

The book cover features two shirtless, muscular men in the upper half. The man on the left is wearing a black leather jacket and looking down. The man on the right is looking down and has a tattoo on his left arm. Below them is a dark, atmospheric image of a city skyline at night, with lights reflecting on water. At the very bottom, a pair of large, glowing orange eyes is visible. The title 'RETRIBUTION IN BLOOD' is prominently displayed in the center, with 'IN' in white and 'BLOOD' in large orange letters. Below the title is the series name 'DRONE VAMPIRE SERIES' in white. The author's name 'STEPHANI HECHT' is at the bottom in white serif font.

RETRIBUTION **IN BLOOD**

DRONE VAMPIRE SERIES

STEPHANI HECHT

Micah knows he should be one happy vampire. Not only has he been reunited with his human family, but he's found his mate, a very sexy vampire/werewolf named Ozzie. He has everything he ever wanted and more. However, if there's one thing Micah has learned since being transformed, it's to never take anything in life for granted. Not only do he and Ozzie have a huge bounty on their heads, but their vampire clan is threatened by enemies from both within and outside. Micah's worst fears are realized when everyone and everything he has ever held dear is attacked. In order to protect them, Micah must become the very thing he hates. One unspeakable act forever changes him and Micah knows he'll never be the same again. Will he ever be able to redeem himself and home? If so, will Ozzie still love him?

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RETRIBUTION IN BLOOD
DRONE VAMPIRE BOOK 9

BY

STEPHANİ HECHT

DEDICATION

To my readers. You guys rock!

CHAPTER ONE

They were hunting him and if that didn't suck bad enough, by Micah's estimate, they'd catch up to him in the next two minutes. Desperate to put off the confrontation for as long as possible, he ran down the eerily deserted street. Night had fallen on the city of Detroit a few hours ago and the darkness of the sky gave way to weak streetlights and a thin, pale crescent moon. The air reeked of garbage, humans and smog. The only sounds were his harsh rasping breaths and the thumps of his military boots stomping onto the pavement. Behind him, he could hear similar footfalls, only doubled since there were two Pure Born vampires giving chase. Then another noise reached his ears. This one was sinister enough to make his skin crawl. A high-pitched laugh followed by a voice.

"Running only makes it more fun for us. Just ask all the other Drones we've killed."

With the exception of an irritated grunt, Micah stayed silent. If they thought he'd start pleading

and sobbing for his life, they were in for a sad disappointment. He did twist around long enough to flip them off as he continued to run. His boots sloshed through what may have been a puddle of rainwater, but he wouldn't be surprised to find it to be something more foul and organic. Since this was Detroit, one could never be sure what exactly collected in the street.

"Micah! Micah, come out to play. We have all kinds of fun things to show you," one of the Pure Borns chanted like some bad parody of a bad guy in an action movie.

Surprised at hearing his name, Micah jumped and missed a step, nearly making a face plant on the pavement. The already high level of fear went up another notch as he finally broke and let out the softest of groans. How in the hell did they know who he was? The city was full of Drones like himself. Since the city was a haven for those who worked under the Drone Rebellion, the fact the Pure Borns had singled him out of the group and had actively tracked him down made his blood turn to ice. Even before the war, nobody wanted to attract the attention of the Pure Born-run government.

Out of habit, he tried to reach up and key his ear mic so he could contact his clan. When his fingers found nothing but air and his own flesh, he cursed under his breath. Fear had made him

temporarily forget that he'd lost his communication device ten blocks back when he'd been engaged in an earlier battle with a different opponent. Something told Micah that this new pair would be a whole lot harder to beat than the last guy he'd tangled with, too.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, this was not good. He'd got himself into plenty of messed up situations, but this one had to rank in the top five. Why had he so eagerly agreed to this stupid assignment? If he ever got out of this alive, his clan leader, Eric, was going to have his ass.

Just as he got ready to turn around and confront his enemy, he sensed it, the now-familiar scent that marked his mate. Micah smiled to himself as he realized the assholes behind him were in for one hell of a nasty surprise. Spurred on, Micah decided to push forward.

The Pure Borns were so close now, Micah could literally feel them breathe on his neck. His own fangs elongated as he got ready for the upcoming confrontation.

Just as he sensed one of them reaching out for him, he dodged to the side and bolted up the steps of one of the many abandoned houses dotting the rundown neighborhood.

One of the Pure Borns let out a whoop of delight. "He's making it so damn easy. Drones are so stupid."

Ignoring the barb, Micah pushed open the warped, wood front door and stumbled into the house. Empty except for numerous used syringes and crack pipes, it would be a perfect place for the Pure Borns to corner him...and that is just what Micah wanted them to think.

The Pure Borns followed him in, which is exactly the way Micah planned it. They were about to get a hard lesson on who was truly the stupid one. Turning around, he let out an exasperated, "What do you want?"

Both of the Pure Borns stopped, identical looks of shock on their faces. Clearly, they had expected fear, maybe even a little bit of crying. His annoyance seemed to take some of the air out of their gonna-get-you sails. One look at them confirmed his worst fears as to their identity. Both of them were dressed in the Pure Born uniforms of all black from their sharply pressed pants, to crisp button up shirts. Even the rifles they had pointed in his face were Vampire Regulation Force issue. It seemed the Pure Borns fear of entering the werewolf-controlled city had ended.

"Micah Cooper," the taller of the Pure Borns spoke with a certainty that showed he already knew who stood in front of him. He had short dark hair slicked back in a style that'd gone out of vogue years ago. But then again, since his kind had been vampires since birth, he'd probably been

around a century or two, so he no doubt thought he was styling.

"Yes, that's me," Micah replied calmly. Not seeing any sense in denying it.

"Son of the humans who call themselves Margaret and Adam Cooper?" the second one demanded. He had a short blond military buzz and cold gray eyes.

Micah fought to remain cocky and at ease, even though his heart pounded painfully. The mere thought of his mother's name resting on a Pure Born's lips made Micah see red. Instead of giving them the satisfaction of seeing his anger, he slowly shook his head as he made a *tsking* sound. "Did you really just say *son of*... That's just so clichéd, it's sad."

"Just answer the damn question?" the dark-haired one snapped as he gripped the butt of his rifle.

"Yes...no...kind of," Micah hedged, loving the looks of confusion and annoyance his answer generated. While aggravating the vampires was fun as hell, he also hoped to bide for more time so Ozzie could get there to help. It wouldn't take long. With each passing second, he could sense his mate drawing nearer.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Blondie sneered, his disdain clearly marked on his handsome face.

Nothing new there. All Pure Borns looked down on their Drone counterparts. They thought since Drones were made transformed from humans they didn't deserve to have the same rights and privileges as those who were born vampire.

"Well, my dad is dead, so he's not exactly calling himself anything these days." He scratched his head, making a big show of acting like a dumbass. "I mean, I *guess* he could if he were a zombie or a ghoul or something. But last time I visited his grave, it looked intact, so I'm pretty sure he stayed dead. Although if he were a ghoul, I doubt he'd be going around shouting, *My son is Micah*. Last I knew, ghouls are pretty selfish and all they care about is feeding off rotting flesh. Since I'm not dead, he'd probably just ignore me. Which would make for one sucky family reunion if you ask me. Of course, if he—"

The taller one let out a low growl and then made a slicing motion for silence. "We have a warrant for your arrest."

"Really? For what?" Micah cocked one brow. Again, not surprising since the Pure Born Vampire Regulation Force, or the VRF as they were called, had a bounty on nearly every member of Eric's clan. The only shocking thing was that they had the balls to enter Detroit to try to arrest someone. Before tonight, the VRF were content to cool their

heels and hope that they'd catch any Drones foolish enough to venture outside of the city limits.

"You're wanted for murder, theft, arson and terrorist acts."

"Ah, I see." He gave an understanding nod before he did the scratching thing again. "Which arson?"

The Pure Born paused, clearly thrown off by Micah's question. "There was more than one?"

"Well...yeah." Micah shrugged. Now, he wasn't just bidding for time, but having a blast. God, he'd almost forgot how much fun it was to bait VRF meatheads. "There was the farmhouse where I was held for a year as a living snack for some ferals, the railroad car a couple weeks ago that was transporting some Drone prisoners and the truck in the VRF envoy. That one was just last night." When a tick developed in the dark-haired vampire's jaw, Micah knew he'd finally succeeded in completely messing up their night. He was just getting started, too. "Oh wait! There was also the bar incident, I almost forgot that one."

"You burned down a bar?" the smaller Pure Born cut in.

"Well technically a warlock did, but I may have egged him a bit by betting him he couldn't juggle three fire balls at once. Plus, we didn't completely torch the place. We just singed it a bit. They never

even had to close down for repairs. Within an hour, it was business as usual. Although Alonzo had a few hairs missing from his head."

"Alonzo?" the blond let out a small sound of confusion as he slowly shook his head. The other one started to grind his teeth and was slowly caressing the trigger of his rifle.

Frankly, Micah was surprised they'd let him yammer on so long. "Yeah, that's the zombie who runs the bar. He's always had a real aversion to fire. Do you think all zombies are afraid of flames or is he just a special case because we keep torching his business?"

As one, both the Pure Borns primed their rifles.

Okay, so fun time was over.

"How about we just agree the warrant is for all the arsons and leave it at that?" the dark-haired vampire informed him in clipped tones. "What do you have to say for yourself concerning the other charges?"

They were actually *asking* him for more commentary. It didn't get better than that. "Oh, I did them all."

"You did?" the vampire paused, seeming to lose some of his bluster at Micah's easy confession.

"I sure did. Every last fucking one and I enjoyed them so goddamn much I had a boner the entire time." Micah gave a grin that he knew was cocky. He even added a wink just to add more fuel

to their anger.

"And did you also help to manufacture a weapon know as the *Sunlight Grenade*? Thus developing the capability of wiping out countless numbers of vampires?"

Micah tsked again. "The only ones I'm interested in killing is you Pure Borns."

The vampire raised one dark brow. "So, you're admitting that you've taken up arms against your government?"

"No, I took up arms against an organization that has enslaved and murdered my fellow Drones. I've refused to follow leaders who would take away all my basic rights and leave me with shit. What's more, I haven't felt one bit of remorse over any of it," Micah spat. While he knew, even if Ozzie didn't get there in time, they may still try to rough him up and arrest him, he realized they wouldn't kill him. Ever since they'd mentioned the *Sunlight Grenade*, he'd known they'd do anything to make sure he was taken in alive. For as much as the VRF feared the weapon, they coveted it and he was one of the few who knew how to manufacture the damn thing.

"You don't have to make this hard on yourself. If you just drop your weapons and turn yourself over to us, we won't harm you," the smaller Pure Born bargained.

"Yeah...the last time I was in the protective

custody of Pure Borns, I found myself locked in a cellar so I could be a fuck and suck toy for over a year. Call me crabby, but I don't find myself willing to go in for a repeat of all that."

The dark-haired one curled up his lips as his fangs dropped down in preparation for a fight. "I was hoping you'd be difficult."

With a grin, Micah pulled out a twin set of daggers from the holsters strapped to his back. "Yeah, well I can't make it too easy on you. What would be the fun in that?" he said before he dropped down on one knee.

"Do you honestly think you can take us on by yourself?" the tallest one asked.

"Nope," Micah replied simply, seconds before the sound of claws skittering across the filth-encrusted floor reached them.

The Pure Borns took a step back, but they were already too late. A huge brown wolf jumped over Micah's head and landed in front of him. The animal crouched between Micah and the vampires in a protective manner. Arching its back, the wolf let out a low growl as it flashed its long, sharp canines.

One of the Pure Borns let out a soft whimper, while the other whispered, "I've never seen a werewolf that big before."

"That's because it's not a normal *were*. It's the half-breed, freak," the first one said as it stared at

Ozzie in wide-eyed horror.

Micah neither felt, nor showed any fear of the huge wolf. Instead, he just cocked his head to the side. "It took you long enough to get here, Ozzie."

The wolf turned around and let out a huffing sound that came off as an *I'm here now, aren't I? So, stop your bitching.*

"Did you have to wait until the last minute?" Micah retorted, more than a little ticked. A part of him knew Ozzie took his sweet time in hopes of proving a point to Micah.

Ozzie let out a low growl. This time, it sounded more annoyed than angry, but then again he aimed the growl at Micah.

The Pure Borns looked at each other, no doubt wondering how they managed to get saddled with an idiot Drone and his sidekick mutt.

Just as Micah was about ready to give them the chance to give up and leave, one of the vampires had to be stupid and get aggressive. It really wasn't that much—just a finger tightening on a trigger, but the move let Micah know the time for mercy had ended. "Damn! You assholes would have to make this violent," he said as he brought up the blades.

One of the Pure Borns shot at Ozzie. While vampires were always much quicker than werewolves, this jerk had a real surprise coming his way. Ozzie was in a class of his own. Since he

was half-vampire, half-werewolf, he'd been lucky enough to get the best talents from each. He jerked to the side, avoiding the bullet. Before the vampire could even defend himself, Ozzie had him pinned to ground.

The other enemy let out a choked cry of fear as he stared in horror at the attack. When Ozzie let out a growl, the vampire jumped, the gun falling from his hands and clattering to the floor. Suddenly, he seemed to remember that Micah was still there. Pulling out a dagger of his own, he fixed Micah with a gaze that was equal parts panic and anger. He no doubt assumed it would be easy to take Micah down—that he posed no real threat. Micah may be a vampire, but he still had a small, slender build compared to other paranormals.

The Pure Born let out a yell as he swung his weapon in a long, downward arch.

Micah brought up his weapons, crossing them over his head so they caught the other vampire's blade. For one heart-pounding moment, they stayed that way, frozen in battle while they waited to see who would make the next move.

Then the other vampire let out a gurgling cry. His opponent glanced away long enough to see what was happening, which gave Micah the opening he'd been waiting for. Sweeping one foot around, he took out the vampire's feet. It didn't knock him completely to the ground, but it

unsettled him enough to make him drop his guard.

Micah took immediate advantage. With one, quick practiced move, he plunged one of his blades deep into his enemy's chest. As soon as the metal pierced his heart, the Pure Born's body vaporized with a blinding flash. In less than a second, Micah reduced the vampire to nothing but a pile of ash.

Another bright light let Micah know that Ozzie had his finished battle, too. Micah stared down at the pile of ash at his feet. Despite his earlier boast to the Pure Borns, unwanted remorse momentarily choked him up and he blinked several times. It didn't matter how many times he'd gone into battle, he always felt that small twinge of regret whenever he had to kill.

A small *woof* was his only warning before a heavy weight hit him square in the chest and brought him down to the ground. Micah ended up on his back, gazing up into the wolf's amber eyes. It had only been recently that Ozzie had regained his ability to shift into his wolf form and it still struck Micah as odd that it was actually his mate inside all that fur and teeth.

"I'm fine. Let me up," Micah grouched as he playfully batted at the wolf's head.

The wolf let out a snort before it slowly moved away. Micah scrambled to his feet and by the time

he finished brushing the dirt off his clothes, Ozzie had transformed back into his human form.

Micah paused, hands in mid-brush as he took in the pure raw sensuality of his mate. Even though they'd been together for several months now, Micah still felt a jolt of arousal at how Ozzie's tall, muscular body filled out his black cargo pants and shirt in a way that put all the other males in their clan to shame. The uniqueness of his short hair that seemed to be every shade of brown at once. His amber eyes, which never seemed to miss any detail, no matter how small it may seem. Micah didn't think there was a male out there that was even half as hot as his mate.

Ozzie slowly shook his head. "Don't you dare give me those fuck-me eyes. Not when I'm so pissed at you."

Micah ran the tip of his tongue over his lips as he continued to drink in the image of Ozzie. Damn, he really did love that body. The best thing was, Micah knew how every inch of it tasted, was intimately familiar with every dip and crevice. "Don't be mad at me," he pleaded, even though he realized he probably deserved it. It had been foolish to go off without backup.

Ozzie moved in closer so his taller body pressed against Micah's thin frame.

Micah shivered the first time he'd been intimidated by Ozzie's daunting build. Now, a

thrill went through him whenever he faced the prospect of Ozzie overpowering him.

"I'd have thought that you'd know better than to go off on your own." Ozzie took a couple of steps forward, forcing Micah to back pedal until his spine was pressed against the wall. God knows what kind of crap coated the shredded wallpaper, but at the moment, filth was the last thing on Micah's mind.

Micah tilted his head up so their lips were inches apart. "I knew you'd eventually track me down. Besides, I may be small, but you know I can take care of myself."

"What if it had been a half dozen Pure Borns instead of just two?"

Micah nibbled on his bottom lip. Ozzie did have a point there. It was on the tip of his tongue to admit the true reason for his solo jaunt out, but he refrained. If Ozzie knew his true intention, he'd find himself dragged home, then tied to the bed, and not in a good way.

Just the thought of ropes, with him at Ozzie's mercy, set off Micah's arousal again. Nothing felt better after a good fight than a nice hard fuck—the perfect combination to the adrenaline high that always came from combat.

All the fear, anxiety and stress from the night melted away as Micah leaned in closer so he could better drink in Ozzie's scent. The warm, spicy

smell that marked his mate always served to soothe Micah even as it set his body on fire.

Micah rocked forward on the balls of his feet so his body could rub against Ozzie's larger more muscular one. Ozzie tensed and, for a second, Micah thought he'd pull away and start yelling again. Instead, Ozzie went still and seemed to hold his breath.

Even though Micah knew they should go right back to headquarters—that more VRF soldiers could show up at any moment, he was helpless to his need. Hell, he didn't even care they were still in the filthy house. All that mattered was getting Ozzie's cock inside him.

CHAPTER TWO

Ozzie could sense Micah's arousal as if it were his own. Even though he tried to fight it and not respond, one twist of Micah's hips shredded his iron control. The movement caused Micah's erection to brush against Ozzie's thigh and in that moment, all anger fled, leaving behind blinding desire. Still, Ozzie tried to fight it. With an iron grip, he held Micah's waist to make him stop. "Not now."

Micah parted his lips slightly, showing off his still-extended fangs.

The site of them never failed to turn Ozzie on. Ozzie let out a low groan as his cock pressed painfully against the zipper of his uniform pants. "I mean it, Micah. We're too exposed here."

A frustrated sound burst from Micah's mouth. "Please, I need you."

The way Micah looked, his eyes so passion-infused they were nearly black and his cheeks

flush with want, Ozzie knew he couldn't refuse. Ozzie growled low in his throat before he grabbed a handful of Micah's short, brown hair. Giving it a gentle tug so Micah's head tipped further back, Ozzie began to lower his mouth. Once their lips were a mere breath apart, he warned, "Don't think this gets you off the hook." Before Micah could respond, Ozzie claimed his mouth in a hard kiss.

Micah dropped his weapons, the blades making a loud clanging sound, before he fisted Ozzie's shirt and started to rub against him.

God, Ozzie loved it when Micah got this worked up. Not that he complained when Micah went the nice and tender route, but it always gave him a heady sense of power to know he made his sometimes-introverted mate lose control.

"Fuck me, now. Here," Micah pleaded between kisses.

Ozzie cast a dubious glance around the filthy ground. "Are you sure?"

Micah thrust his hips forward, the movement edged with desperation. "Yes, we can do it quickly. I just can't wait until we get back home, please."

Ozzie still hesitated.

"Come on. It's not like you didn't already tackle me and get me dirty."

With a nod, Ozzie put a firm hand on Micah's chest and pushed him back. "Fine, but we do this

my way. I'm in control."

"Okay," Micah readily agreed before trying to go in for another kiss.

Ozzie kept him back. "I want to hear you say the words."

"You're in control," Micah replied, his voice heavy with passion. "I promise to obey you."

"If only we followed that rule all the time. Maybe then I wouldn't have to track you down over half the city."

Micah may have whispered something that sounded like *for you* before Ozzie silenced him with another kiss. Micah instantly responded, his tongue darting out to caress Ozzie's fangs.

The touch shot straight to Ozzie's cock, making him growl in anticipation. Not breaking the lip lock, Ozzie reached between them to start fumbling with the zipper of Micah's pants. Once he had it undone, Ozzie tugged hard, not caring if he popped the button still holding the fly together. When he encountered bare skin instead of the confining cotton of briefs, he smiled against Micah's lips. "I love it when you make it easier for me." He reached in and firmly grasped Micah's shaft.

"Thank you," Micah gasped, the word coming out strangled as Ozzie gave a good, hard squeeze.

"You like that, don't you?"

"You know I do." Micah moaned, his body

trembling.

Their kissing had been so violent, a small bead of blood had collected on the vampire's bottom lip. Ozzie couldn't resist dipping down so he could lap it up. Once the taste of his mate's blood washed over his taste buds, Ozzie let out a moan of his own. Pulling in Micah's bottom lip, Ozzie sucked in hard, wanting to milk as much of the addicting essence in as possible.

Since he knew they didn't have time for a proper feeding, Ozzie settled for giving one last pull as he ran the back of his fingers over Micah's carotid pulse. He made a mental vow that once they got back to their quarters, he'd pin Micah down on the bed and feed until they were both lightheaded. It took everything he had to let go of Micah's lip and pull back.

Micah let out a sound of distress and brought searching hands up only to drop them when Ozzie gave a reproachful shake of his head.

"I didn't give you permission to grab me, did I?" he demanded in the hard voice he knew Micah secretly craved.

"Sorry." Micah ran his tongue along his swollen bottom lip.

This movement alone made Ozzie want to command the younger man to his knees, had it not been for the dirty floor. "Take off one boot," Ozzie ordered as he started to undo his own pants.

Pulling his cock out, he gave it a few strokes.

Micah hesitated, confusion making him even more endearing. "One?"

Ozzie nearly laughed. "Trust me. This will be the best way for me to get at your sweet ass while not making you touch this floor without boots on."

Micah shrugged before he bent over to obey, his trembling fingers working the laces.

Once he had it undone, Ozzie helped him balance on one foot so he could take off the boot. With that taken care of, Ozzie slid Micah's pants down to his ankles.

"Oh, I get it," Micah said with an embarrassed flush as he pulled the sock-covered foot free from his pant leg.

"Wrap your legs around me and hang on tight," Ozzie commanded before he slammed Micah's back against the wall again.

Micah immediately obeyed, his strong, muscular legs sliding perfectly around Ozzie's waist.

Ozzie rewarded him with a brief kiss. Ozzie's cock brushed against the Micah's ass, making them both moan with desire. Breaking the kiss, Ozzie brought three fingers to Micah's mouth. "Suck them, make sure you get them good and wet."

Again, Micah obeyed, his lips parting.

Ozzie slid his fingers into the warmth of Micah's mouth, his breath hitching as he felt the velvet slide of his mate's tongue. "That's it, babe, suck them hard. While you're doing it, think about where I'm going to be using them next."

Micah's eyes flared with passion as he continued to use his mouth on Ozzie's fingers. At the same time, he clawed at Ozzie shoulders, almost as if he couldn't get their bodies close enough together to suit him.

After a few moments, Ozzie pulled his hand free and reached between them so he could start circling Micah's hole. If they had been in the privacy of their room, Ozzie would have taken more time and been gentle. Seeing as how they didn't have time to play around, Ozzie quickly thrust one finger inside Micah's willing body.

"Oh, fuck," Micah yelled, his hands now digging painfully into Ozzie shoulders. Not that Ozzie minded it, especially when Micah rocked back.

"More. Hurry."

Ozzie didn't know if that *hurry* came from Micah's building desire or the need to get things done before they were discovered. Whatever the reason, Ozzie responded, adding a second and finally a third finger.

"Fuck me now," Micah growled as his legs tightened around Ozzie.

"Do I need to remind you who's in charge?" Ozzie warned as he twisted his wrist and curled his fingers.

Micah's eyes widened as he let out a cry of pleasure when Ozzie brushed against his sweet spot. "Sorry, I'll be good."

Ozzie snorted. "That'll be the day." He did move his fingers out, however. Spitting on his palm, Ozzie slicked his cock. It wasn't exactly the best lubricant, but it would do in this circumstance. Gazing into Micah's eyes, he asked, "What am I going to do with you?"

Micah gave a slightly goofy smile. "Love me?"

God help Ozzie, but he did love the vampire — loved him so much that it sometimes scared Ozzie stupid. At the moment, it just made him want to take his mate with a fierce possessiveness. Letting out a low growl that sounded more animal than not, he thrust his cock into Micah with one hard push.

Micah let out a grunt before he hissed, "Yes, just that like."

After that, the conversation became reduced to moans and whispered encouragements as Ozzie pounded Micah into the wall. And he literally *did* slam Micah in so hard, a long crack developed in the drywall.

Feeling Micah tense up, Ozzie quickly reached between them and grabbed his mate's cock with

his hand. Nothing stained black t-shirts worse than semen and they did have to walk through a vampire filled building on the way to the shower and a fresh change of clothes. He was just in time to catch the mess as Micah shot off.

It only took Ozzie a couple more thrusts before he found his own release, shouting Micah's name so loudly, it echoed through the empty house.

After a few seconds, Micah lowered his legs. "I guess we should get back," he said, his voice still a little breathless.

"Yeah, we need to tell Eric about the VRF sending soldiers into the city." Ozzie stepped back and grabbed a rag from his pocket so he could make a clumsy attempt to clean up. A reluctant smile tugged at his lips as he watched Micah try to keep his balance on his one-booted foot and still get his clothes adjusted at the same time. Then Ozzie's gaze drifted back to the spot where'd they fought the Pure Borns and all his good humor fled. "What were you doing out here tonight?" he demanded as he glanced over just in time to see Micah finish zipping up his pants.

Kneeling down, he pulled on his boot and started to lace it up. "Since I had the night off, I just thought I could get out of the clan and get some fresh air. With so many of us living there now, sometimes I feel crowded."

"If that were the case then you would have

asked me to go with you. So why don't you try answering my question again?" Ozzie could tell whenever Micah was getting ready to lie. The vampire would start worrying his bottom lip. Most of the time, Ozzie thought the action looked damn cute, right now, it annoyed the hell out of him. "What kind of mess are you trying to get into now?" Ozzie demanded as he resisted the urge to grab Micah by the shoulders and shake some sense into his mate. Even though Micah had been through a lot of shit since he'd been turned, he still clung to a bit of his human naivety. Not much, but enough to get him killed.

Ozzie glanced down at the twin piles of ash and his heart did a painful gallop. The thought of Micah meeting the same fate had Ozzie almost to his knees in worry. He looked back over at the man he loved more than life itself and had to resist the urge to wrap him up in a protective embrace.

Fuck, who was he kidding? He wanted to do a whole lot more than just hold him. Even mad, all Ozzie had to do was gaze down into Micah's beguiling blue eyes and he was lost. After years of laughing at his older brothers as they bent to the whims of their mates, Ozzie now understood how it felt to love someone so much that you'd do anything for them. He reached out and brushed away a lock of Micah's brown hair, allowing his fingers to linger so he could savor the softness.

"I was just out testing a new weapon," Micah explained before he started worrying his lip again.

Pain sliced through Ozzie's chest as he realized Micah had lied yet again. He decided to let it slide for now. They'd already wasted too much time as it was, so they needed to get their asses in gear instead of staying around and chatting. Once they got back to the safety the clan, Micah would fess up, even if Ozzie had to pry it out of him. Ozzie shifted his hand so it cupped Micah's cheek. "You could have been hurt."

Micah's lips curled up into such a gentle smile, Ozzie almost had trouble believing the man had just killed someone moments before.

"You worry too much."

Maybe so, but Ozzie had seen a lot in his lifetime. Unlike Micah, he'd been born into the paranormal world so he had a wealth of knowledge as far as the mean, wicked and deadly went. He knew damn well that his concerns weren't unfounded.

Their mouths were still close together and Micah stood up on tiptoe so he could brush his lips against Ozzie's. As soon as the familiar warm taste of his mate invaded Ozzie's senses, the anger left his body. He pulled back and asked, "Are you trying to distract me again?"

Micah showed no shame as he gave an eager nod. "Is it working?"

Ozzie thrust his hips forward so his already, half-erect cock brushed against Micah's stomach. There was something to being a vampire-werewolf and an amazing recovery time ranked near the top. "Does this answer your question?"

"Hmm..." Micah hummed, a thoughtful look passing over his face. There was no mistaking the mirth in his gaze though. "I think it's a start. Why don't we go back home and I can really make you forget how bad I've been?"

"As much as I would love to, Eric needs to see you first." Ozzie almost laughed at the look of profound disappointment that came over Micah's face. Served the brat right.

"What did I do now?"

"Besides sneaking off? I don't know. He just said to find you and get your ass into his office ASAP." He could almost see the wheels turning in Micah's head as he attempted to figure out what he'd done to earn Eric's summon. Knowing his mate, it could be a number of things. While Micah and his Drone soldier team may be the smartest group in the clan, they also had the nasty habit of finding trouble.

"I guess I better get in there, huh?"

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Ozzie smiled despite still being worried about Micah secretiveness.

They quickly made their way back to the large

once-abandoned warehouse that served as the Clan dwelling. An equally large building next door served as home for a coven of white magics who'd joined forces with Eric's group.

While there were many different kinds of paranormals who lived in the clan, Ozzie was the only half-werewolf, half-vampire. But then again, he was the only one of his kind—period. Such a creature was considered so taboo with both vampires and werewolves, all other halfplings had been hunted down and killed by their various packs. The only reason why Ozzie was still breathing and kicking had been the wolves' healthy respect for Eric. At one time, his clan had been small and hardly worth a second glance. Over the last couple of years, however, the group had grown. That, coupled with their unique, but deadly weapons, made them one of the more powerful Drone clans in the States.

After being turned to a vampire, Ozzie had spent a year on the run before he'd found Micah. Within days of being with the smaller, younger vampire, Ozzie had allowed himself to be talked into living with the Drones. Instead of shunning him as so many others had, Eric and his clan had accepted Ozzie as one of their own. Not only had they given him a place to live, but they'd fully taken him into their fold. He even served in their ranks, fighting side-by-side with them in their war

against the Pure Borns.

As they walked inside, Ozzie allowed his gaze to sweep the large common room that stood just inside the front doors. Even though Ozzie had been living with the Drones for several months, he still felt a moment of awe whenever he looked at the modifications they'd made to the old human building. They had what amounted to a small functioning city, complete with a school, medical wing, training facilities and separate living quarters. It was hard to believe the place had once been just one of the many deserted warehouses that dotted the Detroit River.

While the clan wasn't the same as the pack he'd grown up in, it did have its own homey appeal. Several vampires moved around, going about the activities of normal life. Civilians mixed in with soldiers, laughter would sometimes burst through the hum of conversations and the place seemed alive with various activities. There were even small groups of children running around, their shrilling giggles bringing a smile to his face. One of Ozzie's buddies, Kane, waved from across the large common room.

"Hey, Oz, can you come help me with this training exercise? We're instructing a new group of fledglings and they need a lot of work."

"Sure, be right there." He turned to look at Micah. "You going to be okay?"

A brief flicker of emotion passed over Micah's face before he smiled. Ozzie couldn't help but grow concerned when he saw the grin didn't quite reach Micah's eyes. Lately, something had seemed to be bothering his mate. Most nights, the vampire tossed and turned for hours before finally going to sleep and his usual ever-ready humor had been absent. Before Ozzie could press to see what was bothering him, Micah nodded.

"Sure, I'm just going to go see what Eric wants and then put some time in at the workshop for a while."

Ozzie leaned down to give Micah a soft kiss. "Okay, but just promise me you won't go out on your own again. I worry about you."

Micah ran his tongue over his lips, as if savoring the lingering flavor of the kiss. "I swear I won't go out again tonight."

It wasn't until Micah had walked away that the last word of that sentence hit Ozzie—*tonight*. He knew then at that moment that Micah would be sneaking off again. Whatever he'd been out doing obviously hadn't been finished and there would be no stopping Micah until then. Dread settled heavily in Ozzie's stomach as he vowed to himself that he'd get Micah to tell him what was going on, even if it meant he had to tie the brat to the bed to force him to confess.

* * * *

It took every ounce of Micah's self-control not to bolt away before Ozzie changed his mind and started the interrogation again. Micah forced himself to maintain a casual attitude, but still held in an apprehensive breath until he turned into the long hallway leading to the offices and meeting rooms. Once there, Micah ducked into the first bathroom he came across.

He made sure to securely lock the door behind him before he rushed over to the sink. With shaking hands, he pulled a large hunting knife out from one of the inner pockets of his uniform. Wrapped around the blade was a long cloth that had once been white, but now had red stains covering it. As he unwound the fabric, the scent of blood slammed into his senses. Despite his nerves, his fangs dropped in response.

Shit, not good. Since he'd only been a vampire for a few years, he still needed to feed daily. In his anxiety, he'd forgotten to drink from Ozzie when they'd first gotten up and now he was blood starved. Before long, the shakes would be setting in and then he'd be no good to anyone. It was not the best condition to be in to face Eric. Micah knew he'd need all his senses if he wanted to get anything across his leader. Eric could be more tenacious than a half-starved kobold when he

wanted to be.

Micah idly tapped on one fang with his tongue as he fought to get his shit together. While he could have tracked Ozzie down and easily remedied the situation, Micah dismissed that solution. The more time he spent around Ozzie, the more questions Ozzie would throw his way – questions he couldn't answer, just yet. Once everything was done and over and Micah had paid the price for the huge favor he'd asked. Once Micah had made everything finally right for Ozzie, then he'd explain everything. Until then, he had to keep everything close to his chest.

Now that the cloth was off, Micah found himself staring down at the blade. Dulling crimson stains marred the sliver, serving as a gruesome reminder of what he'd done. A ball of guilt and dread filled his throat, making him let out a choked sob.

"Come on, get it together. This isn't the first time you killed, for crying out loud," he chastised himself. Despite his words, his hands shook violently as he reached over and turned on the water.

As he washed the weapon, he took in a sharp breath that turned to a near whimper at the end. "Get a hold of yourself. It was a damn werejackal and you know how bad they usually are. It's not like you assassinated an innocent. They told you

the bastard had mauled humans for God's sake. You did the world a favor."

The pep talk didn't help. Maybe because while the werejackal had deserved to be killed, it still didn't set well in Micah's gut that he'd played executioner. He tried reminding himself again that the jackal had deserved to be eliminated, but that still didn't ease away the feeling of self-loathing. When he'd become a vampire, one of the first things he'd done was vow that he'd never become like the ferals who had captured him. Now, here he was, cleaning up the evidence of a homicide—or rather a jackal-cide.

Even after the blade was clean, Micah ran the water for several more minutes, almost as if the extra time would wash away what he'd done in the previous few hours.

Someone pounded on the door, the noise jerking him out of his daze. He quickly turned off the water and made sure he cleaned the sink of any traces of blood before he slid the knife back into his pocket. As he rushed from the bathroom, he nearly bowled into Dante Toren.

As always, Micah felt a sharp spike of fear when he found himself alone with the Pure Born vampire, even though the guy had an easygoing attitude. Under all the humor and smiles was a dangerous vibe that never failed to make the hair on the back of Micah's neck stand on end. Of

course, given his past, Micah never felt truly comfortable in the presence as *any* Pure Born, so it didn't take much for him to get the hinkies.

Micah worked hard to keep his feelings hidden. Not only was Dante mated to Micah's team leader, Brenden, but the Pure Born had been friends with Ozzie forever. He even knew Ozzie when he'd been just a normal werewolf. It was rumored that several years ago the Toren brothers had saved Ozzie's family from a harpy attack and that they'd been tight ever since.

Despite all that, Micah's survival instincts kicked in as he looked over Dante's shoulder to see if the vampire was alone. Dante never went far without his two brothers, Kane and Rafe, and they were almost as scary as Dante. The three of them together were enough to take down even the strongest of paranormals. Micah still had nightmares about the time he'd seen the brothers kill a gorgon. Granted, the bitch had just offed an innocent human family, but it'd chilled Micah at how quickly and efficiently the Torens had defeated her.

The problem was, Micah seemed to be the only nancy who feared the Toren brothers. The rest of the clan appeared to think the brother trio walked on water. To be fair, the Torens had always remained loyal to the Drones and they'd given up a lot to join the rebellion. Hell, Dante had played a

huge part in Micah's training.

He still couldn't shake his reservations though, which was yet another guilty secret he had. Damn, at this rate, he'd have to make up a spreadsheet just so he could keep track. With great effort, Micah plastered a smile on his face. "Sorry about bumping into you. The bathroom's all yours."

Dante's eyes narrowed. "You weren't doing anything funny in there, were you?"

Micah's stomach lurched in fear. "No, I was just taking a piss. I swear."

"Easy there, kiddo, I was just ribbing you." Something shifted in Dante's expression and he really pinned Micah with a probing glare. "However, now you really got me wondering."

Fuck! Micah bit back a groan as he realized Dante had just been making yet another one of his off color jokes. He hadn't suspected anything. Or he hadn't until Micah had to go and overreact.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Dante asked as he leaned one arm against the wall.

The move partially trapped Micah in, but it was just as effective as a set of handcuffs. Sure, he could try to push his way through, but they both knew that Dante was much stronger and faster. Not only that, but Dante was also a tenacious bastard who wouldn't let something drop. Once, Micah had seen the vampire chase a kobold

halfway across the city just because the thing had called him fat and ugly.

"No." Micah averted his gaze. He'd never been a good liar and he knew Dante would probably see right through him. It had been out of sheer will and desperation that he'd managed to fib his way through his encounter with Ozzie earlier. Now, with his nerves even more on edge, Micah doubted he'd be able to give a repeat performance good enough to fool the savvy Dante.

"No, you don't have something to tell me, or no, you do have something, but you're refusing to tell me what it is?"

That comment caused Micah to look back up as confusion took the place of fear. "Huh?" Too late. He realized his mistake and found himself locking gazes with Dante. Micah repressed a shiver as he found himself paralyzed, much like a gazelle would as it found itself cornered by a lion. Instinct made him try to take a step back, only to bump into the wall.

"Micah, after you escaped from the Pure Borns who held you captive, where did you go?" Dante demanded in a soft tone.

"You already know the answer to that one. I kind of ghosted around until I found my way to Detroit," Micah replied as he wondered where Dante was going with this odd question.

"And who found you—half-starved and scared

shitless as you huddled behind a dumpster in the worst part of the city?"

Micah swallowed hard, now realizing with sickeningly clarity where Dante was heading with the conversation. "Your brother, Rafe."

"Who taught you how to shoot a rifle and actually hit what you were aiming at?"

"Kane did," Micah confessed in a choked voice.

"Right, and when you went on your first mission and got covered in kobold guts, who cleaned you up and then took you to the bar so you could get drunk off your ass?"

"You." Micah's chest clenched as he recalled how upset he'd been that night because all the carnage had brought back memories of his captivity. Dante had never looked down at him in his moment of weakness. Instead, the strong, kick-ass vampire had gently led him down the road to the bar and spent the rest of the night being a friend.

"Then why are you so scared of us?" Dante asked, a brief look of hurt flickering over his usually cocky eyes.

Micah wanted to melt into a pile of guilt. The Toren brothers had done a lot for him and not just the things Dante had mentioned. When Micah's human family had been under attack, Dante had been part of the team who rescued and brought them back to the safety of the clan. In addition, all

three of the brothers had saved Micah's ass countless times out in the field. "It's not anything you guys did," Micah mumbled, ducking his head so his shame wasn't evident to Dante.

"Then what is it?" Dante persisted, just like Micah knew he would.

Micah gestured to the open bathroom door. "Didn't you have to take a piss or something?"

Dante grinned, showing a flash of fang. "I'm very good at holding it, so we have plenty of time to finish this."

Micah let out a low hiss of disappointment as he nervously shifted his feet. Since he knew there'd be no getting out of it, he finally confessed, "It's just that it's still hard sometimes."

Dante scratched his head. "You're going to have to expound a little further because I'm not getting it."

If the circumstances had been different, Micah may have ribbed Dante for using a five-dollar word like *expound*. Not that Dante was dumb by any stretch. In fact, he was probably one of the sharpest members of the clan. He just wasn't big on vocabulary. Micah took a deep breath before saying, "The vampires who tortured and turned me were Pure Borns. I know it's stupid and wrong, but sometimes I get a little jumpy when I'm around..." He trailed off, unsure of how to continue.

Dante finished, "My kind."

"I realize it's bad for me to lump you in with those jerks just because of who you are. It makes me no better than the VRF. I'm so sorry," Micah rushed out desperately. In spite of his stupid hang-ups, Micah never wanted to hurt Dante.

Dante reached out and put a comforting hand on Micah's shoulder. "It's okay. Believe it or not, I understand some of your anxiety. Did you know that my brothers and I were in a paranormal prison for five years?"

Micah gave a small nod. "I'd heard something about it."

"Well, I still carry some of those fears with me. It's a battle I fight with every day."

"Really?" Micah nearly let out a sob of relief. If someone as strong as Dante sometimes got scared, then maybe that didn't make Micah such a pussy after all.

"Have you talked to Ozzie about this?"

Micah wrinkled his nose in confusion. "What? Tell him that I secretly want to piss my pants when I'm alone with his best friends? No."

Dante gave a tiny smile. "I mean, does he know a part of you remains behind in that damn cellar?"

"There is no cellar anymore. I burned down that place," Micah protested as he recalled the elation he'd felt as he watched the house of horrors and his tormentors being consumed in

flames. How good it was to know that, not only would they not be able to hurt others anymore, but that he'd finally got some revenge for all they'd done to him.

"You know what I mean. Have you told him that you have issues?"

"Since a week doesn't go by where I don't wake him up screaming from nightmares, I'm sure he has a pretty good inkling."

"I think it's more than that. You should try talking to Ozzie and letting him know you're having trouble dealing."

Micah shook his head. "I'm not telling Ozzie shit and neither are you. He's got enough of his own problems to handle without worrying about mine."

"He's your mate and he'd want to know," Dante argued as he reached out to pat Micah's shoulder again.

Micah shrugged off his touch. "Ozzie's still too upset about the way his pack cut him off and I don't want to add to his stress."

"Ozzie doesn't care about his pack anymore."

"Yes, he does. It's all he thinks about some days," Micah spoke around the lump in his throat.

"I'm not going to say it didn't hurt Ozzie when his pack turned on him for being turned half-vampire, but now that you're in his life, he's happy."

God, how Micah wished that were true. "I thought so at first, too, but I've noticed how sad he gets sometimes. How he looks around the clan and gets this wishful look on his face, like he's searching for something and it's just not there."

"You're wrong, both about that and for not talking to him about your issues."

Now Micah was the one who reached out for Dante as he grabbed the vampire's arm in a desperate bid for him to understand. "Just give me a week, please? I'm working on something that will get Ozzie back into his pack. Once that's taken care of, I'll tell him everything. I promise."

Dante narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What do you mean you're working on something to get him back in? I hate to break it to you, kiddo, but it doesn't work that way. Once the pack kicks you out, it's for good. There are no second chances with wolves."

Micah silently cursed himself, realizing he'd revealed too much. It wouldn't take someone like Dante long to put everything together. "Never mind, I'll just forget my plans. It's just one of my crazy theories and probably never would have worked anyway."

"Here's another thing I hate to break to you, sport." Dante leaned in and said the rest in a loud stage whisper, "You're a piss poor liar."

The blood in Micah's body seemed to freeze.

This time the fear didn't come from who Dante was, but what he now knew. Even though Dante didn't have all the pieces yet, he did have enough to crumble Micah's carefully constructed plans. *I didn't come this far only to fail now.* "Please?" Micah begged. "Don't say anything to Ozzie."

Dante gave a slight shake of his head, although he did seem sympathetic. "It's never a good idea to hide things from your mate. Brenden and I found that out the hard way."

"It's not like I'm lying about having an affair or anything. Look at it more as a surprise gift."

"How about this? You 'splain to me what in the hell you've got going and I'll decide for myself whether or not to keep your secret."

Micah debated inside his head for several seconds about just how much he should share with Dante. In the end, he decided to go with the bare minimum. No sense in giving up too many details, unless pressed. "I have a contact inside the pack who claims he can get Ozzie back in."

Dante crossed his arms over his chest. "And he's helping you out of the goodness of his little doggy heart?"

"Wolf," Micah corrected automatically. Werewolves took great offense to being called dogs. "Yes, he said he and Ozzie went back a ways and that it would be a way to help an old friend out."

"Bullshit, he could care less about you or Ozzie. He wants something and I'm pretty sure it's not good. I can already tell whoever your contact in the pack is, isn't making it easy. Whatever you were just out there doing, has you so jacked up, you're shaking just thinking about it. All that fear you're feeling right now isn't from being around me."

Yup, Dante was way too smart for Micah's own good, just like he'd suspected. Part of Micah yearned to spill. To unload all his guilt, worries and stress with Dante. It would feel so damn good to share his burden with somebody. Instead, Micah clamped his lips together and kept it all in. Ozzie and Dante were so close, there'd be no way Dante wouldn't tell if he knew everything.

Dante let out a low curse. "Fine, I'll give you two days. That's it. After that, if you haven't come clean with Ozzie, I'm going to him. I can respect you wanting to help him out, but I'm not about to stand by and watch one of my closest friend's mates commit suicide."

Before Micah could respond, Dante stormed off. Micah stood there, heart pounding and gut clenching. He realized, not for the first time, that'd he'd gotten in way over his head and there may be no way out.

CHAPTER THREE

Micah's mood didn't get any better by the time he'd knocked on the door to Eric's office. He continued to debate the choices he'd been making, his mind so troubled he almost missed Eric's voice telling him to enter.

Once Micah walked in, his evening grew worse. Sitting perched on the edge of the desk, pretty as you please, was Micah's human sister, Sydney. She was facing Eric, who was seated in his office chair, her legs so close to the Drone leader, they brushed against his shoulder. The blatant intimacy nearly made Micah sputter with anger.

Human or not, clan life had agreed with Sydney. Back home, she'd always looked tired from the long hours of trying to work full time as a waitress while going to school. Now her large blue eyes seemed to have a new life and instead of her old work uniform, she wore a pair of black dress pants and red blouse. She even styled her

brown hair differently, opting for a more loose, curly look instead of the old ponytail. That still didn't mean Micah wanted to see her practically sitting on his leader's lap though.

How Sydney managed to find a spot to plant her ass on Eric's messy desk was a miracle. While Eric led the clan with a clean, efficiency, his office had always needed to see the business end of a *Dustbuster*. This time, however, Micah frowned as he did a double take. For once, the desktop was clean of clutter. The wood even had a shine to it as if it'd been recently polished.

Micah shot Sydney a questioning glance that she chose to ignore before he turned his attention back to Eric. The clan leader stared back at him, his cool blue eyes revealing nothing. His usually carefully groomed blond hair was messed on the top a bit, almost as if someone had been running their hands through it. Micah's stomach flipped as he realized that probably was exactly what had been happening before he walked in and interrupted.

Shocked, he glanced back over at Sydney who at least had the good graces to lower her gaze as she fiddled with her nails. "What's going on?" Micah demanded, working hard to keep his tone calm.

"We'll discuss that in a moment. First off, I want to know what you were doing going off

without backup. I thought you'd learned your lesson on that," Eric replied, his gaze narrowing dangerously.

Micah had become well acquainted with look and it indicated he was in trouble. Surly Eric wasn't about to dress him down while Sydney was in the room, though. "It was my night off, so it's not like I was shirking my duties or anything."

"I have to disagree with you on that one. One of your responsibilities, whether you are on duty or not, is to make somebody aware of your location every time you leave the dwelling," Eric snapped.

Alrighty, so Micah was going to get his ass handed to him in front of a witness. That just had to be the cherry on his crap-day sundae. "Ozzie knew —"

Eric slammed his hand down on the desk, cutting off Micah's lie. "Ozzie had no fucking clue where you were. I was with him when we discovered you'd taken off. If he hadn't been able to track you as fast as he did, you'd have found yourself captive just like the last time you wandered away from the clan dwelling. I can guarantee things wouldn't have turned out as nice as they did the previous time either."

"What happened last time?" Sydney asked.

"Didn't your brother tell you how he and his mate met?" Eric gave a false smile.

When Sydney shook her head, Micah hastened

to explain, "I didn't want to give her the wrong impression of Ozzie."

She crossed her arms over her chest, kind of reminding him of the stance Dante had taken earlier. "Oh, now you're telling me for sure."

Sure, right after you tell me why you're practically sitting in Eric's lap, Micah yearned to fire back, but knew that comment would only serve to piss Eric off even more. Micah turned his head away and refused to answer.

Eric said, "Micah thought it would be a good idea to go off on his own and test out a new weapon. Along the way, he encountered a pissed off half-werewolf, half-vampire who had a grudge."

Sydney gasped, "Ozzie?"

"Yep," Eric confirmed grimly.

"Did he hurt Micah?"

"No...not much," Micah admitted begrudgingly.

"He just knocked Micah unconscious. Then he took your darling brother back to his house and tied him up in the basement."

"Just for a day until we reached an understanding, then he untied me."

Eric cocked his head to the side. "*Understanding?* Is that the kinky nickname you and Ozzie gave it?"

Micah's mouth opened in shock. "Way to share

my private life in front of my sister. Why don't you just crack out the dry erase board and draw her a diagram or two while you're at it?"

Eric appeared unfazed by Micah's outrage. "My point is, you of all people should know better than to leave the clan dwelling without a buddy."

"One day?" Sydney gaped at him, obviously still stuck on the revelation of her baby brother hooking up. "You slut!"

"It's not like I did that kind of thing all the time," Micah defended. "Before Ozzie, I kept to myself."

"Sure you did," she drawled out slowly.

Micah gave her a sarcastic smirk before he said to Eric, "Did you hear who we ran into out there?"

"No, just that you guys did encounter some trouble." Eric's expression grew from angry to all business.

Not that Micah thought he was off the hook by any stretch. He knew there'd still be some form of punishment coming his way. "It was a pair of VRF soldiers. They were in uniform and they tried to take me in."

Sydney gasped. "For what?"

Micah shrugged, "Nothing much...arson, treason, murder."

She closed her eyes with a heavy sigh. "I told you it was a mistake to burn down that bar."

"I only singed it," Micah protested, echoing his

earlier excuse to the Pure Borns.

"You did much more than that," she snorted. "It took me half the night to calm down poor Alonzo. Even Zech felt bad for the bartender and you know how much he hates zombies."

"I wasn't the one who lost control of the fireball. That was Kale," Micah pointed out.

"Remind me again why I let you out—*period*, backup be damned." Eric rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Micah guilty....well, almost. Eric had just moved his hand to Sidney's thigh, so Micah was short of sympathy at the moment. "Because aside from Brenden, I'm your best weapon maker and you would be lost without me?"

Eric growled, but didn't call out his boast. "Charges aside, I don't like the fact that a couple of VRF soldiers felt comfortable walking around our city. It makes me wonder if the werewolves' hold on Detroit is beginning to slip."

Even though Micah had the same thoughts, his gut still clenched at hearing Eric speak them. Then his gut did a nice, sloppy flip as he watched Sydney put a comforting hand on the leader's shoulder.

"What would happen then?"

"Without the wolves protecting our asses, we may as well pin bulls eyes to our asses and say a final prayer," Micah supplied grimly. No sense in

sugar coating the truth.

"Do you guys really get along with the wolves to begin with?" she asked.

Eric covered her hand with his own. "No, the only reason they've given us sanctuary this far is because, while they may dislike us, they loath the VRF. Giving us protection is their way of giving the Pure Borns the ultimate middle finger."

"Up until recently, the VRF have been too scared to move in on this territory," Micah added.

"Until tonight," Eric finished blandly.

"So what do we do now?" Sydney looked at Eric as she spoke.

Micah fought hard not to gag at the tender glances the two shared, even more than he tried not to curse at the way she'd said *we*. Almost as if she and Eric were partners or something.

"We beef up patrols, get things ready in case we have to make for a quick evacuation," Eric told her.

There they went with that *we* crap again. Micah forced himself to keep a calm façade. Meanwhile, inside, he was so pissed he had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold in a string of colorful curse words. Although, if Eric kept getting all handsy with Sydney, Micah couldn't guarantee he'd be able to hold his temper for long. "Will we use the tunnels under the city?" Micah asked, pleased when his voice came out even instead of with a

hard bite of anger.

"Not unless necessary. Even though I've had some crews working to strengthen them, the tunnels are still old and unstable. I wouldn't feel comfortable escorting the entire clan through that mess. I think it would be better if we start plans to evacuate in stages. If the VRF is watching the city border, one or two vehicles are less likely to catch their attention than a whole convoy."

"Where will we go?" Sydney questioned.

"Ethan, the leader of the coven, and I just secured a couple of buildings in Pontiac. Since they used to house offices, it will take a lot of work to convert them, but they're stable and, more importantly, they're within a mile from a Hell's Mouth."

Micah couldn't believe how calmly Eric dropped that bombshell. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I'm with Micah," Sydney added. "I don't know what a Hell's Mouth is, but from the name alone, it doesn't sound good."

"That's because it's not. It's a gateway to Hell, so we'll have all kinds of interesting breeds of demons as our new neighbors," Micah cut in sarcastically.

"Ethan has used some of his more dubious magical connections to garner a deal with the demons. They've promised to leave us alone."

"If they're looking for a virgin sacrifice, you can count me out. As you already so helpfully informed my sister, I no longer fit in that category." Maybe it was a bit shitty of him to pop off with that remark, but Eric's hand had yet to leave Sydney's thigh, so Micah was fresh out of friendly.

"Enough, Micah," Sydney chastised.

"You two have been spending a lot of time together and I have a sneaky suspicion it's not just because Sydney's tutoring Misty," Micah observed. Misty was Eric's now nine-year old daughter.

"Eric asked me to help teach at the school and I agreed," Sydney beamed at the leader even as she spoke to Micah. She'd been going to college to get her teaching degree before she'd been forced to come live at the clan.

"That's good news," Micah replied. It had been because of his actions that the VRF targeted his family. It made him feel a little bit better to know that she'd been able to find some sense of acceptance with his clan. It still did little to soothe his suspicions about her and Eric, however.

"You're right though, Sydney and I have been together a lot and it's not because of her new position," Eric announced as brushed a kiss along the back of Sydney's knuckles.

It felt like all the air had been sucked from the

room as Micah's gaze honed in and locked on the dopey, lovesick expressions on their faces. "Sir?"

"I've fallen in love with your sister and I plan on taking her as my mate."

Anger surged through Micah and a low growl slipped past his lips before he could hold it back. "The fuck you are."

Sydney gasped. "Micah! What has gotten into you tonight?"

Micah chose to ignore her so he could focus his fury on Eric. "You can't claim her. In case you forgot, she's human."

Eric met his aggression, refusing to lower his gaze. "Not for long."

Just when he thought he couldn't have possibly get more pissed, Eric had to throw out the bombshell. "You better tell me that doesn't mean what I think it does."

Eric rose out of his chair and braced his hands on the top of his desk. "Do I need to remind you who your leader is?"

"No, sir," Micah spat. "But with all due respect, this is my family you're talking about."

"Micah...Eric and I have discussed this and we both know what we're getting into," Sydney soothed.

"Really? Did he tell you what happened to his first wife? That she died in the paranormal prison after she and Eric were sent there for having

Misty? Did he tell you that the VRF is so adamant Drones don't reproduce, that before the rebellion both Sable and Toni were forcibly sterilized?"

Sydney paled. "How dare you bring his first wife into this?"

"Because you have every right to know what you're getting yourself into, Sid. This won't be a normal marriage for you. Once you do this—once you become one of us, there is no going back. Drones are hated by most other paranormals and pitied by the rest. We have to spend every moment of our lives looking over our shoulders, waiting for the next attack. Why in the hell would you want to choose that life?"

She sprang onto her feet and came around the desk. Stepping in close to Micah, she gently cupped his cheek. "I'm doing it because I love him. Before I met Eric, my life was empty and I was just surviving. Now that I have him, everything suddenly seems so right."

Micah wanted to keep arguing, but then he looked into his sister's eyes and realized he didn't have it in him to smother the pure happiness he saw there. "The transformation hurts, you know. Some have been known to lose their minds because of the agony."

"Dahlia says she has some drugs to help me through the worst of it," Sydney said, referring to the clan doctor.

Eric added, "I promise you, she'll have the best care possible. Dahlia assured me that she can make it so Sydney sleeps through the whole thing."

"After you bite me, of course." Sydney gave Eric a shy grin. "I want to make sure I get to feel every second of that."

"Ew," Micah groused. "I could have gone on all day without hearing that."

"It serves you right for all those times I had to watch Ozzie making out with my baby brother," she teased.

Micah sighed, knowing he'd been beat. He still tried one last time though. "Are you really sure?"

"Immortality? Never growing old or fat? Super strength? I think I can live with that." She laughed before she wrapped her arms around his waist, her cheek resting on his chest. "I'm also doing it for you. I don't want you to have to watch all of us grow old and die. I can't stand the thought of you being alone again."

Micah hugged her back. "That's not going to happen. I have Ozzie now."

They embraced each other for a few more moments before Micah pulled back and asked, "When are you going to do it?"

"Tomorrow," Eric replied shortly.

Micah's throat grew dry with a fresh wave of anxiety. "So soon?"

"Yeah, we don't want to wait any longer to be together," Sydney said.

He nodded, worry making it hard to hold up a conversation. All he could think about was his own transformation. How much it had hurt. Near the end, he'd been pleading for someone to put a bullet in his head, just so his suffering would stop.

"It won't be the same as it was for you," Eric cut in, almost as if he could read Micah's mind. "You have to admit, after it's all over, it will be safer for her. Especially now that we suspect the VRF may attack. A human body is so frail and it would destroy me if something were to happen to Sydney when I know I could have prevented it by making her stronger through the transformation. Hell, if your mother wasn't so old, I'd think about changing her, too, just to protect her better."

Again, Micah nodded. Humans never survived long in the fucked up paranormal world. That was one of the reasons Drones were forbidden from contacting their human families. Micah had disobeyed that rule and now it had come back to bite him in the ass.

"I didn't mean for you to get mixed up in all this," he finally managed to whisper to her. He hadn't either. In a moment of weakness, he'd gone to visit his father's grave. While there, Sydney had stumbled upon Micah and then the worms were out of the great big, I'm-a-vampire-now can.

"I know you didn't, sweetie. None of us have ever blamed you." Sydney leaned up and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. "If it helps, I'm not sorry it happened. I would have never met Eric and Misty otherwise."

Micah's thoughts drifted to his brother. "What about Toby? Should I ask him if he wants to make the vampire leap?"

Sydney cleared her throat as she suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I already brought it up to him and he flat out refused. Give him time though. It's been harder for him to make the adjustment than me or Mom. Maybe once he's grown more comfortable with everything, he'll change his mind."

Somehow Micah doubted that. Toby hadn't exactly been thrilled to find out that, not only were there monsters, but his little brother was one. Even though he now lived at the clan, Micah didn't miss the looks of fear and distrust Toby occasionally shot in his direction. With a heavy sigh, Micah closed his eyes. He had a feeling the next couple of days were going to be a trial for all of them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Toby sat at the center table of the clan's cafeteria, trying, without much enthusiasm, to finish off the dinner special, turkey and gravy. He'd never been a picky eater, but even he couldn't get enthused by the mess in front of him. Because while the clan may be big and super efficient, a cafeteria was still a cafeteria and not one had ever turned out good turkey in any form.

Still he refused to give up. All the while he made to sure to keep his head tilted up slightly as he eyed all the vampires around him and tried damn hard not to feel like the lone gold fish in a tank full of piranhas.

Not that any of the vampires acted unfriendly toward him—just the opposite. Since he was Micah's older brother and everyone in the clan just *simply adored* Micah, they all treated Toby with the utmost respect. They went out of their way to make sure he had a job within the clan, that he

had plenty to eat and clean clothes. They'd even given him his own private bedroom. Sure, it may be the size of a shower stall, but it was his and afforded him some privacy—something that was in short supply when you lived in the same building as hundreds of others.

Still, he couldn't squelch that little bit of fear whenever he saw the fangs that went along with those smiles. No more than he could help but notice the heavily armed soldiers and the fact a large part of the building was devoted to a training facility.

After a lifetime of thinking humans presided at the top of the totem pole, Toby had found out quick and hard that they were dead last. Lucky him, he was one of only three humans presently living at the clan, too.

So yeah, that definitely made him the gold fish.

With a heavy sigh, Toby put on his happy face and pushed away from the table. Dumping out his tray of half-eaten food, he left the cafeteria. The first thing he'd done when he'd come to Detroit was adjust his schedule to that of the vampires' nocturnal one. So, even though it was three in the morning, he was wide awake.

Off guard duty for the night and not in the mood for another humiliating training session, he instead, wandered to the weapons workshop. Since that's where Micah and the rest of his team

usually hung out, Toby felt almost at home there.

As soon as he walked into the large, open room, the sounds of loud eighty's music assaulted his ears. Micah and the rest of his team had been listening to the stuff so much lately, it only took Toby a second to recognize the current tune as *The Safety Dance*.

The place seemed deserted save for a vampire named Nolan. The small, young looking blond man sat in front of the long bank of computers. He looked up with a smile when Toby sank into a chair next to him.

"Hello, Micah's brother," Nolan sang, mimicking the tone and inflection of Buster from *Arrested Development*.

Toby laughed since he was a fan of the show, too. "Did they leave you with all the work?" He waved to the empty room to indicate what he was speaking of. While there was plenty of tools, weapons and other various equipment lying around, the usually busy room remained oddly silent.

"Most of the team has the night off, so they went out to the bar to terrorize Alonzo. Micah's around, but Eric called him into his office for something," Nolan replied. He turned away from the monitor to give Toby his full attention.

Toby's gut clenched. After the conversation he'd had with Sydney, he knew exactly why

Micah'd been summoned. Something on his expression must have given away his anxieties because Nolan's face softened.

"Is he in trouble or something?"

As he gazed down at the vampire, Toby realized that with his boyish good looks, sensual blue eyes and smart wit, Nolan had a lot going for him. Too bad Toby didn't go for the thin, innocent types. "No, Micah's not in trouble. At least I don't think he is," Toby hastened to add. One could never be for sure with his brother. Even as kids, Micah had an annoying knack for always finding mischief.

"So, is it because of Eric and your sister being together?" Nolan nodded understandingly.

Toby blinked in surprise. "You know about that?"

"Ah, yeah," Nolan drawled out sarcastically. "Everyone at the clan has noticed them getting closer. It's just you and Micah who've been blind to it."

"Well, damn," Toby muttered.

"Blind to what?" a voice called.

Toby twisted around in his seat to see who it was, only to have his heart do a funny stutter at the site of what had to be the hottest warlock he'd ever laid eyes on. Of course, given his limited exposure to the paranormal world, that didn't say much, but the man walking their way would put

anyone to shame.

"Hey, Blaine," Toby managed past a suddenly tight throat. Whereas Nolan wasn't Toby's type, Blaine filled that need and then some. From his dark hair that curled just perfectly at the collar, his warm, brown eyes to his athletic build, he was a walking, talking masturbation fantasy.

Blaine's twin brother, Kale walked in right behind him. While they were identical twins, Toby barely noticed Kale. Though the two of them may look alike, Blaine had something special that mysteriously drew Toby in. Both the warlocks were dressed in their standard coven uniform of black leather pants and tops, the clothes edged in dark green trim and the shirts had hoods on them that were presently down.

"How's it going, human?" Blaine nodded, almost absently in Toby's direction.

Toby had to tamp down a burst of hurt and frustration. For as much as he noticed Blaine, the warlock gave him as much attention as one would a gnat.

Blaine pulled up a chair on the either side of Nolan. Kale decided to invade Toby's space. He leaned up against the table, so his muscular leg nearly pressed into Toby's arm. Gazing down at Toby, he gave a smile that one could call sly.

"Hello to you, too. It was so nice of you to notice I was in the room."

Toby felt a slight flush come over his face as he realized he'd been rude. "Sorry, Kale. I got hit the other day in training and just assumed I was still seeing double."

Nolan snickered while Kale just gave the smallest of smiles. Blaine grunted something that may have been a laugh or a fuck-off, it was kind of hard to tell. Then he completely dismissed them when he'd fired up one of the computers and started surfing for something.

Toby idly wondered if maybe it was porn and if so, what kind of smut vampires and warlocks were into. Coffin play? Real-life dungeon games? He attempted to covertly lean forward in hopes of catching a peek, but Blaine's massive body blocked the screen. Toby jumped guiltily when he felt a big hand settle on his shoulder. He glanced up to find Kale giving him that same smug grin.

"So, is your sister and Eric registered anywhere or would a cash gift do for the wedding?"

"What, did everyone know but us?" Toby demanded, feeling like a huge idiot.

"Like I already told you once, yes," Nolan cut in.

"But then why should Toby notice that, when his attention is always on someone else?" Kale eyes flickered with a knowledge that had Toby's stomach clenching.

Oh God, Kale knew. There was no mistaking it.

The smirk on the warlock's face as his gaze deliberately flicked over to his twin clued Toby into that. How had a warlock who he'd hardly ever talked to managed to figure out Toby's biggest secret when even his own family remained clueless?

Then he looked over and saw a grin playing on Nolan's lips and he realized that Kale wasn't the only one. Horrified, Toby turned his head in Blaine's direction, for once actually praying the warlock was ignoring him. To his immense relief, Blaine continued to work on the computer and paid them no heed.

Toby's night got even worse when Raven, another member of the team, chose that moment to infect the group with her presence. With long dark hair, huge breasts and big, red lips, she was a popular bed partner in the clan. The problem with Raven though, was outside from a great body, she had little to offer. Toby had tried to like her, but he'd quickly found her to be mean, spiteful and more than a little scary. Unfortunately for him, she'd developed some kind of weird attraction to him.

"Here's my favorite boy," she purred as she all but glided across the floor.

"Aw, I missed you, too, Ravie," Nolan called, the corner of one lip curling up in dislike.

"Not you, jackass," she snapped, barring her

fangs for a brief moment.

Out of the whole clan, Nolan seemed to take the greatest pleasure in annoying Raven. Dante had once said, Nolan had *Raven Baiting* honed to a fine art form. Something Toby whole heartily agreed with.

"Now, now, buttercup. You keep talking to me that way and you know what people are going to say?" Nolan asked with mock seriousness.

"What?"

"That we're in love," Nolan replied, showing he was also a fan of *Oklahoma* and at least one of its songs.

Raven tilted her head to the side for a moment, clearly not getting it. Then again, there was a lot she didn't understand. Unless something was all about Raven, she never seemed to care about it.

"Why didn't you go out with the others?" Kale asked as he moved closer to Toby.

If Toby hadn't known better, he would have almost thought the gesture protective. Maybe he wasn't the only who sensed a little bit of danger lurking under Raven's heavily made-up face.

Raven ran her tongue over her red lips as she made the *yummy* sound, the entire time her gaze never left Toby. "Why would I want to do that when I have everything I want right here?"

"Enough!" Blaine let out a loud curse, startling them all as he pushed away from the table and

stood. Moving slowly, he put his body between Raven and Toby. "I know for a fact Eric and Micah both warned you away from the human. So call back in your claws and fangs and get the hell out of here."

"Who made you his personal protector? For all you know he might want to go play with me?"

Toby nearly jumped when she let out a low hiss, sounding just like a cobra as she bared her fangs.

Blaine for his part just looked bored. He even made a big show of glancing over at his twin so they could share an eye roll. The tension in the room grew and Toby started to feel like a damn gold fish again, only this time it was in the middle of a great white feeding frenzy.

* * * *

Micah walked into the workroom just in time to see Raven eyeing Toby up like her next meal. The danger to his brother mixed in with the anger and stress already riding Micah had his fangs instantly dropping aggression. *This is so not the time to fuck with me.* Since everyone focused on her, Micah had made it halfway across the room before Nolan glanced up and noticed him. The small vampire's eyes grew wide as he got the classic oh-shit expression on his face, but he didn't yell out a

warning to Raven. Not surprising since Nolan had never made it a secret he couldn't stand the bitch.

The warlock twins were the next to spot Micah, but they didn't say anything either.

It did shock Micah a bit to see Blaine facing off against Raven. Usually he was the more reserved of the two.

"Raven, what in the fuck do you think you're doing?" Micah finally said once he was within striking distance.

She let out a sharp breath before slowly turning to face him. When he saw her fangs out and ready for action, Micah had to ball his hands into tight fists to keep from striking out at her.

"I was just trying to make nice," she all but purred.

Micah glowered at her as he wondered why in the hell his team leader Brenden still allowed the bitch to serve with them. There really were times where the guy was too nice. "I've already told you several times that my family is off limits. You want a suck and fuck, go find one of your usual buddies."

Raven pursed her lips together. "You never were any fun, Micah. Take away your fangs and new muscles and you're still the same, sad little boy who used to watch old sci-fi movies and jackoff in your mommy's basement."

Ouch, that one was a bit personal and a little true.

Micah could have flung an equally mean comeback in her face, but he didn't feel like adding fire to her game. Instead, he let out a low growl and said, "Do you really want to take a chance and find out how strong I am? If so, let's do this once and for all. I'm just pissy enough today to want to take my mood out on somebody." For one heart-pounding second, he thought she'd take him up on his offer.

She relaxed her posture and offered a cool smile. "You're always so uptight, Micah. I would have thought having a mate would have loosened you up some." She brushed past him and left, leaving behind a bad taste in the room.

They were all silent for a while before Toby broke it. "Having a bad day or something?"

"Would you rather I leave you and her alone?" Micah challenged, knowing damn good and well Toby didn't. He'd caught the overt glances his brother had been shooting Blaine for the past few months, which at first had just shocked the shit out of Micah since he hadn't even known his brother was gay up until that point.

"No, but did you have to be so..." Toby trailed off as he shot a self-conscious glance at the rest of group.

"Micah did right," Blaine cut in. "In our world, only the mean and strong survive. Had he backed down to Raven at all, it would have made him

look weak.”

“So?” Toby shrugged. “Just because he’s not human anymore means he has to give up his compassion.”

“Yes, it does. Because even in a clan as friendly as this one, the weak are the prey,” Micah explained. Toby had started to give him the look – the one that never failed to make Micah feel like a fucking monster.

“I still don’t think it’s going to be enough to scare Raven away,” Nolan said.

Toby frowned. “Why not? It looked to me that Micah made himself pretty clear?”

“Raven hates Micah and she’ll use you to get back at him,” Kale oh-so-helpfully chimed in.

Nolan leaned forward and started with the meddling, too. “You see, Raven had a crush on Micah. When he first got to the coven, he was just this little, adorable puppy and Raven loves that kind of guy. Personally, I think it’s because the meat’s more tender when she eats them alive.”

Toby visibly shuddered before saying, “Let me guess, Micah wanted nothing to do with her.”

“To be fair to Raven and her highly-skilled charm, Micah didn’t want anything to do with anybody. He wouldn’t even take a feeding buddy. While most vampires wouldn’t even think about trying to live off bagged stuff for even a week, Micah did it until he finally hooked up with

Ozzie."

Micah started to angrily pace the room. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here."

Nolan flashed a grin. "Well someone has to help your family with their communication skills."

Micah felt ready to beat Nolan with his own keyboard. "So, you just decided you should fill that role?"

"Well, I'm bored and have to fill the next couple of days somehow. *The Micah and Toby Show* has been the best entertainment I've had all night. You guys even beat *Hulu* out."

"Can't you just go to Eric about her?" Kale suggested

Micah shook his head. "And say what? That he should banish one of his clan because she may or may not have a hard on for my brother? She hasn't even shown any real aggression to him."

"Micah's right. The only thing Raven has done is made it clear she's ready and able. Half the guys in the clan would happily take her up on that offer," Nolan added dryly.

Blaine leveled a hard, knowing look at Micah. "So, we need to make sure that Toby is protected at all times."

Micah let out a growl of frustration as he ran a hand through his hair. As if he already didn't have enough to worry about. "Yeah, we do. Fuck it all."

Toby's face flushed. "Try not to sound too

cheerful about it. I wouldn't want you to break a sweat or something out of concern for me."

Micah immediately grew contrite. "I didn't mean it like that."

"It's not like I encouraged her or anything," Toby continued to protest.

"I know you didn't." Micah didn't add that he was certain the only one Toby would encourage would be a certain dark-haired warlock.

Nolan gave Micah a closer look. "You don't look so good tonight."

Micah glanced down and realized the events of the night had left his clothes ripped in places and streaked with all kinds of interesting things. He suddenly yearned for a hot shower, a soft bed and Ozzie's strong arms.

While he knew there were a million things he needed to do, Micah gave in to his basic needs. Giving the group a wave, he left for the safety of his and Ozzie's quarters. Micah knew he'd been needing all the rest he could get in order to be ready to everything that lay ahead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ozzie stormed into their living quarters, determined to talk to Micah about his secretive trip outside the dwelling. Angry, tired and cranky, he swore that he wasn't going to let the little punk dodge the questions this time.

As soon as he saw Micah lying on the bed, however, all of Ozzie's intentions fled. Micah was on his side, his knees tucked to his chest. He'd cleaned up since they'd parted, all traces of blood and dirt washed away from his face and hair. Gone was the uniform. In its place, Micah wore a pair a baggy gray sweats and a pale blue 99Luftballoons T-shirt.

"Hey, babe," Micah called out a soft greeting.

A tiny smile tried to form on his lips as he gazed up at Ozzie, but it quickly trembled away. In its place, came an expression of such sadness, that Ozzie instantly rushed over and sat on the edge of the mattress. "I take it Eric told you about

him and Sydney," Ozzie guessed as he reached down and gently ran his fingers through Micah's freshly showered hair.

"Just tell me you didn't know about this all along like everyone else and the night won't be a total disaster."

Ozzie leaned down and placed a kiss on Micah's temple. "I didn't know a thing, I swear. You know I don't get all caught up in the clan gossip mill. So I was just as clueless as you were until Eric came and talked to me after you left his office tonight."

"It's good to know I wasn't the only one in the dark. I had a chat with my mom, too. Not only has she known all about their plans for a while, but she's excited for them." Micah flopped to his back, then angrily scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"I guess every mother wants to see their child happy." Ozzie pulled Micah's hands away so they could share a soft kiss.

"I'm sure having Misty as her step-granddaughter is an added bonus. Lord knows you and I aren't going to give her any children."

Ozzie let out a short laugh. "Yeah, that would be a feat."

"Toby won't be having any kids of his own either," Micah hedged, obviously testing the waters.

"You mean because he's gay?" Ozzie replied simply. When Micah's eyes widened in shock, Ozzie added, "Okay, that one I did suspect. I just hadn't said anything to you yet because I wasn't certain."

"After seeing the way he drooled over Blaine tonight, I'd say it's a pretty sure thing." Micah grabbed Ozzie by the front of the shirt and pulled him down for another kiss.

The kiss started off soft, but grew deeper as their shared desire built. Soon Micah had his hands threaded through Ozzie's hair and was letting out those soft, sounds of passion—the ones that Ozzie lived to hear. Reluctantly, Ozzie pulled back. "I'm going to take a quick shower. You make sure to be naked when I get back."

Ozzie practically ran into the bathroom and rushed through a shower. When finished, he didn't bother to get dressed, only wrapping a towel around his waist. As he left the warm, foggy bathroom for the cooler bedroom, he stopped at the threshold of the door, struck stupid by the sight in front on him.

Micah lay stretched out over the covers, his beautiful, nude body on display. Ozzie's mouth watered at the sight of all the lickable flesh just waiting to be explored.

A flush had spread over Micah's tight chest, his eyes closed in passion as he stroked his cock with

one hand. With the other hand, he fingered his own ass, getting himself ready for Ozzie's cock.

"Fuck," Ozzie groaned as he watched Micah slide in another digit. He now had three fingers pumping in and out.

Micah's lips curled into a lazy, blissful grin. "Sorry, I couldn't wait."

"Don't apologize." Ozzie rubbed at his own, towel-covered erection. "If you only knew how hot you look right now."

Micah let go of his cock long enough to crook a finger at Ozzie. "Why don't you come over here and show me?"

That was an invitation that didn't need repeating. With a low moan, Ozzie lost the towel and crossed the room. Climbing onto the bed, he positioned himself between Micah's stretched thighs.

"Slick me up," he ordered in a gruff voice.

Micah pulled the fingers out of his ass and reached under the pillow for the bottle of lube. Micah frowned as he looked at it. "Too bad we ran out of the cherry flavored stuff. I love licking it off your cock."

"After the show you just gave me, I'd have been lucky to have lasted ten seconds with your tongue on me." Ozzie gasped as Micah's slick fingers wrapped around his shaft.

Micah moved his hand up and down. If he took

a little extra care in getting Ozzie's dick ready, that was okay. Ozzie closed his eyes against the pure bliss of having his mate's touch on him.

"Did you get yourself stretched enough?" Ozzie finally asked when he could no longer stand any more of the sweet torture.

Micah nodded before he spread his legs wider, offering himself up.

Ozzie didn't waste any time, slowly pushing his cock past the tight ring of muscle. Micah bit his bottom lip, but otherwise showed no signs of discomfort, so Ozzie surged forward. He didn't stop until he was buried balls deep inside the man he cherished more than anything. Ozzie groaned at the wonderful sensation of Micah's hot, tight ass squeezing his dick. When added to the look of pure adoration that Micah shot his way, it threatened to overwhelm Ozzie.

"You know I love you, right?" Micah asked, his breath hitching a bit.

Ozzie stilled. "Of course, I do, babe. I love you, too." He pulled almost all of the way out of Micah's body, before slamming forward again. "Now are we going to talk all night, or do you want me to fuck you?"

Micah moaned. "Fuck...I wanna fuck."

At first Ozzie took things slow, wanting to savor every touch and caress. Then Micah slid one leg up over Ozzie's shoulder. The slight change of

position made Ozzie go in deeper and that changed the whole tempo. Grabbing Micah's hips, Ozzie started to pound into him in hard, quick strokes.

"Going to come," Micah warned, his face flush with passion.

"Go ahead, babe. Paint my chest."

With a sharp cry, Micah obeyed. Without the aid of either of their hands, his cock pulsed as it shot off warm streams of semen. As soon as the scent hit Ozzie, the wolf inside him howled its approval. Throwing his head back, Ozzie allowed his own passion to crest. "Mine. All mine," Ozzie panted as he filled Micah's ass.

Still caught up in the high, he grunted in surprise when Micah suddenly twisted his body and flipped them both over. Once he was on top, the small vampire wasted no time, his fangs immediately sinking into Ozzie's neck.

"Damn!" Ozzie cried out at the mixed pleasure and pain.

Micah gave a grunt that may have been an apology or a hold-the-fuck-still as he stared to take in slow drags of blood.

Ozzie cupped the back of Micah's head to urge him on. Whenever Micah fed from him, it felt so damn good that Ozzie would be tempted to do the activity all day long, had he not needed some blood left in his body to live. Last he heard, any

immortal couldn't survive through having their body completely drained. Still, as Micah's tongue made a slow path over the bite mark, a slightly insane part of Ozzie's brain couldn't hold back a whimpered plea for more. With a satisfied sigh, Micah turned his head and snuggled into Ozzie's chest. A few minutes later, the slow, deep pattern of his breaths let Ozzie know he'd gone to sleep. Ozzie knew he should move them. Already he could feel their combined sticky mess gluing them together as it dried. It would make for one not-so-pleasant wake-up call.

Not only that, but he still needed to get to the bottom of the whole what-were-you-doing-sneaking-out thing. Then Ozzie remembered the bleakness in Micah's expression just moments ago. How it looked like life had just given him a swift kick to the nuts. Ozzie knew more than anyone how shitty that felt.

He decided tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with everything.. After Sydney had gone through her transformation and that worry was off Micah's mind, then Ozzie could pin him down and finally get some answers.

* * * *

Admittedly, Toby had never seen a vampire transformation before, but even in his wildest

dreams, he hadn't imagined it like this.

From the stories he'd heard around the clan and the various research material he'd read, it was supposed to be violent, bloody and painful. What he saw before him was anything but.

Sidney rested in a private room in the infirmary. She slept peacefully, thanks to the various drugs the clan doctor had administered. Her face remained relaxed and free of any grimaces of agony. The only blood visible was a bag attached to an IV pump.

"How long is it going to take?" Toby asked as he squinted to see if there were any fangs visible between her parted lips.

"Since she's not fighting it, a couple of hours," Micah replied from the other side of the bed. Ozzie was in a chair, next to Micah, while Toby's mother sat on the edge of the mattress so she could hold Sydney's limp hand.

Eric didn't sit at all, instead, hovering over Sydney like some kind of two-hundred and fifty pound, six-foot four nursemaid.

While Toby knew he should resent the vampire for taking his sister fully into the paranormal world, he just couldn't bring himself to hate the guy. One glance at the way he acted around Sidney was enough to let Toby know the two of them were in love.

It did suck to know that *both* of his younger

siblings would be able to kick his ass without so much as losing their breath though. Not the best boost for his macho ego.

They'd all settled into silence when a harried looking Drone soldier crept into the room. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but an issue has come up."

Eric shot the poor vampire a dark glance. "Whatever it is, can wait."

The Drone gulped, but didn't back down. "I'm afraid it can't. A group of werejackals are outside the building and they refuse to leave until they speak to you. We've tried to tell them that you're unavailable but they won't listen. Dante Toren suggested we just shoot them and be done with it, but Brenden thought it better we come to you instead."

"They're here because of me," Micah blurted, causing everyone to look at him in shock.

"He's right. The jackals did seem to yell his name a time or two during the conversation," the Drone added, almost apologetically.

"What in the hell did you do now?" Ozzie demanded, his voice hard with anger.

When Toby saw his brother flinch, he wanted to give Ozzie a hard kick to the ass. Even though the guy had more muscles and mean than just about anyone Toby had ever come across, didn't mean he had the right to push Micah around.

Eric tried for a more calm and direct approach.

"Does this have anything to do with you being out last night?"

Micah lowered his gaze to his feet. "Yes, it does. I kind of did a freelance assignment."

"Kind of or did?" Eric demanded.

"Did."

When Micah didn't expound, Eric finally appeared to lose his cool. "Now isn't the time to piss me off."

"Why would you need to do freelance work anyhow?" Ozzie added. "You have everything you need within the clan."

"It wasn't for money. I did it in return for a favor."

"What kind of favor?" Eric pressed.

"Someone from Ozzie's pack needed a problem taken care of and I agreed to do it."

"Why in the hell would you do something that stupid," Ozzie bit out.

Toby wondered what the big deal was. One would think he'd be happy that Micah was trying to make nice with his family. Toby knew Ozzie didn't get along with them, but that still didn't mean he shouldn't try to make amends or something. He should be thanking Micah, not growing like some overgrown Scooby Doo with a burr up his ass.

"Yes, Micah, why would you agree to help out with something like that?" Eric added.

"They promised if I did a few things for them, they'd help Ozzie get back into his pack," Micah answered, still keeping his gaze down. "The first thing they asked me to do was to kill off a wild werejackal that had attacked a few humans. My contact said something like that could bring unwanted attention to all the paranormals in the city. So, they wanted the problem gone."

"And what did you do?" Toby asked, his heart pounding so loud it was a wonder the whole room didn't hear. Surly his brother turned them down. Fighting in a war was one thing, but to go out and just exterminate another living being was completely different.

Micah finally raised his eyes to lock gazes with Toby. "I took the job and completed it."

Toby felt nauseous. This thing in front of him that just so coldheartedly admitted to murder could not be the same Micah he'd grown up with. His Micah had always been so sweet, if not a little dorky. He'd never hurt anyone and he certainly would not hire himself out as an assassin.

Micah let out a long breath before he rose to his feet. "I guess I better go talk to them." Before anyone could respond, Micah left the room, the Drone solidier hot on his heels. What followed his departure could only be described as a heavy oh-fuck silence. Not even his mother said anything. She just pressed her lips together in a thin line as

she clutched Sydney's hand tighter. Toby tried to catch her gaze, but she averted her eyes in such a deliberate way he knew it was on purpose.

After letting out a scary sounding growl, Ozzie got up and followed the same path Micah had taken a few moments earlier.

Toby only hesitated for a couple of beats before he got up and gave chase. Ozzie moved fast and by the time Toby caught up, they were already outside of the large, front doors of the coven building. What he saw scared him more than anything he'd ever seen.

Micah stood alone, facing off against a half dozen rough looking men. While the vampires and warlocks could appear mean at times, they'd never seemed as rough and dangerous as the group of what Toby assumed were werejackals. They all had ratty, dirty hair and equally filthy clothing. Even their faces and hands seemed covered with smudges of God knows what. When one of them sneered, showing off rotten teeth, it just completed the picture.

Several clan members stood behind Micah, but none moved forward to offer any support.

Toby felt a burning outrage on his brother's behalf. If they were all supposed to be one great big, happy, vampire family, then why weren't they standing up for one of their own. Even Ozzie hung back and he was Micah's mate for fuck's

sake.

To hell with that, weak human or not, Toby was not about to let his brother go down alone. He surged forward to help, only to have a strong arm wrap around his chest and hold him back. "What the fuck, that's my brother," Toby protested. He craned his neck to see who held him and was shocked to the toes of his Nikes to find it was Blaine.

"It will make him look weak if we rush forward to his aid. Besides, they won't charge him all at once. As long as we stand back, it will just be a one-on-one fight," Blaine explained in a low voice.

Toby gaped at him until Blaine nodded in the direction of the confrontation. Reluctantly, Toby glanced over and saw that Blaine had been right. Only one jackal, the sneering one, had stepped forward to challenge Micah.

"You killed Rob," the jackal said as he splayed out his fingers.

The breath left Toby's lungs when he saw huge, curved claws at the ends of the man's hands. They looked big enough to slice open Micah in one swipe. How in the hell did his brother think he could even stand a chance against that?

Micah, for his part, look unruffled. He just gave a single, curt nod. "I did."

It should have given Toby a measure of hope when he noticed his brother had armed up before

coming out. He had his twin blades strapped to his back and another dagger tucked into the waistband of his jeans. Still, even with all the weaponry, Toby didn't see how Micah stood a chance against the jackal. The guy was fricking huge, towering over Micah by at least six inches.

"Rob was my friend, you neck sucker." The jackal let out a high-pitched growl.

"I'm sorry." Micah continued to be the poster child for calm. He didn't even blink when the jackal let out another of those freaky sounding growls.

Run! Just run, Micah. There's no shame in that.

"You think a simple sorry is going to get you out of this?" The jackal flexed his fingers, once more calling attention to those huge ass claws.

"Oh, you mistake me. I'm not apologizing for killing that piece of bog troll's snot. I'm just sorry that was all you had in the way of friendship. It really doesn't say much for you. Now does it?"

Shit, he did not just bait that wall of mean. How could he be so dumb? Toby started to struggle against Blaine's hold again. Someone had to go and help Micah before he got himself killed.

Blaine tightened his grip. "It's going to be okay."

"How can you say that? The jackal has at least fifty pounds on Micah." Toby watched helplessly as the pair started to circle each other. Fuck, Micah

hadn't even thought to pull a weapon out yet.

"Which means the jackal is just a tiny thing. Micah can take him, no problem."

Toby stopped struggling long enough to gape at Blaine. "You call that small?"

Blaine smiled. "Have some faith in your brother. I don't give the jackal two minutes before Micah finishes him off."

Since Blaine didn't seem inclined to let go, Toby had no choice but to stand there and watch the fight. He just prayed the warlock was right.

CHAPTER SIX

Micah could feel the nearly palpable excitement from both his clan and the small handful of jackals. They wanted a show and nothing ever screamed entertainment more than a good knock down drag out fight. If he had been in a better mood, Micah may have drawn things out a bit, given them some real fun. Instead, he decided that the jackal would serve as a good outlet for all the stress that'd been building up.

"Are you ready to die?" The jackal let out a sickening giggle.

Micah cocked a brow. Seriously, aside for little girls, who in the fuck giggled? If Micah hadn't already planned to kick the jackal's ass, that ridiculous laugh would have been reason enough on its own. Instead of answering the stupid question, Micah reached behind his head and pulled out his blades. Once he had the grips in his palms, he made a point of spinning the weapons a

few times. He wanted to let the jackal know that, not only did Micah have a weapon, but he was very comfortable handling it.

As soon as he sensed the sharp spike of fear coming from the jackal, the vampire side of Micah took over. Letting out a dark chuckle, he allowed his fangs to drop. Fear spread out over the jackal's face, replacing the annoying cockiness that had been there just seconds before. "You sure you want to do this? I'm giving you one last chance to back out," Micah said. Not that he expected the jackal to take him up on the offer.

Sure enough, the bastard charged.

Micah spun to the side, bringing the blades in at a horizontal arch.

The jackal screamed as two crimson slashes appeared on his gut.

"You want to know why the wolves ordered Robbie's execution?" Micah taunted. "Because he'd taken a liking to human flesh."

"Not true!" the jackal bellowed as he lunged again.

Micah moved to the side again, but this time was a hair too short. Sharp claws caught him in the back. Micah let out a low hiss of pain before he swung his blades around. Once more, a pair of slashes appeared on the jackal. "Sorry to burst your bubble, giggles, but it is. When I found him, he was just finishing off a homeless guy. Robbie

was such a noisy eater, too. That's such a pet peeve of mine."

Micah spun, delivering a roundhouse kick to the jackal's chest. After that, it was pretty much over. Micah still continued with the beating for a couple more minutes. Not that his heart was in it anymore. While the jackal may have shitty taste in friends, his cries of pain sliced through Micah's conscious. But he also knew he had to send a message to anyone who would even consider challenging the clan. They had children there, civilians—all of whom counted on soldiers like Micah for protection.

It wasn't until his opponent was bleeding and unconscious that Micah stepped back. None of the other jackals said a word as they rushed forward to drag their fallen comrade away. Once they'd left, several of the clan members started to cheer.

Micah ignored them, knowing he didn't deserve their praise since it had been his fault the jackals had shown up in the first place. Then he glanced to the side and what he saw broke his heart. *Oh, shit! Toby! He saw everything.*

Toby's face was nearly snow white as he stared at Micah in horror.

Micah glanced down at himself, noting the blood streaking his clothes. Hell, he still held the bloody knives in his hands. If Toby hadn't thought he was a monster, he did now. There was no

mistaking the expression of disgust or horror stamped on the man's face. Micah took in a shuddering breath. Here was his big brother, his childhood hero, looking at Micah as if he was one step below Ted Bundy or something. "Toby," Micah pleaded in a strained voice as he took a step forward.

Toby jumped...actually jumped as if he had something to fear. His mouth opened and closed several times before he turned around and pushed his way through the crowd.

Micah started to give chase, only to be brought up short by a hand on his shoulder. Spinning around, he found himself locked into Ozzie's furious gaze. "What in the fuck were you thinking?"

A jolt of confusion shot through Micah. Surely, someone who grew up in a pack like Ozzie had understood why Micah had just been so brutal. "I didn't want the jackals to think they could get away with coming and knocking on our front door." Ozzie gave him a slight shake, making Micah hiss in pain as the movement jolted his scratched back.

"I don't mean that. I'm talking about you going to my pack and begging them to let me back in. Do you know how that makes me look?" Ozzie snarled.

Micah didn't think he'd ever seen Ozzie so

angry. His eyes were nearly dark with rage and the tendons on his neck stood out. Even his fangs had come completely out. Instinctively, Micah tried to back away, only to have Ozzie jerk him back in. "I was just trying to help you," Micah explained desperately as he fought to ignore the raw hurt that sliced through him. This one having nothing to do with his injury.

"And you thought the best way to do that would be to make me look like a bitch to my pack?"

A small sound of distress burst from Micah's lips. "Of course not. It was just my attempt to get my mate back something precious that he lost. Ivan swore to me that if I did a few things for him, in return, he'd petition for you to be able to return."

Ozzie let out a harsh, bitter laugh. "Ivan. I should have known that bastard would be behind this. He was just playing you, kiddo. You were nothing but a puppet and I'm sure he laughed the entire time he had you run through his hoops."

Micah didn't know what hurt worse, the fact that he allowed Ivan to dupe him so easily or all the hurtful words Ozzie had just tossed his way. "I never meant...what I'm trying to say is...fuck, Ozzie, I didn't think..."

"That's the problem with you, Micah. You never think things through. You just jump in,

consequences be damned."

Ozzie let go of him so abruptly that Micah stumbled back a few steps. When his foot slipped in something wet, he realized he'd been bleeding all over the concrete. Blaine must have spotted the puddle, too, because he rushed forward and put an arm around Micah's waist.

"We should get you to the infirmary," he said in soothing tones.

Micah shook his head. "My mother is in there with my sister. If she sees me like this, it will only upset her. I'll be okay. It's just a scratch." A scratch that hurt like hell. Micah hissed as he tried to regain his footing.

"You should at least feed. That will help speed up the healing some," Blaine urged.

"Micah can go get some bagged stuff if he needs blood because he's not getting any from me," Ozzie growled.

Micah bit back a cry as those words hit him like a physical blow. Blaine's face grew stony as he turned on Ozzie. "He's your mate. You can't turn on him when he needs you."

"Watch me." Then Ozzie did just that. He turned his back and walked inside.

Micah's whole world shattered as he watched Ozzie leave. Tears built up in his eyes and he furiously attempted to blink them away. It didn't matter though, because one tear still managed to

slip free and slide down his cheek. All he had wanted to do was make Ozzie happy and instead, Micah realized he'd probably lost him for good.

* * * *

Ozzie sat in the back part of the deserted training room and tried not to remember the look on Micah's face two hours earlier. That task proved to be impossible though. Every time he closed his eyes, Ozzie saw the hurt and sadness stamped in Micah's normally soft, blue eyes. Ozzie let out a groan of self-hatred as fresh a wave of guilt hit him. Now that he'd had time to calm down and reflect, Ozzie realized he'd been a first-class idiot.

He knew he should hunt Micah down and apologize, but a part of Ozzie's pride stubbornly refused. What Micah had done had hurt—badly. By going to the pack as he had, he'd all but said that he thought Ozzie was weak and unwilling to fight his own battles. That Ozzie was just the bitch of the clan and needed the big, bad vampires to intercede on his behalf.

If anyone had been an idiot, it had been Ozzie. He'd thought Micah had been different. That it hadn't mattered to him that Ozzie was defective. All the while, Micah had been going around behind his back, trying to overcompensate for his freak, halfling of a mate.

"You have no idea how badly you fucked up!" a voice growled.

Ozzie glanced up to see Dante approaching. "I know, I should have never trusted him." Ozzie shrugged, more than a little stung by his friend's criticism. He was completely unprepared for Dante to reach over and cuff him on the back of the head. "Ouch! What as that for?" Ozzie demanded.

"For destroying Micah the way you did."

Ozzie stared up at Dante in shock. "How do you figure? He was the one who went to a member of my pack behind my back."

"Only because he didn't know better. Shit, Oz, you have to realize that the kid is still new to our world and customs. He didn't know he was making you look bad. All that mattered to him was that you're happy."

Ozzie sprang to his feet. "Whoever put it in his head that I wasn't satisfied with this life?"

"You did, jackass."

"That's ridiculous. I never said a goddamn thing to him," Ozzie yelled.

"You didn't have to. All he had to do is watch you and he knew. He told me that you'd get this sad look on your face and he'd realize it was because you yearned for the pack. You know the sad thing? I couldn't argue with him on that point. I've seen the same damn expression myself

numerous times. You've always made it clear the clan was always you second choice."

"Maybe I still miss home from time to time, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be here with Micah. I love him."

Dante shrugged, some of the anger leaving his eyes. "All I know is he didn't think he was enough for you. Maybe he has a point, too."

Ozzie balled his hands into tight fists as he resisted the urge to strike his old friend. "Micah is everything to me."

"Then why did you leave him injured and refuse to let him feed? I know if that had been Brenden bleeding all over the concrete, nothing, and I mean *nothing* would have stopped me from going to him."

"I was angry?" Ozzie defended, knowing how poor the excuse sounded.

"That shouldn't have mattered. Your mate and his needs should always come first. The most fucked up thing is that wasn't the first time you let him down when he needed you."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean? I've always made sure he was protected and taken care of."

Dante gave a slow shake of his head. "No, you haven't, Oz. He's still messed up from what happened to him during his captivity and you never noticed."

Now Ozzie was the one feeling a healthy dose of anger. "He's gotten over that."

Dante let out a humorless laugh. "You really don't have any clue, do you?" When Ozzie just shook his head, the vampire continued, "You've gone through some shit, no one can deny that, but nothing can compare to what Micah had to deal with. You have no idea what it's like to be so completely helpless like that for months at a time. How it feels to be totally at the mercy of someone. To know that it's only a matter of time before they come down and abuse you yet again, but there's not a damn thing you can do to stop it."

Ozzie put a hand to his gut, suddenly feeling as if a mule had kicked him. "No, I don't."

"So, who can blame Micah for being desperate to hold onto that feeling of safety and love he gets from you. He's been terrified that you'd get so despondent over this whole pack thing that you'd take off and leave him."

"He told you that?"

"He didn't have to. All I had to do was look into his face and I could see that worry as clear as glass."

A wave of self-hatred and guilt hit Ozzie so hard, his knees nearly buckled. "Fuck. I messed up big time."

Dante growled, "I'm glad to see we're finally on the same page."

Ozzie ignored the barb, but instead moved to the door. "I have to find him and apologize."

"You can't. Micah went out on a mission."

Ozzie halted, his heart strumming with fear. "What do you mean *out on a mission*? He's too hurt to do anything."

"I tried to tell him the same thing, but he wouldn't listen to reason. You really upset him."

"Shit," Ozzie started for the door again. "How long ago did he leave?"

"A little over an hour ago," Dante said as he began to follow Ozzie out.

"Why didn't you come get me sooner?"

Dante's eyes got a dangerous glint to them. "Because I needed my own time to cool down after watching the way you broke that kid. Otherwise I would have taken out a piece of your ass."

Ozzie took the comment in good grace because he damn well knew he deserved it. Right now, all that mattered was finding out where Micah was. Ozzie would even be willing to track him halfway across the city again if he had to.

As soon as they hit the main area of the building, Ozzie knew something was up. Several people were running around and they all seemed upset. Angry yells, mixed in with the harsh, barking orders from some of the higher ups. Rage wasn't the only emotion at play either. The air was

thick with the scent of despair and fear. Some of the Drone soldiers were even crying.

Ozzie grabbed the nearest male. "What's going on?"

"One of our teams was just attacked by a group of dark magics and the VRF. We lost communication, but we think there's heavy casualties," the soldier supplied before he ran off.

Micah! Even though there had to be dozens of teams out in the city, something inside Ozzie screamed that it had been Micah's crew.

"Micah, Nolan and Jonas went out with Rick's group," Dante said. "I'll ask around and see if I can find out anything about that team."

It proved to be a hopeless task though. No matter how many vampires Dante and Ozzie questioned, none of them knew anything. It had seemed that all communication was cut off, just not with the one ambushed team.

"Fuck this, I'm going out and tracking him down myself," Ozzie snarled.

"I'll come with you," Dante offered.

They'd just made their way to the doors when Brenden's shouts interrupted. "They're bringing in the survivors now."

Ozzie's gut clenched at the word *survivors*. "Do we know what team it is yet?"

A stricken expression crossed Brenden's face.

"It was Micah, Jonas and Nolan's group."

Ozzie knew a lot of the anguish on the vampire's face was because those three usually served under him.

They all rushed to the large connected parking garage. The vans were already pulling up by the time they got there.

Ozzie started to run between them. The entire time, he repeatedly yelled Micah's name. Through the haze of worry, he noticed how horrific some of the injuries were. Fuck, this had to be the worst attack in Eric's clan history.

Then one scream seemed to separate itself from the rest. Laced with agony and fear, it made the hairs on the back of Ozzie's neck stand on end. At the same time, it filled him with a small measure of relief because he recognized the voice behind it.

"Micah!" Ozzie sobbed as he rushed toward the sound. He ran up to one of the vans, just as they were lifting Micah out. At first Ozzie didn't understand why they had him tied down to the cot until Micah let out another ear-splitting scream as his body arched up. "What happened?" Ozzie asked the medics. He eyed up Micah's body but didn't spot any obvious injuries.

"We don't know for sure, but we think he got hit with a spell," one of the medics supplied.

"Why didn't you have a warlock from the team check him out?" Dante demanded.

"Because they were all killed." The medics carried the cot over to one side of the garage.

It was only then that Ozzie noticed they'd set the area up as a makeshift triage center. Given the sheer number of wounded, the infirmary couldn't hold them all.

"I'll go find someone from the coven," Dante offered.

Ozzie nodded gratefully as Micah continued to scream and writhe around, caught up in some sort of agonizing torture that Ozzie was powerless to stop. Just when he thought Micah had screamed himself hoarse, those beautiful eyes became lucid. Instead of glancing at Ozzie, however, Micah looked at Brenden.

"They took Nolan and Jonas," Micah whimpered. "Those bastards took them and now they're doing God knows what to them."

Brenden paled as he swayed on his feet. "Who took them?"

"The fucking VRF. They were on us so fast, we didn't even stand a chance. They had some dark magics with them. Shit, Brenden, they killed so many of us. One of the guys was standing just inches from me when they blew him away." Micah's breathing grew rapid.

Ozzie knelt down so he could take Micah's hand. "It's okay, babe, you're safe, now."

Micah started, as if he hadn't noticed Ozzie

until just then. "You're here?"

"Of course I am. I was just getting ready to come out there and drag you in myself before the vans pulled up," Ozzie's voice broke a bit.

Micah let out a soft sob, his eyes welling up. "I didn't think you wanted me anymore."

Ozzie had never hated himself more than that moment. "I will always want you, mate. My life would be empty without you by side."

"I'm so sorry for what I did." Micah continued with the rapid breathing and a fine sheen of perspiration had broken out on his forehead.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry." No sooner had the words left Ozzie's mouth, then Micah started screaming again. Ozzie frantically looked around for a medic, but they all were occupied with other patients. Just as he was about to pounce on the nearest one and drag them over, Dante came in with the warlock twins at his heels.

"Damn, this is not good," Blaine said by way of greeting.

"What is it?" Ozzie asked as he rubbed Micah's sweaty brow.

Micah didn't seem to notice any of them anymore, too caught up in pain.

"The Hyperalgesia Curse," Kale said as he began to run his hands over Micah's body. "The best way to describe it would be to say that every inch of his body is feeling ball-crunching agony

right now."

Ozzie felt his eyes well up in sympathy as he watched tears streak down Micah's face. "Can you counteract it?"

Kale nodded. "It's not going to be easy though. He seems to be channeling another person's pain along with his own."

"It's one of the fun twists of the curse. If anyone he loves is near and hurting, that will add to Micah's pain," Blaine added, his jaw tight with what had to be disgust.

"You gotta love dark magic," Kale sneered.

"So, do you think he's channeling Sydney?" Dante suggested.

"No, I ran into Eric a few minutes before all this went down and he told me she already made it through," Brenden said.

"Well, then who could it be?" Ozzie shook his head.

All of a sudden, the answer came to him with bone numbing certainty. At the same moment, Blaine must have come to the same conclusion because he exclaimed, "Toby!"

"When's the last time anyone saw him?" Ozzie demanded.

"Not since Micah kicked that jackal's ass," Dante replied. "The bigger question should be, where in the fuck is Raven?"

Blaine let out a low growl as he straightened.

Pointing to his brother, he commanded, "You start on the counter curse." Then he jerked his head at Brenden and Dante. "Let's go find us one bitch of a vampire. If she so much as breathed on Toby, I'm going to do things to her that would make even dark magics shudder."

* * * *

Micah woke up with a huge, lung-clearing gasp. For a few moments, he didn't remember what had happened or where he was at. Heart pounding, he clawed at the air. Then strong arms surrounded him and the familiar scent of Ozzie seeped through Micah's panic.

"It's okay. You're safe now," Ozzie soothed.

Micah then remembered it all, the attack, the deaths, Nolan and Jonas being captured. He bit his bottom lip to hold back a sob as he allowed his body to sink into Ozzie's embrace. Things got even worse when he spotted who was in the next cot over.

"Toby?" Micah croaked around a dry throat. He tried to get up, but Ozzie held him back.

"He's okay, now."

Micah's gaze swept over his brother, taking in the bandaged neck, the four-point restraints, before finally settling on the IV bag of blood. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, ohfuckohfuckohfuck," Micah

chanted. This was Toby's worst nightmare come true.

"I know he didn't want this, but at least he's alive," Ozzie soothed as he pulled Micah in tight to his chest.

"What happened?"

"In all the excitement, Raven managed to corner Toby. She dragged him back to her room, attacked him and turned him. Blaine, Brenden and Dante found them just as she was finishing up."

"Where is she now?" Micah growled. When he was done with her, what he did to the jackal would seem like a paper cut.

"Last I heard, there wasn't enough left of her to fill a doggy bag. I guess Blaine got a little ticked and all but blew her up with a spell."

While that gave Micah some satisfaction, another glance at his brother sent his mood spiraling down again. "What's going to happen to the clan now? We obviously can't stay in Detroit."

"Eric moved up the evacuation to Pontiac. Several van loads have already left." Ozzie's hand started to make slow, lazy circles on Micah's back.

"What about Jonas and Nolan? Does he have plans to rescue them?"

"He doesn't have that many men to spare, but he did send out a few scouts to see if we can find out where they were taken to. It's not going to be easy though. The VRF has so many internment

camps, it's going to be near impossible to pin down which one they're at." Ozzie gave Micah a near rib-crunching hug. "God, whenever I think of how close I came to losing you, I want to cry."

Cry? That stunned Micah so much the breath left his lungs. Ozzie had always been the strong one in their relationship. The one who always kept it together. Micah wiggled a little until Ozzie loosened his grip. Turning in Ozzie's arms, Micah gazed up at the face he loved so damn much. "You didn't lose me though," Micah responded, feeling the need to assure him.

Ozzie ran the pad of his thumb over Micah's cheek. "I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself for the way I treated you."

Micah leaned up so he could press his lips against Ozzie's mouth. "I love you, Ozzie. Nothing can ever change that."

Ozzie gave him another kiss, this one much deeper and passion-filled. Once they broke apart, Ozzie said, "It's going to be okay. The VRF may have won this round, but we'll come back, stronger than ever."

Micah nodded, although his heart felt heavy with doubt. He just prayed that Ozzie's prediction proved correct because the future had never looked so bleak for the Drone vampires.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

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