Werewolves
of
NEW YORK
I
FALEENA HOPKINS

WEREWOLVES OF NEW YORK BOOK 1

NATHANIEL

FALEENA HOPKINS

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About the Author

In real life wolves will do anything to avoid mankind.

— LIAM NEESON

CHAPTER 1

While flashing blue and yellow club lights lacerated her pretty face, Rose made her way through the undulating crowd, yelling, “I need to get laid!!!!” Headed for two seats that just opened at the bar, she didn’t see the rolled eyes and exasperated look of her best friend Michelle who was attempting to keep up, despite the hindrance of severely high heels and uncooperative club-goers.

Rose stopped in the middle of the room, imprisoned by a fresh beat blaring through the expensive sound system, drunken arms flying up as her hips swayed.

Descending upon her, Michelle said, “Be careful! Don’t say those things so loud!”

“Oh, you’re always so uptight!” Rose snapped, her light brown hair bouncing as she resumed her oh-so-purposeful journey to the bar.

Michelle grabbed Rose’s arm and swung her around. “Coming from a *lawyer*, I take that very personally. I am not *so* uptight! I’m just trying to make sure you don’t get hurt.” She added in a loud-whisper, “This is New York City. A woman has to be careful!”

Rose scoffed loudly, and then slurred, “We’re smack in the middle of a public place. I could yell FUCK ME NOW, just like that, and no one would do anything about it.” With a dramatic swing of her pretty head, she looked around. “See? They just think I’m drunk.”

Michelle smiled despite herself. “You *are* drunk.”

As irritating as Rose was being tonight, Michelle loved the hell out of her.

The girl always had a way of making her forget about work, her lack of a partner, and the fact that they'd cancelled The Paradise after only two seasons. They'd met when one of the companies Michelle was working for with her private social marketing business, broke the contract and didn't pay her. Rose had come with high recommendations that said she was a viper in the courts who'd get the money due, and then some. When they'd met for their first consultation the two had hit it off as if they were sisters…and sometimes got on each other's nerves in exactly the same way. Best friends ever since, and that was two years ago. Oh, and Rose took that company to the fucking cleaners just like the referral promised. It gave Michelle enough money to be choosier about who she worked with, a luxury she'd never stop being grateful for.

In especially rare form tonight as it was her birthday, Rose reached behind Michelle's head and unleashed the messy bun from its elastic band, tossing it in her face. "There! That's better. Loosen up!" Dark chocolate-brown locks cascaded onto Michelle's bare shoulders, the spaghetti straps disappearing entirely on her little black dress. "And I AM drunk. What's wrong with that? It's a celebration!" she said with sarcasm, then flipped around and took off running.

Michelle stared after Rose and glanced down to her own loose, long hair. It smelled like sweet shampoo, still slightly damp from the shower, and with her cleavage hiked up–thanks to the most insane underwire ever invented–even without a mirror she knew she must look pretty smokin' hot.

So she put her hair back up.

Running back to retrieve their forgotten purses from the booth, Michelle wondered, *Good Lord, why are birthdays always so hard?* Her elbows stuck out as she fought to tie her hair into place, and she knocked into people along the way, distracted and trying to get to their bags before they got stolen. "Excuse me!" On seeing the booth still empty, she exclaimed, "Oh, thank God!"

In a hurry, she climbed onto the red leather cushion on all fours, her mind still on men, not wanting the distraction of them, *and* on her drunken friend who was probably surrounded by them this very minute. In her haste, up went the hem of her very tight, little black dress. She yelped and straightened up like a shot, tugging the skin tight fabric to a safer location as she peeked behind her to

see if anyone saw.

Eyes of the palest green flashed upward and locked on her mortified face. Frozen, kneeling on the leather seat, her bun askew on her head, she stared back at a man who was without a doubt the most handsome she'd ever seen. He had thick, dark, wavy hair, a square jaw and sexy lips parted in surprise. He wore an expensive suit, complete with tie, and his hands rested casually in his slack's pockets. From the darkening look on his features, he'd seen the crotch of her lacy pink panties and hadn't minded at all.

Michelle blinked herself back to focus. She glanced around, grabbed the purses from the shadows and caught sight of her fucked-up hair in the reflection of the mirrored tabletop. Her thunderstruck brown eyes widened and she mumbled, "Great. I look like a spaz," as she pulled down the ridiculous bun and let her hair go free. Climbing out of the booth rather gracefully despite herself, she kept her eyes on the floor, but could not help casting a glance to her left to see if he was watching. He was. They locked in a visual tug-of-war until… SPLASH.

"Dammit! Watch where you're going!"

Michelle cried, "Sorry!" wiping off the cold, clear, olive-smelling liquid from the girl's red blouse with her hand. "So sorry!"

"I just bought that martini! Stop doing that!"

"Sorry! I'll get you another one! I'll be right back."

"Do me a favor and don't."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Michelle snapped.

Backing down, the woman muttered, "Nothing. Just leave me alone."

As she headed for the bar Michelle stole a glance over to the green-eyed stranger. He was gone.

"Chelle! Hurry up!" Rose yelled.

Distracted, Michelle muttered on her way, "I have the worst luck with men." But she couldn't help searching one last time.

With a seductive yet somehow slightly pathetic smile on her face, Rose leaned over the glossy, black countertop toward the baby-faced pretty-boy working behind it. Her breasts threatened to tumble out for all to see, so

Michelle gritted her teeth and warned her, “Rosey…watch it, baby. You’re about to fall out of that dress.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” the bartender smirked.

“Look at that smile,” Rose purred to him. “Did I tell you yet that it’s my birthday? Wanna be my present?”

Michelle rolled her eyes as he reached for a bottle of Patron tequila. “Your birthday, huh? Well, then it’s time to celebrate.”

Rose winked at him. “You knew I was drinking Patron, huh? You were watching me earlier, weren’t you?”

He cocked an eyebrow that said he had been.

Staring between them, Michelle couldn’t take it anymore. The dude was obviously a douche-bag and nothing good would come of this. That might have been what Rose wanted now, but in the morning, not so much. Friend-to-the-rescue time. Michelle threw out her arm to stop him from pouring. “Don’t. She’s had enough.” He ignored her. “Okay, that’s it. I’m sorry, but she won’t be drinking that. We’re leaving.” She shoved Rose’s purse at her, feeling slightly bad about the *oof* her friend made as it knocked the wind out.

Pointing to the full glass, he grunted, “I’m not pouring expensive booze down the drain. She *ordered* it.”

Michelle shot him a look that meant business. “No. She didn’t. You did. And you can clearly see she’s drunk. It’s illegal to serve her, and you know it. So, pour that tequila out or get a call from the city declaring your liquor license removed for negligence.” She wasn’t a lawyer, but she’d seen Rose act this way enough times to know what to do. Rose glared at her, though. Apparently imitation is the sincerest form or *irritation* when blocking one’s bed-buddies.

Michelle yanked her off the chair and pulled her toward the exit.

“I don’t like you!”

“You love me, and you know it.”

As she thrust her friend into the fresh air of Manhattan’s West Village, Michelle set her down by the wall and went to hail a cab. Outside the lounge club patrons stood in clumps smoking and chatting in private tones, unconcerned with the argument beside them. It was New York after all. People could be

stabbing each other and no one would blink.

“He wanted me!”

“He would have taken you home and never called you again.”

“What wrong with that?” Rose grumbled. “It’s my birthday.”

With her arm in the air, Michelle admitted only to herself that birthday or no birthday, she too could use a good romp in the proverbial hay to release the tension of the last, oh, five years. Ever since she’d graduated college, it had been work work work mixed in with friend-time and inconsistent dates with inconsistent men. Men raised by women. Men who were really boys. Men who wanted their mommy. Well, she didn’t want to be her lover’s mommy. She wanted to be his bitch. His conquest. His slut. His lady and equal in public, but whore and slave in the bedroom. She wanted her clothes ripped off her…and...

Straightening her spine, Michelle shook off her daydream and focused on the problem at hand. “Another time. You wouldn’t have remembered any of it anyway and...whoopsie!” She ran to grab slumping Rose before she hit the unforgiving pavement. Resting her against the dark window, she pulled at her friend’s short blue dress to keep her decent. Rose closed her eyes and there was sadness to her face that broke Michelle’s heart. She smoothed down the shoulder-length light brown hair and held her friend’s cheek, saying quietly, “Happy Birthday, lovely. It’s not as bad as it seems.”

“Hrmmm…”

Michelle sighed and went back to hailing a cab, stepping off the sidewalk this time to show she was serious. The first two drove by taken, but the third stopped. The driver, a round-faced man who originated from the Dominican Republic, was nice enough to help her get Rose in the car without having to be asked. Michelle slid in next and before he closed the door, she said, “Thank you.”

“It’s Saturday,” he shrugged, like been-there-done-that-every-week. “Where are you headed?”

“Downtown, please.”

As they rode, Rose snored and Michelle stared at the passing buildings with a growing sense of disappointment. For what, she didn’t know. Her job was

fulfilling in its own way. She loved the creative aspect of getting a great product seen by structuring compelling social-media marketing campaigns. She knew how to leash and control the power of the Internet and most of the executives at the major companies hiring her had no clue, so her voice was heard and appreciated. But between all the hours she put into promoting their products, and promoting her own name to maintain consistent income, it left little time for play.

"Boy, do I need to have fun," she told the closed glass window.

"What do you do?" the driver asked her.

Surprised, Michelle met his eyes in the dirty rearview mirror. "What? Oh…I have my own business."

"No, what do you do for fun? You just said that you needed to have fun."

"Did I say that aloud?" She glanced away from his kind, inquiring gaze out onto the dark city streets again. He dropped it.

CHAPTER 2

After tucking Rose into bed, Michelle locked up and took the elevator to the lobby, wondering why she didn't ask the driver to wait for her. It was hard to get a taxi downtown this late, but when he'd asked her that question, she didn't have an answer and it unsettled her. The club wasn't fun, save for the two brief minutes she'd held the attention of Mr. Gorgeous.

Walking out, she glanced around the dimly lit street and crossed her arms considering waiting for a cab.

Calling one wouldn't do any good on a Saturday.

Why hadn't she worn a coat tonight? "Because I thought I'd be inside a freaking car, that's why." Sighing, she started walking to her one-bedroom apartment in the East Village, planning to catch the very first cab that passed even if it had someone in it. She'd jump in front of it if she had to.

With her clutch bag tucked under her arm and her eyelids blinking way too much, she kept her head down and didn't see the limo sedan parked a block or so up the street.

Nervous at being out this late alone, she passed several darkened businesses until she spotted something that turned her stomach.

An alley on the left coming closer by the second.

Baby hairs all over her body shot up as scenes from horror films passed before her.

Don't be such a wimp, Michelle.

No one's going to be there.

You’re scaring yourself for nothing.

But another voice whispered, ignored, *Call a fucking cab!*

The shadows grew as she crossed in front of the alley. She looked left even though it was the last thing she wanted to do.

No one was there, and she relaxed, smiling and chiding herself inwardly for watching those damn films in the first place.

To face the fear, she stopped walking and stared into the darkness of the empty alley, taking deep breaths.

There was debris on the ground, and a graffiti-covered metal trash bin to the left, but no monsters or ghouls.

She grinned at her immaturity and called into the darkness, “Boo!”

So engrossed in her own personal psyche-out, she hadn’t seen a hooded man crossing the street.

Hadn’t heard his filthy sneakered feet swiftly making their way over.

Hadn’t seen the look in his eyes as he clocked her and glanced around to make sure she was alone.

It wasn’t until he was two steps from her did she hear him and turn, startled, nearly falling over as her heels caught the seam in the sidewalk.

Before she knew what was happening, he shoved her into the shadows.

She cried out as she hit the gravelly surface.

Her clutch bag fell to the hard ground, its contents spilling out.

Stunned and scared, she stared up at her attacker, but couldn’t see his eyes for the sunglasses he wore.

He was Caucasian and from his skin, maybe mid-thirties.

He sneered and lunged at her.

She tried to get away but he pinned her down and covered her screams with his hand.

“Shut up!”

He pushed her legs open with his as she fought him, tears rushing from terrified eyes.

The stink of body odor perforated her nostrils and she gagged.

Hearing his zipper open was the worst sound she’d ever heard in her life.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *If I don't see it happening, it won't haunt me for the rest of my life.*

She felt faint but kept fighting him through the dizziness that descended upon her, kicking and hitting.

It did no good.

She had no training.

A strange unearthly sound came from somewhere outside of them, a wild animal's snarl but greater, because it was paired with a voice so thunderous her body vibrated with its every syllable.

"GET OFF HER!"

The assailant was dragged off her like someone had tied his feet to a truck and put it in high gear.

He shouted, and the preternatural voice echoed off the walls of her chest cavity.

"RUN."

Raving mad, with hot tears blurring her vision, Michelle leapt up and ran, kicking off her heels and not looking back.

Her bare feet slapped against the cold cement as the most terrifying, masculine scream came from the alley.

She ran twenty whole blocks as fast as she could past late-night partiers, homeless people and even empty taxi cabs, not seeing any of them.

When she got to her building on 1st Avenue, she grabbed onto the marble exterior and gasped for air, immediately hitting all the buttons on the security box. Someone buzzed her in and she shut the glass door behind her, staring out to see if anyone had followed.

There was no one, but it didn't make her feel better.

She rushed to the staircase and up three flights to her apartment limping from the pain in her legs and the adrenaline that pumped through her.

Shaking fingers found the spare key hidden along the top of the doorway.

Rushing inside, she locked the deadbolt, grabbed a chair and braced it against the door, knowing she'd left her keys in the alley along with her driver's license that bore her address.

It would be a long night until morning came and she could change the locks. She wouldn’t feel safe until then.
She crumbled to the hardwood floor and sobbed.

CHAPTER 3

Darik casually shouted, “That you, Nathaniel?” at the sound of the closing front door.

The questioned didn’t answer, his mind on what he’d just done. He dropped the keys into the hand-carved wooden bowl on the table just inside the Midtown two-bedroom flat he shared with Eli. Strolling into the well-decorated living room, he nodded to his roommate and their guest, two of his pack members. The balcony door opened and Dontae, the fourth and final member, walked in with a look that said he knew things. But the truth was Dontae was naturally suspicious ever since Catherine.

All three werewolves stared at their friend, the new arrival, their nostrils flaring at his impossible to ignore stench.

Oh yeah.

Well there goes lying about where I’ve been.

From where Eli sat on their couch, he demanded, “Why do you smell like murder?”

Nathaniel exhaled deeply and walked behind the sleek bar to reach for Lagavullin scotch among the many high-end liquor bottles stored below. He raked strong fingers through his dark hair, popped the top off the bottle with his other hand, and ignored the cork-cap rolling toward the end of the bar where it hovered. Very aware they were waiting for an answer, he poured a hefty amount into a sleek, clear rocks-glass. “What can I say? The world is shy one disgusting human being as of tonight.”

As Darik scratched his beard, he exchanged looks with Eli. They turned to include Dontae who stood above them, still by the glass balcony door. Nathaniel glanced over. Dontae's expression was grave and his returned glance said he was not happy with this information. How could he be?

Eli, the wolf closest to Nathaniel, shot up off the couch and approached his roommate. "What did you do?"

Green eyes stayed locked on amber liquid as he brought the glass to his lips. "Nothing you wouldn't have."

"Let me be the judge of that." Eli grabbed the bottle. "Shit. Hand me a glass."

Nathaniel reached for one, dropping it onto the counter with a thud. Images of her sobbing on the ground with that monster on top of her flashed before him. He grimaced and took another sip to make it go away. *Why hadn't I been paying closer attention?* "I stopped a rape."

"Oh, well, you're right. I would've done that, but…" he trailed off, not wanting to be the one to introduce the obvious, the thing they were all worried about.

Being discovered for what they really were.

Darik shuffled his long limbs on the ottoman. "Pour me another one, too."

Dontae said nothing.

They were all dressed in suits as all four had been out that night, agreeing to meet back here for a last nightcap if they didn't find anyone interesting with whom to spend a few hours. That they were all here was a little annoying, for several reasons, but at least Nathaniel didn't have to explain the situation more than once. And explaining he had to do.

He knew this.

They were civilized.

They didn't take human lives unless absolutely necessary, which it rarely ever was.

So why did he smell like murder?

He walked to the center of the room. There was a kitchen off to the side hidden by a large white screen they'd installed for design and appealing use of

space. Recessed lighting had been added into the entire flat after moving in, as well. The bathroom and kitchen sinks were refitted with high-end faucets and drains, as were the two showers and bathtubs. Stone tile replaced carpets.

The only thing that was wanting was a fireplace, which Eli too often reminded Nathaniel he wished they had. But what could be done? They couldn't install a chimney in a tenth floor flat in a twenty-four-floor high-rise Downtown no matter how good they were at their jobs.

The four naturally nocturnal creatures were architects by day. Together they ran a firm, which employed no one but them. It protected them to keep the business small with the strange hours they often kept. Some things in their line of work–meetings with contractors, plumbers, electricians, the city–couldn't all be done at night by any means, since everyone they worked with was human.

Kept normal hours.

Might ask questions.

Spread rumors.

But with a small team of only them, they were able to take at least one day a week to sleep all day long, and let their wolves reset in the way that felt best. Sometimes more than one, if they felt like slacking off. The pleasures of being your own boss…

Darik leaned forward with a gleam in his blue eyes. "Go on."

"Don't get too excited, Darik," Nathaniel frowned. "I did what I had to do. Nothing more."

Bored with his night's lack of adventure, Darik wasn't easily dissuaded. "Come on. Give me some details, Nate. It's not every day we get to take someone out."

Dontae growled, causing all heads to turn, "Darik, if we let you, you'd kill a man for cutting you off in traffic. Put your leash back on."

Eli looked to Nathaniel. "What happened?"

"There was a woman. She was walking by herself. Didn't see the guy coming. If I hadn't been there, she would have been…hurt." Nathaniel downed his glass, thinking, *if I'd have just looked up a few moments earlier...*

Eli opened his mouth to speak but Dontae interrupted with authority, "What I

don’t understand is why you had to kill him.”

All eyes locked on Nathaniel for an answer. It was the question of the century, wasn’t it? He’d been asking himself that ever since he’d literally shredded the guy’s arteries.

Eli ventured, “You’ve stopped people from doing shitty things before…”

“…We all have,” Darik overlapped.

Dontae finished, “But we don’t murder them.”

Green eyes flashed around the room and his fist closed, breaking the glass in his hands. “You think I don’t know that? That I have to be told like some cub?” Blood dripped onto the stone by his feet.

Eli rubbed his head; the short shave was often where he found his comfort. “Alright. Easy, boy. We’re just a little surprised, and worried about you. About all of us.” He threw a clean, white bar towel to his buddy.

Darik rose to throw the glass away. He held out his hand and Nathaniel gave it to him, impatient at the whole night. “Give me the towel for a second.” Nathaniel handed it to him and shook his head as Darik wiped up his blood. “I got it, buddy. Don’t look so bummed.” He handed it back so Nathaniel could wrap his nasty wound up.

As Darik brought the wet broken glass to the kitchen, Dontae asked, “What did you do with the body?”

Remembering, Nathaniel dropped his head and closed his eyes, blocking out the visual. “I left it there.”

“YOU WHAT?” Dontae shouted.

Nathaniel shrugged heavy shoulders. “What was I supposed to do, get caught carrying a carcass to the water? Even if I was successful the body would be found eventually and it’d be obvious an animal did it. If an animal killed the guy, what’d the animal do then, try to hide the body in the fucking Bay? Smart animal.”

Darik walked back into the living room, processing out loud, “Right. An animal would just leave it there and not give a fuck.”

“Well, I give a fuck.”

“Yeah. Wow. So now what?”

“Let’s wait for the news and find out,” Eli muttered as he handed Nathaniel a fresh, full glass. “Because it’s sure as hell going to be on there.”

“This is why we don’t kill,” Dontae said, gravely.

Nathaniel dropped onto the couch and took a generous gulp, not flinching as the heat hit his throat. “Dontae. Enough.”

“Are your prints anywhere?” he asked. “What about cameras?”

Nathaniel looked at him. “No cameras. I checked before I shifted. I’m not an idiot.”

“What about the girl?”

“She’s not a girl. She’s a woman,” Nathaniel corrected him, aware of the immediately exchanged glances around him. He rose up. “Look, I’m tired. I’m going to bed.” He downed the scotch and laid the glass on the elegant coffee table. As he passed Eli, he received a supportive swat on the shoulder. It was much needed, especially with Dontae looking at him like he’d never been more disappointed in anyone.

Darik called to his back, “We’ll know more tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

Walking down the short hallway to his room, he heard Darik say, not quietly enough, “What the hell was that about the woman thing?”

Dontae agreed, “Exactly.”

But Eli assured them, “Don’t worry. Nathaniel’s too smart to let a woman get under his skin. He just likes to play hero. We all do.”

CHAPTER 4

Nathaniel closed his bedroom door knowing there was more to it than that. He'd felt something when he'd locked eyes with the brunette who was clearly having a bad night in the club. His *wolf* had caught sight of the base of her panties peeking out when she'd bent over, and then the full back of them as her dress slid all the way to her waist, but when she'd corrected it and turned around, something hit him. First, she was adorable with her hair all a mess and she unaware of it. Second, those eyes of hers, he felt like he'd looked into them before. Something snapped inside of him like he'd found something. And when she'd held his stare that feeling only got worse.

He'd left to escape it. He'd run, but then found himself telling his driver to go home for the night, to take a cab and leave the sedan with him so that he could secretly follow her home and find out where she lived, unencumbered with having to explain why he was stalking someone. But then she'd taken her drunk friend home instead and had naively walked home. There were no cabs downtown at that time of night. She should have known it was dangerous, and called someone. He'd considered offering her a lift, but that would have looked too obvious. She would have known he'd stalked her, and that couldn't happen. So, distracted he'd stared down at the keys trying to will himself to turn the car on and go. He blocked everything out since he was trying to force himself to do something he didn't want to. When he'd looked up, she was gone with the sounds of a struggle arresting his heightened aural senses. Swearing at himself for not paying attention, he'd rushed to save her, and when he'd gotten his teeth

into the guy's neck, the sight of his near-flaccid penis hanging out of his dirty jeans incensed him. The idea that this vial human being was about to hurt her and not only that but take what was his, he couldn't stop himself from killing the sonofabitch.

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, he heard Darik and Dontae go home. A few moments later, a knock came on his door.

"Come in."

Eli walked into the dark room and didn't bother to switch on the lamp. They could both see easily in the dark, and from the look on his face what he was about to say didn't need more light on it. He stood by the wall with the sixty-inch flat screen T.V. set and asked, "You wanna tell me what happened, now that they're gone?"

Nathaniel rose up on his elbows and looked at his best friend. "For a minute I thought you wanted to have a sleep over."

Eli grinned, "Who says I don't?" but the smile stopped at his brown eyes, now glowing in the darkness. Here he didn't have to hide his supernatural qualities as they did out in public.

"When was the last time you killed someone?"

Eli stared at him. "Never have. I thought you knew that." They'd been friends for eleven years, since they were eighteen, but they'd never talked about this subject.

"No." He sat all the way up, his shoulders heavy. "I didn't."

"What about you?" Eli asked.

"Never mind."

Eli nodded, rubbing his closely shaved head as he glanced out the window at the New York skyline before meeting Nathaniel's waiting gaze. "Are you gonna make me torture it out of you?"

Nathaniel smiled a little. "I'd like to see that."

"No, you wouldn't," smirked Eli. "Seriously. What's up with the woman?"

"She's safe now."

"That's not what I mean."

Nathaniel exhaled. "I know. Look, I fucked up. I won't see her again."

Eli's eyebrows rose. "Again?"

Backed into a corner of his own making, Nathaniel confessed everything in the way guys do, with as little detail as possible but covering all the major points. Eli watched and listened, reacting often, as was his way. There was nothing subtle about Eli, you always knew what he was thinking because he wore it on his face. Nathaniel was the opposite, but he wanted to get this off his chest. "She sparked something in me, Eli. It's not normal. I couldn't stop myself. That he was going to do what he was going to do, he had to die."

"What's her name?" Eli asked.

Nathaniel stared at him. "Michelle. Michelle Nero."

Eli nodded. "Nice name. Well, you know what we're going to do tomorrow?"

Foreboding hit him as he sensed no good was going to come from that question. "Watch the news and see what they come up with?"

"Go see this Michelle Nero."

Nathaniel stared, stunned. "What?"

"You have a girl…excuse me, a *woman*, hit you this hard to the point where you'd kill a guy who tried to hurt her? You don't let that one go."

The dancing eyes of his friend didn't take away the shock. In fact, they added to it. "Are you fucking kidding me? I can't go see her. She's dangerous. And why are you coming?"

Eli headed to the door, chuckling. "Because I gotta see this chick, dumbass. I'll set the alarm for noon." He opened the door and turned with a humorously delicate wave of his fingers. "Sleep tight, superhero." Then he was gone.

Nathaniel got out of bed and walked to the window, staring out at the city. "Fuck," he muttered, shaking his head.

CHAPTER 5

Michelle woke up on the floor by her front door at 10:15 a.m. At first she didn't know why she was there or why her body ached so badly, but then it came flooding back to her. Her familiar ringtone had awoken her. It sounded far away like in a dream. She stared into her apartment at the red sofa, the Ikea lamp and coffee table, the kitchen farther back that had a sink full of dirty dishes packed so high she could see it from here.

She got up to get her purse and remembered she'd left it behind. The ringing stopped and then started again and she turned and stared at the door, realizing it was coming from the other side. With a throbbing heart, she put her ear to the door and then peeked through the peephole to see if someone was standing outside. "Hello?" she called through the wood. No response came back.

Running into the kitchen, she grabbed her biggest knife and walked to the door like it might burst open any second. Dragging the chair away from the door, she held the knife at the ready and unlocked the deadbolt. The hallway was empty, but lying on her welcome mat lay her clutch bag.

"What the hell?"

She snatched it up and closed the door quickly, locking it behind her. Everything was inside the purse. No money was missing. Her keys were all there, and since it was Sunday she guessed whoever had left it there hadn't had a chance to make a copy or anything. Confused and not knowing what to think, she checked her phone to see two missed calls from Rose.

Without listening to the voicemail messages, she called her back.

“Hey, I’m sorry about last night, Chelle.” Rose waited, and misunderstood the silence. “Really, I’m sorry. I know I was more than a little embarrassing. Me and birthdays don’t mix; you know that! I can’t help it. Thank you for keeping me safe. Hey…you there?”

Safe. Someone, or some*thing*, had kept Michelle safe last night. Consumed by the memory, she stared at the wall.

After a few awkward seconds, Rose begged, “Can I make it up to you? Brunch? Mimosas? I have the worst hangover and need the best cure ever. The hair of the dog that bit you, they say.”

“Yeah, sure. Where?”

“Really? Great! For a second there, I thought I’d gone too far and you were never going to speak to me again.” Nervous chuckle. “How about Lafayette? It’s in the East Village so you won’t have to go far and–”

“Great. See you in an hour.” She hung up, not saying goodbye or waiting for a response as she headed for her bathroom. When she caught sight of herself in the mirror, the mascara-stained cheeks, knotted hair and wrinkled dress with a broken strap, she shook her head with gratitude. “It could have been so much worse,” she mumbled to her own reflection. “You’re one lucky chick, Michelle. So many aren’t as fortunate.” With a shake of her head, she turned the shower on and washed all the evidence away.

An hour later, she walked into the restaurant looking and feeling more like herself. She planned to tell her friend everything, but the words kept getting stuck. It seemed so dark a thing to haunt a beautiful morning with and she didn’t want to think about it anymore. Putting it behind her seemed a more positive, proactive approach, so she smiled extra wide and suggested a toast instead. Rose raised her glass, waiting.

“To both of us getting home safely,” Michelle said.

Rose paused and clinked the champagne flutes together with a shrug. “We could toast to that every day.”

Michelle took a sip. “Mmm.”

“Right?” Rose licked the pulp from her top lip and set the glass down on top of her menu. “What have you got cooked up this week?”

Happy for the change of subject, Michelle took another sip and set her glass down as she answered, “Well, I’ve hired some teens to do a twitter campaign for Moore Designs.”

“That clothing store in the Meatpacking District?”

“Yeah. I figured hiring people who already love to tweet would take the onus off me. By delegating, I can spend my time thinking of new ideas. I’ve got some cooking.”

Rose shook her head. “I hate twitter.”

“There’s a huge community there.”

“I know. But I am much more private.”

“Except when you’re screaming to the world that you want to get laid,” Michelle teased.

Not missing a beat, Rose yelled out to the room of twenty occupied tables, “I WANT TO GET LAID!” Michelle covered her face with her hands, and Rose leaned forward. “But that doesn’t go past this room. The Internet? That’s a whole different ballgame.”

A guy sitting with his buddy at the table next to them, who couldn’t have been more than twenty offered, “I’ll help you out with that.”

Rose and Michelle glanced over and he received the once over, twice. Turning back to Michelle, Rose went on as though they weren’t interrupted, “Can I pay you back for the cab?”

Michelle’s smile vanished and she hurriedly picked up the menu, toppling over her mimosa. A loud crash sounded as wet, orange liquid-covered glass checkered the tile floor. “Shit!” She jumped up in dismay, lying, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

A busboy called out as he ran over carrying a mop and dust pan. “I’ve got it! Don’t touch it!”

Embarrassed, she looked from the mess to him, to her friend who was watching her. Rose didn’t care about public scenes, but she did care about the law. “Let him get it, Michelle. If you cut yourself, you could sue them. That’s what he’s worried about.”

Michelle sunk back into her chair. “Sorry,” she apologized to the busboy as

he swept up the floor. The momentary silence of the tables around them went back to normal chatter. “I wouldn’t sue them for my clumsiness. Who does that?”

“Assholes. Or desperate assholes.”

“You don’t have pay me for the cab. It’s okay.”

Rose nodded and handed her menu over. “Here, I already know what I want. What’s up with you today? You’re normally my role model of poise and grace and you seem…”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Shaken. You okay?”

Michelle buried her face in the distraction of the menu. “I’m just hungry. And I’m pretty sure I’m done with booze for the day.”

CHAPTER 6

When they said their goodbyes an hour later, Rose was still looking at her like she wondered what Michelle wasn't telling her. She didn't push it, but Michelle felt badly for the look on her friend's face. For some reason, she felt ashamed at having been attacked, even though it wasn't her fault. She was frightened of telling her friend and seeing the sympathy or worse, pity that would surely be there for some time to come. And Rose might blame herself. Saying nothing seemed the best thing to do so that she could move past it, and not have to hear the endless *Are you okay? How are you doing?* asked every time they got together.

But she was definitely shaken, and she needed a nap something awful. Eating a tasty meal had helped her feel a little better, but there was a lingering unrest she couldn't shake. "At least I didn't spill anything on myself," she mumbled as she glanced down to her white t-shirt and sweater. She tucked her hands into loose boyfriend-jeans pockets and walked home enjoying the calming sensation of one foot placed in front of the other. Just like everything in life, one step at a time would make the next chapter of her existence come sooner and last night a distant memory. Time, tragedy's greatest friend.

What if he'd succeeded?

If this is how I feel from just the limited violence I suffered, what if it had been worse?

An image of the green-eyed man from the club appeared before her and she allowed the daydream of him to change the channel of her mind's screen. The

way he'd looked at her had been disarming in the best of ways. It made her smile to remember the look on his face when her dress had betrayed what she was wearing underneath.

Familiar storefronts, tourists, and locals passed by unnoticed and soon she found herself pushing the button on the stoplight across from her place, the warm sun shining on her and adding the lift to her spirits.

She almost felt normal again.

Out of habit she glanced to the front door of her building and saw *him*, the man from the club, standing in front of it wearing dark well-fitting jeans, a black t-shirt and black boots. She stared at him, thinking it the wildest of coincidences. Then he looked over, met her surprised eyes, and offered a tilt of his head in greeting. There was no smile on his face, but the patience there indicated he seemed to be waiting for her.

But that's impossible!

She walked into traffic and his widening eyes and hand flying into the air made her look at what she was doing. She scrambled back onto the sidewalk and glanced away, embarrassed, then found her gaze drifting back to meet his. Michelle tried to look casual when she felt anything but. *What is he doing here?* She bit her lip and glanced around, then back to him. He wasn't alone, she realized. A good-looking man with shaved short hair and mischief in his eyes stepped forward and said something in his ear. His friend wore jeans and a blue t-shirt with yellow writing that read, "Deal With It."

When other pedestrians walked past her, she realized she'd missed the light's change. Joining them as though nothing ridiculously peculiar was happening, she kept pace with the crowd, but could not take her eyes off him. She smoothed her hair self-consciously and then realized she was being silly. *Hold your head high, girl. That's how to do it.*

Arriving in front of him, she glanced to her door and back to him. "What are you doing here?" she blurted, sounding not at all collected.

Looking adorable, he blinked and stammered, "I…uh…"

His friend gave a lop-sided grin and thrust out his hand. "I'm Eli. It's nice to meet you. This is–"

“Nathaniel.” Green eyes flashed as he interrupted to introduce himself. He knocked his friend to the side, holding out his own hand to say again, “I’m Nathaniel.”

Eli laughed, and was ignored.

“Michelle.” She shook his hand. Her eyelashes dropped as she looked at the size of his hand holding her much smaller one. She loved the way their skin looked touching, and how he felt. He was so warm! “Do you have a fever?” she asked, meeting his eyes. Not that she cared if he did. He could have Ebola and she’d still want to touch him.

A light danced in his eyes and he shook his head, still holding her there. He said, huskily, “I run hot.”

Eli snorted and Michelle looked at him like she’d forgotten he was there. He dropped the smile.

Nathaniel asked, with his light green eyes locked on Michelle, “Eli, don’t you have to be somewhere?”

“Yeah. Totally. Have to be somewhere. Someplace. Right now. Nice meeting you.” He walked off, glancing over his shoulder with a final wave neither of them saw.

“Walk with me?”

Michelle nodded as he laced his fingers with hers and led her back in the direction she’d come. They walked for a whole block in silence, waiting at the same stoplight she’d just crossed at, both of their minds occupied as they stared forward. The silence was charged, but comfortable, and she wondered at why being with him felt so perfectly natural. She glanced over to his handsome profile. *Do I know him from somewhere and just can’t remember? No, I would definitely have remembered him.*

But then he raised his arm to hail a cab and one pulled over immediately. Her heart raced as she became conscious of the fact that she did not know him. Whatever this was, it made no sense and he was not a friend. She had no idea how he’d come to be there, how he’d found her, and the realization pulled her hand away with violent force.

“Hold on a second! I’m not getting into a cab with you.”

A deep crease pierced his brow as he searched her face. “I was taking you to Central Park. For a walk…where we could get to know each other. It’s a beautiful day and I thought…” He stopped cold at her expression.

“Look. I see you for the first time last night, and today you’re outside my apartment like you’re waiting for me or…or something? It seemed like you were.”

“I was waiting for you.”

Her manicured hand flew up as a boundary between them. “How did you know where I live? Did you follow me last night?” Struggling, she muttered, “No, you couldn’t have followed me, because…” and stopped before *because you’re not that fucking rapist. He was smaller than you and sunglasses or no, did not have your face!* “Do you know the bartenders from last night and they gave you my card info? How do you know where I live? Who are you?”

He frowned and she could see he didn’t know how to answer the question. “I obviously didn’t think this through. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He trailed off, lost in thought. He waved the waiting cabbie off and turned to frown at her again. She waited for him to say more, but he just stared at her, and if she weren’t careful, she’d forget under that gaze to protect herself from him and any man who couldn’t tell her how he’d found where she slept at night. “I don’t know what to say. I don’t have any answers I can give you, and I know that sounds strange, but…”

“You could just tell me the truth.”

He glanced to the sidewalk and then to his left, tortured. “I can’t,” he whispered.

Stunned, Michelle mumbled, “Great,” and headed home. Walking backwards, she called to him, “Until you can tell me the truth, don’t bother talking to me. I don’t do *this.*” She spun around and left him standing there. Before getting home she changed course and found a key shop open on the weekends where she begged the guy to change her lock that very day.

CHAPTER 7

Nathaniel watched her yelling at him. Of course she was scared; why hadn't he thought of that before showing up like this? But he couldn't tell her the truth. She had him in a bad spot and she didn't even know it. She'd looked at him like he was the problem, like she was scared of *him*.

What could he tell her?

I'm the one who saved you?

That guy will never bother you again, or anyone else–I made sure of that? I know where you live because I brought your things back to you? That bag in your hands, I know what's in it. I studied everything in the purple wallet you've stuffed too many receipts into for it to close. I even know you forgot to take your pill yesterday.

When she left, didn't turn around or look back, he walked to the nearest building and leaned against it, watching her, oblivious to the many, many New Yorkers walking past him enjoying the bright Indian summer day. He pulled out his phone and called Eli. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"You scare her off or something? Why are you calling me?"

"Yeah. She wanted to know how I knew where to find her."

Eli exhaled like a tire letting out air. "Right. We should have thought of that. I'm sorry but with the ass you get, it never occurred to me she'd ever question anything."

She walked out of his sight as Nathaniel said, "Yeah, but Michelle was attacked last night, remember?"

Silence, then, “Shit.”

“How do I make it right?”

“I don’t know man, but I’ve got a woman lying naked in front of me, so can we talk about this later?”

Nathaniel chuckled and hung up. He absently tapped his phone against his thigh as he thought about the problem. Eli was with someone already; had to be a regular hook-up he had in the East Village. Nathaniel had a couple of those, but now they seemed ridiculous. Michelle’s hand in his, he’d felt like he wanted to use it to pull her toward him and crush her in a tight embrace. He wanted to spend time with her, listen to her voice, watch her expression change…as long as it didn’t change into fear of him.

But with what I am–isn’t that inevitable if I let her in, anyway? No matter how strongly I feel about this human woman, it can’t go far. I cannot allow myself to become attached. I will never be able to tell her what I am without that terror transforming her beautiful brown eyes, with me the cause. Knots formed in his stomach and his chest ached with loneliness. He pushed off the wall, walking slowly into the traffic of human bodies, blending in with the pedestrians of all ages, races, and nationalities as though he were just like them.

He buzzed the brownstone Darik lived in, expecting to find him absent, lost to a movie theater, his packmate’s greatest passion. Darik loved to travel into worlds he would never otherwise know by way of motion pictures. But today Nathaniel found himself lucky as a sleepy voice burst from the speaker. “Pizza guy?”

“No, it’s me.”

The door unlocked with a loud alarm and Nathaniel entered quickly, taking the single flight of stairs to the second floor. The door was open and standing in the doorway was his 6’3” friend wearing checkered, flannel blue and white sweatpants, bare feet and chest. His red, curly hair was everywhere and he jerked his head with a flat, “Hey.”

“Were you sleeping?”

“Yeah. It’s Sunday. Where do I have to go?”

Upon entering the apartment, Nathaniel glanced around the usual mess of clutter layering every flat surface including sections of the hardwood floors. “You’re a slob.”

“My maid quit,” Darik lied with amused sarcasm.

Nathaniel pushed over a stack of earmarked Fortune and Money magazines to make room to sit. The comfortable couch cushion gave slightly under his weight and he sunk into it, leaned back and closed his eyes.

Darik threw a questioning glance behind him as he headed to the kitchen. “What’s up? Feeling guilty? Don’t. You should be proud; forget about what Dontae says. Oh, I’ve been watching the news.” He threw beans into a coffee grinder, turned it on and talked over the obnoxious sound. “Nothing yet. But it’s Sunday, so…we’ll see if it hits the nightly news, or maybe tomorrow. Don’t look so glum, man. Rapists should die a horrible death. And I won’t apologize for saying that.”

Nathaniel listened to the freshly ground coffee poured into the French press. If focused, he could hear almost every flake fall. They all could. But you tune that stuff out most of the time. You have to. But on a day like today where he needed something to ground himself, sounds like that were helpful to keep him not thinking about her. It wasn’t doing the trick.

He exhaled and called over, “I don’t feel bad about what I did. Not that, anyway.”

Darik filled a pot from the water faucet. “What then?” He put the pot on the stove, turned on the gas and padded back to the couch, his head to the side. “Is it the woman?” Surprised, Nathaniel glanced up. Darik chuckled and crossed his arms over his sinewy bare chest. “It’s always a dame.”

“Dame? You’ve been watching Casablanca again.”

Darik shook his head. “Double Indemnity.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s not whatever, Nate. It’s Barbara fucking Stanwyck. Now, if she was still alive…” he whistled. “Remember Judy?”

Nathaniel threw an arm over the back of the couch. “The blonde with small tits?”

Staring into the memory, Darik nodded with a distant smile. “Yeah. She was my modern-day Barb Stanwyck. Such a bitch that one. I miss her.”

“What happened to her again?”

“Married.”

“When you were seeing her?”

“Yep.”

“Ah.”

Darik walked back to the kitchen. “You want some coffee? I’m assuming you do. So the woman last night, is she who’s got that weight on your soul? You know what I’d do?”

“What?”

“I’d go find her.”

Not sure he wanted to reveal that he already had, Nathaniel asked, “How would I do that?”

“Her scent. Duh.”

Oh. That. The fresh shampoo mixed with her own personal aroma that he couldn’t get out of his nose. And then the sweet scent of arousal he’d gotten a whiff of when they were walking hand in hand. *God help me*. “It’s a big city. That’s not so easy.”

A knock at the door swung both of their heads in that direction as a muffled voice called through, “Let me in.”

Dontae.

“How’d he get in the building?” Darik mumbled, impressed.

Nathaniel opened the door and in walked Dontae with a look that sized up the messy room with distaste. He turned on his packmate. “Eli tells me you’ve contacted the woman you saved.”

Nathaniel cast a guilty look to Darik and shrugged at the dropped jaw waiting for him in the kitchen. Darik shook his head with disapproval, grabbing a third coffee cup and pouring.

“Eli has a big trap.”

Dontae ignored the casual tone. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Nathaniel paused. “I don’t know.”

Dontae held his stare. “From what I hear, she’s nothing special.”

Fire burst through Nathaniel’s preternatural veins. He lunged at Dontae. His punch landed because his attack was unexpected. The second one was for him. Nathaniel reeled back as the powerful hit knocked him against a wall. Running at Dontae, he snarled but Darik flashed between them with unhindered speed, holding them back with his long arms stretched wide, muscles taut. “Enough! Dontae, we know what this is about.”

Dontae glared at the tall wolf from under blonde, furrowed eyebrows. “Fuck you.”

Panting and eager to fight, Nathaniel glared at Dontae. “Move out of the way, Darik. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Calm your wolf, Nate.” Darik’s eyes flashed. “Calm down!”

Nathaniel snarled, “Eli didn’t say that about her. You’re lying just to piss me off.”

Dontae shook out his shoulders and his leather jacket shone in the sunlight streaming through the window. A grimace appeared and he stepped away. He didn’t argue, so Nathaniel knew he’d hit the truth.

Satisfied the worst was over, Darik dropped his arms to his sides. “I wish one of you had been the pizza guy instead of this.” His joke hovered in thick air.

With hazel eyes flickering, Dontae carefully chose his words. “We came to this city to have lives amid culture and diversity. To see the theater, build things, expand ourselves! And you want to tear it all down.”

“I want to do no such thing,” Nathaniel stepped forward with fury. “I was the first one who said yes when you wanted to leave Maine for here. What I did last night has no reflection on that! What was I supposed to do, let him rape her? Would that have made you happy?”

Dontae’s jaw tightened. “Of course not,” he grunted.

“You stopped that robbery a month ago when that old lady was tied up in her house! How is this any different?”

“I didn’t…finish the job.”

The room went silent.

“Yeah. Well, I did.” Nathaniel flipped around and made for the door.

“Nate. Come back,” Darik called after him.

“Fuck him.” Nathaniel slammed the door. As he strode to the stairs, he paused. Inside, with a voice so low only a werewolf could hear, Darik confessed, “You’re still hung up on Catherine, that’s your problem. Not every woman cheats and lies, Dontae. When are you going to make room for that?”

There was only silence. Nathaniel headed down the stairs, realizing they were probably listening to his exit. Or at least Dontae would be; he was no fool. He’d been one for Catherine, and Darik was right, he wouldn’t let it go. Now he was on high alert for anyone doing anything they couldn’t say aloud and with pride. Nathaniel didn’t have to explain himself for wanting to see Michelle today. Last night’s actions were his pack’s business, but he didn’t see how seeing her had anything to do with Dontae. The mere implied power he tried to exert over Nathaniel was offensive and out of line. They were their own wolves, equals. A fact that all four understood.

Fuck Dontae.

CHAPTER 8

By Wednesday, Michelle was kicking herself for not getting his last name. Sure, she didn't want to get into a cab with a stranger no matter how hot he was, but she could have suggested instead that they go get a coffee and chat, or something! At the same time, his being unable or unwilling to explain his appearance made her angry all over again.

Back and forth went her emotions over the passing days. As she sat outside Moore Designs waiting for her client to come out and join her, she typed away on her laptop on the bench, muttering more than once, "I'm losing my mind."

"Sorry that took so long!"

Michelle looked up to find thirty-something Laura Moore smiling, her red hair all wild, wavy and fabulous. Her outfit was to die for, one of her own creations. She had a funky hipness to her clothing style that didn't lack elegance. It was what a hipster would wear when they grew up a little and decided to wash their hair.

Closing her laptop, Michelle rose up to give a hug. "You look so cool."

"Me? Look at you!" Laura motioned to Michelle's burgundy wrap dress and brown boots. "I love this!"

Laughing and pleased, Michelle admitted, "I feel like I have to step it up a notch when I come to meet with you in person."

Laura waved her away like a friend would, and cocked a red eyebrow. "Want to get a drink and talk about what you've got planned? Karrie can watch over the place just fine." She leaned into the shop and called out, "Karrie! I'll be back in

an hour or so. Make sure it doesn't burn down!"

"You got it!" her associate shouted back.

Laura winked. "Fun! Let's go!"

They walked to a local restaurant that had a full bar and while Michelle wouldn't normally have a drink during work hours, this was her client and in a way her boss, so…best job ever. As the bartender leaned in, she was pleased to hear Laura inquire as to whether they carried Trefethen Chardonnay, one of Michelle's delicious favorites.

"We have that by the glass."

"Two, please." Laura turned on her bar stool and crossed her legs. "So, what have you got for me?"

The women talked about marketing for the boutique at first, but as they were halfway into their first glass they were laughing so much that business was soon forgotten.

"Yes, you should have seen his face!" Laura mimicked her ex-husband's reaction, lowering her voice. "*'Do you know how many clothing stores there are in New York? You might as well throw money into the Hudson*!'"

Michelle laughed, "Once I was dating a guy who told me that because I was a woman, corporations wouldn't take me seriously! There was no way I'd get anywhere big with my business. Can you believe that? In this day and age? I mean, he's right that sexism is still alive and well, but as if that ever stopped us!"

Laura rolled her eyes. "Don't they know we woman have been fighting for everything we've gotten since the dawn of time? Look at Eve! She wasn't going to just sit in that garden looking pretty. She made a deal with the devil to get what she wanted."

Michelle cracked up, shaking her head. "I guess you're right!"

"Well, I knew when he told me that, he would never take me seriously and didn't know who he was married to! You have to find someone who helps you keep your sparkle, and that man wasn't him."

They clinked glasses in a good-riddance toast. "I can't believe you were already married. I haven't found the guy yet."

"Well, apparently neither have I!" Laura glanced over as a couple of men sat

down on barstools to their right. They returned her look, but she wasn't impressed and gave all her charismatic attention back to Michelle. "Is there anyone in your life?"

"I met someone last weekend, but…it's not going to go anywhere. He was a little strange."

"Strange good or strange bad?"

"I'm not sure yet. And now I'll never know. I don't even know his last name." A rueful smile flashed on lips that had lost their lipstick from all her nibbling. "Should we get some food?"

"I had lunch, but I need a snack." Laura leaned toward the bartender, catching his eye. "Could you give us a couple menus, please?"

He reached beside the cash register where plastic folded menus lay waiting. As he brought them to her, he asked, "Another round?" Laura and Michelle exchanged mischievous looks and both nodded at the same time.

While he got them, Laura shared more of herself easily in a way that Michelle found very refreshing. She was really growing to like this woman and already considered if she and Rose would get along, or if they'd be separate friendships. Mixing people together was like making a good soup, and both women had enough fire to cause a potential explosion. "I married Matthew early, and he wasn't a bad man, but he just had too many rules set for himself. Those included having a wife who stayed a couple steps behind him. That wasn't me, but it took me a little while to realize that."

"You always knew what you wanted, didn't you? That you were going to design fashion?"

A nostalgic smile lit Laura's face and she shook her head. "No. At first, I thought I might be a housewife. Matthew made good money, but when I thought of having kids with him, it didn't feel right. And I had this inspiration eating at me that I couldn't ignore."

They thanked the bartender as two new glasses replaced their fingerprinted, empty ones. Michelle waited for him to leave before she asked, "He was competitive with you, then? Is that why he didn't like the idea of you owning a shop?"

“At first he thought I couldn’t do it. But then when I got the loan, found manufacturers I could afford to have create the designs, found a graphic designer who created my logo, all the beginning foundation pieces, etc., and it was moving forward, that’s when his true colors came out. He became irritable. Snapped at me all the time. He stopped having sex with me…” Her eyes went back to the past. “Except this one time. It was so angry and raw I could feel how mad he was that I wasn’t who he’d wanted me to be. Which, between you and me, was the hottest sex we’d had in the three years since he’d put the ring on.” Her eyes clouded as she looked at the empty space on her finger. “You know when you get married you think it will be forever. I guess sometimes you can’t predict the future.”

“No, but you can still be hopeful and give it your best shot.” Michelle watched as her client nodded, picked up the menu and began to read. It was clear Laura’s mind wasn’t on the printed words before her; she wanted the distraction as the subject had gotten a little painful.

Michelle gently offered, “You loved him.”

Laura glanced up from far away. “What? Yes, at first. But it’s more the loss of a dream. That’s the worst thing about divorce.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Laura said with a wave. She perked up with a wicked smile. “I just want to meet a man who can go toe-to-toe with me. I’m telling you, that angry sex? I liked it.” She picked out her red hair, making it wilder with her fingers. “I think I need French Fries.”

Michelle chuckled and realized it was the only sound to be heard besides the quiet background music. Everyone around them was locked on the T.V. screen. She looked at it, curious to see what had the whole room rapt. To her horror, there was a reporter standing outside the alley she’d been attacked in. “Can you turn it up?” The bartender glanced over to her and nodded, grabbed the remote.

The reporter grew louder by the second. “They still haven’t found the animal that killed Gene Carol Williams here a little past 3:30 a.m. last Saturday Night. As we’ve told you, police say the body was torn to shreds, but now we hear that the zoo is denying any animals have escaped, assuring us they are on full

lockdown. What was it that killed Gene Carol Williams that night, and are we safe?"

Laura's voice came through the fog. "So scary."

Like someone had just packed her gut with ice, Michelle stared at the screen. "Oh my God," she whispered.

Laura glanced over. "Haven't you seen this? They've been talking about it for days."

Numb, Michelle shook her head, admitting quietly, "I don't watch the news."

Laying down the menu and picking up her fresh glass, Laura shrugged one shoulder. "Smart. It's always bad anyway. But can you believe it? I think the zoo is lying. I think they caught the beast and don't want to draw bad press. You're in marketing, what do you think? Would it be good to tell, or better to keep it secret?"

"Keep it secret," she mumbled, her mind on the attack.

Blinking to her menu, she did what Laura just had: hid her feelings by focusing on the mundane problem of whether to order sliders or Buffalo wings.

"Your phone's ringing. Go ahead and grab it. I have to use the ladies room."

Michelle looked from Laura walking away to her phone silently lighting up on the bar-top. It was a phone number she wasn't familiar with. Sliding to answer, she heard her voice still shaken as she said, "Michelle Nero."

"Ms. Nero? We'd like to interview you this Friday. Are you available?"

She sat up straighter, her eyes on the T.V. screen. A commercial was playing and the sound was back down, but Michelle could only see that alley. *That was no animal. Animals don't talk.* "Sure. Who is this?"

"My name is Darik. I'm with D.D.E.N. Inc., an architecture firm here in Manhattan." His calm deep voice lifted the fog. "We hear you're good at getting new business for your clients and we want to meet you. If you're free on Friday? Tomorrow we'll be out of the office."

"Yes. I am free Friday. And I'm glad for the day to prepare so I can present you with some ideas of how to expand your social presence. Do you have a Facebook page?"

He chuckled then cleared his throat. "No. We have none of those things.

That’s why we need to meet you. How’s one o’clock?”

“Fine. You have my phone number so I’m assuming you have my email as well, that you got it off my website?”

He paused. “Yes. I have it in front of me.”

“Fantastic. Will you please send me over whatever information you’re currently using for your brand, and the address I’m to go to? Oh, and perhaps send a few photographs or links to buildings you’ve designed so I can get an idea of your vision, and how best to present that to the world.”

From his tone, she’d impressed him already. “I can do that.”

“Wonderful. I’ll see you then.”

He said goodbye and they hung up.

Michelle ordered the sliders and two orders of French fries. Her mood was lifted and when Laura returned, she saw it. “Good news?”

She said on a wide smile, “Someone referred me to an architecture firm. I’ve never worked with one of those. Should be a challenge. Though it won’t be half as fun as pushing amazing clothing.”

Laura laughed, “Flatterer!”

“I ordered for us.”

“Oh good, I’m starving.” She lifted her glass and held it toward Michelle. “To success.”

“To new friends,” Michelle added.

“Awww…I’ll drink to that!”

They clinked their glasses.

CHAPTER 9

Darik hung up and looked at his two packmates.

Eli leaned against the office wall. “She’s coming?”

Nodding, Darik glanced over as Dontae interrupted, “I can’t wait.”

Eli was tired of Dontae’s attitude. It didn’t matter that he understood it. They were under enough stress as it was and if everyone could just relax a little, he’d be glad of it. It didn’t look like that was going to happen.

Darik set his phone on his desk. “She sounds very intelligent and good at her job. Nice, too.”

“She’s the one human being who could expose us!” Dontae nearly shouted. “And if you think you can trust a woman, then I don’t know who you are!”

Exasperated, Eli crossed his arms, his suit bunching up a little from its tightness. “She hasn’t come forward yet to the police and from what Nathaniel said, she didn’t see him in his shift. He said she didn’t even look.”

“And you think we can trust…”

“DONTAE!” the two other wolves shouted in unison, over it once and for all.

Darik inhaled deeply. “You *know* we can trust Nathaniel. No way and I mean NO WAY would he ever put himself or any of us in danger with that kind of lie. If he says she didn’t see his wolf, she didn’t see it.”

“He put us in danger by…”

Cutting him off, Eli growled, “I swear to God, your trust issues are enough to make me want to find Catherine and gut her myself for changing you into this.”

Dontae grimaced at the harsh point hitting home. “I just want to make sure

she won't tell anyone." Hazel eyes dropped to the floor, and for once he looked vulnerable.

Eli pushed off the wall and smoothed down his jacket to calm himself. "You'll be able to determine what kind of a woman she is on Friday. Now tomorrow, I'm sleeping in until at least eight at night. I suggest you come join me so I can hold you and make it all better."

Dontae grumbled and left the room.

Darik and Eli waited until they heard the door to Dontae's office close, then Eli looked at his bearded friend and said at a lower volume, "Between you and me, I'm not having her here to see if she can be trusted. I just want to get Nathaniel talking again. He hasn't said a word since Sunday."

"He's got it bad. He hasn't come in today, either. What's he doing?"

"Who knows?" Sitting in the chair opposite Darik's desk, Eli added with a tired spirit, "You and I are the only sane ones around here. Let's do something. Let's promise to always stay single. Anything else is too messy."

Darik stretched his arm across the desk. They clasped hands and said together, "Deal."

Looking to the door with his mind full, Darik leaned back and sighed, "*An animal escaped from the zoo.* Can you believe it?"

Eli rubbed his head. "We're lucky so far. They found fur on the body, so…"

"Yeah. It's a good thing the police don't know werewolves exist or they'd be checking that evidence more closely. You'd think after all these centuries, human beings would have caught on by now"

Eli nodded, thinking about it. "People like to shove their heads in the sand over things they don't understand. Or kill it if they're forced to look."

Darik frowned. "Do you sometimes wish they knew? Not just the cops…*everybody*."

Eli played with a button on his suit jacket. "Yeah. I've thought about it. It'd be nice to not have to hide. But can you imagine what society would do if they realized their horror myths were sitting at the table next to them at Dominic's?"

A sardonic smile spread from Darik. "If they accepted us and knew what we were, and you know, didn't try to dissect us to see how to heal faster and

advance science…it'd make life a very different thing. Like what Nathaniel's going through. You know he just wants to go and tell her what he is and what he did."

Eli stared at Darik, surprised he'd figured it out so clearly. "How'd you know that?"

Darik shrugged. "It's what I would want if I met someone I'd kill for. I'd want her to see me."

Eli snickered, "You've been watching Avatar again."

Guilty as charged, Darik mumbled, "Well, if the world knew, it would make dating a whole lot easier. I'm just saying."

"Or harder. Depends. Most women would be scared to death." Eli cocked his head to the side, his dimple flashing. "But we're staying single, so what do you care about women and dating?"

Darik restrained a grin. "Right. I forgot about that."

Smacking his hands on the arms of his chair, Eli rose up and shook his head dramatically. "Fucking women. What they do to us."

"If they only knew."

At the closed door, Eli turned around, his smile dropping. "Nathaniel's not going to like this if it doesn't work out."

Darik leaned forward with his hands clasped together, elbows on the desk. "He'll never know. But this will give us a chance to check her out and see what to do next. If he wants her, we need to meet her and make sure he's got our best interests at heart. We're a pack of four, not one."

"Now you sound like him," Eli pointed at the door, and both of them knew he was talking about Dontae. "Nathaniel's our brother. You'll see."

After Eli left the room, Darik yelled, "Avatar's a great film!"

"Softy!" came back the laughing retort.

"Jerk," Darik muttered.

"I heard that!"

"No shit!" he yelled.

Muffled laughter as Eli went into his own office and shut the door.

CHAPTER 10

She paid the cabbie and stepped out of the car, holding her brown leather briefcase in one hand, her white Kate Spade purse in the other. Wearing a coral blouse that flattered her complexion and tasteful heels that matched her tan pencil-skirt, Michelle looked up at the elegantly modern two-story building to the sign that read: D.D.E.N. Inc. Armed with her usual classic style, she felt comfortable she wouldn't appear too intimidating to whatever male ego might be holding her future big paycheck inside. She was subtle and not overtly sexy despite her curves–always a winning combo for a first-meet.

"Here goes nothing," she smiled, opening one of the double-doors.

The lobby was crisp white, with two white chairs off to the side, a small, white, round table between them with fresh lilies that smelled welcoming resting in a clear square vase on top. The reception desk was empty with a printed sign on it that read, *Press Intercom for Help.*

She raised her eyebrows and walked to the white intercom by the immaculate double doors leading inward. Before she had a chance to push the button, a deep, male voice graveled through the speaker. "Ms. Nero?"

Momentarily startled, she glanced up to a tiny, round camera pointed at her, stationed in the ceiling corner to her right. She held down the intercom button to speak. "Yes."

"Come on in." A buzzer sounded and she grabbed the long, sleek, silver door handle, walking into a hallway with five doors, two on either side of the hall, and one at the far end that led to stairs with a sign saying so.

From the first door on the right stepped a very tall man with ginger hair and an appealing auburn beard. His suit was expensive, pale gray and fit his long limbs very well. She returned the smile he gave her and walked up to shake his outstretched hand, marveling at the strength and warmth of it. *What is with these men and their warm hands? Have I just been out of the dating scene for too long and I'm having a reaction to them?*

"Come in. Please."

Glancing around the room to movie posters on the walls, she took a seat across from an oval silver desk. "Does your firm design movie theaters?" she asked, smiling.

Blue eyes flicked to the posters and he shook his head a little, lowering himself jovially into a high-backed, gray leather chair that blended with his suit. "No, just an obsession of mine. My partners wish I'd put photos of buildings on the walls, but I ignore a lot of what they say." He grinned, eyeing her with so much interest, it made her a little uneasy. "So, Ms. Nero. Tell me about yourself."

She hated this question in interviews, but she'd had enough to arm herself. She'd learned to always have a few sentences at the ready, something short and sweet that told a little about herself, but not too much, something that showed her dedication yet also sounded personable.

"Well, I'm from Fremont, California and moved here five years after graduating from Berkeley with a marketing degree. I've got plants, but no pets. I devote so much time to my work, that wouldn't be fair to them." She smiled, very aware of the flirtatious smirk he wore. Most employers listened closely, but this guy, he was staring pretty hard and more than once glanced at her chest. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?"

He leaned back and weaved his fingers together in front of his chest. "I'm Darik. One of the partners here. I'm the one who phoned you. So, tell me. A beautiful woman like yourself, are you married?"

Surprised, she answered quickly, "What? Uh...no."

He looked very pleased with her answer. "Why not?"

She sucked on her teeth and cocked her head a little. "Excuse me?"

“Ever been?”

What is this guy’s problem? “Do you only hire married people or…”

“Ever been?”

After a pause, she carefully said, “Not yet, no.”

“Why not?” He leaned forward with narrowed eyes.

A nervous chuckle escaped her. Glancing down to pretend-straighten her skirt, she explained as casually as she could muster, “I haven’t met the right man, I guess. I’m not sure what that has to do with my qualifications.”

He nodded as if he were listening, but then boldly asked, “So, what are you looking for in a mate? Loyal? Strong? Could protect you…if you needed it?”

Mate? On top of everything, who uses the word ‘mate?’

She looked at him from the corner of her eyes. “I’m sorry, but what does this have to do with my creating a social presence for D.D.E.N. Inc.?”

A sly smile tugged at his lips. “That’s a very good question. And there’s a very layered answer.” He rose up and walked to stare at the closed curtains as though through a clear window. “How would you propose to create a social presence for our company?” He turned with purpose as though he were playing at being an executive, and over-acting to boot. Was this guy even a partner here or was she being toyed with?

She caught him glancing at her blouse again and she followed his look, horrified to discover the reason. One of her buttons had come undone. The nude lace of her bra was peeking out. “Excuse me,” she blushed. Quickly fastening it closed, she yanked her briefcase off the clean tile floor and laid it on her lap. “I’ve put together a Power Point presentation, which I have on my laptop, if you’ll just give me a second to turn it on.”

He stopped her. “Show that to one of my partners.”

“Um…okay.” She kept the briefcase on her lap and watched him walk to the door. “And where are they?” *Please, have him not be the only one at the office!*

He opened his door and peered outside like he was hiding from someone, then oddly jerked his chin for her to follow him, vanishing before her widened brown eyes. She rose slowly from the chair and picked up her things, wondering if she should make a run for it now or later. But she was too curious at the way

he tiptoed down the hall not to follow him.

He rapped on the second door on the left. A deep, angry voice called through it, “Come in!”

Darik held open the door. “After you.”

She looked inside. This office was very different from the other one. Its walls were wood and the desk black. There were two huge, framed black and white photographs of buildings she recognized, on either wall to her right and left. The curtains here were drawn as well, but were violet. Behind a long black desk sat a handsome man who looked kind of like the blonde guy on The Mentalist, only far more imposing. He glared at her as she stepped into the room, followed by lecherous Darik who stood by the wall, gazing at her like he wondered what she was about to do.

Strangest. Interview. Ever.

Half rising out of his chair, the blonde motioned for her to sit opposite him and when she did, he sat back down. It was a gentlemanly thing to do, but he looked like he hated her so the contrast was extreme and unnerving. “I’m Dontae.”

“Michelle.” She set her briefcase on her lap and her purse on top of it as shields.

“I hear you can help us master modern technology’s ability to reach new clients.”

Relieved he was talking about something appropriate, she relaxed. “I can. I was about to show a presentation of ideas I have, but I hear you’re the one to impress, so let me just show you…”

With a succinct raise of his fingers he stopped her from opening the briefcase. “In a minute. I want to ask you a few questions first.”

She braced herself. “Okay…”

Dontae stared at her for seven long seconds that felt like an hour, during which she doubted her abilities entirely, and that made her angry. Finally, he deemed her worthy of the first question. “Have you ever stolen anything?”

She blinked, her temper bubbling. “Sorry? What? No.”

“Never?”

She returned his cold glare. “No, never.”

“Cheated?”

“Dontae,” Darik muttered from the sidelines.

Dontae threw him a glance. “Let her answer the question.”

Michelle glanced back and forth between them, offering sarcastically, “You mean like on a bet or on a guy?”

“Either one.”

“The answer is no.”

He nodded, seeming to believe her despite himself. What was even stranger was that he looked disappointed. “This is your own business, this marketing thing?”

Marking thing? A sense of pride pulled her spine taut. “Yes. Completely mine.”

“What made you do such a thing?”

She shot back, “Meaning?”

He rapped on the desk with his fingers. “Work for yourself. Why would you do that? Don’t work well with others? Not a good teammate? I’m curious.”

Her crossed leg bounced as she considered how not to punch his smug face. “I do very well with teams, it’s why I’m able to fit in with so many. That’s necessary for someone who is self-employed and reliant on being hired by clients of differing backgrounds and needs. But, since I’m feeling irritated, let me also admit freely that I am not one to easily conform to rules set by the masses, if you must know. I am a self-starter and I have new ideas. For example, I…”

He stopped her again with those annoying fingers of his. “No, no. First I have a question that might seem a little off topic.”

“As if the others were on topic?” She failed to stifle a snort. Off his look, she half-chuckled, “This is definitely the most uncomfortable and inappropriate interview I’ve ever been on. And I’ll tell you right now that I have no intention of working for D.D.E.N. Inc., but since you’ve got me intrigued, I can’t wait to hear what you’re going to ask.”

His blonde eyebrows rose slightly. “We’re one of the best firms in the city, if

not the best."

"Still."

He glanced to Darik and back. "You are turning us down? *Us?"*

"Yep. And I can't wait to do it."

He looked truly shocked. "Why?"

She opened her purse and pulled out a trial size tube of hand cream, opening it and applying. "Look, you're both very dashing in appearance. Those suits and your offices are spectacular. But I work for myself, which means I choose who I work *with* not *for*. And I can already see by your godlike attitude that you want a servant. And Darik over there was coming onto me very heavily and asking about my marital status, which is just wrong. I don't want him in the days to come, breathing down my blouse as I'm trying to show him ideas, ideas by the way he has no interest in seeing. He's got movie posters on his walls. Even his office doesn't advertise your firm's goals. How can I help you achieve them if this simple fact has been ignored when even his partners suggested it?"

"You could guide us."

"Yeah." She put the cap back on the tube. "But I don't wanna."

He drummed his fingers with persistence, narrowing his eyes. "Aren't you afraid we'll tell people about your rudeness today?"

"I could give a shit."

Dontae pursed his lips. "Very interesting."

"Very," Darik echoed.

"I still would like to ask you a question."

Michelle tucked the lotion back in her bag and glanced back and forth between them with a wry smile. "And I'd still like to hear it."

"Have you been watching the news?

She blinked. "That's your question? I thought you were about to ask something more unusual." He waited. "Oh, yes, sorry. I have. Why?"

"Did you hear about the animal attack, the one they're thinking was an escape from the zoo?"

She felt her blood freeze. After she'd left Laura the other day, she'd obsessively read up on what the news was saying and in having done so, had

learned a lot about her attacker in the process. She'd come very close to being one of many he had hurt and she thanked her luck every day that she'd been spared. Licking dry lips, her eyelashes fluttered as she struggled for composure. "Yes. They won't stop talking about it. Of course I've heard. Who hasn't?"

The way Dontae was watching her made her feel like he knew something about the attack; the look in his eyes was unmistakable if she didn't know better. *But how could he know? Don't be paranoid, Michelle.*

"Do you think it was an animal who committed the murder?"

Darik warned, "Dontae…"

Dontae raised an innocent look to his partner. "What? I'm interested. It's the topic of the week, isn't it? We're just discussing current affairs." He met Michelle's eyes again. "So…do you?"

Her hands were clammy, the lotion having trapped in the nervous moisture. She held his suspicious gaze and heard herself say with confidence, "Of course it was. I have no doubt. What else could it have been?"

"What else could it have been, indeed. Well, since our firm is Downtown where the murder took place…"

Darik said, "Dontae!" in earnest, but was ignored.

"…I guess we should all be careful until the beast is caught."

Before she realized what she was saying, Michelle blurted, "I hope they never find it!" At the shift in both men's bodies, she apologized, "I'm sorry. That was loud. It's just that I heard the man who was killed had a record of assaults against women. He'd been in jail twice already for rape." Her voice shook a little. "It's one less horrible human being on the planet if you ask me, and there's nothing wrong with that!"

Dontae leaned back in his chair like he'd been hit. All of the anger that had heated his features vanished and she had no idea why. He nodded curtly to Darik and watched him walk to the door and mysteriously knock on it.

She turned in her chair to see a man open the door and look around. He was dressed in an expensive suit just like the other two, but his was brown. His tie was purple and thin. He looked like he'd walked out of a magazine he was so fashionable and hip, even with his hair that short. Their eyes met and she

instantly remembered him.

"Eli!" she whispered, confused.

He showed no surprise at seeing her, and glanced to the other two. "Verdict?"

Nathaniel's friend was a partner here, too? *Wait, D.D.E.N.*

Darik, Dontae, Eli, Nathaniel.

She felt weak. Turning pale, she squeaked, "What's going on?"

Dontae said, on an annoyed sigh, "I hate to admit it, but I like her."

Michelle gaped at him.

"Can you come this way?" Eli asked with a gentle tone. She flipped back around so fast that her things crashed onto the floor. "Leave those where they lie," he said as his brown eyes danced with amusement. "Come with me, Michelle."

Flustered, she rose up and left her belongings lying there, to follow him to the white door marked "Stairs."

"Was it you who put me up for this job?" He looked like he wanted to answer her, but didn't know if he should. Her heels and his leather soles echoed up the two flights and she stared at his back, growing more irritated by the second. "Where are you taking me?"

At the door marked "Roof," he turned to her with his hand on the doorknob. "Answers coming soon."

He walked through it ahead of her and called out to a man who stood looking down at the street below. She knew immediately who it was. That body, the way his pinstriped suit tugged at the shoulders, where his dark hair stopped just above the collar, his confidant stance. Had he set her up to the catastrophe she'd just experienced downstairs? What was this guy's problem? Her steps slowed as brewing rage took her over.

Eli announced with amused triumph, "I'd like to introduce our new Marketing Liaison." Michelle wanted to punch him in the back of the head.

Muttering an annoyed, "Marketing Lia…?" Nathaniel turned and saw who was glaring at him. The rest of what he was about to say disappeared. Surprise flickered across his masculine features and he whispered, "Michelle."

She felt heat race down her spine at the way he said her name, so slowly like

he savored the word. The obvious surprise to see her meant he wasn't in on it, so she directed a furious gaze to Eli, thinking him the culprit.

Seeing how angry she was, Nathaniel turned on his friend and snarled, "What do you mean Michelle is our new Marketing Liaison? What have you done?!"

Eli's hands went up in peace. He could see from their faces that he'd made a mistake, and took two steps back. "Hey, calm down."

"Did you think you were helping?! She obviously didn't know I work here with you! Did you deceive this poor woman after all she's been through?"

Michelle's jaw dropped. *How does he know what I've been through?*

Eli licked his lips and stammered, "I'm sorry. I…"

"SORRY DOESN'T CUT IT," Nathaniel growled. "GO!"

Michelle felt the world around her spin as she recognized his voice. The animalistic snarl. The urgent order. The fury that drove it. He was the man…the animal…who'd saved her. She stared, dumbstruck.

Eli turned on his heel, shoved his hands in his pants pockets and left them alone.

The fire in Nathaniel's eyes as he watched his partner's exit was both thrilling and terrifying. She studied him. How could he be who saved her from that horrible person? How could this man be that *thing*? But when he met her eyes, his own softened with such care and concern that it was unbelievable. She was so struck by her discovery, she could barely hear him say, "I'm so sorry. My…friends were out of line bringing you here. What did they do to you?"

You saved me! was all she could think. She dipped her head with humility, wanting to thank him but not knowing how. He didn't seem to realize he'd given away his secret.

"They weren't so bad," she whispered, trying to understand what he was.

"I doubt that. Did you meet Dontae?" She slowly nodded. "Then I know it's not true. But you're very kind." He searched her. "Are you alright? I can't apologize enough for them. I will let them know it is unacceptable."

"I'm fine. It's okay. But thank you. I appreciate that."

He smiled, the clouds still dark behind his mood. "How have you been?"

“Well, thank you. And you should know, I held my own down there.” She pointed to the floors below with a smile of mischief.

“Did you?” A grin flashed across his handsome face and it gratified her. As she watched his features lighten, she realized that it must have been him who’d returned her purse and that’s how he knew where she lived. He’d come back to talk the next day? Was he going to confess what he’d done if they’d gotten in that cab and gone to the park? These questions rushed to her, but she held her tongue.

“Michelle,” he whispered, daring a step closer.

“Yes,” she breathed, her heartbeat racing as he drew near.

He searched a moment for the words. “I have been wanting to apologize for coming to your home the way I did. I haven’t been able to think about anything else, and I had no idea how to make it up to you. That you’re here right now is mind blowing. I want to hurt my friends for tricking you, but part of me wants to thank them.”

Feeling shy for the first time in her life, she smiled. “I think you could hurt them a little first.”

He grinned and stepped closer so that he was towering over her. His smile changed to one more intimate. She could smell his scent on the cool breeze, a hint of soap mixed with the delicious musk of man. “Come to dinner with me.”

She glanced down, overcome. Here he was, a man who’d killed someone, and she wasn’t afraid of him. She wanted to get closer to him, not run away. The idea of sitting across from Nathaniel made her giddy, and what might come afterward, she could hardly speak just thinking about it. “I’d love that,” she whispered.

“How about eight o’clock?”

Her eyelashes rose and she met his green eyes. “That seems like a long time away.”

A sexy darkness crossed his face and she felt warmth suddenly emanate from his body. His eyes even seemed to take on a glow. What *was* he?

“Six then.”

She could only nod and since a part of her wanted to stay there forever, she

flipped around and made a beeline for the exit. Vanishing out the door, she literally ran down the stairs and into Dontae's office for her things. She barely noticed three pairs of eyes watching her every move.

"Thanks. Bye," she mumbled, dashing out.

CHAPTER 11

Watching her hair sway in opposite motion to her hips as she made for the door mesmerized his wolf. She'd turned from lioness to lamb right before his eyes and it was killing him. If she hadn't run off, he'd have grabbed her and kissed her, but after her rebuke the other day he did not want to do *anything* that might scare her off again.

But tonight was a whole different thing. She'd accepted a date, and he planned on kissing her as soon as the moment was right, and maybe more.

With his mind on the surprising turn of events, he went downstairs and found his pack in Dontae's office. They heard him coming before he entered the room, of course, and the looks on their faces were exclusive to each wolf's personality: Dontae looked grave. Darik, cautious mixed with hope. Eli, amused as he laughed, "From the smell of her just now when she got her things, everything went well?"

"Keep your nose to yourself. So it was you who planned this?" Nathaniel demanded.

Eli shrugged from where he leaned against the wall. "I couldn't stand seeing your mopey face anymore."

"I wasn't mopey." At the unified sound the three made, he added with more conviction. "I don't mope. I just wasn't in a good mood."

"And now?" Darik asked with a smile in his eyes.

Nathaniel looked at Dontae, ignoring the question. "What did you ask her? And why wasn't I involved?"

“Relax.” Dontae leaned back in his chair. “We needed to vet her first and if she hadn’t passed the test, it would not have been useful for you to know.”

Nathaniel’s blood boiled at the idea that a test was conducted without him, but he knew the reasons. Still, it pissed him off. “What did you do?”

Darik rose from the chair and stood between the two strong-willed beasts. “Now reign it in and we’ll tell you, alright?”

Nathaniel glared from him to Dontae. The animal inside his soul didn’t like the idea of this particular female frightened or even the least bit uncomfortable. There was no way Dontae was easy on her; it wasn’t his way ever since he’d been burned by love. But years of self-discipline came in handy at that moment. Nathaniel nodded despite his urge to tear Dontae apart.

“I’m listening.”

Taking turns and interrupting each other as friends do when explaining an exciting story, they told him that Eli knew the woman’s name and suggested that they should see if she was…worth getting to know. Together they devised the interview and searched her name on the Internet to find her line of business, thereby extracting her contact information. “We couldn’t just go to her house, and snail mail takes too long.” Interviewing her was the most fun Darik had enjoyed in a long time. He felt like an actor in a movie, and while gathering information about her relationship status, he played the role of the smarmy executive. From that he determined she wasn’t the type to open her legs for just any hot guy (Eli rolled his eyes at Darik calling himself hot). Then it was Dontae’s turn and while he got sidetracked by the cheating and stealing questions (which he denied as being selfishly motivated), he revealed the most important discovery which neither he nor Darik were expecting.

“She said almost word for word what you said about what you did,” Darik exclaimed.

Dontae repeated, his tone less enthusiastic, “One less foul human being on the planet, or something along those lines.” After a brief pause in which he watched his friend take this information in, he added, “And she did not give away that she was there, or that she knew anything. When it was suggested the ‘animal’ be found to save us all from danger, she said with much enthusiasm that

she hoped he never was."

"We think she can be trusted," Darik said.

"With?"

"Maybe everything."

Nathaniel was thoughtful, his eyes cast down. "I see."

"But you need to tread carefully," cautioned Eli. "From the look on your face when I brought her upstairs, you're in deep."

Nathaniel turned to leave.

A knowing dimple flashed on Eli's cheek. "Where are you going?"

He received a closing door as his answer.

At five-thirty dressed in Hugo Boss black slacks and blazer over a white shirt, unbuttoned with no tie, Nathaniel sat in his limo sedan, deep in thought. Nigel, his driver of the past three years, had the window partition down and was strumming lightly on the steering wheel as they made their way toward the East Village.

Through the window Nathaniel spotted a flower display outside a local bodega. "Stop here."

The fingers paused strumming to turn the wheel, bringing the car gracefully to parallel-park directly in front of the store. Nigel started to get out but stopped as Nathaniel opened the door and sprang out with more enthusiasm than he'd felt in years.

An Asian woman in her sixties stood over the flowers, smelling them and taking her time. After perusing the vast array of colorful blooms gathered in twine, Nathaniel picked several bunches of deep purple Dendrobium orchids.

The woman gave the gathered bunches in his hand a wrinkly smile. "Lovely!"

He returned her friendly manner. "Thank you. Which ones do *you* like?"

She pointed to pink roses among the many rose varieties. He pulled them from the display, shook the dripping water from the stems and handed the

bouquet to her. Her eyes widened with happy surprise.

“For you.”

“Thank you!”

With a bounce in his step and thoughts of Michelle’s smile on his mind, he went inside and paid.

“That was a nice thing to do,” Nigel told him upon his return to the car.

Nathaniel reached over and pressed the button closing the partition, eliciting a generous laugh from Nigel as the window rolled up.

Pulling out his phone, he searched for the number he’d tried so hard not to call since Sunday, and dialed.

Her voice was all business as she answered, “Hello?”

His blood warmed, but he kept his voice cool and distant. “It’s me. I’m here early.”

“Oh! Hi.” The change in her tone was intoxicating. “I’m ready. I’ll be right down. Are you standing outside?”

“I’m driving up now.”

“In a cab?”

“I’ll see you in a moment.” He hung up, staring at the phone and finding himself more impatient than he remembered ever being. Two more streets and they would be there. What would he tell her? Nothing. He’d tell her nothing. Not yet anyway. She was a stranger to him, and precautions must be taken. So why did he want to confess everything he was?

CHAPTER 12

Michelle had done all the pampering things necessary to prep for the best date of her life. She'd shaved everywhere needed, changed her outfit five times, settling on a red mini-dress with no sleeves and a chocolate brown slim coat. Her nails on her toes and fingers were nude-pink, and she picked out a pair of heels that were nude leather. It made her legs look naked.

There was nothing trashy about her appearance but it did have sex written all over it.

Staring at herself one last time in the mirror, she felt as though her heart might crumble from beating so fast. She yanked the elastic band out of her hair and watched her deep brown locks fall around her shoulders.

Remembering Rose's face as she'd done the same to her last Saturday, she whispered, "You're right. That is better."

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her clutch bag and headed for the elevator. There would be no chancing breaking a sweat on those stairs since she was already running hot with excitement. As the numbers lit, she watched wishing they'd hurry the hell up. *He's here early. Let him wait,* the voice in her head said, but she was too excited to pay it any mind. As soon as the doors slid open, she was out and forcing herself to walk normally at a slow pace on the foyer tile toward the front door. When she walked outside, the East Village was still golden from the sun's descending light. It lit up the west side of her face, hair and body as she searched for cabs, finding none.

A long black sedan sat waiting in front of her building. The door to the driver's side opened and a driver rose into sight. Michelle glanced to him in her search and saw the back door swing open revealing Nathaniel sitting inside. His long legs swung out of the car and he leaned over for something inside. What had to be fifty purple orchids appeared as he rose out of the car in one fluid motion. Walking toward her, he took her breath away as he held them out.

One foot in front of the other, Michelle.

"They're stunning," she whispered as they met.

"At the risk of sounding cliché, they're nothing compared to you." He smiled.

Her eyelashes fluttered up. "Thank you."

"Your dress is…" His gaze traced downward, lingering awhile.

"Yes?"

His eyes clouded and he shook his head like he had to control himself. "Ready to go?"

The way he looked at her made her feel very beautiful and it gave her a grace where nervous clumsiness might have otherwise been. She climbed into the car knowing full well he was watching her, finally crossing her legs only after he sat down, to make sure he saw her skin touch skin, and her pretty toes peeking out of the front of her heels, so purely feminine. Oh, he saw alright. The driver came around and closed the door–a good thing, because it looked like Nathaniel had forgotten it was open.

As the car pulled away from the curb, from where she sat beside him in the darkness of the luxurious vehicle, she became very aware that they were alone. The partition was closed and solid–complete privacy. She knew she was damp from the sensations floating over her skin wherever his glance traced.

"What were going to say about my dress?" she asked, casting a smile sideways to him.

His gaze dropped to her lips. To her surprise, he reached over and touched her knee, then slid his fingertips lightly up the length of her thigh until they touched her red hem, and paused there. His heated gaze fell to her bare thigh and he held there a moment, then crooked a finger under the fabric and pulled it up

just a teasing inch.

Her body commanded her to uncross her legs and give him access, but she kept very still. Her heart pounded and he glanced up briefly to her chest like he could hear it. Or was he looking at her breasts? Well, now he was. A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips and she saw his nostrils flare a little. He ran his middle finger across her skin to the left and right, pulling slightly at the fabric with every slow, calculating motion. It was torture. He leaned in for their first kiss, but as his lips brushed hers, they both jerked forward, the car coming to a violent stop. Nathaniel's arm went up to protect her from flying forward so fast she didn't see it until it was there.

He hit the button. "Nigel! What happened?"

Muffled swearing grew louder as the divider rolled down for an explanation. Nathaniel drew back his hand. Michelle crossed her legs in the other direction.

"Sorry, sir! Some asshole ran a red light! Then he acted like it was my fault and flipped me off! Fucking people!"

Nathaniel smiled. "It's alright Nigel."

"We're just a block away now. Hang on. Sorry, Miss."

"I'm fine. And I love rollercoasters."

A grateful look passed over the driver's face, visible through the rearview as he continued on their journey.

Nathaniel looked out the window watching the final cluster of popular storefronts pass by. "We'll leave the flowers here, if that's okay."

"As long as they're safe," she teased.

He met her eyes with disarming sobriety. "Nothing will happen while I'm around."

She stared at him and nodded, knowing he truly meant that. The car came to a stop and the door next to her opened a moment later. She took Nigel's offered hand and rose out of the limo while Nathaniel let himself out on the other side.

He waited for her to be brought to him on the sidewalk, watching her walk to him, with unabashed admiration. "Thank you, Nigel. I'll call you when we're ready." When she stepped onto the curb, he took her hand. "You like steak?"

She smiled. "I'm a meat and potatoes type of girl."

As he led her into a restaurant chosen to impress, he said, under his breath, “You’re a woman, not a girl.” She watched his profile as he glanced around the dimly lit restaurant. There weren’t many windows so despite the bright sun being out, there was a romantic atmosphere here that seemed to please him.

He led her to the hostess who visibly did a double take at his looks.

“Nathaniel Jacobs.”

The girl blinked to compose herself and looked at the reservation list. “Right this way.” Choosing two menus and a wine list, she led them through the low-ceilinged, intimate dining room. Michelle glanced around thinking it was exactly the type of first-date restaurant she’d always dreamed of. Not too stuffy, but elegant enough to know that she was important to him.

Immediately as they sat down, he ordered an expensive bottle of Syrah and a bottle of still water. “Do you like crab cakes?” he asked her, glancing up from a menu.

“Love them,” she smiled.

“Great.” To the hostess, he said, “Could you please tell our server to order those as well.”

She nodded, looking as though she’d do anything he asked her, but keeping that desire as subtly hidden as her position demanded. He didn’t seem to notice, but it made Michelle all the more proud that she was the one seated at the table. The hostess exited and Nathaniel set the menu down and smiled. “I want to know everything about you.”

She blushed. “Well, I’d like to know some things about you as well.”

His eyebrow rose. “Oh? You say that as though you have specific things in mind. But let me start with the questions.”

“Okay.”

A server appeared with the wine and showed him the label. Nathaniel nodded and turned back to Michelle as it was being uncorked beside him with all the proper etiquette.

“So, you like red wine?”

“Love it. Bolder the better,” Michelle smiled, eyes locked on him. That cleft in his chin was so attractive that all she could think of was reaching over and

tracing it with her finger.

“Have you always loved it or did you gradually get there?” he asked, taking a taster sip poured for him. “That’s fine. Thank you,” he told the server, quickly returning focus back to her.

Michelle answered, “Oh no. I started out with wine coolers, if you can believe it. Then White Zinfandel, then Chardonnay, then reds. I still drink Chardonnay when the mood hits. But we’re in a steak house so…” she trailed off.

“With red meat, always red wine,” he finished with a smile that matched hers. Glancing to the male server like he wanted him to leave, he watched as her glass was gracefully filled to halfway. As soon as he completed the pour in Nathaniel’s glass, the server told them he’d give them some time with the menu, and disappeared quickly.

“What about you?” she asked, leaning forward with her chin on her hand as she gazed at him.

He smiled and leaned forward, answering like he was giving away a secret. “Reds all the way. Never anything else, in terms of wine. But I’m not a big drinker. It’s not my weakness.” He raised his glass to toast.

She lifted hers up, a habitual response, but was curious about what he’d just said. “What is your weakness, Nathaniel?”

He held her eyes for a heated moment. “Apparently I have only one.”

She felt warmth pool out from her heart and other lower places. “Which is? Or won’t you tell me.”

“Another time,” he said thickly. “To red wine, red meat, and red dresses.”

A flattered laugh softly fell from her lips and she tapped her glass to his. “To cleft chins.”

A surprised grin appeared and vanished quickly as a food runner interrupted them, carrying the most beautifully arranged plate of crab cakes laid on a bed of sautéed kale. As he set it down, the electricity calmed between them and Michelle nervously picked up her menu and asked, “What will you be having?”

Nathaniel looked at her like he knew she was putting a wall between them with that leather bound list, but he was respectful enough not to mention it. “Let

me see. I'll probably have Filet. What about you?"

The runner left to get their server and as soon as they were alone again, Michelle felt hot. She glanced over the menu at him to find he was staring at her. "Hi."

"Hi," he said without a smile, his green eyes so intense that she set her menu down, unable and unwilling to read it. "Know what you want?" he asked her.

"I do."

A sexy smirk tugged at a corner of his lips like he got her meaning. "So do I."

"Ask me more questions or I'll…"

His eyebrows lifted again. "Or you'll what?"

"Just…ask," she laughed, turning red again.

Leaning back in his chair, he surveyed the hills and valleys of her face, soaking her in. "What do you love about Manhattan? How do you enjoy working for yourself? How many times have you been to Central Park and would you like to go with me now that we're better acquainted?" He rattled them off like a list he'd been thinking about.

She memorized the questions and answered easily, "I love how electric the city is. I feel more alive here than when I was in California. I'm from the South Bay, about an hour south of San Francisco. I went to Berkeley, and this is so different from there! Have you been?" He nodded, taking a sip from his glass. "As for working for myself, I love it. But I don't want to talk about work except to say I won't be working for your firm."

He laughed loudly at that. "I don't blame you! And what about my last question."

She smiled, happy he wasn't offended at her turning down the job, if there ever was one. "I would love to go to the park with you."

He nodded and leaned forward, but the server reappeared and asked if they were ready thereby stopping him from saying what he intended to. Nathaniel asked if he could order for her, and she said he could. "Two Filet Mignons please. Raw for me with a baked potato, everything on it." He looked at Michelle.

“Medium well, and the baked potato sounds amazing. Just butter for me, please. Lots of it.”

The server smiled and nodded, committing their order to memory without need of a pen and paper. “Will that be all?”

“No. Bring us a lobster, too.” Nathaniel handed him the menu and watched as he walked over to take Michelle’s. “I hope you like shellfish.”

She pointed to the forgotten plate of crab cakes. “Yep.” They cut into it, using the same plate as she asked, “What do you like about the city?”

“I like the vibe as well. I lived in Maine before this…in the woods. This is very different. We came here for the opposite reasons you’d live in the country for–more people, more choices, more everything. There aren’t greater restaurants in the world save for maybe London. And you can disappear in a place like this if privacy appeals to you. In the country that can be more difficult.”

The ‘we’ had caught her attention and taking a bite, she considered how to ask without appearing jealous. “Did you move here with your partners or…?”

At the mention of them, his eyes flickered like there was more to say than he was willing. “Yes.”

She paused. “You’re close, then?”

He smiled at her tone. “They’re nice when you get to know them.”

“We’ll see about that.” He laughed again and she chuckled happily. “They kind of set the game against them, but I can’t help but like Eli. He seems like life amuses him and that’s a nice quality to have in a friend. I know from experience. My friend Rose is like that.”

Nathaniel nodded with warmth in his eyes. “He’s my roommate. And Darik is the same way. I know he was coming onto you, but that was just to see what you’d do. He’s not like that at all.”

She stared at him. “They told you about the interview?”

“They told me everything. We have no secrets.”

That last sentence was an interesting thing for him to say and she took note. If he meant that, did that mean they knew about Saturday? It unsettled her to have this much curiosity and no way to satisfy it. “That’s nice,” she said,

absently rising from the chair and grabbing her clutch purse. “I have to go to the ladies room. I’ll be right back.”

He stood up and she smiled at him, and then walked as gracefully as she could knowing he was watching her all the way to the back of the restaurant. The moment she closed the door, she pulled out her phone and called Rose.

“Hey, I was just going to call you! What’re you doing tonight? I’m still in the courthouse but I should be getting out soon and man do I need a drink!”

Michelle paced the length of stalls, glancing under them to make sure she was alone. “I’m on a date with the hottest man I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

“What!? When did this happen? Did you meet him online?”

“No! I’m not online dating. I met him on your birthday at that club. Well, I kind of did. But then afterward…” She quickly explained how they locked eyes at the club, lied about giving him her business card, and how he tracked her down and showed up at her apartment building the next day. She told Rose truthfully that she'd sent him away that day thinking him a stalker, but that his friends had interviewed her to get them back in the same room together and now here they were on a date. She kept out the part about the near-rape, him saving her, and the fact that she thought maybe he wasn't human. Plus, she didn’t want Rose to think she was dating a murderer. Even though she was?

“So, let me get this right. You’re calling me because you’re terrified you’ll jump on his lap and start grinding away right there at the dinner table?”

Michelle laughed and Rose cracked up, too. “No! Well, yes! I just…I’m kind of stuck. He’s more than perfect and I am freaking the fuck out! The way he looks at me, I can't explain it. Feels like something big is happening, and I didn't want to leave you out of it.”

Rose got serious. “Michelle. You are amazing. I love you, and you deserve a man who makes you feel precious. It sounds like he does that, and he’s sought you out and found out where you lived. He’s not a sicko?”

Shaking her head even though Rose couldn’t see her, Michelle said, “No! He’s not a sicko. He’s a gentleman and there’s something…special about him.”

“Well, then get your ass back out there! And call me tomorrow. I want details. Don’t fuck him tonight.”

“Why not?”

Rose laughed at the disappointment. “Because you need to make sure he comes back. You don’t pay for the milk…”

“Oh, shut up. Alright.” Michelle hung up and shoved the phone in her purse. Glancing to the mirror, she was pleased with how she looked. A little wild-eyed but she fixed that quickly, and opened the door with a calm she did not have. Fake it ‘til you make it, as the saying goes.

True to cliché, the food was waiting on the table when she returned. He stood up again and she touched his arm as she passed. “It looks delicious!”

Sitting down, she smiled and focused on cracking open the lobster shell. “You moved here with all of them? You all lived in Maine?”

“Mmmhmm.” He was watching her carefully as he used a large steak knife to slice the meat.

“I see.” An unexpected laugh burst out from him and she looked up, wondering what had caused it.

Grinning, his eyes danced. “You are an open book.”

She blushed and put the lobster tail down, wiping her fingers off on the white linen napkin and reaching for her wine goblet. “How so?”

“You obviously don’t like lobster. The frown on your face is extreme.”

She swallowed a larger gulp of wine than she’d expected to and stared at him over the glass. Holding it in both her hands, she whispered, “It’s not that.” *It’s that I want to know what you are and I couldn’t ask my friend, and I can’t ask you! Can I?*

His smile disappeared as he watched her face. Setting down the utensils, he leaned in and held his arm over the white linen tablecloth. She laid her hand on his and he wrapped his fingers around her firmly. “What is it then? Is something on your mind?”

Staring at their joined fingers, she opened her mouth to speak. Nothing came out. Shaking her head, she knew she had to wait for him to tell her.

“Michelle.” She glanced up from their hands. “Did I say something wrong?”

She smiled. “No! You’ve done everything right. I misunderstood you the other day, and I’m sorry for getting so angry and leaving you there on the street.

I didn't know…" She swallowed the words, *it was you telling me to run.*

Darkness flashed across his face and he released her hand. "You didn't know what?" He looked at her like he guessed, but was clearly not happy.

"I didn't know you were so nice," she smiled.

He blinked and the dark cloud lifted. "Oh. Well, thank you. I'm not as nice as you might think." He picked up his wine. "You want some help with that?"

She glanced to the crustacean shell. "No. Thank you, I can manage. It's half the fun!"

He smiled and she hid her nervous exhale. "You have a boyfriend?"

She chuckled, fighting with her messy meal. "Ha! Um…no. I wouldn't be here with you!"

"I just had to check."

"You have a girlfriend?"

He cut into his filet and smiled. "I've never had a girlfriend."

Her mouth slackened. "Never?"

"Never found someone I felt this way about before now."

Michelle stared at him and wiped her fingers again. He smiled at the forgotten lobster, and waited for her to speak. That took some time. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard, and that it was given without guile. "We just met," she reminded him in a whisper, even though she knew that didn't matter. Sometimes that's all it took, and this was definitely one of those times for her, too.

He nodded, his voice low and thoughtful. "I know. It's very strange."

"It is, but I love it."

He smiled and sighed. "Good. You want to get out of here soon?" He reached over and effortlessly cracked her lobster like it was a toothpick. "I want to hurry up, but I keep making you forget what you're doing."

She laughed and dug out some of the juicy sweetness, dipping it in butter. "Are you going to cut my meat, too?"

He grinned and shook his head. "I have a feeling from that look on your face, you'd cut my hand off if I tried."

"Oh really!"

“Yes,” he laughed. “The lioness is back and the lamb has disappeared.”

Michelle chuckled at the accuracy of his awareness, and they ate their meal chatting easily about different topics. She loved hearing his voice as he explained why he loved living Downtown over mid-city, that he liked the grittier aspect of the area. Underneath their conversation she was very, very aware that he just expressed an interest in taking her somewhere else in a hurry. She had visions of his private bed and what it must be like, or maybe the back of that limo, and more than once he paused like he could sense she was turned on. The heat in his eyes was palpable and he kept glancing down as though he could see through the table to her dampened panties.

As soon as their plates were cleared, Nathaniel asked for the check. She played with the napkin on her lap to keep her mind off what was about to happen. All she wanted was for him to sweep his arm across the table, throw everything onto the floor, and lay her down right there and now.

“You smell amazing,” he said, thickly.

She glanced up. “I do?”

“You have no idea.” The lust in his eyes made her breath hitch. “Let me just text Nigel to bring the car around.” He typed quickly then looked at her again, tucking the phone into his pocket. They stared at each other until the server returned with his Credit card and receipt, and when he signed it, he barely looked down like he couldn't take his eyes off her. “Let’s go,” he said, thickly. Rising, he crossed to lead her out and she slid her hand through his offered arm. They left the restaurant, both unaware that there were other people in the room and that the hostess stared longingly after their departure.

They walked into the cool night air, the sun gone. Nigel was parallel-parked out front, and there was a cop car behind his. Two uniformed police officers stood outside waiting. “Nathaniel Jacobs?” one asked as they walked up.

Nathaniel’s steps slowed and the muscles in his arms clenched. Michelle stared at the cops, glancing up to her date with concern. She knew immediately why they were here.

CHAPTER 13

Behind them, Nigel watched his boss and friend, shrugging to signal that he couldn’t think of what to do fast enough, that he’d had no choice. Nathaniel’s pulse raced, but he kept cool as he answered, reaching to cover Michelle’s small hand with his own much larger one. “Yes. That’s me. Is there a problem?”

“Sir, we have some questions for you if you don’t mind.” The officers watched him closely in that way that seasoned truth-catchers always do. “We’ll just take a minute,” the other added, glancing to Michelle and noticing their dressed-up attire.

Nathaniel smiled amiably, disguising his unease. Their timing could not have been worse, because if they were going to ask him about Saturday night, that she would hear these questions when he hadn't had a chance yet to explain, was the most unwanted thing in the world. “I’ll help in any way I can.” He glanced to Michelle, wondering if he could ask her to give him a moment, but the officer didn’t give him the chance.

“On Saturday night, we have on local cameras that this car was near a crime scene. By any chance did you see an animal roaming the streets when you were Downtown?”

Nathaniel shook his head, appearing surprised. “Was there a dog attack again?”

“No. A wolf.”

He didn’t betray the dryness in his throat as his eyebrows raised like any

normal person's would. "A wolf? In New York? No! Oh, this is what they were talking about on the news. No, I didn't see anything."

"Your driver said he didn't either, but sometimes when you're riding as passenger you see more."

So Nigel lied for me? Why? Nathaniel smiled in agreement, appearing struck by the idea that a wolf was loose. "I've seen that news story…"

Overlapping him, Michelle agreed, "Everyone has!"

He didn't miss a beat as he finished, "but believe me, if I'd have seen a wolf, I would have told you. I would have told everyone! Put it on Instagram and everything. Would have had to start an account to do so," he added with a smile.

The cops laughed. "Yeah, it would have been something to see."

"So, the zoo is saying none of their wolves got out?"

One of the officers shook his head as the other answered, "That's their story. Between you and me, we're not buying it." The men shared a knowing look at how people are, and Nathaniel felt Michelle's fingers tighten on his arm.

"It's so scary to think of!" she said. There was something in her voice that alerted him to the fact that she knew they were both averting certain disaster here. But then he realized she probably had not reported what happened to her, and wanted the police to go away just in case they were to question her next.

"Well, we'll let you get back to your date," the more vocal officer told her with a respectful smile.

"Thank you," Nathaniel told them. Nigel walked around the car and opened the door for them.

"Have a good night, officers," Nathaniel said as he walked Michelle to the car.

"You too." They headed for their police vehicle, the radios on their hips alerting them that a 211 was taking place on Houston Street. "Friday nights," one mumbled as they got in.

Nathaniel let Michelle in first as he listened closely to their conversation. From their casual banter and change of subject, he knew they hadn't suspected anything in him. All of his muscles were tight and his jaw hurt from him trying not to clench it. He cast a look to his driver as he lowered himself into the

vehicle. They would talk later.

The door shut and he stared out the window, momentarily caught in the what had just happened, before he remembered Michelle. Turning to her with forced casualness, he found her keenly staring at him like she knew everything. His heart slammed in his chest and he looked to the divider as Nigel asked, “Where to?”

“Central Park.” He heard his low voice crackle with shakiness, and cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

Nigel nodded and met his eyes in the rearview, then pulled the car away, merging with traffic. The window rolled up to give them privacy again and Nathaniel was grateful for the thought. But what to say to Michelle with her looking at him like this, he had no clue.

He took her hand and stared out the window, wondering what he could tell her and how much. It was a while before they got to 51st Street where the park began, and he took that time to consider the fact that he’d never revealed what he was to a human. Up in the woods they had only been werewolves in their small community. As the lights of the city flew by the window, he toyed with her fingers, his mind racing.

Nigel opened the door for them when they arrived and this time it was Nathaniel who helped Michelle out. She smiled at his driver and allowed herself to be led into the darkness as though she weren’t afraid of him in the slightest. The park in daylight was one thing, and she’d turned down that, but now with only old-fashioned lampposts to light their way, he knew something had changed. She trusted him implicitly. The fear he’d smelled on her when they were being questioned back there was gone. It was inexplicable as to why she was not the least bit concerned, since they were alone in a park at night and just the other night she had been assaulted. What was the cause of her calm? He was very curious to find out.

They walked a ways in silence, their hands entwined and lightly swinging. With her free hand, she held her coat tighter to her body and he saw this, and wrapped a warm arm around her. “That better?”

“Much. Thank you.” She met his eyes.

The patience he saw in her was stunning. He stopped walking and searched her face, dying to know what she knew. “Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

He shook his head a little with impatience. He knew why he’d brought her here, it was the closest thing to a forest and nature as there was in the city. It calmed his wolf and made him feel at home. That made Nathaniel easy, but tonight it wasn’t working. Her pull on him combined with his curiosity at how much she knew was too powerful. “Why are you so comfortable here with me right now?”

Gazing up at him, he saw a decision pass over her pretty face. “I know it was you who saved me.”

His blood froze and he nodded slowly. “I see.”

“I just don’t know how…”

With his heart pounding in his ears, he rasped, “Don’t you?” He’d thought she hadn’t seen him, but was he wrong? “What did you witness that night?”

She glanced around to make sure they were alone. He knew that they were. He could hear a half-mile in every direction and that included heartbeats, if he paid as much attention as he way paying now. She reached up and touched his cheek, tracing her fingers down it as she looked into his eyes with tenderness. It eased the battle waging inside him. Her voice was so gentle as she said, “I was too terrified to look back, but I heard your voice telling me to leave. And today on the roof, when you were angry at Eli–”

“You recognized it?” She nodded. He grabbed her hand and held it to his cheek, closing his eyes. “I can only imagine how I sounded. You aren’t afraid of me?”

“You saved me from a lifetime of pain. How could I be afraid of you?”

He pulled her close, kissing her deeply. “Michelle!” he said hoarsely against her lips. He kissed her again and she slid her arms around his neck, allowing herself to be consumed by his kisses, meeting his tongue as it reached for hers. They explored each other’s mouths and he couldn’t believe how good she tasted.

She tasted like love.

Pulling away, he struggled to catch his breath, his wolf thrashing about inside

him desiring to claim her and put his stamp forever on her. But he'd never shown what he was to a woman before. He'd kept all females at a safe distance, and that caution wouldn't last here; he felt it! "I don't want you to ever be afraid of me," he whispered against her lips, tortured by the images of exposing the whole truth.

"I couldn't be!" She kissed him. "Not ever!"

He grabbed her head roughly and looked into her eyes. "You don't know everything."

"Then tell me!"

The thought that he could do just that, that the words were on the tip of his tongue, was devastating. He let her go and took her hand, leading her deeper into the park. "You don't know what you're saying."

"What *are* you?"

He glanced over, surprised by the question. "What do you mean, what am I?"

"I know you're not human."

He halted abruptly and stared at her in shock. She pressed her body to him and tucked her head into his chest, wrapping her arms around to hold him tight. The lamb was back and he wanted nothing more than to protect her, even if that meant from him. "I'm a man. Plain and simple," he whispered. "And I want you so badly I can hardly stand it."

She met his eyes, her chin resting on his chest. He saw she didn't believe him but for some reason he couldn't fathom, she didn't push for more. "Nathaniel, take me home. I need to feel your skin against me. I need you."

Heat rushed though him and he nodded, kissing her hard on the lips before grabbing her hand and leading her back to the car so quickly she had to jog to keep up. He pulled out his phone and said, "Text Nigel."

The phone's computer voice replied, "Okay. What would you like to say to Nigel?"

"Come get us."

"Okay. I'm sending your text."

By the time they arrived on 51st Street, the car was waiting with Nigel at the ready. "Take us back to Ms. Nero's apartment."

“Yes, sir.”

Inside the car, the privacy of the large backseat drove him insane. He sat away from her, holding her hand firmly on the leather between them. He felt her looking at him and when he turned, there was worry in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She licked her lips self-consciously. “I’m just wondering why you’re way over there.”

A rueful smirk pulled at him. “If I start touching you now, I won’t be able to stop. And Nigel has a way of hitting the brakes when we least expect it. I need you alone. Really alone.”

“Oh!” A relieved smile flashed in her eyes and on her lips. She stroked his hand and watched out the window as the buildings passed. He took the opportunity to trace her body with his hungry glance. She was full-figured and proud of it and he couldn’t wait to taste her. The scent of her arousal lost to most human males, drove Nathaniel’s wolf wild for her. Grabbing the door handle with white knuckles, Nathaniel waited until the precious moment when he could open it and whisk her upstairs.

CHAPTER 14

He wasted no time to get her inside her building. When the elevator doors opened, Michelle gasped as he picked her up and planted her against the metal wall, his body up against hers. The strength of him was such a turn-on that she felt dizzy. Before the doors closed he was exploring her over her dress, running his hands down her sides, her back, over her ass where he squeezed, all the while looking at her with hooded eyelids filled with raw hunger.

Her lips were parted and her breaths came in short heated bursts as she stifled a moan.

The doors opened and he glanced over, saw no one there and led her to her apartment. The way he knew where to go reaffirmed he'd been the one to return her clutch to her. She smiled to herself as he stopped confidently in front of her door without explanation. She pulled out her new keys and handed them to him, wanting him to drive everything tonight.

He took them without hesitation, not noticing their un-scuffed shine, and opened the lock. He listened to the room and glanced around, checking for unwanted visitors. She knew there would be none, there never were, but to watch him being so protective made her heart skip. He closed the door and locked the deadbolt, turning to look at her.

"Walk."

"Sorry?"

He motioned with his hand. "Walk around. I want to watch you in that dress

before I rip it off. I'll buy you a new one."

Her lips parted with pleasure and she blushed. With her spine straight and her ass swaying a little more freely than normal, she paraded in front of his ravenous stare, the heat pooling out from between her thighs more and more with each slow step.

"Again."

She glanced over, smiled and did as she was told. Sometimes she looked at him, other times not. Being watched, admired and wanted so carnally was an aphrodisiac to her senses. She floated before him and when she finished the second circle, she turned and pulled her hem up just a little, exposing more of her leg. One of her hands rose and she slid her fingers under the low neckline of her dress, just enough to make him begin to pant.

"What are you?" she asked boldly.

He blinked, his eyes aflame. "What?"

"Tell me what you are, or I will ask you to leave."

He chuckled with confidence. "You wouldn't."

She walked dangerously close to him on her way to the door, casting a sideways tempting glance his way. Her hand rested on the deadbolt, ready to unlock it. "Leave, please." She knew he wouldn't force himself on her. She had him right where she wanted him. As much as she needed him, she wasn't going to allow that until she had all the facts. "This is my body, and I get to decide who, or what, gets inside it."

He huffed and raced away from her, the close proximity too much for him to bear. Flipping around, he rasped, "What if you hate me for it?"

She rested her back against the door, her hands behind her. "I have a very strong undeniable feeling I could never hate you. But I have to know."

"You've got me in a bad way right now."

"I can see that. But I know you won't hurt me."

The look in his eyes changed to pride and he stood straight. "I wouldn't, no. I'm not thinking of that. I'm afraid you'll send me away when you know." He exhaled, deeply lost in thought. "Please reconsider what you're asking." He looked for an answer and found only a willful shake of her head. "Fine." He

glanced to the floor. “I can’t believe I’m going to do this. I might regret it for the rest of my life.”

She swallowed, worried for the first time. She had an idea what he might be, but had to know for sure. She didn’t dare offer up what she thought. If she were wrong, he might laugh in her face. What she thought he might be was impossible but it seemed the only logical explanation. Had she not heard what she heard, had the reports not come back as they had, had the police not said…

“I’m ready.” She wasn’t sure if that was true, but it sounded believable even to her own trepidation.

Struggling, he paced back and forth. Finally he stopped and looked at her, resigned. A wall that hadn’t been there before was between them and she hated to see it but she had no choice but to push for the truth. “Are you sure you want to know this? It will change your view of the world forever.” She gave him the tiniest of nods. “I’m not human. I’m a werewolf.”

She blinked and gulped, closing her eyes with strange relief. “I thought so.”

His eyebrows rose. “You did?”

“Yes.” She stayed by the door, pressing herself closer into it as though it might suddenly become pliable and warm. She needed a hug. “Yes. The growl. The way they described the body in the news. The policemen asking–”

“About a wolf,” he interjected. “Right. Of course you would deduce from all that… What do you want to know? Now that I've told you my secret I'll answer any questions you have for me.”

“My mind is a blank.”

He stared at her. “I'm not surprised. Well let me just clear up a few things. My bite or scratch can't turn you into what I am. I don't only change during the full moon; I have full capacity to shift whenever I please. I was born this way, as were most of the others.”

“Most?” she whispered.

“For some of us, a very few, the change was brought on despite the fact that they were born from human parents, by very special circumstances. But that is delving deeper than I wish to go right now, into details that don’t apply to me. I assume you want to know about my situation and who I am?”

“Yes.”

He met her eyes and held them. She wondered if he could tell how awestruck she was.

“You want me to show you? I’ve come this far. I want desperately to show you. It’s been all I’ve thought about for days.”

It was her turn for eyebrows to rise. “It has?” On his affirming nod, she whispered, “Please show me.”

He groaned and his head fell back a little. “You will be the very first human being to ever see this and live to tell about it.”

What a way to put it! She stared at him, her heart thudding in her ears. “I’m honored.”

He took a deep breath. “Just know that I’ve always been this. I have complete control in both forms. I will not hurt you.”

“Okay,” she whispered, terrified and rapturously excited.

He walked to the windows and closed all the blinds. When they had total privacy, he walked to center himself in front of her, ten feet away. He raised his hand in a calming gesture and held her eyes. Then his began to glow, the green becoming instantly paler and iridescent. He slipped off his blazer, and unbuttoned each button of his shirt while staring at her. He tossed them to the couch where they fell with a soft thump. Unzipping his slacks, he glanced her way and smiled. “This wasn’t the order I was expecting to do this in. I was thinking your dress was coming off first.”

She smiled, speechless and nervous now for more reasons. She was about to see him naked and from his chest and the structure of those arms, she couldn’t wait. He kicked off his shoes and his slacks dropped to the floor around his feet. In black boxer briefs, he bent down to remove black dress socks, throwing her a self-conscious smile. “I’m really doing this.”

“Looks like you are.”

He grinned and shook his head. The smile disappeared as he kicked his socks and pants to the side and met her eyes. With one fluid motion, he slid his briefs down, kicking them away to stand naked before her. He was majestic. His body was beautiful and his cock called to her, standing at attention. But it was the look

in his glowing eyes, the pride and regal strength there that undid her.

Then without another word, he shifted. She heard the most amazing cracking sounds as his bones reformed so quickly it took her breath away. In the movies the change was always so dramatically painful but he didn't look agonized at all. It was as if he blended the two forms, transported swiftly from one to the other until there he was, a wolf standing in her apartment gazing at her as if it belonged.

It had dark fur the color of his hair. Its eyes shone beautifully in the low lamplight and she stepped forward in awe. It was larger, much larger, than any wolf she'd seen during road trips to ski up north. "Nathaniel, can you hear me?"

The dark beast approached her, eyes free of danger. They were soft and watching for her reaction. It nodded.

"Can I touch you?" Her hand drifted toward him and he stepped closer until all she had to do was lean down. She stroked his back slowly, bewildered that the man was now a wolf, the miracle of that. After a few moments of petting him, she kneeled. He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "You're gorgeous," she whispered, tracing her index finger from his forehead to the end of the long black muzzle. She lifted his chin and he gazed at her. "Thank you for trusting me."

He stepped back. The sounds of bones cracking echoed off the walls again as he shifted to his human form. As his head completed shaping, he raised it and met her eyes. There was so much emotion staring back at her! She walked to him and he met her halfway. Touching his cheek, she tilted her head for a kiss. He brushed pink lips against hers and whispered, "I am overcome."

She shook her head and smiled, overjoyed and quieted by the respect she had for him. "I have no desire to run from you. I just want to get closer."

His eyes blazed hot and the glow returned. He picked her up and mangled her lips with hot kisses as he carried her to her bedroom, flipping on the light. "I want to look at you."

"Whatever you want. I'm yours," she breathed, gasping as he kissed her harder and searched her mouth with his skillful tongue. The sensations his kisses sent choked her up. She'd never been this happy in her life and as he lowered her

to the bed, she ordered herself silently not to cry. She was with a supernatural being, and one who seemed to have eyes only for her. The tears stopped cold from excitement as his fingernails sharpened and like razor blades he used them to rip her dress from her body. Her lacy nude bra and panties were exposed to him and torn red fabric lie on either side like a frame. He stood up, his body lit from the side, the floor lamp dim and perfect for this moment. Every muscle had shadows. He looked like Heaven.

“Do you want to keep your lingerie items?”

She blinked down at her body, happy to find the shadows did nice things for her curves. Her breasts in this underwire were fabulous with her resting on her elbows and gravity doing its best to make them shine. Her tummy could use some toning, but since he didn’t seem to mind, she threw that self-conscious thought out the window where it belonged. “Tear them off.”

He bent down, his shoulders sinewy as he slipped a long fingernail under the middle of her bra and ripped it in half. Her breasts tumbled freely and he stared at them with all-consuming need. Falling on his knees, he took one into his mouth, the heat from his tongue sending her into euphoria. He teased and kissed and sucked her dusky pink crest, holding her other breast with his hand, the sharp nails gone. He rubbed her other nipple with his thumb as he worked this one with his mouth and she moaned.

His nostrils flared. “Your scent. It’s killing me.”

Horrified, she gasped, “What?”

“I can smell your arousal,” he said, thickly, against her tender bare skin.

She relaxed. “Oh. Do you like it?”

“Like is too weak a word. I yearn for it.” He travelled blazing hot kisses down her stomach and looked up. “Say the word.”

She moaned under the gentle rubbing of his thumb on her nipple. “Taste me. I want you to. Tear my panties off with your teeth if you can.”

He chuckled and repeated, “If I can,” as if the idea that he couldn’t was ludicrous. His teeth grew sharper as she stared. He smiled a dirty smile and bit the tiny strand of flimsy lace that rode on her hip. Running his fangs the length of the front of her panties until he was on the other hip, he paused. Then with

one tear they were off. As his teeth went back to normal, he watched her with interest.

“Still don’t want to run?”

She shook her head. “See what I taste like.”

He groaned at her command and spread her legs to gaze at her pussy. He pushed open her folds and stared, drinking her in with glowing eyes. She started to throb under his stare. His nostrils flared as he bent down and spread her with his fingers, his tongue extended slightly. She moaned, waiting for him, the ache growing painful the more he looked at her. He buried his face in her sex and explored every secret part of her with languid sensuality, building up speed until she was crying out his name. He murmured into her wet flesh, “You taste so good.” Her back arched and her breasts thrust upward as she fell back onto the bed, trembling. He lapped at her and teased her with tiny flicks to one side of her clit until she was begging him to make it end. He slowed down, holding her on the brink of her orgasm, the heat of the burn focused in that one tiny little spot his tongue teased. Then with long licks, he brought her away from it until she thought it wasn’t going to happen. But suddenly, his tongue returned to the spot and flicked again, keeping its methodical talented rhythm until she screamed. The orgasm tore her down the middle and she fisted his hair and held him there as her body writhed against his open lips.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. Before she had time to catch her breath, he flipped her around and pulled her ass into the air, slapping it hard and massaging the sting away. She looked over her shoulder and watched him position himself behind her, standing next to the bed and bending his knees. He frowned and reached over, picking her up and moving her forward like she weighed nothing. He climbed onto the bed on his knees and palmed himself, looking at her ass with greed. Pushing the smooth, hard tip of his cock against her swollen sex, he hovered there a moment and groaned. He slid in slowly savoring every consumed inch. She felt her body open to him, his hard length stretching her walls deliciously. They moaned together as he filled her all the way and began to move. His hips moved slowly at first in circles then in long, sure thrusts. His fingers sunk into her hips and she listened to the masculine sounds of pleasure he

made. He wasn't quiet, and she loved that. It egged her on to hear him and the louder his groans and grunts grew, the more she felt herself ache and edge closer to her own climax. He grew harder as his thrusts came faster and soon their bodies had taken over, moving together as though in a dance they were born to do. He collapsed on her back and palmed her breasts as he moved in her, kissing and biting her flesh. She arched her ass up opening herself to him, wanting more. His arms enveloped her and he brought her up to kneel in front of him, their bodies pressed together as he moved inside her, bending and thrusting. She felt his cock expand and throb. He groaned in her ear and the sound of his deep, gravelly voice sent her over the edge. She cried out as the quakes took her to another place. He released himself inside of her, splashing freely until he was emptied, his body jerking it out as they moaned together.

Panting, they quieted and he kissed the back of her neck and buried his face in her hair. "Marry me."

She froze. "What?"

He pulled out, taking his time and lowering her to the bed so that he could face her. He held himself up on elbow and searched her eyes. "Marry me, Michelle Nero. Be my wife."

She chuckled and closed her eyes, looking at him again after an incredulous moment. "You're serious." He nodded. "It's our first date."

"So?" He shrugged like that meant nothing.

With a fluttering heart she pushed back a fallen lock of hair from his forehead, looking into his eyes. "I don't believe in divorce," she whispered. "If we were to do this, it would be for good. We'd be a team and best friends. Do whatever we had to in order to keep it strong, and not lose the love."

He gave her a calm, knowing smile. "I have no problem promising I can do that."

She paused, her blood racing so much she could barely speak. The crazy thing was, she believed him! Everything about the way he was looking at her told her instinctual self that this was right, and that he would keep that promise. "God help me," she whispered, unabashedly amazed.

"You won't need God's help. I'm not going anywhere. When I make a

decision, I keep my word." His voice grew huskier as he rolled on top of her and played with her hair that had fallen back on the pillow. "Working as a team is something I know how to do. I have that with my pack. We are one unit. Even when we fight, there is love and loyalty always behind it. It's how we're able to be honest."

"Your pack?" It dawned on her what he meant and she asked, "You mean your friends are also…" she trailed off with understanding. "So that's why they interrogated me!" She gave an incredulous laugh as she pieced the pieces together. "You were all protecting a secret, a secret you've shared with me? I am so honored, Nathaniel. Thank you for trusting me."

He kissed her and whispered against her lips. "You'll have to thank them, too. Can you handle that?" he teased.

She laughed and held him tight. "I think I can manage."

He grinned at her. "Be my wife."

"This is very fast, Nathaniel."

"Say yes."

"Yes," she smiled, unable to believe this was happening. "I will."

He crushed her lips in a kiss that sent shivers down her spine, and she felt him hardening against her leg. The stiffness of his length beckoned her body to open to it and her legs moved of their own accord as he continued to kiss her. With just a small adjustment of his strong hips, he pressed himself inside her and slid into the slick cave, groaning against her lips, "You're so tight."

"I'm a little sore," she murmured, pleasure overcoming her. "But I don't mind."

"I'll go slow at first," he breathed into her ear, the heat warming all the way down her neck. She threw her head back as he filled her. "My wife," he whispered.

Michelle felt her heart open up. He stepped into it to stay, claiming it as his forever. For good reason she felt safe with this man. Or could she even call him that? He was a creature feared by those who did not understand, and here she was committing her life to him, knowing it was the best decision she would ever make.

He met her eyes and his glowed pale green. He moved in her with a growing rhythm and their breathing synchronized with the motions, sweat mingling on their chests and legs. He stiffened inside her and the muscles in his neck went tight, the veins showing as his head craned up and he moaned, pushing in as deep as he could, his spine stretching up. He exploded inside her and she came with him, harmonized. When the throbbing subsided, he lay on top of her and traced her arm with his fingertips. “I love you,” he murmured.

Stroking his hair, she whispered, “I love you, too.”

He rolled off her but kept one arm and leg over her body. She turned on her side so she could see him, and rested her hand on his thigh. He closed his eyes and she kissed both his eyelids, making him smile. She couldn’t take her eyes off of him and soon his breathing changed to sleeping breaths. She didn’t know when she fell asleep, but at some point…she did.

CHAPTER 15

The sound of his phone ringing in the other room woke Nathaniel up. That stupid ringer was hardwired into his body's alarm system just like as it was for the rest of the world. He blinked around the room and saw the lamp still lit. Looking at Michelle, he found her sleeping with her soft lips parted and her dark hair messy, thanks to him. He climbed out of the bed with care so as not to wake her and padded into the living room where he'd ditched his pants. As his feet enjoyed the journey across the cool hardwood floors, images and memories from a few hours ago made him smile. The ringing stopped, but he was coming for the phone anyway because at this hour, he knew his pack was checking in, as they did every night.

It was Eli whose name was on the missed-call notice. Calling him back, Nathaniel sat down on the sofa and relaxed.

"Hey! I was just leaving you a message."

"Sorry. I didn't get to the phone in time."

"No worries. You're not home so…I'm guessing your date went well."

He reached over and picked up a copy of INC. Magazine, thumbing through it. "The cops asked me questions about the animal who got loose from the zoo."

Silence. "Wait, what? When? Where are you?"

Nathaniel laughed and tossed the mag back onto the table where it landed at a perfect angle. "Sorry. I'm in such a good mood, I thought I'd fuck with you."

"So, they didn't?"

Knowing he was on a cell, he was careful with what he said, in case Uncle

Sam was watching. The four of them had that habit well ingrained into their conversations where they could be overheard. “No, they did ask me. I was driving down there that night, on my way home, you know.”

“Riiiight?” Eli said, stretching the word.

“And they caught the license on a camera so they asked me if I spotted the wolf.”

Silence. “They’re saying it’s a wolf now? They haven’t said that on the news.”

“Probably trying to keep the city calm. I told them if I saw a wolf I would have told everyone. Can you believe it, Eli? A WOLF escaped from the zoo.” A real smile accompanied the fake wonder in his voice.

“We should be more careful at night around here,” Eli quipped.

“We should. You never know what’s out there.”

“It’s a scary world.” Eli paused. “Get over here so I can hear about your date!”

“What are you, a girl?” Nathaniel chuckled, kicking a foot up onto the table and leaning back.

“Get over here. I’m dying to know.”

Nathaniel reminded him with forced sobriety, “And this from the guy who vowed no dating.”

“Darik tell you about that?” Eli asked, on a low chuckle. “Precautionary measure so I keep my fucking sanity. Are you coming?”

With his sensitive aural cavity, Nathaniel heard Michelle roll over in bed. He listened for a moment to her breathing. It didn’t take much in the silence of this pre-dawn hour to know that she was still out. “Nah, I’m staying here. It’s Saturday. I’m going to spend the day with my future wife.”

“What?! Your future WHAT?!” Eli shouted.

“I’ll call you later,” Nathaniel grinned and hung up as Eli yelled at him not to. He stared at the screen, half expecting his roommate to call back. He didn’t, but Nathaniel knew he wanted to.

He walked back to her, switched off the bedroom floor lamp, and climbed back into the covers. The room smelled like the two of them now and it made

him proud. He'd marked her with his scent, though only a wolf would know that.

In her sleep, Michelle cuddled up to him and he wrapped a possessive arm around her, looking down at her pretty face. There was a small smile on it and she peeked at him through sleepy eyelids. "You're awake," she whispered.

"I am. I'm nocturnal by nature." He traced up and down her curvy side with his fingertips. "But I've become accustomed to normal human hours."

She kissed him. "Still want to marry me?" Her smile said she just wanted to hear him say it again.

"I still want to marry you. You look like you're waking up. Want to go for that walk now?"

Burrowing into his chest, she laughed. "In Central Park? Really?"

"Yeah. My wolf needs some nature around him. You've awoken something in me, my love."

She kissed his chest and peeked up at him, looking so beautiful as her eyes twinkled. "I'd love to go for a walk in the park with you. I just need a coffee! Or twelve," she laughed then glanced downward. "Don't you want to do something about that," she smiled, motioning to his hardening length.

"Later. Let's get you that coffee." He planted a kiss on her forehead and smirked at the disappointment on her face. "I want you."

She laughed and climbed out of bed. "I know."

He grinned and padded back for his clothes. "I feel you staring at my ass."

She giggled and ran into the bathroom. He could not wipe the grin off his face if he tried.

They took a cab to the local coffee house since she insisted she only patronized small businesses if she could help it. Then the cabbie dropped them off in Central Park where they took their time walking the night-cloaked grounds, holding hands. It really was a well-made landscape and that someone thought to put it in the middle of the most compact urban landscape outside of maybe Japan's, was an inspired decision.

She plucked a red leaf from a tree branch and fingered it as they continued onward. He enjoyed watching her tell him stories about her college days, and further back about her childhood. Her voice soothed him, it's register pleasing. "Do you miss the country? You said your wolf needs nature."

"Sometimes I do. But we travel up a couple times a year to run free in the woods. I'll bring you next time." He smiled at the excited look on her face. "And you and I will go and live there when our cubs are at puberty age."

She stopped walking. "I'm sorry…cubs?"

He laughed. He was enjoying shocking her and Eli now that his secret was out and he felt the weight lifted from his overly responsible shoulders. "Don't look so scared. They're born normal babies and will remain so until they hit puberty. Then we'll have to take them away to teach them to control the shifting, or we'll have a public outcry on our hands."

Thunderstruck, she stared at him. "We're talking about children already?"

"Don't you want them?" he asked, genuinely hoping she did.

She nodded without hesitation, and slowly began to walk away from him, soaking in what he'd just told her like it was even more overwhelming than finding out he was a werewolf. That amused him to no end. Catching up with her, he took her hand. "You look like I just told you you're already pregnant."

With wide eyes, she whispered, "I've never met a man who so freely talked about…wait. No, that's not true. A couple of my boyfriends wanted kids badly. I almost forgot about that."

His gut clenched at the thought of her past men. "Oh?"

She glanced at him and smiled when she saw the jealousy he could not hide. "I have had boyfriends you know. I'm twenty-eight. I'm not a child."

A huff escaped him. "I wish I'd met you before."

She swung his arm lightly as they journeyed up a dark, stone path. "Things happen when they're supposed to. I wouldn't have been ready before now. In fact, I didn't think I was even looking until I met you!"

He relaxed, feeling gratified by the distinction that he had changed her mind in some way, just by his appearing in her life. "Did you want kids with these men?"

“Boys. They were boys. And no. That’s one of the reasons they didn’t last.” She gave him a sideways glance.

He had to ask the burning question. “Do you want them with me?”

She walked on for a bit before answering, and dropped the leaf from her hand. “I didn’t want children with them because I didn’t want to marry them. And since I want to marry you…that goes to say that I do want your children. Wow. Can you be patient with my getting used to this?” Her eyebrows lifted with curiosity.

He squeezed her hand and brought it to his lips. “You’re not the only one I’m going to have to be patient with. My…friends…they will need some patience as well.”

Her face fell. “They don’t approve of me?”

He thought of Dontae. “They do. But as I mentioned.” He stopped abruptly, the sound of two heartbeats beating abnormally arresting his attention.

“What is it?” she whispered, looking in the direction he stared.

“Shh…” he warned in a low volume. Flipping around, he led her quickly in the direction they’d come from, hoping to avoid a confrontation. After what had happened last weekend, he knew where her protection was concerned it was difficult for him to control his wolf. The thieves waiting for them in the shadows below the stone bridge had no idea who they were about to fuck with.

Nathaniel heard them decide to attack and he stopped walking, knowing there was nothing to do but deal with the problem. “Shit,” he muttered. “Michelle, stay back.” With worried eyes, she did as she was warned. Glancing to her with a calming hand raised, he told her silently that she was safe. To wait for him and not be scared.

He listened for more people, making sure they wouldn’t be ambushed with her off behind him and unguarded from that direction, but these two were alone. From the disgusting scent that drifted on the breeze into his nostrils, there was crack cocaine seeping out of their pours. They were needing their next fix and weren’t about to take no for an answer. When addicts need money, they’ll do anything to get it. Nathaniel had enough experience to know that to be a fact.

He turned to face them, seeing them in the darkness. They wore dark

clothing that bore the scent of their lifestyle, and a silver knife gleamed from one young man's fist. "Give us your wallet!" They glanced shiftily to Michelle, their greed searching for but not finding a purse. "Now!" they ordered Nathaniel. His temper caught fire and he squared off against them forming a human barrier to his mate.

"Nathaniel," she whispered, fear in her voice.

"Stay back," he repeated. In a menacing voice, he told them, "You should walk away now."

They snickered and exchanged a conspiratorial glance between them. "Yeah right." The one with the knife lunged forward, swiping the sharp blade at Nathaniel's middle section. The werewolf narrowly avoided the cut on purpose, to keep the man close to him. He deftly grabbed the offending wrist, bending it back until it buckled and broke. The thug screamed out in pain, the knife clattering to the hard ground at their feet. The other man attacked with a shout as Nathaniel threw the injured man away as though he were a piece of garbage he'd pick up later. Nathaniel's arm thrust out faster than the shouting man could see, throwing him backward onto the grass off the path. He grunted as he hit earth and the wounded man jumped onto Nathaniel's back, yelling and groaning with pain as he tried to strangle the wolf's throat, his own wrist hanging loosely and not doing its job. They were high and logic eluded them. Nathaniel bent forward and using his own strength and the thugs weight with gravity, he threw him so hard the man screamed out as he hit the cement. The other leapt up from the grass, his surprise at the spectacle now gone. He wanted that wallet and he wanted it now. With a human snarl he lunged at Nathaniel but was thrown back again. Nathaniel jumped on top of him and punched his face so hard and fast that he felt his wolf gaining control, the violence increasing.

"Nathaniel, stop!" Michelle screamed from behind him.

The fear in her voice stayed his hand, his wolf called off instantly. He rose up and saw the man he'd beaten was unconscious, breathing but barely. The other was grunting and holding his right leg. It was broken just like his right wrist. "It's time to change your way of life," Nathaniel growled, turning to retrieve and soothe his mate. He could smell her fear and the thought that he'd frightened her,

sickened him.

Panting and struggling against his guilt, he took her hand and led her away. “Let’s find a pay phone and call the police. They’ll pick them up, take them to the hospital.” She nodded, and Nathaniel walked with purpose through the park with her silently at his side. He’d beaten up guys like these before, but just like the other night in the alley, having her involved had intensified his reaction. He didn’t like that. He’d have to be more careful. “I’m sorry. I almost got out of hand.”

“They were on drugs! You couldn’t have reasoned with them!”

That wasn’t the point, he wanted to say, but he didn’t. They still had payphones in the park for emergency, a fact he was glad of. On one, he placed a call to 911 and gave a fake name and number. They always wanted to know who was calling, a nuisance to him and his friends when they wanted to handle the low-lifes of society. He explained to Michelle that they should take the subway. “Taking a cab can be traced. I don’t need the attention.”

“Of course!” she agreed, following him without question.

When the subway doors opened, he guided her on first and stepped in after her, taking both her hands in his and kissing them. “Are you alright?”

She smiled up at him and nodded. “Yes. You?”

He didn’t want to tell her that she made him lose control just by her very presence, that his instincts to keep her safe overrode all others. That the self-discipline he’d formed over the years would have to be fine-tuned to say the least. Maybe his packmates could come up with a sort of obstacle course. He’d think of that later. The truth was he liked this feeling; wanting to protect his mate felt very right to him. He just wanted to have more control over himself, that’s all.

“I’m fine. We sometimes do these kinds of things when we hear robberies happening, stuff like that. But this is the first time I wasn’t alone.”

“Except for last Saturday,” she gently reminded him.

“Right. It’s just got me a little on edge.” Changing the subject, he asked, “What would you like to do today?”

She chuckled and ran her thumbs over his raw knuckles. “Are you hurt?”

He smiled and kissed her. “No.” The C train started south down the tracks and their bodies swayed with it’s rolling speed. “Let’s go to my place. I’d like to shower and change clothes.”

“Okay.” She leaned into him and he wrapped her in his arms, the steady movement of the train calming them both. There were more passengers aboard than one would expect at only six in the morning on a weekend, but this was New York…the city that never sleeps.

CHAPTER 16

Eli was awake when Michelle and Nathaniel walked in. On the walk up, Nathaniel warned her about their superior hearing and sense of smell, that Eli would know who was there before they'd even stepped foot in the two bedroom apartment. If he couldn't smell them right away, he'd surely hear them. Sure enough, he called out from living room, right as the door opened, "Well, well well! Can't wait to hear what you two have been up to." Then, "Shit. Nathaniel! Why do I smell blood?" He appeared at the end of the hallway, his brown eyes searching the couple.

"We went for a walk just now and got into it with a couple of low-lifes." Nathaniel dropped his keys in a pretty wooden bowl and took Michelle's hand. "This is our home," he told her with a welcoming smile. "Come."

Eli shook his head and his demeanor shifted to a friendlier one. "Welcome! Let's give you the tour!" It was a larger apartment than hers by far, but not obnoxious. They pointed out the changes they'd made to the place after moving in, both of them overlapping their explanations like two friends totally comfortable with each other would. The last stop was the living room after explaining the dividing screen used to keep the kitchen more separate and give the illusion of two rooms rather than one.

She sat on their long, modern couch and watched as Nathaniel recounted the events of the fight. He wasn't proud of the story, and had no idea how much he'd impressed her back there. She was a bit stunned by all that had happened in so quickly a time, and being here in their home, she felt very humbled.

It was beyond her amazement to watch them talking, knowing now that they were both werewolves. Eli, too! Their gestures and movements fascinated her. They looked like normal men save for the fact that they were both more masculine than a lot of the skinny-legged hipsters that seemed to be taking over the world. They were more like the men of Cary Grant's era, the kind who wore suits as comfortably if not more so, than jeans.

"Michelle?" Nathaniel said, and from the tone it wasn't the first time he'd tried to get her attention.

"Sorry. I must have been daydreaming," she smiled. "Yes?"

"Come to me."

A wave of happiness drifted through her and she rose from the couch and crossed to where he stood by the bar. Eli was on the other side, holding a drink. She slipped her arm around Nathaniel's back and he around hers. "I'd like to formerly introduce you to my oldest friend, Eli Jackson. Eli, my future bride, Michelle Nero."

She held out her hand and he clasped it in his and shook it firmly, his dimple deep as his eyes danced. "Pleasure to meet you, Eli."

He laughed, let go of her hand, picked up his drink and shook his head. "So, from the way she's looking at me…?" he trailed off, not wanting to say it aloud if he was wrong.

Nathaniel gazed down at her with love. "She knows. Yes. I showed her."

Surprise exploded on Eli's face and he whooped. "Wow! You SHOWED her? That's a first right there." To her, he asked with his eyebrows up high. "What'd you think?"

She grinned and shrugged one shoulder. "No big deal."

He guffawed and hit the bar-top. "No biggie. Yeah, same shit different day. I hear ya."

Michelle laughed with him, his wonderful personality infectious. Already she was thinking of setting him up. But with which friend? "It's amazing, actually. Thank you so much for trusting me with this. Although, I'm still mad at you for that interview debacle."

He made a face and brought up two more glasses. "No, you're not."

Glancing to his friend, he asked, “We have to drink to this fucking miracle right here. Nathaniel tied down by a ball and chain. I never thought I’d see the day!”

“Hey!” Michelle objected with laughter in her eyes. “I resent that term.”

Nathaniel picked her up, kissing her deeply as though they were alone. She returned the kiss with equal passion. If he didn’t care about the audience, neither did she. And she felt so good in his arms! He set her back down and stared at her. “Don’t listen to this shithead. He’s just jealous.” Picking up the glass offered him, he held it up.

Michelle did the same and Eli announced, “To love.”

As she clinked her glass to theirs, she’d never felt so happy. “What is this?”

“Scotch,” Eli said, drinking a hefty gulp.

She took a small sip and felt the warm sting, wincing accordingly. “Oooo, that burns. I like it.”

“Here they come,” Nathaniel said, ear perked. “You called them?”

Eli shrugged. “I didn’t know you were coming back here, but I had to tell them your declaration.” He glanced to Michelle. “I’ve got a big mouth. We don’t keep any secrets. Be warned.”

Michelle smiled, but looked at Nathaniel, wondering what they were talking about. He led her to the side as the sound of the front door opening reached her ears, the voices of Darik and Dontae growing louder. Oh no! She didn’t want to see those guys right now. That Dontae was a little intimidating.

Michelle straightened her spine and watched the two men…two werewolves…give her the once over as they entered the room. From their faces, Nathaniel had been right about their senses of hearing and smell. They knew she was there before they’d walked in. Dontae was as intense as always, but Darik had a gleam in his eyes that was pure excitement and curiosity. His lecherous smile was gone, just like Nathaniel had told her it would be. Then frowns creased their foreheads at the exact same time.

“You smell like blood again,” Dontae growled.

“What the hell?” Darik exclaimed, staring at the dark haired wolf at her side.

Eli came out from the behind the bar to stand between the two pairs. “Alright, alright. No one’s killed. Calm down. He just did what we do practically

every week. It’s just bad timing is all, since after what happened,” he glanced to Michelle.

“It’s alright. You can talk about it.” She eyed Dontae, wishing he wouldn’t glare at her like that.

Darik expressed loud relief, heading for the bar. “Thank God for that! I need some peace and quiet again.” Then he muttered, “I never thought I’d hear myself say that.” Looking to Dontae, he asked. “What do you want?”

Michelle slipped her hand into Nathaniel’s and held the bold stare of the blonde wolf.

“Dontae, Darik asked you what you’d like to drink,” she smiled.

He blinked and glanced over. “Whatever. I don’t care.” He headed for the balcony and opened the curtains, looking at the city with his back to the room.

She shared a look with Nathaniel and he squeezed her hand, saying to the others, “I’ve asked Michelle to marry me.”

Dontae flipped around, his eyes wide. Darik’s smile betrayed his shock, but he was clearly happy. Michelle’s heart was beating fast and she remembered that Nathaniel had told her he’d need to be patient with his pack. He’d meant Dontae; that was plain. But it made her feel like she was coming between them. She wanted to be a part of what they had.

“Congratulations, man!” Darik came forward and hugged his friend. He looked at Michelle like he didn’t know what to do. She held out her arms. He laughed and gave her a huge bear hug. “Wow! That’s incredible news.”

Michelle was hyper-aware of the silent wolf to her right and she couldn’t take it anymore. She walked to him and held out her hand. “He told me.”

“I showed her,” Nathaniel added, from behind her. She glanced over to him and he gave her an encouraging nod. This wasn’t easy, but it was worth facing her nervousness to try. Knowing there was a wolf inside the intense blonde man made him all the more imposing.

Dontae looked past her to Nathaniel, eyebrows lifted slightly. “You showed her,” he whispered, taking it in. He met her hopeful eyes, but his wall was up.

Michelle continued with as gentle a voice as she’d ever used, “You can trust me. I will never tell your secret to anyone. It’s yours to tell, and I promise you

that I will keep it safely guarded in my heart."

Dontae huffed through his nose, not knowing what to believe. She could see doubt on his face. She kept her hand out for him and he looked down at it. "We are all vulnerable now because of you."

There was something in his voice that hurt her to hear. Empathy pulled a soft smile from inside her and she shook her head just a little. "No, you are stronger. With more members to your pack and one of your own happier because of it. Give me time, you'll see who I am."

He blinked, struck by her logic. She felt the three behind her relax. Then Dontae surprised her by pulling her in for a reluctant hug. It was tense and more than a little awkward, but she appreciated the effort, and squeezed him back.

He released her and took the glass Nathaniel walked over to him. "Are you done glowering so I can celebrate?"

Dontae smiled despite himself. "Oh, alright." Then with exaggerated defensiveness meant for comedic effect, he muttered, "I said in the interrogation that I liked her."

Michelle cried out, "So it was an interrogation!" She threw an amazed glance around the four. "I'm glad *someone* isn't calling that shit-show an *interview*!"

They all laughed. She smiled at Eli who was the loudest by far. Nathaniel's proud appraisal of her overjoyed her and she knew he approved of her handling of Dontae. The five made themselves comfortable and spent the next hour talking, with much laughter, each sharing stories about their Friday night, the other wolves censoring their tales slightly out of respect for the female company.

After that hour, exhausted by the hour, the little sleep and all that had happened, Michelle found she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. She excused herself to sleep in Nathaniel's room. He kissed her goodnight…or good morning… "I'll be in, in a little while."

"Okay," she said sleepily, leaving the four of them to talk, and probably about her, she guessed, smiling to herself as she walked down the hall and into his room.

His pillows smelled like him and she buried her face in one of them and breathed in the wonderful scent. She could hear their muffled voices far off

through the walls and as sleep took her over, she couldn't help but think this might all be a dream.

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep when she felt him climb onto the bed, the heavy mattress giving slightly to his tall frame. "Is the courthouse open on Saturdays?" he asked.

She blinked in the gray morning light, the curtains halfway open. "Why?"

"I want to see what paperwork has to be dealt with." He pulled the covers up over his naked body and let his muscles go lax as he sunk into the comfortable bed.

She rose up on her elbow and looked at him. "Wait, you're saying we're doing this soon?"

"Monday too soon?"

Michelle yelped and covered her mouth. "Are you serious?"

He shrugged and smirked at her. "I keep surprising you."

Her eyes were wide as dinner plates as she stared at his calm face. "Of course you keep surprising me! We just…"

He touched her lips to quiet her, pulling her to lie on his warm, muscular body. He felt so good that her objections felt silly. Could she really take this great a chance?

"Look woman, we will have plenty of time to get to know each other when I've got a ring on your finger. Why do you want to wait?"

She sputtered quietly, "I didn't say I wanted to wait…I'm just surprised!"

He laughed and kissed her, dropping his head back on the pillow, green eyes shining. "You are only surprised because you can't believe it. You'll believe it when you're married to me and when I've said *I do*." She was unable to argue with that. He was right. He rubbed her back absently as he continued, "I'm going to see if they're open. I've already set my alarm and told the guys. They're coming with us. Hope you don't mind. Then on Monday, if I'm able to take care of the legalities properly, I will make you my wife. Do you have any friends you want to invite? That drunk one, maybe?"

She burst out laughing, half from his calling Rose that, half from shock. "Of course I have friends I want to invite. But be prepared for them to think we're

crazy.”

“I don’t care what they think.” He grabbed the back of her head and kissed her. She melted into him.

“Okay,” she murmured against his lips, surrendering completely to the power of her feelings.

He rolled them both over so that he was on top of her and moved open her legs with his knee. She gasped as he filled her with one thrust, encasing her mouth with his own. She sucked on his tongue as he groaned with pleasure. The soreness down there made her smile. It had been so long since she’d been with anyone, and here she was, three times in one night with a man who wanted to marry her, and who she couldn’t wait to call husband. They made love quietly after Nathaniel whispered, “Eli’s probably listening.” The way Nathaniel looked at her made her feel truly beautiful, something she hadn’t ever really felt before now.

Love has a way of opening the mind as well as the heart and right then, in the brightening light of a city morning, Michelle felt hope spring to life and take root in her soul.

CHAPTER 17

On Tuesday morning, D.D.E.N. Inc. didn't open its doors. Its four partners instead walked up the stone steps of City Hall on Worth Street, Nathaniel with marriage license in hand. They all wore black suits. Not quite matching, but it would do. His three packmates had no ties, their shirts unbuttoned one button down. Only Nathaniel wore a tie, a slender black one, so that he was distinguished from them. They turned quite a few female heads walking in, and even some male ones.

"Having to wait twenty-four hours after obtaining the marriage license was bullshit," Nathaniel muttered.

Eli hit his back and gave him a shake as their footsteps echoed off the marble tile. "She's going to show."

Nathaniel grumbled, "I'm just saying."

He ignored the look Eli threw Darik and Dontae. He was just happy they respected his anxiety enough to keep their traps shut, unlike his roommate. He didn't want it voiced aloud; it made it more real.

Nathaniel wanted to lock this down because he was afraid she'd wake up and realize he wasn't good enough for her. That he was a just a monster from some horror film, and to marry such a thing was ludicrous. Fear had him in its unforgiving grip. All his veins were tight and his jaw hurt again from trying in vain to relax. It was no use. He was a mess on the inside.

"Your heart is racing abnormally fast," Eli warned.

"Shut up!"

As they neared the doors of the City's Clerk's office, he looked around for her. Appointments were not needed, but they'd agreed to be here at 10:00 a.m. sharp. He flipped around and stuffed his hands into his slack's pockets. "What time is it?"

Dontae looked as nervous as he did. He pulled out his phone and said with sobriety, "Nine fifty-five."

Nathaniel tried to inhale patience, but oxygen seemed to have left the room. Like a statue, he stayed staring at the hallway where they'd just been, his packmates at his side. People walked through the halls for different purposes and when up walked a bride and groom, grinning from ear to ear, Nathaniel thought he might explode.

"Excuse me," the groom asked him, and Nathaniel moved aside, not realizing he was blocking the entrance. "Thank you. You ready?" he asked his bride-to-be.

"I can't believe we're doing this!" They opened the doors and went in.

Nathaniel couldn't look at his friends. "Time?"

Dontae grated through his teeth, "Ten."

"Where is she?" Darik groaned, tapping his feet.

Just then, he heard her voice and his hands escaped his pockets as he took a couple steps toward the welcome sound. There were other female voices with her, and their heels clicked speedily along the floor, a clear sign they knew they were running late.

Dontae sighed out all of his tension and Eli chuckled. "You guys should see your faces."

With nervous laughter in his voice, Darik said the obvious, "Here they come."

Around the corner appeared his future wife wearing a white floor-length spaghetti strapped dress that hugged her in all the right places. Her hair was in loose, long curls and she wore no jewelry. In her hands was a bouquet of the orchids he'd given her, the resilient flowers beautiful still. She'd brought them all, and the effect was kind of funny since there were so many.

She had two friends with her, the woman who was drunk at the club, now

sober and with light dancing in her blue eyes as she tended to her friend's hair and kept talking non-stop. She wore a blue dress that complimented her eyes. The other was a redhead with wild wavy hair and chic wardrobe. The women didn't match, but it didn't matter. The redhead was looking at Nathaniel's party. She smiled at the males en route to them, and her eyes paused a moment longer when she saw Dontae. She glanced back quickly to Michelle.

Nathaniel walked to meet them and he felt as though he could finally breathe. He gave her no sign he'd been nervous and when he stood before her, she and both her friends stared up at him. "You are so beautiful."

She blushed and held out her hand. He took it and was about to walk away with her, but she tugged on him. "This is Rose," she indicated the woman with the light-brown hair, who he'd seen before.

"Rose, nice to meet you." He nodded, not willing to let go of Michelle's hand.

"And Laura," Michelle smiled to the redhead. "She's a newer friend, but I thought I'd invite her anyway. I have others, but it's a work day, so…"

"I wouldn't miss this!" Laura grinned, clearly thrown by the swiftness of the courtship.

Rose rolled her eyes, clearly indicating her disbelief that any of this was a good idea, but kept quiet. Nathaniel could see that took some doing, and he imagined she must have given Michelle quite a bit of grief over this decision. He was just glad she hadn't talked her out of it.

With his future wife's hand tightly held in his, he turned and introduced his packmates. "Ladies, this is Eli, Dontae, and Darik." He turned back as each one inclined their head in respective order. Locking eyes with Michelle he saw love gazing up him. "Come with me."

She nodded and let him lead her to the door. He listened through it and heard the previous ceremony coming to a finish. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. When he knew it was time, he walked her in just as the other couple was leaving.

The city workers smiled at the large party's arrival. Their friends stood back a few steps as Nathaniel and Michelle walked to the front and faced one another

in front of an older man in a tired suit, who waited to perform the ceremony. He went through the normal verbiage without much romance, and when he started to give them the usual vows, Michelle shook her head.

“I want to say my own. Sorry, I should have warned you. I just thought of it, though,” she said with a shaky voice. “Just now. I don’t want the same old thing.”

He smiled at her. “I don’t need time to prepare. I know what I want to say to you.”

She flushed happily, a small shy smile on her lips. Taking a deep breath, she began, “Nathaniel, I promise to love you every day for the rest of my life. I promise to always be loyal and to treat you with the utmost respect. I vow to you today to work through whatever problems we may encounter as the years go by and when we change and grow. I promise with all of my heart to truly love you in the deepest sense of that word.” There were tears in her eyes and he squeezed both her hands and kissed her.

“Not yet,” said the County Clerk.

Throwing him a sideways smile, he cleared his throat. Looking into Michelle’s soft brown eyes, he told her, “Michelle, I promise to love and protect you every day for the rest of my life. I promise to support you in whatever you do and to be your greatest friend. I vow to take care of you and treat you with the respect you deserve. I promise to make love to you with passion and commitment from this day forward.” She chuckled and a tear escaped. He bent down and kissed its trail, this time uninterrupted, as there was not a dry eye in the room. “I promise to grow and change *with* you, and to share everything I am, to be honest and have no secrets. I will work through problems. I will be on your team. I promise you that. You have my word.”

The County Clerk cleared his throat. “Nathaniel Jacobs, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Nathaniel said, firmly, “I do.”

“And Michelle Nero, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

She gazed up at him, and choked, “I do.”

“Then by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride…again.”

Nathaniel crushed her to him and kissed her deeply as her arms swung around his neck. She pulled him close and they kissed until their friends were whooping and hollering, the clapping echoing loudly off the sparsely decorated room.

The newly married couple separated, laughing, and shook the clerk’s hand before they turned back to grin at their friends. Michelle threw the bouquet without warning and it hit Rose in the face. Rose laughed and held the flowers, rolling her eyes at them and not seeing what Nathaniel had, that Eli had a special gleam in his eye as he looked at the blue-eyed female.

“Now what?” Dontae asked with pretend gruffness. “Move to Brooklyn and buy a house? Ridiculous. All of this!”

Nathaniel threw his arm around his new wife. “We’re staying in Manhattan.”

She nodded beaming at him. “It’s been decided.”

“Well, with the rate this is going, she’ll be having his child by Thursday,” Laura quipped.

“Right?!” Rose said dryly. She pointed her finger at Michelle. “Don’t you dare!”

Nathaniel exchanged a look with his packmates. All of them knew from her scent that his bride wasn’t fertile just yet, but that would soon change. He smirked and started for the door, his arm still around her. “Let’s go eat!”

Cheers from the group as they followed them out, their footsteps echoing loudly off the hard tile. Nathaniel heard Eli asking Rose, “So, what do you do?”

“I’m a lawyer,” she said with casual lightness.

“Hot.”

Darik’s voice rose over the clattering heels. “No dating, remember?!!!”

Nathaniel grinned over his shoulder to see Eli throw up his arms in mock-innocence. “What? I’m just asking the pretty lady a question!”

Sunlight burst onto them as the double door swung open. Michelle whispered up to him, “Hey husband.”

“Yes, wife?”

“I just had to say it.”

He stopped at the top of the steps before the group descended, and kissed her again as though no one was watching. They heard the voices of their friends fade away. They’d given them a moment alone. Nathaniel felt such a rush as he held her, knowing she was here to stay. He looked at Michelle and he said in a husky tone, “Remember I said, no secrets?” She nodded. “I have to confess something then.” Her eyebrows tilted up. “I didn’t think you were going to come.”

Tenderness warmed her eyes and she rose on her tiptoes to kiss him before saying, “And I didn’t think I’d ever meet the one. See, we were both wrong.”

He grinned, grasped her hand and led her down the steps. Their friends waited at the bottom, talking amongst themselves. They turned to watch them coming down, and broke into applause.

Nathaniel called out, “Alright! Enough! I’m starving! Let’s do this!”

The seven walked into the city feeling their lives were changed, and changed forever. A seal of secrecy had been broken. A human female accepted them, and that opened the possibility for more to.

Eli, Darik and Dontae, each had it on their minds that love, once thought impossible was now open to them. The city felt different, more interesting. Their wolves were on alert in a whole new way. Dontae didn’t like the feeling.

Who would come into their lives next?

Would they remain single while Nathaniel and Michelle moved on?

Could they make a family?

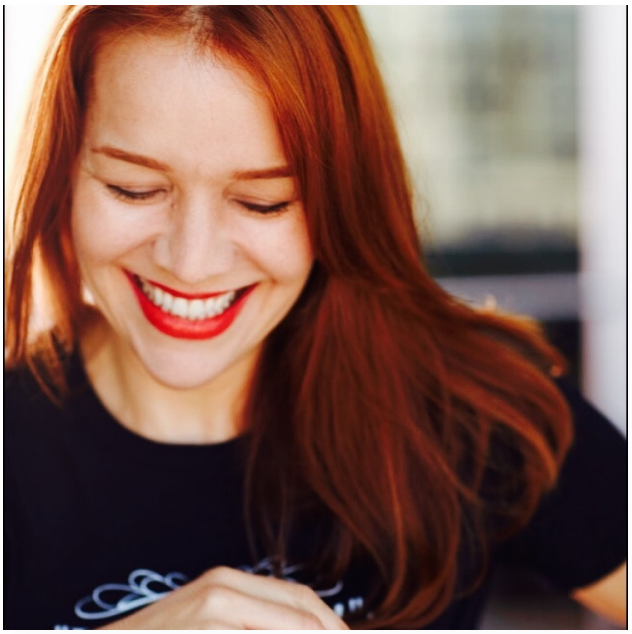
What would happen now?

First wolf down and three to go…

THE END

Thank you so much for being a member of *Members House.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Faleena Hopkins specializes in love stories about good people with strong family bonds, in both books and film. Published since May 2013, she lives in NYC with her senior rescue dog Sophia, where she writes every day, drinks too much coffee and not enough wine.

Her feature film “Just One More Kiss” is coming in 2020.

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