



ONE

WILD

WISH

DEVON RHODES

## Chapter One

“I DON’T know how you talked me into this,” Rory grumbled as Benny made wide, innocent eyes at him from the passenger’s seat of the SUV. His best friend and bandmate’s “who, me?” expression was getting old. Fast.

Rory had to admit, Benny’d gotten the group an amazing gig—a chance to play a really small venue and try out some of their new music in an intimate setting. Three consecutive shows for their band, One Wish—and one was actually going to be a cappella, Austin City Limits-style. Being booked in for three performances spread over a week with rest days in between shows—without having to travel—was a huge plus as well. The topper? A staggering remuneration package, and Rory sure needed the money right now.

Too good to be true, right? The only fly in the ointment was the weird conditions in the contract they’d just signed with the group they’d be performing for. It was essentially a private performance for some kind of religious organization or something, and they’d laid down some very bizarre ground rules. Not just requests either, but actual deal-breakers in the fucking contract.

No photography or videography. That one Rory was really bummed about. It would’ve been fantastic to tape the small-house shows for a music video or promo piece or at

the very least something to stick up on the website. Especially, he thought wistfully, the a cappella performance.

Once the band arrived at the property containing the venue, they could not leave until after their last show. That was all kinds of fucked up. Like volunteering—by contract, no less—to be a prisoner.

And everyone involved had to be in a committed relationship.

Rory snorted and rolled his eyes. And they said performers had freaky conditions in their contracts.

It was this last one that Benny had tried to slip past Rory, mumbling it at the last second.

“What?” Rory had exclaimed incredulously. “First of all, what the hell? And secondly, duh! Both of us are single. And wait. Does that mean the roadies and tech guys too? Shit.”

“So we only take the married or practically married ones.” Benny had turned on his persuasive charm. Which usually worked. Damn it.

Rory waited impatiently for his roommate to continue and address the obvious. When nothing more was forthcoming, he rolled his eyes. “And us? Kinda pointless to leave *us* at home.” When you had a group of four, two missing would be a tad noticeable. Especially the lead singers.

“Well, we *are* in a committed relationship.” That was when the butter-wouldn’t-melt look had started. Benny used his long, elegant fingers to tick off his supporting arguments. “We live together. We own the house together. We’ve got the band together. Hell, we even have sex more often than some of our married friends. If that’s not committed, what is?”

Rory took a deep breath, striving for patience. “Now, I realize I don’t know exactly why they want it that way, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure that’s not what they meant. And you know it.”

“Aww, c’mon, Ree. Seriously. This is a great opp. Don’t go getting all righteous on me now.” Benny had really turned on the charismatic, give-in-to-me-you-know-you-want-to eyes that would have had ninety-nine percent of the population tripping over themselves to do whatever Benny wanted. Unfortunately, Rory had never been one of the one percent. He could feel himself caving. Damn it.

“Okay, but let’s keep it cas’ in private. I’m not in the mood for one of our weird little messed-up now-we’re-screwing-and-can’t-be-friends episodes.”

“Keep it friendly, but not too friendly. Got it.”

The GPS mellifluously reminded Rory to turn right in two hundred feet, which was a good thing, because otherwise he might have missed the very low-key and overgrown side road. Glad of the four-wheel drive when he saw the condition of the gravel road ahead, he held on to the steering wheel with white knuckles as he tried to avoid the worst of the potholes.

“Nice road,” he muttered under his breath after a particularly hard jolt. “Hope the crew made it up here with the equipment okay.”

“They did,” Benny confirmed nonchalantly, swaying easily as if getting tossed around didn’t bother him in the slightest. “I got a text a half-hour ago. Everyone’s waiting on us.”

Rory grimaced as the slight dig hit home. “Hey, it’s not every day you pass straight through a damn National Park. So I needed to take a few pictures. Sue me.”

Benny had snorted loudly at the word “few.” “Just as long as you don’t do it up here,” Benny shot back. “These guys probably would sue.”

An imposing gate impeded their progress, and Rory pulled up to the expensive-looking monitor, glaringly out of place in the back of beyond. It flashed on, and he was faced with a militaristic-looking guard.

“Private property. Please turn around and go back the way you came.” The gruff request was spoken in a bored recitation.

“No, uh, we’re supposed to be here, I think. We’re with One Wish, the band....”

He was interrupted as the guard looked down at something out of view. “State your names.”

“Rory Dean and Benny Oshiro.”

The eyes narrowed and shot up to peruse him intently, seeming to measure him and find him wanting. The guard shook his head, and for a moment, Rory thought they were going to be turned away.

Then, with a clank and shudder, the huge gate began to slide open. Rory put the rude guard out of mind and drove through as soon as the gate cleared. At this point, the nerves for the coming performances—both of his purported relationship with Ben and the actual shows—had settled with a hum into his gut, making him eager to get on with it. Continuing on, they finally crested the seemingly Everest-

sized mountain they'd been working their way up, and Rory got his first view of their destination.

“Compound” was the first word that sprang to mind at the sight of the sprawling collection of houses and buildings, all surrounding a gorgeous mountain lodge. The whole thing was nestled in a verdant valley, surrounded by the mountains on all sides but the one beyond the river winding away in the distance. It looked like something out of a movie cut-away.

“Holy shit, will you look at this place.” For once, even Benny sounded impressed.

Rory was too. The lodge alone wouldn't have looked out of place in the National Park they'd just passed through, and the effect of the whole privately-owned complex set against such a stunning backdrop screamed “money.” Suddenly Rory let go of part of the tension he'd been carrying around. Obviously these people would be able to afford the promised compensation. Part of him had been afraid the gig was some elaborate hoax or scam of some sort. Not that he didn't trust Benny or Les, their new manager, but still....

After a careful, and much less bumpy, descent to the grouping of buildings, Rory pulled up to the logical stopping point—right in front of the stone entrance to the main lodge. Cars and trucks filled the parking lot and spaces in front of the other buildings, but there wasn't a soul in sight. The whole area had an abandoned feel to it.

Reaching for the door handle, he glanced at Benny, who shrugged, looking just as puzzled by the deserted area as Rory felt. As he turned to step out, his heart gave a jolt. A tall, muscular man had appeared out of nowhere, assisting him in holding open the door.

Rory jumped and swore. “Shit. Oh, sorry, you startled me.” He automatically held out a hand. “Rory Dean.” Rory recognized the serious visage as the guard who had appeared on the monitor at the gate. Then he really looked at the man.

His hand was swallowed in a firm grasp. “Welcome. I’m Jared Salinas. And this must be your partner, Benny Oshiro?”

Having momentarily forgotten the ruse, Rory just stood and gaped, speechless, hand forgotten in Jared’s. On the video screen, he had looked like any other military type, but in person the details transformed him. Short hair was revealed to be chestnut, the red tones glinting warmly in the natural light. A touch of wave would prove troublesome at a longer length. The intense, serious eyes were a rich amber, almost the same color as his hair—warm and compelling. Rory was tempted to reach out and stroke the masculine jaw line, which begged to be traced, Jared’s strong neck inviting Rory to come find his pulse with his tongue. The man was classically gorgeous and built, but more than that, he exuded a charismatic and commanding presence that had Rory weak at the knees.

Benny inserted himself into the conversation smoothly as he rounded the vehicle. “That’s me. We spoke on the phone. Beautiful place you have here. Should we grab our stuff?” He pointedly removed Rory’s hand from Jared’s, pulling Rory up against his side in a possessive parody of ownership. Back in the right mindset, Rory had to work to fight back a grin. Live-and-let-love Benny was probably the *least* jealous guy he’d ever known. Thankfully, he was getting right into character.

The sudden, intense frown on Jared's handsome face would've been a little scary if he didn't immediately follow it with a rueful smile. "Sorry for staring. You guys aren't at all what I expected."

Benny laughed, letting his hand idly roam Rory's side and hip. Even though Rory wasn't romantically interested in Benny anymore, it still felt good—a caring, familiar touch. "We get that a lot. We look pretty ordinary without our stage makeup and wardrobe, I guess."

"Ordinary? Hardly." Jared's eyes flicked down to the vicinity of Benny's hand, now with fingers hooked through Rory's side-most belt loop. Though his smile remained, his eyes looked cool, and Rory began to wonder if their host had some latent homophobic tendencies. He'd seen that before, guys who were cool with you being gay—unless you had the temerity to actually look at or *touch* another guy in front of them. Then all bets were off.

"As for your bags, I'll have them brought up to your suite." Jared held a large hand out, evidently for the keys, continuing in an apparent non sequitur, "Curtis?"

"Yes, sir?"

This time, Benny jumped in tandem with Rory as the new, deep voice came unexpectedly from behind them. Damn, these guys were fast and quiet. He took a closer look at Curtis: fast, quiet—and huge. Rory and Benny were each just under six feet tall, but both Jared and Curtis seemed to tower over them and were solid walls of muscle compared to Benny's lithe, slender build. And Rory's own body? "Skinny" by his own word, "lean" in the popular press. Po-tay-to, po-tah-to.



“I’m a bit surprised to see you out here, son. Shouldn’t you be inside with the rest?”

The newcomer, Curtis, cleared his throat. “Yes, sir. I just—needed some fresh air. So I, ah, thought I’d see whether you needed any help with the visitors.” A slide of his eyes toward Benny, then Curtis’s gaze snapped back to Jared, a tinge of red creeping up his cheeks.

Suddenly Rory understood. Curtis must be a fan. The incongruously uncomfortable shuffle from the otherwise mature-looking young man confirmed his suspicions.

He decided to make things easier on the kid. “Hi there, Curtis. I’m Rory and this is Benny.”

“Oh, I know who you are,” Curtis eagerly replied, then shot Jared a sheepish look.

Jared’s expression had softened just a touch, but now it seemed colored with—concern? Which didn’t make sense to Rory. He looked at Curtis a bit more closely. On second glance, he wasn’t as young as Rory had originally thought—probably well into his twenties, for all his awkwardness. Which would make him around Rory and Benny’s age chronologically, although he currently seemed years younger.

Rory shook his head in disbelief. He felt positively ancient next to this young man with his naïve vibe. He guessed that was what the touring lifestyle did for a guy. He wearily wished for a mirror so he could check for wrinkles.

“Son? Wow, you must’ve had him young,” Benny chimed in, giving Curtis an appraising once-over and his best seductive voice. *Great. Way to convince them we’re together.*

Jared's brief flash of puzzlement turned into his first genuine grin. "Ah. Son. No, just a figure of speech." He focused over Rory's head. "Curtis, if you want to help, you can bring their bags up to the Phoenix Suite and then park their car. But then, you really have to get back to the others," he chided gently. "No special privileges. Okay?"

"Yes, sir." With a satisfied grin, the dark-haired young man gave Benny one last surprisingly heated glance—returned by Rory's "partner" in full measure—and turned back toward the rear of the SUV with a strut.

Curtis either didn't get the memo on the monogamous relationship thing or didn't care. Jared looked fit to be tied, and Rory would have been loving it if the successful outcome of this gig hadn't been so urgent. Time to remind Ben of how they needed to appear. He snaked his arm around Benny's waist and gave him a pinch—hard—at the waistline. Benny gasped and tried to squirm away, to no avail.

"Why don't we go check out our room, babe? I could use a... *nap* after that drive." Rory let his hand slide down to Benny's hip, then gave him a loving caress and pat before leaning in to grab his laptop case out of the SUV. When he emerged, he had an audience of three with expressions ranging from apologetic to forbidding to wistful.

God, he loved to entertain.

BENNY excused himself from the suite after a quick shower, wanting to head down to explore the lodge a bit more. They'd had one more conversation about the necessity of appearing head-over-heels.

“This was your idea, Ben, and you’re the one who’s always saying what a great actor you’d be. So act, damn it. It shouldn’t even be that much of a stretch with our history. Just keep your eyes in your head and your cock in your pants and feel me up every once in a while, and we’ll be golden.”

Benny was contrite, as contrite as he could ever be anyway, and then jokingly invited Rory to come along and find a public forum to PDA. “Give the fans a thrill.” Rory begged off, claiming exhaustion, but what he really needed was privacy to check a few things online. Hastily connecting to the Internet, he went immediately to his bank’s log in page.

*Access denied. Password does not match account records.*

Fuck. Already?

He dropped his suddenly pounding forehead into his hand and felt a dangerous prickle behind his eyes. Oh, no way. Richard was an asshole, but tear-worthy? No fucking way.

Heaving the mother of all sighs, Rory looked at the clock and debated for all of two seconds about calling the bank and trying, yet again, to explain that Richard was no longer associated with him in any capacity. Deciding to play ostrich instead, he slapped the computer closed and flopped down on the bed, toeing off his shoes. Maybe he would try to get the payment for this event in cash. Hmm....

The ludicrous image of armored truck guards pushing wheelbarrows full of cash into his and Benny’s house actually made him smile, and Rory tried to stick with the

upturn in mood, flipping onto his belly and wriggling around until he was completely comfortable. Happy thoughts might just equal some sleep—finally. The past month had been a nightmare of restless nights and stressful days.

The wheelbarrow scene loop followed him down as he began the descent into dreamland... only now all the guards looked like Jared.

*Mmm.*

A weight landed on him, pressing him into the mattress, and belatedly Rory registered the snick of the door closing must mean that Benny had come back for something.

“What’s up, Ben? I’m sleeping.”

No response, but Benny shifted until he was fully covering Rory, his unmistakable erection full of promise against Rory’s ass. The nibbling at his neck made Rory squirm against the pressure, and damned if his cock wasn’t filling out. He would’ve sworn a minute ago the last thing he was in the mood for was fucking Benny, but hey—stranger things had happened. So much for keeping things just friendly, though.

“Benny, you seriously want to do this right now?”

“It’s not Benny,” growled a becoming-familiar deep voice in Rory’s ear. Adrenaline surged as every muscle in Rory’s body tensed at once. “And what *I* want right now is find out what the hell you two hope to accomplish with this charade?”

## Chapter Two

TROUBLE.

Delicious, irresistible, tantalizing trouble. That was what the man under him smelled like.

That wasn't all he smelled like, but Jared firmly put that observance from his mind, at least until he got some answers. Irresistible or not, poaching was not condoned. Plus he had all the young alphas to worry about now with two gorgeous unattached males prancing around, flaunting themselves like fucking bait. Just look at how Curtis had reacted.

The sexy male pinned beneath him gave a heave and twist that rubbed Jared in every right and wrong way, and his anger surged along with his arousal. He adjusted his position to easily quell Rory's movement, trying to ignore how blessedly right it felt to cover him.

"So?" Jared prodded. "Any explanation for why you would lie to me about being together with that..." Jared struggled to stay polite, the thought of anyone but him touching Rory searing like a brand to his chest. "With Mr. Oshiro."

"I didn't lie to you," came the righteous answer, slightly muffled by the pillow. "We've never even spoken before today, much less about our love lives."

Oh, he just wanted to fuck that smug, superior tone right out of Rory's voice. Man didn't know what he was doing, taunting him like that. He felt the blossoming of power inside, leaking beyond his customary walls.

*You're acting no better than those horny, immature kids downstairs. Control.*

Reaching deep down, he seized hold of his human side with every ounce of will. Jared forcibly relaxed every muscle until he was loosely draped over Rory, then regretfully rolled off to the side. Freed, Rory immediately sat up and scooted to the opposite edge of the bed, then sat cross-legged, watching Jared warily.

Jared sighed and stood, thinking fast. Admittedly, coming up here and using his passkey to enter their suite when he knew Rory would be alone was just wrong. Jumping him on the bed? Wrong. Confronting him about his "boyfriend?" Hmm. Only wrong if he'd mistaken the lack of romantic connection between the two singers. After all, it was spelled out in the contract, or Jared would never have allowed Curtis to talk him into booking the group as entertainment for the solstice retreat. An unwilling smile crossed his face. His nephew Curtis pretty much had his number. But now that Rory and Benny were here, it could trigger a pursuit if they left before the conclusion. Better to keep them close and under the protection of the governing alphas.

And Jared would make the personal sacrifice of keeping this one close.

"First off, I apologize for coming in uninvited and, uh...."

“Using me as a sex toy?” Rory’s eyebrow arched in amused challenge.

Jared’s jaw dropped and his fingers twitched. How long had it been since a potential bedmate had had the nerve to banter with him? Probably never. He’d seldom strayed from his kind, and the humans he had been involved with were usually so intimidated by his powers, they were uniformly submissive. Even now, the teasing poked the tiger. *If he was mine, I’d....*

*Not yours. Get over it.*

“Mr. Dean....”

“Call me Rory.”

Jared gritted his teeth. “Rory. The contract you signed with us specifically and clearly verifies that you are in a committed relationship with Mr. Oshiro. Misrepresentation would be a breach of contract.”

“And just how are we misrepresenting anything, Mr. Salinas? Benny and I have been together for years.” Rory’s face had sobered, and Jared could sense that he was agitated underneath his calm exterior. Whether the nervousness was from lying or because Rory felt intimidated, Jared couldn’t pinpoint. Usually he was much better at getting a read on humans, but for some reason this man confounded his radar.

“So you maintain that you two are indeed involved?” he sought to clarify.

“Yes,” Rory inclined his head, his gaze steady.

A twist inside his chest was the internal response to Rory’s confirmation. “That’s good. It’s a difficult enough

retreat for our participants without the... temptation to stray from celibacy.”

Rory blinked. “Celibacy? Is this a religious order then? We weren’t sure.”

Jared couched his answer carefully, unable to lie, but having to walk the line in protecting his clan. “Not a recognized religion. More like a coming of age ceremony for the youth of our... ethnicity. And the celibacy is necessary in order for them to complete the ritual steps by the conclusion of the retreat.” He smirked. “Boys being boys, if there is someone available to chase, they’re distracted. At this age, it can be difficult to keep their mind off instant gratification.”

“Won’t they just fool around with each other?” Rory wondered aloud, and Jared winced. Damn, he asked good questions. Too good.

“In rare cases, but for the most part they aren’t each other’s type.” Jared couldn’t explain that the group comprised solely of young alphas would rather be celibate than hook up with another alpha—who was unlikely to yield to their superior status. These sexy, flexible humans, on the other hand....

“So why us? Why have anyone come in at all?” Rory was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, thoroughly engaged in the conversation. His head was slightly cocked to one side, his silky auburn hair veiling the tops of his shoulders, deep green eyes glued to his. It was unexpectedly flattering being the sole focus of the charisma that gave Rory his star quality. Jared cleared his throat.

“Well, we usually don’t. But this year, the boys petitioned for entertainment, and I, uh, we decided to give it



a trial run. With the conditions we laid out in the contract to keep things under control.”

“And why us?” Rory prompted, watching Jared, a smile teasing at his lips, as if he already knew the answer.

Jared returned his smirk wryly. “Can’t you guess? Curtis begged.”

“And you said yes. Pushover.”

It was Jared’s turn to arch a brow at the teasing. “I prefer open-minded. Just because it had never been done before didn’t mean that that’s the way it had to be.”

Rory gave him a full-out, stunning grin, then stretched sinuously. “Some stodgy elder statesman you are. Good for you. And don’t worry. I’ve no interest in your charges. I have more than my hands full.”

The implication made Jared grimace and lose the pleasant feeling their banter had engendered. He was still bothered by the image of Rory and Benny together, and something didn’t ring quite true about the situation, but if they were willing to keep to themselves, that was all Jared could ask. Right?

The door opening had both males turning toward the entrance to the suite, visible through the open bedroom door. Benny came strolling in with a staff member pushing a room service cart right behind him. When he saw the tableau in the bedroom, Benny’s only response was a sultry smirk.

“Should I be concerned that you have a visitor in our bedroom, babe? Right over there,” he directed the waiter with a casual wave toward the coffee table before stalking toward Rory with intent.

Jared watched, lips pressed firmly in a bid for neutrality, as Benny snaked his arms around Rory and took his proffered lips in a gentle but thorough kiss that spoke of long familiarity. Keeping his arms around Rory, Benny turned to Jared. “So where is everyone hiding? There must be a hundred cars out there, and this place is like a tomb.”

Trying to avoid looking at Rory ensconced in another man’s arms was like trying not to breathe. At some point, animal instinct took over and forced you to do it. Still, he tried.

“Most of the group is out on a hike. A dozen of our top candidates, including Curtis, are in a seminar downstairs.”

“Ah, yes, Curtis. Not your son. But I see a resemblance?”

Like Rory, Benny was sharp; no airheaded media darlings here. Jared would have to remember that. “He’s my nephew,” he admitted. Rory sat silently quiescent in Benny’s embrace, and Jared felt his blood pressure rising. Time to go. “Speaking of which, I need to get back downstairs. Rory, it was good talking with you. Maybe you can fill your... boyfriend in on what we discussed. Oh, and your manager mentioned that you need access to the venue tonight?”

“A sound check, so we’re all set up for the first show tomorrow. We’ll do a run-through of our sets tomorrow afternoon, of course, but it would be nice to have everything ready to go before then.”

“Sure, I understand. I’ve shown Les where to set up your equipment for the indoor shows. I thought you might do the acoustic show in the outdoor amphitheater, weather permitting.”

The surprised look of excitement on the men's face was the first genuine emotion he'd seen from them both, and the answering pleasure warmed his insides like a good swallow of brandy. Rory looked years younger, and now that he'd seen the man's unguarded look, Jared realized just how much of a mask Rory had kept in place so far. He was definitely hiding something. But what? And from whom?

RORY caught the thumbs-up from the sound tech. "Okay, we're good," he announced to the room at large. "Benny?" He turned to take in Ben with his stage-face on. For all his teasing personality and antics, Benny took his music very seriously. They had carved out a niche with their bread-and-butter rock beat and gender neutral lyrics, but lately Benny had been writing more ballads. That more than anything had been Benny's motivation to tack this stop on to the end of their touring schedule, the chance to try out the slower, mainly acoustic songs on a smaller crowd.

"Yep, I'm done. And thirsty. Let's go get a drink. Babe," he tacked on as an after-thought with a wink, and Rory smiled. Benny was really trying to keep up the pretense and doing surprisingly well. So well, Rory's body was starting to get confused by all the attention. Rory hadn't had this much trouble keeping his cock under control since he was a teenager.

*Yeah, but are you getting off on Benny rubbing all over you, or the "warden" watching every move you make?*

Jared had slipped in at the beginning of the sound check and sat still in the back through several songs. They

went through their paces to the constant tweaking of their crew. At the announcement they were finished, Rory caught the movement of Jared standing to leave out of the corner of his eye. Their eyes met across the large space, and Jared gave a curt nod, then turned to leave. The dimness of the space couldn't hide the fine lines of his retreating ass, shown off by faded jeans, or the breadth of his shoulders straining his T-shirt. Rory groaned. Just his luck. The finest man he'd seen in years and he couldn't even ogle openly.

Glad he'd worn a jock under his yoga pants, he gave himself an adjustment, to Benny's apparent delight. "Is that for me?" he crooned in Rory's ear, reaching down to cover Rory's hand with his own. Just then Jared turned back, and Rory could see the flash of anger in his eyes even from this distance. Apparently, the attraction between them was mutual. All the more reason to not ever let Jared suspect that his relationship with Benny was a sham. Jared controlled the purse strings on this venture, and Rory was sunk without this payoff.

"All for you, love," he deliberately allowed his trained voice to carry, and Jared spun around again and stormed from the room, anger in every line of his taut physique.

"Careful about baiting the tiger. You might end up as prey," Benny warned melodramatically, then ruined it with a snort of laughter.

Rory gave him an irritated look now that they were free of observation. "Um. You can take your hand off my dick any time now."

"Oops," Benny teased, but he complied. "Ready?"

"Yeah, let's hit it. I'm beat."

LATER in the pub, they sat in a corner booth with Les, Buzz, and Pierce, their other two bandmates, who were giving them crap about all the cuddling.

“You two are just turning me right the fuck on,” Buzz leered. “All this PDA is like free porn.”

“Oh yeah,” Pierce leaned toward their manager. “Les, you should get ‘em lined up, they’d make a fortune. For real.”

Rory rolled his eyes at Pierce. “I thought you were happily married.” He jerked his head at Buzz. “*You* getting hot from it doesn’t surprise me in the least. Why isn’t Skip here to keep you on a leash?”

The drummer aimed his phone at Rory and Benny and took his hundredth snapshot of the evening. “I’m giving him status updates, and he couldn’t get away from work. Fuckers.”

The rest of the group laughed, but not unkindly. They knew that beneath his brash exterior, Buzz was a total pushover for his Skip and missed him like crazy when he couldn’t come along.

“So are these gonna end up on the Internet?” Without waiting for a reply, Benny threw his thigh over Rory’s and climbed right onto his lap, writhing and kissing Rory in an exaggerated show of passion.

“Seriously, enough, garlic-breath,” Rory mumbled into Benny’s mouth. Benny responded by doing some serious damage to his earlobe with his teeth. “Ouch.”

“That’s hot! Oh hell yeah, Skip’s putting the best ones up on my blog and fan pages.”

“C’mon,” Rory complained, dislodging Benny with difficulty. “Now everyone’s going to thin—” He cut himself off mid-word as Jared walked up to their table.

“Hi, guys. I just wanted to make sure you had everything you need.” He didn’t meet Rory’s eyes, keeping his gaze averted toward the others in the group.

Les smiled and spoke for the band as he usually did. “You’ve been just wonderful, Jared, and the place is fantastic. The boys and I were just talking about how much we’re enjoying this.”

“Yeah, and it’s not often we can have a drink together without getting mobbed. I suppose we have you to thank for that?” Benny surveyed the crowded room as Jared nodded in response. For the entire time they’d been there, just about every eye had been on them, but no one had approached. Rory figured Jared had imposed martial law or something to keep the hordes back.

And it was quite a roomful. Not a female in sight. Every man in the pub, with the exception of a few of the wait staff, was built to some degree like Jared and Curtis. Something in the water? Or maybe they cruised gyms on membership drives? It was like being in the middle of a Chippendales convention. Most of the guys looked to be in their twenties, with a few looking—like Jared—to be a decade or so older.

Finally off his lap, Benny was still snuggled up next to Rory when Curtis walked up to the table and gave the two a glare. Whoa. Picking up on his uncle’s habits, apparently.

“Curtis. Come to meet the rest of the band?” Jared grinned. His smile faltered as Curtis only nodded in response. Tension was coming off him in waves, very like Jared... oh. Rory had a sudden flash of intuition and connected the dots. Curtis was jealous too. The way his eyes shone when they hit Benny and hardened when they flicked to Rory was obviously not just a coincidence.

Great. Maybe they could get everyone in the place pissed off or heartbroken by the end of the week. Just another thing to thank Richard for.

## Chapter Three

SENSING that his nephew was near the tipping point, Jared clasped his hand around the back of Curtis's neck and growled in his ear. "Control. Now." He knew his hand resting there would look like a convivial gesture to the humans watching, but in their world it was tantamount to picking him up by the scruff and shaking him. Once he'd gone through the solstice ceremony, he would never allow a touch there from anyone other than his mate without reacting with violence.

Curtis shuddered and almost instantly relaxed. In spite of the tension of the situation, Jared was proud of how quickly his heir had regained control. "Good," he praised, and he lifted his hand, signaling that he knew Curtis was trustworthy. Curt gave him a look that was a mixture of relief and confusion. Poor guy. Words couldn't convey how difficult that final stretch before the solstice of their Making year was, with all the tension of the burgeoning magic to come, yet with the balancing control as yet unrealized.

Their kind reached official adulthood on the summer solstice of their twenty-fifth year of age, and so their youngsters from across the continent were gathered here to learn to lead and receive training before their abilities were unlocked the day of the solstice, less than a week away. This year was special to him, with his heir numbering among the participants, and so when Curtis and some of his friends



had asked Jared to hire their favorite band to come play at the retreat, money hadn't been the issue.

But bringing unsuspecting humans into a group of highly sexed shifters who were unaccustomed to being celibate was a delicate situation, and so initially Jared had vetoed the suggestion. Curtis was nothing if not persistent and had worked with his group of friends to come up with the very clauses to the contract Jared had presented, along with the generous offer, to One Wish.

The photography clause was intended to control images of the group from going out unscreened. Jared was certain that even if the worst happened and the image of a shift was captured, most people would think it was doctored or staged. But no sense in taking chances.

Requiring them to stay here until all this year's participants had achieved control was essential. If the young men sensed a potential mate in one of the visitors this close to the advent of their powers, they could go into pursuit and shift unsupervised if they perceived their possible mate as escaping. That would be disastrous.

And with the nearly unlimited power his kind wielded, very strong strictures and rules were in place by necessity. One that was inviolable was that no matter how strongly a male felt that he knew his mate, if that person was already taken by another, there could be no interference. Period. Obviously, with their powers, they could eliminate a rival with ease. But that kind of barbaric behavior was not tolerated, and reasonable restraint was advocated. Adults had the necessary control to manage this feat, but the young ones....

Jared watched Curtis carefully. It appeared that Curtis had honed in on Benny, which worried Jared. Of all the future alphas, Curtis had the most promise, and that wasn't just Jared being partial. Disrupting his solstice sequence with a potential mate was folly, especially with someone like the rocker, who lived in the public eye and was currently very taken. He turned his attention to Benny and Rory as they petted one another and felt empathy for his nephew if he felt a fraction of the envy Jared did right then.

Part of him wanted to say the hell with it, rip Benny out of Rory's arms and toss him to Curtis, then pull Rory to him and never let go. The very fact that he could meant he never would. Trying to ease his tension, he thought of Curtis's reaction if he were to do such a thing.

He smiled reassuringly at his nephew and inclined his head, indicating that he should precede him. They left the group as their dinners arrived, making their departure look natural.

"Curtis, we need to talk."

Curtis swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Once seated on the leather couch in Jared's office, one of his favorite rooms in the lodge, and not coincidentally, his nephew's as well, the last remnants of tension seemed to drain away from them both.

"I know you're interested in Benny, but you have to let it go, son."

His nephew's jaw clenched briefly at the pronouncement. "I've tried. It's hard," he finally admitted. "I can't stand to see them touching each other."

“It’s their right to do so, and I understand how hard it is. But you know that what you’re sensing is just compatibility. There are more out there for you. This is just your first possible mate, it doesn’t mean he’s the only one or even the *best* one. And he’s taken, so it’s a moot point.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Curtis railed, frustrated. “Just because you’ve never come across a possible mate—”

Jared interrupted, “Wait just a second. Where did you get that idea?”

The younger man appeared confused. “Well, you don’t have a mate at your age, so I guess I just thought you never found one.”

Biting back a rueful snort at the reference to his age, Jared tried to put aside his own current situation and explain. “I’ve come across several possibles in my life, and all could have been my mate. But they either weren’t available or weren’t right for me at the time, so I had the *self-control*,” Jared stressed, “to leave them be and go on my way.”

Curtis persisted tentatively, “You mean, this—what I’m going through—has happened to you? Someone who’s taken? That you had to watch be with someone else?”

His heart aching empathically at the pain he heard in the young man’s voice, Jared pulled Curtis into a side-hug of support. “I know it’s hard, and doubly so for you right now, so close to coming into your powers. But I guarantee someone else will come along someday that you will feel just as drawn to. And when that happens, you need to search your feelings. Is being attracted to them all there is, or are they someone who fits you?” He thumped Curtis’s chest. “Here, and here.” Jared tapped his temple.

“I thought you weren’t happy with me being interested in Benny”—Curtis pinkened as he spoke the object of his affection’s name—“because he’s a human. And a guy.”

Jared felt much lighter as they continued to clear the air, and he laughed aloud. “If anything, being male would be something in his favor. And you know that half the matings anymore are with humans. No, just the fact that he’s taken, plus the publicity he garners. There’s a reason we try to keep a low profile, and it’s more difficult to do when you’re around celebrities. Especially attention hounds like these guys.”

“Hey!” Curtis started indignantly, protesting the slur on his crush. He finally noticed the twinkle in his uncle’s eye and realized he was being teased. “Hmm. You know, sir? I think you actually like Rory,” he observed with the instincts and brilliant mind Jared was counting on to succeed him someday. Sharp eyes the same color he saw in the mirror every day narrowed on his. “I think you more than like him.”

Jared shrugged wryly and stood. “So we’re in the same boat,” he indirectly admitted, feeling a bit of relief at having someone else know his secret. “Doesn’t make any difference. They’re together and just here for a week, and meanwhile, we have the most important gathering of the year to manage.” He ruffled Curtis’s hair. “It’ll pass, kiddo. And when we meet our real mates, these two’ll become a distant memory.”

Jared sounded confident, but who was he trying to convince? Curtis? Or himself?

“I KNOW he has power of attorney, but I’ve already told you that I’m revoking it and I don’t want him having access to my accounts. How is he still able to make withdrawals?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Do you wish to file a complaint?”

Rory’s head ached. “Fuck,” he whispered, then just hung up the phone, immediately calling back and getting yet another bank employee.

“Yes, I’d like to close my account.”

Twenty minutes and a dozen questions later, Rory had a small fraction of the money he’d started the year with—all that now remained after Richard’s thieving—on its way to his house in the form of a cashier’s check. Since the post office was holding their mail while he and Benny were gone, and he’d requested signature release on the check shipment, Rory was hopeful it would remain safely at the post office until he could claim it. All the money he had left—and it wouldn’t even cover a month’s worth of expenses.

*I’m so fucking stupid to have trusted that snake.*

With his portion for this set of performances, he’d have just enough of a cushion to maybe not have to tell his bandmates—particularly Benny—about the whole nasty episode. Maybe even have enough to get a lawyer to take a look at the whole situation, not necessarily to get his money back, but to prevent Richard from getting his hands on any more in the future. He was working the personal angle with the POA, going in and explaining how he was helping out his poor nutso boyfriend.

Richard had milked him for months before they broke up, and Rory’d had blinders on the whole time. Everyone

else hated Richard, especially Benny, and it had almost been the end of their long friendship over the guy.

“I don’t trust him as far as I could throw him. He’s only in it for the money, babe. Wise up, will ya?”

Benny’d warned him. They all had. And he’d still signed the damn POA with him. “It’ll help us both out, sweetheart. I can manage all the details for you so you can just create and do what you love.” Oh, he’d said all the right things, even about Rory’s friends just being jealous of their love.

And now? He couldn’t face the horrified and pitying looks and *I-told-you-sos* if they were to find out how fucked over he’d gotten. Better just to take the loss and move on.

Rory’s eyes settled on the clock, and they widened in alarm. Shit, now he was late for practice. Scrambling to pull himself together, he rushed in fifteen minutes late, to his bandmates’ amusement.

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you saw it here first. Buzz beat Rory to practice.” Pierce’s voice reverbed through the room and turned all eyes to Rory as he came skidding through the door, breathless.

Rory flipped them all off as he mounted the stage and took his guitar from a stagehand, smoothing it into place and subconsciously beginning to check for tuning.

“What were you doing, love?” Benny leaned in and stole a kiss, murmuring the question loud enough to be heard through the mike.

“Nothing exciting without you there,” was his dutiful, flat reply, bringing a genuine frown to his best friend’s face. But to Rory’s relief, Benny was distracted from any

uncomfortable questions by Jared's arrival with Curtis in tow.

"You guys mind if Curtis is here in my place? I have some business I can't put off any longer, and he'll be able to help just as well as I could."

"No problem," Benny purred. "We'll take good care of him for you. Right, Rory-love?"

"Amen, Brother Ben," Rory cracked on auto-pilot as he was able to do when onstage, still thinking about how many places he was going to have to contact that had automatic payments come out of the bank account he just closed. He cringed when he mentally reached double digits. And of course, none of the info was with him. Rory just hoped not too many would bounce before he got home and managed to straighten it out. Was it his car payment that came out on the twenty-something? Something big....

"Babe? You with us?" Benny's concerned voice made him realize he'd missed his musical cue.

"Crap, sorry. Let's start over, okay? I'm here now, I promise." *Nothing you can do now, man. Just play.*

TWO sweaty hours later, they wrapped things up to their satisfaction. Even with the sound check the night before, there were blocking and lighting issues to iron out, equipment to strategically place, and set orders to run through. Best part was, once this was done, the last show would be a piece of cake. They could just leave everything as

it was until then, since the show in a couple days was the acoustic one outside, and they wouldn't use most of it.

"Great run-through, guys. Yeah!" Buzz drummed a quick riff before bouncing up out of the seat. "So what'd ya think? Curtis, right?"

Rory glanced quickly over at Curtis, having forgotten he was even there, he'd been so quiet. Benny was standing close by him, speaking low enough that Rory couldn't hear what was being said. He could guess, though, from the intense, flushed expression on his handsome face, that Curtis was enjoying the conversation with his favorite rock star. Maybe a little too much. Rory had too much riding on this contract to let a little flirtation bankrupt him.

"C'mere, Benny-baby," he called out, beckoning with the fingers of both hands. Benny's expression mixed irritation and apology, and he gave Curtis's broad shoulder one last pat before bounding over toward him. Rory barely had time to brace himself as Benny's intentions became clear, and he staggered backward a step as he caught an armful of Benny, who wrapped his legs around Rory's hips and planted a deep, involved kiss on his lips.

"Sorry, I keep forgetting," Benny mumbled against Rory's lips, eyes open and on his.

"Just don't fuck this up. Please. I need this."

Benny frowned and started to pull back. That was when Rory saw Buzz snapping them clinging together onstage. He swiftly glanced at Curtis, who already looked ill-tempered at the kissing and had obviously taken note of the picture-taking. "Stop it," he whispered to Buzz. "No pics, remember?"



With impeccable timing, Jared came striding in just at that moment and spoke in low tones with his nephew. Unmoving, Rory waited with a sick feeling in his stomach for the hammer to drop.

Nothing. Curtis was obviously ignoring the whole camera thing, maybe because they were only taking them amongst themselves? For whatever reason, he didn't mention it to Jared. With a sickening sense of relief, Rory decided to just count his blessings and make sure it didn't happen again, if he had to steal the stupid thing from Buzz and pitch it into the forest.

RORY was stoked. The show had gone off without a hitch before a very appreciative audience. The young men were flatteringly attentive and participated enthusiastically in everything they threw out there. Benny was on his A-game and really worked the crowd, and Rory loved the acoustics in the room.

The post-show cool down was loud and full of joking around among the bandmates and their employees, as well as respectful and short visits from group after group of young men. Curtis was proudly perched in a permanent place of honor with Benny and Pierce on the couch, and Jared stood beside Rory, lingering close in an apparent about-face of his distance earlier in the day.

A slight, tentative feeling of hope had snaked its way into Rory's mood. With the bank issue on its way to being resolved and the job here going well so far, it felt as though a hundred-pound burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

And Jared actually going out of his way to be close to him was the icing on the cake. So when he announced he was going to head up to bed, not really tired, just having had enough of the noise, he wasn't surprised when Jared offered to walk him up.

Benny gave him an indecipherable look but only nodded and deliberately turned away. Were they supposed to be fighting? Rory wasn't sure, but he figured silence was the best policy.

Walking just close enough to brush sleeves occasionally, they traversed the lodge from the wing with the concert hall to the area with the guest rooms.

"Do you want to stop for a bite?" Jared offered when they passed the pub, which was also in full swing. Everyone was having a great time tonight.

Although tempted to say yes just to stay in Jared's company for a while longer, he regretfully shook his head. "I'm not the least bit hungry right now. Might call room service later on." Something struck Rory. "About that... it seems a bit too organized around here to be just for your... group?"

Jared chuckled warmly, his amber eyes reflecting the dancing of the fire in the stone fireplace they were walking past. "No, usually we're a paid guest lodge. We just close to the public for the two weeks in the middle of the summer, as well as a couple weeks around the holidays and New Year's."

Realization dawned. "Oh, man. I thought you all lived here, like a big commune." Rory shook his head, hoping Jared didn't think he was a complete idiot.

“I can see how you got that impression. A couple dozen of us do, including my nephew and myself.”

“You live here year-round? Don’t you get stuck up here in the winter?” Rory couldn’t imagine being out here with snow blocking him in.

“We have the trucks, and there’s always the snow machines.” Jared shrugged, those massive shoulders bunching and flexing under the immaculate white dress shirt. He continued in a quiet voice Rory had to lean closer to hear. “We do have to plan some travel around the weather, but generally we do fine.”

“Wow,” Rory murmured, matching Jared’s low, intimate tone. “You really love it here.”

“It’s home,” Jared answered simply, a slight smile teasing around the corners of his mouth. His eyes dropped to Rory’s and suddenly Rory realized how close he’d swayed while listening to Jared.

He should step back.

His lips parted.

Any minute now.

His own eyes were drawn irresistibly to Jared’s full, smooth-looking lips. Rory could feel every breath he pulled in like a caress, mimicking what the touch of those lips on his own would be like. Time stood still as they paused, frozen in place, neither man making the first move.

Rory’s breathing came faster and shallower as he fought the urge to close the distance. Damn it, what was Jared waiting for? An engraved invitation? He swiped his tongue across his bottom lip, and as if that was the sign Jared had

been awaiting, he lowered his head those last couple inches and slowly, gently touched his lips to Rory.

Plucking lightly at first Rory's top then bottom lip and back again, Jared seemed in no hurry to deepen the kiss. The light, unsatisfying contact was driving Rory crazy, and without thinking, Rory took a small step inward—which broke the spell. Reason returned to mesh with regret in Jared's eyes as he immediately pulled back, putting an excess of space between them.

“Good-night.” Jared turned and opened the suite door with his passkey, holding the door open just long enough for Rory to take a step over the threshold before striding off down the hall to the back staircase.

“Good-night,” he whispered, his chest tight with unnamed emotions, and closed the door.

## Chapter Four

IT WAS their fourth night at the lodge, and the acoustic show in the amphitheater had gone swimmingly. It was amazing to hear their voices soar to the skies and come back to them as they sang without mikes. What a rush. Rory knew that they'd have to try another such performance when cameras were allowed. He could already envision booking more small venues, more personal-feeling gigs. Les wouldn't be happy, but Benny agreed with him, so Rory was sure they could strike a balance between arena shows and intimate performances.

They had given themselves several hours to wind down before going to bed, but apparently that wasn't enough. Rory was tossing and turning, Jared on his mind. The man was driving him crazy. Rory almost wished he would just lose that palpable sense of control for even a minute and act on the attraction between them. No way was he initiating things, not with Richard managing to siphon funds from him—he couldn't afford to lose the payout for this gig. But maybe if Jared just disregarded Benny's claim on him....

Then Rory wouldn't respect him nearly as much. He heaved a sigh. Fucking standards.

“That's your third sigh in as many minutes, love. What's eating you? And don't say 'nothing' again, or I might have to smother you with my pillow.”

Rory put his hands over his face, just in case, as he replied to Benny, “Dunno. Just... antsy, I guess.”

“Oh, that’s much better than ‘nothing’.” Benny’s voice dripped with sarcasm. Then it was his turn to sigh in the darkness of the wee hours of the morning. “I’m a little wired too. Wanna mess around?” His hand ran playfully down Rory’s side.

It was several days into their ruse, and despite the constant fondling in public, neither man had pressed for more in private. At least not seriously. They shared a bed, which wasn’t new for them, but they hadn’t been inclined to do anything more than chat and sleep.

Rory was stuck between tempting visions of Jared—who had returned to his distant and über-professional self—and worries over the Richard situation and his nearly non-existent finances. And Benny was distracted as well, although he hadn’t confided in Rory as to why, and Rory knew better than to push his temperamental best friend.

Rory chuckled aloud, and Benny snorted in mock hurt. “Oh, sure, laugh at the idea of sex with me. You’re great for my ego.” Rustling from Benny’s side of the bed, and the mattress dipped as Benny stood. “I’m going for a walk. Light bright,” he warned a millisecond before he snapped the bedside light on.

Rory groaned and squinted against the sudden brightness as he watched Benny pull on his discarded long-sleeved button-down and toss his favorite white silk scarf around his neck. *Wait a minute.* He sat up in bed. “A walk? Where? Not outside alone. It’s dark, and there’s probably animals and stuff out there.”

“Oh, quit being such a drama queen. They have a parking lot and lights out here. I just want some fresh air. I’m obviously not going to sleep anytime soon, and I’m keeping you up. Don’t bother,” came the second Rory opened his mouth to protest. “You know I am.” Benny pulled up and fastened his jeans and slid his feet into the old, battered mocs he took everywhere. “Don’t forget, I know you. We’ve shared space in one form or another for a decade, yeah? So I know when I’m bugging you.”

He walked over and leaned down to plant a sincere kiss on Rory’s lips, and the open, unguarded look on Benny’s face made Rory wish briefly they were compatible as partners for real. It would make some things so much easier for them both. But after all this time, they knew better. “Get some sleep, Ree,” Benny whispered. “M’kay?”

“M’kay. Be safe.”

Benny gave him a wink. “Don’t worry about me, babe. I’m like a cat.”

“In the nine lives way, or the land on your feet way?”

“I was thinking more the prowling tomcat way, but those’ll work too. And no,” he held up a hand. “I’m not going out looking for some tail. Ha ha. Just taking a breather.” He walked through the bedroom door, leaving it open, and Rory watched as he exited the suite, letting the door close slowly with a barely audible snick.

Suddenly realizing Benny didn’t have a jacket on, chiding himself for being such a mom, Rory debated with himself briefly and lost. But by the time he got to the door, Benny was nowhere to be seen. Damn it.

Oh well, he was up anyway. Might as well go catch up with Benny.

Dressing quickly, but taking the time to don his own jacket as well as grab Benny's, he headed downstairs, eschewing the closer back stairs for the grand, wide main staircase that ended up in the lobby. No one around, not surprising at—he looked up at the huge clock over one of the river rock fireplace mantles—four a.m. Ouch. Tomorrow, uh, *today* was going to be brutal. Good thing there were no performances until the last one on Monday. They had the whole weekend to kill, the chance to relax and have some fun.

Rory went out through the main doors and looked around. It was dark—the aforementioned exterior lights were either not working or maybe on a maladjusted timer. Huh. Rory widened his eyes in an attempt to penetrate the darkness, so absolute up here away from city lights. The further he walked away from the lodge, the blacker it seemed.

Uneasy, thinking there was no way Benny would've continued in these conditions, he turned to go inside but stopped. Maybe the lights *had* been on when Ben came out, but had gone out. He might not be able to find his way back, Rory worried.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Ben?" he called in a slightly louder tone, uncomfortable with really yelling. Rory walked forward. "Benny?"

Becoming accustomed to the dimness, his eyes picked out something white—a person?—by the edge of the parking lot. He seemed to remember a picnic table in that direction,



maybe Benny was sitting over there. That made a lot more sense than wandering around blind.

He carefully covered the distance, feeling with his feet as stepped along, until he hit the curb. The terrain had caused him to misjudge the position of the white object. It wasn't a person, it was something on the ground....

Rory gasped and snatched it up, Benny's scarf smooth against his fingers, still warm. "Benny? C'mon, man, where are you?" He looked around to no avail, then absently looked back at the scarf, eyes narrowing and then flying open in horror. The dark and—he felt with trembling fingers—damp splotches could only be blood. "Ben!" he yelled, heart beating through his chest, by now not caring about disturbing anyone.

He spun around, thinking to run back to the lodge for help, and froze in shock. A huge wolf was standing less than five feet away, staring right at him, crouched in a defensive posture. Rory held his breath, shaking, trying to remember what to do. Play dead? Or was that bears? Fuck.

The wolf was dark, maybe black, and blended into the night seamlessly. Rory waited, as still as he could manage to keep as tremors ran through his frame, reality swimming as he braced for an attack. The wolf moved quickly, and, to Rory's disbelief, snatched the scarf from his hands and bolted into the night.

"Hey!" Rory screamed after it, unthinking, the only thought in his head at that moment that the animal had stolen Benny's damn scarf. He took two steps after the wolf before he stopped, shaking his head. What was he doing, chasing a fucking wild animal?

The first person he encountered when he ran, panicking, back through the huge front doors of the lodge, was Jared.

“Whoa, whoa,” Jared reached an arm out to snag Rory by the waist as he would have run straight past. “What’s going on? Are you okay?” Jared took Rory firmly by the upper arms and bent slightly to look straight into his eyes.

“It’s Benny, oh fuck. I think a wolf attacked him. There was blood and then this huge fucking wolf and it took his scarf and....”

“Stop.” Jared gave Rory a hard shake, once, twice. “Slow down. Benny was outside?”

Rory couldn’t stop trembling. “He wanted to take a walk. But he forgot his jacket, so I was trying to find him, and the lights were all out, but I saw his scarf by the picnic table. It’s white, and it was just lying there, so I picked it up.” Rory finally focused on Jared, who was looking grim. “It had blood on it, I know it.” He lifted his fingers, and two fingertips had light smears of blood. Benny’s blood. Rory started to feel woozy, and Jared just lifted him right into his arms like a bride and crossed to the sofa by the still-smoldering fireplace.

Jared grabbed his hand and studied the bloody fingers, pulling them closer to—sniff them? “Did you drop the scarf?”

“I told you, the wolf took it. I turned around and there was this huge black wolf standing there, and I thought it was going to attack me too, but then it kind of snapped the scarf right out of my hands and ran off. That’s when I ran in, and”—Rory waved his hands around, his chest heaving with the effort to pull in air. “We have to go find him! He’s out

there with that wild animal, bleeding. He doesn't even have a jacket on."

For some reason, more than anything else, the thought of Benny out there in the cold night with no jacket made the tears he'd been holding back finally begin to fall. He rested his forehead against that massive, comforting chest.

*Jared.*

Rory gave himself over to that strength and fought to regain his composure. A flurry of sound and activity buzzed around him, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. Oh God, if anything happened to Benny....

"You, find Curtis. I want every tracker out there now. Start by the picnic table in the parking lot." More movement toward the door, and Rory took a deep breath to steady himself, then rose to follow. Jared was already shaking his head.

"You stay in here."

"No way! I'm not fucking helpless. I need to help look." His voice broke, and he swallowed convulsively. "He's my best friend." Rory frowned up at Jared's serious, determined expression, not caring anymore about whether the "truth" came out, or about the money, or anything other than finding Benny safe and sound.

"I know." Jared's tone was as gentle as his eyes were fierce. "But you don't know the wilderness, you can't see in the dark, and you're not prepared or dressed for it. I don't want to have to save you too. What you *can* do is answer some questions for me." Jared nodded in encouragement, and Rory's knees almost gave out as the tension left him in a

rush, reacting to Jared's leadership and quiet confidence. Jared guided him back down to the leather couch.

"Okay, how long ago, precisely, did Benny leave your suite?"

Rory tried to think. He remembered looking at the clock when he got downstairs. "It was a few minutes before four o'clock."

"Perfect. That helps a lot. Now, tell me everything he was wearing. Besides the lost scarf."

"The pin-striped button-down he had on earlier. Jeans. And his mocs."

"Socks? Underwear?"

Apparently "everything" meant *everything*. "No socks. And boxer briefs. Black."

"Jewelry? Watch?"

Rory began to feel himself calm down as he answered the simple questions. Jared was holding his hands in both of his own, rubbing his fingers comfortingly. "He doesn't wear a watch. Platinum band on his right ring finger. Probably a thick silver necklace, he wears it a lot, but I... I can't remember if he was wearing it tonight."

"Did he have his phone? Or a wallet or keys in his jeans pocket?"

"No, nothing. He hates bulges. Usually has me or Les carry stuff for him."

Jared gave his hands a squeeze and let go. "I'm going to pass this information on to the trackers. You just stay put, right here, until I get back. Okay?"

Rory surprised himself by reaching out to grab Jared's arm as he stood to go. "Don't go." He flushed. "I mean, take me with you. I won't be a bother, I just need to know what's going on."

A huge, bald man Rory recognized as one of the bartenders approached. Jared locked eyes with Rory for a long moment, seeming to see right through to his very soul. He then turned and relayed every detail they'd just discussed, almost verbatim, to the man, Tom, then settled back with Rory on the couch as Tom took off at a rapid clip. Rory's insides were roiling. He was torn between a sense of relief that Jared was obviously staying and a frantic need to go look for Benny.

People flitted around, in and out of view, one stoking the fire up to a warming blaze, another bringing a tray with coffee fixings and some pastries. Jared took phone call after phone call, and finally, just when Rory had been stretched to the breaking point, there was a loud commotion on the front porch.

Jared leapt to his feet. Rory dogged his heels until they reached the door and several naked—naked?—men came through, one carrying an unconscious Benny cradled in his arms.

"Oh my God, Ben. Benny?" Rory took his friend's cold, limp hand firmly in his as he hurried alongside, refusing to give up his place in the procession, which ended at the first room down the west wing. Instead of the guest room Rory expected, he was vastly relieved to see it was a well-stocked infirmary, complete with waiting... doctor? Nurse? Medic? Whatever.

Jared guided Rory to the far side of the gurney Benny had been gently placed on, while the medical professional wasted no time in getting to work on Ben, getting his vitals and taking a look at his pupils and the nasty blood-encrusted cut on his temple. Rory tried to stay out of the way and be content with being this close to Benny, who was alive and safe. But when his friend began moving and calling out wordlessly, he didn't wait for permission but moved in to drape himself over Benny in a quick, one-sided hug before sitting back down and stroking his black hair away from the uninjured side of his face.

“Benny. Benny, love, it's me. Rory. C'mon. Open your eyes, babe.”

Rory repeated his litany over and over, soothing Benny's face with the proffered washcloth, holding his hand. Benny winced and flinched a bit, and Rory, encouraged, leaned over his friend, taking him gently by the shoulders.

Suddenly, Benny lunged upwards, flailing, and knocked Rory back into Jared. With uncanny reflexes, Jared somehow managed to catch Rory in one strong arm and also get a firm grip on Benny, who began twisting and fighting the hold.

“Ben! It's me.” Rory felt his stomach twist as he caught his first glimpse of his friend's panicked and dilated eyes. “I think he's been drugged.”

The three of them managed to get Benny to lie down again, and this time, when Benny's lids fluttered upwards, his gaze zeroing in on Rory was saner, if no less altered by some chemical.

“Ree?” he croaked. “It was Richard,” he slurred, unable to keep his eyes open.

Rory bit his lip and looked away, guilt swamping him as he realized this was all his fault. “Shh, it’s okay now,” he helplessly reassured his friend. “You’re safe.”

“No.” Benny tossed his head on the pillow. “Curt.”

Rory felt Jared stiffen beside him as Benny continued in a near whisper as he faded back into unconsciousness.

“He has Curtis.”

## Chapter Five

“ANY news?”

“No, sir. We did find his....” Tom’s eyes slid to Rory and back to Jared. “His phone and a few other things were on the side porch.” Meaning his clothing, Jared was sure. Fuck. So it *had* been Curtis’s wolf form Rory had seen. He could barely believe it. Something about the situation had brought Curtis’s powers early. And now he was out there, clumsy as a kid driving his first car: all that power, but no knowledge or practice in how to control it.

He stood at the window, gazing unseeing out into the dawn just pinkening the sky, running through scenarios in his mind. Curtis was attuned to Benny. Benny gets up to go outside, and Curtis comes to watch. Someone hit Benny on the head in the parking lot, and Curtis quickly stripped and shifted to pursue the attacker.

But that didn’t account for Rory. So maybe instead, Curtis had heard Rory calling Benny’s name, and when he’d caught on that foul play was involved, he shifted and took the scarf to hone in on Benny’s scent.

The trackers who’d found Benny had also found the scarf there at the scene, along with Curtis’s scent trail and footprints of an unknown man in hiking boots. But worst of all, it was right by a rough, dirt road—with fresh tire tracks. Shit. Curtis could be anywhere by now. And with Benny



drugged and still unconscious, they didn't have much to go on. Except the name.

He whirled back toward Rory.

"Who's Richard?"

Jared knew his voice sounded angry and demanding, but he couldn't bring himself to soften it. Hell, it was taking every ounce of his control not to shift and wreak havoc in his anger at the kidnapping, or worse, of his nephew.

Rory looked wearily up at him from his place beside Benny. They'd all tried in vain to get Rory to take a break from Benny's side, but he clung miserably to his friend, the guilt he felt evident in his face.

His bottom lip quivered just a bit. "Richard was our former manager, before Les."

Jared waited. He knew there was more.

"He's also my ex." The usually confident rocker looked haunted, and Jared just wanted to get through this so he could hold him and never let him go. "He didn't take our breakup well. The rest of the band hated him. He was a great manager for the group, don't get me wrong, but not so great in his personal life. They all warned me to steer clear of him." Rory shook his head in anguish. "Fuck, but I wouldn't listen. He knew all the right things to say."

He shot to his feet, dropping Benny's hand like a hot rock as his cell phone rang. Fumbling it out of his front pocket, he went ashen as he saw the caller ID. His worried eyes met Jared's. "It's him."

"Put it on speaker," he ordered, pulling out his own cell phone and hitting the memo record function.

He clenched his jaw at the first sound of Richard taunting them. “Hello, Rory.” Jared grimaced at the name he’d turned into an endearment in his mind, now being perverted by the twisted fucker’s voice.

“Dammit, Richard. You can’t do this! This is between us, it doesn’t involve the kid and his family.” Rory was still clearly upset with himself, but now he was getting angry at the real person responsible.

“Oh, so you’ve noticed that someone is missing? Or should I say, *something*?”

Jared went still at the thinly veiled reference. Apparently this guy knew about Curtis’s abilities. Fuck, that complicated things.

“What are you talking about?” Rory shook his head. “Bring him back now, unharmed, and you can have what’s left.”

“Don’t worry, I’m done with you. I have bigger fish to fry now, jumped right into my pan, so to speak. Here I was thinking I could use Benny as leverage to clean you two out. But really, you’re too high profile anyway for a mediocre payoff. By the time I’m done selling this guy to the highest bidder, I’ll be able to retire in a style you can only dream of.”

“Selling him? You mean a ransom?” Rory turned his puzzled and guilt-stricken gaze up to Jared. “I can put you in touch with who you need to talk to.”

“I’m sure you can. No cops. I’ll call back tonight.”

“Wait....” The soft disconnect resounded through the deafeningly quiet room. “Oh, fuck. He’s nuts. Jared, I’m so

sorry. Jesus.” Rory brought both hands up to cover his drawn face.

“Come on, let’s go up to my suite.” Jared was suddenly bone weary, and the fatigue that had accumulated from all the sleepless nights he’d spent since Rory had arrived slammed into him at once like a freight train.

“But the police, and Benny, and....”

Jared shook his head, knowing instinctively they would be made to bide their time. Richard had apparently seen enough to know Curtis would be worth big bucks to the right organization or research group. But it would take time to find them, and he would want to play them off against each other and Jared in a bidding war. The only hope he had was that somehow Richard would slip up or underestimate Curtis. Meanwhile, all they could do was wait.

“No police, he said. I can’t take that chance. And Benny will be fine. He’s mostly just sleeping off whatever Richard used on him, and they’ll let us know if anything changes.” Jared tugged Rory’s hand, and he allowed himself to be drawn away from Benny’s bedside. After a quick word with Tom, he led a drooping Rory upstairs.

Once back in his suite, he brooked no arguments as he stripped them both down to their briefs and propelled Rory to his bed. Not exactly how he’d envisioned finally getting the sexy man there, he snorted mirthlessly. Sick with worry for his nephew, lulled by the warmth of Rory, who had fallen almost instantly asleep, tucked up close beside him, he let go of his tenuous grasp on consciousness and drifted to sleep himself.

RORY came gasping out of sleep, heart thumping, in the grips of a nightmare he couldn't quite remember, except it had blood and wild animals. An arm tightened like a steel band across his chest, and he relaxed back into Benny's warmth.

Benny!

Suddenly all the events of the previous night came back to him, and he again tried to sit up, whipping his head back toward his jailor when he made just as little progress as before.

Jared. His warm, burnt honey eyes just inches from his own.

Instantly his heart resumed its wild beating, only this time it was due to the proximity of the magnificent man he'd been lusting after for days. Rory became hyper-aware of a warm, heavy, hair-prickled thigh draped across his, the imprisoning arm tucked around his chest, hand holding his upper arm in a firm grasp, all as if Jared were afraid he would flee given the chance.

"Before you ask, Benny's doing better," Jared murmured, and Rory's gaze was drawn helplessly to his full lips. "He woke up a while ago and is sleeping naturally now. The doc's been able to wake him up every hour to check on him."

"What about Curtis?"

Rory watched as anger and worry rose in Jared's eyes. "Nothing yet."

“I’m so sorry.” His stomach turned. This was all his doing, Benny being hurt, this gentle man’s nephew missing. All because he had trusted someone that everyone else saw through.

“You didn’t do this. Richard did. Don’t worry, we’ll get Curtis back, and when we do, that man will pay.” For an instant, Rory saw a savage gleam in Jared’s eyes, and instead of making him pull away, it drew him in with a need to soothe. He stroked Jared’s face, trying to erase the tension he could read in every line, and Jared seemed to come back to himself with a startled look at Rory.

Before Rory quite knew what was happening, he found himself on his back under Jared’s welcome weight. His body quickly caught up with the program, though, his cock filling rapidly against the pressure. His eyes drifted closed in expectation of the kiss to come but snapped back open when nothing happened.

Jared was shaking his head and began to pull back. Rory latched on with arms and legs in an attempt to arrest his withdrawal, knowing instinctively what he needed to do. At this point, he couldn’t give a shit about the money.

“We’re not together.” He was looking intently at Jared when he confessed, so he saw the surprise and relief ease Jared’s expression when his meaning became clear. Rory stopped fighting to hold him, and Jared relaxed over him, raising an eyebrow inquiringly.

“The contract?” he surmised.

Rory flushed. “I needed the money. Richard cleaned me out.” He squirmed uncomfortably, then froze as he realized his erection couldn’t care less about confession time. It

wanted to move on to the good stuff. He continued quickly in an attempt to get the difficult part over with. “He had access to my accounts and has been systematically emptying them. I just closed the last big one this week, so I guess that’s why he tried to use Benny to get me to give it up. I’m still not sure how he knew where we were, or why he switched to Curtis.”

Jared’s jaw clenched, and Rory wriggled under Jared, smoothing his hands down that wide back, knowing the big man needed a distraction from the helplessness he must be feeling. Jared focused back in on Rory and smiled wryly, eyes crinkling at the corners. For the first time, Rory wondered how old he was.

“Okay, attention back on you.” Jared’s hands came up to bracket Rory’s head, and his thumbs stroked gently over Rory’s temples. Rory closed his eyes, savoring the genuine touch. It had been a long time since he’d been on the receiving end of such a loving caress.

“Can we stop talking now?” Rory pleaded, the need he’d felt since the first time he saw Jared coming to the fore as he arched under Jared. Even using all his strength, he couldn’t budge the larger man. Instead of bothering him, it was enthralling to realize he would have to take whatever Jared wanted to do to Rory at whatever pace he wanted to dole it out.

Jared seemed to read his mind. “I like having you under me like this. Trapped and wanting. Gonna make you feel so good.” And his mouth slammed down on Rory’s, bringing every molecule of his body zinging to life at once. Rory moaned into Jared’s mouth as he explored every nuance and

crevice with his lips and touch, seeming to want to absorb his taste and replace it with his own.

His hands stroked everywhere they could reach across that strong, wide back and shoulders, down to his rock-hard ass. Dipping his shoulders, he could just reach the tops of Jared's thighs and the hem of his clingy boxer briefs. He traced along the lightly haired legs, then spread his hands over the fabric covering Jared's taut backside, all the while a willing participant in the kiss that was leaving him breathless.

As Jared surfaced for air, Rory managed to spread his legs, and Jared settled into the cradle of his thighs. This brought their straining erections into loving juxtaposition, and Rory gasped at the full feel of Jared against him.

Jared smiled wickedly and began to rock, deliberately—it seemed to Rory—setting an agonizing pace that rubbed in all the right places, but too slowly. By no means could he get Jared to vary from the rhythm he'd set, so he took the only avenue open to him. Rory turned his head, bringing his teeth together on the muscular arm braced next to him in a warning love bite.

This galvanized Jared into blessed action, and he sat back on his heels, eyes full of promise as he ripped Rory's briefs down his legs, then stood to shuck his own. He pulled open the drawer of his nightstand.

But instead of the lube and rubber Rory was expecting, his prick bobbed as he almost lost his control at the sight of what Jared teasingly dangled from his fingers.

Wide leather cuffs and straps, and a black silk scarf. Holy shit.

“Do I need to gag you?” Jared growled playfully, then let his eyes drop to Rory’s begging erection, which was glistening with pre-cum. His own cock gave a jump, and his breath hitched. He tossed the whole handful back in the drawer. “Maybe next time,” he conceded hoarsely, and this time his hand came out of the drawer with the expected supplies.

Jared’s knees hit the bed between Rory’s legs, and he paused and looked at Rory with a surprising amount of apprehension as he popped the lube open. “You do bottom?”

“Duh.” Rory couldn’t fight a back a laugh. *As if* he’d dare to think he’d be topping He-man. “Give me that, you’re going way too slow.” He snatched the lube from Jared and began to work himself open, knowing he was going to need some serious prep due to both the length of time he’d been without and the girth of the erection proudly curving up from between Jared’s powerful thighs. The erection he was slowly rolling the condom down.

“Fuck it, I’m ready.” Rory reached for the prize and finished slicking the rubber down that warm, pulsing length. “How do you want me?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned over, lowering his head to his arms and wagging his ass invitingly.

A large, warm hand stroked down his lower back, then around the curve of his hip. Jared’s other hand came up and teasingly stroked over Rory’s grasping entrance before delving inside. Rory almost came from the feel of the warm, thick fingers stretching him wider than his own had done. They worked and withdrew, only to return, curling and searching until....



“Ahh,” Rory yelled as his fingers glanced across his prostate, wringing a shudder of pleasure from him that almost ended the whole thing. “Oh, come on. Please?” He arched his ass backwards, spreading himself as completely open as he could before Jared.

Apparently this was too much for him to resist, and Rory finally felt the blunt pressure of Jared’s hard cock seeking entrance against his hole. The press grew inexorably until he felt himself yield with a quick burst of pain that soon began to fade toward pleasure as Jared held still, waiting for his acquiescence. He blew out a gust of air as the final twinges passed and began to move himself on Jared’s shaft.

Jared took the sign and ran with it, easing forward with a smooth press until he was fully sheathed inside Rory, his hair rough against Rory’s ass, sac resting against his own. The feeling of being possessed by Jared was the most incredible thing Rory had ever experienced, the rightness of it, the totality of his claim on Rory, body and soul.

Then he began to move.

Rory knew instantly that he wouldn’t last. He even set a number of strokes in his head. If he could only make it past ten....

He could feel the tingling promise at the base of his balls as Jared drew back and then rammed forth the third time. Oh no, not so soon. Rory panted with the effort of holding back, and then Jared wrested him upright, bringing him back against that massive chest, changing the angle of the thrusts inside him to one he couldn’t fight any longer. And why did he want to?

He threw his head back against Jared's shoulder as Jared wrapped a hand around his erection, giving him the touch he needed. Just like that, he was coming in long, endless ropes over Jared's hand and the pillow below, tightening and loosening around Jared's cock, shaking with his release.

He sagged in Jared's sure hold as Jared whispered in his ear. "I knew you'd be fucking beautiful. Ah, Rory." He thrust a few more times, then held hard against him, and Rory could feel the pulsing within him as Jared stiffened and found his own completion, hips snapping erratically a couple more times before he collapsed to his side, pulling Rory with him into a tangle of limbs.

Their combined pants for breath were the only sounds in the room for several minutes as they recovered themselves. Jared finally eased himself slowly from Rory and disappeared into what must be the en suite bathroom. A few sounds of water, and then Jared was back with a warm washcloth, which he gently applied to Rory, cleaning him with a caring, soft touch.

"I should get up," he said regretfully, then paradoxically crawled in behind Rory, pulling him into his arms to Rory's deep satisfaction. Rory couldn't mistake the depth of emotion leaking from Jared, touching Rory as if he was something precious and rare.

Melting back into the embrace, he countered, "Just a few minutes, then we'll both go."

*Mmm, Jared,* his mind whispered contentedly.

"Hmm?" came the response.

*Did I say that out loud?*

“No,” Jared mumbled uncomfortably.

*What the fuck?* Rory pressed his lips firmly together to make sure he wasn't whispering. *Okay, can you hear me now? Or am I losing my mind?*

A sigh from his bedmate. “No, you're not. I guess it's time to talk about a few things.”

“You can hear what I'm thinking?” Mind reeling, Rory tried to roll away from Jared, who, after a brief tightening of his embrace, reluctantly relinquished his hold. Rory stopped on the edge of the bed, trying to wrap his mind around the evidence before him. But before he thought any more about it...

“Hey. Can you, uh, turn that off for a while? I want to think in private.” An awful thought occurred to him. “Or is my mind an open book now? Shit.” He dropped his head into his hands. Just a little while ago, he'd thought that the Benny/wolf thing was the weirdest thing that had ever happened to him.

“I can tune you out, yes.” Rory could almost feel Jared's hand hovering just inches from his back and waited for the touch he wasn't certain he wanted. Perversely, he was deeply disappointed when the hand dropped away without making contact.

Jared sighed. “I'm only so strong, Rory, and if I touch you, there's no way I can keep your thoughts from communicating themselves to me.”

Rory whipped around, pissed. “I thought I told you to stay out of my head!”

“Well, fuck, Rory. I’m just getting the hang of this too,” Jared shot back. “And when you’re thinking that fucking hard, it’s like ignoring a bullhorn.”

Something clicked in Rory’s brain. “This is new to you too. But it didn’t surprise you. Not entirely.” One thought and memory after another chased around his mind: the stacked physiques of Jared—and Curtis—and everyone else here for that matter. The stealthy, silent way they moved. The weird way Jared sniffed at the blood on his fingers. The ban on photography.

On horror flick after another flashed in turn. Vampires turning into wolves and bats, bloodthirsty werewolves. God, was he nuts? It would be easy to dismiss this all as a dream, except for the indisputable way Jared was now able to pluck thoughts and emotions out of his mind.

Jared watched him solemnly, warily, and Rory realized that his bedmate was tense with... fear? As if he expected his whole world to be swept out from under his feet. Rory felt a wash of compassion for him. Jared must be worried sick about Curtis, and Rory’s tantrum wasn’t helping matters. After all, it wasn’t as if Jared had ever shown any ill intent toward Rory or anyone else. No, he was intelligent and considerate and caring. His eyes wandered down Jared’s still-naked form. And sexy as hell.

He tried an experiment. Watching Jared closely, he mentally shouted, *What are you?* as “loud” as he could and was rewarded with a visible wince.

“Does this mean you’re ready to talk?” Jared rubbed his temple wearily.

Rory agreed wholeheartedly. “Oh, fuck yes, it’s time to talk. For starters, why the hell can you hear me, and I can’t hear you, dammit? That’s so not fair.”

## Chapter Six

OF ALL the possible first questions Rory could have come up with, Jared was unprepared for that one. And he was a little stunned himself. Mental communication outside of blood relatives was not unheard of, but it was not common either. Only a small percentage of mates ever achieved that sort of connection.

Might as well get this over with.

*You can when I'm projecting to you.*

Rory's beautiful eyes widened. *Oh good! That's much better. Wow! How awesome is that?*

Now Jared was utterly floored. He'd expected disbelief, fear, or even disgust, but not... excitement? "This doesn't bother you?"

"Bother? That's a bit strong. It's freaky, yeah, but, honestly?" He shrugged. "Hell no, this is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me." Rory gazed up at him expectantly. "Say something else."

Jared felt an unwilling smile surface at the antics of his new mate. *Like what?*

*Mate?!*

Uh oh. Did he leak that? Rory's eyes had narrowed on his speculatively.

“Are you a vampire? No, duh, I’ve seen you out in the daylight. Oh!” he gasped. “I know, you’re werewolves! That wolf in the parking lot, was that you? Dammit, you scared the shit out of me,” Rory scolded.

Jared tried to keep up. “Whoa, okay. Slow down. You’re partially right.” He watched Rory carefully, heart pounding, as he disclosed, “We’re shapeshifters.”

Rory cocked his head inquisitively. “So what does that mean? Can you pick any shape? Ooh, how about a dragon? Can you become a dragon? Or does it have to be a ‘real’ animal? Oh, well, I guess if you’re real, then maybe dragons are too.”

It was the most Twilight Zone conversation Jared had ever taken part in. He snorted. And Jared had thought *Rory* would be the one confused.

“Silly man. Uh, shapeshifter. Now, about the dragons....”

A double knock on the suite door made them both jump, and Jared managed to get them both covered with a sheet before Tom used his passkey to come in.

“We know where they are.”

JARED glanced in Rory’s general direction one last time. He was firmly ensconced—over Jared’s vehement objections—in the cab of the truck just out of sight. He’d refused to stay behind at the lodge, saying that since Richard had been drawn here because of him, he needed to be there when they ripped Richard to pieces. Jared had patiently explained that

they weren't going to kill the man, to Rory's reluctant understanding. He'd pouted for a moment before conceding that killing him was indeed a bit drastic.

He shook his head, having the premonition that doing so would become a very familiar reaction over his lifetime with Rory. His mate. His love.

Forcibly pulling his focus back to the current situation, he ran through what they knew. The Hummer parked tauntingly on their own clan's land was indeed registered to Richard Hankins, and the trackers had seen a laptop and a satellite phone, as well as several guns. But Richard was alone, except for the inert covered form on the backseat they believed to be Curtis, back in human form.

Richard, for his part, was dozing in the driver's seat, windows lowered, seemingly unaware of the danger closing in on him. It was all rather anticlimactic. In the end, they didn't even need to resort to using their powers. Yanking open the unlocked door, one of their clan members, who was also a Sheriff's Deputy, had Richard subdued, disarmed, cuffed, and read his Miranda rights before he knew what was happening.

Jared threw open the back door and uncovered Curtis. Naked and cuffed, he had evidently been kept drugged with the same thing Richard had injected Benny with. He remained unconscious throughout his transfer to Jared's truck and the long, bumpy ride back to the lodge.



AS SOON as they pulled up, Benny ran out to meet them. Jared carried Curtis toward the infirmary. “Oh god, is he okay?”

“Hey, what’re you doing up?” Rory had never been so glad to see his friend in his life. He pulled him in for a hard, heartfelt embrace. “Oh, your poor head!” The stitched cut was bandaged, but the blow had caused a colorful black eye.

“I’m fine,” Benny waved off the concern impatiently. “How’s Curtis?”

Les and Buzz and Pierce crowded around them. “They think he’ll be okay. He’s still knocked out with whatever Richard used on you, but he doesn’t look injured.”

“What about that asshole, Richard?” Benny’s voice hardened. “I can’t believe he did this. I always knew he was a vile weasel, but assault and kidnapping? What was he thinking? He’s fucking nuts!”

Rory dropped his head, shame searing his core.

“Hey,” Benny’s voice gentled considerably as he forced Rory to meet his dark gaze. “What’s this?”

“It’s my fault.”

“What?”

Rory sighed, looking around at his band, his family. Time to come clean. And he explained all that had happened from his now-embarrassing trust in the man to Richard’s theft and the shame he felt at the betrayal.

“I didn’t want to tell you guys, because I didn’t want to hear—”

“I told you so?” Benny finished for him gruffly. “You stupid fucker. Of course we’d say that. But we wouldn’t

think any less of you. Jesus, you're human. Everyone fucks up sometimes, but it wasn't your fault. *He's* the criminal. Not you."

"I thought I'd shut him down when I closed the last account. I never dreamed he'd try using you to get to me. I don't even know how he knew where we were. This was just a private gig slash vacation, not on the schedule."

Buzz cleared his throat, and Rory look up into his sheepish eyes. "Sorry, man. I didn't know."

Comprehension bloomed. "Your blog."

"Yeah. He follows it, I'm sure. We put up pics and stories, and I kinda mentioned the name of the lodge. Hell, I thought it was only fair, give them a bit of publicity, you know?" Buzz added defensively.

"And with all the shots of you two making out, he saw an opportunity to score," Pierce guessed. "Crazy fucker. But I don't get why he'd dump Benny for Curtis. How did he know he was connected to money?"

Rory locked gazes with Benny, who frowned at him warningly. Even without that reminder, Rory knew he'd never betray Jared's trust, even to his closest friends. And evidently his *best* friend knew the truth, or enough to guess anyway.

Rory shrugged nonchalantly as he fibbed, "Oh, you know how he has lots of connections and is always online. He probably recognized him from a picture." The three clueless members of their group nodded, accepting that idea, and Rory went limp with relief. A firm arm around his shoulder buoyed him up.

Benny.

Who should probably be in bed.

“And what are you doing up? I think you need a trip to the infirmary,” he teased, enjoying the rare flush coloring Benny’s cheeks. So that was the way the wind was blowing. He’d thought as much.

Time to play Cupid.

WHEN they entered the infirmary, they were glad to see Curtis awake, if not completely aware. Jared smiled as they came in, and the happy look on his face took Rory’s breath away. He couldn’t restrain himself for another moment and vaulted into Jared’s arms, trusting his love’s quick reflexes to catch him.

Suspended above the ground, he took advantage of being at eye level with Jared and kissed him with every bit of love he felt, wrapping his arms around Jared tightly, never wanting to let go.

When he surfaced, Rory opened his eyes to a sight that ranked almost as high on his happy-meter: Curtis sitting up with Benny straddling his lap, foreheads gently resting together as they silently communed.

“Hey, take it easy on the patient, you spaz,” Rory teased his friend, who flipped him off without turning away from Curtis. Curtis turned beet red.

Adorable.

Jared gave him a squeeze, then managed to settle them into the bedside chair without dislodging Rory's stranglehold on his neck, much to his delight.

"I was just telling Curtis that Richard has been arrested. And with the evidence of theft, trespassing, kidnapping, and assault, at the very least, we shouldn't be bothered by him for some time."

A sudden thought made Rory's stomach turn. "What if he got hold of some awful people and told them where you are?"

Jared looked at him reassuringly. "It's possible, but I doubt he'd have given away much without being sure of his payout. It was such a spur-of-the-moment thing, taking Curtis, that he would've had to start from square one trying to find a 'buyer'. We have some computer techs working on finding out exactly what he managed to accomplish before we found him." He shifted Rory around so he was straddling Jared.

*Mmm.* Rory didn't care if it was meant as a distraction tactic. It worked. Heedless of their audience, Rory rotated against the growing ridge under Jared's zipper, his own cock perking in response.

"In the meantime, don't worry. Our eye in the sky will keep us safe."

*Eye in the sky?*

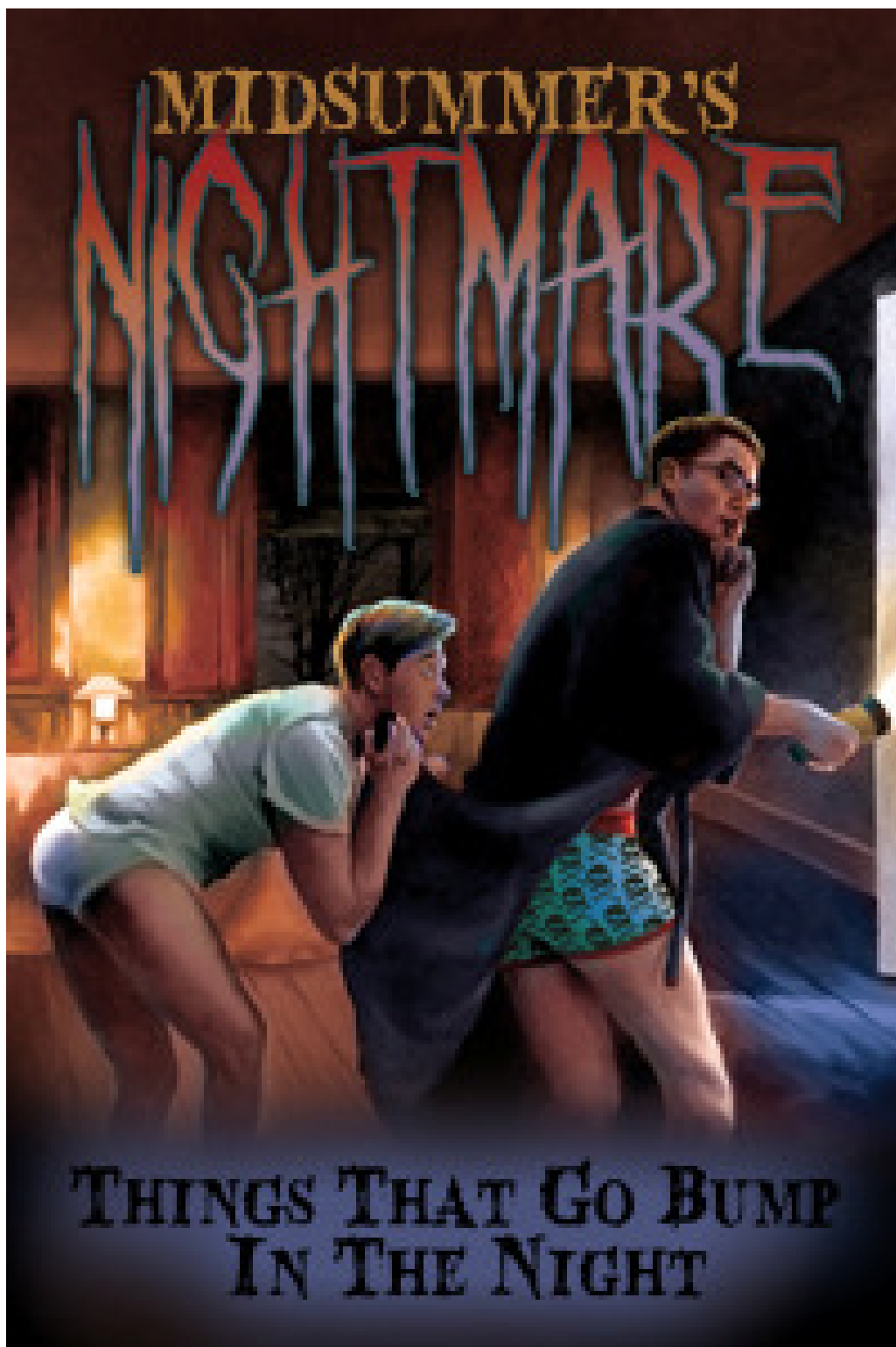
"As in a satellite? Or birds?"

Jared winked at him. "Dragons."

Rory's eyes widened in delight.

*Wild.*

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