

The Raven's Flight



Catherine Lievens

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE RAVEN'S FLIGHT

By Catherine Lievens

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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Photo Description

The picture is a close-up of a gorgeous Native American man. His long, black hair moves with the wind and flows against his right shoulder. His dark eyes are looking straight at you, and you can almost *feel* them on your skin. His arms are crossed on his hairless chest, and there's a barbed wire tattoo wrapped around his upper right arm. His plump, pink lips are highlighted by the dark stubble on his cheeks.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have never ventured far from home. Being a shifter keeps me from becoming a part of society, but it seems that society is beginning to infringe on my territory. They, the humans, are all so full of themselves and think they are entitled to my land. But there is one man, who stands up to the others, who stands on his own... he draws my attention. Why?

Sincerely,

Raevyn

P.S. I would prefer a non-wolf shifter, but something strong. I would like for the human to be a smaller, more flamboyant man. Please no rape or torture. And I really want an HEA.

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, contemporary

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Chapter One

The bird's beady eyes were fastened on the humans milling under its tree.

They were invading his forest, his territory, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. He cawed, trying to be menacing, but no one cared. The humans were all busy—they had places to go, things to do, and they didn't even notice him.

The bird took flight, wanting nothing more than to be home. The humans hadn't gotten there yet, and they never would. The bird would defend his home to his last breath, no matter how much money they offered him to sell it.

The wind rushed around the bird, sliding along his slick black feathers, making him want to fly away from his human problems. It was a temptation that was hard to resist when he was in the raven form, but Kangee did, just like always.

A roof made of thick, dark logs appeared between the trees the bird was flying over, and he flew lower. He circled the house and the small clearing in front of it a few times, his eyes noticing a squirrel right at the tree border when the small animal moved. He briefly thought about catching it, but decided against it. His human part much preferred pancakes and eggs for breakfast.

Kangee landed in front of his house. Pulling his wings tighter around him, he set to grooming his feathers. He wasn't that dirty, but his bird half was happy with the simple routine.

Kangee cawed once more before shifting back to his human form. He walked up the stairs that led to his front door and grabbed the jeans he'd left on the porch's railing. At least it was summer, and he wasn't freezing his bits off.

The noises of laughing kids and bathing humans still reached his ears, even with the distance between his home and the nearest hotel, and he scowled. He wanted peace, and he couldn't have it, not even in the middle of nowhere.

His long hair moved in the soft wind blowing around him as he pushed open the front door and let himself in. It was time for breakfast, and he was hungry. He always was after flying.

Kangee walked through his living room, stopping briefly and letting his finger dance on the glass of one of the framed pictures on his fireplace. He stroked the cool glass with his thumb in a gesture he repeated often and sighed

as memories of his family ran through his mind. He shook his head, smiling at the frame before walking to the kitchen.

He opened the fridge and scowled at the contents—not that they were many. The fridge was close to being empty, and it didn't help with Kangee's mood. It meant he was going to have to take his car and drive to Kilkenny, and worse, interact with people, which was the last thing he wanted. Maybe he should have eaten that squirrel after all, or maybe he could have looked for a rabbit. There were plenty of those in the Rockies.

After one last glance at the lone wrinkled lemon and the jar of pickles—the only things in the fridge—he closed the door and decided he might as well go grocery shopping right then.

Chucking his clothes again, Kangee closed the front door behind himself, but he didn't bother to lock it. There was no one around, at least not near enough to want to try to get in his home. No one had even gotten close to his home in the past seven years, and he didn't think they were going to start now.

The local grocery store was in Kilkenny, and as much as Kangee wanted to keep himself far away from people, he did need to eat, and after a while squirrels just didn't do it anymore. At least the town was small and usually had few inhabitants. The population increased quite a bit during summers, but it was contained. It was still too many people for Kangee's taste, though, and he went there only when he had no other choice—which meant when he was close to starving and was fed up with hunting in his raven form.

He shifted and took flight again. There was something about being in the air and being in his raven form that made him feel free. The raven knew where he had to go, and Kangee released the flimsy control he had over it. His mind became less human, more primal, and he let go of the everyday worries that burdened his human half.

The flight didn't last long enough for Kangee's taste, but he really needed to eat. He landed in a tree next to the wooden shed that contained his car and the quad he used to take the groceries home and searched the hole in the trunk where he always left his keys.

He dropped both sets of keys to the ground and followed them, shaking his feathers out before shifting. He grabbed the keys from the ground and opened the shed, taking his clothes from the shelf to his right and putting them on before pocketing the quad's keys and opening the car's door.

He squirmed, feeling uncomfortable. He was used to walking around almost naked, especially in the summer, and the shoes he needed to wear to go out felt heavy and constricting on his feet. They restricted his toes even when he tried to wiggle them, and he couldn't feel anything through the soles. Still, it was a necessary hardship, so he climbed in the car and turned it on before backing it out. A few minutes later, he was on the road to Kilkenny.

The room was... an eyeful.

Jase finished pushing the door open and stepped in, closing it behind himself. He dumped his bag on the bed and wrinkled his nose. The room was very flowery. There was no other way to describe it, really.

The bedspread was stamped with dark- and light-pink flowers and dark-green leaves and reflected the motif running around the higher part of the light pink walls, walls that matched perfectly the curtains hanging at the window and even the generic watercolor painting on the wall.

The queen-size bed had a light wooden frame, rough and irregular, as if it had been carved by hand. It probably had, actually, just like the small table and chairs that cluttered the corner of the room.

Jase shuddered. His grandmother would have felt right at home in the room, and while Jase actually liked the wooden furniture, he wasn't exactly fond of the pink palette.

Knowing he wouldn't have to spend a lot of time in his room made him feel better. He couldn't wait to go back out there. There was nothing better than camping, but he was going to have to wait a little before doing that. He wanted to explore the small town and the forest around it before heading farther in and planting his tent. He had already planned everything.

Grabbing his key, Jase walked out and locked the door before heading to the small grocery store. He might not be about to go camping, but he had every intention of hiking a bit, and he needed supplies.

He wasn't in Kilkenny for vacation, but he still wanted to have fun. His parents were funding his research trip, and his mother had insisted he have fun as well as look for the bear he needed to find. It was the only condition she had given him, and he had agreed. There really wasn't much to have fun with in the small town, though.

Kilkenny was alive with summer visitors, true, but most of them were families and older couples. The most entertaining thing Jase had found when he had researched the town was the city park. He could also swim in the lake, of course, but he didn't really want to do it at one of the organized beaches. They were packed with small kids running around—definitely not Jase's idea of fun.

He nodded at the motel's owner as he passed by the counter before following the instructions the man had given him when he had registered. It wasn't a long walk—nothing could be in so small a town—but Jase enjoyed being in the open. The sky was a deep summer blue, not one cloud in sight, and the sun was warm on his skin. It was the perfect day.

There was nothing Jase wanted more than to head into the forest right away or maybe walk to the lake, but instead, he walked through the swooshing doors of the store and took a deep air-conditioned breath.

The store wasn't full, and he let his eyes idly pass over the other customers as he looked around, at least until they encountered *him*.

Him, the sexiest man Jase had ever seen. He could see only the man's back from where he was standing, but what he saw was enough for him to be sure of that.

The man was tall, and his long, black hair reached the middle of his back. It was the perfect length for Jase to bury his hands into, for him to grab on to while he moved in the guy's perfectly rounded ass, even if Jase knew it would never happen.

Even if Perfect Guy was gay—and Jase would have to be really lucky to find a gay man in Kilkenny—he doubted the man would eagerly bottom for him, even if only occasionally. No one ever thought Jase would want to top, not with his short height and slight body. No, he screamed bottom, and he hated it.

Perfect Guy turned around, a melon in his hand, and Jase eagerly looked at his front side. *Yup, perfect.*

The man's eyes were as dark as his hair, and Jase was ready to bet that he had some Native American ancestors. His skin was a dark caramel tone, his cheekbones were high, his nose straight, and from what little Jase could see under the guy's wifebeater, his chest was smooth and hairless.

Jase wasn't what anyone would call shy, so he walked straight up to the guy and stuck his hand out. "Hi."

Perfect Guy looked at the offered hand as if it were about to bite him. "What do you want?"

"Okay, let's try this again." Jase wiggled his hand to make sure the guy saw it. "Hi."

The only answer that came Jase's way was a scowl. "What. Do. You. Want?"

"I'm Jase."

"I'm not interested."

Perfect Guy put the melon in his cart and turned around to grab some strawberries. "In what? Buying a vacuum cleaner? Knives? Something to make your dick bigger?"

The strawberries fell down, and Jase crouched to pick them up. "Pity. I bet these are delicious."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" The man looked around, probably to check if anyone had heard them, but Jase knew no one was close enough. He might be a smart-ass, but he didn't want to embarrass the guy. He wasn't *that* cruel. Not always anyway.

"You assumed you didn't want whatever I was offering, but you don't even know what it is."

That earned him another scowl. Jase couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun, so he gave the guy a wide smile and ignored the narrowed eyes and the pursed lips. The guy tried to walk around Jase, but he sidestepped him, making sure he kept himself in the man's path.

The man stopped and took a deep breath. "Again, what do you want?"

"Your name."

"That's it?"

"Yup." Jase offered his hand again. "I'm Jase."

"I'm not deaf. I heard you the first time."

"This is the moment where you grab my hand, shake it, and tell me your name so I can stop calling you Perfect Guy in my mind."

Perfect Guy opened his mouth, closed it with a snap, then grabbed Jase's hand and gave it a hard shake. "I'm Kangee."

Definitely Native American. “What does it mean?”

“What do you care?”

Jase was still standing in front of Kangee, but it looked like the man had had enough of him. He grabbed Jase's waist with both hands and hauled him up, putting him down on his other side, and walked away.

Does he really think he's going to get rid of me so easily? Jase was actually impressed. It usually took him a lot less to push people to their breaking point.

Jase followed, keeping his chatter up as Kangee selected stuff from the shelves and let it fall in his cart. “It's a nice name, and I'm guessing you have Native American ancestors. I was just wondering what it meant.”

Kangee ignored him, but Jase wasn't easily dissuaded. “Bear? Wolf? Rabbit?”

Kangee froze. “Rabbit? You think my mother would've called me rabbit?”

“Not really, but it got you to talk to me again.” Kangee didn't look all that happy, so Jase went on, “Dog? Cat? No, wait, butterfly?”

“Raven.”

“Raven?” Jase looked Kangee up and down. “Yeah, it suits you.”

“I feel so much better now that I have your approval.”

“There's no need to be sarcastic.”

“I wouldn't be if you stopped bugging me.”

Jase made a show of raising his hand to his heart. “Oh, now you're hurting me.”

Kangee shook his head and headed to the checkout, and Jase remembered why he had walked into the grocery store in the first place. He looked at the swinging ass walking away from him and yelled, “Can I have your phone number?”

Kangee didn't even bother to answer. He waved at Jase without even turning around as the girl at the counter packed his things, and Jase sighed. That could have gone better.

Kangee threw the envelope and everything it contained on the floor. He felt the intense need to set it on fire, or at least shred it to pieces, but he knew it

wouldn't solve anything and that a new one would come sooner or later anyway.

What scared him, though, was that if he kept on ignoring the letters, he might end up with someone on his porch and knocking at his door one day. Sure, it wouldn't be an easy thing, what with him living literally in the middle of the woods, but it was possible. Kangee didn't think the sharks that were after his home would have scruples about anything, let alone about finding a way to his front door.

He hadn't wanted to go into town, but he hadn't thought it would've been so bad. Not only was the mail that had arrived in his post-office box mostly bills, but he'd also met that smart-ass, mouthy kid in the store.

For some reason, the guy had been particularly annoying. Kangee had had more than enough after about five minutes of yapping, and he could only imagine how the guy's family and friends could stand him if he was *always* like that.

Still, his being annoying didn't explain why Kangee had fled that way. Yes, he wasn't used to being around people, and he wasn't used to talking much, but he should have been able to handle Jase or at least ignore him. Instead, Jase had gotten under Kangee's skin as soon as he had opened his mouth to say hi, both annoying Kangee and making him horny as hell.

Jase was what many would call a twink. Slight, short, and Kangee was ready to bet there wasn't a lot of muscle on his frame. That didn't mean Jase wasn't hot as hell, though. He was just softer than what Kangee was used to, not that he'd had a lot of lovers lately.

It could've been because of the way Jase's blond hair flopped in front of his eyes, reaching almost down to his nose. It could've been the big brown eyes that had peeked from under the silky-looking curtain, framed by long lashes and neat eyebrows, or the straight nose. It could've been the pair of plump lips made for kissing, and not only for that.

It didn't take much for Kangee to imagine them stretched around his cock as Jase's wicked eyes looked up at him, and his tongue worked Kangee's length.

Kangee shook his head to disperse the naughty images running through his mind and finished shoving his groceries into the fridge before taking off again. He couldn't afford to think of Jase like that, because he knew that even if he did, Jase would be one of the one-night stands Kangee was used to. He already knew he wanted more than that, though, even if they had talked only briefly.

Jase was annoying enough to stand up to Kangee, to mock him and his deep-seated habits, and to not get offended by Kangee's harsh words. In short, he was the perfect man for Kangee, yet Kangee couldn't have him.

He slammed his front door closed and ignored the quad he had left next to the porch, throwing his clothes off before shifting and flying away.

He retreated deeper into his mind, letting the raven take control and relishing in the sensations. When he was a bird, he didn't have to think about bills, offers to buy his land or annoying twinks. He was free from his human side, even if only for the short time of a flight.

The raven headed toward the lake and soared above the water, periodically crying out at other birds. Kangee gave the raven's mind a little push, and the bird moved over their property, checking the borders for intruders but not seeing any. The bird flew back in the lake's direction, wanting to feel the damp air slide over his feathers again.

Flying low over the sandy beach, the raven noticed a gleaming whitish pebble on the ground close to the shore and swooped down, landing beside it. It pecked at the pebble with its beak, turning it around to examine the other side of it. Once satisfied both sides were good enough, the raven picked the pebble up with its beak and took flight again, this time heading toward Kilkenny. Instinct was running strong through the raven's mind, and Kangee let him lead. He could feel they needed to get to Kilkenny as soon as possible, even if he didn't know why.

The raven soared above the small town, its eyes moving from person to person as it looked for *him*. Kangee didn't try to intervene, or at least he didn't until the raven spotted who it was looking for, and Kangee finally understood what was going on.

He wanted to groan, maybe stomp his foot and stalk away, but he could only watch from the back of the raven's mind as the bird flew lower and lower until they reached Jase.

Jase looked up from the screen of his cell phone when he heard a loud *kraa* coming from somewhere too close for him to be comfortable.

His eyes widened when he noticed the black bird standing in front of the bench he was sitting on, so close to him that he could have touched it if he had wanted to. The thing was huge, and Jase pressed his back against the wood of the bench and tried to put a little more space between them.

He knew what kind of bird it was, but he'd never seen so big a raven, and the way it looked at Jase made him a touch uneasy. He knew ravens were intelligent, but he really didn't think they were supposed to stare like this one was doing.

He watched as the bird delicately took something it had found on the ground in its beak and hopped closer, biting his lip to avoid making noise and scare the bird away. The raven was gorgeous. It opened its wings wide, and Jase enjoyed the sight of the spread primary feathers as the light gleamed over them and made the deep black color of them appear almost blue.

The raven flapped his wings and hopped on the bench next to Jase. Jase yelped, even if the bird didn't seem to be aggressive. Still, he slowly slid sideways, just to be sure the raven wouldn't come too close, but the raven didn't seem to care. It lowered its head, and Jase watched as it put whatever it had picked up down before slightly retreating.

It was a white pebble.

Jase's eyes went from the pebble to the bird. What was the raven doing?

When Jase didn't move, the bird hopped closer again and pushed the pebble toward Jase with its beak. It clearly wanted Jase to take the thing, and Jase hesitantly reached for it, keeping his eyes on the strong beak since he really wanted to keep all his fingers.

The pebble was smooth and cool, but it was just a pebble. There was nothing special about it, and Jase had no idea why the raven wanted him to have it. Still, the bird looked satisfied—as much as a bird could look satisfied anyway—and it hopped down off the bench before flying away, leaving a stunned Jase behind. “That was... weird.”

Jase looked down at the pebble in his hand again, but he still had no idea what had just happened, so he got up. It was time to head back to his room anyway. He needed to get ready to head out to the forest. He was in Kilkenny for a reason, and he had every intention of finding the bear he was looking for.

He made to throw the pebble away, but he hesitated, his arm already raised. The raven obviously wanted him to have it, and while it shouldn't have mattered, Jase wasn't sure it didn't. He realized he didn't want to throw it away. It wasn't big, and keeping it wouldn't give him any problems, so he slid the small stone in his pocket and walked out of the city park, following Main Street until he reached his motel.

The room was still as grandmotherly and pink as it had been when he had left it earlier, and Jase ignored it as well as he could and reached for the map he had left on the wooden table. His gaze skimmed over it as he wondered where he should start to look for the grizzlies he hoped he would find.

They weren't an endangered species, not anymore, but they usually lived up north. The fact that they seemed to be expanding along the Rockies was very good news, but it wasn't documented yet. Jase was going to find the bear someone had seen, and he would document it. It was a good subject for his thesis, but the bear had to cooperate. Even if it didn't, Jase was as stubborn as they came, and he was going to find it.

Chapter Two

The raven was still in charge when it landed on Kangee's porch, but that didn't last long.

Kangee shifted as soon as the bird's feet touched the wooden floor and shook himself as if trying to put some distance between them. He couldn't believe what had just happened, and he was a little puzzled. Why had his raven felt the need to give Jase a gift? He knew someone who could probably answer that, so he pushed the front door of his house open and quickly pulled on clothes before grabbing his phone. He dialed the number without even looking, having done it often enough to remember it.

"Hello?"

"Hi."

"Kangee!"

Kangee smiled at his brother's obvious enthusiasm. Mojag's name fit him perfectly since it meant *never silent*, and he was already talking Kangee's ear off.

"—she's doing really good, you know, and—"

"Mojag."

"What?"

"I'm glad to hear Tanhya is doing well, but I have a question."

Mojag was older than Kangee by ten years, so while Kangee had barely known their father, his brother had spent a good thirteen years with the man, and Kangee hoped he could tell him more about what had happened.

"Go on."

"What does it mean when the raven gifts stuff?"

"Gifts? Like twigs and shiny things?"

"More or less."

"What is it that you're not telling me, Kangee?" Mojag's voice was teasing, and Kangee just knew that what the raven had done was important. Now he had to convince his brother to spill the beans.

“My raven gifted someone a pebble.”

“Did he accept it?”

“Why did you assume it was a man?”

“Who else would your raven try to impress?”

“Oh, no. No way.”

“I take it that’s not what you want?”

“Definitely not! I can’t want that—that guy! Not him!”

Kangee could hear Mojag laugh on the other side of the phone. “I’m actually impressed you managed to find someone who appeals to your raven since you hardly ever step out of your house. Where did you meet him? Grocery store?”

Mojag knew Kangee too well, and the man knew it. “I don’t see why else I should go out.”

Mojag sighed. “I know you think we shouldn’t mingle with humans, but I still think you’re wrong. Look at Elise and me. She’s absolutely fine with what I am.”

“Yeah, Elise is, but how common can that be? Anyone else would have run away screaming bloody murder as soon as they’d seen you shift.”

“You can’t know that. Maybe what’s-his-name wouldn’t mind. Maybe he would accept your bird. How did he react when you gave him the pebble?”

Kangee thought about it. Jase hadn’t seemed scared, merely cautious and curious. “It doesn’t mean he wouldn’t rat me out to the media.”

“No, but you don’t have to tell him right this second. Heck, you don’t even have to ever tell him if you don’t want to. Why don’t you get to know him and decide once you do?”

Kangee thought about Jase, about his full lips and bright, brown eyes, and a pang of longing shot through him. He lived a very lonely life, even if it was self-inflicted, and he really wanted Jase to make it less lonely, at least for a while.

No. Jase was obnoxious, annoying, mouthy, and too lively and cute to put up with Kangee, no matter how much his raven might like the guy. Besides, the bird might like him, but Kangee certainly didn’t. Nope, he didn’t.

“When are you going to come by? Elise and Tanhya miss you.”

Kangee snorted. “Tanhya is only five. I don’t think she even remembers me.”

“Probably not, which means you’ve been on your own for way too long.”

Kangee couldn’t protest against that because it was true.

The night was already falling, and Jase was nowhere close to Kilkenny. He hadn’t found anything on his first hike, but he wasn’t one to give in easily, so he trudged on, trying not to think of the way his T-shirt was sticking to his chest and the itchy insect bites. No matter how much repellent he sprayed on himself, they always managed to find the only spot he had missed.

At least it wasn’t completely dark yet. He knew he should have started the hike back to town at least an hour ago, but he had found a bear trail—what he had thought was a bear trail—and he had decided to walk a little bit more. He hadn’t found anything anyway.

The bushes to his left rustled as something moved in them. Jase froze. He didn’t think it was the bear. It hadn’t attacked yet, and it was so close that he would have noticed it right away, sunset or no sunset. It didn’t mean it couldn’t be a snake, though, so Jase used the stick he had grabbed earlier to poke at the bush. A small squirrel scurried out of it, and Jase squeaked in surprise, sounding very much like the squirrel had.

He looked around, but it wasn’t as if there was someone out there who could have heard him. It looked like he was the only one stupid enough to be around the woods this late, and he wasn’t surprised by that.

Jase used the stick to bat at the space in front of his feet as he walked toward the lake and the closest road to Kilkenny, hoping he wouldn’t encounter a snake. An owl hooted in the distance, and a loud *kraa* answered. It made him think about the raven again, and Jase slid his hand in his pocket to finger the pebble. It was ridiculous, but he couldn’t bring himself to throw it away. Maybe it’d been a sign. Maybe the raven had given it to him because he was meant to use it against something that would attack him soon.

Jase scoffed at himself. He could already imagine the scene—the bear he was looking for appearing in front of him and him throwing the damn pebble at its nose. Yeah, that would totally save his ass.

Jase could already see the lake peeking between the trees as he got closer to the shore. It gleamed with the little light the moon provided, and after walking

around the forest for hours and sweating like a pig, Jase wanted nothing more than to take a dip.

He continued to walk, thinking he just might stay there until morning. It was summer, so he wouldn't be cold or anything. The only problem was that he hadn't brought anything to eat in his bag, so staying there was out, especially since he had a perfectly flowery room waiting for him. He still could wash the sweat from his body and get away from the insects that thought he was an all-you-can-eat buffet, though.

Jase finally reached the tree line and walked out of the woods into a small clearing that opened on the lake. On his right stood a wooden cabin he didn't remember being there when he had started his hike, which meant he possibly had taken the wrong direction sometime during his walk.

Jase stopped and examined the house. The cabin would have looked good buried in the snow, and he briefly wondered if he could come back in a few months to see it, before shaking his head. The heat had probably gone straight to his head, because there he was thinking about coming back to visit when he wasn't even sure whoever lived there wouldn't shoot him in the ass. He sure hoped not, because he quite liked that part of his anatomy, and he wasn't the only one.

Still, he wasn't sure which way he should go to get back to town. He would have to knock on the door of the perfect-looking cabin with the yummy scent of bacon coming from the open window and ask if he should go left or right.

Jase looked left, then right, then at the cabin. He swatted at a mosquito that he could have sworn had been following him for the last half-hour, hooked his backpack higher on his shoulder and leaned his stick against the side of the porch before climbing the steps leading to the front door and knocking.

Kangee was so absorbed in his book that when the knock came he nearly missed it. He looked up, sure he had imagined it. It wasn't as if his house was on the beaten path. He didn't think anyone had ever knocked on his door before, and he'd been living in the cabin for the last seven years.

When he heard nothing, he shrugged and turned back to his book, but after a couple of seconds another knock came, and not only that. "Hello? Anyone there?"

Kangee groaned and let his head fall back against the couch. It couldn't be. Surely he couldn't be so unlucky, right?

“Hello? I know someone’s there. I can see the lights are on. I swear I’m not a serial killer or anything, I just kind of got lost in the forest, and I’m not sure which way Kilkenny is, so if you could help me, I would love you forever. Unless it makes you uncomfortable, of course, then I guess I could settle for just liking you. I’m not asking to stay for the night or something like that, although I *am* kind of tired. I just want to know which way I have to go, just to avoid walking into the lake, you know.”

Oh, yes. Kangee really was that unlucky. He slammed his book closed, and after giving it one last longing glance, he put it on the small table next to the couch and stood up. Jase must have heard him moving, because he started talking again.

“Oh, great, thank you! I really thought I was talking to myself for a minute, even with the lights on and everything. You could have gone out and forgotten to turn them off for all I know, and I would have spent the entire night on your porch. I don’t think it would have been really comfortable, I mean, you don’t even have a chair out here, and let me tell you, wood and dirt aren’t the best things to spend a night on.”

Kangee took a deep breath just to avoid snapping at the guy as soon as he saw his face and opened the door. Jase was standing on the other side of it, and Kangee bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing in the guy’s face.

Sure, Jase was as cute as he had been a few hours before, but he wasn’t exactly at his best at the moment. His face was flushed a deep red, especially on the cheeks, and the red spread down along his neck. He was also damp with sweat, and even if Jase had obviously tried to push his hair behind his ears, strands of the silky-looking stuff had escaped and were plastered to his forehead.

Kangee’s gaze wandered down, and he nearly wished he hadn’t looked when he saw that Jase’s face wasn’t the only sweaty thing. His dark blue T-shirt was sticking to his slender chest, and it left nothing to the imagination. Kangee could even see the two nipple rings there, and it did nothing to make him want the kid less.

“Oh, hey. It’s you.” Jase smiled a wicked smile. “Obviously we’re meant to be together.”

“Uh?” Now Kangee sounded like an idiot, but he had just noticed Jase had a piercing in his bellybutton too, and his mind was about to go on overload.

“If we weren’t, I wouldn’t have found *you* of all people just now. Maybe we’re soul mates or something, you know, like in a romance book. I could be the buxom blond and you can be the pirate.”

“The what?” Kangee wasn’t sure he was hearing it right. Surely no one could be so... Kangee didn’t even have a word for it.

“Pirate. Or you’d rather be a cowboy? I think you’d be a better pirate because of the long hair, but I’m sure we can find you a nice hat or something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Anyway, are you going to invite me in, or do I have to go back in the dark, dark woods on my own?” Jase batted his eyelashes, and Kangee had a sudden vision of the man in a big, puffy dress, breasts half-exposed and head thrown backward.

He shook his head to dissolve the image and moved to the side. “Come in.”

He wasn’t sure it was a good idea—scratch that, he *knew* it wasn’t a good idea—but the relieved look on Jase’s face was enough for Kangee to feel a bit better about it.

Jase walked by Kangee, so close that a wave of his scent assaulted Kangee’s nose. He inhaled and immediately wished he hadn’t. Not only did Jase smell good on his own, but the spice and man scent mixed with the scent of his sweat and the smells of the woods he had just been walking around in, it was enough for Kangee’s raven to want to come out right then and there.

Kangee held back a groan and bit his cheek harder as he tried to keep the raven in. He hoped Jase wouldn’t notice anything.

The house was exactly how Jase had imagined it, all dark wood and earthy colors, leather and lean lines. It was very masculine and obviously lacked a feminine presence, but it was welcoming and cared for.

“Nice place.”

Kangee didn’t answer, and Jase turned to face him. The man’s face was slightly red, and his lips were pressed together as if he were in pain. “Are you okay?”

Jase reached for Kangee, but Kangee moved and waved him away. “Sit... wherever you want. I-I’ll be back soon.”

Kangee stepped outside and slammed the door. Jase looked at it with wide eyes, wondering what the heck had happened for Kangee to run and leave him alone in his house without even a scathing remark.

Jase shrugged. While he was just a tiny bit worried about the man, he was more interested in the fact that he could rest and that he wasn't going to have to walk all the way back to town. Sure, Kangee hadn't exactly offered to let him stay the night, but Jase wasn't about to leave, not when it was dark outside. Kangee was going to have to lift him and throw him out if he didn't want Jase there.

Jase cocked his head to the side. Thinking about it, Kangee was probably more than able to do just that. *Oh, well.* It just meant that Jase was going to have to grab at the furniture while Kangee tried to drag him to the door.

Jase had been more than surprised when Kangee had been the one behind the door, and he saw that coincidence like another opportunity to get to know the guy better—as in, get to know him in the biblical sense. Jase might be in Kilkenny for work—kind of—but it didn't mean he couldn't have fun as well, and hopefully Kangee was as gay as Jase was.

He put his bag back on the floor next to the couch and walked around the room. He stopped in front of the fireplace and looked at the pictures that sat there. There was one of a woman with two small children, the smaller one pulling on the bigger boy's hair, the woman smiling as she tried to stop him. The bigger boy looked resigned as he tried to ignore the younger one's antics.

The smaller boy's face was set in a stubborn expression Jase recognized right away. He hadn't known Kangee for long, but he'd already seen it directed his way a few times, and it made him smile. It looked like Kangee had been as serious as a child as he was as an adult, and Jase couldn't help but wonder what it would take to make Kangee smile more.

He turned away from the fireplace and sat on the couch, reaching for the book that sat on the small table next to it. It was well used, and Jase was surprised to see it was an old *Dracula* paperback. It made him even more curious about the man who'd run out the door.

Jase thumbed through it and noticed the notes at the margins. He read a few of them before putting the book down and leaning back against the couch only to grimace and sit back up. That was the downside of leather couches—Jase was so sweaty his back had stuck to the couch even through his T-shirt.

Jase looked at the door, then at the hallway that led further inside the house. Kangee was gone God knew where, and Jase was dirty as hell and needed a shower. Jase didn't want to dirty the leather couch, really he didn't, so he rose and walked to the door. He opened it and peeked out, but Kangee was nowhere in sight, and Jase really needed a shower.

He raised his arm and sniffed his left armpit, grimacing at the smell. Yeah, he could see a shower in his very close future, but Kangee still wasn't coming back. Jase shrugged and headed toward the hallway—if it could even be called that since only three doors opened on it. He poked his head through the first open door he encountered. He wasn't nosing around—he just needed to find the bathroom.

The door opened into a small kitchen that held only the basic appliances and a tiny table with two chairs, so Jase passed to the next one and scored.

The bathroom was as basic as the kitchen was, but he only needed water and a towel. Kangee still wasn't back, so Jase stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door. He took his clothes off and let them fall on the floor next to the sink. There was a fluffy towel next to the shower stall, so he wouldn't have to put his dirty clothes back on, and if Kangee refused to let him borrow some clean ones... well, Jase never had problems walking around the house naked. Maybe seeing the goods would help Kangee decide if he wanted Jase to have his wicked way with him.

The raven soared above the small house and cawed at the moon. It wanted nothing more than to go down and get to the human, but its human side wouldn't let him.

He flew around the house a few times, and when Kangee finally calmed down enough to be sure he wouldn't shift in front of Jase, the raven lowered itself and landed in the clearing in front of the house.

Kangee had left his clothes under a tree just out of sight of the house, and he quickly dressed, both elated and scared at the idea of Jase being in his house. He couldn't deny he was attracted to the man anymore, just like he couldn't deny his raven was too, although obviously not in the same way. It didn't mean he had to do anything about it, though. Kangee wasn't stupid. He knew very few humans would willingly be with a shifter. No, he was better living on his own, as far as he could from people.

He climbed the stairs and opened the door, sure of his decision. He was going to tell Jase he couldn't stay the night, point him toward town, and hopefully never see him again.

Of course, since Kangee had made this decision, Jase was nowhere in sight when Kangee walked into his living room. Jase's bag was there against the wall, and Kangee knew the man had been snooping around since the piece of paper he'd used to mark the page of his book now was on the floor next to the table. The book was closed, which meant that Kangee would have to look for the precise point he had gotten to.

He hated Jase. Really.

Especially since the man was obviously somewhere around the house, exploring without having even asked if he could, and most importantly, without having been granted the authorization to do it.

Kangee stalked along his tiny hallway, stopping at the kitchen to peek inside. When he didn't find Jase there, he tried the next open door and froze at the sight that greeted him.

"What... what are you doing?"

Jase stopped toweling his hair dry and peeked from under the hem of the towel. "Drying my hair."

"I can see that! What are you doing in my bathroom?"

Jase lowered the towel and grinned. "I thought it was obvious. I was sweaty and dirty, so I took a shower."

"I—what—why." Kangee took a deep breath and tried to keep his eyes away from the slender waist, the golden treasure-trail, and the pierced nipples and belly button. "Why. Are. You. Showering. In. My. House?"

Jase tilted his head to the side. "Because I was dirty. I waited for you to come back, but you took so long that I decided to shower without asking." He shrugged. "Sorry."

In his attempt to avoid looking at Jase's body, Kangee lowered his eyes, only to have them fasten on Jase's underwear lying on the floor. There was no way to avoid it, not when said underwear was the smallest pair of underwear Kangee had ever seen—and hot pink.

Jase didn't seem to notice Kangee's interest in his underwear, luckily, although maybe if he had he would've left. *Yeah, right.*

"I didn't think you were old enough yet to go deaf, although I guess it doesn't always have to do with age."

"What?"

"I already told you I was dirty. Why'd you ask again?"

"Okay, one, I'm only thirty-one years old. Two, why on earth would you think showering in a stranger's house without asking for permission was a good idea?"

"I just didn't want to dirty your sheets. Jeesh, you really have to relax, man."

Kangee pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn't sure if Jase was naturally infuriating, or if he was making a special effort just for Kangee. It didn't really matter because he was good at it either way. "Put your clothes back on and go back to Kilkenny."

"What? Why?"

"Because I don't want you here."

Jase reached for Kangee. Kangee stepped back to avoid him, but his eyes followed the towel around Jase's waist as it slowly slipped down. Just a little more and the thing would end up on the tiled floor, and Jase would be completely naked. Just what Kangee needed to make the day even more fucked-up.

"Please. I'm sorry I showered without asking you if I could, but I can't go back now that it's dark. Even if you point me the right way, I'll probably get lost and fall in the lake, then I'll drown, and you'll regret sending me away forever."

Kangee cocked a brow. "Seriously?"

Jase nodded, and his lips slid into a pout. It shouldn't have been so adorable on a grown man, but it was, especially coupled with the puppy eyes. "Please? I promise I'll be good. I'll even ask you before going to the bathroom. And if you say no, and I drown, I'll haunt you forever."

Kangee opened his mouth to say no, but he couldn't bring himself to. He knew Jase *probably* wouldn't drown in the lake, but it was already eleven, and the night was pretty dark. He could hurt himself, fall and break something, or wander too far in the forest. Plus, Kangee really didn't want to risk having a ghost Jase for a roommate.

He looked at the puppy eyes again and nearly laughed when he saw Jase was batting his eyelashes. “Fine. You can stay, but you’re going to follow my rules.”

Kangee turned around. He forbid himself to look down at the hot-pink briefs again as he moved and stepped outside the door. He needed to put as much space between Jase and himself as he could, at least for a little while. Kangee’s raven was pushing to come out again, and Kangee couldn’t afford to disappear once more. He didn’t even want to think about what Jase would manage to do if he did. He would probably find the man sleeping in his bed.

“So, can I borrow some clothes?”

Chapter Three

The sweats were too long, and Jase had to tie them to avoid tripping over them as he walked, but they were clean and it was more than he could say about his jeans. The T-shirt wasn't as big, and it smelled of Kangee. It was oddly soothing, even if the man in question didn't seem to be overly happy that Jase was staying for the night.

Not that Jase cared. Okay, if he was honest with himself, he did care. A bit. And he definitely wanted in the man's pants. Kangee didn't seem to want to give Jase the time of day, though, but Jase wasn't easily put off.

"So, you live here alone?"

Jase was sprawled on the couch, his bare feet pressed against Kangee's jeans-clad thigh. The other man had returned to his book as soon as he'd given Jase the clothes, and Jase was wondering if Kangee was avoiding talking to him because he was used to being alone or if there was something more to it.

Kangee looked up at Jase, scowled, then moved to the right, just enough so they weren't touching anymore. He continued to ignore Jase and returned to his book. "Yes."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Seven years."

"That long? Isn't it boring? I mean, there's not even a path to get here. How do you go to work?"

Kangee pointed to a desk in the corner of the room. There was a computer on it and some books, but Jase couldn't see the titles from where he was. "You work from home? Cool. What do you do?"

"Graphic designer."

"That's nice. I'm a student."

No answer. Jase pushed his feet against Kangee again, just because he knew it would make the man react at least a bit.

He was right. Kangee looked up again, and he didn't look happy, so Jase spoke before Kangee started insulting him. "At Berkeley, in Environmental Sciences. That's why I'm here, too. I'm looking for the bears."

Kangee tilted his head to the side, book momentarily forgotten. "Bears? You're spending your summer vacation looking for a bear? I thought people like you wanted to have fun, go dancing, get drunk, stuff like that."

Jase narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, people like me?"

"You're young."

"So what? It means I'm a moron?"

"No, it means you should have fun."

"Maybe I have fun looking for bears."

"Maybe." Kangee's eyes went back to his book, so Jase quickly continued, "You're young too. Why aren't you dancing somewhere?"

Kangee closed his eyes for a second, then looked up at Jase. "It's... complicated."

"I bet. Everything always is."

"I'm not so young anymore anyway."

Jase snorted. "Please. You told me thirty-one isn't old before, and I agree."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's way too old to go dancing."

"Oh yeah? And is it too old to get drunk? I'm sure you have some alcohol somewhere in the house. We could give it a try."

Kangee shook his head, and his black hair moved with him. Jase wanted nothing more than to bury his fingers in the strands and check if they really were as soft as they looked. He hesitated, then he shrugged. What was the worst thing that could happen? He leaned toward Kangee and raised his hand, fingering a strand that fell in front of Kangee's eye.

Kangee froze, and Jase smiled. The hair really was soft, and as black as the feathers of the raven he had seen earlier that day.

"What are you doing?" Kangee asked in a whisper.

"It's soft."

Kangee leaned away and put his book down before getting up and walking to the window, leaving a bereft Jase alone on the couch. "Why are you looking for bears anyway?"

"Because they haven't been seen in the Rockies recently, only more up north."

“How do you know they’re here then?”

“Someone saw it, even posted a picture on a specialized blog. The fact that the bear got here is incredible, and I want to confirm it’s somewhere around here.”

Kangee stood ramrod straight and tense at the window, and he still refused to look at Jase. Jase didn’t know why, but he didn’t care either. He wanted the man, and he usually got what he wanted. He had at least a few weeks to work on it after all.

“You know this place. You could help me.”

That got a reaction out of Kangee. He turned around, and while he didn’t come closer, he was at least looking at Jase now. “Help you? To do what, catch a bear? I don’t think so. I value my skin too much.”

Jase shook his head. “I don’t want to catch it. I just want to find it and take a few pictures I can use for school and to send to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.”

“So let me get this straight. You want to traipse around the woods, looking for a bear you’re not even sure is here and take its picture if you ever happen to find it?”

Jase nodded with enthusiasm. “Exactly! I knew you would get it!”

“Uh, no, thank you. I have better things to do.”

“But it’s important! We have to know if the bears got here! There are things to do to protect them if they did, conservation efforts to help their population grow in this area. We have to check if people kill or capture them, if—”

“What will happen if they really are out there in the forest? What can you do if you can’t even find them?”

“I really just need proof. It should be enough to push the wildlife service to at least investigate.”

Jase watched Kangee’s face as emotions he couldn’t read played on it. He was desperate to get the man’s help, and not only because he wanted to get in his pants. Really.

“What would happen to the new construction sites if you do find proof that bears run around here?”

Kangee didn't want to hope he really could stop the company which wanted to buy his land and the ones around it, but Jase looked so sure he could do something that he couldn't help it. Oh, he knew he didn't have to sell if he didn't want to, but he had chosen to buy his land because of how isolated it was. If a new resort was built right next door, the only reason he lived where he did would vanish.

He couldn't let that happen, because people might see him shift or notice how the raven was always around the house. It had never happened before, but some people were smarter than others, and if someone came to live close enough to Kangee's house, it wouldn't take them long to understand he was the raven.

"They would at least be put on hold for a while, and if the bear's presence is confirmed it could become permanent." Jase tilted his head. "Why? Are there new construction sites around here? I didn't see anything."

Kangee wasn't sure telling Jase was a good idea, but the man was handing Kangee an easy way out—if they found the bears. "That's because I haven't sold them my land yet. They're trying to convince me so they can add it to the land they already have and build a new resort right by the lake."

"Aren't there enough of those already? I mean, when I looked up the motels and resorts around Kilkenny, there were at least six or seven to choose from."

Kangee shrugged. "None are as luxurious as the one they're planning." He moved to the desk, opened the top drawer and took out a stack of papers. He handed them to Jase before going on, "They're planning to build a main building with rooms and twenty cabins in the middle of the woods. People would have privacy and a sense of the wild, but without the inconveniences of real camping."

"But what's the point?"

Kangee shrugged. "I guess some people don't like too much wilderness when they go camping."

Jase looked over the papers, and from the frown on his face he seemed to be in Kangee's corner, which was a relief. Kangee knew the townspeople had mixed feelings about the new resort, because while they wanted to keep the area as natural and untouched as possible, tourism did bring money and jobs, and those were desperately needed.

"And they want your land? You're not thinking about selling it, right?"

“No. I don’t want to, but they’ll build even without it. If they do, I won’t stay. I live here for a reason, and having tourists walking around for months at a time isn’t it.”

Jase was still looking at Kangee as if he was trying to read him, and it made Kangee uncomfortable. His raven was trying to take control again. It wanted to go fetch Jase a new gift, and Kangee gritted his teeth together as he tried to fight the urge. “I’m going to bed. You can sleep on the couch.”

He turned around and stalked toward his bedroom, but Jase’s voice followed him.

“What? What did I do? Kangee?”

Kangee closed his bedroom door and leaned against it as he tried to breathe and fight the shift.

“Kangee?” Jase’s voice came from right behind the door, and Kangee closed his eyes.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

Even he could hear his voice trembled, and he didn’t want Jase to worry. God knew what the guy might try to do if he thought Kangee was sick. Probably the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation technique. “I’m fine. Good night.”

“Wait!”

“Good night, Jase.”

Kangee stayed where he was until he heard Jase walk away. Only then did he relax, although not completely. There was no way he could, not with Jase in his house, wearing his clothes and sleeping on his couch. If Kangee really wanted Jase’s help to keep away the resort from hell, he would have to find a way to be around the man without freaking out like he seemed to do every time.

He couldn’t afford for Jase to find out what he was. Kangee didn’t think he would be able to stand the disgust and fear he knew Jase would feel. He’d already seen them once on the face of someone who should have loved him, someone who had said Kangee was everything to him, at least until he had found out about the raven.

It didn’t matter if it was Jase or someone else—shifters couldn’t mix with humans. That was why Kangee lived alone in the woods, and it was why he

was going to keep his distance from Jase. He would find another way to keep the resort away, and if he couldn't, he would just sell his house and find another one.

The couch was anything but comfortable, never mind the fact that Kangee hadn't even bothered to give Jase some sheets or a pillow. Still, Jase couldn't complain. He was sleeping on a marginally soft surface and had a roof over his head, and he was grateful for that as he listened to the rain falling outside.

He had been awakened by the storm only a few minutes ago, and Jase hated storms. Okay, he more than hated them—he was scared to death of them. There wasn't a reason for it. He was just scared, and while he could somehow cope with them when he was at home, in familiar surroundings, he was having a harder time at the moment.

He was buried under the lone blanket he had found on the far end of the couch, huddled in on himself and trying to make his body as small as he could. It wasn't helping—he was still scared, and he jumped with every rumble of thunder. His hiding-under-the-blanket plan wasn't working.

Jase peeked from under said blanket after a particularly loud thunderclap. The next flash of lightening was already illuminating Kangee's living room, and Jase knew the next thunderclap wasn't far. He bit his lower lip and tried to mentally get ready for it, but he still yelped when it came. It was so loud Jase might as well have been outside under the rain.

He sure felt as cold as he'd have outside. The temperature had dropped with the storm's appearance, and the blanket wasn't enough to keep Jase warm. He shivered and tightened his grip on the thin fabric. He couldn't help but wonder if Kangee had locked his bedroom door. He hadn't heard the lock engage, so he was pretty sure Kangee hadn't, but he had been clear about the fact that he didn't want Jase anywhere close to him.

Still, Jase was cold, and Kangee probably had more blankets in his room. Jase could go in, find them, and he would be out of there as soon as he could. Kangee wouldn't even notice until morning.

Jase stood up and tightened the blanket around his shoulders. He leaned toward the lamp on the table next to the couch, but when he tried to turn it on, nothing happened. The storm had knocked the power off, and wasn't that another reason to hate storms?

Luckily for him, Kangee's house wasn't big, and he knew where the bedroom was. Jase hurried along the tiny hallway and reached for the bedroom door handle, praying it would open.

He turned it as slowly as he could, hoping he wouldn't make too much noise. Thunder crashed outside the house, and he jumped. Jase stopped caring about making noise and threw the door open. He barreled into the room only to freeze when he got to the bed just as a lightning bolt illuminated it.

Kangee was sprawled over the mattress, uncaring of the storm and the rain that raged outside. His mouth was slightly open, and Jase could hear him snore lightly in the silences between thunderclaps.

Kangee's hair looked spectacular fanned out on the pillow, the dark strands a stark contrast with the white of the pillowcase. Kangee didn't have a shirt on, and the sheets were bundled around his waist, exposing his upper body. He didn't seem to be cold, though, and Jase couldn't help but look at Kangee's cinnamon-colored skin, wondering how it would feel against his. Was it as soft as it seemed to be?

Kangee didn't have hair on his chest, just like Jase had imagined when he had first met him. He did have some tattoos, though, and Jase couldn't wait to see them in full light.

He suddenly looked at his feet, a little embarrassed about ogling a sleeping man, but just then thunder crashed again, and Jase squeaked. He didn't even think about what he was doing when he let the blanket fall on the floor and raised the sheet that half-covered Kangee.

Jase slipped under it, as close to Kangee as he dared, and hoped the man wouldn't wake up. He knew Kangee would be less than pleased in the morning, when he would find Jase in his bed, but at the moment Jase didn't care. He just wanted some company, even a sleeping one, someone to hold on to until the storm died. He was ready to face Kangee's wrath in the morning if he needed to.

Jase tucked the sheet around his shoulders and tried to keep to the unoccupied side of the bed—it wasn't easy, not with the bed being as small as it was—but Kangee seemed to have another idea.

He rolled in Jase's direction, and Jase squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the scolding he was sure was coming his way. It never came.

Kangee's arm slid around Jase's waist and pulled him close, and Jase went willingly. Kangee's skin really was soft and silky when he touched it, burrowing his face in Kangee's long hair and breathing in his scent.

Once Jase was tucked into Kangee's body, his own arm around the other man's waist, Kangee settled down. Jase felt safe surrounded by Kangee's body, and his warmth and scent were soothing. It was enough to lull him back to sleep, even with the storm still raging outside the house.

Chapter Four

Kangee tried to roll over only to be stopped by a warm body clinging to his. Someone's head was pressed against his chest, an arm was slung around his waist, and his legs were tangled with someone else's.

He hadn't woken up with someone next to him in years, not since he had moved to Kilkenny. Kangee opened his eyes and closed them as soon as he realized just *who* was in bed with him.

Jase. Of course it was Jase.

Kangee wasn't sure if he should jump out of bed and risk waking Jase up or if he should let the man sleep just to avoid the confrontation he knew was going to happen as soon as Jase opened his eyes.

It wasn't a hard decision to make. It took just a moment of looking at how peaceful Jase was for Kangee to decide he would let him sleep. They would have time to fight later.

Kangee tried to untangle them, starting with their legs. He was happy he'd given Jase some clothes the day before, because it meant they were separated by more than just his boxers. He wasn't sure how he would have reacted if he had awakened to both of them mostly naked.

Just the thought was enough to make Kangee shiver and for his morning wood to throb, and he knew he had to get to the bathroom before things escalated further. The last thing he wanted was for the smart-ass to wake up to Kangee's erection poking his side. God knew what comments would come out of that mouth if he did.

Kangee moved his butt to the side and tried to slide out of Jase's arms, but the man was stubborn even while asleep. He tightened the hold he had on Kangee's waist and snuggled deeper into his side. His warm breath fanned over Kangee's naked skin, just a few inches above his nipple.

Kangee gritted his teeth against the sudden wave of feelings that threatened to overwhelm him—feelings he shouldn't be having, feelings he'd never thought he would have again after Chris, especially not for a human.

Kangee wanted nothing more than to stay in bed with Jase plastered to his side. He wanted nothing more than to wake the man beside him with a kiss, a caress, but he had to keep his hands in check even in front of the angelic image

Jase made. The sun peeked through the window and made his blond hair shine like a halo—it contrasted completely with what Kangee knew of the man, and somehow it made him even more desirable.

Kangee coughed. He couldn't stay there, and the best way to get rid of Jase was to act as if he was angry, even if he was anything but. "Jase? What the fuck are you doing in my bed?"

Jase scrunched his nose as his eyes fluttered open, and Kangee had to stop himself from doing something foolish—like kiss the man's hair or stroke his cheek.

"What?"

"I said, what are you doing in my bed?"

Jase looked up at Kangee but didn't even try to move away. "I didn't think you'd mind. I was cold."

Kangee scoffed and sat up. His arm was stiff and numb, and it felt as if Jase had slept on his arm the entire night. Kangee wouldn't have been surprised if he really had. "So what, you couldn't grab a blanket and go back in the living room?"

"Oh, can you please take the stick that's stuck up your ass out? It was your fault I was cold in the first place. You didn't even give me a blanket!"

Kangee kept his mouth shut. He had to if he wanted to keep the wrong words in. Jase's hair stuck up wildly around his head, his eyes were still mostly closed, and he was pouting. "Never mind. Just... get out of my bed, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going. I can see why you live alone now. No one in their right mind would want to live with you."

Kangee felt a pang of pain and longing. He'd had someone to sleep with once, someone who didn't mind him being grumpy in the morning.

He shook his head. He hadn't thought so much of Chris in years, and he couldn't help but wonder if Jase would be different to live with. Would the man accept what Kangee was if he ever found out?

Kangee wanted nothing more than that, so he rose from the bed, not caring that he was wearing only underwear, and headed to the bathroom. Hopefully a cold shower would help him keep the thoughts of having Jase in his bed every night away, because he couldn't afford to hope for anything different.

Jase slumped back on the bed. He didn't know what to do with Kangee, and he was starting to think that maybe he should leave the man alone. It's not like there could be anything more than a summer fling between them anyway, and Jase wasn't sure it was worth the effort he would have to put in to seducing the man.

Oh, he wanted it to be, but it was becoming obvious that Kangee couldn't stand him on the best days. He merely tolerated Jase, and Jase didn't think the other man looked at him as a potential love—or lust—interest.

He rolled over and buried his face into Kangee's pillow. He knew himself, and he knew the truth. It didn't matter that it would be only for a few weeks, or that Kangee seemed to want nothing more than to stay away—Jase was going to pursue him, and the fact that Kangee was running away only made Jase want him more.

“Get up. I'll take you back to town.”

Kangee's voice was cold and emotionless, but it still didn't deter Jase. He groaned into the pillow and rolled again, this time to face Kangee. “Thanks. So, are you going to help me find the grizzlies?”

Kangee opened his mouth then closed it again. “I have to think about it.”

Jase stood from the bed and stretched, smiling when he saw Kangee stare at the strip of skin the move had exposed on his belly. “I could use some help. They can be sneaky as hell.”

“It's a bear, it's not like it can hide easily. I'm sure you'll be able to find it even on your own. That is, if you take enough time to actually look for it instead of sneaking into other people's beds.”

With that Kangee turned around and left, and Jase stuck his tongue out at the man's back. Gosh, what would it take to get under the hard shell Kangee had wrapped around himself? It couldn't only be that he wanted to be alone—there was something in his eyes, something that made Jase think someone had hurt Kangee.

He stopped briefly in the bathroom before heading to the kitchen and poking his head through the door. “Coffee?”

Kangee was there, and of course he was already scowling at Jase. “I don't drink coffee.”

“How am I to be a decent human being if I don't have my morning coffee?”

Kangee looked at Jase and smirked. "I'm not sure you are, even with coffee."

"Hey, now! I don't mind bantering with you, but there's no need to be nasty."

"I'm not being nasty, I'm being realistic. You're an annoying brat."

Jase frowned and stepped away from the kitchen. Yeah, he might be annoying and pushy, but he was never mean like Kangee had just been. It wasn't the words but rather the tone that had made how serious Kangee was obvious. It had hurt, more than Jase would have thought—more than it should have, coming from Kangee.

There wasn't a reason for Jase to stay in the cabin, obviously. Kangee wanted nothing more than for him to leave. Maybe Kangee lived alone because he was a dick like that with everyone. Jase didn't care anymore, or rather, he didn't want to care anymore.

Jase didn't know the man, and he obviously never would. A two-week fling wasn't worth the sting of pain he felt when he thought about what Kangee had just said.

Jase rushed to the living room where he had left his dirty clothes and backpack. He pushed his feet into his shoes and grabbed the bag, swinging it over his shoulder and hurrying to the door even as he heard Kangee calling him.

"I'm sorry, Jase. I didn't mean it."

Jase didn't wait to hear Kangee's empty apologies. He opened the door, briefly thanking whoever was up there that it had stopped raining sometime during the night. The ground was still damp, and the air smelled of rain, but it would be okay. Jase was sure—or at least nearly sure—he could find his way to his motel without help. He might have to follow the shoreline until he found the road, but at least he would be far away from Kangee.

"Jase, wait! I didn't mean it, I swear. I'm just not the best person to be around when I've just woken up."

Jase shook his head. It wasn't only when Kangee woke up. The man had been prickly since they'd met the day before, and Jase knew when to push and when to stop pushing.

"Jase!"

Kangee's voice became fainter as Jase walked away from the small cabin and continued to ignore Kangee. Better listen to what his heart and brain were telling him—he wasn't wanted. He would look for the damn bear on his own, find it, report it, and go back home, hopefully in time to have at least a week to spend on the beach.

Yes. Jase would have a nice end of summer, away from Kangee, and thinking about that didn't hurt one bit. He just had to try and convince himself of that a little harder.

Kangee punched the outside wall of the house in anger and immediately regretted it. Pain shot through his hand and up his arm, and he swore, looking at the now scraped knuckles. He shook his hand, trying to ease the pain, but he couldn't do anything for the guilty feeling that was lurking in his chest.

He hadn't meant to be such a dick to Jase. He just wanted the man to stop pursuing him, and he knew he wouldn't obtain that by being nice. He'd exaggerated, though, and even if it had gotten him what he wanted, now he felt guilty. The look on Jase's face when Kangee had spoken had been hurt and betrayal, and it was something Kangee hadn't wanted.

Swearing again, he pushed his jeans down his legs and threw them inside, quickly followed by his T-shirt. He closed the door and shifted, his raven coming forward with mixed feelings.

The bird was happy to be out and able to fly, but it also wanted to peck at Kangee for hurting the sweet man the bird liked so much. Kangee surrendered to the bird, letting him decide how they should try to make things better.

The first thing to do was to make sure Jase wouldn't get lost. The possibility of another storm was low, but it didn't mean the man wouldn't have problems. The raven took flight, circling around the cabin a few times before flying after Jase.

It didn't take them long to see him. Jase was walking along the shore of the lake, looking out at the water rather than at the woods on his other side. He wouldn't get lost if he went on that way, because there was a road that led to Kilkenny a little further on, but the raven didn't want to risk it.

It passed over Jase, cawing as it went, and flew ahead, landing on the trunk of a dead tree. It still had Jase in sight, and it didn't like the sad expression on the man's face. The raven hopped down the trunk and used its beak to move the earth at the base of the tree. It needed to give Jase something.

The raven put a few sticks to the side before choosing one of them, the prettier one. Grabbing it with its beak, the raven took flight again and headed toward Jase.

Jase looked up and stopped walking when the raven landed in front of him. The raven looked at the man and hopped closer.

“Umm... hi?” Jase made a strange face. “Great, now I’m talking to a damn bird. Maybe Kangee was right—I should keep my company to animals.”

The raven let the stick fall and pushed it in Jase’s direction with its beak before hopping backward, its beady eyes still on Jase.

“Oh. Are you yesterday’s raven?”

The raven cawed, and Jase chuckled nervously. “Okaaay. I’ll take that as a yes since you seem to have brought me a gift again.” Jase bent down and grabbed the stick, and the raven preened.

“It’s... pretty. Thank you. Okay, now I think it’s best if I go and see a doctor, because I think I went around the bend.”

Jase went to throw the stick back on the ground, and the raven croaked loudly and hopped closer.

Jase’s head snapped up. “Okay, okay, I’ll keep it. I’ll put it next to the pebble you gave me yesterday, okay?”

The raven croaked, and Jase looked both amused and relieved. He started walking again, and the raven could hear him talk about how crazy he was obviously becoming. The raven didn’t care. It was satisfied that its human had accepted the second gift, and it flew ahead of Jase.

The raven stopped every so often, settling on a trunk or a branch to wait for Jase to get back in its sight. Jase soon noticed it and shook his head. “I’m not sure what’s happening here, but let me tell you, you’re a weird birdie. I don’t think ravens are supposed to give people gifts and follow them around.”

The raven stayed with Jase as he found the road that would lead him toward the town, then as he walked along it. Jase looked up at the sky every so often, his eyes searching for the raven, and the bird always answered with a caw to let Jase know where it was. It seemed to reassure Jase, and it was exactly what the raven wanted.

Jase stopped at the edge of town and looked up again. The raven landed close to him, but far enough that Jase couldn’t touch him. “I’m, uh, I’m going

to stop talking to you now. It'll look weird if someone sees me, so you can just go back in the woods or wherever you came from." Jase made a gesture to shoo the bird away, and it cried out good-bye.

The raven wasn't exactly happy about leaving the man alone, but it knew Jase was safe, and its human half wanted to come forward again.

After one last look at Jase, the raven took flight, circling around its human one last time before heading back home. It could feel Jase's eyes on its back until it disappeared from sight.

Jase put the stick and the pebble on the dresser and cocked his head. He really didn't know much about ravens, but he didn't think they were supposed to behave like this one did. Even if by any chance it was normal for them to give each other gifts, Jase didn't think they usually did it with humans, and he didn't think they were supposed to behave as if they understood things.

Jase's raven had looked at him as if he understood Jase wanted him to go away, and he hadn't seemed to be pleased. It was also insistent for Jase to accept its gifts instead of just dropping them in front of him and flying away.

Jase shook his head. The raven's behavior might be weird, but he wasn't there to investigate that, nor was he there to find a way into Kangee's bed.

He was still wearing the man's clothes, and while they were only sweats and a T-shirt, he was going to have to give them back to him. There was no way Jase would let Kangee think he was a thief in addition to being an annoying brat.

He took the clothes off with jerking movements, throwing them against the wall and letting them fall on the floor. Taking his anger out on Kangee's clothes was stupid, but he couldn't take it out on Kangee himself, and it helped, even if just a tiny bit.

He gave the clothes one last kick, the T-shirt catching on his foot and nearly making him fall. Jase shook his leg and scowled at the offending piece of fabric. He sent it flying toward the middle of the room before slamming the bathroom door behind him.

He turned on the water in the shower stall and waited for steam to fill the tiny room before entering. The water was hot, just this side of too hot, but it didn't matter. It made Jase feel better. The tension that had settled on his shoulders slowly melted away under the hot spray, and Jase wished it could take Kangee's words with it. He didn't know why they had hit him so hard—it

wasn't the first time someone said something like that to him, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

Jase knew he was too much to handle for a lot of people, people who didn't like his smart-ass comments and outgoing manner, people who wanted him to be quieter. It wasn't him, and he had no intention of changing, for anyone.

He wanted to stay under the warm water for much longer, but a knock on the door lured him out. The bathroom's mirror was fogged, the room full of steam, and when Jase opened the door, it spread into the bedroom.

There was another knock, and Jase yelled, "Coming!"

He grabbed a pair of clean jeans—the last clean pair—and made a mental note to find a place to do his laundry. Jase snorted. He might've made a mental note, but he knew he wouldn't remember it until he'd already used his last clean pair of underwear.

He was still toweling his hair dry when he swung the door open and froze. "What are you doing here?"

Kangee was standing outside his door, two coffees in one hand and a paper bag in the other. "I came to apologize."

"There's no need to do that. I'm not stupid or blind. You don't like me, so I'll stop bothering you. I can take the hint, and yours wasn't exactly subtle."

Kangee looked everywhere but at Jase's face and grimaced. "Look, can I come in? You can insult me all you want, but I don't want to do this in public."

Jase crossed his arms on his chest. "What, ashamed to be seen with me?" Maybe he was. Jase didn't know if Kangee was out in town, or even if he really was gay, although Jase thought he was. Any straight man would have kicked Jase out of their bed if they'd found him in it, and while Kangee had done just that, he'd been gentle about it—well, as gentle as grumpy Kangee could be.

"No, not ashamed. I just like to keep my life private, and that includes groveling for your forgiveness."

"Groveling, uh? That could prove interesting."

Jase wanted to be hard and aloof, but curiosity was one of his biggest flaws, and he wanted to see what Kangee would do. He stepped to the side and gestured for the other man to come in.

Kangee's eyes moved around the room as he walked to the small table and put the coffees and the bag on it. "Nice room."

“Please. It’s horrible, but it’s cheap. I don’t think I ever saw so many flowers in one room before, except maybe in my grandmother’s living room.” Jase grabbed one of the coffees and sat on the bed. He took a sip and hummed his pleasure before looking at Kangee. “So. I’m listening.”

Kangee was obviously nervous. He looked at his feet, then at his hands, before moving one of the chairs and sitting down on it. He clasped his hands together. “I live alone. I’m not used to being with people, and I’m even less used to wanting them to like me.”

“You want me to like you? Let me tell you, telling me I’m an annoying brat isn’t the right way to obtain that.”

“Look, I’m sorry I was harsh. I shouldn’t have been, but you have a way of getting on my nerves and making me lash out, okay? I’m not used to dealing with people, and you—you puzzle me. I have no idea of how to act around you.”

“Do you really think I’m an annoying brat?”

“Honestly? Yes. You’re annoying, you’re pushy, you don’t listen to anything I say, but all this doesn’t mean you’re not a decent person. That was out of line, and I’m sorry I said it. You might be all of these things, but from what little I know of you, you’re also funny and nice, and—and cute.” Kangee blushed on the last word, and Jase gaped at him.

Sure, the blush was hardly noticeable on Kangee’s dark skin, but it was there. Yet more stunning was the fact that Kangee had admitted he thought Jase was cute. “Okay, fine. I forgive you. Now you can go and be a loner in peace.”

Kangee looked at him. “Do you still need help to find that bear?”

“Are you offering?”

“Yes. I don’t want to sell my land, and I don’t want any type of resort built near it. If you say finding the bear will help keep it away, I’ll help you find it.”

“You do realize you’ll have to be in close quarters with me to do that, right? We’ll have to go camping, stay in the forest for a while, just the two of us...”

Kangee’s expression was determined. “I know. I can deal with that.”

“I hope you can, because if you ever talk to me like you did this morning, I’ll abandon your ass in the middle of the forest for the bear to feed on.”

Chapter Five

Kangee eyed the bundle of fabric on the ground. "Why don't you do it?"

"I'm going to go look for some wood. You shouldn't have problems putting it up, it's easy." Kangee didn't answer, and Jase turned toward him, a big smile on his face. "Don't tell me you don't know how to put a tent up."

Kangee crossed his arms on his chest. "I might live in the woods, but I have a house. I never actually had to use a tent."

Jase patted Kangee's shoulder. "I'm sure you can do it, and if you can't, well, I'll help you when I come back."

With that Jase sauntered away. Kangee's eyes were glued to his ass, watching the way it swung from side to side. He groaned, and Jase turned at the sound, so Kangee hurried away as if he hadn't just been ogling the man's ass.

Their camping trip wasn't starting well at all. Kangee was in charge of setting the tent up, and while Jase made it sound like the easiest thing in the world, the tent looked like a death trap to Kangee. He poked at one metal pole with his foot and sighed. There was no way out of it, so he might as well start to try to make sense of all those poles and fabric.

There was a lot of grumbling and cursing coming from Kangee over the next half hour or so. He'd found what had to be an abnormal number of poles for just one tent, and he didn't have a clue what to do with them. He did try to read the directions stamped on a small piece of paper, but they didn't help, so he just threw it back where he'd found it.

He grabbed the canvas, trying to make sense of it and decide which way it went on the poles. He took one and tried to slide the canvas on it, all the while cursing Jase for buying one of the most complicated tents Kangee had ever seen—not that he had ever seen any before that day.

"I see I'm going to have to help you."

Kangee looked to the side. Jase was walking back to their camp, his arms full of small pieces of wood. He dumped them next to the stone circle in the middle of the camp and came to stand beside Kangee, his hands on his hips.

"Why didn't you buy one of those tents that open on their own?"

Jase shook his head. "Those aren't real tents."

“Real tents? What, they’re fake ones? What does that even mean?”

Jase grabbed one side of the canvas fabric and tugged on it. He hadn’t anticipated the fact that Kangee was standing right on it, though, and with one hard tug Kangee was falling toward Jase.

They crashed together. Jase’s hands let go of the canvas and flew to Kangee’s shoulders, but Jase was smaller than Kangee, and they toppled over. Jase’s back hit the ground, hard enough that Kangee heard the air leaving his lungs with a *whoosh*.

They both froze. Jase’s eyes were huge, and Kangee realized he was lying on top of the smaller man, their bodies aligned, Jase’s legs open and cradling Kangee’s hips.

It was an intimate position, one two lovers would be more than happy to find themselves in, but Kangee and Jase weren’t lovers. Kangee rolled to the side, hitting his head on the ground in his haste, and cursed.

“Are you okay?” Jase’s voice held a hint of worry, and Kangee nodded even as he raised his hand to feel the back of his skull.

“I’m fine. Just hit it a bit too hard.”

Their eyes were locked together, and it seemed that neither of them wanted to look away, so Kangee sat up, severing the connection that was making him uncomfortable. He was afraid Jase would see just how much he wanted him, and he couldn’t afford that.

“Are you going to finish setting the tent up?”

“Yeah. I don’t think you can be trusted with it, but you can blow up the air mattress.”

Kangee frowned. “Air mattress? As in, one air mattress?”

“Yeah. How many did you think I brought?” Jase was already at work on the tent, putting the canvas up on the poles. His forehead was damp with sweat, and Kangee watched as a lone drop rolled down the side of Jase’s face and neck.

“I don’t know, two? One for you and one for me.”

“Uh, nope. There’s only one, but it’s big enough for both of us. Don’t worry.”

Kangee opened his mouth, then closed it again without saying anything. He didn’t want to sleep next to Jase, not because he didn’t like the man, but

because he liked him way too much for his own good. He remembered how Jase had felt in his bed, plastered to Kangee's body, but protesting too much would be ridiculous and childish, especially since they'd already slept together. Kangee would have to make sure to keep a safe distance between them, that was all. It might even be easier than he would have thought because Jase hadn't flirted with him since Kangee had apologized. Maybe they could be civil to each other after all.

Kangee blew the air mattress up and sat on it while he waited for Jase to finish with the tent. He lightly bounced on the mattress, all kinds of images of things he shouldn't have been thinking about popping in his mind. "Tell me about the grizzly."

Jase used the back of his hand to clean off a bit of sweat from his face and looked at Kangee. "It was listed as endangered in 1967 for the first time."

"You told me they weren't anymore, though."

"That's because their numbers increased enough for the species not to be endangered anymore."

"Then why is it so surprising to find one here?"

"Because it's not their usual territory. There are lots of bears in Canada, in the Yellowstone area and in Montana, but not in Colorado. Last sighting was in 1979."

Kangee didn't really understand why that was a problem, but he liked the fire he saw in Jase when he talked about it. It didn't help with the things he shouldn't have thought about, but he couldn't berate Jase for being passionate.

Jase nodded as he put the last touch to the tent and stepped away from it with a satisfied expression on his face, one Kangee could imagine him having after sex. He peeled off his sweaty T-shirt and flung it to the side.

Kangee just about swallowed his tongue at the sight of the rosy nipples, glinting metal, and mostly hairless skin. He tightened his fists to stop himself from reaching out and turned away.

It was going to be a long week.

Jase knew what he was doing. Well, he *mostly* knew it.

He wasn't blind. He'd seen how Kangee looked at him when he thought Jase wasn't looking. The lust was obvious in the man's eyes, and too much for

Jase to resist. He'd promised himself to stay away from Kangee, but he wasn't sure he was going to be able to do that, not with those black eyes burning with want every time they looked at Jase.

Night had fallen around them, but it hadn't cooled the air, not yet. Jase had hesitated before lighting the fire in the small pit in front of the tent, but they needed it if they wanted to eat something warm. It didn't help with the feeling of being too hot, though, and Jase had yet to put his T-shirt back on.

At least Kangee wasn't complaining.

The campsite was mostly grassy and faded to sand as it got closer to the water. It was one of the registered campsites, but it was so far from Kilkenny that no one usually camped there, or at least that's what the motel owner had told Jase. The fact that the fire pit had been mostly clean was an obvious clue of that—or it could just mean that the previous campers had been neat.

Not that it mattered, at least not at the moment. Jase just hoped people would stay away for the entire time Kangee and he would be there, and not only because he didn't want the grizzly bears to flee. He also didn't want Kangee to run away, not before Jase could have a real chance at the man.

Jase looked up and peeked at Kangee. The other man was sitting by the fire, the light coming from it playing on his dark skin. The sight made Jase's knees weak. God, he couldn't believe how much he wanted Kangee, and he couldn't even explain to himself *why* he did.

He watched Kangee flip one of the burgers on the grill he'd insisted on bringing, and Jase was more than happy to have complied at the moment. The scent of cooking meat floated in the air and made his stomach grumble, and he realized he'd skipped lunch.

They'd been on the quad at the time, again after Kangee's insistence. Jase usually brought only his tent and enough for him to eat, but Kangee wasn't used to doing that. Jase found it kind of funny. The man lived in the middle of the woods, the closest town at least thirty minutes away by car, yet he'd never camped and never slept outside. He was more used to having his comforts than Jase was.

“Are you going to come and eat?”

Jase looked up at Kangee's face. “It's ready?”

“Yeah. Grab something to drink from the cooler.”

Jase shook his head and chuckled, and of course Kangee heard him.

“You’re still laughing at me?”

“I’m not laughing at you, well, not exactly. You have to admit it’s kind of ironic, though.”

“Yeah, yeah, you already told me, and I already told you that even if I’m a loner, I do live inside a perfectly fine house with all the necessities I need.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, man?”

“I left it in Florida.”

Jase looked up from his plate. “You used to live in Florida?” Kangee didn’t talk about himself, ever, and Jase was curious about the tidbit of information he’d just gotten.

Kangee scowled and kept his eyes on his half-eaten hamburger. “Yeah.”

Jase waited, but Kangee didn’t elaborate. He sighed. Trying to pry anything out of Kangee was a nearly painful experience, and he already knew he would obtain nothing even if he pushed, so he just concentrated on his meal.

Once he was done, Jase dug inside his backpack for the bag of marshmallows he’d brought. The thing had sunk to the bottom of the bag, but he managed to wrestle it out and open it. He grabbed the stick he’d kept away from the fire and stabbed one of the white sweets with it before holding it above the hot bed of coals he’d already prepared.

“What are you doing?”

“Roasting marshmallows.”

“I can see that, but why?”

Jase shrugged. “I have a sweet tooth. I always have marshmallows with me when I go camping, although I wish I’d remembered to bring graham crackers and chocolate too.”

“The last thing you need is a sugar high.”

Jase stuck his tongue out and moved the marshmallow away from the fire. He blew on it to cool it, then gave it a lick and hummed in pleasure. It wasn’t a s’more, but it was good anyway.

He looked up to see Kangee looking at him, his expression a mix between curiosity and disgust. Grabbing a second stick, Jase speared a marshmallow with it and handed it to Kangee. The man looked at him like he was crazy.

“Come on, try it.”

“I don't think so.”

“Aww, come on. Don't tell me you don't like toasted marshmallow!”

“I wouldn't know.”

Jase pressed his hand to his heart. “What? You're telling me you never tried it? Now I just *have* to convince you.”

Jase licked away the last of his own sweet on the stick. He noticed the way Kangee was looking at him, his eyes fixed on Jase's mouth, so he made a show out of it, sliding his tongue over the wood and hoping he wouldn't get a splinter. He smacked his lips together before licking his lips to gather the last of the gooey sweetness. “So good.”

Jase handed the second stick to Kangee again, and this time he took it, even if his face still held a perplexed expression. Jase shrugged and speared another marshmallow before holding it over the coals. “Come on, try it.”

Kangee held his stick over the fire, but he wasn't as good as Jase was. He held it out too long, and before Jase could remember to warn him, the thing burst into flames.

Jase laughed, his mouth full, and Kangee scowled at him. “Here, take another one. You'll get the hang of it, I promise. The trick is to rotate the stick and to keep it high above the fire, and when the marshmallow is roasted, you take it out.”

Jase smiled at the determined expression on Kangee's face as he stuck the marshmallow on the stick and held it out again. The smile became a laugh when the marshmallow melted off into the coals and Kangee bared his teeth at the offending sweet.

Jase rose from his seat and went to sit next to Kangee, leaning into him as he grabbed another marshmallow. He speared it on Kangee's stick and grabbed the man's hand. “Here, I'll help you.” Jase moved Kangee's hand toward the fire, mildly surprised when the man didn't resist. He could feel Kangee's eyes on him, roaming over his face, and he had every intention of taking advantage of that.

Jase moved his own stick over the coals, rotating it until he had a perfect marshmallow. He pulled it out just after Kangee's, then gestured. “Come on, try it while it's still hot.”

Jase brought his marshmallow to his mouth and took a tiny bite, making small noises of pleasure. He trailed the gooey treat over his lower lip before licking the creamy white stuff away. It was sticky, sweet, and so, so good.

Jase heard Kangee's breath hitch. Knowing the other man was watching him, he redoubled his efforts. He bit into the marshmallow and licked it, looking up only when it was gone—which was way too soon for his taste.

Kangee was staring, his own marshmallow forgotten and dripping on the ground. His eyes were burning, and one of his hands was raised as if reaching for Jase.

Jase licked his lips and inched closer to Kangee as smoothly as possible, but it was enough to break the moment.

Kangee shook himself and rose, handing his stick to Jase. "I'm going to bed, uh, to sleep. Good night."

In seconds he was gone, the tent's opening flapping behind him, Jase's eyes on it as he wondered what the hell had just happened.

Kangee woke up to warmth surrounding him, and he knew without opening his eyes that Jase was wrapped around him. The guy didn't seem to understand or care about personal boundaries or protests, and Kangee didn't know how to get it in the man's thick skull.

Kangee didn't know what to make of Jase. Jase was almost ten years younger and much more carefree than Kangee had ever been. It seemed that nothing could stop him when he wanted something, and at the moment he wanted Kangee. Kangee wasn't blind, and he wasn't made of stone. He wanted nothing more than to surrender.

He shook his head and finally opened his eyes. A curtain of blond hair blocked his sight. Jase's head rested on Kangee's chest, his nose burrowed in the crook of Kangee's neck. An arm was possessively slung around Kangee's waist as if to stop him from running away.

They were both as pigheaded as they came, and Kangee was determined to win the battle—at least for now. He moved as slowly as possible, grabbing Jase's wrist and unhooking it from his side. He put it down at his side, but moving Jase's head was going to prove more complicated.

Kangee slowly moved to his side, taking care of holding Jase's head up with his hands. Jase grunted and Kangee froze, his eyes fastened on the smaller man's face, but Jase just wrinkled his nose and didn't wake up.

Kangee took the opportunity to lay Jase's head on the pillow Jase had abandoned for Kangee's chest. He then carefully scooted backward, but Jase seemed to be a heavy sleeper. He sighed and rolled away from Kangee, settling deeper into the pillow.

Kangee hesitated, but in the end he grabbed the covers they clearly hadn't needed and pulled them over Jase's half-naked body. Feeling satisfied, Kangee opened the tent and slipped outside, grabbing the jeans he'd abandoned next to the opening as he went.

The sun was barely up, and Kangee was glad he would have the time to have a flight before Jase woke up. He didn't know what the man had planned for their day, even if Jase had told him they'd walk around the forest so he could get an idea of where the bears would be more easily seen. Kangee was skeptical. The forest was big, and there was no real proof bears had made it into the Rockies, just rumors and a picture on some blog. Even if they had, it wouldn't be easy to find them.

Kangee shrugged. Even if they didn't find them, he was actually happy to be out of his house for once. He might be a loner, and he actually loved being on his own most of the time, but even he needed someone to talk to sometimes, to see he wasn't the only man alive. Jase might be a smart-ass, but he would leave Kilkenny in a few weeks at most, so Kangee knew he wouldn't get attached. It was a perfect situation, really.

Checking the tent one last time, Kangee dropped his jeans next to the spent fire. He then threw his T-shirt and underwear on it and headed for the tree line.

Maybe he could use his raven form to look for the bears, not that he knew what he should be looking for. Of course, bears weren't small, but it didn't mean they were easily found in the middle of the forest.

Kangee didn't look forward to traipsing around the woods and actually hoping to come face to face with one, but he'd accepted helping Jase, and he would do it. Damn the man's brown puppy eyes! They'd pulled Kangee in when he tried to apologize, and he just hadn't been able to get out of the camping trip. Of course, the fact that this could help him save his home made the sacrifice at least bearable.

Kangee shifted. The raven took control immediately and flew up to perch on a branch, its beady eyes sweeping over their small camp. Jase was still nowhere in sight, so the bird flew higher and higher, until it was soaring over the trees. It could see Kilkenny in the distance, but it was far enough away to isolate them from all the noisy tourists who thought camping was the best thing since sliced bread.

The forest was devoid of human noises. The only things the raven could hear were other birds and animals, and Kangee's human half reveled in the peace nature gave him, in the freedom the raven's wings allowed.

Something shiny caught the raven's eye. It was half buried in the sand on the lake's shore, but the tiny bit that peeked out was enough for the raven to see it. It flew down and landed next to it, using his beak to move the sand around and dig the piece of metal out.

It was an earring. It was silver and shiny, even after being under the sand, and the raven just knew what he was going to do with its new treasure. The earring would look good on its human. It was small and manly enough that Jase could wear it if he wanted to.

The raven grabbed the earring and flew back to the camp. It landed and dropped the earring before cawing loudly enough to wake Jase up. A smaller bird flew away from where it'd been hopping next to the fire pit, and the raven cawed again, as loud as it could. It needed Jase to wake up and get out of the tent.

The raven flapped its wings and hopped closer to the tent, making as much noise as it could, croaking and cawing until the human's head finally poked from the tent.

“What the fuck?”

Jase got out and looked at the raven, his eyes wide. “Okay, this is becoming weirder every time I see you, buddy. You're a bird, you shouldn't stalk me. Don't you have a lady bird to go bug instead of me?” Jase scratched the top of his head and yawned. The raven hopped to the earring it had left in front of the tent and pushed it toward Jase, hopping back once Jase saw it.

“What did you bring me this time? I still have the pebble and the stick, you know. I have no idea why I kept them, but then all of this is just weird.”

Jase bent and took the earring, and the raven opened its wings, fluffing the long primary feathers in an attempt to show off.

“Hey, this is pretty. I like it.” Jase looked at the raven. “I feel stupid talking to you, but thank you.”

Jase took a step toward the raven, but the bird knew it shouldn't let Jase touch it, so it jumped away, cawed one last time, and took flight, leaving behind a startled and perplexed human.

Jase fingered the earring he'd placed in his pocket. He had a bird stalker. *Great.* He just hoped the thing wasn't following him around. Jase looked up and checked the higher branches of the trees above his head, but he couldn't really see anything, and a black bird would've been noticeable. Maybe.

“I don't think you'll find your bear in a tree.”

Jase looked at Kangee. “You never know. Maybe it decided to climb.”

“Can they really do that?”

Jase shrugged and continued walking, taking care to keep his eyes wide open. Not that the bear was small enough that he could actually miss it if he stumbled on it, but he'd rather see the animal long before he did that. Jase liked his limbs too much to lose them. “Sure. It's harder for grizzlies, but they can do it.”

“And we're looking for a grizzly?”

“Yup.”

“How do we know we're close to it? The forest is huge. It could be anywhere.”

“There are signs you can look for.”

“Like what?”

“Tracks, although since the ground is dry, it would be hard to actually see some. You can also look for bear poop, scrapes on the tree barks, carcasses, and diggings.”

“Diggings?”

Kangee seemed to find it interesting, so Jase explained, “Yeah. Grizzly bears dig up roots, bulbs and stuff like that, although they usually do it in spring and fall rather than in summer. It leaves holes in the ground, and it would be a sign that a grizzly's been in the area within the past few months. They also

make trails if they're in an area long enough, and those are usually easier to spot."

"How do you know it's a bear trail and not a human one?"

"You check the height of the trail. Bears are shorter than humans, so you wouldn't be able to walk the trail without hitting branches. If you do find a trail, it's probable the bear isn't far, so tell me right away."

"Great. Remind me why I'm doing this again?"

"Because you want to be able to sunbathe in the nude?"

Kangee spluttered, and Jase smirked. Yeah, he liked getting under the man's skin.

"Who said anything about sunbathing?"

"I assumed. You have an isolated house that sits right on the lake. Why *wouldn't* you sunbathe in your birthday suit? And you can't do that if there's a family resort right around the corner, obviously."

Jase could picture it, the way Kangee's dark skin would glisten with water, the way the drops would slide down his chest until they encountered dark hair.

"I'd never do that!"

Jase shook his head to disperse the yummy images. "Yeah, I guess you're way too uptight for that."

His eyes caught something, and Jase stopped. Kangee hadn't been expecting it, and he stumbled against Jase's back, so Jase reached behind and steadied the other man before crouching.

"What did you find?"

"Shit."

"What? What is it?"

"I told you, it's shit. Bear shit, to be precise." Jase pointed at the small pile of scat. "There's really a bear wandering around. It's not too fresh, but it means we're on the right track."

"I don't even want to know why you know this."

Jase stood. "It's what I'm studying."

"Bear shit?"

“Well, not exactly, but it’s what I’m interested in. I want to help salvage endangered animal homes, and I can’t do that if I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“You’re weird.”

“More than you think.”

Jase looked around. He couldn’t see other traces, and the sky was starting to darken. They didn’t have much time to get back to their small camp, and they couldn’t afford to stay in the forest even for one night, not when there possibly was a bear around. “Let’s go back.”

“Finally!”

“You know, I didn’t think you would complain every step of the way.”

“I didn’t!”

“Okay, you didn’t. You’re much too broody to actually come out and tell me you want to go back to the tent, but I could feel your disapproving eyes weighing on my back the entire day.”

“You asked me to help and I did. What more do you want from me?”

“Absolutely nothing.” To be honest, Jase didn’t know what he wanted from Kangee, well, not exactly. He knew he wanted the man’s body, he knew he actually liked grumpy Kangee, but what did Jase want? Other than having Kangee in his bed, he didn’t know, not for sure. “Unless you’re offering something?”

“You want money?” Kangee’s face was bewildered and angry.

“No! You really think I want money to do this? Gosh, I know you don’t know me, but I thought we’d talked enough for you to know I just want to help.”

Jase stomped away, and it reminded him of the last time it had happened. It seemed to have become a habit between them—Kangee insulting Jase and Jase running away. He wondered if Kangee would apologize this time too.

“Wait, Jase. I’m sorry.”

And there it was. Jase knew Kangee hadn’t meant to hurt him. “Have you ever heard me talk about money?”

“No, I didn’t. It’s just... I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. I’m not doing this for you, you know? I’m doing this for the bears, because they can’t defend themselves against humans. I’m doing this for the forest, the trees and all the other living beings around here.”

They walked in silence after that, at least until their tent was in sight. Jase couldn’t wait to pull his sweaty clothes off and run into the lake, but Kangee’s voice stopped him. “You feel strongly about this.”

“Of course I do.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t. We can’t stop the construction of the resort yet. Maybe you’ll have to sell your land after all. Besides, I told you I’m not doing it for you.”

“Still, it’s more than anyone has ever done for me, so even if I do end up selling my land, you’re still the only one who tried to help me. Thank you.”

Jase shrugged and walked away.

Kangee wanted to kick his own ass. He’d managed to get Jase angry again, and it looked like it was becoming a habit for him. He didn’t do it on purpose, really, and since he had to stay in the middle of the forest with only Jase for company, he knew he couldn’t afford to antagonize him even more.

Kangee actually liked Jase, as much as it pained him to admit it. Sure, the man was infuriating and he had a smart mouth that never seemed to stay closed, but he was growing on Kangee even as he tried to keep some distance between them. It wasn’t working, not when Kangee’s raven wanted Jase so much—and Kangee wasn’t far behind.

For all that Jase got under his skin and made Kangee want to strangle him, Kangee could also see the good in him. Jase cared, probably too much. Who else would work his ass off like that for someone he didn’t know? Sure, Jase wasn’t traipsing in the woods just for Kangee’s sake, but Kangee knew it was important for Jase that he kept his house anyway.

The fact that Jase was also cute, a hard worker, and that he seemed to like Kangee’s raven were pluses Kangee was having a hard time ignoring as the days passed.

He shook his head. Only time would tell if something really was possible between them, and he wasn’t sure they actually had that time. Jase had already

managed to find traces of the bear, which meant they could find the bear and photograph it in a matter of days. After that, Jase would be gone, and Kangee would be alone again.

“Can you take care of dinner?”

Jase was looking at Kangee expectantly, so Kangee nodded. “Sure.”

“Great. I want to see if I’m able to connect to the Internet, just to check if there were other sightings.”

“And you think you can connect here?”

“Who knows?”

Kangee left Jase to fiddle with his cell phone and opened the cooler they’d brought with them. He was more than happy to have insisted on driving to the campsite with the quad. Kangee might live in the middle of nowhere, but he was used to modern life comforts and that included a fridge. He wasn’t sure he would have been able to survive on protein bars, beans, and pasta for a week like Jase had suggested they do.

Kangee had packed meat for the first few days, so he grabbed two steaks to throw on the fire. He was about to do just that when a doubt stopped him. “Jase?”

“Yeah?”

“You said the bear is close, right?”

Jase looked up from his phone. The sun was just disappearing on the horizon, and it bathed Jase from behind in a soft orange light. It made his skin glow golden and his hair shine. It made Jase’s face hard to read because it was in the shade, but he looked otherworldly in a way that made Kangee’s heart beat just a little bit faster.

“Yeah, but of course it depends on what you mean by close. The tracks we found just indicated the bear was around here a few days ago, but for all we know he could have gone the opposite way from here.”

“Do you think so?”

Jase shrugged. “No idea. We can look for other traces tomorrow to see if it stayed around here or if it went away.”

“Is it safe to cook the meat?”

“Mmm, I guess so. At worst it'll lure it here, and we'll get great pictures of it.”

Kangee nearly let the steaks fall. “What?”

“You know, it might not be a bad idea. That way we wouldn't have to go hike around again. I guess I didn't think it would be so hot when I decided to do this.”

“You want me to bait the bear here? Are you serious?”

Jase looked up at Kangee with an innocent look on his face. “Yes?”

“You—you're crazy. Completely crazy.”

Kangee walked back to the cooler and put the steaks back in with a last forlorn look at them. He wasn't about to risk being eaten by a bear just to eat steak, no matter how good it was.

Jase was pouting when Kangee handed him a protein bar. “You're no fun. We could've been gone from here by tomorrow.”

“If you want to risk your hide, you're welcome to do it, but I like it right where it is. This is just to tide you over until the pasta is done anyway.”

The bar tasted like cardboard and had about the same texture, but it would do for a bit. Jase was still pouting and fighting with his cell phone, but Kangee could tell just by the pouty expression on his face that he hadn't been able to connect, not that Kangee had thought he would.

Their small camp was peaceful, and Kangee let himself relax. It'd been a while since he last had this much company, but he didn't hate it as much as he'd have thought. Jase wasn't always annoying, and it wasn't too hard to live with him.

The last rays of sun disappeared as they finished eating the bars, and Jase finally gave up and stopped fiddling with his cell phone. Kangee eyed the water in the pot he had placed on the fire and saw it was boiling, so he got up and threw a bit of salt in it, then the pasta. He was glad he had packed a few cans of sauce and not only canned beans and dehydrated stuff like Jase had wanted to.

Fifteen minutes later, they were eating, and Jase was talking nonstop about his life on campus. It made Kangee think of his own college years, and a pang of pain hit him. It didn't hurt as much as it had then, but it hurt enough for him to want Jase to stop talking. “Could you stop?”

Jase snapped his mouth shut. "Stop what?"

"Talking so much. Camping is supposed to be relaxing."

Kangee could see Jase wanted to snap at him, but surprisingly, he didn't. He rose from his seat instead and handed his empty plate to Kangee. "I'm going for a swim. I hope you'll be less bitchy when I come back."

"Hey, you could wash the dishes at least! I cooked!"

Jase waved over his head as he walked to the edge of the lake. Kangee was about to get up and gather the dirty dishes when Jase started stripping, and Kangee realized the man didn't have a bathing suit.

Kangee froze, his eyes on the skin Jase was exposing without shame. His T-shirt was the first to go, landing on the soft sand, then Jase reached for his shorts. Kangee didn't seem to be able to look anywhere else, no matter how hard he was trying—not that he was really trying.

The shorts slipped down just enough to expose the top of Jase's ass, and Kangee's mouth went dry. Jase bent down, his rounded ass calling for Kangee's hands, and slipped off his shoes and socks. He paused for a moment, and Kangee could see he was wiggling his toes in the sand. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to join Jase, so he grabbed the edge of his chair and held on as hard as he could when Jase finally slid his shorts down.

Either he wasn't wearing underwear or he had slid it off with the shorts, because the pale skin of his ass was glowing in the firelight. There was no way Kangee could look away, even if he knew he should have. He tightened his hold on the chair instead, and waited.

Jase knew exactly what he was doing, and he wasn't ashamed of it. He'd had enough of Kangee's passive-aggressive behavior, enough of his snapping when Jase came too close, and most of all, enough of staying away. He wasn't blind—Jase saw how Kangee looked at him when he thought Jase didn't notice. If he really didn't like Jase, Kangee could have said no to the camping trip. It's not like Jase really needed help anyway. He'd camped on his own more than once before, and Kangee wasn't really a big help since he'd never done anything similar.

Sure, it was nice to have company, but when that company passed the time snarling and snapping at Jase, it nearly made him regret even talking about the trip. Jase would've bet his left hand that Kangee was behaving like that not

only because he was a grumpy person, but also because he was trying to keep some distance between them. Well, that distance was about to disappear.

Jase let his shorts fall on top of his T-shirt and risked a glance behind. *Yes!* Kangee was watching him, his eyes glued to Jase's ass, and Jase had every intention of taking advantage of it. He moved slowly, stretching before walking to the water. He dipped his foot in, just to be sure he wasn't going to freeze his most important bits, but while it was as cool as one would expect mountain water to be, it wasn't downright cold. Well, not too much at least.

With one last glance to Kangee, Jase slid in the water. He shivered as his body got used to it, but it felt good after all the time he'd spent hiking in the forest and getting sweaty. Jase hadn't realized how dirty he'd felt until he'd entered the lake.

Forgetting about Kangee for a bit, Jase immersed himself and swam, taking care of staying parallel to the shore where Kangee was waiting and watching. The last thing he wanted was to get too far and need Kangee to rescue him like a damsel in distress.

Jase lay backward and looked at the moon, aware that the position was exposing his junk. He didn't have much to expose at the moment if he was honest—the water was too cold for that—but he still hoped a bit of nudity would take care of Kangee's foul mood and the stick in his butt. Not that his body was a good enough cure for that, but it might thaw Kangee just a bit and make life easier for Jase.

He rose, grinning at the sensation of the water on his skin, and waved at Kangee. "Come on! Get in!" Jase was satisfied to see that the other man was still looking his way, even if Kangee did suddenly look away when Jase gave him his attention.

"No way."

"Aww, come on! Don't be a party pooper!"

"Party pooper? Who even says that?"

"I do, obviously. Are you coming or not?"

"No."

"I'll let you fondle me if you come."

"Is that supposed to entice me? Because it's not working."

Jase snorted and started waddling back to their small camp. Kangee looked away, but Jase really didn't care if he ogled him. He was doing this on purpose after all. He stopped by the fire and put his hands on his hips, thrusting them just a tiny bit forward. "Are you sure it's not enticing you?"

Jase wasn't affected by the cold water anymore, and when Kangee's eyes slid over him, his cock twitched. Kangee's eyes snapped to it, and Jase could have sworn he saw just a hint of a blush on the man's cheeks.

"No, it's not."

Jase groaned and plopped on the grass next to the fire. He didn't care about getting dirty—he could take a swim anytime he wanted to get clean. "Okay, I see my sneakiness isn't going to work with you. I'll have to hit you on the head with it, uh?"

Kangee shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Things are like this. I like you. Well, I like your body, at least, but I have to admit that all your grumpiness is growing on me too."

Kangee cocked an eyebrow at the declaration. "Really?"

"Yeah, I know, incredible, uh? Anyway, I like you. You're hot and sexy, and I wouldn't mind a roll in the hay with you. There, I said it."

"You do know that there's no hay around here, right?"

"Details. I'll take a roll in anything if it's with you, hay, grass, sand, even water."

Jase could see Kangee was hesitating, but he didn't know why. "You can tell me if you don't like me, you know. I'm a big boy, I won't cry over it. Well, maybe I will, but I swear it'll be only a few tears, and I'll do it while you're not looking." Jase gave Kangee a big grin and crossed his fingers.

"You'll be gone as soon as you find the bear."

"Yeah, so what? We're not planning a wedding here, just a few fucks."

"What if I don't want just a few fucks?"

Jase let his head fall backward and looked at the stars as he answered. "Ah, well, there's nothing much I can do for that. I wouldn't blame you for wanting more than a one-night stand, but there's nothing I can do. We can make it a one-week stand or whatever it'll be, I guess, but my life is in California and yours is here."

The silence that fell between them as Jase waited for an answer was heavy with his expectations and Kangee's doubts. He didn't know why it was so important for him that Kangee say yes, and he didn't want to analyze his feelings too deeply, not when he would be going home in a matter of weeks. He just knew he wanted Kangee, and he hoped Kangee wanted him back. It didn't matter if it was just sex or if something deeper was hiding under lusty feelings—they wouldn't be able to act on them anyway.

“All right.”

Jase snapped his head forward and widened his eyes. “All right?” Kangee gave him a nod. “You mean, all right you'll sleep with me?”

“Yeah.”

Jase jumped up and whooped. “Yes!”

“I can't believe I actually agreed. You're—you're immature and mouthy, and—”

Jase lunged and grabbed Kangee's shoulders before smashing their lips together and putting an end to Kangee's little speech. He didn't deepen the kiss, not yet, but it was enough to know he would definitely enjoy what was coming.

Kangee's lips were dry and a bit chapped, but they felt perfect under Jase's, even if the kiss lasted only a few seconds before Jase stepped away and took Kangee's hand, pulling on it. “Come on, let's go swim!”

“I don't have a swimming suit.”

“Swimming suit? Pfft! We don't need them!”

Jase pulled again, and this time Kangee followed. He stood up and looked down at Jase's naked body, still damp from the swim he had already taken. “Yeah, we won't need them.”

Jase grinned and let go of Kangee before darting toward the water. “Come on then!”

He ran into the lake, not even caring about the coolness on his skin. Kangee wanted him just as much as he wanted Kangee, and he was finally doing something about it. Who cared about how cold the water was?

Chapter Six

Kangee knew he was doing the wrong thing, yet he wasn't going to back out, not now. The look on Jase's face when Kangee had finally said yes, the enthusiasm he'd shown, all of that was enough to ensure Kangee wouldn't. The fact that he didn't want to and that he longed to enfold Jase in his arms also helped Kangee to ignore his brain and go with his heart—or his cock. They wanted the same thing anyway.

The same thing his raven also wanted. The damn bird was ecstatic at the idea of Kangee finally mating with Jase, and for once it wasn't even trying to get free. Kangee knew he was going to have a hard time dealing with the bird once Jase went back home, especially since ravens mated for life. That alone should've been reason enough for Kangee to stay away from Jase, but his raven was just that—a raven, a bird, an animal. Even if it was part of Kangee, there was no way he could explain and be understood by it. His only hope was that the raven would forget about Jase once the man was far from them.

“Did you change your mind?”

Kangee looked at the lake. He could barely make out Jase's head in the darkness, and only thanks to his blond hair. “No.”

“What are you waiting for, then?”

What was Kangee waiting for indeed? He reached down and grabbed his T-shirt, yanking it off. Now that he had made the decision he had agonized over for hours, he decided he might as well enjoy the time he had with Jase and send every moment he could to memory. He would treasure them once Jase went back home, leaving Kangee alone again.

Kangee's hands went to his jeans. He unbuttoned them and pushed them down after toeing off his shoes, then took care of his socks. That left him with only his briefs on, but Kangee hesitated. He looked at the water, searching for the blond head, and smiled when Jase waved back at him.

“Lose the briefs, man! You saw my junk, now it's my turn, and if you don't get here fast enough, I'm coming to get you!”

As far as Kangee was concerned, that solved his little doubt. He slipped his underwear off and threw it on the small pile of clothes that was already on the ground. He heard a squeak coming from the lake and smiled as he strode

toward the water, trying to look confident. Sure, the squeak helped, but Kangee hadn't had sex or even been naked with anyone for close to three years. He'd had a few one-night stands in the first four years after he moved to Kilkenny, but he didn't particularly enjoy them, so after a while he'd stopped bothering. He knew he wasn't bad to look at, but it didn't mean he didn't feel just a tiny bit nervous. He looked down and tried to imagine what Jase was seeing.

Kangee was tall, and he kept in shape. He loved to swim in the lake early in the morning during summer, and he had a tiny gym in the shed he'd built behind his house. It wasn't much, but it was enough to keep on exercising when he was snowed in for weeks in the winter. His skin was a very light brown, thanks to his mixed origins, but his long, black hair betrayed his Native American father.

Kangee shook his head. Who cared what he looked like? Jase obviously liked what he saw, and that was good enough for Kangee. He stopped at the edge of the lake and looked at the water near his feet, wondering how cold it was.

A heavy weight slammed into him just before he could dip his feet in the lake, and he stumbled backward, his hands instinctively reaching for Jase and grabbing him even as Kangee fell. The breath shot out of his lungs as his chest took Jase's weight, and Kangee landed in the sand.

"What the fuck?" At least Jase had waited for him to get on the sandy beach before assaulting him.

Jase was laughing, still on top of Kangee and nearly cutting his air supply off. Kangee wheezed and tried to push him off, but Jase just moved to straddle Kangee's hips, pressing their bodies together. Jase's skin was cool and wet from the lake, but his cock felt hot and hard against Kangee's and the contrast made him shiver.

"You weren't coming, so I came to get you."

"And you thought assaulting me would be a good idea? Couldn't you just call me or grab my hand?"

"That wouldn't have been half as much fun."

Jase was looking down at Kangee, his cheeks flushed, his eyes sparkling with laughter, his mouth opened in a wide smile. He'd never looked so beautiful. Kangee reached up with one hand, clasping it behind Jase's neck and using it to pull him down. Their lips met, and Kangee's world exploded around him.

Their first kiss had been so brief and chaste it nearly wasn't a kiss, but this one was the exact opposite. Jase's lips were plump and soft and opened as soon as they met Kangee's. Jase sighed and rested his body more firmly on top of Kangee, hips pressed against hips, chest against chest.

Kangee felt the bite of Jase's nipple piercings, the crisp feeling of his chest hair against his own smooth skin, the slickness of his tongue when it probed at Kangee's lips for entrance. He opened his mouth willingly, any doubts he still harbored melting away when their tongues met. It'd been so long since he'd last been kissed, and more than the mere physical and pleasurable aspects of it, Kangee had missed the intimacy of two mouths meeting, the way Jase was at the center of his universe at the moment, just like he was at the center of Jase's.

Jase's hands were already roaming over what he could reach of Kangee's body, but it wasn't what Kangee had thought it would be. Knowing Jase and how hyperactive the man could be, Kangee had expected that aspect of the man's personality would reflect in his kisses and in the way his hands moved. He'd expected frantic groping and fast satisfaction, but Jase was touching him slowly, caressing his skin with soft, almost reverent touches.

Their tongues tangled, their hips pressed together, yes, but everything was slower and felt more meaningful than what Kangee had thought. It scared him, because he could feel an underlining of affection in every touch that he knew shouldn't have been there, not after only three days together.

He grabbed Jase's hips more roughly and pulled him even closer, or at least he tried to. He wasn't sure there was still space between them, but he needed more. The warm summer night echoed with the sounds of their passion as their pace became more frantic, their kisses harsher, their moans louder.

Their teeth clicked together during a particularly hard kiss, and Kangee pulled away, needing to breathe something that wasn't Jase and to put some distance between them. Jase wasn't having any of it, of course. He latched on to Kangee's neck and sucked at the tender skin, his hands clutching at Kangee's hair, the strands twined between Jase's fingers.

The rhythm of Jase's hips faltered, and he tensed on top of Kangee. Kangee felt hot spurts against the skin of his hip and lower stomach, and Jase slumped against him, breathing hard. Kangee tried to slip his hand between them to take care of himself, but Jase stopped him.

"Don't you dare."

Kangee froze. "What?"

Jase sat up and moved backward until he could reach Kangee's cock. It didn't take long for Kangee to come, not after all the grinding and humping they had just done. Jase's mouth was hot and wet and perfect around Kangee as he sucked and slid it up and down. After only a few minutes Kangee shouted his release at the sky and smiled when he felt Jase move to his side to cuddle. They could wait a bit to move into the tent.

Jase opened his eyes and closed them again with a groan. "Why is the sun so *bright*?" His pillow moved under his face, and he opened his eyes again. "Oh." Right, no pillow, but a very naked, very hot Kangee. That explained why Jase had been uncomfortable for the last few minutes—hard chests didn't make for comfy pillows.

"What are you talking about?" Kangee asked with a sleep-rough voice.

"This is the morning after."

Kangee groaned and opened one eye. "Again, what are you talking about?"

"You know, the morning after. The morning after we had sex for the first time, and you panic and decide you made the wrong decision by saying yes, so you pack and abandon me all alone in the middle of the woods with a bear for my sole companion."

Kangee's eye closed again. "You're weird."

"Uh, you're still not running away. Why?"

"I would never do that to the bear. I'm not that cruel."

Jase propped his head on his elbow and slapped the enticing chest he'd been lying on. "You're not funny."

"I think I'm very funny, and I'm sure the bear would agree."

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with Kangee? Or was it the incredible sex that mellowed you? Because if it was, I'm up for round two whenever you want."

Jase yelped when a hard slap landed on his ass. "Hey!"

"Come on, get up. We have to go look for a bear, although with all the noise you're making, I'm pretty sure he already ran away."

Jase moved so that Kangee could get up and looked as the man stretched in the morning sun. To say he was surprised at how well Kangee was taking what

they'd done the night before was an understatement. He'd really thought Kangee would change his mind once he thought about it, or at least that he would be hesitant and closed off. He hadn't expected a joking, ass-slapping Kangee, at all.

"Wow, you're taking this well."

"It's too late to go back, isn't it?"

Jase pouted. "What, you would go back if you could?"

Kangee looked at Jase appraisingly from head to toe. It made Jase want to squirm, and he would have if he hadn't already had more than enough sand in places where sand should never have been. "No, I don't think so."

With that, Kangee turned around and strode to their tent. He opened it and withdrew two towels, walking back to Jase and throwing one of them on his head. "Come on, let's clean up. We have bear shit to look for."

Jase yanked the towel off and let himself fall backward in the sand, immediately regretting it. It was cold and damp, not the best sensations first thing in the morning.

"Do I really have to?"

"Unless you want to spend even more time covered in dried cum and sand, yes."

"You know, I think I preferred you when you didn't talk to me."

"Too bad, Blondie." Kangee walked straight into the water, making Jase shiver. It had to be cold as hell, but Kangee didn't seem to care.

Still, the man had a point. Jase looked down at his body and noticed that yes, sand had managed to cover pretty much every inch of him, especially his stomach and dick. It was encrusted and just the thought of trying to clean it up made Jase grimace. He would have to face freezing water, it seemed.

He rose from the sand, shaking off as much of it as he could, and dropped the towel on top of Kangee's before running after the man. He made sure to splash a lot of water around, just because he could, and laughed at the scowl a now very wet Kangee gave him. "What? You said you wanted to clean up."

Jase dove, knowing it was better than to get wet slowly. The cold water was a shock to his system, waking him better than any cup of coffee could. He surfaced and shook his head, laughing when a lot of the water landed on

Kangee. The man narrowed his eyes and pounced, grabbing Jase's waist and dunking him in the water again.

Jase spluttered and freed himself. He tried to push Kangee in the water, but the man didn't budge—not that Jase had expected him to. Jase did the next best thing and jumped on Kangee, hoping he would catch him. Kangee's hands shot under Jase's ass, and he wrapped his legs around Kangee's waist, holding himself up. "I win."

"Please, explain how you won exactly, because I'm not sure I understand it."

"I'm right where I wanted to be." Jase smirked, but the wicked smile Kangee gave him back both scared him and made his toes curl.

Kangee's hands disappeared from under Jase, so he tightened his legs. It wasn't enough to hold him up though, not when Kangee started tickling him. Nimble fingers ran over his stomach, his sides, and up under his armpits. Jase tried not to laugh, but it lasted only a moment. There was no way he could keep it in, not when Kangee's fingers dug in his belly button. Jase squirmed and tried to get away from the fingers. His hold on Kangee's waist loosened, and he ended up back in the water.

"Who won again?"

Jase pushed his hair away from his eyes and smiled. "Okay, I'll admit you're pretty good at this."

"I asked, who won?" Kangee held his hands out and pointed his index fingers at his own chest.

"Okay, okay, you did. Happy?"

"Very."

They washed quickly after that, the cold getting to Jase more than he'd have thought. It might have been summer, but the lake was up in the mountains, so he was shivering by the time he stepped out. He smiled gratefully at Kangee when he handed him his towel and wrapped himself in it. "So, what's on today's plans?"

"Shouldn't you be the one to decide?"

Jase shrugged. "I guess we can go look for more bear shit, like you said."

"Or I could just cook steaks and hope for the bear to come to us."

“How much longer before they spoil?”

“If we don't cook them today, we might as well offer them to the bear.”

“That's a pity. Maybe we can cook them tonight and hope the bear is far enough that it can't smell it.” It was weird how Jase had gone from wanting nothing more than to find the bear to hoping the animal would stay away for at least a few more days. Now that Kangee was his, he wanted to enjoy the little time they had without furry interferences.

By the end of the week, the steaks had been cooked and eaten, but there was still no signs of any bear around their small camp.

Kangee knew Jase was getting a bit desperate, and not only because he had only one more week to find the damn thing. Their food supply was getting low, and Kangee knew Jase wanted a warm shower more than anything. The fact that they were alone also weighed on them. Jase was becoming irritating and more smart-mouthed than usual, and that was saying a lot. If it weren't for the regular bouts of hot sex they had, he would have been ready to leave already, but he had a hard time even only thinking about leaving Jase.

“So, when did you decide to stop playing cat and mouse with me? I mean, you changed your mind a bit suddenly.”

Kangee looked up from the beans he was cooking. “And you were the cat?”

“Well, yes. I was the one trying to catch you after all, but don't worry, you make for a very big mouse. A very big, very manly, and mean-looking mouse.”

Kangee growled and noticed Jase shiver in reaction. He gave the man a sly grin before turning back to the pot he had on the fire. Jase had learned early in the week that Kangee didn't like to be disturbed when he was concentrating on something. The forest still echoed of the insults they had exchanged the first—and last—time he'd done that.

Jase bounced his knee up and down as he waited, his eyes fastened on the edge of the forest near their camp, but Kangee ignored the nervous behavior.

“We found the poop, we found the markings on the trees and even a few trails, but still no bear. Why?”

Of course, Jase wouldn't be able to stay silent for long. Kangee had become used to hearing the sound of Jase's voice. In fact, he had to admit he actually liked hearing Jase going on about anything and nothing for hours at a time. “It might be because it doesn't want to get too close to you.”

Jase scowled at Kangee. "You don't seem to have any problems getting close to me."

"That's because I get something the bear doesn't."

"Oh, ugh. I could have done without the mental images you just gave me."

Kangee chuckled and shook his head before reaching for the plates. "You're weird."

"You were the one talking about sex and bears!"

"I didn't, I just said I get something the bear doesn't. I could have meant steak, but your twisted mind went straight to the gutter. It's definitely not my fault."

Jase took the plate Kangee offered him and wrinkled his nose. Kangee knew exactly why, and while he wasn't showing it, he was feeling pretty much the same. They'd been eating beans for the last few meals, and it was getting boring.

"Maybe we're too noisy?" he proposed as he stuck his spoon in his bowl.

"Oh, you definitely are, especially when I suck your—"

"I meant too noisy for the bear to come close."

"Could be, but I'd think it might be lured by our food. I don't know..."

"So what do we do?"

Jase sighed. "Do you have to go home?"

"Not really. I took care of all the jobs I still had before leaving and left a note that I was on vacation. I guess I still have about a week before I need to go back, but we do need more food, unless you want to hunt squirrels."

Jase looked down at his beans, and Kangee suppressed a smile at the forlorn expression on his face. "I know squirrels are considered a delicacy in some places, but I think I'll stick with my beans."

They really needed to do something. Kangee didn't want to see Jase go, but their little camping trip was getting on their nerves, and he had noticed they were snapping at each other more often as the days passed.

He tried to remember what Jase had said about how to find a bear, and an idea struck him. He was a raven shifter. He could shift and try to find the bear that way. "Do you think you can ride the quad?"

Jase's eyes widened in surprise. "Probably, why?"

"Why don't you head into town tomorrow? I'll stay here and keep an eye on the tent and our stuff."

Jase put down his bowl and looked at Kangee. "Wait, you're offering to let me drive your quad without any type of supervision?"

Kangee pressed his lips together. Was it really so hard to believe? "Yeah."

"I'd drive it on my own?"

"I think I just said that. Are you a little deaf or just plainly stupid?"

Jase smacked Kangee's arm. "Neither, but thanks for the vote of confidence. That quad is like your baby or something. I didn't think you'd voluntarily hand me the keys, let alone let me drive it on my own, take care of the shopping for both of us, and bring everything back."

"Yeah, well. I actually trust you." Kangee kept his voice low, but Jase had heard him say it.

He poked Kangee's side with a finger, drilling it into Kangee's muscles. "I didn't get that. Maybe I really am starting to go deaf."

Kangee took a deep breath and soldiered on. "I said, I trust you."

Jase's hand fell away. It was obvious that Kangee's words shocked him, probably just as much as the realization that he did trust Jase shocked Kangee.

So far, the only thing he'd trusted Jase to do was to look for the bear, because it was the one thing Kangee couldn't do. He'd taken care of everything else—from cooking to cleaning their small camp and even washing a few items of clothing in the lake. He was used to living on his own and doing everything, and while he didn't exactly distrust Jase, it was hard to give up control to him.

Kangee realized he was bossy and secretive, but Jase didn't seem to have a problem with that. If anything, it seemed to spur him on, and he kept teasing Kangee at the most unbelievable moments, like right after Kangee opened his eyes in the morning.

Realizing Jase was still gaping, Kangee frowned. "Jase?"

"What?"

"Are you going to go or not?"

Jase smiled at Kangee, and his world immediately grew brighter. The way Jase was able to do that with only a smile was scary. A good kind of scary, but

scary nonetheless. "Yeah, I'll go, but I need you to make a list of what you want. I won't take responsibility if I don't bring you what you want."

"Yeah, okay. I'll write it down later." Kangee turned back to his bowl and scooped another bit of food he didn't want to eat, but Jase wasn't done.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For trusting me."

He grabbed Kangee's bowl from his hands and put it down next to his before sliding closer and putting his hand on Kangee's knee. "I feel... honored."

Kangee snorted. "Honored? I think you're giving this whole thing way too much importance. It's not like I asked you to go to the bank and empty my account for me."

"Still." Jase leaned forward and kissed the corner of Kangee's mouth, making him smile. "You're trusting me not to abandon you here and just run with your quad and the shopping money."

"At least I would be a better deal for the bear."

Jase's laughter filled the warm summer day, slowly shifting to moans and whimpers when Kangee reached for him, pulled him onto his lap, and took care of him.

Chapter Seven

Jase smiled at the girl and took his change. "Thanks."

She smiled back, and he could tell she was interested in more than his shopping by the way she flipped her hair back. Pity he was gay and already had a... something.

Was Kangee his boyfriend? That didn't sound right for the man, never mind the fact that what was between them would last only another week at most. Every other word Jase could think about—partner, lover—spoke of something steady, and he didn't have that with Kangee.

With a heavy sigh, Jase grabbed the two grocery bags and headed outside. He had to make sure to balance the bags just right, because the girl had stuffed them as full as she could. The sun and heat hit him when he stepped outside, and he closed his eyes just for a moment. It wasn't even that hot—it was just a big difference from the air-conditioned grocery store.

Walking to the quad, Jase was glad Kangee usually used it to move his groceries to his house. He had equipped it with a big box that could be closed and locked, and Jase took care in putting the bags in it. He didn't want the eggs he'd just bought to end up in an omelet on the hot asphalt.

After checking he had everything Kangee had written on his list, Jase locked the box and climbed on the quad. It still felt weird to drive something so open, but it was fun. He loved the way the wind messed his hair up and how the sun felt warm yet not too hot on his skin.

He stopped briefly at the laundromat and retrieved the clothes he'd put in the dryer before heading to the grocery store. Kangee didn't know Jase had planned to stop to do laundry, but he just couldn't wear dirty clothes for another week, not when he had the opportunity to get some clean ones. He'd also taken a shower in his motel room while waiting for the clothes to be washed, so now he was ready to go.

He followed the road until he reached the spot where he knew he had to look for the big trail that led to the camp. It wasn't exactly advertised, which was why not a lot of people camped there. It was far enough away from the usually sleepy town of Kilkenny that campers wouldn't want to go back if they'd forgotten something.

It took about an hour, but Jase finally got to the camp and parked, already looking around. He couldn't see Kangee anywhere, so he unloaded the grocery bags and started putting stuff in the cooler. He was trying to fit the eggs in it when Kangee burst from between the trees.

“Grab your camera!”

Jase stood. “What?”

“Grab your camera! I know where the bear is!”

Jase jerked into action. Leaving the eggs where they were, he lunged for the tent, squirming inside even as his hands reached for the black bag that held the camera. He took it out, checked it was ready to take pictures, then hurried to Kangee's side.

The other man was noticeably amped up, and it wasn't a look Jase had ever seen on Kangee. It looked like the bear hunt had become almost as important for him as it was for Jase.

“Where to?”

Kangee pointed toward the trees. “There. It's not too far. I'd say a ten-minute walk.”

“Let's go then, or it'll disappear.”

The walk was silent. Kangee literally seemed to make no sound as he moved between the trees, and Jase knew he was incredibly loud next to him, especially since he was trying to hurry. He just hoped the bear Kangee had found was a little deaf or too busy to notice them approaching.

“How did you find it anyway?” Jase whispered.

Kangee scowled at him, but he answered. “I just decided to go for a walk, and I stumbled upon it.”

Jase pulled up short. “You went to look for it on your own? Are you crazy? It could have hurt you.”

“I'm fine, but if you continue to make so much noise, it's bound to notice us, and I don't want to end up being bear dinner.”

Jase made a zip-my-lips gesture in front of his mouth and Kangee gave him an approving nod before he started to walk again. Jase hurried behind him, his camera ready to take pictures, his heart beating so hard it felt as if it wanted to escape from his chest.

Jase was used to bears, at least up to a certain point. He'd seen plenty of them while camping, but it was the first time he was actually looking for one. Still, the adrenaline felt the same as it rushed through him and made his heart beat faster.

Kangee slowed, and Jase followed his example, knowing they'd gotten close. He tried to peek around the bigger man's back, but Kangee held a hand out to keep him behind. Jase bristled a bit at the protective gesture, but it wasn't as if he could say anything, so he just crossed his arms on his chest and scowled at Kangee's back.

"There." Kangee pointed at a tree in the distance, and Jase leaned to his side.

There it was. The bear he'd hoped to find, the one they'd spent the entire week looking for. Jase could see only its ass since it was digging, but there was no doubt it was a bear.

The bear moved a little, enough for Jase to see the hump on its shoulders. Its fur was a dark brown tipped with lighter shades of the same color, and it was an adult. Definitely an adult.

"Can you take a good enough picture from here? Because there's no way we're getting closer."

"Yeah, I think so. It's not like I have to take a portrait or anything, just prove there's a bear around."

Kangee moved to the side but stayed close, and Jase stepped forward, his camera already held up, his finger ready to snap the picture as soon as possible. He looked through the camera's lens and took several pictures, a smile growing on his face at the victory.

They'd done it—they'd found the bear, and Kangee's home would be safe and tourist-free. Even when he lowered the camera, having taken enough pictures, Jase's eyes stayed fastened on the bear, so he didn't see the root of the tree they were standing next to.

His foot caught on it as he moved, and he started to fall. He let his camera go and put his hands out in front of himself to stop the fall, but the only thing he managed to do was avoid a face-plant. He felt Kangee try to grab him from behind, but he still fell onto his knees, a loud *humph* escaping him as he tried to stay as silent as he could even when pain shot through his legs.

The bear rose from its crouch and turned their way, and Jase's heart stopped beating. Sure, they were far enough away that it probably wouldn't reach them,

but still. He bit his lower lip against the pain and tried to force his brain to remember what to do when confronted with a massive bear.

“Okay, okay. You’re a nice, pretty bear, aren’t you?”

“What are you doing?” Kangee hissed behind Jase, but Jase ignored him and stood up very slowly.

“You’re not going to hurt us, are you? We just wanted to take a nice picture of you, that’s it. We won’t hurt you, I swear.”

Jase kept his eyes low, never looking the bear in the face, and grabbed Kangee’s hand. “Look down.”

“We have to go.”

“Yeah, but we can’t just run away. It would outrun us and catch us. Start walking backward as slowly as you can.”

The bear was still looking at them, but it wasn’t attacking yet, and Jase hoped it wouldn’t. They’d obviously disturbed it while it was looking for food, and he didn’t want to become bear dinner, to quote Kangee.

Jase and Kangee started backing away, Jase’s eyes never leaving the bear. He could already taste freedom when the bear decided to investigate and started walking toward them. Jase froze, *oh shit* cycling through his mind as he scrambled to remember what he should do. “Okay, if it gets too close, we’re going to have to get up a tree. If it gets close and we’re not in a tree yet, and if it attacks, play dead.”

“What?”

“Play dead. Throw yourself on the ground in a fetal position and play dead. He’s only trying to keep his lunch safe from us, and if we’re dead we can’t steal it.”

Kangee squeezed Jase’s hand harder, and Jase took a deep breath. The bear wasn’t backing away. If anything, it seemed to be more interested in them than ever.

“I think we should start looking for a tree.”

Jase felt Kangee nod, but just as he started looking at the trees to find one in which he could climb easily, the bear decided it had enough with the slow approach. It started running their way, and Jase turned around, knowing he had to get up the closest tree.

Kangee was standing still behind him, his eyes fastened on the bear, and Jase tried to push him. "Come on! We have to climb!"

Kangee looked down at Jase, his eyes wide, his face set in a resolute expression. He cupped one of Jase's cheeks. "Don't be scared."

"What? We have to—"

Kangee moved fast, crouching in front of Jase, but before Jase could start to panic, Kangee seemed to melt in his clothes. Jase gaped, his eyes opening even wider when a raven fought its way from under Kangee's clothes and flew toward the bear.

Kangee didn't know what he was going to do when he shifted, but his raven needed to come out and protect its mate. Kangee hadn't been able to stop the shift, but he needed to find a way to make the bear go away.

The raven shot toward the bear, croaking loudly enough to make the animal stop and look up. The bird flew in a circle, trying to keep the bear distracted and give Jase the time to get to safety. The bear looked up at the raven as it flew above its head. It tilted its head to the side and seemed to forget about Jase. It was a half victory for the raven, but now it needed to make sure Jase ran.

The raven glanced toward Jase and saw that the human had grabbed the clothes from the ground and was quickly making his way toward their camp. He kept on looking back every few seconds, and the raven didn't like the scared expression on his face. Jase's eyes were wide, and he was pale, his lips pressed together as if he was stopping himself from crying.

The raven looked back down and croaked. The bear seemed to have completely lost interest in its human, and it rose on its hind legs and batted at the raven, but the raven was faster. It flew in circles around the bear, occasionally coming closer when the bear lost interest.

Once Jase was far enough that the raven couldn't see him anymore, the bird gave the bear one last croak and headed back to the camp. It knew Jase would be there, waiting for the raven's human side. The raven could feel the human inside him was afraid of Jase. He was scared Jase wouldn't want him anymore, so the raven looked for something shiny they could offer the human to make him stay.

The raven was nearly at the camp when his eye caught a shiny thing gleaming in the dirt. A bottle cap had been abandoned there, and the bird flew down. It extracted it from the earth it'd been half buried under and grabbed it before flying toward the tent.

Jase was sitting in front of the fire pit, a pile of clothes on the seat in front of him. The raven landed not too far away, and careful of Jase's wary eyes, it hopped toward him. It kept a safe distance so that Jase wouldn't be scared and let the bottle cap fall. The raven cawed and pushed the cap toward Jase with its beak before hopping back.

"Um, Kangee? Is that... is that you?" The raven cawed, and Jase jumped in his seat. "Okay, I'll take that as a yes. Could you—do you think you could, I don't know, shift back or whatever it is you do? I'm not exactly comfortable talking with a raven, at least not now that I know it's you."

The raven started to shift, Jase still mumbling to himself.

"I think I've gone crazy. I mean, what other explanation could there be. He... a raven! So what, my raven stalker really was Kangee all that time?"

Kangee shook himself and rose from his crouch. He looked at Jase, his heart squeezing painfully at the bewildered expression on the man's face. Jase was huddled on his seat, his arms wrapped around his chest as if he were trying to keep himself from falling apart.

"Jase?"

Jase's head snapped toward Kangee. "Kangee?"

Kangee moved slowly toward his clothes to avoid startling Jase. He kept his eyes on the man even as he dressed, but once he was done he was at a loss. Should he try to move closer to Jase and reassure him? Should he keep his distance to keep from scaring him even more? Should he try to talk to him, or should he just pack and go home?

Flashes of another time, another conversation, passed through his mind and made him want to run away, but he owed it to Jase to stay and try to make things right, or at least as right as he could. "Jase? Are you okay?"

Jase looked up at Kangee but didn't say anything. He was biting his lower lip hard enough to make it bleed, and Kangee reached out, wanting to pull it out from under his perfect white teeth. Jase cringed and huddled into himself even more, and Kangee stopped, his hand still hovering between them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to scare you, I... I just wanted you to be safe." Kangee let his hand fall and moved toward the tent. "I'll grab my things and leave. You can keep the quad, just... leave it in front of your motel when you're done."

"Wait."

Kangee stopped. He was ready to do whatever Jase wanted him to do at the moment, so he waited, and hoped.

"Are you... what *are* you?"

"I'm a shifter."

Jase snorted, and he sounded almost like his old self for just a moment. "Yeah, I noticed that. You're... you turn into a raven?"

"Yes." Kangee moved slowly, as slowly as Jase had when the bear had seen them, and walked to the seat on the other side of the fire pit. He sat down and clasped his hands together, his eyes never leaving Jase's face. "You can ask me whatever you want."

"How is it possible? How can you be—" Jase gestured toward Kangee "—whatever you are? A shape-shifter?"

"I don't know. No one ever told me why or how, I just know I am. My father used to tell me about Sioux legends when I was a kid, about the Raven and how he could take several forms. Maybe it's because he was Sioux, I don't know."

Jase looked at him. He seemed to be a bit calmer, and the weight that'd been sitting on Kangee's chest seemed to lighten just a bit.

"Tell me more?"

"About what?"

"The stories."

"Why? Shouldn't you want to know more about my raven?"

"You seem to think it's related."

"Okay, fine. So, the Raven is a keeper of secrets and a trickster. The tales basically show how children should behave, but they're very different from tribe to tribe. I researched them when I was younger. I was looking for an explanation, but... I didn't find one. They're just stories. The only thing I'm

sure of is that my father, my brother, and I can turn into ravens. I don't know how or why, and I'm not sure it matters anyway."

Jase stayed silent for a while, then he shrugged and gave Kangee a nod. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay with it."

"You're okay with me being a raven shifter?" Jase nodded. "But... why? Anyone else would have gone running for the hills."

"Some things don't have reasons or explanations, but it doesn't mean they don't exist or that they're, I don't know, bad."

Kangee had no words. Jase was reacting in a completely different way than Chris had, and Kangee wasn't sure what to do with him at the moment.

"Are you still you when you're a raven?"

"In a way. I'm still there, and if I want, I can try to convince the raven to do things, but he's also a being of his own, so it's not always easy. I usually let him lead when I'm in raven form. He acts on instinct mostly, and I only have so much control over those."

Jase grinned. The wary, scared man he'd been only moments before was already a distant memory. "So, when the raven brought me gifts, who was in charge?"

Kangee blushed. He'd never been so happy to have dark skin since it hid the blush, but from Jase's smirk he knew exactly what was happening. "It was the raven. He has... taken a shine to you, I guess. He likes you."

Jase reached for the bottle cap the raven had left for him. He brushed the dirt away with his thumb and smiled. "I knew it was weird for a bird to do that, but now it makes sense. He likes me as much as you do."

Kangee glowered at Jase, but he wasn't really feeling it. He felt incredibly relieved at the way Jase was taking it. If Jase accepted Kangee's animal side, then maybe they could have a relationship.

No.

Jase would be leaving soon. He had his pictures now. He didn't need to stay any longer.

"Yeah, he does."

“Can I ask why you didn’t tell me before?”

“How should have I done that? Hi, I’m Kangee and I’m a raven shape-shifter?”

“You might be right. I’d have thought you were crazy, and I certainly wouldn’t have gone camping with you.” He hesitated, but Jase was nothing if not courageous, and he always spoke his mind. “Is that why you live in the middle of nowhere? Because you’re scared someone’ll find out?”

“Partly.”

“And...” Jase gestured for Kangee to go on, and even if Kangee didn’t want to, he felt as if he owed it to Jase.

“You’re only the second person I’ve told about this, and you’re the only one who reacted well to it.”

“Oh. What happened?”

“When I was in college, I, well, I was in a steady relationship. I met Chris right at the beginning of college, and we stayed together almost until the end. When we started talking about living together, I knew I had to tell him. I thought he loved me enough to...” Kangee looked at his hands.

Seven years had passed, but Chris’s rejection still burned. “I showed him the raven and scared him to death. He ran away, told me I was a monster and that I had to stay away. I never saw him again. As soon as I graduated, I bought the house here and moved. I took it as a sign that shifters shouldn’t mix with humans.”

A soft hand grabbed Kangee’s, and he looked up at Jase. “It was his loss. Not everyone thinks the same way, but you’re still you, even with a raven half. It shouldn’t have mattered.”

Kangee squeezed Jase’s hand. “Thank you.”

Jase smiled and let Kangee’s hand go. “So, are you alone, or do you have a clutch or something?”

“Clutch? I’m not a chicken!”

“What, it’s not called a clutch of ravens? I thought clutch was fine for all the birds.”

“It’s not!”

“So what’s a group of ravens called?”

“An unkindness.”

Jase's eyes widened. “An unkindness of ravens?” Kangee nodded, and Jase tilted his head to the side as he examined him. “Yeah, I guess I can see that. It suits you.”

Kangee growled, but he was secretly relieved at the turn the conversation had taken. Everything was back to normal, at least until Jase left.

Jase took one last look at the room that'd been his for the past two weeks. Well, it had been his, but he'd slept in it only for a few nights, of course.

Strong arms slid around his waist, and Jase leaned backward into Kangee's chest.

“You have everything?”

Jase forced himself to smile. “Yeah. How long do we still have?”

“Your bus leaves about an hour from now.”

“That's more than enough time then.”

“For what?”

Jase didn't bother to answer, at least not with words. He let his body talk for him and turned to kiss Kangee. His chest hurt at the thought that these were the last kisses, the last touches, the last time they would make love, but he needed it. He needed to say good-bye and to *feel* one last time.

He thrust his tongue inside Kangee's mouth and clutched at his shoulders, trying to get closer even when he knew it wasn't possible.

He pushed Kangee backward, relieved when Kangee went without protest and followed Jase's lead instead of being his usual hardheaded self. The room wasn't big, and Kangee's legs hit the side of the mattress almost right away. He tumbled onto it and pulled Jase with him. Jase went willingly. He let himself fall on top of Kangee, smiling when the man made a strangled noise as the sudden weight hit him. Jase didn't give him much time to start breathing again.

He pressed their lips together, his hands already working on their clothes. It didn't matter whose they were, Jase opened buttons, pushed, and pulled on fabric, until they were both naked.

Jase sat up on Kangee's thighs and looked down at the man who'd come to mean too much in too little time. He wanted to remember this Kangee, the one

with black hair fanned over the white pillow, the one with smooth skin waiting for Jase's lips and fingers. The one with a surprising surrender in his eyes.

Jase wanted to explore, to send every inch to memory, but need was already building deep inside him, running through his veins. He leaned forward and kissed his man, groping for the bag he'd left on the bed at the same time.

Kangee hissed when Jase's stomach pressed against his cock, so Jase pushed down harder and squirmed a little, just to hear that sound again. Kangee was a man of few words or sounds even during sex, so every one of them was precious to Jase.

Kangee wasn't in a playing mood, though, and he grabbed Jase under his armpits, hauling him up until their bodies were aligned as much as their different heights permitted it. Their cocks met, hard and smooth, and sticky with pre-cum, and Jase stopped looking for the lube he knew was in his bag. He concentrated on the sensations, on the way his skin slid on Kangee's, and on how the other man's breath felt against his neck.

Kangee chuckled and reached out, his hand more steady than Jase's had been as he opened the front pocket of Jase's bag and took what they needed out of it. He looked away from Jase, and Jase heard the snick of the lube bottle opening. He reached for the bottle and tried to take it from Kangee, but the man shook his head.

Jase frowned, but Kangee didn't talk. He gently pushed Jase instead until Jase climbed down from his hips, then he opened his legs. Jase was speechless. He knew Kangee would never outright ask for it, but the way he held his legs open and tilted his hips made what he wanted obvious.

"You sure?"

Kangee nodded. Jase smiled at the blush creeping on the other man's cheeks and held his hand out. Kangee squirted lube on Jase's fingers, never looking him in the eyes, but Jase didn't care. He knew Kangee didn't like to give control up and that he was bound to feel vulnerable.

Jase put his fingers to work, sliding them on Kangee's skin, into him, opening him quickly but gently. He didn't know how long it'd been for Kangee, but it had to be a while. He made sure to hit Kangee's prostate as often as he could, and it seemed to help.

By the time Jase deemed Kangee ready, the blush on the man's cheeks was obvious. That and the quickened breath were the only hints Kangee liked what

Jase was doing—other than the hard cock that was leaking on Kangee's stomach, of course. Jase found the control Kangee was keeping on his reactions endearing. It was typical Kangee, and it made Jase want him even more. He wanted to push Kangee until he finally gave him a sign of how much he liked it, until he moaned and writhed.

He leaned over and kissed Kangee before sitting up and taking the condom the man was handing him. He opened it and rolled it on his cock, hissing at the contact. He smeared the lube he still had on his fingers on the latex and slid between Kangee's legs.

Jase grinned at the man under him and slowly started to inch inside Kangee, biting his lower lip against the urge to push too hard and too fast. Kangee tensed, and Jase stopped, his eyes riveted on Kangee's face to try to understand when to stop and when to push again.

Kangee nodded, and Jase started moving again. Kangee didn't stop him again, and he sank to the hilt inside the man's ass. Jase moved back a little and thrust back in. When Kangee didn't protest, he set a gentle rhythm with his hips and slid a hand between them. He grasped Kangee's cock and squeezed, moving his hand up and down and using his thumb to smear the pre-cum on the head. Small words of love mixed with the erotic sound of flesh slapping against flesh as Jase took Kangee, and he never wanted to let go.

Jase leaned down and kissed Kangee's lips just as he felt Kangee tense again. He drank the sound of Kangee's release from his lips as the man filled the space between them with his release, his hands clutching at Jase's shoulders, their legs intertwined together.

When Kangee's body relaxed, Jase moved. Kangee gave him a wicked smile and tightened his internal muscles around Jase's dick with every thrust. It didn't take long for Jase to come. He filled the condom and let himself fall onto Kangee, not caring that he was smearing cum all over himself.

They stayed like that for too little time, Kangee's arms around Jase, and Jase's head on Kangee's chest as he listened to the man's slowing heartbeat. Their time was up, though.

Jase looked up at Kangee and pressed their lips together. "Thank you." He rose and slowly slid away, disposing of the used condom in the room's wastebasket. He grabbed his phone from his jeans and checked the time. "We still have twenty minutes."

“We can clean up. I don’t think you want to spend the entire bus ride smelling of sex.”

Jase nodded and headed to the bathroom. They showered separately, and Jase took the time to make the bed as well as he could while Kangee was showering.

“Want to go get some snacks at the grocery store?”

Jase looked at the now open bathroom door. Kangee looked and sounded just as bad as Jase felt, and Jase wasn’t sure how that made him feel. “Sure.”

Kangee grabbed the bag Jase had moved next to the door and pointed to the office with his other hand. “Go on and give the keys back, I’ll wait here.”

It didn’t take long, and Kangee was exactly where he said he’d be when Jase was done. Jase reached for his bag, but Kangee shook his head. “I’ll keep it for now. You’ll have to haul it around once you get home anyway. Better take a break while you can, this thing is heavy as hell.”

“One of my friends is coming to get me from the bus station.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Jase didn’t protest. Over the past two weeks he’d learned that Kangee could be just as stubborn as Jase was, and when he set his mind on something, he didn’t back out of it. Their relationship—if it could be called a relationship—was a good example of that.

Kangee had hesitated for a while and pushed Jase away, but once he’d decided to give Jase a chance, he hadn’t looked back, or at least not that Jase had noticed.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Same as always. I’m going to go home and luxuriate in the silence while ignoring the letters and phone calls from the company that’s trying to buy the land. I hope it won’t take too long for them to get the news of the bear.”

“I’ll send the pictures to the Fish and Wildlife Service as soon as possible, don’t worry. I wouldn’t want you to have to give up on your full-body tanning.”

Jase watched Kangee splutter and smiled with satisfaction. Yeah, he was still able to rile the man up even if Kangee had softened.

“I already told you I don’t do that.”

“No, but you still run around naked when you become your feathery self. You wouldn’t want to scar anyone for life if they happen to stumble on you in your birthday suit.”

The trip to the grocery store took only a handful of minutes. Jase grabbed a bottle of water and selected a few snacks, smiling at the girl at the checkout. She was the same one who had been there the last time, and she still seemed to be interested in Jase.

“What about you? What are you going to do once you get home?”

“Unpack, turn my computer on, and send those pictures. That way I know you won’t be on my ass because I forgot to do it.”

Jase felt Kangee move backward and smiled. He knew the man was checking his ass out—not that he needed to do it since he’d already seen it plenty of times.

“I’d love to have a reason to be on your ass.”

“I’m sure.”

The eyes of the checkout girl had gone wide, and she’d finally stopped fluttering her lashes at Jase. He winked at her, relieved when she didn’t react badly but smiled instead.

Still, the banter had reminded Jase that he’d have Kangee on his ass only for about fifteen more minutes, and he felt that it wasn’t enough.

Time with Kangee never seemed to be enough, even if Jase had spent the entirety of the last two weeks with him. He should be over it by now, right? He’d gone in knowing that whatever was between them had a best-before date, and yet...

Yet Jase hadn’t been able to protect his heart. Oh, he wasn’t in love, but he definitely was in lust, and he had a crush on Kangee. Time would take care of that and make him forget, of course, but Jase felt like he didn’t *want* to forget.

He followed Kangee out of the shop and to the bus stop, cracking open his bottle of water and taking a drink just to do something with his hands, something that wasn’t reaching for Kangee and holding on to him.

Kangee put Jase’s bag down and opened his arms, and Jase threw himself into them gratefully. Maybe he wasn’t the only one too affected by their one-week stand.

"I'm gonna miss you." Jase burrowed his face into Kangee's chest and took a deep breath, sending the man's scent to memory. He would forget soon enough, but at the moment he needed to feel close to Kangee.

He felt Kangee press a kiss on the top of his head. "I'm going to miss you too."

"I wish..."

"I know. Right now this feels hard, and it is, but you'll see, soon you'll be back home, with your friends and your family, and you'll forget about me."

Jase shook his head against Kangee's chest. "I won't."

Kangee's hand came up, and he stroked Jase's hair. "You will. Not completely, of course, but this summer will be a nice memory you'll only think about sometimes. Soon you'll go back to college, you'll study and take exams, you'll probably find yourself a boyfriend, and you'll be happy."

"I—"

Kangee cut Jase's words and pressed their lips together. Jase let himself be distracted, knowing there really was nothing he could say or do to make their relationship last longer. They hadn't been together long enough to have any option other than breaking up.

He opened his mouth for Kangee, relishing the last moments they had together, but he could already hear the bus approaching. When Kangee broke their lips apart and started leaning away, Jase clung to his shoulders, trying to keep him close just for a few more moments. This was hard, harder than he ever could have thought it would be.

The bus stopped next to them, hissing and clicking, and Kangee gently pushed Jase away. "You need to go. You can't miss the bus."

"But I—"

"Go. I'll be waiting to hear from you about the pictures. You have my email address, right?"

Jase nodded but kept his eyes on Kangee's chest. He didn't want to show him just how vulnerable and hurt he was feeling at the moment, especially since it seemed to be so easy for Kangee to watch Jase go. "Yeah. You have mine, right?"

"Yes. You gave me everything, remember? Your email, your phone number, even your address."

Jase chuckled and looked up. "You can't blame me for wanting to be sure you can reach me if you want to."

"I don't."

"Are you coming?" someone shouted from the bus, and Jase looked up to see the driver looking at him.

"Yeah. I'm... I'm coming."

He looked up at Kangee one more time, and this time he could see the pain in the man's dark eyes. Knowing they were sharing it didn't make it go away, though, and it didn't make it easier for Jase to step away from Kangee and onto the bus.

Kangee cupped both of Jase's cheeks and kissed his forehead. "Good-bye, Jase."

"Good-bye."

Chapter Eight

Kangee looked at the dark sky above him. The end-of-summer storm was moving away, leaving the trees around Kangee's cabin clean and the air smelling of wet grass and rain. Kangee could feel his raven wanting to come out. He wasn't sure he could let it, though, not when the damned bird wanted only one thing—to fly to California and find his mate.

Kangee hadn't forgotten Jase, not yet, and maybe not ever, not when his raven wanted the man more than ever. The bird hadn't taken Jase's departure well, and things weren't getting better, not even now that a month-and-a-half had passed. It had gotten to the point where Kangee was afraid to shift because last time he had he'd found himself almost halfway to California when he'd finally managed to regain a bit of control. Making the raven turn around and come back home hadn't been easy, and keeping it inside was becoming harder as the time passed.

The phone rang inside the house, and just like always, Kangee's heart jumped in his chest. Even knowing it couldn't be Jase, there was always a tiny flicker of hope, just like there was one every time Kangee went through his emails.

Jase had written only twice, once to tell Kangee he'd forwarded the pictures he'd taken of the bear to the Fish and Wildlife Service, and once to tell him the service had contacted him for more info. Kangee didn't know how it had gone, but he hadn't received any more offers to sell his land, so he imagined the resort had been moved to another, more convenient place.

“Hello?”

“Hey bro.”

Kangee let the breath he had been holding go. “Hi.”

“Gosh, could you sound any happier to hear from your brother?”

“Oh, I'm so happy to hear from you, Mojag, so happy I think I just peed myself.”

Mojag laughed. “I'd think it was true if your voice of doom didn't give you away.”

“Voice of doom?”

“Yeah. It’s like I can nearly see how unhappy you are just by hearing your voice. You sound desperate, brother.”

Kangee snorted. “You’ve always been overly dramatic.”

“Okay, maybe not desperate, but you’re not your usual happy self either.”

“Are you sure you’re my brother? Because I don’t think I’ve ever had a happy self.”

“You sounded happy when that guy was there.”

Kangee’s heart sank. “Yeah, maybe I was. Not much sense dwelling on it, though.”

“Why not? If you were happy with him then maybe you should continue whatever was between the two of you.”

“He lives in California, Mojag. That’s not exactly around the block.”

“So what?” Kangee could almost hear the shrug in his brother’s voice. “You could move there. As much as I love your cabin, I’ve always thought you were too isolated. It’s not good to be alone so much, not even for you.”

“Oh, so I should move hundreds of miles away for a guy that hasn’t even bothered to call since he left. It’s been a month-and-a-half, I think he’d have said something if he missed me as much as you seem to think he does.”

“Okay, wait. One, I don’t think you should move because of what’s-his-name.”

“Jase.”

“Yeah, Jase. You shouldn’t move for him, but he could be a plus. You don’t even have to move to California if you don’t want to. Maybe you don’t like warm weather or whatever. You should move because I know you’re not happy in Kilkenny. Keep the cabin, go back during the summer, sure, but you should stop isolating yourself just because one guy freaked out on you.”

“Chris wasn’t just some guy, Mojag.”

“Yeah, I know. You thought he was your soul mate or something. Well, he obviously wasn’t if he couldn’t accept your birdie. I’m not saying he was a bad guy, but he obviously wasn’t open-minded enough to accept your little quirk. It’s been seven years, Kangee. It’s time to move on, and you’ll never be able to do it if you stay all alone and holed up in the mountains.”

Kangee wanted to protest, but for once what his brother was saying made sense. Not that Mojag was stupid or anything, but he'd had it easy, at least on the love life side. He'd married his high school sweetheart right after college, and she'd accepted Mojag's raven without problems.

Kangee couldn't help but feel jealous of his brother, just like every time he thought about it, but this time there was something more to it, a sparkle of hope and *need* to change something.

Yes, Kangee had run after Chris had rejected him. He'd thought it was the sign that shape-shifters like him weren't meant to mix with humans, that normal human beings just wouldn't be able to accept him. He'd hidden in the mountains, concentrating on his pain instead of looking at the positive examples he had of human-shifter relationships, coming out only when the loneliness got too heavy to bear.

Kangee's mother and his father had been happy, and she'd never cared about the raven. Mojag was happy with Elise, and even Jase had accepted Kangee for what he was. He hadn't run, hadn't called him a monster or any other names, and Kangee knew Jase had been as sad as Kangee when he'd left.

Yes, he hadn't called or even written, but then neither had Kangee. He'd felt it would make things easier, that a clean break was what he needed, but he couldn't hide from himself anymore. Jase's departure had left a hole inside him, and while he was able to live with it, it didn't mean he *had* to.

"Kangee? You still there?"

"Yeah."

"If I didn't know you so well I'd think you're actually thinking about it."

"I'm doing more than that. I'm going to do it."

"What?"

"How long do you think it'll take me to get to California?"

"Ah, well, if you leave early tomorrow morning, I think you can be there by late afternoon if you don't find too much traffic."

"I'm going now."

"What? Kangee, wait! What are you talking about?"

"I'll call you from Berkeley." Kangee was already pulling his clothes off, not really listening to his brother.

“You’re not thinking to fly there, right? It’s too far, Kangee. You’ll end up too tired, if you even get there in the first place.”

“I’ll call you.”

“Kangee, wait! It’ll take less time to go—”

Kangee hung the phone up and grabbed his keys. He locked the house and checked to be sure everything was closed before hiding his keys under the rock he usually used for that, not that anyone would come looking for him anyway.

He didn’t stop to think, because he knew that if he did, he’d find reasons to stop and stay home. It wouldn’t be the first time it happened. Sometimes Kangee was his own worst enemy, but he couldn’t let it get in the way, not this time.

Opening his arms wide, he relished in the caress of the wind against his skin. Kangee gave control over to his raven for the first time in a month. The raven came forward, its happiness coursing through their connection as Kangee’s body shrunk and sprouted black feathers. The raven shook its head as Kangee’s humanity retreated and let it have the reins. It knew what it had to do.

The raven took flight, circling once around the house in the clearing and cawing loudly before heading southwest.

Jase scrolled through the pictures he’d taken in Kilkenny, stopping on a picture of Kangee.

Jase remembered when he’d taken that particular picture, even if there were another dozen of them now saved on his computer. He’d snapped it on their second morning after. They’d made it to the tent that time, and they’d done a lot more than just frottage. Kangee had been sweet and slow, as if he’d thought Jase would break under his hands, and after the sex they’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms.

Surprisingly, Jase had been the first one to wake up the next morning. When he’d opened his eyes, he’d had to smother a laugh before it woke Kangee. The man was lying on his back, an arm around Jase, his long, black hair suffering a bad case of bed hair.

Jase hadn’t known hair so silky and thick could even have bed hair, so he’d leaned closer and had found out why exactly the strands looked like something a bird had used to make a nest.

Kangee had been a little too enthusiastic in his use of lube the night before, and he obviously had forgotten just how much of it had been on his hands. Jase vaguely remembered the man pushing his hair away from his face while he was thrusting into Jase, and that had to be the moment when Kangee had smeared his hair with lube.

A knock on the door startled Jase. He quickly turned off his desktop before calling, "Come in."

"Hey, we're going out. Want to come?"

Jase turned his chair around to face Pete. "No, I think I'll stay here." He should have known better than to try to get out of it without a good explanation.

"Uh, no, you're coming with us. All we roomies are going to eat something and then go for a beer."

"Look, thanks for the invite, but I'm tired." Jase made a show of stretching and yawning, but they'd lived together for the past two years. Pete knew Jase better than Jase's mother did by now.

He slumped down on the bed in front of Jase and leaned his elbows on his knees. "Okay, spill."

"What?"

"You think I'm blind? Or stupid? We've all seen how weird you've been since you came back from the boonies."

Jase chuckled. "I was in Kilkenny, Colorado."

"Yeah, what you said. So, what happened? Did you fight with your mother again?"

"No, no. She's been quiet lately." Jase's mother always tried to fix him up with some girl. She thought he just had to find the right one to suddenly become straight, and while he usually ignored her, sometimes it wasn't easy.

Pete smirked and leaned backward. "You know I'm not going anywhere until you tell me."

Jase groaned. Pete was one stubborn ass, and if he'd decided not to move until Jase spilled, then he wouldn't. Jase knew from experience that he'd wake up tomorrow to find out that Pete had slept with him in his bed if he didn't confess soon. The man had to be the only straight guy Jase knew who wasn't afraid of sleeping in the same bed as Jase.

“Yeah, okay. Look, it’s stupid. I just kind of got a crush on a guy I met in Kilkenny, and now I can’t forget him. That’s all.”

“Oooh, nice try, but now that I have you talking, I won’t stop until I get all the juicy details.”

“Do you know how annoying you are?”

“Just as much as you.”

“I’m not that bad!”

“Oh, you definitely are.”

Had Kangee felt the same way Jase felt at the moment when he’d been dealing with Jase? He wasn’t sure, but the thought made him smile. “There’s nothing much to say. I met the guy, he agreed to go camping with me, we had sex, stayed together for about a week and a half, I left. End of story.”

“I’ll pretend I don’t know there was a lot more to it. Anyway, what does your guy think of this? Or has he already disappeared?”

“I haven’t contacted him.”

Pete cocked a brow. “Why not?”

“Because he’s a thousand miles away from here.”

“Ever heard of long-distance relationships?”

“Please. I was with Kangee for all of two weeks. He’s older than me by nearly ten years and so hot he could have anyone he wants. Why would he want to be in a long-distance relationship with me?”

“The way I see it, you have two options. Either you call your guy and ask him if he wants to give it a try, or you forget about him.”

“I know. It’s just... hard, you know?”

“Yeah. I had a girlfriend in high school. We tried the long distance thing when I came here, but it didn’t work, at least not for long.”

“Nice way to make me want to give it a try.” Jase sighed. He knew he should keep things as they were, but... what if there could be something more to it? He’d never felt what he felt for Kangee with anyone else, and he didn’t think it was only lust, or even a crush. It sure didn’t feel that way.

“I wouldn’t miss him if it was only sex, right?”

"I don't think so. You can have all the sex you can possibly want here, and without complications. You don't need him for that. So, you're coming with us?"

"Nope. I'm going to stay here and call him."

Pete dropped his hand on Jase's shoulder and squeezed. "That's my man. What does your guy look like anyway? Must be pretty special for you to pine after him like this."

"It's not only his looks, Pete."

"I know, I know."

Jase grabbed his mouse and turned the monitor back on. He quickly selected a new picture, but from the snicker coming from behind him, Pete had already seen the bedhead Kangee. Still, Jase selected his favorite picture of Kangee to show his friend.

It was one he'd taken just as the sun was setting, and the play of the light on Kangee's skin highlighted his dark complexion. Kangee was sitting on a water-worn log next to the lake, looking out at the water but with unfocused eyes, as if he was lost in his thoughts. His black hair was a little messy because of the wind and framed his face.

"Yeah, I think I see the appeal." Pete was tilting his head from side to side as he appraised Kangee, and Jase felt his chest puff with pride at the idea that the man was his. *Maybe*.

"Well, I'm going then. We'll be at the pub when you're done with lover boy."

Jase nodded but his eyes were fixed on his monitor again.

"Holy shit."

Jase swung his chair around. "What?"

Pete pointed at the window. "That. What's it doing?"

Jase's eyes went round when he saw what Pete was pointing at. A black bird was on the fire escape, hopping toward his open window, but it was having problems staying upright. The bird wavered and looked like it was exhausted, but it still went on.

"Is that a crow?"

“A raven.” Jase’s heart was beating fast. He wasn’t completely sure the bird wasn’t a real raven, not when it was behaving like it was.

Pete gave Jase a weird glance. “How’d you know that?”

Jase shrugged. “Can you go get me some water?”

“Are you going to try to save it?”

“If I can.”

“Better you than me, man.”

Pete disappeared and reappeared soon after, a bottle of water in one hand and a bowl in the other. “Here you go. We’re leaving, okay? Call if you need anything.”

Pete leaned out and looked at the raven one last time, shaking his head as he walked to the door. Jase waved and turned his attention back to the bird.

Once he was sure Pete was gone, he poked his head out of the window. “Kangee?”

The raven cawed and hopped closer. It let something fall on the metal of the stairs and Jase’s breath hitched. The raven had brought him a gift. “Kangee, I hope it’s you because I’m about to grab you, and I’m particularly fond of my fingers. All of them.”

Jase reached out, holding his breath until his fingers skimmed over the soft black feathers on top of the bird’s head. The raven reacted much like a cat, to Jase’s surprise.

It pushed its head into Jase’s fingers as if asking for more cuddles, and Jase smiled. He moved his fingers away and climbed over the sill, taking care to move slowly as to not spook the bird. He grabbed the stick Kangee had brought and tucked it in his pocket before crouching next to the raven.

“I’m going to grab you now, okay? Be good.”

Jase reached out and slid his hands around the raven, surprised at how nice the feathers felt. He kept his hold as loose as he could and lifted, relieved when the bird didn’t react. Its intelligent eyes were fastened on Jase, and while it was a little creepy, Jase took it as another sign that it really was Kangee.

He stood and held the bird close to his chest before climbing back in and walking to the bed. Jase put the raven down and grabbed the bottle of water. “Okay. So, are you Kangee or not? Because if you’re not, I think I might be the bird whisperer.”

The raven cawed. Its body started to grow, feathers retreating and wings becoming arms, its entire form rippling until Kangee was sitting right in front of Jase.

Kangee collapsed backward, grateful that Jase had put him on the bed. It made for a soft landing, and Kangee didn't think he could have put up with anything else at the moment.

"Please tell me you didn't fly all the way here."

"What do you think?"

"Right now? That you're an idiot. You do know it would've taken you less time and would've been a lot less tiring to drive, right?"

Kangee grunted. "Well, excuse me for being impatient at the idea of seeing you. Next time I'll make sure I think before I act on instinct."

When Jase didn't answer, Kangee pulled his head up enough to see him and opened his eyes. Jase was standing next to the bed, a bottle of water in hand and his eyes wide.

"You were impatient to see me?"

Kangee sat up and reached for the water. Jase pressed it into his hand and turned to grab a towel from the dresser. He handed it to Kangee, and even if it was pink and purple, Kangee accepted it. He draped it over his groin and drank the water before answering, "I was."

"That's all you're going to tell me?"

"I feel kind of tired, you know?"

"That's your own fault. Are you going to tell me what happened or not? I don't hear from you for more than a month and suddenly your feathery self pops out of nowhere on my fire escape. What should I think about it? For all I know you were just impatient to hear about the Fish and Wildlife Service and decided to drop by on your way to—to Honolulu."

Kangee laughed. God, he'd missed Jase's overly dramatic ways. "Do you by any chance know how the weather is in Hawaii these days?"

Jase spluttered and launched himself at Kangee. Kangee wanted to resist, really he did, but he felt tired to the bone, so he just grabbed Jase around the waist and pulled him closer. He leaned back on the bed, and Jase immediately settled next to him, his face on Kangee's chest and his arm around his waist.

“Really, what are you doing here?”

“I missed you, and someone made me realize I didn’t have to stay away if I didn’t want to.”

“Yeah? Who’s that genius?”

“My brother. I wouldn’t call him a genius, but he knows me better than most—”

“Not that there are many that actually do know you, what with you being a hermit for the last seven years.”

“Yeah, think you can close that smart mouth for a bit?”

Jase mimed locking his mouth and throwing the key away, and Kangee pressed a kiss on his forehead.

“I talked with Mojag, and he basically told me I was being an idiot.”

“That’s what I said. How come he can call you that and I can’t?”

“What happened to the locked mouth?”

“Oops, sorry. I’ll shut up now. I promise.”

“He pointed out that I’ve lived alone for a long time and that I didn’t really have a good reason to do it, not when you know what I am, and you don’t seem to mind.”

Jase’s hand shot up. Kangee waited, but Jase just held it there until Kangee had to ask. “What are you doing?”

“Asking for permission to speak.”

“We’re not in high school, Jase.”

“Okay, so you came here just because I accept what you are?”

Kangee knew he had to be very careful with his next words. “In part. I told you about Chris and the way he reacted to my raven. A lot of people would’ve done the same thing, and some would’ve reacted even worse and called the cops or something. You didn’t. Even knowing that both my mother and my sister-in-law accepted my father’s and my brother’s raven, I didn’t think I’d find someone who could accept mine.”

Jase was tense in Kangee’s arms, but at least he wasn’t pulling away, so Kangee went on. “I never realized I needed to be accepted for who I am, for *all* I am, until you barreled into my life. I kept telling myself that it was only a

summer fling, but I always knew it was more. I wouldn't have made love to anyone who couldn't accept my raven, or with every pretty boy I'd have stumbled on in the grocery store. You're special, Jase. You're the only one who managed to open my heart again after seven years. No one had been able to do that, because I kept away. You didn't care about that and you went on and pushed until you got in."

Kangee shut up after that. There wasn't much more he could say. He'd told Jase he more than liked him in his roundabout way. He'd told him he had an important place in Kangee's life now. Kangee only hoped Jase would be able to read between the lines and get to the heart of the message.

"So you think I'm a pretty boy, huh?"

"Pretty, bossy, smart mouth, sexy as hell, intelligent."

"Aww, now you're trying to seduce me with compliments?"

Kangee pushed Jase onto his back and rolled on top of him. "Do I need to seduce you? I thought you were a sure thing."

Jase rolled his hips upward, and Kangee groaned. "I could have found someone else in the past month."

"Did you?"

Jase shook his head, his blond hair flying in Kangee's face. "No. I guess it means you're pretty special too."

"Maybe we can be special together."

"Yeah? What about your house?"

"We can keep it as a summer house."

"Your job?"

"The only thing I need is a computer."

"Your family?"

"They don't even live in Kilkenny, but that reminds me I have to call my brother."

"You have an answer for everything."

"There's only one question I don't know the answer to."

"And which one would that be?"

“Do you want me to move to California?”

Kangee held his breath. He might have acted nonchalantly, but the answer Jase would give him would either make him the happiest man on earth or the saddest one.

“Where are you going to live?”

“I’ll find a place somewhere close.”

“You’re going to have to go back to Kilkenny for now, though.”

“I guess.”

Jase grinned. “I really want to see how you’re going to do that. You do realize you don’t have clothes here, right? I don’t think you’ll fit in mine, and I don’t think Berkeley is ready to accept you in all your naked gorgeousness.”

Kangee groaned and leaned their foreheads together. “Since you’re joking, I’m guessing the answer is yes?”

“Did you have any doubts?”

Kangee had had doubts, more than one, but right at that moment, he forgot all about them.

They didn’t matter anymore.

The End

Author Bio

Catherine lives in Italy, country of good food and hot men. She used to write fantasy as a child, but reading her first gay erotic romance novel made her realize that was what she really wanted to write.

After graduating from college in English and French languages and translation, she divides her day between writing, reading, taking care of her son, and reading some more.

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