



# As the Raven Flies: A Charm City Novella

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "Even though you're just a bird, I accept you as my mate."

I, Abraham Williams, raven shifter extraordinaire, am not impressed. Not with the pronouncement. Not with the fated mates fairy tale. And most definitely not with sinfully sexy Michael Kashto, the arrogant dire wolf shifter in the thousand dollar suit.

I've got no time for guys who look down their noses at me or think I should be grateful for scraps. I've come a long way from an unwanted, scared kid to a man I can be proud of and others depend on.

When I took this job protecting a friend, I knew it would be dangerous. Accepted the risk. Only I didn't expect the assault to target my heart instead of my body. And fellow bodyguard Michael Kashto takes no prisoners.

Forced proximity has never been so forced.

As the Raven Flies is a 30k forced proximity, fated mates, standalone romance set in the Charm City Chronicles world with a guaranteed happy ending. Shenanigans include: a raven just trying to do his freaking job, a dire wolf with a lot of groveling to do, a sweet ghost, a trigger-happy boss, and a slightly unhealthy love of Led Zeppelin.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Ikissed my temporary boss, Kennedy Fergason, hard. A teeth-clinking kind of kiss. She liked it rough and gave as good as she got, one of the thrilling things about having sex with her, even if she was only human.

Or it had been, until three days ago, before a certain asshole dire wolf shifter had the balls to stride up to me and tell me we're fated mates. He sprung it on me at a mutual friend's going-away party. Talk about killing the moment.

And fated mates? The hell? Raven shifters don't have fated mates. We rarely even went through with an actual mating, preferring the human custom of marrying. But fated mates? Only wolves seemed to embrace that fairytale shit. And Michael Kashto is no prince. We'd butted heads from our first meeting, and even now he got on my last nerve.

Michael watched Kennedy and I work our way toward her bed. We kept our lips locked and shed our boots and winter coats as we went. I did my best to ignore his unwanted presence, like he ignored the hint to leave. He leaned against the doorframe, a low growl emanating from his chest. Too low for human ears, though I heard it just fine. A warning. To me or Kennedy?

"Abe," Michael called, clear menace in his tone.

Guess that would be me, then.

I glanced in his direction, scowling. He never called me by my first name.

"Ooh, look, he knows your name. Progress." Kennedy chuckled and shoved me

backward. The backs of my knees hit the side of her bed, and I sank down as she climbed onto my lap. She tugged at my purple Baltimore Ravens long-sleeved tee. I quickly yanked the shirt over my head, then released the tie holding back my waist-length locs.

Her mouth slammed against mine, her hand fisting my hair to hold me in place. I didn't object. I enjoyed giving my partners what they desired in bed, and Kennedy liked control. All of it. Being such a big guy, it was a rush having a partner who didn't always want me to take charge. Not that I minded either way. I was as easy and versatile as they came.

Only now, I couldn't fully concentrate on her kiss. Could feel Michael's glare as he stood in the doorway watching. Hard to miss a guy who stood over six and a half feet tall with a build to match. Took a lot to make me feel small. The fact he was scorching hot only pissed me off more. Serious eyes that didn't miss any details, short, perfectly styled auburn hair, and a clean-shaven jawline so square I could cut my finger on a corner. But it was the smattering of freckles across his aristocratic nose that did me in. Looked like he stepped out of a Hot 100 Gingers photoshoot. Even his ridiculous custom-tailored suits added to the image. Who wore thousand-dollar suits as a bodyguard? Rich asshole Michael Kashto that's who.

A slightly louder growl.

Man, the dude needed to fuck right off with his condescending attitude. Like he was doing me a favor. Fuck him. He didn't own me. Didn't even like me. I was too fine for his ass, anyway.

Kennedy chuckled against my mouth, then broke away again. "Michael, instead of glowering, why don't you come join? There's enough of us to go around."

I tensed. Join? I knew they had their own thing—that's why he and I hadn't hit it off;

Michael seemed to want a dick-measuring contest—but I wasn't prepared for him to join us. Not him. No way.

Before I could say, 'hell no,' he stomped out and slammed the door.

Good riddance.

I let out an audible breath and relaxed my shoulders. Yet, I also felt strangely . . . disappointed.

Oh, fuck no. No, I didn't want him to join. I didn't want him to watch. I didn't want him at all.

If I was hard as steel, it was only because Kennedy was grinding on my lap. Nothing to do with that wolf.

Forcing a grin, I said, "Looks like it's you and me."

"Shame. I was up for a threesome. You two would look amazing together." Kennedy's lush mouth turned down in a pout, and she ran a long nail down my cheek. Not hard enough to draw blood, but not gentle either. Kennedy didn't do gentle.

She leaned in to kiss me again.

Her phone chirped. She froze a hairsbreadth from my lips.

"Shit. That's Tommy."

Not surprised my actual boss' boss called her, though his timing sucked. His and Kennedy's alliance assured he'd be interested in today's misadventures. Hoped it didn't mean I'd be stuck on bodyguard duty even longer. I hadn't minded until that

damn wolf's fated mate pronouncement. Now I craved home and not having to see his smug face on the daily.

Kennedy rolled off me, grabbed her cell. She moved with remarkable grace, her long limbs usually causing a bolt of lust to shoot straight to my cock. I hated to admit it, but tonight it wasn't her limbs that had my dick throbbing.

"Hey, thanks for the quick call back," she said, answering the phone. "We have a potential problem." She slid off the bed and mouthed the word, "Sorry," before sauntering into the office and shutting the door with a resounding thud.

Fuuuck. I slumped back on the bed, my dick aching, my temper short, just wishing this shitty day would end. I threw my arms out to my sides, my legs still dangling off the edge.

Between someone trying to sabotage machinery at the Domino Sugar Refinery—Baltimore's largest manufacturing plant—and Michael and I fending off another assassination attempt on Kennedy, I was done. To make things more complicated, the assassin had been a shade. In commando gear.

That spelled trouble.

The attempts themselves weren't surprising. Her position as the new Roger of Central Baltimore didn't sit well with everyone. I couldn't remember the last time a human had been a Roger. With only five Rogers in all the city, and the other four supernaturals secure in their positions, any creature thinking a human would be an easy mark was taking their shot. Truth was, Kennedy was more dangerous than either Michael or me, but that didn't mean she couldn't use help. And the optics were good. Bodyguards lent status.

Until Michael's fated mate announcement, the perks had been pretty great, too. Even

the thought of him made my temper flare hotter and my dick throb painfully. Not for him, of course.

Liar.

My soon-to-be blue balls only made me snarlier. I was still flying on an adrenaline high from the earlier attack, and I'd hoped to work some of it off. My cock throbbed again, reminding me how I'd planned to deal with the excess adrenaline.

Fuck it. Kennedy would be a while. She wouldn't blame me for finishing the party without her.

I unfastened my jeans, sliding them down to my thighs, taking the pressure off my confined cock and enabling me to slip a hand into my boxer briefs. My fist closed around my dick for the sweetest relief. I held back a groan as I stroked myself from base to tip. I liked the feel of the calluses on my hands sliding against my aching cock. I had just taken up a solid rhythm when the bedroom door slammed open.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“Stop!” Michael snarled as he stalked toward the bed.

I froze, my eyes going wide.

“I’m sorry, Kennedy,” he growled, “he’s my . . . mate,” he trailed off, his eyes scanning the room as he drew to an abrupt halt. He blinked.

I swallowed. Looks like I’d be fighting instead of fucking. I let go of my cock. Michael’s gaze shot to my crotch. He licked his lips, and I stilled again.

“Where’s Kennedy?” he asked, like he hadn’t barged in. He ran a hand over the back of his neck, the only sign he felt embarrassed. For having such fair skin, he didn’t blush easily.

“Tommy called.” I kept my voice chill, like it was normal to talk to someone with my hand down my pants.

He nodded, his eyes still fastened on my lap. He stepped forward, a smirk forming. “I can take care of that for you.”

My cock throbbed against my palm. Traitor.

“Nah, man, I’m good. Besides, don’t know if you noticed, but I don’t like you.”

“Yes, you do.” He said it so matter-of-factly. Wolves were a conceited bunch.

“I really don’t.” I moved to withdraw my hand, but he strode to me and clamped onto

my wrist, his grip firm.

He tugged gently until my hand slid from my waistband, and he brought my palm to his mouth and kissed it, his tongue teasing.

“You do.” His eyes fluttered closed for a second on his inhale. “Fuck. You smell like wildflowers. Everything sweet in this world.”

My cock noticeably jumped. I yanked my wrist from his grasp and glared. “Fuck off, wolf. You don’t get to decide who I like or who I sleep with. You don’t get to decide shit about me.”

And I didn’t smell like wildflowers. Possibly burnt sugar from spending part of the day at the sugar factory. More likely, stagnant water, exhaust fumes, and sun-warmed asphalt from working the docks. Didn’t think I’d ever scrub those scents out of my skin, even though I hadn’t worked there for months, thanks to my increasing obligations to my alpha and now Kennedy.

The more I thought about his words, the more they pissed me off. I bared my teeth in a snarl.

“Fuck, that’s hot, baby.”

I ignored how the endearment made my heart flutter.

“I’m not your baby. I’m not anything to you. Get it through that thick wolf skull.”

“Dire wolf. It’s not the same thing. I’m much stronger than any wolf. My lineage goes back before wolves even existed.” He actually puffed out his chest.

“Don’t know why you think I care.”



“Because you’re my mate. You have to care.”

“I already told you, I’m not interested.”

He blew out a frustrated breath before leaning over and caging my shoulders—they were broad, so that was no easy feat—between his arms so we were eye-to-eye. “I know what you said. But you’re wrong. We’re meant to be together. That’s how fated mates work.”

“And I’m telling you, I don’t care.”

I started to sit up and shove him away. A low growl in his chest stopped me.

“Don’t do that.” His eyes darkened, his lips thinning.

“What? Sit up? Tell you to fuck off?”

“Pretend you can’t feel it, too.”

“Ravens don’t have mates.” That much was true. At least as far as I knew.

“Dire wolves do, and you’re mine.” He said it with such conviction that a shiver raced down my spine. He leaned back slightly. “I’m sorry I was such an ass when we met. I’m an alpha. We’re possessive by nature. I assumed the feelings were for Kennedy. Turns out it’s you. I didn’t like her touching you.”

“Look, man, that’s not as flattering as you seem to think. And being an alpha doesn’t excuse your behavior. Poe never acts like that. Never.”

Poe was our alpha—and the big boss’ mate—but not because he was born an alpha. He earned it. And our respect. Wolves had this messed up hierarchy where they

believed they were born into a certain rank and stuck there. Most of the alpha wolves I'd met in Tommy's Neighborhood weren't the stereotypical knot-heads, though Michael seemed to define that role to a T. Not impressed. Just because I was a beta in my roost didn't make me less. I'd earned my position. Poe counted on me, asked for my counsel regularly, and treated me as a friend.

"I'm not a bird. My instincts are different." He shrugged.

"Different isn't a problem. The fact you think your instincts are better than mine is."

"I never said that." His gaze stayed locked on mine, though he shifted his weight to one arm and brushed a stray loc off my face, the backs of his strong fingers brushing along my close-cropped beard, licking like a trail of fire.

I forced myself to turn away from his touch.

"Do the words, 'Even though you're just a bird, I still accept you as my mate' ring a bell?" That still stung days later.

He had the grace to wince. "I . . . I didn't mean it quite that way."

"There's really no other way to take it."

"You're perfect the way you are. I simply expected my mate to be another dire wolf. My parents would be furious if I mated a regular wolf, much less a raven. You have no idea the social ruin and the complication this brings—"

"Let me up." I gritted my teeth and tried not to punch him. I was strong, but he was stronger. Didn't mean I wouldn't give as good as I got. Didn't care how many people said he was a good guy. He'd been nothing but a snarly dick since our first meeting.

The abrupt turnaround wasn't appreciated, either. At least when he'd hated me, I knew what to expect. His backhanded compliments were worse. Didn't have time for that shit.

"That's not what I meant—"

"Seems you say that a lot. Maybe you should just stop talking." I shoved his shoulder, letting him know I wasn't playing. "Let. Me. Up."

He licked his lips, his gaze trailing down my body and stopping on my cock. "Can I pleasure you first? The smell of unsatisfied mate is driving my wolf crazy. Let me take care of that for you?"

"I don't need you to take care of me." It would probably be more convincing if my dick wasn't still hard as steel. At least my voice sounded steady.

"You don't have to do anything. It doesn't even have to mean anything." He glanced away, his jaw hard. "I need to . . . can I please suck your cock?"

My turn to blink. "You want to . . . suck . . . me . . . off?"

He nodded, his body rigid.

"Do alpha wolves do that?" I couldn't help the taunt.

I could almost hear his teeth grind. "You're my mate. I'd do anything for you."

I raised a challenging brow. I wasn't usually such a dick, but between the disappointments of the day, sexual frustration, and having to put up with his 'compliments,' I was at the end of my tether. "Fine. Yeah. Do it."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

If I thought he'd back down, I was mistaken. He gave me a smile so breathtaking I barely rasped out, "It means nothing. Just so we're clear."

His smile dimmed. "Right. I understand." Didn't stop him from gripping my boxer briefs and pulling them down my hips to join my jeans. He tugged them both off, leaving me naked. "Can I remove my shirt? Skin-to-skin contact soothes my wolf."

"Knock yourself out." I did my best to keep my voice detached. A simple hookup like I used to do in the clubs. These days I texted a regular hookup and they'd be at my place in under an hour. Or I'd be at theirs.

I scooted back on the bamboo-silk bedding to give him room, pushing aside a bunch of artfully arranged pillows. I tried not to focus on his broad, freckled shoulders, or his eight-pack as he pulled off his jacket and silky black tee. Or that fiery treasure trail, leading straight to a sizable bulge. He didn't move to undo his dress pants, instead running his gaze over me from top to bottom.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous." He squeezed my thighs, sinking down between them. "Solid."

I wasn't some twink, that was for sure. I'd honed my body on Baltimore's docks. Knew I was built like a brick wall. Or a boxer in his prime. But so was Michael. Seeing him between my legs, his hot breath ghosting along my length made me want to moan. I didn't. He didn't need to know how he affected me. He hadn't earned that.

"I love your body. Love that you have the perfect amount of hair—not too much, not too little." To demonstrate, he ran his hands down my thighs again, then slid one onto

my stomach, his fingers splaying over the tightly curled hair at my groin.

Shit, this was a bad idea. Didn't want pretty words. Not from him. Not when I was a "complication." I'd grown up in a human household where my existence was a complication. Not planning to relive those days. Wouldn't be some guy's dirty little secret. Or even worse, his public shame. Been there, done that.

I opened my mouth to call the whole thing off when he bent forward and swiped his tongue over the slit in my crown, his eyes crinkling in pleasure as he tasted the drop of precome beaded there.

Instead of stopping things, I moaned. His mouth felt amazing.

He heard me. All the encouragement he needed. He began to engulf my cock, at first only taking the tip, his tongue pressing hard against the underside, the heat so good. Then he slid partway down, his fist gripping my base so he wouldn't choke. Still, I wasn't a small guy. Holy fuck, I wanted to thrust into that damnable mouth. I kept my hips still. I wasn't an inconsiderate asshole. Not even to him.

I curled my fingers in the sheets so I wouldn't run them through his hair. I'd always loved redheads, and his was a beautiful shade of dark auburn, with enough length to grip and a bit of wave to make me itch to touch. Looked soft and inviting. Not doing anything he might take as encouragement, though. This was a quick one-off, nothing to get worked up over.

Pulling off my length with a pop, he ran his tongue down the underside and paid my balls some attention. He nipped my thigh, and I jumped. He chuckled, his eyes definitely darkening with want.

"You taste so good. Bet I know where you'll taste even better," he said, before placing his hands on my thighs and pushing them toward my chest and swiping his

tongue over my entrance.

I almost shot off the bed in surprise. No one had rimmed me in a long time and I forgot how amazing it felt. Michael kept a steel grip on my thighs. I couldn't squirm away. His strength only ratcheted up the heat. Another lick, and then his tongue pushed inside.

I tried hard to hold back my moans, but no way could anyone have the dire wolf's hot tongue inside them and keep quiet. At this rate, he wouldn't even have to blow me.

He reduced me to a writhing mess of nerve endings, pleasure zinging along all my limbs, and my stomach clenching from the desires he awakened in me as he continued tongue-fucking me. Damn, he was good at that.

My body pulled tight, my balls ready to unload. I reached for my cock, but he batted my hand away and withdrew his tongue. He wiped his chin on the bedding before grinning and moving back to my dick.

"I promised you a blowjob. I always deliver on my promises."

The way he said it let me know he wasn't talking about sucking my dick. But damned if he hadn't realized the best way to cut off my protests was to sink onto my cock before I could get the words out. Fucker.

This time, he didn't mess around. He opened his throat and took my cock, angling me in a way that made every cell light up. I wasn't going to last. My back arched, and a pained groan escaped my throat as the last of my reserve gave way.

"I'm gonna come," I rasped. Always respectful to give a guy warning.

Instead of pulling off, he sank down and tightened his suction. That's all it took. I

unloaded in his mouth, my orgasm ripping through me, every muscle straining as he continued to suck me down. Felt like my orgasm lasted forever. When I finally stopped coming, my muscles went lax, my chest rising and falling like I'd run a race.

Contentment tried to settle over me. Couldn't let it. Should get up and walk away. Let him know it didn't mean shit to me. Only I wasn't that guy. Not right to leave someone hangin'. I sighed.

"I can—" I started to offer, at the same time he pushed up onto his elbows and said, "You don't have to—"

We both stopped and stared. Michael cleared his throat, his eyes shifted back to a deep green. "I did this for you. Until you're ready to make it mean something, I won't accept or expect anything from you."

"You'll be waiting a long time." My words didn't sound convincing, even to me. And the twinge of disappointment in my gut didn't help.

His mouth tugged up at the corners. "We'll see."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

He rolled off the bed, adjusted his stiff cock, then grabbed his shirt, his broad back flexing with each movement as he tugged it on. Watching him cover up such a fine body was almost painful. I had the urge to tear off his clothes and spend the next hour—or several—exploring every curve and dip. I forced myself to look away.

He slipped into his coat, then turned back around and made it clear he had every intention of waiting for me to get dressed and enjoying the show in the meantime.

Fine. Not ashamed of my body. Sitting up slowly, my limbs protested the movement after such a great release. I shook my head, my locs falling around me like a curtain.

“I fucking love your hair. It’s so sexy. Especially the gray streaks in all that dark.” Michael’s voice had a husky quality, letting me know he was serious.

I shrugged, didn’t meet his gaze.

His brow furrowed. “Did I say something wrong again? I always mess up around you.”

“Nah, man, it’s cool. Had the gray since I was a kid.” I picked up a loc and ran my hand down the strand. His gaze followed, a hungry look on his face.

My grams said the gray was from growing up in the battle zone that was my father’s house.

She was probably right.



I grudgingly liked that Michael didn't make a joke about my hair not matching my age. I'd had lovers call me 'Daddy' since I hit my early twenties and at only thirty-six—young by raven standards since we lived to over two hundred—I wasn't anyone's Daddy. Not my kink. A lost opportunity, I guess.

He handed me my discarded boxer briefs and jeans and then searched until he found my tee. I dressed as a knock came at the door.

"That'll be Jagger and Ike," Michael said. "They'll stand guard tonight so we can rest up."

"Cool. Could use a night off." Jagger and Ike were the other security personnel Kennedy favored, so she'd be in capable hands.

"You want to—"

"Got plans." I didn't. I just didn't want to spend any more time with him, or I might actually start liking the guy. Couldn't afford to thaw. Being his mate only brought complications, like he said. He needed to move on, find a dire wolf or whatever his parents expected. I liked my life here just fine.

When he continued to stare, I stuffed my hands in my pockets. Wasn't much for lying.

"Later." Stepping past him toward the door, I felt his gaze between my shoulder blades. I stuffed my feet into work boots, snatched up my coat, and opened the door enough to slip through. Outside, I greeted Jagger and Ike before heading down the hallway and turning into my room. I didn't hurry. Even though I wanted to. I shut my door, leaned back against it.

Never should have let Michael blow me. Bad idea. And as much as I pushed it away,

guilt ate at me for not returning the favor. Still, I was glad I didn't taste him, get to know his body. Bad enough his scent—fresh fallen snow and pine—lingered on my skin. Some temptations are better left alone. Plus, I wasn't joking when I told him I didn't like him. Attraction wasn't the same thing. Sue me, my dick knows what it likes. But I'd stopped setting myself up for pain a long time ago.

I startled. A little girl in a cream dress—the Lord Baltimore's youngest ghost in residence—sat on the edge of my bed, her feet swinging, a red ball sitting beside her.

“Molly,” I gently chided. “You know you're supposed to wait for permission to enter my room. Living creatures need their privacy.”

Her lip trembled, and she stared at her black buckle shoes, her movements stilling.

I sighed. Funny thing about the Lord Baltimore, it was loaded with ghosts. Molly was a casualty of the Great Depression. After the stock market crash, her parents took her to the top of the building and jumped to their deaths, taking her with them. I'd met her when we first moved into the hotel, though she was shy at first. When I didn't freak out or run from her like so many guests did, she'd started hanging around more.

“Anyway, thanks for the heads-up about the shade,” I said.

The little ghost nodded, a small smile making an appearance. She never spoke. Not sure she could. She communicated readily enough through gestures and seemed to have some sort of foresight. Earlier today, she'd mimed fading in and out, someone springing out at us, and had pointed toward the lobby. At first, I thought she referred to a ghost, because shades were so uncommon. She finally pointed to the Ouija board on my desk I'd picked up in hopes she could talk to me that way. We used it a lot. After the pointer sped around the board, I got the picture. When it attacked, Kennedy had used a bespelled flashlight that kept the shade from being able to fade, at least until Michael had ripped the guy's throat out.

When Molly remained sitting at the end of my bed, I grabbed Roald Dahl's *Matilda* from the pile of books on my bedside table, sank into my desk chair, and proceeded to read aloud.

Molly leaned so far forward, I thought she'd topple to the floor. I'd bought the book secondhand when I realized she was lonely and probably bored. Imagine being perpetually seven years old.

I closed the book after completing a chapter. "That's it for tonight. I'm really tired."

She mimed clapping, but still didn't leave.

"You okay?" I asked. Were ghosts ever okay?

She pointed at me, then placed her hand above her head to show something—or someone—big. She pretended to howl. Then, putting her hands together in a heart, she grinned. Took me a second. My cheeks heated. Had she seen . . . ?

"No, I don't like him." I almost sounded convincing.

She giggled, though no sound came out, and made the heart gesture again.

"Molly—"

She faded away. Cheeky brat. I shook my head. I'd have to introduce her to more staff so when I returned to Tommy's Neighborhood, they could take over reading to her.

Once I was sure I was alone, I hopped into the shower to wash the day away—and Michael's scent—piling my locs on top of my head to keep them out of the lukewarm stream. Kennedy had purchased the entire 19th floor of the Lord Baltimore Hotel and

was still remodeling the space. Living in a former guest room wasn't ideal for a raven, since we're collectors by nature and like to surround ourselves with personal items. Nothing more impersonal than this, even with the framed splatter art and the great view of the downtown. I hoped I wouldn't be here longer than a couple weeks more. I could manage until then.

After the shower, I pulled on a pair of sweats and crawled into bed with a biography of Babe Ruth, even though he played for the Yankees and I preferred football to baseball. I liked reading about famous Baltimoreans. I wasn't born here, but the city had carved a place for itself in my bones, and I didn't see myself ever leaving.

After reading and re-reading the same page multiple times, I gave up. My thoughts kept straying back to Michael's lips wrapped around me, the possessive way he'd gazed at me, even though I should have been the one in control. We both knew I wasn't. I groaned. I liked it better when he'd hated me. That had been simple.

This. This was complicated.

I despised complicated.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

The next morning, when I opened my bedroom door to head to the common eating area, I found a bouquet of wildflowers in a scarlet vase, wrapped up with a big silver bow. The card said,

“Thinking of you.

–M”

Dammit. Didn’t appreciate him playing me like this. Tempted to smash the vase, but that would be a waste. I snatched up the flowers, hoping no one saw them, and placed them on the nightstand.

I took a few deep breaths. Let it go. He could send me all the flowers he wanted. I wasn’t fool enough to think pretty gestures would make a difference. He was still an overbearing asshole, and he’d as much as said his family would never accept me. Wasn’t signing up for that shit. Again.

I traced a raised purple scar on my forearm. Sliced with a sliver blade and never fully healed. My stepmother’s reminder of where I stood in the pecking order. If not for my grams showing up at my school and whisking me away to Baltimore when I was eight, I don’t know what would have happened. Or maybe I did and just didn’t want to think about it.

My dad didn’t fight Grams once he knew where I was. No calls. No visits. Probably breathed a sigh of relief. Not his problem anymore.

I shook off the memory, a suspicious tingle lingering behind my eyes whenever I

thought of my grams. My angel.

I missed her. Human life spans were so short.

I looked at the flowers. No idea how Michael found these in the middle of winter—crazy wolf had to have paid a mint. I ran a finger over a sunflower petal before turning and heading to the community eatery. Kennedy had partitioned off her personal space from the rest of the penthouse, with only Michael, me, Ike, and Jagger rooming on the same hallway. Even her staff, she only trusted so far. Then again, if I'd had as many attempts on my life in the last weeks as she'd had, I'd also be paranoid.

I strode down a long hall, past the elevators, and turned the corner, reaching what had been three hotel rooms—now turned into the common area. Her guards bristled with mercenary zeal as they stood in groups or sat eating breakfast. A well-trained fighting force. Michael stood in the center of a group of mostly wolf shifters. I didn't meet his eyes. Several group members tilted their chins in my direction. A grizzled wolf gave me a good-natured leer. I winked.

No shifter could miss Michael's low growl. Dude had a serious problem. If he didn't knock that alpha shit off, I was gonna step over to him, set him straight. Didn't help that all the wolves instantly bared their throats to him. And the asshole took it as his due.

Instead of reacting, I swaggered past the group to a round table. A lone figure hunched over a plate of food and guzzled coffee. Kennedy served real coffee, the beans rich and dark, not the synth stuff most of Baltimore drank.

"Hey, Linc, 'sup?" I grinned at the petite fairy. A huge pair of square frames rested on his button nose.

He grunted. Our resident tech guru wasn't a morning person.

To sate my shifter's metabolism, I grabbed several plates of food, slid them onto a tray, and then snagged myself a cup of coffee, not bothering with cream or sugar.

Even though the hair at my nape prickled, I ignored Michael's stare. Didn't owe him anything.

I returned to Linc and sank into a chair next to him. I dug into my food. While I devoured my eggs, pancakes, toast, waffles, bacon, and sausage, Linc guzzled several more cups of coffee.

The news played on a flat screen TV that took up almost an entire wall. Sally DeSantos, BNN's highest rated news anchor, pretended to enjoy discussing Valentine cupcake ideas. Management had recently pulled her from the prime-time Baltimore Today and shoved her into Baltimore Outta Bed, a morning show focusing on puff pieces. She'd been one of BNN's best investigative reporters. The morning show must have been a huge demotion. Might have something to do with the new bombshell siren Tiffany Something—couldn't remember her last name—they'd hired. Personally, I missed Sally taking the hard-hitting pieces.

"Isn't this frosting divine?" asked Randall Jerico, a distinguished jackalope with silver sideburns. He ran a finger through a cupcake's frosting and popped it into his mouth. "So creamy."

Sally's angular features remained bland, but her pastel green wings fluttered, and her matching beehive wobbled slightly.

"Yes, Randall, so creamy." Her lip turned up in a hint of a smile, and she pulled her signature yellow cat's-eye glasses down her nose. "You know, it reminds me of currents. Like the ones in the harbor."

“Uh, sure,” Randall said, always affable. He took a big bite of the cupcake.

“Speaking of the harbor, did you hear about the floater they found last night near the bridge?”

Randall choked, spraying cupcake crumbs everywhere. He wheezed, wiping at his shirt. “I don’t think we’re supposed to talk about those kinds of stories. Besides, jumpers happen.”

Not wrong. A popular spot. Still, several of us snickered. Good for her for slipping that tidbit into the morning show.

Sally shrugged, her eyes the picture of innocence. Nothing innocent about that fairy.

“Why Randall, I’ll have you know, I talked to some sources. Not a jumper. Garroted,” she sing-songed.

“That was Tiffany’s story,” Randall hissed, though his mic picked him up loud and clear. He shot her a murderous look, then turned to smile at the cameras. “Right. Thanks for that, uh, morbid commentary, Sally. Next up, the moistest red velvet cupcake to ever grace your palate. First, a word from our sponsor.”

I tuned out and finished my breakfast. By the time I pushed my tray away, Linc looked more alert. He brushed his blue curls back from his heart-shaped face, his eyes owlsh behind his glasses.

“Hey, Abe.” Like he’d just noticed me. “You on the roster today?”

I nodded. “Far as I know.”

I didn’t get many days off. Kennedy liked to keep both Michael and me close. Too



close for my comfort.

“Cool. She has me looking into the Domino Sugar sabotage.”

“That why you look like you haven’t slept in a week?”

He shrugged, and his deep blue wings fluttered. “Don’t sleep much, anyway.”

“You know who’s behind it?” Weeks ago, someone had torched the sugar factory’s main shed. Since it was the largest manufacturing outlet in Baltimore and refined upward of twenty-five percent of the country’s sugar, this had quickly become a national crisis. Yet permits kept being stalled. This problem dropped in Kennedy’s lap when she took over the position of Roger.

One of the first things she did was call her father—a U.S. senator and the president’s closest advisor—to cram those permits through. She’d built a temporary sugar shack and reopened the refinery. Baltimoreans depended on those jobs, so even as assholes kept trying to take her out, she was winning over the business district and the hard-working grunts.

Yet, once again, someone—or more likely someones—had tried to close the factory. This shit had to stop.

Linc’s bow lips turned down in a frown. “Not sure. But one thing I know: it’s personal. Kennedy’s got one hell of an enemy.”

Ah, damn.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

My lip curled against my will. Kennedy had run in high political circles her whole life. Even before becoming a Roger, she'd been a target. And she'd made a lot of enemies. Seemed it was now payback.

Before I could say that aloud, a shadow fell across us. Michael. Knew his scent now.

Linc's face lit up, his voice dropping to what I think was supposed to be a seductive purr. "Hey, big guy. You wanna join us?"

So Linc had a crush on Michael. I told myself I didn't care, even as my shoulders tensed. Only because he was looming over us like a dark cloud.

"Go on," I said. "Sit. Stop shading us." I waved in his direction without looking at him.

I didn't actually want him to join us, but I wasn't a dick. Just because he blew me didn't make us friends, though.

A pause.

"Thanks, I'd love to."

Could feel his smile without looking. Linc's wings fluttered madly for a moment before calming. He patted a seat beside him. Michael instead pulled out the chair next to mine and sat, our knees almost touching.

I tried not to growl.

“Kennedy wants to visit the MT stadium today. And then, we’ll head back out to the sugar factory. She’s added some security and wants to go over the new layout.” He leaned closer than absolutely necessary. “Make sure you bundle up. The cold weather’s already rolling in.”

I nodded, still not looking his way. Fuck. I hated the cold. That was the only thing I missed about Florida—warm weather. We’d recently had a Nor’easter that shut down most of the city. Now, another storm was predicted to hit in the next couple of days, and it was already ushering in a cold front.

Linc glanced between us as a loaded silence joined us at the table.

“Kay, I’m gonna get started on chasing down those leads. Talk to you guys later.” Linc sprang to his feet, patted my shoulder before leaving.

“What leads?” Michael asked.

“Who’s trying to sabotage Domino Sugar.” I focused my attention on my now-empty mug.

“Let me get you another cup.” Michael jumped up and swiped my mug before I could say anything.

He returned with a full cup. “Black. The way you like it.”

“What gives, man?” I forced myself to turn and look at him. Perfectly put together, as usual, in a gray suit that fit his big body like a glove. Went really well with my hoodie, jeans, and work boots. The stark contrast only made me pricklier. Time to end this. “I told you, last night changes nothing.”

His eyes focused intently on my face, heat in them.

“Can’t I be nice to my mate without you making a big deal of it?”

“Until you realized I was your mate, you would’ve rather spit on me than do something nice.”

“Because I was eaten alive with jealousy. It wasn’t until I shifted fully that I recognized you were my mate. That was why I was acting crazy.” He leaned in close, his fresh scent making me feel lightheaded. I leaned back and crossed my arms.

“Yeah, it must kill you to find out your mate’s ‘just a bird.’”

Michael blew out a breath and stared at the ceiling for a good ten seconds. When he looked back at me, his eyes met and held mine, the intensity unnerving. “I’m not disappointed. A mate is a rare gift. You are a gift.”

I swallowed and forced myself to break contact. “I’m sure your family will agree.”

Michael raked a hand through his hair. “They’re . . . traditional.”

“That’s a nice way of saying bigoted.”

“Why are you trying to pick a fight with me? I simply want to spend a little time, get to know you better. Is that so wrong?”

“See, this is why I don’t want to do that. You’re wearing blinders. You think spending time together is a good thing. But what’s the end goal? You’ve said your parents won’t approve. Hell, it will ruin you socially. So, what? I’ll remain your dirty little secret? Or bring shame down upon you and your family? There is no positive outcome here. You’d be better to move on and find someone more compatible with your family’s traditional values.”

“Now who’s wearing blinders?” Michael huffed. “Even if I wanted to—which I don’t—now that my wolf recognizes you, I can’t move on. You’re it for me. No one else will hold my interest.”

“Sucks to be you, man.” If my heart twinged in sympathy, I ignored it and kept my face stony. The guy needed to face facts. We couldn’t work.

He narrowed his eyes. “You’ll be in the same predicament.”

“Nah, told you, birds don’t have mates.”

Standing, he chuckled and leaned over me until we were nose to nose. “Let’s see how that goes, shall we?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

It didn't go well.

Two days had passed since Michael's pronouncement, and he wasn't wrong. My sex drive had anchored itself to that fucking dire wolf, and no matter how I flirted, I couldn't muster up the enthusiasm to take anyone up on their offers of company.

Kennedy had been so preoccupied she hadn't called me to her bed, either. Not that I even wanted to go. Which was aggravating. Objectively, she was fine. And a hell of a lover. You think my dick cared?

Was that the way this mate thing worked? One blow job, and suddenly my body only wanted him? I didn't even believe in fated mates. I didn't. If I said it enough, I might even convince myself.

Every time I considered seeking Michael out to talk it through, I'd mutter "complication" and steel my resolve to keep the wall between us. Not that he made it easy. Each morning a new gift sat outside my door. The first morning a bejeweled raven figure with emerald eyes. Had to cost a pretty penny. And since ravens were worse than magpies at collecting shiny things, I loved it. Not that I'd tell him that. The next morning a string of sparkly lights to hang around my room, along with a fuzzy blanket and some fancy pillowcases, wrapped up with a giant gold bow. "To feather your nest," he said in the card.

I hated that he understood me so well.

He brought me coffee, gave me blinding smiles, and kept his distance. Or as much as Kennedy would allow us, anyway. We'd been going to a lot of meetings with her and

often took up positions outside the door together.

I stubbornly stayed quiet. Michael didn't push, but his presence felt like sandpaper rubbing my nerves raw.

By the end of the second day, I could hardly wait for Kennedy to excuse us so I could rush back to my room and angrily jerk off to thoughts of that fucking wolf.

The third morning, when I walked into the breakfast room—after receiving the poem “The Raven” in a beautifully gilded frame—Michael grinned at me, his expression smug, as if he knew what I'd done the night before.

Led Zeppelin's “Since I've Been Loving You” played quietly over the din. Michael's favorite band. I'd learned that much in the last weeks we'd been thrown together. He was a little obsessed.

I scowled and ignored him, seeking out Linc. I'd barely sat down and said good morning, when a platter of waffles and bacon appeared in front of me, along with a steaming cup of black coffee. Gritting my teeth, I turned to say thank you. Grams didn't raise no ill-mannered child. But Michael had already moved away and was now surrounded by the other wolves, who refused to even look my way.

Why wouldn't he give up? I gave him zero encouragement. Yet, he seemed so sure I'd break.

Hated to admit he might be right.

Except I wouldn't be an anchor around his neck. Once this assignment was over, and we didn't have to spend most days together, I'd avoid him. Not the bravest approach, but I was a practical bird. The lust would fade. He'd move on, and that would be that.

“He’s crushing hard on you, huh?” Linc propped his chin on his fist, dark circles ringing his eyes. “Heard from one of the wolves you two are mates. I think he’s serenading you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Led Zeppelin doesn’t exactly scream romance. Besides, we aren’t anything. I don’t even like the guy.”

Linc stared at me and raised an eyebrow.

“I’d be on that wolf like a kraken on coffee.” Linc grimaced. “Speaking of which, did you hear Kennedy’s coffee shipment didn’t make it? Kraken attack.”

I winced in sympathy. Kennedy had many business interests—even before becoming the Roger of Central—and since the federal government controlled the airspace and the outrageous tariffs, Kennedy opted to invest in a ship like some Christopher Columbus shit. I’d jokingly called it Little Nina, even though it held more than a thousand times the cargo capacity of the original ship. Told her she’d need two more, so we’d have the PetitePinta and the PequenaSanta Maria.

Problem with a ship, though, she’d had to gamble on a kraken not finding it. It’s a big ocean, but they loved nothing more than coffee beans. Well, except cocaine. Many a ship filled with containers of coffee had limped into port after a run in with those overgrown squids.

“It take the whole ship down?” I asked.

“No, though its hull is badly damaged. Crew had to throw most of the beans overboard.”

“The Baltimore Coffee Party.” Even had a tariff involved.



Linc snickered. “Something like that.”

Man, Kennedy would be in a terrible mood.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Sometimes I could be the master of understatement. Kennedy had passed “terrible mood” about five hours ago. We spent the morning at the Domino Sugar factory meeting with her new security team—again—and I’m pretty sure creatures twice her size pissed themselves by the time she finished grilling them about gaps in their security system and routines. I winced more than once in sympathy.

Eventually, we were relegated to standing outside the manager’s office while Kennedy requested—in a waytoo sugary voice—all sorts of documentation from the terrified staff.

Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” kept playing from Michael’s pocket as we stood “guard.” He didn’t answer the phone. Each time it began the opening riff, his jaw hardened a little more, and he silenced it. After the fifth or sixth time, I snapped, “You going to answer that?”

He glowered, but snatched ear buds from his pocket, stuffed them in his ears, and stomped a few feet down the hallway. He answered. “I’m working. Now is not a good time.”

He stood too far away for me to hear the voice on the other end. A woman, that much I could tell. Not that I wanted to eavesdrop. Didn’t care.

After shooting me a glance from under his lashes, Michael strode farther away. Got that message loud and clear. He stayed quiet, his knuckles whitening as his hands clenched into fists. After a couple minutes, he said, “Are you finished? I’ve already told you—”

His posture stiffened, and for a second I swore he began to shift. Since he was a fucking huge prehistoric-looking wolf and this hallway was narrow, that was slightly worrisome. Didn't shift, though.

"No. I've been clear. Tell her to go home. I've told you repeatedly, I—"

Shouted indistinct words—a man's voice this time—and then Michael said, "Deal with it," and hung up. He stomped back over to me, his face so thunderous I might have been intimidated if I didn't know him.

Guess we were all in a shitty mood now.

We stood there almost shoulder-to-shoulder in the deafening silence. Now that he easily gave me the quiet I wanted, I had to bite my tongue not to talk to him.

"Everything all right?" I blurted. I dipped my chin so my locs would cover my grimace. Sometimes being a caretaker caused more problems than it solved. "Sorry, man, I shouldn't have—"

"My parents. We don't have the best relationship." His voice lacked inflection.

I nodded. Yeah, bigots sucked, though that probably wasn't what he meant.

"It's hard to be the heir, right?" Not that I knew anything about that.

He snorted. "What makes you think I'm the heir?"

I couldn't help it. I laughed, keeping my voice low. "Right. Good one."

"I'm serious. My sister's next in line. It's the reason I left. My dad wants me to challenge her position."

I turned toward him. “Your dad wants you to fight your own sister?”

“Yeah. We’re twins. She’s ten minutes older. And an alpha. It’s not all that unusual in a wolf pack. Dad is sure I’m the stronger wolf.”

I gave him a slow perusal from head to toe. Not hard to believe. “Are you?”

“Maybe. I don’t care. I’m not hurting my sis. Besides, she’ll be a better leader than I ever would.” He shrugged.

Color me surprised. Hadn’t expected him to acknowledge any weakness. And for an alpha wolf, admitting someone else could be a stronger leader would be seen as weakness.

“So, what are you planning to do?”

He locked gazes with me. “Live my life. Try to be happy. Let my sister take her rightful place.”

“You’re not going back?” I swallowed.

“Maybe someday. But everything I want is right here in Baltimore.” His eyes darkened.

I flushed. Don’t fall for it. He’s a wolf. They always return to their packs. . . Unless they join new ones, an annoying voice chimed in. I cleared my throat again, my mouth suddenly dry. “They sending your sister here? I heard you say—”

The door banged open, and Kennedy swanned out, an evil grin on her face. “Let’s go kick some ass, boys.”

\* \* \*

The rest of the day, Michael and I kept quiet. As if the day responded to Kennedy's mood, it remained overcast, frigid, and gray. To make matters even worse, she dragged us to a meeting with Valkyrie Cane, the Roger of West Baltimore. A high-powered mage, Cane was as nasty as the rest of her coven. Poe joked that the mages all dressed like they should sell scented candles at the Ren Faire, and he wasn't wrong. The shapeless earth-tone robes, silver jewelry, and cloud of incense that quickly gave me a headache made them a cliché.

Cane came in trying hard to both influence and disrespect Kennedy. By the time we finished, one of Cane's enforcers left in tears, another cradled broken fingers, and Cane herself had paled to the color of freshly fallen snow. Couldn't even take credit. Michael and I hadn't done a thing.

Except stay out of Kennedy's way.

There was something soothing about having Michael by my side. His fresh pine scent was driving me crazy, though it helped with the incense headache. My body was having all sorts of inappropriate and confusing reactions to his nearness.

During a tense moment with the mages, he'd subtly reached out and squeezed my elbow. I pretended I didn't notice, but was tempted to lean into him.

In the late afternoon with the sun hidden behind ominous clouds, we climbed out of her fancy SUV with her new pink Oleander logo stenciled on the hood. A fitting symbol. Pretty but deadly. Like Kennedy.

So ready to be done for the day, but we still had a couple more stops to make. Just as I finished that thought, a lone boar shifter came out of a crouch behind a parked car and lunged for Kennedy.

She put a silver bullet between his fire-red eyes.

He fell, lifeless, at our feet.

“Damn, I needed that.” She stepped over his corpse like he was barely an inconvenience. Guess he thought he could claim the Roger’s position for his own.

Fatal mistake.

Don’t know what it meant that I barely flinched. Michael shot me a feral grin, which should have disgusted me, instead of heating my blood to boiling. I glanced away. Damn this fated mates shit. I would resist it. Ravens don’t have mates. Ravens don’t have mates. Ravens . . . maybe if I repeated it enough times, it would stick.

Michael tensed, tilted his face up, and seemed to taste the air. A growl rolled from his powerful chest and claws sprung from his fingertips through his expensive leather gloves. Both Kennedy and I froze.

“What is it?” she asked, her gun reappearing in her hand.

I scanned the street. Only a couple of humans lingered on the other side of the road with six lanes between us. Perhaps a father and son. Big fuckers, but human. Definitely human.

“Abe, stay with Kennedy. Watch each other’s back.” He looked both ways and sprinted across the wide street directly toward the humans. They began to slowly dissolve right before our eyes. The hell?

Then it hit me.

Shades.

They looked human during the day, but at night could disappear like smoke. Since they hadn't winked out of sight, it must still be light enough they couldn't easily shift to their amorphous state. Michael lunged and swiped a clawed hand at one of their faces . . . but they were gone.

He prowled around the area in a quick sweep before jogging back to us.

He held up his hand. Blood tipped his claws. "Tagged that fucker. Should make him easy to spot, unless they have a healer, too."

"Nice job, Michael. Joris' always been vain. Serves him right for getting too cocky." Kennedy tapped a long nail against her cheek. "Should have killed him in Antwerp when I had the chance. Ugh, now, Tommy will gloat. He said there'd be more."

She seemed more annoyed than concerned.

"Who's Joris?" I asked.

She waved a hand dismissively. "Just a guy."

"You know him?" My tone came out sharp, probing.

"Does anyone really know another creature?"

"You didn't think to tell us there'd be more shades gunning for you?" I crossed my arms, my jaw going tight.

"Michael had it under control." She gave him a nod, then proceeded toward the building onto her next errand.

I gaped. Really?

“Damn, Kennedy, warn a guy next time!” I called after her, beginning to follow.

She barely gave me a wave in acknowledgement.

Michael stepped close, his nearness comforting.

“How’d you know?” I asked, gazing into his faintly glowing eyes. “I’d have bet my life those guys were human.”

“Dire wolves have exceptional noses. On the surface, they smelled human. Underlying their scent was the hint of sulfur. Like fireworks. Dead giveaway.”

“Huh,” was all I managed.

Michael leaned in close to my ear, his words only for me. “You notice the way they stood? They’re mercenaries. My guess? Belladonna. Night Shades. If they’re here, there’s more going on than we’re being told. You need to stay close.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

By the time we returned for dinner, I was ravenous and horny with a mood rivaling Kennedy's. Michael had glued himself to my back in a protective display only a wolf could think was normal behavior. His scent, the heat of his body, and things afoot we weren't trusted to know about, added to my frustration. I wanted to punch him and fuck him in equal measure and the feeling didn't sit well.

"Abe, you want to blow off some steam before we eat? You seem tense." Kennedy flashed a predatory smile my way. Michael stiffened next to me, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. As a human, she wouldn't hear it, but I sure did.

I wanted to be angry at his bold behavior.

Wasn't.

Shit.

To make matters worse, the thought of sex with Kennedy turned my stomach. Also that dire wolf's fault. Not that I'd tell him. I considered accepting just to piss him off. Couldn't do it.

"Raincheck? I'm famished and still have a headache from all that incense. Don't know how those mages stand it." I squeezed the bridge of my nose for emphasis.

She raised an artfully shaped brow. Didn't call me on my lie, though.

"Your loss. Michael, you game?"

Now, I had to hold back my own growl. What did I care if she had sex with my mate? I mean, that wolf. I didn't. Obviously. I refused to look at him. I also didn't walk away, no matter how much I willed my legs to move. Let them have their tryst.

I still didn't budge.

"I've met my mate," he said, his voice almost a purr. His hand snaked out and rested possessively on my lower back. "There will be no one except Abe from now on."

Had to force myself to keep a satisfied smirk off my face.

Kennedy tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "It's always the fun lays who want to settle down. Shame."

A flash of heat raced through my limbs, and I clenched my fists at my sides to keep from punching her. Not only would that be an exceptionally bad idea, but I liked Kennedy. Usually. When she wasn't murdering everyone she came into contact with. Or hitting on a certain stuck-up dire wolf.

She waved us off and headed toward her suite, leaving us alone in the corridor. I swallowed, the air too thick to breathe. Then my feet miraculously unstuck, and I hurried toward the common area to grab some food. Michael jogged to catch up, his nearness causing my skin to prickle with heat.

"Abe—"

I held up my hand. "Not now. I'm going to grab a bite. Don't want to discuss this."

He stopped, letting me continue on my own. "It won't go away. You get that, right?" he called after me.

I didn't respond.

Didn't mean to be rude, but between Kennedy's rotten mood and being in close quarters with Michael all day, I needed time to regroup. I sighed in relief when I entered the common room and filled a tray to the brim with steak, four types of potatoes, lots of roasted vegetables, and a monster-sized cup of coffee. Other shifters dodged out of my way like I had a contagious disease.

Not helping my mood.

I retreated to an empty table, hoping Michael would stay away.

When he didn't enter immediately, I sighed again and ignored the twinge in my chest. Where was he? Tempted to pull out my phone and use the Find app Kennedy had insisted Michael and I have for the three of us. I'd never used it, though from the moment I'd installed it, I'd been aware I could. But I wouldn't.

I finished my meal in silence, barely pausing to chew. I'd just refilled my coffee cup and returned to my seat when Linc stumbled in, looking like he'd forgotten what sleep felt like. His wings drooped, his glasses sat askew, and he looked even tinier than usual.

Needed to check on him. The guy worked too hard.

I waved him over. Could do with some company, anyway. The other shifters were mostly keeping their distance once news of Michael's and my fated mates' status made the gossip rounds. Couldn't keep anything quiet around here. Since we hadn't completed the bond, I guess they figured Michael would be a little volatile. Maybe it was good Linc wasn't a shifter, or I'd be spending all my meals alone.

I'd never regretted being a shifter—even when my human stepmother hurled insults

and fists my way—but sometimes we could be ridiculous. He might as well have pissed on me with the way the wolf shifters acted. I swear wolves had more instincts than brains. Give me a raven shifter any day. We might be collectors of shiny things, but we had some common sense. Usually. Once we got our urges to acquire pretty things under control.

Problem was, Michael was the shiniest of shiny things, and my bird really, really liked all his gestures and gifts. Also, liked that he didn't hide me from Kennedy. Wasn't expecting that.

Didn't matter. We couldn't work. And I wasn't ready to forgive his disdain when we first met. That shit wasn't cool, even if I'd never seen him act that way to anyone else. Hell, that made it worse, didn't it?

Shoving my irritation aside, I smiled as Linc moved my way with a tray holding almost as much food as my own. He wobbled unsteadily, and even the bags under his eyes had bags. When was the last time he slept? He'd almost reached the table when he tipped slowly to the side. Oh, crap.

I sprang to my feet and snagged him and his tray before he toppled. He blinked up at me, his eyes glazed. I helped him ease into a seat.

"Thanks. I'm always so clumsy."

I huffed. "Exhausted, you mean. You need to sleep, man."

"There's been some fresh developments with the sugar factory . . ." Linc froze in place, his gaze riveted over my shoulder. I turned to see why.

Kennedy stomped through the door, the click clack of her heels loud on the wood floor, Michael following behind. Had he returned to her? No, he wouldn't. Would he?

Shit, I didn't care if he did. The burning in my chest meant nothing.

The room took a collective step backward, clearing the path to our table. She rolled up to us like a thunderstorm about to break.

"Linc, did you fill Abe in on the Domino Sugar sitch?"

Linc shrank like a hen before a cobra.

"Not yet. I was about to," he squeaked.

Guess I'd play mongoose.

"What's up? You know something?" I asked.

Kennedy turned her stormy gaze my way. Before she could answer, Michael moved behind me, a steadying presence.

"Sometime yesterday, containers with materials for the new off-loader and conveyor belts went missing."

I furrowed my brow. "Missing?"

Corruption wasn't unheard of at the port, lots of deals in play, but it took balls to steal materials the Roger of Central Baltimore had a particular interest in. Especially because there'd have to be a guy in place to offload the stolen containers. Or someone could've hid them in the stacks. It'd be weeks before they'd be discovered.

I looked at Linc.

He shrugged. "The port authorities are blaming the container ship, since they have no

record of the containers being offloaded.”

I chuckled, but it wasn't a happy sound. “Bullshit. It's buying them time. No way were they careless with containers meant for the sugar factory. They knew jobs depend on it and heads could roll.” Literally, if Kennedy had anything to say about it.

Kennedy's lips thinned as she gripped her large handbag holding more firepower than most military outposts. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Slow that roll, sister. Give me a chance to check it out.” I could nose around, see what the other dock workers knew. Just because I hadn't worked there in a couple months didn't mean my contacts were stale.

She glared before saying, “That's the idea. You can do that while I see to . . . some other business there. Michael, you'll be with us, too.”

I didn't groan, but it was close. Going to be a long night.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“Thought we were going to the docks?” Michael said over Led Zeppelin’s “When the Levee Breaks,” pulling the SUV off Broening Highway and into Sal and Pepper’s diner parking lot like I directed.

A defunct car ferry, permanently moored, housed the diner, though how it got the permits to sit in the waterway, I couldn’t say. Perfect place to catch up with friends and hear the latest gossip. No way they wouldn’t be talking about missing containers.

We’d already dropped Kennedy, Ike, and Jagger in front of what had been the LittlePinta though it now looked more like floating Swiss cheese. Since Kennedy had a strong preference for full-sized luxury BMW SUVs, our ride was about three pay grades above the average vehicle you saw at the diner. Not to mention the Oleander stenciled on the hood. Kennedy didn’t step quietly.

Michael hadn’t changed into something more casual, sticking to his silk shirts, tailored trousers, and handmade shoes. He’d even thrown on a camel hair trench costing more than most of these guys made in a month. I’d yet to see him in a pair of jeans.

When I’d mentioned he’d stand out—and not in a good way—he’d shrugged and said he’d roll up his sleeves, like that made any difference. Couldn’t even see them under his coat. Damn fool. Seemed to think it was funny.

In contrast, I’d thrown a waffle shirt over a long-sleeved tee, switched my boots out for steel-toed ones and added a Carhart knock-off and a beanie. Another reason Michael and I wouldn’t work. But the way he eyed me, you’d think I only wore a stripper’s tear-away thong . . . in pure gold. Shook my head internally.

I nodded toward what could generously be called a parking space. “You should stay in the car. They’ll be more likely to talk with one of their own.”

He parked, killing the engine and the music before turning to me.

“I have faith in your abilities to loosen tongues.” He smirked and exited the car into the chilly night.

Nice way of complimenting me while still not doing what I wanted. I took a deep breath and climbed out after him. “Keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking. They don’t like strangers.”

“I can handle myself.”

I snorted. “Whatever, man. Just keep quiet, you feel me?”

He looked me up and down, a wolfish grin making me shiver. “Not lately. I promise I’d like to if you’d let me. Feel you, that is.”

Gasoline and a match couldn’t make me combust so fast. I failed to hide a hitch in my breath, before choking out, “Never gonna happen.”

“Shame. Let me know if you change your mind.”

It took a moment to break eye contact, but I pulled myself away and raced up the port side gangplank that needed a fresh coat of paint with Michael close on my heels. At least the railings were stable, since a dunk in the harbor would be miserable this time of year.

We headed inside the main deck. The car ferry’s interior had been gutted. Now long tables and red, yellow, and blue booths lined the area from bow to stern. In the



middle of what had once been the crew area, an enormous hippo shifter with a long black beard flipped greasy sausages behind a grill. A tiny woman manned the bar next to it.

I led Michael toward the bar.

“Pepper?” he asked as we approached.

“Nah, that’s Sal,” I said. “Pepper’s the big guy.”

When Sal looked up, she grinned, a sizeable gap between her front teeth. “Look who the dog dragged in. Literally. How you doing, Abe? Missed your ugly face round here. You didn’t cause no trouble. Unlike most these guys.” She winked.

Michael frowned. “He’s not ugly—”

I elbowed him. “Good to see you, too, Sal. Don’t suppose you’ve got a Natty Boh on tap just for me?” I leaned against the bar.

“Yeah, sure. What’s your big, scowling friend havin’?”

“Same,” I said before Michael could answer. I waited for her to get our beers, scanning the room for a good source of news. There. Walter. A shift manager. Once I’d paid for our beers, I slipped a twenty into a tip jar.

“You always was a good one.” Sal blew me a kiss, and Michael growled low. That earned him another elbow.

“Cool it, wolf. You don’t want to get into it with Pepper. He’ll kick your ass.”

Michael scoffed. “I’d like to see him try.”

I didn't bother to tell him Pepper didn't play fair. He wielded a mean bat with a steel core and wasn't afraid to use it. Plus, had brass knuckles plated in silver. Did a lot of damage to supernaturals. I'd watched him break up more than one brawl. Wasn't pretty.

I ambled toward Walter, Michael in tow, calling greetings to different tables. Some of these guys I'd known for over fifteen years. Walter sat with several guys I'd worked with before, but I couldn't remember their names. A walrus shifter, Walter was a big guy in all ways. He had a thick mustache, drink-reddened cheeks, and a receding hairline. He also liked to gossip. I tipped my beer in his direction when we made eye contact, and he waved me over.

"Who's the giant?" Walter called, as his friends turned to watch us approach.

"Just a guy," I said, earning a scowl from Michael.

They all looked him up and down.

"Fancy duds for a place like this. No wonder you haven't been hangin' with us stiffs."

"Fuck off," I said good-naturedly. "Who says I ever wanted to hang with you assholes?"

Walter chuckled and pushed out a chair with his foot. I waved Michael to another one. I took off my coat and slung it on the chairback before sinking into the plastic seat.

"You coming back, Williams? We could use you on the line. Even give you some lighter work. I mean, looks like you're getting soft living the high life."

I flipped him off to snickers from the other guys, even flexed my bicep when I did it. “Nah, not in the cards. My roost alpha’s keeping me too busy these days.”

Walruses had similar social organization to ravens, so he’d get it.

“Alphas, man. What can you do?” He shook his head in mock sympathy as he side-eyed Michael.

I knocked my knee against Michael’s under the table in warning. Didn’t need him to start a fight. I could talk shit with these guys, but they’d be quick to take offense from a stranger. He pressed his thigh against mine and didn’t move. It burned where we touched, and my pulse sped up.

Michael grinned, all fang, his arm draping casually over the back of an empty chair beside him. “I don’t know. We have our uses.”

Walter and the guys burst out laughing and raised their glasses in a salute. “That you do, that you do.”

We finished our beers, good-natured insults flying, and then Michael ordered a couple more pitchers. He paid for the table, which instantly made him everyone’s favorite guy. He occasionally joined the conversation but mostly kept quiet, even as he placed less space between us. Not quite a possessive display, but the guys wouldn’t fail to notice his interest. Amazed they didn’t say shit about it though.

Two rounds later—also paid for by Michael—I felt pretty good. I’d missed these assholes.

“So, if you aren’t coming back, Williams, why are you slummin’ down here?” Walter asked, licking the foam on his mustache.

“Wanted to get the word on those misplaced containers for Domino Sugar. Roger Fergason is pissed. Don’t know if you met her yet, but she’s not one to fuck with.”

Michael snorted. “Bit of an understatement, don’t you think?”

“You working for her?” Walter asked, sitting forward and leaning on the table, his meaty arms resembling flippers even in his human-like form.

“For the moment.” Michael kept his voice relaxed, like it wasn’t a big deal.

Walter snapped his thick fingers. “That’s why you look so familiar. You’re that guy who’s always with Tommy Tittoti. A bodyguard, right?”

“So they tell me.” Michael waved down a waitress and ordered another round for the table.

“Shit, man. This ain’t good,” one of the other guys said, his gaze gone wary.

“Keep your shirt on, McBride. Williams wouldn’t bring him here if he was gonna bust heads. Right, Williams?”

“Nah, we’re just looking for information. Want to know what happened.”

Walter rolled his eyes. “What happened is some dumbass took a bribe and wound up dead.”

“Oh, yeah?” Now, I leaned forward, too. “Who’d that be?”

“You ’member Jimmy Kolakowski?”

“Yeah, ’course. He got himself dead?” I poured Walter another glass of beer, my

hand a little unsteady.

“Walt, you don’t know he did nothin’,” one of the others said.

“Sure I do.” Walter downed his beer in one go. “Seal shifters sure as shit don’t drown in the harbor.”

The floater Sally DeSantos had mentioned on the news the other day. Shit. Michael and I shared a look. He gave me the barest nod.

“What makes you think he took a bribe?” I took a swig of my beer, a nice buzz settling around me.

Walter looked around like someone else might overhear. It was all for show. He loved spouting off. Some of it was bullshit, though sometimes he produced a diamond.

“He operated one of the cranes. Several guys on that job been complaining of threats to them and their families. Lots of call-ins lately. Guys are scared. Heard from one that big money was being offered. Most weren’t dumb enough to take it.”

“Jimmy was?” Michael asked.

Walter shrugged. “Kolakowski was a dumb kid. Always hustling. My bet, he gave them what they wanted, and they eliminated the evidence.”

“Any idea who these guys are and why they’d want the containers?” I doubted he’d know but always worth asking.

“Nah, they weren’t exactly advertising. Humans, seems like. Throwing around cash and threats.”

Michael and I exchanged a loaded glance. Humans? Or shades?

“It’s fucked up my roster,” Walter continued. “Sure you don’t wanna come back?”

“Can’t, man. But I appreciate the intel.”

“Sure, sure. Put in a good word for the working stiffs with that new Roger. Now,” he glanced at Michael, “how about ordering one more round before you go?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

I'd purposely stuck to beer since it took a lot to get me tipsy. Didn't consider I hadn't been drinking lately. My shifter's metabolism would burn off the alcohol in no time, but as we walked out of the diner, everything seemed a little brighter, my steps less steady than when we'd gone in. Michael had pretended to drink more than he actually did, so I was sure he was fine to drive.

A few snowflakes landed in my hair. The storm was rolling in. By morning, if things went as predicted, most of Baltimore would shut down for the day. For now, our breath steamed in the frigid air, though with my buzz I didn't feel the cold.

When I reached the passenger side door of our SUV, I turned and started to say, "What do you think—" when Michael's lips smashed down on mine.

I grunted but kissed him back, opening for him without thinking. He swept his tongue inside, and I was undone by how ravenous he seemed. Damn, he tasted good. And the way he kissed made me lightheaded. Forceful, though not as dominating as I assumed. Passionate. Could get addicted to it.

Not bad for a first kiss.

When we broke apart, both breathing heavily, Michael said, "Fuck. Is there anyone you can't charm? You're so damn perfect. Wanted to throw you over the table and take you right there."

I blinked, my thoughts hazy, my body zinging with pleasure. "That so? Maybe I would have thrown you over the table."

Shit. Why was I flirting? And why was I still gripping his shoulders hard enough to bruise?

“We could wrestle for it.” He pressed into me until almost every part of us touched.

I felt his interest, and my cock was just as hard. I shouldn’t do this . . . but couldn’t exactly remember why.

I brushed my lips against his to get one more taste. He kissed me back with so much hunger, I melted. I’d had lovers hot for me before, but he devoured me like he’d die if we stopped. Caught between him and the SUV, I didn’t have a lot of room to move. He took care of that by rutting against me, our bodies both straining for each other. Fuck, this was hot.

He gripped my hips, lifting me slightly, digging his fingers in, and increased the pace. At this rate, I’d come in my jeans.

When he pulled back, I chased his mouth. He dodged my clumsy attempt.

“I want to take you to bed.” His breath came in pants, and his eyes darkened to pure predator. With a shuddering breath, he rested our foreheads together, his body vibrating with barely leashed power. “But not like this. I shouldn’t have kissed you—”

I grabbed his hair and yanked him back down into a scorching melding of mouths. Even bit his lip. He growled. Felt like coming home.

Still, he pulled away again. “Shit. I want you.”

Had to be the drink, but I didn’t have the will to resist. “So, have me.”



His eyes flashed a brilliant green, and his fangs dropped. His lust was like a match to my own. He shuddered.

“Abe, I don’t want a single night. I want you as my mate. You’re worth waiting for.” The damn wolf stepped back, completely releasing me. Only my grip on his shoulders connected us.

I opened my mouth to protest, but he said, “You’ve had too much to drink. We shouldn’t be discussing this now. I’m taking advantage of you.”

I scoffed. Taking advantage of me? “I’m not some innocent. I make my own decisions. Something you better get used to.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Yeah, I’m learning that. Only I don’t want regrets between us. Or more regrets than I already have.”

“You regret us?” My lip curled, and something in my chest shriveled. I pulled away like he’d burned me.

His gaze shot to mine, his eyes wide and shocked. “What? No. That’s the last thing I regret. I regret the way we met and my previous actions. They reflected poorly on my character. You just . . . you threw me off my game from the moment I first saw you. I hadn’t shifted to my wolf form for . . .” He blew out a breath. “Too long. If I had, I would have understood why my body went haywire when you came into the room. Why I felt so out of control around you.”

Since Michael was a pretty stoic guy, hearing he felt out of control was a nice ego stroke. Glad it wasn’t only me. And maybe I needed to stop hauling my baggage into every exchange we had. He’d said he didn’t regret me. Maybe I should believe him.

“I forgive you,” I heard myself say. Wait, did I? Yeah, I guess I did. “Everyone

makes mistakes. Why should you be any different, wolf?”

He swallowed, reaching for me, then stopped. “You don’t know how much that means to me.”

I shrugged, kept my voice steady. “No biggie, man.”

He reached out a shaking finger, stroking a loc that had fallen into my face, his touch light. “Yes, it is.”

His gaze softened, the lust banked. I was still hard as stone, but the time for tipsy decisions had passed. I spun around and fumbled for the car door.

“Allow me.” Michael reached over my shoulder, pressing our bodies together as he opened the door and waved me inside.

His hot breath along my neck gave me goosebumps, especially as it skated over the spot where a mating bite would go. I’d never thought of that patch of skin as sensitive or erogenous, but now it tingled. My breathing sped up. So tempted to lean back into him, let him support my weight, or shove my hips back so he could put me over the car instead of the table.

I did neither. I thanked him and slid into the SUV. When he climbed into the driver’s side a minute later, he reached over and slipped his hand in mine.

I let him.

\* \* \*

By the time Kennedy and the other guys climbed into the SUV, I was so relaxed I almost dozed. Michael’s hand felt perfect in mine, strong and warm.

I'd kept expecting her to call us at the diner, though we'd actually had to wait for her. Guess there was even more damage to the LittlePinta than it looked.

Michael relayed what we'd learned, and I chimed in with the news report about the floater.

Kennedy sat quietly through our explanations, her head tilted like she was listening to something the rest of us couldn't hear. She stayed silent when we were done.

"Everything go okay with the ship?" Michael finally asked.

She waved her hand dismissively. "I need a new captain."

Michael and I exchanged a knowing look.

She snorted. "I didn't kill him. A kraken did. Though I might have if that overgrown squid didn't. No common sense."

We returned to the Lord Baltimore, and Ike and Jagger scouted the area ahead. I was relieved. Most of my buzz had worn off, but my limbs felt heavy and slow. A good night of sleep would do me right. I yawned.

Ike and Jagger signaled everything was safe. At least for now.

Michael squeezed my hand before letting go and went around to let Kennedy out, then me. "Come on, let's call it a night."

Surrounded by her most trusted guards, she headed inside the hotel's majestic lobby with the enormous glittering glass chandelier that drew the eye. The painted ceiling and polished brass accents added a classy touch, too. We made a beeline to the elevator. I could already hear my bed calling my name.

“Mikael!” a husky voice rang out. We all went on high alert and, in a blink, weapons appeared in our hands.

“Oh, sorry,” a dire wolf called from across the lobby. A gorgeous dire wolf. Red hair, expensive form-fitting clothes. “Didn’t mean to startle you. I just came by to visit my mate.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

His what now? I blinked. Had I heard her correctly? I hadn't detected a mate bond.

"Something you forgot to tell us, Mikael?" Kennedy said, her voice frosty.

"I . . ." His jaw worked, no words coming out.

The wolf glided closer, not completely bridging the distance. "Mikael? Aren't you happy to see me? I came all this way to surprise you. Surprise!"

All warmth drained from me. "You have a mate?"

"Not yet," he croaked out. "I mean—"

"Handle this," Kennedy snapped and snagged my arm, tugging me away. I numbly followed. Ike and Jagger brought up the rear, none of us speaking as we stepped into the elevator. As the doors closed, the woman threw herself into Michael's arms.

Wow. Hadn't read someone so wrong in a long time. I could practically hear my heart pounding in my ears. Didn't know whether I wanted to laugh or punch the guy. A mate. He had a mate. Or would. I should have known.

When we reached our floor, I bade everyone goodnight and strode to my room.

Once inside, I stripped to my boxer briefs, crawled into bed, and let the darkness take me.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I woke to a text from Kennedy telling me to take the morning off. When I peered outside a curtained window, I could see why. Falling snow had blanketed downtown, though so far, power remained on. I shivered looking at it. Unless all hell broke loose, we'd be staying in today.

No messages from Michael. No gift, either. I hadn't expected him to come by or anything, but I thought he'd at least send a "Hey, sorry" text or something. Whatever. I didn't need this shit, anyway.

I skipped breakfast, eating a couple of protein bars I'd stashed in my bedside drawer. Wasn't up for seeing Michael or being the focus of gossip. How had I been so stupid? Of course, he'd mate with another dire wolf. I'd thought as much from the beginning. I'd almost let him convince me it could be different.

More fool me. I debated using the shared gym—taking my frustrations out on a punching bag sounded like a hell of a plan—but again, couldn't muster the energy. Needed to pull myself together so when I faced him, I wouldn't look like I cared. I didn't care. Not much, anyway.

The lie sat heavy in my gut. When had I started to fall for the wolf? I'd done my best to keep him at a distance. I just hadn't had a guy pursue me like that, with such focus. That's all. I'd get over it.

A knock at the door startled me from my restless pacing. I didn't answer. Another knock. I didn't move.

"Abe," Michael called. "I know you're in there. Please open the door so we can talk."

Part of me wanted to keep quiet until he went away. Wasn't a coward, though. Another part wanted to punch his lights out. After a deep breath, I let that urge go, too. I wasn't a kid. The least I could do was act like the man I'd fought so hard to

become. Pulling on a pair of basketball shorts but no shirt, I steeled myself, tilted my chin up, and swaggered to the door, yanking it open.

Michael looked terrible. Blood-shot eyes like he hadn't slept, a vein throbbing on his forehead. Even a sparse dusting of ginger stubble along his jaw. He'd thrown on a pair of track pants, a black tee, and a ball cap instead of his usual finery. Not a bad look, though the grim expression ruined it.

His gaze trailed over my bare chest, and he swallowed. "May I come in?"

"Sure, man, knock yourself out," I said, as though I were totally unaffected by him. Like he was just some guy. I stood back. "'Sup?"

"I owe you an explanation—"

"Nah, it's cool. You don't owe me anything." I waved him to my desk chair. He refused it, choosing to lean back against the door like it was the only thing holding him up.

"Abe, please. It's not what you think. Natalie and I have been . . . betrothed since we were kids. Our families are close. My parents encouraged her to come. I'd told them about you . . . about finding my fated mate, and as you can imagine, they weren't happy. They set both of us up."

"Your parents sound awful," I pointed out. "So, when's the mating ceremony? Or is that why you look like you haven't slept?" A tendril of jealousy snaked its way around my heart. I stomped it viciously. I knew the score. Besides, he didn't smell mated. I'd know.

His eyes narrowed, and he straightened, bristling. "You think I would sleep with someone else when I've found my fated mate?"

“I don’t know what you would do, man, but it’s none of my business.”

“Like fuck it’s not,” Michael snarled, a muscle in his jaw ticcing. “You’re my mate. Not her. You.” He took a prowling step in my direction, and I admit, I stepped back. “And the reason I look like I haven’t slept is because I had to tell her I was breaking the contract. This doesn’t only affect my life. She has to face the consequences, too, and I feel like shit about that. But I wouldn’t be with someone else when I’ve found you.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.” Made myself stand my ground, crossing my arms. I wasn’t going to be blamed—

“Why do you do that?” He stormed over to me until we were chest to chest. “I know you didn’t ask. I wanted to. Abe, I’m crazy about you. Only you. I’d break a hundred contracts if it meant having a shot with you.”

I swallowed, mouth gone dry. “And what about your family? Don’t want to be a complication, mess up your perfect world.”

“Fuck being a complication. And I told you, my family is hardly perfect. I’m not going back. Not ever. I’m not fighting my sister. I’m not mating with anyone except you. And I’m not leaving Baltimore unless you do. This is my home, too. There’s a reason I’m in Tommy’s territory, why I work for him. I never planned to go back. I simply hadn’t acknowledged it to myself before. Until this morning. I called my parents and let them know if they couldn’t be happy for me and my mate, I wanted nothing to do with them.”

A tiny flare of hope unfurled. “I . . . we don’t come from the same worlds. You’ve seen me. This is who I am.” I held out my arms. “You going to be happy with that? I’m not changing.” A hand lacing through my locs scattered my thoughts. “I’m not . . .”



“I know. I don’t want you to change. I like who you are. You’re rock steady, you care about people, you do what needs to be done. And you’re the most stubborn bird I’ve ever met. An alpha couldn’t ask for a better mate.” He tipped my chin up, his large hand cradling the back of my head. He didn’t kiss me. “You drive me wild. Every time you walk in the room, I want to use all available surfaces to pleasure you until you scream. I want everyone to know you’re mine. And I’m yours. Just yours.”

I pushed up on my toes, closed the last few inches between us and kissed him. Couldn’t help myself. He moaned into my mouth, letting me make all the moves this time. I explored him—his mouth, his chin, down his neck, leaving a hint of beard burn on his skin. My instincts were going wild, and my mating spot tingled. Wasn’t ready for that, yet. But maybe a little . . .

A loud hum and an even louder pop as a transformer blew. The power went out, and then the generator kicked on. A second later, Michael’s phone chimed with a text.

We both groaned.

“Damn it. Kennedy’s pissed at me for the way I handled things last night. She’s had me running errands since early morning.”

I couldn’t hide the small smile. “Oh, yeah? She looking out for my honor?”

“More like your property,” he grumbled, pulling out his phone to confirm he’d been summoned.

“My property?” I snorted, giving him a sweeping glance. “Looks like I bought something upscale.”

“I’d like to show you how ‘upscale’ I can be.” His hand tangled harder in my hair.

Another chime.

“I don’t want to keep her waiting. Don’t suppose we can pick this up later? I offer myself as tribute.”

I chuckled. “Go deal with Kennedy. I’ll be around.”

I felt his reluctance to let me go. He stepped back. “I’m serious. Abe, you’re it for me. I know I’m not perfect, but I hope I’m enough.”

He looked so unlike him, vulnerability in his gaze. It squeezed my chest. I wanted to tell him it wasn’t him, it was the situation. What would being mates look like? He was an alpha. Wouldn’t he want a pack of his own? I already belonged to my roost and didn’t want to leave it. So many questions and not enough answers.

I must have paused too long before answering, because he looked away, his jaw tense. “Guess not. Good to know.”

“Michael—” I started. He’d already strode back to the door, wrenching it open. “Wait!”

He paused in the doorway.

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Not a ringing endorsement.”

Before I could say more, he vanished into the hallway.

Well, shit.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

I didn't see Michael later that day. Not at lunch and not that afternoon. No one gave me pitying looks, either, which meant Ike and Jagger hadn't opened their mouths. My guess? Kennedy threatened them. Shouldn't make me feel warm, but it did. Kennedy was a little—or a lot—messed up, though in her own way, she cared for people. She wouldn't be my alpha's best friend if there wasn't anything redeeming.

The snow continued to fall, and the power flickered on and off all day. Our generator was getting a workout. Currently, the electricity was on, and while I should go for an early dinner, I had too much on my mind.

Neither Michael nor I were great with pretty words. At least he was trying. I'd locked down my emotions and reactions so tight that I hadn't looked for solutions. One thing was clear to me now—he meant what he said. I didn't feel good he'd cut off his family, but it also wasn't my place to make that decision for him. And not all families were worth keeping. Mine a perfect example.

No, I needed to think through my questions, answer the ones I could, and bring the others to him. If he was serious about making this work—and I still wasn't a hundred percent sure we could do it—I wanted to approach it head on. Before we mated.

I didn't normally shy away from hard discussions, and it bothered me that I'd basically been doing that this last week because of the trauma caused by my family of origin. I hated that they still affected me so strongly, even though they'd been out of my life way longer than they'd been in it. It'd been easy to pretend I was all healed up when I didn't have a stubborn wolf holding his heart out hoping I'd take it.

I sent him a quick text.

Thinking of you.

Like I'd said, I was no poet. Hopefully he'd understand I was trying.

No response. Not that I expected one if Kennedy was as annoyed with him as he said.

Needing some fresh air, I pulled on my boots, coat, scarf, and gloves, and wrapped my hair. I left my room and headed to a private staircase leading to the roof and the dome that sat on top. I climbed the steps and entered the code to unlock the door and then I was outside.

The snow had picked up again, blowing down in large, sticky flakes. The wind howled and lashed against me. With all the snow, the visibility was limited, and a good several inches already coated the roof.

Baltimore got the occasional hard snow but not often. Looked like BNN had called it correctly this time. I brushed off a patch of the roof ledge and sat down, my feet dangling. Ravens didn't fear heights, and even in the frigid evening air, there was peace to be found in the wind's calling.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, letting doubt fall away. When I opened them, a familiar shimmery form sat next to me.

Molly.

Always surprised me she didn't avoid where she'd lost her life, but I didn't mind the company tonight. So, I told her stories my grams used to tell, and she listened, occasionally cracking a smile. The snow continued to pour down from the sky. The streets had cleared of traffic, and parts of the city were already losing power again, neighborhoods winking into darkness. Judging by the rate of snowfall, the business district would probably shut down for a couple days.

I shivered. Should probably go back inside and warm up.

My cell rang. My heart sped up. Maybe Michael was finally free to talk. I pulled the phone from a pocket and checked the caller ID. Shandra, one of the raven teens in the roost. She'd recently turned sixteen and had her first shift. I'd taken her and a bunch of her friends to the movies to celebrate. An ache blossomed in my chest. I missed my roost.

I answered, a little gruffly. "Hey, Shandra, what's up?"

"Abe? Oh thank gods you picked up." Her voice came out high pitched and frightened.

"What is it? You okay?" I sat up straighter.

"We're in trouble." She lowered her voice. "We need your help."

"Who's 'we'? What kind of trouble?" I kept my voice level. I often made myself available to the teens in the roost so Poe could focus on the bigger picture.

"Me, Nyia, Alex, and Kai. We, uh, sort of borrowed a car and it got stuck in the snow."

"Borrowed." Uh-huh.

"Yeah, we need to return it."

"From a roost member?"

A long pause.

“No. We found it.”

I rubbed a hand over my forehead, a headache coming on. We ravens liked our shiny things and—if not checked—had the tendency to have sticky fingers. I’d worked on discouraging that habit among our youth, but it was fighting our natures.

“Where exactly did you find it?” I tried my best not to sound exasperated. I wasn’t overly successful.

“Fells Point.”

Kennedy’s territory then. Good. If it had been in Josephine Jones’ Neighborhood, we’d have had a big problem. Might still have a problem depending on where the car’s owner came from. At least Kennedy would have final say on the matter.

“And where are you now?”

“Chiapparelli’s.”

“In Little Italy?”

“Yeah.”

Without the snowfall, I could fly there in under ten minutes. I glanced at the sky, snow instantly sticking to my lashes. Hell, on another evening, I’d see if they had an open table. Their calamari was terrific. Tonight wouldn’t be a pleasant flight.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. Stay put. And don’t try to get the car out.”

“We won’t. But hurry. The block lost power, and we’re sitting in the car. It’s creepy.”

“Fine. Expect us to have a long talk once we get the car back to its owner.”

“You’re not going to tell Poe, are you?” Shandra said in a near whisper.

“I should.”

“Abe—”

“Don’t you try sweet-talking me, Shandra. I’ll take care of it, but you don’t steal cars and not expect your alpha to know. You’ve been told what you do reflects on him and on Tommy.”

I swore I heard a whimper right before I disconnected. They should worry. Poe was pretty laid back, but he wouldn’t be happy finding out what these kids were getting up to. Baltimore was hella dangerous. Piss off the wrong Roger and your life would be forfeit.

“Gotta go,” I said to Molly.

She nodded and disappeared.

I sent a quick text to Kennedy to let her know I’d be out tonight on roost business. Then I transformed into a raven, my clothes and items magically disappearing.

I wasn’t twice the size of a regular raven though pretty close. Gray tipped my wings, and I shook off the snow.

I launched myself in the air, careful of the billowing wind currents and flew toward trouble.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Fighting the currents turned out to be less of an issue than the lack of visibility. Leave it to teenagers to steal a car in a snowstorm.

I flew over Little Italy until my destination came within sight. A few cars parked alongside the restaurant. I had to go to the end of the block to find a vehicle with exhaust trailing from the tailpipe. Front end surrounded by a snowdrift. Oh, shit. Must have had a snowplow come by and box them in.

And not just any car. A pristine two-door, powder-blue Cadillac with four teens huddled together in the backseat. Yeah, the car was that big. Had to be an early '70s model. The car definitely had a steel body. Also, if I wasn't mistaken, rear-wheel drive. Fuuuck. They couldn't have lifted an SUV with four-wheel drive? I'd driven in snow, but it wasn't like Baltimore had a lot, so I was no expert. Usually, I had enough sense to avoid being out in this kind of weather.

I did a few circles over the car before landing and shifting on what was probably the sidewalk. Damn, it was cold. The kids screamed from the backseat like they were in a horror movie, and I had to fight a laugh. Guess I'd startled them.

I trudged around the car, noting they'd obviously floored the accelerator and spun the wheels. They'd turned the snow beneath them to hard-packed ice. Great. That much harder to push the car out. Especially with a heavy steel body.

Marching to the driver's side, I climbed in the front, shaking the snow from my clothing. The ignition had been hot-wired. Not a bad job, either. The car idled, and its heater blasted.



Four worried faces peered at me from the backseat.

My turn to be surprised.

I looked them up and down. The girls wore wispy scraps of fabric that bared their shoulders and rose above their knees. Gold laced through Shandra's microbraids, and she wore a bright purple lip color matching her dress. Nyia's make-up was more subdued. She made up for it by wearing a blinding glitter nail polish and piling her long black hair into an elaborate updo, some strands painted to match her polish. They came by their love of shiny things naturally, as all ravens did.

Their dates—because now it was obvious this had been a double date—had draped their suit jackets over the girls' shoulders. The boys' matching bow ties and cummerbunds would have been cute on any other night, but their patent leather shoes weren't designed for pushing a car out of the snow. Nor were the girls' heels. I groaned. Looks like I'd be doing the grunt work.

“Are you all wearing prom outfits?”

Shandra snorted sarcastically, the way only a teen can. “No, prom isn't for months yet. Obviously, these are winter formal outfits.”

“Ah,” I said, like this should have been obvious. “Explain to me why you stole the car.” Though I was now pretty sure I had the answer.

“We didn't steal the car.” Nyia's hand flew to her chest like how dare I suggest such a thing.

“Yeah, Abe, we just borrowed it. Honest,” Alex said, crossing his lanky arms over his thin chest. “We would have brought it back.”

I hummed noncommittally.

“What? We would have,” insisted Shandra. “It’s not like we could drive it home without our parents noticing. We wanted a car as close to a limo as possible for the dance. And Alex has only got his mom’s old Elantra.”

All the kids shuddered at the mention.

“Not a proper date car,” I said, keeping my voice neutral.

“Exactly,” Shandra insisted. “Now you see why we borrowed it.”

The only one who hadn’t said anything was the non-raven in the car. I didn’t know Kai well. From what Shandra had told me, this quiet wolf shifter was a recent addition to Tommy’s Neighborhood. He’d arrived alone because his pack had cast him out for challenging his caste designation. Kai was born a gamma, but according to Shandra, he identified as a beta wolf. He wasn’t having much better luck with acceptance from the wolves in Tommy’s territory. Shandra had a crush on him and talked my ear off about him at her birthday party. My guess? She’d asked him to the dance.

Speaking of the dance . . .

“How did you end up here? I can’t believe your school would hold the dance in this weather.”

That earned me an eye-roll from all the raven teens, though Kai just stared at his shoes.

“Obviously, they canceled it,” Nyia said in a tone suggesting I was dense.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. No wonder Poe was only too glad to have me handle the teens in the roost. “That still doesn’t answer my question.”

I didn’t ask why they hadn’t abandoned the car. I knew why. Nyia hadn’t had her first shift yet, and no way they could walk back to Tommy’s neighborhood in this weather in those clothes. Ravens might have sticky fingers but we were loyal. No way they’d leave Nyia behind, even if Shandra and Alex could have flown through this weather—which they couldn’t. Took experience they didn’t have. I continued staring them down. Said something that Kai didn’t abandon them. In his wolf form, he could have easily made it back to Tommy’s Neighborhood.

“Abe! Can we just return the car now? We didn’t even have dinner and we’re starving.” Shandra batted her lashes at me.

“Don’t get cute. You want my help? You answer my questions.”

Shandra huffed. “Fine. The dance was canceled, but Nyia’s mom works evenings, and I told my parents I was spending the night at her place. Everyone came over, and we got ready and decided to keep our dinner reservation. By the time we arrived, they’d closed because of the storm. And then we got stuck. Stupid snowplow only made it worse.”

The kids all looked at me expectantly. They may speak in sarcasm, but I knew they wouldn’t have reached out if they weren’t in over their heads. At their age, I’d run wild and gotten myself into all sorts of messes. Poe’s dad, the former alpha, had helped put me back on a better path. I wanted to be that bird for the teens in my roost now.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” I said, keeping my voice firm and addressing Shandra, since she was clearly the leader of this bunch. “You’ll hop in the front seat and drive this bucket. I’ll get out and push. You know how to drive this car?” I asked.

It had the gearshift on the side of the steering wheel.

“The Internet, Abe. It’s a thing.” Shandra removed her heels, then crawled over the bench seat to land beside me in a graceless heap. She grinned up at me. “We had to look it up.”

“Too bad you didn’t look up rear-wheel drive,” I muttered.

Her brow furrowed. “It’s rear-wheel drive?”

I couldn’t tell whether she was joking, so I didn’t answer. “Put the car in reverse once I get in position and don’t floor it. This is going to take some finesse.”

I hopped out and let her slide into the driver’s seat. Here’s to hoping she didn’t run me down. I slogged around to the front of the car, sinking up to my thighs in the snowbank, and tried to find the best grip to push this beast out. I leaned low over the car, digging in. I gave her a thumbs up.

Shandra floored it, and snow shot into my face and soaked my clothing. “Stop!”

She stopped. I wiped my face and glared at her through the window. Shandra’s eyes were huge, though Nyia and Alex seemed to think me being covered in slush was hilarious. Even Kai cracked a smile.

I stomped back to the driver’s side and tapped the window. She rolled it down.

“Sorry.” She bit her lip.

“Let’s try easing it out this time.”

“I didn’t expect it to react like that. I just tapped it.”

I trudged back, and we tried again. They'd really wedged the car in good. I couldn't quite get enough traction to push it out. I signaled a halt so I could catch my breath. A back window rolled down.

"Um, try rocking it out," Kai called. He held up his phone to show he'd done his research.

Shit. I so wasn't a snow person. "Thanks."

I tried not to sound sarcastic.

Kai nodded before rolling up the window.

"Don't run over me," I called to Shandra.

"No promises," she shot back.

I hid my grin and went back to pushing. And this time we tried rocking it. Shandra got the hang of it. Forward, back, forward, back. Almost . . .

The car finally started to move when I glanced down the street in the fading light and had to blink to clear the snowflakes from my lashes. I stopped pushing. Was that . . . ?

Michael loped up to me in his huge dire wolf form, his tongue lolling, his red fur covered in snow. Looked like he was having the time of his life.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He shook out his fur, and I sputtered, gave him a not-so-gentle shove. “Ugh, wet dog.”

From one moment to the next, he’d changed from his wolf back into his human-like form. He actually wore a pair of jeans and was bundled in useful winter gear. Miracles never cease.

“I’m hardly a dog. And wet wolves smell divine. If we had more time and less of an audience, I’d show you.” He smirked.

“Uh huh. Likely story.”

“Besides, I’m here to help. I tracked you on the app. That sweet little ghost let me know you needed me.”

“You talk to Molly?” That little meddler. I fought a grin.

He shrugged. “I’m full of surprises. Besides, I was thinking of you, too.”

I wanted to grin like a fool, but held back. He then eyed the classic Cadillac. Tapped the hood with a knuckle. “Haven’t seen this car before. She’s a beauty.”

Didn’t miss the question in his voice. I kept quiet.

He bent down and stared through the windshield. Never saw teens sink so quickly in

their seats as though it would make them invisible. That wasn't at all suspicious.

I waved him off. "I got it. No worries."

"Abe, if this is what I think—"

"I said I'm handling it." Could feel my raven's feathers ruffle. Wolves didn't have the instinct to acquire pretty things the way ravens did, so he wouldn't understand the kids' thinking.

He exhaled, his breath steaming in the late evening air. "You are so stubborn. I know you can handle it. I'm offering my help. Stealing a car's not a small thing. Tommy would be upset if he knew."

"Hopefully, he'll never have to know." I held up a hand before Michael could protest. "If I need to tell him, I will. Promise."

Michael seemed to consider this. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I trust your judgment. It's your roost. Mostly." He bent and looked through the windshield again. Like reverse jack-n-the-boxes, the kids all but disappeared from view again. "Who's the wolf? He one of ours?"

I nodded. "Tommy took him in shortly before we took this job with Kennedy."

His brow furrowed. "He usually introduces new wolves to me when they apply for asylum. It keeps all the lone wolves in line."

If what Shandra told me about Kai was true, I knew why Tommy hadn't introduced

them. Michael bought into wolves' hierarchies, so would he be any kinder? No wonder Kai hung with a bunch of ravens. I opened my mouth to say it, thought better of it, and snapped it closed.

"What?" He stepped closer to me, his head cocked in such a wolf-like manner it was hard not to smile.

He deserved the benefit of the doubt. So, I kept my voice gentle. "Maybe Tommy thought you wouldn't be any more sympathetic to Kai than his original pack."

Even with my gentle tone, I could almost see Michael's hackles rise. "He's a kid. Why wouldn't I be sympathetic? What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything. He just identifies as a beta."

Michael blinked at me, the furrow deepening. "What's wrong with that?"

"He was born a gamma."

Took him a moment to process what I meant. Could see when it dawned by the raising of his eyebrows. "That's not . . ." He looked back at the car, then back at me. "Really?"

I nodded, tipping my chin up in challenge.

To his credit, he didn't blurt out something Kai might overhear. He absently ran a hand down my bicep, his face scrunched up in a thoughtful expression.

"Huh," he finally offered. "Has anyone been training him in the role a beta plays in a pack?"



I gaped. “What?”

“If he’s a beta, he needs to know how a beta acts in their pack. You planning to teach him?”

“I-I’m not sure it’s the same for wolves as for ravens.” Was he serious?

“I guess I could mentor him,” he looked dubious, “though I don’t know all the instinctual parts of being a beta. We could probably figure it out.”

“You don’t have a problem with it?” My voice might have come out a little disbelieving. Mister ‘Wolves-are-Instinctual’ was now going to roll with it?

“I . . . I’m not sure. Doesn’t seem possible. But as my mate keeps pointing out, there are other ways to view the world. And I do listen to him and think about what he says. Also, I’ve heard of wolves who haven’t felt they belonged to their designation, so it’s not completely novel. It’s more I don’t understand it since I’ve never felt the urge to question my place.” He kept stroking my arm. “If he’s determined to be a beta, the kid needs to learn to act like one. Betas have certain responsibilities to a pack, and if he’s avoiding other wolves—which he is or I would have met him—he’ll never learn how to do that. He’s too young to be lone. It’s not healthy.”

“You’d do that? Mentor him?” My pulse sped up, and I held my breath for his answer. Couldn’t be with a guy who’d turn his back on a kid.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’d agree to almost anything. But yeah, he’ll need another wolf.”

Without thinking, I grabbed Michael by the back of the neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Excited squeals from the teens reminded me this wasn’t the time or place. We broke apart, our breath steaming in the air.

“Wanna help me get this boat unstuck?” I asked, a little winded.

“I live to serve.” He walked to the passenger side door and opened it. He slid the front seat forward. “You three, in the back, out. Your weight isn’t helping us push this tank out.”

“But we’re in nice clothes!” Nyia protested.

“Uh huh. Should have thought about that before you stole a car in a snowstorm. Out.” The alpha command in his voice had all three teens spilling out into the cold.

He shut the door, then stepped around me and took up position. I joined him and between the two of us, we pushed it out with ease.

The kids cheered, and without missing a beat, piled into the backseat.

Now to return the Caddy to its rightful owner. I brushed off my soaked clothes, the cold seeping into me. A heated car would feel real nice.

“You want me behind the wheel?” Michael asked. “I grew up in Montana, so I’m used to driving in far worse conditions. And rear-wheel drive’s a bitch in the snow.”

Those were some beautiful words spilling from his lips. I readily agreed.

“Let’s check the trunk for tire chains. I can’t believe anyone would have a beauty like this out on roads tonight without a set.” Michael patted the hood.

Tire chains?

“I don’t think it’s likely. This is Baltimore, not Montana. Besides, they weren’t planning to have their car stolen and probably had enough sense to stay indoors.”

“Well, maybe they’ll have cat litter or sand bags at least. If we get stuck again, we can use that to get some traction.”

Unlikely. Still, couldn’t hurt to check. “Pop the trunk, please, Shandra.”

She searched around for the button. “I can’t find it.”

“Might be in the glove box,” Michael leaned in, eyeing the steering column that had obviously been hot-wired. “A key would be really useful.”

When the glove box turned up empty, I sighed and nudged Michael aside. I stuck my hand through the window and waited. A flurry of exchanged glances between the teens, and then Nyia reached in her purse and pulled out a set of lock picks. She handed them over.

Michael’s eyebrow climbed practically to his hairline.

I chuckled. “Almost all raven teens carry them. Some even have holders in their phone cases. It’s a raven thing.”

“I’m surprised more ravens aren’t in prison.”

“We rarely get caught.” I moved to the back of the car, took out the tools, and inserted them into the trunk lock. Seconds later, the latch gave an audible pop and rose half an inch. “Success.”

“Um, Abe?” Shandra’s voice came out high pitched. She waved a small piece of paper.

“What?”

“We, uh, might have accidentally stolen that news anchor—um, Sally DeSantos’—car. I found the registration.”

Michael and I swore in unison. This had just got more complicated.

“Sally’s going to have a field day with this one,” I groaned. No way we’d keep it quiet now. I’d have to call Poe and Tommy. And Kennedy. Talk about a shitshow.

Grimacing, I opened the trunk. Michael and I stared.

No tire chains, though it wasn’t empty.

Someone lay curled up in the back. I glanced at Michael. He inhaled, scenting. His eyes widened. Then he shook his head. “Dead.”

Oh, shit.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“On a positive note, we don’t have to worry about Sally DeSantos turning the theft into a news item,” Michael said.

I glared. “Her dead body is so much better.”

“Did you say ‘dead body’?” Shandra leaned so far out the window she teetered and had to grab the window frame.

“Stay inside, Shandra, I mean it,” I snapped. She didn’t need to see this.

I leaned forward for a better look. Sally had a wire garrote around her neck, her eyes bulging, and her fingernails bloody and broken. Her phone lay beside her, the screen cracked.

Michael snagged the phone and turned it on.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“She was a reporter, right? Maybe something on her phone will give us a clue what happened. The more we know, the better. Then we’ll call Kennedy, and she’ll handle it.”

He held the phone in front of her face, and despite her grotesque expression, the camera recognized her and unlocked. Michael thumbed through the open apps.

“Anything?” I leaned into him to see.

“Yeah. A recording from tonight. And some notes.” His finger slid across the screen. “Shit. She was researching that dead guy and the Domino Sugar situation. She somehow made the connection between them. Even knows, uh, knew about the shades.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Hey, Shandra, you said you took the car from Fells Point, right?”

When she didn’t answer, my heart sank. Worse and worse.

“Shandra,” I drawled.

“Don’t be mad,” she whispered.

I closed my eyes, puffed out my cheeks. “Where did you steal it from?”

“Borrowed. And we didn’t mean to take it. We drove to the port. Heard from my brother there was a shipment of custom SUVs recently offloaded but not moved yet. We meant to borrow one of those, only there was a container without a lock, so it made sense to check that one first. The Cadillac was parked in it. And it was so much cooler than anything else.”

“A container?” Michael asked, rubbing his forehead like it ached. I could relate.

“Specialty orders are sometimes shipped in containers. Maybe they killed her and had to stash the evidence.” I paused. “They could have planned to have it shipped out or maybe they planned to come back for her. My guess, they went to look for someone willing to move it. Put it on a truck, and they could drive away with her. Her car is pretty conspicuous.”

“Wouldn’t these specialty cars be in a secured area?” Michael asked.

Good question. “Shandra, how’d you all get past the guard house?”

“Easy.” She leaned out the window again. “No guards posted. Only took us a minute to disable the cameras and wire the gate to open.” She sounded a little too proud, considering the trouble we were in because of their antics.

Michael and I exchanged glances. No way guards would leave their post unless they were in on whatever was going on, or something happened to them. I’d guess the latter, though in Baltimore you never knew.

Shandra’s voice gathered strength. “We thought since you know everyone at the docks, you could . . .”

“Deal with it,” I finished.

“Without getting in trouble,” Shandra added. “Everyone knows you’ve got a lot of friends there.”

Michael’s knuckles whitened around the phone. He walked back toward the driver’s side.

“It was incredibly short-sighted. Just because Abe worked there doesn’t mean he’s your ticket out of trouble or you should put him in a position to have to shield you. That’s not how you treat roost members. Especially your betas.” His voice held a growl that even made me flinch. The teens sank even lower in their seats.

“Michael—”

“No. I understand these kids are important to you, and you want to protect them, but they need to learn there are consequences. You’re not their get-out-of-jail-free card.”

“A dead body should do it. No way to keep Poe and Tommy out of it now.” I closed the distance and placed my hand on his forearm, squeezed it once. I didn’t like the situation any more than he did, but there was a big difference between joy riding and murder. “We need to call Kennedy.”

He grimaced. “It’s going to be a long night.”

I returned to the back and, with a last glance at Sally DeSantos, closed the trunk. No sooner had it latched than a black SUV turned onto the street. The lone vehicle on the road, it crawled down a lengthy block behind us. No headlights. Not full dark yet but enough you’d want your lights on. The hair on my nape stood on end, and my skin prickled.

“Shandra, in the back.” Michael’s voice came out low and urgent. “Abe, I need you to get in. Now.”

He cracked the driver’s door open. I slipped inside and slid to the passenger seat. He followed, settling behind the wheel. Michael adjusted the bench seat and the rearview mirror and inched away from the curb. He also didn’t turn on the headlights, though street lamps began winking on. He managed not to spin the wheels as the car lurched into motion.

We neared the midway point of the block, only sliding a little, the windshield wipers working furiously to clear accumulated snow. Soon we’d hit the corner where Chiapparelli’s sat. The SUV picked up speed, but the icy roads kept it from roaring up on us. We just needed to reach the intersection, and we’d race down High Street toward the Lord Baltimore.

As if summoned, three more SUVs—with no headlights—skidded to a halt and blocked the junction in front of our vehicle. Car doors opened, and humans in black military-like gear swarmed out, guns in hand. They flickered, dissolving into the



shadows, then reappearing.

Oh, fuck. Not humans.

Shades.

A lot of them.

Michael carefully braked until we idled, his knuckles whitening around the wheel. He glanced in the rearview mirror, put the Caddy in park. “Abe, you need to drive. When you hear the signal, gun it. Don’t stop. Get back to Kennedy.”

“Where are you going?” I said, as he cracked open the car door.

“Wait for the signal.” He leaned in and brushed our lips in a hint of a kiss, flipped on our high beams, then flung himself from the Caddy, using the door as a shield.

“What signal?” I called after him.

Michael transformed into his dire wolf form before he hit the ground. He scrambled across the road almost faster than the eye could track. A mad burst of gunfire. Dammit, I saw him flinch. The kids screamed. The door slammed shut from the force of impact from a round of bullets.

Leaping onto a snowbank, Michael hurtled to the top of a row home’s second-story balcony, his weight denting the metal railing. In a blink, he disappeared onto the roof of another home, the move more monkey than wolf.

The gunfire stopped.

My pulse pounded. These kids needed me to be the cool one.

“Down on the floor and stay down until I tell you otherwise. It’s going to get rough.”  
I slid into the driver’s seat, sinking as low as possible.

An older shade stepped forward under a streetlamp, command in every movement. Large gashes covered his cheek. The guy that Michael had slashed. Joris, Kennedy called him. No gun, but he held a megaphone.

“Come out with your hands up.” His voice—wispier than most humans’—sent chills through me. “Only warning. Any sudden moves and you’re dea—”

Someone screamed behind him, and the shade spun away from the light, dissolving into the near darkness. Another shout that quickly cut off. More bursts of gunfire.

A shade ventured too close to a streetlamp, his form almost ghostlike. He shimmered, his gun waving madly. He screamed as Michael’s hulking mass took him down. They rolled before both disappeared into the darkness.

More screaming. And a deafening growl.

A bullet shattered our back windshield. The kids shrieked again. Damn it! Forgot about the SUV at our rear. Throwing the Caddy in drive, I gunned it. Seemed as good a signal as any.

The car spun in place before fishtailing wildly. We careened into a curb and ricocheted into the center of the road. Then we rocketed forward like a missile.

“Brace!” I screamed.

My foot on the floor, I aimed between two of the cars, praying we wouldn’t spin-out.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Ashade loomed in front of the Caddy, gun pointed at me, setting up his shot. No way was I stopping now. The roar of the Caddy's powerful engine should have warned him this wasn't a modern car. He'd misjudged the timing. He didn't fade out fast enough and we hit him dead center, rolled over him, and kept going.

I slammed into the SUVs. The impact threw me forward, my chest hitting the steering wheel with force, then I rebounded, slamming back into my seat. That would leave a bruise. Thank gods for shifters' healing abilities, or I'd probably have internal bleeding. Still hurt like a bitch though.

One SUV rolled, colliding with another, while we shoved the third to the gutter. The Caddy rocked, did a minor fishtail, and cleared the intersection.

I whooped and eased up on the pedal so we wouldn't skid out. The car behind us had to navigate the wreckage and the wounded, though it was definitely attempting to follow. Damn.

"You all right?" I called over my shoulder.

Groans but muttered yeses followed.

"Stay down. We're not out of this yet."

I pulled to the next intersection, slowing when Michael burst out of the shadows. He loped to the car. I threw open the door and slid over. He effortlessly transformed and glided into the driver's seat like he'd never left. He made it look so easy.

“You okay?” Blood coated Michael’s chest and face. I ran my hands over him looking for wounds.

“I’ll live.” His eyes were a bright green, but he smiled with fangs extended. “Hang on. Incoming.”

I grabbed the ‘oh shit’ bar on the door and hung on. He spun the wheel to the right, counter-steering so we wouldn’t spin-out. We made the sharp turn and shot forward.

Pulling out my phone, I texted Kennedy 767, which stood for SOS. When Michael swore and narrowly avoided rear-ending a slow-moving snowplow, I fumbled and dropped the phone. No other cars around, except the one SUV trailing behind. Even with the SUV’s better traction, we had a good lead.

We swung a wide left, the whole car listing sideways. Damn if Michael didn’t get us through it. We rocketed down Lombard. Before long, we’d be home free, too close to Kennedy’s base for them to follow.

Once again, I spoke too soon. I banged my fist on the dash.

Two other SUVs appeared ahead, barreling down the wrong side of the road to intercept. Shit, they planned to hit us head on. Michael whipped the car onto another street, heading the wrong direction on a one-way. At least there weren’t many other drivers on the road in this weather. Another SUV blocked our way, a mage hanging out the sunroof, a fireball in his hand. Michael swore under his breath.

“Everyone, hold the fuck on.” He spun the wheel hard, and the Caddy did a perfect 180-degree turn. He snapped out of the spin like he made this move every day.

We sped back toward the intersection. I looked back in time to see the fireball explode behind us. The car shuddered. I thought for sure the other SUVs would T-

bone us—from both sides—but the Caddy had a lot of power under the hood. We skidded through the junction as gunfire shattered a backseat window and strafed the side of the trunk. The kids screamed. Michael held steady, though blood trickled down his chin. Flying glass had nicked his cheek.

Brakes screeched, and gunfire cut off. I looked over my shoulder. A giant clusterfuck as the shades swerved to keep from hitting each other. One SUV bounced to the sidewalk and spun out. It would only be a minute before they course-corrected. The others skidded to a messy halt. The mage's vehicle continued through. Dammit. So close.

The rest then broke off in different directions. Where'd they all go?

“We're moving away from Kennedy,” I said, stating the obvious. “We gotta turn around.”

Michael growled. “Guarantee the other SUVs are flanking us. If I turn, they'll be waiting. I need to put some distance between us first.”

He counter-steered to keep from sliding out, and we picked up speed. Unfortunately, the mage closed the gap. Guy behind the wheel had to have snow experience, too. We couldn't catch a break.

We raced down the street, blowing through all the lights. The mage threw some sort of energy bolt that slammed into us. The Caddy juddered, kept going. Michael laughed.

The hell?

“If this had been a modern car, that hit would have fried all the circuits.” He grinned at me, fangs glinting. I had the urge to smile back. Before I could, he jerked the

wheel, and we skidded onto the fork at Key Highway. I slid across the seat, banging into him.

Another fireball. It narrowly missed. The kids screamed again as our car rocked from the near impact.

“It’s okay,” I said, even though it really wasn’t. “Just stay down.”

Michael gripped the wheel so hard it creaked, his entire focus on the road. “They’re pushing us to Federal Hill. They’re trying to box us in. Where the fuck is Kennedy?”

I scrambled for my phone. Where the hell was it? Must be under the seat.

A fireball struck the trunk. The kaboom shook the Caddy, and Michael fought to keep control. More screaming from the backseat. The smell of burning tires filled the car. Then the hiss of fire hitting snow.

Oh, shit.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Michael swore a blue streak, and I joined him. He pressed harder on the gas. We couldn't go much faster or we'd spin-out. I looked behind us. The mage held another fireball. Dammit. We couldn't take another hit.

I turned to Michael. "Promise me you'll protect the kids."

His jaw hardened. "Abe—"

"Left!" I yelled.

He swerved, dodging the next lob. This was it. We'd go into a tailspin, and it would be all over. Miraculously, Michael kept the car on the pavement, a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"I have to stop that mage. You know it. I know it. Promise me."

"With my life."

That was all I needed. I rolled the passenger window down, shifted into my raven, and launched. The wind buffeted me, and I almost lost control. I flapped furiously, climbing as fast as I could go. The mage aimed his next fireball at me. I was out of range, and it fell to the street with a loud explosion.

I let the SUV pass. The mage swiveled, looking for me, but I blended into the night. After a moment, he refocused on the Caddy. Perfect. I swooped down behind him. My talons locked onto his coat, and using all my strength, I dragged him airborne. He shrieked, grabbing for the sunroof and dropping his fireball into his ride. We cleared

the car and soared.

The SUV went up in a fiery explosion. The heat singed my wings. I veered sharply. Despite my dodge, shrapnel still peppered the mage's lower body. He let out a pained scream. Then the fucker tried to electrocute me.

I released him. He hit the pavement with a sickening smack. No way he survived the fall. I hoped the kids hadn't seen it.

I kept rising, visibility growing worse. As much as I didn't want to be shot out of the sky, I dropped lower and winged toward Federal Hill, doing my best to keep our car in my sights. I could probably catch them down there.

The Caddy rounded Federal Hill Park. Before Michael completed the second turn, another SUV cut him off, skidding sideways to block his momentum. He spun onto a narrow street that ran between the park and the art museum, side-swiping the shades' vehicle as he rounded the corner. Damn, that wolf knew how to handle a car.

Several SUVs appeared behind him. Where had they all come from? The sound of gunfire was loud, even with the wind.

No snowplow had been down this way. The Caddy bumped along as Michael crested the snow, not slowing for an instant. Once he reached the end of the lane, he'd fully round the park. He'd be headed back toward the Lord Baltimore.

I wanted to croak in triumph.

Then two more SUVs appeared, blocking escape. Fuck! I swooped lower in case I could help. Maybe I could draw their fire?

His best bet was to ram the vehicles head on and to knock them out of the way.



Risky, considering the single-lane street didn't have any maneuvering room. A half wall on one side and trees on the other closed it in.

The Caddy veered off the road and onto the sidewalk. The half wall was coming up fast in front of him.

Shit! Had he lost control of the car?

The Caddy swung hard up the hill and made for the top, off-roading it. The hell was he doing? The SUVs behind him drew to a slippery halt. Shades poured from the vehicles and took up position, aiming their guns at our car. Before I had time to react, they opened fire. Most bullets didn't hit, though some did. He needed to get out of there!

I swooped and raked my talons over one guy's face. He yelped, drawing attention away from the Caddy. I winged hard, hoping to move out of range. A bullet grazed my tail feathers and sent me flailing. I corrected and kept rising. The distraction only lasted a moment. Enough, I hoped.

Michael made it about two-thirds up Federal Hill before his tires spun. Dammit! He wasn't going to make it. My stomach flip-flopped. Where the hell was Kennedy?

The car slowed to a stop. I heard the shades' laughter. They'd ceased firing and waited. Fuckers. I prepared myself to do . . . something. Anything. It couldn't end like this. Not with Michael. And not with those kids.

The Caddy's brake lights came on. And then Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" thundered from the speakers. The tires kicked up snow before the car roared down the hill in reverse. Pedal to the metal. Fuck!

The shades shouted and opened fire, but the Caddy was a tank. Bullets pierced the

trunk, the tires, and shattered the remains of the back window. Still, it barreled on. It rammed into the SUVs like a snowplow, shoving the vehicles into the now-fleeing attackers.

The Caddy's engine sputtered, kept running. The rear axle had cracked, though. Not going anywhere. The music continued to blare. Talons raking, I dove at a shade who leveled her weapon at the car. I hit from behind, knocking her from her feet. The gun clattered away.

Not hurting those kids. Or my mate.

Another went down under a—my—huge dire wolf.

A half dozen more dark SUVs turned onto the street. I swore before noticing Kennedy's Oleander logo on the vehicles' hoods.

Reinforcements at last.

A moment later, six more cars showed up at the other end of the street. They'd caught the remaining attackers in a pincer maneuver.

Kennedy's soldiers streamed from the cars and took up positions.

The shades dropped their weapons and melted away into the night.

Dammit.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Kennedy's forces secured the scene before she climbed out of an armored SUV with Ike and Jagger, her large handbag slung over her shoulder. She scowled. Michael circled the Caddy, growling at anyone who got close. The teens peeked out from the backseat, locked tightly together. After a final circuit of the area, I descended.

Kennedy approached Michael as Ike and Jagger fanned out.

Inky smoke one moment and fully formed the next, the shade commander appeared behind Kennedy. He gripped a garrote.

I dove. Fast and hard. I banged into him, both of us crashing to the ground. My wing snapped. Fuck, that hurt! My vision swam. When it cleared, Michael had clamped onto the guy by his nape, his powerful jaws incentive to stay still.

Kennedy glanced my way. "You okay, Abe?"

I squawked and sat up, fluffing my feathers and focusing on my shift.

She turned to the shade commander, her expression smug. I wouldn't want to be him. She rummaged around in her handbag, probably searching for one of her many weapons. "Figured you'd take your shot, Joris. Guys like you are always over confident. Have mediocre sex with a girl once and you think you can assassinate her without a fight. Can't wait to have a long chat and stroll down memory lane."

She didn't have to say what that chat or stroll would entail. The commander could guess. Michael dragged him upright, keeping a firm hold of his neck, a low growl rumbling from his chest. Michael wanted to kill the guy. He'd hurt me, scared the

kids, and planned to strangle our boss.

The shade actually smirked. “So good to see you again, lekker ding. Such a pity I cannot accommodate your request. Until we meet again . . .”

He dissolved into inky smoke. Michael’s teeth gnashed, trying to keep hold of him. No use.

Kennedy pointed her magical flashlight in his direction and hit him with the beam of light. He reformed, his eyes wide with shock. Before he bolted, Jagger stepped up, yanked the commander’s hands behind his back and snapped on magical cuffs.

Joris recovered quickly, snarling, “You think this is over? You don’t know the powers coming after you. Not even your family can protect you.”

“You talk too much.” Kennedy’s expression chilled my blood. She flipped the beam on her magical flashlight higher, and he screamed. Within seconds, he turned to ash. She stepped to his remains and ran her boot through them. “I hate monologuing. So unprofessional.”

At her gesture, several of her contingent pulled out similar lights and swept the area. Caught three more shades in the sweep. The others had vanished.

One shade struggled especially hard in his magical cuffs, lunging for Kennedy. Jagger intercepted.

Kennedy grinned. “I knew where Joris went, you wouldn’t be far behind. So pleased we’ll have plenty of time together, Nigel.”

“Fuck you! I’ll kill you,” he spat.

“You’re welcome to try.” Sounded like she’d revel in it.

She nodded as Jagger led the resisting shade to an SUV and stuffed him in the backseat, climbing in after his charge.

Since I had finished transforming, Kennedy stepped over and offered a hand. I clasped it with my uninjured one.

“What took you so long?” I grouched.

“Now, now, it worked out for the best. You’re all fine, and I have a new plaything.” She leaned in and kissed my cheek.

I huffed. “You’re impossible.”

“True.”

Michael, still in wolf form, nosed me, whining.

“My arm will be okay, wolf. It just needs to heal. No biggie.” It ached like a bitch, and I could already feel the bones knitting back together. “What about you?” I searched for any sign of more serious wounds. Under all the drying blood, it was hard to tell.

He barked, before nudging me toward the guy with a medical kit.

“All right, I’ll have them look at it.” I rolled my eyes, though secretly pleased he cared. “You should get looked at, too.”

He shook his head, his fur fluffing. It was ridiculously adorable.

“What’s good for the goose, er, raven . . .” I stared him down.

He actually grinned at me, tongue lolling and tail wagging. Not overly majestic, but, hell, did it make my heart flutter.

Shaking off the moment, I stepped around him. “Let me see to the kids first—”

The damn wolf nipped my hip—hard—and continued pushing me.

“Ugh, fine. You’re so annoying.” I stomped to the medic, watching from the corner of my eye as Michael returned to the kids.

Fifteen minutes later, I stood talking to Ike, my feet numb, my arm in a sling, while others cleaned up the area enough to let a snowplow through. They’d removed Sally’s less-than-pristine corpse from the battered trunk. I’d found her phone on the floorboards in the backseat along with my own and passed it to Ike.

Michael stayed in his shifted form. The raven teens now bundled in blankets and draped over his back, huddled for warmth. Kai had transformed to his much smaller wolf and curled against Michael. Poor kid needed comfort. No one approached without getting a flash of Michael’s teeth and a menacing growl.

As I watched him soothe and protect the kids, my heart felt too big for my chest. I stood on the edge of a cliff, ready to jump. When we made eye contact, I stepped off.

Falling wasn’t anything like I thought it would be.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“Molly’s favorites are adventure stories,” I said two days later. Linc eyed the little ghost sitting on my bed. I patted a stack of books on my bedside table. “She stops by most nights.”

He nodded.

“And we sometimes use the Ouija board. It’s the easiest way for her to communicate more complex ideas.” I added the board to the pile I was leaving with him.

“Uh-huh.” He continued to stare.

Molly ducked her head.

I threw a pile of jeans into a duffle bag. Today I’d return to my alpha. Couldn’t wait to sleep in my own bed.

“Linc, you’re making her uncomfortable.” I patted him on the back. “She’s just a little girl who happens to be a ghost.”

He tore his gaze away from her and scanned the room. “I-I knew the Lord Baltimore was supposed to have ghosts, but she’s the first one I’ve seen.”

“Yeah, the others don’t show themselves much. Heard another popped into Jagger’s bathroom once while he was showering. Scared the shit out of him.” I chuckled. “Would have paid good money to see him howl.”

Linc gave me an uncertain smile.

“And Molly seems to have foresight. She’s warned me more than once when someone with ill intent entered the hotel.”

“That’s . . . good.” Linc sat on the edge of the bed. Molly slid over until they were sitting side-by-side. They examined each other. Linc’s shoulders relaxed. Excellent.

I continued packing. Molly pointed to me and made the heart sign and pretended to howl. Linc laughed. I glared at them both. They’d get along fine.

I checked my phone. Nothing from Michael. He’d left early this morning to meet with Tommy. Not sure about what. I thought maybe he’d come back and head home with me, though. The last two days, we’d hardly seen each other. Between endless calls about Sally DeSantos, her car, the shades, and explaining everything to the teens’ parents, there’d been no time to sort out our own stuff. We were both relieved of bodyguard duty, so we didn’t even have that.

A knock. Molly disappeared in a blink. Linc startled, too. I rushed to the door, tugging it open.

Kennedy.

My disappointment must have been obvious because she huffed. “Happy to see you, too.”

I pasted on a grin. “Aww, I always enjoy seeing you.”

She pushed past me, her lips twitching, but not gracing me with a smile. “How’s the arm?”

I wiggled my fingers. “Healed.”



Linc hopped to his feet. “Uh, I should go back to work. I can—”

“Get some sleep.” Kennedy crossed her arms. “You look like crap. You’ve given me what I need, so I expect you to rest until tomorrow morning.”

He sputtered, no actual words coming out. Finally, he nodded, scooped up the books and Ouija board.

“I’ll take good care of these.” Linc leaned into me.

“If you have free time next weekend, let’s get together for a beer.” I caught him in a one-armed hug.

“Sounds great!” Linc looked wistful and smiled at me. “Good luck with Michael.”

I gave him another squeeze. “Thanks.”

Linc hurried from the room, and Kennedy closed the door behind him, then propped her back against it.

“So, bet you wonder why I’m sending you home.”

“I figured Poe freaked out and demanded I return.” Since my alpha was her closest friend, he was one of the few people she didn’t say no to.

She snorted. “Well, there was that. Something about revoking best friend privileges. But no, that wasn’t the deciding factor. With Ike and Jagger coming onboard permanently, I’m sending you packing. They have my back. And with all the information the shades are . . . providing, I’m confident I can handle the issue in due time.”

Fortunately, neither Michael nor I had anything to do with the captives. I saw a guard leave the cells after Kennedy had “met” with the shades. A seasoned soldier, he looked green around the gills, so, yeah, relieved not to be involved.

“You sure?” I wanted to go home, but I’d signed on to stay as long as she needed me.

“Positive. You and Michael need to get on with your lives.” Her pointed look told me she knew very well it would be together.

I shrugged. “We’ll see how that goes.”

“I wouldn’t worry. You’re well matched. Took you both long enough to figure it out. You ravens are really dense.”

I knew she referred not only to me but also to Poe. She’d given my alpha a stern talking to when he’d tried to sabotage his relationship with Tommy Tittoti.

“We’re cautious,” I argued, tossing the rest of my clothes in a bag.

She snorted. “Sure.”

Time for another topic. “So, what’s the deal with the shades? You’ve been tight-lipped.”

She sighed, sounding annoyed.

“Sometimes my past comes knocking. Unfortunately, for them, I answered.”

“They’re mercenaries, right?”

“Were.”

“Who hired them?”

“No one you need to concern yourself with.”

Okay, topic closed. Got it. I zipped my duffle. Seemed weird I’d lived with so few of my things for the last weeks. Made me miss home. But I’d also miss this. A little.

“And Sally?” I asked.

“She connected the dots and, unfortunately, her digging cost her her life. The shades weren’t ready to move on me fully, and wouldn’t have, if those kids hadn’t made off with her car.”

“Leave it to ravens,” I joked.

“I’ve let the other Rogers know Sally died a hero, and there will be a service next week to celebrate her life and accomplishments.” Kennedy pushed away from the door. She slid into my arms and pressed against me. “Thanks for having my back. Means a lot to me.”

I wrapped her even tighter and gave her a good squeeze. “You got it.”

She stepped away. “Go home, Abe.”

So, I did.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

When I returned, my apartment in the EA building was in pristine condition. Even my wall of photos had been dusted, and my Baltimore Ravens flag looked washed and starched. Someone had cleaned the furniture, floor, and rugs, and my grams' rocking chair had been polished to a high shine. Huh, I should go away more often.

The cleanliness lasted for about five minutes. I had only enough time to throw my bag in the bedroom and grab an ice cold Natty Boh, before my roost trickled in.

Arriving in ones and twos, giving hugs and catching me up, it was soon a full-blown party. Someone ordered pizzas. And numerous six-packs covered the counter.

"Fuck, Abe, don't abandon me like that ever again. You're the social one," Poe grouched, taking a swig of his beer as he propped a hip against my kitchen island. He'd been the one to suggest I act as Kennedy's bodyguard in the first place, so he was just giving me shit.

"No plans to." I clinked my bottle against his. "It's good to be home, Alpha."

Poe hated when I used his title. Said it sounded like I was talking about his dad. He flipped me off, his middle fingernail coated in black polish, thick leather bracelets ringing his wrist. He'd added another tattoo on his forearm, a slight glow to the ink.

Before he could say more, Shandra's mom stepped up to give me a crushing hug. She pulled my face down to kiss both my cheeks. To say the teens' parents were grateful was a bit of an understatement.

Shandra and her friends clustered in a corner of my living room, and she mouthed,

“Sorry” when her mom refused to let me go. I winked. Even though I wasn’t a parent, I could imagine their fear when learning someone shot at their kids and involved them in a high-speed chase. Not half as scary as being there. They’d keep the teens on short leashes for a while. Couldn’t say I blamed them.

Kai huddled with the raven teens, and the kid seemed to stand taller, take up more space. Michael’s influence. Kai had been deprived of an alpha’s guidance for too long. Or at least that’s the way Michael explained it. I still didn’t understand all the nuances of wolves. We ravens relied on our alpha, too, though none of us expected Poe to be everything to everyone. But I was learning.

I’d just finished my beer when another knock came at the door. More food?

I extricated myself from Shandra’s mom and wove through the party. I opened the door.

Michael. Recently showered and dressed in another thousand-dollar suit that hugged his toned body to perfection. He’d even shined his shoes. And damn, did he smell good. His pine forest scent made me want to put my nose in the junction of his neck and shoulder and just breathe.

In contrast, I wore a ratty long-sleeved Ravens tee and gray sweats. Hadn’t even showered before the roost converged. Yet the way he looked at me . . . I shivered, even though my place was hot as hell from all the bodies.

“How’d you know where I live?” Not the best opening line.

“I asked Tommy.” He leaned against the doorway, eyes devouring me. “You going to invite me in?”

My dick twitched from his sultry tone. Of course, I had an apartment full of ravens,

so no way we'd be getting any alone time soon. I wanted to grind my teeth. Instead, I sighed.

"Yeah, sure, man. Come on in. Join the party." I waved him inside and then beelined for my fridge. "You want a beer?"

For some reason, my hands shook, and my pulse raced. Something about seeing him among my roost made me nervous. And hopeful.

"No, thanks." He followed me and greeted Poe, raising his voice over the noise.

"Good to have you back." Poe put out a fist for Michael to bump. "I see my demon didn't waste any time meeting with you."

Michael met his fist. "You know Tommy."

"Indeed, I do." Poe ran a hand through his messy black hair, a brazen grin making an appearance. Seeing his happiness when he spoke of Tommy made me hope for something like that of my own.

They chatted while I forced myself to circulate. After endless minutes passed, an ear-splitting whistle rang out. Everyone fell silent and looked at Poe.

"Abe needs to unpack and settle back in. Let's move this party to my office."

And like that, everyone marched from my apartment and disappeared down the hall, beer and pizza in tow. They left an extra six-pack and a cold pizza, at least. Michael ruffled Kai's hair as he and his friends exited. In less than five minutes, it was only me, Poe, and Michael.

"You kids have fun now." Poe winked, then sauntered out.

“Damn, must be nice to be alpha,” I called after him.

Another middle finger before he turned a corner. I chuckled. Man, we’d got lucky with him. I closed the door.

“Poe’s good people,” Michael said behind me, his breath ghosting over the shell of my ear.

I shivered again and leaned into him. “Yeah, he is.”

Michael’s arms came around me, one large hand on my hip, squeezing, the other resting on my abs. “I have some excellent news.”

“Oh?” I looked up at him.

“Mmhmm.” He nuzzled into my hair.

Hard to track his words when he did that. My body sparked with heat. My cock began thickening. If he’d only move his fingers a little lower . . .

“Abe, did you hear what I said?” he asked, breaking through my lustful fantasy.

“Nope,” I admitted. Whatever he’d said was lost in a haze of need.

Then the fucker let go and stepped away. I turned on him, ready to yank him to me. His irises darkened, his fangs slightly extended. He took another step back and held up a hand, his pants tented. What was it with this guy? He can’t get enough of me, but when I give in, he backs away. I glared at him.

“The hell, wolf? Do you want me or not?”

“Talk first.” His voice wavered.

I groaned.

He moved to my sofa and took a seat. Patted it. “Sit.”

I sat near him, purposely not touching. He didn’t seem to like that. He reached for my hand and grasped it.

“I know you have questions about how we’d make things work between us.” He ran a thumb over the back of my fingers.

“I do . . .” How to say this? I hadn’t actually told him the car chase had changed everything for me. Made me realize I wanted a lot more from him than I’d let myself hope for. But I was a practical bird. I rubbed my forehead.

“Care to share?”

“Most of them, you’ve answered. But I still worry. You’re an alpha. Won’t you want your own pack? I’ve got my roost and I don’t want to leave it.”

“Is that your primary concern?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I don’t want to leave Baltimore or my roost. You’ve been making all the concessions. If I’m going to be a good mate to you, I have to bend, too. I don’t know how to give you what you want.”



He huffed. “I want you. Just you. The rest is negotiable—”

“You say that now. What about five years down the line? Or ten? Or fifty? From what I’ve read about mating, it’s forever. No take backs. What happens if—”

“Abe. I don’t think you’re listening. Baltimore is my home, too. And as of today, it’s permanent. That’s my good news.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Tommy wants me to take a more formal role with the wolves in his territory.”

“Like a pack?” Damn, I was squeezing the life out of his hand. I relaxed my grip. He glanced at our clasped hands and pretended he didn’t notice.

“Pretty much. He feels the other wolves would benefit from a more defined hierarchy. Several lone alphas in one Neighborhood can create tensions, even though most get along well. But none question my status or authority. I’ve been unofficially keeping the peace since I came. Tommy said when I was away, he realized how much of a calming element I provide.”

He couldn’t keep the pride out of his voice when he said the last part. Couldn’t blame him. High praise from Tommy.

I shifted on the sofa. “If you have a pack, wouldn’t I need to be a part of it?”

“You’d be my mate, so I’d expect everyone to extend the same respect to you as they do to me. Since both pack and roost are in Tommy’s Neighborhood, I don’t see a reason you couldn’t have a place in both. Officially in yours and unofficially in mine.”

“And you’d really be all right with it?”

Michael chuckled. “You are the most suspicious bird I’ve ever met. Yes, I’d be all right with it. If I’ve learned anything these past weeks, it’s to question assumptions I had about my future and my mate.”

I didn’t flinch, though it was close. “I know I’m not what you expected—”

“Thank fuck for that.” He pulled me closer and rested our foreheads together, our breaths mingling. “You’ve infuriated, excited, and challenged me at every turn. I’m a better person and alpha for it. Tommy wouldn’t have given me the chance to lead a pack if he didn’t see it, too. That’s why he offered it now.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

We sat in silence, sharing a quiet moment. Surprisingly comfortable. He was giving me everything I asked for, so if I wanted this to work—and I most definitely did—I needed to give him something, even if it was only honesty.

“There’s a reason I’m . . . closed off. To you, I mean. The way we met . . .” I shrugged. “It hurt. I—”

“I’m so sorry. I wish I could take it all back.” Michael’s eyes softened, his expression contrite.

“I know you do.” I ran my hand through his hair. Felt like silk under my fingers. Could get addicted. “It’s not even you not liking me. It’s when you called me a ‘complication.’ I have too much experience being that exact thing, and I don’t want to feel like that again. Especially not with my mate.” I tilted my chin up. “I’ve worked

too hard to be a man of substance.”

His head cocked in that wolf-like way that made it hard not to smile. “You are a man of substance.”

“Yeah, well.” I drew in a deep breath and then told him about my shitty family and my grams saving me, cutting myself open so he could see me bleed. I even pulled up my sleeve to show the literal scar.

His gaze hardened, and a finger traced the raised flesh with a soft touch. “Are they still alive?”

Murder in that voice. Warmed my heart even though I didn’t need him to fight my battles.

I bumped his shoulder. “No clue, man, and I don’t care. No need to find out. Last I spoke with them, they accused me of stealing my grams’ money when she left everything to me after she passed. Not that she’d had much. Well, not money,” I amended. “My grams had so much love to give. I was lucky to have her.”

Michael kissed my forehead, his arm around my shoulders pulling me closer. “And now you’re giving back to kids in your roost.”

“Paying it forward.” I nodded.

“Abraham Williams, you are an amazing man.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. Meant a lot to me that you protected those kids.” I rested my head on his shoulder. Liked the vibration as he chuckled. Such a warm sound. He kissed the top of my head.

Another comfortable silence before Michael pulled away and re-clasped my hands.

“Even though I’m not the best with words where you’re concerned, is it too soon to formally ask you to be my mate?” Michael kissed my knuckles reverently. That was the only word for it. Our gazes locked. “I neglected to do so earlier. I made a complete mess of it all. But, Abe, I would be honored and the luckiest wolf alive to have you as my mate. I’d make sure you never felt unwanted again. I can promise you that. You’ll always be wanted. Always. I love you so much and want to spend the rest of our lives showing you, if you’ll let me.”

His voice rang with such sincerity I had to blink a few times to fight off tears. I wasn’t much of a crier, but I’d also never had a guy tell me everything I wanted—no, needed—to hear. Like the other night, I stepped off the cliff.

“I’d be honored, Alpha.”

His gaze heated. So, he liked me calling him that? He shouldn’t get too used to it. Or maybe he should.

We shared a grin.

“We should get to it, then.” I didn’t waggle my eyebrows, though it was close.

Suddenly, he looked panicked. “I didn’t even bring you flowers or a gift. I wanted to take you to dinner, ply you with compliments, make you feel special—”

My laughter cut him off. “Wolf, I’m a simple bird. You don’t need to wine and dine me. I’m yours.”

He gaped.

“Did I break you?”

He nodded, then snapped his mouth closed.

“You have no idea how much I needed to hear that,” he said.

“I can guess.” Tugging him to his feet, I backed toward my bedroom. I’d only gone a few steps when he stopped. I couldn’t budge him.

“I-I think we need to talk about one more thing before we do this.”

I almost snorted, but he’d flushed, his body tensing. Now he had my interest.

“You’re not going to tell me you have another secret mate, are you?”

He rolled his eyes, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “I spoke with Tommy about Kai.”

I scratched my cheek. “And?”

“He’s staying with Ethan’s family, at the moment. However, I’m planning to take him.” His face went hard. “He’s been abused by his pack of origin and ignored by this one. That’s about to change. I know you love kids, but we didn’t talk about how you feel about—”

I lunged forward and kissed the rest of the words away. When we came up for air, I said, “Damn, when you want to impress a guy, you don’t hold back. Of course I’m okay with it.”

“It would change things for you. Your place isn’t big enough for the three of us. And if—when—we mate, we’d need to live together. Mated pairs don’t thrive apart. Tommy told me he could move us to a bigger apartment in the building if you agreed,

but I know how much your nest means to you.”

“It would just be a bigger nest. Besides, don’t you need to be near Tommy’s place?”

“No, my role as pack alpha will be a formal one. I won’t have time to drive him around or be his bodyguard. Let’s be honest, he’s never needed my protection, and I’ll make sure my wolves fill that role for him and Poe. He’s mentioned moving a bunch of the pack over here, too.”

“Then it’s settled.” I tugged on his arm again, and we resumed our trek to my bedroom. This time I was the one to halt. “Hey, how do you understand the importance of a raven’s nest? Been meaning to ask.”

He crowded me and placed his hands on both sides of my face, his thumbs running over my cheeks. “I asked Poe how to win you over.”

“You what, mmph—”

His kiss cut off my outrage, and before I could pull away, the backs of my knees bumped up against the side of my bed. How had the damn wolf managed that bit of magic?

We tumbled to the mattress, and I forgot what I’d been upset about. Clothes came off in record time.

Well, shit, I thought I was big. We stared at each other, taking the other in. A freckle by his belly button made me want to bite him there, leave a mark. The red treasure trail, the enormous cock with a prominent knot near the base, and all that rippling muscle had my breath coming in short bursts. He was so gorgeous.

His lunge took me off guard, and my back hit the mattress with him on top. Feeling

him skin-to-skin as he draped himself over my body was almost enough to end things before they'd really started. We kissed and ate at each other, our need zinging between us. Resisting the bond had only made us more desperate, more hungry.

And I was starving.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

“How do you want it?” He broke away to kiss down my neck, bite at my collarbone.

“I thought alphas—”

“Don’t stereotype.” He nipped me. “I’m willing to mix it up if you want.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked breathlessly as he latched onto one of my nipples.

“Mmmhmm.” He kept licking the nub.

Fuck, who knew a nipple could be so sensitive? Mine never had been. Apparently, that was past tense because with each suck, it was like he’d wrapped his lips around my dick. I speared a hand through his hair. I’d dreamed of the silkiness under my fingertips and on my skin. It had nothing on the real thing.

When he switched to the other nipple, I groaned before placing my feet flat on the mattress and rolling us so we reversed positions. He growled. The hottest thing ever. His big body stretched out under me was so sexy. His muscles strained as he fought the instinct to flip us back and pin me beneath him. I leaned over, capturing his lips. He tasted like fresh snow, mint, and . . . mine. I did my best to match his possessive growl.

His hands gripped my ass, the hint of claws only adding to the pleasure. He ground us together. I liked that I had the power to work him up like this. Wanted to be the only one who could do this. Mine.

My possessive instincts took me by surprise. I’d never felt this way toward a lover



before. Now I accepted that true mates were a real thing and not just a fairy tale, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised at these new feelings surfacing. Ravens might not be as rigidly instinct-driven as wolves, but we still had them.

I broke our kiss and nipped his jaw. He tilted his head in a way that suggested submission. I knew better. He was offering me a gift. His trust. His love. His strength. I didn't hesitate, sucking up a mark on his neck even though it would heal within minutes. For now, I wanted to see the proof he was mine.

When my questing lips kept moving down his body, he let go of my ass and sank his fingers into my comforter, his muscles going rigid and his Adam's apple bobbing. I ran my tongue along his freckles in a game of connect-the-dots, memorizing each one. His abs were so well-defined, truly a thing of beauty, and when I began tracing each muscle, his belly shook in silent laughter. Oh, yeah. Ticklish.

We locked eyes, and I couldn't help grinning. Good to know. He glared with no bite behind it. When I trailed lower, he sucked in a sharp breath.

"That's ill advised." He groaned. "Not certain I can control my instincts."

"Then don't." I leaned over and swiped over the tip of his dick. Currently an angry red, it needed some attention. I'd no sooner sucked his cockhead into my mouth, getting used to the weight on my tongue, when a warning growl tore from his throat. It only revved my motor higher. Fuck, so hot. I slowly sank onto his length. I enjoyed giving head, liked pleasing my partner, watching them fall apart. With Michael, this was definitely going to be an addiction, his eyes dark, the wolf close to the surface.

I pressed my tongue along the underside and tightened my suction. Before I could blink, I found myself face down on the bed, his weight pressing me into the mattress, his dick sliding between my cheeks. He wedged his thighs between mine and shoved them apart.

I arched back into him, loving his power, the desire thrumming between us.

“I told you not to play with fire,” he said, then nipped my shoulder. Not hard, but enough it would leave a mark.

I moaned. Damn, I liked this side of him.

“Can I grip your hair?” he asked, and my stomach swooped. Loved that he’d asked. “It’s so fucking beautiful. Like you.”

“Knock yourself out.” I pushed against him, needing him to unleash his wolf, to show me what he had. “I won’t break.”

“You’re tempting me.”

“No tempting, wolf. I’m telling you I want you to fuck me hard and fast.”

“So bossy,” he crooned, his hand tangling in my hair and yanking, until I had to rise to all fours beneath him. He pressed my shoulders down and used his knees to spread me even wider. I’d never had a partner put me in such a submissive position before, but I didn’t mind. Made my dick throb.

“Need you like this for our mating.” He kissed down my backbone, holding me in place by his grip on my locs. “Afterward, I’ll flip you over and pleasure you all night until you don’t know where you end and I begin.”

“Well, damn, Michael, seems you found your words.”

Felt his smile against my shoulder blade. “You’ll hear a lot of them in the future. Now, where’s your lube?”

I pointed to my bedside drawer. A moment later, cold liquid trickled down my crack, only to be warmed by his trailing fingers.

“Bards could write poems about your ass.” He punctuated this statement by swirling two fingers around my entrance. I jerked, my hips automatically shoving back, trying to pull him inside. “Fuck, so greedy,” he purred.

“Get on with it,” I bit out, my balls already so heavy and full and my cock throbbing for release.

“You ever taken a wolf’s knot?” Michael kept his voice neutral, though I heard the jealousy.

“Can’t say I have.” I pushed back again, welcoming him.

A noise resembling more of a purr than a growl rumbled in his chest. “Good. I like being your first . . . and only.”

I chuckled. No reason to dwell on the past when it would only be the two of us going forward.

“That’s why I plan to stretch you extra well. I only want you to feel pleasure.”

“I’m not delicate,” I huffed. Damn wolf. If his balls ached the way mine did, he wouldn’t be so eager to go slow.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I want to hurt you, either. A knot is a lot to take. Especially the first time.” His fingers slipped inside, and I moaned. Didn’t even pretend I wasn’t hungry for him. He thrust a few times before adding the next and soon the next. Not a slow stretch, though one I could easily handle. He worked me open, letting my body adjust.

When I couldn't take it any longer, I bit out, "Your dick, now."

A sharp intake of breath, and his fingers withdrew. Then the head of his cock pressed against my entrance, and I pushed back, letting him in. The first slide inside almost sent me over the edge. He'd breached my ring, his dick not even buried an inch, and I had to tighten my stomach not to come on the spot. Damn, this was going to be short.

"Oh, fuck. I can feel you clench against me." He'd stilled and waited for me to relax, still clutching my hair, his other hand moving to my hip in a bruising grip. Loved it.

Once I'd relaxed, he slid in another inch. And then another, and then all the way, until I was pushing against his knot. I already felt so full—Michael was a big guy in every way—so I couldn't imagine adding that monster, too. Then again, I lived for a challenge. I bore down.

"No, stop, Abe!" His voice came out garbled. "Not yet. Trust me, baby. I'll take care of you."

And for once, I didn't argue. Just gave myself over to him as he thrust, each one deeper than the last. When he shifted his angle and pegged my prostate, I howled. Gods, was there anything better? My hands scrabbled for purchase on my comforter. His firm grip kept me from rising. Kept me at his mercy. The heat pooled in my balls and spread through my limbs. Each punch of his hips elicited another sound, another moan, as I took everything he offered.

When his pace sped up and his breathing turned ragged, I knew he was close. Hell, I was hanging on by a thread. His knot pushed against my entrance with each thrust. When Michael's knees suddenly spread mine even wider, it was the only warning I had before he shoved inside. For an endless second it burned, and my body stiffened from the shock and pain. Clenching only made everything tighter, and it should have continued to hurt like hell. Instead, a zing of pleasure so strong I bucked beneath him,

hit me like a tsunami. I keened, a sound I'd never uttered before, and would be embarrassed about later. But fuck, his knot felt amazing adding pressure against my prostate.

Michael's hand shifted my locs aside before he lowered down onto my back, his mouth at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, and his fangs slid home.

And that was it. I exploded. Come shooting from my untouched dick, my ass clamping hard around his knot, the entire world going white and fuzzy. Michael came, heat flooding my insides. He howled as his jaws held me in place, pleasure spearing me from the bite, his venom sealing our bodies and souls together.

I shook uncontrollably as I drowned in the ecstasy, the new connection, my body's need. When he finally withdrew his fangs, I collapsed like a ragdoll, boneless.

He was still coming, both hands gripping my hips and grinding his pelvis against me. I moaned weakly, the stimulation both fantastic and too much. I didn't have the energy to move away, a lethargy stealing over my body, leaving me floaty. I think I came again, though I honestly couldn't tell. A laugh bubbled from my chest. So, this is what it felt like to be mated. Not bad, I had to say.

When Michael finally eased us down onto the mattress and turned us sideways, our bodies locked together, I had a million questions about his knot, our connection, and our future.

I fell asleep before I asked a single one.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:16 am*

Didn't realize I'd be hosting another party so soon. Yet only a week later, Michael and I had an apartment bursting with ravens, wolves, and a few other creatures to boot. A combination moving party and mating celebration, our friends, roost, and pack members turned out in force. While we'd arranged the big furniture, we were still largely living out of boxes. I couldn't wait to finish unpacking and feather our nest properly. Even though Michael had more upscale furnishings, our styles were surprisingly compatible, and I didn't regret giving away some of my older pieces. I kept my grandma's rocking chair though. And my Baltimore Ravens flag.

Michael chatted with some of his wolves, Kai pressed tightly to his side. Michael kept shooting me "Big Bad Wolf" I'll-Eat-You-Up vibes from under his lashes. Made my blood boil with want.

We'd moved Kai in two days ago and were still buying some things for his room to make it more his own space. Having a teen in the home meant we couldn't fuck on any surface we wanted. Yet having him and Michael sharing my nest settled something inside me that I hadn't realized needed settling. I wasn't even nervous with Michael's sister's upcoming visit in three weeks. Well, not much. She'd at least been thrilled he mated. We'd already video chatted a couple times, and she seemed cool. Michael and his parents still weren't speaking. I stayed out of it, simply offering him support.

A steady stream of Led Zeppelin tunes ran through the speakers Kai set up in our living room yesterday. With all the creatures in our place, it was hard to hear the music. Turned out, Kai had started listening to Led Zeppelin after the night of the chase, and it seemed Michael had a convert on his hands. Didn't mind. The kid also happened to be a Ravens fan, and we'd be hitting up some games in the fall. Michael

might tag along. How anyone could be indifferent to football was a mystery, but Kai and I would teach him, I was sure of it.

Even better, that kid glowed under his alpha's attention. The other wolves were careful to show deference to Kai's station as both Michael's beta-in-training and his ward. Even the other alphas treaded carefully, since one had made the mistake of flashing teeth at Kai, and Michael had soundly put that wolf in his place.

Having Kai around also meant seeing more of Shandra and her friends, which I didn't mind in the least. Though with both roost and newly minted wolf pack excited for our mating, we hardly got a minute alone. Except at night. And we made excellent use of that time. Amazing how well I already knew my mate's body. His likes, dislikes. We truly felt like two halves of a whole.

As if reading my mind, Michael excused himself from the others and wound his way toward me, my heart rate speeding up as he neared.

"You're so dick-whipped." Poe nudged me with his elbow, and I startled from my trance.

"Fuck you, Alpha. Like you're any different." I'd seen how he looked at Tommy.

Michael reached us and pulled me against him, slamming his mouth to mine in a toe-curling kiss.

When we came up for air, Poe smirked.

"Never said I was." He clinked the neck of his bottle against mine. "To being dick-whipped. And disgustingly in love."

I laughed, and I tightened my hold on my mate.

“I’ll drink to that.”

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