

Dedication

To my mom who, like me, suffers from migraines.

To my dad, who gets to suffer through my mother having a migraine. Trust me; it's no more fun for the family than it is for the sufferer.

To Dusty, who's helped me figure out what my triggers are and how to avoid them. Yanking the roast beef sandwich out of my hand and eating it yourself was such a sacrifice. I know you're still not over the pain.

And to everyone else out there who, like me, has suffered through what Dave does, you have my sympathy.

Prologue

Benjamin Malone shivered in the dark, praying no one would find him. If they did, they might “help” him, and the last thing Ben needed was the Pack’s form of help. Because if they found him, the first thing they’d do would be to return him to his father.

“Benny?”

He held still, praying, hoping Steve would just go away. Steven Hoode was his best friend. He knew all about Ben’s father, knew about the drinking binges, the fights, the emotional blackmail. The fists that left behind bruises no one else could see.

He always wondered why the Alpha didn’t do something about his father. He had to know what was going on! Or the Marshall, the Alpha’s enforcer, the one who felt the physical well-being of the entire Pack; how could the man feel what was going on and not *do* something? The Omega felt the emotional state of the Pack members; why didn’t he make it stop?

But no one helped him. No one cared except a few friends his own age. The entire Pack turned a blind eye to his father’s blows, the drunken rampages. Walter Malone was careful to keep his drinking to himself, hiding it from others, but there was no way in hell he was hiding it from the Pack leaders. Which, to Ben, meant they didn’t give a shit about the teenager hiding in the trees.

He thanked God every day that his parents only had one child. He couldn’t even imagine what it would have been like if his father had someone younger than him to hurt. Someone weaker. Someone Ben couldn’t protect. Hell, up until her death his mother hadn’t been able to protect herself. If the cancer hadn’t taken her, his father would have. Trying to protect someone when he could barely protect himself would have been a nightmare.

“C’mon, Benny. They’re headed this way.”

Shit. If his father found him cowering in the trees like a little girl he’d beat the shit out of him again. He might be a drunk, but his father was damn strong and still a lot bigger than Ben. Ben dropped to the ground, close to where he knew Steve was hiding.

“Let’s go.”

Steve. The full-human boy who lived not too far down the mountain, the one he wasn’t supposed to be friends with. The one who knew nothing of Packs and Alphas and men who turned into Wolves. If the Alpha found out he’d let a human onto Pack lands his father would be the least of his worries. The Alpha might even go so far as to Outcast him, turn him out into the world without his Pack.

He’d rather suffer the beatings than that. To be Outcast was the worst form of punishment, forever cut off from the voice of the Alpha, the warmth of the Pack. Forever alone. He’d be a target for anyone from the shifter world who wanted a toy to play with or something to beat on just for the hell of it.

At least here he had hope that someday, when a new Alpha took over the Pack, he’d be safe.

Ben grabbed Steve’s hand and started running. Ben was even more terrified now that Steve was here. The Alpha could do serious damage to both of them if he caught them, and if he did catch them Steve probably wouldn’t survive. The Alpha firmly believed that humans and shifters should remain separated at all times no matter the circumstances. Anyone caught infringing on his rule would suffer the consequences. They’d probably never even find Steve’s body.

If Rick were here he’d help Ben hide the boy. Rick didn’t share his grandfather’s views on Pack life, but Rick wasn’t here. He was housebound, grounded for a week for trying to stand up to his grandfather. Ben had been proud of him. Someday, that scary redhead was going to challenge the Alpha, and Ben had every intention of standing right at his side when he did.

“Ben?”

Ben froze. Oh God. Oh no. He recognized that voice. He couldn’t be here if the Alpha caught them. Ben couldn’t protect him. “Go away, Dave!”

Dave Maldonado, fifteen years old and tempting as sin, stepped out from behind a bush. His light brown hair glittered in the moonlight like it was dusted with gold. His startling amber eyes were wide. He stared at the hand Ben had clamped around Steve’s, his own hands clenching. When the boy grew into those hands he was going to be huge. “What’s going on?”

Ben didn’t want to drag Dave into this. The kid wasn’t ready to face Ben’s dad, let alone the Alpha. “Go away.” He tightened his grip on Steve’s hand, ignoring the way his gut clenched at the thought of someone hurting Dave.

Dave’s gaze rose to his, the pain in them worrying Ben. “Where are you going?”

“Far away from here,” Steve muttered. He looked behind him. “Can we chat later, ladies?”

Ben jerked. He could hear the pursuit behind them, knew they had seconds before the others caught wind of them. “Gotta run. Listen, don’t tell anyone you saw us, okay?”

“But—”

“Dave!” Ben took a deep breath. “Don’t tell *anyone*.”

Dave nodded and rubbed at his forehead. “Yeah. Sure. No problem.”

And Ben took off, dragging his best friend behind him and leaving behind the boy he knew would someday be his mate.

Chapter One

“Mmm. That’s so good. Don’t stop, baby. Please don’t ever stop.”

Dave reached down and dug his fingers into the short, ebony strands. Wet heat surrounded his cock, damn near swallowing him whole. He resisted the urge to thrust up into the warm, willing mouth wrapped around him. He didn’t want to be too rough, was afraid he might cause damage to the man currently sucking him down.

He would never hurt his mate.

Strong fingers reached around and toyed with Dave’s balls, his mate’s nearly black eyes dancing wickedly. Dave thought he’d died and gone to heaven. He groaned, the tingle in his balls stronger now. He was close. So fucking close he could taste it. Tingling sparks of pure pleasure raced down his spine.

“Gonna.” That was all he could get out, his brain having short-circuited the minute that wet mouth hit his prick.

His mate nodded, his tongue stroking the head of Dave’s cock. He sucked on Dave’s cock like it was the last piece of man candy in the world and he was determined to get a piece.

Dave exploded into his mate’s mouth, the pleasure so intense he damn near blacked out. His whole body clenched as wave after wave of pure delight streamed from him into Ben Malone.

RING.

Dave stroked the dark fall of hair away from deep, almost black eyes and smiled. His mate’s lips parted, glistening, plump from the suction he’d had on Dave’s cock.

RING.

He frowned. What the fuck?

Ben’s brows rose, and his mouth opened once more. Inside, his tongue had become a cell phone.

RING.

Dave bolted upright, his sheets sticky, his body still heaving from the best orgasm he could ever remember having. He picked up his cell phone, took one look at the caller ID and threw it across the room. Whatever it was, Rick could wait. Dave was battling the mother of all headaches and wasn’t in the mood for much more than sleep.

Fuck it. He’d rather dream than live in reality anyway.

In dreams, he got to have his mate. He didn’t have to see the scorn in Ben’s eyes or hear the disgust in his voice when he spoke to Dave. Why fate had seen fit to give him a mate who hated him Dave didn’t know. Life would be so much easier if Ben’s mate had been that fucker Steve, the full-human he was always around.

Then maybe Dave could have found someone of his own and these migraines would never have been.

Dave lifted away the sheet and stepped out of bed. It was time to face the day, damn it. Rick was coming back from his trip to Halle, and Dave had to be there to greet his Alpha. The headache was building again, slowly ramping up. He could feel it beating behind his eyes in time to his heartbeat. Soon the nausea would rise, and Dave would be useless. He just hoped Rick arrived sooner rather than later.

Dave just wanted to go back to painless dreaming.

He showered and dressed in the dim light of his cabin. When he came out, a text message waited for him on his cell. The Alpha would arrive in the next thirty minutes, and he wanted Dave’s ass on the front porch of the Red Wolf Lodge, ready to report on the last week. Dave threw on his light jacket and dark sunglasses and headed for the main lodge. He hid his wince when he saw who waited for him. Ben, the Pack’s Marshall, stood with his arms crossed, glaring at Dave. Chela, the Pack Omega, winced in sympathy.

It was nice to know one of them was on his side. “Morning, Chela. Ben.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Dave wasn’t surprised by the barely veiled contempt on Ben’s face, a sight he had become all too familiar with when they were alone. He sighed, resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. But that would move his sunglasses, and he just couldn’t handle the pain that would hit him if he did. It was a cloudless spring day, the sun bright and shiny and full of stabbing daggers dying to bury themselves in his eyes.

Ben rolled his eyes. “Headache again?”

“Yeah.” Dave hoped, just *once*, that the man who was meant to be his mate would be sympathetic.

“Hmm” Ben’s lips pinched together in disapproval. He turned away, staring at the driveway. “Rick and Belle should be arriving any moment now.”

“Any itchiness, Marshall?” Dave folded his arms, ignoring the stabbing pain of the early spring light. If his Alpha didn’t arrive soon Dave was going to be in no shape to brief him. Ben’s attitude wasn’t helping, either. The coolness between them had returned quickly after Belle had arrived and settled in, much to Dave’s dismay. More than once he’d tried to get the other man to open up about why he was always so distant. Not once had Ben deigned to answer him.

He had to face it. His mate hated him, and he had no idea why. Not even Chela, the Omega, could figure out the source of the contempt Ben showered on him. All she could say was it was very personal. Just because you could feel someone’s emotions didn’t mean you understood *why* they felt them.

“Nope. They’re safe.”

“That’s good.” Dave sniffed. Damn, he couldn’t wait to get out of here. He had two weeks’ vacation coming up, and damn if he wasn’t looking forward to a little down time. He had all his plans in place. Fuck Ben Malone. Dave was going to enjoy himself if it killed him. And he knew just the person to help him too.

But he just had to try one last time to get through to Ben. If he could get the man to talk to him, maybe he could find out why Ben avoided him like the plague. “The fall crowd is pretty tame this year.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Spring looks to be busy, though. The lodge is full through June.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Dave sighed. The man plain refused to talk to him. Enough was enough. Ben had been avoiding him ever since Rick and Belle left for Halle to visit Belle’s doctor. Dave, as acting Alpha, needed to coordinate with the Marshall, Marshall’s Second and Omega. That meant that Ben’s avoidance could be construed as a challenge. Dave chose not to see it that way at first, but now he wasn’t so sure. Rick and Belle had been gone for a week and Ben had been less than cooperative. “Ben.”

“Hmm?”

“Until Ted gets here with Rick and Belle I’m still acting Alpha.” Ted, the Marshall’s Second and Ben’s right hand man, had gone with Rick and Belle in Ben’s stead.

For some obscure reason Ben had requested to stay behind with the Pack and Rick had agreed. "You need to respect that."

Ben frowned. "Why the hell should I? You don't."

Dave blinked at the low growl in Ben's voice. "Excuse me?"

"Why the hell do you think I stayed behind?" Ben sighed. "Look, I don't know what the fuck Rick was thinking appointing you Beta, but we both know it was a huge mistake."

Mistake? He could feel his power shifting inside him, his wolf unhappy at his mate's words, the innate Alpha within him stirring at the blatant challenge. Betas, like Alphas and Marshalls and the rest of the hierarchy of the pack, weren't picked, they were born that way. Ben of all people had to know that. "Explain yourself."

Ben winced. "Can we talk about this later? Rick and Belle will be here any minute now."

Ben had been saying that for years. Some form of *Can we talk about it later?* had passed his lips ever since Dave had turned seventeen and let it be known he was ready to mate him. Well, Dave was twenty-four now and damn sick and tired of Ben wanting to wait. He let some of the power that was his seep from him, demanding an answer from the Marshall. "No. We'll discuss this *now*."

Ben looked startled before his head bowed down in deference to the display Dave was using. If he knew exactly how strong Dave was he would probably be shocked. Most Betas didn't have the strength that was an Alpha's, and there was only one reason Dave *wasn't* an Alpha. The fucking headaches made it impossible for him to be effective leading a Pack for more than short stints. Being Beta to Rick was the perfect solution, and one his wolf was more than happy with.

But if Ben didn't knock off challenging him, he wouldn't be able to hold back. The wolf would force Benjamin Malone to bow down and offer his neck to Dave whether the human wanted it or not.

"You're a fucking drunk. How can Rick trust the Pack to you?"

Dave reeled. What the *fuck*? "I am not."

Ben sneered at him. "You're hung over right now."

What? Where the hell was this coming from? "No, I'm not!"

"Oh hell, Dave, you've been drunk off and on since you were fifteen."

Dave's eyes widened behind his sunglasses. That's when the headaches had started, when he'd known he'd never be a real Alpha. He shook his head, trying to dispute the accusation rising in Ben's eyes.

"You think I don't know all about it? I'm the goddamn Marshall. I can fucking *feel* it, pounding in my brain. You think you can hide that from me, of all people? You, asshole, have the mother of all hangovers. I'm surprised you're not heaving in a toilet right now."

Dave felt the nausea ratchet up, the bile tickling the back of his throat. Ben really *did* hate him. He hadn't even bothered to ask Dave about the headaches before, just assumed he knew why Dave suffered from them.

Dave rarely drank. The last time Dave had gotten hammered had been at the party celebrating the mating of his Alpha and Luna, Rick and Belinda Lowell, and that had been over a year ago. The only reason he'd allowed it that night was because Ben had once again been avoiding him. He'd drunk nothing but soda at the Halloween party, and he was still avoiding red wine like the plague. A mojito or a beer once in a while did not make a man a drunk.

And thanks to their newfound alliance with the Halle Pumas, the source of Dave's headaches was finally being narrowed down. Their doctor, Jamie Howard, was delighted to be able to work with other shifters. Dave had been seeing him for about six months, at first under Rick's orders but now on his own.

Too bad the medication Dr. Howard had prescribed wasn't working this time. If the headache got much worse he'd need a ride to the hospital.

Dave wasn't a drunk, but how to let Ben know what was really going on without making it sound like an excuse? He hadn't understood the source of his pain before. If asked, he couldn't have told Ben much beyond how horrible the pain was, how he wished just once that Ben would help him when the floating lights came, when sound itself became a hammer beating against his flesh.

His head pounded, the pain so intense he wanted nothing more but to lie down in the dark and wait to die. He rubbed his forehead and held back a moan. Yeah. The hospital was definitely his first stop once Rick and Belle arrived. This was shaping up to be the worst migraine he'd ever experienced.

Ben made a disgusted noise and turned back to the driveway, his brows furrowed in an attempt to ignore the pain. Being Marshall meant that Ben could feel whenever one of the Pack members was hurting, which meant he'd felt every single one of Dave's headaches and had ignored them, choosing to believe his mate was an alcoholic rather than just talking to him to find out the truth.

God, he had to get away from here before he did something epically stupid, like grab the man, bend him to his will through force and mark him whether he liked it or not. A huge source of Dave's stress would be relieved at that point, but he was certain that solution would just lead to a different kind of stress. One he might not be able to live with.

Forcing his mark on a man who held him in contempt would be tantamount to rape. Dave would rather run from the Pack, an Outcast, than do that.

No. He'd go away for a while, figure things out on his own and decide what he was going to do. One thing was certain. Nothing would ever be the same again.

The huge SUV Rick used for Pack purposes finally made an appearance at the end of the drive. Dave closed his eyes, praying that Belle and Rick would take pity on him. He needed to go, and soon. The pain in his head mirrored the pain in his heart. At least he now had an idea why Ben wanted nothing to do with him, but his head hurt too badly to really think about it.

"Dave?" He opened his eyes to find Chela, the Pack Omega, standing in front of him. She'd pushed Ben out of the way, her small frame belying the inner core of strength she possessed. "You need to go inside."

Ben snorted. "Yeah. Run inside, Dave."

Chela turned on him, a fierce mother Wolf protecting her pup. "Fuck off, Ben."

Ben blinked, shocked. "What?"

"Dave, get your ass back in the house. And Ben, just get lost. *Now*."

"You don't give me orders!"

Dave moaned, unable to stop himself. Ben could shout almost as loud as Rick when he wanted to.

"In this instance? Yes. I do. This concerns *my* bailiwick and you're stepping all over it." As Omega she was in charge of the emotional and psychic well-being of the Pack, which meant she knew all about the heartache and frustration he constantly lived with. She was one of only a few who fully understood how broken Dave's heart was. "Now get your ass gone, *cabrón*."

If Dave had it in him he would have laughed. Chela didn't break out the Spanish curses very often, but when she did the rest of them tended to pay attention. The Omega was rapidly losing patience with the Marshall, and if he didn't listen to her Ben would be dealing with more than one kind of headache. She was more than capable of teaching him the error of his ways. Calling him a bastard was just a warning; soon she'd break out the big guns. Whatever happened to her victim when she did that, Dave didn't want to ever experience. He'd seen the results from the outside more than once and had no desire to find out what it was she did to them.

Ben darted a glance at him but he barely acknowledged it. Why should he? The remorse he saw there would soon be replaced with contempt again, and Dave was tired of facing that day in and day out. Even so, some innate part of him, the one that still, despite everything, refused to give up hope, pushed his mate to obey so the

Omega would have no reason to punish him.

“Go.” He pushed, using his powers, forcing Ben to move. He’d pay for it—oh how he’d pay for it—but if he had to look at Ben one more moment he’d either punch the other man or start crying. Or worse, Chela would follow through in her implied threat, something Dave didn’t want to live with.

He couldn’t bear to see his mate truly hurt. Better to force his will on him this way than have him face some nightmare only he could see.

Ben hissed in pain, his shoulders hunched, his fists clenched in his hair. “Dave?” The look of pure shock and dismay on his face would stay with Dave for a long time.

Chela’s eyes narrowed as Ben fought his Beta’s order.

“GO!” Dave roared, pouring all his power into the command. The vicious pounding in his head increased to unbearable levels as he forced the Marshall to do his bidding.

Ben went, running. *Thank God.*

Dave collapsed, vomiting on the steps, his whole body wracked with spasms so strong he pissed himself while he heaved. That was how his Alpha found him, on his knees and in so much pain he was blinded by it.

They settled him into the SUV without a word and started back down the mountain.

Chapter Two

“How is he?” Ben didn’t even look up at the doorway to his office, guilt riding him with red-hot spurs. He hadn’t been able to force himself to go to the hospital to see Dave. He knew what he’d find there. Hell, he’d seen his father in that position often enough. There’d be excuses and tears, maybe a lot of anger, but no real change.

Alcoholics never changed, not until they acknowledged what they were.

Still, it hurt something deep inside to know his mate hurt that badly and there was nothing he could do about it.

“I want to see you in my office, Ben.”

Ben blanched. Rick’s voice was lethal. He looked up to find icy blue eyes fixed on him, the tension in his Alpha’s muscles all too apparent. Rick was spoiling for a fight and looking at his Marshall like he was the punching bag. “Yes, sir.” Ben put his pen down and followed Rick into the Alpha’s office. He stopped short when he saw Chela, Ted, Belle and Jamie Howard, the Halle Puma’s doctor, seated in the room. “Rick?”

Rick moved to his desk but kept his back to Ben. *Not good.* “If this wasn’t a mate thing I’d be Outcasting you right now.”

Ben’s knees shook. Outcast? Him? What the hell? “May I ask why?”

Rick’s fist slammed down on the desk as he turned on his Marshall. “WHY?” Ben flinched. “My best friend and Beta is in the hospital because of you, and it’s not the first time!”

Something, the indefinable *it* that made Ben the Poconos Pack Marshall, cracked under the lash of Rick’s anger. From the widening of Rick’s eyes he felt it too, felt that first tentative break in the Alpha-Marshall relationship. Ted gasped, his Second also feeling a minute break in *their* relationship.

Ben was terrified for more than his mate now. If Rick Outcast him, nothing would save him. The Pack was all that kept him sane in the face of his mate’s addiction.

“Rick, allow me.”

Ben swallowed. Belle, the Poconos Luna, was smiling at him with that inane, vacuous look that meant she was contemplating something mean and probably painful. Her blonde hair was mussed, like she’d been running her hands through the thick, shoulder-length mass. Her green eyes were blank and sparkling.

He was in for a world of hurt. When Belle looked this innocent heads rolled. Or wished they’d rolled. His eyes automatically scanned her hands, searching for the air horn she usually carried.

Rick glared at him before nodding. He remained standing, all of his attention centered on Ben and Belle. His shoulders were tensed as if . .

Fuck. He thinks I’m going to hurt Belle. What the hell was going on?

“Ben?” Seemingly delicate fingers snapped in front of his face, but Ben knew better. Those fingers could grow into sharp claws in an instant. “Look at me, Benny.”

Ben turned his attention to his Luna. Belinda “Belle” Lowell was arguably the most dangerous member of the Pack, and she wasn’t even Wolf. She was a Puma, and a former member of the Halle Pride. She limped toward him, the tap-tap-tap of her cane loud in the otherwise silent room. “You’ve been a very naughty boy, Benny.”

Ben saw movement behind the Luna. Rick was handing everyone but him earplugs.

Oh, crap.

Belle patted his cheek, her claws out enough that he could feel the sharp tips. “Someone I care about is very sick, and you did this to him.”

He felt compelled to answer. This wasn’t the first time he’d felt the blame for someone else’s alcoholism. “He’s the only one who can stop drinking, Belle. I can’t force him to.”

Everyone in the room froze. From the stunned, even astonished looks on everyone’s faces, apparently they didn’t know Dave was an alcoholic.

“*WHAT?*” Rick roared. Ben’s eyes crossed. Damn, his Alpha was loud. “Dave is not a drunk!”

Denial. He’d seen it before in loved ones, but he knew better. “Rick, he’s hung over a *lot*.”

Belle’s eyes were narrowed. Fury rode her features. “Have you smelled alcohol on his breath?”

“No.” Because he never allowed himself to get close enough. If he did he was afraid he’d shake the man. God, how could Dave do that to himself? To *Ben*? It was better to just stay away.

“When was the last time you saw Dave with an alcoholic drink?” He opened his mouth to respond, but Belle stopped him. “And I mean you were one hundred percent, no way to confuse Coke for rum and Coke, positive.”

He realized he didn’t know for certain, other than the night of the Alpha pair’s mating celebration over a year ago. But as she’d said, it was so easy to hide alcohol in something much more innocuous looking. Hell, his father had been a master, a fucking virtuoso at hiding his drinking. “I don’t know.”

“Belle, hold on. Maybe it would help if I explained a few things to him.” Finally, the one person in the room he’d be able to relate to. Dr. Howard took a step forward, placing a hand on Belle’s shoulder. “If it comes from me he might be able to understand it a little bit better, especially if he’s been laboring under the delusion that Dave’s an alcoholic.”

Ben gaped at the doctor. He had the sinking feeling that the foundation of his world was about to be rocked to its core. “What’s going on?”

“David Maldonado does not suffer from alcoholism. In fact, his condition is exacerbated by the consumption of alcoholic beverages.”

Everything within Ben froze in horror. Condition.

Condition?

“What’s wrong with my mate?”

Belle laughed, the sound harsh. “Oh, so *now* he’s your mate.”

He closed his eyes. He deserved that. If Dave’s headaches were caused by something other than what he’d thought . . . if all the different ways he’d shoved the man away had actually made things *worse*, the way Rick had implied . . . he deserved a lot more than the Luna’s scorn. “Doc?”

“Do you know what a migraine is?”

“A migraine?” Ben frowned. Is that all that was wrong with Dave? “It’s a bad headache.”

The doctor sighed. “Yeah. That’s what most people think and, in typical cases, they’d be right.” He settled on the edge of Rick’s desk, his hands on either side of his hips. His blond hair gleamed in the light streaming in from the window behind him, giving him a halo effect. “Migraines are a lot more common in women than in men, and people who don’t suffer from them think they’re just headaches. Sometimes they even misdiagnose the problem and think they’re sinus headaches when they’re actually migraines. Those are the ones that are the most common. What Dave suffers from goes a lot deeper than that.”

Ben gestured toward the empty chair in front of Rick’s desk, relieved when his Alpha nodded his consent. It was either sit on the chair or collapse on the floor. “I’ve

felt what Dave feels, and they're more than 'just' headaches."

"David suffers from unusually bad migraines, the kind you hear about and wonder how someone can live through them. Left untreated they can lead to much more serious problems."

Ben felt the blood drain from his face. He'd felt the migraines, known the pain Dave was in. "You said I made them worse."

Jamie nodded. "Yeah. Stress is one of Dave's triggers."

Triggers. Like Ben had shot him. "What other things trigger Dave's migraines?"

"Sodium nitrates seem to be one of the main culprits. Hot dogs, lunchmeat, red wine—they all contain sodium nitrates. Dave can't eat them at all or he runs the risk of getting sick."

Ben nodded. He'd see to it that Dave never touched another fucking hot dog as long as he lived. "What else?"

"We're not sure. Even eliminating most of the sodium nitrates from his diet doesn't seem to have lessened the severity of the migraines. Common triggers can be controllable things, like reducing stress levels, avoiding certain foods like alcohol and aspartame. Or they can be uncontrollable, like weather changes. With the severity of Dave's migraines the most we can hope for is to reduce their frequency and the intensity with which they strike. All I know for certain is he's got to be under more stress than he's letting on."

Ben felt that right down to his soul. "Which means it's my fault he's in the hospital right now." He'd done more than stress the Beta out. He'd essentially pointed the gun at Dave's head and pulled that particular trigger.

"Damn straight," Rick growled.

Ben accepted that. He closed his eyes, the pain of what he'd forced his mate to suffer washing through him. "This has been going on since he was fifteen?" When the doctor nodded again Ben damn near moaned like a wounded animal. "When can I see him?" He had a lot of making up to do. It would serve him right if Dave wanted nothing more to do with him. He'd treated the man like shit for all the wrong reasons, when he should have been trying to help him through his suffering.

Damn it. Once again the memory of his father had tainted something that was supposed to be good. How could he have been so stupid?

"Dave doesn't want you at the hospital, and I agree with him." Ben accepted the doctor's words. He'd have to wait until Dave returned to begin making amends. "You could inadvertently add to the stress. Right now I've got him on tranquilizers, pain relievers and anti-nausea medication, and we're monitoring him due to the increased risk of stroke. He's been rehydrated intravenously."

Thank God he was sitting down, because he was shaking so badly there was no way his legs could have held him. "What do you mean, stroke?" His voice was shaking. Holy hell, this was a lot more serious than Rick and Belle had let on.

"Dave's official diagnosis is *status migrainosus*. The blood vessels in his brain are dilated, which increases the risk of stroke."

He put his head between his knees. In about two seconds he'd be joining his mate in the hospital.

"We've got things under control but I don't need his treatment disrupted. He's calm, the pain is manageable and he's conscious."

"Are you sure I can't see him?" If anything happened to Dave (*anything more*, his conscience growled) he'd never forgive himself.

"He specifically requested that you be kept away." Ben winced, his wolf howling in despair. "I'm sorry, but you two aren't mated. From what I understand you've denied the mating several times already."

"My father was an alcoholic. A rotten one. I thought..." He sighed. "It doesn't matter what I thought. I should have known."

"You should have asked." Rick sat behind the desk, the fury gone from his face, replaced by concern. Rick was one of the few who knew about Ben's childhood. One of Rick's first official acts as Alpha had been to Outcast Walter Malone.

Ben could already feel the soothing balm of Rick's acceptance, knew the Alpha had begun to forgive him. The way Belle was studying him, he knew he'd have more explaining to do to the Luna and the rest of the Pack leaders. How would he explain to them about the hell his father had put him through? There were few scars on his skin, but there were more than enough scars on his soul.

"We've been doing what we can to keep Dave healthy, but you need to stop pushing him."

"Yeah. I get that." He scrubbed the back of his head before sitting up. "What's his treatment going to be? How do we get this under control other than diet and stress reduction?"

The doc shook his head. "I can't share that with you."

"Because he told you not to?"

"Because you're not his mate, so doctor-patient privilege applies."

Ben took a deep breath and leashed the growling wolf within. "I'll be rectifying that situation as soon as possible."

"No. You won't." Rick leaned forward. "The doc said no stress, so I'm telling you. You will *not* stress out my Beta any more than you already have. I find out you've pushed anything on him or forced him into something, and I swear to God I will Outcast you so fast you'll bounce down the mountain."

Ben swallowed hard. Each and every person in the room blamed him for what was happening to Dave. Including himself. "The headaches started when he was fifteen. Why has it taken so long to figure out what's wrong with him?"

Rick leaned back with a sigh. "You remember how much of an isolationist my grandfather was." Rick's grandfather, the old Alpha, had been unwilling to even discuss going outside the Pack for anything. Maybe if Rick's father had lived it would have been different. Rumor had it Roger Lowell could talk his father into just about anything. But Roger and his mate had died in a car accident while Rick was still a baby, and Rick's grandfather had completely closed the Pack off from the outside world. "He thought simply shifting back and forth would solve Dave's problems. No way he'd let Dave go see a doctor no matter how much Dave's folks pleaded with him. Hell, I got punished more than once for trying to get the old man to relent. He was convinced channeling his wolf would fix everything that was wrong with Dave."

It hadn't. The headaches had grown worse over the years. That was one of the reasons Ben had been so certain they were hangovers. That and the fact that he'd caught the man drunk on a few occasions. Thinking back he realized he could count on the fingers of one hand the times Dave must have *truly* been drunk. Could those strange, floaty times when Dave's head pounded and he seemed so disconnected have been associated with the migraines?

"Now that we have access to a doctor we're finding out more and more about what's wrong with him. It never occurred to me to take the man's hot dogs away." Rick winced, because Dave did love his hot dogs. Come summertime you could find him with one in his hand and a can of soda in the other, laughing and having a good time.

Despite everything Ben had done to shove Dave away the other Wolf had remained a decent human being, playful and fun-loving. He'd caught Dave's wistful looks, the longing there plain to see, but he'd turned away from it over and over again.

No more. Dave was his mate, and he was hurting, and it was past time for Ben to do something about it.

"That's all I can tell you without permission." Jamie shrugged. "Until the two of you resolve your mating issues, there's nothing more I can do."

"And I'm telling you to stay the fuck away from him until the migraines are under control. Got it?" Rick glared at Ben again. "In fact, I'm thinking I might send you into New York for a few days. The Coyotes want to negotiate a pass-through treaty and I'm inclined to send you and Chela to deal with it."

A pass-through treaty would grant each Pack the right to enter the other's territory without the need to stop and make nice. It would mean more Coyotes spending time at the lodge, even becoming regular customers if it worked out. It also meant that Ben would more than likely be gone until after Dave came home and had a chance to settle in. It would also give everyone's temper a chance to settle down.

As plans went, it wasn't a bad one. The urge to go to his mate's side despite the doctor's warnings and Rick's threats was damn near overwhelming. Having the time to come up with a way to make things up to his mate would be appreciated, and knowing he was earning back his Alpha's approval would calm his wolf. "I'll go." He stood, his hands shaking. "But you have to promise me that all bets are off if Dave is in any danger."

"Ben—"

"No." He glared at his Alpha, who snarled back. "If it was Belle, what would you do?"

"I did what was right."

Ben's jaw clenched. Rick *had* done what he'd thought was right, leaving his wounded Luna in Halle despite the fact that the mating hadn't been completed. Belle had needed her own doctors and the hospital in Halle to heal the damage she'd received defending a Pridemate from a stalker. Now that the Halle Pride leaders had agreed to allow the Pack to use their facilities, Rick could allow his Packmates to go back and forth to see one of the few shifter doctors in the area. Hell, with the coming treaties with the New York Coyote Pack, odds were they'd have access to more and better facilities than even Halle had. Ben bet the Halle Pride would have their own representatives talking to the Coyotes. Cats might be lazy by nature, but Max Cannon, the Pride's Alpha, wasn't one to let grass grow under his feet.

Ben eyed Belle. "Will Max have anyone at these talks?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. He doesn't inform me of his plans." She smirked. "But he does know to keep your ass away from Dave."

Of course he did. Belle and the Halle Puma Curana, Emma, were friends. Ben resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I give you my word, I will not approach Dave until he's returned from the hospital. I won't give you any promises beyond that."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Ben."

"No. It's the best we can hope for." Rick's hand slid across Belle's hip. "It was what I could promise you, after all."

She shook her head, but Ben knew the memory of her mate's claiming had soothed her. Rick had marked her within an hour of her arrival at the Red Wolf Lodge, making her both Pride and Pack. He'd then handed her Lowell's Restaurant, the Lodge's steak house, to manage, fulfilling her dreams of owning and operating her own restaurant.

"Ben? Go pack. You're out of here as of tomorrow morning. You too, Chela. And don't fuck this up. It could mean big things for both the Lodge and the Pack. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Sure thing, boss." Ben sighed and left the room. He debated going back to his office, but fuck it. He was taking the rest of the day off to pack and plan. Watching his Alpha with his Luna never failed to cause him pain and pride. Pride, because Belle really *was* the best Luna, despite her feline handicap, the Pack had ever had. Pain, because he didn't think he could have that kind of closeness with his own goofy mate. The man was a perfect foil for Rick's stern Alpha persona. People spoke to the Beta in a way they did not with the Alpha, more comfortable with Dave's easy-going ways and hidden strength. Everyone revered the Alpha pair, but they all *adored* Dave.

Even him.

He remembered one of the few times he'd allowed his guard down around the Beta. They'd been bringing Belle home to Rick, her wounded hip still bothering her from what he could tell. She'd been in therapy for months before the Pride doctors had released her for what she called Lunatic duty.

He snorted, amused, and threw on his lightweight suede jacket. He could still hear the sound of Dave's laughter, his jokes, even his taunts. He strode out of the main lodge and headed for the back cabins reserved for "employees". Little did the paying customers know that these cabins were the nicest homes in the area.

Belle had tried not to laugh as the lodge's sign came into view. "Red Wolf Ski Lodge and Spa, hmm?"

Ben had grinned, still tickled by the name Rick's great-grandfather had picked for the place. Talk about throwing their presence in the oblivious humans' faces!

"Like it?" He chuckled when she snorted. "Most of the big ski resorts around here shift into water parks for the summer, but people mostly come here from New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia for the skiing. Recently we upgraded some of our facilities to be more wheelchair accessible."

Dave had started filling in the gaps, the love he had for the place clear in his voice. Ben wouldn't have admitted it, but he loved the lodge all the more when Dave spoke of it. "We have a full gym, a day spa, babysitting services offered by some of the Pack females, and even a small golf course. All of it sits on about three thousand acres, a third of which is forested. Hiking and horseback riding are popular in the spring in this area. We just warn the humans to beware of wild animals. Right now, our only guests are shifters; Rick arranged it that way because...well, you'll see."

The Red Wolf Lodge was a huge wood and stone building. It looked like a mountain cabin on steroids. It was long, two stories high, with a vaulted, dark gray roof barely visible under the snow. The doors of the hotel rooms could be seen through the railings of the huge deck that ran all around the second story. Belle had stared through the front windshield with wide, disbelieving eyes. "Where are the cabins?"

Ben took one hand off the steering wheel and started pointing. "The cabins are around the back. If you follow the road to the right, it leads to them. Follow the road to the left, and it takes you to our banquet facilities."

She turned back to Dave. "Banquet facilities?"

As the event coordinator for the Lodge, Dave was intimately familiar with all the Lodge's party facilities. Ben was the money man, his sole job to keep the Lodge operating in the black. The two frequently butted heads over Dave's more extravagant ideas. "Winter weddings are pretty popular up here. Wait until you see the room. With the fairy lights lit, it looks like a winter wonderland."

Ben had flicked a glance at Dave, and the urge to tease his mate had been overwhelming. He'd gone with it, hoping it would also soothe his new Luna's nervous energy. "Damn, Dave. You're such a girl."

Belle had covered her mouth, but not before Ben saw her smile in the rearview mirror.

"What?" Dave had been shocked, not just by the comment. Ben *never* teased the other man, preferring to avoid him whenever possible.

"Fairy lights?" Ben's brows had risen. It had been all he could do not to laugh out loud.

"Isn't that what they're called?"

"Yeah, but... I mean, real men don't say fairy lights. Call them Christmas lights, or, I dunno, string lights."

The Beta's eyes had narrowed dangerously. "Are you questioning my masculinity?"

"All I'm saying is, if I see you dancing around in a tutu, I'm not gonna be surprised."

"Asshole."

"Fairy."

Dave's eyes had twinkled, hope making them brighter. "I'm gonna kick your ass when we get out of the Pack meeting."

"You can try, Tinkerbell. You can try."

Belle leaned forward. "Dave?"

"Hmnn?" He stopped glaring at Ben long enough to turn towards her.

Belle grinned and kept her voice low, but not so low Ben couldn't hear her. "I think he likes you."

She sat back and waited for the explosion.

"Oh no. No way." Ben's face was beet red as he pulled up outside the lodge. He couldn't let this go any further. He already regretted putting that hope on Dave's face. He'd known it was a hope he could never fulfill. They'd both just have to live on the mate dreams, because until Dave got his drinking under control there was no way Ben could be with him.

Dave had leaned over, an evil look in his eye. One hand fumbled the door open behind him. "Admit it, sweetie. You want my ass." He blew Ben a kiss before hopping out of the truck, sprinting for the front of the lodge before Ben could even turn the truck off.

Ben had scowled after the Beta as he exited the car, but now, gods, now he wished he'd chased the man down, admitted how much Dave was right, and taken his mate then and there. The weeks and months since then had been pure torture as once again he did his best to keep his distance.

And he had no one to blame but himself. If he could get Dave to forgive him he'd be everything his mate needed, no matter what.

Ben stalked from the lodge, the scowl on his face warning away the few "employees" who attempted to approach him. The scent of spring, of green growing things and raw, rich earth, failed to soothe him. Nothing but Dave, safe and in his arms, could ease him today.

Ben opened his cabin door and headed right for his bedroom. Too bad he wasn't going to enjoy it for too much longer. If Dave refused him, he had no doubt Rick would see to it that Ben left the Pack.

Permanently.

Chapter Three

Dave sat up in bed and tried not to snarl at the pretty young thing flirting with him. The last thing he needed was some big-breasted Puma thinking he needed some TLC. And even if he *did* have leanings toward the soft and feminine, the fact that he knew who his mate was would have kept him from doing anything about it.

It was the lack of a mating mark. He knew that. He was fair game until Ben decided he was worthy to wear Ben's mark.

Dave snorted. Yeah. Like *that* was ever going to happen.

"Hey, stranger!"

Dave winced. *Oh, God. Please no. Don't let it be—*

"Move it, sweetie, the man doesn't swing your way."

Emma.

Pretty, blunt Emma Cannon, the Curana of the Halle Puma Pride and the only woman he'd ever met strong enough to stand up to Belle, gently pushed the blushing, stammering nurse out the door and shut it firmly behind her. "I brought you some real food." She held up the white paper bag, the smell filling the room now that the perfumed nurse was gone.

"Oh, God. For that, I'll switch teams."

She laughed and handed him the bag of medium-rare burgers fresh off the grill. Frank's Diner had the *best* burgers in the tri-state area, and Dave was rapidly becoming addicted. "So. Rumor has it that Ben has been sent to New York to negotiate a pass-through treaty with the Coyotes."

Dave nodded, trying not to feel anything at the sound of his mate's name. As far as he was concerned, from now on Ben was just another Wolf.

Yeah. Right. Someday he might even believe that.

"Rumor also has it he thought you were an alcoholic."

Dave choked on the bite of burger he'd just tried to swallow. Emma pounded on his back with hammer-like blows.

She was dainty, but she was mighty.

"You okay?"

Dave nodded, red-faced for more than one reason. Who had told the Curana that? "I'm not."

"Psh. Please. I know that." She waved her hand at him and picked up one of the burgers, checking under the bun for God knew what. When she didn't find it (or did, Dave had no clue), she bit happily into the sandwich. "Mmm. Damn. These are *so* good."

Dave eyed the extremely rare, bloody bit of beef between the buns held in her small hands. "Um. Emma? Are you feeling okay?"

"Never better," she moaned. "You gotta try this."

Even for a Wolf that was some pretty rare meat. He wondered if Frank had even bothered to sear the outside or just slapped it raw onto a bun. The only time Dave ate meat that rare was when he wore his fur. "Will it moo at me?"

Emma giggled. "I thought that's the way Wolves liked it."

"Only in my fur. My human taste buds prefer medium-rare." He took a bite of his own burger, happy to note that it had definitely had some intimate moments with a grill.

"Anyway, he'll be there for a few days, so you should be able to return home without him bothering you. After that, you're on your own."

Dave shrugged. He wouldn't worry about it. His trip to Disney World was coming up in a few weeks. With some luck and careful planning, he'd probably be able to avoid Ben for that short amount of time. The distance would help keep Dave from assaulting the man. If he did, he didn't know if he'd mark him or beat the shit out of him.

How could Ben think so little of him? And why hadn't the man ever *asked* him if he drank? All of the pain and sorrow of the last nine years could have been avoided if Ben had only *spoken* to him. But no. Ben had chosen his path, and now it was time for Dave to choose his.

Starting with Gay Pride Week at Disney World.

With luck, Dave would find that he was one of the rare Wolves who had more than one mate. It was so far from common that most Wolves looked only for one, but if Dave was one of the fortunate few, he'd find someone who loved him. Someone who didn't have the emotional baggage he and Ben had.

It didn't matter that he still carried around that stupid shirt, hoping Ben would come to his senses. It definitely didn't matter that, even if Ben *did*, he'd never have the balls to wear it. It had become the symbol of Dave's hopes and dreams, and he took it everywhere he went. It was under his pillow at night, in his desk drawer during the day. Hell, he'd even taken it on vacation before, but not this time. Dave reminded himself not to pack it. He wouldn't need it. The odds of Ben showing up in Disney World, looking for his ass and ready to apologize, were pretty damn slim.

His fingers dove under the covers, his hand clenching around the soft material of the T-shirt.

God, he was such an idiot.

"What's your plan? Going to torture him? Going to make him beg for forgiveness?"

"Rick told him about the migraines?"

Emma snorted. "Rick was all set to Outcast him."

Dave froze. Oh *hell* no. No. No matter how pissed he was at Ben, he couldn't picture putting his mate through that torture. Ben would be stripped of his powers as Marshall and sent down the mountain. He would be fair game to any Wolf who thought they could take him. Odds were good he'd be dead within a year or two if he didn't find a new Pack and Alpha willing to take a chance on him.

Most wouldn't. Most would assume he'd been Outcast with good reason and would drive him away with prejudice. That new Wolf living in Halle, the pretty one with the green hair and the *huge* Bear mate, was the exception to the rule, and the only way she'd managed was by staying wolf for years at a time.

"Please tell me he didn't." Because if Ben had been Outcast Dave would go to him, rejected or not. Dave would protect his mate until they found a new place, a new home.

Dave would kill Rick if his mate died.

"He didn't."

Dave collapsed, his fingers once more brushing over the material of that goddamn shirt. "Fuck. Don't scare me like that."

When he looked over at the Curana, he saw that she'd had every intention of scaring him just like that. "Honey, you need to claim him."

Dave snorted. Yeah. No shit. Just the thought of Ben in danger was enough to send his wolf howling for the door, any thought of protecting himself or his heart gone in an instant.

Maybe that was what was needed. Maybe, instead of waiting for Ben to take matters into his own hands, Dave should do the claiming. Ben might be older, but apparently he was nowhere near wiser.

Maybe, just maybe, the trip to Disney would restore Dave's spirits and make approaching Ben easier. He grinned and bit into his burger.

Maybe it was just what the doctor ordered.

Ben dropped the package of meat at the back door of Dave's cabin. Flowers hadn't worked. He'd found them strewn across Dave's back yard. The chocolates he'd left had melted into a gooey mess. Ben had caught sight of Dave rinsing the back porch off and muttering dire threats about whoever had left them there.

That left his wolf's suggestion of meat. Maybe this would win Dave's attention in a way the more feminine offerings hadn't. Besides, he had to replace the hot dogs he'd filched from Dave's refrigerator when the man was off working. If Rick saw them there he'd tear the Beta a new one.

Ben bounded back into the woods, pleased with himself. He knew Dave was home, but from the smell of things his mate wasn't alone. That didn't bother Ben. He knew the person Dave was with and trusted him implicitly. Rick would take care of Dave in a way Ben couldn't, not yet anyway. He just hoped his mate hadn't developed another one of those debilitating headaches. It would just about kill him to know his mate hurt and wouldn't let Ben near.

He'd tried a few times to get Dave's attention in the week since he'd been back from New York, but Dave was avoiding him like...well, like Ben had once avoided him. Aggressively polite when cornered once, Dave had calmly waited, arms crossed, for whatever Ben wanted to say. Before Ben could even begin his apology, Chela had arrived and dragged the Beta off. The only reason Ben wasn't pissed was because it had to do with Dave's job as an event coordinator with the Lodge. Chela had actually apologized to him for dragging Dave away, but the relief on Dave's face was unmistakable.

He was *happy* to be dragged away, even if it meant working just before a Pack meeting.

Ben trotted through the trees until he came to his own cabin. He slipped back into his human skin, changing easily from wolf to man. He strode into his cabin and prayed that this time, his offering to his mate would be accepted.

If it wasn't, neither man nor wolf had a clue what to do next.

Chapter Four

“Did you scent him?”

Dave nodded. What kind of teenage hell was this? Ben was leaving things—nasty, flowery, melty, *bleeding* things—on his back porch and then slinking away like a terrified Scooby-Doo. “The man needs a clue.”

“Then give him one.” Rick picked up the meat, his brows rising in surprise. “Fresh venison. Straight off the deer.”

Dave wrinkled his nose. “Ew.” He darted back into the house and grabbed his bottle of Mr. Clean. He doused the back porch and grabbed the hose. “I’d move if I were you.”

Rick moved. He knew Dave meant it.

Dave started the hose and rinsed off the blood and disinfectant. “Has he ever heard of ‘I’m sorry’?”

“Rumor has it he’s been trying to say it, but the women have decided he needs to grovel more.”

Dave stopped the flow of water and stared at his Alpha. “What?”

“Yup. They want you to go on vacation and come home, calm, rested and ready to claim your mate. They want Ben to suffer while you’re gone. And they want to have a hand in it so later they can whisper and smirk and look all smug when you two snuggle-bunnies coo at each other.” Rick rolled his eyes. “Hey, I tried to stop them”

“But stopping Belle and Chela when they’re on a roll is like trying to stop a hurricane with tissue paper.” Dave leaned against the back wall of his cabin and sighed. “They’re more likely to drive him off than drive him closer. Ben hates games.”

Rick held up the bloody slab of meat.

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know what the fuck that’s about.” Dave threw up his hands and got dripped on. He ignored Rick’s chuckles and coiled up the hose. “If he really wants to apologize, why didn’t he knock on the door? Why this stupid-ass shit?”

“Maybe he thinks it’s romantic.”

The two men eyed the blood dripping to the ground from Ben’s latest “present”.

“Nah.”

Rick laughed and threw the meat in the garbage. Dave had no idea how long it had been sitting out in the sun before they found it, but the scent was already beginning to turn sour. “He gave you flowers and candy and venison steaks. What more does a guy need?”

“How about actually talking to me?”

“How about a fifty-two-inch LCD flat screen with surround sound and a vibrating recliner to sit in while watching Jessica Alba in that skin-tight Fantastic Four outfit?”

Dave blinked. “That’s oddly specific.”

“Thanks. I’m warning Belle up for our anniversary. Think it’ll work?”

“Not if you mention Jessica Alba.” Rick had claimed Belle the previous February; it was now nearly June. She’d been Luna for over a year now, and Dave had a good idea how she’d react to her mate’s obsession with Ms. Alba. “You’ve got a ways to go before then.”

“I know, but maybe I’ll get one of them for Christmas.” Rick winked, as happy and carefree as Dave ever got to see his best friend. But that carefree expression didn’t last long. “Listen. Whatever Ben’s planning, he’s obviously not ready to claim you yet. Go and enjoy your vacation. The women will torture him, you’ll get some sun, and maybe he’ll have gotten his head out of his ass by then.”

Dave shook his head. “I don’t know. At this point I’m not sure if I want his head on straight or if I should just look for a second mate.”

Rick looked shocked. “Are you serious?”

Dave shrugged. “It would be a fresh start with someone new, someone who doesn’t have the baggage Ben and I do. And besides, bloody chunks of meat aside, can you honestly say Ben wants me?”

Rick opened his mouth to reply, but there was nothing really to be said. All games aside, Dave was pretty sure this was Ben’s way of taking care of his poor, wounded mate. Dave would lay odds it was Ben’s wolf that had pushed him into it too.

Well, if Dave got a second mate, Ben’s wolf could take a flying leap. He’d have someone to take care of him, thank you very much, and Ben could sit alone and miserable in his cabin while Dave boned and got boned every damn night for the rest of his life.

“The week I head to Florida?”

“Yeah?” Rick was giving him a strange look, but Dave couldn’t figure it out.

“It’s Gay Pride Week.” He smiled, aware of how sad it looked. He really wished, from the bottom of his heart, that his mate was going with him. They could ogle all the pretty men during the day and wrestle naked at night. But Ben wasn’t going to Disney World, and it was past time for Dave to stop dreaming.

“Dave. You’re my best buddy. You’re like the annoying little brother I never had and still don’t want. I want you to know that I say this with love in my heart for you.”

Dave winced.

“You’re a dumb ass.”

Dave picked the hose back up and sprayed down his Alpha. He had two weeks until he left for Florida. Dave ran for it, laughing as Rick snapped at him, that long red hair dripping into the Alpha’s eyes. By the time he left Rick would have forgiven him.

Two days later, when a bucket of water was dumped on his head from one of the balconies surrounding the hotel accompanied by a soft “Gotcha!” he knew he’d been right.

“Florida? What is Dave planning on doing in Florida?”

“Visiting Mickey Mouse.”

Ben pinched the bridge of his nose. Ever since he’d come back from New York the Luna had been particularly bitchy. Dave wasn’t himself, even Ben knew that. Dave was rarely this quiet, but Ben had barely heard a peep out of the normally laughing Beta. It was like the sun was hidden behind impenetrable clouds, and Ben

wasn't the only one suffering from lack of light.

Now the Beta was taking two weeks' vacation. Not that Ben would know anything about that since Dave was still avoiding him like the plague. Hell, the other night after the Pack meeting, when everyone else had changed for a good run, Dave had turned and gone back to the main house, still fully dressed, still human.

Ben had, for a split second, thought of following him. They'd be alone at the big house, with no interference from the Pack females. He could confront him, apologize, and finally claim him as his own. The gifts hadn't worked. It was time for direct confrontation, and Ben was more than ready to get this settled between them.

Then the air horn had gone off next to his ear, and by the time his hearing had returned he'd been alone in the great circle. The order was clear, even if the delivery method was cruel: stay away from the Beta or suffer any consequences his crazy, overprotective Luna deemed fit.

Ben had tried once or twice to corner Dave after that, but he'd been wily, his mate. Ben hadn't caught Dave alone at all in the two weeks since he'd left the venison, and now his Luna was informing him that Dave would be leaving for two weeks' vacation starting Friday.

Shit.

"And it's Gay Pride Week at Disney." She sounded absolutely delighted, the bitch.

Ben saw red. His wolf snapped and snarled. No way.

No *fucking* way.

Was Dave looking for a second mate? He'd kill any man that touched his David. He took a deep breath, trying desperately to control his snarling wolf. If he let the wolf out now he'd hunt Dave down and force a mating on him, something he didn't want to do. He wanted to woo Dave the way the man deserved, and biting his ass in wolf form wasn't the way to go about it.

Ben turned to the keyboard and began typing. "Thank you, Luna."

He didn't give a fuck if Belle became pissed at him. Ben picked up the phone and began dialing. Sometimes it paid to have friends in interesting places. "Please put me through to Steven Hoode. Tell him it's Ben Malone, and it's an emergency." He waited patiently while Steve's personal army connected Ben to the best friend he'd ever had. If anyone could pull a miracle out of his ass and help Ben get his mate, it would be Steve.

"Ben! What's wrong?" The concern in his friend's voice soothed something in him, but nothing would get rid of his tension if Dave succeeded in his quest and found a second mate. He wouldn't put it past the man to bring him home and flaunt him in front of Ben for eternity.

"Hey, Steve? Can I borrow the Disney timeshare for a couple of weeks? I'll trade you a few weeks here at the lodge in primo rooms." He had the authority to offer those, and when Rick found out *who* he was trading rooms with he'd kiss Ben's feet. The man could give the Lodge's reputation a huge boost among the humans. Steve hadn't stayed here yet, so it would be a real treat for the New Yorker. He'd been so busy building his business he'd refused to take a vacation in years. That dedication had paid off, making Steve one of the richest men on the East Coast. He'd bought the timeshare planning to use it when he had the time. And now Ben was going to beg and plead to use it himself.

"This is your emergency?" He could hear the creak of Steve's office chair as the man leaned back. One of these days he was going to fall and crack his head wide open.

"Dave. Gay Pride Week. Help, man." He ignored the snickers of the Luna behind him as he began typing the email to Rick informing him he'd be gone for a couple of weeks unexpectedly. There was no way he'd allow Dave to find another mate.

The Beta already had one.

"I thought you wanted nothing to do with him."

"Let's just say I was dead wrong. Need to grovel over broken glass wrong. Bamboo shoots shoved in my...okay, not *that* wrong, but you get the idea."

"Ah." Steve's chair creaked again. "Tell me everything."

And Ben did, except for the part about him and Dave being Wolves and mates. Steve still didn't know his best friend was a Wolf, and Ben couldn't tell him. Not yet, anyway. "And now I'm afraid he's given up on me, just as I'm ready to try and win him."

"You owe me. I was planning on going myself on Friday."

"Yeah. I know." Ben grinned and brought up the Southwest Airlines website. He knew it was okay to book his flight. Steve hadn't said *if I do this*. The timeshare was Ben's.

"Big time. I was going babe watching."

"During Gay Pride Week."

Steven clucked his tongue. "Hate to tell you this, but those of us of the straight persuasion tend not to notice little things like that until our asses get groped."

"I told you not to wear those shorts."

"How about next time you just warn me that it's a gay bar?"

Ben winced. He hadn't wanted to go into the bar in the first place and hadn't been in another one since. "Yeah, yeah. Let me know how much I owe you for tickets, 'cause I know you have to arrange things through the timeshare people."

"Will do. By the way, I expect roaring fires, pretty ski instructors and Tia Maria-laced hot chocolate."

Ben snorted. "Are you sure you're not gay?"

"Don't make me hurt you." Ben grinned at the sound of another creak. "You win over your lady-love and you can consider this your wedding present, okay?"

"Thanks."

"But I'm still taking those rooms at the Lodge."

"Fine."

"For a month."

"A...what?" Ben blinked, shocked. "You. A month off. When did the sky turn pink?"

"Don't you think I've earned it?"

"Yeah, but..." There was something Steve wasn't telling him.

"Ben. You want the room or not? Think about it. Dave, all alone in Florida. Hot guys in bathing suits wandering around shirtless sucking on dripping—"

"Deal."

Chapter Five

Dave stepped off the plane and into the Orlando airport, a huge grin on his face. The brightly colored mosaic tile on the floor, the sunshine pouring in through the windows, the flip-flops and grins on the faces of those around him let him know he was no longer in Pennsylvania.

He was in the House of Mouse and, damn it, he was going to have *fun*.

Dave followed the rest of the passengers down the long hallway to the—was that a monorail running through the airport? Holy shit! Dave grinned like a kid given the keys to the toy store. He'd never been to Florida, never had the opportunity to come to Disney World. Rick's grandfather had refused all requests to leave the Lodge, believing the only way to protect his Pack from outsiders was to keep them isolationist. Dave had hated it, and when Rick challenged the old goat and won, Dave had been right at his side.

He knew Rick missed his grandfather, but the old Wolf had been wrong.

He watched a man walk by in tight jeans and a T-shirt that read *Clap If You Believe in Fairies*.

He was totally psyched about this. It was going to be great.

"Hey, when do we have to be at our hotel?"

Dave stopped at the monorail doors and grinned at his friend Charlie. "Check-in's around three."

"Dude, I still can't believe you scored us the Contemporary. What did you do, rob a bank?"

Nope. He'd spent the money he'd been saving toward a honeymoon, finally realizing he'd never get the happily-ever-after he'd always dreamed of. Staying in one of the deluxe resorts at Disney with one of his best friends seemed like a good alternative.

All right. It was an okay alternative. Dave would much rather be pounding his mate through the mattress than sleeping a few feet away from his friend. If he succeeded and found a second mate in the ten days he was here, he might just get to do that. "Something like that."

Bright blue eyes rose heavenward. "Uh-huh. This has nothing to do with the hunka-hunka you've been sending me pictures of over the years, does it?"

Dave winced. Charlie was a friend of his from his online college days, and damn if the Lion didn't have a huge fucking mouth. He couldn't let himself think of Ben, not when he was hunting a second mate. It made him feel oddly like he was cheating on the Marshall. "Just get on the goddamn train."

Charlie's laughter flowed over him. Dave followed his friend to baggage claim, eager to start his vacation.

It was going to be a fun time, whether his wolf liked it or not.

Ben scented his mate and prayed the other man didn't scent him. He wasn't ready yet for Dave to know he'd followed him to Florida. Ben grinned, knowing how feral it must look.

Dave could run, but he couldn't hide. By this time tomorrow, he'd have the man mated and in his bed or he'd die trying. He threw away his cup of coffee and headed for baggage claim, knowing he had to stay far away from Dave until he was ready to show the man that he was here to claim him.

If Dave thought he was going to enjoy himself at Gay Pride Week with anyone other than his mate, he was sorely mistaken.

Dave stepped out of the hotel room and breathed deep. Below him, the monorail rumbled by, shaking the soles of his feet. He could barely hear it, but the knowledge that it, and Magic Kingdom, were mere steps away was worth it.

The hotel room rocked. The flat-screen TV was bolted to a faux fireplace, and when Charlie had flipped a switch the glass tile in the center of that fireplace had lit up. The beds were both queen size, giving him and Charlie plenty of room. The entire room was done in chocolate browns, pale tans and greens in a contemporary style. Dave loved it. It was modern, but it was far from the cold, sterile look many people associated with contemporary design. It was warm and inviting without being kitschy. The bathroom had double sinks with modern, farmhouse-style bowls and a private, enclosed toilet. The brown and white marble tile was cool underfoot.

And best of all, he'd gotten the Magic Kingdom view. He'd be able to sit out on his balcony and watch the fireworks every night if he chose. No lines, no squealing kids, no trying to see over other people's heads.

Charlie was enchanted. He was going to have a hard time getting the Lion out of the room. When Charlie declared it was time to test the shower, Dave had bolted, knowing how long a Lion could spend washing their "mane". He breathed in the rich smells of the three restaurants just a level or two below him. The whole center of the hotel was open, giving a hell of a view over the dark brown railing of the restaurants and the lounge below. The place had three stores on the fourth floor, including two gift shops and a small grocery.

Dave was in love, and he'd barely left his room.

He headed around the corner to the elevators and nodded cheerfully at a woman with two kids. He made note of the artwork on the walls, the modern furniture even here by the elevators.

He'd have to talk to Rick about that. Having artwork near the elevators might not be a bad idea at the Lodge.

He stepped in and pressed the button for the first floor. He was in Disney, and he had every intention of visiting a park. Today he planned on hitting the Magic Kingdom. He had a runaway train to catch, a waterfall to go over and a haunted mansion to explore. And if he got really lucky, he'd run into some handsome pirates.

Ben who?

He chuckled on the way out the doors, following the footpath he'd seen earlier when they'd first arrived at the hotel. Who knew you could *walk* to Magic Kingdom from his hotel?

He resisted the urge to squeal like a child and practically ran for the magic, eager to let it wash away all his worries. He'd deal with Ben when he got home. Now, it was time to play.

Ben stared around the one-bedroom, one-bathroom timeshare he'd finagled out of Steve. The place was fucking *amazing*. There was a divider between the huge tub and the master bedroom that acted like a giant window. He could just picture his mate lying there, covered in bubbles and waiting for him, chatting while Ben got ready for bed. The king-sized bed was covered in tan sheets. The front room boasted a sofa and a small kitchenette complete with the food Ben had ordered delivered. The two flat-screen TVs were a bonus he hoped he didn't wind up watching.

He'd rather watch his mate.

He dropped his bags and dug out his shorts, flip-flops and T-shirt. He had to find Dave. He knew the man was staying at the Contemporary, just a short walk away. It was incredible luck that Steve was able to get him this room at the Bay Lake Towers, right next to Dave's hotel. Apparently Steve had planned on using the room himself during these two weeks. The wily bastard had made him work for it, though. Ben knew how much this little jaunt was going to cost him. He owed Steve *big* time. The man was going to get his free stay at the Lodge even if Ben had to bend over and spread 'em for Rick.

He changed quickly out of his jeans and sneakers into shorts and sandals, grabbed his room key and park ticket in one hand and ran for the door. If he knew anything from watching Dave covertly all these years his man would head for the closest park, Magic Kingdom. He wouldn't be able to resist the lure of it no matter how tired he was from the flight. Ben dashed out the door, confident it wouldn't take him long to find Dave and begin the process of healing their broken relationship.

After all, how hard could it be to find one lone Wolf in a theme park?

Jesus Christ! Ben glared around the park. He was tired, hotter than he'd thought he'd be, sweaty and ready to kill the next person who bumped into him. He'd been wandering the park for hours. *How fucking hard can it be to find one Wolf?*

He'd caught elusive whiffs of his mate, but so far he hadn't found the man. Where the fuck *was* he? Hell, he'd managed to find two Lions, a Tiger, six Pumas and a Fox, but his mate was nowhere to be found.

He turned in place, staring around. He was at the entrance to Splash Mountain, wondering if the man had been eaten by Br'er Fox or Br'er Bear. Because this was where Dave's latest scent trail led and, thanks to the fucking water, Ben couldn't find it anymore. So he waited by the exit for the ride and prayed he didn't miss him in the press of people that surrounded him.

Fuck.

There was a gasp behind him. "Holy shit. Ben?"

Oh, thank you, God. Ben turned and smiled into the startled, wary face of his mate. "Dave."

Dave took a step back, his face pale. "Ugh."

Ben held up his hands. The last thing he wanted to do was stress Dave out and trigger another migraine. "Hey. No worries, Dave."

Dave blew out a breath, but his shoulders remained tense. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Right. Tell another me another fairy story, Grandma, I ain't buyin' that one."

Ben glared at this mate. "I'm here for the nachos."

He'd managed to startle a laugh out of Dave, easing the tension in his mate's shoulders. He dared take a small step forward, lowering his hands back to his sides. "I've been trying to talk to you for weeks."

"About?" The wary fear was back in Dave's eyes.

Ben took a deep breath. He had to figure a way to erase that look from Dave's face before it became permanently etched there. He'd caused his mate enough pain. "Could we maybe have dinner together? I have a lot of groveling to do, and I think it would be better done over steak."

Dave blinked, his expression blanking for just a second. His shoulders eased. A relaxed, easy smile graced his lips. "Oh. Sure. You have a Hopper pass?" Ben nodded. "Cool. How about the Brown Derby over in Hollywood Studios? I heard the food there's really good."

Ben's brows rose. This was way too easy. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yeah." Dave looked up at the sky. "It should start raining pizza soon, so we might want to get under cover."

Pizza? Ben choked down a laugh. "You're not dreaming."

"No?" Dave was still smiling. "In about three seconds you're going to tell me you're sorry, you can't live without me, and you've got a naked Gerard Butler stuck in your pocket."

That forced the laugh out. "Two out of three isn't bad."

Dave put his hands on his hips, some of the wariness returning. "So you're not planning on going down on me on the Merry-Go-Round?"

"Nope."

"Haunted Mansion?"

"Nuh-huh."

"Rockin' Rollercoaster?"

"Rockin' — Are you insane? I'd bite your dick off." Ben winced and waved an apology at the father of the five-year-old girl staring at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Sorry." He could feel his face turning beet red. He cleared his throat. "Look, can we go somewhere and talk?"

"Just talk?"

Ben nodded. At this point, he'd take anything Dave handed him. Hell, the man was finally talking to him. That was a step up in Ben's estimation.

"And you're sure this isn't a dream?"

"I just gave a five-year-old an accidental education in sex. Yeah, I'd say this isn't a dream."

Dave's mouth lifted in a shy smile, so at odds with the dominant personality Ben knew existed inside the Beta. Ben knew firsthand exactly how powerful Dave was. No one but Rick had ever forced him to bow down the way Dave had, and that had been while the Beta was in blinding agony.

"What are you doing here?"

He took slow steps until he was right in front of his mate, Dave's heady scent filling his nostrils. "I'm here to claim you."

Dave's jaw dropped. His wide eyes darted upward.

Ben, knowing what Dave was looking for, grabbed his arm and pulled him after him. "Nope, still no pizzas. Jesus, you are such a goof." And now he got to finally enjoy his mate's innate goofiness. Before he would have held himself aloof, thinking alcohol was the cause of Dave's attitude.

Now he knew the man was just weird. Ben couldn't be happier about that.

Dave laughed and pointed to a teenager wearing a huge green Goofy hat. "Then it looks like I'm in the right place."

But his hand tightened around Ben's like he was afraid Ben would let go of him.

Ben grinned. As if.

"Where are you staying?"

Ben winced. This was the only part of the situation he knew for sure would get him into trouble. "Bay Lake Towers."

"How the hell did you get a room there? And on such short notice?"

Ben wasn't going to answer that if red hot pizza fell down from the sky and landed on his naked testicles cheese first. "How do we get to the Brown Derby from

here?"

"Ben."

Shit, Dave was using his power to demand an answer. Of all the Betas Ben had met only Dave seemed to have the ability to mimic a true Alpha. "I asked a friend for a favor."

Dave scowled. "Steve."

The anger in Dave's voice worried Ben. "What do you have against him?" Ben turned to confront his mate. "He's been a good friend for a long time."

"Sure." Dave's smile was tight-lipped. "Is he here with you?"

Ben studied the look on Dave's face. The anger there was mixed with...hurt? Ben was shocked. He'd known Dave hated Steve, but surely it wasn't because of jealousy? "Dave. He's just a friend."

Dave's jaw clenched.

"Seriously. He's straight."

One of Dave's brows rose. "Really?"

"Let me put it to you this way: I've been thinking of introducing him to Chela. I think the two of them would get along great." And if they turned out to be mates, so much the better. He'd love to make Steve Pack, but Rick had turned him down the one time he'd suggested it. They hadn't been ready to add another Wolf to the fold, especially with the crap Dave's sister Gina had been pulling at the time. Gina was gone now, and last he'd heard she'd begun an Amazon Pack with herself as the Alpha.

It was what she'd truly wanted in the first place. She hadn't wanted Rick, she'd wanted *power*, and all of them had known it.

Still, Ben was planning on bringing his friend into the Pack by hook or by crook. All he had to do was ease his mate's fears about the man and he knew everything would work out.

"I think Chela would take your friend, chew him up and spit him right back out."

If they were still talking about Chela he'd eat that Goofy hat. "She might. She also might find he's a good man who helped a friend when he really needed it." He toyed with Dave's fingers, glad when the other man didn't pull away. "Please. I have a lot of groveling and explaining to do. Dinner?"

Dave looked off to the side, his expression uncertain. "Groveling?"

"Yup."

"Lots of groveling?"

"Yup."

"With beds of nails and hair shirts?"

Ben sighed. "I'll do anything to make things up to you."

Dave grinned, and Ben didn't like the look of it. It was evil. The last time he'd seen that expression on Dave's face the dining hall got painted purple. Rick had nearly blown a gasket. Rumor had it Dave had spent all night fixing the color. He still didn't know what Rick had done to make Dave paint the hall that hideous shade of Barney. "Anything?"

Ben nodded.

"You're sure? Because there's no taking it back."

"I won't chop off my left nut or wear a clown nose."

Dave started to laugh again. "You put clown noses and cut off balls in the same sentence?"

"Hey, those clown guys are creepy."

Dave bit his lip. His cheeks flushed. "Fine. I'll meet you at the Brown Derby in an hour and a half. There's something I need to go get in my room."

"I can go with you."

Dave looked guilty for a split second before he smiled. He was a little wild-eyed. "No. That's okay. I've got it covered."

"Dave," Ben drawled. He clamped down when Dave tried to pull his hand free. "What are you hiding?"

Dave pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "Charlie."

It was like a punch to the gut. "Charlie."

Dave nodded. "Yeah. Charlie."

Ben swallowed. God, it hurt to think his mate was here with another man, but it was his own goddamn fault. He just hoped they hadn't gotten the chance to do anything more than unpack or he'd have to kill the fucker. "Okay. Charlie." He blew out a breath and tried to reign in his anger. "Is Charlie back in your hotel room?"

Dave nodded, looking guilty as sin.

"How do you feel about moving into the Towers with me?"

"I paid a crap-load of money for my room."

"Then let's move Charlie into the Towers, okay?" Ben gritted out between clenched teeth. His jaw was beginning to hurt. It was all he could do not to mark his mate right then and there. His eyes turned, the colors of the Magic Kingdom changing around him. The reddish clay color of Splash Mountain turned a deep, bright gold. The greenery around it altered subtly, taking on a brownish cast. Skin tones became grayer. Even the bright blue sky took on more of a violet cast as green and red blended in his vision. If he were to try driving down the street right now, he knew all the traffic lights would look yellow to him.

Dave sighed. If he noticed that Ben's nearly black eyes had lightened to his wolf's golden brown he didn't react. "I'm not sure Charlie would want to move."

Ben growled. He really didn't give two shakes of a rat's ass what Charlie wanted. But he knew what he wanted.

Charlie gone.

Chapter Six

“Down, boy.” Dave grabbed his arm and got them moving again before Ben could go all Beast without Beauty. “Um. Why don’t we go back to my room and—” The growls got louder.

“—not eat my friend for dinner.” Dave winced. Charlie was going to *love* Ben. The Lion would look at his mate like a giant squeaky toy if he kept this up. But Ben’s golden-brown eyes warned him that Ben’s wolf was close to the surface. “Don’t make me get the leash.”

Ben snorted, whether in disgust or amusement Dave didn’t know. He was going to walk Ben back to the Contemporary and introduce his mate and his friend and pray the two of them didn’t get them all kicked out. Dave was having the time of his life and didn’t need to lose out on his vacation because the two shifters didn’t get along.

Half of him was still convinced this was a dream. Maybe he’d fallen asleep on the plane and only *thought* he was in Disney. He’d been looking forward to this for so long he wouldn’t be surprised. Having Ben here with him had been a dream for just as long.

“Listen, the way you say Steve has been there for you? Charlie’s been there for me. Don’t give my friend shit, and I promise not to barbeque yours.”

Silence. *Not good.* If Charlie and Ben got into it, Dave could lose them both. Unless, of course, he was right, and this was all a dream. He had a sure-fire way of proving it one way or another. He just had to get Ben to his room first.

“Steve tried to protect me. He knew what my dad was doing to me.”

Dave froze. “Your dad?”

“That’s the explaining portion of tonight’s entertainment, remember? I explain my childhood, you explain Charlie being in your hotel room, we agree to move you into my room so we can have wild kinky sex to fireworks, the end.”

Dave started walking again. He did his best to ignore the thought of wild, kinky sex, but just thinking the words made his cock hard. Add in the words “Ben and,” and he was practically panting.

They were past Cinderella’s Castle and near Main Street, USA. They’d be out of the park in no time. “Oh! Monorail!” One of the reasons he’d booked the Contemporary was because the Monorail from Magic Kingdom and Epcot went right through the hotel. He’d always thought that was cool, but when he’d heard you could *walk* to the Magic Kingdom from his hotel he’d decided to do that first. But now he’d get to give the Monorail a try. Ben was calm again, in no danger of shifting. The Monorail would be safe and quick.

Ben laughed. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that.”

Dave pivoted and began walking backward, pointing at Ben with his free hand. “You need to learn to have fun.”

“You need to learn not to invite other men into your room.”

Dave’s jaw dropped. Other men? He began laughing.

Yup. Charlie was gonna love this one.

“It’s not funny, asshole. How would you have felt if I’d brought another man on vacation with me?”

Dave abruptly stopped laughing. “Like you haven’t done that.”

Ben snarled. “No. I haven’t.”

“So you’re what? A virgin?”

“Are you?”

The two men glared at each other.

“Gentlemen, would you mind taking a small survey?” A cheery blonde smiled up at them, some sort of data pad in her hands. An electronic pen was poised over the pad, ready to mark down their answers.

“Yes.” Ben grabbed hold of Dave’s hand and dragged him towards the exit. “Monorail. Contemporary. Killing Charlie. Fucking. In that order.”

Dave’s brows rose. He wondered what Ben’s reaction was going to be when he found out Charlie was—

“Dave, pay attention!”

Dave tripped over the curb, almost going to his knees. Ben managed to get his arms around him and keep him from falling, but the position it put them in brought other things to mind. Dave was bent double, his hands on the circular railing in the center of Main Street, Ben’s crotch pressed tight to his ass. Dave flushed, the feel of Ben’s cock hardening against his ass bringing to mind all sorts of wicked things.

The wolf-whistle had both men straightening. “Nice catch.” A man winked at Ben and waved at Dave. “He’s a big one too.”

The man at his side laughed. “Yeah, no need to lie when you brag to your friends about this one, huh?”

The two men walked off, still laughing. Dave’s cheeks were bright red, Ben’s only a shade lighter.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Ben nodded and walked under the train overpass that marked the beginning of the Magic Kingdom. The two men hopped the Monorail that led directly to the Contemporary, neither saying a word. He had no clue what Ben was thinking, but Dave was worried. Why the change of heart? Did Ben feel sorry for him now that he knew the truth? Was it jealousy, knowing Dave had chosen to come here during Gay Pride Week?

Did he know of Dave’s plans to find a second mate?

The Monorail came to a stop, and the two men left. They rode the escalator to the fourth floor where they caught the elevator to Dave’s room. Dave’s heart was pounding, his nerves shattered. The moment of truth was almost upon him. He only hoped Ben’s sense of humor would get them through this.

“Calm down, baby. If it means that much to you I promise to only take a small chunk of Charlie’s hide.”

He turned his head and looked down at the Marshall. The man was only a few inches shorter than he was, but it made Dave feel protective, something he knew he didn’t need to feel. If anyone could take care of himself it was Ben Malone.

“How do you feel about Lions?”

Ben blinked. He stared straight ahead. He ignored the other people in the elevator. “We’re going on the safari ride?”

Dave almost laughed. “Something like that.” The elevator doors dinged and let them out on Dave’s floor. It was two floors above the bridge that led to the Bay Lake Towers. “We’re here.”

Ben followed him to his room, his hand on the small of Dave’s back the entire way. When it came to helping Rick rule the Pack, Dave was a rock. Introducing his

mate to his friend turned him into a wreck. "Listen, there's something you need to know about Charlie."

Ben blanched. "He's your mate?"

"No!" Dream or no dream, he had to get that stricken look off Ben's face. "Just...look. Charlie's—"

The door flew open. "Davey!" Suddenly he had an armful of warm, cuddly, *female* Lion. Her long blonde hair tickled his nose. "Who's your friend?" She leaned back and gave Ben the once-over, approval in her blue eyes. "Did you finally find someone to help you forget Big Ben?" Her eyes widened. "Oh, my God. You look familiar."

Ben's jaw had gone slack the moment Charlie threw herself into Dave's arms, but it hardened when she mentioned someone else helping him get him over Ben. *Oh boy.*

Ben held out his hand. "Name's Ben Malone." Ben shot Dave a look that promised retribution. "You must be Charlie."

Charlie pulled slowly out of his arms, her gaze glued cat-like and unblinking on the Wolf. She dug her toe into the carpet and bit her bottom lip, the picture of innocence.

Dave took a step back so he wouldn't get blood on him. He reminded himself that Ben could take care of himself.

Her hand whipped out so fast it was a blur, but the smack of flesh on flesh was loud in the echoing hotel. At least she'd kept her claws in. He wouldn't have appreciated scars on Ben's pretty face. "You bastard!" And she burst into tears.

Dave rolled his eyes, picked his roomie up in a fireman's hold and carried her into the room. "No getting the nice Wolf arrested, Charlie."

"But—"

"No, Charlie. And don't you dare claw my ass."

He heard more than saw her pout, but she went limp in his hold. "Aw, you're no fun."

The door shut. He glanced over to make sure Ben had followed them inside. When he saw the smirk on Ben's face he dumped Charlie on her bed ass-first. "Be nice to my mate or I'll limit your catnip to two a day."

Charlie blew him a raspberry before turning her attention once more to Ben. "Are you going to treat Davey like he deserves, or are you going to continue being a rat bastard?"

Ben sighed and strolled into the room. "Long story short? My father was an alcoholic, a mean one. I can't handle being around them, and I thought Dave was one." He stared right into Dave's eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You said that." Dave was glad to finally hear it, even if he wasn't sure it was real.

"I'll keep saying it until you believe it."

"He beat you?" Charlie crossed her legs and propped her chin in her hands.

Ben's eyes remained on Dave's. Dave could see the remorse written there clearly. "Yeah."

"Shit." Charlie sighed and rolled onto her stomach. "Is he still alive?"

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"How could that be? The Alpha, hell, the Marshall or Omega would have done *something* about it." Dave knew Rick's grandfather could be an ass when it came to dealing with outsiders but he'd never put his people at risk, even the teenage ones.

"They didn't. He was a master at hiding it, even from them. The times they knew I'd been hurt? He blamed it on accidents. The Omega thought I was a moody little boy and a moodier teenager. Remember, just because you feel what someone else does doesn't mean you understand *why*." The way Ben was looking at him, Dave understood the message he was trying to convey. Ben had been wrong, just as the old Marshall and Omega had been, and now they were both paying for it. "The last thing the Alpha wanted to do was rock the boat over a boy they all thought was going through a stage and hurting himself."

Dave flopped onto the bed next to Charlie. "That's why you thought my migraines were hangovers."

Ben nodded curtly.

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you ask me about them?"

Ben winced. "Honestly? I couldn't allow myself to get that close." He perched on the other bed, the one Dave had been planning on sleeping in. Charlie had wanted the bed by the sliding glass doors so she could see the fireworks over the castle. "My mother didn't fight him. She loved him too much, and he beat on her too." Ben shook his head. "I think the old Alpha just didn't want to see what was right in front of his face. If he had, he would have been forced to Outcast my dad and deal with what came next. Odds are good Dad would have forced Mom and me to go with him." He shook his head. "I've watched someone I was supposed to love destroy everyone around him because of alcohol." Ben clasped his hands between his knees and gazed right into Dave's face, hiding nothing. "I'm sorry, baby. I couldn't let myself become my mother."

Ouch. That hurt, but he could almost understand where Ben was coming from. He'd had a twisted childhood, and that was going to do things to his perspective. Now all Dave had to do was decide if he forgave him or not.

Dave narrowed his eyes. "You said you'd do anything if I would just forgive you."

Charlie chuckled. She knew what was coming. Hell, she'd helped him design the damned thing. "The shirt?"

"Oh yeah." And if Ben wore it, he'd get his wish. Dave would do his best to forgive Ben for being a prick. Hell, he was halfway there just from hearing about Ben's childhood.

Then again, if Ben put it on he'd *know* this was nothing more than a dream. Real Life Ben's pride would never allow him to wear a shirt like that, let alone in public.

Ben looked like he'd just stuck his arm in a dark hole and had no clue if he was about to grab a handful of honey or bees. "What shirt?"

Dave handed him the bag containing the shirt and waited.

Chapter Seven

Dave was grinning like a loon as they entered The Brown Derby, but something seemed off. He still seemed...wistful, somehow, especially when his gaze landed on the shirt Ben wore. “You said *anything*.”

Ben’s jaw was permanently clenched. He’d been stared at, pointed at, and laughed at everywhere they went. But fuck it if he was taking this shirt off. He’d said anything, and if abject humiliation was the only way to win Dave over then damn it, he’d do it.

Unless it involved clown noses. Then all bets were off.

“C’mon. It matches your eyes.”

The fact that Dave’s hand was cupping his butt did not mitigate the fact that Dave was also laughing his own ass off.

“Where the hell did you find this thing?” Ben gave their names to the maître d’ and studiously ignored the smile trying to break out all over the man’s face. He’d made the reservations from Dave’s room, glad to get a table on such short notice.

Now he was wondering if they would have been better off with room service.

“I had it made.” Dave caressed the brown cotton. Ben damn near shivered at the feel of his mate’s hand on him, stroking down his back. “You like it?”

“I love it,” he gritted out. At this rate he’d not only get his mate but a huge dental bill as well.

Dave huffed a laugh as they followed the maître d’. “Good. Then you’ll wear it at the next staff meeting.” Dave batted his lashes at him, daring him to go there.

God. There was no way in hell Ben was wearing a dark chocolate brown T-shirt with the words *Trophy Wife* stenciled on it in bright yellow letters at the next Pack meeting. “Sure thing, honey.” *In your dreams, maybe.*

Dave held out Ben’s chair, and Ben almost snapped his head off. “I’ll make sure it makes it home safe and sound, then.”

Ben took his seat, the low growl dying to break free. He gritted his teeth and held it back through sheer willpower. A family of four was seated right next to them. *Don’t scare the straights, Ben.* “I think I can take care of that.”

Dave’s brows rose like he knew exactly what Ben was thinking of doing with the shirt before it ever hit the Poconos. “Florida has really small pipes,” he muttered, confirming Ben’s thought. “I wouldn’t try flushing it down the toilet if I were you.”

Ben sniffed. The scent of his mate surrounded him, soothing his wolf even as it made his cock sit up and take notice. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Dave picked up the menu, but not before Ben caught the big man’s shoulders shaking. Ben rolled his eyes and picked up his own menu.

He was *so* flushing this shirt.

After they ordered, Dave left the table to hit the men’s room. Ben sat back with a smile. So far, so good. Dave knew now why Ben had acted the way he had, rejecting him when he had no real reason to. Better yet, he was on the way to forgiving Ben.

Things were looking up.

Ben breathed in deep, happy to have his mate with him. The scent of Dave surrounded him, and his head whipped around, eager for the sight of the man walking towards him.

No Dave. No sign of him anywhere.

Ben sniffed again. Dave’s scent was strong, mingling subtly with his own. His eyes darted around the restaurant, a frown forming on his face. *What the fuck?*

Then it hit him. The shirt. The damn fucking shirt Dave had given him. Ben lifted the hem and sniffed.

Dave’s scent filled him, poured through him. If he’d been a cat he would have been purring. As it was he had the urge to rub that scent into his skin until it never came off.

Ben dropped the hem of the shirt and tried to figure out why Dave’s scent was so strong on it. Had Dave worn it? It didn’t have the feel of a shirt that had been worn often enough to pick up the owner’s scent. If anything, the butter-soft cotton felt brand new. So how had it gotten there?

Dave was winding his way back to him through the tables, a smile on his handsome face. Ben, for the first time in years, allowed himself the luxury of studying his mate. Those amber eyes were as huge as they’d been when he’d been a gangly teenager, dominating a stunning face that could have graced magazine covers. The light brown hair had never quite been tamed, the bangs falling into those gorgeous eyes, the ends brushing the collar of his T-shirt. And damn if he hadn’t grown into those hands. The guy was simply huge. The only man Ben had ever met who was bigger than Dave was Rick, and the Alpha was *scary* huge. The Luna was the only one who could look at Rick and think “cuddly”.

Ben fingered the edge of his T-shirt and stared at Dave’s chest. There was no way Dave could wear Ben’s new shirt without stretching it or ripping it.

The shirt fit Ben like a glove.

Dave sat. “Food here yet?” His eyes flickered to the shirt, a strange satisfaction in his gaze.

“You slept with it, didn’t you?” Dave’s eyes flew to his. The self-conscious panic on his face told Ben he was dead right. “That’s why your scent is so strong.” Ben couldn’t stop stroking the hem of his shirt. Every time he did, Dave’s scent wafted up to his nose.

“Oh, look, the drinks came.” Dave took a huge gulp of his soda and damn near choked.

Ben couldn’t stop the smile that came, watching his mate try not to die on soda bubbles. Dave said he’d had the shirt made. He wondered how long ago he’d done it.

How long had he held on to hope?

Shit. Looks like I’ve got a new shirt to wear to the next Pack meeting.

Ben picked up his own soda and took a swig. He couldn’t wait to get home and show off his new shirt. “So. What made you decide to come here for vacation?”

Dave grinned. “I’ve wanted to come here ever since I was a kid, but I finally decided to do it when I heard Rick and Belle had to be here for Max and Emma’s wedding.” Max and Emma, the Alpha pair of the Halle Pumas, had gotten married last April, and Belle had been one of her bridesmaids. That had been a year ago, and the way reservations went so quickly at the Contemporary Dave must have been planning this trip for months.

“Thinking of getting married here?” Ben grinned at Dave as the waitress set their dinners in front of them.

“Sure.” Dave batted his lashes. “You’d look gorgeous in a wedding dress.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed. “Oh please. You’d be the one in the dress, and you know it.”

Dave snickered. “Like we don’t know who the alpha male of *this* relationship is gonna be.”

“Yeah, fairy-light boy. That would be me.”

Dave shook his head sadly. "Pretty, yet delusional." Ben choked on his fish. "Sorry. You'd look much better in white tulle than I would."

"Don't bet on it."

"I got you into that shirt, didn't I?"

Ben tried desperately not to laugh. "That was a one-shot deal, and you know it."

"Do I?"

Ben didn't respond to that. If wearing this stupid shirt brought this kind of happiness to Dave's face then he'd wear the fucking thing every day. "There's no way in hell you're getting me in a wedding dress."

"Wanna bet?"

"That's the second time you've said that." Dave waved his fork at him. "Sure. I'll bet on it."

Ben grinned. "You're on."

Ben shook his head. "You're kidding me, right?"

Dave picked up the paddle and waved it at him. Damn, this was the best dream *ever*. He knew it was still a dream because Ben was actually wearing the shirt. Real Life Ben would have torn it to shreds. Hell, Real Life Ben would still be in the Poconos, pushing papers and doing who knew what. Dream Ben was playing with him, smiling and having fun. Usually Dream Ben begged forgiveness for all of two seconds before they had hot sex. He couldn't decide which dream he liked more, but he hoped they wound up at the same place: mind-blowing orgasms. "What's the matter? Afraid of a little smack-down?"

"As if. I just can't believe we're using air hockey to figure out which one of us gets to wear a dress." They'd returned to the Contemporary after dinner and headed straight for the hotel's game room. Or rather, Ben had followed Dave to the game room, seemingly ready for whatever Dave had in mind.

A short burst of laughter from a woman by a pinball machine had Ben's cheeks turning red. "I am out of here."

Oh, that was way too much like Real Life Ben. Dave had to fix that fast. "Do you smell something?"

Ben paused. "What?"

"It smells like..." Dave sniffed.

"Like what?"

"Chicken."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Did you just call me chicken?"

"If the cluck fits."

Ben glared and picked up the paddle. "You're on, pansy-boy. Get ready to wear tulle."

A brief but intense time later Dave stared at the score in disbelief. This wasn't the way it was supposed to go. "I lost."

"Yes, you did." Ben's arm draped around his shoulder and squeezed him close. "When you go shopping for your dress, make sure you pick one that shows off a lot of cleavage."

The woman by the pinball machine laughed again.

"I'm not supposed to lose."

Ben straightened up, the paddle dropping to the table with a clatter of plastic on plastic. "Dave?"

Dave gulped. Oh. Shit. His heart was pounding. The shot of fear and hope jolted his system, making him feel like he was going to throw up. "This isn't a dream."

Ben's smile froze. "No. It's not a dream."

Dave felt like he might start hyperventilating. "You're really here."

Ben tugged Dave out of the arcade. "Breathe, baby."

Baby? "You're in the Poconos doing boring money shit. Not in my hotel's game room acting like a mate."

Ben winced. "No, baby. I'm here. Everything today has been real."

Dave stared at the shirt straining across Ben's shoulders. He'd been right. It fit the man like a glove. He rubbed his eyes, but the little dancing lights only intensified. "I need to get to my room."

Ben's hand rubbed down his back, attempting to soothe him. "Headache?"

"Not yet, but I'm getting an aura."

Ben began hustling for the elevators like he knew what the hell that meant. Maybe he did; Dave didn't have it in him to ask. Luckily they'd come back to the Contemporary for their impromptu air hockey game, so they weren't far from Dave's room. He needed his medicine, fast, or the rest of this vacation was going to go to hell.

"I'm here, Dave. What do you need?"

This was not happening. It couldn't be. "Um. I need my medicine." The elevator arrived and Dave stepped in, smiling wanly at the people already on board. The lights felt brighter than they had earlier. A slight headache began behind his eyes.

Shit. Not now. Please, not now.

Ben stayed close, rubbing his back, until the elevator arrived at Dave's floor. "Let's get your stuff, baby."

Dave got out his keycard and slid it into the lock.

"Davey!"

Ben caught Charlie before she could land on him. For that alone he forgave Ben a lot. "He's beginning to migraine." Ben's voice was soft and even, but Dave could hear the concern.

Charlie fell back. "Oh. What does he need?"

Dave pointed to the small black bag he had next to the television. "Imitrex."

Ben pulled out the white box of medicine and read the instructions. "Here. Take your meds. We're going to pack you up and take you to my room."

"Why would you do that?" Charlie folded her arms and stood in front of the door, blocking their exit.

"Because if the medicine doesn't stop the migraine I have a bedroom he can collapse in that's separate from the living room. I can make it nice and dark for him."

Dave left them to their pissing contest and headed into the bathroom. He winced at the light coming off the mirror, the headache intensifying. "Shit." He filled one of the glasses with water and downed the pill, making sure to drink all the water. He then filled the glass again and downed that. "Done."

Ben stuck his head in the bathroom and nodded. "Gather your stuff." He shook his head. "Better yet, go lay on the bed and point. I'll gather your stuff. Charlie can help me."

"Mm-hmm." Dave got around him and lay on the bed, one hand over his eyes. This was the first time he'd gotten one of his headaches since he'd been in the hospital. He prayed the new medicine Dr. Howard had prescribed worked. The last thing he wanted was a full-blown migraine right now.

"All set. Let's go, baby."

Dave lifted his arm. "Why are you being nice to me?"

Ben sighed. "C'mon. Let's get you settled in for the night. I'll order room service for breakfast, and if you still think you need me to explain it, I'll do it then. Okay?"

Dave nodded carefully. His head was beginning to swim, but the headache seemed to be easing off. "Sure."

"Take care, Davey."

He accepted Charlie's careful hug. "You too. You still coming to the Lodge in December?"

"Yup." She kissed his cheek. "You take care of him. And just so you know, we have reservations for dinner in Italy Tuesday night."

Ben nodded. "Maybe I'll talk him into making it reservations for three."

"Hmph. We'll see." Charlie held the door open. "Ben?"

"Hm?"

"Don't claim him until you're *sure* the headache's gone. You might make things worse."

Dave's jaw fell open. "Wait. You approve this?"

Ben's eyes rolled, and he picked up both of Dave's suitcases. "No, you're still not dreaming."

Charlie hid her laugh behind her hand. She was probably trying not to make noise. "Have fun, you crazy kids." The sound of the door shutting behind him was final.

He really wasn't dreaming.

"Let's go, baby. It's a bit of a walk once we get off the elevator. Think you're up to it?"

"I have to be, don't I?" Dave shook his head. The dizziness was getting worse. It felt like he'd had one too many glasses of wine, and the light was still stabbing into his eyes. "We need to get me in the dark."

Ben frowned and carried Dave's luggage to the elevators. "Let's go."

It didn't take long to get to the Bay Lake Tower bridge. The view from the bridge that connected the Contemporary to the Towers was incredible. Too bad he couldn't enjoy it.

"We can come out here and watch the fireworks if you like."

Dave didn't respond. He was too busy trying to stay on his feet.

By the time they got to Ben's room Dave felt like he was floating. He propped himself against the wall and waited for Ben to open the door.

"You'll like this. It's a great room."

"Mm-hmm." He was prepared to hate it on principle. It was *Steve's* room, not Ben's.

He followed Ben into the suite, impressed despite himself. It was like the room he'd been in, only enhanced, improved. There was a dinette set with a banquette and a few chairs. The kitchen had dark cabinets and a light countertop. The living room boasted a comfy looking sofa and chair.

"The balcony goes from the living room to the bedroom." Ben, his hands empty of suitcases, opened the glass doors. "I'll show you."

Dave stepped out into the cool evening air and followed Ben around the balcony. Ben opened another set of glass doors that led into a decent sized bedroom dominated by a huge bed. Dave nearly groaned in relief at the sight. His head was still swimming, but at least the headache was receding.

"Crawl in, baby. I'll take care of everything."

Dave did as he was told, not even bothering to pull off his sandals. The nausea had died down, but even so he was glad to get into bed.

He felt Ben tug his sandals off. "Want me to help you get undressed?"

He rolled over and gave Ben a look.

Ben's hands went to his hips. "I'm not asking for sex. I'm asking you to let me help."

Dave closed his eyes and sighed. "Sure." He buried his head in the pillow and tried to ignore the feel of Ben's hands tugging his clothes off. He lifted up long enough for Ben to pull off his T-shirt, leaving him in nothing but his boxers.

"Damn. Just...damn."

Dave would have laughed at the heated awe in Ben's voice if he wasn't so tired. "Lights."

Darkness filled the room. Dave allowed himself to drift away, the cool air dancing across his skin soothing him into sleep.

Chapter Eight

Ben sat in the living room and filled out the room service form. No way was Dave leaving that bedroom until Ben was certain the migraine had been averted. He filled out the form, requesting Mickey-shaped waffles, juice, and coffee. He hung the sheet on the doorknob as instructed. That done, he turned his attention once more to Dave.

He couldn't believe Dave had thought the whole day had been some sort of dream. No wonder he'd been so relaxed, so willing to forgive. Ben had thought they'd gotten past that in Magic Kingdom with the nonexistent pizza rain. What had made Dave think it was still a dream? The fact that he'd put on the shirt? The easy way they'd gotten along?

Ben scrubbed his hands across his face. Who knew his very presence was enough to give Dave a migraine?

Ben picked up his cell phone and dialed a number he'd memorized for just such an emergency. "Dr. Howard? It's Ben Malone."

"Hey, Ben. What can I help you with?"

Ben prepared to lie his ass off. "My mate's in our bedroom, and he's begun a migraine. I've given him the initial dose of Imitrex, but I was wondering when he should get the next one? I didn't want to ask him, since the first one made him fall asleep."

"Hmm. You're mated?"

Ben crossed his fingers. "Yes."

"Good. The dose I gave him is the strongest they make. You can give him a second pill in two hours, but that's it. No more after that. If the migraine doesn't go away you'll have to deal with it, unfortunately."

"Shit. Okay. Will do. Is there anything else I can do to try and stop it? We're on vacation, celebrating our mating, and I'd hate for Dave to miss out."

"Congratulations."

Ben almost felt guilty. "Thanks."

"Pick up some Excedrin Migraine. That will help. Not too much of that, either, it's got caffeine in it. Too much caffeine can make the migraine worse."

Ben got up, ready to scratch the coffee off the morning breakfast list.

"But don't cut the caffeine out altogether. A little helps push the medicine through his system and can ease the symptoms."

Ben sat back down, grateful he didn't have to give up his black gold. "Thanks, Doc. Anything else I need to know?"

"Yup. If he's vomiting for more than an hour or the symptoms become truly severe, take him to the hospital. He'll need to be admitted."

Ben nodded, forgetting the doctor couldn't see it. "Thanks, Doc."

"You're welcome. And Ben?"

"Hmm?"

"Take care of him."

"I will. I promise."

Ben hung up the phone and prepared himself for a long night.

Someone was snoring. Loudly.

Dave opened his eyes and looked around at the unfamiliar room. Dark walls, soft bed, Ben Malone stretched out next to him and snor—

Wait. What?

Dave reached over and pinched himself. Yup, it hurt. So either his mate dreams had become *incredibly* realistic, or Ben was really lying next to him. In a bed.

Fully clothed.

Dave shimmied to the edge of the bed and rolled off. A quick glance showed him the bathroom, and he made quick use of it, startled to see his own brushes and things right next to Ben's. A thrill went through him at the thought of his toothbrush snuggling up next to the Marshall's.

He shook his head. This wasn't real. It couldn't be.

He tiptoed into the living room and headed right for the coffee maker. He needed caffeine to sort this all out, and he needed it now.

On the counter next to the coffee maker was his Imitrex. Suddenly, the day before came rushing back. Splash Mountain. Ben's jealousy over Charlie. The T-shirt. Max and Emma's wedding, and Dave in white tulle. Finding out it *wasn't* a dream. He took a deep breath and leaned against the counter, staring at that box and trying to calm himself. He couldn't risk reactivating the migraine. Not now.

Not when his dream was so close to being reality.

Ben had taken care of him last night. He'd been everything Dave had always dreamed he'd be: loving, attentive, caring of his mate's needs.

Am I sure I'm not dreaming?

"Morning."

Dave was very proud of the fact that he didn't jump. "Morning." He pushed himself up and turned to face his mate. "How'd you sleep?"

God, the man looked gorgeous in the morning. His hair was sleep-tousled, his eyes drowsy. Stubble highlighted his strong jaw. Ben's brows rose. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Ben stretched, tightening the fabric of the T-shirt against his chest.

Dave shrugged, uncomfortable now that he knew this was really happening. How did he handle...? Dave blinked.

Ben was still wearing the T-shirt. From the scent, he'd slept in it. Every time he moved their combined scents drifted to Dave. It was as if he'd marked the man without laying a fang on him.

Ben's smile was knowing as he stepped around Dave. "Coffee?"

"Dear God in heaven, yes."

Ben laughed, but before he could start making the coffee there was a knock at the front door. "Room service!"

Ben let the waiter in. The man quickly deposited the food, got Ben's signature, and left, leaving the tantalizing scent of waffles and coffee behind. Dave was already settling in to eat at the banquette when Ben slid in next to him. "So. I promised I'd explain this morning."

Dave added some fresh fruit to the top of his waffles and cut into them. "And grovel," Dave added around a bite of waffle. Damn, the food here was good.

Ben grinned. "And grovel. But explanations first."

"That day in the woods when I found you with Steve and you told me not to tell anyone. It wasn't because you were running off to have sex with him, was it?"

Ben looked shocked. "Hell, no. My dad told the Pack leaders I'd run away from home, which wasn't true. I was trying to avoid him because he'd been drinking."

Ben added butter and syrup to his waffles, but Dave could tell his attention was really somewhere in the past. "Steve knew what was going on with my old man. He was the only one who believed me."

"I would have."

Ben sighed. "I know that now. But you were too young to deal with it, and I wasn't quite old enough to trust you yet."

"Yup. That only took...hmm. Do you trust me yet?"

Ben winced. "Yes, I trust you. I wore the damn shirt, didn't I?"

Dave waved his fork at Ben. "That's completely different, and you know it."

Ben stood up and hiked up the tail of his shirt. He turned around and showed Dave his back. "You see the scar on my lower back?"

Dave leaned in. This was the first time Ben had allowed him this close to his naked skin. Sure enough, there was a faint scar. He ran his finger down it, enjoying the way Ben shivered under his light touch. "Your father?"

"That's not the only scar." Ben tugged the shirt back into place and sat back down to his breakfast. "He'd drink, he'd do horrible things, he'd get sober and he'd apologize. Lather, rinse, repeat. I was this close to leaving the Pack and going lone when Rick challenged his grandfather and won control of the Pack." Ben grinned. "I never thought I'd see the old man *relieved* to lose his Alpha status."

"He'd been Alpha a long time, waiting for a suitable replacement. His son and daughter-in-law dying so soon after Rick was born was hard on him." Dave shook his head. "Sometimes I think that's why he isolated us so much."

"Maybe." Ben shook his head. "Anyway, that doesn't matter now. Dad managed to get them to believe him no matter what I said or did. It was like they didn't *want* to know." He sighed. "Dad... Let's just say I can't abide being around drunks."

Dave picked up his coffee mug and leaned back in his seat. "I don't drink as often as you think I do."

"I'm beginning to realize that." Ben stared at him, his expression so sincere Dave had to stop himself from leaning across the table and consoling him. "I should have talked to you rather than assuming things. I really am sorry."

"Sorry enough to wear that T-shirt at the next Pack meeting?"

Dave was shocked when Ben nodded. "It smells like us." Ben's eyes had brightened, the golden brown of his wolf's eyes bleeding away the dark, nearly black of his iris.

Dave was proud of the fact that his hands weren't shaking when he set his coffee mug back down. He could feel his own eyes shifting in response to his mate's desire. The scent of Ben's need was stronger, overpowering their combined scent. "It does, doesn't it?" He leaned forward and placed both hands, palms up, on the table. "What hurt the most was the fact that you never spoke to me like I meant anything to you."

Ben laid his hands in Dave's. "I couldn't let myself. I couldn't get trapped in a relationship with an alcoholic. I couldn't give my life over to someone whose soul didn't belong to them. I knew if I let you close to me we'd wind up mated. I pushed you away to save myself and wound up hurting you in ways I'd never dreamed of."

Dave closed his eyes. "I needed you."

"I know." The pain behind those words told him that Ben had suffered too. Ben squeezed his hands. "I can't change the past, but I can promise I'll be there from now on. Can you forgive me?"

Dave stared into his mate's eyes, reading the sincere regret, the determination to win him over and the urge to mark, to mate, that dominated his thoughts, and made his decision. "If you ever shut me out again I will feed you to Charlie. In bite-size pieces. *Dainty* bite-size pieces."

The smile that lit up Ben's face was worth it.

Still, there were some things that needed to be said. Dave had waited a long time for this, and he wasn't going to lose out on it now. "We're hitting the parks. This is our honeymoon, whether you like it or not. You *will* go on water rides and get soaked." Ben grimaced, but Dave didn't let up. "I've been saving for this for a really long time. No way are you getting out of it. Space Mountain *will* be conquered. Understood?"

Ben didn't care what they did so long as he got Dave's sexy ass naked and in bed within the next five minutes. "Fine. But first, I'm marking you." Ben lunged across the table, but he wasn't quite fast enough to catch Dave. The Beta was on his feet and gone, leaving Ben to clutch the air he'd occupied.

"Wait. Do you honestly think I'm going to be the catcher in this little ball game?" Dave grinned, the goofy look Ben had come to love on his face. His mate wanted to play.

Ben was willing to oblige him. "I'm sorry, which one of us lost that air hockey game?"

"That was for tulle, not tush."

Ben started laughing. The man was insane, and everything he'd ever needed. "You're so goin' down."

"You wish." Dave leered at him, but Ben could see the remnants of fear lingering in his eyes. Part of Dave still believed Ben would push him away.

Once he'd marked Dave that fear would disappear. It had to. Ben couldn't bear to see it in Dave's eyes anymore. "C'mere, Dave."

Dave's goofy grin turned feral, the Beta's power pulsing around him. "No." He crooked his finger at Ben. "You come here."

Ben fought the pull of his Beta, but it was hard. "Do I look like a bottom?"

Dave nodded, his hot gaze travelling up and down Ben's body.

"Hell, no." No way was Dave shoving anything up Ben's ass.

That feral grin turned downright evil, and Ben feared for himself. "Are you telling me you're a cherry boy?"

Ben glared at Dave, refusing to answer, but he knew his cheeks were bright red. "You know there's only one way to decide this."

Dave smirked, the picture of utmost confidence. "You sure you wanna do this?"

"Oh yeah." Ben held up his closed fist.

"Are you prepared for the abject humiliation that will follow your defeat?" Dave laughed at Ben's low growl. He held up his own fist. "Ready?"

"Rock paper scissors shoot! Shit." Ben looked at his flat hand and Dave's vee'd fingers and knew he'd lost the first round. "Best two out of three."

Dave shrugged. "If you like; just know you'll lose."

Ben gritted his teeth. No way could he lose this, or he'd lose something a lot dearer to him. His butt cheeks clenched. "Rock paper scissors shoot! Hah! Paper covers rock." One more win and his ass was safe.

Dave merely held up his fist. "Last one."

"Rock paper scissors shoot!" Ben stared down at his vee'd fingers, a chill running down his spine.

"Rock breaks scissors."

Before he could react to his loss Dave was on him, his fangs buried in Ben's neck, and Ben forgot everything but his raging hard-on.

Chapter Nine

Dave shivered at the needy moan Ben let loose. He needed his mate to mark him back, to claim Dave the way he'd always dreamed. "Bite me. Make me yours." Dave carefully removed Ben's shirt. No way was he damaging it. The man had sworn to wear it to the Pack meeting. If that didn't say commitment Dave didn't know what did. The mocking would be relentless, and Ben had to know that.

Belle was going to have a field day with it.

Ben growled. He buried his fangs in Dave's naked chest, the pain of the bite rapidly fading as Ben pumped him full of the mating enzyme that would mark Dave as his forever. Dave's dick hit Def Con One, ready to shoot off at the slightest move Ben made.

Shit. He had to get Ben naked *now*. Anything less was unacceptable. He cupped the back of Ben's head. "Let go, Ben."

Ben growled and stroked Dave's cock through his boxers.

"Shit, Ben. You want me to come in your hand?"

He felt more than saw Ben's nod.

"Hell, no." He tapped Ben's ass. "This baby is all mine." Dave pulled Ben's head away from his chest by the hair. That beautiful, dark silky hair he now had every right to touch. "You're mine, Benjamin Malone." It took all his strength to keep the sudden tears from his eyes. *You're finally mine.*

Some of the feral need leached away from Ben's face to be replaced by a tenderness so sweet Dave almost lost his battle with his tears. "Yours, baby. Forever."

Without further prompting Ben stripped, and Dave got to look his fill without fear he'd see contempt or loathing in his mate's eyes. Ben was seriously ripped, with six-pack abs and a chest that begged for Dave's hands. Faint scars marred his skin here and there, scars he'd noticed but never thought twice about. Now that he knew where they'd come from he had the urge to kiss each and every one of them. He couldn't make what had happened to Ben better, but he could show his mate that none of it mattered anymore. Dave's eyes travelled farther south, and Ben's cock twitched. His lips curled in a hungry grin at the sight of his mate's desire.

"Now you."

Dave's brows rose at the command in Ben's voice. He had the feeling that, no matter what he might think, they'd both wind up "catching" at some point. Ben was too dominant to be a permanent bottom, and Dave would do anything to make his mate happy.

But first things first. He was the Beta, after all, and he'd won the right to take his mate first. Dave was going to make Ben beg for him.

Dave slid his boxers down and kicked them aside. His erection bobbed as he walked backward toward the bedroom. "Tell me you packed lube."

Ben's brows rose. "Of course. I was coming to claim your ass. I may not have been a Boy Scout but I understand 'Be prepared'."

Dave grinned. "And maybe someday you will get a shot at my ass." He almost laughed as Ben stumbled. "But today, to the victor goes the spoils." He pointed to the bed. "Lay down and spread 'em." He eyed the bed and sighed. "Just like a virgin sacrifice."

Ben growled as he stomped past Dave. "Asshole."

"Not yet. I have to prep you first, remember?" Dave batted his lashes at Ben, laughing at the man's grumbles.

Ben climbed onto the bed and positioned himself on his back. "Let's get it over with." The state of Ben's cock belied the grumpy tone of voice. It was rock-hard, standing up from the dark curls of Ben's crotch.

"Impatient, are we?" Dave crawled up the bed until his face was level with Ben's cock. "Where's the lube, Ben?"

Ben reached into the side table drawer and pulled out a bottle, placing it next to him on the pillow. His breathing was quick and shallow, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

This wouldn't do. Ben was so tense that no matter what Dave did he knew it would hurt. He had to get Ben to relax, and he had just the way to do it. He *needed* to make his mate come in the worst way, and if getting Ben off once before he took him relaxed the man, then that's what Dave would do.

Dave leaned down and licked a long, slow line up his mate's cock. Ben's indrawn hiss was the only indication Dave had that he was doing something Ben liked. If anything, the man's thighs tensed up even more.

Dave lapped at his man's cock like his life depended on his performance. He treasured it, loved on it until his mate was writhing beneath the gentle movements of his tongue, and he still hadn't taken Ben in his mouth yet.

He reached for the bottle of lube and slicked his fingers up, careful to keep his tongue in constant contact with Ben's cock. He teased his mate's hole with gentle strokes, hoping to get him used to the feel of Dave's touch. He leaned up and over Ben's cock and, with one last flick of his tongue, took his mate into his mouth. At the same time, he carefully pushed his finger inside Ben.

"Oh shit." Ben was groaning. "Ow. Shit. So good."

Dave tried not to smile as his mouth moved up and down his mate's cock, his finger sliding in and out of Ben's hole. He searched for and found the rough spot inside his mate that had the man practically levitating off the bed.

"Oh God, Dave. Suck me, baby, please." Ben's hands finally let go of the sheets to bury themselves in Dave's hair, holding on as Dave sucked on him. His knees drew up, then straightened, his hips twisting either to get away from or get more of Dave's mouth and finger. Dave couldn't tell which, but from the way Ben was digging his fingers into Dave's hair he'd bet it was the latter.

Dave pulled his finger from Ben's ass and slicked up some more. He was going to add two fingers, stretch his mate out a little more. This first time he took Ben with his cock it would be uncomfortable, he knew that, but he'd do everything in his power to make Ben crave this. And this was the first step in making it merely uncomfortable rather than painful.

He concentrated his efforts on the head of Ben's cock as he inserted both fingers into Ben. The hitch in Ben's breathing and the tensing of his thighs let him know it burned, but Ben didn't say a word. He just thrust his cock into Dave's mouth. "Suck it. Make me come, Dave."

Dave was happy to oblige. He stroked Ben's prostate and sucked his mate's cock, willing the man to come.

"Close. Please."

Dave doubled his efforts, determined that Ben would get pleasure, even if taking him caused him some pain. Ben groaned, his hands tightened, and he was coming in Dave's mouth in wave after wave of salty, bitter goodness.

By the time he was done Dave had slicked up a third finger and was carefully working it into his relaxed mate. "That sounded good."

Ben's grin was goofy. His eyes were closed, his expression one of relaxed bliss. "Oooh, yeeah."

Dave laughed. "I'll have to see if I can do that again." It didn't matter that Dave's cock was so hard it hurt; watching his mate melt for him was worth the pain. It

eased the raging need inside him to see his mate come, pleased into a stupor.

Ben nodded so hard Dave thought his head might fall off his shoulders. "Yes, please, thank you."

Dave laughed again and twisted his fingers. "I'm going to fuck you soon."

One of Ben's eyes opened. He swiped feebly at Dave. "You can try."

He sounded way too relaxed to stop Dave. Dave stuck his tongue out and tickled the head of his mate's now flaccid cock. "There is no try. Only do."

Ben snorted. "Thank you, Yoda, for that insight."

"I try." Dave bent his fingers until they gently rasped over Ben's prostate again.

Ben twitched. He drew in a deep breath. "Do that again."

Dave knew his grin was evil, but he really didn't give a shit. "My pleasure."

Dave might say it was his pleasure but Ben knew the truth. Dave was holding back, doing everything he could to make sure Ben enjoyed their first time together.

He wouldn't lie to his mate. The first finger had felt weird, almost uncomfortable. The second had stung, made him tense up until Dave took him into his mouth and began sucking his brains out through his cock. By the time the third finger had been introduced into his virgin ass he was so relaxed he barely felt the sting.

But he was feeling now. Oh boy, was he feeling now. Those wicked fingers were stroking something inside him that made his drained cock want to sit up and sing the Hallelujah Chorus again. Add in the primal urge to make his mate come, the need to see Dave's face in ecstasy, and he was more than ready to take this to the next level.

Ben watched as Dave took him once more in his mouth, sucking on Ben's cock like it was a fucking straw in an extra-thick milkshake. The man was determined to make Ben come again. Ben wasn't complaining. Dave could suck his cock as much as he wanted.

But he never, *ever* wanted to know how his mate had learned to do this. He might lose his damn mind and go postal on some unsuspecting twink's ass if he did.

His cock grew under the skilled lips and tongue of his mate until he was as hard as he'd been before. Dave's stroking fingers had picked up momentum, fucking into him even as he fucked Dave's willing mouth. Any discomfort was gone now, lost in a sea of pleasure, his eyes closed as he did nothing but feel.

But then the pleasure abruptly ceased. Ben frowned, wondering what had happened. But all confusion left him as he heard soft, squishing sounds.

Dave was greasing his cock, preparing to take Ben.

"Let me in, Ben." Ben opened his eyes to find Dave hovering over him, both hands braced on the bed, his mouth inches from Ben's. "Let me fuck you."

Dave's hips pushed forward, his cock nudging Ben's twitching hole.

Ben thought of all the years missed, all the agony he'd forced his mate to suffer, and decided he wouldn't even try to fight it anymore. Dave had *earned* this, and not through fucking Rock Paper Scissors either. He smiled and relaxed as much as he could, dragging his mate's mouth down to his. He needed to taste his man, take those luscious lips, conquer one part of him just as Dave conquered part of Ben. He thrust his tongue deep into Dave's mouth in a savage kiss as Dave slowly stroked into him, gentle to the core even as Ben ravaged him.

Dave ripped his mouth from Ben's, panting heavily. "Enough. I'm in, Ben." His wolf's eyes glowed down at Ben with a brutal hunger and desperate need. "I'm inside you."

He could feel him, hot and pulsing deep inside. "I know." He shifted slightly, the uncomfortable stretch of his mate in his ass making him wince. "Are we sure about this? I mean, I was cool with the whole blow job thing."

Dave grinned. "Wait and see, cherry boy." He leaned down and took a quick sip from Ben's willing mouth. "It gets a hell of a lot better from here."

"Says the man on top."

Dave's brows rose arrogantly. His hips shifted, his cock dragging almost all the way out. Ben waited for the sensation to get better.

Dave's hands slid down, gripped his ass and shifted him ever so slightly. He stroked back in, and Mary Malone's baby boy saw God.

"Holy shit!" Ben's hands rose and clutched Dave's shoulders. Whatever Dave had done, however he'd moved, had Ben's whole body lit with pleasure.

"There, huh?" Dave pulled out again, brushing over that spot in Ben's ass again.

Ben groaned. "More. Give me more."

Dave placed his lips against Ben's. "My pleasure."

And that big bastard began to move, fucking Ben through the mattress, making Ben see stars that had never belonged in the night sky. And all the while he kept their lips touching, barely kissing, each of them breathing in the other until Ben couldn't tell where one began and the other ended.

"Gonna." Dave's pants were harsh, strained. He was holding back, waiting for Ben.

He wouldn't have to wait long. Ben was close, really close. "Together."

Dave damn near sobbed. "Shit. Now?"

Ben reached down and stroked his cock in time to his lover's thrusts. His spine tingled, his hips arching to meet Dave's thrusts. He felt the beginning of his orgasm flow through him and barely managed to moan, "Now!"

Coming with Dave's mouth on him had been incredible. Coming with Dave's cock in his ass could be listed as a religious experience. He could hear his mate's agonized grunts, knew Dave was filling his ass. Ben was coming and coming, his ass clenching down on Dave's cock and making his orgasm even stronger as Dave rubbed his newly discovered happy spot. He bit down on the mating mark on Dave's chest, making Dave howl as his orgasm went on and on until Ben thought he'd pass out from the pleasure.

Dave collapsed over him, his cock still twitching in Ben's ass. "Jesus fuck."

Ben laughed breathlessly. He was sweaty, covered in come and happier than he'd ever been in his life. He hugged his mate close and breathed in their mingled scents. "Amen."

Dave snuggled his mate close, damn near bursting with happiness. Ben was his, all his. No one, not Steve, not Rick, not even the Leo himself could tear them apart now.

"So. You've done this before."

Ben, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter. "Wanna do Disney Quest?" And he gave Ben his best innocent grin.

And it worked about as well as it did on Dave's mother. Ben's eyes narrowed. His mouth opened, and Dave just knew he was about to ask a question the answer to which might get Dave dead just a few minutes after consummating their mating. "Well?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I might be incinerated." He pulled the sheet over his head to hide his face from Ben, but all it did was make their combined scent stronger. There was no air movement below the blanket, and their scent was strong.

"Shit." Ben thumped him on the head with a pillow. "I don't want to know any details. Just tell me you never had feelings for anyone else, okay?"

He pulled the blanket back down and stared Ben right in the eyes so his mate would know he was serious. "I never loved anyone but you. You know that."

"But you fucked other men."

Dave sighed. "I was a teenager. Chock full of hormones. And my mate hated the very sight of me." He shrugged. "If it helps, it's been a few years." He grinned up at Ben. "What about you?"

Ben's jaw clenched before he grunted in disgust. "I refuse to answer on the grounds that I might be incinerated." He flopped down on the bed, his face buried in the pillow. "Damn it."

Dave would have been pissed if he'd remained celibate, but after hooking up with other men in an effort to forget Ben, he understood why Ben had gone hunting. "It didn't work for you either, did it?" He knew from experience how tainted he'd felt afterward. Hell, if at any time he was in danger of becoming an alcoholic it would have been during those years when he'd needed Ben but had taken others. After a while his wolf refused to allow him to touch anyone at all. The despair had been nearly overwhelming.

Ben turned his head until they were nose to nose, the expression on his face full of distant unhappiness. "No. It didn't." His hand cupped Dave's cheek. "You're my only love." His eyes narrowed. "And I'd better be *your* only, Mr. Gay Pride Week."

Dave blinked. "Blizzard Beach sounds good."

"Dave."

The warning in his mate's voice had him sliding off the edge of the bed. "Or we could hit Typhoon Lagoon. You know. Whichever you prefer."

Ben sat up and winced. "Ow!"

Dave was back at his side in an instant. "What?"

Before he knew it he was on his back, Ben straddling him with a triumphant look. "Gotcha."

Dave tugged Ben down into a crushing embrace, for once positive Ben wasn't going to turn him away. "Yeah. You do."

Epilogue

“What in holy hell is that?”

Ben grinned at his Alpha and fingered the edge of his *Trophy Wife* T-shirt. “Dave gave it to me.”

“And you’re seriously planning on wearing that to the Pack meeting?” Rick shook his head. “I’ve heard of pussy whipped, but that’s a new one on me.”

Ben glared at Rick. “Would you like me to fetch your cape, Little Red? It’s kinda chilly out tonight.”

“And he might run into Grandma again?” The Luna leaned into Rick, her green eyes dancing with laughter. “I like your shirt, Ben.”

Dave’s scent drifted over him, surrounded him. It soothed him, kept Rick’s barely bottled laughter from bothering him too much. “I do too.”

“I gather your vacation went well?” Belle wagged her brows.

“Oh hell yes.” Ben’s answering smirk was full of satisfaction. “Let’s just say Space Mountain was most definitely conquered.”

“Oh, hey, Ben! How was Disney—” Chela, the Pack Omega, stopped just in the doorway to Ben’s office, her eyes glued to Ben’s T-shirt. “Holy hell. He’s been Stepfordized. Before you know it he’ll be making crème brûlée and doing dishes. With a *smile*.”

The Alpha pair burst into laughter.

“My God.” Ted, his Second, followed Chela into the office. “What the hell did he do to you?” Ted was grinning. “Is this penance?”

“It started out that way, yeah.” Ben stroked his shirt, Dave’s scent drifting once more to his nose. “But not anymore.”

The ruling hierarchy of the Pack, minus the Beta, laughed at him on their way out the door. “See you in a few, Ben.” Ted winked at him. “I think I saw Dave headed this way.”

Ben couldn’t help it. He straightened up, earning another laugh from his Second before the man left him alone in the office. He’d been smiling since they’d come home from Disney, and he didn’t think he’d be stopping any time soon.

This was their first Pack meeting since coming home a mated pair. Dave had been running around ever since, finalizing a summer wedding, dealing with Pack issues Rick needed his assistance on and dealing with moving into Ben’s cabin. Ben hadn’t wanted to move; he loved his view off his back porch, and Dave hadn’t cared enough to fight him on it. Once Chela heard Dave’s cabin would soon be empty she’d promptly claimed the larger space for her own.

The only thing that marred his happiness was Dave falling into bed every night exhausted. Ben hadn’t realized how much pressure his mate was under until they’d come home. The man ran himself ragged, barely able to eat the meals Ben had prepared before damn near passing out.

Ben was going to have a chat with Rick about that soon. If he had to he’d pull the Marshall card, because this directly involved Dave’s health. Dave needed someone to take the stress off him. They needed to hire someone to be Dave’s assistant. Ben didn’t care if it was a Wolf, a human or a goddamn Grizzly, just so long Dave could breathe again.

Hell, maybe Charlie the Lion would be willing to take the post. The two got along like a house afire, and was someone Ben could tolerate close to his mate. She was almost as protective of Dave as Ben himself.

“Hey, Ben. What’s with the frown?”

Ben pulled his smiling mate between his legs and accepted the kiss Dave gave him. Man, his mate knew how to use his mouth. “I’m worried about you.”

Dave frowned and tilted his head. “Why?”

“Your work load. I don’t want you to stress too much.” Dave hadn’t had a migraine since the aborted one while on vacation. Ben didn’t want his mate to suffer through another one.

Dave’s expression became serious, the way it did only when he discussed the truly important things. “It’s my job, Ben.”

“I know. Which is why I’m thinking we should talk Rick into hiring an assistant for you.”

Dave looked surprised, but only for a moment. “Oh, for the event planning. Not a bad idea. We’d have to get Belle in on it too, since the restaurant hosts a lot of the dinners for these events, and she’d have to work with whoever we hired.”

Ben grimaced. “Hell. I was gonna suggest Charlie, but maybe we should hire a Grizzly instead.”

Dave choked on a laugh and patted Ben’s ass. “C’mon, we’re going to be late for the Pack meeting.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ben started to follow his mate out the door but stopped dead at the sight of something white sticking out of the top of Dave’s jeans. “What the hell?”

Dave winked and raced off, flashing that little bit of white tulle behind him, but not before Ben collapsed in laughter. Oh yeah. The mocking would be bad.

But it would be *so* worth it.

About the Author

Dana Marie Bell wrote her first short story when she was thirteen years old. She attended the High School for Creative and Performing Arts for creative writing, where freedom of expression was the order of the day. When her parents moved out of the city and placed her in a Catholic high school for her senior year, she tried desperately to get away, but the nuns held fast, and she graduated with honors despite herself.

Dana has lived primarily in the Northeast (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, to be precise), with a brief stint on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix. She lives with her soul mate and husband Dusty, their two maniacal children, an evil, ice-cream stealing cat and a bull terrier that thinks it's a Pekinese.

You can learn more about Dana at www.danamariebell.com or contact her at danamariebell@gmail.com.

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Halle Shifters, Book 1

Once a Bear sets his mind on a mission, it's best to stay out of his way. Alexander "Bunny" Bunsun is that Bear. Something's not right with his cousin Chloe, and he's come to Halle, PA, to sort it out, turn his Harley around and head home to Oregon. Until an enticing scent lures him into the local tattoo shop.

There she is. An inked, Southern-drawled she-Wolf with lime-green hair. His perfect mate.

Tabitha Garwood's rotten day just got worse. Her Outcast status makes her a target for harassment with alarming regularity. And now, in the middle of a root touch-up, looking like a half-melted Skittle, she's met her destined mate. The only upside? She finally has a protector in the form of a huge, tattooed, shaved-head Bear who vibrates with carefully restrained power.

When Chloe is left for dead and Tabby is threatened, only Alex can keep his growing family safe. Giving Tabby the loving home she needs, though, could come at a price—Alex must give up the control he's worked a lifetime to attain.

Which means someone could die at the hands—and claws—of his beast.

Warning: This novel contains explicit sex, graphic language, a hunky Bear named Bunny and... Yes. I said a Bear named Bunny. I don't know about you but I'm not brave enough to make fun of it.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bear Necessities:

"Ohmigod, ohmigod." Tabby pulled her hair, staring into her closet. It was six forty-five and her mate would be here any minute, she didn't know his name and she had nothing to wear.

"Little black dress." Cyn stuck her head in Tabby's bedroom, grinning at the pile of clothing around Tabby's feet. "Can't go wrong with a little black dress."

"Guh." The panic was threatening to tear Tabby apart. She stared at the three black dresses hanging in her closet, her hand moving between them like a demented butterfly.

Glory's head peeked in from the other side of the doorway. "The sleeveless one."

"Uh?" She held up her sleeveless black dress, the one with the red belt and matching shoes.

Two heads bobbed in agreement.

Tabby stripped, more than used to being naked in front of her roommates. Hell, when she'd first moved in with them, they'd been shocked at how easy she felt being nude. Glory had actually asked her if she was gay and trying to tempt them to "the dark side". She'd giggled and said that she might be susceptible to temptation if the dark side had chocolate. Tabby had just shaken her head and put some clothes on. She'd spent so long as a Wolf, she'd forgotten some of the basic parts of being human, like pants. The first time she'd used a toilet after so many years had been an interesting experience, something Mrs. Anderson still chuckled about.

When Cyn and Glory had found out what she was, they'd freaked a little. They hadn't accepted her immediately. In fact, there'd been another girl, Brit, who'd worked at Living Art. Brit had left, refusing to believe what she'd seen the night Tabby, drunk off her ass for the first time in her life, let her Wolf loose in the middle of the apartment. She'd gone so far as to quit her job when Glory and Cyn refused to fire her or kick her out of their apartment. But Glory and Cyn, after the initial shock had passed (and after, they claimed, they wiped up the dog drool), had accepted her without reservations. Hell, they'd mocked her once the hangover had passed. There was still a huge bag of Kibbles N' Bits in the pantry the bitches refused to throw away "just in case".

If she thought they'd take it, she'd make them Pack in a heartbeat. She missed having that connection, the knowledge that there were others for her to rely on without a shadow of a doubt. Part of her wondered if her dipshit ex had ever told his father the truth, or if he'd shrugged and let it go. Let her go.

Tabby shook her head and reached for her hairbrush, smoothing down her hair. That didn't matter now. Her mate would be here any minute. She slicked on some berry gloss and stared at herself in the mirror. Then she stuck out her tongue and made a face. She was so nervous, her Wolf was whining. She slipped her feet into the red high heels, grabbed her favorite purse and headed for the living room. "Well?"

Cyn circled her finger. "Twirl."

Tabby twirled.

Glory wolf-whistled. "See you at work tomorrow."

Cyn snickered and threw a bunch of condoms at her. "You'll need these."

Tabby swallowed. "I'm gonna throw up." Nausea roiled in her belly. She bent and picked up the condoms just as the doorbell rang.

Glory had the door open before Tabby could hide the packets. "C'mon in!"

In stepped the hottie from the store. He wore a green shirt that really emphasized his hazel eyes, dark wash jeans that looked painted onto his thighs and thick-soled black boots. Now that she was upright, she could see how tall he was. He towered over her, the top of her head barely reaching his upper lip, even in her four-inch heels. She'd hit his chin in her bare feet. His bald head gleamed, his jaw clean-shaven. She could see the tattoo that circled his biceps and her fingers itched to trace the design. In his hand, he held a daffodil.

My favorite flower. How did he know? Tabby smiled, knowing her mouth was trembling. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her flowers. "For me?"

He held it out, a smile on his full lips. "Hello, Tabby."

"Thank you." She reached for the daffodil.

He coughed. "I'll take those." He reached over and removed the condoms from her hand, grinning at her embarrassed squawk. "It's okay, honey. I'm just glad one of us is, um, prepared." He eyed the condoms. "Very prepared." He unrolled them, one eyebrow rising in disbelief. "And optimistic."

Glory was practically doubled over with laughter. Tabby's face was beet red. She snatched the condoms back with her free hand, snarling as one got left behind in his big paw. She could hear Cyn snuffling and snorting behind her and just knew they were practically choking on their laughter.

She turned to her two roommates with a smile. "Don't make me forget I'm housebroken." They stopped, but from the way they were clinging together, Tabby figured it was only a matter of time before one of them broke again. She turned back to her new mate. "And you, whose name I don't even know." She smiled at Mr. Chocolate. "Thank you for the flower. My name's Tabitha Garwood."

Mr. Sin held out his paw, the condom miraculously gone. "Bunny." She wondered if he'd dropped it or shoved it into his pocket for later.

Wait. "Bunny," she repeated carefully.

"Alexander Bunsun, but everyone calls me Bunny." He grinned.

She sniffed. Nope, his scent is definitely Bear.

“Are you laughing at my name?” Bunny’s hands went to his hips, but she could tell he wasn’t pissed by the way his lips quirked up.

She blinked. “Yes.”

He coughed, but she could tell he was trying not to laugh. “Dinner?” He held out his arm.

She gave him her sweetest smile and took it. “Yes.”

“Hold on.” Glory stopped them by placing her hand on Bunny’s arm, her expression worried. For all that Glory liked to flirt like mad, when it came down to actual dating she could be a real worrywart.

Bunny chuckled her under the chin. “I’ll take care of her. My word on it.”

Glory studied him, and Bunny stood still, allowing her intense scrutiny. Glory relaxed and nodded, looking relieved. Tabby wasn’t sure she felt the same.

Bound by Nature

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A Forces of Nature Novel

It doesn't take Hayden Garrett's college degree to figure out why Officer Josh Peterson is the last man alive he wants to face. Not because of the council's harebrained idea to broker peace between their clans.

It's the sweaty palms that prove Hayden never got over his embarrassing attraction to his alpha rival. Mate with him? Nothing fills Hayden with more desire—or dread. Josh doesn't have a gay hair in his fur. At least not one he owns up to.

Despite Josh's reputation for being a connoisseur of female flesh, he's always cared about Hayden. In a different world, they might have been friends. Now, face to face after five years, the bitterness in Hayden's eyes fills Josh with regret for what could have been—should have been.

As Hayden and Josh journey through rituals—and intimacies—that will knit their souls for life, passion and anger flares, revealing a powerful secret. The truth about a long-ago sharing of hearts, bodies and souls that ended in tragedy...

Warning: Steamy love between two rival alpha werewolves, a pregnant moon that inspires mating urges, and one shy guy who knows exactly what he wants.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bound by Nature:

Hayden could have just gone ahead and shot himself. At least it would have gotten the torture over with. Butterflies kicked around inside his gut, his heart pounded with expectation, and his palms sweated with the worst kind of dread and embarrassment. No fucking way was this prearranged meeting going to end well. It wasn't even going to happen. The hair along Hayden's nape kept prickling, giving him a bad feeling about the whole set up.

The council elders had decided that drastic measures were called for in order to stop recent escalating violence between the two rival packs in the area. Lately the aggression and marking had breached boundaries, and just last week two males—one from each of their packs—had wound up dead after a bloody brawl. As a result, the elders demanded a peace settlement. That's why they'd arranged this meeting between Hayden, second in line of his own pack, and the secondary Alpha from the other clan.

Hayden was hardly involved with pack policies or dealings these days, but as heir apparent, he'd shown up as requested. And Joshua Peterson—curse his unreliable, smug ass—was supposed to be here representing his own pack in the exact same capacity. Hayden cringed inside just thinking about seeing the other wolf.

Josh Peterson was literally the last man alive he wanted to face, not about anything and definitely not about the council's current proposition. Now, it appeared Josh didn't even have the balls to show for the sham of a meeting.

Hayden had known the idea sucked from the first moment the council members approached him, suggesting this unique way of brokering peace between the warring clans. "Given your special...situation," they'd said, "we thought this initiative might have particular appeal to you."

Because he was gay he was supposed to roll over and play dog? Supposed to be satisfied with taking a rival and near enemy as a lifemate? Hayden couldn't imagine anything more mortifying than binding himself to a man whom he'd always wanted, but who would never return his own desires and longings. Especially not with as primal and powerful the mating act was between any two wolves, gay or straight. The supernatural bonding linked their souls and bodies together, a process that began during sex and continued to solidify over a period of weeks. Weeks when two literally became knit together as one. Weeks when the sheer power of the connection inhibited the mated pair's ability to transform from human to werewolf.

Hell, no, he didn't want to share anything that intimate or emotional with Joshua Peterson, not now, not ever. Hayden had finally gotten over the damned guy, and he wanted to keep it that way—not talk about some jack-off council member's idea of them mating for peace.

Hayden snorted at the ludicrous nature of the proposition. He was gay, had been sure of it since he was fifteen. Josh, on the other hand, was a strong, brooding alpha male who—although also unmated—probably didn't have a gay hair in his fur. At least not one he'd willingly own up to.

Great, perfect plan, especially given their past. Hayden buried his face in his hands, shuddering at the memory of that horrible December night five years earlier. He shivered at the images flashing through his mind, hating that a spiral of desire shot straight to his cock. He felt it swell, pressing tightly against the rough denim of his jeans, and he shifted slightly in his seat so he wouldn't ache so badly.

Yeah, dude, you're over the guy. Clearly.

He was here for his people, not for Joshua—well, for Josh's people, too, in a strange sense. They were all werewolves, after all, a secret that bound them together, even as it separated their two packs, which was how the council had managed to gain Hayden's participation so far. Because of one simple reason: He believed peace was possible between their clans. In theory, at least, the elders' idea made sense. What better way to bring harmony and unify their packs, than through their younger alpha males bonding to each other? Such same-sex pairings were not entirely unheard of among werewolves, although extremely rare.

So rare, in fact, that Hayden remained single and unmated at almost twenty-seven years old. Joshua Peterson, on the other hand, was a prowler of women, a connoisseur of what lay between their feminine legs. Normally Josh hung in bars just like this one, going on the hunt every weekend. Hayden had sometimes glimpsed him across the way, working his moves, and what he'd observed left absolutely no doubt as to how straight the other wolf truly was.

It was also obvious enough why Josh didn't have a mate himself—he wasn't going to lay down with a female and let himself be claimed or mated. So why in hell did the council think Josh would roll over for any male wolf, Alpha or otherwise?

Yeah, this plan was fucked already. And mortifying as hell. Hayden didn't need his Dartmouth degree to realize what a field day Josh and his pals must be having over this situation. No doubt they'd been guffawing about this meeting ever since it was set up two weeks ago.

Hell, they were probably watching Hayden through the front window even now, observing his nervous binge drinking while patting old Josh on the back. Good work, buddy! He still wants you! Just like he always did, the faggot freak.

Hayden squinted at the large plate glass window at the front of the saloon, but it was too dark to see outside. Now he was becoming paranoid.

Just calm down and get it over with, he coached himself. If Josh didn't show, he would have fulfilled his duty, end of discussion—and knowing Joshua Peterson like he did, Hayden was sure he'd never turn up tonight. Good ole smirking Josh would leave him feeling like a total ass, and laugh about it for the rest of their natural lives.

Hayden buried his face in both hands again, cursing the elders. This mating was a total wet dream for them...and an utter nightmare for him.

A blast of cool air hit his fevered skin, and Hayden glanced up, squinting blearily. Only then did he realize he'd already gotten a bit drunk, but not so wasted that he knew his eyes weren't deceiving him. Oh yeah, he recognized that confident, graceful stride, as well as the police uniform and stocky build of the man wearing it. He gave a half-hearted wave as Josh approached the back booth Hayden had selected for the meeting.

"Hey, man," Josh said, his voice deeper than it had ever been in the past. His body was bigger and bulkier, too, and they had to adjust the table slightly to

accommodate his muscular form. Josh slid into the booth, dumping the contents of his pockets on the table between them—wallet, cop’s badge, car keys.

“Not even a hello for an old friend?” Josh asked with a smile, the look in his eerie-light eyes seemingly sincere. The man pulled off a ski cap, raking fingers through hair that still curled slightly despite how short he now wore it.

“You’re late,” Hayden said sullenly.

Why couldn’t Josh have just saved them both the trouble at this point? Hayden stared into his beer, feeling miserable and deciding that he might definitely be halfway drunk.

Joshua flagged a passing server and ordered a Sprite. Then, he turned back to face Hayden, relaxing into the booth seat. “I’m really sorry, buddy. The boss grabbed me for a last minute ride and couldn’t get out of it. I hated making you wait.”

Hayden met his gaze, tapping his Blackberry. “This never rang.”

“I’m not allowed to make personal calls while on duty, Hayden.” Josh’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he kept smiling. “What, you gonna grill me the whole time or what? I’m here, aren’t I? Same as you.”

“For this totally fucked-up and fucked-over plan.” Hayden shook his head, peeling at the label on his beer bottle.

Josh’s expression darkened. “You never used to sound so jaded.”

“A lot’s happened in my life since...”

“Since we got together last,” Josh finished smoothly for him, his expression open and not unkind.

“Yeah, since my innocent youth.” Hayden laughed bitterly, staring across the bar.

“I’d hate to see you lose your dreams, Hayden,” Josh said gently. “You’re the smartest guy in our crowd, with so much potential and talent. Don’t get cynical.” Josh leaned forward, planting hands openly in front of them. “Promise me that you won’t.”

“Why should you fucking care?” Hayden pinned Josh with a hard gaze. He had no clue about all that Hayden had endured since that night five years earlier. If Hayden had become cynical, it was with damned good reason. “Huh? Why should you give a shit what I do or how I live, Peterson?”

Josh’s vibrant, lovely eyes never so much as blinked. He stared at Hayden for a long, intense moment, then in an extremely quiet voice said, “Simple, Hayden. Because more than you’d probably believe right now, I do care.”

Forbidden: The Temptation

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A year ago, Jacob Madison got more than he bargained for during a rock-climbing trip to Yosemite. A freak accident left him badly injured, at the mercy of the elements—and the wolves who rescued him. If it hadn't been for them, he'd be dead. He'd also still be human. Now he's back, hoping to find out who he is and what he's become. Instead, he finds smart, sexy Allison Connelly.

A forensic psychologist, Allison is newly divorced and proudly standing on her own two feet...until an unexpected storm shears off the snow bank she's standing on. She plunges down an icy ravine, thinking she's heading for oblivion. Then she lands in the arms of a tall, dark Texan. Jake.

Brought together by circumstance and bound by passion, secrets from their past threaten their future before it can begin. And somewhere in the mountains lurks a rogue Were turned serial killer. Whatever the danger Jake's inner beast poses to Allison, there's only one way to protect her—unleash it. Even if it costs him her love.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: This book contains raging winter storms, truly inspiring sex, a kick-butt heroine, and one very hot, dirty-talking cowboy...who's sometimes furry.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Forbidden: The Temptation:

I rolled onto my side and studied Allison's back, resisting the urge to touch her. I listened intently to her breathing, trying to determine if she'd drifted off.

"What?" She'd been on the edge of sleep. Her voice sounded far away.

"You're amazing."

"I bet you say that to all the girls you save."

"Only the ones who swallow."

She pushed back against me. It was probably meant as a sign of reproach but my dick thought it encouraging. It was semi-hard and slipped right between the cleft of her ass.

"I should let you sleep," I murmured, gently kissing her shoulder.

"You should sleep too."

"Can't. Too many thoughts going through my head."

She rolled over, more awake now.

"What are you thinking about?" She ran the tips of her fingers across my forehead as if she were trying to smooth out the rough spots in my psyche. If that were her goal, she was going to need a hammer and a chisel.

"Doesn't matter, go to sleep."

She frowned.

"It's none of my business," I added.

"It's keeping you awake." She kissed me, softly on the mouth. "Ask."

"Tell me about your marriage, about your divorce. You said you had baggage. I want to understand."

"Why?"

"Because I like you. I want to see more of you."

She smiled. "I'm pretty sure you've already seen all there is of me, Dallas."

I threaded my fingers through her hair at the base of her skull and looked her in the eye, my gaze steady and unwavering. "I want to *see* you," I repeated.

She nodded and licked her lips. "You might not like everything you see."

"You haven't disappointed me yet."

She rolled over, gazed up at the ceiling, and sighed. "Suddenly I feel like I could use a drink."

"Water?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of scotch."

Every minute I was with this woman, I liked her more and more.

I climbed out of bed, walked over to the kitchen area, pulled a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label out of one of the cupboards, and grabbed two glasses.

Allison sat up in bed. "You had scotch and you didn't use it to try to get me drunk and in the sack earlier?"

I made my way back over to her. "That wouldn't have been very honorable." After pouring each of us a generous glass, I set the bottle down on the floor.

"Do men still think of things like honor?"

I handed Allison her scotch, then crawled back into bed with the other. "Some do."

"Have you ever been in love, Dallas?"

"Can't say I have."

"You've never had your heart broken?"

"Superbowl Forty-Two When Eli Manning threw that thirteen-yard touchdown pass to Plaxico Burress with thirty-five seconds to go in the fourth quarter. I cried."

She frowned. Apparently she wasn't a football fan. Guess it's true, nobody's perfect.

"No." I continued, hoping I could make the frown disappear by giving her a real answer. "Not the way you mean. My mother died a couple years ago. That was hard. We were close. I miss her...still."

"I'm sorry." She reached for my hand and held it.

I shrugged. There wasn't really any more to say. I'd opened up and shared. Now there was nothing to do but bask in the small victory.

We lay next to one another for a bit, sipping scotch in companionable silence and looking out the window. The snow was still coming down, hard and heavy, and in the moonlight we could see it.

"When Gavin proposed, it was summer here," she began. "It was beautiful. Have you ever been here during the summer?"

"A few times."

"We'd met the year before."

Apparently, she was ready to talk about Gavin.

"How did you meet?"

"His practice offered one internship slot. It was quite coveted. I applied. I was thrilled when I was awarded the position. I hadn't thought the woman who'd interviewed me cared for me at all. It was only after we were married Gavin confirmed she hadn't. But it didn't matter. He'd watched the interview from behind a mirror and at the time he'd liked what he'd seen."

"Gavin's a..."

"Forensic psychologist. He makes a living assisting with jury selection, being an expert witness, that sort of thing. His practice was—is enormous."

"That's what you do too?"

"Not anymore." She took a sip of her scotch and swallowed. "Now I teach. I couldn't continue to work with him. Not after the break-up. I enjoy teaching. I enjoy standing on my own. Gavin casts a pretty big shadow."

"You're so full of light," I said, thinking out loud. "It's hard to imagine you living in anyone's shadow."

"When we met I was young and naïve. He was, as you said, polished. And confident. Oh was he confident." She turned and studied me for a moment. "You're confident."

"About some things. Wouldn't say I'm polished though," I added, kicking back the remainder of my scotch, then smacking my lips together.

Allison laughed. "Anyway, things were good in the beginning."

"Until?"

She shrugged. "I grew up. The stars in my eyes faded. Gavin didn't love *me*. I don't think he's capable. What Gavin loved was that *I* was so in love with *him*."

"You deserve better."

She shook her head. "Dallas, how can you say that? You don't even know me."

"Anyone would have deserved better." I reached for the bottle, poured myself a bit more, and offered some to Allison.

"No thanks. I'm good."

"To love and be loved. It's what marriage is all about, right?"

"For most. At least in the beginning." Allison shifted onto her side. "If only it could stay that way."

"You want to know what my father said to me the day my mother died?"

"Yes."

"He said, 'Son, for over thirty years I've woken up every morning certain of one thing, I was about to fall in love with your mother all over again. What the hell am I gonna do tomorrow?'"

Her eyes misted over with tears. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Let's go duck hunting'."

She gasped. "You shot at ducks? With guns?"

"No. We threw rocks at them. Of course we used guns."

"I was just about to accuse you of being romantic."

"You don't think a man can be a hunter *and* be romantic?" I climbed out of bed to throw another log on the fire.

That was the question, wasn't it? The one I had been struggling with on some level. How to reconcile the man and the beast, the civilized soul and the predatory animal.

"Maybe," she mused. "But could they be good at both? I don't know. Romance is about connecting. Hunting is about dominating, conquering—"

"Going in for the kill," I finished as I reached for the edge of the covers and pulled them off the bed, leaving Allison naked before me.

"Jake!" she yelped, folding one arm across her breasts, lowering her other protectively between her legs. Suddenly she was exposed, defenseless. Her pulse quickened. Her heart started to race. Her pupils dilated. It was intoxicatingly arousing.

"Allison," I said softly, grabbing hold of her ankles, separating her legs, and tugging. She slid another six inches down the bed.

She started to move, to protest, but then my eyes connected with hers and she froze in place. For several long moments I found myself wondering why, wondering what she'd seen in my gaze. Was it the beast or the man? Were they even separate any longer?

"Your move, Dallas."

I climbed slowly, steadily and with assurance up the length of her body, peppering kisses along the way, nuzzling into the hollow of her hipbone, nibbling, licking, breathing in deeply the musky smell of her sex, scenting traces of myself along the way. The canvas of her skin was already becoming familiar to me, familiar in a way that was comforting, soothing.

A sigh escaped her lips and she arched into me, her hips lifting slightly off the mattress.

"How about some more stew?" Resting my chin on the soft pillow of her stomach, I gazed up into her warm brown eyes.

"You've already had two helpings, you can't still be hungry."

"Are you kidding? I worked up quite an appetite. You're very demanding of your sex slaves."

"We should keep our strength up."

"Right. So, go fetch me some more stew, woman." I ordered, rolling off Allison so my back was to the wall. "Go on." I gave her a little nudge.

"Fetch you some more stew? You've got to be kidding. What about me?"

"Tell you what, you feed me now, I'll fuck you again later."

Allison's cheeks burned red.

"I can't believe you just said that."

"Believe it."

Finding Forgiveness

Dana Marie Bell

To forgive is divine...if he can pin his lover down long enough to beg for it.

Poconos Pack, Book 1

Ben Malone's role as Marshall attunes him to every nuance of the pack's wellbeing—which means he's forced to feel every one of his mate's hangovers. It's the one reason Ben will never claim Dave Maldonado. Being alone is better than being with someone who lives in a bottle.

Dave was destined to be a pack Alpha until his first migraine hit at age fifteen, the day he caught his future mate holding hands with another boy. In the nine agonizing years since, he's contented himself as Beta, but never learned to live with the pain and confusion of Ben's rejection.

Dave's worst attack yet sends him to the hospital—and brings them both face to face with the misunderstanding that's kept them apart all these years. It's too late, though. Dave is headed for Gay Pride Week at Disney World with one goal in mind. *Forget Ben Malone.*

Ben's got a problem with that. Only one man is destined to hold *his* David. And he'll give anything, even his last shred of pride, to win forgiveness—and the right to finally claim his mate.

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, graphic language, and male/male love scenes between two top dogs. Who knew Rock Paper Scissors could be such fun?

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