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FATED MATES

AND

HOW TO WOO THEM

AJ SHERWOOD

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FATED MATES AND HOW TO WOO THEM

Fated Mates 1

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CHAPTER 1

Preparing for the architecture fraternity party had been more than a little bit of work and frankly, Chase no longer remembered why he'd thought it a good idea to sign up for the committee. He was tired enough that his memory on the whole thing was foggy. Some part of his brain insisted Sig and Max were involved in the scam, which was entirely possible. Maybe it had something to do with Nikita also being on the committee? Chase tended to look for any possible excuse to be near Nikita.

Not that she'd agreed to date him yet, but he was working on it.

Anyway, he didn't remember exactly how he'd signed up for it, he just knew at this moment, after a very long three days of juggling school projects, decorating for the party, and not getting enough sleep, he was dead tired. Even the sheer amount of noise filtering in through the door wasn't quite enough to rev him up again.

Chase estimated there were a good hundred to two hundred people here for the party, including alumni. The guest list was so large they'd had to rent a party hall, not that a big venue was a bad thing, because the more alumni the better. It was a great chance to network, get internships and possible jobs. It was also a semi-fundraising party to entice alumni to fork over money to their alma mater. It was important, Chase wasn't saying otherwise, but he'd pay someone to let him sleep right now instead.

People scurried back and forth, getting drinks and snacks out to replenish the buffet table, double checking on their freshmen to make sure everyone was fine—one person already drank too much who was now suffering in the bathroom—and so on and so on. Some of the more recent graduate alumni even started to help out once a few more people than bathroom stalls started looking like they might have had one too many.

Chase was at the kitchen island mixing punch when he heard someone

approach from behind him.

“Need some help?”

Chase was elbows deep in all of this and without energy to spare, so turned, already expressing thanks. “Hey, thanks, could you grab—”

Damn. Where had this handsome guy walked in from?

He stood taller than Chase by several inches, black hair long and tied back, looking like a model in search of a runway. He was long and lean, with a high brow and tanned skin. For a long second, Chase’s brain could only gibber and sigh. Such a nice view. Not that he was gay, or anything, but every man could appreciate how good-looking other men were, right?

Fingers snapped in front of Chase’s nose. “Don’t fade out on me. How can I help?”

Right. He’d asked a question. Chase gave himself a shake and managed a smile. “Sorry. Long day. Can you grab the pitchers I’ve already made up and get them on the table inside the room?”

“Sure.” The man grabbed four by the handles like a pro before walking casually into the party hall.

Damn fine ass on that man.

Chase lightly slapped his cheek and made himself focus. Mix punch. Lots of thirsty people.

He had two more pitchers done when Nikita skittered over to him, poking him in the side. Her ponytail looked a little askew, and she’d thrown on a white apron around her petite waist, likely to protect the black dress she wore. “Chase! Did you seriously ask Ronan to carry pitchers in?”

He’d only asked one person that, so...yes? Was that his name? “I don’t know who he was but yes, probably. He asked how he could help.”

Nikita gave him a Look like he’d done something stupid. (She gave him that look a lot to be fair.) “Do you not know who he is?”

“Am I supposed to?” And was this even the moment for a lecture, busy as they were?

“Ronan Draughon. He’s one of the most famous graduates out of the architecture department!” Nikita said with exasperation. “He’s won multiple awards. He’s a genius in the field and he’s only thirty! How do you not know this?”

“I can’t figure out how *you* know all this.” It wasn’t like Chase investigated people from graduating classes. Who did that?

“Ugh, forget it, it’s like I’m talking to a brick wall. I’ll take these two.”

She pointed a stern finger at Chase's face. "Do not ask him to do menial tasks."

Maybe the man had a fan club, Chase mused as he mixed up the last of the punch. That would explain why Nikita knew him. Hell, Ronan was handsome enough to have one, and if he really was all that, then a fan club was inevitable.

Anyway. Not Chase's business.

He went back to being a good committee member and keeping the snack and drink bar stocked. He carried in the last of the supplies himself to put on the buffet table in the party hall. It was loud, chaotic, so much so it was hard to see what was going on past his own face.

As long as people stopped drinking themselves stupid, they were good.

It was like Chase's thought summoned bad luck from the ether. He saw Max supporting a girl on one side, Ronan on the other, and she was limping between them. Shit.

Chase darted ahead of them to get the kitchen door open, holding it aside as they awkwardly maneuvered through it, then shut it again. It cut the noise in half, so he had a prayer of being heard and hearing the answer now. "What happened?"

"One of the spotlights got knocked over," Max answered. He was almost head level with the girl he was holding up, as Max wasn't a big guy, and his black hair was mussed somehow and sticking up a little in the back. "Ronan caught it, but she got knocked into in the process, and sent over a speaker."

"I'm okay," she assured all three of them. "I just twisted my ankle going down. It's more annoying than painful."

"Let's get it wrapped, okay?" Max carefully sat her down in a chair. "Then we can call someone to get you. Chase, where's the first aid kit?"

"It's right over there, I'll grab it."

Chase was efficiency itself fetching the first-aid kit and coming back. He was worried about his frat sister, of course, but it was impossible to ignore Ronan when the man stood right there. He noticed Ronan favored one arm, like he was cradling an injury. Had he gotten hurt too?

Chase handed the kit over to Max, as his friend was better at first-aid than he was, then asked Ronan, "Did you get hurt?"

"I'll be fine," Ronan assured him with a smile.

That answer didn't quite reassure Chase for some reason.

"Chase, can you support her leg while I wrap it?" Max requested.

Pulled back to the patient, Chase helped as Max dictated. When he looked up again, Ronan was gone. His answer still didn't sit well with Chase, so he let Max handle the logistics of getting the girl home and went looking for his possibly injured alumnus.

Nowhere in the hall or bathroom was a sign of Ronan, so Chase went outside, finally finding him leaning against the darkened side of the building, coat laying on the grass. A pained grimace was on Ronan's face as he gingerly held his arm up. Even in the dim lighting, Chase could see it was a mottled patch of bruises. The spotlight had apparently come down hard.

"You *are* hurt," Chase blurted out.

Ronan lifted his head to look at him. "I'll be fine."

"I don't know what that means, but you hiding out here doesn't help, you know?" Chase stomped in closer, determined to draw him back inside. "We've got more bandages, I can wrap that and get you home—"

Ronan lifted a hand to stop him, expression morphing into...amusement? "Chase. I'm a vampire."

Wha...oh. *Oh*. So, in other words, the injury would likely heal before Chase could even get Ronan home. "Um. Then are you out here just waiting for it to heal?"

"I didn't want to worry anyone when it would heal fine without fuss. I didn't expect you to catch that I'd gotten hurt shielding her." Ronan looked down at his arm and sighed. "It is taking longer than I expected, but I also haven't fed well recently, so that could be why."

What Chase knew of vampire biology could fill maybe a thimble, but he had heard the healing factor in vampires was influenced by two things: first, what generation they were; second, how well fed they were.

If Ronan needed a little blood to heal faster, Chase didn't see a problem offering it. "Then feed from me."

Ronan stared at him, a man waiting for a punchline. "I'm sorry?"

"If you were human and injured, I'd bandage that," Chase explained since apparently, he'd thrown Ronan for a loop with this offer. "But you're not so that won't help. What you need is blood to heal, right? So let my blood help. Er...unless you like female blood better? Is that a thing with vampires? Like are there preferences and stuff?"

"For some," Ronan acknowledged slowly. "I'm bi, so I don't really care about the gender of my partner. If you're really sure...?"

"Sure," Chase encouraged. It wasn't a big deal. Like donating blood,

right?

Ronan's dark brown eyes searched his for some reason, still questioning, but eventually he shrugged and took hold of Chase's arm, pulling him in closer. "Then, thank you."

"No problem." Chase loosened the top two buttons on his shirt so he could pull his collar aside, giving Ronan better access.

Ronan's hand found the small of Chase's back as he shifted in closer. As this very handsome man came in close enough to kiss, Chase abruptly realized this was going to be a lot more intimate than he'd expected. Uh. Oops? He hadn't thought this through. Wow, Ronan smelled amazing, was that cologne?

It was getting hotter out here, or at least, Chase felt flushed all of a sudden.

The tip of Ronan's nose traced a line along Chase's neck just once, and that shouldn't be enough to get his heart skipping a beat, but damn if it didn't do just that. Then the flat of his tongue laved along Chase's skin. He was licking Chase. That shouldn't be hot. Why was that hot?

Chase's eyes fluttered shut, hands finding purchase in Ronan's shirt on either side of his waist. He leaned into the caress and barely felt it when two sharp teeth sank into his neck. Blissful. That was how this felt. Utterly blissful. Hell, no wonder people volunteered to do this. It made total sense. This felt.... Nothing Chase could think of equated to it. Nothing he'd ever experienced had felt this good.

Then Ronan's mouth pulled at his skin, sucking harder, and the movement tugged directly at Chase's dick. He squirmed in response, helpless to do otherwise. Chase had never been turned on this fast in his life. The more Ronan fed from him, the more intense the throbbing in his dick became, and he had to fight the urge to grind his hips into the other man's. Chase clawed at willpower, trying to keep his base instinct in check, but dammit, he was coming out of his skin.

He might have kept his hips in place, but his hands were all movement. He kept trying to find some hold on Ronan, hands roving over the man's warm back, the softness of his t-shirt. Little gasps and aborted groans poured out of Chase's mouth but he couldn't stop them. Even to his own ears he sounded obscene. There was no hiding what this was doing to him.

As embarrassing as this all was, he didn't want Ronan to stop. It felt too amazingly good.

Of course the second he thought that, Ronan lifted his head. Chase made a noise of protest, hand coming up to Ronan's head, trying to pull him back in. *No, not yet, don't stop yet!*

"I can't take anymore from you," Ronan rasped. He sounded strangely as affected as Chase. "It'll endanger you. Don't worry, I won't leave you frustrated. You need to come, don't you."

Yes. Please. Chase would absolutely collapse into a puddle of frustration if he didn't come soon.

Ronan dipped his head down again but this time it was to snare Chase's mouth. Chase dove into the kiss with enthusiasm, needing some outlet for the sexual energy coursing through him. Ronan's tongue invaded his mouth, tangling with his in a hot glide, and Chase groaned. God, that felt amazing. French kissing was this hot? He didn't even mind the metallic tang of blood, it just made everything hotter.

He barely registered his button and zipper being undone, but Chase felt Ronan's hand. It was firm, the skin lightly callused on the fingertips, and deliciously warm. He thrust up into it as soon as Ronan wrapped fingers around his shaft, needing friction more than he needed air. Yes. Yes, yes, yes, that was what he needed, that sensual stroking. Ronan knew what he was about. He got his thumb right at Chase's tip, caressing along the main vein, and as wound up as Chase was, he could feel his climax building quickly.

Pleasure slammed through him, feeling like liquid fire along his nerves. Chase gasped into Ronan's mouth as he came hard, arching into the man, clutching him tightly around the shoulders. In the aftermath, he felt like his brain became nothing more than staticky white noise.

The next thing he was aware of was Ronan lifting him into a bridal carry. Chase shook his head a little, trying to dismiss the dazed afterglow enough to think. It proved hard. It kind of felt like coming down from a high. No wonder people were addicted to sex.

"Ronan." Chase had to reboot his mouth twice to get it working enough to speak. "Your arm—"

"Fully healed," Ronan assured him. "Let me sit you up here so you can catch your breath."

Sitting. Yes. Please let him do that. Chase didn't trust his legs. Especially not his knees. They threatened to betray him if he even tried to put weight on them yet.

Ronan didn't move him far, just to the short retaining wall next to the

stairs. The cold concrete pressed up against his thighs and Chase realized he really must have checked out, as his pants and shirt were all done back up.

Well, that was just embarrassing, that Ronan had cleaned him up without Chase even realizing.

It slowly sank in that aside from feeding a vampire—which was a definite first—he'd also had his first sexual experience. With a *man*. One he barely had a name to. Chase was used to getting himself into situations, but damn, this one really took the cake. He wasn't even sure how to feel about it all. Know what? He would freak out about this later. Right now, he couldn't summon the spoons to have the breakdown he deserved.

Ronan stood between his legs, hands resting on Chase's hips. His dark eyes studied Chase like he'd never seen someone like him before. Chase had no idea why Ronan was looking at him like that. Surely what they'd done wasn't all that unusual?

"You," Ronan murmured, "are so delightfully unexpected."

"Eh?" Chase blinked at him, not following. "What?"

"Chase, two questions. Have you ever fed a vampire before?"

Had Chase done something weird? He'd totally done something weird, hadn't he. A little nervous about answering, he gamely did so anyway.

"Um. No?"

"I thought not."

What did that mean?

"Second question. Did me feeding from you hurt at all?"

This at least Chase felt more confident in answering. "Not at all. Really, really the opposite. Um. I guess that last part is obvious."

"Deliciously so," Ronan purred.

Okay, the purr was hitting below the belt. Chase felt that purr right in the feels.

"CHASE!" Nikita yelled from somewhere nearby. "Where the hell did you disappear to!"

Oh shit. Right. The party. Chase was in the middle of a party. Panic shot him off the wall. "Sorry, Ronan, I have to get back in there. Um, do you feel better? Your arm's okay?"

Ronan visibly bit back his first response. "Arm is fine. But we need to talk later, all right?"

"Yeah, sure." Chase gave him an awkward smile and then skittered past, jogging straight back into the building.

He'd just ignore that he'd had sex, out in the open, with a guy. At least until later. Right now was very much *not* the moment.



Ronan stood there watching Chase go, frustration curdling in his gut. This wasn't the right time or place for the conversation that needed to happen, he understood that, but dammit, it was not what he wanted to happen. Ronan had never been with someone so compatible with him. The chemistry between him and Chase had been off the charts insane. Ronan was incredibly aroused, body pulsing with need, and he had to take several deep, calming breaths—plus go through some mental cold shower material—to resist the urge to tackle Chase and finish what they'd started.

Yes, definitely some very good chemistry with Chase. Plus he was hella cute. Ronan normally wasn't attracted to redheads, but he could absolutely make an exception for Chase. Those big, apple green eyes had pulled him right in from the start. He'd gotten glimpses of smooth, pale skin, and frankly he needed more than glimpses.

If Chase had told the truth—and the wanton desire and lack of pain Chase had displayed made Ronan inclined to believe him—it meant Chase was biologically compatible with vampires. At the very *least*, possibly more.

Ronan knew one thing. Tonight might not be the right timing to talk about it, but he was absolutely not leaving here until he had Chase's contact info.

They were absolutely revisiting this. Ronan would make sure of it.

CHAPTER 2

By the time the party was over, Chase was done. Stick a fork in him done. He drove home like a badly animated zombie, changed into pajamas, and flopped straight into bed. He was out before his head even hit the pillow.

He woke up some ten hours later feeling rested if groggy from the deep sleep. With a wide yawn, he rolled out of bed and into the bathroom, starting the water to warm it before shucking clothes and climbing under the spray.

Chase was mid-shampoo, fingers massaging his scalp, when last night's events came slamming through his consciousness like a freight train.

Holy. Shit. He'd had sex last night. Wait, did a hand job and a kiss hot enough to melt his synapses count as sex? Chase was uncertain on this point, but someone else had gotten him off, so he was calling it sex.

He'd had sex last night. With a vampire he'd barely known an hour. Damn handsome one too, but beside the point. Chase slumped against the cool tiles to sit for a minute. He'd heard over the years how good sex could be, how it made a person feel, but experiencing it was another thing entirely. It had honestly felt like Ronan had stroked every nerve in his body into an overload of pleasure. Felt fucking fantastic, to be honest.

But oh, there was the guilt. He liked Nikita, right? He'd been chasing her long enough. So why had he given in to Ronan so easily? Chase hadn't thought twice. It hadn't even occurred to him to say no, for that matter.

Was it vampire stimulus or something? Was that why?

Brain a mess and no closer to an answer, he finished the shower, got out, threw on clothes, and then called up Max. If anyone could untangle the ball of thoughts in his head, it would be his best friend. Chase sat on the edge of the bed, chewing on his bottom lip as he listened to the phone ring.

Max answered with a grunt. "*You finally up?*"

"Um, yeah. Max. I got a question."

“Question for a friend?”

“I’ll be the friend I’m asking for. Uhh...so, um, I guess I better start from the beginning. I kinda made out with Ronan last night?”

Dead silence.

“I’m sorry, I’m quite certain my ears didn’t wake up with the rest of my body. Say that again?”

“You heard me. I made out with Ronan last night. Um. Kinda did a bit more than that, too.” Chase winced. Maybe he should have planned out what to say first? This was already coming out wrong. “When the whole spotlight incident happened, and he stepped outside, I went to check on him ’cause I was worried he’d gotten hurt after all. Turns out he was fine, but, um”—shit, should he mention the whole vampire thing? Ronan hadn’t told anyone else about it, so maybe he shouldn’t?—“things kinda rolled from there and I ended up doing things with him.”

Max made a noise somewhere between a screech of surprise and incredulous laughter. *“Oh my god. Chase. Wait, wait, I thought you were straight?”*

“I, uh, yeah that’s kinda partly why I’m freaking out. I thought I was too. I mean, literally, never been attracted to a guy before.”

“I can see why you’re in a tailspin. But speaking as a bi person, attraction to both sexes isn’t always fifty-fifty. Sometimes, like with me, you lean very heavily toward one sex and you occasionally like the other.”

It was true Max had only dated guys for as long as Chase had known him. In fact, if Max hadn’t said he was bi, Chase would never have guessed it. Hearing this confirmation from Max made him feel a little better.

“Okay, so, it could be I’m bi and for the first time I found a guy I’m attracted to. I feel like I need time to let it sink in, but it does explain last night.”

“Could be you’re bi. Could be you’re just attracted to Ronan. I mean, sexuality doesn’t fit inside neat boxes. But whatever it is, it’s okay. Totally fine if you need to sleep on it and let it settle for a few days. Or months. Sexuality is fluid, it can change over time, so give yourself grace.”

“Noted.” It really did make him feel better. Like he still knew himself, he’d just learned a new aspect.

“Now, let’s tackle the next part of this. Nikita.”

Chase let out a pained groan. “You know how much I like her, and now I’m feeling guilty, so why the hell did I go along with Ronan when he started

kissing me?”

“Okay, my little virgin, let me explain some basics here. You can like someone and be attracted to someone else. You can be attracted to someone and not like them. Okay? The two don’t always go hand in hand.”

“So just because I was with him last night, it has nothing to do with how I feel for Nikita.”

“Quite possibly. You were attracted, he was attracted, things happened. And it’s not like you and Nikita are together, so you shouldn’t feel guilty. There’s no promises between you two.”

Also a good point. See? Calling Max was genius.

Then Max’s tone got wicked. *“How was it?”*

Chase thought about it. Then decided he was totally the type to kiss and tell. *“Fucking fantastic. He damn near melted my brain.”*

Max cackled. Outright cackled. *“I wondered if something would happen. I caught him looking at you a couple of times.”*

“Eh, really?”

“I think you were too busy to really notice, but he kept giving you this once over and smiling, like a man enjoying the view.”

“How is it I never notice when someone is interested in me?”

“You don’t want me to answer that question, trust me. Anyway. I’m very glad you enjoyed yourself. Now what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean? Like, do I want to follow up with him or something?” Chase wasn’t so sure about that. Ronan was a vampire, the sex had happened because Chase fed him. Right? There wasn’t anything deeper between them. “Nah. I enjoyed last night but I like Nikita. It doesn’t change things.”

“Really? Chemistry like that is hard to find between people. I would think you should at least consider it, but it’s your call.”

From downstairs, Chase could hear his mother calling, asking if he was up. He glanced that direction before saying, “Max, my Mom’s calling me down. I gotta go.”

“Yeah, fine. Talk to you later.”

“Sure, bye.” Chase hung up and headed downstairs. He was starving, so he hoped his mom had something made up for him. It was basically dinner time, so she probably did.

He put Max’s question completely out of his mind. It wasn’t like Ronan would be interested in dating him or anything, right? It was just the chemistry

from the feeding that had gotten them all hot and bothered. It was like a one-night stand. He should think of it like that.

By the time Chase hit the bottom step, he'd already mentally switched tracks. "Mom, what's for dinner?"

CHAPTER 3

With the chaos of the party, Ronan hadn't managed to catch Chase one-on-one again after their encounter. In fact, Chase disappeared at some point, and he'd failed to get any contact information whatsoever. It'd frustrated Ronan to no end.

It did not mean he was going to give up, though.

Ronan had maintained many a contact within the architecture department ever since graduation so it wasn't any real trouble to call up a friend, who in turn put him in touch with another guy who was Chase's friend, who was quite happy to chat and give him Chase's phone number. Took twenty minutes to manage.

Ha! Take that, elusive redhead.

He tried texting first, didn't get a response. Impatient, he switched to calling. His first two calls didn't pick up, but Ronan wasn't too surprised. Odds were Chase was still dead asleep after being up all night. His call Sunday evening was also ignored, though, which wasn't the result he wanted.

All right. Fine. If Chase wouldn't answer, then he'd go to him directly.

Ronan worked a half day on Monday, taking the rest of the day off before heading straight to the college. He parked near the front of the architecture department, then strode right inside. These were his old stomping grounds, so he knew them well. He smiled at people as he passed, recognizing some faces from the party, and stopped to chat with an old professor, all the while keeping one eye peeled for a certain redhead.

It wasn't until he was at the back of the building, toward the workspace area, that he finally spied his quarry. Chase sat at one of the drafting tables, toiling away on a drawing, earbuds in his ears. He was completely, utterly focused, and didn't notice Ronan at all.

Finally. Found him. Ronan huffed out a breath of relief, but still irritated

on some level he'd been forced to hunt Chase physically down like this. He went straight to Chase and pulled an earbud out.

"Hey, what—" Chase swiveled in the chair, looking up with a protest, only to stop dead. His pretty green eyes flared wide. "Ronan."

Ronan caught his arm and hauled him up. "You and I need to talk. Somewhere private."

"Um, but—"

"No buts."

Ronan got an arm around his waist, keeping him in motion until they could get out of the room and into one of the empty classrooms nearby. They garnered a few looks on the way, but Ronan ignored those. He didn't care if rumors spread.

Chase was still making inarticulate noises of protest even after he got them both inside a classroom with the door shut.

"Why are you here?" Chase looked honestly confused.

Ronan summoned patience. He didn't want to rile Chase up, after all. Ronan needed him to listen. "I told you we needed to talk."

"Oh. Right, you did." Chase's expression said he'd just now remembered this.

For the love of...

"Chase. Your reaction to feeding is not typical."

Chase blinked, then blinked again, looking rather like someone had smacked him on the back of the head. "Uh. It's not?"

"No. Very atypical, as a matter of fact." Okay good, Ronan had his full attention now. It let him be more patient as he explained. "For most humans—and by most I mean 99% of the population—feeding a vampire is nice. Just nice. There's some pain involved; our saliva is meant to act as an anesthetic, but it's not a painless experience. It gives people a very mild, pleasant sensation and that's about it."

Chase's brows beetled together in confusion. "But that's not how it felt to me at all."

"I know. I could tell from your reactions. You're part of that one percent. You are very compatible with vampire chemistry."

Chase sat on this for a good second. "But not, like, a vampire's mate. Right? Not like you see in movies."

"Time will tell on that one. It's possible." Distinctly possible given how Chase had reacted. It wasn't that Ronan was getting his hopes up, he barely

knew Chase, but it was a possibility.

“Ehhh?” Chase didn’t seem to quite believe this. Or maybe he was having trouble wrapping his head around it. “Um. Okay, that aside, so I’m reactive to feeding a vampire. And?”

“I don’t think you realize the full implications. If any vampire hears about this, learns about you, they’re going to be automatically interested. Humans like you are very rare. Compatibility like yours means not only hot sex, Chase. It means you’ve got the makeup to be a very good spouse for us. Biologically speaking, that is.”

Chase turned and leaned his butt up against the side of a desk, staring at the floor for a long second. If he wanted to think, Ronan was perfectly willing to let him think.

“I guess I can see how this is very important to you,” Chase finally said. “Because it’s so rare you meet a human who reacts like me, right? But I don’t really see how this is going to impact me. I know you said if vampires knew they’d approach me, but I’m not going to advertise this. Or likely offer to feed a vampire again.”

This idiot didn’t get it. All right, maybe it was Ronan’s fault, he’d been speaking too much in the abstract.

“You really think it doesn’t matter?” Ronan challenged in a low tone.

Chase’s gaze flew back up to Ronan’s and he looked a little defensive. “I don’t. Why should I? The person I like isn’t vampire, so it’s not like this will come up. Right?”

Shit, was he in a relationship? Ronan wasn’t a homewrecker. It was just...he was attracted to Chase; they had insanely good chemistry together, he didn’t want to pass on that. “You’re dating someone?”

“Uh, well, we’re not together yet, that’s a work in progress at the moment, but...” Chase’s nose wrinkled up in aggravation. “Never mind. Not important. My point is that it doesn’t matter.”

Phew. Okay, he was still single. Therefore he was still fair game. Ronan closed in, nudging Chase’s legs apart so he could stand between them, hands going to lock down around the edges of the desk, caging Chase right in place. Chase threw one hand up, pressing against his chest, startled at Ronan’s posture.

“Ronan, what are you doing?” he asked uneasily.

“Let me clarify.” Ronan locked eyes with him. “I am not going to let you go now that I know what you are like. Having experienced how delicious you

are in my arms, I refuse to pass you by. This other person you want to date, how long have you been pursuing them?"

"All semester," Chase breathed, a blush climbing up into his cheeks.

"And they're still not interested? Then they're not my competition. They've had a chance with you, they lost it. My turn now."

"Th-that's not how it works." Chase pushed harder, trying to force him to back up.

Ronan didn't budge an inch. He caught Chase's chin with a finger and thumb, leaning in closer. Chase was obviously affected, his breathing was coming out faster, hands no longer pushing but fisting in Ronan's shirt. Their mutual attraction charged the air, feeling like a steel cable drawing the two of them closer. Ronan wanted to kiss Chase so badly, but this was not the moment.

"I am going to pursue you," Ronan informed him, mouth hovering over Chase's as if poised for a kiss. "By the time I'm done, you're going to forget you ever had a crush on that person to begin with."

A light of challenge lit up in Chase's eyes. "You really think you can change my mind?"

Feisty, wasn't he? Ronan approved. He hated doormats. "I'll change your mind in a month flat."

"You know what? You're on." Chase lifted his chin stubbornly. "Try me."

He really, really shouldn't have said that. Before that moment, Ronan had vague thoughts of going a little easy on him since Chase was so much younger. Now? The thought went straight out the window.

Chase was the one who'd picked up the challenge. Ronan wouldn't let him call mercy later.

CHAPTER 4

He was here *again*.

Chase growled in the back of his throat, aggravation damn near choking him. The last two get-togethers the fraternity held, Ronan had come too. Hell, this one he'd sponsored. Of course everyone else was delighted. The architecture department's God had chosen to grace them with his presence. Chase really, really wanted to be snarky about it, but he knew there wouldn't be a listening ear in this crowd. Chase knew at least why Ronan was really there. But the hell of it all was, Ronan really was helping them. If someone consulted him, looking for advice on a project, or for their career path in general, he sat down and advised them. He was being a good alumnus.

It would have been admirable if not for his ulterior motives.

Chase sat in his corner seat in the restaurant, nursing his soda, glaring at Ronan from the corner of his eye. It had been precisely five days since Ronan declared he was going to pursue Chase. And damned if the man wasn't doing it. Chase had never been pursued by anyone in his life. He kinda liked the attention, to be honest, but he was uneasy by all of it too. Honestly, he was still wrapping his head around the fact he was apparently bi. Chase felt like he needed a few more weeks to really let the knowledge settle into his skin, and he'd appreciate *not* being flirted with while he let it settle. On the other hand, he liked Ronan's attention, wanted to respond, but wasn't sure if it was the best idea. Too many conflicting impulses was his issue right then.

His unease spiked as Nikita dropped into a chair at Ronan's table, sitting close to him and leaning in with a bright smile on her face. Ronan had his hair tied back, wearing a casual red Henley which looked fantastic on him, like it was custom fitted. Nikita was in a cute white dress that hit her in all the right ways, and she'd obviously dressed up a little to impress. One look at her

expression and it was obvious—she liked the look of Ronan very much. Fucking *hell*, she'd never once looked at Chase like that.

Insult to injury, that's all that was. He could not believe his crush was crushing on Ronan.

Chase sulked and glared some more. Nikita kept leaning in a little, hands fluttering as if she wanted to touch Ronan's arm on the table, but didn't quite dare. Ronan, on the other hand, kept his expression neutral. He was responding but clearly not flirting back, which made Chase feel marginally better, but still. The whole scene was a bitter pill to swallow. Chase wasn't even sure who he was jealous of right now, which felt like lye added into an open wound. Chase suspected he was more upset about Ronan being flirted with than Nikita doing the flirting, and how screwed up was that?

You know what? Fuck this. No one was paying any attention to him anyway. There was no reason for Chase to keep sitting here and tormenting himself. He got up, threw money on the table to pay for the tea—this whole dinner was Ronan's treat but like hell would he let the man treat him—and slipped out the side door. The air outside was muggy with the promise of a storm that hadn't hit yet, air humid against his skin. A storm fit Chase's mood well.

Chase plotted as he moved. He'd get the biggest chocolate fudge sundae he could find on the way home. The only thing that could possibly rescue him out of this funk right now was an insane amount of sugar. Then he might find a good shooting game and kill things. Yeah. That sounded good.

A strong arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him to a stop before he could even step off the sidewalk, a warm chest pressing against his back. Chase startled for a second before he realized who this was.

"No need to glare or be jealous," Ronan purred against his ear. "I wasn't flirting with her."

"I know you weren't." Annnnd that confirmed he'd been staring. Smooth, Chase, real smooth.

"Oh, is that the person you like? Nikita?"

Damn him for being so quick on the uptake. Chase remained mutinously silent and tried to tug Ronan's arm off him.

Ronan resisted a full second before letting go. Chase turned as soon as he was free, back to the brick wall of the building, looking up at him. He thought about not admitting to anything, but Ronan looked like he'd figured it out already, so what the hell did it matter?

“Fine. All right? I’ll admit it. Nikita’s the one I like. Forgive me if it was hard to watch her flirting with you.”

“You should take this as a sign to give up on her,” Ronan offered. His expression was a little sympathetic, like he knew how much this smarted. “I know it had to be unpleasant to see. You’re right to be upset, but it can’t be any clearer than that. She’s not into you, Chase. Let her go. Holding on to her only means you’re missing other opportunities.”

“That would be really thoughtful advice if it wasn’t coming from you.”

“What, you’re saying you can’t believe me because I have ulterior motives?” Ronan grinned as if Chase amused him. “Well, I admit to the ulterior motives, but my advice still remains good.”

Bastard. Chase really wanted to kick him in the shins. It wasn’t Ronan’s fault Nikita didn’t like Chase, though, so he wasn’t going to take it out on Ronan. Even if he was a handy target.

“Want to hug it out?” Ronan offered, hands spreading in invitation.

Chase threw up a hand to stall him before Ronan could try closing in. “No.”

“All right.” Ronan dropped his hands, still smiling.

“I amuse you, don’t I?”

“So much.” Ronan’s grin widened.

The urge to shake him was back. Two-fold. “You can’t be that interested in someone a decade younger than you.”

“Eh, it’s true we’ve got a bit of an age gap, but when I became a vampire, age also ceased to be a factor. I’ll always be much, much older than the humans around me.”

Well, now, there was perspective for you. Ten years probably didn’t make much difference to him in that context. Okay, next argument. “Ronan. Answer me this. Why me? Aside from my compatibility, why me? I can’t imagine you would chase me for that reason alone. You barely know me.”

“Mm, it’s a more powerful motivator than you’d think, but it’s true that’s not the only reason.” Ronan sobered, dark eyes penetrating, expression thoughtful as he answered. “I like what I’ve seen of you. You pay attention to people. You’re thoughtful and considerate of them. Even when you barely knew my name, you double checked on me, made sure I was all right. You offered to feed me just to help. It speaks really well of you. Also, I like that despite how annoyed and hurt you are right now, you’re not taking your temper out on me.”

Oh. Well, damn, he would give Chase a some solid reasons. It took half the wind out of his sails.

Leaning in a little, Ronan tacked on, “And you do amuse me. You’re a lot of fun. I like people who don’t give me any quarter.”

“I’m cheap entertainment for you, in other words.”

“The best kind,” Ronan agreed without batting an eye.

Just for that, Chase poked a finger into his stomach, a silent rebuke.

Ronan laughed in delight, pretending like it hurt, the movement totally exaggerated. Bastard, Chase thought again, but this time without rancor. It was hard to hold onto any kind of irritation when Ronan was being direct and honest with him. It was equally hard to maintain those feelings when a man looked at him like *that*. With such clear warmth and interest.

Dammit. This would be easier to deflect if he wasn’t so handsome and charming.

“Chase. I can make it obvious to everyone in that room it’s you I want.” Ronan’s head cocked a bit in question. “Should I do that?”

While that would boost his reputation for a few days... “No. It’ll just cause trouble for me.”

“Well, that’s why I didn’t do it before, but I don’t want any miscommunication or misunderstandings here, either. I’ll be a good alumnus for every person in this major—but the only one I want is you. Clear?”

It did make him feel better. Oddly. Chase had no idea why. “Clear.”

“Good. Now, I’ll walk you down to your car, but one thing first.”

Chase didn’t need his escort, but didn’t say that as he wanted to know first why Ronan had taken his phone out of his pocket. Was he going to show him something?

Ronan tapped on the screen and then for some reason, Chase’s phone started ringing in his pocket. He fished it out, looking at the screen with puzzlement. Oh. This number. He’d seen this number crop up a few times over the past week.

“That’s me,” Ronan said, tone exasperated. “Please answer when I call you.”

“Oh.” Chase blinked at the screen. “I thought it was a spam call so ignored it.”

“I figured that must be the case. Save it, okay?”

Might as well. Just so he’d know who was calling. Chase shrugged and saved the number.

Ronan tilted up to see the screen and then laughed. “You did not save my number under *Storm Incoming*.”

“It’s my phone,” Chase retorted primly, “and I can save your number however I wish.”

“And you wonder why I like being around you.” Still laughing, Ronan slung an arm around his shoulders and nudged him back toward the parking lot. “All right, which car is yours?”

Chase allowed the escort but questioned with suspicion, “You’re going to leave now too, aren’t you?”

“If you’re not here, no real reason to stay.” Ronan shrugged. “I already paid for everyone so they can continue if they like.”

Chase had no good response. Was Ronan one of those people with a one-track mind? Or just not willing to indulge people all night? It was kinda late.

He pointed to the black BMW. “That’s me.”

Ronan opened the door for him like he was some grand lady, escorting him in. “Call me when you get home.”

“We are *not* at the point of good night calls,” Chase retorted.

“If you say so.”

Give this man an inch and he’d take ten miles. Seriously.

Ronan smacked a kiss against his forehead. It froze Chase right in place. He did not just do that. In public.

With a cheeky wink, Ronan said, “Night, Chase. Drive safe.”

Okay, that was not cheating fair. And heart, stop wavering. Wavering because someone’s flirting with you is no. Chase watched him head toward a bright blue motorcycle and knew it was going to be a long time before he’d be able to fall asleep tonight.

CHAPTER 5

Warm hands stroked down his back, grabbing hold under Chase's thighs and picking him up off the table altogether. Chase leaned into the man's hard body, one hand sliding up to grip long, silky black hair. His head was spinning, his mouth fused in a kiss hot enough to melt his nerves, and it took all of his brainpower to kiss back. So good. Being in this man's arms felt so good.

His back hit cool sheets. Ronan leaned over him, a wicked smile on his face.

A hot hand slid between Chase's legs, finding his dick and caressing it. Chase broke the kiss on a groan, head tilting back to press into the mattress. Ronan knew where to touch to drive Chase crazy.

"So good," Ronan murmured into his ear. "You're always so good for me. Come. Come just like—"

The blare of an alarm snatched Chase right out of sleep. He flailed awake, shutting it off, then lay there for a long moment.

A dream. He'd dreamed of Ronan. Not even a memory of the night they'd done *that*, but something else entirely. A fantasy of what could be. Shit. His first wet dream and it had to be because of Ronan.

Disgruntled, he looked down at his own body and the obvious arousal there. *Thanks a lot, subconscious. Fuck you too. Why couldn't the dream have been because of Nikita, that I wouldn't have mind—*

The thought screeched to a halt. Wait a damn minute. He'd never dreamed of Nikita like this. Not once.

Why?

Puzzled, Chase sat up. Then just sat there with his feet over the side of the bed, staring at his bedroom wall like he'd never seen it before.

He'd never dreamed of Nikita. At all. Never mind wet dreams, but any

dreams. Not even daydreams. He'd sometimes planned possible dates he could take them on, but Chase didn't know if those really counted. It had been more a just-in-case exercise on the hope she'd say yes.

Why was his reaction to Ronan and Nikita so radically different?

He really wanted to sit here until he figured it out, but he was losing time already. Chase shook it off after a minute, taking a shower—cold, for obvious reasons—and got ready for school. He managed to stay focused on logistics right up until he started driving to campus.

Then those pesky thoughts came right back to him.

Why hadn't he dreamed of Nikita like that? Why was he dreaming of Ronan? Was it only because he had experience of being with one and not the other? That didn't sound right to him. Dreams didn't need reality to base themselves off of.

Chase tried to rationalize in a dozen different ways, but by the time he reached campus, he had to admit to himself the real reason.

He wasn't really attracted to Nikita.

He was attracted to Ronan.

Fuck. What a way to realize all of this.

Chase wasn't in the best of moods as he got his project, art boards, and backpack out of the trunk. He slouched into school, turned in assignments, went to class, and avoided looking in Nikita's direction. Not difficult—she kind of ignored him in class most of the time anyway. It used to drive Chase to distraction, but now he felt blessed for it. He really didn't know how to look at her anymore now that he'd realized the obvious.

He was too locked inside his own head to pay attention to much of the lectures. Chase really had to focus on homework though, otherwise he would be screwed later, so he bought something out of the vending machines for a quick lunch before going into the drafting room. He ate quickly, set up paper and supplies, and set to work.

Or, tried.

Chase carefully drew a line using his ruler as a straight edge, then took the ruler away to make sure it was right.

It wasn't.

The line was, in fact, utterly crooked.

Fuck.

He groaned, exchanged ruler for eraser, and removed the line. He had so many eraser marks on this damn paper he might as well start over, really. It

would look cleaner. Assuming he could learn from his many mistakes and not repeat them again on the second try. Or, you know, create whole new mistakes.

Knowing Chase, he would make up new ones. It was how he rolled. He felt so agitated in his own skin, it was hard to focus.

Unfortunately, Max was sitting next to him, and he was a terribly observant person. They were relatively alone in the drafting room, as most people were still out for lunch. It gave Max the freedom to poke Chase in the shoulder with the end of his pencil.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You’re spending more time erasing than drawing.”

Chase tossed the eraser back into the small white basket at his elbow and sat back, frowning at his drawing as if it had betrayed him. “I can’t focus.”

“Yeah, caught that.” Max put his pencil down as well, turning on the swivel chair to face him. “Why?”

“For the first time ever in my life, I have love troubles. I feel like a damn heroine out of a bodice ripper.” He gave up on drawing for the time being and chose to drink some of his green tea instead. Where to even start explaining this? Oh. Probably there. “Um. All right, you know how you said before that when I find someone with the chemistry I have with Ronan, most people would at least explore it?”

“Riiiiight?” Max trailed off invitingly.

“Ronan apparently agrees with you.”

Max was not slow on the uptake. He let out a huff of surprise, but there was a grin on his face, too. “Get out. Ronan is not flirting with you.”

“Oh, he’s not flirting,” Chase agreed, tone as dry as a martini. “He’s outright pursuing me. Is frank about it, too.”

“Oh. My. God. Ha! I wondered why he’d suddenly invited us all to dinner the other night. It was to get near you, wasn’t it?”

Why did he have a best friend who was so quick to put the pieces together? It made Chase feel like a dumbass. “I only realized after I got to the restaurant. I wish I hadn’t gone, it was an emotional trainwreck for me.”

Max’s eyes narrowed, his amusement fading for a moment. “If memory serves, Nikita was all over Ronan trying to get his attention.”

“Yeah.”

“Ah...sorry, Chase. I didn’t think you’d seen that. When I looked up, you were gone.”

“It’s why I left,” Chase explained, crossing his arms over his chest and brooding. “I couldn’t stand watching it. I really never stood a chance with her, did I?”

“Sorry,” Max repeated sympathetically. “I know you tried, it was almost painful watching you try sometimes, but...she really sees you as a friend. She likes you, thinks you’re nice, but there’s no attraction there.”

“I guess I finally have to face that. And it hurts, it does, because I invested a lot of hope and time into her, but...” Chase paused and honestly didn’t know how to phrase the rest of this. “I’m starting to wonder if I was ever really attracted to her, either?”

Max blinked at him. Blinked again. “What?”

“I guess I didn’t really get how attraction worked?” That sounded so lame, but Chase didn’t know how else to explain it. “It’s just, before, I thought if you liked being around someone and thought they were pretty, that was attraction. I guess it kinda is, but that’s not chemistry. That’s not sexual attraction. I never once imagined what it would feel like to hold her. I never yearned to kiss her. I didn’t dream of her. She was a nice person I found pretty. That’s literally as far as the thought went.”

Max leaned so far out of his chair he was in danger of falling out of it, dark brown eyes growing wide in his face. “And you now know the difference. Ronan?”

Chase couldn’t manage to look at his friend. He stared blindly down at his drawing and nodded.

His friend let out a low whistle. “Oh *really* now.”

“Attraction, real attraction, you can’t mistake it. Can you?” It was a rhetorical question Chase didn’t need an answer to. “Just a touch, a brush of skin, sends a little thrill through you. A single kiss can leave a phantom impression behind, sometimes so vivid you can feel it. Taste it. You hunger so much for their company it leaves a hollow ache in your chest.”

“*Damn*,” Max sounded delighted. “You really do know it now. So what this sounds like to me is, you want Ronan rather badly.”

The hell of it was, he apparently did. Chase wasn’t completely comfortable with these feelings. He couldn’t honestly say he liked Ronan. He didn’t know the man well enough to like him, for one thing. Desiring someone without being able to link it to affection didn’t sit well with Chase.

“I don’t know what to do,” Chase admitted helplessly. “I’ll stop pursuing Nikita, that much is obvious, because apparently it was all wrong for me to

ask her out to begin with. I don't know what to do with Ronan.”

“Try dating,” Max suggested. “You know, you could be overthinking this. Most people start dating because they're physically attracted to someone else. The whole point of dating is to learn more about someone, to figure out if you want to be in a long-term relationship with them or not.”

That was a really good point. Maybe Chase should give this a try, then? He wasn't sure about dating-dating, but a single date couldn't hurt, right?

Chase still wasn't sure about that, either. He had a feeling if he asked Ronan on a date, the man would pounce and eat him. Literally. He was in no way prepared for that. Maybe maneuver Ronan into asking him on a date so Chase wasn't taking lead? Yeah. That sounded better to him.

How to do that, though?

CHAPTER 6

Ronan was being a good little worker bee at his desk when his phone rang. He absently picked it up and swiped answer. “Hello?”

“*Um, Ronan?*”

His attention snapped from the commercial building he’d been partway through designing to the phone in his hand. Chase was calling? Why? Had Ronan finally done something pleasing to the dating gods?

“Chase, hi.”

“*Yeah, hi. I know I’m kinda calling you out of the blue, but I’ve got some questions. Can we meet somewhere and talk?*”

Ronan could not have been more delighted than if he’d won the lottery. “We absolutely can.”

Chase sighed. “*I said meet and you heard date, didn’t you?*”

“No,” Ronan drawled, the word packed without about twelve syllables of innuendo. “I heard meet.”

“*Uh-huh.*”

Chase didn’t believe him. Look how smart he was.

To deflect this, Ronan offered, “How about I come pick you up? When do you want to meet?”

“*Is this afternoon too short notice? I’ve got a cancelled class and by some freaking miracle I’m actually caught up on work at the moment.*”

Ronan would have happily cancelled things if necessary but he happened to be free after work as well. “Sure, five o’clock? I can get you from campus.”

“*That works for me. See you at the main doors.*”

“Okay.” Ronan hung up, and while he wasn’t the type to punch the air in victory, he was totally doing so in his head. Yes! Finally, Chase had reached out to him. They were making progress. Even if he was only calling to ask

questions, the fact he was finally curious enough to ask those questions was a milestone.

Now. All Ronan had to do was find a place for dinner that wasn't too fancy to avoid tipping his hand, but good enough to segue this into a date. Easy peasy, right?



Ronan was at the main doors of the architecture building precisely at five. He came to a stop with the Rover instead of parking, since he saw Chase coming out. He looked so damn good. All he wore was a plain white button down and jeans, and Ronan felt his mouth salivate. If he really dressed up, Ronan might lose what was left of his sanity. He itched to pop out, open the door for Chase and usher him in, but he had a feeling Chase wouldn't appreciate it.

Nikita, Max, and Sig were with him, and Chase said a goodbye to them before heading straight for the Rover. Ronan saw a few doubletakes—not from Max, though, interestingly—as Chase got in. Chase apparently hadn't told anyone what he was doing or that Ronan was getting him. He also didn't seem to care if they knew or not.

Chase slid in, putting his bag on the floor at his feet, and gave Ronan a smile. “Hi.”

Why was he so cute when he smiled? And Ronan got to see it so rarely, dammit. “Hi yourself. What do you want to eat?”

“Korean.”

“Korean, huh.” Ronan thought through his predetermined list and gave a nod. “I've got just the place. Buckle up.”

Chase did, and Ronan waited until he was fully settled before putting the Rover back into drive.

“I didn't expect this car,” Chase noted. “I was looking for your bike.”

“I ride the bike when I know traffic will be terrible or I'm heading for the garage. The Rover is for the office job since I often have to carry so much to the different sites.”

“Garage?” Chase asked as if he had no clue what he meant.

Didn't he know...? Well, he likely didn't. Ronan didn't talk much about his other career in front of the others. He also really, really liked Chase's curiosity. He answered as he turned onto the main road. “I have two jobs. My

brother runs a garage and I work out of it, tuning racing bikes for the most part.”

“Oh. Really? Why two?”

“I love both. It’s exhausting sometimes, but I can’t choose between them.”

“Well, that’s a good enough reason. My dad always says a man who enjoys his work never works a day. As long as you’re enjoying it, who’s to complain?”

“Rather how I feel about it.”

Chase looked more settled with him than any other time they’d met. Ronan wasn’t quite sure why. It felt like something had changed. Chase hadn’t even glanced at Nikita before leaving, either, which was telling. Had they had something of a falling out? Was it wrong for Ronan to wish so?

“When were you changed into a vampire?” Chase prompted.

He was really full of questions today. Ronan tried not to get his hopes up because of it. “When I was twenty-three. I was plugged into the racing strip even then, tuning bikes and stuff. The man who organizes the races, Fernando, took a liking to me. He kept handing me his personal bikes to tune and he really liked the work I did on them. I ended up spending more and more time around him and we got rather close. My father and I always had a good relationship but this felt like I’d gained a second father. After about six months of friendship, Fernando asked if I wanted to become his child.”

“Is that really how it works? You become a child to him?”

“It really is. A vampire who changes you is called a sire. We are his children in every sense. I’ve got twenty-five other siblings, too, most of them older. Only one is younger than me. Fernando doesn’t turn people very often. He has to really like them to even consider it.”

“Hmmm. That’s cool, then. Your parents were okay with it?”

“They were. Not interested in becoming vampires themselves, though. My twin took up my offer to turn. Which I’m glad of, I don’t want to go through the rest of my life without my brother.”

“You’re a twin?” Chase looked him over with new interest. “There’s another one of you running around?”

“Ha, no. Raiden and I are fraternal twins, we don’t look a thing alike. Also slightly different interests, totally different personalities.”

“Oh thank Buddha. I wasn’t sure if the world could survive two of you.”

Ronan laughed outright at the teasing. He liked sassy Chase very much.

“Where are we going anyway?”

Ronan slowed to take a turn and in doing so, the building came into view. He pointed to it. “There.”

Chase took two seconds to give it a thorough look and then said with exasperation, “You are absolutely not taking me to a hotel.”

“Best Korean restaurant I know of is at the top of it. Maxview, too.”

For some reason, Chase looked at him as if judging how far he could trust Ronan.

“Whether or not we end up in a hotel room after dinner is entirely up to you,” Ronan told him truthfully. “I don’t expect it. This is merely a really good restaurant I know of.”

“Ugh, all right, fine.”

Well, well, well. Ronan had expected more resistance than that. Chase was definitely softening. He didn’t think he’d softened enough to get him into a hotel room later. But the fact Ronan could take him through a hotel was miracle enough for today.

He parked in the attached parking garage, then took the elevator straight up to the rooftop of the hotel. The place wasn’t so swanky it called for black tie, so it was a good balance for the right atmosphere. Ronan stepped off and then almost immediately stiffened.

Brad. Why the hell was Brad Campbell here? Dammit, he liked the idiot about as far as he could drop kick him.

Brad’s lip lifted in a sneer but his eyes were taken with Chase. Whether it was only to see who was with Ronan or not, he did seem caught on Chase for whatever reason. His eyes swept over Chase from head to toe and back again, and the smile on his face changed, suggesting he liked what he saw very much. Ronan didn’t like it. He moved to put Chase on his right side, blocking Brad’s view, hand catching the redhead’s to keep him there. Ronan’s gaze met Brad’s in clear challenge.

The other vampire snorted as if amused by Ronan’s protectiveness and then shrugged, choosing not to engage. He walked past and toward the elevators.

Ronan promptly moved Chase along, putting space between them and Brad. He didn’t want to linger and get into anything. Thankfully, Chase followed his lead, not protesting as Ronan drew him into the restaurant. Only at the restaurant doors did Ronan glance back, watching as Brad got onto the elevator. Good, he wasn’t interested in causing trouble for once. Ronan

would take the win.

“What was that about?” Chase asked quietly.

“Another vampire,” Ronan explained, keeping his voice low. He turned his attention back to Chase, meeting apple green eyes. “Brad. He’s a hothead and a braggart, usually causes trouble whenever I see him. I don’t want you involved with him.”

“Oh.” Chase head’s canted in question. “Would he have messed with me?”

“I gave it good odds. We’ve clashed several times and he might have, just to get back at me. Thankfully he chose not to start anything today.” Ronan shook this off and turned to the hostess, getting them a table outside.

Chase didn’t try to take his hand out of Ronan’s as they followed the hostess, which honestly surprised Ronan. He liked the feel of it, a perfect fit for his own. He also liked that Chase apparently wasn’t shy about holding hands with him in public. He might need to donate to a charity, boost his karma later if today kept going so well.

They were given a corner table with a very good view of the city, menus, and then allowed to settle in. They placed drink orders before the hostess retreated.

Chase gave a nod, satisfied with his own selection, and put the menu down. “All right, I’m set. And this brings me to my first question. Vampires eat?”

“It doesn’t really give us any nutritional value,” Ronan admitted freely. “We just like doing it. It’s like eating candy. You get no benefit from it but you like eating it anyway, right? Plus a lot of human social norms revolve around eating together, so we end up eating.”

“Got it.” Chase was definitely taking mental notes. “So how often do you really need to eat?”

“Every two weeks is optimum. Anything shorter than that is an indulgence, longer than that is uncomfortably hungry.” What did this curiosity mean, anyway? Last week, Chase hadn’t cared what any of these answers might be. Now, he was firing off one after the other.

Chase’s eyes were sharp on his face. “And when you fed from me, had long had it been?”

“Closer to three weeks,” Ronan admitted ruefully. “It was why I was healing slower than usual. I hadn’t done it on purpose, but the person I was supposed to meet up with got unexpectedly sick, and then work schedule

went briefly crazy on me, so events rather conspired against me.”

“So, you do have a designated partner?”

“Eh, not in the sense you mean it. There’s places vampires can go for blood. It’s a licensed service. They’re paid well and we’re not constantly having to hunt someone up. A mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, one could say. Also, places we can buy blood bags from.”

“So...kinda like restaurants and fast food joints?”

Ronan snorted at the comparison. “In a nutshell, yes.”

They paused as a waitress came to take their orders and gave menus back. Chase picked the conversation back up as she left.

“I guess I’m trying to figure out what’s myth and what’s fact. Some of the old movies have it that vampires can’t eat garlic, or be in the sun without consequences, but that’s not matching with what I’m seeing. And the myths around fated mates is all over the board.”

“Hmm, well, to tackle those in order—the garlic and silver aspect of the myth is actually based in science. Both garlic and silver are antibacterial, and when people still thought of vampirism as a disease, they would use both to safeguard themselves.”

Chase blinked. Blinked again. “Holy shit. That actually makes sense. Sunlight?”

“Also scientifically based. A very anemic vampire will faint in the sun. Really, any anemic person doesn’t do good in strong sunlight but a vampire especially.”

“Huh.” Chase glanced down at his phone on the table and then laughed a little. “I feel like I should be taking notes on this for some reason. What about the other?”

“Mates? Ah, now that’s a whole topic in and of itself.” Ronan folded arms on the table and looked at Chase steadily. He had a feeling they’d reached the main topic Chase wanted to hear about. “Most of what’s in movies or books is very embellished, not based in fact at all. There’s a few truths to it all though. One, we prize our mates more than anything else. Our entire world really does revolve around them. Two, they really are rare. Extraordinarily so. I think there’s barely over a hundred of them in North America.”

Chase’s jaw steadily dropped. “Seriously?!”

“Yup. It’s why, when we suspect someone might be a mate, we safeguard them assiduously. It’s considered a capital crime to mess with one. Vampires

are executed promptly if they try to hurt or kidnap one.”

He let out a low whistle. “Wow. You said, that night, I might be one. Why?”

“I told you part of it,” Ronan pointed out. “Your reaction to feeding is in line with a mate. It’s one of the indicators. Another indicator is being completely immune to a vampire’s powers. Say I try to use Mesmerize or something, if you showed no reaction to it, then odds are very high you’re a mate. Showing no fear of a vampire is also part of the immunity to our powers. It’s one of our basic abilities, one every vampire of every generations has. If you can stand in the face of our rage, then there’s no doubt you are one.”

Chase sat on that for a long moment, looking out over the city. He looked pensive, face scrunched up in a frown. He didn’t look exactly happy about any of this.

“Do you dislike the idea?”

“I don’t know,” Chase admitted softly. “Honestly, ever since that night, I’ve felt like I’m ping-ponging emotionally. First I realized I was attracted to guys—”

Ronan’s eyebrows shot into his hairline. Wait, Ronan was Chase’s sexual awakening? Oh. Well that could explain why Chase was reacting so. That was a lot to process right there.

“—then I realized I didn’t understand sexual attraction at all because I never once dreamed of being with Nikita like I do with you, which really sent me for a tailspin—”

Delight swept over him. Chase dreamed of him? Oh really now.

Seeming to realize what he’d just said, Chase stopped dead and dropped his head into his hand. “Shit. I did not just say that.”

Ronan wasn’t about to let him back out of this. He picked up Chase’s hand, stroking a thumb over the knuckles. “Keep going. I’m very interested. You dream of me?”

Chase refused to look up and tried tugging his hand free. “Stop. I’m currently begging the universe to restart this conversation.”

“Sorry, really can’t. What kind of dreams?”

“Why do you like teasing me so much?” Chase complained, dropping his hand enough to glare at Ronan.

“I tease the people I like,” Ronan said without apology. “Take it as a sign of affection. Is this why you weren’t paying attention to Nikita when I picked

you up?”

Chase dropped head back into hand. “I’m cursed to be surrounded by observant people. First Max, now you. Ugh, all right, fine. Fine. I figured out I wasn’t ever really attracted to Nikita. I liked her company and thought she was pretty, which is apparently a different thing.”

The victory Chase had handed Ronan went straight to his head. He didn’t even seem to realize it, either. Ronan wasn’t about to enlighten him.

Chase kept talking, on a roll now that he’d started. “I tried to convince myself I was only dreaming of you like that because you’re the first to kiss me, much less have sex, but I don’t think I can explain it all by that.”

Ronan damn near fell out of his chair. He was what, now?!

“Um.” Chase froze again, peeking at him. “I shouldn’t have said that either. My mouth is betraying me today. Crap.”

“I’m really glad you did tell me.” Ronan just wished he’d said it *before* Ronan had jumped him, but too late now. “I wish I’d known that night, I would have handled it differently. But at least now I understand better why you’re acting the way you are. I’ve overwhelmed you.”

“A bit, yeah.”

Ronan lifted Chase’s hand and kissed the knuckles in silent apology. The blush that spread across those cheeks at such a simple gesture of affection made Ronan want to do a lot more to him. “You’re so cute, my prey drive kicks in.”

“Prey...?” Chase spluttered for a second. “Hey! That makes it sound like you want to catch and eat me.”

Ronan cocked a brow at him, amused. “Well, yeah.”

“I wanted a denial there,” Chase groaned.

“You prefer I lie to you?”

Chase groaned, sounding defeated.

Their food arrived, which saved him from teasing for a moment. Ronan generously let Chase have his hand back so he could eat. This whole conversation had been enlightening, to say the least. Ronan’s takeaway was that he might have hit Chase with too much at once, causing the redhead to hit the breaks. He was also, apparently, working through it all and coming to conclusions that weighed in Ronan’s favor. Him not being interested in Nikita anymore was already great for Ronan.

Being Chase’s first made him a little too giddy, honestly. The masculine, possessive side of him was downright smug with the knowledge that no one

else had ever touched Chase. If Ronan got his wish, it would stay that way.

Ronan might need to back off just a little, give Chase some grace to wrap his head around all of this. Only a little, though. He wouldn't give anyone the room to squeeze in.

With Chase, he was taking no chances.

CHAPTER 7

Did you know it was possible to be so tired your hair hurt?

Chase had just acquired this knowledge. Knowledge might be power but in this particular case, Chase was weighing on the side of ignorance being bliss.

He staggered to his car feeling like a drunkard, that's how off-balance he was. Chase damn near tripped over his own feet getting down the stairs to the parking lot. Twice. It didn't help that he felt lightheaded. He fetched up against the side of a black car and blinked down at it. Was this his car? It looked like his car.

Chase pulled out his keys from his pocket and hit the unlock button. The lights flashed, locks clicking. Ooh! It was his car. Victory. Now all he had to do was drive home.

Ugh. That sounded like such a nuisance.

With something that might charitably be called coordination, he got the trunk open, threw in things, then closed it.

All right, Chase. Take this in baby steps. Get driver side door open. Good, good. Now, get into driver's seat. You're doing great. Now, start the engine. Oops, key slipped, try again.

Why the hell was his phone ringing?

Grumbling, Chase pulled out phone and stabbed accept. "Ronan, why you calling?"

There was a beat of silence. "*You sound...drunk?*"

"I not drunk." Chase glared at the phone even as he jammed it into his phone holder on the dash. "I am just really, really tired. You're interrupting... ugh, what was I even doing?"

For some reason Ronan sounded concerned. "*Chase, where are you?*"

"I'm in my car." He'd been doing something in his car. Oh, right, starting

the engine.

Why had he been starting the engine, again? This seemed to be connected to something but Chase for the life of him couldn't put the dots together.

Ronan's concern sounded like it ratcheted up a level. *"Where are you?"*

"I told you, in my car."

"Where's your car?"

"Ohhh. Uh. University. I'm—oh, that was it. I'm in the car to go home."

Ugh that still sounded exhausting. Chase wanted to drive home as much as he wanted a stick in the eye. "Ronan," he whined. "I don't wanna drive. I'm tired. I want to sleep."

"I don't want you to drive." The words were overlaid by the sounds of footsteps, like Ronan was running. *"Chase. Listen to me. I'm coming to you. I will drive you, okay?"*

"You will?" An angelic chorus broke out in the background. Chase didn't have to drive? If Ronan really came and got him, he'd love him forever and ever.

"Wow, you're easy to win over. Driving you is all it takes?"

This made no sense to Chase. "What?"

"You said the last part out loud."

"Oh. Did I?"

"When you're exhausted like this, you're funny. Chase, I'm ten minutes out. Sit tight, okay? I want you to turn off the engine."

"Okay." Chase didn't want to drive anyway so he was happy to turn the car off.

Talking and obeying instructions sapped what remaining energy he had. He yawned wide and slumped into the seat. "Ronan, I'mma nap while I wait on you, 'kay?"

"That's fine. Sleep."

Right now, that instruction sounded like sweet talking. Chase closed his eyes with a smile on his face and went promptly into dreamland.



Ronan was more than a little worried as he pulled into the architecture building's parking lot. Chase had not sounded at all coherent on the phone and he really, really hoped the redhead hadn't woken back up and decided to drive after all. It was late at night and most people were gone at this point,

very few cars left. He spied Chase's black BMW without trouble and breathed out a sigh of relief. Good, he was still here. Ronan pulled into the parking spot next to it. Hopping out, he rounded the hood and spied Chase in the driver's seat, dead asleep.

How much had he worked that he'd driven himself into the ground like this?

Ronan got the door open, checking on Chase first. He wasn't feverish, at least, just passed out cold. Ronan remembered days from college when he was tired enough to sleep standing up, so he recognized the symptoms without trouble. What Chase needed most right now was uninterrupted sleep.

He grabbed Chase's keys and phone first, as he'd need both later, and pocketed those. Then he turned, got his passenger door open, and returned to scoop the redhead up in his arms. Chase went without even stirring, settling in against Ronan's chest with a sigh. He was so cutely trusting in this moment, it made Ronan smile. Could he have this reaction all the time?

"Ronan?" A voice called from the stairs.

He looked up and saw Max, standing there and taking them in with a puzzled expression.

Max came toward them, looking more lively than his friend, although he had circles under his eyes too. "What's wrong with Chase?"

"Passed out," Ronan answered, quite comfortable holding Chase while having this conversation. It wasn't like he was heavy. "I'm just glad he fell asleep before he actually got the car in motion."

"Yeah, me too," Max admitted. "He told me he was good to drive, but clearly I shouldn't have trusted that. We had a bad week this week."

"Let me take you home," Ronan suggested. "You can tell me on the way."

"I will not turn you down."

As Max loaded into the backseat, Ronan put his precious burden into the front, lowering the seat a little so Chase was more comfortable before buckling him in. Then he took off his sports coat and draped it over Chase to keep him warm. All right, should be set now. Closing the door, he came back around to the driver's side and got in.

"What made this week bad?" he asked Max as he started the engine.

"CAD drawings started this past week," Max answered wearily, slumped sideways in the backseat. "We were all fighting over computer lab space as it was, which made for weird hours, but then two nights ago, the computers

crashed with a virus. Whole lab.”

Oh shit. Ronan knew what he was going to say next before Max could say it.

“So we basically had two days to redo the drawings from scratch. The professors weren’t interested in cutting us some slack. Chase and I both have been up for the past...great Buddha I can’t even math right now. Two nights in a row.”

“Seventy-two hours?”

“Something like that. I would kill for sleep right now. I got a catnap earlier, it’s the only reason I’m still functional. Chase didn’t.”

“Got it. Max, where am I going?”

“Oh, right.” Max pointed ahead. “Two lights, take a right, my dorm building is on the left.”

“Okay. So tell me, what’s your coursework load for this weekend? Anything due?”

“Three works, and I think Chase got one of them done, but not the other two.”

He’d likely need to help Chase get those two done. Which was fine, he wanted Chase to sleep first and foremost. This kind of sleep deprivation was dangerous.

“I’m surprised Chase called you?” There was a lilt to Max’s tone, a question.

“I called him, actually.” Ronan had been hoping for a repeat of Monday’s date. In his mind, at least, it had turned into one. He and Chase had chatted over dinner for a good three hours before going downstairs, finding an ice cream shop across the street, getting dessert and then chatting another two hours. It had been almost midnight before Ronan actually got Chase back to his car. They’d had a surprisingly easy conversation and quite a few tastes in common. It had only made Ronan all the more determined to convince Chase to date him for real.

With it being Friday, he’d hoped to lure Chase back out but this was not quite how he envisioned the day going.

“You really like my friend.”

Ronan smiled. Understatement right there. “I really do.”

“Good. Chase can play airhead with the best of them but he really is one of the best people I know. It was hard watching him chase Nikita, knowing it wouldn’t go anywhere. She looked at him like a girl would a bratty younger

brother. I could see the shift after he met you. He realized what it meant to be with someone he was genuinely attracted to. Just...be careful. Okay? He has *no* dating experience.”

“He’s about to get some. With me.” There was genuine worry there and Ronan addressed it. “Don’t worry, Max. I know he’s a novice to all this. I won’t railroad him.”

“Please and thank you. Oh, this is me.”

Max got off with a thank you, then trudged inside. Ronan let him go, not even trying to ask if Max knew Chase’s address. It was naughty of him but he was going to take Chase home with him and use not knowing his address as an excuse.

He snickered to himself as he got the car back in motion, enjoying his evilness. Chase might have quite a lot to say about this tomorrow but hopefully when he woke up safe and tucked into Ronan’s bed tomorrow, he’d learn Ronan could be trusted with him. Ronan would only take a little advantage.

The drive to Ronan’s house was quiet and he didn’t turn on music or anything, letting Chase sleep. He pulled up to his house, parked, and went around to fetch his passenger back out. Chase curled right into his chest as Ronan picked him back up. Did he normally sleep this deeply? Or was this a sign of his exhaustion? Either way, Ronan liked it a lot. Now if he could figure out how to get Chase to do that when awake....

Ronan got halfway up the sidewalk to the door when Raiden opened. He took in the sight of his older brother carrying a younger man and lifted both brows.

“Chase, right?” Raiden checked even as his eyes roved over him. “He’s cute.”

“It’s downright criminal how cute he is,” Ronan agreed. As expected of his brother, he had good taste too. “Help me get doors and turn the covers down.”

“Is there any reason why you’re bringing him into this house unconscious?” Raiden inquired even as he turned to do Ronan’s bidding.

“He’s exhausted. Fell asleep in the parking lot before he could even get the car going. I went and got him before he could get into an accident.”

“Ahhh.” Proving he did know how his twin thought, Raiden shot him a knowing look over his shoulder. “And you brought him here instead of taking him home because you’re being you.”

“I’m living up to my reputation as a beast,” Ronan retorted.

“Uh-huh. If he starts yelling the second he wakes up, I’ll have no sympathy for you.”

“I expect nothing else from you.”

Raiden got the bedroom door open and turned the covers down before stepping away. Ronan was careful as he put Chase into the bed, but his care might not have been all that necessary as Chase slept on peacefully. Raiden retreated from the room, leaving Ronan to situate Chase a bit better. He got shoes, socks and jeans off, leaving Chase to sleep in his shirt and boxers. Chase might not thank him for taking off the jeans later but Ronan couldn’t leave him in them. He hated sleeping in jeans.

Drawing the covers up, Ronan leaned in and kissed him gently on the forehead. This wasn’t how he’d imagined getting Chase into his bed but he was happy to have Chase here all the same.

“Sleep,” he murmured against that fair skin. “And this time, dream of me with my full permission, hmm?”

CHAPTER 8

Chase woke up by degrees. His first impression said something was off. The sheets under his nose didn't smell right—they smelled nice, masculine and musk, just not how his sheet smelled. The pillow and mattress felt different, too. And it was dimmer in the room than it should be for morning?

Brain engaged a little more and he found two brain cells to rub together. Wait. Last thing he remembered was getting into his car and talking to someone on the phone. How the hell did he get home last night?

All right, the question bugged him enough he got stubborn about it. Eyelids. Yo, eyelids, up. All the way up. It felt like gears were grinding getting both lids open but he was victorious in the end. Ha, all right now he was awake...enough...the hell? Where was he?

No, seriously, where was this?

Chase might have been struggling to exit dreamland before he got his eyes open but he was wide awake now. He sat up and looked around, confusion mounting by the second. It was a nice bedroom, very large, too. There was plenty of space around the king sized bed he lay in, a desk was over there against the other wall, two large picture windows on either side with drapes drawn shut. It was very masculine in blues, whites and greys.

“I've been kidnapped,” Chase declared aloud. “And my kidnapper for some reason put me to bed. If this is a dream, it's one of my stranger ones. Wait, was I that tired that I dreamed of someone kidnapping me and putting me to bed?”

The bedroom door clicked open and the handsome man Chase might be lusting over strode in. Ronan was here. Why was Ronan here?

The memory slammed into his head of talking to Ronan before passing out in his car. Chase groaned and put both hands over his face. “Ronan. This is your bedroom, isn't it?”

“It is,” Ronan agreed, bare feet padding in closer.

“Please tell me I didn’t declare undying love for you if you drove me,” Chase pleaded. He distinctly remembered saying that.

“You did. I’m holding you to it, too. We’ll talk wedding dates after you’ve eaten lunch.”

Chase dropped both hands to glare at him. This man, seriously. “Would it kill you to stop teasing me?”

“It might,” Ronan answered mock-solemnly. “To prevent a heart attack, I’ll have to continue. Sorry. How are you feeling?”

Stiff, from lying still so long. Rested, though, and mostly, “Hungry.”

“I’ve got lunch sitting on the table. Your timing is good, I was coming to wake you up.”

Chase blinked at him. “Wait. Did you say lunch?”

“You slept fourteen hours.” Ronan sat down next to him, one leg under another, looking Chase over.

“Holy...well. I guess I was that tired.” For good reason, too.

Ronan stroked a hand over Chase’s hair, worry still in his eyes. His hand felt good, soothing and comforting.

“Max told me what happened, why you were so tired. Next time, instead of fighting for computer lab space, just come here. I have the same CAD program. You’re welcome to work here.”

“Before we talk about me using your house like a study lab...” Chase circled a finger to indicate the room and house in general. “Why am I here?”

“I didn’t know where you lived.” Ronan’s smile was the picture of innocence.

“And you couldn’t just ask Max? You spoke with him, after all.”

“He forgot to tell me and went into his dorm before I could get the address.”

“Uh-huh. And that’s your story and you’re sticking to it.”

“I certainly am.” Ronan braced an arm on the other side of Chase and leaned in, dark eyes twinkling with laughter. “What? You have a problem being in my bed?”

He was teasing, Chase could see he was teasing, but there was something about the look the man gave him. Something that suggested Ronan would be perfectly happy to pounce and eat him right now. It made Chase’s gut tighten with anticipation, his whole body flaring with awareness of how close Ronan was. How only inches separated them and it would take nothing, no effort at

all, to close the gap. His skin tingled with phantom impressions of the last time Chase had been this close and he couldn't help but remember it.

Ronan's nostrils flared and his hungry expression became more blatant, eyes nearly pitch black. "Chase," he rasped, voice husky and deep, "if you react like that, I really can't promise to keep myself in check."

React like...what? "Huh?"

"I can smell your arousal." Ronan leaned in, rubbing the tip of his nose along Chase's jawline. "So intoxicating."

EHHHHH? Chase swallowed hard, hand finding hold on Ronan's chest, but he wasn't sure whether to pull him in or push him off. "You-you can smell things like that?"

"A vampire's nose is very sensitive." Ronan lifted his head but not far, hovering as if poised for a kiss. "I know precisely how delicious you can be. I'm even more in tune with you because of it."

So, this is what a deer felt like while staring right into the eyes of a ravenous wolf. Chase had utter sympathy for them.

"Advance or retreat?" Ronan murmured. "Up to you."

Adva—no, shit, what was Chase thinking? He wasn't anywhere near ready for that. "Retreat. Please."

Ronan paused a moment, but he let out a breath and sat back, and the tension between them eased as he did so. "Take a shower. I'll lay out some clothes you can borrow. Be quick so lunch doesn't get cold."

"Okay." Why did Chase feel slightly disappointed by his own decision?

Ronan leaned in and smacked a kiss against his mouth. "Don't look at me like that. I'll seduce you later. Let's fill your belly first at least."

"I wasn't looking at you like anything," Chase defended. Er. Pretty sure, at least.

"Uh-huh."

The blatant disbelief in Ronan's voice was insulting. That's all that was. Chase's expression scrooged up as Ronan left the bed, sauntering around the bed and into a room apparently just out of sight from where Chase sat.

"Let me know if you need help in the shower," Ronan called to him.

This damn man would expire on the spot if he couldn't tease Chase. He'd swear to this. Chase threw the covers back and headed in the same direction Ronan had disappeared to, finding it led into an en suite bathroom.

"After lunch, take me back to my car," Chase instructed.

Ronan turned and pulled open closet doors, rifling through for clothes. He

very notably didn't agree.

Chase went and poked him in the side. "Don't ignore me. You need to take me back to my car."

Turning, he wrapped an arm around Chase and pulled him in closer. Ronan was far too delighted, the grin smug. "But don't you want me to help you with the projects you've got?"

...Damn it. That did sound good. Chase's brain was still mushy feeling. Who would turn down free labor? He didn't think Ronan offered out of the goodness of his heart, though. "You have no intention of letting go of me today, do you?"

"Tomorrow doesn't look good either," Ronan confessed easily. "You told me to come get you. You didn't say I had to give you back."

"I'm curious, how many people get frustrated and hit you?"

"Mostly just you. Use your words, Chase. Oww!"

"You asked for it. And stop grinning like a leprechaun with a pot of gold, you're unnerving me, here."

"Take a shower," Ronan instructed again, still grinning. "We can negotiate your release later."

"Negotiate, huh." Chase rolled his eyes and stepped free, heading for the shower where the water was already running.

He wasn't about to admit this aloud, but honestly, he wasn't in any real hurry to leave. The more time he spent with Ronan, the more addicted he became to the man's company. As long as Ronan helped him with his projects, he was okay with staying the rest of today. Of course, admitting that would give Ronan way too much of an advantage and Chase would never get the upper hand ever again.

A secretive smile flirted around his mouth as he stripped his shirt over his head. He couldn't wait to see how Ronan 'negotiated' with him.

CHAPTER 9

Raiden really looked nothing like Ronan. He was as fair as his twin was dark, with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. The build and facial structure was similar, but not identical. If Chase hadn't been introduced to him, known he was Ronan's twin, he'd never have picked him out of a lineup. Seemed really nice, though. Not interested in teasing Chase, unlike his brother.

Chase sat at the table, eating a rather excellent lunch, and tried to figure out why Raiden kept looking at him with this mix of amusement and curiosity. Finally, he couldn't take it. "Is there something on my face?"

"I've been hearing about you for days now," Raiden explained, shooting his twin a grin. "You're not quite what I expected, but you are, if that makes sense."

"It does." Chase shrugged. "I heard about you too and I feel the same way."

"You need to come over more often," Raiden instructed. "It's been ages since Ronan cooked. I like it when he's motivated."

Eh? Wait, someone hadn't just ordered in delivery or gone out and grabbed something? Ronan had cooked? He'd gone through the effort of actually grocery shopping and cooking? Chase felt rather touched by it. Also impressed. This was restaurant quality food.

"Raiden," Ronan's tone had a warning note in it, "you can stop teasing."

"Hell no." His twin's grin widened. "Where's the fun in that?"

You know, Chase hadn't seen the similarities between these two before, but he could certainly see it now. No DNA test required.

Ronan forcefully changed the subject. "I already called Max and told him I'd keep you today too, to help you with the coursework. He said he'd pass that along to your mom. I'll take you back tomorrow."

"You know, there were several things in that statement that made no

sense,” Chase mused. “Starting with how you know my friend’s phone number.”

“I took him home after I picked you up,” Ronan explained easily, lifting another fork of rice to his mouth. “We chatted and exchanged phone numbers then.”

“In other words, you conned him into thinking you were trustworthy.” Chase eyed him sideways.

“Conned is such a strong word.”

Since he had someone to ask this of, Chase demanded of Raiden, “Is your brother always like this with people he likes?”

“Dunno,” Raiden admitted. His curiosity was back. “You’re uncharted territory. I’ve never seen him like this with someone before. Just be aware, once Ronan decides he likes something, he doesn’t let go.”

So, Chase was fucked. Got it.

“I’m being perfectly reasonable,” Ronan objected, the soul of innocence.

“Which part?” Chase and Raiden demanded in unison.

Far from being chastised by this, Ronan just snickered and kept eating. No remorse from this one, clearly.

Chase gave up. Apparently, he was doing his work here today. Ronan didn’t seem inclined to let him go anytime before tomorrow. It wasn’t like he could use the excuse of needing supplies to do the work with, either. He was in an architect’s house, of course there would be drafting and modeling supplies here.

Honestly, it didn’t bother him much. He liked hanging out with Ronan. For every bit he learned, the more he liked him. Saying that aloud, though, would only ensure Ronan would let go of him on the twelfth of never. Not a second before. Chase wasn’t quite ready to make that commitment yet.

Since Ronan cooked, Chase decided to be a good guest and do the dishes. He cleared the table and went to the sink, running hot water and getting a sponge soaped up.

Two arms wrapped around his waist as Ronan snuggled up against his back, hooking his chin to rest over Chase’s shoulder. Chase paused with dish in hand, exasperated. “What are you doing?”

“I’m being moral support.”

Uh-huh. Pigs fly, too. “You really expect me to be able to do dishes like this?”

“You’re resourceful. I’m sure you can manage.”

“You have absolutely no intention of letting go, I take it.”

“None.”

He needn't sound so cheerful admitting that.

Chase rolled his eyes and focused back on washing dishes. “Fess up. You had to go buy groceries in order to cook for me, didn't you? Two vampires in this house, of course you had no food to speak of.”

“I'm glad you liked it.” Ronan kissed his cheek and settled in more. Meaning more clingy.

He'd take that as a yes. “So are you trying to score brownie points or are you the type to spoil your lover?”

“More the latter. I told you, didn't I? A vampire's entire world revolves around his mate.”

He had said that. “Even to this degree? That was a lot of trouble you went through for me.”

“Pfft, this is nothing. You should see how my sire treats his mate.”

Chase's ears perked. “Wait, your sire has a human mate?”

“He does. Rather recently found, too. Noel is only a few years older than you so it was a surprise to all of us those two connected.”

“Huh.” Chase had to stretch to put the dish in the rack to dry, an effort Ronan did nothing to help with. This man, seriously. “You're also the type to be clingy with your lover, aren't you?”

“I completely am.”

“May I point out I'm not your lover?”

“You can upgrade from the friend plan to the boyfriend one at any time,” Ronan assured him mock-seriously. “No restrictions apply.”

“You sound like an infomercial. Quit it.”

Chase rinsed off the last dish, setting it aside, then turned his head a little to address Ronan. “I would like to actually tackle my projects now so they're not hanging over my head.”

“Seems like a good idea,” Ronan agreed.

“That means sitting down.”

“Kinda follows, yeah.”

“I refuse to use you as my chair.”

“You're really being so uncooperative today. I'm sure we can negotiate.”

“The last time I negotiated with you, you got your way completely, so no. We're not negotiating.”

Chase tried tugging at Ronan's arms. Failed. Ronan had no intention of

letting go. Was he a boa constrictor? “Do you accept bribes?”

“I’m quite amenable to bribes.”

He might have felt a little shy doing this but dammit all to hell and back, Chase had slept in this man’s bed without issue. Surely this wasn’t that big of a deal. Right? Right. Before he could second-guess himself, he caught Ronan’s chin and smacked a kiss against the corner of his mouth. “Bribe paid. Let me go.”

Ronan was startled enough his grip actually loosened. Only for a second flat, then he caught Chase by the hips, turned him, and lifted him up on the counter. Chase took one look in those dark eyes and swallowed hard. So... looked like he just hit a switch. Oops?

Those slender, strong fingers slid over his cheek, moving to gain purchase on Chase’s head. He couldn’t look away from Ronan’s eyes; it felt like he was caught in them, so thoroughly ensnared he barely remembered to breathe. Ronan’s gaze fell to his lips as he leaned in. He moved slow, Chase had all the time in the world to dodge him, to refuse him.

For the life of him, Chase couldn’t think of a single reason to do either.

Chase’s lips parted as those soft lips touched his, eyes fluttering shut. The first touch was perfection, then Ronan’s head slanted, taking the kiss in deeper, and everything somehow got even better. Chase sighed under it, quite happy to indulge. Ronan was exquisite to kiss. Chase slid his hands up a firm chest, coming up to wrap around Ronan’s neck, pulling him in closer.

More.

One of Ronan’s hands got under his knee, pulled his leg around Ronan’s waist and mmm, that felt good. To press into that, to be able to pull him in tighter. Chase’s hunger for this man grew with every kiss. It all felt so good it made him greedier. He remembered how it felt to have those hands on his bare skin and that, that’s what he wanted more than anything—

“You’re supposed to eat food in the kitchen!” Raiden called from somewhere nearby. “Not people!”

Ronan broke the kiss and glared over Chase’s shoulder. “Twin or no twin, don’t make me murder you.”

Raiden only laughed. He also very quickly left the living room for the outside, too.

The mood was broken but somehow, Chase didn’t feel embarrassed about it? Just a little peeved.

With a sigh, Ronan stepped back. “We should be working on your

coursework. Come on. Let's get it done."

He was right, they should, and Chase was realistic enough to know that if he pulled Ronan back in, they'd do nothing constructive the rest of the day. Which he couldn't really afford to do.

Plus, Chase did need to step back from all this and really think it through. Just what did he want from Ronan? Casual dating...was likely not an option. Not with how hard Ronan pursued him. Did he want to take on a serious relationship? Right now, instincts were clamoring for one thing, and one thing only. This man in front of him. Chase was inclined to agree, but he also wanted a clear head when he made that decision. Not one clouded with lust.

So, despite the fact his blood was still running hot, Chase nodded. "Yeah. Let's get that done."

CHAPTER 10

Chase's morning had gone thusly:

First, he'd slept right through his alarm.

Second, the water heater had broken in his house, so he'd been forced to take a cold shower.

Third, he'd dropped his phone while rushing down the stairs and completely broken the screen.

It was, in short, the Monday from hell. At 8:23 in the morning, no less.

But the day wasn't done with him yet, oh no. That would be too easy. Clearly, the universe needed to fuck with him some more.

Chase looked down at the model he'd dropped, which was now caved in on the side and wet to boot because of course it landed in a puddle at the base of the stairs, and felt like crying. Weren't bad things supposed to happen in threes? He was past his allotment for the day, dammit.

Sig dove for the model and yanked it up. "Sorry, man, sorry! I totally did not see you. Oh shit, this is really not good. You have to turn this in today."

"In fifteen minutes or less," Chase agreed dully. There was no way in hell he could rescue it or undo the damage in that amount of time. He'd blame Sig for running into him, but Chase hadn't been paying attention to where he was going, either.

Sig looked guilty as sin as he looked at Chase. "Let me go with you to the professor. Explain it was my fault for bumping into you. I really should have been looking where I was going."

"It might help?" Chase was willing to try it. The professor was a known hard ass, but he might be willing to listen to reason. Chase had nothing to lose by trying.

"Let's try it," Sig urged.

They did duck into the art room for ten minutes to undo the damage as

much as they could, righting the building, putting the roof back on, and re-attaching one of the trees. Nothing could be done about the damp cardboard, though. It was as good of a fix as they could manage in the time allotted.

The professor was not amused at the condition of the model. Sig's explanation and apology only softened him a little bit. He grudgingly accepted it but assured Chase he wouldn't do it again in future. He'd better figure out how to safely transport his models from now on. Chase accepted the scolding, just glad the professor had accepted it, and trudged back out.

The rest of the day went about as bad. Nothing went right for Chase, not a single blessed thing. He finally sat at his desk with his head down on folded arms, unwilling to even attempt anything else.

Was this karma setting in? Because he'd spent all day Sunday playing with Ronan, and now he had to pay for it?

The last class of the day was cancelled, at least. Chase was quite happy to go home and bury himself in his bed for the rest of the day. He trudged out to his car, promising himself sugar the second he got home. Sugar, and maybe he'd call Ronan and whine about his terrible day. Ronan would at least listen to him. Maybe come by and spoil him to lift his mood.

Yeah he'd do...wait, that didn't look right. Chase came to a stop and looked at his back tire more carefully. It was flatter than a pancake. He stared at it for a long moment before his head dropped forward.

If the universe was intent on fucking him *this* hard, it could at least use lube.

Chase felt his eyes prick with tears. He couldn't even call for help because his damn phone was busted. He hadn't had time to drop it off at a repair shop this morning, it was still dead as a doornail in his backpack. It was all so incredibly frustrating.

His feet turned him, carried him to main street. He had no real plan, just this burning desire to get to Ronan. If anyone could help him straighten this out, it would be Ronan. More than that, he wanted the comfort of those arms. He wanted to turn, bury himself into them, soak in the warmth and strength Ronan offered. Why he wanted Ronan and nothing else, he didn't understand. Chase was just certain on his course.

It was the only thought in Chase's head as he flagged down a motorcycle taxi. Get to Ronan. Do nothing else, just get to Ronan. At this time of the day, he wouldn't be at the office, but hanging out with Raiden at the garage. He gave the driver the bike garage's name, and fortunately the man recognized it

and told him to hop on. Chase did, trying to calm down. He didn't want to show up at the garage all hysterical and weepy.

He rode along, letting the streets and city pass by him in a blur, not paying attention to any of it. The thought kept tumbling around in his head: Why was he doing this? Why was he going to Ronan? It made no sense, logically speaking, as Ronan couldn't fix anything that had happened today. Yet the impulse was there, to go to Ronan. Only Ronan could offer him the comfort he craved.

The truth was, he didn't want his tire fixed, or the phone, or anything else. He wanted to bury himself in Ronan's arms and breathe. The realization dragged a tired smile onto his face. Seemed he finally had an answer to the question lurking in his brain over the past several days.

Halfway to the garage, the skies opened up and drenched them both. All Chase could do was groan. Of course he was going to get soaking wet. Of course he was. Clearly, he'd done something to offend the universe and today was its retribution.

At least he arrived at the garage safely. There was that, right? With the way his luck was going, getting into an accident was totally plausible.

Chase paid the man then trudged to the main office. There were lights on inside. It felt like a beacon in a storm. He opened the door and stepped in, then stopped, dripping water everywhere and feeling like a drowned rat. The woman behind the counter blinked at him, not expecting some drenched college student in her office.

The back door opened and a familiar face stepped inside. Raiden spotted him immediately and paused, startled.

"Chase. What happened?"

"Bad day," Chase explained simply. "Is Ronan here?"

"No, he's not in yet." Raiden rounded two chairs and came in closer, pace quick, his eyes roving over Chase from head to foot and back again. He looked even more worried after this study. "What happened?"

Chase shook his head, not willing to get into all of it. Raiden was nice, but not who he wanted. "My car's still at uni. I've got a flat tire. Can you help me?"

"Sure, Chase, sure. Just give me your key. What's your car?"

"Black BMW."

"Got it. I'll send someone out. Come on, we've got a back room here we use to sleep over, you can rest there while waiting on Ronan. I'll call him for

you, okay?”

That sounded good. Just sitting. Chase needed to sit for a while. He gave a shallow nod and handed his car key over.



Raiden got Chase into the room, with a towel, and then retreated back to the office. Chase looked like he'd been through hell and was clearly not in the mood for company so Raiden didn't try to linger. He called his brother the second he was able to.

“What?” Ronan greeted, sounding distracted.

“Bro, you better get over here.” Raiden cast another glance at the room, despite the fact he couldn't see anything through the walls. “Your boy's here and he does not look good.”

Ronan went from distracted to worried in Mach 2 seconds. “Why? Is he sick?”

“He might get sick at this rate. He wouldn't tell me all that went wrong but it looks like his day was shitty in the extreme. He came in dripping wet, like a rat that escaped a sinking ship. Said his car had a flat tire. He was looking for you.”

“I'm on my way. Do not let him leave.” Click.

Chase didn't look like he had the motivation to do anything but sit there so Raiden wasn't worried about that. He hoped whatever had happened, Ronan could somehow make it better. Chase was too sweet of a kid to deserve to suffer.

In the meantime, the least he could do was attend to the flat tire and take some of the worry off both their shoulders.

CHAPTER 11

Ronan came in at a dead run. He had no idea what had happened, but if Chase came looking for him in that condition, it wasn't anything good. Raiden pointed him silently to the back room the second he hit the doors. Ronan gave a quick nod of thanks before heading in that direction. He got through the door and paused, looking for his quarry.

Chase sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, knees up, head down and he really did look bad. Wet and done in, maybe on the point of tears with how bright his eyes were. His head came up slowly as Ronan came in closer.

He hated seeing Chase like this. Chase was suited for smiles, always. Ronan had no idea what had gone wrong today, but it didn't matter in this moment. Giving Chase the comfort he so desperately needed, that took priority over anything else. He came to within a foot and knelt there, holding arms open in invitation.

Chase only needed a second before he was up on his knees, slotting himself into Ronan's arms, his own tight around Ronan's waist. He folded him in, stroking a hand up and down Chase's spine. "It's all right," he murmured against wet hair. "Shhh, it's all right."

"Ronan," Chase whispered against his shoulder. "Today has been so unbelievably shitty."

He tightened his hold, heart aching in sympathy. "Let's get you dry, yeah? And then you can tell me about it. You don't want to get sick on top of everything else today."

Chase nodded mutely but didn't move. Wasn't ready to let go yet, huh.

"Have you eaten?"

Chase shook his head. "I tried. That was one of the things that went wrong today."

How could food possibly go wrong...? Not the moment to ask. His

curiosity could wait.

Sitting here wouldn't solve any of it, so Ronan urged him up. He got Chase into his car and took him home. The second he was out of the car, Ronan urged him upstairs and into the bathroom, into a hot shower to warm him up, then backed out to find him clothes to change into. He shed clothes himself that had gotten damp, climbed into sweats and a t-shirt, then got Chase into dry clothes. He only looked marginally better with the shower. But Ronan hadn't expected it to solve anything.

He sat Chase down on the bed and sat behind him, toweling Chase's hair dry. With the pampering, it unwound Chase a little. Enough he started talking without prompting.

"You ever have those days where the universe has it out against you? Today was mine. Everything that could possibly go wrong went wrong. I woke up late, I dropped my phone and killed the screen, Sig bumped into me on the stairs and sent my model into a puddle, which of course my professor wasn't happy about, someone stumbled and sent their soda into my lunch before I could get more than two bites into it, but I didn't have time to get anything else before the next class—the list goes on and on. The last straw was coming out to find a flat tire, and then getting soaking wet trying to get to the garage."

Ouch. That was quite the litany. No wonder Chase looked absolutely fed up with today. "Troubles normally come in threes."

"Today, they chose to come in nine's." Chase turned and snuggled into Ronan's side. "Getting to you was the only good thing today."

That was the sweetest compliment anyone had ever handed Ronan. For all the crap Chase had waded through today, all he wanted was to be with Ronan. He might have fallen a little in love with Chase for that statement alone. It was hard not to.

He kissed Chase's temple and snuggled him further in. Chase was being so cute, he wanted to do more than hold him, but Chase clearly just needed comfort right now. "I'll help you right every wrong I can. Let's start with food, yeah? Low blood sugar on top of everything else can't help. Then we'll call your mom, tell her I have you, and that she'll need to call through me until you can get your phone fixed."

"Mmm," Chase agreed, nodding against his shoulder.

Ronan pulled up a food delivery app on his phone and had Chase choose something. He hadn't had dinner yet either, obviously, so he chose something

for himself too before placing the order. Then he listened as Chase called his mom, assuring her that while Chase had a terrible day, Ronan had him from here. She seemed reassured after chatting with Chase for a minute.

During all of this, Chase didn't let go of him. He clutched Ronan close like he was a comfort item. Seriously, if he got any cuter than this, Ronan's heart might give out. He stroked a hand over his damp hair, not sure how else to settle Chase, or how to lift his mood.

"Ronan?"

"Hmm?" He tilted his head a little to see Chase's face better.

"I kept asking myself on the drive over here, why was I coming to you? What did I expect to happen? It wasn't until I was here, waiting on you, that I realized the answer. I didn't want my tire fixed, or my phone, or to reverse all of the events of today. All I wanted was you."

Those sweet words impacted Ronan with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer to the heart. He was overjoyed to hear them, to say the least. And because of them, he lost all hold on the restraint that had carried him through so far.

With one hand, he cradled Chase's face and brought it up so he could meet those clear green eyes. It felt like his heart was in his throat asking this question. "Chase. Be mine. I'm already yours."

For the first time, Chase smiled. A true smile that lifted his eyes and dazzled. "Yes."

As simple as that answer was, it was the best he'd ever heard. He hauled Chase in closer, hugging him hard, giddy with relief. Finally. Finally, he'd caught this man's heart. Unable to restrain himself, he pulled back to pepper Chase's face with kisses. The onslaught caused Chase to burst out laughing before Ronan caught his mouth in a kiss.

Chase gave as good as he got, kissing back, not at all shy as he knotted his hands in Ronan's shirt.

He didn't want to overwhelm him, so he drew back by degrees, softening the kiss and lingering once, twice, then a third time before he finally retreated. Chase was incredibly addictive to kiss. Ronan knew this to be fact, as he was addicted already.

"Can I tell everyone you're mine?" Chase asked with wide eyes. If he was trying to look innocent, he missed by a country mile, as there was a calculative tilt to his expression.

Either way, the answer was, "You most certainly can. I certainly am."

“Good. If Nikita dares to flirt with you again, I’m going to set her down sharply.”

“You know, if anything, I’m the one who gets to be jealous where she’s concerned,” Ronan pointed out in amusement. “You liked her first.”

Chase sniffed, nose lifting haughtily. “If someone is flirting with my boyfriend, I’m allowed to be upset about it.”

“Oh is that right.” Ronan absolutely couldn’t take his expression seriously.

“It is. I’m really, really hungry so I want to eat first, but…” Chase chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before continuing. “After, will you feed from me?”

He looked into his newly minted boyfriend’s face and felt his willpower pack up and head for a trip south of the equator. “You want me to feed from you. Why?”

Chase trailed a fingertip down Ronan’s chest, looking up through his lashes. “It felt amazing last time. I really, really want to do it again. It’ll be a great way to boost my mood?”

Ronan was absolutely, one hundred percent, behind this justification. “Well, you do need your mood boosted.”

“I absolutely do.”

“As a good boyfriend, it is my duty to indulge your every pleasure.”

“I really like your stance on this.” Chase teased his mouth with a kiss. “If you want to eat me in more ways than one, I won’t complain.”

So, looked like Ronan wouldn’t have either willpower or sleep tonight. RIP to both. After waiting so long, trying so hard to win Chase over, he absolutely didn’t mind the loss of either.

“Brace yourself,” he rasped. “Because I’m definitely not holding myself back tonight.”

CHAPTER 12

Ronan knew how Chase had reacted the last time he got fangs into skin, so it was a mixture of anticipation and lust curling in his gut as he licked at the slender column of Chase's neck. Chase was all too eager, head tilted to the side, arching up into him already. This reaction alone drove Ronan a little crazy. If it was feasible to do it, he'd feed from Chase every day.

He sank fangs into skin, felt that hot course of blood fill his mouth, like the most delicious delicacy ever made. Chase shuddered under him, fingers digging into the bare skin of his back. A little cry escaped from his throat, the sound pure pleasure. In that single moment, Chase completely ruined him for feeding from anyone else.

It took more control than Ronan knew he had to stop when he did. He couldn't take more than this from Chase, for both their sakes. Chase protested immediately, hand sliding into Ronan's hair and trying to tug his head back in. It nearly destroyed his decision but he managed to hold firm. Any more than this would weaken Chase and make himself sick from overindulgence. It wasn't worth it, tempting as it was.

What Chase really needed was an outlet for the passion building up inside him, and it was something Ronan was all too happy to provide. He turned his head, catching Chase's mouth in a kiss, which Chase was all too happy to return. The kiss grew heated, their tongues invading each other's mouths to duel, a mimicry of sex. He wanted—no, needed. It had become a need to have this man.

Ronan pulled up the back of Chase's shirt, finding bare skin and smoothing a palm up it. Having his warm, firm body under his hands felt very nice indeed. Ronan had never seen him like this before, so lost in pleasure and sweetly trusting. He liked it more than he should. He could actively feel the obsession of driving Chase crazy on a regular basis start to

kick in.

Oops?

Chase tugged his mouth up and back to his, lips diving back to Ronan's, feeding off Ronan's mouth like a man denied food for months suddenly faced with a buffet. Which was more or less the case; at least Ronan felt just as starved for him. Ronan might have to call off all plans for the next three days. If he kept Chase like this for three days straight, he might be able to calm down enough to be a rational human by the weekend.

No promises, though.

As much as he enjoyed kissing this man senseless, Ronan was getting hard, and the pants were restrictive enough to threaten blood flow. He wanted clothes *off*.

He sat back for a second, a tad short on breath, and quickly started stripping. In seconds, all clothing came off to land somewhere else in the room, making audible plopping sounds as they hit the floor.

Chase was all too happy to help, twisting to get his own pants off, then dove right back into kissing Ronan. Chase dropped his hand to Ronan's half-hard cock and every other thought evaporated like it never existed. Those hot fingers wrapped around him, tugging upward in a sensual glide, felt amazing. Ronan's head fell back, eyes slipping shut so he could focus on the sensation. Damn. Damn, that felt exquisite.

He definitely needed to return the favor.

Chase let out this little purring sound as Ronan's fingers found his dick and gave it some loving attention. The hunger and heat in the man's eyes was everything, pure desire that spoke to Ronan's own. Hearing the way his breathing changed, seeing the open pleasure on his face as Ronan touched him, it was all so perfect. Ronan had dreamed of exactly this.

Reality was so much better.

"Let me take you," Ronan panted.

There was no hesitation or doubt in Chase's answer. "Yes."

He smacked a kiss against that mobile mouth before standing up, a flat hand on Chase's chest pushing him down. Ronan sucked kisses down his chest, using his ears and fingers to register Chase's reactions, noting what was good and what wasn't. Chase liked it when Ronan grazed a nipple with his teeth, felt the shudder under his hands. His breath stuttered as Ronan used the flat of his tongue to lick down his happy trail. As he lowered himself to the floor, he continued the licking motion up Chase's cock, from base to tip,

using one hand to keep it steady.

Chase groaned, hand tightening its hold in Ronan's hair.

Definitely liked that. Noted.

Driving Chase slowly over the edge was proving great fun.

Ronan had another goal in mind. Lifting one of Chase's legs, he put it over his shoulder for access and trailed his mouth lower.

"Ronan, pity," Chase gasped. "Why are you teasing me so much?"

"It's because I'm evil," Ronan whispered against his skin, then bit the inside of his thigh. (Ronan might be a biter.) "You like it."

Chase wordlessly protested, or he started to, right until Ronan found the taut ring of muscle and traced it with the tip of his tongue. The sound became a strangled groan.

Ronan had always considered rimming more intimate than fucking, and with his face buried in musk-scented skin, he agreed with his past self. Hearing the noises pouring out of Chase's mouth as he fucked his tongue in and out, feeling the give as his hot channel opened up to him, gave him a thrill all on its own.

The sheets gave a popping sound. Chase might have ripped the sheets off the corners of the mattress under the force of his grip, oops. He was making delicious noises, too, animalistic pants and whines of pleasure. Hearing them turned on every primal instinct in Ronan. He had to have this man.

Now.

The lube and condoms weren't far, in the top drawer of the nightstand, and he leaned far enough up to snatch both.

Chase tugged at his arm in frustration, too far gone to string words together, but his intent was clear: Get back here.

So impatient, this one. Ronan hid a smirk against hot skin as he coated a finger and slid it into Chase's ass.

Chase let out a sigh as if that was even better, more of what he wanted. It went in easy, so Ronan slid in another, eyes taking in every nuance of expression. Chase didn't show the slightest bit of discomfort, but holy hell was the man tight. He had clearly not had sex, matching what Ronan knew of his history.

A third finger, all while Ronan sucked love bites into the skin of Chase's thighs, feeling the jump and quiver of muscles as Ronan opened him up. Chase's eyes were closed, expression one of bliss. It proved to be Ronan's undoing. Looking at Chase like this, he couldn't take anymore.

He slapped condom and lube on his own throbbing cock and came up onto his knees, keeping Chase's leg over his shoulder. Chase's eyes opened to a sliver as Ronan lined up and pushed slowly, easily in. Chase's head tilted back, a deep groan vibrating in his throat.

"God you're sexy like this," Ronan whispered, mostly to himself. "I wish I could draw people. I'd capture you just like this."

Chase grabbed at Ronan's arms, holding on as Ronan bottomed out inside of him.

Glorious heat surrounded him, flexing around Ronan's cock as if to keep him there. It was literally all Ronan could do to not come right then and there. Who told the man to be so perfect? He felt branded, especially when Chase wrapped his free leg around Ronan's waist and tried to pull him even further in.

The man was killing him. Absolutely killing him.

Instinct had him moving before he could really think. He pulled back, intoxicated by the mixture of gasp and moan Chase released as Ronan thrust in. On the next thrust, a stuttered gasp escaped Chase's mouth, his hold on Ronan borderline punishing. Oh, he liked that. Ronan could feel Chase's heel drive into his back, urging him in harder, deeper, and animal instinct took over. He drove in hard enough to make Chase's head snap back, feeling nothing but primal satisfaction in return.

The bed squeaked in protest as he drove into Chase, over and over again, driving them both to the edge. He felt his own sanity unraveling, the heat pulling him back in every time he drew out, his groin tingling with an overload of sensation. His climax was approaching at high speed.

Ronan wasn't about to come alone.

He shifted a hand down to Chase's upright cock, stroking it with his still lubed hand. He made the hand firm, relentless, watching as Chase's back damn near arched off the bed as he became overloaded with sensations.

In a muted scream, he came hard under Ronan's hand, entire body clenching up and around Ronan, shaking. It was too sublime, feeling Chase's ass clench around him too, demanding an equal response. Ronan buried his head into Chase's shoulder and slammed in once more, hips pumping in micro bursts as he came hard.

Ronan could only breathe. Thoughts were beyond him. He lay draped over Chase's chest, felt the man also breathing hard under him, fingers gently combing through his hair. When he felt like words might be available once

more, he tilted his head up to put a chin on Chase's sternum. "You. You tried to melt my brain, didn't you?"

"Excuse me, that was you," Chase retorted easily, not even bothering to open his eyes. "Also, we're calendaring this."

"What? Me feeding from you?" Ronan grinned at him, delighted Chase was already addicted to this.

"Of course. Every two weeks on the dot. I know you won't do it sooner than that—"

Damn right he wouldn't. Ronan wasn't risking Chase for any reason.

"—so two weeks precisely. I will accept no excuses or delays."

"I'm not entirely sure who's getting addicted to who, here." Ronan caressed his cheek, his whole heart feeling warm and full while looking at this man. He'd been attracted to Chase from the start, but he'd never anticipated this outcome. Being here with him like this felt like a fantasy realized.

Chase blinked at him. "You liked sex with me that much?"

"Oh so very much," Ronan murmured. Chase had apparently been too overwhelmed to fully realize how Ronan reacted just now. "In fact, I give you fifteen minutes to recover. You'll get no mercy after that."

A sassy grin tilted Chase's mouth up. "Bring it on."

CHAPTER 13

Chase didn't exactly skip onto campus the next morning, but he was damn close. Was he a little tired after making love with his new boyfriend until the small hours of the morning? You bet. Was he sore? Also yes. Mostly, though, he was smug. And satisfied. So incredibly satisfied.

Ronan dropped him off (apparently Chase's car had problems with all four tires and more besides). He sent Chase off with a kiss and the promise he'd get Chase's phone back to him after it was fixed. They'd dropped it off that morning at a shop when they went out for breakfast, so hopefully Chase would have it back soon. He felt naked without it.

He got into the classroom early, dropped into a chair, and got situated. All while humming a ditty he couldn't remember the name to. Didn't matter. All was right in his world.

Sig came to sit down next to him, eyeing him like he suspected Chase was on the verge of a breakdown. "Yesterday you were on the verge of tears because bad luck had a stranglehold on you, and today you're humming. You okay, man?"

He grinned at Sig, trying not to look unhinged. From Sig's reaction, he failed. "I'm great. Yesterday was a catastrophe right up until I got to my boyfriend's. It was amazing after that."

Sig blinked like a few parts of that statement had failed to process and he had to reboot his brain. "I'm sorry, I thought you said boyfriend for a second."

"I did say boyfriend."

His eyes flared wide enough to consume his face. "Since when do you have a boyfriend?!"

"Yesterday, to be precise. We'd been kinda dating but yesterday we made it official." Chase sank back into the hard plastic chair with a sigh,

remembering certain moments from the night before. “The sex was so hot. If I didn’t have that damn report to turn in today, I would not be in class, trust me.”

“Oh my god.” Sig pointed at Chase and, on spying Max coming to join them, demanded, “Did you know he has a boyfriend?”

Max blinked but he also knew more of what was going on. “Oh, did he ask you?”

“He did.” Chase beamed. The giddiness might wear off next decade but not before. “I was going to ask him if he didn’t ask me, he just beat me to it.”

“Why do you know what’s going on?” Sig whined to Max.

Max took the seat in front of Chase, sitting sideways so he could easily look at both of them. “Because Chase is absolutely incapable of keeping a secret.”

Hey! Okay, fine, he resembled that remark.

“I know they met at the frat party,” Max continued, eyeing Chase as if looking for something in particular. “And things have snowballed from there. From the hickies on your neck, you had a good time last night.”

Chase’s grin went naughty. “Three rounds. It’s a miracle I can walk straight this morning.”

Sig threw up both hands. “Wait, wait, wait, who are we even talking about? Who are you dating?”

A man entered, drawing Chase’s attention up and to the door.

“Chase.” Ronan came in like he had every right to be there (in truth no one would protest if he chose to stay), a smile on his face.

“Ronan!” Chase bounced right out of the chair and into his boyfriend’s arms without care of the audience. He was delighted to see him, of course, but they’d only separated twenty minutes ago so why was Ronan back already? “Did I forget something in the car?”

“No. Your phone’s done.” Ronan took it out of a pocket and handed it over.

Chase accepted it with relief. “That was fast.”

“The screen itself was broken but the rest of the phone was fine. The phone guy was able to swap it out without much trouble. He called me the second you were out of the car so I grabbed it immediately. I don’t want you walking around without a phone.”

“Me neither.” Chase immediately put it in his pocket before hugging Ronan in thanks. “Thank you.”

Ronan wrapped an arm around him, hugging him in. Against his forehead he murmured, “I don’t want you skipping meals, especially today. If any more bad luck hits, call me. All right?”

Chase nodded agreement. “Okay.”

“I’ll go to work. Try to be good.”

Eh, being good was overrated. He’d rather be smug all day. That sounded more fun.

Ronan squeezed once before letting go. He gave Sig and Max a wave before turning and walking out as casually as he’d walked in.

It took ten long seconds for Sig to get his mouth back in working order. “You...are not dating Ronan.”

“Totally am.” Chase bounced back to his desk and sat down. He pulled his phone out to check it, wanting the assurance everything was working again. It seemed to be. Phew, good.

“You are *not* dating the department’s god,” Sig repeated, sounding floored. “How the hell are you two dating?”

I’m delicious was probably not the answer he should give Sig. “Well, Sig, when two people like each other very much....”

Max without apology took a picture of Sig. “Your face could be a meme.”

“How the ever loving hell did this happen?” Sig scooted in closer, all ears. “Tell me. Every detail.”

“We don’t have time for every detail,” Chase pointed out. “We’ve got five minutes until class starts. But buy me lunch and I’ll regale you with the full story.”

“Deal.”

Maybe Monday’s streak of bad luck had been to offset everything good that would happen the rest of the week? A balancing of karma. Either way, Chase was not looking this gift horse in the mouth.

He was, however, going to make it very clear to Nikita Ronan was taken. That he would do first thing. The days of people thinking they had a chance with Ronan were over.

CHAPTER 14

Ronan had his head under Chase's car hood—seriously, when was the last time he'd even had this serviced?—when the phone rang. Wiping his hand off on a rag, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and blinked. Oh, his sire was calling. "Fernando, hello."

"*Ronan, I hear good things have happened.*" Fernando's voice was a mellow tenor, sounding as rich as whisky. "*Raiden mentioned a boyfriend?*"

"My brother's got a big mouth as usual." Ronan turned and put his butt up against the bumper, resting for a moment as he talked. "But yes. Actually, I need to talk to you about him."

"*I'm all ears.*"

Fernando was a good listener. It was one of the reasons why Ronan respected him. He knew how to take care of people. "His name is Chase. He's an architecture student at my alma mater. I think you'll like him, he's charming and direct."

"*I like honest people,*" Fernando admitted easily. "*This sounds good so why do I hear a note of concern in your voice?*"

"Probably because there's a question in all this. Chase's...possibly a true mate."

Fernando let out a low whistle. "*How sure are you of this?*"

"I'd say it's 60-40 odds right now. I've fed from him twice now and he responds very, very well to a feeding. He's definitely compatible to vampires."

"*That's a very good indication right there. Have you told him about this?*"

"I've explained, yes. He's on the fence about whether he might be or not. I honestly don't think he realizes the full implications. There's still a lot he's wrapping his head around. He's asked me quite a few questions, though."

Ronan paused, mind whirling with possibilities. “I want to test this. To prove it, one way or another. I hesitate to do it because if he really is, we have to report it to the VSB.”

“And your relationship is new enough you don’t want to test it with their interference.”

“Basically, yes.”

“I think we can quietly test this and then give you both some grace time before reporting it. You’re right in that we need to know, one way or another. Why don’t you check his schedule and yours, come up with a good night to have dinner with me. I can meet him that way and help you test his reactions.”

“That...sounds best. I’ll get back to you later tonight on possible times.”

“Do so.”

“Will Noel be there? I told Chase about him and he’s very curious to meet him.”

“Yes, he’ll likely be there. I’m keeping him close to me these days.”

Ronan groaned. This didn’t bode well. The Vampire Society Bureau was known to be heavy handed where true mates were concerned. They wanted to dictate where those mates went, who their possible spouses would be. They really, really didn’t like that Noel had chosen a mafia boss for his lover. “Are they hassling you again?”

“It’s irritating more than anything but I’m not taking chances. Don’t worry about it, it’ll sort itself out.”

“All right.” Ronan would stay on alert anyway, just in case.

“I’m sure you’re at work, I’ll let you go for now. Just let me meet him soon.”

“I will. Bye.” Ronan hung up and tapped the phone to his palm for a moment. The VSB were apparently set on being a nuisance, as usual.

They’d better not try this nonsense with Chase later. Ronan would have no mercy on them if they tried anything.



Chase would like the record to show he did try to behave himself. Max was his witness. He really did try to behave himself.

Then Malik got in his face as he was packing up in the art room and well, things went pretty downhill from there.

Malik was almost nose to nose, looking at Chase like he'd murdered the man's dog or something. "What did you do? Tell me what you did."

Chase's head flopped back on his shoulders. Why were both siblings so gone on Ronan? First Nikita, now Malik. "I didn't *do* anything, for the love of—listen to me already."

"You got his attention somehow!" Malik insisted.

Max tried to intervene, peacemaker that he was. "Malik, calm down, take a breath. It doesn't do you any good to yell at Chase."

"I've been around Ronan so many times over the years, and he's never *once* looked at any of us with interest. He'll tutor us, he's always willing to do that, but he won't even flirt back. He'll come in, do special lectures or something, and then leave. We're all just underclassmen to him." Malik flung a hand at Chase like a duelist would a glove flinging a challenge. "You can't tell me his type is this immature idiot!"

Chase could admit freely he had space cadet moments, he'd own up to that, but the idiot part was hurtful. It upset him enough he lost his temper and got even further into Malik's face, staring him down.

"You can be bitter I have Ronan instead of you, that's your call, but shouldn't you be mature enough to take the loss? You're standing there claiming I'm immature but *you're* the one throwing a fit right now."

Malik looked mad enough to punch him. He bared his teeth, speaking through them. "Just confess. You pestered him into dating you."

"I didn't seduce or pester him," Chase denied, groaning. It was quite the opposite. Well, had he? With the whole feeding thing. Huh, guess this could be debated either way.

Nikita jumped a little. "Oh. Ronan."

Eh? Chase's head swiveled to look where she was looking. His boyfriend didn't look all too pleased as he strode into the room, his narrowed eyes mostly on Malik.

"I could hear the yelling from out there," Ronan commented as he walked to Chase's side.

Oh. Shit. Vampire hearing. Ronan probably heard every word after walking into the building.

Chase tucked himself in against Ronan's side, requesting plaintively, "Please tell them I didn't seduce or trick you into dating me. You wouldn't believe the accusations I've been handed."

He wrapped an arm around Chase's back like he was being supportive but

Ronan looked down at him with mock-innocent confusion. “Didn’t you seduce me?”

“Ronan!” Chase poked him hard in the ribs in rebuke.

Ronan jumped and snickered, pleased with himself as always when teasing. “Fine, fine. I’ll set the record straight. He didn’t seduce me. I chased him.”

There. Chase nodded, satisfied.

Malik still didn’t get it. He stared at Ronan like a man waiting for a punch line. “But why?”

“Because he suits me. Right down to the ground.”

In more ways than one, but Chase wasn’t about to say that.

Ronan wasn’t interested in justifying or explaining anything else as he caught Chase’s hand, pulling him out of the room. Chase only paused long enough to grab his portfolio bag and backpack, Ronan taking the portfolio, and then they left hand in hand. Malik looked crestfallen, Chase couldn’t help but notice, but he didn’t have a lot of sympathy. Malik already had his chance to win Ronan over.

Chase wasn’t the only one to notice Malik’s expression. “You haven’t been getting that all day, I hope.”

Chase waved this aside. “Not really. Sig got the story from me at lunch, that’s when Malik heard it, and Nikita. The story spread from there. Class kept us occupied until I went to the art room to get some drawing done, and that’s when Malik tracked me down and laid into me. He was convinced I’d done something underhanded to get you. You’re the least gullible person I know, so what did he even think I was capable of doing to hoodwink you?”

“Jealousy doesn’t make sense.” Ronan shrugged.

“Preach. Anyway, your timing was good, as always. I couldn’t get him to back off.”

“If he gives you trouble again, call me. I’ll deal with him.”

Chase had a Ronan and he wasn’t afraid to use him. His grin might have been a touch evil. “Okay.”

Ronan drew him to the Rover and they loaded in. Putting the Rover into drive, Ronan asked, “What do you want to eat?”

“I have been craving BBQ.”

“Considering how much blood I took from you last night, red meat is probably a good idea. BBQ it is.” Ronan started driving before stealing a glance. “Chase. I talked to my sire earlier today. He wants to have dinner

together and meet you.”

“Oh.” Chase absorbed this for a second. “That sounds good...?”

“It is. You don’t need to worry, Fernando’s a kind man. He’s very invested in all his children so of course he wants to meet who we’re dating, too. I did tell him my suspicions about you, so he wants to test things and get a firm yes or no on the issue. Either way, we need to know.”

“Yeah...” Chase saw that it was important, but it made him uneasy, too. He couldn’t put a finger on why, it just did.

Ronan took his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Even if the answer is no, it doesn’t change anything between us. If it’s yes, though, we have to report it to vampire society that you are one. It’s one of the rules. I want the backing of my family if that’s the case.”

“Ohhhh. Okay. I didn’t realize you had to report it.”

Ronan grimaced. “Unfortunately. It usually causes us trouble, but we can handle it. Anyway, what day is good for dinner?”

“I think I can do Friday.”

“Okay. I’ll confer with him and see if that works. In the meantime, I want to meet your family and say hi.”

Chase turned that over in his head. Ronan. Meeting his parents. Telling them they were dating. Um. “Must we?”

“You don’t think they’ll react well?”

“They’ll be fine with me dating a guy, it’s just I expect us to get a thousand questions. It’ll be worse than the Spanish Inquisition. Wait, should we tell them about the whole vampire-possible-mate thing?”

“We’ll have to. If you really are one, then they’ll need to know.”

Chase groaned. This would go so poorly.

CHAPTER 15

Chase had a certain expectation for how this dinner-with-parents thing would go. Right now, he honestly couldn't tell if it was going better or worse. Ronan strangely seemed to have this whole conversation under control...? Or at least, both of his parents kept smiling at Ronan like he was delightful. Chase always found Ronan delightful, but he was admittedly prejudiced. It was just that they kept asking borderline uncomfortable questions Chase didn't know how to answer.

They sat around the family dinner table, parents on one side, he and Ronan on the other. Mom had cooked up quite the spread and Ronan had immediately landed in her good graces by complimenting her on the curry, and then asking what she'd used as the roux base as it had great flavor to it. The man was smooth, had to give him that.

Mom took the first gambit. "Ronan, you look Chase's age, but of course you've already graduated."

Deciphering the question buried in there without problem, Ronan answered, "Yeah, I'm thirty. I have something of a baby face, I've never really looked my age."

His parents looked a bit iffy with the age difference, but Chase was quick to stamp this out. "His maturity has saved my ass a few times, so no judgement please."

Mom winked at him. "Not judging. Grateful, in fact, as you can be an airhead at times."

"Thanks, Mom," Chase groaned. "Love you too."

Dad questioned as he scooped up another spoonful, "Chase mentioned you're both an architect and a mechanic? Why both?"

"I can't choose between them is the short answer." Ronan shrugged, smile rueful. "My father's a mechanic. My mother always used to complain

to him that he provided a good living, but he didn't know how to make a house beautiful. I grew up thinking I'd do both when I got older. Of course as an adult, I realize how much work it is, but I can't seem to give either of them up."

Chase decided to pitch in on this. "It's saved me on more than one occasion, that he can do both. He's helped me with projects a couple of times when I was overwhelmed. When I had the flat tire, I was able to call him and his brother in for help."

"I'm glad he did, too." For some reason Ronan gave him a sideways look. "In more ways than one. Chase, I'm now in charge of your vehicle's maintenance."

He looked at his boyfriend with a blank expression. "Was there something else wrong with the car?"

"When was the last time you even had it serviced?"

This question made absolutely no sense to Chase. "But there weren't any lights on?"

Ronan's expression turned even drier. "As I said. I'm now in charge of your vehicle's maintenance. I will teach you how to change out a tire, though, so you're not stuck waiting on me to help you."

Well, he had no issue with that, so shrugged agreement.

Mom beamed at Chase. "You're really so good to him, Ronan."

"He's just as good to me." Ronan put his fork down and sobered. "Charlotte, Nathan, there is something we need to tell you. It's not a bad thing, it's just really important."

Chase's parents stopped eating and focused too. Chase looked between them. Oh. Oh, were they doing this now? Um. He hastily chewed and swallowed the bite in his mouth.

"First, let me start by saying I'm a vampire." Ronan held their eyes steadily and gave them a moment to process.

Dad was the first to find his voice. "You are. Born or...?"

"Made. My sire is Fernando. He and I grew very close when I was twenty-three and he turned me then."

Mom didn't seem to know what to make of this. "It's fine that you are, but why is it important? I feel like you're leading up to something."

"I am." Ronan shot Chase a smile. "The reason why we got close so quickly was because of my nature, in a way. You see, we did meet at the frat party, but we didn't interact most of the night until I was injured protecting

another student. Chase saw it, saw I wasn't healing quickly, and offered to feed me to help speed the healing along. It was a very generous thing to do and I took him up on it. In the process of feeding, though, I realized a few things about him. Namely, he's very, very compatible with vampire physiology."

"I don't understand," Mom admitted. "How is this important?"

"To us, to vampires as a whole, it is. We like having significant others who are compatible with us as it makes life both easier and far more enjoyable. But in Chase's case it might mean something more." Ronan paused, clearly phrasing this before speaking. "He's showing one of two signs of being a vampire's mate."

His parents stared at Ronan like he suddenly spoke in Greek. Then at their son like they'd never seen him before.

"No, but," Dad spluttered, staring at his son still, "aren't they like one in a million?"

"More or less. Statistically speaking, one in five hundred thousand are possible mates but realistically, there's just over a hundred mates in all of North America. His nature is rare as it stands, but if he really is a true mate, then he's even more rare. I can't begin to describe how precious he is."

Chase would feel all sorts of puffed up and important about this if Ronan hadn't already given him a list of what kind of trouble would head their direction because of it. In the immediate sense, he was more worried about how his parents were taking this. "Mom? Dad? You okay?"

"It's like suddenly being told my child is the lead of some sweeping romance novel." Mom shook her head, looking a little dazed. "Of course I love my son, he's my world, but to think of the *rest* of the vampire world looking at him like...like they do those heroines in the movies, that's just..."

Chase completely got it. "Trust me, I'm still wrapping my head around it. It's still a possibility, though, we haven't confirmed it."

"We haven't," Ronan acknowledged with a nod. "My sire wants to meet Chase, and we'll test it properly then, but honestly? I give it really good odds. Chase's just too compatible with me. The reason why we're telling you this now is to give you a head's up. If he is, then certain things have to change."

"Like what?" Dad queried, looking worried.

"For one, protections will automatically fall into place around him. He'll be too important, you see, we'll need bodyguards to safeguard him."

He would...what? "Now hold on, you didn't tell me about bodyguards!"

Ronan picked up his hand and kissed the knuckles, reassuring him, “They’ll be discreet and at a distance. You’ll never notice them. This hopefully won’t be a forever thing; once you’re established as someone’s mate, we can ease off the protections some. You’re too precious to take chances with. That said, in the immediate sense, we’ll have to worry about the VSB.”

Urk. Yeah. Them. Chase had heard about them. For his parent’s sake, he translated, “Vampire Society Bureau. Think of them as a kind of loosely governing body for vampires.”

“That’s the best way to describe them,” Ronan approved. He kept Chase’s hand in his, resting on his thigh, as he explained. “The VSB in theory are there to keep law and order in vampire society. They rule on disputes, check unruly vampires, and handle punishments when vampires go off the rails. They also handle a lot of the diplomatic side of vampire society. That said, in practice, they’re rather a pain in the neck. They tend to go overboard, and they always have an agenda they’re pushing. I trust them about as far as I can throw them. When they hear there’s a new true mate discovered, they’ll lose their minds. They are very, very eager to play matchmaker with new mates to a vampire of their choosing.”

Mom didn’t like the sound of this, her face was scrunched up in a frown. “But won’t they respect you and Chase are already dating?”

“Honestly? They won’t want to. It’ll be quite the argument. It’s why we’re telling you this now, so you understand the situation, and why you absolutely shouldn’t give into their demands if they come knocking. They have their own politics and agendas, and you absolutely should not heed what they say to you. Chase’s choice in spouses is exactly that—his choice. He can’t be coerced, forced, or ordered on who he has to marry. They’ll try to convince you otherwise but hold firm on this.”

Dad gave a grunt, jaw flexing. “You can bet I won’t hand my son over to them. Thank you, Ronan, for forthrightly explaining before it all hits the fan. But if Chase is not a mate, then we’re fine, right?”

Ronan lifted a hand and tilted it back and forth in a see-saw motion. “Mostly. As I said, he’s already proven to be highly compatible with vampires, which is nothing to dismiss. There’s still many a vampire who would give their eye teeth to be introduced to him. If he’s not a mate, he’ll have less pressure from the VSB, but not zero pressure.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You haven’t reported him to them

yet. Have you?"

"No. Not yet. Fernando counseled we wait until we've proven Chase's nature one way or another first. And then give ourselves a little grace time afterwards before telling anyone."

"Wise counsel," Dad agreed, still looking like he was ready to take this battle right to someone else's door. "Ronan, what do you need from us?"

"For now, just be aware of the possibility. If the VSB come knocking, call me immediately. I'll handle them. Or get Fernando to handle them, either way. Don't agree to anything they say, don't sign anything, don't tell them where Chase is. They really, really can't be trusted with him."

"That we can do. We'll safeguard our son."

"Chase." Mom reached across the table to take his hand, her eyes studying him carefully. "How are you taking all of this?"

"It honestly feels surreal more often than not."

"Do you want to be a vampire's mate?"

Now there was a question of the ages. Chase wasn't even sure how to answer. His feelings on the matter waffled back and forth all the time, sometimes in the same minute. "I'm not looking forward to the trouble this will bring down on my head, to be honest. I'd skip that headache if I could. I guess the best way to answer that is, am I interested in being a vampire's mate? No. Do I want to be Ronan's mate? Yes. He's the only thing that makes all of this worth it."

Um. Wait, should he have said that aloud...? Chase dared a peek at his boyfriend.

Ronan lifted his hand again, lips hovering over Chase's skin. The look in his eyes was everything. The delight, hunger, and possessiveness felt like a caress over Chase's skin. He might have shivered a little under those dark, consuming eyes.

Why did he get the feeling that as soon as they were alone, he was going to be eaten?

Somehow Ronan managed to speak normally. (Chase didn't get how because he couldn't even breathe properly under that look much less speak.) "Charlotte, Nathan, with all of that said, can I keep Chase with me for the next two weeks? Just to make it easier on all of us until we have this settled."

His parents had a whole silent conversation, and eventually his mom said, "Just keep us updated, okay, honey?"

Chase had to restart his brain, twice, before he could formulate a

response. “Yeah, sure.”

Ronan really had to stop turning his brain off. That was not cheating fair.

CHAPTER 16

Chase grasped the back of Ronan's thigh, trying to pull him in, so frustrated he felt like he'd combust. He'd been right, the second Ronan had him back to his house, he'd hauled Chase right upstairs, kissing him as they went. Chase had been quite happy to strip off clothes, hop into bed, and pull Ronan into him.

Right now, though, his boyfriend had Chase on his side, locked into place so Chase couldn't really move. He had himself fully seated inside Chase and his dick felt amazing, Chase had no complaints, except for some reason Ronan was just laying there and *not moving*.

Was sexual frustration grounds for murder? Chase felt like it was.

"Ronan," Chase growled, wriggling and trying to thrust onto Ronan's hard dick. He didn't have the leverage, which frustrated him further. "*Move.*"

"Have you never heard of Polynesian sex?"

"When you ask me questions like that, I feel absolutely certain you've found some new way to tease me."

Ronan put his mouth right next to Chase's ear, speaking in that low voice that always made his nerves flutter. "The Polynesians believe true intimacy is sharing energy with each other. To really recognize and respect the spirit of the person they're with. There's a seven day build up of them merely looking at each other, or lightly touching, before they even have sex."

Seven days? That sounded like torture to Chase.

Ronan's mouth trailed down to kiss under his ear. "The Japanese take on this, or so I heard, involves laying connected to your partner for thirty minutes before moving—"

Uh-oh. Chase could tell where this was going.

"—and then when you do start, make the thrusts gentle and slow."

In other words, Ronan was in absolutely no rush tonight and his goal was to wear Chase out. Chase would complain, but he had a feeling by the end of the night, he'd be passed out in a puddle of bliss.

A strong, warm hand smoothed up his side and kneaded Chase's chest, nipple hardening under the attention. It felt good, of course it did, his nerves humming in delight. Chase's fingers dug into Ronan's thigh, trying to haul him in impossibly closer.

The words were a sensual whisper against his skin. "You've become more and more sensitive to my saliva every time we've made love. What I'm curious about is if I can make you come like this."

Ronan set his mouth to Chase's neck, laving only once before sucking hard. It jolted Chase's system, pleasure kicking up a notch, his already hard dick taking notice. Every time Chase had been sucked like that, amazing sex followed, so it was almost a Pavlovic reaction. He stared blindly ahead, panting, whole body starting to thrum. His blood was pounding in his ears, ass flexing wildly around the cock still inside him.

"Ro—" Chase begged on a gasp. "Ronan, please—"

Sharp teeth barely scraped at his skin and Chase about lost it right there. He scrambled for something to hold onto, found the edge of the pillow and got a stranglehold on it. It wasn't enough, he had to have something, anything to take the pressure off. He grabbed Ronan's hand and hauled it down to his own cock, silently pleading for attention.

Ronan wrapped fingers around it, but didn't start jerking him off as Chase wanted. Instead, the tip of his fingers played with the head, stroking under it in a gentle back and forth. As limited as that was, it drove Chase even wilder.

Like a benediction, Ronan pulled his hips back an inch and thrust gently back in. Chase sobbed at the action, the way it grazed his prostate in all the right ways. He needed Ronan to do it again, to continue, but he was past words at this point. A whine came out of his throat, broken up only by a breathy grunt as Ronan granted his wish and did it again.

His cock was throbbing in time with Ronan's mouth, still sucking at his neck. Chase's hand came up to tangle in dark, silky hair and the hold wasn't exactly gentle.

Ronan drew further back and thrust in hard, hitting at exactly the right angle, and at the same time, he bit into Chase's skin. The dual pleasure overloaded Chase's system completely and he came hard over Ronan's fingers, damn near blacking out in the process. Darkness ate at his vision

even as stars exploded behind his eyes. A groan caught in his throat as he spasmed under the force of it.

He might have honestly passed out for a few seconds. When he did come back to himself, Chase was vaguely aware Ronan had pulled out, then resituated them so Chase was curled up against his chest. Those long, skilled fingers were gently carding through his hair, feeling good against his scalp.

“Back with me?” Ronan murmured against his forehead, sounding incredibly smug.

Chase had to restart his mouth, then his brain, then his mouth again before he could manage words. “The Polynesians are definitely onto something.”

An earthy chuckle rumbled from Ronan’s chest. “So I can do this again?”

“Absolutely.” Maybe not tonight, because Chase’s energy had packed up and gone on vacation without him, but he was perfectly game to do this again. He just had one question. “Ronan, am I really becoming more sensitive to your saliva?”

“From what I’ve seen.”

“I thought that was me imagining things. Huh. But, I mean, that’s not going to continue on indefinitely, right? There’s got to be an upper threshold.”

“One would think,” Ronan agreed reasonably. “The only way for us to figure out yours is to wait and see.”

Figured that would be the answer.

“Chase.” Ronan tipped his chin up so he could look him directly in the eyes. “Did you really mean what you said to your parents? That you want to be my mate?”

Chase hadn’t actually meant to say that but...it was out now. “I meant it. I really can’t imagine being with anyone else but you.”

If joy could be personified, that was Ronan in that moment. He kissed Chase softly, lips lingering. “I love you.”

Chase was already a pile of goo but he somehow melted a bit further. Hearing those words meant everything to him. It felt like his heart was trying to burst inside his chest when he gave those words right back. “I love you just as much.”

“No matter what happens, stay with me.”

He had no idea what Ronan was worried about, but this Chase could promise. “I wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else.”

The smile his statement made brought to Ronan's face made an already handsome man even more stunning. He started kissing Chase in earnest then. Chase kissed back even though it was making his head spin.

Ronan turned them, putting Chase flat on his back, settling between his thighs, and Chase could see where this was going already.

He broke the kiss to pant, "Remember I have to be able to walk tomorrow."

"You'll be fine," Ronan dismissed, diving back into the kiss.

With this mood his boyfriend was in, Chase wasn't so sure about that, but right now all he could do was hope for the best.

CHAPTER 17

Chase honestly didn't know how he was walking straight today. Ronan had *not* taken it easy on him last night. Or the night before. He was as giddy as a kid with free reign in a toy store, frankly. Something about having the parents' permission to keep him had gone straight to Ronan's head.

There would be absolutely no living with him after this. Chase predicted this now.

He got to campus on time, by some miracle, as it had been hard to pull himself from Ronan this morning. Damn irresistible boyfriends being all cute and cuddly. There should be laws against this.

Anyway, he was a responsible adult, and he got to campus just fine. Chase turned in his projects first thing, which was a stress relief, then realized he'd forgotten his backpack in the car. Dammit. Doubling back through campus wasn't a quick trip, but he'd be almost useless in class if he couldn't take notes.

He passed Max in the hallway and called to him, "Forgot something in the car, be right back."

"Hurry!" Max called after him. "Class starts in fifteen minutes."

"Yeah, I know!"

Chase put some more pep in his step as sometimes the professor came in early. She did it to screw with her students, he knew she did.

He made it to the car in record time, grabbed his backpack, locked the car, turned back for the building. All right, time to sprint madly.

"Chase, right?"

Hearing his name called behind him, he automatically turned, as he didn't recognize the voice. The man standing in front of him was good-looking, trimly built, and vaguely familiar? Chase couldn't begin to place him and then in all of a second it clicked. The guy they'd passed in the hotel, the one

Ronan had been wary of.

Uh. Shit. This probably wasn't a good thing.

Chase backed up, paranoia rising hard and fast in his throat. "Why do you know my name?"

"You recognize me," the man murmured, an evil delight spreading over his face. "Interesting. He did talk about me, didn't he?"

What had been the bastard's name...Brad, that was it. "All he said was he didn't trust you. I don't know what you're doing here, but I've got class."

The man's grin widened. "No you don't. Stay."

What the hell was he talking about? Chase shook his head, baffled, but he wasn't lingering. It wasn't safe to, for one, but he really didn't have time. Turning on his heel, he started for the stairs at a quick stride.

Brad darted around to block him, and Chase screeched to a halt, falling into a defensive stance.

"I said stay," Brad said more intensely.

"Who the hell would?" Chase bit off. "You're scaring me, dude, go away."

He tried again to get around Brad, heading for the door, but once again Brad moved to block him.

"It's not working on you," Brad said, eyes wide with disbelief. "Great God above, no wonder he's keeping you close. You're a true mate."

Oh. Shit. Chase swallowed hard and backed up a step. Had Brad tried to do something? Maybe Mesmerize or something like it? On the one hand, cool, true mate! On the other, fuck, of all people to know.

You know what, screw this. Ronan had coached Chase on what to do if something went hinky, and this qualified, so Chase didn't hesitate. He threw his hand straight into the air above his head and held it there.

It was like a magic trick. One second, it was just him and Brad in the parking lot, the next second, they had no less than three men in black suits right there, two of them flanking Chase in a protective stance. It happened so fast Chase actually jumped. Damn, how fast did vampires move, anyway?

"Master Chase," the vampire in front of him said calmly, "is there a problem?"

"The guy's name is Brad, he was trying to kidnap me," Chase blurted out. "He's an enemy or something of Ronan's."

"Got it."

Brad put up both hands, smile charming. "Now, now, I didn't touch him."

I didn't even threaten him. You don't want to mess with me, my sire will be very cross with you if something happens to me."

It was true he hadn't done anything...that Chase could prove, anyway. Not for lack of trying, though, as he clearly had tried something.

The three vampires looked at each other, silently conferring, before the oldest of the three turned back to Brad. "If you leave now, quietly, I won't take action."

"Done." Brad waggled his fingers at Chase. "See you around, cutie. We'll chat more then."

"Over my cold, rotting corpse," Chase promised him flatly.

Brad seemed to find that funny as he chuckled before turning and walking calmly away.

One of the guards, a tough looking woman who probably chewed on nails for breakfast, looked him over. "What happened, Master Chase?"

"I think he tried to use a vampire power on me." Chase swallowed hard, staring after Brad's back, mind whirling. "He was trying to convince me to go with him. He said...shit. This isn't good. Um, you guys are the bodyguards of Fernando's family, right?"

"We are," she assured him.

"I'm Franklin," the oldest man introduced himself. "I'm the designated bodyguard for you. Amy and Kyle are also assigned to your protection."

"Ohhh. I know who you are. Um, Franklin, I think someone better take me to Ronan. Shit got real."

"Done. Amy and Kyle will escort you directly there."

His two bodyguards, okay, cool. Still, Chase pulled his phone out and called his boyfriend.

Ronan answered on the second ring. "Chase, aren't you in class?"

"I should be but no. Um, Ronan, thing is— Brad found me on campus."

The next words were delivered in a growl. "What did he want?"

"I dunno, not really, he was trying to get me to go with him." Chase's words came out faster and faster, panic starting to set in, because this was really not good. "I wouldn't, of course, but then he used some kind of vampire power on me, only it didn't work, I dunno which one, but he realized it didn't work on me. He called me a true mate, which yay for having that confirmed, but it's really not good that he knows."

"No," Ronan agreed and he had his graveyard voice on. The one that was calm on the surface but promised death underneath. "No, it's not good at all."

Did the bodyguards respond?”

“Yeah, Franklin’s dispatching Kyle and Amy to take me to you.”

“Come quick, Chase. I don’t know what Brad’s going to do with this information, but I do know we won’t like it.”

“Yeah,” Chase agreed hoarsely, following as Amy led him through the parking lot. “That much, I figured. What do we do?”

“By the time you get to me, I’ll have a plan, I promise you.”

At least Ronan had an idea of what to do. Chase’s only idea was to panic, which wasn’t exactly helpful. If he had to go through this crazy situation, at least he had a Ronan to help him through it.

CHAPTER 18

When Ronan had initially told Chase to come to him, he'd assumed Ronan's office.

Well, you know what they say about assumptions....

He looked up at the absolute monstrosity of a house, that really looked like a French Chateau, and gulped. Yeah, so, this could only be one place. Fernando's house. Well, shit. He was meeting the parents. Without prep time or warning. Yaaaaay.

He followed Amy inside, past all the other bodyguards standing around in suits looking menacing (there were a lot of those) and into a very elaborately decorated foyer. Everything was glistening. Everything. Chase felt like he was in a museum.

Ronan was pacing the marble floors as he came in, and then came straight for him, hauling Chase in for a hug.

He needed the hug, relaxing into those arms because really, being with Ronan settled him like nothing else. Ronan was the one person who could make the world stand quiet and still for him when everything else was chaos.

"You have a plan?" he murmured against Ronan's shoulders, arms tight around his waist.

Ronan sighed. "I had a good one. Then Brad threw a monkey wrench into it. Come in, meet my sire, and we'll explain."

That did not sound good. Chase was still nervous about meeting Fernando, but he followed Ronan into the room anyway. Ronan kept a hand at the small of his back, the touch grounding.

The parlor was more like a study, to Chase's view, as it had a desk and a full wall of bookshelves, but there were two couches and two armchairs in front of the desk, clearly arranged there for conversation. Upon their entrance, a man stood and came around the desk, a slight smile on his face.

Handsome, was Chase's first impression. He was firmly built, blond hair swept back and held in place with gel, highlighting a strong bone structure. Older, perhaps in his early forty's when turned—oh wait, no, Fernando was generation zero. Maybe he just aged really, really slowly. He did look like a mafia boss, there was an aura about him that suggested he gave no fucks, but he had a warmth to his blue eyes when he looked at Ronan. A clear affection for his son. It made him more approachable.

"Father," Ronan introduced, "This is Chase. Chase, my sire."

Chase offered a hand in greeting. "Sir, it's nice to meet you."

Fernando took it, his grip firm without being crushing, smile widening a notch. "And you, Chase. My son has become very happy since he's met you. Please, sit. I'm sorry you had a scare on campus today."

"Yeah, I wasn't thrilled about it. Oh! But the bodyguards you assigned, they were quick to come help, so thank you for them."

Fernando's demeanor softened a touch more as he claimed one of the armchairs. "You are very welcome. If you like them, I can make them your bodyguards indefinitely."

"Uh, check with them first," Chase hedged. "If they're okay with that, I am. They were super nice to me on the way here. I don't want to lock them into something."

"I'll speak with them. Now, tell me precisely what happened. Leave no detail out."

Chase settled right next to Ronan on the couch, their thighs pressed together, one of his hands latched onto his boyfriend's. It helped him settle some. He had to take a second to organize his thoughts before he could talk.

"Um, so did Ronan tell you that I'd kinda come across Brad before?"

Fernando gave a nod. "In passing while on a date."

See? See?! Chase knew Ronan had counted that as a date. Eh, never mind, not the time to pursue it. Later. "Right. I got the feeling Brad grew curious about me because of it. Okay, so, that in mind, I was running late for a class. I'd forgotten my backpack in my car, went out to grab it, everyone else was basically in class at that point so I was alone in the parking lot. He called to me from behind and it took me a second to recognize him. He wanted me to talk to him but I was in a rush, I told him I was late, I had class. He told me to stay. I ignored him, I mean I already knew he was bad news, I wasn't lingering, yeah? So I turned and headed into the building. He darted around me and told me to stay again, with more force this time, and I told

him no way. He was creeping me out, too, I told him that. That's when he started laughing, this incredulous laugh and he said something like 'It's not working on you. No wonder he keeps you so close. You're a true mate.' I'm maybe paraphrasing a little, I can't remember his exact words."

Ronan's fingers tightened on his. He looked torn between being super happy and worried. "Chase, did you feel anything at all? Did he indicate what power he tried to use on you?"

"I legit have no clue." Chase shook his head helplessly. "Until he said that, I had no idea he was using a vampire ability at all."

"A true mate indeed," Fernando murmured. He looked thoughtful; one finger pressed to his chin.

Chase was honestly still grappling with it. He had a feeling it might take a few days to settle in his head. "While I'm really happy about it in a way, I'm afraid of what Brad will do with the information."

"Oh, we know what he did with it." Ronan groaned, head flopping forward for a moment. "He immediately called the VSB."

Shit. Of course he had.

"They in turn called me," Fernando informed them, mouth in a flat line of anger. "And informed me we were to turn you over at once."

"Uh...*hell* no."

"What I said," Ronan growled.

Fernando held up a staying hand. "I have no intention of taking my son's mate from him. Rest assured. What I did promise is that we would take you to their main headquarters and they could talk to you. That was the best compromise I could offer. You, of course, are allowed to say no. Firmly. To whatever they propose. They will want to talk to you one-on-one without our interference for a few minutes, which I will allow, but I impressed upon them that where you go, and who you mate with, is entirely your choice. They are not to strongarm you into anything."

Would this really be okay...? Chase searched Ronan's face, feeling really uneasy about this whole thing.

Ronan stroked his cheek with a thumb, expression reassuring. "I promise you, it will only be a few minutes, and I'll be in the next room the entire time. They won't be able to do anything to you. They have to verify you're with me of your own will and they can't do that if you're stuck to my side."

It made sense. Of course it made sense. To an outsider, someone who didn't know the story, of course they'd need to make sure Chase chose all of

this. That said, he still had this foreboding twisting up his stomach and he didn't like it. If he'd seen any other way to get out of this, he would have already done it.

Still, what choice did they have? Even Fernando had only managed to compromise this far, and he had far more power than Chase did.

Reluctantly, Chase gave a nod. "All right. I guess let's do this, then. When do we go?"

"Now," Fernando answered, standing. "The sooner we can get this over with, the better."

Well, Chase couldn't argue with that. Waiting would only wear on his nerves anyway.

Look, foreboding feeling, lighten up. It'll be fine. All Chase had to do was march in there and tell some vampires he loved Ronan and he didn't want anyone else. If they tried to argue, he could just say no. Repeatedly. If they wouldn't take the no, he would yell for Ronan or walk out.

Easy peasy.

He hoped.

CHAPTER 19

Chase sat in the VSB's headquarters and honestly wished to be anywhere else. Dentist chairs were preferable to this. As were torture racks, lectures on the mating habits of beetles, and watching water boil. In fact, he would rather paint a house with a q-tip rather than sit here, in this very nicely decorated room, and face Vanessa.

Walking into this room, he'd been anxious, wanting to phrase things right so he could get his point across. His wish had more or less died an instantaneous death when she had met them at the door, banished Ronan to lurk in the hallway, and then physically escorted/frog-marched Chase into this room. Chase had tried protesting to no avail.

Unfortunately, she insisted on Ronan not being in this room. Something about him influencing Chase's answers. She obviously didn't know Chase well enough to understand that very little influenced his opinions, but if Ronan sitting outside the room made her feel better, fine. For now. Fernando unfortunately had something come up, so he wasn't there, but he was a phone call away. And Chase would absolutely make that call if things came down to it. He left his phone on his lap, recording, as he didn't trust this bitch and wanted a record of their conversation, just in case.

And if she tried to infer even once more that Ronan wasn't the best boyfriend in the world, Chase would climb right down her throat.

She sat opposite him at the round table, a smile pinned to her face. She'd done her best to look 'casual' only to completely miss the target. She wore blue jeans, a form fitting black silk shirt, her blonde hair tamed back into a sleek ponytail. D for effort as she also wore enough jewelry to sink a pirate ship. It was like she wanted to put him at ease by being friendly but had to flaunt her wealth at the same time. It hit all wrong. "Have some tea, Chase."

Chase would not have tea because he was one hundred percent sure

Vanessa was the type to slip something into it. “I’ll pass, thanks. Can we just get this over with?”

Her smile slipped for a second. She did not care for his attitude, apparently. Tough beans, Chase had no other attitude currently available.

“I think you should listen to me with an open mind, young man.”

“Sorry, grandma, I’m afraid if I’m too open minded, my brains will fall out.”

Vanessa’s eye twitched, and it was clear she was about two seconds from losing her temper. This filled Chase’s petty heart with joy.

Vanessa took in a breath and visibly reigned her temper in. “Chase. I think you underestimate how valuable you are.”

If she was trying to make him feel like some kind of rare art piece, she’d not succeeded. Just rubbed him in all the wrong ways. With a cactus. “You know, valuable isn’t the word. I do feel very, very loved. Which is why this whole conversation is pointless—”

She cut him off. “You are only one of a hundred and eighteen true mates in the entire continent. Literally millions of people wish to be in your shoes. You could be mated to a prince, or—”

Two could play this game. Chase cut her off. “I had no reason to want to be a true mate. This fairytale you’ve built in your head, where everyone wants to be in my shoes? Utterly false. I didn’t dream of this. I didn’t even think it a viable option, honestly. A true mate is a trope for movies and books, that’s what I thought of it until I realized I was one.”

That stopped her dead for a second. Vanessa’s head drew back, brows twisting up in utter confusion. “What? You didn’t think they were real?”

“It’s like dinosaurs,” Chase explained, hoping he was finally getting through to her. “Do I know they exist? Sure, I see the history of them. Did I aspire to be one? Well, no, it wasn’t a viable option. You see what I mean?”

She kept staring at him like he wasn’t making sense. Granted, Chase did have those moments where he talked nonsense, he wouldn’t pretend otherwise. But he was pretty sure that was logical, she just didn’t want to buy it. And a closed mind was very hard to convince.

Pushing through, he kept going. “Honestly, Ronan had a hell of a time convincing me I was one. That’s how far out the concept was for me. Once he did get it through my head, the only reason why I was glad for it was because I want to be with him.”

She snapped back into motion, like he’d given her some kind of lifeline to

seize. “Now, Chase, you’re young. I don’t think you realize what you’re saying. There’s so many people you could meet who would be better suited to you.”

He rolled his eyes so hard, Chase damn near gave himself a migraine. Like hell. Not that she wanted to hear it.

Vanessa whipped out her tablet and pulled up a picture. It was a rather nice house, from the downtown section judging from the architecture, one of those mansions from a bygone era that had been pristinely kept up over the generations. The architect in Chase appreciated it but the rest of him regarded the picture warily. Why was she showing him a house?

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Vanessa was all smiles again. A salesman in full force. “We’d set you up here so you can have your own space to meet bachelors in—”

What was this, a reality show? “No.”

“—or bachelorettes? I understand you’re bi, do you have a preference on which you’d rather date? We only went with men at first because you dated one.”

“Dating. Currently. As in, not past tense, do not try to shove Ronan under the rug.”

Vanessa had selective hearing. She chose to ignore him utterly. “There’s several beautiful princesses whom I think would be charmed by you. What do you think?”

He was done answering her questions. If she was going to ignore him, he would ignore her. “Just out of curiosity, can you at least roleplay intelligence?”

Oh, that pissed her right off. She slapped the tablet down, smile gone like she ripped it right off. “Chase. Do be serious.”

“Been serious this whole time,” Chase informed her, kicking back like he was at his ease. Actually, he was boiling mad, enough so he felt it burning and clawing its way up his throat, but he strove not to let it gain control. If it did, he’d be flipping tables. “You’re the one ignoring what I’m saying.”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“How much am I worth?” Chase countered, not even trying to hide the anger in his voice. “Five million? Six? I understand there’s quite the matchmaking fee with true mates.”

She snapped her mouth shut, teeth audibly grinding together. “I see Ronan only told you the negative sides.”

“He told me all the sides. Because we don’t have secrets from each other. We have complete trust in each other, I know that’s something of a foreign concept for you.” Dammit, where was his BishBGone spray? Chase needed it right about then.

Vanessa abruptly switched tactics. “You realize that by being belligerent like this, you’re only hurting him?”

That stilled him for a second. Concern tempered his anger. What the hell did that mean. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Ronan is in trouble with the VSB,” she informed him tartly. “He should have reported you immediately. Instead, he tried to hoard you for himself.”

“Is that what you think? Lady, he didn’t *know* I was a true mate until I ran into Brad.”

Vanessa’s haughtiness faltered for a moment. “Of course he knew.”

“No, he very much didn’t. We suspected, sure. But we didn’t know for sure until Brad tried to Mesmerize me and failed. The second I got away from Brad, I called Ronan and told him. *That’s* when he knew. And then it was reported through Fernando.”

It seemed to take some of the wind out of Vanessa’s sails. She obviously had thought the opposite had happened, had banked on it in order to argue her case, and now she wasn’t quite sure how to handle this.

Chase pushed his advantage while he had it. “Ronan didn’t choose me because I’m a true mate. He chose me because he wants me. I chose him because I fell in love with him. It’s really that simple. It’s why nothing you’re offering me seems at all enticing. Okay? Truly, seriously, not interested. So do whatever paperwork you need to that says I’m not available and let’s call this a day.”

She rallied. Unfortunately. Vanessa cleared her throat, straightening a little in her chair. “It doesn’t change my point that you should meet and date other vampires before making any decisions.”

This bitch was completely the type to cross boundaries so much you’d think you’re France and she was Germany. At least, Chase felt like that in this moment.

Genuinedislike.jpeg.

“I swear to the god of gay porn, there’s just no way to change your mind.” Chase sighed and pushed back from the table. “I’m done.”

Vanessa hopped up immediately, slamming hands on the table. “What do you think you’re doing? We’re not done here!”

“I came to talk to you, as commanded, but no one gave me a time limit. *I* say I’m done, and if I’m really as valuable to the vampire community as you say I am?” Chase shot her a challenging look, snarling out the last words, “*Then my opinion outweighs yours. We’re done.*”

Oh, she didn’t like that at all. She nearly vibrated, she was so mad, face purple with rage. “How fucking dare you!”

“Lady, this takes no daring.” Chase didn’t take his eyes off her (for the simple fact he didn’t trust her one iota) as he raised his voice and called, “Ronan!”

Ronan was through the door in a heartbeat. From the angry expression on his face, it looked like he’d heard every word clearly and didn’t like any of it. With his vampire hearing, he likely had. The man had formidable restraint to not barge in here before Chase called him.

Vanessa rounded the table, eyes locked on Chase. “You are not leaving here.”

You know what? Fuck this noise. Chase had a Big Daddy and he wasn’t above using him. He promptly pulled his phone out and called Fernando.

Fernando was cued and waiting for the call, as the phone didn’t even fully ring once before he answered. “*Chase.*”

“Hey, she’s being a bitch like predicted. Says I can’t leave. I spent fifteen minutes trying to talk sense into her, but failed, can I leave now?”

“*You absolutely can.*”

See? This was why he liked Fernando.

Vanessa hissed towards the phone. “You do *not* have the authority to—”

“*Chase has chosen his mate.*” Fernando’s voice was pure steel, daring her to argue with him. “*He has said so plainly, in front of multiple witnesses. You cannot overturn this. No one in the VSB can force a true mate away from their chosen one. Chase is absolutely correct. He has all the power in this situation. You do not. If you persist in this, know that my family will respond accordingly.*”

Vanessa stared at the phone like she couldn’t believe her ears. “You can’t possibly be suggesting you’d fight the VSB over this!”

“*You may test that assumption at your convenience.*”

That was the classiest way Chase had ever heard someone say ‘fuck around and find out.’ He absolutely was remembering that line for future use. For now, though, time to skedaddle.

Without a backwards glance, he linked hands with Ronan and left. Ronan

was silent as they walked out of the building, which wasn't a good thing. Normally, when Ronan was silent, he was plotting something. From his expression, said plotting involved explosions.

He didn't say a word as he opened the passenger's side door for Chase. Chase eyed his boyfriend while he spoke with Fernando. "Thanks for the backup."

"Not at all. Are you out of the building now?"

"Yeah, in Ronan's car. We're heading—"

Ronan slipped into the driver's side of the car, finishing the sentence. "To you. I do not like what I overheard just now. We need to discuss it."

"Understood. I'm home now, so come here."

"Be there soon."

Chase didn't like that meeting either, but he had a feeling he'd missed some of the undercurrents. He was new to vampire society and didn't have all the history he needed to understand precisely what was going on. As Ronan started the car, he hung the phone up, debating on whether to ask. Might as well, before it ate at him.

"Um. Ronan? She really doesn't have the power to take me away, right? It's completely my choice?"

"It's completely your choice," Ronan assured him. But he didn't look happy either, jaw set in a stubborn line. "But I don't trust her to play by the rules."

Oh.

Well, shit. For that matter, Chase didn't either. "So...do I need to brace myself?"

"I'd rather be prepared and wrong, than unprepared and scrambling to save you."

"I prefer that too. If the VSB do approach me again, can I act with extreme prejudice?"

Ronan finally flashed him a smile, although it was tight-lipped and strained. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

See, this was why he and Ronan got along. They were kindred spirits.

When things get fucky, fuck shit up. Chase had no problem with this philosophy and if Vanessa tried something, he was absolutely going to follow through on it.

CHAPTER 20

Ronan could see clearly through the façade Chase had up. He was trying to act like it was all fine, but Ronan knew him better than that. It was the little tells that gave Chase away. The way he gravitated to Ronan every few minutes, doing nothing more than making sure he knew where Ronan was, or coming in long enough lightly touch Ronan's shoulder, as if needing tactile reassurance. He couldn't seem to focus on anything, either, popping up every few minutes and switching from phone, to book, to TV, to laptop, and then back again in an endless cycle.

He let this play out for a while until Chase came back around to him, then caught his lover's hand to pull him into Ronan's lap. Chase settled with a surprised *meep*, blinking up at Ronan with a silent query.

"Want to talk about it?"

Chase opened his mouth as if to protest then subsided with a sigh, entrusting his body weight to Ronan by slumping against his chest. "Sorry."

"I'm not reprimanding you."

"I'm just...unsettled. I honestly thought facing Vanessa down would make it clear to her there's no chance of her winning. Instead, all I seemed to do was spark her competitive side. I thought vampires all had a lot of money, so why is she so focused on my matchmaking fee? To the point of making enemies to get it."

Ah. That was an erroneous assumption although Ronan could see how Chase arrived at it. "Not everyone's rich, love."

Chase lifted his head to blink up at him. "Eh?"

"Vampires are like people. Some of us are better at money management, at business, than others. Most of the vampires who work for the VSB *work*. They depend on the salary they get there."

The light dawned over Chase's face. "Oh. Duh. I should have realized. I

thought it was like, an honorary position or something.”

“Like a public office? Ha, no, nothing like that. They’re government goons.”

“So she really, really wants the money because there’s no other way for her to get it.” Chase pulled a face, expression sour. “Well, at least her motivation makes more sense.”

“That it does. It’s why I said you have all the power. She really doesn’t have the leverage to force you to do anything.”

Chase nodded a little, but didn’t move.

Hmm, yeah, that failed to reassure him. Ronan switched tactics. “There is a way to block her entirely from trying this again.”

Now he had Chase’s full attention. “There is?”

“Sure. I was hoping to date a little longer before springing this on you, but…”

“Spring it,” Chase encouraged.

“If we submit paperwork to the VSB office that you are registering me as your mate—”

“Wait, wait, shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“No, I told you, you have all the power here. I would be *your* mate, that’s how the vampire world sees it. I’m privileged enough to be your choice.”

That got Chase’s chest puffed up in pride. “Wow. I am hot shit.”

Ronan chuckled, enjoying the spark of life in Chase’s eyes. “That you are. So back to my point. I can submit the paperwork to show you and I are mated, or wish to be. That will stop her, if nothing else can. No vampire will be able to touch you or try to claim you with that on file.”

Chase didn’t even think about it. “Let’s do it.”

“That easy, huh.” Ronan couldn’t take the cuteness. His heart felt on the verge of overflowing. Chase’s love and affection were just so *there*, so obvious, so utterly genuine. He never left Ronan in doubt of his own feelings, and it was the best gift he could ever give Ronan, bar none.

He leaned in and kissed Chase, taking his time with it, as kissing Chase was always a pleasure. His lover hummed into the kiss, arms coming around Ronan’s neck as he kissed back.

Mmm, utterly delightful. Also distracting. Ronan had things he must do that didn’t involve stripping Chase and spending the rest of the day driving him crazy.

He reluctantly broke the kiss. Very reluctantly. “If we’re going to do this,

I want to do it now. If we're quick, we can get everything done in the next two days and in by Monday morning."

"I'm all for it. What do we need?"

"First and most importantly, your parents' permission."

Chase's expression turned utterly blank. "Uh?"

"Because you're underage," Ronan explained. "Anyone under twenty-one has to have a parent's or guardian's permission. It's a very antiquated rule but the VSB still adhere to it. I need one of their signatures at least, although both would be preferable."

"Um," Chase scratched at his cheek with one finger, "Does that mean it's time for the parents to meet?"

He hadn't thought of it in those terms, but, "Yeah. Basically what it means. How about we host a dinner party tomorrow night? Everyone can meet that way. I'll have paperwork prepped and ready to go."

"It's a bit short notice, but I think my parents would be good with it. Lemme call."

Chase got up promptly and went for the phone he'd left on the coffee table.

Ronan's biological parents were in a different town, meaning they'd have to drive in, so he better call them, too. They needed more of a head's up. He was 120% sure they would want to be here for this.



In the end, Fernando actually hosted the dinner. As he pointed out to Ronan, he had an in-house chef, which took the worry of cooking off of them, plus his table could hold everyone. It was all fine by Ronan, as that meant no cleanup, either.

He half-expected Chase to be a bundle of nerves, considering parents were meeting for the first time, but instead he seemed relieved. In fact, he had a definite bounce to his step as they walked up the stairs to Fernando's house.

Ronan caught his hand, twining fingers together. "You're not nervous?"

"Naw." Chase threw him a bright smile. "My parents like you, Fernando likes me, I really don't have much to worry about. Even if your parents object for some reason—"

"They won't," Ronan assured him, meaning every word.

"—they'll be overruled by the other parents. And it's not their signatures

we need, anyway. I can win them over in time if it comes to that.”

“You’re so logical sometimes.”

“Sometimes? What do you mean by sometimes?”

Ronan was saved by the butler opening the door and greeting them.

“Good evening, Master Ronan.”

“Good evening, Samuel. Is everyone here?”

“Your parents have arrived, but I believe we’re still awaiting Master Chase’s.” Samuel gave Chase a reassuring nod. “They’re very eager to meet you.”

“Thanks, Samuel, that’s reassuring.”

When had Samuel and Chase become so friendly with each other...? Then again, Chase did seem to make friends wherever he went. It was that friendly nature which had brought them both together to begin with, so Ronan wasn’t about to complain.

They went through and sure enough, Ronan could hear his parents’ voices coming from the sitting room. His mother was laughing at something, sounding very high in spirits. He hadn’t seen his parents face to face in months, so part of him was eager to see them, but part of him was a little nervous about introducing Chase, too. He honestly believed they’d love Chase once they got to know him, but there was the small part of him that planned for contingencies.

They turned the corner into the room, and Ronan’s father spied him immediately.

“There he is!” His father came straight in, giving him a firm hug.

Ronan hugged him back, happiness bubbling up inside him. He did love his parents. He also wished they hadn’t chosen to retire to a city over two hours away.

Mom came over to get a hug in, too. Ronan kept Chase close during this, as he expected his father to—

“And you must be Chase.”

As expected. His father wasn’t one to beat around the bush.

“I am.” Chase held out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“None of that, you’re going to be my son too, shortly.” Dad wrapped him up in a hug.

Chase was definitely startled at this, but went right in, hugging back. His delighted smile showed over the taller man’s shoulder.

Mom leaned in to whisper to Ronan, “You’ve got good taste. He’s

incredibly cute.”

“Isn’t he, though?” Ronan maybe puffed up a little in pride. He couldn’t help it. Chase was very, very cute and he liked showing him off. Sue him.

The front door opened, voices he knew greeting Samuel. Ah, Chase’s parents had arrived. Ronan stayed right where he was in order to facilitate the introductions. Everyone was curious, putting on good manners as they exchanged greetings. Ronan had prepared his parents as much as he could for this meeting, so they would know names and faces, and it seemed to have worked. No one clashed immediately.

Fernando encouraged people to come to the dining room, as dinner was ready for them. Ronan and his parents settling on one side of the massive table, Chase with his parents on the other. Fernando had spared no expense in setting out this dinner, it was a surf and turf menu with the *good* wine from the cellar pulled out for the occasion.

With the first course served, and wine poured, people settled into eating.

“Well.” Mom regarded everyone at the table with transparent delight. “I hoped to see this day, my son with a cute boyfriend, but I admit I didn’t anticipate this exact situation. Ronan, you told me quite a bit over the phone, but clarify a few things for me.”

“Of course,” he encouraged.

“This Vanessa woman, you said she works for the VSB? I thought the VSB worked for the betterment of vampire society, so I don’t understand why she’s giving you so much trouble.”

Ah. He perhaps should have explained that better. “She’s something of an outlier. She *shouldn’t* be giving us trouble, that’s true. She’s doing so because there’s a five million dollar matchmaking fee if she facilitates a meeting between Chase and a vampire. The five million is unfortunately her higher purpose.”

Dad slammed his fork down, a scowl on his face. “What a bitch. All right, I know you, what do you plan to do about this?”

“Well, there’s a few things I want to do.” Ronan inclined his head toward Chase’s parents on the other side of the table. “We start by filling out the paperwork to say I’m Chase’s mate, with his parents’ signatures, to make it official. Her hands are tied after that, she can’t try to introduce him to anyone else.”

Fernando picked up smoothly. “The other thing we’ll do is file a formal complaint against her. We cannot, obviously, file any paperwork through this

city's office as she'll surely 'lose' it or some such. But Ronan and I, first thing Monday morning, will go into the next town over, to their office building, to submit it in person there. I will take advantage of this by lodging a complaint against her. Since I'm head of a family, they'll take it quite seriously."

Chase made a face. "Normally, I'd go with, to add my own complaint to this, but I've got a test I absolutely can't miss on Monday."

"It's all right," Ronan soothed. "I can handle—"

Chase's phone went off. From the way he sighed, as if someone was taking the remaining patience, and stabbing it repeatedly with a dull spoon, it could only be one person.

"Vanessa again?" Ronan glared at the phone, honestly wishing he could reach through it and restrict her airway.

"Yeah." To the rest of the parents, Chase wearily explained, "She won't take no for an answer. She keeps texting and calling me. This is like the 30th text today."

All of the parents exchanged looks, none of them happy.

"She really thinks she can tear you from my son?" Dad looked to Fernando, expression dead serious. "When you kill her, bring her out my way. I've got fifty acres of forest and no close neighbors."

Fernando's smile would make sharks quake. "You're too kind."

"Chase, go ahead and block her." Ronan rubbed at the bridge of his nose, over this whole situation. "We have more than enough evidence now."

"Thank god." Chase stabbed at the screen of his phone with vengeance. "There, done. Mom, Dad, now that you've met everyone, you'll sign the papers, right?"

"We will," Charlotte assured him. "And Ronan?"

Ronan sat up a little, alert. "Yes?"

"Be on the doorstep of that office the second it opens," she ordered.

Ronan snapped off a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

CHAPTER 21

Chase had Ronan's phone. Unlocked.

Ooooh, the possibilities.

No, no. He should be good. They'd swapped phones for a very good reason. He shouldn't mess with Ronan when the man's stress levels were already levitating him toward Mars.

And yet...temptation hovered, beckoning him with a shit-eating grin on its face.

It was like Franklin had eyes in the back of his head. Despite being in the driver's seat, with his eyes on the road, he apparently could see all. "Chase, do not."

Chase glanced up guiltily. "I wasn't doing anything."

"I can hear the gears churning from here. You were thinking of doing something naughty with Ronan's phone."

"So, just so I know, what kind of alarm do you have for this kind of thing?"

"A very keen one. My 'oh shit now it's my problem' alarm is finely tuned after many, many years of safeguarding my charges."

Chase thought about that. Thought of who Franklin had protected over the years. His lips pursed in an O of understanding. "Yeah, I can totally see how you'd acquire that. Just out of self-preservation."

"Precisely so. So, you'll also understand why I ask you to put the phone down."

RIP fun possibilities. Chase sighed and did as bid. "Yeah, okay. I probably shouldn't, anyway. Ronan's got enough on his plate."

"He's actually done and back in town," Franklin corrected. "You're on your way to meet him for lunch now."

"I, uh, am? How come I never know what's going on?"

“I don’t know. Genetics?”

“Hardy-har-har, ten thousand comedians out of work and you’re sitting there cracking jokes. Okay but no, seriously, I have his phone. He could have texted me.”

“He wasn’t sure when your exam ended and didn’t want to get you in trouble. Hence why he communicated with me.”

Chase appreciated the foresight on Ronan’s behalf. True, that particular professor was a hardass and if they heard even a text message notification, they’d drop a student’s grade by a whole letter. He’d already sort of struggled through the exam as it was, so a phone call or text would not have been helpful.

Ronan had taken Chase’s phone with him that morning while he filed the paperwork for a couple of reasons. One, he wanted to show the authorities there that Vanessa had harassed Chase for the better part of the weekend by calling and texting him. It was a huge no-no, so she was sure to get in trouble for it. Second reason was Chase had secretly recorded his conversation with her on his phone. There was a very clear record of Chase saying no, repeatedly. Everyone wanted that recording on file as well.

Honestly, if not for this exam, which was worth a third of his grade, he would have gone with Ronan to make his own case. But everyone agreed, the sooner the paperwork was filed, the better. And it wasn’t like Ronan needed his help to begin with. Man was sure to have it covered.

Chase was very, very invested in what all had been said and done that morning. He was glad Ronan had arranged lunch together as he wanted all the details. All.

“Which restaurant are we going to?”

Amy, the hulking female body guard who could scare even other vampires into behaving by staring at them, sat in the front seat and pointed for him. “Red Olive, there on the corner.”

“Huh, I haven’t been there before. What type of restaurant is it?”

“Mediterranean.”

“Mmm, love me some good Mediterranean. What, is that Ronan I see standing on the corner?”

“I believe it is,” Amy confirmed.

Okay, now he could totally play with Ronan like this. Chase snatched up the phone again and promptly called his phone.

Ronan was equally quick to answer, a smile in his voice. “Why hello.”

“Hello, handsome,” Chase flirted back. “I see you.”

“Do you, now?” Ronan turned his head this way and that, looking for the car, then stilled as he apparently spotted it. “Ah, there you are. You’re close.”

“I am. If traffic wasn’t such a pain, I’d be there already. Hey, Amy, can we get out and walk—”

A spray of glass imploded as the car window shattered. Chase screeched in alarm, ducking on instinct, his hands raised to protect his head. What the ever loving hell?!

He heard the whine and groan of tortured metal and turned his head to look, only to wish he hadn’t. A large man with his face covered in tattoos was physically wrenching the door off the car, and Brad stood right behind him, hand outstretched as if ready to grab Chase and haul him out.

Shiiiiit, this wasn’t good. Wasn’t good at all!

It wasn’t just those two, he could see other vampires attacking the front of the vehicle, his vampire bodyguards responding with full force. It was quite the fight, so ferocious and fast Chase couldn’t track any of it. They were moving faster than his eyes could follow, but it seemed like his bodyguards were winning? At least, Franklin had just throat punched one of them, and the man was now on the ground gasping for air, so he’d take that as them winning.

Chase could hear Ronan shouting through the phone, but he couldn’t focus on it. Too much noise going on, and he was trying to get away from Brad’s outreached hand. The door was off completely now, unfortunately, and it left a gaping hole where there should have been metal.

“You fucking asshole,” Chase snarled at Brad, mentally going through his backpack, trying to think of anything he could use as a weapon. Nothing sprang to mind. “Don’t you dare try to—”

“Oh, I dare.” Brad didn’t even look all that bothered. More amused than anything that Chase would try to warn him off. “Now, come here.”

“Listen, chucklefuck, I would rather deep throat a cactus than even look at you.”

Brad found this funny. He laughed even as he reached forward.

Chase tried to fight him off, but sadly, a vampire’s reflexes were so much faster than a normal human’s. He didn’t stand a prayer. Between one blink and another, Chase was out of the car, Brad’s hands like iron cuffs around his arms as he hauled Chase out onto the street.

Shit, fuck, hell no! Chase struggled, for all the good it did, even as Brad

hauled him toward a white van idling right next to their car. No, okay? Just no, he'd seen what happened to people who got hauled into white vans with no windows in horror flicks and he wasn't about to become another victim.

"Hippity-bibbity-no," Chase babbled, digging in his heels, doing his best to become dead weight. "I have developed this cool new spell called boundaries. I don't like you, go away!"

Brad laughed even as he opened the back of the van and threw Chase roughly into it. Hard metal floor, no carpeting, so that was ouchy to say the least. He flinched and rubbed at an abused elbow even as he glared up at Brad.

"I see why Ronan likes you. You're entertaining."

It was like a wolf complimenting a rabbit on giving him a good chase before being devoured. Not only was it insulting, but unfortunately accurate.

Okay, two problems at a time. First problem, being in a van was really bad, it would make it harder to find Chase if they took off right now. Second problem, his bodyguards were still fighting goons outside, he could hear them going at it. As long as they were occupied, they could not help him. Right now, his only chance was Ronan coming to the rescue.

Then he heard it. The glorious sound of Ronan snarling out some very choice words even as he joined the fray. Yay, boyfriend! Hopefully that turned the tide and he could get away from Brad.

"Ronan's here," the driver of the van announced, sounding like he announced a death god had just made an appearance.

"Fuck, why's he here?" Brad turned and slammed the door shut, enclosing them in the van. "Go, drive!"

"Go where?" Driver snapped back irately. "I fucking told you not to jump out right now. We're gridlock, there's no going anywhere."

Yeah, that hadn't been the brightest move of Brad's. But Brad wasn't bright, now was he? No one could be considered smart if they were attacking the Fernando family. It was also, in this moment, Chase's saving grace.

"Fuck it, I'll claim him now." Brad turned to Chase with a fixed intent, lips pulling back to reveal fangs.

"Uh." Claim? The hell? "Dude, do you really think sinking fangs into me is going to somehow make me yours?"

"That's how it works," Brad informed him even as he knelt down, getting more on Chase's level.

The fuck it did. "Then Ronan's claimed me like, I dunno, a dozen times

over?”

Brad stilled for a second. “He’s fed from you that many times?”

“Well, yeah. We both happen to enjoy it very, very much.” Chase let that sink in. It was a complete lie, of course, Ronan wouldn’t feed from him more often than every two weeks as it would risk Chase’s health. But Brad was the kind of self-centered asshole who would take advantage of a mate, so would likely not question this.

That did not make Brad happy. Which, conversely sparked joy for Chase, because he absolutely loved thwarting Brad.

“No, it’s different,” Brad muttered, seemingly to himself. “I’ll prove it to you, what it feels like when a *real* vampire mates with you.”

So, Brad was clearly on the Delusion Train heading for the Early Grave station. Why he thought he was better than Ronan was anyone’s guess, but it certainly wasn’t accurate. No vampire worth their salt would pull this whole maneuver. Brute force was the tactic of cowards.

Brad seized Chase by the throat, hauling him upwards into this very awkward half-inclined position on the floor, lowering his face. Chase struggled, grabbing at his hair, yanking, trying to poke at his eyes, but all that did was make Brad grab his hands and hold him forcefully still.

As those razor sharp teeth touched skin, Chase felt a whine of pure disgust climb up his throat. No, no, nonononononono—

In a split second, the van door opened, and then Brad was abruptly gone. Chase sucked in a deep breath, relief pouring through his system. He needed a second, just a second to overcome the shock, then he scrambled up to his knees to see what was going on.

Ronan had Brad out in the street, hands lifting Brad by the neck, like a hangman’s noose without the scaffold. Brad pulled at the hands, feet kicking air, searching for purchase and unable to find it. Ha, served him right to get a taste of his own medicine.

“Chase?” Ronan looked his way, eyes searching him.

“Bruised, but otherwise okay,” Chase reassured him. Thankfully, it was true.

His lover looked relieved but still pissed as all hell. His eyes snapped back to Brad. “Before I kill you, one question. Did Vanessa put you up to this?”

“Go to hell,” Brad rasped out.

“Have it your way.” Ronan reached up with the other hand and in a move

too smooth to be believed, broke Brad's neck in one jerk. Then he dropped the body, uncaring of the man now that he was dead.

Chase startled, not expecting that. He should have, he knew anyone who messed with a true mate brought on a death penalty, but he hadn't expected Ronan to do the deed himself. Vampire law was apparently a lot more unforgiving than the court systems.

Ronan came quickly to him, his brow still knitted together in worry. "You sure you're all right? You look pale."

"It was a little too close for comfort," Chase admitted. He stepped out of the van, into Ronan's arms, and took a second to breathe. Just breathe. The scent of Ronan filled his head, the warmth and strength in his body comforting Chase in a myriad of ways. Only then did he feel grounded.

Turning his head, he checked on his bodyguards. Franklin was on the phone, probably reporting this all in. Amy had the two remaining goons on their knees in front of her, and they were shaking, so she probably had Prestige or Mesmerize in full effect to keep them cowed.

A messy situation, to be sure, but at least none of his own had died. Or been kidnapped. Ronan had turned the tide.

"They're all right," Ronan assured him softly, brushing hair out of Chase's face. "Let's go home, hmm? I'll order some takeout for you."

Honestly, home and takeout sounded blissful. "Best offer I've had all day. Take me home."

CHAPTER 22

Ronan paced back and forth on his back patio as he spoke with his sire. He'd taken the call outside, not wanting Chase to overhear in case it was bad news.

His precaution, unfortunately, was warranted.

"There's absolutely no ties? Are you sure?"

Fernando sounded as vexed as Ronan felt. *"I wish I could tell you otherwise. But Franklin's checked everything. Phone records, financial records, he's spent three days investigating this. Vanessa unfortunately covered her tracks very, very cleanly. She cut all ties to the three goons from the VSB a week ago. They were labelled as 'freelancers' under the payroll."*

"Oh now, that's convenient."

"Isn't it, though? This matter isn't completely done, I've lodged another complaint with the VSB. After all, freelancers aren't supposed to be under VSB payroll."

"No, they're not." And for precisely this kind of situation. Anyone working for the VSB had to have background checks and security clearance. Even freelancers had access to systems and such, and a card showing they were part of the VSB. That authority could be very easily abused in the wrong hands.

Unfortunately, in this case, the wrong hands happened to be Vanessa's.

"I really, really want her dead for this." Ronan wasn't just saying it, either. He'd do the deed himself.

"I completely understand, my son. Trust me, I want her dead for this too. We don't have the evidence to pin this on her. And I can't make an enemy of the VSB."

Ronan's head dropped as he sighed in defeat. "I know."

He did know. It would paint a target on his family's backs if he did

something to the VSB right now. His vampire instincts were utterly at war—they wanted to protect Chase. They wanted to protect his family. The method to doing both clashed, hence his struggle. In the end, though, not going after Vanessa was also protecting Chase.

“I’m sorry, son. Trust me, I won’t reclaim Chase’s bodyguards until he himself requests to do so.”

“I appreciate that. I know he does. It just about killed me when I pulled him out of that van. You should have seen him—he was so pale, sheet white, and shaking. And still, despite how terrified he’d been, the first thing he did was reassure me he was all right.”

Fernando gave a sad chuckle. *“He’s brave, your Chase. I understand he put up a fight the whole way.”*

“He did. Amy and Franklin both bragged about it. Still, I want to equip him with a very heavy-duty Taser.”

“I’d do it. No harm in having a backup, as we learned.”

“True. All right, I’m going back in. Thank you, for all the help.”

“Anytime. Keep me posted about anything else happening.”

“I will.”

Ronan hung up, staring at the phone for a long moment, then sighed again. He was doing a lot of sighing these days. His soul was going to escape his body at the rate he was going.

Chase sat on the couch, watching anime and eating popcorn. After the scare he’d had, Ronan expected him to hole up in the house for a while. Instead, Chase seemed to take it as a challenge. He still went to school and did study groups with friends, refusing to let one attack stop him. It was Ronan who kept him close, needing to put hands on Chase when fears gripped him.

He almost went in, joined Chase, but his phone beeped with a notification sound. Ronan paused to check it, reading through the text, and finally some measure of peace bloomed inside of his chest. At least he had this. This would stop Vanessa when nothing else would.

Far more reassured than before, he forwarded the text to Fernando, as good news should be promptly shared. Then he went in, closing the sliding glass door behind him, and joined Chase on the couch.

Chase paused the anime to give him a once-over. “How did the talk with Fernando go?”

“Not well. Franklin tried, but Vanessa covered her tracks too well.”

“Dammit.” Chase’s head thumped against the back of the couch. “Figures. You’re not going to get into trouble for killing Brad, though, right?”

This seemed to worry Chase as he’d asked this question twice before. “No, it’s fine. I was well within my rights, especially since he put his teeth against you. Now, I do have some good news.”

Chase promptly paused the anime then twisted to face Ronan more directly. “I love good news. Hit me.”

“I just got a notification from the VSB official headquarters that our paperwork went through. We are officially mates in the system and we are the only two who can contest it.”

With each word, Chase’s eyes grew a little wider, joy sparking until it exploded over his face. On the last word, he punched the air with both hands in victory.

“YES!”

Look at him. His joy was infectious, beautiful and breathtaking. He was so thrilled to be at Ronan’s side, that something as simple as paperwork finally going through excited him this much. Was it any wonder why he loved this man?

Chase seized his head with both hands, kissing him thoroughly. Ronan kissed back, sinking into the moment. He’d never take it for granted. Chase choosing him was the best gift the universe could ever give him. Ronan would thank the fates for the rest of his days for it.

Pulling back, Chase announced, “Hold on, I’ve got to tell my parents. They’ve been worried about this. Then we’ll properly celebrate it. Oh, go call your parents too, they’re worried.”

“Sure.” Ronan once again got up, to give them space so their conversations didn’t overlap each other. He didn’t go far, though, just the opposite side of the living room, his eyes on Chase the whole while as he called his mother. He’d promised Chase’s parents he wouldn’t propose until after Chase was done with school. He intended to keep his promise.

The very second that degree was in Chase’s hands, though, he was going to marry this man. And heaven help the fools who tried to stop him.

EPILOGUE

Seven months later

Ronan had no idea what had gotten into Chase, but he liked it. A lot. Chase had booked them a private beach house for the weekend. The beach house was cute, like a white cottage set in the shelter of trees with a pretty walkway lined with mums. Ronan pulled up into the driveway and parked, looking around with a delighted smile. “This is really pretty. How did you find this?”

“Google.” Chase opened the door and beckoned him out. “Come on. I had someone lay out dinner for us on the beach.”

Seriously? Ronan had no idea what he’d done to deserve this romantic getaway but maybe he could get Chase to tell him. Just so he could do it again.

Chase waited with hand outstretched once out of the car and Ronan was quick to catch up. There had been a time when merely being near Chase got a scowl on the man’s face but now Chase’s eyes lifted in a smile as Ronan took his hand. How far they’d come.

They walked hand in hand down the path laid with paving stones, around the side of the house and past the line of trees. The beach was barely a stone’s throw from the back patio. It was so incredibly peaceful and tranquil here that Ronan fell in love with the place immediately.

His Chase really did have amazingly good taste.

A table was set right on the beach, snowy white tablecloth, candles, flowers, and all. It was one of the most romantically set tables he’d seen. Ronan took it all in with a wide smile, seeing some of his favorite foods there and a small white cake set off to the side.

“I can’t take it anymore.” Ronan kissed the back of Chase’s hand before

demanding, “What did I do? You have to tell me so I can do it again.”

Chase smiled up at him but he looked strangely...nervous? Jittery, somehow. “You made me happy.”

“I try to make you happy every day,” Ronan pointed out. Granted, some days he irritated Chase, but he honestly did try.

“That’s true, you do.” Chase took in a breath and reached into his pocket. “I brought you out here because I want to turn the tables. I want to try and make you happy every day.”

What was he...? Ronan’s head canted in confusion, eyes on Chase’s face because there was something there, some hint of what his lover was doing.

Chase opened a velvet black box, showing a rose gold ring with three diamonds inside. The sight of it stopped all thought in Ronan’s head. At the same time, blood rushed up, making his head spin for a second.

“Will you marry me, Ronan?”

For a moment, just a moment, Ronan found himself speechless. He looked into those beautiful green eyes he’d fallen for, so filled with joy his heart actually twinged under the feeling, as if threatening to burst. Ronan hadn’t proposed before this because Chase’s parents had requested he wait until after Chase graduated from college. He was willing to wait—he’d be with this man the rest of their lives, after all, a few years made no difference to him. Apparently, Chase either didn’t get the memo, or didn’t care. Never in a million years did Ronan expect to be the one proposed to, but he also was absolutely, one hundred percent, not complaining.

“Yes,” he managed, grabbing Chase into a tight embrace. “A thousand times over, yes.”

Chase hugged him around the shoulders just as hard. Ronan only drew back to kiss him, as he had to kiss Chase *now*, and the kiss was so unbearably sweet. He’d die of happiness at this rate which would be a rotten shame because really, he wanted at least a thousand years with Chase first.

Chase drew back from the kiss to take the ring out of the box. He slid the engagement ring on, smiling as he did so. It didn’t begin to match how happy Ronan was to have the ring on his finger.

The words felt inadequate to express all the joy, need, desire, and trust he had in this incredible man, but Ronan used them, needing to express it all somehow. “I love you.”

Chase smiled as he said the words back. “I love you.”

Ronan seriously could not take the happiness. Either he found a healthy

way to release it, or he'd explode right here. He knew his preference on how to release it. "There's a bed inside the cottage somewhere, right?"

Chase smacked a kiss on his neck before whispering near his ear, "Lube and condoms in my pocket, too."

Bless his fiancé for being so well-prepared. Ronan grabbed his hand and hauled him toward the back doors. "I promise we'll eat dinner later but right now, I have to have you."

Chase was fighting a smile as he suggested, "Move faster."

Damn, was it any wonder why he loved this man?



They did—eventually—eat the dinner. They had to warm it back up first, but eh, Chase wasn't complaining. After dinner and cake, they relaxed on the beach, curled up together on one of the beach blankets, watching the stars. The waves came in rhythmically, soothing, like a white noise in the background.

Chase honestly couldn't remember a time he was happier than this. He really didn't think he'd feel differently, being engaged. He was completely committed to Ronan even before proposing, but something about this promise between them gave him a better grounding. Like their relationship felt more permanent to him, something he could trust in more. Strange how that worked. He absolutely wasn't complaining, though.

He lay on his side, head pillowed on Ronan's shoulder, perfectly content. It would have been picturesque, this moment, straight out of a romance, except for one thing.

Ronan was looking at rings on his phone.

"Why are you looking at rings?" Chase really had no clue.

"Because I find it wholly unfair I'm wearing an engagement ring and you're not," Ronan answered, still scrolling. "We will be fixing this tomorrow. Ooh, that one's nice, how do you like that one?"

There was no stopping him now, so Chase didn't even try. "I like platinum better than gold."

"Oh really? Okay, let me refine the search, then." Ronan turned his head to smack a kiss against Chase's forehead. "After we settle on a good ring, give me the contact information for whoever owns the cabin."

Chase's suspicions rose. "Why?"

“Because I’m buying it.”

Eh? He hadn’t expected that. “Ronan, are you serious?”

“Excuse you, you proposed to me here. I am absolutely owning this place. We’re spending anniversaries here from now on.”

Honestly, the idea of having this place as their own private retreat didn’t bother him whatsoever. He was kind of sentimentally attached to it now, too. That said, “I thought it was Zander who had a habit of buying everything that makes him happy.”

“Man’s got a good point sometimes. While he does go overboard from time to time, his reasoning is sound. All I’m saying.”

This give and take had to be from both sides and Chase knew precisely what to give Ronan to make him happiest. He rolled forward, throwing a leg over Ronan’s waist, straddling him, which distracted his lover mid-sentence.

“What, I can’t?” Ronan asked a touch warily.

“You can.” Chase grinned as he leaned in. “But before you do that, I’m officially moving in with you. From now on, it’s all in for me.”

Ronan’s smile was glorious when he was happy and right now he was incandescent. “You will? When?”

“Day we get back?”

Ronan leaned up to kiss him, tongue sweeping inside of Chase’s mouth for a hot, filthy moment. “If you make me any happier than this, I might keel over from a heart attack.”

“Well, that won’t do. Here, I’ll take some happiness away and refuse the cottage.”

Ronan laughed like Chase was teasing—he was half serious, actually—and rolled them both over on the blanket, getting Chase under him before leaning in to kiss him once more. Chase could tell where this was going, as Ronan was already tugging his shirt up, and even though he’d never made love outdoors before, he found he was all right doing it. Ronan might be giddy past reason...but so was Chase.

Right now, he didn’t mind showing just how happy he was.

Thanks for reading *Fated Mates and How to Woo Them!* Want more? You got it! Read how Chase's friend Max finds his fated mate in *Fated Mates and Where to Find Them* [HERE!](#)

I also did a thing with author Devon Vesper, featuring vampires, reincarnated husbands, and sentient libraries. You'll only be able to read it on my Patreon [HERE](#) or Ream [HERE](#), so if you're interested, head on over! (The content and rewards I post are the same on both, so you don't need both.)

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Dealing with Mapinguari and Dogged Engineers*

Unholy Trifecta

How to Shield an Assassin

How to Steal a Thief

How to Hack a Hacker

Villainy

How I Stole the Princess's White Knight and Turned Him to Villainy

The Warden and the General

Fourth Point of Contact

Zone of Action

Single Titles

How to Keep an Author (Alive)

Marriage Contract

Books by AJ Sherwood and Jocelynn Drake

Scales 'n' Spells

Origin

Breath

Blood

Embers

Wish (a Christmas novella)

Wings 'n' Wands

Dawn (a novella)

Ruins

Rise

*Coming soon

AUTHOR

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AJ's mind is the sort that refuses to let her write one project at a time. Or even just one book a year. She normally writes fantasy under a different pen name, but her aforementioned mind couldn't help but want to write in the LGBTQIA+ genre. Fortunately, her editor is completely on board with this plan.

In her spare time, AJ loves to devour books, eat way too much chocolate, and take regular trips. She's only been outside of the United States once, to Japan, and loved the experience so much that she firmly intends to see more of the world as soon as possible. Until then, she'll just research via Google Earth and write about the worlds in her own head.

If you'd like to join her newsletter to be notified when books are released, and get behind-the-scenes information about upcoming books, you can join

her [NEWSLETTER](#) here, or email her directly at sherwoodwrites@gmail.com and you'll be added to the mailing list. You'll also receive a free copy of her book *Fourth Point of Contact*! If you'd like to interact with AJ more directly, you can socialize with her on various sites and join her [Facebook group: AJ's Gentlemen](#) and her [Patreon](#) or her [Ream](#) account! (The content on both are the same.)