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J.J. Massa



Montgomery Family Legacies 1

A Fragile Family

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By

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Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

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Dedication:

To some of my closest friends—Tracey, Claudia, Sasha, Holly – Thank you.

To Barb, always my champion. Tom Jackson, a good man. March 14, 2007. You're in my heart.

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Prologue

*Camiguin Province
Northern Mindanao
Philippines*

"I don't see it."

"Don't see what?"

Ashley puffed a heavy sigh. "Sherman, are you even here with me?"

"Sure I am, sweet cheeks," the large man grinned, his head popping out from behind an old, overused map.

"I'm looking for the fuel filter. There must be a fuel filter..." she stopped, pulling in another deep breath. "Sherman, you think you could come over here and give me a hand?"

"Sugar hips, nothing would make me happier...except maybe calling a limo right now. Problem is, a limousine turning up on this lovely dirt road is just as likely as you getting that relic started again." Sherman moved around the car during his little speech and now stood facing her. The first heavy drops of rain were splattering his face.

He was right, she knew that. And because of that, he had already insisted that they prepare the three families stranded in this isolated little town for the storm on its way. First an earthquake had divided this low-lying plain, and now, a storm threatened.

There just weren't that many options. It was a low-lying area and the ground was dusty and dry. There weren't any caves in the area and the only hills around were likely to cause more harm than good. They couldn't take the families anywhere, really, that would make them safe.

They'd ridden in with the usual emergency team, splitting up so that the other three members could go to a larger settlement and help those people regroup in the aftermath of the earthquake—the result of an angry volcano.

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Unfortunately, the other team was out of reach and there was no transportation available to take anyone anywhere. To make a bad situation worse, this small settlement was on the side of a steep hill. Though there were seven volcanoes on the island, the area surrounding this little village was all loamy dirt. Dirt that made mud.

"Ahh, stuff it!" she growled, aggravated. It was a "Myles" thing to say, she knew it. But somehow, invoking her estranged mate comforted her just a little bit. It didn't take away her ire, though. "We're stuck and I'm just wasting time, right? Just go ahead and say you told me so, why don't you?"

"You said it well enough yourself, Ash. You don't need me for that. Now," Sherman folded the map and stuck it back into whatever pocket or flap he'd pulled it out of. "Let's go find us some grub, shall we? It pays to eat while it's on offer, don't-cha-know?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ashley grumbled, following Sherman into one of the ramshackle buildings that those who'd remained behind were using as a community center.

The rain beat a steady tattoo on the tin roof, a drumbeat of danger, impending doom that everyone there was aware of, and could do nothing about. They'd already lined a wall of sandbags around the perimeter of the little community, hoping to divert the flow of mud when it came. And it would come. There was no doubt about that.

As if Sherman were privy to her bleak thoughts, and he so often was, the large man strode toward her, entering from the opposite side of the building, his long legs eating the distance between them.

"John-John, could you get me some more rice crisps?" Ashley smiled sweetly at the little boy who'd become her adoring shadow. The moment he scampered away, she looked at Sherman. "What's wrong, Sherm?"

"Ash, the storm is increasing in strength and heading this way. We've got one real problem and a potential one," he warned her.

"Oh, is that all?" she quipped elbowing him, eliciting a tight smile from her team leader. "Hit me!"

"Not that you don't need a good spanking," he winked, then sobered. "Okay, the real problem is, of course, that the trench and sandbags might not hold off the water and mud because of the ground saturation and such. Worse than that, though, is that there's a few little farms up the hill there, some with cleared dirt, and one for sure with a pond of

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some kind. Uh...” he faltered for a second and then continued. “There’s a weak tectonic shelf, according to the geologist I just spoke to, with a rock mass consisting of sheared and brecciated volcanic, sedimentary and volcanoclastic rocks.”

Ashley stared at him, blinking, ice water pounding through her veins. She shook her head hard. “Are you telling me that the rain is going to wash whatever is up there down, and what’s up there is big and heavy and going to steamroll right over us?”

Sherman squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them, looking back at her. “That’s the short answer, yeah,” he nodded.

Ashley moved to the covered doorway of the dilapidated building, her eyes marking the lush countryside rolling green and misty above her. The rain seemed to increase in velocity, hammering at the soft earth, mocking her, the cacophony ridiculing her guilt. And she did feel guilty because her first thought was that she’d be too busy, too worried to think of her mate, to miss Myles, if she were entrenched in a life or death struggle.

One wry glance up at Sherman told her that his guilt echoed hers.

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Chapter One

*Office of Bernadette Fonteneax, Disaster Relief Coordinator
UCH-Medical Center
Tampa, Florida*

“Blinkin’ shite,” Myles murmured, almost under his breath.

Bernadette looked from Myles to his adopted brother who was her own husband and mate, Marc. It hadn’t been easy giving Myles bad news about Ashley, his mate—his wife? She wasn’t completely sure, but she thought they were considered married. The two hadn’t exchanged vows as she and Marc had, but Ashley wore a faint bite mark on her shoulder very similar to Bernadette’s.

That bite mark made it official in a werewolf pack. Wedding vows or not, Ashley had taken his last name. She and Myles were joined in the eyes of the pack, and she supposed, God. Certainly, being mated was a force of nature, and apparently couldn’t be undone except by death. They were mated, ergo: Ashley and Myles were also married, right?

Regardless, Ashley was missing. Ashley West-Montgomery and her team leader, Sherman Landon were both missing. They’d been in the Philippines aiding in the recovery of an earthquake that had ravaged several islands. The rains that had followed the quake had been worse than the original catastrophe.

Marc moved up behind Myles and squeezed his shoulders.

“Bloody. Buggery. Bollocky. HELL!” Myles ground out.

Bernadette’s head snapped back as if she’d been struck. One didn’t need to live in England to understand the curse words. Besides, Myles’ tone was perfectly clear.

“They were in the area of Northern Mindanao, one of the least populated municipalities of Camiguin. Needless to say, everything that can be done *is* being done, in an effort to...” Bernadette was hiding behind official speak right now. Obviously, Myles was having none of it.

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“Sod all,” Myles growled. “That’s what’s being done. I’m going in there and finding my Princess...”

“Myles, come on,” Marc interrupted. “You can’t even *get* there right now. Not by boat, plane, not at all.”

“You!” Myles’ face was changing now, hair covering his cheekbones, teeth elongating. “You bloody well *knew* what was going on! My mate!” He whirled away from Bernadette and stalked around the chair, toward Marc, snarling.

“Go wait outside, Bernadette,” Marc growled, his face changing now. “Go!”

Bernadette scampered out of the office, only too pleased to be out of the way. She’d heard stories about Myles’ superior strength and had even seen it in action for a split second. That’s how long it had taken him to snap the spine of an attacking werewolf. But Marc and Myles were brothers, always looking out for each other. She knew they wouldn’t hurt one another but still...

She shook her head. She didn’t want to think about that. A loud crash drew her attention to the door again, snarls echoing through the thick wood. Bernadette flinched and stepped to the side of the door, because anything could happen now, and she was frankly relieved to be out of the line of fire.

“You knew! You could have stopped her! You could have *told* me!” Myles voice raged on the other side of the door.

“If I’d told you, she would’ve done it anyway, but somewhere else! At least this way, I knew!” Marc bellowed back at Myles. And did it really matter what they were saying to each other? Bernadette didn’t really think so.

“She could be hurt, in pain, in need,” Myles’ voice was lower now, but still heard. “I can’t stand it, Marc...I can’t stand it.”

A low howl, the heartbroken sound of a dog in pain rose up, floating out to her, rending her heart, squeezing and drawing tears to her eyes.

Devastated.

Marc couldn’t think of another word. His little brother—everyone’s little brother, was devastated. A book slid off a tumbled pile behind them, a muted punctuation to the heartbreak written on Myles’ face.

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Both men were on their knees now, and he held Myles against his chest, head pressed between neck and shoulder as he licked and soothed, allowing the younger man to grieve.

There was no reason yet to think that Ashley was lost, and he knew that wasn't what Myles was grieving about. It was time, the lost years that separated Ashley and Myles as they'd grown apart, living separate lives, each on their own side of an ever-widening chasm.

Finally, Myles pulled back, his beast in check once again. "You can't go there, Myles," Marc murmured, raising a finger to brush away a lingering tear. "You know that, right?"

"I'd feel something if she were gone, yeah mate?" Myles looked into Marc's face, a younger brother checking his facts. "I mean, I could feel that she was...something was wrong, but it doesn't feel like she's gone..."

"I--I think you would," Marc nodded, looking earnestly back at him. "Riker...well, I know guys who've felt things from their mates when separated," he trailed off, not able to complete that thought.

"It's okay, pet. I don't think she's dead, I just don't," Myles grunted, turning away, gaining his feet again.

Marc rose behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you come and stay with me for a bit, huh? Come on over to the house, spend time with Rafe and Tayler, let Bernadette feed you up a little."

Marc's immediate family was made up of his mate, Bernadette, Rafe, and Tayler. Rafe was a young Were who had been sent to kill Tayler, Bernadette's pup, but who had come to love him and assumed the role of protector.

"I don't...I can't...How can I eat, Marc? She's out there..." Myles was stumbling over his words now, stuttering.

A hand on the side of his neck told Marc that the other Were had a rapid but weak pulse and clammy skin—he was going into shock. Whatever their problems, love and empathy were not missing between Myles and Ashley.

His own heart breaking with the loss of Myles' and Ashley's well-being, Marc tried to shove it all away. He stepped up to the phone, punching a few buttons as he gathered Myles into one arm.

When his assistant picked up, Marc didn't waste time on pleasantries. "Jeanette, are my pups around there?" he addressed the Were who was his able assistant and general dogs body. "Send Rafe in to Bernadette's office with a blanket and a saline IV kit."

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He didn't wait for a reply, hanging up the phone and lowering Myles down until he was seated once again on the floor. Sinking down behind him, Marc wrapped Myles in a bear hug, sharing body heat. If Myles had been unconscious, Marc would have laid him down, but for now, he kept him upright, hoping Rafe would hurry.

Marc needed the young Were to help him get Myles home, but before that, he needed to make sure his little brother was hydrated, safe. Should he have told Myles about Ashley's activities? She'd sworn him to secrecy about working with the Disaster Unit, and Marc had kept his word. Nobody in the family knew that Ashley West-Montgomery, daughter to Tavist Darke and mate to Myles Montgomery, put her life on the line regularly to rescue strangers from natural disasters. They very likely would have kicked his ass from one end of the pack to the other had they found out.

Seventeen years had passed since Myles was legally adopted by Mik Montgomery, the Montgomery-Livingston Pack Alpha. He became a Montgomery, and literally, a werewolf in blood at the very same time when Mik donated his own DNA to help rid Myles of Hemophilia. The disease had been worsening and his future looking bleak prior to the experimental procedure that saved and changed his life forever. Now, aside from his accent and the fact that he couldn't change completely into wolf form, Myles was so much a member of the Montgomery clan that his birth origins didn't matter at all.

Marc was divided between self-flagellation and soothing Myles, murmuring softly to him as he berated himself. Myles was unresponsive, shivering, and occasionally tugging against Marc's hold. Marc simply held on, busy worrying about Myles, fretting about what he should and shouldn't have done regarding Ashley when the door opened and Rafe came striding in.

"¿*Qué paso*, Papi?" Rafe asked, pulling the door closed resolutely behind him. One quick glance no doubt took in the chairs thrown aside and an overturned bookshelf.

Marc could smell Tayler from a distance and knew that Rafe was protecting him from the unknown. From whatever it was that Marc had called him into. The twenty-year-old Were had adopted Marc and Bernadette as surrogate parents when his own father had been killed during an attack on Tayler.

He was now a full and valuable member of the extended Montgomery-Livingston pack. Marc was the overall pack leader for the Florida and Alabama branches of the very large werewolf pack.

Rafe made their family perfect, as if they'd always been a family—two sons, two parents. But what a collection they were. Beautiful, brown-skinned Bernadette, then Rafe

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with dark, almost black skin and long, glossy straight hair, silver flecks in his dark eyes. Tayler's skin was a creamy caramel color, a cap of curly black hair and dark gold eyes making him cuter than he wanted to be. Then there was Marc with his black hair and pale yellow eyes. They did look like a family, a motley one, but a family nonetheless.

"Myles is in shock," Marc explained brusquely, accepting the saline bag from Rafe, knowing he was worried, too. He quickly swabbed a length of Myles forearm over the vein and then eased the IV needle in.

"What happened?" Rafe asked, easing the blanket around Myles' shoulders, careful not to interfere with the tubing.

"Hold this," Marc instructed, handing the bag to Rafe. "Go ahead and stand—the bag needs to be elevated. I'm gonna get an ammonia capsule and bring him around again." Rafe did as instructed, keeping one eye on Myles and one eye on the door. Marc knew he was concerned about Tayler's safety. That was always uppermost on Rafe's mind. "It's okay, son," he began, stroking a soothing hand across Rafe's cheek on the way to the first aide kit in Bernadette's desk. "Ashley is missing, and we had to tell Myles."

"Tayler," Rafe called softly. "Tayler-Puppy," he called again. "He'll comfort Myles, you won't need that smelly stuff," Rafe explained.

Marc knew that Tayler was out there, and knew that he'd heard every word. The door opened slowly and the thin young Were eased inside. Marc's eyes locked with the dark butterscotch eyes of his adopted pup. Tayler nodded and Marc winked, holding out a hand.

It was almost painful to watch Tayler limp the short distance from the door to Myles, and Marc made a mental note to have a talk with Rafe. Obviously, he was carrying Tayler again as opposed to making him walk. Rafe couldn't stand the idea of Tayler suffering, even if it was for his own good.

Tayler was still recovering from a painful and debilitating bout of canine distemper virus, complete with myclonic seizures—painful muscle contractions that sometimes rendered his legs next to worthless. His illness had brought Bernadette and Marc together, and for that, Marc was grateful. The pain this little pup lived with day in and day out was excruciating for all of them. He didn't blame Rafe for wanting to ease Tayler's suffering, even though, in the long run, it was doing him more harm than good.

Tayler planted both hands on Myles' shoulders, lowering himself to straddle the older, more muscular Were's legs. "Myles?" he murmured, his voice still high-pitched with youth. "It's me, Tayler," he added, his palms cupping Myles' cheeks now.

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Myles turned his face into the soft palm, rubbing a little. “Tayler-Puppy,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, s’mee,” Tayler slipped his arms around Myles’ neck, only to be enfolded in a tight hug. “I’m worried about you, Myles.”

Myles buried his face in Tayler’s neck and held on. “I’m okay, Tayler, don’t worry,” he promised. “I’ll be okay.”

Marc and Rafe, and Bernadette as she entered the room again, exchanged glances and sighs of relief. Myles was alert. He’d be okay.

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Chapter Two

*Office of Bernadette Fonteneax, Disaster Relief Coordinator
UCH-Medical Center
Tampa, Florida*

It was difficult, but Lilith Landon managed to retain her impassive mask as she picked an invisible piece of lint from the skirt of her designer original. Inside she wanted to celebrate, although that might be premature as yet.

“Excuse me,” Lilith interrupted the woman who was speaking. Bernadette something or other, something French although this woman was black. Perhaps she was Haitian, Lilith mused, though the heavy ring on her finger suggested that her husband might be. “How long, exactly, has my husband been missing?”

“We lost all contact with the area about a week ago....” Bernadette began gently.

Lilith wanted hard facts, not niceties. “When did you or one of your...people, last speak with Sherman? Have you spoken with his little friend, what was her name—oh, Aston?”

The scent of anger flared from the woman facing her and brought Lilith up short. This human woman no doubt felt close to Sherman and his playmate, and the scent of Were was heavy on her. It was time to tread carefully now.

“My apologies, Miss...umm, Bernadette. It’s just, this is such a shock,” she sniffed, reaching for a box of tissue on the desk in front of her.

Dabbing daintily at her dry eyes, Lilith hid a satisfied smile. Humans were always so easy to fool. This one might belong to a werewolf, but she was nothing special. Well, she was attractive, with dark caramel-colored skin, close-cropped curly hair, high cheekbones and large chocolate drop eyes. She could have been a model, a little heavy probably. Her looks were wasted here in the bowels of this hospital. No, she was simply a working woman, a normal sheep-like human.

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On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt for Lilith to hedge her bets. This woman was mated to an alpha and Lilith didn't want to call undue attention to herself.

"It's quite all right, Mrs. Landon," Bernadette excused politely, her anger apparently ebbing. "I know you spend a lot of time in Atlanta, taking care of business concerns there. You can't be expected to know everyone."

"It does take a lot out of me, of course," Lilith murmured, leading the other woman away from her little gaffe and hopefully back to being sympathetic to her again. "And now, Sherman lost...what shall I do?" she sniffed, stifling a choked sob. Under the circumstances, she didn't think it could hurt to lay it on thick.

"Now, we don't know that he's lost, Mrs. Landon, just that we haven't been able to reach him for an extended period of time. It's standard procedure that we notify his next of kin and upgrade the search," Bernadette attempted to placate her, but Lilith wasn't having any of that.

"You wouldn't drag me in here this way if you didn't think something was truly wrong, now would you?" she demanded, fighting hysteria. Everything was so close now, all her hopes and plans.

"Of course not, I mean..." Bernadette appeared to be at a loss now.

Lilith pressed her advantage. "Has this much time ever passed before? I mean between a disaster and hearing from the people?"

"Well, no, this is the longest we've gone without hearing from one of our teams," Bernadette admitted. She appeared to be having some difficulty now, keeping her cool. That suited Lilith fine. She was certain she'd get more frank answers if the woman wasn't guarding herself so closely. "However," Bernadette amended, "the area authorities are watching for both Sherman and Ashley, his team member. Ashley's family is in Georgia, as a matter of fact—not too far from Atlanta. If we don't hear from the team soon, I'll be glad to put you in touch with them."

"Why can't I contact them now?" Lilith demanded. She didn't really intend to contact them, but she wanted to keep this woman off kilter, and she wanted whatever information she could glean about Sherman's little teammate.

"Ashley's mate, uh, husband hasn't spoken to the rest of the family yet. It will be up to him to make contact. I'm sure he'll be anxious to keep in touch."

Bernadette patted Lilith's cool hand, attempting to soothe. For the time being, Lilith would allow herself to be soothed. *Mate, uh, husband, huh?* The best bet then would be to stay well clear of the girl's family. She wasn't a Were, Lilith knew that, she would have smelled it on Sherman, even in passing. Still, there was something...

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“What’s her name—her full name again? I just want to be able to watch the papers, in case something comes up. And I’ll have to go to the shareholders about this, of course...” Lilith let her statement trail off. It never failed, evoke the specter of legalities and big business and everyone bowed.

“Ashley West-Montgomery,” Bernadette answered quickly. “But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make that public.”

“Well of course not,” Lilith sniffed, “I simply need to provide it for the lawyers, you understand. A big corporation like Landon International with its CEO missing, well you can imagine the legal issues.” She had been sure she’d heard the name before and so she had. The girl did cartoons, she remembered. And now that she thought about it, Lilith remembered an attack on the young woman when she was a child. It had been all over the news—an angry father, or something like that. That information could come in handy. “Of course I have to have all the information they might ask for.”

“Certainly,” Bernadette sighed. Lilith was sure that insurance and everything else was in order, but what a publicity nightmare it would be for the hospital’s disaster relief program if these two high-profile people didn’t return.

Lilith bit back a smile. It might be a nightmare for Mrs. Bernadette French-last-name who was mated to a Were. For her, though, it was a dream-come-true. She enjoyed her husband’s millions, his status, his name—everything but the man himself. If she could be rid of Sherman Landon, her world would be a lovely place indeed. She should have listened when her father warned her not to marry him. Now, she was stuck with him...unless he was dead.

“Thank you for contacting me and speaking with me personally, Bernadette,” Lilith murmured. The effort of acting like a bereaved potential widow was telling on her. Time to end this little visit. “I know you’ll be in touch when you have more information.” Lilith stood, causing Bernadette to join her.

“Of course, Mrs. Landon.” Obviously dismissed, Bernadette graciously guided Lilith to the door.

*Apt 1404 Chatham Way
Chatham Suites Apartments
Atlanta, Georgia*

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Jack Aschtholdt was having a most surreal day. After fifteen long years doing time in Jesup, Georgia, he had been graced with something other than a cold *no* from the Federal Parole Board. To put a point on it, Jack had gotten much more than something besides *no*.

This very morning, Jack had been granted a parole and a sponsorship. Wonder of wonders, Landon International, a huge conglomerate, had sponsored his release and was taking a personal interest in his ongoing quest for rehabilitation. They were so exceedingly convinced of his worthiness that the company itself had provided him a nice little apartment in Atlanta and a job to go with it.

Now, he stood in the middle of *his* furnished apartment, complete with television, computer, living room and bedroom furniture, everything. In fact, Jack opened the refrigerator, yes, it was fully stocked, too.

He didn't know what the catch was, but there had to be one. There was *always* a catch. It didn't matter. Jack would be a good boy until he found out the price of his freedom. By the time everything was clear to him, he expected to have a tidy nest egg somewhere.

Pulling out a beer, he popped the top and continued his explorations. He found a phone in the kitchen and another in the bedroom. No wires...a lot had changed in a decade and a half. Yes, he had all the tools he needed here to build himself a considerable sum of money when he wasn't at work.

Equally important as his nest egg, though, was access to extracurricular activities. While that could mean a neighborhood bar, a pool hall, or even a sports arena to most men, Jack had other interests. Specifically, he intended to collect on a debt owed him.

Fifteen years ago, Jack had lost all that he valued at the hands of his wife and his mealy mouthed daughter. Between them, they'd cost him everything that mattered in life-namely, his home, his two fine sons, and his freedom.

They owed him some payback. If it killed him, he would make them pay. Actually, he expected it *would* kill them.

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Chapter Three

*Home of Marc and Bernadette Fonteneax
2109 Piney Lane Drive
Tampa, Florida*

The evening air was thick and heavy following a dousing autumn rain. Rain. Right this minute, Myles hated rain. Apparently, too much rain had been Ashley's downfall. Or maybe the problem was too much of Myles. She wouldn't be missing, wouldn't have gone away, if not for him.

He smelled Jacob before the other man made his presence known. Myles decided to wait, to respect his brother-in-law's desire to remain hidden. Jacob Darke was Ashley's brother and close confidant. From their first meeting, Myles had felt like he was on probation with Jacob. The intervening years had done nothing to change that.

"One day, I was just sitting around, hanging out, not doing anything much—hating you. It was a normal Tuesday, really." Jacob began speaking as he moved closer to Myles on the patio of Bernadette and Marc's Hillsboro County, Florida home.

Myles nodded, accepting. Jacob had been angry at him, had hated him, for a long time. "The usual, then?" he asked without rancor.

"Yeah," Jacob agreed with a shrug. "The usual. But then I knew."

"Knew what?" Myles was trying to make head or tails out of what Jacob was telling him. Trying to fight through his own pain to understand that of Ashley's brother. It wasn't going like he'd hoped.

"Knew everything, brother. Everything," Jacob clipped out succinctly. Myles shook his head, not understanding. "About you. Everything." Jacob said one more time.

And then, the penny dropped. Myles followed it down, sitting hard on the ground with a thud, his head spinning. He leaned back on his hands to look up at Jacob.

"It's a legend. You can't be..." he took a deep breath. This was a situation nobody ever talked about. He barely knew anything here. He was traveling in the dark.

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According to lore, Jacob was supposed to light his path. “The pack seer...it’s not real. How can it be real? Nobody even bloody mentions it.”

Jacob squatted, facing Myles--within arm’s reach if Myles just leaned forward. And he wanted to, wanted to touch Jacob, to understand, even to be closer to his mate’s brother.

“I’m real, Myles. Christopher is real.” Jacob shook his head, a smile curling one side of his mouth. “Yeah, Ashley’s your mate, and Christopher and I get the sight. It’s got to be better than being your mate, anyhow.”

Myles shook his head again. “I’m trying to follow here, Jacob. This is...odd, to say the least.”

Jacob extended a hand to him, helping the stunned werewolf to his feet. “You think it’s odd, do you? Well, try it from my perspective,” he smirked, an eyebrow arched.

“You’re really very nice looking,” Myles mused, not realizing he’d spoken aloud.

“You aren’t thinking of switching teams are you?” Jacob stepped back, amused alarm written across his dark features.

“Very funny, mate,” Myles growled to cover up his embarrassment. “And anyway, if you’re the seer, you tell me.”

Jacob shook his head, chuckling. “So anyway, Christopher and I are seers, yes. It’s all together.” At Myles blank look, he moved to a chair, seating himself. Myles lowered himself to another chair, watching him. “See, it seems that, if a human woman is a werewolf’s mate, then her brothers—not her fathers, not her sons—have the potential to be pack seers.”

“Half the women in this pack are human, pet,” Myles reminded him, still feeling dizzy, but not as odd as before. “We ought to be fair lousy with seers in that case.” And then something occurred to him. “Hey! I should be a seer then, yeah?”

“Uh, no,” Jacob smiled his understanding. “It makes sense that you’d ask, but no, the thing is, the abilities apparently don’t kick in until said human mate actually mates with the Were and nobody dies—I guess you know that happens pretty often, too. So...” he arched a brow at Myles who nodded, saying nothing, waiting for Jacob to continue. Myles wouldn’t stop this explanation for any amount of money. “So, by the time that your sister was really and truly mated with her Were, you were a Were already.”

Myles looked at him for long moments. Finally he managed to sort the questions that were plaguing him.

“How do you know that? How does...how does it happen? Tell me something to make me believe you *are* a seer now...and Christopher? He is as well?” It was all

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jumbled up in his head, and he really wanted to just accept it all. Jacob was sitting with him, talking, not angry. He was a fool for questioning things, but he couldn't seem to help himself. "Wait, can you read my mind?"

Jacob stretched back in his chair, long legs out in front of him. He wasn't a lot bigger than Myles, but he was taller, well built.

"Read your mind? Not as such," Jacob began. Myles made a "come on" gesture with his hands, encouraging him to continue. "I just know things...I know what you feel when I need to know that. I know what should happen next and what will go wrong or right depending on how things are going. What I don't know, Christopher does." He shrugged apologetically at Myles. "We compliment each other."

"So...tell me something then. That nobody else knows," Myles clarified. He was half afraid of what Jacob would say, but he needed proof that the legend was true, that his stand-offish brother in law wasn't having fun at his expense.

"Tell you...hmmm," Jacob tapped the side of his nose with one long finger. "You want me to tell you that you're mad at your parents for not loving your sister enough? Should I tell you that you're mad at my mom for pushing Tav away when he was hurt? Or maybe I should tell you that you never expected to be with Ashley because you don't think anyone can really love you." Myles stared at Jacob, mouth open, wanting to be angry but knowing the truth when he heard it. "When you ended up mating with her, it *had* to be a dream, didn't it? Nothing that special could really happen to you, right? Nobody as wonderful as Ash could love a loser like you..."

Jacob's tone was kind, his manner calm, still that didn't matter. "How...I don't know what to say," Myles stuttered, upset, taken aback. His deepest hidden truths were pouring out of a young man he was certain hated him. What would he do now?

"Don't worry, Myles, I'm on your side. Nothing I've said to you will ever go further. It's between us. I don't know anything I don't need to know and I don't say anything to anyone that I'm not supposed to."

"When did this all...come about?" Myles asked for want of a better way to phrase his question. His mind was racing, confused. He was grabbing at straws now, trying to make sense of this amazing situation. "I mean...last year, the year before?"

Myles had mated with Ashley on her eighteenth birthday. Jacob would have been sixteen then, and only just turned. Was Jacob—and worse yet, Christopher, two years his brother's junior—pry to the events of that fateful night? The night that Myles had claimed Ashley's virginity and marked her as his mate only to accuse her of trying to trap him. He hung his head, embarrassed.

J.J. Massa

“It was my eighteenth birthday when I knew, Myles. And Christopher was eighteen before he learned. In fact, he’s still getting used to it. Don’t worry,” Jacob leaned forward, looking intently at Myles. “I don’t know your thoughts so much as how you feel. How members of my pack feel...I can draw on that when I need to know. I guess it makes me part of the pack in a way I never was before. I belong.”

He was trying to reassure him and Myles appreciated it. “I’m just...you know, knocked for six, mate, yeah? Just give me a minute to process this.” Jacob nodded and leaned back again. “Uh, why are you telling me now?”

“Ah yes,” Jacob smiled, tapping his fingertips together. “The million dollar question, finally.” His tenor was deep and musical, not the same as Lakon Montgomery’s famous singing voice, but an appealing voice in its own right. Myles knew Jacob, who sang professionally with his brother and two of his cousins, would be every bit as successful a singer as his uncle.

“I was bound to ask, wasn’t I?” Myles grinned weakly. The entire episode was fantastic to him, beginning with sitting so calmly and talking with Jacob in the first place.

“Yes you were,” Jacob nodded solemnly. “And the answer is simple. You have work to do. I’m here to guide you.”

“I’m eighteen years older than you, luv, you have to admit that sounds...hokey.”

Jacob shrugged. “Hey, I don’t make up the rules, buddy, I just follow them. You, however, enforce ‘em. That’s why you need to fix what’s broken. I’m going to help.”

“What’s broken then?” Myles asked, almost reluctantly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. And while Jacob’s enigmatic presence was distracting him from Ashley’s plight, it was never far from his thoughts.

“My sister for one, our family for another; and after that the entire pack...” Jacob answered with another uncomfortable shrug.

“No pressure then, good,” Myles growled, pushing to his feet. “So you’re going to tell me how to fix it all, is that it?”

“Sorta,” Jacob appeared to be blushing now. “I’m gonna tell you what to do about Ashley, a little, and then...we’ll just take it a step at a time, huh?”

Myles rolled his eyes. “A step at a time, then. Why not? What shall I do first, mate?”

Jacob flashed him a smug grin. “Go to Ashley’s place and wait,” he told Myles, rising to his feet and throwing an arm across his shoulder. “I’ll call you when the time comes.”

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Myles shook his head, allowing Jacob to lead him. The young man had never been very forthcoming and that had obviously not changed at all. Oh well, what else could Myles do but what he was told? Hopefully things would be easier with Jacob's inscrutable counsel.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Four

*Home of Ashley West-Montgomery
801 Hillsboro Avenue
Tampa, Florida*

Ashley's apartment had the feel of a place that had been empty for days, weeks—possibly longer. Myles walked into the bedroom and looked around. The bed was made but messy, as if its last occupant had simply reclined restlessly upon the comforter instead of crawling under it and sleeping.

As he glanced around the room, Myles noticed the blinking light on the phone. Realizing that it was the answering machine, he pressed the prominent button in the middle labeled *play*.

"Hello?" he heard Ashley's out-of-breath voice panting. The machine had stayed on, recording the conversation.

"Hey, sweet cheeks," a man's voice responded. "Just getting in? How was it?"

"Hey, stud muffin! How's it going?" she asked the man on the other end of the phone. Myles growled angrily at both the man's and his mate's words. He could hear noises as if she were moving around the room.

"Sit, fun buns! Tell me. I need to know what I'm scooping up here. We have a marathon coming."

He heard a creaking, squeaking sound as if she followed her caller's instruction and sat down. "I'm okay, Sherman, really."

"Truth, come on. I'll show you mine if you show me yours," the man said. Myles growled again low in his throat. He didn't appreciate the easy familiarity between this man and *his* Princess.

"It wasn't much different than every other time, Sherman." *Sherman Landon? Of Landon International?* He heard the strain in Ashley's voice this time.

"Was he there?" Sherman asked.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Course he was,” Ashley responded.

“Did it hurt as much as always?”

“Course it did,” Ashley responded. “More, even. More than ever.”

“Words, Tasty Thighs, I need words—adjectives, adverbs...” Myles sat on the edge of the bed not liking the conversation he was hearing a bit.

“Relentless ache, driving need, desperate throbbing hunger, excruciating yearning...” She took a deep breath. “I can go on, Sherm, only it goes downhill from there.”

“Let me take you away from all this. There’s a typhoon in Japan, after that, we’ll head to flood ravaged Venezuela, and then back to the Philippines where typhoon Felion is bearing down on the little island nation once again.”

“You always said you’d show me the world, didn’t you, pal?” Ashley sounded a little tearful.

“I did, I did,” the voice of Sherman came back, his jesting tone a little hollow. “I’ll never take his place but I’ll keep your beautiful mind off of him as much as I can. You packed?”

“I never unpacked. I hate to say it, but this is a good time for a disaster or two,” she told him. There was silence on the line. Myles could hear the waiting. “Sometimes it feels like I’m going to fly to pieces. You?”

“Do you remember last year in Australia when those crocodiles were tearing up that cow?”

“The part where you snatched me out of the gaping jaws of the hungry predator and I wished you were Myles?” Ashley answered back, her voice small and a little lost.

Myles sat up straighter, his brow furrowed.

“And I wished you were Lilith clinging to me for dear life? No, the part where the actual cow was disembodied and eaten alive,” Sherman clarified.

“I’ll never forget it as long as I live.”

Now that he knew she’d gone through it, Myles wouldn’t forget it either. There was a time when she would have written him about it. There was a time when she wouldn’t put herself in danger without knowing he was nearby to keep her safe.

“That’s what my holiday was like,” Sherman sighed.

“In that case, this three-disaster marathon should be a cake walk for both of us, huh?” Ashley returned, false cheer coloring her voice now.

“I think it’ll be soothing for us, sweet cheeks. I’ll be there in half an hour. Don’t plan on being home for a month. Or so...”

J.J. Massa

“I’ll be ready. Maybe we’ll get lucky this time, huh?” Myles heard the click and dial tone.

Of course she wouldn’t care if her entire conversation with anyone was recorded. She was alone. Had been alone for so long. How had they ended up this way?

Since he’d met her at eight years old, Myles had known that Ashley West was his mate. According to Mik, his adopted father and her step-grandfather, she’d known it since then, too. That had been fifteen years ago. He was thirty-nine now and she was twenty-three.

*Office of Lilith Landon
Landon International
Suite 2A, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta Georgia*

“As a company, of course, Landon International has always taken an interest in the rehabilitation of Georgia’s citizens, Mr. Aschtholdt.” The woman was beautiful, but Jack wasn’t fooled. There was just something about her. “The fact that my husband is dear friends with your daughter...well, that does enter into the equation, of course.”

Bingo! Either this was a woman scorned or...Jack didn’t know. He would certainly tread carefully. Whether this woman perched on the edge of the desk facing him was friend or foe remained to be seen. He eyed her warily as she crossed one bare leg over the other, revealing a wealth of toned and tanned thigh.

Jack wasn’t a conventionally attractive man, but prison had hardened his body and toned his muscles. He was in better shape than he had ever been, and at forty-six, he wasn’t yet past his prime. He knew he filled out his new suit well, and his bad boy attitude didn’t hurt either. Lilith Landon appeared to like what he had to offer.

He decided to address her statement about Ashley, head on. “You must know, Mrs. Landon, that I don’t have a warm and friendly relationship with my, uh, daughter.” How he hated being reminded that the girl was his flesh and blood. He took a deep, calming breath. “I’m not sure what you hope to gain from me in that regard.”

Oh, what a naughty smile she had. Jack was enchanted.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Yes, I know you weren’t close to her. Some of what you said in court the first time around makes particularly interesting reading. Oh! And *do* call me Lilith. I believe we’ll become quite good friends.”

“Friends, huh?” Jack grinned. Leaning forward, he trailed two fingers along the edge of her very short skirt, coming to rest just inside her right thigh. She caught his hand and held it there. “You have a crumb...” he murmured.

Lilith shifted so that the tips of Jack’s fingers lightly brushed warm strands of hair and heat between her legs. “I’m looking for a dangerous man who has a score to settle—specifically with the young lady in question. Do you know anyone like that, Mr. Aschtholdt?” she asked breathily.

Jack spread his fingers, stroking the silky, warm skin at the crease of her thigh. So soft, so hot.

“Please make it Jack,” he murmured. Daring, he stroked the outside of her partially shaved labia with one finger. “Yes, Lilith,” he answered her heated question, dragging his index finger down and sliding it into her creamy sheath. “I do know someone,” he stood, unzipping and freeing his aching hard cock with his other hand. “I know someone *just like that!*” he grunted, moving in front of her and pulling her more fully around to face him.

Lilith spread her legs wide, looping them around Jack’s waist and pulling his jutting erection toward her. “Do you, Jack? Show me...” she purred.

With a flex of her legs and a little scoot, Lilith impaled herself on Jack’s cock.

Jack groaned loudly, savoring the feel of his needy length buried in her tight heat. “Yeah, s’good,” he moaned, pulling back and plunging forward again. “Been about seventeen years since I got me some pussy. Saves me from finding a whore.”

“Shut up and fuck me, Jack. Prove you can do a good job. We’ll consider this our handshake.”

Jack complied with a growl. So she wanted to see what he had, did she? He slipped one hand under her buttock cheeks, pushing her flimsy skirt up around her waist. Still pumping his hips like a pistoning jackhammer, Jack brought one finger to his mouth, wetting it with his saliva. Angling her forward, he reached around behind her for her exposed puckered opening and pushed his glistening finger in deep.

“Oh! Oh! Oh, Jack!” Lilith shrieked, wrapping her legs tight around his hips and her arms around his shoulders.

J.J. Massa

Her sheath clenched snugly around his jerking length, squeezing him. “Shit!” he bellowed, the tingling in his balls elevating to tiny explosions as his hot semen erupted like lava deep into her wet center.

Carefully, slowly, Lilith unwound her legs from Jack’s middle, pushing to her feet and adjusting her skirt. Jack stepped back on wobbly legs, casually zipping his pants and tucking his shirt in.

Lilith turned and handed him a moist towelette, arching a brow at him. He took it with a smug smile, ripped it open and wiped his fingers carefully.

“Come with me and I’ll show you to your new office,” Lilith murmured, all business now.

“What, specifically, will my job be?” he asked, following her out of her large feminine office into a smaller one, more masculine, situated just next door.

“You’ll be my personal assistant, Jack. My beck-and-call man. I’ll assign you personal projects which you will carry out, answering only to me. Think you can handle that?”

Jack grinned widely. “Of course I can handle that.”

“Good,” she said decisively. “Your first assignment will be to find everything you possibly can about Ashley West-Montgomery.”

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Chapter Five

*Home of Ashley West-Montgomery
801 Hillsboro Avenue
Tampa, Florida*

As he poked around her small apartment, Myles was stunned at the barren way that Ashley lived. The refrigerator held a bottle of water and nothing else. She had plenty of books, a laptop—now dust covered, and some of Tav’s paintings on the wall. Tavist Darke, the renowned artist, was her stepfather.

He found pictures of Jacob and Christopher, and Serena and Victoria, her younger twin half-sisters who were now fifteen. There were pictures of her parents and her uncles, Lakon and Riker Montgomery with their wives Mya and Bethany. There were even pictures of Philly—Ashley’s best friend who had married to Lakon, Riker, and Myles’ cousin, Yancey.

Opening a cabinet, he found two photo albums filled with pictures of Ashley and him. He leafed through them watching her grow up in the pictures. Had he grown up, too? At thirty-nine years old, he wondered if his growth had arrested when he turned twenty-four.

He didn’t feel bad about poking through her life while she was gone. She was his mate. They *had* mated and he’d left his mark on her.

On the afternoon of her eighteenth birthday, she’d taken a nap in his bed. He’d lain down next to her not realizing that she was even there. When he’d made love with her, he’d thought he was having a beautiful dream.

What a dream it had been, too. Her sweet voice whispering, “*Touch me, Myles, mate with me,*” still resounded in his head.

She’d tasted so beautiful—felt so good under him. Their mating had been perfect. And then he’d destroyed it, and her, in a matter of seconds.

J.J. Massa

He'd awakened with her beautiful body in his arms, still buried deep inside of her. He'd been licking the bite he'd made on her shoulder when he realized that he was no longer dreaming. She was real. He'd mated with his Princess.

Myles couldn't remember word for word what he'd said to her. He could recall the gist of it, though. He'd yelled that he'd slept with a child who didn't know her own mind. He accused her of making him a child molester.

He'd gone so far as to suggest that her being in his bed in the first place proved her very immaturity. Worse than the things he'd said, he'd seen her going paler and more still by the word but somehow he just couldn't shut up.

She'd stared at him from those dark chocolate eyes of hers as if she were memorizing the scene. Finally, she'd stood and pulled on the clothes she'd worn before she'd napped—all but the thong he'd destroyed at some point during their mating.

"Well," she'd answered him brightly, "I guess you told me. I am now *firmly* sorted out."

"Princess, wait!" he'd reached for her. Some imp of sanity had finally kick-started his brain but it had been too late.

He remembered that he could actually feel a chill in the air the closer he'd gotten to her. He might have caught up with her but she'd run into Mya and Lakon in the yard. She'd wrapped an arm around Mya and chattered seemingly happily from his house to Mik's a short walk away.

After that Ashley was always polite to him. She even seemed affectionate to him in front of others. He could feel the river of ice flowing between them, though. Whenever he came near her she threw up shutters like an old house before a storm.

Continuing to look around, Myles spotted a tape in her VCR. On it, written in Sharpie were the words *Ashley/Sherman Disaster Documentary*. Curiosity piqued, he inserted the tape and turned it on.

The picture opened on Ashley dressed elegantly in a purplish-colored skirt suit that followed her figure, tucking in at the waist. The straight skirt ended just above the knee with a series of tiny pleats. Her long dark brown hair waved around her shoulders and down to the middle of her back. She was seated on a couch next to an elegantly dressed and very attractive man.

The man was young looking although his hair seemed to be silver. Maybe it was silver and blonde. He wore an expensive lightweight Armani suit in a dark gray color. He was about six feet tall and made Ashley look even more petite than she already was at five feet nothing.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Across from them sat a thin, studious looking man with shaggy, dishwater blonde hair. He began to speak. "Let's just do this casually. You can even drink if you want."

The thin man began speaking.

"Nope, don't drink—not usually." Ashley's beautiful smile hit Myles in the gut.

"We drink once or twice a year, usually in a foreign country." *We?* Turning to Ashley, the man text to Ashley said, "He was going to ask about that incident in Nepal, Sweet Cheeks." This must be Sherman.

"Coffee then?" They nodded. "Now, tell me how you two met," the studious man asked.

"It was at that hospital opening, wasn't it? Your uncle?" Sherman looked at Ashley.

"Yeah, Uncle Marc's new hospital," Ashley confirmed.

"You also call Lakon and Riker Montgomery *Uncle*, don't you?" She nodded.

"Tavist Darke is your father, right?" The blonde man asked. She nodded again. "Is West your husband's last name?"

I guess that's me. I'm her husband...

"No. Tav is really my stepfather. I guess we never got around to the adoption. West is my mother's maiden name. I kept it," Ashley answered him.

"Was that hospital opening after you quit dancing for the London Modern Dance and Ballet?" The man asked. She nodded with a smile. "So what happened when you met?" He looked at Sherman again.

"I was by the bar; she was near a chattering group of people." Onscreen, Sherman took her hand drawing a deep growl from Myles. "I looked over and our eyes met." Myles continued to growl. "I've never seen such stark hopelessness." The man's words shut him up.

"Besides in the mirror you mean?" she smiled sadly.

"From my own endless despair, I looked out into the eyes of winter," Sherman squeezed her hand, bringing it to his lips.

"A corporate raider with the soul of a poet." Ashley rubbed the hand holding hers and then tugged away.

"That begs another question, Sherman. Your company is in the top one hundred of the nation's Fortune Five Hundred companies. What are you doing? Why are you two..." he couldn't finish the question.

"Dead babies," they said together.

J.J. Massa

“What do you mean? Did you both lose babies?” Myles held his breath. He didn’t think she’d gotten pregnant but...

“The loss of hope, Harvey. Dead babies are the end of hopes and dreams.” At her words, Sherman leaned over and took her hand again.

“The only babies we have lost are those we aren’t allowed to have.” Sherman rubbed her hand in his and released it. She crossed her arms in front and rubbed them as if chilled.

“You are both estranged from your respective spouses, aren’t you?” the man asked them.

“Good save, Harvey. Yes, in fact we are.” Ashley’s hands moved to her lap.

“As well known as the two of you are, why do you do this?”

“We’re having an affair, Harvey and this is the only way I can show her the world.” Sherman looked straight at the man as the camera moved in a little.

“As you said, we’re both recognizable. However, nobody would notice us carrying on in the middle of a disaster now would they?” Ashley sounded serious, too. Myles felt his lip curl.

“Really?” The questioner asked.

“No, not *really*.” They both chuckled at his red face.

Shaking his head, the questioner turned to the camera.

“Let’s take a look as the CEO of one of this country’s top companies and a recognized dancer and writer of family oriented animation movies...I’m going to have to work on that one, huh? Okay, let’s watch you guys respond to the flooding disaster in Haiti.”

The picture changed to show Ashley and Sherman trudging down a flooded street in what looked to be an old-fashioned or poor town. There must have been more people behind them. A leg occasionally made its way on camera, and certainly, someone followed behind them carrying that camera. Myles could see automobiles submerged up to their grills in dirty water.

“Watch it, Ash. I don’t want you to slip. There’s a foot of mud here,” Sherman ordered sternly as the team neared the door of a ramshackle hut.

As he spoke, she grabbed for the door and did slip. Sherman caught her and held her front to back for a minute. A body came bumping out.

“Sorry,” she sighed. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.”

“Me neither,” he sighed in answer. “You got it now?”

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Yeah, I’m all right.” Sherman released her and she started to move inside. She stopped. “Wait!” she called back over her shoulder.

The roof to the hut had been blown away in the strong winds of the storm and the interior could be seen clearly.

Myles watched as she slowly moved into the center of the room. Suddenly, a cracking sound was heard.

“Stay back!” she warned, her high pitched yell ending on a shriek.

Another ominous cracking sound and then a loud *whoosh*, and Ashley disappeared.

“Ash!” Sherman bellowed as he moved forward carefully.

Spitting and coughing seemed to come from what looked like a hole in the mud. Sherman dropped to his stomach.

“Sherman,” Ashley’s choked voice called. “It’s a cavern or basement.”

“I’m coming, sweet cheeks, don’t...”

“Need water. Mouthful of ick,” she choked.

Someone handed Sherman a canteen and he scooted toward Ashley. Myles was perched on the edge of the couch.

“Don’t get too close!” he called back to the rest of the team as he continued inching through the muck.

The view of events had dropped to a level just above Sherman’s head and about three feet to his left. As the camera panned in front of Sherman, it landed on a mud-covered Ashley hanging from a hole in the floor.

When Sherman reached her, he scooped an arm around her and opened the canteen with his teeth. Carefully, he brought it to her mouth, tipped it up, and pulled it away.

After Ashley spit what was in her mouth out and gagged, she said to Sherman, “Lower me a little.” He did. “*Ayude a estar por el camino.*” *Help is on the way* she’d told someone. “There’s people down there—some alive and some not,” she informed Sherman breathlessly.

The next five or so minutes showed a muddy Sherman Landon of Landon International and a muddier Ashley West-Montgomery hauling people, both alive and dead, out of the hole in the floor of the dilapidated hut.

It was obviously a cut scene that went on longer and ended in a harrowing few moments of Ashley and Sherman trying to head back to the base camp. On the way, they’d thought they heard sounds in a building.

J.J. Massa

When Sherman got the door open a little, a deluge of wet grain and dead and living rats poured out. It was a frightening and hideous event that included Ashley helping Sherman dislodge a particularly resilient rat from his forearm.

The segment ended at the base camp with both people being rinsed just a little and stitched up after receiving a shot. They were splitting a supper of thick soda-bread when the scene dissolved back into the sitting room.

Myles turned the VCR off for a minute and sat trying to control his breathing. He thought only of the last event he'd seen onscreen. Oddly enough, although it had been traumatic, it was less painful than thinking through all the other things she'd said.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Chapter Six

*Home of Ashley West-Montgomery
801 Hillsboro Avenue
Tampa, Florida*

Myles shot upright on the bed when he heard the door open. He'd been at Ashley's home for days. He'd been dozing—just about given up on her.

"I want you to get help. Counseling," he heard the voice he recognized as Sherman Landon say.

"You first." Ashley replied.

"We do suck, don't we?" asked Sherman.

"Like a couple of Hoover vacuum cleaners," Ashley agreed. "Renewal or denial?" Myles didn't understand the question.

"Renewal, I think," Sherman said. "I'm going to go home and tell Lilith that I was one of the people buried in the mudslide in Camiguin and find out if she cares that I lived."

"If she doesn't?" Ashley asked.

"Then I'll get help, I guess. You?" Myles realized that the two had a long-standing relationship.

"I'm gonna stick with denial, I think. Myles is my mate. The problem is he'll never see me as a grown up individual. I've known my own mind since I was a kid and he'll never accept it."

"I'm so sorry, sweet cheeks. Does he know you do this? Did he see your last cartoon movie?"

"No and I don't know. That's why I know it's hopeless. 'Tis better to have loved and lost or something, right? Maybe I'll start dancing again..." Ashley trailed off.

"You lived, baby doll. Sit down and cry for a week. Eat some ice cream. If you can't face the rising sun in three days, get help, promise?"

J.J. Massa

“You, too, Sherm?” she asked.

“Me, too, Ash. We lived again. Damn it!” He sounded genuinely sorry that this was true.

“There’s always next time, huh?” she whispered.

He caressed her cheek, ignoring the tears flowing down. “Yeah, let’s try again—there’s always a next time.” Sherman kissed her forehead and Myles heard the door close behind him.

Myles watched, frozen, as Ashley sank to the couch and wrapped her arms around her knees. She sat there for long seconds. Rocking back and forth, she collapsed to her side and buried her face into the back of the couch. It took Myles almost a minute to see that she was shaking with uncontrollable sobs.

Without a word, he moved into the room and scooped her up, carrying her into the bedroom. She didn’t acknowledge him nor did she stop crying. She continued to sob against his chest as if she couldn’t help herself.

She didn’t stop crying when he peeled her clothes off nor did she when he turned her into his arms and held her against him.

*Home of Mik and Elke Montgomery
Montgomery Mountain
North Carolina*

“Gandad,” Jacob addressed Mik hopefully, “I’d really like you to come with me.”

“Son, she’s your own mother, how hard is she gonna be on you?” Mik asked reasonably.

Jacob tilted his head and gave his adopted grandfather a hard look. Mik Montgomery looked like a very large, gray timber wolf. His voice, however, was a deep, ringing baritone, warm and welcoming or cold and foreboding depending on what it was he had to say. He was the product of a werewolf father and a wolf mother and did not have the ability to change into human form. For all intents and purposes, he was a talking dog.

“Ask me that the next time you tell Gramma Elke something you *know* she doesn’t want to hear,” Jacob countered with a raised brow.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Mik sighed gustily. “You make a fair point, boy.” He cocked his head and considered Jacob for a moment. “So Ashley’s going to be okay, though?” he asked, a hint of worry in his eyes.

“Gandad!” Jacob growled, and then straightened. Mik was the pack alpha. He had every right to ask this. If anyone needed to know what was coming, it would be Mik. Unfortunately, Jacob could only tell him so much. And things could change so easily... “She’ll come back, yes. Will she be okay? That’s going to depend on Myles. In fact, everything from here on out will probably depend on Myles.”

“That’s a helluva lot of responsibility, Jacob,” Mik observed quietly.

“I don’t decide who gets to do what!” Jacob growled, turning away. It was a heavy burden, the knowing and the telling. Sometimes he really didn’t want to be the one who knew what was coming next.

Jacob wouldn’t want trade places with Christopher—his brother’s responsibilities were no easier. Christopher would be there to help individual pack members through trials and tribulations. While Jacob would be there for larger issues, events that involved the larger pack or several pack members at a time.

Needless to say, the brothers would support each other and there wasn’t a job description for a seer—no clear delineation of roles. This time, the weight of responsibility fell on Jacob’s shoulders. He found it heavy indeed.

He felt a solid bump against his rib cage and turned, wrapping his arms around the thick furry body of his grandfather.

“It’s okay, son. I know it’s not your fault, and I know it’s a heavy cross to bear. The fact that this is your own sister and mother...it’s going to be tough. Of course I’ll go with you and help all I can. I’m proud to have you in my pack, Jacob Darke. I love you, son.”

Jacob sniffed deeply, burying his face in the course fur. He might be twenty-one and nearly grown, but that didn’t stop him from needing love and reassurance sometimes. He knew he was damned lucky to be a member of Mik Montgomery’s pack. Damned lucky.

*Home of Ashley West-Montgomery
801 Hillsboro Avenue
Tampa, Florida*

J.J. Massa

Ashley didn't know if this was a dream or reality. Everything seemed to be ebbing and flowing right now. One minute, she was buried in filth and sludge, trapped in a cave with a bleeding child in her arms. The next minute, she was almost naked and pressed tight against the man she'd loved since she was eight years old.

Right this second, she didn't care how real her dream was. Myles was here, he was holding her, stroking her, murmuring sweet words in her ear.

"Shh, Princess, I'm here. I love you and I'll never leave you again," he crooned, rocking her in his arms, cuddling her against his chest.

She buried her face against his throat and kissed him, nipping and licking at the skin of his muscular shoulder. "Myles, kiss me, love me," she whispered, rubbing her face on his bare chest.

"Princess," Myles groaned, pulling back and looking down at her. "Are you..."

Ashley didn't give him time to finish. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips against his, nipping at his lower lip. Myles groaned and Ashley pressed her advantage, kissing first one corner of his mouth and trailing her tongue along the seam to the other corner.

"Please, Myles," she begged into his mouth, "I need you."

"Oh, god," he moaned, laying her down, his mouth never leaving hers as he took over the kiss.

His mouth covered hers, parting her lips, his tongue sweeping in, tasting her, owning her as he savored and charted every corner, silky satin decadence taking over her world. It was exactly what Ashley wanted, needed, yearned for as she threaded her fingers through the thick pelt of hair on his chest, teasing a tiny peaked nipple hidden there.

She felt his hands at her back, fumbling with her bra, and then easing the straps down her arms and off. Arching her back, she offered a taut breast to him, threading her fingers through his soft hair as his lips closed over her nipple. He teased at it with his teeth, sucking it, causing it to harden painfully before kissing his way over to the other breast to lavish the same treatment on it.

Swirling his tongue around the hard bud, his hands continued their journey south, easing her flimsy panties down her legs. Ashley helped, pushing them down the rest of the way before reaching for the waistband of the sweat pants he wore.

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His fingers, having trailed sensuously across her abdomen, were teasing at her swollen lips. As his fingertips rubbed back and forth across her clitoris, her body tightened with need. She was hot and wet when he stroked her clit with his thumb.

Ashley gasped when she felt one large finger enter her, sliding deliciously inside. His had been the only touch she'd ever felt there besides her own and she was ravenous for him. The teasing finger pulled out and inched upward along her slit, over and around her throbbing nub, until her halting breaths became cries.

As the drumbeat of arousal coursed through her, a second finger penetrated, exploring her walls, spreading her open. "Myles, please," she begged huskily, her own hands tugging at his pants. He kicked out of them, giving her access to his body.

Finally, she wrapped her hand around his heavy erection, squeezing lightly and exploring with her fingertips. It was so hard, but so soft, a bubble of fluid at the tip, and too big around for her hand to circle it completely.

His cock throbbed in her palm and she lifted her leg, draping it over his hip. "Princess," he groaned, his mouth coming down hard over hers again, lips teasing hers apart as his tongue dominated her. "I want you so much, love you so much," he husked, pulling his fingers out of her and wrapping them around the hand that held him.

"Make love to me, Myles. Show me that I'm real," Ashley breathed into his mouth, tracing his lips with her tongue.

"Oh luv," he moaned, "you are the only thing that's ever been real to me."

Ashley felt the blunt head of his cock pushing against her wet center, slipping in her body's juices as he slowly entered her. She groaned deeply as he filled her, tightening her legs around his waist and hanging on.

Myles pulled out and pushed in again, moving inside her clinging sheath, slowly at first, then more quickly, sinking deeply inside her with each thrust. She cried out with every plunge, her knees gripping his hips as he drove high and hard inside her.

Again and again, he filled her, the missing piece of her, the only one who could satisfy the empty ache inside of her. She met his thrusts, her body spiraling higher. Her nipples brushed against his chest, the gentle abrasion only pushing her arousal up another notch.

His hips pumped with a fierce, driving force—straining, reaching. She felt something building inside of her and then everything shattered. From a distance, she heard her own hoarse voice cry out, felt her body close tight around Myles, and heard his deep roar as he bit down on her shoulder, and his hot seed spurting inside of her.

He warmed her from the inside out. She was finally safe.

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*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“Mom! You can’t blame Myles for this!” Jacob was valiantly hanging onto his calm, but Mik wasn’t sure how much longer that would last. He hadn’t seen the young man lose his temper in almost five years and it appeared that he was due.

“I can blame Myles for whatever I want, Jacob Ryan! Don’t you take that tone with me, either! I’ll blame him for global warming if I think he deserves it and right now, I’m not sure that he doesn’t!” Tracey Darke glared at her oldest son while ignoring her husband, her younger son, and Mik completely.

“It was Ashley’s choice to work in Disaster Relief and Myles didn’t know about it at all, until Aunt Bernadette and Uncle Marc told him she was missing last week. He’s in the same position you are...” Mik covered his eyes with a paw, knowing that was the wrong tack to take with fiery, redheaded Tracey.

“And that’s another thing!” Tracey advanced on Jacob, jabbing him in the chest. “Why did they tell him first and how could they keep that from us all this time?” Whirling around, she faced her husband and demanded, “Tavist, you get on the phone and yell at your brother! I want answers right now!”

“Mother!” Jacob growled. “Myles is her husband! He gets to know first. And Ashley swore Uncle Marc and Aunt Bernadette to secrecy. She’s an adult and she did what she wanted to do!”

Tracey stared at Jacob in shock before dissolving into a puddle of tears. “My baby is missing,” she hiccupped, “and you’re yelling at me!”

Mik nosed Jacob out of the way and pushed Christopher forward. Jacob eased over to the edge of the kitchen, and Tav squeezed his shoulder on the way by, before wrapping his arms around Tracey. Christopher moved up behind his mother and stroked her hair, murmuring platitudes.

The boys made a good team, Mik believed. He was still stunned and proud that his pack had been blessed with seers, and during his lifetime, too. Jacob had come to Mik right away when he learned what he was.

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It had been an amazing day, and every day since then had been richer for it. Jacob had told him three years ago that he was a pack seer and that Christopher would be as well. To Mik, that meant that his pack was destined for great things. He'd heard of other packs that had seers, but it had been long, long ago.

The Montgomery-Livingston pack was huge, certainly one of the largest in the United States, maybe *the* largest. With the addition of the de la Rosa pack, Tayler's pack, there was no doubt that it was the largest. But they hadn't incorporated that pack officially. It would be up to Tayler and Rafe to decide what to do there.

Jacob had also endorsed waiting and had told Mik who to place in the temporary position of leadership there. He'd given Mik some insight about who would succeed him as Alpha and many other tidbits of important information. There was a lot that neither Jacob nor Christopher would share with him, and oftentimes, what they *would* say was enigmatic at the very least.

Mik shook his head to clear it, surprised to see Jacob dialing the phone.

"Pick up, it's Jacob," the young man clipped into the handset. Mik could hear...Myles? That was Myles answering the other end.

"Hallo? Jacob, she's here," he heard Myles respond. "Ashley's here. Um...we just..."

"I know, Myles," Jacob's face was a little red now. "I know what...well, anyhow, just don't think it's all better now, okay? Let her get some rest and then you have to bring her back here."

"Back where, ducks?" Myles asked, confused.

"I'm at our parents' house right now," Jacob informed him, looking around at the now-riveted audience he'd garnered since he'd begun speaking.

"Is that my baby?" Tracey demanded, "You let me speak to her," she growled.

"No, Mom, it's not. It's Myles, and he'll be bringing Ashley home later," Jacob explained.

"Myles!" Tracey spat, her face angry and disgusted.

"He can bring her to the little house," Tav informed Jacob, pulling Tracey against his chest and soothing her.

"She can stay right here!" Tracey insisted, struggling to break free of Tav's hold. "This is where she belongs! Right here in her own room!"

Tav steered Tracey out of the kitchen and down the hall, leaving Christopher and Jacob exchanging glances. Mik sighed gustily. This was not going to be smooth sailing

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for anybody. How had he missed noticing all that animosity between Myles and Tracey? Chances were, he'd chosen to ignore it. Jacob and Christopher didn't have that luxury.

Myles, of course, had heard every word. "You sure that's a good idea, pet?" he asked Jacob uneasily.

"It's what you need to do, Myles," Jacob insisted.

"Right," Myles agreed in acceptance. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow then, won't I? Is there anything else?" he asked with obvious reluctance.

"There is, but you can wait until you get here," Jacob sighed. He seemed more than a little stressed. "Uh, call Rafe...or Marc. Have Tayler and Rafe head this way, too," Jacob added.

"Cor mate! Are you barmy? I'm gonna bring that pup into this mess? Don't think so, mate," Myles growled.

"Myles," Jacob growled back, his tone threatening.

"Don't get shirty, luv..." Myles took a deep breath. "If you say so, I'll do it," he gave in. There was no doubt he had reservations, though.

"It's important, Myles," Jacob answered evenly.

"Cheers, then. I'd better call Marc." Myles sounded more resigned than anything as he said goodbye. "Give us a bell if anything changes, right?"

"Okay," Jacob agreed, "Um, kiss Ashley for us. Maybe warn her a bit about Mom?"

"Right," Myles granted evenly, hanging up before Jacob could say anything else.

Jacob replaced the receiver on the cradle and turned to face Mik and Christopher. "Well, she's back on solid ground."

Christopher and Jacob locked eyes. "It's gonna be a fun few weeks here, huh?" Christopher observed.

Mik couldn't agree more. "You're sure he needs to bring Tayler?"

Jacob nodded sharply. Yes, indeed, it was going to be no end of fun around this house for a little while. Mik didn't even want to know what it was the brothers *weren't* telling him.

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Chapter Seven

*Office of Lilith Landon
Landon International
Suite 2A, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

Sherman stood in the doorway of his wife's office, drinking in the beautiful sight of her as she spoke on the phone, long legs propped on the desk, looking inward, seeing nothing but whatever was playing across her mind's eye.

"Lilith," he murmured, hoping, loving, praying she'd missed him and would be glad to see him.

"Darling!" Lilith pasted a false smile on her face. His heart tightened. There was no doubt she wasn't genuinely moved. "When did you get in? I was *so* worried about you!" she lied.

She skirted around the edge of her desk and took Sherman's hand, kissing the air beside his cheek and stepping back. The words were right—he wanted to hear her say she was worried. If only her facial expression and her tone bore that out.

"Were you really worried, Lilith?" Sherman asked frankly. He swallowed heavily, forging ahead, taking a chance. "I've missed you. I'd like us to go away together. We need to talk."

"Oh, Sherman, I would *love* to do that," Lilith's face was a study in artful disappointment. "This is just *such* a bad time for me. I wish you had called, Sherman. It would have been nice to know you were alive. When did you get back? That nice Bernadette Fiavel—or whatever—said you were lost in the Philippines."

"I got back to Tampa yesterday," Sherman answered, keeping his face free of any telling expression. Yes, to put it mildly, he was disappointed that she was handling things this way. He supposed it was too much to ask that she really had missed him. But maybe it was a shock—maybe if he really impressed on her how he felt. "I'd like us to spend

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some time together, Lilith,” Sherman repeated. “We’ve grown apart. I’ve missed you and I want us to act like we’re married again.” He knew he sounded desperate and he hated himself for it. The thing was, this was his wife, his soul-mate—or so he’d thought. “Let’s go away for awhile. I really want to...”

“Darling, you *know* we don’t have the same kind of syrupy relationship as you see on television. Please don’t tell me that you buy into all that. Now, you’re overwrought. You need to be home...” Her tone was sharp, no nonsense, as if he were a silly child, asking for a ridiculous toy.

“Lilith, do you hear yourself?” Sherman’s temper was rising with his hurt and desperation. How could she just ignore what he’d been through? Bernadette had told him that she’d been notified at the return briefing. She’d told him that his wife was worried about him.

The door behind him burst open and a dark-haired man strode in talking. “Lilith, you won’t believe what I...”

“Not now, Jack,” Lilith waved one elegant hand, brushing him off. “Sherman, how is little Ashley? Her family was quite worried about her, weren’t they?”

Sherman looked at the man backing out of his wife’s office with a knowing look on his face and then back at Lilith. “She’s as well as can be expected,” he answered carefully. “I didn’t realize you knew her name?” That she did raised his suspicions a bit. Lilith wasn’t jealous—she’d have to care about him for that he reminded himself ruthlessly. She *was* self-absorbed, however, and to take note of Ashley could only mean negative things for his dear friend. “I didn’t know you had any interest in Ashley.”

“Well of course, darling, she was lost with you,” Lilith cooed, patting his cheek as she turned back to her desk.

“Who was that man, Lilith?” Sherman asked, glancing toward the empty doorway. The man made him uneasy. Among other things, he seemed far too familiar with *his* wife.

“Nobody, darling, just my new assistant. Shouldn’t you be resting somewhere?” she asked belatedly. “I mean, weren’t you hurt?”

“No,” Sherman answered, his heart frozen and cracking.

“But I’m sure you’re upset, depressed. You needn’t be working just yet, Sherman. You should go home and just stay there, think about your experiences. I’m sure I know a good head doctor that could talk to you.” Suddenly Lilith was all over him, grabbing his arm, patting his back, steering him toward the door. “Jack, do drive Sherman home! You shouldn’t drive yourself, darling, and please don’t go near the guns. *Jack!*”

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The other man materialized inside Lilith's office, once again. The short hairs at the back of Sherman's neck were beginning to rise.

"Thank you, no, Lilith. I'll be fine. I certainly don't need your little minion to drive me. Atlanta has plenty of taxis if I don't choose to drive." The last thing Sherman wanted was to spend time around anyone who reminded him of Lilith right now.

"Why don't you take my car, Sherman? Jack will go down and make sure it's in operating order." She looked at the man called Jack who'd reappeared in the office. A raised brow answered whatever question passed between them. Sherman wanted no part of it.

Something about her behavior—everything about it—turned him off. She didn't want him, he acknowledged, that hadn't changed. He loved her, or at least he had. He'd married her with so much hope for the future, so much love in his heart for the children they could have, the life they could lead.

Her family had never really accepted him, but he'd been so sure that would change. They'd see how well he treated her, how important she was to him. How could they not appreciate a man who worshiped their daughter as much as he did?

Right after the ceremony, however, Lilith had changed. In truth, within minutes of the ceremony, she had changed. Once she had that nouveau platinum band on her finger, Sherman had become superfluous. Even their wedding night had seemed stilted, unreal.

He sighed. It was a nice day out, but if he'd been paying attention, he wouldn't have been caught like this, outside where it could rain. Few knew better than he did how quickly and violently the weather could change.

*Office of Lilith Landon
Landon International
Suite 2A, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

Lilith watched Sherman leave. She was angry, disappointed—hell, she was livid. She opened her mouth to call Jack, but he hadn't left. Before she could say anything, his fingers covered her lips, silencing her.

"He could be back," Jack hissed.

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Angry, Lilith stomped her foot and turned her back to Jack. A second later, she heard the door close and lock.

Suddenly, she found herself spun around and bent over her desk, her skirt pushed up, leaving her buttocks exposed and bare.

“Jack!” she growled, struggling half-heartedly. “You don’t know who you’re playing with!” She didn’t know whether to be aroused or angry. As a werewolf, it wouldn’t take much effort on her part to throw him off.

The sound of a zipper lowering echoed in the quiet office. Suddenly, she felt the head of Jack’s cock pressing against her nether hole.

“What I do know, bitch,” he rumbled angrily, “is that you’re not going to ruin everything by doing something stupid.”

He continued to push inside of her roughly without any preparation to ease the way. It hurt, and yet Lilith had never been so sexually excited.

“I could kill you right now, Jack,” she hissed, squeezing her eyes shut as he forced himself past the tight muscles protecting her anus.

“Do it then and shut up,” he grunted.

And then he was all the way in, his pelvis resting against her cheeks. She felt his hand sneak around in front of her and between her legs, massaging her throbbing clit.

“Oh, god, move, just move, asshole,” she groaned.

Jack pulled back and slammed in again, ripping a shriek out of her. “Like that, bitch?” he growled, causing her to cry out once more.

“Yes, yes!” she urged, rising backward to meet each violent thrust, sobbing at the pleasure-pain of his squeezing, prodding attack between her legs.

Before she knew it, she was moaning out her climax joined by Jack’s brutal jerky thrusts into her anal channel, his head pressed between her shoulder blades.

After long panting minutes, she elbowed him in the gut, ordering, “Get off!”

Jack pulled out of her, reaching around her to snatch a handful of tissue from her desk.

“Who told you that you could do that to me?” Lilith spat, wiping her rear hole with a handful from the same box of tissue.

“It’s what you pay me for, isn’t it, Lilith?” he challenged smugly. “You pay me to fuck you hard and clean up this mess that you got yourself into that just happens to include a mess I ended up with...my daughter. Isn’t that right?”

“Just as long as you remember who is in charge, Jack Aschtholdt, do you understand me?” Lilith warned him.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“And that would be whichever one of us wasn’t about to blow everything by fucking up, Lilith,” Jack snarled back, grabbing her by her shoulders. “You wanted me to do something to his car, didn’t you? Somehow kill him, am I right?”

“Maybe,” Lilith glared her answer, her eyes narrow. “It’s *my* money. I don’t need him and he isn’t using it.”

“And you don’t think anyone would suspect anything?” he asked, incredulous.

“Why? He just came back from a terrible situation and he’s depressed. And he probably hasn’t driven a real car in real traffic in...well, forever. I’m not even sure how long he was gone.” Lilith wasn’t sure what Jack was getting at, but she did *not* need some human criminal telling her what to do, no matter how good he was with his cock.

“Because the first person they’d look at if there was even the slightest bit of doubt would be you. And after that—me. And I’m not going to be *anybody’s* fall guy,” he stepped up close to Lilith, grabbing a handful of her well cut, expensive silk blazer. “You got that, *Mrs. Landon?*”

Lilith let a little bit of fang and beast show in her face as she grabbed Jack’s wrist and squeezed. “You *really* don’t know who you’re dealing with, Jack,” she sneered.

“So what?” he snapped back at her. “So you really *are* a bitch. I’ve seen the worst this country has to offer, fucked some of ‘em, been fucked by some of ‘em. I didn’t lay down and take it for nothin’—just so you know.”

Lilith felt a thrill of delicious fear race up her spine. Jack Aschtholdt might be human, but there was a bit of animal in him. Nasty animal. Maybe she’d keep him around a while after she got rid of Sherman. Just maybe.

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Chapter Eight

*Home of Ashley West-Montgomery
801 Hillsboro Avenue
Tampa, Florida*

"I don't want to go outside, Myles!" Ashley resisted, twisting away from him. He opened his mouth to speak and she burst into tears. "I can't! And you shouldn't either!" she sobbed, flattening herself against the wall. "What if it rains?" she whispered, sliding down to crouch on the floor, covering her face with her hands.

"Oh, Princess," he murmured, leaning down and pulling her into his arms. "I won't let anything happen to you, okay? I promise. Even if it rains." Myles didn't know what else to say, what else to do. He wrapped his arms around her and crooned into her hair, stroking and holding her until she calmed. "I've never let anything happen to you, have I? You've always been safe with me, right?"

Ashley sniffed noisily, clinging to him. "Yes," she whispered finally.

"Don't you want to go see your mum and da?" he coaxed.

"I do," she agreed, loosening her hold on him some.

"Take my hand, Princess, and don't let go. I'm going to take you down to the car and we'll get in and drive up to see everyone. You can sleep during the trip and we can take our time. The weather is supposed to be nice and sunny, okay?" Myles wheedled, hoisting both her bag and his onto his shoulder by the straps.

Jacob hadn't said one way or another how he was supposed to get Ashley to Georgia and somehow; Myles felt certain driving would be better than flying. He knew that Rafe and Tayler were flying in, and perhaps that was for the best as well. Either way, he got the impression that he should go with his gut. His gut was telling him to get in the car and drive.

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It was still very early in the morning—the sky was only just showing faint purple streaks. The drive usually took seven and a half hours, but Myles knew from experience that he could trim that back by a couple of hours.

He settled her into the front of his little sports car and eased the seat back so that she could recline. “What kind of car is this, Myles?” she questioned, stroking the supple leather seat as he reached over her to fasten the seatbelt.

“It’s a Porsche,” he answered with an embarrassed smile. His weakness for sports cars was well known. “Um, it’s called a Cayman S,” he explained, leaning down to kiss her head.

“Tell me about it,” she invited him with a tiny smile.

With a mental shrug, he decided it was a reasonably safe topic. “Well, it’s got a five speed Tiptronic transmission...”

“What’s that?” she frowned, turning her head toward him where it lay on the reclining headrest.

“It’s a sort of automatic transmission developed by Porsche,” he explained. “It can operate just as the common type of automatic transmission, but it also allows the driver to override the automatic mode by moving the shift lever into a second shift setting. It has two spring-loaded positions: “upshift” and “downshift”.”

She yawned widely and murmured, “And then?” as if he were telling her a fascinating story.

He grinned to himself. While they weren’t discussing the important aspects of their relationship that they really should sort out, she was with him, depending on him, talking to him and listening.

He continued to explain. “Once it’s in the manual setting, the driver takes over most of the shifting decisions which are usually performed by the transmission’s computer in most cars.” He saw her yawn widely but went on explaining. “When the driver shifts on his own, it lets you delay the downshift which allows for increased acceleration or to increase the braking effect of the engine.” Looking over, he stopped talking.

Ashley’s eyes drifted closed. With difficulty, Myles managed to keep his hands on the wheel instead of reaching over, touching her and reassuring himself that she was really there with him.

This was the stuff of his long-denied dreams. Hopes that for so long he couldn’t possibly allow himself. To do so would have been torture. Jacob had been right on when

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he'd said that Myles had never really believed Ashley could love him. She was far too good for him.

On the other hand, if Jacob, the pack seer, said that Myles could save Ashley—that he was what she needed—well, who was he to argue with a seer? He chuckled wryly at himself for how quickly he'd changed his outlook. Now he was clinging to Jacob's directives just as much as Ashley had been clinging to him this morning before he managed to convince her to leave the apartment.

"Myles, you won't leave me alone, will you?" Ashley's voice startled him out of his reverie. They'd been driving for almost three hours.

This time he did reach over and touch her face, stroking her soft cheek with two fingers. "My precious Princess," he murmured. "I'll be with you every possible chance I can be. I won't leave you alone ever, if that's how you want it."

"I—I know you won't let... You'll take care of me, right? Everyone is safe with you." Not expecting an answer, Ashley adjusted her seat so that she was sitting up and then turned to look out the window.

Myles didn't know how to address her statement and didn't know if it was even something he should acknowledge. In fact, it made him a little nervous.

"Do you—we should talk about what happened in the Philippines, Princess," Myles suggested tentatively.

"No," Ashley answered bluntly. "I don't want to."

Myles considered that for a moment. "Well, okay," he agreed finally. "Then how about we stop and eat? Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes," she whipped around to look at him, her eyes desperate. "Please, yes, I am."

"Right then," he started, when the sound of a siren caught his attention. He'd been exceeding the speed limit by at least fifteen miles an hour.

Flipping the right turn signal on, Myles began to edge onto the shoulder of the road.

"What is it? Myles? Are...is there a storm?" Ashley's voice was high and frantic as she clutched at his hand.

"It's a traffic stop, Princess, nothing serious, okay?"

She continued to grip his hand as Myles lowered the window and waited for the officer to approach.

"License and registration please," the officer barked as he walked up.

Saying nothing, Myles held his documentation out the window, noting before the patrolman arrived that he was a Montgomery pack member.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Oh, Mr. Montgomery sir,” the man stuttered, glancing briefly at Myles license. “I’m sorry for bothering you, sir,” he mumbled nervously.

“No bother, Officer Montgomery,” Myles answered. “After all, I *was* speeding. Could you direct us to a restaurant? Fancy a spot of nosh, Princess?” They’d already covered this, he knew she was starving. He just wanted to draw her out, to wipe that frightened, threatened look off of her face.

Ashley didn’t respond, her worried eyes fastened on the officer at the car window. “Uh, there’s a Denny’s up another mile at exit three ninety-nine. It’s right there by the Quality Inn,” the officer explained, his eyes trained on Myles’ elbow.

“Perfect,” Myles smiled. “Thanks ever so,” he murmured, closing his window, anxious to be away from whatever was upsetting Ashley. “All right, Princess?” he asked, squeezing her hand.

“Um, the PNP,” she muttered. “Philippine National Police. Uh, it’s okay, they were okay.”

She didn’t say anything else, and Myles let it drop in favor of breakfast.

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Chapter Nine

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Tracey watched Myles' expensive sports car pull up in the yard and rushed to the door. Christopher stepped in front of it and Jacob intercepted her, steering her to the large window that overlooked the porch.

"Watch Mom," he instructed her, and she did. She wanted to growl, kick and scream, but she managed to restrain herself, instead watching Myles walk around the car and open Ashley's door.

When her daughter shook her head adamantly at Myles and tried to close the car door, Tracey was stunned. Jacob lifted the window a little and Tracey strained to hear what was said as Myles dropped to a squat in front of Ashley.

"No, Myles, I don't want to go in there, because I'll just have to go out again and then, what if...what if..."

"Princess, your mum's in there. I know you want to see her, don't you?" Myles asked gently. Tracey was confused and a little frightened. What was wrong with Ashley?

"I do, Myles, but anything could happen," she countered.

Myles reached up and cupped Ashley's cheek, taking one of her hands in his. "Your mum has always kept good care of you, now hasn't she? And Tav, Jacob, and Christopher are there as well. Even your Gandad, Mik. Nothing could be safer than that, hmm?" He rose to his feet. "If it wasn't safe in there, they'd come out, now wouldn't they?"

Ashley moved to stand, looking from the house, to Myles, and back to the house again. "I guess so," she agreed reluctantly. "You won't go, will you? You'll be there, right?"

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Of course,” Myles agreed, standing with her and stepping away. “I’ll be right there with you.”

“Shit,” Jacob hissed. “I wish he hadn’t said that.”

Tracey looked over at Jacob and back at the two in the yard, talking quietly as they moved slowly toward the door. “What?” she asked Jacob, even though she was angry with him.

“Myles has to do something. He’ll have to leave Ashley here for a little bit,” Jacob explained. “But, Mom, you can see how much she needs him, can’t you?” he changed the subject, directing her back to the two who were climbing the porch steps now.

Tracey ignored him, moving to the door and giving Christopher a little shove. Christopher stepped away, giving his mother room to fling open the door. She rushed out onto the porch and pulled Ashley to her, her hands running up to the top of her daughter’s head, down her shoulders and enfolding her tightly in her arms.

“Baby, my baby,” she babbled, not able to form a coherent thought outside of acknowledging that Ashley was whole and alive and standing in front of her.

“Mom? Mama?” Ashley wrapped both arms around her mother and began to cry, quietly at first and then sobbing uncontrollably. “I was so scared I wouldn’t see you again. See anybody. Mama...”

Tracey had no idea how she got back inside. All she knew was that she and Ashley were seated on the couch, surrounded by Tav, Christopher and Jacob, when suddenly Ashley was frantic once again.

“Myles!” she yelled. “Myles!” she shouted a second time, louder, looking left and right for him.

“Right here, Princess, I’m here,” he reassured her, reaching between Tav and Jacob to squeeze her shoulder.

That seemed to be enough and Ashley turned back to her mother, and scooted close to her, snuggling in. In seconds, she was asleep.

“You have to go and get Sherman,” Jacob informed Myles succinctly.

“What? I think not,” Myles opposed immediately. “I need to stay here so that Ashley can see me when she wakes up!”

“Shh, or you *will* wake her up,” Jacob hissed back at him in a loud whisper.

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Jacob and Myles both looked over at Ashley, who was stretched out on the couch, her head on her mother's lap. Tracey was lovingly stroking Ashley's hair, every now and then glancing up to glare at Myles.

When Myles looked away, Jacob noted that while at first his face registered hurt, it was clear that Myles felt he deserved Tracey's scorn. Perhaps that was something Myles needed to give plenty of thought to.

It was certainly something both Tracey and Myles needed to discuss. Jacob knew that things would come to a head between them before much more time went by. He only hoped that there was a positive outcome at the end.

"Why do *I* have to do it?" Myles all but whined.

"All you have to do is get in your cute little car, go to Peachtree Street, where Landon International is, and pick him up. If you go now, you'll get there before he finds a cab. The way you drive, you won't even be gone two hours," Jacob informed him smugly. "He's got things to tell you that you need to know. Besides, you'll rack up lots of points with Ashley for getting him and taking care of him, too. He's in trouble—he just doesn't know it yet."

Myles glared at Jacob for long seconds. "You have a good argument there, mate," he conceded grudgingly.

"You need to be back by two-thirty, Myles. She's really going to need you then," Jacob murmured.

He hated being so elusive, but some things really did have to unfold at their own pace. Too much interference from him would change the shape of the pack's history. That would render himself, Christopher, perhaps all of them useless.

"I'll say one thing for you, pet," Myles growled. "You have cryptic down to a science."

"Everybody's gotta be good at something," Jacob smiled thinly.

"Oh, and my bloody car's not bloody cute!" he added, apparently for good measure, heading for Ashley. "I'm not going to leave and not tell her," Myles told Jacob as he knelt down beside his mate. Jacob shrugged, privately agreeing with Myles' decision.

"He's grown into a good man," Mik murmured to Tav.

"He has," Tav granted, his eyes soft on Myles who was stroking Ashley's cheek.

Tracey's lips were thin and angry, but she didn't say anything. Jacob suspected that his mother too agreed that Myles shouldn't leave without telling Ashley. Especially since Ashley had been so adamant that Myles stay with her.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“Princess,” Myles uttered quietly.

“Hmm,” Ashley responded, not really waking up, but lucid enough.

“I’m going to get Sherman, okay? I won’t be long,” Myles said in a low voice.

“Sherman? You’re getting Sherman?” Eyes open now, trying to focus, Ashley was obviously confused, though she sounded distinctly hopeful.

“Yes, precious. He needs to be here with friends, don’t you think?” Myles asked quietly, calmly.

Tears sprang to Ashley’s eyes. “Yeah, he does. Thank you, Myles,” she mumbled, shifting onto her side, her eyes drifting closed again.

Myles looked over at Jacob and arched a brow, smiling as he rose to his feet. Jacob winked at him.

“Thanks for the brownie points, seer,” Myles mumbled, clapping Jacob on the shoulder on his way to the door.

Delta Flight 651 Tampa to Atlanta

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Rafe asked Tayler for the fourth or fifth time.

Tayler hid a smile and squeezed Rafe’s hand as his personal bodyguard fretted over him. Rafe worried far more about Tayler than Marc did and sometimes even more than his own mother did.

He knew that Rafe felt bad about coming to kill him in the hospital before. Still, the older Were looked after Tayler because he cared so much—like a protective older brother, a devoted follower, a champion, and a friend. Rafe believed that Tayler was special and important and nothing mattered more than his safety and comfort. Sometimes he argued with Rafe over it—other times, it paid to let him have his way.

“I’ll be fine, Rafe. And it’s important that we go. Especially since Jacob said so.” Tayler knew that Jacob was a seer. He’d known it right off, even if he hadn’t understood it. Gandad Mik told him that it was a special thing, and even more special that Tayler had recognized it. “I’m glad you’re here with me, and I’m really glad that you’re my brother now,” Tayler smiled at Rafe. “You make me feel safe.”

It was true, he wouldn’t say it if he didn’t mean it. But it also distracted Rafe from whatever was bothering him—usually Tayler’s health, and focused him on the task at

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hand. Right now, the task was getting the two of them through the airport, through the flight and ultimately, getting them over to Tav's house where Ashley was.

"I'm really glad, too," Rafe grinned, taking one of Tayler's thin hands in his own. "I just worry about you, *hermanito*," Rafe confessed, rubbing the hand he held.

"I know, Rafe," Tayler allowed, "But there are things I have to do, you know that."

Rafe opened his mouth to answer when an airline employee walked up. "Little boy, let me see your ticket, please," she demanded brusquely.

"Is there a problem, ma'am?" Rafe asked, his hackles rising, although Tayler was happy to note that so far he'd managed to keep his beast in check.

"Our manifest shows no children in first class and if this was a courtesy upgrade, I'm afraid I'll just have to..." the woman was really on a roll, but Rafe cut her off before Tayler could intervene.

"It was *not* a courtesy upgrade," Rafe growled. "Tayler Fonteneaux doesn't travel any way except first class and if you have a problem with that, you need to speak to your supervisor."

Tayler sat back and watched for a minute. He'd know when it was time for him to jump in. So far, Rafe wasn't in danger of hurting anyone. It was a little funny how self-righteous Rafe became on his behalf, but a year together had taught Tayler to let Rafe do what he needed to do, only interfering when the situation became extreme.

"Now listen here, young man, there's no need to be rude," the flight attendant bristled. "This little boy is in the wrong seat and chances are, you are, too," she snapped, glaring at him.

"You were rude right off the bat, calling *mi jefe* a little boy without even checking your facts," Rafe stated firmly. "You go get someone who knows respect and we'll talk nice without causing a big, loud scene."

The woman flounced off and Tayler looked indulgently at Rafe. He certainly took his position as Tayler's protector very seriously.

"You aren't gonna get us in a fight are you?" Tayler teased.

Suddenly, the scent hit him. Rafe's head shot up but Tayler held up a hand. The air hostess who had been giving Tayler grief was heading up the narrow aisle followed by another woman and a man in pilot's uniform.

At first glance, the two newcomers might have been of Hispanic descent. The man's head shot up and his gaze locked on Tayler's for a split second before he dropped his eyes. The woman with him looked at Rafe but focused on his shoulder.

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“Sir,” the man in pilot’s uniform began. It was unusual to find werewolves working in the aviation field and Tayler was surprised.

“You don’t even know my name, do you?” Tayler murmured kindly. The man looked miserable and Tayler couldn’t blame him. “You are a de la Rosa?” He knew that this man and the woman with him were both de la Rosas. He could smell it on them.

“Yes, sir, I am.” The woman who’d initially caused all the trouble seemed terribly confused, and opened her mouth to speak. The man stepped in front of her, directing his words to a very smug-looking Rafe. “My apologies for this, both of you. You are Rafael Acosta?”

“Si,” Rafe nodded. “His name is Tayler *Fonteneax*,” Rafe informed them, nodding at Tayler. “You won’t forget that?”

“No,” the man replied, placing a hand on the arm of the woman who’d come with him. “None of us will, I’ll make sure of it.”

Rafe nodded in satisfaction. The first woman could be heard complaining as she followed the other two, but Tayler tuned it out.

“The thing of it is,” Tayler shook his head, stretching his leg carefully. “We had the right tickets and we paid for them.”

Rafe leaned over and pulled Tayler’s thin leg toward him, rubbing at the cramping muscle. “Well, *jefe*, at least now we know how they’ll react. We know they know who you are.”

Tayler grinned at Rafe, rolling his eyes. “I think you enjoy all that a little too much, you know that? And besides, you really are the one...”

A low growl from Rafe halted his words. “You’re the rightful heir. You’re the one, you know it. Don’t say that anymore.” Rafe flicked his eyes up at Tayler, rubbing the twitching calf muscle under his palm.

Tayler reached out and patted Rafe’s cheek in forgiveness, leaning back and closing his eyes. Some days, it didn’t seem right that he had to know all this stuff at thirteen years old. What happened to puberty? Ah well, he consoled himself, at least if he had to fly, he got to fly first class.

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Chapter Ten

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Tracey continued to stroke Ashley's hair where her head rested in her mother's lap. Tav had come along and covered the young woman with an afghan, handing Tracey a small pillow which she slid under Ashley's head to make her more comfortable. With a loving kiss on the forehead, he left her alone, taking their two sons with him.

Their younger daughters, thirteen-year-old twins Serena and Victoria, were still at school. The girls would probably stay late today, both played the violin and had lessons after class. It was someone else's turn to handle the carpool duties, and for that, Tracey was profoundly grateful.

She loved all of her children to distraction, but Ashley was her first. She hated to say one was somehow more special than the others, and truly, it wasn't that at all. This was simply Ashley's turn—her strong, sweet, independent, intelligent daughter.

Maybe it *was* a little irrational to hold Myles responsible for the state Ashley was in. Of all the people in her now very extended and over-protective family, Myles would have been her strongest ally in keeping Ashley home and out of danger.

The fact was, Myles had come in when Ashley was still so very young, and laid claim to a part of her that Tracey could never touch. And it wasn't really like Tracey felt she *had* to have access to each facet of her children—that wasn't it at all.

The problem was, by showing up when he had and somehow being Ashley's predestined mate or whatever, he'd effectively cut her off from an entire world of normal, little girl experiences. Because of Myles, Ashley hadn't really dated, didn't care about her prom, hadn't had crushes. It wasn't right.

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Worse than all of that, though—Myles’ number one, greatest offense was simple. He hadn’t valued Ashley enough. He hadn’t appreciated what, just by existing, he had denied her daughter.

Upon reflection, Tracey decided that it was high time someone clued him in. As it happened, she had no qualms whatsoever about being that someone.

*300 W Peachtree Street
Atlanta, GA*

“Get in the car, Sherman,” Myles ordered, struggling to keep his voice calm and friendly. He knew that this man hadn’t been intimate with Ashley, though he couldn’t believe the desire didn’t exist.

“You’re Myles Montgomery,” Sherman responded needlessly. He glanced around at the Carnegie Monument standing proud behind him.

“Got it in one, ducks,” Myles nodded, keeping his eyes on Sherman’s face as he leaned over and pushed the passenger door open.

Sherman looked startled. “Is something wrong with little sweet cheeks?” he asked in alarm as he lowered himself into the bucket seat.

With a snarl, Myles pinned him against the seat by the shoulders, fastening the seatbelt harness none too gently. “Ashley, my *mate*, is simply smashing, thank you. At least as much as you are.”

Sherman sat unmoving as Myles pulled the door closed and threw the car into gear, accelerating quickly up the busy street and leaving Hardy-Ivy Park well behind them.

“I, uh, sorry, I...meant no disrespect,” Sherman mumbled, sounding confused more than anything.

“S’fine,” Myles mumbled, inhaling. “You married to a werewolf?” he asked indelicately, not thinking, just noting the scent.

“A...a *what*?” Sherman asked. “Well, she’s a bitch, that’s for sure,” he mumbled more to himself than in answer to Myles’ question.

Instead of responding to Sherman, Myles merged onto Interstate seventy-five North thinking furiously. Jacob had told him that *he* had to go and get Sherman. In fact, Jacob had said that Sherman had things to tell him.

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If that were so, and if Sherman needed him, well, in the spirit of friendship and brotherhood, perhaps it was time for Myles to share some home truths with Sherman. Glancing at the clock above his rearview mirror, Myles decided he'd make it back to Talking Rock in plenty of time, even if he spent half an hour or more talking with Sherman.

Spotting a rest area ahead, Myles flipped his blinker on, turning right and parking at the edge of the secluded little oasis, directly in front of a metal picnic table.

"What...what's wrong? I thought you were taking me to Ashley?" Sherman asked, looking around nervously.

Myles could smell his uncertainty, his utter hopelessness punctuated by the pungent scent of a female Were on his person. A close inspection of Sherman's face revealed a tired man at the edge of his endurance and possibly even past it.

"I *am* taking you to Ashley, Sherman. You'll be with me, and her, her brothers, her entire family. You'll be safe and welcome. I just wanted to talk to you first." Myles kept his voice even and low, not wanting to startle the edgy man.

"I swear, she loves you very much and I'd never..." Myles cut him off, opening his car door and stepping out.

Sherman followed him, a study in uncertainty. Myles leaned back against the low hood of his car, arm sweeping out to indicate that the other man should have a seat facing him. Sherman did, plopping himself down, planting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hand.

"Sherman," Myles asked carefully, "What do you know about werewolves?"

"Werewolves?" Sherman lifted his head, a look of amused incredulity on his face. "What does anyone know about werewolves? They are an intriguing fantasy that..."

Myles concentrated for a second, feeling his incisors lengthen, his hair begin to grow, his beast was never all that far beneath the surface. "They're real," he informed Sherman needlessly, his voice a deep rumble.

"I, um, I..." Sherman wiped a hand over his face, if possible, looking even more pale than he had before.

"It's okay, Sherm, I'm on your side," Myles murmured, allowing his beast to recede slowly.

"What...Why?" Sherman's blue eyes were almost silver now, dark, intent.

"You are married to a werewolf and it occurred to me that you didn't know that," Myles informed him carefully.

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“Lilith? How do you...I mean, she’s a hard woman but...a *werewolf*?” Sherman was obviously well outside of anything he could get a handle on. Myles knew his calm demeanor was tenuous at best.

“Werewolves, like dogs, have a very strong sense of smell. In fact, in many ways, werewolves are very canine—lupine, really,” he supplied, wondering what would come next.

“So, is Ashley...?” Sherman asked, trailing off, his question obvious. “I’m trying to process this,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair.

“No, Ashley is not a werewolf. But some human women are meant to be mated to werewolves. Ashley is my mate. She was always my mate. This Were you are married to...” he struggled to find the right words. “She isn’t meant to be your mate. It’s something a Were can smell.”

Sherman shot to his feet, holding his arm out, shaking hard. “Bite me then,” he demanded, closing his eyes and turning his head.

“Wha?” Myles shook his head hard. “Cor, ducks, why would I want to do a thing like that?”

“Bite me and make *me* a werewolf,” Sherman spelled it out, his voice hard, talking loud and slow as if to a small child. Myles looked at him and shook his head, stunned. “Come on! I’m married to a werewolf—in love with a werewolf; I want to be a werewolf! She’ll love me then. Make me a werewolf, too!”

“It doesn’t work that way, luv,” Myles tried to explain. “You don’t just *make* someone a werewolf,” he hedged, neatly bypassing the fact that *he* had been made a werewolf, although not by being bitten.

“Bullshit!” Sherman spat, stepping forward and grabbing Myles by the lapels. “It happens that way in the movies! Jack Nicholson became a werewolf. They get that stuff from somewhere! If werewolves are real, then...”

Myles lifted Sherman by the shoulders and sat him back on the picnic table, stepping back from him. “You can’t believe everything you see on television, ducks, it’s just make-believe,” he tried to reason.

“You’re really strong, aren’t you?” Sherman interrupted, seemingly diverted, for the time being, from his desire to become a werewolf.

“Uh, yeah,” Myles answered cautiously. He wasn’t sure what this new direction of conversation meant, but he’d try it. “I’m exceptionally strong, even for a werewolf.” He picked up a large rock and crushed it, showing Sherman his strength. “I had some gene-splicing done and it made me strong with extra endurance. It’s hard to injure me—I

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heal right up,” he explained judiciously, hoping Sherman would grasp what he was trying to say.

Suddenly, the silver-haired man was all over him, throwing wild punches and kicking at him, trying his best to injure Myles.

“You sorry son of a bitch! How could you? Why didn’t you..? You piece of shit!” Sherman raged, his face red as he attempted to bring Myles down.

“Blimy you fool! What the bleedin’ hell are you doin’?” Myles pushed him to the ground and sat on him, at a complete loss.

Sherman looked up at Myles from his position flat on his back, blue eyes sparkling, sparking with fury.

“You could have fucking saved us,” he rasped, the words low and harsh, forced through a tight throat. “You could have saved the little boy that died in her arms; you could have gotten us out of there, kept us from...” Sherman was breathing heavily, anger and hurt pouring off of him in waves.

Myles backed up, pulling the larger man with him, dragging him onto his lap and pulling him tight against his chest. “Tell me, pet,” he murmured, his voice low and soothing. “Tell me what happened,” he urged, stroking through Sherman’s unruly curls. “It’s just us, you and me. Tell me.”

It could have been awkward, perhaps should have been. Myles didn’t think beyond his role of protector. Sherman Landon was a man in pain.

Myles remembered the video he’d seen at Ashley’s apartment. In it, Sherman had treated Ashley as an equal, but it was obvious that he tried to look after her as well.

He’d fought hard against any number of things bigger than he was and had kept Ashley somewhat safe while he was doing it. He needed comfort and security and Myles was determined to give it to him. In that moment, Myles opened his heart and let Sherman in. He was family.

It was Myles’ job to provide whatever he was capable of for members of his pack and so he would. And Sherman *was*, irrevocably, a member of Myles’ pack.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Sherman relaxed against Myles and began to speak, leaning into the stroking palm petting his hair, his voice dead, colorless.

“It was just a little village on the side of a mountain—there are so many through there. We knew there were less than twenty people, three families, and no way to get them out.” Sherman’s voice was flat, monotone, and he probably didn’t realize that warm tears were trickling down his face. Myles continued his rhythmic movement. He needed to hear this as much as Sherman needed to tell it.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“We were so arrogant,” Sherman shook his head slightly, and then leaned back into Myles stroking hand. “Educated, capable Americans, to the rescue. We dug trenches, we filled sandbags, Ash tried to fix their car, but we knew we were there for the duration. It was too late when we realized that we were screwed. The rains had already hit, the ground was loose from the earthquake, and I had reports that a shelf above us would probably collapse. The families didn’t want to go, couldn’t leave everything they had. So we did the best we could, dug more trenches, filled more sandbags, tried to make a cave hoping the debris would just pass us by, flow over us and keep going maybe.”

Sherman stopped talking for a minute, just resting. Myles shifted him slightly, wiping his leaking tears with his thumbs. “So?” he hated to ask, almost didn’t want to know, but he felt he had to. “What happened next?”

“Like I said, there were three families. Three sets of parents, a couple of teenaged boys, a twenty year old girl, and a handful of smaller kids—twelve, ten, eight, five—like that.” Pulling in a deep sigh, Sherman closed his eyes and went on. “We heard the shelf up the mountain give. Sounded like the wrath of God or something—a herd of freight trains, it was horrible.”

Sherman shuddered, his breath hitching as he turned his face against Myles’ chest. Whatever was next had to be truly awful, Myles reasoned; Sherman Landon was not a weak man.

“Shh, mate,” Myles crooned, “take your time.” Yes, Jacob had told him he had to be back there by two-thirty. It had been just after twelve when he’d pulled over here. Some things just took the time they took. He wouldn’t rush Sherman in his telling.

“There was a gap—an air hole of sorts, an escape hatch. We’d fixed it in such a way that you could get out, air could get in, but the floe should have passed right over.” Sherman paused, his hand gripping the arm that Myles had wrapped around him, hanging on tight. “We were clinging together, mothers holding the little kids, dads holding the moms. This little skinny boy, eleven or twelve—he’d been hanging on Ashley, she’d glommed on to him right away. When the shelf collapsed, he broke free, shooting across the room,” his throat clicked and his grip tightened on Myles. “Little bastard just *had* to see. He stuck his head out of that hole. His sister, hysterical, shot up after him—her boyfriend jumped up, too. Fucking deluge of rock, mud, natural bullshit, just ripped ‘em right in half.” He shuddered again. “Fuckin’ tore ‘em right up. Three kids, half their bodies ripped off. The older two were stuck there. The little boy...his lower half dropped, too skinny, I guess. Took his head off, but the rest of him was intact. Had a cartoon Ash

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had drawn for him, still holding it in his little hand. She caught him when he fell from that hole..."

"Bloody hell," Myles croaked, resting his chin on Sherman's head.

"We were trapped in there for a week with the rain and debris still pouring down that hill. Then we tried to dig out. Stuck there with hysterical moms, devastated fathers, traumatized kids, and three mangled corpses. A week." His voice had dropped to a whisper and then, nothing. Sherman swallowed once, twice, over and over, his body tight, fine tremors wracking his tense frame.

In his lifetime, Myles had been responsible for more death than he'd ever thought possible. He was an enforcer, jokingly referred to as a *troubleshooter* for his pack. He kept the peace throughout the enormous Montgomery-Livingston pack, whatever that took. Sometimes that meant giving his beast free reign—all at the behest of his adopted father and pack alpha, Mik Montgomery.

Myles trusted that Mik would never put him in a situation where his violence would be used in some self-serving way. In fact, when Myles was finally called in, it was usually in an effort to protect the local human population. Werewolves convinced of their own superiority were a dangerous lot indeed.

Never, ever had he wanted Ashley to be exposed to such violence. And thus far, she hadn't been. Aside from the violence of her own biological father, Ashley had been spared the demons that drove some men and werewolves to hurt one another. He couldn't have foreseen the possibility that she'd put herself in harm's way to help people in emergencies.

He wasn't surprised, thinking about it. Ashley was a giving soul who would always do for others before she would do for herself. And now, he had an armful of what appeared to be her soul mate of sorts. He just didn't have it in him to hold that against Sherman.

"Come on, guv, let's go see my princess, hmm?" He dropped an easy kiss on the top of Sherman's head and pulled him to his feet. "You can see for yourself she's okay, and let your new family take care of you."

"What about Lilith?" Sherman mumbled, stumbling alongside Myles, an automaton.

Myles helped the larger man climb into the car, easing the seat back and buckling him in. Sherman, completely spent, stayed where he was put.

"I'll give a call on Lilith a bit later, pet. Never fear," he smiled grimly.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

There wasn't a thing he could do to fix what had already happened, that was true. Lilith Landon, however, was a puzzle to Myles. He'd never liked puzzles. He didn't expect to like Lilith, either.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Eleven

*Office of Jack Aschtholdt
Landon International
Suite 2B, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

“Did you know that she was married into *those* Montgomerys?” Lilith demanded, stalking into Jack’s office.

Jack was pulling on his jacket and giving Lilith only a modicum of his attention. “She’s not actually married, Lilith. There’s no record of it,” he murmured, flipping through a stack of papers on his desk.

“He’s a werewolf, moron!” she growled. “They’re mated. You can be sure there’s some legal-enough record in the family rolls somewhere.” Jack arched a brow but didn’t say anything. “What, you don’t believe in werewolves? I thought we settled this...”

Jack leaned forward, into her face. “I don’t give a shit if he’s a mermaid. Hell, he could be a vampire, they can still be killed. I just don’t like staying up that fuckin’ late. Now, you got something for me? Cuz I have a job to do.”

“Your job,” Lilith hissed as she stepped up to him, invading all of his personal space, “is to do what I tell you to do. I don’t recall telling you to do anything besides find out about Ashley West-Montgomery.”

Jack snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her hard against him and shoving her against the wall. Had she been as delicate as she looked, she might have been hurt. As it was, she a little angry, and Jack suspected, she was probably aroused, too.

Too bad if she was. It would be good for her to want for awhile. Maybe she needed a crash course on what he really was doing here. In fact, maybe she needed reminding that she was *not* the baddest ass on the block.

“I am here to do what you need, and I’ll stay here and do it as long as it coincides with what I need. Right now, I need to know what I can about the guy that picked up your

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

husband and see if he's the same one that's screwing around with my daughter." He bucked his hips against her roughly. "If it turns out that Sherman and Ashley are in the same place, it will be a lot easier to do something about them. If they're in the middle of a bunch of hotheads, we have a motive for their murder, now don't we?"

Lilith stared at him, transfixed. Was that respect in her hard yellow-green eyes?

"So? What are you doing now?" she purred, rubbing her pelvis against him.

Jack looked at her with narrowed eyes. "I'm going out. I need a team, and not a management team, either." He gave her a shove and walked around her, heading for the door.

"You can do that later," she barked. "I want you to do *me* right now."

"Maybe in a while, Lilith," he smirked, slipping through the door and closing it behind him.

It wouldn't hurt her to know that he wasn't just a stud for her. Besides, he didn't care who she was, he had needs she couldn't meet. Living behind bars in the society of men had taught him more about his body and about the worst people had to offer than Lilith ever could. She thought she was bad—she had *no* idea.

"Twenty-five Rockwell," Jack growled to the cab driver, sliding into the back seat.

"It's gonna be twelve bucks, up front," the reed-thin driver insisted, looking suspiciously back at Jack.

The neighborhood wasn't really bad, not all that great either. Jack supposed he looked a little iffy, hardened, but he wore a new suit. It didn't matter. He would get what he needed there and twelve dollars wasn't that much money to him right now. Funny how all things were relative. A month ago, he didn't have twelve cents to his name, now he was handing some skinny little prick a ten and a five and letting him keep the change.

More ironic, if he thought about it, was that he'd just turned down a good romp with a pretty and rich woman just so that he could hook up with a guy he had known in prison. Not just any guy, though.

Becker was a bullet-headed black man with a scar down his left cheek. He'd owned Jack during his stint in federal prison and eventually, Jack had been grateful. Not at first, of course.

Hail Becker was a contradiction in terms in Jack's opinion. Glancing at the lace covered windows of the house when the cab pulled to the curb, Jack knew Becker had made them himself. Crocheted by his own ham-fisted hands, Jack had no doubt.

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Once inside, Becker would strip him down, beat him good, take care of any other needs he had, and then tenderly treat whatever injuries he'd inflicted. Afterward, Jack would explain that he had to kill off a couple of people and explain how he intended to go about it. Becker would tell him what was wrong with his plans and then help him assemble a team of whatever kind of creatures he thought were best suited to the job.

Jack didn't care if they were giant insects. He'd get rid of that annoying little bitch he'd donated sperm for, and maybe her mother, for good measure. While he was at it, he'd dispense with Lilith's little problem, too.

Becker opened the door and greeted him with a nod. He knew the state of things. Jack would use Lilith Landon for his wants. Hail Becker would be there to meet his needs.

*Home of Riker and Bethany Montgomery
Montgomery Mountain
Franklin, North Carolina*

Acclaimed actor Riker Montgomery read the letter a second time before picking up the phone to call his brother. He hadn't had the time to dial a single number when the door to his study opened to admit his cousin, Yancey, and his twin brother, Lakon.

"What's up, Rike?" Lakon asked. "We could smell the anger clear out there," he aimed a pointing thumb over his left shoulder, indicating the front yard.

Riker wasn't a bit surprised. He was pissed as hell and there as no way he wasn't throwing off sparks. He could feel his teeth lengthening and knew his hair was already shaggy.

"I just got this today, dated a week ago," he waved the document he'd been reading in front of the two men. "It says that Jack Aschtholdt was released from prison last week. Says he was sponsored by a local company and now lives in Atlanta. *Atlanta!*" he growled to emphasize his point. "According to the letter, Timmons' office got one just like it."

"What company? When? Why didn't Sheriff Timmons say something?" Lakon growled rapid fire. "He's still Sheriff over there, right? Why didn't they tell him and..."

"All right guys, listen." Yancey was forever the voice of reason, especially when his older cousins were lost in some primal, testosterone-induced fog. "First, we ought to

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call Uncle Mik, don't you think? Uncle Mik who is conveniently staying at Tav's right now?"

Riker reached out and clapped Yancey on the shoulder. "Thanks for speaking up before I got all fangy," he half-smiled.

"All *fangy*?" Yancey yelped, looking at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"Uh, throwback from that vampire show I did..." Riker grinned sheepishly.

"It still cracks me up that my brother the werewolf played a vampire on TV for five years," Lakon chuckled. "But hey, whatever pays the bills. Thanks Yancey," he aimed a smile at his cousin, probably as grateful as Riker for Yancey's lightening the moment in his own, straight-man way.

"Okay, you guys have a seat, I'm gonna call Dad and Tav and see what everybody knows," Riker instructed. "Maybe we can stop this before it goes bad..."

He punched in a series of numbers and then hit the speaker button. The hollow sound of a phone ringing on speaker echoed throughout the room.

"Hello?" it was Tav.

"Hey, buddy!" Riker smiled. "It's Riker, Lakon, and Yancey. I guess we need to talk to you and Dad."

A click could be heard and then Tav spoke again. "Hey, guys," he greeted them. "It's Riker, Lakon, and Yancey, Mik," he informed the older Were. "Hang on, I'm gonna get Jacob in here, too. And Christopher if he thinks it's called for."

"Uh, why?" Yancey asked, looking at Riker and then at Lakon. He'd been their cousin all their lives of course, and managed both their careers, Riker's as a very famous actor and Lakon as a well know singer—as well as handling a great deal of Montgomery-Livingston pack business. But Yancey wasn't an Alpha. Sometimes, Riker forgot what Yancey did and did not know.

"Jacob and Christopher are pack seers," Riker explained. Lakon didn't say anything.

"Two of 'em? And ... I didn't think they were real," Yancey murmured, brow furrowed.

"Turns out they are," Jacob answered, laughing over the speaker phone.

Yancey turned red and ducked his head, his face not that much lighter than his ginger-colored hair.

"Good to talk to you, Jacob, uh, and Christopher?" Riker asked as an afterthought.

"Not this time," Jacob responded. "He's got some other things to tend to."

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Riker decided to leave that alone—chances were, he didn't really want to know what Jacob's brother was doing. "Well, I called because I got a little love note from the Federal Bureau of Prisons," he told them without preamble. "It seems our old nemesis Jack Asshole is a free man. Timmons' office in Talking Rock got the letter; they just didn't get around to telling you yet. Victims get personal notification, it seems," Riker growled. "Thankfully, we had 'em copying any correspondence to me."

"Shit," Mik commented. "Jack Asshole, a free man. Just doesn't seem right..."

Riker identified the heavy breathing as coming from Tav. It wouldn't surprise him to find that Tav was getting "fangy" as he'd joked about before.

"Turns out he was sponsored by a local company and works in Atlanta," Riker went on.

"What company?" Tav demanded, his voice vibrating deep across the line.

"Landon International," Jacob answered quietly.

"Holy hell! That can't be a coincidence," Mik growled. Riker wasn't sure who he was talking to, but he couldn't help but agree.

"It isn't," Jacob responded. "I can't give you chapter and verse, but Sherman Landon's wife is a Were. He loves her...a lot. She," he sighed heavily. "She isn't as attached to him, it seems. They aren't actually *mated*, but they *are* married." It was a fine distinction, but noteworthy to two roomfuls of werewolves.

"Okay," Tav agreed cautiously. "So...and he's coming here?" he all but yelped. "Why again?" he asked. "You told Myles to go get him..."

"Sherman Landon is to be a member of our pack," Jacob answered. Riker just listened, stunned. Jacob seemed to know what he was talking about. There wasn't a hint of doubt in his voice, in fact, he sounded almost commanding. "I don't know who he is meant for, but he is under Myles' protection now."

"Ooo-kay," Lakon answered—his manner tense and careful. "So, um, why don't we just load everyone up and bring them on over here where we can defend 'em?"

"Yeah," Riker agreed eagerly. "That makes a lot of sense. It's damned hard for anyone to bother us up here."

Jacob exhaled heavily. "That's a problem because Sherman and Ashley need to be here. They're...damaged. They *need* to be here."

"Yeah," Riker sighed. "Of course. So..."

"You sent for Tayler-puppy," Mik rumbled. "Did you...why?" he demanded angrily.

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“They need him, Gandad,” Jacob replied evenly. “It’s very important that Tayler be here.” Everything was silent for long minutes. Finally Jacob growled, “Look, I don’t make this shit up.”

Riker could hear the swish of fabric. He knew Tav was doing what he himself would be doing. Hugging his son.

“Look, a bunch of us are gonna head that way,” Riker decided, checking with Lakon and Yancey for nods. “I know Kaden and Kameron will want to be with you, son,” he addressed Jacob, knowing that the young man would accept that. Jacob had always been close with Riker’s twin sons and now they played and sang together. Hopefully, having them nearby would be comforting to him.

“Thanks,” Jacob answered huskily. “You can have the back half of the house. Sherman will be staying with Myles and Ashley.” His voice was a little muffled, no doubt by Tav’s shoulder. No matter how old and how knowing a man was, sometimes, he just needed his father.

“Just, for God’s sake,” Mik growled, “make sure they leave little Tinker-Puppy at home.” Tinker was Kameron’s year old son. Before anyone could answer, he went on, “And if you tell me they need that puppy too, seer, I’ll bite you in the ass, grandson or not.”

Riker managed to hit the disconnect button before the room erupted into deep, ringing laughter.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Twelve

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Myles gingerly helped Sherman out of the car, closing the door behind him much as he had for Ashley. Sherman had stared straight ahead, saying nothing for the rest of the ride. Regardless, Myles knew he was holding himself together through strength of will alone. He was a strong man, but battered. A wave of profound respect shook him, deep admiration, almost reverence for this stalwart but beleaguered soul.

The fact of the matter was that this man was as emotionally bruised as Ashley had been and possibly worse. After all, it wasn't manly to break down, was it? Certainly not when someone was depending on you.

Sherman seemed to take it as a matter of course that he could depend on Myles now. Perhaps because the person, well, the *Were* he'd depended on had let him down, and Myles had turned up fresh on the heels of that.

Possibly Jacob could explain it, but it really didn't matter. Without giving it any thought, Myles reached forward and caught Sherman's arm when he stumbled, helping him up the wooden stairs of Tav's porch.

"Sherman?" Ashley's voice floated through the open window. "Myles?" she called out. He could hear her rushing for the door.

"S'okay, Princess," Myles murmured, catching her in one arm and pulling her in front of Sherman. "Here he is."

"Sherm?" Ashley questioned in a husky whisper, almost as if she didn't believe he was really there.

Sherman cleared his throat and swallowed loudly. "She didn't want me, Ash," he choked, wrapping his arms around her.

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Ashley's arms came up around Sherman, holding him tight. "I'm so sorry, Sherman. But..." she was crying now, too, choking back sobs. "But we want you, don't we, Myles?"

Myles vaguely wondered when his life had become a nursery or pre-prep class, but he put an arm around each of them. "Course we do, Princess. We'll look after you, ducks," he promised Sherman, herding his little group toward the front door.

Sherman paused instead of going in, attempting to wipe his eyes on his shoulder. "I'm a mess, I'm sorry. I really don't know why I'm so...weepy, I guess," he shrugged, trying to turn away.

Myles stopped him, keeping an arm firmly along his back. "The front room is empty there," he told them both, grateful that everyone had cleared out for a few minutes. "You can go to the loo and have a little wash. I'll see if Tracey will put a kettle on, shall I?"

Ashley flashed him a relieved smile and led Sherman inside. Myles dropped a kiss on her head and headed for the kitchen.

"He meant you can wash your face in the bathroom. He's British—it's a whole other language," he heard Ashley tease.

"It's kind of a nice change of pace, isn't it?" Sherman answered. Myles couldn't help but wait and see what she said.

"Yeah, it really is, huh?" Ashley agreed. "It sounds nice. I like listening to Myles talk." Myles grinned. It wasn't a major breakthrough, but it was acceptance and he'd take it.

"Can I talk to you out here for a minute, son?" Mik called out, having heard Myles enter the kitchen.

Jacob had ushered his mother in the other room where she was, surprisingly enough, making hot tea for everyone.

Myles followed his nose and his ears until he made his way out onto the back porch where Tav, Mik, Jacob and Christopher were apparently having a meeting of the minds.

"Something up?" he asked. "Or is that a daft question?"

"Uh, yeah," Jacob grinned.

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“To both...” Christopher tossed an arm across Myles’ shoulders and nudged him onto the railing next to him.

Before he could respond, Tracey pushed the door open and handed Myles a steaming cup of tea. She arched a flaming brow at him until he accepted it.

“Ta—I mean, thank you,” he murmured, looking pathetically grateful. “I’m parched.”

Mik noted that she had used loose tea leaves and had sweetened it to Myles’ taste. He mulled over the possibility that she was coming around but shrugged that notion away. It was more than likely just simple cause and effect. Myles had done something right and Tracey was rewarding positive behavior.

Everyone remained quiet for long minutes, just letting Myles savor the rich blend. Mik had spent enough time with Myles to know that Tracey had prepared it exactly the way he liked it. That woman never ceased to amaze him. She reminded him of his unpredictable Elke in so many ways. A quick look at Tav, who was shaking his head ruefully, made him suspect he wasn’t the only one harboring similar thoughts.

“So,” Myles spoke up, “what’s going on?”

“Do you remember Jack Aschtholdt, Myles?” Mik chose not to beat around the bush, getting directly to the point.

Myles went still, raising his eyes slowly to Mik’s. He nodded.

“Riker just called,” Tav informed him quietly. “He got a letter from the Federal Board of Prisons. Apparently the man was awarded parole. He was sponsored by a company in Atlanta.” Tav paused.

Mik stepped forward. “He was sponsored last week...by Landon International.”

Myles’ eyes flashed red for a minute. Even Tav caught his breath.

“I know too bloody well what my boy in there was doing last week,” he growled low. “I promised him I’d go see her...his wife,” Myles explained.

“You can’t just go blasting in there,” Mik insisted, looking askance at Jacob and Christopher, hoping for backup. The jury was still out about how useful seers were in his opinion, especially after that last phone call. “We can’t just go over there and pick a fight. Surely you two agree?”

Both seers kept quiet, watching Myles.

“I have no intention of picking a fight,” Myles informed Mik. He looked around at Tav, back at Mik, and then over at Jacob, who nodded.

Myles then reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Flipping it open, a little *beep* was heard.

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“Contacts, call someone,” a pleasant female voice intoned.

“Call Yancey,” Myles said evenly.

“Calling Yancey,” the female voice of Myles’ cell phone repeated back to him.

Myles hit another button and the woman’s voice said, “Speaker.”

A half ring bubbled across the back porch and then, “Yancey Livingston,” Yancey answered.

“All right, Yance?” Myles greeted him.

“My! We’re on our way to see you...sorta,” Yancey told him, sounding distracted.

“Yeah, I need you to do something for me, mate,” Myles stopped him.

“Okay, what?” Mik could tell that Yancey was now completely focused on Myles.

“You’re licensed to practice law here in Georgia?” Myles questioned him.

“I’m licensed in every state where we have pack holdings,” Yancey assured him, waiting.

“I need you to draw up divorce paperwork on behalf of Sherman Landon—seeking a divorce from Lilith Landon.”

“Myles...” Yancey began.

“I will act as his agent and he will voluntarily sign in front of as many witnesses as you need. We can start with fraud as the reason, and you can go on and list as many other grounds for divorce as you can find. Bring it with you when you come,” Myles instructed him.

“All right... I might need middle names. Let me see if I can access the original marriage paperwork. It won’t be hard to get the dates. You know if there’s a pre-nup?” Yancey was all business now.

“No, I don’t know, so just find a way to make sure none of her heirs are entitled to anything. I can’t guarantee I won’t end up killing her,” Myles growled, locking eyes with Jacob. His eyes flashed again and Jacob shrugged. Apparently he knew which way things would go and wasn’t saying.

“Will do,” Yancey agreed. “And I’m bringing Philly, that okay?”

“Sure, pet, I know Princess would like to see her.”

Mik shook his head, feeling dizzy. Well, Philly wasn’t helpless. Yancey’s wife was blind, but she was a werewolf. She could take care of herself. She might even be able to provide a little extra security for Ashley and Sherman while whatever was going to happen happened.

J.J. Massa

*Home of Hail Becker
25 Rockwell Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

Jack lowered himself gingerly in the scented water, leaning heavily on Becker as he did so. He held his breath, biting back any sound until Becker nodded.

“Ahh,” Jack hissed as the oily water at first stung and then soothed his many aches and pains.

With one notable exception, Becker hadn’t broken the skin, although he had beaten Jack very thoroughly. He’d cried, begged, pleaded, moaned and groaned, until his overtaxed vocal chords could barely push a sound out of his raw throat.

As sore as he was, though, Jack doubted that he’d even bruise. Still, there wasn’t a single inch of his body that hadn’t been touched by Becker’s dubious loving attentions.

Without giving it any real thought, Jack knew he wouldn’t be seeing Lilith for the rest of the day. On the off chance that she might show up at his apartment, he wouldn’t even go home. Not that he believed Becker would let him leave. The big man liked to see the results of his handiwork and Jack had learned the hard way to let him have what he wanted.

And now that both men had worked out their more physical stresses, Becker would spend the next day or so pampering Jack. It had always been thus and frankly, Jack had missed it. Now that they were on the outside, Jack was curious to witness the extent of Becker’s indulgence since luxuries were so limitless.

“How you doin’, babe?” the big man’s deep voice echoed in the tiny, tiled bathroom.

“It’s been awhile,” Jack tried. Becker’s face took on an ugly caste. “I’m sore,” he admitted.

“You just lay back, let me get what you need,” Becker rumbled, turning sweet again.

Carefully, Jack eased back in the small tub, closing his eyes as Becker dabbed at his face with a soft, natural sponge. Poor Lilith. She thought she had Jack. She just didn’t know.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Chapter Thirteen

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Rafe pulled the baby blue, metallic Chrysler Crossfire into Tav's front yard, thanking Hertz, Marc, and the Gods of ingenuity for seeing to it that he got a car with a portable satellite navigation system.

He would have hated to get lost for so many reasons. Of course he didn't want to let Tayler down, that was a given. But to get lost when driving to the home of his hero, Tavist Darke—that would have been humiliating.

In an odd parody of Myles' earlier behavior twice already that day, Rafe stepped out of the small car and hurried around, trying to open the door for Tayler before he could do it himself.

Tayler just grinned and shook his head at Rafe, making him laugh at himself. His heart swelled with love for the young Were as he stood there, looking down into Tayler's dark gold eyes. He couldn't believe how much his life had changed in one short year. And for all his losses, Rafe knew he was richer from what had come before, even though he still sorrowed over the loss of his father and the faith he'd had in him.

As he stood in the middle of the tree shrouded yard, Rafe heard the scream. And then he heard a strange man's voice chanting, "No, it can't be, no..." as it retreated deeper into the house.

He turned, stooped to lift Tayler and waited. After a second's indecision, Tayler's skinny arm wound around his neck and Rafe lifted him, hurrying toward the door.

"It wasn't Tayler before, luvvies. Shh, this is Tayler, now. You must come see him, he's traveled just for you both," Myles was murmuring soothing nonsense to two people Rafe couldn't see. He knew one to be Ashley and the other, someone new. "We mustn't scare him, isn't that right? Wouldn't that be terrible?"

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Rafe put Tayler down inside the doorway of a fair sized utility room that was situated at the back of the house. He could smell the other members of the family though they had cleared out, apparently, leaving the three here and Rafe and Tayler.

Tayler made his laborious way across the room and stopped next to Myles who slipped an arm around him. Easing the young Were to his knees, Myles turned back to the two cowering between the washing machine and the wall.

“Sherman, you remember Bernadette’s little boy, Tayler. Come on, pet, open your eyes. Show Princess here that this is Tayler, come to be with you and ...” he trailed off lamely, apparently at a loss. Myles exchanged a helpless glance with Tayler and tried again. “Come on, my loves, you can’t ignore our own Tayler this way and hurt his feelings.”

Rafe had always been respectfully afraid of Myles Montgomery. He’d never really been sure who had killed Anton and Luis de la Rosa—even though Marc had fought with Rafe’s own father, it was possible that Myles had killed him, too. Each death was warranted, though Luis could have lived. His struggles and an answering twitch from Myles had resulted in a snapped neck and severed spine.

To see the deadly Were crouched on the floor, crooning inanities to two cowering humans was bizarre, to put it mildly.

After long minutes of wheedling, Tayler put an end to the stand-off by easing forward and laying a hand on the man’s cheek. To Rafe’s relief, Myles kept a hand around Tayler’s waist, ready to pull him away if either Ashley or Sherman panicked.

“Sherman,” Tayler called out low. “It’s me, Tayler, you know me...”

Sherman’s eyes popped open, so blue that Rafe took a step backward. “Tayler?” his voice cracked, disbelief ringing in the single word.

“It’s me, Sherman. I’m here, and I’m okay,” Tayler kept talking, both hands cupping Sherman’s face now as he sat in Myles’ lap.

Rafe knew that Tayler believed in the power of touch and used it often. He couldn’t fault his little alpha for it, either. When Tayler touched someone, it always seemed to have the desired effect.

“Ash!” Sherman’s voice was high and cracking. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Ashley, it’s really him. It’s real. He’s real.”

“Myles,” Ashley whispered, and then her eyes locked on Tayler. “Oh, God!” she began to cry. “You look so much like him...I was afraid I was...” she choked and couldn’t speak. Myles let go of Tayler who slid closer to Ashley and Sherman and put his arms around both of them—as much as he could. “He died, his little body...”

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“Blood everywhere,” Sherman husked, touching Tayler’s arm reverently.

“Locked in there with his body, their bodies, like nothing else was real anymore.”

“No more babies,” Ashley sobbed, stroking Tayler’s hair, his cheek, his shoulder.

“Even the babies, the little ones, they couldn’t be kids anymore. We weren’t...”

“We weren’t real,” Sherman supplied, picking up where Ashley left off. “We tried when we got home, but...”

“And then Myles came and...he saved us and you’re here and maybe we’re real again, after all,” Ashley said in a rush, her words nearly running together and making no sense.

Rafe backed carefully out of the room, Myles and Tayler touching and stroking, crooning and petting the two sobbing humans on the floor.

Home of Hail Becker

25 Rockwell Street

Atlanta, Georgia

Jack lay on his stomach, naked on the clean cotton sheets. He mentally catalogued his aches and pains, beginning and ending with the one between his nether cheeks—although there was a symphony of dull pain throbbing from his head to his toes and everywhere in between.

Becker had used him again last night, though he’d been liberal with the lube, especially in light of his complete disdain of it the afternoon before. In comparison to every other liaison between Jack and his owner, that single joining had been almost gentle. It was probably as close as violent and deadly Hail Becker could ever come.

The dichotomy between the two halves of Becker’s personality taunted Jack as he felt the huge man’s fingertips skim down his back. “How are you, babe?” Becker murmured, the sheet sliding away beneath the sensuous glide of his fingers.

“Fine,” Jack mumble-moaned, arching slightly into the touch.

The sheet slipped off, exposing his bare buttocks, bringing a tingle to Jack’s groin. Becker’s fingertips continued to stroke down, feather light, tracing Jack’s cleft.

“You’re not hurting, babe?” he rumbled, his touch still light, but possessive as he cupped Jack’s pale cheek. Just the idea of his white, white skin, molded and stroked by those so-dark fingers brought a flush to Jack’s face. Becker chuckled, deep and rich.

J.J. Massa

“You’re done, babe,” he murmured, his voice like gravel to Jack’s ears. “You lay here, be my good little babe, let me see to you. We’ll get some folks together later, when you’re up to it.” Jack felt a soft kiss on his shoulder, counterpoint to Becker pulling his thighs apart, then his cheeks. A thick finger slid in and out of him and then massaged his pucker for a long minute. “I missed you, Jackie. You always was my favorite. You’re a good little babe, coming to me this way. You know I’ll take care of what’s mine.”

Jack didn’t answer, floating as he was on the edge of sleep, the deep, vibrant voice of Becker lulling him back to a place of twisted safety in his mind. Suddenly, his balls were caught in a tight grip, a wide thumb plunged roughly into his anus. Belatedly, he remembered that a response was expected here.

His mind searched frantically as the vice tightened around his testicles, the thumbnail scraping at abused and torn tissue. Pain, razor sharp, cut through him, tearing him, crushing. This wasn’t the pain he craved, this was punishment.

“Yours, Becker...Hail. Yours, always belong to you,” he managed, finally. The thumb stopped moving, the grip between his legs loosened. “Do whatever you tell me to, need you,” Jack wheezed, grateful when the hurting thumb became soothing again, the fingers fondling his balls cuddled them tenderly.

“I don’t mind spankin’ you when you need it, babe,” Becker oozed lovingly. “Don’t make me hurt you, though, Jackie, I don’t like to be mad at you. My favorite.”

“M sorry, Hail,” Jack apologized, his throat thick. He *was* sorry, hurting, so much that he truly wanted to cry. Had he been forgiven? He was so glad he remembered to call Becker by his given name...would there be more abuse or was he finally deserving of the cossetting indulgence lavished on him when his owner was happy with him?

“That’s my good babe,” Becker crooned, pulling his fingers away, sliding the sheet back up over Jack’s nudity. “You let ol’ Hail see to you, bring you some goodies, take care of you. We’ll find someone to do your job for you later, when you’re feelin’ better. Rest now, babe,” his loving litany ending on a whisper as Becker pulled the door closed behind him.

Jack sniffed, turning his head on the pillow and letting a tear leak down. Had he really had a choice? Riding the razor’s edge between pain and pleasure, ownership and freedom, Jack didn’t think there were any choices left. This was the life he’d been molded to, helpless to resist what Becker had to offer. He was, in spirit and in fact, owned by the half-sweet, half-killer that doled out love and blood in equal measure, just as he saw fit.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Once, many years ago, Jack had been the owner. He had been the one to use, abuse, punish and indulge as he saw fit. His sons deserved to be as powerful as Hail Becker, as powerful as Jack had once been.

In his way, Becker loved Jack. He understood the loss that ate at Jack...now that he was no longer owner but property, whether he was Becker's favorite or not. Becker would help him exact his revenge. Tracey and Ashley would be punished for the hurt they'd inflicted on Jack. Lilith would be rewarded with the death of Sherman Landon, a gift for setting Jack free.

Jack's revenge would be awesome and terrible. Becker would see to that.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Fourteen

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Tracey draped herself over the aged rubber and wood of the old tire swing, crafted and hung by Tav and her sons fifteen busy years ago. She closed her eyes and floated along, listening to the full, sensuous sounds of Myles' aching saxophone as it throbbed around her.

The deep, soulful tenor ebbed and flowed, caressing every frayed nerve, stroking over her, reminding her of black satin, soft fur, rich chocolate and fine wine. She needed the escape, the beautiful, warm melody lifting her and transporting her to that other welcoming plane, just as much as everyone else within hearing distance.

No doubt in her mind, as she drifted back to earth, Myles needed the music as much as all of the battered and bruised souls littering her home this night. She didn't need to be a werewolf to hear Sherman and Ashley sobbing out the details of their horrific experiences in the Philippines.

The two had been trapped under maybe a ton of mud, stuck in what amounted to a cave with three dead bodies, one of which they'd somehow come to believe was little Tayler. Now, Ashley was back, maybe changed irrevocably, Sherman, hurt beyond measure, had been added to the family...and then there was Myles.

Myles. Tracey couldn't escape Myles. The music faded away, like the receding ocean tide, leaving her feeling melancholy as she hung, twisting under the branches of the big old tree.

A gentle nudge sent her riding the cool night air, her long hair ruffling in the light breeze. She couldn't fight a grin, even though her throat filled, tight and heavy, to see Myles' hopeful half smile back at her.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

She sniffed, a tear rolling down her cheek as she held a hand out to him. Stepping forward, he took it, pulling her into his arms, holding on. “We have problems, Myles,” she rasped, leaning her cheek against his solid chest.

“I know...” he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, “I know we do.” His voice was soft, thick, and she felt his cheek against the crown of her head, felt a warm tear trickle down her temple. “Why can’t you love me?” he whispered, maybe he hadn’t meant to say that aloud.

“It’s hard to love you like a son when you’re breaking my daughter’s heart,” she forced out, breathy sobs punctuating every other word.

“You--you were so mean to my brother, and,” he took another deep breath, “and I wanted you to love me so much,” he stuttered, struggling obviously to keep his emotions somewhat under control. “He forgave you but--but I just couldn’t,” he choked.

Tracey’s arms tightened around him, one hand reaching up to stroke his shaggy hair. “You changed my daughter’s life, before she ever even had a chance. I was so mad at you, just for...just because.”

“I’m sorry,” Myles gasped, pulling back. Tracey kept her arms around his waist when he cupped her face with both hands. “Tracey, I’m sorry. So sorry.”

Tears streamed down his face as he swallowed convulsively. He sniffed deeply but didn’t look away, letting her see his weakness, his heartbreak, his deep sorrow for whatever sins she chose to assign him. In her heart of hearts, Tracey realized that he probably blamed himself for more than she could even imagine.

“Myles,” she whispered, managing a weak and watery smile. “I’m--I’m sorry, too, okay?” He opened his mouth to speak, maybe to object. “How about let’s start from here.” He closed his eyes and nodded, still cupping her face. She tapped him on the chest lightly, causing him to meet her eyes. “Don’t screw up anymore,” she said as fiercely as she could, not bothering to try a glare. Her heart wasn’t in it just now.

“I--Thank you,” he croaked. She nodded sharply at him. “Thank you,” he whispered again, dropping his hands and stepping back.

She tilted her head and smiled, not moving as Myles turned and made his way up the path toward the small house where Sherman and Ashley lay sleeping.

“You, Tracey West-Darke, are a truly remarkable woman.” Mik’s ringing baritone took her by surprise, causing the bottom to drop out of her stomach. “Don’t you say anything or I’ll bite you!” he growled.

“You scared the red out of my hair, Mik Montgomery!” she yelped. “What are you doing lurking around?”

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“Get over here and scratch my neck or I’m gonna dig up your flower bed and get fleas in your carpet,” Mik threatened.

Tracey’s laugh peeled out, washing the tight emotions free. “You better watch it or I’ll chain you up out back and braid your tail!” she shot back, moving forward to embrace Mik in gratitude.

“That was *good*,” he snickered, walking beside her toward the back porch.

“Yeah?” she glanced over at him. “I think ‘em up at night when I can’t sleep.”

Mik chuckled, warming her with his regard. “I just bet you do, young lady, I just bet you do.”

*Cave above Talking Rock Creek
Talking Rock, GA*

Tayler limped to the edge of the gorge looking down on the rushing water of Talking Rock Creek. Tipping his head back, he howled mournfully, releasing the cacophony of emotions twisting and turning and squeezing his heart. He listened to the musical echoes of his voice as it reverberated off of the sheer rock walls of the cliff that dropped down to the water.

Rafe’s low, desolate song joined with the resonance of his own, the babbling and rushing water a backbeat. Tayler turned, nuzzling into Rafe, grateful when he nuzzled back, comforting him.

Rafe’s thick coat was glossy and straight, beautiful to Tayler as he buried his face against it. His own pelt was fluffy and thick, but every bit as black and it made him feel closer to Rafe, like they looked more like brothers when they were in wolf form. Tav joined them, his deeper chorus following Rafe’s, fusing with the night sounds, pulling them together in a single, doleful melody.

Where Marc had tan in his ebony coat when he transformed, Tav was jet black as Rafe and Tayler in full wolf, his hair wavier than Rafe’s and straighter than Tayler’s. They all looked like family together and it warmed Tayler’s heart.

He was grateful, too, that Serena and Victoria had stayed over with friends tonight. He liked Tav and Tracey’s twin girls, though they fussed over him, but he needed quieter, calmer company tonight.

“You okay, *hermanito*?” Rafe yipped, supporting Tayler as he leaned.

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Rafe had told him that the word meant little brother in Spanish, and it warmed Tayler all the way through. He liked when Rafe called him that.

“Um, hmm,” he mumbled, pretty sure that Rafe would buy it, equally sure that Tav would not. Dads were different, and Tav was a dad.

“Whole lot of emotion in the air today,” Tav observed, giving Tayler a lick on his snout. “All that on top of traveling...I know you’re worn out. How’re you feeling about Ashley and Sherman thinking you were dead?”

Tayler nuzzled Tav back, dropping down to his belly, his muzzle between his paws as he looked out into the inky night, sorting through his feelings. Rafe dropped down next to him, supporting him, as always, though silently for now.

Tayler took a deep breath, and decided full disclosure was called for. “I feel sad, and sorry—for those families, I want to help ‘em. For those kids, cuz it’s all over. For Ashley and Sherman, because they tried so hard...and I want to bite Sherman’s awful wife for not loving him right and making him sad...” He breathed deep, scratching at his nose. “And then there’s Myles, Jacob, Aunt Tracey, Christopher...I want to help ‘em all, make ‘em feel better.” He sighed heavily, knowing it was hopeless.

“Shh, son,” Tav nuzzled through the thick fur at his ruff, soothing and offering comfort. “You did help everyone that you could, just by being here. You reassured Ashley and Sherman, even Myles and Jacob. We all take strength from having you around, Aunt Tracey, too. It would mean a lot to know you’re taking strength from those of us who have it to offer, okay?”

“Yeah,” Rafe nipped at his ear and then licked it. “What he said, *jefe*.”

Tayler could hear the smile in Rafe’s voice, even though he referred to him as *boss*. Rafe called him that as often as *little brother* and Tayler knew it was said with affection. Sometimes though, he didn’t want to be thought of as a boss, not in any way. But Marc and Gandad Mik said that was what being an alpha was, and he was one of them.

Tayler smiled back at Rafe. “I’m tired,” he admitted, wagging his tail at both of them, so they wouldn’t worry. “Can we go home now?”

Tav and Rafe rose easily to their feet, both of them helping him to rise. He tried to ignore the quivering in his flanks as he turned and followed them back toward the big house.

Nothing more was said after Tav wished them goodnight. Rafe quietly helped Tayler dress, his burnt black skin stark against Tayler’s dusky, light coffee-colored flesh.

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But their differences faded away as Rafe lifted him carefully and settled him in bed, climbing in next to him, a healthy wolf protecting his leader.

Not all Alphas were physically strong; they were simply stronger in many ways than everyone else. Rafe's love and devotion was a constant reminder to Tayler that his heart was strong, even if his body was weak.

"I'm here for you, little brother," Rafe mumbled. "Always."

Tayler scooted back against him, cuddling, and drifted off to sleep, safe and loved.

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Chapter Fifteen

*Sometime home of Myles Brooks-Montgomery
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Ashley heard Myles come in, moving about, probably checking on Sherman before he came to check on her. She knew that he'd slip back into the other room if she let him, not wanting to impose. There was so much unsaid between them. Maybe it was finally time to change all that.

"Myles?" she murmured, knowing he could hear her.

He moved toward her and she pulled the covers back, making room for him beside her. "Princess..." he began. She could tell he'd been upset.

"Come lay down with me, Myles. We've been apart enough." She remembered vaguely what she'd said to Sherman when he left her at her apartment in Tampa a few days ago. It was certainly time to address that.

Myles had showered before he'd made his rounds, Ashley could smell the soap. Her eyes traveled over his bare torso, taking in his muscular chest, silky thick hair covering his pecs and arrowing down over his abdomen, disappearing under the waist of his snug-fitting sweat pants.

It seemed like minutes that she'd be staring at him, but she knew it hadn't been anywhere near that long. Still, she felt her face flush when she looked up at him, moved, as she had always been, by the thought that he was hers and she was his.

Ashley looked down at her hands. Hers. His. So many years wasted. So much loss.

"Princess?" Myles moved carefully over to her, sliding onto the bed to sit facing her. Pushing a hand into her thick curtain of hair, he stroked her cheekbone, the top of her ear. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

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"We've wasted so much time, Myles. So much...Do you love me?" Her voice broke in desperation, and she knew that's what it was. Desperation. Ashley knew Myles loved her, had always known that. What had happened between them...they had to work it out, they *had* to.

"Of course I love you, Princess, you *must* know that." He scooted closer to her, his manner intent, earnest.

Ashley leaned against him, not really wanting to look at his face while she told him the things in her heart—things she should have told him so long ago.

"I knew you loved me, Myles, and I knew you had...urges." Myles cleared his throat, but didn't say anything. Ashley was grateful for that, forcing herself to keep on talking. "This...all this time, I had urges, too, but I knew I was young. Still, I was mature, wasn't I?" He opened his mouth to speak and she tapped his chest. "Don't answer, I'm just telling you what I was thinking right now."

Myles cleared his throat. "Um, you'll tell me when I *should* answer, yeah?"

"Oh, sure," she agreed, forging ahead before she lost her nerve. "So there I was, getting kinda mad that you were having sex with *other* women when you were supposed to be *my* mate!" Myles shifted uneasily, his face flushing a deep pink. Ashley sighed. "I know I was like seventeen or something, but still, I was only human...and very hormonal. And before you say anything, I *know* men have needs. Women have needs, too." Myles sighed gustily. "Yeah," Ashley went on sheepishly, "Even seventeen-year-old virgins have needs—and raging hormones, and romantic daydreams that get more...detailed, every single time." She huffed a little snort. "Okay, you can speak now...for a second," she decreed.

"I don't want to try to defend my actions, Princess," Myles started. Another snort proclaimed Ashley's disbelief. "Well, not much...But you..." he ducked his head in what could only be described as embarrassed, boyish cuteness, Ashley was sure. If he didn't get on with it, she would probably jump him before he explained himself.

"Myles?" she encouraged, nudging his chest with her shoulder before snuggling back in.

He blew out a frustrated breath. "Princess...you were *hot*," he growled. Ashley arched a brow. "When you were twelve, eleven—it was easy. You were a child." He pulled back and looked down at her, his eyes blazing. "Suddenly, blimey! I woke up on your thirteenth birthday and you were...there were Bristols everywhere," he cupped his hands in the universal sign for large breasts. "I wanted you so bad, Princess...and you were so bleedin' young..." He groaned. "I guess I just trained myself a little too well to

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keep my hands off you,” he mumbled ruefully, no doubt reliving the scene that had defined the last five years of their lives.

Ashley leaned heavily against him. “You really hurt me, Myles,” she said quietly.

She felt Myles nod behind her. “I really hurt us both, Princess. Did I...was it permanent?” he asked carefully.

Tilting her head back to look up at him, Ashley considered carefully before she answered. This was important. She had to be totally honest with him.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t think so...” she started. Myles stayed tense, holding her, looking down. “I mean,” she struggled to explain. “I trust you in a lot of ways. And I still love you—I always have loved you.” She looked into his eyes. He nodded, knowing there was more. “I’m hurt Myles. A lot of different kinds of hurt, I guess. I didn’t know—*don’t* know—how bad, really. Sometimes right now, I don’t even know what I’m doing, what’s going on. You’re the most solid thing, the most real, you and Sherman...but I’m...and then, what are we going to do about Sherman?”

Myles smiled almost indulgently before his expression evened out to thoughtful. “I know you’re hurt—blown off course. I’m going to help you. I’m going to help you and Sherman both, in every way that I can,” he assured her, not looking away. “I want you to trust me again, to let me be your mate, your family, your husband, after all this time.”

“I want that, too, Myles, as best as we can. I...” she bit her lip, forcing herself to go on. “I’m not right. I know it. I want us to work, but I don’t know...”

“Princess,” he murmured, leaning in to plant a kiss on her nose. “One day at a time, hmm? We have to start somewhere. I’m very pleased to take it slowly, to accept whatever you have to give, all right?”

“Uh,” she shifted uneasily. “About Sherman?” He nodded. “We’re not talking some weird sex thing are we? Because you know...” Myles threw back his head and laughed out loud, causing Ashley to chuckle lightly. “Well, I mean...he’s a real good-looking guy and all. And...”

Myles brought himself under control after a little more laughter. “Princess, my princess. Only you,” he snickered. “No, I’m not interested in men at all, sexually speaking,” he winked. “But Sherman...he’s become mine, in a way. My family—a son, a brother, nephew, I don’t know. Part of my pack, like you...only not just like you.” He huffed impatiently. “What I’m saying is, I’m going to take care of him, make him better, get him help, like with you. Only, I want to hold you, make love with you, sleep with you in my arms. Him...a hug should do it—not a leg over.”

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Ashley turned in his arms, facing him. Hands on his chest, she began pushing steadily against him with serious intent. Finally, she had him flat on his back.

“I’m interested in the making love right now. Think we can start there?” She leaned over him, shimmying up a little. “That’s something I have to give right now.”

Myles looked up at her, his smile blooming slow and sexy across the angular planes of his face.

One delicate hand trailed down his cheek, tickling his throat, over his collarbone, until he felt her teasing fingertips at his nipple. Myles caught his breath with a groan.

Ashley’s expression became sweetly naughty as she lightly raked a fingernail back and forth across his tight little nub.

“Oh, god, Princess,” he groaned, his hips flexing up involuntarily. A thought occurred to him and he caught her shoulders in his hands, holding her still. “You seem to know exactly...” he swallowed, hating the thought. Where had she learned how to tease like that?

“Don’t worry, Myles,” she cooed sweetly. “I’ve only ever wanted to do things to you...lots of things.” Her loving smile turned a little bit wicked. “Now it’s time for you to help me live out all of those fantasies I told you I was having back when I was seventeen...”

Myles rolled his eyes in mock fear. “Remember, I’m well past seventeen, Princess...” The age difference had never really bothered her before. After all they’d been through he wasn’t going to let it become a *real* issue now. They had enough of those already.

“Thank heavens for werewolf stamina, then,” Ashley purred, leaning down to nip and mouth her way across his clavicle and down, taking his other nipple between her teeth.

Myles arched under her again, coming out of the semi-stupor her boldness had caused. Rolling, he brought her under him, dislodging her mouth from his aching nipple. Flashing her wicked grin of his own, Myles skimmed up her body, pushing the light t-shirt she wore, one of his, up and over her head, baring her to him.

She was so beautiful to him. With an uncontrollable growl-groan, he covered her mouth with his, her lips warm satin under his hungry onslaught.

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“This is *exactly* how I fanaticized,” she breathed against his mouth, her arms slipping around his shoulders, hands clutching at his back as she arched into him. She pulled back again, breaking the kiss. “Except...”

With a grunting heave, she pushed against him. Startled, he allowed it, collapsing onto his back once again. She rose above him, a brow arched as she hooked her fingertips in the waist of his pants.

He chuckled lightly, lifting his hips in answer. Edging back, her full, beautifully firm breasts bouncing as she moved, Ashley pulled the sweatpants down and off.

“Now...where was I?” she murmured. Myles hoped the question was rhetorical.

Situated between his legs, she leaned above him, finding his ear and mouthing his sensitive lobe. Moving to the tender place below, her tongue trailed along the curve of his jaw, blunt teeth nipping at his throat until her busy mouth found his shoulder.

From there, her nipping mouth blazed a moist trail to his sensitive, aching nipple.

“Ahh, yes,” she murmured, “this is where I was.”

Her tongue swirled around the little point before she bit at it gently, soothing it with her warm and clever tongue.

Myles’ hips flexed up, heat flashing through him, as one hand made its tortuous way down, wrapping around his straining erection. Feather light, her fine fingers stroked up and down his throbbing cock as she moved back and forth, from one nipple to the other.

After endless, delicious torment, and without slowing her lightly taunting strokes, Ashley kissed down the tight muscles of his stomach and then over. Following the slightly prominent edge of his hipbone, she nipped and nibbled her way down, obviously delighting in the havoc she was wreaking on his control.

After sensually torturing him that way for longer than he’d ever thought he could stand it, she kissed her way down his leg. He couldn’t contain his strangled moans as she tugged at the short hair of his thigh, sucked lightly at the inside of his knee, and then switched legs.

Moving to his left ankle, she sucked at the round joint there, rubbing her face in the soft hair covering his shin. As satin lips made their way up the bulge of his calf, then to his knee, Myles gave in.

“Please, Princess, please,” he begged, reaching for her, his hand grazing her shoulder before she jerked away.

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“Uh, uh,” she denied, not even looking up at him before resuming her sensuous persecution. Kissing over the heavy muscles of his thigh, she found the crease between hip and groin, and ran her tongue along it, still stroking him firmly, lightly.

Myles strained upward into her hand, desperate for friction, needing the pressure, only to be denied as she deliberately loosened her already slack hold, her teasing glide almost a tickle now.

Landing one hand on his shifting hip, Ashley bent over his cock, her long dark hair teasing the sensitive nerves begging to be touched. She paused, one fingertip gently tracing the flared head, finding the first slippery drops of pre-come and carrying them to her mouth. He couldn’t contain a strangled moan at her innocent, wanton actions, his weeping cock a testament to how hungry he was for her.

With a Mona Lisa smile, she lowered her head over him. Myles thought he would burst on the spot. Her mouth felt warm around his taut length, and her wandering tongue sliding up and around, gliding down, wrapping its wet heat around him. He was shaking, trying to hang on.

“Princess...Ashley,” he ground out. “You...I...” his tone was rough gravel, he wouldn’t last much longer.

She played with his balls, cuddling them in her small palm, squeezing gently as her lips and tongue blazed incessantly over his needy length. She tangled her fingers in the thick curls at the base of his hard-on, tugging upward along the heated shaft as she licked and suckled his slit.

She was relentless, stroking, licking, sucking; he would explode any minute now unless he stopped her. Finally, seconds from his breaking point he caught her shoulders, pulling her up, her wet lips dragging satin heat along his thigh, telling him how very ready she was for him.

His hands slid down to cup her buttocks, pulling her firmly against his body, a fingertip slipping forward, sinking into the satiny center of her and out.

“Are you ready for me, Princess?” he managed, his voice thick and husky with need.

“Uh, huh,” she squeaked, attempting to spread her legs, to open for him.

He pulled back, shifting slightly, his hungry length nudging at her opening. Nipping at the mate-marks on her shoulder, he groaned, gathering her up, and with a grunt, he surged forward, hilding deep inside her tight, wet heat.

“Mine,” he growled, pulling out, plunging in again, mouthing and then biting at her shoulder. “Mine,” he rumbled again, closing his teeth over the evidence of his claim,

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not breaking the skin, but holding her there as he pumped into her. Her legs wrapped around his waist as she held on, mewling against him as she attempted to meet every thrust.

Explosion was imminent, fire and hunger built in him taking him higher, taking her with him as he felt her body tighten around him.

“Myles!” she choked, gripping him tightly, nails digging deep as she clutched at him, her body quaking.

“Mine!” he roared, his head snapping back as his climax rolled over him like a seismic wave.

Ashley’s sheath tightened impossibly around him, her entire body convulsing, clamping down hard as she answered his roar of completion with a strangled cry, her juices gushing over him, mingling with his own.

The echo of their cries seemed to ring in the silent house as the two collapsed boneless onto the mattress. Legs tangled, both panting, Myles continued to lick at Ashley’s shoulder, working hard at trying to breathe normally again.

A noise caught his attention mingling with their muted gasping, and Myles struggled to identify the rhythmic sound. Turning his head, his eyes locked on Ashley’s—she’d heard it, too.

His forehead wrinkled as he tried to place it. Ashley’s body shaking in his arms as she snickered drew his attention back to her.

“That’s Sherman,” she giggled. “Isn’t it great that he snores?”

Myles flopped back on the bed, laughing, and pulled her firmly against his chest. “It’s jolly good,” he chuckled, holding her close. “Smashing, in fact,” he grinned.

He could still feel the smile on his face as he drifted to sleep with Ashley in his arms. Sometimes things did go his way. Absolutely jammy, this was...yes, absolutely.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Sixteen

*Don's Bar
West End Area
Atlanta, GA*

Don's Bar was nondescript, unless seedy could be called a decorating theme. There were two pool tables in the back and that was as far as the establishment went toward catering to proactive entertainment. When a man came to Don's, he either needed a drink or he needed to talk to someone. Whichever reason sent him there, everyone knew to keep it down. Women didn't go there at all. Ever.

Loud noises were not encouraged—even the pool games managed to remain muted. It wasn't the place to go for a good time. It *was* the perfect place to meet with men who could be paid to kill.

Jack was pretty sure he would have been taken seriously at Don's in his own right. He wasn't a nice man, he didn't pretend to be. He'd done a dime, nearly two, federal. He was as hard as anyone there. With Becker at his side, he was guaranteed respect.

Sipping at his drink and trying not to look around, Jack realized that it had never occurred to him to wonder if this or that guy was a werewolf. It still didn't matter. For all he knew, Becker was. His eyes turned a little funny sometimes.

"Something tickle you?" Becker grunted—a response to Jack's unconscious snort.

Dangerous ground again. Jack carefully slid his glance to Becker's face and away. He hoped he got this one right. Becker wouldn't kill him in public...but Don's wasn't really all that public.

"Just crossed my mind..." he paused, noting Becker's interested focus. "I wouldn't know if you were a werewolf or something."

He risked a full-on glance at the big man, sucking down his cheap whisky, relieved when Becker knocked his back and then looked at the bartender. Two shot

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glasses running over with whiskey landed on the table in front of them. The bartender was back behind the counter before Becker could look at him a second time.

“Nope,” the big man rumbled, watching Jack. “‘F I was, I’da marked you by now.”

With no idea how to respond to that, Jack gave a jerky nod.

By the time they’d finished their second drink, Becker had inclined his head three times. Jack had carefully avoided catching the eye of any of the men Becker had apparently been nodding at. He knew they’d turn up at Becker’s house later.

*Sometime home of Myles Brooks-Montgomery
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“What’s wrong, Sherman?” Myles asked him, stroking a hand through the unruly curls that Sherman would have shaved off ten times over up until now. A chair scraped back as the other man sat down.

Sherman turned his head, pretending to look out the kitchen window. He could barely see it from where he sat at the little dinette set. Myles wouldn’t let him get away with that, though, a palm on his cheek turning Sherman back to face him.

“Werewolves are really physical, hmm?” Sherman asked, more to divert Myles than anything else.

“As it happens, yeah,” Myles confirmed. “Like dogs, I told you, or wolves. Very physical, very affectionate with their family—their pack.” He patted Sherman’s cheek and stroked a splayed hand through his curls again. “I like these, don’t use any goop on ‘em, okay, ducks? You know—you’re a member of my pack now.”

Before his sojourn in the Philippines, Sherman might have been uneasy about being handled so much, so much familiarity. Objectively, he doubted it. Aside from Ashley and Bernadette, the odd handshake from Marc or hug from Tayler, he hadn’t been really touched in years; the hysterical clinging of a week ago just didn’t count. This was the touch of someone who simply cared about him.

Lilith certainly didn’t touch him like this, or at all if she could avoid it. It had been four years since they’d been married. Four years since their wedding night. They

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hadn't made love ten times since then. Well, he'd been making love, and it seemed, he'd also been getting screwed.

"Family?" Sherman said now, a rush of tears prickling at the back of his eyes. "My parents died when I was in college...car wreck. I was an only child. Lilith...didn't really want family."

"Family," Myles repeated, pulling Sherman's forehead to his shoulder in a brief hug. He had pulled his chair around the little table so that he sat directly in front of Sherman, facing him.

"Why..." Sherman swallowed, cleared his throat, tried again. "Why would you want me in your family?"

Myles tilted Sherman's chin up to make eye contact. Ashley's husband was only about ten years older than he was, but he felt like a child looking into those knowing brown eyes.

"You're a good man, Sherman Landon. Smart, a natural leader, a guy who isn't afraid to risk his life to protect his friends and to help people who need it. Why wouldn't I want you in my pack?"

Sherman stared into that mesmerizing gaze, trying hard to believe what Myles was telling him.

"Why indeed?" a deep voice rang from the kitchen door. "You're a welcome addition to the Montgomery-Livingston pack."

Sherman had turned to look, anxious—even nervous to see who was coming in the back door. His grip on Myles tightened and before he knew it, he was practically in Ashley's old man's lap. A giant talking dog was holding the door open for a red-headed guy who lifted a hand to wave as he entered.

"I..." Sherman was afraid to look away. "Myles, I don't feel good. I'm seeing...Good God that dog is big!"

"A wolf, son," the dog said, holding a giant paw out to Sherman. "Mik Montgomery. I add my thanks to everyone else's for trying to keep Ashley safe."

"It's okay, Sherman," Myles soothed, stroking his hair again. It *did* make Sherman feel calmer, even if he would never say that out loud. "This is my da. Remember I told you about the gene-splicing?" Sherman nodded, looking between the dog and Myles. He gingerly took the paw and gave it a quick shake.

"I don't, um, I don't really see a family resemblance, Myles," Sherman said carefully, testing the waters to see what could possibly happen next.

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Myles cleared his throat and Sherman watched as his eyes went a little pale and his hair and teeth began to grow the way they had the day before.

“Don’t let him fool ya,” the guy with the dark red hair moved forward and offered his hand. “Myles was adopted. He’s not going to look that much like Mik. Me?” His light green eyes flashed and his teeth and hair grew as Myles’ had. “I’m related by marriage. Yancey Livingston.”

Sherman shook the man’s hand, more than a little relieved that he wasn’t slipping any further away from reality than he already had. His time in the cave, running out of food, so little drinkable water, the bodies starting to break down, to decompose, all that crying, shrieking, babbling... He felt something shift in his mind and then he was back there. So dark, so afraid, where was Ashley?

“Sherman? Pet?” Myles was tapping his cheek lightly.

“Um, um, where’s Ash?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“She’s with her Mum, and I’m here with you, all right?” Myles sounded calm, even. Solid. Sherman nodded, looking around again.

Everything was back, Myles was here, the big dog had a paw on his knee. The red-headed guy was moving around the kitchen, running water. “Yancey,” he said aloud, and then looked at the dog. “Um, not a dog. Mik Montgomery. Myles’ dad...”

That toothsome doggie smile was a little disturbing, but Sherman tried to smile back. Remembering a bunch of names was a simple thing, but he felt like he’d passed a college exam or something.

The smell of coffee filled the air and Yancey pulled a wide bench up beside the third chair. Now Mik, Yancey, Myles and Sherman all sat at the small kitchen table.

“I brought the paperwork we talked about, Myles,” Yancey said carefully. He looked at Sherman and back to Myles. There were obviously things not being said.

Mik glanced over his shoulder as Jacob slipped quietly into the kitchen, automatically pouring five cups of coffee without being asked. He patted Mik’s shoulder and faded back to the sink where he started another pot of coffee.

“Sherman,” Myles squeezed the blue-eyed man’s wrist, turning toward him. Mik was sure he’d never seen such vibrant blue eyes in his life. Tracey’s were as blue as a summer sky and quite lovely, Philly’s were starbursts, very pretty, but these almost didn’t seem real they were so vivid.

J.J. Massa

“Uh, yeah, I’m okay Myles,” Sherman smiled at Myles, sipping the steaming coffee.

“Ta ducks, but I wanted to ask you summat,” Myles stopped, rolled his eyes, “...wanted to ask you *something*,” he corrected himself

“I like when you talk all English,” Sherman grinned. “Ask away.”

Mik knew that Myles’ accent broadened, became courser when he was especially uncomfortable. In fact, over the last seventeen years, it had only happened once or twice. Although lately, Myles did seem more British than usual—probably because of all the strain he was under. Still, Mik agreed with Sherman, he liked it, too.

“When you dropped Ashley off and all, when you went over to see Lilith—what had you planned?” The question was cumbersome, general even, but Sherman’s brow wrinkled as he considered it. “You okay to answer that?”

Sherman shrugged, looking from one face to the next, his gaze resting on Mik’s for a second and then locking with Jacob’s who was standing a few feet away, in the doorframe.

“I wanted to get clean and then get a nap. I psyched myself up...” he closed his eyes briefly and then turned to look at Myles. “I was going to see Lilith, tell her what had happened and try to reconcile with her. If she refused to take me seriously, I was going to file for a divorce and then go see a psychiatrist or a psychologist.” He looked down at the table, tracing the edge of his coffee mug. “I was going to do it exactly in that order. I knew I couldn’t live...Lilith’s behavior...she didn’t care, she said she did but...it was making me crazy, Myles,” he confessed in a husky whisper.

Myles’ hand slid up and gripped Sherman’s, releasing it after a quick squeeze. Mik glanced over at Jacob and winked. The seer had called it—well, he’d trusted Myles, and so far, had been right on.

“Sherman, Yancey’s a lawyer,” Myles informed him, angling his head toward Yancey. Yancey nodded with a friendly little smile. “I asked him to draw up some papers for you, just in case...” Yancey held up the manila envelope to show Sherman. “Of course you don’t have to sign anything if you’re not sure,” Myles rushed. “But if you *do* choose to file for divorce, Yancey and I will go file the complaint, and I’ll go bring the paperwork to her. Or go with the sheriff if need be.”

“You’d *do* that?” Sherman looked from Yancey to Myles. “But...she’s a werewolf, Myles,” his face flamed, looking at Mik and back at Myles. “Well, but she’s a real bitch, too.”

“Don’t worry, pet,” Myles smiled coldly. “Sometimes, I’m pretty rude myself.”

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

J.J. Massa

Chapter Seventeen

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“Remember when we used to play Barbies out here? The rain pouring down around us, giggling about Myles and Yancey and pretending our Ken and Steve dolls were them?” Ashley had tensed up noticeably when Philly mentioned rain, but she did laugh a little remembering their doll play. “We were so safe in our own little world on the back porch, huh?” Philly went on, twining their fingers together.

“I wish we could have stayed on the back porch all the time...I mean, instead of growing up.” Ashley’s voice was tight, but the smell of fear had receded some.

“We-ell,” Philly grinned, elbowing Ashley. She would treat Ashley just the same as always, she decided. “You couldn’t have hot make-up sex with Myles last night if you lived your whole life on the back porch, now could you?” Ashley’s breath had caught and if Philly could see her, she knew she’d see the red blush creeping up her face. “Come on! I can smell it all over you!” Philly chortled.

“Philomela Livingston!” Ashley snapped. With relief, Philly noticed the laughter in her voice. “Do you remember the difference between Werewolf conversations and Human conversations?” she lectured mock-sterly. “We don’t talk about smell unless it’s a nice new perfume...”

Philly giggled and leaned her head on Ashley’s shoulder. She’d really missed them being together this way. Their friendship had been so easy, so solid.

“Okay, so I’m bad. Now *give!*” Philly insisted, smiling as she heard a movement by the door. “Did you talk to your mom already?”

“I did,” Ashley said softly. “Mom and Myles had a talk last night, too. I guess we’re all really working together to get our lives back. I really feel like Myles and I have a chance now. We wasted so many years, Phil,” Ashley sighed.

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“You had to go through it, Ash. It’s how we learn what’s important, huh?”

“I guess,” Ashley agreed reluctantly. “But I don’t want to learn anymore right now. I just want to rest.”

Philly reached out with her foot and nudged the glider into a little sway. “When I first went blind, I was just... stunned. Then, after awhile, I learned to take it slow. I found out that if I did, I’d realize a lot of things I’d missed before.” Philly leaned back a little, trying to find the right words. “I wouldn’t sign up for what happened to me, Ash. That’s the truth...but I like me a lot better now. I like who I am now that I’ve gotten through all that hard stuff. I like the people in my life and I like what I know about them now that I’ve taken the time to learn. I guess... I just like knowing who I can count on and also, that I can get through the hard stuff and have good things after. I can count on myself...” She sighed, shaking her head. “Did any of that make sense or...did it sound like a reject from *Chicken Soup for the Confused Person’s Soul*?”

Ashley leaned in and gave her friend a watery kiss on the cheek. “It made sense, Philly. You’re telling me that, even though I’m lost in a house of mirrors, I know who to call to lead me along. At the end, I’m gonna feel good about having made it, and know more about me and them, too.”

“Uh...I said all *that*?” Philly deadpanned

“Yup, so don’t say anything else, or I’ll get all turned around,” Ashley teased. She reached out and gave the glider a push with her toe.

Philly smiled. Ashley would get through this...no matter what.

“Aunt Tracey!” Kameron wrapped his long arms around his diminutive aunt and twirled her through the kitchen.

“Kameron Montgomery, you put me down!” Tracey groused, face red, though she was laughing uncontrollably.

“I just can’t help it, Aunt Tracey,” Kameron kissed her cheek soundly. “Red hair, blue eyes...you’re the perfect woman. I’m just gonna put you in my pocket and take off with you.”

Tracey rolled her eyes at her tall and handsome nephew, Riker’s son. He looked more like Lakon than Riker with his blond hair and green eyes, though his father was Lakon’s twin and Kameron himself was a twin.

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“Go find yourself a redhead who’ll put up with you, young man, and quit swinging me around the kitchen,” Tracey growled.

“Ahh, Aunt Tracey, there’s nobody...” his voice cracked and wavered, and Tracey knew their little game was over. Tinka, Kameron’s mate, had died just over a year ago during his birth. It was obvious that everything had just come rushing back. There was a lot of hurt going around.

She hugged the giant, muscular young man and ruffled his hair like she had when he was the five-year-old she’d first met. “How’s Tinker?” she asked after giving him a few minutes of hiding his face in her hair and regrouping.

Kameron pulled back, the proud light of fatherhood brightening his eyes. “He’s perfect, Aunt Tracey. So smart, so cute. He’s got his mother’s eyes...” he swallowed and went on. “He can already growl!”

Tracey laughed, glancing out the window at Ashley and Philly on the back porch glider. “It’s funny the things they do that make us proud, isn’t it?”

“There’s something about holding your own flesh and blood in your arms,” Kameron looked at her with moist eyes. “There’s just nothing as big as that, huh?”

Kameron had proved to be an excellent father and Tracey was vastly proud of him. But she didn’t want him to become elitist—even about something as special as being a parent.

“We all have a destiny of sorts,” she looked over at Philly. The daughter of her heart. There was just so much love in that little girl. She might never have children, but she had so much to offer. “I don’t know if there’s anything bigger,” she offered. “I do know that I’m awfully glad I have my children, even in spite of their natural father...and I love all my adopted children, just about as much as Elke does, I’d have to say.”

“I repeat—you are the *perfect* woman,” Kameron stated staunchly, arms folded over his chest. “I won’t even waste my time looking any further.”

Tracey threw him a smile, distracted by the site of Myles emerging from the woods; Sherman, Yancey, Mik, and Jacob close behind. One step ahead of her, Kameron opened the door to the porch and Tracey preceded him out.

She was a little startled when two black wolves, one looking much more scrawny and underfed than the other, rose and stretched in a square of sunlight. She hadn’t known that Rafe and Tayler were out there.

“Tayler-Puppy!” Kameron boomed, lifting the small collection of fluff and bones and nuzzling his face against the sun-warmed fur. Putting him down again, Kameron turned to Rafe, stroking over his smooth pelt. “How’re you doing, buddy?” he asked.

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“It’s all good,” Rafe responded, butting his head against Kameron’s leg. He was pretty large, especially compared to Tayler.

“Hey boys!” Riker and Lakon came around the side of the house, moving up the stairs, Tav joining them from somewhere.

The large home had been added onto over the years though it appeared seamless. It was obvious that Tav’s artistry had a great deal to do with the outcome. After he’d added a bathroom for Ashley, he continued to build. By the time he’d stopped, there was a third storey, with a total of seven bedrooms and four bathrooms—and a small two bedroom apartment in the garage and one over it, including two more bathrooms. Tracey had often teased him that he was building for an army.

In a family like theirs, Tav had reasoned to Tracey, you never knew when you’d need extra space. And although Christopher and Jacob still shared a room when they weren’t on the road, the extra space had certainly come in handy. Add to that, Tracey finally had the kitchen she’d always wanted. The porches, though, while they’d been part of the original house, were easily everyone’s favorite gathering place.

She situated herself on a bench next to Tav, enjoying his arm around her. Myles sat on the floor of the porch at Ashley’s feet while Yancey scooted onto the glider beside Philly. Tracey wasn’t surprised to see Sherman find a spot on the floor close to Myles. Nor did it take her by surprise when Tayler climbed up in Sherman’s lap and let himself be petted.

“Yancey and I are going into town, Princess,” Myles told everyone, never taking his eyes off of Ashley. Sherman was looking at Ashley as well, his piercing blue eyes sad now, fine tremors barely visible in his taut frame. Myles reached over and patted Sherman’s knee. “We’re going to file a divorce complaint on Sherman’s behalf with the superior court, and then we’ll pop in on Lilith and give her a copy.”

Tayler licked Sherman’s hand gently while Mik and Rafe sat near him, lending comfort and support as best they could.

“You think you guys ought to go on your own?” Lakon asked casually. “We really don’t know what the set up over there is.”

“It’s mostly a meet and greet,” Yancey spoke up. “We’re sort of letting her know where Sherman is and how he feels without him having to interact with her.”

“I don’t really feel right letting you guys...” Sherman began, but Riker cut him off.

“Sherman, Yancey is the pack lawyer. He and Myles often file things and deliver difficult news to unpleasant people. It’s their job within our pack,” he explained patiently.

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Sherman looked up, eyes locking with Riker's. "So what's *my* job within the pack?" he asked, pulling no punches.

Riker raised a brow. "The same as all of ours. Use your talents and resources for the good of the pack, and take care of yourself while you do it." He squatted down in front of Sherman, ostensibly to pet Tayler, his large hand cupping the delicate puppy skull. "Everybody does what they're good at. We take turns taking care of each other. Just like you did for Ashley, and she did for you."

Sherman expelled a breath and nodded, both men stroking the soft, silky fur of the pup on Sherman's lap.

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Chapter Eighteen

*Office of Lilith Landon
Landon International
Suite 2A, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

Lilith was having an exceptionally bad day. She hadn't heard from Jack since early the day before and that made her vastly uncomfortable.

Now, the sun had already gone down again, it was getting a bit cold. Of course, the weather wasn't really what was bothering her. It was the complete absence of a warm body in her bed. Not that Jack had actually been in her bed.

That didn't matter. Jack was supposed to be here. He had specifically refused to get her off when she'd demanded it. On top of that, he hadn't been to his apartment in two days.

"Mrs. Landon?" Lilith snarled at the speaker on her desk before tapping the button and responding. She'd hired a half-werewolf secretary because she hadn't wanted a shrinking violet. The woman turned out to be weak and spineless; just hearing her voice sounding hesitant enraged Lilith when she was already in a bad mood.

"What is it, Ginger?" she snapped, not really interested unless it was Jack. She knew instinctively that it wasn't.

"Two gentlemen are here to see you," the secretary's smooth voice floated out of the speaker. "They say it's important personal business."

She'd liked Ginger's melodious voice when she hired her, it was actually soothing when the young half-breed Were didn't sound hesitant and nervous. Besides, she calmed herself, it was important to have black women in visible positions of importance. Ginger's mother was a black woman and her father had been a white Were. Lilith thought briefly of the woman she'd met in Tampa—Bernadette F-something-married-to-a-Were.

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Taking a deep breath, Lilith calmed herself. It was actually a good thing that she made Ginger nervous—after Sherman was gone, she'd place Ginger in a more key role and keep her in line. Yes, fear could be very advantageous. Lilith took a deep breath and pushed the button.

"Do show them in, sweetie," Lilith purred, trying to fake it. "I don't have any appointments scheduled just now."

"She's not in a good mood in case you can't tell," Ginger was warning the men. Lilith's jaw tightened. The impertinent little witch would pay for that. "She has a bit of a temper."

"Ta," one of the men said, a smile in his voice. "We'll be just fine. You go on home now, pet."

How dare he? Who did this man think he was telling her hired help she could go home?

"Take care, Ginger," said another voice, with a more southern accent this time. "Tell your Aunt Maisie we said hello."

Maisie...a reasonably unique name. And she was a werewolf of course. Dr. Maisie Montgomery? Lilith had met her at some charity function or another.

"Thank you, Mr. Montgomery," she heard Ginger's voice receding.

The scent floated in just before the door opened. The men were werewolves. Maybe having the air filtered and keeping the office insulated so well was not the best idea she'd ever had.

Montgomery—no doubt something to do with Sherman's friend then. Lilith held her back ramrod straight, working to keep both anger and fear at bay. These were Weres, of course they'd scent the emotion on her. Less was better, of course.

"How can I help you gentlemen?" she asked pleasantly. "I'm Lilith Landon," she held a hand out.

The darker of the two she recognized as Myles Montgomery, the well known saxophonist.

"Myles Montgomery," he said, stepping into her personal space. She could smell the primal power, like an aphrodisiac. And then she could smell something else...somebody else on him. "I have something for you," Myles said smugly, stepping even closer, so that there wasn't two inches between them. Nothing except the thick manila envelope he held to her chest.

"Sherman," Lilith snarled. "You stink of Sherman!"

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“Odd way to put that, innit?” he murmured, stepping back. “Sherman Landon is a member of my pack. ‘S only natural for pack members to touch, share scent.” Myles leaned into her, his scenting her, nostrils flaring slightly. “Funny. I don’t smell him on you at all.” He turned toward the other man. “This is Yancey Livingston, Sherman’s attorney.”

Lilith blanched. She’d heard of Yancey Livingston about as much as she’d heard of Myles Montgomery and his whole family. The Montgomery-Livingston pack was *huge*.

“Sherman Landon is my husband and the CEO of Landon International, as I’m sure you know. You can expect action to be taken for your forcible removal of a man under duress...” Lilith knew she was grasping at straws, but she’d try just about anything right now.

“Save it, Miz Landon,” Yancey Livingston said coldly. “Don’t put yourself in a position to be defending anything more than a divorce complaint. The local sheriff’s office will be delivering your official document in a few days.”

“Sherman is my family—a member of the Montgomery pack,” Myles growled low, his fangs dropping, face covering with hair. “We take it very personally when a pack-mate is suffering. Sign the papers. Leave him alone. You’ll be better off for it.”

Myles released the folder he’d been holding to her chest. It slithered to the floor as he turned and walked out.

*Home of Jack Aschtholdt
Apt 1404, 5302 Chatham Way
Chatham Suites Apartments
Atlanta, Georgia*

“Where the fuck have you been?” Lilith snarled at Jack when he pushed the door open and dragged himself inside.

“What the hell are you doing here, Lilith?” Jack mumbled tiredly.

He really wasn’t in the mood for her just now. In fact, he’d hoped to crawl into his cool and quiet bed and just mull over everything that had taken place over the last forty hours or so.

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That was obviously a pipe dream now. Lilith was not the kind of woman who mulled, or who allowed anyone else to mull, either.

“What? Who has been all over you?” she shrieked, grabbing Jack by the shirtfront and yanking him closer.

“Stop it, Lilith! What are you doing?” He was becoming alarmed now as she sniffed up and down his body, including his groin, his ass, even his ankles.

“Someone has been fucking you,” she hissed, sniffing her way back up his body.

Jack groaned. He *really* didn’t want to deal with this right now. Not ever, if he was honest about it. “I’m aware of that, Lilith,” he sighed.

“And you’re in pain...and you’ve been bathing in *lilac oil*?” she ended on a high note.

“Did you get what I had for supper?” he asked wryly, his arms crossed over his chest.

Lilith pushed her nose up to his. “Deep fried okra,” she growled. “With too much salt and pepper.”

“I like it that way,” he responded blandly. He’d stumbled into an alternate universe and it looked like he had to live here. He’d just make the most of it...

“So you’ve been gone all this time getting fucked by some guy? While I’ve had to deal with the Montgomery family?” she spat, stomping across the dim room.

Turning the other direction, Jack flicked on the kitchen light and pulled down two glasses. “Drink?” he asked. She narrowed her eyes at him. He went ahead and poured two. “I’ve been out assembling a little team who can go in, scope out what’s going on with Sherman *and* Ashley, and take care of them for us. Getting fucked was just part of the process.”

He sipped his drink, keeping his eyes on her. How would she take this little bit of misinformation? What he was telling her was true...factual, anyhow. She seemed to relax a little, lifting her shot of amber liquid and drinking slowly.

“That’s above and beyond Jack...but,” she sighed gustily. “Well, the Montgomery family has Sherman and they’ve filed paperwork for divorce...he signed it. Any ideas?”

“Yes, of course I have ideas, Lilith,” he answered, impatient. “First, don’t *you* sign anything. It’s going to take the Sheriff’s office at least a week before they deliver your copy.”

“How do you know?” she asked, brow arched.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

"I've been divorced in this state before, and nobody knows more about the legal system than the men trying to escape it, Lilith," he shrugged.

"Okay, so...you still think we can kill Sherman even though he's filed for divorce and living with all those Montgomerys right now?" She didn't look like she expected to be convinced—more like she expected to be amused by his answer.

Jack smirked at her. "Lilith my dear, *we* aren't going to kill him," he shook his head at her.

"Oh no?" she waited.

"Of course not. That would be *wrong*." He adopted an alarmed expression. "But you know who *says* they want to kill him? And they probably want to kill his famous and high profile friends, too..."

She began to smile. "Do tell, Jack, I'm riveted."

He leaned close to her. "Well...there's this group, lots of groups really, but this one—you know the one? We've gotten all kinds of terrible letters from them—that's why you hired a criminal, Lilith, to help you understand and stop it," he interrupted one explanation with another. "It's hard to tell if this is an organized group or just a couple of angry Americans who think big business needs to mind it's own business and let other countries take care of themselves...But we'll keep investigating in-house for now."

Lilith stared at him unblinking for a full minute. Suddenly, she pounced, knocking him flat on the couch and sending his drink flying.

His *oomph* of pain was lost in her enthusiastic kisses as she rubbed, squirmed, sucked and nipped at every part of him that she could reach. Every part of him that Becker had had his very special way with not twenty-four hours before. It had always been Jack's experience that the second day was by far the worst.

"Ohhh, Jaaack," Lilith oozed. "You're hurting. Let me see to you. I'll take care of you until you feel better. I love your mind. Let me take care of your body until you feel better."

She quickly pulled herself off of Jack and supported him back to his room, efficiently stripping him and helping him crawl under the covers. Fluffing up his pillows, Lilith bustled back down the hall to get him another drink.

Jack stared after her, oddly disconcerted. She'd all but repeated the words Becker had said to him that very morning. How eerie. Jack shivered and accepted the glass of fine whiskey. If she wanted to cater to him, he'd take it, no problem. What an odd world.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Nineteen

*Future home of SunTrust Mini Tower
Fifth floor frame
Secure Building site
5299 Chatham Way*

In the unlit darkness, Becker watched the wolf-woman pass back and forth in front of Jackie's fourth floor window. He didn't need binoculars to see what was happening. His distance vision was excellent.

He really didn't need to hear what was said. He could have if he strained—Jackie liked the windows open. He'd been locked up a long time. His Jackie. So smart. Too smart to be left alone.

Becker wasn't a wolf-man, he'd told the truth before when Jack had asked. He wasn't a cat-man, not a vampire, not anything so much as a little part nice and a big part bad. When he was good, he was so sweet. But when the bad rose up in him, he had to use it on someone. Having pets helped—pets like Jackie.

Becker didn't mind the woman being around his babe. Jackie had a dick. He needed to put it somewhere. After all, Jack wasn't gay—he didn't put his dick in guys. What he *was*, was his. Property of Hail Becker.

When the wolf-woman pushed Jack over, Becker did get pissed off. Some things were allowed, some things weren't. Nobody marked his babe, and nobody made him sing like Becker did. He watched intently.

She was sorry—that was fine. Jackie would probably be fine then. Becker would make his way back to his own little den—his lair. He kept the top part pretty for his pets, for Jackie when he came. He kept it pretty for after he took them downstairs and showed them what he really was. That wasn't pretty at all.

Tomorrow, one of his pets would go to Jackie's new job and bring the letters, letters written all over the state, threatening Sherman and his cohorts. The wolf-woman

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was right, he heard her say that Jack was very smart. His plan covered just about everything.

Becker himself would accompany another pet to see the people that Jack wanted dead. He'd get an idea about the set up. From what Jack had told him during the long years they'd been in prison together, this was the very same place that Jack had been caught and put into federal prison.

It was also the place where Jackie's sons were. Becker wanted to know more.

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

"Bint was scared, she couldn't hide that," Myles murmured to his brothers. Part of him wanted Marc and T Paul here as well, but he had a feeling it wasn't going to be pretty. Maybe it was best not to have too many family members around.

"I think we should call Marc and T Paul," Yancey shocked him, repeating his thoughts aloud.

"Why's that, Yance?" Tav had been strangely quiet ever since Ashley had come back. Conflicted possibly, unless Myles missed his guess.

"Stop it," Jacob murmured low, arching a brow at him. "You worry about them. Dad'll be fine."

Myles knew that he was the only one who'd heard what Jacob whispered in his ear, and he almost wanted to laugh. To have his brother-in-law go from hating him to directing his love and concern...it was bizarre, absolutely bizarre.

He glanced over at Ashley, leaning on Tracey as the two chatted quietly with Philly. Then there was Sherman, who, along with Kameron and Kaden, was tossing a ball around for Tayler, and Tav and Tracey's twins, all three in wolf form. Myles suspected that Tayler felt better in wolf form, but he didn't know. Either way, Rafe sat nearby, quietly sketching the three pups as they played.

Getting Sherman and Ashley outdoors to enjoy the mild night had been difficult to put it mildly. Ashley had fretted about the dark, shaking and shuddering before she broke down in tears. He'd coaxed her out to the porch with assurances that her mother and Philly would be there and she could stay on the steps so that she was still close to the

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door if she wanted to go inside again. He also promised that he would stay where she could see him at all times.

Sherman had been a different kettle of fish altogether. Standing next to Myles, he'd looked out the window and quietly drifted away to whatever hell he lived in when reminded of his last adventure. It had taken Myles half an hour after clearing the house of people, Were and otherwise, before he'd been able to coax Sherman back from the edge mentally and talk to him about stars, trees, and breezes.

Every minute or two, those intense blue eyes flicked to Ashley and then fixed on him before Sherman turned back to the conversation and the pups. Ashley had been only too willing to hover outside the kitchen door on the porch with her mother while Myles spoke quietly with Sherman. She'd been unable to give up the directive of seeing him, but completely understanding of Sherman's need for calm and silence and Myles' accented voice.

Remembering Lilith Landon's invective of "*you stink of Sherman*" just made Myles' blood boil.

"I *said*..." Yancey had obviously noticed Myles' distraction. He felt a little sheepish but hid it, looking pointedly at his cousin now.

"Yes, Yance?" he urged facetiously.

"I smelled Jack Ashtholdt all around the door in the office there, and more when I moved around toward another door." Yancey paused, looking around. "It apparently connected with another office."

"I smelled something familiar on her...someone, anyway. But it wasn't Sherman," Myles remembered as he looked over at Ashley, who was looking at him.

He sent her a smile and she smiled back shyly, looking away to talk with Tracey again. His heart raced and his blood heated. The thought of crawling in bed next to her later blotting out the worry that was never far away.

When he glanced over at Sherman, he wasn't surprised to find the silver-haired human looking at him speculatively. Myles flipped him a little wink and a half smile. Reassuring, calming he hoped. Sherman turned back to Victoria and Serena, letting them tug at his shoelaces and tease him. Tayler lay resting near Rafe.

Ashley was in danger. Ashtholdt had hated his daughter. What this meant for Sherman couldn't be good either.

"I know Marc'll want to come," Riker observed, taking in the fact that Tayler had joined Rafe on the edges of the pup-play. "I expect that means Bernadette, too, don't you? I'm surprised she's not here already," he mumbled wryly.

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“Yeah,” Lakon glanced over at Tyler’s curled form on the ground by Rafe’s chair. “It’s a toss up whether Rafe or Bernadette is the worst about smothering that pup.” He looked over at Jacob. “You sure he can’t go home now?”

Jacob’s jaw tightened. From nowhere, Christopher moved up behind his brother, hands landing on his shoulders in an impromptu massage.

Finally, Jacob spoke. “We need Tayler here for Rafe as much as anything else. We’re going to need every one of us...and more.” Nobody spoke. Jacob closed his eyes. “The wind has shifted. A dark storm is coming. There’s more danger than we can guess.”

“Cryptic,” Myles grumbled. “He’s very good at that.”

*Home of T Paul and Lacey Fonteneax
10 Harbor Ridge Road
North Maryland, LA*

“But *Daddy!*” Two identical southern voices in perfect harmony whined at just the right pitch to make T Paul Fonteneax check to see if his ears were bleeding. “We’re *good* for Tayler, *and* Ashley. Of *course* we’ll be good for this Sherman man, too.”

“If you don’t kill the poor bastard first,” T Paul grumbled.

“Oh, *thank* you, Daddy!” Missy, the eldest of his twin daughters by a minute and a half, threw her arms around T Paul’s neck. His complaint was obviously interpreted as permission. Correctly.

The other twenty-one year-old, tall, elegant blonde wrapped her arms around her father a split second later. “Daddy, you *won’t* regret this!” she squealed.

“I already do,” T Paul groaned, attempting to peel the girls off. “Why don’t you two pack? And remember, it’s fall in the mountains of Georgia. It’s likely to get cold.”

Extricating themselves from their father, the two leaned toward one another. “Oh, Missy, that gray cashmere cardigan, it looks *so* good with your eyes.”

“And you could try my sand-colored Uggs...you’ve got *great* legs...” Heidi offered, taking her sister’s hands.

T Paul shook his head hard. He tried not to wonder if they realized that complementing each other was like complimenting themselves. The two girls were so identical that even their scents were almost interchangeable. He knew that, while they appeared superficial, there was so much more to this stunning offspring. Sometimes he

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wondered how much of their behavior was natural and how much a cleverly crafted act. But he had something else to bring up.

“Girls!” he interrupted them sharply.

“Yes, Daddy?” they answered in unison.

How to start he sighed to himself. “I just spoke at great length with Myles...you two know that.”

“Yes, Daddy, we know,” they answered, still holding hands and still in perfect synch with each other.

“Ashley and Sherman...they are likely suffering from post traumatic stress disorder as a result of...” Did he really want to tell them what had happened? Maybe he would when he could get his mind around it himself. For now, “Myles’ family...” he tried again. “They’ve had a trauma that they seem to be reliving...” No, that wasn’t going to work. “Myles’ family is fragile. They’re fragile.” He sighed with relief. That was it—that was right. “Just...remember that.”

“Oh, Daddy,” Missy sighed, tears welling up in her wide silver eyes.

“We really can help,” Heidi’s lower lip trembled.

“Thank you for telling us, Daddy,” they murmured together, hands clasped, they turned as one, talking softly to one another as they left the room.

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Chapter Twenty

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

"I think I should dye my hair that color," came a wry, smooth and deep woman's voice from behind her.

"Girl!" Tracey giggled, opening her arms to her sister-in-law. "They can't put this color in a bottle. It's so hot, it'd melt the plastic!"

Bernadette laughed, her voice low and husky. "You know you're right, and it'd probably make my skin look orange."

"It might turn you white," Tracey commented, holding out a pale arm. "It turns mine brown in spots."

Bernadette choked, doubling over with laughter. "I can always tell when you've been hanging around Mik. Your sense of humor turns *wicked*!"

Tracey smiled but stepped back. She couldn't stay angry with Bernadette, however, she did have a bone to pick with her.

"You should have told me, Bernadette," Tracey said, her voice hard.

Bernadette sighed, her throat full. "I couldn't, Tracey," she managed. It was suddenly hard to talk. "At first, I didn't know you. Ashley was with me for a year before I met Marc. And then...well, I had already promised, you know?"

Tracey looked at her, trying to stay mad. Finally, she sighed, her own eyes filling with tears.

"Yeah, I know," she allowed, her own voice thick. "I don't like it though."

Bernadette nodded and the two women stood awkwardly in the well lit kitchen, not looking at each other.

"Marc!" Tayler's happy voice rang out.

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Both women turned to the window, watching as Tayler made his halting, limping way across the yard to Marc. Finally, his painful trek complete, Marc leaned down and lifted him into the air, hugging him tight. At thirteen, Tayler might have been considered too old for such childish treatment, but he and Marc had a dozen years to make up for.

Bernadette smiled sadly at Tracey. "I'm so glad he's as well as he is...it's just painful sometimes," she whispered.

"I know," Tracey agreed, nodding toward the gap in the woods that opened into the back yard.

There, both women watched as Ashley clung to Myles, frantic, her face a mask of fear as he coaxed and praised her every step of the way, one arm around her, never letting go. More than once, Ashley stopped, burying her face against Myles' chest and shaking her head, obviously pleading for him to fix something that only time could heal.

Bernadette slipped an arm over Tracey's shoulders and Tracey leaned into the taller woman.

"It's going to take him another ten minutes to get her in here. Longer if anyone tries to help," Tracey sniffed. "Then, he's got to go back and get Sherman. That's going to be about a half hour or so."

"Does..." Bernadette broke off, and then started again. "Is Sherman like that?"

Tracey shook her head, tearing her eyes away from her beautiful daughter. "No. Sherman usually gets a little way along, and then he kind of...zones out. Myles says he goes back there in his head, to that cave. Myles can usually bring him around, but if anyone comes up to him, or the wrong person says something, he turns around and goes back to the little house. Myles has to find him and talk him around again. If it takes too long, Ashley gets worried." Tracey sighed. Saying this all out loud just made it seem that much worse.

The thing was, if anyone should ever hear what was happening to these people, Bernadette needed to. This was her doing in a way, though Tracey knew the other woman would rather cut her own hand off than see this happen to two people that she loved, or for that matter, any two people at all.

Tracey reached out and took Bernadette's hand, leading her to the marble covered island for a cup of coffee. She fixed herself a cup of Folgers instant—her preferred blend. For Bernadette, a nice hot mug of freshly brewed coffee, courtesy of Tav and Mik, who preferred it to instant.

"Myles has scheduled them both appointments with a pack psychiatrist who specializes in PTSD—post traumatic stress disorder. She told him that it's best to let

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them go through the symptoms and the depression of their experiences and get them to talk about it as much as they will, like debriefing. She's going to come to the little house this evening and talk to them, for a first appointment," Tracey explained. Myles had explained it all to her and Tav the other evening when it was quiet. She had to admit that she was pleased that he wasn't wasting time with this issue.

"Umm," Bernadette was trying to marshal her thoughts and Tracey waited patiently, sipping her coffee. "Okay, two things." Tracey nodded. "Why are they staying in that house over there when it's so much trouble getting them over here? And why Myles?"

Tracey chuckled. Why Myles indeed... "Nobody's sure exactly why Myles, except that, in a way, Ashley and Sherman had Myles in common. He was the first one to reach out to each of them and offer them care and protection. That's the psychiatrist's prevailing theory. He asked her. He was worried that...you know Ashley...they seem to have ironed out a lot of their problems and I guess he was afraid that..." saying *that* part out loud did seem wrong some how.

"He was afraid that she'd dump him when she got better?" Bernadette asked, pulling no punches. "Being direct was never a problem for me," she grinned, a little abashed.

Tracey chuckled. "Well, yeah, I guess that was a concern for him."

"Valid," Bernadette shrugged. "Can't blame the boy. So, why aren't they staying over here?"

That was a sticking point for Tracey, too. But both Ashley and Sherman had reacted badly when she'd made the offer. Later, Ashley had confessed that there were too many people around, it was too dark and too close. She began to hyperventilate during her explanation to the point that Myles had to come and help her through it.

Privately, she suspected that they both needed to be closer to Myles and that was the best way to ensure that they were. She did wonder what would happen when the time came to move on, though she hoped that it was a ways off—she'd missed her daughter—and she hoped that a great deal of recovery would take place between now and then.

"They're both a little claustrophobic," Tracey told Bernadette, keeping her explanation brief. "And having all these other people around them makes them nervous." She inclined her head toward the door. "I think he's got her up on the porch now. You can go say hello if you want."

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*Intersection of Jones Mt. Rd and GA-136
Talking Rock, GA*

Becker pointed to a wide, barren path leading into the woods. “Park there,” he rasped, glancing over at the pet who was driving.

This one called himself Tim even though his name was Richard. It made no sense, but he was a durable pet. Not as durable as Jack, but he was useful when the bad was just beginning.

Tim parked the car and Becker hefted himself out. All muscle, Becker was a heavy man. He tipped the scales at two hundred and seventy-five pounds and was as hard as a rock. He didn’t like hauling himself around when he had to sit for long periods.

Jack’s enemies had yet another strike against them for causing him to sit still for an hour at a time—two if he considered the drive back. And another drive would be necessary before this was over.

Tilting his head back, Becker turned, flicking a look at Tim. Tim followed, knowing better than to speak.

They had climbed a high peak, looking down at a shorter one, just across an abbreviated valley. It wasn’t another hill or mountain so much as an add-on to the one he was sitting on. But it was far enough away that his scent wouldn’t be obvious.

Leaving Tim next to a large tree, Becker edged around a short outcropping and then found a seat. Yes, perfect. He could see the two houses. One was real big—the other was small.

Wolves—wolf-people. He could tell the difference, like a dull neon shine. There were lots of them down there. And that wasn’t all. Becker looked over the two houses, saw so many lives there. But there was energy down there. There was powerful good down there.

Becker had always been able to see the good and bad in people. It was like a glow, very distinct to him. And the more the good he saw, the more he wanted it. Like a forbidden fruit, the good in people called to him, made him want to hurt them, break them, take away from them what he didn’t have in himself.

About thirty-five years ago, in celebration of his twentieth birthday, Becker had tortured a young cleric to death, reveling in his screams of pain, his pleas for mercy. His life sentence had been judged served at thirty years, his behavior in prison exemplary.

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After all, he had not killed since then—crushed perhaps, but for all appearances, Becker had been a model prisoner. No one had looked too close at the model.

Something snapped and crackled in the cool mountain air. Becker could see a man, frozen in place. The shoulders were broad, he was dark, with the look of—it was vague, but Becker could see Jack in the profile of the man. Jack...but energy...some kind of power. This could be one of Jack's sons, though Becker couldn't tell if the man was good or bad. He was different.

That wasn't all though. Like a beacon, something called to him. A light—something good that he could change. The good thing radiated pain already—a hopeful pain—but Becker could make it sing with his own kind of hurt, the pain of desolation, of begging, of punishment by the bad. Yes, a good person, a good wolf-person, someone that Becker could hurt, could enjoy hurting. And was that a second, fainter glow?

Whatever or whoever was down there, Becker needed it. Needed to take it. It was good and he wanted to own it, taste it and make it his. And all of it, so much of it, was gathered in that pretty, big house.

Suddenly, he was overwhelmed, wracked with pain. Hot, burning pain and the profile that reminded him a little bit of Jack changed. The man was looking at him, his arm raised, pointing. Now, a white-hot, blue-green fire joined him. The air was thick, icy, hot, sharp and it hurt. He felt stinging sharp nips, like bees or small mouths eating him up.

Becker stumbled backward, away from that place. The further he got away from the looking man, the better he felt. The hurt was less now, but the memory of it chased him, pushed him past Tim until the young man followed him, stumbling but quiet, afraid as they made their way to the car.

Becker was shaking. He felt something that he couldn't ever remember feeling. It wasn't nice. It didn't satisfy. As he looked at his eyes in the car's rearview mirror, he identified it and he hated it. Fear.

Tim glanced nervously at him. Yes, it was fear and he'd never felt it before. He liked to cause that, not feel it. He would awaken the fear in Tim when he got home. While he was enjoying Tim's fear, he would figure out what had happened up there on that mountain.

After he was finished with Tim, he would call Jack. They would attack the wolf people tomorrow, maybe sooner. He wanted to find whoever had the good glow on that mountain. He wanted to find the person who'd made him feel fear, too. They would both be very sorry. Becker would enjoy hearing them sing in pain, hearing them beg.

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It was much quieter around the house this morning, and Jacob was grateful. Even though Marc and Bernadette had just arrived, there were far fewer family members around than the day before. He stopped halfway across the yard to listen to Tayler describe Talking Rock Creek to Marc. Yes, it was peaceful around here right now.

Riker, Lakon, Kaden, and Yancey had all gone to some concert and promotions related meeting, taking Philly with them. Jacob's fifteen year old twin sisters had gone off on a school ski trip which Christopher had valiantly volunteered to chaperone, down time of a sort. That left only a handful of people around for the next day or so: Jacob himself, Kameron, Marc and Bernadette, Mik, Tracey and Tav, Tayler and Rafe, and of course, Myles, Ashley, and Sherman. It was a veritable ghost town.

Out of the peace filled morning, a ripple of unease arrested him, sending a shiver dancing up his spine. The hair at his nape bristled and stood on end.

Jacob looked up, an arc of energy snapping, popping in the air, crackled between him and...what? There, on the far peak, off of what must be Jones Mountain Road, he saw a vague shape, but the power that pulsed from it was bad, possibly evil. And then it shifted, Jacob could feel it looking, searching.

"Tayler!" he shouted, spinning. "Get Tayler inside, get him inside!"

"Wha--?" Marc and Tav turned.

"Son?" Tav asked.

"Pick him up, Rafe!" Jacob bellowed, his eyes fixed once again on the angry, red-orange pulse from the neighboring peak. "Run, damn it! Get him out of here!"

Rafe had sprinted across the yard the instant Jacob had shouted. He knew that. Not really an alpha, Rafe was conditioned to act under the right set of circumstances. Had another alpha ordered, Rafe would have responded—but for one single thing. Tayler was his final, complete alpha. If it was for Tayler, Rafe would do anything. And thank God, Tayler had told him to listen to Jacob first before everyone besides him.

Tayler was the ultimate alpha. He knew what each of his people needed and how to give it to them. In time, he would be magnificent.

Right now, Jacob was just grateful that Ashley was inside, out of sight, and to a lesser extent, Sherman. This pack, this family had been blessed. Two seers were needed because they had more angels than potential devils here. Ashley, beautiful, special Ashley, his little big sister, was so good, too good. And then there was Tayler, the future

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of the pack. Maybe they both were. Jacob didn't know where Sherman fit into the mix, but Myles' family was two thirds pure, and one third indestructible. He had no doubt they'd keep him on his toes.

"Myles!" Jacob's lungs were tight, like he was breathing hot lava. "MY-les!"

"Here, guv." At his elbow, Myles was there. Jacob pointed and Myles looked up. Mik had come with him, bulky, solid, reassuring. He, too, was looking up.

"Can you see it? Can you see him?" Jacob couldn't see who was there precisely; he just knew that there was a presence. Myles, with his lupine senses, augmented by the gene splicing, would be able to see everything very well.

"Yeah, there's a big guy up there, and he's...what's this, hey? Looks like he's leaving, and leaving quick." Myles was in full wolf form, hackles raised, face covered in hair, fangs showing—as changed as he got. Jacob wondered if he even knew it. Mik sensed the presence, too, whether he could see it or not. His ruff standing, teeth bared, anger apparent.

"Something's changed, Myles, it's bad. You gotta go see if you can stop him. If he comes back, it's going to be worse." Jacob knew he was babbling. He had to babble, he needed to tell. Maybe he was a seer, but he was afraid, too. "That--that guy wants to hurt Tayler. Hurt Ash, maybe Sherm, I don't know...I'm sure he saw Tayler. He's bad; you've got to stop him."

"I'm on it, mate," Myles growled over his shoulder, gone before the words were out. And Mik, too, hot on Myles' heels.

Jacob felt his legs give, sitting hard on the cool grass. In a minute, he'd go inside, hug his sister, hug Tayler and maybe he would even hug Sherman. Then he'd let his mother make him feel better.

Hands were lifting him, pulling him up. A stethoscope was at his sternum. Did Marc keep one in his pocket? Was it forever tucked under his shirt? Jacob felt faint. He'd forgotten that Tav and Marc were even there.

J.J. Massa

Chapter Twenty-One

*Office of Lilith Landon
Landon International
Suite 2A, 5400 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia*

Jack and Lilith were arguing. They were bickering like an old married couple. Lilith wanted to bring in a few Weres that she knew to help handle the Montgomery family. Loners who could handle themselves in a werewolf battle.

She was sure that Jack's friends were quite lethal. Jack himself was dangerous, she'd felt it right away. For him to allow another man to dominate him...well that man had to be dangerous, without question.

For all Lilith knew, Jack had already enlisted a few werewolves in their little plan. Still, Lilith wanted some familiar faces; she wanted people who were on *her* payroll. There was no mystery here. Lilith was *not* a trusting person. Jack should be able to understand that.

The problem was, Jack *wasn't* understanding that.

"I'm not having anyone Becker doesn't approve of, Lilith. There's no middle ground here," he stated resolutely. "If you don't like it, you can do your own dirty work."

"Who the hell is this Becker guy, anyway?" Lilith demanded. She knew damned well that Jack wanted his daughter Ashley dead as badly as she wanted Sherman out of the picture. So what was the big deal?

"Becker is...well, you just don't want to cross him. More importantly, *I* don't want to cross him. That's all I've got to say about it," he growled stubbornly, arms crossed, implacable.

"Uh, huh," she oozed, taunting him. "Becker must be the big, bad man who fu..." Before she could finish that comment, Lilith found herself pressed bodily against the wall, a tight hand gripping her throat, hard, angular hip bruising her pubis.

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“You don’t want to say that, Lilith,” Jack murmured, his voice raspy and threatening, his peppermint breath fanning her face.

“S’ry, Jack,” she wheezed, “’n called...for.”

And then she was free, a shivering pile on the carpet, aroused, angry, and frightened in equal measure—as usual. Lilith rubbed at her throat, searching for words, something scathing to restore her pride and singe Jack’s ego, when her secretary interrupted.

“Excuse me. Is Mr. Aschtholdt with you, ma’am?” Ginger enquired neutrally. “Phone call for him.” She paused. “A Mr. Becker, sir.”

“Transfer it,” Jack snarled, moving toward her phone.

In the short time he’d been with her, Lilith had noted that Jack never spoke on the phone. She’d expected him to be in touch with old friends, looking for new fun, something. But not Jack. And now he was grabbing the handset, a look of alarm settling across his face. This was a phone call she didn’t want to miss.

Becker...holy shit. Jack strode back to the desk, ignoring everything but the phone. What could he possibly want? How should Jack address him? Something must truly be wrong if Becker was on the phone.

He hit the button. It wouldn’t pay to keep this man waiting.

“Hail?” he croaked.

“Good boy, Jackie,” the warm, thick rumble praised him in lieu of a greeting.

Jack relaxed in relief. He’d made the right choice.

“I’m glad to hear from you,” he gushed, though carefully. “Is--is everything all right?”

“We got to go sooner, Jackie. Something I want there,” Becker’s gravelly voice sounded oddly soothing to Jack, like a caress. “Tim won’t be comin’, he’s hurting.”

Jack knew what that meant, no question. They’d gone to the area where Ashley and Tracey lived and Becker had gotten riled up. Poor Tim. Jack resisted the urge to ask if the other man would recover at all.

Quickly, before he could lose his nerve, Jack rushed forward to tell, explain. “Lilith wants to bring some...werewolves,” he got out. Becker hadn’t been unaware of them.

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There was silence on the line. It lasted so long that Jack was becoming nervous. With difficulty, he managed to refrain from speaking to fill the gap.

“Can she hear me?” Becker’s voice was cold now. Jack shivered.

“No,” he squeaked.

“Make her hear me,” Becker ordered, harsh.

Jack swallowed with difficulty, leaning across the desk to put the call on speaker. Becker’s labored breathing filled the room sounding ominous and threatening.

“Okay,” Jack forced out.

“You listenin’, wolf-woman?” Becker rasped, his voice even, uninflected, and all the more menacing for it.

“Yes,” Lilith answered. She sounded small to Jack.

“You bring who you want,” Becker began. Jack saw some of the tension leave Lilith’s wary frame. He knew better and waited. “Things don’t go like I say, I’ll rip your throat out and drown ‘em in your blood.”

The silence was total. Jack waited, wondering how Lilith was taking Becker’s portent. She cleared her throat, sitting up a little straighter. Jack noticed that her breathing was heavier, faster.

“Yeah,” she answered, sounding husky.

“Tonight, Jackie,” Becker ordered flatly. “Bring her.”

“Yes,” Jack answered, locking eyes with Lilith.

She blinked rapidly, fear apparent on her face. Becker severed the connection.

Intersection of Jones Mt. Rd and GA-136
Talking Rock, GA

Myles roamed up the slope to where the man’s car had been parked. He and Mik had been over the terrain between the road and the hillock several times. They’d arrived too late to stop the man so that meant the worst.

He would be back later. The threat was still out there and his family was in danger. Myles knew that he needed to turn for home, to return and explain to Jacob that he’d failed and the enemy had gotten away.

“Let up on yourself, son,” Mik’s ringing baritone called Myles back from his reverie.

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By unspoken agreement, the two turned and began loping back toward the two houses on Darke Woods Road.

“I should have caught him, Mik. Now he’ll be back...”

Mik stopped, turned, jumped up on him, planting his huge paws on Myles’ shoulders.

“Stop it, Myles. You’ve done all you can.” Myles turned his head away, disgusted with himself. “How do you think Jacob feels?”

“Jacob?” Myles yelped, looking back at Mik in alarm. “God, he did everything! He got Tayler out of there, he got us over, showed us the guy—even did some kind of seer hocus pocus...what more could he have done?”

“Well, unless you are above the laws of physics, you need to ask yourself the same question, son,” Mik observed wryly.

Myles lowered his eyes in embarrassment. He had no doubt that Jacob was indeed torturing himself that he hadn’t conquered the foe and saved the damsel, or the pup. Mik dropped back to all fours, turning toward the house once again.

“Guess we’d better hurry,” Myles stretched his legs a little farther, increased his gait a little more. “Bet Ashley and Sherm’ll be worried.”

“I expect so,” Mik observed, trotting along beside him easily. “So things are better between you and Ashley, then, huh?” he asked nonchalantly.

Myles stole a glance at his furry parent. “Yeah, we talked a lot of it through,” he answered vaguely. Not much got by the old man, he knew. Those pointed furry ears heard everything. “We’re taking it a day at a time.”

“Gonna keep Sherman with you awhile?” Mik went on. Myles couldn’t guess what was going through Mik’s mind.

“Until he feels ready to go on his own,” Myles allowed, waiting for the next question.

“You’ve been alone a long time,” Mik observed, and this, Myles realized, was the point. “It’s nice to be needed like that, have people you love depend on you so much, huh?”

Myles grinned and shook his head. “You telling me, you didn’t really need me or depend on me, old man?” He was sure that, without the fur, Mik’s cheeks would be somewhat red. “That’s a little obvious, even for you, Mik,” Myles teased.

“Well, you weren’t convincing me,” Mik sounded sheepish.

“I’ll spell it out, because I love you,” he winked. “Don’t want you to work so hard.” Mik chuckled. “I know they’ll both love me, even when they’re better. I want a

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happy, healthy relationship with my princess. I want my boy Sherman to get a mate, be happy. They're gonna need me and depend on my anyway, same as I do them—and you. We're family."

Mik beamed proudly at him. "Good answer," he rumbled, turning to face a wide gorge. "Think you can jump that, son?" he teased.

"I got meself over 'ere, din' I?" Myles teased back.

Mik picked up speed and leapt the divide, not slowing down after he landed. Myles grinned and followed him across. The sooner he was home, the better.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

Ashley sat near the window, looking out at the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon. She was distantly confused by the fact that she didn't want to be outside, but she wanted to be able to see outside.

She knew what she was really doing, of course. She was distracting herself from the fact that Myles wasn't here with her. It was ironic, really, when she'd kept herself apart from him for so long and now the idea of not having him with her was frightening.

It could be that she'd learned how fragile life was, having seen it ripped away by something as detached as the weather. The forces of nature were so uncaring and impersonal that they could kill or cure with no consideration at all. Age, ability, health, wealth, none of that mattered to the vagaries of the environment.

When he'd held her in his arms at her apartment, Ashley had realized in a blinding rush that time was not on her side. Anything could happen and she and Myles had let too many hours, days, years go by living in misery.

The truth was and always would be that she loved Myles and he loved her. They could work out any issues they had—as long as they were both alive.

"What ya thinking about, sweet knees?" Ashley smiled and scooted over so that Sherman could sit next to her, looking out of the long dormer windows over the porch.

"Myles," Ashley answered simply. Sherman would probably understand.

"He's...He really came through for ya, huh, Ash? For both of us," Sherman smiled sadly. "And you were gonna give up on him," he accused without heat.

"We had it backwards, didn't we?" she asked him gently. She wanted to talk about Lilith if he did. Sherman had to be hurting; he'd really loved Lilith.

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“Yeah, we did. She’s a hateful woman, Ash. I was trying to give her a heart and she just wanted a wallet.”

Ashley leaned forward and touched Sherman’s cheek. She’d never seen him looking so young. For all that he was a brilliant captain of industry, Sherman wasn’t even thirty years old...he would be sometime this year, but not yet. She wondered if the silver hair made him look older and what it was that made him seem younger now. Perhaps it was the hurt of his broken heart finally eclipsing the resolve that had kept him in check for so long.

“How’re you doing, otherwise?” Ashley braved asking. She hated to upset Sherman, she hated to be upset. But she needed to know...would he understand the question?

“You mean, is it weird? Do I wake up reaching for the walls, trying to figure out if they’re dirt or...or where I am?” Ashley’s eyes filled with tears and she nodded. He took her hand. “Sometimes, I hear them crying. I try to comfort them and it turns out to be your old man, comforting me,” he sniffed, giving her a watery smile. “Guess I’m doing okay.”

“We’re pretty screwed up, all things considered, huh?” Ashley bit her lip. “You ready to see this shrink?” she asked candidly.

Sherman grinned and rolled his eyes. “A werewolf shrink? The woman ought to be all about post traumatic stress disorder.”

Ashley began to snicker and then Sherman began to snicker, too

*Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport
Northwest Airlines flight 9612
Runway 4L/22R*

T Paul was incensed. The flight had been delayed, followed by late boarding and now they sat out on the taxiway somewhere idling. They’d been out here so long, hours now, that a fuel truck had come out and filled up the airplane’s tank again.

Werewolves *hated* flying. The change in air pressure wreaked havoc on their inner ear. He wouldn’t have put himself or his family through the trauma of flying if getting somewhere hadn’t been *that* important.

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“Calm down, T,” Lacey said calmly. “Sighing like a leaky balloon isn’t gonna get us outta here any sooner.”

“I know, I know...” In spite of himself he sighed again. “I hate being trapped like this. Like a hostage. If they’d just drive the plane back over to the gate, we could get in the car and drive. We coulda been there by now!” he growled.

“We’re here and we’re stuck, it’s not the airline’s fault, honey. There are rules. You’re just upsetting the girls, fretting like that,” Lacey scolded lightly.

“I am *not* upsetting the girls. Being stuck here while little Tayler is stuck somewhere else is upsetting the girls. Aw, shit, I’m just ready to get off this thing and get on with my life, Lacey, that’s all.” She was the perfect doctor’s wife and the perfect female alpha. Always calm until it was time to get ugly. He knew sometimes, she must really have to work at that calm of hers. “I’m sorry, honey, I know you’re worried, too.”

“Damned right I am,” Lacey growled low, flipping a magazine page with undue force. “Some things are just bigger than one person’s problems. I guess the Federal Aviation Administration is one of those things,” she rumbled, her sweet voice heavy and rough.

A quick glance showed T Paul that she was fighting to keep her fangs from lengthening. He slipped an arm around her.

“I love ya, sugar. We’ll get there eventually, I guess. Breathe deep with me.”

Lacey leaned into him and smiled tightly. “I’ll do my best,” she murmured.

*I-575 North/GA 5
Toward Canton, GA*

Lilith didn’t know who owned the nearly new Grande Marquis she was currently riding in, but she didn’t care, either. She was just glad to be sitting in the front seat instead of the back. Jack was in the back seat, sitting next to the most frightening man she’d ever met. Bar none.

In a show of bravado, or perhaps she’d simply been going on instinct, she’d growled at the man when he’d wrapped a hand around the back of Jack’s neck, pulling him a little closer. It hadn’t been an intimate gesture so much as it was possessive. Lilith had objected to that.

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She had become quite possessive of Jack in a very short time. Used to getting what she wanted and keeping it, she would share Jack if needs be, but make no mistake about it, he was hers. Or so she'd thought.

The man hadn't made a sound in response to her warning growl. But when he'd turned those flat, dead obsidian eyes on her, she'd felt something slither across her spine. For the first time since she was a pup, Lilith dropped her eyes and lowered her head.

It didn't even matter to her that the Weres she'd assembled had seen it. Some of them had made vague noises of backing out until Becker had turned that chilling gaze on them.

Lilith shivered. One thing she felt pretty certain of—Sherman would not bother her after tonight. That man would see to it. If Becker planned for someone to die, she had no doubt that they would.

Jack sat still as the miles slipped by, bringing him closer and closer to his sons. He was also that much closer to his ex-wife Tracey and her daughter and the payback they so richly deserved.

He didn't look over at Becker, he didn't need to. The big man's body was as tight as a guitar string, practically humming. His entire energy was focused, right now on Jack but not only him.

When Lilith had growled at Becker, Jack nearly cringed. In the early days, on the inside, others had tried to claim one of Becker's chosen. It had not been pretty. For a minute there, Jack had been sure that Lilith would be the first casualty in their little war.

The car followed the road around to the right and then stayed in the right lane. A green highway sign read GA-754 / GA-136 just before the car turned right.

"Almost there," Becker grunted. "Five minutes. Then we get out and walk."

Jack nodded sharply, glancing back to the dark green van that followed. Four of Becker's men and three werewolves rode behind them, making up the rest of their mini-convoy.

He swallowed heavily, trying not to fidget. What would happen tonight? He remembered the debacle of his last visit here. Tonight he was ready. He fingered the gun in the pocket of his jacket. He didn't know what it took to kill a werewolf, though folklore said silver bullets.

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Jack didn't really care about all that. He knew exactly what it took to kill human women.

*Property of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Northeast corner*

Two black wolves froze in place, muzzles raised as the scented the night air. Exchanging a look of confusion, they raised their snouts a second time.

Tav was certain that he smelled strange Weres, but there was something else. Something new. The wind shifted and the harsh tang of fresh water, rocks, and dirt filled the air.

The wolves turned, by tacit agreement and headed back the way they had come. They weren't worried so much as they both felt the pull of mates, home, pups. Time to be with family.

And the wind shifted again. The scent this time was unmistakable. There were strange humans and strange Weres in Tav's woods, as well as something else. Whatever it was, it was not quite human and not quite other. It was different.

Marc and then Tav began to run, both stopped by surprise for perhaps a half second. The surprise turned to urgency when Kaden's call argued with Myles' and Tayler spoke up, his high pup's voice carrying the ring of authority in spite of too few years. Mik's deep answering bark would have been reassuring if it hadn't come on the run.

Jacob had warned them that something was coming their way—something bad, frightening. They knew about Jack Aschtholdt, and even about Lilith Landon. Either one would have been a threat, but nothing they couldn't handle—any one of them could.

In spite of Jacob's forewarning, somehow, Tav and Marc, too, had convinced themselves that nothing more threatening than a werewolf or maybe a violent human would be along. Even then, they had been convinced it wouldn't be so soon.

Ashley had only been returned from lost for a few days. How had Tav come to believe that she was invincible? Was it because she'd made up for the loss of Tate, his long-dead pup who would have been her age? Perhaps it was that she'd suffered so much and come through it all intact, if only on the outside.

Ashley, Jacob, and Tav had talked earlier. Myles had taken longer than expected and he'd joined her. Sherman had graciously excused himself and the three of them had

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sat and talked about Jack and the threat he brought them once again. Tav had reaffirmed his love for Jacob and Ashley, and they had for him. Tracey had also joined them. It had been a beautiful moment in a lifetime full of them—one that very well could be the last.

Tav forced those difficult thoughts from his mind, reminding himself of all that Jacob had told them. Tayler, Ashley, and now Sherman, were special. They were good, very good, in the way of those who were pure of heart. And they were of their pack, the strength and substance which would keep them all safe and directed.

One amazing Were and two very special humans that were more than beloved family members. They were the future and the very salvation of the pack.

While he was thrilled to hear the barks, yips and growls of his pack, he couldn't understand what they were saying, only the fact that they were trading information. The wind was picking up, stirring the scents and sounds until nothing made any sense.

Sudden, piercing screams and shrieks filled the air, pain, shock everywhere. Tav forced himself faster, burning to be there already, to stop this before it could get worse. His wife, his daughter, his son, they were all there, not nearly protected enough. He wasn't done loving them yet, he had to get there, just had to.

Myles heard the strangled yelp, followed immediately by a muted impact sound of a rolling car hitting a tree. The rising wind had hit him with a chaos of scent and snatched it away in the same second.

Almost impossible to sort out, he smelled first a jumble of Were and human, then blood, the family psychiatrist whose car had been slowly rolling up Darke Woods Road. Suddenly, a dark, dirty scent hit the air. A blend of anger and carrion, this one made his blood run cold.

He'd been walking back to the little house, filling Tracey in on the doctor's visit. Bernadette had been interested, too. Rightfully so, of course, because not only were Ashley and Sherman her crew, Tayler had been asked to join in.

Now, something threatening was in Darke Woods and Myles was too far. He was less than a mile, less than half of a mile, but that was no reassurance now. Any distance at all would have been too far.

Kameron snarled out a warning, the wind wreaking as much havoc with him as with Myles. Thank God that Mik was with Kameron, running for Tracey and Bernadette,

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because Myles had to go to Ashley. Ashley and Sherman were Myles' immediate family who needed him and needed him now more than ever.

Thank God also that Rafe was there for Tayler because he was also there for the others. Myles loved them all, it didn't matter now. But Jacob's warning rang in his ears, his cautions about the vile thing that lurked and wanted to damage the three perfect souls in the little house.

Myles fought down panic, the distance between the big house and the little house had never seemed so great. He was so focused on saving them, on getting to them, that only Tayler's stern yipping alert got his attention. Tayler growled sternly, telling Myles to watch himself because he was no use to them if he allowed his anger to rule.

Mik barked an alert, low and carrying on the unpredictable wind, Kaden adding his own reassurances. They were there, at the big house, they'd be with Bernadette and Tracey, one out and one in, because humans and Weres were scattered between both houses.

So close now, Myles could see the back porch through the whipping trees, the swirl of leaves rising and falling to confuse the eyes and the nose. Was that a Were or a porch mat flashing in the low light?

It wasn't easy to hurt Myles, but a gunshot would have slowed him down. He caught the intruder's scent in the intensifying wind when he was almost on top of him. His anger at himself was almost as overwhelming as his rage at the human who dared threaten his family.

The bullet went wild and Myles' hand shot out, shaking, angry, but on target. He grabbed the man's forearm and twisted, throwing the broken limb over his shoulder and away, leaving the screaming man to bleed out next to the path.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

The wind was making her jumpy, blowing her hanging plants around, picking up the swing and dropping it against the tree with a loud thud, over and over. Usually, they secured things when the wind came up like this. Usually, there was some warning.

Tracey had wanted to be over at the small house, had wanted to hear what Sherman and Ashley had said to the psychiatrist. She wanted to comfort and strengthen her daughter. Tayler had been asked to join them and both Tracey and Bernadette had worried about what he'd hear. A quick chat with Tav and Marc and Tayler himself had reminded them of the year before and how hardened Tayler already was.

Yes, he was a thirteen year old boy, but he was also a werewolf and a pack alpha who had witnessed enough carnage already with much more to come, they all knew. The family was under threat and Tayler would not be shielded. He knew that many members of the de la Rosa pack might want to challenge him. Besides that, there was an unnamed threat coming for him now, in addition to Ashley and Sherman.

Once again her first husband was after Ashley, and no doubt after Tracey, too. Add a crazy nearly ex-wife, a multi-million dollar corporation, and some kind of unnamed evil and you either had a good soap opera or a bad day. From Tracey's perspective, it was looking like a pretty bad day.

Suddenly, curses and shrieks, barking and growling punctuated the angry wind and Bernadette snatched at Tracey, pulling her back, away from the front door. Snarling was her only warning when a thin, brindled wolf burst through the front door, advancing on her.

Tracey didn't have any time to panic, and barely had time to wish for a weapon, things were moving so quickly.

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“That’s my favorite aunt, you piece of shit!” Kameron erupted through the kitchen door, fangs bared and hackles up.

Tracey stumbled backward, into Bernadette, who wrapped her arms around the smaller woman.

“Um,” Tracey whispered to Bernadette, “He really doesn’t know you that well yet,” she squeaked, turning to Bernadette, taking her hands and backing away, her sister-in-law holding just as tightly to her.

Bernadette squeezed her hands tighter, dark skin stark against Tracey’s porcelain complexion. “Don’t worry, honey, it don’t bother me a bit. In fact, right this minute, he’s my most favorite nephew.”

Tracey meant to answer, say something clever or something reassuring, but another strange wolf burst in, followed by a strange man waving a gun, with another immediately on his heels.

“Red hair, blue eyes! Here’s one of the one’s we’re supposed to kill.” the man crowed triumphantly, yanking Tracey away from Bernadette.

Tracey saw Mik crouched in the shadows by the door. It took every ounce of control she could possibly dredge up, but she managed to keep her lips pressed firmly together.

“What about the black one?” the other man growled, his words punctuated by the growls and snarls going on behind him with Kameron fighting the other wolf.

“Nobody said nothin’ about shooting no black ones,” the dark skinned man holding Tracey yelped back. “Becker’s black and he might not like it.”

“Oh, is that so?” objected Bernadette archly, who was obviously scared to death but cocky just the same—or, Tracey hoped, she’d seen Mik in the shadows. “So now you don’t want to shoot me just because I’m black? I bet you think I should be grateful, too.”

Tracey rolled her eyes and bit her lip, wanting to giggle though noticing that Bernadette moved closer to the black man waving the gun, leaving the field open for Mik.

With a bellowing roar, Mik erupted from the dark corner of the room. Tracey’s attacker squealed like a frightened six year old and threw his gun at Mik, allowing Tracey to grab Bernadette and run in the other direction.

She did note in passing that the black man with the gun was no fool, backing toward the door and then scrambling through it, disappearing into the screaming wind.

Mik took off after him, shouting, “The other house!” to Tav when he came through the back door.

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“Tayler!” Bernadette choked.

“And Ashley,” Tracey cried, pivoting on her heel to go after Tav when suddenly she was on the ground, looking up into the glowing green eyes of her nephew.

“Get off me,” Bernadette growled, “Or you’re not my favorite anymore.”

Kameron leaned down and licked her cheek. “You can’t go. You’ll just make it harder to protect them.”

Tracey felt her eyes fill with tears. She hated it, but Kameron was right. He knew it, too, licking the tears away and gingerly stepping off of his two aunts.

*Sometime home of Myles Brooks-Montgomery
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“There’s going to be a very scary man,” Tayler warned them gently, morphing into wolf form as he did so.

“My biological father?” Ashley asked, nodding. “He hates me. I’m used to it.” She was fighting the sound of the wind. It reminded her of the noises from the cave.

Tayler kicked out of his pants that were caught on one backward doggie knee. His head tipped back and he scented the air. When his eyes narrowed and his hackles rose, Ashley felt a chill of fear.

Tayler barked out what seemed like an order, though all Ashley could make out was the word, “Myles.”

“What’s happening, Tayler? Rafe?” she asked, frightened. Sherman took her hand, his eyes fixed on Tayler. He, too, appeared to be fighting the dark memories.

“There’s a bad man coming for us, Ashley. Your original father is there, and your wife, Sherman, and they want you dead. But this other man, he wants us to hurt,” Tayler explained, staring intently at them. “He wants to make us hurt.”

“Why?” Sherman wondered, looking toward the window, taking a fireplace poker in one hand. He hefted it lightly, still keeping an arm around Ashley. She leaned forward and picked up the matching wrought iron fireplace shovel with a shrug. At least this was something they could fight. Maybe...

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The wind was blowing stronger now, lifting a bucket on the back porch, branches hitting the windows. Out there somewhere, wolves were barking, vague shrieks that could have been high tension wires or scratching, but she knew they weren't.

"It's because we believe in good things," Tayler answered Sherman's question. "You and Ashley are good people," he explained, turning, backing in front of them and facing the door. "Myles and Jacob are coming, they'll make him go away."

Something heavy impacted the door and Tayler's ears went back in a feral snarl. He didn't look like a cute puppy now. Instead, he looked like a sleek and dangerous wolf, small but deadly. Next to him, Rafe was just as menacing, with his dark eyes glowing, his fangs even whiter against a sea of angry black.

"Daddy's home," a sneering voice pricked as the door slammed open.

Ashley looked into her father's eyes for the first time in over a decade, seeing the same hate she always had. He raised a shaking hand that held a gun and Sherman jerked her behind him. At the same time, Rafe shot forward, ripping at the other man's thigh, bringing him down, but not before Jack squeezed the trigger on his gun.

A hurtling body covered in dark brown fur that could only belong to Lilith Landon collided with Rafe. The two wolves came together in a clash of snarling, gnashing teeth, blood and fur flying.

Sherman slumped against her, blood pouring from a wound on his neck. Ashley wrapped her arms around him, trying to pull him away, out of the room, frantic but fighting it. She was barely hanging on, frightened and afraid. Sherman was mumbling very low, but still struggling to heave himself upright, to look after her.

"S'okay, missy," a deep molasses voice rumbled from the front door. "Just a scratch." For some reason, she believed him, and the blood at Sherman's throat slowed to an oozing trickle, supporting his words.

Tayler had edged in front of her and Sherman, somehow looking bigger, meaner, more threatening than she could have possibly imagined. His snarls and growls were louder now, enraged.

"Who are you?" Ashley choked, feeling weak, like all the oxygen was being leached from the room.

"Don't speak to him," Tayler ordered, backing her up, further into the room.

The big man took a deep breath, as if he were savoring the flavor of air around him. "So good. I'm gonna love making you sing." He turned toward the man on the floor, her genetic father, whom Rafe had injured. "Shoot that wolf boy over there, and the woman, too if she don't shut up."

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Jack raised the gun, sweat pouring down his face and thick, dark blood gushing from his leg. He aimed it at Ashley and Sherman. “Her, Hail, gotta kill her,” he wheezed.

“No!” the big man thundered, “Don’t make me hurt you, Jackie.” In an almost gentle voice, he added, “They’ll die, but first, I’m gonna make ‘em sing for me.”

Ashley had heard and seen many things in less than a quarter of a century, but nothing had ever made her skin crawl and her blood freeze at the same time. She could feel her heart stuttering against her breast bone, terror crawling through her.

The shiny mahogany face smoothed into a horrifying impression of a smile. “It’s so good, tastes so good already,” he murmured, moving closer. “They’re too loud. Shoot ‘em, Jackie,” he growled, his face changing in an instant, ugly and fearsome.

Without a word, Jack raised the pistol and shot two times, dropping Rafe soundlessly and then Lilith with a startled yelp.

The man called Hail turned his frightening face toward the door, fear creeping across his features as Myles strode into the room, and behind him, Jacob.

“No!” Ashley screamed, as Jack raised the gun again.

One bullet after another slammed into Myles and he stumbled slightly, but kept coming until he had Jack by the throat, twisting and crushing the hand that held the gun.

The dark skinned giant was transfixed, horror and pain etched across his features as his eyes locked with Jacob’s. “Tayler,” Jacob called, voice low.

Still growling, Tayler moved over a little to stand with Jacob, looking at the large man, just as Jacob was. Jacob was next to Ashley now, kneeling with a hand at Sherman’s throat.

“It’s okay, Ash, hold onto me,” Jacob murmured, pressing in next to Sherman, an arm around Ashley’s shoulders.

She could still hear snarling, growling and barking in the yard. The popping of a gun went off somewhere, only once. Marc had come in behind the bad man, still in wolf form with a vague outline of his other self, perhaps he was changing back.

The room grew warm and began to glow a funny color. The silver of Sherman’s hair shone like polished steel, almost sparking at the ends. The large man dropped to his knees and covered his ears, moaning.

Tayler’s fluffy fur brushed against her, tickling, but shining glossy onyx in the odd light. Wherever Myles was, he must be okay. Ashley could hear his British accents underneath the screaming of Jack, and then that faded away to gray, then white, and then nothing.

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Chapter Twenty-Four

*Sometime home of Myles Brooks-Montgomery
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“Sleep, Sherman, okay, luv?” Myles squatted next to the other man’s bed, stroking those silver-soft curls. He resisted the urge to touch the paper white bandage, a dot of red at the center of the gauze. It was merely a deep, curving graze, but so close to a major artery. It had to hurt, and had cost Sherman too much blood and too much pain.

The younger man was heavily drugged but resisting for all he was worth, it seemed, trying to stay awake. “Ash is okay, Myles? Tayler?” he slurred, barely able to form words.

“All is well, pet,” he repeated one more time, finding it oddly easy to be patient under the circumstances.

“Shot! You!” Suddenly, Sherman was groping at his chest, clumsily searching for bullet holes.

“Shh, s’okay.” He lifted Sherman’s questing hand, pressing it flat to his unmarked chest, so glad he’d discarded what he’d been wearing. A clean jersey meeting Sherman’s frantic fingers. “I’m hard to hurt, luv. The gene-splicing, remember?”

“Kay,” Sherman subsided with a sigh, his eyes fluttering closed, breathing evening out.

“Apparently seventh time’s the charm then,” Myles murmured, dropping a kiss on the slightly gaunt cheek of the man he’d briefly considered his nemesis.

He shrugged, pulling the door mostly shut, shaking his head at the oddities of life. Sherman Landon was almost thirty, not thirteen, but somehow, Myles felt like a proud parent when he looked at the man.

He didn’t feel as if he’d done anything to shape who Sherman was, but he did feel the love swell in his heart at the thought of the younger man, his posturing, his protective

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nature, his brilliant mind and his caring heart. Sherman was family—that was irrevocably that.

And now, Myles smiled to himself with purpose, it was time to lavish some attention on the *rest* of his immediate family.

“How are you, Princess?” Myles murmured, arms snaking around her trim waist as he rested his chin on her shoulder. She stood by the bedroom window, leaning back into him now, her body molding to his.

“Glad you’re here,” Ashley sighed. “Sherman okay?” she tensed, turning in his arms.

“He’s fine and sleeping.” Leaning down, Myles’ hands eased up to cup her face and his mouth covered hers, tasting, taking, savoring.

“Mmm,” Ashley purred against him, wrapping her arms around his waist and cupping his shoulders.

“Per’aps it’s time to tuck you in as well, Princess?” he growled softly, swinging her up into his arms before she could protest.

Laying her down gently onto the bed, Myles came down on top of her, covering her, spreading over her, his hands coming up and stripping away the loose t-shirt she wore to sleep in.

“Mmm, Myles,” Ashley husked, arching against him. “Make love to me, don’t tease me tonight,” she begged him, her small hands stroking up under his shirt, tugging at it.

“Yes, luv,” Myles agreed. “No long teasing tonight,” he promised.

Moving to his knees, Myles shrugged out of his shirt and skimmed his trousers and shorts off, then leaning in to strip her tiny thong panties off as well.

The wind ebbed and roared, rattling the windows, but Myles ignored it, all of his attention fixed on Ashley. She, in turn was focused hungrily on him, her small hand immediately wrapping around his rigid erection, pushing his hunger for her even higher.

“Want you, Myles, right now,” she groaned, bending her knees and parting her thighs, spreading her legs wide. “Now!” she demanded, pulling him toward her, until his dripping cock brushed her folds.

“Oh, god, Princess,” he groaned, lining up and sinking in easily, her velvet heat wrapping around him, warming him.

She groaned, wrapping her legs around his, body arching like a bow. He began to move slowly, pulling out, sinking in, sliding out, gliding in. She rose to meet him with every thrust now, cupping his buttocks, pulling at him.

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“More, Myles,” she groaned, her legs lifting to wrap around his waist. “More!” she insisted, delivering a stinging slap to his butt cheek.

Shocked, and then gone, Myles scooped her legs around his forearms, spreading her wider as he plunged deep, pumping into her high, hard and fast.

“Mine!” he rumbled, his mouth clamping down on her shoulder.

“Yeah! Yeah!” she urged him, her fingernails biting into him, her hips pistoning against his. “Mine!” she growled against him, biting him hard, just above the nipple.

“Princess!” he roared, slamming home one last time, his seed erupting, shot from him, squeezed from him, as he emptied himself into her clenching channel.

He collapsed atop her, rolling to the side and taking her with him, stroking her and cuddling as his body cooled and calmed.

“Amazing,” Ashley sighed, snuggling in.

“Quite,” Myles sighed, taking her mouth in a drowning, worshiping kiss. “Gonna combust if we do that again,” he murmured after he pulled back.

“It’s worth the risk,” she sighed.

“Yeah,” he agreed, still dazed.

“Myles?” she ventured after long minutes of quiet. He was embarrassed to find himself dozing.

“Yes, Princess?” he mumbled, trying to wake up a bit more.

“What happened with that man?” she shifted against him. “I think...I guess I passed out.”

“You and Sherman both passed out,” he confirmed, settling her more firmly against him. She’d need to satisfy herself before she could move on. Additionally, so would Sherman. “Jacob got a nosebleed, and Tayler seems to be okay, but...thoughtful, y’know?”

She nodded. “So, I didn’t ask, except about Rafe, what happened to anyone else. Besides Lilith, I mean. She’s still in surgery or...?” she let that trail off.

“Lilith died on the table while you were in the shower and Marc was shooting Sherman up with happy drugs. Apparently, the bullet punctured her liver and toxic stuff got in her bloodstream.” He expected that Ashley knew more about that than he did, but she’d get the gist.

“I don’t know how Sherman is going to be about that, Myles. He loved her—she hurt him, but he loved her.” Her face was sad and a tear dripped down, silver in the low light. He leaned down and sipped it up, kissing her lips lightly.

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“We’ll just love him and be patient with him, and help him through it, hmm?” he smiled hopefully.

“I always knew you loved me, Myles, but...” she shook her head, possibly afraid that her words would be misinterpreted. Myles wasn’t worried. There was too much good to be had to worry about an occasional wrong word.

“Loving you, Princess. You taught me to love everyone else. I always had my sister Mya, and eventually, the pack. But you, you’re magic. I love you.” He couldn’t say anything else, and she didn’t seem to want to.

Her lips found his and lingered, clinging, not letting go. “I love you so much,” she mumbled against his lips, kissing, sighing against him. He stroked her long hair, pushing it back from the perfect lines of her face, still kissing lightly, tenderly tracing her jaw. A puff of breath evening out to regular exhalations told him that she’d fallen asleep. He knew it was only a matter of minutes for him as well.

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Epilogue

*Home of Tracey and Tavist Darke
Darke Woods Road
Talking Rock, GA*

“He’s dead then?” T Paul asked Tav, his eyes straying over to Ashley who was sitting with her Aunt Lacey, Aunt Bernadette, and her mother.

Tav sighed, relief pouring off of him. “Yeah, finally, Jack Asshole is dead,” he growled, keeping his voice down. “He fuckin’ shot Myles four times before Myles dropped him.”

T Paul squeezed Myles’ shoulder, noting that the younger Were’s eyes kept drifting between his mate Ashley, Sherman, and once in awhile, Missy and Heidi.

“I’m just glad that Tracey and my princess are both safe from him now,” Myles murmured.

“Me, too, Myles,” Tav slid an arm across his shoulders. “Sherman seems shell-shocked, though.”

“He will for a while, I think,” Myles agreed. “He nearly starved to death in a cave with his best friend, a bunch of strangers and three dead bodies. Next, he finds out he’s married to a werewolf, now deceased. And then an evening with evil. My lad deserves a quiet breakdown.”

“Breathe,” Kameron murmured, winking at Myles. Myles rolled his eyes but smiled back.

“Damned shame about the psychiatrist,” Mik shook his head. “She was a friend of Maisie’s. The service is tomorrow.”

“Tayler wants to go,” Marc shrugged. “The family ought to have a presence, for sure.”

“Tracey and I are gonna go,” Tav murmured. “I don’t think Sherman and Ashley...”

J.J. Massa

“Think we’ll play it by ear,” Myles agreed noncommittally.

“So the big guy? Who was he, and what happened to him?” T Paul asked, his eyes sweeping the room again.

“Apparently, he was in prison with Aschtholdt,” Tav answered. “From what we’ve gleaned, they had a *special* relationship.”

“Aschtholdt smelled like him, and there were...other little bits of...evidence. He’s been locked up, a maximum security psych facility,” Marc supplied, albeit haltingly. “He’s in poor health—possible aneurysm.”

“And nobody knows what happened with him and Tayler and everyone?” He was so damned glad to be off that plane, but so frustrated that his pack had needed him and he had been trapped in airline hell.

Rafe sat, stretched out on the couch, his injured leg propped on the bent knee of Sherman who sat on the other end of the couch. Tayler was stretched along Rafe’s left side, close so he could be sure his big brother was fine.

Tracey, Lacey, Bernadette, and Ashley all sat around the kitchen island, easily visible from where all the men sat. Missy and Heidi sat with them, but were oddly silent; sometimes sharing a word with each other, and often looking over at either Rafe or Sherman, and T Paul couldn’t decide which.

He wondered with a start if one of those young men was meant to be a mate to one of his daughters or perhaps both? Hard to say because until they marked or were marked by a mate, it wasn’t obvious—there wasn’t a clear scent. If one of the girls was meant for Rafe, the boy at least would know it. But the twins hadn’t gotten any closer to him than they already were. They were so interchangeable. Maybe they both liked the same man?

Myles stared speculatively at them and then locked eyes with T Paul. “What’s up with your matched set and my boy?” Myles demanded, low and easy, but still insistent.

“I don’t rightly know,” T Paul answered, honestly.

Myles turned to Jacob and arched a brow. T Paul turned, realizing that Jacob would certainly know if anyone did. Hadn’t he been the first to say that Sherman was meant for someone in the pack? That’s what Tav had told him...

But Jacob smiled secretively and shook his head, fathomless eyes answering no questions. Myles glared, gaze narrowed on Jacob, to no avail.

Mik snickered. “Good luck getting a straight answer out of a seer,” he chuckled. “He won’t even tell us what happened to Becker and he was there!”

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

“It wasn’t anything much,” Jacob smiled evasively. “He just got to listen to us sing.”

J.J. Massa

Montgomery Family Chart

Patriarch, Matriarch
Mik & Elke Montgomery

Montgomery Family 1: Acting Like Family

Riker Montgomery (twin of Lakon)

Bethany Black

Children:

Kameron (one son, Tinker)(twin of Kaden)

Kaden (twin of Kameron)

Kirin

Montgomery Family 2: Family Harmony

Lakon Montgomery (twin of Riker)

Mya Brooks (twin of Myles)

Children: (Triplets)

Lynkon

Jaymes

Mikhel

Montgomery Family 3: A Family Portrait

Tavist Darke

Tracey West

Children:

Ashley

Jacob

Christopher

Victoria (twin of Serena)

Serena (twin of Victoria)

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Montgomery Family 4: Managing A Family

Yancey Livingston

Philomela Crossland

Montgomery Family 5: Family Doctor

Marc Fonteneax

Bernadette Reeves

Children:

Tayler

Rafe

T Paul Fonteneax

Lacey

Children:

Missy (twin of Heidi)

Heidi (twin of Missy)

Montgomery Family Legacies 1: A Fragile Family

Myles Brooks-Montgomery (twin of Mya)

Ashley West

Sherman Landon

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