

AN INTREPID TRIP TO LOVE

Tristan "Trip" Hagan is a Husky shifter who was born to be the Hagan Clan's next Alpha, a position of honor and nobility, a position he never wanted and was all too happy to pass onto his younger brother. But when they discovered his brother couldn't have pups, the responsibility of continuing the Hagan Alpha line fell back to Trip. At the tender age of eighteen, Trip gave in under the weight of the Hagan Council's demand for him to fulfill his duty, but after years of struggling to uphold his family's traditions, Trip found the courage to do what no other Hagan Alpha had done in the history of the clan: he came out.

With his Enforcers—the Devil Dogs, at his side, Trip won the battle against the Council, who attempted to banish him and take his young son away. His victory allowed him to remain within the clan and raise Robbie. Now five years later, the dust has settled, and Trip is living a happy life with his cheeky pup and their own little makeshift family. Brook—Robbie's mother, her true mate Deacon, and the Devil Dogs are the only ones who support Trip and know of his heartache.

True mates within canine shifter clans are very rare, but Trip has had one since he can remember. Despite losing his heart to Boone twenty years ago, Trip holds little hope of ever getting to bond with the sexy Enforcer, as it's against clan laws for pure-bloods to bond with half-breeds. How much longer can Trip and Boone resist the longing in their hearts? With the call from their feral halves to seal the bond growing stronger by the day, can Trip and Boone find a way to be together without losing everything?

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

AN INTREPID TRIP TO LOVE

(Little Bite of Love #1)

By Charlie Cochet

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the <u>Goodreads M/M Romance Group</u> and visit the discussion section: Love Has No Boundaries.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers.** It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader

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Photo Description

An adorable picture shows a man with short, light brown hair wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, holding his large, dark gray and white Husky in his arms. The Husky's ears are flattened back and his paws are on the man's shoulders. The picture's tag reads: *OMG Dad kill it. I swear it was as big as my head! I hate spiders!*

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It is just the two of them after he fulfilled his obligation to have a pup. But they need someone who will kill the spiders infesting their house. Please send help!

Sincerely,

Nikyta

Story Info

Genre: shifters, urban fantasy

Tags: humorous, family drama, Husky-shifters, fantasy, sweet, men with

children, fugly spiders

Word count: 35,168

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PROLOGUE

Centuries ago, the delicate veil between the mythical world and human world crumbled, dawning an age of chaos. With the two worlds no longer hidden from each other, fear for the unknown spread like wildfire, culminating in the War of the Fallen. It was a vicious war with no winners, each clan battling for its own purpose. Some fought for self-preservation, while others sought to conquer. The loss on all sides was vast, and it became clear that in order to save what was left of their people, clan leaders would be forced to unite and coexist under common laws. While each clan lived by its own rulings, the World Law governed all. Humans and mythical beings agreed to live among their own kind, divided by borders which would remain uncrossed.

In time, alliances and kinships were formed between the humans and creatures. With peace came the amendment of many World Laws, allowing for clans to travel beyond their borders and settle among other species. While many embraced the human world, there were those who believed themselves above such frail creatures and refused, turning away not only from humanity but from their own kind. Poisoned by their hate, their spirits blackened, and the Likho were spawned. They were creatures dark and wild, devouring and infecting all with their poisonous touch.

Once again, the clans united to drive these creatures of darkness deep into the forests. The Likho soon became nothing but the stuff of legends, used to frighten children and keep them obedient. The worlds once again found peace, and many ancient clans thrived. One such noble clan was the Hagan Clan, whose strength lay with its pack members, their undying loyalty, and its strict adherence to old world traditions. Traditions which remained firm and unchallenged. Anyone who did not conform to the ways of the clan was banished or in some cases sentenced to death via the dark forests. Those who

did not wish to face such punishment from the Hagan Council maintained their silence, their secrets locked away within them forever.

Until the day Tristan Hagan changed everything.

Our story takes place in the town of Perin, located in the Provence of St. Veles, a heavily wooded land mass situated between Maine and Nova Scotia. It is largely occupied by shifters of the Canidae family, though some humans and Felidae shifters are known to live in the area as well.

CHAPTER ONE

"Oh no."

Trip knew that sound all too well. Claws scratched against the hardwood floors and something in the living room fell over with a loud *thunk*. Preparing himself for what came next, Trip spun on his heels and braced himself. Seconds later, Robbie landed in his arms, paws scrambling to wrap around Trip, who struggled to keep hold of the large pup.

"Robbie, you're getting far too heavy for this," Trip groaned. As the next Alpha, Robbie was already larger than most pups his age when in his Husky form, and Trip's human muscles pulled under the weight.

Dad! Robbie whined, his little voice clear as day in Trip's head. There's a spider in my bedroom and it's ginormous!

Gods help him. "A spider? You're about to snap my spine over a spider?"

Robbie's ears flattened back and he lowered his head, his nose nuzzling Trip's temple with a whine as his tail wagged hopefully. *It's real big, I swear. I'm not making it up.*

"All right, I'll go see, but how many times do I have to tell you not to change inside the house?" Carefully, he lowered Robbie to the floor, and waited for his son to shift back into his human—and much more manageable—form. Trip didn't bother to look down at his clothes, which were probably now in the same state as the rest of the house. He was going to have to vacuum. Again. Not that he didn't shed—his kind were notorious for that sort of thing—but his pup seemed to shed enough for half the clan. How the kid still had a coat left after all the shedding he did was beyond him. Any other canine would have been bald by now. Nope, not his little ball of fur.

When Trip turned his attention back to Robbie, the pup was still sitting at his feet, wagging his tail and gazing up at him with those big dark eyes.

"Absolutely not. What have I told you about staying in your Husky form?" *If I'm not careful, I'll get stuck that way.*

"Exactly. Spending too much time in our true forms is dangerous enough as it is for us grown-ups."

But you and the Devil Dogs have stayed in your true forms for weeks and nothing's ever happened to you.

"We've had a lot of practice, and even so, it's not something that's easy to master. It takes a lot of control. The Devil Dogs are different, they're half wild, and it's part of their nature, so for them, they have to work extra hard to hold onto their human side. That's why they're Enforcers. You're an Alpha and still learning, so be patient. Now come on, or I'll have to break out the hairbrush."

Robbie leapt back, shaking his furry head with a bounce before his ears perked up and his form started shifting, his mass decreasing and his body changing to that of an average seven-year-old boy, one who had a talent for shedding as much in his human form as he did in his canine form. Trip was sure he hadn't bought Robbie the number of socks he seemed to find everywhere on a daily basis. Finished with his transformation, Robbie ran up to him and grabbed hold of his hand, pulling at him.

"Come on, it's in my room."

"All right, let me just grab something from the kitchen to catch it with." Making a quick stop in the kitchen, he rummaged around one of the bottom cabinets, and pulled out a medium-sized plastic food container and the cardboard backing of an old calendar he kept for just such an occasion. "Show me to this beast."

The moment he stepped foot in Robbie's room, he stifled a curse as his socked foot was all but impaled on a piece of LEGO architecture. To top it off, the place looked like a war zone. "Robbie, why is every toy you own scattered all over the floor? You're not even playing with them."

"I was," Robbie protested from behind him.

"Yeah? Then why is your PS3 on 'pause'?"

With a sigh, Robbie gave him an impatient nudge. "Because I haven't gotten to a save spot yet, obviously."

"Obviously," Trip muttered. Because that *obviously* answered everything. "I'm surprised you even saw the spider in all this mess."

"It was the only thing moving." Robbie carefully tiptoed around him, looking for the demon spider.

His son, the next Alpha of the legendary Hagan Clan, was afraid of a spider. Where had he gone wrong? "So? Where is this hideous creature from another world?"

"It went under the bed," Robbie murmured, pointing at the bed across the room—which had yet to be made at six in the evening. Leaving that gripe for after he corralled their unwanted arachnid guest, Trip weaved through the valley of toys and made it to the bed unscathed. He'd lost count of how many times he'd stepped on those angular little landmines that were supposed to be building blocks. It was as if they lay in wait beneath the surface of the carpet, knowing just where he was going step or kneel. Testing the fluffy rug for any impaling objects, he got down on his knees and lifted the comforter hanging off the side of the bed.

"For crying out loud, Robbie, there's more stuff under your bed than out here. Did you leave anything in the closet? I wouldn't be surprised if there was a nest under here." Robbie let out a whimper and Trip rolled his eyes, shaking his head at the pup and trying not to laugh at his little worried face. "Relax, there's no nest." He returned his attention back under the bed and saw something move. "Aha! I've got you now you little sucker. I don't know what you're so scared of. It's not that big."

"It is so! It's like one of those *facehuggers* from *Aliens*. What if I'm asleep and it jumps on my face and tries to lay eggs in my tummy and then it bursts from my chest all argh!" Robbie dramatically threw himself back against his desk's chair, his tongue poking out one side of his mouth as he made gurgling noises, his body twitching.

"That's the last time I let you stay up to watch a sci-fi marathon." The movement stopped. Taking the cardboard, Trip slowly slipped it under the bed toward the black lump, only to poke it and find it was a balled up sock. What the hell? Something scuttled beside it—something much bigger. It turned and darted right for him.

"Holy fudge!" Trip shot away from the bed, managing to curb the copious amounts of colorful swear words ready to roll off his tongue. Scrambling, he climbed onto the bed in a manner which could only be described as astoundingly undignified, losing one of his socks in the process. Getting to his feet, he wobbled on the bed a moment before finding his balance, his plastic container out in front of him like a shield and the piece of cardboard brandished in his right hand like a sword. He was ready for battle.

"There it is, Dad!" Robbie squealed and Trip gave a start.

"Where?"

Robbie frantically pointed at the huge hairy black spot in the middle of the blue carpet. "There!"

"Oh my Gods," Trip gagged. "What is that? That is the most revolting thing I have ever seen."

"What about when Grandpa Hagan lost his swim trunks at the lake?"

"You're right. This is the second most revolting thing I have ever seen."

Robbie swiped a book off his desk, ready to hurl it.

"Hey, don't throw your math book."

Dropping his math book on the desk, Robbie swapped it for Trip's tablet.

"Throw the math book! Throw the math book!"

Robbie obliged, picking up the hefty hardback and chucking it across the room. It landed like a teepee over the spider. They held their breaths. Pages ruffled, and seconds later the spider leisurely crawled out. "It's still alive, Dad! What do we do?"

"What is that thing made of? All right, that's it. Ain't no eight-legged creep gonna get the best of Tristan Hagan."

"Go, Dad!' Robbie cheered him on.

Trip inched closer to the foot of the bed when the beast turned toward him and leapt forward. "Holy shit, it jumps!" He scrambled back until his back hit the wall behind him.

"You said a curse word," Robbie admonished, wagging a finger at him.

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. But, did you see that?" Trip's smartphone rang in his pocket and he shuffled his weapons into his left hand to grab it, pressing it against his ear. "Brook?"

"Trip? What's wrong?"

"Put her on speaker phone," Robbie demanded. "Mom! Mom! There's a huge spider in my room and it looks like one of the *facehuggers* from *Aliens*!"

"What have we told you about watching those sci-fi marathons?"

"You sound like Dad. Why are you fighting with me when you should be fighting the *Aliens?*"

"It's a spider," Trip clarified.

"A mutant spider that probably has mutant babies," Robbie added.

Brook sighed. "He gets that from you, you know."

"No, but seriously, Brook, the thing is fugly."

"No one says fugly anymore."

"I just did."

"Yeah, well, you're a nerd."

"Aw, thanks, babe. I gotta go now. Got aliens to kill. Don't worry, if I end up an incubator for mutant spider babies, I'll remember the good times we had." When Brook next spoke, he could hear the smile in her voice.

"Do you want me to send Deacon over? He'll be home in about fifteen minutes."

"Hm, do I want to emasculate myself further by having my ex-wife's husband come kill a spider for me?"

"Dad, it's moving again!"

"Fifteen minutes you say? That'll work for me. He can let himself in. Tell him to bring his shovel. And a blowtorch." By the sound of Brook's laugh, it was clear she wasn't taking this as seriously as he was. Didn't she know they were in mortal peril?

"What are you, the mob? You're gonna whack a spider?"

His gaze went to the eight-legged freak. "Oh, and a garbage bag and some bleach."

"I'm hanging up now."

"Love you."

"Yeah, yeah. He's going to end up in your bed tonight."

"Who? Deacon? I didn't know he swung that way." Trip wriggled his eyebrows, making Robbie giggle.

"Our son, dummy."

"I'm already plugging in the night-light."

Brook said her goodbyes and Trip slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"Is Deacon coming to rescue us?" Robbie asked cheerfully.

"Deacon is coming to *assist*." Trip scanned the room, trying to work out the best way to get around the spider. Living with a forest behind their house meant all sorts of creepy-crawly things managed to find their way inside, but this nasty piece of work was a first. He'd seen horseshoe crabs that were prettier, and if he didn't know any better, he would say the *facehugger* had it out for him.

"It's okay, Dad. No one's going to think any less of you for not being able to kill a spider."

Trip arched an eyebrow at his son. "You're the next Alpha, why don't you kill it?"

"Because I'm seven." The "duh" wasn't said but it was certainly implied. "But you, you're old."

"I'm thirty-five! In human years, anyway."

"That's, like, still super old. Even in human years."

"Why am I bothering? I have underwear older than you."

"Gross."

"They're clean. And if I'm old, what's your great-grandpa?"

Robbie looked stumped. "What's older than ancient?"

"Ha!" Trip couldn't help but laugh as he climbed off the bed. "I'm making a run for it."

"What about me?" Robbie shifted anxiously from one foot to the other.

"I don't know." Trip hunched over and put a hand to his back. "I'm too old to carry you. My feeble bones may crumble to dust."

Maybe Robbie did get his overactive imagination from Trip, but the huffing and planting of fists on hips was definitely a trait his pup got from Brook.

"That's not funny."

"I beg to differ, and just to show you, I am now going to let out a hearty laugh." Which Trip did.

"Daaaad," Robbie whined.

"Yeah all right. As long as we agree Deacon is only coming over to assist." Slowly—and as far away as physically possible from the spider, Trip edged toward Robbie.

"Fine. He's not coming to rescue us, only assist." Robbie's dark eyes suddenly widened. "What if Deacon can't kill it either! What if the spider babies come out from hiding and attack him?"

"Well then, I'll make sure a statue is put up in his honor in Perin Park. Preburst chest obviously. Out of respect for your mother." He managed to make it over to the chair without getting mauled.

"Not funny."

"Again, I beg to differ." He noticed the Spiderman T-shirt Robbie was wearing and grinned broadly, giving him a poke in his belly. "That right there, son, is called 'irony'."

"I can't believe I'm related to you."

"I know. How is it you inherited *none* of my amazing genes?"

Robbie shrugged. "Lucky I guess."

"Oh, you impertinent pup. You're gonna get it now." He grabbed Robbie and threw him over his shoulder before descending with a one-handed tickle attack. Robbie squirmed and giggled while trying to bat his hand away.

"Stop! I'm not a baby," Robbie said through his laughter as Trip dashed out of the room, stopping his assault long enough to close the door behind him. Not like the spider couldn't crawl under it, but he'd rather not think about that, or the possible spider babies lurking around somewhere, undoubtedly waiting to strike at the most inappropriate moments—like when he was on the toilet or in the shower.

They made it to the living room safely. He dropped Robbie on the couch with a bounce when there was a heavy pounding on the door. For a moment, Trip thought whoever it was, was going to break it down.

"That doesn't sound like Deacon. Stay here." Trip made his way to the front door, sniffing the air on his way there. It was a familiar mix of scents and he quickly rushed over and threw the door open.

"Bo—" Trip had barely gotten the name out before Boone grabbed a hold of his upper arms and practically lifted him off his feet.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Hunter came barreling in behind his brother, looking equally alarmed. "What happened? Where's Robbie?"

Boone put Trip back on his feet and checked him over before seeming satisfied he was in one piece. With a curt nod to affirm his visual assessment, the brothers marched past Trip into the house, looking around and sniffing the air.

"Boone?" Trip closed the front door, following the destructive duo.

"I don't smell anything out of the ordinary," Hunter told his brother, going off into the living room where Trip heard Robbie's cheerful shout as he greeted Hunter, followed by Hunter's equally enthusiastic reply.

"That's because it's just me and Robbie. Do you two want to tell me what's going on? You're kinda freaking me out here."

Boone stopped in his tracks and turned with a deep frown. He tilted his head to one side, looking endearingly puzzled. "I got a text from Robbie saying there was an emergency. We were down at Perin Park and got here as fast as we could."

"Emergency?" What—oh. "Robbie! Get your little butt out here right now."

Robbie poked his head out from the doorway. "Yes, Father?"

"Don't you 'Yes, Father' me, and don't you even think about pulling those puppy eyes. I taught you that trick. Come out here and face the music."

With a pout and his head lowered, Robbie shuffled out into the hall, stopping in front of Trip.

"What did you think you were doing?"

"You always say if we need help or if there's an emergency to call Boone. You said he's the biggest, strongest, bravest, most honest, most reliable..."

Trip felt his face burning up as Robbie proceeded to list every one of Boone's virtues off his little fingers. With a nervous laugh, Trip threw a hand over his pup's mouth. Mortified didn't begin to cover it. Boone, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly amused, and his lips quirked up on one side.

"Is that so?"

"Well, you know, you are an Enforcer." Trip shrugged, doing his best to sound like it was no big deal. Boone gave him a nod, his somber expression betrayed by the playful gleam in his eyes.

"Of course."

"The house is clear," Hunter declared, coming to stand beside Boone, his hands on his hips. "What's going on?"

"False alarm." Boone crouched down in front of Robbie, his six-and—a-half-foot, two-hundred-and-ten-pound frame eclipsing the pup. "All right, little man, what was that message about?"

Robbie moved Trip's hand away from his face, his eyes going big. "Aliens!"

Boone's eyebrows shot up and he exchanged glances with his brother before turning his gaze up to Trip's. "I'm sorry, what?"

Wonderful, because he clearly hadn't been humiliated enough. "He means spiders."

"The size of aliens!" Robbie threw his small arms out to his sides, stretching them as wide as they could go to denote the newly mutated size of their recent arachnid invaders. Apparently they'd quadrupled in size.

"They're not that big, but they're definitely freakish," Trip said, putting Robbie's arms down.

"Spiders. That's why you called." Hunter shook his head in amusement.

"Technically, he called," Trip pointed out, putting his finger in Robbie's ear and wiggling it just to annoy him. Mission accomplished. He quickly moved his hand away before Robbie could swat it.

Boone chuckled at their antics and stood to look around. "So you didn't get rid of them?"

"Nope."

"How come?"

"Did I mention they were freakish?"

"Are you saying you're scared of spiders?" Boone narrowed his eyes at him, probably trying to deduce whether Trip was being serious or not. It wasn't the first time. Trip got that a lot from folks, even folks who had known him since he was a pup.

"I'm not scared—"

"He screamed and jumped on the bed," Robbie offered with a wide grin.

Unbelievable. His own son. "Traitor. And I didn't scream. I expressed surprise."

"Of course." Hunter crossed his arms over his beefy chest, making Trip wonder yet again what the Devil Dogs ate that made them the size of Redwoods. Trip wasn't even small. He was of Alpha bloodline, and at six foot

two, and one hundred and ninety pounds, he was still considered small when standing next to these two.

"I was caught off guard."

Hunter pointed behind Trip. "Is that it there?"

"Where!" Trip jumped and darted behind Boone, using him as a shield.

"Wow." Hunter shook his head in disbelief. "You didn't even hesitate. Just threw my brother right into the line of fire."

"He's trained for combat."

"You saying the spiders are going to face off against us? Do they know jujitsu? Because I gotta tell you, I'm a little rusty. Hand to hand, we can probably take 'em, but... Would it be hand to hand? Hand to leg?"

"You know what, Hunter, bite me."

Hunter wriggled his eyebrows. "Is that an invitation?"

"I don't have to take this from you. I'm going to address the sensible one."

"Sensible?" Hunter let out a bark of laughter. "Do you know what Mr. Sensible did this morning?"

Boone cast his brother a warning glare. "Shut up, Hunt."

"What did you do?" Trip turned to face Boone and held back a smile. Boone might look like the sort of guy you didn't want to meet in a dark alley, but Trip had never been afraid of him. He was like a big ole cuddly teddy bear. Well, unless someone did something stupid, like get on his bad side. Then he wasn't so cuddly.

"Nothing." Boone frowned, his gaze going to his boots in embarrassment, and his hands shoved in his back jean pockets.

"He chased a squirrel into Vucari Woods and got his head stuck in a tree." Hunter broke into laughter and soon he was doubled over, laughing so hard he was in tears.

"Don't laugh at your poor brother."

"Are you kidding? It was the funniest sh—"

Trip cleared his throat loudly, motioning to Robbie who was listening intently, and Hunter caught himself. "Uh, I mean, that was the funniest thing I'd ever seen."

"Don't listen to him, Boone. Those little suckers are nasty." Trip instinctively reached up and gave Boone's ear a gentle tug, making him smile. In return, Boone gave him a playful bump with his hip.

"Aw, aren't you two adorable," Hunter teased, receiving a scowl from both of them. He quickly put his hands up in surrender. "Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em."

Self-conscious, Trip withdrew his hand. "Uh, you guys want a beer or something? Deacon's going to be along soon."

"Sure, I'd—"

"No thanks." Boone grabbed Hunter by the arm, giving him a tug. "We gotta go. Sorry to have bothered you."

Trip wondered why the sudden rush to leave. "We were the ones who called."

"What about the aliens?"

All three men stopped to gaze down at the wide-eyed pup and his quivering bottom lip. Hunter took a step behind his brother, whispering hoarsely.

"He's doing that lip thing, Bo."

Even Boone didn't stand a chance. It was over and they all knew it. "All right. Point us to the aliens."

"You sure you don't want to wait for Deacon?" Trip asked, following them through the living room and down the hall toward Robbie's bedroom.

"He's bringing a shovel," Robbie pitched in excitedly.

"A shovel? You sure that it's a spider and not like, a Jersey cockroach, because I don't do cockroaches," Hunter stated adamantly. "Those things are indestructible. I hit one with a brick once, and I swear it put itself back together and just sat there facing me, like it was waiting for me to apologize or something."

"You are so full of it," Trip muttered.

Hunter smacked his brother in the arm. "Tell him."

"It actually happened. Don't think it was waiting for him to apologize though, more like sizing him up. Must have found him wanting because it scurried away after that."

"Gee, thanks, big bro."

Boone gave his brother a charming smile. "Anytime."

"Ouch." Trip laughed at Hunter's pout and grabbed the two brothers by their collars before they could open the bedroom door. "Shoes off and watch out for the LEGOs."

"Are you serious?" Hunter groaned, toeing off his biker boots.

"Hey, if you want to get impaled by tiny little bricks of plastic hurt, that's your choice, but I don't want you tracking dirt onto my carpet." Trip followed Boone's amused gaze down to his feet. "Crap." This night just got better and better.

"What happened to your sock?" Boone asked, toeing off his own boots.

"It became a casualty of war."

"He lost it when he was running away from the spider," Robbie said, hiding behind Boone. He looked up at the mountainesque man with a bright smile, bringing out the dimple in his cheek. "Can you carry me, Uncle Boone?"

Oh, the kid was good. Trip wondered if he showed his dimple, Boone would carry him, too.

With a deep rumble of a chuckle, Boone lifted Robbie up with ease, depositing him on muscular shoulders. "Hold on then." He opened the door and stared. "How'd you even see it in all this?"

"Thank you." Trip cast his son a smug smile. "See, I'm not the only one."

"That's because he's a grown-up. Hunter, you understand, right?"

Hunter frowned at him. "Hey, I'm a grown-up."

Robbie studied him before coming to his conclusion. "I don't think so."

Trip burst into laughter, and donned his best gangster voice. "Oh, you just got owned by a seven-year-old, son."

"Well excuse me, Snoop Dog. I don't think I asked for your opinion."

"Just go kill my spiders." Trip shoved Hunter into the bedroom, smiling contently when he heard Hunter growl and curse under his breath. "I told you to watch out for the LEGOs."

This was going to be fun.

CHAPTER TWO

Scratch that. This was going to be a disaster.

What on Earth possessed him to ask the Devil Dogs to catch a creepy-crawly inside his house? Boone had put Robbie down on his chair, and with his brother at his side, started toward the spider which had remained serenely in the center of the room. The moment they stepped toward it, it leapt straight at them. Trip had been watching from the safety of Robbie's bed, which he was sure wasn't meant to hold the weight of the three large men now occupying it.

"What the hell, Trip," Hunter yelped, trying to shove both him and his brother in front of him. "I thought you said it was a spider?"

"It is. I told you it was freakish."

"That's not a spider. It's evil. I can feel it trying to steal my soul."

Robbie let out a whimper and Trip smacked Hunter in the arm. "You're scaring him. Robbie, monkey, it's not going to steal your soul. Remember, Hunter isn't the brightest pup in the litter."

Hunter cast him a daggered look before turning to his brother. "That ain't right, Bo." He took a deep breath and nodded toward the spider. "All right, Mr. Sensible, go get it. Go on, boy."

"You're lucky there's a seven-year-old present." Boone gave Hunter a nudge forward, nearly making his brother lose his balance. "You're always harping on about how fearless you are. Now's your chance to prove it."

Puffing up his chest, Hunter edged toward the foot of the bed when Robbie yelled out, "Don't let it lay eggs in your tummy!"

Hunter turned around and marched right back. "Nope."

"Oh come on!" Both Trip and Boone protested, trying to shove Hunter back toward the foot of the bed.

"Are you insane? Didn't you hear that? It's going to lay eggs in my tummy!" Hunter crossed his arms over his chest and dropped down onto the

mattress, refusing to budge. "Nope. You think you're such a tough dog, you do it. I'm pretty sure it's got spikes all over its grossly bulbous butt."

Trip nodded somberly. "He's right, it does."

"This is ridiculous. Three grown men can't get rid of one spider?" Boone huffed, yet Trip noticed the larger man hadn't actually moved.

"Hello?"

"Deacon!" Robbie bounced on his chair, calling out, "We're in my room! Did you bring the shovel?"

Deacon laughed as he approached the room, the moment he saw the spider he nearly tripped over his own feet trying to step back. "What the hell is that?" He looked over at Trip, his brown eyes going wide. "I thought you said it was a spider?"

"It is," Trip replied calmly, taking just a tiny bit of satisfaction in seeing Deacon cower along with the rest of them. Order had finally been restored to his world. At least it would be once the spider-beast was gone.

"I'm sorry, but that, that thing is not a spider."

"What's going on?" Brook appeared behind Deacon, looking around the room, her gaze landing on the three of them on the bed. "You called the Devil Dogs to get rid of your spider? Really, Trip?"

"Robbie called them. And the Devil Dogs are getting their tails kicked, FYI."

"Hey," Hunter protested, only to have Brook shush him.

"I don't even have words." She looked around the room and spotted the spider. "Oh, that's disgusting."

"See," Hunter hummed smugly.

"Unbelievable." Brook marched in past Deacon who threw a hand out to try and stop her but failed. She ignored all their protests, picked up the piece of cardboard and plastic container, then walked up to the spider, ignored their cries as it flung itself at her, and smacked the cardboard over the container as soon as it landed inside. The whole process took mere seconds. The room sat in silence.

At least until Robbie jumped off his chair and started running around waving his arms. "Oh my Gods, did you see that! That was *awesome*! It was all like 'Argh, I'm going to lay eggs in your tummy,' and you were like, 'Not today, butt-head.' Woo! Go, Mom!" He ran over to the foot of the bed and stopped in front of it, his expression grave. "I can feel your shame."

"You little—" Hunter lunged at him and Robbie let out a yelp, darting from the room with Hunter on his heels. Trip turned to Boone and put his fists up.

"All right, come on, I need to restore my manhood."

Boone chuckled, and in a swift move, grabbed Trip's leg, pulling it from under him and knocking him onto his back. With easy grace, Boone stepped off the bed and followed Brook out of the room. Trip lay there, staring up at the ceiling. Seconds later, Deacon stood over him, a big smile on his too-handsome face.

"It's just not my day is it?"

Deacon shook his head. "Nope."

"I can't believe you let your wife make me look like a dork in front of my son." Trip sat up and glared at him.

"Oh, you mean like the time you went running through the school halls like a lunatic, burst into his classroom, and then handed him his lunch box? His *preschool* lunchbox?"

Trip frowned pathetically. "I couldn't find his new one."

"Because he had it on him, along with his lunch. The poor kid nearly died of embarrassment. Face it, you don't need anyone to make you look like a dork, you do a pretty fine job of that on your own."

"You know, just because you're a music teacher, you think you're *so* cool. I don't like you anymore. Get out of my house you traitor. Everyone's a traitor!" He threw his arms up and headed for the door, a sharp object knifing his bare foot. "Damn you, LEGO!" Why would anyone make such tiny sharp toys?

Deacon laughed, following Trip as he limped all the way to the living room where everyone had already made themselves comfortable.

"The beast has returned from whence it came," Brook said cheerfully, Robbie sitting beside her on the couch, his legs swinging back and forth and a huge grin on his face. Trip was never going to hear the end of this.

"How did you do that?" he asked her. "You didn't even blink."

"Trip, I'm a pediatrician, remember? I've had pups cough up uglier things than that."

Hunter's brows shot up. "Gods, Brook, whose pups you been treating, the *Exorcist*'s?"

"More like your sister's," Trip muttered.

Everyone burst into laughter except Hunter, who was always being told his sister's little hell hounds were just like he'd been when he was a pup. Ravyn and Corbyn were twin boys, ten years old, and in Trip's humble opinion, made the kid from *The Omen* look like the Dalai Lama.

Trip headed for the kitchen wondering if he could get them drunk. He could convince them it had all been a hallucination brought on by one of Brook's homemade stews. They would totally buy that. Robbie he'd just have to bribe. Opening his fridge, he grabbed five beers, setting them on the gray marble counter before rummaging around the drawer for a bottle opener. How was it there was one of everything in there, even a... With a frown, he lifted the little plastic figure with hollow eyes and decomposing entrails. Why was there a zombie in with the cutlery? Sometimes he worried about that boy.

The moment the scent hit his nose, Trip froze. It was a gut reaction he thought he had long ago cured himself of. At least that's what he kept telling himself in the hopes it might actually one day prove to be true. Whenever his mate was near, it was as if everything around Trip stilled, as if the rest of the world blurred while only they remained in focus. Trip swallowed hard, shoving the action figure into his back pocket, and returning to his rummaging as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Yet no matter how hard he tried to push it all away, it came flooding back, over and over, like rolling

waves against the shore. His thoughts went back to that day, the beginning of the end, when his world as he knew it had turned into something new and terrifying.

Trip had been fifteen, small and insignificant for his age, standing in his father's oversized and imposing study. He had reached maturity and therefore would be entrusted to his guardians, who would remain loyal by his side, pledging their undying fidelity to him, their next Alpha. The study door had opened and a scent so strong, so intoxicating, wafted in, Trip feared if he didn't keep fierce control over his feral side, he would lose it right there in front of his father. It had been the moment he'd been both dreading and hoping, the source of his nightmares and wet dreams. It wasn't the first time he'd come across that scent, or felt that presence, but any time Trip had so much as caught a whiff, he bolted in the opposite direction, too terrified to follow it to its source. He'd known for some time it was someone in the pack, but after spending the last few years attempting to deny what he was, having his fears confirmed on that day of all days, had been excruciating.

It was as if he were back there now, fifteen years old, staring down at a future he had never asked for, feeling his heart all but ready to beat out of his chest for a mate he could never have.

"Trip?"

Even now, it was so very hard to meet those eyes... those amazing eyes. The scent grew stronger, and Trip's heart beat frantically in his chest. In all the commotion, with the mixture of scents in the air, Trip had managed not to home in on the one that drove him crazy.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah," Trip answered, annoyed by his breathlessness. He finally found the damn bottle opener only to drop it. "Shit." He turned around, his gaze meeting intense eyes. Boone gave him a little smile and handed him the bottle opener.

"Thanks."

"You sure you're okay?" Boone asked gently, taking another step toward him.

When Trip had turned around in his father's study that night twenty years ago, and seen Boone standing there, the fire in his eyes burning despite his very stoic and well-trained posture, Trip had wanted to flee. Not only was his mate a male, but an Enforcer. Any hope he had ever had of being with the beautiful young man was dashed, and worst of all was the heartache Trip could sense coming off his mate. Boone had known it too, yet he remained by Trip's side, never bitter, never angry, always kind, fiercely protective, and forever hopeful.

"Yeah, just been a long day. Help me take these in to those ingrates, will you?"

Boone nodded, though his expression told Trip he wasn't buying the performance. Luckily, Trip could always count on Boone not to press matters. Boone reached over Trip to grab the bottles when he came to a halt, and Trip did his best to appear unfazed, pretending he couldn't feel the heat coming off the sexy male.

"New aftershave?"

Trip nodded. "Yeah, uh, Brook got it for me. They stopped making my old brand and you know what I'm like with change." He tried to laugh but it fell flat.

"Yeah. You know, change isn't always a bad thing," Boone said quietly. Even without his heavy boots, he was still a good few inches taller than Trip. Damn he was gorgeous. Pitch-black hair just long enough to curl around his ears, thick black eyebrows, full lips, chiseled jaw... Heterochromic eye color was a common trait among their kind, especially in Enforcers, which explained why Boone had one blue eye and one brown. Trip had always found it sexy.

Had Boone stepped closer, or had Trip gravitated toward him without realizing? Either way, Boone was suddenly too close. His hand went to Trip's side, and he leaned in, nuzzling Trip's temple as he occasionally did when the opportunity presented itself. When there was no one around, they had a bad habit of giving into such stolen moments, and although Trip knew it would only make things worse in the long run, he wasn't strong enough to turn Boone away.

Trip nodded, closing his eyes and feeling the muscles in his body tightening with the same anticipation he always felt when Boone was so close. He could smell Boone's own aftershave, his shower gel, shampoo, the desire that radiated off of his firm body. "Sometimes change can be dangerous."

He could tell Boone wanted to argue the point, but instead he nodded somberly, took all five bottles, and walked away. Trip's body pulled him forward, every fiber of his being wanted to follow. He forced himself to stay, backing up against the sink and gripping the edge so tight his fingers ached.

"Hey, sweetie, Robbie wants some snacks." Brook walked in, took one look at him and rushed over.

"Trip, honey, you have to stop doing this to yourself."

"It's getting harder," he admitted, rubbing a hand over his face. He didn't know when it had happened, but being around Boone had become some kind of endurance test, one he seemed to be getting worse at with each passing day.

"Then why fight it?"

"Because you know the Council. They already curse my birth as it is. If they find out who Boone is, they won't hesitate. You know them as well as I do, Brook. I can't even begin to think about what they'd do to him. Hell, have you forgotten what they did to Deacon?" Tears welled in Brook's eyes and Trip immediately regretted bringing it up.

Trip had been born to be the Hagan Clan's next Alpha, a position of honor and nobility, a position he never wanted and was all too happy to pass onto his younger brother Aiden. But when the doctors discovered Aiden couldn't have pups, the responsibility of continuing the Hagan line fell back to Trip. For the second time in his life, his world had come crashing down around him, and at the tender age of eighteen, he had given in under the weight of the Hagan Council's demand for him to fulfill his duty. Trip married Brook, who had been his high school sweetheart, and although he had always loved her, he could never be *in* love with her, a fact he had never hidden from her.

The peace brought on by his and Brook's union had been short-lived when Trip struggled to uphold his family's traditions, especially once discovering he wasn't the only one harboring a secret, or several. Like himself, Brook had a true mate within the clan, one she kept to herself in order to do her duty, enduring a broken heart. There hadn't been much he could do about himself and Boone, but he was sick and tired of having Brook and Deacon denied their happiness. With Boone's silent strength to aid him, Trip found the courage to do what no other Hagan Alpha had done in the history of the clan: he came out.

A whole year after their divorce, Trip and Brook believed enough time had passed for her to finally be united with Deacon. The day after they bonded, Deacon missed his lunch date with Brook. In a panic, she called Trip, who wasted no time in going off to search for him with the Devil Dogs at his side. They found Deacon in Vucari Woods. Someone had attacked him, leaving him so weak he hadn't even been able to shift back into his human form. There was no doubt in any of their minds who had ordered the attack.

Trip had done everything to assure the Council that the divorce had been his decision, yet they still felt the need to send Brook a message, letting her know they were displeased with her. Trip had been furious, confronting the Hagan Council, warning them to leave Brook and Deacon alone. He knew they would listen, if only for the fear Trip would pack Robbie up and disappear with him. On his worst days, when the walls seemed to be closing in on him, Trip thought about it, but his heart never allowed his thoughts to be more than that. He could never do that to Brook, or Robbie, and the thought of leaving Boone, no matter how painful it was to be around him... He just couldn't.

"If you had it to do over?" Brook asked, her soft voice interrupting his thoughts and he realized he had drawn her into his arms.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat. There's nothing in this world or any other that would make me give up Robbie. The moment I saw his little wrinkled face, I knew everything I'd endured or would ever endure was worth it." Trip had fought viciously to remain by his son's side when the council had tried to run him out of the clan, and thanks to Brook, Deacon, and the Devil Dogs, they won that particular battle, but the war was still raging, even if things seemed to have settled. He couldn't let his guard down for even a moment, not when Matthias Hagan and the Hagan Council had it out for him.

He ran a hand soothingly over her head, knowing she felt the same where Robbie was concerned. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." At least he could be content that, for the most part, Brook had the love of her life and was happy.

"It's okay." She drew back with a sniff, and brushed a tear away before giving him a sad smile. "Your father's an asshole of epic proportions."

Trip chuckled. "Eloquently put."

"Shut up. Tell me you have ice cream." She went to the freezer, opening it wide and rummaging through.

They made their way to the living room when a feeling of emptiness washed over him, bringing him to slow his steps. He didn't know which was worse, feeling Boone's closeness, or the overwhelming hollowness that took over when the man was gone.

"What's wrong?"

"Boone left." Trip couldn't help the disappointment in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. It can't be easy for him either."

He nodded, knowing Brook was right. It was for the best anyway, even if his heart mourned the loss each time.

Hunter sat on the floor next to Robbie and Deacon, watching the large flat screen TV and what appeared to be yet another sci-fi flick. Hadn't they gotten enough of that today? Hunter looked up at him innocently—never a good sign. "Hey, Boone said he had to go. Probably went to jack off or something."

"Hunter!" Deacon sputtered, throwing his hands over Robbie's ears.

"What's wrong with you?" Trip joined in with Brook and Deacon's glaring.

"Are you kidding me? Look at him. He shuts down when he's in front of that thing. Watch." Hunter turned to Robbie, picking up each small arm and waving it. "Hey, Robbie, the *Men in Black* are here to take you away."

Robbie's attention remained glued to the TV screen.

"It's official. Your son is a couch potato. Make that a floor potato."

"He is not," Trip griped. A commercial came on and Robbie blinked a few times before turning to the adults.

"Why has Uncle Boone gone to jack off?"

"You see what you've done?" Brook smacked Hunter in the back of the head.

"Ow! What? Have you stopped to wonder why he hasn't asked what that means?"

Trip opened his mouth and closed it. Damn it, the Annoying One had a point. He addressed his doe-eyed son. "Robbie, do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, it means when you masturbate."

Under normal circumstances, everyone's gaping expressions would have been comical. Instead, Trip donned his serious-dad voice. "And just where did you learn about that, young man?"

Robbie looked down at his toes. "Um, TV?"

"Nice try. Both Mom's TV and ours have parental control on them, and you know it. Truth now."

"Ravyn and Corbyn."

"I knew it! Those little scoundrels." Trip shot Hunter an accusing glare. "I blame *you*."

"Me? Are you insane? Do you know what Ivy would do to me if I taught them something like that?" Hunter looked genuinely alarmed. "When we were kids, I bit the head off one of her dolls, and the next time I fell asleep in my canine form, she shaved my tail from root to tip! Besides, they're boys. They're going to do a whole lot worse."

"Not Robbie." Trip grabbed Robbie, ignoring his protests and hugged him tight against his chest, stroking his head. "Not my little angel."

"Dad! Stop. Argh! Mom, make him stop."

"That's what you get for listening to those pups. Mm, Trip this ice cream is good. And it's supermarket brand?"

Robbie continued to flail and struggle in Trip's unyielding paternal embrace. "Yeah, can you believe it? It was on sale, too."

Brook leaned over to Deacon and held out a spoonful. "Try this."

"Mom!"

"I can't hear you. I'm too busy enjoying my ice cream."

"Mm, that is good," Deacon agreed, making a move for the bowl.

"Don't even think about it. Get your own."

Robbie continued to struggle while Deacon tried to sweet talk some ice cream from his wife. Neither of them were getting anywhere.

"Resistance is futile and will only make it worse," Trip told Robbie, starting to rock him while humming an old lullaby.

"Oh my Gods, you're such a dork!"

"Hear that? Your son called me a dork."

"Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em." Robbie's smartass remark was all too familiar and everyone's gaze went to Hunter, who jumped to his feet.

"Hey, wow, look at the time. I'd love to stay but I got things... you know, laundry in the oven, stuff... uh..."

Trip narrowed his eyes and Hunter bolted from the room like it was on fire. Seconds later the front door slammed.

"Do you think he dresses himself, or does Boone have to do it for him?" Deacon asked thoughtfully, before making another swipe for Brook's ice cream. He wasn't quick enough.

"We're talking about a man who sleeps in Dr. Who boxer shorts," Trip informed him.

Brook got that wicked gleam in her eyes that told Trip he should have kept his mouth shut. Now it was too late. "How do you know?"

"Remember that night Robbie turned six and the Children of the Corn were here for a sleepover?" Brook nodded and Deacon cringed. "Well, Robyn nearly set the kitchen on fire microwaving popcorn, and the Devil Dogs rushed over in their jammies."

"Seriously?" Brook finished up her ice cream and handed the bowl to Robbie. "Honey, wash this up for Mommy."

"You're just trying to get me to leave the room."

"Clever boy. Now get."

"Ugh," Robbie huffed and stomped out of the room with the bowl.

"Well?" Brook sat forward, her face propped on her hands, and her big brown eyes sparkling. "What does Boone sleep in?"

Trip fingered the frayed end of his hoodie's cords. "Clothes."

"What kind of clothes?"

Trip looked over at Deacon, waiting for him to jump in. Deacon just shrugged. Coward.

"I'm not going to leave you alone until you spill."

"Boxer..."

"Boring."

"Briefs."

"I'm listening."

"Boxer briefs. Black with a gray band and a charcoal gray V-neck T-shirt. Snug." He would never be able to see another pair of boxer briefs again without picturing Boone's finely-toned ass. The image had been seared into his brain.

"Ooh, I bet he fills those briefs up nicely." She wriggled her brows and made a grabby gesture with her hands. "He has an exceptional ass."

Deacon's lip jutted out in a miserable pout. "Hey, what about my ass?"

"You also have a fantastic ass."

"Not as fantastic as Boone's," Trip said, earning him a scowl from Deacon. "His ass should be in a museum. Seriously, it's a work of art."

"Who says my ass isn't worthy of a museum?"

Trip did his best not to laugh at Deacon's slighted expression. "I do. I know about these things."

"You haven't even seen it."

Trip rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. "All right then, let's see it. The things I do for my friends."

Deacon made to get up and Brook grabbed him by the arm, yanking him back down. "You are not dropping your pants in my ex's living room."

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"But—"
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"Seriously, is everything a competition with you males?"

Trip and Deacon replied in unison, "Yes."

Deacon mouthed the word *later*, making Trip laugh. He couldn't have picked a better mate for Brook if he'd tried. Deacon was a standup guy, sweet, gutsy, and madly in love with Brook. If anything ever happened to Trip, he knew Robbie would be in good hands. Deacon protected the pup as though Robbie were his own, and even though Trip had never asked, nor felt he had earned it, Deacon was always ready to jump in to Trip's defense.

Brook and Deacon suddenly burst into laughter and Trip noticed the change in the air. He narrowed his eyes, not needing to look behind him. "If you tell your brother, so help me, I will inflict serious bodily harm upon your person."

Hunter put his hands up as he walked over to the couch. "Forgot my hat. Didn't hear you talking about my brother's ass. Please tell me you don't use that as a pick up line."

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"Get out."
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Robbie came back into the room, and dropped down onto Trip's lap with an *oomf*. He wrapped his little arms around Trip and smiled wide. Gods above, what now? "Out with it."

[&]quot;Going."

"Can I go home with Mom and Deacon tonight instead of tomorrow night? Pleeeease?"

"I thought we agreed you were going to clean your room before you left for the weekend?" He would not give in. He would not give in. Discipline. Fairness. Firmness. Discipline. Fairness.

Robbie nodded, his hand going to Trip's head and petting it. "You're absolutely right. We did agree. You're such a good dad. The bestest, really."

Trip pursed his lips, his gaze shifting to Brook and Deacon who were trying their hardest not to laugh. "I'm not giving in."

"I know," Robbie said, cuddling up to him, his head resting on Trip's shoulder. "I love you, Dad. You're always such a good dad, and you always do what's best for me, even when you brought me the wrong lunch box at school, or when you showed all the parents at the last PTA meeting a picture of me as a pup with my butt in the air. I know it's just because you try very hard. Or when you forgot to take your red shirt out of the washing machine and I was the only angel in a pink robe for the Christmas play. No one minded. And for the bake sale you bought store cupcakes instead of homemade cupcakes and then fought with Mrs. Harriet demanding to see the 'Bake Sale Handbook' and—"

"All right! Geeeez, I get it, fine, go pack your weekend bag."

"Yay!" Robbie jumped out of his lap, hugged him tight, and whooped all the way to his room.

Brook shook her head at him. "Wow, you caved in after the bake sale. It used to take you until the school assembly when you sat in the only broken chair in the whole auditorium and landed on your ass. That's a whole six embarrassing events early."

"That boy is too smart for his own good," Deacon said. "It's scary. He scares me."

"I know." Trip wiped an imaginary tear from his eye. "My baby's going to rule the world one day, you'll see."

It wasn't long until Trip was standing in the middle of his living room all on his lonesome. He had a whole extra day and a half to himself before he joined Robbie and the others for a play date in Vucari Woods. Now what? Should he run around in his underwear? Get drunk in front of the TV? Have an orgy?

Trip headed over to Robbie's room and started clearing up, hoping their arachnid problem was resolved for good. The excitement of the evening was underwhelming. He really needed to get a life at some point, preferably before Robbie reached maturity. After cleaning Robbie's room, he wandered around the house and tidied up a little before making himself a sandwich, grabbing some chips and a beer, and settling in front of the TV doing his best not to think about Boone in his boxer briefs. He wasn't so successful.

This was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER THREE

Boone stood beside his brother on Trip's front porch doing his best not to turn around and make a run for it. This was a bad idea. Last night had been hard enough, but a whole evening alone with Trip? Of course his brother would be there, but when Hunter sat down in front of a movie he was about as conscious as a throw pillow.

"Relax, big brother. It's not like we haven't done this a million times."

"Yeah, but usually Robbie's home," Boone muttered, frowning at his brother's wicked grin.

"I know."

"I hate you."

Hunter laughed, turning toward the opening front door. Boone stifled a groan at his brother's goofy grin as he held up the six-pack of beer in one hand and the pizza box in the other.

"Movie night!" Hunter waved the six-pack in front of Trip, whose expression was rightfully leery.

"I don't remember agreeing to this."

Hunter scoffed. "Like you have something better to do. Let's face it, Robbie's with Brook and Deacon, which means you'd either be spending all your time cleaning or moping."

"What if I had plans?" Trip crossed his arms over his chest looking unimpressed when Hunter burst into laughter. Boone swiftly elbowed his brother in the ribs, groaning when Hunter stopped and stared at Trip.

"Oh, shit, you were being serious?"

"Just get in here."

"We're going to watch movies where they use cars and helicopters to blow things up. Completely ridiculous but it's in HD and loud!"

"You know what else is ridiculous and loud?" Trip asked, receiving a divaesque toss of the head from Hunter as he sauntered toward the living room, his voice going low and gruff as he quoted lines from *Die Hard*. With an apologetic smile, Boone stepped inside, waiting for Trip to lock up.

"You ever find the mute button on him?"

Boone shook his head. "There isn't one, I've checked. He even talks in his sleep."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Boone followed Trip to the living room where Hunter had already popped in a DVD, turned on the surround sound, and was on the floor stuffing his face full of pizza by the time Trip sat down on the couch. Boone unzipped his black and gray hooded jacket, tossed it over the armrest, and joined Trip. He hadn't even realized how close he was until their knees touched. If Trip thought anything of it, it didn't show.

It wasn't as if Boone had done it on purpose. By now it was just instinct, and when he really thought about it, Trip had a habit of doing the same. Whenever Trip walked in somewhere, if Boone was already seated, Trip walked over and sat next to him. No matter where they were or what was going on, they gravitated toward each other without thinking.

About half hour into the movie, Trip managed to swipe some pizza and beer away from Hunter before they were left without. His brother could easily eat a whole pie if left to his own devices. Boone put his arm on the backrest, holding back a smile when Trip casually let his head fall back against it. Somewhere in the middle of Trip and Hunter's argument over whether shooting at a car's gas tank would be enough to make it explode, Boone dozed off.

When he woke and stretched, he inhaled deeply, a soft moan escaping him when he was met with Trip's scent. He looked down to find Trip fast asleep on him, his arm around Boone's middle and his head nestled on Boone's shoulder. With a sleepy smile, he carefully wrapped his arms around Trip, pulling him closer. These moments were rare, and getting to hold Trip like this was a gift, one he wasn't about to let go of just yet. He let his cheek rest against Trip's head, feeling his soft hair, and catching a subtle whiff of Trip's citrus shampoo. He instinctively gave a gentle squeeze, his heart swelling when Trip nuzzled even closer.

Had Tristan Hagan not been his true mate, Boone still couldn't picture himself loving anyone else. Trip was of Alpha bloodline, strong, fearless when he needed to be, yet at times his vulnerability tugged at Boone's heartstrings like nothing else. Sure, Trip would deny it until his dying breath, using his humor to distract anyone from discovering the truth, but he couldn't fool Boone. He only had to look into those pale blue eyes to know when Trip was trying to hide.

He didn't know which was harder, being this close to him and having to let go, or being away. Boone had taught himself long ago to accept their fate. He loved Trip, always would, but if Boone wanted to remain in this clan, by Trip's side, he would have to do so with the knowledge that he would always be incomplete. Before he reached maturity, when his father had been alive and one of the fiercest Enforcers of his time, he had been taught the difference between Trip's kind and his own. Alpha lineage was like royalty to their Husky-shifter race, and Boone was a soldier, a servant. Back in the day, his kind had been knights and royal protectors. Now, they were glorified guard dogs.

"You two are real sweet together."

Hunter's voice interrupted his thoughts, and Boone frowned at his brother. He had completely forgotten he was there. To his surprise, Hunter's usual mischievous expression had been replaced by one of tender sadness.

"I mean that, Bo. You two... I can see why he's your mate. You're like two puzzle pieces, completely different on your own, yet together you fit perfectly."

He didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't like his brother to be so sentimental. He wondered what was bringing this on. "You okay, Hunt?"

Hunter shrugged. "Ari got into another fight with his Mom."

"About Addison?"

"Yeah." Hunter shook his head, his arms coming around his drawn up knees. "I'm worried, Boone. How long do you think he can hold out against her? Everyone's afraid of her. Skyrah's a real piece of work. With Brook costing them their link to the Alphas, she's depending on Ari to get it back."

"You know Ari cares about you too much." He and Hunter were the only ones who knew the truth about Brook's younger brother being gay, and Boone had only found out about it because he had mistakenly walked in on his brother and Ari making out in the living room after coming home early one afternoon. To say he had been surprised would have been the understatement of the year.

Hunter didn't look convinced. "Yeah? What about Brook and Deacon, you and Trip?"

"Brook got her mate in the end."

"So you're saying there's hope?"

"I'd like to think so."

"But Deacon's not an Enforcer." Hunter fell onto the carpet on his side sighing like he used to do when they were pups, and it broke Boone's heart. No one knew Hunter like he did. On the outside he was this whirlwind of boundless energy, loud, shameless, foul-mouthed, trouble with a capital T, but when things got too much, he curled up on his side and turned to his big brother like he used to do when they were kids. "The Hagan Council isn't going to change its laws for a couple of half-breeds, Bo. Our kind used to mean something. Now we're easily replaced."

"You know that's not true. Do you really think our friends would replace us so easily?"

"No." Hunter rolled onto his back, his expression troubled. "But you don't know Skyrah like I do. She's manipulative, Bo. She'll do whatever it takes to get her family that connection, no matter what it does to Ari."

"At least he has Brook. She gives him strength."

"What if he does something rash? As relieved as I would be for him to come out, who knows what his mother would do to him. Everyone already blames you and me for Trip coming out. Like we infected him or something."

"What about Addison?"

Hunter chuckled, rolling back over to face him, and propping himself on his elbow. "Hell on four paws, that one. Everyone says she gets her stubbornness from Trip. She's got her sights set on a certain Enforcer and ain't no one gonna change her mind about it. Matthias is all but foaming at the mouth. Of course he doesn't know which Enforcer it is and Addison isn't about to tell him. She knows too well what her father's like."

Boone was surprised. He wondered if Trip knew his little sister was in love with an Enforcer. "Who is it?"

"Cy."

"Shit." And not just any Enforcer, one of Matthias's. His heart went out to the poor girl.

"Exactly. She told Ari, who told me, but you can't say a word. The Council finds out and Cy's gone."

"Does Trip know?"

Hunter's gaze went to Trip and he shook his head. "I doubt it or he would have said something to us. The only reason no one else has found out yet is because Matthias thinks it's an embarrassment. This clan is fucked up six ways from Sunday." He tilted his head, his gaze still on Trip. "What're you gonna do, big brother? You're not gonna find another one like him."

"Don't you think I know that?" Boone sighed, his hand going protectively to Trip's head. "I don't want to either. I don't know what we're going to do."

Trip let out a sleepy groan before he pulled away, his hair sticking up on one side. "What happened?"

"Hey. We dozed off," Boone replied, chuckling at Trip's hair. He reached out and smoothed it down for him.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. I didn't drool on you or anything, did I?"

"Yeah, you left a big wet patch. Had to dry it out with a blowdryer."

"Jackass." Trip poked him in the ribs, making him squirm. "Holy shit, don't tell me you're ticklish. Why didn't I know this?"

Boone was about to protest when Hunter piped up. "Oh, you have no idea. The ribs, under his arms, his feet, his neck."

"You are a dead man," Boone growled, lunging off the couch and tackling his brother, pinning him underneath him. He could always count on his brother to drive him to distraction by being an annoying pain in the ass. Speaking of pain...

Trip sat back on the couch, watching the brothers wrestle. Boone was obviously the stronger of the two, but Hunter was the craftiest. He knew just how to squirm out from under his brother's grip like a true escape artist. Trip's cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he cheerfully answered.

"You have to stop calling me like this. Deacon's going to get suspicious."

Brook laughed. "I highly doubt that. Robbie's getting his jammies on and wants to say goodnight. What's that noise?"

"The Devil Dogs are wrestling in my living room."

"So you're watching gay porn."

"Basically," Trip said, tilting his head to get a better view of Boone's ass as it came right into his line of sight.

"Why do you get to have all the fun?"

Deacon's voice rang out somewhere behind her. "I heard that."

"I know," Brook said with an evil laugh. "So who's winning?"

Trip grinned broadly. "Now that's a silly question. I am, obviously."

"All right you dirty dog, here, say goodnight to your son."

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hey, Champ. Whatcha been up to?"

"Deacon and I obliterated the Zombie hoards."

"I bet your mom loved that."

"She said we were disturbed."

"Sounds about right."

"What's going on?"

"Uncle Boone and Uncle Hunter are up to their shenanigans again."

"Who's winning?"

Trip looked over to find Boone and Hunter had somehow both lost their shirts in the brawl, and now Boone had Hunter against his bare chest, his arm around his brother's neck holding him in a headlock. Trip's gaze went to the matching Devil Dog tattoos the brothers had, Boone's on his left shoulder, Hunter's on his right. They were tribal-style silhouettes of a growling Husky's profile with a 'D' incorporated in the design, each one with slight differences to make it personalized. The designs were simple and damn sexy.

"Oh come on," Trip groaned before turning his attention back to Robbie. "Goodnight and sweet dreams, Kiddo. Daddy loves you. Daddy has to go now." *Before he embarrasses himself*.

"Night, Dad," Robbie replied cheerfully before they both hung up.

"All right you two, break it up."

Boone and Hunter stilled, released each other, and sat back on their heels to watch Trip. Hunter cocked his head to one side, his eyes narrowed as he studied Trip.

Crap.

His eyes widened before he fell over in a fit of laughter.

"What?" Boone asked with a frown.

"Your boyfriend is into some kinky shit."

Boone looked from Hunter to Trip and back. "I don't understand."

Trip braced himself as Hunter shot up and whispered in his brother's ear. Just the thought of what Hunter might be telling his brother made Trip cringe. Boone's mouth dropped open and he gazed up at Trip in disbelief.

Double crap.

"Whatever you two are thinking, you couldn't be more wrong."

"Yeah? Move your hands," Hunter said.

"Why?"

"Because you have a raging hard-on right now." Hunter licked his index fingers and circled his nipples. "Admit it, you think I'm hot."

"You're embarrassing both your brother and yourself. I do not have a hardon. So what if I think two half-naked, tattooed guys wrestling in my living room is hot? You know how much people pay to watch that sort of thing? I bet you do. You have like, what? Three subscriptions?"

"Fuck off. With a body like this, I don't pay for squat." Hunter jumped to his feet and started wiggling his ass in front of Trip. "You think I'm hot. Oh yeah."

"I think you're a jackass, is what I think."

Boone put on his shirt, and dropped down onto the couch beside Trip, his arms crossed over his chest and a deep frown on his face.

"It's not like that," Trip assured him, wondering why he was defending himself. "If you're going to sit there and tell me you never got turned on by another guy, I'm going to call bullshit. I will shout it from the mountain top."

"Yeah, but none of them were your brother."

"That's because my brother's King Dick, ruler of all Dicktopia, and no one has the hots for him, not even his wife."

Hunter wedged himself between them on the sofa, and threw an arm around each of them, his attention on his brother. "Aw, look at that pouty face. He's all jealous."

"I'm going to kick your ass when we get home."

"Yeah? Make sure to invite Trip over, you know how much he loves that kind of thing."

Boone growled and Hunter darted off the couch, swiping up his shirt and rubbing it all over his chest as he walked out of the living room, laughing all the way to the kitchen.

"You think that's hot?" Boone asked, arching an eyebrow at Trip.

"Truth?"

"Always."

"I begrudgingly admit, he is somewhat physically attractive, in the same way you might be walking down the street and think the same of any other guy or some Hollywood actor. It doesn't mean anything, and it sure as hell would never lead to anything." Trip shuddered at the thought. "Anyway, if I got turned on at all, it was because of you." He played with the cord of his hoodie, surprised when Boone turned to face him, his hand slipping behind Trip's neck and his fingers starting to stroke his skin. Trip swallowed hard, concentrating on the frayed little cord. "So, you know, don't get all pouty."

"Okay," Boone said, a charming smile spreading across his face. "I was just messing with you. It's my brother we're talking about."

Trip shuddered again. "Ew."

Boone edged closer, his hand slipping underneath Trip's collar, making the butterflies in his stomach go nuts. Maybe Trip hadn't had a raging hard-on before, but if Boone kept stroking the back of his neck the way he was, or if the hand that just landed on his knee travelled any further up, it was only going to be a matter of time.

The doorbell rang and Trip jumped off the couch. "I'll get that." Without looking back at Boone, he quickly made his way over to the front door, surprised when he found Ari out on the porch. He was dressed in black from head to toe, from his Vans to his jeans and hoodie. Ari was a sweet guy, just turned twenty-six. He had light brown hair and big brown eyes like his sister, though unlike his sister, Ari was somewhat on the shy side and didn't possess the talent for cursing like a drunken sailor.

"Ari? Everything okay?"

"Hey, Trip. Yeah, um, mind if I come in?"

"No, of course not." He stepped aside, and closed the front door after him, wondering why Ari had come to sudden halt. When Trip turned around, he found Hunter looking equally surprised.

"Hunter..." Ari cleared his throat and shoved his hands into his hoodie pockets. "I was looking for you. I tried calling your phone, but it kept going to voicemail. My sister said you were here."

Hunter checked his pockets, cursing under his breath. "I must've dropped it while making Trip's porn vid with Boone in the living room."

Ari's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You're a real douche bag, you know that?" Trip turned to Ari with an apologetic smile. "It's a long story."

"A sexy story."

"Not a sexy story," Trip assured Ari.

"Trip thinks I'm hot."

Ari's expression was somewhere between puzzled and alarmed. "Uh, okay."

"Let me get my jacket."

This time it was Trip's turn to look surprised. "You're leaving?"

"I know it's going to be tough, letting go of all this," Hunter said, circling a hand over his chest as he walked backward toward the living room, "but I got plans."

Trip turned back to Ari. "For the record, I think many things about him, but I promise you, him being hot is not one of them. In fact, most of what I think about him revolves around his being an idiot. I can't believe you voluntarily hang out with him."

Ari shrugged and averted his gaze. "He's fun."

There was something in the slight fidget, in the faint coloring of his cheeks, that told Trip maybe Hunter was a little more than just "fun". Trip had always had his suspicions about Ari, but whenever he extended an invitation for Ari to

confide in him if he ever wanted to discuss certain things, Ari would shyly thank him and nothing would come of it.

Hunter came back, started to slip into his jacket when he stopped to look down at himself. "Crap, my shirt's on backwards." He shoved his jacket between his knees and pulled off his shirt before proceeding to put it back on the right way around. Trip did his best to pretend he couldn't see the lustful way Ari was watching Hunter's every move, the way his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip, or the way he tugged down on his hoodie. Holy shit, Ari didn't just have the hots for Hunter, he had it bad.

"Ready," Hunter declared, walking up to Ari and throwing his arm around his neck. He gave him a playful squeeze, but for all his chummy behavior, Trip knew that look too well. It was the same look reflected in Boone's eyes when it involved Trip, and that left him with a heavy heart. Hunter glanced up at him and realizing he'd been caught out, reached over and gave Trip's cheek a gentle nudge, his voice void of its usual brass.

"Take care of my big brother."

Trip nodded, watching stupefied as Hunter led Ari out of the house, his arm slipping from around the younger man the moment they were out on the porch. It was like nothing Trip had ever seen. The way Hunter's entire demeanor changed spoke volumes. He smoothed out Ari's hoodie, giving the ends a playful tug, and when they walked down the steps, Hunter hunched over just a little so he was closer in height to Ari as they talked. They walked so their arms brushed each other, Hunter's tone gentle, and he used any excuse to touch Ari. It was sweet and heartbreaking.

Trip closed the front door and stood there for a moment, wondering how long this could go on. He had fought hard to be where he was now, no matter how difficult it was at times, but as an Alpha, he had been allowed certain exceptions, exceptions that would never be made for Hunter or Ari... or Boone. Was it really worth fighting to be in a clan that didn't want you? Then again, he knew full well that if it hadn't been for Robbie, Trip would have probably left a long time ago. It would have broken his heart to be away from his sisters, Brook, and Deacon, but he would have made the sacrifice. Pushing

those thoughts aside, he headed for the living room to ask Boone a few questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

The moment Trip entered the living room, Boone knew there was something weighing heavily on his mind, and he had a feeling he knew what that something was. He remained quiet while Trip dazedly took a seat beside him on the couch, fiddling with the cords of his hoodie like he always did when he was nervous or thinking.

"How long have you known?" Trip asked him.

"Known what?"

Trip turned toward him with a sigh. "You know what. About Hunter and Ari."

"Oh."

"A while then."

"A year."

Trip's jaw dropped. "A year?"

Boone knew Trip wasn't going to ask why he hadn't known about it. It was obvious. Much like Boone and Trip, there was nothing that could be done, and unlike Boone and Hunter's mom who had always been caring and supportive, Ari and Brook's mom was a complete psycho. When Trip and Brook divorced, they had made certain Skyrah wouldn't find out until it was done. The woman made it her mission to make Trip's life miserable, instigating hostility among the clan's members. Boone really felt for Ari. As if coming out wasn't hard enough, he also had Skyrah to contend with—if and when he decided to. Boone was fully aware of how both Addison and Ari were fighting with everything they had to refuse the marriage both families kept trying to push on them.

"This is bullshit."

"What is?" Boone blinked up at Trip, surprised by his anger.

"That we have to live like this. You, me, your brother, Ari. You think I didn't know how bad you were hurting when I got married? When Brook got pregnant—"

Boone quickly put a hand up to stop him. "Hey, I wouldn't give Robbie up for anything." He loved that kid, and no matter what had happened, Boone would never wish he weren't around.

Trip's eyes welled up and he quickly blinked the tears away. "I know. Believe me, I know. What I'm saying is, I hate how much you've suffered by staying at my side."

"I'm not the only one who suffers. Besides, you know I couldn't be anywhere else." Boone pulled Trip into his arms, relieved when Trip allowed it. At times the man was soft and affectionate, while at other times he did his best to stay away from Boone, not that Boone could blame him. Sometimes it got a little too much for him, too.

"I feel like I'm letting everyone down. Like if I stood up to my father, we might all have a chance."

"It's not like it was before, Trip, and no one knows that better than me and Hunter. We were there. You were brave as hell, and at the time, your father hadn't been expecting it. He certainly hadn't been prepared for the fight we put up. Plus, our numbers were pretty even. Now, he's got the Trevyn Clan behind him, not to mention Aiden and the rest of the clan. We're outnumbered."

"We can still fight."

Boone put his hands on Trip's shoulders and moved him away so he could meet his gaze. "Absolutely not. You have Robbie to think about. So whatever crazy notions might be swirling around that head of yours, just forget it."

Trip's gaze shifted to Boone's lips before moving back up to his face. "Robbie's not the only one. I have you to think about."

Boone had to admit he was surprised, though not as surprised as when Trip took hold of the back of his neck and pulled him forward, their lips meeting in a hot and needy kiss. Boone wasn't about to question it. He gave himself over, returning Trip's kiss, and loving the feel of Trip's lips, the taste of him, the—shrilling sound of the doorbell.

"Are you kidding me?" Trip pulled back, pushing to his feet with a frustrated growl and heading for the front door. Maybe his brother had

forgotten something. When he sniffed the air, he cursed under his breath and jumped to his feet. He got to the front door just as Trip opened it. Ashley Kelsey stood on the other side.

Ashley was one of Matthias's Enforcers, tall, slim, hard as nails, and a thorn in all their sides, especially Hunter's, seeing as how she and her father had gotten it into their heads that Hunter would make a perfect mate for Ashley. After all, according to them, Hunter was merely trying to emulate his big brother, he wasn't really gay.

"Why hello, Ashley. What brings you to my humble abode this fine evening?" Trip's smile was wide, but Boone knew his mate too well by now. Trip was merely biding his time, waiting for Ashley to make the first move. It didn't take her long. She glanced over Trip's shoulder at Boone and let out a noise of disgust.

"Can't you two find a motel or something? You have to bring the whole neighborhood into your seedy little homo world?"

Boone crossed his arms over his chest and came to lean against the door frame beside Trip. Oh, this was going to be fun. Ashley might be a nasty piece of work, but if there was one person who could put her in her place, it was Trip. When Trip gasped dramatically, Boone knew he was in for a show. He held back a smile and watched as Trip rushed passed Ashley, down the porch steps, and whirled around, gazing up at the house. His hand went to his chest and he let out an exaggerated sigh.

"You had me worried for a moment there, but nope, this is indeed my house. So I'm going to flash you my *I-can-do-whatever-the-hell-I-want-in-it* badge." He unzipped his hoodie and opened one side. "Hm, must have left it in my other hoodie, but this is where I usually keep it, right here, next to my heart. Now is there something you wanted, because Boone and I were about to"—he held a finger up and shouted the rest as loud as he could—"have wild, hot, dirty gay sex with lots of thrusting and moaning and inserting of penises! There will be lots of gay sex, here, in my house! Did you hear that Mrs. Liebermann? Gay sex! Lots of it!" He headed back toward the house, looking over at Boone. "Is that the plural of penis or is it peni? No, that doesn't sound right."

Boone chuckled and shook his head. The horrified look on Ashley's face was priceless. When she finally managed to find her voice, she sputtered indignantly at Trip. "You're a disgrace to the Hagan name!"

"Yeah, well, and you're a bitch, but you don't see me coming to your house to chat about it. Next time, save yourself the walk and send me an email. It's trippyhagan at kiss-my-perfectly-rounded-ass dot com."

"Tell Hunter I'm looking for him."

"Nope."

"Then go to hell."

"Already there, Tootsie Pop. Nope, that's not right. Even a Tootsie Pop has a soft, gooey center whereas you're just a cold hard bitch." He spun around, waited for Boone to move before slamming the door in her face.

"That was impressive," Boone marveled.

"Gods, she pisses me off. It's like they all took the same 'how to be an asshole' course in college." Trip's icy blue eyes glowed dimly, his pupils dilated, and his canine teeth slightly elongated. Boone drew him into his arms, running a soothing hand over his head.

"Easy there, sweetheart. You're getting all worked up, and you know how much you hate shifting inside the house."

Trip took a deep breath and released it slowly. "You're right. Sorry about the whole sex thing."

Boone shrugged. "It's okay. It was worth it to see the look on her face."

"Not that I don't wish it were true."

"Not helping."

"Right. You know what's the most fucked up part about all this? Half the town probably thinks we're fucking and they go out of their way to pretend otherwise, yet if we bonded or they found out you were my mate, they'd bust out the pitchforks and paddy wagons."

"Sounds like a country song."

"Doesn't it?" Trip let out a sigh and let his forehead fall against Boone's shoulder, his arms slipping around Boone's waist. The closeness was welcomed, even if Boone did wish the encounter with Ashley hadn't left Trip all riled up. He led Trip back into the living room and resumed his seat on the couch, pulling Trip along with him. He needed to calm his fiery little Husky before the man ended up grumpy and shedding all over the furniture. As it was, Trip's eyes were back to normal, but Boone decided to be on the safe side. He pulled Trip against him and covered his mouth with his.

It didn't take long before they were back to their previous hot kiss. Whatever the reasons for Trip's eagerness, Boone was all too grateful for it, and they were soon both fighting for dominance. Boone's instincts told him he was the bigger of the two, but Trip's blood told him he was Alpha. In reality, their tussle never led to anything other than getting them even more turned on, and in the end, Boone's instincts eventually conceded that Trip was top dog and he submitted.

He enjoyed the feel of Trip's muscles under his hands, Trip's scent, and the faint taste of beer on Trip's tongue. He nipped at the stubbly jaw, his hand feeling his way down and finding the hem of the hoodie. Boone didn't hesitate in pulling it and the T-shirt up off him, and dropping it to the floor beside the couch.

"Boone," Trip gasped his name, his hands hastily finding the hem of Boone's long-sleeve shirt and pulling it off him before grabbing Boone's neck and dragging him down on top of him, his hips pushing against Boone's thigh. He could feel how hard Trip was, feel his need, the heat coming off him as he fought to keep control. His fingers dug into Boone's shoulders as Boone settled on him, their crotches lined up and rubbing against each other.

"Oh, Gods. Boone, we shouldn't be doing this," Trip breathed, even as he fumbled with the buttons of Boone's Jeans. "Zip fly, man. How many times do I have to tell you? What is it with you and button fly jeans?"

Boone chuckled, swatting Trip's hand away and undoing all four buttons of his jeans with one hand. "I like them better."

Trip grumbled at him before unzipping his own jeans. "I feel like a teenager."

"Do you want me to stop?" Boone spit on his palm and grabbed Trip's cock, giving it a gentle tug. Trip arched his back and groaned.

"That's a stupid question I won't dignify with a response."

"Okay then, quit your moaning."

Trip arched an eyebrow at him, his hand taking hold of Boone's dick and making him groan. "Yeah? Who's moaning now?"

"Smart ass."

"It's not my ass you should be concentrating on."

Boone lowered himself closer to Trip, his lips inches away from his ear. "Maybe not now, but one day that ass will be mine."

"That day can't come soon enough."

"Speaking of coming..."

"And I'm the smart ass?"

Boone laughed and covered Trip's mouth with his own again. He allowed Trip to jack him off while he returned the favor, his tongue circling Trip's as his hand picked up the pace. It had been a long time since they'd had the opportunity to enjoy each other like this. As if reading his mind, Trip spoke up, his voice sounding breathless.

"I'm sorry we don't get to do this more often." Trip's free hand found its way onto Boone's left ass cheek where his fingers dug into his skin.

"I'll take what I can get," Boone replied, and it was the truth. He counted himself lucky that they managed these little stolen moments at all. In truth, Trip could have any guy he wanted. He was sweet, funny, sexy, yet he was content to be with Boone. When they'd been younger, they both had their fair share of random hookups, but the guilt after each sexual encounter had started weighing on them heavily; they decided even if they couldn't have sex, it didn't mean they couldn't make love to each other. They just had to be extra careful.

"Boone," Trip warned, thrusting into Boone's hand, his movements growing more erratic.

"It's okay, we're okay."

Trip nodded, his bottom lip between his teeth before he let his head fall back, exposing his neck. Boone took advantage, his lips pressing to all that soft skin, his canines grazing when he opened his mouth. Instead of following his instinct to bite, Boone let his tongue lick a trail up to Trip's jaw to his ear before taking the lobe gently between his teeth.

"Boone, I'm gonna come."

Boone nodded, thrusting repeatedly into Trip's hand. His free hand went to Trip's hair, grabbing a fistful of it as he felt his muscles tightening and his orgasm barreling through him. He covered Trip's mouth with his own before Trip could cry out and let loose with all the swear words he usually released. The man had a talent for it.

Trip groaned, and his body relaxed under Boone, who shifted so he was now half on, half off his mate, their legs intertwined and their arms wrapped around each other. He nuzzled Trip's neck, planting small kisses and loving the way it made Trip shiver underneath him.

"You're so beautiful."

"You're so cheesy," Trip laughed, still somewhat breathless, his face flushed, and his hair sticking up at all angles. Boone chuckled and tried to tame Trip's short locks by running his fingers through them.

"Dick. I'm trying to be romantic here."

"You want romance?" Trip cupped Boone's face in his hand, his voice soft. "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her."

"Oh, okay, so it's like that, huh?"

"You had me at hello."

"Trip," Boone warned.

"I wish I knew how to quit you."

"Oh my Gods, shut the fuck up."

Trip threw his head back and laughed. "One more. Come on, one more," he pleaded.

"One."

"I have crossed oceans of time to find you."

"Are you shitting me? *Dracula*? Really?" Boone refused to laugh. He wasn't going to encourage him.

"What? It's romantic." A truly malevolent gleam came into Trip's bright blue eyes. He opened his mouth and Boone put a finger to his lips to stop him. He knew what was coming.

"So help me, if you quote *Titanic* to me, I will *never* jerk you off again. You know I can't stand that movie."

"Shutting up." Trip pressed his lips together, fidgeting under Boone.

"Look at you. You can't hold still. You're about to burst." Boone shook his head and reached over Trip, swiping his shirt off the floor.

"I may not be a smart man—"

"But I am going to kick your ass if you don't stop." Well, at least it wasn't *Titanic*.

Trip laughed and sat up, planting a sloppy kiss on Boone's cheek. "I think driving you batshit crazy might just be my new favorite hobby."

Astounding. "How do you do it? It's like some kind of super power."

"And I choose to use it for evil." Trip wriggled his eyebrows and Boone just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"You are such an asshole," he laughed.

Gods, how he loved this man.

Trip grabbed his old T-shirt, used it to clean them both off before snatching Boone's shirt away from him and putting it on. "No one gave you permission to cover up those abs." Trip lifted up Boone's shirt—which was about two sizes too big on him—and patted his stomach. "How come I don't have a six pack? I work out."

"First of all, it takes more than running around in your Husky form to work out your abs."

Trip frowned at him. "Running on four legs is way easier than running on two."

"Clearly. Second of all, following said runs with half a liter of soda and a bag of macadamia nut cookies is not helping."

"Who told you about the cookies?" Trip narrowed his gaze at him.

Boone held his hands up. "I've been sworn to secrecy."

"I'm surrounded by traitors." Trip fell back onto the couch with an exaggerated sigh, making Boone smile. He wondered how many of his shirts Trip now had. Every time they were intimate, Trip ended up keeping Boone's shirt.

"What do you do with them?" Boone asked, his hand coming to rest on Trip's soft belly.

"With what? The cookies? I eat them, you silly goose."

Boone rolled his eyes. "The shirts."

"Oh." Trip cleared his throat, his fingers going to his neck before he realized he wasn't wearing his hoodie and hence there were no cords to fiddle with. "Promise not to laugh?"

The rising color in Trip's face was sweet and Boone held back his smile, nodding. "Promise."

"I wear them to sleep or, uh, when I have a meeting with the Council or my dad, I'll wear one under my clothes."

"Wow." Boone didn't know what to say. He had been expecting some smartass remark or a joke, he certainly hadn't expected this.

"I know, it's stupid. I'm a grown man and I'm walking around with a security blanket."

"They're your security blanket?"

Trip rolled onto his side, burying his face in the couch cushions. When he spoke, his voice was so muffled, Boone had to lean in to hear him. "I know, I know. I told you it was stupid. I'm sorry your mate is such a dork."

"We're not in high school, Trip, and even so—" He settled in beside Trip and ran his fingers over Trip's head. "Hey, look at me." With a grunt, Trip turned toward him, his whole face red. "I wouldn't want you any other way. The fact that you wear my shirts for comfort is the sweetest thing I've ever heard, and it just reminds me of how lucky I am to be in love with someone so amazing. So we're good, right?"

Trip nodded. They were both quiet for a moment when Boone made to get up and Trip stopped him. "Stay?"

"The night?" Trip had never asked him to spend the night before, not on his own anyway. There were plenty of times when he and Hunter had crashed over at Trip's, usually after days out with Robbie, but he'd never stayed over with just Trip.

"Yeah. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course." Boone lay back down, rolling carefully onto his side and pulling Trip against him.

"Boone?"
"Hm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything. For being a great guy."

"I'm not great. I just... love you." A lump formed in his throat and he smiled when he felt Trip squeeze him.

"I love you, too. But if you tell anyone what I told you tonight, I will kill you."

Boone chuckled and kissed Trip's temple. "I wouldn't dream of it." He slipped his hand into Trip's back pocket, frowning when they met hard plastic. He pulled out the object and stared at it. "Trip? Is there a zombie in your pocket?"

"No, just happy to see you."

"Ass." Boone laughed and tossed the little plastic figure onto the carpet before settling back down with Trip. "Robbie's..."

"Weird. I know," Trip muttered, snuggling closer to Boone. "But if the zombie apocalypse ever comes, he's the one who's gonna make sure our brains don't get eaten. You remember that. Now shut up and hold me... because I love you. You're my only reason to stay alive... if that's what I am."

"Oh, fuck no." Boone shoved Trip off the couch, ignoring his mate as he lay on the floor on his back in a fit of laughter. "You did not just fucking quote *Twilight* at me."

Trip jumped to his feet, his eyes narrowing at Boone. "I have a seven-yearold who's obsessed with vampires, werewolves, and zombies. What's your excuse, tough guy?"

"I have a thirty-six-year-old brother who's an idiot."

"Touché." Trip got that mischievous gleam in his eyes and Boone thrust a finger at him.

"Unless the next quote out of your mouth is something from *Mad Max* or *Back to the* Fucking *Future* I am going to kick your ass."

Trip rolled his shoulders and took a fighting stance. "Challenge accepted."

"I'm serious, Trip. Don't do it."

Trip opened his mouth and Boone took a step closer. "Trip, I'm warning you."

"I'm the king of the—"

Trip landed on his back with a painful *oof*, Boone straddling him. "You're in for a world of pain."

"Sexy pain?"

Boone shook his head. "Try again."

"You wouldn't hurt me," Trip said, running a finger down Boone's chest. "You love me too much."

"Hm, you're right." The light bulb went off and he grinned wickedly. The moment Trip's eyes widened, he knew his mate was onto him.

"No, not that. Please, anything but that. You can kick my ass. I won't even fight back."

Boone got off Trip and stepped back. Before Trip could protest he shifted, leaping out of Trip's grip just as he made a grab for him. With a pounce, he landed on the couch and rolled around. Trip fell to his knees, his arms raised to the heavens.

"Noooo! The hair, so much hair!"

Boone leapt off the couch and ran around the living room, rolling around wherever he could, leaving a trail of fluffy black hair behind.

"My vacuum won't be able to take it!" Trip's hands went to his head, looking around the room before his gaze landed on Boone. "Bad dog!"

With a series of short howls, Boone made for Trip's bedroom, Trip scrambling after him.

"Not my white sheets! I just washed those! Boone!"

By the time Trip caught up to him, Boone was laying serenely on Trip's bed wagging his tail. The sheets were a disaster zone, pillows were strewn on the floor, and Boone wasn't done. He jumped off the bed and dashed into Trip's bathroom, jumping in the tub. Trip stood at the door, his finger pointing menacingly at him.

"Don't you dare."

With his paw, Boone hit the cold water faucet. The shower turned on, Trip screamed, and Boone got soaked. Knowing Trip all too well, he waited for Trip to run over and turn off the water before he let loose. He shook himself from nose to tail, water and fur splattering everywhere.

Trip took in the state of the bathroom, looked down at his soaking wet clothes, then curled up on the floor in a fetal position. Boone shifted back, sitting in the middle of the bathtub in his damp jeans. He leaned over the edge, propping his chin over his crossed arms as he watched Trip rock himself back and forth.

[&]quot;Something you want to say?"

"I underestimated the power of the dark side."

Boone laughed and snatched a towel off the rack. He removed his socks and hung them up to dry along with the towel after drying himself, followed by his jeans. He climbed out of the tub and sat on the edge of it in his boxerbriefs.

"Lend me sweatpants and I'll help you clean up. Then we can fool around. Will that make it better?"

Trip sat up, his gaze on Boone's only piece of clothing. He nodded. "Yes please."

"Okay then." He stood, helped Trip to his feet, and planted a kiss on the tip of his nose. "You're the only canine shifter I know with an aversion to dog hair."

"It goes everywhere!" Trip exclaimed. "If I wanted to wear black and be covered in hair I'd just drape you around my neck, but I can't, because you're too heavy."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know! I'm too traumatized to quip coherently!"

"Okay, calm down." He kissed Trip on the lips and led him out of the bathroom. This was going to make for an interesting night.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Trip and Boone reluctantly left the warmth of the hairless couch—after taking care of a little morning stiffness—and showered together in the pristine bathroom, changed, had breakfast, and headed for Perin Park to wait for Brook, Deacon, Robbie, and Hunter. They had decided to get there before the others and enjoy the peacefully quiet park, walking along the bike trail.

St. Veles was surrounded by Vucari Woods on all sides, with plenty more forests and parks in between, and in the fall it was gorgeous, a sea of yellow, orange, and red. The sun was bright, but the temperature was in the fifties. Soon their Husky winter coats would grow in, and trying to keep Robbie indoors would become a battle of wills. The pup's feral instincts and love of playing in the snow made the long winter months interesting to say the least. Not that Trip didn't enjoy the snow, but they still had human lives to keep up with. Homework and chores waited for no pup.

As they walked, Trip did most of the talking, which was nothing new, but having Boone at his side felt right, it always had. After a nice walk, they sat on one of the park's many stone benches near Vucari Woods where they would all be burning some much needed energy by having a good run. Running was in their nature. It's what their kind were bred for. Now of course, it was just fun. Speaking of running...

"Well, look who it is. Dorothy and Toto."

"Oh my Gods," Trip squealed, "That is so adorable. Oh, you're so clever." He turned to Boone and slapped his arm playfully. "Isn't he just so clever, Toto."

And the start of a great day just went to shit.

Boone narrowed his eyes at Aiden and Summer Hagan. "No."

"Tell me brother, what brings you two out here to the Land of Oz on such a glorious morning, other than to gift us with your witty observations," Trip said brightly, a big grin stretched across his face. Sometimes he just wanted to

punch his brother square in his smug nose. It didn't help that he also looked just like their father.

"Jogging. And it was glorious until I saw you two." Aiden leaned into his wife with a sneer, his gaze on Boone. "How likely do you think it is he has fleas?"

"About as likely as your wife coming home without the stench of another male," Boone grunted.

Aiden took a step toward Boone, his teeth bare. "Fuck you, you half-breed piece of shit!"

Trip jumped to his feet, planting himself between his brother and Boone before the fur started flying. "You started it, Aiden. Is there a reason you came over, or are you just being your usual charming self?"

"Dad's having a barbecue tomorrow night to celebrate another ten years as clan leader. He expects you and your Devil Dogs to be there. Make sure they take a bath first. Not that you'll be able to remove the nauseating reek of filth."

"Watch it," Trip warned him.

"Maybe if you started thinking a little more with your head and not your dick, people might not think you were such a degenerate."

"I guarantee you, if those people got laid every once and a while, they might think a little differently. Or they could just mind their own damn business. That could work, too."

"Everything's a joke to you, isn't it?"

Trip looked his brother over. "No, but I'll tell you what is, that outfit, man. You really need to swap the whole Executive-Douchebag-out-for-a-run look. I mean, who wears cologne to go out jogging? I bet with all the fancy moisture-wicking fabric and Body Glide, the rain never even touches you."

"Much like your wife," Boone added with a grin.

"That's it you son-of-a—"

"Daddy! Uncle Boone!" Robbie came running, putting all the tension on ice as he launched himself into Trip's arms, and gave him a great big hug. "Oh

my Gods, Dad, you should have seen the way Deacon—"Robbie came to a halt and looked up over his small shoulder. His son had always been very perceptive, not to mention a good judge of character. The smile he had on his face now was the same one he used with every other adult Robbie didn't like but was forced to put up with. "Hi, Uncle Aiden, Aunt Summer. What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Robbie. We were jogging."

Robbie tilted his head to one side, sniffing as he looked Aiden over. "Oh. Why are you wearing cologne?"

Boone and Trip both started laughing. Robbie looked puzzled, but didn't comment as he was too busy watching Aiden muttering to himself. His brother stalked off with Summer following along, though not before she glared at Boone.

"Why was he mad?" Robbie asked, finally turning back to Trip who gave him a big squeeze for being the best kid ever.

"Because the sky is blue, baby. It's your uncle, he was born that way."

"A jerk?" Robbie asked thoughtfully.

"Now, Robbie, you know you shouldn't call him that, even if it is true."

"Is it because he can't have babies or because he can't be Alpha?"

Trip's expression fell and he sighed. "Either. Both. I don't know." To his surprise, Boone shook his head.

"No. If your roles had been reversed, you never would've become bitter, and you sure as hell wouldn't have taken it out on him."

Robbie nodded in agreement, his nose wrinkling. "He's always so mean to you."

"Aw, my two tough guys defending my honor." Trip put Robbie down, waving to Deacon who shifted as he ran over, the sun reflecting off his copperred fur. How Summer and Deacon could be related was beyond him. Deacon was awesome, whereas Summer was striving to steal Ashley's title as St. Veles' Biggest Bitch. Deacon stopped in front of Trip, his tail wagging before

he started hopping playfully around Robbie, nudging him with his nose, and making him giggle. "Where's your mom?"

"She stayed home. Said the house was a mess and unfit for neither human nor beast," Robbie recited. "She was going to make us clean up first."

"When did she give in?" Trip asked.

"After the time she made me wear that dorky Christmas sweater with the fluffy snowmen on it, but before the time she picked me up from school with her skirt stuck in her pantyhose."

"Ha! Last month she made it to the pantyhose. You're wearing her down, kid. Slap me five." He held his hand out and Robbie cheerfully slapped it. Trip was determined to beat Brook, and if he couldn't hold out, it meant Robbie would just have to try extra hard to wear her down. He was a scoundrel, there was no denying it. Deacon whined and nuzzled Trip's hand. "Hey, you're a married man. Stop hitting on me."

Deacon started mewling and howling at him and Trip held his hands up. "I can't understand you, you know that." Trip turned to Robbie and motioned over at their silly friend. "Go on before he pops a spleen or something. He knows you're the only one I can hear when I'm human, yet he always does this. We'll catch up."

Robbie laughed and with a loud *woot* ran off with Deacon bouncing along after him. Robbie shifted in midair, the little show off. His pup was nearly Deacon's size, and if it weren't for his Alpha scent, most of their kind would mistake him for a full grown Husky. And then of course there was Boone. The Devil Dogs were a special breed of Enforcer, half black and white Husky, and half wolf. Hunter's eyes matched his brother's, only where Boone's left eye was blue and his right was amber, Hunter's left eye was amber and his right was blue. When they stood together in their Husky form, they made one hell of an impressive pair, their look and size alone was enough to intimidate most anyone. They were also the only Enforcers who were bigger than Trip in his Husky form.

Trip turned to look at his grumpy mate who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. "What's the matter, tough guy? You're usually a lot better at not letting Aiden get under your skin."

"I know. I just kept thinking about how nice it was this morning, waking up next to you, and I guess I was still buzzing from that when he showed up. Then all I could think about was how assholes like him are what's keeping us from being a family."

Trip's heart slammed against his chest. Most of the time he didn't let himself dwell on what he didn't have, and instead concentrated on what he did have. It wasn't as if they were new to their clan's antiquated laws, but the thought of having his own little family with Boone and Robbie, it made his heart swell and break at the same time. What he wouldn't give...

He tried to think of a joke, something to take both their minds off a dream that would most likely never come true, but for the first time in his life, he couldn't. He slipped his hand discreetly over Boone's and gave it a squeeze, a shaky smile playing across his face. "I need you to keep it together for me, Boone. I'm not wearing one of your shirts right now so that means you gotta do the job instead."

Boone looked up at him, swallowed hard, and nodded. "Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. You've got nothing to be sorry for." Boone brushed his knee against Trip's, making him smile. When Boone cursed under his breath and moved away, Trip looked up and spotted the reason why. Kristoff Trevyn and his brother were heading straight for them.

Everyone was afraid of the blond man with the amber eyes, but not Trip. Kristoff was Alpha of the Trevyn Clan, a white wolf and one of the fiercest around, yet the only indication was in the man's penetrating gaze. For some strange reason, Trip never had a problem with him.

Kristoff was tall, slender, of Scandinavian descent, and very refined, like one of those models you saw in men's fashion magazines wearing a three hundred dollar scarf, a pair of tighty whities, and nothing else. Trip was hardly friends with the man but they were on pleasant terms. Merit, however, was a different story. Trip didn't trust the guy.

"Hello, Tristan." Kristoff bowed his head before doing the same with Boone. At least Kristoff acknowledged Boone, unlike Merit.

"Kristoff, hey. Merit, how's it going?"

Merit gave him a nod and remained stoically beside his brother.

"Could we have a moment in private? Merit will leave us as well."

"Okay." Trip turned to Boone and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Why don't you go off with Robbie and Deacon? I think that's your brother coming this way, so he can join you. I'll be there in a minute."

Boone nodded, giving Kristoff and Merit one last uneasy glance before getting up and running toward his brother, shifting along the way. He landed gracefully on his paws and turned to look at Trip before running off, Hunter shifting and darting off after him.

Kristoff watched Boone and Hunter disappear into Vucari Woods. "Exceptional specimens, I must admit. And those eyes... We don't get that with our kind." He turned back to Trip with a smile and motioned to the bench. "May I?"

"Of course." Trip shifted over while Merit wandered away, though Trip noticed he hadn't gone too far.

"What can I do for you, Kristoff?"

"Actually, it's more about what I can do for you. Ever since your clan and mine have become associated, I've been privy to its activities, and I have to say, I'm saddened by what I hear."

Trip hadn't been expecting that. It was true he often saw Kristoff and Merit in his father's company or sitting in with the Council, but that was expected when clans came together as the Hagan and Trevyn clans had, but he didn't expect Kristoff to care about what was actually going on with individual clan members, especially one who had been declared a disgrace.

"And what have you been hearing?"

"The way your own kin have shunned you. Granted, if anyone knows the importance of rules, it's me, but then I wholeheartedly believe in knowing which rules to invest in."

"I heard you run your pack a little—lot differently," Trip admitted. He had been shocked—as most of the other clan members had—when his father had

declared a pact with the Trevyn Clan, who were not only wolves—which his father believed were beneath them—but because Kristoff ran things far differently, leaving a good deal of the Trevyn family's old ways behind.

Kristoff nodded. "Yes. My clan has been around for a very long time, yet I believe if we are to evolve, we must embrace the world around us and move forward. It's one thing to honor your history and another to get stuck in the past."

"I don't understand, and no offense meant to you, but why would you want to associate with a clan like ours?"

"Despite your father's stubbornness, the Hagan Clan is an ancient one. Your name carries a great deal of weight behind it. You may not be wolves, but you're still an ancient breed and therefore have the fewest genetic differences from us. Your predatory instincts are solid, your endurance is astounding, and you're strong-willed. If Matthias wants to strengthen his pack by having our numbers behind him, I'm not opposed."

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

Kristoff chuckled. "I like you Tristan. You're bold. Which is why I'd like to offer you a place in my clan."

"What?" Trip blinked at him, wondering if he'd just heard correctly.

"Your father is a good Alpha, but I'm afraid he allows himself to be influenced by the Hagan Council far too often. It's been instilled in him and he isn't one for change. Denying you your title was a foolish decision on his part. I can offer you the freedom you deserve. My clan is far more accepting and I know they would welcome you."

"I don't know what to say. I'm flattered, really." Not to mention surprised and confused. Why the hell would an Alpha wolf as powerful as Kristoff want Trip in his pack?

"But?" Kristoff's smile was friendly as he gracefully crossed one leg over the other and placed his laced fingers over his knee. Trip couldn't think of a time when he'd seen Kristoff anything but calm and collected.

"I can't leave my family."

"Robbie would be well taken care of, and I'm certain Matthias wouldn't be opposed of you coming to visit him." Kristoff's gaze went to the woods before returning to Trip, his sharp gaze knowing. "Or is there perhaps someone else you don't want to leave behind?"

Trip wasn't about to lie, but he wasn't about to discuss his complicated relationship with his Enforcer either. As tempting as it was to be given a chance to start over somewhere where he didn't have to be looking over his shoulder every time he left the house, he would never leave Robbie or Boone. It was unthinkable. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"I understand. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Thanks. I genuinely mean that." He stood as Kristoff did and they shook hands.

"You better get going. Your Enforcer has been watching me since I sat down. He's very protective of you."

Trip followed Kristoff's gaze to the opening of Vucari Woods and saw Boone lying in the grass, his head on his paws as he watched Trip and Kristoff. It made Trip smile. "Yeah, he is." When Trip waved, Boone's head shot up and his tail started wagging. "I'll see you around, Kristoff." He ran off toward Boone, shifting mid-leap, and bounced excitedly around Boone when he reached him. He walked up to his mate and nuzzled him under his neck.

What did Kristoff want?

Do you really want to talk about that now? Trip asked, his instincts telling him it was time for running. He loved running. Well, in his Husky form he did. Running in his human form sucked. He lowered his head to his paws, stuck his butt in the air, and wagged his tail.

Really? You're going to try and distract me with your ass?

Is it working? Trip asked hopefully.

Boone let out a low growl before running off, Trip cheerfully running off after him. They sped through the woods, jumping over fallen trees, over shrubs and stumps, stopping only for a quick play. They ran for miles until they picked up Robbie and the others' scents and headed that way. The three

Huskies were by the shallow creek, pouncing, and playing. When Robbie saw Trip, he ran over, head-butting him and knocking him over.

Oof! You little furball. Trip rolled over onto his belly while Robbie jumped over him a few times, nipping at his ears. What have you been up to?

I chased a rabbit, but he got away because Uncle Hunter fell into the stream and scared him off, Robbie grumbled, taking hold of Trip's tail and tugging.

I didn't fall, Hunter griped, *Someone tripped me!* He looked over at Deacon sitting innocently nearby.

How many times do I have to say it was an accident? I'm sorry, okay. I saw something small and furry, so I chased it.

You know what else is small and furry? Hunter loomed over Deacon whose ears flattened back as he looked up at the much larger Husky.

Leave him alone, Hunt. Boone lay down next to Trip, unfazed when Robbie threw himself at him, pawing and nipping. Other than the occasional ear twitch, it was as if Boone didn't even feel the pup using him as a chew toy. At least until Robbie bit Boone's tail—hard. Boone yelped and got to his paws, turning and snapping at the pup. Robbie darted behind Trip with a whimper.

What have I told you about the tails? Trip said.

Don't bite, Robbie murmured, poking his head up from his hiding spot behind Trip. I'm sorry, Uncle Boone.

Boone returned to his position beside Trip. *It's okay. You have to be more careful, Robbie. Playing is welcome, but biting always leads to trouble.*

Yes, sir.

Now why don't you get Uncle Hunter to teach you how to fish?

Yay! Robbie bounded out from behind Trip, bouncing over to Hunter.

Trip gave Boone's muzzle a lick. You could have caught him. Someone else would have nipped him, just to show him.

I know, but he's still a pup. He'll learn. Besides, Robbie's a smart kid. You just have to show him you're serious and he gets it.

Trip got up and took hold of Boone's ear, tugging at it. Boone shook his head, got to his paws, and pounced on Trip. They played for a good while, each giving as good as they got. Trip loved playing with Boone, who was always aware of his size and strength around Trip. Then again, there wasn't a whole lot Trip didn't love about Boone, and when they were in their true forms, the pull toward Boone was always at its strongest.

Hey, fellas, it's getting late and I promised Brook I'd bring her lunch. Hunter, you mind dropping Robbie off in a couple of hours? Deacon headed toward the more condensed area of Vucari Woods, pausing for Hunter's reply.

Sure thing, Deacon. Say hi to Brook for us. Hunter went back to his fishing lesson with Robbie, who seemed more interested in pouncing around in the water than actually catching anything. They all said goodbye to Deacon, and Trip continued to hassle Boone.

They rolled around, each one trying to get the upper paw, when Trip rolled onto his back and stayed there. Boone stopped in his tracks. He stood over Trip, his head cocked to one side as he looked down at him. Trip pawed at Boone playfully, licking his muzzle when suddenly Boone snapped and latched onto Trip's shoulder.

Trip let out a yelp at the abrupt, sharp pain. To his astonishment, Boone didn't release him. There was something strange in the air around him, something different coming off Boone. Trip stayed very still, for the first time in his life scared of what might happen next. He slowly rolled over, noticing how Boone moved with him, not letting go. Carefully, Trip lowered himself onto the grass, unwilling to fight. Had it been anyone else, he would have retaliated, and his feral side couldn't understand why he wasn't doing exactly that. His human heart wouldn't allow it. He could never hurt Boone. Instead, he let his head rest on his paws, a low whine escaping him. Hunter and Robbie came running, slowing when Boone let out a low, feral growl.

Robbie, you stay right there, Trip said calmly, fully aware of his pup's anxious whimpers.

What's going on? Why is Uncle Boone hurting you? Robbie paced nervously, walking behind Hunter and back, peering out from behind the safety of the larger dog, his fur bristling.

Bo, what are you doing? Let go of him.

There was no reply from Boone, making the whole situation far more frightening.

Bo? Can you hear me? It's Hunter, your baby brother. You have to let go of Trip. You're hurting him. You don't want to hurt him. You love him, remember?

There was a low, soft series of whines and Trip realized it was coming from Boone. Suddenly he was released and Boone backed away, his ears flattened back against his head and his tail lowered between his legs. Without a word, Boone darted off.

Boone, wait! Trip tried to go off after him, but the moment he moved his shoulder, he yelped, the pain shooting through him. And then Boone was gone.

He'll be fine, Hunter said, walking up to Trip and nuzzling him gently. Come on, that wound's going to hurt like a son-of-a bitch when you change.

His wound wasn't the only thing hurting at the moment.

CHAPTER SIX

"Shit-mother-fucking-pissbunnies!"

Hunter shook his head. "Why do you have to bring the bunnies into this? What did they ever do to you?"

"Your brother nearly bit a chunk off my shoulder! It fucking hurts!"

"I get that."

"He ever sink his teeth into you?" Trip asked, trying not to press down on his wound too much. It had healed enough not to need stitches, but he couldn't understand why it hadn't healed completely. His blood should have sped up the process, but something wasn't right.

"No. I mean, he did once, by accident when we were pups, but his teeth weren't deadly at the time."

"You are no help at all."

"Sorry." Hunter went back to pacing the room, his mood growing somber.

"Have you heard from him?"

"No. I tried calling home, his cellphone, our mom, Deacon, and no one's seen him."

"I need to go find him. He's probably beating himself up over this." Trip sat writhing in the middle of a room that was several shades of blue and covered in an array of colorful sea creatures from fish to seahorses, swirling seaweed, and sparkling chests of treasure. The serene murals were doing nothing to ease his anxiety, but then again, he wasn't a toddler, only acting like one. He wasn't about to go to the hospital or his own doctor for this. If he did, it would be all over town by morning, and he had enough troubles on his hands. So he went to the only doctor he could trust, even if he was a little too old to be sitting here.

Brook walked into the room, took one look at his bloodied hand pressed over his bloodied shoulder, and peered at him warily. "Should I even ask what mess you've gotten yourself into this time?"

"I didn't do anything," Trip grumbled, feeling miserable. Boone had never been this aggressive with him during their roughhousing before.

"We were all playing, and suddenly Boone bit him," Hunter offered. Brook's eyes widened, and she quickly went through the cabinets and drawers pulling out supplies.

Carefully, Trip moved his hand, wincing at the sting. "And it hasn't healed. Not completely anyway. I don't get it."

"Of course it hasn't," Brook told him, walking over with disinfectant, sterilized pads, gauze, and bandages. She set the supplies on the examining table beside him and looked the wound over. "You're going to have permanent scarring."

Trip gaped at her. "But... how? I mean, why isn't it healing?" It was true that in his human form, the healing process was slower, but it should have been a lot farther along by now. Brook's inability to look him in the eye told him this wasn't typical. "You know something. What is it?"

"It's not good news. Or maybe it is, I don't know." Biting her bottom lip, Brook slipped her pediatrician's coat off one shoulder, followed by her shirt. Trip stared in disbelief. Hunter hovered beside them looking equally stunned. There was a very visible bite mark on her shoulder, not all that dissimilar to his, only slightly smaller.

"What the hell, Brook? Deacon bit you?"

Brook fixed her clothes and sighed. "Don't tell him you know. He's never been able to let go of the guilt, even if it's nowhere near as bad as yours. It happened during... well, when our bond was sealed. It was scary, for the both of us. We didn't really understand what was happening. Deacon has always had a good grip on his feral side, but that night, he just seemed to struggle with it. I think... I think he lost himself for a few seconds. That's when it happened. His fangs have never come out when he's in his human form. The day you boys found him, he'd been out for a walk trying to deal with it. I spoke to Cora that morning and she explained it to me."

"My mom?" Hunter looked puzzled. "What would she know about it?"

"She has experience."

"Experience?" Trip wondered what the hell was going on. He was still trying to get over the fact Deacon had bitten Brook.

"She and my dad had been true mates," Hunter explained, though he still looked confused.

Brook nodded. "It's such a rare occurrence, most of us don't know what to expect. Cora said to seal the bond, the more feral of the pair bites the other, but it always happens during mating, because that's when the least feral partner is at his or her most vulnerable. I don't know why Boone lost himself while you were in the woods, but I'm guessing whatever set him off, his human side never stood a chance. Don't forget, Boone's still a half-breed." She gave Hunter an apologetic smile. "No offense."

"None taken."

"Shit," Trip muttered, wincing when Brook started to clean his wound. "I um... I think I know what happened." Both Brook and Hunter exchanged looks before turning their attention back to him. "We were playing around, got a little, you know, sappy, and I sort of..." Gods, Brook was going to tear him a new one. She arched a perfectly shaped brow at him and he decided the hell with it. "I submitted."

"You submitted to my brother?" Hunter actually reeled back.

"Yeah, well, one thing led to another and I trusted him. You know I trust Boone like no one else. On top of that... Come on, you two know how I feel about him. I just let go. Some part of me wanted to show him what he meant to me, and before I knew it, I submitted, he responded, and then it happened."

Brook put a hand to her head. "What were you thinking? You're an Alpha, Trip. What you did, that's as vulnerable as you can get, even more than any sexual position. I'm sorry to say it, but you set Boone off. His instincts kicked in, and he was ready to give you what his feral side believed you were ready to take. You started the bond."

"I've really fucked up this time, haven't I?" Despite all the questions and worries running through his mind, he could only think about one thing: Boone.

His mate was out there somewhere feeling like shit for having hurt Trip when Trip had been the one to set things off. But how was he supposed to have known what it would lead to? It wasn't as though there was some manual for true mates. Brook hadn't been kidding when she said it was a rare occurrence. It was so rare, unless a clan kept up with their old world traditions like theirs did, most creatures didn't believe true mates existed. "What do you think's going to happen? I mean, I don't feel any different. What happened after you and Deacon bonded?"

Brook went back to disinfecting and bandaging his shoulder. "Like I said, it's different for every pair. With Deacon, we can communicate with each other no matter what form we're in."

"Ah." Trip finally understood. "No wonder he's always trying to talk to me in my human form when he's in his Husky form. He's used to doing it with you."

"Yeah, he's always forgetting," Brook said, smiling tenderly. "Plus there are lots of other little things. We can speed along each other's healing process. We can sense certain things in each other."

Hunter leaned against the examining table with a chuckle. "So no more stealing your snacks and trying to cover it up."

"Exactly." Brook's smile faded and she gave Trip a hug, mindful of his shoulder. "I'm sorry, hon, I don't know what comes next, but we all know what will happen if you seal your bond. You won't be able to hide it. With Deacon, we're both Huskies, but you're an Alpha and Boone's a half-breed. Who knows what the end results will be. There's no record of a situation like yours in the Hagan history books and if there ever was, they hid it well."

Trip nodded. He touched his bandaged shoulder, his heart beating rapidly in his chest. "Whatever happens, I'm not going to let them touch him."

Boone sat in the grass, a beer in his hand, and his back against the large pine tree, the shadows keeping him company. He wasn't one for big social gatherings, especially not one of Matthias's, but to blow off his Alpha's party would only result in getting him pushed up to the very top of Matthias's shitlist, and it was bad enough being on there to begin with. Boone had spent the whole night out in Vucari Woods in his Husky form. After running for miles to clear his mind, he had veered back, but he just couldn't face anyone. So he'd curled up in a mossy thicket and gone to sleep. Today, he'd waited until early evening when his brother had headed out for the barbecue, and used the opportunity to shower and dress. Now here he was, doing his best to avoid Trip, who didn't know he was here.

From this distance, he had a clear view of Trip standing beside Brook and Deacon, his sisters, Addison and Kyla, along with Kyla's husband Rhys, all of whom were in fits of laughter over whatever story Trip was sharing with them. By his gestures, it was the summer Matthias attempted to be one of the common folk by showing off his cannon-ball at the lake and ended up losing his swim trunks. He doubted Matthias would find the story so amusing.

Boone took another long gulp of his beer as he watched Trip, taking in every inch of him, wondering what it would feel like to walk up to him, take hold of the scuffed little silver pull of his hoodie and slowly unzip it. He would slide it off those strong shoulders, run his hands down the front of the faded band T-shirt he was undoubtedly wearing just to piss off his father, and slip his hands underneath, his fingernails scraping against soft skin before they followed the thin, soft trail of hair he knew would disappear into the waistband of Trip's jeans. The way they rode low on his hips, begging to be pulled down had Boone getting hard, and what's more, he didn't care. He had always wanted Trip, but right now, his body felt like it might burn itself up if it didn't have him. Ever since yesterday afternoon, his human side and his feral side were battling it out, and he just didn't know what it meant. Something told him he would soon find out.

Trip felt a fierce heat erupt within him, blazing a path from his toes up to his face. He was grateful everyone was focused on Deacon and hadn't noticed Trip shoving his hand into his hoodie's pocket while he attempted to hide the painful erection pushing against his jeans. What the hell? It felt like he was going to burn from the inside out. He smiled at something someone said, but

found he was having trouble concentrating. It was as if he could feel Boone on him, could feel his hands running down his chest, his warm breath against his ear as he tugged at the waistband of Trip's jeans. Boone's scent was making him dizzy, and the pull to his feral side was aggressive, demanding his attention. He tried to keep his head down, but his body was scorching, the canine inside him demanding he answer the call. This had never happened to him before, and it was pretty damn scary. The intense feelings had come out of the blue, slamming into him.

Finishing what was left of his beer, he cleared his throat. "I'm gonna go get me another. Anybody else want?" Thankfully no one was in need of a top-up, and he discreetly looked around as he headed for the gazebo where the iceboxes were situated. The turnout for his father's barbecue was extensive as there wasn't anyone in town who would insult their Alpha by not showing up. Most folks were gathered in little groups either around his father or mother, the rest around the pups or other family members, all distracted and enjoying themselves. Trip knew Boone was here, he just hadn't caught sight of him, nor had he caught his scent. If he was in his Husky form he'd be able to see into the dark corners better, but he could hardly shift right in the middle of the party for no reason at all.

"Tristan."

Trip turned, groaning inwardly. Now really wasn't the time. Kristoff smiled widely and stretched out his hand. With a smile, Trip took it. He shouldn't be rude. It wasn't Kristoff's fault Trip was—whatever it was that was happening to him.

"Lovely night, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah, it is actually. Having a good time?"

Kristoff gave him a playful smile. "I am now."

"Oh, um, okay."

Kristoff took a step closer and Trip took one back. Before he realized it, his back was against the gazebo. How was it the place wasn't littered with guests? It's where most of the booze was.

"Kind of running out of personal space here." Trip gave a shaky laugh, surprised when Kristoff put his arm to the side of Trip's head and leaned forward.

"I was thinking about our little chat yesterday, and I realized that I should have been more honest with you."

"Honest? About what?" He had no idea what the deal was with Kristoff, but it was making Trip a little uncomfortable.

"About my invitation. See, in truth, I don't merely want you to join my clan. I'd like you to join me."

"I... don't understand." Why was he feeling so dizzy all of a sudden?

Kristoff reached out, his hand going to Trip's waist, and making him jump. He tried to play things off, wagging a finger at him. "You keep that up and people are going to talk."

"Tristan, I want you to be my mate." Kristoff's hand slipped under the hem of Trip's hoodie, his fingers finding skin.

"What?" Before Trip could do anything, a dark shadow spread across them. Boone grabbed a fistful of Kristoff's shirt, and nearly lifted him off his feet.

"He already has a mate. *Me*," Boone growled, his eyes glowing and his canine teeth showing.

Trip's jaw nearly became unhinged, but he wasn't given a moment to find the appropriate expletive to express his shock before Boone released Kristoff and gave him a shove. It was bad enough his mate was challenging an Alpha, but one as powerful as Kristoff? What the hell had gotten into him?

Kristoff smoothed down his shirt appearing unfazed, but his glowing amber eyes betrayed his calm exterior. He gave a sniff, his eyes widening and going from Boone to Trip. Then the strangest thing happened. Kristoff's eyes returned to normal, and he bowed apologetically at them. "Forgive me, I wasn't aware. I wish you the best of luck, Tristan. I am, of course, at your service." With another bow, he turned and walked off.

"What the...?" Why? Who? Where was he again? Trip turned to look at Boone. "Gods almighty, what the hell was that?"

"That's me going out of my fucking mind," Boone snapped.

Trip had to admit, he was taken aback by his mate's aggressive behavior, but he wasn't given the time to argue. Boone grabbed his wrist and started dragging him toward the woods.

"Boone, we need to talk about this." Trip pulled at his arm, frustrated when he couldn't get out of Boone's steel grip. "For fuck's sake, can you please just tell me what the hell is going on?"

Boone came to a halt just inside the woods, and spun around to face him. His hand went to his chest, the anger still coming off him in waves. "I can't do it, Trip. I can't feel what I just felt again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I could feel him touching you. His fingers on you, on your skin, the heat he was giving off for you."

"What?" Trip gaped at him. Things had just gone from weird to what the fuck?

"That's right. I felt it, and it was agony. I don't want anyone touching you."

"What, so now I'm supposed to live like the boy in the plastic bubble?"

"Don't joke about this, Trip, not this."

"It's my defense mechanism and you know it. I'm freaking out here, Boone. Yesterday I opened Pandora's Box and I don't know what the fuck is going to come out of it. I'm scared, so I need you to be my mate, and my best friend, and the one who can tell me that everything's going to be okay, just like you always have, because I need that right now. My brother, Ashley, all those other assholes, I can deal with, but this," he motioned between them, "I don't know which way is up anymore, Boone. Please, we gotta figure this out together."

Boone clenched his jaw, and he stood there for a moment. He seemed to be

thinking about something. Then he took a step back, his eyes brighter than Trip had ever seen them. "Follow me."

Before Trip could reply, Boone shifted and was off, disappearing into the woods. "Shit." Without giving it anymore thought, he shifted and followed, his canine vision making it far easier for him to see through the darkened woods. He ran as fast as his paws could carry him, the only light around him coming from the rays of moonlight filtering through the pine trees. Vucari Woods always looked so beautiful during the day, but at night, it was pretty creepy, and all those stories grown-ups told their pups about the Likho living in the darkest parts of the woods waiting to snatch them up to take them to their caves at the Drekavac Falls seemed all too plausible. His fur was bristling, and every snapping twig, every flutter of wings, or rustling of leaves his ears caught the sound of, started playing tricks with his mind. After all, at one time humans had believed his kind hadn't existed. Who was to say the Likho weren't real? He really needed to watch less TV.

Finally he caught up with Boone who had changed and was pacing in a moonlit clearing surrounded by trees and shrubs. Trip shifted, ready to ask his mate what was going on, but it was clear Trip was going to have to wait until Boone got whatever it was that had him so worked up off his chest.

"Why did you do it?"

Not what he was expecting. "Why did I do what?"

"You submitted, to *me*. I just... something snapped. When I got hold of you, I was so afraid to let you go. This fear of losing you took over and I couldn't let go. I knew I was hurting you, somewhere deep inside, but my body just wasn't listening. All my body wanted was to claim you and if Hunter hadn't gotten through to me... I don't know what I would have done."

Trip could see the torment Boone was in and he slowly made his way over, doing his best not to make any sudden movements. He had no idea how much control Boone had over his feral side at the moment. He only knew he was responsible for it.

"I'm sorry I've put you in this position, but I'm not sorry I submitted."

Boone's head snapped up and he marched up to Trip, shoving him up against a large tree. "Why?"

"What do you mean why? You seriously have to ask that? Because I love you, you big idiot. I love you, I saw a chance to prove it, and I took it. I know I fucked things up and our DNA or whatever the hell is going screwy, but I'm not sorry I submitted to you. Fuck being an Alpha and fuck the clan's laws. You're more than just my Enforcer, and if you try and tell me you didn't know that, so help me I will kick your ass, or at least try."

"Trip, stop talking," Boone said quietly.

"I mean, I know we don't get to do as much as we want to do with each other, but that doesn't mean I love you any less. It's not just about the sex."

"Trip," Boone grumbled.

"If anything, it just—"

Boone cut off Trip's rambling with his mouth, and the moment their lips touched, a spark of heat shot through Trip like a firecracker going off. He threw his arms around Boone's neck, eagerly returning the fervent kiss. Boone grabbed him by the waist, lifting him, and wrapping Trip's legs around him. Trip didn't bother to question what would come next. He was too far gone. So when Boone got on his knees and lowered Trip onto his back on the ground, Trip didn't protest. His senses were ablaze, every one of them filled with the taste, sight, scent, and feel of Boone. He felt his shoes come off then the cool breeze as it hit his bare legs.

"Take off your clothes," Trip demanded, unzipping Boone's jacket and pushing it off his shoulders. He grabbed the hem of Boone's long-sleeve shirt, pulling it off and dropping to the side, followed by his own shirt. Next thing he knew, they were both completely naked, the evening chill barely cooling their heated skin, and Trip was gasping for breath, his back arching up off the ground as Boone's slick finger entered him. A second finger soon joined the first and Trip couldn't help but writhe beneath Boone in his desperation for more. His hands slid up Boone's thighs, around to his ass, his fingers digging into his flesh. "Fuck me, Boone. Right now." He had waited so long for this, he just couldn't wait anymore. He heard a cap open and he chuckled. "I see you've come prepared."

Boone gave him a sheepish grin. "I had a feeling." He sat back on his heels to apply the lube, purposefully stroking himself from root to tip ever so

slowly, and Trip was all but ready to come from just watching him. Gods his mate was sexy, and damn frustrating.

"Dick," Trip grumbled, deciding two could play that game. Of course when Trip played, he went all out. He drew his knees up, started stroking himself with one hand, while inserting his finger into himself with the other. The expression on Boone's face was a cross between predatory and helpless. He grabbed Trip's wrist, and moved his hand away, lining himself up as he leaned over him, his lips covering Trip's. Slowly he pushed himself into Trip, inch by agonizing inch. Trip groaned and wrapped his legs around Boone, his fingers sinking into Boone's shoulders. At first Boone moved slowly, a tender rocking motion, but it was driving Trip out of his mind. He grabbed Boone's face and growled at him.

"Now's not the time for romance, tough guy. I've been fantasizing about this since I was fifteen so I suggest you fuck me like you mean it."

Boone arched an eyebrow at him. "No pressure then." He snapped his hips forward and Trip thought he saw stars. Well, actually he could see the stars seeing as how he was lying on his back in the middle of the great outdoors. He closed his eyes for a moment, his body clenched around Boone who wrapped one arm around his shoulders while the other grabbed a fistful of his hair. His thrusts came hard and deep, and Trip knew he wasn't going to last long, especially when Boone hit his prostate.

"Fuck!" Trip grabbed Boone's face, kissing him hard and sloppy. He could feel every muscle in his body tensing, his toes curling as he jerked himself off. He cried out against Boone's lips as white burst in front of his vision, and then a sharp cry tore from his throat as he felt Boone's canine teeth sink into his other shoulder the same moment Boone came inside him. Everything after that was an indiscernible haze of pain, pleasure, and sedation before everything went black.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Sweetheart, wake up."

Trip groaned and rolled over, a shiver going through him. He was cold. Why was it cold? He blinked open his eyes and saw it was dark. It was dark and he was in the woods. He looked down at himself. And naked. "Boone?"

"Oh, thank Gods." Boone wrapped Trip in his arms as they lay in the grass. "I thought you fell asleep, but then when I tried to wake you up, you wouldn't. You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm okay," Trip looked up at Boone's worried face and smiled. "That was... amazing."

Boone chuckled and kissed him tenderly before pulling back. "I'm glad you approve." A mischievous gleam came into his eyes and Trip peered at him warily.

"What?"

"So um... my ass is museum worthy, huh?"

Trip buried his face against Boone's chest, feeling it rumble with his chuckle. "Oh my Gods, I'm going to kill him!" Trip pulled back, looking up at him. "He's adopted right? You can tell me. I swear, I won't say a word."

"Sorry." Boone's smile faded and he sat up suddenly, pulling Trip with him.

"What is it?"

"I bit you."

"Oh yeah, you did." Trip looked down at his other shoulder and frowned. There was nothing there. "Didn't you? I'm pretty sure I wasn't imaging nearly losing my shit from the pain."

Boone tenderly ran his fingers over Trip's shoulder where the wound should have been. "What the hell? I mean, not that I was hoping I'd left another scar but... it's like it never happened."

Trip couldn't understand it. He took the bandage off his right shoulder, surprised when there was only the clean faint scar of Boone's teeth from the original bite. It wasn't red or swollen or anything. "Okay, so the weirdness clearly isn't over."

"Do you think it has to do with what we just did?" Boone asked worriedly, standing and helping Trip to his feet.

"Who the hell knows? Which is another thing I don't get." He swiped his clothes off the floor and started getting dressed. "How come no one knows anything about what happens when an Alpha and an Enforcer bond? It has to have happened at some point. We can't be the only Alpha/Enforcer true mates in the history of our clan."

"You think someone's trying to hide something?" Boone asked, following Trip's lead and getting dressed.

"Would it really surprise you if the Council was keeping secrets?"

"I'd be more surprised if I found out they weren't."

"Exactly." Trip walked over to Boone and wrapped his arms around his waist, loving his scent. "Mm, you smell like sex and sweat." He planted a kiss on Boone's jaw and took hold of his hand. "Come home with me?"

"Yeah?" The boyish lopsided grin on Boone's face was adorable and Trip couldn't wait to get him home.

"Robbie's decided to stay with Brook and Deacon until mid-week, so until then, I am going to have sex with you in unimaginable, filthy ways. I have this insatiable urge to ride you." Boone's eyes widened and Trip couldn't hold back his laughter. "Come on, tough guy."

"You know, you're dad's going to have a major shit-fit we left the party."

"I think when he sees us, the last thing he's going to be thinking about is the party," Trip replied somberly. He told Boone what he'd learned from Brook about the bonding and the changes it brought her and Deacon. "Do you think your changes will be noticeable?"

"Well, nothing's happened yet, so maybe it's not as big a deal as we thought?" Trip sure hoped so. It wasn't like they were prone to the same

illnesses or ailments as humans. Either way, they would eventually have to leave Trip's house and face the clan. Whatever happened, they would have to be ready, because Trip wasn't about to give up Boone.

That night, Trip did his best to live out his sexual fantasies, and Boone was more than happy to give Trip full control. They'd had sex until they were so exhausted that every muscle was screaming in protest, and Trip was unable to do anything but lay there on top of Boone, sweaty and trying to catch his breath. As far as he was concerned, they were making up for lost time. He fell asleep sprawled over Boone sometime before dawn. When he woke, he expected soreness and achiness. Not only did he feel none of those things, he felt amazing.

"Morning." Trip rolled over, his smile fading when Boone's eyes widened. "What? Morning breath?"

Boone shook his head and swallowed hard. "I think... I think those changes are going to be a little more noticeable than we thought."

Trip scrambled over Boone, hitting the floor with a painful *thud* but too freaked out to care. He got to his feet and ran to the bathroom, hitting the sink and gasping when he saw himself in the mirror.

"Holy fuck!"

What the hell had happened to him? He was nearly as big as Boone, less wide perhaps, but taller, his muscles more defined, his hair was darker, and his eyes... There was bright amber around his pupils, as if the color had burst out from the center, spreading into the blue. He'd never seen anything like it. He took a step back, looking himself over. His body looked like he had just spent the last year doing intensive training.

What. The. Holy. Living. Fuck.

The moment Boone neared the bathroom, Trip knew. He didn't just catch his mate's scent, he could *feel* Boone approaching. He turned, watching Boone stop short at the door, his jaw dropping as he looked him over.

"Say something," Trip pleaded.

"Uh..."

"I was expecting more syllables."

"You... you look hot."

Trip opened his mouth then closed it. He crossed his arms over his new chest. "So what, I wasn't hot before?"

"Don't be an ass, of course you were. This is just... wow." Boone walked over, pressing his finger into Trip's bicep.

"I would be insulted if you weren't talking about how fucking amazing I look." He turned back to the mirror, unable to believe it. "They're definitely going to notice."

"How do you feel?"

"Stronger."

"Want to put it to the test?" Boone asked, wriggling his brows.

They quickly slipped into sweatpants before running out into the backyard. Boone positioned himself and motioned for Trip to advance. "Take me down, tough guy."

"I don't know about this, Boone."

"Hunter told me about the picture of me you carry in your wallet."

"That bastard!" Trip let out a growl and made a run for Boone, ramming into him, and knocking him off his feet before grabbing him around the waist and slamming him into the grass. It wasn't until it was over that he realized what he'd done.

"Oh my Gods, Boone, are you okay? I'm so sorry." He took hold of Boone's arm and helped him sit up.

"Holy shit," Boone wheezed, his hand going to his chest.

"You okay?"

Boone nodded. "Just give me a moment to catch my breath."

Trip dropped down onto the grass beside him, and looked down at his hands wondering why their bond would change him like this. What was the purpose? Not that he was complaining, but there had to be a reason.

"Trip, not even Hunter can do that to me, and he's had practice." Boone leaned over and took hold of Trip's chin, turning his face toward him. "Whatever the hell happened, you're stronger than I am."

Trip wracked his brain trying to understand, but he couldn't. "We need to go see your mom." He got to his feet and pulled Boone up, still unaccustomed to how close in height they were now.

"My mom?"

"Yeah, if she knew about the true mate bond, she might know more." He headed for the house with Boone on his tail.

Boone nodded his agreement. "I should have told her you were my mate years ago."

"You were trying to protect us, and the less your mom knew the better. You know we can't trust the Council." He went to his closet and pulled out one of his T-shirts, slipping it on, or at least attempting to. "Oh, come on, man." He pouted and turned to Boone who tried his best not to laugh. "My clothes don't fit."

"Would it help if I said you look sexy?"

"Would it help if I said you're buying me a new wardrobe?"

Boone stared at him. "Why me?"

"Because your stupid DNA did this to me."

"Well I'm sorry my DNA made you a fucking sex God."

"You're forgiven." He turned back to his closet and pulled out one of Boone's black long-sleeve shirts which fit perfectly. "Looks like you won't have to buy me a new wardrobe after all," Trip declared, turning to Boone. "I'll just wear yours."

Boone rolled his eyes and finished getting dressed. They snuck out of the house through the back and shifted. Trip started for the woods in the back when he noticed Boone wasn't with him. When he looked back, he found Boone was still by the back porch. He ran over wondering what the hell was wrong now.

You gonna stand there all day? Trip asked.

Boone's ear flattened and he slowly approached Trip, his head slightly lowered. Wait, Boone's head wasn't lowered. Shit, Trip was looking *down* at him. Trip ran over to the glass doors, stunned by his reflection. Next to him, Boone looked like just a regular sized Husky. Opening his mouth, Trip saw his teeth were bigger, too, especially his fangs. It seemed like it wasn't just his human form that had changed.

We need to go see your mom. Right now. He turned and sped into the woods behind the house which would connect to the woodlands behind Cora's house. As he ran, he could feel how much faster he was. Not only could he keep up with Boone, he could actually outrun him. In minutes they were behind Cora's house and they quickly shifted back before sneaking into the backyard. They couldn't afford to let anyone see them. Looking around, Boone carefully opened the back porch door and slipped inside, Trip following him.

"Mom?" Boone called out, closing the glass door behind them.

"There you are, sweetheart. Your brother's been looking for you. You know how worried he—" Cora stepped into the kitchen, gasping when she saw Trip.

"What you told Brook wasn't even the half of it, was it?" Trip said, stunned when he saw the tears well in Cora's eyes as she slowly took a seat at the kitchen counter.

"Oh, boys. I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

Boone rushed to her side, taking her hand in his. "Mom? What is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me Trip was your true mate?" Cora's hand went to Boone's cheek. "I knew you loved him, I just... I had no idea."

Trip watched Boone with his mother, unable to hold back his smile despite their situation. It was sweet to watch his rough around the edges mate and the loving way he looked after his mom. In reality, Boone and Hunter were very protective of Cora. They were good sons, and everyone in the clan knew not to mess with her. Not if they didn't want Boone and Hunter pounding at their

doors. Boone had always told Trip he could deal with any hostility that came his way, but he wouldn't put up with it where his mom was concerned.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. We were afraid the council would find out."

Cora's head shot up and she looked worriedly at him. "Do they know?"

"Not yet. We came straight over. Mom, what's happening to Trip? The Council always claimed Enforcers would taint pure-bloods if we mated. Is that... is that what's happened?"

Cora nodded. "Yes. Your blood has infected him." When Trip dropped down into the chair to her side, Cora quickly waved her hands. "No, you don't understand. Usually if a half-breed mates with a pure-blood, the pure-blood does get infected, but nothing really happens other than the pure-blood picks up a few traits from his mate. But... that's not why the Hagan Clan forbids the mating. It's because if a true mate pair exists where one is half-breed, when the bond is sealed, the pure-blood will not only inherit the traits of his or her mate, the pure-blood will become stronger than the Alpha himself."

"Wait, are you saying, I'm now stronger than my father?" Trip sat, confused, as Cora cupped his face in her hands, her gaze intense.

"Trip, you're stronger than Kristoff."

The air seemed to have been sucked out of the room, and pretty soon, Boone ended up sitting down as well. Trip was stronger than Kristoff? "But how can that be? He's a wolf shifter."

"Sweetheart, the changes your body has undergone have been in order to lead you to your true purpose. We're an ancient breed, Trip. There's a lot the Hagan Council has kept from us. Mother Earth does not make mistakes in her true-mate pairings. Brook was born to nurture, while Deacon was born to inspire. You were born to lead, and Boone was born to protect. Individually you are strong, but together, you are a great force."

The more Trip thought about it, the more everything started to make sense. "That must have been why Kristoff apologized, why he offered his services. He knew somehow. He must have sensed the bonding had started and knew what it would mean. Why else wouldn't he respond to your challenge,

Boone?" He turned back to Cora, taking her hand in his. "So the Enforcer Law isn't about keeping our blood pure at all, is it? It's to prevent anyone from challenging the Hagan Alpha." That's all it had ever been about. "I'm guessing this happened at some point, or there wouldn't be a law to begin with."

Cora nodded. "In the time of our ancestors it happened more often than it does now, but our numbers were greater then. When it happened, the Hagan family would come together and kill both the pure-blood and the half-breed. It was kept secret and out of all scriptures. Soon, the law was passed. The fact you're of Alpha blood only makes you stronger."

"How do you know all this?" Boone asked, and Trip could tell his mate was as shocked as he was.

"Your father. The knowledge was passed down through his family in order to protect us. It had happened to one of his Enforcer ancestors." She looked up at Boone with a sad smile, her hand going to his cheek. "It's why the Council never attempted to run you and your brother out of the clan for being gay. They knew I wouldn't hesitate to reveal their secret."

So that was what it was like to have a parent protect and sacrifice for you. Trip had never had that, though he wouldn't hesitate in doing the same for his son. Everything he and Brook had learned about good parenting, they had learned either on their own, together, or from Cora. He couldn't imagine his mother ever protecting him like that. Boone hugged Cora tight when the telephone rang, making the three of them jump.

Cora excused herself to answer it, and Trip mulled over everything he had just learned. All this time he had believed that stupid law had been in place out of arrogance, because his father and the Hagan Alphas before him believed themselves to be so much better than everyone else. Instead, it was to ensure their positions, no matter how slim the chances. The more he thought about it, the angrier he found himself growing.

"Trip, sweetheart..." Boone ran his fingers softly down Trip's cheek, snapping him out of it.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Your eyes... they were doing this freaky glowing blue thing."

"Our eyes always get brighter when our feral side speaks up."

"Yeah, but not like this. Yours just kinda... disappeared."

"They what now?"

"Your eyes, they kind just glowed this whitish blue and I couldn't see your pupils or irises or anything."

Trip covered his face with his hands and groaned. "Gods, what's happening to me?" He felt Boone come to stand beside him. He drew Trip into his arms and Trip melted against him, allowing Boone to comfort as he always did. He hummed and snuggled closer. "You're so warm." Boone chuckled, squeezing him tight and making him feel a hundred times better. Whatever happened, he knew with Boone at his side, everything would be all right.

"Trip?"

They turned to Cora who was looking terribly anxious. "Your father has called a council meeting. He expects us all to be there."

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Trip walked into the small four-columned courthouse, he did so with his head held high and his hand proudly in Boone's. He didn't know what this meeting was about, only that his father was surely going to work in his disappointment regarding Trip and Boone's disappearance from the party. His father was going to be in for one hell of a surprise.

Trip headed toward the Hagan Council's chamber, a monstrosity of white marble that resembled an Ancient Greek temple three sizes bigger than it needed to be but that his father loved—no doubt because it meant he could hear himself speak in surround-sound.

Outside the room, Brook sat with Deacon and Robbie, and the moment they approached, Deacon jumped to his feet in front of Brook and Robbie with a fierce growl. He sniffed the air and froze. "Trip? Is that you?"

Trip chuckled as he reached them. "Yeah, it's me."

"Daddy?" Robbie looked up at him, his little face uncertain. His gaze went from Trip to Boone and back. Trip knelt down before him, hoping his new look didn't change things between him and his son. In truth, he hadn't given it much thought until now. Maybe it was because deep down, he was too afraid his pup would reject him. The thought terrified him like nothing else. Hell, he'd shaved his head once after getting gum stuck in his hair and Robbie refused to talk to him for a week. Robbie, much like his dad, wasn't very good with change, and well, his appearance alone right now was more change than they'd had since the bubblegum fiasco of 2010.

"Hi, baby, it's me. Still your goofy, embarrassing dad. You're not scared are you?"

Robbie bit his bottom lip and reached out to touch Trip's face, his hand moving up to Trip's hair, ruffling it a little as he pulled away. With a finger, he poked Trip's arm. "You got muscles."

"Yeah, I kinda do."

"It's weird"

"Yeah, it kind of is." Trip waited for Robbie to make the first move. Robbie looked into his eyes, staring so long Trip was about to go blue in the face from holding his breath. Then Robbie threw his arms around Trip's neck, squeezing fiercely. Gods, he felt like such a blubbering baby. Tears welled in his eyes and he shut them tight as he hugged his son. How could he have ever doubted his amazing pup?

"I love you so much, kiddo."

"I love you too, Dad." Robbie pulled away with a big smile and petted his head, his eyes going wide suddenly. "You're as big as Boone now, so you can carry me on your shoulders!"

Trip chuckled. "You bet."

Robbie took Trip's hand in his, then reached out and took Boone's, beaming up at him. "Hi, Boone."

Boone's eyebrows shot up, and Trip knew it was due to the fact that for the first time, there was no "uncle" attached to his name.

"Hey, little man."

"You're going to live with us now, right? Because you and Daddy are bonded, like Mommy and Deacon."

"Um..." Boone looked over at Trip who couldn't help but puff up a little at his two beautiful boys.

"Daddy's going to try his damn hardest to make that so, champ." Trip gave Boone a wink, and together they walked down the wine-red carpet inside the council chambers, stopping in front of the Hagan Council, each member sitting in their respective seats on the dais. Matthias sat in the center with Trip's mother, Vita. To the left were the Hagans, and the Holts—Trip's mother's family—were on the right. The rest of the families were situated either to his immediate left, or to their right in long jury boxes. The Hagan Council thrived on public displays of power using this chamber from everything to making arrests to organizing the town's Christmas play. Brook kissed Trip's cheek, wished them luck, and took hold of Robbie who reluctantly went with his mom.

"Well look who decided to grace us with his presence," Ward Hagan sneered. It was clear where Trip's father got his charm from. Trip didn't respond, though he'd noticed his mother had already caught onto something. Trip loved his mom. She had always been good to him, as good as could be with a husband like Matthias around, but as the Alpha's wife, her duty to her husband and her clan took precedence over everything else, so she had turned her back on him as well, though from that day, she barely ever smiled. The thought saddened him.

"I hope you're here to apologize for leaving the party." Matthias sniffed the air and shot to his feet. He stared at Trip, his expression horrified. "No. It can't be." The room fell silent as Matthias came down from the stage, marched up to Trip, grabbed a hold of his face, and looked into his eyes. His head shot over to Boone before he quickly stepped back, shaking his head.

"It's not possible. How dare you keep this a secret from me!" He backhanded Trip across the cheek, but Trip was too busy holding Boone back to worry about the sting left behind or what his father had just done.

"Boone, please, easy." He motioned for Hunter, relieved when the younger brother darted over. Initially Hunter had done a double take when he saw Trip, then he just grinned knowingly and took hold of his brother's arm.

"Easy, big brother. We got pups in the room."

Reluctantly, Boone settled down, though his steely gaze remained on Matthias, who sneered at him. "You and your mongrel of a brother are fired. Your job was to keep an eye on my son, not sleep with him."

"Wow." Trip couldn't believe the nerve of the man. "You're unbelievable."

"Don't take that tone with me, you little heathen. How long have you known he was your true mate?"

"Since I was fifteen. Do you realize the hell you've put us through because of your stupid law? If we hadn't started the bonding by accident, we might have never known. We'd probably still be living in fear for who knew how long. I've loved him for twenty years!"

"You shouldn't love him at all! Isn't it enough we allowed you to stay, turning the other cheek at what you are? Now you're setting out to break every tradition that has made this clan great?"

"Great?" Trip let out a humorless laugh. "Our great clan is built on lies and deception, on fear and control."

"It was your duty to inform us the moment you knew!"

"So you could kill him? Because that's how the Hagan Council has always dealt with their little true mate problem isn't it, Dad? Kill off anyone whose true mate is an Enforcer. Unless they're a Hagan Alpha of course, then you just kill the Enforcer to keep your dirty little secret, but not before you've taken their strength, of course."

"Matthias?" Trip's mother stood, looking stunned. "What's he talking about?"

"Didn't you know, Mom? That's what the Enforcer Law is really about. Any pure-blood whose true mate is an Enforcer, if bonded, will become more powerful than the Alpha. Our family couldn't have some newly infected nobody become head of the clan, so they killed them. If they'd found out about Boone before the bond took place, they would have killed him and covered it up."

Isa Hagan shot to her feet, her bony finger jutting out at Trip. "Matthias, this is too much. Have you no control over that beastly spawn of yours?"

"Thanks, Great Grandma. Shouldn't you be off knitting booties somewhere? By the way, no one says 'spawn' of anything anymore, unless it's attached to Satan, even then it's old hat. But then again, if anyone knows old, I guess it'd be you." Trip delighted in the way her face went red and she turned, sputtering to her husband, who of course didn't hesitate in giving his two cents or tuppence, or whatever the hell currency was around in his day.

"Your faggot son is making a mockery of this clan, Matthias! He has no respect for his elders."

"Yeah, because you're all about respect," Trip replied heatedly. "You've respected the hell out me for years. Oh, wait no you haven't. In fact, you've

gone out of your way to tell everyone how unfit I am to breathe the same air as them."

Briana Holt jumped on the bandwagon and Trip did his best to suppress his groan. "He should have been dealt with in the same manner as all the others before him. He should have been banished, and if he refused to leave, killed!"

"Mother!" Vita gasped. "Whatever your opinion, you're talking about my son."

"It's not our fault you gave birth to an abomination! We should have rid ourselves of him long ago."

"No!" Robbie ran up to Trip, throwing his arms around Trip's leg and holding on for dear life. "I won't let you hurt my dad!"

Trip's hand went to his pup's head, soothing him. "Robbie, it's okay, buddy. Why don't you go with Mom?"

"No. They want to hurt you and Boone just because you're different." Robbie glared at his grandfather, his small hands balled into fists at his sides. "Boone's my friend. He's always protected us, and Hunter, too. They love us and they're good guys. They're family."

Matthias gave Robbie a placating smile, yet his tone was nothing but patronizing. "Robbie, you're a child. One day you'll understand."

"I might be a little kid, but I understand the difference between right and wrong, and you're wrong. You're selfish and pigheaded and mean. You should want your clan to be happy, instead you do everything to make them miserable just because you can. You're nothing but big bullies!"

Matthias bared his teeth, taking a step toward Robbie. "And you are an impertinent little whelp who clearly needs a good thrashing."

Trip's growl stopped him in his tracks. "Don't you even think about laying a hand on my son."

"You bare your teeth at me? Make threats? Do you know who you're dealing with?"

"I know exactly who I'm dealing with, and you might be able to hide from the others, but you can't hide from me. Not anymore. I can smell your fear." Matthias reeled back, nearly tripping over himself. His father had always been a daunting man, towering over him, using his strength and power to intimidate him. Everything Trip had ever done in his life had been a disappointment, and Matthias made certain to flaunt his failings in front of the whole town at every opportunity. The poster boy for disgrace, he'd been called. For a time, Trip had even started to believe it, but thanks to Robbie, Brook, Deacon, Boone, and Hunter, Trip learned he was none of the things his father proclaimed him to be. Trip might not be perfect, but he was a good man, a good father, and a good friend. He could hardly say the same about Matthias.

"My whole life, you've looked down on me, simply for not living up to your expectations, yet you and your council have murdered in the name of power. Who's the real depraved one here?" He felt his father's Enforcers moving closer and Trip shook his head. "Call them off. We both know they don't stand a chance against me and the Devil Dogs."

"I'm willing to make the sacrifice," Matthias spat out.

"Oh, I bet you are. However, I doubt some of the others feel the same." Trip turned to look at Boone and Hunter's younger sister huddled together with her pups, their worried gazes on Duncan who stood with his brother, Cy, his father, Logan, and his sister, Ashley. "The council is prepared to leave your pups without a father, just to teach me a lesson. Let me tell you right now, Duncan won't win. I don't want him hurt, but if he attacks me or my family, I don't have a choice."

Ivy looked from her brothers to her husband and shook her head. "Duncan, don't. Please." Her twin pups whined and whimpered, clutching their mother.

Trip hated putting Duncan in such a position, but he had to be honest with Ivy. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but he would protect his loved ones. Trip knew his father too well, knew how he would have no problem giving his Enforcers the order to attack. Trip had been in this fight before. The first time had been to keep the council from taking Robbie away from him, and Trip had fought fiercely beside the Devil Dogs, but in the end, although they each collected their fair share of battle wounds, the fact remained that they had all managed to walk away. He couldn't make that promise now.

To his surprise, his little sister ran out and threw herself into Cy's arms. "You can't!"

"Addison?" Trip looked from her to Cy, realization dawning on him. "Oh, baby. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry, Trip." His blue eyed sister held onto Cy, whose arms wrapped around her protectively. He could see the challenge in Cy's amber eyes, but Trip gave the younger Husky a tender smile. Cy was a good guy. It wasn't his fault he was related to Ashley or that their father was as big an asshole as Matthias.

"Addison, go back to your seat," Matthias demanded. "This is not your concern."

"Not my concern?" Addison rounded on their father. "You're trying to force me to marry someone I'm not in love with for what? To keep your ego intact? I love Cy, and I love my big brother. I won't let you make them fight."

"He's a soldier. His life belongs to the clan," Matthias replied through his teeth.

Ivy came out from behind the juror's box, her glare on Matthias. "My husband may protect you and this clan, Matthias, but he isn't your personal chew toy. It's not bad enough you've always treated my brothers like dirt under your shoes, but now you want to send my husband to his death to prove your stupid point?"

Logan turned to his eldest son. "Duncan, control your wife before I do."

"You lay a hand on her and you'll have me to deal with," Duncan growled. "I've kept my mouth shut long enough. I've stood by while you tried to force Ashley on Hunter. He's gay, yet neither of you care. Like he's going to change just because you want him to. It's embarrassing, not to mention ignorant."

"All right, that's enough!" Matthias turned to Trip, his gaze hard. "You see what you've done to this clan? You and your mutt are a stain upon our noble name."

"Then we don't want to be in this clan anymore!" Robbie declared. "We subji—abjucate, um, abdicate! We abdicate our positions in this clan!"

A collective gasp went around the room and everyone turned to Robbie who stood looking every bit as determined as the rest of them. Trip kneeled down in front of his son, taking his hands in his.

"Robbie, sweetheart, you can't say that unless you mean it. It's a very serious proclamation."

"I am serious. I don't want to be part of this clan anymore. You're an Alpha, and now you're stronger than Grandpa and any of them, so you can protect us. You can have your own clan. You'd make a great Alpha."

"Robbie, you're in school and—"

"And I can make new friends at a new school." He walked over to Brook who was standing anxiously by with Deacon and took her hand. "You can get a new job, Mom. Towns always need doctors and teachers." He faced the rest of the room. "You can find new jobs. We'll help each other. My dad's clan will be much better. He's strong and brave, and he has Boone. No one will challenge them. We can be a real family."

"I'm in!" Hunter threw his arm around Trip's shoulder. "You lead, I'll follow."

The council laughed derisively. "A pack consisting of two queer mongrels, an Alpha and one pup? Absurd. You'll be the laughing stock of St. Veles"

"They've got us, too." Deacon took Brook's hand, gave her a reassuring smile, and led her over to Trip's side. "We're coming with you. Any clan stupid enough not to want you in it is a clan I don't want to be a part of."

Brook nodded her agreement. "I go where my boys go."

"We're going, too."

Trip was stunned as Duncan, Ivy, and their pups joined them. Logan looked like he was ready to pop a blood vessel.

"Duncan, you get your ass back over here. You go with them and you're dead to me."

The hurt and anger was evident in Duncan's blue and brown eyes, but he pulled his family close, his head held high. "Remember that was your decision, not mine. You brought this on yourselves."

Kayla took her husband's hand, each holding onto one of their pup's hands, and they joined Trip. "We're with you big brother." Rhys nodded, giving his own brother a playful nudge.

"You know I can't leave you, D. Who knows what trouble you'd get into?"

Deacon chuckled, giving his younger brother a squeeze. "Thank you."

Addison soon followed, pulling Cy along with her. Cy looked embarrassed as he held his hand out to Trip. "I know we've never talked much, but Addison thinks the world of you, and that says something. I won't let you down."

Trip couldn't believe what was happening. He never expected this. Hell, he had never known how much support he'd actually had until now. But become Alpha of his very own clan? Boone must have sensed his apprehension, because he turned, and placed a reassuring hand on his side.

"I know you never wanted to be Alpha, but that's when your only choice was being Alpha under the Hagan Council, and you had every right to turn away from that, but now you have the chance to lead a family who loves you, supports you, and has always respected you. You know I would follow you anywhere."

Trip didn't know what to say. He threw his arms around Boone, hugging him close. "Thank you. But only if you lead with me, at my side as my mate, and my equal."

Everyone cheered—well, almost everyone. The Hagan Council, along with Logan, Ashley, Deacon's parents and Brook's parents all shot daggers at them, but they remained seated. There was nothing they could do. At least until Kristoff walked out onto the floor. The room went quiet and everyone took a wary step back. Someone in the council must've called him. The truly malevolent look on Matthias's face made Trip feel sick to his stomach.

"I don't think anyone's going anywhere," Matthias said smugly.

Kristoff made his way over to Trip, stopping before him. His head cocked to one side and he reached out to take hold of Trip's chin.

"Well, look at you. You finally sealed the bond."

Matthias smoothed down his expensive suit, his grin full of self-satisfaction. "A whole lot of good it's done him. It's over, Trip. All Kristoff

has to do is call his clan and you and your Devil Dogs will finally be out of our hair for good."

Trip's gaze went to Kristoff, who was still holding his chin. When Trip spoke, it wasn't a threat, but a heartfelt appeal. "I don't want to fight you."

Kristoff blinked and released Trip. "Who said anything about fighting?"

"But, that's what my father is saying, isn't it? That's why you're here?"

To his surprise, Kristoff threw his head back and laughed. "My dear, sweet Tristan." Kristoff patted his cheek gently and smiled. "I control my clan, not your father. I meant what I said earlier. I'm at your service, and unlike your father, I know my place in the food chain. Also, I'm not a bigoted asshole." With a wink, he turned and headed toward his brother, waving a hand dismissively at Matthias. "Your request is denied, Matthias. I will not waste my wolves on one of your whims. Call me when there's a genuine threat. Tristan, good luck with your new clan, I have no doubt you will be the best Hagan Alpha yet."

Matthias ran after Kristoff, but obviously begging was beneath the Hagan Council. The elders quickly put a stop to it, snapping at Matthias.

"You're right, Dad. It is over." Trip took Boone's hand in his and turned to his new clan. "Let's go."

They heard Skyrah's growl and turned in time to see her grab Ari's wrist and yank him back.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Ari looked from his parents to Hunter, the heartache on his face palpable. Trip's heart went out to them. He knew Hunter would leave the decision to Ari, no matter how it pained him. Ari remained by his mother's side, his wrist in her grip and his head down like a scolded child. It was painful to see the effect Skyrah had on the young man. Hunter took a step forward and held his hand out.

"Ari, you belong with us."

Trip knew Hunter wasn't about to out Ari, yet for those who knew him well, the complete and utter adoration in his eyes for the younger Husky was

unmistakable. Poor Ari looked torn, and a part of Trip sensed Hunter would be walking away from this with a broken heart.

Skyrah gave Ari's arm a tug, drawing his attention away from Hunter. "Now you look at me. You forget about them. Addison can rot with her fag brother. We'll find you a new girl. Then you can settle down, have pups, and maybe one day—"

"Just stop it!" Ari jerked his arm away. "I am so sick and tired of you treating me like a child! And stop badmouthing Trip. You're always calling him all those horrible names."

"Well that's what he is." Skyrah shrugged and tried to get closer to Ari, but that only resulted in him moving farther away. "What's gotten into you?"

"Trip is gay, Mom, and guess what, so am I."

"Shit," Trip and Boone exchanged glances. "Brook, sweetheart, I think your brother's about to wake the sleeping bear."

"With a Taser," Boone added.

Trip turned to his new clan who were looking on worriedly. Skyrah's reputation was all too well known. This wasn't going to be pretty. "Why don't you all head to the park with the pups, and we'll come meet you. We can talk about what comes next soon as we get there, okay?"

They all nodded, quickly ushering their pups from the room. Trip gently pushed Robbie toward Deacon. "Robbie, kiddo, you go with Deacon."

"But I want to stay with you," Robbie replied anxiously.

"Not this time, tough guy. Don't worry, I'll be along shortly. Promise."

Reluctantly, Robbie allowed himself to be lifted into Deacon's arms and carried away. Trip headed toward Boone, Hunter, and Brook only to have Aiden get in his way.

"You think this is over? You've destroyed this clan you selfish—" Trip held a hand up, his voice grave.

"I don't have time to put up with your nonsense right now." His growl was enough to have his brother retreating for the first time ever. Hearing Skyrah's scathing laugh, Trip quickly joined the others.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not gay."

"Yes, I am," Ari insisted.

Skyrah's gaze went to Hunter, her eyes glowing dangerously. "This is your doing isn't it, you half-breed filth. First you and your brother infect Tristan, now you're trying to infect my son?"

Ari threw his hands up in frustration. "Are you listening to yourself? No one's infected me. I've always been this way, but I was too scared to stand up to you. Enough is enough, Mom. You drove Brook away. Dad doesn't even get to see Robbie because of you, and now you're about to lose me, too."

"You're not going anywhere." The wild look in Skyrah's eyes concerned Trip. There was no telling what she would do when cornered.

"I'm not staying here to lead the life you want me to lead!" Ari started to walk toward Hunter, his hand stretched out to him when Skyrah shifted. Her heavy mass landed on Hunter's human form, knocking him off his feet. She clamped down on his shoulder just over his heart, and the pained cry Hunter let out echoed through the cavernous chamber. Boone was immediately at his brother's side, his canine teeth bare as he growled at Skyrah in his Husky form. He towered over her, but Trip was all too aware why Boone didn't make a move. With Hunter still in his human form, and his body between Skyrah's powerful jaws, all it would take was one sharp bite lower down and she would pierce his heart.

Skyrah's gaze went to Ari and she shook her head. A painful cry tore from Hunter's throat and he shut his eyes tight, the fingers from his free hand grabbing a fistful of Skyrah's fur in desperation. Trip knew Skyrah was crazy, but he hadn't expected her to attack any of them while in their human form. It was an act of dishonor, and something only cowards resorted to. It went to show how fraught she was.

"No! Please, don't." Ari got down on his knees beside his mother, his hands clasped together in front of him. "I'm begging you. Let him go."

Trip took a step toward her, only to have her drag Hunter back with her. He held his hands up and took a quick step back. Damn it. "Sorry, I'm staying put."

Ari's gaze went to Hunter, a tear rolling down his cheek, and his voice barely audible when he spoke. "Forgive me." He turned his gaze to his mother. "I was lying. I'm not gay. I just thought if I said that, you'd let me go with them. I'll stay, I promise. If you let him go."

Skyrah's jaws unlatched and Trip quickly went to Hunter's side to help him up. Boone shifted and joined him, throwing an arm around his brother's waist for support as he and Trip pulled Hunter to his feet. Ari stood dazedly beside his mother who was growling fiercely at them, the fur around her muzzle stained with Hunter's blood. Boone's muscles tensed and Trip put a hand to his shoulder.

"Your brother needs medical attention, Boone. Another time."

Boone nodded, and with Trip's help, they kept Hunter on his feet. He was losing a good deal of blood and his face was pale, though it was clear from the clotting under Hunter's torn shirt that his body was doing its best to heal itself. Despite that, Hunter turned his body as best he could in their grasp, his voice fierce.

"This isn't over, Skyrah! If you hurt him, I'll kill you!"

"Hunter, please calm down," Trip said, but Hunter was practically vibrating with anger.

"Did you hear me? I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

They managed to get Hunter outside and away from the courthouse. The moment his body healed itself enough to stop the bleeding—even if he was still weak from the blood loss—Hunter fought against Trip and Boone's hold to get back to the courthouse.

"I can't leave him there!"

"Hunt, you're hurt. You can't help him like this." Boone struggled with his brother, dropping to the grass when Hunter could no longer hold himself up.

"I can't leave him with those sons-of-bitches! Please, Bo, you gotta let me—" Hunter choked on his words, his fingers digging into Boone's arms. The struggle only lasted a few seconds longer until Hunter's strength gave out. Then he buried his face against his brother's chest, his shoulders shaking as he

gave in to his grief. Boone sat with his brother wrapped tightly in his arms as he offered comfort. He looked up at Trip, his eyes bright with unshed tears, and Trip could feel the pain his mate was in, pain Boone was feeling for his heartbroken brother.

"This isn't over," Trip assured Boone. He knelt down beside him, his hand going to his cheek. "We'll get Ari back. I swear we will."

Boone nodded. He buried his face in Hunter's hair, and simply held him. It wasn't over. Not by a long shot. Somehow they would have to get Ari away from Skyrah. There was a lot to do. They couldn't stay in Perin anymore. It wasn't safe. Although most of his generation and those that came after were leaving with him, Trip knew the Hagan Council was a resourceful bunch. Whether they convinced Kristoff to go to war against Trip, or allied themselves to another clan, Trip would have to be ready to protect his own. He prayed he could be the Alpha everyone expected him to be.

EPILOGUE

Four months later

Trip rolled over, snuggling up against his warm, cuddly pillow. He blinked open his eyes and smiled. His big, warm, cuddly, *sexy* pillow. Boone let out a soft hum as Trip slipped a hand under his mate's T-shirt and ran it slowly up his chest. He leaned forward for a kiss when something heavy and painful landed on them.

"Robbie!" Trip groaned as Boone let out a low rumble of laughter before rolling over onto his stomach, Robbie rolling with him to end up sprawled on Boone's back. "What have I told you about knocking?"

Robbie waved his arms and legs trying to make a snow angel on the sheets, on Boone's back. "Um, that I should do it?"

"Yes, that you should do it."

"But I was getting bored waiting for you two sleepy heads to get up. I want pancakes," he moaned.

"What do I look like, your butler?"

"No. If you were my butler you would have unpacked all my toys by now."

"You know, ever since Boone moved in, you think you can get away with anything. You're not that cute."

Robbie sat up on Boone's back and started playing with his hair, trying to make it stick up. "Boone, can you make me pancakes? I think pancakes will stop Dad from being such a grumpy puss." He wrapped his small arms around Boone's neck, giggling when Boone got up with a roar. With his arms held securely in Boone's grip, Robbie hung off him, giggling his little head off every time Boone swung around.

"You spoil him," Trip grumbled.

"I spoil you, too." Boone leaned over and gave Trip a kiss.

"Ew, it's too early for kissing. Kiss after pancakes," Robbie demanded.

Trip grunted and crawled out of bed to stretch, jumping when Boone slapped his ass as he walked by. Robbie found it particularly hilarious for some reason.

"Boone always gets you," Robbie chortled.

"Yeah, he's a sneaky one." Not that he was complaining, though Boone always managed to get him by surprise, whereas whenever Trip tried to do the same, Boone somehow knew, dodging and getting Trip instead. Completely unfair. He was Alpha, surely it was his right to get in a couple of butt-slaps?

They headed into the kitchen, pausing when they found Hunter sitting silently at the kitchen counter twirling his butterfly knife. Lately, Hunter never left home without it.

Boone put Robbie on the floor and gave his bottom a playful pat. "Why don't you go change out of your pajamas, kiddo? Your dad and I will make those pancakes."

"Okay." Robbie skipped over to Hunter and petted his leg. "Good morning, Uncle Hunter."

Hunter leaned over with a small smile and Robbie kissed his cheek. "Morning, trouble."

With a cheerful smile, Robbie dashed off to his room. Trip exchanged glances with Boone and started on the coffee, watching from the corner of his eye as his mate leaned on the kitchen counter across from his brother. Ever since they'd left Perin and moved to Iarilo, all the way on the other side of St. Veles, Hunter hadn't been the same. He still joked with them and messed around, but that mischief he'd always carried with him, that light in his eyes, had dimmed. In truth, Hunter was a shadow of his former self. He was a lot grumpier, preferred to be on his own, and had a habit of disappearing for days on end. There were dark circles under his eyes, and if it weren't for Trip making sure he ate, his friend would have lost more weight than he already had.

Trip poured a mug of coffee and placed it next to Hunter. "Have you had breakfast?"

Hunter took a sip of coffee before shaking his head.

"Hunt, you're barely eating, you hardly sleep..." Boone came to stand beside his brother, his hand on his shoulder. "You've got us worried sick."

"I'm fine." Hunter shrugged Boone's hand off his shoulder, never a good sign.

"Right, because this is fine." Boone snatched the twirling knife away from Hunter who growled at him. "Don't you dare. I've told you how I feel about you taking this out with Robbie around, so don't you go giving me attitude. Not in this house and not to me. I'm your brother. I love you and I'm worried." He handed the knife back to Hunter, his expression softening. "Don't push me away, little brother."

Hunter shoved the folded knife into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, and got to his feet. His eyes were glowing and Trip could see his teeth growing out. He really hoped Hunter and Boone weren't about to get into another fight. It seemed to be happening more often than not lately.

"You're not going to fight are you?"

The warbled plea caught them off guard and they turned to find Robbie standing in the doorway in his Spiderman pajamas, his bottom lip quivering, and tears in his big brown eyes. He looked from Hunter to Boone before the dam burst, the high-pitched wail giving them all a start.

Trip dropped everything and made for his pup, aware of Hunter heading for the front door when Robbie cried out Hunter's name. Trip stood stunned, his gaze going to Boone, who looked equally surprised. To Trip's astonishment—and relief—Hunter stopped in his tracks. He stood with his fists at his sides for a moment, before turning, marching back to the kitchen, and scooping Robbie up, hugging him close, his voice gentle when he spoke.

"It's okay, little man, don't cry."

Robbie let out some garbled sounds that Trip knew were supposed to be words, his small arms wrapped around Hunter's neck. Trip and Boone followed Hunter as he carried Robbie into their new living room and sat down with him on the couch. He ran his hand soothingly down Robbie's back,

murmuring words of comfort. When Robbie had calmed down enough to speak, he sat back, his pout at maximum capacity.

"You want to tell me what the waterworks are for?" Hunter asked quietly.

"You were going to go away and not come back," Robbie replied with a sniff, his cheeks flushed and his lashes wet.

"Who says?"

"You're always angry and you don't spend time with us like you used to. Do you not want to be friends anymore?"

Hunter's face went pale. "What? I would never *ever* not want to be friends with you, kiddo. I love you, you know that."

"Then why are you acting so weird and always fighting with Boone?"

"I'm sorry... I just." Hunter's eyes welled up but he blinked back his tears. "I love someone very much, but they're far away, and I don't know if they're in trouble, and I can't help them, or be with them, and I miss him so much."

Robbie petted Hunter's hair and cocked his head to one side. "Don't be sad. Daddy and Boone can do anything. They'll help you." Robbie looked up at Trip and Boone, his eyes wide with innocence and that heart-wrenching look filled with the belief and trust that his parents really could do anything. "Right, Daddy?" How the hell could anyone not do their damned best to prove the pup right?

Trip walked around the couch and positioned himself at Hunter's left while Boone took a seat to his brother's right. "You bet. I know you think you have to face this alone, Hunter, but you don't. You've always been there for me, Robbie, and Boone. You think we won't be there for you?"

"But it's not your fight," Hunter began, only to have Boone slip his arm around his brother's neck, bringing their heads together.

"We're family, Hunt. Of course it's our fight. I'm not saying it won't take a little time to figure things out, but I promise you, we're going to get Ari back to you. Have I ever let you down?"

Hunter shook his head. "No."

"And I'll say it again," Trip insisted. "You can stay with us as long as you want. There's plenty of room." Hunter had been so lost since their move, Trip and Boone had insisted the younger Devil Dog move in with them until he felt ready to find his own place.

"Thanks, Trip."

Trip snuggled up to Hunter and started making purring noises. "Promise me, if you start feeling like everything's coming down on you, you'll talk to us?"

Hunter chuckled. "Yeah, all right, you weirdo."

"So you're going to stay and be Hunter again?" Robbie asked hopefully.

"Yes. Though I reserve the right to be grumpy every once and a while."

Robbie patted Hunter's cheeks with a big grin. "That's okay. Daddy is grumpy *all* the time."

"You little rascal!" Trip made a grab for Robbie who squealed and jumped off Hunter's lap, running around the living room. Hunter jumped off the couch, lumbering after Robbie like a zombie.

"Brains!" He stopped behind the couch and latched his hands onto Trip's head. "No brains," he grunted before chasing after Robbie who was squealing and laughing. Trip slid over and wrapped his arms around Boone as Hunter and Robbie wreaked havoc around the house.

"You know, I was really starting to miss him," Trip said, smiling when Boone chuckled and kissed his cheek.

"I heard that!" Hunter called out from somewhere in the house.

"Crap."

Boone threw his head back and laughed. "You are so never going to hear the end of that one."

With a grumble, Trip scanned the living room and the remaining boxes that needed unpacking. He couldn't believe that pup still hadn't unpacked everything. "Robbie, one of your toy boxes is in here," he called out. "Boone, you know if we don't get it out of the living room, there's going to be toys

everywhere." He got up and walked over to the box, tearing the tape off and opening it. "There's clothes in here, too." He looked closer. "Or at least socks. Wait a minute..."

"What is it?" Boone asked.

"Call Brook."

"What?"

Trip slowly backed away from the box, spun on his heels, threw his arms up, and ran screaming for Robbie's room. "They're back!"

He heard Boone laugh behind him, followed by a string of colorful expletives, and soon Boone was standing on Robbie's bed with the rest of them. As Trip cowered with his boys, he had to smile. Their little family might be unconventional, but they were an intrepid bunch. Most importantly, they loved each other, and no matter what they faced, they would face it together, through thick, thin, and... freakish mutant spider babies.

THE END

Author Bio

M/M Romance author by day, artist by night, Charlie Cochet is quick to succumb to the whispers of her wayward muse. From Historical to Fantasy, Contemporary to Science Fiction, no star is out of reach when following her passion. From hardboiled detectives and society gentleman, to angels and elves, there's bound to be plenty of mischief for her heroes to find themselves in, and plenty of romance, too!

When she isn't writing, she can usually be found reading, drawing, or watching movies. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.

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