



ALPHA WOLF

THE WESTERVELT WOLVES BOOK 5

REBECCA ROYCE

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Rebecca Royce

Published 2011

ISBN 978-1-59578-792-7

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Maria Rogers

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

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Blurb

In search of his sister in New Orleans, Michael finds his mate instead. But Scarlett is broken, nearly destroyed. With doom around the corner, Michael Kane has no time to lose. If he can save his mate, perhaps there will be a chance for all of them. Or maybe it's already too late.

Left with no other choice, Michael will have to teach the wolves in the New Orleans pack how real Alpha shifters behave, while showing his mate he is a man of his word.

Chapter One

Michael Kane took a swig from his Abita beer and tried not to choke on the smoke that wafted into the bar from the open door to his left. The hot New Orleans humidity did nothing to lessen the stench of cigarette smoke on his wolf senses. He rolled his eyes. These humans, they killed themselves with their vices. Well—he inwardly shrugged—it wasn't just humans who smoked. His brother Gabriel had picked up the dirty habit except it wasn't going to kill him. It just made him stink.

What kind of wolf wanted to meet someone in a bar? He looked around the room for the fortieth time since his arrival half-an-hour earlier and sniffed deeply. Truthfully, he didn't think it was possible that the smell of smoke and humans could mask a wolf shifter from him but it was never a bad idea to be careful. He had been on time in his arrival and now his contact was downright late.

Patience. We don't have anywhere else to go tonight, his wolf interjected into his thoughts and Michael smiled.

To anyone watching it would seem as if he was lost in his thoughts, smiling at something he'd remembered. They'd have no idea that his inner wolf spoke to him; they'd have no clue that he was never alone.

He finally answered his wolf. *Lateness is rude, no matter what my personal schedule is like.*

Taking another swig of the cold, bitter taste of the local brew, he looked around the room, noticing the signed pictures of various jazz musicians who must have, at some time, either visited or played in the bar. From the outside, Floozies' seemed a typical dive bar, located on the outskirts of the famed French Quarter in an area called the Marigny. It was unassuming. The kind of place you might see in any town, anywhere in the city. The sort of business that drew the locals and not the tourists.

Inside, however, was a different story.

It had felt like stepping back in time to the 1920s with its bench seats and low lit ambiance, not to mention the mirrors on the wall that led the eye straight to the stage where whatever live performer was expected would hold court for the evening. The effect had left him a little bit disoriented when he'd first walked in. For a second he'd thought he'd walked into his past—or that he'd somehow lost the last ninety years.

As he contemplated the oddity of the sensation, the truth hit him over the head. Today was his birthday. Today he was two hundred and ten years old. He took another swig of his brown amber beer.

Happy-frickin-birthday to me.

His wolf laughed. *To us.*

You're a little bit younger than me. You didn't show until later.

I was always with you, Michael. You just couldn't hear me until you were ready.

His senses hit high alert as the scent of wolf wafted through the door seconds before the woman herself appeared. She darted into the room looking left and right and then left and right again. In an obvious fashion that made him wince for her lack of subtlety, she sniffed the air and turned in his direction.

For a moment, he stopped breathing. Small, to the point of being downright teeny,

she looked to be about thirty years old. Michael knew that was deceptive. He appeared to be the same age, but wolf-shifters stopped physically aging at the age of thirty until they mated. She could be centuries old for all he knew or she could actually be thirty.

Jet black hair fell in long curled ringlets down her back. She had graceful movements, like a dancer, and her arms held well-defined muscles that indicated she probably exercised regularly. From a distance, he admired her high cheekbones on a heart shaped face. Her lips were pink and ... puffy?

She stepped up to his chair and he became aware of two things simultaneously. One, someone had beat the hell out of this woman. Her face was a mixture of bruises displaying all kinds of colors, meaning that each bruise was in a different stage of healing. That meant someone had done this repeatedly and over the course of time. Two, she was his mate. Her scent filled him up inside, awakening a side of him he thought, after two hundred ten long years, long dead.

He growled, jumping off the chair as he felt his eyes turn wolf. Who the hell would dare to lay hands on his mate?

His wolf laughed. *Guess you're no longer considering committing ritual suicide, are you?*

His soon-to-be-fulfilled destiny widened her eyes as he ceased making his territorial noise. She sniffed the air again. Gods, she still hadn't spoken. Did she sense it too? What was her name?

She placed a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. He gazed down at her tiny hand. Her fingers were so small; they barely made it around his bicep muscles.

His gaze moved back to her face. Staring at him with eyes that could only be called amber, she clearly pleaded with him for something even without using words.

Can she talk?

"Sweetheart," he still had no name to use, but already that name seemed to fit her. "Can you speak?"

She wrinkled her eyebrows and squeezed his arm again. This time as if she needed support. Using her other hand, she touched the back of her jaw. Opening her mouth, he watched tears come to her eyes. Gods, she was really injured. Even opening her mouth to speak caused her excruciating pain. As soon as they mated, he would be able to communicate with her telepathically. Until then, as much as she was wolf, she was not pack. They couldn't speak mind-to-mind yet.

"Are you Kane?" Her words sounded slurred as if she couldn't quite get her mouth and tongue to function properly.

"I'm Michael Kane."

She nodded. "I was told to come get you."

Someone had sent her out this battered to come pick him up from a bar? Was this how this other pack of wolf shifters treated their women? How dare they? This was *his* mate. They had an obligation to keep her safe until her other half was found.

He placed his hand on top of hers and let his warm fingers stroke hers that were surprisingly cold, considering the heat both inside and outside of the bar. "Do you know who I am?"

That was a loaded question. It could be answered two ways. First, did she know he was the oldest royal brother of the Westervelt pack and second, did she realize she was his mate?

Her mouth crunched open again. Gods, she needed to shift to heal those injuries. Why hadn't she?

"You're here to find your sister, Angel. That's what Cole told me."

Cole? "I spoke to someone named Nero. He said he was the Alpha of your pack."

One lone tear escaped from her swollen eye and she gasped as if it burned her. She grabbed her face as she shook her head. "Dead."

"And Cole is Alpha now?" So it was Cole who he would be taking to task for letting his woman out and about when she was this injured.

She shook her head. "No Alpha. Sorry I'm talking so funny. It hurts."

"I gathered that." He gave into the urge and ran his hand through her soft black strands. "What is your name, sweetheart?"

"Scarlett."

His heart leapt at the sound of her name. It was so ... exotic. "Like in the book?"

"My mother really liked it."

"Alright." He took her arm. They still hadn't discussed the fact that they were mates. He started to wonder if she was aware. "Let's get you somewhere so you can shift."

She shook her head. "We should go but not so I can shift."

Under his fingers, he could feel her tremble as every word, every step she took, caused her physical pain. They walked out together into the hot night air and immediately a layer of sweat appeared on his body. The air conditioning in the bar had helped with the heat and even then it had still felt hot inside. He'd forgotten that the deep South was like this. It had been too many years since he'd left Maine.

"Why don't you want to shift?"

She made a sound that was somewhere in between a laugh and a groan. "It's not that I don't want to shift, there is nothing I would like to do more in the world." She paused as she looked left and right like she had when she entered the bar. "It's that I *can't* shift. I never could. I'm a half-shifter and I'm latent."

He nodded as he took her arm more tightly in his grasp. If she wasn't a full shifter then he needed to handle her, physically, with more gentleness. "We need you to get to a hospital then."

"No hospital. They'll call the police."

"Fine, a doctor you can trust. Someone human who can heal you."

"There's no one." She stopped moving and turned to regard him. Lights from the bar were the only illumination in the darkness except for the occasional glare off a headlight on the slowly driven street. "I know what you were asking before." She stared down at her well-worn shoes. He could see the lining coming through the top of the leather on the front of the left one. First thing he was going to do was buy her some new ones. "I know that I'm your mate. I could smell it when I came in the bar. My sense of smell is about the only wolf trait that I actually got. I'm sorry."

He clasped her cheek in his hand. So she did know. He wanted to grin from ear to ear. Gods, what a gift she was to him. She existed. She lived in the world. He wasn't alone. He didn't know what mating meant except that it had changed the male members of his pack irrevocably. Now he was actually going to get to know. "What are you sorry for, Scarlett?" He said her name because he wanted to hear it on his tongue. His wolf wanted to howl with delight.

"I'm sorry that I'm your mate. You can bring me to the pack wielder and for a price

he'll take the magic off. You can make it so I'm not your mate and then someday you'll get another one."

It was the most she'd said since he'd met her and now he wanted to take her out back and spank her perfect little ass for uttering those words. Get the magic off? Not her mate?

"What are you talking about?" He knew he asked the words through clenched teeth.

"I've known my whole life I was going to have to utter these words to my mate someday. Don't make it harder."

"Scarlett." He forced himself not to yell her name and instead pulled into his embrace so he hugged her. His mouth pressed close to her ear as he had to all but bend over to speak to her. "Destiny chose for me. You are *mine*. There is no undoing this. We're meant for each other. When you die, I will follow or if I die, you will. We will live forever in each other's minds, each other's souls. You are my one true love, the one I've waited to meet for two hundred and ten years."

He heard her intake of breath. "Michael." It was the first time she'd said his name. "Shifters get out of unwanted mates all the time."

No, they didn't. "Not where I'm from."

"You guys just accept who you're given?"

He nodded. "You don't?"

"Men alter it to suit their needs all the time. No one wants to have to breed with an undesirable."

It was as if she spoke a foreign language. "Scarlett, this is all very strange to me." He ran a hand through her long hair. "I'm going to need you to explain it to me, later. Right now, I have to find you some medical help."

She cleared her throat. "Do you have a hotel room?"

He nodded his head. "I do."

"Then after we see Cole and he tells you about your sister we can go there. I can try to make more sense at that point."

Scarlett looked down at the ground as she spoke. It was a gesture of submission and it made him furious.

Someone has hurt her, Michael. Someone has hurt her repeatedly.

He trusted his wolf on these issues. They'd been together so long. The dominance struggle that younger shifters faced with their wolves, he no longer did. They worked almost as one unit now.

She's not an Alpha wolf, Michael. Or at least she's not anymore.

Inwardly, Michael shook his head. *She's not a wolf at all. She's latent. That makes her basically human.*

"Look me in the eyes when you talk to me, pretty lady. I don't bite." Unless she asked him to.

She still didn't meet his gaze. "You're a wolf. A royal wolf, at that. I can't look you in the eyes."

Yes, she could and she would, but Michael wasn't going to batter her into doing so by screaming. Instead, he pulled her against him.

"We'll wait on seeing Cole. You'll come with me to my hotel room now. I'll get you off your feet and figure out what to do about the doctor situation."

Maybe he could get one of the females from his pack to come down and help him...

She shook her head and the long strands of her hair whispered against his arms.

“Cole will be furious.”

Dealing with his newly discovered mate was a little bit like putting together an old jigsaw puzzle. He had to find all the pieces first before he could even attempt to recreate the picture.

Trying to keep his voice steady, he moved them down the dark street. “Is Cole the one who beats you?”

“No.”

He waited a second for her to continue and when she didn’t he patiently asked her the next question. “Who hurt you?”

“So many people. The pack is at war with each other. I don’t even know everyone who was involved. I shouldn’t have been there. I know better than to try to involve myself. It just makes the men mad to see me.”

“I’m trying to figure out who I need to kill for putting their hands on you, Scarlett. Help me out here.”

She sucked in a gasp of air and finally met his eyes. “You would do that? For me?”

We need to take her home and wrap her up in our sheets and just hold her for months and months.

“I would take on the whole world for you.”

Just then, he caught scents in the air. It was like a light popping on in a room inside his brain. He could smell them. There were five shifters and they moved on them fast.

Scarlett’s eyes widened. “Oh gods.”

“I assume you know these guys who are coming this way?”

“They want to be Alpha.”

He digested this. “All five of them want to be Alpha?”

“Nero never designated a successor and no true Alpha was called upon his death. All the men have to fight for the spot now. A few have already backed down. They’re old or their mates don’t want them to be it. But almost everyone else is still in contention. All the women—well, not me because I don’t count—but all the others have taken up sides.”

Her long explanation tired her and she nearly collapsed against him. Picking her up in his arms, he moved quickly toward a more crowded street. He wasn’t afraid of the shifters. Not at all. You didn’t live your life fighting your own father, and not come out capable of giving a beat down to five testosterone laced wolves. No, he needed to get Scarlett to safety before he could adequately handle the threat.

Moving onto Canal Street, he moved her into a one-arm embrace and hailed a taxi.

“Michael, what are you doing? Are we running?”

Was that disappointment he heard in her voice? Interesting, so she wasn’t Alpha herself but she didn’t want him to be Beta. That was fine. He might not have been the Alpha wolf of Westervelt, but he was no fleeing pack member. He was a Kane and he remembered when that was an honored last name. It would be again, if he had anything to say about it.

He set her down on the seat in the back. Pulling out his wallet, he took out a wad of money and his hotel key. He handed her both even as she stared at them in confusion. Turning to the driver, he gave instructions to take her to his Uptown hotel.

“Scarlett, I’m in room 228. Wait for me.”

She nodded but bit on her lower lip, which made her wince in pain.

“Just tell me one thing. Were these men involved in any of your beatings?”

Watching her look at the floor was the only answer he got. The cab driver seemed to be getting annoyed at their long conversation but Michael couldn't care less.

"Tell me, Scarlett."

"I don't want them to hurt you."

So they were.

"If you believe nothing else, believe this—they will not hurt me. They're bullies. I'm not and that makes me more of a threat to them than they are to me. I teach *men* to fight." He emphasized the word because the driver was in earshot, hoping she would know he meant shifters. "Take a hot bath, get in bed and wait for me. I won't be long."

He closed the door and watched as the taxi drove away. His mate was going to need lots of care. It was a good thing he was never in a hurry. Except for now, he thought. Right now, he was going to deliver a beating.

Turning his back on Canal Street, he let his nose direct him toward the shifters. They waited, as he suspected they would, in one of the quiet alleyways that littered this part of town.

He took two more steps forward. "Gentlemen, would you like to stop skulking in the corner and come out or shall I come in there?"

One of them moved forward in his direction. He was tall, broad shouldered and tattooed. He wore his brown hair spiked up like out of some movie where one of the characters was supposed to be a punk. His shirt was cut to the shoulders revealing a skull and bones tattoo. Hell, the idiot was like one bad cliché after another.

Just the fact that he'd moved forward first meant he thought he was a tough guy.

Are we shifting?

Michael looked left and right. The street was clear. It so often was when these things happened. He wasn't an expert on magic by any means, but it seemed to him that the level of magic it took for a shifter fight sent out some sort of adverse signal to humans that they instinctually stayed away.

Yep.

Calling the warm white light onto himself, he shifted into his wolf form. He knew he looked impressive when he let the wolf out. His canine-self was big, at least two feet taller than most of his brothers, and dark black except for white stripes around his ears and eyes. His belly also had a circle of white. These fools wouldn't be seeing it today when they fought. None of them were getting anywhere near his stomach.

As he watched, his opponent also shifted. The white light surrounded him. At least he was able to call the light. That meant he was a real magical wolf. Not one of Kendrick's miscreant wolves for whom the shift was painful and wrong.

Growling, Michael leapt, landing hard on the other man's back. With an oomph and a whimper the "tough" wolf hit the ground hard. With very little fanfare, the wolf who had challenged him, who had very likely beat up Michael's latent mate, whimpered and whined, moving his body until he lay flat beneath Michael in a gesture that screamed subservience and defeat.

Michael snapped at him as he jumped off his back. He wanted—no needed—more of a fight than that. They'd hurt Scarlett. He arched as he felt the hair on the top of his spine stand straight up. Turning around, he regarded the four other men still in their human form. There was nothing he wanted more than a good fight.

As if moving in unison, they backed up into the wall behind them, raising their arms

in surrender. None of them had shifted.

Finally, one of them spoke. "We're sorry."

Michael called the shift onto himself, returning to his human form. He stared at the men in front of him. The wolf he'd easily bested shifted and joined his friends.

Regarding them each with a cold stare, he found not one of them to be more than a pipsqueak pretending to be a man. But then even a pipsqueak could beat up a human and had when they'd attacked his woman.

"What are you sorry for?"

The one farthest to the left, who had blond hair and a goatee, spoke first. "For stalking you."

Michael waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "I don't care if you stalk me. Stalk me all day if it makes you feel like a man." He pointed at each of them. "The four of you hurt my mate. You'll answer for it in blood."

The one he'd beat up gaped at him. "The latent? Scarlett?"

Michael growled as his wolf took over his eyes. "That is my mate you speak of. You will never speak of her in disrespectful terms again, and out of your mouth, the word latent doesn't sound okay."

The man fell to his knees. "I didn't realize a wolf of your abilities would be interested in a creature that should have been killed at birth." Michael lunged forward. This time he would kill.

Dipshit fell flat on the ground before Michael could even speak. "I apologize."

Michael decided he didn't feel like accepting his apology.

Chapter Two

Scarlett stared dauntingly at the bed. So far she'd managed to follow all of his instructions. She'd taken a bath, but she hadn't had any clothes to put on afterwards so she'd taken one of the bathrobes she'd found in the closet. Biting down on her lip, which caused her enough pain to bring tears to her eyes, she quietly hoped he wouldn't mind that she'd looked in the closet. He hadn't told her it was okay.

But he was her mate so it should be fine, right?

Rolling her eyes, she sat down on the end of the bed. Who was she talking to? She had no wolf to answer her. Never had, never would. So why were tears forming over this issue now? Sniffing, she climbed onto the bed, wincing with every jerky movement.

The tears were because she now had a mate, a handsome, strong shifter from a royal family of a famous wolf pack who would no doubt, despite his best protests, throw her over for a non-broken wolf the first chance he got.

And then there was Cole to deal with. He was going to be furious she hadn't brought Michael straight to him, especially after he offered her protection. But she hadn't completely disobeyed him. She hadn't told Michael about Angel yet. Cole had been clear. No one told Michael about Angel Kane but Cole. That much she could handle. She hoped.

The door swung open and she tried to sit up, groaning in pain as she did. Michael strode into the room wearing different clothes than he'd had on when he'd put her in the cab. In the bar, Michael had looked like a secret agent. He'd been dressed in all black, with curly hair cut short and high cheekbones that framed his long face. His chin was covered with dark brown stubble and the eyes that had regarded her were a warm, chestnut brown with specks of green in them. When he'd stood up, he was so tall she'd had to lean all the way back to look at him.

Oh and how he'd smelled, it had been so right. His scent was like coffee, like cloves, like cinnamon and like the woods. Well, what she imagined the woods smelled like. No one let her go to the woods.

Now, however, as he walked into the room on nearly silent feet, he wore a Harley Davidson t-shirt and pants that were too big on him. Not to mention he smelled like ... Seamus. Oh heavens, had he killed Seamus and taken his clothes?

Michael walked to the end of the bed and looked down at her, still not uttering a word. His silent regard made her gulp. What did he want? Had she done something wrong? She'd get out of the bed and take off the robe if he wanted. She'd move as fast as she could.

"Don't say a word, I know I stink to high heaven like Seamus and probably Todd and Barge too." He held up a bag he carried in his left hand. She recognized it as belonging to one of the local drug stores. "After I shower and get the aroma of those three imbeciles off, I'm going to bandage you up."

She opened her mouth to speak, but she had no idea even where to start. Had he killed all three of them? She'd been terrified they would destroy him. How was it possible? He'd been all alone. Then there was the complete novelty of someone saying they were going to take care of her. What was she supposed to say to that?

“Thank you.”

He nodded, his smile indicating he was satisfied with that answer.

“Um ... are they all dead?”

“No, they live to be idiots another day.” He shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“They suffered, though. Let’s say I gave them what they gave you and if there are any others out there who were involved, I want you to tell me because I’ll do the same to them.”

There were tons of others and she was sure she would never tell who they were. Not ever. Michael’s good luck at besting Seamus, Barge and Todd couldn’t be relied upon to last. No, she would protect him.

Michael crossed the room to the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Seconds later, the water in the bathroom turned on. Scarlett swallowed as something that should have occurred to her earlier dawned on her at once. He was probably going to want to have sex with her. Tonight.

She pulled the covers up tightly till they touched her chin. Oh. Gods. She did not want to do that again. And Michael was so big. All of him would be that way. Suddenly, all of his masculine beauty scared the hell out of her. She realized her hands shook and she hid them underneath the sheet.

Would he discard her like so much garbage afterwards? If they had sex did he have to keep her as his mate?

She heard the water turn off. Seconds later, Michael bounded out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist. His hair was wet, the curls, for the moment, looking straight and plastered to his head. He hadn’t shaved and the whiskers she’d seen earlier were still there.

His chest and abdomen were muscular, but also angular at the same time. He didn’t have the look of what she thought of as a “shifter gym rat”. Still, he was obviously an athlete.

He opened one of the drawers and pulled out a pair of boxer shorts. Dropping the towel for a second gave her a view of his tight ass. Strange warmth pooled between her legs.

His body was so spectacular, at least as it was viewed from a safe space. She wasn’t sure how she’d feel with it pushing down on top of her while it assaulted her insides.

“Alright.” He smiled as he turned around and walked to the bed. “Let’s have a look at your wounds.”

“You really don’t have to.” She wasn’t sure she wanted to start the touching the process. The more skin-to-skin contact they made, the more he would decide he was entitled to. Nothing good was going to come from that.

He narrowed his eyes. “I do have to.”

As she watched, he pulled out two ice packs and manipulated them until she heard a crack. “There, that should work now.”

He climbed onto the bed and scooted up next to her. This close she could feel the warmth that radiated off him all the way to her bones. “Was it a hot shower?”

“That’s the best kind.”

Gently, which surprised her, he placed one of the ice packs up against her jaw. She flinched. Gods, it hurt. Anything touching her face was almost beyond bearable. For days and days, they’d taken turns giving her pain. She closed her eyes. If she had endured that,

she could make it through this.

"I don't mean to cause you pain."

She laughed, it was better than crying. Besides, she had her eyes closed. It was always easier to say what you wanted with your eyes closed. "No one ever means to."

"I don't think that's true. I think most people who cause pain mean to do it. At least my father always did."

Opening her eyes, she regarded him. He was looking at her cheek as he held the icepack to her. His expression seemed pinched, pained. It did appear as though he cared a great deal about the fact that she had discomfort.

"Your dad is Kendrick Kane, right? He's famous."

His eyes found hers again. "For many reasons, I imagine."

"Angel was hidden in New Orleans with us from the time she was a baby to keep her safe from him."

"And now I've come to take her, and you, back with me."

Her heart stuttered. "You want me to leave with you?"

"Of course, I do. You're my mate. You go where I go."

"I can come with you. Angel can't."

Damn. She closed her eyes again. Two minutes talking to Michael and she'd gone and done what Cole specifically told her not to do.

"Why can't she?"

He didn't sound angry. Just sort of curious so she opened her eyes again. At this rate, opening and closing her lids she was going to get dizzy.

"I'm not supposed to tell you."

"Oh no?" He removed the ice from her cheek. "We'll leave that off for a moment or two and then put it back on. I want to examine your cuts. You need disinfectant."

He opened up a tube of antibacterial ointment and starting applying it to her open wounds. She wasn't currently bleeding anywhere. Some of the more recent ones hadn't completely scabbed up yet.

"Who told you not to tell me?" His hands stayed gentle as he bandaged her up. But maybe he was one of those men who got all of a sudden mad. There was no build up. There was just explosion.

"Cole."

"I'm going to meet Cole first thing tomorrow morning."

That was probably for the best. If they showed up first thing in the morning, Cole would be less mad. Yes, that made sense.

"Okay."

"Listen," Michael started speaking and she almost blanched. This was it. She knew it was coming. He was done with her. He'd done his duty, fixed her up and now they were through. "I need you to explain your pack to me, okay? I'm confused."

So was she. That had not been what she thought he was going to say. Not at all. "What's causing the confusion?"

"Where I'm from we have an Alpha. Shifters meet and they fall in love, mostly with another shifter but sometimes with a non-shifter. They mate. It's for life and beyond. We almost always travel together to the Great Beyond. When the Alpha passes on, someone steps up to be the next Alpha. In my long lifetime, that's only ever happened once. Our Alpha, Tristan, wasn't ready to take control so I held the pack for him until he could. If

there's a challenge, it's one wolf against another, fight to the death."

When he'd spoken, he moved closer to her until he was so close she could feel his warm breath against her face. He smelled sweet, like mint and shifter and man.

She rubbed her nose, which gave her a twinge of pain. "For a long time, Nero was our Alpha. My whole life, actually. But he didn't hold us together very well and men have always had a choice in the women they get mated to. No one would want a mate like me, for example. I'm going to pollute the bloodline of any children I might have."

Michael sucked in his breath. "Not true. My great-grandmother was latent. Her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren are all pretty damn talented."

Really? Michael was making her head spin with all the things he said. In his pack everyone accepted and loved their mates? The Alpha held everything together?

"Your pack sounds pretty fantastic, Michael."

He nodded. "I'm not going to lie to you ever. It was fantastic and then it wasn't and now it's struggling but it will be again."

"Something happened with your dad?"

Michael stood up and pulled the covers back on the bed, removing the top bedspread. She had no idea what he was doing. Did he not like to sleep with sheets? Without realizing it, she must have given him a questioning look and he smiled.

His grin made her heart stutter. Michael had one dimple in his left cheek. Gods, she was so pathetic. There was no question he was dreamy, but there was no point in her fluttering around about him especially because she did not want his hands on her.

"The bedspreads in hotel rooms are always infested with bacteria. I'm removing it from the bed." That being said, he dumped the floral monstrosity on the floor.

"Are you a hypochondriac?" As soon as she asked the question, she shut her mouth in horror. You didn't ask Michael Kane that. She dropped her eyes down. Now she had done it. Now he would flip out.

"Not at all. I've slept in horrendous circumstances much worse than this. But, I'm thinking of your open wounds. I don't want anything happening to you."

He climbed up on the bed next to her again, this time lying down with his head on the pillow. Scarlett's heart pounded hard. Where was the attack? She waited and waited, but he lay silent next to her.

Finally, she lifted her eyes to look at him. His head slightly turned, he regarded her with one eyebrow raised. "To answer your question from earlier, my father got drunk with power. His objectives changed. He no longer cared about being a good Alpha, he wanted more. He wanted to make more of us. So he got involved with a very bad man, and between the two of them, they found a witch who cursed all the mated men in my pack to kill their mates."

She gasped, a vision of that night filled her eyes even as Michael kept talking. She could almost see them as it happened. Michael had been there, he'd tried to stop things, he'd tried to help, and he'd been attacked on all sides. Ten different wolves, all shifters he'd grown up respecting and caring about, they'd tried to kill him too...

"You okay?"

She nodded, coming back to herself. "Sometimes I have this weird thing happen where I can see what people see when they tell me stories."

"Ah." He smiled and reached out to stroke her hair. She had to admit, she really liked when he did that. She didn't want his hands on her body; her hair was a different story.

“You’re a vision-seeker.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s part of the female magic line. Men may be the stronger shifters, but the female pack members hold all the magic, keep the pack right with the universe. Yours is an old ability, very rare these days.”

Wait a minute. That wasn’t even possible. “Michael, I’m latent.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just because you can’t shift doesn’t mean you can’t do anything else. You have the sense of smell, you have the magic. Surely, even here, someone explained it to you.”

Scarlett was beginning to suspect that nothing that had ever been explained to her was ever true. “No.” She cleared her throat. “Please continue.”

“Oh, well after that night, we struggled. My mother had hidden away all the unmated females when she got wind of my father’s plan. Then he killed her. We spent thirty years floundering around in agony before Tristan found Ashlee, his mate. After that, he took his place as Alpha of the pack.”

She wasn’t sure why exactly, but Scarlett heard something in Michael’s voice that told her he was holding back something from this story. Something personal. Maybe it was the way he’d rushed through the backend of it. More likely it was because she couldn’t see what he talked about. He must be holding something back, something that made the story incomplete.

“And Angel came to live with us because your mother hid her from her father.”

That much she was aware of. Scarlett had been five. She could still remember the day the beautiful infant had arrived. Dark hair, dark eyes, and a smile that made everyone in the pack grin back.

“Yes, that’s when Angel got sent away. We all forgot about her. It was part of the magic my mother did to protect the women. Only recently did we become aware of her existence again.” He rolled over and turned off the light before turning on his side to face her. “But we aren’t going to talk about Angel Kane any more tonight. Cole told you not to and you don’t trust me enough yet to know that I would never let anyone so much as speak harshly to you let alone punish you for disobeying an order.”

She leaned back, wincing at the pain the slight movement caused her. The darkness usually scared her. With only her smell and no ability to defend herself, she always felt the most vulnerable in the dark. Tonight, however, was a different story.

Michael had made no move to touch her in an unwanted manner and she had to admit lying next to him did make her feel less alone. She knew if anyone showed up, they wouldn’t get to her without him trying to kill them first.

She opened her eyes wide at the thought. It was an odd thing for her to think and she wasn’t sure how she knew it but it was true. Michael wasn’t going to let anyone hurt her tonight.

Exhaling, her shoulders sagged and tears fell from her eyes. Gods, when was the last time she could lie in a bed and know she’d been fine?

“Hey.” He pulled her against him in a gentle hug. His stomach pushed against her back. “What are these tears?”

“I think, if you want to know the truth, they’re relief.”

“Scarlett, I don’t want to frighten you, ever. But I have to tell you this and I want desperately for you to believe me. Whatever you’ve gone through, and I hope someday

you'll trust me enough to tell me about it, no one will ever harm you again." He kissed the back of her head and she shivered, her core getting warm and tingly. "You're my *mate*. I've waited two hundred and ten years for *you*."

Now that was some interesting information. "Two hundred and ten?" No one in her pack ever made it that long. They all died from something long before then.

"Today actually. I am two hundred and ten years old today."

"It's your birthday?"

"For about two more hours."

She sighed, feeling warm. "Happy Birthday, Michael."

"Thank you. I got the best gift imaginable."

"What?"

He laughed, low in his throat. The sound brought chills up her back. "You, Scarlett, I got you."

"I might prove to be more of a curse."

"No." His voice was firm, unrelenting. It was easier to speak to him in the dark facing away from him. She didn't feel like looking down this way. "I know curses. I've lived under one. You're a gift from the gods."

Tears pooled in her eyes again. She was like a weeping machine. He patted her hair, pushing his head up against hers on the pillow. "Go to sleep."

"I never sleep very much or for very long."

"You will tonight."

As if on command, she yawned. "I am really exhausted."

"I know. I can feel it. My wolf is pacing around like he's caged because he's so worried about your level of tiredness."

She would love to know what that felt like. What did it mean to have two entities inside of you?

"Scarlett?"

"Yes, Michael." She could feel her eyelids drooping down.

"What is your last name?"

"Knoll. Scarlett Knoll."

The heaviness of sleep beckoned her and she wanted to roll around in it like a warm blanket, but she also didn't want to give up this feeling of being held by this Hollywood handsome man. Of course, if he were to be believed they'd have lots of time to do this again.

"Stop thinking so hard."

"Michael?"

He laughed. "Yes?"

"How did you get Seamus' clothes?"

"I told him to give them to me."

That was surprising. "And he did?"

"Almost everyone does what I tell them to do." He rubbed her neck. "Go to sleep."

Her eyelids closed.

Chapter Three

Michael looked at the clock next to the bed. It was ten thirty in the morning. He'd been up for hours, but beautiful Scarlett still snored lightly next to him. From the moment she'd closed her eyes she hadn't budged.

He'd slept lightly. At first, he'd kept waking himself up just to make sure he hadn't hallucinated the whole thing and that she really was pressed up against him and after that because he wanted to be on alert in case of any of the pack members from this crazy place decided to make another try for her.

He wasn't a betting man, except he'd place money on the idea that Scarlett had been hurt in ways he couldn't possibly fathom. His wolf growled and he felt his eyes change. Shaking off the need to shift, the need to hunt, the need to kill who dared harm his mate, was not an easy task but he forced himself to do it. If she woke up and found him in his half-crazed wolf form she'd probably make a run for it, and it had taken a good hour last night of soothing words and simple movements to get her trusting him to begin with. Not to mention a passive-aggressive play of refusing to speak until she made eye contact with him. Fortunately, it worked.

She smelled like strawberries and he closed his eyes to enjoy the aroma for a few minutes. Normally, he didn't lounge around in bed this late in the day. Only he wasn't going to move a muscle until she woke up for fear of disturbing her. If she needed to sleep twelve or more hours, she was going to get that much sleep.

His wolf sighed. *Her wolf needs help.*

Haven't you been paying attention? She doesn't have one.

He never got a chance to hear his wolf's response as his nose twitched. Three odors that shouldn't have been standing outside his room wafted inside. It was Tweedle-Dumb, Tweedle-Dumber, and Tweedle-Dumbest. Otherwise known as Seamus, Todd and Barge, the idiots from the night before who had helped to beat up Scarlett and then thought to attack him. Hadn't they gotten enough?

Scarlett's eyes flew open and he could tell from her gasp and wide-eyed stare that she'd smelled them too.

He petted her head gently before kissing her forehead. "Relax, I'll get rid of them."

"Michael." She sounded as if she might hyperventilate.

"I'll get rid of them."

Jumping out of bed, he didn't bother to dress. He'd probably be shifting in a few minutes anyway. No need to waste the clothes.

He swung open the door, letting it bang against the wall. Sure enough, dressed and looking worse for wear—thanks to the fight they'd had with him the night before—were the three wolves he'd hoped not to see again. Inwardly, his wolf howled his pride that Michael didn't have a mark on him. Unfortunately, it was clear they'd already started to heal, unlike his tiny mate who would take weeks, maybe months, to recover from her ordeal.

Yeah ... he could go another round if they wanted to.

"Hi." Barge was the first one to speak. He held a cup of coffee out to him. "We thought y'all might like this."

What? His wolf was as confused as he was.

Todd stepped forward next. "And we brought one for Scarlett. She likes tea, so that's what we got." Todd held up the Styrofoam cup up like a child showing off his new Christmas present.

Finally Seamus held up a large brown shopping bag. "We thought she might like clothes so we went into her apartment and got some for her."

Michael stared blankly at Seamus. "Are you telling me that you broke into my mate's apartment and handled her clothes?" He paused as he narrowed his eyes, the full extent of what bothered him finally dawning on his brain. "Her underwear?" The very idea of Seamus' grubby hands picking up her panties made him want to throttle the man right now.

All three of them dropped what they held and shifted immediately into their wolf forms. The tea and coffee spilled all over the floor. Whimpering, they fell to their stomachs, ears flat against their heads. Barge panted.

"What the hell are the three of you doing?" Michael looked left and right. Fortunately, there was no one around. One room was open with a housekeeping cart positioned outside the door. Damn, but that was close.

"Are you crazy? You don't shift in public where anyone can see you unless it's a dire emergency." Michael groaned. He could feel a migraine starting to throb between his eyes. "Get in here."

All three wolves stood and ran into his hotel room. Michael picked up Scarlett's clothes and closed the door behind them just as Scarlett shrieked. Grabbing the covers, she stood up on the bed, panic radiating from her. The wolves started whimpering again.

Michael silently cursed. He'd just woken up and already he was having a long day.

"Gentlemen, since you're here, you can shift back and make your apologies to Scarlett. Then you can tell me what you want and get out."

The sooner he got the hell out of New Orleans the better. Already he was missing the cool winds off the Atlantic Ocean. His pack might be cursed, battered and half-missing, but at least they weren't entirely made up of lunatics.

The warm white light that came before natural shifts filled the room and the three men reemerged.

Seamus looked at him. "We were apologizing, Mr. Kane."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Michael will do. Scarlett doesn't have a wolf. She can't speak telepathically to you or hear what you say. You need to use words to speak to her. Apologize out loud."

Scarlett interrupted. "Michael." She looked back and forth between the three men before she spoke to him. "Nero taught the pack to shift into their wolf form and hit the floor as a means of apologizing. That's what they did. I didn't understand at first because I've never seen it directed towards me, but they did say they were sorry, right?"

"That's a stupid rule if ever I heard one. Shift and drop to the floor? Do you guys go around town just shifting and dropping to the floor?"

Barge nodded. "For the most part, if we've done something wrong."

Todd stepped forward. "Michael said to apologize aloud." He stared at Scarlett. "I'm sorry, Scarlett, we should never have laid hands on you even if we were just following Zack's instructions."

The other three followed suit as Michael mulled over what was said. He turned to

Scarlett. She was the only one in the room who made sense to him and even she spoke in riddles part of the time. "Who is Zack?"

When we get her home and out of here, we won't have to put up with all these strange people darting in and out of conversation.

"No true Alpha presented itself after Nero's death. Cole and Zack both want to hold the pack and are fighting for control of it."

Todd nodded. "Everyone has taken sides. We aligned ourselves with Zack because he's stronger. Scarlett is on Cole's team."

Team? He acted as if this was a sporting match and not life and death decisions.

Still looking at Scarlett, he was relieved to see the dark circles under her eyes from the night before had faded a bit and some of her bruises seemed better.

"Why did you side with Cole?"

"Because part of what Zack is preaching is that all latent and beta wolves need to be put to death."

"So then you didn't have much of a choice. What does Cole say?"

Barge interrupted. "Not much. He hardly ever talks, but he has a big house and he offered them his protection."

Michael felt his eyes turn wolf. "I was speaking to my mate."

Barge's eyes got huge and Michael realized what was about to happen. He raised his hand. "Do not shift and hit the floor. Your silence while I speak to Scarlett will suffice."

All three of the male wolves nodded. They really did seem to think with one brain.

"Which side did my sister take?" He wasn't going to be searching for Angel anymore, someone else from Westervelt was going to have to do it. Michael had one priority and it was getting Scarlett out of here.

"Cole wanted to tell you about Angel."

He nodded. He'd forgotten that fact. Only to spare his mate worry had he not insisted on being told about Angel last night. The truth was, he didn't remember her and she'd been missing for thirty-five years. One more night wasn't going to make that much of difference. Still, he needed to report in to Tristan so someone else could be sent to find Angel.

Seamus glanced at Scarlett. "He doesn't know Angel took off?" Scarlett moaned and covered her face with her hands. Seamus looked back and forth from Michael to Scarlett. He was clearly confused about why she was upset.

Michael sat down on the bed. "It's okay, Scarlett, you didn't tell me. You didn't break any rules and we'll let Cole tell me where she went, shall we?"

He patted the bed and sat down next to her, putting her face against his arm so that he shielded her from the room. It was nice to have her physical proximity back even though Michael suspected it would be a long time until he had actual intimacy with her.

Now he had to deal with the three wolves who for some reason had come to make amends this morning.

"I'm going to tell you three something and you can do with it as you wish. The wolf pack functions like a very large family. There is the ultimate Alpha. He's in charge. Then there are Alpha wolves, which I am and which I assume the three of you are if you've sided with Zack, even though you can't win a fight to save your life."

The three shifters stared down at the floor. A little shame might be a good thing for them.

“That’s not entirely your fault. Someone in the pack is supposed to teach the others how to fight. At home, I am one of those people.”

This seemed to get their attention and their heads shot back up. “Then there are the Beta wolves. Not everyone in the pack can be an Alpha. The Beta wolves are as important, maybe more so, than the Alpha wolves. An Alpha’s first instinct should be to protect the Betas, at all cost.”

Barge spoke up. “Why? They’re so weak.”

“They’re not weak, they just don’t have the same level of aggression an Alpha wolf has. They can still fight and at Westervelt we teach them the same way we teach the Alphas. A lot of them have other interests, like carpentry or technology or teaching. A true Alpha wolf never wants to hurt them. *Ever*. He or she always wants to keep them safe.”

Todd fell to his knees and to Michael’s ultimate horror started to bawl—big, pent-up tears flowing freely down his face. The blond haired man punched the floor. “I know that. I know that. I’ve always known that. They told us we had to dominate. If we wanted to live we had to dominate. Nero, Cole and Zack ... they’ve made it so hard and my wolf has been so angry for so long.”

“In matters of heart and conscience, I tend to listen to my wolf. He usually knows the right thing to do.”

Barge and Seamus knelt down next to Todd. Seamus’ face was beet red while Barge looked sort of green. Finally Seamus looked up at him. “When our wolves finally come to us, the elders of the pack take us out and teach us how to dominate them. They taught us it was important to make our canine instincts subservient and part of the way to do that is to eliminate or, at the very least, make servants of the weaker members of the pack.”

It was like speaking to children who had been told the color red was the color blue. How did you undo a lifetime of neglect? You couldn’t and Michael wasn’t even sure he wanted to.

He stroked Scarlett’s hair. “Is that what Cole does? Makes you guys his servants for his big house?”

Against his arm, Scarlett nodded.

Michael turned his attention back to the three men now on the floor. “I’m not finished. There are two other groups to a healthy pack.”

You sound like your mother. You do realize that, don’t you? His wolf laughed at him. *In this area of life, she knew a lot of stuff.*

“The first are the latent wolves. For whatever reason, their wolf halves never appear, but they still have some of our traits.” Without moving his gaze from the men who last night he beat up and today he had to school like teenagers, he squeezed his mate’s knee. “In most cases, it’s the scent. They can smell like we can. Some of them can do other things too. These members are a gift to have around. They remind us of our humanity, keep us from losing sight of the fact that we have dual natures and sometimes we have to be human too. When I was growing up, Westervelt always had five or six latent shifters in the pack. Most of them got married and had full shifter children. They’re considered lucky and they hold as high a position in the pack as anyone else.”

Barge nodded. “And the other group?”

“The human mates of pack members.”

Todd gaped at him. “Y’all let them live?”

Scarlett whispered in his ear. "Zack killed my father and mother because Mom was human. He hunted them down, killed them and brought me back to the pack to see if I could shift."

Okay, now Zack was dead. Michael felt his eyes turn wolf as he stood up. "Yes, we let them live. Come on, Scarlett, we're going to see Cole."

The three men jumped up from the floor. Todd spoke first. "We'll come too."

"Don't you people have jobs?"

"No," Scarlett answered. He was thrilled that his mate was speaking up so much. It meant she was comfortable. "Only the Betas and latent wolves have to work."

"The Alphas just lounge around all day?"

She nodded.

"Of course. What else would they do?" He hoped his sarcasm translated into the brains of the other men. "Explain to me how Zack hopes to have any money after he kills off all the people who earn it?"

Silence met his question. Holding out his hand, he let Scarlett take it before he walked from the room.

"You guys can come. In fact, you can drive us." He stared at them for a moment. "After, I give you some clothes, apparently."

* * * *

Climbing out of Barge's SUV, he regarded Cole's house. It was big but it wasn't spectacular. Nothing that intimidated Michael in any case. He'd been alive long enough to not particularly care for wealth displays. They were meaningless most of the time.

Stopping only to make sure Scarlett was okay, he took the stairs two at a time before he rang the bell. She followed right behind him, close on his heels, and the three wolf shifters he'd now somehow inherited as annoying little brothers behind her.

The door opened and Scarlett shivered even though it was ninety degrees outside. He pulled her close to his side before he regarded the man who opened the door.

"I'm Michael Kane. I need to see Cole about my sister."

As he watched, the man—who was at least three inches shorter than he was with blazing red hair and green eyes—let his eyes turn wolf. Michael could have laughed. It took guts to be that aggressive and that stupid. Or maybe Michael was simply unaccustomed at this point to being surrounded by power hungry males who had no idea what real shifter power felt, smelled and tasted like when they encountered it. For kicks, he should send Tristan and Cullen down here to blow their minds with power.

Rather than return the glare, he looked past the man into the hall. "Is he here?"

When wolf-eyes spoke, he had a gruff voice. Its scratchy timbre hurt Michael's ears. "He's here. He expected the latent wolf to bring you last night."

"*Scarlett* is my mate. We were temporarily sidetracked. I'm here now. Cole can deal...unless, of course, he wants me to go see Zack for my information."

Michael had no intention of going to Zack for anything other than murdering the son-of-a-bitch, but he was willing to let Cole and his crew think otherwise if it got the ball rolling on Angel's location a little faster.

From behind the man who blocked the door, a shout resounded down the hall. "Let him in, Deke."

Deke jumped, moving out of the way and Michael clutched Scarlett's hand tighter to

reassure her she was still safe. He would tear every member of the house limb from limb if he needed to. They were here to collect information and get out. That was all.

As Barge, Todd and Seamus passed Deke, they growled at him. Turning around, he looked at his three companions.

“Listen, boys, if you’d rather wait outside that is fine.”

Todd shook his head. “No, Michael, we go where y’all go.”

Great. Michael’s wolf rolled his eyes. We have officially gained a fan club.

Not sure exactly how that happened. We delivered them a beat down.

His wolf paced around. Their wolves are thrilled to be with us.

Michael wasn’t sure exactly what to do with that information. Instead, he looked at the shifters.

“If you’re coming with me, I’m going to charge you with a job.”

All three men hit the floor. Michael cursed and grabbed Todd by the shirt, pulling him up.

“Don’t you guys start that dropping to the floor and shifting nonsense. I’m not going to carry your unconscious selves out of here if you overuse your shifting and pass out.”

He looked at the other two. “Stand up.”

They did as he commanded and Michael heard Scarlett snicker next to him.

Grinning, because Scarlett had just laughed at something he’d said, he continued his instructions.

“If I’m busy, the three of you are responsible for Scarlett’s safety, even if that means carting her out of the house and taking her back to my hotel room.”

Pulling his key out of his pocket, he handed it to Scarlett. She took it and placed it in her pants’ pocket. For a second, Michael was absolutely fascinated with the way her small fingers moved. There was a gracefulness that she possessed that he’d never seen on anyone else before. It was as if her limbs flowed in one simple, straight movement, as opposed to the jerky rushed way his own body functioned. She was just so ... dainty.

“We’ll protect her, Michael, you can count on it.”

Todd’s voice pulled him out of his obsessive thinking about Scarlett. He glared at them one more time. In no way did he fool himself into thinking he could count on them. He didn’t plan on getting into the kind of trouble where he would actually need their help. However, having them on alert might help things. Where his mate was concerned there was no such thing as being too careful with her welfare.

Finally, they turned the corner and walked into a room. The walls were painted red with high ceilings, a large fireplace and furniture that spoke of antebellum south. If no one in this pack lived very long as Scarlett said, then this wasn’t a callback to another time the occupant had actually lived in. No, Michael knew right away that Cole was trying to make some kind of statement about class and culture with his home decoration.

Michael’s wolf howled inside of him. Yes, both parts of him were both unimpressed with the show.

Three men sat together on a couch. The one in the middle—who looked to be about thirty but then again everyone here did since clearly no one was truly mated—wore an expensive white linen suit. On his right and left were two dark haired shifters. They were big and bulky looking.

His wolf snarled. *The bodyguards.*

No one stood up to greet him and Michael smiled. So much for the show of manners

and breeding.

“I’m Michael Kane. I understand you have information on my sister.”

Chapter Four

Scarlett could hardly breathe. Michael had just walked into the living room of the man who could be called the most powerful shifter in the world—unless you were on Zack’s side of the war—as if he owned the place. He wasn’t cowering. He didn’t even look down. He just announced himself like he had every right to be there.

Her mate was magnificent.

“Yes, Mister Kane.” Cole actually stood up.

She knew she wasn’t alone in her shock at this behavior. Next to her, Todd, who for some strange reason now wanted to protect her, bristled, moving back and forth on his feet.

Cole spoke with his lazy southern drawl that masked an anger she was glad not to have seen very often. “I’m Cole Devereaux.”

Cole extended his hand and Michael eyed it but did not shake. The would-be Alpha of their wolf pack stared down at his own hand before putting it by his side.

“Here’s the deal.” Michael’s voice was so low, so strong sounding. It did funny things to her insides. In fact, every time he was near her, she seemed to get warm—sometimes wet—in all sorts of places she hadn’t known could react like that. “You offered my mate protection so I’m not going to kill you right now.”

Cole’s eyes got huge. “Excuse me? You come into my home and threaten me?”

“I didn’t threaten you. In fact, I think I just told you that you’d be safe from me. But I’m taking Scarlett and we’re leaving here forever after you tell me where my sister has run off to.”

Cole turned his gaze to hers and there was pure hatred in it. She’d seen that look before, only it had been coming from Zack and his men. Gods, Michael really couldn’t throw her over now. There would be no one left to help her. She’d be a dead woman within a matter of moments.

Cole addressed her directly. “I told you *I* wanted to tell him.”

Michael growled and all eyes in the room turned to him. “She didn’t tell me. Someone else did. In fact, she went out of her way not to tell me, you presumptuous moron.”

The two wolves who were permanent sentries for Cole stood and the door opened up. Thirty of Cole’s rank and file wolves marched in. Scarlett didn’t mind this group as much as she hated Zack’s version of it. These guys expected her to cook and clean for them, to wait on them hand and foot, but they never asked her for sexual favors.

She’d never known if that was because she was latent and that was so disgusting to them they didn’t want to touch her or because they were actually relatively decent people who didn’t demand sexual favors as a reward for letting her live. She suspected it was the second option since most women in the pack preferred to be here than at Zack’s.

Cole cocked his head to the side. “Despite your words, I think you are challenging me, Mr. Kane.”

“You know what?” Michael turned around to look at Scarlett before he glanced back to Cole. “You might be right about that. You might not have threatened to kill her but you just spoke to her disrespectfully. I don’t like that she had to act like a servant to stay

alive. So, yes, I'm challenging you, Mr. Devereaux."

Scarlett had no time to even gasp before Michael and Cole both shifted into their wolves.

"No, Michael, no," she screamed at the top of her lungs as Todd pushed her back against the wall. She struggled to see around him until finally he moved so she could at least poke her head out.

This was wrong. Michael couldn't die here. Why couldn't they just run away?

Tables and chairs went flying. Cole's wolves ran through the room clearing the path for their would-be supreme Alpha. Todd continued to stay mostly in front of her, but Barge and Seamus rushed behind Michael, seemingly prepared to do battle for him.

She stared at Michael's wolf. He was big, black, except for the few white patches on his face. Even having grown up around wolves, Scarlett had never seen one quite so big or fearsome looking. Cole was always impressive; a red wolf with brown spots, he dominated everyone except Zack. But, this time, Scarlett suspected Cole wouldn't be dominating Michael.

Just that fast, the two wolves were on each other. Todd whirled around to her, a grin plastered on his face. "Wait until you see Michael."

She couldn't help *but* see him. His teeth bared, he growled at Cole as he tore at the smaller wolf. Every time Cole got up, Michael knocked him down. If Cole moved left, Michael moved left. If Cole moved right, so did her mate. There was nowhere for Cole to go. Michael wasn't just beating Cole, he was humiliating him by showing the wolves in the room how completely unmatched they were. If it was apparent to Scarlett how ill-prepared Cole had been for Michael and she didn't fight, then those who could had to be able to see it too.

Her heart beat fast and she shifted her weight to the balls of her feet. Gods, she was filled with so much nervous energy she was almost giddy from it. Looking left and right, she tried to assess the crowd's reaction to the fight. Usually, she was good at it, staying to the sides, watching from afar but not today. She felt like howling in her very human voice how great Michael was doing.

What little she could fathom through her adrenaline rush, it seemed that all the wolves were equally as stunned as she was. Everyone's eyes had become wolf. Their gaze locked on the battle, their jaws open. All of the men were enthralled.

Finally, Cole lunged forward leaping at Michael's side. At the last second, Michael moved left, snarling as Cole crashed into the wall before hitting the ground face first. The would-be Alpha stood up and limped toward Michael. The red wolf stretched out flat on the ground, his ears back and whimpered his defeat.

All noise in the room ceased. Scarlett couldn't hear anything but her own breath and the sound of her heart beating. Cole changed back into his human form, shifting out of his wolf body. Michael did the same, giving her a view of his backside. She wanted to rush forward and grab him, wrap her arms around him and stop the shaking of her limbs that seemed to be moving of their own accord, but Todd still hadn't moved.

Cole looked up at Michael from the ground. "By the heavens above, I relent to you."

Michael shook his head. "I don't want you to relent. I want you to tell me where my sister is, apologize to my mate for your role in the brutality she's endured and then leave town. You can come back when I'm gone. I don't want to see you ever again. The only reason I'm not killing you is because you did offer Scarlett protection from Zack."

On the floor, Cole nodded. "I'll get my things."

"No." Michael stepped forward. "You'll tell me where Angel is, apologize to Scarlett and then run for your life before I change my mind."

Scarlett doubted very much that Michael ever changed his mind. He was like a river, his flow seemed to be always going forward in one direction, unrelenting and sure of itself. But Cole didn't need to know that.

Cole stood up, his limbs almost giving out. No one moved to help him and Michael grabbed his arm to steady him and keep the other man from falling over. "Angel ran off when the fighting started. She said she wanted no part of it. She's always been hard, your sister, difficult. She never knew how to tow the line."

Michael grinned, his eyes still in their wolf form. "I like her already."

Cole's voice shook. "I sent two of my enforcers after her to bring her home. Both of them claim to be her mate."

"The mating rituals of this pack are so screwed up, I don't even know where to start with that statement."

Michael paused. He still hadn't looked at her and she was dying for some eye contact. She wanted to see into the depths of his soul again, to the soft place she sometimes thought she saw there. Of course, being her, she'd probably stare for two seconds and then have to glance at her feet. At least she'd have those two wonderful seconds.

He hauled Cole over to the chair that now resided in the corner giving Scarlett a view of her mate's back muscles in action. If she needed any reminder of just how powerful Michael could be in his human form, she got it. So far he'd only been gentle with her. What would he do if she ever stepped out of line? Send her away or something worse?

That thought in mind, she looked back down to the floor.

Michael continued speaking. "In other words, you don't know what happened to my sister."

"No, I don't."

"Do you suppose Zack knows?"

Cole laughed, a wheezing sound. "Angel hated Zack even more than she hates me."

"Okay," her mate sighed. "Next up, you have an apology to make."

Scarlett heard some strange scraping sounds as Michael dragged the chair with Cole in it over to her.

"Scarlett," Cole spoke her name. "You may make eye contact with me."

With a thud, Michael knocked Cole's chair over onto the floor. He oomphed as his body collided with the ground.

Her mate snarled. "Your damn right she can look at you. If she feels like staring at you on the ground, that's where she'll do it." Michael put his foot on the side of Cole's body. "Go on."

"Scarlett, I'm sorry if any of my actions ever led to you suffering more abuse or if I ever did anything to not treat you correctly."

She nodded as she stared at Cole. He was just one of the many men who had run her life since she was a small child. He lay flat on the floor, in a position of subjugation, just as she suffered all her life from him, Zack and Nero. She could remember him laughing as he'd dropped a piece of food or a cigarette butt on her head.

The revenge that she expected to feel never came. A gasp sounded from across the

room as Scarlett knelt down to be closer to the floor where Cole was strewn.

Tears filling her eyes, she swore she wouldn't let them fall. "Thank you for your attempts to protect me from Zack, even if it was never enough. I'm not dead today because you took me in a few weeks ago and you didn't rape me or let anyone else here take me against my will."

She realized what she said were things she'd not said to Michael yet. He was bound to have questions ... lots of them ... and maybe she should have just stayed quiet. Still, her mouth kept moving, almost of its own volition.

"You're mean and you're a bully, but I owe you a debt of gratitude and if there's anything you ever need that I can provide, I will be glad to."

Above her Michael growled. "You can ask me and I'll decide if she helps you."

The edges of her mouth quivered. She was torn between wanting to sob and wanting to smile. She stood up instead and found Michael's gaze waiting for hers. Exhaling, she gazed in his brown depths, now human and not wolf. There in the center of his eyes, as he reached out to take her hand into his, was the softness she'd needed to see.

Even now after he conducted this fight with Cole, he didn't look at her with hostility. Maybe, just maybe, Michael was a man who could control his aggression. If such a thing was possible.

He regarded Cole. "I think I told you to run."

Cole grunted as he got off the floor and ran out the front door, slamming it behind him. The room was still so quiet she could have heard a pin drop.

Michael let go of her hand as he looked around. His voice was low when he spoke to her. She knew everyone in the room could hear him anyway thanks to their wolf senses, but she appreciated the effort nonetheless. "Any of these shifters here ever rape you, Scarlett?"

She shook her head. "Not here, no."

"Okay." He glanced back at the group. "Who's next? Who wants to go at me?"

No one moved. Then, within seconds of one another, the thirty-two wolves in the room hit the ground, shifting as they went. One by one they assumed their submissive poses, head down, eyes pleading at Michael.

He turned around to regard Scarlett. "Tell me they didn't all just do that."

She bit down on her lip, which hurt, trying not to laugh. Michael's expression was priceless. His eyes were huge, his mouth gaping open as if he'd just tasted something bad. His body was totally naked and the sight of it made her stomach tighten.

He was an Adonis brought to life. If he hadn't been holding her hand, she might have taken a few steps backward into the wall just to support herself.

"They're all offering you their submission."

Michael looked up at the sky for a second before exhaling a long breath. He spoke to the group of wolves.

"Shift back."

One by one they obeyed.

Turning back to Scarlett, he spoke. "Is there a place here I can shower?"

"Upstairs. You can use Cole's room. It's the nicest."

Nodding, he smiled at her, but it was tight and she could see the tension in him radiating from his clenched jaw and his tense stance. "Okay."

She watched as he scanned the room. Finding who he sought, he stared at Todd.

“Good job taking care of her.”

Todd beamed like he’d just been told he’d won some kind of lottery. “Thank you, Michael, it was my pleasure.”

“Uh-huh.” Michael took two steps toward him. “I want you to do me one more favor. I want you to tell all these people here what I told you about how a pack should work, about mates, about the Alphas taking care of everyone else. Can you do that?”

Todd’s neck strained as he swallowed. “I can.”

“Good, Barge and Seamus can help you.” He walked toward the stairs and held out his hand to her and she followed, taking it.

Michael was full of surprises. Why had he wanted them to explain how a pack should work?

* * * *

While Michael showered, Scarlett rummaged through Cole’s drawers until she found some shorts and t-shirts that she thought might fit her magnificent mate. It had to be shorts. There was no way Cole’s pants wouldn’t be high-waters on Michael. Finally, the shower stopped and Michael came out of the bathroom, holding the towel around his waist like he had the night before.

His seemed looser, as if the warm water had helped to calm him down. She held out the clothes. “This was the best I could do. If you want, I could go down and see if any of the others have clothes that might fit you.”

“Not without me you’re not.”

She knew some women might bristle at being told what to do by their mate but not Scarlett. It was a ... relief. The truth was, she would go down if he needed her to, but she definitely preferred not to have to.

“Okay.”

He took the clothes from her hands. “Thanks for finding them.”

She nodded, pleased that she’d done it on her own and that he was happy with her. “You’re welcome.”

Michael stepped forward invading her personal space. Heat radiated from his body and warmed her up from the chill of the air-conditioning.

“Scarlett, I could feel your eyes on me through the whole fight. I could smell you. It was hard to concentrate.”

His voice was low, husky, and before she could stop herself with worry, she reached out and stroked his bare chest with her fingers. His hair was soft, his muscles well defined and he shuddered under her hand.

She looked up to meet his eyes. Had she just done that to him?

“You liked it when I was fighting Cole.”

He said it as a statement, not a question. She wasn’t sure how he knew, but it was probably one of those wolf qualities she would never have. He’d heard her heartbeat pick up or smelled her excitement or both. There was no point in denying it.

Her lips trembled when she spoke. “I think I might be a little screwed up.”

He shook his head, his eyes hard. “No, this whole place is awful, like something out of a horror movie. Even my father wouldn’t have tolerated it before he went nuts. Probably not even after.”

She lifted the other hand and ran her fingers down his strong arm. Again, she felt his

body shake from her touch.

“Why does my caressing you create that response?”

“I like how it feels.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her hair, not moving his mouth from its spot after he finished. His voice sounded slightly muffled. “It gives me pleasure to feel your fingers on me.”

“Oh.” She swallowed. So far he’d made no move to carry her to the bed and push himself inside of her. “Can I keep doing it?”

“Yes. Please.”

Her hand shook with nerves as she explored Michael’s exposed skin. She had to get on her tiptoes to touch the top of his chest since he was so much taller than she was and she could hardly get her hands around his waist to feel his back. His skin was so smooth; surprising for such a tough man.

He stayed absolutely still except for the occasional shudders she felt when her hands touched him some place new.

Finally after a few minutes, he spoke. His mouth moved off the top of her head slightly and he rested his chin there instead. “I’ve been alone a very long time. Having you do this, it’s such a gift.”

She was confused. The first part she understood but the second confused her.

“Having me touch you is a gift? But you haven’t even taken your pleasure from me yet.”

“If you think I’m not taking pleasure from you then you don’t know the meaning of the word.”

He moved slightly forward and she could feel his hard cock pushing through the towel he still held onto.

“Um...”

She needed to be brave. It was important, desperately important that she not lose Michael, that he not change his mind about her. She knew he had told the others that mates were for life, that you didn’t get to pick, you just accepted with gratitude who you were given. Still, it was hard to reconcile that with what she had always known.

Pushing her fear down into her stomach where she knew she’d have to deal with it later—usually by getting sick—she finally spoke. “Do you want to, you know, go to the bed?”

“Only if *you* happen to be tired.”

Maybe she hadn’t made herself clear. “Don’t you want to...”

“Yes.” He backed up from her a few steps and crossed the room to put on his clothes. “More than you can imagine, but I want to do it when we’re both ready. Not because you think you have to.”

“I want to be your mate.”

He pulled on the shorts over his naked rear end and when he turned around he raised one eyebrow. “That’s good considering that we are, in fact, mates.”

“Michael.” She looked at her feet. “Are you deliberately misunderstanding me?”

He shook his head. “No, here’s the thing.” He sat down on the bed and ran his hands through his hair. His shoulders were curved over like he was tired. “We will have sex when you want to and not a minute before. Even if it takes years.”

She walked over and sat down next to him on the bed. “I don’t know if I’ll ever really want to. It’s really not about the woman.”

“How long ago were you raped?”

“I wasn’t raped.”

Pulling her into his side, he kissed her forehead. “Sure you were.”

“Zack has this rule. He wants all the undesirables dead. He thinks we’re going to pollute the bloodline, but if we volunteer to be the sex partners to one of his wolves then we’re spared. I volunteered in order to stay alive until I could get to Cole.”

“That’s still rape, sweetheart.”

Was it? She hadn’t said no...

“Scarlett, I have a question. Where are all the women? There’s none here but you. Are they all with Zack?”

“Today is vitamin day.” Now that he mentioned it, she was feeling kind of itchy. It was definitely time to get her injection. “They’re with the pack wielder.”

Michael stood up, hands in pockets. “What is vitamin day and what is a pack wielder?”

She swallowed. “He’s the one who can make it so you’re not mated to me anymore.”

And now that he knew just how screwed up she was, that she might never be better, she wouldn’t blame him if he took that route.

Chapter Five

Michael knew he had to find the right words to use to answer Scarlett. At the moment, talking to her was like running through a minefield blind. Every other sentence gave him a new piece of information that might blow up in his face or make him lose a limb.

“He can’t unmate us. He might be able to do something, some sort of weird magic thing, but you would still be my mate. And in the very, very remote chance that he could and he tried, I would kill him.”

And gods knew he would really like to kill someone after having restrained himself twice now. First with the three amigos, who were rapidly increasing in his estimation, and second with Cole who only got to live because he’d sheltered Scarlett from Zack.

“You don’t want to get a new mate?”

“No! And I think I’ve answered that a few times now.” He wasn’t endlessly patient even if he wished he was. “So the next time you ask or hint that you think that might be the case I’m going to get angry.”

Her neck muscles clenched and she glanced down. “What will my punishment be if you get angry? What will you do to me?”

“I won’t do anything to you. Most likely I’ll stomp around and mutter. I might even, I don’t know, swear a little bit or yell. Then, with a little time, like a few hours maybe, I’ll get over it.”

She looked up. Good, they were making progress on that front. More and more she held his eye contact, even if her first instinct were to stare down.

His wolf spoke. *That might always be. It might be a Beta wolf thing.*

She doesn’t have a wolf and she’s my mate. She doesn’t belong in the whole Alpha/Beta scenario. Lots of Betas make plenty of eye contact with their Alpha halves.

That’s true. His wolf yawned. It had been a long day for him. *But you’re not mated yet.*

What difference does that make? I want her to be unafraid of me when we have sex.

Michael, his wolf hmped. *I’m not speaking about sex. I’m talking about mating, genius.*

With that, his wolf lay down and went to sleep. Evidently, his canine half was done with their conversation. Although he had certainly given Michael plenty to think about. All of this was a problem since no one ever discussed their matings. It was the best-kept secret in a pack where everyone knew almost everything.

“Michael, are you talking to your wolf?”

Jolted, he stared back at Scarlett. He’d been staring straight ahead for a few minutes during his exchange.

“Um ... yes ... sorry. I guess I’m not used to being around other people. I kind of just talk to him whenever I feel like it. It’s rude. My mother would have yelled at me two hundred years ago.”

“No,” she laughed. It was the first time he heard the sound. Scarlett’s laugh was akin to a bird twittering. Adorable, just like the rest of her. “I’m used to it. I wanted to make sure you weren’t having a seizure.”

He stood up. "A seizure?"

Scarlett scratched at her arm. "You just had a big fight. Maybe you were hurt and you didn't know it. I read about seizures. People sometimes look like they're just staring straight ahead."

"Really?" He'd never heard of that. When he thought of seizures he thought...

His mate's movements caught his attention. She'd just scratched her arm and now she was itching her neck.

"Are you okay?"

Nodding her head, she stood up next to him. "It's just time for my vitamin shot."

His wolf senses went on alert. Something was wrong. The hair on the back of his neck stood up straight as his eyes turned wolf. He stepped forward taking a deep breath. Something was wrong with Scarlett.

He pulled her into his arms and she gasped. "Michael?" Her eyes were huge.

"Not going to hurt you. Would never hurt you." But he needed to concentrate, needed to figure out what happened.

Her temperature was too high. Not terrible, not so much that she would even notice, but it was at least one degree higher than it had been that morning or since they'd entered the room. He could feel it coming off her skin.

What kind of *vitamin* shot would do that?

Her heart rate had picked up, but maybe that was just because he had grabbed her abruptly. No, it was her scent that most concerned him. It spoke of pain and he had a taste in his mouth like blood. Scarlett's pain was becoming his own.

Finally, when he could speak he let the wolf out of his eyes. "This person—this pack wielder—he gives you this shot how often?"

"At my age, I get it once a month. When I was younger it was more frequent. Once a week. But now my body is better able to hold the nutrients."

This didn't sound right. Not any of it. He wasn't a science person; back before life had imploded he'd been a teacher of English and History.

He needed to speak to Azriel immediately. His brother was the go-to guy when it came to this kind of thing. He'd been working on finding a cure for the miscreant wolves for months. The man seemed to know everything.

Letting Scarlett go, he stalked to the other side of the room and picked up the phone he saw there. He'd left his cell phone at the hotel earlier by mistake when he'd been so annoyed at Todd, Barge and Seamus. He supposed he could send one of them to get it, but he didn't want to encourage whatever this newfound hero-worshiping from them was.

Dialing Az's number, he decided he didn't care about making long distance phone calls on Cole's line. Paying for it could be part of Cole's punishment.

After two rings someone answered, but it wasn't the voice he'd expected to hear. It was Theo, not Az.

"Theo, why are you picking up Az's phone?"

Usually Az was buried in a below ground lab away from any other shifters. "Good to speak to you too, Michael." Theo paused. "Whose number is this?"

"It's the phone of this shifter name Cole. Never mind. I need Az."

"Yeah ... that's going to prove to be a problem."

Michael didn't like the sound of that. He put his hand on the wall in front of him. "Why not?"

“Az is unconscious.”

“What?”

Realizing he yelled, he tried to cool down his nerves. Behind him, he heard Scarlett move closer to the door. Great, he’d raised his voice and now she contemplated escape. He really had to find a way to keep it together.

“He took on Dad all by himself.” He could hear the awe in Theo’s voice.

“Azriel did?” Az was Mister Brains, not Mister Brawn.

“To protect his mate. Actually, he saved all of us. Tristan is in an uproar because the pack didn’t allow him, as Alpha, join in the fight. Az was practically dead before we got there, but it looks as if he’s going to survive thanks to his mate’s powers. Anyway, it’s a long story. We could have used you, my brother.”

Michael closed his eyes around the lump that had formed in his throat. That was pretty standard. He was always letting his family down when it counted the most. Opening them, he tried for nonchalance. “Sorry, I’m here on Tristan’s orders looking for Angel. Didn’t find her, but I found my beautiful mate instead.”

“Really? That’s great. When are you bringing her home?”

“Soon. I just have a few things to finish up here first.”

Like finding out what they’d given her to make her itchy and feverish and killing the bastard who had raped her. Then he’d bring her home and keep her in his room until she was sure of him. Or something like that. He’d figure it out when he got there.

“What did you need Az for?”

No point in telling Theo and getting him worked up. “I’ll handle it on my own. When he wakes up tell him good work on holding off Dad.”

Damn, Michael needed to get home and fast.

“It’s just a temporary fix, big brother. Some other things have happened. I can explain when you get here, but we’ve had a bit of an inside look into Dad’s operation through Dad’s own brain—”

Michael interrupted. “Theo, what?”

“I know it sounds odd. I promise to give you the rundown when you get here, but right now it looks like even if we can get control of the magic situation, find ourselves a witch who will work against Dad, *and* get someone to tell us what Dad is planning, we’re still going to lose.”

That was a blunt statement from his younger brother. In all their years fighting their father no one had ever said that. Not ever.

“Why do you say that?”

Things must really be dire. Michael tapped his foot on the floor, nervous energy pressing on his insides. He wanted to go, needed to go, and couldn’t.

“Because Dad has hundreds of wolves, maybe more. Just from sheer power of numbers there is very little chance we can ever win this. We may have to make some kind of arrangement.”

“What do you mean?” Michael could hardly get the words out.

Theo was silent for a few seconds. “We might have to split up, hide our mates, leave here.”

“Tell Tristan I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

There really wasn’t anymore to say. He hung up the phone. When he turned around, he was shocked to see Scarlett standing right behind him. He’d been so preoccupied with

his conversation he hadn't even heard her approach.

"What happened?"

That was right. She couldn't hear the other half of the conversation. She wasn't enhanced in her hearing.

"I just got some really bad news from my brother." He ran a hand through his hair, suddenly exhausted. "I was hoping one of my other brothers could help me figure out what is in the vitamin concoction they're giving you, but he's out of commission for a while."

Scarlett wrapped her arms around her body in a protective gesture. "Is he okay?"

He nodded. "He'll be fine. He got into a one-on-one battle with my father, not something he should have done. Somehow he survived. That's really an accomplishment."

"I'm glad to hear it, that he'll be fine, not that he had the fight."

"Thank you."

She was pretty. He reached out to run his hand down her perky nose. She smiled, but her eyes looked wary.

"I'm sorry I yelled while I was on the phone. I didn't mean to scare you."

She shrugged. "It's okay. Do you think there is something in the vitamins making me sick or something?"

As if to illustrate his worry, she scratched her arm.

"Maybe."

"What do you think it is?"

He shook his head. "The only way to find out is to go see your pack wielder—a term I have never heard before in two hundred years—and take a look at it."

"He's very secretive."

"Is he a wolf?"

"No." She coughed. "But he's magical."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, he'll tell us what we want to know."

"How can you be so sure?"

"In this arena, I'm completely confident in my ability to get the job done." In other ways, he was not and that she needed to hear about.

He continued. "Scarlett..."

"Yes?"

"Here's the deal. My brother just told me we are likely to lose the war against my father. If that happens we will either have to hide or," it was so hard to say the words. "Or I may die and the truth of our mating is that you will feel compelled to follow me to the other side."

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh."

"So if you want to get out of our mating—and this wielder person can do that—I wouldn't blame you for running away."

Although it might kill him. He'd understand. It was cruel to tie her to him without giving her all the facts. Right now, he'd defeated Cole and he took care of her. In no way should she be forced to have a future with him without knowing what she was getting into.

"I thought that part of this whole mating deal was that the universe picked the person who was supposed to stand by you for life."

He nodded. "That's right."

"I'm not strong. I'm not brave. I'm always going to be flawed because I don't have a wolf. But I'm loyal to a fault and I'd like to stand with you on this journey. Even if it means I hide behind your back half the time."

"Really?" He tried to ignore the choked sound of his voice. "You mean that?"

"I do."

In two steps he was next to her. Picking her up off the ground he held her close to him, hugging her as tight as he dared without hurting her or making her injuries act up.

"I've been alone such a long time." He had to get control of his emotions before they overwhelmed him and his wolf, usually so calm and steady, was not helping him. "You are brave. Most people couldn't have survived what you did here. You're not broken. Don't ever say that again. If I am nothing else, I'm strong. I'll be strong for both of us if you need it. But you're stronger than me in most of the ways that really count."

He had to put her down before he gave into the urge pulsating through his veins to lie her down on the bed and make love to her until they both couldn't see straight. Besides, he was two seconds away from blubbering and then she'd think that not only was she mated to a shifter almost guaranteed to get her killed, but that he was also a wimp.

Men might get to be emotional and touchy-feely these days, but when he was raised you didn't do that.

With a sigh, he put her back on her feet. She looked up at him as she scratched at her left hand with her right one. Damn, he had to get control of himself. Scarlett needed his attention right now.

"Come on, let's go see this pack wielder."

Hand in hand, they walked from the room into the hallway. Turning down the stairs, he stopped abruptly. The thirty-some-odd wolves he'd left downstairs stood lined up in the front hallway of Cole's house.

He raised an eyebrow to stare at Todd. "What's going on?"

"I did what you said. I told them what a pack is supposed to be like."

Okay. He glanced at Scarlett and she raised her shoulders in a shrug. It seemed as if she was as confused as he was.

"That's good." He paused. "Why is everyone still standing here?"

Seamus spoke. "Where are y'all going now?"

"To see the pack wielder." He might as well be completely truthful with all of them. "I think there's something wrong with what he's doing to your women. This vitamin shot he gives them might actually be making them sick. Where I'm from, there is no such thing as a pack wielder."

Seamus furrowed his brow. "Really? You think he's hurting the women?"

There was some grumbling in the room. "I do. I want to know what's in this so-called 'vitamin' injection."

Barge spoke up. "It's supposed to make them potent."

"Do you mean fertile?"

Barge nodded. Well, at least that was a little more information than he had. It still didn't make sense. Why give it to Scarlett if none of them wanted to mate with her because of fear of her latency?

"How many babies were born this year?"

A wolf he didn't know stepped forward. He couldn't be more than twenty-five years

old with brown hair and dark eyes. "I was the last baby born. I'm Marvin, by the way."

Michael tried to make note of that name. As a rule, he had a hard time remembering names. "You were?" He looked around the room. "Seems to me, guys, that the shot isn't working that well."

Marvin spoke again. "Nero said it was going to take a while to work, but that ultimately it would double our numbers."

"See, that's the problem." Michael felt as if he could write a book on this subject at this point. "When you have a bad leader, things tend to go askew. That's why we all have to make sure we always have a good one."

"Do you have a good one?" Barge's face was so eager when he asked that question it made Michael grin. What must it be like to still view the world so brightly?

"The best. My brother, Tristan, is a great leader."

Todd scratched his head. "How can you not be supreme Alpha?"

"Believe it or not, Tristan makes my power seem like it's nothing."

Next to him he saw Scarlett scowl. He'd have to ask her later what bothered her. "Okay, well Scarlett and I are going." This was getting awkward and he wanted out of Cole's house immediately.

Todd smiled. "Then we'll all go to the pack wielder."

Scarlett laughed and then covered her mouth with her hand. Still, her amber eyes danced with amusement.

"You think this is funny?"

She nodded, still keeping her hand over her mouth.

It would be funny if it was happening to someone else. Only the fact that he had to deal with it kept his amusement factor down.

"None of you work, is that correct?"

Seamus spoke up. "No. As Scarlett said, the Betas and the latent wolves work. We now know that is not okay. But that's how it's worked before you came."

"So all of those folks are presumably at their jobs and the women are at this pack wielder's, which means that the thirty of you want to come with me."

A thought occurred to him. "Anyone who apologizes to my mate can come. She'll be waiting on the front steps."

Scarlett dropped her hand from her mouth. "Michael, I..."

He tugged on her hand. "Humor me, Scarlett, it'll make me feel better."

"They're *all* going to apologize?"

Every last one of them.

Chapter Six

Scarlett sat pressed up against Michael in the back of Todd's SUV. She was sure her mate would have been much happier in the front seat where he could have stretched out his long legs, but he had staunchly refused to leave her side. He'd even sat next to her while she had personally accepted thirty-two apologies for bad behavior.

It was odd, watching these men who had either treated her like a servant or downright ignored her now approaching her with their eyes down and begging for her forgiveness. Truth was, she was happy to give it. Since Michael had arrived, she'd started to see that the whole pack was infected with bad ideas and the wrong teachings.

Michael had spoken to his wolf silently in the hotel room and it hadn't looked as if he'd berated it or put it down. If anything, he'd seemed to enjoy the conversation. Step one in fixing the pack problem might be to have everyone work on their internal relationship with his or her wolf. She shrugged, not that it would be her problem since she was leaving with Michael to go to Maine and maybe die, therefore never seeing any of these people again.

She wasn't sad about leaving New Orleans. It had never felt like home. Even though she didn't remember her first years of life, she could remember the day she'd been carted off from her home five minutes after her parents' funeral by a man she'd never met before who called himself Nero.

He kept babbling on and on about things she didn't understand. Wolves, shifters, destiny and pack—he'd confused her. She was three years old and her mom and dad were dead. He'd tried to explain. Her mother hadn't been okay for her daddy. It hadn't been okay that they'd married. Her daddy should have undone something. He hadn't.

But now they had to see if she was a wolf.

That had seemed silly. Of course she wasn't a wolf, she was a little girl. She'd stuck her thumb in her mouth.

Scarlett blinked away the memory. When was the last time she'd thought about that? Over the years, things had become clearer. Nero hadn't killed her parents, but he hadn't stopped the pack elders who had. Fortunately they were all dead now. No one who tried to run the New Orleans pack lived very long.

Still, if things were going to get better, if everyone was going to listen to Michael, and start behaving the way their wolves apparently wanted them to, then she might have liked to stay around and see it.

Turning to look at Michael, who had his eyes closed as he leaned his head against the back of the seat, she thanked whoever had decided she should be given to him. So far he'd been fair, brave and kind.

But then they hadn't gotten to Zack yet. What would he do to Zack? She narrowed her eyes. It might be okay if he killed Zack, she might actually like that. She almost gasped at the thought. What was the matter with her?

If they were alone, she might have the courage to ask him. Todd, Barge and Seamus surrounded them—not to mention the two dozen or so cars that followed behind like they were in some kind of funeral procession. Where were they all going to park?

Michael exhaled loudly and opened his eyes. He gazed at her through his wolf eyes.

What did that mean? Why had they changed?

Reaching up with her shaking hand, she touched the top of his eyelid. He blinked and smiled at her.

“Why are your eyes wolf?”

“Michael’s basically asleep.”

She blinked. *What?* “I’m sorry?” Realization dawned on her like a light bulb going off. “Oh ... you’re his wolf?”

Having never had one of her own, she wasn’t sure exactly what to do.

“That’s right.” He blinked twice. “Our boy is exhausted, but that’s what happens when he fights twice in two days and doesn’t eat.”

She gasped. Oh god, she’d never thought about it. She was accustomed to not eating for long periods of time but the men, the male shifters, they required food and lots of it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even think of it.”

The wolf speaking through Michael’s face smiled. “Now don’t trouble yourself, pretty lady. He’s a big boy. He can and should remember to eat.” Michael’s body shifted and he moved until his face was close to hers. Staring her straight in the eyes he spoke again. “I just have one question.”

She swallowed. “Yes?”

“Why are you hiding in there?”

“What?”

Michael blinked twice and grabbed his head, his eyes turning back to his brown depths.

“What’s going on?”

She stuttered. “I’m not sure. You were talking to me but it was your wolf.”

“Was I?” He shook his head. “He hasn’t done that to me since I was a teenager. What did the old boy want?”

“I’m not sure. It was confusing. Except he did point out that you haven’t been fed.”

“Oh.” He laughed, a snicker, more than a hearty laugh. “That’s right. We can eat after I handle this and before I take care of Zack.”

Todd turned around from the passenger seat up front. “Oh! Is Scarlett going to cook?”

Michael narrowed his eyes. “She’s not anyone’s slave anymore.”

Before she could stop herself, she put her hand on Michael’s arm. “No, it’s okay. I love to cook.”

Her mate cocked his head to the side. “Really?”

She smiled. This she could speak on easily. “I love it.”

Todd nodded his head, still facing them. “She’s the best cook in New Orleans.”

Her cheeks heated up. “Stop it. You don’t have to say that. He’s not going to beat you up again. You’ve apologized.”

“That’s not necessarily true, sweetheart. I might beat Todd up again.”

Michael’s eyes sparkled when he spoke and she realized he teased her. It was the first time anyone had ever done that. She wasn’t sure how she felt about it. The sensation was ... odd.

Todd wasn’t done. “Seriously, Michael, when we’re done with this, can we go back to Cole’s and let Scarlett cook everyone dinner?”

She loved the idea. For some people cooking a meal was a task or something they

dreaded, for her it was peace and order. And then if people actually liked what you made well then it was an accomplishment.

"I'd love to."

She gasped, realizing she hadn't asked Michael's permission. Maybe he'd wanted to do something else, maybe he hated the idea. She looked down at the car floor.

"If Scarlett loves the idea then that is what we'll do."

She jerked her head up. "What would you like for lunch, Todd?"

It would be a late lunch, so she'd make it big. The three shifters started arguing about what they wanted to eat and she sat back to enjoy the show.

Michael took her hand. "Is that what you do for a job? You know, the career you have to have to pay for everyone else?"

"That bar you were in yesterday? *Floozies*? I work there." She shrugged. "It's simple work, bar food, a little red beans and rice. Kind of dull actually. My dream is..."

She stopped. The last thing she wanted to do was to start rambling off about nonsense to Michael. Not when they were making such progress to get to know one another. Not, she finally admitted to herself, when they were on their way to the pack wielder.

Even if she wasn't supposed to say or think things about the pack wielder ending her mate relationship anymore...

But he was nodding and his expression was so honest and open, with his eyes wide and his grin infectious. "Your dream? Go on, tell me."

"Well, it's not unique, everyone in New Orleans wants to own a restaurant. It's like a condition for living here or something."

Michael rubbed his nose. "I can't get you a restaurant here but I can get you one."

She gaped at him. "You can?"

"When we get back home. Actually, it's perfect. Well, perfect if you don't mind cooking for thirty or forty really hungry shifters who will worship the ground you walk on. Oh and also whatever human guests show up at the hotel from time to time. They're mostly gone now. It's not safe to have them while we're under constant attack."

She clapped her hands together. "I'm kind of confused by some of that, but if you mean that in Maine I can have a restaurant then you made my day, my week, oh, Michael, my whole life."

Without another thought, she squirmed around as she undid her seatbelt and threw her arms around him. Michael laughed and held her close. It was then she realized all the conversation in the car had ceased. Michael must have sensed it too as he gently let her go and looked at their three car mates.

"What's wrong, boys?"

Todd smiled, this time with discernable sadness in his eyes. "Nothing, Michael. We're here."

Barge pulled the car into it a spot and they all got out. Even as they did, Scarlett couldn't help but dwell on the change of mood in the car. For a moment, she held eye contact with Todd, refusing to look away. She knew exactly what he was thinking. They didn't want Michael to go. Things were getting better and if he left, what would they do?

Finally, she looked down, not because she was feeling submissive or scared. No, because there wasn't a thing she could do for Todd, Barge, Seamus, or any of the pack and it wasn't because she resented them or held bitterness, which likely she did even if

she didn't want to dwell on it. There wasn't a solution.

Was there?

As the array of cars they'd travelled with arrived and parked, Michael stared up at the building in front of them. The sign said "Mandy's Candies".

She grinned. "Doesn't look like a pack shop does it?"

"I don't know what a pack shop looks like. Back home, we all live together on an island so the very fact that you all live apart, visit each other, and come to a shop to visit someone called a wielder is new to me." He looked down at her and her stomach flip-flopped. "Is the wielder Mandy?"

"No, I'm not sure who Mandy is. It's kind of just the name of the shop. The wielder is Joe."

Michael nodded. "Good to know." He walked ahead a few steps before turning around to Todd again. "You're in charge of her safety again."

Todd's eyes brightened up. "Yes, Michael."

Her mate sauntered into the store, letting the door close behind him with a thud. Scarlett took a deep steadying breath. This was the first time she'd seen him move like that. Michael always seemed so focused, so determined in his stride. Just now he'd moved as if he were lazy and there was something about that deceptive sway that made her more nervous than any of her his earlier fights.

Barge walked next to her and stood still. "Scarlett?"

She looked at him. "Yes?"

"I think Michael's going to kill the wielder."

She gulped. "How do you know?"

"There was just something about him right now that was different. Even when he took us down on the street, he acted less controlled. Right now, he seems more like an animal than a man."

She didn't want him killing the wielder. Zack, maybe, but not the wielder. Fisting her hands at her side, she ran into the shop with Todd and Barge on her heels.

"Michael," she called out as she walked through the entranceway. No one stood in the front of the store. Glass candy containers lined the wall; the displays that showed kids happily eating various sugary creations were all in place. There were no telltale signs of struggle and yet she knew it wasn't good that the place was empty. Michael hadn't entered and just had a fast conversation.

Sniffing the air, she followed his scent. Rounding the corner, she took the stairs leading to the basement of the store two at a time. Almost no buildings in New Orleans had lower floors because of the water level but this one did. She'd never known why, but it was where the wielder gave them their vitamin shots.

She heard Michael's growls before she made it down the stairs. "Michael!" She called his name again and he looked up.

He had Joe by the neck dangling him in the air. Surrounding them were the ten female shifters who made up the pack. Five of them were latent, five could shift. They all stared at Michael, big eyed.

"Don't kill him. He's not worth the effort."

"He's been giving you something harmful and he's a *wizard*. You might say I have a serious problem with witches and wizards. It might be fair to say that, as a rule, I hate every last one of them."

The women gasped and Molly, one of her few friends in the pack grabbed Scarlett's arm. "You know this man?"

"He's my mate." Scarlett pretended she didn't feel the pride at being able to say that.

Molly raised an eyebrow. "And he wants to keep you?"

"He does."

Michael turned his head, still holding the wizard and looked at Molly. "I am just going to say this one more time and you can all tell whoever needs to hear it. Mates are determined by fate. I am more than thrilled with mine—I'm humbled and grateful—and anyone who suggests I might do anything to alter my circumstances is going to get pounded in the face. That goes for men and women. Am I clear?"

Silence filled the room until Todd spoke. "Crystal clear, Michael."

Michael shook his head and Scarlett could feel the sudden amusement coming off him. "Thanks, Todd."

Scarlett moved to the center of the room where Michael held the wizard off the ground. "Do you think it's remotely possible that you are overreacting because you are hungry and tired?"

Flaring his nostrils, he stared at Joe. "No."

She arched an eyebrow. Alright, he wasn't going to be reasonable. She'd have to take a different approach. "If you kill him you won't know why or how he convinced Nero to start drugging us. You won't know what he drugged us with."

"I'm not going to kill him before he tells me what I need to know."

Joe's feet dangled in the air. When he spoke, his voice sounded choked, as if he couldn't get enough air. "Help me. He will kill me. The Kanes kill witches and wizards."

Michael shook him so hard his teeth rattled. "We killed one witch. She was the one who cursed my family thirty years ago and her work made our Alpha, Tristan, try to kill his mate. And if you want to be accurate about it, Cullen Murphy killed her, not a Kane."

"Everyone knows he's the Alpha's right hand man. No way did he do that without orders from a Kane."

Michael walked with him over his head, pressing him against the back of the wall. Scarlett didn't turn around as the rest of the wolves they brought with them came down the stairs.

"You seem to know an awful lot of my family business." Michael's eyes turned wolf. "For the record, *I* ordered her killed. At that time, I was Alpha of Westervelt."

In the way that she could see things when people spoke, Scarlett could see the scene almost as if she lived it herself. Michael had been stressed, beyond stressed—he was wiped out—his brother, Tristan, had returned to Westervelt with a mate. That had made all of them thrilled. Maybe it meant the curse was lifting. But Tristan still wouldn't acknowledge he was Alpha.

Gasping, she could feel Michael's pain as if it was her own. This had never happened with one of her visions before. She didn't know why it was happening now. She blinked to try to clear it but couldn't. No, Michael knew he wasn't Alpha. Knew it like he knew his name or what color his wolf was. He didn't want to be Alpha, had never wanted it, but he was determined to hold the pack together for Tristan. He would keep it in tact until his brother claimed it.

And he had. But he still felt so much shame. Why? She couldn't understand. It wasn't clear and the scene was changing. Ashlee, Tristan's mate, with red hair and sad

eyes, had dragged back a witch. They needed to kill her to get the curse off the island.

He never liked having to order a fatality. It felt dirty, wrong. It wasn't the wolf way. He liked to fight, to hunt, to challenge. Not to order one of his wolves to kill someone. But for Tristan, their rightful Alpha, his little brother ... he'd do anything.

She watched as he turned to Cullen and gave the order with a nod of his head. That quickly it was ordered, that quickly it was done.

Finally, Michael's memory cleared from her mind and she was back in the basement watching him hold above his head the man who most likely had been poisoning her for most of her life.

She walked toward them. "Joe, the best thing you could do to reach my mate's compassionate side right now would be for you to stop screaming for help. It's not coming. Why don't you try, instead, to tell him what you've been doing, why you've been doing it and anything else you think might be relevant."

Joe stared at her. "Who gave you a backbone?"

Behind her she heard Molly growl, but it was nothing compared to Michael's snarl. Scarlett grabbed Michael's arm. "It's okay. His insults don't hurt me. They're just words."

Real pain, to Scarlett, was a combination of the physical with the emotional. She could survive either of the two alone but combined, they beat her down.

"Let's just say I'm not afraid of you anymore."

Not when her mate could snap Joe's neck anytime he felt like it.

She sighed. Maybe she should just back up and let Michael end this whole thing. "I'm trying to help you."

"Okay, I'll talk."

Michael bared his teeth and as she watched urine slide down Joe's pant leg through the opening at the bottom of his pants and onto the floor. Scarlett shuddered. The acrid smell wafted through the air and she wanted to gag. Disgusting.

She could see Michael's teeth had elongated in his mouth. He was already starting to shift. Having never done it herself, she couldn't identify with the sensation, but she'd heard that half-shifts were hard. That meant he held onto his human form by sheer will alone. Probably, he couldn't be pushed much further without losing it.

Joe spoke. "When Nero heard what happened at Westervelt after Michael's mother brought Angel here, he became convinced that his own females were going to revolt and try to take over the pack to protect themselves from the Westervelt fate. He hired me to keep the females weak. That's what I've done. I was only following orders."

Michael dropped him to the floor and Joe landed with an oomph and a groan. Sticking his foot on top of him to keep him down, he finally spoke. "Where's the antidote?"

"No antidote. It just wears off. They go through a withdrawal and then they're clear of it. None of it is lethal, just things to keep them weak, to keep their wolves from gaining in strength."

Michael removed his foot and whirled around. She turned in the direction that he looked.

The women that surrounded the scene had a mixture of horror and sadness on their faces. She felt the same pain. They'd lost so many females over the years. Strong, healthy women who had suddenly succumbed to bouts of illness or been struck down in fights

with humans, which should have been impossible. Some had chosen the ritual suicide to end their lives.

Scarlett closed her eyes. She wanted to vomit and she wasn't sure she could hold it in. Michael swept her up in his arms and she was engulfed in his now familiar scent, feeling safe and secure even as the world fell to pieces.

"One more thing, Joe. How did you convince mated men to throw over their women?"

Joe sighed. "That's a little more complicated. That takes a curse."

Michael growled. "I hate curses."

Scarlett opened her eyes. Michael turned to the men in the room. "Well, gentlemen, *he* did this to your women even if he was 'just following orders'. I suppose I'll leave it to you to decide what to do with him. I'd listen to your wolves in this instance. I'm going to take my woman somewhere where she can start withdrawing. Anyone who wants to rest should come to Cole's."

Michael took her up the stairs fast. Behind her she heard thirty some odd wolves start to growl. Whether her pack mates realized it or not, Michael Kane had just ordered another fatality. Her mate's face was firm and stoic.

"You're teaching them how to behave."

"Someone had to."

Chapter Seven

Michael snuck out the back door of Cole's former residence, hoping Scarlett was too distracted to notice. She was cooking when she should be resting, but since he'd gotten the impression that cooking for her was a Zen thing, he was doing his best not to pull out his inner caveman and order her to bed.

She'd made the rest of the pack, who had killed Joe—he was sure of it even without them telling him they did—a giant pot of gumbo, which they had devoured. For him, she whipped up something else. He wasn't sure what but it smelled like meat.

When he'd asked where to go, Todd had pointed him in the right direction and had even offered to run the errand for him. That would have defeated the purpose. He was buying some wine to share with Scarlett and call him old fashioned, but he wanted to do it himself.

He couldn't believe how hot it still was outside. Did the humidity or heat never let up in New Orleans? Wiping the sweat off his brow, he waited a moment for traffic to pass before crossing the street. Todd had said if he walked three more blocks and took a right he'd find a grocery store that sold wine.

You have a lot of energy considering you haven't eaten today.

Michael laughed. Remembering his wolf's earlier remark he couldn't help but quip back. *Now who sounds like my mother? But seriously, we're going to eat, shortly.*

You think Cole didn't have any wine in the house?

I wanted to buy this for her.

His wolf rolled his eyes. *It must be one of those human things.*

Michael caught the scent in the air two seconds before his wolf growled. *Shifters.*

And not ones he knew.

That meant that they were from Zack's camp. Michael's eyes turned wolf and he crouched down to the ground letting his shifter senses take over without giving up his human form. It was the first lesson his father taught him. Know your enemy. If you didn't it was the last mistake you made.

Considering his own sons had been trying to eliminate him for almost thirty-five years, it was a good bet that his father knew something about staying alive.

There were at least ten of them but he couldn't see them. Moving fast, he saw the grocery store in the distance. It would have to serve as a safe haven until he could get some help. Three wolves were a piece of cake, even five he could handle, but ten was more than he was capable of defeating.

Without another thought, he took off running in the direction of the store. As a shifter, he was fastest in his wolf form, which he couldn't shift into for fear of being spotted by people who shouldn't know wolf-shifters existed, but he was still faster than a regular human on two feet as well.

Shift.

His wolf didn't like the inactivity. He wanted in on the battle. As a human, Michael could manage most of the time to keep his fight impulses in check. Three more scents hit him as he got closer to the store.

Damn.

He swung around and did a quick head count. That was thirteen and they had him surrounded. He wasn't getting into that store.

Raising an eyebrow, he inwardly shrugged. It looked as if despite his best efforts he was going to engage in a fight he could not win. Just a few days ago, he would have seen it as an honorable way out of a life spent caring for his friends and family.

Now all he could think about was his tiny mate alone in her kitchen waiting for him to come back. He'd promised to take care of her and more than anything else he wanted to love her too. Blinking, he reminded himself he'd had one morning and one night. The universe had blessed him that way. He'd gotten to hold her, to smell her warm aroma when he'd gone to sleep and opened his eyes. That was more than he'd expected to get.

They hadn't mated, not sexually, and she might not have the compulsion to follow him to the next life right away. That was best. She deserved to live a long, full life. Gods knew he had gotten to have one.

"Which one of you is Zack?"

Unless Zack hadn't bothered to show up himself. That wouldn't surprise him. Men who used and abused women were cowards themselves. Otherwise, they wouldn't pick on people smaller than themselves.

"I'm Zach."

Well, Michael had to give him credit for coming. At least he was one step up from total slime. He was just the insect swimming around in the slime. Short for a man in his human form, he was only five foot five inches tall, with brown hair and glasses. Michael raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for a shifter to wear glasses. Maybe Zack had spent too much time partaking of the products given to him by Joe.

It didn't matter. It was likely that Michael wouldn't survive this encounter, but before he left this world he was taking Zack with him.

The thought dawned on him that maybe that wasn't enough.

"Tell me something, Zach, which members of your crew was my mate forced to service in order to stay alive?"

Zack laughed, it was a cold hard sound devoid of any emotion. "Oh yes, I heard you were mated to one of our latent females. Fate must hate you. For the record, both Justin," Zack nodded to a shifter standing to the left of Michael. "And I have sampled your mate's treats."

So Justin was dead too. That was fine. Justin was going down first. With a growl, Michael shifted into his wolf form and leapt on Justin. The other shifter never had time to shift as Michael gave into every instinct he'd ever had and tore the man who dared to defile his mate to pieces.

The other wolves around him growled but nobody moved in time. In two bites Michael had Justin's neck ripped from his body. He could taste his blood in his mouth and he had to admit it felt fantastic. Or at least it did to his wolf side. If the man side of Michael were in control, he wouldn't be so happy with the sensation.

Growling, he dropped the now dead man and turned his attention to Zack. Three of the others shifted, however, before they could get in his way, he leapt onto Zack going straight for his jugular.

Mid-bite, Zack shifted into a tall grey and brown wolf. Growling, Zack foamed at the mouth. Michael lunged forward with only one thought in his mind: kill.

Zack was no pushover. For the first time since he'd arrived in New Orleans, Michael

had a challenge. Zack didn't let him advance without tearing back. Behind him, Michael was distantly aware that Todd, Barge and Seamus' scents wafted over the group. He heard growls and wolves howling in the background.

It didn't matter. Michael only had eyes for Zack. He'd had tough opponents before having grown up fighting Cullen and his father. It was good thing; it meant that he was never afraid of working hard to win.

His father always went for the kill, stopping only just before he ended Michael's life. In his mind's eye, he could see it now. It was Kendrick's favorite move and unless you had personally endured it, you never saw it coming.

Leaping forward, Michael went up on two feet, keeping his front two paws in the air. With his claws extended, he swiped at Zack's face as he pushed his whole body weight onto Zack's face. The problem with the move was that you got bit on your stomach, which Michael had anticipated. It hurt and he refused to whimper as he focused on the next part of the fight. Kicking up with his back feet. he kept his front paw around Zack's neck.

Using his mouth, he tore at Zack, now having complete access to the other shifter's body. Zack might have gotten a bite in, but now Michael was in control of the fight. Piece by piece, he tore Zack apart. The taste of the other man was in his mouth, his life seeping out bit by bit.

Finally, he pulled back panting. He fell to the floor, expecting the blows to come from Zack's group. He had no energy left to handle it. He'd done what he needed to do.

Todd's scent filled his nostrils and he looked up at the other shifter who was in his human form albeit naked, which meant he'd shifted to wolf and then shifted back.

The other shifter's voice was gruff when he spoke. "Wow."

He wished he could speak to Todd telepathically only they weren't pack. That was saved for post-mating ritual spouses and pack communication. With no choice, he shifted into his human form.

Groaning, he put his hand on his stomach and saw the blood that covered it when he pulled it away. Zack had really gotten him good. Two large teeth marks marred his skin. They bled and burned.

He looked at his wolf for one last second. *Good work.*

Michael's wolf still panted. *I live to please.*

Finally, he spoke to Todd. "Where are the rest of Zack's cronies?"

"We took out a few of them. The rest are in awe of you, they're not going to risk a fight."

Michael tried to stand up and fell back. Damn, he was really hurt. It had been a long time since he'd been this bad off. He needed food and then sleep or he was going to be in for a world of hurt.

Staring at Todd, he asked a question that had been brewing on his mind for some time. "Did you do it, Todd? When you were with Zack, did you and Barge and Seamus abuse female shifters sexually?"

Michael already knew they had participated in some of the beatings.

Todd's eyes got wide. "Never. Zack is powerful. We wanted to be aligned with the most powerful shifter. If he said hit, we hit, but most of us didn't participate in the 'have sex with me to live' mentality." Todd looked down at the ground. "Personally, I've been waiting for my mate."

“Alright.” Michael grabbed his head to stop the world from spinning. “Here is the deal, take everyone who wants to come back to the house back to the house, assuming they’ve never raped anyone. Anyone who did that may not come.”

“Where should they go?”

Michael shrugged even though it pulled on his stomach and hurt like hell. “I couldn’t care less.”

Extending his hand, he glanced up at Todd. “Help me up?”

Todd nodded and helped Michael get unsteadily to his feet.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

Todd raised an eyebrow before grinning. “You’re welcome.”

Michael limped forward. “How did you know where I was?”

“When you didn’t come back in a reasonable amount of time, we came searching for you. The whole group wanted to come, but we convinced the others to stay with the women.”

Stopping his slow progress forward, he regarded Todd. When he’d first gotten here, he’d thought they were stupid. Truth was, they’d been acting that way. Now, however, they reminded him more of the young wolves he used to train when Westervelt actually had teenagers. More like what his nephews would become when they aged a little bit more.

Sometimes the young pups struck out at him, bit down, didn’t listen to their wolf-halves. They had to be trained out of this behavior. His job had been to teach them, to work with them alongside their parents until they matured. If need be, it was his job to turn them over to Cullen Murphy for a different kind of lesson.

Then when they’d done their years with him it had been his joy to watch them walk away the wolf-shifters they were supposed to be. This whole pack—who had somehow managed even through their dysfunction to shield his sister from Kendrick Kane for thirty-five years—were stuck in time emotionally in their teenage years.

“Can I help you walk back?”

Michael laughed. “You can, but I need to do something first.”

“What?”

“I want to get some wine and maybe some flowers.”

Todd rolled his eyes. “We’re all naked. We can’t go traipsing into the grocery store.”

“I suppose you’re right.” He closed his eyes as he swayed on his feet. “But that really fucking sucks.”

* * * *

Michael opened his eyes and blinked twice trying to figure out where he was. The room was dark, not a problem since his other senses were on alert. Scarlett’s scent filled his nostrils and he breathed deeply. Wherever it was, it was fine if she was there.

“Scarlett?”

“Michael.” Her voice came from the other side of the room and he heard fast, soft footsteps approach him. “You’re awake.”

“Kind of.” Sitting up hurt like hell, but he’d never been one to stay flat on his back. Groaning, he ran his hand over his stomach, relieved to see the wounds had closed.

“Where are we?”

“Cole’s room.” She sat down on the bed next to him, placing her hand on his

forehead. Her skin felt cool and smooth. He closed his eyes against the sensation.

"I forgot for a second. I know Zack knocked around my insides, I didn't realize he'd rattled my brains."

She sighed and the sound made his heartbeat pick up. "You lost a lot of blood."

He opened his eyes. "Forget about me, I'm hard to kill. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She leaned over and turned on the light. For a second, he couldn't see at all, blinded by the sudden onslaught to his vision. Seconds later, it cleared and he was treated to his mate's lovely form.

"Are you telling me the truth or has the withdrawal been really hard?"

She shrugged and when she spoke concern laced her voice. "I have a little headache, I'm a little itchy, and kind of tired but other than that, I'm fine. I'm not the one who almost died."

He waved his hand to dismiss the accusation. Truth was, he was kind of uncomfortable that she fretted about him. "Don't exaggerate."

"I'm not. When Todd brought you in, I thought you were dead."

"Nah ... I told you, I'm hard to kill." If growing up with his father taught him anything, it taught him that.

"Michael, please don't make light of this."

"What do you want me to say? It's not as if I set out to get jumped by Zack and his cronies."

"No." She shook her head, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "You went out to get me wine. No one ever buys me anything."

"I did. I wanted to."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held on to him. He could hear her heartbeat and the blood rushing through her veins. Being this close to her was bliss. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, I never got the wine."

She pulled her head back to look at him. "Thank you for trying."

"You're welcome." He held her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Someday I will surprise you with it."

She blushed even as she changed the subject. "You must be starving."

"I think I passed starving a little while ago. Now I'm at the point where I can't feel it anymore."

"Wait here."

Letting go of him, she jumped off the bed and ran out of the room. He leaned back and tried to make sense of all the small things that had just happened. She'd been worried about him, which made him feel weird and then she'd hugged him, which had made his night. Even better was the fact that she hadn't looked away once when they'd spoken.

Their relationship moved forward, which was a really good thing.

Scarlett entered the room, closing the door quietly behind her while she simultaneously balanced a tray in her hands. It was an impressive feat and showed she'd been working in restaurants for some time.

He raised an eyebrow as it dawned on him how silent her movements were. "What time is it?"

"The middle of the night, almost two I think."

Placing the tray down in front of him on the bed, she lifted a napkin off the top of it. "I kept it warm so it might be a little dry. I had to make do with Cole's stuff here."

On the plate was what looked like a meal for a king: steak with a side of some Spanish looking rice and mixed vegetables. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten this well. These days he was always eating on the go, picking up takeout, or grabbing whatever he could on his way out the door.

Using the fork and knife she'd left on the tray, he cut off a piece of the steak and placed in it his mouth. There was nothing dry about it. It was cooked to perfection and the juices of the meat filled his mouth and stimulated his taste buds. "Gods, this is good."

Faster than he would normally consume a meal, he stuffed himself full. Every compliment he gave it made his mate blush or grin. It was a great feeling, considering that he wasn't exaggerating. It really was that good.

When he was done, he leaned back on the headboard. "Who taught you to cook?"

"This is New Orleans. Everyone can."

He laughed. "Seriously, who taught you?"

"There was a shifter, she died a few years ago, she could really cook and she used to let me watch. I guess I just picked things up."

"It's a gift then because I could watch someone cook every day for the next two years and still burn water."

With a grin on her face, she swatted at his arm. "That's not true."

"Trust me, it is."

He smiled at her, feeling real contentment for the first time in a long time. It was nice to sit and look at her for a while. It was splendid to...

Without another word, Scarlett leapt on him pressing her soft lips against his and the dishes of food and tray went flying. Startled, it took him a second to respond but then he kissed her hard. She made a small sound in her throat before kissing him back.

The world became Scarlett. There was nothing but her mouth against his, nothing but the sounds she made, nothing but the smell of her scent in his nose. Running his hands through her long hair, he could feel each strand as it touched the pads of his fingertips.

Scarlett placed her hand on his chest and caressed the hair at the top of his chest. He shuddered under her caress, a sensation he still hadn't gotten used to. It was amazing. This woman, this tiny little woman, had power over him like no other being in the universe.

And he loved it.

"Michael." She pulled her head back to speak to him. Her eyes burned with fire and he wondered if she knew it. "I want to do this. Please, can we do this?"

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know that I'm ever going to like it only I'd like to try with you. Maybe I'll finally understand what all the fuss is about." She looked down. "Gods know just looking at you does strange things to my insides."

He knew that feeling too well. He'd been hard as a rock since he'd met her. Stroking the side of her face with his hand, he smiled.

"No time like the present to discover each other."

She grinned and he kissed her again.

Chapter Eight

Scarlett wanted him. She was sure about it. For the first time in her life, she was going to give into what her body wanted and not be terrified of the consequences.

She wasn't sure what made her feel so brave.

Maybe it was thinking Michael was dead when Todd carried him in. Maybe it had reminded her how short life could be. Maybe it had been the way he had eaten her food like he'd loved every bite. Maybe it was the way his woodsy scent made shivers go up and down her back. Maybe it was just Michael being Michael.

As her mate moved his hands beneath her shirt she decided not to question it.

She didn't need to undress him because he was already naked under the covers, which meant all she needed to do was get the covers off him. She tugged them down, exposing his chest and the upper part of his abdomen to her perusal.

Michael's skin seemed to dance beneath her fingers. Wherever she touched it, she could feel goose bumps pop out. She loved running her hands over his chest and from the way he made growling noises in his throat, she was certain he enjoyed it too.

He kissed like he lived his life, with intensity. Most of the men she'd had the unfortunate luck to be intimate with, were all tongue and no concentration. It was always a dirty, nasty business. A combination of bad breath and lack of interest.

But Michael was sweet. He smelled delicious and when his tongue played in and out of her mouth in a joyful tangle with hers, she was happy to let it go on forever.

He hadn't shaved since she'd met him and the slight growth of dark whiskers on the deep planes of his face dug sensuously into her skin. There was something so masculine about it.

Pulling back, she squeezed both his cheeks in her hands. He raised an eyebrow and she smiled.

"Can you keep your whiskers like this?"

He smiled, a broad tooth-filled grin. "I'm sorry. If I don't shave, I'll have a beard and if I do shave, it doesn't stay like this. But I can try to shave say once every three days, which will give you this level of growth twice a week."

"Thank you."

It was, she had discovered, just easier to thank Michael for all the wonderful things he did. He was going to do those things and there was no arguing with him. If she suggested he shave at his discretion, he would still do it once every three days. Just to please her.

His swift hands unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it off her, discarding it somewhere on the floor. It was one of three shirts she owned and usually she was meticulous about keeping it clean. Right now, she didn't care.

Scarlett knew her breasts were small. She had eyes, and even if she'd been clueless, she'd heard it enough. Waiting for the laughter she'd received in the past, she was stunned when Michael's eyes got big instead.

"Beautiful."

She shook her head. "Tiny."

"Scarlett, if you were any bigger, you'd topple over. You're what? Ninety pounds?"

She weighed more than that but his point was made. She was small framed.

She unhooked her bra—not that she ever really needed one, it was more a modesty thing than a support device—and let what little of her there was fall free.

Michael leaned back against the headboard and pulled her until she lay against him. With his hands, he grasped her breasts gently.

“See, sweetheart, they fit in the palms of my hands. They’re made for me.”

Her cheeks heated up. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

Well, all right then. She couldn’t think any further as he rolled first one and then the other nipple through his fingertips. Pain that immediately turned to pleasure travelled her spine. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of feeling something on her own terms. Even this far along she knew if she told Michael to stop, he would.

Which was exactly why she didn’t want to tell him to do anything but to keep going.

Michael replaced his fingers with his mouth and Scarlett’s eyes shot open. She saw the top of his head as he suckled at her breast. Running her fingers through his brown hair, she stroked the back of his neck, stopping where his hair met his neckline and then back up again.

Finally, she had to speak. “Michael, that feels so good.”

His only response was to switch his mouth’s attention to her other breast.

Using her vantage point to her advantage, she leaned down to kiss and lick at his ear. He shivered and groaned, pulling his mouth from her breast, he met her tongue-to-tongue again in a kiss that spoke of possession.

That was fine for her, she wanted to be possessed by Michael Kane more than she wanted to breathe.

Michael placed kisses on her chin, on her neck, on her shoulders. She sighed. It was heaven. Her core had long since gotten hot and wet and as she squirmed on his lap, she could feel his hard erection pushing through the blanket that still covered him from the waist down.

She squirmed and he groaned. “Do that again.”

“What?”

“Move like that.”

Laughing, she touched the tip of her finger to his nose. “I’m not sure what I did.”

“Never mind.”

Pushing her backward, gently onto the bed, she squealed when he came on top of her. He was no longer covered and she got a full view of his hugely erect cock. Moving her eyes, she forced herself to look at his grinning face. It was safer. Much as she wanted this—and gods knew she did at this point—she didn’t want to face the reality of *that*.

“Your eyes just got so serious.”

“Kiss me again.” She pulled his head until his mouth was on hers again. Lost in his sweet embrace was better, so much better than worrying about things.

Michael ran his hands down her chest to her stomach, stopping to play with her belly button.

She squirmed under his embrace. He was certainly a tactile lover, he liked to touch everything, kiss and caress every part of her. Scarlett had never found the first part of sex to take this long. She wasn’t complaining—just surprised.

He raised his head. “Scarlett, when this is over, even though you don’t have a wolf,

you'll be able to speak to me telepathically."

Gods, she hoped she could. She hoped it wasn't one of those things she should be able to do but it turned out she couldn't actually manage. No, she pushed away the thought.

It was important for her sanity to stay in the moment.

Still, she needed to respond. "That's great."

"I'm losing you somewhere." Michael stopped what he was going to look down at her. His eyes showed passion mixed with concern. "Are you okay?"

"I guess I'm a little bit nervous." And now she was more than sure she'd ruined the moment.

Michael scooted up until their faces were aligned. He held his body off hers with his elbows. Gently, with his thumb, he caressed her forehead.

"Am I going too fast?"

She cursed and he raised an eyebrow. Finally she spoke. "Maybe I'm just too messed up for words."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Rolling onto his side, he pulled her up against him. Slowly, he played with the curls right above her pussy.

Tense, she waited for the intrusion she knew was going to come. She waited. And waited.

Finally, she turned her head to the side. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you used to the feel of my touch."

Gods, she could cry Michael was so *good*. "Don't you just want to strangle me? Aren't I making you crazy?"

"No." He kissed the top of her nose. "I've been alive two hundred and ten years. Do you think a few minutes concern me? Besides, if you can't tell, I really like touching you."

"So I didn't ruin the mood?"

"Nope. Just out of curiosity, what part made you get nervous?"

She sighed. "Looking at your ... you know ... big cock."

"Ah, now, sweetheart, he's not going to hurt you." Michael grinned at her and rolled onto his back. His penis stood upright, protruding from his body.

Scarlett swallowed. "Yes, I saw it before."

"Did you? I think he'd like you to come and play with him."

Play with him? "Um ... what kind of things would *he* like me to do to *him*?"

"Anything you want."

What Scarlett wanted to do was go under the covers and hide away from the pain she knew Michael's member was going to eventually cause her. Still, she really wanted this to work. That was going to mean, at the very least, not being terrified of looking at Michael's hard length.

Not sure of how much pressure to use, she ran her fingertips gently over the head of the penis. It jumped in response. She looked up at Michael. For all the time she'd been in bed with other men, she'd spent no time examining their private parts. Not only had they not required it, she'd had zero interest in making the attempt.

Michael's gaze bored into her. It was intent, focused, even as she watched his eyes glaze over in.

Gulping, she finally spoke. "Good?"

“More, *please*.”

Still using just her fingertips, she traced the length of his cock up and down, stopping the second time to feel his balls. He shuddered and closed his eyes, a small amount of liquid releasing from the top of his penis.

“Was that it?”

Had he just done his business without even being inside of her?

He opened one eye and then the other, amusement apparent in his brown depths.

“Not even close. But that was a tribute to just how much I want you.”

“Should I keep playing with it?”

“If you want. He’s certainly happy to have you do it. You can even grip it harder if you want. Wrap your whole hand around it, but not too roughly, if you don’t mind. That would hurt.”

Hurt? As Scarlett did as he instructed, she dwelled on the last thing he had said. She could hurt him. In no way did she want to but she could. It had never occurred to her that such a thing was possible.

Gently, but with a firmer grasp, she stroked him several times amazed as he got even bigger in her grip. Michael didn’t hold all the power in this act. No, it wasn’t just going to be him slamming in and out of her until she lost her mind from the pain. No, this beginning, the touching and the fondling that they engaged in, it let them both show each other that they could be trusted with their most sensitive areas.

Clearly, Michael would not have told her he could be injured on his cock if he intended to cause her any pain. He’d given her the means to retaliate. Michael moaned and closed his eyes again.

“That’s right, sweetheart, that’s just the right amount of pressure. A little more of that and then I’m going to need you to stop.”

She didn’t really want to stop. This was fun. Her mouth went dry as she watched her hand once again travel the length of him. His response to her was instantaneous as his hips came off the bed for a split second.

“Why do I have to stop?”

“If you don’t, then I’m going to come in your hand.”

The idea had merit. What must that be like to hold that much control that he would ejaculate outside of her body?

Looking at it now, Michael’s cock seemed sort of beautiful. Like the rest of him, it was hard and controlled, but just like Michael’s insides—and the white underbelly she’d glanced when he’d fought Cole—he had a sensitive side that could be easily hurt.

Gods, she never wanted to hurt this man.

Michael pulled her hand away. “Sorry, sweetheart, he’ll just have to wait for more of your exploration another day. I have something I want to do.”

Travelling down the length of her body, Michael moved his head down to her private area. She wasn’t used to anyone being near her pussy and she tried to shut her legs.

“You got to examine me, now I’m going to examine you.”

“Michael, I…”

She never got to finish that thought as Michael licked her hot core. Instead, she gasped, her hips moving slightly off the bed.

“Do you know how good you taste? Can you imagine it?”

His tongue went deep inside of her, finding a sensitive spot she hadn’t known was

there.

“What have we here? I think I just found my favorite part of your body—except for your amber eyes, of course.”

Then he went back to what he had been doing and—oh gods—what that was. His tongue stroked in and out of her, stopping to caress that magic spot he’d found over and over again. Then finally, he inserted two fingers inside of her. A pressure she’d never felt before clenched inside of her and she tried to breathe.

But it was hard. Closing her eyes, she grabbed the bed with her hands, hoping to brace herself, to get some semblance of control back. It was no use.

“Don’t hold back. Come for me. Let me watch you explode.”

With one last lazy swirl of his finger on her sweet spot, she exploded into a million pieces. Colors formed before her eyes and for a second she might swear she was above her body staring down.

Michael’s tongue continued to lap at her and she became aware that liquid had expelled from her vagina.

“Um...” She tried to speak. It was tough as she panted to form coherent thoughts.

“You’re so gorgeous, Scarlett. I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

His voice held such raw emotion, such passion that she stared at him in awe. “What *you* did to deserve *me*?”

The very idea that he thought he was somehow unworthy of her...

It was preposterous.

Before she could speak again, he was kissing her, softly, gently on the mouth. She could taste herself on him and the naughtiness of it thrilled her. In between kisses, he murmured nonsensical words, telling her things she couldn’t follow, but the way he spoke made her heart flutter. Michael believed in eternity, he believed that the joining they were about to make would bring them together, not just for now, but for always, in the life that happened when you left this planet.

She believed him. She, Scarlett Knoll, who had never imagined any truly good thing could ever happen to her knew he spoke the truth. Which was why, she wrapped her legs around his waist and braced herself—happily, willingly—for his cock to enter her.

She wanted it. If it hurt, she didn’t care. If it was something she had to endure every night for the rest of her life—she would. Because it was for Michael. Her Michael.

Keeping his gaze on hers, he entered her. She waited for the pain, for the assault. Nothing.

The only thing she felt was full, as if she’d waited for this. She’d been somehow empty and now she wasn’t anymore. Then he started to move.

Now she could feel him. Michael moved in such a way that the side of his cock brushed up against her sensitive area that had made her orgasm so completely before. How did he do that?

Gods, she didn’t care. She closed her eyes. Wow.

This was better. She wasn’t sure how that was possible. Truly, when she’d come on Michael’s tongue she’d thought that was the ultimate experience. This, however, had already topped it.

Scarlett could feel the pressure building inside of her again.

“Gods, Scarlett, I want to make this last. I want to make it so good, but I’m not sure I can. I’m so hard and you are, sweet heavens, you are so tight.” Michael panted. “Can you

feel that? Can you feel how you milk my cock like that? Oh gods, your sweet little pussy.”

His words were almost as stimulating as what he did inside of her. She wasn't going to make it. She wasn't sure exactly what was going to happen. Nor did she have the mental capacity to really figure it out. Maybe it would be just like before, maybe not.

In and out, they moved together forming a rhythm, a primitive dance that was just their two bodies joined, experiencing each other. How could she have been afraid of this?

Michael was everything. She knew now that in the same way he'd never let anyone harm her when they were out of the bedroom, he wouldn't let anything but pleasure touch her in the bed too.

Soon, she couldn't breathe. Her knees buckled as he lifted her up by the ass pulling her even closer beneath him. He arched against her, giving her sensitive nub a full-on assault.

“Michael.” She screamed his name as she came, this time not sure she'd ever make it back into her own body, dying a million deaths in the most pleasure she could possibly endure.

Seconds later, from a distance, she heard Michael shout her name. All she could do was breathe and hold onto him. Her eyes glued shut, she realized she sobbed and it was okay, because it was a true release. She'd come undone and what was left of her was better, stronger, more “Scarlett” than she'd ever been before.

Michael whispered in her ear. “Open your eyes.”

She wasn't sure she could, but she liked doing what Michael told her to do. It felt right, it was always safe.

When she did, she gasped. Between their bodies floated the most amazing colors she'd ever seen. She could see them coming and going, out of her body and into Michael's, and the reverse was true as well. Michael had all the colors of the rainbow leaving him and entering her.

As they touched her, she realized what was happening. First it was red and she sucked in her breath. The red was Michael's strength, his resolve, the part of him that always knew how to move forward and which direction he needed to walk. The next was blue, it was his kindness, his heart, his sense of right and wrong. Mixed with the red she knew it would never falter, even when he had to do things that made him uncomfortable.

There were less forthright parts of Michael. They were no less beautiful. He was insecure of his value, he had a strong sense of failure even when he had not been at fault. He loved family, valued them above everything else. That included her now. She was the first and foremost importance in his life.

And for the first time, Scarlett could see herself as he saw her. He'd said it but she hadn't understood—or perhaps she simply hadn't believed—that she was a gift to him. The one thing in his life he'd thought never to have, but would hold onto with both hands to keep. Always loving her, always needing her, making her his whole universe.

Dear gods, she would carry Michael inside of her for all the days of her life now. And if she died, she would take parts of him with her. That's why he would follow immediately. She carried half of his soul as he now carried half of hers.

Neither of them had ever really been whole without the other. Now they could simply not exist apart.

And it was a beautiful gift.

“Oh, Michael.” She wrapped her arms around him and held on, knowing that he would never let her go. The tears she cried were, for the first time, nothing but happiness.

Chapter Nine

Michael felt as if he could reach out and touch Scarlett's soul. Her kindness had come into his soul first. That was no surprise. She was a woman who had graciously forgiven each and every person who had, at one time, abused her in some way. How was that even possible? Michael was certain he couldn't do it.

Yet, as he now carried part of Scarlett inside of him, he could sense it. That level of forgiveness was an actual possibility for her. She was also capable, smart, funny and giving. Oh gods, she was so much more. He could hardly keep up with all the parts of Scarlett he was given.

He opened his mouth to speak, to tell her how fantastic she was when his wolf interrupted. Up until now, he'd been silent.

This isn't over, Michael. This is our chance. I have to go and get her.

Michael's head swam. He was exhausted, beat up, he'd just had incredible sex and now his wolf made no sense. *What?*

I have to go and get Scarlett's wolf.

She doesn't have one. She's latent, remember?

His wolf shook his head. *No, she has one. She's just buried in there, terrified.*

Michael tried to grasp what he was being told.

She has a wolf?

Exactly.

And you can go and get her? Isn't that something Tristan does?

His wolf paused. *Well usually, yes. I have no interest in these types of things, but we'll never get another chance like this one again. If Tristan does it, he'll have to call on pack magic and put her through the shift over and over again. We can spare her some pain this way.*

Michael grabbed her cheeks in his hands. "Scarlett, you have a wolf. It's in there. My wolf is going to go get it."

Her eyes were huge, all amber light staring back at him. She swallowed. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "It's going to hurt. The first shift into wolf hurts like hell and then the shift back is painful as well. After that, it never hurts again. Then it's heaven."

"I've wanted a wolf my whole life." She sniffed and fresh tears came to her eyes. "Whatever I have to go through, I'll do it. Can you really make this happen?"

He looked at his wolf. *Go get her.*

In his mind's eye he could see it. His wolf garnered energy, the same white light they used for all their shifts, and he pushed it forward. The power surrounded Scarlett. Bathed in the magnificence of the experience, she looked ethereal and Michael gasped at the sight.

Scarlett shrieked, grabbing his hand and he knew the pain started. It had been one hundred and ninety-three years since his first shift and he still hadn't forgotten what that was like. The ripping of all of his muscles, the way his bones had cracked and reformed.

Agony was the only word he could use to describe the scream that came from Scarlett's mouth.

The hand he held changed became more paw than hand and he let it go. Finally, as she bellowed in horror, her human body was gone and in its place stood a small black wolf.

For a second, Michael couldn't move. He stared feeling dumbfounded at the tiny black animal that blinked back at him. She was totally black, just like he was, except she didn't have his white spots. Her eyes, turned wolf, were still amber. If he had to guess, she was no more than fifty pounds in size.

Reaching out with a hand, that shook, he petted the top of her head and she whimpered.

"I know. It hurts." He exhaled a breath he hadn't known he held. "You're beautiful. You're such a beautiful wolf."

"I don't know what to do, Michael." He could hear her voice in his head and he wondered if she was conscious of the fact that she'd spoken to him telepathically. Her wolf whimpered and lay down on the floor.

Michael scooted over until he climbed off the bed and sat down next to her. She placed her head in his lap.

"You don't have to do anything for a few minutes. We'll just stay like this and then you'll shift back and all the pain of the experience will be done."

Her wolf sighed and closed her eyes. Scarlett's wolf body shook beneath his hands. Wow, she was skittish.

His own wolf spoke to him. *She's not an Alpha wolf, not at all. She's watched Scarlett go through hell and she's terrified of being out in the world.*

The door to the room banged open and Seamus stood in front of it. With him were at least five other wolves and Michael could smell more approaching.

"It's okay. We just brought out Scarlett's wolf."

Seamus' eyes got wide and he stroked his goatee. "She has a wolf?"

"She does."

Scarlett cried and whined, burying her head deeper in his lap. Finally, she jumped up on the bed and burrowed down beneath the covers. He could feel the bed shake behind him as she quivered in fear.

"Please make them leave. I'm terrified of them."

Michael raised an eyebrow at that. *"You know not one of them would hurt you. If they ever tried, I would rip them to pieces."*

It might have been his imagination, but he thought he felt the bed's vibrations lessen.

"Yes, yes you would and you're our mate."

"I am."

Michael looked at the shifters who looked as surprised as he had felt earlier. "Can you guys give us a minute, please?"

Seamus nodded and after a second moved out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

Michael knew what had to be done. He'd done it before with some of the Beta wolves that were timid. There was no place for timidity in the pack, not while they were at war with his father. Honestly, not before then, either. Just because you were Beta did not mean you had to be afraid. If anything, the fact that a large number of Alpha shifters wanted nothing more than to protect you all day long made most Betas feel safer.

Scarlett had never experienced this sensation. Even if they were improving

drastically by the minute, the ones who should have guarded her had abused her. This had driven her little wolf farther and farther inside of her until she hadn't known she was there at all.

No, there was no wasting time with this issue. He had to take control.

Calling the shift onto himself, he waited until he was in his wolf form. In this case, Michael didn't have to be in control. His animal side knew just what to do. Jumping up on the bed, he pulled the cover off Scarlett by using his teeth. She looked up at him, her head down, until she averted her eyes.

Michael moved forward and nudged her with his head. She whimpered. No, that would not do. He pushed at her again. This time she lifted her eyes. He could feel her wanting to speak to him telepathically but he blocked her voice.

This had to be animal to animal.

Michael bumped at her stomach forcing her to stand up. Jumping off the bed, he motioned with his head for her to follow. This time she did. He lay down on the floor and she put herself next to him.

She panted loudly and he could tell her heart rate increased. Nuzzling her, he put his head on top of her spine keeping her down. Little-by-little, moment-by-moment, pressed against his warmth she calmed. The panting decreased, her tongue went back inside her mouth and her pupils became less dilated.

"Scarlett?"

"Yes." Her voice was smooth. She didn't sound worked up anymore.

"Anytime you feel tense, you come to me. It's that simple. Things will get better. You'll get used to your wolf, she'll get used to you. The shift won't be odd anymore. Until then, think of me as your personal safety net."

"Okay." She really did sound good, which was nice to hear. That meant he had been able to calm her with his presence.

"Now it's time to shift back."

"Does it hurt as much as becoming the wolf did?"

He wished he could tell her it didn't. *"Just this time. Next time it will be like breathing or sneezing. It'll just be something you do."*

Calling the shift onto himself, he pushed his magic onto her, forcing the white light to come and change her back. If she'd done this with Tristan, his voice alone would do it. Michael was her mate, but not her supreme Alpha; Michael had to work a little harder to make it happen.

She collapsed onto the floor, back in her human form. "That really, really hurt."

"I know." He leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

She was silent for a few moments before she looked at him wide-eyed. "I have a wolf inside of me."

He smiled as he pulled her into his arms. "How does it feel?"

"Really right." When she grinned, it was with tears in her eyes. "You can't know. I've wanted this my whole life. I could never go live with the humans. Everyone always asked me why I didn't. I tried it. Oh gods, I just wanted to be around other wolves even knowing I wasn't really one."

"You did know." Michael was sure of it. Standing, he picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed where he set her down gently. "It's why you knew you needed to be with pack."

“Why didn’t she come before?”

“I don’t know.” He walked into the bathroom to get a warm washcloth. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“Ask her?”

Turning on the water, he ran the cloth underneath it until it was warm and then shut the faucet off. Ringing the rag out, he walked back into the room. “Yes, ask her. She does talk, right?”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes and sat in silence. He wasn’t offended. He knew just what she was doing, having done it a million times himself. In her mind’s eye she could see her wolf living as a separate being inside of her. Soon, maybe even instantly, they would start to fight for dominance.

It was never clear who won that battle. In his case, they’d come to a pleasant impasse. Sometimes Michael won, sometimes it was the wolf. At his age, he knew when to let the canine have his say. Younger shifters fought tooth and nail for control and in the case of Nero’s pack here in New Orleans they’d apparently been taught to hurt their wolves, to dominate them completely.

Westervelt was different. There were some members of Tristan’s pack who, although they walked around on two feet, were clearly more wolf than man. Lately, Michael worried his brother, Gabriel, was going through a major power change with his wolf. Normally, it wasn’t a problem but it was highly unusual to have it happen at Gabriel’s age. Michael saw less and less of the human side of his brother.

Scarlett looked up at him. “She’s kind of skittish.”

He’d seen that earlier. He placed the warm cloth on the back of her neck. “I imagine she’s been through a lot, watching you suffer, unable to help.”

“She’s embarrassed that she hid. She was afraid because she wasn’t with her pack. She was terrified to show herself here.”

“You can tell her from me we’ll be leaving shortly.” Immediately, if he got his way. “Let’s go put together a suitcase. We can go to your apartment and get your stuff.”

She stood up and crossed to her discarded shirt from earlier. Putting it on, he was treated to a nice view of her ass as she searched for her underwear. Michael decided leaving wasn’t important. Not when Scarlett walked around naked.

His groin got hard at the sight. She turned around with her eyebrow raised. “I think I just recognized a new scent.”

“Oh yeah?” He couldn’t help his grin. “What would that be?”

“Arousal.”

She moved forward with a distinct sway in her step. She bit down on her lower lip and he was surprised he didn’t come right there. Scarlett was having no trouble with eye contact at the moment.

If anything she looked like a sexy, confident vixen.

“Michael?”

His throat went dry and he had trouble speaking. Finally, he managed. “Yes?”

“I was thinking about our sex earlier.”

“Okay.” Hell, he was becoming the king of one-word answers.

“And I was thinking about how you put your mouth on me.”

Her words brought the image back to him. The way her succulent pussy had exploded in his mouth. Gods, he wanted to do it again. His cock jumped in response.

Scarlett looked down, her cheeks red when she regarded him. "You remember it too."

"Seeing as it was only a little while ago, I'd have to be pretty dense not to remember it."

"I don't know." She shrugged. "You are pretty old. Maybe you just forget things easily now."

"Ouch, it hurts." Stepping forward, he grabbed her. "You're maligning me. I have the body of a thirty year old guy."

"Yes." She leaned forward and kissed him. "It's your mind I was questioning."

"Wounded. You have mortally wounded me."

She bit on her lip again and he groaned. "So anyway..."

"Yes?" Whatever she was going to say he wanted her to say. The way this conversation was going he was sure he would like it.

"I was thinking I might like to put my mouth on you like you did me."

He had no words to answer her. What should he say? 'Please, Scarlett, do it.' Or maybe he should beg. Although that might seem pathetic...

"Would you like that, Michael?"

Managing to nod, he was still shocked when she fell to her knees before him. Reaching out, her small hand encircled his shaft. Gods, he wasn't sure he would make it this time. On the bed, earlier, when he'd suggested she fondle him it hadn't been for purely selfish reasons. No, he'd wanted to instill some kind of confidence in her. To make his member seem less of a threat. It had worked.

Now, however, as her mouth touched the top of his cock, he was feeling like the luckiest guy on earth and happy to indulge in the feeling. "Wow."

Her mouth was tight and moist as she moved up and down, taking him deep into her throat and then slightly releasing him. Back and forth, in a rhythm that was pure Scarlett. He caressed the back of her head, massaging her neck, anything to keep physical contact with her outside of what she did to him.

"That's it, baby, just like that."

Not that she needed any encouragement. She was amazing. He, by contrast, would be lucky if his knees didn't buckle and he didn't fall right on the floor.

Suddenly, it wasn't enough. He needed to be inside of her. Feeling his balls tighten, he knew he was close.

"Stop," he begged, and was relieved when she listened.

"Did I do it wrong?"

"No." He pulled her up to kiss her hard on the mouth. "I need to be inside of you."

"I bet I could make you come like this."

He nodded. "That's a sure bet. You could but I really, really want to feel your sweet pussy around me again."

Leaning her back on the bed, he crawled on top of her. She was so beautiful with her long, curly dark hair displayed behind her. Promising himself that someday he would lose himself for a while in her dark strands, he reached down to another place where Scarlett's exquisite hair dominated his attention.

Finding her sweet spot, he pressed on the bundle of nerves until she gasped, her neck arching backward on the bed.

"Like that?"

“Yes, please, more.”

“I’ll give you more.”

He’d give her anything she wanted, always. Moving to where his cock was positioned right on the edge of her pussy, he pushed slowly at first, not wanting to overwhelm her with his pressure.

Michael knew he was right on the edge of losing control. She wrapped her arms around his back, pressing her mouth against his chest.

“I want all of you.”

Already her core welcomed him home. Scarlett’s inner muscles clenched in greeting, nearly making him lose himself. But, no, he wasn’t ready yet. It wasn’t time.

He wanted more. In and out, he moved, trying to stimulate her clit at the same time. She made the most wonderful noises as her nails dug into his back.

“Michael, it’s so fast this time. It’s happening so fast.”

For him as well, which was why he couldn’t answer her. She needed to come. It was the most important thing in the world to him at that moment. Scarlett was everything. The universe only existed so he could please her.

Finally, as she shouted his name, he felt her sweet juices surround him. It was heaven. He was almost there ... almost...

Michael lost himself inside her. He wasn’t sure where he went or how he got there, but it was okay if he never came back. In that moment, inside of his beloved, there was no pain to face. No one he loved would ever be hurt because he could and would always protect them. He could take care of her, live with her, make babies with her...

Scarlett sighed and he kissed the spot between her chin and her collarbone. Breathing in her scent, he looked down realizing he’d never taken off her shirt. “I think we were in a rush.”

She wiggled beneath him. “In the best possible way.”

What had they been talking about before his mate had made him lose his mind with lust?

His wolf supplied the answer. *Getting the heck out of this heat and back to the winds off the Atlantic and our pack.*

“It’s time for us to go home.”

She stretched. “Okay.”

Picking up her pants off the floor, she stood up and put them on. “I’m ready.”

“Shouldn’t we stop at your apartment and get your stuff?”

Shaking her head smiled. “I don’t have any. The guys brought you my clothes. That’s it.”

Michael rubbed his nose. That was going to change. He was going to buy her things. Tons of things. Anything she wanted.

Things she didn’t know she wanted, he would get for her.

He would buy her things she could return because she didn’t want them anymore.

“I love you, Scarlett.”

Her smile lit up the room. “I love you too, Michael, and now, forever,” she touched her chest. “I’ll carry part of your soul in here with me.”

She was right. That was exactly what happened now.

Scarlett wasn’t done talking. “I’ll take care of it while you take care of everyone else.”

He kissed her nose. "Someday it'll be safe for us in the world. I promise you."
Somehow, he would make that happen.

Chapter Ten

Scarlett looked down at the floor as they walked out of the bedroom in Cole's house. She held onto Michael's hand tightly. It felt odd to be leaving New Orleans. For better or worse, despite the small memories she had of her first three years of life, and even those she wasn't sure where they actually were from, she'd lived here her whole life.

Abruptly they came to a stop as she, and she assumed Michael, were all but overwhelmed by the scent of forty-five wolves.

What do you think they all want? She loved hearing his voice speak telepathically in her mind.

Maybe they're here to say goodbye. She doubted it, but she hoped that was what it was.

Michael squeezed her hand and walked down the stairs next to her, stopping to regard the group at the bottom.

"What's going on?"

Michael spoke to the group, not one person in particular. Scarlett supposed anyone could answer.

It was Barge who spoke. Out of the three of them—Todd, Barge and Seamus—he'd always been the quietest.

"Don't leave, Michael."

She couldn't imagine what it cost emotionally for him to say that. He kept his face stoic, his emotions hidden.

"I have to. I came here for a reason." Michael shrugged, but she could feel the tension in the way he held her hand tightly. She didn't want to squirm as she tried to loosen his grip. After a second, he pressed less hard. "As it turns out, I didn't find my sister, I found my mate. Still, I need to go home."

Barge wasn't finished. "Make this y'all's home."

Scarlett wanted to shout at them to be quiet, to not ask this of Michael. She'd seen what Michael had gone through in the brief moments she'd witnessed him as Alpha.

He could lead, but the absolute truth was that he didn't want to be. There was nothing about it that appealed to him. She wished to scream at them to be quiet, to not make him have to tell them no, to cause everyone pain. Instead, she stayed silent. This was happening.

Michael shook his head. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"Why not?" Todd stepped forward. "You're making everything better. We're better, our wolves are better."

Michael let go of her hand and leaned against the banister of the stairs. "They will keep getting better, all of you will, if you just follow your instincts and don't do things that feel wrong."

Seamus stepped forward and Scarlett wondered if they'd coordinated this, practiced, in the hope he would agree.

"You could be our Alpha. You don't have to go home and be just a member of the pack. Couldn't you do that?"

There it was. The question Scarlett hoped they wouldn't ask.

To her relief, Michael smiled. "I can't."

Seamus opened his mouth and Michael raised a hand to stop him from speaking.

"I wish I could, but one of the things you will all learn as you get older is who you are. I'm not a supreme Alpha. I tried it for thirty years. I like being a member of the pack."

Todd scratched his head. "But you're so Alpha, how can you like to follow anyone?"

"Being an Alpha wolf is not about leading. It's about who you are." Michael sat down on the step. She moved to sit next to him. "There is nothing in me that is stifled by listening to Tristan's good judgment. He runs our pack and I make it easier for him. Besides, if you think I'm powerful you should see what some of my pack members are like. You can feel their power a mile away. It's really amazing."

"Michael." Scarlett spoke up, getting his attention. This idea had brewed in her brain since they'd scented them all at the bottom of the stairs. She never would have risked stating her mind in public before, but now that she carried Michael's soul inside of her she knew there was nothing she could do that would make him stop loving her.

His eyes found hers. She could see the stress this took on him. He never wanted to disappoint anyone. "Yes?"

"Take them with us."

There, she had said it.

Silence filled the room.

Michael smiled but there was no mirth in it. "Truth is, I don't even want to bring you there. It's not safe. Westervelt is under constant attack. I could never ask anyone to live that life."

Todd squatted so he was below Michael's level on the floor. His intent couldn't have been clearer: submission.

"What if we wanted to come? Would Tristan take us?"

"Tristan would take any shifter who wanted to join our wolf pack, as long as they swore loyalty." Michael stood and moved up the steps. "But that's a permanent thing. You don't join Westervelt and then leave it. I can't stress enough how dangerous it is and you'd be giving up everything to follow me. Think about that. Do you want to renounce your life here to come with me to certain danger? You might not even like me in a few days."

Todd opened his mouth to speak and Michael stopped him again this time by speaking over him.

"Okay, here's the deal. I needed to stop at Joe's before I leave. Something he said yesterday is bothering me. When I get back in a few hours, anyone who wishes to come with me can. If you don't want to, and I think you should seriously consider not coming, then consider this goodbye."

Grabbing her hand, Michael pulled them both down the stairs and through the group of shifters.

When they were a safe distance away, he slowed his speed. Smiling with a sad look in his eyes, he sighed. "Sorry about the near-run out of there."

"I knew they weren't going to just let you leave."

"Maybe we should have snuck out in the middle of the night." He shook his head. "I could never do that."

She squeezed his fingers. "I know you couldn't, which is why you're you."

"It won't be easy for them. They'll have to be trained. Cullen and Gabriel are taskmasters. Then there's the constant fear of being blown up by my father."

"Yes, there is all that." She cleared her throat. "But there is also having you there, having a real leader, having a chance at a real shifter life, having something to fight for instead of just fighting."

He shook his head. "Don't romanticize it."

"I'm not." She stopped walking. "Are we really going to Joe's or did you make that up?"

"We're really going to Joe's."

"Okay, then we need a car unless you want to walk all day."

He laughed, some of the joy that had vanished reappearing in his gaze. "Good call. If it's just you and me going back to Maine, we can fly. If it's more than us we'll need to drive anyway since we'll never all get on the same plane."

"Should we go to the car rental?"

She knew where that was. Every time Zack had destroyed one of his cars, she'd had to go rent him a new one while he picked out the next one to buy. In the meantime the rest of the pack took the bus everywhere they went, since all of their money went to Zack, Cole or Nero.

"Do you have a driver's license?"

"I do, but I don't have a car."

Where was Michael going with this? The hair on the back of her neck stood up as she realized her mate was up to something.

"Great. Let's go to where we can get a taxi."

Without another word, he pulled her down the street.

* * * *

Hours later, she still couldn't believe what had happened. Michael had bought her a car. She sat in the front seat of it, gripping the steering wheel; still unable to believe he'd done that.

She hadn't even known you could walk into a car dealership and walk out with a car the same day. Evidently you could if you paid cash and you bought one that was already on the lot. Her hands shook on the steering wheel as she pulled it into a space outside Joe's store.

"I'm still without words."

He grinned, the same satisfied smile he'd been giving her since he'd marched into the place and picked out a car for her. "I think it handled really nicely. You do like the color don't you?"

She did. It was silver. Having never thought to own a car, she found she liked everything about it instantly, down to the position of the cup holders. "Are there are a lot of cars on Westervelt?"

"None, actually. We don't have roads. We leave our cars in a lot we own on the mainland."

Gasping, she gripped the wheel tighter until it felt as if her hands might bleed. "You want me to leave it somewhere? What if someone takes it?"

"It's a covered, monitored lot. As far as I know, no one has ever had a problem with theft. Not too much of that going on in rural Maine. However, if you're concerned, let me

reassure you that the insurance on it will replace it if it's stolen."

Tears filled her eyes. "You have to understand, no one has ever bought me anything...and this is huge."

"Hey, there." He pulled her across the center console into his arms. "It's okay. This is just the first of many gifts."

"No." She shook her head. "You don't have to buy stuff for me. You just have to be you."

"Buying stuff for you is *me* being *me*."

It was the same argument they'd had at the car lot.

Her wolf panted inside of her. *Don't make him mad.*

If most people had to fight their wolves for dominance, she had to argue with hers not to make her more afraid than she should be. It was a strange circumstance, considering she'd never been that brave to begin with. Now, however, she had Michael's soul to strengthen her.

Michael undid his seatbelt. "Let's go inside."

Scarlett sighed, leaning her head against the window.

Michael paused as he raised an eyebrow at her. "What's going on?"

"I really don't want to leave the car."

He laughed, one loud "ha" that vibrated through the car. "Scarlett, I had no idea when I got this for you that you were going to have separation anxiety about a motor vehicle."

"Make fun if you must but..."

He interrupted. "Oh, I *must*."

"Fine." Turning off the engine, she opened the door and stepped out. Using the remote control on her keychain, she locked the car. Then she locked it again. And again.

"Are you going to get OCD about this?"

Oh no, you're making him mad. Her wolf hid her face under her paws.

She grinned. "My wolf thinks I'm making you mad."

He shook his head. "She's going to have to get used to my teasing you."

"What are we doing here, anyway?"

With all the excitement of being taken to the dealership and then bought a car, she'd neglected to ask him what he wanted to do at Joe's. Personally, she'd hoped to be done with this place now that the proprietor was dead. Her hands still shook a little bit and she hoped the occurrences of her withdrawals would cease soon. Although, she supposed it could be much worse. She wasn't stuck at home vomiting or shaking under the covers.

I'd like to go home.

Her poor wolf. Maybe they were going to have to attend some sort of counseling together.

Michael answered her question as they walked through the front door of the shop. Well, maybe it would be more accurate to say that Michael broke into the shop by pushing at the door until it gave way.

"I don't like how much he knew about the death of that witch."

Scarlett remembered Joe had briefly spoken about the witch the Westervelt Wolves had killed. Michael still felt a little ill about it.

"It bothers you that you ordered her death."

He sighed. "It doesn't bother me she is dead or that I had to order her death to save

Tristan. No, what bothers me was that it was one more bloodstain. Thirty-five years ago more than half my pack was butchered because of a curse. At some point, the bloodshed has to end.” Looking at her, he rubbed his nose. “That’s why I can’t be Alpha. Because I would say ‘enough’ and an Alpha never can.”

For her part, she was glad he wasn’t. “You’re Alpha enough for me.”

Pulling her into his embrace, he kissed her. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

They walked together, stepping over the broken glass that now littered the floor. “Looks as if the group wasn’t satisfied with just killing Joe. They made a mess of the whole thing.”

“It was smart actually. The cops will think robbery.”

A thought dawned on her and her stomach fell. “Are we going to find Joe’s dead body?” She closed her eyes, trying to stem off the nausea at the thought.

“No.”

She exhaled and opened her eyes. That was a relief. “How do you know?”

“Use your nose. Do you smell rotting corpse in this building?”

Taking a deep breath, she extended her sense of smell as far as it went. There were a lot of disgusting things in here, rotting food, urine and somewhere on the street someone had puked but no dead body.

Michael kept speaking. “You’ve always had your ability to scent. The rest of the things you inherited when you got your wolf you’ll have to get used to but not that. If you learn to trust yourself, you’re ten steps ahead.”

That was true, but it was also easier said than done. “Okay, I’ll work on it.”

“Or don’t. You’re pretty perfect as you are.”

She swatted his arm. “Michael Kane, you’re going to give me a big head.”

“If that was possible, I’d work on it.”

“What are we looking for in here?” The sooner she got out of the building the better. Joe had received real pack justice here. She’d seen it before and coming back on the scene gave her the creeps. It was too soon since his death. Maybe she had an overactive imagination, but she always felt as if places that had seen violence held onto for it a while.

“His computer.”

“You’re going to hack into his computer?”

He coughed and let go of her hand as they approached the back office with Joe’s desk. “It’s stale in here, isn’t it? If I could, I’d open a window. Anyway, no, I don’t know how to do that.” Looking back at her, he had a crooked smile. “Weren’t you the one who pointed out I must have a decrepit brain at my advanced age?”

“Okay, you’ve got memory loss and I’m obsessive compulsive about the car. We make a great team.”

“We do.”

“So what are you going to do with the computer?”

“Pick it up and bring it back to Westervelt in the back of the car so my friend, Malcolm, who is a security expert, can break in and tell me what it says about how the witches know our business.”

That made sense. As Michael unplugged and then grabbed the computer like it weighed nothing and walked toward the front door, she picked up some of the notebooks strewn around just in case they proved to be important later.

Following Michael out the door, she turned around to shut it behind them. It was broken now and for some reason she still felt the need to close it like it could seal. She couldn't help but feel that this was more than just a moment of leaving the store. No, it was the last time she'd see this place.

A slight drizzle of rain had started while they were in the store. It was typical New Orleans for the summer. If you didn't like the weather, wait a minute. She raised her head to the sky, letting the light drips hit her on the face.

I want to go home. Her wolf whimpered.

We're not going back there anymore. This is goodbye. Doesn't it feel that way?

This was never home. This was why I didn't come. We need to go home.

Somehow this didn't surprise her. She walked toward Michael. *Where is home?*

Get in the car with Michael; he'll take us there.

That was settled. Her wolf had wanted to be there in the first place.

Michael leaned against the car still holding the computer. "Pop the trunk for me?"

She pushed the button on the remote and the trunk opened. That was so fun.

He placed the computer into the compartment and she pressed the button again to close it.

Walking toward her, he stopped and leaned on the car. "Ready to go?"

"More than."

And that was the truth.

* * * *

They pulled up to Cole's house. She turned off the car and got out, locking it behind her. Just once this time, even though she thought a few times about hitting the button again. If it was silent she might do it, but Michael would hear the telltale chirp the car made when she pushed the button and know she was giving into her mania about the car again.

She was going to make her obsession her own private little thing. She'd never had anything like it before; if she wanted to, she could privately worry over its care.

They walked together toward the house. Michael turned to look at her. "How many do you think realistically are coming with us? I can't imagine it's more than ten. Who would want to put themselves through Westervelt hell if they didn't have to?"

She would. But she didn't say that aloud to him. Michael wasn't taking his own advice. He ignored his sense of smell and his hearing. He was nervous, she could tell from the way his shoulders were rigid and the sound of his jaw clenching.

If he'd done what he told her to do, if he didn't ignore his wolf, he'd know exactly how many people waited in the house to come to Maine.

Every single one of them.

Just before they opened the door, the scent must have become too much for Michael to pretend he couldn't tell the number.

When Michael moved to look at her, she couldn't help beaming at him. He had no idea what he'd done to her pack. They needed him, not like she did, in an entirely different way.

He might be bringing them to Tristan for the other man to lead, but it was Michael they counted on right now.

That was what he was at his core: absolutely dependable and just the person you

wanted with you in a crisis. He was hers. He was magnificent.

Even if he didn't know it.

When he spoke to her, it was with a gruff voice and she realized instantly how much emotion he hid from the world. She could feel it, as if it were her own.

"This is going to be a logistical nightmare. How am I going to transport them all across country?"

"I'll take care of everything."

This type of endeavor, she was good at.

Chapter Eleven

Michael was more grateful to Scarlett than he could express. She really handled everything. He wondered if she knew how remarkable it was that she'd done that. Even as she'd stared downward and stubbornly looked no one in the eye except him, she'd managed to take a head count—the number forty-five still blew his mind—figured out who had cars, how many people could fit in each and sent a group to the grocery store to purchase enough food to feed everyone for two days. If they all slept in shifts, stopped minimally and ate in the car they could be at the dock waiting for the Westervelt boat in just over twenty-nine hours.

So far the plan had gone without a hitch. He was supposed to be sleeping. It was Marvin's turn to drive Scarlett's car. After she'd obsessed about letting him drive, which had gone on constantly somewhere between Chattanooga until they'd approached West Virginia when she'd finally conked out.

He opened his eyes, figuring Marvin and the two other wolves—Chester and Liam—knew he was awake anyway. It had been so much easier to fly down.

"I still haven't told Tristan we're coming." He needed to, considering they were about fifteen hours away.

"You could do what I do when I want to get out of having an actual conversation." Marvin glanced in his direction before turning his eyes back to the road.

"What's that?"

"Send him a text message and then turn off the phone."

Actually, that would be kind of funny. He wouldn't do it to Tristan, though. No, that brother had too much on his plate being Alpha. Theo, however ... the idea had possibility. Smiling at the thought, even as he knew he wouldn't do it, he pulled Scarlett's cell phone out of her purse. His was long gone, having been lost in one of the shifts during the fights that had gone down in New Orleans. That was the problem with the shifting process. Your clothes were magically destroyed and anything in the pockets went poof right along with them.

He dialed Tristan's number. It rang three times and his brother answered. Even over the phone he could tell he was tired.

"My Alpha."

It was the formal way to address his younger brother. Respectful and certainly something Tristan had earned.

"My brother. What number is this? I almost didn't pick up."

Michael laughed. "Sorry, Trip, have you been getting a lot of telemarketers?"

"Well, no. However, generally I know the numbers that come up. Ashlee programmed this thing for me. It normally says 'Michael' if you're calling."

If Michael wasn't careful, this was all they were going to talk about. "It's my mate's phone."

"That's right. Theo told us you were mated. Congratulations. I assume you're bringing her here since our missing sister has vanished."

Michael swallowed. "I am."

"What time does your flight get in?"

“We’re not flying.”

Ah ... hell.

Just tell him. Scarlett’s voice in his head startled him and he turned around noticing for the first time her amber eyes open and regarding him.

“Did you decide you needed some kind of road trip?”

Every once in a while someone in the pack taught his brother some slang. Unlike the rest of them, Tristan had always been so serious; he’d never learned the vernacular that was used even during his own childhood. When he said things like “road trip”, it made the rest of them want to crack up. Not that they would, they just kind of silently snickered.

Michael often wondered if Tristan knew and that was why he did it.

Blinking, he finally spoke. “Something has happened, my Alpha.”

“We’re back to ‘My Alpha’ that must mean it’s a serious *something*. Tell me what it is.”

“When I got down here, I found the pack in total chaos. Nero had just died and two rival factions competed to take his space. One was worse than the other but they were both bad. My mate had been sorely abused.”

“Abused how?”

Looking up at the rearview mirror, he saw her face and she glanced down. *Tell him. He’ll be my Alpha, he should know.*

“Physically and sexually. Scarlett was so beat up when I got here she could barely walk or speak.”

Staring at her now, since she’d shifted and found the magic that came with a wolf, she seemed better. Her bruises faded more every second.

Tristan growled. “Did you kill them?”

Adjusting the phone, he regarded Marvin. The other shifter did a good job of not making eye contact with him, as did the two wolves in the backseat. Even Scarlett acted as if she gave him privacy by not speaking aloud. He was more than cognizant of the fact that everyone in the car could hear Tristan as well as he could. There was no such thing as shifter privacy.

“I killed one after he attacked me. I beat the other one in a fight and sent him away.”

“I would have killed both of them.”

Michael knew this to be true. That’s why Tristan was Tristan and Michael was Michael.

“Anyway, I tried to teach the pack some of the right ways to behave. They really took to the lessons.”

Tristan laughed. “I’m not surprised. You taught me. No one understands Pack better than you. That’s why you’ll always be one of our top Alphas. Men follow you. You’re a born leader even though you have no interest in being supreme Alpha.”

“They’re *all* coming home with me. They insisted. They’re *all* swearing allegiance to you.”

Silence met him on the other end of the phone and he looked up to make eye contact with Scarlett again. She smiled at him in what he thought seemed like a reassuring manner.

“You explained what the situation is here?”

Michael closed his eyes. “More than once.”

“And they still wanted to come?”

“Yes.”

He heard Tristan’s footsteps in the background. Seconds later, he heard a door swing open and the sounds of outdoors filled the phone. “Then that’s fine. I’m always glad for more Pack.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Then why do you sound like you still want to vomit?”

There was no point in stalling. Inside of him, his wolf had laid down. Brother or no brother, phone or in person, Tristan was a forced to be reckoned with. Even over the phone, his power could make Michael’s wolf tremble from the magic he produced. “I haven’t told you how many there are.”

“How many?”

“Forty-five.”

He waited for Tristan’s explosion. Nothing but the sound of the Alpha’s breathing could be heard.

Finally, Michael’s younger brother spoke. “How far away are you?”

Studying the GPS in the car, Michael answered. “About fifteen hours.”

“Ashlee is going to freak out having to get everything ready, but we’ll make it happen.”

“You’re not going to comment on the number?”

Tristan laughed. “I’m overwhelmed. Once again, you have saved us.”

Michael blinked. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Theo told you about Dad’s numbers. There was no way we stood a chance, but now that you found us more people who want to join us, we might.” Tristan’s voice had a tremor and Michael had to blink away his own tears. He turned his head, not that it helped, so the others in the car couldn’t see him.

“They have to be trained. They’re adults but they’ve no instruction—”

Tristan interrupted. “We’ll teach them.”

“They’re anxious to learn.”

“You always do this, Michael, you always come through for us when all hope is lost.”

Michael shook his head. “I don’t, my Alpha.” If anything, he was a constant failure.

“You held us together for thirty years while I floundered. You saved my life when I was cursed. You endured Dad’s wrath over and over again so I wouldn’t have to.”

“Tristan, I—”

His brother interrupted. “Call me when you’re an hour away.”

With that, his Alpha disconnected their conversation.

“He’s wonderful.”

Scarlett’s voice was warm water flowing over his body on a cold night. It was heaven.

“He is.”

“Mostly because he recognizes how good you were.”

Michael wasn’t sure what he’d ever done to deserve so many people loving him. He would take it, nonetheless.

* * * *

Standing in front of the dock waiting for the boat to come back and take the next group over to Westervelt, Michael pulled Scarlett up against him.

"You okay?"

She'd been quiet since they'd arrived. Of course, that might be because there was so much organizing to get the boat situation handled.

"I am. I need to tell you something."

"Sure."

She bit down on her lip. "You know how I can see things? How I can see a story that someone tells, if they've lived the story?"

"Yes."

"I saw the day you ordered the witch killed."

He raised his eyebrows and let go of her. Taking two steps toward the water he found that this time he was the one who couldn't meet her gaze. So she knew the full extent of what he'd done. She'd seen with her eyes that he'd ordered the wretched woman killed and bled to save Tristan's life.

Well, there was probably some kind of justice in it. His soft, gentle mate should know what he was capable of.

"I would do it again." He knew his voice sounded more like a growl than a voice and he couldn't control that.

"Your brother was dying. He was going slowly insane."

He laughed, looking up at the sky. How to make her understand? "Thirty years ago while I was asleep in my bed, my father cursed the mated men to kill their spouses. They awoke and started butchering them. As soon as they'd done that, they'd snap out of it, realize what they'd done, and end their life. Some of them didn't even wait for the ritual suicide. They just found a weapon and did the deed."

Michael gasped as he stared at Scarlett whose eyes were huge. "Are you seeing this right now as I speak it?"

She blinked. "I am."

He backed up another two steps. "I won't continue." He would not have her live it. The woman had been through too much in her life. By all that was holy, he would spare her the memory of that night.

"You can tell me. You lived it. So can I."

"No." He ground his teeth in his mouth. "Let's just say there was no way my brother would have the same fate. Not while I was living to stop it."

She walked forward and grabbed his hand. "I know. That's why I want you to stop beating yourself up about it. I can feel the ache in your soul. Let it go."

Her touch jolted him out of the rage he felt about that memory. "You ... you ... you don't judge me?"

"No. I want you to stop judging yourself. I'm in no position to think anything about any decisions others make. Before you, there was no one who would have really cared if I lived or died. I don't know what it must be like to have someone willing to kill for my safety."

"Except you do."

He sent the phrase telepathically to her and he watched her eyes widen. "You're right. You killed Zack for me."

"I would do anything for you."

She pressed herself closer and he could smell her scent. Closing his eyes, he put his head down on top of hers as he embraced her in a tight hug.

"Mine."

He wasn't sure he'd spoken aloud until he heard his own voice in his ears. Up against his chest, he felt her nod. Good, she agreed. For a while, he might need reassurance about it.

Walking to him, he heard his brother, Gabriel, speak. "Sweet."

Michael opened his eyes to roll them. Letting Scarlett go a little bit so he could look at the brother who was directly younger than him, he resisted the urge to tell him to go away.

They'd been close, probably the closest out of the whole group until recently. Something was wrong with Gabriel. It wasn't that he'd gone "bad". Michael was certain that could never happen to his brother, to any of them, after what they'd seen and no one worked harder to uncover traitors than Gabriel Kane.

He was just harder now. Any softness to Gabriel had long since left and most days he wasn't sure if he spoke to his wolf or the person he'd known for one hundred and ninety years.

"What's going on, younger brother?"

Gabriel must have gotten off the boat that just arrived.

"I'm leaving."

"You're kidding?" When his brother didn't say no, Michael continued. "We need you. We have forty-five wolves to train. Where is Tristan sending you?"

"He's not in charge of this particular mission. I have someone to kidnap."

Michael let go of Scarlett altogether. "What? Are you crazy?"

"It's not your problem. Let's put it this way, I'm either going to be a hero or I won't be at all."

Michael's heart pounded hard in his chest. Gabriel was serious, dead serious, Michael could smell it. "Hold on. Okay? I'll go with you. We'll grab Rex and the three of us will go."

Gabriel shook his head. "Sorry. If Rex were here, I would take him but he's not. He's off witch-hunting."

"Then I'll go with you."

Smiling, Gabriel took two steps away. "You can't. You're mated now. It's different."

"You'll find yours."

Gabriel raised his hands out in front of him like a shield. "Don't wish that on me. I don't need to be pussy-whipped."

Now that wasn't okay. "Hey, watch your language."

"It's an expression."

"I'm not Tristan, I'm not falling for that. I know exactly what it means."

"Anyway, I'm just here to say goodbye and to say I'm glad to see you're not considering ritual suicide anymore."

Behind him he heard Scarlett gasp. He whirled around. "Scarlett, I..."

She interrupted, even as she wouldn't meet his gaze. "You were considering what?"

"Sorry, man."

Michael turned to look at Gabriel. He hoped his glare said just how angry he was. Why did he have to go and do that?

He spun back to Scarlett. "Let me explain. Ritual suicide is..."

"I know what it is. We actually had that in our pack. It's an out. When a shifter feels that he can't wait any longer for his mate, he can opt out. Or if the other half dies, he can use it to follow."

Okay, so she understood. "I had started to think about it. Not all the time. I'm two hundred and ten years old."

Her eyes welled with tears and one by one they escaped her amber depths until there was a steady stream of them down her cheeks. Her bottom lip quivered. Gods, he had just made her cry. Suddenly, he wasn't certain he could breathe.

She spoke on a sob, wrapping her arms around herself as she backed away from him. "You would have left me here? Have I missed something in all the talking you did about mates? Isn't it our duty to hang on until the universe presents the person to you? No matter how long it takes?"

He moved forward, reaching for her, but she put her hand out to stop him. It was a small gesture even as it pinned his feet to the ground. "I would have been here all alone and never known you. You cared so little about waiting for your mate?"

No! "That's not true."

Do something. His wolf paced inside of him.

Michael had no clue what to do about this. He'd worried she would be mad that he'd ordered the witch dead not that he'd considered the ritual.

"I never would have left before the war was over and really, what does it matter? I'm here. I didn't do it. Fate brought us together."

"I guess I was just lucky that happened before you got tired of waiting." She wiped her eyes with her palm as she turned to walk onto the boat. "If you don't understand, I'm not sure I can explain it to you."

Keeping her head down, she walked the plank onto the boat that would take them to Westervelt.

Finally able to make his feet work, he followed her. "Scarlett..."

A growl stopped him in his tracks. Turning, he raised an eyebrow at the culprits. Todd, Seamus and Barge had wolf eyes as they glared at him.

"Do you want to explain that growl?"

Todd stepped forward. "You just made Scarlett cry."

Hell. He had appointed them her protectors, it looked as if they were going to take that duty seriously. Even if, in this case, they decided to protect her from him.

"That's my mate."

Barge shrugged. "Seems to me the lady doesn't want to see you right now."

Michael thanked the Gods that none of his brothers were around to see this right now. He'd never live it down. Set away from his own mate by the very shifters he'd explained the concept of true pack.

"You imbeciles beat her up not three days ago."

Now it was Seamus' turn to talk. "That was before. We would never dream of it now. We apologized and she accepted. What's your excuse?"

As the boat moved, Michael wanted to throw himself overboard and swim. "This was something I thought about before I even met her."

Todd sat down in one of the deckchairs. "Have you apologized?"

"I was going to when you growled at me."

Barge shook his head. "I think she needs a few minutes. Give her a break to calm down."

That didn't sound like terrible advice. Moving to the deck chair, he sat down watching the mainland disappear into the horizon. "I can't believe I'm taking love advice from the three of you."

Truth was, he had no clue what else to do. His mate was hurting and she wasn't wrong. It had been a selfish thing to have thought. Especially when she'd lived her life thinking she would never have a mate and no one would ever rescue her, but she'd still hung on.

There was no doubt. Scarlett was braver than he was. How long did women usually stay mad about things like this? He wasn't asking the three shifters near him that was for sure.

Fix this. His wolf ordered.

He wanted to. Bad.

Chapter Twelve

One of Michael's brothers, she thought it was Theo, showed her into Michael's room. Michael was broader shouldered than Theo, his face angular, his eyes darker and also warmer.

Theo hadn't said much before he'd left. Clearly, her hysterical tears had put him off his game a little bit. Even she couldn't understand why she was *this* upset.

A world without Michael in it would be a darker, miserable place. In fact, she knew firsthand how low that existence would be. She'd been relatively content to go through life abused all the time. In fact, she'd been relieved not to be dead.

Michael had changed all of that. Not just for her, but for nearly an entire pack of wolves. What if he'd made a different decision and taken the out offered by the ceremony?

She closed her eyes and slumped upon the bed. Michael's scent enveloped her, making her heart ache with longing for him. Where was he?

She'd heard the three guys stop him on the boat and she'd appreciated it. That wouldn't have been a good time for her to speak. But now?

The safety of sleep grabbed her attention and pulled her to its waiting arms. Trying to pry open her eyes worked for about three seconds before she gave into the exhaustion that overtook her.

She wasn't sure how long she slept. When she woke up, it was dark outside and Michael's arms were wrapped tightly around her, all but pinning her to his chest.

Waiting for a moment to see if he would say something, she realized he was out cold. His deep breaths were steady and sound, a reminder that he was there and he was with her. Listening to him lulled her back down into unconsciousness.

The next time she awoke, Michael was not asleep. His warm lips made their way down her body as his hands skillfully unbuttoned her shirt. The same clothes, she realized distantly, she'd fallen asleep in.

"I really must smell bad. I've been in these clothes forever."

He mumbled something incoherent and kept kissing her.

"Michael?"

"You smell awesome, like you always do, and I swear if I don't get inside of you soon I might explode."

She opened her eyes to look at him. His eyes were serious. All of a sudden, the argument came back to her. Her unreasonable response to his thinking about leaving this world.

More rested, she didn't think she'd react quite so strongly. Not that she was any happier but she wasn't going to weep.

"I'm sorry I got so upset."

He kissed her hard on the lips. "I've got to get you out of these clothes."

Clearly, Michael wasn't fooling around. Sitting up, she helped undoing the buttons and threw the shirt on the floor. It was already disgusting. She was going to have to do some laundry. Next, she pulled off her khaki pants in the same general direction where she'd thrown the shirt.

Michael tugged at her clothes breaking the clasp of her bra. She gasped and looked down. His cheeks turned a decidedly red color. "Sorry, I'll get you a new one. A whole bunch of new ones. Or you get yourself some. What's mine is yours, as you know."

"Let's face it, I don't really need a bra."

"Still, I can't go around destroying your clothing."

"Sure you can, I kind of like it that you're losing it a little bit."

He narrowed his eyes. "You do?"

"Sure. You don't have to be in control *all* the time."

With a muttered oath, he pushed her flat on her back, kissing her frantically. She could hardly keep up. Michael seemed crazed and, for her part, she was happy to go along for the ride.

He kissed her chest and she gasped. Her skin tingled with excitement. For a person who had once thought sex horrendous, it was amazing how turned on she could get by being kissed and caressed by her mate. Then again, maybe it was supposed to work that way.

She didn't care. Arching her back off the bed, she felt the rough pads of his skilled hands delve into the curls covering her pussy. "Yes, Michael, stroke me there."

"You like that, huh?" His eyes sparkled with lust as he gazed down at her.

"I like everything but, gods, I want your hands on me."

"That's good because I want to put my hands on you."

And he did. First one finger and then another as she groaned. Another few seconds and she'd be begging. He played with the sensitive bundle of nerves inside her channel and she sighed, feeling the pressure growing.

"You're so beautiful, Scarlett. I want to watch you come for me. Then I'm going to make you do it again." He nuzzled her neck as he spoke. She could feel the hard length of his erection pressed up against her leg.

He wasn't going to have to wait long to get his wish. All the pent-up emotion of the last few days swirled inside of her, desperate for release and Michael's talented hands were giving it a chance to explode. Biting down on her lip, Scarlett saw colors form before her eyes before she shouted Michael's name in a frenzy of pleasure that made her whole body shake.

Michael's mouth took hers in what she could only describe as an assault on her senses. Gods, she loved him. Loved the way he tasted, loved the way his whiskers rubbed her as he kissed, loved the way he lost himself in the joining of their two mouths.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on, feeling his hard member against the outside of her opening. She knew what would be happening, she craved it.

"I want you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Take me."

He seemed to need no other words. He pushed his erection deep inside of her with one hard movement. She gasped from the fullness and closed her eyes.

"Gods, Scarlett, you're so damn tight. It's like heaven in here."

For her part, she couldn't speak and his words were like caresses on her ears. He was never as uncontrolled as when they made love. It astonished her that she was the one who could make him this way.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pushed her against the headboard in his strong movements, his hand preventing her head from striking the board itself.

“More, Michael. Give me everything.”

“I want to, Scarlett. I want you to have my whole life.”

Closing her eyes, she let herself get lost in the feelings his cock created inside of her. Shifting his legs, he changed his direction slightly and now he rubbed her clit in his thrusts.

She cried out as the pressure became too much. If she was going to die, she decided, she wished it could be like this, with Michael inside of her, their bodies forever joined.

“More ... more ... more,” she begged as her body exploded. She could feel her wetness surround Michael’s length as he screamed her name following her into the oblivion they had created together.

Seconds later, or maybe it was hours, she could no longer sense time, he kissed her nose, her forehead, her neck.

“I’m so sorry, Scarlett. I’m so sorry I even thought about not waiting for you. I felt sorry for myself, lost, alone. I can’t really explain it except the way it is between us now, I need it. I was drifting in loneliness, needing you and not knowing you were out there.”

Scarlett opened her eyes to look at him as tears fell on her face. Her heart pounded hard as a lump formed in her throat.

“Michael, are you crying? Don’t.”

He wiped his eyes. “If you tell anyone I did this, I’ll never live it down.” He laughed.

She pulled his head down for another kiss, trying to show him with her mouth all that was impossible to say. He’d never have to worry that she would betray him like that. He was her *everything* too.

Finally, she spoke. “I overreacted. It was exhaustion. The idea of there being a world without you in it was too much for me.”

“What can I do to fix it?”

She reached up to kiss him. The more she knew of her wolf, the more she understood what this actually was. Michael was an Alpha wolf, he needed to take care of everyone and she being his mate meant he felt doubly so toward her.

“You can’t fix it, Michael. It’s not broken. It’s just over.”

He exhaled loudly. “You forgive me like you forgave your pack members for hurting you?”

“It’s not even in the same league. It’s nothing. Didn’t you ever fight with your brothers?”

He laughed. “Yes, but we’re all stupid little boys. We’d end up pounding on one another and get over it.”

“You and I don’t do that, however, I think we may have done the mated equivalent of it just now.”

“Okay.”

He rolled off her and she felt bereft of his warmth. It wasn’t that it was cold in the room. No, she just preferred being close to Michael. Rolling over, she snuggled into his side as he pressed his nose against her hair.

Suddenly remembering her thoughts before she went to bed, she yawned. “Where did you go last night?”

“We had to swear in the wolves to make them Pack. There were forty-five of them; it took hours.”

“Didn’t I have to do that?” She felt a little put off that she had missed the whole

thing.

“No,” he laughed. “I can hear it in your tone you didn’t like not being there. I came back to get you but you were out cold. You’re my mate, which makes you automatic Pack. Technically, it makes you royalty.”

Royalty? She’d not given much thought to that aspect of Michael’s persona. He was a Royal member of the pack—not just an Alpha but one of the top members. Life was going to be a little different from being all but ignored except when someone wanted you to wait on them or beat on you.

“Tristan doesn’t mind that I missed it?”

She’d only met the Alpha briefly and she hadn’t been able to hold his eye contact the whole time they’d been together. She assumed, or hoped rather, that would lessen as time went on. Or maybe she’d really never know what he looked like.

“If he did, he didn’t mention it to me.” Michael kissed her hair. “Wanna go run?”

“I didn’t pack any sneakers.”

She was going to need a lot of clothes if she was going to make it in Maine. It was warm right now, well, warmish. Compared to Louisiana it was downright cool.

He pinched her lightly and she yelped, laughing. “What was that for?”

“I didn’t mean run on our two legs. I meant run in our wolf bodies.”

She started at the thought. Wow, she really could do that. Gulping, she remembered the last time she’d shifted and how much that hurt.

She decided to ask her wolf. *Do you want to run?*

Yes. Her wolf sounded tentative. *As long as Michael stays with us. I don’t know these woods yet.*

“She wants to as long as you stay with us the whole time.”

Michael laughed. “Just try to get rid of me.”

He bounded off the bed like a little boy. “I’ll show you all my favorite spots.”

She moved a little more slowly. The idea of shifting for fun was brand new to her. She’d never even gotten to go with the pack when they ran wherever they went. What did shifters do when they ran together? Look at the scenery?

“Where do we shift?”

“Here.” As if to demonstrate, Michael shifted as the warm white light she’d witnessed so many times in shifts surrounded his body. In his place, was Michael’s tall black wolf with the white lines around his eyes.

“You make it look so easy.”

It is. Try it yourself now.

He’d told her it wouldn’t hurt and it wasn’t that she didn’t believe him, she did. It was hard, however, to imagine it could be pain free when it had been so agonizing the first time.

“Okay.”

Closing her eyes, she called the white light to herself and felt the shift begin.

“Breathe.”

Listening to Michael she took a deep breath in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her muscles shifted, her bones altered, and through all of it there was no pain. She blinked as she realized she was a wolf.

Taking two steps, she got used to the feeling of moving on four feet instead of two.

“Now what?”

Michael sniffed the air. *"Give her control."*

"How do I do that?"

Even as she asked the question she could feel the wolf prowling on the edge of her mind pushing forward. Before Michael could answer, she opened up her senses and the wolf moved in.

Now things were clear. She could see the world through her eyes and wow, things looked different. Michael's room was awash in color and smells, all of which she'd known as a human but now she could really feel it. Colors had taste. Why hadn't she known this before? Red was hot, it burned her tongue just to look at it. Yellow...

"Come with me."

She didn't need to be told twice. Michael was her mate and he was Alpha to her, to boot. If he said come, she came. Scarlett blinked. Wow, her thoughts had been given over to the wolf too. It wasn't that she didn't think these things as a human just not quite like that...

They moved together through the house. It was mostly quiet. She could hear low voiced conversations behind closed doors as they walked on four feet.

"It's quiet."

"It's still early."

Scarlett hadn't heard the others last night, which she now knew she should be able to do. That meant that something about the construction of the building kept sound to a minimum. Probably a must-have for a wolf house...

Michael growled, low and nonthreatening. Clearly, he wanted her attention. *"You're thinking too hard. Be the animal. You need to learn to do this. Someday you might need to live like this for a while."*

"Why?"

"We never know what's going to happen. Theo did for a while. Who knows when we may need to hide from my father."

"Okay." She swallowed. That was a horrible thought. She needed to be the wolf. Finally, she exhaled and let the wolf in completely.

As they approached the doorway to the outside, Michael took off running and Scarlett followed. At this speed, it was easy to be her wolf.

There was nothing but the call of the woods. The wind felt glorious and the grass soft beneath her feet. It took her twice as many steps to keep up with Michael thanks to his larger size but she didn't care.

They entered the woods side by side. That was when she scented it. Having never hunted one, she still knew exactly what it was: deer. It was there and she wanted one.

Michael crouched low and she followed suit. *"Get it."*

He wanted her to get it? It turned out to be no problem. Her wolf might have been terrified in the human world, but in these circumstances, she felt right at home. As long as Michael watched, she'd do anything he wanted.

Pouncing in the air, she gave into the instinct to take down the deer. It ran, but she was faster. Michael moved in front of the deer, distracting it, keeping it from getting through the bushes. Growling, Scarlett took it down by ripping out the tendon in the back of its left leg. The animal screeched as it went down. Then it was easy. She was hungry, it was meat.

Michael came up behind her, helping her with the final moments and together they

enjoyed their breakfast. When it was over, she was full and tired. Moving forward, she banged her head into Michael's side. He smelled so ... right.

He knocked his head into hers making a low sound in his throat. Yes, this was contentment. She lay down as Michael stood protectively at her side. The breeze off the Atlantic cooled her down.

A scent hit her nostrils and she jumped up. There was no question as to who it belonged to: Tristan.

Her wolf knew her Alpha. Whimpering, she lay flat on the ground as Nero had taught them to do in his presence. It was the only way she knew how to show respect.

"She does it too?"

Tristan's voice filled her head as long as well as Michael's laughter.

"Tristan saw that behavior over and over last night at the swearing in. We've asked everyone not to do that."

"I never really got to greet my new sister-in-law and then I smelled you guys out here. Thought maybe I could help with the deer, but you've done just fine without my slow interference."

"You're not slow." Michael scoffed. *"You never could be."*

"I will be if everyone keeps me out of every challenge."

"Ah." Michael's laughter again. *"I heard you were upset about that. You can't expect the pack to lose you. You're too important."*

"So I'm supposed to let everyone I care about go down over and over again while I watch?"

"You're supposed to lead us."

"That's why I should be first through the door in danger."

"No," Michael growled. *"Your magic sustains us. We will keep you safe and you will keep us whole."*

Scarlett watched the exchange in awe. Michael challenged Tristan's desire and Tristan took it and even seemed to listen to him.

"I need to ask you something."

"Anything, my Alpha."

"I ask you as my oldest brother, not as your Alpha."

Michael howled at the sky and Scarlett knew that meant yes. It was amazing how many things she understood that she never had before.

"If something were to happen to me—"

It won't."

Tristan spoke over Michael's interruption. *"If something were, I want you to hold the pack as you did before. Hold it for Braden until he comes of age. You did it for me. Do it again."*

Michael lowered himself beneath Tristan, looking down.

Scarlett swallowed both in her human and wolf form. Michael had agreed. She knew what that cost him. He never wanted to be supreme Alpha wolf again and yet for his brother, his Alpha, he would. This time she howled at the sky, in tribute to her mate who was everything, who filled her life.

Some moments were meant to be had as wolves.

Chapter Thirteen

Michael watched Scarlett dress herself. Lounging on the bed, he wondered if with forty-five new wolves to train, if it would be appropriate to spend the whole day making love to his mate and running in the woods. He was about to suggest it when the first crash sounded.

Scarlett gasped as Michael ran to the window. Fire.

"Oh damn it."

The woods where they'd been earlier, Tristan possibly still was, were ablaze.

"What is it?"

"Fire bomb. We're under attack and Tristan is out there alone."

She visibly paled. He pushed away the panic he felt. Tristan alone, Scarlett so untrained. There was no time for nerves. He was an Alpha wolf. He would handle this. "Go down to the basement. Most of the women and children will gather there. Stay there. Hurry."

He ran for the door opening up his telepathic senses to pick up information. Things were chaotic, lots of people talking at once. None of them knew where Tristan was and so far the Alpha wasn't answering.

Damn.

Must protect our Alpha. His wolf was right.

"Michael." A sob wrenched through Scarlett's voice and he whirled around.

She rushed to him, kissing him hard on the lips. "Be safe."

"You too."

He kissed her again trying to keep his veneer of nonchalance.

It wasn't "goodbye". It was "see you later". He rounded the corner at a run.

Sending out the message to the group, he ran for the outdoors, staying in his human form. He needed to assess the situation before he decided if he should shift.

"Tristan's in the woods."

He heard Cullen curse and Theo slam something. They all knew what that meant, especially with Gabriel and Rex off-island, fewer hands to help in a crisis.

"I'm almost into the trees. Cullen, get the new wolves somewhere away from most of the fighting. I don't want them involved unless it's a crisis—they're totally ill prepared. Then get yourself into the woods. I don't know how many are out there."

He heard the newest members' objections and tuned them out. There was too much to do. Where there was fire, there were almost always miscreant wolves. He'd been told Azriel had found a way to keep them alive and turn them back, but not how to stop them from being created. Kendrick Kane had an endless army.

"Theo, you and Malcolm and some of the Alphas get into the woods and get these flames out. I don't want them hiding from us in the smoke."

Gods knew they were hard enough to handle when you could smell them.

"Az?"

"I'm here, Michael."

Up until yesterday, Az had been on medical leave.

"Are you up for this?"

“Always. You’ve got to get Tristan.”

“I will. There will be wolves to test your product on. Maybe you’ll save some.”

Michael would save Tristan.

His heart beat fast as ran on silent feet. Sniffing the air, he scented his brother Tristan a distance away. Locating his scent didn’t make Michael feel better as there was still nothing from their supreme Alpha over their general link. That meant bad news, one way or another.

Theo spoke in his head. *“Michael, I’ve sent Faith down to guard the women and children. Ashlee is frantic, she can’t reach Tristan.”*

“Tell her I’ve spotted him and I’m going for him now.”

He wasn’t going to open himself up to Ashlee’s pain or her communication. It would be too distracting right now. It might too easily bring on thoughts of Scarlett.

Finally, he sent his location to Cullen. If something went wrong, the other man would come and get Tristan. That was the most important thing. Scarlett’s face appeared before his eyes and he pushed it away. For the pack, Tristan was key; for Michael, there was no question it was Scarlett.

He’d pick her. He knew that and what’s more, Tristan knew it because supreme Alpha or no he would pick Ashlee hands down. That’s what Gabriel had been talking about on the dock.

It was different now. Michael couldn’t go kidnapping people. He had to stay here, he always would.

Pushing away those thoughts, he ducked down. Tristan was unconscious. Black smoke filled the air as five miscreant wolves circled his body. Michael swallowed. They weren’t alone. Standing in the circle watching Tristan’s silent body was Michael’s father.

The smoke that made it hard for him to smell and detect the man who’d helped make him did the same for Michael’s benefit. Kendrick had yet to detect his presence. Tristan’s chest moved up and down. For now, he breathed.

Michael let his gaze fall on his dad. Other than a brief glance at the man during Cullen’s rescue three years earlier, he hadn’t seen his father since the older man had stood on a boat calmly floating away from the chaos of the massacre occurring on Westervelt. Minutes after murdering his own wife, Michael’s mother.

If others had been surprised, Michael had not. He’d known—for as long as he could remember—there was something wrong with Kendrick Kane.

We’ve done this number before.

He had. Just recently when he’d fought Zack. But he hadn’t been alone. That’s why he’d lived. Hearing a sound, he whirled around. Todd, Barge and Seamus stood behind him in their wolf forms. Michael placed a hand to his lip to quiet them. For his part, he wanted to ring their necks.

They were Pack now. They could be spoken to telepathically. *“Can you three not follow orders?”*

Todd snorted. *“You’re not our Alpha and besides, last night when Tristan swore us in he told us that the one thing he would ask was that we protect Pack first and foremost. Our pack needs our help, not our bodies hidden away where they can’t get hurt.”*

He wanted to argue, might have, if he didn’t also see Cullen approaching in the distance.

“The boy makes a good point.”

Damn it, Cullen wasn't going to support him.

"They wanted to be Pack, Michael. They swore an oath. Their Alpha needs them."

"Fine. There are five miscreant wolves there...and my father."

"I'll take your father," Cullen growled in his head.

Michael shook his head. *No, I will.*

He wasn't being macho. Out of the whole pack, Michael had been the only one to best him and walk away unscathed. He knew it and what's more Kendrick knew it.

"Cullen, as Royal member here, I order you to get these three bozos away when the fighting is done and to get Tristan to help."

He could hear Cullen mutter before he spoke. *"I am Tristan's top Enforcer."*

"You are but just an hour ago, he named me Keeper of the Pack until Braden comes of age. I don't want to be the Alpha. If you value Westervelt, get Tristan out of here."

Michael was done arguing. He moved forward in the direction of the black smoke. It burned his eyes and made his wolf want to vomit. They hadn't been able to replicate the stuff yet. Clearly, it had a sulfuric component. Not that knowing that particularly helped at the moment. He had to make it. He had to endure until he knew he was covered in it. The smoke hid him, hid his scent. The only way he could win was with an element of surprise.

Silently, he moved into position behind Kendrick. Once he was hidden he spoke. "Hello, Dad."

Kendrick jumped and whirled around. "Michael?"

"Glad to see you still recognize my voice. Maybe you'll recall some other things too."

Shifting, he leapt out of the dark smoke and onto his father's back. He made contact, biting down on his father's still human back for a moment before Kendrick called the shift onto himself and changed into his large wolf form. Still, he'd had the enormous pleasure of hearing the man scream before the fight started.

Around him, he heard the miscreant wolves begin to growl. They would pounce on him any second. As he knew they would, Cullen, Todd, Barge and Seamus attacked. Cullen could handle two of the "made" shifters himself. That meant Todd, Barge and Seamus would each be matched up one to one.

He hoped they could handle it. The magically created wolves were stronger than they should be thanks to their mystical enhancements.

That was his last thought as he ripped and tore at his father. Kendrick swiped at him, catching him in the eye and the blood that ran into his vision made it hard for him to see.

I want to kill him. His wolf growled, reaching for Kendrick's throat.

Behind him, he heard a yelp and a howl of pain. Using his back legs, he rolled fast and kicked his father in his underbelly. Kendrick bit back at him, catching Michael on the leg.

If this was a fight to the death, he wasn't going to be the one losing.

Michael wasn't sure how long the battle went on. He gained ground only to lose it. His father would press forward and he would manage to push him back. As a young wolf, Michael had beaten him. Now, however, it seemed that whatever supplemental magic Kendrick ingested on a regular basis made him harder to hit.

Still, Michael held on. He couldn't let Tristan down and he would walk through fire completely unprotected before he allowed anyone to harm his mate.

Behind him, Tristan groaned. "...off of me, Cullen, I'm not leaving this fight."

"You will, my Alpha. You have no choice." Cullen must have shifted back. Michael didn't care. His father had been momentarily distracted. Michael went for his neck. Making contact, he tore until he could taste Kendrick's blood.

Tristan growled. "By all that is holy, I have a choice."

As Michael went for a final rip at his father, sure that this would be the one to kill their former Alpha, Kendrick vanished beneath his grip. Michael fell forward hitting the ground with a thump.

What the hell happened? His wolf was not pleased to be denied the right to finish his enemy off.

Michael groaned and called his shift back on to him. The white light brought him back to his human form.

"Dad is such a coward. I had him. I had his throat in my mouth."

He could still taste his blood. Michael pounded the ground with his fists as he roared. It was intolerable.

When Tristan didn't answer, Michael whirled around. Standing in a group were Barge, Tristan, Cullen, and Seamus. Where was Todd? Michael's heart beat faster as he took two steps to reach the small group.

He looked down and knew instantly what the others must have already learned. Todd was dead.

Michael shut his eyes for a moment to collect himself. He was responsible for this. He should have found another way to get to his father. It had been useless anyway.

Someone grabbed his arm and he opened his eyes. It was Tristan. Half of his brother's face was covered in ash, he looked tired and blood ran fast from a gash on the side of his head. "This is not your fault. It's mine."

For a moment, Michael couldn't speak. When he finally could, his voice sounded hoarse. "I brought them here; I should have done a better job of explaining just how bad it is."

He heard Barge suck in his breath as he looked at them. "Don't do that." Barge shook his head. "You gave us everything. You came and rescued us. Todd—all of us—we'd gladly trade our lives for the few days of learning we had with you and the night of feeling the wholeness that comes from being in a true pack."

Tristan nodded. "Michael gives us what we need, even when we don't know we need it."

Why was Tristan always saying things like that? Michael shook his head. There weren't words for the conflicting emotions Michael felt. Horror and utter sadness at Todd's death, pride that his Alpha thought so highly of him. Michael did what he'd trained himself to do for years, he pushed it aside. He'd deal with it later. Cullen leaned over and picked up Todd's lifeless body.

"I'll take him back." Cullen took two steps forward and looked at Tristan. "Come, my Alpha, it's not safe yet. There are still miscreant wolves all over the place."

Cullen was right. Michael could hear the pack fighting. Tristan had to leave and Michael needed to go help them.

"Tristan, they need to be trained. Tomorrow might be too late." And so help him he wasn't losing any more of them to his father because they didn't know what they were doing.

“You’re right. We start tonight. Let’s round up what wolves we can and then Cullen—you take them out back and start the procedures.”

Cullen nodded. “Yes, my Alpha.”

Tristan staggered backward and Michael lunged forward. What was wrong?

“Tristan?”

“It’s the women, they’ve broken through the defenses to the women.”

Without another word, Michael shifted into his wolf form and took off running. He’d thought Scarlett safe. Opening up the telepathic link he’d closed off, he moved as fast as he could through the woods.

Blocking his path was one of his father’s wolves. Growling, he tore into it, ending its life in a matter of seconds as he continued to run.

“*Scarlett?*” He called through their telepathic link.

“*Michael, oh gods. Michael, they’re here.*”

Pushing himself even faster, he bounded out of the trees into the open path that would lead to their home.

“*I’m coming. We’re all coming.*”

Her voice laced with fear. “*Faith and Summer are fighting them back. They keep coming for the children. Ashlee and I have them. We can’t let them get to the children.*”

“*Just hold on, I’m coming.*”

She didn’t answer him and his heart fell to his stomach. Roaring, he tried to move even faster. His legs burned and his breath came out in gasps. His wolf had never moved this fast.

He tried to reassure himself that he would know if she was dead. He would know, because he would suddenly want to die too and would, in fact, follow her immediately. Tristan would have to win this war without him. Scarlett held half of his soul. He loved her and he would go wherever she went.

Pushing away the morose thoughts, he plunged through the door of the main house. He would know if she was dead, but hurt was another issue. Bounding down the entranceway to the stairs, he took them four at a time as he made his way to the safe room.

So much for thinking it could not be breached. It might be fireproof, but the rest of it was going to have to be reevaluated. Storming through the door, the room was in chaos.

The women fought alongside the men. Summer growled, taking down a wolf with two long slashes of a sword. Where was Scarlett? Too much noise assaulted his ears. He couldn’t hear her. It was time to follow his nose.

Pushing his nose to the floor, he ran in the direction of her scent. She was in the corner of the room. His niece, Virginia, hung onto her leg as she fought back a wolf still in her human form.

He gasped as he watched her pick up a chair over her head and smash it down on top of the wolf that attacked them. Pride filled his veins. That was his woman and she was doing a hell of a job improvising. Leaping forward, he took down her attacker quickly and efficiently. Turning back to view the room, he saw the miscreant wolves were all being subdued. Most were dead and Azriel was rounding up the survivors for testing.

Michael looked at Scarlett. In her tiny arms, she held his three-year-old niece. Murmuring reassuring words to the child, she looked down at him and smiled.

“Thank you for getting here so fast.”

"I'm not sure you needed me." He called the shift onto himself, returning to his human form. "That was a great move with the chair."

"I had to make do."

She seemed calm as she held the still crying Virginia, but he could tell from her eyes as they darted back and forth that she hung on to her demeanor by a tiny thread.

"Let me take her." Michael held out his arms and let Scarlett hand him Virginia. The child was a perfect combination of Tristan and Ashlee with her red hair and Tristan's former brown eye color. But then again he thought all of the babies born to the pack were perfect. The child sniffled as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Uncle Mike's got you."

With his free hand, he pulled Scarlett up against his side. "I bet you never thought you could fight back."

"When they came at the children, all of a sudden I was capable."

He nodded. "Even the Beta wolves step up when the little ones are threatened. You did well. You should be proud of yourself."

"When I stop shaking, I will be. Thanks."

For his part, he might never sleep again thinking of how close he had come to losing her to one of his father's creations, but he wasn't going to mention that to her.

Across the room, Faith shifted back, having finished off the last wolf. Jumping from foot to foot, she hollered with delight. "I got it. Did you see that, Theo? Did you see how quickly I took it down?"

Theo raised an eye at Faith. "I saw it, dearest. Now if you could have managed to do it without giving me three different kinds of heart attacks, I might have preferred it."

Faith laughed, which made Michael snicker. "Sheesh, you're getting old."

Doing a quick headcount, he was relieved to see everyone was there. Everyone but one, actually. Walking toward Ashlee, he handed her Virginia as he smiled at Elizabeth and Braden. They were shaken up but, he hated to admit it, the children had actually gotten used to the attacks.

With each incident, they bounced back faster to their usual jovial moods.

His wolf spoke to him. *They'll get their wolves early. Already, their canines want to protect them.*

Michael nodded. He'd never been entirely sure how the magic that gave them the wolves worked and if he asked his wolf, he got strange answers he couldn't follow. Maybe that was part of it, maybe he'd never know. Still, he needed to ask one more question on the subject.

When Todd died, did his wolf go with him? Or did he go to someone else?

His wolf snorted and lay down to go to sleep. Apparently, he wasn't going to be informed on that subject today.

Kissing the top of Scarlett's head, he knew he was a very lucky man. He still had to tell her what had happened and he couldn't promise her it would never happen again.

"Todd died in the woods helping us get Tristan back."

She gasped as her eyes filled up with tears. "Not when he'd finally learned what being a wolf shifter truly meant."

"It's awful." There weren't words for his level of sadness. Still, there was something he had to do. "Come with me." Squeezing her hand, he pulled her from the room. Tristan was going to want to have a meeting to go over what happened and the conversation he

needed to have with Scarlett would determine if he went.

Finally, finding a quiet spot, he stopped walking and leaned down to kiss her. She was soft and smelled so much like home to him some of the tension he'd been holding lessened in his shoulders. He couldn't relax completely, not yet. Not until they talked.

"What just happened happens a lot these days. Dad has raged a full-on assault against us. Probably because we took the fight to him a few too many times."

She nodded, her eyebrows slanting downwards as if she was confused by what he spoke about.

He continued. "This will be our life here until it isn't anymore." He swallowed. "Unless you want to leave. For you I will go anywhere. Run for the rest of my life to keep you safe, if that's what you need."

Scarlett's eyes widened. "Michael, what I need is you and what you need is here. There's no pack here without you. This is my home too. We'll defend it together. Kendrick's not going to win. Not now. He can't."

Leaning down he kissed her again. "I may need you to remind me of that a few thousand times."

She laughed. "No you won't."

For a Beta wolf, she sounded decidedly sure of herself, which he loved. In fact, as he thought of it, he loved everything about his mate, Scarlett Kane. He might be the Alpha in their relationship, but he was happy to let her be in charge of their lives.

Forever.

In this life and the next one.

The End

About the Author:

As a teenager, Rebecca would hide in her room to read her favorite romance novels when she was supposed to be doing her homework. She hopes that these days, her parents think it was worth it.

She is the mother of three adorable boys, and she is fortunate to be married to her best friend. They live in northern New Jersey and try not to freeze too badly during the winter months.

A hardcore fan of science fiction, fantasy, and the paranormal, Rebecca tries to use all of these elements in her writing. She's been told she's a little bloodthirsty so she hopes that when you read her work you'll enjoy the action-packed ride that always ends in romance. In her world, anything is possible, anything can happen, and you should suspect it probably will.

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