.” Logan pointed past the cabins to a mountain range not far beyond. “The Rocky Mountains.”

“Oh, wow,” Keeton whispered.

“And over there—” Jackson pointed toward the west. “—is where we’re going. Through Crystal Creek Woods.”

Talon could hear Keeton’s gulp from the backseat and bit his tongue to keep from laughing. Oh yeah, the self-proclaimed princess was in for a rude awakening.

Sure enough, Logan ended up with Keeton on his back, carrying him as he trudged through the thick snow. Braxton tried to dig his way through the white wonderland, but in the end, gave up and allowed Xander to carry him as well.

Jackson stumbled, almost going down, but Talon grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close. “Want me to carry you, too, pup?”

An elbow caught him in the ribs, causing a stream of thick smoke to erupt from his lips as he grunted.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jackson growled playfully.

The cold wind whipped around them, shredding through their clothing, and stealing the breath from Talon’s lungs. It didn’t take long for him to remember exactly why he’d been happy to escape this damn place. Give him the heat and humidity of Texas any day.

So it was with great relief that he stepped into the small cabin. Having reached the place before them, Blaise already had flames dancing merrily in the fireplace against the back wall.

Talon groaned as the warmth surrounded and thawed him. His fingers stung, his toes ached, and his wet clothes actually

steamed as he stepped closer to the fire. Fuck, he hated the snow.

“Are we really walking in this crap through the woods?”

Keeton asked as he grabbed a blanket off the sofa and wrapped it around him. Braxton hurried over, grabbed a corner of the blanket, and huddled in close to his friend.

Not his place to say so, but Talon had doubts about taking Braxton and Keeton along with them. Not only were they likely to get hurt, but the trek through the trees wouldn't be an easy one.

Thankfully, Xander seemed to have the same idea. “You two aren't going anywhere.”

To Talon's surprise, neither Braxton nor Keeton argued. They just nodded their heads enthusiastically as a unit.

“It's still a few hours until sunset. Let's get some shut eye, then we'll go over the plan one more time before we set out.” Xander motioned for his mate to follow, and they disappeared through one of the bedroom doors.

“I slept on the ride here, so I'll take watch duty.” Jackson dragged a chair across the room, placing it just to the side of the window.

“I'll sit with you.”

Though exhausted, Talon couldn't sleep if he wanted to. His nerves were shot, and his stomach twisted in knots. Worst of all, his mind continued to work overtime as it flipped through all the ways this rescue mission could go wrong.

“What is this place anyway?” he asked a few minutes later when he and Jackson were alone.

Logan and Keeton had staked a claim on the other bedroom, and Blaise and Boston had vanished into the kitchen to make coffee and search for food.

“The pack rents them out to tourists,” Jackson answered. “Mostly hikers.”

That explained why the pantry was stocked, and the place seemed so clean. “Will anyone look for us here?”

Jackson shrugged. “We’re not going to be here that long.”

Fair enough.

They sat in silence after that, only speaking to mumble their thanks when Blaise returned with mugs of steaming coffee for them both. After Talon assured him that they would be okay to keep watch, Blaise had claimed one of the sofas near the fireplace, while Boston had stretched out on the other.

They wouldn’t get to sleep long, though.

Shortly after the sun had set, Talon jerked his head up and sniffed at the air. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Jackson asked.

Instead of answering, he crept closer to the window and stood to the side as he parted the curtain a mere centimeter.

The moon glowed yellow, making the fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the last hour appear eerie rather than beautiful. A small, lone shadow pushed his way right up to the front door

and tapped softly. Even in the dark, Talon could see the paleness of his skin, the soft glow of his yellow eyes.

“Wake the others.” He spoke softly, barely more than a breath.

“What? Who is it? Who’s out there?” Jackson stepped up behind him to peer over his shoulder. “Shit.”

He crept across the living room to shake Boston and Blaise awake before hurrying down the hallway to knock on doors.

Talon inched toward the front door. Standing with his back to the wall, he reached out and closed his hand around the knob. With a deep breath to steady his resolve, he flung the door open and launched himself onto the porch. He caught the smaller man in the chest, toppling him backwards, and sending them both rolling into the icy snow.

Oddly, the bloodsucker offered no resistance, made no sound. Talon hovered over him, straddling the male’s hips with one hand wrapped around his slender throat. His other fist hovered near his ear, ready to plow into the vampire’s face at the first sign of struggle.

“You!” His voice sounded guttural, even to his own ears. He recognized the man as the little vampire from the diner. “Why are you here? Why are you following us?”

“Please.” The vampire lifted his hands in a show of surrender, but he made no move to free himself. “We’ve come to offer aid. We just want to talk.”

“Where’s the rest of the men you were with?” Talon lifted his head and scanned the area. He saw no one. “Show yourself,”

he called.

“They will not show themselves unless we have your support. We fight for the same cause, Moonkin. Let us help you. You can’t hope to defeat your enemy without our assistance.”

“What fight? What enemy?”

“The Crystal Creek Pack.”

“I’m pretty sure we can take on one old man and his pack.”

Talon refused to loosen his grip on the male’s neck. His mate was just on the other side of those walls, and he would die before he let anything happen to him.

“I’m sure you can, but they’re not alone. We have information you need.”

“What information? Who’s helping them?”

“They are holding a wide range of supes, including several vampires.”

Talon resisted the urge to shake the bloodsucker. “I already know this. Get to the fucking point.”

“Cyrus Redway is helping them.”

Talon blinked, and his fist relaxed a fraction. “The leader of the Redway Coven?”

The vampire nodded. “He’s gone mad, and he’s desperate to find a way to walk in the sun.”

“This isn’t your fight. Why do you care?”

“They have a member of our coven. The Snake River Coven.”  
The vampire looked him in the eye, never blinking, shaking his head as much as Talon’s grip would allow. “Cyrus has to be stopped. Let us help you.”

“Talon, let him up.” Xander’s deep, commanding voice rumbled from just behind him.

Though reluctant, Talon let his hand slip away from the vampire’s neck and slowly moved off of him. His eyes never left the male’s face, his muscles tense and prepared for trouble.

“Tell your brothers to come in out of the cold. We’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“Xander!” Talon couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “They attacked us, and you’re just going to let them waltz in here so we can have a nice little *chat*?”

“You said the Snake River Coven?” Blaise appeared just behind Xander, looking out into the trees.

The little bloodsucker dipped his head.

“Enforcers?”

Nodding again, the man rose gracefully to his feet to face them. “Yes, the men with me are Enforcers.”

Blaise looked pleased as punch. “Get them in here.”

The little guy looked over his shoulder and whistled softly. Five dark figures appeared as if out of thin air and marched toward them.

The largest of the group looked about Talon's size, though maybe a little broader in the shoulders. He clapped the small man on the back and grinned, revealing long, pointed fangs.

"You did well, Malakai."

The little guy smiled and nodded. "Thank you. I thought he was going to eat me."

"I am Stavion, leader of the Snake River Coven Enforcers." He stood straight and met Xander's gaze. "I apologize for our unusual methods, but I think we can be of help to each other." He looked back at the man beside him. "This is Malakai. We sent him to speak with you in hopes his small stature would prove less threatening."

"I'm Xander, alpha for all intents and purposes. Let's move this party inside and finish the introductions there. I'm freezing my balls off."

Talon agreed with the last statement. It was damn cold in the wilderness of Colorado. He didn't like the idea of five large—and one little—vampires being in the same room with his mate, however. Rushing ahead, he went through the door first, across the room, and took up a protective stance in front of Jackson.

"What the fuck are they doing here?" Boston roared as the rest of the men trailed into the room single file.

Xander held a hand up to quiet him. "They're here to help. Calm down, and let's hear what they have to say."



Boston nodded but glared mutinously at the newcomers. Xander sighed and dipped his head as well, then made the introductions.

The vampires stood together on the other side of the room. They looked as nervous as Talon felt, and it helped ease some of his distrust.

Stavion stepped forward and waved a hand toward his coven. “These are my men, Raven, Varik, Demos, and Cassius.” He turned to the smallest man in the group and smiled. “This is Malakai, the tech man, and a kind of liaison of sorts.”

Malakai wasn't looking at him though. His eyes were locked on Boston, and a quiet rumble had started in his chest. As if hypnotized, he glided across the room, through the pack, and right up to stand in front of Boston.

Boston looked down at the vampire, his nostrils flaring and his eyes darkening with what Talon could only describe as lust. Hell, he could smell it wafting from them both clear across the room.

Then Boston shook his head and stumbled backward. “I will not have a vampire for a mate.”

Turning on his heels, he stalked out of the room, disappearing toward the back of the cabin.

# NINETEEN



JACKSON TOOK A STEP forward, shaking off Talon's hold when his mate tried to stop him. "Malakai? Are you alright?"

The vampire turned to him and smiled sadly. "I will be. I should have shown more discretion. The shock of meeting my mate overwhelmed my good sense. I apologize."

"Don't." Keeton stepped out of Logan's embrace and walked over to Malakai. "I thought only shifters were mates of shifters." He tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips. "Did that make sense?"

Malakai actually chuckled softly. "I understand what you meant. I'm a hybrid. Both vampire and shifter, though more vampire."

"Sweet. I guess I'm a hybrid, too. Shifter and human, though *a lot* more human." Keeton beamed at Malakai as he took his arm and steered him toward the short hallway. "He'll come around. Let's go talk to him."

“I’m coming, too.” Braxton shook off Xander’s restraining arm and hurried over to them.

Malakai looked hesitant, but he nodded and allowed the brats to lead him in the direction where Boston had disappeared.

“Get him out!” Boston’s voice echoed around the small cabin.

“Oh, shut up already,” Braxton snapped. “We’re right here, and we’re not fucking deaf.”

A door slammed, and the silence that followed felt like a physical force.

“Is he safe?” Stavion looked as though he wanted to go in and snatch Malakai from the irate shifter.

Jackson couldn’t blame him.

“Boston won’t hurt him,” Xander assured the coven leader. “My mate will hand him his ass if he even thinks about it. We’ll leave them to work out their differences.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the corridor. “We only have eight hours until sunrise, and we need to leave soon if we hope to make it back before then.”

Stavion didn’t look completely convinced, but after a brief hesitation, he dipped his head once.

Jackson moved into Talon’s arms, kissing the underside of his mate’s chin. He understood all too well how Malakai felt. It sucked to have a mate that didn’t want you. Luckily, Talon had finally come to his senses because Jackson couldn’t picture his life without the big asshole.

Smiling fondly, he kissed Talon's jaw again. "Love you, yeah?"

Talon nuzzled his cheek and sighed. "Yeah, baby. Love you, too."

"Tell us what you know." Blaise stepped forward, speaking as though nothing had happened. That was Blaise, all business, all the time.

"The small contingent that followed you have been dealt with," Varik stated immediately.

"They won't send others. They know you're coming," Raven spoke next.

"Someone has been following us other than you?" Venom dripped from Talon's words, and his chest vibrated against Jackson's back.

"Yes," Raven answered flatly.

"I suppose I should apologize for the blocker incident." Stavion shook his head as his lips turned down at the corners. "We wanted to talk, but I thought you might not be keen on speaking with a group of vampires." He glanced around the room as he spoke. "We just wanted to make sure you didn't shift, but we weren't sure how much to give you. It's not really supposed to be taken orally. Obviously, I misjudged."

Jackson snorted derisively. "Yeah, no shit." He pushed out of Talon's arms and moved a little closer to the group of vampires. "How are we supposed to get in and out if they know we're coming?"

“That’s where we come in.” Cassius stepped forward, nodding solemnly.

“This can’t all be coming from Alpha Cunningham. He has to have help. I mean, where is he getting these vampires from?” Blaise scratched the back of his neck as he paced.

“Cyrus Redway,” Jackson and Stavion answered at the same time.

Blaise stopped so abruptly he nearly fell over as he whirled around to gape at them. “Cyrus? Are you sure?”

“Who’s Cyrus?” Logan looked back and forth between Blaise and the Enforcer leader.

Tension filled the space between the men, but it didn’t seem directed toward each other.

“Cole said he’s helping our father,” Jackson offered. That’s all he knew.

Blaise looked like he might choke. “Cyrus Redway is the vampire representative for the Council.”



JACKSON TRUDGED THROUGH THE snow around the frozen lake a few miles west of the mountains. The frigid wind blew hard and fast, swirling the snow around them.

Talon walked beside him, while Xander, Blaise, and Logan marched in front with the vampire Enforcers. Boston stomped

along at the back of the group. Cassius remained behind at the cabin to protect Malakai, Braxton, and Keeton.

He didn't know if Boston and Malakai had worked out their problems or come to any kind of agreement, but at least they had refrained from open hostility before Boston left. He hoped the male could overcome his prejudice about vampires and accept his mate. Malakai seemed like a nice guy, though maybe a little reserved.

Jackson couldn't blame him. If he found himself mated to a bigoted shifter who didn't want him—and hated everything about him—he probably wouldn't have much reason to smile, either.

The farther they trekked through the woods, the harder Jackson's heart pounded against his sternum. The amber moon overhead, and the snow-covered forest looked exactly the way it had in his dreams. Just over the next hill, they would see a flickering light through the trees.

“You okay, pup?” Talon shouted over the roar of the wind, but Jackson still had to strain to hear him.

Instead of trying to make himself heard, he just nodded. He didn't know if he was okay, but he didn't really have a choice. He had to save his brother.

Sure enough, he spotted the flickering light from his dreams as they crested the slope. It shined softly, flickering through the closely packed limbs of the frost-lined trees. He half expected to keep marching toward the light, but never getting closer.

Thankfully, it took only minutes before they stepped through the tree line and up to the old barn on the very edge of town. It had been there on the abandoned rodeo grounds for as long as he could remember. The adults never strayed this far outside of town limits, which made it great for kids to hang out, drink, and get high.

Not that he'd ever done those things.

The glowing amber light came from a small window near the back of the dilapidated building. It flickered and dimmed, then grew brighter, dancing across the window. A four-foot, chain-link fence surrounded the building with a big red-and-white sign proclaiming it "Private Property" and giving a warning against trespassing.

Jackson gripped the top of the fence and jumped over it. Yeah, that had been a great deterrent. Not just crazy, his dad was an idiot. How no one had stumbled upon his scheme was beyond Jackson. Hell, the sign alone would be enough to have the kids in the area flocking to the barn, eager to flout authority.

The rest of the men hurdled the fence as well, standing clustered together beside the barn and staring at it as though it might be haunted. Jackson shook his head and started forward.

Before he could take a step, however, Talon jerked him around and slammed their mouths together. His warm tongue forced its way into Jackson's mouth as his mate clutched him close. The fear and desperation in the kiss scared the hell out of him.

Talon's lips abandoned their claim on Jackson's mouth and trailed along his jaw and up to his ear. "Just in case," he said.

“I want you to know I’ve always loved you. Only you, Jackson. You are my heart.”

The tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes threatened to spill over, but Jackson blinked them away quickly. It wasn’t often he saw this side of Talon, and damn, the man had horrible timing. Still, the words melted his heart and gave him the courage to face whatever waited on the other side of that wall.

“No goodbyes. We’ve got this. You ready?”

Talon stepped back and nodded. He looked exhausted, and his face seemed paler than usual. Jackson prayed the strain of the last few weeks hadn’t aggravated Talon’s heart condition. His mate had promised him at least another twenty years, and Jackson intended to hold him to it.

“Not too concerned about security, is he?”

Jackson turned to look at Raven, shaking his head and frowning at the huge hole in the side of the falling down barn. His dad was one cocky bastard. No guards, no locks, nothing to keep anyone from stumbling upon his little secret.

He followed the other men in through the side of the barn and froze as his stomach curdled and bile rose in his throat. He covered his nose, breathing through his mouth as he tried not to gag at the rancid smells coming from inside the building.

The smells of dead animals, rotten food, and human waste assaulted him, making his eyes water and his nasal passage burn. How could anyone do this to another human being?



“Keys?” Xander asked.

Jackson didn't have a clue what he was talking about until he stepped further into the barn and saw the steel cages stacked three deep against the back wall. Grabbing the single torch from its holder on the wall, he held it high and approached cautiously.

There had to be at least a dozen men crammed into the six tiny cages on top. The cages on the bottom weren't exactly cages, but more like steel boxes. Jackson guessed those held the vampires. Huge padlocks secured each door, ensuring its captives didn't escape.

Rage bubbled up inside him, blurring his vision and ripping a vicious growl from his throat.

“Jackson?”

Hurrying over to one of the smallest cages, Jackson ignored the disgusting mess beneath his boots and reached his fingers through the bars. “Cole? Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Seven years had passed since he'd last seen his brother, but Cole still looked the same. A little older, a little more angular, but just as Jackson remembered.

“I'm not hurt. Hurry up and get us the fuck out of here.”

“I'm on it.” Demos dropped the black backpack he carried to the floor and pulled out two pairs of wicked looking bolt cutters. He handed one to Raven, and the pair set to work cutting the locks from the cages.

They freed Cole first, and he burst from inside his confinement to wrap his arms tightly around Jackson, nearly choking him in his enthusiasm. “I’m so glad you didn’t listen to me.”

Jackson stumbled backward, gripping his brother firmly to his chest. “Like I ever did.”

He released his hold and took a step away, shaking his head. “We need to hurry. It’s not long until sunrise, and I’m sure Dad knows you’re here by now.”

Jackson nodded, keeping a protective hand on the small of his brother’s back. Cole may be older, but Jackson had always been bigger—always been the protector.

A soft growl behind them had him whirling around, crouching low and pushing Cole behind him. He relaxed marginally and tilted his head to the side when he realized the sound came from Blaise.

“Blaise? What the hell? Are you okay?”

Blinking several times, Blaise shook his head and coughed. “No, I don’t think I am.”

Immediately concerned, Jackson rose from his defensive stance and took a step forward. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“He’s my mate.”

Jackson closed his eyes and groaned at his brother’s softly spoken words. Though he didn’t begrudge Cole finding his mate, and he even liked Blaise, this wasn’t the time to deal with this crap. Especially not after the disaster that had happened between Boston and Malakai.

“And mine,” came another quiet voice from somewhere behind him.

Jackson turned to find a small, delicate-looking man covered in dirt, his hair matted and clinging to his bare shoulders. Cole hurried over to the little man, wrapped him securely in his arms, and whispered soothing words into his ear.

Blaise’s gaze followed them, and his nostrils flared as another low growl vibrated in his chest. Once he realized it, however, he clamped his lips tightly together and dropped his chin to his chest.

“This is not fucking happening.”

Rolling his eyes, Jackson reached out and cuffed Blaise in the back of the head. “Can we maybe work this out later?”

Blaise glared at him but didn’t argue. “We need to get them somewhere safe, somewhere protected. I’m going to need them to testify once I gather enough evidence to bring formal charges.”

“We’ll take them back to our coven.” Stavion stepped forward, holding a tiny, naked man with long black hair in his arms. “They will be protected there, and we can help the ones with families find their way home.”

Nodding, Blaise clapped the vampire on the shoulder. “Thank you. That would be a huge help.”

“I’m staying,” Cole said defiantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I want to stay with you,” Blaise’s other mate whispered.

Hoping to avoid an argument, Jackson dipped his head curtly. “Fine. Let’s move.”

Ten minutes later, they had gathered everyone outside of the barn to begin the brutal journey back through the woods to the small clearing where they had parked the vehicles.

“You take them in the cars. We have a certain alpha we need to pay a visit.”

Blaise tried to push Cole toward the rest of the group, but he was having none of it.

Jackson snorted. If Blaise thought he could force or intimidate Cole, he was going to be sorely disappointed.

“I know the way,” Cole insisted. Still completely naked, he jerked his head for the pack to follow him, while the vampires led the prisoners out of the forest.

“Hey! Who the hell is the alpha here?” Xander grumbled as he stomped along behind them.

Stopping in his tracks, Jackson bowed deeply and waved a hand for Xander to precede him. “Please, lead the way, Oh, Great Leader.”

Talon came up behind him, chuckling, and elbowed him in the ribs. “Stop being a smartass and let’s go.”

Xander shook his head and gave Jackson a light push. “Just don’t get us lost, kid.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when loud shrieks, vicious snarling, and frantic voices echoed through the night.

# TWENTY



“RUN!” JACKSON SCREAMED AS he took off sprinting for the tree line.

Talon’s heart seized in his chest, and a sharp pain shot down his left arm. Pushing away the pain, he took off after his mate with the rest of the pack trailing behind.

“Stay here,” he heard Blaise yell and assumed the man spoke to his new mates.

Just as he reached the edge of the trees, a black blur darted past him, snarling and barking. Blaise had shifted, and he raced through the snow and underbrush, intent on finding his target. Then a much smaller silver wolf zipped past \, growling as he raced over the frozen ground.

“Cole!” Blaise’s little mate ran up beside Talon, his lips blue and teeth chattering from the cold.

Talon snagged him around the waist and hoisted him off his feet. “Whoa! You can’t go in there.”

“He’s my mate! They both are!” Kicking and contorting his body, he fought like a wildcat to escape Talon’s hold.

“What’s your name?”

“Willow.”

Turning and dropping the man to his feet, Talon pointed a finger in his face. “It’s too dangerous, Willow. Your mates will be distracted trying to protect you. You need to hide.”

“I can help.”

Talon didn’t have time for this. His own mate waited for him through those trees, and Talon needed to see for himself that Jackson wasn’t hurt. “You can’t. Now, go!”

Without waiting to see if the man would comply, Talon left him in the snow and hurried into the woods, following the sounds of battle.

His breathing came in shallow pants, and his heart beat painfully against his sternum as he stumbled to a stop near the group of captives huddled together behind a tree. He followed their combined gazes to the all-out brawl happening between animal and beast.

Eight enormous russet wolves, presumably from the local pack, were locked in battle with the vampire Enforcers, the pack, Blaise and Cole, and...

“Jackson!”

Talon raced ahead, stripping off his shirt as he ran, prepared to shift and defend his mate by any means necessary. One of the

russet wolves sailed through the air, his huge paws catching Jackson in the chest and propelling him backward to land in the snow. The momentum of the blow, combined with Jackson's hard kick, propelled the lupine over his head to land several yards away.

Jumping to his feet, Jackson shook his head to brush away the snow and jumped back into the fray. Grunts, growls, howls, and moans filled the night as the fight raged on.

Talon didn't have to wonder why none of his brothers had shifted. It was the same reason he felt reluctant to call upon his leopard. Since none of the vampires were Moonkin or mates of white shifters, and he assumed none of the captives were either, the powerful magic from his shift would drive them to insanity within minutes. Four large, crazy, and armed vampires did not sound appealing in the least.

One of the Crystal Creek wolves stalked Xander from behind as the alpha circled around another lupine in front of him. Taking a running start, Talon tackled the wolf his alpha had yet to see, wrapping his arms around its chest and rolling with him across the forest floor. By some miracle, Talon landed on top and snapped his fist forward with enough force to shatter the bones of the shifter's muzzle.

A loud, pain-filled yelp ripped from the beast's mouth, and his paws kicked out, trying to dislodge Talon from atop his chest. Talon wouldn't budge. Another blow, this time to the side of the head, and the shifter stopped in his struggle and went motionless beneath him.

Three more russet wolves sprawled limply on their sides with crimson drops splattered around them in the snow. Three others had shifted back to their human forms and knelt before Xander and Stavion with their heads bowed. Talon knew he'd counted eight wolves from the pack when he'd burst into the clearing. So, where was the last one?

Whipping his head one way and then the other, he searched the trees for the remaining enemy. Paralyzing dread consumed him when he spotted a shadowy figure stalking up behind his mate in the shadows created by the low-hanging tree branches. He opened his mouth to yell out a warning, but Jackson's next words stopped him dead.

Without turning, Jackson dropped his arms to his sides and stiffened. "Hello, Dad."



TAKING A DEEP BREATH, Jackson tried to calm his racing pulse as he looked over his shoulder to see his father walk forward into the moonlight. He expected to feel fear, but it wouldn't come. Maybe because he had his pack, his brother, his new allies, and his mate behind him, ready to have his back if things with the alpha turned violent.

He hoped it didn't come to that. His father needed to face justice for what he'd done to those men in the barn, but that didn't mean Jackson wanted him dead. Crazy, unstable, and even cruel, the man was still his father.



Slender fingers wrapped around his wrist and squeezed gently before falling away. “You can do this.” Cole stood beside him, stark naked and shuddering in the cold wind.

He gave Jackson a weak smile, then stepped back to stand beside an equally naked Blaise.

Talon started forward, but Jackson waved him away.

“Jackson.”

The angry quality of his dad’s voice sent a shudder through him, the same as it had when he’d been a child. Still, Jackson held his ground, turning to face the man as he approached. The spicy scent of anger wafted off his father, accompanied by the stench of body odor and stale whiskey.

Once proud and handsome, Roan Cunningham looked far older than his forty-seven years. Deep lines marred his face, his salt-and-pepper hair had begun to thin on top, and the trim waist Jackson remembered rounded and sagged around his hips, spilling over the waistband of his jeans.

“Dad,” Jackson repeated sadly, but he didn’t make a move to approach the man. “What have you done?”

Roan shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His tone told another story.

“Your own son, Dad? Was the money really worth it?” Jackson waved a hand behind him at Cole. “What else did Cyrus offer you?”

His dad glared at him, but he didn't answer. Then again, Jackson hadn't expected him to.

"It's time for you to step down. You've hurt this pack long enough." Jackson motioned for the scared men behind the tree to come forward.

Slowly, hesitantly, they moved as a group, shuffling forward as their eyes darted back and forth between Roan and Jackson. Keeping his eyes locked on his father, Jackson spoke to Stavion. "Get them out of here. Take them somewhere safe."

"I am alpha here. You can't take them!"

"I'm not going to let you hurt them anymore. You're done here."

Stavion gathered the frightened captives, along with the three surrendering members of Roan's pack. The other Enforcers collected the four unconscious wolves that had yet to shift back to their human forms. Then they all disappeared into the trees as Jackson's dad snarled and spluttered.

"What would you possibly know about running a pack?" Roan spat at him. "I did what I had to do to protect them. You can't take those men."

"I just did."

"I need them!"

"To lock in fucking cages and experiment on them?" Jackson's voice rose with each word until he shouted the last.

“You always were an ungrateful little shit. I wouldn’t expect you to understand about responsibilities. You ran from yours, didn’t you?” His dad snarled at him, his lip curling over his yellow teeth.

“I didn’t run from anything. You shot me, you bastard!”

He heard several gasps from behind him, followed by the collective grumble of distressed voices.

“Your father’s the one who shot you?” Xander asked, his voice laced with steel.

“Of course, I shot him!” Roan turned to point a finger at Xander. “He’s an abomination! He doesn’t deserve to live!”

He moved his right hand from behind his back and jerked it up in one fluid motion. A muffled *whoomph* reached Jackson’s ears just before he felt a sharp prick of pain at the side of his neck.

Before anyone could move, an angry, feral cry rent the air. Spinning on his heels and plucking the dart from his neck, Jackson’s mouth dropped open as a sleek white leopard hissed and spat. His ears lay flat against his head, and his shoulder blades seesawed as he prowled toward Roan.

Jackson expected to go numb, get sleepy, or pass out... something. None of those things happened. Within seconds, however, his dick hardened and pushed against his zipper, his pulse accelerated, and his skin heated to near boiling.

*Not again. Not now.*

Fighting against the overwhelming desire that swamped his senses, Jackson tried to think around the fog in his brain. It wasn't easy, though. His cock strained, leaking from the slit, pre-cum already creating a dark spot on the front of his pants. His balls ached as his sac tightened, and his breath created clouds of smoke as it stuttered from his panting mouth.

Roan yelled in fear as he backpedaled, lifting the dart gun to shoulder height and squeezing the trigger several times in quick succession. The gun clicked, but nothing happened.

Talon reached him in three long, powerful strides, sailing through the night and knocking Roan to the ground. He landed on the man's chest, his fangs bared as he continued to growl and screech.

Roan stared up at the cat, his eyes rounded and his mouth hanging open in a silent scream. Seconds ticked by, and his lips began to move, but still, no sounds escaped him. A moment later, his head began whipping back and forth in the snow, and he reached up to cover his ear, his entire body quaking beneath Talon.

Then he stopped. Just stopped everything. His hands fell limply to his sides, his body stilled, and he stared blankly up at the night sky. His lips still trembled, working to form words, but only a slight hum vibrated in his chest.

Approaching the big cat slowly, Jackson reached out and stroked the top of his mate's head. "He's done, Talon. Come on, babe."

His voice shook as he worked to control the consuming desire that coursed through him.

Talon turned and nuzzled into his palm, then stepped over the prone figure on the ground to butt against Jackson until he fell on his ass in the snow. Laughing, he wrapped his arms around his mate's furry neck as Talon leaned over him, licking him from cheek to temple with his rough tongue.

"Eww. Okay, okay, stop it!" He pushed playfully at his mate.

Talon made a grumbling sound in his throat, his eyelids drooped, and he staggered back before dropping to the ground heavily.

"Talon?" All thoughts of lust and passion fled, and Jackson scrambled over to his mate, running his hands over the furry flank. "Talon! Talon, what's wrong? Get up!"

He heard footsteps crunching in the snow as his brothers rushed over and dropped to their knees beside him.

"What happened?" Logan demanded.

"I don't know. He just fucking dropped." He stared back at Logan, fear and desperation clawing in his chest. "Help him."

Logan leaned over his brother, resting his ear against the cat's chest. His face went slack, his spine snuffed, and he shook his head. "It's his heart."

"What?" Jackson shook Talon's limp body roughly. "No. Talon, wake up." He glared at Logan. "He is not dead!"

“No, but he won’t make it long enough to get him to a hospital.” Logan’s voice cracked and unshed tears glimmered in the moonlight.

“Fuck you. He’s not going to die! What about my blood? Yours saved Keeton.”

Logan shook his head sadly. “It’s not the same thing. If he’d been shot in the heart, it might help. This is different, Jacks.”

“No!” He shoved at Logan’s shoulders. “Do something! Fix him right now!”

“I can help him.” A soft, musical voice spoke from just behind him.

Looking over his shoulder, Jackson frowned at Cole’s other mate. “How?”

“Willow is part elf,” Cole explained as he knelt beside Jackson and wrapped an arm around his waist. “He’s...special. Let him help.”

Jackson nodded and shifted to the side to make room for Willow. He didn’t know shit about elves, but he’d do anything to help his mate.

Willow crouched down in the snow and began rubbing his hands over Talon’s side, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. A soft, golden glow began to shine from beneath his palms, and it seemed to seep straight into Talon’s limp body.

Several minutes passed, and Jackson’s anxiety kicked into high gear. It wasn’t working. Why the fuck wasn’t it working?

He could see the freaky magic glowing out of Willow's hands. Why didn't Talon just open his god—

The big cat sucked in a great lungful of air, and his body jerked and shuddered. His limbs lengthened, his fur began to recede, and within seconds, he'd shifted completely.

Willow slumped over, and Jackson caught him before he could hit the ground. "I'm fine," Willow whispered. "Just tired."

"I've got him." Blaise lifted Willow into his arms and backed away, staring down at the little man with a mix of awe and trepidation.

"Talon?"

So slowly Jackson wanted to slap him, Talon's eyelids flickered before finally flipping open. He stared up at Jackson blankly for just a moment before a slow grin spread over his face.

"Hey, baby."

Jackson wanted to cry. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to punch the asshole in the face for scaring the hell out of him.

"Hey," he answered back. "Don't ever do that shit again."

Reaching to cup his cheek, Talon caressed the skin with the pad of his thumb. "Sorry, pup. Wanna know a secret?"

Jackson rolled his eyes, but he couldn't keep from smiling.

"Sure, tell me a secret."

"You are the best thing that ever happened to me. The only good thing that ever happened to me. He had no right to say

those things about you.”

Glancing over at his father’s still unmoving body, Jackson grimaced. “I don’t think he’s going to be saying anything about anyone for a while.”

“Cut it out, Jacks. I’m trying to have a moment here.”

Jackson grinned and leaned over to rub his nose against his mate’s. “By all means, please continue.”



## TWENTY-ONE



TALON PUSHED INTO A sitting position as Jackson stood and offered a hand to help him up. Gaining his feet, he gratefully took his clothes from Logan's outstretched hand and dressed quickly, his teeth chattering from the bitter coldness.

"How do you feel?" Logan asked, eyeing him with concern.

"Great. Better than I have in years. What did he do to me?" He looked over to where Blaise still cradled Willow against his chest and smiled.

Willow smiled back at him and nodded. "Your heart was very sick. I healed it."

"You...you healed it?" Talon spluttered.

Willow nodded again. "Yes."

Talon didn't know what to say. "Thank you," sounded inadequate considering the gift he'd been given, but he didn't know how else to express his gratitude.

“Thank you. If there’s anything I can do to repay you, just name it.”

Still smiling, Willow shrugged, just a small movement of his shoulders. “I like you, and we’re family now. I’m glad I could help.”

Glancing up at Blaise, Talon had to turn away to hide his smile at the look on the male’s face. Oh, the big, bad hunter had finally met his match.

“Uh, so, which one of you is a Moonkin?” Blaise asked, looking between Cole and Willow.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Cole frowned and cocked his head to the side. “You just saw me as a wolf. I’m silver, not white.”

“What’s a Moonkin?” Willow asked quietly.

“I am,” Talon answered. “All three of you should be nuttier than a fruitcake right now, unless one of you is a white shifter.”

Willow continued to look confused. “I suppose I could be. I’ve never shifted before.”

“Then I guess you’re the winner.” Talon chuckled. Walking over and placing his foot on Roan’s hip, he pushed the man over in the snow to reveal the dart gun on the ground beneath him.

Snatching it up, he turned to glare at his mate. Oh, he was going to paddle the kid’s ass good when they got out of this mess. Talon had thought his heart would explode out of his

chest as he'd watched Jackson's dad raise that gun. Though proud as hell of the pup, he still shook from fear of what could have happened had it been a real weapon.

It had taken him too long to pull his head out of his ass, and now that he'd claimed Jackson for himself, he wouldn't lose him. Jackson may be a shifter and able to take care of himself, but that didn't stop Talon from wanting to protect him.

He was still trying to decide whether to kiss the man he loved or chew his ass out for being reckless when Cole walked up to him and knelt at his feet. Looking between the small man on the ground, his mate, and the rest of his pack, Talon frowned. What the hell was happening?

"Cole, dude, what are you doing?" Jackson placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, shaking him a little. "The man has a beautiful cock, but I have to tell you, I kind of have this covered." He grabbed Talon's flaccid cock through his jeans for emphasis, pulling a strangled grunt from him.

The rest of the pack snickered in the background, and Talon felt his cheeks heat as he knocked away his mate's hand. A paddling was definitely in Jackson's future.

"He is our alpha now. He deserves our respect and submissiveness." Cole lifted his head to stare up at Talon. "Welcome to the pack. I'm sure you will be a great leader."

"Whoa! Hold the fuck up! I am not an alpha, and I already have a home back in Texas." He waved his hands around as panic reared its ugly head. Hell, he could barely take care of

himself. What did he know about running a pack? “Give it to someone else.”

Blaise snorted as he set Willow on his feet and marched over to him. “This isn’t a democracy, Talon. The alpha isn’t elected by majority vote. You challenged Roan, and you won.” He nodded toward the man on the ground who’d begun to rock back and forth in the snow. “Congratulations.”

“No way. Not going to happen.” Talon took several jerky steps back, almost tripping over Cole where he still knelt on the ground.

“Sorry, man.” Blaise clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re the alpha now.”

“I thought a challenge was to the death?”

“No.” Blaise shook his head solemnly. “It usually happens that way because neither is willing to surrender. All it really takes is for one to concede defeat and show an act of submission.”

Talon dropped to his knees, turning his head to the side to bare his neck. He had never submitted to anyone, and it made something burn in his belly. He’d much rather appear weak than be the new alpha of this screwed up pack, though.

Frowning down at him, Blaise growled softly. “You son of a bitch. What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I relinquish my status as alpha and defer to your leadership.”

“You son of a bitch,” Blaise repeated.

A loud squeal tore through the air, and Talon jerked his head around just as the little elf came flying across the snow and launched himself into Blaise's arms again. "My mate is the alpha."

Blaise looked like he would swallow his tongue. He gently pried the man from him and sat him on his feet. "Uh, hi. Willow, right?"

"Willow," the little man said happily as he nodded. Then he turned to Cole, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "And this is your other mate, Cole Cunningham."

Talon rose to his feet and wrapped an arm around Jackson as they watched the three tiptoe around each other. Talon kind of felt sorry for Blaise, but mostly, he just found the whole thing hilarious. Blaise had been quick to remind them on several occasions that he wasn't gay. Now, he had two very male mates. Priceless.

At the same time, he had to call bullshit. He didn't know what hang ups Blaise had, but something told him not liking dick wasn't one of them. The guy would be better off if he'd just accept his mating and get on with it. Bumping Jackson's hip with his own, Talon grinned inwardly. He definitely knew from experience.

"So, what now?"

Blaise snapped his attention to Jackson, looking very thankful for the reprieve. "I have to take your dad to the Council. I also need to question the prisoners and gather as much information as I can before I even attempt to bring formal charges against

one of the elders.” He took a deep breath and turned his gaze to Xander. “Would you be willing to stay and help until we can get things settled and running smoothly?”

Xander eyed each member of the pack before he spoke. “We’ll have a meeting and discuss it. I think we can help out for a bit, though.”

Blaise dipped his head in thanks. Then he turned and growled at Talon again. “I really hate you.”

Talon just snorted and pulled his mate closer. He had everything he needed, right in the palm of his hands.

## TWENTY-TWO



THE TRIP HOME GAVE Jackson plenty of time to think over the events of the last few weeks.

A tiny part of him ached for the loss of his father, but in reality, the man had been dead to him for years. He'd miss his brother, though. Cole had promised to visit, but Jackson knew he would have his hands full with his new alpha mate.

He should probably feel sorry for the self-professed straight man, but Keeton had promised to bring him over to the dark side. Well, it looked like fate had stepped in and taken the matter out of their hands. If anyone could bring Blaise around, it would be Cole.

Though he didn't know Willow well, he had an idea the little man would be just the glue to hold them all together. Smiling at the thought, he reached over and slid his fingers through Talon's. So much had happened, and he'd barely had time to just enjoy being with his mate.

It had taken only three days for them to confiscate the blood samples and vials of serum, and question all the captives. Blaise had called in the Snake River Coven to look after his new pack while he delivered the evidence and Jackson's loopy father to the Council.

Cyrus Redway currently had a cell all to himself while he awaited trial for various crimes against the paranormal community. Jackson didn't really understand the laws, but he did know that the charges would be quite different than kidnapping or manslaughter.

While Cyrus remained securely inside his prison, Blaise still felt concerned for the safety of the pack. He had made them promise to remain vigilant and had even gone so far as to call in more Enforcers to stay with them until after the trial. Flynn Murphy was set to arrive the following week.

Logan's Jeep bumped along the gravel drive, and Jackson sighed. It felt good to be home. He may have lived the first fourteen years of his life in the Crystal Creek Pack, but this is where he had grown up, become a man, found his mate, and had a family. This was home and where he belonged.

"I can't believe Boston just left Malakai like that," Keeton said sadly.

"He didn't even say goodbye," Jackson added.

Talon squeezed his hand, gaining his attention. "Don't worry. Boston just has some issues he needs to work through."



“He won’t be able to stay away for long,” Logan added as he pulled to a stop in front of the house. “It’s not something you choose, but something that chooses you. He doesn’t really have a say in the matter.”

Keeton giggled as he opened his door. “Are you saying you don’t enjoy being mated to me?”

Logan laughed and winked at his mate. “Get out of here, goofball. You have a wedding to plan, remember?”

“Oh!” Keeton stood beside the Jeep, flapping his arms. “It’s only two weeks until Valentine’s Day. Your birthday is coming up, then mine, and I don’t even know when I’m going to find time to plan a June wedding.”

Jackson snorted and shook his head. He didn’t think it was exactly a life-altering dilemma, but then, he wasn’t the one getting married.

As if reading his mind, Talon groaned and turned to look at him. “Please tell me you don’t want to get married.”

Chuckling, Jackson shook his head. “Not on your life.”

“Thank the gods.” Talon sighed and opened the door to climb down from his seat. “So, are you going to take Blaise up on the offer?”

“I’m thinking about it.” Jackson slid out of the Jeep and grabbed his bag from the cargo area. “He said I wouldn’t have to move, and I could do all the work from here. I’d have to get a new computer and set up a workstation, though.”

He spoke lightly, calmly, but inside, he practically bounced with excitement. He still couldn't believe Blaise had offered him a job as the Security Administrator for the Council. Not only would he be working on securing the Council database and managing their records, but he'd also be designing interlinks to connect the different packs, covens, colonies, and whatever else via the web. He already had big ideas on how to modify the existing registry as well as the registration process itself.

“What do you think?” He wouldn't let on to it, but Talon's opinion meant everything to him.

Talon didn't speak until they made it up the stairs and into their room. *Their room*. Jackson liked the sound of that. He made a mental note to move all of his things to Talon's room after a nice long nap.

His mate dropped his bag just inside their door, stripped out of his clothes, and went over to plop down on the bed. Lifting up on his elbows, he smiled widely.

“I think it's a great idea. It's a fantastic job. You get to do what you love.” He crooked his finger for Jackson to come closer.

Jackson disrobed as well and moved to stand between his mate's spread thighs. Talon tugged at his hip until Jackson fell over him.

Laughing, he straddled Talon's hips and bent until their noses touched. Talon's hand cupped the back of his head and pulled him forward, sealing their mouths together in a heated kiss.

“And, I won’t have to worry about you getting hurt,” he whispered against Jackson’s parted lips.

Jackson grinned and licked at his mate’s mouth. “You like having me around, huh?”

Talon flipped them so fast it left his head spinning. He hovered over him, pinning his shoulders to the bed. “Yeah, pup. I like having you around.”

“I’m hungry.”



“WAY TO KILL THE mood, Jacks.” Talon laughed and pushed off of his mate. Good grief, the kid would eat them out of house and home. He started to roll off the bed. “Come on, and let’s get—”

Jackson tackled him to the mattress, covering his body, and shoving his tongue down Talon’s throat. Talon hesitated for a heartbeat before fisting his hands in Jackson’s hair and attacking his mouth like a starving man. They had important things to discuss, but he was only human—kind of—and his mate proved too tempting to resist.

Breaking the kiss, Jackson slid his lips down Talon’s throat, rocking against him and grinding their renewed erections together. “Didn’t say what I was hungry for. Need you now, Talon. Can’t wait anymore. It’s gotta be now.”

Oh, yeah, Talon liked *now*. He was definitely an instant gratification kind of guy. “Get the lube.”

Jackson dove across the bed and ripped open the drawer with such eagerness it flew out of the nightstand, its contents spilling onto the carpet. Wiggling his perfectly rounded ass, Jackson inched over the edge of the bed, growling in frustration.

Talon almost laughed. Almost. The sight of those muscled globes wiggling invitingly gave him some ideas though. Moving across the mattress quickly, he parted Jackson's cheeks and zeroed in on his tight little pucker. Without wasting time on preliminaries, he dove in, licking and sucking, pushing his tongue past the tight ring.

Jackson groaned, pushing back into Talon's mouth and humping his hips against the bed. Talon pushed a finger inside the satin heat beside his tongue, sawing it in and out, stretching his mate as quickly as he could without hurting him.

Damn, he needed to be inside him.

Once he had three fingers pumping into Jackson's hole with ease, he moved away and slapped his mate's ass. "Get up here and ride my cock, baby."

Jackson growled, the sound deep, primal, and sexy as sin. Talon moved to sit on the edge of the mattress, spreading his thighs wide and stroking his weeping cock. Once on his feet, Jackson flipped open the cap on the lube and poured a generous amount into his palm before taking over Talon's ministrations and coating his cock with the slick.

Without a word, he turned to straddle his lap and press his back against Talon's chest. Talon gripped his cock by the base,

lining it up with Jackson's entrance, and held perfectly still while he waited.

"Climb on, baby."

Sinking over him, Jackson took him in slowly, inch by torturous inch. "Oh, damn, you feel fucking good." He looped an arm over his head and around Talon's neck. "Don't know how long I can last."

"Just take what you need, baby." Talon nipped at the damp skin on his throat. "I've got you."

Once fully seated, Jackson paused to turn his head and claim Talon's mouth in a kiss that left his balls burning with the need to come. Grasping his mate's hips, Talon lifted him, moaning at the wonderful friction dragging along his throbbing shaft.

"Move, Jacks."

Grinning against his lips, Jackson tightened his inner muscles, clamping down on Talon's cock. "With pleasure."

Leaning forward and bracing his hands on Talon's knees, Jackson planted his feet on the floor and began jackhammering his hips up and down.

Still grabbing at his mate's hips, Talon held on for dear life. Holy shit, he'd never felt anything like it. He just hoped he could hold out until Jackson found his own release. Luckily, it only took a few more strokes before Jackson began to pant and whimper, his movements becoming wild and erratic.

"Now, Talon."

“Hell, yes.”

Talon pulled him back against his chest, fell to the mattress, and planted his feet as he began thrusting upward in quick, hard jabs. Keeping a bruising grip around his waist, his other hand wrapped around Jackson’s bouncing dick to stroke him hard and fast.

“Come for me, Jacks.” He rammed into his mate harder, his brain going fuzzy, and speech becoming more difficult. “Christ, you’re so fucking tight.”

“Claim me, Talon. Please, claim me.”

He’d waited so long for this. Talon needed the bond between them, the closeness that came from claiming his mate. He licked a long, wet path along the side of Jackson’s neck before sealing his lips over the jumping vein and sucking hard.

“Mine,” he whispered.

Then he bit into his mate’s neck, his canines pushing effortlessly through the supple flesh. Groaning at the sweetest taste to ever pass through his lips, he couldn’t even remember why he’d waited so long to do this.

Jackson stiffened, yelling out his name as he bathed his chest and stomach in thick ropes of creamy seed. Removing his teeth from Jackson’s neck, Talon wrapped both arms around his mate as he pumped through his climax, murmuring his name again and again.



ONCE JACKSON HAD WRUNG the last drop from him, Talon collapsed back onto the bed, his arms spread wide. Grinning at his mate, Jackson rolled off him slowly, and they both hissed when Talon's flagging erection slipped from his ass with a wet squelch.

"Love you," he panted, stretching out on his back beside his mate.

"Yeah. Me, too. You." Talon waved his hand around halfheartedly. "You know."

Jackson just laughed. It seemed the connection between Talon's brain and tongue had short-circuited.

Nuzzling his nose against Talon's throat, he inhaled the warm, sandalwood scent, moaning with renewed need as his canines elongated. Though exhausted, he had one thing left to do. One thing he'd been waiting to do for seven years.

"Mine," he murmured against the damp skin before sinking his fangs into the yielding flesh, claiming his mate, and bonding them forever.

Talon's sweet blood filled his mouth, and Jackson sighed in contentment. So many years wasted, but it had been well worth it. Talon was finally his.

His cock twitched, swelling and filling with renewed interest. He knew they needed to talk. He knew Talon had to be exhausted. He didn't care.

Pulling his canines from his mate's neck, he licked over the bite mark as his hand skimmed down his mate's stomach to

grasp and fondle Talon's limp prick. With a little persuasion, he hoped to wake up his new favorite toy and create his own whispers in the night.

Talon arched his hips into Jackson's hand and groaned loudly.

Okay, maybe something a bit more vocal than whispers.



## EPILOGUE



SITTING ALONE ON THE sofa in the den, Jackson flipped through the channels on the television with more force than strictly necessary. It was fine, though. He was fine. Everything was fine.

Just because it happened to be Valentine's Day didn't mean anything. He definitely wasn't pouting just because Xander and Logan had whisked their mates away on romantic getaways to celebrate.

He knew Talon loved him, and he didn't need a holiday to prove it. To be fair, he had never expected roses or chocolates or any of the other hallmarks of the day. At the same time, he had kind of hoped his mate would at least *acknowledge* it. Maybe even make him peek-a-boo eggs.

That would have been enough for Jackson.

Instead, Talon had cracked one eye open when Jackson had presented him with his Valentine's gift—a beautiful gold

watch with a leather wristband—set it on the nightstand, then had immediately fallen back to sleep.

Fine. He hadn't made it home from work until well after four in the morning. Jackson could let him sleep in a little.

Only, it was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon, and Talon still hadn't made an appearance. When he had tried to check on him through their new telepathic bond, he had received only a grunt in response.

Could their honeymoon phase be coming to an end? They had officially been together for barely a month now. Surely it couldn't be over already.

*"Jackson?"*

He jumped, just as he did every time Talon's voice rang inside his head. He hoped it would get better with time, but after two weeks, it still startled him if he wasn't expecting it.

*"Yes? Are you awake now?"* He wondered if he sounded as irritated as he felt.

*"Can you bring me some water?"*

Jackson frowned. While he had no problem taking care of his mate, it was a pretty odd request considering he hadn't seen Talon all day.

*"Sure. Are you okay? Is there something wrong?"*

*"I'm fine. Just lazy."*

Reminding himself that he had just been whining about not being able to spend time with Talon, he pushed up from the

sofa. It really wasn't a big deal. He had asked for much more on plenty of occasions. He didn't typically ignore his mate for hours before requesting a favor, though.

Shuffling into the kitchen, he grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, then retraced his steps to the staircase. At the bedroom door, he paused, and for a moment, he actually wondered if he should knock. After brief consideration, he shook his head and sighed.

Something had gone horribly wrong if he felt like an outsider in his own bedroom. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Talon sat with his back against the headboard, his broad chest bare, and the blankets pulled up around his hips. He had his phone in his hand, the screen illuminating his handsome face as he scrolled.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Talon returned without looking up from his phone.

“I brought your water.”

“Thanks.” He jerked a thumb distractedly toward the nightstand. “Just leave it here.”

His annoyance growing, Jackson stalked across the room and slammed the plastic bottle down on the table. “Do you think you could at least look at me?”

With a heavy sigh, Talon lowered his phone to his lap and lifted his head. “What?”

Was he fucking serious? “I don’t know. I guess I was just hoping to spend some time with you today.”

Talon actually rolled his goddamn eyes. “We see each other every day, and I spent all day yesterday with you.”

“Excuse the hell out of me,” he snapped. “I didn’t know there was a limit. My fucking bad.”

Gods, this was not how he had expected the day to go at all.

Talon sighed and went back to looking at his phone. “Stop being a brat. Not everything is about you.”

He was going to kill him. Not by accident. No insanity plea. He was going to straight up murder him.

“Talon, I—”

“Can you close the door when you leave?”

Jackson gaped, heat creeping up his neck as his anger boiled over. “Screw you, Talon Cartwright.”

Stomping out of the room, he slammed the door behind him with enough force to shake the entire second floor. His heart raced, and his muscles cramped as he jogged down the stairs. Never, not once, had Talon treated him like this, even when he had been so desperate to keep him at arm’s length.

Jackson didn’t like it.

He didn’t even care if he was acting like a spoiled, petulant child. It wasn’t like he asked for the damn moon. He had just wanted to spend the most romantic day of the year with his mate, maybe curled up on the sofa watching movies and eating

popcorn. He really hadn't thought that was too much to ask, but apparently, that made him selfish and unreasonable.

Asshole.

Heading back to the kitchen, he had every intention of decimating the pantry, but he pulled up short when he found three men standing at the edge of the island.

"Cole?" He glanced at Blaise, then Willow, his muscles slowing unknitting as a huge smile stretched across his face. "Oh, my gods. What are you doing here?"

"Surprise!" Cole and Willow sang in unison.

Bounding forward, they both wrapped their arms around him, squeezing him with every ounce of strength they possessed until he struggled to breathe. He didn't care.

Blaise chuckled and shuffled forward to clap him on the shoulder. "I'm just the chauffeur, but it's good to see you again."

"Ignore him," Cole insisted. "We had every intention of coming alone, but he just about shit kittens. It was not pleasant."

"Cole," Blaise warned.

Jackson chuckled at their bickering. He had been worried in the beginning, afraid Blaise wouldn't be able to overcome whatever had him so tangled up about his mating, but clearly, they were doing okay.

“Oh!” Wiggling out of the embrace, Willow bounced over to the kitchen table and retrieved a bouquet of white roses from one of the chairs. “For you.”

“Me?” He accepted the flowers with shaking hands, a lump forming in his throat. Why the hell was he getting so emotional over some plants? “Thank you, but you didn’t have to.”

“We didn’t.” Willow beamed, and his gaze flickered to a spot over Jackson’s right shoulder. “He did.”

Jackson spun around, his eyes stinging with tears when he found Talon standing just inside the kitchen wearing his new watch and a sheepish grin. “You did this?”

His mate shrugged. “I’m not really good at this kind of stuff, and I didn’t know what to get you. I know how much you’ve been missing your brother, and I thought—”

Striding forward, Jackson grabbed his mate by the back of the neck and dragged him into a hard, demanding kiss. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I’m sorry I got angry.”

Talon sighed, a contented little noise, and dipped his head to rub their noses together. “I know. I would have been pissed, too, and I’m sorry I treated you like that. I just wanted it to be a surprise.”

Oh, he was definitely surprised, in the most fantastic way possible. “I love you, Tal.”

“Love you, too, pup. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in the south, and while she's traveled to many exotic locations, she always returns home where the tea is sweet, the grass is green, and everyone calls you hon.

Gabrielle is a firm believer in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing life with both hands. She also insists that a great cup of coffee can cure anything, and happily ever afters are best served with a heaping side of kink.

When not reading, she should probably be writing, but is likely watching cat videos instead.

Ah, procrastination.

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